

Siddhartha: The Man Behind the Myth

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Recommended Citation

Bischoff, Sarah () "Siddhartha: The Man Behind the Myth," *The Histories*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol5/iss1/3

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II

Siddhartha: The Man Behind the Myth

By Sarah Bischoff '08



A monumental change in one man's thinking can have a lasting affect not only on the man's own society, but also on the civilizations that follow. Siddhartha Gautama, a young man in India, matured from an ignorant and naïve adolescent to a wise and spiritual man. This conversion was the result of a profound event that he unexpectedly experienced. Because of this single occurrence, Gautama completely changed his method of thinking and, eventually, founded a new religion called Buddhism based on his new ideas. Unfortunately, much of what we know about the Buddha is based on fictional tales and there are few accurate records of his experiences. Much of the information that is taught to people about Gautama is false, and is based merely on myth or legend. With this paper, I intend to separate these falsities from the truth, and to discover the historical man of Siddhartha Gautama. By piecing together the little that is known of his life in 500s B.C. India, it is possible to understand his motives and goals, and how his ideas changed to become the basis of an entirely new religion.

One might ask how and why there came to be so many different versions of the story of the Buddha's life. Early Buddhists did not write down Siddhartha's biography but only his teachings,¹ which contain a limited amount of information about his lifestyle. It was not his personage that affected them so deeply, but instead his lessons and discourses of achieving *nibbana*,² a state of absolute freedom from all wants and desires.³ Eventually, as Buddhism evolved into a religion, Siddhartha's followers began to think of him as a semi-divine being. Through oral tradition they passed down elaborate, fictional versions of his biography, which only became more inaccurate over time. Even though

¹ These teachings were compiled into the Triple Canon by monks who followed the Buddha's doctrines. Three councils were held to determine which information should be included, with the last council taking place c. 250 B.C. K.D.P. Wickremesinghe, *The Biography of the Buddha* (Homagama: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd., 2002), 277.

² *Nibbana* means literally, "emancipation". K.D.P. Wickremesinghe, *The Biography of the Buddha* (Homagama: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd., 2002), 55

³ *IBID.*, 55.

several texts were written down less than one-hundred years after the Buddha's death, these also contain fabricated stories.

It is believed that Siddhartha was born at about 550 B.C. Although the date 566 B.C. is often used as his birth year, it is only an estimated date and may not be correct.⁴ He was born in Northeast India, an area of the world that was in the midst of questioning religious beliefs and was struggling with various religious ideals. This social atmosphere influenced the Buddha, and started him off on his search for a new doctrine. It was a period of prosperity for India, with a steady increase in population and an influx of wealth entering the cities. As a result of urbanization, the population density also increased and these urban settings became learning and cultural centers where trade between various regions of India took place. This allowed Siddhartha to come into contact with a variety of religious ideas, which spread quickly from city to city.

The moral climate of the cities differed greatly from that of the villages surrounding them. The urban centers were very heterogeneous, and contained a mix of different cultures and ideas. There were stage plays, gambling halls, and houses of prostitution. The villages, however, held a much different atmosphere. The people living in the quiet outskirts of the active urban centers desired a moral, peaceful setting in which they could raise a family without the immorality of city life disturbing them. It was in this environment that Siddhartha was raised, and he suffered a great shock as an adolescent experiencing the culture of the city for the first time.

It is during this period that Siddhartha Gautama was born to a wealthy citizen living in the Shakyas Republic. Although India was divided into many different republics, a monarchical form of government was beginning to develop. Republican assemblies remained, but they consisted of elders who were not elected and held authority only because of their position as members of the Kshatriya clan.⁵ Siddhartha was most likely born into this clan of high status in society, and he therefore enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle. However, he probably was not a prince. There are early records of Siddhartha's birth that support the idea that he was born into a ruling family, and he is most likely the son of a clan leader. These records include the Triple Canon, in which the Vinaya Pitaka, Abhidhamma Pitaka, and Sutta Pitaka are contained.⁶ However, these sources were used to exaggerate the Buddha's position in society in order to have a greater effect on people.

By perceiving Siddhartha as a prince surrounded by wealth and oblivious to the sufferings of the world instead of seeing him as an average man in society, his conversion to a monk who gives up all material belongings can be thought of as a profound and awe-inspiring event. Thus, his followers were more able to make him into a superhuman being.⁷ Siddhartha's immediate advocates were enlightened by his teachings, and did not perceive him as having divine qualities. They appreciated the wisdom and knowledge that he had gained over time, and conformed to his convictions in an attempt to achieve

⁴ The date is based on the belief that Siddhartha was a contemporary of kings Bimbisara and Ajatasatru, who ruled during that time. Michael Pye, *The Buddha* (London: Duckworth, 1979), 12.

⁵ The Kshatriyas were member of the landed ruling class, the highest social class in India at the time. The other three classes, listed in descending order according to social status, were the priestly class, the trading class, and the hunters. *IBID.*, 50.

⁶ A Buddhist monk known as the Venerable Maha Kassapa called the First Council, during which the compilation of the texts, eventually arranged into the Triple Canon, began. K.D.P. Wickremesinghe, *The Biography of the Buddha* (Homagama: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd., 2002), 276.

⁷ Michael Pye, *The Buddha* (London: Duckworth, 1979), 4.

nibbana, which would free them from all worldly desires. It was the death of the Buddha and the passing on of his teachings throughout generations of Indians that resulted in the corruption of the facts of his biography.⁸ It was not long after his death that monastic philosophers took it upon themselves to write down the Buddha's teachings into documents such as the Triple Canon. In doing so these men embellished his ideas and lifestyle, transforming his entire life's work into a religion.⁹

It is certain that Siddhartha, as an adolescent, became unsatisfied with his rich lifestyle and decided to give up his worldly possessions in pursuit of a less materialistic existence. The controversy surrounding this immensely important turning point in his life resides as a result of two stories; one arising from fact and the other from legend. It is a popular belief that, around the age of sixteen, Siddhartha witnessed four signs that caused him to contemplate about suffering and his own lifestyle.¹⁰ The legend follows that a group of Brahman leaders made a prediction to Siddhartha's father at the time of his son's birth. They stated that upon witnessing the four signs Siddhartha would give up his life as a prince and become a recluse.¹¹ Therefore, when as an adolescent he experienced the four ills, "the old man, the sick man, the dead man, and the wandering mendicant,"¹² Siddhartha realized suffering for the first time and was permanently affected by all he had witnessed.¹³ This story only adds to the false ideal of Buddha as a godly being. The predictions of the Brahmans made him into a divine person who established his own religion. The monastic philosophers attempted to prove that, because the Buddha's life was foretold by holy men, he was meant to become a great, semi-divine being who was meant to be honored as a near-god.

The more probable circumstances of the Buddha's transformation from a comfortable prince to a wandering holy man involve a gradual realization of the sufferings of the world. He did not experience one event that suddenly penetrated his thoughts and beliefs and caused him to completely change his view of life.¹⁴ Instead, as Siddhartha grew older and matured, he slowly realized how much suffering and evil existed in the world, and that as a prominent member of society he was immune to much of this suffering.

The one question, then, remains as to why he decided to change his lifestyle at that particular point in his life. Perhaps he realized he did not want to follow in his father's footsteps and carry on the family's wealth, but wanted instead to discover the root of this suffering in the world, which he had not yet fully experienced. It was this unquenchable desire that caused Siddhartha to leave his comfortable home and to become a holy man, wandering in and out of the villages and cities of India.¹⁵

⁸ Trevor Ling, *The Buddha* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1973), 37

⁹ Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *Buddhism: An Outline of its Teachings and Schools* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1974), 17.

¹⁰ Kenneth W. Morgan, *The Path of the Buddha* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), 6.

¹¹ K.D.P. Wickremesinghe, *The Biography of the Buddha* (Homagama: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd., 2002), 18.

¹² John S. Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 46.

¹³ It is further explained in this myth that Siddhartha encountered four people representing the four ills in the gardens surrounding his palace, which his father had created to protect him from the evils of the world. Jean Boisselier, *The Wisdom of the Buddha* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1994), 48.

¹⁴ Trevor Ling, *The Buddha* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1973), 94.

¹⁵ Kenneth W. Morgan, *The Path of the Buddha* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), 4.

The gravest misconception of several Buddhist factions today is that of Siddhartha as a semi-divine being. Siddhartha never claimed to be divine or semi-divine, but acted only as a man who had achieved Enlightenment and felt the obligation to elaborate his ideas to others. Those who follow his actual, historically accurate teachings believe he was a very spiritual man and was able to achieve an incredible sense of peace through many difficult trials. Although Siddhartha believed one could come closer to a state of contentment with life and feel an absence of all desire by following his ideas, he recognized that one must first purge oneself of all doubts.

As a young man searching for a state of being in which he would be free of all suffering, Siddhartha encountered wise teachers¹⁶ who influenced his life and led him to the formation of his own new ideas.¹⁷ However, he was not satisfied with these teachers and knew he must find his own method of attaining the truth to be content in life and free from all desires. Because of this personal experience, Siddhartha realized that his own followers could only use his teachings as a guide to achieving their own Enlightenment. They, too, must discover through their own personal trials which method will lead them to spiritual freedom.¹⁸

Siddhartha himself walked a very difficult road to Enlightenment. He was not able to achieve a state of *nibbana* easily, but lived through a variety of challenging experiences that eventually led him to a state of peace. Siddhartha encountered two extremes in his journey to find the answer to suffering. He first experienced the life of a rich upper-class citizen, and indulged himself physically and mentally. After gradually becoming more dissatisfied with this lifestyle, Siddhartha then decided to try a different extreme: self-mortification. Giving up all he owned, he left his home and became a wandering holy man begging for food on his journey.¹⁹

As an ascetic²⁰ Siddhartha practiced several methods of self-control in an effort to become selfless. At this point in his life, he thought he could conquer the self in order to achieve the state of *nibbana* for which he was striving. As one source states, "because of belief in self, (*atta* or *atman*), men are vulnerable to the process of ageing, decay, and dying, and hence to sorrow."²¹ Through excessive fasting, meditation, and breath-control, Siddhartha attempted to accomplish and maintain complete control over his self.²² These practices were incredibly painful, and through this pain he hoped to find the end result for which he was searching. One example of a form of self-control—breath-retention—required Siddhartha to hold his breath regardless of the pain and discomfort he felt. Although this practice resulted in immense pain and exertion, he would not allow himself to breath until he reached a state of near-death.²³ These demanding acts were as futile in

¹⁶ Two significant teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, influenced the Buddha but did not satisfy him on his quest. K.D.P. Wickremesinghe, The Biography of the Buddha (Homagama: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd., 2002), 55.

¹⁷ Michael Pye, The Buddha (London: Duckworth, 1979), 25.

¹⁸ Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1951), 27.

¹⁹ David J. & Indrani Kalupahana, The Way of Siddhartha: A Life of the Buddha (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1920), 74.

²⁰ At this time, there were several different groups of wandering ascetics who followed their own leader in an effort to find peace. Trevor Ling, The Buddha (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1973), 66.

²¹ *IBID.*, 94.

²² Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1951), 11.

²³ John S. Strong, The Buddha: A Short Biography (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 62.

helping Siddhartha find peace as his previous life as a wealthy citizen had been. As his body wasted down to skin and bones, he slowly realized he was following the wrong direction in his search for Enlightenment.

The actual events of the Buddha's Enlightenment are, like many other aspects of his life, almost entirely unknown to us. However, there is an account of the experience written in the Discourse on the Ariyan Quest.²⁴ This retelling of the event is believed to be the one told by the Buddha to his disciples, years after it occurred. Here, the Enlightenment is said to have happened at a beautiful piece of land where the Buddha meditated and was "'awakened' to the truth".²⁵ Just as Siddhartha's life as a wealthy young man was elaborated into one of a rich, secluded prince in later Buddhist texts, so too was his Enlightenment exaggerated in the Buddhist literature written long after his death. Later Buddhists, in an effort to accelerate the transformation of Siddhartha and his teachings into a religion, wrote dramatic accounts of the event. This fact can be used to further prove that Siddhartha had not meant for his life to be seen as divine, and had not wanted his teachings to be followed as a religious doctrine. It was the later Buddhists who, never witnessing the Buddha alive, were responsible for changing his life and work into something it was not intended to be.

Siddhartha's teachings focus on selflessness, and on several key ideas besides. One must rise above the self, and realize that the individual is insignificant when compared to the whole, the unity of all beings.²⁶ It is this surrender of the self that leads to an elimination of suffering, which was the goal of the Buddha's journey to peace. Therefore, the Buddha's doctrines are not meant to be followed simply to achieve the goal of one's own salvation. Instead, Siddhartha believed that individualism, which was prevalent during his time and had strengthened as a movement in India, was detrimental to society and only resulted in "limits on love."²⁷ One who resists individualistic beliefs and accepts that the individual is just one small part of a significant whole is then able to more readily free oneself from physical desires. Another important doctrine is the eight worldly concerns, those of gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, and fame and disgrace. Siddhartha listed these eight items because these are most often mistakenly used in an attempt to reach happiness. Although some can lead to a temporary state of happiness, it will not last and one soon begins to feel unsatisfied.²⁸ One of these practices, which the Buddha explained in his sermons, is The Middle Way. This is perhaps the most prevalent of the instructions taught by the Buddha after his Enlightenment. Because of his experimentation with the two extremes, asceticism and self-indulgence, Siddhartha learned it is best to follow a middle path. Neither of the two radical paths he previously followed had resulted in the attainment of his goal to find the resolution to suffering. By abandoning the unreasonable asceticism that he had found to be unsuccessful, the Buddha found that he could still prevent himself from becoming attached to physical pleasures. This realization led to the formation of the Eightfold Path, which remains an important guide to Buddhists today. This compendium lists the eight aspects of the path in terms of three categories. The first, knowledge/wisdom, requires a person to be right in view,

²⁴ Trevor Ling, The Buddha (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1973), 107.

²⁵ IBID., 107.

²⁶ IBID., 122.

²⁷ Trevor Ling, The Buddha (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1973), 122.

²⁸ IBID., 2.

thought, and speech. The second, morality, requires right action, mode of living, and effort. Last is concentration/meditation, which is comprised of right awareness and concentration.²⁹ The Buddha offered the Eightfold Path as a method of self-discipline that could be used to staunch the flow of cravings that dominate one's life.

This approach of self-discipline further acknowledges the fact that Siddhartha had not meant for his teachings to be formed into a set of religious doctrines. His goal is not characteristic of that of most other religions, which is to offer a set of practices and beliefs usually based on faith in one or many gods. He makes no reference to any gods, and the intent of his instructions is to offer a path to personal liberation.³⁰ Strict adherence to the Eightfold Path in itself does not lead a person to freedom from desire, but one must also adamantly believe in the instructions that are being adhered to. If one does follow the concepts accordingly, *nibbana* is attained. However, Siddhartha realized through his years of inner struggle that one cannot long for liberation. Feeling intense desire for anything, even longing for the freedom from desire, prevents one from achieving *nibbana*.³¹ Siddhartha also realized that it requires more than meditation and self-restraint to reach this goal. One must also recognize how insignificant the self is, and accept it as a fact of life.

The Four Noble Truths are also an integral factor of the Buddha's teachings. Siddhartha believed there were four main points about suffering which, when studied, would allow a person to gain a better understanding of suffering and the method by which it can be eradicated. The first is the Truth of suffering, in which he explains that "human experience is characterized by suffering: birth, old age, disease, dying, all these add up to a continuous cycle of suffering."³² The second, the Truth of the origin of suffering, indicates that it is the craving for physical pleasure and further existence, (a longer life), from whence suffering originates. Because one's physical desires can not always be satiated, one will always be disappointed and unfulfilled unless one realizes the third truth, the Truth of the cessation of suffering, and gives up all desires.³³ The last and final truth is the doctrine of the Eightfold Path, which will lead to fulfillment if truly believed in and followed efficiently.³⁴

For the remaining years of his life after his Enlightenment, which took place around the age of thirty, Siddhartha Gautama dispersed his inspirational ideas among the Indian people. As a humble man who had finally achieved all for which he was searching in life, the Buddha treated people of all social statuses with equal respect and dignity. He sincerely believed in the philosophical revelations he had experienced, and knew with certainty that he must carry on these ideas not only to his most avid followers but to all people who needed guidance in their spiritual search. As the Buddha lay on his deathbed he uttered the final words, "Now, monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a

²⁹ The Eightfold Path was not originally divided into three groups. These divisions came later, and are found in The Lesser Discourse on the Miscellany. Michael Pye, The Buddha (London: Duckworth, 1979), 43.

³⁰ Hans Wolfgang Schumann, Buddhism: An Outline of its Teachings and Schools (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1974), 79.

³¹ IBID., 79.

³² Michael Pye, The Buddha (London: Duckworth, 1979), 44.

³³ Jean Boisselier, The Wisdom of the Buddha (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1994), 61.

³⁴ Michael Pye, The Buddha (London: Duckworth, 1979), 45.

nature to decay—strive on untiringly.”³⁵ These last words prove that, although Siddhartha made the ultimate achievement in life and became free from all suffering, he did not consider himself above the human race. To the end, even after he had built up a large following, the Buddha recognized his own humanity and that the body is only temporary and is subject to decay. He never elevated himself above others, but accepted his place as a member of the human race. Siddhartha never lost the sense that his self was unimportant when seen with respect to the world, and he lived by his teachings until his natural death around 485 B.C.³⁶

Although there were Pali texts written down shortly after Siddhartha Gautama’s death c. 483 B.C.,³⁷ his life story was altered and modified to exaggerate the events of his existence and make him into a divine being. Unfortunately, this led only to a misrepresentation of the Buddha that eventually resulted in the transformation of his teachings into an entirely new religion. Although it is evident that much of this “biographical” information is false, many forms of Buddhism have been based on these ideas and remain important religious doctrines today. Unfortunately, however, his actual teachings were not meant to be treated as a set of religious ideals. Their meaning is often lost if one focuses too much on the divinity of the Buddha. This is not to refute the religion of Buddhism, which is primarily based on accurate historical teachings of the Buddha, but merely to put into perspective that which is the truth and that which is legend. Siddhartha Gautama, as an individual, was a very spiritual man who achieved a state of consciousness that few are able to reach. He had an impact not only on his own native country of India, but also on the entire world. The Buddha’s ideas eventually spread to the Western world, where they became widely accepted over two thousand years after his death. It is nearly impossible to comprehend how one small event, one man’s awakening, could have such a great effect on civilization. However unfathomable it may seem, Buddhism, a global religion, began with one man who was discontented with his life and hoped to find an end to suffering. He found it and, whether or not Siddhartha had meant to, he changed the lives of countless individuals across continents and over centuries.

³⁵ John S. Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 140.

³⁶ Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *Buddhism: An Outline of its Teachings and Schools* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1974), 32.

³⁷ *IBID.*, 32.

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