

Religious Leaders: Buddha

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A statue of Buddha Courtesy of Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Synopsis: Siddhartha Gautama lived in Nepal sometime between 300 and 500 B.C., about 2,300 to 2,500 years ago. He became known as Buddha. Scholars agree that he was a real person, but do not agree about his life. Siddhartha tried to discover the truth about the universe. He explored different ideas, but did not agree with any of them. He spent a night in deep meditation, which means he was awake but his mind was calm and silent. All of the answers became clear. He achieved full awareness of the universe, thereby becoming Buddha.

Early Years

The Buddha means "enlightened one" or "the awakened." He was born Siddhartha Gautama about 2,500 years ago in an area that is now modern Nepal. His father was the king, and his mother died shortly after giving birth to him. A holy man predicted great things for Siddhartha, whose name means "he who achieves his aim." The holy man said he would either be a great king, a military leader or a

religious leader. Siddhartha's father wanted to keep his son from knowing about religion and human hardship, and raised him in a palace built just for him. He got married when he was 16 years old.

Beyond The Palace Walls

The prince did not know much about the world beyond the palace walls. One day he went out with his chariot driver. He saw a very old man and asked about the man. The chariot driver said that all people grow old. Siddhartha began taking more trips outside his palace. On these trips he saw a very sick man, a dead person and an ascetic. An ascetic is someone who does not own anything and lives on very little food and water. The driver explained that the ascetic had given up the world so that he would no longer be afraid of death and suffering. Siddhartha was 29 years old, and the next day, he left his kingdom, his wife and baby son to lead an ascetic life. He wanted to end suffering.

The Ascetic Life And Enlightenment

For the next six years, Siddhartha lived an ascetic life. He met a group of five other ascetics, who became his followers. When he did not find answers to his questions, he tried twice as hard. He endured pain, went without food and refused water.

One day a young girl offered him a bowl of rice. As he accepted it, he suddenly realized that he had been wrong to be an ascetic. So he ate his rice, drank water and bathed in the river. He said people should not have too much or too little and should not go to extremes. He called it the Middle Way. His followers did not agree and left him.

The Buddha Emerges

One night, Siddhartha sat under the Bodhi tree. He said he would not get up until he knew the truth and remained there for several days. During this time, he had to overcome Mara, an evil demon. Soon a picture began to form in his mind of everything that had happened in the universe, and Siddhartha finally saw the answer to his questions about suffering. In that moment, Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha.

He got up from his spot under the Bodhi tree and went out to teach others. About 100 miles away, he came across the five ascetics. He spoke to them and to others who had gathered around. They became his first followers, Women also joined his community of followers. Wealth, race, gender and background were not important, only the desire to reach enlightenment.

Buddha lived until he was 80 years old. For the rest of his life, Buddha traveled and taught the Dharma, which is the name given to the teachings of the Buddha. He wanted to lead others along the path of enlightenment and understanding. He believed in peace. When he died, he told his followers that they should not follow any leader.

Buddha is one of the most important people in world history. His teachings have had a big influence on other religions, books and ideas in India and around the Western world.

Quiz

- 1 Based on information in the biography, which of these statements is TRUE?
- (A) Scholars think that the Buddha may not have been a real person.
 - (B) The Buddha was familiar with ascetic life because he grew up in a poor family.
 - (C) The Buddha believed that people should not have too much or too little.
 - (D) Ascetics became followers of the Buddha because he gave them much food and water.
- 2 Which sentence from the biography BEST supports the idea that Siddhartha experienced suffering before he became the Buddha?
- (A) Siddhartha's father wanted to keep his son from knowing about religion and human hardship, and raised him in a palace built just for him.
 - (B) The prince did not know much about the world beyond the palace walls.
 - (C) On these trips he saw a very sick man, a dead person and an ascetic.
 - (D) He endured pain, went without food and refused water.
- 3 Which of the following are two main ideas from the biography?
1. *The Buddha was born in an area now called Nepal.*
 2. *Before he was the Buddha, Siddhartha learned about ascetics from his chariot driver.*
 3. *Siddhartha became the Buddha after he was enlightened about suffering.*
 4. *The Buddha traveled with his followers, trying to help people become enlightened.*
- (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 2 and 3
 - (C) 3 and 4
 - (D) 1 and 4

- 4 Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the biography?
- (A) Siddhartha got married when he was a teenager.
 - (B) Siddhartha became enlightened about suffering after sitting under the Bodhi tree.
 - (C) After leaving his spot under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha walked for about 100 miles.
 - (D) The first followers of the Buddha were five ascetics.