

Buddhism Basics

Who Was the Buddha?

The Buddha, a human, was born over 2500 years ago in Lumbini (in present day Nepal). He was born into a wealthy family and until the age of 29 lived a life of luxury and pleasure. He came to realize, however, that such pleasure was temporary and would never bring him lasting happiness. Whatever happiness was found in life would eventually be undermined by old age, sickness and death.

So the Buddha left his life in his father's palace, his own wife and child and became a wandering mendicant, bent on finding a way that would lead him to perfect contentment and peace. For six years, sometimes working with other seekers, sometimes alone, he experimented with various practices, often starving the body in the belief that by ignoring his bodily needs, his spiritual faculties would be enhanced. He achieved some measure of success but not the ultimate peace he was seeking.

One day he overheard a musician explaining the proper way to tune the strings of his instrument and experienced a moment of illumination having nothing to do with harming the body. And so he took another direction, a middle path between extremes, no longer relying on the concept of spiritual development resulting from starving the body.

Enlightenment in Bodh Gaya

At the age of thirty-five he came to a place called Bodh Gaya (in northern India) and sat beneath a tree, determined not to get up until he had attained enlightenment. As he meditated, he came to understand the nature of existence and a path that led to release from the inherent suffering we all experience. He also saw that we are all born many times and the conditions we are born into are depend on our deeds from previous births -- good actions leading to happy states, bad deeds leading to unhappy ones. He also realized the idea of a permanent self or soul was an illusion. Thus was he "awakened" or enlightened.

The Buddha now had a choice. Should he share his teaching with the world -- a teaching he believed many would not understand -- or keep it to himself? Out of compassion, the Buddha chose the former and soon began teaching to all those who were willing to listen. For the next forty-five years or so, he lived as a wandering monk, amassing many followers. He died at the age of eighty, leaving his disciples with the following instruction: 'Strive on with diligence.'

The Buddha was not a God and did not profess to be one. He was a very special human being who succeeded in finding a way to end suffering. Buddhism is often referred to as a combination of psychology and philosophy, a religion without a God. This is true. Tibetan Buddhism does have a cosmological dimension but the supreme figure is the Buddha, an awakened man, rather than a god or gods.