



Lord Buddha— Embodiment of Compassion

by Swami Jyotirmayananda



More than six centuries before the birth of Christ, there was a spiritual crisis in India. Vedic culture began to dwindle in the encircling gloom of illusion, and people, instead of sacrificing the latent beasts of anger and passion, began to indulge in sacrificing innocent animals. Instead of pursuing religion in its true spirit, they began to take recourse to crude forms of austerity, dry intellectual learning, and many hypocritical forms of piety. Violence, cruelty, selfishness, greed and passion began to dominate the minds of the masses. In such an atmosphere of decline of virtue, there emerged the glorious light of the spirit in the form of Buddha—a light that was meant to bring order in the world of disorder, to stop the decline of virtue, to dispel the forces of darkness and to promote the path of righteousness.

An interesting story is told about the birth of Buddha. King Shuddhodana was a righteous king who ruled over a prosperous state known as Kapilavastu in the Himalayan valley, north of Bihar in India. His Queen, Maya Devi, gave birth to a child in a charming garden in the midst of celestial portents and signs, and his body had auspicious marks that foretold his future greatness. The impact of the delight of having given birth to such a glorious spirit could not be endured by the frail body of Maya Devi; she died seven days after his birth. Buddha, who was then known as Siddhartha, was brought up under the loving care of Maya Devi's sister, Mahaprajapati, his foster mother.

King Shuddhodana consulted the astrologers regarding the destiny of the child, and after having studied the planetary conditions of his birth,

foretold that the child was going to become one of the greatest of men in the world—either he would be the emperor of emperors, or he would renounce the world and teach the path of *dharma* (righteousness). When King Shuddhodana asked what he should do in order to secure emperorship for his child, they told him that if the child were to be kept away from the sight of four things—a diseased person, an old man, a dead body, and a monk—he would become an emperor; otherwise, he would live a life of renunciation.

Following the advice of the astrologers, King Shuddhodana built seven encircling walls to keep the palace a completely conditioned atmosphere. All luxuries of life were presented before the growing child, and all the sights of pain and suffering were kept away from him. However, in spite of all this care and caution, Siddhartha at times entered into deep reflections over the plight of the withering flowers. Even in his royal garden he saw how a moth is captured by the quick tongue of a frog; and how the frog is, in turn, devoured by a snake; and the snake, in turn, is killed by a mongoose or carried away by a hawk. He noticed how the chain of mutual violence continued to expand in ever-widening circles. He would become depressed and sorrowful at the wide-spread sufferings of all living beings.

As time passed, Siddhartha became a handsome youth. He acquired the knowledge of the Vedas as well as all the learning that was meant for a *kshatriya* prince. In order to prevent him from becoming a monk, King Shuddhodana kept him in the midst of numerous charming young ladies, and all the pleasures of the senses were available for the prince. In the course of time, his father married him to Yashodhara, a princess of a neighboring kingdom, and eventually, his son, Rahula, was born.

Sometime before the birth of his son, Siddhartha had passed beyond the walled enclosure of the palace four times, and each time he witnessed one of the four signs that he was not supposed to see. It is said that the Gods them-

selves appeared before him as a sick and miserable man, as a person disfigured with age, as a dead corpse with its terrifying stillness, and as a monk beckoning him to renounce the world that is fraught with disease, old age and death.

As a result, when the royal palace was jubilant over the birth of his child and all the people were engrossed in festivity, Siddhartha, with the help of his chariot driver, secretly slipped away from the palace. Departing from his beloved wife, his newly born child, and his world of material prosperity, he began to wander through the forests of northern India in search of Enlightenment.

He met various spiritual teachers but was not satisfied with their teachings. While practicing intense austerities in the forest of Buddha Gaya, he was reduced to a skeleton, yet he persisted in the practice of severe austerities. It is said that the Gods sent before him three dancers who sang as they passed him, “Do not tune the *veena* too tight, or it will break; do not tune it too loose, or it will not give sweet melody; but tune it neither tight nor loose, and it will charm the hearts of men.” Siddhartha understood the message of the song, and from then on adopted a path of moderation.

Under the bodhi tree, Siddhartha passed into the various stages of *samadhi* (superconsciousness). He waged an intense fight against the spirit of temptation, Mara, and attained supreme victory. By his intuitive vision he saw the end of misery and the path that leads to such a blessed end.

For a moment he thought to renounce the body and to be merged into the state of Liberation, but soon, overpowered by a spirit of compassion, decided to preach the revealed path. He reflected within himself, “The ship that I have built for crossing the ocean of the world-process should now be placed at the disposal of all who would like to cross it. Why should I destroy it?”

After Enlightenment, Siddhartha became known as Buddha (the Enlightened). Since his family name was Gautama, he is also called Gau-

tama Buddha. And further, since he belonged to the Sakya tribe, he is also called Sakya Muni.

Buddha began to teach the mystic art of attaining *Nirvana*—the end of the cycles of birth and death, and the extinction of all cravings. He spoke of the four Arian truths—Pain, the Cause of Pain, the Cessation of Pain, and the Path that

leads to the Cessation of Pain. He elaborated upon the chain of causation that keeps a person confined to the cycles of birth and death, and taught how ignorance was the root-cause of sufferings. His teachings were, in essence, the teachings of the Vedas, however, he gave a new vitality to the Vedic teachings because of his direct realization of the Truth. He condemned sacrifices of animals and all expressions of cruelty and violence. He further discouraged mere intellectual speculations about God, Liberation and the Absolute, and asked his followers to end their pain instead of indulging in various speculations about it.

He gave an example of a person who is injured by an arrow. When a doctor comes to remove the arrow and to heal him of his injury, the injured man begins to ask many questions, such as, “O doctor, what is the name of the person who shot this arrow? What is the arrow made of? How fast was it travelling?” If the doctor were to stop and answer all these questions, the person would simply die. What is needed is to remove the cause of pain, and later try to find the answer, if such is needed.

The words of Buddha were so powerful, his personality so magnetic, his conduct so lofty and elevating, that kings, princes, and people from all walks of life began to follow his teachings. His wife, Yashodhara, and his own son, Rahula, also became monks under his guidance.

Buddha continued to promote *dharma* with an indefatigable dynamism. He and his group of monks collected alms by begging and devoted their energy towards the dissemination of his sublime teachings. Then, at the age of 80 (480 B.C.), Buddha departed from this mortal world, but the light of compassion that emanated from his glorious personality continued to sweep over India, China, Japan, and most of Asia. And even today that light is being increasingly recognized, revered and followed by aspirants all over the globe.

May all receive the blessings of Buddha—the Enlightened!

**Ah! Lover!
Brother! Guide!
Lamp of the Law!
I take my refuge
in thy Name and Thee!
I take my refuge
in the Law of Good!
I take my refuge
in thy Order!
Om! The dew is on the lotus!
Rise, Great Sun!
And lift my leaf
and mix me with the wave.
Om Mani Padme Hum,
the Sunrise comes!
The Dewdrop slips into
the shining Sea!**

*Sir Edwin Arnold
(The Light of Asia)*

