**Buddha’s life & times** – a very brief account

There is no way of knowing in great detail the factual story of the Buddha’s life. What we can gather about his life comes from the early Buddhist texts – known as the Pali Canon – and other historical sources. The Pali Canon was written in Sri Lanka around the middle of the 1st century BCE. These texts were a compilation of material that had been passed down in an oral tradition – often by communal chanting – from the Buddha’s time.

Early Buddhist terms are either in the Pali language – possibly similar to the language the Buddha may have spoken – and Sanskrit – a language closely related to Pali. This is why Buddhist terms often take two forms: eg. Gotama (Pali) & Gautama (Sanskrit).

The first biographical profile of the Buddha didn’t appear until about 500 years after his death, and the most famous early biographical text is the Buddhacarita (Acts of the Buddha) an epic poem written in the 1st century CE by Asvaghosa. By this time the Buddha was a legendary figure and his life story is described in very fanciful, magical, super-natural terms – there is much exaggeration, fantasy and imaginative embellishment. The first images of the Buddha don’t appear until around the second century CE.

**Birth and death:** popular dates for the Buddha’s life are 566-486 BCE – but recent scholarship suggest his death may have been around 410 BCE. According to legend the Buddha’s family belonged to a warrior caste – but there is no concrete evidence of a caste system amongst the Sakya people (the Buddha’s own clan, tribe or ‘nation’).

**Names:** Buddha is an honorific title – derived from a Pali word ‘budh’ meaning to perceive or to awake – and so Buddha means, ‘awakened one.’ Sakyamuni – means ‘sage of the Sakya people’. His family name was Gotama (or Gautama). His first name: Siddhartha (or Siddhattha).

**A Life – possible facts!**

Born: c.490 BCE in the foothills of the Himalayas, just inside Nepal – near the border with north-eastern India.

At 16 he is married to Yasodhara – who bears him a son named Rahula (‘fetter’).

At 29, shortly after the birth of his son, he leaves his family and begins his travels - meeting sages and teachers, from whom he seems to have hoped to learn how to live a ‘good life’.

At 35, he realises enlightenment or ‘awakening’ – according to legend as he sat under a Bo tree (ficus religiosa – a member of the fig family).

The rest of his life (45 years) is spent teaching.

Dies: c.410 BCE – reportedly in a small Indian town called Kusinara – about 100 miles south of the Nepalese border.

**A Life – less verifiable, merging into parable and legend**

In his late manhood, Buddha is supposed to have taken four chariot rides outside his ‘palace’. His over-protective father had arranged for his route to be filled with smiling healthy people. However, on the first trip he meets an old man – and is astonished to find how old age manifests itself.

On the second trip, he encounters a very sick man, and on the third, the body of a person who has died. He realises how transient life is and how common it is for people to suffer.

On his fourth trip, Buddha meets a travelling religious mendicant (*samana* – one who lives on alms given by others – a practice well-established by the Buddha’s day), and on his return he decides to leave his family to become a seeker of solutions to the great questions and difficulties posed by human existence.

There are many accounts of the various teachers and practices the Buddha tried. Early on, he learnt very swiftly how to enter a deep trance state – a state of serenity – but, as he always had to return to everyday states of mind, he was dissatisfied with this practice and moved on. Later, he decided that the ‘mystical’ states of consciousness entered during different meditation practices, provided no lasting benefit, because one always had to return to everyday consciousness. These practices seemed to him to offer only temporary relief and release, whereas he sought some skill or practice that would transform his everyday life.

Buddha then turned to various ascetic techniques. He tried many austerities recommended by teachers he met on his travels. After undertaking fasting, strict breath control and other regimes, he realised that extreme practices of any kind offered no lasting benefit. He decided that what would be most beneficial and long-lasting was a path of moderation between indulgence and denial, between meditation techniques that induced short-lived states of bliss or ecstasy, and ascetic practices that denied his body the nourishment necessary for well-being.

After the regimes of austerity, he began to eat and sleep in moderation (much to the disgust of the ascetics who had gathered around him), and to begin meditating on his own day-to-day, moment-by-moment experience. Stories are told of how, in one night - seated under a Bo or Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya - he was able to see into his past lives, and to see into the cycles of birth and death experienced by all beings, and to extinguish the craving and ignorance that had previously led him astray. These embellishments are part of the legend of his awakening, enlightenment, achieving nirvana. In contrast to these accounts, in various parts of the Pali Canon, there are descriptions of the mindful meditation he seems to have actually practiced, and taught – something similar to vipassana (insight) meditation and zazen.

Following a few weeks of pondering on what to do next, he starts out on his career as a teacher – sharing the wisdom he had acquired and introducing countless students to his ‘middle way’. Legend has it that he first travelled to Benares, where he met some of his old colleagues and delivered a sermon or teaching that is considered to be a momentous event in the history of Buddhism. His first teaching (sutta or sutra) is titled, Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma (*Dhammacakkappavattana* Sutta).

**Context**

My late friend, John Comben, spent many years researching the cultural and geographical context within which the Buddha lived and travelled. He points out a few factors that should be kept in mind in trying to imagine the Buddha’s life and times. For instance, prior to the 11th century BCE the whole of the Ganges valley was thickly forested. It was only after Indo-European Aryan peoples (related to the Persians) began to move into the valley, that forest clearance started, and small settlements and towns were established. By 600 BCE construction of the first cities had begun. However, the north-eastern region of the Ganges plain remained heavily forested, even in the Buddha’s time. For centuries this area was inhabited by many tribal groups, including the Mallas, Moriyas, Viddhas and the Buddha’s own people, the Sakyas – all, apparently, holding strong beliefs in rebirth as karmic retribution, that could only be purged by ascetic practices (especially fasting).

Comben argues that the Buddha was sensitive to the great changes happening in his day, and to the tension that may have existed between the forest and urban peoples and cultures, and the divergent identities of tribal and urban-based societies. He seems to have welcomed people of any background to his meetings – regardless of tribe, caste, status, wealth and gender – he seems to have aimed his teaching at everyone. There is evidence in the sutras that Buddha was directly, or implicitly, critical of Brahmanical authority and hierarchical values. (Brahmins are the priestly caste – at the top of the Hindu caste system).

Although legends describe the Buddha’s upbringing as ‘a prince’ living in ‘a palace’, evidence suggests that it is more likely he was the son of a tribal elder living in a large thatched hut in a forest settlement, or a settlement near to the forest. In one of the Sutras he says: ‘I found great solace in dwelling in the forest.’ During his long career as a teacher and sage, he spent the dry parts of the year travelling from place to place - one of many peripatetic teachers with students scattered over a large area. It was only in the wet season, when travel became much more difficult, that teacher and students would gather together into what we might now call a monastic community or sangha.

The Buddha’s forest upbringing seems to have given him many skills (like elephant handling) and a deep understanding of natural processes, and of animals and plants. He lived within a culture that had, what we would now call, an ‘ecological worldview’. That human beings exist within, not apart from, the natural order, would have been axiomatic to the Sakyas, and to the Buddha. This deep sense of interdependence between beings, landscape, changing climate and seasons, is maintained and developed within the Buddha’s teaching. Co-existence and co-operation, living in harmony with others and with the natural environment, are emphasised again and again in the sutras.