MATERIAL 2

THE LIFE OF THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI

Buddhist sources offer differing accounts of Buddha´s life. The written records were not compiled until about 300 years after his death and vary depending on the oral traditions of the different Buddhist schools. The focus was not an historical evidence, but rather his life was regarded as a source of inspiration for following the Buddhist path.



At the time of the birth of the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni about 2600 years ago, India was a flourishing and highly developed civilization. There was great spiritual openness - comparable to the Renaissance and the awakening in the West in the 1960s. Various philosophical schools and views flourished simultaneously, and old teachings and the spiritual authority of the Brahmins were challenged. People expected a teaching to be holistic; they claimed that a world view should permeate life. The teachings had to have a foundation, have clear methods and have an attainable goal.
Assertions were handled with great care: For as soon as someone held a view that another person could refute, he became his disciple - the spiritual honesty of the time demanded it. Buddhism as a religion gets along without God. As philosophy, it encourages, like Socrates a century later, lifelong questioning on the path to self-knowledge. As psychology, it offers a profoundly effective method for achieving lasting happiness: meditation.

Siddhartha Gautama was born as a prince around 560 B.C. in the Nepalese village of Lumbini, near the former city of Kapilavastu. The family belonged to the Shakyas and the Gautamas, from where his name Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni comes. His mother died shortly after his birth and he was raised by his aunt, who was also married to his father.

The family belonged to the Hindu caste of the Kshatryas, the highest warrior caste. Siddhartha's father was the ruler of a principality, which today is located in southern Nepal and used to belong to India. Siddhartha, the late born only child, was to one day take over power as heir to the throne, according to the family's wish. At that time, India was undergoing violent territorial and social transformations. Nevertheless, India looked different from today: the population was small, there was enough to eat, the north was forested, and philosophy and the thirst for knowledge dominated.

Siddhartha's aunt took care of the boy and made sure that he learned everything that belonged to the education in the better families of old India and prepared him for a life as a warrior king: this included mathematics, reading, writing and law, the handling of weapons, chariot driving, riding and taming elephants. When he was born on a full moon day in May, his parents had received the following prophecy: "If the boy does not come into contact with the sufferings of the world, he will become a great ruler. But if he perceives the world's suffering, he will leave everything behind and bring a whole new dimension into the world".

Siddhartha's father decided to raise him inside the palace in an artificially shielded world where there was only youth, beauty, pleasure and joyful experiences. During his few trips into the "normal" world, everything was prepared in such a way that he only saw young, healthy and happy people. The young prince grew up in his luxury world, enjoyed life, married and had a son.

This lasted until he was 29 years old. During secret excursions he met the dark sides of life. On three consecutive days he saw a seriously ill person, an old man and a dead person. What one otherwise gets used to very gradually shook him deeply. It was revealed in all vehemence that worldly joys, beauty, strength and youth are conditional and transitory. The insight that these sufferings belonged to the life of the beings left him no peace and he sought a way out, a lasting happiness that is not subject to conditions.

The next day he had another experience that would shape his life. He saw a man with a happy, contented expression sitting in deep meditation and understood that real freedom can only be found in one's own mind. However, it seemed impossible for him to reach this insight within the framework of his social life and he decided to leave his princely existence. He cut off his long hair, the sign of his noble descent, went out into the woods and studied with many teachers of his time, as others did in those turbulent times. He joined various teachers and holy men, immersed himself in the study of the ancient Vedic scriptures and learned meditation techniques already known at that time. Although he learned quickly and often surpassed his teachers, none of their methods could lead him beyond limited, transient experiences. A phase of radical asceticism began: weeks of remaining in an upright posture without sitting down or even leaning back, breathing exercises and starvation cures. After he had experienced all the joys of the body and senses as a prince, he believed that sensory impressions were an obstacle and that their suppression led to mental clarity. Eventually, however, he realized that asceticism not only weakened the body but also his mind and did not bring him closer to his goal. This experience was another turning point in his life - his turning away from the extremes and he started eating again.

No sooner had he regained his strength than he embarked on the most momentous trek of his life and arrived in the North Indian city of Uruvela, today's Bodhgaya. Here, Siddhartha settled in the shade of a poplar fig tree, determined not to get up until he finally attained the enlightening knowledge he had been searching for six years.

He sat for six days and nights in deep meditation. His immersion was so unshakable that neither external nor internal distractions could disturb him. At the dawn of the seventh day, the full moon in May, he attained enlightenment at the age of 35 and became Buddha, the Awakened One - awakened from the dream of ignorance. All inherent qualities of the mind were unfolded. Perfect enlightenment means the experience of fearlessness, infinite joy and boundless compassion. Out of this compassion one acts with wisdom for the benefit of all beings.
Calling the earth "as a witness for his steadfastness", he touched the ground with the fingertips of his right hand. As a statue, he is often depicted in this earth touching gesture. Buddha remained in meditation under the Bodhi tree for seven more weeks to accustom his body to the strong currents of inner bliss.

Siddhartha was 35 years old when he became Buddha, the "awakened one". He never had the idea to bring a religion into the world, he did not even know the term "religion". Compassion was the driving force to share his insights with others.

Interestingly enough, Buddha's first disciples were those five companions of all people who had initially turned away from him in indignation when he broke off his rigorous fasting to follow the "middle path". When the five ascetics approached him in the forest near Benares (Varanasi), they were attracted by his charisma and understood that something special had happened to him. They became curious, asked him for explanations, and Buddha taught the "Four Noble Truths" as the basis, goal and path to liberation and enlightenment. Thus began his teaching.

More and more Buddha developed the Dharma, the Buddhist teaching. Already in the first three months, while he stayed in the forest of Benares, the community of his disciples, the Sangha, grew. The number of disciples increased greatly when the North Indian King Bimbisara declared his belief in Buddhism.
As ruler of the powerful kingdom of Magadha, he ensured that the new teaching would have far-reaching influence. Unusual for the time was the mixed composition of followers across all strata of the people: kings, merchants and beggars were among the disciples of Buddha. The caste system had no significance in the Sangha. The warrior

caste recognized its own ideals of nobility and serenity in Buddhism. The merchants valued the Buddhist rejection of costly cult sacrifices, which were traditionally seen as a guarantee of business success. Lower castes and casteless people were attracted by the idea that the path to enlightenment through meditation and self-knowledge was open to everyone, regardless of their ancestry and origin. This also applied to women. Buddha's aunt opened the first nunnery - which was tantamount to a revolution at a time when women were sometimes worth less than cows.
His son and wife also became Buddha's disciples.

Against the resistance of many Hindus, who saw him as a charlatan or traitor, Buddha taught in three cycles, or "turned the Dharma Wheel Three Times": The first sixteen years he taught the basics of Buddhism. Above all, he gave teachings on behavior: on cause and effect, ego-illusion and mindfulness. In the second teaching cycle, which lasted eleven years, Buddha devoted himself to attitude. He taught about compassion and wisdom and that the supposed reality is dreamlike. In the third teaching cycle, in the last quarter of life, Buddha also gave teachings on the view and nature of mind. Here it was about the insight that everyone carries the potential to become a Buddha within himself and that space and joy can be experienced in an unseparated way.

During the monsoon season Buddha usually stayed in one place. Meditation retreats and teachings deepened the development of the practicing Sangha. Buddha called them "people of the inner being". Most of his students followed the first described path of cause and effect to achieve personal happiness. Some of his disciples were able to follow the path of viewpoint, which presupposes strong trust in one's own Buddha nature and a realized teacher.

In 45 years, he gave 84,000 teachings, which today are handed down in the 108 volumes of the Kangyur. When Buddha died at the age of 80 in the small village of Kushinagara - not far from his birthplace - on the night of the full moon in May, his last words are said to have been: "Now I can die happy. I have never held a single teaching in a closed hand. Everything that is useful to you, I have already given." And last but not least: "Don't believe anything I say just because I am Buddha, but check if it corresponds to your experience. Be your own light." After Buddha's death, his teachings were compiled at the Council of Rajgir. 500 realized practitioners gathered in order to write down the teachings, which until then had often been remembered and transmitted in verse form. Thus, each sutra begins with the words "Thus I have heard it ..." and introduces the place, the listeners, the occasion and the circumstances of the teaching. In this way, the Buddha's teaching has been preserved for the future. The teachings of the Great Way (Mahayana) and the Diamond Way (Vajrayana) were not yet published at that time. They were largely passed on orally among practitioners and transmitted from teacher to student.