MATERIAL 2

BUDDHA´S LIFE STORY

Buddha's life story is not presented in all details in the various Buddhist traditions; this has to do with the fact that certain aspects of his life serve as inspiration and are emphasized differently.

At the time of the birth of the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni, India was a flourishing high culture. There was great spiritual openness - comparable to the Renaissance and the awakening in the 1960s. Various philosophical schools and views flourished simultaneously. People expected that a teaching would be holistic and that a world view would 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 could refute, he became his disciple - the spiritual honesty of the time demanded it.

Buddha was born around 560 B.C. as the son of a princely family on the southern edge of present-day Nepal near the then city of Kapilavastu in the Lumbini grove. The joy over the birth of the heir to the throne was great. The family belonged to the Shakyas family and belonged to the Gautama's lineage, from where his name Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni ("the wise man of the Shakya's tribe") comes.

His birth on a full moon day in May was accompanied by special signs and his parents received the following prophecy: "If the boy does not come into contact with the sufferings of the world, he will become a great ruler and fulfill all your wishes. But should he see the suffering of mankind, he will leave everything and bring a whole new dimension to the world in search of lasting happiness".

The parents then decided to raise the young prince inside the palace in an artificially shielded world where there was only youth, beauty, pleasure and joyful experiences. He enjoyed a comprehensive education in the sciences, in art, in sports and, as a member of the warrior caste, also in martial arts. In all disciplines he excelled by his outstanding talent. He was subtle, courageous and strong at the same time. During his few excursions into the "normal" world, everything was prepared in such a way that he saw only young, healthy and happy people. So the young prince grew up in his luxury world, enjoyed life, married in the traditional way



and had a son, Rahula.

This lasted until he was 29 years old. During secret excursions he encountered the negative aspects of life. On three consecutive days he saw a seriously ill person, an old man and a dead person. The things one otherwise gets used to very gradually met him completely unprepared and shook him deeply. He suddenly understood that worldly joys, beauty, strength and youth are conditional and transitory. He returned to his palace, but nothing could please him anymore. The insight that these sufferings were part of the life of the beings left him no peace and he looked for 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 sitting in deep meditation and when their eyes met, he suddenly knew that true freedom and lasting happiness 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, determined to leave his previous life behind, went out into the woods and studied with many teachers of his time. Although he learned quickly and usually surpassed his teachers after a short time, none of their methods led him beyond limited, transient experiences.

Driven by a deep desire to find something truly liberating, he went further and joined a group of five ascetics who lived in the woods near present-day

Bodhgaya. Having experienced all the joys of the body and senses as a prince, he now believed that sensory impressions were an obstacle and that their suppression led to mental clarity. So he practiced in complete renunciation and almost starved himself to death. Eventually, however, he realized that asceticism weakened not only 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.

After Siddharta had regained his strength, he sat down in the shade of the well-known Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya and decided to stay here in deep meditation until he reached his goal. He sat in deep meditation for six days and nights. 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 developed. 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.

In the forest near Benares (Varanasi) he met his former companions, the five ascetics. They were attracted by his joyful aura and understood that something special had happened to him. Curious, they asked him for explanations, and Buddha taught the "Four Noble Truths" as the basis, path and goal for liberation and enlightenment.

Already in the first three months, while he stayed in the forest of Benares, the community of his disciples, the Sangha, grew. Unusual for the time was their mixed composition across all social classes of the people: kings, merchants and beggars were among the disciples of Buddha. The caste system had no meaning in the Sangha. Buddha's wife and his son Rahula also became members of the Sangha.

From then on, Buddha travelled through Northern India teaching for 45 years, mostly surrounded by traveling disciples. Several places developed, where he stayed more often and gave special teachings. The forest of Benares is mainly connected to the teachings of the first cycle, which historically gave rise to the Theravada schools. At the Vulture Peak in Rajgir he gave mainly the Mahayana's teachings on compassion and wisdom (second cycle); in Shravasti (in the kingdom of Magadha) and Vaishali finally the Vajrayana with the explanations on the nature of mind (third cycle).

Although Buddha and his disciples never proselytized, the new teaching spread to Northern India through its natural attraction: "Where there is a lake, the swans will come". On the other hand, the new movement was also met with hostility by those religious forces who were envious as well as from those who feared social upheaval. After all, the Buddha did not accept the caste system and accepted women as nuns into the order. Moreover, his statements on cause and effect (karma) did not at all correspond to the norms of the caste system.

The rainy seasons were spent by Buddha and his disciples in seclusion with intensive meditation practice, while the other times of the year were used for travel and teaching. Over the course of 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 begins with 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 written at that time. They were largely passed on orally among practitioners and transmitted from teacher to student.