# 1 BUDDHA'S LIFE STORY

INTRODUCTORY TEXT

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL I

Course of lesson
Didactic references
Material 1
Material 2
Worksheet 1
Answers to Worksheet 1
Worksheet 2
Answers to Worksheet 2
Worksheet 3
Answers to Worksheet 3

SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL II

Course of lesson
Didactic references
Worksheet 1
Material 1
Material 2
Worksheet 2
Answers to Worksheet 2

# BUDDHA´S LIFESTORY

Buddha's life story is not presented uniformly 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 to different degrees.

At the time of the birth of the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni, India was a flourishing advanced civilization, characterized by great spiritual openness. A wide variety of philosophical schools and viewpoints flourished simultaneously. People expected a teaching to be holistic and for a worldview to permeate life. Teachings had to have a foundation, have clear methods, and have an attainable goal. People were very careful with assertions: For as soon as someone held a view that another could refute, he became his disciple - so demanded the intellectual honesty of the time.

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. There was great joy at the birth of the heir to the throne. The family belonged to the Shakya family and to the lineage of the Gautamas, from where his name Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni ("the sage from the tribe of the Shakyas") 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. However, should he see the suffering of the people, 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 within the palace in an artificially shielded world where there was only youth, beauty, pleasure and joyful experiences. He enjoyed an extensive education in the sciences, the arts, sports and, as a member of the warrior caste, martial arts. In all disciplines he shone with outstanding talent. He was subtle, courageous and strong at the same time. During his few excursions into the "normal" world, everything was prepared so that he saw only young, healthy and happy people. Thus, the young prince grew up in his luxurious world, enjoyed life, married traditionally and had a son, Rahula.
This lasted until he was 29 years old. During secret excursions, he encountered the darker side of life. On three consecutive days he saw one seriously ill person, one old person and one dead person. What one usually gets used to very gradually, hit him completely unprepared and shook him deeply. He suddenly had to understand that worldly pleasures, beauty, strength and youth are conditional and transient. Thereupon he returned to his palace, but nothing could please him anymore. The realization that these sufferings were part of the life of beings gave him no peace and he looked for a way out, a lasting happiness that is not subject to any conditions.

The next day he had another experience that was to shape his life. He saw a man sitting in deep meditation and when their eyes met, he suddenly knew that real freedom and lasting happiness can only be found in one's own mind. However, penetrating to this insight seemed impossible in the context of his social life and he decided to leave his princely existence. He cut off his long hair, the sign of his noble lineage, determined to leave his previous life behind, went out into the woods and studied with many teachers of his time. Although he was a quick learner and usually surpassed his teachers after a short time, none of their methods took him beyond limited, transient experiences. Driven by a deep desire to find something truly liberating, he went on to join a group of five ascetics living in the forests near present-day Bodhgaya. Having experienced all the pleasures of the body and the senses as a prince, he now believed that sense impressions were a hindrance and that suppressing them would lead to mental clarity. So he practiced complete renunciation and almost starved himself to death. Eventually, however, he realized that asceticism weakened not only his 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 extremes and he took food again.

After Siddhartha regained his strength, he sat down in the shade of the now-famous Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya and decided to remain here in recess until he reached his goal. He sat in deep meditation for six days and nights. His absorption was so unshakable that neither external nor internal distractions could disturb him. At

the dawn of the seventh day, the full moon of May, he attained enlightenment at the age of 35 and became the Buddha, the Awakened One - awakened from the dream of ignorance. All the inherent qualities of the mind were unfolded. Perfect enlightenment means the experience of fearlessness, infinite joy and boundless compassion. From this compassion, one acts with wisdom for the benefit of all beings.

Invoking the earth "as a witness to 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.

For seven more weeks, Buddha remained in meditation under the Bodhi tree to accustom his body to the powerful currents of inner bliss.

In the forest near Benares (Varanasi) he met his former companions, the five ascetics. They were attracted by his joyful radiance 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 to 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 up. Unusual for the time was its mixed composition across all classes of the people: kings, merchants and beggars belonged to 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 traveled around northern India teaching for 45 years, usually surrounded by traveling disciples. Several places crystallized where he stayed more frequently and gave special teachings. The forest of Benares is especially associated with the lessons of the first cycle, which historically gave rise to the schools of Theravada. At Vulture Hill in Rajgir, he gave mainly the Mahayana teachings on compassion and wisdom (second cycle); at Shravasti (in the kingdom of Magadha) and Vaishali, finally, the Vajrayana with the explanations on direct identification with the qualities of the nature of mind (third cycle).

Although Buddha and his disciples never proselytized, the new teaching spread in northern India through its natural appeal: "Where there is a lake, the swans come". On the other hand, the new movement was also opposed by religious envious people as well as those who feared social upheaval. Finally, the Buddha did not accept the caste system and accepted women as nuns into the religious community. Moreover, his statements on cause and effect (karma) did not conform at all to the norms of the caste system.

Buddha and his disciples spent the rainy seasons in seclusion with intensive meditation practice, while the other times of the year were used for travel and teaching. In 45 years he gave 84,000 teachings, which today have been 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 not held a single teaching in a closed hand. All that is of use to you I have already given." And last of all, "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 teaching discourses were compiled in the First Council of Rajgir. 500 realized practitioners gathered to write down the teaching discourses, which until then had often been recalled and transmitted in verse form. Thus, each sutra begins with the words "Thus I have heard ..." and as introduction, states the place, audience, occasion and circumstances of the teaching. In this way, the Buddha's teaching was preserved for the future. The teachings of the Great Way (Mahayana) and the Diamond Way (Vajrayana) were not published at that time. They were largely passed on orally among practitioners and transmitted from teacher to student. Only in later councils in Vaishali and Pataliputra (Patna) were these teachings also written down. For this reason, there is an early Buddhist canon in Pali and a later canon in Sanskrit.

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

# COURSE OF LESSON – SECONDARY LEVEL II

## OBJECTIVES

**Students will be able to:**

- reflect on Buddha as a historically significant personality and as the founder of Buddhism.
- explain important aspects of the phases of his life path.
- explain Buddha's last statement.
- reflect on their own life dreams and relate them to Buddha's life story.

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|---|---|---|
| TRANSFER | Take another look at your wish list. Check if and to what extent your selection has changed. | **WS 1, lower half**<br>Students complement new ideas<br>Students discuss these |
| DISCUSSION | The last statements of Buddha | **WS 2, Question 6**<br>Students consider the meaning |
| EXERCISE 2 | Buddha's life story and important aspects of the individual phases | **Material 2**<br>**WS 2**<br>**Answers to WS 2**<br>Students evaluate text with questions<br>Students save the results |
| EXERCISE 1 | Buddha's luxury life in the palace - why did he give it up? | **Material 1**<br>Students consider and discuss |
| INTRO | What do you hope for in your life? Fill out the wish list! | **WS 1, upper half**<br>Students reflect on their own desires and expectations |

## BASIS

**What could intertest students on the topic:**

- Are there wishes, values and attitudes that increase happiness in life?
- As the founder of a religion, does Buddha convey a path of experience that is still up to date today?
- Does Buddha's life story have anything to do with us?

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

# DIDACTIC REFERENCES — SEKUNDARY LEVEL II

## OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to …

1. reflect on Buddha as a historically significant personality and as the founder of Buddhism.
2. explain important aspects of the phases of his life path.
3. explain Buddha's last statement.
4. reflect on their own life dreams and relate them to Buddha's life story.

## INTRODUCTION

The central goal of Buddhist practice is to achieve a state of lasting happiness. As a starting point, the students should reflect on their own wishes for a fulfilling life. They fill out the "wish list" on the upper half of **Worksheet 1**, which is then completed on the lower half of **Worksheet 1** at the end of the lesson.

## EXERCISE 1

**Material 1** is read aloud by the teacher or projected with a suitable medium. On the upper half of the sheet a short description of Buddha's life in the palace is provided as well as details leading to the question:

What made Prince Siddhartha leave this "wonderful" situation in the Royal Palace?

The students consider the motives. These are not discussed; this is an approach to the topic.

Then the lower half of **Material 1** with the prophecy is read out or revealed:

Buddha's departure from the palace was predicted in case he was confronted with the suffering of the world. His goal will be to find a way to achieve lasting happiness.

Discussion about the meaning of the prophecy takes place in a short teaching talk.

## EXERCISE 2

The students read the text on Buddha's life story in **Material 2** and formulate key points on important aspects of the individual phases in **Worksheet 2.**

They discuss these in the group and the results are then presented together in class.
The initial question of why he left the palace is again referred to. It should become clear that his motivation was outstanding, namely to find a way to achieve lasting happiness for himself and all beings (i.e. the "Four Noble Truths").

## DISCUSSION

**Exercise 6 of Worksheet 2** is dealt with in more detail. The last statements of Buddha, such as "Be your own clear light" are reflected in the plenary. His invitation to review his teachings makes it clear that Buddhism is not a religion of faith, but a path of experience. Anyone can follow the path to become a Buddha. Buddha is like a friend that you trust and whose example you can follow. He does not want blind followers, but gives teachings and methods. Each of his students makes his own experiences on the path to enlightenment. Realized Buddhist masters pass on the methods of the Buddha to their students to this day.

## REFLECTION

The students read again their wish list on **Worksheet 1** from the beginning of the lesson. They reflect and formulate new wishes and ideas on the lower half of **Worksheet 1**, if necessary. At the end of the lesson it is all about the inspiration to develop a further perspective.

Buddha's life story could inspire to put the development of inner qualities and values on the wish list as well. Long-term life goals such as developing wisdom, strength and surplus, so that one can do a lot for others, could be added.

Further examples of additions to the wish list could be:
Love that thinks of others; using one's mind for meaningful scientific work; maintaining patience and perseverance in the long run; fearlessly maintaining one's goals; being aware of the meaning of one's own actions; ...

WORKSHEET 1

# WISH LIST

**EXERCISES**

1. "What do you hope for in life? What are your dreams and desires?" Fill out the wish list.
2. Mark now your wishes of material kind - i.e. objects (like cars etc.) in RED and your wishes of immaterial kind (like peace etc.) in BLUE.



## Wish List



3. Were there new wishes and ideas that came up that you had not previously considered? This could also be about the development of inner qualities and values.



## Wish List



MATERIAL 1

**STEP 1**

**Siddhartha, the later Buddha,**
grew up inside the palace in a sheltered world where there was only youth, beauty, pleasure and joyful experiences. As the son of a prince, he learned everything that belonged to the education of the families of the ruler caste of ancient India and prepared him for a life as a warrior king. In addition to mathematics, reading, writing and law, he also perfected the use of weapons, chariot driving, riding and elephant taming. The young prince grew up in a world of luxury according to the ideas of his parents, enjoyed life, married and had a son.

**IMPULSE**

**This is an excellent, wonderful situation that could hardly be better. But he left the palace and his sheltered life. Why?**

**Make guesses.**

**STEP 2**

**Shortly after Siddhartha's birth the parents had received a prophecy:**
"Unless your son comes into contact with the sufferings of the world, he will become a great ruler according to your wishes. But should he perceive the sufferings of the world, he will leave everything behind and bring a new dimension into the world. He will find a way to achieve lasting happiness."

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.

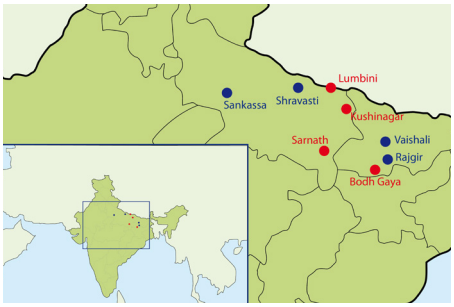
In 45 years, he gave 84,000 teachings, which today are handed down in the 108 volumes of the Kangyur. When Buddha died at the age of 80 in the small village of Kushinagara - not far from his birthplace - on the night of the full moon in May, his last words are said to have been: "Now I can die happy. 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.

WORKSHEET 2

# QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

**EXERCISE**

Read the text "The Life Story of the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni" in **Material 2** and note down key points to the questions. Discuss them in the group.




1. In what environment was Prince Siddhartha born?
   Note country - place - time - parents' home - culture.

2. What disturbed him when he was 29 year's old and caused him to leave the palace?
   Name the motives of the young prince.



3. What did he try out on his search?
   Find different phases.

4. How is his goal, enlightenment, described?
   Emphasize formulations in the text.

5. Who were his students?
   Name what was special for that time.

6. What were his last words?
   Explain their meaning.

ANSWERS TO WS 2

# QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

**EXERCISES**

Read the text "The Life Story of the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni" in **Material 2** and note down key points to the questions. Discuss them in the group.

1. **In what environment was Prince Siddhartha born?**
   **Make a note of country, place, time, parents' house, culture.**

   Southern Nepal - Northern India, Lumbini near Kapilavastu, ca. 560 B.C., princely family, dynasty of the Shakyas Gautama, flourishing high culture with spiritual openness and various philosophical directions

2. **What disturbed him when he was 29 years old so much that he left the palace?**
   **Name the motives of the young prince.**

   The confrontation with the reality of old age, sickness and death disturbed him greatly. He understood the transience of worldly pleasures and searched for a way to achieve lasting happiness.

3. **What did he try out on his search?**
   **Find different phases.**

   He went out and studied with many teachers of his time. He practiced in complete renunciation (asceticism) and starved himself almost to death. He sat in deep meditation (immersion) under the Bodhi tree without allowing any distraction.

4. **How is its goal, enlightenment, described?**
   **Emphasize formulations in the text.**

   Perfect purification from all veils of ignorance and the perfect development of all the inherent qualities of the mind: fearlessness, highest joy and boundless compassion. Huge streams of inner bliss flowed through his body.

5. **Who were his students?**
   **Name what was special for that time.**

   They came from all walks of life: Kings, merchants, beggars, women and men, his wife and son. The caste system had no meaning. Even women could achieve the highest realization.

6. **What were his last words?**
   **Explain their meaning.**

   "All that is of use to you, I have already given. Don't believe anything I say just because I am a Buddha, but check if it is in accordance with your experience. Be your own light."
   He passed on everything he knew and had experienced (84,000 teachings). It is not a religion of faith. It is about one's own experiences, everyone can critically question and check. He challenges people to go the way themselves.