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.