

Contemplative Odyssey Day-long Retreat

The Buddha's Greatest Discovery, part 1

February 3rd, 2018

In order to understand the singularity of the Buddha's great discovery, I'd like to start by introducing you to the man whom we all call The Buddha. Some of you will know this story, but for me, it never gets old.

The man who came to be known as the Buddha was a real, historical person. This is not disputed, but most of the specific details of his life are hard to pin down. Much of what we know is from transcriptions of oral accounts made a hundred years or more after his death, so it is inevitable that the facts have become muddled. On top of this, his story was increasingly embellished with miracles and powers and mythologies, some traditions even elevating him to a god. At times it is hard to know where the fact stop and the stories begin.

I'll tell you the story as generally accepted by historians. There may be errors in it, and there may be parts of the traditional stories that are accurate but have been left out, but this is pretty close to what is believed to be the historical story.

The man who became known as the Buddha was born somewhere around 500 BC in what is now Nepal, at the foot of the Himalayas. He was named Gautama Siddhartha. His father was the leader of the influential Gautama family of the Shakya clan. (The epithet Shakyamuni Buddha literally means "sage of the Shakyas.") Though not the son of an actual king, as told in the traditional stories, Siddhartha was nonetheless born to an influential family, and was heir to it's leadership.

There are stories of prophesies and secret midnight expeditions, but whether or not these occurred is impossible to say. It did eventually come to trouble the young Siddhartha that everywhere he looked outside of his palace, he saw suffering: sickness, old age, and death. He was living a life of ease and power now, but he saw that eventually he would succumb to suffering. It was inevitable. And so would everyone he loved, and indeed, everyone ever born.

In the culture of the time, wandering ascetics and contemplatives were a common sight, and at 29 years old Siddhartha left his home in search of such a teacher who could show him the solution to the problem of suffering. The classic stories say that he snuck out at night, but that was a later addition

to the story. Early writings agree that he left with the full knowledge of his family, and despite the fact that his parents did not want him to go. It can be troubling to think of this young man leaving a wife and son in order to ease his own fears. There is no way of knowing what he was thinking, but I like to think that he left them in a place of safety and ease while he went searching for a solution to the suffering that his family would inevitably face. It is equally possible, though, that he simply had a personal crisis and abandoned his home for his own benefit. Whichever was the case, some time later he clearly had an intention of saving everyone from their suffering, and did call for his wife and son to join him.

Siddhartha became a student of Alara Kalama, who was a master of the Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy. Alara Kalama taught Siddhartha *dhyanic* meditation, which involved deep states of concentration resulting in pleasant altered mind states. (As far as I can tell, most meditation styles up to this point in time were concentration techniques of some type, focusing on “the light” or seeking the “sphere of emptiness” and so on. These had roots in the earliest Hindu writings.) Siddhartha was a good student and mastered the techniques relatively quickly, but found that despite the depths he could reach while meditating, when he returned to daily life, suffering still remained. When there was nothing more Siddhartha could learn from Alara, he went in search of another teacher.

Uddaka Ramaputta was Siddhartha’s second teacher, and he taught even deeper concentration practices known as the *immaterial meditations*. Again, Siddhartha masters these techniques quickly, and again found that whatever ecstatic or transcendental states he reached during meditation, these passed away once he returned to daily life. When Ramaputta had nothing further to teach him, Siddhartha moved on.

Having determined that deep concentration was not a solution to suffering, Siddhartha joined five others and practiced extreme asceticism for about five or six years. I can’t tell you specifics of what these ascetics did, but it included self-mortification and self denial. One practice was extreme fasting, and by the time he finally gave up on asceticism, it was said that his ribs “stood out like a row of spindles” and that he could feel his spine through his stomach. That may be hyperbole, but certainly five years of self torture and malnutrition had left him in a pretty desperate physical state.

So finally, the story goes (and I’m wandering from historic facts here), in desperation, Siddhartha Gautama sat down under a tree and determined that he would not get up again until he had discovered the key to freedom from suffering. He had spent years withdrawing into profoundly deep

meditative states, and denying his physical body in order to find a spiritual one, and these had not worked. There had to be another way.

The traditional story is that Siddhartha sat under a fig tree in the town of Gaya, in what is now northeastern India, determined to find the solution to suffering. In the same way that Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, Siddhartha was tempted by Mara, the deva of evil and death. He was guilt-tripped about having abandoned his duty to his family and clan; he resisted being seduced by beautiful women; and he withstood the terror of monsters and demons attacking him. The story goes that having faced his innermost demons, he watched the sun rise, and on seeing the morning star, he had the realization that freed him from suffering.

It seems pretty well accepted that Siddhartha's two concentration teachers were real people, and that he did practice some form of asceticism for several years, but the actual events that led to his final discovery (*enlightenment* as the traditional stories call it) are not known. Certainly something happened which led to his teaching something new and changing the world of psycho-spiritual endeavor.

We don't know exactly how he came to his discovery, but we do have very clear written documentation of what that discovery was. Rather than seeking escape from the reality of suffering, Siddhartha instead escaped *into* reality. Instead of taking deep concentration as the solution, he used it as the *means* to explore the experience of each moment in real time. He found that he could break down the complex experiences of self, emotions, thought, and sensations, into their component parts. Like a biologist analyzing an organism, or a physicist exploring the composition of matter, Siddhartha looked at experience in greater and greater detail, breaking it down into smaller and smaller parts until he got to the most basic, fundamental, tiniest pieces and found that they weren't really anything at all. Suffering comes from these millions of tiny momentary events connecting, interacting, tangling, and glomming together. Because we cannot see this clearly, we have the sense of suffering. But suffering doesn't really exist. We suffer because we can't see what's really there. Siddhartha discovered a way to see what's really there. He discovered the way to be free from suffering, and it was nothing like what had been taught so far in the history of contemplative endeavor.

When he discovered this, Siddhartha felt like he had awoken from a dream. Until this point, he had not been able to see clearly, but now he saw things as they really were. The story goes that shortly after this, he encountered several men who recognized him to be a very extraordinary being. They asked him if he was a god, or a reincarnation of a god, or if he was a wizard. He denied all these, and

when they asked him what he *was*, he simply replied, “I am awake.” The word for *awake* in the language of the time was *buddha*.

So now you know the Buddha’s greatest discovery, but it’s no use unless you know how to do it. I’ll teach you how in part two, after a 20 minute break. During the next 20 minutes, you can do walking meditation, or if you prefer, for this period, do walking contemplation. Walk around the block and allow what you’ve just heard to sink in. Contemplation is not the same as intellectual analysis. Don’t *think about* what I’ve been saying. Rather, just hold these thoughts in your awareness and allow insights or realizations or resonances to arise naturally. If they don’t that’s fine. Try not to fall into logical thinking about it, but if you do, and you find it to be productive that’s OK too.

In 20 minutes the bell will ring, and then we’ll learn how to do this amazing thing that the Buddha discovered, that can release us from the bondage of suffering.