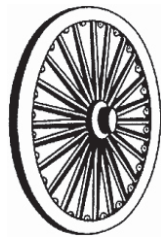




**GOTAMA the BUDDHA**  
**His Life and Teaching**

Vipassana Research Institute

# **Gotama the Buddha: His Life and Teaching**



**Vipassana Research Institute  
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## THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

Sixth century B.C. was an important era in history. This was the period when a great benefactor of mankind was born and became renowned as Gotama the Buddha. The Buddha rediscovered the path of Dhamma leading to the eradication of universal suffering. With great compassion he spent forty-five years showing the path and this helped millions of people to come out of their misery. Even today this path is helping humanity, and will continue to do so provided the teachings and practice are maintained in their pristine purity.

History tells us that in 624 B.C. King Suddhodana ruled the kingdom of Sākya. He had two queens: the chief queen was Mahāmāyā and the younger queen was Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the sister of Mahāmāyā. When Mahāmāyā was travelling from Kapilavatthu, the capital, to Devadaha, her parents' home, to have her first child, she gave birth along the way to a son under a large sāla tree in the Lumbinī grove on the full moon day of Vesākha (month of April-May). An old sage, Asita, visited the palace, and on seeing the marks of greatness (*mahāpurīsa lakḥaṇa*) in the child, first expressed joy and then shed tears. He was joyful at seeing that a great being

## THE TEACHING OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha taught the middle path. In the first sermon known as the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*,<sup>15</sup> or the Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma, the Buddha taught that seekers of truth must avoid two extremes—that of the path of sensual pleasure, and that of extreme penance or austerity. This middle path he explained by means of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

### The Four Noble Truths

1. There is suffering.
2. Suffering has a cause: craving.
3. If craving ceases, suffering ceases.
4. There is a path leading to the cessation of suffering.<sup>16</sup>

This path leading to the cessation of suffering is the Eightfold Path. It is divided into three divisions of *sīla*—moral living, *samādhi*—control of the mind, and *paññā*—total purification of the mind by wisdom and insight.

## THE SIX COUNCILS (*Dhamma-Saṅgītis*)

The six historical Councils, or *Dhamma-Saṅgītis*, were held for the purpose of compiling the words of the Buddha. These were called recitation councils, or *saṅgītis*, because the texts were recited sentence by sentence by an eminent Thera (elder monk), and chanted after him in chorus by the whole assembly. It was only on the basis of unanimous acceptance by the members of the assembly that the words were compiled. This collection of the Buddha's teaching is called the *Tipitaka*.<sup>22</sup>

There are two important aspects of the Dhamma—the theoretical, textual aspect (*pariyatti*), and the practical, applied aspect (*paṭipatti*). Basically the work of such recitations or councils is to preserve the *pariyatti* aspect of the Dhamma in its pristine purity. The means for preserving the *paṭipatti* aspect of the Dhamma is the actual practice of the Buddha's teaching, handed down from teacher to pupil.

The councils were necessary to preserve the words accurately because, until the Fourth Council, the words of

## *THE SPREAD OF THE DHAMMA*

**H**istory shows that during the time of the Buddha, the Kings Bimbisāra, Suddhodana, and Prasenajita received great benefit from their practice of the Dhamma, and naturally wanted to share this benefit with others. They enthusiastically supported the dissemination of the Buddha's teaching in their respective kingdoms. Yet the fact remains that the Dhamma spread to the masses not only because of this royal patronage but because of the efficacy of the technique itself. This technique enables anyone who applies it to come out of misery by rooting out the mental impurities of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). A simple and universal technique, it can be practised by men and women from any class, any sect, any communal group, with the same results. Suffering is universal: unwanted things happen and desired things may or may not happen. A universal malady must have a universal remedy: Dhamma is this remedy. The Buddha compassionately and freely distributed the Dhamma throughout northern India,

## VIPASSANA MEDITATION

Vipassana meditation is the personal purification of the mind. It is the highest form of awareness—the total perception of the mind-matter phenomena in its true nature. It is the choiceless observation of things as they are.

Vipassana is the meditation the Buddha practised after trying all other forms of bodily mortification and mind control and finding them inadequate to free him from the seemingly endless round of birth and death, pain and sorrow.

It is a technique so valuable that in Burma it was preserved in its pristine purity for more than 2,200 years.

Vipassana meditation has nothing to do with the development of supernormal, mystical, or special powers, even though they may be awakened. Nothing magical happens. The process of purification that occurs is simply an elimination of negativities, complexes, knots, and habits that have clouded pure consciousness and blocked the flow of mankind's highest qualities—pure love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*),