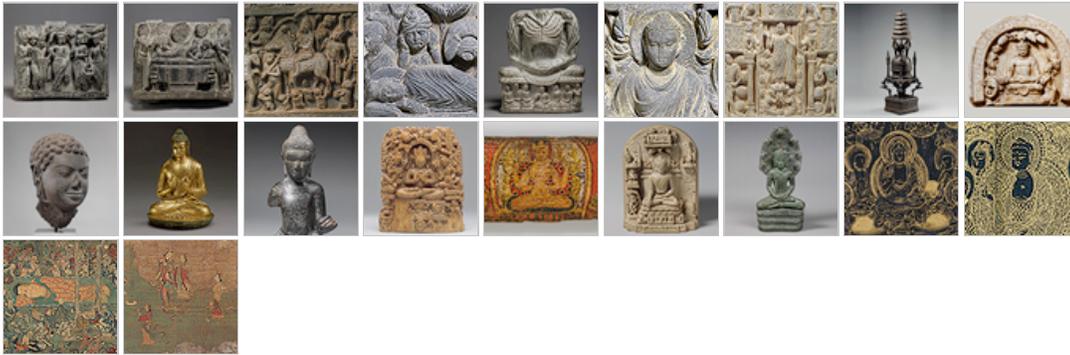


## Life of the Buddha



According to tradition, the historical Buddha lived from 563 to 483 B.C., although scholars postulate that he may have lived as much as a century later. He was born to the rulers of the Shakya clan, hence his appellation Shakyamuni, which means "sage of the Shakya clan." The legends that grew up around him hold that both his conception and birth were miraculous. His mother, Maya, conceived him when she dreamed that a white elephant entered her right side (The Dream of Queen Maya, 1976.402). She gave birth to him in a standing position while grasping a tree in a garden (Birth of the Buddha, 1987.417.1). The child emerged from Maya's right side fully formed and proceeded to take seven steps. Once back in the palace, he was presented to an astrologer who predicted that he would become either a great king or a great religious teacher and he was given the name Siddhartha ("He who achieves His Goal"). His father, evidently thinking that any contact with unpleasantness might prompt Siddhartha to seek a life of renunciation as a religious teacher, and not wanting to lose his son to such a future, protected him from the realities of life.

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The ravages of poverty, disease, and even old age were therefore unknown to Siddhartha, who grew up surrounded by every comfort in a sumptuous palace. At age twenty-nine, he made three successive chariot rides outside the palace grounds and saw an old person, a sick person, and a corpse, all for the first time. On the fourth trip, he saw a wandering holy man whose asceticism inspired Siddhartha to follow a similar path in search of freedom from the suffering caused by the infinite cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Because he knew his father would try to stop him, Siddhartha secretly left the palace in the middle of the night (The Great Departure and the Temptation of the Buddha, 28.105) and sent all his belongings and jewelry back with his servant and horse. Completely abandoning his luxurious existence, he spent six years as an ascetic (Fasting Siddhartha, 1987.218.5), attempting to conquer the innate appetites for food, sex, and comfort by engaging in various yogic disciplines. Eventually near death from his vigilant fasting, he accepted a bowl of rice from a young girl. Once he had eaten, he had a realization that physical austerities were not the means to achieve spiritual liberation. At a place now known as Bodh Gaya ("enlightenment place"), he sat and meditated all night beneath a pipal tree. After defeating the forces of the demon Mara, Siddhartha reached enlightenment (Plaque with scenes from the life of the Buddha, 1982.233) and became a Buddha ("enlightened one") at the age of thirty-five.

The Buddha continued to sit after his enlightenment, meditating beneath the tree and then standing beside it for a number of weeks. During the fifth or sixth week, he was beset by heavy rains while meditating but was protected by the hood of the serpent king Muchilinda (Buddha sheltered by a naga, 1987.424.19ab). Seven weeks after his enlightenment, he left his seat under the tree and decided to teach others what he had learned, encouraging people to follow a path he called "The Middle Way," which is one of balance rather than extremism. He gave his first sermon (Buddha's First Sermon at Sarnath, 1980.527.4) in a deer park in Sarnath, on the outskirts of the city of Benares. He soon had many disciples and spent the next forty-five years walking around northeastern India spreading his teachings. Although the Buddha presented himself only as a teacher and not as a god or object of worship, he is said to have performed many miracles during his lifetime (Bookcover with scenes from the life of the Buddha, 1979.511). Traditional accounts relate that he died at the age of eighty (The Death of the Buddha, L.1993.69.4) in Kushinagara, after ingesting a tainted piece of either mushroom or pork. His body was cremated and the remains distributed among groups of his followers. These holy relics were enshrined in large hemispherical burial mounds (stupa, 1985.387), a number of which became important pilgrimage sites.

In India, by the Pala period (ca. 700–1200), the Buddha's life was codified into a series of "Eight Great Events" (1982.233). These eight events are, in order of their occurrence in the Buddha's life: his birth (1976.402), his defeat over Mara and consequent enlightenment (1982.233; 1985.392.1), his first sermon at Sarnath (1980.527.4), the miracles he performed at Shravasti (1979.511), his descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (Buddha's Descent from the Trayastrimsha Heaven, 28.31), his taming of a wild elephant (1979.511), the monkey's gift of honey, and his death (L.1993.69.4).

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#### Suggested Further Readings

Pal, Pratapaditya, et al. *Light of Asia: Buddha Sakyamuni in Asian Art*. Exhibition catalogue. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984.

Snellgrove, David L., ed. *The Image of the Buddha*. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978.

#### Suggested Online Resources

[The Asia Society and Museum: Buddhist Art and the Trade Routes](#)

#### Related exhibitions and online features

Special Exhibitions (including upcoming, current, and past exhibitions)

[Early Buddhist Manuscript Painting: The Palm-Leaf Tradition](#)

#### Related information by department

[Asian Art: Features and Exhibitions](#); [Collection Database](#); [Books](#); [Bibliography](#)

These related *Museum Bulletin* or *Journal* articles may or may not represent the most current scholarship.

Stone, Elizabeth Rosen. "An Early Image of Maitreya as a Brahman Ascetic?" *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 42 (2007).

Ford, Barbara Brennan. "The Arts of Japan." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, v. 45, no. 1 (Summer, 1987).

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The life story of the Buddha begins in Lumbini, near the border of Nepal and India, about 2,600 years ago, where the man Siddhartha Gautama was born. Although born a prince, he realized that conditioned experiences could not provide lasting happiness or protection from suffering. After a long spiritual search he went into deep meditation, where he realized the nature of mind. He achieved the state of unconditional and lasting happiness: the state of enlightenment, of buddhahood. This state of mind is free from disturbing emotions and expresses itself through fearlessness, joy and active compassion. He practiced his new way of life with a group of five ascetics, and his dedication to his quest was so stunning that the five ascetics became Siddhartha's followers. When answers to his questions did not appear, however, he redoubled his efforts, enduring pain, fasting nearly to starvation and refusing water. The Buddha Emerges. That night, Siddhartha sat alone under the Bodhi tree, vowing to not get up until the truths he sought came to him, and he meditated until the sun came up the next day. He remained there for several days, purifying his mind, seeing his entire life, and previous lives, in his thoughts. During this time, he had to overcome the threats of Mara, an evil demon, who challenged his right to become the Buddha. Dream of Maya presaging the Buddha's birth, marble relief from Nagarjunikonda, Andhra Pradesh state, India, Amaravati school, c. 3rd century ce; in the India Museum, Kolkata. P. Chandra. The Buddha's place within the tradition, however, cannot be understood by focusing exclusively on the events of his life and time (even to the extent that they are known). The story of a particular buddha begins before his birth and extends beyond his death. It encompasses the millions of lives spent on the path toward enlightenment and Buddhahood and the persistence of the buddha through his teachings and his relics after he has passed into nirvana. The historical Buddha is regarded as neither the first nor the last buddha to appear in the world.