

CHAPTER 2

The Life of the Buddha

Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who would become known as the Buddha, was born around the year 563 B.C.E. His birthplace was the town of Kapilavastu in what is now Nepal. Siddhartha was the son of Shuddhodana, the chief (sometimes called a rajah, or king) of the Sakyas. Hence the title Sakyamuni, or "Sage of the Sakyas," by which Siddhartha was later known.

There is no doubt that Siddhartha really existed. About 250 years after his death, an Indian emperor set up inscribed stone pillars at the important sites of Siddhartha's life and teachings. These are regarded as reliable historical records.

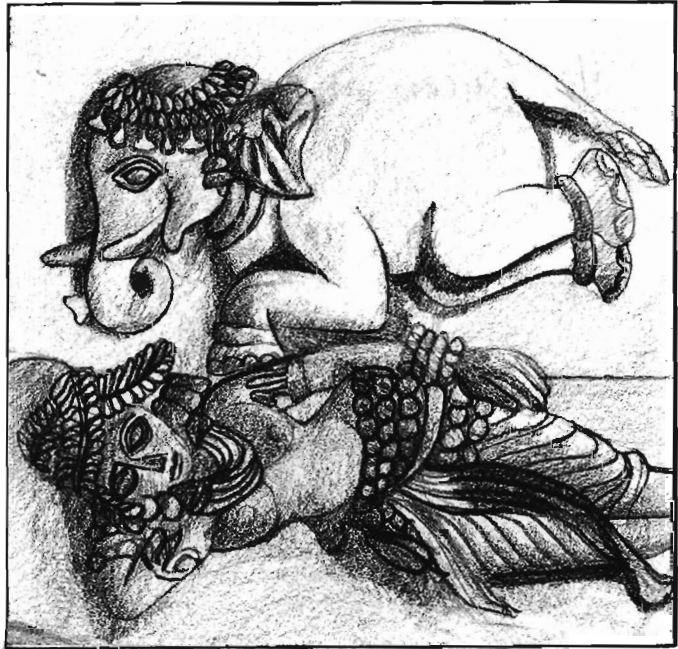
Moreover, the details of the Buddha's life, as retold in this chapter, come from an oral tradition begun by those who actually knew and saw him. These accounts were not written down until around 500 years after his death. They contain many miraculous elements, which Buddhists accept as historical truth. Students of religious history may regard them in the same way as Christ's miracles and resurrection, Moses' reception of the commandments from God, or the archangel Gabriel's revelations to the prophet Muhammad.





■ *Preceding page-
A side view of the mon-
umental Borobodur
temple in Java. Notice
the seated meditating
Bodhisattvas carved
in stone.*

According to the Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha's mother, Queen Maya, was a woman "of perfect form and bee-black tresses, fearless in heart and full of grace and virtue." One day, a feeling of great peace and joy came over her. That night, while she slept, she had a wonderful dream: An elephant with six tusks, carrying a lotus flower in its trunk, touched her right side. At that moment, her son was miraculously conceived.



■ *Queen Maya's
(Buddha's mother) dream*

When the queen told her husband of the dream, he called Brahmins, or learned men, to interpret it. They predicted that the child would be either the greatest king in the world or the greatest ascetic, a holy man who practices self-denial. His name would be Siddhartha, which means "he whose aim is accomplished."

Accompanied by dancing women and guards, Queen Maya went to her father's home to prepare for the birth. As she stepped from her chariot in the Lumbini Gardens, she stopped to rest, taking hold of a branch of a sal tree.

Legend tells us that at that moment, Buddha emerged from her right side. Without any help, the infant walked seven steps in

each of the four directions of the compass. In his footprints, lotus flowers sprouted from the earth. The miraculous infant announced, "No further births have I to endure, for this is my last body. Now shall I destroy and pluck out by the roots the sorrow that is caused by birth and death.

Seven days after the wondrous birth, Queen Maya died. Hence Mahaprajapati, Maya's sister, looked after Siddhartha.



The Great Renunciation

The prediction of the learned men had disturbed Siddhartha's father, King Shuddhodana. From the time of his son's birth, Shuddhodana encouraged his son to follow the path of kingship. Shuddhodana surrounded his son with pleasures and granted his every wish. Never did Siddhartha see or learn about any kind of suffering or hardship. When he left the palace, the king's guards went ahead of his chariot, clearing the streets of anything unpleasant or disturbing.

A Brahmin priest instructed Siddhartha in the ways of government, preparing him to govern wisely. Siddhartha also learned the arts of war—how to fight with a sword and shoot an arrow from his bow. The young man was strong and healthy, and his physical beauty and lively spirit attracted many friends. All of his companions were children of the officials of the court.

When Siddhartha was about twenty, he married Yasodhara, the daughter of one of the king's ministers. Their wedding feast lasted for many days, and gifts were distributed to the people of the kingdom to mark the occasion. Within a year, Yasodhara bore Siddhartha's son, named Rahula, which means "fetter" or "impediment."

King Shuddodana was pleased, for he had provided everything his son would need for happiness in his life and success as a great king. Some years passed, during which time Siddhartha lived in the palace with his wife and son, enjoying all the pleasures of a king.

Then, when he was twenty-nine years old, Siddhartha asked his charioteer, Channa, to take him for a ride without the consent of the king. As the prince rode through the city, he saw three things that he had never seen before. One was an old man, one

was a man suffering from illness, and the third was a corpse surrounded by mourners.

Siddhartha asked Channa to explain the meaning of these strange sights. Channa responded that old age, sickness, and death were natural and unavoidable things that came to all people. They were to be endured.

Shocked, Siddhartha returned to the palace and thought about what he had seen. For the first time, he confronted the reality of life: "Everything is transient; nothing is permanent in this world....Knowing that, I can find delight in nothing....How can a man, who knows that death is quite inevitable, still feel greed in his heart, enjoy the world of senses and not weep in this great danger?"

Once more, Siddhartha asked Channa to take him into the city. This time, he saw the last of the "Four Sights" that changed his life. This was a wandering holy man, an ascetic, with no possessions. The man had shaved his head, wore only a ragged yellow robe, and carried a walking-staff. Siddhartha stopped his chariot and questioned the man. The ascetic told the prince, "I am...terrified by birth and death and therefore have adopted a homeless life to win salvation....I search for the most blessed state in which suffering, old age, and death are unknown."

That very night, Siddhartha resolved to renounce the life of pleasure in the palace. He silently kissed his sleeping wife and young son and ordered Channa to drive him out of the city. Legend claims that celestial beings held up the hooves of the horses so that their clatter would not wake the guards. At the edge of a forest, Siddhartha took off his jeweled sword, cut off his hair and beard, and discarded his princely garments. He put on the yellow robe of a holy man, and told Channa to take his possessions back to his father.

The Great Retirement

Siddhartha wandered through northeastern India, seeking out holy men, who taught him ancient Indian techniques of meditation. But his main quest was to find the answer to the problem of suffering. He wanted to know why people suffered, and how this suffering could end.

Siddhartha studied the teachings of Hinduism, the ancient religion of India. He was most influenced by the concept of Samsara. Samsara is a belief that after death, a person's innermost essence, or soul, transmigrates into a new body—it is born again. Another name for this process is reincarnation.



When a soul is reborn, it may enter a body in a higher or lower state of existence than its previous one. The new body may be that of a king, a beggar, or even an animal or insect. The determining factor of a soul's new existence is the quality of life led by the individual soul in its previous existence. This is called the law of Karma. Simply put, Karma consists of the individual's thoughts, words, and deeds in his or her previous existences. If the Karma has been good, the soul will be reborn in a higher form. Conversely, if the Karma has been bad, the soul is punished (pays a "Karmic price") by being reborn in a lower form. Human suffering, therefore, was the result of some bad Karma that a person had accumulated in a previous lifetime.

The law of Karma also had social implications. Indian society was strictly divided into four castes, or classes. At the top were the Brahmins—priests and religious teachers. The second caste included the warriors and rulers. It was within this caste that Siddhartha was born. The third and fourth castes were the merchants and workers (labourers, craftsmen, farmers and so on). At the very bottom were people who were literally out-castes, below the four castes, whose station in life made them impure.

In a single lifetime, it was impossible to rise within the caste system. By law and tradition, the members of each caste were strictly separated from the others. People of different castes did not marry, eat together, or have physical contact with one another. If a person violated the caste rules, he or she had to undergo rituals of purification. The only way to move up was to accumulate good Karma and be reborn into a higher caste.

Some Hindus believed that Samsara—this process of life, death, and rebirth—was an endless chain of existence. It would continue forever, from life to life. Around the time of Siddhartha's life, however, new teachings—later set down in scriptures called the Upanishads—were being developed. The Upanishadic teachers developed the idea of Moksha, or release. By leading a highly

spiritual life (or several lives), a soul could be reunited with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. The cycle of Samsara would be broken.

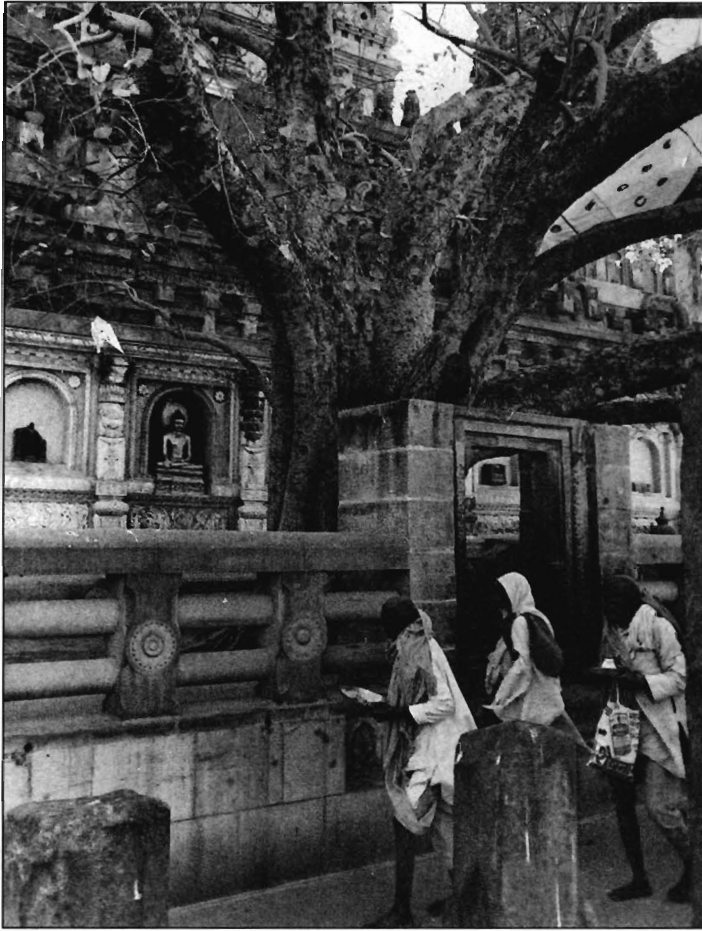
Attracted by this idea, Siddhartha adopted a life of extreme self-denial and penances, meditating constantly. He settled on the bank of the Nairanjana River, determined to force himself into the state of mind that would lead to moksha. For six years, through rain and wind, hot and cold weather, he stayed there, eating and drinking only enough to stay alive. His body became emaciated, and his former physical strength left him. His holiness was so evident that five other holy men joined him, hoping to learn from his example.



■ *Fasting Siddhartha—in search of Enlightenment*

The Enlightenment

One day, the Buddhist tradition holds, Siddhartha realized that his years of penance had only weakened his body. In such a state of physical exhaustion, he could not meditate properly. He stood up and stepped into the river to bathe. But he was so weak that he could not raise himself out of the water. The Buddhist



■ *The shrine of Bodh Gaya, India. The tree stands where it is believed the original Bodhi tree (under which the Buddha attained enlightenment) grew.*

scriptures say that the trees on the river bank bent their branches down so that he could reach them.

At that moment, a milk-maid named Nandabala came into sight. She offered Siddhartha a bowl of milk and rice, and he accepted it gratefully. When the five holy men who had been his pupils saw this, they left because they thought he had abandoned his quest to achieve true holiness or moksha.

Refreshed by the meal, Siddhartha sat down under a fig tree (known to Buddhists as the Bo tree, the Tree of Enlightenment) and resolved that he would not arise until he had found the answer he had sought for so long.

The Buddhist scriptures say that Mara, an evil god who constantly tempted people with desire, saw that Siddhartha was near to his goal. Mara sent his three sons and three daughters to tempt Siddhartha. They tormented him with thirst, lust, and discontent, offering all sorts of pleasures to distract him.

But Siddhartha was not swayed by them. He entered a state of deep meditation, in which he recalled all his previous rebirths. He gained knowledge of the cycle of births and deaths, and the certainty that he had cast off the ignorance and passion of the "I" self that bound him to the world. At last, he had attained enlightenment.

This experience was the beginning of the history of Buddhism as a religion. Siddhartha became the Buddha, the "enlightened one." His own desire and suffering were over and, as the Buddha, he experienced Nirvana. In the Buddha's words, "There is a sphere which is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air...which is neither this world nor the other world, neither sun nor moon. I deny that it is coming or going, enduring, death or birth. It is only the end of suffering."

As tradition has it, the Buddha could then have cast off his body and his existence. Instead, however, he made a great act of self-sacrifice. Having discovered the way to end his own suffering, he turned back, determined to share his enlightenment with others so that all living souls could end the cycles of their own rebirth and suffering. He thus set an example of compassion and wisdom or self-knowledge for others that would be a hallmark of his followers.

Setting in Motion the Wheel of Doctrine

Buddha went to the city of Sarnath, where he found the five ascetics who had deserted him earlier. They were sitting in a deer park. Seeing him approach, they decided not to greet him by the respectful title they had used to address him before. But when he appeared before them, they saw signs on his body and head that indicated he had risen to a higher state of holiness.

The Buddha began to teach them what he had discovered. He took a handful of rice grains and drew a wheel on the ground. This represented the wheel of life that went on for existence after



■ An early-nineteenth-century Tibetan painting depicts the Wheel of Existence, which exhibits the causes of suffering and the stages of endless becoming.

existence. (The symbol of the wheel is often used to stand for Buddhist teaching.) This preaching was called his Deer Park Sermon, or “Setting in Motion the Wheel of Doctrine.”

Siddhartha Gautama revealed that he had become the Buddha. He described the life of pleasure that he had first known, and then the life of severe asceticism that he had practiced. Neither of these was the true path to Nirvana. Instead, the Buddha advised

the Middle Way, which keeps aloof from both extremes. "To satisfy the necessities of life is not evil," the Buddha said. "To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise we shall not be able to trim the lamp of wisdom, and keep our mind strong and clear."

The Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path that were the heart of his teaching. The Four Noble Truths were the Buddha's analysis of the cause of suffering. The Eightfold Path was the solution. Together they formed the Dharma, or the doctrine of Buddhism.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Suffering consists of disease, old age, and death; of separation from those we love; of craving what we cannot obtain; and of hating what we cannot avoid.
2. All suffering is caused by desire and the attempt to satisfy our desires.
3. Therefore, suffering can be overcome by ceasing to desire.
4. The way to end desire is to follow the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is a series of eight stages that leads to the end of desire. The first of these are attainable in everyday life; the later ones require more effort and concentration. Like many of Buddha's teachings, they appear simple at first, but take on subtle and intricate meaning when studied closely.

The Eightfold Path is:

1. Right opinion
2. Right intentions
3. Right speech
4. Right conduct
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

The first of these, right opinion, concerns understanding the Four Truths. Then, through right intentions, a person decides to set his or her life on the correct path. Right speech consists of not lying, not criticizing others unjustly, not using harsh language or gossiping. Right conduct means to abstain from killing, stealing,

cruelty, or lustful activities. To follow right livelihood a person must earn a living in a way that does not harm any living thing. To practice right effort, a person must conquer all evil thoughts, and strive to arouse and maintain only good thoughts. Right mindfulness has a special meaning in Buddhism, in which a person becomes intensely aware of all the states of his or her body, feeling, and mind. That leads to the final stage, right concentration, which is deep meditation that leads to a higher stage of consciousness. A person who practices right concentration will come to the enlightenment that Siddhartha attained.

The five ascetics immediately recognized that the Buddha had found the correct way. They became his first disciples. For the next forty-five years, he traveled through northeastern India, preaching the Dharma and answering the questions of those who wished to learn it.

In his teachings, the Buddha retained many elements of the Hinduism of his time, including the concepts of Samsara and Karma. However, the Buddhist Dharma differed from Hinduism in certain important respects.

The Buddha challenged the authority of the Brahmins, the highest caste in Hindu society. He opposed the animal sacrifices that only Brahmin priests could perform. Hinduism made extensive use of animal sacrifices to its various gods. In contrast, the Buddha told his followers not to kill any living creature. In addition, the Buddha did not accept the Brahmins' special role as interpreters of religious truth. Instead, the Buddha stressed that anyone, regardless of caste, who followed the Eightfold Path could achieve Nirvana.

The Buddha also questioned the Hindu idea of the Atman, or soul—the individual consciousness that was reborn again and again. He denied there was any personal, eternal soul or permanent self. Instead, the Buddha compared the individual to a cart. A cart was made up of different elements—wheels, body, yoke. Separately, they were not a cart. Only when they were together did they form a cart. In the same way, Buddha taught, an individual is composed of five elements called Skandhas, which were constantly in a state of change. The Skandhas were: form and matter, sensations, ideas, emotions, and consciousness. What was



■ *Health is the greatest possession. Contentment is the greatest treasure. Confidence is the greatest friend. Nirvana is the greatest joy.*

From the Dhammapada (15:204)

reborn over and over were groups of ever-changing Skandhas, influenced by Karma. Thus, the Skandhas reborn were not exactly the same as the Skandhas that had died.

The Buddha declared that by following his Eightfold Path, people would lose their false idea of self, and achieve Nirvana. When a person reached Nirvana, the “cart” would dissolve. After that, a person would no longer accumulate bad Karma even if his life continued.

As for Brahman itself—a Hindu concept we might liken to a Supreme Being—Buddha refused to consider whether or not such a universal soul existed. Once, when a Hindu scholar pressed the Buddha to debate the existence of Brahman, he replied that the scholar was like a man who finds himself in a burning house. The scholar wanted to find out who set the fire or how it started, when he should be thinking first of getting out of the house. The Hindu goal of Moksha—or union of the soul with Brahman—was replaced, in Buddhism, by the goal of achieving Nirvana.

The simplicity of the Buddha’s teaching, its emphasis on personal action, and the Buddha’s opposition to the caste system, soon won him many followers. Like other religious teachers, Buddha often used stories or parables to explain his doctrine. In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the Buddha taught the lesson of facing and accepting suffering.

Once a distraught woman brought the body of her dead son to the Buddha. She begged him to bring the boy back to life. The Buddha asked the woman to bring him a tiny mustard seed. But he made one condition: the seed must be one that came from a house in which no death had ever occurred. The woman searched but could not find such a house. Instead, she saw people who had suffered losses like her own. In her search, her own pain lessened as compassion for the pain of others increased. The Buddha wanted her to realize that death was normal and universal. Only through facing the human situation “as it really is” could she start her own journey on the Eightfold Path.

Beginning with the five disciples he spoke to in the Deer Park, certain people embraced the Buddha’s teachings so completely that they accompanied him everywhere. He set rules of conduct for them, thus organizing the Sangha, which became a

community of monks (later, nuns as well). The members of the Sangha are known as *bhikkus*. The Sangha served two functions. First, the monks were charged with preserving and teaching the Dharma. Second, the Sangha enabled bhikkus to concentrate on the goal of Nirvana. Only people who spent time in meditation could achieve the last two steps of the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha made another break with Hindu tradition when he permitted women to join the Sangha. The first Buddhist nun was the Buddha's aunt, who had raised him.

These Buddhist monks and nuns followed the Buddha's example of wandering from place to place, spreading his teaching. They were allowed to possess only a beggar's bowl, a razor, a needle, a strainer, a staff, a toothpick, and a robe. (The strainer was to remove insects that had fallen into their drink, so they would not be consumed and killed.)

During India's long, hot, rainy season, the members of the Sangha settled in *Viharas*, or resting places. These were the beginnings of the great monasteries that are today found in many parts of Asia.

The Buddha recognized that not everyone could give up his or her everyday life to become part of the Sangha. He also accepted the laity—followers (*upasaka*) who believed his teachings but did not follow the strict rule of the Sangha. People in everyday life could achieve merit by practicing good works and build good Karma. In a future rebirth they would be able to seek Nirvana. The Buddha encouraged the laity to follow as perfect a life as they could. As a guide to everyday behavior, the Buddha prescribed Five Precepts, or rules:

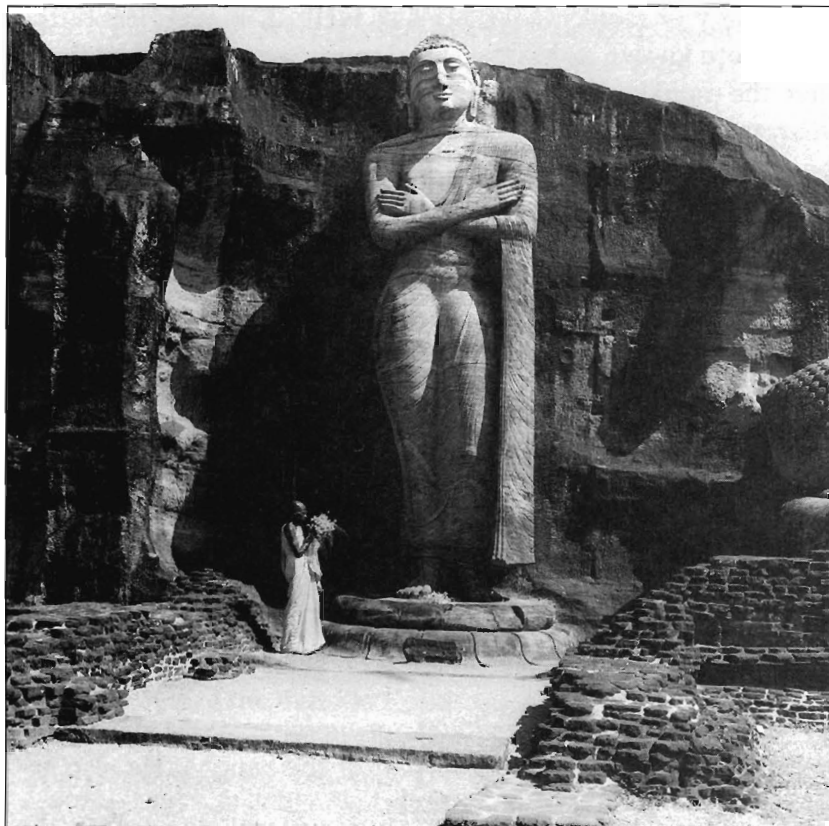
1. To refrain from taking life
2. To refrain from taking what is not given
3. To refrain from sexual misconduct
4. To refrain from false speech
5. To refrain from intoxicating things that cloud the mind

The Parinirvana

During the Buddha's travels, he returned to his birthplace in Kapilavastu. His father, Shuddhodana, was mortified to see his son begging for food. "No one in our family," said the king, "has



■ A Buddhist priest is dwarfed by a twenty-six-foot-high statue of Ananda, Buddha's cousin and one of his major disciples. This statue stands next to the "Reclining Buddha." (See pages 110 and 111 of this book.)



ever lived by begging." But the Buddha kissed his father's foot and said, "You belong to a noble line of kings. But I belong to the lineage of buddhas, and thousands of those have lived on alms."

Shuddhodana remembered the prophecy at Siddhartha's conception and became reconciled with his son. The Buddha's wife Yasodhara and son Rahula both joined the Sangha, as did his cousin Ananda, who became the Buddha's most faithful attendant during the later years of his life.

When Buddha was about eighty, a blacksmith named Cuanda gave him a meal that caused him to become ill. Buddha forced himself to walk on to the village of Kushinagara, where at last he lay down to rest in a grove of shala trees. As a crowd of followers gathered around him, he lay on his right side. Though it was not the season for blooming, the trees sprouted blossoms and

showered them upon him. The scene has often been the inspiration for Buddhist artists.

Buddha told Ananda, "I am old and my journey is near its end. My body is like a worn-out cart held together only by the help of leather straps." Three times he asked the people gathered around him if they had any more questions about his teaching. Everyone remained silent.

The Buddha spoke his final words: "Everything that has been created is subject to decay and death. Everything is transitory. Work out your own salvation with diligence."

After passing through several states of meditation, the Buddha died—or, as Buddhists say, he reached his *Parinirvana*, "the cessation of perception and sensation."

During his long lifetime, the Buddha never traveled farther than 250 miles from Sarnath, the city where his teaching ministry began. However, he had set in motion a religious movement that would spread throughout the world and still remains a vital force 2500 years after his death.

