



The life of the Buddha is usually told as a mixture of historical fact and legend. The name of the historical Buddha is Siddhārtha Gautama. The exact date of his birth is not known. Many scholars say he was born in Kapilavastu on the present-day Indian-Nepalese border about 563 BC, and other sources indicate he may have been born up to a century later. As he belonged to a people called the Śākya, he became known as Śākya-muni, 'the sage of the Śākya'.

Legend tells that Queen Māyā, the mother of Śākya-muni, became pregnant after dreaming of an elephant appearing on a cloud. Śākya-muni was born from his mother's right side as she was reaching for a branch of a sāla tree in the Lumbinī grove. As a young prince, Śākya-muni lived a life of luxury in his father's palace.

At the age of 29, the young prince became curious about life outside the palace walls. In the outside world, Śākya-muni had four encounters which would change his life. He saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a serene holy man. From these experiences he learnt that life is full of suffering, is impermanent and eventually comes to an end. He noted that the holy man seemed unaffected by these traumas, and decided to leave his father's palace to embark on his own spiritual journey to understand human suffering and how it may be endured and transcended.

After attempting various kinds of ascetic practices, Śākya-muni sought shelter under a bodhi tree to reflect on his life and the passing away of all living things. During this time, he was tormented by a demon called Māra but eventually, at the age of 35 he achieved enlightenment, subsequently becoming known as the

'Buddha', or the 'Awakened One'. From this moment, Buddha devoted the rest of his life to alleviating the suffering of other beings through teaching. This was effectively the birth of the Buddhist religion.



Buddha with a Begging Bowl . 1919,0101,0.193  
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Detail from a Paper Prayer Sheet . Or.8210/P.14  
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Detail from the Frontispiece of the Diamond Sutra. Or.8210/P.2  
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### Activity:

Look at the painting on silk from the British Museum on the right. Can you identify any of the key moments in Buddha's life in the scenes depicted?

### Discussion:

What do the prince's encounters outside of the palace tell us about the kind of person Siddhārtha Gautama was?

How does the story of Buddha's life compare to our own ideas of ambition and success in life today? Do you think Buddha would place value on the same ideas?

Do you think there is value in Buddha's beliefs?



The Life of Śākyamuni. 1919,0101,0.96  
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