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THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

This unit, "The Life of the Buddha", is designed as a teaching aid to assist the instructor in classroom use -- intermediate to high school -- in the following areas: 1) Survey of World Religions; 2) History & Culture of South, Southeast and East Asia. The material presented provides a pre-requisite for any extended discussion of Buddhism (historically and culturally) and serves basically as an introduction to the subject.

The unit, which is organized as a framework for one class period, contains: 1) a set of seventeen color slides depicting major events in the life of the Buddha; 2) a basic syllabus containing the principal points and key terms (underlined) to be covered in each slide. In addition, a glossary is appended at the back of the syllabus defining these underlined terms. The unit basically provides an outline for the instructor to organize a presentation or to lead a discussion.

Syllabus

Preliminary Remarks

a) Buddhism has a history in Asia of over 2,500 years and as the centuries rolled by the cultural shadings and the doctrinal and philosophical variations it exhibited increased. The former can be examined within the context of the various countries it passed through (Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaya, Java, Sumatra, Taiwan, and then to Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Soviet and Chinese Turkestan, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan), while the latter viz., its Hinayana and Mahayana forms. At the present, the Buddhist population of the world is estimated at over 600 million.

b) Buddhism was founded in India by Gautama Siddhartha in the sixth century B.C. Among the founders of religions, the Buddha was unique in that he did not claim to be other than a simple human being. On the other hand, founders of other major religions were either held to be God, his incarnation in different forms, or inspired directly by him. The Buddha not only claimed to be a simple human being but denied divine inspiration and any recourse to supernatural and external power. On the contrary, he attributed all of his realization, attainments and achievements to man's inherent capacities and abilities and intelligence. Every man has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if he so wills it and endeavours. Hence, in Buddhism, the Buddha is held to be the human being par excellence. It is no surprise, therefore, that at all times, in every country, and in all forms of Buddhism, the life of the Buddha came to be extremely venerated as the model for the life of an ideal human being.

GLOSSARY

- abhaya mudra -mudra means hand gesture and in the various iconographic representations of Buddhist images, various mudras are employed for a variety of purposes. This particular mudra consists of a raised forearm and open palm symbolizing reassurance and confidence.
- bodhisattva -literally, a 'being'(sattva) on his way to enlightenment (bodhi). The term has considerable import in all schools of Buddhism, particularly in Mahayana where it came to mean a being who postpones his own enlightenment in order to lead other beings to enlightenment. In Hinayana Buddhism, bodhisattva, however, refers specifically to the life of Sakyamuni, prior to his attainment of enlightenment.
- Buddha -(c. 563-483 B.C.). literally, the Enlightened or Awakened One. While the term may be applied to anyone who has achieved enlightenment, it specifically refers to Siddhartha Gautama.
- deva -a god.
- Hinayana -literally, the 'lesser' (Hina) vehicle (yana); a derisive name historically given to the early schools of Buddhism by the later schools of Buddhism called Mahayana. Hinayana, in contra distinction to Mahayana, stresses individual rather than universal salvation.
- Mahayana -literally, the 'greater' (Maha) vehicle (yana). See Hinayana.

SLIDE 1

(Top) *The Devas ask the bodhisattva to incarnate among men.*
(Bottom) *Queen Maya dreams that a great being will be born through her.*

The founder of Buddhism is known by a number of names. He is often referred to as Sakyamuni or "the sage (muni) of the Sakya tribe". Within this tribe, his family belonged to the Gautama or Gotama clan and, hence, he is also known as Gautama. The name given to him at birth was Siddhartha, meaning "he who has accomplished his objectives". After he became enlightened, he was called the Buddha or "one who has obtained enlightenment". Before he attained enlightenment, he was often referred to as a bodhisattva, meaning "a being (sattva) who is on his way to enlightenment (bodhi)". In Buddhism, there is a belief that a bodhisattva takes an enormous amount of time and a bewildering number of rebirths in order to accomplish this goal.

According to legend, the future Buddha, the bodhisattva in his quest for enlightenment took many forms, e.g., fish, bird, rabbit, dog, woman, man, etc. Before his rebirth as Siddhartha Gautama, the Bodhisattva dwelt for a time in the realm of the heavenly devas (or divine beings). Concerned about the low spiritual state of human beings, the devas approached the bodhisattva and begged him to be re-born as a human being in order to lead men away from the path of suffering and corruption. Accordingly, the bodhisattva surveyed the world and seeing that the conditions were indeed ripe entered the womb through the left side of Queen Maya while the latter was sleeping during the midsummer Rain-Festival. In Buddhist art, the bodhisattva entering the womb of his future mother is symbolized by a six-tusked white elephant -- the symbol of purity, dominance and power. Thus is pictured the prevailing Buddhist view of the conception which is held, as in the Christian tradition, to be immaculate.

SLIDE 2

The birth of the bodhisattva at the Lumbini garden.

The bodhisattva was conceived through the wife of King Suddhodana of the Gautama clan who ruled the kingdom of the Sakyas in present-day Nepal. During those times, it was the custom that women return to the home of their parents at the time of delivery. Accordingly, at the tenth month of her pregnancy, Queen Maya while journeying to her parents' home in Devadaha stopped to rest in the Lumbini garden in the town of Kapilaratthu, at the foot of the Himalaya mountains near the present India-Nepal border. At that time, she felt her time coming and standing upright against a Sala tree she brought forth the child. Legend holds that the newly-born bodhisattva took seven steps in four directions and, accompanied by the udumbara flowers blooming out of season, raised his hand to the surprise and fear of those present in a reassuring gesture (ab haya-mudra) and proclaimed that he would in this lifetime attain complete, perfect and final enlightenment.

SLIDE 3

(Center) *The Sage Asita pays homage to the infant Siddhartha.*
(Side) *The distribution of alms on Siddhartha's birth.*

To celebrate the birth of his first son, King Suddhodana ordered alms to be distributed to the poor and sick and temples, streets, and buildings to be decorated. Throughout his realm there was great rejoicing. Among those who attended the festive celebrations was the sage Asita renowned in India during that time for his wisdom and holiness. On the day of the bodhisattva's birth, Asita, dwelling in the Himalayas, saw the devas dancing with joy, and when he asked the reason for their delight, learned that a bodhisattva was born to the world. Immediately, he left to visit the palace of King Suddhodana. When Asita was presented the child, he at once noticed that the child was endowed with the 32 major and the 80 minor marks of a great man and realized that this child when grown would either become a universal monarch ruling over the entire realm or an enlightened being, a Buddha. At this, the aged sage wept. Suddhodana, seeing the sage weeping, inquired as to the reason for such behavior to which Asita replied that he wept because he would not live long enough to see the infant grow up to become a Buddha and to hear his teachings.

Seven days after the birth of the bodhisattva, Queen Maya died and ascended into one of the many heavens to be re-born as a deva. Upon her death, Suddhodana's second wife was devolved the duty of bringing up the child.

SLIDE 4

Siddhartha's first meditation at the Plowing Festival.

During Siddhartha's early childhood one incident is worthy of mention because it provided him, during this lifetime, with his first taste of spiritual insight. One day, while his father was participating in a state plowing festival, Siddhartha was taken along to witness the ceremony. He was placed under the shade of the Jambu tree whereupon he soon fell into a deep spiritual trance. It was then that he entered into his first stage of spiritual knowledge. When his nurses came to take him away, they found that the shadows of the other trees had moved, but that of the Jambu tree remained still for the purpose of shading the youth.

SLIDE 5

Siddhartha bids farewell to his sleeping wife and child.

At the birth of Siddhartha, the king, Suddhodana, invited brahmin astrologers to foretell the future of the newly born baby. They prophesied that the youth would leave the household life when he saw four signs: an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a mendicant. In order to prevent the son from seeing these signs, the father initiated elaborate measures and precautions to keep the boy in seclusion amidst the luxurious life of the palace. The Buddha himself later told his followers:

Monks, I was delicately nurtured, exceedingly delicately nurtured. For instance, in my father's house, lotus pools were made thus, one of blue lotuses, one of red, another of white, just for my benefit. No sandalwood powder did I use that was not of Kasi; of Kasi cloth was my turban made; of Kasi cloth was my jacket, my tunic, and my cloak. By night and day a white canopy was held over me, lest cold or heat, dust or chaff or dew, should touch me. Moreover I had three palaces: one for the winter, one for summer, and one for the rainy season. In the four months of the rain, I was waited upon by minstrels, women all of them.

At the age of 16, Siddhartha married a young princess named Yosadhara.

Slide 5 continued--

At the age of 29, Siddhartha, one day, was riding through his pleasure gardens when he suddenly came upon an old man with a broken down body, gray hair, trembling, his back bent with age and with a stick in hand. Never having seen such a sight, the young prince asked his charioteer, Channa, what manner of creature was this and was told that it was a man in old age, a stage which must come to all living beings. On succeeding days, the young prince witnessed a sick man, a dead man and finally a mendicant (see left side of fresco). When he saw the mendicant with his calm and serene composure, Siddhartha decided that such a life would provide an escape from the disgusting, sorrowful and meaningless life that he was enjoying and from the terrors of disease, old age and death that inevitably lay in store for him. After making this resolution he returned to the palace, only to find that a son, Rahula, was born to him. However, he decided that even this event would not deter him from his resolution. One night, as his wife and son lay sleeping, he silently bid them farewell.

SLIDE 6

Siddhartha leaves the palace.

Having bid his wife and child a silent farewell, Siddhartha called his faithful charioteer Channa to bring forth Kantaka, his horse, and left his kingdom to become an ascetic in search of the solutions to life's many questions. This event is known as the "Great Renunciation".

SLIDE 7

(Top) Siddhartha meets the sage Alara Kalama.

(Bottom) Siddhartha accepts the offering of food from Sujata.

For six years after that, Siddhartha wandered about the valleys of the Ganges in North India and Nepal meeting famous teachers like Alara Kalama and studying and practicing their systems and methods. During this time he subjected himself to the severest austerities to determine whether or not he could gain his goal through such means. This recourse to austerities was in accord with the prevailing ideas in India that wisdom could be achieved when the physical senses were disciplined and the passions calmed. Later, the Buddha described those six years as follows:

To such a pitch of asceticism have I gone that naked was I, flouting life's decencies, licking my hands after meals, never heading when folks called to me to stop or to come, never accepting food brought to me before my rounds or cooked expressly for me...I have visited only one house a day and there taken only one morsel;...or one every two days...or one every seven days, or only once a fortnight... In fulfillment of my vows, I have plucked out the hair of my head and the hair of my beard, have never quitted the upright for the sitting posture, have squatted and never risen up...having couched on thorns, have gone down to the water punctually thrice before night fall to wash away the evil within. After this wise, to such diverse fashions, have I lived to torment and to torture my body, to such a length of asceticism have I gone.

Slide 7 continued--

So persistent was Siddhartha in his austerities that a group of five ascetics -- Kondanna, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama, and Assaji -- waited patiently at his side, convinced that he would soon realize wisdom and thence deliver the contents of that realization to them.

After undoing such a life-style for six years, Siddhartha was unable to obtain the goal that he sought and decided that there must be some other method. At that time, in Uruvela where Siddhartha was staying, the young wife of a rich landowner, Sujata, was busily engaged in preparing offerings of thanks to a tree-god in honour of having a son born to her. When she went to milk the cows, miracles began to happen, for the milk flowed from the cow on its own accord. She then cooked rice with the milk and though bubbles arose, the milk did not overflow the brim of the pot. Now on the previous night, Siddhartha had dreamt that he would attain enlightenment the very next day, so early in the morning he awoke and sat under a Nigrodha tree. There he was seen by Sujata who came with her offerings of milk-rice. Thinking Siddhartha was a tree-god, she humbly offered it at his feet. The latter, having just renounced the practice of austerities, accepted the food, went to the river to bathe himself, after which he ate the food with relish. His companions, the five ascetics, at once deserted him saying, "The ascetic Gautama giving up exertion, falls into luxury". When he had finished the meal, Siddhartha said to himself that if the dish were to go upstream against the current, then he would attain Buddhahood that very day. When he threw the dish into the stream, it began to sail upstream.

SLIDE 8

Buddha attains enlightenment.

As the hour of the Full Moon of Vaisakha drew near, Siddhartha, refreshed by Sujata's offering, took his seat under the Nigrodha tree (since then known as the Bodhi or Bo-tree, "The Tree of Wisdom") on the bank of the river Neranjara at Buddha-Gaya (near Gaya in modern Bihar). It was here, at the age of 35, that Siddhartha attained enlightenment after which he was known as the Buddha, "The Enlightened One".

During the night which ensued he had to meet and conquer all those forces of lower human nature (e.g. hate, greed, lust, etc.) barring the way to enlightenment which alone perception of ultimate truth can be achieved. In Buddhist folklore, Mara is symbolized as the personification of this abstract concept of the lower human nature. He was held to be the lord of the world of desires, and the father of three beautiful daughters, Desire, Discontent, and Passion. The aim of Mara was to thwart the bodhisattva from attaining his goal. To this end, Mara brought onto the scene his three daughters and his huge menacing army equipped with all the weapons imaginable. He first attacked the bodhisattva with whirlwind, rainstorm, showers of hot rocks, live coal, sand and mud, but all these lost their strength and power when they reached the vicinity of the bodhisattva. Mara then tried darkness, but this was turned into light. His hordes now attacked with spears, clubs, axes, discus, arrows, etc., but these miraculously turned into heavenly scented flowers falling harmlessly at the foot of the bodhisattva. The latter now called upon the earth to witness that the Buddha seat really belonged to him, whereupon the earth responded with a deafening roar of assent that frightened and scattered the hosts of Mara. When Mara finally acknowledged defeat, the bodhisattva resumed the concentration that had been interrupted, until he finally realized omniscience in the last part of the night.

SLIDE 9

(Top) The Buddha delivers his first sermon to his disciples at Sarnath.

(Bottom) The Buddha preaches to King Bimbisara of Magadha.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha sought out the group of five ascetics who deserted him earlier at Uruvela. At first they did not wish to receive him, but when he drew near they could not resist the glow that radiated from him, so one took his bowl, another prepared a seat, while the others brought water, a footstool and a towel. When the Buddha had washed his feet he delivered his first sermon entitled the "Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law" in the Deer Park at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares. The sermon contained the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, namely the Four Noble Truths, viz., Suffering, The Origin of Suffering, The Cessation of Suffering, and the Eightfold Path (1 - Right Understanding; 2 - Right Thought; 3 - Right Speech; 4 - Right Action; 5 - Right Livelihood; 6 - Right Effort; 7 - Right Mindfulness; 8 - Right Concentration) which leads to the Cessation of Suffering.

SLIDES 10-14:

From that day, for 45 years, he travelled throughout N.W. India teaching all classes of men and women -- kings and peasants, relatives and strangers, Brahmins and outcasts, rich and poor, holymen and murderers -- without making the slightest distinction between them. He recognized no differences of caste or social groupings and engaged in a multitude of compassion-based activities.

SLIDE 10 *Buddha ministers to the sick and preaches thereon.*

SLIDE 11 *Buddha reconciles the warring Sakyas and Koliyas.*

SLIDE 12 *Buddha preaches to his family at Kapilavastu.*

SLIDE 13 *Buddha converts the murderer Angulimala.*

The Buddha's power of converting was strikingly shown in the case of the murderer Angulimala. A halo of 999 fingers surrounded his evil form, representing the 999 murders he had committed. To complete his goal of 1000, he was preparing to kill his own mother, however, when he saw the Buddha approaching he decided that this was his chance to get the 1000th kill. He found, however, that he could not unnerve the noble figure that stood so calm before his furious onslaught. The fierce murderer was compelled to listen quietly to the Buddha's discourse and after he had expressed remorse for his evil deeds, the Buddha received him into his company.

SLIDE 14 *The disciples of the Buddha accept water from an untouchable woman.*

SLIDE 15

The death of the Buddha.

One day, at the age of 80, when the Buddha and his followers were on the road from Vesali to Kusinara, he stopped at Pava to stay at the Mango Grove of Cunda who provided the Buddha with some food, including some generous portions of a dish named sukaramaddava. The Buddha told Cunda to serve the excellent food to the rest of the retinue but to reserve the sukaramaddava for him. After eating it, the Buddha experienced sharp pains and the flow of blood, but endured this without complaint and continued the journey to Kusinara. The question arises, just what is sukaramaddava, literally "pig's soft food". It is soft food made out of pig's flesh or soft food eaten by pigs? If the latter, it could mean some form of yams or mushroom. Either type of food could have caused food poisoning which the Buddha apparently suffered. At any rate this was the last meal eaten by the Buddha, and all the events that followed were to happen within the same day.

After arrival in Kusinara, in modern Uttar Pradesh in India, the monks approached the Buddha to ask for further instructions. To this request, the Buddha replied that there were four places which should be honored after his death: Lumbini Grove where he was born (Slide 2); Bodhgaya where he attained enlightenment (Slide 8); Benares where he preached his first sermon (Slide 9); and Kusinara where he died (Slide 15). These four spots have since become the four holy sites of the Buddhist religion. After this exchange, the Buddha instructed the monks to announce to the people of Kusinara that he would die during that night and to invite them to see him for the last time. So many of them came that the monks had to announce them by groups of families instead of individuals. Then the Buddha asked the assembled monks whether or not they had any questions to ask him and when they all remained silent he uttered his last words: "Impermanent are all worldly things, seek your salvation with utmost diligence". Amidst the shaking of the earth and the peals of thunder, the Buddha passed away. His body was then wrapped in 1000 layers of the finest cloth and cremated. After, the remains were divided into eight equal parts and distributed to eight cities, each of which erected a stupa or memorial mound over its share.

SLIDE 16

Buddhist stupa at Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh, India.

SLIDE 17

The Mahabodhi Temple at Sarnath.

The paintings included in this unit are taken from the wall paintings in the Mahabodhi Temple at Sarnath.