



"I take refuge in the Buddha." In Sri Lanka or in Thailand, when the community of monks gets together in the morning, you will hear a chant. "I take refuge in the Buddha," and so on. What does it mean to take refuge in the Buddha? Who is Buddha? What is Buddha? And what does it have to do with me? With us?

The first person that was referred to as the nomenclature "Buddha" in history was a man named Siddhartha Gautama. He was born of an affluent family, in fact the son of a ruler of a large region in northern India at that time, about 5th or 6th century B.C. That territory is now covered by present-day Nepal and some parts of northeastern India.

What was this man all about? Well, being born in an affluent family, he had everything going for him. His future was assured. As he would grow up, he was destined to inherit his father's position as the ruler of this large area, and so he would have been a maharaja—great king or great ruler—as his father was. He had all of the possessions that he could ever want as a human being because they owned everything there. His father did, and that was also supposed to be his inheritance. He had the power that any human being could want. He had the power to be the ruler of that big track of land, and, of course, in that position, whatever pleasure he sought he could have.

In fact, there are accounts where, as a young man, Siddhartha also indulged in different kinds of pleasures and went to parties and orgies and so on. He would wake up in the middle of the night after one such kind of splurge and would begin to question, "What was that all about?" And so those were the beginnings of the questions, those little nudges from his inner voice, which continued until he was able to really listen to them. During his mid to late 20s, he began to consider those questions and consider the way of life that he was leading.

Now, it is said that, according to some accounts, he was prohibited from leaving the palace because his father did not want him to see the misery in the world but only wanted to help him enjoy the best of what life would offer—life in the palace, isolated from the rest of the world. But, precisely because of that, his curiosity was piqued, and so he stealthily left the palace and examined what was in the world around him. That was when he really got a rude awakening as to the realities of the life of ordinary human beings.

One other account that is not too well written about is that, in going out and looking at



the lives of ordinary people, he saw how the poor people—especially those who were tilling the land, the farmers—were the ones who were producing food, and yet it was they who had the least food because they had to give most of their food that they produced to the landowners and so on. How his heart was moved by the plight of the farmers. His heart was already moved with compassion at that stage, and then he asked, "Why do I have everything that I could ever want—and much more—and yet so many people don't have the very basic things they need to live their lives?" That was one account about one of the motivations that led Siddhartha to leave his affluent life and go on a spiritual search.

In any case, whatever the concrete motivation was, our story tells us that this young man, who had everything going for him, at some point in his late 20s decided, *Unless I change my way of life radically, I will not be able to resolve this unease that has now crept up in me.* What kind of unease was that? He started questioning, realizing that he had all the power he could ever want and all the possessions that any human being could ever want. He had every pleasure at his disposal. But he realized, *Hm, is that all there is? Is that all being human is all about?* That's one aspect of what may have led him to make that decision; his heart was nudging him to go deeper and to seek something deeply fulfilling, also something that could squelch doubts about why he had these benefits while so many were deprived of even the basic necessities.

Whatever motivated him, those were the factors that he could consider, and so he made that great resolve—to leave his worldly status, to leave his castle, and even leave his wife and children (he had one son then), and to leave that privileged life of his and go out and search for answers to his basic questions.

Let me pause and say, you may be in a state of your journey in life where you're asking questions like, "Is that all there is?" or, "What is still lacking in my life?" Or if you are already asking questions like, "What's the point of life? How can I live life in a most fulfilling way?" Or, maybe you've been bitten by the bug of impermanence and realized that at the end of this life awaits a certain death, whenever that may come. Maybe now you're asking the question, "How can I live my life so that when I meet my death I can say, 'I have no regrets. I have lived a full life and I can be grateful for everything.'"



If you're asking those kinds of questions and are beginning to pursue the answers to those questions, you are watering the seeds of Buddhahood that are in you. That's a great sign. When you say, "I take refuge in the Buddha," that which you are taking refuge in is already beginning to give you that sense of where your refuge might lie.

In pursuing that line of questioning, the young Siddhartha wandered all over in the northern part of India and saw teachers. As he listened to them, he did not find any satisfaction and did not receive the right answers to his questions. He decided to set all that aside and just follow a path that was already taught in the Hindu tradition: the path of yoga, the path of being still, following one's breath, and allowing one's mind to rest in that stillness. In doing so, now he got into the habit of just being able to watch and listen in that stillness. It is said that, after learning that, and after doing that for some time, one evening, he resolved, *I will not budge from this seat until I receive the answers to my questions about what this life is all about, how I can live in a way that is truly at peace with myself.* He wished to resolve all of those doubts that he had in his mind for so long.

With that resolve, he sat and sat throughout that night. It is said that it was the 7th day of the 12th month. On the 8th day, as the dawn of that day arose, the morning star rose on the horizon and the light of the morning star met his eyes, all of a sudden, he literally saw the light. He awakened to whatever he needed to be awakened to. He realized.

The question then is: What did he realize? What did he awaken to? What was that light that he saw? We will consider that as we go along, but, first of all, when he came to that moment of awakening, he felt a great bliss upon him, and he just wanted to sit there, relish, and enjoy it. What he awakened to was such great satisfaction and such great joy and he just wanted to continue relishing it. He felt that he could stay there for the rest of his life, truly enjoying what he had realized.

It is said that he was urged by compassion to move from there in order to share what he realized with other people. This moved him from that seat where he could have rested in smugness. He realized that it was not just for him, and that he was now called to share what he discovered with everyone that he met. And so he did.



What did the Buddha see that made him a Buddha? The name Siddhartha means literally "one who has accomplished his goal," or her goal. Siddhartha, the one who has accomplished one's goal, now has awakened. What does that awakening entail?

As he went out among the people, they saw that he was so composed and calm and he was such a very attractive person that they naturally approached him and asked, "Sir, you seem to be at peace with yourself and living in a way that is so calm and so attractive. Please tell us how we can be like you. How can we awaken like you?" The words that he offered to them were not so much a doctrine or a set of instructions to do certain things, like rituals and so on, but an invitation: "Come and see. Come and see the way I live, and live like me." *Ehipassiko* in Pali—come and see.

That invitation to come and see can be parsed further into two words, "stop" and "see." Stop—*shamata*—stop your active mind from grasping, from analyzing, and from figuring out or comparing, and just allow it to be still. In being still, allow yourself to just be there and taste that stillness. In that stillness, you will see yourself. What did he see? Well, he saw the place of peace and was able to arrive at that place of peace. What does that place of peace entail?

Among the earliest recorded sutras from the Buddha in a collection known as the Sutta Nipata, there's a passage that says, "The one who has arrived at the place of peace is still living in this way." The key words there are: "The one who has arrived at that place of peace," where Siddhartha has now arrived at. One who has arrived there lives in this way.

After describing those characteristics, it describes a very, very famous and moving line: "As a mother regards her child and would give her life to protect her only child, have this boundless heart in you toward all beings." That's what someone who has arrived in that place of peace is all about—someone with a boundless heart.

That boundless heart is categorized by four themes: first one is a heart of lovingkindness, opening up to everyone, wishing goodwill and well-being of everyone in loving kindness. The word *lovingkindness* comes from "*metta*", which comes from the word "friendliness" or from a sense of kinship—a sense of intimate connectedness. "Kin" is a very good word from translating the word *metta*, translated as lovingkindness. If you see everything around you and everyone



around you as your kin, you cannot but have that sentiment of loving kindness toward all because they're your kin. Everyone is your kin, and you want to see everyone's well-being.

Secondly, it is categorized by compassion. What's the difference between that and loving kindness? Compassion is simply feeling the suffering of others and bearing the pain of others as your own pain. In bearing others' pain, you also want to take steps toward their alleviation, not as someone out of pity but precisely as something that you need to take care of because it is your own pain.

The third characteristic of that boundless heart is one of sympathetic joy. Whenever there is any cause for joy, like the birth of a child or some success in endeavors or just looking at things the way they are, you are bubbling with joy because things are what they are. Then, that is truly another characteristic of that boundless heart.

Then, fourthly, that boundless heart is also categorized by equanimity, seeing things with that sense that they are what they are, and, therefore, you are at peace with it. I am at peace with the way things are. Not to say that, if there are things to be fixed, you don't do anything about them but that, whatever happens, you are at peace, and, if there is something to be addressed, then you do so out of that sense of peace. Those are the four characteristics of a boundless heart.

If you feel that your life is attracted in that direction, then those are the characteristics of Buddha that you are seeking refuge in. I take refuge in the Buddha. That's an invitation to live a life of a boundless heart with those four characteristics.