

Story of the Buddha

The hero of our story is Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, who lived more than 2,500 years ago. His father was the Rajah of the Sakya clan, King Suddhodana, and his mother was Queen Maha Maya. They lived in India, in a city called Kapilavasthu, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Siddhartha's parents belonged to the Indian warrior caste. They lived in a great palace in their capital city of Kapilavasthu, beneath the majestic mountains of the Himalayas. Queen Maha Maya was beautiful, intelligent and good. King Suddhodana was honoured and respected because he ruled well. Both of them were admired and loved by the people they ruled.

After many years, Queen Maha Maya became pregnant. She and her husband were very happy about it. On the full moon day in the month of May, she gave birth to a boy in Lumbini Park, while she was on her way to see her parents. Five days after the prince's birth the king asked five wise men to select a name for his son. They named him Siddhartha. This name means "the one whose wishes will be fulfilled".

There had been much rejoicing at the birth of the prince, but two days after he was named, Queen Maha Maya died. Everybody was shocked and felt very sad. But the saddest person was, of course, her husband King Suddhodana. He was worried, too, because his wise advisers had predicted that if the prince saw someone old, someone sick, a dead person, and a monk, he would want to leave the palace and become a monk himself, instead of being a prince.

The Queen's sister Prajapati Gotami took care of the baby prince with as much love as if he were her own son. Prince Siddhartha was a healthy and happy boy. He liked to learn and found it easy to study, and was the cleverest in his class and the best at games. He was always considerate to others and was popular among his friends. The prince was kind to everyone. He was gentle with his horse and other animals. Because he was a prince his life was very easy, and he could have chosen to ignore the problems of others. But he felt sympathy for others. He knew that all creatures, including people, animals and all other living beings, like to be happy and don't like suffering and pain.

Siddhartha always took care not to do anything harmful to any creature. He liked to help others. For example, one day the prince saw one of the town boys beating a snake with a stick. He immediately stopped the boy, and told him not to hurt the snake.

One day, Siddhartha was playing with his friends in the palace garden. One of the boys was his cousin, Prince Devadatta. While Siddhartha was gentle and kind, Devadatta was by nature cruel and liked to kill other creatures. While they were playing, Devadatta shot a swan with his bow and arrow. It was badly wounded. But Siddhartha took care of the swan until its wounds healed. When the swan was well again, he let it go free.

Siddhartha liked to watch what was happening and think about different things. One afternoon his father took him to the annual Ploughing Festival. The king started the

ceremony by driving the first pair of beautifully decorated bullocks. Siddhartha sat down under a rose-apple tree and watched everyone. He noticed that while people were happily enjoying themselves, the bullocks had to work terribly hard and plough the field. They did not look happy at all.

Then Siddhartha noticed various other creatures around him. He saw a lizard eating ants. But soon a snake came, caught the lizard, and ate it. Then, suddenly a bird came down from the sky, picked up the snake and so it was eaten also. Siddhartha realised that all these creatures might think that they were happy for a while, but that they ended up suffering.

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Siddhartha thought deeply about what he saw around him. He learned that although he was happy, there was a lot of suffering in life. So he felt deep sympathy for all creatures. When the king and the maids noticed that the prince was not among the crowd, they went to look for him. They were surprised to find the prince sitting with legs crossed, in deep meditation.

The king did not want his son to think about deep things in life too much, because he remembered that the wise men had predicted that his son might one day want to leave the palace and become a monk. So, in order to distract him, the king built Siddhartha a beautiful palace with a lovely garden to play in. But this did not stop the prince from thinking about the suffering and unhappiness that he noticed around him.

Siddhartha grew up to be a handsome young man of great strength. He was now of an age to get married. To stop Siddhartha from thinking of leaving home, King Suddhodana arranged for him to be married to his own beautiful cousin, Princess Yasodhara.

Following the ancient tradition, Siddhartha had to prove how brave he was to be worthy of Yasodhara. In the presence of her parents he was asked to tame a wild horse. Siddhartha tamed the horse not by beating it, as some suitors might, but by talking to the horse to calm it and stroking it gently. Yasodhara wanted to marry the prince, and no one else. They were married in a great ceremony. Both were only sixteen years old.

To stop the prince from thinking about unhappiness or leaving home, King Suddhodana built a pleasure palace for Siddhartha and Yasodhara. Dancers and singers were asked to entertain them, and only healthy and young people were allowed into the palace and the palace garden. The king did not want Siddhartha to know that everybody gets sick, grows old and will die. But in spite of the king's efforts, the prince was not happy. He wanted to know what life was like for people who lived outside the palace walls.

Finally, the king allowed Siddhartha to go on short visits to the nearby towns. He went with his attendant, Channa. On his first visit Siddhartha saw a white haired,

wrinkled man dressed in rags. Such a sight surprised him, as he had never seen anyone old before. Channa explained to him that this man was old and that everyone will be old one day. Siddhartha felt frightened by that and asked Channa to take him back home. At night, he could not sleep and he kept on thinking about old age. Although Siddhartha felt frightened by the vision of getting old, he wanted to see more of the world outside. On his next visit, he saw a man lying on the ground and moaning. Out of compassion, he rushed over to the man. Channa warned him that the man was sick and that everyone, even noble people like Siddhartha or the king could get sick.

On the third visit, Siddhartha and Channa saw four men carrying another man on a stretcher. Channa told Siddhartha that the man was dead and was going to be cremated. He also said that no one can escape death, and told the prince that everyone will die one day. When they returned to the palace, Siddhartha kept on thinking about what he had seen. Finally, he made a strong decision to find a way out of the suffering of old age, sickness and death.

Some time later, while the prince was riding in the garden, he saw a man in a yellow robe. He noticed that the man looked very peaceful and happy. Channa explained to him that the man was a monk. The monk had left his family and given up his desire for pleasures to search for freedom from worldly suffering. The prince felt inspired by the sight of the monk and began to want to leave home to search for freedom in the same way. That day, his wife gave birth to a lovely baby boy. Although he loved the boy, Siddhartha could not rejoice because he wanted to become a monk. He realised that now it would be more difficult for him to leave home.

From the day when he decided that he wanted to leave the palace the prince lost all interest in watching the dancing girls and other such pleasures. He kept on thinking instead about how to free himself and others from sickness, ageing and death. Finally, he decided he had to leave the palace and his family and become a homeless monk, in order to understand life and what caused suffering.

One night, when everyone in the palace was asleep, Siddhartha asked Channa to prepare his horse, Kanthaka. In the meantime he went into the room where Yasodhara and their newborn boy Rahula slept. He was filled with loving-kindness towards them and promised himself that he would come back to see them. But first he had to understand why all creatures suffer, and find out how they could escape from suffering.

In the silence of the night, Prince Siddhartha mounted Kanthaka. Accompanied by Channa, he left the palace and the city of Kapilavatthu. They stopped at a river some distance from the city and the prince took off his expensive dress and put on the robes of a monk. Then he told Channa to take the horse back to the palace. At first, both Channa and Kanthaka refused to go back, but Siddhartha insisted that he had to go on alone. With tears rolling down his face, Kanthaka watched as the prince walked out of sight.

So, at the age of 29, Siddhartha began the homeless life of a monk. From Kapilavatthu, he walked south to the city of Rajagaha, the capital of the Magadha

country. The king of this country was named Bimbisara. The morning after Siddhartha arrived, he went to the city and obtained his meal for the day by begging. After his meal, Siddhartha decided to go to the mountains where many hermits (people who live alone) and sages (wise people) lived. On the way there, he came across a flock of sheep. Shepherds were driving the herd to Rajagaha to be sacrificed in a fire ceremony. One little lamb was injured. Out of compassion Siddhartha picked up the lamb and followed the shepherds back to the city.

In the city, the fire was burning on the altar, and King Bimbisara and a group of priests were chanting hymns. They all worshipped fire. When the leader of the fire-worshippers lifted his sword to kill the first sheep, Siddhartha quickly stopped him. He asked the king not to let the worshippers destroy the lives of the poor animals. Then Siddhartha turned to the worshippers and told them: "Life is extremely precious. All living creatures want to live, just like people."

He continued: "If people expect mercy, they should show mercy. By the law of cause and effect (karma), those who kill others will, in turn, be killed. If we expect happiness in the future, we must not harm any creatures. Whoever sows suffering will reap the same fruits." This speech completely changed the king's mind, and the minds of the fire-worshippers. He stopped the killing ceremony and invited Siddhartha to stay and teach his people. But Siddhartha declined, as he had not yet found the truth he was seeking.

After Siddhartha left Rajagaha, he went to see a sage (wise person) named Alara Kalama. He stayed with the sage and studied diligently. Soon, he knew as much as his teacher. But although he had learned how to make his mind very calm, he still did not know the way to freedom from all suffering. So he thanked Alara Kalama and left to find another teacher.

Siddhartha then studied with a sage named Uddaka Ramaputta. He learned how to make his mind very still and empty of all thoughts and emotions. But he still did not understand the mystery of life and death, and did not find the complete freedom from suffering that he sought. Again, Siddhartha thanked his teacher and left. But, this time, he decided to find the ultimate truth by his own wisdom and effort. In those days, there were many wandering monks who belonged to various cults. They had left their families to become ascetics. They believed that by starving themselves or tormenting their bodies (asceticism) they would be reborn in heaven. Their belief was that the more they suffered in this life, the more pleasure they would receive in the future. So some ate extremely little food, some stood on one foot for a long time, and others slept on boards covered with sharp nails.

Siddhartha also tried to become an ascetic. He thought that if he practiced hard enough, he would become enlightened (that is, know the way and be able to overcome suffering). So he found a place at Uruvela near a river and a village, where he could wash and obtain his daily food. There were five other men living there, and they became his companions. Like Siddhartha, they also practiced asceticism. Their names were Kondanna, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama and Assaji.

Siddhartha practiced various forms of asceticism for six years. He reduced his eating more and more until he ate nothing at all. He became extremely thin, but still he did

not want to give up such practice. One day, while meditating alone he fainted, exhausted by the ascetic practices.

At that time, a shepherd boy with a goat walked by. He saw Siddhartha and realised that without any food Siddhartha would die very soon. So he quickly fed him some warm goat's milk. Soon Siddhartha regained consciousness and began to feel better. He realised that without the boy's help, he would have died before attaining enlightenment.

From then on, Siddhartha began eating normally. Soon his health was completely restored. It was clear to him now that asceticism was not the way to enlightenment. However, his five friends continued with their ascetic practices. They thought that Siddhartha had become greedy and so they left him. One morning, a girl named Sujata offered Siddhartha some delicious milk-rice porridge and said to him: "May you be successful in obtaining your wishes!"

On the same day, Siddhartha accepted an offering of straw from a straw-peddler, made a seat from it and sat down to meditate under a large bodhi tree, facing east. He made a promise to himself: "I will not give up until I achieve my goal, until I find a way of freedom from suffering, for myself and all people."

As he meditated, Siddhartha let go of all outside disturbances, and memories of pleasures from the past. He let go of all worldly thoughts and turned his mind to finding the ultimate truth about life. He asked himself: "How does suffering start? How can one be free from suffering?" At first many distracting images appeared in his mind. But finally his mind became very calm, like a pond of still water. In the calm of deep meditation, Siddhartha concentrated on how his own life had started. First, Siddhartha remembered his previous lives. Next, he saw how beings are reborn according to the law of cause and effect, or karma. He saw that good deeds lead the way, from suffering to peace. Then he saw that the origin of suffering is being greedy, which arises from thinking that we are more important than everybody else. Finally, he became completely free from thinking in a way that caused him any suffering. This freedom is called nirvana. So, at the age of 35, Siddhartha became the Buddha, the Supreme Enlightened One.

After attaining the supreme enlightenment, the Buddha remained sitting in the happiness of nirvana for several days. Later, a Brahmin, an upper caste man, came by the tree where the Buddha sat. He greeted the Buddha and asked: "What qualities does one have to have to be a true Brahmin and a noble person?" The Buddha replied: "The true Brahmin must give up all evil. He must give up all conceit, try to understanding all things and practice pure living. This way he will deserve to be called a Brahmin." After a long rest, the Buddha began to plan what to do in the future. He thought: "Although the Dharma (teaching) is deep and will be difficult for most people to understand, there are some who only have a little craving. Such people may be able to accept the Dharma. They are like the lotuses that extend their stalks from the bottom of the pond up in the air, to receive sunshine. So I should not keep this radiant truth a secret. I should make it known everywhere, so that all people can benefit from it." Then the Buddha thought: "Who should I teach first? The person must be interested in the Dharma and quick to understand it." First he thought of his old teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. But they had both died. Then he remembered his five

ascetic friends, Kondanna, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahanama and Assaji. When he found out that they were living at Sarnath, near Varanasi, he left soon afterwards to find them.

At Sarnath, when the five ascetics saw the Buddha coming, they decided not even to greet him or talk to him. They still thought that he was greedy and had given up his search for truth. But as he got closer, they realised that he was surrounded by a brilliant light and looked very noble. They were so astonished that they forgot about their previous decision. They greeted him, offered him some water and quickly prepared a seat.

After sitting down, the Buddha told them: "Monks! I have realised the truth of the end of suffering (nirvana), and the way to end suffering. If you learn and practice it, you will soon become enlightened. You must take responsibility for working to understand these things." At first, the five monks doubted his words and asked him many questions. But finally they began to trust him and wanted to hear his teaching. And so the Buddha gave his first teaching to the five monks at Sarnath.

The Buddha taught them the Four Noble Truths. The first Noble Truth was about the fact that suffering exists. The second was about the cause of suffering; the third was that it is possible to end suffering; and the fourth explained the path to be followed if you want to end suffering. During this first teaching, Kondanna understood everything and attained the first stage of enlightenment. Then he asked the Buddha to ordain him as a monk. Soon the other four also joined the Buddha's order. All five monks practiced diligently and with the help of the Buddha they soon became fully enlightened ones, or arahants.

The Buddha continued teaching at the Deer Park in Sarnath. After hearing the teachings Yasa, a young man from a wealthy family, and his best friends left home and became monks. Later, fifty young men from high-caste families also left their homes and joined the community of monks to spend their lives practising the Buddha's teachings.

When the Buddha had sixty monks as his disciples (students) he held a meeting. He told them: "Go and spread the Dharma to other places, to give more people the chance of gaining freedom from suffering. Spread the Dharma so that human lives may be purified and brightened. There are people ready for the Dharma. They will be able to understand it. I myself will go to teach at Uruvela."

After the Buddha sent out his sixty-arahant disciples for the first time, he travelled to Magadha in the southeast, to Uruvela village. After hearing the Buddha's teaching, many men left their homes and became monks. Later, more than 1,000 of them became fully enlightened arahants.

Then the Buddha took his arahant disciples to Rajagaha. He went to teach and enlighten King Bimbisara and his people, as he had previously promised the king he would. After hearing the Dharma, King Bimbisara took refuge (look for protection and help) in the Buddha and became his follower. Later, he donated Veluvana Park as a residence for the Buddha and the monks. Veluvana became the first Buddhist monastery.

One morning, on his way from Veluvana to beg for his daily alms food, the Buddha came across a young man named Sigala. The man was bowing to the east, south, west and north. Then he saluted the sky above and the earth below. He finished by scattering seeds in these six directions. The Buddha asked him why he did such things. Sigala replied that his father, before he died, asked him to do this ritual daily, to protect himself from any evil that might happen to him.

The Buddha then explained to Sigala what his father had really meant. By asking him to bow in the six directions, his father really wanted him to remember, respect and be kind to all living beings in all directions. By doing this he would create good karma and he would be protected. Finally, the Buddha instructed Sigala not to kill, steal, be unfaithful to his wife, lie or take intoxicants. These are the training rules known as the

Five Precepts

During the Buddha's stay near Rajagaha, there was a well-known teacher of one of the traditional schools. He had about two hundred students, and among them were Upatissa and Kolita. These two students were best friends. They wanted to learn more about life and death than their teacher had been able to teach them. So they agreed with each other that they would search for the highest knowledge, and as soon as one of them found it, he would share it with the other.

One morning Upatissa was walking towards Rajagaha. On the way there he met a monk who looked very peaceful and seemed to be free from all fear. This monk was the arahant Assaji, one of the five former ascetics. Upatissa went towards him and said: "Venerable master! Who is your teacher and what did he teach you?" The monk replied with a smile: "My teacher is a great sage of the Sakya clan. He is the Buddha, and I practice according to his teaching."

Then Upatissa asked Venerable Assaji: "What is the teaching of the Buddha?" Assaji replied: "I will tell you the meaning of the Buddha's teaching very briefly. The Buddha said that there is a cause for everything and he also taught how things decay." Upatissa was so clever that when he heard this he understood that whatever comes into existence will also decay, and he attained the first stage of enlightenment. Then he thanked Assaji, asked him where he might find the Buddha, and left.

After this encounter Upatissa was filled with happiness, and went straight to see Kolita. He told Kolita what the noble monk Assaji had told him. Instantly, Kolita also understood the Buddha's teaching and attained the first stage of enlightenment. Finally, the two friends went to see the Buddha. They asked him to accept them as monks and the Buddha agreed. After practicing diligently, they both attained arahantship. Later, they became the Buddha's chief disciples and were known under their monks' names as Sariputta and Moggallana.

When the Buddha was living at Rajagaha, a conference was held at Veluvana on the full moon of the third month of the year. One thousand two hundred and fifty monks attended the meeting. They were all arahants and all of them arrived on the same day. On this special occasion, the Buddha told his disciples to practice and teach following the same basic principles. The essence of this teaching was: do not do anything bad, do good and purify your mind.

When King Suddhodana learned that his son had become a Buddha and was staying at Rajagaha, he sent an officer to invite the Buddha to Kapilavatthu. The Buddha promised to visit his family. So one day the Buddha took his disciples to Kapilavatthu. They arrived in the evening and stayed in a garden outside the city. The next morning, the Buddha and his disciples went to the city to beg for alms food. When the king found out that the prince was begging for food, he felt very angry and disappointed. He asked his driver to take him straight to the Buddha. When he saw the Buddha, he spoke to him in an angry way: "My son! Today you have done a most disgraceful thing to the royal family and me. Have your ancestors ever done such a thing? Have they ever accepted food like beggars?"

The Buddha spoke calmly to his angry father: "Father! I am not following the custom of my worldly ancestors. I am following the tradition of the Buddhas of the past. All past Buddhas begged for food, to inspire people to follow the teachings. Then the Buddha explained some basics of the Dharma to the king. Then King Suddhodana calmed down and asked the Buddha and his disciples to accept food at the palace. In the palace, after finishing a delicious meal, the Buddha taught the Dharma to the king, his relatives, and other people. Then he took two of his senior disciples to see Yasodhara, the cousin he had married at the age of sixteen, and Rahula, his son. Yasodhara was very sad. The Buddha could see past lives, and he compassionately told her about the good actions she had done in the past and explained the Dharma to her.

Later Rahula, who was seven years old, was ordained by the Buddha and became the first novice in the Buddhist tradition. (A novice is someone who is in training but has not yet taken the full vows of a monk or nun.) Besides Rahula, the Buddha also converted his step-brother Nanda and several princes of the Sakya clan. Among them were his cousins Ananda and Devadatta.

Many years after he left Kapilavatthu, the Buddha went back to visit his father King Suddhodana, who was very ill. The king was very happy to see the Buddha again and felt better. But because he was very old, he could no longer resist the illness, and two or three days later he passed away. Everyone felt very sad.

When King Suddhodana died, Lady Prajapati Gotami felt very sad. She and several other women decided to leave the worldly life and join the Buddha's group of monks to practice the Dharma. So she led the women to see the Buddha. She asked him to accept them as nuns, but the Buddha refused. The women felt very disappointed and cried. But they did not give up their wish to become nuns.

When the Buddha was residing at the Mahavaha Monastery, Lady Prajapati Gotami and her group of women went to the monastery and told Ananda what had happened. Ananda felt compassion for them and promised to help them. He went to see the Buddha to ask him to be merciful and let the women join the monastic order. But the Buddha refused again.

Ananda then said: "I beg you, Lord Buddha, please do a favour to Prajapati Gotami and accept her and other women as nuns, because she has done you great favours in the past. She brought you up as her own son." So finally the Buddha said: "Alright, if they are willing to follow the monastic rules I give them, they can leave home and become nuns and practise the Dharma."

After leaving the Buddha, Ananda went to tell Lady Prajapati Gotami the good news. All the women were very happy and promised to observe the eight rules of conduct that the Buddha gave them. Ananda then went back to the Buddha and told him that the women were happy to follow the rules. So Prajapati Gotami became the first Buddhist nun.

Of all the disciples of the Buddha, his cousin Ananda, was the most devoted to him. So the Buddha selected him to be his close attendant. Another of the Buddha's cousins also became a monk. His name was Devadatta. But he was envious of the Buddha and competed with him, trying to take over the leadership.

Devadatta was very conceited, and was jealous of the two chief disciples of the Buddha. So he left the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns) and made friends with the crown-prince Ajatasattu, son of King Bimbisara. The prince built a private monastery for Devadatta. Devadatta then persuaded the prince to kill his father, King Bimbisara, and make himself king. The prince followed Devadatta's evil scheme and starved his father to death so he could become king.

Now Devadatta felt very powerful, because the new king was his friend and supporter. So he decided to kill the Buddha. One evening, while the Buddha was walking past a rocky hill, Devadatta pushed a huge stone down the hillside, intending to kill the Buddha. But the rock suddenly broke into many pieces and only one sharp piece hit the Buddha, on his foot. The Buddha returned to the monastery and was treated by the famous physician Jivaka.

Although his evil plot had failed, Devadatta tried to kill the Buddha again. When the Buddha was on his daily alms-round at Rajagaha, Devadatta set loose a wild elephant. But as the wild elephant ran towards the Buddha, it became calm because of the Buddha's enormous loving-kindness. After this incident, Devadatta gave up trying to kill the Buddha, but he still wanted to break up the Sangha.

To impress the other monks and nuns and disrupt the Sangha, Devadatta asked the Buddha to make stricter rules of conduct for the Sangha. He asked that monks not be allowed to sleep in houses or eat any meat. But the Buddha refused Devadatta's proposal. He said: "If some monks prefer to sleep in the open or not eat meat, they are free to do so. But if they do not wish to live this way they do not have to." Finally, the Buddha said: "Devadatta, if you try to break up the Sangha you will reap the evil fruits."

Devadatta ignored the Buddha's warning, led away a group of monks and made himself their leader. One day, when Devadatta was asleep, the Buddha's chief disciple Sariputta came and warned the monks about the consequences of evil actions. The monks realised their mistake and returned to the Buddha. When Devadatta woke up he was so angry that he became ill. Eventually, he began to regret his actions, and he asked his servants to take him to see the Buddha. But he died unexpectedly on the way there.

The Buddha taught people for forty-five years. He travelled to different kingdoms in India, always on foot. During the rainy seasons, he stayed at monasteries built for him and the Sangha by different supporters. The places the Buddha stayed at most often

were Veluvana, near Rajagaha, and Jetavana, near Savatthi. During all these years, the Buddha worked hard every day to spread the teachings.

The Buddha usually got up before sunrise, took a bath, and then contemplated on whom to teach. When he found someone ready to understand and accept the teaching, he would go and teach that person the same day. After sunrise, the Buddha went to beg for alms from people in the neighbourhood. Sometimes he went alone, and sometimes with his monks. Some people also invited him to their homes to accept offerings. After the meal, he taught them the Dharma. Then he returned to the monastery.

Back at the monastery, the Buddha rested quietly in the hall, under a tree or in his room, waiting for the monks to return from their alms round. When all the monks and nuns had assembled in the hall he gave a Dharma talk or just encouraged them to practice the Dharma. Some monks also asked him for personal instructions for their Dharma practice. The Buddha then considered their natures and gave to each of them the individual advice that suited them best.

In the summertime, the people from the neighbourhood used to visit him in the evenings. Some came to offer him gifts, others to hear his teachings. The Buddha taught them the Dharma using skilful language, so that everyone would benefit. After the talk everyone would feel happy and satisfied.

After the people left, the Buddha usually took a bath. Then he would meditate for some time. After that, he would instruct monks who came from other places. He helped them to understand the difficult parts of the Dharma and so made them very happy. At sunset, the Buddha usually went for a walk to refresh himself. After this he would again give talks to his monks. Late at night, distinguished people, such as kings, came for advice and instruction in the Dharma.

After this, the Buddha went to sleep, usually for four hours only. He slept on his right side and woke up before sunrise. Then he entered into deep meditation to explore the natures of his audience for that day.

The Buddha always worked very hard to spread the Dharma. When he was not travelling, he spent time not only explaining the Dharma, but also in helping people to solve their daily problems. He was always willing to help people from any station in life, whether they were a housewife, a farmer, or just somebody in need of help. The Buddha was never reluctant to answer difficult questions or explain complicated problems. He never felt irritated by the person asking questions, and always was able to answer correctly. The Buddha always explained the Dharma in a way that was most suited to the natures of his listeners. He welcomed all people. Many who doubted him at first became convinced of the truth of his teaching. They then became his loyal disciples.

After 45 years of travelling and teaching, the Buddha had reached his eightieth year. Although his mind was strong, he felt that his body was getting weaker. He realised that his life was coming to an end. So he decided to go north to the foothills of the Himalayas, the region where he was born. He wished to enter the final nirvana, or freedom from suffering. On the way north, the Buddha and Ananda stopped in the

Bamboo Grove Village, in the kingdom of Patali. The Buddha decided to stay there for the rainy season.

During his stay in the village the Buddha fell seriously ill. After he recovered, he told Ananda: "Ananda, by now the Sangha should know the way to practice, be able to check their practice and attain nirvana. I do not keep any secrets. With all my heart I wish the best for all the monks and nuns. I am an old man now. You should depend on yourselves. You should rely on the Dharma."

In the morning, after eating, the Buddha went to the Pava Stupa to meditate. He sat on a rock in the shade of a tree and investigated with his mind when he would be due to pass away. He concluded that he would enter the final nirvana after three months. When he told this to Ananda, Ananda begged him: "Please stay and continue helping people to end suffering!" The Buddha replied: "Ananda, the life of the Buddha is drawing to its close. He will attain final nirvana three months from now. Death is unavoidable."

Then the Buddha called the monks and gave them many important instructions. He encouraged them to practice his teaching for the benefit of all people in the world, and to help others to learn and practice the Dharma. He also encouraged them to serve as good examples for the people of the world. Finally he instructed: "All things must grow old and pass away. Study the truths I have taught you and put them into practice; guard your own minds; do not be careless, so that you can be freed from suffering and rebirth."

One morning, to have a last look at the city of Vesali, the Buddha and Ananda went there to beg for alms. After that the Buddha and his disciples visited neighbouring villages, and the Buddha taught the Dharma to people. The Buddha also told his disciples that when anyone teaches them the Dharma, they should carefully verify it against the Dharma taught by the Buddha. He said that if it was not consistent with his teaching, they should reject it. Then they continued to the city of Pava and rested in the Mango garden, which belonged to Cunda, the son of a goldsmith.

The Buddha taught Cunda and his family. They gained confidence in the Dharma and took refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma. But the meal that Cunda offered to the Buddha contained a fungus that made the Buddha feel very ill. However, in spite of the pain, the Buddha and his disciples continued their journey to Kusinara. On the way they met a prince of the Malla clan. The Buddha taught him the way to live in peace. The prince then took refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (the Three Jewels), and offered two rolls of fine gold-coloured cloth to the Buddha. The Buddha kept one and gave the other to Ananda.

Finally the Buddha and Ananda arrived at the boundaries of Kusinara. When they came to Salavana, a holiday resort of the royal clan of the Mallas, the Buddha felt he could go no further. So he asked Ananda to prepare a place for him to lie down. Ananda took the Buddha's outer robe and placed it on a bed between two big sal trees. The Buddha then lay down on his right side. He did not fall asleep, but rested to relieve his pain and fatigue. His mind remained as tranquil as it had ever been. Ananda felt that the Buddha was really leaving him this time, and he felt deep grief in his heart. So he left the Buddha, and went to an isolated place among trees to cry. He

thought: "Unlike the other monks, I still have not reached the stage of an arahant, and I shall lose my compassionate master forever, and be left alone." His face became flooded with tears. When the other monks told the Buddha that Ananda was weeping in a hidden place, the Buddha asked them to bring Ananda back.

On Ananda's return, the Buddha praised him in front of the other monks. He told them: "Ananda has, at all times, been my most excellent attendant. He knew how to arrange just the right time for me to meet with visitors. He always treated all visitors well." Later, Ananda said to the Buddha: "Lord Buddha, please do not enter nirvana in such a small and unimportant place. Please select one of the large cities, such as Rajagaha or Vesali, and enter the final nirvana there. In those cities there are many rich and powerful people who are your disciples. They can take responsibility for your holy remains."

The Buddha said to Ananda: "No Ananda, do not say that. This is not a small and insignificant place. Long ago this was a prosperous city, and the residence of a righteous king. Ananda, go to Kusinara and tell the king and the people that late tonight the Buddha will enter the final nirvana in this forest. If they wish to, they should come to see me before this time." So Ananda went to Kusinara with several monks and told King Malla and his people what the Buddha had said.

When the people of Kusinara learnt that the Buddha was about to enter nirvana, they all felt very sad and cried. They said: "It is too early for the Buddha to enter final nirvana. The light of the world is going to be extinguished too soon!" Men, women and children, crying loudly, went to Salavana, where the Buddha was staying. They all hoped to see the Buddha one more time.

A wandering young man from an ascetic cult, whose name was Subhadda, happened to be in Kusinara. When he learnt that the Buddha was about to enter the final nirvana, he decided to visit him. He wanted to ask the Buddha some questions that bothered him. He believed that only the Buddha would be able to give him a thorough explanation. So he went to Salavana, and asked Ananda to allow him to see the Buddha. However Ananda refused him permission, as he thought that the Buddha was too tired to see visitors.

But Subhadda was very anxious to see the Buddha and asked Ananda again and again. When the Buddha heard them both talking, he knew Subhadda's good motivation. So he told Ananda to let Subhadda come in. Having listened to Subhadda's questions, the Buddha taught him until any problems in Subhadda's mind were cleared up. Subhadda gained confidence in the Buddha and the Dharma and asked the Buddha to accept him as a monk. Thus Subhadda became the last person to be ordained by the Buddha.

Later the Buddha gave the monks and nuns the last chance to ask any questions. He asked them if any of them still had doubts about the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. But none of them had any doubts about the Triple Gem. Finally the Buddha said to the monks: "Monks, this is the last time for me to talk to you. All things change. Work hard to gain your own salvation!"

The Buddha then entered into meditation, deeper and deeper, until his mind was purely balanced and steadily focused. And then he passed away. Thus, the Buddha, the Blessed One, had attained that final freedom known as nirvana. Soon after the death of the Buddha a meeting of 500 arahants was held to collect together all his

teachings. They were memorised and handed down from one generation of monks to the next. In this way, the teachings of the Buddha were not lost, and we can still hear them today.