

Handout for Class 2

Life of the Buddha

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More than twenty-five hundred years ago, in ancient India, a very inquisitive young prince began to explore his world. He explored the environment of his lifestyle within the royal palace, as well as the different walks of life outside. His father, the King, had a great fear of his son discovering the true nature of life, which from the Buddhist point of view, is full of suffering, pain, and struggle. It was said that if the young Prince discovered this, he might renounce his princehood and become a saint, a practitioner of the spiritual path. Therefore, the King tried his best to prevent his son, the Prince, from seeing the true nature of the world. Consequently, he offered the Prince everything he wanted. The King did everything in his power to prevent the Prince from seeing the true nature of life.

Recognizing the Nature of Life

However, one day, the Prince looked out of his window, and he accidentally saw several things. First, he saw a very old person. Next, he saw a very ill person. Finally, he saw a corpse being carried to a funeral. Afterwards, the Prince asked his friends in the palace about what he had seen. The prince then thought to himself that the nature of life is such that: you are born, you grow up, you get old, and young or old, you sometimes you get sick, which leads to death. That is the nature of life. The prince then asked, "How can we prevent these sufferings of sickness, old age and death?"

Seeking Freedom from Suffering

The Prince found that there is only one way to overcome this suffering, which is to discover the true path of spirituality. Therefore, he renounced his life as a prince and ran away from the palace. This is a very important part of the Buddhist teachings: that he was born a prince and later ran away, renouncing his palace. He ran away from his palace as we sometimes run away from our house. However, we go back home, but the Prince never returned. He went away for many, many years. He went into the jungles, somewhere in the northeastern part of ancient India. There, he found many Hindu practitioners, followers of the ascetic path of Hinduism, and he practiced with them for many years.

The Middle Way

After a time, he discovered that undertaking the religious trip of asceticism was not the way to overcome our pain, our suffering and causes of suffering. At that point, he renounced the path of asceticism. In other words, he renounced the path of religious fanaticism. Now, we can see what he was going through. First, he renounced ordinary life and entered the path of asceticism. Next, he renounced the ascetic path or the trip of being a religious fanatic. Then, where did he go from there? He found the "middle way," the path that does not fall into either of the "two extremes" of completely trusting and believing in the religious path of asceticism, or of totally ignoring our pain, our suffering and causes of suffering, which we try to deny. Twenty-five hundred years ago, we did that and the tradition of shielding ourselves from our pain still continues today. In fact, we are finding better ways today to ignore our pain. We have a highly developed medical science and other resources through which we can totally deny our pain.

Complete Awakening

Through having found the middle way devoid of these two extremes, the Prince achieved the spiritual insight, the spiritual realization, which is called "complete awakening," true awakening. That awakening is like waking from a dream state. When we are sleeping, and we dream, we have a variety of experiences; we might have the beautiful experience of hiking a high Himalayan mountain. We are on top of a high mountain, seeing a beautiful view from the peak of the mountain, even the clouds are in the dream. There are such beautiful experiences in our life. At the same time, we could have a dream in which we are being chased eternally by a poisonous snake, like an anaconda. We could have that kind of nightmare going on and on and on, but not being able to wake up. Being in that state of dreaming and not recognizing that we are dreaming is what the Buddha called "samsara," the confused state. Whereas, when we wake up from that, it is called "enlightenment" or "buddhahood." We become buddhas, awakened ones, fully awakened ones.

When the Prince achieved the state of the inner awakening, in the northeastern part of India, in a place called Bodhgaya, in his last stage of practice on the spiritual path, he was sitting under a beautiful tree called a "bodhi" tree. "Bodhi" means "awake" in Sanskrit; therefore, bodhi tree means something like "awake tree." The prince was sitting under that tree on a cushion of kusha grass. He was peacefully resting his mind, exploring further and further the nature of mind, the nature of suffering, the pain that he was going through in his mind, and the calmness that he was experiencing through his meditative spiritual journey. Then, finally, one day under that tree in the early morning (Rinpoche snaps his fingers), he just clicked in. He just (snaps fingers) awakened in that click, all the way; finally, (snaps fingers) he clicked in and that was the experience of enlightenment, awakening.

Teaching

The Buddha shared his experience of the path, the spiritual journey. He shared his experiences of realization, of spiritual insight into the nature of mind. In one of his earliest discourses, the Buddha addressed his audience of monks and lay people and said, "You should examine my teachings thoroughly. Like a gold merchant looking to acquire pure gold, you should thoroughly go through the process of analyzing these teachings." Buddha said that a substance could be examined to see if it were pure gold by first striking it, then cutting it, then rubbing it with different cloths. Through this testing, it is possible find out if a substance is pure gold or fake gold. In a similar way, Buddha said, "It is extremely important for you to analyze and examine my teachings, and then, in the end, you can decide whether to adopt them. If there is any wisdom, you can adopt it. If there is nothing, just leave it. You do not have to accept these teachings." Buddha said, "Do not accept my teachings because they are taught by a King, or a Prince. Do not accept them because they are taught by someone called "Buddha." However, accept them if they are logical, if they are reasonable, if there is wisdom in them, and if there is some benefit."