

# Buddhism – The Core Story

There was once a young man who lived in ancient India. He was the son of the king of the Shakya tribe, in one of India's most northern provinces, near what is now Nepal. This elegant, sensitive young prince was brought up, he later said, with great care, dressed in silk, and instructed in civil and military arts. He later said of his early life,

“Although brought up in wealth, I was by nature very sensitive, and it caused me to wonder why, when all men are destined to suffer old age, sickness and death, and none can escape these things, yet they look upon the old age, sickness and death of others with fear, loathing and scorn. This is not right, I thought, and at that time, all the pride and courage I felt in my own youth and good health deserted me”.

This young man, Siddhartha Gautama, married, and his wife, Yashodha, bore him a son and heir, Rahula. But the questions that once vexed Gautama continued to do so. Why do old age, sickness and death invoke such terror in human beings?

Gautama, or Shakamuni, (sage of the Shakya tribe, as he was later known) couldn't put these questions away. They continued to bug him. How torn his heart must have been at the thought of leaving his beautiful young bride and his beloved child, and of going against his dear father's wishes. Eventually, though, he renounced his claim to the tribal throne in favour of his infant son, and went out into the world in search of enlightenment to the questions in his heart.

He first placed himself under one Brahmin teacher, and then another. Brahminism was probably the top-dog school of thought in those days, and though Gautama excelled under their instruction, he found no answer to his questions about human suffering,

He next turned his attention to the ascetic life. In Gautama's time, it was common for men of a certain (middle) age to leave their homes, renounce comfort, and enter the forests to discover the truth of life, or new ideals, to bring back to society. Gautama's approach to these austerities appears to have been determined in the extreme. At one point, his co-practitioners thought he had killed himself. Perhaps the idea that suffering is caused by desire lead to these austere practices in an effort to eradicate desire.

Perhaps also, Gautama began to realize that desire is inherent in life. If you eradicate desire, you eradicate part of your life, and become zombie.

After a number of years of such practice, Gautama took his emaciated body to the river, washed it clean, hauled it out, and replemished it with gruel brought to him by a village girl named Sujata. Later, he seated himself in the Lotus position under a papal fig tree, and determined not to move until he had won enlightenment to his questions.

Gautama first remonstrated with King Mara, the voice of sweet temptation in our minds, “Better to me that I die in battle than that I should live defeated”. King Mara retreated, saying “Like a crow attacking a rock mistaken for aq tender morsel, I leave Gautama in disgust an frustration”.

Gautama next purified himself of delusions arising from desire, as Brahmins and ascetics often did in those days. He then recalled his previous life times; what he had eaten, whom he had loved, his joys and sorrows and his deaths and rebirths through countless destructions and formations of the universe. Of this stage, he later said “Ignorance perished, and gave way to insight”.

Following this, Gautama observed the lives of others. He later said “I saw the passing away and rebirth of all creatures, according as their acts were lower or higher. Those living beings whose acts are harmful pass to the sphere of misery. Those others whose deeds are good win a place in the triple-heaven”.

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Just what Gautama perceived during the final watch of his meditation, there is not full consensus. A contemporary writer writes:

“My conviction is that Gautama’s enlightenment was in a sense a cry of wonder at the mysterious entity called life, whose myriad manifestations are joined to and dependent upon one another through the links of cause and effect.

“But ordinary people are unaware of this truth and delude themselves into believing that they exist independently of one another. Such a delusion estranges them from the Law of life, and causes them to become the prisoners of desire. From desire stem suffering, tragedy and misfortune. How foolish and pitiful people are! They are led astray by ignorance, which is a form of evil, and there is no way out for them except to confront this evil that dwells in their minds.

“Such, I believe, must have been the thoughts that passed through the mind of Gautama, insofar as it is possible for an ordinary man like be to guess. Having attained enlightenment, he himself was free of the ignorance that blinded other men and could live in accord with the true Law of life. What joy, what bliss he must have felt.

“To summarise, what Gautama attained under the pipal tree was an intuitive grasp of the essence of life”.

For some time, Gautama savoured the bliss of his new understanding. Then he went to Benares Deer Park and preached his first sermon to the five men with whom he had shared his ascetic life. Initially they were cool towards him, since he had abandoned his rigours, but he asked them, “have you ever seen me so radiant before?” Indeed, they hadn’t.

If Gautama had tried to explain his intuitive enlightenment directly to people, they almost certainly wouldn’t have understood it, subtle and complex as it is. For about forty years, he formulated ways of enticing people towards enlightenment, of encouraging them, and of healing and transcending suffering and bringing joy to people’s hearts. He told many people many things, and partly as a result of this, there are many forms of Buddhism around today.

At the age of about seventy-two, Gautama said to his followers, at a place they had named Eagle Peak because of its shape, “The Thus Come One (meaning himself) has long expounded his teachings, and must now reveal the truth.” He went on to clarify that all that he had taught up to that point were provisional, or partial teachings, and proceeded to teach what he called the Sutra of the Wonderful Lotus Flower.

We read in this Lotus Sutra, or teaching, that myriad Buddhas came to Eagle Peak from their Buddha lands to hear Gautama preach the Lotus, and that a great Treasure Tower, festooned with banners and adorned with jewels, arose from the earth to the sky. From within this Treasure Tower, the assembly heard the voice of the Buddha Many Treasures saying “Excellent! Excellent, Sage of the Shakyas, that you preach this Sutra of equality”. These are, perhaps, some of the metaphors that Gautama used to try to express the vast, harmonious state of life that one can experience when one’s life is one with that of the great universe. One message of the Lotus Sutra is that this state, Buddhahood, is inherent in our lives. Gautama later said “All beings alike possess the Buddha nature”. Gautama revealed that even Devedatta, Gautama’s own jealous cousin who had tried to kill him, was his, Gautama’s teacher in a previous life time.

Shortly before Gautama died at the age of eighty, he went to a place called Bamboo Grove Village. Here, resting under a Chapala tree one day after the rains, he is reported to have said with a sense of fulfilment, “This world is beautiful – it is a joy to live in it”.

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On 16<sup>th</sup> February 1222 A.D., a boy called Zennichimaro was born in a small fishing village in Southern Japan. Before his birth it is said that his mother, Umegiko-nyo, dreamed that she was embracing the sun in her bosom, and that the heavens proclaimed the advent of a great Buddhist leader. The child’s name, Zennichi, means splendid sun. Maro means small boy.

Zennichimaro’s parents sent him to study at the local temple when he was eleven years old. He did well, as the beauty of his extant calligraphy and linguistic expression attest. However, something was bugging young Zennichimaro. Japan was a Buddhist country in those days, but there were a number of different Buddhist sects in the country, and there was ugly infighting between them. Natural disasters also visited Japan’s people like dominoes in those days. If Gautama’s message had been about how to live in harmony, then it was clearly lost in Japan by then, though the people professed to practice Buddhism. Where amongst all the Buddha’s teachings, pondered young Zennichimaro, was his enlightenment as to how to transcend suffering?

Zennichimaro was later to write:

“Ever since my childhood, I have studied Buddhism with one thought in mind. Life as a human being is pathetically fleeting. A man exhales his last breath with no hope to draw another. Not even the dew borne by the wind suffices to describe this intransience. No one, wise or foolish, young or old, can escape death. My sole wish has therefore been to solve this mystery. All else has been secondary”.

It would seem that this mystery was on Zennichimaro’s mind from the remarkably early age of eleven or twelve years, an age at which my own sons were more interested in football and gameboys. Remarkable – but then, we in the twenty-first century can do things which couldn’t have been done in thirteenth century Japan.

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Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Zennichimaro chose at the age of fifteen to follow the religious rather than the military life, and changed his name to Zesho-bo Rencho, meaning roughly, Lotus-growth sage under the Sun.

Before he did this, it appears from some of his writings that he prayed for, and was granted, the jewel of the wisdom of the essence of life.

From the age of fifteen to the age of thirty-one, Rencho travelled the land poring the scriptures and documents he could find in Japan following Buddhism's journey from Gautama's voice in India, through Korea and China and eventually to his homeland over the centuries.

He found that his own intuitive grasp of life's essence was matched only in the Lotus Sutra that Gautama had expounded in his later years. In Rencho's days, Japanese people pronounced the Chinese translation of the Wonderful Lotus Sutra "Myoho-Renge-Kyo". By prefixing this phrase with the word 'Nam', resulting in the incantation "Nam-myoho-rence-kyo", Rencho discerned that ordinary people can devote themselves to, or lay claim to, the enlightenment inherent within themselves - enlightenment as to, for instance, what will we feel when we die, as we inevitably will. Will an ever-widening gulf open between us and those we love, or will we be able to bridge this gulf and move towards complete repose, knowing that we used our life well?

Early in 1253, at the age of thirty-one, Rencho returned to the temple where he had been educated as a boy. Early in the morning of April 28<sup>th</sup> that year, he climbed to the top of a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and there, before heaven and earth, with the rising sun as his witness, his voice resounded:

"Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo".

At noon the same day, in the main hall of the temple of his youth, Rencho proclaimed Nam-myoho-rence-kyo as the practice for this age. He explained that other forms of Buddhism practiced in Japan at that time may have been effective in the past, but were by then ineffective. He even denounced Zen as the work of devils. He also changed his name to Nichiren, or Sun-Lotus. We can imagine the Lotus-flower growing and blossoming in the warmth of the sun, feeding from the putrefying swamp.

In so doing, Nichiren had ruffled the feathers of those with cherished beliefs in, and with power invested in, established forms of Buddhism. He was extolling Gautama's Sutra of equality. Dusk the same day saw him making a hurried escape through the woods, pursued by the murderous intent of self-interest.

Though such hostility and persecution were to follow him throughout his life, Nichiren stuck to his conviction. The years 1256 to 1260 saw a series of natural disasters – floods, earthquakes, fires and epidemics, that spurred Nichiren to write to the authorities of the day in July 1260,

"Oxen and horses lie dead in the street, and the bones of the dead crowd the highways. Over half the population has already been carried away by death, and there is not a single person who does not grieve for some member of his family". He followed this with an exhortation to "embrace the single good doctrine of the Lotus Sutra". But they wouldn't listen. Followers of a rival Buddhist sect attacked his residence late the following August, intent on doing him in, but he escaped a second time.

The following year, Nichiren returned to the then Japanese capitol, Kamakura, intent on debate with members of this sect. Instead, he found himself exiled. When he found in the Lotus Sutra the words,

"again and again we will be banished"

he began to realize that he was probably living out exactly the predictions that Gautama had spelt out centuries earlier. Nichiren's conviction grew stronger.

Though pardoned from this exile in 1263, Nichiren continued to be persecuted, and was indeed exiled once again, this time to a with holes in the roof on a freezing island named Sado off the north coast of Japan. But this was not before a further, official attempt on his life was made.

Nichiren was convinced that the plan was that he would be beheaded rather than reach his place of exile on Sado island. He and his arresting party came to the shrine of a great bodhisattva called Hachiman. Nichiren was allowed by the party to dismount and pray at this shrine. To the astonishment of those present, Nichiren remonstrated thus:

"Bodhisattva Hachiman, are you truly a god? I, Nichiren, am the greatest votary of the Lotus Sutra in Japan, and entirely without guilt. In the presence of the countless Buddhas and gods of India, China and Japan, the Buddha urged each Buddhist god to pledge to protect the votary of the Lotus Sutra at all times. Each and every one of you made this pledge. I should not have to remind you. If I am executed tonight and go to the pure land of Eagle Peak, I shall report to Gautama Buddha that

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Tensho Daijin and Hachiman have broken their oath to him. If you feel this will go hard on you, you had better do something about it right away!”

Further on this journey, Nichiren asked permission to send for his loyal follower, Shijo Kingo, who later arrived with his brothers. Nichiren said to him,

“Tonight I go to be beheaded. Until now, no one has ever given his life for the sake of the Lotus Sutra. Now I will present my severed head to the Lotus Sutra and share the blessings therefrom with my parents, and with my disciples and believers, just as I promised you”.

Shijo Kingo was, very naturally, distraught at the thought of losing his beloved friend and guide in life. In tears, he cried “These are your last moments”, and pledged to die beside Nichiren. Nichiren cajoled him,

“How foolish you are! You should be delighted at this great fortune. Don’t you remember your promise?”

No sooner than Nichiren said this, than the night sky lit up, the terrified execution party was in disarray, and Nichiren called out “Here, why do you shrink from this miserable prisoner? Come nearer! Come closer!”

But a comet, or some heavenly body, had passed overhead and had terrified the wits out of them all. The execution had become impossible.

So Nichiren proceeded to exile on Sado island, where he was expected by the authorities to die. He didn’t. He was supported amongst others by an elderly couple whom he met on the island, Abutsu and his wife, Sennichiamama. In response to a letter from Abutsu inquiring about the Treasure Tower the Gautama described in the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren replied,

“Now, the entire body of Abutsu-Shonin is composed of the five universal elements of earth, water, fire, air and potentiality. These are also the five characters of the daimoku (Myoho-enge-kyo). Therefore, Abutsu-bo is the Treasure Tower itself, and the Treasure Tower is Abutsu-bo himself. No other knowledge is purposeful. You, yourself are the Buddha who possesses the three enlightened properties, You should chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with this conviction”.

Nichiren was indefatigable. He went on to inscribe the Dai-Gohonzon, a scripture or mandala that enables us now to achieve and put into action his extraordinarily ordinary life state. The story of the Gohonzon deserves another delving. Good night, good people.