



4 BUDDHA 563 B.C. - 483 B.C.

Gautama Buddha, whose original name was Prince Siddhartha, was the founder of Buddhism, one of the world's great religions. Siddhartha was the son of a king ruling in Kapilavastu, a city in northeast India, near the borders of Nepal. Siddhartha himself (of the clan of Gautama and the tribe of Sakya) was purportedly born in 563 B.C., in Lumbini, within the present borders of Nepal. He was married at sixteen to a cousin of the same age. Brought up in the luxurious royal palace, Prince Siddhartha did not want for material comforts. Nevertheless, he was profoundly dissatisfied. He observed that most human beings were poor and continually suffered from want. Even those who were wealthy were frequently frustrated and unhappy, and all men were subject to disease and ultimately succumbed to death. Surely, Sid-

dhartha thought, there must be more to life than transitory pleasures, which were all too soon obliterated by suffering and death.

When he was twenty-nine, just after the birth of his first son, Gautama decided that he must abandon the life he was living and devote himself wholeheartedly to the search for truth. He departed from the palace, leaving behind his wife, his infant son, and all his worldly possessions, and became a penniless wanderer. For a while he studied with some of the famed holy men of the day, but after mastering their teachings, he found their solutions to the problems of the human situation unsatisfactory. It was widely believed that extreme asceticism was the pathway to true wisdom. Gautama therefore attempted to become an ascetic, for several years engaging in extreme fasts and self-mortification. Eventually, however, he realized that tormenting his body only clouded his brain, without leading him any closer to true wisdom. He therefore resumed eating normally, and abandoned asceticism.

In solitude, he grappled with the problems of human existence. Finally, one evening, as he sat beneath a giant fig tree, all the pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place. Siddhartha spent the whole night in deep reflection, and when the morning came, he was convinced that he had found the solution and that he was now a Buddha, an "enlightened one."

At this time, he was thirty-five years old. For the remaining forty-five years of his life, he traveled throughout northern India, preaching his new philosophy to all who were willing to listen. By the time he died, in 483 B.C., he had made thousands of converts. Though his words had not been written down, his disciples had memorized many of his teachings, and they were passed to succeeding generations by word of mouth.

The principal teachings of the Buddha can be summarized in what Buddhists call the "Four Noble Truths": first, that human life is intrinsically unhappy; second, that the cause of this unhappiness is human selfishness and desire; third, that individual selfishness and desire can be brought to an end—the resulting state, when all desires and cravings have been

eliminated, is termed *nirvana* (literally “blowing out” or “extinction”); fourth, that the method of escape from selfishness and desire is what is called the “Eightfold Path”: right views, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. It might be added that Buddhism is open to all, regardless of race, and that (unlike Hinduism) it recognizes no distinctions of caste.

For some time after Gautama’s death the new religion spread slowly. In the third century B.C., the great Indian emperor Asoka became converted to Buddhism. His support brought about the rapid expansion of Buddhist influence and teachings in India and the spread of Buddhism to neighboring countries. Buddhism spread south into Ceylon, and eastward into Burma. From there it spread into all of southeast Asia, and down into Malaya, and into what is now Indonesia. Buddhism also spread north, directly into Tibet, and to the northwest, into Afghanistan and Central Asia. It spread into China, where it won a large following, and from there into Korea and Japan.

Within India itself, the new faith started to decline after about 500, and almost vanished after about 1200. In China and Japan, on the other hand, Buddhism remained a major religion. In Tibet and in southeast Asia, it has been the principal religion for many centuries.

Buddha’s teachings were not written down until several centuries after his death, and, understandably, his movement has split into various sects. The two principal divisions of Buddhism are the Theravada branch, dominant in southern Asia, and considered by most Western scholars as the one closer to the Buddha’s original teachings, and the Mahayana branch, dominant in Tibet, China, and northern Asia generally.

Buddha, as the founder of one of the world’s major religions, clearly deserved a place near the head of this list. Since there are only about 200 million Buddhists in the world, compared with over 500 million Moslems and about one billion Christians, it would seem evident that Buddha has influenced fewer people than either Muhammad or Jesus. However, the dif-



The belfry of a Japanese Buddhist temple.

ference in numbers can be misleading. One reason that Buddhism died out in India is that Hinduism absorbed many of its ideas and principles. In China, too, large numbers of persons who do not call themselves Buddhists have been strongly influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

Buddhism, far more than Christianity or Islam, has a very strong pacifist element. The orientation toward nonviolence has played a significant role in the political history of Buddhist countries.

It has often been said that if Christ were to return to earth, he would be shocked at many of the things which have been done in his name, and horrified at the bloody fights between different sects of persons who call themselves his followers. Buddha, too, would doubtless be amazed at many of the doctrines that have been presented as Buddhist. But while there are many sects of Buddhism, and large differences between those sects, there is nothing in Buddhist history that remotely compares with the bloody religious wars that took place in Christian Europe. In this respect, at least, Buddha's teachings seem to have had far greater influence on his followers than Christ's teachings had on his.

Buddha and Confucius have had an approximately equal influence upon the world. Both lived at about the same time, and the number of their adherents has not been too different. I have chosen to place Buddha before Confucius for two reasons: first, the advent of Communism in China seems to have greatly diminished Confucian influence; and second, the failure of Confucianism to spread widely outside of China indicates how closely the ideas of Confucius were grounded in pre-existing Chinese attitudes. Buddhist teachings, on the other hand, are in no sense a restatement of previous Indian philosophy, and Buddhism has spread far beyond the boundaries of India due to the originality of Gautama Buddha's concept, and the wide appeal of his philosophy.

"Buddha's Return from Heaven,"
by Nanda Lal Bose.

