

## Social Studies Survey

Ellwood

Name:

The Legend of Buddha

Period:

Many centuries ago in a peaceful kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains, there lived a king and queen who longed for a son to take the throne. One night the queen had a wonderful dream. A beautiful white elephant with golden tusks came to her, gently touching her right side with a lotus flower. In the center of the lotus blossom glittered a brilliant jewel. Upon waking, she described the dream to her husband and the wise men of the kingdom. They all agreed that the dream foretold a miracle.

The wise men explained that a son would soon be born, a boy of great importance and promise. If the boy remained in the royal household, he would grow up to be a magnificent king and rule the world. However, if he ventured out, he would find the Truth and become a holy man set on becoming the savior of the world. This prophecy alarmed the king, for holy men at the time were poor beggars who wandered the land spreading their word. This was not a suitable future for his noble son, and he vowed to shelter the boy from life outside the kingdom walls.

Soon the prediction came true. One afternoon while the queen strolled through the royal gardens, the earth began to shake and quiver. The queen quickly grasped the branch of a nearby flowering tree as a baby boy emerged from her right side. Heavenly water rained down on the infant, bathing his head, and lotus blossoms fell from the skies. The boy was named Siddhartha, meaning, "every wish fulfilled." There was great rejoicing in the palace, but the king was still disturbed by the prophecy. Adding to his sorrow, his beloved queen died seven days after the birth.

Siddhartha grew up surrounded by luxury and showered with love. The king ensured that the boy would never need or want anything or experience any pain. Only young, vibrant servants tended to his needs. The prince was sheltered from sickness and images of death. His father trained Siddhartha to become a great king. The young prince excelled in his lessons of language, math, science, and athletics and became an expert marksman and warrior. Despite all of these efforts the young prince was never carefree and often pondered the true meaning of life.

At the age of 16, Siddhartha married a beautiful princess. The king had three exquisite palaces built for the couple to ensure that Siddhartha would remain in the kingdom and fulfill his destiny as a great ruler. For 13 years Siddhartha lived in the most splendid surroundings with a loving wife tending to his every need, but he still grew more and more restless. He yearned to see what lay beyond in the big world.

One day he commanded his chariot driver to carry him outside the kingdom. As they slipped beyond the palace gates, Siddhartha saw on the street an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. For the first time in his life, he witnessed human suffering.

"Does everyone become sick and old?" Siddhartha asked his driver, "Will everyone eventually die? What then? What becomes of us then?"

The driver replied, "We all die." Siddhartha was filled with sorrow and disbelief. How could people laugh and sing knowing they would die? How can anyone live in peace knowing of all this suffering?"

The next day Siddhartha, filled with curiosity, slipped away again. On this journey he met a monk in a saffron robe who seemed completely at peace and free from suffering. Siddhartha commanded his driver to stop so he could speak with the monk. "Who are you?" he asked, "How can you be content with the knowledge of this world around you?" The monk explained to the prince that he was a seeker of Truth, a seeker of life over death. To seek the Truth he had given up everything on this earth. Siddhartha decided that he, too, would seek the Truth in order to find peace. He would leave his riches, his family, and his protected life to follow in the monk's footsteps.

The night he was to leave the palace forever, his wife gave birth to a baby boy. Siddhartha was torn but knew he must follow his destiny, which did not include raising a child. He kissed his saddened family goodbye and ventured out from the kingdom. Once he was far off into the countryside, a monk appeared before the prince and offered him a robe and a begging bowl. The monk then

disappeared. Siddhartha cut off his hair and cast away his princely garments. Now, alone with his few humble possessions, he began his quest for the Truth.

Along his journey he met with many monks and sought their wisdom, but none could teach him how to find the Truth of life over death and reach the state of absolute peace. Siddhartha met five hermits who denied their bodies any comfort in order to rise above earthly concerns. He remained six years with these men, eating very little and practicing rituals that caused him great pain. Close to starvation and death, he realized that he was still no closer to understanding the Truth. He decided that the Truth cannot be found in the mind or in the body but only in the innermost core of the heart, which is connected to all existence. It was then that he decided to follow a middle path. The hermits left Siddhartha in disgust for his weakness, and Siddhartha traveled on in his quest. He accepted food from villagers and bathed in the river. Finally, he came to a large Bodhi tree. A cowherd offered him eight handfuls of grass to sit upon. Siddhartha spread the grass beneath the tree and vowed, "Even if my blood dries up and my skin and bones waste away, I will not leave this seat until I have found the Truth of life over death, the end of suffering for myself and for all people." Mara, the evil one, heard this vow and called on his army of demons to defeat Siddhartha's enlightenment. He plagued the prince with doubts and fears and called forth winds, rain, and lightning. No matter what evils the anti-god threw at him, Siddhartha remained pure in mind and meditated for 49 days.

At dawn on the fiftieth day, Siddhartha opened his eyes and glimpsed the last fading star. It was perfectly peaceful and the horizon glowed. At that moment Siddhartha became enlightened. Finally he could see the entire cycle of life and understand all of its mysteries. He saw the whole of existence within himself and himself the whole of existence. Rivers, once dry, began to flow, while flowers blossomed in the morning light. The animals danced and the birds all sang. Spirits, angels, and heavenly protectors were revealed with the scent of incense. At the age of 35, Siddhartha had ended his search. He had become Buddha, the enlightened one.

He left the shelter of the tree and set out to teach the Truth. He found the five hermits in a park near Sarnath and taught them the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-fold Path to follow, and the concept of *karma*, the cycle of death and rebirth measured by one's thoughts and deeds. The five hermits were doubtful at first of living the Middle Way but then became overwhelmed by the Buddha's wisdom and peace. They became his first disciples and spread his word. The Buddha traveled and taught his Truth of life over death.

He taught meditations that helped purify body, speech, and mind. Eventually he had hundreds of followers from every walk of life, for he preached that anyone could reach enlightenment if he or she could find the path in his or her heart.

Buddha returned to his father's kingdom where he performed miracles to prove to the king that this was his chosen path. Many people in the kingdom, including his wife and son, were so moved that they left the comforts of the kingdom to follow him.

At the age of 80, after preaching for 45 years, the Buddha knew it was his time to die. Believing in reincarnation, he knew that the cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth continues until enlightenment is gained. Most people travel through many lifetimes seeking this enlightenment. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, had finally accomplished this feat and was finally free from further rebirth and earthly suffering. He had reached *nirvana*.

This story of Buddha's birth and life is legend, yet a man named Siddhartha Guatama did actually live in India from about 563 to 483 B.C. He traveled the countryside teaching others. His personal experiences and teaching are the foundation of Buddhism. At that time there was much unrest in India regarding religion, and many people who had begun to doubt the Vedic rituals that depended on priests, rules of caste, and animal sacrifices, were seeking spiritual answers.

Buddhism offered peace to everyone without the aid of priests and their rituals. It taught that all people were equal and that everyone had the right to a better life. Buddhism did not require animal sacrifices to gods, and it taught strict nonviolence against man and beast. The Buddha's teachings emphasized moderation in thought and action. Greed is wrong but so is complete denial of necessary comforts. Because it offered much to those seeking answers, Buddhism gained popularity, eventually becoming one of the world's leading religions.