

# Introduction to Buddhism

## Also by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

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GESHE KELSANG GYATSO

# Introduction to Buddhism

AN EXPLANATION OF THE  
BUDDHIST WAY OF LIFE



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# Contents

Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Editorial Note	x
 <i>PART ONE: Basic Buddhism</i>	
Who was Buddha?	3
Understanding the Mind	13
Past and Future Lives	17
What is Karma?	25
Our Precious Human Life	35
What is Meditation?	41
Death	47
The Buddhist Way of Life	51
 <i>PART TWO: The Path to Liberation</i>	
What is Liberation?	59
Developing Renunciation	63
The Three Higher Trainings	73
 <i>PART THREE: The Path to Enlightenment</i>	
Becoming a Bodhisattva	79
The Bodhisattva's Way of Life	87
Ultimate Truth	113

Enlightenment	123
Dedication	132
Appendix I – The Commitments of Going for Refuge	133
Appendix II – <i>Liberating Prayer</i> and <i>Mahayana</i> <i>Sutra of the Three Superior Heaps</i>	143
Glossary	157
Bibliography	173
Study Programmes of Kadampa Buddhism	179
Tharpa Offices Worldwide	185
Index	187
Further Reading	196

# Illustrations

Buddha Shakyamuni	2
Buddha Complete Subduer with the Essence of Vajra	
Buddha Jewel of Radiant Light	
Buddha Powerful King of the Nagas	12
Buddha Leader of the Heroes	
Buddha Glorious Pleasure	
Buddha Jewel Fire	18
Buddha Jewel Moonlight	
Buddha Meaningful to Behold	
Buddha Jewel Moon	26
Buddha Stainless One	
Buddha Bestower of Glory	
Buddha Pure One	34
Buddha Transforming with Purity	
Buddha Water Deity	
Buddha God of Water Deities	40
Buddha Glorious Excellence	
Buddha Glorious Sandalwood	
Buddha Endless Splendour	46

Buddha Glorious Light	
Buddha Glorious One without Sorrow	
Buddha Son without Craving	58
Buddha Glorious Flower	
Buddha Clearly Knowing through Enjoying Pure Radiance	
Buddha Clearly Knowing through Enjoying Lotus Radiance	62
Buddha Glorious Wealth	
Buddha Glorious Mindfulness	
Buddha Glorious Name of Great Renown	74
Buddha King of the Victory Banner, Head of the Powerful Ones	
Buddha Glorious One Complete Subduer	
Buddha Great Victor in Battle	78
Buddha Glorious One Complete Subduer Passed Beyond	
Buddha Glorious Array Illuminating All	
Buddha Jewel Lotus Great Subduer	86
Buddha King of Mount Meru Seated Firmly on a Jewel and a Lotus	124

The illustrations in this book depict the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas. The purification practice associated with these Confession Buddhas, called *Mahayana Sutra of the Three Superior Heaps*, is explained in Appendix II.



# Acknowledgements

This book, *Introduction to Buddhism*, is an exceptionally clear explanation of the Buddhist way of life. From the depths of our hearts we thank the author, Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, for his immeasurable kindness in preparing this book, which provides a definitive introduction to Buddhism for those in the West.

We also thank all the dedicated, senior Dharma students who assisted the author with the rendering of the English and who prepared the final manuscript for publication.

*Roy Tyson,  
Administrative Director,  
Manjushri Kadampa  
Meditation Centre,  
October 1992.*

## Editorial Note

If you are not already familiar with the life and teachings of Buddha, you may find some of the concepts and practices introduced in this book a little unusual to begin with. However, if you think about them patiently and sincerely, you will discover that they are very meaningful and have great relevance to our daily lives. Although Buddhism is an ancient religion that first appeared in the East, the practices taught by Buddha are timeless and universally applicable. These days, many people are discovering that Buddhism has answers to questions and solutions to problems that cannot be found anywhere else. It is hoped, therefore, that the publication of this book will help to deepen the understanding and appreciation of Buddhism in the West.

*Cover illustration* The lotus flower is a traditional Buddhist symbol of purity. A lotus is born from the mud at the bottom of a lake but blossoms above the water as a stainless flower that brings pleasure to all who behold it. In a similar fashion, living beings are born in the ocean of suffering with impure bodies and impure minds; but if they train in meditation they can attain a completely pure body and mind, and bring peace and happiness to all who meet them.

# PART ONE

## Basic Buddhism



*Buddha Shakyamuni*

# Who was Buddha?

In general, 'Buddha' means 'Awakened One', someone who has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and sees things as they really are. A Buddha is a person who is completely free from all faults and mental obstructions. There are many people who have become Buddhas in the past, and many people will become Buddhas in the future.

The Buddha who is the founder of the Buddhist religion is called Buddha Shakyamuni. 'Shakya' is the name of the royal family into which he was born, and 'Muni' means 'Able One'. Buddha Shakyamuni was born as a royal prince in 624 BC in a place called Lumbini, in what is now Nepal. His mother's name was Queen Mayadevi and his father's name was King Shuddhodana.

One night, Queen Mayadevi dreamed that a white elephant descended from heaven and entered her womb. The white elephant entering her womb indicated that on that very night she had conceived a child who was a pure and powerful

being. The elephant descending from heaven indicated that her child came from Tushita heaven, the Pure Land of Buddha Maitreya. Later, when she gave birth to the child, instead of experiencing pain the queen experienced a special, pure vision in which she stood holding the branch of a tree with her right hand while the gods Brahma and Indra took the child painlessly from her side. They then proceeded to honour the infant by offering him ritual ablutions.

When the king saw the child, he felt as if all his wishes had been fulfilled and he named the young prince 'Siddhartha'. He invited a Brahmin seer to make predictions about the prince's future. The seer examined the child with his clairvoyance and told the king, 'There are signs that the boy could become either a chakravatin king – a ruler of the entire world – or a fully enlightened Buddha. However, since the time for chakravatin kings is now past, it is certain that he shall become a Buddha, and that his beneficial influence will pervade the thousand million worlds like the rays of a sun.'

As the young prince grew up, he mastered all the traditional arts and sciences without needing any instruction. He knew sixty-four different languages, each with its own alphabet, and he was also very skilled at mathematics. He once told his father that he could count all the atoms in the world in the time it takes to draw a single breath. Although he did not need to study, he did so to please his father and to benefit others. At his father's request, he joined a school where, in addition to studying various academic subjects, he became skilled at sports such as martial arts and archery. The prince would take every opportunity to convey spiritual meanings and to encourage others to follow spiritual paths.

At one time, when he was taking part in an archery contest, he declared, 'With the bow of meditative concentration, I will fire the arrow of wisdom and kill the tiger of ignorance in living beings.' He then released the arrow and it flew straight through five iron tigers and seven trees before disappearing into the earth! By witnessing demonstrations such as this, thousands of people developed faith in the prince.

Sometimes Prince Siddhartha would go into the capital city of his father's kingdom to see how the people lived. During these visits, he came into contact with many old people and sick people, and on one occasion he saw a corpse. These encounters left a deep impression on his mind and led him to realize that all living beings without exception have to experience the sufferings of birth, sickness, ageing and death. Because he understood the laws of rebirth, he also realized that living beings experience these sufferings not just once, but again and again, in life after life without cessation. Seeing how all living beings are trapped in this vicious circle of suffering, he felt deep compassion for them, and he developed a sincere wish to free all of them from their suffering. Realizing that only a fully enlightened Buddha has the wisdom and the power to help all living beings in this way, he resolved to leave the palace and retire to the solitude of the forest where he would engage in profound meditation until he attained enlightenment.

When the people of the Shakya kingdom realized that the prince intended to leave the palace they requested the king to arrange a marriage for him in the hope that this would cause him to change his mind. The king agreed and soon found him a suitable bride, Yasodhara, the daughter of a respected

Shakya family. Prince Siddhartha, however, had no attachment to worldly pleasures because he realized that objects of attachment are like poisonous flowers, which initially appear to be attractive but eventually give rise to great pain. His resolve to leave the palace and to attain enlightenment remained unchanged, but to fulfil his father's wishes, and to bring temporary benefit to the Shakya people, he agreed to marry Yasodhara. However, even though he remained in the palace as a royal prince, he devoted all his time and energy to serving the Shakya people in whatever way he could.

When he was twenty-nine years old, the prince had a vision in which all the Buddhas of the ten directions appeared to him and spoke in unison, saying, 'Previously you resolved to become a Conqueror Buddha so that you could help all living beings trapped in the cycle of suffering. Now is the time for you to accomplish this.' The prince went immediately to his parents and told them of his intention: 'I wish to retire to a peaceful place in the forest where I can engage in deep meditation and quickly attain full enlightenment. Once I have attained enlightenment, I shall be able to repay the kindness of all living beings, and especially the great kindness that you have shown me. Therefore, I request your permission to leave the palace.' When his parents heard this, they were shocked, and the king refused to grant his permission. Prince Siddhartha said to his father, 'Father, if you can give me permanent freedom from the sufferings of birth, sickness, ageing and death, I shall stay in the palace; but, if you cannot, I must leave and make my human life meaningful.'

The king tried all means to prevent his son from leaving the palace. In the hope that the prince might change his mind, he



surrounded him with a retinue of beautiful women, dancers, singers and musicians, who day and night used their charms to please him. In case the prince might attempt a secret escape, he posted guards around the palace walls. However, the prince's determination to leave the palace and enter a life of meditation could not be shaken. One night he used his miracle powers to send the guards and attendants into a deep sleep while he made his escape from the palace with the help of a trusted aide. After they had travelled about six miles, the prince dismounted from his horse and bade farewell to his aide. He then cut off his hair and threw it into the sky, where it was caught by the gods of the Land of the Thirty-three Heavens. One of the gods then offered the prince the saffron robes of a religious mendicant. The prince accepted these and gave his royal garments to the god in exchange. In this way, he ordained himself as a monk.

Siddhartha then made his way to a place near Bodh Gaya in India, where he found a suitable site for meditation. There he remained, emphasizing a meditation called 'space-like concentration on the Dharmakaya', in which he focused single-pointedly on the ultimate nature of all phenomena. After training in this meditation for six years he realized that he was very close to attaining full enlightenment, and so he walked to Bodh Gaya where, on the fifteenth day of the fourth month, he seated himself beneath the Bodhi Tree in the meditation posture and vowed not to rise from meditation until he had attained perfect enlightenment. With this determination, he entered the space-like concentration on the Dharmakaya.

As dusk fell, Devaputra Mara, the chief of all the demons, or maras, in this world, tried to disturb Siddhartha's

concentration by conjuring up many fearful apparitions. He manifested hosts of terrifying demons – some throwing spears, some firing arrows, some trying to burn him with fire, and some hurling boulders and even mountains at him. Siddhartha, however, remained completely undisturbed. Through the force of his concentration, the weapons, rocks and mountains appeared to him as a rain of fragrant flowers, and the raging fires became like offerings of rainbow light.

Seeing that Siddhartha could not be frightened into abandoning his meditation, Devaputra Mara tried instead to distract him by manifesting countless beautiful women, but Siddhartha responded by developing even deeper concentration. In this way he triumphed over all the demons of this world, which is why he subsequently became known as a 'Conqueror Buddha'.

Siddhartha then continued with his meditation until dawn, when he attained the vajra-like concentration. With this concentration, which is the very last mind of a limited being, he removed the final veils of ignorance from his mind and in the next moment became a Buddha, a fully enlightened being.

There is nothing that Buddha does not know. Because he has awakened from the sleep of ignorance and has removed all obstructions from his mind, he knows everything of the past, present and future, directly and simultaneously. Moreover, Buddha has great compassion that is completely impartial, embracing all living beings without discrimination. He benefits all living beings without exception by emanating various forms throughout the universe and by bestowing his blessings on their minds. Through receiving Buddha's blessings, all beings, even the lowliest animals, sometimes develop

peaceful and virtuous states of mind. Eventually, through meeting an emanation of Buddha in the form of a Spiritual Guide, everyone will have the opportunity to enter the path to liberation and enlightenment. As the great Indian Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna said, there is no one who has not received help from Buddha.

Forty-nine days after Buddha attained enlightenment, the gods Brahma and Indra requested him to teach, saying:

O Buddha, Treasure of Compassion,  
Living beings are like blind people, in constant danger  
of falling into the lower realms.  
Other than you there is no Protector in this world.  
Therefore we beseech you, please rise from meditative  
equipoise and turn the Wheel of Dharma.

As a result of this request, Buddha rose from meditation and taught the first Wheel of Dharma. These teachings, which include the *Sutra of the Four Noble Truths* and other discourses, are the principal source of the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle, of Buddhism. Later, Buddha taught the second and third Wheels of Dharma, which include the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* and the *Sutra Discriminating the Intention*, respectively. These teachings are the source of the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, of Buddhism. In the Hinayana teachings, Buddha explains how to attain liberation from suffering for oneself alone. In the Mahayana teachings, he explains how to attain full enlightenment, or Buddhahood, for the sake of others. Both traditions flourished in Asia, at first in India and then gradually in other surrounding countries, including Tibet. Now they are also beginning to flourish in the West.

The reason why Buddha's teachings are called the 'Wheel of Dharma' is as follows. It is said that in ancient times there were great kings, known as 'chakravatin kings', who used to rule the entire world. These kings had many special possessions, including a precious wheel in which they would travel around the world. Wherever the precious wheel went, the king would control that region. Buddha's teachings are said to be like a precious wheel because, wherever they spread, the people in that area have the opportunity to control their minds by putting them into practice.

'Dharma' means 'protection'. By practising Buddha's teachings, we protect ourselves from suffering and problems. All the problems we experience during daily life originate in ignorance, and the method for eliminating ignorance is to practise Dharma.

Practising Dharma is the supreme method for improving the quality of our human life. The quality of life depends not upon external development or material progress, but upon the inner development of peace and happiness. For example, in the past many Buddhists lived in poor and underdeveloped countries, but they were able to find pure, lasting happiness by practising what Buddha had taught.

If we integrate Buddha's teachings into our daily life, we shall be able to solve all our inner problems and attain a truly peaceful mind. Without inner peace, outer peace is impossible. If we first establish peace within our minds by training in spiritual paths, outer peace will come naturally; but if we do not, world peace will never be achieved, no matter how many people campaign for it.

## WHO WAS BUDDHA?

Buddhism, or Buddhadharma, is Buddha's teachings and the inner experiences or realizations of these teachings. Buddha gave eighty-four thousand teachings. All these teachings and the inner realizations of them constitute Buddhism. Buddhism can be divided into two parts: basic Buddhism and advanced Buddhism. The essential teachings of basic Buddhism are now explained in the remainder of Part One of this book, and the more advanced teachings are introduced in Parts Two and Three.



*Buddha Complete Subduer with  
the Essence of Vajra*

*Buddha Jewel of  
Radiant Light*

*Buddha Powerful  
King of the Nagas*

## *End of preview*

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