

LIFE OF THE BUDDHA: NOAH LEVINE

Let's go all the way back to the origin of this teaching and tradition--that is, to the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. How is it that we are still studying and practicing what he experienced and taught more than 2,500 years later and on the other side of the planet? He was born by the name Siddhartha Gautama, but for the purposes of sacrilege and brevity I will refer to him as "Sid" until the point in the story when he wakes up--that is, the point at which he reaches enlightenment and becomes the Buddha.

Sid's father was the ruler of a small kingdom in northern India (now southern Nepal). Sid's mother, that ruler's first wife, died shortly after Sid's birth. His father then married his dead wife's sister, and Sid was raised by his father and his aunt. There was a sage, probably a fortune-teller or astrologist, who came to the birth and said he'd had a vision: he had seen the coming of a future enlightened being. The sage foretold that this baby would grow into that being, and prophesied that he would become either a great enlightened spiritual master or a powerful warrior-king. Sid's parents did not want their son to leave them and become a spiritual master, because spiritual masters do not hang out with their families much and rarely go into the family business. He was their only son and they wanted to keep him. They wanted him to inherit the family dynasty and become ruler. Fearing the truth of the sage's prediction, they kept him secluded.

The family had three palaces, and he rarely had cause to leave them. Growing up in these palaces, he was surrounded by young, beautiful people all of the time. He never saw anyone who was old, sick, or dying. His parents were really trying to set it up so that he would have no reason to ask the big questions of life and seek answers through spiritual practice. If he thought life was perfect, there would be no reason for him to try to transcend it, right? Their strategy seemed to work for quite a while. There was an exception, though: it is said that one time in his childhood when he was feeling a little uneasy he decided to chill out under a tree and watch his father, who was plowing a field or perhaps overseeing a groundbreaking ritual. Relaxing as he watched his father, he had a spontaneous experience of serenity. As a kid of only eight or nine, he had an overwhelming experience of peace. Though he went on with his adolescent years as before, he later recalled that experience of mindful relaxation, which I think is best described as an experience of total satisfaction--not needing or wanting anything to be different.

It is said that as a youth he was excellent at everything. Since his father was the king in a warrior caste and Sid was a prince, he was most likely a spoiled kid. There were periods in his young adult years when he was surrounded only by beautiful women; he was the only guy in his part of the palace. It is said that his life was one of access to constant pleasure. He reflected on this later, saying that during that time he sensed something was missing. Though Sid's parents tried to keep their guard over him subtle, Sid eventually figured out that he was not allowed to leave the palaces on his own. He had everything he wanted in terms of physical needs, but he never got to explore the city without a retinue of guards and royal courtiers. What's more, while he was traveling from palace to palace or on the occasional procession through town, his father had guards clear the streets of anyone or anything that might be displeasing to the eye. This included all of the elderly and sick.

By the time he was in his twenties, Sid had started to feel like a prisoner in his own home. One day he talked his attendant into sneaking him out of the palace. The two men slipped out and went into the nearby town. Walking for the first time in his life without a royal escort, Sid experienced what Buddhists call "the Four Messengers." The first messenger was sickness and disease. For the first time in Sid's life, he saw people who were suffering from disease; because of his isolation, he

had never seen illness before. Most of us grow up knowing about or experiencing some level of sickness and disease. It is a normal part of our lives. You can imagine how shocking it would be to see a sick person for the first time in your life as an adult. Sid asked his attendant if the debilitation he saw was going to happen to him as well, and the attendant replied that this is what happens to all humans. We all eventually get sick or experience disease; it is the nature of the body. The second messenger was a very old and frail person, the body deteriorating, skin sagging, and hair falling out. Sid asked his attendant what had happened, and his attendant replied that it was nothing more than what happens to all people. This was a shocking and powerful revelation to the overprotected Sid. We all get old; this is the natural process of life.

The third messenger that they encountered was a corpse. Sid had never seen or heard of or even thought about death. He had been so sheltered that when he saw the dead body, he was horrified. (Keep in mind that this was before embalming or fancy caskets; this was a decomposing corpse by the side of the road.) Sid asked if that was going to happen to him and his family and demanded to know if there was any way to avoid it. He was told that death is inevitable. Not only that, he was informed, it happens over and over and over. Reincarnation, which was the popular perspective at that time, affirms that when one's body dies, the essence of the person is eventually reborn into another body. That is the cycle of birth and death. Every body dies, but existence continues.

Sid was disconcerted to say the least, and perhaps more than a little pissed that all of this had been hidden from him for so long. Then they saw the fourth messenger, a wandering spiritual seeker. Sid had never seen one of those before either, and he asked his attendant what the guy in the robes was doing. His attendant said that it was a sadhu--that is, someone who has dedicated his or her life to understanding the nature of life and death; A person in search of understanding reality. It was at that moment that Sid decided he knew what he had to do. As soon as Sid saw the spiritual seeker, he had a new sense of hope and faith that he would be able to come to a solution for this endless cycle of birth and death. He vowed to overcome suffering and to awaken to the Truth.

If you are reading this blog, I am guessing that you are searching for answers too. What was the first experience that made you think that the spiritual path was possible? For Sid it was seeing sickness, old age, and death, and then seeing a spiritual practitioner, but for each of us it will be a different experience that brought us to the path.

Anyway, Sid was recently married at the time of this revelation, and his wife had just given birth to a child. Theirs was an arranged marriage, and there may or may not have been any true love in it. Because his new spiritual resolve was stronger than his commitment to his family, he chose to leave his family and seek answers. He thought that since he and his family were only going to get sick and old and die, he had better go out and see if he could find a truth that would lead beyond sickness, old age, and death. He was motivated to find freedom not only for himself but for the benefit of his family and all beings in existence. His search was not a selfish one, as it might appear to some; it was an altruistic sacrifice for the good of all humanity. Most people are initially confused and even troubled that he would leave his wife and child. I don't fully understand it myself. Imagine leaving your newborn child to go meditate, with no intention of returning until liberation was found! It turns out to be the right choice, however--and he does later return to his family, and his son also becomes a monk and gets enlightened. The search for truth may demand this kind of willingness and commitment, if not literally at least figuratively.

So Sid hit the streets. His attendant took him to the edge of town, but then Sid sent him away. Sid shaved his head, took off all his gold and fine clothing, put some rags around his body, and took

off on foot with nothing but his desire to find freedom... He sought out all of the spiritual masters of his time. He studied with several great Hindu masters and learned all of the practices and wisdom they had to offer. During the course of that instruction he had many very pleasant spiritual experiences.

What he was primarily taught during that phase was concentration practices like yoga and mantras--repetitive exercises of the body or mind that lead to one-pointedness. He was taught theories of existence that ranged from eternalism (existence forever) to nihilism (nonexistence after death).

Most of the concentration practices he experienced were subtle forms of aversion, allowing him to ignore pain and confusion but not changing his relationship to it. It is said that he had meditative experiences ranging from total bliss to complete nonexistence--experiences that took him to a level of understanding or peace--yet, when the concentration wore off he was still suffering, still subject to attachment to pleasure and aversion to pain, still identified with his physical body as his identity, still caught in the cycle of sickness, old age, and death.

Each one of the spiritual experiences that he had with those teachers taught him something new and wonderful that temporarily freed him. But as soon as he stopped doing a practice, the concentration wore off and he was left with ordinary consciousness. In other words, the practices did not transform his perspective. Because there was still fear, greed, and confusion in his heart, he knew that he had not reached full liberation.

Each teacher he studied with told Sid they had taught him all that they could, that he had accomplished what they thought to be spiritual liberation. Each of these teachers wanted Sid to be their spiritual heir, to stay and lead the community with them, but he had no interest in the power or prestige of being a guru. The practices he had learned did not lead him to total liberation, and he was not satisfied with the temporary spiritual experiences they offered. He decided to keep searching for the truth until he found complete freedom from the unsatisfactory nature of the cycle of rebirth. He vowed not to stop till he found a state of mind that wasn't dependent on any temporary meditative technique.

Sid's next bright idea was to break his identification with his body through self-mortification. He went off into the jungle and hooked up with a handful of other homeless homeys--aka sadhus--who were doing various practices to prove that they were not the body. They had the notion that if they denied their physical needs they could break the identification with the body, the physical form, and thereby reach the state of nonidentification and non-suffering.

So they starved themselves, tortured their bodies, and tried to find freedom through extreme renunciation practices. It is said that Sid fasted for weeks on end. When he did eat, he consumed only morsels of rice or fruit each day. It was also popular, among these sadhus, to go without sleep and to spend days standing without ever sitting or lying down to rest. Sid wound up emaciated and close to physical death, but he was still suffering, still subject to attachment and aversion, still identified with his thoughts and feelings.

All told, Sid had spent seven years on the streets so far, following the conventional practices of his time and mastering the techniques offered in the Hindu tradition, including the more extreme techniques of the sadhus, and none of those practices had gotten him completely free. Now, close to starvation and still totally committed to waking up from the delusions of attachment, aversion, and identification that cause suffering, he reflected back on his childhood experience of being at

peace beneath the tree. As he meditated on that experience, and on his ongoing battle against all forms of pleasure-- a battle waged in the belief that attachment to pleasure is one of the delusions that cause identification with the body and lead to suffering and rebirth--Sid realized that neither pleasure nor comfort is the enemy. On the contrary, physical health and pleasure are wholesome experiences.

Sid had experienced both extremes of life, from gluttonous attachment to pleasure to radical rejection of all things pleasant, from aversion to discomfort to attachment to pain. Suddenly he could see that he needed to find some balance. So he left his homeys at the jungle squat and set off on his own to find the middle way. They accused him of selling out, saying he was giving up the true spiritual path. They knew he was going to eat and sleep and do all of the things that they had renounced. Hearing taunts of "food-eater" and all sorts of other insults, Sid stumbled to a nearby river and sat beneath a grove of trees, where he did sitting and walking meditation by himself.

A young girl from a nearby village saw him there, and realizing that he was close to dying of starvation, offered him the food she was taking home from the market. She returned to feed him yogurt and rice every day, and he gradually regained his health. Meanwhile, he spent his time in deep contemplation of the truth of the suffering and confusion that fuel the human cycle of dissatisfaction. He began to see that a key ingredient in his practice had been missing: it was simple mindfulness. He began to practice an investigative present-time awareness, seeing the process of mind and body more and more clearly.

Once Sid had put a few pounds back on, he sat underneath a tree and vowed to stay there until he could see through the confusion in his mind. He was committed to not getting up from that seat until he had freed himself from all forms of misidentification, attachment, and aversion--that is, until he never had to take birth again. Until he was totally free, he wasn't moving. Can you imagine that kind of resolve?

So Sid sits there paying close attention to his mind and body, and he sits there and he sits there and he sits there, meditating on the causes of suffering and confusion. Feeling his breath as it comes and goes, investigating the pleasant unpleasant and neutral tone of each thought, feeling, and sensation. He opens his awareness in a more compassionate way, not trying to stop any experience no matter how unpleasant it may feel, but rather meeting each moment with love and kindness.

Many things happen to Sid that can be interpreted in retrospect as either internal or external experiences. A demon-like character named Mara shows up. Mara personifies all of the strong negative emotions that, when taken personally, cause us to suffer. These are the experiences of lust, fear, anger, and doubt, to name a few. Mara appears and tries to tempt the Buddha-to-be off his seat.

We can think of Mara as the aspect of mind often referred to as the ego, or perhaps the superego. Mara is afraid that Sid will see through the mind's illusion of control, and then Mara will not have power over him anymore. This Mara-mind will stop at nothing to sabotage Sid's (and our) resolve to be fully free from the attachment and aversion that cause suffering and dissatisfaction.

Mara's first line of attack is hatred, anger, and violence. Mara tries to expose Sid's attachment to pleasure by raining violence on him. Mara wages war on Sid, shooting arrows and throwing spears in an attempt to deter Sid from his goal. But Sid continues to sit. Seeing clearly that Mara

is only an aspect of his mind, he radiates love and compassion throughout his being and turns the weapons of hatred into flowers that shower down all around him.

Next, Mara attacks with lust. A harem of beautiful women dancing naked arrive to tempt the Buddha-to-be with his desire. Sid continues to sit peacefully, reflecting on the fact that beneath the surface of temporary beauty is a bag of bones, flesh, and putrid fluids. He knows that the happiness he seeks will never come from a fleeting experience of sensual pleasure. He allows desire to arise and pass without clinging to it or identifying with it as personal. Feeling rejected and confused at Sid's refusal to accept their invitation of sexual pleasure, the dancing girls retreat.

Sid continues to sit there, unmoved by the mind's insistence. Mara takes one final stab at Sid, attacking with the most debilitating weapon in his arsenal: doubt. He challenges and taunts Sid with criticism and judgment. Mara tells Sid he is worthless and conceited to think he can fully awaken. Mara says, "Who do you think you are? Everyone is identified with the body, attached to pleasure, afraid of pain. How dare you try to be different?" Yet Sid has, by now, seen through his mind's limitations and has understood that by turning his awareness on the mind itself, he can see through the doubts and fears that arise. He knows that the doubts of the Mara mind are not true; they are just another phenomenon that arises and passes. To prove his resolve, he touches the earth to bear witness to the four elements--earth, air, fire, and water--that make up all forms in existence, as he continues to be mindful and aware of his mind and body.

Mindfulness is the revolutionary insight that sets Buddhism apart from other traditions. Sid's main practice was investigative, compassionate, present-time awareness. Though Sid had learned to get the mind concentrated through his study with various gurus, he had not learned to open the consciousness to present-time awareness. It was this breakthrough that led to his freedom.

Around dawn, Mara understood that he no longer had any power over Sid. Mara had been defeated. With no more ammunition or means of attack, he sulked dejectedly off to find another victim. Sid just sat there feeling his breath and sensations coming and going, and he realized that everything is impermanent. Every physical and mental experience arises and passes. Everything in existence is endlessly arising out of causes and conditions. He saw that we all create suffering for ourselves through our resistance, through our desire to have things different than the way they are--that is, our clinging or aversion. Sid understood that if he just let go and was mindful and accepting without grabbing or pushing, he would be free and at peace with life...

He realized that when he really looked through the lens of concentration and then opened himself to mindful investigation, examining who was experiencing the moment and what the nature of his self was, he eventually could see that even the self is impermanent. He concluded that there is not a separate, solid self. Memory, consciousness, feeling, and perception exist, but there is not one solid, separate aspect that knows all of those experiences--that is, there is no independent entity or soul that remembers, is conscious, feels, or perceives. There are only memories, feelings, and perception. These are only experiences that are, as it were, experiencing themselves; there is not a separate, solid self experiencing them. Because there is memory, one remembers experiences; because of awareness one is aware of experiences--but in each case it is just awareness being aware of memory and experiences.

This battle with the Mara-mind and these three revolutionary insights brought about Sid's final transformation. He was no longer asleep; no longer subject to identification with greed, hatred, or delusion; no longer subject to rebirth. Sid was awake, the Buddha.

After the Buddha gained liberation under the Bodhi Tree-- so called because he attained bodhi, or enlightenment, there--he said, in effect, What now? He was free. He had learned to accept pleasure as pleasure, pain as pain. He had seen through Mara's tricks and the ego's control and did not resist or attach to anything. He radiated care for the suffering in the world, but suffering no longer existed for the Buddha. So what now?

One important note: Pain does still exist. Nirvana is not a state of constant pleasurable bliss. Suffering and pain are distinctly different. Many spiritual practitioners have the idea that if we are in pain we are doing something wrong and that spiritual practice, properly conducted, will make life pleasant all the time. According to Buddhist teachings, that was not the Buddha's experience. He went on to teach for forty-five years, and he had a bad back toward the end. His back hurt and he said so. That was the truth of that experience. He got injured and sick. He still had a human body, but he had no aversion, no attachment, and did not suffer because of his human body.

Even more important, the Buddha still had a human mind. Although he was free from the dictates of and misidentification with Mara as personal or powerful, Mara continued to visit the Buddha. Mara came back regularly to see if the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha had prevailed. Fear, desire, and doubt still arose in the enlightened Buddha's mind. The difference was that he responded every time with, "I see you, Mara." He did not take Mara's visitations personally and did not feel that he had to act on them; he saw fear, desire, and doubt as they were and did not react, but responded with care and understanding.

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha was not sure what to do next. He spent many days continuing his meditation, reflecting on his newfound freedom and the path that had led him to deliverance from all forms of suffering and confusion. He reflected on the five factors that had led to his spiritual awakening and labeled them faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom (which encompassed compassion). The factor of mindfulness he broke down further still, into four distinct levels: body, feelings, mind, and the truth of experience. Then he formulated all of what he had learned and experienced into four universal truths consisting of twelve main factors, a formulation that later was referred to--and still generally is referred to--as the four noble truths and the eightfold path. We'll take a look at these teachings in a bit.

With the path of awakening fully understood and comprehended, the Buddha considered sharing his insights with others, but he was hesitant because his revolutionary insights were so contrary to the common teachings and views of his time. He was pretty sure they would not be understood or accepted by the masses, because they are so subtle, so simple, and so contrary to the natural human instinct. To ask people to accept pain and a spiritual liberation that does not include bliss all of the time seemed crazy. He was unsure if people would be willing to do the work necessary to free themselves from attachment to and craving for pleasure.

Buddhism is often referred to as an atheistic tradition, but that isn't an accurate description. The Buddha acknowledged the existence of celestial beings or gods, and in fact he later recounted that a god named Brahma came to him and implored him to teach. Perhaps God, like Mara (who could be seen as the devil), is just another aspect of our minds, God being the wise aspect and Mara being the unwise aspect.

It would be more true to say that real Buddhism is non-theistic. While the Buddha acknowledged gods, he concluded that they did not have the power to free us from suffering, and thus they were not part of his formulation. They were the beneficiaries, though: the Buddha is often called the teacher of humans and gods, because the gods are suffering as well and the Buddha can and did teach the gods the path to freedom.

The god Brahma saw that the Buddha was hesitant to teach the Dharma--the truth of his enlightenment--and implored the Buddha to reconsider. There are some who will understand this teaching, Brahma explained. The Buddha replied that it was a freedom that was very difficult to attain. He characterized it as being counter-instinctual to human beings: the natural human instinct is to resist, avoid, or meet with aversion all things that are unpleasant, and to grasp at, hold on to, and crave all things that are pleasurable. He explained that his experience along the whole spiritual path was one that went "against the stream" of ordinary human consciousness.

The Buddha felt that the masses would never be willing to practice the kind of renunciation, mindfulness, concentration, and morality that it takes to become free. Brahma agreed with the Buddha, but he insisted that there would be some in every generation that were not completely asleep, that had only a little dust in their eyes. The Dharma, as experienced and taught by the Buddha, Brahma insisted, could clear away that dust and allow those who chose to undertake this training to awaken.

The Buddha reflected on Brahma's plea as he was sitting next to a lotus pond. He saw that most of the lotus plants stayed stuck in the mud, beneath the surface and the light of day, and some were barely breaking the surface, but there were a few lotuses that had broken forth into the sunlight and blossomed. The Buddha likened humans to the lotus flowers. Out of the deluded mud of human existence, filled with greed, hatred, and delusion, in a world where wars, oppression, and lust rule the masses, there are those who can and will rise above the muck and emerge victorious against suffering.

Being convinced that it would be a worthy endeavor to start a spiritual revolution, the Buddha decided that he must offer the path to freedom to all who cared to follow it. He thought of his homeless homeys he had been practicing with in the forest and thought that if anyone could understand this radical teaching it was them. So the Buddha set forth to teach the Dharma.

Noah Levine: May 2009