



The Indian Prince



My name is Sunil and my caste is Sudra. I spent my life as a servant for the ruling family of Shakya near the great mountains. When I was young, I served as handmaiden for Mahamaya, queen of the clan, and wife of King Shuddodana Gautama. As a member of the household, I was close to the events that I share with you. My story may seem fantastic but I attest that it is true.

At the time when Mahamaya was expecting her firstborn, she had a dream in which a baby elephant blessed her unborn child with his trunk. When she told me of it, I believed that the dream foretold greatness, but I could not have imagined what lay in store.

The boy's birth was unusual, if not miraculous. The queen was on her way to visit family when her time came. From all I saw and heard the birth seemed painless. Her son was born awake and able to speak and said to his mother, "I have come to free humankind from suffering." He could walk and as he did lotus blossoms rose from places where he stepped. His parents named him Siddhartha but sadly, his mother died in the first week of his life.

His mother's sister came to the palace to care for the child and I became her servant and helped with Siddhartha. The young boy was indeed different from most, so his father consulted a wise man who predicted Siddhartha would become either a king or a great spiritual leader. Wanting his heir to inherit his position, King Shuddodana tried his best to influence his son accordingly.

Siddhartha Gautama grew up surrounded by luxury. As a prince, he was trained in warfare. When he grew into manhood, he was married to a beautiful princess who bore him a son. Yet there was sadness about the young man. At times he spoke with me, his old nursemaid, about his longing to learn about the world and the people.

Finally Siddhartha demanded that his father allow him to leave the palace walls. While the king agreed, he also arranged that when Siddhartha went out into the streets, the prince would see nothing of poverty, illness, or suffering of any kind, but the king's plan failed. While walking down the prepared route through the streets of the capital city, Siddhartha ran from his escorts.

Once on his own he met people who were poor and elderly, people who were severely ill, and he witnessed a funeral. Since the prince had never been around anything but beauty and luxury, he did not understand the meaning of what he had seen. Confused, he was drawn to a monk sitting with a peaceful look on his face. Siddhartha spoke with the holy man, who had found that peace in giving up all things that were pleasurable.

When Siddhartha returned to the palace, he spoke with me of what he had seen and heard. It was not long before the prince left the palace again. The second time he left for many years. In that time Siddhartha studied with holy men and gave up all things that gave him pleasure, yet he found no peace. One servant that chanced to see him reported that the prince looked to be near death from starvation.

We did not hear of him again for years but when we did, he was no longer called Siddhartha Gautama. He had become the great spiritual leader Buddha. We learned that he had found starvation and suffering did not bring happiness, so he had sought the Middle Way. Many from the palace, including his father, aunt, wife, son, and several of us who were their servants left to study with Buddha and join his growing numbers of followers.

I learned that he had achieved "enlightenment" at the age of thirty-five. After many years of seeking the truth and feeling frustrated and confused, the prince sat down under a tree we call the Bodhi Tree. He had chosen that tree and decided he would sit in a place beneath it until he understood the meaning of life and suffering. He was there for many days and was met by many demons that tried to stop him from learning the truth, but he was finally enlightened and became "Buddha," which means "The Enlightened One."

I learned much from Buddha, but mainly that we should seek the Middle Way. Buddha taught that suffering is caused by man's desire for worldly things, and I know this to be true. Wars are fought for power. Thieves steal for money. People murder for greed and jealousy. Buddha said that we should instead try to do all that is right and good, say all that is right and good, and think all that is right and good.

Buddha taught us that a person's status in the world does not matter, but thoughts, words, and deeds do. He told us, "By birth one is not an outcast, by birth one is not a Brahman; by deeds alone one is an outcast, by deeds alone one is a Brahman." If a person is rich or poor, if a person is from India or another land, if a person is born into a high class or born an untouchable, it does not matter. All people can find enlightenment. To achieve perfect wisdom we must travel through many lives, yet we do not believe that our future lives are reward or punishment for earthly behaviors. We travel through a great wheel of lives in order to reach a final state of perfection and purity which we call Nirvana.

Buddha taught his followers for forty-five years. In his eightieth year Buddha told us that he would soon be leaving us and he did. After eating some spoiled food, he became ill. He went to sit under a grove of trees and went into a deep meditation, but he never returned to this life. It has been several months since Buddha's death, and I too am very old now. But before leaving this life, I wanted to tell others my story and the story of the Indian prince I knew who grew to become a great spiritual leader.

Based on his words, how do you think Buddha would have viewed the caste system? Explain your answer. _____

How do these teachings compare with what you have learned about Hinduism? Explain your ideas. _____
