

CHAPTER
3

HISTORYMAKERS

Siddhartha Gautama

Enlightened One

Section 2

“Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good. Let him overcome the greedy by liberality, the liar by truth.”—Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

Born a prince in a warrior family, Siddhartha Gautama lived in northern India during a time of turmoil. From a young age, he was disturbed by the suffering of his world. Unsatisfied with the life of ease, he hoped to find deeper meaning in his life. He tried many ways of reaching inner peace, but none worked. When he finally discovered his path, he decided to teach others how to reach that same state—and in doing so, founded a new religion. Siddhartha was born near the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. His father ruled a small kingdom and hoped that his son would follow after him. Siddhartha was not the typical prince, however. He was concerned more with spiritual matters and wrestled with deep questions about human life. He asked himself, “Why is there suffering and what is death?” Hoping to settle his son down, the king built him a palace, but Siddhartha continued to be restless. At age 29, he later recalled, he broke with his comfortable life:

In the days before my enlightenment . . . I bethought me that a hole-and-corner life is all that a home can give, whereas a wandering [religious man] is as free as air. . . . So the time came, when I was quite young and with a wealth of coal-black hair untouched by gray and in all the beauty of my early prime—despite the wishes of my parents, who wept and lamented—I cut off my hair and beard . . . and went off from home.

He tried for six years to find the solution to his spiritual longing. In the end meditation provided the answer. He experienced the Bodhi, or moment of enlightenment. Life is suffering, he decided, but people do not realize this fact and try to achieve pleasure. By following Siddhartha’s eight rules or the Eightfold Path, one can end desire and bring about the needed understanding. Then the person experiences a release from suffering, a state called nirvana. Siddhartha came to be called the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.” He quickly went to a park in the Indian city of Benares and preached his first

sermon. He continued for 46 years, traveling throughout India. Soon he had many followers. The Buddha had great compassion for people, and he strongly rejected the inequality that was a central part of India’s caste system. In this system, the Brahmins, or priests, were considered the most worthy of people. The outcasts, or untouchables, were shunned by all others. People lived in the caste into which they were born. The Buddha once said, “Not by birth does one become an outcast, not by birth does one become a Brahmin. By deeds one becomes an outcast, by deeds one becomes a Brahmin.” He was reinforcing the message made clear in another saying: “Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love.”

The Buddha gathered large numbers of followers. He did not want to create a religion that relied on a strict hierarchy to grow. He once told his followers, “Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be a refuge to yourselves. Hold fast to the truth as to a lamp. Look not for refuge to anyone besides yourselves.”

Even in his death, the Buddha showed his feeling for others. As the story goes, the Buddha was 80 years old when he took a meal offered by a poor believer. The food was spoiled, but the Buddha did not wish to hurt the feelings of his host and ate it anyway—although he prevented his followers from joining him. Soon after, he was taken sick. He laid down in a grove of trees and gave his final instructions to his followers. As he lay dying, he sent a messenger to the poor man who had cooked the fatal meal to reassure the man that he should not feel any blame. Soon after, he died. According to Buddhist belief, his soul passed into nirvana.

Questions

1. **Drawing Conclusions** Explain what you think the Buddha means by the quote on this page.
2. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** Do you agree with the Buddha’s idea that all life is suffering? Explain.
3. **Hypothesizing** How could the Buddha’s message about the caste system undermine Hindu society?