

Outline for Class 2 Life of the Buddha

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From the KTD Curriculum

This is a nonmagical presentation of the life of the Buddha that stresses his human qualities. It could include the life of Prince Siddhartha, his royal upbringing, the stages of understanding the four sufferings, renunciation, asceticism, enlightenment, and a presentation of the middle way that transcends asceticism and indulgence. The twelve deeds of the Buddha will be discussed at a later point in the curriculum from the Mahayana perspective.

Preparation

Before this class, students should have read the “Four Noble Truths” transcript.

Topics

1. Life of the Buddha.
2. Definition of “buddha” and “sangye.”
3. Introduction to the concept of “buddha nature.”
4. Role of meditation in the development of enlightened potential.

Life of the Buddha

[Please read the article on the life of the Buddha by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, at kagyu.org.]

Review the life of the Buddha in whatever detail you feel necessary to refresh the memory of the class.

Birth

Born: 2,500 years ago as Siddhartha Gautama, in Lumbini, which was part of India, and is now in Nepal. Lumbini is considered one of the major pilgrimage spots of Buddhists.

Parents: Siddhodana and Mahamaya, king and queen of the Shakya clan of Northern India, near the Nepali border.

Prediction: After the Buddha’s birth, a holy man viewed the baby. The holy man laughed and cried: he laughed over the child’s future, and cried because he would not be alive to experience his teachings. If the Buddha were not exposed to the four sights (see below), then he would be a chakravartin, or world leader. If he were exposed to suffering, he would become enlightened. Everything depended on the Buddha’s father!

The Four Sights, or Signs

Siddhartha was absolutely forbidden to go outside the palace compound. King Suddhodana was explicitly told not to let him see the four sights. Siddhartha ventured forth and saw during three separate trips: an old man, a sick person, and then a corpse. Upon the fourth trip he saw a holy man.

Birth

Death

Old Age

Suffering

The Years before Awakening

Siddhartha as a medicant: For six years, the Buddha studied various ascetic yogic practices, including fasting, which caused him to be very emaciated. He was offered a bit of milk rice by a peasant girl, ate it, and immediately his mind was clearer. His fellow yogis saw this, criticized him, and left him to fend for himself. (In those days, most yogis travelled in small groups.)

Enlightenment

Siddhartha went to Bodh Gaya, or Dorje Den, where he sat in lotus position, on a cushion of kusha grass, under a huge bodhi tree, and vowed to remain until becoming fully awakened. The forces of Mara assailed him, but he remained motionless. “When other visions and distractions arose, through the stability of His meditation, He remained unmoved. The earth shook and rain fell from a cloudless sky in response to His supreme achievement. With the dawn, He arose a Buddha.”

Teaching to All

For 49 days the Buddha did not teach. But then he was approached by Indra and Brahma of the god realms, who requested him to turn the wheel, to teach the truth. Shakyamuni Buddha taught to all castes, and to women, which was unheard of.

The Three Turnings of the Wheel

Hinayana

Presented at Saranath

The Four Noble Truths

Mahayana

Presented at Rajgira

Emptiness of self and other

Vajrayana

Presented at Vulture Peak

Emptiness has the qualities of Buddhahood

Meaning of “Buddha”

[The translator reviewing this outline stressed the importance of introducing people to the original Tibetan words for major dharma terms since the English words do not convey the full meaning.]

“Buddha” is a Sanskrit word which means “awakened one” (awakened from ignorance).

The Tibetan term for Buddha, “Sang-gye,” has a slightly different meaning.

“Sang” means completely purified of negativity.

“Gye” means the complete flourishing of what is positive.

Potential for Buddhahood

The Buddha was a human being, like us, with both positive and negative potential.

Like the Buddha, we have the potential for complete enlightenment. This potential for enlightenment is referred to as “buddha nature.”

Buddha nature is inherent in us. Enlightenment does not mean creating or adding something to what we already are.

What obscures our enlightened potential are negative habitual patterns: thoughts and actions based on ignorance, attachment, and aversion. Fully enlightened beings, like the Buddha, were able to completely uproot negative habitual patterns. We still have the task of eliminating negative patterns. This is the difference between ourselves and fully realized people.

Our traditional analogy for this: sun covered by clouds. The sun represents our basic enlightened nature, our potential. The clouds represent the obscuring patterns of ignorance, attachment, and aversion.

Another analogy: ordinary beings are like unrefined gold ore; fully developed, enlightened beings are like pure, refined gold.

Role of Meditation

Meditation practices in Buddhist tradition are time-tested methods for the uncovering and uprooting of negative habitual patterns (refining the gold ore, as in the analogy).

In Buddhist teaching, the root cause of negativity is ignorance. In this context, ignorance does not mean stupidity or being uneducated, but instead lacking in wisdom [per caj: wisdom of realizing one's true nature].

There is a traditional expression: "opening the eye of wisdom." Ignorance is like having one's eyes closed; wisdom is opening up one's eyes.

Meditation practice is so highly valued in Buddhist tradition because it is the most effective way of cultivating wisdom.

Meditation at KTCs

[With the goal of helping students in the class connected with meditation practice at the Center, it might be appropriate to outline the way in which meditation instruction has been developed at the KTCs.]

The monk who founded this center, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, is a recognized meditation master in the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism.

As a young man, Rinpoche spent five years in meditation retreat under the direction of experienced teachers. He then spent a number of years in intensive academic study.

After completing his personal training, Rinpoche was authorized by his teachers to begin instructing others, and for the last 30 years, Rinpoche has been guiding both Tibetans and Westerners in Buddhist meditation practice.

[Here we need to update and insert Bardor Tulku Rinpoche's biography also.]

Handout

"The Life of the Buddha and the Four Noble Truths," by Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche