

Buddha was not a celestial being. He was a simple human. But not too simple, for he was a prince. He went by the name Siddhartha Gautama, and he enjoyed a privileged life—a beautiful palace in Kapilavastu, a loving wife and son, adoring parents, loyal subjects, lush gardens with peacocks, and a host of well-endowed courtesans. His father, Suddhodana, made sure that his every need was taken care of and his every wish fulfilled within the palace walls. For when Siddhartha was a baby, an astrologer had predicted that the prince might choose to become a hermit in his later life, and Suddhodana was determined that Siddhartha would succeed him as a king. Palace life was luxurious, sheltered, and also quite peaceful. Siddhartha never quarreled with his family; in fact, he cared for them and loved them very much. He had easy relations with everyone, apart from occasional tension with one of his cousins.

As Siddhartha grew older, he became curious about his country and the world beyond. Bending to his son's pleas, the king agreed to let the prince venture out beyond the palace walls on an excursion, but he gave strict instructions to the chariot driver, Channa, that the prince should be exposed only to things beautiful and wholesome. Indeed, Siddhartha very much enjoyed the mountains and the rivers and all the natural wealth of this earth. But on the way home, the two came upon a peasant who was groaning by the roadside, wracked with pain from some excruciating illness. All his life Siddhartha had been surrounded by strapping body guards and healthy ladies of the court; the sound of groan and the sight of a disease-wracked body were shocking to him. Witnessing the vulnerability of the human body impressed him deeply, and he returned to the palace with a heavy heart.

As time passed, the prince seemingly returned to normal, but he longed to make another journey. Again Suddhodana reluctantly agreed. This time Siddhartha saw a toothless old crone hobbling along, and he immediately ordered Channa to stop.

He asked his driver, "Why is this person walking so?"

"She is old, my lord," said Channa.

"What is 'old'?" asked Siddhartha.

"The elements of his body have been used and worn out over a long time," said Channa.

Shaken by this spectacle, Siddhartha let Channa drive him home.

Now Siddhartha's curiosity could not be abated—what else was out there? So off he and Channa went on a third journey. Again he enjoyed the beauty of the region, the mountains and the streams. But as they were returning home, they came across four pallbearers carrying a flat, lifeless body on a palanquin. Siddhartha had never in his life seen such a thing. Channa explained that the frail body was actually dead.

Siddhartha asked, "Will death come to others?"

Channa answered, "Yes, my lord, it will come to all."

"To my father? Even to my son?"

"Yes, to everyone. Whether they are rich or poor, high caste or low, you cannot escape death. It is the fate of all who are born on this earth."



Siddhartha on Kanthaka with Channa (Thailand)

“When Buddha left Kapilavastu, he was not alone. In the predawn hours, as his family and servants slept, he went to the stable, where Channa, his chariot driver and most trusted friend, slept. Channa was speechless at the sight of Siddhartha unattended, but at his master’s instruction, he saddled Siddhartha’s favorite steed, Kathanka. They passed through the city gates undetected. When they were a safe distance away, Siddhartha dismounted and proceeded to remove all of his bangles, anklets, and princely finery. These he gave to Channa, ordering him to take Kathanka and return to the city. Channa pleaded to be allowed to accompany Siddhartha, but the prince was firm. Channa was to go back and continue to serve the royal; family.

Siddhartha asked Channa to convey a message to his family: They were not to worry about him, because he was embarking on a very important journey. He had already given Channa all his ornaments but one, the final symbol of splendor, caste, and royal bearing—his beautiful long hair. This he cut himself and, handing it to Channa, he set off alone.”

—from: *Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, What makes you not a Buddhist, Boston & London 2007;*
<http://www.khyentsefoundation.org/>

<http://www.siddharthasintent.org/>