

The Buddha Achieves Enlightenment

Over 2500 years ago, Indian Prince Siddhartha Gautama at age 29 left his home, family, and all earthly possessions to search for the meaning of life and its hardships. After six years of discipline and asceticism, he still had not found an answer. Finally, he sat under a Bodhi tree, fasted, and vowed not to move until he received understanding. On the morning of the eighth day, he attained enlightenment, which led to his teachings that formed the foundations of modern Buddhism: The Middle Way, The Four Noble Truths and later The Noble Eightfold Path (a path between deprivation and excess).

As shown here, the Buddha touches the earth as witness to his meditation and the realization that suffering in this life is avoided by the elimination of desire. "Calling the earth to witness" (*bhumisparshamudra*) is a well-known representation of the Buddha in SE Asia. As he was meditating, the forces of darkness, in the form of the demon Mara's three lascivious daughters tried to lead him astray. Passage from biography of Buddha about his temptation: "Another [woman] repeatedly let her blue garments slip down under the pretext of intoxication, and with her girdle partly seen she seemed like the night with the lightning flashing. Some walked up and down so as to make their golden zones twinkle and displayed to him their hips veiled by diaphanous robes. Others grasped mango boughs in full flower and leaned so as to display bosoms like golden jars." But the Buddha resisted these temptations.

Mara asked him, "Who can vouch for your goodness?" There was no one else around, so the Buddha pointed his right hand toward the ground and said, "The earth shall be my witness." Then the earth goddess Toranee appeared, and, wringing a torrent of water from her hair, she washed away Mara and his daughters. The Buddha continued to meditate through the night, and at dawn achieved supreme understanding.

Awakening of the Buddha Nature:

According to the Mahayana tradition, in the early morning hours of December 8, Siddhartha became the Buddha, the Awakened One. By his example he showed us that it is possible for a human to become a buddha, a fully enlightened person. We are therefore in possession of this potentiality, this buddha nature, which, when awakened and cultivated, will enable us to achieve the same enlightenment.

"Are you a God?" they asked the Buddha.

"No," he replied.

"Are you an angel, then?"

"No."

"A saint?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

Replied the Buddha, "I am awake."

Through personal reflection (prayer, meditation, teachings), Buddhists are encouraged to learn from and emulate this profound example in order to seek enlightenment in their own lives.