

PRINCE GAUTAMA (1)

BACKGROUND

The story of Prince Gautama, a prince who left his palace to become The Buddha (meaning Enlightened One) is central to the Buddhist tradition. In this session, we focus on the main story without going into the teachings of Buddhism. So you could use it as a stimulus for thought on these issues without even mentioning Buddhism, but it would probably be useful for children to know where it comes from, just for general knowledge.

One of the distinctive aspects of Buddhism is that it does not have a God, or gods, as such. So buddhists meditate instead of praying. It also means that, for a buddhist, when we are good we benefit ourselves. We are not obeying higher authority or following rules. Instead, we are doing the right thing because we understand that it is good in itself and will free us from everyday needs and wants, which stop us finding peace.

Central to Buddhist teaching is the cycle of reincarnation: if we live the right way our spirit will return in better circumstances. The highest goal is no longer to be reborn at all - like The Buddha. This happens if we escape from the hurly-burly of greed, desire and deprivation. It is the state of Nirvana. It is not a place, like paradise, but a state of being.

What can be confusing for visitors to a buddhist country like Thailand is that a lot of ordinary practising Buddhists - farmers, shopkeepers and so on - don't seem to conform to these ideas. They may worship at the temple in the hope of a good harvest or a prosperous business, and it is common for buddhists to have animist beliefs, (animism being the idea that animals or other objects of nature (e.g. rivers) have spirits). At this level, it is not so clear how what they are doing is different from praying, and doesn't seem to be part of the quest for Nirvana. Monks, well-educated buddhists and Westerners who convert to Buddhism are less likely to incorporate animistic beliefs, and less likely to attempt to sway their fortunes with offerings at the temple.

Another key difference between Buddhism and Christianity/Judaism/Islam is that there is less emphasis on justice, law and punishment. What those religions see as sinful (stealing, lying etc) would also be seen as wrong behaviour by a buddhist, but the buddhist would see wrong behaviour as ignorant or unenlightened. There is less emphasis on condemnation and codes of law.

STIMULUS

There was once a prince called Gautama. From the moment he was born, Gautama was kept inside the palace. His father, the king, built the palace walls so high that the boy would never see out. Everything the boy wanted or needed was brought to him. He made sure his son never saw the sad things in life.

No-one who was sick or old was allowed near Gautama, and he didn't know about those things. Neither did he know about death. Nothing troubling came into his world and he had everything he could ever want. (1)

But he was curious about the world outside the walls of the palace. So one day, he slipped out, in disguise. Straight away, he saw an old man, walking slowly along the road. His back was bent, his skin was wrinkled, and his old eyes squinted as he tried to see the ground in front of him.

The prince was horrified. He asked the old man and was told all about what happens in old age. The prince had never imagined that this was what happened to people if they lived their whole life through.

He kept on walking and before long came across a woman suffering from a terrible, incurable disease. She couldn't walk and was in constant pain. When she told Gautama that she would never be cured, he couldn't believe that her life could be so difficult and unhappy. He kept walking and was now very worried. Would these things happen to him?

Just as he was wondering this, he saw a procession in the street. People were carrying a body to a funeral. Gautama asked someone:

'Is the man they are carrying asleep?'

No, he was told. So he asked: 'Then why is he closing his eyes and lying there?'

The people had to explain to the prince about death: that the man would never get up and walk, or talk, or see or think again. (2)

When the procession had passed on there was just one person left standing at the roadside. He was a beggar, dressed in rags. His only possessions were the old, torn clothes hanging off him and a begging bowl.

The prince asked the beggar why he lived that way. The beggar replied:

'I choose to live like this. I used to live in luxury and wealth, but I realised that those things are false. The truth is that we grow old, and ill, and die. So what is the point of chasing after riches and pleasure, which will soon go, and leave us with nothing but pain. People like me turn our backs on that life. We own nothing, and we eat only a few nuts or a piece of bread each day. We drink and wash in the river. It is a better life' (3)

When the prince returned to the palace he told his father the king what had happened. And he said that he now wanted to be a beggar too. The king shook his head. 'All your life I have tried to protect you from sadness and pain. Now you can see why. Please don't leave the palace to be a beggar.'

But Gautama did leave. And he never went back. (3)

Task Questions

- ✓ Should parents stop children from seeing sad things like sickness and death?

Some children might say you can't protect children from it so you shouldn't try. That's a fair point, but you can anchor them back to the main question: If you could protect them in this way, should you choose to? This keeps the question in the moral sphere, rather than what's practically possible.

- ✓ How would you explain death to someone (maybe a child) who didn't know what it was?

It might be interesting to get another child to pretend to be the person being explained to: what questions would they ask back? Would they really understand - does that matter?

- ✓ KEY Q: Did Gautama discover the truth about life on his journey outside the palace?

This contains the question of whether we agree that sickness, age and death are the truth about life. In Buddhism, this is not just a true thing but the true thing.

COMMENTS

The first two questions here are intended to develop the context a bit and get children into the story - also to help them see that this is a moral story. The third question deals with the central idea of Buddhism head on: Is life suffering? According to Buddhism it is suffering and if we see reality, rather an illusion, we will come to understand. As such, it is a pessimistic outlook if you stop there. Buddhists may point out, however, that it's actually a very optimistic religion because it offers a complete way out of suffering.

But as mentioned above, you don't have to use this story to teach Buddhism. Or you could explore various aspects of the story before homing in on the religious side.

One way to extend question 3 is to ask:

- ✓ What about someone growing up poor outside the palace? Would they see the truth if they saw what life was like in the palace?
- ✓ (If so, why is that the truth, and not poverty, or vice-versa?)

CONNECTIONS

This story has particularly good connections to Art and Drama. Children can choose to illustrate different stages of the story in order to tell it (just as churches had pictures from the life of Jesus to tell certain stories). It would also be possible to set this up as a two-minute play with each character needing only one or two lines.

For literacy it is often interesting to get the children to tell the story from different viewpoints. They could use their imagination to tell it from the point of view of the king, or one of the people that Gautama meets, who may or may not be aware of who he is. They might think his questions are really stupid, for example.