

The Four Sights

Why was his dad worried?

Siddhartha Gautama was born in the 5th century BCE, in a small kingdom. His father, King Suddhodana wanted his son to continue the family line as a great leader. A holy man visited the palace. He predicted that Siddhartha would grow up to become either a mighty king or a spiritual teacher who would give up his power. The king was deeply upset because he needed his son to be King.

What was his plan?

To prevent the young prince from seeing anything that might make him want to leave the king decided that Siddhartha would live in total luxury. Any sight of suffering, death, or hardship was forbidden. The prince would be protected at all costs. The palace became almost a paradise built around him. He had the finest clothes, music, food, and gardens. Servants attended to his every need. Dancers and musicians entertained him. Anyone elderly, sick, or unhappy was kept far away. The king believed that if Siddhartha never encountered suffering, he would never think to leave the palace.

What was Siddhartha's life like?

However, Siddhartha's curiosity continued to grow. He wanted to see the world outside the palace walls. Eventually, after much pleading, the king agreed, but only under strict conditions. The city was to be cleaned and decorated, and no unpleasant sights were to be visible.

What did he see first?

Despite the king's efforts to hide reality, Siddhartha's first trip outside the palace changed everything. As he rode through the city in his luxurious chariot, alongside his loyal charioteer Channa, he suddenly noticed something he had never seen before: an old man.

What did this teach him?

The man was bent and frail. His teeth were gone, his hair was thin, and he leaned heavily on a stick. Siddhartha was shocked. He had truly never seen age before. Turning to Channa, he asked what was wrong with the man. Channa explained that this was simply what happened to all humans. Everyone grows old; it is part of life

What did he see second?

What did this teach him?

What did he see third?

What did this teach him?

What did he see fourth?

What did do next?

Siddhartha had not known this. Learning it troubled him deeply. If all people must age and lose their strength, then youth and beauty were temporary illusions. This planted the seed of doubt in Siddhartha's mind. His comfortable life in the palace suddenly seemed fake.

On his second journey, Siddhartha saw a man lying by the roadside, sweating and shaking in pain. His body was covered in a rash, and he struggled to breathe. Siddhartha turned to Channa and asked what was happening. Channa explained that illness was another unavoidable part of human life, that everyone gets ill at some point. Siddhartha realised that suffering was more common than he knew.

On his third journey, Siddhartha saw a group of people carrying a dead body wrapped in white cloth. The mourners were crying and chanting as they made their way to the cremation ground. Siddhartha had never seen death before. He asked Channa whether the dead man would ever live again. Channa replied that death comes to all—it is the inevitable end of every life.

The knowledge struck Siddhartha. Not only was suffering everywhere, but life was temporary. Everything he loved—his wife, his newborn son Rahula, his parents, even himself—would one day pass away. After these three sights, Siddhartha felt overwhelmed. His sheltered life no longer made sense. He needed answers. On his final journey outside the palace, he witnessed something unexpected.

Siddhartha saw a wandering holy man, or ascetic, walking calmly along the road. The man owned nothing and had left behind all luxuries, yet he looked peaceful, more than anyone Siddhartha had ever seen. Siddhartha asked Channa why he was happy. Channa explained that some people gave up their ordinary lives to search for the truth and a way to end suffering.

This finally pushed Siddhartha. For the first time, he saw a possible solution to the suffering he had just discovered. He left the palace and find the answers to his questions. He started his journey to become the Buddha.