

Gautama the Buddha was born over two thousand five hundred years ago, as Prince Siddharth. He was the son of a king - Raja Shuddhodana. He was born on the sacred day of Vaishakh Purnima at Lumbini, situated near the city of Kapilavastu. Seven days after his birth, his mother Mayadevi passed away. It was prophesied at his birth that the infant would grow to be either a great *Chakravarti* (an Emperor) or a *sannyasi* (a renunciate) who would bring comfort to thousands of lost souls.

The king was determined to prevent his beloved son from renouncing the world. He surrounded the Prince with every imaginable luxury and comfort. It is said that the King had three magnificent palaces, one for each season of the year, and in the beautiful atmosphere of these royal mansions, Prince Siddharth lived his secluded, protected life.

In good time, the prince was married to one of the most beautiful girls of the realm – Princess Yashodhara, the daughter of the Koliyan king. Soon, a son, Rahul was born to them. At the age of twenty-nine, Siddharth went out to see his kingdom and to meet his subjects. He beheld what the Buddhist books call the ‘four signs’ - witnesses to the impermanence of the world. He saw an old man, a diseased man, a dead man, and a monk. And there entered into his heart a vision of *dukkha*, the world-sorrow. “What is the way out of the world-sorrow?” he asked himself, repeatedly. The unanswerable question led him to renounce worldly life, leave his wife and son and set out in quest of the Truth of life.

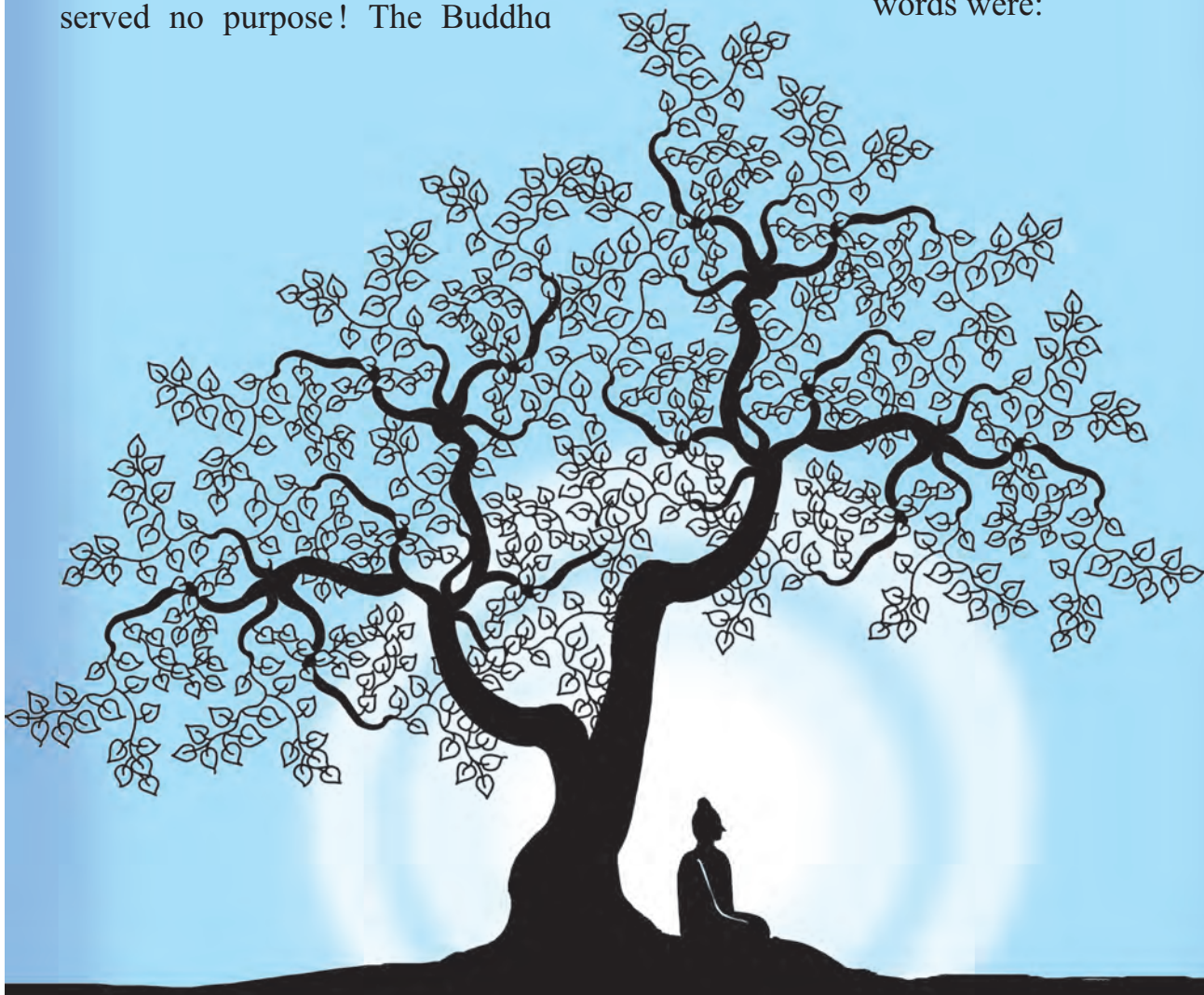


The story of Gautama's quest that ends in illumination and attainment of *nirvana*, is one of the most moving tales of our times. For six years did Gautama practise intense asceticism. For several days in succession, he ate barely a grain of rice. His strong, athletic body was reduced to a bag of bones. But it served no purpose! The Buddha

then scattered a handful of grass on the ground beneath the Bodhi tree and formed a seat for himself. "I care not if my skin and nerves and bones decay!" he thought. "I care not if my life-blood dries, I shall not give up until I attain to enlightenment."

What divine will-power in these words! And what may not a man achieve if he would wake up his will-power!

It is said that he saw a vision which contained a message for him: it acted as a spiritual stimulant to him. The words were:



Tune the sitar neither low nor high,
The string overstretched breaks
and the music dies.
The string overslack is dumb
and the music dies.

He thought to himself, 'I too, have tortured my body to starvation. I have taken to extremes. Let me follow the middle path'.

When he tried to get up to take a bath in the river, he found that he had become so weak that he could not rise. Just then, a beautiful girl named Sujata appeared before him, carrying a golden bowl filled with sweetened milk and rice.

When she saw the weakened ascetic, she offered the bowl at his feet. "Lord,

please accept my offering of milk and rice." Buddha accepted her offering. This was his first meal after many days of starvation. It refreshed him and infused a new strength in him. He realized that making the body suffer was not the way to enlightenment and truth.

Gautama had longed for enlightenment. That night, he found the answer to his query. What is the cause of sorrow? The cause of sorrow is desire. The cure for sorrow is to give up all desires and adopt Right Living.

Born under a tree, the Buddha received illumination also, under a tree. To this day, we venerate this tree as the Bodhi Tree.

POINTERS

1. Complete the following sentences with reference to the passage :
 - (a) Gautama, the Buddha, was born over two thousand five hundred years ago, as
 - (b) The king was determined to prevent his beloved son from
 - (c) For six years did Gautama practise
 - (d) He realised that making the body suffer was not
 - (e) To this day, we venerate this tree as
2. Write short notes on the following :
 - (a) Prince Siddharth's protected life.
 - (b) The 'four signs' that Prince Siddharth beheld.
 - (c) The message in the vision.
 - (d) Sujata's offering
3. Read aloud a paragraph of your choice from the passage.
4. Visit a library : Read stories about Gautama Buddha. Relate one story in the class.

