

Life Span Development and Personality of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

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### Abstract

Buddha means Enlightened One, or the Awakened One. In 563 B.C., Siddhartha Gautama was born to this world and would through the course of his life come to be known as The Buddha after attaining spiritual enlightenment. This paper serves to examine the life span development and personality of Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha's family issues and social support systems will be examined for their influence on Siddhartha's developmental growth and adjustment, and the influences of heredity and environment on his psychological development will be discussed. In addition, Cognitive-Social theory and Existential theory will be used to explain Siddhartha's unique patterns and traits, including which best explains his behaviors and achievements.

## Life Span Development and Personality of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

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Siddhartha Gautama's mother died a few days after his birth. Shortly thereafter, Siddhartha's father had soothsayers examine the baby, and they said the child had marks of a great man on his body. These marks foretold he would either be a great religious figure, or a great world leader. His father preferred Siddhartha to become a political figure, and thus closeted the child to prevent him from having experiences that would lead him down the religious path. Siddhartha was to slated become the future king and defender of Kapilvastu, one of the first cities in northern India (Meissonnier, 2001).

Siddhartha was good at the princely sports of fencing, wrestling and archery, but he was deeply thoughtful and curious as a child, and was more interested in the nature of the world around him than in military pursuits (Meissonnier, 2001).

The world outside the palace and city interested Siddhartha the most. His father allowed him out to the hinterland at age none to celebrate the annual plowing festival. Here he say hard work for the first time, watching a farmer plow the field. He was fascinated by the labor and

repetition of the task. This was a significant turning point in his life. He managed to slip away to be alone, and ponder on this experience. To everyone else this was a celebration, but to Siddhartha, this was a deeply profound experience. Through the process of plowing, the farmer had unearthed a worm, and a bird enjoyed it as sustenance. Had the farmer not been plowing, the bird would not have eaten. Siddhartha realized that everything in life is connected and all actions have consequences. This simple realization, a concept known as karma, would become one of the cornerstones of his teachings in his later life (Meissonnier, 2001).

Siddhartha's behavior deeply troubled the king. The current religion of the time, known as Brahmanism, dictated that sons should follow in the footsteps of the father. As Siddhartha grew up, his father did everything in his power to tempt Siddhartha to stay inside the palace, attempting to protect his son from the sufferings of the world in order to steer him to become a king. Siddhartha even competed to marry a princess at the age of 16, and his skills outshone all competitors. This pleased the king, who began to think that palace life was having the desired effect upon Siddhartha. However, Siddhartha continued to pester his father to let him out of the palace (Meissonnier, 2001).

The king, unable to refuse Siddhartha any longer, began to sanitize the city outside, removing all that showed signs of suffering. He had the poor and the sick removed, and attempted to have everything as clean as possible. However, Siddhartha made four journeys far from his father's influence and was able to experience real life. He experienced, for the first time, aging, sickness and death. This experience deeply troubled him. Siddhartha had come to understand the existential nature of life, and the meaning of impermanence. He saw impermanence all around him now (Meissonnier, 2001).

This recounting of Siddhartha's childhood shows a sheltering of significant impact by his father. The situation becomes apparent that Siddhartha's father wanted to protect Siddhartha from the cruel reality of the world, and follow the religious tradition of the time wherein the son follows the footsteps of the father. In the father's attempts to do so, the king's closeting of Siddhartha has heightened his introspective and inquisitive nature. The sudden shock of experiencing the harshness of life at an older age forced him to realize that the world he knew was not real, and the truth of human suffering caused him to look closer at the world around him.

History says little of Siddhartha that shows how heredity has influenced his psychological development. However, Siddhartha's history is rich with his psychological development. “Human infants are born without any culture. They must be transformed by their parents, teachers, and others into cultural and socially adept animals. The general process of acquiring culture is referred to as socialization” (O'Neil, 2002). Siddhartha's childhood shows an intentional lack of socialization to the world outside the palace. Siddhartha's father literally controlled what culture Siddhartha was allowed to take in an attempt to shape the child's thought processes and future. “Socialization is important in the process of personality formation. While much of human personality is the result of our genes, the socialization process can mold it in particular directions by encouraging specific beliefs and attitudes as well as selectively providing experiences” (O'Neil, 2002). The lack of socialization on a broader spectrum likely shaped Siddhartha's emotional development the most, and likely influenced his desire to learn of the outside world.

Buddhism is often called the religion of the mind, and Siddhartha Gautama's greatest desire was to rid humanity of suffering; a very humanistic goal. As such, it seems appropriate to examine Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, using the Cognitive-Social and Existential theories of

personality. Each has a strength and weakness in assisting to analyze Siddhartha's personality traits and patterns.

According to Cognitive-Social theory, “personality reflects a constant interplay between environmental demands and the way the individual processes information about the self and the world” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 434). The way a person thinks about the events that surround them determine his or her emotions and emotional connections to these events, and thus influence their behavior (Kowalski, 2005, p. 434). This rational explains Siddhartha's behavior fairly well. Siddhartha was sheltered from the suffering of the outside world by his father, but still developed a compassionate nature. A deeply thoughtful and introspective child, when Siddhartha saw tedium and hard labor for the first time, he began to understand the basic concept of minor suffering. Thus, how he thought about the events that he saw where suffering occurred shaped his behavior and personality, and living a sheltered palace life allowed him time to think and develop these beliefs further. The shock of seeing suffering on a more grand scale in his teen years caused him to further ponder the situations around him, but now he began to relate suffering to age, sickness and death, and that it happens to everyone. This thought process further shaped his behavior and personality.

“Existentialism is a school of twentieth-century philosophy that similarly focused on subjective existence. According to many existentialist philosophers, the individual is alone throughout life and must confront what it means to be human and what values to embrace” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 448).

Siddhartha did not have to face this harsh reality in his childhood. Although Siddhartha surely knew of death and suffering to some degree, he was sheltered from the full reality of what age, sickness and death ultimately mean by his father's efforts to remove the poor, sick and dying

from the surrounding city. In his late teens, Siddhartha's observance of the phenomena of age, sickness and death intensified his understanding of human suffering, deeply troubling him. For the first time, he truly began to understand what mortality was, and that everything and everyone would succumb to the eventuality of death (Meissonnier, 2001).

Consequently, Siddhartha's mortality salience became more clear to him than ever before. "Not only does mortality salience heighten attraction to cultural norms, but these cultural norms can subsequently affect behavior" (Kowalski, 2005, p. 449). This would quickly cause Siddhartha to leave the palace, his wife, child, and father, to wander the world for several years to attempt to discover true enlightenment, and find a way to escape and end human suffering (Meissonnier, 2001).

In reviewing the wide variety of theoretical approaches to personality, Existential theory appears to explain Siddhartha's behaviors and achievements the best. Many common concepts exist between Buddhism and Existential Psychology, and most notable are what the Buddha called The Four Truths.

In the first Truth, the Buddha states that life is suffering. This makes it an intrinsic part of life; to live is to know suffering and to suffer means to know one is alive. To improve one's life, the Buddha believed one must first fully understand and accept this concept. Existentialism relates to this in the concept of ontological anxiety, or the anxiety and dread of being alive and eventual death. Existential psychologists also believe that to this must be understood and embraced to improve one's life (Boeree, 1997).

In the second Truth, the Buddha states that suffering is due to attachment. This can be seen as one's desire to make intangible concepts such as love and happiness last forever, and to attempt to make suffering go away. To overcome attachment, one must realize that all things are

impermanent and to cling to impermanence is to know attachment; to let everything go is to acknowledge and accept impermanence (Boeree, 1997). Existentialism relates to this in a similar way. “Our lack of 'essence' or preordained structure, our 'nothingness,' leads us to crave solidity. We are, you could say, whirlwinds who wish they were rocks. We cling to things in the hopes that they will provide us with a certain 'weight'” (Boeree, 1997). By this, Boeree means to say that people are impermanent, as are the things to which individuals cling. Our intent in clinging is delusional, and has no value, and leads to more unnecessary suffering.

Each of the other two Truths of Buddha also relates astonishing well to Existentialism. Although some deviations in similarity exist among the various teachings of Buddhism and the theories of Existentialism, much of the Buddhist principals and Existentialism are strikingly similar.

Siddhartha's life was full of deep thought and introspection, and from a psychological standpoint is fascinating to many people. Extreme sheltering in Siddhartha's childhood helped shape his thought processes and behaviors. Siddhartha's heredity is not well documented other than he came from a noble bloodline. His environment, the palace and the lack of access to outside influence, however, is well documented and clearly shows how environment can impact an individual in profound ways. Cognitive-social theory does a decent job of explaining Siddhartha's thought processes and behaviors, however, Existential theory far outshines in the ability to relate to Siddhartha's mental processes and the message of his teachings.



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