If when my wife is sleeping  
and the baby and Kathleen  
are sleeping  
and the sun is a flame-white disc  
in silken mists  
above shining trees,-  
if I in my north room  
dance naked, grotesquely  
before my mirror  
waving my shirt round my head  
and singing softly to myself:  
"I am lonely, lonely.  
I was born to be lonely,  
I am best so!"  
If I admire my arms, my face,  
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks  
against the yellow drawn shades,-

Who shall say I am not  
the happy genius of my household?

-- William Carlos Williams

Joseph Campbell, in his epochal book 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces,' emphasizes that the essential trait of a hero in the making is his restlessness. Not at ease with his immediate environment and circumstances, a constant unease gnaws at his heart, prompting him to question the very nature of his existence. This inner strife is the first inkling that a greater destiny lies ahead of the potential hero.

Campbell divides the evolution of the hero into five distinct phases:

1). The Call to Adventure  
2). Crossing of the Threshold (Entering the Unknown)  
3). Trials and Tribulations of the Journey  
4). Attainment of Enlightenment  
5). Return of the Hero

The Buddha's journey to spiritual awakening or 'Nirvana,' as it is popularly called, perfectly mirrors the above mentioned progressive development of a hero.

The Call to Adventure

Gautam Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha, in the lap of luxury. Exposed to an overdose of riches and comfort right from the beginning, the prince, while still relatively young, exhausted for himself the fields of fleshly joy, thus becoming ripe for a higher, transcendent experience.
The young prince remained glued to his pleasure chambers and had no contact with ground reality. His palace, and the sensual pleasures which it contained, were his only limiting worlds.

Once, after a particularly hectic schedule of sensual frenzy, Siddhartha was suddenly awakened from his blissful sleep, in the middle of the night. Surrounding him were the remnants of last night's debauchery and revelry. The sight of the shameless naked flesh and the overflowing wine pitchers jarred him into the unreality of his own reality. He felt suffocated in those very environs which had once given him what he thought were the pleasures of paradise. He immediately arose from his gold-gilded bed, descended the stairs and asked his favorite charioteer to take him to an open space where he could breathe more freely.

He had traveled only a few miles when he came across a sight which was totally new to him in terms of the distressing emotions it stirred up in the innermost depths of his heart.

Right in front of him was an old man, tottering on a stick, his physical frame entirely ravaged by the trials of time. Never having been exposed to such an image, Siddhartha asked his charioteer who that individual was, and why he was the way he was?

When he heard that the man had deteriorated due to his advancing age, the next natural question was whether he himself, Siddhartha, the prince of the mighty Shakya clan, and all those whom he loved would one day be exposed to the same degradation? Confronted with the truth, the reply completely shattered him, and he asked to be taken back to the comforting environs of the palace.

In the journey of the hero, a figure suddenly appears as a guide, marking a turning point in the biography. This symbolic figure is somehow profoundly familiar to the unconscious, but is unknown, and even frightening to the conscious self. Thereafter, even though the hero returns for a while to his familiar occupations, he finds them unfruitful. A continuing series of signs of increasing force will then become visible. According to Campbell, "The Four Signs," which appeared to the Buddha, are the most celebrated examples of the call to adventure in the literature of the world. These are signals from a higher domain, summons, which can no longer be denied.

Here it is also significant to note that being awakened in the midst of his blissful sleep was another call of destiny. Modern psychoanalysis has confirmed that when we are asleep, we travel to realms unavailable to our waking moments. These are the depths of our consciousness, which is but a part of the combined heritage of humanity. To quote the words of Jung, in a dream: "man is no longer a distinct individual but his mind widens out and merges into the mind of the mankind - not the conscious mind, but the unconscious mind of mankind, where we are all the same."

Jolted from his subliminal dream state, the immediate horror of his temporal circumstances made Siddhartha, the future Buddha, realize his own cutting of from this eternal dimension of life. Thus a feeling of rootlessness gripped him and he felt himself disjointed and lonely, even amongst the multitude of those who loved him. The hero's journey almost always begins with such a call.

According to Campbell, the moment the hero is ready for the destined adventure, the proper heralds, or callers to his destiny appear automatically, as if by divine design. We have already noticed the first such herald, namely the old man above. The Buddha later came across three more such signs: a sick man, a dead man and a monk.

His mind greatly agitated by the first three disturbing views, Buddha at last came upon his final call, when he laid his eyes upon the monk. The confident spiritual calm he perceived within the monk
emboldened him to the fact that amidst the inevitability of suffering and distress, there was still ground for sufficient optimism, and salvation.

Thus the first stage of the mythological journey, which is the 'call to adventure,' signifies that destiny has summoned the hero, and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown.

**Crossing of the Threshold (Entering the Unknown)**

*Your real duty
is to go away from the community
to find your bliss.*

*Breaking out
is following your bliss pattern,
quitting the old place,
starting your hero journey,
following your bliss.*

*You throw off yesterday
as the snake sheds its skin.*

*Its by going down into the abyss
that we recover the treasures of life.*

The hero feels off-center, and when one is off-center, it's time to go. The hero leaves a certain social situation, moves into his own loneliness and finds the jewel. This departure occurs when the hero feels something has been lost and goes to find it. It is the crossing of the threshold into a new life. It is a dangerous adventure, since one is moving out of the known into the unexplored, unknown sphere.

The disenchanted prince Siddhartha believed that he was setting out on an exciting adventure. He felt the lure of the 'wide open' road, and the shining, perfect state of 'homelessness.'

But even then, it was not easy enough for him to leave behind the structured space of his home for the untamed forests. Texts mention that before finally leaving his palace, he could not resist the temptation to take a last peek at his wife and son sleeping upstairs. But his resolve was strong enough to bear the emotional brunt of the separation. Not looking back again, he went directly to his destined quest.

**Trials and Tribulations of the Journey**

When he set about on his journey, the Buddha did not know what lay in store for him. What he did know was that:

*The goal of life
is to make your heartbeat
match the beat of the universe,
to match your nature with Nature.*

The joy of the hero's adventure lies in exploring the unknown, through which nature unfolds and reveals its hidden treasures. The Buddha too experimented with various unexplored avenues, before coming to
the ultimate spiritual realization.

He first tried asceticism. Since he believed his disillusionment to stem from the cravings of his body, his first reaction was to negate it totally, even to the extent that he stopped eating. Consequently, his bones stuck out like a row of spindles, and when he touched his stomach, he could almost feel his spine. His hair fell out and his skin became withered. But all this was in vain. However severe his austerities, perhaps even because of them, the body still clamored for attention, and he was still plagued by lust and craving. In fact, he seemed more conscious of himself than ever. Finally, Buddha had to face the fact that asceticism had failed to redeem him. All he had achieved after this heroic assault upon his body was a prominent rib cage, and a dangerously weakened physique.

Nevertheless, Buddha was still optimistic. He was certain that it was possible for human beings to reach the final liberation of enlightenment. And at that very moment, when he seemed to have come to a dead end, the beginning of a new solution declared itself to him. He realized that instead of torturing our reluctant selves into the final release, we might be able to achieve it effortlessly and spontaneously, as Campbell says:

What you have to do, 
you have to do with play.

Opportunities
to find deeper powers
within ourselves
come when life
seems most challenging.

This was a momentous event in Buddha's journey towards herohood. Rather than relying upon external discourses or props, he awakened to the fact that he would have to delve into the infinite depths of his own inner being to come up with the Eternal Truth.

Having thus resolved, he accepted the bowl of milk-rice offered to him by Sujata, the milk-maiden.

After eating this nourishing dish, the texts tell us, he strode majestically towards the bodhi tree (tree of life), to make his last bid for liberation.
The tree of life is said to be standing at the axis of the cosmos, and is a common feature of salvation mythology. It is the place where the divine energies pour into the world, where humanity encounters the absolute, and becomes more fully itself. We need only recall the cross of Jesus, which according to Christian legend, stood on the same spot as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. The hero as the incarnation of god is himself the navel or axis of the world, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time. More than a physical point, it is a psychological state which enables us to see the world and ourselves in perfect balance. Without this psychological stability and this correct orientation, enlightenment is not possible.

Hence, seated at the spiritual center of the world, Buddha dived into his own inner universe. As he sat in isolated meditation, the potential hero gave himself to the practice of mindfulness. This practice consists in observing, as a detached observer, all our activities: eating, drinking, chewing, tasting, defecating, walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, waking, speaking, and keeping silent.

He noticed the way ideas coursed through his mind and the constant stream of desires and irritations that could plague him in a brief half hour. He became 'mindful' of the way he responded to a sudden noise or a change in temperature, and saw how quickly even a tiny thing disturbed his peace of mind. This mindfulness was not cultivated in a spirit of neurotic inspection. Buddha had not put his humanity under the microscope in this way in order to castigate himself for his 'sins.' The purpose here is not to pounce on our failings, but becoming acquainted with the way human nature works in order to exploit its capacities. He had become convinced that the solution to the problem of suffering lay within himself and deliverance would come from the refinement of his own mundane nature, and so he needed to investigate it, and get to know it objectively. This could be achieved most effectively through extasis, a word that literally means 'to stand outside the self,' and which is the same as the practice of mindfulness.

As Buddha thus recorded his feelings, moment-by-moment, he became aware that the dukkha (suffering) of life was not confined to the major traumas of sickness, old age and death. It happened on a daily, even hourly basis, in all the minor disappointments, rejections, frustrations, and failures that befall us in the course of a single day. True, there was pleasure in life, but once he had subjected this to the merciless scrutiny of mindfulness, he noticed how often our satisfaction meant suffering for others. For example, the prosperity of one person usually depends upon the exclusion of somebody else, or when we get something that makes us happy, we immediately start to worry about losing it.

As Buddha observed the workings of his mind, he realized how one craving after another took possession of his heart. He noticed how human beings were ceaselessly yearning to become something else, go somewhere else, and acquire something they do not have. Blinded in our desires we almost never see things as they are in themselves, but our vision is colored by whether we want them or not, how we can get them, or how they can bring us profit. These petty cravings assail us hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute, so that we know no rest. We are constantly consumed and distracted by the compulsion to become something different than what we are at present.
The world, whose very nature is to change, is constantly determined to become something else,' Buddha concluded. 'It is at the mercy of change, it is only happy when it is caught up in the process of change, but this love of change contains a measure of fear and insecurity, and this fear itself is dukkha.'

This constant changing whirlpool of dynamic flux characterizes our temporal existence and dominates it so thoroughly that we lose touch with the eternal essence of our lives, remaining subsumed only in the fleeting and passing moment of current time. Buddha realized that he just had to find that essential link in his inner being, which bound the transient to the eternal. Our existence is defined by our mortal self, and also an immortal divine spark underlying it. When we have found the bridge that links the two, we have attained salvation.

Brooding in this manner, Buddha finally was on the verge of enlightenment, when he was confronted by Mara, Buddha's shadow self, or the residual forces within him which still clung to the old ideals he was trying to transcend. Mara came out decked like a Chakravartin (World Ruler), seated on an elephant, and accompanied by a large army.

Mara's name means delusion. He symbolizes the ignorance which holds us back from enlightenment.

As a Chakravartin, he could only envisage a victory achieved by physical force. Mara thus was convinced that the spiritual throne, where Buddha was sitting, belonged rightfully to him. Accordingly he challenged Buddha to vacate the seat. But the Buddha only moved his hand to touch the ground with his fingertips, and thus bid the goddess Earth to bear witness to his right to be sitting where he was. She did so with a hundred thousand roars, so that the elephant of the antagonist fell upon its knees in obeisance to the rightful owner of the throne. The army was immediately dispersed and Mara vanquished.

The earth-witnessing posture, which shows Buddha touching the ground with his right hand is a favorite icon in Buddhist art.
It not only symbolizes his rejection of Mara's sterile machismo, but also emphasizes the profound point that it is the Buddha who is a true Chakravartin, since it is through the heart that a lasting empire is won, and not through the sword.

**Attainment of Enlightenment**

Having thus overcome Mara, Gautama crossed the final obstruction to his enlightenment, and won over to Buddhahood. He called this blissful state of immeasurable peace 'Nirvana.' Nirvana literally means blowing out or snuffing out (as a flame).

But Nirvana did not mean personal extinction: what had been snuffed out was not Gautama's personality, but the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion, which were once the basic impulses governing his behavior. Through his practice of mindfulness, Gautama had come to the conclusion that it was these three negative traits that were at the root of all suffering in the world.

The extinguishing of a flame is invariably followed by a certain coolness. It was this coolness that descended into Gautama's heart and permeated his each and every core. The permanent retention of this feeling is Nirvana, which is similar to the cooling experienced when recovering from a fever. Indeed in Buddha's time, the related adjective 'nirvuta,' was a term in daily use to describe a convalescent.

**Return of the Hero**

Having attained enlightenment, the hero-quest has been accomplished. The adventurer now has to decide what to do with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round or cycle of his adventure requires that he now start the process of bringing back to humanity the boon of illumination granted to him. This is the call which the mythical hero often refuses. The Buddha too doubted whether his message of realization could be communicated at all. It is in this context that he is given the title of Shakyamuni. Shakya derives from the fact that he was a descendant of the Shakya clan, and muni is a Sanskrit word for silent. The message here is that Nirvana is something that could not be described in words.

The Buddha further thought that: 'If I taught the Dharma, people would not understand it and that would be exhausting and disappointing for me.'
But failing to heed the call to return is not fulfilling the complete requirements of the heroic cycle. It is a part of the hero's evolutionary destiny to knit together the world of higher spiritual bliss with the mundane world of everyday existence, as he had bridged together transient time and eternity.

At this crucial moment of uncertainty, the god Brahma intervened. Like Mara, he too was a projection of Buddha's subconscious mind, the only difference being that he was a positive projection.

Brahma requested Buddha to 'look down at the human race which is drowning in pain and to travel far and wide to save the world.' There was no way in which the compassionate Buddha could refuse this call. He understood that staying locked away in his personal Nirvana would be a negation of all that he had achieved, it would be like entering a new kind of pleasure palace, such as that of his father which he had left behind a long time back. The Buddha thus carefully listened to Brahma and gazed upon the world with his eyes full of compassion, realizing that the gates of Nirvana were wide open for all, and he was the destined instrument to lead humanity it.

The Buddha spent the next forty-five years of his life tramping tirelessly through the cities and towns of Northern India. Indeed there were no limits to his compassionate offensive.

**Conclusion**

The essential message of Buddha's life is that each of us (irrespective of sex or creed) is capable and deserving of Nirvana, having a potential Buddha hidden in us. Buddha was born an ordinary mortal. His path to fulfillment was not smooth and uneventful. Rather it was a journey full of exciting experiences and mistakes made. He learned from each of his mistakes, making it a springboard for all future, and finally the ultimate success. The day we realize and awaken the Buddha within, that would be our own Nirvana, which though personal, would bind us to all humanity like never before.

**References and Further Reading**


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