

The Buddha

The Legend of the Buddha

Sources

The centrepiece of the legend of the Buddha is the story of the Buddha's life from his conception to the events of his awakening and his first teaching. This narrative must be accounted one of the great stories of the world. Part of the common heritage of Buddhism, it is known throughout Asia wherever Buddhism has taken root.

The core of this story and not a few of its details are already found in the Sūtra and Vinaya collections of early Buddhist texts.

In literary works and in sculptural reliefs that date from two or three centuries later, we find these details embellished and woven together to form a more sustained narrative.

The classical literary tellings of the story are found in Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahāvastu* ('Great Story', first century CE), the *Lalitavistara* ('Graceful Description', first century CE), in Aśvaghosa's poem the *Buddhacarita* ('Acts of the Buddha', second century CE), and in the Pali *Nidānakathā* ('Introductory Tale', second or third century CE), which forms an introduction to the commentary on the *Jātaka*, a collection of stories of the Buddha's previous births.

New narratives of the life of the Buddha have continued to be produced down to modern times.

Tibetan tradition structures the story of the Buddha's life around twelve acts performed by all buddhas, while Theravādin sources draw up a rather longer list of thirty features that are the rule (*dhammatā*) for the lives of all buddhas.

The substance of these two lists is already found in the oldest tellings of the story. What follows is in effect the story of these twelve acts and (most of) the thirty features, told with a bias to how they are recounted in the early discourses of the Buddha and Pali sources, together with some comments aimed at providing a historical perspective on the development of the story.

The Legend

The Buddhist and general Indian world-view is that all sentient beings are subject to rebirth: all beings are born, live, die, and are reborn again and again in a variety of different circumstances. This process knows no definite beginning and, ordinarily, no definite end.

The being who becomes a buddha, like any other being, has known countless previous lives—as a human being, an animal, and a god. An old tradition tells us that the life before the one in which the state of buddhahood is reached is always spent as a 'god' (*deva*) in the heaven of the Contented (Tusita/Tusita). Here the bodhisattva (Pali *bodhisatta*)—the being intent on awakening—dwells awaiting the appropriate time to take a human birth and become a buddha.

1. Dwelling in the Tusita Heaven

Dwelling in the Tusita heaven is the first of the twelve acts, but how does the bodhisattva come to be dwelling here? The answer, in short, is that it is as a result of having practised 'the perfections' (*pāramitā/pāramī*) over many, many lifetimes.

Long ago, in fact incalculable numbers of aeons ago, there lived an ascetic called Sumedha (or Megha by some) who encountered a former buddha, the Buddha Dīpamkara. This meeting affected Sumedha in such a way that he too aspired to becoming a buddha. What impressed Sumedha was Dīpamkara's very presence and a sense of his infinite wisdom and compassion, such that he resolved that he would do whatever was necessary to cultivate and perfect these qualities in himself.

Sumedha thus set out on the path of the cultivation of the ten 'perfections': generosity, morality, desirelessness, vigour, wisdom, patience, truthfulness, resolve, loving kindness, and equanimity. In undertaking the cultivation of these perfections Sumedha became a bodhisattva, a being intent on and destined for buddhahood, and it is the life in which he becomes the Buddha Gautama some time in the fifth century BCE that represents the fruition of that distant aspiration.

Many *jātakas*—'[tales] of the [previous] births [of the Bodhisattva]—recount how the Bodhisattva gradually developed the 'perfections'. Such stories, like the story of the Buddha's life, are deeply embedded in Buddhist culture and serve to emphasize how, for the Buddhist, the being who dwells in Tusita as one intent on buddhahood is a being of the profoundest spiritual qualities.

The appearance of such a being in the world may not be unique, but is nevertheless a rare and special circumstance, for a buddha only appears in the world when the teachings of a previous buddha have been lost and when beings will be receptive to his message.

2. Descent from Tusita

So it is said that surveying the world from Tusita the Bodhisattva saw that the time had come for him to take a human birth and at last become a buddha; he saw that the 'Middle Country' of the great continent of Jambudvīpa (India) was the place in which to take birth, for its inhabitants would be receptive to his message.

3. Entering the Mother's Womb

The Bodhisattva was conceived on the full moon night of Āsādḥa (July); that night his mother, Mahāmāyā, dreamt that a white elephant carrying a white lotus in its trunk came and entered her womb. The second and third acts, descent from Tusita and entering his mother's womb, had been accomplished.

Māyā carried the Bodhisattva in her womb for precisely ten lunar months. Then on the full moon of Vaiśākha (May), passing by the Lumbinī grove on her way to her home town, she was captivated by the beauty of the flowering *śāla* trees and stepped down from her palanquin to walk amongst the trees in the grove.

4. The Bodhisattva's Birth

As she reached for a branch of a *śāla* tree, which bent itself down to meet her hand, the pangs of birth came upon her. Thus, 'while other women give birth sitting or lying down', the Bodhisattva's mother was delivered of her child while standing and holding on to the branch of a *śāla* tree. As soon as the Bodhisattva was born he took seven steps to the north and proclaimed, 'I am chief in the world, I am best in the world, I am first in the world. This is my last birth. There will be no further rebirth.'

Such is the legend of the Bodhisattva's birth, the fourth act. By the middle of the third century BCE, a site reckoned to be the place of his birth had become a centre of pilgrimage, and the great Mauryan emperor Aśoka—or, as he preferred to call himself, Piyadassi Beloved of the Gods—whose empire extended across virtually the entire Indian sub-continent, had inscribed on a pillar at Lumbinī:

When King Piyadassi, Beloved of the Gods, had been anointed twenty years, he himself came and worshipped [here], because this is where the Buddha, sage of the Śākya, was born (Thomas, *Life of the Buddha*, 18).

The Bodhisattva was thus born among the Śākya people into a *ksatriya* family whose name was Gautama. Seven days after his birth his mother died and was reborn in the Tusita heaven. The child was named Siddhārtha—'he whose purpose is accomplished'.

Despite the strange and marvellous circumstances of his birth, as he grew up the child appears to have forgotten he was the Bodhisattva: he had no memory of his dwelling in Tusita or any of his other previous births. However, certain predictions of his future destiny were made to his father, Śuddhodana.

Soon after his birth, the infant Bodhisattva was examined by brahmin specialists in 'the thirty-two marks of the great man' (*mahāpurusa-laksana/mahāpurisa-lakkhana*). This notion may be of some antiquity in Indian tradition.

These marks take the form of signs on the body that indicate that the possessor is a Great Man. Such marks may not be visible to the ordinary eye, but it is said that certain brahmins kept the knowledge that was capable of interpreting these marks.

According to Buddhist tradition two destinies are open to one who possesses these marks in full: either he will become a great 'wheel-turning' (*cakra-vartin/cakka-vattin*) king ruling the four quarters of the earth in perfect justice, or he will become a buddha.

5. The Bodhisattva's Enjoyment of Proficiency in Worldly Skills and Sensuality

On hearing that the brahmins had pronounced his son was one who possessed the thirty-two marks, Śuddhodana determined that his son should become a wheel-turning king. To this end he arranged matters that Siddhārtha should have no occasion to become unhappy and disillusioned with his life at home: he would be sheltered from all things unpleasant and ugly such as old age, sickness, and death; whatever he wanted to make him happy, that he should have.

In this way Śuddhodana hoped that he might prevent Siddhārtha from renouncing his home-life for the life of a wandering ascetic and thus assure that he became not a buddha but a wheel-turning king. We are told that Siddhārtha married a young and beautiful wife, Yaśodharā, and had a son, Rāhula, by her.

All this relates to the fifth of the twelve acts, the Bodhisattva's enjoyment of proficiency in worldly skills and sensuality. The oldest sources say virtually nothing of the Bodhisattva's life before the time he left home. They indicate that he did indeed have a wife and son, but apart from that all we have is a stock description of a life of luxury enjoyed by the very wealthy and privileged placed into the mouth of the Buddha himself:

I was delicate, most delicate, supremely delicate. Lotus pools were made for me at my father's house solely for my use; in one blue lotuses flowered, in another white, and in another red. I used no sandal wood that was not from Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments and cloak were all of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night so that I would not be troubled by cold or heat, dust or grit or dew . . . Yet even while I possessed such fortune and luxury, I thought, 'When an unthinking, ordinary person who is himself subject to ageing, sickness, and death, who is not beyond ageing, sickness, and death, sees another who is old, sick or dead, he is shocked, disturbed, and disgusted, forgetting his own condition. I too am subject to ageing, sickness, and death, not beyond ageing, sickness, and death, and that I should see another who is old, sick or dead and be shocked, disturbed, and disgusted — this is not fitting.' As I reflected thus, the conceit of youth, health, and life entirely left me (*Anguttara Nikāya* i. 145-6).

6. Disenchantment with His Life of Pleasure

This brings us straight to the sixth act, disenchantment with his life of pleasure. In the developed account this experience of disenchantment with the world is related in terms of the story of the Bodhisattva's rides with his charioteer. As he leaves the confines of his luxurious apartments, he encounters for the first time in his life a decrepit old man, a severely ill man, and a corpse being carried to the funeral pyre by mourners. The experience is traumatic, and when he then sees a wandering ascetic with serene and composed features, Gautama resolves that he will leave his home and take up the life of a wandering ascetic himself.

7. The Bodhisattva's 'Great Going Forth'

The Bodhisattva's 'great going forth' (*mahāpravrajyā/mahāpabbajjā*), the seventh act, took place on the night of the Āsādhā full moon.

Accompanied by his charioteer, Channa, he went forth on his horse, Kanthaka. According to traditional reckoning he was then 29 and this was the beginning of a six-year quest for awakening.

During these six years he first spent time with and practised the systems of meditation taught by Ārāda Kālāma (Pali Ālāra Kālāma) and then Udraka Rāmaputra (Pali Uddaka Rāmaputta). Although he mastered their respective systems, he felt that here he had not found any real answer to the problem of human suffering.

8. The Practice of Severe Austerities

So next, in the company of five other wandering ascetics, he turned to the practice of severe austerities. The old texts preserve a hauntingly vivid description of the results of this practice, the eighth act:

My body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed stems of creepers or bamboo; my backside became like a buffalo's hoof; my backbone, bent or straight, was like corded beads; my jutting and broken ribs were like the jutting and broken rafters of an old house; the gleam of my eyes sunk deep in their sockets was like the gleam of water seen deep down at the bottom of a deep well (*Majjhima Nikāya* i. 80, 245).

But by his gruelling penance he again felt he had not found what he was searching for. Then he recalled an experience from his youth. One day seated quietly beneath the shade of a rose-apple tree his mind had settled into a state of deep calm and peace. Buddhist tradition calls this state the first 'meditation' or *dhyāna* (Pali *jhāna*).

According to the later Buddhist understanding, this state is the gateway to a state of perfect mental calm and equilibrium known as the fourth *dhyāna*. As he reflected, it came to the Bodhisattva that it was by letting the mind settle in this state of peace that he might come to find what he was looking for. This required that he nourish his body and regain his strength. His five companions thought he had turned away from the quest and left him to his own devices.

In the full legend this is the occasion of the young woman Sujātā's (or, according to some, Nandabalā's) offering of milk-rice to the Bodhisattva.

9. The Defeat of Māra

Now nourished, he seated himself beneath an *aśvattha* or pīpal tree (*ficus religiosa*), henceforth to be known as 'the tree of awakening' or Bodhi-tree. It was once more the night of the Vaiśākha full moon and he made a final resolve: 'Let only skin, sinew and bone remain, let the flesh and blood dry in my body, but I will not give up this seat without attaining complete awakening' (*Jātaka* i. 71). The gods from many different world-systems gathered around the tree sensing that something momentous was about to happen.

Again the oldest accounts describe the gaining of awakening in generally sober psychological terms, most often by reference to the successive practice of the four *dhyānas* and the gaining of three 'knowledges', culminating in the knowledge of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation—what come to be known as 'the four noble truths'; the awakening is also described in terms of gaining insight into the causal chain of 'dependent arising' (*Majjhima Nikāya* i.21-3; *Dīgha Nikāya* ii. 30-35; *Majjhima Nikāya* i. 167; *Samyutta Nikāya* ii. 104-6)

These are classic elements of Buddhist thought. Perhaps because they do not exactly make for a good story, the later legend of the Buddha recounts the awakening in terms of the story of the Bodhisattva's encounter with Māra. This is a story rather more vivid and immediately accessible than the abstract technical concepts of Buddhist meditation theory.

Māra is a being who in certain respects is like the Satan of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. His name means 'bringer of death' and his most common epithet is 'the Bad One' (*pāpīyāms/pāpimant*). Māra is not so much a personification of evil as of the terrible hold which the world—in particular the world of the senses—can have on the mind. Māra is the power of all kinds of experience to seduce and ensnare the unwary mind; seduced by Mara one remains lost in the enchantment of the world and fails to find the path that leads through to the cessation of suffering.

So as the Bodhisattva sat beneath the tree firm in his resolve, Māra, mounted on his great elephant, approached. He came accompanied by his armies: desire, aversion, hunger and thirst, craving, tiredness and sleepiness, fear, and doubt. His one purpose was to break the Bodhisattva's resolve and shift him from his seat beneath the pīpal tree.

The gods who had gathered around the tree in anticipation of the Bodhisattva's awakening fled at the sight of Māra's approaching armies, and the Bodhisattva was left to face Māra and his armies alone.

Some relate how at this point the beautiful daughters of Māra came before the Bodhisattva and tested his commitment to his purpose by offering themselves to him. But the Bodhisattva was unmoved. Māra then sent various storms against him. When this too failed, Māra approached to claim the Bodhisattva's seat directly. He asked him by what right he sat there beneath the tree. The Bodhisattva replied that it was by right of having practised the perfections over countless aeons. Māra replied that he had done likewise and, what was more, he had witnesses to prove it: all his armies would vouch for him, but who would vouch for the Bodhisattva?

10. The Attainment of Complete Awakening

The Bodhisattva then lifted his right hand and touched the ground calling on the very earth as his witness. This is the 'earth-touching gesture' (*bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā*) depicted in so many statues of the Buddha through the ages. It signals the defeat of Māra and the Buddha's awakening. As the Buddha touched the earth Māra tumbled from his elephant and his armies fled in disarray. With the ninth and tenth acts, the defeat of Māra and the attainment of complete awakening, Siddhārtha had accomplished his goal.

The legend of the Buddha is dense and rich at this point and we must pass over many of its details. But according to tradition the Buddha spent as many as seven weeks seated beneath and in the vicinity of the Bodhi-tree enjoying the bliss of emancipation.

Once a great storm arose as the Buddha was seated in meditation and a Nāga, a great serpent, came and spread its hood over the Buddha to protect him. Again this scene is often depicted, especially in images of Cambodian provenance.

The Buddha had achieved his purpose; he had come to an understanding of suffering, and had realized the cessation of suffering. In Buddhist terms, seated beneath the tree he had a direct experience of 'the unconditioned', 'the transcendent', 'the deathless', nirvāna (Pali *nibbāna*); he had come to know directly the deep and underlying way of things that is referred to in India as Dharma (Pali *dhamma*).

It is said that at that point his mind inclined not to teach:

This Dharma that I have found is profound, hard to see, hard to understand; it is peaceful, sublime, beyond the sphere of mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation takes delight in attachment, is delighted by attachment, rejoices in attachment and as such it is hard for them to see this truth, namely . . . nirvāna (*Majjhima Nikāya* i. 167).

Even the oldest tradition seems to know the story of how the great god, the Brahmā called Sahampati, or 'mighty lord', came then and stood before the Buddha and requested him to teach. The implications of this story are various. Sometimes it is suggested that it has been created as a device to show that even the gods already recognized at that time in India acknowledge the Buddha's superiority.

But there are perhaps other meanings. There are reasons for thinking that the realm of Brahmā is associated with compassion in early Buddhist thought.

There is also a strong Buddhist tradition that the teaching should only be given to those who ask and thereby show their willingness to hear receptively. Thus even today, in certain traditions of Buddhism, when a layman makes a formal request to a Buddhist monk to teach Dharma he consciously repeats Brahmā's original request by using the very words of the ancient formula.

Then the Brahmā Sahampati, lord of the world, with joined palms requested a boon: There are beings here with but little dust in their eyes. Pray teach Dharma out of compassion for them (cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* i. 168).

11. "Setting in Motion" or "Turning the Wheel of Dharma"

In a deer park outside Benares the Buddha approached the five who had been his companions when he practised austerities and gave them instruction in the path to the cessation of suffering that he had discovered.

In this way he performed a buddha's eleventh act: 'setting in motion' or 'turning the wheel of Dharma' (*dharma-cakra-pravartana/dhamma-cakka-ppavattana*), and soon, we are told, there were six *arhats* in the world—six in the world who had cultivated the path to the cessation of suffering and realized the unconditioned.

For the Buddha this was the beginning of a life of teaching that lasted some forty-five years. Many stories and legends are recounted of the Buddha's teaching career.

Indeed, fourteen of the thirty features given in the Pali sources as the rule for all buddhas relate to it. To a large extent these incidents are preserved by the earlier tradition in no systematic order, and it is left to later tradition to organize them into a sequential narrative.

Most of these legends must be passed over here but it is worth just mentioning some since they form part of the common heritage of Buddhism and are again and again alluded to by later tradition in literary texts and in paintings and stone relief.

There is the story of how the Buddha gained his two greatest disciples, the monks Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana; of how the monk Ānanda came to be his attendant; of how the Buddha performed the extraordinary 'miracle of the pairs', causing fire and water to issue from every pore of his body, and then ascended to the heaven of the 'Thirty-Three Gods' to give his profoundest teachings to his reborn mother. There is the story of the quarrelling monks at Kauśāmbī and of how the Buddha retired to the Pārileyyaka forest where he was attended by a lone elephant who had grown weary of the herd, of how a monkey came to the Buddha and offered him honey. There is the story of the dispute with his cousin Devadatta, who attempted to kill him by releasing a rogue elephant which the Buddha subdued by the strength of his 'loving kindness' (*maitrī/mettā*).

It is one of the great emphases of Buddhist teaching that the things of the world are impermanent and unreliable. To the extent that the Buddha is of the world then he is no exception.

12. The Buddha's Death

There is a majestic and poignant account of the Buddha's last days preserved in the ancient canon under the title of 'the great discourse of the final passing' (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*). According to tradition it was some time in his eighty-first year that the Buddha fell ill:

I am now grown old, Ānanda, and full of years; my journey is done and I have reached my sum of days; I am turning eighty years of age. And just as a worn out cart is kept going with the help of repairs, so it seems is the Tathāgata's body kept going with repairs (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii. 100).

As the Buddha lay dying between two blossoming śāla trees, it is related how the monk Ānanda, who unlike many of his other disciples had not achieved the state of arhatship or perfection, lent against a door and wept. Then the Buddha asked for him:

Enough, Ānanda, do not sorrow, do not lament. Have I not formerly explained that it is the nature of things that we must be divided, separated, and parted from all that is beloved and dear? How could it be, Ānanda, that what has been born and come into being, that what is compounded and subject to decay, should not decay? It is not possible (*Dīgha Nikāya* ii. 144).

The Buddha's death constituted his 'full going out' (*parinirvāna/parinibbāna*), the twelfth and final act of all buddhas.

Before his death the Buddha had given instructions that his remains should be treated like those of a wheel-turning monarch and enshrined in a stūpa where four roads meet. After the Buddha's body had been cremated, various messengers arrived from districts in northern India each demanding a share of his relics. The relics were thus divided into eight parts and eight different stūpas were built over them.

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