

The Buddha

In This Chapter

The problems in uncovering traces of the “historical Buddha” are similar to those faced in the search for the “historical Jesus.” While the personality of the founders dominates both religions, relatively little is known about their lives. The earliest sources give us snapshots of the Buddha throughout his career: as child prodigy, family man, student of yoga, philosopher, teacher, and miracle-worker, but there is no biographical narrative that links all of these phases together. Moreover, the earliest texts tend to dwell on certain incidents in the Buddha’s life—such as his enlightenment and death—and give little information about others. In the centuries following the Buddha’s death, a standard biography was synthesized from the various fragments and stories in circulation, and preserved in literary compositions of high quality. Even the earliest of these accounts are highly embellished and contain hagiographic elements which obscure the historical reality.

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The Buddha

“Buddha” is not a personal name, but a Sanskrit word meaning “one who has awakened” or “one who has woken up.” In Buddhism, it is a title given to those enlightened individuals who have fully attained the goal of the religious life. In addition to “the Buddha,” such individuals may also be referred to by their followers in other ways, for example as the Bhagavat, or “Lord.” Naturally these titles only apply once the individual has achieved the goal, and before then they are known by another term, namely bodhisattva (Pāli bodhisatta). Literally this means an “enlightenment being,” in the sense of someone “bound for enlightenment,” or a “Buddha in training.” While not particularly important in early Buddhism, the term “bodhisattva” became extremely important later on in the movement known as the Mahāyāna which arose a few centuries after the Buddha’s death.

The person we refer to as the Buddha was born just inside the borders of Nepal in a region known as the Terai lowlands. In common with Indian custom he had both a personal name and a clan name. His personal name was Siddhārtha (Pāli Siddhattha) and his clan name was Gautama (Pāli Gotama). The people he came from were known as the Śākyas, and for this reason the Buddha is often referred to as Śākyamuni, meaning “the sage of the Śākyas.” We cannot say exactly when the Buddha was born, since the chronology of the period has yet to be firmly established. Indeed, it is only in the last century or so that archaeologists have discovered concrete proof that the Buddha existed at all. Apart from what the scriptures of Buddhism tell us, there is very little independent evidence of the Buddha’s life, and few artefacts survive from the period when he lived and taught.

Various dates for the Buddha’s life have been proposed by scholars. Commonly, he is said to have

lived from 566–486 BCE, or from 583–483 B.C.E. The most recent research, however, suggests that these dates are too early and that the Buddha may have lived closer to our own time, perhaps from 490–410 B.C.E., or 480–400 B.C.E. Chronological precision is not really possible since due to the nature of the sources all dates from this period are accurate only to plus or minus ten years.

Buddhist sources tell us that the Buddha came from a royal lineage, and describe the pomp and ceremony of his father's court at great length. This is likely to be something of an exaggeration, since the political system in existence among the Śākya was not kingship but republicanism. The Buddha's father was most likely the leader of a tribal confederation which decided its affairs in a council of elders. However, the Buddha would very probably have had a privileged aristocratic upbringing, and have benefited from a traditional education studying subjects such as religious law and custom (dharmaśāstra), statecraft, grammar, logic, and other arts and sciences. As a member of the kṣatriya or warrior caste, the second of the four castes, the Buddha would have been expected to lead a practical life as a man of action, either as a warrior or political leader like his father. The Buddha would thus have been an urbane and educated young man familiar with the customs and manners of the aristocracy and equipped by his upbringing to mingle comfortably with the kings and courtiers he would encounter later on his travels as a wandering teacher. This, along with his own personal charisma, would have a considerable bearing on the spread and reception of the Buddha's teachings during his lifetime.

The Buddha's Life in a Nutshell

The traditional accounts of the Buddha's life give us few facts on which to construct a

biography, but one widely-accepted chronology of events would be as follows. He was born at a place called Lumbinī in Nepal, and at sixteen married Yaśodharā, who bore him a son called Rāhula (“Fetter”). Some sources say his son was born soon after the marriage, while others suggest his birth came much later at the age of twenty-nine shortly before Siddhārtha renounced the world and became a wandering student seeking religious knowledge. Six years after embarking on this quest he obtained the awakening he sought, and was henceforth known as the Buddha. For the remainder of his life, a total of forty-five years, he travelled throughout the towns and villages of Northeast India giving religious teachings. At the age of eighty he succumbed to illness and passed away into the state of nirvana from which he would never more be reborn.

The few brief facts mentioned in the text box are the kernel of a story which is referred to elusively in the earliest sources in the form of scattered details, but is not found in any one place as a single continuous narrative. For this reason producing a biography of the Buddha is no easy task, and there are large gaps in his life for which little chronological data is available. While the sources preserve his teachings at great length, it does not seem to have occurred to his followers to record the biographical details of his life in detail. The same happened in the case of Jesus, and despite the much greater amount of archaeological and other data available in respect of the ancient Near East it has so far not been possible to recover the “historical Jesus.” Constructing a biography of a person is a relatively recent literary innovation, and an added complication in the case of India is that individuals are thought to have lived many times,

so that the significance of any one life tends to be lost sight of against the background of the others.

Early Scriptures

The teachings of the Buddha are recorded in various collections of scripture known as “canons.” These derive from an oral tradition which goes back to the time of the Buddha, and which was preserved through a method of communal chanting. The only one of these early canons which has been preserved intact is the [Pāli Canon](#), so called because it is written in Pāli, a vernacular language related to Sanskrit and close to that spoken by the Buddha. The Pāli Canon was committed to writing in Sri Lanka in the first century B.C.E. and consists of three divisions known as “baskets” (piṭaka). These are (1) the Discourses (Sūtra Piṭaka) or sermons of the Buddha, which are subdivided into five divisions known as nikāyas; (2) the Monastic Rule (Vinaya Piṭaka), which contains the rules of monastic discipline; and (3) the Scholastic Treatises (Abhidharma Piṭaka), a slightly later compilation of scholastic works.

Our earliest literary information about the Buddha comes from the Pāli Canon (see text box), but the scattered details preserved there were not placed in chronological order until several centuries after the Buddha’s death. The most famous account of the Buddha’s life is the *Buddhacarita* (“The Acts of the Buddha”), an epic poem composed by Aśvagoṣa in the second century C.E. more than half a millennium after the events it narrates had transpired. Literary works of this kind are not of much use to the biographer since they contain much hagiography and constantly refer to supernatural beings and phenomena. Aśvagoṣa’s account is comparatively sober in tone, but from the earliest times the sources had intertwined factual

and religious details to such an extent that it is now almost impossible to separate them. For example, early sources describe the Buddha as performing miracles such as walking on water and transporting himself across rivers with a wave of his hand. His whole personality is surrounded in mystique down to distinctive physical marks which were thought to be found on his body. These, known as the “thirty-two marks of a great man,” are part of ancient Indian lore and are believed to mark out great heroes and sages. Such individuals have a noble bearing, a melodious voice, and many other unusual and distinctive features.

Artists later depict these details on images and statues of the Buddha. Among some of the most common are a distinctive hairstyle, displaying what is referred to as a “snail curl” pattern since it is composed of small clumps which curl to the right, a bit like the spiral pattern on the shell of a snail. Another is the *uṣṇīṣa* or mound on the crown of the head, indicating, perhaps, his great wisdom. A third is a small tuft of hair between the eyes symbolizing his “third eye” or great spiritual insight. Perhaps surprisingly, the physical form of the Buddha is never seen in works of art in the early centuries after his death, perhaps because the artistic imagination needed time to ponder the best way to depict it. Only with the passage of time, and perhaps at the request of lay patrons who felt the need to express their devotion, did artists begin to represent the Buddha in human form (see also “Buddhist Art” in Chapter 5). Although many beautiful images were created, however, it is highly unlikely they bear any close likeness to the historical individual they depict, since they are largely based on stylized conventions of the kind just described.

Sources for the Buddha's life

There is no continuous narrative biography

in the early literature, but the most important sources for details of the Buddha's life include:

- The Pāli Canon. Certain sūtras provide biographical details, such as the Discourse of the Great Decease (Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra) which recounts the last few months of the Buddha's life and confirms he was eighty years old when he died.
- The Mahāvastu ("Great Story"), first century C.E. (anonymous)
- The Lalitavistara ("Graceful Description"), first century C.E. (anonymous)
- The Buddhacarita or "Acts of the Buddha," an epic poem in twenty-eight chapters composed in the second century C.E. by Aśvaghōṣa
- The Nidānakathā ("Introductory Tale"), second or third century C.E. This text forms the introduction to the Jātaka, a collection of popular stories about the Buddha's previous lives.

Other biographies have been composed down the centuries in different languages, including [The Light of Asia](#) (1879) by the English poet Sir Edwin Arnold.

The Buddha's Birth

For Buddhists, four events in the Buddha's life are held to be of key importance: his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death. These are the events around which myths and legends cluster, and they are celebrated in rituals throughout the Buddhist world. The sites at which these events took place, moreover, are regarded as especially important places of pilgrimage. The Buddha's birth, like that of Jesus, was foreshadowed by portents and omens. According to the Nidānakathā,

at his conception Māyā, the Buddha’s mother, dreamt that a white baby elephant had entered her side. This was a very auspicious symbol suggesting that this was no ordinary child. Soothsayers were consulted as to the dream and confirmed that the child would be either a great religious teacher, or a mighty king known as a Cakravartin (“world-ruler”). The tradition in India was for a pregnant woman to return to her relatives to give birth, and as the time drew nigh Māyā set out from Kapilavastu, the Śākyan capital, to return home. Her journey was interrupted for the child arrived on the way and was born in a delightful grove at a remote spot called Lumbinī. The texts report that the [queen gave birth](#) standing up holding onto the branch of a Sāl tree, and that the baby was born from her side without pain. A number of supernatural phenomena accompanied the birth. Many gods had assembled to witness this wonderful event, and they now took the infant, laid him upon the ground, and bathed him in a miraculous shower of water. The ground shook and trembled, registering the importance of what had taken place, and it is said that the new-born baby stood up and took seven steps, looked around in all directions and declared himself to be the “chief of the world.” He also proclaimed that this was to be his last birth. Clearly, the sources intend us to understand that this was no normal child, but one who was fully conscious and aware from the moment he was born. Sources such as the Accariyabbhūtaḍḍhamma Sutta (M.3.123) also claim that the Buddha’s awareness of these events preceded his conception, and that he had been waiting mindfully and aware all along in the Tuṣita heaven for the time to enter his mother’s womb.

The young boy was given the name Siddhārtha (Pāli Siddhattha), which means “one who has achieved his aim.” Amid the celebrations the story takes a darker turn as seven days after his birth

queen Māyā passes away. The Buddha was then raised by his aunt, Prajāpatī, who subsequently married his father. The sources do not dwell on the effect the loss of his mother would have had on the young child, but clearly this early bereavement must have had an psychological impact of some kind. Perhaps it brought home to the Buddha the fragility of human life and the powerlessness of individuals to control the forces which shape their lives. It may have predisposed him to a pessimistic outlook, and to seeing the world as a place of sorrow and pain, although he does not come across as gloomy or morbid by nature. Little information is given in the Pāli Canon about the Buddha's childhood, although we are given to understand that he wanted for nothing and had a very comfortable life as a resident in the three palaces belonging to his father (A.i.145). He wore fine clothes and fragrances, and spent his days listening to music and being ministered to by servant-girls and attendants who were on hand to attend to any requirements. The Buddha is portrayed as quick-witted and with nascent psychic powers and a keen intelligence. Later sources emphasize his father's fear that the prophecy made at his son's birth might come true, and that the Buddha would leave home to become a religious teacher instead of following in footsteps. His overprotective father therefore cosseted and pampered the young Siddhārtha, shielding him from any unpleasantness that might intrude from the world beyond the palace walls.

Renunciation

Siddhārtha's comfortable home life would soon come to an abrupt end. The events which provoked this and propelled him into a new life outside the palace walls, and eventually to his awak-

ening (bodhi), are narrated in the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, one of the few texts to provide a continuous narrative of part of the Buddha's life. This and other early sources give the impression that the Buddha's decision to leave home was premeditated and the result of a growing realization that the realities of sickness, ageing and death were things against which he was powerless. What he sought was nirvana—a state beyond birth and death, a mystical goal which many of his contemporaries also sought under various names and descriptions.

According to the Dīgha Nikāya (2.151) it was at the age of twenty-nine that the Buddha took the momentous decision to leave home. The same text tells us that this pattern is reproduced in the life of all the Buddhas, who all undergo the same critical experiences. A well-known story recounted in both this source and the later Nidānakathā relates the build-up to the decision. The story relates how the Buddha ventured outside his palace on four occasions accompanied by his charioteer. On the first three he visits a park, and his father arranged to have the streets kept clear of disturbing sights such as elderly and sick people, which might provoke a spiritual crisis in his son. Only healthy, smiling, people were permitted to line the thoroughfares. Nevertheless, as luck would have it (or, as later sources explain it, through the intervention of the gods) Siddhārtha was confronted by the sight of an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. Siddhārtha asked his charioteer to explain what had befallen these three individuals, and was thunderstruck when he was told that all humanity was vulnerable to ageing, sickness and death. Hurrying back to the palace he pondered what he had learnt. Deeply disturbed at the transient nature of human existence, he ordered his charioteer to take him out a final time. On this trip he encountered a śramaṇa,

a religious mendicant dressed in an orange robe. Inspired by the thought that he too could embark on a spiritual quest he decided to leave the palace that very night. Taking a last look at his sleeping wife and son he turned his back on family life forever and left to become a homeless wanderer. The Buddha rode out on his white horse, Kanthaka, with his charioteer, Channa, holding onto the tail. In order that its hooves should make no sound which might alert the palace guards, the gods—so the later sources inform us—bore both the horse and rider aloft in the air. Once outside the town, Channa pleaded with the Buddha to let him accompany him into the forest, but the Buddha refused, and horse and charioteer returned home both full of grief at the loss of their master.

The story of the Buddha's renunciation is probably best read as a parable rather than a narrative of historical events. It is unlikely that an



The Great Renunciation: the Buddha leaves home on his horse Kanthaka born aloft by the gods

educated and highly intelligent man like the Buddha would have been unaware of the facts of life, despite his privileged upbringing, and what we see described in the story is more likely a dawning realization about the true nature of the human condition. The palace may represent complacency and self-delusion, and its walls the mental barriers we construct to shield ourselves from unpleasant truths. The Buddha as a young prince was “living in denial,” as we might say today, and the four signs were experiences which challenged the cosy picture of the world he had constructed for himself. Eventually, when reality intruded forcefully in the form of the four signs, the tension became so strong that it provoked a kind of existential crisis which shattered his previous model of the world and launched him into a new and unfamiliar way of life. Experiences of this kind are familiar to everyone: although people no longer travel in chariots, the equivalent of the four signs can still be seen on almost any city journey in the form of hospitals, care homes, cemeteries, and churches, or unpleasant experiences like the sickness and death of family and friends which thrust themselves into our lives and overturn our comfortable equilibrium.

Many characters play a part in the drama of the Buddha’s life.

The following is a cast list showing the names of the main protagonists:

Ānanda	The Buddha’s cousin and personal attendant
Ārāḍa Kālāma	The Buddha’s first teacher
Chandaka	The Buddha’s charioteer

Kanthaka	The Buddha's horse
Māra	The Buddhist devil
Māyā	The Buddha's mother
Prajāpatī	The Buddha's aunt, and Śuddhodhana's second wife
Rāhula	The Buddha's son
Śuddhodhana	The Buddha's father
Udraka Rāmaputra	The Buddha's second teacher
Yaśodharā	The Buddha's wife

Austerities

Now free of family and social obligations, Siddhārtha became a śramaṇa, one of a loose community of homeless mendicants who devoted themselves to self-mortification, the practice of penances, and a range of religious exercises such as yoga and meditation in the hope of attaining mystical knowledge. Siddhārtha was therefore not alone, but a new recruit to an established counter-culture which had existed for many centuries. śramaṇas like Siddhārtha depended on the laity for alms, although many of them wandered far away from towns and villages to live an arduous life of seclusion in the forest.

In the time-honored fashion, Siddhārtha sought out a religious master (guru), turning first to a well-known teacher called Ārāḍa Kālāma who showed him a meditational technique which allowed him to enter a profound state of trance. This state, attained through yogic concentration, was known as the “sphere of nothingness,” and was one in which the mind transcended all thought

producing a sensation of deep spiritual peace. Siddhārtha was an able student and quickly mastered this practice. So impressed was his teacher that he offered to make his student joint leader of the group. Siddhārtha declined, since he felt that he still had not achieved the goal he sought.

Taking leave of Ārāḍa, Siddhārtha turned to a second teacher of yoga by the name of Udraka Rāmaputra, and once again excelled as a student. Now he was able to attain an even loftier state of trance enigmatically known as the “sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.” In this state consciousness becomes so subtle that the mind of the meditator no longer registers even the idea of nothingness. Udraka was so impressed that he offered to exchange places with his student and make Siddhārtha his master, but Siddhartha turned down this offer for the same reasons as before. The problem, as he saw it, was that while the experience of these mystical states was good and valuable as far as it went, it was only a temporary escape from life’s problems. While a person could abide for hours or perhaps days in such a state, enjoying sensations of bliss and deep spiritual peace, the fundamental problems of suffering, old age and death remained unresolved. However, the Buddha did not discard his new-found knowledge, and later on when he formulated a distinctively Buddhist method of meditation he included these two states within it.

The Buddha next turned his attention to an alternative form of spiritual practice, one well established in India, based on subjugating the body by sheer force of will. The belief was that by gaining control over the body one could gain control over all appetites and thereby free oneself from desire. By becoming free of desire no new karma would be produced, and so rebirth in saṃsāra would come to an end. The practices of self-mor-

tification were also thought to generate a form of mystical energy known as tapas (heat) which became the basis of various magical powers when correctly channelled.

The Buddha began by undertaking exercises in breath-control and attempting to suspend the process of respiration for longer and longer periods. Rather than generating spiritual awareness, however, this simply resulted in painful headaches and stomach pains, and the Buddha abandoned the technique. Next he turned his attention to his intake of food, and reduced this to minute amounts,

just a spoonful of bean soup a day. Soon he became painfully thin “with his ribs standing out like the rafters of a tumbledown shack” (M.i.245) and was barely able to maintain the seated meditation posture without falling over. His hair began to fall out and, close to death, he decided this second technique was also a failure and abandoned it.

The Buddha realised that he had taken the path of austerities to its limit: “Whatever recluses (śramaṇas) or brahmins in the past have experienced painful, agonising and intense sensations as the result of their exertions,” he tells us, “this has been the limit, no-one has gone further than I have” (M.i.246). Unfortunately the path had turned out to be a dead-end, and the Buddha now cast around in his mind wondering if there might be another way to reach enlightenment. Reflect-



The Buddha performing austerities. Lahore Museum

ing on his experience this far he may well have contrasted the two earlier phases of his life: as a young man he had enjoyed material comfort and luxury, but this had left him frustrated and unfulfilled. In the second phase, as a śramaṇa in the forest, he had gone to the other extreme and deprived himself of all comforts, pushing his mind and body to their limits in the hope of a spiritual breakthrough that never came. He therefore declared his six-year experiment with self-mortification at an end, and adopted a more balanced and moderate lifestyle. He became convinced that the way forward involved a lifestyle that avoided extremes of all kinds and steered a “middle way” between over-indulgence and extreme self-denial.

Inspired by this new approach the Buddha recalled an incident from his childhood when he had spontaneously entered a state of trance known as the “first dhyāna.” This was a level of trance lower than those he had attained with his two teachers, but which seemed to him to hold greater promise, perhaps because it did not involve the suppression of the intellectual faculties but instead honed them to a new sharpness. At this moment the realisation came to him “that is the path to enlightenment” (M.i.246), and he began to take nourishment once again to build up his strength. When his companions saw the Buddha eating boiled rice and bread they were disgusted and criticized him for living “luxuriously” and abandoning the acetic lifestyle.

Enlightenment

Undeterred, the Buddha returned to the practice of meditation, this time in a more structured programme that involved him in passing through four different dhyānas or levels of trance. One particular night when seated under a large pipal or banyan tree (ficus religiosa) later known as the **Bodhi**

[tree](#), he entered the fourth state of trance, when his mind was most concentrated and purified. In this state he obtained three kinds of “true knowledge.” In the first watch of the night he obtained the power to see back into his past lives and to recall them in all their detail. In the second watch, he attained the ability to see not just his own lives, but the decease and arising of other beings in accordance with their good and bad karma. In the third watch of the night he attained knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, namely “This is suffering ... This is the origin of suffering ... This is the cessation of suffering ... This is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering” (Mi.249). He knew then that all his spiritual defilements (āśrava) such as sensual desire and ignorance had been rooted out and destroyed and that he had achieved his goal. He realized that for him “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, I have done what needed to be done and rebirth is at an end” (M.i.249).

Later accounts of this night take on a more mythological form, in which the Buddha first of all gains victory over Māra, an evil, fallen, divinity not unlike the Christian Satan. Māra is often referred to as the “evil one” (Skt. pāpīyaṃs; Pāli Pāpimant), and his name literally means “death.” Māra personifies all that is negative and opposed to the Buddha’s teachings. Māra and the Buddha were lifelong opponents because the Buddha’s teachings showed the way to liberate humanity from Māra’s power. Despite his best efforts, Māra was never able to do much more than cause mischief because the Buddha was too powerful. The Buddha knew, however, that even he would fall victim to Māra one last time when he eventually faced death.

On the night of his enlightenment, the accounts relate how in an effort to prevent the Buddha achieving enlightenment, Māra approached the seated Buddha with his “army” of evil forces

such as greed, hatred, delusion, hunger and thirst, tiredness, and fear and doubt, hoping to break his resolve. When the Buddha did not flinch Māra adopted an alternative strategy and sent his beautiful daughters—Delight (Ratī), Discontent (Aratī) and Craving (Trṣṇā)—in an attempt to seduce the Buddha and deflect him from his purpose. When the Buddha proved immune to their charms, Māra recalled his daughters and unleashed a barrage of terrible storms and fearful sights, but none of this made any impression on the Buddha. The Buddha then reached out and touched the earth with his right hand, calling upon the earth-goddess to bear witness to his enlightenment. This gesture (mudrā) known as the “[earth-touching gesture](#)” (bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā) or the “conquest of Māra” (māra-vijaya) is one of a number of classic poses that were later incorporated into the stylistic repertoire of Buddhist art. When the Buddha made this gesture the earth trembled, and Māra toppled from his great war-elephant and his forces fled in disarray. The Buddha was now the “enlightened one,” and his victory was complete. It is not hard to see this story as an allegory of the psychological battle the Buddha had fought with the negative forces deep within his own mind. To subdue these dark powers is the supreme challenge, and enlightenment cannot be won without courage and firmness of purpose.

The place where the Buddha achieved enlightenment became known as [Bodhgayā](#). Today the site is marked by the Mahābodhi temple, and is an important center of pilgrimage for Buddhists from all over the world, but in the Buddha’s day it was a remote place and the Buddha spent four weeks there in solitary reflection pondering his future plans. He wondered whether he should take up the career of religious teacher, but at first rejected this option when he reflected on how difficult it would be to communicate the nature of his

achievement and explain to others how to attain it. His thoughts turned to the ease and comfort of a private life free from the demands of students and followers. The texts report that at this point, the gods—alarmed by the prospect of the Buddha not communicating his Dharma (teachings) to anyone—intervened, and the deity Sahampati appealed to the Buddha to proclaim his teachings to the world. Moved by compassion, and realizing that there were individuals who could benefit from hearing his teachings, the Buddha agreed.

The Tale of [Barlaam and Josaphat](#)

Barlaam and Josaphat are two Christian saints venerated in both the Greek and Roman churches who were the protagonists of a popular medieval religious tale. Around a century and a half ago it was discovered that the story is based on the legend of the life of the Buddha. The name Josaphaat is a corruption of the Sanskrit word Bodhisattva, a term applied to the Buddha before he became enlightened.

In the Western version of the tale, Josaphaat is the son of a king, and on his birth a prediction is made that he will either become a great king or renounce the world to follow a religious calling. His father does all he can to prevent his son following a religious vocation, but on a visit outside the palace one day Josaphaat meets Barlaam, an ascetic who gives him religious instruction. Guided by his spiritual mentor Josaphaat renounces the world and becomes a great saint. The story thus parallels the life of Siddhārtha Gautama at various points, although the theology is adapted for a Christian context and the theme concerns the notion of salvation through faith. There are Greek, Georgian, and Arabic translations of the legend, but it became most widely known in Europe through a Latin version in the eleventh and

twelfth centuries. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century numerous vernacular versions appeared and new forms of the story were produced in prose, verse and dramatic form.

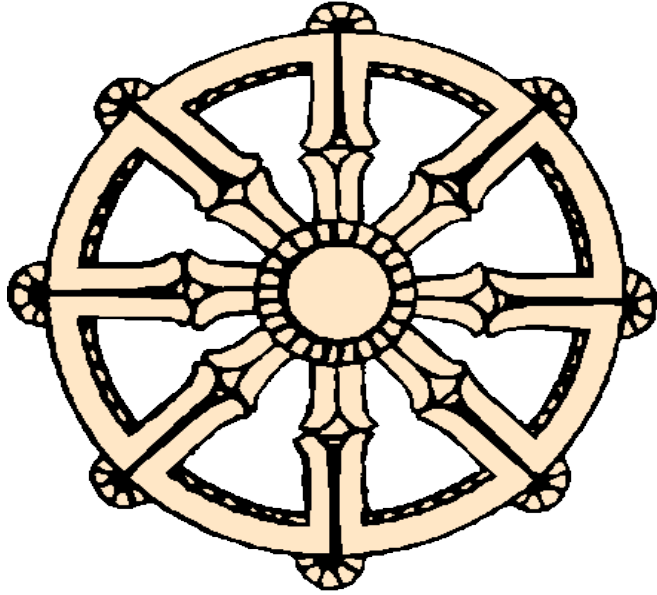
The First Sermon

But who should the Buddha teach? He became aware (so, the texts inform us, by his clairvoyant powers) that his two previous teachers had since passed away, so he set out for the holy city of Benares (now known as Varanasi) on the Ganges, where he knew he would find the five companions who had previously abandoned him when he rejected the practice of austerities. He encountered them in a park set aside for royal deer on the outskirts of Benares. At first they were lukewarm towards him, but soon realized that a profound transformation had taken place in the wandering śramaṇa they had known earlier. The Buddha declared that he was now a Tathāgata (“one who has attained what is really so”) and preached his first sermon, marking the inauguration of his teaching ministry and the beginnings of the religion we now know as Buddhism.

This first sermon is preserved in a scripture called “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma” (Dharmacakra-pravartana Sūtra). This relatively short text contains the essence of Buddhist doctrine, and begins by speaking of the “middle way” the Buddha had found between the extremes of self-indulgence and harsh austerity. It then makes reference to the Four Noble Truths he had perceived on the night of his enlightenment: the truth of suffering, the truth of the arising of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth

of the path that leads to the cessation of suffering (these will be explained in the next chapter).

In Buddhism the wheel is a potent symbol. In



Dharmacakra or “Wheel of the Dharma”

the title of this sermon the Dharma is likened to a wheel because it is without beginning or end, and roams from place to place. The wheel of the Dharma is often depicted with either four or eight spokes, representing the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path (the last of the Noble Truths). In iconography, the Buddha is often shown making a wheel-shaped gesture by touching together the thumb and index finger of his left hand. This is known as the [Dharma-cakra-mudrā](#) (“gesture of the Dharma wheel”) and calls to mind the first sermon.

On hearing the Buddha speak, one of the five mendicants by the name of Kauṇḍinya immediately grasped the essence of the teaching and became a śrotāpanna or “stream-enterer,” a term denoting a relatively advanced stage of spiritual understanding. Kauṇḍinya was said to have at-

tained the “Dharma-eye” and to have been freed from all doubt in the Buddha’s teachings. This act of transmitting the truth from teacher to disciple is also an important part of “turning the wheel,” and on this day the Buddha initiated a lineage of teachers and students that would carry his doctrines to every part of Asia, and eventually the whole world. Over the course of the next week all four of the other mendicants also attained this state as the Buddha gave further teachings. All five accepted him as their teacher and he ordained them as monks (bhikṣu) in a ceremony where he admitted them simply with the words “Come, monk” (ehi bhikṣu). A few weeks later the Buddha delivered a second important sermon on the idea of “no self” (anātman), and on hearing this all five mendicants attained nirvana. Although their understanding was now virtually identical to that of the Buddha they were known not by the title “Buddha” but as arhants (Pāli arahants), meaning “saints” or “worthy ones.” This is because the title of Buddha is reserved for those who discover the path to enlightenment through their own efforts rather than by hearing it from another.

News of the Buddha’s teachings spread quickly, and before long this small group of five arhants had increased to sixty. The Buddha instructed them to spread his teachings out of compassion for the world, just as he had done, thus inaugurating a missionary movement. After the order of monks had been established for five years the Buddha allowed an order of nuns to be founded. At first he was reluctant to permit this, perhaps because it was almost without precedent in India, but on the intercession of his stepmother, Prajāpatī, and his cousin and personal attendant Ānanda, he eventually agreed. Many laymen and women left home and flocked to join these new orders. The male order grew rapidly and flourished, but the female order eventually died out in India and most of

Southeast Asia in the early centuries C.E., although orders of nuns do survive today in East Asia.

Vihāras

The term *vihāra* literally means “dwelling,” one associated particularly with a Buddhist monastery. Originally, when monks and nuns used to wander through the countryside, settling down only during the rainy season, the term was used to designate an individual hut within the rainy season retreat. Later, with the establishment of permanent dwellings for the monks, the term came to indicate an entire monastery. For this reason, it is customary to refer to monasteries by this generic term, although in some countries, such as Thailand, it is reserved for a shrine-hall. In the early period, monks of differing doctrinal affiliations lived side by side in the same *vihāra*. This would typically comprise individual cells arranged around a central courtyard very often enclosing a railed Bodhi Tree, a shrine room and an ambulatory. As times changed, and the needs of the *sangha* began to reflect growing institutionalisation, some *vihāras* became large, complex, and wealthy units with elaborate administrative hierarchies. Some, like Nālandā and Somapuri, developed into universities with many thousands of resident students. The modern Indian state of Bihar takes its name from the Buddhist *vihāras* that were abundant in the region.

The Buddha’s Last Days

The next biographical details we have of the Buddha relate to a time close to the end of his life. The source is the Discourse of the Great Decease (*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*), which recounts events in the months before and leading up to the Buddha’s

death. The text shows us the Buddha as an old man of eighty, in failing health, but determined to continue giving religious teachings to the end. He is still leading an itinerant lifestyle, perhaps on a last journey to a destination which is never disclosed (although the trajectory could suggest he was travelling to his home town in the North). He frequently calls upon his psychic powers to assist him in controlling illness and pain until such time as he is ready to let go. The nature of his medical condition is not made clear, and the Buddha may have been suffering from a variety of ailments. It is often said that the cause of his death was food-poisoning after eating a meal of pork, but the account in the Discourse of the Great Decease shows the Buddha recovering from this, and his death takes place some time later, apparently due to natural causes.

At this point numerous questions arose. What would happen to the sangha after the Buddha died? Who would be his successor? When Ānanda asked him specifically about this, the Buddha replied that he would appoint no successor, since he had never considered himself to be the leader of the sangha. Henceforth, he said, the monks should be self-reliant and hold fast to the Dharma as their island and refuge, and the Vinaya (the monastic rules) as their teacher. The Buddha told his followers to resolve any doubts by checking whatever views they heard against the teachings in the scriptures. This meant there would be no need for a head or patriarch and no central institution charged with determining orthodoxy.

At last the Buddha came to the end of his journey at a remote village by the name of Kuśinagarī, where he lay down between two Sāl trees, the same kind of tree his mother had grasped as she gave birth. The text reports that the trees bloomed, although it was not their season, and that other su-

pernatural phenomena accompanied the Buddha's passing. Numerous gods were said to be in attendance, crowding in to witness the momentous scene. The Buddha instructed that his body should be cremated and his remains placed in a special monument known as a stūpa (see Chapter 5) reserved for the Buddhas and World Rulers (cakravartins). In due course his relics would be divided into eight portions, and a stūpa built for each. The Buddha recommended the practice of pilgrimage both to stūpa and to four of the main sites in his life, those associated with his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death. He then directed some words to Ānanda, who was distraught at the passing of the master he had served for a quarter of a century, predicting that Ānanda, who was not yet an arhant, would become one soon. Then he called the monks together and invited them to ask any final questions they might have. When none were forthcoming, the Buddha uttered his final words: "Conditioned things (saṃskāra) are subject to decay. Strive diligently (to attain perfection)."

The Buddha then passed through several levels of meditative trance, before entering nirvana from the fourth dhyāna. At last he had attained "the deathless" (amṛta), the goal he had abandoned his home to seek, and would never again be reborn.

Key Points You Need to Know

- The main details of the Buddha's life are as follows. His name was Siddhārtha Gautama, and he was an Indian prince of the Śākya clan who was born at Lumbinī in present-day Nepal. He married at sixteen, left home at twenty-nine to seek spiritual knowledge, gained enlightenment at thirty-five, taught for forty-five years, and died aged eighty.
- The Buddha's dates are not known with

certainty. The current scholarly consensus is that he died between 410–400 B.C.E.

- Almost all we know about the Buddha's life comes from Buddhist texts. There is little corroborating historical evidence from other sources until a century and a half after his death. The Buddha's supermundane nature is emphasized from the earliest times, and as time passes, the accounts of his life become increasingly embellished with tales of miraculous events.
- The Buddha was cremated and his relics were divided up into eight portions and distributed among the local rulers.

Additional Material at *Buddhism Online*:
[Self Test Questions](#)

[Class Discussion Questions](#)

[Essay Questions](#)

Further Reading

Chan Koon San. [Buddhist Pilgrimage](#) (Adobe ebook, 3.3mb)

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