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# 1

## WHY WE ARE NOT ENLIGHTENED

### Life of the Buddha up to prelude to the Four Sights

#### 1. WHY STUDY THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA?

##### (a) Vālkali (Vakkali)

Once the Blessed One was staying in the Squirrel Sanctuary of the Bamboo Grove at Rājagṛha (Rājagaha). Now on that occasion the Venerable Vakkali was dwelling in a potter's shed, gravely ill. Then the Venerable Vakkali requested his attendants to convey his respects to the Buddha (since he had come to meet the Buddha):

“The bhikkhu Vakkali is gravely ill. He pays homage to the Blessed One with his head at his feet.”

When the Buddha received the message, he consented by his silence to visit Vakkali.

On seeing the Buddha coming, Vakkali stirred on his bed (out of respect).

[B.] Enough, Vakkali, do not stir on your bed. There are seats ready, I will sit down.

Vakkali, I hope **you are getting better**.

[V.] Venerable Sir, I am not getting better; it is getting worse.

[B.] I hope then, Vakkali, that **you're not troubled by remorse or regret**.

[V.] Venerable Sir, I have quite a lot of remorse and regret.

[B.] I hope, Vakkali, that you have **nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to virtue**.

[V.] I have nothing, Venerable Sir, for which to reproach myself in regard to virtue.

[B.] Then, Vakkali, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?

[V.] For a long time, Venerable Sir, I have wanted to come to see the Blessed One, but I haven't been fit to do so.

[B.] *Enough, Vakkali! Why do you want to see this foul body? **One who sees the Dharma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dharma.***

Then the Buddha instructs Vakkali on the perception of impermanence.

(S 3:119-121; It 91 f.; abridged)

##### (b) Two levels of language

In this Vakkali Sutta, we clearly see that the Buddha, in his admonition to Vālkali, is referring to two levels of language [4:1] in communicating the Dharma to others. In modern terms:

*One who sees the Dharma, sees me.*

**Logos**

The level of the letter: conventional language.

*One who sees me, sees the Dharma.*

**Mythos**

The level of the spirit: ultimate language.

Because **myths** speak of extraordinary events without trying to explain or justify them, there is the wrong opinion that myths are simply unprovable and false stories, and thus they have made the word “myth” a synonym for **fable** (from the Latin *fabula*, which originally has a similar meaning as *mythos*, but today means a fictitious story with a moral). It is important to note the difference between myth and fable in the study of religion.

### (1) Sutras of direct meaning and indirect meaning

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha speaks of the two kinds of sutras, that is, the *nīt'attha* (Skt. *nītārtha*) [ $\sqrt{\text{NĪ}}$ , to infer + *artha/attha* = meaning], “those of direct meaning”, and the *neyy'attha* (Skt. *neyārtha*), “those of indirect meaning” (D 3:127 f.; A 1:60).<sup>1</sup>

The Pali Commentaries illustrate the two kinds of sutras, thus: “A sutta of the form ‘There is a person, O monks’, ‘There are two persons, O monks’, ‘There are three persons, O monks’...etc., is a sutta of **indirect meaning**. Here although the Perfectly Enlightened One speaks of ‘There is one person, O monks’, etc., its sense has to be inferred since there is no person in the absolute sense (*param'atthato*)... One should speak of a sutta of **direct meaning** (as of the form), ‘This is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.’...” (AA 2:118; also AA 1:94, KvuA:JPTS 1889: 34).

The dangers of misquoting the Buddha and the importance of distinguishing these two types of teaching are clearly stated in the Chapter on the Fool (*Bāla, vagga*) of *Āṅguttara Nikāya*:

Monks, **these two misrepresent the Tathāgata**. What two?

One who proclaims, as utterances of the Tathāgata, what he has never uttered, and one who denies what has been uttered by the Tathāgata.

Monks, **these two do not misrepresent the Tathāgata**. What two?

One who denies, as utterance of the Tathāgata, what he has never uttered, and one who proclaims what has uttered by the Tathāgata.

Monks, **these two misrepresent the Tathāgata**. What two?

One who proclaims a discourse of indirect meaning (*neyārtha sūtra/neyy'attha sutta*) as a discourse of direct meaning (*nītārtha sūtra/nīt'attha sutta*); and one who proclaims a discourse of direct meaning as a discourse of indirect meaning.

Monks, **these two do not misrepresent the Tathāgata**. What two?

One who proclaims a discourse of indirect meaning as a discourse of indirect meaning; and one who proclaims a discourse of direct meaning as a discourse of direct meaning.

(A 1:60)

### (2) Teachings in terms of persons and in terms of ideas

The Buddhist Commentaries and Compendia (like the *Nettipakaraṇa*) give a useful classification of the Buddha's teaching method: teaching in terms of **persons** (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*) and teaching in terms of **ideas** (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*) (MA 1:24; PsA 449 where 4 types are given; Nett 164 f.). A teaching in terms of **persons** is this Udāna verse:

I visited all the quarters with my mind  
But found not any dearer than myself;  
Likewise is self dear to everyone  
Who loves himself will never harm another.

(U 47)

In the **Kasī Bhāradvāja Sutta**, the Buddha meets a ploughman and presents the Dharma in terms of **ideas**, that is, agricultural terms:

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<sup>1</sup> See *Abhidharma,kośa* ch. 9, Poussin vol. 9, p. 247 = Pruden 1324 & n43; *Vyākhyā* ad 3:28.

Faith is the seed, discipline the rain,  
Wisdom is my yoke and plough,  
Moral shame the pole, the mind my yoke's tie,  
Mindfulness the ploughshare and goad.

(Sn 77)

Such metaphors bridge **conventional truth** (*sammutti, sacca*) with **ultimate truth** (*param'attha, sacca*), allowing the listener to make a quantum leap from a lower reality of the world to the higher reality of the Dharma (AA 1:95; KvuA 34).<sup>2</sup>

In this connection, the Buddha declares that the Tathāgata is sometimes given the designation (*adhi-vacana*) of **Dharma-body** (*dhamma, kāya*) (Aggañña Sutta, D 3:84).<sup>3</sup> Those who cannot swim need this boat or bridge to reach the other shore. Or at least, they need to be inspired to the spiritual life through stories. As one insightful scholar puts it, “The earth may go around the sun, but stories will continue to refer to the sun rising because this is how we experience it.” (Graeme MacQueen in a personal communication.)

### (c) How to benefit from studying the life of the Buddha

For our present purposes, this should set the spirit with which we look at the life of the Buddha. At least, I hope to approach our study of the Buddha in this spirit. That is to say, as expression of the head (intellectual approach) and as experience of the heart (spiritual approach), as **history** and as **mythology**.

What we cannot convey in words, we need to express in stories and other artistic expressions of our senses. In order to understand and profit from studying the life of the Buddha and his disciples, **we have to think as well as feel** the events and stories we hear.

In speaking of the life of the Buddha, I am speaking about myself, since whatever I speak of is my opinion. And yet, **nothing of what I speak is new or original**: they have been spoken and written by others before me, those who have understood the subject better than I have.

This critical analysis of the Buddha's biography or more correctly **biographies** is useful and important because, like the biographies of other famous religious teachers, they are not written by the founders themselves, but by believers living decades, generations and centuries later. Often enough, such accounts reflect the social conditions and thoughts of the writers' times.

In many ways, too, as you will discover in the course of these lessons, there is nothing new in the Buddha's teaching. Other Buddhas have come before him, and more will come in due course. Yet, the Buddha taught his teachings to serve as **reminders** so that we can work to get out of our sufferings or, at least, we can become better people. Moreover, deep piety often coloured and magnified such biographies so that they grew into epics, reflecting both truth and imagination. All this have two main purposes: education and inspiration.

## 2. HISTORY AND MYTH

### (a) Levels of communication

The Buddha first taught his Dharma to an elite group of people—those who had the time, the inclination and ability to understand the teaching and realize the liberating truth. In due course, his spiritual

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<sup>2</sup> See also Buddhadasa, *Two Kinds of Language*. Tr. Bhikkhu Ariyananda. Repr. “Everyday Language and Dhamma Language” in Donald K. Swearer, 1971b. Bangkok: Sublime Life Mission, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> See Bhikkhu Bodhi's note, S:B 1081 n168.

community grew and attracted all those who hear about him or his teaching. As Buddhism grows into a popular religion, the direct bright light of the Dharma has to be shaded and dimmed so that the less ready and more worldly masses could understand and benefit from the Dharma.

**Story-telling** has always been an important means of **entertainment and education** in Indian society (indeed, in all ancient civilizations). In most cases, there is almost no dividing line between entertainment and education in such traditional story-telling (which include a wide range of visual arts and performing arts). The most palpable and famous examples of such a visual aids are the carvings and bas-reliefs of the ancient Indian stupas (at Sāñcī, Bhārhut, etc.).

In Buddhist literature, stories fall under the category of “conventional truth” (*saṃvṛti, satya/sammuti-sacca*), serving as a conveyance for the more abstruse “ultimate truth” (*paramârtha, satya/paramattha-sacca*). As such, we find in the Buddha biographies, many aspects of his teachings have been dramatized into actual human actions. This presentation is “person-based” (*puggalâdhiṭṭhāna*).

This artistic licence is founded on statements by the Buddha himself, such as: “As I say, so I do; as I do, so I say.” (*yathā, vādī tathā, kārī yathā, kārī tathā, vādī*, A 2:24 = It 122). The three great evils of life—decay, disease and death—for example, are graphically represented as actual events involving an aged person, a sick man, a dead man which Prince Siddhârtha personally encounters.

This is not to say that all the events of the Buddha life are not historical. He had certainly personally experienced most of the events that later Buddhist story-tellers introduced. However, since **the Buddha placed the Dharma above himself**, as attested in the Gāraṇa Sutta (S 1:139 = A 2:20), he did not give much personal details of his personal life. As such, it is left to later commentators and story-tellers to use the Buddha himself as a medium of conveying the Dharma to the masses. [4:3]

As you listen to the life of the Buddha, **both as history and as myth**, I hope you will be able to identify with some if not all of the wonderful aspects of the greatest events to have occurred in this world cycle: the life of the Buddha—because the life of the Buddha is ultimately the story of your own life!

## **(b) Canonical biography and Sinhalese tradition**

When studying the biography of the Buddha, it is important to note that there are two somewhat disparate sources: the canonical and the traditional. The Pali Canon records valuable episodes of the Buddha’s life presenting the spiritual side of his life. The traditional accounts of the Buddha, that is, the popular legends that most Buddhist grow up with are mostly from the Sinhalese Commentaries, especially the works of Buddhaghosa (who was northern India living in late-4<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka).

A good example of the “Sinhalization” of the Buddha biography is the tradition of **cross-cousin marriage** said to commonly occur amongst the Śākya. According to Sinhalese tradition, for example, Siddhârtha and Yaśodharā, were said to be first cousins: Yasodharā was the daughter of Amitā (Siddhattha’s paternal aunt) and Suppabuddha (Mahv 2:14-24; DhA 3:44). There is no such account in the Pali Canon, the Pali Commentaries, the Mahāvastu, the Lalita, vistara, the Tibetan Vinaya or the Dīpavaṃsa.<sup>4</sup>

## **(c) The Pabbajjā Sutta**

**The Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn no. 27; cf. V 1:36), one of the oldest document on the Buddha’s life, gives an important insight into his spiritual aspirations, albeit without the legendary colours of later times.

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<sup>4</sup> See Trautmann 1981: ch. 5, esp. pp. 320-330.

Introduction [Ānanda:]

1. I shall sing the praises of going-forth  
As the One with the Eyes<sup>5</sup> went forth,  
As he, trying it out (for himself),  
Was well-pleased with the going-forth. [405]
2. “This household life is stifling.  
A world of dust,” he thought.  
“But open and free is the going-forth!”  
Seeing this, he went forth, [406]
3. Having gone forth, he kept away from  
Evil action through the body;  
Giving up evil conduct through speech,  
He purified his way of life. [407]

Siddhārtha in Rājagṛha

4. The Buddha, endowed with excellent marks,<sup>6</sup>  
Went to Rājagṛha,  
To the Giribbaja of the Magadhī.  
Seeking almsfood. [408]
5. Standing in his palace,  
Bimbisāra saw him.  
Seeing the one endowed with the marks,  
He uttered this wish: [409]
6. “Look at this one, sirs!  
He is handsome, of good build, fair-skinned<sup>7</sup>,  
Endowed with good demeanour, too,  
And he looks ahead only a plough’s length. [410]
7. “With downcast eyes, mindful;  
This is not like one from a lowly family.  
Dispatch the royal messengers:  
Find out where the monk is going!” [411]
8. The royal messengers, sent out,  
Followed behind him, (wondering:)  
“Where will the monk go?  
Where will (his) dwelling be?” [412]
9. Walking from door to door,  
With the sense-doors guarded, well-restrained,  
He quickly filled his bowl,  
Attentive and mindful. [413]

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 4:3n.

<sup>6</sup> i.e. bodily marks.

<sup>7</sup> lit. pure (P. *suci*).

10. Having walked the almsround,  
Having gone out of the city, the sage  
Left for Paṇḍava,  
(Thinking:) “Here will my dwelling be.” [414]

Siddhârtha meets Bimbisāra

11. Having seen him go into the dwelling,  
The messengers then sat down;  
But one messenger went back  
And informed the rajah: [415]

12. “That monk, maharajah,  
Is seated on the eastern side of Paṇḍava,  
Seated like a tiger or a bull—  
Like a lion in a mountain cave!” [416]

13. Hearing the word of the messenger,  
The kshatriya, in the state carriage,  
Then set out with the utmost haste  
Towards Paṇḍava Rock. [417]

14. Going as far as the ground was suitable for vehicles,  
The kshatriya then got down from the carriage,  
Made his approach on foot,  
And on reaching him, sat down. [418]

15. Having sat down, the rajah thereupon  
Exchanged friendly greetings and courteous words.  
Having exchanged greetings, he  
Uttered this wish: [419]

16. “You are young and tender of age,  
In the first youth, a stripling,  
Endowed with good complexion and build,  
Like a kshatriya of good birth [420]

17. Who beautifies the van of the army,  
At the head of a company of elephants.<sup>8</sup>  
I offer you wealth and pleasures (*bhoge*), enjoy them!  
And tell us, when asked, your origins (*jātim*).” [421]

Siddhârtha on his origins

18. **Straight on [*pointing*], there is a country, O rajah,  
On the slopes of the Himalayas,  
Endowed with wealth and strength,  
An inhabitant of Kosala. [422]**

<sup>8</sup> Sn 421ab. These 2 lines are problematic: *sobhayanto anik’aggam | nāga,saṅgha,purakkhato* (Sn 421a). The BHS has *udagro tvam asi rājñah | aśvāroho ’va selako* (Mvst 2:199) = “You are a joyful king, | like (the hero) Selako mounted on a horse”, which is cryptic. Senart (Mvst 2, ed. 1890) gives a tentative reconstruction as *...rājyam aśvāroham sainyaṇam* which Jones translates as “[I offer thee] a kingdom with an army of cavalry” (Mvst:J 2:190 &n2).



19. They are “Āditya” by lineage,  
 “Śākya” by birth,  
 From that family I went forth, O rajah,  
 Not longing for sense-pleasures. [423]

20. Having seen the peril of sense-pleasures,  
 Having seen security in renunciation,  
 I shall go on to strive:  
 In this my mind delights. [424]

(Sn 405-424)

#### (d) Mahāvastu

This is a narrative ballad/dialogue of great antiquity (in most parts anyway). The first three verses (Ānanda’s introduction) of the Pabbajjā Sutta (SnA 381 ascribes the sutra to him), however, are late, probably added later by the Councillors (*saṅgītikarā*). These three verses are not found in the Mahāvastu account (Mvst 2:198 ff), where instead a short prose sentence states that the Bodhisattva leaves Ārāḍa Kālāma and heads for Rājagṛha. Sn 413 is missing from the Mahāvastu. (Jayawickrama PBR 3,1:5)

Rājagṛha was connected with the Buddha’s early career and, as such, was one of the earliest centres of Buddhism. Pāṇḍava rock was situated in the line of hills that formed a natural fortification to the city, giving it the name **Girivraja** (Giribbaja). The Śākyas are spoken of as a family of the Āditya clan inhabiting the Himālaya sector of **Kośala**. Legend has not grown around them yet making them an all-powerful clan. They are merely a *kula* (family) in Kośala. All this supports the general antiquity of the poem (Jayawickrama PBR 3,1:6). In **the Aggañña Sutta**, the Buddha says that “the Sakyans are vassals of the king of Kosala” (D 3:83).

Although the dialogue between Bimbisāra and the Buddha are more condensed in the Mahāvastu, it does not end where the Pabbajjā Sutta ends, but continues with two more stanzas in which Bimbisāra solicits the Buddha’s promise to visit him at Rājagṛha first after the enlightenment (SnA 2:386; cf. V 1:36 where Bimbisāra’s 5 wishes are mentioned). [4:20]

It is possible that the Mahāvastu account preserves an older version of this text (Jayawickrama, PBR 3,1:6). Nevertheless, the Pabbajjā Sutta (Sn st 3,1), together with Padhāna Sutta (Sn st 3,2) and the Nālaka Sutta (Sn st 3,11) “are precious remnants of that ancient sacred ballad-poetry from which later epic version of the life of the Buddha grew, in the same way as the heroic epic grew out of the secular ballads or Ākhyānas” (Winternitz 1933:96 & n2).

#### (e) Aśvaghoṣa’s **Buddha,carita**

It is interesting to note that the Pali Canon nowhere mentions the Buddha’s royal birth as traditionally presented in his modern biographies. In fact, the earliest text appears to be Aśvaghoṣa’s **Buddha,carita**<sup>9</sup>, in which “the Buddha’s royal birth, connections, and status are highlighted almost to the point of absurdity” (Walters 1993:275). Apparently, Aśvaghoṣa had good reasons (and ability) to attribute royal status to the Buddha. Aśvaghoṣa is believed to have worked in the court of the Kushan emperor Kanishka.

It is even more interesting to note that the **Buddha,carita** became **the model for classical Sanskrit court poetry**, which, remarks Walters, because it is “rare to have Buddhist classical Sanskrit at all, espe-

<sup>9</sup> Buddhacarita: partial ed. & tr. E.H. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, 2 vols. Calcutta, 1936, repr 1972, 1978. Chinese: Fo suo hsing tsan ching (T 192). Tibetan: mdo.’grel (skyes.rab) (nge), 1-124b; ed. Friedrich Weller, *Das Leben des Buddha von Aśvaghoṣa*, parts 1 (1926) and 2 (1928), Leipzig. For complete list, see main Bibliography.

cially weird because this biography became definitive of a genre of theist court poetry” (1993:275 f.). Walters further notes that Aśvaghōṣa,

...a converted Brahmin, as far as I know the first biographer to draw explicit parallels to the Rāmāyāna, to justify apparent Buddhist deviance from Vedic precedents with an appeal to different Vedic precedents, and to diffuse the “God begs Buddha to Preach” segment by having Indra come down instead of Brahmā, more as a sort of friendly call than as a charge to preach (Aśvaghōṣa’s Bodhisattva already knows he is going to preach).

(Walters 1993:275 f.)

Such a work would give Aśvaghōṣa “a sharp social edge...while adding a level of aesthetic quality and completeness to the Buddha biography that had never been achieved before.” (Walters 1993:276)

### 3. THE ARIYA,PARIYESANĀ SUTTA

#### (a) Core story

In 1993, **Jonathan S. Walters** published an important article on his analysis of **the Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), entitled “Suttas as History: Four approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest* (The Ariyapariyesana-sutta)” (*History of Religions* 38,3 1993:247-284). An American Academy of Religion-sponsored collaboration on “Pāli Texts in New Contexts” (a conference held in Chicago, May 1998), says Walters, “forced me to confront the problem of reading suttas as history in the light of...the Ariyapariyesanasutta, or Sermon on the Noble Quest.” (1993:249).

The Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta contains **an abbreviated autobiography** that the Buddha uses to illustrate his own spiritual journey as a progression from the ignoble to the Noble Quest. According to Walters, this autobiography forms the core or “seed” that is “repeated almost verbatim at other points in the Tipiṭaka” (1993:253), in three other suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya. According to **Lamotte**,<sup>10</sup> whom Walters quotes, four suttas repeat and complement one another which “all tell us of an important phase in Śākyamuni’s life, namely the period which extends from the flight from Kapilavastu until the Enlightenment”. The four suttas are:

The Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta (M 1:163-173; T 26, 204:56 pp776b-778c)

The Dvedhā,vitakka Sutta (M 1:117)

The Bhaya,bherava Sutta (M 1:17-23; T 125:23 pp665b-666c)

The Mahā Saccaka Sutta (M 1:240-249)

Another parallel to the Ariya,pariyesana Sutta is found in **the Vinaya** (V 1:4-10 || M 26.19-28), that is, from the section from the hesitation to preach his newly-found Dharma up to just before the Dhammacakka-pavattana Sutta.<sup>11</sup> The “ignoble quest” section of the sutta is found in the Aṅguttara as **the Anariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (A 4.252 = 2:247 f.) [15b].

#### (b) Buddha narrative sequence

The Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta is a critically important biographical text which contains an easily defined sequence of the Buddha narrative that Walters charts as follows: (1) unenlightened state, (2) encounters with Ālāra and Uddaka, (3) fulfillment of the Noble Quest, (4) the decision to preach / God’s [sic] plea and subsequent boast [sic], (5) encounter with Upaka, and (6) meeting with the Group of Five. Thus the

<sup>10</sup> Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 1988:648 f.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Walters’ comparative study of the two texts is found in his “Rethinking Buddhist Missions” (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1992:228-230).

ancient structure of the early Buddha narrative is as follows, with discrete events indicated by letters and the “chorus” of references to the teachers of the *jhānas* indicated by asterisks:

- (a) the Bodhisatta in his unenlightened state (“Even I, O monks....”)
  - \* encounters with Āḷāra and Uddaka/mastery of the *jhānas*
- (b) fulfillment of the Noble Quest/Enlightenment
  - \* Enlightenment involves a progression through and outside of the *jhānas*
- (c) decision to preach/God’s plea and subsequent boast
  - \* Buddha wants to teach Āḷāra and Uddaka; discovering them dead, he goes to Benares
- (d) encounters with Upaka the Ājīvaka
  - \* Buddha’s self-declaration as Teacherless Teacher
- (e) meeting with the Group of Five
  - \* Buddha becomes teacher of *jhānas* (and beyond) to the Group of Five (who happen to be former followers of Uddaka?)

(Walters 1993:270 f.)

Walters argues that these core episodes form “the seeds of a fuller, supplemented Buddha biography”:

...in the phrase “wives and sons are destined for birth” we might find the source for the stories of Yasodharā and Rāhula; “slaves and slavegirls are destined for birth” supplies the Bodhisatta’s attendants and harem; “goats and sheep...cocks and pigs...elephants and cows and hroses and mares...silver and gold are destined for birth” [M 1:162] intimates the opulence of the palace. Continuing through the ancient autobiographical fragment: “being a young man with very black hair” may have been the source for the stories about the Bodhisatta’s beauty, skill, agility, and so forth; “while my parents” in the plural (Mahāpajāpatī as second wife/surrogate mother of the Buddha) “were weeping and wailing” (the opposition of the king and the whole cycle that explains it); “recognizing the danger in that which is destined for death...old age...disease” (the first three signs); “isn’t it the case that I ought to quest after the unborn, unsurpassed, perfectly peaceful Nirvana?” (the fourth sign) [M 1:163]. Likewise, “This group of five monks was very helpful to me, who assisted me in my resolution to strive” (the six years’ asceticism) [M 1:170]; whatever sermon about Māra is attached to the end of this fragment, as here the heap of snares (the battle with Māra); the initial reflection on the subtlety of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (the emergence of Buddhahood over the three watches of the night). It is possible to read all of these details as already there in the original text; the supplements work.

(Walters 1993:277)

The Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta, as such, is “a carefully structured piece of literature designed to bring the readers/hearers face to face with the Buddha. It is the core of traditions of biographical supplementation that span Buddhist history, and this sutta therefore helps us identify the stages in the development of the Buddha biography” (Walters 1993:282), from which the mediaeval Commentators, especially **Buddha-ghosa**, built up a Buddhological vision far removed from “the historical Buddha” as conceived in recent centuries.

#### 4. SOCIOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS

##### (a) Common terms

Before proceeding, let us first get down to the basics:

- (1) The founder of Buddhism is called the “**Buddha**”, which comes from √BUDH, “to know”. This is not a proper name, but a generic title, meaning “the Enlightened One”, that is, one who has realized the true nature of life by his own effort and is liberated thereby.

- (2) Buddhism share many important terms with Jainism [4:3d], for example, both their leaders are described with the same epithets: Buddha, Jina, Mahāvīra, Arahanta:

**Buddha.** For example, according to the Jaina text, the *Isibhāsiyām*, the forty-five sages (*ṛṣi*) are “all *buddhas* who will not return to this world”.

**Jina** (spiritual conqueror) often used by Mahayanists for the Buddha is used by the Jainas to refer to their founder, Mahāvīra. As such, the religion is called “Jainism”.

**Arhant** (BHS) or **arahanta** (P) (worthy) is another term common to both Buddhism and Jainism. It is an especially important term in Jainism whose followers are called *ārhata* (*Sarvadarśanasanṅraha* §3: Arhatadarśanam).

Others common terms are words like **muni** (sage), **bhagavā** (lord).

### (b) Urbanization

A specialist scholar of early Indian archaeology and history, **G. Erdosi**, writes that by the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, “the technological base of the economy in this period [had] already reached a level not to be significantly exceeded until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” (G. Erdosi, *Urbanisation in Early Historic India*, 1988: 112). The rise of urban centres in this period and the production of food surplus are closely connected.

According to **R.S. Sharma**, although rice as *vr̥hi* was known to later Vedic people, it was a rainy season whose yield was limited. The change came when the people learned and used the art of **paddy transplantation** or wet paddy production, which was grown as a winter crop. This kind of rice was known as *śāli* (*sāli*) (R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, 1983:96, 161f.). This is the surplus that created the institutions of kings (Collins, 1993: 309).

### (c) The Middle Country

Around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, northern India was politically divided into 16 major states (*mahā, janapada*). Among these countries, the Buddhists distinguished between two kinds of territories: **the Middle Region** (*madhya, deśa*), where the Buddhist discipline is vigorously applied, and the **frontier regions** (*pratyanta, janapada*) which are allowed some concessions (V 1:197).

The Middle Region or Middle Country, which roughly corresponded to the ancient **Āryāvarta**, comprised 14 of the major states with its 7 principal towns: Śrāvastī, Sāketa, Campā, Vārāṇasī, Vaiśālī, Rājagṛha and Kauśāmbī (D 2:146).

#### (d) The 16 great states

Some of these sixteen great states (*soḷasa mahājanapadā*), such as **Kāśī**, **Kośala**, **Kuru-Pañcala**, **Matsya**, **Gandhārā** and **Kambojā**, had existed long before and were mentioned on the Vedic literature. The rest, such as Aṅga, Magadha, Vṛjī, Malla, Ceḍī, Vatsā, Śūrasena, Aśmaka and Avantī, were new states that arose from declining old ones or more areas coming into prominence.

[Greek references are given in *italics*.]

Country/State	Capital & towns	Modern districts
1. Aṅga	<b>Campā</b> (Bhagalpur) Bhadrikā (P, Bhaddiyā) Aśvapura (P, Assapura)	Bengal
2. <b>Magadha</b>	<b>Rājagṛha</b> or Girivraja (Rajgir)	Southern Bihar
3. Kāśī/Kāśī	<b>Vārāṇasī</b> (Banaras)	Banaras/Vārāṇasī
4. <b>Kośala</b>	<b>Śrāvastī</b> (Saheth Maheth) <b>Sāketa</b> (Ayodhyā)	Oudh
5. Vṛjī/Vajjī	<b>Vaiśālī</b> (Besarh) of the Licchavis Mithilā (Janakpur) of the Videhas	Northern Bihar
6. Malla ( <i>Malloi</i> )	Pāvā (Padaraona) Kusīnagara (Kasia; P, Kusinārā)	Gorakhpur
7. Caitya/Ceḍī	Śuktimati Sahajati Tripurī	Bundelkhand
8. <b>Vatsā/Vapsā</b>	<b>Kauśāmbī</b> (Kosam; P. Kosambī)	Allahābād
9. Kuru	Indraprastha (Delhi) Hastinapura	D. of Thānesar, Delhi & Meerut
10. Pañcāla	N. Ahicchatra (Rāmnagar) S. Kāmpilya (Kampil)	Rohilkhand Central Doāb
11. Matsya/Maccha	Virāṭa (Bairāt)	Jaipur
12. Śūrasena	Mathurā	Mathurā (Muttra)
13. Aśmaka or Aśvaka/ Assaka ( <i>Assakenus</i> )	Potali or Potana (Bodhan)	Nizam
14. <b>Avantī*</b>	Ujjayinī (Ujjain), (P, Ujjeni) Māhiṣmati	Mālwa & Nimār
15. Gandhārā or Yonā*	Takṣaśilā (P, Takka, sīlā)	D. of Peshāwār & Rawalpindi
16. Kambojā		S.W. Kāśmīr & Kāfiristān

(A 1:213 = 4:252 f. = Nc 247) [See Lamotte, 1988:8]

The names in *italics*, e.g. *Malloi*, are those found in ancient Greek writings.

A name with an asterisk (\*), e.g. “Avantī\*” denotes that it was outside the Middle Country.

The Middle Country of the Buddhists was **about the size of Malaysia** or England and Wales.

#### (e) The autocratic monarchies.

The autocratic monarchies (*rājya/raja*) were Kośala, Magadha, Vatsa and Avantī. Kośala had annexed Kāśī; Magadha had annexed Aṅga; Vatsa had annexed Ceḍī; and Avantī had annexed Aśmaka.

#### (f) The great person (mahā, puruṣa).

Under such unstable and fragmented social conditions, some waited for **the wheel-turning monarch** (*cakra, varti/cakka, vatti*), that is, a universal ruler, who would rule, not by armed force, but by virtue. Others longed for the appearance of **the Buddha** who would bring universal spiritual salvation.

## 5. THE ŚĀKYAS

### (a) Śākyan background

- (1) The historical Buddha was often referred to as **Śākya,muni** (the sage of the Śākyas). **Śākya** was the name of his tribe (*jāti*).
- (2) Scholars often refer to the Buddha as **Gautama Buddha**. “Gautama” was his clan (*gotra/gotta*). Such an epithet is helpful when he is contrasted with other Buddhas such as past Buddhas Dīpaṅkara (Dīpaṅkara) and Kaśyapa (Kassapa), and future Buddha Maitreya (Metteyya).
- (3) There were **500 Śākyan** families in the Buddha’s time. The capital city of the Śākyas: **Kapila,vastu** (Kapila,vatthu) was owned by the Gautama clan.
- (4) Livelihood: mostly **rice farming**—note names: Śuddhodana (*śuddha*, “pure” + *odana*, “rice”); the **ploughing festival** further attested to the predominance of rice cultivation in the region.

### (b) The Śākyas

The Śākyas were a small *kṣatriya* (aristocratic warrior caste) clan who lived on the borders of India and Nepal. Contrasted against the absolute monarchy of Kośala and of Magadha, the Śākya clan (like the Vṛjī/Vajjī) was an “**aristocratic republic**” (*gaṇa,saṅgha*) led by an elected and alternating *gaṇa,rāja* (chief). They conducted their administrative affairs in the mote hall (*santhāgāra*) at Kapilavastu (D 1:91). They had another council hall at Cātumā (M 1:457). The Mallas had theirs in Kuśinagara (D 2:164), and the Licchavis in Vaiśālī (V 1:233; M 1:228).

### (c) Śākya & Kośala

Although the Śākyas governed themselves, they were not completely independent since they were dominated by **Kośala** in the south [8:11]. **The Pabbajjā Sutta** provides some valuable information on the Śākyas:

- |   |  |          |
|---|--|----------|
| <p>18. Straight on, there is a country, O rajah,<br/>On the slopes of the Himalayas,<br/><b>Endowed with wealth and strength,</b><br/><b>An inhabitant of Kosala.</b></p> | <p><i>Ujū janapado rāja</i><br/><i>Himavantassa passato</i><br/><i>dhana,viriyena sampanno</i><br/><i>Kosalesu nīketino</i></p>  | [Sn 422] |
| <p>19. “Āditya” by lineage,<br/>“Śākya” by birth,<br/>From that family I went forth<br/>Not longing for sense-pleasures.</p>  | <p><i>Ādicca nāma gottena</i><br/><i>Sākiyā nāma jātiyā</i><br/><i>tamhā kulā pabbajito</i><br/><i>na kāme abhipatthayaṃ</i></p> | [Sn 423] |

Two important points should interest us here. First, the Bodhisattva’s description of his homeland as “(a country) endowed with wealth and strength” is likely an allusion to the prosperity of the Śākya agricultural economy. Declaring himself “an inhabitant of Kośala” is a broad hint that the Śākyas were under the hegemony of that state.

### (d) Parents

- (1) The Buddha’s father, **Śuddh’odana** (Suddhodana), was one of the leaders of the Śākyas. No kingship of Śuddhodana is mentioned in the Pali Canon itself.

- (2) The Buddha's mother was named **Mahā Māyā**. In ancient India, *māyā* meant "mysterious spiritual power of a deity". In later Indian philosophy, it came to mean the source of the visible universe, but it would be inappropriate (anachronistic) to apply this later meaning to her name.

Because she died seven days after the birth of the **Bodhi,sattva** (Bodhisatta), he was raised by her younger sister, **Mahā Prajā,patī Gautamī** (Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī), whom Śuddhodana also married. **Nanda** was his younger half-brother.

- (3) The Buddha's personal name is generally said to have been **Siddhārtha** (Siddhattha) or Sarvārtha-siddha (Mvst 3:111, 176), meaning "one who has achieved his purpose". This name however does not appear in the earliest writings, so a question arises as to whether it was a later addition (Nakamura, 2000:47). This name only appears in the Jātaka (esp. the **Nidāna,kathā**) and the Sinhalese chronicle, **Dīpa,vam̐sa** (Dīpv 3:47, 19:18). However, as no other name is suggested anywhere else, there is no positive reason to reject this tradition.

## 6. MAHĀ MĀYĀ

### (a) Conception of the Bodhisattva

The oldest artistic depiction of Māyā's dream is a medallion found at Bhārhut (Bharhut stupa, central India, 2nd century bce) now on display at the Indian Museum, Calcutta. Māyā is lying on her right side on a couch in the centre of the picture. A large albino elephant is descending from the top. Two female attendants sit in front of the queen, one fanning her with a whisk, to cool her and to keep insects away, the other sitting with her palms together, apparently venerating the imminent conception. A burning lamp is depicted at Māyā's feet, indicating that it is night. An old woman appears in the upper left, the palms of her hands together, watching intently. An inscription at the top of the medallion reads: bagavato ūkram̐ti (The Blessed One descends).

### (b) Māyā's dream

[J 1:50-52, tr. N.A. Jayawickrama, 1990:66 f.]

At that time, it is said, the festival of the asterism of Āsāḥī was proclaimed in the city of Kapilavattu...she rose early in the morning of the seventh day [of the full moon, having performed various acts of charity and keeping the precepts, she retired to her chamber]. Falling asleep as she lay on the royal couch she dreamt the following dream:

She felt as though the four Guardian Deities of the world lifted her up with her bed and taking her to the Himālaya mountain placed her beneath a great Sāla tree (*Shorea robusta*) seven yojanas in height growing on a plateau of red arsenic sixty yojanas in extent, and stood on one side. Then their consorts came forth and taking the queen to the lake Anotatta bathed her to rid her of her human stains, and clothed her in heavenly garments, anointing her with divine perfumes and decking her with heavenly flowers.

Not far from that place there was a silver mountain and within it was a golden abode. In it, they prepared a heavenly couch with its head towards the East and made her lie upon it. Then the Bodhisatta, who in the form of a lordly **white elephant**<sup>12</sup> was wandering there on the neighbouring golden mountain, descended from it and climbed the silver mountain; and coming from the northern direction carrying a white lotus in his trunk which had the lustre of a silver chain, he trumpeted.

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<sup>12</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids remarks (D:R 2:116n) that the use of such a figure (that of the white elephant) is not confined to India. In one of the Apocryphal Gospels, the Gospel according to the Hebrews, the incarnation of the divine gentleness and love is expressed by saying that a dove from heaven "entered into" the human form (cf. Matt 3:16, Luke 3:22; John 1:32).

Then entering the golden abode he went reverentially round the mother's bed thrice and appeared as though to have entered the womb making an opening on her right side.<sup>13</sup> Thus did he take conception under the descendent asterism of Āsālha.

(J 1:50-52)

### (c) Interpretation of the dreams

According to the Tibetan Dulva (fol 452a), Māyā had altogether **four dreams**: (1) She saw a six-tusked white elephant enter her womb. (2) She moved in space above. (3) She ascended a great rocky mountain. (4) A great multitude bowed down to her. (Rockhill, 15; cf. Bigandet, 28 f).

On waking up, the queen went into a grove of ashoka (*Saraca indica*) trees and sent for king Śuddhodana. She related her dreams to the king who summoned **64 eminent brahmins**, showed them honour, and gave them excellent food and other presents. After that he asked the brahmins to interpret the dream. The brahmins said, "Be not anxious, O king, you will have a son. If he dwells in a house he will become a **universal monarch** (*cakravarti*); if he leaves the house and goes forth from the world, he will become a **Buddha** who will remove ignorance." (J 1:51)

In real life, a **six-tusked white elephant** is rare and symbolic of royal power. The Buddha is a rare and unique being whose advent into our world, like that of a royal albino elephant, brings untold blessings. The elephant's six tusks represent the consummation of the Bodhisattva's six Perfections.

## 7. VASUBANDHU'S INTERPRETATION OF THE DREAM

In later times, people expressed doubt about the veracity of the myth. Indian commentators such as **Vasubandhu** (320?-400?) discussed the possible meaning of the Bodhisattva entering his mother Māyā's womb in the shape of an elephant and whether in fact he did indeed assume such a shape. Here is an excerpt from the **Abhidharma,kośa** where Vasubandhu gives his arguments:

...we know that the mother of the Bodhisattva saw in a dream a small white elephant enter her side. This was only an "omen", because for a long time the Bodhisattva has been disengaged from animal rebirth. King Kṛkin also saw ten dreams: an elephant, wells, a pole, sandalwood, a park, a young elephant, two monkeys, cloths, and contests, which were omens. Furthermore, intermediate beings do not enter into the womb by splitting open the side, but rather by the door of birth...

(Abhk ed. P. Pradhan 128,26-27; ed. Poussin 3:13a-b; T 29:47b ; Pruden's tr.1988:390 f..)

In his book, *Gotama Buddha* (2000), Nakamura remarks that Vasubandhu's comments represent a **demythologizing process** taking place over 1,500 years ago in India. "Then why was the myth of a white elephant created?" Nakamura asks.

The mounting rain clouds of the monsoon season in India remind us of an elephant. Kālidāsa, the fourth- or fifth-century poet and dramatist, describes clouds being transformed into young elephants and falling down into the gardens of the mansions of the *yakṣas* [*Meghadūta* 2]. In this, he may have been influenced by the Buddhist legend. Elephants were close to the Indians; they were employed in both war and peace and were thought to give life to both human beings and animals by calling on the rain clouds and so bringing about a successful harvest.

(Nakamura, 2000:58 quoting Zimmer, 1960 1:160)

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<sup>13</sup> This is the only mention in the Pali texts of Māyā's "right side" in connection with the Bodhisattva's birth story.



## 8. PRELUDE TO THE NATIVITY

### (a) The child in Māyā's womb

For ten lunar months queen Mahā Māyā bore the Bodhisattva like oil in a bowl (J 1:52). Mahayana texts go on to say that during the Bodhisattva's "gestation period", Mahā Māyā had the power to heal the sick and confer happiness on others. It is said that the child sat in the womb in a cross-legged posture, covered by a beautiful canopy. According to the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Siamese Supreme Patriarch **Vajira, -ñāṇa, varorasa**, this means that although the Bodhisattva would be surrounded by luxury in the palaces, he would not be drowned by them (*Life of the Buddha*, 102).

### (b) Journey to Devadaha.

As the time approached for Māyā to give birth to the Bodhisattva, she told king Śuddhodana that she wished to go to her parents' house in **Devadaha**, the capital of the Kraḍya (also Kroḍya, Koḍya; P. Koliya). The king approved and ordered the road from Kapilavastu to Devadaha to be made smooth and adorned with vessels filled with plantains, flags and banners. When everything was ready, the king seated her in a golden palanquin borne by a thousand courtiers, sent her off with a great retinue.

Between the two cities lay a grove of sal trees called **Lumbini Park** which belonged to the inhabitants of both the cities. Although it was not the right season, the trees were in full bloom and the whole place was alive with birds and bees. When the queen saw this, she felt a desire to sport in the grove.

The courtiers brought the queen into the grove. She went to the foot of a great sal tree and desired to seize a branch. The branch, like the tip of a supple reed, bent down and came within her reach. Stretching out her hand, she seized the branch. Thereupon she felt the pangs of birth. The courtiers set up a curtain around her. While standing right there, holding the branch and looking up at the sky, she delivered her child on the full-moon day of Vaiśākha, 623 BCE.

### (c) Lumbinī & Kapilavastu.

One or two centuries later, when emperor **Aśoka** went on a pilgrimage of the holy sites, he visited Lumbinī and had **a stupa and a pillar** erected there. About 8 centuries later, the pilgrim **Xuanzang** visited the site.

The pillar was discovered in **1896** and the inscription on it was deciphered, identifying a site in the modern village of **Rummindei** (in Nepal) as the birth-place of the Buddha. We also know approximately where the Śākya territory—**Kapilavastu**—was located. However, there are two claims: the Nepalese and the Indian. The Nepalese claim that it is **Tilaurā Kot** in the Nepalese Terai, 24 km from Rummindei.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indian archaeologists unearthed an urn containing the relics of the Buddha at **Piprahwa** (in Uttar Pradesh, India), about 500 km east of New Delhi and about 15 km from Rummindei. Between 1970 and 1976 further excavations uncovered brick structures including a Kushan-period monastery, a stupa, and part of a palace. The objects discovered include two talc reliquaries, three pots and 40 terra-cotta seals. On a pot lid found there is found this inscription: "This monastery was built by Devaputra Kaniṣka, for the Sangha of Kapilavatthu." [Nakamura, 2000:48-54.]

### (d) Earthquakes

When the Bodhisattva was born, it is said that the earth quaked and numerous miracles followed. In the **Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta**, the Buddha explains that there are **eight causes of earthquakes**:

1. Tectonic instability ("mighty atmospheric disturbances occur, the [subterranean] 'waters' [magma] are agitated; with the agitation of the waters, the earth quakes").

2. When an ascetic or deva develops intense power of concentration.
3. When the Bodhisattva is conceived.
4. When he is born.
5. When he attains Enlightenment.
6. When he gives the first discourse.
7. When he renounces the remainder of his lifespan (instead of living out the whole cycle).
8. When he attains Final Nirvana.

(D 2:107) [10:9b]

Earthquakes are seldom mentioned in other myths and they are usually associated with disasters (believed to be the action of demons). In Buddhist mythology, however, earthquakes take on a positive role. It is probable, suggests Har Dayal that “the Buddhists meant only a slight tremor as a gesture of delight and approval on the part of the devatā of the earth.” (1932:298).

## 9. THE BUDDHA’S BIRTHDATE

A number of different theories have been advanced regarding the Buddha’s birthdate.

### (a) **Mahā Parinirvāṇa.**

The Buddha is said to have died at 80. Thus, most theories are based on calculations that work backwards from this date. The tradition of the Buddha’s age of 80 is mainly based on the Buddha’s statement in the **Mahāparinibbana Sutta** to Subhadra (Subhadda) that he was 29 when he renounced the world and that the event happened *vassāni paññassa samādhikāni* (D 2:151 verse), which T.W. Rhys Davids (in agreement with traditional translations) renders as “fifty years and one year more” (D:RD 2:167). This was said immediately before the Buddha passed away, perhaps on the day itself (Upadhyaya, 1971).

### (b) **Sinhalese chronicles.**

One of the most widely accepted theories is based on the Sinhalese chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (The Island Chronicle) and the *Mahāvaṃsa* (The Great Chronicle). The Buddhists calculate this date by correlating those of the **Mahāvaṃsa** to ancient inscriptions (e.g. the Gal-vihāra Inscription of Polonnaruwa). The *Mahāvaṃsa* gives the dates of coronations of the Sinhalese kings Parākrama Bāhu I as 1696 AB<sup>14</sup>, that is, 1153 CE, and that of Parākrama Pāṇḍya as 1589 AB, that is, 1046 CE.

On the basis of these chronicles, **Wilhelm Geiger** calculated that the Buddha died in **493 BCE** and consequently had been born in 563 BCE. (Mahv:G ix-lxiii).

**Herman Jacobi**, using the same method and sources, maintained that the Buddha died in 484 BCE (“Buddhas und Mahāvīras Nirvāṇa”, 1930:322-332).

The Japanese scholar **Kanakura Enshō** arrived at the same date (*Indo Kodai seishinshi* 338 f.). The “**dotted record**” transmitted along with the Chinese translation of the Samantapāsādikā (T 1462), the Theravada commentary of the Vinaya, also indicates a similar date. At the conclusion of each rains retreat after the Buddha’s death, a dot was added to this text. A total of **975 dots** had been added to the text as of the year 490 CE. As such, the Buddha’s death would have thus occurred 975 years prior to 490 CE, in **485 BCE** according to the dotted record (Kanakura ib; Fei Ch’ang-fang, *Li-tai san-pao chi*, T 49:95b).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> AB = *Anno Buddhae* (The Year of the Buddha) or *After the Buddha*, that is, after the Parinirvāṇa

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, see Akira, 1990:22 f.

**(c) The traditional birthdate.**

The traditional date for the Buddha's Parinirvana is **544 or 543 BC**. The Indians and Sinhalese favour the former (by counting 1 for the moment of Parinirvana, that is, at the beginning of the year).

The south-east Asian Buddhists start their count from the end of the first year of the Parinirvana. To get the current Buddhist years, one simply adds the number 544 (in the case of south Asia) or 543 (in the case of south-east Asia) to the Common Era. It is in keeping with this tradition that 1956-57 was celebrated by most Buddhist countries and groups as the **Buddha Jayanti** (the anniversary of the Buddha's Parinirvana). [According to the S.E. Asian system, the year 2002, for example, would be the Buddhist Era 2545.]

**(d) Festivals.**

In Southern Buddhist countries, **Vesak Day** (full-moon day of April-May) commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and final Nirvana of the Buddha, all on the same day. East Asian Buddhists, however, celebrate them on separate days: 8 April, the birthday; 8 December, the enlightenment day; and 15 February, the Final Nirvana.

**10. THE NATIVITY**

**(a) Miraculous birth**

While other beings when born come forth stained with impure matter, not so the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva, like a Dharma teacher descending from the Dharma-seat, like a man descending a flight of stairs, stretched out his two hands and feet, standing unsoiled and unstained by any impurity, shining like a jewel laid on Benares cloth, descended from his mother.

The devas were the first to receive him. Indra and Brahma took him in their hands and wrapped him in fine silk which was not soiled at all. Then, human beings received him on a silk cushion. When he was freed from human hands, he stood on the earth and looked to the east. Devas and humans worshipped him with scented garlands. Having examined all the various directions he finally faced the north and, while Mahā Brahmā himself held a white parasol over the child, and the devas followed with other symbols of royalty in their hands.

**(1) The Seven Steps**

According to the Tibetan Dulva (fol 458), Indra caused a violent rain to fall and a great wind to blow, which dispersed all the crowd of attendants. Assuming the appearance of an old woman, he went to receive the new-born child in his lap. The Bodhisattva, however, ordered him back, and then took seven steps in each of the four quarters.

Looking to the east, he said:	“I will reach highest Nirvana!”
To the south, he said:	“I will be the first of all beings”
To the west, he said:	“This will be my last birth!”
To the north, he said:	“I will cross the ocean of existence!”

Then, **two streams of water**, one warm and one cool, issued from the sky and washed him. At the very spot where he was born there appeared a spring in which his mother bathed (Rockhill 16). According to Vajirañāṇavarorasa, the warm stream represents the Bodhisattva's trial of self-mortification while the cool stream stands for his own spiritual efforts (*Life of the Buddha*, 102). While the present author agrees to the former interpretation, he is inclined to regard the cool stream as representing the sensual life of the Prince in the palace. The seven steps would then represent the “Middle Way”.

## (2) The lion roar

The Pali Commentaries mention that the extraordinary infant took seven steps northwards. Stopping at the seventh step, he declared:

I am the chief in the world!	<i>aggo 'ham asmi lokassa</i>
I am the eldest in the world!	<i>jeṭṭho 'ham asmi lokassa</i>
I am the foremost in the world!	<i>seṭṭho 'ham asmi lokassa</i>
This is the last birth!	<i>ayam antimā jāti</i>
There is now no more rebirth!	<i>n'atthi dāni punabbhavo</i>

(DA 2:437)

### **(b) Commentarial interpretation**

In the centuries that followed the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, there were attempts at explaining the various miraculous events that attended the Bodhisattva's birth. The *Sumaṅgala*, *vilāsini*, for example, gave an elaborate interpretation (*pubba, nimitta*) of the Nativity, event by event, thus:

Standing on the earth	=	His attaining of the 4 paths of accomplishment ( <i>iddhi, pada</i> ) <sup>16</sup> .
Facing the north	=	His winning over (spiritual conversion) of the multitudes.
The seven steps	=	His attaining of the 7 limbs of enlightenment ( <i>satta, bojjhaṅga</i> ) <sup>17</sup> .
The white parasol	=	His winning the "umbrella" of spiritual liberation ( <i>vimutti</i> ).
The fivefold regalia <sup>18</sup>	=	His attaining the 5 liberations <sup>4</sup> ( <i>pañca, vimutti</i> ).
Looking all around	=	His attaining the unobstructed knowledge (omniscience) (Pm 1:131).
The majestic words <sup>19</sup>	=	His turning of the Wheel of Truth ( <i>dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana</i> ).
The lion-roar <sup>20</sup>	=	His attaining the final nirvāṇa without remains,

### **(c) Modern interpretations**

#### (1) Vajirañāṇavarorasa

According to Vajirañāṇavarorasa, **the seven steps** represent the seven main states wherein the Buddha's Message would dominate, namely, Kāśī-Kośāla, Aṅga-Magadha, Śākya, Vṛjī, Malla, Vatsā and Kuru. The Bodhisattva stopped at the end of the seventh step because he would attain Final Nirvana after the Dharma had been firmly established in all the seven states (Life of the Buddha, 101 f).

#### (2) Minoru Hara

The Japanese scholar, Minoru Hara, in his article "Birth of Extraordinary Persons: The Buddha's Case" (Werner, 1989:69-81), attempts to explain the miraculous nature of the Buddha's birth in relation to the notion of *janma-duḥkha* (suffering of birth) in Indian religious literature, such as Kauṇḍinya's *Pañcārtha, bhāṣya* (a commentary on the Pāśupata Sūtra) and the Purāṇas.

<sup>16</sup> *iddhi, pada*: the will to attain mental absorption, the effort to attain it, the mind to enjoy it, the investigation of that mental absorption (D 2:213, 3:78).

<sup>17</sup> *satta, bojjhaṅga*: mindfulness, investigation of mental states, effort, zest, calm, concentration, and equanimity (D 3:251, 282; Vbh 277).

<sup>18</sup> *pañca, rāja, kakudha, bhaṇḍāna* (J 5:264): royal fan, diadem, sword, sun-shade, slippers.

<sup>19</sup> *āsabhivācābhāsanam*, that is, all the words spoken by the new-born child Siddhārtha.

<sup>20</sup> *ayam-antimā jāti* = "This is my last birth!"

The Buddhist sources Hara quotes are: the Acchariya-bhūta Sutta (M), the Mahāpadāna Sutta (D), Nidāna-kathā (J), Mahāvastu (Mahv), Lalitavistara (Lalv), Buddha-carita (Buc) and their Chinese equivalents (T 1:1 ff.). The account of miraculous birth of the Buddha can be summarized thus:

*The Bodhisattva was born out of the right side (dakṣiṇa pāśva) of his mother. When the Bodhisattva was born, gods received him first and then human beings. Prior to his touching the ground, four deities received him (M, J). According to J, four pure-minded (suddhacitta) deities brought a golden net upon which they received the Bodhisattva. He came forth stainless (visada) from the womb of his mother; undefiled (amakkhita) by liquid (udda), mucus (semha) or blood (ruhira). Completely immune from uncleanness, the Bodhisattva and his mother are compared to a gem laid on Benares muslin, the one does not stain the other, but both embellish the other by their purity.*

*Nevertheless, two streams of water issued from the sky, one cold and one hot, for the deities to do the necessary bathing of the Bodhisattva and his mother. According to J, four kinds received the Bodhisattva from the hands of the four deities who had received him in the golden net on a cloth of antelope skin soft to the touch. A large, white parasol was held over him and a pair of chowries (cāmara) were fanned to keep insect away from him.*

*The Bodhisattva then surveyed all the quarters and in a lordly voice, proclaimed: “I am the chief in the world; I am the eldest; I am the foremost. This is my last birth. There is now no more rebirth.”*

#### **(d) Janma,duḥkha**

In summary, the Indian religious texts explain what happens at the birth of an ordinary human being in this manner:

It is the *janma-duḥkha*, the severe pains one experiences at the time of birth that causes one to lose one’s memory (*smṛti*) and knowledge (*viññāṇa*) which the embryo is supposed to possess until the last moment inside the mother’s womb. This pain is caused by mother’s bodily processes, by the tightness of the birth-passage, and the encounter with powerful winds both inside and outside of the mother’s womb. Because of this suffering at birth, the ordinary human being becomes *bāla*, meaning both “stupefied” and “a child”. This is also the starting point of further suffering caused by ignorance.

(Kaunḍinya’s *Pañcārtha, bhāṣya & Viṣṇu, purāṇa*, summarized by Hara 1989:72 f.)

#### **(1) Nature of the nativity**

Let us now compare the Bodhisattva’s nativity with the birth of an ordinary human being:

Consciousness. First, ordinary human beings are said to pass through five stages of embryonic development (Vism 236) [see Hara 80 n29]. It is toward the end of the prenatal period that the embryo is endowed with consciousness (*caitanya*) and knowledge (*jñāna*).

The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, is said to possess consciousness and knowledge from the very beginning (Abhk 3:16). He makes the five investigations [time, country, family, mother, her life-span, J 1:49-50] from the Tuṣṭita heaven, enters Māyā’s womb, stays there and issues forth, all the while conscious and mindful (*sata sampajāna*).

Comfortable. Second, the ordinary embryo experiences pain while it resides in its mother’s womb. It is confined in a dark, doorless chamber which is often compared to hell (Vism 501; Abhk 3:15). Not only is it tormented by its mother’s actions, but it torments her, too.

The Bodhisattva, however, stays in his mother’s womb comfortably without giving her any pain.

Purity. Third, the ordinary embryo is troubled by all sorts of impurities (*mala*) both of its prenatal state and at the time of delivery. The baby newly born out of its mother's womb is often compared to a worm falling from a foul-smelling sore (Vism 500; Abhk 130).

The Bodhisattva is immune from impurity (*amrakṣita*). He and his mother's womb are compared to a gem placed on Benares muslin: both are pure and embellish each other.

Divine reception. Fourth, when an ordinary being is born, he falls to the ground like a worm onto excrements. Bereft of free will, he is left in complete dependence on others for cleanliness and nourishment.

The Bodhisattva is received by the *deva,putras* before he reaches the ground and is bathed with two jets of water issuing from the sky.

Divine attendance. Fifth, an ordinary baby is laid on a dirty bed and is unable to turn around. Insects bite him but he cannot scratch or drive them away.

The Bodhisattva was laid on a beautiful bed with canopies guarded by the four guardian deities with Brahma holding a parasol over him, and nāgas fanning him with their chowries to protect him from insects.

Miraculous deeds. Sixth, the Purāṇas describe the new-born babies' inability to move, walk or speak anything other than inarticulate loud cries.

The Bodhisattva takes seven steps (from which lotus blossoms spring forth), and he makes various famous proclamations.

## (2) The Bodhisattva's *ayonija* birth

The most important point of all is that the Bodhisattva is born *ayonija*, "not through the birth-passage", but issues forth from the mother's right side. We have the impression that such stories may well have been designed **to release the Bodhisattva from the suffering of birth** (*janma-duḥkha*).

If the Bodhisattva is *ayonija*, he is free from *janma,duḥkha* which normally brings about stupefaction. He is therefore privileged to preserve the memory of his previous births (*smṛti*) and the sublime thoughts (*matī, jñāna*) which the embryo holds in his prenatal state.

Here, the Bodhisattva recalls the suffering of rebirth, and is disgusted (*nirveda*) with it. He determines not to repeat the same. This determination, obliterated in ordinary babies at birth, is retained in the infant Bodhisattva thanks to his *ayonija* state so that he can proclaim after his birth: "I am the chief in the world; I am the eldest; I am the foremost. This is my last birth. There is now no more rebirth for me."

These points, Hara claims, may illustrate some peculiarities of devices used by the Buddhist authors of the Buddha biographies for his **mythification**. This process of mythification is strongly tinged with the general cultural background of India as revealed in the Indian religious literature. Such devices, however, are much more commonly found in Buddhist Sanskrit texts (Mahāvastu, Lalita, vistara, Buddha, carita and their Chinese translations) than in the Pali texts.

## **11. AFTERMATH OF THE NATIVITY**

### **(a) The Connatals**

On this day, too, seven other things, **the connatals** (*satta, sahajātāni*), came into existence: the Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*), Rāhula's mother (his future wife), the four pots of treasure, the royal elephant, his horse Kaṇṭhaka, his charioteer Chandaka (Channa), and his trusted counsellor Kālūdayī, the minister's son.

(DA 2:425; J 1:54, 6:489; BA 131, 276, 298). [It is said that Ānanda (DA 2:425; ApA 58, 358; J 1:63) and Prasenajit (Pasenadi) [8:11], the future king of Kośala, too, were born in the same year.]<sup>21</sup>

A week after the Bodhisattva's birth, Mahā Māyā passed away and was reborn in Tusita heaven as **Māya Devaputra**. It is said in **the Jātaka, mālā** that she was so virtuous that she should not continue to live as an ordinary wife, or because she must be spared the pain of seeing her son's renunciation later on.

#### (b) Asita the black

The sage Asita “the black”, **Kāladevala**, who dwelt in the Himalayas was well-acquainted with king Śuddhodana's family. On the day of the Bodhisattva's birth, he saw the devas in the heaven of the Thirty-three rejoicing greatly. After inquiring of them the reason for their joy, they told him that the Bodhisattva had been born in the human world amongst the Sākyas in Lumbini Park, and that he would turn the Wheel of Truth in the Deer Park at Benares.

Asita joyfully went to the dwelling of Śuddhodana and asked to see the extraordinary boy. On seeing the wonderful child, he was delighted and **smiled**. He recognised in the baby **the 32 marks of the Great Man** (D 2:17-19; M 2:136 f.), and declared, “Supreme is he, the highest of men!”

Then, remembering his own impending death, he **wept**. The Śākyas anxiously asked if there would be any misfortune for the child. Asita replied:

“No misfortune will befall him. He, for certain, will become Buddha.”

“Then, why do you weep?”

“I will not get the opportunity to see a person his like, when he becomes Buddha. Great will be my loss. Bewailing my condition I weep.” (J 1:55)

Asita was pained—since his own life was drawing short, he would not be able to hear the Dharma.

#### (c) Nālaka

After leaving the palace, Asita for his nephew, Nālaka (or Naradatta, according to the Lalita, vistara). He told Nālaka that as soon as he hears of the Buddha, he should look for him and live the holy life with him. Nālaka lived with guarded senses in expectation of the Enlightened One, and when the time came, he went to the Buddha and asked him about the state of the true sage (*muni*). This is a summary of what is probably the oldest version of the story of Asita as given in the **Nālaka Sutta** of the Sutta Nipāta.<sup>22</sup>

Nālaka or Naradatta is sometimes identified as **Mahā Kātyāyana** (Mahā Kaccāna), the future missionary in Avantī (Sn 679-723; J 54 f; Buc 1:81, Lalv 101-8; Mvst 2:30-45). In that case, Asita came, not from the Himālayas, but from the Vindhya mountains situated to the south of Avantī.<sup>23</sup>

Another canonical account is given in the **Nidāna, kathā** (Introduction to the Jātaka). The account is similar to the one given in the Nālaka Sutta except for a few details. When king Śuddhodana tried to make the child pay homage to the sage Asita, the child's feet turned and placed themselves in the sage's matted hair. The sage Asita then rose from his seat and stretched out his clasped hands to the Bodhisattva. The king, seeing this marvel, himself, showed respect to the child. This was the first time that king Śuddhodana worshipped the Bodhisattva. Then followed the smile-and-weep episode by Asita.

<sup>21</sup> See BA:H xliii-xlix for discussion on the connatals.

<sup>22</sup> See Jayawickrama PBR 3,1:3, 13-19.

<sup>23</sup> See Lamotte, 1988:674.

## 12. LIFE IN THE PALACE

### (a) The 3 lotus pools and 3 palaces

When Prince Siddhārtha was seven years old, the king had his men dug within the palace grounds three ponds in which were grown various kinds of lotuses. The Buddha gives the following account of his luxurious life as a prince in his own words:

I was delicate, O monks, extremely delicate, excessively delicate. In my father's dwelling lotus-pools were made, one of blue lotuses (*utpala*), another of red lotuses (*padma*), and another of white lotuses (*puṇḍarīka*), all for my sake. I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares, my dress was of Benares cloth, as were my tunic, my under-robe and cloak. Night and day, a white parasol was held over me so that I should not be touched by cold or heat, by dust or weeds or dew.

(A 1:146; cf D 2:21, M 1:504; Mvst 2:115 f)

When Prince Siddhārtha was 16 years old, the king built three palaces for him. In his own words, the Buddha describes them:

I had three palaces, one for the cold season, one for the hot season, and one for the rainy season. Through the four rainy months, in the palace of the rainy season, entertained by female minstrels, I did not come down from the palace; and as in the dwellings of others food from husks of rice was given to the slaves and workmen together with sour gruel, so in my father's dwelling rice and meat were given to the slaves and workmen.

(A 1:146; J 1:58; cf D 2:19, M 1:504; Mvst 2:115 f)

### (b) Life of pleasure

To the handsome heir, the king, besides providing him with the three palaces, one nine storeys high, one seven and the third five, for the three seasons, furnished him with **the five capital pleasures** of the time: first, dancing, consisting in the Indian manner of a sequence of more or less stylized poses combined so as to represent certain legendary dramas; second, singing, probably the high-pitched tonality that delights Orientals; third, music solos, which makes string or wind instruments, such as flutes or harps, “speak”; fourth, orchestral music with the sustained rhythm of drums that accompanied the dancing; and fifth, women.

The ancient scribes mention little about the sensual luxuries of the prince. It is evident, however, that the prince's life had been one of the Arab's harem or the Indian *antaḥpura*. The Jātaka Nidāna, for example, mentions that there were 40,000 dancing girls attending to him, and Rāhula's mother was his chief consort. (J 1:58)

When the three palaces were ready, the king thought that the 16-year-old prince Siddhārtha should get married and become his heir. The king ordered that a proper bride be found for the prince. The seeker did not have to go far in his quest, for he found in **Yaśodharā** (Yashodharā), the daughter of Suprabuddha (Suppabuddha), the living example of the prince's feminine ideal.

Despite all these sensuality, the Bodhisattva never cease to observant and thoughtful. This life of the prince immersed in sensuality plays a vital role in proving the futility of one extreme (*antā*)—that of sensual pleasures.



### 13. SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTERS

#### (a) Devadatta

Prince Siddhârtha had a wicked cousin named **Devadatta** [Chapter 7]. Once, when they were hardly twelve years old, Devadatta saw a royal swan (*haṃsa*) flying over the garden where he was and shot it down with an arrow. It fell in the Bodhisattva's garden, who took it, and having extracted the arrow, nursed the wound.

Devadatta tried to claim the bird, but the Bodhisattva would not give it up, saying that **it belonged not to him who had attempted to take its life, but to him who had saved it**. And this was the first quarrel between the two.

#### (b) The ploughing festival

Although Prince Siddhârtha was well-trained in academic subjects and martial arts, he was inherently a very thoughtful and observant child, as evident from the episode of **the ploughing festival** (*vāpya-maṅgala/vappa,maṅgala*) (J 1:57-58).

On a certain day of the year, usually in May, the king himself led the ploughing of the field. There were a thousand ploughs, a hundred and eight of which were of silver for the courtiers, except one golden one for the king. The farmers ploughed with the rest.

The Mahāvastu gives some interesting details: the Bodhisattva was watching the soil being tilled and saw the ploughs throw up a snake and a frog. A young boy took the frog away for food but threw the snake away. The young Bodhisattva was deeply stirred by what he saw and quietly retired under the shade of a jambu tree (*Eugenia jambolana*).

This episode in the Bodhisattva's life is immortalized in Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879):

But looking deep, he saw  
The thorns which grow upon this rose of life:  
How the swart peasant sweated for his wage,  
Toiling for leave to live; and how he urged  
The great-eyed oxen through the flaming hours,  
Goaded their velvetflanks; then marked he, too,  
How lizard fed on ant, and snake on him,  
And kit on both; and how the fish-hawk robbed  
The fish-tiger of that which it had seized;  
The shrike chasing the *bulbul*, which did chase  
The jeweled butterflies; till everywhere  
Each slew a slayer and in turn was slain,  
Life living upon death.

(*The Light of Asia*, Book the First)

#### (c) The first absorption

The young prince was taken and placed on a couch within a screen beneath a jambu (rose-apple) tree. The nurses left him, and he sat up cross-legged, practised **meditation on in-and-out breathing**, and attained the first level of meditative Absorption (*dhyāna/jhāna*).

When he was deep in the first Absorption, **the shade of the tree did not leave him** although the sun had moved (Mvst 2:45). The Tibetan Dulva and the Divyāvadāna, however, insert this account between the four sights and the Renunciation (Rockhill 22; Dvy 391).

When the nurses saw this amazing event of the 7-year-old meditating child under the jambu tree, they informed the king. When the king saw the miracle, he did reverence to him saying, **“This is my second salutation to you!”**

This episode of child Siddhārtha’s meditating under the jambu tree reveals a very interesting symbolic aspect of meditation. **The movement of shadows** here represents the passage of time and the world. In meditating, prince Siddhārtha transcends the world represented by the ploughing festival. At the same time, when one is concentrated in meditation, one also transcends time. Above all, meditation is the most natural thing to do—even a child could do it!

## 14. MARRIAGE

### (a) Yaśodharā

King Śuddhodana came up with a plan to get Siddhārtha marry the right woman. Having made beautiful ornaments, he sent word throughout his capital that in seven days the prince would receive at court and present jewels to the young Śākya girls. As each of them came before him, Siddhārtha handed her a jewel, but his heart yearned for none of them. And they, incapable of beholding the brilliance of the Bodhisattva, withdrew rapidly, taking their presents with them.

At last, Yaśodharā arrived with her retinue, and she alone was able to look at the prince without blinking. But, by then the stock of jewels was exhausted. Yaśodhara approached the prince and the following conversation ensued:

[Y.] Your Highness, what have I done that you disdain me?

[S.] It is not that I disdain you but that you came last.

And removing from his finger, a most valuable ring, he handed it to her:

[Y.] May I really accept this present from you, Your Highness?

[S.] This jewel is mine, accept it.

[Y.] No, our aim is not to remove any adornment from the prince, but rather to become an adornment to him.

Having spoken thus, she withdrew.

### (b) The tournament

The palace agents heard the gracious conversation and reported it to the king. The king believed that the affair was settled, but against all expectation his plan backfired. The princess’ family, however, asserted that the prince was incapable of any athletic sports as no one had ever seen him participate in any. On discovering this setback, Prince Siddhārtha persuaded his father to challenge in his name all the young Śākyas of his age. He was probably about 16 years old then (Lamotte 1988:15).

Five hundred well-trained young athletes responded and Yaśodharā, by common accord, was named the “Prize of Victory”, to be awarded to the victor of three contests: fencing, archery and wrestling. The prince easily outbeat his opponents. The climax of the competition was the archery contest when all the bows broke as twigs in his hands.

He then asked his father if there was any other stronger bow. His father replied that there was one, that of his grandfather, Siṃhahanu, too heavy to be lifted by anyone, much less to string it. Prince Siddhārtha easily managed it and surpassing all his rivals, pierced target after target. They still had enough strength, after hitting the most distant target, to bury themselves into the ground right up to the feather.

Nothing and no one now stood in the way of Siddhārtha's marriage. Nothing much is mentioned in the Scriptures about the prince's wedding ceremony. However, two essential rites are known to us: the joining of hands and the triple circling of the fire by the bride and groom. He was 16 when he married (J 1:58 ff.)

## 15. SOURCES OF THE BUDDHA LEGEND

The oldest sources of the Buddha life comes from the early Canon (the four Nikāyas). Around these early stories, grew a spiritual drama of cosmic proportions. In his monumental work, *History of Indian Buddhism* (tr. Sara Webb-Boin, 1988:648-682), Etienne Lamotte proposes five successive stages in the development of the Buddha legend:

1. Biographical fragments incorporated into the Sūtras: **Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (M 1:163-73) [3], **Dvedhā,vitakka Sutta** (M 1:117), **Bhaya,bherava Sutta** (M 1:17-23) and **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 1:240-9). The **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 2:72-168) is entirely devoted to the last days of the Buddha.
2. Biographical fragments incorporated into the Vinaya: the **Skandhaka** of the Sthavira,vāda (V 1:1-44), the Mahiśāsaka (T 1421 101a 10-110c 10) and the Dharma,guptaka (T 1428 779a 5-779b 24).
3. Autonomous but incomplete "Lives". Towards the beginning of the Common Era, the life of the Buddha became more prominent than the Doctrine and Discipline. Two Sanskrit works have survived: the **Lalita,vistara** (ed. S. Lefmann, Halle, 1902) and the **Mahāvastu** (ed. E. Senart, Paris, 1892-97).
4. Complete lives of the Buddha. Only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, do we see complete biographies of the Buddha (from Tuṣita through to his Parinirvāṇa and funeral rites). These were the works of king Kanishka's contemporaries: Saṅgharakṣa of Śūrāśtra (**Buddha,carita**) and Aśvaghōṣa of Sāketa (**Buddhacarita**) [2e]. There is a third complete Buddha biography in verse but is today only found in the Chinese translation, *Fo pen hsing jing* (T 193) translated by Pao Yun (between 427-449).
5. Sinhalese compilations. The ancient Sinhalese inherited ancient Commentaries on the Pali Canon, such as Buddhaghosa's **Nidāna,kathā**, the Introduction to the Jātaka Commentary, which gives an account of the Buddha from the time of his birth as Sumedha right up to the donation of Jetavana to the Sangha. Buddhaghosa's contemporary, Buddhadatta (southern India), in his Commentary to the Buddha,vaṃsa listed **30 important episodes** comprising the Buddha's life (BA 298 f.; cf. Lamotte, 1988:405) and also compiled accounts of **the first 20 years** of the Buddha's ministry (BA 3). The first 20 years list is also given by Buddhaghosa (AA 2:125), but treated in full in the **Jina,kāla,mālī** (Jink 29-35), a 16th century Siamese work.

In the Theravada tradition, Buddhaghosa's **Nidāna,kathā** to his Commentary on the Jātaka (Jātak'attha-kathā) (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) is the first continuous narrative of the life of the Buddha, including his former lives. "The narrative brings together episodes from the life of the Buddha found in the Pali Canon, such as his enlightenment and his postenlightenment teaching, with cycles of legends that had probably developed around major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India." (Swearer, 1995:541)

## 16. THE EVOLUTION OF THE BUDDHA LEGEND

Lamotte goes on to give 6 reasons for **the development of the Buddha legend** (1988:662-685). Such causes contributing to the growth of the Buddha legend are: (a) the need to justify certain details in Buddhist tradition, (b) the influence of holy places on the development of the texts, (c) the incidence of religious imagery on the written tradition, (d) the borrowing from outside sources, (e) the claim of regions that were not converted until late that they had been visited by the Buddha and (f) the desire of the great families to be connected with the Śākya lineage. To this we should add, another important source for the growth of the Buddha legend: (g) the stupa keepers.

#### **(a) Justification of detail**

When a given source is in contradiction with a universally accepted tradition over a point of detail, the ancient biographers had to think of ways to explain the contradiction.

#### Rāhula

According to the Nidāna,kathā (J 1:62) and the Buddha,carita (B 2:46), Yaśodharā gave birth to Rāhula **7 days before the Bodhisattva's renunciation**. The Bodhisattva then trained under Ārāḍa and Udraka for a year, and leaving them, went on to practise self-mortification for **6 years** before finally attaining Enlightenment. Then after spending the 3-month rains retreat in Vārāṇasī, 3 months in Uruvilvā, 2 months in Rājagṛha, and 2 months on the road—altogether a total of some 7 years and 10 months—the Buddha reached **Kapilavastu**, his native town.

At his mother's instigation, young Rāhula<sup>24</sup> who was **more than 7 years old**, asked for his inheritance due from the Buddha. However, the Buddha's only reply was to have Śāriputra confer the going-forth (*pravṛājya/pabbajjā*) on him (V 1:82).

However, according to the **Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya**, the Buddha's first visit to Kapilavastu did not occur until the 6<sup>th</sup> year of the Ministry (T 1450 12 159a 8-9). In that case, Rāhula would have been initiated at the age of 12. In order to resolve this problem, the Mahāvastu, for example, recounted that Yaśodharā carried Rāhula in her womb, not for 9 months, but **for 6 years** (Mvst 2:159).<sup>25</sup>

#### **(b) The influence of the holy sites**

As A. Foucher (1949:108) correctly remarks, **it is not possible to separate the biography of the Buddha from the sacred geography of Buddhism**. Since the tours of Aśoka, pilgrimages to the holy places increased in number, which incited the guides to perfect their patter and recall new “memories”.

*This, they said, is the “Elephant Hole”, caused by the fall of the animal which was thrown over the walls of Kapilavastu by Prince Siddhārtha. Here is the “Arrow Well”, where the arrow shot by Prince Siddhārtha stuck in the ground. Here again is the shrine of “Chandaka's Return”, where the Bodhisattva laid aside his precious clothing and took leave of his charioteer.*

Pilgrim guide books existed from which certain “Lives” of the Buddha were based. The Lalitavistara, for example, is presented as an enlarged—and badly corrected—edition of several pilgrimage guide books placed end to end.

#### **(c) The incidence of religious imagery**

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<sup>24</sup> For details on this Rāhula case, see Lamotte 1988:662-665.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mvst 3:172-5 for a Jātaka where a king—Rāhula in the past—remained in his mother's womb for 6 years for 500 lives due to a bad karma.

Before the first centuries of the Common Era, the Buddha was represented only **aniconically**, that is, symbolically. At the beginning of the Common Era, through the rise of the Gandhārā school of Buddhist art, the Buddha began to be represented **anthropomorphically**, that is, in human form in the classical Greek style. Such representations of the Buddha were given in great detail, especially in the bas-reliefs, becoming more complicated and innovative than the early depictions on the stupas of Bhārhut and Sāñcī.

An old Indian belief, probably earlier than any carved representation of the Buddha, claim that perfectly enlightened Buddhas and Cakravarti kings are endowed with **the 32 physical marks of the “Great Man”** (*mahā, puruṣa, lakṣaṇa*) (D 2:17-19, 3:143 f.; M 2:136 f.). In terms of one of these marks, the Buddha is *jālāṅguli, hasta, pāda*, i.e. his hands and feet are marked like a net. However, in several lists, the *jāla* (net) is taken to mean, not a venous network, but a membrane “like a royal swan the digits of whose feet are linked by a membrane” (Lamotte, 1944-70 1:271 n2).

Similarly, the turban which adorns the head of a statue was interpreted as being a cranial protuberance (*uṣṇīsa*), and the precious stone set in the middle of the brow passed for a natural tuft of white hair (*urṇa*) between the eyebrows.

#### **(d) Borrowing from outside sources**

The early Sūtras contain considerable sections of the life of the Buddha repeated in part and completed in the Vinayas. While the later Vinayas (such as that of the Mūla, sarvāstivāda) added greatly to the Buddha legend, the **Pali texts** are the most restrained of them all, remaining in line with the early biographical sūtras.

Under the Mauryas and Śuṅgas, Buddhism made a spiritual conquest of all ancient India and, in the north-west, the Buddhists came into prolonged contact with **Western civilizations** represented by the Greek (Macedonian) conquerors, the Seleucid officials and the Indo-Greeks in Bactria and the Punjab. The ancient Buddhists also made important sustained contact with the **Śaka-Pahlavas** who replaced ended the Greek occupation of north-west India.

As such, Indian Buddhism was opened to a rich tapestry of influences from Greek, Serindian (Central Asian) and Iranian cultures and religions. **The first three centuries of the Common Era**, under the Kushans, were a particularly rich period of inter-cultural contacts and influences.

It was precisely during this period that the “Lives” of the Buddha proliferated which, while repeating earlier facts, embellished the account of new details and unprecedented episodes. Without the slightest concern for historical truth, they invented or welcomed anything that could glorify the person of the Master, both during his last life as well as throughout his former existences.

(Lamotte, 1988:668)

#### **(e) The distant journeys of the Buddha**

There is another powerful cause contributing to the Buddha legend: the desire of distant regions, which did not come under the influence of Buddhism until late, to have been visited by the Buddha as well. To judge from the early sources, the farthest that the Buddha ever reached in the west was **Verañjā**, a small village near Mathurā (V 3:1-11; A 4:172; DhA 2:153). Later, however, many journeys were attributed to the Buddha, both in India and abroad.

(1) Gandhārā claimed to have been the setting of former lives of the Bodhisattva. Then it was claimed that the Buddha went there in person.

(2) Kaśmīr. In the course of a journey in Kaśmīr, the Buddha converted the ṛṣi Revata.

- (3) Śūrpāraka, the capital of northern Konkan (on costal Mahārāshtra, western India), to which the Buddha flew with 500 disciples, and stayed in a sandalwood pavilion built by Pūrṇa. On his return, he converted the nāgas of the Narmāda and left the imprint of his feet on the banks of the river. (MA 5:90-2; SA 2:378-9; Divy 46-55; Mūlasarv. Vin. T1448, 3 14b-17a 21).
- (4) Sri Lanka, which the Buddha visited three times (Dīpv ch. 1-2; Mahv ch. 1). It is interesting to note that during these visits, the Buddha no longer sought to recruit monks and limited his teachings to a strict minimum. He was more interested in the construction of stupas and monasteries. He addressed nāgas and yakṣas rather than human beings. “He is no longer the ascetic Gotama of the early days, but a living advertisement for accompanied pilgrimages” (Lamotte, 1988:681).

#### (f) The lineage of the Śākya

If the new Buddhist lands considered it indispensable grant “citizenship” to the Buddha, the ruling families sought to include him in their family tree and claimed to be blood relations of the Śākya family. The Mahāvamsa Subcommentary, for example, declares that the Mauryas were related to the Buddha’s family (MahvT 181). Candragupta, the founder of the Maurya empire, belonged to the kṣatriya clan of the Mauryas, a small republic, whose capital was Pippalavana on the borders of the Nepalese Terai, was given a share of the Buddha’s relics (D 2:166).<sup>26</sup>

The glorious lineage of the Sinhalese kings also goes back, at least in part, to the Śākya family. If we believe the legend (Dīpv 10:1 f; Mahv 8:18 f), the second king Paṇḍu Vāsudeva (447-417 BCE) married the Śākyan princess Bhadda, kaccanā, the daughter of Paṇḍu, first cousin of the Buddha.<sup>27</sup>

#### (g) Stūpa keepers

Unlike the monastic practitioners, whose spiritual life centre around the Dharma, the less spiritually committed lay Buddhists generally need a more palpable object of worship and inspiration in their busy and uncertain worldly life. The life of the Buddha serves as a powerful source of faith and inspiration for the spirituality of the lay Buddhist.

An important development in Buddhist history is the greater involvement of lay Buddhists in Buddhist worship and practice. The closest physical connection which lay followers have with the deceased Buddha is with his relics enshrined in the stupas. Understandably, **stupa worship** (which began in India soon after the Buddha’s parinirvana) became very popular with the laity.

**The stupa keepers’ roles** evolved into those of curator and teacher. In the beginning, these stupa guides explained the stories (and perhaps doctrines) behind the art (mostly bas-reliefs and carvings) around the stupa. Most of such art depict the last life of the Buddha and his past lives. In due course, such stories evolved in complexity and the stupa guides became more confident of their subject.

### 17. WHY WE ARE NOT ENLIGHTENED

All good teachings are pointers to higher truths. One of the most popular and effective ways of teaching is through **stories**. At the beginning of this Chapter, I mention the two languages of *logos* and *mythos*, the literal approach and the spiritual approach. **Stories belong to the language of mythos** in the sense that they should not be taken literally, or at least, they are not spiritually “useful” in that sense. After all, they are stories about someone else, even if it is the Buddha.

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<sup>26</sup> See Lamotte, 1988:218 ff.

<sup>27</sup> See Lamotte, 1988: 682-685.

Such stories become “useful”, that is, spiritually liberating, or at least, they inspire us with joy, when we **identify** with their characters. This process of identification with the Buddha story goes through three stages. First, we feel **mentally** inspired, a sense of joy and zest in rejoicing in the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha as told in the stories.

Second, we allow the inspiring energies from the Buddha stories to settle into our daily thoughts and lives. We act them out in our **speech and actions** or allow them to inspire our words and deeds. At first, this takes some effort simply because we are not Buddha, and maybe we are not used to doing those wonderful deeds the Buddha does. As we allow ourselves to be Buddha-hearted, such compassionate and wise actions become second nature. Then we are ever nearer to spiritual liberation.

**Our lives are largely guided by the kind of role model we adopt**, whether consciously or unconsciously. As such, we have to examine who really are the people whom we take after or pattern our personal habits and daily lives. If they are negative people, then we would have assumed negative ways, which by such self-examination exposes them through our wisdom, just as Māra is routed simply by pointing him out with our wisdom.

Since we are privileged to have **a living memory of the Buddha, the most evolved of beings**, it would logically be to our greatest advantage to take him as our role model and refuge. **Why stand in the burning and blinding sun of suffering and ignorance when we have the cool shade of the Bodhi tree?**

Even then, we have yet to be enlightened. To be enlightened to see, that is, to **rightly see**, the true nature of life. Prince Siddhārtha saw four common sights that we would have simply dismissed, but he gave them second thoughts and he looked deep. That is why he was enlightened. We will examine the consequences of his extraordinary vision in our next Chapter.



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