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## BUDDHA, LIFE OF THE

The term *buddha* (literally, "awakened") refers to a fully enlightened being who has attained perfect knowledge and full liberation from REBIRTH. *Buddha* is not a proper name but a general term that may be applied to all enlightened beings. Therefore, the historical Buddha may be designated using this term from the time of his enlightenment (bodhi) only. Before that moment, he was a BODHISATTVA, one who was on the way of obtaining full enlightenment. At the same time, the term *buddha* is used as an honorary title for the founder of the Buddhist religion, the only buddha living in the current historical period.

### The dates of the historical Buddha

There is no reliable information concerning the dates of the historical Buddha's life that has been unanimously accepted by Buddhist tradition and by scholars. Traditional dates of the *parinirvāṇa* (the decease of the Buddha) range widely from 2420 B.C.E. to 290 B.C.E. The dates proposed by scholars who contributed to a 1988 symposium in Göttingen, Germany, on *The Dating of the Historical Buddha*, vary from 486 B.C.E. (the so-called corrected long chronology) to 261 B.C.E. The THERAVĀDA tradition calculates the death of the Buddha to have occurred in 544 or 543 B.C.E., 218 years before the consecration of King AŚOKA (ca. 300–232 B.C.E.) as calculated by this tradition. Taking into account the obvious error in this chronology, which was discovered when exact dates for King Aśoka became known, most Western and Indian scholars calculate 487 or 486 B.C.E. as the date of the Buddha's death. However, early Buddhist texts from mainland India belonging to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition, as well as two references in the earliest historiographic work of the Theravāda tradition (the *Dīpavaṃsa* or *The Chronicle of the Island* [of Sri Lanka]) date this event to one hundred years before the rule of King Aśoka, or 368 B.C.E. (the so-called short chronology). In addition, later Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist texts provide a considerable variety of earlier dates.

The lists of the so-called patriarchs are of great importance for a reliable calculation of the dates of the historical Buddha. All early Buddhist traditions list only five patriarchs, not enough for an interval of 218 years between the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* and King Aśoka. In Indian tradition, information about the succession of teachers was much more reliably handed down than any dates. For this and many other reasons, including the state of development of Indian society at the time of the Buddha, we may conclude that the Buddha passed away at a later date than that handed down by Theravāda tradition, including its variant, the corrected long chronology. Although the available information does not allow scholars to arrive at an exact dating, it is safe to suppose that the Buddha passed away some time between 420 B.C.E. and 350 B.C.E. at the age of approximately eighty years.

### Sources for the biography of the historical Buddha

On the basis of the available sources it is possible to reconstruct a fairly reliable biography of the man who was to become the Buddha. The sources are the canonical texts of the Theravāda, the SARVĀSTIVĀDA AND

MŪLASARVĀSTIVĀDA, and the DHARMAGUPTAKA traditions. Only the Theravāda texts are fully extant in the original Indian version in Pāli; the texts of the other traditions are fully extant only from Chinese or Tibetan translations and partially from incomplete Sanskrit texts. These texts do not provide coherent biographies of the historical Buddha, but they do offer considerable autobiographical and biographical information that was handed down during the first three to five centuries after the death of the Buddha. Oral tradition of the Buddha's teaching in various local dialects was responsible for minor differences in these traditions and for the insertion of mythic lore, which shall not be considered in the following summary of the Buddha's biography.

### The life of the future Buddha

**Before his departure from home.** The historical Buddha was born into the Śākya family, which belonged to the kṣatriya (noble) caste, considered by Buddhists to be the highest caste. He was later known by the honorary title Śākyamuni, which means "sage of the Śākya clan." The Śākyas were not kings, but they formed a class of nobles within a republican system of government that held regular meetings of the members of the leading families. The future Buddha belonged to the Gautama clan, so he was later on known as Gautama Buddha. His individual name was Siddhārtha (Pāli, Siddhattha), his father's name was Śuddhodana (Pāli, Suddhodana), and his mother's name was Māyā. Detailed information on Māyā is mainly derived from later literature. The family resided in Kapilavastu (Pāli, Kapilavatthu) at the foot of the Himalayas near the present-day Indian-Nepalese border. The future Buddha is said to have been born in Lumbinī, also near the Indian-Nepalese border. In 248 B.C.E., Aśoka placed a pillar with an inscription commemorating the birth of Śākyamuni Buddha (the so-called Rummindē inscription) in Lumbinī. Therefore, it is certain that during the time of Aśoka this place was identified as the birthplace of the Buddha. Lumbinī is considered to be one of the four main Buddhist pilgrimage sites on the Indian subcontinent.

Because Māyā died shortly after Siddhārtha was born, the future Buddha was raised by MAHĀPRAJĀPATĪ GAUTAMĪ (Pāli, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī), the younger sister of his mother and second wife of Śuddhodana. The autobiographical passages of the early texts describe in much detail the luxurious conditions of the bodhisattva's life in his home. Siddhārtha was mar-

ried to Yaśodharā (Pāli, Yasodharā), who is also called Rāhulamātā (mother of Rāhula) in the early texts. RĀHULA was their only son. The bodhisattva Siddhārtha was not satisfied with his sumptuous life because he realized that, like all beings, he was subject to old age, disease, and death. This perception caused him, at the age of twenty-nine, to abandon his home, don monk's robes, shave his head, and go forth to live as a homeless ascetic. Early texts explicitly state that he did this "though his parents did not consent and wept full of affliction." The legend that Gautama left his home in secret is of later origin.

A noteworthy account of an early contemplative experience of the bodhisattva before he left his home is reported in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* in the Pāli scriptures. Here, the Buddha is said to have reported that he had already experienced the first DHYĀNA (TRANCE STATE) as a youth when he sat under a rose apple tree while his father conducted a ceremony.

**Ascetic life and austerities.** After he left home, Gautama visited the leading yoga masters of the period: Ārāḍa Kālāma (Pāli, Āḷāra Kālāma) and Udraka Rāmaputra (Pāli, Uddaka Rāmaputta). When Gautama did not attain salvation under their direction, he went to a site near the river Nairāñjanā (Pāli, Nerañjarā) and engaged in extreme ASCETIC PRACTICES (Sanskrit, *duṣkaracaryā*; Pāli, *dukkarakārikā*) for six years, hoping to reach his goal in this way. Five other ascetics joined him as followers. However, when he finally understood that this extreme austerity would not lead to salvation, that it was fruitless, he ended these efforts, ate a substantial meal, took a bath in the river, and sat down under a tree of the botanical species *figus religiosa*, which Buddhists thereafter called the *bodhi tree*. It was here, seven years after he had left home, that he obtained BODHI (AWAKENING), perfect enlightenment, and thereby became a *samyaksambuddha*, or "fully enlightened one."

**The period of teaching and dissemination.** After enlightenment, the Buddha remained in meditation for several days. In the beginning he was hesitant to preach the way to liberation that he had discovered (his dharma) because he doubted that others would understand it. However, he finally decided to preach, and he set out toward the city of Benares (Vārāṇasī). On the way, he met Upaka, a follower of the Ājīvika group of ascetics, but Upaka did not take the Buddha's words seriously and went his own way. The Buddha then

reached R̥ṣipātana (in other texts called R̥ṣivadana; Pāli, Isipātana) near Benares, and here he delivered his first sermon, the famous *Dharmacakrapravartana-sūtra* (Pāli, *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*), the discourse at Benares by which the wheel of the dharma was “Set into Motion.” In this sermon, the Buddha explained the middle way between the extremes of luxury and asceticism, the FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS (the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the extinction of suffering, and the truth of the eightfold PATH leading to the extinction of suffering), as well as the impersonality of all beings. The site where the Buddha delivered this sermon is now known as Sārṇāth, and it is one of the most important Buddhist places of PILGRIMAGE.

The Buddha accepted his first disciples on this occasion and thereby established the SAṄGHA, the Buddhist monastic community. He continued teaching his doctrine for the next forty-five years. The Buddha’s itinerary extended from his hometown Kapilavastu and Śrāvastī in the north, to Vārāṇasī (Benares), Rājagṛha (Rājgir), Vaiśālī (Besarh), Kauśāmbī (Kosam), Nālandā, and several other places in the Ganges basin. Later commentarial texts provide exact information about the places where the Buddha took up residence during the rainy season of each particular year of his teaching period, but it is doubtful that the dates provided in these texts are reliable.

A number of important events occurred during this period, including the conversion of ŚĀRIPUTRA (Pāli, Sāriputta) and MAHĀMAUDGALYĀYANA (Pāli, Mahāmoggallāna), who became the Buddha’s two chief disciples; the ordination of MAHĀKĀŚYAPA (Pāli, Mahākassapa), who was to become the convener of the First Buddhist Council (*saṅgīti* or *saṅgāyanā*) in Rājagṛha after the Buddha’s demise; and the visit of the Buddha to his home town, where he met his father Śuddhodana and his foster mother Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, and where his son Rāhula and several other members of the Śākya family joined the saṅgha. Among them was UPĀLI, who was considered the most proficient monk in questions of monastic discipline and who acted as expert in this capacity during the First Buddhist Council. ĀNANDA, a member of the Śākya clan and a cousin of the Buddha, accompanied the Buddha during the last decades of his life. He was instrumental in persuading the Buddha to admit women into the saṅgha, thus establishing the *Bhikkhūṇī Saṅgha*.

Among the important lay followers of the Buddha was Bimbisāra, the king of Magadha. The Buddha was

five years older than Bimbisāra, and Bimbisāra is reported to have become a follower of the Buddha fifteen years after his accession to the throne. Bimbisāra dedicated the Veṇuvana (Pāli, Veḷuvana) grove near his residence at Rājagṛha to the Buddhist saṅgha; it became the first *ārāma* (place of permanent residence for monks). Until he was imprisoned by his son, Bimbisāra did whatever he could to promote the Buddhist community.

The Buddha’s adversary was his cousin DEVADATTA, who was ordained when the Buddha visited Kapilavastu. However, Devadatta later attempted to take the Buddha’s place and provoked a schism in the saṅgha. Devadatta was supported by Ajātaśatru, King Bimbisāra’s son. Devadatta and Ajātaśatru even tried to kill the Buddha, but they failed. Ajātaśatru then dethroned his father and imprisoned him with the order that he should be starved to death. Traditional Buddhist chronology dates the beginning of Ajātaśatru’s reign to the eighth year before the Buddha’s death. It seems that Ajātaśatru, most probably for political reasons, supported the Buddha during his last years; the Buddha’s public support was too great to oppose.

**The last days of the Buddha.** Although the chronological order of the events described in the preceding paragraphs remains uncertain, there is reliable information about the last days in the life of the historical Buddha. This information is handed down in the MAHĀPARINIRVĀNA-SŪTRA (Pāli, *Mahāparinibbān-sutta*), which is available in several versions that differ only on minor points. The account begins with the visit of King Ajātaśatru’s minister, Varṣākāra (Pāli, Vassakāra), on the mountain Gṛdhraḥakūṭa (Pāli, Gijjhakūṭa). Varṣākāra had been sent by the king in order to ask the Buddha if a campaign against the Vṛjji (Pāli, Vajjī) confederation would be successful. The Buddha responded by explaining the seven conditions necessary for the prosperity of a state, which he had earlier taught to the Vṛjjians. After Varṣākāra’s departure, the Buddha explained to the monks the analogous conditions of prosperity of the saṅgha.

After he delivered a sermon in Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna) and crossed the river Ganges, the Buddha traveled toward Vaiśālī, where he converted the courtesan Āmrapālī (Pāli, Ambapālī). At that time, the Buddha also met leading members of the Licchavi confederation, but different texts vary in their versions of this event. Afterwards, the Buddha visited Veṇugrāmaka (Pāli, Belugāma or Beluvagāmaka), where he spent the rainy season with Ānanda. There the Buddha fell ill



and was near death, but he recovered. At that time Ānanda asked the Buddha if there were additional instructions that the Buddha had not yet revealed to his disciples. The Buddha declared that he had completely and openly explained his dharma.

From Vaiśālī the Buddha traveled in the direction of Kuśinagara (Pāli, Kusināra). In Pāvā he accepted a meal from the smith Cunda, which caused a diarrhea that led to his death. The Buddha reached Kuśinagara (Pāli, Kusināra), where he admonished his disciples to continue their endeavor toward the final goal without cessation, and he passed away.

### Early legendary expansions

The preceding paragraphs reduce the record of the Buddha's life to its historical essence. This account relies on comparative studies of the ancient texts; these include studies of the various early traditions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the *Mahāvadāna-sūtra*, and other texts by Ernst Waldschmidt and André Bareau, as well as similar investigations made by other scholars. The existing texts include a multitude of legendary stories that crept in and, step by step, changed the original character of the biography of the Buddha. These compilations were written down in their final form centuries after the Buddha's death and only after a long period of oral transmission.

Although there is no coherent biographical text of the life of the Buddha in the early canonical works, later texts provide full biographies, and such works are available from various Buddhist traditions. In these works, the Buddha's biography is extended by a multitude of myths and legendary accounts. All these accounts begin by describing former existences of the Buddha; most begin with the story of the former buddha DĪPAṂKARA, who existed many kalpas (world periods) ago. When the ascetic Sumedha met DĪpaṁkara, Sumedha took the vow to become a buddha himself in a future age and he received DĪpaṁkara's confirmation by a prophecy (*vyākaraṇa*). He thereby became a bodhisattva who was eventually to be reborn as the historical Gautama Buddha. During the subsequent kalpas, DĪpaṁkara confirmed the bodhisattva's vow and received confirmation from the buddhas of these kalpas. Finally, he was reborn in the Tuṣita heaven, where he decided to descend to the human world.

In the human world, the bodhisattva was reincarnated as the son of Māyā, the wife of King Śuddhodana. Several miracles are associated with the bodhisattva's conception and birth. For example, the

conception took place even though Māyā had not had sexual relations with Śuddhodana. This myth parallels the Christian belief in the supernatural conception of Jesus. There was an earthquake on the day of the conception because a *mahāsattva* (great being) was to come into human existence. The brahmins at the court of Śuddhodana predicted that Māyā's son would become either a buddha or a universal monarch (*cakravartin*), and several other miracles were observed at that time. The bodhisattva is said to have entered into the womb of Māyā through the right side of her chest in the shape of a white elephant.

Māyā decided to visit her parents in the village of Devaḍaha. Before arriving there, she gave birth to the bodhisattva in the grove of Lumbinī. On the same day, the bodhisattva's future wife and his horse Kanthaka were also born. The king named the prince Siddhārtha, which means "he whose aims are fulfilled." The traditional biographies report that the bodhisattva lived in great luxury, and his palaces and other aspects of his life are described in detail. The bodhisattva made Yaśodharā his first wife, but he is said to have had a number of other wives as well.

Knowing the prophecy that the prince Siddhārtha would become either a buddha or a cakravartin, his father did everything he could to keep the prince from seeing signs of old age, sickness, or death. However, during visits to the park Siddhārtha witnessed a very old man, a sick man, a corpse, and finally an ascetic. After this he received news of the birth of his son Rāhula.

Then one night he witnessed his consorts splayed in disgusting array, and he decided to leave the worldly life. He ordered his charioteer Channa to saddle his horse Kanthaka, he entered his wife's room for a last look at her and at their son, and then he took his leave from the world (*pravrajyā*). This story of the four sights definitely does not belong to the earliest traditions of the life of the historical Buddha, but it became a constituent of all biographies of the Buddha at an early date. Originally it was derived from the legendary biography of a former buddha that is narrated in the *Mahāvadāna-sūtra* in the form of a sermon of the Buddha.

At the time of his departure from his home, the bodhisattva was twenty-nine years old. After following the instructions of several teachers mentioned earlier, and after undergoing extreme ascetic practices, the bodhisattva obtained full enlightenment (*samyak-sambodhi*) under the bodhi tree at BODH GAYĀ.

MĀRA, the evil one, is said to have tried to prevent the Buddha from teaching his doctrine to humankind. But the Buddha had become invincible by the power of his perfections, and he successfully repelled Māra. From the moment the Buddha decided to teach the dharma, he was the *Samyaksambuddha*, the “Fully Enlightened Buddha” of the current world period.

The records of the Buddha’s first sermon at Benares are certainly based on historical reminiscences. Some of the many events that are narrated in the various biographies of the Buddha do, in fact, have a historical background, especially those events that occurred during his period of teaching. However, all these stories were greatly exaggerated and many stories were invented in the later period. Among them, the JĀTAKA and AVADĀNA stories are important. These stories claim to be narratives of the Buddha’s former existences, before he was reborn in his last existence. Such stories are already found in later parts of the canonical collections of Buddhist scriptures, but many new stories of this kind were invented up till the medieval period. Similarly, the Buddha’s supernatural powers are also described in early canonical texts, but many additional supernatural faculties are described in later texts.

While some features are more or less common to all biographies of the Buddha, there are many differences in the details. Complete biographies of the Buddha seem to have been compiled no earlier than the second century C.E., as Étienne Lamotte points out in *Histoire du bouddhisme indien: Des origines à l’ère śaka* (pp. 725–736). The most famous biography of the Buddha is the BUDDHACARITA, which was composed by the poet ĀSVAGHOṢA, a brahmin who was converted to Buddhism. This work was widely read in Buddhist countries and transcended sectarian doctrinal differences. A Buddha biography from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition, probably the most widespread of the so-called schools (*nikāya*) of Buddhism in medieval India, has come down to us in a Tibetan translation. This text was translated into English by W. W. Rockhill in 1884. Another famous biography of the Buddha composed in mainland India is the LALITAVISTARA. It professes to be a work of the Sarvāstivāda school of HĪNAYĀNA Buddhism, but in fact shows strong influence of early MAHĀYĀNA Buddhism. This is also true of the MAHĀVASTU which, though a work of the MAHĀSĀMĠHIKA SCHOOL of mainstream Buddhism, shows many characteristics of “Mahāyāna-in-the-making” or “semi-Mahāyāna.” Several other Indian texts of this genre have survived in Chinese translations only.

The Theravāda tradition of Buddhism includes short biographies of the Buddha in late canonical texts that may have been composed in India and brought to the Island of Sri Lanka in the first or second century C.E., at the latest. The earliest available comprehensive biography of the Buddha in this tradition, however, is the *Jātakanidāna* (ca. fifth or sixth century C.E.). It forms the introduction of the commentary on the *jātaka* stories. Descriptions of the life of the Buddha in East Asian and in Central Asian traditions are greatly influenced by the legendary accounts as handed down in the later Indian tradition because they are largely based on translations of Sanskrit texts composed in mainland India.

### Buddhas of earlier ages

As mentioned earlier, a buddha is not a unique being; there were and will be buddhas in the past and in the future. However, there is only one buddha in the world at any time. The texts describe the biographies of many buddhas who lived in earlier periods. The mythical biographies of six buddhas of antiquity are described in a sermon preached by the historical Buddha. This sermon is found in all parallel versions of the early *Mahāvādāna-sūtra* (Pāli, *Mahāpadāna-suttanta*). Later Mahāyāna texts and Theravāda literature have increased the number of buddhas of antiquity more and more.

### The cult of the relics of the Buddha

When the historical Buddha passed away, his funeral rites were performed in accordance with traditional practice. The cremation was carried out by the Mallas, who lived in Kuśinagara. The bones left after the cremation were divided because King Ajātaśatru and other influential personalities claimed a share of the relics. The relics were enshrined in several STŪPAS, and soon the cult of stūpas developed into an important feature of Buddhism. It is believed that relics of the Buddha were later further divided and distributed to many sacred places. Besides the corporeal relics, material objects used by the Buddha, including his alms bowl, were venerated as relics and deposited in stūpas.

### Buddhas of the future

Though the dharma as taught by the Buddha is eternal and immutable, the tradition of the dharma and the process by which it was handed down in the world is subject to the universal law of impermanence. After a certain period, the dharma will disappear from this world, and it will not be known until it is rediscovered

by the next buddha. Thus, to be a buddha is not only a personal quality of a particular being, but rather a task to be fulfilled by any bodhisattva in one of the innumerable kalpas. As with the buddhas of the past, there are similarities in the various biographies of the buddhas who are expected to appear in future ages. These biographies are largely modeled on the main features of the life and legend of the historical Buddha. The next Buddha to appear in the world is MAITREYA. Throughout the centuries, many texts dealing with prophecies concerning the coming of Maitreya were composed.

### Types of Buddhas

The historical Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist religious tradition, was a *samyaksambuddha* (Pāli, *sammāsambuddha*); that is, he has reached NIRVĀṆA by his own efforts without receiving instruction from anyone else. The Buddha was fully enlightened and thus was able to preach the dharma to others. There is another type of buddha: the PRATYĒKABUDDHA (Pāli, *paccekabuddha*), who obtains nirvāṇa by his own efforts but is not able to teach the way to salvation to other beings.

In the Mahāyāna tradition, buddhas are supernatural beings who have descended to the human world out of compassion. There are several classes of transcendental buddhas and transcendental bodhisattvas. They are brought into relation with particular buddha fields (*buddhakṣetra*), which they are supposed to rule. These buddhas and bodhisattvas (e.g., AKṢOBHYA, AMITĀBHA or Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara, Bhaiṣajyaguru, Mañjuśrī, etc.) became the main object of veneration in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the later development of Mahāyāna, the concept of *Ādi-buddha*, representing ultimate reality, was developed. It is to be found particularly in the texts of the KĀLACAKRA system.

### Epithets of the Buddha

Buddhist literature offers several synonyms for the term *buddha*, as well as epithets mainly or exclusively used to refer to buddhas. An ancient term for a buddha is TATHĀGATA (thus come/gone one). As R. O. Franke pointed out, this term refers to an old messianic expectation that an enlightened being would appear in this world (pp. xiv–xxix). Some epithets relate to particular qualities of buddhas, such as *samyaksambuddha* (a perfect enlightened one); other terms relate to the buddhas' intellectual or moral qualities, for example *sarvajña* (omniscient). The most famous list of epithets

for the Buddha is found in the ancient sūtras announcing the coming of a *tathāgata*. The epithets listed there are *bhagavat* (elevated), arhat (holy), *samyaksambuddha* (fully enlightened), *vidyācaraṇasampanna* (endowed with knowledge and good moral conduct), *sugata* (who has gone the right way), *lokavid* (who knows the world), *anuttara* (who cannot be surpassed), *puruṣadamyasārathi* (the charioteer of men that need to be tamed), and *śāstā devamanuṣyānām* (the teacher of gods and men). The *Mahāvvyutpatti*, a classical Buddhist lexicographical work, lists as many as eighty epithets for the Buddha.

*See also:* Buddha, Life of the, in Art; Pāramitā (Perfection)

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