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The Life of the Buddha: An Interpretation

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# The Life of the Buddha

## An Interpretation

NAGAO GADJIN

ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA, the founder of one of the three great world religions, has from the beginning been the dominant figure of the tradition which he inspired. His life is widely known and has long been studied in Asian lands. Indeed it is fascinating to consider just what sort of life a remarkable man like Śākyamuni lived. From ancient times the Buddha's life has been described most elegantly in literature, inlaid with a variety of instructive episodes. Though without turbulence and conflict, it was nonetheless extremely severe and radically different from the life of the ordinary man. The biographies of the Buddha are interesting not only because they illustrate those unique elements that make Buddhism what it is, but because they also contain the seeds of doctrinal ideas which reached full development only in later generations.

If we compare the biographies of Buddha and Christ, for example, there are differences on a number of points. To mention just two or three, Christ was born the son of a carpenter and died on the cross at a mere thirty-three years of age. His period of preaching was perhaps one year, certainly no more than three years. In the case of Śākyamuni, he was born into the highest possible social class: as the heir apparent of a royal family. Furthermore, he lived a long life of 80 years which ended on a note of peace and fulfillment. Śākyamuni's period of preaching was forty-five years, and many kings of his time became earnest believers in him and his teachings. Thus the death of the Bud-

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\* This is a translation of the second chapter of the author's *Bukkyō no genryū* ("The Sources of Buddhism," Osaka, 1984). The original work is based on a transcript of a series of public lectures which were intended for a lay audience.

dha is surrounded by none of the tragedy of political oppression that marks the capital punishment of Christ. The differences between the lives of these two men seem to me to parallel the differences in the characters of the two religions they founded.

*Biographies of Śākyamuni, Sage of the Śākyas.* There are a number of works on the life of Śākyamuni in Japanese and Western languages by modern scholars, but when I speak of the “biographies of the Buddha” my main source is the collection of Buddhist scriptures on this subject that have come down to us from the past. These scriptural biographies available to us today were, in fact, compiled hundreds of years after the death of Śākyamuni. The literary attitude in India at that time was not like it is today when biographies are written immediately; it appears that two thousand and some hundred years ago even the direct disciples of the Buddha himself did not write biographies of their teacher. A great many of the accomplishments and events of Śākyamuni’s life, however, were transmitted to each succeeding generation; teachings and monastic rules elicited from them were memorized, and these in turn were passed on in the form of Sutra or Vinaya texts, and it is within this material that we find fragmentary evidence of the events of the Buddha’s life. Many centuries later, a whole genre of literature centered on the life of the Buddha developed that was based on this same source material. I am referring to such works as the *Kuo-ch’u hsien-tsai yin-kuo ching* (過去現在因果經, T.189) and the *Fo-pen hsing-chi ching* (仏本行集經, T.190), which take the sutra form; the Vinaya texts which, in explaining each precept, provide us with events and episodes from the Buddha’s life; the *Introduction* to the Pali Jataka which is itself a biography of the Buddha; Aśvaghōṣa’s *Bud-dhacarita*, a poem of epic length, and other writings.

At the time this literature emerged, the deification of the Buddha was in full swing; thus, these texts give lavish praise to the Buddha and are replete with miraculous scenes related in the most beautiful of language. Although these accounts offer a glimpse of the basic structure of the Buddha’s life, there has also been inserted a great deal of material that cannot be considered historical fact. Scholars struggle to separate fact from fiction in these texts, but this is an extremely difficult task. If we remember, however, that this biographical literature reflects the view of the Buddha held by the Buddhists of the period in which it was

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composed, the literature itself becomes just as interesting as the actual historical facts (which can never be fully known) about the life of the Buddha. I feel we should also view this as an opportunity to ascertain the character of Buddhist thought during this early period and to find within it the beginnings of doctrines that came to fruition only much later. Therefore, the biography of the Buddha which I wish to consider here will focus on the prevalent views of the Buddha and Buddhism at the time of the creation of these biographies, rather than on the historical facts of the Buddha's life.

Śākyamuni Buddha was born the son of the leader of a clan who lived at the southern foot of the Himalaya mountains. He married and had one child. He left his household (probably at about 29 years of age) in search of religious truth and, at about the age of 35, found enlightenment and became the Buddha. He travelled long and far, preaching throughout the Gangetic plain, gaining many disciples and believers along the way. Sometime during the 5th century B.C. (or the 4th century B.C.) he died at the age of 80 and entered Nirvana. Everything I have mentioned thus far is regarded by scholars to be historical, but there are a number of specific issues, such as the dates of his birth and death that remain problematic.

The age in which the Buddha lived was one in which religion and philosophy were remarkably advanced. In the Upanishadic literature produced during the two or three preceding centuries, many original thinkers had developed fresh thoughts. Economically, India had entered a period of great transition, with coin currency having been put into use. Politically, the center of Indian civilization had shifted from northwest India to the Ganges River valley where a variety of autocratic states had come into existence. Two of these states held enormous power: Kosala, situated in the northwest quadrant of the Gangetic plain, and its rival Magadha, situated downstream to the southeast. Both maintained powerful armies and hoped to annex the weaker states in the region. The capital of Kosala, called Śrāvastī, and that of Magadha, known as Rājagṛha, were about 450 kilometers apart as the crow flies, but about 600 to 700 kilometers apart in actual travelling distance. It was said to take 60 days on foot from one capital to the other, which works out to approximately 10 kilometers per day. The lengthy time needed for this journey is explained by the difficulties travellers must have faced in fording the many rivers, large and small,

that cross the Gangetic plain. The major rivers among them are the Ganges and Yamunā flowing from west to east and the Gandaki moving from north to south, all of which carry water from the Himalayas. All three of these have formidable currents with considerable waves and of course there were no bridges across them at that time. The actual preaching of Śākyamuni was done during continuous travel within the area of these two countries.

The name Śākyamuni, “sage of the Śākya,” is derived from the name of the ethnic group known as the Śākya into which he was born. This clan lived in the Tarai region on the southern slopes of the Himalayas in what is now Nepal, their small kingdom being located somewhat northeast of the city of Śrāvastī. It is not known what type of people these Śākya were, except that they were one of a number of different ethnic groups that had coexisted in India since ancient times. Today it is common practice to categorize the many tribes of the subcontinent into Aryan and Dravidian peoples. The Dravidians were the original inhabitants of India and are said to have been dark in color with flat noses and thick lips. The term Aryan refers to the conquering tribes that invaded India from the northwest much later and are regarded as racially identical to the Caucasians found from Iran west to Europe. But the internal divisions within these groups were quite complex, and it has been inferred from the remains of the Indus Valley Civilization that there had always been a mingling of the different ethnic groups in India. Indeed, it appears there was a mixing of Mediterranean (from the west), Australoid (from the south) and even Mongoloid (from the north) peoples. This seems to have been especially true in northwest India.

We really do not know where to place this Śākya clan among all the different ethnic strains. Some scholars guess they were of Mongol stock. In the literature they are called the descendants of Ikṣvāku, that is, descendants of the sun. This is probably best interpreted as an assertion that the Śākya were of Aryan stock; but it was common at this time for ruling families to trace their genealogies back to the legendary king Ikṣvāku, a son of Manu. Toward the end of Śākyamuni’s life the Śākya people were overrun and annihilated by armies from the neighboring state of Kosala. After this event, the name Śākya disappears from history. Adding this final fact to the puzzle, we are unfor-

tunately left with inconclusive evidence of just who the Śākya people were.

We do know that the Śākyas did not occupy a large area of land and that they were subordinate to Kosala. It is thought they ruled themselves with some kind of republican form of government from their capital at Kapilavastu. Śākyamuni's father, named Śuddhodana, was head of the ruling oligarchy in this government and is referred to as the king. *Odana* means cooked rice, thus Śuddhodana was translated into Chinese as "pure rice." It is said he had three younger brothers whose names were "white rice" (Śuklodana), "a measure of rice" (Droṇodana) and "sweet rice" (Amṛtodana). Because each name contains the word for rice we infer that the Tarai region was a very fertile place for rice growing.

Śuddhodana's queen, Māyā, came from the neighboring state of Koliya. She often is referred to as Mahāmāyā, the prefix "*mahā*" meaning "great." The term goddess or "*devī*" frequently is also affixed to her name, resulting in the form, Māyādevī. The word *māyā* alone is usually translated as 'fantasy' or 'illusion' in Chinese. In Buddhism it is said the impermanence of the world is such that everything is revealed to us only in a temporary form, for there is no real substance to anything. This notion is likened to *māyā*. Much later in Indian religion *māyā* became a philosophical principle used to express the creative power of God. The name Māyā also has been used since ancient times as the names of a variety of female deities, so it is indeed appropriate as a woman's name.

From the union of these two was born a child they called Siddhārtha. Siddhārtha means "to have one's wish come true" or "to realize one's goal." It seems this was not an uncommon name at the time, prompting some to speculate on the motivation behind its choice. It might refer to his "excellent qualities" or to the fact that he is "already accomplished in virtue" (i.e., the virtues befitting a Buddha); or it might simply refer to "the wish coming true" of his parents to produce the male child they had been longing for.

In addition to his given name Siddārtha, there is his family name of Gotama or Gautama, literally, "superior cow." In India where cows are so highly regarded, the name "Gautama" should be taken as a direct expression of the family's high social status. Gotama or

Gautama appears as a surname of many people in Indian history, including a number of ancient sages. Thus Śākyamuni's proper name was Gautama Siddhārtha. As it turns out, however, the followers of Buddhism rarely used his personal name, preferring to call him "Buddha", meaning "the enlightened one." Throughout the literature there is a standard list of ten different epithets for the Buddha that includes, in addition to those just mentioned, the titles Tathāgata and Sugata ("well gone"). In sutras, Śākyamuni frequently refers to himself as "the Tathāgata" instead of using a personal pronoun. This term encompasses manifold meanings but is usually translated into Chinese simply as "thus come" or "thus gone." Generally, it is understood to signify "coming into this world from true thusness," but it is probably acceptable to further interpret this as either coming or going "in a state of thusness"; to wit, to live in accordance with Truth.

In the early period of Buddhism the name Buddha or Tathāgata was synonymous with Śākyamuni, as there were no other Buddhas or Tathāgatas. It was considered impossible for there to be anyone other than Śākyamuni who could have experienced the highest and most complete enlightenment and thus become a Buddha while still in human form. The disciples of Buddha, no matter how far they progressed in their ascetic practices, were aiming for the highest goal known to them, the stage of the Arhat. It was unthinkable that they could become equals of their teacher Śākyamuni.

With the onset of Mahayana Buddhism, however, the meaning of the word Buddha expanded considerably, no longer being restricted to the historical Buddha. There were now numerous Buddhas who had appeared in the past and were scheduled to appear in the future. Moreover, no longer restricted to this world, there were said to be innumerable Buddhas in Buddha worlds throughout the universe. This became an accepted truth, and it is out of this ideological framework that the so-called seven Buddhas of the past and Maitreya Buddha of the distant future emerged. The land of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya was far off to the east and that of Amitābha Buddha ten trillion lands away to the West. Vairocana Buddha and the Great Sun Tathāgata (Mahāvairocana) were established as "Buddhifications" of principles of the universe. Yet another example would be Bhaiṣajyaguru (Medical Teacher) Tathāgata, the Buddha who saves sentient beings from illness. Thus the Mahayana is infused with a plurality of Buddhas and to



distinguish the historical Buddha, he is often referred to as Gautama Buddha.

The suffix “muni” originally meant one who kept silent and by extension came to designate an ascetic, wise man, or sage. Thus Śākyamuni means “a wise man descended from the Śākya clan.” Another common epithet of the Buddha is “Bhagavat,” meaning “blissful one” or “holy man worthy of respect.” This was translated many ways into Chinese, most frequently as *shih tsun* 世尊 meaning “the World-honored One.”

Establishing the dates of his life presents a real problem. In India, a country without a strong sense of history, there are many people and events whose precise times are unclear; often all we can pinpoint is the century. There are tens of different explanations about the dates of the Buddha’s life. Roughly dividing them in half, one camp concludes he lived approximately 560–480 B.C. and the other pegs his life from 460–380 B.C.—both agreeing his lifespan measured 80 years. The fact that these two academic conclusions differ by as much as 100 years is not at all unusual in studies of Indian history. I will make no attempt here to resolve this problem as it has no real bearing on the issues I am raising, but it is important to keep in mind, when reading modern works on Buddhism, that both opinions are currently held, the earlier dates generally appearing more often.

In conjunction with the uncertainty surrounding Śākyamuni’s dates, it is also worth mentioning that there have been scholars who even denied his historical existence. More than a hundred years ago, an eminent scholar of Sanskrit biographies of the Buddha, E. Senart, concluded that these biographies represented merely another example of the sun myth which occurs frequently throughout the world, interjecting doubt about the Buddha’s historicity. He was immediately opposed by many scholars. Moreover, there is now archaeological evidence. Śākyamuni’s personal relics and remains of his clan have been found so that today we can safely say there are no scholars who deny that such a man lived.

Within the Buddhist tradition statements vary as to whether he left his family for the religious life at age 29 or 19 and whether he was enlightened at age 35 or 30. Also, many of the miraculous tales in the biographies cannot be taken as historical realities but, as I stated above, they created an indelible impression of the Buddha in the minds



of the later adherents of Buddhism. As legends, what do these tales of the Buddha have to say to us?

*Birth and Younger Days as a Prince.* The birth of Śākyamuni is described as being accompanied by a host of miracles. Lady Māyā becomes pregnant by dreaming of a white elephant descending from heaven and entering her womb. The palace is overcome with joy. On her way home to have the birth, Māyā stops to rest in a park in Lumbini, and it is in this so-called “Lumbini-grove” that Śākyamuni is born. As Māyā reaches out to grasp an Aśoka flower, Śākyamuni is born from her right side.

We are able to pinpoint the location of Lumbini from the pillar erected there by King Aśoka (mid-third century B.C.) that was discovered at the end of the last century. In 1958 I travelled from this Lumbini to where there are remains of what is presumed to be Kapilavastu, a journey of about 19 miles. There were only extremely poor roads that traversed the fields, and the jeep shook like a boat coursing through stormy seas. The two and a half hour trip would have been far easier, it seemed, had we gone by elephant back.

In the story of the Buddha’s birth, we should note that the pose of a woman stretching her right arm up to grasp a flower is a traditional way of representing a beautiful woman in Indian art. It is often seen in depictions of goddesses in folk religion. The followers of Buddhism, in applying this convention to the mother of the Buddha, show him being born from her right side.

As soon as he is born, gods descend from the heavens to receive the newborn baby, while two elephants stand on either side of him, one pouring warm and the other cold water on the infant to bathe him. This is called *abhiṣekha* (anointing, sprinkling) as it is similar to the purification ritual performed in India when a king is crowned. This is not the only miracle, for soon after his birth, the child takes seven steps in each of the four directions, then utters the famous proclamation, “I am alone the one to be venerated in heaven and earth.” In other words, among those dwelling in the heavens and on the earth, that is, among all living beings, there is no more reverent being than him. As he says this the infant stands pointing up to the sky with his right hand and down to the earth with his left; this form is called the “newborn Buddha” and is commonly depicted in Japanese art.

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Miraculous events such as being born from his mother's right side and initially being bathed by gods apparently were believed by early Buddhists at the time these biographies were compiled because they felt there was no other way to express their profound awe of the Buddha. As they felt it was itself a miracle that one such as Śākyamuni, who was destined for Buddhahood, was born in this defiled world as a human being, they introduced these miracles into his biography. That the newborn infant could make the proclamation, "I am alone the one to be venerated in heaven and earth," can be thought of similarly. When we come to the age of Mahayana Buddhism, Śākyamuni is no longer seen as someone who became a Buddha when he was enlightened during his lifetime on earth, but as one who has been a Buddha from the limitless past. In Mahayana thought he merely takes human form to demonstrate the experience of enlightenment to the world. In other words, the "subject" or "person" who realized this enlightenment, called "original enlightenment," has been born once again in human form as Śākyamuni. Thus, this scene conceptualizing the Buddha's birth in this way anticipates Mahayana thought. The declaration, "I am alone the one to be venerated in heaven and earth" may sound arrogant, though in fact it is not, for it expresses the attitude held by later Buddhists regarding Śākyamuni as the ultimate object of respect. Also, after attaining enlightenment, the Buddha meets a man named Upaka while on the road to Benares and in a similar vein tells him, "I have become enlightened alone, without a teacher." This idea also is reflected in the original birth scene just described, where his enlightenment is a foregone conclusion.

After Lumbini, the newborn child is brought home to the castle at Kapilavastu. In the sky a wisp of purple cloud appears—an auspicious omen. Asita, a hermit living in the mountains, sees this cloud and, guessing that something wonderful has happened, descends the mountain to learn that a prince has been born. Straight away he goes to the palace and taking the new prince in his arms gives him a long careful look. Suddenly the hermit breaks out in tears. The father, Śuddhodana, scolds him, saying, "Why do you cry on such an auspicious day?" Asita answers, "The prince has been born with the thirty-two auspicious marks."

Asita also was a fortune-teller who read physical characteristics, and he recognized these marks as the thirty-two distinctive features said to

be visible on a Buddha's body. On top of his head was an excrescence, the *uṣṇīṣa*, the hair on his head grew in tight curls twisting to the right (*pradakṣiṇāvarta-keśa*), between his eyebrows was a circle of white hair called the *ūrṇā*, between his fingers was a membrane of skin (*jālāvanaddha*), and so on. One can see in Buddhist sculpture attempts to represent as many of these thirty-two lakṣaṇas as possible. In addition there are another eighty markings on a Buddha that are somewhat more subtle. These thirty-two major and eighty minor marks also are found on a Cakravartin, a holy king who "turns the wheel" of truth and is capable of subduing the entire world.

The hermit Asita then explained his reaction, "Because this child is endowed with the thirty-two marks, if he is kept at home he will probably become a Cakravartin; if he renounces the household life he will become a Buddha without fail. Whether he becomes a Buddha or a Cakravartin, the appearance of such a person in the world is an extremely rare event. I have already reached old age and it will be impossible for me to live long enough to see this. That is why I am crying."

Stories such as this clearly reveal the way of thinking of the Buddhists at this time. The authors of these biographies established a dichotomy between king and Buddha. They wanted to give the impression that the world of a Buddha's enlightenment is even more noble than that of a secular king of absolute authority who has conquered the world. Rather than abandoning these accounts of miracles and prognostications because they lack historical credibility, here is an example of how they afford us a glimpse into the emotions and affirmations of Buddhists living in India just before and after the time of Christ.

Various other stories accompany the youth of Śākyamuni. In one, just after birth, the infant is carried to the shrine of the local deity for his first pilgrimage, but when they arrive the deity is the one who descends his dais to pay obeisance to Śākyamuni. Many such stories have provided source material for the Buddhist art of later generations. As a child Śākyamuni was notably gifted and it is stressed that he was extremely capable in letters and the martial arts. In his special education as prince, he probably studied both the Vedas and Upanishads, and we assume he became well versed in both. In the martial arts as well, whether it be archery, wrestling or whatever he attempted, he is said to have been second to none. But he is sometimes depicted as decidedly frail, not at all of robust stature, and one wonders how much in-

terest he actually had in the martial arts. He seems frequently to have fallen into pensive moods; all the biographies depict scenes of him lost in thought on the meaning of life.

That Śākyamuni had a tendency to become pensive created nothing but anxiety for his father, the king. This was, of course, not unrelated to the ascetic Asita's prediction that if the young man remained at home he would become a great monarch, but that if he left household life behind he would become a Buddha. If the prince, who was being groomed to rule the Śākya nation, renounced the world for the life of an ascetic, the king would be left stranded. Hence his father ordered various steps taken to eliminate anything in the prince's surroundings that might bring on gloomy thoughts, hoping that by doing so he could prevent the young man from reflecting on the imperfections of the world. The king gathered a host of beautiful women to serve the prince, and the Buddha himself tells of the palaces built for him for each of the three seasons. India does not really have four seasons, only summer, a rainy season and winter, and three palaces were built to provide the most comfortable environment for each season. With the special consideration given him, Śākyamuni undoubtedly spent his youth in sensual extravagance. To a degree this may have been the usual thing for an aristocrat, but it is interesting that the Buddha himself mentions in the sutras that in his early years he lived a life of luxury.

He also married, although the age at which he did so differs from biography to biography. Generally, it is assumed to have taken place at about the age of 20. His wife was the beautiful and talented Yaśodharā, and a son was born to them, Rāhula. *Rāhula* means "obstacle", and the name is said to have come from Śākyamuni's response upon hearing the announcement of his son's birth, to which he murmured, "Ah, another obstacle." This is understood as indicating that he considered affection toward children to be an obstacle to his desire to renounce the world and cultivate the religious path. Taking into account a number of elements relevant to Śākyamuni's home life, it seems that the birth of Rāhula occurred quite some time after the couple's marriage. As his consort, in addition to Yaśodharā, other names, including that of Gopī, are mentioned. Gopī may be the name of another wife, or it may merely be another name for Yaśodharā.

*Seeking Amusement Outside the Four Gates.* Before Śākyamuni's renunciation of his home, one important event stands out in the biographies: the story of "seeking amusement outside the four gates." This refers to departing from the four gates of the city of Kapilavastu in search of amusement. Scholars today are generally agreed on the location of the ancient Kapilavastu. More than 20 years ago I went there to inspect the site. In scale it was a small city, about five hundred meters by one kilometer. There are the remains of a moat and one can imagine the location of each of the city's gates outside of which the prince sought diversion.

One day as the prince was leaving the east gate he met an old man walking along the side of the road. Shocked at this first sight of age, he said to his groom, Chandaka, "What kind of person is that? His back is bent, his face full of wrinkles, his head pure white—why he can barely walk! Who is that ugly person?" Chandaka answered, "That is an elderly person." When Śākyamuni inquired, "What kind of person ends up looking like that?" Chandaka explained, "Everyone becomes like that. You may be young now, but you will certainly look like him one day." Hearing this, Śākyamuni became pensive and immediately turned around and returned home.

On another day, they encountered a sick man when leaving the southern gate. Seeing someone suffering the enfeeblement of illness for the first time, he again asked, "What kind of person is that?" Chandaka answered, "That is a sick person. You are young and healthy now, but no doubt at some point you will become sick." Once again on the occasion of leaving the western gate, they came across a funeral. Seeing the deceased in a coffin surrounded by a group of people crying in loud voices and heading for the edge of a field, Śākyamuni asked, "What was that?" Chandaka responded, "Someone has died there. You, too, will definitely die someday."

It seems incredible that Śākyamuni would know nothing of old age, illness, or death before learning of them from his charioteer. Probably these stories are given in this form to show the gradual deepening of Śākyamuni's introspection on the human realities of aging, illness, and especially, death. Actually the king, because of his fears, had planned to lock the prince in a tower of the palace with women to serve him, but gave in to his son's desire to leave the city, thinking it might dissipate his melancholy. At the same time, the king gave strict orders that all

visually unappealing sights be removed from the roads, so that the prince would not feel even the slightest bit of uncertainty about the world. The fact that the old and the infirm did appear before the prince in spite of these precautions was because the gods intentionally conjured them up. The retainers were scolded for what happened, so that the gods made the scene of the funeral visible only to the prince. The explanations given by the groom on the reality of aging, illness, and death also were made at the instigation of the gods as everyone was barred from telling him about these things.

The fourth time, as he was leaving the north gate seeking amusement he encountered a śramaṇa: a seeker of truth who, having left his family behind, has entered the forest and pursues his religious path as a mendicant. The name *śramaṇa* is often mentioned together with that of *brahman* (or *brāhmaṇa*) in Sanskrit (usually brahmin in English), the highest class in the Indian social system. This indicates that śramaṇas, regarded as being almost the equals of brahmins, were highly respected. The śramaṇa the Buddha met had once again been conjured up by the gods for his sake. The śramaṇa's gait revealed an attitude of serenity and calm and his face reflected a mind free from care, ennobled by deep introspection. Śākyamuni was deeply moved by what he saw. As usual, he asked his groom Chandaka who the man was and this time he went on to question the man himself. From this experience Śākyamuni grew more and more certain that this was the road he himself must follow. On the day of meeting the śramaṇa and coming to know of such a lofty way of life, he experienced true happiness, as if a secret joy inside of him had finally emerged.

Apart from this story of "seeking amusement outside the four gates," various other events have been transmitted about Śākyamuni's life prior to his renunciation of it, all of which relate a gradual process leading to his resolution to leave home and become an ascetic. They also tell us about the objects of his concern which are none other than the central concerns of Buddhism—those aspects of life that no one can avoid: aging, illness, and death. Or, one might say, the problem of life itself.

*Renunciation of the World.* Śākyamuni eventually left his household behind. In traditional India, a scheme was established in which an individual's lifetime was divided into four stages (*āśrama*). In the fourth

stage, reserved for one's later years, the individual was to leave his family and become a homeless wanderer in search of truth. Although this reflects an ideal rather than any dominant social reality, the idea of renunciation was familiar to Indians in general. Śākyamuni was exceptional because he was so thorough in the actual cutting of his ties to his family, throne and nation. Thereafter he truly led the life of a homeless wanderer, sleeping under trees with only a rock for a pillow and sustaining himself only by receiving alms from others. The word *bhikṣu* which is often applied to Buddhist monastics (*bhikṣuṇī* for women) originally implied someone who had absolutely no place to live and no means of earning money; one who survived by meals begged from others. In other words, a beggar. Later, the concept of renouncing one's household referred to leaving home to enter a monastery where one lived and practiced religious discipline. But in this early period, *bhikṣu* were truly homeless. For Śākyamuni, who had previously led such an extraordinarily luxurious life, it must have been a drastic change.

Finally Śākyamuni decided to leave his family and become a seeker, but on the night he was about to slip away from the palace, he felt the urge to embrace his only child, Rāhula. However, seeing his wife Yaśodharā sleeping next to the child and fearing he might arouse her, he abandoned the idea and decided to leave immediately, being careful not to make a sound. King Śuddhodana, in great fear that his son Siddhārtha might abandon his family and home for the holy life, had surrounded the palace with sentries to prevent his leaving. Knowing this, Śākyamuni had his trusted servant Chandaka ready a superb white horse named Kaṇṭhaka upon whom he planned to make his escape. Here the biographies tell us that because the sounds of Kaṇṭhaka's hooves might awaken the sentries, four devas descended from the sky, each catching one of the horse's hooves before they hit the ground so that not a sound would be heard as they jumped over the city wall. The scene is frequently depicted in Indian sculpture. In the recently constructed Golden Hall of Shitennoji in Osaka, there is also a mural painting by Nakamura Gakuryō which shows Śākyamuni riding Kaṇṭhaka with Chandaka running alongside, and if one looks carefully there are faintly drawn white hands under the horse's hooves, the hands of the gods.

Having left the city, Śākyamuni removed his jewelry, crown and expensive garments, cut his hair, and gave all of this to Chandaka who



was then sent back to Kapilavastu. Śākyamuni, his renunciation now complete, began his solitary journey. Knowing he would probably be pursued, he first crossed the Lohini River and then walked southeast, eventually arriving in the kingdom of Magadha. Rājagṛha, its capital, was a center of learning at the time and many great teachers lived there.

During this first leg of his travels, one wonders just how Śākyamuni traversed the distance from Kapilavastu to Rājagṛha. About thirty years ago I tried to follow the same path, hoping to trace the route he travelled. But at present we lack detailed information about the road he took. On his trek, for instance, he inevitably encountered the enormous Ganges and Gaṇḍakī rivers, but we know nothing about where and how he crossed them. When I crossed the Ganges River aboard a large 600 ton steamer-ferry it still took about an hour. To avoid shallows and sandbanks, it was a very oblique crossing that involved a long drift downstream. The Gaṇḍakī is not as wide, but it is still a big river with rough waves. Śākyamuni had to face these same rivers in order to reach Magadha.

On arriving, he sought out two teachers: Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra, who were masters of meditation. But it was not very long before Śākyamuni achieved the same stages of meditative trance that his teachers had attained. Recognizing this and understanding how unusually gifted Śākyamuni was, Ārāḍa Kālāma suggested that they team up to train a large number of pupils. But Śākyamuni sensed that the stage of attainment he had reached was not true enlightenment and declined. Udraka Rāmaputra taught him how to achieve even higher meditative states, which Śākyamuni easily mastered. The meditations taught by these two teachers were extremely sophisticated, but Śākyamuni was still not satisfied. Like Kālāma, Rāmaputra also sought to keep Śākyamuni with him, but Śākyamuni refused and left them both, deciding next to join a group of ascetics.

*Ascetic Practices.* Ascetics enjoyed tremendous respect in India at this time as asceticism was generally considered the essential practice for obtaining liberation. There was a so-called “ascetics’ forest” in Magadha where such people gathered, and it was here Śākyamuni went to test the waters. By “asceticism” I refer to the belief in India that enlightenment can be gained through enduring physical pain—pain inflicted intentionally on the individual by himself. Today, yoga is well

known outside of India. In India, its history is extremely old, predating the time of Śākyamuni. There are many forms of yoga; one focuses on the training of the body, another is concerned with controlling the mind through meditation. Asceticism is one form of yoga, in which one causes extreme pain to the body.

Śākyamuni pursued asceticism for the next six years. There were many different kinds of asceticism practiced at the time and Śākyamuni probably tried most of them in accordance with the beliefs of his peers. He, himself, relates that he went through ascetic practices which were so painful that no one else could stand them. The gradual reduction of food was one type of ascetic practice. The intake of beans or rice would be reduced to a single bean or grain daily. Or a small amount of food would be taken but the interval between each meal increased to once every few days and finally to once every few weeks. This is equivalent to fasting for long periods of time. Because the sutras often record that those around him felt, “Gotama has died,” we know he was risking his life during his ascetic discipline.

Another practice we are told of was to close the nose and mouth and stop breathing. Although death is the end result of not breathing, it was said that by closing the nose and mouth one breathes through all the pores in one’s skin, making the entire body into a feverish mass. There is a famous statue in the Lahore Museum in Pakistan showing Śākyamuni in the throes of his ascetic practice. A superb sculpture in the Gandharan style, it depicts an emaciated Śākyamuni with sunken eyes and protruding ribs yet locked in an attitude of dauntless resolution.

Ascetics still can be seen in India sitting for hours in the scorching heat of the sun, keeping the head pointed down for an entire day, lying on a bed of nails, and in other painful poses. Such severe ascetic practices stem from the belief that the spirit will become free and exalted if it can be separated from the corporeal body, which is to be accomplished by putting the body through tortuous experiences. Today it is exceedingly difficult to imagine such an elevation of the spirit. In our daily lives, far from becoming free and exalted, we are nearly driven out of our minds even by such a relatively simple pain as a toothache; how much more torturous must it be to lie naked on a bed of upturned nails sharp enough to draw blood.

Living at a time when it was believed that asceticism was the key to

liberation, it was natural that Śākyamuni should also try this path, although he was probably unusual in that he threw himself into it to the point of risking his life. Ultimately, however, he realized the futility of asceticism and decided to abandon it. This was seen as apostasy by those around him and since ascetics were so respected, quitting invited contempt. But Śākyamuni sincerely sought the way to true enlightenment so, facing the truth about asceticism, he boldly renounced it.

He next walked to the banks of the Nairāñjanā River near the “ascetics’ forest” and bathed himself in it. Indians routinely bathe in a pond or river several times a day and there is religious significance in this. In contrast, there is one traditional practice whereby ascetics cover their bodies in dirt with the intent of never washing it off. Thus Śākyamuni’s bath symbolizes his repudiation of the creed of asceticism. After finishing his bath and climbing the bank of the river, Śākyamuni received a meal of rice gruel cooked in milk from a village girl named Sujātā and ate. Actually Sujātā had been making daily offerings to a large old tree nearby in hopes of realizing a wish and she was elated to find an emaciated ascetic sitting at the base of this same tree for she took him to be the spirit of the tree. She then rushed home and carefully prepared rice gruel for him as an offering. Rice gruel is extremely nutritious and having eaten it, Śākyamuni felt physically and mentally restored.

*Confrontation with Māra and Accomplishment of the Path.* On the west bank of the Nairāñjanā River there was a huge expansive tree, a variety of fig called *pipalla* or *aśvattha* in Sanskrit. Later it became known by the name “Bodhi-tree” or the tree of enlightenment, for it was under this tree that Śākyamuni became totally enlightened. Because Śākyamuni established himself as the “Buddha” under this tree and because it was located about 6 miles south of the town of Gayā, the site was given the name Buddha-Gayā (present Bodhgayā).

Before this event one version of the biography tells of him climbing a mountain on the east bank of the Nairāñjanā River known as the “Mountain Prior to Enlightenment” (*Prāg-bodhi*). Also on the east bank of the river a village named Sujātā-kuṭī can be found today and this name suggests the site from where Sujātā came to offer the milk gruel to Śākyamuni. Ultimately Śākyamuni crossed over to the west bank and spreading some cut grass under the Bodhi-tree, sat down to

meditate. As he sat down he made a firm resolution, “This time I will not rise from this seat until I have experienced enlightenment.” Finally, on the eighth day of the twelfth month (according to Buddhist sources translated into Chinese), late at night as the planet Venus shone in the sky, he reached “the highest enlightenment.” However, just as he was about to experience this enlightenment, he was besieged by the hosts of Māra. Through battling with and conquering Māra, he was able to reach enlightenment, and thus these two are often linked together in Chinese Buddhism in the phrase, “Conquering Māra, Accomplishing the Path.”

The Sanskrit word *māra* is transliterated in Chinese as *mo-lo* 魔羅 which is usually abbreviated to *mo*. This character *mo* did not exist in ancient times and is thought to have been created specifically for the use of this transliteration, combining 麻 (sound element *mo*) with 鬼 (ghost). “Māra,” signifying destruction or killing, essentially means death. There are several well-known frescos depicting the forces of Māra in Buddhist caves in Central Asia; the images are indeed frightening. If Śākyamuni were to complete his enlightenment and the true teaching thereby made available to the world, the influence of Māra would be that much lessened, so Māra appears with his army before Śākyamuni in an attempt to obstruct his liberation. In these frescos, we see the ugly, mean-faced warriors of Māra facing Śākyamuni with swords, spears, and other weapons ready to attack.

Descriptions of Māra’s army differ among the various biographies of the Buddha, but all of them are quite detailed. There is a real assortment of the hideous and grotesque: some of the soldiers have only one eye, some only half a face, others three heads; some have dangling tongues with split ends so long that they touch the ground. Some have heads that are merely skulls, heads attached to their stomachs, or heads of a wild boar or dragon; some have two legs but many bodies or one body but many heads. Wielding every conceivable weapon they surround the seated Buddha challenging his resolve not to move. They jump this way and that, flames rising from their bodies, some even floating in the air as they threaten the Buddha. There are warriors holding what seems to be a flame-throwing device and there are snakes spitting out poisonous venom. Despite all this intimidation, Śākyamuni sits unmoved. Māra attempts to crush his determination by cajoling Śākyamuni with sweet words. Māra whispers in his ear, “If

you would only leave this place and return home, you will surely become a great emperor and conqueror of the world.” Unsuccessful, Māra next sends his three daughters to entice him sexually. The three daughters use every bit of coquetry available to them, exposing their alabaster-like skin, luring him with song and dance, sidelong glances and soft words of flattery. They parade in front of him with their skirts lifted, saying things like, “I would love to serve a great man like you.” But, needless to say, Śākyamuni will not be moved.

One interesting aspect of this story is that when Māra’s soldiers put arrows into their bows, the arrows suddenly catch on fire, arrows or spears that have already been launched stop in midair, a sword-wielding hand becomes inflexible, the rain of fireworks falling on Śākyamuni become red lotus flowers. In the last line describing the flirtations of the three girls, it is recorded that they all suddenly become old women. All these miracles are said to be the result of Śākyamuni’s virtue, and the gods help create them in praise of him. What a beautiful and moving spectacle, to see weapons turn into flower petals. If only we in the modern world with our vastly more powerful weapons could achieve such a wonderful transformation.

In the midst of this battle there is a direct conversation between Śākyamuni and Māra. Māra attempts to weaken Śākyamuni’s self-confidence through a host of linguistic tools—cajoling, reasoning, etc. Śākyamuni reminds Māra that his resolve is of the highest order, that he will not waver, and that he will surely reach enlightenment. As he calls on the gods to attest to this, the ground opens and from it emerges an earth goddess holding forth a vase filled with lotus flowers, the earth shaking in all six directions. Māra is thoroughly defeated. The depiction of this scene in Buddhist art shows Śākyamuni in his *bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā*, that is, sitting in a full lotus posture with his right hand extended over his right knee and pointing down, indicating the moment when he sought verification from the earth goddess.

In this dramatic episode, “Conquering Māra and Accomplishing the Path,” Śākyamuni’s enlightenment is attained: the exorcism of Māra itself should be seen as the completion of the Path. Here Māra is understood to represent the *kleśas*, or mental afflictions, that form the basis of suffering. In other words, the battle with Māra is none other than the struggle within oneself. The departure of Māra means the *kleśas* are now absent. The three main *kleśas* are greed, anger and

stupidity and must all be eliminated. Although the removal of the *kleśas* clearly represents an enlightenment, this in itself is not enough. If there is no sparkle of penetrating lucidity, the light of wisdom, there is no true enlightenment. If it were only a matter of overcoming the *kleśas*, then, as in the example of the *kleśa* of sexual desire which gradually weakens with age, all would eventually be enlightened. But, in fact, the quiet contentment of old age normally brings with it diminishing clarity of one's intellectual powers. In Mahayana Buddhism the elimination of *kleśas* is important, but greater weight is placed on the attainment of the highest, so-called "Buddha" wisdom. The central question becomes: when Śākyamuni was sitting in quiet contemplation under the Bodhi-tree after Māra retreated, what kind of wisdom did he gain?

Biographies of the Buddha at this point record that all the actions of his previous lives became crystal clear to him, he was able to know the spiritual condition of all sentient beings through his "divine eye," and above all, he perceived the twelve-fold chain of causation known as *pratītya-samutpāda*, or dependent co-origination. This formula of dependent co-origination is somewhat complicated, but for our purposes here let us just say it is an elucidation of the human condition of confusion. The concept of dependent co-origination is unique to Buddhism. More than merely a central principle of Buddhist doctrine, it is its fundamental philosophical standpoint.

*Reluctance to Engage in Preaching.* The completion of the path, the enlightenment of the Buddha, occurred at about the age of 35. If his renunciation of the world is placed at the age of 29, then his religious practice spanned six years. There then followed 45 years of sermons propagating the Dharma until his "entering into Nirvana" at the age of 80. But Śākyamuni did not immediately start to disseminate the message of his realization. The literature relates an episode prior to his decision to expound the Dharma in which he hesitates or even rejects the notion of preaching altogether. This point, common to all the biographies of the Buddha, is a matter of utmost significance.

After reaching enlightenment, Śākyamuni, now a Buddha, remained where he was for some time (usually said to be either five or seven weeks). He reflected upon the process that led up to his spiritual breakthrough and allowed himself time to fully savour the bliss of the

Dharma he had realized. At one time, he was transfixed, staring up at the Bodhi-tree with renewed thoughts of gratitude for this tree that had protected him from the heat and cold. Another time, during a cold, week-long storm, it is told that he was protected by Mucalinda, king of serpents (*nāga*), who enveloped the body of the meditating Buddha with his hood. During this period, Śākyamuni also gave thought to the matter of whom he should speak to about this Dharma he had realized, this unsurpassed truth resplendent with joy. At the same time it occurred to him that it would be futile to speak about it at all.

“At the end of all this effort and hardship, I have now been able to grasp the highest truth. But I have given up the idea of explaining it to other people. Suffering from lust and hatred, the world would certainly find it difficult to understand this teaching. For it is subtle and contains much that goes against the common views of the world. There are profound and extremely fine points which are not easily understood. Burning with sensual passion and veiled in the darkness of pitch-black ignorance, people would never be able to comprehend it.”

With these thoughts in mind, Śākyamuni abandoned the idea of expounding the Dharma. At the very least, the people who wrote the biographies felt that Śākyamuni at one point had indeed rejected the idea of preaching the Dharma altogether. Upon learning that he had made this decision, the god Brahmā was shocked and descended from his heaven with great haste and said:

“In spite of all the trouble you have been through to reach enlightenment and become the highest Buddha, to enter Nirvana without explaining to others what you have realized would be a tragic loss to them. I beseech you, please expound the Dharma. For in this state of Magadha there are all sorts of defiled, improper ideas about the nature of man. The heterodox paths of the six teachers are part of this. You must preach the correct, pure teaching to counteract them. There should certainly be people who can understand you.”

In this way, Brahmā requested the preaching of the Dharma. This was referred to as “the supplication of Brahmā.” His entreaty to expound the Dharma was repeated three times and each time Śākyamuni voiced his refusal. Finally, from a sense of compassion toward the world he agreed to comply with Brahmā’s wish and expound the Dharma. That is, with his Buddha-eyes he observed the conditions of people mired in suffering and realized that although there were some people



who were foolish or steeped in defilement and evil, there were also some who were wise, defiled by few stains and striving for good. They were, he saw, like lotus flowers blooming in a pond; some lotuses remain submerged in the water, some have reached the surface of the water, and others stand out high above the water with beautiful flowers. When he expounded the Dharma, he was confident that its message would be understood and accepted by the intelligent ones.

Having made this observance, Buddha proclaimed his decision to preach with a verse as follows:

O Brahmā! The door to the ambrosia has now been opened.  
Anyone with ears should come listen with the purest faith.

The word ambrosia, *amṛta* in Sanskrit, means undying, immortal, eternal. This is how the Buddha's preaching finally began.

*Propagating the Dharma.* The Buddha, in beginning his career of preaching, considered to whom the first sermon should be directed. Remembering how sharp his teachers Ārāḍa Kālāma and Udraka Rāmaputra were, he thought it would be appropriate to explain the Dharma to them first. But he learned by his supernatural vision that both had recently died, one a week earlier and the other just the previous day. Then he decided he should speak to the five bhikṣus. Six years earlier these five mendicants had been asked to accompany Śākyamuni by his father the king, who was worried about his son's safety. They later became the Buddha's fellow practitioners while he was performing austerities in the ascetics' forest. But when Śākyamuni abandoned his asceticism, they thought he had degraded himself, and left him to continue practicing on their own. Eventually they took up residence in an area called the Deer Park (*mṛgadāva*), so named on account of the many deer living in its vicinity; it has been identified as the present Sārnāth, an area located in a northern suburb of Vārāṇasī (Benares). In order to preach to these bhikṣus, Śākyamuni walked alone to the Deer Park. From Bodhgayā, where he became enlightened, the journey to the Deer Park probably took more than ten days.

Regarding Śākyamuni as no longer a proper mendicant, the five bhikṣus had decided among themselves not to greet him or make any salutation if they ever saw him again. But when they looked upon him now as he approached them, they were so moved by his dignity that

they rushed to greet him and brought water to wash his feet. Śākyamuni declared he had reached enlightenment and become a Buddha; he then began his first sermon. This is known as “the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma.” This metaphor of the wheel is originally political, referring to the ideal of a world-conquering emperor who sends his war chariots out, thus “turning their wheels,” to unify the world. In the same way, the Buddha as the teacher of all mankind turns the “wheel” of the Dharma, setting in motion the grand event of expounding the Truth. The contents of this first sermon are collected in a small text entitled *Sutra of the Turning of the Wheel*. Its contents include explanations of key concepts such as the Middle Path, the Eightfold Path, and the Four Noble Truths.

Being wise, capable men, these five mendicants immediately attained the high spiritual state known as Arhat upon hearing this first preaching. Including Śākyamuni himself, that meant there were now six Arhats in the world. Within a few days this number swelled to 61 people because there was an instantaneous response to the Buddha among the young men of Vārāṇasī, many of whom renounced the world and also attained the enlightenment of an Arhat. At this point, Śākyamuni dispersed the group and sent them off, not in pairs but as individuals, to spread the teaching to everyone. Then the master returned alone to Magadha.

While the biographies of the Buddha are quite detailed concerning Śākyamuni’s path to enlightenment and initial turning of the wheel of teaching, they only give a general outline about what happened afterward. Aside from the significant event of his Nirvana, it seems it was felt that whatever needed to be said about Śākyamuni’s life ended with his turning the wheel of the Dharma. Nevertheless, we are aware of a variety of events that occurred during the course of his 45 years of preaching from their appearance throughout the canon. I have selected merely one or two incidents from among them to present here.

The Buddha, the World-honored One, now headed alone toward Magadha. On the way, a number of people were brought directly into the religious movement which we may now call “Buddhism.” One important event occurred on the banks of the Nairāñjanā River in which he had previously bathed, when the Buddha met and converted three brothers named Kāśyapa, each of whom, a fire-worshipper, had been leading their own religious group. This resulted in the members of each

## NAGAO



*The Buddha returning home following his enlightenment, being greeted by his son Rāhula. The Buddha is represented by his footprints and throne. Amarāvati, 3rd century. Indian Museum, New Delhi.*

of these groups, numbering 500, 300 and 200 persons, respectively, also joining the burgeoning Buddhist movement. The eldest Kāśyapa had already reached old age at this point and was apparently greatly revered in the country of Magadha. Nevertheless, the three brothers and their collection of a thousand disciples all became Buddhist bhikṣus.

Accompanied by his thousand disciples, the Buddha then continued on to Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha. There he met the king, Bimbisāra, whom Śākyamuni had actually met once before immediately following his renunciation of the world. When the king heard the Buddha had come to a forest outside the city, he took his ministers and went out to visit this holy man which, in turn, resulted in the king's own conversion. On this occasion, the king donated a bamboo forest retreat to the Buddha and his group. The word "retreat" (*vihāra*) later came to mean temple or monastery, but at this time it merely referred to a physical space as there was no reason to have any buildings as such for the monks. As stated above, a bhikṣu had no home; he wandered from village to village. However, during the three to four months of

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the rainy season, these mendicants were forced to remain in one place because insects and small animals were most active at this time and in walking through puddles and streams it would be impossible not to tread on and thereby kill them. Another reason for this cessation of activity during the rainy season is simply that roads became impassable due to flooding. In any case, travelling at this time was prohibited and each bhikṣu would build himself some sort of temporary shelter from the rain. For this reason a fixed piece of land was essential, and it was for this purpose that the bamboo grove was contributed by the king. With fixed residences during the summer rainy season, this period developed into a study session for the monks. One after another, such places of retreat multiplied and spread as the religion grew.

Perhaps the most famous among the Buddhist retreats was Jetavana. Donated by a wealthy merchant named Sudatta, it was located in a suburb of Śrāvastī, the capital of Kosala. Sudatta took pleasure in giving presents to people, especially in providing meals for those with nowhere to turn, and thus he received the nickname, “provider to the solitary” (Anātha-piṇḍada). He bought a garden owned by prince Jeta by paying the amount of gold coins it would take to cover the entire park and then donated the park to the Buddha.

During his stay in Magadha, the Buddha acquired two followers, Maudgalyāyana and Śāriputra, who later became among his greatest disciples. Being close friends, they had agreed to remain together in their studies with whatever good teacher they might find. There were 250 other disciples of their common teacher at the time they met the Buddha and the entire group decided to follow them in entering the sangha. When the sutras give the figure of 1250 disciples of the Buddha, they are referring to this group of 250 plus the 1000 people brought in by the three Kāśyapa brothers.

It is thought that it was also at this time that Mahākāśyapa, a native of Magadha, became a disciple. To distinguish him from the Kāśyapa brothers, the prefix “mahā” is added to his name. He too seems to have been well into his years at this time. Somewhat advanced in years and very strict in his deportment, he was a man of true virtue whom the Buddha trusted highly. After the Buddha’s death it was Mahākāśyapa who brought the bhikṣus together and led the job of editing the canon.

It is not known exactly when the Buddha returned to his home of Kapilavastu first after his enlightenment. The biographies give it

variously as two, six, or twelve years later. Upon learning of his son's attainment, the king frequently sent messengers imploring him to return to Kapilavastu. But it seems the Buddha did not attach much importance to going home. When he finally did return, he was greeted by the Śākya people en masse and he even delivered a sermon to his father. During this visit he convinced both his only son, Rāhula, and his younger brother, Nanda, who was about to get married, to join the order. The circumstances under which the latter made this decision are the theme of an epic poem by Aśvaghōṣa entitled "Saundara-nanda." The scene of Rāhula meeting the World-honored One is beautifully depicted in a medallion of Amarāvātī sculpture where Rāhula is shown at about ten years old. Considering this and other relevant facts, it seems most probable that the Buddha's initial return home took place between two and six years following his enlightenment.

*The Buddha's Death—Nirvana.* The biographies become relatively detailed again concerning the final journey of the Buddha prior to his passing away. The Buddha was now 80 years old. Leaving Rājagṛha, he retraced his steps on the road he first took upon leaving his family and headed northwest. Near the end of his trek, a newly converted disciple, the blacksmith Cunda, invited the Buddha and his accompanying disciples to a meal. Among the foods there was some pork (or mushrooms) which caused the Buddha terrible stomach pains, but he continued his journey nevertheless.

The personal attendant of the Buddha was called Ānanda. A cousin of the Buddha thirty years his junior, Ānanda was continually at the Buddha's side during the final 25 years of his life. Aside from his role of caring for the master, Ānanda is also well known as "the one who heard the most," for standing next to the Buddha he heard all the sermons expounded to a wide variety of audiences. He was with the Buddha during this final journey to Kuśinagara as well.

On the road again the day after the meal given by Cunda, the Buddha suffered from severe pain, and probably, diarrhea. Finally, he told Ānanda that he was tired and wanted to rest. Ānanda spread out a robe for him on the side of the road and there he lied down. How could one not be moved by this scene of the Buddha, having reached the advanced age of 80 and enfeebled by illness, the master of thousands of disciples, lied down on the road-side instead of seeking a place of

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recuperation under the roof of a disciple or believer? This shows how strict the Buddha's attitude was in adhering to the wandering and homeless life he had chosen.

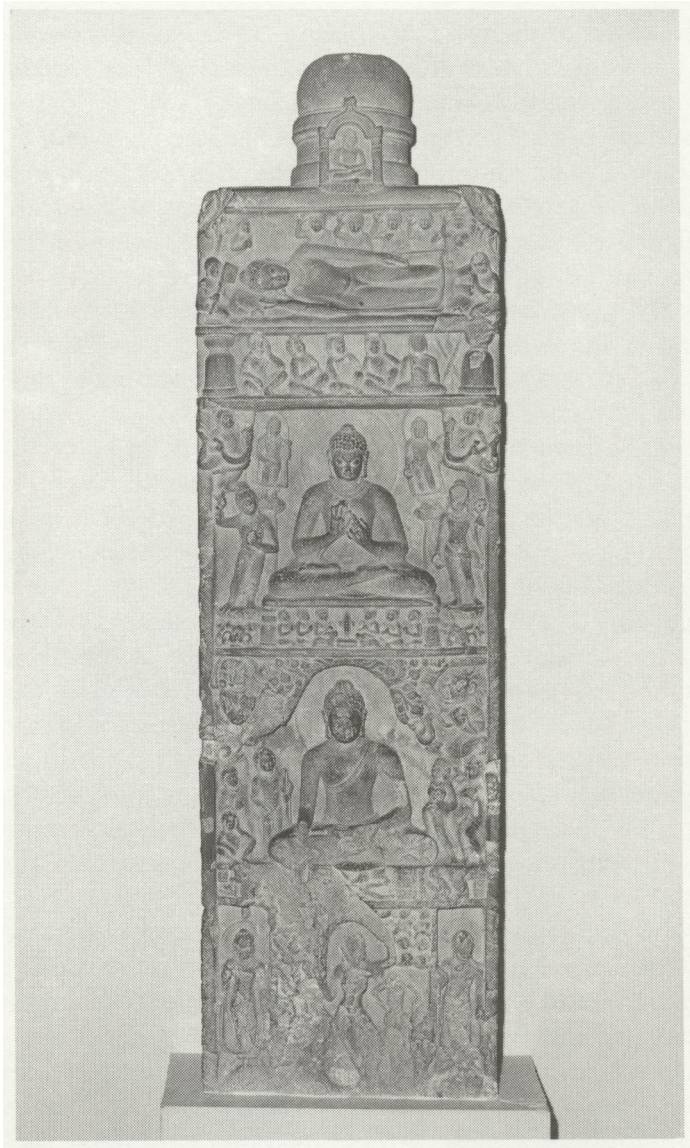
Feeling thirsty, he asked Ānanda to fetch him some water. There was a river nearby but only a few minutes earlier a caravan of horses and oxen had walked across it and now its waters were muddy. Ānanda replied that the water was dirty, and suggested they walk to the next stream. But the Buddha ordered him three more times to bring water from the river and when Ānanda finally approached it, he found the water had suddenly become completely clear. This is explained as another of the miracles performed by the Buddha's supernatural powers.

The Buddha then pressed on with his journey and straining his infirm body, finally reached the village of Kuśinagara. There, between a pair of Śāla trees, he told Ānanda to set up a bed for him. When the bed was ready, the Buddha lied down on his right side, his feet one atop the other, his head pointing north and his face looking west. In this so-called "Nirvana pose" the Buddha died. Śāla trees grow straight and tall, and produce a hard wood used for timber. When the texts say the bed was erected between "a pair of śāla trees," we do not know if this refers to only two trees on either side of the Buddha, or, as the Chinese translations of this passage have it, a pair of śāla trees surrounding the recumbent Śākyamuni in each of the four directions, thus totalling eight. The paintings of the Nirvana scene in Japan all depict the latter configuration, as well as a host of gods, disciples and animals in lamentation over the Buddha's death.

While the Buddha is lying sick a religious seeker visited, seeking to hear the teachings: he became the last direct disciple of the Buddha. At that time the Buddha asked the assembled disciples two and three times if they had any final questions. Confronted with their silence, he said, "Ask me not as your teacher, but as if you are asking a friend." But no one dared open his mouth. Then he added, "All things eventually perish. Do not become negligent but maintain your diligence in pursuing the Path." These were his last words. Then he repeated a series of meditative trances and finally died while in samadhi.

Ānanda and the others prepared the body for cremation. It appears that cremation at that time was reserved only for heads of state. They lit the coffin, but it would not burn. The eldest disciple, Mahākāśyapa,





*Stele depicting (from top) Nirvāṇa, Preaching, Enlightenment, and Birth. Sārnāth, late 5th century. Sārnāth Archeological Museum.*



## THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA: AN INTERPRETATION

happened to be spreading the Dharma far away to the south. Upon hearing by chance of the critical nature of the master's illness, he and other disciples rushed to see him but despite their great haste they arrived seven days after he had passed away. They reverently circumambulated the coffin and bowed in obeisance, and thus with the formality of their final parting now completed, the fire began to burn.

After an earth or water burial there is nothing to be dispensed with, but in cremation the bone-remains (*śarīra*) and ashes are left. The people of Kuśinagara wanted to take the Buddha's remains and enshrine them in their village. But all over India people who had received the teachings cried out for the remains to be divided up among the followers. Kings of eight different states throughout the land came together, each claiming their right to the Buddha's remains. Their discussion became so heated it nearly led to war. A wise man named Droṇa interceded in the controversy, resulting in the remains ultimately being divided into eight portions. The eight kings took their allotments home and each built a stupa to house them. Someone took possession of the urn they had been kept in, another gathered up the ashes from the pyre, and stupas were built over these as well. Thus there were a total of ten stupas erected across India.

A stupa is essentially a grave mound built of either earth or stone serving as a shrine to the memory of the Buddha. These first ones all contained his actual funerary remains. As architectural structures they originated with Buddhism, and came to be symbols of the religion in general. During the hundreds and thousands of years that followed these first stupas, innumerable others were erected throughout the Buddhist world regardless of whether they actually contained any relics or not. The Chinese transliteration for stupa was *ts'u-t'o-p'a* 卒塔婆, which became abbreviated first to *t'o-p'a* and then again to *t'o* which is the Chinese character for pagoda. Pagodas, first constructed in this mound shape, became taller and tiered as time passed. The three- or five-storied pagodas we see today, however, still preserve the original mound shape within its structure in the element called *fu-po* 覆鉢 located on the roof under the nine-ringed finial.

*A Peaceful and Lofty Life.* Above I have summarized the essential elements in the biography of Śākyamuni Buddha. Within the tradition, there is a list of 12 or 14 events which were considered an appropriate

summary of his lifetime. In Chinese Buddhism, normally eight are given, known as “the eight aspects through which the path was accomplished.” Different texts give different enumerations. In one text, the first event is the so-called descent from heaven. Before his birth in this world, the Buddha resided in the Tuṣita heaven; when the time came for his rebirth on earth he considered in what country and in what ethnic group he should be born, ultimately deciding on India and the Śākya clan. At that point he descended from the Tuṣita heaven in the form of a white elephant. The second event is his conception. Lady Māyā had a dream in which she saw a white elephant enter her right side and she thereupon woke up pregnant. The next six events are given the following names: 3) birth, 4) leaving home and fleeing the city, 5) subjugation of Māra, 6) completion of the path, 7) the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma, and 8) entering Nirvana.

In Indian sculpture, there have been a number of findings of single stones into which eight scenes from the Buddha’s life have been carved. These stones were probably utilized as aids in teaching the life of the Buddha. The group of episodes depicted differs somewhat from those described above, but the third, sixth, seventh, and eighth events always appear. They are: the birth which occurred at Lumbini (presently located just inside the Nepalese border at what is now called Lummindei), the enlightenment at Buddhagayā (now called Bodhgayā), the first sermon at Mrgadāva (corresponding to the present Sārṇāth), and his entering into Nirvana at Kuśinagara (present day Kasia). The geographical locations where these four events took place became holy sites to which Buddhists were expected to make pilgrimages. Accordingly, stupas, temples, and other memorials have been erected at these four sites and have become the objects of the pilgrimage. Even today, many such groups of pilgrims arrive from such countries as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. At the same time, mementos, such as clay medallions, have always been made by the local populace for the pilgrims, an industry which no doubt contributed to the development of Buddhist art.

The life of Śākyamuni was certainly not without turmoil. During his youth, he willingly undertook life-threatening austerities. In his later years, his cousin Devadatta, while renouncing the world to become his disciple, actually plotted to murder Śākyamuni and take control of the Buddhist order. Furthermore, there was the tragic incident in which

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the newly crowned king of Kosala, Viḍūḍabha, feeling resentment at being humiliated by the Śākya clan, sent his troops into Śākya territory where they massacred the entire population. Despite all this, Śākyamuni lived a peaceful and lofty life of 80 years. This is in marked contrast to the life of Jesus Christ who barely lived beyond the age of thirty before falling victim to political oppression, resulting in the ultimate punishment of crucifixion. Though born into a royal family, Śākyamuni always stood outside the pale of politics; yet he was respected by many kings, several of whom could be considered Buddhists. The life of Mohammed also contrasts sharply with that of the Buddha. Wielding political power alongside his religious authority, Mohammed struggled to establish a nation. During his later years Mohammed led huge armies into battle, fighting day and night. He married eleven times, taking his last wife at the age of 62, one year before his death.

It is worth considering how the life of the founder of a religion influences the subsequent nature of the faith. One characteristic of Buddhist history is the near total lack of religious strife fought under the banner of religious truth. No wars have been fought with other religions. It would be a mistake to assume this fact is unrelated to the peaceful nature of Śākyamuni's character as reflected in his way of life. The various stories and ideological attitudes that appear in the biographies of the Buddha are thought to have exerted considerable influence on later Buddhist doctrine and philosophy in a number of ways. I will deal with this subject in the next talk.

TRANSLATED BY MARK L. BLUM