

# I

## Stories of the Buddha



### The Many 'Lives' of the Buddha

It was the Venetian merchant and adventurer Marco Polo (1254–1324) who gave to the West its first account of the life of the Buddha. Between 1292 and 1295, Marco arrived in Sri Lanka. There, he heard the story of the life of Sergamoni Borcan. This Sergamoni, he tells us, 'was the first man in whose name idols were first made'.<sup>1</sup> In short, the Buddha was the origin of all pagan idolatry. Sergamoni was, the idolaters declared, 'the best man who ever lived among them. He was the first man they held holy and in whose name they made idols.'<sup>2</sup>

According to Marco, Sergamoni Borcan was the son of a great king who wished to renounce the world. The king moved Sergamoni into a palace and tempted him with the sensual delights of thirty thousand maidens. But Sergamoni was unmoved in his resolve. When his father allowed him to leave the palace for the first time, he encountered a dead man and an infirm old man. He returned to the palace frightened and astonished, 'saying to himself that he would not remain in this bad world but would go seeking the one who had made it and did not die'.<sup>3</sup> Sergamoni then left the palace secretly and

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Kinoshita (trans.), *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168–9.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

lived the abstinent life of a celibate recluse. ‘Certainly’, Marco declared, had he been Christian, ‘he would have been a great saint with our Lord Jesus Christ’.<sup>4</sup>

Sergamoni Borcan was a name that Marco had learnt at the court of Kublai Khan (1215–1294) in China, for Sergamoni Borcan was the Mongolian name for the Buddha: Sergamoni for Śākyamuni – the sage of the Śākya clan – and Borcan for Buddha – the ‘divine’ one. The Buddha was also known as Bhagavān – the Blessed One, or Lord. His family name was Gotama (in the Pāli language) or Gautama (in Sanskrit).<sup>5</sup> Although it does not appear in the earliest traditions, his personal name was said to be Siddhārtha, which means ‘one who has achieved his purpose’. This name has been ‘retrofitted’ to the Buddha because of his having become the ‘enlightened one’.

We know the early Buddhist traditions about the life of the Buddha from two sets of literature in two closely related Indian languages: the earlier one in Pāli dating back to the first century BCE; the later one in Sanskrit from the first century BCE to the early centuries of the Common Era, subsequently translated into Chinese and Tibetan. The Pāli canon contains the scriptures of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition – that form of Buddhism still extant in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The Sanskrit texts come from Mahāyāna Buddhism – that branch of early Indian Buddhism that was to make its way into China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> For ease of reading, except where necessary, I use the Sanskrit versions of names and terms.

The earliest Buddhist traditions showed little interest in the biographical details of the life of the Buddha as such. To be sure, his teachings after his enlightenment within the Pāli literature especially were often derived from a particular context within his life. But it was, after all, the teachings of the Buddha – the Dharma as Buddhists call it – rather than his person that mattered. That said, we can discern a growing interest in the genre of biography, and especially the events of his life prior to his enlightenment, from the first century BCE up until the fifth century CE. This reflects the development within Buddhism of interpreting the Buddha not merely as a teacher but also as a divine and heavenly saviour – a figure in both the past and the present who can not only teach the way to liberation but can also personally assist in the individual's attaining of it.

Over these centuries there developed in both Pāli and Sanskrit continuous 'lives' of the Buddha from his birth (and before) to his renunciation of the world, his enlightenment, his teachings, and finally to his death. Thus, it is possible, on this basis, to tell a composite story of the life of the Buddha as it came to be imagined within early Buddhism by drawing on these various 'biographies' – especially the *Mahāvastu* (first century CE), the *Lalitavistara* (third to fourth centuries CE), the *Buddhacarita* (second century CE), the *Nidānakathā* (second to third centuries CE), the *Buddhavamsa* (second to first centuries BCE) and the scholar-monk Buddhadatta's commentary on it (fifth century CE), the *Jātaka* tales (500 CE), and the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta* (fifth century CE). And it was a version of one of these – probably the Pāli *Nidānakathā* – that led Marco Polo to recognise the distinctive 'saintly' qualities of the Buddha.

These biographies were created in the context of competition between the Buddhist and the Brahmanical (or Hindu as we would call it) traditions on both sides of the beginning of the Common Era. Against the teaching of the Brahmins, the biographies emphasised that the Buddha both taught transcendent truth *and* incarnated it. Moreover, the texts stressed that not only the Brahmins recognised the superiority of the Buddha, but their own gods did so, too. Within the Christian tradition, the person and teaching of Jesus were thought both to fulfil and therefore to transcend the Jewish tradition out of which Jesus arose. Similarly, within the Buddhist tradition, the person and teaching of the Buddha were thought to fulfil and thereby supersede the Brahmanical tradition. It was a case of Brahmanical dharma versus Buddhist dharma. The biographies of the Buddha were intended to demonstrate the superiority of the Buddhist dharma over that of the Brahmanical.

The various lives of the Buddha have been so overlaid with myth and legend that it is almost impossible to separate fact from fiction. We might say that the attempt to separate the Siddhārtha of history from the Buddha of faith has been as difficult and just as unsuccessful as finding the Jesus of history behind the Christ of faith. Like the search for the historical Jesus, the search for the historical Buddha seems to be an undeniably modern Western preoccupation.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, that the

<sup>6</sup> For the recent modern debate, see David Drewes, 'The Idea of the Historical Buddha', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 40 (2017), pp. 1–25; Alexander Wynne, 'Did the Buddha Exist?', *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 16 (2019),

Buddhist tradition is ultimately reliant upon a historical figure seems undeniable.

That said, it is difficult to determine the exact dates of the Buddha. There is a general agreement that the Buddha lived for eighty years. But there remains disagreement on the dates that these years cover. Determining the dates of the Buddha has been an academic cottage industry since the first estimate was made by Belgian Jesuit missionary Philippe Couplet (1623–1693) in 1687 in a work on Confucius. He gave the year 1026 BCE for the birth of Foe (i.e. the Buddha) and 947/946 BCE for that of his death, with his enlightenment at the age of thirty. ‘The horrible deceiver’, he declared, ‘spread his dogmas far and wide throughout the Orient for a total of forty-nine years, at the time when Solomon himself, the king of flowing wisdom, was ruling over the West.’<sup>7</sup>

Within Buddhism itself, there were two predominant alternative chronologies. The Ceylonese Long Chronology, accepted by the Theravādin tradition, dated the life of the Buddha from c. 624 to c. 544 BCE. The Indian Short Chronology of the Mahāyāna Sanskrit and Chinese traditions dated his life from c. 448 to c. 368 BCE. In both cases, the dates of the Buddha were calculated from the reign of King Aśoka, the third Indian Mauryan king and, at least according to legend, the first regal convert to Buddhism. The Long Chronology

pp. 98–148; Bryan Levman, ‘The Historical Buddha: Response to Drewes’, *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* no. 14 (2019), pp. 25–56.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Siglinde Dietz, ‘The Dating of the Historical Buddha in the History of Western Scholarship up to 1980’, in Heinz Bechert (ed.), *When Did the Buddha Live? The Controversy on the Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1995), p. 40.

relied upon the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka, the *Mahāvamsa* (fifth century CE). According to this, ‘Be it known that two hundred and eighteen years had passed from the nibbāna [or the death] of the Master unto Aśoka’s consecration.’<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, the Short Chronology has it that the Buddha died only some 100 years before the accession of Aśoka to the throne. Thus, the earliest source for this chronology, the *Aśokāvadāna* (second century CE), mentions several times that there is only a 100-year gap between the death of the Buddha and the accession of Aśoka. For example, on one occasion, a monk informs Aśoka that ‘with reference to you, the Blessed One predicted that one hundred years after his parinirvāna [i.e. his death] there would be in the city of Pātaliputra a king named Aśoka . . . a righteous dharmarāja who would distribute his bodily relics far and wide, and build the eighty-four thousand dharmarājikās [stupas or reliquaries]’.<sup>9</sup>

The key to both the Long and Short Chronologies was the date of accession of Aśoka. This turned out to be a major problem for the Long Chronology, as was pointed out as early as 1836 by a British colonial administrator in Ceylon, George Turnour (1799–1843). In his seminal study of the Pāli *Mahāvamsa*, Turnour realised that the dating of the life of Aśoka in the *Mahāvamsa* was some sixty years earlier than that derivable from comparable

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 5.21, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> John S. Strong (trans.), *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 217. See also p. 203.

Western sources.<sup>10</sup> This was to lead to a Corrected Long Chronology that set the accession of Aśoka at c. 268 BCE and recalculated the life of the Buddha as from c. 567 to c. 486 BCE. The Short Chronology was also problematic. As John Strong remarks, the ‘one hundred years’ may be no more than a formulaic way ‘of stating that Aśoka was living at a time when there was no one still alive who had actually known the Buddha personally’.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the modern French scholar Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983) went a sceptical step too far in declaring that ‘[t]he modern historian can opt for either the long chronology or the short’.<sup>12</sup> It is undoubtedly more complicated than that. Uncertainty reigns. But we should probably be not too far wrong were we to assume that the Buddha died somewhere around 400 BCE.<sup>13</sup> The better to orient (or perhaps to ‘occident’) ourselves, we may note that, if this is the case, the life of Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), the teacher of Plato, overlaps with that of the Buddha. That has a certain pleasant symmetry about it. Where the dates of the Buddha are so fragile, we need to be careful in

<sup>10</sup> See George Turnour, *The Mahāwanso in Roman Characters with the Translation Subjoined . . .* (Ceylon: Cotta Church Mission Press, 1837), p. xlvi. It was in effect the first Pāli text ever to be printed.

<sup>11</sup> Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Étienne Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śāka Era* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988), p. 14. See also Heinz Bechert, ‘The Dates of the Buddha and the Origin and Spread of the Theravāda Chronology’, in Heinz Bechert (ed.), *When Did the Buddha Live? The Controversy on the Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1995), pp. 254–86.

<sup>13</sup> See Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 14. That said, Heinz Bechert suggests that the Buddha died sometime between c. 400 and c. 350 BCE. See Bechert, ‘The Dates of the Buddha’, p. 286.

giving too much credence to the dating of any of the events within them.

That said, for the Buddhist tradition, the life of the Buddha does not begin in c. 500 BCE. Simply put, there is no beginning to the life of the Buddha. This is because there has never been a time when he was not. The Buddha, like all of us, has been bound to an infinite cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths – Samsāra (wandering). All creatures in the universe have been reborn billions of times. As the Buddha is reported to have said, ‘The transmigration of beings [Samsāra], O my disciples, has its origin in the remote past. It is impossible to discover a beginning for the beings caught in ignorance, enmeshed by the desire for life, wandering from rebirth to rebirth, moaning and weeping and shedding more tears than there are drops of water in the great ocean.’<sup>14</sup>

The quality of each of these lives is the consequence of good and bad actions committed in a preceding life. Thus, each person is continually reborn in different physical forms according to the law of karma – a cosmic law of moral debit and credit. Each moral deed, virtuous or otherwise, leaves its mark on the individual. At the time of death, the sum total of karma determines the individual person’s status in the next life. Still, among the myriads of persons being reborn every moment, there are occasions in the cycles of the universe when particularly compassionate individuals determine to become Buddhas. Their aim is to obtain liberation (Nirvāna) from the endless

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by A. Foucher, *The Life of the Buddha According to the Ancient Texts and Monuments of India* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963), p. 14.



cycle of rebirths and to assist their fellow creatures in doing likewise.

Gautama was one in a long series of Buddhas. The Pāli text the *Buddhavamsa* describes the life of Gautama and the twenty-four Buddhas who preceded him, as well as naming the Buddha who would come after him – Metteyya (in Sanskrit, Maitreya).<sup>15</sup> The stories of the Buddhas prior to Gautama gave his teaching legitimacy as the rediscoverer of an aeons-old teaching. His appearance became necessary when the teaching of the previous Buddha was lost and when the world was again receptive to it. The construction of the lives of the earlier Buddhas was intended to emphasise to the cultured despisers of Buddhism among other contemporary religions, especially the dominant Brahmanical tradition, that his teaching was not only new but also ancient – and not only ancient but interminably so.

Because of his enlightenment, the Buddha had knowledge of the lives of the previous Buddhas. Thus, the *Buddhavamsa* informs us, the Buddha ‘expounded what had been taught about past Buddhas, Conquerors [as it had been] celebrated and handed down’.<sup>16</sup> But he also knew of his own previous lives. According to the *Buddhavamsa*, it was ‘a hundred thousand eons and four incalculable aeons ago’ that he had lived as an ascetic named Sumedha, a millionaire grain merchant but also learned in all the duties of the Brahmanical priesthood.<sup>17</sup> Recognising his subjection to birth, old age, and ill health,

<sup>15</sup> On past and future Buddhas, see Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 126–84.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, *Nirvana*, 1.79, p. 153. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1, p. 154.

Sumedha determined to ‘seek for the unageing, undying safety, and peace [of Nirvāna]’.<sup>18</sup> He gave away all his wealth and went off to the Himalayas in search of liberation.

According to Gautama, while acquiring supernatural attainments and gaining mastery of ascetic practices as Sumedha, there appeared in the world the Buddha Dīpankara. Having encountered Dīpankara, Sumedha made the vow himself to become a future Buddha: ‘By this resolution I have made (in the presence of him) who is unsurpassed among men, I will attain omniscience and cause many people to cross over.’<sup>19</sup> Dīpankara recognised that Sumedha would attain Buddhahood. ‘Do you see this ascetic, this great matted-hair ascetic?’ he asked. ‘Countless aeons from now he will be a Buddha in (this world).’<sup>20</sup> Having heard the words of Dīpankara, the beings and gods of the ten thousand world systems clapped their hands with joy and made obeisance to Sumedha. He then became a ‘Bodhisattva’ (in Pāli, ‘Bodhisatta’) – ‘a being intent on achieving enlightenment’.

When Sumedha heard what the Buddha Dīpankara and those who lived in the ten thousand world systems had said, he was happy and contented. ‘What Buddhas say has but one sure meaning’, he declared. ‘Conquerors do not speak falsely. There is no falsehood in Buddhas – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!’<sup>21</sup> He then embarked upon the cultivation of the ten perfections that would enable him to attain Buddhahood – giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truth,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 2.7, p. 154.      <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2.56, p. 158.      <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2.60, p. 159.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2.111, p. 163.

determination, loving kindness, and equanimity. Praised and gladdened by the people, the Buddha-to-be went into the forest to practice the perfections as had the Buddhas before and after him.

After his commitment to becoming a Buddha, Gautama spent many lives as animals, gods, ascetics, Brahmins, and others progressing towards his enlightenment. Thus, the story of the Buddha is the story of the billions of previous lives of which he is said to have obtained knowledge when he became the Buddha. The belief that the Buddha came to know his previous lives as well as those of everyone else made possible the creation of the genre of literature known as *jātakas* (birth-stories). The oldest and largest collection of these ‘fairy tales, parables, fables, riddles, and comic and moral stories’ is the 547 collected in the Pāli Buddhist literature.<sup>22</sup> It is one of the world’s largest collections of folk tales. The original folkloric tales were transformed into *Buddhist jātakas* by beginning each with an incident in the Buddha’s life. This served as the occasion of his retelling an event from his past lives. And each ended with the Buddha identifying himself and his contemporaries with various characters in the story.<sup>23</sup>

Above all, the *jātakas* are intended to inculcate Buddhist virtues in their readers and listeners. The last of the *jātaka* tales and arguably the most popular in Buddhism – the *Vessantara Jātaka* – exemplifies the first

<sup>22</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. iii.

<sup>23</sup> For the complete collection in English, see E. B. Howell, *Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895–1907).

of the ten perfections, namely the virtue of giving, although simultaneously it endorses the irresponsible shedding of duties. The story is as follows. Prince Vessantara (in Sanskrit, Viśvantara), Gautama in his penultimate life, lives with his wife, Maddī, and their young son and daughter. The well-being of the kingdom is dependent on a magic white elephant that ensures rainfall. Vessantara gives it away to Brahman emissaries (generally the villains in Jātaka stories) from another kingdom. The outraged citizenry forces his father, King Sanjaya, to banish him and his family. Vessantara is unrepentant: ‘Let the Sivi [city people], all of them banish me – or kill me! Let them cut me up into seven pieces, I will not stop giving!’<sup>24</sup> Before leaving with his wife and children, he gives away all his possessions – ‘the gift of the seven hundreds’ – seven hundred elephants, horses, chariots, women, female and male slaves, and cattle.<sup>25</sup> Vessantara and his family establish themselves far away in a mountain dale.

One day, while Maddī is away gathering food, a cruel Brahman named Jūjaka comes to Vessantara and asks Vessantara for his children to give to his own wife as slaves. Distraught at having given his children away, Vessantara nonetheless pulls himself together: ‘Realizing that such pain overcame him because of a flaw in him, his affection, and for no other reason, and certain that that affection must be banished and equanimity developed, he plucked out that dart of grief by the power of his

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich (eds. and trans.), *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara: A Buddhist Epic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Fearful that Vessantara might also give his wife, Maddī, away, in order to protect her, Śakra (in Pāli, Sakka), the king of the gods, appears as an old Brahman and asks Vessantara to give her to him. He gladly gave his wife to Śakra. ‘Look, brahman’, declares Vessantara, ‘omniscience is a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand times dearer to me than Maddī. May this gift be the means for me to realize omniscience.’<sup>27</sup> On receiving her, Śakra gives her back immediately to Vessantara because, as a gift from the king of the gods, Vessantara cannot return it.

Meanwhile, the evil Jūjaka continues to travel with the children, mistreating them appallingly, until they reach the court of Vessantara’s father, King Sanjaya. The king pays a large ransom to the Brahman Jūjaka for his grandchildren. The wicked Jūjaka dies of overeating soon afterwards, and his newly acquired wealth reverts to the king. Remorseful at allowing his son to be banished, Sanjaya travels to the home of his son to be reunited with him. He hands over sovereignty of the kingdom to Vessantara and he becomes the king. On the day in which Vessantara re-enters his city, the gods pour down gold and jewels upon the palace to knee height. All, we might say, live happily ever after. For his part, ‘The noble king Vessantara, after so much giving, at the dissolution of his body, full of wisdom, was reborn in heaven.’<sup>28</sup>

And the moral of the story? Giving has its reward both in heaven and on earth. The story reinforces the Buddhist virtue of doing the unthinkable – giving away wealth, wife, and children for a higher religious end. Simultaneously, it reinforces the value of earthly ties and the gift of love – of

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 65.    <sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 76–7.    <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

love given by fathers to children, by sons to fathers, and by wives to husbands. Thus, in the *Vessantara Jātaka*, detachment and attachment are intricately woven together. Through his generosity, Vessantara advances towards heaven, but he ends up on earth reunited with his family and richer than ever. It is a story that, in the end, has appeal both to those who give up the world and those who stay in it.

### The Birth of the Buddha

Having realised the perfections, after his last earthly existence, the Bodhisattva – the Buddha-to-be – was ‘reborn’ as a god by the name of Śvetaketu in Tuṣita – the Heaven of the Contented. This was the fourth heaven of six in which the gods dwelt. It was the heaven in which Bodhisattvas lived in their final life before attaining Buddhahood and the one in which the future Buddha Maitreya lived. Time passed slowly in these heavens: four hundred earth years amounted to only one divine day in Tuṣita.<sup>29</sup> It was a place of unimaginable pleasures that lasted for hundreds of thousands of years. The *Lalitavistara* tells us that the Bodhisattva lived in a celestial palace with thirty-two thousand floors surrounded by enchanting gardens. ‘Millions upon millions of gods’, we are told, ‘turned their eyes towards the palace and gazed in awe.’<sup>30</sup> According to the *Nidānakathā*, when the angels

<sup>29</sup> See Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 32–6.

<sup>30</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara* (2013), ch. 2. 14. Available at <https://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-046-001.html>.

of the Tuṣita declared that, in a thousand years, a Buddha will appear on earth, the gods of the ten thousand world systems gathered together and went to the Bodhisattva in Tuṣita and beseeched him to return to earth. 'Now has the moment come, O Blessed One, for thy Buddhahood', they declared, 'now has the time, O Blessed One, arrived!'<sup>31</sup>

That the Buddha was born in a particular time and place was no mere happenstance. A Bodhisattva was no longer subject to the determination of karma as to his next life. He could make choices. Thus, Śvetaketu reflected on what would be the most auspicious circumstances for his birth on earth – the time, the place, the tribe, the mother. He decided that the right time was when the span of a human life was under a hundred thousand years but over a hundred years and a time in which there was old age, sickness, and death. When the Bodhisattva saw that the span of an individual life was one hundred years, he realised that the time of his advent had arrived. In the *Lalitavistara*, he declared that 'in twelve years the Bodhisattva shall enter the womb of his mother'.<sup>32</sup> He then thought about which continent he should appear in. Of the four great continents, he decided to appear in Jambudvīpa – that continent in which Bodhisattvas always appear. He then determined that he would appear in the Middle Country of that continent in a town called Kapilavastu.

<sup>31</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 60. See also The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 2.34.

<sup>32</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 3.2.

A Bodhisattva could also choose to be born into either a priestly or a warrior class, depending on which at the time was dominant. Śvetaketu decided to be born into a warrior family. In the *Lalitavistara*, he outlined the sixty-four qualities that the family, into which a Bodhisattva would be born, had to have and the thirty-two qualities that the mother of a Bodhisattva was required to have. The Śākya clan of Kapilavastu was found to meet all sixty-four criteria. Its king was Śuddhodana. He 'is kind and handsome, neither too old nor too young. He has a fine body and every excellent quality. He is knowledgeable concerning crafts, astrology, the self, the Dharma, the truth, the world, and signs. Indeed, he is a Dharma King who guides according to the Dharma.'<sup>33</sup> His wife, Māyā (Māyādevī, Mahāmāyā), met all thirty-two criteria. Among many other virtues, spiritual and physical, she was said to be

wealthy and youthful. Indeed she is in the prime of life. She has an excellent figure and has not given birth. She has no sons or daughters. With a beautiful form, as pleasing to the eye as a finely drawn picture, she is bedecked with jewelry like a celestial maiden, free from the faults of womankind. She speaks the truth, with words that are soft, gentle, dependable, and altogether beyond reproach. Her voice is like that of the cuckoo; she is demure and speaks only sweet and pleasant words. Māyādevī is reserved, free of anger, pride, conceit, and arrogance. She does not get indignant or jealous; rather what she says is timely, and she gives generously. She is disciplined and devoted to her husband, unconcerned with other men.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., ch. 3.34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., ch. 3.35–6.



Śvetaketu then gave a final sermon that laid out the 108 gateways to the light of the Dharma and finally declared his intention to leave the Tuṣita heaven. The gods wept and embraced the feet of the Bodhisattva. ‘Virtuous One’, they cried, ‘without you, this Heaven of Joy will lose its splendour.’<sup>35</sup> The Bodhisattva comforted them with the words, ‘the bodhisattva Maitreya will teach you the Dharma’. And he placed his crown upon the head of Maitreya: ‘You, virtuous one, shall awaken to perfect and complete Buddhahood after me.’<sup>36</sup>

The Buddha was not the result of sexual reproduction. Rather, on the most auspicious day, the Bodhisattva, fully conscious and aware, moved from heaven to the womb of his mother. He did so in the form of a white (baby) elephant. He entered his mother’s womb through his mother’s right side.<sup>37</sup> Without his mother suffering any pain, he entered ‘her body in the form of a noble elephant, light of step, flawless of limb, gleaming like snow-white silver, with six tusks, a gracefully waving trunk and a crimson head’.<sup>38</sup> At the moment of his entry into his mother’s womb, the universe acclaimed it: ‘[T]he constituent elements of the ten thousand world-systems quaked, and trembled, and were shaken violently. The Thirty-two Good Omens also were made manifest. In the ten thousand world-systems an immeasurable light appeared . . . The ten thousand world-systems revolved,

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., ch. 5.2.      <sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> There is the suggestion in the *Nidānakathā* that he only ‘seemed to enter her womb’. See Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> J. J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu* (London: Luzac & Company, 1952), vol. 2, p. 8.

and rushed as close together as a bunch of gathered flowers; and became as it were a woven wreath of worlds, as sweet-smelling and resplendent as a mass of garlands, or as a sacred altar decked with flowers.<sup>39</sup>

The Bodhisattva remained for ten months on the right side of his mother's womb, seated in a cross-legged meditative posture. All his limbs and organs were fully formed. Sustained by a drop of magical nectar provided by the god Brahmā, he remained clean and unpolluted in the womb. From within the womb, the Bodhisattva was able to see his mother. She too could see the exceedingly beautiful child within her 'as one could see a thread passed through a transparent gem'.<sup>40</sup> It was as if 'a gem of beryl in a crystal casket were placed in her curving lap, so does his mother see the Bodhisattva like a body of pure gold illumining her womb'.<sup>41</sup> It is an image that both demonstrates the perfection of the Bodhisattva while simultaneously sanctifying women's biological experiences. As the perfect mother of the Bodhisattva, Māyā had miraculous powers: 'Those afflicted by illness caused by disorders of wind, bile, or phlegm, / And those with body and mind tormented by diseases of the eyes and ears, / And all those stricken by many different kinds of ailments, / Were freed from illness when Queen Māyā placed her hand on their heads.'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, pp. 64–5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 15. Images of the Virgin Mary with a transparent womb and a fully formed foetus were common in mediaeval art.

<sup>42</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 6.69.

When the time of the Bodhisattva's birth arrived, Queen Māyā found herself, whether by accident on her way to Devadaha, the city of her family, or by design, in the paradisaical Lumbini Grove near Kapilavastu. Surrounded by human and divine maidens, she made her way from grove to grove and tree to tree. Eventually, she arrived beneath a pure and stainless fig (plaksa) or sal (sāla) tree. Because it was the type of tree under which all Buddhas were born, it was one to which the gods of the pure realms would bow down and touch with their heads. Knowing that the time had come for the birth of the Buddha, she reached out to take hold of a branch of the tree. The tree itself paid homage to the Bodhisattva and the branch bent down towards her. Grasping the branch of the tree, Māyā stretched her body and gave birth to the Bodhisattva. Unlike other women, the mothers of Bodhisattvas give birth standing after exactly ten months.

The *Nidānakathā* suggests that the birth of the Bodhisattva was vaginal and painful. At the moment of his birth, four gods from the heaven of the great god Brahmā brought a golden net in which to catch him. He was born unsmearred by any impure matter, 'pure and fair, and shining like a gem placed on fine muslin of Benares'.<sup>43</sup> Other texts deem such a birth beneath a Bodhisattva. The *Mahāvastu*, the *Lalitavistara*, and the *Buddhacarita* of the poet Aśvaghoṣa (c. second century CE) have him born from his mother's side without harming her: 'For the Supreme of Men are born from their mother's right side; it is here that all the valiant men

<sup>43</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, pp. 66–7.

abide when in their mother's womb. Why is not that side of the Conqueror's mother rent as she gives birth to the Best of Men, and why does no pain ensue? Tathāgatas [the ones who have thus come] are born with a body that is made of mind, and thus the mother's body is not rent, nor does any pain ensue.<sup>44</sup> In short, his birth was super-human, but not inhuman.

With the birth of the Buddha in Lumbini Grove, we may again be on some firm historical ground, for the tradition that he was born there reaches back to the time of King Aśoka (c. 300–232 BCE). During his reign, King Aśoka erected a number of pillars to commemorate his pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist sites or as Buddhist memorials. One of these was to commemorate his visit to the site of the birth of the Buddha. This pillar was discovered in 1896 in a temple called Rummindi at a village called Padariya, not far from the modern border between northern India and Nepal. The pillar informs us that 'King Piyadassi (Aśoka), beloved of the gods, twenty years after his consecration [c. 248 BCE], himself came to this place and paid homage because Sakyamuni Buddha was born here. He caused a stone wall to be made and a stone pillar to be erected [to commemorate] the birth here of the Bhagavant [Blessed One].'<sup>45</sup>

Despite the purity of his birth, it was said that the Bodhisattva and his mother were immediately bathed

<sup>44</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 18. See also The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 7.27; Patrick Olivelle (trans.), *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghoṣa* (New York: New York University Press, JJC Foundation, 2008), Canto 1.9, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted by Hajime Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha: A Biography Based on the Most Reliable Texts* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2000), vol. 1, p. 59.

supernaturally. In his case, it was both the cleansing of a child and the anointing of a king. '[T]wo showers of water', we are told in the *Nidānakathā*, 'came down from heaven in honour of them and refreshed the Bodhisattva and his mother.'<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere, two wells of water, one cold and the other warm, sprang up from the earth and filled two pitchers.<sup>47</sup> The *Lalitavistara* went further: 'Then the great nāga [water spirit] kings Nanda and Upananda . . . produced two streams of cool and warm water to rinse the Bodhisattva's body. Śakra, Brahmā, the guardians of the world, and many hundreds of thousands of gods bathed the Bodhisattva in perfumed water and scattered flower petals over him.'<sup>48</sup>

When the Buddha was born, he was omniscient. Surveying all humans and gods, he knew there was no one like him in virtue, discipline, meditative skill, and knowledge. Like several of his Buddha predecessors, he was instantly able to speak when he came out of the womb, and to walk, for he immediately took seven steps to the north: 'Then as soon as he was born in a family of the Śakyans, the Wise One took seven mighty strides. Scanning the regions of the world he laughed out aloud, and said "This, at length, is my very last existence."<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, he was said to have taken seven steps to each of the four points of the compass. The *Lalitavistara* reported that when the Bodhisattva, 'who is more exalted

<sup>46</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 67.

<sup>47</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 7.29.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 21.

than anyone in all the worlds', came into this world, 'many inconceivable events took place'.<sup>50</sup>

The Buddha's mother was not long to survive his birth. All the Buddhist texts agree that Māyā died only seven days after his birth. This was undoubtedly a very early tradition that troubled later Buddhists. As Vishvapani Blomfield notes, the death of Māyā 'strikes a dissonant note, as if an uncomfortable but important fact has somehow survived within the litany of marvels'.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the *Nidānakathā* reflected an early tradition in simply reporting that 'the mother of the Bodisat, seven days after his birth, died and was reborn in the City of Delight'.<sup>52</sup> But several of the biographies of the Buddha go out of their way to explain her early demise. The *Mahāvastu*, for example, explicitly wondered why the mother of the Best of Men should die so soon after his birth. This was the fate of the mothers of all Bodhisattvas, it declared. Moreover, it was not fitting that she who bore a Bodhisattva should afterwards indulge in sex. After all, the Buddha proclaimed the depravity of all sensual desires. 'Should then the mother of the Saviour of the world indulge in the pleasures of sense', it asked.<sup>53</sup>

The *Lalitavistara* took a gentler position. It happened to the mothers of all the Bodhisattvas, it declared, 'Because once a bodhisattva is born and has grown up, it would destroy his mother's heart if he were to renounce

<sup>50</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 7.37.

<sup>51</sup> Vishvapani Blomfield, *Gautama Buddha: The Life and Teachings of the Awakened One* (London: Quercus, 1988), pp. 19–20.

<sup>52</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 3.

his home.’ Moreover, it suggested, her karma was sufficient for her to be reborn as a (male) god in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, only two below that of the Heaven of the Contented in which the Buddha dwelt before entering her womb. The *Buddhacarita* declared that she went willingly and happily to heaven: ‘But when Queen Maya saw the immense might / of her son, like that of a seer divine, / she could not bear the delight it caused her; / so she departed to dwell in heaven.’<sup>54</sup>

That she was not a follower of the Dharma was also problematic. Thus, another tradition has the Buddha ascending to the Tuṣita heaven where his mother lived in order to teach her the doctrine. For example, the *Samyukta-āgama* (200–400 CE) reports that ‘at one time the Buddha was spending the rains retreat in the Heaven of the Thirty-three . . . teaching the Dharma to his mother and the *devas* of the ‘Thirty-three’ before returning to earth at the end of the rainy season.<sup>55</sup> This was a story that reaffirmed family values in the face of Gautama’s apparent rejection of them when he deserted his family.

Unknown to the Indian Buddhist tradition is the Chinese and Japanese tradition of the return of the Buddha’s mother from heaven to his deathbed. This may be found in a text known in Chinese as the ‘Sūtra

<sup>54</sup> Olivelle (trans.), *Life of the Buddha by Āśvaghoṣa*, Canto 2.18, p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> See Anālayo, ‘Teaching the Abhidharma in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, The Buddha and His Mother’, *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 2 (2012), p. 13. This article contains a translation of the tradition from the *Samyukta-āgama*. There is a division within various texts as to whether the Buddha’s mother went to the Tuṣita heaven or that of the Thirty-three Gods. See *ibid.*, p. 25.

of Māyā' (c. sixth century CE). It is absent from the Indian texts. But it fits especially well into the Chinese tradition of the filial piety of sons to mothers. According to the story, the mother of the Buddha became aware in heaven of the death of her son. 'And as it is time to assume extinction, there will be no more time for me to meet you again.'<sup>56</sup> She descended to earth to her dead son. She asked the Buddha why he had hastened to reach Nirvāna: 'Hidden in your heavy coffin, did you not know that I would come?'<sup>57</sup> Having venerated the robe, the bowl, and the staff of the Buddha, she threw herself on the ground. Then, wishing that the sorrow of his mother should end, the Buddha arose from his coffin and asked her 'to find solace, and not suffer from affliction'.<sup>58</sup> The coffin closed again. Māyā then spoke of the impermanence of all things and, as a later commentator put it, 'Crying and moaning, she ascended to her heaven.'<sup>59</sup> After the death of his mother, the Bodhisattva was cared for by Mahāprajāpatī, his mother's sister and his father's second wife. As we will see, she was later said to be the first woman to become a Buddhist nun.

### The Buddha: Childhood and Youth

By the time of King Aśoka in the third century BCE, the religion of the Buddha was well established in India. Aśoka classified all the religions of his empire under five

<sup>56</sup> Hubert Durt, 'The Post-Nirvāna Meeting of the Buddha with Māyā: Examination of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* and Its Quotations in the *Shijiapu* – Part II', *Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies* 12 (2008), p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.    <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.    <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.



headings: Buddhists, Brahmins, Ajiviks, Jains, and ‘other sects’. Aśoka himself patronised the Buddhist Dharma, but he honoured and respected them all.<sup>60</sup> In competition with the other religions, especially the dominant Brahmanism (later to become what we know as Hinduism), the followers of the Buddha no doubt believed that the Buddhist Dharma was pre-eminent. Even the gods, they believed, recognised this. Thus, while journeying to Kapilavastu, the Bodhisattva was taken to a temple to pay honour to the gods. But as soon as he set foot in the temple, the gods worshipped him. His superiority to all the gods was clear: ‘the insentient statues of the gods such as Śiva, Skanda, Nārāyaṇa, Kubera, Candra, Sūrya, Vaiśravaṇa, Śakra, Brahmā, and the guardians of the world, all stood up from their seats and prostrated at the Bodhisattva’s feet. Right then a hundred thousand gods and humans cried out in amazement and delight . . . A rain of divine flowers fell, and a hundred thousand divine instruments sounded without even being played.’<sup>61</sup>

The gods recognised the destiny of the Bodhisattva and so too did the Brahman seer (rishi) Asita. Thus, according to the *Lalitavistara*, soon after the Bodhisattva’s arrival in Kapilavastu, the court of his father, Śuddhodana, was visited by Asita, who came to determine whether the Bodhisattva would be a universal king or a perfect Buddha. Asita declared to the king that the Bodhisattva bore the thirty-two marks that showed he

<sup>60</sup> See A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (Calcutta: Rupa, 1981), p. 262.

<sup>61</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 8.8.

would become a Buddha – from having designs of wheels on the soles of his feet, to walking like a swan, to possessing a head shaped like a royal turban.<sup>62</sup> He also had the eighty minor marks that showed that he would become a renunciate and leave home – from having eyes that were clear, stainless, warm, elongated, large, and like blue lotuses, to having a perfect tuft of hair between his brows, to moving with the serene gait of an elephant, the stride of a lion, the step of a great bull, and the swoop of a swan. When the king heard the prediction of Asita, he prostrated himself at the feet of the Bodhisattva and declared, ‘All the gods prostrate to you. / The sages give you offerings, / And the entire world worships you, / So I will also offer you my homage.’<sup>63</sup> The great sage Asita returned to his dwelling place by flying magically through the air. It was a matter of great regret to him that he would not live long enough to see the Bodhisattva become the Buddha: ‘I am old, my vigour gone’, he declared, ‘and just now a boy has been born who will become a Supreme Man. But I shall be dead when the boy attains enlightenment.’<sup>64</sup>

Although it was unnecessary for him to do so, the Bodhisattva went to school. As his schoolmaster, Viśvāmitra, declared, ‘Whatever topics of knowledge are circulating in this world of humans – / Numbers, scripts, mathematics, the permutations of the elements, / And all the immeasurable mundane techniques of craftsmanship – / This child already learned these things many tens of

<sup>62</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 7.104.

<sup>64</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 37.

millions of eons ago.<sup>65</sup> Intellectual modesty was not one of the Bodhisattva's virtues. When it came to the writing lesson, the Bodhisattva asked his teacher, 'Which script, O master, will you be teaching me?' and then proceeded to name at least sixty-four to choose from.<sup>66</sup> As the teacher said the alphabet to the thousand other boys with the Bodhisattva, the Bodhisattva took the opportunity to deliver an ethical statement that began with each of the forty-six letters. Thus, as the schoolmaster taught the alphabet, the children also absorbed the Dharma teachings of the Bodhisattva. He was, in short, a child prodigy. As Aśvaghōṣa informs us, 'in a few days he grasped the sciences / that were suitable for his family, / that commonly take many years to grasp'.<sup>67</sup>

He was not only intellectually gifted but also spiritually skilled. From an early age he could become immersed in meditation. Thus, at the time of the Ploughing Festival, the Bodhisattva was reclining under a Jambu tree and found himself left alone, his nurses having gone to watch the king ploughing. Finding himself alone, the Bodhisattva 'got up quickly, seated himself cross-legged, and holding his breath, sank into the first Jhāna [level of meditative absorption]'. While the shadows of the other trees turned round, that of the Jambu tree remained steady and circular in form. When the King saw the miracle that had occurred, he paid homage to his son,

<sup>65</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 10.3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 10.9.

<sup>67</sup> Olivelle (trans.), *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa*, Canto 2.23, p. 43.

saying, ‘This, Beloved One, is the second homage paid to thee.’<sup>68</sup>

Intellectually gifted and spiritually skilled, he was also superior in the ‘manly arts’ – jumping, wrestling, running, rowing, swimming, elephant mounting and driving, horsemanship, chariot driving, and gymnastics. But to the warrior class it was archery that mattered. The *Nidānakathā* simply reports that, in a competition with masters of the bow, he was unsurpassed. But the *Lalitavistara* gives an extended version of the legend of the archery competition to extol his sporting prowess. His best opponent had hit the target ‘eight times shouting-distance’ away but could shoot no further. Breaking every bow he tried, the Bodhisattva was given his grandfather’s bow. His opponents were unable even to string the bow, much less draw it. The Bodhisattva, by contrast, strung it with a single fingertip of his right hand. He then picked up an arrow, drew the bow, and released the arrow. It not only pierced his opponents’ targets but cleaved his own that was ten times shouting distance away and went straight through seven palm trees before finally entering the ground and disappearing.

The entire assembly was amazed that the Bodhisattva should have such skill in archery without having been trained. The gods knew the transcendent meaning of his archery skills. They told the people to listen to something even more amazing: ‘He will sit on this earth, on the seat of the previous awakened ones. / Holding the bow of calm abiding, he will shoot the arrows of empty lack of self, / And so destroy the enemies, the afflictions; rend asunder

<sup>68</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 75.

the net of views; / And attain sublime awakening – tranquil, stainless, and free from sorrow.<sup>69</sup> In the *Lalitavistara*, his superiority in all things also mattered for more mundane reasons, for his skill in archery demonstrated to the Śākya Dandapāni that he was worthy to marry Dandapāni's daughter, Gopā (elsewhere called Yaśodharā). It was little wonder that, as we might say, he fell in love with her at first sight, for she 'had a supremely beautiful complexion like a white lotus, was neither too tall nor too short, neither too fat nor too thin, neither too fair nor too dark, was in her first blush of youth, and was a jewel of a woman'.<sup>70</sup> In short, she was just right for a prince. The *Buddhacarita* simply said that she was endowed with 'beauty, modesty, and good bearing'.<sup>71</sup> Because the Bodhisattva had been able to demonstrate not only his skill with the bow but also that he knew everything that could be known and could do everything that could be done, Dandapāni agreed to the marriage between his daughter and the Bodhisattva.

The life of the Bodhisattva was a luxurious one. According to the *Nidānakathā*, he had forty thousand dancing girls 'like a god surrounded by troops of houris, and attended by musical instruments which played of themselves'.<sup>72</sup> The *Lalitavistara* tells us that he dwelt among eighty-four thousand women who all resembled goddesses.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 12.64.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 12.18.

<sup>71</sup> Olivelle (trans.), *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa*, Canto 2.26, p. 45.

<sup>72</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 75.

<sup>73</sup> See The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 12.66.

Did the Bodhisattva succumb to their enticements? Perhaps to emphasise the sacrifice he was later to make, the *Lalitavistara* declares that he partook ‘of the amorous games with pleasure’.<sup>74</sup> The gods became worried that he was spending too much time with his retinue of consorts and would not renounce the world when he should. The Bodhisattva was able to reassure them that he knew when the time was right: ‘He knew indeed what was timely as well as what was untimely. Seeking the right opportunity, he would never miss it, just like the great ocean, which is always timely. Since he possessed the power of clairvoyant wisdom, he knew everything himself.’<sup>75</sup> Elsewhere, we are informed, he remained aloof from the temptations of the flesh, detached from all worldly pleasures.

However that may be, there were endless other delights from which to practice detachment and other-worldliness. The palaces were perfectly constructed and perfectly furnished. His body was always perfectly scented and dressed in pure white clothes. His bedding was made of the finest fabrics. He woke up to the sound of music – ‘of conches, kettledrums, clay drums, wood drums, lutes, harps, tambourines, cymbals, and flutes’ and to the songs of his girls.<sup>76</sup> The *Mahāvastu* has the Buddha tell us of how he was ‘most delicately’ brought up. He had three palaces for different seasons, couches of gold, silver, and precious stones spread with covers and blankets, the finest garments, and a diet varied and refined. He had the five varieties of sensual pleasures – dance, song, music, orchestra, and women – to delight and amuse him, along with

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., ch. 12.66.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., ch. 13.4.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., ch. 13.17.

various conveyances – elephants, horses, boats, and palanquins. If he went into one of his four gardens, each pointing towards one of the four compass points, a sunshade was held over him lest heat, dust, or light trouble him.<sup>77</sup>

### The Great Renunciation

To the Bodhisattva, the life of what he called diversions, pleasures, and amusements was eventually to become meaningless. While he was thus being brought up, the Buddha informed his disciples, ‘this thought occurred to me: “Now this life at home is too full of hindrances. The way of religious life is the open air. It is not possible for one living at home to live the holy life that is utterly bright, blameless, pure and clean. Let me then, now go away from home into the homeless state.”’<sup>78</sup>

This meant that the Bodhisattva had to leave his wife and the child that had just been born – a son called ‘Rāhula’, meaning ‘Fetter’. According to the *Nidānakathā*, Rāhula was born on the day that the Bodhisattva decided to renounce the world. When the Bodhisattva heard of his birth, he declared, ‘An impediment has come into being, a bond has come into being’<sup>79</sup> – hence the name Rāhula. A slightly different feeling towards his son occurs within the same account. Prior to the departure of the Bodhisattva, he went to see his son. Opening the door of his wife’s room, he saw her asleep, resting her hand on the

<sup>77</sup> See Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, pp. 111–14.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 114.

<sup>79</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 79.

head of their son. Stopping on the threshold, he thought to himself, 'If I lift her hand to take my son, she will awake; and that will prevent any going away. I will come back and see him when I have become a Buddha.'<sup>80</sup>

Rāhula was said to have later become the first novice to enter the order of Buddhist monks. But King Śuddhodana was so distressed at his grandson becoming a monk that he asked the Buddha in the future not to receive any child into the order without the consent of their parents. The Buddha acceded to this request. We can assume that this tradition reflects an attempt to manage a conflict between the Sangha – the Buddhist monastic community – and the general community arising from young men entering the Sangha without their parents' consent. Reliant upon the community for its well-being, it was therefore important for the Sangha to keep the community outside. Writing the resolution of the problem back into the life of the Buddha solved this issue.

That the Bodhisattva led such a luxurious life was the consequence of his father's attempt to thwart Asita's prediction and to forestall the Bodhisattva's destiny of renouncing the world to seek liberation from it. Not only had his father provided the best of things, but he had also protected him from the worst. Thus, the Bodhisattva was sheltered within his father's palace from the awareness of old age, illness, and death. Nevertheless, according to the *Mahāvastu*, the Bodhisattva was determined to visit his park outside of the palace. The king gave orders to his ministers to ensure that the Bodhisattva experienced only pleasurable things. So, the way from the royal palace to

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 82.



the park was cleared of everything unpleasant. Men were stationed to ensure that the prince should see ‘no old man or one advanced in years, no one diseased or one-eyed, or lame, no one suffering from leprosy, the itch, scab or eruption on the skin, and that nothing unpleasant should stand before him’.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the gods conjured up an old, hoary-headed man with a blotched body, bent over and tottering along with the aid of sticks. When the Bodhisattva realised that this was the lot of every man, himself included, he discerned that there could be no pleasure in life. He returned to the palace. Despite his father’s attempt to divert him by instructing his harem to distract him with music, dance, and song, the Bodhisattva continued to ponder what he had seen.

On the next occasion of a visit to the park, the king again took pains to have the Bodhisattva shielded from unpleasant sights. This time, the gods conjured up a diseased man in front of him. ‘This man’, we read, ‘had swollen hands and feet. His face was swollen, and his complexion jaundiced. His belly was dropsical and on his dropsical, protruding navel thousands of flies were feeding. He was a loathsome and disgusting sight.’<sup>82</sup> In the *Lalitavistara*, this led the Bodhisattva to reflect on the transitory nature of health: ‘Health is just like a play in a dream! / What wise person, having witnessed / Such unbearable terrors of disease, / Would have a positive view of playful games.’<sup>83</sup> Again, the Bodhisattva returned

<sup>81</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 145.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>83</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 14.17.

to the palace. And again, his father attempted to divert him with the harem providing music, dance, and song.

Again, the Bodhisattva visited the park, shielded by the king from the sight of anything unpleasant on the way there. The gods outmanoeuvred the Bodhisattva's father by placing a dead man in the path of the Bodhisattva. 'How sad', he declared, 'that the life of a wise man does not last long.'<sup>84</sup> Thus, the Bodhisattva had witnessed old age, illness, and death – the three great evils common to all humanity: 'He who has seen an old man, a diseased man and a dead man, and does not shudder at the round of rebirth, is to be grieved for as dull-witted, as a blind man who has lost his way.'<sup>85</sup> His charioteer turned the chariot around and they returned to the palace.

The Bodhisattva was no longer to be comforted by the pleasures provided for him. For a fourth time, the Bodhisattva journeyed to the park. This time, the gods conjured up a wandering monk in saffron-coloured clothes. The Bodhisattva saw the monk and noticed that he was peaceful, self-controlled, and restrained: 'His behaviour was beautiful and exquisite, as was the way he walked . . . The way he wore his robes and his offering bowl was delightful to see.'<sup>86</sup> He then asked the monk why he had become a wandering mendicant. 'O prince', he replied, 'I became a wanderer for the sake of winning self-control, calm, and utter release.'<sup>87</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., ch. 14.21.      <sup>85</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 150.

<sup>86</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 14.23.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 152.

It was the sight of the women of the Bodhisattva's harem sleeping that night that hardened his resolve to renounce the world. Some were foaming at the mouth, some were grinding their teeth, others were yawning, some were gaping, and some had their clothes disordered. Seeing the change in their appearance, his home 'began to seem like a charnel-house full of loathsome corpses ... An utterance of intense feeling broke from him – "It all oppresses me! It is intolerable!"<sup>88</sup> They looked so utterly revolting that 'he had the impression that he was indeed in a cemetery'.<sup>89</sup> Detachment from the body more generally, as of something deeply disgusting, was at the core of the Bodhisattva's quest for meaning beyond embodied life:

'Grown in the fields of karma and born from the water of craving, we call it the transitory body. / This body is moist from tears, sweat and mucus, and filled with urine and blood. / It is full of all kinds of filth, fat, pus, and brains; / It constantly leaks excrement and it stinks / It is made of bones, teeth, and hair, and is covered by a hairy skin; / Packed with intestines, liver, spleen, lymph, and saliva, it is weak. / It is like a machine held together by bones and sinew and adorned with flesh; / It is filled with diseases, subject to pain, and always afflicted by hunger and thirst. / The body of beings has many cavities and transforms into old age and death. / Seeing the body, what wise person would not think of it as an enemy?' / In this way the Bodhisattva remained mindful of the body as something that must be left behind.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 81.

<sup>89</sup> The Dharmachakra Translation Committee, *The Play in Full: Lalitavistara*, ch. 15.39.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 15.48–50.

Determined not to allow the Bodhisattva to leave home, King Śuddhodana placed armed men at each of the gates of the city. The gates were so heavy that their closing could be heard for miles around. Recognising the determination of the Bodhisattva to leave the city in the middle of the night, the gods put all Kapilavastu's inhabitants to sleep. The Bodhisattva asked his servant, Chandaka, to bring his horse, Kanthaka. Although Kanthaka was able to leap over the walls, the god Śakra opened the gates of the city. The guardians of the world held the hoofs of the horse to muffle the sound so as not to awaken the inhabitants of the city.

At that moment, the evil demon Māra, who lived on the edges of the sixth heaven, came to the Bodhisattva. Within the Buddhist tradition, Māra is the god devoted to preventing beings from achieving escape from rebirth and conquering death. Appearing in the air, he attempted to persuade the Bodhisattva not to depart. Seven days from now, he declared, 'the wheel of empire will appear, and will make you sovereign over the four continents and the two thousand adjacent isles'.<sup>91</sup> The Bodhisattva rejected rule over all the kingdoms of the world for the sake of becoming a Buddha to 'make the ten-thousand world systems shout for joy'.<sup>92</sup> Māra was 'unhappy, discomfited, remorseful, dark-visaged and tortured by the sting within him'.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, he determined to stay close to the Bodhisattva, in order to know his every thought of lust or anger. And 'he followed him, ever watching for some slip, as closely as a shadow which never leaves its

<sup>91</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 84.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.      <sup>93</sup> Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, vol. 2, p. 158.

object'.<sup>94</sup> Thus, Māra, rather like Satan within the Christian tradition, was ever-present. As Rupert Gethin remarks, metaphorically, 'Māra is the power of all kinds of experience to seduce and ensnare the unwary mind; seduced by Māra, one remains lost in the enchantment of the world and fails to find the path that leads through to the cessation of suffering.'<sup>95</sup>

With this last temptation to remain in this world resolved, the Bodhisattva left the city by the light of a full moon. But as he departed the city, the desire to see it once more arose within him. As soon as this thought arose, the earth stopped revolving, as if it were saying to him, 'O Great Being, there is no need for you to stop in order to fulfil your wish.'<sup>96</sup> The Bodhisattva turned and gazed at the city. And then he galloped on: 'As that steed sped along like the steed of the sun, / its mind as if spurred on, he travelled many leagues, / before the stars became faint in the sky / at the coming of the dawn.'<sup>97</sup>

The Bodhisattva's quest for enlightenment had begun.

<sup>94</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 84.

<sup>95</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 23.

<sup>96</sup> Rhys Davids (trans.), *Buddhist Birth Stories or Jātaka Tales*, p. 84.

<sup>97</sup> Olivelle (trans.), *Life of the Buddha by Āśvaghoṣa*, Canto 5.87, p. 157.