

CHAPTER 1

The Life Story of the Buddha and Its Ramifications

Though few would doubt the historical existence of the north-Indian religious teacher who came to be known as the Buddha (Enlightened One), what we know about his life is legend. Scholars are still debating such fundamental points as the dates of his birth and death, some contending that his life should be placed in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., others inclined to situate it as much as one to two hundred years later (440–360 B.C.E.). As for the historicity of many of the stories told about him, there is widespread disagreement. Did the Buddha's mother really die seven days after his birth? Did he really have no knowledge of sickness, old age, and death until his late twenties, when he went for a drive in his chariot? Did he really attain enlightenment in one night at Bodhgaya? The questions about the Buddha are as numerous as the recorded events of his life, but in answering them, we are better off thinking of his biography not as "his history" but as "his story."

This does not mean that all Buddhists were in agreement as to what that story was. Eventually, as we shall see below in the selections dealing with the teachings of the Mahāyāna school (Great Vehicle), some Buddhists came to view the whole of the Buddha's life in a radically different context. But more immediately, different groups of Buddhists retold his story in different ways, emphasizing various events or episodes so as to make it into their story. For example, in recounting the start of the Buddha's religious quest, his Great Departure from home, monks might portray it in such a way as to make it resemble their own ordination rituals, whereby they themselves left home to begin a monastic life. Alternatively, laypersons might choose to emphasize stories of the Buddha's previous lives (*jātakas*), when he accomplished great deeds of merit as a prince or lay householder. Or the people in a particular community might wish to enhance the prestige of their hometown by "recalling" the time when the Buddha himself visited them, thus eventually fabricating stories of his visits to places far from his homeland (for example, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia).

This does not mean that these various stories about the Buddha's life were deliberately made up by people plotting to fulfill their own purposes. That is not the way legends are born. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out, myths or legends are as much "models for" reality as they are "models of" it.² In other words, the Buddha's life story was both a blueprint for and a reflection of the lives of Buddhists.

Written or oral texts, however, were not the only ways in which the Buddha's story was told. Early on, art and architecture also became important mediums in which the whole of his life or episodes from it were recalled. Narrative bas-reliefs allowed devotees to retrace visually, and in their own religious emotions, the whole of the Buddha's career from his past lives to his birth, his Great Departure and Enlightenment, his first sermon, and his death and cremation. On a grander scale, stūpas (originally monuments built over the relics of the Buddha), or *cātyas* (commemorative monuments), were built at actual sites associated with events in the Buddha's life story. Thus Buddhist pilgrims, by going on a "grand tour" to visit and venerate these monuments, could themselves relive the life of the deceased Master. In this way pilgrimage, and the devotionism that went with it, became important factors in the ongoing development of the Buddha's biography.

1.1 THE EIGHT COMMEMORATIVE SHRINES

At first, in the development of Buddhist pilgrimage, particular attention was paid to four major sites, each making a key event in the story of the Buddha:

1. Lumbini, just over the north Indian border in what is now Nepal, where the Buddha's mother, Queen Māyā, gave birth to him while holding on to the branch of a tree
2. Bodhgaya, in what is now Bihar, in North India, where the Buddha attained enlightenment, sitting under the Bodhi Tree (Tree of Enlightenment)
3. the Deer Park at Sarnath, near the city of Vārāṇasi (Benares) on the Ganges, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, an event that is called Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma (Doctrine)
4. Kuśinārā, or Kuśinagar, the present town of Kasi, where the Buddha, lying between two sal trees, passed away, no longer to be reborn in this or any other world, an event that is known as his parinirvāṇa (complete extinction)

As time went on, four "secondary" sites of pilgrimage were added to these four major sites to form a group of eight. The identification of the Buddha-stories that took place at these four secondary sites varies somewhat from

one textual or iconographic tradition to another, but for the most part they are said to commemorate seemingly supernatural events, thus emphasizing the Buddha's miraculous powers. It is interesting to note, at the same time, that although the four "major" Buddhist sites listed above were all located in groves of trees in rather out-of-the way places, the four "secondary" ones were situated in what were, at the time, major towns and cities:

1. Śrāvastī, the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, where the Buddha is said to have performed a great display of magical powers.
2. Sāmkāśya, or, less commonly, Kānyakubja, a major center upstream on the Ganges, where the Buddha is said to have come down from heaven after preaching the Dharma to the gods of Indra's (the king of the gods) heaven
3. Rājagṛha, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, where the Buddha is variously thought to have tamed a maddened elephant or put an end to an incipient schism in the community
4. Vaiśālī, the capital of the Licchavi republic, where the Buddha is variously thought to have been given an offering of honey by a monkey or to have announced his decision not to remain in this world

The following text, extant in both Chinese and Tibetan, lists the eight sites in their "chronological" order in his life and advocates devotion to them.

These are the Eight Great Stūpas:

In King Śuddhodana's capital, Kapilavastu, Lumbinī Garden is where the Buddha was born.

In Magadha, by the Nairāṇjā River, under the Bodhi Tree, he attained enlightenment.

In the kingdom of Kāśī, in the city of Benares, he set in motion the Wheel of the Great Dharma in twelve ways.

In the great city of Śrāvastī, in the Jetavana monastery, he put on a display of miracles, throughout the Triple World.

In the country of Sāmkāśya, in the city of Kānyakubja, he came down from the palace of the Thirty-three gods.

In the great city of Rājagṛha, where there was a schism in the community, the Tathāgata [the Buddha] changed the ways of the heretics and practiced compassion.

In the great city of Vaiśālī, a stūpa marks the spot where the Tathāgata reflected upon the duration of his life.

In the city of Kuśinagarī, the place of the very powerful Malla tribe, between the two sal trees, he entered nirvāṇa.

These are the Eight Great Stūpas. . . . Devout laymen and laywomen . . . who build stūpas and cātyas . . . will attain great benefit, win

² Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 4th ed., ed. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 81.

meritorious rewards, and be honored. If they worship these Eight Great Stupas sincerely in this life, they will be reborn, as soon as they die, in one of the heavens.

Source: Translated from *Aṣṭamahāsthānacaityastotra* [Taishō shinshū daizōkyō, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe, [Tokyo, 1924-29], no. 1685, 32:773a].³

1.2 A ROYAL PILGRIM RETRACES THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

According to Buddhist legend, one of the greatest builders and worshippers of stūpas and caityas was King Aśoka, who ruled as emperor of all of India in the third century B.C.E. and was one of the most important monarchs in the history of Buddhism. Historically speaking, we know from an inscription on a pillar that still stands at the site (see 2.6.3) that Aśoka himself personally visited Lumbini, the place of the Buddha's birth. But according to a Sanskrit legend, Aśoka is said to have built no fewer than eighty-four thousand stūpas all over India to enshrine the bodily relics of the Buddha, which he collected and had redistributed throughout his kingdom. For centuries, many pilgrimage sites in India and beyond were thought to be centered on the monuments that Aśoka had built. In the following legend, Aśoka is portrayed as accompanying the Buddhist elder Upagupta, who acts as his guide, on a tour not only to Lumbini but to over thirty sites associated with events in the life of the Buddha. It is a good example of the further elaboration of the legend of the Buddha, especially the early events of his childhood and youth, and of the intimate relationship of that story to the practice of pilgrimage.

King Aśoka then prostrated himself in front of the elder Upagupta and said: "Elder, it is my desire to venerate the places where the Blessed Buddha lived, and to mark them with signs as a favor for people in the future."

Upagupta replied, "Very good, Your Majesty, your intention is a fine one. I will, even today, be your guide." . . . And he took him first of all to the Lumbini Wood, and stretching out his right hand he said, "In this place, Your Majesty, the Blessed One was born. . . ."

"This is the first of the caityas of the Buddha whose vision is unsurpassed. Here, as soon as he was born,

he took seven steps, and looked down upon the earth in the four directions, and uttered these words:
"This is my last birth,
my last sojourn in a womb." . . .]

And King Aśoka gave one hundred thousand pieces of gold to the birthplace of the Buddha, built a caitya there, and went on.

The elder Upagupta then led him to Kapilavastu, and stretching out his right hand, he declared: "Your Majesty, in this place, the bodhisattva was brought to his father, King Śuddhodana, and when he saw that his son's handsome body was adorned with the thirty-two marks of the Great Man, the king prostrated himself fully at his feet.

"And this, Your Majesty, is the ancestral temple of the Śākya tribe. Soon after he was born, the bodhisattva was brought here so that he could venerate the clan deities, but, instead, all the statues of the deities fell at the bodhisattva's feet, and King Śuddhodana declared that his son was a god even for the deities, and so gave him the name 'Devānīdeva' [God beyond gods].

"In this place, Your Majesty, the bodhisattva was shown to the Brahmins who were learned readers of bodily signs; and over here, the sage Asita predicted that he would become a Buddha in this world.

"In this place, Your Majesty, he was brought up by his aunt Mahāprajāpatī; here he was taught how to write; and here, in the bodhisattva's gymnasium, he trained in the arts appropriate to his lineage: riding an elephant and a horse, driving a chariot, handling a bow, grasping a javelin, using an elephant goad. And in this place, Your Majesty, surrounded by a hundred thousand deities, the bodhisattva pursued pleasure with his sixty thousand wives.

"In this place, distressed by the sight of an old man, a sick man and a corpse, the bodhisattva went out to the woods; and over here, sitting down in the shade of a jambu tree, he rid himself of evil and demeritorious inclinations, and attained the first level of trance. . . . and when it was afternoon and the mealtime was past, the lengthening shadows of the trees slanted toward the east, except for the shadow of the jambu tree, which did not leave the body of the bodhisattva. And witnessing this, King Śuddhodana once again prostrated himself fully in front of his son.

"Through this gate over here, surrounded by a hundred thousand gods, the bodhisattva left Kapilavastu at midnight and here he gave his horse and his ornaments to his groom Chandaka, and sent them back to the city . . . while he went on and entered the forest of asceticism.

"In this place, the bodhisattva met the hunter; he gave him his clothes of Benares silk in exchange for a yellow robe, and wandered forth as a recluse. And here, the potter invited the bodhisattva to his hermitage; here King Bimbisāra offered him half of his kingdom; and here he . . . studied . . . under the sages Udraka and Ārāda.

"In this place, the bodhisattva practiced extreme asceticism for six years . . . and then gave it up, realizing this was not the path to highest knowledge.

³Alternative English translations, P. C. Bagchi, "The Eight Great Caityas and their Cult," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 17 (1941):241; Hajime Nakamura, "The Aṣṭamahāsthānacaityastotra and the Chinese and Tibetan Versions of a Text Similar to It," in *Indanism et bouddhisme: mélanges offerts à Mgr. Étienne Lamotte* (Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1980), p. 261; Susan L. Huntington and John C. Hun-
tington, *1980*, pp. 531-32.

"In this place, Nandā and Nandabalā, the daughters of a village headman, came to the bodhisattva and gave him sweetened milk-rice . . . and after partaking of it he set out for the seat of enlightenment. And over here, on his way to the Bodhi Tree, the bodhisattva was praised by the nāga king, Kalka" [. . .]

Then the elder Upagupta led King Aśoka to the foot of the Bodhi Tree, stretched out his right hand and said: "In this place, Your Majesty, the bodhisattva used his loving kindness to defeat the forces of Māra, and then realized complete unsurpassed enlightenment [anuttara samyak sambodhi]. . . ."

And King Aśoka gave one hundred thousand pieces of gold to the Bodhi Tree, built a caitya there, and went on.

Then the elder Upagupta said to Aśoka: "In this place, the Blessed One received from the divine guardians of the four quarters four stone begging bowls which he joined into a single bowl. And over here, he received an offering of alms food from the merchants Trapuṣa and Bhaḷlika. And here, on his way to Benares, the Blessed One was praised by the Ājīvika Upaga."

Then Upagupta led Aśoka to Rṣipatana in Sarnath near Benares, and stretching out his right hand he declared: "In this place, Your Majesty, the Blessed One set in motion . . . the magnificent Wheel of Dharma, in order to bring saṃsāra to a standstill."

"In this place, he converted a thousand long-haired ascetics. And over here, he taught the Dharma to King Bimbisāra, and the king, along with eighty-four thousand deities and several thousand Magadhan Brahmin householders, realized the Four Noble Truths. In this place, he taught the Dharma to Indra, the king of the gods, and Indra, together with eighty-four thousand other deities, realized the Truths. In this place, Śrāvastī, the Blessed One performed a great miracle. Over here in Śāṃkāśya, surrounded by a host of gods, he came down from the Tṛyastriṃśa heaven after spending a rainy season retreat there teaching the Dharma to his mother."

Finally, the elder took King Aśoka to Kuśinagarī, and stretching out . . . his right hand, he said: "In this place, Your Majesty, the Blessed One finished doing the work of a Buddha, and attained the state of complete nirvāṇa without remainder." And he added:

The great, wise, most compassionate Sage
converted everyone he was to convert—
gods, men, asuras, yakṣas, and nāgas.
Then he went to rest, his mind at ease,
because there was no one left for him to convert.

Hearing this, Aśoka fainted. His attendants splashed some water on his face, and, as soon as he had regained consciousness, he gave a hundred thousand pieces of gold to the site of the Buddha's parinirvāṇa and built a caitya there.

Source: Translated from *The Divyāvadāna*, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no. 20 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1959), pp. 248–52.

1.3 THE GREAT DEPARTURE AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Two key events in the legend of the Buddha are his decision to leave his family and home to set out on a religious quest—an event known as his Great Departure—and his attainment, six years later, of bodhi (enlightenment)—an event that transforms him from being a bodhisattva (a being headed for enlightenment) into being a Buddha (an Enlightened One).

The story of the Buddha's Great Departure was clearly informed by, and a model for, the ordination ritual of Buddhist monks. One of the first things that the Buddha does after leaving home is to cut his hair, to give up his princely clothes in exchange for the rough yellow garb of an ascetic, and to embark, bowl in hand, on the rounds of a mendicant. The same events are ritually reenacted to this day by Buddhist monks, whose initial ordination ceremony, called their wandering forth (pravrajyā), is marked by the shaving of their head, the exchange of their lay clothes for the robes of a monk, and the acquisition of their begging bowl.

The practice of abandoning one's home to adopt a life of religious mendicancy was, however, already widespread in the Buddha's time. It was, in fact, an age that saw all sorts of youthful questers (śramanas), not just Buddhists, seeking out teachers and striving for religious satisfaction in one way or another. It was an age of ferment, in which it was thought that enlightenment, salvation, and escape from the prison of repeated rebirths could come only by "dropping out," by quitting the householder's life with its pleasures and obligations. The Buddha's family—the Śākya tribe—being of royal blood, was clearly opposed to the Buddha's Great Departure.

According to Buddhist legend, at the time of the Buddha's birth, some soothsayers had predicted that if he remained at home and inherited his father's throne, he would become a great cakravartin king, or "world-ruling" monarch. The Buddha's father, Śuddhodana, concerned for the future of his family line, understandably preferred his son's becoming a cakravartin king to his becoming a wandering quester. In the hopes of preventing his son's departure, he therefore made the Buddha a virtual prisoner in the palace, surrounding him with beves of beautiful women and encouraging his attachment to his principal wife, Yaśodharā, and to his newborn son. But all of this was in vain. The Buddha, on a drive in his chariot through the royal park, came across an old person, a sick person, and a corpse and became deeply distressed by the phenomena of old age, sickness, and death. When, on his next outing, he met a wandering śramaṇa who seemed to be at peace with the world, he was inspired to leave home and become a quester himself. Soon thereafter, according to what is perhaps the best-known version of the story, he was filled with disgust by the sight of the sleeping women of his harem, drooling, disheveled, and snoring, and turning away from his wife and his child whom he now called Rāhula (a fetter), he left home.

But Buddhist attitudes towards the family and home were more complex and varied than this account, informed by the misogynist attitudes of male monastics, would seem to indicate. The selection that follows, taken from a Sanskrit text, presents a noted variant to the story given above. Here, the Buddha's father still tries to keep him at home, and the Buddha's repulsion at the sight of the harem women is still expressed, but his relationship to his