

Section: 9: Past Lives of the Buddha

In this section we are focusing on the previous lives of the Buddha and also how he recalls his past lives as a Bodhisattva and rebirths of other beings. Rebirth- previous lives is a central teaching in Buddhism; when someone passes away, he/she will have a rebirth according to actions (Kamma) they have performed in the present life. Good Kamma supports good rebirth in a higher destination and Bad Kamma leads to a rebirth in a lower destination ⁱ.

“According to the Buddha’s teaching, all beings except the arahants are subject to “renewal of being in the future” (punabbhava), that is, to rebirth. Rebirth, in the Buddhist conception, is not the transmigration of a self or soul but the continuation of a process, a flux of becoming in which successive lives are linked together by causal transmission of influence rather than by substantial identity. The basic causal pattern underlying the process is that defined by the teaching of dependent origination, which also demonstrates how rebirth is possible without a reincarnating self...”

Quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi ⁱⁱ

▲ The Buddha’s ability to see previous lives

According to the scriptures, the Blessed One had many special knowledges known as ‘The Ten Powers’—dasabala— ⁱⁱⁱ and among them were: the power of understanding Kamma and its results—Kamma Vipāka — of all beings and the power of knowing rebirths of beings, whether they will be born in a higher realm or a lower one ^{iv}.

◆ The Buddha has the Ability to know Manyfold Past Lives

The following extract, uttered by the Blessed One on the night of his enlightenment, describes his experience of recollecting his past lives:

“When my concentrated mind was thus purified, ... and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, ... a hundred thousand births, many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion: ‘There I was so named, of such a clan, with such an appearance, ... such my life-term; and passing away from there, I reappeared elsewhere... thus, with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives. This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night... ’” ^v

◆ The Buddha has the Power to see Ninety-one Aeons of Past lives:

* Appearance of Former Buddhas’

In this sutta the Blessed One described in details of the Buddha’s appears in the world before him beginning from ninety-one aeons before him:

‘Monks, ninety-one aeons ago the Lord, the Arahant, the fully-enlightened Buddha Vipassī arose in the world. Thirty-one aeons ago the Lord Buddha Sikhī arose; in the same thirty-first aeon before this Lord Buddha Vessabhū arose. And in this present fortunate aeon the Lords Buddhas Kakusandha, Konagamana and Kassapa arose in the world. And, monks, in this present fortunate aeon I too have now arisen in the world as a fully-enlightened Buddha’” ^{vi}

* Appearance of Beings in Heavenly Realms

On one occasion wanderer Vacchagotta^{vii} asked the Buddha, whether there were any Ājīvakas who, on the dissolution of the body, has gone to heaven. The Blessed One said:

“ When I recollect the past ninety-one aeons, Vaccha, I do not recall any Ājīvaka who, on the dissolution of the body, went to heaven, with one exception, and he held the doctrine of the moral efficacy of action, the doctrine of the moral efficacy of deeds ”^{viii}

* Long Standing Generosity of People

One-time Asibandhakaputta^{ix} the headman in order to refute the Buddha asked this question: *“...why, venerable sir, is the Blessed One wandering on tour with a large Saṅgha of bhikkhus at a time of famine, a time of scarcity, when crops are blighted and have turned to straw? The Blessed One is practising for the annihilation of families, for the calamity of families, for the destruction of families. ”*

The Blessed One replied:

“I recollect ninety-one aeons back, headman, but I do not recall any family that has ever been destroyed merely by offering cooked alms food. Rather, whatever families there are that are rich, with much wealth and property, with abundant gold and silver, with abundant possessions and means of subsistence, with abundant wealth and grain, they have all become so from giving, from truthfulness, and from self-control ”^x

▲ Scriptural Evidence of Previous Births of the Buddha as Bodhisattva

■ In **Kuddaka Nikaya** there are 3 texts describing previous lives of the Bodhisattava:

1) The Great Chronicles of Buddhas (Buddhavamsa): describes the appearance of 25 Fully Enlightened Buddhas, beginning from Buddha Dipankara to Buddha Gotama. This text recounts the story of the Bodhisattva's first aspiration in the presence of Buddha Dipankara to become a future Buddha; gives details of twenty-four Buddhas who appeared before our Buddha Gotama and finally the appearance of the Buddha Gotama. In these texts one can find details of the Bodhisattvas' parents, birth and the place of his birth, enlightenment and final passing away^{xi}. For more details see End Notes^{xii}

2) Cariyāpiṭṭaka (Canon of Conduct) describes twenty-four previous lives of our Bodhisattva^{xiii}

3) Jātaka stories (Past Life stories of the Buddha) mention about numerous previous births of the Bodhisattva^{xiv}. For further information see End Notes^{xv}



Bodhisattva as the ascetic Sumedha at the feet of the Buddha Dipankara aspiring to be the future Buddha. Gandhara sculpture. Source: Metropolitan Museum. NY. Picture courtesy: Wikipedia.

■ Apart from the three texts mentioned above, there are other suttas in the Sutta Pitaka showing the previous births of the bodhisattva. According to the scriptures, the Buddha narrated about his previous lives on special occasions such as: in order to clarify some Dhamma matter or at the request of his disciples. Selected extracts from the scriptures where the Blessed One mentioned his past lives are given below:

◆ **As an Attendant to Brahma Baka.**

On one occasion, the wrong view of thinking that his life was permanent had arisen in Brahma Baka. The Buddha having known the thoughts of the Brahmā Baka, out of compassion for him appeared in the Brahma world. The Blessed One then explained to the Brahmā Baka, that his life span would one day also end. On the invitation of the Brahma. the Buddha explained to him, his previous rebirths and good work done by him and further said that in one life, brahma was the teacher and the Buddha (as Bodhisattva) was his attendant name Kappa.

“I was your apprentice named Kappa; You thought him intelligent and devout: That was your ancient practice of vow and virtue, Which I recollect as if just waking up.” ^{xvi}

◆ **As the Brahmin Student Jotipāla during the time of Buddha Kassapa**

On one occasion the Buddha, walking with large group of Sangha in the Kosalan country saw a place off the main road smiled. Venerable Ānanda, seeing the Blessed One’s simile, thought:

“What is the reason, what is the cause, for the Blessed One’s smile? Tathāgatas do not smile for no reason.”

Then he approached the Buddha and asked him for the reason for his smile. Then the Blessed One said that previously the place was a prosperous town called Vebhalinga, where the monastery of the former Buddha Kassapa was situated. In his narration he said that the chief supporter of the Buddha Kassapa was a potter named Ghaṭṭikāra, who had a good friend the brahmin student Jotipala of the same village. Ghaṭṭikāra inspired Jotipala to visit the

Buddha Kassapa and after listening to the Dhamm, Jotipala then became a disciple of the Buddha. Then the Blessed One said thus:

“Now, Ānanda, you may think thus: ‘Certainly, someone else was the brahmin student Jotipāla on that occasion.’ But it should not be regarded thus. I was the brahmin student Jotipāla on that occasion.”^{xvii}

In Ghaṭikāra Sutta (SN2: 50) describes how the potter Ghaṭikāra, after passing away as a non-returner, appeared in Brahma world as Brahma Ghaṭikāra, and visited the Buddha and said thus:

“In the past I was the potter, Ghaṭikāra in Vehaṇṇa... was a lay follower of the Buddha Kassapa... I was your fellow villager; In the past I was your friend...”^{xviii}

♦ As the Brahmin chaplain of King Mahāvijita

On one occasion when the Blessed One was living in Ambalatthika park at Khānumata village, Brahmin Kutadanta went to see the Buddha and asked how to successfully conduct the triple sacrifice with its sixteen requisites. The Blessed One then narrated the story of King Mahāvijita who lived long time ago. The king wished to perform a big sacrifice, so he consulted his minister-chaplain—Purohitawho—who instructed the King how to make the sacrifice with sixteen reasons. The sacrifice the King Mahāvijita performed was without killing any animals but with ghee, oil, butter, curds, honey and molasses. Brahmin Kutadanta rejoiced in the words of the Buddha and inquired in that previous life whether the Buddha was the king or the chaplain. The Blessed One said:

‘I do, Brahmin. I was the Brahmin chaplain who conducted that sacrifice.’^{xix}

♦ As King Mahasudassana, a Wheel-Turning Monarch of Kusavati

When the Buddha was at the sāl-grove of Mallas of Kusinara, shortly before his final Nibbana, Venerable Ānanda after paying homage to the Buddha said:

“Lord, may the Blessed Lord not pass away in this miserable little town of wattle-and-daub, right in the jungle ... there are other great cities such as Campa, Rajagaha, Savatthi... in those places there are wealthy Khattiyas, Brahmins and householders who are devoted to the Tathagata and they will provide for the Tathāgata’s funeral in proper style.”^{xx}

The Buddha then related the story of King Mahāsudassana, a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous King, who reigned the Kusinara (then known as Kusāvātī), a well-populated and affluent city with a large kingdom. Concluding the narration, the Blessed One said:

“Now, Ānanda, you might think King Mahasudassana at that time was somebody else. But you should not regard it so, for I was King Mahasudassana then... ‘See, Ananda, how all those conditioned states of the past have vanished and changed! Thus, Ananda, conditioned states are impermanent, they are unstable, they can bring us no comfort, and such being the case, Ananda, we should not rejoice in conditioned states, we should cease to take an interest in them, and be liberated from them...”^{xxi}

♦ As the Jotipala, son of the chaplain of King Disampati

On one occasion when the Blessed One was staying at the Vultures’ Peak of Rajagaha, Pañcasikha of the gandhabbas came to see him. After paying homage to the Buddha, he told

how Brahmā Sanankumāra had visited the realm of the Thirty-Three Gods. Then Brahmā Sanankumāra said to Sakka and his assembly:

“For how long has the Blessed Lord been one of mighty wisdom?”

He then related a previous birth of the Buddha as the son of the chaplain of King Disampati. When his father passed away, because of his mighty wisdom, he became the king’s great chaplain called ‘Mahā Govinda’. After some time, when Mahā Govinda decided to leave the household life into a homeless life, many of the population including kings of that kingdom followed him and became his disciples. He practiced the four Brahmaviharas and taught his disciples the way to union with the Bahama world.

After telling the narration of Brahma Sanankumāra, Pañcasikha asked the Buddha:

‘Do you remember this, Lord?’

The Buddha replied:

‘I do, Pañcasikha. At that time, I was the Brahmin, the Great Steward, and I taught those disciples the path to union with the Brahmā-world... however, Pañcasikha, that holy life does not lead to disenchantment to dispassion... to Nibbana, but only to birth in the Brahmā-world, whereas my holy life (as the Buddha) leads unfailingly to disenchantment, to dispassion...to enlightenment, to Nibbana.’^{xxii}

◆ As the Chariot Maker to the King Pacetana

Following sutta described another previous life of the Buddha:

On one occasion, the Blessed One recounted the story of King Pacetana and his chariot maker to the Sangha to point out that who is able to stand the spiritual path and who is not. The story goes like this: The King Pacetana was preparing for a forthcoming war and asked his chariot maker to make pair of wheels for the royal chariot. Then chariot maker began his work and it took him nearly six months to make only one wheel. The King came to see his work and, finding only one wheel was available, told him to hurry up as he was going into the battle in six days’ time. The chariot maker agreed to make the second wheel within the next six days and finished his task. The king was puzzled about the two wheels, he could not see any difference of them. He asked what the difference was between the two wheels and the chariot maker demonstrated the difference of the two wheels this way: first he took the wheel made in six days and rolled it, it went a certain distance and then fell into the ground, however when he rolled the wheel made in six months, it rolled as far as it could go and then stood still on its axle. The king was amazed and wanted to know why the two wheels acted in two different ways. The chariot maker said thus:

“ ‘The wheel that took six days to finish, lord, has a rim ... spokes ... and a nave that is crooked, faulty, and defective. For this reason, it rolled as far as the momentum carried it and then it wobbled and fell to the ground. But the six months wheel has a rim... spokes... and it has a nave that is without crookedness, faults, and defects. For this reason, it rolled as far as the momentum carried it and then stood still as if fixed on an axle’ ”

Concluding the story, the Buddha told the Sangha that in that life he was King Pacetana’s Chariot maker. The story was narrated by the Blessed One to show the Sangha, that who would succeed in the Dhamma Vinaya and who would not. Like the wheel made only in six

days could not roll and stand still, Sangha who are not practicing well and are crooked in body, speech and mind will fall down, but the Sangha who are practicing well and without any crookedness in body, speech and mind will stand tall in the dispensation like the wheel made in six months^{xxiii}.

♦ **As King Makhādeva of Mithilā and also as King Nimi** ^{xxiv}

Once the Blessed One was staying in Makhādeva Mango Grove of Mithilā, when in a certain place, he smiled. Then Venerable Ānanda knowing that “*Tathāgatas do not smile for no reason*” asked the Buddha why he was smiling and the Buddha narrated the story of a king named Makhādeva who regained the city of Mithilā a long time ago. That king was established in Dhamma and observed the Uposatha days. According to the long life span of that time the king Makhādeva ruled the country, because he was reflecting of old age, he asked his barber to tell him if he saw a grey hair on his head. Accordingly, the barber having found a grey hair, informed the King. Then desiring to enhance his spiritual practice as a homeless ascetic, he gave up the kingdom to his son and said thus: ^{xxv}

“... dear prince, when you too see grey hairs growing on your head...carefully instructing the prince, your eldest son, in kingship, shave off your hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and go forth from the home life into homelessness. Continue this good practice instituted by me and do not be the last man...”

So, the tradition established by the Bodhisattva as king Makhādeva continued for a long period of time. The last king of the lineage of Makhādeva was King Nimi, who practiced the Dhamma accordingly and having found a grey hair, gave his kingdom to his son and became a homeless ascetic. However, his son Kaḷārajanaka when old age approached did not go into homeless life and broke the tradition. Then the Buddha said to Venerable Ānanda:

“ Now, Ānanda, it may be that you think thus: ‘Certainly, on that occasion someone else was King Makhādeva, who instituted that good practice.’ But it should not be regarded thus. I was King Makhādeva on that occasion. I instituted that good practice and later generations continued that good practice instituted by me. But that kind of good practice does not lead to disenchantment... to Nibbāna, but only to reappearance in the Brahma-world. But there is this kind of good practice that has been instituted by me now, which leads to complete disenchantment, to dispassion... to Nibbāna. “Ānanda, I say to you: continue this good practice instituted by me and do not be the last man...”^{xxvi}

♦ **As Brahmin Velāma who Gave Great Alms**

On one occasion the Blessed One gave a discourse to the householder Anāthapiṇḍika ^{xxvii} on the proper way to give alms. Then he told a story of a brahmin named Velāma who gave great alms of nine types (such as golden bowls...silver bowls) each of a quantity of 84,000. Then the Buddha said:

“You might think, householder: ‘He was someone else, the brahmin Velāma who on that occasion gave those great alms offering.’ ...but you should not look at it in such a way, I myself was the brahmin Velāma... now, householder, at those alms offering there was no one worthy of offerings, no one who purified the offering. Even more fruitful than the great alms offering that the brahmin Velāma gave would it be to feed one person accomplished in view...”^{xxviii}

◆ Following sutta, describes, during his past lives the Buddha has performed many wholesome deeds. Because of those good kamma, he was endowed with thirty-two great marks.

Monks, in whatever former life, former existence or dwelling-place the Tathagata, being born a human being, undertook mighty deeds to good purpose, unwavering in good conduct of body, speech and thought, in generosity, self-discipline, observance of the fast-day, in honouring parents, ascetics and Brahmins and the head of the clan, and in other highly meritorious acts; by performing that kamma, heaping it up, lavishly and abundantly, at the breaking-up of the body after death he was reborn in a happy state, in a heavenly world, where he was endowed beyond other devas in ten respects: in length of heavenly life, beauty, happiness, splendour, influence, and in heavenly sights, sounds, smells, tastes and contacts. Falling away from there and coming to be reborn here on earth, he acquired this mark of the Great Man: feet with level tread, so that he places his foot evenly on the ground, lifts it evenly, and touches the ground evenly with the entire sole... ”xxix

▲ Previous Lives of Other Beings

Occasionally, the Blessed One has also narrated the previous lives of other beings. Some selected stories are given below.

◆ Lives of Five Buddhas’ who Appeared in the World Before the Buddha Gotama

On one occasion, the Bhikkhu Sangha who were residing at Anāthapindika’s park in the Jeta Grove, gathered in the Dhamma hall after the meal to discuss former lives. The Blessed One then approached them and inquired what kind of discussion they were having. When the Sangha told him of their talk, the Buddha asked whether they would like to hear a discourse on past lives and the Sangha consented.

In the discourse, the Buddha described that during ninety-one aeons there appeared seven fully enlightened Buddhas in the following order: 91 aeons ago the Buddha Vipassī arose, 31 aeons ago the Buddha Vessabhū arose, in the present aeon there were five Buddhas Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa. Then as the sixth one Buddha Gotama- the Blessed One arose. The sutta gives details of previous Buddhas: their family, enlightenment, names of chief disciples etc. Afterwards, the monks discussed about the great psychic abilities of the Buddha:

“... it is marvellous, friends, it is wonderful, the Tathāgata’s great power and ability — the way he recalls past Buddhas who have gained Parinibbāna... their birth... name, ... clan, their life-span, the disciples and assemblies connected with him. Well now, friends, how did the Tathagata come by the penetrative knowledge through which he remembers all this ... ? Did some deva reveal this knowledge to him?”

Then the Buddha, after leaving his seclusion approached them and inquired, ‘what was your conversation as you sat together? What discussion did I interrupt?’

When the monks told him, the Blessed One said thus:

“The Tathāgata understands these things...by his own penetration of the principles of Dhamma; and devas, too, have told him ”xxx

◆ Former Lives of Sakka, the Lord of the Devas

In SN: Sakkasamyutta, there is a discourse of the Blessed One describing previous lives of Sakka as human being, how he had lived righteously and undertook seven vows which later brought him the status of Sakka, the Lord of the devas ^{xxx}

End Notes: Section 9

ⁱ These 2 suttas give detail analysis of workings of kamma: MN: 135 (Cūḷakammavibhanga Sutta) & MN: 136 (Mahākammavibhanga Sutta)

ⁱⁱ See: MN: Introduction: Kamma & Rebirth, p. 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ In **Section 5** of this compilation the Ten Powers of the Tathāgata has been elaborated.

^{iv} For details see: MN:12 (Mahāsīhanāda Sutta)

^v MN: 4 (Bhayabherava Sutta).

^{vi} DN:14 (Mahāpadāna sutta)

^{vii} Later he became an arahant disciple of the Buddha.

^{viii} See: DN:Notes:717.

^{ix} He was formerly a student of Niganthanāthaputta; after hearing the discourse became follower of the Buddha.

^x SN42:9 (Families sutta)

^{xi} * The Great Chronicles of Buddhas in Pali- Mahāsaṅgīti Tipitaka Buddhavaṃsa (available on line : w.w.w. suttacentral.net) * Buddhavaṃsa in English by Ven. Mingun Sayadaw, translated in to English by U Ko Lay & U Tin Lwin (available on line: Internet archive) * Buddhavaṃsa & Chariyapitaka in Sinhala and Pali: Buddha Jayanti Tripitaka Series, Vol. 38 (available online).

^{xii} * In the Introduction to Buddha Jayanthi Buddhavaṃsa and Chariya pitaka it states that on the occasion of the Buddha's visit to Kapilvastu, he performed the twin miracle (**yamaka maha pathiharya**) at the presence of his Sakyan relatives in order to dispel their doubt of the Buddha's enlightenment. On that occasion, Venerable Sariputta invited the Blessed One to relate the 'Chronicles of Buddhas'—The narration begins with the 'Story of Sumedha' - the then name of the Bodhisattva, asking approval of the Buddha Dipankara to become a future Buddha"n* **The Great Chanting Book (Maha Pirith Potha)** mentions 28 Buddhas who appeared this world: The first three arose before the Buddha Dīpankara: Taṇhaṅkara Buddha, Medhaṅkara Buddha and Saraṅkara Buddha. Then came Dīpankara Buddha, Koṇḍañña Buddha, Maṅgala Buddha, Sumana Buddha, Revata Buddha, Sobhita Buddha, Anomadassi Buddha, Paduma Buddha, Nārada Buddha, Padumuttara Buddha, Sumedha Buddha, Sujāta Buddha, Piyadassi Buddha, Atthadassi Buddha, Dhammadassī Buddha, Siddhattha Buddha, Tissa Buddha, Phussa Buddha, Vipassī Buddha, Sikhī Buddha, Vessabhū Buddha, Kakusandha Buddha, Koṇāgamana Buddha, Kassapa Buddha, ending with Gotama Buddha.

^{xiii} **Note:** the introduction to the Cariyāpiṭka in Buddha Jayanthi publication says: *Why is the text is called Cariyāpiṭka?* It described the great conduct of the Bodhisattva in each his previous life, fulfilling all aspects (paramita) to gain the Buddhahood.

^{xiv} Birth stories: * Jataka (English): Translated by Bhikhu Sujato: w.w.w.suttacentral.net. * Sinhala and Pali: Buddha Jayanti Tripitaka Series: 3 volumes. (available online). In these 2 texts described 547 birth stories; in Sinhala 'Pansiya Panas Jatakaya' (550 birth stories) mentioned 550 births of the Bodhisattva.

^{xv} The Jataka Tales in the Buddhist Canon, the Buddha recounts the tales of his previous five-hundreds (500) plus incarnations, when he was still an unenlightened "Bodhisattva" — not yet the Conqueror, the Buddha. The word "Jataka" means "birth" in both the Pali and Sanskrit languages. The Jataka tales, among the oldest and best known of Buddhist texts, refers to stories of the past lives of Siddhartha Gautama before he became the Buddha in his final life. These charming and helpful stories number in the hundreds, with each life illustrating different teachings: the Paramitas,

the Four Noble Truths, the Bodhisattva Vows, the Eightfold Path, the Four Abodes, the Six Realms — all engagingly taught in the form of life stories. Each features the Buddha in diverse forms: he appears as an animal, a king, a wandering ascetic, a monkey and much more. Source: <https://buddhaweb.com/the-jataka-108-1>

^{xvi} SN6: 4 (Brahama Baka sutta) * This event is also described in MN:49 (Brahmanimantila sutta).

SN: Notes 391, p. 552: per Bhikkhu Bodhi: This verse refers to the Kesava Jātaka (Ja No. 346; see too Dhp-a I 342-44). Kesava was the name of the teacher: Baka Brahama.

^{xvii} MN: 81 (Ghaṭikāra Sutta).

^{xviii} SN:2: 50.

^{xix} DN:5 (Kūtadanta sutta).

^{xx} **See:** DN:16 (Mahāparinibbana sutta)

^{xxi} DN:17 (Mahasudhassana sutta). * This story is also mentioned in DN:16.* **Note:** In DN:17 the Buddha said that seven of his previous lives he lived in the same place (the city of Kusavati) and he remembered discarding his body there.

^{xxii} **See:** DN: 19 (Mahāgovinda Sutta).

^{xxiii} AN3:15 (Pacetana sutta)

^{xxiv} **See** Makhādeva Jātaka (No. 9) and Nimi Jātaka (No. 541). King Makhādeva and King Nimi were earlier births of the Buddha Gotama: see: MN: Notes: 806, p. 1139.

^{xxv} MN:83 (Makhādeva Sutta).

^{xxvi} Ibid.

^{xxvii} He was the chief lay supporter of the Buddha, see: AN:1:249 (Foremost).

^{xxviii} AN:9: 20 (Velāma sutta).

^{xxix} DN:30 (Lakkhaṇa Sutta).

^{xxx} DN: 14 (Mahāpadāna Sutta).

^{xxxi} SN11:12 (Sakka's Name sutta).