

Comparative Conceptions of the Self

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Lecture 2

Background on the Buddha



Outline

Who the Buddha was.

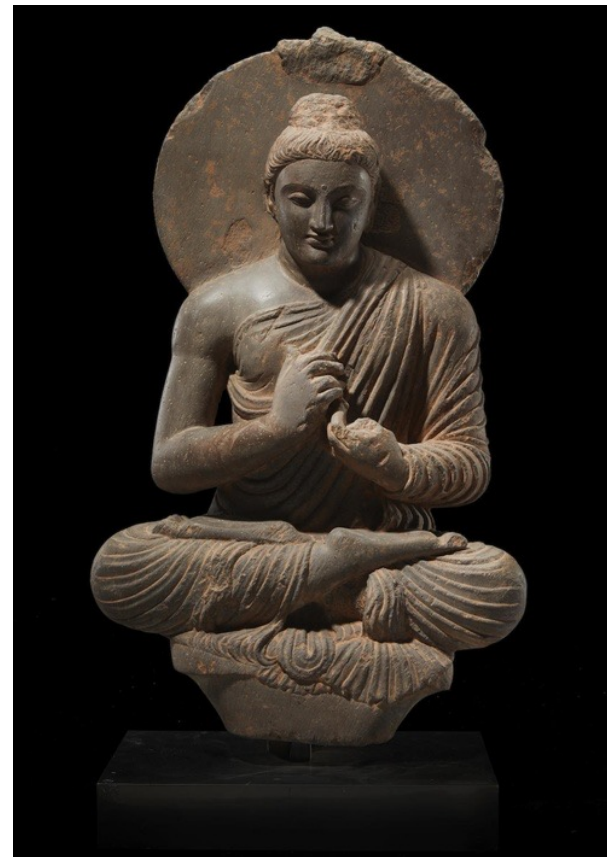
The historical context of the Buddha's ideas.

The Buddha's first teaching (according to the later tradition).

Who the Buddha was

Names, epithets, and title:

- Gautama (Gotama): family name.
- Siddhārtha (Siddhattha): personal name, “one whose aim is accomplished.”
- Buddha: title, “One who is awake,” “The Awakened One.”
- Śākyamuni: epithet, “sage of the Śākya clan.”
- Tathāgata: epithet, “One who has thus gone.”



Dates

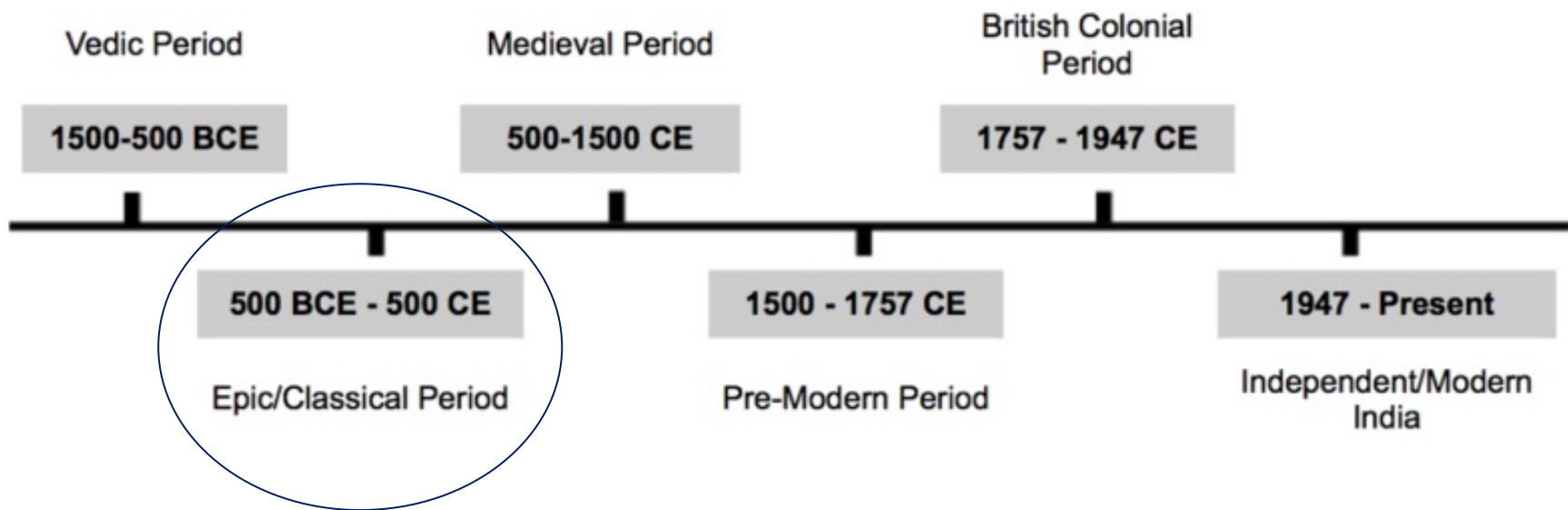
The traditional canonical account tells us that the Buddha lived to be 80 years old.

Older scholarly view:

ca. 560-480 BCE.

Current scholarly view:

ca. 485-405 BCE (based on the current view that he must have died around 405 BCE).



Buddha, 485-405 BCE

Vedas, 1500 BCE

Upaniṣad, earliest from c. 700 BCE

Bhagavad-Gītā, c. 3rd century BCE-4th century CE

Dates

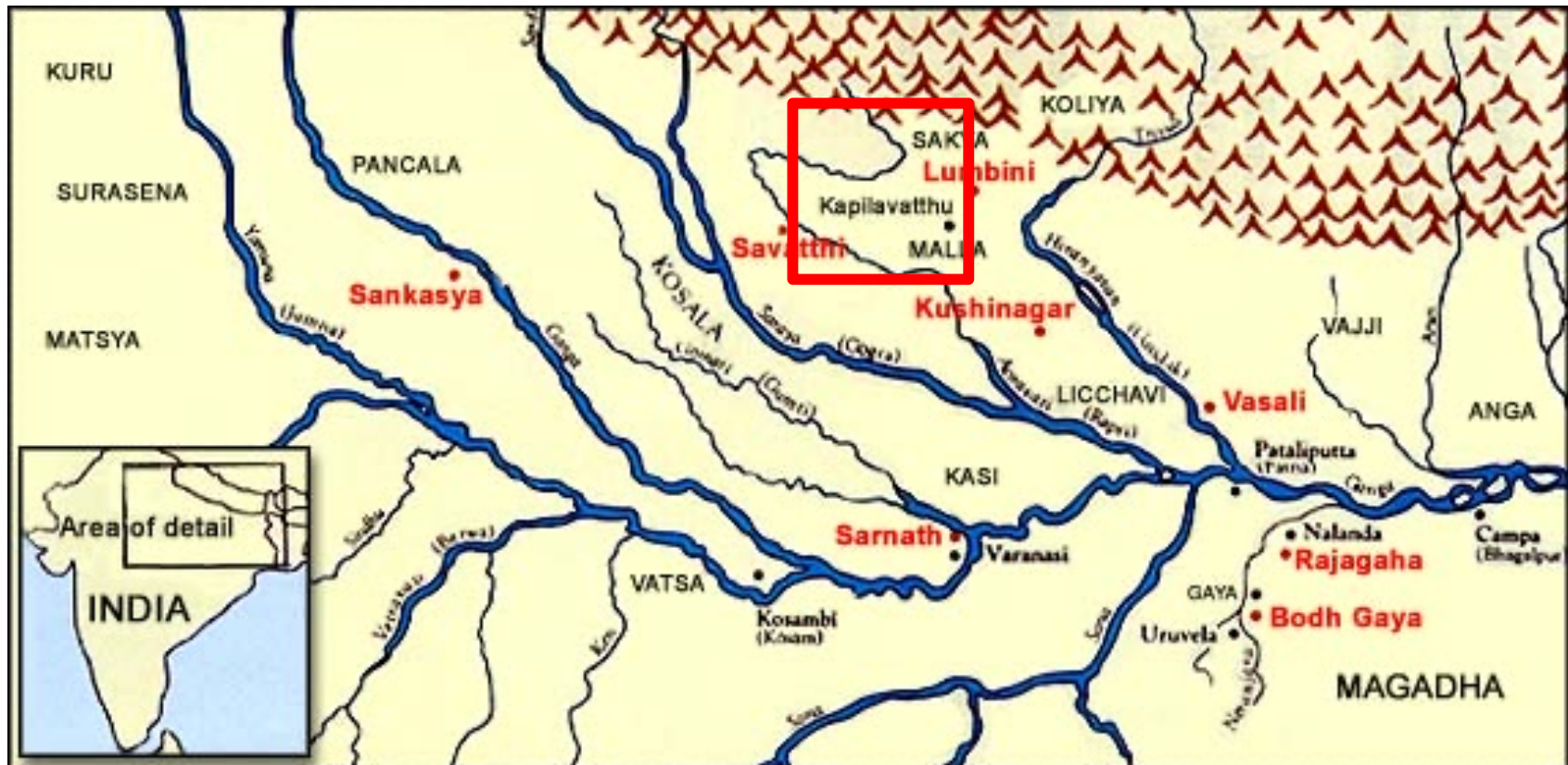
Confucius/Kongzi:	551-479 BCE
Buddha	485-405 BCE
Socrates	469-399 BCE
Mengzi	372-289 BCE
Aśoka (emperor largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism in India.)	c. 269-231 BCE.

Biography

Born in Kapilavastu (home of the Śākya clan, now western part of Nepal, near the Indian border).

Grows up in comfortable circumstances, but in early adulthood abandons the householder life to become a *śramaṇa* (recluse).

Kapilavastu



Biography

After taking up with a number of *śramaṇas*, he strikes out on his own.

Through a combination of meditative contemplation and insight, he attains awakening (*bodhi*), the realization of *Nirvāṇa*, which consists in liberation from all further suffering.

Biography

At first, he inclines not to teach what he has realized, because he thinks no one will listen or understand.

But then he decides to go forth and teach, and for the remaining 45 years of his life, devotes himself to teaching others the path he has found.

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Historical context

Brahmanism:

Vedic ritual and sacrificial culture.

Upanishadic vision of ātman-brahman.

Śramaṇas:

Deniers of karma and mokṣa (*Ājīvīkas*, materialists).

Jain asceticism.

Historical context

Brahmanism:

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Jain asceticism.

The Buddha rejects Brahmanism and the various *Śramaṇic* doctrines as misguided and not conducive to liberation.

Instead, he propounds an original view based on the following radical ideas.

Fundamental ideas

Everything we experience is **process**—constant change with no unchanging essence.

Process or change is not random; it is patterned according to various **cause-effect regularities**.

Karma is the ethical factor at work in these causal regularities, and it is fundamentally a mental factor—how volitions (intentions), wholesome and unwholesome, condition or affect the constantly changing processes of the world that we experience [ethicization of karma].

Liberation from suffering is attainable through a combination of wisdom (right understanding), ethics (moral discipline), and meditation.

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First teaching

“Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Teaching”
(translated at
<http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebsut001.htm>)

First teaching

The Middle Way

The Dhamma is a middle path between self-indulgence and self-mortification.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The Dhamma as a path comprising right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The Four Noble Truths

Suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation (the eightfold path leading to Nibbāna/Nirvāna).

The Four Noble Truths/ The Four Truths for the Noble

1. There is suffering (*dukha/duhkha*).
2. There is the origination of suffering [suffering comes into existence in dependence on causes].
3. There is the cessation of suffering [all future suffering can be prevented].
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering [the Noble Eightfold Path].

Suffering (*dukha/duhkha*)

Not ordinary pain, but **existential suffering**.

Traditionally described as three-layered, each more subtle than its predecessor.

Suffering (*dukha/duhkha*)

1. Suffering as painful experiences. Immediate unpleasant sensation of hurting + mental reaction to it (worry, anguish, dread, frustration, etc.).
2. Suffering as impermanence. Nothing lasts, everything changes and is eventually lost, hence we're always in pursuit of something new, anxiously knowing we'll lose it too.
3. Suffering as due to conditions. Not getting what one wants; getting what one doesn't want; getting what one wants and inevitably losing it.

Suffering due to the conditions that result in rebirth-redeath: craving, thirst, desire, attachment.

Suffering (*dukha/duhkha*)

Seen from this perspective, the pursuit of ordinary happiness (via possessions, wealth, reputation, sex, etc.) is a kind of **treadmill**—whatever happiness one gains is outweighed by the inevitable loss, so that one has the sense of going nowhere, a sense that leads to alienation and despair.

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The origination of suffering

“And what is the origin of suffering? It is this **craving** [*taṇhā/ṭṛṣṇā*] that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination. This is called the origin of suffering.”

The origination of suffering

At a deeper level, craving for permanence (permanent existence or non-existence).

But everything changes and is impermanent.

So, at the deepest level, a manifestation of fundamental ignorance (*avijjā/avidyā*)—mistaking what is impermanent for something permanent.

The origination of suffering

As a result of our fundamental ignorance (*avijjā/avidyā*), we ascribe a permanent, unchanging self (soul) to ourselves, and a permanent, unchanging essence to things.

This belief in permanence produces craving for permanence, which is constantly being thwarted by impermanence.

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The cessation of suffering

“And what is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonattachment.”

The Four Noble Truths/ The Four Truths for the Noble

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The path to the cessation of suffering

“And what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path...”

The Noble Eightfold Path

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|-------------------------|---|------------------|
| 1. Right view. | } | Wisdom |
| 2. Right intention. | | |
| 3. Right speech. | } | Moral Discipline |
| 4. Right action. | | |
| 5. Right livelihood. | | |
| 6. Right effort. | } | Meditation |
| 7. Right mindfulness. | | |
| 8. Right concentration. | | |