

BUDDHISM: MYTHS AND HISTORIES

Outline

- Conceptual Problems (3 and 4)
- Mythic life of the Buddha

- Focus on:
- Myth of the Buddha
- How myth reflects history
- How myth informs practice and belief

Complication the third

- “Buddhism” is not monolithic (a single thing)
- “Buddhisms are vast and homogeneous
- Masks differences among similarities
- “Athlete”
- “University Student”

Differences

- Buddhists in different places have different rules of behaviour
- There is no singular essence of Buddhism to which all historical people uniformly adhere
- Think about the sandwiches!

Challenge the fourth

- The term “Buddhism” gives the impression it is a completely distinct religion
- For example, Buddhism is distinct from Hinduism, and Daoism, and Confucianism
- In reality “Buddhism” has strong syncretic ties to other cultural traditions

Mythic Origins

- 6th-5th century BCE
- Border between North East India and Nepal in city of Kapilavastu
- Prince named Siddhartha Gautama (also called Shakya-muni) became spiritual leader
- Historical person? Probably, but we know next to nothing about him beyond the myths

Story of the Buddha

- Based on some historical facts (probably)
- Mostly mythologic embellishments added and compiled over centuries
- Story not meant to be taken literally, but understood as a “complex weaving of historical concerns with myth and legend”

Story of the Buddha

- If Shakyamuni wrote anything himself, we don't have it
- Stories of his life pop up in historical records centuries after his death
- Biographies of Shakyamuni appear c. 500 years after his death
- Most famous the *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha), an epic poem written in Sanskrit by Indian philosophers Ashvaghosha in 2nd c. CE

Buddhacarita

- Was a eulogy, meant to establish, praise, and commemorate the person
- It is also a religious paradigm that conveys important teachings
- It was also critical of practices of other “religions” and shows how Buddhism is different
- The biography is NOT a piece of scripture central to all Buddhists, but is a starting point

Story as Myth

- The biography of the Buddha not only tells us about his birth, life, enlightenment, “founding” of Buddhism, and death, but also lays the mythic foundations of the major ideas of Buddhism
- Pay attention for these in the story!

Buddhacarita Book I vv. 19-20 translated by E. B. Cowell (1894)

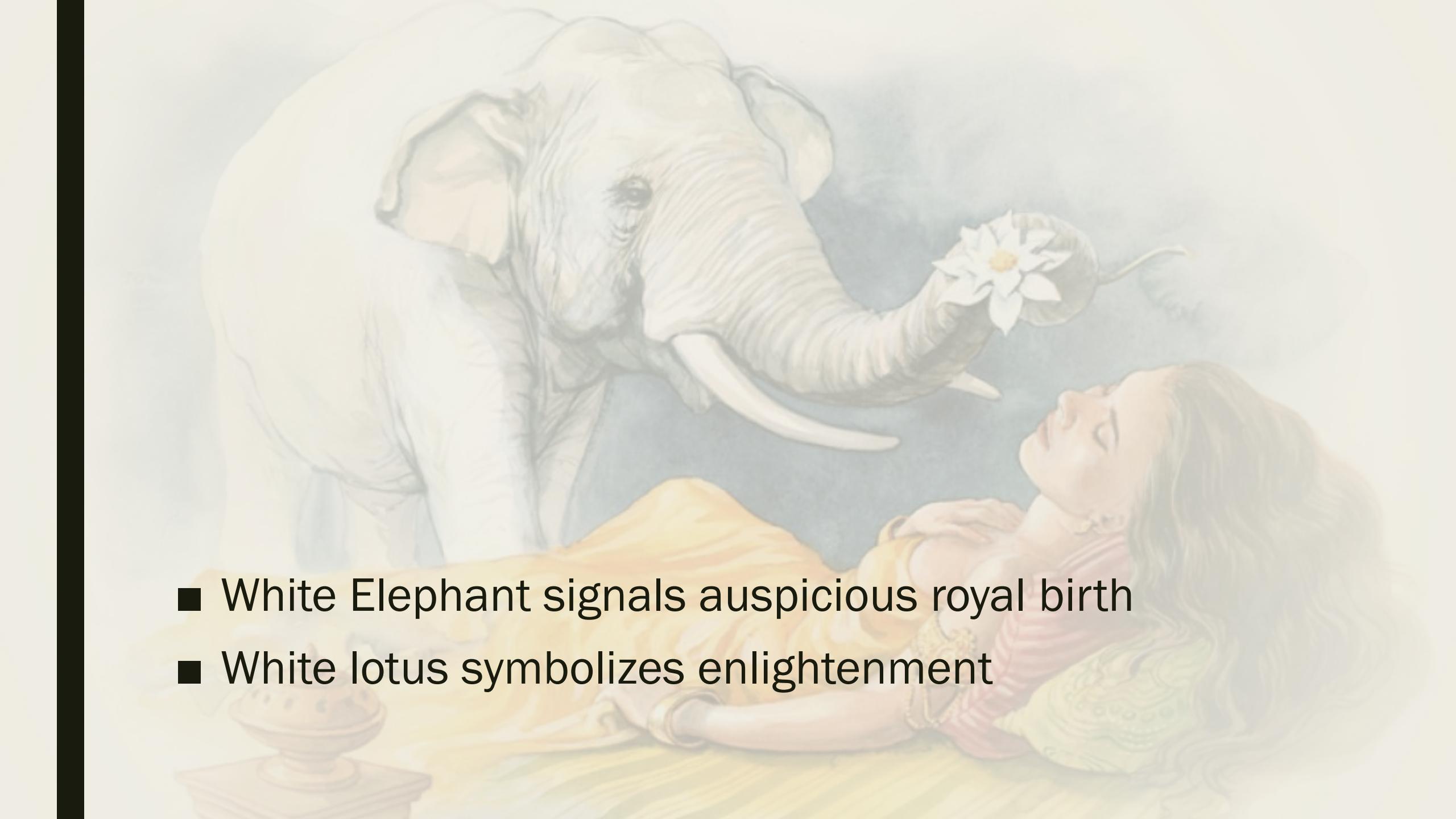
- 19. Then falling from the host of beings in the Tuṣita heaven, and illumining the three worlds, the most excellent of Bodhisattvas suddenly entered at a thought into her womb, like the Nāga-king entering the cave of Nanda.
- 20. Assuming the form of a huge elephant white like Himalaya, armed with six tusks, with his face perfumed with flowing ichor, he entered the womb of the queen of king Śuddhodana, to destroy the evils of the world.

Past Lives of the Buddha

- Shakyamuni not the beginning of the Buddha story
- Before him Sumedha (which is also not the beginning)
- In seeking enlightenment Sumedha became a *bodhisattva*, a being of enlightenment
- As a bodhisattva he cultivated virtue seeking spiritual awakening to benefit both himself and others
- Sumedha was destined to become what we now call the Buddha

Myth of the Buddha

- The great bodhisattva is reborn to a Queen and King
- Queen Maya and King Shuddhodana
- Before the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, the Queen had a dream that a white elephant holding a lotus flower entered her right side

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- White Elephant signals auspicious royal birth
 - White lotus symbolizes enlightenment

- Buddha born painlessly from his mother's side
- Did not cry, but immediately declared he was the last rebirth and would become the buddha in his lifetime
- Baby named “Siddhartha” which means “one who has achieved his goal”
- (a little on the nose)

The Two Paths of the Buddha

- Brahman priests informed the king (Buddha's father) that Siddhartha has two possible destinies:
 1. He could be a great sovereign
 - For this he would need to stay in the world
 2. He could be a great religious leader
 - For this he would need to renounce the world

The Sovereign Path

- The king sheltered his son from the unpleasantness of the world
- Enjoyed the best things: fine clothes, wine, food, music, women
- Was oblivious to realities outside the walls of the palace

Book III vv. 3-4

- 3. The king, having learned the character of the wish thus expressed by his son, ordered a pleasure-party to be prepared, worthy of his own affection and his son's beauty and youth.
- 4. He prohibited the encounter of any afflicted common person in the highroad; 'heaven forbid that the prince with his tender nature should even imagine himself to be distressed.'

The Four Sights

- The four sights changed Siddhartha and put him on the path to becoming the Buddha
- Siddhartha was permitted four excursions from the palace in his royal chariot
- His father tried to clear out the unpleasant things from the path (mostly old and sick people)

- The gods had other plans (they wanted Siddhartha to follow the religious path)
- Book III vv. 26. But then the gods, dwelling in pure abodes, having beheld that city thus rejoicing like heaven itself, created an old man to walk along on purpose to stir the heart of the king's son.
- The old person is the **first sight**
- The sight of old age disturbed the Buddha who was only familiar with youth and beauty

- After spending a long time reflecting on old age, Siddhartha went out again
- Book III vv. 39. But when he found no happiness even there, as he continually kept reflecting, ‘old age, old age,’ then once more, with the permission of the king, he went out with the same arrangement as before.
- 40. Then the same deities created another man with his body all afflicted by disease; and on seeing him the son of Śuddhodana addressed the charioteer, having his gaze fixed on the man

- 41. ‘Yonder man with a swollen belly, his whole frame shaking as he pants, his arms and shoulders hanging loose, his body all pale and thin, uttering plaintively the word "mother," when he embraces a stranger, – who, pray, is this?’
- 42. Then his charioteer answered, ‘Gentle Sir, it is a very great affliction called sickness, that has grown up, caused by the inflammation of the (three) humours, which has made even this strong man no longer master of himself.’
- 43. Then the prince again addressed him, looking upon the man compassionately, ‘Is this evil peculiar to him or are all beings alike threatened by sickness?’

- The Second Sight: illness
- The Third Sight: a corpse
- Siddhartha was not used to old age, illness, and death and was deeply troubled by it
- Trouble by the realities that face us all
- Also teaches two fundamental Buddhist concepts:
 1. The world is subject to inevitable change (impermanence)
 2. Frailty and mortality bring grief to all people (life is suffering)

The Fourth Sight

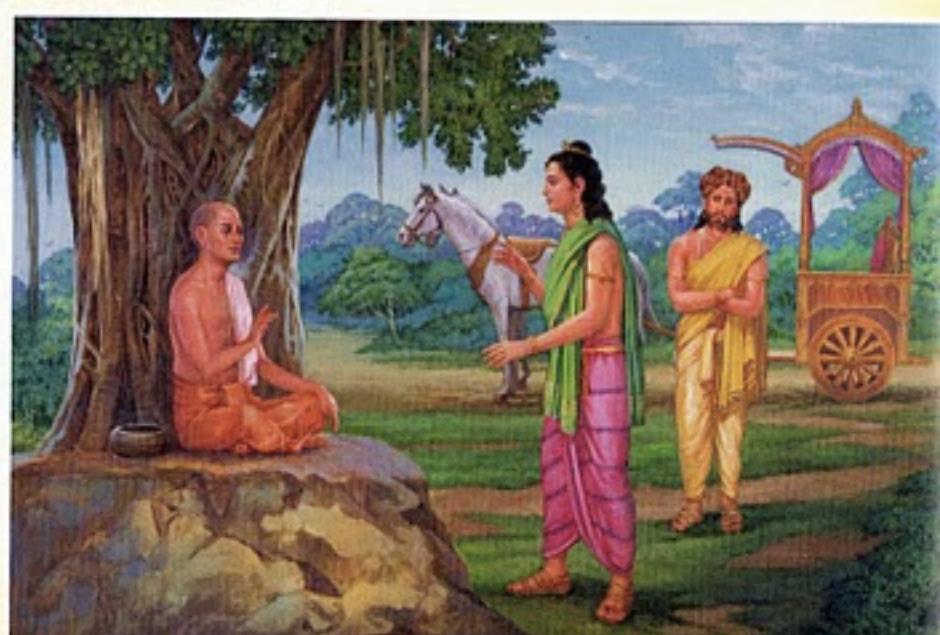
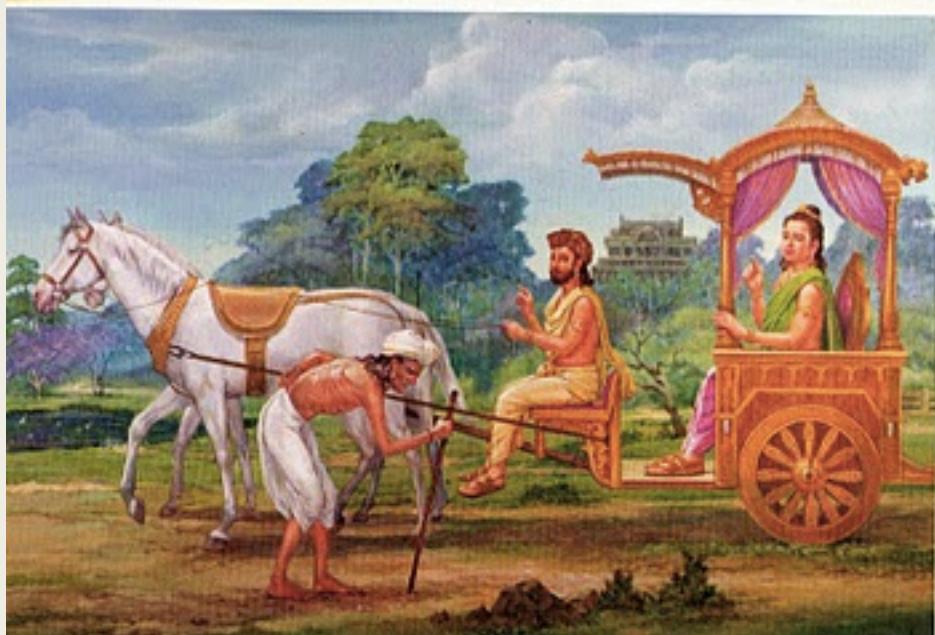
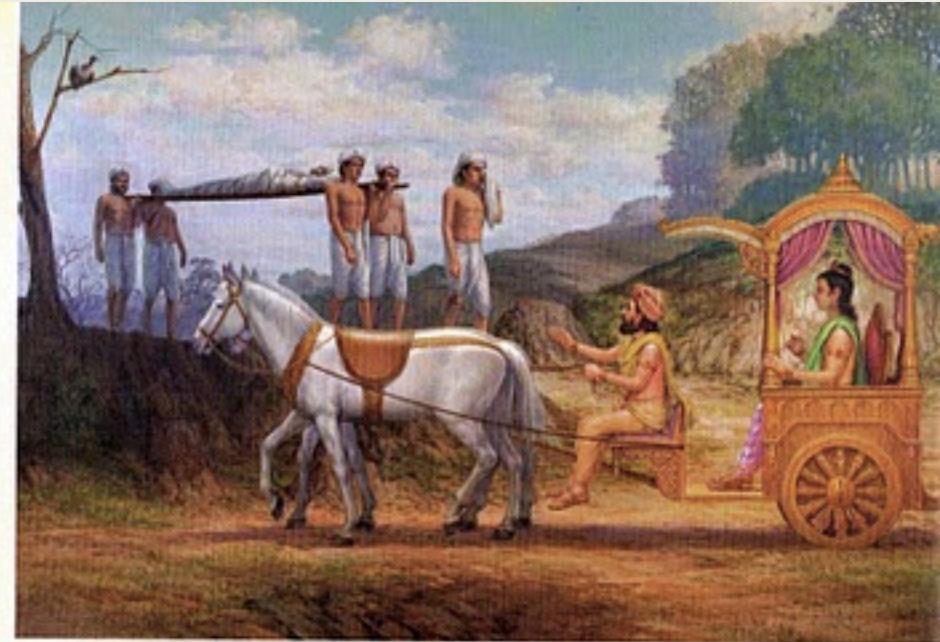
- Something different!
- Dismayed by negative things, Siddhartha went into the forest and started meditating on what he has seen
- Siddhartha saw a religious renunciate

16. Thus did this pure passionless meditation grow within the great-souled one; and unobserved by the other men, there crept up a man in a beggar's dress.

17. The king's son asked him a question, – he said to him, 'Tell me, who art thou?' and the other replied, 'Oh bull of men, I, being terrified at birth and death, have become an ascetic for the sake of liberation.'

18. 'Desiring liberation in a world subject to destruction, I seek that happy indestructible abode, isolated from mankind, with my thoughts unlike those of others, and with my sinful passions turned away from all objects of sense.'

The renunciate gave Siddhartha hope that there was a solution to the impermanence that cause aging, disease, and death



The Great Renunciation

- The four sights convinced Siddhartha to leave his life in the palace, his wife, and his son
- He cut off his hair (act of renunciation)
- Began spiritual quest



- Spends 6 years trying to attain enlightenment
- Learned from many masters and attained internal peace, but was not satisfied
- Experimented with self-mortification (self-inflicted pain and extreme fasting)
- Rejected it, concluding that one cannot concentrate when exhausted

An aside: Biography as commentary

- Siddhartha's rejection of extreme asceticism probably a comment on existing and competing interpretations of “Buddhism”
- The Buddhacarita serves to both tell the story of the Buddha, and demonstrate that a particular manifestation of Buddhism is the correct one

The middle way

- The Buddhacarita has Siddhartha champion a “middle path” between hedonism and extreme asceticism
- Historically, this situated proper “Buddhism” between two extreme positions that were popular among Buddhist in the first centuries BCE and CE

The Enlightenment

- At 35, the Buddha sat under a large *pippala* tree (also Bodhi Tree or Enlightenment Tree) in Bodhgaya to meditate
- Mara, god of sensual desire and death, feared Siddhartha might break the bonds of worldly desire and become a powerful being, so Mara used a demon army to tempt, taunt, and attack Siddhartha



- Siddhartha defeated Mara, at dusk entered a deep state of meditation, and at dawn achieved perfect awakening and became a buddha



The Buddha!

- One who has attained enlightenment (**nirvana**)
- Did so by fully understanding **Dependent Origination**
- A sophisticated theory of cause and effect
- Nothing in the world comes into existence by itself
- Everything is influenced by a chain or cycle of causation