**The Mythical Life of the Buddha**

The man people refer to as ‘the Buddha’ is deeply revered for the teachings and traditions he spread in his journey, and as a result the biography of his life is often filled with mythic accounts and miraculous events that are used to shape Buddhist institutions and to give a more sacred narrative of the life of the Buddha. These accounts of the Buddha’s life can differ between schools of Buddhism, but they share a common thread in that they each use these life stories to influence Buddhist art, rituals, and religious behavior in various ways (Schober 2010: 45). In order to fully understand the life of the Buddha, it is important to have knowledge of his background and early life, the key events in his last life as told through mythical stories that shape Buddhist tradition, and lastly how these events have influenced Buddhist teachings and institutions.

The Buddha was born as Siddhartha Gautama in Nepal, although scholars are uncertain when, with the most commonly accepted timeline of his life is 566 – 486 B.C.E (Prebish 2010: 26). He was born a prince into a wealthy family and a life of privilege and took advantage of it – as a young man Gautama had access to traditional education in a variety of subjects and disciplines including religious law, statecraft, and numerous arts and sciences (Prebish 2010: 27). Being born into the aristocracy also gave him the opportunity to familiarize himself with the customs and manners of aristocrat nobles and other members of court. Gautama combined this personal experience with a natural charisma to better educate his disciples and spread his teachings later on in his life. While growing up in this spoiled life however, he became curious about life outside the palace and is said to have started having existential troubles regarding esoteric concepts like age, suffering, and death that were unable to be answered within the comfortable confines of his home (The Life of the Buddha 22:48). In his adulthood at the age of 29 (as suggested in religious records), going against the wishes of his father to become a monarch and breaking Brahmin family tradition, Siddhartha Gautama left his life of luxury and indulgence, renounced society, and became a wandering ascetic seeking enlightenment (Schober 2010: 46).

Much of the Buddha’s journey is difficult to find precise records of, and there are large spans of time in which we cannot say exactly what the biographical details of his life were. However, these gaps are supplemented by mythical tales and episodes that largely define and serve to legitimize the teachings of the Buddha. There are four events of legendary importance defined in the Buddha’s life that have great religious significance and are celebrated through rituals in Buddhist tradition. The first of these events is the birth of the Buddha, considered by soothsayers at the time to be an auspicious event – this proclamation stemmed from his mother seeing a white baby elephant by her side in a dream, and this was thought to be an omen indicating that no ordinary child would be born, but instead either a religious leader or great monarch (Prebish 2010: 29). The birth of the Buddha himself is told to be a remarkable occasion itself, taking place in a beautiful remote grove with many gods in attendance to witness his painless birth and declaration of his last life. The second event is his enlightenment, perhaps the most critical event in Buddhist tradition. After freeing himself from the social norms and family obligations of his youth, Siddhartha went on to become an ascetic wanderer that sought out religious teachers and practiced a combination of yoga and meditation in hopes of attaining higher knowledge and enlightenment (Prebish 2010: 32). In his journey towards enlightenment, the Buddha gradually tried a number of different physical and spiritual techniques in hopes of inducing a spiritual trance, but eventually determined his austerity to be detrimental to his search and ineffective in generating spiritual awareness (Prebish 2010: 34). Following this, the Buddha realized that the true path to enlightenment was a middle ground between extremes – a realization that lead to his return to meditation. One night while meditating, he is said to have entered a trance and attained to knowledge of his past lives and the Four Noble Truths. Mythologically, the Buddha overcame the evil god and representation of negativity Mara despite being assailed with forces like greed, doubt, and fear. Undeterred by this darkness, the Buddha reached enlightenment and toppled Mara, subduing negativity in his mind and reaching enlightenment (Prebish 2010: 37).

The Buddha’s first sermon is the third key event and defines many of the core teachings of Buddhist tradition, as well as inaugurating him as a teacher and beginning the religion known as Buddhism. The sermon included teachings regarding the “middle path” and the Four Noble Paths that he gained knowledge of the night of his enlightenment: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path leading to that end (Prebish 2010: 37). These truths along with the Eightfold Path was central to the teachings of the Buddha, and his few mendicants quickly spread his message throughout Southeast Asia as his followers grew in number. The death of the Buddha was the final important event in his mythos, or rather the discussion in his last days over what would occur once he had finally died and escaped the cycle of death and rebirth he faced in his many lives. It was revealed that there would be no successor, and that their teacher going forward would be the Dharma (Prebish 2010: 39). Much like his birth, gods were said to have been there to bear witness as the Buddha entered a meditative trance, and soon after finally attained his goal of nirvana.

Siddhartha Gautama was a remarkable person who discovered a way to be free from suffering and instead lived a life of wisdom and compassion, laying the core tenets of Buddhism with his teaching of the Four Noble Truths alongside the knowledge of the Dharma and duty of the Sangha. The Buddha’s mythical background and rich legacy is an essential component of Buddhism that gives shape to religious customs and culture and gives great insight into the beliefs held in Buddhist society and the nature of the Buddha.

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Works Cited

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