

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 4: The Buddha (2) – The Founder and His Quest

Introduction

For Buddhists the figure of the Buddha represents first and foremost the ideal of Enlightenment, the awakened state that is the goal of the spiritual life. But the Buddha is not just a static image. He is also the centre of a story which tells us a great deal about the spiritual quest. The traditional biography of the Buddha is full of incidents that have a deep symbolic meaning. Some may be historically accurate. Others may be mythology. But this hardly matters. What is certain is that the traditional story brings a number of fundamental truths to life in a concrete and vivid way. We need to have an appreciation of the meaning of the Buddha's life story to understand what the figure of the Buddha means within the Buddhist tradition.

In the next two sections of this course we will look at the story of the Buddha's life, bringing out many of the more important symbolic episodes. In the following text Sangharakshita gives us a general overview of the Buddha's life, and brings out the significance of two episodes with a particular symbolic significance for us – the Four Sights, and the Going Forth.

Who is the Buddha?

(An edited extract from 'Who is the Buddha?', by Sangharakshita)

'One who is Awake'

The tradition which in the West we now call Buddhism sprang out of the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree 2,500 years ago. It is with the Buddha, therefore, that Buddhism begins. But the question which at once arises is, 'Who was the Buddha?' It is useful, even for those who regard themselves as Buddhists of long standing, to think about this question.

The first thing we have to make clear is that the word 'Buddha' is not a proper name but a title. It means 'one who Knows, one who Understands'. It also means 'one who is Awake' - one who has woken up, as it were, from the dream of life, because he sees the Truth, sees Reality.

The early life

This title was first applied to a man whose personal name was Siddhārtha, whose clan or family name was Gautama, and who lived in the sixth century BCE in the area which is partly in southern Nepal, partly in northern India. Fortunately we know quite a lot about his early career. We know that he came from a well-to-do,

even patrician family. Tradition sometimes represents his father as being the king of the Śākya clan or tribe. But it seems more likely that he wasn't so much the king as the elected president of the clan assembly, holding office for twelve years with the title of ājā, and that it was during this period that his son Siddhārtha Gautama, who afterwards became the Buddha, was born.

Siddhārtha received what was, by the standards of those days, a very good education. He didn't go to school, of course, and it is not really clear whether he could read or write, but we know that he received an excellent training in all sorts of martial arts and exercises. From the wise old men of the clan he also learned, by word of mouth, various ancient traditions, genealogical lists, beliefs, and superstitions. He led a comfortable life, with no particular responsibilities. His father, a very affectionate, even doting, parent, married him off when he was quite young – some accounts say when he was only sixteen – and in due course a son was born.

The Four Sights

The traditional accounts make it clear that, despite his well-to-do way of life, Siddhārtha Gautama was very deeply dissatisfied. The legends speak of a sort of spiritual crisis, of a turning point, when the young patrician saw what are called the 'Four Sights'. These Four Sights crystallize in a powerful form certain fundamental teachings of Buddhism, and throw a great deal of light on the Buddha's own early spiritual development.

The legend goes that one beautiful, bright morning Siddhārtha felt like going out for a drive in his chariot, so he called his charioteer, whipped up the horses, and set out. They drove into the town and suddenly Siddhārtha saw his first Sight: he saw an old man. According to the legend he had never seen an old man before. Taking the account literally, this means that he had been shut up in his palace and hadn't taken much notice of other people, hadn't realized that there was such a thing as old age. But one can take it another way. Sometimes we see something as though for the first time. We have seen it a hundred, even a thousand times already, but one day we see it as though we had never seen it before. It was probably something like this that happened to Siddhārtha, and it gave him a shock. He said to his charioteer, 'Who on earth is that?' And the charioteer replied, "That is an old man." 'Why is he so frail, so bent?' 'Well, it's just that he's old.' And Siddhārtha asked, 'But how did he get like that?' 'Well, everybody gets old sooner or later. It's natural. It just happens.' 'Will it happen to me too?' And the charioteer of course had to reply, 'Yes, young as you are, this will inevitably happen to you. One day you too will be old.' These words of the charioteer struck the future Buddha like a thunderbolt, and he exclaimed, 'What is the use of this youth, what is the use of this vitality and strength, if it all ends in this!' And sick at heart he returned to his beautiful palace.

The second Sight was the sight of disease. It was as though he had never seen anyone sick before, and he realized that all human beings are subject to maladies

of various kinds. He had to face the fact that, strong and healthy though he was, he might at any time be struck down by disease.

The third Sight was that of a corpse being carried to the burning ground on a stretcher. He asked the charioteer, 'What on earth is this?' The charioteer said, 'It is just a dead body', and Siddhārtha said, 'Dead? What has happened to him?' 'Well, as you can see he's stiff, he's motionless. He doesn't breathe, doesn't see, doesn't hear. He's dead.' Siddhārtha gave a gasp, and said, 'Does it happen to everybody, this death?' So the charioteer drew a long sigh and said, 'Yes, I'm afraid it does.' Thereupon Siddhārtha realized that this would happen to him too one day. The revelation struck him very forcibly, like a thunderbolt. He saw how it was. You don't want to grow old, but you can't help it. You don't want to fall sick, but you can't help that either. So you start asking yourself, 'How do I come to be here? Here I am with this urge to live, and to go on living, but I have got to die. Why? What is the meaning of it all? Why have I been made like this? Is it God who is responsible? Is it fate, or destiny? Or has it just happened? Is there any explanation at all?'

In this way Siddhārtha was brought up against these existential situations, and he started thinking about them very deeply. Then he saw a Fourth Sight, a holy man, walking along the street with his begging-bowl. He seemed so calm, so quiet, so peaceful, that the future Buddha thought, 'Maybe he knows. Maybe this is the way. Maybe I should do likewise – should cut off all ties, all worldly connections, and go forth as a homeless wanderer as this man has done. Maybe in this way I shall find an answer to the problems that are tormenting me.'

Going forth

The story goes on to relate how one night, when everything was quiet and there was a full moon in the sky, Siddhārtha bade a last farewell to his sleeping wife and child. He wasn't happy to leave them, but he had to go. He rode many miles that night, till he reached the river that marked the boundary of Śākya territory. There he left his horse, left his princely garments, cut off his long hair and his beard, and became a homeless wanderer in search of the truth.

This 'going forth' is psychologically very significant. It is not just becoming a monk. It is much more than that. It means cutting oneself off from the ties to blood and soil and kindred and leaving oneself free as an individual to work out one's own salvation, one's own spiritual destiny.

This is what Siddhārtha did. He got away from it all. He opted out. He'd had enough of worldly life and was now going to try to find out the truth, to try to see the truth for himself. The search was to last for six years.

Asceticism

In those days there were in India many people who professed to teach ways leading to the realization of truth. One of the most popular of these ways was that

of self-torture. Now in this country we can't really take this sort of thing seriously. But in India such practices are very much part of the atmosphere, and even now many Indians have the strong belief that self-torture is the way to heaven, or the way even to Enlightenment.

So it was in the Buddha's day. There was a powerful movement of this sort, a movement teaching that if one wanted to gain the truth one had to subjugate, even mortify, the flesh. And that is exactly what Siddhārtha did. For six years he practised the severest austerities. He limited his food and his sleep, he didn't wash, and he went around naked. As one of these accounts says, the fame of his austerities spread 'like the sound of a great bell hung in the canopy of the sky.' No one in India, he afterwards declared, had outdone him in self-torture and self-mortification. But he also said that it had led him nowhere. He had become famous as a great ascetic and had a number of disciples with him. But when he realized that this was not the way to Enlightenment, he had the courage to give it up.

Meditation and Awakening

He started eating again, and his disciples left him in disgust. And this is also significant. He had already left his family, left his friends, left his tribe, and in the end even his disciples deserted him. He was left utterly alone, and on his own he remained. He went about from place to place and eventually, we are told, he came to a beautiful spot on the banks of a fresh running river. There he sat down in the shade of a great tree, and made the resolution, I will not rise from this spot until I am Enlightened.'

So day after day, night after night, he sat there. As he sat he controlled and concentrated his mind, purified his mind, suppressed the mental hindrances, the defilements, and on the night of the full moon of May, just as the morning star was rising – just as he fixed his mind on that star glittering near the horizon – full Illumination, full Enlightenment, arose.

It is obviously very difficult to describe this state. We can say it is the plenitude of Wisdom. We can say it is the fullness of Compassion. We can say that it is seeing the Truth face to face. But these are only words, and they do not convey very much. So let us simply say that at that moment the light dawned, and Siddhārtha Gautama became the Buddha.

Teaching

In a sense this was the end of his quest. He had become the Buddha, the 'one who Knows'. He had found the solution to the riddle of existence. He was Enlightened, he was Awake. But in a sense it was only the beginning of his mission. Deciding to make known to humanity the Truth he had discovered, he left what we now call Bodhgayā and walked to Sārnāth, about one hundred miles away, gathered together the disciples who had left him when he gave up his austerities, and made known to them his great discovery. He gave his first discourse, or sutta, to his former followers.

Gradually a spiritual community grew up around the Buddha. He didn't stay permanently in any one place, but roamed all over north-eastern India. He had a long life, gaining Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and living to be eighty. So he had forty-five years of active life, spreading his teaching. The pattern seems to have been that for nine months of the year he wandered from place to place preaching, and then for three months took shelter from the torrential monsoon rains. Whenever he came to a village he would, if it was time for his one meal of the day, get out his begging-bowl and stand silently at the door of the huts, one after another. Having collected as much food as he needed, he would retire to the mango grove which, even now, is to be found on the outskirts of every Indian village, and sit down under a tree.

When he had finished his meal the villagers would gather round and he would teach them. Sometimes brahmins would come, sometimes wealthy landowners, sometimes peasants, sometimes merchants, sometimes sweepers, sometimes prostitutes. The Buddha would teach them all. And sometimes in the big cities he would preach to kings and princes. In this way he gained a great following and became in his own day the greatest and best known of all the spiritual teachers in India. And when he died there were thousands, even tens of thousands, of his disciples to mourn his departure, both monks and lay people, men and women.

In outline, such is the traditional biography of Siddhārtha Gautama, the Indian prince who became the Buddha. But does it really answer the question, 'Who was the Buddha?' This question, in its deeper sense, has been asked since the very dawn of Buddhism. In fact it is a question which was put to the Buddha himself, apparently, soon after his Enlightenment.

Who are you?

Journeying along the high road, the Buddha met a man called Dona. Dona was a brahmin, and skilled in the science of bodily signs. Seeing on the Buddha's footprints the mark of a thousand-spoked wheel he followed him until he eventually found him sitting beneath a tree. There was a radiance about his whole being. We are told it was as though a light shone from his face – he was happy, serene, joyful. Dona was very impressed by his appearance, and he seems to have felt that this wasn't an ordinary human being, perhaps not a human being at all. He came straight to the point, saying, 'Who are you?'

Now the ancient Indians believed that the universe is stratified into various levels of existence, that there are not just human beings and animals, as we believe, but gods, and ghosts, and yakṣas, and gāndharvas, and all sorts of other mythological beings, inhabiting a multi-storey universe, the human plane being just one storey out of many. So Dona asked, 'Are you a yakṣa?' (a yakṣa being a rather terrifying sublime spirit living in the forest). But the Buddha said 'No'. So Dona tried again. 'Are you a gāndharva?' (a sort of celestial musician, a beautiful singing angel-like figure). Once again the Buddha said 'No', and again Dona asked, 'Well then, are you a deva?' (a god, a divine being, a sort of archangel). 'No.' Upon this Dona thought, 'That's strange, he must be a human being after all!' And he asked him

that too, but yet again the Buddha said ‘No’. By this time Dona was thoroughly perplexed, so he demanded. ‘If you are not any of these things, then who are you?’ The Buddha replied, ‘Those mental conditionings on account of which I might have been described as a yakṣa a gāndharva, as a deva, as a human being, all those conditionings have been destroyed by me. Therefore I am a Buddha.’

The word for mental conditionings is ‘saṃskāra’, which means all kinds of conditioned mental attitudes. It is these conditioned mental attitudes, these volitions or karma-formations as they are sometimes called, which, according to Buddhism, and Indian belief in general, determine the nature of our rebirth. The Buddha was free from all these, and so there was nothing to cause him to be reborn as a yakṣa, a gāndharva, a god, or even as a human being; and even here and now he was not in reality any of these things. He had reached the state of unconditioned consciousness, though his body might appear to be that of a man. Therefore he was called the Buddha, Buddha being as it were an incarnation, a personification, of the unconditioned mind.

You are the Buddha – potentially!

We have seen that ‘Buddha’ means ‘unconditioned mind’, or ‘Enlightened mind’. Knowing the Buddha therefore means knowing the mind in its unconditioned state. So if at this stage we are asked, ‘Who is the Buddha?’ we can only reply, ‘You yourself are the Buddha – potentially.’ We can really and truly come to know the Buddha only in the process of actualizing our own potential Buddhahood. It is only then that we can say from knowledge, from experience, who the Buddha is.

Going for Refuge

We cannot do this all at once. We have to establish, first of all, a living contact with Buddhism. We have to arrive at something which goes further than mere factual knowledge about Gautama the Buddha, but still falls far short of knowing the unconditioned mind, of really knowing the Buddha. This something that comes in between the two is what we call Going for Refuge to the Buddha. This means taking the ideal of Enlightenment as our ultimate objective, and trying our utmost to realize it. In other words, it is only by taking Refuge in the Buddha in the traditional sense that we can really know who the Buddha is. This is one of the reasons why I have always attached such great importance to the Refuges, not only to Going for Refuge to the Buddha, but also to the Dharma and to the Sangha.

In conclusion, it is only by taking Refuge in the Buddha, with all that that implies, that we can really and truly answer, from the heart, from the mind, and from the whole of our spiritual life, the question, ‘Who is the Buddha?’

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. As a young man the future Buddha lived a comfortable, opulent life, but he did not find this satisfying or meaningful. What might this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society? Do you see any parallels in your own experience?
2. The first three of the ‘Four Sights’ were experiences that brought the future Buddha face-to-face with uncomfortable aspects of reality, and made him realise that the conventional approach to life was based on illusion. The Fourth Sight showed him that there was an alternative way of living that promised a deeper fulfilment. What have been *your* equivalents to the Four Sights? What experiences have led you to be here, studying the Dharma?
3. Gautama felt the need to leave his old life completely behind – the ‘Going Forth’. Why might cutting ourselves off from familiar people, places and roles – at least for a time – have a beneficial effect on our spiritual life? Does this throw any light on why retreats can be helpful? Are there any aspects of *your* life that keep you stuck in an out-of-date version of yourself?
4. After his Enlightenment the Buddha did not fit into any of the categories of being that people were familiar with. At a lower level, could we see freeing ourselves from the descriptions we use to define ourselves as an aspect of our spiritual lives. How do you define yourself: by age, gender, nationality, social class, education, subculture, political persuasion, and so on? Which of these descriptions are you particularly attached to?
5. What might it mean to say that the Buddha was ‘unconditioned mind’?