

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 5: The Buddha (3) – The Mythic Buddha

Introduction

For Buddhists in the East the life story of the Buddha is much more than a historical account – it is a poetic myth full of profound meanings that resonate in the depths of the mind. In the following text Sangharakshita looks at a number of these mythic elements in the story of the Buddha, bringing out some aspects of their significance, and in the process making the point that from a spiritual point of view poetic truth is just as important as historical truth – or perhaps more so.

To feel the impact of the mythic and poetic elements in the Buddha's story we need to open up to them imaginatively, and not just engage our rational, critical mind. This needs time, so it would be very helpful to read the text well before the study group, and then to follow up on the questions and suggestions at the end. In particular it might be helpful look at some representations of the incidents described in the text in Buddhist art, and to bring any art you find to the study group.

Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha

(Text condensed from 'A Guide to the Buddhist Path', by Sangharakshita, Chapter 3, Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha.)

The language of the depths

If we look below the rational, conceptual surface of man's mind, we find vast unplumbed depths which make up what we call the unconscious. The psyche in its wholeness consists of both the conscious and the unconscious. 'The unconscious, non-rational part of man is by far the larger part of his total nature, and its importance is far greater than we generally care to recognize. Consciousness is like a light froth playing and sparkling on the surface, whilst the unconscious is like the vast ocean depths, dark and unfathomed, lying far beneath. In order to appeal to the whole person, it isn't enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language from the language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form. If we want to reach this non-rational part of the human psyche, we have to use the language of poetry, of myth, of legend.

This other, no less important, language is one which many modern people have forgotten, or which they know only in a few distorted and broken forms. But Buddhism does very definitely speak this language, and speaks it no less powerfully than it speaks the language of concepts. Some people are under the

impression that Buddhism speaks only the language of concepts, of reason; that it is a strictly rational system, even a sort of rationalism.’ Such a misunderstanding is in a way quite natural in the West. After all, most of our knowledge is derived from books, magazines, lectures, etc., so that although we may not always be aware of this, our approach is in terms of rational, conceptual understanding. But if we go to the East we see a very different picture.’ In the Eastern Buddhist countries people tend to the other extreme. They tend to be moved and influenced by the images all about them without easily being able to give a rational, conceptual formulation of what they actually believe.

So far as Buddhism in the West is concerned, much more attention has been given to the conceptual, analytical, intellectual approach. We now have to give much more time and much more serious attention to the other type of approach, to begin to try to combine both these approaches, unite both the conceptual and the non-conceptual. We need a balanced spiritual life in which both the conscious and unconscious mind play their part.

It is therefore through the language of poetry and myth that we are going to approach our subject, changing over from the conceptual approach to the non-conceptual, from the conscious mind to the unconscious. Here we shall be encountering some of what I have called the ‘Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha’. To allow for this encounter, we have to be receptive, to open ourselves to these archetypal symbols, to listen to them and allow them to speak in their own way to us, especially to our unconscious depths, so that we do not just realize them mentally, but experience them and assimilate them, even allowing them eventually to transform our whole life.

The meaning of ‘archetypal symbolism’

Now, let us define our key terms. What is an archetype? Broadly speaking, an archetype is the original pattern or model of a work, or the model from which a thing is made or formed. And what do we mean by symbolism? A symbol is generally defined as a visible sign of something invisible.’ But philosophically and religiously speaking it is more than that: it is something existing on a lower plane which is in correspondence with something existing on a higher plane. To cite a common example, in the various theistic traditions, the sun is a symbol for God, because the sun performs in the physical universe the same function that God, according to these systems, performs in the spiritual universe: the sun sheds light and heat, just as God sheds the light of knowledge and the warmth of love into the spiritual universe. One can say that the sun is the god of the material world, and in the same way God is the sun of the spiritual world. Both represent the same principle manifesting on different levels. ‘As above, so below.’

Two kinds of truth

Various Western scholars in modern times have tried to write full, detailed biographies of the Buddha. There is quite a lot of traditional material available. Western scholars have explored this abundant material thoroughly, but having

gone through the various episodes and incidents, they divide them into two great ‘heaps’. On one side, they put whatever they consider to be a historic fact. On the other side they put what they consider to be myth and legend. Now this is all right so far as it goes, but most of them go a step further, and start indulging in value judgements, saying that only what they regard as historical facts are valuable and relevant. As for the myths and legends, all the poetry of the account, they usually see this as mere fiction, to be discarded as completely worthless.

This is a very great mistake, for we may say that there are two kinds of truth: what we call scientific truth, the truth of concepts, of reasoning; and in addition to this – some would say above this – there is what we may call poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, of the intuition. This is at least equally important. The latter kind of truth is manifested in what we call myths and legends, as well as in works of art, in symbolic ritual, and also quite importantly in dreams. And what we call the archetypal symbolism of the biography of the Buddha belongs to this second category. It is not meant to be historic truth, or factual information, but poetic, even spiritual, truth. We may say that this biography of the Buddha in terms of archetypal symbolism is not concerned with the external events of his career, but is meant to suggest to us something about his inner spiritual experience, and therefore to shed light on the spiritual life for all of us.

Examples of archetypal symbolism

I will now give a few examples of archetypal symbolism from the biography of the Buddha.

The Twin Miracle

A traditional text says:

‘Then the Exalted One standing in the air at the height of a palm tree performed various and divers miracles of double appearance. The lower part of his body would be in flames, while from the upper part there streamed five hundred jets of cold water. While the upper part of his body was in flames, five hundred jets of cold water streamed from the lower part. Next, by his magic power the Exalted One transformed himself into a bull with a quivering hump. The bull vanished in the east and appeared in the west. It vanished in the north and appeared in the south, it vanished in the south and appeared in the north. And in this way the great miracle is to be described in detail. Several thousand kotis of beings, seeing this great miracle of magic, became glad, joyful and pleased, and uttered thousands of bravos at witnessing the marvel.’

I am not going to say anything here about the Buddha’s transformation into a bull – I am going to concentrate here on the ‘Twin Miracle’ proper, in which the Buddha emits both fire and water. First of all, the Buddha stands in the air. This signifies a change of plane, and is highly significant. It represents the fact that what is described does not happen on the earth plane, or on the historical plane.

The Twin Miracle is not a miracle in the usual sense, not something magical or supernatural happening here on this earth, but something spiritual, something symbolic, happening on a higher metaphysical plane of existence.

Having stood in the air, in this metaphysical dimension, the Buddha emits fire and water simultaneously: fire from the upper half of the body, water from the lower, and vice versa. On the higher plane of existence where he now stands, fire and water are universal symbols. They are found all over the world, in all cultures, all religions. Fire represents 'spirit', or 'the spiritual'; and water represents matter, the material. Fire, again, represents the heavenly, principle; water the earthly principle. Fire represents the active, masculine principle; water the passive, feminine principle. Fire represents the intellect, and water the emotions. Fire again represents consciousness, and water the unconscious. In other words, fire and water between them represent all the cosmic opposites.

The fact that the Buddha emitted fire and water simultaneously represents the conjugation of these great pairs of opposites. This conjunction on all levels, and on the highest level of all especially, is synonymous with what we call Enlightenment. This episode of the Twin Miracle tells us that Enlightenment is not a one-sided affair, not a partial experience, but the union, the conjunction, of opposites, of fire and water, at the highest possible level.

The ladder between heaven and earth

Let us now turn to another episode. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha preached what became known as the Abhidharma to his deceased mother in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (a higher heavenly world where she was reborn when she died, seven days after his birth). When he returned to the earth, he descended by means of a magnificent staircase, attended by different gods, divinities, and angels. In the texts this staircase is described in very glorious terms, as being threefold, made up of gold, silver, and crystal.

The staircase or the ladder between heaven and earth is also a universal symbol. For example, in the Bible there is Jacob's ladder, which has the same significance. The staircase is that which unites the opposites, which links, draws together, heaven and earth. In the Buddhist texts, the archetypal significance of this episode of the Buddha's descent is enhanced by colourful, glowing descriptions in terms of gold and silver and crystal, and different coloured lights, and panoplies of coloured sun-shades and umbrellas, and flowers falling, and music sounding. These all make a strong appeal not to the conscious mind, but to the unconscious, to the depths.

The World Tree

Another important variant to the theme of the union of the opposites is what is generally known as the 'World Tree', or 'Cosmic Tree'. The Buddha, according to the traditional account, gained Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi Tree – 'Bodhi' meaning transcendental wisdom, or 'Awakening'. A tree's roots go deep

down into the earth, but at the same time its branches tower high into the sky. So the tree also links heaven and earth, is also a symbol of the union, or harmony, of opposites.

The World Tree is found in many mythologies. For instance, we have the Norse Yggdrasil, the World Ash – roots deep down, branches right up in the heavens, and all the worlds suspended on the branches. We also get the identification of the Christian cross with a World or Cosmic Tree. I have seen a representation of the crucifixion where branches were growing out of the sides of the cross, and the roots went deep down into the soil. The cross also, like the World Tree, links heaven and earth cosmically, in the same way that Christ unites the human and the divine natures psychologically.

The Diamond Throne

Closely associated with the idea of a ladder, or a staircase, or a tree, is the image of the central point. In all the traditional accounts of the Buddha's Enlightenment he is represented as sitting on what is called the 'Vajrāsana', which literally means the 'Diamond Seat', or 'Diamond Throne'. The diamond, the vajra, in Buddhist tradition represents the transcendental element, the metaphysical base. According to tradition, the Vajrāsana is the centre of the universe. One can compare this with the corresponding Christian tradition that the cross stood on the same spot as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which Adam and Eve had eaten the apple, and that this spot represents the exact centre of the world. This centrality in the cosmos of the Vajrāsana suggests that Enlightenment consists in adopting a position of centrality. This metaphysical, or transcendental, centrality, which constitutes Enlightenment, amounts to the same as the union of opposites about which we have spoken.

Events surrounding the Buddha's Enlightenment

Now we are going to take up not just isolated archetypal symbols, but a whole sequence of symbols. This series is connected with the most important event in the Buddha's whole career, his attainment of Enlightenment. These symbols are represented by certain incidents usually regarded as historical, or partly historical, though their actual significance is much deeper.

The Victory Over Mara

The first of these incidents is traditionally known as the 'Victory over Mara', the 'Satan' of Buddhism. The Buddha-to-be was seated in meditation at the foot of the tree, when he was attacked by terrible demon hosts, by all sorts of foul, unsightly, misshapen figures, led by Mara. These hosts and their attack are vividly depicted in Buddhist art and poetry. They were partly human, partly animal, hideously deformed, with snarling, leering, angry, and wrathful expressions, some of them lifting great clubs, others brandishing swords, all very menacing and frightful indeed. But all the stones, arrows, and flames, on reaching the edge of the Buddha's aura of light turned into flowers and fell at his feet. The significance of

this is obvious and doesn't need to be explained, only to be felt. The Buddha wasn't touched, wasn't moved, by this terrible attack. His eyes remained closed, he remained in meditation with the same smile on his lips. So Mara sent against the Buddha his three beautiful daughters, whose names are Lust, Passion, and Delight. They danced in front of the Buddha, exhibiting all their wiles, but the Buddha didn't even open his eyes.' They retired discomfited.

All this represents the forces of the unconscious in their crude, unsublimated form. The demons, the terrible misshapen figures, represent anger, aversion, dislike, and so on. The daughters of Mara represent the various aspects of craving and desire. Mara himself represents primordial ignorance, or unawareness.

Calling the Earth Goddess to Witness

The second incident is known as the 'calling of the Earth Goddess to witness'. After he had been defeated Mara tried another trick. He said to the Buddha-to-be, "You are sitting on the central point of the universe, on the throne of the Buddhas of old. What right have you, just an ordinary person, to sit on that Diamond Throne where the previous Buddhas sat?" So the Buddha said. "In my past lives I have practised all the Perfections, the Perfection of Giving, of Morality, of Patience, of Energy, of Meditation, of Wisdom. I have reached a point in my spiritual evolution where I am about to gain Enlightenment. Therefore I am worthy to sit on this Diamond Throne, like the previous Buddhas when they gained Enlightenment."

Mara wasn't satisfied. He said, "All right, you say that you practised all these Perfections in your previous lives, but who is your witness?" So the future Buddha, who was seated on the Diamond Throne in the position of meditation, with his hands resting in his lap, just tapped on the earth – this is the famous earth-touching mūdra, or position. And up rose the Earth Goddess, bearing a vase in her hand. She bore witness, saying, "I have been here all the time. Men may come, men may go, but the earth always remains. I have seen all his previous lives. I have seen hundreds of thousands of lives in which he practised the Perfections.' So I bear witness that he is worthy to sit in the seat of the Buddhas of old."

This scene is also often depicted in Buddhist art. Sometimes the Earth Goddess is shown as dark green in colour, sometimes a beautiful golden-brown, always half-emerged from the earth. Basically, she represents the same forces as those represented by Māra's daughters, but in their tamed, subdued, or sublimated aspect – ready to help, not hinder.

Brahma's Request

The third incident is known as 'Brahmā's Request'. The Buddha, after his Enlightenment, was inclined to remain silent. He reflected, "This Truth, this Reality which I have discovered, is so difficult to see, so sublime, that ordinary people, their eyes covered with the dust of ignorance and passion, are not going to

see it. So it is better to remain silent, to remain under the Bodhi tree, not to go out into the world and preach.”

But then another great apparition arose. A great light shone forth, and in the midst of the light an ancient figure, the figure of Brahmā Sahampati, Brahmā the Great God, Lord of a Thousand Worlds, appeared before the Buddha with folded hands. He said, “Please preach, preach the Truth – there are just a few with little dust on their eyes. They will appreciate, they will follow.” The Buddha opened his divine eye and looked forth over the universe. He saw all beings, just like lotuses in a pond, in various stages of development. And he said, “For the sake of those with just a little dust over their eyes, those who are like lotuses half-way out, I will preach the Dharma.”

We shouldn't of course take this incident literally, in the historical sense – the Buddha didn't need to be asked to preach. Brahmā's Request represents the manifestation within the Buddha's own mind of the forces of Compassion which compelled him to make known the Truth he had discovered, to preach to mankind.

The Serpent King

For seven weeks the Buddha sat at the foot of the Bodhi tree, and in the middle of the seventh week there arose a great storm. The Buddha was Enlightened in the month of May, and seven weeks takes us to the middle of July, the beginning of the rainy season. In India, when the rainy season begins, in a matter of instants the sky becomes black and rain descends, not in bucketfuls, but in absolute reservoirfuls. The Buddha was out in the open, under a tree, with just a thin robe – he couldn't do much about it. But another figure arose out of the undergrowth: a great snake, King Mucalinda, the Serpent-King. He came and wrapped his coils around the Buddha and stood with his hood over his head like an umbrella, and in this way protected him from the downpour. This episode is often depicted in Buddhist art.

Then the rain disappeared, the storm-clouds cleared up, and the Serpent-King assumed a different form, that of a beautiful youth about sixteen years of age, who saluted the Buddha.

Some scholars, I am afraid, try to take this episode literally, saying, “Oh yes, it is well known that in the East snakes are sometimes quite friendly with holy men, and come and sit near them, and this is what must have happened.” But we cannot accept this pseudo-historical type of explanation. We are on a different plane, a different level of meaning altogether. All over the world, as we have seen, water, or the sea, or the ocean, represents the unconscious. And in Indian mythology the nāgas, that is to say, the serpents, or the dragons, live in the depths of the ocean. So the nāgas represent the forces in the depths of the unconscious in their most positive and beneficent aspect – and Mucalinda is the king of the nāgas. The falling of the rain, the torrential downpour after seven weeks, represents a baptism, an aspersion. All over the world, pouring water on someone or on

something represents the investiture of that person or that object with all the powers of the unconscious mind.

Mucalinda also stands for the powerful psychic energies surging up inside a person, especially at the time of meditation. Mucalinda's assuming the form of a beautiful sixteen-year-old youth represents the new personality which is born as a result of this. Mucalinda in the new form salutes the Buddha: this represents the perfect submission of all the powers of the unconscious to the Enlightened mind.

Suggestions for reflection, research, and discussion

1. Do you agree that poetic truth is just as important as factual truth?
2. Which of the episodes or symbols described do you respond to most strongly?
3. Look for any representations of these incidents from the Buddha's life in any books of Buddhist art you have access to, or on the internet, and bring them to the group. Alternatively you might like to draw or paint one of the incidents yourself.