

What Do We Really Know About the Buddha?

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So, what do we really know about the Buddha?

It's obviously a slightly rhetorical kind of title for a talk because it's obvious in a way that the Buddha is removed from us by a considerable amount of time. So, in terms of really knowing about the Buddha, we're not likely to know very much. And anyway, who is the Buddha?

The Buddha being an awakened being, which is in theory at least a present possibility for all human beings. So, the recollection of the Buddha we are doing is, in a way, the recollection of qualities that are always possible. That kind of way of looking at things is reflected in the idea that the Buddha isn't the only Buddha: there've been many past Buddhas and there will be Buddhas in the future.

But what I want to talk about is in fact the historical Buddha. I've got a particular interest in the person of the Buddha. I think for me it's a devotional kind of thing: I've got a strong faith in the teaching of the Buddha. I love studying the Pali Canon and I've been studying Pali recently which has really heightened my sense of connection with the material and with the person of the Buddha, if you like.

I believe that the Buddha did exist and was a very particular sort of person with a particular kind of spiritual intellectual genius, which is responsible still to some degree for the nature of the Buddhist tradition, for certain ways of thinking about the spiritual life, for instance. So that's where I'm coming from. But the rhetorical bit of the title 'What Do We Really Know about the Buddha?' is to do with the way that in a slightly less obvious way, there is a tension in our feelings of devotion towards the Buddha or just our sense of the Buddha between, on the one hand, you could say, the humanity of the Buddha. In our threefold puja we say 'The Buddha was born as we are born'. That's Sangharakshita's composition and it's supposed to remind us that the Buddha was a human being just like us. So, we too can overcome everything that a Buddha managed to overcome, which seems to sort of level the field a bit, in theory. On the other hand, especially in the Mahayana, the Buddha is not at all human: he's an eternal principle of enlightenment and was only ever in a human body as a sort of artifice or skilful means, to teach the Dharma.

So, there's a kind of tension in the Buddhist tradition between the Buddha as a human figure and the Buddha as a magnificent archetypal principle of wisdom, as it were. And feelings of devotion tend to accentuate the magnificent archetypal side of things. But my idea is that distinguishing these two ways of approaching the Buddha gives us a sort of clearer way of reflecting upon who the Buddha was. Hence the title 'What do we really know about the Buddha?'

So, as for the humanity of the Buddha, I'd like to read a bit to you from a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya. It's called 'The analysis of the elements', but that's not the bit that's really interesting. It's an opening section from a sutta. A lot of these suttas in the Majjhima Nikaya have stories at the beginning, a little narrative section which puts the teaching in context, presents the Buddha in a particular sort of environment, and this one's quite a long one:

'Thus have I heard, on one occasion the Blessed One, was wandering in the Magadhan country and eventually arrived at Rajagaha. There he went to the potter Bhaggava and said to him, "if it is not inconvenient for you Bhaggava, I will stay one night in your workshop".

"It is not inconvenient for me, venerable sir, but there is a homeless one already staying there. If he agrees then stay as long as you like, venerable sir."

Now there was a clansman named Pukkusati, who had gone forth from the home-life into homelessness out of faith in the Blessed one, and on that occasion he was already staying in the potter's workshop. Then the Blessed one went to the venerable Pukkusati and said to him "If it is not inconvenient for you Bhikkhu, I will stay one night in the workshop."

"The potter's workshop is large enough friend. Let the venerable one, stay as long as he likes."

Pukkusati doesn't realize it's the Buddha. That's the point.

The Blessed one entered the potter's workshop, prepared a spread of grass at one end and sat down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect and establishing mindfulness in front of him. Then the Blessed one spent most of the night seated in meditation and the venerable Pukkusati also spent most of the night seated in meditation. The Blessed one thought, "This clansman conducts himself in a way that inspires confidence, suppose I were to question him?" So he asked the venerable Pukkusati "Under whom have you gone forth Bhikkhu? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you profess?"

"Friend" This is Pukkusati speaking "There is the recluse Gotama, the son of the Sakyans, who went forth, from the Sakyan clan. Now a good report of that Blessed one has been spread to this effect" – And he repeats the Buddha Vandana – "I have gone forth under that Blessed One, that Blessed One is my teacher, I profess the Dhamma of that Blessed one."

"But Bhikkhu, where is that Blessed One, accomplished and fully enlightened, now living?"

"There is friend, a city in the northern country named Savatthi. The Blessed One is now living there."

"But Bhikkhu, have you ever seen the Blessed One before? Would you recognise him, if you saw him?"

"No friend, I have never seen that Blessed One before, nor would I recognise him if I saw him."

“The Blessed One then thinks, “I’ll teach him Dhamma”

And he gives him a Dhamma discourse on the six elements.

And then the venerable Pukkusati thought “Indeed the teacher has come to me. The Sublime One has come to me.”

He rises from his seat and he prostrates himself in front of the Buddha and asks his forgiveness because he called the Buddha ‘friend’ instead of Blessed One. And of course the Buddha forgives him.

I think this is a very beautiful story and it shows us that the people that compiled these Scriptures were completely prepared for the people hearing these scriptures to regard the Buddha as completely ordinary. You wouldn’t know it was him. Presumably he just looked like any other monk, until you hear him teach the Dhamma. So I wanted to read that as an example of the way in which the tradition regards the Buddha as a human being. But no doubt you’ve come across from time to time, the life story of the Buddha, in its traditional form and you’ve probably noticed that the way the Buddha is represented there, the Buddha and the bodhisattva prior to his enlightenment, in ways which don’t sound all that normal at all.

There are only a few traditional biographies of the Buddha (Actually, there are four) and they obviously all rely on the same basic pool of stories and information and all of them are written centuries after the Buddha. In the main Theravada one which is called the Nidanakatha, the extended story; it starts with a Bhikkhu named Sumedha vowing to attain Buddhahood under the Buddha Dipankara who lived four incalculables and a hundred thousand kalpas ago: he was twenty four Buddhas ago. So in that story our Buddha has got a very long history behind him of striving through various lives to become the Gotama in this life. So that is not at all very ordinary, in a way.

Another biography of the Buddha, The Mahavastu, is explicit in the way it describes the Buddha as *lokuttara*, ‘beyond the world’; the Buddha just appears as a human being, as in a body, just for the sake of teaching. It’s quite explicit.

In another biography, the Lalitavistara, or the Sports of the Buddha, the figure of the Buddha becomes magnificently exaggerated – and I would like to read you some of this. This bit of the Lalitavistara concerns the bodhisattva, having resolved upon attaining enlightenment, walking towards the bodhi tree. You might remember the traditional story: he gives up austerities and realises that the way to gain enlightenment is by attaining jhana, so he takes food and then heads to the bodhi tree.

“Thus, O bhikshus, the Bodhisattva, having bathed in the river Nairañjana, and having restored his physical strength and vigour by eating, departed unto the spot under the lordly Bodhi tree, in the spot on the Earth with sixteen forms, with the victorious walk of a great man, the untroubled walk, the walk which is satisfying to the senses, the well established walk, the walk of a Lord Meru, the walk which is straightforward, not a zigzag walk, an unaffected walk, not a tripping walk, not a limited walk, not a dispirited walk, not a frivolous

walk, a playful walk, a pure walk, an auspicious walk, a faultless walk, an undeluded walk, an unattached walk, the walk of a lion, the walk of swan, the walk of a lordly elephant, the walk of Narayana, a walk that did not touch the earth, a walk as wonderful on earth as a thousand-spoked wheel, the walk with webbed toes and red nails, a walk to resound on Earth, a walk to break open the lord of mountains, a walk that made uneven areas, a walk that emitted a ray of light, as though in between the webs of fingers, which travelled well and touched the creatures, a walk that created pure lotuses at every step, a walk that came from previous auspicious deeds, a walk of the previous Buddha-lions, a walk tough and unpierceable as adamant, a walk that obstructed the path of all evil and ill...”

And on, and on:

“With such a walk did the bodhisattva go to the seat of enlightenment.”

I read that so you get a feeling for the kind of stories that nourished the early Buddhists in their attempts to represent the Buddha. And with those stories they made absolutely no distinction between this kind of Buddha and what we regard as a ‘human Buddha’ as it were. This is clearly not of importance to the Indian imagination: to distinguish between myth and reality in the way that we might.

Now this has some interesting consequences, because when we think about the life story of the Buddha we perhaps take it rather factually. An example is that we think ‘oh the Buddha was called Siddharta Gotama’. Well it’s true that in the early canon he’s always called Gotama, everyone calls him Gotama, it’s the name of his clan or ‘family’; but the name Siddharta is never found in the early scriptures, it is simply a name that means ‘one who has achieved his aim’. So the later story tellers gave the Buddha this name clearly as a way to relate his qualities. He’s given other names as well. ‘Sarvartha Siddha’ is another one, which means something similar. So he wasn’t called Siddharta, as far as we know.

Actually it’s almost impossible to extract any historical information out of these very early scriptures. I mentioned the Pali Canon, that’s our only source for what we might regard as information, historical information, about the Buddha. But as you might know it was only written down in the first century BC, about four hundred years after the Buddha died and it contains a mass of material that was transmitted orally, for all those years it was passed on through a well organised system of monks reciting these texts. And clearly at some point in the remote past, in ways that we’ve got no idea about, these scriptures were put together, they were compiled. The story goes that a council just after the Buddha died, the monks got together and just pooled all the stories they’d heard about the Buddha, all the teachings they’d had. But it’s clear that a lot more sorting and compiling and story-telling went on after that. There are all sorts of layers of material in the early texts as we have them, some of it clearly later. And there’s just no way of really sorting it out. So when we ask about historical information about the Buddha, we’re asking something that the materials that are available just aren’t able to provide.

But surely, we might think there’s at least a bit of information. Well of course there is, and its limited but interesting, so this is what I want to talk about by way of describing what we

really know about the Buddha, and a really important bit of information is that he came from (he was a member of) the Sakya people, or the Sakya Clan, and these people lived to the north of India, just below the Himalayas. And they weren't really a Vedic people; they weren't really a Brahminical people. They were possibly a tribal people who were just getting assimilated into the Brahminical culture of North India. This is important because it means the Buddha didn't really belong to a caste if that makes sense. He wasn't a Brahmin, we know that. He wasn't a priest, and he wasn't a warrior or Kshatriya; and in fact, among the Sakya peoples, they didn't have Kings. They didn't have a system of government with a monarch. That was just coming in. There were large kingdoms developing in India which very soon after the Buddha's time engulfed the whole of India in large monarchic states. So the Sakya peoples had a sort of republican system. And what this means is that the Buddha certainly wasn't a prince and the son of a King, because they didn't have kings. Almost all the stories of the Buddha relate him as a prince, the son of a king, who had a very privileged upbringing. And clearly this is actually not compatible with him being from the Sakya people. It's quite possible he was from an upper class influential family, a member of the ruling elite, that's quite possible. It's sort of likely in a way, but there's no more information than that. So the idea that the Buddha was a prince, the son of a king, is a later story, and you can understand what it's supposed to illustrate. It's supposed to illustrate that he had a lordly kind of inheritance. He had kingly qualities. And he knew about life at the very highest level of society, which the ideal sort of saviour of humanity would have. But this is an archetypal kind of quality rather than what you might call a historical one.

And the next historical bit of his life is the fact that Gotama, the future Buddha, at some point 'went forth' from home life into the homeless life. This is very important, because it was as a homeless wanderer that Gotama had the chance to meet teachers, take up meditation practice, develop the kinds of understandings and practices which later led to his enlightenment. And in India at that time there'd been for a hundred or two hundred years, a whole culture of wandering philosophers and ascetics, the samanas, or shramanas in Sanskrit, and the Buddha basically joined in with this culture. Very interesting that that should have risen at that time. It was as if the culture (the Indian religious culture) was obsessed with the search for truth, such that large numbers of people, men and women, would leave home and wander about and get supported to do nothing other than quest for wisdom, or at least appear to quest for wisdom, in all sorts of ways.

Now our story of the Buddha has him being a prince, marrying Yasodhara, fathering a little boy, and then leaving home, 'buggering off'. This is quite an important part of the usual story. But interestingly, the earlier sutta, in which the Buddha describes his going forth, doesn't even mention his wife and child. In fact the opposite. I'll read it to you. In the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, 'the discourse on the noble search', the Buddha, describing his noble search for enlightenment says that he recognised that he was subject to birth, to suffering, to old age and death, and he was looking for a solution to these problems. And so later he says:

"Whilst still young, a black haired young man, endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my father and mother wished otherwise, and wept with tearful faces, I

shaved off my hair and beard, I put on the yellow robe, and went forth from the home-life into homelessness.”

Having gone forth he went and found his first teachers Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, but anyway, that little excerpt shows the Buddha, in my opinion as just a young man, perhaps in his late teens, that age where you are prepared to act in impulsive, adventurous ways. There's no mention of a wife and child. And in a way, it would make more sense to talk of his being married and having a child, if you wanted to portray the Buddha as someone who'd known all sides of life. He'd known about the home-life, he'd known about the life of sense pleasures, the life of sexuality and family and that again is an archetypal sort of ideal, portraying the Buddha as someone who had all life experience, and therefore is talking from full life experience when he's teaching the Dharma. But it doesn't appear from the earliest records, that that was actually the case. There are other mentions of a son Rahula, but I'm not sure actually, whether they are very early. I haven't looked into it closely. I know for some people the idea that the Buddha abandoned his wife and children, is not very appealing, but another way of looking at it is that, well, it's only a story.

So then the central event in the Buddha's life, his enlightenment, is one about which of course, we can know nothing. How can we know anything, when it's an event that happened to him alone? The only possible information we could have is that which comes from the Buddha. And what is in these earlier sources about the enlightenment is very varied. The Buddha gives several different accounts of what happened, of the actual thought process, and experiential process by which he came to full and perfect enlightenment, whatever that is. But there is one thing that all the accounts agree on, and that is that there was an event. There was a particular night, is the usual way its written about, is recorded as, in which the Buddha attained to that which he called full and perfect enlightenment. So I mention that by way of mentioning something that all the early material agrees on. And I can only present it as something mysterious really, that one might like to reflect on. It appears there was an event called the enlightenment, after which the Buddha taught as a Buddha, as an enlightened being, in his own description of that.

So in terms of what we could call history, the Buddha clearly went on to continue living as a samana, as a wandering ascetic and was recognised as that in his culture. Some people went for refuge to his teachings, other people didn't, but they all recognised him as a wandering teacher, as a samana. And he continued in that lifestyle, he didn't give it up, he continued to meditate and he taught his own particular Dharma for another forty five years. And when I say 'particular Dharma', it was clearly new and unique, now this is something that's quite obvious from these early texts. He contrasts his teaching with that of other teachers. And although the Buddhist texts are biased, there is enough information around about what other teachers taught, in the Upanishads for instance and the Jain scriptures, for us to get the general sense of context. And his teaching was clearly new, it was of a high intellectual calibre, and it was extremely pragmatic, and it is that that has continued to the present day, has been passed on, passed down.

So he spent forty five years wandering and teaching before dying at the age of eighty. That's the age we read about in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta: the great sutta of the Buddha's last days. Which seems like a reasonably old age, and perhaps we can read as simply meaning that the Buddha lived until he was quite old, and then when he was very old, he passed away. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta he describes what it's like being old; he feels like an old cart, held together by rope. And he only felt any comfort when he sat in meditation and took himself into a samadhi whereby he no longer was in touch with his bodily sensations. So that sounds like a very ordinary experience of old age.

These early scriptures represent the Buddha as 'a friend of kings'. I think this is a lovely quality. He obviously had a strength of personality, a kind of charisma, you could say, which meant that he could relate to kings and they regarded him as a friend and advisor, even when he disagreed with them.

He was a teacher, that's obvious, but he was a lover of solitude as well. This is important. Sometimes the monks would make him quite fed up. They would argue, they would be noisy, and he would, as it were, go off. There are a couple of suttas where he says 'I've had enough, you're too noisy, and I'm going to go into the forest.' And in one lovely story, which is clearly a story, he goes into the forest and he's joined by a bull elephant, who has got fed up with elephant family life. He's got hassled by the she-elephants, and the bull elephant attends on the Buddha for a little while, they share the solitude for a little while, before the Buddha returns to the world. This is quite important I think, because it shows the Buddha's preference, you might say. He wasn't just a teacher and as it were, wanderer, he was a full time spiritual practitioner, and never stopped enjoying solitude and meditation. He was a meditator. He continued to meditate a great deal, and when asked about what he did, of course it was very hard for him to say, but he was clearly able to teach a huge range of meditation practices, which he obviously knew about from personal experience.

In addition he was clearly an intellectual genius. The philosophy of *paticca-samuppada* – 'dependent arising' – was as far as we know the product of the mind of the Buddha. And it's a magnificent philosophy of life really. It embraces all levels of existence, and yet boils down to a very simple formula. It steers a middle way between theism – a belief in God – and a theory that nothing has a cause, and that we can't do anything about our lives. It's a very flexible, basic philosophical position. And almost certainly it comes from the Buddha and he developed that in dialogue with various teachers of his time.

So that gives you a picture of the Buddha as far as we can talk about him historically. I'd just like to conclude by mentioning an aspect of the Buddha that is clearer to the devotional mind, and is not so obvious when we think historically and yet which bridges these two: and that's the Buddha as someone who's motivated by compassion. There's a lovely sutta where the Buddha says, he explains to the monks,

"Monks, there is one person who is born, and comes into the world, for the welfare and happiness for the people, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and

happiness of gods and human beings. Who is that person? The Tathagatha, the worthy one, the fully and completely awakened one.”

So he describes his own person, if you like, his own nature as a Buddha as essentially rooted in compassion, the desire to improve the lot of people. And the word for compassion here is ‘anukampa’ which you may have come across: it’s a word that literally means ‘trembling with’, and so it suggests someone who was without any limit able to sympathise, which has the same sort of etymological route, ‘feel with’ the plight of human beings, and yet help, and the Buddha spent the greater part of his life doing what he could to benefit the people he came into contact with. So no wonder in a way the Buddhists in the years after the Buddha died, went on to spin out a story which gave some expression to the unusual qualities that the Buddha had, the compassion, the intellectual genius, the strength of personality, by a way of imaginative exaggeration and archetypal inflation of what people had known of as the historical Buddha.

(Transcribed by Danielle Sunshine)