

## 5 – The Buddha through myth

### Usage of the word “myth”

In these notes the word “myth” should not be taken to mean a fallacy, as when someone may say “it is a myth that XYZ bank has the cheapest mortgage rates in town”. The word is used to mean a traditional story which, although not historically true, conveys meaning. The ancient Greek stories of Hercules, Sisyphus and Narcissus are examples of myths in this sense. Such myths appeal to our imagination and have enriched people’s lives down the centuries, including those who do not have an intellectual or scholarly bent.

Some people draw a distinction between myths and legends. They say a myth is a story that is obviously not about a historical character (eg. the story of Gandalf in the book *Lord of the Rings*), while a legend is an embellishment of the biography of someone who actually lives or lived on earth. These notes do not draw this distinction. The word “myth” is used in a way that includes legendary stories.

### The Buddha as an embodiment of people’s spiritual goal

For people who strive for spiritual awakening, it is useful, if not essential, to have some sort of embodiment of their ideal to focus on.

The Buddha came to be seen as an embodiment of the spiritual goal for all people, rather than just a particular historical example of an Enlightened person. Not only did the Buddha come to be seen as representing the essence of Enlightenment, but his life prior to becoming Enlightened came to be seen as representing the process of spiritual unfoldment that leads to Enlightenment. So, for example, the Buddha’s determination to gain Enlightenment was seen as exemplifying the heroic spirit that human beings are capable of, and as a reminder of the need for determination in the spiritual life.

### Development of myths about the Buddha

Given the focus that was put on the Buddha’s life as an example of the process of spiritual development and an example of what it is to be an Enlightened person, some stories came to be exaggerated. In addition myths about his life were interpolated. As well as adding in myths about his life, a lot of previously existing stories about holy sages were ascribed to the Buddha’s previous lives. (These are known as *Jataka* stories.)

The ancient Indians would not have seen the incorporation of this historically inaccurate material as deceitful. They never made much of a distinction between what was and was not historically accurate. (By contrast the ancient Chinese recorded historical information meticulously.)

Perhaps it is only natural that people wanted to mythologise the Buddha because they felt that the ordinary historical facts cannot portray the richness, breath and the sublimity of spiritual life very well. Being restricted to historical detail here on earth is a bit like trying to portray a garden full of flowers with a black and white camera.

So the myths that grew up conveyed something of the spirit of the Buddha. Because they are not intellectually based, and they effect us on an intuitive level, there can be several ways of interpreting them, all of which may have validity.

### Super-normal powers and myths

In the scriptures there are some episodes where the Buddha exercises super-normal powers. For instance, on certain occasions he apparently knew what was going on in somebody’s mind (ie. through telepathy). Such stories are really historical facts which are sometimes regarded with scepticism because of the limitations of modern people’s life experience.

These stories are distinct from true myths that metaphorically represent psychological experiences and spiritual truths.

### **An early childhood experience**

We do not know very much about the childhood of the Buddha. But one important incident has been recorded about an experience he had during the annual ploughing ceremony.

The annual ploughing ceremony marked the first sowing of seed for the year. When the Buddha-to-be was only about five or six he was taken to one of these ceremonies to watch. He was positioned to one side on a little bank, in the shade of a jumbu tree. While sitting there he experienced a “super-conscious” state (*dhyana*). He did not even see the ploughing, and when the ceremony was over his father and foster mother found him deeply absorbed in his super-conscious state of mind (ie. *dhyana*).

Later in the development of Buddhism a myth was formed around this incident. It is said that when he was put there, in the shade of the jumbu tree, it was noon, and when the ceremonial ploughing was finished it was evening. But the shadow of the jumbu tree had not moved. Rather than taking this as a sort of miracle it could be taken as illustrating that for someone in a higher state of consciousness it seems as if time stands still.

### **The diamond throne**

According to myth, the place where the Buddha was sitting at the time of his Enlightenment was located at the centre of the universe. This spot is called the “diamond throne” (*vajrayasana*) and is said to be the precise place where all previous Buddhas sat just prior to their Enlightenment.

One way of looking at this is the need for balance on the mental level before someone can gain Enlightenment.

### **Calling the earth goddess to witness**

When the Buddha was seated on the diamond throne *Mara* (see notes from week 2) appeared and said to him that he had no right to sit there, and no reason to believe he was about to gain Enlightenment. The Buddha replied that for many lifetimes he had been practicing the virtues (*paramitas*) - generosity, ethics, effort in the pursuit of good, patience, meditation and wisdom, and that on account of this he was now ready.

But *Mara* did not give up so easily. *Mara* said: “*That’s your story, but how can you prove it. Who is your witness?*” In reply to this the Buddha tapped on the earth [as shown in the hand position (*mudra*) of many Buddha images]. And with this earth-touching hand gesture he said: “*I call the earth to witness, because all these lives I have lived on earth*”. At this point, in response to the tap, the earth goddess came up and bore witness. She said: “*Yes, I have seen all those previous lives and all the virtuous practice he undertook. So he is worthy to take this seat*”.

This scene of the earth goddess bearing witness is often depicted in art. She is shown as a beautiful woman of mature age, half emerged from the earth, bearing a vase of riches that represent the earth’s treasures.

### **Bhrama’s request**

It is said that after his Enlightenment the Buddha was inclined to remain silent. He reflected that the truth he had discovered was very sublime and difficult for human beings to grasp. He knew that ordinary people’s eyes are “covered with dust” - the dust of ignorance, craving and ill will - and that this would obscure their vision of ultimate truth.

Then a vision of Bhrama Sahampati, the so-called “lord of a thousand worlds”, appeared. With folded hands he implored the Buddha to teach humanity, saying there were at least some people who had “little dust in their eyes”.

The Buddha then surveyed the world with his “divine eye”. In a sort of vision he saw all of humanity as a vast bed of lotuses. Many lotuses were not just underwater, but deep down in the mud. But other lotuses, the

Buddha saw, had begun to grow so that at least the tips of their buds had emerged above the surface of the water. Some buds even stood free of the water and were starting to unfurl their petals. And a very few were on the point of bursting into bloom. Through this vision of the different stages of development of human beings, the Buddha realised there were people who could flower in the sunlight of his teaching, and that others could grow and develop towards this. He therefore decided to teach human beings - as Bhrama Sahampati had requested him to.

The point of the story is not that the Buddha would not have cared about humanity if he had not been asked to help. The Bhrama Sahampati of this myth is part of the Buddha's own mind; and the story conveys that an Enlightened being is inherently compassionate.

### **Mucalinda, the king of the serpents**

The Buddha spent seven weeks under or near the bodhi tree after his Enlightenment. At the end of the seventh week there was a great storm. The heavens burst open, as so often happens at the onset of the Indian monsoon. The tree which had provided shelter from the sun was inadequate to provide shelter from the torrential rain. So Mucalinda, the king of the serpents (*nagas*), came out of his hole and wrapped his coils round and round the Buddha to protect him from the rain, and placed his cobra-like head above the Buddha to form an umbrella. [This is also commonly depicted in art.]

When the rain stopped Mucalinda threw off the guise of the serpent and assumed the form of a beautiful young man who bowed to the Buddha.

Mucalinda represents the forces of the unconscious mind in their most positive and beneficial aspect.

Mucalinda also corresponds to what the Tantra calls the chandali, the fiery one, or what the Hindus call the kundalini, the coiled-up one. His seven coils represent the seven psychic centres along the median nerve, up which the psychic energy (*kundalini*) passes in its ascent from the lowest to the highest centre.

The beautiful young man bowing before the Buddha represents the perfect harmony of all the powers and forces within the Enlightened mind.

### **Angulimala's attempt to catch-up**

Angulimala was a famous bandit living in a forest somewhere in central India. He had a rather unpleasant habit of catching people who were passing through the forest and chopping off their fingers. As a result of doing this he had made a garland of fingers. That was why he was called Angulimala: *angula* is finger, and *mala* is garland. He wore the garland around his neck.

At the time this story begins he had ninety eight fingers, and wanted to have a hundred. It happened that the Buddha was about to pass through that forest, and so people who knew about Angulimala tried to dissuade the Buddha from travelling that way. But the Buddha ignored their warnings and set off. As soon as Angulimala saw him coming he decided to make use of the opportunity to obtain another finger.

There was a little trail winding through the jungle in which the Buddha was walking. The birds were singing in the trees, and the scene seemed peaceful. As the Buddha was meditatively walking along Angulimala emerged from the shadows and stealthily started pursuing him. He drew his sword in readiness to cut off a finger.

After Angulimala had been following the Buddha for some time he noticed a rather odd thing. Although he seemed to be moving much more quickly than the Buddha, the distance between the two of them did not seem to be decreasing. In an effort to catch-up Angulimala quickened his pace until he was running as fast as he could; but still there was no change in the distance between them.

When he realized what was happening he broke out in perspiration with fright and bewilderment. In desperation Angulimala called to the Buddha to stand still. Then a dialogue took place:

**Buddha:** I am standing still, it is you who are moving.

**Angulimala:** You are supposed to be a holy wanderer (*sramana*), so how can you tell a lie. Here am I running like mad, and I cannot catch you.

**Buddha:** I am standing still because I am standing in Nirvana. You are moving because you are going round and round in the Samsara.

On hearing this reply Angulimala became the Buddha's disciple.

This story illustrates that the Buddha exists in a different dimension. Angulimala represents time, the Buddha represents eternity. However long time goes on, it never comes to a point where it catches up with eternity. Angulimala could still be running now, but even after two thousand five hundred years the distance between them would be the same.

### **The Lalitavistara sutra**

The Lalitavistara sutra (a Sanskrit text of the Mahayana school) gives a very mythologised account of the Buddha's life. The name 'Lalitavistara' means the story of the sports (*lila*). [For a spiritually mature person their activity is said to be like sport or play, because it is a spontaneous flow, motivated from within.]

The Lalitavistara sutra describes events in the Buddha's life from his descent from a heavenly realm (the *Tushita* heaven) in the form of a white elephant into his mother's womb, up to his the time when he gives his first teaching. The reliefs at the base of Borobodur stupa in Java depict incidents from the Lalitavistara sutra, as does some Tibetan Buddhist art.

Here is a short sample of the text, from the edition by Dharma Publishing (1983). It is about how the Buddha-to-be, having left home, discards his clothes and cuts off his hair.

*In this way, O monks, the Bodhisattva left home. Crossing the land of the Sakyans, the land of the Krodyas, and the land of the Mallas, by the time daylight appeared, he had arrived at the city of Anumaineya, in the land of the Maineyas. There the bodhisattva alighted from his horse Kanthaka, and standing upon the earth, he dismissed the great hosts of gods, nagas, ghandharavas, asuras, garudas, kinnaras, and mahoragas. Having dismissed them, he thought: "I will now dismiss Chandaka and Kanthaka and these ornaments over him.*

*Then calling Chandaka, the Bodhisattva said to him: "Go Chandaka. Take these ornaments and Kanthaka, and return to the palace." At the place from which Chandaka retraced his steps, a caitya stands, which is still known today as Chandakanvartana, the Return of Chandaka.*

*Then the Bodhisattva reflected: "How can I become a wandering monk with my hair still long?" And cutting his hair with his sword, he threw it to the wind. The Thirty-three gods gathered the Bodhisattva's hair to do it honour, and even today the gods celebrate the Festival of the Locks of hair. There also a caitya stands, which is still known today as Cudapratigrahana, The Collected Locks of Hair.*

*Again, the Bodhisattva thought: "How can I become a wandering monk when I clothe myself in silken garments woven with gold and silver? It would be better if I had saffron-colored garments, suitable for living in the forest."*

*Then the gods of the Suddhavaśa realm considered: "The Bodhisattva needs saffron-colored apparel." And devaputra appeared before the Bodhisattva in the form of a huntsman in saffron-colored garb. The Bodhisattva said to him: "Friend, if you were to give me your clothes, I would give you my silken garments." The other said: "These clothes suit you; those clothes suit me." The bodhisattva said: "Then I accept them."*

### **Acknowledgement**

These notes include material derived from the following lectures by Sangharakshita:

- *Buddhism and the language of myth*
- *Archetypal symbols in the biography of the Buddha*
- *The Buddha, God and Reality*