The Art of BUDDHISM

AN INTRODUCTION TO ITS HISTORY & MEANING

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INTRODUCTION

Siddhartha/Shakyamuni: His Lives and Teachings

BUDDHISM—which began with the life of one man, Siddhartha Gautama (revered today as Buddha Shakyamuni), and his austere emphasis on personal discipline and spiritual growth—remains the one complex of images and ideas that unites the Asian world. As it spread from India throughout Asia, Buddhism was adapted to different cultures; evolved into various practice traditions; and expanded to include celestial buddhas, savior bodhisattvas, and a marvelous assemblage of teachers and protectors.

Like others beings, at least according to a worldview prevalent in India for millennia, Shakyamuni endured many lifetimes, often taking the forms of animals or men. In each life, he practiced virtues such as compassion and generosity, accumulating the merit that would ultimately lead to his final rebirth, during which he became an awakened being or a buddha. (The understanding that past actions can determine a future life or lives is central to Indian thought and is generally termed *karma.*) In his penultimate lifetime, Shakyamuni was reborn as a prince named Vessantara. During that lifetime, he gave away his wife, his children, and an elephant thought to ensure the wealth of his kingdom. His unprecedented generosity led to his final life, during which he attained enlightenment.

Arguments continue regarding the date of Siddhartha's birth. Early scholars, relying on texts in Pali, accepted 563 B.C.E. Pali is a canonical language written in several scripts and thought to represent a homogenization of dialects spoken in India before and after Siddhartha's lifetime. However, recent studies based on archaeological evidence and Chinese texts, suggest a date between 485 and 450 B.C.E.

Siddhartha was the son of a woman named Maya and her husband, the ruler of a small polity in present-day Nepal. His miraculous birth from his mother's side was heralded with flowers raining from the sky and other auspicious signs, and the newborn infant promptly took four steps symbolizing his dominion over the cosmos. As was traditional, the young Siddhartha was taken to a soothsayer, who foretold his future as either a world ruler or a great teacher.

Not surprisingly, Siddhartha's father and aunt (his mother died soon after his birth) attempted to ensure that he became a ruler rather than a teacher. The boy was raised in a palatial environment, engulfed by worldly goods and pleasures, and protected from the harsh realities of daily existence. Nonetheless, during an excursion (or in some texts, several excursions) from his royal compound, he encountered sickness, old age, and death, and also saw one of the ascetic wanderers who were prevalent in India at that time. Shaken, the young prince understood that life is filled with inescapable change and suffering, and he subsequently fled from his home, leaving behind his beautiful young wife and newborn son, in an attempt to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of existence.

Siddhartha lived during a time of great social turmoil, when an agricultural lifestyle was being replaced by an urban, mercantile society; challenges to the prevailing beliefs and practices, which included ceremonial sacrifices to a host of gods performed by members of a hereditary caste, were widespread. The wanderer Siddhartha had seen during his crucial excursion(s) outside the palace was one of many such figures, who were known as *parivajrakas*; they left their homes to seek spiritual salvation and were supported by alms. Siddhartha studied with several of the more famous of these wanderers and also spent six years with five of them practicing harsh austerities, such as only eating one grain of rice per day. Finally, when he was near death, he realized that he had not yet attained the enlightenment he sought. He accepted milk from a young woman (which caused him to be rejected by his fellow ascetics), sat beneath a pipal tree, and vowed not to move again until he had attained awakening.

Despite repeated attempts by negative forces such as fear or discontent (symbolized by the semidivinity Mara and his minions), Siddhartha persevered, meditated, and ultimately became a buddha (one who is awakened) in one evening. He recollected not only his own past lives but also those of others, understood the relationship between causes and actions, and became omniscient. After his awakening, he spent about seven weeks meditating before he decided to teach others what he had learned. His first sermon, given at Sarnath, transformed the lives of the five ascetics who had previously rejected him, and they become his first followers.

The greater understanding that Siddhartha achieved is often termed the Four Noble Truths: existence is fundamentally painful, this pain is the result of the desire (or thirst) for things and states of beings, this pain can be relieved, and an Eightfold Path of practice and understanding is the cure. The Eightfold Path—right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—guides practitioners through several lifetimes (ideally as human beings) and helps them gain enough merit to finally escape the endless circle of birth and rebirth into a transcendent state of being known as nirvana. Underlying this path are practices such as morality (*shila*), spiritual wisdom (*prajna*), and meditation (*samadhi*), and virtues such as generosity, knowledge, and compassion, which provide the foundation for all branches of Buddhism, even those that developed centuries after Siddhartha became enlightened.

The Buddha's charisma and the depth of his understanding quickly attracted an additional fifty-five disciples, who were known as both *shravakas*, those who listen to the teachings, and arhats, those who have heard and understood the teachings and have advanced on the path to enlightenment. He spent approximately forty-five years walking through northern and northeastern India and teaching a wide range of individuals. During this time, Shakyamuni met periodically with different groups of his followers—often during the rainy season—to recite the teachings and the rules of the order and to discuss transgressions of these rules. At least twenty rainy seasons were spent in a pleasure garden in the kingdom of Koshala that had been bequeathed to the order by a wealthy lay follower. It seems likely that devotions of some sort, such as offering flowers to Shakyamuni, were part of the practice at the time.

When he was around eighty, Shakyamuni ate poorly prepared or spoiled food, possibly pork or truffles, and died lying on his side in a grove of trees near Kushinagara, a moment that is known as his final transcendence (*parinirvana*) because he would no longer suffer rebirth in any form. His corpse was cremated seven days after his death, and the remains were divided among the rulers of ten kingdoms and placed beneath large domed structures made of earth or brick that are known as stupas. Devotion to these relics,

which involved pilgrimage between the various sites that held them, was an important aspect of early practices because the relics were understood to contain the essence of the Buddha and his teachings.

His death spurred discussions in the sangha (those of his followers who had taken monastic vows) regarding how to maintain the teachings in the absence of the master, and a council of five hundred learned disciples was convened in Rajagriha to address the future of the order. Despite grumblings from some members, the council decided to adhere to the teachings and practices established by the Buddha. Two other such meetings—one held around 345 B.C.E. at Vaishali and another thirty-seven years later at Pataliputra—focused on rules of behavior, especially minor infringements such as handling money or eating after midday. The latter meeting was held under the auspices of Ashoka (r. 269–232 B.C.E.), ruler of the extensive Mauryan Empire, who is credited with helping to spread Buddhism throughout India as well as into Southeast Asia.

This council marked the first formal division of the order, which had by that time grown substantially and divided into branches (some small) called *nikayas*. Differences regarding the proper behavior of a monk led to a split between a more conservative group known as the Sthavira—thought to be the precursors of the current Theravada tradition—and a larger constituency known as the Mahasanghika, whose redefinitions of the rules of order reflect the development of changes in practice that led to the creation of new branches of Buddhism (now known as Mahayana and Vajrayana) during the first half of the first millennium.

Texts also record that another council was convened in the second century by Kanishka, one of the most powerful rulers of the Kushan Empire (second century B.C.E. to third century C.E.), which included Afghanistan, Pakistan, and much of northern India. Both Ashoka and Kanishka are revered in Buddhist sources as devoted patrons of the religion; the period between their reigns saw the flowering of texts and images that provide the principal sources for the study of Buddhism today. The Buddhist canon (known as the *tripitaka*) contains more than two thousand texts and includes records of the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni; commentaries (*shastras*); rules for monastic discipline; metaphysical speculations on existence and reality; and biographies of Shakyamuni, monks, and other devotees. Many texts are preserved in different versions, and they are recorded primarily in Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan. (Not every text is found in all three languages.) The Pali canon serves as

the basis of practice in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia; Chinese is used in Korea and Japan.

Unlike the Pali version, the Chinese and Tibetan canons contain texts known as tantras (the Sanskrit *tantra* means "woven" or "fabric"). These texts include meditations and visualizations focusing on a mind-boggling array of tutelary and protective figures who are thought to be able to overcome obstacles quickly and help one attain awakening in a single lifetime. The writing and mastery of texts is a monastic practice limited to a small number of scholarly clerics, who specialized either in the writings of a particular tradition or in a group of related works. It is unlikely that many individuals have been completely versed in all Buddhist writings.

Based to a greater or lesser degree on the written word, artistic traditions have encapsulated Buddhist thought, making it accessible to viewers who often—particularly in earlier centuries—did not share the literacy found in monasteries. Visual narratives detailing the lives of Shakyamuni and other advanced practitioners and teachers show a paradigm of a life lived according to Buddhist tenets. Stupas, cave sanctuaries, and monasteries provide sanctified places for meetings between devotees and awakened beings who are either immanent as relics or accessible in symbols such as sculptures. Paintings, sculptures, and other objects thought to embody the wisdom of the Buddha and his followers provide both a focus for devotion and a visual definition of the ineffable state of being that is enlightenment. Other icons, such as images of bodhisattvas and protectors or portraits of teachers, illustrate the continuing presence of role models and helpers in all Buddhist traditions.

Intended as an introduction for general readers and undergraduate students, this book discusses the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia and traces the evolution of Buddhist art from its inception during the reign of Ashoka to the nineteenth century. It focuses on the dialogues between cultures that underlie the dissemination of Buddhism and on the fascinating interplay of ideas, practices, and images that mark the religion's development. This volume also stresses the importance of visual culture in understanding the history of Buddhist thought.