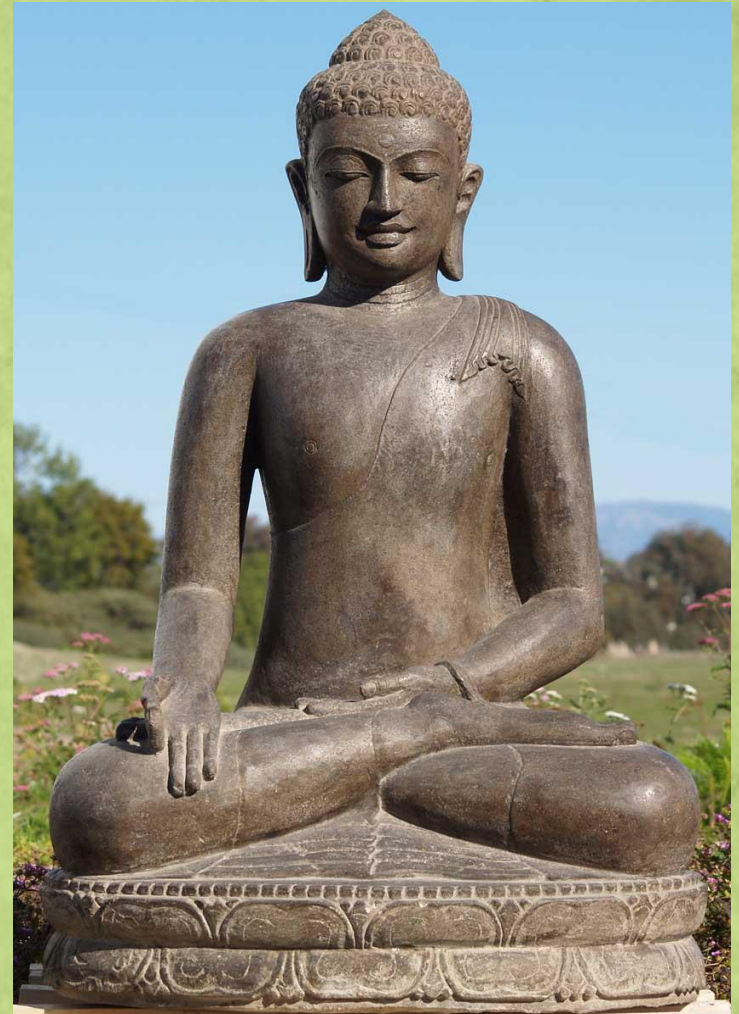


Siddhartha Gautama and the Origins of Buddhism

HPRS4003 Asian Religious Traditions

The Buddha

- Siddhatta Gotama [P]/Siddhartha Gautama [S]
- Lived roughly around the 5th century BCE.
- Taught in the region of the Ganges basin in north-east India.
- Considered by his followers to have achieved the fullest understanding of reality, hence an 'enlightened' being.



The Buddha in Historical Context: The Brahmanical Tradition

- The tradition of the Aryans.
- Centred on Vedic sacrificial ritual.
- *Dharma* defined in terms of *varna* and *ashrama*.
- Sanskrit as the sacred language.
- Rooted in a hierarchical system of ritual purity based on heredity.

The Buddha in Historical Context: The *Sramana* Tradition

- The tradition of the renouncers.
- Spiritual wisdom attained through the practice of austerities and the cultivation of meditative and contemplative techniques.
- Developed philosophical/theoretical views on the nature of truth, knowledge and wisdom.
- The Upanishadic concern for liberation from *samsara* arose in conjunction with the emergence of *sramana* movements.

The Buddha in Historical Context

- The *sramana* tradition threatened brahmanical religion – offered competing visions of society and challenged the authority of the Brahmins.
- Later Vedic texts (the Upanishads) contain ideas about the nature of reality and the Self that seem to draw upon *sramana* traditions.
- The Buddha appears to have rejected brahmanism in favour of sramanism.
- Aspects of the Buddha's teachings appear to be formulated in response to brahmanical norms.

Sources for the Life of the Buddha

- No continuous life of the Buddha in early Buddhist texts.
- The ***Mahavastu*** ('Great Story', 1st century CE)
- The ***Lalitavistara*** ('Graceful Description', 1st Century CE)
- Asvaghosa's poem the ***Buddhacarita*** ('Acts of the Buddha', 2nd Century CE)
- The ***Nidanakatha*** ('Introductory Tale', 2nd-3rd century CE), an introduction to the commentary on the ***Jataka***.

The Historical Buddha

- 'Buddha': a descriptive title meaning 'Awakened One' or 'Enlightened One'.
- No scholarly consensus on precise dates for the Buddha, but a general tendency to bring the date of the Buddha's death much nearer to 400 BCE than 500 BCE.
- The earliest Buddhist sources state that the Buddha was born Siddhartha ('one who has achieved his aims/purpose') Gautama (belonging to the **Shakya** clan), the son of a local chieftain in Kapilavastu.

The Historical Buddha

- At some point in his life, Gautama underwent a radical change in orientation, renounced the world and became a wandering ascetic or *sramana*.
- Had an experience which affected him profoundly.
- Devoted the rest of his life to teaching this 'way to the cessation of suffering'.
- By the time of his death, he had established a well-organized mendicant community which attracted considerable support from the wider population.

The Mythological Buddha: Past Lives

- The traditional biography of the Buddha begins with his many lives as a *bodhisattva*.
- In one of his past lives, Gautama was an ascetic named **Sumedha** (or Megha) who met and was inspired by a previous Buddha, Dipamkara.
- He spent many lives as a human, animal and god, building up the moral and spiritual perfections necessary for Buddha-hood.
- The Buddha chose the time in history in which to be reborn for the last time.

The Mythological Buddha: Birth



The Four Sights



He saw Old Age, Sickness, Death & Monk

Theravada Buddhist Council of Malaysia

The Mythological Buddha: The 'Great Going Forth'

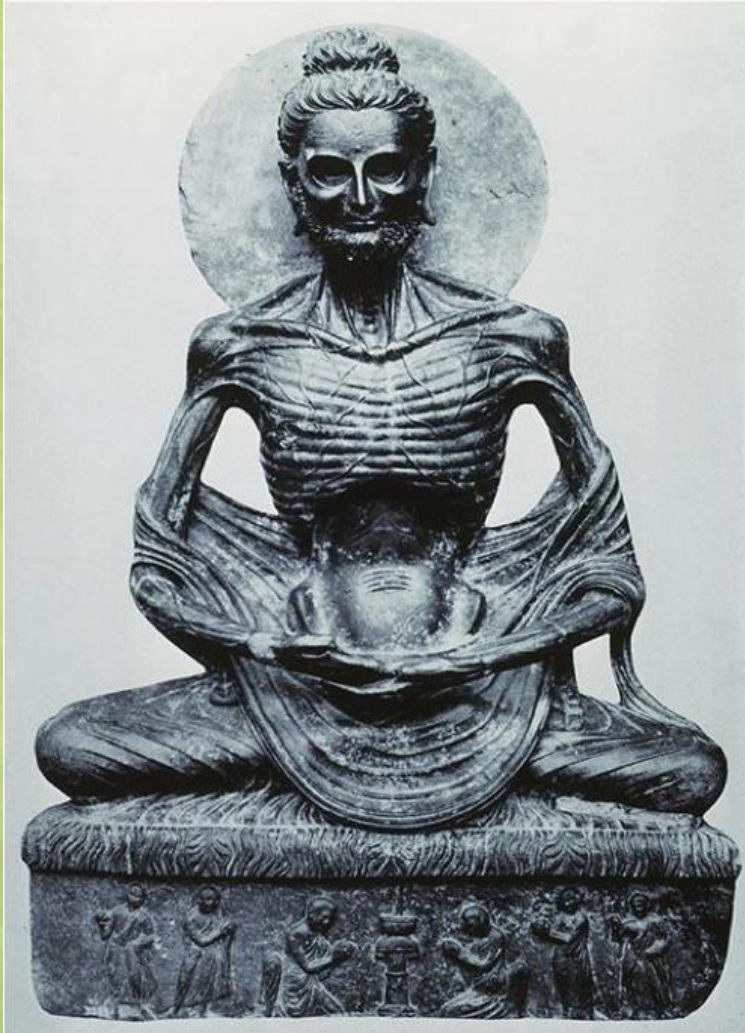


- 'So at a later time, when I was still young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life, having shaved off my hair & beard — though my parents wished otherwise and were grieving with tears on their faces — I put on the ochre robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness' (*Majjhima Nikaya* 36).

The Mythological Buddha: Siddhartha's Search for the Truth

- The *bodhisattva* left home and became a wandering ascetic.
- The Pali Canon records the names of two teachers who taught the *bodhisattva* how to master meditation (**Alara Kalama** and **Uddaka Ramaputta**). Through their instruction, he learned how to reach the deepest of meditative states.
- However, this activity did not lead the *bodhisattva* to the liberation he was searching for and so he parted ways with his teachers.

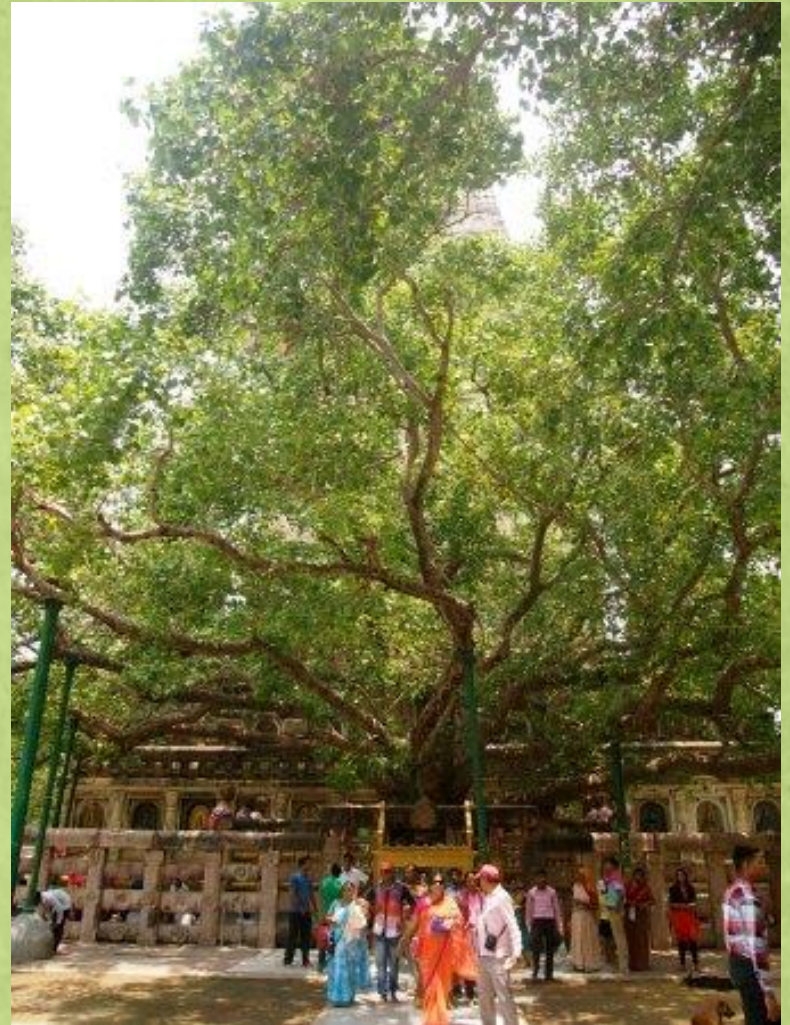
The Practice of Severe Austerities



- 'My body reached a state of extreme emaciation. Because of eating so little my limbs became like the jointed stems of creepers or bamboo; my backside became like a buffalo's hoof; my backbone, bent or straight, was like corded beads; my jutting and broken ribs were like the jutting and broken rafters of an old house; the gleam of my eyes sunk deep in their sockets was like the gleam of water seen deep down at the bottom of a deep well'
(*Majjhima Nikaya* i. 80, 245)

The Mythological Buddha: The Enlightenment

- Sat under a tree in *Bodh-gaya*, the *bodhisattva* spent the night in deep meditation.
- During the night, he was granted a gradual insight into the nature of existence and eventually achieved his aim of reaching a state of perfect peace (*nibbana* or *nirvana*).



The Mythological Buddha: The Defeat of Mara



The Mythological Buddha: The Enlightenment

- 'This *Dhamma* I have found is profound, hard to see, hard to understand: it is peaceful, sublime, beyond the sphere of mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation takes delight in attachment, is delighted by attachment, rejoices in attachment and as such it is hard for them to see this truth, namely...*Nirvana*' (*Majjhima Nikaya* i. 167)

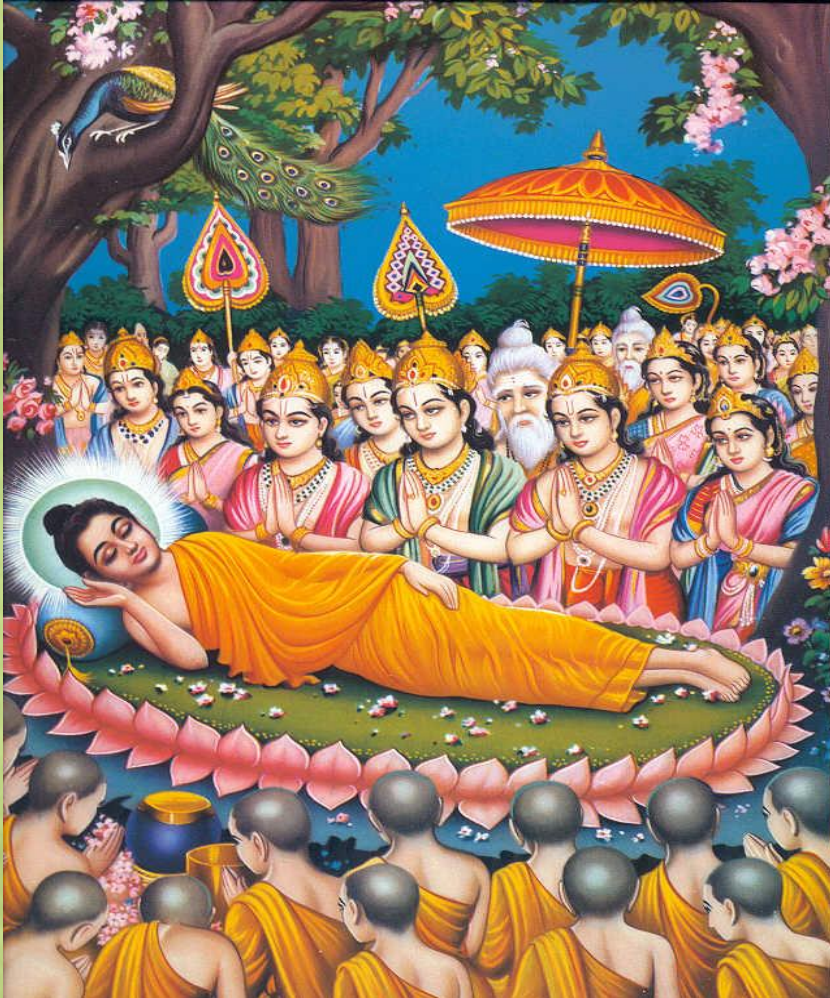
The 'Setting in Motion of the Dhamma Wheel'

- Following his awakening, the Buddha resolved to find and teach his five former companions.
- The Buddha insisted that he was a ***Tathagata***, a 'Thus-gone' or 'One attuned to reality'.
- Gautama, usually referred to as the 'Lord' or 'Blessed One' (*Bhagavat*) in the *Suttas*, then gave his first sermon.
- This first sermon commenced with the idea that there is a '**middle way**', a way which avoids both the extremes of devotion to mere sense-pleasure and devotion to ascetic self-mortification.

The 'Setting in Motion of the Dhamma Wheel'

- The Buddha spent the next 45 years travelling around north-east India, sharing his 'middle way' and teaching people from every walk of life.
- During his ministry, the Buddha established the **Sangha**, a mendicant community of monk-disciples.
- By the time of his death, the Sangha consisted of hundreds (if not thousands) of 'enlightened ones'.

The Death of the Buddha (The 'Full Going Out')



- At the age of 80, the Buddha fell ill and subsequently died.
- He had reached *parinirvana* (*nirvana* beyond death).
- The Buddha did not appoint a successor but said that the ***dhamma*** (his teaching/the truth discovered by him) should be the teacher.

The First Buddhist Council

- Soon after his death, enlightened monks met to recite what they remembered of the Buddha's discourses. This is known as the **First Buddhist Council**.
- According to the accounts of this communal recitation, what was remembered of the Buddha's teachings fell into two categories:
 1. The general discourses of the Buddha, the *Sutras* [S]/*Suttas* [P] (recited by Ananda).
 2. His prescriptions for the lifestyle of the Buddhist monk, the *Vinaya* (recited by Upali).

The Preservation and Transmission of the Buddha's Teachings

- At the First Buddhist Council, the Buddha's disciples collated (through oral recollection and recitation) the Buddha's teachings.
- Teachings transmitted through group recitation for some generations before they were committed to writing (c. 1st century BCE).
- The Buddhist **Sangha** (ascetic order) crucial to the preservation of these teachings -- it is the guardian of this tradition, and is understood to serve as the embodiment of these teachings (Buddhist *dhamma*).

The Sangha

- During the Buddha's lifetime his followers came to constitute the *Sangha*.
- Monasteries were set up which regulated the conduct of the *Sangha*; these monastic rules are referred to as the *Vinaya*.
- The Buddha's teachings were, and continue to be, mediated via the Sangha – a community understood to live the teaching.
- Lay Buddhists can access the teachings of the Buddha through the Sangha.



The Sacred Canon

- The Buddhist canon comprises the texts recited at the First Buddhist Council:

The ***Sutras/Suttas*** – teachings of the Buddha and select followers (also known as the *Nikaya/Agama*).

The ***Vinaya*** texts – texts relating to the structure and discipline of the monastic order.

... as well as a later addition:

The ***Abhidhamma*** – a detailed scholastic reworking of material appearing in the *Suttas*.

- Together, these three sections form the 'Three Baskets' (*Tripitaka*): the basket of discourses, the basket of discipline and the basket of 'further dhamma'.

The Three Principal Canons

Three principal 'canons' of Buddhist scriptures survive today, corresponding to the three main traditions of living Buddhism:

1. The Pali or Theravada Canon of 'Southern Buddhism' (Sri-Lanka and South-East Asia).
2. The Chinese *Tripitaka* of 'Eastern Buddhism' or Mahayana (China, Korea, Japan).
3. The Tibetan *Kanjur* and *Tenjur* of the northern tradition of Tibet and Mongolia.

Summary: The Origins of Buddhism

- Buddhism founded by Siddhartha Gautama around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE.
- The Buddha's ministry regarded as the 'setting in motion of the dhamma wheel'.
- The Sangha crucial to the preservation and transmission of the dhamma.
- The Buddha's teaching/instructions eventually set down in writing.

Suggested Reading (see folder on Moodle page)

- Gethin, R., *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chs. 1-2.
- Harvey, P., *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 1.
- Keown, D., *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chs. 1-2.