

Eight Scenes of the Buddha's Life

The Buddha—that is, the “Enlightened One”—lived nearly 2,500 years ago in northern India. His followers have always seen his life as a shining example to all, but what “really happened” is now impossible to know for certain. Even the earliest stories of his life include miraculous events that may seem hard to take literally. Later versions are even more elaborate, and they differ from one another in many details. The outline of the story usually runs something like this: The Buddha-to-be had passed through hundreds of previous lives, perfecting himself with the eventual goal of achieving buddhahood and gaining release from the unhappy cycle of death and rebirth. He determined that he was finally ready for his last life and was born miraculously as the son of a king and queen. The king had been warned that the boy might someday abandon his royal destiny to follow a spiritual path, so the king surrounded him with luxury and tried to shelter him from awareness of the world’s suffering. When he was a teenager, however, the prince, sensing his own isolation, left the palace four times and saw three sad sights and one hopeful one: an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and then a wandering truth seeker. The prince was deeply disillusioned with his artificially happy life. He left his home and family, threw off his royal finery, and set out to discover why people suffered so much and how suffering could be avoided. After long and intense self-searching he achieved a breakthrough into perfect understanding: the enlightenment. He then spent many decades traveling from place to place preaching and performing miracles. Thanks to his enlightenment he had freed himself from further rebirths, and so, on his death, he passed into the condition of blissful peace known as nirvana.

Images of the Buddha frequently illustrate eight particular episodes of the Buddha’s life. Presumably these standard scenes are so familiar that many Buddhists can recognize them from only one or two clues.

The following are key moments of the Buddha’s life, the sites where they took place, and a description of each event:

BIRTH OF THE BUDDHA (LUMBINI)

“There was a pleasure grove of sal-trees called Lumbini Grove. . . . And going to the foot of the monarch sal-tree of the grove, Queen Maya wished to take hold of one of its branches. Then she reached out her hand and seized hold of the branch, and immediately her pains came upon her.

. . . So her delivery took place while she was standing up and keeping fast hold of the sal-tree branch. At that very moment came four pure-minded Maha-Brahma angels bearing a golden net, and receiving the Buddha-to-be on this golden net, they placed him before his mother and said, ‘Rejoice, O queen! A mighty son has been born to you.’ ” (Adapted from Henry Clark Warren’s 1896 translation of an ancient Buddhist text)

THE VICTORY OVER THE DEMON MARA (BODH GAYA)

After many lifetimes of spiritual and intellectual preparation, the Buddha-to-be neared the achievement of enlightenment, and thus of buddhahood, as he sat meditating under a tree. The demon Mara, an embodiment of violence and uncontrolled passions, approached at the head of a monstrous army, intending to put a stop to the enlightenment.

Mara and the Buddha-to-be repeatedly challenged each other’s power and past accomplishments. Finally, the Buddha-to-be said, “ ‘Mara, who is witness to your having given donations?’ Said Mara, ‘All these,’ and he stretched out his hand in the direction of his army. Then Mara said, ‘Who is witness to your having

given donations?' The Buddha-to-be replied, 'I have no animate witnesses present. However, the great seven-hundred-fold donation I gave in my immediately previous existence will be testified to by the solid earth.' And drawing forth his right hand from beneath his priestly robe, he stretched it out towards the mighty earth. And the mighty earth thundered, 'I bear you witness' with a hundred thousand roars. And the followers of Mara fled away in all directions."

THE FIRST PREACHING (SARNATH)

After the enlightenment, the Buddha resolved to teach to others the understanding he had achieved. He decided to address first a group of five monks with whom he had once practiced severe austerities: "Then I thought, 'Where do the five monks dwell?' And with my divine vision, I saw the five monks dwelling at Benares in the deer park. So I made my way to Benares.

... The five monks saw me coming from afar, and decided among themselves, 'This, friends, is Gautama coming, who lives in abundance, who has given up exertion. We must not greet him. But the five monks were not able to hold to their decision. I said 'Give ear, monks, I instruct, I teach the Doctrine. If you walk according to the teaching ... you will learn, realize, and attain the goal of a religious life and abide in it.' "(Adapted from Edward J. Thomas's 1927 translation of an ancient Buddhist text)

THE MIRACLES OF SHRAVASTI (SHRAVASTI)

The king at Shravasti heard that a group of heretics were planning to perform miracles. The Buddha promised the king that he too would perform miracles, and would do so under a certain mango tree. When the Buddha found that the heretics had destroyed the mango tree, he made another tree grow to full size instantly from a seed. Then he performed other miracles such as manifesting multiple appearances of himself, all preaching the doctrine simultaneously.

THE DESCENT FROM INDRA'S HEAVEN AFTER THE BUDDHA HAD PREACHED TO HIS DECEASED MOTHER (SANKASHYA)

The Buddha's descent from Indra's heaven is depicted here. The Buddha went to this heaven, ruled over by the king of the gods, to preach to his deceased mother and the other inhabitants. When the Buddha was ready to return to earth, Indra and another powerful god, Brahma, honored him by attending him as would high-ranking servants.

THE MONKEY'S OFFERING (RAJGIR)

While residing in the Protected Forest, the Buddha was attended by a noble elephant that provided him with water and wild fruits. After observing these propitious deeds, a monkey decided that he too would give the Buddha an offering. One day, the monkey spied some honey. He broke off a branch of honey-comb which he gingerly placed on a plantain leaf and offered this gift to the Buddha. The Teacher received the honey and sat down, but did not eat it. Concerned as to why the Buddha would not consume it, the monkey lifted and rotated the stick revealing tiny insect's eggs on its underside. The monkey tenderly removed the eggs one by one, and gave the honey-comb back to the Buddha. To the monkey's delight, the Buddha ate the sweet honey thereby accepting the monkey's offering. The monkey joyously leaped among the trees. As he did this, however, a branch broke beneath him causing the monkey to fall upon a tree stump that pierced and killed him. Due to his faith in the Buddha, the monkey was reborn in paradise with an entourage of celestial nymphs. (Adapted from *Buddhist Legends [Dhammapada Atthakatha]* by Eugene Watson Burlingame, Part 1, p. 180).

THE TAMING OF THE ENRAGED ELEPHANT (VAISHALI)

The Buddha's evil cousin sent an enraged elephant to attack him. The Buddha held his ground and is said to have suffused the elephant with loving-kindness of mind. The elephant knelt in submission. This story can be understood as symbolizing our need to subdue our uncontrolled and violent animal instincts.

DEATH (KUSHINAGARA).

After having spent many decades traveling from place to place preaching and performing miracles, the Buddha became ill at the age of eighty. In a forest, he lay on his deathbed sheltered between two blossoming trees. Surrounded by hundreds of mourning disciples:

“Then the Blessed One addressed the priests: ‘And now, O priests, I take leave of you. All the constituents of being are transitory; work out your salvation with diligence.’

And these were the last words of the Blessed One. . . . Thereupon, the Blessed One [after progressing through a series of trance states] passed into Nirvana.” (Adapted from Henry Clark Warren’s 1896 translation of an ancient Buddhist text)