

Aide Memoire L09

Spiritual teacher and founder of Buddhism later known as Siddhartha Gautamaⁱ

The legends associated with the major events of the Buddha's life, given here in condensed form, are based on a number of sources. Among the most important is the *Buddhacarita* or 'The Acts of the Buddha', the first full length biography of the Buddha written by an Indian poet called Ashvaghosha in the 1st century CE. There are a number of ancient traditions concerning the dates of the Buddha's life making it almost impossible to know exactly when the events took place. In all probability, however, the Buddha lived between just after the mid 6th century and the late 5th century BCE.

Conception and Birth of the Buddha

The Buddha's parents were Suddhodana, king of the Sakyas, people living on the Indian borders of Nepal, and his wife Maya. According to legend, just before her conception Maya had a dream in which a white elephant entered her womb. Wise men prophesied that this meant that her future son would either become a 'World Sovereign' known as a *Chakravartin* or a Buddha. When the time came for her to give birth, she withdrew to the garden at Lumbini, attended by her maidservants. Her baby was born miraculously from her right side, his limbs shining like the sun with dazzling brilliance. He immediately took seven long strides to the north and looking north, south, east and west he said, *'I was born for enlightenment and*

ⁱ The information contained in this aide Memoire has been extracted mainly from V&A's web site

to benefit all that lives. This is the last time I have been born into this world of becoming! He was named Siddhartha Gautama.

The Great Renunciation

The young Siddhartha Gautama grew up surrounded by luxury and wealth. He was protected from the harsh realities of life by his father who had been warned that his son would withdraw from the world should he encounter such sights. However, one day when riding outside the palace grounds, the future Buddha saw four things that deeply disturbed him; an old man, a sick man, a dead man and finally a wandering holy man who had given up his home and family to search for knowledge. The prince became determined to find the reason for human suffering and the final cure for it. He decided to leave his luxurious life, wives and palace to seek spiritual salvation. One night he left his palace accompanied by his attendant and richly bridled horse. When far from the city he took off his princely jewellery and clothes and cut off his hair and beard with his sword. He changed his royal robes for the simple robes worn by holy men and gave his horse to his attendant.

The Enlightenment

Wandering in the forest with five other holy men Siddhartha followed a very strict regime of fasting and deprivation until he almost starved to death. Realising at last that he had failed to acquire spiritual knowledge by such extreme means he resolved to seek it by a moderate 'Middle Way'. He took food and seated himself under a Bodhi treeⁱⁱ or 'Tree of Wisdom', vowing not to move until he had gained enlightenment and finally solved the mystery of human suffering.

ⁱⁱ A fig tree

Mara, god of the world, sent his demon armies to prevent him as if Siddhartha succeeded this would weaken Mara's kingdom which was founded on deaths and rebirths. Seated in meditation Siddhartha resisted the physical assaults of Mara's army, the seductions of his daughters and finally a challenge to his worthiness to claim enlightenment. In response to the last challenge he touched the earth calling it to witness his spiritual qualities. In response the earth shook and Mara and his armies fled. Siddhartha then entered deep meditation and through the following night had a succession of realisations that culminated in a final understanding of the cause of human suffering and sorrow. He saw his own successive re-births, how all beings passed into the higher and lower worlds and finally how craving, desire and ignorance are the cause of the process of re-birth. With this realisation he became a Buddha which means '*Awakened One*'. He remained for seven days under the Bodhi tree or 'tree of wisdom'.

The First Sermon in the Deer Park

The Buddha at first hesitated to spread the truths he had discovered, thinking them too difficult to understand, but urged by the gods Indra and Brahma,ⁱⁱⁱ he decided to begin teaching. Remembering the five holy men he had previously known he travelled to Varanasi to pass on his knowledge to them. Here, to the north of the city, in the deer park of Sarnath, near modern Patna in Bihar, he preached his first sermon. In the first '*Turning of the Wheel of the Law*' the Buddha explained the essence of his teachings in the form of the Four Noble Truths. He spoke of the fact of suffering, identified desire as the cause of suffering, explained that suffering can be stopped and that the way to escape suffering is by following the 'Noble Eightfold Path

ⁱⁱⁱ Hindu Gods

which showed eight ways in which people should live. At this time he also ordained the first Buddhist monks to spread his message. The Buddha spent the next forty-five years travelling throughout north eastern India teaching and ordaining monks.

The Death of the Buddha

The Buddha lived till over eighty. His death occurred at Kusinagara (modern Kasia) after eating a meal prepared for him by a blacksmith. When he knew that the end was approaching he gathered his disciples around him and gave a last speech. His final words were 'Decay is inherent in all compounded things, work out your own salvation with diligence'. Then laying on his right side on a couch between two trees he passed into successively higher states of awareness and then into the final state of Nirvana. After his cremation his ashes were divided into eight parts and distributed amongst the eight local rulers. Burial mounds known as stupas were raised over each set of ashes.

Iconography of the Buddha

The image of the Buddha is distinguished in various different ways. The Buddha is usually shown in a stylised pose or asana. Also important are the 32 *lakshanas* or special bodily features.

Lakshanas

Some of these symbolise aspects of the Buddha's spiritual character whilst others draw attention to the concept that his beautiful and perfectly proportioned body is an outer reflection of inner spiritual power. These are drawn from the ancient Indian concept of the *Mahapurusha* or 'Cosmic Being'.

01. Well-placed flat-footed feet
02. Mark of the Wheel of Law on soles of feet or palms of hands
03. Soles and palms more tender and soft than in most people
04. Long toes and fingers
05. Webbed fingers and toes
06. Feet well set on the ground
07. Ankle bones that are hardly noticeable
08. Lower legs like those of an antelope
09. Body frame tall and straight
10. Arms that reach to the knees when standing
11. Genitalia withdrawn
12. Hairs on the head and arranged in soft curls that point to the right
13. Hairs of the body point upwards.
14. Skin smooth and delicate
15. Skin golden. (According to legend the Buddha was born with limbs that shone like the sun)
16. Seven special features:
 - 2 broad heels
 - 2 broad hands
 - 2 broad shoulder blades
 - Broad neck
17. Torso like a lion
18. Shoulders gently curved
19. Chest wide
20. Body circumference has proportions of a fig tree
21. Cheeks like a lion
22. 40 teeth rather than the normal 32
23. Teeth have no gaps
24. Teeth are equal in size
25. Very white teeth

26. An excellent sense of taste
27. A long tongue that can reach his ears
28. A strong and attractive voice like that of the Hindu god Brahma
29. Eyes the colour of sapphire
30. Long eyelashes
31. Tuft of hair or third eye between his eyebrows (*urna*). This symbolises spiritual insight
32. A bump on the top of the head known as *ushnisha* that symbolises wisdom and spirituality and his attainment of enlightenment.

Other symbols regularly found in images of the Buddha include:

Elongated ears

One feature that is regularly used but is not considered a *Lakshana* is showing the Buddha with elongated earlobes: these are to remind us that the Buddha was once a prince who wore a great deal of jewellery including heavy earrings which stretched out his earlobes. Although he gave up the wearing of any jewellery when he gave up his life of luxury, his earlobes remained elongated.

Lotus flowers

Lotus flowers often appear in images of the Buddha. It is a symbol of things which are pure and good. A lotus is a flower that begins its life in the mud at the bottom of a pond and then rises to the surface to flower. It therefore reminds people that in the same way, people can rise above their problems and achieve enlightenment.

The Wheel of Law

The Wheel of Law can sometimes be found marked on the soles of the Buddha's feet and the palms of his hand. It has eight spokes to remind followers that the Buddha taught of the Noble Eightfold Path

which outlined eight ways of living. The Wheel itself is a reminder of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

The Snail Martyrs

There is a later legend that when the Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree he was so deep in meditation that he was unaware that it was extremely hot. A group of snails saw him and realising the importance of his thoughts, crawled up to cover and protect his head with their bodies. The snails died from exposure to the hot sun and became honoured as martyrs who had died to protect the Buddha. In some images of the Buddha, his hair curls do indeed resemble snails to remind people of this story.

THE MUDRAS

In addition, the hand gestures or *mudras* of the Buddha all have particular meanings. Most symbolise a major event in the Buddha's life, such as his attainment of enlightenment or his first sermon, while others represent a characteristic act such as giving of charity or of reassurance to his followers.

BHUMIPARSA The Buddha made this gesture just before his enlightenment to call the earth Goddess witness to his worthiness to become a Buddha. In response the earth shook and the evil demons of Mara who had been tormenting him fled in terror.



DHARMA CHAKRA or 'the turning of the Wheel of Law' refers to one of the most important moments in the life of the Buddha when he gave his first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath. (preaching the Law)



ABHAYA means 'no fear' and by this gesture the Buddha gives reassurance and protection to his follower



VARCEA symbolises giving and generosity, both important Buddhist virtues

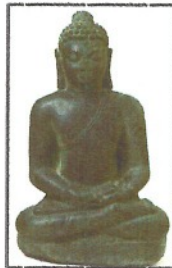


ASANAS

The pose that a Buddha is in is known as an *asana*. Buddhas are usually represented standing, sitting or reclining.

When shown standing, he often has one hand raised in blessing and reassurance.

When seated he is meditating in the lotus position *dhyana*



Images of the Buddha Sayyamuni reclining refer to the end of his life just before he entered Parinirvana



The Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life enshrines the main Buddhist teachings on karma, the laws of spiritual cause and effect. At the heart of this lies the belief that the way we live our lives, what we do and say, our good or bad conduct, results in rebirths in one of six worlds. In Buddhist scriptures the diagram of the Wheel of Life was said to have been designed by the Buddha himself as a teaching tool for his disciples. A 5th century painting of it exists at the entrance to a Buddhist cave monastery at Ajanta, Maharashtra State in central India. In Tibetan monasteries the Wheel is usually painted on one of the walls flanking the main temple entrance where it instructs the people entering much as wall paintings of the Last Judgement once did in Christian churches.

a human, animal, hell being, hungry ghost, god or warring god. What we do in this human world therefore has long term consequences for us and generates all the details of our future lives, whom we meet, our health, suffering and happiness. What we are now has been shaped by how we acted and reacted in the past. Our rebirths depend on what emotional quality has come to dominate us as the result of the way we have lived our last life.

Though each realm is described in terms of a rebirth they may equally be seen as states of mind which can be experienced while still in a human life. For example one may feel the hell of hatred towards another or the torture of wanting something but not being able to have it as in the hungry ghost realm, or the proud and godlike state of the successful and wealthy.

There are three main negative qualities or '*kleshas*' that continually draw us back into the wheel of rebirth. These are represented by the three animals shown at the centre of the wheel. A cockerel symbolises desire, a snake symbolises hatred, and a pig represents ignorance. According to this scheme actions based on greed and desire result in being reborn as a hungry spirit, those based on hatred and anger or which result in the harming of others result in rebirth in Hell and those based on ignorance and confusion result in being born as an animal.

Although the short-term aim of some Buddhists may be to gain better rebirths in the human realm or the realms of the Gods by good conduct, this is seen by the more spiritually developed as a limited aim. The far greater aim is to escape from these cycles of rebirths or 'wheel of becoming' known as Samsara by developing the Buddha nature. This ultimate aim is achieved by developing the qualities of wisdom and compassion. As loving and wise qualities are developed through choices in the way we live, successively higher

developed through choices in the way we live, successively higher rebirths are gained and negative qualities that lead to rebirth melt away. The individual is eventually transformed and gains the enlightened or Buddha state.

The enlightened understanding of how the forces of ignorance and desire act, step by step and moment by moment to bind beings to the process of rebirth, were first clearly stated by the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment. Known as the 12 links of dependent origination they form a series of symbolic pictures found around the outer rim of the wheel.^{iv}

Images of the *Wheel of Rebirth* are usually covered with small scenes representing aspects of life and the fates that befall people according to how they live their lives. These symbolic images are used to teach how Karma and the process of rebirth operate.



Om ma ni pad me hum' is one of the most famous Tibetan mantras that Tibetan Buddhists believe invokes the powerful benevolent attention and blessings of the

bodhisattva of compassion. Each syllable relates to qualities of spiritual goodness and is connected with one of the six realms of the Wheel of Rebirth.

^{iv} *Dependent origination* is primarily a teaching tool to understand suffering and cessation of suffering. All twelve links are inter-related and dependent on each other. Each one does not have its own nature. Thus there is no starting point or ending point. They are cyclic phenomena. Each link is a cause on one hand, and an effect on the other.