

## **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BUDDHA**

"Those who imagine the Buddha, who is beyond being described by false statements, are all destroyed by idle fancy. They do not see the Tathagata [Buddha]. What self-nature [= svabhava] is the Tathagata, that self-nature is the world. The Tathagata is without self-nature and the world is without that self-nature." --Nagarjuna, MK 22:15-16 (in McCagney 1997 194-195)

"Therefore there is really no difference between the world of living beings and Buddhas. Hence You [Buddha] are convinced of the identity of yourself and others." --Nagarjuna, CS III:42 (in Lindtner 1982 155)

### **The Life of Buddha**

"At a time which practically corresponded to that of Zoroaster and Confucius, one hundred years before the time of Socrates and five hundred before the birth of Christ, a son was born in the family of a feudal lord in a far corner of the Nepalese Terai. From then on we have his biographical data: the death of his mother [= Maya], his education, his marriage, and the birth of his son. At this time a revulsion against the world came over him and at twenty-nine he left everything--home, riches, family, and so on--to become a begging monk. From then on his quest was the solution to the problem of human destiny. Six years later, after his painful search, as he was sitting under a tree, he felt the truth come to him at sunrise and then he discovered the cure for the world's sufferings. After preaching the new doctrine to five companions, he found that the number of his disciples quickly multiplied, and his word spread. Forty-five years of teaching and traveling throughout the Ganges Valley as a mendicant brought the Master to his Death in a small, obscure town in the same general region as that of his birth. This happened in 543 B.C. according to the Singhalese tradition; about 477 according to the European calculations. This is all that we know, or think we know, about the one who had become the Buddha, the 'Awakened,' or, as the term is usually translated, the 'Enlightened One'." (Foucher 1963 45)

### **The Moralist**

"The Vinaya [= monastic] and Sutra [= scripture] treatises are, above all, collections of moral prescriptions and instructions. There is a great deal of truth in such statements as the following, which are attributed to the Master: 'I only teach that there is suffering and the freedom from suffering'; or again, 'I only teach the retribution of acts.' A well-known quotation makes clear this general law: 'Abstaining from all sin, practicing the good, purifying thought, here is the teaching of Buddhas.'"

"In spite of the fact that each one is responsible for his own salvation and consequently must concentrate his effort on his own life, still we are reminded that 'kindliness is the purification of the heart' and 'doing good is the best way to love one's self.' The older Buddhist doctrine, long before the later one, preached four responsibilities toward fellow beings, that is, all that lives. First, there is 'equanimity,' which implies not simply a feeling of impartiality and disinterest but also complete calm towards the worst affronts. As a consequence, there is to be no resentment and no desire to return evil for evil. Then comes 'compassion' towards all sufferings, which does not exclude trying to alleviate them as one can. The third responsibility is 'joyous participation,'

which means sharing the happiness of others and thus doing away with the ignominious sin of envy. Finally, crowning all, is maitri or metta which is defined both in Sanskrit and Pali as 'the love that a mother or a father and mother bear towards an only son, even though it costs them their life.' This clinches the matter, for that is not a neutral and passive feeling such as some have been prone to condemn. Each true Buddhist must be his own redeemer, atoning for his life by virtue. In accomplishing this he effectively works for universal happiness." (Foucher 1963 251, 253)

### **On Buddha's Personality**

"We could go on at length into a series of pros and cons and conclude that, like the unknowable atman [= self] of the ancient [Hindu] Upanishads, the Predestined One [= Buddha] could be defined only in negative terms, and consequently admit that we could never know the basic make-up of his personality.... Perhaps it is not a mere illusion that the most constant characteristics of his personality were revealed to us in his youth. His noble birth, his training in sports and in intellectual matters, the life of luxury and pleasure that he led until he was almost thirty, determined the lordly quality that remained forever despite the monastic robe. His innate distinction always impressed his visitors....

At all times and everywhere, [his disciple] Sariputra reputedly said, the Buddha was a model of urbanity and politeness. It was due to both his good education and his free intelligence that he scorned the foolish and indecent practices common to the religious sects of his time and that he would have nothing to do with their jealousies and intrigues. His constant concern with good manners and with physical as well as moral cleanliness in his Order can also be traced to his youth. The last sections of the Formulation of Confession are a genuine book of etiquette for the use of monks. Just as he condemned lust, theft, lies, and cheating, he forbade carelessness in dress, the licking of fingers when eating, speaking with a full mouth, and ogling the food in the bowl of one's neighbor. All behavior had to be, above all, 'correct.' And when he announced his determination, which would always remain with him, to adhere to the golden mean [= the middle path], can one not recognize there a manifestation of his innate and refined sense of decorum and fitness?"

"Without doubt he wished to be, and was, loved rather than feared, but his kindly attitude towards suffering humanity had nothing of bleating humanitarianism. His compassion was that of a surgeon towards his patient and it never diluted his severity in necessary interventions. Concerning means of salvation, he was inflexible and may have seemed implacable.... That was only because Sakyamuni's own confidence in his doctrine equaled his self-control. We may then conclude that the Buddha Sakyamuni was a gentleman to his fingertips free from the slightest suggestion of charlatanism and fanaticism as well as endowed with a surpassing strength of mind and perfect serenity. He also was an austere moralist but without excess and considerate of others, an independent and judicious thinker as consistent an enemy of meaningless metaphysics as of vulgar superstitions. He became the founder of a religion completely imbued with a spirit of mercy throughout its secret despair, and was the first leader of men--at least in man's memory--to accuse the selfishness of desire of being the source of evil and hatred. The infallible cure Sakyamuni offered his fellowmen for their worst sufferings was mutual love." (Foucher 1963 254, 256)

### **The Final Decease (Parinirvana)**

"Daylight was soon to come but the Buddha would not see it. He gave [his disciple] Ananda a few more instructions and called his monks together. Did any of them have in their minds any doubts or perplexities concerning the Doctrine or the discipline? Let them hurry and state them before it was too late! After urging them for the third time and receiving silence in answer, the Blessed One said: 'Behold now, brethren, I exhort you, saying, "Decay is inherent in all composite things! Work out your salvation with diligence!"' These were the Tathagata's [= Buddha] last words." (Foucher 1963 237)

### **References**

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