



The Life of the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism

Dominique Side

One of the main scriptural sources for the life story of the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism is the *Lalitavistara Sutra*. The account we find in this Sutra is elaborate and colourful, full of drama and imbued with legend and miracles. It lists twelve Acts of the Buddha, not ten as in Theravada. The extra two Acts are given as the first and second in the list, and they pertain to the idea that Shakyamuni was already enlightened before he took birth as a human, when he was dwelling in the Tushita Heaven. During his human life he simply went through the motions of becoming enlightened, as it were, in order to show us the way. So for Mahayana Buddhists, the Buddha was enlightened from the very moment he was born as Siddhartha.

The two additional Acts of the Buddha are as follows:

1. Dwelling in the Tushita Heaven

According to the Buddhist view of the universe, the Tushita Heaven, or Heaven of the Contented, is a pure celestial realm inhabited by gods and bodhisattvas (advanced followers of the Mahayana path). It is from this realm that all buddhas take birth as humans. Having perfected selfless actions in his previous lives, the being who would become Buddha Shakyamuni took birth as a bodhisattva in the Tushita Heaven where he taught the Dharma to the gods. When the time was right, he resolved to take birth as a human being to teach the Dharma in the human world, and thus determined his birth in the Shakya clan in northern India.

2. Descent from the Tushita Heaven

When the time had come for the bodhisattva to take birth as a human, he gave his final teaching to the gods of the Tushita Heaven and placed his jewelled crown upon the head of the bodhisattva Maitreya. He appointed Maitreya to replace him as the main teacher in the Tushita Heaven and predicted that Maitreya would become the next perfectly enlightened buddha to take birth in the human world.

Buddha nature

Another difference with the Nikaya view is the Mahayana principle of 'buddha nature' which is key to its understanding of the Buddha and of how human beings relate to the Buddha. The significance of the Buddha's life stems from the fact that he was a human being like ourselves, and we can therefore follow in his footsteps. His life story makes us realize that it is possible for us, too, to find liberation from suffering. It may take many lives but it *is* possible; indeed, it also took many lives for the Buddha himself to reach the point when he became a fully enlightened buddha. The important thing is that there is no unbridgeable gap between the Buddha and ourselves.



Mahayana Buddhism develops this point through the theory of 'buddha nature' or *tathagatagarbha*, the potential or seed for enlightenment that exists within every single being, both human and non-human. Just as we can never squeeze oil out of an ordinary stone, in the same way we would never be able to become enlightened if it were not for the fact that we have the seed of enlightenment within us already, and under the right conditions that seed can blossom into full buddhahood. That seed, or potential, is called buddha nature. This is a deeper way of understanding that there is no radical separation, or metaphysical gap, between the Buddha and ourselves.



Windows into Buddhism is licenced under a Creative Commons 4.0 international licence.