



How Buddhists see the Buddha

The significance of the Buddha for Buddhists is quite different from that of Jesus for Christians, or Mohammed for Muslims. Paul Williams explains:

The Buddha is thought by Buddhists to be one who has awakened fully to the final truth of things, and thus freed, liberated, himself once and for all from all form of suffering. He is also one who, out of supreme compassion, has taught others the way to attain liberation themselves. Buddhas are not born that way, and they are certainly not thought to be eternal gods (or God). Once (many lifetimes ago) they were just like you and me. They strove through their own efforts and became Buddhas. A Buddha is superior to the rest of us because he 'knows it as it is'. We, on the other hand, wallow in confusion, in ignorance. Thus we are unhappy and suffer. i

Paul Williams makes the point that it is only convention that leads any book on Buddhism to begin with the life story of the Buddha. If it were necessary to begin that way, it would imply that the story of the Buddha's life is a crucial preliminary for understanding what follows. In some other religions it would indeed be the case that the story of their respective founders is an essential starting point, but this is not the case for Buddhism for the reasons set out below.

Was the Buddha the founder of a new religious teaching?

Buddhists do not consider that the Buddhist teachings were invented by Shakyamuni Buddha. Richard Gombrich presents the Buddhist view:

Outsiders see him as the founder of Buddhism; for Buddhists the matter is slightly more complicated. As they see it, the Truth is eternal, but not always realized. Time has no beginning or end but goes through vast cycles. Every now and again there arises in the world a religious genius, a Buddha, who has the infinite wisdom to comprehend the Truth and the infinite compassion to preach it to the suffering world, so that others too may attain Enlightenment. Gotama [Gautama Skt.] is the most recent teacher in the infinite series of Buddhas. ii

The Dharma is considered an eternal truth that does not belong to anyone in particular. However, if we refer to Buddhism not as a teaching but as a historical development, then it is fair to say that the Buddha was the founder of the religion that began in India.

When the Buddha gives a summary of his teaching in the *Dhammapada*, he makes a point of saying that the principles he is highlighting represent the message of **all** the buddhas, and not only his own. There is therefore a conscious portrayal of Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings as being the continuation of those of previous buddhas, and in essence no different from them.



To do no harm whatsoever,

To cultivate good to perfection,

To tame this mind of ours:

This is the teaching of all the buddhas.

Dhammapada 183

Buddha Shakyamuni is not the only buddha

The historical Buddha whose life we learn is one of many different buddhas who have come, and will come, to teach here on Earth. According to some Buddhist traditions there have been countless buddhas in aeons prior to our current human history, and there will be many more in the future. Some accounts say there will be 1,002 buddhas in this age. The next buddha will be called Maitreya, 'one who embodies loving kindness'. Like Shakyamuni before him, he currently resides in Tushita Heaven until the time comes for him to be born a human being.

There are a number of sacred Buddhist sites in Asia that are explicitly said to be associated with previous buddhas. The magnificent Shwedagon Stupa in Yangon, Myanmar, is said to house relics of the three buddhas who preceded Shakyamuni Buddha, as well as bodily relics of Shakyamuni himself. And the Swayambhunath Stupa in the Kathmandu valley, Nepal, is said to have arisen, according to legend, from a miraculous lotus flower planted on the spot by a previous buddha.

Is the Buddha human or supernatural?

The Buddha declared he was neither divine nor a prophet yet his life story contains many instances of extraordinary powers and events. For Buddhists, these illustrate the qualities and powers that come from enlightenment or from being very close to enlightenment. They are powers that can be developed by anyone who becomes fully awakened.

From Discovering Buddhism by Dominique Side



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i Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, p.22.

ii Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*.