

The Start of the Buddha's Path

Most biographies of the Buddha start with his birth to Queen Māyā in the Lumbini grove of trees, or perhaps his conception, perceived by his mother in a dream as a white elephant entering her right side. But this is just his final birth, the lifetime in which he becomes a *buddha* – someone who is ‘awakened’ – and puts an end to future rebirths. Buddhist tradition took for granted from the outset that the Buddha had many, many lifetimes prior to this. Episodes from his past lives are recounted in “birth stories” (*jātakas*), an important narrative genre that remains popular in Buddhist countries to this day.

Over time, stories of the Buddha's past lives began to be codified into an illustration of the Buddha's path, including his pursuit of key virtues required for buddhahood, known as the “perfections” (Sanskrit *pāramitā*; Pali *pāramī*). More than just the path of one buddha, the accounts became an illustration of a path to buddhahood that is open to others. Indeed, the understanding that “our Buddha” (the most recent; the one whose teachings still live in the world today) is one of many buddhas, can be found in the earliest scriptures. Long lineages of buddhas are believed to extend into the past, with the promise of future buddhas too.

In most of the past-life accounts we have of our Buddha, when he is a buddha-to-be (*bodhisattva* in Sanskrit, or *bodhisatta* in Pali), he is doing the best he can in a world devoid of Buddhist teachings and institutions. This is because the role of a buddha is to realise the truth and to teach it to others, founding a community of followers. If the world is ready for another buddha, then by definition there is no Buddhism around already. And then the coming of a new buddha is an event of truly cosmic significance.

However, in some of the Buddha's past lifetimes he meets a buddha of the past, and such stories become an important way of exploring his relationship to the lineage of previous buddhas. The idea developed that a *bodhisattva*/*bodhisatta* begins his path to buddhahood through a particularly powerful encounter with a buddha, which prompts a vow or aspiration, and is in turn confirmed by the all-seeing buddha as destined to come true.

Various accounts of our Buddha's first vow are found in Buddhist scriptures. This example is unique to the Theravāda tradition, preserved in Pali. As such, it keeps to Theravāda perspectives: that there can only be the influence or teachings of one buddha at a time in the world, and that the path to buddhahood is exceptionally rare and special. However, the story also contains an idea that we tend to associate more with Mahāyāna literature, namely that becoming a *bodhisatt(v)a* involves a deliberate turning away from the easier path of an *arhat* or liberated disciple of a buddha. The text from which this account comes, the *Buddhavaṃsa*, is a late addition to the Theravāda scriptures, and offers the first systematic account of how the Buddha's path began.

Sumedha meets Dīpaṅkara Buddha

[The Buddha narrates:] A hundred thousand aeons and four incalculable ages ago, there was a city named Amara. In that city I lived as a brahmin named Sumedha. I was wealthy and well-educated, but I was dissatisfied with life, reflecting: “Rebirth is suffering, as is the breaking up of the body. I am subject to birth, ageing and sickness. I should seek out the peace that is deathless.” I left the city for the Himalayas, and lived in a leaf hut, eating only wild fruits. I practised meditation and within a week I developed supernormal powers.

Meanwhile a buddha named Dīpaṅkara had arisen in the world. Absorbed in my meditation, I missed the signs of his birth, awakening and teaching. When I finished my meditation, I flew through the sky and saw that the people were joyously clearing the road. I descended and asked them why. They replied, “A buddha has arisen in the world, named Dīpaṅkara, and we are clearing the road for him.”

When I heard the word “buddha” I was overjoyed. Saying “buddha! buddha!” I reflected: “Here I will sow seeds. Let not the opportunity pass.” I volunteered to clear a portion of the road, but before I could finish, that great sage Dīpaṅkara arrived, with his retinue of four hundred thousand liberated disciples. Gods and humans alike paid him homage, playing musical instruments and throwing flowers in all directions.

As Dīpaṅkara approached the patch of road that I had yet to clear, I threw myself to the ground and spread out my clothes and my long hair to prevent him having to step in the mud. Lying there I thought:

“If I wished to, I could burn up my defilements today.
But what is the use of realising the Dhamma here while I am unknown?
Having achieved omniscience, I will become a buddha in the world with its gods.
What is the use of me crossing over alone, a man aware of my strength?
Having reached omniscience, I will ferry across the world with its gods.
Through this, my act of service for the best of men,
I will reach omniscience, and cause many people to cross over.
Cutting off the flood of *samsāra*, destroying the three becoming,
I will board the ship of Dhamma, and ferry across the world with its gods.”

And it is said:

The human state, male-ness, the right conditions, seeing a teacher,
Renunciation, attainment of the necessary qualities, an act of service, strong will;
Through the combination of these eight things the aspiration succeeds.

Dīpaṅkara, knower of the world, stood near my head and spoke to the people:

“Do you see this very severe ascetic, this matted hair ascetic?
Innumerable aeons from now he will become a buddha in the world!”

The people rejoiced at this, shouting, “This is a sprouted buddha-seed! If we should fail to free ourselves during the time of the current buddha, we will surely encounter this one in the future! It will be just like people who fail to cross the river in one spot, find another chance to cross further down the bank!”

After Dīpaṅkara and his retinue departed, I sat up, cross-legged, and rejoiced at what had happened. Divine music sounded, flowers rained down on me from the heavens, and the air was fragrant. I reflected that the word of a buddha can never be false, and so surely I was going to become a buddha in the future.

What would be needed in order to become a buddha? I reflected on this question, and saw the perfection of giving – the need to give completely like an overturned jar of water gives all its contents.

I saw the second perfection, the perfection of morality, which must be protected at all times. I saw the perfection of renunciation, the need to see all forms of rebirth as like a prison, and to seek only freedom.

I saw the fourth perfection, wisdom, and the fifth, vigour. Only by seeking full understanding, and energetically pursuing the path, would I become a buddha.

I saw the sixth perfection, of forbearance: as the earth endures everything that is thrown upon it without signs of approval or disapproval, so must I be. I saw the seventh perfection, of truth, and the need for honesty. I saw the eighth perfection, of resolve, and the need for the stability of a mountain.

I saw the ninth perfection, of loving-kindness: just as water refreshes people good and evil alike, so too must I love all, friend and enemy. And I saw the tenth perfection, that of equanimity: the need to remain unmoved in the face of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. These ten perfections, I saw, are the whole path to buddhahood. As I reflected upon them, the earth quaked.

Questions for discussion

Comprehension of the source

What has Sumedha already achieved before he even meets Dīpaṅkara?

Sumedha declares that he is already able to achieve liberation, as an *arhat*. Why does he choose not to do that?

Why are the people so happy to meet a buddha?

Why is Sumedha so excited even by the word 'buddha'? What does it mean to him?

Why does Sumedha want to help the gods, as well as the rest of the world? Why do they need his help?

What will Sumedha have to do in order to become a buddha?

The story uses the popular Buddhist imagery of a river/ocean being like samsara, while crossing over is the achievement of nirvana. Can you find all the occurrences of this image?

What is the boat across, and who drives it?

Application to other contexts

Are there times when you have had to choose between an immediate reward and a bigger reward later on, which required more effort? How did you decide what to do?

Do you think the ten perfections are specifically Buddhist values? How do they relate to other sets of ideals or values that you have studied?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

What is the difference between a buddha and an *arhat*?

According to the Theravāda tradition, which this source belongs to, one of the criteria for a successful vow to buddhahood is being male. How does this relate to bigger questions about gender equality in Buddhism? Is there a difference between this Theravāda tradition and, say, Mahāyāna teachings about women and the bodhisattva path?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is taken from the *Buddhavamsa* ("Lineage of Buddhas"), a Pali text included in the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Theravāda scriptures. For the full text see

<https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/buddhavamsa-2/>

The version here includes some key verses directly translated but the prose parts are summary translation.