

Who Was the Buddha?

Part II: Enlightenment to Parinibbana

Last week we talked about the life of the Buddha up to his enlightenment, which we think happened at about age 35. To recap, Siddhattha Gotama was born a prince in northeastern India. He became disillusioned with his luxurious palace lifestyle and decided to leave home to become a wandering mendicant. He studied under two meditation teachers, mastering both of their methods, but knowing that these methods alone could not bring about the end of suffering that he sought. He then tried the path of extreme asceticism, scarcely eating and practicing painful meditative exercises. Finding this path unproductive, he ate some food and began practicing a more moderate form of meditation. Ultimately, this led him to the understanding of the end of suffering as described in the Four Noble Truths. At this point, he became the Buddha, or, as he usually called himself, the Tathagata.

The Decision to Teach

At first, the Buddha was unsure whether to attempt teaching what he had realized.

This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, is excited by attachment, enjoys attachment. For a generation delighting in attachment, excited by attachment, enjoying attachment, [this Dhamma is] hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding. And if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me. (SN 6.1)

According to the suttas, at this point a deity named Brahma Sahampati appeared to the Buddha and begged him to teach the Dhamma, saying that there existed those “with only a little dust in their eyes” who would understand the Dhamma. The Buddha surveyed the world with his awareness, saw that this was true, and made the decision to teach.

As he contemplated how to begin his teaching career, he thought first of his former teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. Sadly, both of them had died. His next thought was of a group of five monks who had followed him during his period of extreme asceticism. These monks had left him in disgust when he decided to eat. Still, when he returned to them, they recognized his achievement and became the

audience for his first sermon, which described the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.

During the course of this sermon, one of the monks, Kondañña, attained enlightenment, becoming the first to do so under the Buddha's teaching. During the Buddha's second sermon, the other four monks attained enlightenment, forming the beginning of the Buddhist sangha.

The Buddha's teaching career was long (45 years) and successful. Like the other shramana sects, the Buddha's sangha existed outside the caste system, so he drew followers from many different backgrounds, from kings down to the "untouchables." There is a section of the Pali canon known as the Theragatha, which is composed of verses by various monks recounting their experiences. I'd like to read from one of these about the experience of an untouchable being accepted into the sangha.

In a lowly family I was born, poor, with next to no food. My work was degrading: I gathered the spoiled, the withered flowers from shrines and threw them away. People found me disgusting, despised me, disparaged me. Lowering my heart, I showed reverence to many. Then I saw the One Self-awakened, arrayed with a squadron of monks, the Great Hero, entering the city, supreme, of the Magadhans. Throwing down my carrying pole, I approached him to do reverence. He — the supreme man — stood still out of sympathy just for me. After paying homage to the feet of the teacher, I stood to one side & requested the Going Forth from him, supreme among all living beings. The compassionate Teacher, sympathetic to all the world, said: "Come, monk." That was my formal Acceptance. (Thag. 2.2)

("Going Forth" is a common phrase used in the *suttas* to refer to leaving one's normal, household life and becoming a monk.)

Angulimala

The *suttas* record one incident that provides a particularly impressive instance of the Buddha's ability to attract followers. Everyone enjoys a good challenge, but I think that most of us, were we trying to recruit followers, would pass on the guy wearing a necklace of human fingers. Not so the Buddha.

Angulimala is described as follows:

brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He has turned villages into non-villages, towns into non-towns, settled countryside into unsettled countryside. Having repeatedly killed human beings, he wears a garland made of fingers. (MN 86)

While staying near the town of Savatthi, the Buddha set off down the road to where Angulimala was known to stay. He was repeatedly warned by the people he passed that “groups of ten, twenty, thirty, & forty men have gone along that road, and even they have fallen into Angulimala's hands,” but he kept going. Angulimala, predictably, attacked the Buddha, or tried to, but he found himself unable to catch the Buddha, despite the fact that Angulimala was running and the Buddha was walking at a normal pace. Angulimala calls out for the Buddha to stop. The Buddha's reply: “*I have stopped, Angulimala. You stop.*” Intrigued, Angulimala asked the meaning of this riddle. The Buddha recited the following verse: “I have stopped, Angulimala, once & for all, having cast off violence toward all living beings. You, though, are unrestrained toward beings. That's how I've stopped and you haven't.” On the spot, Angulimala threw away his weapons (oddly, it isn't mentioned whether he threw away the necklace) and asked the Buddha to accept him as a monk.

Meanwhile, King Pasenadi, a lay follower of the Buddha, had put together a militia of 500 men to kill Angulimala. The Buddha saw the company approaching and asked what they were doing. On learning that they were after Angulimala, he asked the King, “Great king, suppose you were to see Angulimala with his hair & beard shaved off, wearing the ochre robe, having gone forth from the home life into homelessness, refraining from killing living beings, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from telling lies, living the holy life on one meal a day, virtuous & of fine character: what would you do to him?”

The King answered that he would honor and offer support to Angulimala in such a case, but, of course, found this unlikely. The Buddha then presented the newly ordained Angulimala to the King. The King was true to his word, and after recovering from his initial terror, told Angulimala that he would provide him with robes, almsfood, lodging, and medicine.

Angulimala eventually became an arahant, but apparently never became very popular with those outside the sangha. We are told of one occurrence when he was going on his almsround and the residents of Savatthi pelted him with stones and potsherds. On seeing Angulimala beaten up, the Buddha told him: “Bear with it, brahman! Bear with it! The fruit of the kamma that would have burned you in hell for many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years, you are now experiencing in the here-&-now!”

Growth of the Sangha

Within the sangha, the Buddha had a strong “inner circle” of very accomplished monks. Chief among these were Sariputta and Moggallana. Sariputta was especially known for his wisdom. In fact, some of Sariputta's sermons are included in the Pali Canon alongside those of the Buddha. Another very significant figure in the early sangha was Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant. Although he didn't attain enlightenment until after the Buddha's death, Ananda was known for

his prodigious memory. It is he who served as the living repository of the Buddha's teachings after the Buddha had died. Many suttas begin with the words "*Evam me sutam*" ("thus have I heard"). The "I" in that statement is Ananda.

From what we can tell, the sangha enjoyed a good reputation. Some of the other shramana sects were known for barely eating anything, never cutting their hair, and not wearing clothes. These practices no doubt produced some scary looking people. The Buddha, on the other hand, maintained a well-ordered and hygienic community. His followers were known for looking healthy and acting civilized. In fact, the canon relates how it was the calm and dignified appearance of a Buddhist monk that first attracted Sariputta's attention to the sangha.

The Buddha's teachings included mundane concerns such as social skills and societal duties. This helped to ensure that the sangha not only attracted spiritual seekers, but also earned the admiration of the laity.

Lay followers of the Buddha included many kings, nobles, and wealthy members of the emerging merchant class. This last group included Anathapindika, who often provided food and shelter for the sangha. The location of many suttas is given as "Jeta's Grove," which was a park that Anathapindika purchased and donated to the sangha. King Bimbisara of Maghada was also an important supporter of the sangha and figures heavily in the suttas.

Origin of the Bhikkhuni Sangha

Last week some questions came up about women in Buddhism, so I thought I'd talk briefly about the origin of the bhikkhuni sangha or the order of nuns. At one point during the time of the Buddha's teaching ministry, his father became very ill. The Buddha heard about this and made a visit home. The Buddha was able to see his father before he died, and tradition has it that Siddhodana died an arahant. Although I've had trouble finding a canonical reference for this, tradition has it that it was at this time that the Buddha taught the Dhamma to his son Rahula, who then became a monk.

If you'll recall from last week, Gotama's mother died while he was still young. He was raised by his aunt, Mahapajapati Gotami. After Siddhodana died, Gotami came to him and asked to be allowed to join the sangha. The Buddha refused. Gotami then shaved off her hair and put on the traditional yellow robe. She followed the Buddha to his next destination with a group of Sakyan women. She arrived tired, dusty, and with swollen feet. Ananda found her in this state and learned that she still desired to join the sangha. Ananda asked the Buddha on her behalf and was also refused, but kept at it. He asked the Buddha if women were capable of becoming arahants. The Buddha answered that they were. Ananda then reminded the Buddha of the kindness that Gotami had shown him as his foster mother and the Buddha finally relented, but only if Gotami would accept eight conditions. I won't go

into detail about these, but generally they placed the bhikkhuni sangha on a lower footing than the bhikkhu sangha. For instance, even a very experienced nun was considered inferior in rank to a newly admitted monk. Also, nuns were not allowed to address discourses to monks. Gotami gladly accepted the conditions and became the first bhikkhuni. Later, Yasodhara, the Buddha's wife, also became a bhikkhuni.

According to the suttas, the Buddha wasn't very happy about this. He told Ananda that because women had been admitted to the sangha, the "holy life" would last for a shorter period of time than it would have otherwise. It is unclear whether he meant the Dhamma as a whole or the bhikkhuni sangha in particular.

This story is an uncomfortable one for modern Buddhists. Generally speaking, the Buddha didn't seem interested in distinctions between persons. He didn't care about things like race or caste, so why would he care about gender? Honestly, we just don't know. It is, of course, possible that this tale is a later addition and doesn't reflect the Buddha's true intent.

Devadatta

Every good story needs a villain, even in the Buddhist world. The official bad guy of Buddhism is Devadatta, the Buddha's jealous cousin, who wanted to take control of the sangha. Devadatta's plot began when the Buddha was about 70 years old. In a public gathering, he feigned sympathy for the Buddha's age and suggested that he relinquish control of the sangha to him. The Buddha's response: "I would not hand over the sangha of bhikkhus to Sariputta and Moggallana. How should I do so to such a wastrel, a clod of spittle, as you?" (While the Buddha was, of course, known for his compassion, the suttas include several instances where he just called it like he saw it.) Following this incident, Sariputta, at the Buddha's direction, publicly denounced Devadatta, specifying that Devadatta's acts should no longer be interpreted as representative of the sangha.

Like the Buddha, Devadatta was well aware of the benefits of establishing good relationships with secular powers. He cultivated the trust of Prince Ajatasattu, the son of King Bimbisara. He encouraged the Prince to kill his father and become king, also asking him to kill the Buddha so that Devadatta could become head of the sangha. So the Prince sent a man to kill the Buddha. He also sent men to ambush the man who killed the Buddha and kill him. When the would-be assassin encountered the Buddha, he found himself unable to complete his task. He asked forgiveness of the Buddha, received teachings, and became a lay follower. Then Buddha then warned him to return by a different path, so as to avoid the men waiting in ambush. The ambushers got impatient and decided to see what was keeping the assassin. They met the Buddha as well and also became followers.

The assassin reported back to Devadatta that he had been unable to kill the Buddha, so Devadatta decided to do it himself. While the Buddha was doing walking

meditation in a rocky area, Devadatta pushed a boulder down toward the Buddha. He missed, but two shards of stone injured the Buddha's foot. Devadatta's next attempt involved loosing an untamed elephant to attack the Buddha. The Buddha advised the elephant that it was unwise to attack an enlightened one and the elephant retreated.

At this point, Devadatta seemed to give up on the idea of killing the Buddha. His next strategy was to create a schism within the sangha, thereby gaining his own band of followers. The way in which he did this was very smart: he played the "holier-than-thou" game. He came up with a list of five things that he thought a good monk should do, but which he knew that the Buddha would not require of the entire sangha. These included:

1. living only in the forest and not in villages
2. eating only food collected on alms rounds and not accepting invitations to meals
3. wearing only robes made from cast-off cloth
4. living only outdoors, with no built shelter
5. eating only vegetarian food

He asked the Buddha to make these requirements for the bhikkhus. As predicted, the Buddha refused. Knowing that people of the time associated ascetic practices with holiness, Devadatta spread this around, making it sound as if the Buddha were a lax teacher, while Devadatta himself taught a truer and stricter path. A number of monks (mostly new monks) fell for this and left the Buddha's sangha to become followers of Devadatta.

The Buddha felt great pity for the new monks who had been lured away by Devadatta, so he sent Sariputta and Moggallana to rescue them. The two disciples approached Devadatta's "sangha" while Devadatta was giving a Dhamma talk. Devadatta saw them coming and apparently believed that they were coming to join his faction. He welcomed them, and once he was finished speaking, he stupidly offered Sariputta and Moggallana the opportunity to address the assembly. Devadatta's back was hurting, so he lay down and fell asleep. While Devadatta slept, Sariputta and Moggallana addressed the company and the entire group followed them back to rejoin the true sangha.

This is the last that we hear of Devadatta in the canon, although legend has it that later the earth opened up and swallowed him.

Parinibbana

The last period of the Buddha's life is recorded in a very long text known as the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. (Aside: this sutta also contains an account of the conflict between the aforementioned Ajatasattu, who at this point was king, having killed his

father, and his uncle, who remained loyal to Bimbisara's memory. But that's another story.)

At one point, the Buddha developed a sickness, but willed himself to recover. On seeing his master well again, Ananda commented that it was good that he was well again so that he could give final instructions to the bhikkhus. The Buddha gave the following reply:

What more does the community of bhikkhus expect from me, Ananda? I have set forth the Dhamma without making any distinction of esoteric and exoteric doctrine; there is nothing, Ananda, with regard to the teachings that the Tathagata holds to the last with the closed fist of a teacher who keeps some things back. Whosoever may think that it is he who should lead the community of bhikkhus, or that the community depends upon him, it is such a one that would have to give last instructions respecting them. But, Ananda, the Tathagata has no such idea. So what instructions should he have to give respecting the community of bhikkhus?

Now I am frail, Ananda, old, aged, far gone in years. This is my eightieth year, and my life is spent. Even as an old cart, Ananda, is held together with much difficulty, so the body of the Tathagata is kept going only with supports. ...

Therefore, Ananda, be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge. (DN 16)

This is a very famous passage and establishes the Dhamma itself as the ultimate authority, not any human teacher. The Buddha goes on to explain what he means by being an island, but that will have to be another talk.

Still in his 80th year, the Buddha announced to the bhikkhus that he would die:

So, bhikkhus, I exhort you: All compounded things are subject to vanish. Strive with earnestness. The time of the Tathagata's Parinibbana is near. Three months hence the Tathagata will utterly pass away. (DN 16)

Three months later, the Buddha arrived at a town called Pava and accepted a dinner invitation from Cunda the Metalworker. He arrived, as was customary, with a number of bhikkhus. Cunda had prepared a meal including a dish called *sukara-maddava*, the actual nature of which is debated. "Sukara" means pig and "maddava" means "tender" or "delicate." Some people believe it was pork (i.e., "the tender parts of a pig"), others insist that it must refer to a food which is "a delicacy for pigs," perhaps a truffle or some kind of root. The Buddha instructed Cunda that he may serve all the other dishes to the monks, but only the Buddha would eat the *sukara-*

maddava. He further directed that the leftovers of that dish be buried in a pit. After the meal, the Buddha suffered a severe sickness, presumably food poisoning, from which he never recovered.

The Buddha exhibited a great deal of sensitivity to his followers during the time leading up to his death. In fact, many of the most “human” moments that we know of in the Buddha’s life come from the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. I’d like to share a few passages that I find particularly beautiful.

Ananda, perhaps more than anyone else, was very upset at the thought of the Buddha’s death, both because of his personal attachment to the Buddha and because Ananda himself was not yet an arahant. In response to Ananda’s grief, the Buddha said the following:

Enough, Ananda! Do not grieve, do not lament! For have I not taught from the very beginning that with all that is dear and beloved there must be change, separation, and severance? Of that which is born, come into being, compounded, and subject to decay, how can one say: 'May it not come to dissolution!?' There can be no such state of things. Now for a long time, Ananda, you have served the Tathagata with loving-kindness in deed, word, and thought, graciously, pleasantly, with a whole heart and beyond measure. Great good have you gathered, Ananda! Now you should put forth energy, and soon you too will be free from the taints. (DN 16)

A similar sensitivity was in evidence during the Buddha’s final address to the sangha:

Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus, saying: "It may be, bhikkhus, that one of you is in doubt or perplexity as to the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, the path or the practice. Then question, bhikkhus! Do not be given to remorse later on with the thought: 'The Master was with us face to face, yet face to face we failed to ask him.'"

Then the Blessed One said to them: "It may be, bhikkhus, out of respect for the Master that you ask no questions. Then, bhikkhus, let friend communicate it to friend." Yet still the bhikkhus were silent.

And the Venerable Ananda spoke to the Blessed One, saying: "Marvellous it is, O Lord, most wonderful it is! This faith I have in the community of bhikkhus, that not even one bhikkhu is in doubt or perplexity as to the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, the path or the practice."

"Out of faith, Ananda, you speak thus. But here, Ananda, the Tathagata knows for certain that among this community of bhikkhus there is not even one bhikkhu who is in doubt or perplexity as to the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, the path or the practice. For, Ananda, among

these five hundred bhikkhus even the lowest is a stream-enterer, secure from downfall, assured, and bound for enlightenment."

And the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus, saying: "Behold now, bhikkhus, I exhort you: All compounded things are subject to vanish. Strive with earnestness!"

This was the last word of the Tathagata. (DN 16)

The Buddha then entered a state of profound concentration and passed away.

The question of what it means when a Buddha passes away is one that has engaged philosophers for a long time. Interestingly, this is a question that the Buddha himself declined to answer. Ultimately, this question leads to the question of the nature of a Buddha, which is Chris's topic for next week.