The Buddha
You Never Knew

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Essays on The Buddha

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According to the most ancient sources, several months after the Buddha passed away, 500 monks, all of them *arahats*, met together in Rajagaha and held what is usually called the First Council (*pathama sangiti*). The purpose of convening this council was to make sure that what the Buddha had taught during the previous 45 years would not be forgotten. The *arahats* and probably many others too, believed that the Buddha's Dhamma was too precious, too important to be confused or forgotten. It had done so much for them, leading them to Awakening (*Bodhi*), that they wanted to make sure that others, at that time and forever after, would have the chance of attaining the freedom and peace of Nirvana too. It is likely that the *arahats* did not preserve everything the Buddha had said, because he had repeated the same thing many times, but they did preserve what they judged to be the essentials. Although there is no specific record of it, it is clear that some information was added to the Tipitaka later. For example, the Mathura Sutta, a discourse by Anuruddha specifically says that it was delivered sometime after the Buddha's passing. Some of the poems in the Theragatha and Therigatha were composed by monks and nuns at least two or three generations after the Buddha, and one is said to have been spoken by Asoka's son. The Vinaya includes an account of the Second Council which took place about a hundred years after the Buddha's passing. But more than that, the language, style and contents of some books in the less important Khuddaka Nikaya indicate that they may date from several hundred years after the Buddha. Although they are not attributed to the Buddha or his direct disciples these books are considered authoritative. However, we can say with a high degree of confidence that the core material in the Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta, and Anguttara Nikayas, and in books such as the Sutta Nipata, Dhammapada, Udana, Itivuttaka, etc. accurately reflects what the Buddha taught. It is the earliest and most authentic record we have of his life and teaching. The *arahats* who participated in the First Council preserved what they thought was the essentials of the Buddha's Dhamma.

Thus the Tipitaka is important for what it has in it, but it is also important for what it does not have in it. And what the Tipitaka does not have in it will probably surprise most Buddhists. In fact, it might shock them. In this article I will discuss, not what it says about the Buddha but on what it does not say about him.

Many Buddhists have only a rudimentary knowledge of the Dhamma. But even they probably know the main points of the Buddha's life. Even many non-Buddhists know it. It is sketched in text books and encyclopaedias, it is celebrated in song and film, it is taught in thousands of *daham pasals* (Sunday schools), and incidents from it are depicted on temple walls and in Vesak cards. But what very few people know and what may astonish them, is that almost none of the well-known and beloved incidents in the Buddha's biography are found in the Tipitaka. Here are some examples of this.

His Father. The Buddha's father was Suddhodana, a name meaning 'pure rice'. It is always said that Suddhodana was a king of the Sakyans and depictions of him always show him in regal attire, sometimes sitting on a throne, wearing a crown, or residing in a palace. Despite this, nowhere in the Tipitaka is the Buddha called a prince (*raja kumara*), is he or his father said to live in a palace, and only once in the whole of the Tipitaka is his father called *raja*, a word usually translated as king. In reality, in the 5th century BCE the word *raja* almost certainly did not mean king in the sense the word is understood today, but a ruler, or as we might say, chief. Even in the very places where one would expect the Buddha to refer to his father as a king he did not do so. For example, when asked by King Bimbisara about his family and his birth, the Buddha simply replied that he was from a Sakyan family (Sn.322-4).

It is known that the Sakyans had a body of men called "*raja* makers" (*raja kattaro*). It seems almost certain that this body was made up of Sakyan elders and elected someone to be their leader either for a set period or for as long as he had their confidence. Therefore, it would be more correct to refer to Suddhodana as a chief rather than a king. Thus we can say that while the Buddha was almost certainly from a patrician or ruling class family he was not royalty. It is also worth noting that Suddhodana is only referred to three

times in the whole of the Tipitaka, once in the Sutta Nipata, once in the Digha Nikaya and once in the Vinaya.

Maha Maya's Dream. Just as everyone believes that the Buddha's father was a king and he was a prince, they also believe that his mother dreamed of a white elephant around the time he was conceived. This may have happened, but if it did the *arahats* of the First Council did not mention it because it occurs nowhere in the Tipitaka.

Name. Throughout the Tipitaka the Buddha is referred to or addressed as Gotama, good Gotama or ascetic Gotama, as Tathagata, occasionally as Kinsman on the Sun (*Adiccabhandu*), a reference to the Sakyan Adicca linage, and once as the Sakyan Sage (*Sakyamuni*). Gotama is a clan name meaning 'best cow' and reflects an earlier time in India when having many cattle was a measure of wealth and a source of pride. But interestingly, never once is the Buddha ever called Siddhattha Gotama. In fact, the name Siddhattha occur nowhere in the Tipitaka except in the Apadana, one of the latest works added to the Tipitaka. It may well have been the Buddha's given name but it gets no mention in the earliest records.

Asita's Prediction. According to the Sutta Nipata, when the *devas* told the hermit Asita that a special child had been born in Kapilavatthu he went there to see it. Suddhodana welcomed him and gave him the baby to hold. Being accomplished in the art of "signs and mantras" he examined the boy and proclaimed that he would attain complete Awakening, reach "the ultimate purified vision" and proclaim the Truth "out of compassion of the many" (*bahujana hitanukampa*). Then tears welled up in Asita's eyes. Noticing this and alarmed by it, Suddhodana asked him if he had foreseen some misfortune in the boy's future. The sage replied that he was sad because he knew that he would pass away before this all happened and he would be unable to witness it.

The later elaborations of this Asita story, and there are several of them, each more detailed than the earlier ones, often say that Asita predicted that the baby would become either a universal monarch (*cakkavatti*) or a fully enlightened sage (*Buddha*). This 'either' 'or' prediction is not mentioned the Tipitaka account.

Youth and Marriage. We are told that the young Gotama grew up into a virile and handsome young man. When the time came for him to be married he participated in a competition in the manly arts and won the hand of a charming young maiden named Yasodhara, and the two were married. Of course there is nothing unbelievable about this story, it is exactly what would have been usual for a young man at that time, but it gets no mention in the Tipitaka. We know that Gotama was married because there are several references to his son Rahula. But the name Yasodhara does not occur even once in the Tipitaka. Gotama's wife, whatever her name was, is only ever referred to as "Rahula's mother" (*Rahula mata*).

Young Gotama and the Goose. Surely the loveliest story told about the young Gotama, indeed one of the loveliest from any religious tradition, is the one about him, Devadatta and the goose. Once, while walking through a garden, young Gotama saw a goose fall from the sky with an arrow lodged in its wing. He gently nestled the bird in his lap, extracted the arrow and anointed the wound with oil and honey. Soon afterwards, his cousin Devadatta sent a message saying he had shot the bird and demanded its return to him. Gotama sent a reply saying: "If the goose was dead, I would return it forthwith but as it is still alive, you have no right to it." Devadatta sent a second message arguing that it was his skill that had downed the goose and as such, it belonged to him. Again, Gotama refused to give him the bird and asked that an assembly of wise men be called to settle the dispute. This was done and after discussing the matter for some time, the most senior of the wise men delivered his opinion, saying: "The living belongs to he who cherishes and preserves life, not to he who tries to destroy life." The assembly agreed with this and Gotama was allowed to keep the goose.

It is a great story! But where does it come from? It's not in the Tipitaka, it's not in the commentaries, and it's not in the sub-commentaries. In fact, it is not to be found in any Pali literature. It comes from a Mahayana text called the *Abhiniskramana Sutra* composed around the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD, seven or eight hundred years after the Buddha. This work was translated into English and published in 1876. Some English-educated Sinhalese Buddhists must have read the story, been charmed by it, and gradually it got incorporated into the popular understanding of the Buddha's life. This is a good example of how legends from one tradition grow and get absorbed into other traditions, even in modern times.

Under the Jambu Tree. At some point during his youth Gotama said that as he sat in the shade of a jambu tree (not the Sri Lankan jambu, but the Indian tree *Syzygium cumini*) he spontaneously fell into the first *jhania*, a meditative state. Years later, after giving up the practice of self-mortification, as he sat under the Bodhi tree he remembered this incident, he cultivated the *jhanas* again, and this helped him attain Awakening. If you ask any child who attends a *daham pasal* what the young Gotama was watching as he sat under the jambu tree they will tell you – he was watching his father doing the first ceremonial ploughing of the year, what in Sri Lanka used to be called the *vapmangala*. But the Buddha does not mention this at all, he merely says he was watching "my Sakyan father work". His father might have been weeding the fields, supervising the harvest, the chopping down of trees, or a range of other tasks. So why did the general and non-specific "work" get transformed into "ceremonial ploughing"? Because later tradition came to believe that Gotama's father was a king and kings do not milk cows or supervise agricultural work. They do regal and ritually important tasks such as the first ceremonial ploughing of the year. This is a fascinating example where one legend (Suddhodana was a king) has required the creation of another (he was doing the ceremonial ploughing).

The Four Signs. Probably the most iconic story told about the Buddha's life is the so-called Four Signs (*catu nimitta*). Supposedly as Gotama was driven through the streets of Kapilavatthu by his faithful charioteer Channa he encountered a man decrepit with age, a sick person, a dead body being taken for cremation and lastly a wandering ascetic, a monk. Having been sheltered from the ugly realities of life and never having seen such things before, he was profoundly shocked by this. It was this, so the story goes, that triggered Gotama's determination to renounce his life of privilege and go in search of the state beyond aging, sickness and death. The Four Signs is a dramatic, powerful and poignant story and it is justly famous. It lends itself wonderfully to depiction in art. But sadly it does not come from the Tipitaka. There the Buddha merely says that it was contemplating the fact that he would be subject to old age, sickness and eventually death that motivated him to renounce the world.

Stealing away at Night. It is said that Gotama's father confined him to a luxurious palace provided with every imaginable pleasure in order to prevent him from ever renouncing the world. But after Gotama decided that he would do exactly that he stole out of the palace in the dead of night so that no one would know, having one last look at his wife and new-born son as he went. Again, none of this appears in the Tipitaka. In fact, the Buddha distinctly says that he left his home "despite the weeping and wailing of my parents". This suggests that there was some sort of argument with his parents, and certainly that his leaving took place with their full knowledge, and probably during the daytime.

Encountering the Sleeping Dancing Girls. Another thing that is said to have happened to the Buddha the night he renounced the world concerns the women in his palace. As he walked through the silent palace he came across the female dancing girls and musicians asleep in unseemly positions; their hair dishevelled, their clothes unkempt, their makeup smudged and some with saliva dribbling from their mouths. The contrast between how they looked and presented themselves to him during the day and what they looked like while asleep, brought home to Gotama the difference between appearance and the reality in much of life, and it disgusted him. Again this is a powerful story and it is in the Tipitaka. But extraordinarily, it is not said to have happened to the Gotama but to the wealthy young man Yasa. So an experience that happened to one person has been grafted onto the Buddha's biography.

The Bodhi Tree. We will look at one last detail thought to have a significant presence in the Tipitaka but which actually does not have. All over the Buddhist world Bodhi trees are revered as being special because one of them, growing in Bodh Gaya, then known as Uruvela, sheltered the Buddha under its spreading boughs on the night he attained Awakening. There are numerous stories about the Bodhi Tree and of course a branch of it was brought to Sri Lanka by Ven. Sanghamitta where it has been revered ever since. Considering the attention given to this tree one would expect it to find a special place in the Tipitaka. But it does not. Astonishingly, the Bodhi Tree only gets two brief mentions in the Tipitaka, once in the Digha Nikaya and once in the Udana (repeated in the Vinaya). Even the famous story about the Buddha sitting staring at the Bodhi Tree for a week without blinking is only to be found in the commentaries.

These examples, of which quite a few others could be added, leave the Buddha's biography stripped of much that the average Buddhist is familiar with, and which is iconic. This does not mean that these events never happened or are not true. But if they did happen and were true, clearly the *arahats* of the First Council did not consider them significant enough to be remembered and included in the canon of sacred scriptures. But why? Why discard stories that are so meaningful and memorable, and illustrate aspects of the Dhamma in ways that make them understandable, alive and compelling? One possible explanation is that these details were known but ignored. A much more likely explanation is that they are legends that grew up in the centuries after the Buddha's passing and after the first and second Councils. It seems that the *arahats* and other monks and nuns were deeply concerned with what the Buddha had to say about how to achieve Awakening, but had little or no interest in his life before he became a monk.

This does not mean that these and the other wonderful stories about the Buddha's life need to be considered "just legends" and dismissed. They have added colour and drama to millions of sermons, they are a testament to the creative imagination of the ancient Buddhists, and they almost certainly came into being due to a devotional desire to know more about one of the most significant individuals in history. But as Buddhism has to contend with modernity and alternative religions which seek to displace it, it is crucial that Buddhists know their religion better – know what is fact and what is tradition, what is reality and what is legend, and particularly what the Tipitaka actually says.