

The Birth of the Buddha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 18:05

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — honour to the Blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

We're using this book, *In the Buddha's Words* by Bhikkhu Bodhi, to investigate the discourses. We've moved into the chapter concerning the Buddha himself. Last week we discussed how people see the Buddha, either as a humanist who came up with a wonderful ethical code to make us all happy, right over to as far as a supra-human being who's capable of enormous and amazing things. There's a vast way that we can interpret the Buddha.

Here, of course, in the West, we tend to see him much more as a human being who discovered a path. Some of us believe that this *Nibbāna* that he talks about, you can get it, but you've only got one life, so you've got to be pretty lucky. Others think that you go on, and so in future lives you'll be able to get it.

This particular discourse that has been chosen gives us these two sides and we'll see how the mythic side of the Buddha was built up. It concentrates on the conception and birth of his life. I'll read it and then make comments as I go along. Remember that this is an oral tradition and therefore it has a repetitious feel about it. I won't actually put you through that misery. I'll just read out the kernel bits.

Thus have I heard. Remember it's Ānanda who remembers all that the Buddha said, and at the first meeting after his death, he's the one who related the words of the Buddha. All these discourses begin with "thus have I heard." On one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Sāvattthī in Jeta's Grove and Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

Now, Anāthapiṇḍika was one of these new breed of people who was a merchant. This was something quite new, within the last hundred or so years of the Buddha's time. It's all part and parcel of a change in that society towards ruled by a group of elites, which was what we would call a sort of democracy, to kingship. Anāthapiṇḍika was a very successful businessman, a merchant. In those days they were moving away from barter to using money. That was the shift. Anāthapiṇḍika, upon hearing of the Buddha, had goose pimples all over his skin. When he finally met him, he determined that this was the man. He determined to buy him a piece of land for his monastics.

By this time, the Buddha had gathered around him some monks and some women, some nuns. He bought this field from Prince Jeta. Jeta didn't want to sell it. He said, "Well, what would you sell it for?" He said, "Not even if you covered the whole ground with gold coins." So Anāthapiṇḍika went on to cover the whole

ground with gold coins. In this way, it became the Buddha's first monastery. It was at Sāvattihī. Sāvattihī was the capital of Kosala, which was north of the Ganges. King Pasenadi was a great supporter of the Buddha. Same caste, the Khattiya caste.

They're in this grove, they're in this monastery. A number of monks were sitting in the assembly hall when they had met together on returning from alms round. After their meal, this discussion arose amongst them: "It is wonderful, friends, it is marvellous how mighty and powerful is the *Tathāgata*. For he is able to know about the Buddhas of the past who attained final *Nibbāna*, cut the tangle of proliferation, broke the cycle, ended the round and surmounted all suffering. For those blessed ones, their birth was thus, their names was thus, their clans was thus, their moral discipline was thus, their qualities of concentration were thus, their wisdom was thus, their meditative dwellings were thus, their liberation was thus."

Here they're saying it's an amazing thing that the Buddha also knows all about the past Buddhas. Remember, the East and the ancient world always thought in cyclic time. They didn't think in linear time. You always get this with all these saints at the time, like the Nigantha, who was the head of the Jain sect — there are always the Jinas, the victorious ones. They always look back to a whole train of them. If you know a modern Hindu saint called Nisargadatta Maharaj, he wrote I Am That. He also says that he's part of a row of equally enlightened persons. The Buddha's obviously been talking about these past Buddhas and they were quite amazed that he knew so much about them.

When this was said, the Venerable Ānanda said to the monks, "Friends, *Tathāgatas* are wonderful and have wonderful qualities. *Tathāgatas* are marvellous and have marvellous qualities." Remember the word *Tathāgata* is what the Buddha referred to himself as. It means one who has gone there, one who has arrived, best translated as the transcendent.

However, their discussion was interrupted for the Blessed One rose from meditation when it was evening, went to the assembly hall and sat down on a seat made ready. Then he addressed the monks, "For what discussion are you sitting together here?" "Here, Venerable Sir, we were sitting in the assembly hall when we met together" and then they go through the whole business that I've just told you. They came back from alms round and said how wonderful he was. The Blessed One said, "That being so, Ānanda, explain more fully the *Tathāgata's* wonderful and marvellous qualities."

Now Ānanda really settles down to explain the wonderful things that happened around the Buddha's birth. "Mindful and clearly comprehending, the *Bodhisattva* appeared in the Tusita heaven."

The *Bodhisattva* is the name we give somebody who has determined to become a fully liberated, self-liberated being. The *Bodhisattva* — this translates into Mahayana as the *bodhicitta*, the mind seeking enlightenment. Some of you might know about Ajahn Mun, who was a modern saint. He died in the early twentieth century. He's very famous and from him there came a group of monks who were all also recognised to be fully liberated. Ajahn Mun, whose biography is written by one of his disciples, Ajahn

Mahā Boowa, came to a point where he realised that in his past life he had made this determination to become a fully self-enlightened Buddha, decided it was too hard, gave it up and just became an Arahant. They say that in Sri Lanka now there are five *Bodhisattvas*. There are five monks who've declared themselves as seeking fully self-liberated beings. This means that they start a dispensation like the Buddha did. They start a line of teaching.

He's in the Tusita heaven. There are six realms. The hell realms, the animal realms, the realms of the hungry ghosts, the human realm, the realm of the angry gods, and the deva realm, the realm of the happy gods. All these can be, if you're not into this sort of stuff, all these can be translated as human mental states. When you're pathetic and find yourself in a gutter, you're definitely in the animal realm. If you were to really be born in that state, there wouldn't be much hope in Buddhist understanding.

The hell realms would be equivalent to our ideas of psychosis and deep depressions and such. There are places where you don't see an escape. Remember Dante wrote over the gates of hell, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." That is hell. The difference between hell and purgatory is that it's just as painful but purgatory offers a way out. There's no permanent hell in Buddhist understanding. Everything is impermanent. It just lasts a very long time.

The hungry ghost realm, that's the place where we suffer our griefs. The human realm we know. The angry gods are really the place where you have these battles between good and evil. Then finally, of course, the happy realm where all the millionaires live.

"Mindful and clearly comprehending, the *Bodhisattva* remained in the Tusita heaven." It's understood that that's the last rebirth before he takes his final birth as a human being. This Tusita heaven is a very happy place. "For the whole of his lifespan the *Bodhisattva* remained in that Tusita heaven. Mindful and clearly comprehending." He's fully aware as we are presumably now. "The *Bodhisattva* passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother's womb."

Now we get this wonderful passage which is really quite cinematic. "When the *Bodhisattva* passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother's womb, an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the devas appeared in the world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this population with its ascetics and brahmins, with its devas and human beings. Even in those abysmal world intervals of vacancy, gloom and utter darkness, where the moon and sun, mighty and powerful as they are, cannot make their light prevail, there too an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of devas appeared, and the beings reborn there perceived each other by that light. 'Ah, so indeed there are also other beings born here.' And this 10,000 world system shook, quaked and trembled and again an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the devas appeared in the world."

That's a lovely vision. Whether it's true or not is immaterial.

"When the *Bodhisattva* descended into his mother's womb, four young devas came to guard him at the

four quarters so that no humans or non-humans or anyone at all could harm the *Bodhisattva* or his mother. When the *Bodhisattva* descended into his mother's womb, she became intrinsically virtuous, refraining from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech and from wines, liquors and intoxicants, the basis of negligence."

It's interesting. A lot of the Christian mythology you see mirrored in these sorts of stories from the East.

"Other women give birth after carrying the child in a womb for nine or ten months, but not so the *Bodhisattva's* mother. The *Bodhisattva's* mother gave birth to him after carrying him in a womb for exactly ten months. Other women give birth seated or lying down, but not so the *Bodhisattva's* mother. The *Bodhisattva's* mother gave birth to him standing up."

I was thinking about that, and I presume it's to do with dignity, rather than flat on your back with your legs up in the air. You're standing in a very gentle pose. I remember seeing a clip of a film of a woman in New Guinea, actually, hanging from a branch giving birth. So it's not unknown. And by herself, by the way.

"When the *Bodhisattva* came forth from his mother's womb, first devas received him and then human beings." After all these phrases, he's always said, "This too I remember as a wonderful and marvellous quality of the Blessed One."

"When the *Bodhisattva* came from his mother's womb, he did not touch the earth. The four young devas received him and set him before his mother saying, 'Rejoice, O Queen, a son of great power has been born to you.'" That sounds biblical, doesn't it?

"When the *Bodhisattva* came forth from his mother's womb, he came forth unsullied, unsmearred by water, mucus, blood, or any kind of impurity, clean and unsullied. Suppose there were a gem placed on a fine cloth, then the gem would not smear the cloth, nor the cloth the gem. Why is that? Because of the purity of both. So too, when the *Bodhisattva* came forth, he came forth clean and unsullied.

"When the *Bodhisattva* came forth from his mother's womb, two jets of water appeared to pour from the sky, one cool and one warm, for bathing the *Bodhisattva* and his mother. As soon as the *Bodhisattva* was born, he stood firmly on his feet on the ground, and then he took seven steps facing north, and with a white parasol held over him, he surveyed each quarter and uttered the words of the leader of the herd: 'I am the highest in the world. I am the best in the world. I am the foremost in the world. This is my last birth. There is no more renewed becoming for me.'"

That's an image, isn't it? That little baby. That little scrunched up creature. It's a great image.

"When the *Bodhisattva* came forth from his mother's womb..." Again, we have that repeat of the immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the devas appeared in the world. "And the 10,000 world system shook, quaked and trembled and there too an immeasurable great radiance

surpassing the divine majesty of the devas appeared in the world."

We have all this mythic stuff around the Buddha. The Buddha now brings us back to ground. This is what he says:

"That being so, Ānanda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvellous quality of the Buddha. Here, Ānanda, for the *Tathāgata*, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Remember this too, Ānanda, as a wonderful and marvellous quality of the *Tathāgata*."

He brings us right back to what the *Tathāgata* actually is. He's the one who knows. All this other stuff is, in a sense, immaterial.

Then, "Venerable Sir, since the Blessed One's feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. This too I remember as a wonderful and marvellous quality of the Blessed One."

That is what the Venerable Ānanda said. The teacher approved and the monks were satisfied and delighted in Venerable Ānanda's words. I can only hope that this has been a tremendous inspiration and that you will continue in your practice and attain that awareness of the Buddha sooner rather than later. The listeners were highly delighted.

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