
The Fruits of Paradox: On the Religious Architecture of the Buddha's Life Story

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Traditional accounts of the life story of the Buddha contain an apparent paradox: at birth he is virtually omniscient, but by adolescence when he encounters the famous “four sights”—an old man, an ill man, a corpse, and a mendicant—he does not know how to understand them. This article proposes one possible religious meaning visible within this paradox, relating to differing motivations which encourage believers both to begin Buddhist practice, since they share the ignorance the Buddha felt as a young man, and to continue it despite the vast distance to its final goal, since it was only after a long series of rebirths that the Buddha himself could attain liberation.

ONE OF THE MANY memorable utterances of Inspector Clouseau, the flapping but unflappable investigator of *Pink Panther* fame, is his deadpan declaration: “I know everything—yet I know nothing.” It may seem an association worthy of Clouseau himself to connect his oxymoronic announcement to the life story of the Buddha, Gautama Siddhārtha.¹ Still, among those who have encountered almost any version of the Buddha's traditional

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Although he himself claims no memory of it, I believe that I was first inspired toward the main idea developed here some years ago by an insight shared with me by my friend Sandy Huntington. It is, however, also possible that I heard it elsewhere. If so, I apologize to whomever I have unwittingly borrowed it from. Whether or not I am specifically indebted to Huntington in this particular case, I certainly owe thanks to his creative imagination many times over, and so I take the opportunity to thank him here for his particular or general inspiration, as well as his friendship and encouragement.

¹ I use the Sanskrit form here and below merely for the sake of convenience; in Pāli the name is Gotama Siddhattha.

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life story, there must be many who have been puzzled by what seems to be a glaring internal inconsistency in the account. Briefly stated, it is this: At the moment of his miraculous birth, the culmination of numerous lifetimes of effort, the infant Gautama takes seven steps and proclaims his impending final spiritual victory. This shall be his last birth, he proclaims; he shall attain *nirvāṇa*, complete and total liberation, in this very lifetime. In other words, he knows everything—everything that is worth knowing in terms of spiritual development and cultivation. He is virtually fully awakened (“enlightened”) from the moment of his birth. And yet, the traditional account goes on tacitly to assume that, having been raised to young adulthood in the confines of his father’s palace, protected from the world, this same Gautama finds himself shocked and startled to confront the stark realities of existence, in which the fate of human life is nothing other than old age, sickness, and death. It is only at this point in the story that Gautama resolves to *begin* the process of cultivation which will lead to eventual victory over the world of transmigration, *saṃsāra*. The infant, upon his birth, knows everything; the young man he becomes knows nothing. At least some of us who hear this story can hardly avoid asking ourselves how it can be that the hyperaware newborn became the unaware, indeed ignorant, young man. What can it possibly mean for the infant and the young adult Gautama, respectively, to know everything, and yet to know nothing?

This is the kind of problem which has not, as far as I know, been recognized or addressed within Buddhist scholastic traditions themselves. And while it is certainly possible and productive to approach the question from a historical, philological, or literary standpoint, here I would like instead to suggest a way of understanding the paradox as a window onto one aspect of the spiritual or religious architecture of the Buddha’s hagiography, as a structural feature, that is, which reveals something of the story’s potential religious power.²

² In his remarks to the editor supporting publication of the present paper, John Strong offered several suggestions regarding extensions of the treatment I offer below. I am grateful to him for his permission to refer to these comments here. Among the subjects he addressed is the question whether, in addition to karmic conditions which allow the Buddha’s certainty of his status upon his final birth, there may also be similar reasons for his forgetfulness, as some texts suggest there are for other episodes or experiences he undergoes (such as his sufferings as expiation for past transgressions and his six years of ascetic practices). From another point of view, Strong has raised the question of the influence of the “biographical blueprint” provided by the lives of previous Buddhas. In a synchronic sense, Strong is certainly correct. Diachronically, however, it seems to me more likely that the “blueprint” of the lives of previous Buddhas is modeled on the developed legend of Śākyamuni than the other way round—but as Strong reminds me, this issue is more complicated than it seems, and requires further consideration. Some of Strong’s suggestions are mentioned in his recent “short biography” of the Buddha, a book I had not seen when I wrote the present article, and he informs me that he is now working to develop some of these avenues of inquiry further.

Although there are significant variants in the many versions of the life story found scattered throughout Buddhist literature, most of these differences have little impact on my thesis. The question of the historicity of the accounts is also irrelevant here. The life story—and we are, of course, much more justified in calling it a “hagiography” than a “biography”—represents an ideal, and in my opinion has probably nothing of the historical about it. But whether there may be any historical facts at all contained within this story is of no interest or importance here, and the assumption that the story is not history need not and does not imply a contradictory positive claim that it is unhistorical. The assertion of its lack of historical relevance is merely intended to indicate that our attention here is not directed in the least at the story’s historical facticity or lack thereof. Our study may even take an almost entirely synchronic point of view. Thus, we may freely assume that the generalized life story, as it can be extracted and abstracted from multiple accounts, is amenable (also, in addition to other approaches) to an uncontextualized—we may call it a thematic or even theological—treatment. Even if it has never been explicitly so read before, it is my contention that this is a potential reading, consistent with Buddhist doctrines and mythology.³

Whether in the end such an approach suggests that this reading reveals more about its author than it does about the Buddhist traditions it purports to interpret is a question that cannot be answered objectively. From the point of view of historical text criticism it is more than possible, indeed quite likely, that the perceived contradiction in the story under discussion, like the double beginning to the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, is most reasonably explicable under the hypothesis of multiple sources having been conflated together into a single, composite account.⁴ Nevertheless, such rational explanations often preclude or discourage more creative and productive solutions that find or indeed even create meaning, in a Talmudic fashion, out of incongruities. Given that the tradition hands down an account or complex of accounts of the life of the Buddha which integrate(s) the paradox I have noted, it is no explanation of the religious meaning of the story as it is given to deconstruct it and simply display the (in themselves perhaps incongruous) pieces out of which it was constructed. Rather, there may be more, or at least equally as much, to be learned by accepting the

³ It goes without saying that there exists a considerable bibliography on the life story of the Buddha. I am familiar with only a very small part of it, but insofar as I am aware, the ideas put forward in the following have not been discussed before. For a general, although dated, overview of the literature, see Lamotte 1948 and now (unrevised from 1958) 1988: 644–685. Further relevant studies are mentioned below.

⁴ For a substantial collection of evidence suggesting that this is, indeed, the case, see Barea 1995a.

story as such and seeking out its potential logic and the ways in which it may be seen to resolve its own tensions creatively.

Ancient Indians lived in a world culturally constructed in ways rather different from our own in many respects. Most importantly, we should notice a central concept which would have appeared as self-evident to any ancient Indian: we live in a world characterized by a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Our course through this beginningless cycle is charted by our deeds and their results, our karma. For the Indian Buddhist in particular, this cycle is moreover inherently unsatisfactory (characterized by suffering, *duḥkha*) and leads one to repeated lives in one of the five (or six) realms that constitute the entirety of existence, the realms of gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, (demons,) and hell beings. There is, however, one possible escape from this horrible cycle, *nirvāṇa*, which is by definition release or liberation from *saṃsāra*. The Buddha is the one who discovered and attained this release, which he accomplished as the culmination of his fantastic efforts through a multitude of lifetimes.

For an ancient Indian audience, as for subsequent traditional audiences, the life story of the Buddha was always heard synchronically. That is, both the development of the story, its plot one might say, and its details were thoroughly known in advance. As A. K. Ramanujan pointed out, in the traditional world one never hears a story for the first time; every telling is a retelling.⁵ No one (and even today I suspect this is true) who hears the story of the Buddha's life is in doubt of how it will turn out. This in itself should lead us to look for means other than plot development through which the story delivers its message(s).⁶ Another fact which we must keep in mind, therefore, is that the story cannot be understood as entirely self-contained. It is always heard and interpreted within the frame of other "facts" in the world. And these facts, although not a part of the life story per se, include a vast mythology regarding Gautama's former lives—that is, the lives of the bodhisattva, the future Buddha as seeker—which serve as a background for his present and final life. The specific details of the stories of these former lives, recorded in great diversity in the *Jātaka* literature of multiple traditions, are, in the present context, not relevant. What is essential,

⁵ I heard him say things like this on more than one occasion, but I do not know if the comment has ever been published anywhere as such.

⁶ I do not mean to imply that one must be hearing a story for the first time to enjoy, understand, or profit from it. Good books improve upon rereadings, just as familiarity with a piece of music allows us to enjoy and appreciate it all the more deeply.

however, is the basic notion that the present life of the Buddha, the life in which the events we wish to explain and reconcile took place, is necessarily and obviously located and contextualized in part as the culmination of a string of previous lives, lives that were characterized by the sustained and inertial effort to attain the perfection which would lead to the achievement of *nirvāṇa* and an escape from the cycle of *saṃsāra*.

The most basic outline of the life story of the Buddha begins, in many texts, with the bodhisattva, who will become Gautama, in the Tuṣita heaven surveying the world to decide upon the proper conditions for his final birth. Choosing as his mother Queen Māyā, he enters her womb and after a trouble-free pregnancy is born, according to some accounts, through his mother's side, thus avoiding any of the impurity or pain of childbirth for either mother or child. The just-born infant takes seven steps and proclaims: "This is my last life!"

A sage predicts that the infant will become either a Universal Monarch (*cakravartin*) or a Buddha, which is to say supreme in the mundane or supramundane sphere, respectively. His father, wishing only for the former, raises the child in the isolation of the palace, shielding him from the harsh realities of life which might motivate him to renounce the world.

At a certain point, however, Gautama journeys outside the palace and encounters three sights—an old man, a sick man, and a corpse—and later on a fourth—a mendicant. Inspired by the last, he resolves to leave home, and after six years of ascetic practice, he attains awakening, after which he begins his long teaching career.

The episodes on which we will concentrate here are the birth and the three sights (the fourth, that of the mendicant, being of less relevance).

A number of sources refer to the bodhisattva's prenatal awareness. Some explicitly mention the memory and awareness (*sato sampajāna/smṛtisamprajāna*) of the bodhisattva while in the Tuṣita heaven and in his mother's womb, whereas numerous others—perhaps all—tacitly assume them.⁷ This, as Hara has shown, is a common Indian idea: even ordinary

⁷ For *Majjhimanikāya* §123, see Chalmers: 119.19, 25, 35, translated in Nāṇamoli: 980. An equivalent seems to be lacking in T. 26 (32) (I) 469c–470a (*juan* 8). For *Mahāpadāna-sūtra*, see Rhys Davids and Carpenter: ii.11.12.4 (§1.17), translated in Walshe: 203. See also T. 1 (1) (I) 3c16 (*juan* 1). (The note in Okayama et al.: 400n180 seems to me to ignore the full import of the expression.) For *Mahāvastu*, see Senart: ii. 11.21: "smṛtisamprajānakuśalo mātuḥ kuṣismirīḥ okrānto," translated in Jones: II.11. For *Lalitavistara*, see Hokazono: 386.8, 410.20, and Lefmann: 55.3, 68.3; translated in Bays: 95, 100.

On the terms *sato sampajāna*, see Hara; Lüders: 157–158. Windisch understands the implication as follows: "Die Worte *sato sampajāno* . . . besagen, daß der Bodhisattva sich seiner früheren Existenzen erinnerte, und daß er vom ersten Anfang eines neuen Daseins an das volle Bewußtsein besaß, ohne sich geistig erst allmählich zu entwickeln" (108). As far as I have noticed, this important set of terms escaped the attention of the contributors to Gyatso.

humans possess memory and knowledge (*smṛti* and *vijñāna*) in the womb. The Buddha, however, was also *born* fully aware, as again a number of Buddhist texts tell us, something that is not possible for ordinary individuals.⁸ As Hara has so convincingly demonstrated, the Buddha's special status of being born fully aware and mindful, just as he was before birth, may be attributed to his avoidance of the traumas of normal birth, a torturous process that deprives the individual of the mindfulness he had as a fetus. That the story of Gautama's birth through his mother's side, which is not universally mentioned in the sources, was an innovation intended to account for this awareness *ex post facto* seems a reasonable hypothesis, but is again not essential to our argument here. No matter the history of this idea, the infant Gautama, born with full awareness, immediately after birth takes seven steps and proclaims himself the greatest in the world and this to be his last birth.⁹

The accounts go on to detail other miracles of the childhood of the Buddha-to-be, until we come to the episode of the encounters with the old person, sick person, and corpse. Although presented in slightly different forms in a number of texts, a common feature is the young Gautama's apparent ignorance of the basic facts of old age, illness, and death. Who, he asks his charioteer in each case, is this? And upon being informed who these people are and the nature of what afflicts them, he asks, in a number of our sources, "Will this

⁸ *Daben-jing* (**Mahāvādāna-sūtra*), T. 1 (1) (I) 4b15 (*juan* 1), et seq. *Lalitavistara*, Hokazono: 440.16 and Lefmann: 83.10, translated in Bays: 130. *Mahāvastu*, Senart: ii. 20.11, translated in Jones: II.18. *Buddhacarita*, Johnston 1972a: canto I, vv. 11–15, translated in Johnston: 1972b: 3 (cp. T. 192 [IV] 1b3 [*juan* 1], translated in Beal 1883: 3). Johnston suggests that *sariprajāna* here "probably . . . means 'remembering his previous births'" (1972b: 3, n. ad v. 11). This may be true in some sense, but it seems to me more likely to signify mindfulness and full awareness in general, the fuller form *smṛtisariprajāna* being abbreviated because of exigencies of the meter. For a survey of the episode in a number of texts, see Bureau 1995a: 205–209 and, earlier, the different and in some ways more detailed treatment of Windisch: 107ff.

We may also notice the stock phrase, found, for instance, in the *Dīghanikāya* (Rhys Davids and Carpenter: iii.103.3–19 [§28.5]), listing four ways of being born, the last of which is to enter the womb aware (*sampajāna*), abide there aware, and be born from there aware. According to Buddhaghosa (in *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* [Stede: 885.27–886.23], commenting on the *Dīghanikāya* passage, and *Papañcasudani* [Horner: iv.176.5–177.3], commenting on the *Majjhimanikāya* passage noted above), this fourth category refers to the manner in which buddhas are born into their last births. This suggests that although the notion apparently was not explicitly expressed in the Pāli hagiographies, it was nevertheless accepted in that tradition, at least from the time of Buddhaghosa, that the Buddha was born fully aware. (Incidentally, Buddhaghosa makes no attempt to identify *sampajāna* here with knowledge of former lives.) See, too, the discussion in the *Abhidharmakośa* (*bhāṣya*): Pradhan: 128.1–26 (III.16) and La Vallée Poussin: iii.54–56.

⁹ The seven steps and the proclamation, often presented in verse, have been given some attention in the literature. See especially Byōdō: 69–83 and Lamotte 1981: 6–10n3. The ideas of Mus (483–491) are difficult for me to assess.

happen to me too?”¹⁰ *Ásvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita* in its poetic way goes a bit farther, and emphasizes that Gautama upon hearing that all grow old was “shaken” (*calita*), upon hearing about disease became dejected (*viṣaṇṇacetā*), and upon hearing about death was startled or violently agitated (*saṃcuḥsubhe*), the latter information also causing him to suddenly collapse in shock (*viṣasāda sadyah*).¹¹ Certainly these cannot reasonably be understood as the reactions of one who, from the moment of his birth and even before, was fully aware of the true nature of reality, and on the cusp of achieving the full and perfect awakening of a buddha.¹² On the other hand, the traumatic encounter with these sights can easily be seen within the normal narrative flow as the inspiration for the young bodhisattva to subsequently abandon his family and home and set out on a course of exploration, learning from and then surpassing a series of teachers, undertaking harsh austerities and so on, until in a final desperate push he overcomes his demons, as it were, and attains the awakening which will free him from the cycle of transmigration, characterized as we have seen by the facts of old age, sickness, and death.¹³ But how does this human picture fit with that presented earlier in the account of Gautama’s miraculous birth? How can we understand the fact that these two descriptions stand together in the same narrative sequence?

¹⁰ For *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, see Rhys Davids and Carpenter: ii.22.4ff (§14.2.2ff), translated in Walshe: 207–209. This is explicitly quoted in the *Nidānakathā*: see Fausbøll: 59.6, translated in Jayawickrama: 78–79. For *Mahāvādāna-sūtra*, see Waldschmidt: 118 (§8a.8), very close to which is the *Samghabhedavastu* (Gnoli: 65.22–27, 68.11–14, 70.19–26). See also **Mahāvādāna-sūtra* T. 3 (I) 154c22 et seq. (*juan shang*); *Daben-jing* T. 1 (I) 6a29ff (*juan 1*). Kanno (in Okayama et al.: 154) seems to me to misunderstand the force of Gautama’s question here by translating the first half of the expression as declarative: “I too will certainly become like this” (*watakushi mo mata tōzen sō naru dearō*). I think that the parallels make it quite clear that the question must extend to the whole expression: “Will I too end up like this, unable to escape this calamity?” See, further, **Abhiṅṣkramaṇa-sūtra* T. 190 (III) 720b26–27 (*juan 14*), 722c9–10 (*juan 15*), 723b16–17 (*juan 15*), translated in Beal 1985: 110, 117, 119. The same is also found in the Mahiśāsaka Vinaya version at T. 1421 (XXII) 101b23ff (*juan 15*), translated in Bareau 1995b: 25–26. Cp. *Buddhacarita* canto 3, v. 58 (and T. 192 [IV] 6a6 [*juan 1*], translated in Beal 1883: 33). Finally, a survey of various treatments of the episode is found in Bareau 1995a: 237–246.

¹¹ See Johnston 1972a: canto III, vv. 26–61 (this is even more radically emphasized in T. 192 [IV] 5c23ff [*juan 1*], translated in Beal 1883: 32ff). Johnston (1972b: 38, n. ad v. 32) mentions but rejects Speyer’s suggestion in verse 32 that Tibetan *’dar* suggests the emendation *cakita*. Even if accepted, however, this would not affect the sense. (The dictionary of Tse ring dbang rgyal seems to support the equivalence of *’dar* with *√cal*, albeit not terribly clearly. On folio 87a1 [see Bacot] we find *’dar* matched with *tsar* (i.e., *car*), which I understand as an error for **cal*.)

¹² As Bareau observes: “En somme, ce qui le frappe et l’afflige, c’est moins la découverte de la vieillesse, de la maladie et de la mort que celle de leur nature universelle et inéluctable qui le soumet, lui comme tous les autres, à ces maux. Cette réaction plutôt égoïste est bien naturelle, surtout de la part d’un jeune prince menant une vie toute de plaisirs et entouré de nombreux domestiques ayant pour fonction de le divertir et de lui épargner tout souci” (1995a: 242).

¹³ Bareau observes with regard to the presentation of the four sights in the texts he studied: “Bien que présenté sous une forme légendaire, et dépourvu de toute vérité de fait, le choc moral ainsi décrit ne manque pas de vraisemblance psychologique” (1995a: 238n1).

Table 1.

Model 1	Model 2
<u>Previous Lives</u>	
Miraculous Birth	Birth
High spiritual attainments	Sheltered life of luxury
(Renunciation)	Encounter with “suffering”
	Renunciation
(Awakening)	Battles with temptation
Teaching	Awakening
Nirvāṇa	Teaching
	Nirvāṇa

With the intention of reconciling this apparent paradox, I would like to suggest that the life story of the Buddha be seen as having two levels or, to put it another way, as incorporating two models. First, there is a story of the result of an almost infinitely long career. In this present and final lifetime the miraculous results of a long course of spiritual development spanning multiple lifetimes finally come to full fruition. Second, and almost entirely disjunct from the first, is a story of discovery, of encounter with unpleasant facts of the reality of life in the world, the discovery of a means to cope with those facts, and the efforts at asceticism and mental cultivation which ultimately lead to liberation. Both of these levels to the story—and we must keep in mind that there is, nevertheless, one and only one story—provide elements of a model for the seeker, elements of a path that can be followed by every Buddhist, models to emulate. The two models may be extracted and set side by side diagrammatically, although in fact they never exist other than as intertwined within one and the same story (see table 1).

These two models, two aspects of the story, speak to different concerns. We may begin with what is labeled above as Model 2. Here the facts of Gautama’s birth are of virtually no importance. Gautama may first be noticed as a young man, raised in luxury, cloistered away from the harsh realities of the world. The world can be a dreadful place, full of fear. But even if one is protected from bandits and poverty, there are realities of life from which no one, not the rich nor the powerful nor the intelligent, can escape. And these are the realities that human life itself is characterized by the inevitability that everyone must get old, everyone will eventually become ill, and everyone will die.¹⁴ These are facts about life that are, despite their ubiquity, perhaps not always completely and equally obvious

¹⁴ We might perhaps more precisely say that everyone will die, and that those who live long enough to get old will eventually also become ill. But the modification is in a certain sense gratuitous.

to all, especially to the young. Healthy young people in some way seem to feel immortal; their intellectual realization that they too will grow old, that their health will not persist forever, and that they too will someday die, is too distant and abstract to make any significant impact. But sooner or later, everyone will be confronted with the reality of impermanence, especially the impermanence of youth, of health, and of life itself. Life inevitably ends in death. This simple and entirely obvious fact can nevertheless come as a shocking surprise. Model 2 assures us, however, that the Buddha, too, confronted it. He, like us, was once a carefree youth, unworried by the impermanence of the world, because he was in fact oblivious to it, the story suggests. Indeed, what better metaphor could there be for an ignorance of the facts of the world than to depict one separated from those facts by a wall, like a palace wall, high and impenetrable? The young Gautama is raised within the isolation of those walls just as most young people live without really seeing the reality of the world around them. Yet, whether confronted with the world's reality through a *deus ex machina*—as happens quite literally in some versions of the Buddha's life story in which the four sights are placed in Gautama's way by the gods—or through more mundane means, all who live must eventually face these same facts.

Given this interpretation of Model 2, I would suggest that it may be understood to provide audiences of the story in every generation a model of precisely that confrontation with finitude and mortality that it portrays as having been experienced at the first by Gautama himself. Like Gautama, all humans are finite and fated to old age, illness, and death, and like him all must face up to it. If we have not yet encountered these realities, the story assures us, we will come to. If we have already met them, the story assures us this is the universal condition. The only escape is that discovered by Gautama himself, as Buddha, namely, that conveyed through the teachings he went on to profess in his ministry. When we, like the young Gautama, find ourselves confronting our own finitude, we likewise may discover through his life story a model for our own, and through his teachings a guide to overcoming our own finitude just as he did his.

Gautama's solution to the most fundamental problem of human life entails mastery over the very limitations which make us human. It is natural to ask, then, whether it is really possible to attain such mastery. Although Gautama perfected himself, if we are honest about it, we cannot help but realize the utter futility for ourselves of the path he has set forth. Even were we to start young, most of us cannot help but accept that to truly conquer lust, hatred, and delusion—the so-called three poisons which symbolize the prime features of character locking one to the wheel of becoming or repeated rebirth—would require much more than the remainder of a mere single lifetime. If we look inside ourselves, we must confess that we can

hardly imagine what it would mean for any human to be thoroughly without lust or greed, entirely free of hate or resentment, and completely clear and never confused or uncertain—much less imagine ourselves in such a state. How, then, could the Buddha himself have done it, and what can we learn from his achievement? And here we find the necessity for the simultaneous inclusion in the life story of Model 1 and the force of the story of the Buddha's miraculous birth. To follow to the end the path that the Buddha set forth is a task beyond mere human capacity. How did Gautama himself do it? The answer suggested by Model 1 is that Gautama did not achieve his awakening in one life, any more than we should expect ourselves to be able to do so, or than the ancient Buddhist masters may have expected any human to be able to do so. It is only the result of lifetimes upon lifetimes of effort that allowed such a supreme triumph, the story reassures us. Rather than simply tolerating what we see to be the blatant narrative inconsistencies in the story, we can instead appreciate that, thanks to the profound psychological insight of those ancient masters who composed or compiled it, they were able to incorporate into a single account two crucial elements of the human pursuit of liberation, seemingly contradictory perhaps but simultaneously essential.

Every journey starts with a single step, a single decision. Here I am, and there is my goal; I must set out toward it. But without any realistic expectation of reaching that goal, why start at all? The distance is too great, the time too short. So the goal and its pursuer must be brought closer somehow, the distance between them shortened, or the time allotted for the journey made longer. In a period probably considerably later than that in which the essential outlines of the Buddha's life story were canonized, other Buddhist masters suggested another answer to the same questions addressed by the hagiographers who compiled and redacted the life story. These later Tantric teachers recognized the same sort of problem, the vast gap between finitude and perfection, but their solution was to suggest techniques for shortening the journey from the initial aspiration to attain awakening to the full realization of the fruits of that journey. The techniques of spiritual cultivation they advocated were designed to assure liberation in this very life, and included a set of radical innovations in Indian Buddhist theory and practice. No such possible shortcuts were available or acceptable to the authors of our texts, and so their only course was to rely on and make use of the facts available to them, chief among which was the basic reality of transmigration: all beings are reborn, again and again. This series of lives, this extension of available time from a single lifetime to multiple lifetimes, the hagiographies teach us, is what allows finite imperfect creatures like us to imagine our own perfection, just as this is what allowed the Buddha to reach his own perfection. In other words, we all know that we certainly cannot overcome our limitations in this one, short life. But having been presented with the problem through

Model 2, we are also reassured of our ability to pursue its solution through Model 1. Just as we sense that we cannot overcome our limitations quickly enough to escape death, so the story counsels, neither could the Buddha. Like him, in Model 2 we confront our finitude, and we too are shocked and stunned. We too will grow old, become ill, and die, and we too will recognize that there is no escape—save to follow the path that the Buddha has blazed for us and shown to us in his teaching. At the same time, we realize when we look inside ourselves that we have no chance of success. We are too greedy, too angry, and too ignorant to possibly succeed in perfecting ourselves—unless we, like the Buddha before us, have lifetimes in which to do it; it is, indeed, only the result of these lifetimes of effort, as Model 1 tells us, that will lead to ultimate liberation.

Buddhism's message of liberation requires both of these models to function. It requires the model of confrontation with finitude here and now, starting from a posited beginning of complete unfamiliarity with the basic nature of human life, and it requires the possibility for success that can only come from the model of the Buddha's own persistent efforts, culminating in the life we know in this world but, in fact necessarily extending through multiple lives. There is no need to abandon the path toward perfection just because it seems too long and impossible to complete. The completion will come later—but only if one initially sets forth. Whether or not this is the logic that actually motivated the composition or compilation of the life story of the Buddha in the form in which we have it, that form, with its apparently paradoxical or oxymoronic conflation of the all-knowing infant and the ignorant adolescent, through its duality proves to contain a potentially powerful lesson about the Buddhist path.¹⁵

Our argument could well end here—were it not that some important Indian texts are not content to leave the paradox alone. Attention was already drawn more than fifty years ago to one of these texts by the great Alfred Foucher, who has noted in the *Lalitavistara* the addition of the

¹⁵ Not everyone would agree with this picture, of course. Bareaux has very reasonably suggested the following: "En premier lieu, les faits et les éléments de la jeunesse du Bodhisattva qui ont d'abord et surtout attiré l'attention des hagiographes sont ceux qui pouvaient servir d'exemples aux fidèles, c'est-à-dire les réflexions qui avaient conduit le jeune Gautama à quitter la vie laïque pour l'existence d'ascète errant et cet acte de renoncement lui-même. Pour aider ceux qui hésitaient à suivre cet illustre exemple, étant retenus par l'attrait des plaisirs ordinaires, on expliqua brièvement que le futur Buddha avait, lui aussi, connu et goûté ces derniers dans sa jeunesse, ce qui ne l'avait pas empêché de se soustraire brusquement à leur séduction" (1995a: 266). However, I cannot entirely agree with him when he continues: "L'exaltation du Buddha, placé au rang suprême des humains et égalé au souverain universel . . . est l'autre thème majeur des récits canoniques traitant de la jeunesse de Gautama. Son caractère purement imaginaire est bien mis en évidence par le fait qu'il apparaît d'abord dans les légendes dont les personnages principaux sont de fabuleux prédécesseurs du Buddha historique. Cette exaltation est la seule raison de l'invention des épisodes prodigieux de la conception, de la vie intra-utérine et de la naissance de ceux-ci" (1995a: 266).

phrase “although he knew” before each of Gautama’s questions to his charioteer.¹⁶ Foucher attributed this addition to the unwillingness of the author of the text to accept the idea that a simple servant could inform the bodhisattva of anything at all. Although this may well have been one motivation, it does at least also clearly signal a failure on the part of the *Lalitavistara*’s author to appreciate the importance of Gautama’s questions within the dynamic of the complete story.

Despite this failure of nerve, the *Lalitavistara* does not completely obscure Gautama’s surprise at his confrontation with the three sights. After his charioteer defines old age, for instance, and Gautama wonders whether this affects everyone or just those of a particular family, he continues: “Quickly speak to me of this exactly as it is! When I hear the facts, I will deeply consider them!”¹⁷ The author here has, then, clearly not entirely internalized the idea of Gautama’s superhumanity and is still struggling with his conceptions of the Buddha’s transcendence. This is not the case in the *Mahāvastu*. There is considerable disruption in the internal ordering of the text as we have it, but this does not seem to be the cause of the fact that long before the action even reaches the scene of Gautama’s first encounter with the old man, it has become abundantly clear that he is essentially already fully awakened.¹⁸ The scene is preceded, in fact, by a long dialogue between Gautama and his father, Śuddhodana, in which Gautama at some length stresses the unsatisfactoriness of life and the impermanence of all attractive things. When he finally does mount his chariot and venture forth into the park, see the old man and ask the charioteer to identify him, the latter’s informational response is irrelevant, for Gautama immediately proclaims: “My dear charioteer, mark this. We too are liable to old age. We have not passed beyond liability

¹⁶ See Foucher 1987: 97, abbreviated in 1963: 71 (he actually says cautiously “author or scribe”). The passage (*jānann eva*) is in Hokazono: 674.13 and Lefmann: 188.5. It is found in Dharmarākṣa’s translation of 308 C.E., T. 186 (III) 502c29–503a1 (*juan 3*), but not in Divākara’s T. 187 (III) 570a5 (*juan 5*) dating to 683 C.E. (The general relation between the Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the text is remarked on in de Jong: 313.) For the subsequent questions, see Hokazono: 678.2, 680.2, 682.8; Lefmann: 189.13, 190.13, 191.19; T. 186 (III) 503a16–17, 25–26, b8 (*juan 3*). (The expression is misunderstood by Bays as “upon seeing him” [285]. This is following Foucaux’s mistake, “l’apercevant” [see 1988: 168], repeated from his translation of the Tibetan text [1848: 182], which reads *shes bzhin du* [1847: 156.10].)

There is a frequent cliché in the Pāli Vinaya (Oldenberg: i.59, 13–14 [I.31.4], 158.25–26 [IV.1.10], etc.) which begins: Tathāgatas ask both when they know and when they do not know. It is also common to encounter the expression: “Although the Buddha knew, he still asked. . . .”

¹⁷ Hokazono: 674.8–9 and Lefmann: 188.18–19, translated in Bays: 286.

¹⁸ For one attempt to bring order to Māhāvastu’s narrative sequence, see Hiraoka.

to old age. Verily, when old age is seen to be the lot of every man that is born what pleasure can there be to a discerning man?"¹⁹ Although the seams along which different sources were stitched together are still clearly visible here, as a unit the *Mahāvastu* plainly tends toward the deification of a transcendent Buddha, much more so than does the *Lalitavistara*, which remains content to let Gautama be ignorant of the facts of old age, sickness, and death in at least a certain way.

Even more radical still is the stance of several Mahāyāna sūtras, which might be characterized in this respect as positively docetic. The *Lokānuvartanā* and the *Upāyakauśalya* explain not only the birth and Gautama's confrontation with the three sights but, indeed, all of his worldly actions as merely for show, the play of a supramundane and essentially divine being.²⁰ The *Lokānuvartanā* says of the Buddha's birth:

Having said "I am foremost in the world with its gods!"
He afterwards seeks the Dharma; this is conformity with the world.²¹

The parallel to this in Lokakṣema's Chinese translation of the sūtra has a slightly expanded expression: "When the bodhisattva was born and dropped to the ground he himself uttered the words: 'In the whole world no-one surpasses me! I shall deliver the men of the ten directions!' It is in conformity with the way of the world that he still asks questions."²² The sense of the key expression here is that the Buddha's every action is merely a show, enacted in order to conform to the expectations of the world but actually not at all reflective of his true, supramundane, and entirely transcendent character. The same can be seen in the *Upāyakauśalya*, which says the following:

Why did the bodhisattva, when he had taken seven steps, say: "I am the supreme one in the world! I am the best in the world! I will put an end to birth, old age, sickness and death!"

¹⁹ See Senart: ii. 151.6–8; I quote here the translation in Jones: II.146.

²⁰ The relevance of these texts is pointed out in Harrison 1995.

²¹ The verse reads in Harrison's unpublished critical edition: "lha dang bcas pa'i 'jig rten la || nga ni mchog ces bka' stsal pa || phyin nas chos ni tshol mdzad pa || 'di ni 'jig rten 'thun 'jug yin||"; and the translation is in Harrison 1982: 223 (and see 1995: 5). Very close is a *Mahāvastu* verse (Senart: i.170.7–8), conjecturally reedited by Harrison as follows: "aham agrā ti bhānitvā asmiṃ loke sadevake | puna paryeṇanti tīrthe eṣā lokānuvartanā||" (1982: 216). How Harrison would understand *tīrthe* in *pāda* c is not clear to me, but we can perhaps do no better than to quote Senart himself here, who translates "ils recherchent pourtant des hérétiques" and goes on to comment: "J'admets que ceci fait allusion aux enseignements que le Buddha, avant de trouver sa voie, va demander à des maîtres comme Arāḍa Kalāma et les autres" (i.513).

²² See T. 807 (XVII) 751c12–13, translated in Harrison 1982: 223.

Gentle son, this is because Indra, Brahmā and exalted divinities are gathered in that assembly, and obstinate in their pride they think: “We are the highest, not this bodhisattva,” and they do not bow, do not worship, do not honor and do not make obeisance [to him]. Therefore the bodhisattva thinks: “Indra, Brahmā and these divinities will be helpless, injured, miserable and suffer an evil fate for a long time.” On that account the bodhisattva says: “I am the supreme one in the world! I am the best in the world! I will put an end to birth, old age, sickness and death!”²³

Later, with regard to the sights, the same text says:

[Although] not desiring any amusements or pleasures, why did the bodhisattva appear in the park? To demonstrate old age, sickness and death. The bodhisattva is thus concerned for his kin, demonstrating to them that he fears old age, sickness and death, and that he has departed the home because he is aware that home life is impossible, since there one is attracted to many faults [and not because he wishes to reject his family]. And in order to demonstrate to all sentient beings his fear of old age, illness and death, while not desiring any amusements or pleasures the bodhisattva [nevertheless] appeared in the park, and that too is the bodhisattva’s skillful means.²⁴

The skillful means (*upāya*) referred to here has the same sense as the Buddha’s conformity to the world does in the *Lokānuvartanā*. It is in order to assuage the fears and meet the expectations of beings, and guide them on a path that they otherwise would be entirely unable to understand, that Gautama puts on the show that we know as his life story. In these texts the entirety of the Buddha’s humanity has been stripped from him. He is completely transcendent and not of this world. To be sure, this stance signals a trend influential in later Buddhism, particularly although not exclusively in the Mahāyāna. But it is nevertheless fundamentally foreign to the world of the life story in most of the classical versions investigated above. For as much as such stories indulge in what seems to us miraculous and quite superhuman, they rarely step out of the

²³ See Derge Kanjur 82, *dkon brtsegs, cha* 49b2–6. Cp. the translation in Tatz: 55. In Chinese, see T. 310 (38) (XI) 600c16–22, translated in Chang et al.: 445–556. The expression in what I have made the first paragraph is very similar to what we find in the *Lalitavistara* (Hokazono: 444.7–8; Lefmann: 84.22–85.2). An expression very similar to “Indra, Brahmā and exalted divinities” is also found in the *Lalitavistara* (Lefmann: 413.11–12).

²⁴ See Derge Kanjur 82, *dkon brtsegs, cha* 52b3–5. Cp. the translation in Tatz: 60. In Chinese, see T. 310 (38) (XI) 601c20–27, translated in Chang et al.: 448–449. For the first line, see Senart: ii.144.17–18: “edṛṣeṣu ca udyāneṣu . . . ratiṃ na vindati” (Jones: II.139).

classical Indian world to deny it entirely. Their Buddha is still human in some way. This, as Foucher saw, was beginning to be lost in the *Lalitavistara*, seeps farther away in the *Mahāvastu*, and is completely gone in the *Lokānuvartanā* and the *Upāyakauśalya*.²⁵ Still, this appreciation of the less highly “occult” versions of the story should not be viewed, as through the lenses of nineteenth-century glasses, as a preference for a simplistic and demythologized “human” Buddha, later corrupted by Mahāyāna extravagances and exaggerations.²⁶ The “simpler” hagiographies we studied earlier are all in their own ways just as fully mythologized as the Mahāyāna fantasies.²⁷ The crucial difference for us here may lie in whether the message of the encounter with real human finitude and the promise of possible release from its endemic suffering is not lost by such rewriting of the story. Mahāyāna reformulations of doctrine and reinterpretations of mythology often reveal their authors’ profound insights into the human condition. But occasionally we cannot help feeling that something very human has been lost along the way.

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²⁵ I by no means intend to suggest any chronological sequence for these texts, e.g., that the *Lokānuvartanā* and the *Upāyakauśalya* are later than the *Mahāvastu*, which is itself later than the *Lalitavistara*, itself once again later than the other hagiographies. I refer simply to a tendency toward divinization and suprahumanization, quite possibly entirely unrelated to any chronology of composition or redaction.

²⁶ See Silk. There is, again, no particular reason to impose on these genre differences any assumption of necessary chronological sequence.

²⁷ Here I respectfully disagree with Bureau’s instincts (e.g., in 1995a: 266) to see a historically true and almost certainly demythologized core at the root of the hagiographic tradition.

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