

CHAPTER 3

BUDDHAHOOD

The Tathāgatas are only teachers.

— Dhp 276



fter a stupendous struggle of six strenuous years, in his 35th year the Ascetic Gotama, unaided and unguided by any supernatural agency, and solely relying on his own efforts and wisdom, eradicated all defilements, ended the process of grasping, and, realising things as they truly are by his own intuitive knowledge, became a Buddha—an enlightened or awakened one.

Thereafter he was known as Buddha Gotama,³² one of a long series of Buddhas that appeared in the past and will appear in the future.

He was not born a Buddha, but became a Buddha by his own efforts.

Characteristics of the Buddha

The Pali term Buddha is derived from “*budh*,” to understand, or to be awakened. As he fully comprehended the four noble truths and as he arose from the slumbers of ignorance he is called a Buddha. Since he not only comprehends but also expounds the doctrine and enlightens others, he is called a *Sammā Sambuddha*—a fully enlightened One—to distinguish him from *paccekabuddhas*³³ who only comprehend the doctrine but are incapable of enlightening others.

Before his enlightenment he was called *bodhisatta*³⁴ which means one who is aspiring to attain buddhahood.

Every aspirant to Buddhahood passes through the bodhisatta period—a period of intensive exercise and development of the qualities of generosity, discipline, renunciation, wisdom, energy, endurance, truthfulness, determination, benevolence and perfect equanimity.

32. His disciples addressed him as *Buddha*, *Bhagavā* (Exalted One), *Sugata* (Well-Gone One) etc., while alien followers addressed him as *Bho Gotama*, (Venerable Gotama), *Samaṇa Gotama* (Ascetic Gotama), etc.. Referring to himself the Buddha used the term “*tathāgata*” meaning “he who hath thus come,” “he who hath thus gone.”

33. *Paccekabuddha*: a solitary buddha who does not preach truth to the world.

34. *Skt bodhisattva*.

In a particular era there arises only one *Sammā Sambuddha*. Just as certain plants and trees can bear only one flower even so one world-system (*lokadhātu*) can bear only one *Sammā Sambuddha*.

The Buddha was a unique being. Such a being arises but rarely in this world, and is born out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of gods and men. The Buddha is called “*acchariya manussa*” as he was a wonderful man. He is called *amatassa dātā* as he is the giver of deathlessness. He is called *varado* as he is the giver of the purest love, the profoundest wisdom, and the highest truth. He is also called *dhammassāmi* as he is the Lord of the *Dhamma* (doctrine).

As the Buddha himself says, “he is the accomplished one (*tathāgata*), the worthy one (*araṇṇa*), the fully enlightened one (*sammā sambuddha*), the creator of the un-arisen way, the producer of the un-produced way, the proclaimer of the un-proclaimed way, the knower of the way, the beholder of the way, the cogniser of the way.”³⁵

The Buddha had no teacher for his enlightenment. “*Na me ācariyo atthi*”³⁶ —A teacher have I not—are his own words. He did receive his mundane knowledge from his lay teachers,³⁷ but teachers he had none for his supramundane knowledge which he himself realised by his own intuitive wisdom.

If he had received his knowledge from another teacher or from another religious system such as Hinduism in which he was nurtured, he could not have said of himself as being the incomparable teacher (*aṇṇa satthā anuttaro*).³⁸ In his first discourse he declared that light arose in things not heard before.

During the early period of his renunciation he sought the advice of the distinguished religious teachers of the day, but he could not find what he sought in their teachings. Circumstances compelled him to think for himself and seek the truth. He sought the truth within himself. He plunged into the deepest profundities of thought, and he realised the ultimate truth which he had not heard or known before. Illumination came from within and shed light on things which he had never seen before.

As he knew everything that ought to be known and as he obtained the key to all knowledge, he is called *sabbaññū* (omniscient one). This supernormal knowledge he acquired by his own efforts continued through a countless series of births.

35. Samyutta Nikāya, part iii, p. 66; *Kindred Sayings*, part iii, p. 58.

36. Majjhima Nikāya, Ariyapariyesana Sutta MN 26.

37. Such as Kondaṇṇa, Ālāra Kālāma, Uddakka Rāmaputta etc.

38. Majjhima Nikāya, Ariyapariyesana Sutta, MN 26.

Who is the Buddha?

Once a certain brahmin named Dona, noticing the characteristic marks of the footprint of the Buddha, approached him and questioned him.

“Your Reverence will be a deva?”³⁹

“No, indeed, brahmin, a deva am I not,” replied the Buddha.

“Then Your Reverence will be a *gandhabba*?”⁴⁰

“No, indeed, brahmin, a Gandhabba am I not.”

“A Yakkha then?”⁴¹

“No, indeed, brahmin, not a Yakkha.”

“Then Your Reverence will be a human being?”

“No, indeed, brahmin, a human being am I not.”

“Who, then, pray, will Your Reverence be?”

The Buddha replied that he had destroyed defilements which condition rebirth as a deva, gandhabba, yakkha, or a human being and added:

As a lotus, fair and lovely,
By the water is not soiled,
By the world am I not soiled;
Therefore, brahmin, am I Buddha.⁴²

The Buddha does not claim to be an incarnation (*avatāra*) of the Hindu god Vishnu, who, as the Bhagavad Gītā⁴³ charmingly sings, is born again and again in different periods to protect the righteous, to destroy the wicked, and to establish the Dharma (right).

According to the Buddha countless are the gods (*devas*) who are also a class of beings subject to birth and death; but there is no one supreme god, who controls the destinies of human beings and who possesses a divine power to appear on earth at different intervals, employing a human form as a vehicle.⁴⁴

Nor does the Buddha call himself a “saviour” who freely saves others by his personal salvation. The Buddha exhorts his followers to depend on themselves for their deliverance, since both defilement and purity depend on oneself. One cannot directly purify or defile another.⁴⁵ Clarifying his relationship with his followers and emphasizing the

39. A celestial being who resides in heavenly planes.

40. A heavenly musician.

41. A demon.

42. *Gradual Sayings*, Pt. ii, pp. 44–45, Aṅguttara Nikāya, Pt. ii—p.37.

43. *Paritrānāya sādhuṇām vināśāya ca dukṛtām.*

Dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge.

44. Hindu teachers, however, with the object of bringing within the fold of Hinduism the increasing adherents of Buddhism, have unjustly called the Buddha God’s incarnation (*avatāra*)—an idea which he repudiated in his own time.

45. *Suddhi asuddhi paccattaṃ n’añño aññaṃ visodhaye.* Dhṛp v. 165.

importance of self-reliance and individual striving, the Buddha plainly states:

“You yourselves should make an exertion. The tathāgatas are only teachers.”⁴⁶

The Buddha only indicates the path and method whereby he delivered himself from suffering and death and achieved his ultimate goal. It is left for his faithful adherents who wish their release from the ills of life to follow the path.

“To depend on others for salvation is negative, but to depend on oneself is positive.” Dependence on others means a surrender of one’s effort.

“Be you isles unto yourselves; be you a refuge unto yourselves; seek no refuge in others.”⁴⁷

These significant words uttered by the Buddha in his last days are very striking and inspiring. They reveal how vital is self-exertion to accomplish one’s ends, and how superficial and futile it is to seek redemption through benign saviours, and crave for illusory happiness in an afterlife through the propitiation of imaginary gods by fruitless prayers and meaningless sacrifices.

The Buddha was a human being. As a man he was born, as a Buddha he lived, and as a Buddha his life came to an end. Though human, he became an extraordinary man owing to his unique characteristics. The Buddha laid stress on this important point, and left no room for any one to fall into the error of thinking that he was an immortal being. It has been said of him that there was no religious teacher who was “ever so godless as the Buddha, yet none was so god-like.”⁴⁸ In his own time the Buddha was no doubt highly venerated by his followers, but he never arrogated to himself any divinity.

The Buddha’s Greatness

Born a man, living as a mortal, by his own exertion he attained that supreme state of perfection called buddhahood, and without keeping his enlightenment to himself, he proclaimed to the world the latent possibilities and the invincible power of the human mind. Instead of placing an unseen almighty God over man, and giving man a subservient position in relation to such a conception of divine power, he demonstrated how man could attain the highest knowledge and supreme enlightenment by

46. *Tumhehi kiccaṃ ātappaṃ akkhātāro tathāgatā....* Dhṛ v. 276

47. *Attadīpā viharatha, attapaṭisaraṇā anaññasaraṇā.* Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta Vol. 2, p. 100.

48. Dwight Goddard, *Buddhist Bible*, p. 20.

his own efforts. He thus raised the worth of man. He taught that man can gain his deliverance from the ills of life and realise the eternal bliss of *tathāgata* without depending on an external God or mediating priests. He taught the egocentric, power-seeking world the noble ideal of selfless service. He protested against the evils of the caste-system that hampered the progress of mankind and advocated equal opportunities for all. He declared that the gates of deliverance were open to all, in every condition of life, high or low, saint or sinner, who would care to turn a new leaf and aspire to perfection. He raised the status of down-trodden women, and not only brought them to a realisation of their importance to society but also founded the first religious order for women. For the first time in the history of the world he attempted to abolish slavery. He banned the sacrifice of unfortunate animals and brought them within his compass of loving kindness. He did not force his followers to be slaves either to his teachings or to himself, but granted complete freedom of thought and admonished his followers to accept his words not merely out of regard for him but after subjecting them to a thorough examination "even as the wise would test gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it on a piece of touchstone." He comforted the bereaved mothers like Paṭācārā and Kisāgotamī by his consoling words. He ministered to the deserted sick like Putigatta Tissa Thera with his own hands. He helped the poor and the neglected like Rajjumālā and Sopāka and saved them from an untimely and tragic death. He ennobled the lives of criminals like Aṅgulimālā and courtesans like Ambapālī. He encouraged the feeble, united the divided, enlightened the ignorant, clarified the mystic, guided the deluded, elevated the base, and dignified the noble. The rich and the poor, the saint and the criminal, loved him alike. His noble example was a source of inspiration to all. He was the most compassionate and tolerant of teachers.

His will, wisdom, compassion, service, renunciation, perfect purity, exemplary personal life, the blameless methods that were employed to propagate the Dhamma and his final success—all these factors have compelled about one fifth of the population of the world to hail the Buddha as the greatest religious teacher that ever lived on earth.

Paying a glowing tribute to the Buddha, Sri Radhakrishnan writes:

In Gautama the Buddha we have a master mind from the East second to none so far as the influence on the thought and life of the human race is concerned, and sacred to all as the founder of a religious tradition whose hold is hardly less wide and deep than any other. He belongs to the history of the world's thought, to the general inheritance of all cultivated men, for, judged by intellectual integrity, moral earnestness,

and spiritual insight, he is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in history.⁴⁹

In the *Three Greatest Men in History* H. G. Wells states:

In the Buddha you see clearly a man, simple, devout, lonely, battling for light, a vivid human personality, not a myth. He too gave a message to mankind universal in character. Many of our best modern ideas are in closest harmony with it. All the miseries and discontents of life are due, he taught, to selfishness. Before a man can become serene he must cease to live for his senses or himself. Then he merges into a greater being. Buddhism in different language called men to self-forgetfulness 500 years before Christ. In some ways he was nearer to us and our needs. He was more lucid upon our individual importance in service than Christ and less ambiguous upon the question of personal immortality.

The Poet Tagore calls him the greatest man ever born.

In admiration of the Buddha, Fausböll, a Danish scholar says, "The more I know him, the more I love him."

A humble follower of the Buddha would modestly say: "The more I know him, the more I love him; the more I love him, the more I know him."



49. Sri Radhakrishnan, *Gautama the Buddha*, p. 1.