

The Elusive Historical Buddha

The traditional outline of the Buddha's life is this. He was born about 563 BCE, making him a contemporary of Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras and Lao Tse. He was named Siddhartha, meaning "aim attained." The family name was Gautama (Gotama). The birthplace of Gautama, Lumbini in the city-state of Kapilavastu (Kapilavatthu), the capital of the Shakyas, falls in an area which is now part of West Nepal, west of Kathmandu, near the present border with India. His father, Suddhodana, was the *raja* or king of the Shakya peoples. His wife died seven days after Siddhartha's birth, with Siddhartha being raised by his aunt, Prajapati, who became Suddhodana's second wife. Shakyamuni was married at the age of 16 and when he was 29 his son Rahula was born. Immediately after Rahula's birth he abandoned his home and became a forest renunciant, studying for six years with various ascetic teachers, intent on discovering the origin of suffering and eliminating it. At age 35 he attained perfect enlightenment under a pipal (*bodhi*) tree where he stayed for 4 weeks. For the next 45 years he was an itinerant teacher in India and founded the Sangha, the Buddhist community of monks. He died around 483 BCE.

However, even this skeleton of this "history", let alone its flesh and bones, is dubious.

1. The Dating Problem

Sarao comments,

Invariably, the Buddhist texts appear to exaggerate numbers and in all Indian religions there is always a tendency to claim an antiquity for a religious leader.¹

The date of Siddhartha's birth is variously estimated. Some would put it around 568 BCE, others around 566 or 563 BCE - but these dates are based on Sri Lankan Theravadan traditions. Phra Sunthorn Plamintr sets the date at 623 BCE.² Tibetans often place his birth around 800 BCE or even earlier. Indeed, Chinese Buddhists in the 13th century AD had pushed the Buddha's birth back to 949 BCE to make sure he predated Lao Tse and Confucius. Some even put his birth as far back as 2422 BCE.³

In 1988 a major Buddhist symposium was convened by Heinz Bechert at the University of Göttingen.⁴ Anthropologists, sociologists, art historians, philosophers and historians compared their perspectives, with ethnographical evidence also examined. Symposium participants offered dates for the Buddha's death ranging from 483 BCE to 368 BCE.⁵ Most participants proposed a date approximately a few decades either side of 400 BCE.

The 563 BCE dating (the so-called *Long Chronology*⁶) for the Buddha's birth is largely based on Southern Buddhist legends.⁷ The Sri Lankan tradition is that Asoka was consecrated 218 years after the Buddha's death (referred to by Buddhists as his *Mahaparinibbana* or, simply, *Paranirvana*). It is argued that Ashoka ascended the throne around 268 BCE and was consecrated around 265 BCE, hence the 483 BCE date for the Buddha's death. However, Sri Lankan chronology prior to 160 BCE has been discredited. Further, there is no solid evidence for the authenticity of the 218 figure. Also highly questioned is the authenticity of the *Dotted Record*, contained in the *Li-tai san-pao chi* written by Fei-Chang-fang in 597 AD⁸, on the basis of which, using dots to represent years, the Buddha's death was calculated at 486 BCE or 483 BCE, depending on the number of dots determined.⁹ Akira Hirakawa notes: "We cannot take seriously the idea that after Upāli compiled the *Vinaya*, he memorialized it and added a dot after the end of the *pavāranā*. The reason is that in Upāli's time the *Vinaya* was still

me-morized and transmitted verbally...” As Prebish summarises: “there was no manuscript in which to transcribe the imagined dots.”¹⁰

By contrast Northern Buddhist legends based especially on the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the so-called *Short Chronology*), places the Buddha’s death 100 or 110 years before Asoka’s consecration. This would place the Buddha’s death at around 368 BCE or 378 BCE. However, Tibetan sources place Asoka 100-160 years after the Buddha’s death. Further, the Chinese Tripitaka yields differing dates for Asoka - 116, 118, 130 and 218 AB (that is, years “After the Buddha”). Indeed, according to dates calculated by various Chinese Buddhist schools the date of the Buddha’s death might be 552, 652, 852 BCE or a date between 252-352 BCE.¹¹

Then again, the *Vinaya* of some schools date the Council of Vesali (regarded as coinciding with Asoka’s consecration in the Northern Tradition) 100, while the *Vinaya* of other schools 110 years after the Buddha’s death. But the figures 100 and 110 are just as unsupported as the 218 figure above, apparently reflecting a vague sense of the that elapsed between the Buddha’s death and the Second Council, without any sound knowledge of how many decades were actually involved. Sarao (27) contends that it is highly probably the Council of Vasali actually took place 62 years after the Buddha’s death.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the kind of urban centres spoken of in the earliest Buddhist texts, along with many other features presupposing urban civilisation (e.g. long distance trade, money economy, financial transactions, interest, usury, mortgage, developed state, prostitution, etc.) could not have come into existence before the end of the fifth century BCE.¹² Sarao takes this into account and adds a critical analysis of attempts to date the Buddha based on competing lists of the patriarchs, generations of leading monks (the *Vinaya Masters*) deemed to have transmitted the *Vinaya* up to the time of Asoka. He concludes that the Buddha roughly died around 397 BCE. Gombrich’s dating of the Buddha’s death at 404 BCE¹³, places the emphasis on the transmission process from Upali to Mahinda.¹⁴

Two Chinese versions of Vasumitra’s *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* state that 116 years elapsed between the Buddha’s death and the appearance of Asoka, leading Nakamura to date the Buddha’s death at 383 BCE.

All of this redating has called into question almost everything scholars thought they once knew about the earliest Indian Buddhism. Now the dates for the first, second and third councils, once regarded as certain, are being questioned.¹⁵ Indeed, Prebish concludes:

If we emphasize either the suggestion of Hajime Nakamura or Richard Gombrich, it is virtually impossible to avoid some very unsettling conclusions. As stated above, Nakamura’s date of the *parinirvāṇa*, 383 B.C.E., would place the second council in 283 B.C.E. Following the suggestion of the *Sa-mayabhedoparacanacakra* of Vasumitra, dating the schism at 116 years after the Buddha’s death would make the beginnings of Buddhist sectarianism co-terminus with Aśoka’s coming to power. It would explain why the non-canonical council that occasioned that event was held in Pāṭaliputra, and would explain why some texts identify this council with Kālāśoka, recognized by some texts and individuals as the *same* person as Aśoka. Furthermore, given the tumultuous events that must have resulted from the great schism, it would explain why a third council was necessary shortly thereafter to reaffirm Buddhist orthodoxy amidst a now multivalent Buddhist *sangha*.¹⁶

2. *The Royalty Problem*

At the time Gautama was supposedly born the Ganges plain at that time was occupied by republics which were controlled by one of the four estates, the Kshatriya ruler-warrior class. Kapilavastu was not a monarchy. At best, Gautama was born into one of these noble families.¹⁷ He was not a prince.¹⁸

Given the above it is hard to conclude much about the historical figure who inspired the depiction of the Buddha as presented in Buddhist Scriptures. It would seem he was born in the republic, not kingdom, of Kapilavastu, possibly to a noble family. At some point it appears that he left normal family life to pursue enlightenment as a forest ascetic, as many others had similarly done. At some point he gained prominence as a teacher whose philosophy provided a persuasive alternative to that conveyed through Vedic Brahmanism. He evidently died sometime in a range of dates clustered around 400 BCE.

¹ K.T.S. Sarao, *Origin and Nature of Ancient Indian Buddhism* (Taipei, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2004) 27.

² Phra Sunthorn Plamintr, *Basic Buddhism Course* (Hinsdale, Illinois: Buddhadharma Meditation Center, 1991) 9.

³ B. Christina Naylor, *Seaweed from Stormwaves: Some Aspects of the Life and Thought of Nichiren - Buddha's Messenger to Japan?* (Ph.D thesis, University of Sydney, July 1984) 373. So Suresamati who dated the Buddha's final nirvana ("death") at c.2420 BC. Atisa, an Indian scholar dates the final nirvana at 2136 BC. See Powers, 25.

⁴ See Charles S. Prebish, "Cooking the Buddhist Books: The Implications of the New Dating of the Buddha for the History of Early Indian Buddhism" in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 15 (2008) 3
<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

⁵ For a discussion of the various proposals see Mun-Keat Choong, "Discussion on the Determination of the Date of the Historical Buddha" in *Journal of Indian History* (March 2004) 1-6.

⁶ To be more technical still, there is actually a Long Chronology and a Corrected Long Chronology. See Prebish, "Cooking", 4.

⁷ See Sarao, 22ff; Prebish, "Cooking", 4ff.

⁸ Referred to initially by Tao-hsüan in the *Ta t'ang nei tien lu*. Prebish, "Cooking", 6.

⁹ Sarao, 28-29.

¹⁰ "Cooking", 7.

¹¹ Sarao, 27.

¹² See Sarao, 31-38.

¹³ See too Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy. An Introduction* (Aldershot, Hants, UK: Ashgate / Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 2007) 15.

¹⁴ Prebish, "Cooking", 8.

¹⁵ Prebish, "Cooking", 2.

¹⁶ "Cooking", 15.

¹⁷ Alex Kennedy, *The Buddhist Vision: An Introduction to the Theory and Practice* (London: Rider, 1985) 16.

¹⁸ See too Siderits, 17.