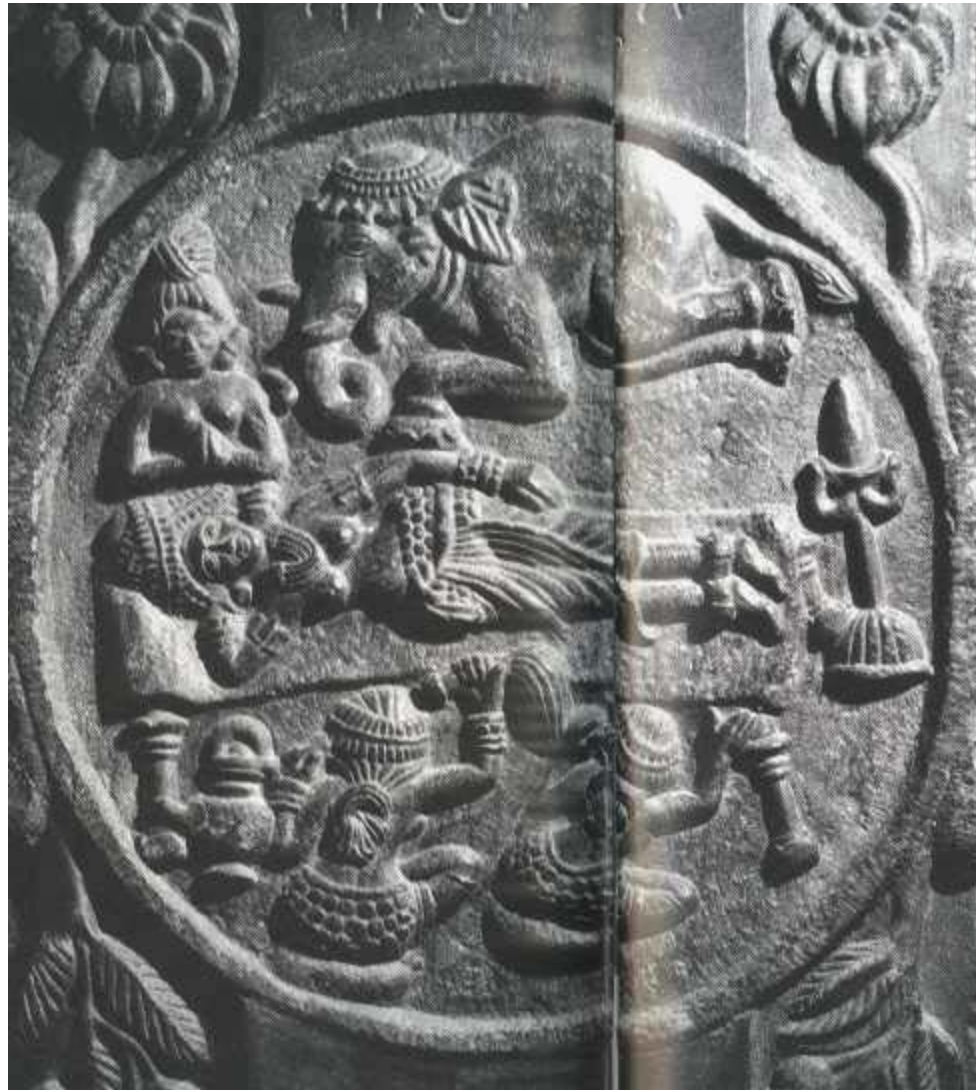


Māyā's Dream and Other Legends pertaining to the Buddha's Conception and Birth

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The Mahāpadāna Suttanta (Dīgha Nikāya.14)

The Acchariyabbhūtaḍḍhamma Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya.123)

The Nidānakathā

The Lalitavistara

The Mahāvastu

The Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra

The Garbhāvakraṇtisūtra

अभिनिष्क्रमणसूत्र

गर्भावक्रांतिसूत्र

The modules/blueprints

Historical biography: highly tentative

The Buddhist tradition came to accept fairly early that the attainment of bodhi by the Buddha was not just the result of a few years of hard work but the culmination of innumerable previous lives recounted in the Jātakas and elsewhere.

During those innumerable lives, he gradually perfected himself through the performance of different meritorious deeds and was finally born on earth as Prince Vessantara.

There is also the familiar tradition that the Buddha was born ignorant, saw those “scenes,” left home, struggled as a homeless person and then attained Enlightenment.

According to Buddhaghosa, when he inclined himself to die in Tusita, **he did not know his dying thought** (Woods *et al* 1922-1938: iii.119.29).

For performing the dāna pāramitā quintessentially, Vessantara was awarded by Sakka to be reborn as a deva in the Tusita heaven, from where descended to the earth to be born as Siddhattha Gotama. Unlike the other devas, he was mindfully (*sato sampajāno*) reborn in the Tusita heaven, stayed there mindfully during his entire sojourn, and then descended mindfully from the Tusita heaven into his mother's womb (Trenckner and Chalmers 1888-1896: iii.119; Woods et al 1922-1938: iii.119.26).

Contrast: The *devas* of Tusita were engrossed in enjoyment so much that they would forget to eat or drink, and would eventually fall from heaven after having died of starvation. However, the bodhisattva was reborn in the human realm of his own volition (Woods *et al* 1922-1938: iii.119.29).

He **himself determined** the time, continent, country, family, and mother (Trenckner and Chalmers 1888-1896: iii.119).

It is worthy of notice here that the bodhisattva in the legend is shown as **a fully conscious agent**.

Mother Māyā **a perpetual virgin** (like the mothers of Moses and Jesus) and develops an aversion to sensual pleasure. **Particular efforts** appears to have been made to show that the Buddha's last birth was asexual and that it did not result from any kind of sexual activity on the part of Māyā.

Both the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* and the *Mahāvastu* also make an explicit reference to the conception taking place precisely *without* the help of the king (Beal 1875: 36; Jones 1976: ii.6).

Asexual conception, it has been suggested, may be attributed to the belief that the birth of the Buddha in its totality **must be morally and physically pure**.

Moreover, as pointed out in the *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra*, parents must have a lustful thought for the purpose of indulging in sexual intercourse so that the mother can conceive a child. But as per the teaching of the Buddha, lustful thinking is essentially defiling which leads to rebirth and hence causes suffering. The *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra* describes the rebirth process in detail for the sake of arousing or confirming disgust in *saṃsāra* (Kritzer 2009: 78). In fact, E.J. Thomas considers the conception a case of **parthenogenesis** (Thomas 1927: 36).

No one else can be born in the womb that has given birth to a Buddha.

Though the Buddha's parents belonged to wealthy nobility, **royalty is conferred** on them in order to heighten the moral effects of the bodhisattva's Renunciation (see Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1890-1911: i.115; Dayal 1932: 294).

Collective Karma: In the Jātakas and elsewhere the karmic history of the future Buddha is shown as interlinked with the karmic histories of many other personalities. E.g., The Bodhisatta and his mother, two important participants in this collective karma, may have worked together in the past to be born as son and mother.

In other words, **the Buddha's mother's accomplishments were not only her own, they were partly her son's too** (Strong 1997: 113-128).

The would-be buddha descended from the Tusita heaven into his mother's womb **mindfully** (*sato sampajāno*), stayed there **mindfully**, and left the womb **mindfully**" (Walshe 1998: 203; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 980; Woods *et al* 1922-1938: iii.119).

If he was so mindful all this while, then how come he became **almost completely ignorant** when he went out of the palace and saw those scenes which made him leave home?

The experience was specifically clean for the bodhisattva as “he is not polluted by bile, phlegm, blood or any other foul matter, but remains clean. For while the Bodhisatta is in his mother’s womb, he has his body rubbed with perfumes and washed clean” (Jones 1976: ii.16).

The bodhisattva’s presence on earth was so powerful that, **even before his birth, his energy was felt throughout the universe** (Mitra 1998: 100-102).

Non-vaginal birth

The seven great *ṛṣis* (sages) of the Vedas were all born from unusual places and the Bodhisatta is also placed on equal footing with previous great sages. There is a reference in the *Ṛg Veda* to the idea of being born from the side of the mother (iv.18.1 quoted at Dayal 1932: 298).

As the Buddha was not born vaginally, this lack of passage through the birth canal is reflective of a concern for purity.

It has also been suggested that as the trauma of vaginal birth wipes out the memory of previous lives, the bodhisattva being aware of his previous existences, obviously could not have been born through the birth canal. As Hara has persuasively shown, the Buddha's special status of being born fully mindful, just as he was before birth, may be attributed to his avoidance of the traumas of normal birth which being a tortuous process removes the mindfulness of the individual that he has in the womb (Hara 1980: 142-157).

By being born through the birth canal, one inherits sin in some way. The Buddha descended from heaven after exhausting his positive karma, his birth through the birth canal was not possible.

The fact of Māyā giving birth to the bodhisattva **standing** signified that his mother was not an ordinary woman.

Both the *Mahāpadāna Suttanta* and the *Acchariyabbhūtaḍḍhamma Sutta* point out that when the Bodhisattva issues from his mother's womb, **devas welcome him first**, and then humans. ... he does not touch the earth. Four devas receive him and place him before his mother" (Walshe 1998: 204; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995: 982).

The *Lalitavistara* says: "**no Bodhisatta should be received by any human being**; therefore, was the Bodhisatta first received by Devas" (Mitra 1998: 114).

He “takes a firm stance on both feet facing north, then takes seven strides, and under a white sunshade, he scans the four quarters and then declares with a bull-like voice: “I am chief in the world, supreme in the world, eldest in the world. This is my last birth, there will be no more re-becoming.... when the bodhisatta issues from his mother’s womb there appears in this world... an immeasurable, splendid light surpassing the splendour of the gods (Walshe 1998: 204; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995: 983).

(Could we still consider him an ordinary and ignorant person? Where is the childhood of an ordinary person? Isn’t he walking and talking right after his birth?)

Further, the would-be Buddha is born **exactly after ten months** (Walshe 1998: 204) and with thirty-two marks of a Great Man (Walshe 1998: 205-206; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995: 982).

Walk in all four directions signifies a cakravartin king's conquest of the world.

The *Lalitavistara*: the images of the deities fell down before him when his father took him on visit to the family temple (Mittra 1998: 120.3). In other words, **he reversed all the current hierarchies and took his rightful place at the top** right after he took his last birth.

The *Buddhacarita*: The Bodhisatta “was born not ignorant but fully conscious” (Johnston 1936: i.11).

The *Lalitavistara*: he came forth from the womb “with full memory, knowing everything” (Mittra 1998: 114).

The notion entered the Buddhist tradition at least from the time of Buddhaghosa, if not earlier, that the would-be Buddha was born mindful.

However, Buddhaghosa at one place points out that the bodhisattva was a human being born with particular limitations and that he was ignorant and even naked at birth (Woods *et al* 1922-1938: ii.123.23). He further states that some believe he was born invisible, but in reality he was visible (Woods *et al* 1922-1938: ii.123.23). This may be a response to the idea of the *Mahāvastu* that the would-be Buddha's **body was made of mind at birth**.

Texts such as the *Mahāvastu* and the *Lalitavistara* specifically emphasize the transcendental and supra mundane character of the Buddha. Though they portray him as conforming to the worldly ways, he is not basically affected by them.

In other words, though he may appear to be exerting himself, he does not feel any fatigue. Similarly, though he may be seen as eating and drinking, he does not ever experience hunger or thirst. It is in this backdrop that the notion grew that **the Buddha had always been enlightened**, that **his life on earth was simply a manifestation of an unchanging, transcendent, and eternal body of truth, the *Dharmakāya***. As a result, various events of the life of the Buddha, such as his birth, quest, enlightenment, and death, came to be perceived **not as transformative personal existential process** for him, but as **a manifestation of his compassionate efforts to teach others** and to be an ideal model for them to be emulated. This appears to have been one of the efforts to answer the paradox of him being virtually omniscient at birth but quite ignorant as an adolescent.

Bareau explains this perceived contradiction as having arisen as a result of efforts to conflate together multiple sources into one composite account (see Bareau 1962: 6-33).

Silk believes that this apparent paradox can be understood by viewing the Buddha's biography as incorporating two module/blueprints

As suggested by J.S. Strong, 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).

As he began walking and talking instantaneously after he was born, the Buddha did not have a typical childhood. The legends show him as a **most preternatural child**, in fact, as a **superman in his childhood or even a human without childhood**.

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