

The Essential Guide to **the Buddha**



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FOR THIRTEEN YEARS, I've worked as a journalist, interviewing writers, actors, activists, dharma teachers, and more. Recently, someone asked me whom I'd interview if there were no limits and I could interview anyone I wanted.

This was not a question I had to think twice about. Beyond a doubt, I would zip back in time some 2,600 years and hoof it all over northern India until I found the Buddha. Then I would turn on my recorder and dive into my million and one questions.

Tradition has it that the Buddha was born a prince named Siddhartha Gautama. There was a prophecy that Siddhartha would either become a great king or a great spiritual master. Siddhartha's father carefully sheltered his son from anything unpleasant so his son would choose the path of royalty.

Prince Siddhartha got married and had a son of his own. Then, at the age of twenty-nine, he saw suffering for the very first time: an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. He also encountered a spiritual seeker who was attempting to find freedom from suffering. Siddhartha was profoundly affected and, in the middle of the night, he slipped away from his worldly life in the palace.

For six years, Siddhartha lived as an ascetic, eating almost nothing. Eventually he realized that if he continued to mistreat his body, he would die. If he wanted to reach enlightenment, he

needed a middle way — neither harsh asceticism nor indulgence. Siddhartha ate a bowl of milky rice, which gave him enough strength to sit under a tree until he understood the true nature of things, becoming the Buddha.

For the next forty-five years, the Buddha taught others how they too could reach enlightenment. Then at the age of eighty, he apparently died of food poisoning.

So that is quite a lot of information about the Buddha — and, trust me, there is a mountain more — but is it true? Nothing, apparently, was written down about him — neither his teachings nor his life story — until the end of the first century BCE. Passed down orally for hundreds of years, parts of his biography were surely misremembered and maybe even fabricated.

Since I can't actually get that interview with the Buddha, each of us will just have to decide for ourselves what we believe is factual and what we believe is myth. But in the end I'm not convinced it matters so much. What's important is whether or not we feel the basic tenets of the teachings attributed to the Buddha, such as the four noble truths and the practice of mindfulness, are deeply true and helpful to our lives, however they originated.

—Andrea Miller, deputy editor | Lion's Roar



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Who was the Buddha?

“Buddha” means “one who is awake.” The Buddha who lived 2,600 years ago was not a god. He was an ordinary person, named Siddhartha Gautama, whose profound insights inspired the world, **Barbara O’Brien** explains.

Buddha is not a name, but a title. It is a Sanskrit word that means “a person who is awake.” What a buddha is awake to is the true nature of reality.

Simply put, Buddhism teaches that we all live in a fog of illusions created by mistaken perceptions and “impurities”—hate, greed, ignorance. A buddha is one who is freed from the fog. It is said that when a buddha dies he or she is not reborn but passes into the peace of Nirvana, which is not a “heaven” but a transformed state of existence.

Most of the time, when someone says *the* Buddha, it’s in reference to the historical person who founded Buddhism. This was a man originally named Siddhartha Gautama who lived in what is now northern India and Nepal about twenty-five centuries ago.

What do we know about the historical Buddha?

The traditional story begins with Siddhartha Gautama's birth in Lumbini, Nepal, in about 567 BCE. He was the son of a king, raised in sheltered opulence. He married and had a son.

Prince Siddhartha was twenty-nine years old when his life changed. In carriage rides outside his palaces he first saw a sick person, then an old man, then a corpse. This shook him to the core of his being; he realized that his privileged status would not protect him from sickness, old age, and death. When he saw a spiritual seeker—a mendicant “holy man”—the urge to seek peace of mind arose in him.

He sat in meditation beneath “the Bodhi tree” until he realized enlightenment. From that time on, he would be known as the Buddha.

The prince renounced his worldly life and began a spiritual quest. He sought teachers and punished his body with ascetic practices such as extreme, prolonged fasts. It was believed that punishing the body was the way to elevate the mind and that the door to wisdom was found at the edge of death. However, after six years of this, the prince felt only frustration.

Eventually, he realized that the path to peace was through mental discipline. At Bodh Gaya, in the modern Indian state of Bihar, he sat in meditation beneath a ficus tree, “the Bodhi tree,” until he awakened, or realized enlightenment. From that time on, he would be known as the Buddha.

He spent the rest of his life teaching people how to realize enlightenment for themselves. He gave his first sermon in modern-day Sarnath, near Benares, and then walked from village to village, attracting disciples along the way. He founded the original order of Buddhist nuns and monks, many of whom became great teachers also. He died in Kushinagar, located in what is now the state of Uttar Pradesh in northern India, about 483 BCE.

The traditional story of the Buddha's life may not be factually accurate; we have no way to know for certain. Historians today generally agree there was a historical Buddha, and that he lived sometime in the 4th through 6th centuries BCE, give or take. It's believed that at least some of the sermons and monastic rules recorded in the oldest scriptures are his words, or something close to his words. But that's as far as most historical scholars will go.

Have there been other Buddhas?

In Theravada Buddhism—the dominant school of southeast Asia—it is thought there is only one buddha per age of humankind; each age is an unimaginably long time. The buddha of the current age is our historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Another person who realizes enlightenment within this age is not called buddha. Instead, he or she is an arhat (Sanskrit) or arahant (Pali) — “worthy one” or “perfected one.” The principal difference between an arhat and a buddha is that only a buddha is a world teacher, the one who opens the door for all others.

Early scriptures name other buddhas who lived in the unimaginably long-ago earlier ages. There is also Maitreya, the future Buddha who will appear when all memory of our Buddha's teachings has been lost.

There are other major traditions of Buddhism, called Mahayana and Vajrayana, and these traditions put no limits on the number of buddhas there can be. However, for practitioners of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism the ideal is to be a bodhisattva, one who vows to remain in the world until all beings are enlightened.

What about buddhas in Buddhist art?

There are multitudes of buddhas, especially in Mahayana and Vajrayana scriptures and art. They represent aspects of enlightenment, and they also represent our own deepest natures. Some of the better known iconic or transcendent buddhas include Amitabha, the Buddha of Boundless Light; Bhaisajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha who represents the power of healing; and Vairocana, the universal or primordial Buddha who represents absolute reality. The way the buddhas are posed also convey particular meanings.

The bald, chubby, laughing fellow many Westerners think of as Buddha is a character from tenth-century Chinese folklore. His name is Budai in China, or Hotei in Japan. He represents happiness

and abundance, and he is a protector of children and the sick and weak. In some stories he is explained as an emanation of Maitreya, the future Buddha.

Do Buddhists worship Buddha?

The Buddha was not a god, and the many iconic figures of Buddhist art are not meant to represent godlike beings who will do you favors if you worship them.

The Buddha was said to be critical of worship, in fact. In one scripture (Sigalovada Sutta, Digha Nikaya 31) he encountered a young man engaged in a Vedic worship practice. The Buddha told him it's more important to live in a responsible, ethical way than to worship anything.

You might think of worship if you see Buddhists bowing to Buddha statues, but there's something else going on. In some schools of Buddhism, bowing and making offerings are physical expressions of the dropping away of a selfish, ego-centered life and a commitment to practice the Buddha's teachings.

What did the Buddha teach?

When the Buddha achieved enlightenment, he also realized something else: that what he'd perceived was so far outside ordinary experience that it couldn't entirely be explained. So, instead of teaching people what to believe, he taught them to realize enlightenment for themselves.

The foundational teaching of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. Very briefly, the First Truth tells us that life is dukkha, a word that doesn't translate neatly into English. It is often translated as "suffering," but it also means "stressful" and "unable to satisfy."

The Second Truth tells us dukkha has a cause. The immediate cause is craving, and the craving comes from not understanding reality and not knowing ourselves. Because we misunderstand ourselves we are riddled with anxiety and frustration. We experience life in a narrow, self-centered way, going through life craving things we think will make us happy. But we find satisfaction only briefly, and then the anxiety and craving start again.

The Third Truth tells us we can know the cause of dukkha and be liberated from the hamster wheel of stress and craving. Merely adopting Buddhist beliefs will not accomplish this, however. Liberation depends on one's own insight into the source of dukkha. Craving will not cease until you realize for yourself what's causing it.

The Fourth Truth tells us that insight comes through practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path might be explained as an outline of eight areas of practice—including meditation, mindfulness, and living an ethical life that benefits others—that will help us live happier lives and find the wisdom of enlightenment. ✿



The Buddha Was Here

On a pilgrimage to India, **Andrea Miller** connects with the flesh-and-blood Buddha, who lived, reached enlightenment, and taught in these very places. His humanity, she finds, is more inspiring than any legend. It means awakening is possible for all of us.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM in New Delhi doesn't usually welcome visitors until 10 a.m., but on the first morning of the 2018 International Buddhist Conclave, they open their doors early for us. This, the sixth edition of the conclave, is attended by nearly three hundred people from twenty-nine countries. We are journalists and monastics, travel agents and scholars. We are Buddhists from many traditions and non-Buddhists. Our purpose is to connect with each other and explore the potential of Buddhist pilgrimage in India.

As I'm filing through security, I have no idea what treasures the National Museum houses. So as far as I know, this museum visit doesn't have a direct connection to the conclave's mission. It's just a nice add-on for those of us who are interested. And I am interested—in everything. This is my first time in India, a place I have always longed to visit.

I marvel at an elegant bronze figurine of a dancer from the Indus Valley, circa 2500 BCE. I laugh when Shantum Seth, an Indian dharma teacher in Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village tradition, quips that the ancient dinnerware on display looks as if it could have come from Ikea. (He's right!) But most memorable of all, I feel a quiet thrill when I come to the Buddhist artifacts and, though I'm being hurried along, I pause for as long as I can in front of a depiction of the Buddha's birth. As was the artistic custom in the early centuries of Buddhism, the Buddha himself is not shown—just his footprints.

Along with the other delegates, I'm ushered into a room that's been prepared for us for meditation and I quietly take a seat on the floor. We sit facing an intricate pavilion, gleaming with gold, that was crafted from teak by Thai artists. This pavilion is roped off and behind glass, and I don't know what it holds until someone whispers in my ear: they're bone fragments from the Buddha.

But are they really? The Buddha died so long ago. How can we know that these bits of skull belonged to him and not to someone else? This is a valid question. Yet as Shantum Seth rings the bell and a clutch of Theravadin monks in saffron robes begins to drone their Pali chants, it's not a question that concerns me. What's touching me is the fact that the Buddha had bones—and flesh—at all.

So often we talk about the Buddha as if he were a figure from mythology, not a human being like you and me. Generation after generation, for thousands of years, we've revered his wisdom so

much that in our imagination he has become more of a deity than a person, and his life story has been embellished with fantastical flourishes—the stuff of legends. Maybe it’s because we want there to be someone who is more than human to save us. Maybe it’s because it’s so hard to grasp a time like 500 BCE, which is around when the Buddha lived. It sounds so far in the past that maybe it was never.

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But now I’m meditating in front of ancient bone and, for a moment, it feels as if the Buddha has reached through the centuries and tapped me on the shoulder. *I was real, he seems to say. I was here.*

This is how the story goes. Twenty-six centuries ago, in the foothills of the Himalayas, Queen Mahamaya dreamed of a white elephant with a lotus in its trunk. The elephant circled her three times and then entered her womb. Since elephants were considered a symbol of greatness, this dream was taken as a sign that Mahamaya would have an extraordinary child.

In those days it was customary for a woman to return to her parents’ house to give birth. So when Mahamaya felt the time had come, she set out for her ancestral home. Along the way they stopped to rest in Lumbini, a garden in what is now Nepal, and

there she delivered her child. It is said that heavenly beings showered down flower petals and the newborn—shining like the sun—took seven paces in each direction and wherever he stepped, a lotus sprang up.

It was prophesied that the boy, named Siddhartha, would grow up to become either a great king or a great spiritual leader. His father—hoping that Siddhartha would dedicate himself to the political realm—tried to guide him in that direction by sheltering Siddhartha within the luxurious confines of his palaces. When Siddhartha was sixteen years old, he married Yasodhara, who was also of his clan, and the couple eventually had a son.

But then, at age twenty-nine, Siddhartha got a glimpse of the troubled world his father had protected him from. Out driving with his charioteer, he saw—for the very first time—old age, disease, and death, and he learned that this degeneration was the inescapable human condition. The prince was shocked. How could everyone just go about their lives, seeking silly pleasures, as if this shadow weren't hanging over them?

While mired in this thought, Siddhartha saw a holy man. Dressed simply, this man had such a peaceful look on his face that Siddhartha knew what he needed to do. In the middle of the night he slipped away, leaving his family and royal life behind. This is how he took his first step on the spiritual path.

Siddhartha found a holy man and mastered his teachings; then he found another and mastered his. Yet Siddhartha still felt that something was missing in his understanding. So, following the suggestion of the great Jain teacher Mahavira, he decided to follow the path of asceticism. Siddhartha's approach was extreme and left him skeletal and weak. Rigidly practicing meditation, he held his breath for long, dangerous periods of time and each day ate only what fit into the hollow of his palm.

Eventually, Siddhartha realized that this self-mortification was going to kill him, not lead him to enlightenment. What he actually needed to advance spiritually was a middle way, neither worldly indulgence nor harsh austerities. On Siddhartha's thirty-fifth birthday, he broke his fast when a young village woman named Sujata made him an offering: a bowl of sweetened rice cooked in milk.

Sujata's gift gave Siddhartha the strength to cross the Nairanjana River, and on the other side, on a sandy bank, he came to a large tree with heart-shaped leaves. Siddhartha sat beneath it and, in full lotus facing east, vowed that he'd stay there until he reached enlightenment. This type of tree became known as a *ficus religiosa*—a *Bodhi tree*.

Since I was a kid, I've always thought of large trees as generous, stable grandfathers, quietly offering shade and support. But the tree the Buddha sat under was more like an old teacher—kind and venerable. I imagine Siddhartha contemplating the Bodhi tree's heart-shaped leaves and seeing in them the sunshine and

rain, the earth and clouds, and in that way, I imagine the tree teaching him dependent arising: *if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist.*

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Though the original Bodhi tree is long gone, its place has been taken by what's believed to be a direct descendent. In the Buddha's time, the tree was rooted in a rural setting, but over the centuries a town by the name of Bodhgaya has grown up around it. Bodhgaya is located in the modern Indian state of Bihar—the poorest in India—and the nearest airport is in Gaya, intense and busy like all Indian cities.

I arrive on a chartered flight with the other delegates of the International Buddhist Conclave, which is sponsored by the government of India. We're given an exuberant, flower-filled welcome and herded onto eight buses festooned with marigold garlands, long stemmed red roses, and ribbons. Driving to Bodhgaya, the buses stick together as if they are a train. A police escort leads us, and children wave as we pass by.

Finally, we get to the site of the Buddha's awakening, and there, silhouetted against the sky, is the Mahabodhi temple, a tall, graceful pyramid rising from a square platform. Everywhere I look people are meditating. They're monastic and lay; in robes and in jeans; doing traditional practice or their own thing. One man has his eyes covered and a bottle of water balanced in each hand, as if they were Chinese meditation balls. There's also the odd stray dog.

Bodhgaya is the most important pilgrimage site in the Buddhist world, and it's believed that even in the Buddha's time there was a shrine here. At first, the Bodhi tree was marked simply by a two-story wooden structure and stone throne. Then in the third century, Ashoka, the Mauryan king who was instrumental in spreading Buddhism in India, ordered the construction of a commemorative temple. Mahabodhi was originally built in the sixth century and over the years has been destroyed and rebuilt several times.

Along with the rest of the delegates, I take my place under the Bodhi tree, which is right beside the temple. Sitting on oriental rugs that have been laid out for us, we face an altar laden with dragon fruit, pomegranates, pink roses, and a statue of the Buddha. A Theravadin monk lights a lamp, and the chanting begins, then builds, and finally stops. Slowly, I let go of my rushing and grasping and find my breath.

Shantum Seth, who sits facing me and the other delegates, rings a bell. “Our teacher, the Buddha, sat under the Bodhi tree for forty-nine days and nights and then continued to be with the Bodhi tree for another forty-nine days,” he says. “So, we look at the Bodhi tree as our spiritual ancestor and we sit with her in the same way the Buddha did—in the present moment.”

Seth holds a yellow Bodhi leaf in his hand and glances down at it occasionally. Focusing on our breath, he continues, our body and mind come together. Often our body is here but our mind is elsewhere. Meditation trains the mind to come back to the present and gives us a way to look more deeply into what’s going on both inside of us and outside.

Seth rings the bell again and guides us to straighten our backs, relax our shoulders, and feel the gentle rise and fall of our bellies. He has a soothing voice, which eventually dissolves into silence. Now, we are hundreds of people, all together, listening to nothing but our breathing and the chorus of birds calling from the branches above our heads.

Later, I talk about our experience under the Bodhi tree with one of the non-Buddhist delegates, a journalist from Poland. Something about it touched her so deeply, she says, that it brought tears to her eyes. It was like she could feel the collective energy of generation after generation of people coming to this spot and finding stillness and quiet. It didn’t matter that she wasn’t a Buddhist.

Shantum Seth, in addition to being a dharma teacher, is also a longtime leader of Buddhist pilgrimage tours with his company Buddhapath. Under the Bodhi tree, he says, people often find they have a deep sense of concentration and gratitude. “There are magical memories you can have,” he continues. “You’re sitting there meditating and then maybe a leaf falls onto your lap. You can take that leaf with you to your meditation space back home and put it on your alter to be reminded of this beautiful space where the Buddha—and you—practiced.”

Siddhartha took his seat under the Bodhi tree on a full moon just before the rainy season. As our train of buses pulls away from Bodhgaya, I understand a little more about what it must have been like for him. We were also there when the moon was a perfect circle. While I was sitting under the Bodhi tree, a few cooling raindrops fell on my back, and they felt like a gift.

After the Buddha achieved enlightenment, he pondered how he could share his realizations with others. The truth he had realized was difficult to grasp and ran hard against the grain of human desires. Most people, the Buddha knew, would turn away from his teachings, but he would try to teach those who could truly listen and understand.

The Buddha contemplated who he should teach first. He thought of the two holy men he’d studied with, but he knew they had passed away. Then he thought of the five men he’d practiced

asceticism with. They'd shunned him when he started to practice the middle way, but he knew they were sincere seekers and might listen.

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The five ascetics were residing in a park where deer roamed freely, in a place now called Sarnath, located in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. So, taking his leave of the Bodhi tree, the Buddha walked more than 160 miles to find his old companions. When they saw him coming, they resolved to ignore him, but there was something new and remarkable about his bearing and, despite themselves, they were drawn to him.

This, says Shantum Seth, is when “the Buddha became the buddhadharma.” On that day in Deer Park, the Buddha taught for the very first time. In this, his first sermon, he taught the four noble truths, and in doing so laid the foundation of the world religion we know today as Buddhism. He taught the truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path.

An ascetic named Kaundinya was the first to realize the truth of the Buddha's teachings. Then soon after, the other four ascetics in the Deer Park came to the same realization. They were the first Buddhist monks, and the Buddhist sangha—the world's oldest continuous human institution—was born.

The Buddha went on to teach for forty-five years. He and his growing number of followers crisscrossed the plains of northern India, going everywhere on foot. He often returned to Sarnath and the surrounding area.

Today, the most iconic feature of Sarnath is the massive Dhamek Stupa, built in 500 CE. Stupas are Buddhist mound-like structures that often contain relics, but Dhamek is solid and relic-less. Other notable sites in this historical city include additional stupas and the Archaeological Museum Sarnath, which houses such antiquities as a lustrously polished sculpture of four lions, each facing a different direction. These four united felines were crafted under the auspices of King Ashoka and originally topped a pillar in Sarnath. Today they're recognized around the world as the official symbol of the Republic of India.

As I wander Sarnath, I linger near the Dhamek Stupa, feeling small next to its girth of more than ninety feet. From a distance, it looks unornamented but up close I can see that it's delicately chiseled with floral and geometric designs, human figures, and even geese. Geese, I'm told, symbolize the sangha because they're birds that live in community, taking turns leading and caring for

each other. This reminds me of two Theravadin monastics—one elderly, one young—who are participating in the conclave. The young monk takes such tender care of his teacher.

Near the Dhamek Stupa stands the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, a temple established in 1931 with an interesting—and international—backstory. In 1891, Anagarika Dharmapala, a Buddhist revivalist from Ceylon, went on pilgrimage to India. At that time, the Mahabodhi Temple had recently been restored but—since Buddhism was no longer practiced in India—the temple had been converted into a place of worship of the Hindu deity Shiva.

When Dharmapala saw this, he resolved to help bring Buddhism back to India and, as part of his efforts, he spoke about Buddhism at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. On the way back, his ship docked in Hawaii and, there, Mary Foster, a friend of a friend, went to meet him. She was a wealthy American woman in emotional turmoil, and Dharmapala consoled her with Buddhist teachings. After that, Foster gave him a substantial donation, and he used that money to build Mulagandhakuti Vihara, marking where the Buddha meditated during his first rainy season retreat after awakening.

On the Mulagandhakuti grounds, there is a tree that, like the one in Bodhgaya, is said to be a descendent of the original Bodhi tree. Its spreading branches are said to symbolize the new growth of Buddhism in India. The temple exterior is embellished with spires, and the interior is graced by a golden statue of the Buddha and frescos depicting his life that were poignantly painted in

soft hues by a Japanese artist. There, in front of me on the wall, is an image of the newly born Siddhartha taking his first steps. And there he is under the Bodhi tree, with Sujata presenting him with her food offering. Finally, there he is stretched out on his side in death—his final resting posture.

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In this place where the Buddha is said to have spent a rainy season meditating, I feel as if he just whispered in my ear. He seemed to say to me that although he was not eternal, his teachings are.

According to the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha said it is of great benefit for practitioners to go on pilgrimage to the four places associated with the most pivotal moments in his life: his birth, his enlightenment, his first teaching, and his death. But bear in mind that the point of pilgrimage isn't just veneration. As Shantum Seth explains, it “teaches us a healthy disregard for comfort. It helps us look at our own mind in an unhabituated way, and teaches patience and humility. You get to know yourself better.”

When we go to these Buddhist pilgrimage sites, we gain new insight into the Buddha's teachings because we have a deeper understanding of his life and circumstances. Despite all the cars, cellphones, and skyscrapers, you can still connect with the India the Buddha lived in 2,600 years ago. Village life is cut from same ancient cloth, and you can meet a modern-day Sujata, serving

something sweet and energizing. The rivers and caves you read about in the sutras are still there, too. Farmers still plow their fields behind water buffalo the same way they did in the Buddha's time. On pilgrimage, says Seth, "The Buddha's story becomes real. You're seeing the whole context of his life. You're breathing the same air he did."

In the Mulagandhakuti temple, I take another long look at the fresco of the Buddha stretched out in death. He died from food poisoning in Kushinagar, in present-day Uttar Pradesh. He was in his eighties and, like every other human being, he'd experienced various mundane ailments his whole life. Sickness, age, fatigue, death—these are the realities of a human body, even the body of the Buddha.

Now, in this place where the Buddha is said to have spent a rainy season meditating, I feel as if he just whispered in my ear, then slipped out the temple door. He seemed to say to me that although he was not eternal, his teachings are, and the beautiful, inspiring thing about his being human is that it means there's hope for all of us. We—just like the Buddha—have the potential to awaken.

I stand in front of the golden Buddha at the altar and light a candle. Then, following my breath, I watch the flame dance and burn. ✿



In Search of the Real Buddha

Buddhist scholar **Peter Harvey** explores the facts, myths, and deeper truths of the Buddha's life story.

Whatever Buddhist tradition we follow, we are probably all familiar with some version of the story of the Buddha, featuring his life and qualities. But what are contemporary Buddhists to make of this figure, generally known as Gotama Buddha by Theravadins and Sakyamuni Buddha by Mahayanists, who lived in the fifth-century BCE (perhaps 484–404)? How close can we get to knowing what he was really like based on critical analysis of the early texts? This is a question related to Buddhist practice, for not only is it said that to have insight into the Dhamma is to have insight into the Buddha, but also that to have insight into the Buddha is to have insight into the Dhamma (SN.III.120).

For a modern Buddhist practitioner, the developed story and figure of the Buddha is a bit like a venerated piece of antique furniture, with a fine patina on it from centuries of handling by previous generations. We are also adding our own fingerprints to it. But trying to dig back to the “bare facts” of the Buddha's life can be like stripping the patina off a fine antique—something many people would be wary of doing, since it might be disrespectful

to the original. However, perhaps it is necessary, as the “antique” Buddha needs restoring, and doing so may reveal the various decorations that have been added over the centuries.

Still, we need to beware of being restricted by too narrow a view of what is possible; our modern perspectives and ideas may lead us to a rather thin and shallow way of seeing the world. We may be tempted to say of some element of the Buddha’s life story, *Ah, that cannot be true, so it must be a later addition that we can ignore.* And we also need to remember that myths are meaningful stories that may convey truth or a direction worth exploring.

The Buddha’s Life Stories

The earliest recorded stories of the Buddha are preserved mostly in Pali texts from the Theravada tradition, which express and share ideas common to various early schools prior to the development of the Mahayana, which in turn developed further reinterpretations and extensions. Some material on the life of the Buddha exists in the Vinaya, or texts on monastic discipline, but more are found in the suttas, the discourses of the Buddha. In their Pali versions, these are grouped in five *nikayas*, or collections: the *Digha Nikaya* (DN), *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN), *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN), *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN), and *Khuddaka Nikaya* (KN).

The suttas and Vinaya were originally transmitted by communal chanting, then written down for the first time around 20 BCE in Sri Lanka. As in other early textual collections, such as the Chinese *Agamas*, the suttas of the Pali *Nikayas* begin, “Thus

have I heard, at one time the Blessed One was staying at... and...,” which purport to be the words of Ananda, the Buddha’s faithful attendant for many years, and spoken at the council of five hundred enlightened monks (arahants) convened after the death of the Buddha to collect his teachings.

The story of the historical Buddha is told in various stages across diverse sources. In the suttas and Vinaya, for example, there is scattered material on certain periods in his life, notably his conception and birth (*Acchhariya-abbhuta Sutta*, MN.123); a few aspects of his pre-renunciation life (e.g. *Sukhumala Sutta*, at AN.I.145); his renunciation (*Ariya-pariyesana Sutta*, MN.26); his spiritual quest, in which he was taught two “formless” mystical states (MN.26 and *Maha-saccaka Sutta*, MN.36) and then practiced harsh asceticism (MN.36); temptation by Mara (*Padhana Sutta of the Sutta-nipata*, verses 425–49); his using the four jhanas as a basis for remembering many past lives, seeing how beings are reborn according to their karma, and attaining enlightenment (MN.36); considering whether to teach and then teaching (MN.26; *Dhamma-cakka-ppavatana Sutta*, SN.V.420–25; Vin. I.4–12); and gaining his first disciples and sending them out to spread the Dhamma (Vin. I.12–21). Events in his forty-five years of teachings are hard to sequence, but the last three months of his life are dealt with in the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta* (DN.16, DN. II.72–168).

The Jataka stories, their verses recorded in the Pali canon, were fleshed out in later commentaries. They include many tales of inspiring people, gods, and animals depicted as past rebirths of

the Buddha prior to his enlightenment. Some of the stories originate in non-Buddhist collections but were later “Buddhicized.” All of them came to be seen as illustrating how as a bodhisattva the Buddha developed various perfections. The *Buddhavamsa* of the Pali canon describes the Buddhas of past ages and aeons whom he met and was inspired by.

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While the facts of human frailty and mortality are known to us all, a clear realization and acceptance of them often does come as a novel, disturbing insight.

Centuries after the Buddha’s death, a more devotional interest in his life developed. Several biographies/hagiographies were written that drew on scattered accounts in the existing sutta and Vinaya collections and on floating oral traditions. These include the *Mahavastu* (“Great Story,” a text from the Lokottaravada school of early Buddhism), the *Lalitavistara Sutra* (“The Play in Full,” a Mahayana sutra), the *Buddhacarita* (“Acts of the Buddha,” an epic poem by Ashvaghosha, and the *Nidanakatha* (the introduction to the Jataka commentary). These, with certain variations, give us the story of the Buddha as we have it now—material from the earlier texts linked into an ongoing narrative, with many embellishing features added in glorification of the Buddha.

Later texts talk of the Buddha born as a prince, the son of a king. In fact, he lived and taught in a society in which small-scale tribal republics were giving way to larger kingdoms. He was born

in the small republic of the Sakka (Skt., Sakya) people, in which rule was probably by a council of household heads, perhaps qualified by age or social standing. As he later wandered in the developing kingdoms, taught some of their kings, and talked of himself as coming from the warrior-ruler class, it became natural for later texts to refer to him as coming from a royal background.

Later biographies describe the Buddha's renunciation as being prompted by seeing, for the first time, an old person, a sick person, and a corpse, leading to agitation at the aging, sickness, and death that we are all heir to. Yet the early texts talk of his renunciation only as the result of gradual reflection (AN.I.145–46, MN.I.163). A story of seeing an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a calm and inspiring renunciant is there in the texts but applied to a past Buddha, Vipassi (DN.II.22–9). Given that the lives of all Buddhas are said to follow a recurring pattern, we can see why this story was applied to the Buddha of our age. In any case, the story expresses a fundamental teaching in a very memorable way. While the facts of human frailty and mortality are known to us all, a clear realization and acceptance of them often does come as a novel, disturbing insight.

There are also small variations between the developed biographies. The Theravada *Nidanakatha* says that the Gotama's renunciation was just after the birth of his son, Rahula (Ndk.61–3), while the Sarvastivada tradition has Rahula being conceived on the night of the renunciation, thus ensuring that Gotama's family line is continued.

Was the Buddha Omniscient?

A quality that is regularly applied to the Buddha in later texts is omniscience (*sabbaññuta*). To what extent is this claim found in the early texts? In the *Kannakatthala Sutta*, the Buddha accepts that omniscience is possible but asserts, “There is no renunciant or brahmin who knows all, who sees all, *simultaneously*; that is not possible” (MN.II.126–27). Rather, what he claims is the “three-fold knowledge” (*te-vijja*). That is, as experienced on the night of his enlightenment, he could, “in so far as I wish,” remember his past lives, see beings being reborn according to their karma, and directly know his state of liberation (MN.I.482).

The suttas attribute the claim of *continuous* omniscience to Mahavira, the Jain leader, though they also say that he prevaricated when actually asked a question to prove it (MN.II.31). Ananda joked that some teachers who made this claim still had to ask people’s names, failed to get alms food, and got bitten by dogs—so they then had to cover themselves by saying they knew these events were destined and so did not avoid them (MN.I.519).

In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha says on the breadth of his knowledge:

Monks, in the world with its gods, maras, brahmas, in this generation with its renunciants and brahmins, gods and humans, whatever is seen, heard, sensed, and cognized, attained, searched into, pondered over by the mind—all that do I know.... I fully understand. (AN.II.25)

Echoing such passages, the *Milindapañha*, a post-canonical Theravada text (developed from first century BCE), asserts:

...the Blessed One was omniscient, but knowledge and vision were not constantly and continuously present to the Blessed One. The Blessed One's omniscient knowledge was dependent on the advert-ing [of his mind]; when he adverted it, he knew whatever it pleased [him to know]. (Miln.102)

Accordingly, the Theravada tradition holds that all knowable things could be known by the Buddha. But the threefold knowledge, as the key example of the Buddha's knowledge, says little about the future other than how particular beings will be reborn. On the question of whether the Buddha's great knowledge extends to the future, he claims that it does (DN.III.134), but the example given is that he knows he will have no further rebirths. In other contexts, however, the Buddha claims to know things in the distant future, such as the coming of the next Buddha Metteyya (Skt., Maitreya; DN.III.76).

The Buddha Makes Mistakes

The idea that Gotama possessed omniscience only applies once he had become a Buddha. Hence his six wasted years of harsh asceticism could be seen as a mistake, as part of a human quest to find the right way to awakening, although later tradition has tended to see even such actions as preplanned, done in order to make some teaching point.

But the early texts show Gotama making mistakes even after his enlightenment. A striking one is when, having taught monks to contemplate the unpleasant aspects of the innards of the body, he goes off to contemplate on his own. Upon his return, he finds that many of the monks have (wrongly) developed disgust at their body from doing this contemplation and have either killed themselves or gotten others to kill them. And so the Buddha makes a new monastic rule, that aiding a suicide has the same penalty for a monk as murder: expulsion from the sangha. He also has the monks change their contemplation to mindfulness of breathing (Vin.III.68–71, SN.V.320–22). It is intriguing that the early texts preserved a record of such a disastrous mistake, which could easily have been edited out.

There are also well-known examples of the Buddha hesitating: for example, when he debated whether it was worth teaching the Dhamma, as he initially thought no one would understand it (MN.I.168), and on the matter of whether or not to ordain women (Vin.II.253–55, AN.IV.274–80).

An Ordinary and Extraordinary Being

We see the Buddha's human frailties and physical limits on several occasions. After he had been teaching a group of laypeople "till far into the night," he asks Sariputta to teach the monks, saying, "My back aches, I want to stretch it"; he then retires to sleep (DN. III.209).

Some very human aspects of the eighty-year-old Buddha are described in the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta*. We find him expressing “weariness” at the prospect of being asked about the rebirth destiny of each and every person who has died in a particular location (DN.II.93). Another time he says, “I am old, worn out... Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathagata’s body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathagata... enters into the signless concentration that his body knows comfort” (DN.II.100). In his final illness, he is extremely thirsty and insists that there be no delay in his being given water to drink (DN.II.128–29).

Yet elsewhere in the same text, the stream he asks for water from is found to be clear, even though it had recently been churned up by many passing carts. He crosses the Ganges by his psychic power (DN.II.89). He says that if he had been asked, he would have had the power to live on “for a *kappa*, or the remainder of one” (DN.II.103), with *kappa* (Skt., *kalpa*) generally meaning aeon, but here possibly meaning the maximum human lifespan at that time, around one hundred years.

Key events in the Buddha’s life are said to have contributed to earthquakes, including his conception, birth, enlightenment, first sermon, letting go during his final illness, and passing into final nirvana at death (DN.II.108–09). His skin, very clear and bright, is said to have made gold-colored robes look dull by comparison on the night of his enlightenment and final nirvana (DN.II.133–34). When he lies down between two *sal* trees, where he will die, they

burst into unseasonal blossom in homage to him, and divine music is heard in the sky (DN.II.137–38). Extraordinary aspects of the Buddha are even said to have existed at his birth, at which he is said to have walked and talked (MN.III.123).

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The Buddha was a real historical person who ate, slept, sweated, and got tired. Yet he was also an extraordinary person who developed inspiring qualities that we are all capable of developing.

Clearly there was an intent to show two sides of the nature of the Buddha. He was an enlightened being who had experienced the transcendent and had developed supernormal powers through spiritual practices over many lifetimes, yet he also shared many human frailties with those he taught.

The supernormal facet of the Buddha is also seen in the *Lakkhana Sutta* (DN.30), which describes his body as having the “thirty-two marks of a Great Man” (DN.III.142–79). Whether interpreted as straightforward physical features or as marks visible only to the spiritually sensitive, these showed that Gotama was destined by the power of his perfections to be either a Buddha or a compassionate Universal Monarch (*Cakkavattin*). Each mark is said to have been due to a particular excellence developed during past lives and to have indicated a particular quality in the present life of a Buddha or Universal Monarch. For example, “On the soles of

his feet and on the palms of his hands wheels arise—with a thousand spokes, with rim and hub, adorned in every way and well-defined within” (in the past, he protected and helped others; in the present life, he has a great retinue of followers); “His skin is delicate and so smooth that no dust can stick to it”(in the past, he was keen to enquire of the wise about wholesome and unwholesome actions; in the present life, he has great wisdom); and “his eyes are deep blue, and he has eyelashes (long) like a cow’s” (in the past, he looked at others in a straightforward, open, direct and kindly way, not furtively; in the present life, he is popular and loved by all types of people).

Here we see that the Buddha possessed both ordinary and extraordinary features that were a crystallization of the kind of good actions that anyone can come to excel in. It is an interesting mindfulness exercise to stand and contemplate the thirty-two marks as if they were on one’s own body. Sometimes they can seem to come alive in the practice.

Not surprisingly, the question arose as to whether the Buddha was still human. Once, when someone saw in his footprints a sign of one of the “marks of a Great Man” and asked the Buddha whether he might be a deva (god), a *gandhabba* (a fragrance-eating heavenly musician), a *yakkha* (a nature-spirit), or even a human, to all these questions the Buddha replied, “No” (AN.II.37–39). In response to his puzzled questioner, he explained that he had destroyed the *asavas*, deep-rooted intoxicating inclinations that would otherwise have kept him limited as one of these kinds of

beings. He was thus none of them, but precisely a Buddha, an Awakened One. In this, he said he was like a lotus, which, although it grows from muddy water, comes to stand above it, unsoiled. He had developed from the “mud” of limitations and defilements of ordinary beings but had risen above all attachment. Elsewhere, he said that an enlightened person was beyond attachment to the bundles of processes that comprise a normal person: material form, feeling, perceptual labelling, constructing activities, and conditioned consciousness. Having abandoned attachment to these, such a liberated one was truly “deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom as is the great ocean” (MN.I.487–88).

The Voice of Dhamma

Ultimately, the most extraordinary features of the Buddha are his applied wisdom and compassion in teaching a great range of beings. A real human voice comes through the suttas, that of a person of deep, incisive, and subtle knowledge responding to the questions and situations of brahmins, non-Buddhist renunciants, kings, a great range of ordinary men and women, and even gods. It is said that what the Buddha taught, compared to what he knew, was like a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in a forest (SN.V.437–38). From what he knew to be true, he said he taught what was spiritually useful and appropriate to the moment, whether the person he taught found the teaching pleasant or painful to hear (MN.I.395).

The most important aspect of the Buddha was the Dhamma he taught and embodied in order to aid others in seeing and fathoming it. Both the restrained glorification of the Buddha in the early texts and the more embellished and magnified glorifications in the developed hagiographies were intended to help a person open to the magically transformative aspects of the Dhamma (and are only of value if they do); conversely, to see the Dhamma is to see the Buddha. Indeed, one of the qualities of a stream-enterer, someone who has had a first transformative “seeing” of nirvana with the “Dhamma-eye,” is to have this unshakable faith in the Buddha:

Thus he is the Blessed One: because he is an Arahant, perfectly and completely Awakened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of worlds, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of gods and humans, Buddha, Blessed One. (SN.V.344)

Reflecting on the Buddha in this way is the path of the noble disciple:

When a noble disciple recollects thus, on that occasion his mind is not obsessed by attachment, hatred or delusion; his mind is straight, with the Tathagata as object. A noble disciple whose mind is straight gains inspiration of the meaning, inspiration of the Dhamma, gains gladness connected with the Dhamma. When he is gladdened, joy arises; for one uplifted by joy the body becomes tranquil; one tranquil of body feels happy; for one who is happy, the mind becomes concentrated. This is called a noble disciple who dwells evenly amidst an uneven generation, who dwells unafflicted amidst an afflicted generation, who has entered the stream of the Dhamma and cultivates recollection of the Buddha. (AN.III.285)

The Buddha was a real historical person who ate, slept, sweated, and got tired. Yet he was also an extraordinary person who developed inspiring qualities that we are all capable of developing. If you find some of the details of the developed hagiography of the Buddha an off-putting burden, look to him as a great human teacher of the path beyond human limitation. 🌸



Buddha in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter

We need to update the traditional narrative of the Buddha's life, says **Pamela Ayo Yetunde**, for people who know suffering all too well. She offers some alternative stories for the time of #BlackLivesMatter.

I AM A PERSON of African descent practicing Buddhism in the age of #BlackLivesMatter. I am also trained in the Insight Meditation tradition to organize and lead Buddhist sanghas.

Most of the work I do is in pastoral counseling. My challenge is how to present the Buddhist teachings in a way that is culturally relevant to African Americans, who are acutely aware of the precariousness of their lives. The conclusion I have come to is that Buddhists need to connect African Americans to a larger story than the Buddha's individual liberation, one that is relevant and inspires them to advocate for their lives in the #BlackLivesMatter age.

Let's look at one Buddha story that is culturally irrelevant for most African Americans today.

Siddhartha was born into a wealthy family. Most African Americans are not wealthy; in fact, many of us are poor due to generations of impoverishment created by wealthy people.

Siddhartha's father protected him from knowing about the countless ways people suffer. African Americans are not protected from the suffering of economic disparities, racism, violence, injustice, mass incarceration, rape, lack of nutrition, and illness.

Siddhartha, at age sixteen, twenty-one, or some other youthful age, was shocked when he saw that people actually got sick, old, and died. African Americans encounter death well before they become teenagers and young adults. In fact, many die when they are teenagers.

Siddhartha left his home, encountered a new reality, realized he had been lied to, and chose not to return home. Instead, he entered the forest to learn how to avoid illness, aging, and death. After years of spiritual practice in the forest, Siddhartha became enlightened. Then, as the Buddha, he proclaimed the first noble truth: there is suffering!

This is not a profound insight from an African American perspective. Yet hidden in this story of the Buddha's life is the substance of myth that can reconnect African Americans to a larger story and inspire them to advocate for their lives.

Many African Americans, despite a history of being enslaved with the help of Christian principles of the day (The land and its inhabitants are mine because God willed it), came to relate to the exodus and other liberation stories of the Hebrew scriptures.

These myths were initially forced on African American slaves but became a means through which the slaves, and their descendants, moved together toward physical freedom.

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If we stick to telling the Buddha story we have always been told, we will continue to tell a story that is not relevant to the suffering of many people.

The Buddhist suttas, in my experience, are not taught in ways that emphasize the communal spiritual liberation that is implicit in the story of monks following the Buddha from grove to grove, adding monastics and householders along the way. If the suttas were taught so that African Americans could hear the story of that communal trek to spiritual freedom, they would speak to us in a way that is culturally relevant.

For our survival, we need inspiration that reminds us we can only survive together, not through individual awakenings alone. Fortunately, there is mythical material in the Buddhist suttas that offers us that inspiration.

In the traditional story, it is said that Siddhartha's father protected him from seeing people who were ill, getting older, or had died. But even if his father tried to protect Siddhartha from seeing the real condition of humans, he could not have avoided awareness of his own aging process, especially during the tumultuous

adolescent years. How likely is it that child mortality rates in ancient India were so low that Siddhartha was untouched by his playmates dying?

As Siddhartha was getting older, so was his father. Was he unable to see that? Siddhartha's wife got pregnant and her stomach grew in size. She gave birth and their son aged. Surely Siddhartha would have noticed the truth of birth. And she could not have been the only pregnant woman Siddhartha saw, or did his father have all pregnant women removed from the village?

Because this particular Buddha story has the absence of logic and the presence of magic, it contains mythological elements. As we reflect on this, we are lifted from a limited (though necessary) scientific consciousness into, as religious philosopher Jean Gebser put it, a redemptive mythical consciousness. This makes space for a more culturally relevant story.

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Hidden in this story of the Buddha's life is the substance of myth that can reconnect African Americans to a larger story and inspire them to advocate for their lives.

Imagine Siddhartha is a person who has been protected by his loved ones from the reality of racism. He leaves his protected compound, perhaps a community gated specifically to separate itself from undesired people. He enters a place where he sees

darker-skinned, unarmed people being shot dead by the police or perhaps by guards who serve to protect his enclosed community. Maybe he encounters darker-skinned people who are sicker and more malnourished than lighter-skinned people.

What if Siddhartha saw that? Would he seek refuge in the forest to avoid a similar fate or would he remain in the situation? Would his response depend on how he saw the color of his own skin in relation to those who were being shot dead or becoming ill and dying? This is a question I would ask all dharma practitioners to reflect on.

In this new story, what noble truths arise when Siddhartha sees the suffering of racism?

Siddhartha's first truth could be "People, including loved ones, try to protect you from the truth of other people's harmful delusions." The truth of racism is too much to bear early in life, so being deluded early on is an experience many of us share.

A second truth could be "There is racism." Why is there racism? According to Gebser, humans are born into a state of "aperspectivalness." To put it another way, they are born without a perspective. Then, sometime after birth, ignorance, anxiety, and aggression begin to form our perspectives. Racism is a manifestation of ill-formed perspective-making processes.

Siddhartha's third truth could be "I am impacted by racism." Racism hurts the heart, as well as the ways it impacts people on a physical level.

A fourth truth could be “There is no refuge from racism.” Yes, one can experience temporary relief from others’ attacks, but racism still remains. Emerging from that “refuge” is a setup for the suffering that occurs when the reality of racism is inevitably faced again.

A fifth truth could be “This suffering I feel is felt by those who look like me.” It is this truth that begins to reconnect us with others.

A sixth truth might be “Since this suffering is shared, the transformation of this suffering will also be shared.”

A myth-infused recasting of the Buddha’s story for African Americans in the #BlackLivesMatter age can be a story of cultivating confidence. This is not the confidence that looks like narcissism, but the confidence that feels like being with others through love. Being with others through love to collectively transform our suffering could even be a ninth step in the Buddha’s noble path, with confidence as an eleventh transcendent perfection.

Being connected with others in liberation from suffering is part of the African-American experience and the legacy we give this world. Prior to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, Civil Rights leaders, predominantly Christians, took inspiration from Jewish and Christian stories and mythology. Today, #BlackLivesMatter takes inspiration from the Black Civil Rights movement, Black feminist lesbian poet Audre Lorde, and post-Black Civil Rights movements, including the AIDS-awareness activist

organization Act Up! and anti-capitalist-greed movement Occupy Wall Street. We no longer need ancient myths to advocate for our lives; we can utilize mythology, history, and present-moment collective suffering to determine what kind of advocacy we engage in.

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If we can remember that the transformation of suffering is a communal and collective endeavor, we can seek temporary refuge from the pain of racism for refueling purposes, but not for the illusion of safety.

We can reflect on the ways the Buddha taught his followers to address people who slandered and physically attacked monks, as #BlackLivesMatters activists are being attacked. If you're slandered, question the veracity of the slanderer without the intention to harm them and tell the truth without attempting to force others to accept your truth. If you're physically attacked, tell the attacker to stop, renounce any intention to hurt the attacker, protect yourself, and remind your attacker of the goodness within them in order to help them transform their ignorance, anxiety, and aggression.

If we can remember that the transformation of suffering is a communal and collective endeavor, we can seek temporary refuge from the pain of racism for refueling purposes, but not for the illusion of safety. There is no absolute safety, as Siddhartha discovered, only relative moments of painlessness. This reality can inspire us to think about how we can tell the Buddha story in culturally relevant ways to other targeted populations.

Syrian refugees in the U.S. are being set up for years of suspicion because they have come to this country at an unfortunate time in U.S. politics. What Buddha story will we tell them? How will they cultivate confidence to rebuild their country post Bashar al-Assad? Can Buddhism be relevant to that enterprise?

Many girls and women throughout the world are sold into sexual slavery. Their suffering is shared. What Buddha story will we tell them to help them build confidence that they are respectable?

If we stick to telling the Buddha story we have always been told, we will continue to tell a story that is not relevant to the suffering of many people. What is the point of that? Let us dwell in the spaces in the Buddha story where there is no reason and no logic. Let us dwell in the spaces where magic appears. Let us think about the various ways people suffer and allow ourselves to be more culturally competent and creative in how we share the Buddhist teachings.

Let's continue to support daily meditation practice, loving-kindness practices, and meditation retreats as a way of life. For an oppressed and invisibilized population, this contemplative

and heart-centered way of life cultivates a remarkable relational resilience. A remarkable relational resilience, I have learned from my study of African-American lesbians in the Insight Meditation tradition, is what helps oppressed people persevere in the midst of ongoing multilayered assaults. Culturally competent dharma can only inspire invisibilized people to become relationally resilient.

The dharma is not about sticking to the script no matter the audience. The dharma helps people transform their suffering. Let's help people transform their particular ways of suffering in the age of #BlackLivesMatter, and in the ages of various oppressions that are here now and are sure to follow. 🌸



The Buddha Is Still Teaching

The true Buddha isn't limited to the body or mind of a particular person who lived long ago. He is present today, says **Jack Kornfield**, in teachers pointing the way to a timeless freedom.

THE TEACHINGS of the Buddha are called the Lion's Roar, words of fearlessness and unshakable freedom. On the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha awakened to the vast and timeless peace of nirvana. He proclaimed that the ropes of clinging and sorrow were snapped, the clouds of confusion and fear dissipated, the powers of aggression and doubt were defeated. He was silently and joyfully free.

For forty-five years afterward, he wandered the dusty roads of India proclaiming this freedom and teaching the path of wisdom and compassion to all who had ears to hear. These teachings were eventually written down as sutras, careful records of the teachings of Buddha. These traditional texts include his instructions, his dialogues with students, and accounts of his words pointing

the way to liberation. The earliest sutras date from more than twenty-five hundred years ago, while others are teachings from the Buddha mind written down by enlightened disciples in subsequent centuries.

The words of the Buddha have great power. The ancient stories tell of many who became enlightened simply by hearing him speak. Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, has depicted these teaching scenes for us, describing how the monks and nuns were seated at the cool wood of Tapoda or in Jivaka's mango grove, or how a thousand followers were gathered at Vulture Peak. As they listened to the Buddha, their hearts were freed from entanglement in the changing conditions of the world. Their understanding shifted from a limited sense of self, caught in the illusion of separateness and clinging, to the peace of nirvana, open and free. They tasted the joyful freedom experienced when clinging, hatred, and ignorance drop away. Each time he taught, the Buddha pointed the way to this timeless freedom.

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Dharma means both truth and the path to discover the truth. The dharma is kept alive by all who follow the path.

In the same way, the freedom taught by the Buddha is brought to life by the teachers of awakening in modern times. When Zen Master Suzuki Roshi first gave teachings on beginner's mind, the hearts of many of the students listening were opened to a

freedom beyond past and future. When the Dalai Lama took the teaching seat surrounded by thousands of followers in New York's Madison Square Garden, he pointed the way to the same liberation and compassion as the Buddha. When Sharon Salzberg and Pema Chödrön speak to crowds of students on loving-kindness and compassion, the human suffering and sorrow of all who listen, their conflicts and judgment, are all held in a vast spaciousness of freedom that is our true nature.

What makes these modern teachings authentic is the understanding that the true Buddha is not limited to the body or mind of a particular man who lived long ago. The Buddha himself explained this. In the ancient sutras, there is a story of a devoted young monk who was so enraptured that he spent weeks sitting at the feet of the Buddha, simply gazing reverently at him as he taught. Finally the Buddha chastised him, saying, "You do not even see me. To see the Buddha, you must see the dharma, the truth. One who sees the dharma sees me."

Dharma means both truth and the path to discover the truth. The dharma is kept alive by all who follow the path. In the forest monasteries of Asia, just before dawn, the monks and nuns gather in the Buddha hall to meditate and to chant "ehipasiko, opanaiko, paccatang veditabbho vinuhittii." The dharma of liberation is "immediate, open-handed, timeless, visible to the wise, to be experienced here and now by each person in their own heart." In every generation, this invitation is repeated in an unbroken

lineage of voices, a call to live with the great freedom of a Buddha and to discover for yourself the path of virtue, compassion, and wisdom. ❁

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Playing With Buddha

“The Buddha is with you,” his mother used to say. “Believe in him.” At age seven, **Ira Sukrungruang** believed that the Buddha was more than a bronze statue. The Buddha was his best friend.

I USED TO STARE at the meditating Buddha in our living room: his straightbacked posture, his wide shoulders and narrow waist, his elegant hands resting humbly in his lap. This statue sat on a shelf seven feet high. Around him were other Buddhas, two yellow candles, and a cup of rice to hold incense sticks. He could rest comfortably in my palm and weighed no more than a couple of pounds. Yet he was heavy in spiritual weight, my father always said.

The Buddha, like my mother and father, was not native to America. He had been in my family for years, ever since my father was a barefoot boy running wildly in Ayutthaya, Thailand. I wondered if the Buddha, too, felt misplaced in this new world—a world without the heat and humidity of his native home, without the familiar sounds of geckos and mynahs and the evening song of croaking frogs. This was America. This was Illinois. This was

Chicago. Here, the house shook on Mondays when the garbage truck rumbled by. Here, our neighbor Jack rode endless loops on his riding lawn mower.

My family revolved around the Buddha. Each morning, before I went to school, I prayed to him. Some days, my mother allowed me to stand on a dining-room chair to offer him a shot glass of coffee—cream, no sugar. Other days, she let me light the candles and incense before we prayed. I was supposed to close my eyes and think only good thoughts, but my eyes remained open, fixed on the Buddha. I imagined that, at any moment, he would rise and float down like an autumn leaf. I imagined he would impart vital secrets, and I could ask him the questions that plagued me. There, in the living room, he would walk onto the palms of my hands and we would spend the evening—boy and Buddha—speaking like friends.

“The Buddha is with you,” my mother used to say. “Believe in him.”

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Buddha was the holder of my secrets. He understood that loneliness and emptiness were one and the same.

And so I believed that the Buddha was more than a bronze statue, that he was solid like a body is solid—the way it gives a bit when you lean against it, the way it molds to accept the presence of another. He possessed the gift of language and was bilingual

like me, skipping freely between English and Thai. We spoke often, our conversations in hushed whispers, and he sounded soothing, not harsh like my elementary school principal or gargled like the monks at temple. Buddha was the holder of my secrets. He understood that loneliness and emptiness were one and the same.

Once, when I was in the living room, my mother asked from the kitchen who I was talking to.

“Buddha,” I told her.

“Excellent,” she said. “Speak to him every day, okay?”

Mrs. Slusarchak, my second grade teacher, asked my mother to come for a meeting one afternoon.

A patient teacher, Mrs. S lived in Munster, Indiana. “I live in Munster,” she always said, “like the stinky cheese.” But I thought she was saying Monster, and imagined hairy demons living in cheese-shaped houses. I liked her. She wore bright dresses—Hawaiian pastels—that seemed to ward off the dreary Chicago winter days. She looked pretty with her short hair and small glasses and laughed with her whole body, which was shocking but funny.

The day of the meeting, my mother came straight from work, still in her nurse’s uniform. She smiled timidly, her purse in her lap, and sat across from Mrs. S. I was next to my mother, but I aimed my eyes out the window at the swing set.

Mrs. S said that I was a math champ every week and that my penmanship was the best in the class. My mother patted my head and said, “We practice every day.”

“I can tell,” Mrs. S said, then let out a laugh that nearly knocked my mother off the chair. “But I’m concerned about his behavior.”

“Has he been bad?” my mother said. “I will tell him to be better.” Mrs. S shook her head. “Not in the least. He’s just terribly shy.”

She went on to talk about what had happened at recess. How I’d wanted to get on the swing but Tommy W told me to go away, so I did and sat on the bench, staring at my hands. This was what I did often, she said. Stare at my hands. I could never meet her eyes. I could never speak more than two words at a time. “There are days,” she said, “that I don’t hear a word from him.”

“Is this true?” my mother asked me in Thai.

I stared at my hands and my mother sighed. It was a sigh that said she knew exactly what Mrs. S was talking about. “I’m sorry for him,” she said. “He is like me.” She, too, had a fear that gripped her. It made her hide in her room, reading magazines and sewing endless dresses she would never wear.

Mrs. S nodded. She understood. She suggested my mother enroll me in Cub Scouts or other activities, so that I would be encouraged to meet some friends. My mother agreed, and the next day she sent me to school with a bagful of apples for my teacher.

But what I wanted to say was that I had a friend—Buddha—and within him was a heart that beat strong and that awakened something in me.

This was not a spiritual awakening—not a recognition beyond the self as many theologians would define it. Nor was it a sudden epiphany to a transcendent crisis. I was too young to comprehend such lofty ideas, too young to fully understand what Buddhism was or why my family was so devoted to it. I was being awakened in the way a newborn registers it has fingers and toes, and those fingers and toes have function. I was being awakened in the same way you realize that if you see one bird, you might see another and another. You realize that you are not as alone as you thought you were. The world is filled with birds, or in this case, with buddhas, and every buddha is a friend.

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What I wanted to say was that I had a friend—Buddha—and within him was a heart that beat strong and awakened something in me.

“I spoke to him every day,” my friend told me. “His name was Bob.” My friend and I were in our early twenties, and in the best place to be on a hot summer evening in Chicago—an over-air-conditioned bar. He was relaying tales of the imaginary friend he had when he lived clear across the ocean, growing up in a semi-affluent family in Poland.

“What did you two talk about?” I asked.

“Bob was well-versed in all subjects.”

We laughed. “Do you remember when he started appearing?” I said.

“About the time when my mom was about to ditch my dad and come here.”

“You think that’s why Bob appeared?” Imaginary friends, I’d discovered through research, often materialize during stressful moments in a child’s life. It is how the child grasps and copes with the turmoil of his or her situation.

My friend shrugged and seemed to speak more to his drink than to me. “I remember what Bob looked like, though.” Then he went on to describe Bob, who had crazy wild hair that went in all directions and who always appeared barefoot and in a blue-and-white-striped sweater and khaki shorts. “Isn’t that crazy?” he said.

I shook my head.

“What’s crazier,” said my friend, “is that I thought I saw him the other day. At work.”

“An older Bob or young Bob?”

“The same Bob.”

“Was he barefoot?” I asked.

“Can’t be barefoot in Home Depot. But he had on the same sweater and he was holding hands with his dad.”

“Are you sure it was Bob?” I asked.

“Nope.” My friend ordered another drink. “When you talk about imaginary friends, you really can’t be sure of anything.”

Maybe I can’t be sure of Buddha. But I am sure that when I was seven I was picked on and bullied. I am sure that I was born an only child and spent much of my time by myself. I am sure that I am the son of two immigrant parents who loved me with

all their being, even more than they loved each other, and sometimes, because of this love, they smothered me with suffocating affection. I am sure that my family was scared and they, too, turned to Buddha for day-to-day guidance through this world that was not Thailand, where it snowed when there should have been hot, devouring sun. I am sure that I possessed an overactive imagination. I am sure that when I felt overwhelmed, I hid myself within the darkness of my arms and made the world sound hollow like a cave. I am sure that the safest place in the world when I was small was the back of my mother's knees. I am sure that the mind is a mysterious muscle, and the mind of a child is even more mysterious.

And of this I am positive: every time I looked at the Buddha in the living room, I found myself calm, serene, as if caught in a moment before waking or sleeping.

Before I went to sleep, I talked to Buddha. My parents were trying to reclaim their bedroom. Up until then, I'd wedged myself between them on their handmade bed. I was a husky boy and prone to tossing and turning. When I was three or four, this was fine, but now I possessed a larger body that took up more of the bed, and my father was tired of having my hand slapping his face.

At night my new room scared me, even though my mother and father had painted it the light shade of green I'd asked for, and even though I'd been in it countless times during the day. Darkness changed the landscape of the room. There was an absence of color, and that absence felt oppressive. The only furniture was

a twin bed and a metal desk, and there was nothing on the walls, except for a small Buddha pendant hanging above the bed and a picture of my father when he was a monk. Although it was only half the size of my parents', my room seemed too big, sonorous. I felt there were places for monsters to hide, especially in the closet, and I convinced myself there were things that existed in there. Unpleasant things.

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At night, Buddha eased me to sleep with his wild stories. We played rock, paper, scissors, and Buddha was always shocked when I beat him.

I frequently ended up back in my parents' bed until my father put his foot down. “Big boys sleep in their own rooms,” he said.

“You are a big boy, yes?”

I nodded.

“Nothing can hurt you,” he said. “Buddha protects us.”

And he did. He sat cross-legged on my bed, not in a meditating fashion, but how I sat when Mrs. S read to us. My Buddha did not speak sage advice. He adopted schoolyard lingo, and told me the kids at school were dork noses and that I was much better than they were. At night, Buddha eased me to sleep with his wild stories. “One time,” he'd begin, and the tale would take off in bizarre and outrageous directions, always ending with a hero who stood tall and was not afraid to take on the world. We played rock, paper, scissors, and Buddha was always shocked when I beat him.

Then when the darkest part of the night came, he hovered above me and I could feel the heat of his presence. His skin glowed, like a night-light.

One day imaginary friends are there and the next they are not. This is true of real friends, also. The friends we had when we were in school—what happened to them? Jody is now a photographer in North Carolina. Casey works for USAA in Texas. Andrea is a schoolteacher in Illinois. What we share is a past, a period in time. We become a memory. We become part of a sentence that begins with, “Remember Ira...”

But seldom do we remember our imagined friends, because to admit to them is to somehow admit to a deficiency on our part. Yet they existed, too. They were essential. But now we want to keep our friends a secret—to protect them from ridicule, from sideway glances. They protected us when we were younger, and now it’s our turn to protect them.

“Remember Buddha?” I want to say. “Dude told the craziest stories.”

Before Buddha became Buddha, he was a boy. He was Prince Siddhartha, heir to his father’s throne, groomed to be the greatest king to ever live. This was the pressure he lived with day in, day out. I imagine this to be stifling, every limb weighed down with lead. I imagine that even Siddhartha, a boy destined for greatness, might crumble under that pressure. And the king sensed it too.

He feared his son would leave the palace, so he built other palaces within the palace; there would be no need for Siddhartha to leave. But what does a boy do without others around him?

I wondered about this.

As soon as I learned how to read, my mother gave me a book entitled *The Story of Buddha*. It was published by a press in New Delhi in 1978 and had pictures on every other page. What I remember most about the book were the times Siddhartha spent alone, something that displeased his father. The king bemoaned his son's lack of interest in his education as a king. He complained how Siddhartha would rather be alone in the garden than with his teachers. But was he alone? Did he speak to the butterflies, the birds, the critters that scampered around in green? Could Siddhartha, who possessed an extraordinary mind, have imagined someone in that garden with him, someone to assuage his loneliness?

Possibly.

Later, when Siddhartha became Buddha, he would teach us that nothing is ever truly alone; everything is in relation to everything else.

God is in everything. He is everywhere. He is always with you. Sitting with my wife's family at their Presbyterian church, I often hear these words, which are not dissimilar to the ones I heard when I was a boy sitting in temple listening to a monk's sermon. *Buddha is with you. Keep him in your mind and heart.* We look to these spiritual guides for ways to calm our tumultuous

lives. There is comfort in the notion that we are never alone, that we are connected by an invisible thread to everything else in the world, the seen and the unseen.

Buddha remained unseen when I traveled down the stairs in a laundry basket, one of my favorite games. But he was there, sitting with me. He remained unseen when we wrestled with body pillows. But he was there, with a pulverizing elbow. He remained unseen when I played with my action figures. But he was there, making my GI Joes move in combative maneuvers. He remained unseen when I played football outside. But he was there, my wide receiver, catching passes for touchdowns.

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My Buddha was a mix of wisdom and mischief. He was my friend, after all, and as friends we were on equal ground.

The real Buddha would not do such things. The real Buddha would have preached peace and emphasized the life of the mind. But my Buddha was a mix of wisdom and mischief. He was my friend, after all, and as friends we were on equal ground.

This friendship, this very idea of Buddha, made me change, if only a little. It made me yearn for real companionship, and perhaps that was the reason I fought against my shyness. If I could speak to Buddha, why couldn't I speak to the weird boy with the spiked hair who looked just as lonely as I was? Or the other boy with the golden hair and thick glasses? Or the other boy who was

as gangly as a bean? Perhaps they had imaginary friends, too, and in this we shared something. Perhaps our imaginary friends would not be needed anymore, and they would simply disappear.

At what moment my imaginary friend disappeared, I don't remember. But he did, and so did the Buddha on the shelf one evening when I was a teenager. Then there was a new Buddha, a green one made of jade and covered in sparkling gold robes. This new Buddha was beautiful the way something new is beautiful, but I found myself looking for the familiar tarnish, the layer of dust that blanketed the old Buddha. The old Buddha went when my father went; it was his, after all, and was one of the only things he took with him after the divorce.

I missed that old Buddha, my friend— missed his presence, his watchful gaze on the shelf. There were questions I still wanted to ask, guidance I still sought. I wonder what the view is like where he is now, and does he remember the boy who used to talk to him? He sat there for fifteen years of my life, and though Buddha has become Buddha again and not my play pal, he is never far from my mind. All I have to do is close my eyes to see him: his straight-backed posture, his wide shoulders and narrow waist, his elegant hands resting humbly in his lap. 🌿



Gautama vs the Buddha

If you're looking for relief from suffering, argues Buddhist scholar and author **Glenn Wallis**, you won't find it in some mythical figure named the Buddha but in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama—an ordinary person like us, who became one of the world's most gifted spiritual teachers.

BUDDHISM WAS BORN IN CRISIS. One day, the coddled young Siddhartha Gautama found himself incapable of enjoying the pretty things of the world. The very life that had once given him such delight now appeared threatening. “The world, indeed, now looks to me as if ablaze with an all-consuming fire,” he said at the outset of his epic quest for understanding and resolution.

Gautama resolved his crisis, and in the process, he claimed, he discovered something significant about dealing with life's difficulties. Two classical dialogues, or sutras, recorded in the Pali canon help to illuminate this discovery. The sutras are called “Quenched” and “Destination.”

Before I turn to these sutras as fitting responses to our own difficult times, I want to explain why I call the speaker of the text “Gautama” (Gotama in Pali), rather than “the Buddha.” The short answer is that I agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson that our

life-guides “must be related to us, and our life receive from [them] some promise of explanation.” Gautama fulfills this basic requirement. The Buddha does not.

I have given up on the Buddha. That is to say, I have given up on the Enlightened One, the Blessed One, the omniscient Lord of people and gods who works miracles, knows unknowable things, and continues to exert his power from beyond. When I ask Buddhists to explain why I should accept their revered sage as a modern-day life-adviser, I am typically offered only articles of faith (claims to be believed in or rejected) and rarely good (that is, examinable and testable) reasons.

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I have given up on the Buddha. That is to say, I have given up on the Enlightened One... who works miracles, knows unknowable things, and continues to exert his power from beyond.

I imagine that some readers are like me in this regard: we have been inoculated against the religious bug. We are no longer willing, or even able, to acquiesce to the inscrutable sureness of the religious authorities’ advice concerning the most important matters of life and death. Like the Kalamas in ancient India, living at a crossroads of competing religious–philosophic commerce, we

have eyes only for what lies in full view. And what lies in view is the merit of a claim, not its sacred origins in some cosmic or cognitive transcendence, such as “enlightenment.”

But along the way, something unexpected happened. I met one of the world’s most gifted teachers. He is Gautama, the human figure behind the fanciful facade of the Buddha. Like the Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists in ancient Greece and Rome, Gautama instructed in the manner of a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. He taught and modeled a viable way to human flourishing, and did so rooted firmly in everyday life. With precision, care, and intelligence, Gautama articulated for us the categories and practices through which we may clearly understand our lives and, doing so, know for ourselves the simple happiness of existing, in difficult as well as trouble-free times. And all of his advice on *these* matters stands in full view—conspicuous, open to scrutiny, testable.

Now, as Gautama would say, don’t take my word on any of this. It is better that you consider an actual example. So, let’s return now to our sutras, “Quenched” and “Destination.” They happen to contain wonderful advice for dealing with difficulties. At least, that is what I discovered when I put these instructions to the test.

Quenched

Once, a man called Janussoni approached the Fortunate One. Exchanging greetings, he sat down next to the Fortunate One, and spoke.

“It is said, ‘unbinding is conspicuous, unbinding is conspicuous.’ In what regard, friend Gotama, is unbinding conspicuous? In what regard is it palpable, leading the practitioner to *come and see*, and to be personally realized by the wise?”

Gotama replied, “Janussoni, an infatuated, hostile, and deluded person comes to the realization that, through the overwhelming power of infatuation, hostility, and delusion he has become mentally exhausted, and that he is hurting himself and others. And that person becomes depressed and distressed. He realizes that if infatuation, hostility, and delusion were eradicated he would no longer hurt himself, he would no longer hurt others, and he would no longer experience depression and distress. It is in this way, Janussoni, that unbinding is conspicuous. Because a person realizes the absolute eradication of infatuation, the absolute eradication of hostility, and the absolute eradication of delusion, unbinding is conspicuous, palpable, leading the practitioner to *come and see*, and to be personally realized by the wise.”

—*Nibbuta Sutta; Anguttaranikaya 3.55*

Whenever I read this sutra, I am struck by its tone. It sounds genuine. I don’t hear anything resembling art or literature or religion in the words being exchanged. I’m not sure why, but I get the impression that Gautama is an old man here. I hear him speaking with the practiced combination of tenderness and terseness unique to someone who has expressed this teaching in so many

ways in such detail to so many people for so long. Janussoni's question is simple and direct, and Gautama sees that Janussoni's concern is real. It's a genuine question calling for a genuine answer.

I suspect, though, that Janussoni was not a student of Gautama. If he was, I think that Gautama might have had a word or two more to say about method. Our second sutra helps fill this gap. In it, Gautama is speaking to a group of followers, which probably accounts for the nature of his additional comments.

Destination

I will teach the destination and the path leading to the destination. Listen to what I say. What is the destination? The eradication of infatuation, the eradication of hostility, and the eradication of delusion is what is called the destination. And what is the path leading to the destination? Present-moment awareness directed toward the body. This awareness is what is called the path leading to the destination.

In this way, I have taught to you the destination and the path leading to the destination. That which should be done out of compassion by a caring teacher who desires the welfare of his students, I have done for you.

There are secluded places. Meditate, do not be negligent! Don't have regrets later! This is my instruction to you.

—*Parayana Sutta; Samyuttanikaya 4.43.44.*

The structure of Gautama's answers in both sutras reflects simultaneously the no-nonsense nature of the exchanges as well as the content of the advice being offered. The exchanges and the advice are sparse and elegant, in the way that physicists like their theories to be.

On the face of it, the instruction that Gautama offers to Janussoni and his students might seem predictable, perhaps even somewhat trivial. The more I reflect on it, however, the more it strikes me as a remarkably poignant response to our situation as human beings in a deeply troubled world.

As the titles "Quenched" and "Destination" indicate, Gautama's advice points directly to the very purpose of his teachings: nirvana. Gautama dedicated his life to developing and prescribing a realistic treatment for human unhappiness. He observed that people spend their lives caught in a whirlwind of activity that harms others and is self-defeating. He termed this tumult samsara, and contrasted it with nirvana, a condition of release. Nirvana is the cool forest, a refreshing breeze, a thirst quenched. Samsara is burning sensation, overheated dizziness, confusion, and difficulty.

Why do we persist in creating such samsaric difficulty for ourselves and others? Gautama's inquiry into the nature and cause of our continuing unhappiness involved a painstaking examination of the processes that, he would come to see, constitute "human being" (as both noun and verb); namely, those of body, feeling, mind, and sensory reception. It is in these "four locations," he would discover, that each of us fashions our particular subjective

experience of “the world.” Gautama wanted to alert us to the character of these processes; so, his teachings on human well-being deal largely with what unfolds in the four areas, such as perception, conception, desire, pleasure, grasping, awareness, causation, absence of self, and non-substantiality.

But Gautama was not merely interested in a *description* of the processes and compulsions of humans. His ultimate concern was a *prescription*—providing recommendations for what to do in the face of these processes and compulsions. Gautama’s own shorthand for describing the aim of his teaching project was simply this: pain and its ending.

So, getting to the point means getting clear about nirvana. Probably most of us would agree, however, that nirvana is a pretty fuzzy notion. What does it refer to? For the casual listener of his day, nirvana would have been understood as referring to an extraordinary state of affairs, such as transcendence, salvation, or even something like heaven. Perhaps both to disarm and reorient his listeners from their pious acceptance of extravagant religious terminology, Gautama gave nirvana lots of nicknames. He called it, for instance: the far shore, the subtle, the unproliferated, the peaceful, the wonderful, freedom, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge.

Glosses like these can help us come closer to a doctrinally responsible English translation of nirvana. What are they saying? What do they point to? Of all the candidates, one translation stands out as being particularly apt: “unbinding.” Most of the

nirvana translations and glosses are adjectives or nouns, describing qualities or positing places and things. “Unbinding” has an advantage over these terms in that it implies a process. It is in a vibrant form, allowing, like a present progressive verb, a sense of a continuous, developing, or imminent action. In short, “unbinding” has a dynamism lacking in most other translations. Most important, of course, it performs exceptionally well the task given it in Gautama’s overall scheme.

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Gautama shows that he understands our everyday difficulty—our mental exhaustion, depression, distress, the ways in which we harm ourselves and others.

This idea of unbinding fits well with what Gautama is telling his students and Janussoni. Gautama shows that he understands our everyday difficulty—our mental exhaustion, depression, distress, the ways in which we harm ourselves and others. He has identified a plausible basis for our “difficulty consciousness” and laid it open to our scrutiny; namely, that we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the “power of infatuation, hostility, and delusion.” Infatuation, hostility, and delusion are fueling our difficulty. For one who realizes this, Gautama tells Janussoni, unbinding—nirvana—has been made “conspicuous, palpable, leading the practitioner to *come and see*.”

Can Gautama really be equating nirvana with the eradication of infatuation, hostility, and delusion? The effects of such eradication certainly would be in full view to you and to all of those whom your life touches. Right?

Taken together, infatuation, hostility, and delusion are referred to as *klesha*—stain, defilement, soiling. The term stems from the verbal root *klish*, meaning “to torment, to trouble, to cause unease.” And it certainly is not difficult to see that the presence of infatuation, hostility, or delusion in any given instance of experience tends to spoil things.

This points to a crucial feature of the *kleshas*. Each of these qualities lies on a continuum of ordinary human responses to any given event, person, or phenomenon. Infatuation lies on a continuum extending from virtually imperceptible attraction to enjoyment to raging lust; hostility, from preconscious aversion to umbrage to violent hatred; delusion, from automatic, unconscious perceptual assumptions to open-minded uncertainty to schizophrenic-like hallucination. Infatuation, hostility, and delusion, then, can be understood as the points where the flavor so vital to a fulfilling life turns sour and becomes toxic. But how will you know when your response has slipped into the toxic?

Could Gautama’s answer be any simpler? Just observe for yourself, he tells Janussoni, the role played by infatuation, hostility, and delusion in your life. Notice how these qualities leave you exhausted and depressed. Notice the distress they create for you

and others. Now, diminish their role—unbind yourself from their influence—and observe what happens. See the difference? It is in this way, Janussoni, that unbinding is conspicuous.

To his students, Gautama is even more specific. He tells them that the path to conspicuous unbinding is “present-moment awareness directed toward the body.” Elsewhere, Gautama emphasized that it was “within this six-foot body, with its mind and its concepts” that he became awakened. I have always understood this statement as pointing to the basic humanity of Gautama’s message. In that regard, we can see it as a warning and a reminder. It warns us to check our tendency to elevate certain humans to an exclusive, even deified, status. If we do so, then what prospects do *we* have? And therein lies the reminder: now, bringing clear and present awareness to your body and all that that entails (namely, everything!), how is it with you? Is infatuation present? Have you unbound from its toxic compulsion? Where, if not there, in your body, can the answer be found?

Gautama’s advice to attend closely to our bodies for direct evidence of our condition stems, of course, from an axiom that he holds: we are estranged from ourselves. Thus, estranged, we are constantly battered by, well, infatuation, hostility, and delusion. What can we do about that? Here, Gautama pushes his students further than Janussoni, and challenges them to really do what it takes: meditate.

In Gautama's view, we are never free from difficulty. Really, the first noble truth could be translated as "life is difficulty." Given that premise, Gautama's teachings always show us how to create ease for ourselves in the midst of this tense, difficult world. And his prescribed method, meditation, enables us slowly to unbind ourselves from the trouble-making effects of infatuation, hostility, and delusion. If we take Gautama's word that each of his teachings contains the flavor of the whole—as every drop of the ocean's water contains the taste of salt—then it might not be an exaggeration to claim that "Quenched" and "Destination" are saturated with the whole of his dharma.

In one of the most moving passages in all of the massive canons of Buddhist literature, none stirs me as much these final words of our sutra "Destination":

In this way, I have taught to you the destination and the path leading to the destination. That which should be done out of compassion by a caring teacher who desires the welfare of his students, I have done for you.

There are secluded places. Meditate, do not be negligent! Don't have regrets later! This is my instruction to you.

After all, what more can a teacher say? 🌸



Buddha: The Great Physician

The Buddha is compared to a doctor because he treated the suffering that ails all of us. His diagnosis and cure, says Zen teacher **Norman Fischer**, is called the four noble truths.

IT IS SAID that just as the Buddha was close to approaching awakening, his nemesis Mara appeared, desperately determined to stop him. Mara's attack centered on the Buddha's body, first with sensual temptations, next with threats of harm.

This lurid archetypical scene—the Buddha serenely sitting, Mara's minions hurling arrows and flames—is the very image of the human drama. Our bodies are under attack. Flesh is vulnerable. And yet, if we are determined, wise, and strong, we can avoid defeat. Like the Buddha, we can not only endure; we can heal and transcend. We can become enlightened beings.

The Buddha is often called the Great Healer. He is the ultimate physician, providing medicine to cure the human disease. His four noble truths follow the classical medical model of diagnosis, treatment, and cure. In their classical formulation they are: 1. The truth of suffering (diagnosis); 2. The truth of origination (cause); 3. The truth of stopping (cure); 4. The truth of the path (treatment).

The diagnosis is drastic: “All conditioned existence has the nature of suffering.” That is, we human beings are inherently ill, even when we think we are not. What we think of as health isn’t really that, for beneath our apparent health, illness lurks.



The Buddha asserted that our disease can be cured.

Illness is the basic human condition. The cause of this condition is desire, which includes not only sensual desire but even the very desire to remain healthy and to stay alive. As long as we cling and grasp we will suffer, because nothing can be held onto. Everything changes, slipping away moment by moment.

Since we can never eliminate desire, our condition seems hopeless. Yet the Buddha asserted that our disease can be cured. That is, though desire can’t be got rid of, it can be clarified and transmuted. Healing is possible. The fourth truth, the path, outlines the course of treatment—a thoroughgoing way of living and understanding that will bring us to full health and wholeness, if only we practice it with diligence.

This straightforward program sounds good to us empowered modern people conditioned by generations of scientific know-how and progress. We believe that health is good and illness is bad and can be eliminated. With enough effort and energy, and with good doctors and psychotherapists, we can, like the Buddha, overcome suffering. We can defeat Mara.

But notice that in the gentle stories of the Buddha's life, as told in the Pali suttas, Mara is never entirely defeated. He appears throughout the Buddha's lifetime, constantly trying to foil the great sage. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, in one traditional tale Mara becomes discouraged, and the Buddha tells him, "Mara, don't quit! I need you. Without you I can't be Buddha." Buddha and Mara depend on one another.

What is health? What is illness? In the modern medical model, health is the default, the norm. When I get my blood test, I want to hear that all my indicators are in the "normal" range, which means I am healthy. Illness is, by this definition, abnormal.

But as the first noble truth implies, there is no ultimate physical health. The human body can't be perfectly free of impediment. There is always something more or less wrong. Even a child has bumps and afflictions, and throughout our lives illness and health are constantly jockeying for dominance. What we call health is simply a brief period of homeostasis. Even a person who seems to have preserved this homeostasis for a lifetime will undergo aging, in which physical vitality gradually decreases until it breaks down entirely and death occurs. Health is an illusion.

"Health" and "healing" literally mean "wholeness." Wholeness implies inclusion of everything—of well-being as well as illness, the good along with the bad—into a larger sphere. In spiritual cultures, notions of healing and health always evoke a category larger than physical and psychological well-being, though physical and psychological well-being are included in it.

People may imagine that after his awakening the Buddha lived a healthy, happy, trouble-free life. But the Buddha's life after his awakening was not trouble-free. There were moments of frustration with fractious members of his community. There was the sorrow of trying and failing to stop impending wars. There were physical problems too. Later in his life the Buddha complained of bellyaches, backaches, and general weariness.

“ The Buddha's fundamental and unshakeable well-being went beyond the condition of his body and mind.

So, the Buddha was not always healthy and happy in the conventional sense. But this did not obviate the strength and thoroughness of his awakening. For even in the midst of problems, the Buddha remained ultimately healed. He didn't expect to transcend the limitations of his body and mind. In wisely accepting and fully understanding the vulnerability of his physical existence, he was whole. His fundamental and unshakeable well-being went beyond the condition of his body and mind.

This more profound sense of health is implied in the four noble truths. Notice their traditional order: suffering, cause, cure, path. This is counterintuitive. The natural order ought to be suffering, cause, path, cure. This is what we expect from the doctor—that once she figures out what we've got and prescribes

medication, which we carefully take, we will be cured. But the end point of the Buddha's analysis isn't the cure, stopping. It's the treatment, the path.

So, curing is not the goal; it's an aspiration, a hope, a faith. The path goes on and on; it has no endpoint. The Buddha's biography bears this out: he doesn't stop treading the path after he awakens. He doesn't just enjoy himself and go on to other things. Instead he continues to practice the Way for and with others for the rest of his life. He doesn't defeat Mara. Their dance goes on. If there is a cure, this is it: delight in the ongoing dance.

Let's return for a moment to the scene of Buddha's awakening. In response to Mara's physical attacks, the Buddha is said to have touched the earth. In doing this, the Buddha was not only calling on the Earth Goddess to be his protector. He was also saying, "The earth is my body. My body expresses earth; it's produced and supported by her. So, as long as earth exists, nothing, even what looks like complete destruction, can threaten my body. Even if pierced and broken by your arrows and flames, even when succumbing to illness and death, my body continues to circulate and flow, returning home to its source and mother, the great earth, which has always embraced it." With this earth-touching gesture, Mara and his forces were dispelled.

At the end of his life, old, ill, and weary, the Buddha was visited one last time by Mara, who tempted him this time with peace and rest. "Now is the time," Mara said, "for your final *nibbana* [Sanskrit: *nirvana*]."

“You need not worry, Evil One,” the Buddha replied. “Three months from now I will take final nibbana.” And three months later, suffering from a severe bellyache with diarrhea, the Buddha laid down between two Sala trees. Surrounded by tearful disciples, he breathed his last. Mara finally won, as he always does.

Or does he?

The worldview of the Buddha’s ancient Indian culture was the opposite of ours. We are radical materialists with an impressive record of mastery of the physical world. This makes us life-affirming and optimistic. As best we can, we try to avoid the inconvenient fact that we die. We say, why obsess about it? Death comes later, after a long happy life. There’s no use spoiling things by thinking about it. That would be morbid. Anyway, science will stave off death for a long, long time. The best doctors can cure even the worst diseases, and they are discovering new cures every day. Perhaps we will even be able to eliminate death at some point. Who knows? Scientists are working on it.

The ancient Indian view of life and death couldn’t be further from this. In ancient India, life was not long and happy; it was brief and brutal. The daily struggle to survive was arduous and miserable. Disease, starvation, and crushing poverty were the fate of most people. And, as the ancient Indians saw it, even at the end of this terrible lifetime there was no escape. We leave this life only to wander for a time in hideous post-life realms from which we will be reborn into yet another miserable life. This diabolical process goes on and on and on.

The goal then, according to ancient Indians, is not to prolong life; it's to end this painful process once and for all. This is nibbana: final peace, complete rest, freedom from the beginningless cycle of birth and death.



Like the Buddha, we can heal, we can become whole, even when we are ill, even as we let go of our life.

The word *nibanna* means “to blow out,” as in blowing out a flame and entering peaceful darkness. Nibbana isn't death; it's the opposite of death. Life and death are restless and painful; nibanna is completion, fulfillment. Though old and infirm, the Buddha did not succumb to illness; he transcended it. In entering nibanna he became whole.

For the Buddha, what we call death is ultimate healing. Though the metaphor is the mirror opposite, the nibanna proposed by the Buddha may not be so different from the Christian conception of heavenly eternal life after death.

To be sure, nibanna isn't the only goal of early Buddhism. Even in the midst of life's unpreventable difficulties, suffering can be reduced by following the Buddhist path. Though we can never eliminate illness and harm, we can reduce the self-inflicted suffering we ourselves produce when we take a bad situation and make it worse through our resistance and unwise behavior.

A lifetime of such exacerbation is normal for most of us. It leads to all sorts of bad effects, from making enemies we don't need to make, to ruining our physical health with bad habits and too much unnecessary stress. If, on the other hand, we practice meditation, ethical conduct, and the other Buddhist virtues, living mindfully and harmoniously, we will have community, cooperation, peace, and love, which will promote and extend our life.

Such is one view of the path set forth in the Buddhist scriptures. It's the view emphasized in Western Buddhism and in the Buddhist-inspired mindfulness movement. Buddhism is good for you; it accords with the healthy life we all want.

And yet, in Asia throughout the ages, beginning with the Buddha, who nearly starved himself to death, sages put their lives at risk in pursuit of the Way. Why?

As we've said, in Buddhism, as in all spiritual cultures, there is an overlap between what we usually think of as physical and emotional wellness and the greater healing promised by ultimate commitment to the path. The Buddhist teachings, as they are interpreted in the West, accord with current scientific research, which has been influenced by them. But the traditional Buddhist canon is full of miraculous stories of physical and emotional healing effected merely by the Buddha's presence. Jesus and other saints also had the power to heal the sick, and tent revival preachers still cause the blind to see and the lame to throw off their

crutches and walk. Faith heals the body and heart by healing the soul. So yes, whether rational or not, spiritual traditions are concerned with our ordinary well-being.

But even when the body can't be healed, the soul can be. Putting us "right" with our inmost hearts, regardless of our physical condition, is the larger goal of all religious traditions, including Buddhism. If we cling too tightly to physical and emotional healing as our goal, we won't be able to find spiritual healing when we need it most. Like the Buddha, we can heal, we can become whole, even when we are ill, even as we let go of our life.

Widening the concept of healing in this way necessarily widens our sense of who and what we think we are. If we are the body, and the thoughts, feelings, and memories associated with it, then we'll want to preserve the body at all costs, and, thus, ordinary healing will be of utmost importance. But all religions, including Buddhism, teach that we are more than the body and its associated mental and emotional states. In Buddhist terms we are also, perhaps most saliently, buddha or buddhanature—awareness itself, luminous consciousness.

The Buddha affirmed that "this Mind, O monks, is luminous, only it is obscured by adventitious defilements from without." The path purifies these defilements, enabling the luminous mind to shine forth unobstructed. In the later mind-only schools of Mahayana Buddhism, there is much teaching about the nature of this mind, and there are deep meditation practices to help guide

us to it, insofar as this is possible. Clearly, mind is not something inside our brains. It is not a state or a condition. It is inside, outside, and everywhere else. It exists and it doesn't.

In the light of Mahayana teachings like this, the point of the path is to appreciate that this is what we are—as much as, and even more than, the body and its mental and emotional concomitants. To affect this identity shift will enable us to die as the Buddha did—fully and with perfect healing. This is the goal of the Mahayana path. ❁



Let Me Know When You See the Iguana

Melissa Myozen Blacker proposes that awakening isn't that complicated. It's when we encounter something just as it is, without preconception, much like the Buddha did.

YOU KNOW THE FEELING: you've lost something and suddenly you realize it's been there right in front of you the whole time. Those missing keys or that misplaced hat were, as they say, hiding in plain sight. They seemed to be invisible and unrecoverable, yet suddenly, there they are. It's clear to you they were never lost at all.

Once I was on a riverboat tour in the Costa Rican rain forest when our guide suddenly stopped the boat. He asked everyone to sit still, breathe quietly, and let our eyes rest on the tree that was right in front of us. The guide had won our trust with his competence and good humor, so everyone in the boat obeyed him.

He said to us, "Let me know when you see the iguana."

It was clear to me and every other tourist on the boat that there was no iguana in that tree. It was just a tree, with a brown trunk and green leaves. Sitting still, breathing, looking, I appreciated the tree very much. It was a beautiful tree, in a lovely place.

The water lapped at the boat, and I felt very peaceful. After all, he had just given us meditation instructions, and I love to meditate. But there was no iguana in that tree.

“ The practice of waking up in every moment is a bit like spotting iguanas. Even when I can't see the iguana, I vow to keep looking for it.

And then there was! All over the boat, people started exclaiming, “I see it! I see it!” It had always been there, but before we saw it, we didn't know we were seeing it.

The practice of waking up in every moment is a bit like spotting iguanas. After every meditation practice, I recite the four bodhisattva vows, a Zen chant that contains the line: “Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.” This vow reminds me to wake up to the teachings that are offered by the world every moment. Even when I can't see the iguana, I vow to keep looking for it.

Naturally, a few questions may occur to you concerning this vow. First of all, what are these dharma gates? If they're so boundless, does that mean that they are everywhere? If that's true, why don't I see them? And what's all this talk about entering them?

When Zen people like me tell stories about the Buddha, we say that this revered and somewhat legendary historical personage was someone just like us. He was searching for meaning in his life and trying everything he could to find the answers to his

questions. But after going through many kinds of trainings and getting really good at them all, he still hadn't found any answers that satisfied him. So he gave up trying. He made his own vow to sit still, just like the tourists in the riverboat, until the true nature of reality revealed itself to him.

After sitting still for some time, he happened to look up at the sky before dawn, just as the morning star appeared. At that moment, he “woke up” to a new understanding of reality and the meaning of human life. He saw that little shining planet without anything getting in the way—just pure seeing. He couldn't contain his joy, and said, “How marvelous! I, the great earth, and all beings are naturally and simultaneously awakened.”

In that moment, he recognized that what he had been searching for had been right there in front of him all the time. Everything was and always had been naturally awake. And he realized he wasn't alone in this discovery—he felt completely connected to everything and everyone, and all beings joined him in this great opening to the vivid aliveness that appears everywhere.

After this experience, friends and strangers he met felt that there was something special about him. They asked him if he was a god. He replied, “No, I'm just awake.” In the language he spoke, a version of Pali, the word for one who is awake was “Buddha.”

In Zen we say that everyone is already a buddha, an awakened one. But we don't know we are until we are shaken out of our complacent habitual thoughts and see clearly that everything we encounter, including ourselves, has the same awakened nature.

Once this truth has been revealed to us, we can no longer avoid it, although we try. Our thought patterns are so firmly entrenched in the neural connections in our brains that our insight is repeatedly overcome by the filters that hide the truth of reality from us. But then, through practice, we set up the conditions for awakening again, and the true world reveals itself.

This reality is one of the ways we translate the word “dharma”—the teachings that were realized by the Buddha through his personal discovery of the way things are.

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By seeing or hearing or tasting or smelling or feeling something without any filters or disguises, whatever we encounter reveals itself, and we wake up.

The entry points to the Buddha’s dharma—these “dharma gates”—are everywhere. They are revealed to us when we encounter the world through the heart-mind that has been clarified by the practice of sitting still.

For the Buddha, the dharma gate was the morning star. For the riverboat travelers, it was the iguana. For other people, it could be a flower, or the sound of a bird, or stubbing a toe. It doesn’t have to be a particularly beautiful thing, because it can be anything. By seeing or hearing or tasting or smelling or feeling something without any filters or disguises, whatever we encounter reveals itself, and we wake up.

Because dharma gates are boundless, we don't have to go somewhere else to find them. They appear everywhere, and our only responsibility is to enter them. Once we begin to recognize this, everything we perceive externally, as well as our own internal experiences of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, become vehicles for awakening to the ultimate truth of reality.

What allows us to enter these gates to awakening are the same instructions that the Buddha, and the riverboat guide, gave: Be still, be quiet, and pay attention. This practice sets up the conditions for revelation. What you have been longing for reveals itself, and you know that it has been there the whole time. ✨