

The Buddha's Lifestory in Art and Practice

Our earliest evidence for the lifestory of the Buddha comes not from texts, but from art and material culture. Full biographies of the Buddha were not put together until several centuries after his death (and indeed they might be better termed “hagiographies”) but certain events were identified early on as particularly important, and these were illustrated in art and also formed the basis of early pilgrimage traditions. Instead of recounting the Buddha's life here (which you can find easily in any textbook, our top recommendation being John Strong: *The Buddha: A Beginner's Guide*) we will focus on the role of *places* and *images* in the ways in which Buddhists have engaged with the Buddha's lifestory.

In some early texts, the Buddha himself, lying on his deathbed, names four events as being significant: he recommends the benefits of a visit to the places of his birth, awakening, first sermon, and death, for those of a faithful mind. These four places (Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kusinagara) remain thriving pilgrimage sites today, alongside many others.

These four events are depicted in art, both as a set and individually. The earliest images do not show the Buddha himself, but represent his presence through footprints, the wheel (representing the Dharma/Dhamma) or the tree of awakening, but soon images of the Buddha himself became ubiquitous.

The four events are understood to be so important that, according to biographical accounts, they were surrounded by special omens, some of which are visible in the art. For example, the Buddha-to-be (Bodhisattva/Bodhisatta) was born from his mother's side, causing her no pain (and making no mess); he was caught and bathed by the gods, and is then said to have taken seven steps and declared that this was his final birth. His awakening was witnessed by the goddess of the earth, hence images of the awakening often (though not always) feature the Buddha reaching down to touch the earth. His first sermon, or the setting in motion the wheel of the Dharma, converted five men, but also reached gods and animals, marking the beginning of both the Dharma and the *saṅgha* (Buddhist community) in the world.

Scenes of the death of the Buddha often hint at a tension between it being a completely normal death and it being highly abnormal. It is sometimes referred to as his *parinirvāṇa*, which some render as “complete nirvana”, or else it is called his “nirvana without remainder”. This is because there are two stages of nirvana: the Buddha's nirvana during his life has a karmic “remainder” including his body, which continues to live; upon death, there is nothing of this left. The Buddha's death is an example of how he too is subject to impermanence, but it is also completely different to a usual death, as it is not followed by rebirth.

While the text and images that follow focus on the set of four events in the Buddha's lifestory, many others are marked with images and pilgrimage sites too.

**From the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*:
On the four places of pilgrimage**

[The Buddha, on his deathbed, addresses his senior monastic attendant Ānanda:]

There are four places, Ānanda, that are awe-inspiring and worth seeing for a faithful person. Which four?

“Here the Tathāgata [=Buddha] was born!” This, Ānanda, is a place that is awe-inspiring and worth seeing for a faithful person.

“Here the Tathāgata became fully awakened to unsurpassed, supreme awakening!” This, Ānanda, is a place that is awe-inspiring and worth seeing for a faithful person.

“Here the Tathāgata set rolling the unsurpassed wheel of the Dhamma!” This, Ānanda, is a place that is awe-inspiring and worth seeing for a faithful person.

“Here the Tathāgata passed away into the state of nirvana without remainder!” This, Ānanda, is a place that is awe-inspiring and worth seeing for a faithful person.

These, Ānanda, are the four places that are awe-inspiring and worth seeing for a faithful person. Ānanda, faithful monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen will certainly come, reflecting: “Here the Tathāgata was born! Here the Tathāgata became fully awakened to unsurpassed, supreme awakening! Here the Tathāgata set rolling the unsurpassed wheel of the Dhamma! Here the Tathāgata passed away into the state of nirvana without remainder!”

And those people, Ānanda, who die while undertaking such a pilgrimage with their hearts established in faith, at the breaking up of the body after death, they will all be reborn in a happy state, a heavenly realm.

Questions for discussion

Comprehension of the source

What are the four places to visit and why are they important?

What will happen to people who visit them?

Application to other contexts

Are there any places that are significant to you because of what happened there? Do you like to revisit them? Why?

Do other religions that you have studied have similar pilgrimage practices?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

In what sense are these the four most important events in the Buddha's life? Are there other events that might seem just as significant? Which ones, and why?

Why is the Buddha telling Ānanda about this when he is about to die?

How are pilgrimage practices connected to other practices that Buddhists use to feel close to the Buddha after he has left the world?

Sources / Further Reading

This is a translation by Naomi Appleton of an extract from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, from the Pāli Canon of the Theravāda tradition.

You can find two rather different translations here:

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html>

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.5-6.than.html#chap5>

For a map showing these sites and others key to the Buddha's life see

<https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/mapbud.htm>

Images of the four great events

1. Birth



The Bodhisattva emerges from his mother's right side, towards a cloth made ready to receive him, while his mother holds onto a branch overhead. This image is from second-century CE Gandhara, an early heartland of Buddhism now part of Pakistan, and probably the earliest region to make images of the Buddha. The baby's face has not been preserved but you can still make out his halo, obscuring his mother's right elbow, as he reaches out towards the cloth. Image in the public domain courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: [link to original](#)

2. Awakening



The central image here shows the Buddha touching the ground, calling the goddess of the earth to witness that he is ready to become awakened as a *buddha*. The tree under which he sits is another sign that this is the awakening scene. This image also shows, around the edges, seven other scenes from the Buddha's lifestory, including his birth (bottom left), first sermon (just above that) and death (at the top). This is from twelfth-century north India, when such images were popular, and it shows that the group of four events was just one of several listings that were recognised. Image in the public domain courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: [link to original](#)

3. First Sermon



There are a few signs that this is the scene of the first sermon. The five monks in attendance represent the Buddha's first audience, who became the first five Buddhist monks and then first five *arhats* or liberated disciples. (The sixth figure is a protective deity.) The deer confirm the location, in a deer park at Sarnath. And the Buddha sets rolling the wheel, symbolising the Dharma. This second-century CE image is from Gandhara, an important early Buddhist land, now part of Pakistan. The image is in the public domain courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: [link to original](#)

4. Death



This third-century CE image from Gandhara shows the various responses of the Buddha's followers to his death. Those who have not yet achieved nirvana mourn, while a single monk sits in meditation, calmly accepting the impermanence that the Buddha taught. The monk on the left may be Ānanda, the Buddha's personal attendant, who was reportedly too attached to the Buddha to be able to achieve liberation despite being an experienced and dedicated monk. He grieved a lot at the Buddha's passing, but did then manage to achieve liberation as an *arhat*. The figures at the top are deities, also mourning. Image in the public domain courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: [link to original](#)

Questions for discussion

Comprehension of the source

Can you describe the key features of each image? What are the signs that tell us which scene is being depicted?

Application to other contexts

Are images of key moments in people's lives used in other contexts, either in other religious traditions or in the wider world?

Why are such images popular, do you think?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

What Buddhist values are indicated in these images?

Are there any Buddhist values that seem to be contradicted by the images?

What is the role of images of the Buddha in Buddhist practice?

Sources / Further Reading

The image sources are all noted next to the image. All are in the public domain and can be found, along with a lot of other images of different scenes, in this essay by Kathryn Selig Brown on the Buddha's lifestory, provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York:

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/buda/hd_buda.htm

For an image of the four scenes together, which you can use in your classroom (but which we cannot reproduce here for copyright reasons) see:

https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/huntington/show_detail.py?ObjectID=30017641