

Introduction to Buddhism Part 1: The Story of the Buddha

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January 06, 2020

Keywords: mindfulness, Buddhism, Theravāda, Tathāgata, jhāna, Māra, Four Heavenly Messengers, renunciation, awakening, impermanence

So well, come to the first Monday evening talk of the year, and I'm going to use this as an occasion to start a series of talks. The plan is for the next ten times that I'm teaching here Monday evening to give a series of talks on Introduction to Buddhism. I'm not here every Monday, so you could check the IMC calendar to see if I'm here. If you want, just come for that series. One of the things maybe that's prompting me to do this is that when we first moved here, now, it's been some nineteen years ago, eighteen years ago, nineteen years ago. Nineteen years ago, it was the first Monday in January that was the first, you know, talk here.

Before that, we were for many years in Palo Alto in a church there. There was a very strong desire in this insight meditation movement when it first came to this country to not include a lot of Buddhism in it, in order to have mindfulness be accessible to people for whom Buddhism would be a turn off, a lot of people who were interested in Buddhism. So it was kind of left, a lot of Buddhism was left out of the insight meditation teachings. I am very happy with that, because a mindfulness practice is a phenomenally effective practice that supports people in all kinds of ways. The Buddhism part is kind of optional for mindfulness, but mindfulness is not optional for Buddhism. So I'm content with this.

But in the twenty, thirty years that I've been teaching now, the environment for mindfulness has changed dramatically. Now, you know, mindfulness is everywhere because people have it on their apps. The amount of mindfulness in our society is just astronomical compared to, you know, years ago when it was hard to find and was hardly here. I was here at the convent, not exactly at the beginning of its time in the United States, but, you know, there was a time it wasn't even here, right? Now, it's secular. Mindfulness is just, it's in the schools.

Believe it or not, my son in college, he's in a fraternity, which is, you know, odd enough for me, my background, that's the case. There's a meditation group in his fraternity. Now, that's

not, that's a congregating consciousness. I don't know what to make of that, given my background and all the associations I had with these things. Recently I was asked to come to a local college and talk to them. They are really eager to get more mindfulness, because they say our students come to our college already knowing mindfulness.

They've learned it at school, high schools, or in society, and everywhere there's apps galore for mindfulness. So what it means is that we don't have to be so careful any more. Now we can be Buddhists, and, you know, I still think of us as a kind of Buddhist light. We're kind of like, almost yet, a kind of Buddhist light, you know. But it does give us an opportunity, or maybe, you know, is to not have to be so careful any more. What we have to offer is something different now than just mindfulness.

We have the opportunity to offer it now much more freely in its original context of Buddhism. So I think it's a little bit behind this offering, an introduction to Buddhism, for these ten weeks. So first some more introductory words about Buddhism, and then we're going to go into the world of Buddhist myth in an overarching way, a generalization that I've heard no one else ever make: There are two kinds of religions on this planet, and what they share and what calls, what we want to make them religions is they have to do with teachings and practices that are of ultimate value, the ultimate meaning, ultimate purpose of people's lives. Meaning it has, it represents the highest purpose or values that people live their lives by, and the purpose into which they want to infuse, bring into everything they do. It's like the foundation of what their life is about. So whatever it is that brings that kind of ultimate value, purpose that's that pervasive in their lives, I call religion.

You might have a different definition. You might not want to use my definition. But with that definition, there are two types of religion generally. There's theistic religions, and there's humanistic religions. Theistic religions, as the name says, are founded and based upon deities, divinities, gods, such things. Often coming with that is some relationship to a transcendent world, a transcendent reality.

So there's a heaven that's a transcendent reality, something completely separate and distinct from this world here and now that often goes along with theistic religions, and that's a transcendent reality of different types plays a big feature. Buddhism is in the class of some religions which are humanistic in that they're human-centered, and there isn't a transcendent being or divine essence that's in a different dimension of reality in a heavenly realm, or some transcendent reality that's quite radically distinct from this world we have here. So the humanistic religions tend to be based on values and purposes and experiences that human beings can know for themselves. Theistic religions are often based, many people who

participate in them are based on things that generally people don't actually know for themselves, but they come from through books or come through teachers or tradition or something. That's a generalization. So Buddhism is really based in the Buddhism that certainly I teach, the Buddhism that I feel like I belong to in the territory.

Buddhism is humanistic in nature. But historically, over time, it has, because maybe human nature or something, it's often kind of started to evolve towards theistic directions, and there are forms of Buddhism that would be, I think, in my definition, theistic forms of Buddhism where there are kind of supernatural beings, kind of god-like beings, where there are transcendent realms, and heavens are very important, and such things like that. So Buddhism is not separate from the many kinds of Buddhisms. But the Buddhism that we teach here at IMC comes from the Buddhism of Southeast Asia, Buddhism of Thailand and Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and a tradition called *Theravāda* Buddhism. And *vāda* means like doctrine or teaching, and *thera* means the elders. So the teachings of the elders.

So it's the teachings of the ancients, the Buddha and his disciples. This tradition makes the claim that it represents the earliest teachings of Buddhism, going right back to the historical Buddha. If there is any living Buddhist tradition that can make that claim kind of responsibly or something, it's the tradition out of Buddhist tradition, this tradition here. Most other forms of Buddhism that survived into the common era have other kinds of origins in Asia and teachings and stuff like that. So if you go back and really dig into this earliest tradition, and try to really do some text critical studies to see what was really being taught back there, and what was the earliest teachings of Buddhism, the more you dig and look, the more it has a very strong humanistic quality to it, and really based on what people can experience and know for themselves, pointing to our own experience, pointing to ourselves being our own teacher, and pointing to something we can discover in ourselves of ultimate value, of purpose, ultimate meaning that can be, you know, so central to people's lives that it could be called a religious life.

So, you know, so in the earliest time. That's my reading of it. It's relatively humanistic, but there's a little strange thing that goes on, and that is that it seems like from the earliest records we have this person that we now call the Buddha didn't quite want to go along with being defined or being seen in the usual ways in which people identify a human being. He didn't quite, you know, maybe have wanted to like, didn't want to be identified, you know, as I don't know what, but as a plumber, or as a parent, or as, you know, a son, or he didn't want to be identified as many things. In fact, if someone asked him, Who are you? You know a very famous story. He answered, I am awake.

Well, that doesn't tell me much. Where were you born? And you know who were your parents? You know, it's awake. And then another, the most common way that he referred to himself, like the name he used for himself, was this little unusual title called *Tathāgata*. So it's very rare that he called himself Buddha, and other people were calling him that, but he called it, he called himself the *Tathāgata*.

Tathāgata probably means, we don't really know what it means. It has two possible meanings. It means either the one, usually people say, the one who is thus gone, or the one who is thus come. I think we suspect a meaning. It means something more closely to something like the one who is thus. So who are you? Like this. It doesn't give you much right now. You get what you see, you know. This is what is thus.

In some ways, it's quite refreshing to just be thus, just not have to be definition, not to have to be anything for anyone, and not have to prove yourself or apologize for yourself or explain yourself. You just, you know, just show up, and you don't carry any baggage with you of your identity, and you just, you know, thus like this, and let, and then we'll see where we go from there. So in this kind of way, also he didn't seem, he did talk about himself some, but mostly he talked about himself as an example for what he had to teach. It didn't seem like there is no biography of him in his lifetime. In early life, he didn't kind of say, Down, I'm going to tell you my story of my life, that he didn't do. He didn't want to define himself in ordinary terms, human terms.

So was he human? Well, you know, well, of course he was human, but he's kind of like a little bit amorphous, a little bit not, he's not quite there in the way we expect from a human being in terms of a definition. So even at the seemingly the earliest kind of records we have, he's kind of a little bit not quite being described or understood in ordinary human terms. Well, it turns out that that's also then a very nice blank slate, kind of an ink blot used to fill in. Down through the centuries, Buddhists have filled it in. There are some pretty phantasmagoric stories about the Buddha and his life, and who he is.

Because you can, if you watch the development of historical texts over time, you watch the growth of what I call the Buddhist myth. You're not usually supposed to talk about others' religions as they have myths, because, you know, myths are not supposed to be true, right? And I believe them. But since I'm a Buddhist, I think I'm allowed to call them myths, that they are these, you know, amazing myths, and that I don't take as being literally true. It's too much to believe as being true. But they're kind of fascinating and fascinating as myths.

Some people point out that myths have their own truth. Sometimes myths can be more true than reality because they point to some underlying patterns, underlying realities, underlying

kind of processes, truths, understandings of our life that really speak to people, kind of like poetry. So I'm going to offer you a myth, the myth of the Buddha's life. We know very little that's actually about him as a person. We don't know what his name was. Nowadays we say his name was Siddhartha. But the word his name, Siddhartha, first appears in texts five hundred years after he was born.

So it's possible, let you know, you know, that was his name, but it seems to appear much later. There are all kinds of aspects that people, stories people make about the Buddha. Most of what I'm going to say today probably never happened. It makes a good story, especially. Anything is a valuable story if you are willing to suspend disbelief enough to take it as poetry, to take it as kind of pointing to something about every person, something about you. Now I'll give you at least one example, as I go along, of how I do this around the Buddha's birth when I teach children.

So once upon a time, far away, there was in India, northern India, a king and queen. We don't know that the Buddha's parents were kings and queens, but they gave birth to the Buddha as a prince. There's no much later, this is like hundreds of years later, this kind of idea. So I'll stop making these caveats, these footnotes, but just to give you an example. So once upon a time there was a king and queen, and at some point the queen was pregnant to give birth, and she then, as apparently was the custom, was going to give birth in her own home country. So she left where she was living with the king and was walking back home to her country.

On the way the contractions began or something. She knew she was going to give birth, and so halfway between the countries under a tree she stood, lifted one hand up to hold a branch, and the Buddha was born out of her side, because that's what is pure or something. An early sectarian, and the Buddha popped out, and the first thing he did was he took seven steps. That's pretty precocious. He took seven steps. Then he pointed one finger to the sky, and one finger to the earth. He said, Heaven above, earth below, I am the world-honored one.

That's pretty good for a newborn. Oh, and then as he walked the seven steps, he didn't actually touch the ground. The deities came and put their hands or lotus petals or something underneath his feet and held him up, so he didn't have to touch the ground. So I'll tell the story of this story to kids, and I say, That's strange. You know that someone would say that about themselves, I'm the best in the world. However, the way we should understand, I can't understand this story. I go on to each kid, and I say, You're the most wonderful person in the world. You're the most wonderful. You're the most wonderful. You're the best. You're one. All the kids like that.

I said there's some way in which everyone is the best. Everyone is the most world-honored

one. That's, you know, that's my interpretation of the story. Everyone comes to realize that they're unique and special and important and valuable. In the whole enterprise of Buddhism, is to inhabit that so thoroughly that you end up having no conceit whatsoever. Isn't that great? So you don't have conceit in being defined that way. You be free of that. But so you start with that kind of underlying, basic foundation. So that's my interpretation of that story.

Then he was raised by the king and the queen, and oh, soon after his birth there was, there came a sage, Asita, I think his name is, came to see the baby, and he looked at the baby, and looked at his signs, looked at the nose, could read signs on the body or something. The sage said, Lo and behold, this is a phenomenal person. This person will grow up either to be a world-ruling monarch, rule the whole world, or a great sage, a Buddha. Well, the father didn't think much of this religious life, you know, for his son. It was his first son, and he, you know, the idea of being following in the footsteps of the father and taking over the kingdom and becoming a world-renowned monarch, and that was the way to go. So the father then built all these palaces to raise, three palaces apparently, to raise his son and one for each season. The three seasons they had, and this is now in the foothills of the Himalayas, and built these palaces in order to protect his son so his son would not see any human suffering.

He was afraid if he saw human suffering, really saw the human condition, that then he would go the religious route. But he wanted to make sure he went the king route. So, you know, he made sure that he was living in a gated community, made sure that he went to private schools and, you know, and had all the luxuries of his life, you know, and probably lived in Woodside. So that's an interesting way to be raised. At some point as a young man, I think it was now, so he was married probably as it was the custom of his time when he was a young teenager, and he was married for a good number of years. Because it says that this happened probably around the time he was twenty-nine, he got kind of curious about what's outside the palace walls.

So he had a charioteer, his charioteer, to kind of get the horses ready and the chariot ready, and somehow was able to get out, sneak out of the palace, and went riding around to see part of the world. Lo and behold, he saw something he had never seen before. He saw an old person, and he asked his charioteer, What's that? The charioteer said, That is an old person. It's the nature of all people to become old. Wow! So then they went back home.

The next night or the next day they snuck out again. This time they saw a sick person, probably really sick. The Buddha said, What's that? That's a sick person. The nature of all beings is to be sick. Wow! He had no idea, he was so protected. So then the next day they went out.

What is that? That's a dead person. Coincidentally, the first time I ever saw a dead person was not far from where the Buddha saw it. It was in Kathmandu when I was eleven, and they were carrying a body down to the river to be burned. So maybe he saw something similar, and the charioteer said, That's a dead person. It's the nature of all people to die.

The fourth day, the Buddha went out, they saw a renunciant, someone who was a contemplative, who devoted himself to the spiritual life, religious life. He was walking down the street. In a very different way, the Buddha had ever seen anybody walk calmly and self-possessed, with a kind of clarity and presence and simplicity, and conducting himself very different than most people. Not looking at the billboards and advertisements and ogling people. The Buddha said, What is that? That's a renunciant. That's a contemplative. These four sights are called the four heavenly messengers.

These are the messengers that came to the Buddha to show him what this human condition is like that he'd been protected from. I think it's not uncommon for people, whether it's consciously done or unconscious, to be protected from a lot of what goes on in this human life, to not really see the degree of suffering that exists in this world, and the challenges of the world that people have. Even what we all share, you know, we're lucky enough, we get old, we'll be sick some day, we're going to die. For the Buddha, this became an existential crisis. This became something that if you can imagine someone growing already fully grown to see this for the first time, What's going on here? I've no idea. This made a huge impact, so much so that the palace life now seemed uninteresting for him. He felt, Now I have to get to the bottom of this. I have to come to see what's going on here, to understand this. I have to find what's beyond this, or the freedom, or the awakening, or something that has greater value, or find something here.

So then the next night, the Buddha snuck out again and had his charioteer take him to the edges of the country, and then when he crossed a river, he took his sword, and he cut off his beautiful long hair, and took all his jewels, royal jewels off, and his nice clothes off, gave them to his charioteer, and then went forth into the world. That's called the great renunciation, renouncing the palace life. Many people know that the Buddha also, that is the way this myth goes, that same day his wife gave birth to his first and only son, and in spite of just having a newborn baby, he left. That's pretty shocking in modern terms. In the ancient world, some people say that as the male of the household, of the royal household, he had fulfilled his duty. The most important role he had was to make sure there was an heir to the throne. So once he had a son, he was free to do this, go off and discover something. I think in some ways that's pretty dramatic what he did.

But remember that there were no schools, universities. There were no cafes down the street. There was, you know, so little that was available for someone who really wanted to understand this world, understand spirituality or their psyche. There wasn't a therapist to go see down the street either. There was nothing. So what there was, the only thing that was available for people with that kind of inquiring spirit, that kind of existential need, was to go forth, leave the regular lay life, and be a renunciant, be an ascetic, be a contemplative, and live that life. So then he went off, and the first thing he did was he went and found the meditation teachers of his time, and those teachers taught him how to go into very deep states of trance, and he became the best of the best students of his teachers, equals to them in the ability to go into deep meditation trances.

He realized that now that he had mastered his teachers' teachings, this didn't really address the existential issues that he was concerned with, and so he left them. The other option that was available at his time was ascetic practices, starving oneself and eating just one rice kernel a day, and, you know, having no clothes, sleeping outdoors all the time, and just, you know, severe asceticism. One of them was holding one's breath until one fainted almost. There are gruesome stories, you know, now, because, you know, it was these myths that got formed around the Buddha. He always had to be the person who was best at anything with everything, because that's what makes, that's a good publicity for getting new, you know, adherents. So he, you know, he did asceticism, you know, more than, better than anyone else had done, to the point where he collapsed, and getting at the edge of a river and laid there as if dead. The people who saw him laying there thought, This person is dead. But somehow he revived himself enough, and he thought, You know, I've now done asceticism better than anyone right up to the edge of dying. This is not providing the answer either. Dying is not going to provide the answer.

So then he decided to start eating. When he started eating to get some energy, he had some companions who were also ascetics, who then saw that he had, you know, now he was indulging, now he was giving up the asceticism. So they were kind of upset with him. So they left, and he was left alone. Then he went to looking for a place to sit. He found this tree that's called the Bodhi tree, and nowadays it's a Ficus tree. It was a beautiful place, not far from a river. He sat there and wondered what to do and what's next. He'd done the different things that the religious people of his time had offered, and it didn't work.

Then he remembered a story about an event in his life, I think the myth says it happened when he was seven, in which his father was doing the royal, the first ceremonial ploughing of the spring. So father and entourage was out in the fields ploughing, and the seven-year-

old was left under a rose apple tree at the edge of the fields. It was probably a comfortable spring day, nice weather, a feeling of safety, of contentment, just watching some activity in the fields, maybe. Sitting upright, just sitting there, and not, you know, not doing anything, not being anything, not trying to accomplish anything, just kind of sitting there in a very easy, relaxed way. His mind got settled, relaxed, collected, unified, and he entered into the first of the deep *jhāna* meditations, into a state of great ease, peace, well-being.

As an adult, he remembered that, and he said that well-being, I had that sense of well-being and peace and joy that I felt in that meditation state as a seven-year-old. That is, that is, the path to liberation, because that doesn't depend on anything in the world. It's an experience of well-being that's free from preoccupation, free of being caught up in sensual desire and hatred and fear and all the kind of things that people get caught up in. I was really free of all those things, and the well-being. I had kind of had a feeling of freedom in it, because it just welled up from inside, not dependent on anything. That's the path.

So then, as he continued that evening through the night, doing this, that's that line of meditation. It's not a trance where you kind of go into some formless realm and really disconnected from the world. But it's a deep state of meditation that is very much connected to oneself, connected to this world, connected to the body. Where there's deeper and deeper a state of stillness, of freedom of the mind from its preoccupations, freedom from being caught up in thoughts and ideas, identity, desires of all kinds, and the mind in a sense kind of can settle on itself and come home to itself. It's no longer fragmented and caught up with all these things. It's a remarkable experience to be able to settle so deeply that we're not in conflict or preoccupied or chasing everything with our minds.

Then he was on the brink of becoming, of awakening, of liberation. But there happens to be this semi, well, it's kind of a deity, but not, most deities are good, but this one was the bad one. This deity is called Māra. Māra's job description is to prevent people from getting enlightened, and to keep people immersed in the world of sensual pleasures and sensual pursuits. Māra saw, Finally, someone's going to leave my realm. Someone's going to leave the world of sensual pursuits and become free. So we have to stop this.

So Māra came with his army, huge battalions of people, and started to try to frighten the Buddha from getting enlightened, and threw spears and arrows and flashing swords and axes, and, you know, you name it. They threw at the Buddha, and the Buddha just sat under the tree meditating and did nothing, and every arrow and spear and axe that was thrown turned into flowers and fell on the ground around him. So then Māra said, Oh, okay, this is not working. Let's try something else. Māra got his daughters. Apparently Māra had some

really gorgeous daughters who, I guess, had been trained for this purpose, maybe to try to somehow do what, I'm not going to say what, but to try to present themselves in such a way that he would be more interested in them than his pursuit for enlightenment. They did what they did, and probably a little bit extreme. Buddha sat peacefully, didn't take the bait.

So then Māra came with his biggest weapon. He came up to the Buddha himself and he said, What right do you have to become enlightened? Now, not a few people have a lot of doubt about themselves. They feel they're unworthy. They feel, I can't do it. I'm not deserving, all kinds of things about, for many things in life. But, you know, when it comes to something as powerful as spiritual liberation, it can come and can rear its head pretty strongly. What right do you have to do this?

So in reply, this time the Buddha responded, and this time he took his hand like the statue here. The statue here is the picture of what the Buddha did when Māra came. Buddha sitting meditating, and the Buddha takes his right hand and pulls it over his knee and touches the earth. He says, He realizes, I call upon the earth as my witness to become enlightened, my witness to my right to become enlightened. When he touched the earth, there was an earthquake that attested to his worthiness to be enlightened, and that frightened Māra away, and Māra ran away. Then the Buddha continued to meditate. In the early morning, as the sun was rising, there was a deep transformation. He had a deep insight, a deep understanding of reality, so that he was able to let go in a very deep way, and that letting go was his awakening, his enlightenment.

Then he went off to teach, and he had a career teaching that lasted over forty years. Over in ancient India, he got to be about eighty or eighty-one years old, which is fairly old by that time, I guess. He had his challenges as a teacher, nothing too big. But then at some point when he was about eighty years old, it was time for him to die. At that time he was walking back to his home country. Makes some sense? Maybe you want to die in your home country. He was walking back, but he didn't keep it. At some point he got sick, and he actually got very sick twice on that trip. The first time, he was in a tremendous amount of pain, and I said the only way he got some relief from his pain was in deep meditation, those deep trances that he'd been taught when he was young. He then used them in order to cope with the deep pain he had. When he got better, then he continued on a walk. Then, after eating something, and we don't know what he ate, then it's the original language. The food that he ate is called pig's delight. Some people think maybe he ate some pork that was bad. Some people think it may be pig's delight is mushrooms the wild pigs like to eat. No one knows what it is, but he was offered it by someone. When he was offered to have that meal, he said, I'm the only one who

can eat this. Don't give it to anyone else. But I'll eat my pork, then bury it. Otherwise, it's not going to work for other people. So he ate it, and then he got sick, and he walked a bit further. Then he felt he was going to die. So he laid himself down under two trees. Under those two trees, he then, for a couple of days or a day or something, just was available for the villagers, the people around, his disciples, to come and visit him. He gave his last teachings.

One of the last things he said to his disciples was, Do you have any questions, any questions left over? They said, No, they didn't say anything. He asked three times, I think, and I don't, you may be out of respect for me being sick and dying, you don't want to ask me, but please ask. No one said anything, okay? Then he said, the last thing he said was something like, All things are impermanent. Practice hard, strive with diligence. Then he closed his eyes, and he went into the deep meditation states that he knew. He took a last tour through these deep meditation states. There's eight of them, and he went kind of through them systematically. When he was in the deepest one, someone asked one of the monks, Is he dead? The monk who was also a deep meditator knew that he was, the Buddha was not dead. He was in this deep state of meditation. Then the Buddha started coming back from his going through the deepest place to what's called the middle one, the fourth, what's called the fourth absorption. In that deep, blissful, peaceful, very peaceful state of meditation, he let go. Conventionally, he died. He passed away. That's the myth.

It's a myth of someone who discovered how to be at peace, so that when it was time for him to die, he could die peacefully. There was no fear, no distress. He'd done what he had to do. He felt complete. He passed his teaching on. He asked them, Do you have any more questions, and they said, No. To have that ability to die with that ease and peace is quite a phenomenal thing, is quite phenomenal to have. Even if none of these stories are true, it's quite phenomenal for this person who set in, to have set in motion a religious tradition that continues right today. This myth, you know, so maybe the myth of every person, the myth that somehow or other, oh, we are protected somehow or other. We don't really understand what's really going on here for us in our lives. We don't really understand why we suffer. We don't really, some of us don't really face our existential issues of our lives. Some people do, and that in order to really face them, we have to turn towards them, sit with them, and then in deep insight, deep ability to sit and really look honestly at what this life is about, we ourselves can find something called awakening. We ourselves can find a level of peace, resolution of the existential issues of our lives, so that not that we're in a hurry to die, but when it's time to die, that we've had a very full, very meaningful, very purposeful life. We're touched into something very true about human life that gives us a degree of peacefulness, freedom, love,

and compassion for this world that is one. That is what the Buddhists have been pursuing or practicing for ever since.

So that's the myth, and the Buddhism that has lent, headed off into the theistic religion. When we come back next time, I won't be here next week. The next time I pick up this series, then I'll offer you much more my kind of interpretation of this humanistic Buddhism and the very much, you know, based on some of the existing earliest texts rather than from the myths. So you'll get a very different flavor of what this Buddhism can be. But I hope I was hoping I could tell the story as a good storyteller, and tell it in a way that's inspiring as myth or as poetry. So I don't know how well I did, but so go out and look for your heavenly messengers, and then come back, and we'll pick up the story from another way. Thank you.