

## The Buddha's Birth Story: Mythology or Truth?

What I want to talk about tonight is how we view stories from the life of Buddha such as that of His birth. Do these stories seem supernatural, out of the ordinary, unusual, or beyond reason? Are they mere legends? Recently I encountered the view that the birth stories were mythology. As I reflected on this word usage, I do not think that the people concerned use the term in a negative way, but more in the sense of a symbology. Personally, though, for several reasons, I do not think that it is a helpful or skillful way to talk about our Buddhist heritage and traditions.

One reason concerns word usage. Mythology is the study of archetypal patterns, or myths, and symbols. This can certainly be an entryway into spiritual truths. It was for me at one time. These archetypes may indeed exist on a subconscious level that we all have as part of our common humanity. However, the problem with using the words "myth" and "mythology" is that they can also refer to fictitious stories of a folk nature, rather than a spiritual one, an example being the "tall tales" of Pacific Northwest logger Paul Bunyan and Babe his Blue Ox. It's not a good idea to mix up mythic truths with fantastic legends of an imaginary and fabulous nature.

A second concern is emphasis or focus. From a practical perspective, I do not think we need to worry about these issues, although scholars and intellectuals might not concur. Our Buddhist stories and legends are simply what they are—our traditions. We do not have to force ourselves to believe in them. Buddha Dharma is about practice, and out of that practice come knowledge and understanding.

A most helpful example I learned on how to deal with this concern was the way Rev. Master Jiyu approached it. As a community (at Shasta Abbey) we never discussed whether all the stories related to the Buddha's birth were real (historically true) or not. She simply presented them to us as an integral part of our liturgy. We learned the music and scriptures; we set up the altars, including the fashioning of a magnificent white elephant; we prepared offerings; we decorated the monastery with flowers. The customs and traditions were simply what we as Buddhists did to celebrate the founder of our religion's birth, and we got on with the practice. And there was a lot of practice preparing and hosting such a large celebration at the monastery! Rev. Master Jiyu also later provided a slide show detailing an authoritative account of the Buddha's life. Similar to her development of the liturgy, she simply presented the account, referring to traditional paintings from Asia, without adding any of her own opinions or views.

For me, this approach is a good example of employing what Rev. Master Jiyu called "the third position," a perspective beyond the opposites. One does not need to turn the discriminatory mind on to these kinds of topics, which immediately places us in duality. Any way you look at it—is it real or is it not real—either way you are into an argument about it, even if only in your own mind. The third position is to simply sit still with it and be open to what is there. Gladly, we do not sign or recite a profession of faith in Buddhism stating that we believe

in all the doctrine. We can simply remain open to the possibilities—perhaps, perhaps not. Put it on the back burner, as Rev. Master Jiyu used to advise us, and just let it simmer. Someday it may be ready for digesting or further cooking. Perhaps these birth stories are more like putting things in the freezer! Regardless, someday the information may be useful, so don't throw it out hastily.

The important thing is to not close down the mind to these extraordinary events. There are many things described in our scriptures, such as in *The Lotus Scripture*, which are far beyond our ordinary perspective. Who's to say they are not true? The fact that we haven't experienced such things doesn't mean they don't exist. In traditional Chinese and Japanese hell scrolls used for teaching about death and rebirth are depicted various hells, as well as beautiful scenes of rebirth in the Pure Land. Some of the scenes match what Rev. Master Jiyu experienced in her third kensho experience described in *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*. So, just remain open, don't hang onto such, and do not be disappointed or think something is wrong if it doesn't happen. We have this idea as westerners that we have to be certain in an intellectual, empirical way about everything that we know. We often limit ourselves to knowing only through our rational faculty. Somehow we think that it has to be thus or it is or is not real, but such a method does not really apply to what occurs on the spiritual level within our hearts. The reason we call it "spirit" is because it is not material. It is not subject to the same laws as the material, phenomenal world—which is not to say these other realms don't have laws and an order of their own. Learning about them is what the Buddha's quest and our practice is about! (See Rev. Master Jiyu's article on "The Five Laws of the Universe," printed in various Shasta Abbey and Order of Buddhist Contemplatives publications.)

The reason I emphasize remaining open is that there are other teachings in Buddhism that are likewise initially difficult to accept, but are critically important as our practice progresses. An example is rebirth. If you keep an attitude of "beginner's mind" toward that which may seem unlikely, such as birth stories, then you have that same open state of mind for these other teachings that somewhere along the line you may prove true for yourself—and may really need. However, if you are already closed down, or have a habit of skepticism or disbelief, it makes it much harder, and you can shut off an avenue of growth in your spiritual development and understanding. Your very spiritual life may be at stake.

Again, on a practical level, such issues as the Buddha's birth stories do not matter. They are not essential for the practice. The practice is to get beyond the discriminatory mind in daily life. That is where we want to have our focus, not sitting around discussing whether dragons poured warm or cool water from the sky on the newborn Buddha. Eventually, or perhaps very soon, it gets pointless. The real training is in daily practice, what we are doing right now in our heart, in mind, and in body.

Additional reasons why it is important to keep an open mind are: First, there may be a concrete truth about patterns that is good to be familiar with. No one will experience the spiritual life exactly the same, but there are stages that are similar. These birth stories may not be showing us the road map so much as offering a general overview in order to help us gauge if

we are going in the right direction. Does what we're struggling with in training our darker side seem like the Buddha's meditation under the Bodhi tree when Mara attacks? Is our practice leading to the kind of joy expressed at the Buddha's birth? The scriptures too can be like this—how things may look or feel, what may be expected. We want to be open to these patterns because their imprint in our minds and hearts develops more openness and sensitivity, which builds faith. We in the modern world often dismiss faith, but all the great Masters have emphasized that faith is essential.

In our modern scientific and technological immersion, we have been educated out of learning about the world from a spiritual perspective. Unlike in native or even simpler Buddhist cultures, an intuitive type of education is often scorned or ridiculed in contemporary schooling. This separation may also simply be the developmental norm as parents and teachers try to help the child develop a "self" and relate to the world, "other," from that perspective. Nobody is bad here. It's just what usually happens. Then ten or twenty years later, we show up at a Buddhist temple trying to open back up! Now, as spiritual adults who have undertaken Buddhist training, we learn ways to handle the pull of the opposites and stay true to an inner sense of Truth. We can find ways to integrate meditation and intuitive knowledge with our intellectual and rational faculties. So keep open to these stories and traditions as patterns, as possibilities. Rev. Master Jiyu was fond of quoting from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Second, these stories are loaded with symbolism and codes, such as the Buddha's seven steps at birth. In this case, they are symbolic for the seven stages of the Teaching. That detail was to show people how to recognize that this child was indeed the Buddha, to confirm Him as the rightful successor to the Seven Buddhas of the Past, and to help them remember key points of practice. Such details are not meant to be taken literally. They serve as mnemonic devices in a way similar to numerical lists, for which Buddhism is also well-known.

Another example is the white elephant which appeared in the dream of the Queen Mother Maya at Siddhartha's conception. (Note that it did not literally enter her side, as some simplified versions of the story relate.) Because of its rarity, in India a white elephant was symbolic of purity and holiness. When found, they were given to the royal ruler because the elephant was one of a Wheel-turning (righteous) monarch's "seven sacred possessions." Thus, it became associated with royalty and symbolized not only strength, but also the capacity to train and help the world. One can view the whole affair of the white elephant as a development from Indian culture into the Buddha's life story to show the rarity of His appearance, the purity of His heart and life, and His right as heir to be "King of the Dharma."

From what I have read, Indian civilization did not place an emphasis on history like the Chinese and our own Western civilization, because there had been so many civilizations that had risen and fallen in that part of the world. The storytellers were so keenly aware of impermanence that they focused on spiritual truths and emphasized that which does not change, that which is beyond suffering. Another way to say it is that for them, the characters were not so important, but the story or plot was! The storytellers remembered and passed on

spiritual truths and overarching life patterns rather than the literal truths of facts and details. Given that these stories were passed down orally for several hundred years before they were written down, it's also possible that their color and interest served to aid memory and the dramatic telling. Most people of the time were not literate.

On reflecting once on a chapter from Great Master Keizan's *Denkoroku* on rebirth and Buddha Nature, I considered asking one of the senior Masters for an explanation. However, on further reflection, I realized that I did not really need to ask. I was just spinning wheels in my brain, and my spiritual life and training did not depend on understanding that point. I would understand it when it was time. I could trust that my experience would ripen and mature this particular point. I also found over the years that when I did ask these sorts of intellectual questions, the answers seemed to jump promptly out of my memory! I was no better off than before. Life becomes much simpler when we just have faith in the teaching and the training and trust that the important things will come through. (We do need to ask about practice, though.)

When we take up a meditation practice, we listen to Dharma talks, we read Scriptures, and we do ceremonies. It is in a sense that we are on a stage and these things are the props and scenery for the play. They can add perspective, color, and direction, but they are not the play itself. They are "not necessary, but useful," as one our Order's Masters put it. The play is our own training in daily life, the liberation of our hearts and minds from delusion and consequent suffering.

Even in the midst of all the grandeur and wonder of the Buddha's birth, the most important thing is that he was a human being. If he could do the training and awaken to the True Reality, so can we. We all have the same potential. Stories like these can be a reminder of the Possible.

*Rev. Oswin*

March 31, 2010



© 2010 Eugene Buddhist Priory. Developed from a Dharma talk on May 26, 2004 at the Priory.  
 Transcribed by Sally Meadow; editorial assistance from Dixie Feiner. This writing may be reproduced  
 for personal or non-commercial use. For other purposes, please contact the Priory.