

INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

Lecture #1 (Sep. 10, 2008)

Who Is Sakyamuni Buddha?

1. Coming down from the *Tusita* Heaven,
2. Entering his mother's body,
3. Siddhartha Gautama's birth as a prince of Kapilavastu, in Northern India (presently Nepal), on April 8. Lost his mother soon after his birth,
4. Suffering caused from mother's death and the victimization of the weak by the strong (Ex. Bird and the worms, War, A bird shot by Devadatta's arrow)
5. Observing a sick person, an aged person, a funeral procession and a monk,
6. Denouncing princehood after his son, Rahula's birth (29 years old),
7. Six years of self denial practices for salvation from all suffering,
8. Subjugating demons,
9. Enlightenment (Becoming a Buddha) on December 8 (35 years old),
10. First Sermon to his five companions at Deer Park in Varanasi,
11. Propagation of Buddha's teachings,
12. Great Nirvana on February 15 at Kusinagara (80 years old)

The Eight Events in the life of the Buddha (八相) are 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 12.

Early Sutras

When Sakyamuni Buddha was alive, none of his teachings were recorded by means of written languages. I am not sure that there were written methods at that time, but it could be that it was impolite to write the words of the Most Honored One, so to was engraving the Buddha's life history in stone. The first few centuries after his death, the Buddha was symbolized with a Dharma Wheel or a Bodhi Tree.

Soon after the Buddha's death, 500 disciples gathered at Rajagriha (near Mt. Sacred Eagle) to refresh their memory about his teachings. They chanted *gathas* or Buddhist hymns, so that they could memorize the sutras easily. This kind of conference was held a total of three times, with the goal of keeping and transferring the messages of the Buddha through disciples' spoken words.

A few centuries later, the spoken words were written down in order to avoid the important teaching to be forgotten and mis-memorized. Therefore, all the sutras start with the phrase, "**Thus have I heard**" 「如是我聞」 in the first chapter, noting the fact that the sutras came from an oral tradition. The editors divided the Buddha's teachings into different sutras and different chapters depending on the contents.

The sutras compiled during this time were called the early sutras such as *The Agon Sutra*, *the Dharma Parada*, and *the Sutta Niparta*.

Two Buddhism (Theravada 小乘 and Mahayana 大乘)

After Sakyamuni Buddha's death, his teachings were well kept, practiced and propagated by the ordained priests, priestesses, lay men and women for about a century. However, the ways of understanding and practicing the Buddha's teachings begun to split into two different traditions because of the differences in interpreting the message. The first group was called Theravada Buddhists, those who tried to keep up the traditional practices and rules set forth from the beginning. They were more often ordained men and women. The second group was called Mahayana Buddhists, those who emphasized the essential ideas but changed their ways of practice depending on their environment and time period. They were more often lay-people who could not practice strict rules.

For instance, ten people can have ten different ideas on what is important. Some people may emphasize the traditional, liberal, emotional, theoretical or practical attitude. It is unavoidable that interpretations of the Buddha's teachings differ depending on each individual's level of education, cultural background, era, and country.

Comparing the two main traditions, we see that Theravada Buddhism is mostly practiced in southern Asia like Vietnam, Thailand and Sri Lanka; and that Mahayana Buddhism is practiced in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Theravada priests stay in monasteries and practice for their own salvation. They go out begging for food in front of their devotee's houses every morning, because the priests are not allowed to produce or to own anything, including food. In Theravada Buddhism, lay people cannot attain Buddhahood, but wish to be reborn in better place by serving priests.

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism arose among the lay people who insisted that attaining Enlightenment is possible even for lay men and women. The origins probably began two or three centuries after the Buddha's death. The attitude was very liberal in contrast to the Theravada Buddhists. I believe that the Mahayana Buddhists have been greatly influenced by the trading merchants on the Silk Road during the first and second century A.D. There are many stories regarding merchants, traders, treasure hunts, physicians, kings, millionaires and the homeless in the Lotus Sutra which I will discuss later.

Theravada priests kept strict precepts even today, but Mahayana priests especially some Japanese priests eat meat, drink sake, are married, own personal property, and so on just like lay people. Although Japanese priests are ordained, they keep lay people's lifestyle. All Mahayana sutras emphasize the practice of a BODHISATTVA, those who are seeking Enlightenment not only for themselves but for others.

The Five Periods of the Buddha's Teachings 一代五時

It is said that Buddha Sakyamuni taught various teachings depending on his listeners' levels of understanding, background, education, business and financial status during his 45 years of propagation. They were compiled as sutras by many editors during several centuries. They are mostly Mahayana Sutras, for example, Heart Sutra, Amida Sutra, Maha Virocana Sutra, Infinite Light Sutra, Lotus Sutra, and Nirvana Sutra. Ordinary people may wonder which sutra is good and which is the most excellent.

Thus, the Great Master T'ien T'ai (538-597) of China revealed the Five Periods of the Buddha's Teachings with the revelation of the inferior and superior sutras. The classification began with the Buddha's teachings immediately after enlightenment until his entrance into Pari-Nirvana at the age of 80. (Note: Buddha's ages at the time of T'ien T'ai and present time are different.)

1. **The Kegon 華嚴 Period:** After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha preached the Kegon teachings for 21 days. However, these teachings were too difficult for the average people to understand. It is said that Buddha Sakyamuni taught the Kegon teachings to the gods who requested him to do so. Example: *The Kegon Sutra*
2. **The Agon 阿含 Period:** The Buddha taught the Agon teachings during the next twelve years (from age 30 until 42) in a manner which anyone could easily understand (The Theravada teachings). Example: *The Agon Sutra, the Hokku Sutra (the Dharma Pada) and the Sutta Niparta* among others.
3. **The Hoto 方等 Period:** The eight years following the Agon Period (from age 42 until 50) was when the Buddha taught that Theravada teachings are inferior to the Mahayana teachings. Example: *The Yuima Sutra (The Vimalakirti Sutra), The Kan Muryoju Sutra (The Amitayurdhyana Sutra), Konkomyo Sutra (the Suvarnaprabhasottama-rajā Sutra), Daijik-kyo* etc.
4. **The Hannya 般若 Period:** The subsequent 22 years (from age 50 until 72) when the Buddha instructed the people to discard the one-sided teachings of Theravada and Mahayana as he introduced the teaching of Ku (voids). Example: *The Dai Hannya Sutra (The Great Heart Sutra)*
5. **The Hokke-Nehan 法華涅槃 Period:** The final eight years (from age 72 until 80) preceding the Buddha's passing. Since the understanding of the disciples and followers had deepened, Sakyamuni Buddha taught the truth of his enlightenment. Example: *The Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra.*

(Note: More detail will be explained in next meeting.)



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