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TRANSFORMATION FROM SIDDARTHA TO BUDDHA

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ABSTRACT

It discusses the events associated with the transformation of Siddartha in to Buddha. In fact, there is no exclusive Canonical account that discusses the biographical events of the Buddha, chronologically from his birth to nirvana. However there are a number of intermingled sources in the canonical texts, both in Pali and Sanskrit languages describing the different events associated with the life of Buddha. The complete biography of the Buddha found in the later Pali commentaries and chronicles as well as in the Sanskrit works, was woven out of those catered evidences

INTRODUCTION

During the *Rig Vedic* period the social and the religious beliefs were simple and flexible. The worldview was more egalitarian. But, the simple, flexible and egalitarian nature of the *Rig Vedic* period was replaced by the burdensome rituals and sacrifices. Superstitions suppressed spirituality. Brahmins more often used religious beliefs for their personal gains and monopolized the study and practice of religion. Numerous religious ceremonies and meaningless costly practices including animal sacrifice dominated the scene. The *Varṇa* system was deliberately made rigid to keep non-Brāhmiṇs away from religion. The egalitarian outlook was not even heard in those days. On the other hand there was an intense technological and material advancement¹, around the second half of the first millennium B.C. But the existing orthodox ritualistic religion did not sanction the material advancement of that time. Besides, it also strictly countered the expanding urbanisation and cross border trade in order to protect the purity of the *Varṇa* system. This *Vedic* conception of the society no longer satisfied the requirements of people in the newly changed socio-political and economic setup. So the dominant section of the society attempted to escape from the formalism of *Vedic* religion and to question the utility of rituals and the claim of the Brahmins to spiritual superiority. In doing so they even awaited new religious beliefs that

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would better cope up with the newly changed socio-political and economic demands. This resulted in the development of many new philosophical ideas that catered to the needs of those people who were disgusted with the already existing burdensome beliefs of the *Vedic* philosophy.

The ideologues of new religious thoughts questioned the ritual centred *Vedic* belief system and *Varna* hierarchy in the society. Of all such heterodox schools, especially Jainism and Buddhism, made vitriolic attack on animal sacrifice, that was done to acquire divine merits. Call for the protection of cattle wealth, particularly made these two religions instantly popular. The pioneers of these two religions Vardhamana Mahavira and Siddhārtha hailed from the *Jnatri* and the *Sakya* clans of *Kshatriya* lineage, respectively.

The current paper discusses the events associated with the transformation of Siddhartha in to Buddha. In fact, there is no exclusive Canonical account that discusses the biographical events of the Buddha, chronologically from his birth to *nirvana*. However there are a number of intermingled sources in the canonical texts, both in *Pali* and Sanskrit languages describing the events associated with the life of Buddha from his ancestry, birth, infancy, youth, renunciation, Enlightenment, dissemination of message and *nirvana*. The complete biography of the Buddha found in the later *Pali* commentaries and chronicles as well as in the Sanskrit works, was woven out of those catered evidences.ⁱⁱ About his ancestry, a myth from *Ambattasutta* of *Dighanikaya*, holds that he belonged to a Sākya clanⁱⁱⁱ. Likewise the *Mahapadana Sutta* of *Dighanikaya* enlists the names of Gautama's father and mother along with their royal capital.^{iv}

Birth of Siddhartha:

The absence of hard bound facts is the major drawback for the study of early Buddhism. By and large the life and preachings of the Buddha influenced the Mauryan emperor Asoka (274-236 B.C.), who was instrumental in transforming Buddhism as a politico-religious ideology, 'Dhamma' to win the people through *dharmavijaya* than by *yuddhavijaya*. Even the date of the Buddha's life is conjectured basing on Asoka's date. It is traditionally held that the death of Buddha took place 100 years before Asoka. The lifetime of Buddha was fixed between 563 and 483 B.C.

Buddhist literature provides ample information with regard to the birth of Buddha. He belonged to the *Sakya* clan. They dwelt along the Rohini River in the Southern foothills of Himalayas under the leadership of the king Suddhodana, who ruled from Kapilavasthu.^v His queen was Mayadevi. They had no children for twenty years after their marriage. On one night the queen Maya got a dream, in which she saw a white elephant entering into her womb

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through the right side of her chest. She then became pregnant. The King and the people awaited the birth of a royal child that could be a boon to the *Sakya* clan. The Queen who was on the way to her parents' home for the delivery took rest at Lumbini Garden and delivered her princely child. The King was extremely happy with the birth of a male child and named him as Siddhartha. The name literally means 'every wish fulfilled'. But the sudden death of Mayadevi made the palace sorrowful. Her younger sister Mahaprajapati became the foster mother of Siddhartha. She brought him up with much love and care.

Asita, a sage who lived in the nearby Himalaya Mountains, observed a sparkle in the castle. Considering it as an auspicious omen, he went to the palace and saw the child. He predicted the future of the newborn boy in the following words:

“This Prince, if he remains in the palace, when grown up, will become a great King and subjugate the whole world. But if he forsakes the court life to embrace a religious life, he will become a Buddha, the Savior of the world.”^{vi}

Infancy:

After listening to the prophecy, Suddhodana was very happy. But he got worried that his son would leave the royal palace and live as an ascetic in the forests. When he was seven years old, Siddhartha began his studies in the civil and military craft. But he was sensitive to the world of sufferings and miseries. He wanted to know the causes of all sufferings. On one day, during the spring season, he went out with his father to see the world outside the castle. Both of them watched a farmer tilling his fields. Then he found a bird came down to the ground and carried a small worm, tilled up by the plough of the farmer. He relaxed under a tree but was thinking deeply with regard to the death of the worm in the hands of a bird. He got worried that whether all living creatures kill one other. Siddhartha who lost his mother in the infant stage was moved away by the incidences.

Youth:

Suddhodana wanted to keep his son away from seeing any miseries and sufferings of the world. He told his servants to see that Siddhartha is kept away from the worldly sufferings and pains. Tradition says that the king kept his son in three palaces amidst forty thousand dancing girls. When he was sixteen years old, his father sent five hundred women to him as prospective brides. But he selected his cousin Yasodhara and won her by performing twelve marvellous feats in archery. Thus Siddhartha led a luxurious life inside the royal household having three lotus pools and three palaces for three seasons, winter, summer and rainy



seasons.^{vii} Such comfortable life immersed Siddhartha in worldly pleasures and joys of princely life. He was unaware of the realistic sufferings and pain and of people in the society. In due course of time he came out of his royal threshold. Near the Lumbini Park he came across the real miseries of life in different forms. On the first day he saw a man who was drooped due to his age. He saw on the next day, a person suffering from some disease. Afterwards, he came across a dead body accompanied by people weeping for the deceased in grief. On the final day he was impressed by the sight and the words of a mendicant, whom he came across on his way. The mendicant told him that he was a wandering monk (*sramana*) and ascetic (*parivrajaka*). After encountering the above four scenes, he understood that the highest goal of life is to be free from the fear of old age, decease, anxiety of birth and death^{viii}. While he was going back to his palace he heard the news about the birth of his son. He named him as Rahula. The term 'Rahula' literally means 'fetter' or 'bond'. He considered his son as a link to continue his life as a house holder and worldly life. Hence he determined to renounce the world and seek enlightenment like an ascetic to attain *moksha*^{ix}.

Renunciation and enlightenment:

On one mid night, Siddhartha finally had a look at his wife and son in their palace, when they were asleep and left his harem and his city, Kapilavatthu in search of truth with his charioteer, Channa. By morning, he crossed the river Anoma. He handed over his garments and other princely paraphernalia to his charioteer and took to the semblance of an ascetic. The prince went south to find solution to the problem of suffering of the world. For the next six years, he tried to find the meaning of life. There he impressed the king of Magadha, Bimbisara. They offered him half of their kingdom to stay. Siddhartha refused to take. He gave him a word that he would return to him with 'truth' if he could be able to find it. He became an exponent in meditation (*dhyana*) and philosophy. During his pilgrimage he came in contact with two spiritual teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. The former taught him the '**sphere of No-thing**'. Siddhartha mastered Alara's system. Alara was glad to declare that Siddhartha was his equal in sphere of knowledge. The latter taught him the concept of '**sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**', a higher mystical state than the 'sphere of no-thing'. Siddhartha did not satisfy with the knowledge that he had gained from them. He continued his search for the truth. He went to Senanigrama in Urvela. There he met five mendicants. They used to practice different spiritual traditions. There Siddhartha wore coarse cloths, refused to sit squatted or any way except on his heels. He stopped to wash his body. He allowed the dirt and dust to accumulate and fall from on their own. He slept in places where the birds ate rotten human flesh. Through self-denial he hoped to understand life, but failed. He described his physical state as follows:

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“Because of so little nourishment, all my limbs became like some withered creepers with knotted joints; my buttocks like a buffalo's hoof; my back-bone protruding like a string of balls; my ribs like rafters of a dilapidated shed; the pupils of my eyes appeared sunk deep in their sockets as water appears shining at the bottom of a deep well; my scalp became shriveled and shrunk as a bitter gourd cut unripe becomes shriveled and shrunk by sun and wind; . . . the skin of my belly came to be cleaving to my back-bone; when I wanted to obey the calls of nature, I fell down on my face then and there; when I stroked my limbs with my hand, hairs rotted at the roots fell away from my body”^x.

Siddhartha realized that both luxurious living and asceticism would not bring truth nearer to him. So he espoused *Middle Way (madhyamarga)*, as a medium to find truth^{xi}. He demonstrated his newly emergent ‘truth’ to his fellow ascetics. He took normal meal in front of them and they left him disgusted. At the age of 35 years old, Gautama went to Gaya, a major north-eastern city in India. There, underneath a Banyan tree, Ajapala Nigrodha on full moon day (*Vaisakha purnima*) in May, he spread a mat under a fig tree near the Meranja River and assumed a lotus position. He swore to remain in that position until he learns the mysteries as well as the causes for the miseries of life.

“After sitting under the tree, Mara, the lord of the world of passion approached him and attempted to prevent him from attaining *Enlightenment*. Siddhārtha, however, sat in meditation unmoved. Siddhārtha was sustained by 10 *paramitas* (“great virtues”) that he had perfected during innumerable past lives as a *bodhisattva* (Buddha-to-be) in order to attain Enlightenment”^{xii}.

The Buddhist texts upheld that Siddhartha won a fierce battle with Mara before he attained Buddhahood. Some scholars interpret that most of the battles with Mara were really a psychological struggle of Siddhartha with worldly temptations^{xiii}. From then onwards Siddhartha came to be known as Buddha, which means the ‘awakened one’ or the ‘enlightened one’.

Buddha attained Enlightenment by realizing the twelve links of Dependent Origination (*Paticca-samuppada*), the real technique that Buddha used during his meditation beneath the *Bodhi* tree before he attained his Enlightenment^{xiv}. After attaining enlightenment, Buddha officially proclaimed the concept of the *Arya sacca* (four noble truths) through his First Sermon entitled ‘*dhammacakkappavattanasutta*’ (The Wheel of Truths) to the group of five *bhikkhus* in the Deer Park in Isipatana near Benares.^{xv}

Conclusion:

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Out of all the newly emerged heterodox sects, Buddhism that questioned the efficiency of Vedic rituals and the caste system, besides adopting vernacular language rather than Brāhmanical Sanskrit, to reach the people became the most successful in that context. Buddha has been considered a great reformer of those times. Further, the ascetic thought of Buddha has been traced to the Yoga practices of pre-Vedic India. He was also called as *Sakyamuni* and claimed to have expounded the old path of previous Buddhas.^{xvi} The realm of the Buddhist ideology was wide to incorporate the sections of the populace that could not be comfortably and ritualistically positioned in the social hierarchy.

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ⁱ Use of iron implements during the period resulted in the surplus production which in turn gave rise to trade and commerce and urbanization.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Maurice Walshe, *Dighnikaya the long discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: wisdom publications, 1996, p. 111.

^{iv} Ibid, p.201

^v Isabelle Onians and Somadeva Vasudeva (eds.), *Life of Buddha by Asvaghosa*, (translated by Patrick Olivelle), New York: Clay Sanskrit Library and New York University Press, 2008, p.3.

^{vi} Bukkyo Dendo Kyonkai, *The Teachings of Buddha*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2006, p.4.

^{vii} U. N. Ghoshal, 'Studies in Early Buddhist Historiography', *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, No.2, Vol. XVII, June, 1941.

^{viii} *Pade tu yasminn na jara na bhir na run na janma, Naivoparamo na*

cadhayah Tam eva manye purusartham uttamam na vidyat, Yatra punah punah kriya; Asvaghosa: *Buddhacarita*, cited in P. V. Bapat (ed.), *2500 Years of Buddhism*, New Delhi: The Publications division, Government of India, 1956, p. X.

^{ix} *Nara-pungava janma-mrtyu bhita sramanah*

Pravrajitosmi moksa-hetoh, *ibid*, p.VI.

^x *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Buddha*, Vol. III, Chicago: William Benton Publishers, 1981, p. 370.



^{xi} Piyadassi Thera (tr.), *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth*, 1999, downloaded from web <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.piya.html> on 29th June 2016.

^{xii} In order to attain Buddha hood, all bodhisattvas [i.e., those who aspire to become Buddhas] have to perfect, during innumerable lives, these 10 *paramitas*: charity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truth, determination, universal love, and equanimity. Downloaded from web

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^{xvi} L.M. Joshi, *Buddhism: A Historical Survey*, Patiala: Punjab University, 1969, p. 1-3.