

The Buddha in Middle Length Discourses: Autobiography, biography, and hagiography

Introduction to Readings for October 3rd Class
Suttas 26, 4, 19, 36, 72, 12, 49, 91, 123
(optional: 47, 71, 77, 92)

One of the major themes in the Middle Length Discourse is the nature of the Buddha. In many discourses the Buddha responds to people's questions about who or what he is. In some discourses he takes the initiative to talk about himself without being specifically requested to do so. Perhaps one reason for the prominence of this theme is that the Buddha was teaching a new path to personal transformation and he was the primary exemplar of what he was teaching. The authority of his message did not come from "faith, preference, oral tradition, or reasoned reflection." Rather it came from what he had seen and known through his own transformation. So, in becoming a Buddha what had he become?

In the Middle Length Discourses answers to this question appear in passages that are autobiographical, biographical, and hagiographical (idealized biography of a "saint"). If the Buddha's autobiographical material can really be attributed to him then the Middle Length Discourses and the rest of the early discourse collections contain one of the, if not the earliest, surviving first person accounts of an inner "spiritual" life.

Numerous biographical passages appear in the early text. This material is not presented in any systematic way. Often this information is found in the narrative description that contextualizes the particular teachings of a particular discourse. At times accounts of events in the Buddha's life are used to make particular teaching points, most commonly by the Buddha in response to someone's questions. The earliest surviving Theravada attempt to compose a full biography of the Buddha is the *Nidanakatha*, a commentarial introduction to the Jataka tales. While we don't know the date this was composed, it was many centuries after the time of the Buddha. A wonderful "biography" of the Buddha is Bhikkhu Nanamoli's *The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon*. This anthology gathers together much of the earliest biographical material from the Pali literature and organizes it chronologically. It provides the source material from which modern biographies have been written.

It is well known that over a period of centuries the Buddha became increasingly idealized to the point of becoming more god than human. Some of the Pali suttas are clearly hagiographic and are likely to have been composed long after his death. We do not know when this tendency started; it may have begun in his own lifetime. It is perhaps impossible to winnow out of the Pali canon a true picture of the Buddha prior to when this idealization process began. In other words, the idealization probably began prior to composition of the Pali Canon.

Much of the modern, popular understanding of the Buddha and his life does not come from the early Pali suttas but rather from much later writings. For example, the famous story of the Siddhartha leaving the palace and encountering the four 'divine messengers' does not appear in a Pali suttas. It appears in literature several centuries

older than the suttas and seems to be based on an account of the lives of previous Buddhas that does appear in a sutta (DN 14, *Maha Apadana Sutta*).

Another example of a surprising absence in the suttas is that nowhere in these texts is the Buddha referred to as “Siddhattha” (literally: One who has accomplished the goal). While this may have been his given name, it is first recorded as such some four centuries after his death. Instead he is often addressed by his family name, “Gotama”, and even more often as *bhagavan* (Blessed One), *buddha* (Awakened One), or *tathagata* (The Thus Gone One). He usually refers to himself as the *tathagata*. What does it mean that the Buddha is most commonly referred to with an epithet? What view of the person do we get when seen through the filter of such an abstract designation? Why would the Buddha refer to himself as “The Thus Gone One”?

For many people the Buddha is an object of profound faith and lofty inspiration. If we cannot be confident that the suttas provide a reliable picture of the who this historical person was, then who is the Buddha people have faith in? More important, who is the Buddha for you? As you do the readings for this month, please consider your own relationship to the Buddha. In what way is the Buddha meaningful for you? What role does he have in your life and in your practice? Why are you interested in studying an ancient record of what he is supposed to have said? In what way might an idealized image of the Buddha be useful for you?

Over the next couple of weeks I hope to write as many study guides for the assigned readings as I can. They will be posted as they are ready.

Whether or not a Tathagata appears, [dependent arising] remains – this regularity of the Dhamma, this orderliness of the Dhamma, this conditionality.

Samyutta Nikaya II.12.20