

Teaching on the Twelve Deeds of the Buddha



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Acknowledgement

The Auspicious Tendrel of this Book

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, delivered this series of teachings in the Tibetan language via videos during the sacred occasion of Saga Dawa in 2020, commemorating the life of Buddha Śākyamuni: his birth, enlightenment, and parinirvāṇa. His Holiness directed our team to translate these teachings into multiple languages.

On the auspicious occasion of Saga Dawa in 2024, the English and Chinese texts of the teaching were translated from Tibetan, edited, and published by *The Sakya Tradition, Inc.*, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and making widely available the precious Dharma teachings of the glorious Sakya lineage. Additionally, our team translated and published the text into Spanish and Portuguese. An edited Tibetan version of this teaching will also be published.

This work was a grand maṇḍala, a collective effort contributed by many individuals—monastics and lay students across the globe—representing followers of the Buddha within

the Sakya school, Tibetan Buddhist schools, and beyond. It signifies a nonsectarian initiative, uniting us all as followers of the Buddha.

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Dedication

May all authentic lineage holders and Buddhist teachers, including Their Holinesses the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizins, enjoy perfect health and long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma. May the genuine, pure, unbroken Buddhadharma flourish far and wide, remaining forever. May all sentient beings swiftly accumulate merit and wisdom, attaining the complete state of awakening. May peace prevail in all directions. And may all be inspired and benefit from this work!

Sarvamangalam,

The Publication Team & Board of Directors

The Sakya Tradition, Inc.



INSIGHTS FROM BUDDHA ŚĀKYAMUNI'S LIFE STORY

Have you ever pondered how it's possible to achieve buddhahood, despite knowing that we all possess buddha nature?

Fortunately, Buddha Śākyamuni, a historical figure, illuminates the path to enlightenment. His entire life story, particularly the twelve great deeds, sheds light on life's struggles and the pursuit of profound awakening.

The Buddha's story demonstrates to us that transcendence from ordinary existence to buddhahood is indeed possible. Even for those who may not be considering the pursuit of enlightenment yet, each of these deeds offers invaluable insights into the human experience, revealing that his wisdom is not only applicable to spiritual pursuit but also greatly beneficial to mundane life.

May you find inspiration and strength through reading this timeless story, and may it propel you towards a journey of self-discovery and spiritual growth.

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Introduction

As we now enter the auspicious times of Saga Dawa (*Vaiśākha*), I thought I would speak about the enlightened qualities and activities of the inconceivable secrets of the body, speech, and wisdom of our teacher, the perfect Buddha.

First of all, as stated in the *Fortunate Eon Sūtra* (*Bhadra-kalpika sūtra*), periods of time when a buddha appears in the world are known as light eons. The current period is one such light eon since a buddha has indeed appeared in the world. Furthermore, as stated in the *Inconceivable Secrets Sūtra* (*Tathāgatā-acintya-guhya-nirdeśa sūtra*), one thousand buddhas will appear during this eon, which is why, among the light eons, the current one is said to be a fortunate eon.

Out of the thousand buddhas that are due to appear during this fortunate eon, Krakucchaṃḍa (Destroyer of Cyclic Existence), Kanakamuni (Golden Sage) and Kaśyapa (Protected by Light) have already appeared in the past. The teacher of our present

time, the Bhagavān, the peerless King of the Śākya, is called the Fourth Guide because he is the fourth in succession out of these one thousand buddhas.

In the beginning, the Fourth Guide, the Bhagavān, was just like us. He was an ordinary individual who suffered much, who had negative actions, the causes of suffering, and also many afflictive emotions that compelled him to wander throughout the three realms of cyclic existence, just as we do. Nevertheless, as Ārya Nāgārjuna says in his *Praise of the Eight Stupas (Aṣṭamahāsthānacaitya stotra)*:

*You who first conceived the mind of supreme awakening,
Gathered the accumulations for three countless eons^[1],
And then vanquished the four obstructing māras^[2],
Blessed Lion, to you I pay homage.*

Thus, in the beginning, he generated the mind of supreme awakening. In the middle, he gathered the accumulations of merit and wisdom for three countless eons. And in the end, he attained manifest and complete awakening. As for how he generated the mind of supreme awakening, the *Fortunate Eon Sūtra* says:

*Previously, when I was just a lowly sentient being,
I offered a single portion of food to the Tathāgata Śākyamuni,
And first conceived the mind of supreme awakening, bodhicitta.*

Other scriptures such as the *Sūtra of Repaying the Kindness*, the *Sūtra of the Three Heaps (Triskandhaka sūtra)*, and the *Compassionate White Lotus Sūtra (Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka sūtra)* mention various other ways of conceiving the mind of supreme awakening. These represent the different ways in which he generated the mind of perfect awakening during his various previous lives. Then, in regard to how he gathered the accumulations for three countless eons, we commonly recite the following:

*By this merit may we quickly perfect
The accumulations of merit and wisdom,
And may we attain the two supreme bodies,
Born from merit and wisdom.*

Merit and wisdom are essential to accumulate. Merit accumulation involves practices like generosity, ethical conduct, and patience. It also consists of prostrations and circumambulations offered with the body, taking refuge and

reciting *maṇi* mantras with the speech, and generating faith and confidence in our gurus and in the Three Jewels with the mind. Alongside these, and in accordance with the four immeasurable thoughts, primarily through immeasurable loving-kindness and compassion, and with the intention of benefiting all sentient beings, merit accumulation extends to activities such as giving assistance to the poor and the helpless, and accomplishing the welfare of others as much as possible.

The accumulation of wisdom described as the practical experience of the true nature of phenomena, known as emptiness, attained through listening, contemplating, and meditation. Thus, there are the two accumulations: merit and wisdom. Regarding the outcome, manifest and perfect buddhahood signifies freedom from all faults and possession of all qualities, the ultimate result of having perfected the two accumulations of merit and wisdom over three countless eons. In simpler terms, it denotes the state of complete buddhahood devoid of any flaws and endowed with all virtues.

So, why did the Bhagavān, the perfect Buddha, our present Fourth Guide, appear in the human world in the present time? The reason is because in the past, while on the path of training, he vowed to take rebirth in the human world for the sake of

future sentient beings. These beings would endure short lives, filled with conceptual thoughts such as the negative emotions of attachment and aversion, making their minds challenging to tame. They would live at a time of epidemics, famines, and conflicts, with a multitude of wrong views prevailing while non-mistaken views being scarce. In accordance with his vows to appear at such a time, our guide, the Fourth Guide, manifested in this world during the current times of strife, where human lifespans are approximately one hundred years.

In a general sense, the Sanskrit word *buddha* and the Tibetan word *sang-gye* share the same meaning. In his auto-commentary on the *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvatāra)*, Master Candrakīrti explains that *buddha* or *sang-gye* applies to hearers (*śrāvakas*), solitary realizers (*pratyekabuddhas*), and to unsurpassed, complete and perfect buddhas. Thus, these terms *encompass* śrāvaka-arhats and pratyekabuddha-arhats, as well as complete buddhas. Furthermore, the meaning of the Tibetan word *sang-gye* is elaborated as follows:

*Having cleansed (sang) the slumber of ignorance,
And developed (gye) the intelligence of the fields of knowledge,
A buddha is cleansed and developed like a lotus.
Therefore, he is known as sang-gye.*

Buddhas are referred to with this word (*sang-gye*) because they have cleansed (*sang*) the sleep of ignorance and have developed (*gye*) intelligence in all fields of knowledge. The Tibetan expression “*to remove (sang) sadness*” conveys the same process. Since a buddha has abandoned or cleansed (*sang*) all the defects of suffering, negative actions, and the obscurations of afflictive emotions and cognitive obscurations, the word *sang* (to cleanse) is used. Meanwhile, the word *gye* (developed) means to have improved (*yar gye*), signifying that a fully enlightened buddha is someone who has reached the ultimate point of improvement.

For śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha arhats, *developed (gye)* signifies reaching the ultimate point of improvement according to their particular teachings. As for buddhas, since perfect buddhahood is the ultimate point of development, the term *developed* applies to them in its fullest sense. In any case, even if the expression *awakened one (buddha, sang-gye)* is applied to all three—śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and buddhas—it is important to recognize that when referring to perfect *buddhas*, it should be understood that we are referring to the perfect buddhahood achieved after completing the accumulations over three countless eons, as delineated in the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition. This applies irrespective of whether they

attain perfect buddhahood through the Pāramitāyāna or the Vajrayāna paths.

Next, distinguishing perfect buddhas by means of their bodies (*kāyas*) can be done in various ways, but in the present discussion, we will talk about the three *kāyas*: the *dharmakāya*, the *saṃbhogakāya*, and the *nirmāṇakāya*. The *dharmakāya* represents the wisdom of a buddha's mind, which is the ultimate knowledge and wisdom. The *saṃbhogakāya* embodies the ultimate wisdom of a buddha manifest in bodily form. It possesses the thirty-two major marks and the eighty minor marks^[3]. It unceasingly and permanently bestows teachings only pertaining to the Mahāyāna to a retinue of sublime bodhisattvas and great noble beings, while permanently dwelling in the realm of Densely Arrayed Akaniṣṭha. Lastly, the *nirmāṇakāya* is a buddha's emanation that can have a diverse form for the benefit of countless sentient beings who will thus be tamed, manifesting whatever form corresponds to these beings' wishes. There are different types of *nirmāṇakāyas*, among which our Fourth Guide, Śākyamuni, is a supreme *nirmāṇakāya*.

A small portion of the infinite qualities of the Bhagavān Buddha can be mentioned by naming the qualities of his body, speech, and mind. To enumerate some of the qualities

of his body, our teacher, the Bhagavān, can benefit sentient beings by manifesting numerous bodily forms to numerous different beings in a single moment, thereby taming them in different locations. As another example, we can mention the bodhisattva Vegadhāra who ascended in the air higher and higher in order to see the uppermost extremity of the Buddha's crown protrusion. He reached the peak of Mount Meru, then the Heaven of the Thirty-Three (Trāyastriṃśa) and still could not see its top. Such are the inconceivable qualities of the Buddha's body.

As for the qualities of the Buddha's speech, it is said:

With just one utterance,

It is heard diversely by myriad beings, each in their own ways.

A single utterance of the Buddha is able to express the Dharma tailored to each disciple's disposition, wish, intention, and language. Furthermore, each utterance is heard as the Dharma that each being to be tamed wishes to hear: those wishing to hear about refuge will hear a teaching on refuge, those wishing for teachings on bodhicitta will hear teachings on bodhicitta, those seeking for teachings on loving-kindness will hear teachings on loving-kindness, and those seeking for teachings on compassion will hear teachings on compassion. Each

sentient being not only hears the specific teaching they desire but hears it in their own language. Such are the inconceivable qualities of the Buddha's speech.

Continuing to the qualities of the Buddha's awakened mind, he possesses the ultimate wisdom that knows the nature of reality as it is and the ultimate wisdom that perceives all that exists. As an example, our Blessed Teacher fully understands the intricacies of the law of cause and effect in minute detail. As for us ordinary beings, we merely understand the karma of cause and effect in a coarse manner, in the sense of knowing that seeds planted in the ground will give rise to crops or that a seed will result in a flower after being planted. We are only capable of a rough understanding of the law of cause and effect and are incapable of knowing the subtle aspects of causality. We cannot explain why certain fruits, such as apples, are sometimes red and sometimes green. We do not know the specific reason for an apple being red, nor the specific reason for an apple being green, and we do not know why some are sweet and others are sour. We are unable to account for these differences. The blessed Buddha, on the other hand, completely understands the subtle law of causality even in such cases.

Furthermore, when reflecting on our own lives, we do not know the circumstances of our most immediate previous lives,

much less the sort of families that we have been born into in countless previous lifetimes or what sort of things we did. Nor do we know what kind of families we will be born into in our infinite future lives, what sorts of actions we will engage in, or what happiness or suffering we will experience. The Buddha, however, possesses the wisdom that has clear and complete knowledge of all of this in great detail. Qualities such as these merely hint at how infinite and beyond any measure are the qualities he possesses.

In the *Introduction to the Middle Way*, master Candrakīrti states:

*It is not due to lack of space that a flying bird returns to earth,
but rather, because of the bird's limited ability.*

Similarly, the Buddha's disciples and bodhisattvas

*cannot express his infinite qualities, which are like space itself, so
they stop.*

As it is said, when a bird flies up into the boundless sky, it is only a matter of time until it returns to the earth or lands on a tree. The reason it descends is not because it lacks room to fly or because it has reached the limit of space. Rather, it is because the bird has exhausted its ability to continue flying. So, the bird ends up landing and perches on top of a tree or a house. In the same way, when ordinary people like us try to describe

the qualities of buddhas, we have to stop at some point. Not because we have run out of qualities or activities to describe, but because we are unable to describe the inconceivable qualities of the Buddha any further. That is to say, the qualities of the Buddha are immeasurable, limitless, and inconceivable.

The Buddhist teachings are generally categorized into two primary traditions: the Sanskrit tradition and the Pali tradition. The philosophical positions of each of these two differ at times. For example, they have different positions on acknowledging our teacher, the Fourth Guide Śākyamuni, as a *nirmāṇakāya*. Moreover, they have various ways of describing his deeds. In what times, drawing from the inconceivable qualities of the blessed Buddha's body, speech, and mind, and from the infinity of his deeds, I will briefly describe the most important ones following the Sanskrit tradition.

Following *The Play in Full Sūtra (Lalitavistara sūtra)*, I will briefly describe the twelve deeds, which are: (1) descending from the Tuṣita Heaven, (2) entering the mother's womb, (3) taking birth, (4) mastering traditional arts and crafts, (5) enjoying at leisure with the queen and the retinue, (6) renouncing the household, (7) enduring austerities, (8) approaching the seat of awakening, (9) conquering Māra's armies, (10) attaining complete awakening, (11) turning the wheel of Dharma, and (12) the physical display

of entering parinirvāṇa^[4]. As the venerable Protector Maitreya says in the *Treatise of the Unsurpassed Continuum* (*Mahāyānottaratantra śāstra*):

After taking a heavenly rebirth:

Descending from Tuṣita,

Entering the womb and being born,

Mastering traditional arts and crafts,

Enjoying at leisure with the queen and the retinue,

Renouncing the household and enduring austerities,

Approaching the seat of awakening,

Conquering Māra's Armies, attaining complete awakening,

Turning the wheel of Dharma,

And entering parinirvāṇa:

Such are the deeds he demonstrates in impure realms

As long as the cycle of existence will remain.



The First Deed: Descending from the Tuṣita Heaven

The First Deed: Descending from the Tuṣita Heaven

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of the Victorious One says:
The tamer of gods, knowing that the time to tame humans had come...

Our teacher Śākyamuni was dwelling in the Tuṣita Heaven prior to appearing in the human realm. To situate Tuṣita, we can describe the three realms within cyclic existence: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. Saṃsāra, which contains these three realms, is known as “cyclic existence of the three realms.” In each of the three realms there are different types of gods. In the desire realm, there are six types; in the form realm, seventeen types; and in the formless realm, four. In the desire realm, besides those six types of gods, other worldly gods can also be found.

The gods of Tuṣita are one of the six types belonging to the desire realm. Before entering the human realm, our Blessed Teacher dwelled in the Tuṣita Heaven as the god named Śvetaketu, meaning Noble White Top. Once, when he was

teaching the Dharma to an immeasurable assembly of gods in Tuṣita, the memory of his previous aspirations and prayers was awakened. The instruments that produced offerings of music issued the following exhortation, “The buddha of the past, Dīpaṃkara, had prophesied that you should go to the human realm. Please remember that.”

At that time, the bodhisattva was living in a heavenly mansion of Tuṣita known as Prominence of Dharma. He preached the Dharma while seated there in the presence of a large retinue of gods numbering six hundred and eighty million, all seated on their own thrones in that same mansion. The bodhisattva Śvetaketu announced to them, “In twelve years’ time, I shall enter my mother’s womb in the human realm.” At that time, some gods of Tuṣita went to the human world and made the following request to the pratyekabuddhas, “In twelve human years’ time, the bodhisattva will enter his mother’s womb. Please, leave this buddhafiield!” They enjoined them not to remain in this buddhafiield but to go to another human realm or to some other place because pratyekabuddhas do not usually remain in a world in which a buddha is living. So, since they would have to leave, the request was made for them to proceed somewhere else. The sound of this request reached a pratyekabuddha named Elephant, who resided on Mount Diverting Tail (Golāṅgulaparivartana) near the city of Rājagṛha.

As soon as he heard it, or shortly thereafter, he rose to a height of seven palm trees, which is around ten to fifteen stories. He rose into the air and entered the meditative equipoise of the fire element and, like a lamp fading away, he entered nirvāṇa^[5].

During that time, there were five hundred pratyekabuddhas in the region of Vārāṇasī. Upon hearing the request, they too rose ten or fifteen stories into the air, and upon entering the meditative equipoise of the fire element, their bodies burst into flames, causing the relics of their physical remains to fall down. Vārāṇasī thus became known as Ṛṣipātana, or Falling Sages, the place where their physical relics fell to the ground. Furthermore, as there were many deer whose lives were protected at Vārāṇasī, it was also known as Mṛigadāva, or Deer Park. These anecdotes explain the origins of the two other names for Vārāṇasī.

The bodhisattva Śvetaketu looked at four considerations before journeying to the human realm. The usual descriptions name five considerations, yet, *The Play in Full*, only mentions four. However, there is no contradiction because the main considerations are four in number: that of time, that of continent, that of region, and that of caste. The time that was considered corresponds to an era of conflicts with human lifespans of one hundred years. The continent is the

southern continent of Jambudvīpa, and the region is the city of Kapilavastu. Lastly, the consideration of caste is divided into the father's kingly caste and the mother's caste. If these two caste considerations are counted separately, we arrive at the five considerations of those other sources.

Why was his father's royal caste chosen? It was selected because this caste was, by all accounts, a noble one and renowned to all, endowed with discipline and wisdom and the sixty-four qualities. Then, he chose his mother, Illusion Beloved of the Gods (Māyādevakanta), or Illusion Goddess (Māyādevī), because she possessed the thirty-two qualities such as hailing from an outstanding family, being beautiful, smiling, reserved, peaceful, disciplined, learned, and free of deceit.

The bodhisattva then called upon his great retinue of Tuṣita gods and said, "Friends! Listen to these gateways to the light of the Dharma that bring you delight. I must teach these one hundred and eight gateways to the light of the Dharma to this retinue of gods prior to my demise." Then he gave teachings on these gateways to the light of the Dharma, comprising one hundred and eight important points or diverse topics.

To give an idea of what they are: the perfection of generosity is one such gateway to the light of the Dharma, for it leads to the

sublime marks and signs, to the complete purity of the buddha realms, and to the thorough ripening of those sentient beings who are greedy. In the same manner, the perfection of discipline is a gateway to the light of the Dharma, for it enables one to transcend all the restricted and lower states of existence and to ripen those sentient beings with lax discipline. The perfection of patience is a gateway to the light of the Dharma, for it enables one to relinquish malice, aggression, anger, pride, arrogance, and conceit, and to ripen those sentient beings who harbor malice. Likewise, the perfection of diligence is a gateway to the light of the Dharma, for it enables one to practice all virtuous endeavors and to ripen those sentient beings who are lazy. The perfection of concentration is a gateway to the light of the Dharma, for it enables one to give rise to all states of equipoise and super-knowledge and to ripen those sentient beings who are distracted. Similarly, the perfection of knowledge is a gateway to the light of the Dharma, for it enables one to relinquish the dark fog of ignorance and stupidity, to abandon views based on imputation, views holding onto characteristics, and incorrect views, and it enables one to ripen sentient beings with incorrect knowledge.

In summary, while he was teaching these one hundred and eight gateways to the light of the Dharma or important points

of Dharma to the gods, eighty-four thousand of his retinue conceived the supreme mind to awaken to complete and perfect buddhahood. In addition, thirty-two thousand gods achieved acceptance of the non-arising of phenomena. These were the excellent experiences and realizations that were obtained by the gods.

To provide some context to what this means, Buddhist teachings describe five paths: the paths of accumulation, application, seeing, meditation, and the path of no-more-learning. The first two of these are at the level of ordinary beings. The third and fourth are at the level of sublime bodhisattvas, and the fifth is the stage of buddhahood. Acceptance of the non-arising of phenomena have attained at the level of ordinary beings. However, unlike us, ordinary beings who attain these excellent experiences and realizations have reached an advanced stage of realization. At any rate, thirty-two thousand beings within the retinue of gods attained acceptance of the non-arising of phenomena, and three hundred and sixty million in the retinue are said to have attained the “dust-free, untainted, perfectly pure eyes of Dharma.” In other words, three hundred and sixty million beings reached the path of seeing.

Then, the bodhisattva, assuming the form of the god Śvetaketu, declared to his retinue, “I, the bodhisattva, will now proceed

to Jambudvīpa. In the past when I practiced the conduct of bodhisattvas, I had already received as my guests all sentient beings through the four means of gathering disciples.” These four means are giving, pleasant speech, beneficial activities, and practicing what one teaches. “So now,” he continued, “if I were to remain without attaining buddhahood, it would not be right or appropriate. Therefore, I must depart to the human realm.” At that point, the gods and goddesses of Tuṣita began to cry out. Clutching the two feet of the god Śvetaketu they looked up to him and said, “If a sublime being like you no longer lives here, then this place, the Heaven of Tuṣita, will become unattractive and unpleasant. This Heaven of Joy (Tuṣita) will cease to be a place where one would wish to reside, it will become unenjoyable.” The god Śvetaketu replied, “The bodhisattva, the Protector Maitreya, will teach the Dharma to you in my place.” Then, the bodhisattva Śvetaketu took his diadem and placed it on Protector Maitreya’s head, saying, “You, virtuous one, shall awaken to perfect and complete buddhahood after me.” Bestowing this prophecy, he enthroned the Protector Maitreya as his regent, to continue teaching the Dharma to the gods in Tuṣita. Such was the deed of enthroning the regent.



The Second Deed: Entering his Mother's Womb

The Second Deed: Entering his Mother's Womb

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

Descending from the god realm

And traveling as an elephant,

Considered the royal lineage,

Entering the womb of Māyādevī,

To you, I render homage.

Accordingly, while still dwelling in Tuṣita, the bodhisattva, the god Śvetaketu considered the majestic dwelling of King Śuddhodana in the human world with its beautiful, encircling gardens, bedchambers, and so on. He also observed the delightful surrounding forests and beautiful pleasure gardens. Many different plants and fruits were growing at that time, and the flowers were in full bloom. These and other omens occurred before the birth of Prince Siddhārtha. Later, spring gradually came. It was the last month of the season, when

the constellation of Saga (Tib. *sa ga*, Skt. *Viśākhā*) was in the sky, and the leaves on the trees had grown to full size. The temperature was neither warm nor cold, but rather pleasant. There was no dust on the ground, and vibrant green grass grew in abundance on the earth. It was at this time that the lord of the three realms, the Buddha, came to the human world.

Noting that it was a special period of time for worship among the people of the world, during the time of the full moon and when the star Victory was in the sky, his mother, Māyādevī, took the lay poṣadha vows. At that time, the bodhisattva, the god Śvetaketu, departed the realm of Tuṣita in the form of an elephant with six tusks. An elephant is not normally white in color, but unlike common elephants, this one was. Elephants normally have only two tusks, yet this one was distinct, as it had six. This six-tusked, white elephant was endowed with the characteristics of perfection, complete in every physical aspect and with perfect sense faculties, and it entered the right side of the mother's body.

During that time, Māyādevī dreamed of a silver-colored elephant with six tusks and a pleasant gait entered her body. She experienced amazing physical pleasure; unlike anything she had ever experienced. It was a state of great bliss similar to that of meditative equipoise. When she awoke, she recounted

her extraordinary dream to King Śuddhodana. The king went to his oracles and asked them what such signs and indications in a dream could mean. They replied that, in the future, a son with the thirty-two major marks of a great being would be born. The king was extremely pleased and rewarded those who interpreted the dream.

The mother Māyādevī was moved to the palace gardens where she was surrounded by luxuries and personal conveniences. She felt no discomfort or worry whatsoever while staying there, and was in an extremely blissful and happy state, just like the gods and goddesses in the heavens. While in that very joyful state, she benefited sentient beings. She gave food and clothing to the needy, horses to those requiring a steed, and blankets and places to stay to those in need of them. In short, she spent her time joyfully fulfilling the wishes and needs of sentient beings, giving them whatever they desired and practicing generosity according to their wishes.



The Third Deed: Taking Birth

The Third Deed: Taking Birth

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

*After ten months, the son of the Śākya king
was born in the auspicious Lumbinī grove.*

To the one before Brahmā and Śakra bowed,

*To the one whose name is supreme and who no doubt belongs to
the lineage of awakening, I pay homage.*

Accordingly, after spending ten months in his mother's womb, the time came for the bodhisattva to be born as a prince. All the flowers were blossoming in the gardens of King Śuddhodana; blue and white lotuses and water lilies bloomed in the ponds and around eight precious trees appeared. A snow lion cub came down from the snowy peaks and was walking playfully around Kapilavastu. Even when it stood at people's doors, it did not hurt anyone. Similarly, in the sāla tree forest, the tree-gods were seen showing the upper halves of their bodies above

the trees and prostrating. Many such wonderful omens and indications occurred.

When Māyādevī realized the time had come for the bodhisattva to be born, she approached King Śuddhodana, telling him, “I shall express what I am thinking. Oh King, please listen! I will soon go to the agreeable parks where all the flowers of the sāla trees are in full bloom, where the cuckoo birds sing and the beautiful cries of the peacocks resound through the forest. Please grant me permission!” The king was truly delighted, and he ordered his servants to decorate the Lumbinī grove with precious gems and to cover the trees with red drapery. He told them that Lumbinī must be adorned with flowers and that they should create many flower arrangements. When all the preparations were complete, they were to report back to him. So, following the king’s order, they perfectly ornamented the mounts and Lumbinī with a variety of flowers and then reported back to him.

Then, surrounded by numerous horse chariots and elephant chariots replete with decorations, Māyādevī traveled there accompanied by “an escort of brave men who were skilled at taming, endowed with noble members, and perfectly outfitted with armor.” This means she was escorted by guards who were courageous, strong, and who wore their armor perfectly. Many

young women of the Śākya clan walked ahead of her, as well as many relatives of King Śuddhodana—old, young, and middle-aged—who came to protect her. There were also deva maidens, kiṃnara maidens, gandharva maidens, nāga maidens, and demi-god maidens accompanying her. They did not wear everyday garb. All were dressed in their best finery and adorned with jewelry. Singing songs, dancing, and sounding praises with musical accompaniment, they came to meet Māyādevī and followed her. Moreover, the Lumbinī forest was “anointed with perfumed water”: scented water as well as many divine flowers had been sprinkled on the ground.

As Māyādevī arrived in the Lumbinī forest and stepped down from the chariot, the aforementioned guards, Śākya maidens, deva maidens, nāga maidens, and so forth circumambulated her many times. Together, they walked and searched for a good spot in the forest and at the bases of many trees. They came across a very special, precious tree with broad limbs and leaves of an excellent color. On it had grown many flowers of the human and divine realms. This plakṣa tree was radiant with light, scintillating like a precious jewel, and even like the palm of a hand. And so they went to the foot of this large, excellent tree. Due to the majestic presence and the power of the bodhisattva, the plakṣa tree bowed down completely in homage in front of

mother Māyādevī. She extended her right hand to the plakṣa tree and grabbed hold of a branch and, at that very moment, the young prince was born. Many desire-realm goddess maidens approached to assist and venerate Māyādevī. Then, Śakra, the king of the gods, and Brahmā, the lord of the Sahā universe, approached to greet the mother and placed the bodhisattva, the young prince, upon a divine silk cloth. At that instant, the two nāga kings, Nanda and Upananda, manifested half of their bodies in the space before them and emanated streams of cool and warm water, with which the young prince was bathed.

At that moment, the great bodhisattva observed that no one was greater than himself in this entire great trichiliocosm. Then, the bodhisattva, the young prince, felt a complete fearlessness. Without hesitation, anxiety, shrinking, or being cowed, spoke as follows, “I will go beyond what has been taught by anyone, beyond even all the roots of virtue of the bodhisattvas,” which meant that he would practice a dharma that no one else had found and that he would attain the level of buddhahood. Then, he took seven steps in each of the four directions. As recounted in *The Meeting of Father and Son (Pitāputrasamāgama sūtra)*, it is said that a lotus flower sprang up in all four directions at each spot where he took a step. Upon seeing this, his father King Śuddhodana offered the following praise to his son:

*When you, the best of two-footed beings, were born,
You took seven steps on this great earth,
Proclaiming, "I am supreme in this world."
To you, who were already wise, I pay homage!*

So, he took seven steps in each of the four directions and fearlessly proclaimed, "This is my last birth. I shall uproot birth, old age, sickness, and death." Because he would subsequently attain buddhahood, he declared that this would be his last display of birth, old age, sickness, and death. At that moment, flowers bloomed on the trees in every universe, and exquisite fruits formed throughout the great trichiliocosm. Miserly individuals became free of miserliness, beings suffering from sickness were freed of their illnesses, and those suffering from hunger and thirst became free of hunger and thirst. In addition, the afflicted regained their sanity, the blind gained sight, and the deaf recovered their hearing. The destitute gained wealth, and the imprisoned were freed. Even beings suffering in hells such as Avīci were freed from their suffering. Such were the excellent omens and indications that transpired.

Moreover, upon the bodhisattva's birth, five hundred children from noble families were born simultaneously. Likewise, ten thousand girls, headed by Yaśovatī, were also born, along with

eight hundred female servants and five hundred male servants under the leadership of Chanda. Furthermore, ten thousand mares and ten thousand colts, headed by Kaṇṭhaka, were born. Additionally, five hundred new gardens sprang forth, and five thousand treasures emerged from the earth. These were among the many other auspicious omens and signs that manifested.

Hence, all of King Śuddhodana's intentions were perfectly accomplished. Later, as he pondered over what name to bestow upon the young prince, he recalled that immediately when the bodhisattva was born, all of his aims had been fulfilled. For that reason, he considered naming him Sarvārthasiddha, Fulfiller of All Aims. King Śuddhodana then arranged a great naming ceremony and bestowed upon him the name Prince Fulfiller of All Aims. Over time, this name was abbreviated to Fulfiller of Aims, or Siddhārtha, in Sanskrit.

All the externalist sages from Jambudvīpa, endowed with the five extraordinary abilities, came flying through the sky and arrived before King Śuddhodana. They expressed their well wishes, proclaiming, "May the king thrive!" For seven days following Prince Siddhārtha's birth, he was honored with celestial and human music, and held in high esteem in the Lumbinī Grove. Similarly, hosts of gods assembled, expressing their joy.

After seven days, his mother Māyādevī passed away and was reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. By and by, the elders of the Śākya clan gathered to discuss who among their women could care care for the newborn Prince Siddhārtha. Who would nurture and protect him? At that time, five hundred Śākya women presented themselves, each claiming that their capability to do so. However, the elders of the Śākya clan felt that since these women were impetuous young girls, vain and proud, they would be incapable of caring for the bodhisattva and his needs. Nonetheless, there was Mahāprajāpatī, Māyādevī's sister and another of the king's consorts, who confidently asserted, "I will do it. I have already been doing it, and I will continue." Thirty-two nurses were then appointed to his service.

At that time, a great sage named Asita who possessed the five extraordinary powers, resided on the slopes of Himavat with his sister's son Naradatta. When Siddhārtha was born, they witnessed many amazing miraculous displays in the sky. Seeing this, the Rishi (Skt. *Ṛṣi*) Asita used his divine eye to survey the world of Jambudvīpa, discovering that a prince had been born to King Śuddhodana in Kapilavastu. This prince was endowed with the brilliance of merit, worshiped by the whole world, and adorned with the thirty-two marks of a great being. Turning to his nephew Naradatta, "A young prince with the thirty-

two marks has been born in Kapilavastu, the great city of the Śākya, in the house of King Śuddhodana. If that young prince remains in his palace, he will become a universal monarch. If he leaves his home and goes forth as a renunciant, he will become awakened.” Later, they decided to set out for Kapilavastu to meet the prince. Like kings of swans, Asita and Naradatta soared through the sky to the city of Kapilavastu using their magical powers. Approaching the palace gates of King Śuddhodana in Kapilavastu, Asita said to the gatekeeper, “I would like to meet the king. Please inform him,” and the gatekeeper relayed Asita’s message to the king, who promptly summoned the great sage.

The sage Asita approached the king and offered well wishes such as, “Great King, may you live long! May you rule in accord with the Dharma!” The king welcomed him, made offerings, and invited him to be seated. He then respectfully addressed him, “Why have you come here?” The sage Asita replied, “Great King, a son has been born to you. We have come to meet him.” “The Prince Siddhārtha is napping at present,” said the king, “Please wait for a short while until he wakes.” The sage replied, “A great being like this does not sleep long.” Then, out of affection for the sage Asita, Prince Siddhārtha showed signs of having wakened. The king lifted Prince Siddhārtha with both hands and presented him to the sage Asita. At that moment, he

saw that the prince was wonderfully adorned with the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a great being, and was over a thousand times more splendid than Brahmā, Śakra, and the guardians of the world. The great sage expressed his amazement, exclaiming, “Oh! Such an amazing being has been born in this world!” Rising from his seat, he joined his hands together, bowed in homage at the feet of Prince Siddhārtha, and circumambulated him three times.

As the great sage Asita held the bodhisattva Siddhārtha on his lap, he could clearly see the thirty-two marks that adorned him. A mixture of joy and sadness overwhelmed him, and tears streamed down his face. Noticing this, the king asked, “What is wrong? Is some misfortune to befall the prince?”

The great sage Asita explained that he wept for himself and not because he had seen anything non-virtuous or inauspicious or any defect in the prince. He wept because he was already advanced in years and would soon die, and yet Prince Siddhārtha would manifest unsurpassed, perfect and complete buddhahood with absolute certainty. Then, having reached buddhahood for the benefit of the world and its gods, he would teach the excellent Dharma. This authentic Dharma is virtuous in the beginning, virtuous in the middle, and virtuous in the end. It has excellent meaning, excellent words, is not confused, and is complete, completely pure and consummate.

The great sage Asita would not be able to meet the Buddha since he was already quite old, and so he wept. He explained this to the king, and then gave the following prophecy, “Great King! The thirty-two major and eighty minor marks that the prince bears mean he will not remain in the palace. He will certainly leave the household and attain complete buddhahood.” After hearing this, King Śuddhodana offered the great sage Asita and his nephew Naradatta with a sumptuous meal and circumambulated them. Subsequently, Asita returned to his own abode by magically flying through the air.



The Fourth Deed: Mastering Traditional Arts and Crafts

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King Śuddhodana and his retinue held an elaborate celebration, with ten thousand boys and ten thousand girls leading the way ahead of young Prince Siddhārtha. Eight thousand goddesses adorned themselves sumptuously and, bearing gems, and went before the young bodhisattva Siddhārtha, cleansing his way. Similarly, the gods, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, demigods, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, and mahorāgas^[6] all revealed the upper halves of their bodies, festooning the place with flowers and woven silk from the sky. Moreover, the Śākya factions, led by King Śuddhodana, preceded Prince Siddhārtha as he was taken to the writing school.

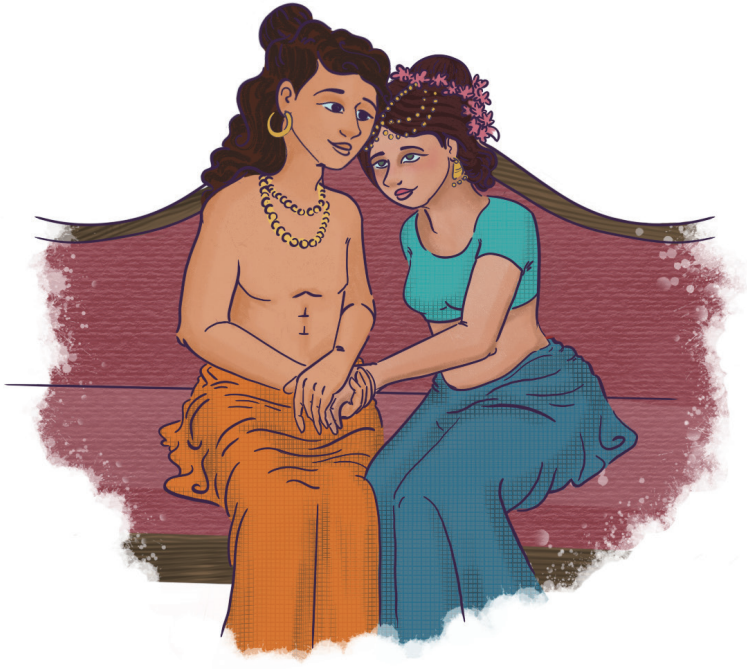
As soon as he arrived, Prince Siddhārtha asked Viśvāmitra, the schoolmaster, “Which script will you be teaching me, O master? Will you teach the Brāhmī script? The script of the kingdom of Magadha? Or will you teach the Kanisha script? The Gāndhāri script? Or perhaps the Kiṃnari script?” After being asked which of the sixty-four scripts would be taught, Viśvāmitra the

schoolmaster was amazed and smiled. “I do not know those scripts,” he said, “I haven’t even heard of them before.” Later, each time the schoolmaster pronounced a letter from the alphabet for the children to repeat, through the power of the bodhisattva Siddhārtha, each letter was followed by a different statement of the Dharma. In this way, innumerable excellent Dharma teachings emerged, and the minds of a huge number of children were ripened by giving rise to thoughts aimed at the unexcelled, perfect and complete awakening.

On another occasion, when Prince Siddhārtha had grown a little older, he and some other children visited a farming village. After exploring the village, the young prince ventured alone to a park, leaving behind his friends. There, he encountered a beautiful and perfect rose apple tree, under which he sat cross-legged, seeking shade. As he sat, the bodhisattva attained a one-pointed state of concentration. He became free from nonvirtuous thoughts, accompanied by thought and analysis, endowed with discernment and imbued with the joy and pleasure born of solitude. In short, he reached the first level of meditative concentration and remained in that state. Gradually, he progressed through subsequent stages, reaching the second, third, and fourth concentrations, where he remained absorbed.

At that point, the people of the Śākya clan realized that Prince

Siddhārtha was missing, prompting them to embark on a search for him. A court minister found Prince Siddhārtha in the park, seated cross-legged, practicing meditative concentration under the shade of the rose apple tree. The sun had shifted, causing the shadows of the other trees to vanish, yet the shadow of the tree beneath which Prince Siddhārtha sat remained, shielding him from the sun's rays. Seeing this, the minister was amazed. Overjoyed, he hurried back to report what he had seen to King Śuddhodana, who rushed to the rose apple tree. He too was amazed and overjoyed as he saw the bodhisattva prince seated in meditative concentration, blazing with glory and splendor.



The Fifth Deed: Enjoying Leisure with the Queen and Retinue

The Fifth Deed: Enjoying Leisure with the Queen and Retinue

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

*To conform to the ways of the world,
And to avoid inappropriate behavior,
You availed yourself of a queen and her retinue,
Thus, ruling over the kingdom by skillful means.
To you, I pay homage.*

When Prince Siddhārtha had grown older, King Śuddhodana was sitting at one time in the meeting hall together with the assembly of Śākya. Some elders said to him, “Your Majesty, you know that the priests who interpret signs and indications have previously given the prophecy that, should Prince Siddhārtha renounce the household, he will become a buddha. If he does not renounce the household, he will become a universal monarch, a righteous Dharma king who has conquered the four quarters and is equipped with the seven treasures^[7]. Therefore,

we must arrange a marriage for the prince. Once married, surrounded by a retinue of women and enjoying to his heart's content, he will not renounce the household. This way, the line of our monarchy will continue uninterrupted, and other kings of the realm won't make any criticism. They will venerate and support him."

The king ordered them to find a suitable match for the prince. Five hundred Śākya came forth and each claimed that their daughter was suitable and worthy of being Prince Siddhārtha's queen. "Since Siddhārtha is most exceptional, we must consult him directly," said the king. As everyone had gathered and informed Prince Siddhārtha that he would need to choose a queen, he replied that he was well aware of the endless pitfalls associated with desire. He said, "I know that it is the root of conflicts, resentment, suffering, and misery." As we know, even in a normal family setting there are sometimes arguments, fights, and resentment due to disliking each other and a lot of other similar sufferings. And so, given that Prince Siddhārtha knew all this, he replied that he did not wish to engage in the objects of sensory pleasure. "They are like the leaves of a lethally poisonous plant." Thinking of the drawbacks of sensory indulgence, he said he would resolve to remain in silence, abide in the forest, perfect his skill in methods, and then actualize the level of awakening and ripen sentient beings.

Later, the bodhisattva Prince Siddhārtha contemplated, “The bodhisattvas who came before me lived together with their queens and children. They enjoyed sensory pleasures, yet they didn’t have any clinging or attachment. In the same way, I shall be like a beautiful, immaculate, and perfect lotus flower emerging from the mud and filth while remaining unblemished by the stains and the mud.” Having thus considered accepting marriage and obtaining a sizable entourage in order to care for those beings to be tamed, he said to the king, “If I can find a woman who possesses qualities such as comporting herself fittingly, being devoid of defects such as jealousy or deceit, not straying from uprightness, being endowed with loving-kindness towards all sentient beings and delighting in generosity, then I will accept her as my queen.”

Upon hearing this, the king instructed his family priest, “Great minister! Go into Kapilavastu and see if there is a young girl with such qualities. It doesn’t matter if she is of royal caste, priestly caste, merchant caste, or servant caste.” In other words, high or low caste was of no importance. He was to search for any girl possessing such qualities. Following this command, the family priest, this great minister, scoured villages and towns looking for such a girl but found no suitable match. However, upon entering the home of the Śākya Daṇḍapāṇi, he saw a beautiful and attractive young woman who looked like a

precious gem. The girl asked, “O great priest, what is your aim?” He explained that he was looking for a young woman with certain qualities, someone worthy of being a queen to Prince Siddhārtha, the son of King Śuddhodana, who possessed the thirty-two marks of a great being. As he was explaining this, the young lady smiled and declared, “I indeed possess all those qualities. If I may be pleasing to Prince Siddhartha, do not allow any delay!”

The great minister returned to King Śuddhodana and reported that he had encountered a young woman possessing the desired qualities in the household of Śākya Daṇḍapāṇi. The king dispatched the minister with a message requesting that his daughter be given in marriage as Prince Siddhārtha’s queen. After reading the message, Śākya Daṇḍapāṇi stipulated that in order for him to do so, the recipient would need to have mastered all the athletic arts that are unique to the Śākya clan. Otherwise, he would not give her away. Since Prince Siddhārtha had been indulging in palace life, he was unfamiliar of any of these arts, such as archery, strength, combat, wrestling, gymnastics and so on. Therefore, Śākya Daṇḍapāṇi declined the proposal, stating that he would not grant his daughter Gopā in marriage.

Upon reading this letter, King Śuddhodana was profoundly dejected. Seeing his saddened countenance, the prince approached him and inquired, “Oh King, why is it that you look so upset and somber?” The king disclosed the contents of the message that he had received, which explained why he was in such a state. “Who within Kapilavastu can compete with me in the athletic arts?” Siddhārtha asked his father. The king repeated the content of the reply and explained that it was the cause of his depression. The prince asked again, “Is there anyone in this city who can compete with me in the arts?” Laughingly, the king asked if he could demonstrate such skill. “I can demonstrate my skills before all those skilled in the arts,” Siddhārtha affirmed. King Śuddhodana then ordered the bell to be rung and announced a competition to be held in seven days, summoning all athletes to participate.

Following the announcement, five hundred young athletes arrived, and Śākya Daṇḍapāṇi’s daughter Gopā, was designated as a trophy for the victor. The pledge was sworn that whoever won the competition would secure her hand in marriage. With the stakes set, the young men competed in many arts including sword fighting, wrestling, combat, gymnastics and archery. Prince Siddhārtha showed his superiority, emerging victorious in all these competitions. Gopā, Daṇḍapāṇi’s daughter, was offered to him in marriage.

Thus, dwelling in the midst of his retinue of consorts, the prince received continual offerings of beautiful, extraordinary songs and music. He enjoyed play and a host of sensory pleasures, skillfully behaving in accordance with the ways of the world. This is how, in his great compassion, the bodhisattva excellently took care of the queen and the retinue of consorts. So, until the age of twenty-nine, the prince took care of the affairs of state and vastly extended his rule.



The Sixth Deed: Renouncing the Household

The Sixth Deed: Renouncing the Household

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

*Seeing the pointless nature of samsaric activities,
You left your home and, traveling in the sky,
In front of the Stupa of Great Purity,
From yourself you took the vows of a renunciant.
To you, I pay homage!*

One night, as he was sleeping, King Śuddhodana dreamed that Bodhisattva Siddhārtha, surrounded by a host of gods, had become ordained and was wearing the robes of a renunciant. Upon awakening, he feared that the prince might leave the palace, that the omens appearing in his dream could perhaps come true. Worried, he began to scheme, “If Prince Siddhārtha could be prevented from going outside the royal gardens and made to stay in the palace, if he could be prevented from going into the city and be totally surrounded by a host of maidens, he would be distracted and would not take the ordination.” And so,

in order for Prince Siddhārtha to delight in these enjoyments, King Śuddhodana built new palaces that would be pleasant during the different seasons. There was a palace where the prince would stay during the fall and another where he would stay during the winter, and so on. He assigned five hundred guardsmen to each of the palaces and ensured that they were filled with innumerable sensory enjoyments. He filled them with the sounds and melodies of songs and music, and he made certain young maidens always surrounded the prince.

Then, one day, Siddhārtha called his charioteer, Chanda, to prepare his chariot. Chanda reported this to King Śuddhodana, who ordered the town of Kapilavastu to be cleaned up over the next seven days. In order to remove any inauspiciousness and ugliness, Kapilavastu was to be decorated with plants and gardens, and the whole town beautified and decorated with parasols, royal standards, canopies and pendants. The king ensured the city was meticulously prepared, making it outstandingly beautiful and attractive.

Seven days later, Prince Siddhārtha mounted his chariot and left the palace through the eastern gate. Through the power of the bodhisattva, a god from the pure abodes had taken on the appearance of an old man on the road where the prince was traveling. The prince saw this decrepit old man covered with

wrinkles, with wispy hair, and protruding veins and tendons. The man was hunched over, his limbs quivered, even as he leaned on a cane for support.

On another day, Prince Siddhārtha departed the king's palace by the southern gate, and he saw a sick man who had no one to care for him. There were no doctors or nurses attending to him, and no treatment available for his condition. The man suffered alone, with no support or assistance whatsoever.

On yet another day, the prince left the palace in his chariot via the western gate. Along the way, and he saw the body of a deceased person. The corpse was surrounded by relatives and acquaintances, all of whom were weeping, suffering, beating their chests, and lamenting loudly. He witnessed these various sights—an old man, a sick man, and a corpse—after leaving by the eastern, southern, and western gates. “The three realms of cyclic existence do not have any worthy essence,” he thought. Seeing the pointlessness of *saṃsāra*, renunciation was born in his heart. Generally speaking, renunciation is explained to be the thought of wishing to attain liberation or the state of omniscience on the basis of having given up this life and the whole of *saṃsāra*.

On another day, the prince bodhisattva ascended his chariot and left by the northern gate. Once more, through the bodhisattva's

power, a god manifested as a mendicant who was peaceful, self-controlled, and chaste. The mendicant was not looking here and there, or far off into the distance. He was peacefully keeping his eyes focused about two yards in front of him. His behavior was beautiful and exquisite. Furthermore, he was wearing the upper and the outer robe, and carrying a begging bowl.

Siddhārtha queried his charioteer, Chanda, about the identity of the mendicant. “That is someone who has completely abandoned the enjoyments of cyclic existence and who has become a renunciant,” Chanda replied. “He searches for the peace of nirvāṇa, and free from attachment or aversion, he lives from alms.”

The prince decided that he, too, would become a renunciant seven days later. Thinking it would not be right to not share his plans with the great king Śuddhodana and simply leave home without his permission, he entreated his father, “Please give me permission to become a renunciant.”

The king replied, “I will give you whatever you need, but please do not take the ordination. Please remain in the royal palace.” Siddhārtha, the great being, responded, “In that case, give me freedom from illness, old age, death, and decline.” The king had no way of granting that.

Suspecting that Prince Siddhārtha was on the brink of becoming a renunciant, King Śuddhodana commanded the Śākya clan to guard the four directional gates of the palace. Consequently, five hundred young men, five hundred chariots, and five hundred infantrymen were posted. The roads and intersections were patrolled by the Śākya elders. Every measure was taken to ensure that the prince could not leave.

On the evening of his intended renunciation, the bodhisattva made many vast aspirations such as, “May I proclaim the sound of Dharma to all sentient beings! I will remove the darkness of ignorance from all sentient beings.” Around midnight, he rode out with his charioteer Chanda and left the city of Kapilavastu. As dawn broke, Siddhārtha reached the Stupa of Great Purity, where he removed all the jewelry from his body and entrusted them, along with his horse Kaṇṭhaka, to Chanda for return to Kapilavastu. Then, he sent Chanda back and turned his attention inward. The prince gave his own garments to a god who had manifested in the guise of a hunter, and who gave him saffron-colored clothing in return. Then, out of loving-kindness for sentient beings and in order to ripen them, Prince Siddhārtha severed his own hair, thus displaying the deed of receiving from himself the condition of a renunciant, or the self-ordination.



The Seventh Deed: Enduring Austerities

The Seventh Deed: Enduring Austerities

The bodhisattva prince journeyed to the great city of Vaiśālī, where Ārāḍa Kālāma, along with a retinue of three hundred students, resided. Master Ārāḍa lived there and taught practices related to the sphere of perception of utter absence. When he saw the bodhisattva Siddhārtha approaching from a distance, Ārāḍa was filled with wonder and remarked to his students, “Oh, look at his figure.” Witnessing Siddhārtha's stature, the disciples were similarly amazed. Then the prince walked up to where Master Ārāḍa was staying and expressed his intention to learn spiritual practices, and that he intended to take him as his teacher. Responding, Master Ārāḍa said, “Gautama, if you do this with faith, you will become accomplished with little exertion.” The bodhisattva affirmed his faith and diligence, as well as mindfulness, samādhi or concentration, and knowledge. He then inquired Master Ārāḍa if he knew of any teachings higher than that of the sphere of perception of utter absence. “I do not know any teaching higher than this,” replied the master.

Prince Siddhārtha asserted that he also knew that teaching. “In that case,” said Master Ārāḍa, “we should both bestow those teachings to the students.” But Siddhārtha responded that these teachings of the sphere of perception of utter absence do not bring the definite liberation from the three realms of cyclic existence. Thinking that he must find a superior path, a superior teaching to this one, he left.

The bodhisattva prince traveled to the kingdom of Magadha. He traveled alone to Rājagṛha and other towns, moving from one town to the next, sustaining himself on alms he received along the way. One day, he met the great king of Rājagṛha, King Bimbisāra, and established at that time their long-lasting spiritual connection by giving him teachings stemming from the pointlessness of the sense objects, describing how the sense pleasures are devoid of any essence.

Prince Siddhārtha proceeded to meet Master Rudraka, from whom he learned and actualized the teachings on the state where there is neither perception nor nonperception. “Do you possess any higher teaching than this?” he then asked Master Rudraka, who replied he didn’t have any higher teaching. The bodhisattva prince thought to himself, “The teachings on this meditative absorption don’t bring definite liberation from saṃsāra. Moreover, by applying them, the freedom from

attachment and the complete pacification of afflictive emotions or of suffering cannot be attained. This teaching won't lead to the state of buddhahood." Therefore, he decided to leave.

The five excellent disciples, devoted to practicing chastity, were under the instruction of Master Rudraka at that time. They pondered, "No matter how much we have trained in the teachings of the sphere of perception of neither perception nor nonperception with Master Rudraka, we have been unable to achieve their mastery. On the other hand, Gautama the renunciant," that is to say the bodhisattva Siddhārtha, "was able to master this with little effort. He has now gone in search of a superior path with the firm intention of becoming the guide of the world." So, the five excellent disciples decided to leave Master Rudraka to join the bodhisattva. Following him, they went to stay on the banks of the Nairāñjanā River, to the south of Gayā.

The bodhisattva prince practiced austerities for six years. By the power of the all-pervasive space samādhi, a type of meditative state, he blocked the breath flowing through his mouth, nostrils, and ears. During this time, a god encountered the bodhisattva and thought, "Oh no! Alas! It seems that Prince Siddhārtha has left this world." The god proceeded to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three where the mother Māyādevī was residing and told her

that Prince Siddhārtha had passed away. Accompanied by a retinue of young goddesses, Māyādevī arrived at the banks of the Nairāñjanā River around midnight. The prince appeared so emaciated that he seemed to have passed away, and she was choked with tears and began to weep. “When you, Prince Siddhārtha, were born in Lumbinī,” she said, “you took seven steps in each of the four directions and said, ‘This is my last rebirth.’ Those words will now never come to pass! The great Rishi Asita prophesied that you would be a buddha. Yet this prophecy has failed. My son, you have not yet had the joys of a universal monarch’s splendors, and you have passed away without attaining awakening! Who could possibly grant my son more time to live, even for a short while?” she lamented.

Siddhārtha inquired who was standing there wailing and crying in such a manner. “It is I, your mother, who carried you for ten months in my womb like a diamond,” she replied, continuing to recount all the hardships she had endured for him. Then the bodhisattva reassured her, “I am ensuring that all the effort you made, you who loved your son and had such affection for him, will become meaningful.” He continued, “I have relinquished all concerns to attain perfect buddhahood, just as Asita prophesied, and it will indeed happen.” Upon hearing these words, his mother felt great joy. Her hair stood on end and she sprinkled mandāravā flowers on the bodhisattva

before circumambulating him three times. Overjoyed, she returned to her abode in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three along with her retinue. The bodhisattva Siddhārtha continued to practice austerities, and his physical condition worsened even further. Not only was he extremely run down physically, but some nearby herders came to insult him and cause him harm. Regardless of the torment inflicted upon him, the bodhisattva remained absolutely motionless, absorbed in one-pointed meditation.



The Eighth Deed: Approaching the Seat of Awakening

The Eighth Deed: Approaching the Seat of Awakening

At the age of thirty-five, Prince Siddhārtha rose out of the samādhi of his six years of austerities. He was in an extremely weakened physical state. He saw that these austerities did not lead to buddhahood, so they were not a path to awakening. He contemplated that if he became awakened with an extremely weakened body, only by the power of his supernatural knowledge and wisdom, it would not be compassionate toward sentient beings, or rather, such a path of austerities would be extremely difficult for sentient beings to follow. And so, after having thought, “I shall regain my physical strength by eating solid food. Once I do so, I will attain awakening,” he ate some food. Observing this, the five excellent disciples thought that not only had the mendicant Gautama not actualized the exalted wisdom vision—in other words complete awakening—through the path of austerities, but he was now even eating food. Consequently, they believed that he was just another ordinary sentient being, and they ceased following him, before setting off for the Deer Park in the region of Vārāṇasī.

The person offering food to the prince bodhisattva was a farm girl called Sujāta, who had been sending ten young girls from her village to see him. They offered him soups, which he accepted. By consuming these meals, his physical strength progressively increased, and he regained some of his previous luster. He became known as Beautiful Monk, or the bodhisattva Beautiful Monk.

Sometime later, Sujāta prepared a milk porridge made from the extracted essence of the milk of a thousand cows, to which she added some honey. She poured it into a golden bowl and offered it. The bodhisattva asked Sujāta what he should do with this golden bowl, and she told him to keep it. “But I don’t need it,” he said. “Well then, do as you please,” she replied. “Usually, when I make an offering of food, I always offer it together with the container. I never make an offering without its container.”

So, the prince bodhisattva took the milk porridge containing honey that had been poured into the golden bowl and went down to the banks of the Nairāñjanā. He bathed, then ate the porridge, and without any feeling of attachment, he tossed the golden bowl into the waters of the Nairāñjanā River. As soon as the bowl touched the water, a nāga king who resided there fetched with great devotion and respect. He considered the precious bowl in which Gautama the monk

had eaten and brought it back to his kingdom, thinking, “This is worthy of veneration!”

After finishing this meal, Prince Siddhārtha once again manifested the thirty-two major marks and the eighty minor marks of a great being, as well as a halo of light, one fathom in diameter, around his body.

Later, in his quest to conquer the māras, the great being adorned himself in divine saffron-colored robes. Then, reflecting on how previous buddhas had arranged grass to sit upon when they attained manifest and complete awakening, he noticed that the grass seller Svastika cutting some soft, fresh, sweet-smelling grass that had a wonderful hue. Approaching Svastika, the bodhisattva said:

Svastika, quick, hand me the grass!

Today this grass holds great significance for me.

(...)

If you grant me this grass today,

You shall reap the power of boundless merit.

For you, this is none other than a sign

Heralding your future as an unsurpassed teacher!

Upon hearing those sweet words, Svastika's heart filled with joy, elation, and delight, and he gladly offered a sheaf of grass to Prince Siddhārtha.

The bodhisattva took the bundle of soft and perfect grass, and he walked towards the bodhi tree in Bodh Gayā. Arranging the grass so that its ends pointed inward, he seated himself on this grass cushion facing the east. Then, he formed the firm resolve not to move from this seat until he attained the level of complete awakening, displaying the deed of entering into a one-pointed meditative absorption.



The Ninth Deed: Conquering Māra's Armies

The Ninth Deed: Conquering Māra's Armies

The day before the great being Siddhārtha attained the level of perfect buddhahood, armies of evil māras^[8], yakṣas, kumbhāṇḍas, mahorāgas, rākṣasas, and flesh eaters displayed their terrible forms. Their appearance was so terrifying that merely seeing them caused people's hearts to burst. Some had two faces, others three or four, or as many as a thousand and ten million faces. They were roaring innumerable threats such as, "Grab that mendicant Gautama! Pound him! Catch him! Bind him! Cut him! Slice him up!" Some were crushing great mountains as big as Meru, the king of mountains. They produced formidable crashing sounds by churning the vast oceans. They directed bolts of lightning toward the bodhisattva and sent down on him rains of masses of swords, wheels, hammers, arrows, spears, lumps of iron and other extremely sharp and terrifying weapons. They also hurled avalanches of boulders and showers of blazing vajra flames at him. However, because of his unwavering commitment to non-harm and his

constant cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion toward all sentient beings, without attachment or aversion towards either friends or enemies, the onslaught of boulders, weapons, and all else transformed into a gentle rain of flowers, softly descending upon the bodhisattva's body.

When Māra, the evil one, called out to the bodhisattva, “Listen, young prince, rise from your meditation! Stop meditating! Go and rule your kingdom! On what grounds could this meager amount of virtue cause you to attain awakening? It is impossible.” The son of the Victorious Ones responded, “You, evil one! Through just a single unstinting act of giving, you have become lord of the desire realm. I, on the other hand, have performed trillions of unstinting acts of giving. I have so many times given my hands to those who asked for hands, my legs to those who asked for legs, my eyes to those who asked for eyes and my head to those who asked for a head. Without the slightest stinginess or feeling of loss, I have so often given beggars my house, wealth, grains, beds, clothes, and gardens.” Māra, the evil one, retorted, “What witness do you have to all those acts of giving? Without a witness, there is no point in speaking of them.” The bodhisattva replied, “Evil one, the earth is my witness.” With these words, the bodhisattva gently tapped the earth with his hand. In response, the ground trembled, and Sthāvarā, the earth goddess, emerged, accompanied by her

retinue of one billion earth goddesses, revealing her upper body. Bowing before the Bodhisattva with joined palms, she affirmed, “You are right. Great Being, you are right. It is just as you say.” She could attest to this truth firsthand, having witnessed it directly. The hordes of demons, powerless, finding no further opportunity to bring harm or pose obstacles, disappeared.

Now Māra, the evil one, felt dissatisfied, resorted to trickery. To deceive the bodhisattva and create obstacles, he emanated many māra-girls, beautiful and attractive, with voluptuous voices and accomplished in the erotic arts, consummate in various dance forms. They performed many dances, sang delightful songs with their beautiful voices. Yet, despite their efforts, the bodhisattva remained undisturbed in his one-pointed meditative absorption, not even a single hair on his body moving. Frustrated, the māra-girls dispersed in all directions, scattering so far apart that they would not reunite for a considerable time.

In brief, Bodhisattva Siddhartha conquered Māra and his entire army through the power of having constantly meditated on loving-kindness, practiced compassion and countless other virtues. At that time, an inconceivable multitude of māras formed the wish to attain the supreme awakening of buddhahood.



The Tenth Deed: Attaining Complete Awakening

The Tenth Deed: Attaining Complete Awakening

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

*To make meaningful all efforts made since beginningless time,
You sat unmoving in the vajra posture
Beneath the bodhi tree in Magadha, and attained buddhahood.
To you, whose awakening was complete, I pay homage.*

It was at Bodh Gayā that our guide, the Bhagavān, became a buddha. As previously stated, he remained in one-pointed meditative absorption and conquered all the māras—or the four māras—the night before he attained awakening. At midnight, he entered meditative absorption, and when dawn broke on the fifteenth day of Vaiśākha, our guide attained the manifest and complete awakening beneath the bodhi tree.

After attaining buddhahood, the Bhagavān perfected the knowledge of the ultimate nature of all phenomena, the ability

to apprehend the individual capacities of sentient beings, and the abandonment of all the sufferings in the whole of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, and the causes of suffering—the two obscurations together with their latent tendencies. In essence, he fully manifested the complete perfection of the qualities of abandonment and realization, the ultimate state of omniscience.

Following his awakening, the Thus Gone One (Skt. *Tathāgata*) gazed at the bodhi tree and declared, “Here I have manifestly and completely awakened to the unexcelled, perfect, and complete buddhahood.” He further proclaimed, “In this place I have brought an end to the sufferings of beginningless birth, old age, and death.”

When the Bhagavān was born amidst inconceivable wonders in the Lumbinī forest grove, he took seven steps in each of the four directions and declared that this would be his last birth, resolving to eradicate birth, aging, and death. This resolution had now come to fruition. Likewise, the prophecy of the great sage Asita had been fulfilled.

During the first week after his awakening, the Thus Gone One remained in close proximity to the bodhi tree. In the second week, he roamed extensively throughout the entire trichiliocosm. By the third week, gazing unwaveringly at the

bodhi tree, he proclaimed, “Having attained the unsurpassable, authentic, and complete awakening, I have put an end to the sufferings of beginningless birth, old age, and death.”

Then, during the fourth week, the Thus Gone One took a walk, this time traveling from the eastern ocean to the western ocean. Māra, the evil one, approached him and said, “Since the time has now come for the Bhagavān to pass into parinirvāṇa, may the Well Gone One (Skt. *Sugata*) pass into parinirvāṇa!”

In response, the Thus Gone One stated that the disputing opponents were to be defeated in concordance with the Dharma, that faith should be instilled in them, that they should be taught in conjunction with various miracles. Until the sounds of the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha—resonate widely throughout the world, he would not enter parinirvāṇa.

Then, during the fifth week, the Thus Gone One dwelt in the domain of the nāga king Mucilinda. In the sixth week, while journeying toward the banyan tree of a goat herder, the Thus Gone One was spotted on the banks of the Nairañjanā River by some ascetics belonging to heretical groups such as the carakas (vagrants’ expert in medicine), nirgranthas (passionless ascetics), parivrājakas (religious mendicants), and ājīvikas (wandering mendicants). They asked him, “Did the Bhagavān

Gautama fare happily?” In other words, they asked if, following a path of happiness, he reached a result of happiness. The Bhagavān responded, “Happy is the solitude of the contented one who has heard and can see the Dharma. Happy is the abstention from harming living beings. Happy it is to transcend wrongdoing, to avoid any wrongdoing, and to be free from attachment. Supremely happy is the subjugation of selfishness and pride.” *Pride* is the thought of “Me! Me!” that we have. He continued his answer with explanations such as, “This world is tormented by the craving of sensory pleasures.”

During the seventh week, the Victorious One prophesied the awakening of the two merchants Trapuṣa and Bhallika, and delighted them with verses such as:

*May divine auspiciousness, which accomplishes all aims
And brings good fortune throughout the ten directions,
Swiftly fulfill all your aims!
May everything promptly be favorable!*

Together with their companions, they went for refuge in the Buddha. Such were the Buddha’s activities during the seventh week. Then, seated at the foot of the tree of liberation, the Bhagavān had the following thought:

Alas! This truth that I realized and awakened to is profound, peaceful, utterly appeased, inaccessible to the intellect, inexpressible by words. Since it can't be shown and it transcends all conceptualizations, if I were to teach this truth to others, they would not understand it. Thus, I will remain silent and not teach it to anyone.

At that moment, he uttered these verses:

*Profound, peaceful, stainless, luminous, and unconditioned
Such is the nectar-like truth I have realized.
If I were to teach it, no one would grasp,
Thus, silently I shall dwell in the forest.*

So, the Victorious One refrained from teaching at all during the seven weeks following his awakening, from the fifteenth day of the fourth Tibetan month until the fourth day of the sixth Tibetan month. Then the Bhagavān said:

*With my infinite compassion for the whole world,
I do not linger when others supplicate me.
These beings all have faith in Brahmā;
Thus, when he supplicates, I will turn the wheel of Dharma.*

The Buddha meant that he would not teach at the request of anyone but Brahmā himself, since the whole population had faith in him. Subsequently, surrounded and escorted by six million eight hundred thousand retinue, Brahmā went to the Thus Gone One. Upon arriving, Brahmā bowed his head to the feet of the Thus Gone One and made the request to turn the wheel of Dharma. In order to engender respect for the Dharma, in order to increase the root of virtue by having Brahmā repeatedly request the Dharma, the Bhagavān did not acquiesce at this first request. The Thus Gone One did not consent to teach after a single request in order to increase the respect towards the Dharma, so that it would be held in high regard in the world and that it would be received with deference. Seeing this, Brahmā went to the realm of Śakra, lord of the gods. When he arrived, he told Śakra, lord of the gods, “The Thus Gone One should be requested to turn the wheel of Dharma. Let us make that request together.” Both Brahmā and Śakra approached the Thus Gone One, bowed their heads to his feet and Śakra requested him intently to turn the wheel of Dharma. Then, the lord of the gods, the Great Top-Knotted Brahmā—or *Brahmā* for short—addressed a second request to the Thus Gone One.

My account of the Buddha’s life is based on *The Play in Full*, where there is no mention of offering a one-thousand-spoked golden wheel and a right-turning conch shell alongside the

request for the Dharma wheel to be turned. Therefore, these offerings must have been recounted in another sūtra, not in the one that I am referencing.

After these requests, the Bhagavān spoke:

O Brahmā, the gates of nectar are opened

To those sentient beings of Magadha

With ears and with devotion,

Who constantly listen with attention and without doing harm.

Once the lord of the gods, the Great Top-Knotted Brahmā, understood that the Thus Gone One had acquiesced, he rejoiced with satisfaction and glee. Ecstatic and elated, he bowed once more with his head to the feet of the Thus Gone One and vanished from sight.



The Eleventh Deed: Turning the Wheel of Dharma

The Eleventh Deed: Turning the Wheel of Dharma

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

Homage to you, who, in your compassion,

Gazed at once upon living beings, then

Turned the wheel of Dharma in sacred places like Vārāṇasī,

And established disciples in the three vehicles.

At this moment, the four gods of the bodhi tree named Dharmaruci, Dharmakāma, Dharmamati, and Dharmacārin bowed to the feet of the Thus Gone One and asked, “Where will the Bhagavān turn the wheel of Dharma?” To their question, the Thus Gone One replied that he would teach at Vārāṇasī. They said, “O Bhagavān, the city of Vārāṇasī has merely a limited population.” This is what the sūtra *The Play in Full* recounts. The gods said that Deer Park had only a limited amount of tree shade compared to other cities that were wealthier, had better crops, larger populations and were ornamented by pleasant

gardens. They requested the Well Gone One to turn the wheel of the holy Dharma in one of these other places. But the Thus Gone One replied, “Do not say such a thing! And why? Because Vārāṇasī was the preferred place of the previous sages.” Before our guide came to the world of men, Vārāṇasī was the place where five hundred pratyekabuddhas or sages lived. The Thus Gone One further explained that many previous buddhas had turned the wheel of Dharma in this place.

Our teacher, the Bhagavān, further thought that his five previous companions would be suited to hear his teaching in Vārāṇasī, which would be the very first turn of the wheel of Dharma. The Thus Gone One saw that the five excellent disciples—Ājñātakauṇḍinya, Aśvajit, Bāṣpa, Mahānāma, and Bhadrīka—possessed pure minds, that their minds would be easy to tame. They would understand readily, having little attachment, aversion and ignorance. Moreover, they had served our guide when he was enduring the austerities before his awakening. Intent on the sublime path and free from obstructing forces, they were primed to receive the teachings. The Bhagavān foresaw that were he to teach the Dharma to them, they would be able to understand its meaning. Knowing they would comprehend the meaning of the Dharma, and they would not turn against him, our teacher traveled through the land, passing through the kingdom of Magadha, Kāśī, and Gayā,

eventually arriving at Deer Park, near Vārāṇasī, by the Hill of the Fallen Sages.

The five excellent disciples saw the Thus Gone One approaching from a distance. As he drew nearer, his immense splendor and radiance overwhelmed them. Rising from their seats, they washed his feet, welcomed him, and then sat down on one side. Addressing the Thus Gone One, they asked, “Venerable Gautama, your senses are clear, and the hue of your skin is perfectly pure. Have you actualized the wisdom of sublime beings?” In other words, his body was blazing with such a resplendent radiance that they wondered if he had attained the level of buddhahood. The Well Gone One answered, “O Bhikṣus! I have actualized the path of immortality. Bhikṣus! I am the Awakened One. I am the Omniscient One. I have exhausted all the faults.” The Awakened One invited them, saying “Come here! I will teach the Dharma.” Before meeting the Bhagavān in the region of Vārāṇasī, the five previous companions wore the insignias of the tīrthika doctrines that they were practicing. They then discarded them and wore the symbols of bhikṣus: the monastic robes and the alms bowl they held in their hands. They respectfully bowed their heads to the feet of our guide, the Bhagavān, and sat in front of him. It was then that the Thus Gone One started to turn the wheel of Dharma.

To the fortunate five excellent disciples, our guide turned the precious wheel of Dharma, expounding upon the four noble truths: suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path that leads to that cessation. Explaining the four noble truths by means of a metaphor, the venerable Protector Maitreya states in the *Treatise of the Unsurpassed Continuum*:

Disease should be known, its cause eliminated,

Wellness achieved and the treatment followed.

Just so suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path,

Should each be known, eliminated, achieved and followed.

Maitreya illustrates that the truth of suffering is like a disease, while the cause of suffering, the truth of the origin, is similar to what caused that disease. The truth of cessation mirrors the state of wellness achieved after being freed from that disease. And the truth of the path is comparable to the treatment followed to cure that disease. In essence, to eradicate suffering, the cause of suffering must be eliminated. And to achieve the truth of cessation, the truth of the path that leads to it should be followed. Thus, the Awakened One had turned the wheel of Dharma that derives from the four noble truths.

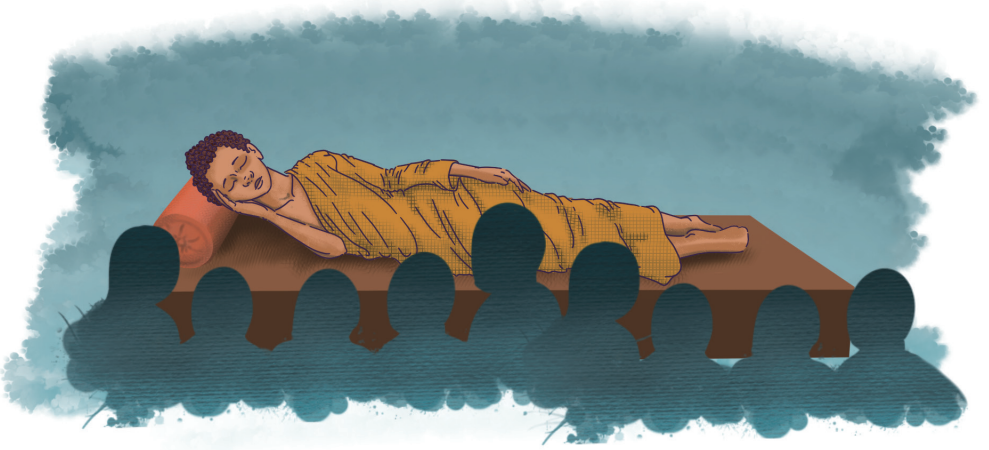
Now, on hearing the expression “the wheel of Dharma,” what should be understood? The teachings explain that the

Dharma—which is the wheel of Dharma—is of two kinds: the Dharma of the scriptures, also known as the teachings, and the Dharma of realization. They are alternatively named the *Dharma of the teachings* and the *Dharma of realization*. The *teachings* refer to the *twelve branches of the scriptures* ^[9]. As for the *Dharma of realization*, it is mainly understood to be the qualities acquired on the path of seeing onwards, the wisdom possessed by sublime beings, or the qualities of the paths treaded by sublime beings.

Why is the Dharma likened to a wheel? It is because of the similar characteristics and functions that are shared by the Dharma and a wheel. A weapon wheel destroys any object standing in its way when whirled, and a chariot's wheels transport a load, like a heap of grass, from one place to another. Similarly, the two kinds of Dharma, the teachings and the realization, destroy the afflictive emotions that are found in the minds of beings who are to be tamed, and the realizations are progressively transported in the minds of those beings. Here, transportation is another way of describing the birth of the Dharma of realization, or the wheel of the Dharma of realization, into the minds of the disciples. This happened, for instance, when our guide first turned the wheel of Dharma that expounds the four noble truths to the five excellent disciples in

Vārāṇasī. Ājñātakaunḍinya and the other excellent ones listened to the teachings, practiced them and gave birth to the Dharma of realization in their minds. In their turn, they taught them to their respective students, who also listened, practiced, and gave birth to that realization—the wheel of Dharma.

Then, in accordance with the various capacities, thoughts, and wishes of each individual being to be tamed, the Omniscient One, our teacher, imparted an inconceivable number of specific teachings. This was because each of the innumerable specific wishes of the beings to be tamed requires a corresponding specific teaching, just like each specific disease out of all of those plaguing this world needs to be cured with a specific remedy. This elucidates why our guide expounded countless sections of Dharma. Among those, at Vulture Peak Mountain, the Buddha expounded the intermediate body of teachings, named the wheel of Dharma of the absence of characteristics. This collection contains the sūtras on the *Perfection of Wisdom*. At Vaiśālī and other places, he expounded the final body of teachings, named the wheel of Dharma that excellently and fully discloses, which includes sūtras such as *Unraveling the Intent* (*Saṃdhinirmocana sūtra*). Thus, the Buddha extensively turned the wheel of Dharma^[10].



The Twelfth Deed: The Display of Entering Parinirvāṇa

The Twelfth Deed: The Display of Entering Parinirvāṇa

As the *Praise of the Twelve Deeds* of our guide Śākyamuni says:

*Homage to you, who, to spur the indolent toward the Dharma,
Left your body, though immortal and akin to a vajra,
And passed into parinirvāṇa
In the pure abode of Kuśinagara.*

After completing all the activities of taming disciples in this buddhafiield, our teacher, the Bhagavān, while in the Malla kingdom, displayed signs of sickness after partaking of his final meal, the alms offered by the smith Cunda. Upon reaching Kuśināgara, he reclined in the lion's sleeping posture on his final bed between two sāla trees.

To lie down on the right side of the body is the sleeping posture of lions. It is essential to understand that our guide had control over birth and death. He had transcended all sufferings associated with birth, old age, sickness and death, having

attained the state of vajra immortality. This can be traced to the moment after the manifest and complete awakening in Bodh Gayā, when he declared, “In this place, I have brought an end to the sufferings of beginningless birth, old age, and death.” At this moment, the Buddha had already gained control over birth and death and was liberated from the four great rivers of suffering. This is corroborated by the sublime Maitreya in one of his treatises:

*Sublime beings have eliminated from the root
The sufferings of birth, death, and old age.*

And yet, the *Sūtra of the Supreme Golden Light (Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra)* says:

*The Buddha does not pass into nirvāṇa,
And the Dharma will not disappear.
But in order to ripen sentient beings,
He passes or displays passing into nirvāṇa.*

The Awakened One displayed the passing into parinirvāṇa to the beings to be tamed who were fixated on permanence, aiming to turn their minds towards the Dharma, prompting them to

generate the thought of impermanence and comprehend it. It is extremely important to understand or integrate impermanence. Our guide says in a sūtra:

Bhikṣus! To think of impermanence is to make offerings to the Buddha.

To think of impermanence is to receive the prophecy [of one's liberation] from the Buddha.

To think of impermanence is to be blessed by the Buddha.

Bhikṣus! Among footprints, that of the elephant is supreme.

Among thoughts, that of impermanence is supreme.

Therefore, if impermanence does not remain something we have only heard or understood—if it doesn't remain a mere word to which we pay lip service, but if we are able to integrate the understanding of impermanence in our minds or realize it on the basis of a firm conviction—then we will naturally be able to overcome our desire towards any outer or inner object and towards the whole of the outer world and all of its inhabitants. This will allow us to eliminate any strong desire stemming from afflictive emotions. It could be desire towards our houses, any part of our wealth or possessions, or towards any person in our family, relatives, or anyone else. Currently, in the course of our lives, our strong desires push us to accomplish many negative actions, and this is how we have experienced in the past and

will continue to experience in the future a great quantity of suffering. But if we are able to completely understand and realize impermanence, we will be able to eliminate our desires. Also, if we are able to correctly contemplate impermanence, we naturally become diligent: by its contemplation, the thoughts of putting off Dharma practice until tomorrow or the day after or until our old age will disappear. We will feel the need to practice Dharma diligently right now. We will naturally have thoughts such as, "Right now, I have to be diligent in practicing Dharma!" As it is said:

Will tomorrow or the next life

Happen first? No one knows.

So drop your efforts for tomorrow

And spare no effort for your next life.

This is true! It certainly happens that people who are in good health, who are in their youth, are suddenly stricken by adverse circumstances and die before they see the following day. Therefore, between tomorrow and the next life, there is absolutely no way to tell with certainty which will come first. Also, if we contemplate impermanence in its entirety, we will be able to refrain from doing negative actions,

which are the causes of suffering and we will be able to feel enthusiasm towards positive actions. This is how the thought of impermanence counters our shortcomings and eliminates our suffering. Furthermore, firm conviction about impermanence will lead us to realize the ultimate nature of phenomena. A thorough understanding of the impermanent nature of things—in other words, the relative nature of phenomena—will lead us or assist us in attaining the realization of the ultimate reality. As elucidated in the Madhyamaka treatises:

*The conventional truth is the method,
The ultimate truth is the result of applying it.*

And also:

*Without relying on the conventional,
The ultimate reality will not be realized.
Without the realization of the ultimate,
Nirvāṇa will not be attained.*

So, it is extremely important to integrate impermanence, to contemplate impermanence, and generate a firm conviction about it.

Since the account of the Buddha's passing into parinirvāṇa, the twelfth among his twelve most significant deeds, does not appear to be included in the present sūtra *The Play in Full*, I relied on it as my source for the first eleven deeds and resorted to other sūtras for the final one.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, four of the twelve deeds stand out as great: taking birth, attaining awakening, turning the wheel of Dharma, and passing into parinirvāṇa. The locations where these four great deeds were performed are extremely important pilgrimage sites. Our guide himself said in the *Finer Points on Vinaya (Vinaya-āgama)* how important it will be, after his passing into parinirvāṇa, to go on pilgrimage to the sites where the four great deeds were performed. Therefore, visiting these four great pilgrimage sites is important for every Buddhist, every follower of our guide, the Bhagavān. At the very least, as Buddhists, we should make sure that we make at least one pilgrimage to each of these significant sites in our lifetime.

While visiting these sites, it is of great importance that we accomplish as much virtue as possible. Sometimes, people who go to these places accumulate non-virtuous actions; sometimes, they accumulate virtuous ones. It is really up to us whether we are able to perform virtuous or non-virtuous actions while

we are there. Generally speaking, the special blessings of pilgrimage sites increase the power of whatever virtuous or non-virtuous actions we perform. For instance, similar to how actions are multiplied by one hundred thousand times during the month of Saga Dawa, virtuous and non-virtuous actions performed at great pilgrimage sites also become powerful because of the blessings of the site. This holds true both during and outside of the month of Saga Dawa. Therefore, people who commit negative actions while visiting a great pilgrimage site will accumulate much greater and much heavier negative karma.

On the other hand, the *Prajñāpāramitā* says that if a perfectly pure Dharma practice is based on a perfectly pure motivation, inconceivably vast benefits can be reaped. For that reason, it is important to always ensure we strive to accomplish virtue and abandon negative actions. We need to carefully do so on the basis of mindfulness and vigilance. It is specifically important to be more careful than usual on sacred days and during visits to significant pilgrimage sites.

I would like to say a few words about the environment since nature and particularly trees share a direct connection with the deeds of our teacher. As we have seen, Māyādevī held the branch of a precious tree, an extraordinary and sublime plakṣa,

when our guide, the Bhagavān, was born. It was also under the bodhi tree, that our guide manifested the perfect awakening, and then in the Deer Park of the Falling Sages, that he first turned the wheel of Dharma. Finally, it was surrounded by two sāla trees that he displayed his last deed, the passing into parinirvāṇa. Each one of the four great deeds are related to nature, and particularly to trees. So, we Buddhists should also care for the environment and we should protect it. This is of great importance. And yet, the importance of the environment did not start to be a concern of humanity only during the twentieth or the twenty-first century. Long before that, Buddhist masters already attributed great importance to the environment, as we can read in Śāntideva's *Entering the Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*:

*If we find ourselves digging the ground, cutting some grass,
Or carving drawings in the soil for no reason,
We should remember the precepts of the Sugata
And with fear we should desist at that very moment.*

Besides that, it is crucial that we generate a firm, unwavering devotion that is felt from the depths of our hearts towards our teacher, the Bhagavān. He is extremely precious to us. He is

extremely precious not merely because we are his followers, not only because of our fondness for him, but because it is the bare truth that the noble Dharma he taught, is virtuous in the beginning, virtuous in the middle, and virtuous in the end. The fact that the noble Dharma is valid, truthful, and authentic establishes our guide, the one who taught it, as valid, authentic, and trustworthy as well.

Paying homage and making offerings to our guide is a custom of ours, and we should maintain it. To achieve this, we should place a statue, thangka painting, or image of the Buddha on an altar in our homes, and contemplate the significance of making offerings and prostrations. We should not view the object of our prostrations and offerings merely as a statue, painting, or image, but rather as the Buddha in person. We should consider that our teacher is actually present in front of us, embodying in a single person all the buddhas of the ten directions and of the three times.

On the basis of such a visualization, we will definitely be able to reap inconceivable benefits and accumulate vast amounts of merits if, motivated by renunciation, loving-kindness and bodhicitta in the beginning, and perfectly dedicating the merits towards the attainment of the complete awakening of all sentient beings in the end, we perform to the best of our

abilities actions such as doing prostrations, making offerings, doing the regular seven bowls offering, and so forth in the presence of the Buddha.

We should further think that we are always in the very presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. As Master Śāntideva states in *Entering the Way of the Bodhisattva*:

*The buddhas and bodhisattvas
see unobstructedly and unceasingly.
Thinking, "I am at all times
in the very presence of all of them,"
generate decency, respect and fear.
The person who does that will unceasingly
recollect the qualities of the Buddha.*

If we think at all times that all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, along with their retinues, are constantly and directly seeing every single action of our body, speech, and mind—that they not only directly see all our good actions but also all our bad actions—we will naturally feel uneasy. This awareness will prevent ourselves from doing non-virtuous actions. We will naturally think, “How could I dare to commit anything negative in the presence of the Bhagavān? I better not do any

unwholesome action. I would feel ashamed of doing anything non-virtuous.” This way, we will naturally avoid negative actions and happily and enthusiastically engage in virtuous actions.

Finally, I would like to request all of you to remember that our constant witness is the unfailing law of cause and effect and that our teacher, the Buddha, constantly sees us. Therefore, I request that you practice the noble Dharma at all times in a pure manner, to accomplish virtue and abandon negative actions, without ever limiting your efforts. Thank you.

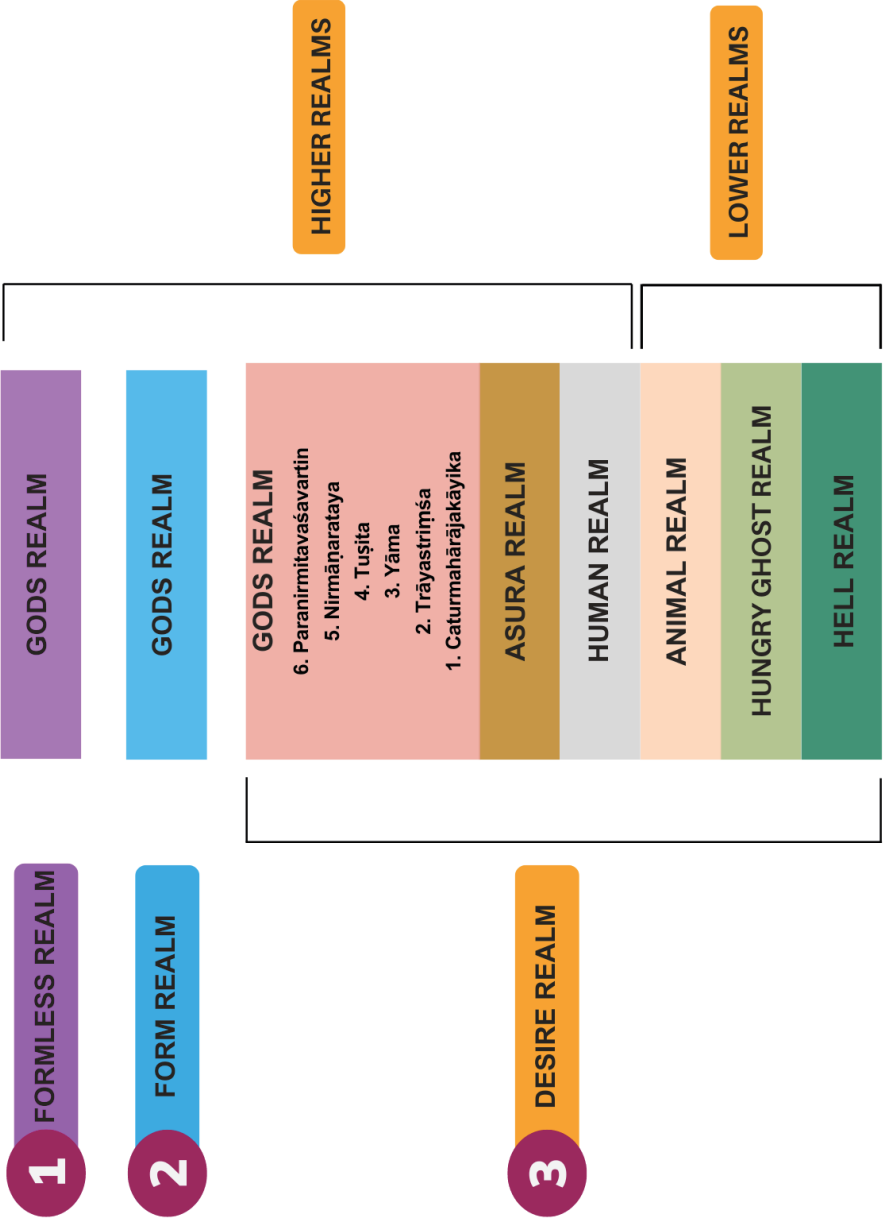
Notes

1. The common Mahāyāna teachings explain that an ordinary sentient being accumulates merits and wisdom for “three innumerable” of “great eons” (rendered here as “three countless eons”) before achieving buddhahood. In the Abhidharma, a “countless” or “innumerable” is a number that equals 10 raised to the sixtieth power. A great kalpa or eon is the time between the beginning of the construction of a world system until the end of the empty period following its destruction. In the human world, this period is equivalent to 3,397,706,240,000,000 years.
2. Generally known as the “four māras,” these are four personifications of the obscurations that prevent awakening. The four demons (māras) are the divine māra, which represents the distraction of pleasures; the māra of the Lord of Death; the māra of the aggregates, which pertains to the body; and the māra of the afflictive emotions. (see note 8)
3. The thirty-two major and minor marks of excellence that characterize the perfect physical form of a *nirmāṇakāya* buddha, including marks of wheels on the palms and soles, and copper-colored nails on both his hands and feet.
4. Parinirvāṇa, the “ultimate” nirvāṇa, refers to the final passing beyond suffering manifested by buddhas and highly realized teachers at the end of their lives. (see note 5)
5. Nirvāṇa is the final liberation from suffering. This Sanskrit term means

“extinguishment,” for the causes for saṃsāra are “extinguished.” In Tibetan, it is rendered as “the transcendence of suffering.”

6. Eight classes of gods and demons. All of them were able to receive and practice the teachings of the Buddha. There are various descriptions but, in the sūtras, the most general is the one found here.
7. The seven treasures of a universal monarch are the precious wheel, the precious elephant, the precious horse, the precious wife, the precious jewel, the precious steward, and the precious minister.
8. Māra is the principal god in the highest paradise of the desire realm. He attempted to prevent the Buddha’s enlightenment and does not wish any being to escape from saṃsāra. The māras are the gods and demons under his rule. Also, they symbolize the defects within a person that prevent enlightenment.
9. The twelve branches of the scriptures, also known as the twelve branches of excellent speech, or the twelve categories of the Buddha’s teachings, include discourses, verse narrations, prophecies, poetic verses, aphorisms, ethical narrations, narrative discourses, parables, past-life stories, extensive sayings, marvels, and resolutions.
10. Since the initial body of teachings, named the wheel of Dharma of the four noble truths, has already been explained in the preceding paragraphs, His Holiness only refers to the last two turnings in this section. Traditionally, the Buddha’s teachings are divided into these three bodies of teachings, each one receiving the name of a wheel of Dharma.

Three Realms of Saṃsāra



The Five Paths and the Ten Bhūmis

of the Bodhisattva Path



PATH OF ACCUMULATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three Levels • Small • Medium • Great

PATH OF APPLICATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Levels • Heat • Tip • Patience • Excellent Dharma

PATH OF SEEING
First Bhūmi

PATH OF MEDITATION
Second Bhūmi to Ninth Bhūmi

PATH OF NO-MORE LEARNING
Tenth Bhūmi

Level of Ordinary Beings

Level of Noble Bodhisattvas

Stage of Buddhahood



- His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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