

The Buddha's Actual Past Lives

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Introduction

The Pali Canon, as a record of the life and teachings of the Buddha, is a mixture of 'serious' sections and mythology. The *Jataka Tales*, as mostly mythology, purport to tell over 500 stories of the Buddha's past lives. In contrast the 'serious' sections of the Canon unambiguously list around nine. This paper details these nine past lives, and considers the implications of them for understanding the Buddha's temperament and teachings.

Keywords: Buddha, past lives, rebirth, *brahma-viharas*, Pali Canon.

Note:

When referring to the four major Nikayas or volumes of the Sutta Pitaka in the Pali Canon, I use DN to denote the *Long Discourses of the Buddha (Digha Nikaya)*; MN to denote the *Middle Length Discourses (Majjhima Nikaya)*; SN to denote the *Connected Discourses (Samutta Nikaya)*; and AN to denote the *Numerical Discourses (Anguttara Nikaya)*.

The four *brahma-viharas* are important to the discussion here, and are generally taken to be the practice of, or abidings in: loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), appreciative joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*uppeka*).

Introduction

The Pali Canon is a mixture of matter-of-fact daily events in the life of the Buddha, his discourses, and mythology. By stripping away the mythology we can obtain a flesh-and-blood picture of a man whose legacy is a profound teaching of enlightenment attainable by anyone. However, there is some difficulty in deciding where to discard elements in the Canon as mythology and where to retain them as intrinsic to the man. There are perhaps three areas of difficulty: firstly rebirth (reincarnation); secondly the existence of non-material beings (gods, spirits, devas

etc); and thirdly the claims to possess supernatural powers such as walking through walls.

In many suttas of the Canon the Buddha describes his awakening in three stages corresponding to the three watches of the night. Each stage provided the Buddha with one of the 'Three Knowledges' that constitute final liberation, these being firstly recollection of personal past lives; secondly the knowledge of the past lives and trajectories of others; and thirdly the knowledge of the complete cessation of taints. This paper deals mainly with the first Knowledge, the Buddha's own rebirths.

Here, I count 'serious' parts of the Canon to include the four major Nikayas, plus the Sutta Nipata, while books of the Khuddaka Nikaya such as the Udana and the Ittivuttaka provide some supporting material. The Vinaya appears to be more mythologised, while there should be no difficulty in regarding the *Jataka Tales* as mostly mythology, even though there is clearly some overlap with the major Nikayas. Of the four major Nikayas, the Digha Nikaya also contains more mythological elements than the other three, though no collection of suttas escapes them completely.

Why give credence to rebirth?

For a Buddhist – or non-Buddhist who is interested in the teachings of the Buddha – rebirth can be stumbling block, and may be seen as entirely mythological. Very few of us remember our past lives. Yet the start of any serious engagement with Buddhism as a transformative vision (as opposed to merely an academic interest) is faith in the Buddha and his teachings. The first step is faith in the possibility of enlightenment. Yet those who have had any experience of enlightenment are probably even fewer than those who remember their past lives. 'Faith', as confidence in the Buddha, or however interpreted, is the necessary first step to enlightenment, a destination we do not yet experience or understand. By the same token that faith also needs to be placed in rebirth, as the Buddha's teachings of enlightenment are not comprehensible without it. I would suggest that giving credence to enlightenment without giving credence to rebirth can be an obstacle to understanding the Dharma.

Rebirth and physics

As most Western-educated readers are likely to place rebirth in the realm of the mythological, I need to explain why this is not a necessary step. At its simplest, rebirth implies the continuation of tendencies and memories from one life to another. This is dealt with by the Buddha as *karma*: actions in one life have consequences in the next. For example he tells his monk that a leper called Suppabuddha had insulted as 'leper' an enlightened one in a former life, and so suffered in the hell-realm, and then was reborn on earth as an actual leper (Udana 5.3). More prosaically we may see that a child of five who shows prodigious talent

as a concert pianist may have inherited the skill from a previous life, though may have no memories of it. Parents are often surprised by personality traits in their children that derive from neither nature nor nurture. Karma, as the Buddha describes it, provides the explanation. Whether we are sympathetic to such ideas or not, the question remains, what does science have to say about all this? My answer – as one trained in physics, chemistry and software engineering – is to say: 'nothing'. Physics, and therefore the other sciences, has a remit that does not run to such questions. The reason to make so bald an assertion is that for the methods of physics, or science in general, to obtain certain knowledge about anything, they must measure entities that have properties of size and location. Technically, all scientific facts about entities break down to a combination of mass, length and time. If one cannot measure these things about an entity, then it is not within the remit of science. Entities such as 'self', 'memory', 'mind', 'tendency', 'love', 'enlightenment' and so on which are all part of the discourse of rebirth are therefore not entities within science, and science is therefore bound to remain without an opinion on them.

A much longer presentation of this idea may be required to convince all readers, but I will proceed on the basis of this short summary.

The Buddha's past lives in brief

In this section I outline nine of the Buddha's past lives that appear in the four major Nikayas, along with his mention of a further six, plus six further inferred lives. (If I have missed any I would be delighted to know.)

The Buddha's past lives as humans

The Buddha makes nine unequivocal references to previous lives, using various simple statements, often to Ananda, that make his meaning clear. The list that follows is in the order in which they appear in the four major Nikayas, along with the reference to the sutta where they are found:

1. The nameless minister-chaplain (head-priest) to King Mahavijita (DN 5)
2. King Mahasudassana (plus 6 previous lives in same location, no details) (DN 17)
3. Jotipala, the Brahmin, the Great Steward (DN 19)
4. The Brahmin student Jotipala (MN 81)
5. King Makhadeva (MN 83)
6. Kappa, apprentice to Brahma Baka (SN 6.4)
7. The nameless chariotmaker to King Pacetana (AN 3.15)
8. The nameless Lord of Jambudipa (all of India) (AN 7.62)
9. The Brahmin Velama (AN 9.20)

In addition we may further infer that six teachers, all reborn in the Brahma world, were previous lives of the Buddha: (1) Sunetta, (2) Mugapakkha, (3) Aranemi, (4) Kuddalaka, (5) Hatthipala, (6) Araka (AN 6.54).

The Buddha's past lives as devas

Although devas and deva-worlds are topics for another essay, it is important to note that the Buddha also tells us about some of his previous lives as devas, for example that he was the Great Brahma 7 times and ruler of the devas 36 times (AN 7.62). The Buddha tells us in MN 12:

But it is impossible to find a realm in the round that I have not already passed through in this long journey, except for the gods of the Pure Abodes; and had I passed through the round as a god in the Pure Abodes, I would never have returned to this world.

Hence it is clear that the Buddha is telling us that he has been many types of god in previous lives.

An important stage in the Buddha's enlightenment was the determination to go beyond his two former teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, who were able to help him realise the states of the base of nothingness and the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. This was not sufficient for final liberation, and so the Buddha pursued his own path up to the night of his enlightenment. At that point the first thing he did was to direct his mind to his past lives. The second thing was to direct his mind to the past lives of others. He came to realise at this point that it was only if he were to engage in discussion with devas (deities) that the 'knowledge and vision of mine would become even more purified' (AN 8.64). Further still, he realised that by knowing the rank of different deities – i.e. the deva-worlds in which they lived – he would know their lifespan and their joy and suffering. (The Buddha often describes their various lifespans, e.g. in AN 8.42.) He says, 'I also knew whether or not I had lived together with those deities.' (Note that it is clear from what he says that to 'live together with' or 'live in the company of' a certain class of deity means to *be* that type of deity.) Because of this he understood the limitations of his own past lives as such deities. It is only out of this knowledge that his final 'unsurpassed perfect enlightenment' arose in him, because he had gone beyond all the deities and reached cessation, Nirvana, the end of rebirth. He then rightly claimed to be a 'teacher of gods and men'.

Given the importance of the devas and their worlds and their lifespans – in other words the insight gained in the second of the Three Knowledges – it becomes clear why the Buddha's own births – the first of the Three Knowledges – is an important topic.

We now look at nine directly confirmed cases of the past lives of the Buddha, along with six further mentions and six inferred cases, all of them in the human realm. Some other general claims to further rebirths are also considered.

1. Minister-chaplain to King Mahavijita

The account given in DN 5 is of a Brahmin minister-chaplain who advises King Mahavijita on a great sacrifice, but one not involving the usual slaughter of countless animals. The Buddha is describing this to the Brahmin Kutadanta, who is oddly silent at the end of the story, whereas his company respond with noisy approval. They ask him why he did not applaud the Buddha's words, to which he responds that the Buddha is speaking in such a way as to suggest that he had been present at the long-ago event, either as the king or as the minister-chaplain. This is in itself interesting, as it confirms the cultural acceptance of past lives, and also that the Buddha was in some way not following story-telling convention. Hence the following exchange:

Kutadanta: Does the Reverend Gotama acknowledge that he performed, or caused to be performed, such a sacrifice, and that in consequence at death, after the breaking-up of the body, he was reborn in a good sphere, a heavenly state?

The Buddha: I do, Brahmin. I was the Brahmin chaplain who conducted that sacrifice.

We note both the simple declaration of the Buddha regarding his former life, and also the acknowledgement that it led to rebirth in a heavenly state, perhaps a Brahma-world.

2. King Mahasudassana

King Mahasudassana is described in DN 17 as a 'wheel-turning monarch', an important category of ruler often referred to by the Buddha. He claims to have been a wheel-turning monarch many hundreds of times (AN 7.62). King Mahasudassana is introduced to us in a conversation with Ananda, who is concerned that where they are staying is a 'miserable little town of wattle-and daub, right in the jungle in the back of beyond', and will not be able to properly provide for the Buddha's funeral. The Buddha objects to this characterisation, saying that King Mahasudassana was a wheel-turning monarch, a rightful and righteous king, who had his capital in that town, then called Kusavati. (The same description is found in MN 16, the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, but in that version no mention is made of the king as a former life of the Buddha.) The Buddha goes on to describe the splendour of the town and the extent of the kingdom, including a lengthy account of the king's attainments. In his later life he became a layman who 'lived the holy life in the Dhamma Palace.' Having practiced the four *brahma-viharas*, he was reborn in the Brahma-world. The Buddha then ends with:

Now, Ananda, you might think King Mahasudassana at that time was somebody else. But you should not regard it so, for I was King Mahasudassana then. Those eighty-four thousand cities of which Kusavati was the chief were mine.

This is one of three cases where the Buddha describes a life and then tells Ananda that the person in question was not someone else, but himself. In this case he then adds that he had died in that same place six previous times, the seventh being as the king. In an interesting addition the Buddha then says that he now sees nowhere in the physical or deva worlds where he would discard his body for an eighth time. It is possible that he means that his impending death, or paranirvana, is not a 'discarding of the body' in any normal sense, possibly because he has ended without residue any identity-view with the body at the time of his enlightenment. Another implication is that King Mahasudassana had attained the spiritual height of being a once-returner, after his allotted lifespan in the brahma-world.

Although not named as such, King Mahasudassana appears again in SN 22.96 (*A Lump of Cowdung*) with identical details, in one of the Buddha's many discourses on the impermanence of such things as wealth and power.

3. Jotipala the Great Steward

In DN 19 a deva called Pancasikha of the gandhabba class reports to the Buddha a conversation overheard in the deva realm of the Thirty-Three Gods. A question arises as to how long the Buddha has been 'one of mighty wisdom', upon which the story is told of the Great Steward Jotipala, who eventually administered the domains of seven anointed kings, and also taught brahmins. The Brahma Sanankumara then teaches him how mortals can reach the 'deathless Brahma world', upon which Jotipala goes forth into the homeless life, telling the seven kings that he resigns his post. After they fail to tempt him with wealth and women, they too go forth. Jotapali tells his brahmin pupils the same, upon which they go forth with him and the kings. Jotipala establishes the practice of the *brahma-viharas* for the way to rebirth in the Brahma-world, and his pupils, depending on their aptitude attained that birth or no lower than that of the gandhabbas. Having told this long story to the Buddha, Pancasikha asks, 'Do you remember this, Lord?' The Buddha says he does; that he was the Great Steward at that time; but that the holy life he taught then only led to the Brahma-world, and not to 'disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to superknowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana', as in his current teachings.

As it is not the aim of this essay to look at the various deva worlds and their denizens we will not dwell here on such details as found in DN 19, but note again

that in his former life as the Great Steward the Buddha had practiced the four *brahma-viharas*.

Another possible reference to this Jotipala is made in AN 7.73, where the Buddha lists the following teachers of bygone age: (1) Sunetta, (2) Mugapakkha, (3) Aranemi, (4) Kuddalaka, (5) Hatthipala, (6) Jotipala, (7) Araka. The list (without Araka) also appears in AN 6.54, where Jotipala is described as being known as Govinda and being the chaplain of seven kings. Although DN 19 does not name Jotipala as either Mahagovinda or Govinda, the sutta is named after him, which must be conclusive evidence. All seven, along with their disciples, were reborn in the brahma world.

4. The Brahmin student Jotipala

The former life of the Buddha described in MN 81 is significant because it is connected to the Buddha Kassapa (the Buddha described by the Buddha Gotama as the one previous to him). It also introduces the amusing cameo of Ananda noticing that the Buddha is smiling, prompting the thought: 'Why did the Blessed One smile? Tathagatas do not smile without a reason'. In each case where this occurs in the Canon Ananda then asks the reason for the smile, and in each case the Buddha tells the story of an individual, sometimes ending it with the statement that this person 'should not be considered other than I', or similar formulation (as in the case of King Mahasudassana). In this case it is of the brahmin student Jotipala.

The Buddha begins his story by saying that the place by the main road that caused his smile had been a prosperous market town near which the Blessed One Kassapa, fully enlightened, had his monastery. Ananda then folds his cloak and invites the Buddha to sit on it, saying, 'Then, venerable sir, let the Blessed One be seated. Thus this place will have been used by two Accomplished Ones, Fully Enlightened Ones'. The Buddha then tells Ananda about the potter Ghatikara who repeatedly begs his friend, the brahmin student Jotipala, to visit Kassapa. Jotipala is not interested in the pleas, but when Ghatikara seizes him by the hair to convey his urgency Jotipala gives in. As an aside we may note the amiable temperament of the Buddha in his former life, because, where others may have been outraged or even slapped the good potter – given the difference in caste – Jotipala thinks: 'It is wonderful, it is marvellous that this potter Ghatikara, who is of a different birth, should presume to seize me by the hair when we have washed our heads! Surely this can be no simple matter.'

When Jotipala then hears the teachings of Kassapa he asks his friend why he does not go forth under this great Master. Ghatikara says he cannot because he has to look after his parents, upon which Jotipala declares that he will. Hence we must now include the Buddha Kassapa as one of the Buddha Gautama's former teachers.

Ghatikara is mentioned again in the Canon, this time as a deva (devata). He appears to the Buddha and tells him that seven of his bikkhus have been reborn in the Aviha realm (one of the Pure Abodes from which final enlightenment is certain). The Buddha asks him by whose Dharma they cut the bondage of existence, to which Ghatikara replies that it is the Buddha's. Having given a brief synopsis of the Buddha's teachings as liberation, 'Where name-and-form ceases, stops without remainder', the Buddha asks him by whose Dharma has he uttered such speech, 'hard to understand, very hard to grasp.' It is then that the devata reveals himself as Ghatikara and that the Dharma by which he is now, like the Buddha, 'bearers of their final bodies', was that of the Buddha Kassapa (AN 1.50).

In another case of Ananda asking why the Buddha smiles on reaching a particular place, the answer concerns a lay follower of the Buddha Kassapa named Gavesi, who we must presume was known to Jotipala (AN 5.180). Another follower of the Buddha Kassapa was the bikkhu Sahaka, also presumably known to Jotipala, who gains a high rebirth as the Brahma Sahampati (SN 48.57). This deity appears a number of times from the start of the Buddha's career all the way to his paranirvana, keeping up the friendly connection that presumably began under Kassapa.

5. King Makhadeva

The Buddha smiles. Again, Ananda thinks, 'Tathagatas do not smile for no reason,' and asks the Buddha why, who then tells the story of King Makhadeva (MN 83). At the end of the story the Buddha says:

Now, Ananda, it may be that you think thus: 'Certainly, someone else was King Makhadeva on that occasion.' But it should not be regarded thus. I was King Makhadeva on that occasion.

The story is interesting because the king instructs his barber to tell him when he finds grey hairs on his head, and after a long time the barber finally spots them, the 'divine messengers'. It was the sign that the king should now go forth, having settled his estate and instructed his son that he should keep up the good practice of going forth when he in turn reaches this stage of life. As in the case of King Mahasudassana and Jotipala the Great Steward, the king practices the four *brahma-viharas* and was reborn in the Brahma-world. His descendents follow this pattern until a son called Kalarajanaka, who broke the good practice, the last man. The Buddha tells Ananda that the practice, good as it was, 'does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana, but only to reappearance in the Brahma-world'. He adds that his own good practice of the Noble Eightfold Path *does* lead to Nirvana, and instructs: 'Therefore, Ananda, I say to you: continue this good practice instituted by me and do not be the last man'.

6. Kappa, apprentice to Brahma Baka

In SN 6.4 the Buddha becomes aware of what he considers an evil speculative view arising in a deity of the brahma-world known as Brahma Baka. This view is a repeated target of the Buddha's criticism, namely that existence in the brahma-world is permanent rather than impermanent. The Buddha then visits Baka, who repeats his strongly-held belief:

Come, dear sir! Welcome, dear sir! It has been a long time, dear sir, since you took the opportunity of coming here. Indeed, dear sir, this is permanent, this is stable, this is eternal, this is complete, this is imperishable. Indeed, this is where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, and is not reborn; and there is no other escape superior to this.

The Buddha remonstrates with Baka over such ignorance, telling him that while his lifespan is enormous by human standards, it is, in the grand scheme of things, short. In other words Baka is prone to old age, sickness and death as are all beings in all worlds. Baka acknowledges the Buddha as one of infinite vision, so asks him – perhaps as a test – to tell him what virtuous practice he led that had given him the high rebirth as a brahma. The Buddha then recounts those virtuous and heroic acts, which he recollects 'as if just waking up.' He also mentions that he was Baka's apprentice at this time, named Kappa, who Baka considered intelligent and devout. Baka is now convinced and concedes that the Buddha has true knowledge of his lifespan, adding that the Buddha's blazing majesty illuminates even the brahma-world.

A longer description of the encounter with the Brahma Baka is found in MN 49, but does not include any reference to Kappa.

7. Nameless chariotmaker to King Pacetana

In this case the Buddha tells the assembled bhikkhus the story of King Pacetana's chariotmaker, ending, 'It may be, bhikkhus, that you think: "On that occasion the chariotmaker was someone else." But you should not think in such a way. On that occasion, I myself was the chariotmaker,' (AN 3.15). The Buddha says that on that occasion he was 'skilled in crookedness, faults, and defects in wood.' Now he is the Arahant, he is skilled in the faults of body, speech and mind in persons. If a follower of his has not abandoned such faults then they have fallen from the Dhamma, just as a rolling chariot wheel falls over if made from defective wood.

8. Nameless Lord of Jambudipa (all of India)

We have seen that in AN 7.62 the Buddha tells us that he was seven times the Great Brahma and thirty-six times ruler of the devas. The Buddha also adds:

I was a Wheel-turning monarch,
 the lord of Jambudipa
 a head-anointed khattiya,
 the sovereign among human beings.

The translator tells us that Jambudipa is understood to mean the whole or a large part of India.

9. The Brahmin Velama

In AN 9.20 a householder asks the Buddha about alms-giving. The Buddha replies (in what is a common theme in his teachings) that the merit of alms-giving depends partly on the respectful manner in which it is given, regardless of whether the alms in question are poor or high quality, and partly on the spiritual attainment of the recipient. The Buddha tells the story of the wealthy brahmin Velama who gives vast quantities of goods (including maidens) as alms, while food and drink flowed like rivers (we note the exaggerations here while accepting the general scenario). However many this wealth might support in the holy life, an offering just enough to feed one person 'accomplished in view' would be worth more. The Buddha then lists increasingly worthy recipients, finishing with the Tathagata and his Sangha. Even more worthy would be to go for refuge and so forth, finishing with the idea that it would be more worthy yet to 'to develop a mind of loving-kindness even for the time it takes to pull a cow's udder' or to 'develop the perception of impermanence just for the time of a finger snap.' Along the way the Buddha confirms to the householder that 'I myself was the brahmin Velama who on that occasion gave that great alms offering.'

We note again that loving-kindness, the first of the four *brahma-viharas* is highly regarded and here comes second-highest in the Buddha's hierarchy of merit.

Inferred past lives

If we assume that the Jotipala mentioned in AN 6.54 and AN 7.73 is the same person as the Great Steward described in DN 19, then the following list of teachers may well have also been past lives of the Buddha: (1) Sunetta, (2) Mugapakkha, (3) Aranemi, (4) Kuddalaka, (5) Hatthipala and (7) Araka. This is because Jotipala is mentioned both times in that list. The most important of these is Sunetta because an account of his life perfectly matches an account the Buddha gives of his own previous life.

Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to the teacher Sunetta: It isn't fitting that I should have exactly the same future destination as my disciples. Let me develop loving-kindness further. Then for seven years the teacher Sunetta developed a mind of loving-kindness. As a consequence, for seven eons of world-dissolution and evolution he did not come back to this world. When the world

was dissolving he moved on to the [realm of] streaming radiance. When the world was evolving, he was reborn in an empty mansion of Brahma.

There he was Brahma, the Great Brahma, the vanquisher, the unvanquished, the universal seer, the wielder of mastery.

This account exactly matches that in AN 7.62 (*Do Not Be Afraid of Merit*) which is prefaced this time by no mention of Sunetta but the statement by the Buddha: 'I recall that for a long time I experienced the desirable, lovely, agreeable result of merit that had been made over a long time.' Where we find the name 'Sunetta' or 'he' in the above passage we find 'I' in this case. In both cases we find the mention of being Sakka, ruler of the devas, thirty-six times and wheel-turning monarch hundreds of times.

Because of this exact parallel we must conclude that the Buddha was Sunetta in a previous life. If both Sunetta and Jotipala are in the list that includes Mugapakkha, Aranemi, Kuddalaka, Hatthipala and Araka, then we may assume that those five were also past lives of the Buddha. However I have not so far found further mention of those names in the Canon.

Mythology and past lives

The source of the Buddha's discourses, the Pali Canon, contains the Buddha's austere teachings in great detail. These are sober accounts of such things as the five aggregates, the six sense-bases, the higher states of consciousness (*jhanas*) and the *brahma-viharas*, not to mention the renunciative lifestyle required of the monks, requiring endurance in the face of all that the homeless condition entails. The four major Nikayas contain much every-day detail about people, discussions, food, clothing and shelter, and when he needs to the Buddha unhesitatingly refers to urination and defecation, all of which conveys a sober reality we can easily picture, even if our middle-class lifestyles make us flinch at some of the details. At the same time the Canon contains much mythology, and in the case of the Buddha's accounts of his previous lives mythology runs large and can overwhelm the sober detailing of those lives. It is easy therefore for Western-educated readers of the Canon to assume that rebirth itself is mythology.

The Jataka Tales is understood to date from after the compilation of the major discourses, and is considered a commentary on rebirth stories circulating after the Buddha's death. A key translator of the Jataka into English, T.W. Rhys Davids, tells us that many of the stories pre-date the Buddha, are folk-lore, and contain within them a simple ethic. In other words they are tales designed to teach basic morality and the basics of Buddhism. As Walshe says in his introduction to the DN, these birth-stories are 'Much used as parables, otherwise mainly of interest as folklore.' In a few cases however, the tales correspond to what is spoken by the Buddha in the

discourses of the four major Nikayas. These accounts of the Buddha's previous births are not without obvious mythologizing however.

Let us consider the story of King Mahasudassana, as told in DN 17 and also in episode 95 of the Jataka Tales. In both cases the story begins with a description of the royal city of Kusavati encircled by bejewelled walls and pillars of silver, beryl, crystal, ruby and emerald. The story in DN 17 is highly embellished: the 'divine Wheel-Treasure' appeared to the king, 'thousand-spoked, complete with felloe, hub and all appurtenances,' and which conquered the surrounding lands. He then had eighty-four thousand of everything, including cities, gold couches, carriages, elephants and wives. This endless description of wealth is matched by the king's endless might and power, and in total is, one could say, the antithesis of all that the Buddha stood for, i.e. the renunciation of all such extravagance, or even ordinary comforts. As Walshe says in his notes to DN 17, 'The whole thing is deliberately set in an atmosphere of fairy-tale splendour.' The question is, of course, set by whom? The answer can only be the compilers of the Canon and not the Buddha himself.

If the Digha Nikaya indulges too much in myth-making, let us turn to a more sober Nikaya: the Majjhima, the Middle-Length Verses. Its account of King Makhadeva is without mention of eighty-four thousand anything; without bejewelled city walls and jewel-trees; without endless conquest. We are left however with superlatives of the eighty-four thousand kind when referring to the king's lifespan; such mythologizing is something we cannot completely escape from. We have to turn to the account of the Brahmin student Jotipala to find something almost devoid of myth and exaggeration. The every-day details of this account, including how Jotipala and his companion Ghatikara wash in the Ganges and how Ghatikara has to look after his parents, belong to the sober parts of the Canon. The technical knowledge about wood and carpentry of the chariotmaker also belong to the real world.

If we take the Buddha seriously enough to strip out in our own minds the mythology that surrounds his life and see him as a flesh-and-blood man speaking about enlightenment, then we should do the same for his past lives listed here, and for rebirth in general. Enlightenment and rebirth cannot be separated without doing violence to the Buddha's system. Discarding the mythological – if done carefully – merely enhances the Buddha's message that enlightenment is real and for anyone.

Implications of the Buddha's past lives

What do we learn, therefore, when taking the above-listed past lives of the Buddha in the round? Some patterns emerge, I would suggest, that inform us both about the Buddha's temperament and his teachings. These patterns would not emerge

from the five hundred or so Jataka Tales, so we have perhaps a unique insight into the Buddha gained by this study.

When we look at the above list of nine lives, including the additional mentions and inferences, we gain a picture of the Buddha's trajectory as including many times 'wheel-turning monarch' and many times brahmin, or brahmin teacher. We only learn of one lower-caste life, as chariotmaker, and that experience includes a common factor with kingship: specialised knowledge. (Note: we do not know the nature of the apprenticeship of Kappa to the Brahma Baka.)

What the Buddha demonstrates in his discourses is a quite astonishing knowledge of all the specialised skills of the trades essential to a flourishing kingdom, not to mention those pertaining to warfare, and even the skills and qualities of a successful householder. He is also a consummate religious teacher with unequalled rhetorical skills. His former births, then, are consistent with his life as the Buddha.

A key factor in the Buddha's kingly and brahmin former births is the teaching of the *brahma-viharas*, and the resulting rebirth in the brahma-world. This would explain first of all the great kindness, empathy, compassion, generosity and human warmth of the Buddha. It would also explain why he consistently states that the practice of the *brahma-viharas* alone do not achieve final liberation.

While the Jataka is largely mythological, as scholars have noted, it does in a few cases support the idea that the Buddha repeatedly pursued the *brahma-viharas* in this world; was repeatedly reborn in the brahma-world; and repeatedly had to subsequently undergo rebirth in the human realm. If we ignore some unwarranted extra detail and exaggeration an extract from the Jataka about King Makhadeva shows this well:

Dwelling in that very Mango-grove of Makhādeva, he there during eighty-four thousand years fostered the four Divine Abidings within himself, and, dying with Absorption full and unbroken, was reborn in the Realm of Brahmā. Passing thence, he became a king again in Mithilā, under the name of Nimi, and after uniting his scattered family, once more became an ascetic in that same Mango-grove, winning the Four Divine Abidings and passing thence once more to the Realm of Brahmā.

Although King Nimi appears to be mythological in the sense that we have no discourse of the Buddha that mentions him, the message of this extract is clear and supports the Buddha's discourses.

In acquiring the Second Knowledge the Buddha would have learned the lifespan of the devas in each deva-world including the brahma-world. The length of the lifespan is not the point; it is that death looms once again in that world, even if it is

after a very long time. I haven't found a sutta yet where the Buddha describes death specifically in the brahma-world, but he does perhaps give a general account of such passing-on in sutta 83 of the Itivuttaka:

Bhikkhus, when a deva is due to pass away from a company of devas, five prognostic signs appear: his flower-garlands wither, his clothes become soiled, sweat is released from his armpits, his bodily radiance fades, and the deva takes no delight in his heavenly throne.

Regardless of such details (which we can take metaphorically) the point is this: no heavenly rebirth is eternal. None of these realms represents Nirvana, the deathless, the unconditioned. Having known all these realms except the Pure Abodes, impermanence was no theory to the Buddha but proven in his journey of aeons.

Bearing this in mind, the other implication of the kingly births of the Buddha must be this: he had experienced every possible pleasure of the senses and of power that kingship brings, not just in one life but many times, hundreds of times. A being that has been round and round such apparently limitless pleasures would inevitably begin to find them limited in actuality.

When the Buddha was born as Gautama, would not the weight of these past lives, the sense of no escape from death and no ultimate satisfaction – in either sense pleasure or that of ruling over the lives of others – feel burdensome? Having been born for yet another time as one destined for satiation of sense pleasure, the delight and burden of governance, for responsibility to earthly matters, the young prince would be naturally disposed to the idea of escape from it all. Perhaps the birth of his son was the final trigger, but in any rate we know that there arose in him the intense determination to find the cessation of the rounds of rebirth. His instinct would also have taught him that the practice of the *brahma viharas* alone would not be sufficient. When he had gone forth and attained the seventh- and eighth-highest meditative states as pupil of his two teachers, he would have had the instinct that they would also merely lead to rebirth in a high deva-realm and not to liberation.

Above all, I would suggest, the Buddha's past lives would have inclined him to see all of life in terms of the three *lakshanas*: impermanence, suffering and non-self. Having developed over many lives the *brahma-viharas*, particularly compassion, would not this highly-developed quality of mind incline him to see suffering everywhere? The end of suffering, for the Buddha, is the end of rebirth. This alone tells us that without accepting the truth of the Buddha's former lives along with the truth of liberation, we are bound to distort his teachings. As is repeated countless times in the Canon, enlightenment means: 'Destroyed is birth, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming back to any state of being.'

I would suggest too, that if we examine our own talents, tendencies and qualities as if they were the outcome of many previous lives, we may find ourselves temperamentally like or unlike the Buddha in a way that we must take seriously. Not all of us have been kings in a past life; not all of us have a natural talent for rulership. If however we are like the Buddha, we will take to his teachings easily. If unlike, then we will struggle with some or more elements of the teachings, perhaps even with all three *lakshanas*. Yet the Buddha clearly saw widely differing personalities among his monks and so was content for them to practice rather different kinds of meditation techniques to suit their different temperaments; to follow rather different routes to liberation; and to live as arahants displaying rather different talents and qualities.

In addition, if we accept the account here of the Buddha's actual rebirths we can see that although his teachings came out of his own history, the teachings are not necessarily a one-size-fits-all affair, as the Canon shows.

Summary

An examination of the Buddha's 'actual' past lives as recorded in the major Nikayas – as opposed to the extensive birth-stories of the Jataka – reveals an important pattern and insight into the Buddha's teachings. His sequence of former lives show repeated high birth and the repeated practice and teaching of the *brahma-viharas*. By examining his own former births in this world and the next the Buddha forged the essence of his teachings, the complete liberation from the compulsive rounds of rebirth. While rebirth appears in the Canon to be extensively elaborated on through mythological elements, we can strip these away to arrive at a sober picture of the Buddha's former births.

A Western-educated person who takes the concept of enlightenment seriously (without personal experience of it) may also do well to take rebirth seriously (without personal experience of it), as the two are clearly inseparable when it comes to understanding the Buddha and his teachings.