

# Māyā's Dream: Examining the Pāli Legends and other Pictographic Representations

Kanika Kaur Sarao

(Ph. D. supervisor Dr. C. S. Paswan), SoBSC, Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida

## Introduction

The legends surrounding the Buddha's conception and birth, including the one about Māyā's dream, are richly detailed in Pāli literature. This particular legend is extensively mentioned in the Mahāpadāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya.14), the Acchariyabbhūdadhamma Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya.123), and the Nidānakathā. The legend, depicted in the Bhārhut sculptures and on display at the Kolkata National Museum, suggests a magical and immaculate conception of the Buddha. In this narrative, the Buddha's conception is not a result of ordinary human reproduction but is presented as a miraculous event. The symbolism of the six-tusked white elephant is crucial in this legend, as it plays a significant role in the conception. According to the account, the white elephant enters the body of Māyā, the Buddha's mother, through her right rib in a dream.

The examination of this unnatural birth involves exploring whether Gautama (Pāli, Gotama) was already enlightened at the time of descending from the Tusita heaven during the dream. Some texts create the impression that the Buddha, being a fully conscious agent, chose his parents, suggesting a pre-conception enlightenment. This aspect raises intriguing questions about the nature of the Buddha's awareness and agency before his physical conception, adding complexity to the understanding of his extraordinary birth and spiritual journey. The portrayal of the Bodhisattva's conception has been artistically represented in sculptures found in diverse locations such as Sāñcī, Bhārhut, Gandhāra, Mathurā, Amarāvātī, and Nāgārjunakoṇḍā. Before delving into the specific details of the legend and its visual depictions across different regions, it is essential to closely examine the precise wording used in the texts where this conception is mentioned.

According to the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (sutta no. 14):

“It is the rule, that, when the Bodhisatta is descending into a mother's womb, four sons of the gods go toward the four quarters to protect him, saying:- "Let no one, be he human, or nonhuman, or whatsoever he be, work harm to the Bodhisatta or to the mother of the Bodhisatta!" That is the rule.

'It is the rule, that, when the Bodhisatta is descending into a mother's womb, the mother of the Bodhisatta is a woman virtuous through her own nature:- averse from taking life, averse from taking what is not given, averse from unchastity, averse from lying speech, averse from indulgence in strong drinks. That is the rule.’”

The *Acchariyabbhūdadhamma Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (no. 123) mentions Māyā's Dream and related events as follows:

“Other women give birth after carrying the child in the womb for nine... The Bodhisatta's mother gave birth after carrying him in her womb for exactly ten months. Other women give birth seated or lying down, but not the Bodhisattva's mother. The Bodhisattva's mother gave birth to him standing up.... When the Bodhisattva came forth from his mother's womb, he came forth

unsullied, unsmearred by water or blood or any kind of impurity – clean, and unsullied. ... Why is that? Because of the purity of both” (Nanamoli, 1972: 982).

The description available in the Nidāna-Kathā is as follows:

“Now between the two towns, there is a pleasure-grove of sāl-trees belonging to the people of both cities, and called the Lumbinī grove. ... Standing, and holding the branch of the sāl-tree, she delivered. That very moment, the four pure-minded Mahābrahmās came there, bringing a golden net; and receiving the future Buddha on that net, they placed him before his mother, saying: ‘Be joyful, O Lady! A mighty son is born to thee!’ (Fausböhl. 1877-1897: i.37).

It can be contended that if the Bodhisatta were already enlightened before his birth, the entire concept of attainable awakening for other humans and the purpose behind Buddhist practices would lose significance. This disagreement has given rise to a prolonged and intricate debate between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools. To some extent, this paper will delve into this debate, shedding light on the iconographic representations of Māyā's dream. The focus will also extend to the significance of a non-canonical birth for a Buddha, transparency visible from the outside, the importance of the mother's purity, the absence of sexuality in the Buddha's birth, and the miraculous preservation of the mother's physical integrity.

The process of the Bodhisatta's descent from the Tusita heaven was a carefully considered decision, contemplating factors such as the appropriate time, place, country, caste, tribe, and suitable parents for his upcoming birth. Numerous Buddhist authors sought to emphasize that the Buddha's presence on Earth did not result from a conventional sexual union. Instead, it is often stated or implied that his mother, Māyā, adhered to Buddhist ethical principles independently and received the Buddha in a dream, manifested as a six-tusked white elephant. In this context, the white elephant symbolizes perfect wisdom and royal power, with the color white considered auspicious.

During the crucial moment of conception, representations consistently depict Māyā alone on her couch, with her husband always absent. This deliberate portrayal aligns with the religious beliefs of the time, emphasizing the necessity for physical and moral purity in all aspects related to the birth of the Buddha. It is a recurring claim that, during gestation, the Bodhisatta was nestled in a jeweled box inside his mother's womb, avoiding contact with her body and any fluids associated with the reproductive process. In accordance with these purity concerns, the birth is described as occurring when the Bodhisatta emerged from his mother's side, bypassing the conventional birth canal.

It is noteworthy that the seven great sages of the Vedas, like the Bodhisatta, were also born from unusual places, establishing a parallel between the Bodhisatta and previous revered sages. According to the Buddhacarita, the primary reason for the Bodhisatta being born from his mother's side, rather than elsewhere, is not necessarily because her side held special significance, but possibly because it was the only place left that had not been utilized by previous sages. An important aspect highlighted in the narrative is that the Bodhisatta's birth from his mother's side ensured that he remained untainted by contact with his mother's sexuality and was spared from her natural impurity. In Indian culture, birth has generally been perceived as impure and inherently polluting. Traditional interpretations consider most biological processes, especially childbirth, as polluting events requiring purification. Given this cultural context, it is particularly remarkable that the Bodhisatta's birth is described as "immaculate,"

signifying that he remained untouched by the pollutant aspects associated with ordinary births. Numerous commentaries emphasize this by stating that the Bodhisatta emerged from his mother's womb completely unsoiled.

In certain Pāli commentaries, it is highlighted that Māyā, the mother of the Buddha, is depicted as being in her mid-forties when she gives birth to the Buddha. This is considered an advanced age, particularly in ancient India, especially for a woman becoming a first-time mother, possibly suggesting challenges in conceiving. Notably, such details are not explicitly mentioned in the traditional life story of Gautama Buddha. It's essential to recognize that the Buddha, prior to attaining Buddhahood, underwent various existences as different kinds of beings. While he is occasionally portrayed as a king or a divinity in past lives, he is more commonly depicted as an ascetic, courtier, merchant, or even various animals. Less frequently, he is said to have been reborn as a slave. Strikingly, he is almost never portrayed as having been a female, reflecting a noticeable gender bias within the tradition, a bias that has caused concern for some within the Buddhist community (Strong 2001: 33-34).

The diversity of statuses that the Buddha held in his past lives can be seen as a way to "open up" the path to Buddhahood, illustrating that beings of various kinds can and did tread this path. It's crucial to understand that Buddhahood is not solely a mental enlightenment experience or a realization of doctrinal truth; it is also a karmic achievement expressed both mentally and somatically. In essence, Buddhahood must be realized not only in the mind but also in the body (Strong 2001: 31). What embodies the Buddha are the perfections he practiced in his past lives. To explain the physical characteristics of the Buddha, texts delve into how each of the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks, such as the wheel marks on his hands and feet, the protuberance (uṣṇīṣa) on the top of his head, the circle of hair (ūrṇā) between his eyebrows, and his long tongue, resulted from specific actions in the Buddha's past lives. The Jātakas, recounting the Buddha's past lives, play a crucial role in narrating his biography by offering numerous opportunities to elaborate on his life story, reveal its karmic connections, and incorporate other tales and traditions into it.

As outlined by John Strong in his book "The Buddha – A Short Biography," early canonical sources provide limited details about the Buddha's actual birth. Descending from Tusita Heaven, he is simply mentioned to enter the side of his mother, Queen Māyā. During his ten lunar months in her womb, the Buddha is described as remaining calm, alert, perfectly formed in body, and untouched by any pollution. Some sources even suggest that Māyā can see and contemplate him inside her. At the end of this period, she gives birth, and the process is painless. The unique aspect is that the Buddha is not born through the natural process but emerges from his mother's side. This departure from the conventional birth canal passage is often explained as a reflection of a concern for purity. However, it could also be linked to a broader pan-Indian tradition asserting that the trauma of natural birth erases the memory of previous lives. In the case of the Buddha, who retains awareness of his past existences, a natural birth would not be feasible within this context.

When other living beings are born, they typically leave their mother's womb covered in offensive and impure substances. However, the Bodhisattva's emergence is distinct. The future Buddha exits his mother's womb in a manner akin to a preacher descending from a pulpit or a person descending a ladder—erect, extending his hands and feet—completely unsoiled by any impurities from contact with his mother's womb. He emerges pure, fair, and radiant, likened to a gem placed on fine muslin from Bārāṇasī. Despite the Bodhisattva's pristine birth, two showers of water come down from heaven in their honor. These celestial showers refresh the

Bodhisattva and his mother, cleansing her body in a symbolic gesture of purification and reverence.

It is mentioned that at the very moment of the Buddha's birth, seven other beings or things come into existence. The specifics of these "co-natals" can vary across different texts, but one source lists them as follows: his future wife Yaśodharā, his future attendant Chandaka, his future companion Udāyin, his future royal elephant (or alternatively, his future disciple Ānanda), his future great horse Kaṇṭhaka, the Bodhi tree, and four treasure-urns. As noted by Strong, "the Buddha's birth is an event marked not only by the birth of beings who will play important roles in his life but also by the response of the entire world around him—natural, animal, vegetable, human, and divine" (Strong 2001: 40). This emphasizes the interconnectedness of the Buddha's life with the broader cosmic context.

Strong argues that understanding the Buddha's story necessitates considering his familial relationships. According to him, the Buddha and his family members worked towards his awakening in numerous lifetimes, and his narrative should be comprehended in connection with their stories. While Jātakas typically highlight the positive aspects of the bodhisattva's achievements, they occasionally touch upon the negative. Negative actions by the bodhisattva in past lives are mentioned, leading to certain adverse consequences in his final life as Gautama. For instance, the Buddha had to endure sufferings in his last life, including being assaulted by his malevolent brother Devadatta and experiencing sickness and slight injuries at certain points. It's essential to note that no evil actions are attributed to the Buddha in his last life. The recognition of negative consequences serves to underscore the karmic complexities woven into the fabric of the Buddha's journey towards enlightenment.

The biographical tradition universally agrees that, at a certain point, the bodhisattva grew weary of his life within the palace. The young bodhisattva's "first meditation" occurs when he observes his father and the royal court participating in the festival marking the first ploughing of the fields. Accounts of the Buddha's birth and youth serve to establish various aspects, including his connections to kingship, the magnificence of his person and achievements, the life of luxury and splendor he led in the palace, and the seeds of dissatisfaction that would lead to his departure on his quest for Buddhahood (Strong 2001: 48).

In essence, the entire blueprint of the Buddha's last life was already prepared even before his actual birth. This last birth of the Buddha epitomized tranquility, free from any evil deeds, and stands as the most significant of all his past lives. Ultimately, the Buddha attained parinirvāṇa, leaving behind a religion, a dharma that would endure for years to come, providing guidance for individuals in making their lives meaningful.

## **Bibliography**

1. Fausböll, V (ed.) 1877-1897. *The Jātakas*, London: Trübner & Co.
2. Luczanits, C. 1993. *The Sources for Bu-ston's Introduction to the Acts of a Buddha*, vol.37, Vienna: Vienna University.
3. Nakamura, Hajime. 2000. *Gotama Buddha: A Biography Based on the Most Reliable Texts*, vol.1, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co.
4. Nanamoli, Bhikkhu. 1972. *The Life of the Buddha According to the Pali Canon*. Kandy: BPS, 1972.
5. Strong, J.S. 2001. *The Buddha: A Short Biography*, Oxford: Oneworld.