

THE TWELVE DEEDS OF THE BUDDHA

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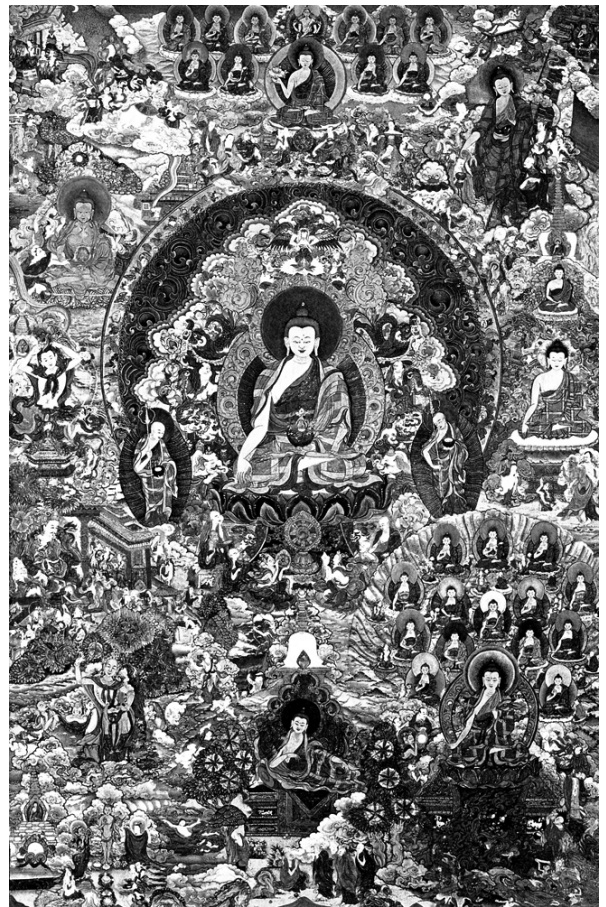
*Homage to you, king of the Śākya-s
Whose form is radiant as a mountain of gold
Who took birth in the Śākya clan with skillful compassion
And vanquished the demon horde which others could not*

Introduction

The Buddha Śākyamuni, the prince who renounced his kingdom to attain perfect awakening for the benefit of all beings in the ‘dark age’ of the present world-system, is generally thought to have lived in the 5th-6th centuries B.C.E., although traditional Tibetan calculations tended to fix the date much earlier. The Śākya kingdom to which he was heir lay in the sub-Himalayan Terai plain of north India, in an area bisected by the southern border of modern Nepal.

The depiction of the lives of supreme spiritual masters as an enumeration of great deeds is a time-honored convention in Tibetan tradition, with antecedents in Indian civilisation. The designs used for this painting have been adapted from the definitive series of nine xylographed wood blocks commissioned for and formerly kept in the great printing house at Derge Gon-chen in east Tibet. These blocks were copied from drawings by the master-artist Drupa-tsang Purbu Tsering of Chamdo, a famous exponent of the ‘New Menri’ style, whose career spanned the turn of the 20th century. Like so many other Tibetan artefacts, they are assumed to have perished after the communist invasion of the 1950s, but copies were reproduced in exile by the great eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche Don-gyu Nyima, in the late 1960s.

The verses of praise, which are well-known in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, are attributed to the founder of the Drikung kahgyu tradition Je Jikten Sumgon Rinchen Pel (1143-1217). (Note



Scenes depicting the twelve deeds of Lord Buddha

that the ‘descent from Trāyatrīṃśā’ is not usually considered as one of the twelve deeds, so there is no corresponding verse). The commentary has been summarised from a number of similar accounts in classical Tibetan histories.

1. The Vow to manifest as a guide of the sentient beings of the dark age

Praise to you who first conceived the aspiration for awakening then perfected the dual accumulation of merit and transcendent wisdom and performed the great deed of becoming the saviour of beings in the present age

Before the Buddha was born into this world as Śākyamuni, he was a Bodhisattva in the Tuṣita heaven, named Śvetaketu. Before that, in the age when human lifespan was 20,000 years, he had been a Brahmin disciple of the Buddha Kāśyapa, perfect in conduct. Kāśyapa prophesied that in future his disciple would return to the Jambudvīpa



Śvetaketu Bodhisattva in Tuṣita Heaven ready to take birth as prince Siddhārtha

continent, the southern quarter of this world-system, in final, degenerate age of the present aeon, and attain perfect awakening for the benefit of all beings. Re-born in Tuṣitā, he perfected the ten stages of the Bodhisattva path in accordance with the aspirations and prophecies made in previous lives, and was enthroned as the Dharma-guru of the divine beings in that realm. Once, Śvetaketu heard some verses of music in the heavenly palace which reminded him of the prophecies made about him by the past Buddha-s Dīpaṅkara and Kāśyapa, and he nobly resolved to take re-birth, attain perfect awakening, refute heretics and spread the Dharma in the dark age of the human world.

Śvetaketu is depicted here making that vow in the presence of the Buddha-s of the ten directions and the Bodhisattva-s and gods and goddesses of Tuṣita, holding a lotus flower to symbolise the purity of his intention. He represents the Sambhogakāya (immanent) aspect of Buddha Śākyamuni, and Prajñāpāramitā, the mother of all the Buddha-s, sits above his head, representing the Dharmakāya (ultimate) aspect.

2. The Choice of a suitable and timely birth in the human realm

Homage to you who knew the time had come to impose spiritual discipline on heavenly and earthly beings who chose a lineage and descended like an elephant from the heavens, into the womb of queen Māyādevī

In his wisdom, Śvetaketu saw that heavenly beings make little progress in renunciation and spiritual growth because they lack motivation, their lives are comfortable, enjoyable and long. But in the present aeon-ending Kali-yuga, he saw that by the time human lifespan has decreased to less than one hundred years, and people are increasingly tormented by poverty and strife, they are better prepared to grasp the truths of impermanence and dependent arising, and more receptive to the teachings of spiritual liberation. This is

especially so in our Jambudvīpa continent, where people are relatively more intelligent and have fewer resources. Seeing this, he chose the time and place of his re-birth, in the 'central land' of the Gaṅgā river plain in northern India. He looked for parents of royal caste, as they were more respected there than the priestly caste, and saw that king Śuddhodana of the Śākya-s was a qualified ruler of excellent lineage, and his queen Māyādevī possessed all womanly virtues and was fit for the miraculous conception of a Bodhisattva.

Before leaving Tuṣita, Śvetaketu crowned the Bodhisattva Maitreya as his regent on the teaching throne, so that Maitreya was destined to become the next Buddha in this world.

Then he descended to earth in the form of a caparisoned powder-white elephant with six tusks, a symbol of the highest virtue in the land of his chosen re-birth. Māyādevī was sleeping alone in her chamber after a purificatory fast when she saw this auspicious omen in her dream, and as it merged with her body, she felt inexpressible joy and bliss. Prior to birth, he dwelt in a beautiful sandalwood pavilion devised by the gods, and stayed there for a full ten months to demonstrate the certainty of perfecting the ten levels of the Bodhisattva path. During that time he guided many Bodhisattva-s, Brahmā and Indra, and innumerable Deva-s and Nāga-s and Yakṣa-s towards liberation.

3. The display of excellent signs at the time of birth

Homage to you the Śākya prince born after ten months in the auspicious grove of Lumbini. Brahmā and Indra came to honor you there, ultimate proof that you were born into the family of awakened conquerors

When his birth was due, there were numerous miraculous signs in the Lumbini grove, a short distance from the Śākya palace, all the trees and plants burst into flower, jewelled lotuses bloomed, there were heavenly lights and music, and visions



Queen Mahā Māyādevī giving birth to prince Siddhārtha at the Lumbini Grove.

of celestial palaces. Māyādevī was borne there in a jewelled chariot attended by the gods Brahmā and Indra. She alighted and walked a few steps into the grove, then reached up with her right arm to hold on to the branch of a fragrant, medicinal Śāla tree for support. At that moment, the baby prince sprang from his mother's side in a flash of light, causing her no pain, and the light spread throughout the three realms, dispelling the ignorance and suffering of sentient beings. The earth shook, the sky was filled with auspicious offerings and there was a rain of flowers, trees and bushes blossomed with flowers and fruits. Gods and goddesses gathered to rejoice in the birth of a prince in the lineage of awakened conquerors. Brahmā and Indra wrapped him in a soft, jewelled robe, and the kings of the Nāga-s anointed him with perfumed

water. Then he stood and took seven paces in each of the four directions, to signify his dedications to the path of the 'four immeasurables' (love, compassion, joy and equanimity), and dazzling lotus flowers sprang up from each footprint.

At the same time, five hundred sons were born to noble families, eight hundred maidens including Yaśodharā, five hundred servants including Chandaka, and ten thousand horses including Kanthaka were also born. The Bodhi tree appeared at the very centre of the Jambudvīpa continent, encircled by five hundred gardens and five hundred treasures. All of the king's wishes were fulfilled at once, and thus he named his son 'Siddhārtha'. After examining the excellent signs and portents of the newborn-prince, the Ṛṣi-s of the Śākya clan declared that if he stayed in the palace and inherited the kingdom, he would become a triumphant world-ruler, but if he went forth in search of wisdom, he would surpass all limits and attain perfection. King Śuddhodana resisted this idea, as he wished a strong heir to succeed him, and saw to it that the prince was shielded as much as possible from the world outside the palace gates.

4. The mastery of learning and athletics as a youth

Homage to you agile youth and lion among men who proved his skill in an athletic contest routed the arrogant competitors and performed without rival

Queen Māyādevī passed away seven days after Siddhārtha's birth, and he was raised by his aunt Mahāprajāpati. He excelled in his schooling and as a youth he easily mastered the sixty-four arts, while in athletics he was second to none. When his father sought eligible daughters of the nobility such as Yaśodharā to be his bride, Siddhārtha had to prove himself in an athletic contest with the arrogant youths of the Śākya clan. In particular, his cousins Nanda and Devadatta were jealous of him and wanted him to lose. In his anger and spite,

Devadatta struck out at an elephant which had been sent to Siddhārtha as a gift, and killed it with a single blow. To show his strength, Nanda lifted the elephant and dropped it outside the palace gates, but Siddhārtha could lift the dead elephant with his big toe and kick it through the air, over seven boundary walls and seven moats.

Then they competed in swimming and elephant riding, and Siddhārtha showed that he could fly across the water like a swan, and command an elephant to do anything he wanted. Finally, they challenged him to an archery contest, to pierce seven palm trees, seven iron walls and seven cauldrons one after the other with a single arrow. Devadatta pierced three, Nanda managed to get through five, but Siddhārtha's arrow shot through all seven. A spring of water of the eight qualities gushed forth on the spot where his arrow landed.

5. The skillful conduct of worldly affairs

Homage to you who ruled the kingdom adeptly in unison with a retinue of queens living by worldly convention as a means to forego the sins of sensual craving

When he came of age and assumed royal duties, prince Siddhārtha had a retinue of sixty thousand queens, principally Yaśodharā, Gopā and Mṛgajā, each with twenty thousand ladies in waiting. With the discriminative wisdom of a Bodhisattva, he engaged in the sensual pleasures of worldly life only to experience them as illusory, and he consorted with his queens, and fathered a son, while remaining free of any trace of desire, as a skillful means to benefit his innumerable subjects. He is seen here at court, with his father next to him, being presented with the seven emblems of royalty.

But Siddhārtha never felt satisfied with this life, and thirsted for knowledge and fulfillment. Once when he was able to slip out of the palace, he went to explore the city accompanied by his



Prince Siddhārtha indulging in the luxuries of the palace specially built for him.

charioteer Chandaka. For the first time, the prince saw the sufferings of birth, sickness, old age and death for himself, and realized their meaning. Finally, they came upon a wandering renunciate with a serene and gentle manner begging alms. Siddhārtha asked who he was, and Chandaka told him, “He is one who has abandoned worldly life to seek the truth”. Thereupon, the determination for renunciation grew firm in his mind.

6. The renunciation of worldly life

Homage to you who sought the spiritual life having perceived the insubstantial nature of worldly affairs who fled your household flying through the very air to the foot of the ‘Immaculate Stūpa’ where you ordained yourself

That night, Siddhārtha, then in his twenty ninth year, walked out on to the roof of the palace at midnight, and made prostrations to the Buddha-s of the ten directions, with the aspiration to swiftly attain awakening for the benefit of all beings of the dark age. The sky filled with gods and goddesses led by Brahmā and Indra, Lokapāla-s, Yakṣa-s, Gandharva-s, and Nāga-s, praising his noble intention. Suspecting that he might try to escape and seek the religious life, his father the king had posted armed guards and briefed sentries at the palace gates and the entrances to the city. But the mighty Vajrapāṇi and Vaiśravaṇa brought a staircase fashioned by celestial artisans, and Chandaka led Siddhārtha’s horse Kanthaka up on to the roof. He mounted, and Kanthaka flew into the sky, with the deities of the pure realm supporting them on one side, the deities of the desire realm on



Prince Siddhārtha cutting his topknot near the Stūpa to perform Cūḍākarma

the other, and Brahmā and Indra in the lead. They flew over many towns and countries, and arrived near the ‘Immaculate Stūpa’ just as dawn broke.

There were three such Stūpa-s in the world, marking the places where the three past Buddhas had been ordained into the monk hood with a hair-cutting ceremony. Removing his golden ornaments, Siddhārtha handed them to his companion, and bade him return with them to his father’s palace. Chandaka wept, and asked his master who would look after him now, all alone in the forest, he replied, “All beings of this world are born alone, and must die alone, and meanwhile endure their sufferings alone. Truly, there is no friend who can carry that burden for us.” Then, since there was no one to perform the ordination ceremony for him, he cut off his long hair by himself and threw it up into the air. It was collected by Indra, who carried it up to the Trāyatṛiṃśa heaven, where it was placed in a Stūpa to be worshipped by the gods. As he cast off his fine silk gown, the king of the gods brought him a saffron robe to wear which had been dedicated for that purpose by the clairvoyant Ṛṣi-s of the past. Then he proceeded alone, without friends or possessions, seeking alms as he went, on the path of spiritual perfection. Feeling that he was not yet far enough away from his homeland, he crossed the Gaṅgā river into the land of Magadha.

7. The Six years of austerities

Homage to you who labored for six years performing austerities by the banks of the Nairāñjanā river intent upon reaching enlightenment through hardship you attained perfect meditative concentration

At Vaiśālī and Rājagṛha, he studied the philosophy of Nihilism and the four concentrations leading to re-birth in the Brahma-loka with the greatest masters of the day, and soon equaled their realization, but seeing that those contemplations could not lead to deliverance from cyclic existence,

he moved on. When the young king Bimbisāra of Rājagṛha came upon him meditating in the forest, he was overwhelmed with faith, and offered Siddhārtha half his kingdom to join him at court as his advisor, but Siddhārtha was bound to refuse. Still believing that self mortification led to the extinction of the self, and ultimate realization, he settled down under a pipal tree (*ficus religiosa*) on the east bank of the Nairāñjanā river in the company of five like-minded ascetics, and remained there for the next six years in meditative concentration. He ate a single grain of rice for each of the first two years, drank a single drop of water for each of the second two years, and took nothing at all during the last two. In this sense, three impetuous shepherd boys come across the fasting ascetic and try in vain to break his concentration. They represent the three mental poisons: desire, anger and ignorance.

Finally, as the Buddha-s of the ten directions and hosts of Bodhisattva-s and Deva-s appeared, praising him and calling on him to a rise, it dawned on Siddhārtha that physical austerity is one of two extremes, and that the ‘Middle Way’ between these two extremes leads to the perfect awakening of Buddha-hood. He slowly rose, and went to bathe in the river. He crossed over to the far bank, and after drying his robe, started to walk into the forest, when he met a village girl named Sujātā who had come to offer him a bowl of cream curdled from the milk of five hundred red cows. It was the first food he had accepted in years, and it instantly restored his body to lustrous good health. Sujātā’s offering was the fruit of aspirations made through many previous lives, and brought her an incalculable store of merit. When his five companions saw that he had wantonly abandoned his fast, they felt betrayed and went elsewhere.

For the past six years, the Caturmahārāja protectors had been keeping watch over the fasting Siddhārtha in the four directions, and now they appeared to him and offered him a stone alms bowl from the heavens, Accepting it, Siddhārtha predicted that they would become the guardians of his teaching. After walking a little further into

the forest, he met a buffalo herder named Svasti who had been cutting long feather grass, as soft and silky as a peacock's throat, and respectfully offered him a bundle of it. Siddhārtha spread the grass for his seat beneath a great pipal tree in the forest, and vowed to remain there until he attained perfect awakening.

8. The defeat of Māra

Homage to you who became fully enlightened beneath the Bodhi tree in Magadha who manifested Buddha-hood in immovable lotus posture and brought the efforts of countless former lives to fruition

The tree which sheltered him was the 'tree of Bodhi', awakening, and the earth he sat upon was 'Vajrāsana', the diamond throne, the world centre, where Buddha-s of past, present and future manifest their enlightenment. Absorbed in the concentration of defeating Māra's demon horde, he caused the brilliance of the Buddha-fields to illuminate the three lower realms of cyclic existence, liberating innumerable beings from their suffering, and there were many miraculous signs. At that, Māra appeared before him in the guise of a hunter, and challenged his claim to perfect realisation, demanding to know if he had witness. Siddhārtha pressed down on the earth with the middle fingers of his right hand, and declared, "This earth bears witness to all beings, she is impartial to animate and inanimate alike", and sthāvāra goddess of the earth, appeared there in person. "Even I cannot calculate how many bodies this noble Bodhisattva has discarded during his quest for omniscience", she affirmed, "and now his time has come to claim victory", and Māra retreated in disgrace. Then Māra sent his seven glamorous daughters, who attempted to seduce the Bodhisattva with sensual distractions, but he didn't flinch. When he turned them into seven old hags through the force of his realization of impermanence, they pleaded with him helplessly to restore their youth. As night fell,



Prince Siddhārtha defeating Māra's demon horde

Māra started to unleash his full fury, and mustered a demon army one thousand trillion strong. But having perfect realization of the illusory nature of phenomena, Siddhārtha was unafraid. Absorbed in concentration on loving kindness, the demon horde were unable to harm him, all the fearsome missiles they fired at him fell to the ground as flower petals, and eventually they scattered in confusion.

During the last quarter of the night, his residual cognitive veils and obstacles to clairvoyance dissipated, and as the morning star appeared on the full moon of the forth month, the day of his birth, Siddhārtha king of the Śākya-s attained Buddha-hood. The earth shook six times, the sky filled with rainbows, perfume and flowers, and a brilliant glow radiated from his body, illuminating the lower realms and liberating beings from sufferings.

9. The turning of the Dharma-cakra

Homage to you who then looked on sentient beings with compassion and turned the wheel of Dharma at Vārāṇasī and other holy places establishing all those who received the teaching in one of the three vehicles of accomplishment

In the first weeks after his enlightenment, the Buddha remained in meditation at Vajrāsana, fearing that there was no use in trying to explain to others the profound truths he had realized. Seeing this, Brahmā came to remind him of his previous vow, and urged him to beat the drum and blow the conch shell of the Dharma. Indra praised him, saying, “Your mind is liberated like the full moon released from the grasp of Rāhu”, and implored him to “Dispel the darkness of the world with the

light of awareness”. Even this he refused, but on the third approach, Brahmā presented him with a thousand-spoked golden wheel, and hesitantly, the Buddha agreed that he could at least teach people of Magadha who were attentive, faithful, discriminating and gentle. The word that he was going to turn the wheel of Dharma instantly spread across the divine realms, and the Deva-s started to assemble and amass their offerings. Knowing that his five former companions had gone to Vārāṇasī, he went in that direction, and found them in the deer park of R̥ṣīpatana, outside the city, a holy place where the three Buddha-s of the past had all preached the Dharma. It was the fourth day of the sixth lunar month.

The five ascetics had agreed among themselves to ignore their lapsed companion, but when they saw him in the perfect form of an enlightened one they were amazed, and asked him all at once what special powers he had obtained. He declared to them that he had attained the ultimate perfection of a Tathāgata, one ‘thus gone beyond’. One thousand jewelled teaching thrones then appeared in the deer park. The Buddha made three prostrations before the thrones of the three past Buddhas, and took his seat upon the forth, whereupon the others disappeared. For the benefit of the five ascetics and the eighty thousand Deva-s, and the Gandharva-s, Yakṣa-s, Nāga-s and others gathered there, he turned the wheel of the teaching on the ‘Middle Way’ between extremes. He explained the four Noble Truths three times and in twelve ways, and the Noble Eight fold Path. After listening to his teaching, the five ascetics requested ordination, and became the first members of a great monastic community. That was the first wheel, corresponding with the Vinaya-piṭaka. He turned the second wheel, the Sūtra-piṭaka, on the ‘vulture’s peak’ in Rājgrha, for Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana and five thousand Arhat-s, Prajāpatī and five hundred nuns Anāthapiṇḍaka, Viśākhā and a host of laymen and lay-women, and a multitude of Deva-s, Nāga-s and Gandharva-s, and the third wheel, the Abhidharma-piṭaka, for an assembly of great Bodhisattva-s at Mount Malaya, and other places.



Turning the first wheel of dharma at Sārṇāth.

10. The descent from the Trāyatrimṣā heaven

Five years later, when he was forty one, the Buddha saw that the divine beings of the Trāyatrimṣā heaven had the potential to be trained in virtue, and that his mother queen Māyādevī had been re-born amongst them. Leaving Maudgalyāyana as his representative on earth, he journeyed to that realm and decided to spend the annual rains retreat there. Indra was dismayed to learn that certain Devaputra-s were destined for re-birth in the hells, so the Buddha taught him the ritual methods for absolving the beings of the lower realms, and the Dhāraṇī-s of Uṣṇīṣavijaya. When the gods suffered a defeat by the Asura armies and Indra came to him in distress, the Buddha taught him the Dhāraṇī-s of the 'Victory banner pinnacle', and granted him relief. When Avalokiteśvara built a Stūpa in that realm the Buddha taught the 'es-



The Descent from Trāyatrimṣā Heaven

sense of dependent arising' formula of consecration. When Maitreya requested him to ease the sufferings of beings in Jambudvīpa, he sent forth wrathful emanations to quell malignant spirits, and taught the Acala tantra. The Buddha spent the three months of the rains retreat there, together with Ānanda, Sāriputra, Mahākāśyapa, Subhūti and 8000 Arhat-s, and guided his mother and innumerable other beings on the path of liberation.

As the summer rains came to an end on earth, king Bimbisāra and the members of the four assemblies of disciples repeatedly put request to Maudgalyāyana to invite the Buddha's return, pleading that while the gods were free to descend to earth as they pleased, humans could never reach the Buddha while he was in the heavens. Maudgalyāyana travelled to Trāyatrimṣā in instant to convey their fervent wish, and the master assented that after seven days he would return to earth at Kāśī (Vārāṇasī). When king Udrayana heard the news, he ordered the cleaning of the city and arranged splendid offerings for the reception. At Indra's command, the celestial artisan Viśvakarmā had created a precious three-tiered staircase, The centre, where the Buddha walked, was made of Vaidūrya, the right side, from where Brahmā and the gods of the pure realm cooled him with fans was made of gold, and the left side, from where Indra and the gods of the desire realm shaded him with a jewelled parasol, was made of crystal. On the twenty-second day of the ninth month, the Buddha and his divine retinue descended to the city of Kāśī, and were received by king Udrayana and the four assemblies of disciples.

Trāyatrimṣā, the 'heaven of the 33 Deva-s', is said to be located on the peak of Mount Meru, The blue south face of Meru, depicted here, makes the sky blue in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa, and the other three faces are of different colours.

11. The victory in a contest of miracles

Homage to you who performed great miracles at Śrāvastī with a prowess unmatched through-

out the three worlds so that gods and men alike adored the Dharma and it was greatly spread

Six evil, heretic teachers led by Purāṇakāśyapa became mad with resentment and jealousy against the Buddha, and tried to engage him in a contest of miraculous powers, which Māra had persuaded them they could win. King Bimbisāra laughed them out of court when they petitioned him, but they persisted, and finally he went to request the Buddha's participation.

The Buddha agreed, but stipulated that he would set the time of the contest. A teaching throne was set up in a large arena at Rājgṛha, but shortly before the proposed contest, the Buddha and all his followers departed for Vaiśālī. Seeing this as an admission of defeat, the six heretic teachers were elated, and rushed after the Buddha, with their ninety thousand followers, and after them, king Bimbisāra and his entourage. The heretics urged the Licchavi king to stage the contest there, and the Buddha again accepted, but said he would set the time. Then he moved on, from one city to the next, each time giving the same answer, and gathering a new following, until they came to Śrāvastī. The heretics soon arrived, and remonstrated with king Prasenajit not to allow any further postponement, and the Buddha assented that the time had now come. On the new moon of the first month of spring, he took his seat on a lion throne in a part outside the city, and was honored with extensive offerings. Before the kings of all the capitals he had passed through, the six heretics and their followers, and a huge assembly of gods and humans, he performed inconceivable miracles for the next fifteen days.

On the first day, he created a bounteous tree, and on the second, two jewelled mountains. On the third day, he produced a jewel lake, and on the fourth, voices came from the lake explaining all aspects of the Dharma. On the fifth, golden light spread from his countenance and filled the world, purifying the emotional poisons of sentient beings. On the sixth day, he allowed people to read each others' thoughts, and on the seventh, he



The Lord Buddha displaying the miraculous power for the Tīrthikas

transformed his benefactors into world-rulers. On the eighth day, the Buddha pressed down on the throne with the fingers of his right hand, and with a thunderous roar, the fierce Vajrapāṇi appeared from beneath brandishing a flaming Vajra at the heretic teachers, and four demons in his retinue scattered them and smashed their thrones. The heretics were so scared that they leapt into the river and drowned. Then, the Buddha radiated eighty four thousand rays of light, one from each pore of his skin, which filled the sky. On the tip of each ray was a lotus, and on each lotus was a Buddha, with attendants, teaching Dharma, and all were amazed, and some were liberated by the sight of it. The ninety thousand followers of the six heretic teachers joined the monkhood, and later became Arhat-s. That is the miracle depicted here.

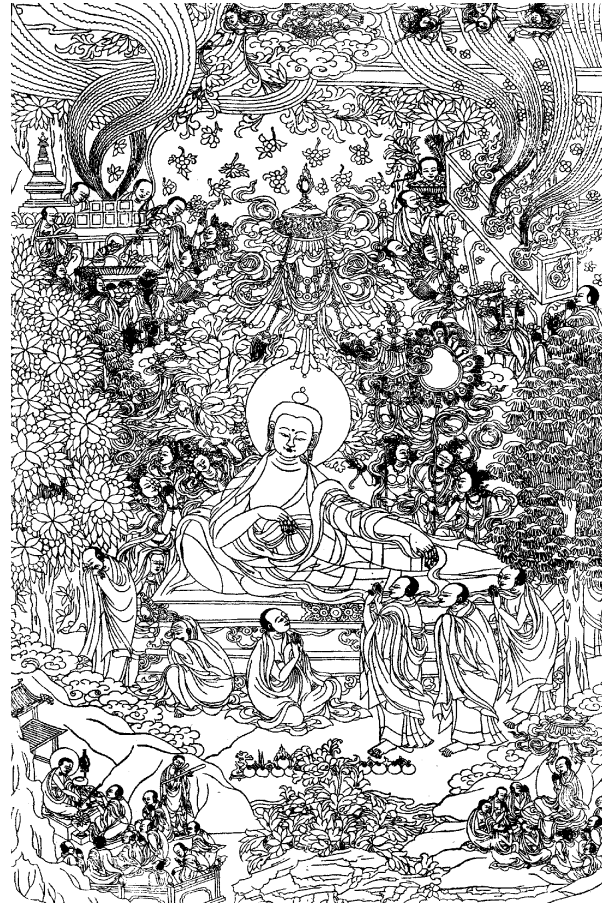
12. The passage into Parinirvāṇa

Homage to you who passed beyond suffering on the undefiled ground of Kuśīnagara who departed your immortal Vajra-like body in order to quicken the resolve of lazy followers

Although he had the perfect form of a Tathāgata who has thoroughly defeated Māra and gone beyond birth and death, at the age of eighty, the Buddha decided to manifest the passing away of his physical body into Parinirvāṇa in order to stir the majority of his followers, who still clung to the illusions of permanence and the inherent existence of phenomena, out of their complacency. He handed over the responsibility for protecting the teachings and the four communities of disciples to Mahākāśyapa, and guided his last disciples, the Gandharva Pramoda and the mendicant Subhadra, to liberation.

He traveled towards Kuśīnagara, and came to rest in a grove of Śāla trees outside the city. Seated on a lion throne, he announced his impending departure from the world, and told his followers that if they had any remaining doubts concerning the doctrine, now was the time to resolve them. Ānanda replied that there were none. Then, the Buddha lifted his robe to expose his upper body, and said: “Behold, O monks, the body of the Tathāgata, a supreme rarity in this world. It cannot last, just as all compounded phenomena are subject to dissolution! Apply yourselves with diligence to the attainment of liberation!” He then reclined on his right side in the lion pose, and passed into Parinirvāṇa. The earth shook, and shooting stars were seen in the sky.

Those monks who had received his teachings felt ashamed and dejected that they had not striven harder under his guidance, and those who were too young to have met the Buddha felt miserable at having missed the opportunity, and as all redoubled their efforts to master the teaching, the number of those who attained the Four Transcendental Stages greatly increased. But it is said that the Buddha’s closest disciple, his kinsman Ānanda,



The Lord Buddha passing into Great Parinirvāṇa

could not contain his sorrow and stood alone in the Śāla grove, weeping.

After the cremation, ashes and Śarīra relics from the pyre were divided among the Buddha’s followers, and enshrined at the heart of eight great Stūpa-s, which remained to assist the devotion and merit of the faithful.

*By virtue of these brief words in praise
of the deeds of the Bhagavat,
lord of the teachings
may the conduct of all beings be as one
with the conduct of Sugata-s*