

The Buddha (taken from 'The Disappearing Buddha' a lecture by Sangharakshita)

Buddha, the word Buddha itself, is a title, is not a proper name. And it means one who understands, one who is wise, who is awake, awake to reality. But the Buddha is known by quite a number of other titles. And we don't always realise this. In the West the Buddha is generally known simply as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. But in the Buddhist scriptures he's often referred to as the *Tathagatha*. In fact he's often represented in the Buddhist scriptures as usually referring to himself in the third person as the Tathagatha. There's a lot of discussion about the meaning of this term. There are several different explanations. And there's more than one grammatical analysis of the term, but I won't bother you with this. It means, Tathagatha means literally, 'He who goes', but it also means 'He who comes'. The Buddha goes through wisdom. He goes through wisdom from the mundane to the transcendental. And he comes through compassion back from the transcendental into the mundane. He comes in order to teach, in order to show the path to liberation. He comes in order to instruct, inspire, fire, and delight, with a discourse on the Dhamma. As he does when he enters the assemblies of the Khattiyas, the Brahmins and so on. The Buddha is both the embodiment of wisdom and compassion. He goes through the one, comes through the other. And this underlines the point, the fact that the Buddha comes through compassion. This underlines the point that Buddhism is not a cold religion as people sometimes think. It stresses compassion just as much as it stresses wisdom. Tathagatha has another meaning, Tathagatha means 'one who acts as he speaks, and speaks as he acts'. This might seem a rather prosaic virtue, nothing very exciting, nothing very exotic, but it's not really so. Because we shall realise - if we reflect a minute - that our own words and acts are very, very rarely in anything like harmony. There's almost always a discrepancy, whether slight or great. A discrepancy between our words and our actions, our professions and our behaviour. But in the Buddha's case, in the Buddha's case it's not so, speech and action are in perfect harmony. Moreover they're in harmony at the highest possible, the highest conceivable level. The Buddha is an enlightened being and speaks and acts like an enlightened being.

The Buddha's also known as *Lokavidu*, which means Knower Of The World. This doesn't mean that the Buddha's worldly-wise, though of course one may also say the Buddha wasn't exactly lacking in worldly wisdom. It means that he knows the world, knows mundane existence, as it really is. He knows that the world is transitory. He knows that existence involves suffering. He knows that it possesses no inherent reality of its own. And this knowledge of his, this knowledge of the world is not merely theoretical, it's a matter of real understanding, real experience. And he therefore acts in accordance with it. We of course do not know the world. Worldly-wise though we may be, we do not know mundane existence as it really is. We like to think that the world is permanent, pleasurable and possessed of an inherent reality of its own. And because we think in this way we tend to become attached to the world. Very, very attached to it. We try to cling on to this or that

aspect of it and in this way we create suffering for ourselves and very often suffering for others too.

The Buddha's also known as the *Jina*. Jina means The Conqueror or The Victor. He's known as the Jina not because he has conquered others but because he has conquered himself. The Dhammapada says - the Dhammapada is one of the shorter and most popular Buddhist texts - the Dhammapada says - and it's the Buddha speaking - "Though one may conquer a thousand men in battle, a thousand times, he who conquers himself has the more glorious victory."

Another of the Buddha's titles is *Bhagavan*. Bhagavan means one who is possessed of all positive auspicious qualities. Compassion, wisdom, purity, generosity and so on. And the Buddha is usually called Bhagavan, or spoken of as Bhagavan, or addressed as Bhagavan when he is regarded as an object of devotion.

And then there is the title of *Mahavira*. Mahavira means great hero. Here we can see the quality of courage come in. Hero. The Buddha is so called because he has the courage to face the forces of darkness, the forces of evil, both within his own mind and outside. The Buddha is not a meek and mild sort of character. He was vigorous, he was bold, he was fearless, he was resolute [...] we mustn't forget that the Buddha has been born into a warrior family. He didn't have a bookish education, he didn't go to university. He couldn't even read or write [...] because in the India of his day there was no literacy. Knowledge, wisdom, was transmitted by word of mouth. So the Buddha didn't have a bookish education. He learned the traditions of his community, he heard religious teachers and he himself always taught orally. The sort of education the Buddha had might even shock some of us. He was educated in all sorts of martial arts and was prompt and bold and vigorous and those qualities he directly sublimated [?] into the spiritual path. In fact once he told his disciples that they too were warriors. He said to them, "Disciples, what are you?". He said, "You're warriors, and you're warriors because you fight. You fight for ethics, sila. You fight for meditation, Samadhi. You fight for wisdom, panna. You fight for freedom, vimutti. But the Buddha was a hero, a great hero, a Mahavira.

The Buddha was also called *Lokadesa*. This means roughly the elder brother of the world. He's called the elder brother of the world because he has been born before us, like an elder brother. Not born before us as a human being, born before us as a Buddha. And this suggests that what the Buddha has attained, we too can attain. At present we are not Buddhas, we are unenlightened. But we can become enlightened, at least we can make progress towards enlightenment if we make the effort, if we tread the spiritual path. If we practise ethics, meditation, and develop wisdom, we'll be liberated. [...]

I'm reminded of very early Indian art depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. They depict the Buddha gaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. They depict him teaching his disciples, depict him subduing a mad elephant and so on. But there's a very strange thing about all these representations, and that is that the Buddha himself is not represented,

the Buddha himself is not shown. Everything else is represented: trees, buildings, animals, crowds of people; but the Buddha is not represented. Where you would have expected to find the Buddha, there's an empty space. And everything is happening, as it were, around this empty space. Sometimes in the empty space there's a symbol. Just a Bodhi tree, if the scene is that of the Buddha's enlightenment. A stupa, if the scene is that of the final passing away. A Dharmachakra, a wheel of the Dharma, if the Buddha is supposed to be teaching, and so on. Why is this, why the empty space? Why just the symbol? Originally it was thought that - that is thought by Western art critics - that the artists and the sculptors felt that they could not do justice to the figure of the Buddha. But later it was realised that this was not the reason, not the real reason why they did not represent him. They did not represent him because they wanted to convey the fact that the Buddha as such was a transcendental being. In their language he was *Lokuttara*, he was beyond the world or hyper-conscious. He was a transcendental being because he'd realised the transcendental sense of Nirvana. We can go further than that. We speak of the Buddha, Nirvana etc. as though they were objects. We can't really help speaking of something that way if we are to speak of them at all. But in reality they're not objects, that is to say not objects as opposed to subjects, as opposed to perceiving subjects. They're not objects because in reality, in themselves so to speak, they transcend the subject-object duality. But although they are not objects, we think of them and speak of them as though they were objects. We can hardly do otherwise, as I've said, if we are to speak at all about them. [...] The Dharma is not an object. The Buddha is not an object. One cannot know who the Buddha is by asking what kind of object he is. So, how can one know the Buddha?

The whole lecture can be found [here](#).