

What Was The Buddha Like?



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Essays on The Buddha

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So extraordinary was the Buddha, so unerringly kind and wise, and so positive was an encounter with him, that it would change people's lives. Even while he was alive legends were told about him. In the centuries after his final Nirvana it sometimes got to the stage that the legends and myths obscured the very real human being behind them and the Buddha came to be looked upon as a god. Actually the Buddha was a human being, not a "mere human being" as is sometimes said, but a special class of human being called a complete or great person (*mahapurisa*). Such complete persons are born no different from others and indeed physically they always remain quite ordinary. But through their own efforts they bring to completion every human potential and their mental purity and understanding develop to the stage where they far exceed those of ordinary human beings. A Buddha, a complete person, is even higher than a god because he or she is even free from the jealousy, anger and favouritism that we are told some gods are still capable of feeling.

So what was the Buddha like? What would it have been like to meet him? The Buddha was about six feet tall with coal black hair and a golden brown complexion. When he was still a layman he wore his hair and beard long but, on renouncing the world, shaved them both like every other monk (M.I,163). All sources agree that the Buddha was strikingly handsome. The brahman Sonadanda described him as "handsome, good-looking, and pleasing to the eye, with a most beautiful complexion. He has a godlike form and countenance, he is by no means unattractive" (D.I,115). Vacchagotta said this of him: "It is wonderful, truly marvellous, how serene is the good Gotama's appearance, how clear and radiant his complexion, just as the golden jujube in autumn is clear and radiant, just as a palm-tree fruit just loosened from the stalk is clear and radiant, just as an adornment of red gold wrought in a crucible by a skilled goldsmith, deftly beaten and laid on a yellow-cloth shines, blazes and glitters, even so, the good Gotama's senses are calmed, his complexion is clear and radiant" (A.I,181). But of course as he got older his body succumbed to impermanence as do all compounded things. Ananda described him in his old age like this: "It is strange, Lord, it is a wonder how the Exalted One's skin is no longer clear and radiant, how all his limbs are slack and wrinkled, how stooped his body is and how a change is to be seen in eye, ear, nose, tongue and body" (S.V,217).

In the last year before his final Nirvana the Buddha said this of himself: "I am now old, aged, worn out, one who has traversed life's path. Being about eighty, I am approaching the end of my life. Just as an old cart can only be kept going by being patched up, so too my Body can only be kept going by being patched up." (D.II,100). However, in his prime people were attracted by the Buddha's physical good looks as much as they were by his pleasant personality and his Dharma. Just to be in his presence could have a noticeable effect upon people. Once Sariputta met Nakulapita and noticing his peaceful demeanour said to him: "Householder, your senses are calmed, your complexion is clear and radiant. I suppose today you have had a talk face to face with the Exalted One?" Nakulapita replied: "How could it be otherwise, master? I have just now been sprinkled with the nectar of the Lord's Dhamma" (S.III,2)

The Buddha was a masterful public speaker. With a pleasant voice, good looks and poise combined with the appeal of what he said, he was able to enthral his audience. Uttara described what he saw at a gathering where the Buddha was speaking like this: "When he is teaching Dharma to an assembly in a park he does not exalt them or disparage them but rather he delights, uplifts, inspires and gladdens them with talk on Dharma. The sound that comes from the good Gotama's mouth has eight characteristics: It is distinct and intelligible, sweet and audible, fluent and clear, deep and resonant. Therefore, when the good Gotama instructs an assembly, his voice does not go beyond that assembly. After being delighted, uplifted, inspired and gladdened, that assembly, rising from their seats, depart reluctantly, keeping their eyes upon him" (M.II,140).

King Pasenadi once expressed his amazement at how silent and attentive people were when listening to the Buddha's talk. "I am a noble anointed king, able to execute those deserving execution, fine those

deserving a fine or exile those deserving exile. But when I am deciding a case sometimes people interrupt even me. Sometimes I don't even get a chance to say 'While I am speaking, sir, don't interrupt me.' But when the Lord is teaching the Dharma to various assemblies, at that time not even the sound of coughing is to be heard from the Lord's disciples. Once, when the Lord was teaching the Dharma a monk did cough; one of his fellows in the holy life tapped him on the knee and said 'Quiet, make no noise, the Lord, our teacher, is teaching Dharma.' When I saw this I thought 'It is wonderful, truly marvellous, how well-trained, without stick or sword these assembly is.'" (M.II,122)

Although the Buddha never gave cause for people to dislike him, there were people who did, sometimes out of jealousy, sometimes because they disagreed with his Dhamma and sometimes because he held up their beliefs to the cold light of reason. Once, when he was staying at Kapilavatthu, Dandapani the Sakyan asked him what he taught and when the Buddha told him, Dandapani was not impressed, and "shaking his head, wagging his tongue he departed leaning on his stick, his brow furrowed into three wrinkles" (M.I,108). The Buddha did not chase after Dandapani trying to convince him of the truth of his message. The Buddha responded to all criticism by calmly and clearly explaining why he did what he did and where necessary correcting misunderstanding that gave rise to the criticism. He was always unflustered, polite and smiling in the face of criticism and he urged his disciples to be the same. "If anyone should criticise me, the Dhamma or the Sangha, you should not on that account be angry, resentful or upset. For if you were, that would hinder you, and you would be unable to know whether they said right or wrong, would you?" "No, Lord." "So, if others criticise me, the Dharma or the Sangha, then simply explain what is incorrect, saying 'That is incorrect, that is not right, that is not our way, and we do not do that'." (D.I,3) Sometimes the Buddha was not criticised but rather abused "with rude, harsh words". At such times, he usually maintained a dignified silence.

The Buddha is often seen as a gentle and loving person and indeed he was, but that didn't mean that he would not himself be critical when he thought it was necessary. He was very critical of some of the other ascetic groups of the time, believing that their false doctrines misled people. About the Jains he said: "The Jains are unbelievers, immoral, shameless and reckless. They are not companions of good men and they exalt themselves and disparage others. They cling to material things and refuse to let go of them. They are rogues, of evil desires and perverse views" (A.V,150). When, through misunderstanding, Buddhist monks taught distorted versions of the Dhamma, the Buddha would reprimand them, saying, as he did on one occasion: "You foolish man, how could you think that I would teach Dhamma like that!" (M.I,132). But his reprimands and rebukes were never to hurt but to spur people to make more efforts or to re-examine their actions or beliefs.

The Buddha's daily routine was a very full one. He would sleep at night for only one watch, i.e. about four hours, wake up and spend the early morning in meditation, often doing loving-kindness meditation. At dawn he would often walk up and down for exercise and later talk to people who came to visit him. Just before noon, he would take his robe and bowl and go into the nearest city, town or village to beg for alms. He would stand silently at each door and gratefully receive in his bowl whatever food people cared to offer. When he got enough, he would return to the place he was staying at or perhaps go to a nearby woodland area to eat. He used to eat only once a day. After he had become famous, he would often be invited to people's homes for a meal and, being an honoured guest, he would be given sumptuous food, something other ascetics criticised him for. On such occasions he would eat, wash his own hands and bowl after the meal and then give a short Dhamma talk. Straight after his meal he would usually lie down to rest or sometimes to have a short sleep. As at night, it was the Buddha's habit to lie in the lion posture (*sihasana*), on his right side, with one hand under his head and his legs stretched out and the feet resting on each other. In the afternoon he would talk to people who had come to see him, give instruction to monks or, where appropriate, go to visit people in order to talk to them about the Dhamma. Late at night when everyone was asleep, the Buddha would sit in silence and sometimes devas would appear and ask him questions. Like other monks, the Buddha would usually wander from place to place for nine months of the year, which gave

him many opportunities to meet people, and then settle down for the three months of the rainy season (*vassa*). During the rains he would usually stay in one of the huts (*kuti*) that had been built for him at various locations like the Vultures Peak or the Bamboo Grove in Rajagaha or the Jetavana in Savatthi. Ananda would tell visitors approaching the Buddha's abode to cough or knock and that the Buddha would open the door. Sometimes the Buddha would instruct Ananda not to let people disturb him. We read of one man who, on being told that the Buddha did not wish to see anyone, sat down in front of the Buddha's residence saying: "I am not going until I see him."

When he was wandering the Buddha would sleep anywhere – under a tree, in a roadside rest house, in a potter's shed. Once, Hatthaka saw the Buddha sleeping out in the open and asked him: "Are you happy?" The Buddha answered that he was. Then Hatthaka said: "But sir, the winter nights are cold, the dark half of the moon is the time of frost. The ground has been trampled hard by the hooves of the cattle, the carpet of fallen leaves is thin, there are few leaves on the trees, your yellow robes are thin and the wind is cold." The Buddha reaffirmed that despite his simple and austere lifestyle he was still happy (A.I,136).

Because he had such a busy teaching schedule and because he was so often approached for advice on different matters, sometimes he felt the need to be completely alone. On several occasions, he told Ananda he was going into solitude and that only those who were bringing him his food were to come and see him (S.V,11). The Buddha's critics claimed that he only went into solitude because he found it difficult to answer people's questions and because he wanted to avoid public debates. The ascetic Nigrodha said of him: "The ascetic Gotama's wisdom is destroyed by the solitary life, he is not used to assemblies, he is not good at debates, and he has got out of touch" (D.III,38). But usually, the Buddha made himself available for anyone who needed him – for comfort, for inspiration, for guidance in walking the Path. Indeed, the most attractive and noticeable thing about the Buddha's personality was the love and compassion that he showered towards everybody, it seems that these qualities were the motive of everything he did. The Buddha himself said: "When the Tathagata or the Tathagata's disciples live in the world, it is done for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world" (A.II,146).