

The Mythic Buddha (1)

Introduction

For Buddhists in the East the life story of the Buddha is much more than a historical account – it is a poetic myth full of profound meanings that resonate in the depths of the mind. In the following text Sangharakshita looks at a number of these mythic elements in the story of the Buddha, bringing out some aspects of their significance, and in the process making the point that from a spiritual point of view poetic truth is just as important as historical truth – or perhaps more so. To feel the impact of the mythic and poetic elements in the Buddha's story we need to open up to them imaginatively, and not just engage our rational, critical mind. This needs time, so it would be very helpful to read the text well before the study group, and then to follow up on the questions and suggestions at the end.

Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha

(Text condensed from 'A Guide to the Buddhist Path', by Sangharakshita, Chapter 3, Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha.)

The language of the depths

If we look below the rational, conceptual surface of man's mind, we find vast unplumbed depths which make up what we call the unconscious. The psyche in its wholeness consists of both the conscious and the unconscious. "The unconscious, non-rational part of man is by far the larger part of his total nature, and its importance is far greater than we generally care to recognise. Consciousness is like a light froth playing and sparkling on the surface, whilst the unconscious is like the vast ocean depths, dark and unfathomed, lying far beneath. In order to appeal to the whole person, it isn't enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language from the language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form. If we want to reach this non-rational part of the human psyche, we have to use the language of poetry, of myth, of legend.

This other, no less important, language is one which many modern people have forgotten, or which they know only in a few distorted and broken forms. But Buddhism does very definitely speak this language, and speaks it no less powerfully than it speaks the language of concepts. Some people are under the impression that Buddhism speaks only the language of concepts, of reason; that it is a strictly rational system, even a sort of rationalism. "Such a misunderstanding is in a way quite natural in the West. After all, most of our knowledge is derived from books, magazines, lectures, etc., so that although we may not always be aware of this, our approach is in terms of rational, conceptual understanding. But if we go to the East we see a very different picture. "In the Eastern Buddhist countries people tend to the other extreme. They tend to be moved and influenced by the images all about them without easily being able to give a rational, conceptual formulation of what they actually believe.

So far as Buddhism in the West is concerned, much more attention has been given to the conceptual, analytical, intellectual approach. We now have to give much more time and much more serious attention to the other type of approach, to begin to try to combine both these approaches, unite both the conceptual and the non conceptual. We need a balanced spiritual life in which both the conscious and unconscious mind play their part.

It is therefore through the language of poetry and myth that we are going to approach our subject, changing over from the conceptual approach to the non conceptual, from the conscious mind to the unconscious. Here we shall be

encountering "some of what I have called the „Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha". To allow for this encounter, we have to be receptive, to open ourselves to these archetypal symbols, to listen to them and allow them to speak in their own way to us, especially to our unconscious depths, so that we do not just realise them mentally, but experience them and assimilate them, even allowing them eventually to transform our whole life.

The meaning of 'archetypal symbolism'

Now, let us define our key terms. What is an archetype? Broadly speaking, an archetype is the original pattern or model of a work, or the model from which a thing is made or formed. And what do we mean by symbolism? A symbol is generally defined as a visible sign of something invisible. "But philosophically and religiously speaking it is more than that: it is something existing on a lower plane which is in correspondence with something existing on a higher plane. To cite a common example, in the various theistic traditions, the sun is a symbol for God, because the sun performs in the physical universe the same function that God, according to these systems, performs in the spiritual universe: the sun sheds light and "heat, just as God sheds the light of knowledge and the warmth of love into the spiritual universe. One can say that the sun is the god of the material world, and in the same way God is the sun of the spiritual world. Both represent the same principle manifesting on different levels. „As above, so below."

Two kinds of truth

Various Western scholars in modern times have tried to write full, detailed biographies of the Buddha. There is quite a lot of traditional material available. Western scholars have explored this abundant material thoroughly, but having gone through the various episodes and incidents, they divide them into two great „heaps". On one side, they put whatever they consider to be a historic fact. On the other side they put what they consider to be myth and legend. Now this is all right so far as it goes, but most of them go a step further, and start indulging in value judgements, saying that only what they regard as historical facts are valuable and relevant. As for the myths and legends, all the poetry of the account, they usually see this as mere fiction, to be discarded as completely worthless.

This is a very great mistake, for we may say that there are two kinds of truth: what we call scientific truth, the truth of concepts, of reasoning; and in addition to this – some would say above this – there is what we may call poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, of the intuition. This is at least equally important. The latter kind of truth is manifested in what we call myths and legends, as well as in works of art, in symbolic ritual, and also quite importantly in dreams. And what we call the archetypal symbolism of the biography of the Buddha belongs to this second category. It is not meant to be historic truth, or factual information, but poetic, even spiritual, truth. We may say that this biography of the Buddha in terms of archetypal symbolism is not concerned with the external events of his career, but is meant to suggest to us something about his inner spiritual experience, and therefore to shed light on the spiritual life for all of us.

Examples of archetypal symbolism

I will now give a few examples of archetypal symbolism from the biography of the Buddha.

The Twin Miracle

A traditional text says:

"Then the Exalted One standing in the air at the height of a palm tree performed various and divers miracles of double appearance. The lower part of his body would be in flames, while from the upper part there streamed five hundred jets of cold water. While the upper part of his body

was in flames, five hundred jets of cold water streamed from the lower part. Next, by his magic power the Exalted One transformed himself into a bull with a quivering hump. The bull vanished in the east and appeared in the west. It vanished in the north and appeared in the south, it vanished in the south and appeared in the north. And in this way the great miracle is to be described in detail. Several thousand kotīs of beings, seeing this great miracle of magic, became glad, joyful and pleased, and uttered thousands of bravos at witnessing the marvel.”

I am not going to say anything here about the Buddha’s transformation into a bull – I am going to concentrate here on the “Twin Miracle” proper, in which the Buddha emits both fire and water. First of all, the Buddha stands in the air. This signifies a change of plane, and is highly significant. It represents the fact that what is described does not happen on the earth plane, or on the historical plane. The Twin Miracle is not a miracle in the usual sense, not something magical or supernormal happening here on this earth, but something spiritual, something symbolic, happening on a higher metaphysical plane of existence.

Having stood in the air, in this metaphysical dimension, the Buddha emits fire and water simultaneously: fire from the upper half of the body, water from the lower, and vice versa. On the higher plane of existence where he now stands, fire and water are universal symbols. They are found all over the world, in all cultures, all religions. Fire represents „spirit“, or „the spiritual“; and water represents matter, the material. Fire, again, represents the heavenly, principle; water the earthly principle. Fire represents the active, masculine principle; water the passive, feminine principle. Fire represents the intellect, and water the emotions. Fire again represents consciousness, and water the unconscious. In other words, fire and water between them represent all the cosmic opposites.

The fact that the Buddha emitted fire and water simultaneously represents the conjugation of these great pairs of opposites. This conjunction on all levels, and on the highest level of all especially, is synonymous with what we call Enlightenment. This episode of the Twin Miracle tells us that Enlightenment is not a one-sided affair, not a partial experience, but the union, the conjunction, of opposites, of fire and water, at the highest possible level.

The ladder between heaven and earth

Let us now turn to another episode. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha preached what became known as the Abhidharma to his deceased mother in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (a higher heavenly world where she was reborn when she died, seven days after his birth). When he returned to the earth, he descended by means of a magnificent staircase, attended by different gods, divinities, and angels. In the texts this staircase is described in very glorious terms, as being threefold, made up of gold, silver, and crystal.

The staircase or the ladder between heaven and earth is also a universal symbol. For example, in the Bible there is Jacob’s ladder, which has the same significance. The staircase is that which unites the opposites, which links, draws together, heaven and earth. In the Buddhist texts, the archetypal significance of this episode of the Buddha’s descent is enhanced by colourful, glowing descriptions in terms of gold and silver and crystal, and different coloured lights, and panoplies of coloured sun-shades and umbrellas, and flowers falling, and music sounding. These all make a strong appeal not to the conscious mind, but to the unconscious, to the depths.

Suggestions for reflection, research, and discussion

1. Do you agree that poetic truth is just as important as factual truth?

