

The Buddha's life as myth

[Based on *The Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha*, SD 52.1 (1.2.1)]

Special effects

The story of the Buddha's life continues to enthrall and inspire us even after more than 2,500 years. His life-story is full of miraculous events, but they are simply embellishments by the ancient story-tellers working with what we today know as "special effects" for their audience who had neither TV, cinema nor social media.

The "special effects" are no mere entertaining embellishments, but play a vital role in reminding us of deeper and more powerful forces and truths at work. Today, we call them "myths." A **myth** is a story that is bigger than we are, lasts longer than we do, and reflects what lies deep in our minds and hearts, our desires, dislikes and delusions.¹

Myth and legend

The best known usage of "myth" is in terms of the ancient Greek and Roman stories of their gods, non-humans and heroes, which are at the roots of western civilization even before Christianity forced itself on the scene. They are also called "legends" although these mythical characters are, as a rule, *not historical persons*.

However, in many of these myths, their key characters are often linked to kings, heroes and people from known places. But the roles they play or their "fates" are beyond those of any normal humans. Moreover, we can easily identify with any of these characters or their actions, or see some human qualities reflected or "mythified" in them.

The Buddha myth

The term **myth** can be usefully applied to the life of **the historical Bodhisattva**—the Buddha before his awakening—for 2 reasons.

The first reason is that these stories are so ancient, it is difficult, even impossible, for us to historically verify them. Accounts of these events are found only in our suttas and commentaries without any other external evidence to show that they are historical events—that they actually happened the way they are described there.

Secondly, most of the events and stories related to the Bodhisattva are of such a miraculous and fantastic nature that they seem not applicable to any other human, certainly not to us. However, like the Greek and Roman myths, we can relate to them as dramatizing or elevating our very human conditions to a heroic, divine or cosmic level—especially regarding the vicissitudes and misfortunes of life.

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion, see [SD 36.1 \(2.1\)](#).

In this mythology, **the Bodhisattva** is the pure-hearted hero in quest of good. On a higher level, he is in quest of the spiritual happiness and liberation of all beings. His antagonists (such as Devadatta and Māra) are often the manifestation of evil or bad extremes, that is, of lust, hate and delusion.

Allegory

We can thus understand **myth** as “a universal narrative of the human condition and the realities they point to—often with a common moral or universal theme.” A **fable**, on the other hand, is a universal narrative of the human condition often with a personal moral—the truths that they point to. When we understand the realities of the human condition, we have a better understanding of the meaning of life. When we see the truth of a narrative or reality, we are moved with the purpose of life.

Basically, a myth dramatizes or allegorizes the realities of life. The Bodhisattva sees the 3 bads or evils of life—an old man, a sick man and a dead man—and when he is told that they will take away all that he has and loves, leaves his world behind to discover how to overcome these bads and evils.²

Fable

A **fable** brings a myth more down to earth with a purpose so that we see what we can learn from it or work its purpose. Instead of asking us to renounce the “world” (all that we have, all that we are), the Buddha uses the parables of the water-snake and of the raft to remind us to “**Let go of what is not yours!**” (*yaṃ na tumhākaṃ taṃ pajahatha*) in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22).³ When parables are related or understood more fully as a story in itself, even briefly, but with a moral, it becomes a fable.

The Buddha's life, then, is not a story to entertain us, but a **lesson** that is retold time and again, generation after generation. It is a reminder of things bigger and better than we are or want to be. The Buddha is willing to give up all that he has, all that he is, for something bigger. He succeeds in his great quest and discovers how to make the best of this world, and then to rise beyond even the impermanent gods in their impermanent heavens, to the boundless space of nirvana, the highest happiness that there is. This is truly the greatest story ever told—it is about us.

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² On the nature of mythology, see [SD 51.11 \(3.1.2\)](#).

³ M 22,40 + [SD 3.13 \(4.2\)](#): the parable of the water-snake (§11) and of the raft (§§12-14).