Captions for paintings and photos related to the life of the Buddha

LIFE: Conception

On the night the Bodhisatta was conceived in Queen Mahā Māyā’s womb, she had a great white elephant visit her in a dream. This scene is very common in Buddhist art around the world.

LIFE: Birth

The birth of a human destined to become a fully enlightened Buddha, known as a Bodhi-satta, is always accompanied by a series of great miracles. The Buddha was born in modern-day Nepal in Lumbini Park under a sal tree. He was received by gods, you can see floating on clouds. More details are in the Accariya Abbhuta Scripture, MN 123.

LIFE: Plowing Festival

As a child, sitting alone, while his father was leading a plowing festival, the Bodhi-satta prince sat beneath a tree and went into a deep state of meditation. Years later when he was on his quest to attain enlightenment, he remembered this moment and gave up the extreme ascetic practices he thought would bring success. You can learn more about this in the Mahasaccaka scripture, MN 36.

LIFE: Seeing Signs

After it was predicted that the Bodhi-satta would leave his life of luxury in the palace to seek enlightenment, his father did everything he could to make sure his son saw nothing of the realities of life. Despite this effort, the Bodhi-satta eventually got to see the realities of life, old age, sickness and death. He also saw a renunciant and realized this might be the solution. You can learn more about the same thing that happened to a previous Buddha in the Mahapadana scripture, DN 14.

LIFE: Renunciation

With the determination to find a solution to the problem of suffering, the Bodhisatta left the palace on his horse Khantika with his driver Channa. After crossing the Anoma river he gave up his jewelry and royal clothes, cut off his hair and took up the clothes of a wanderer.

LIFE: Asceticism

Before he realized that extreme ascetic practices were useless, the Boddhi-satta tried every possible method of torturing his body in every way imaginable to try and purify his mind. He became so thin that when he touched his belly he could feel his backbone. A statue of the Buddha in this condition can often be seen in monasteries. You can learn more about this in the Mahasaccaka scripture, MN 36.

LIFE: Enlightenment

On the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha gained three types of knowledge. First, he was able to remember his previous lives ninety-one eons into the past. Second, he was able to see exactly how beings are born again and again based on the good and bad actions they do. Finally he was able to understand perfectly the Four Noble Truths: what suffering is, what the cause of suffering is, that it is possible to put an end to suffering, and that there is a path to follow to put an end to this suffering. You can learn more about this in the Bhayabherava scripture, MN 4.

LIFE: First Sermon

The Buddha first preached the Dhamma in the Deer Park in Isipatana to the group of five ascetics that he lived with during his time of austerities practice. Countless heavenly beings also attended this sermon which you can see floating on clouds. The sermon he preached is called the Dhamma-cakkap-pavattana Sutta the Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma, SN 56:11. This scene is almost always depicted with a deer in the background so it is easy to recognize.

LIFE: Passing Away

After teaching the Truths he discovered to both gods and humans for forty-five years, the Buddha passed away without being reborn ever again. In this stone carving you can see people weeping and wailing at their loss. Below the Buddha is is a fully enlightened monk meditating peacefully. Also, the wanderer Subhadda, the last person who went for refuge to the Buddha while he was alive. You can read more about this in the Mahaparinibbana scripture, DN 16.

LIFE: Sick monk

Once the Buddha was going on an inspection of a monastery and he found a sick monk not being looked after. The Buddha carefully cleaned him and dressed him in clean robes. Afterwards, the Buddha admonished the other monks telling them that they should always act as a family and look after each other. He finished by saying that anyone who looks after a sick monk collects the same good karma as one who looks after the Buddha.

DISCIPLES:

This picture depicts Sujātā offering the Bodhisatta a meal of milk-rice, the last food he would eat before attaining his enlightenment.

This is one of the earliest serial killers in history, Angulimāla. He was converted by the Buddha and later attained enlightenment. You can read about this in the Middle Length Discourse MN 86.

Having lost her mind over the death of her only child, Kisāgotami goes to the Buddha looking for a “cure.” The Buddha tells her that a cure for her problem can be found in mustard seeds from a house that has never experienced death. Seeing the universal experience of death, she became a nun and attained enlightenment.

-----------------------

HOLY SITES: INDIA

HOLY SITES: Lumbini

This is a shrine built over the place the Buddha was born, Lumbini, in southern Nepal. Queen Mahā Māyā was headed back to her home town to give birth, as was the custom. Along the way, she stopped in this sal tree garden. While she was there, the Bodhisatta was born. The government has set up a huge nature reserve around the site making it one of the most peaceful of all the pilgrimage destinations.

HOLY SITES: Bodhgaya

Over the centuries a spectacular shrine was built on the site in Bodh Gaya, India, where the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. It is the most sacred of all pilgrimage sites. There is a constant flow of pilgrims from all around the world. This photo shows the front entrance. Behind is the Bodhi Tree descended from the original.

This is the tree growing on the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment in Bodh-gaya, India. It is a direct descendant of the original. The railing was built around it recently to protect it from the large number pilgrims. You can see the gold-leaf that they have pressed onto the stone.

This is a photo of the Buddha statue in the shrine in India where the Buddha attained full enlightenment, the Shri Mahabodhi Temple.

HOLY SITES: Isipatana

The Buddha first preached the Dhamma in the Deer Park at Isipatana. This is a stupa built at the site. The shape is very distinctive with the tall, flat sides. This is one of the four great pilgrimage sites in India. It is a huge park that provides a peaceful oasis in the city of Varanasi.

HOLY SITES: Kusinara

The Buddha passed away in a small, backwater town called Kusinara under twin sal trees. This is the stupa built at the site. The building in front is the hall that holds a large reclining Buddha statue. The design is very distinctive and easily recognizable. This is one of the four great pilgrimage sites in India.

HOLY SITES: Mount Vulture Peak

This is the site of the Buddha’s hut on Mount Vulture Peak outside of the city of Rajagaha. Many famous sermons were given on this mountain. It was a peaceful escape from the busy city.

This is the view from the site of the Buddha’s hut on Mount Vulture Peak outside of the city of Rajagaha. You can see the ring of mountains that surrounded the city.

HOLY SITES: Shravasti

This is a flower offering on the site of the Buddha’s hut in Jeta’s Grove in Sāvatti. There is now a huge, peaceful park on ancient land of the monastery built by Anāthapiṇḍika.

HOLY SITES: Ajanta

The Ajanta caves, located in central India, were built from the 2nd century BCE to about 480 or 650 CE. They contain monasteries and worship halls carved out of solid rock.

This is Ajanta cave number 26, built in the second stage of construction. This worship hall was carved completely out of solid rock.

HOLY SITES: Sanci

This is the ancient stupa burial mound at Sanchi, near modern day Bhopal, central India. It was built by the Emperor Ashoka. The gateways and the balustrade were built two centuries later. They contain some of the best preserved stone carvings of devotional practices and scenes from the life of the Buddha.

------------------------------

HOLY SITES: SRI Lanka

HOLY SITES: Thuparamaya

At the request of Arahant Mahinda, King Devanampiyatissa built Thuparamaya to hold the collarbone relic of the Buddha. In the inset image you can see how the pillars once supported a structure surrounding the stupa.

HOLY SITES: Jetavanaramaya

The Jetavanaramaya stupa is one of the largest in Sri Lanka and contains part of the Buddha’s belt. It is located in the ancient Jentavana monastery in Aunuradhapura, not to be confused with Jetavana in the Indian city of Sāvatthi.

HOLY SITES: Mihintale

This is the Mihintale mountain peak in Sri Lanka where the Arahant monk Mahinda, son of the Indian King Ashoka, first preached the Dhamma to King Devanampiyatissa officially bringing the Buddha’s teaching to the island. The large rock to the right is where Arahant Mahinda stood. It is the site of an ancient monastery and the frequent home of Arahant Mihinda.

HOLY SITES: Shri Maha Bodhi

The Shri Maha Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, has grown from the cutting brought from India by the Arahant Nun Sanghamitta.

Two hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha, the great Indian king Ashoka sent his daughter, the Arahant Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta, to Sri Lanka to establish the order of nuns and bring a cutting from the right side of the Bodhi tree to the island. In this painting, found in the Kelaniya Monastery, you can see Devanampiya Tissa coming out to greet Arahant Sanghamitta.

HOLY SITES: Temple of the Tooth

The most sacred relic on the island of Sri Lanka is the holy tooth relic of the Supreme Buddha in the mountain city of Kandy. It is held in an ancient royal palace in the structure you can see with the golden-coloured roof.

HOLY SITES: Shripada

This is Shri Pada, also known as Adam’s Peak. At the top of the mountain is a footprint in stone believed to be left by the Buddha on one of his three visits to Sri Lanka. It is an extremely popular pilgrimage spot. People will often start climbing early in the morning so they can watch the sunrise.

HOLY SITES: Aluvihara

For hundreds of years the Buddha’s teachings were memorized by trained reciters. At one point because of war and famine there was a danger that this unbroken tradition would come to an end. The task of writing down the scriptures was undertaken at the Aluvihara in Matale, Sri Lanka. Specially prepared palm leaves were used, seen here in the hands of the monks.

HOLY SITES: Ruwanvelisaya

This is Ruwanvelisaya Stupa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. It is the tallest stupa and contains the most relics in one place. To give you a sense of scale, two city busses could pass each other on the flat surfaces on both sides of the top spire. In this photo, strings of lights are covering every surface. It is the same stupa framed in the main room.

---------------

ART:

For centuries after the Buddha’s passing away, his images was never represented in artwork. Instead a Bodhi tree, an empty chair, or his footprints were used. Here you can see a carving at the stupa of Sanci in India where he is signified by the Bodhi tree and an empty seat.

The birth of the Bodhisatta (the Buddha-to-be) is one of the most common events depicted in Buddhist art. This carving is from the Gandhara region of modern day Afghanistan. Notice Queen Mahamāyā grasping a branche of the sal tree.

This statue depicts the week after the Buddha’s enlightenment when he was protected by the great snake deva Muchalinda during a great storm. It is a common image in Buddhist art. You can read about the incident in the Udana, sutta 2.1.

This is a Buddha statue in the Bhumisparsha posture. On the night of his enlightenment, the deity Māra challenged the Bodhisatta’s suitability to attain enlightenment. In response, the Buddha called on the earth as his witness, touching it with his right hand. Shortly after he attained enlightenment.

In this painting we see two members of the royal family, princess Hemamala and prince Danta, secretly bringing the tooth relic of the Buddha to the island of Sri Lanka. Enemies of Buddhism wanted to prevent the spreading of the Buddha’s teachings. You can see the halo around Hemamala’s top-knot where the relic was hidden.

MISC: Bodhi Tree

This is our Bodhi Tree. It is the same tree that the Buddha sat under the night he attained enlightenment. It gives us a living connection to our teacher and his amazing qualities. As such, it is a traditional focus of devotion and respect.