

Notes on the Dates of the Buddha Śākyamuni

All traditions agree that the duration of the Buddha's life was 80 years.

There is wide disagreement, however, on the question of the date of his death (which the tradition calls the "*Mahāparinirvāṇa*" — the "Great Final Cessation").

Modern Theravādin Buddhists (i.e., the Buddhists of Śrī Lankā [Ceylon], Myanmar [Burma], Thailand [Siam], Kampuchea [Cambodia], and Laos) hold that he died in 543 or 544 BC (the latter of these two being the preferred year); thus, they calculate his dates as 623-543 BC or 624-544 BC.

[This is the reason why the year 1956 was chosen for the world-wide celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's death.]

By contrast, most modern scholars, in the West and in Asia, have rejected these traditional dates. Until recently, most have held instead to one of the years from 483 to 487 BC as the year of the Buddha's death, thus calculating his dates as 567/3 - 487/3 BC.

However, an increasing number of contemporary scholars, in Asia as well as in the West, have recently expressed preference for somewhat later dates — e.g.:

463-383 (Nakamura Hajime 中村元)

466-386 (Ui Hakuju 宇井伯壽)

448-368 (Heinz Bechert)

500/460 - 420/380 (André Bareau)

502/479 - 422/399 (Richard Gombrich)

The factors used in calculating these dates are numerous, and the evidence not always conclusive, but the nub of most of the arguments is an array of three issues, viz.:

- The question of the dates of Emperor Aśoka (especially the date of his "anointment" or "coronation"),
- The differences among various sources and traditions on the question of how many years separated the Buddha's death from Aśoka's ascension to the throne,
- The various lists of kings and Vinaya Masters (i.e., monks recognized by the tradition as authorities on the code of monastic discipline) who were said to have lived during the years between the Buddha's death and Aśoka's coronation.

Generally, the later dates (5th to early 4th century BC) are supported by Indian (as distinct from Śrī Lankān) sources, i.e., by works written chiefly in Sanskrit, some of which were translated into Chinese and/or Tibetan), whereas the earlier dates (6th to early 5th century BC) are supported chiefly by texts of Śrī Lankān origin which were originally written in Pāli and are held to be authoritative throughout the Theravādin world.

An exception to the above — hard to explain — is the Tibetan tradition, which has held, since the early 14th century, that the Buddha died in 881 BC. This quite untenable view may be based on astrological and chiliastic calculations associated with a very late text, the *Kālacakra Tantra*.

Some Historical Points to Bear in Mind

Alexander the Great (b. 356; d. June 13, 323) was in India, at the head of his armies, from February or March of 326, when he crossed the Indus, until September of 325, when he began his march back to Persia, reaching Susa (the Persian capital) in May of 324 and dying a little more than a year later in Babylon. He left the Western Punjab in the control of his officer Philippos (variant: Philippus), who was killed by his Greek mercenaries in 324 and was succeeded by Eudemos. In 322 Eudemos was pushed from the upper Indus Valley by the Indian leader Candragupta, but he managed to maintain control of the middle Indus until 317. The Lower Indus was left in the control of Peithon and Oxyartes, two other of Alexander's former generals. By 317, however, Candragupta had seized the whole of the Indus basin.

Candragupta began the establishment of his "Maurya" dynasty around 324. The date of its official inauguration is commonly calculated to have been the year 321. His sovereignty over NW India (up to the Hindu Kush) was recognized in 303, in a treaty with the Greek ruler Seleucos (variant: Seleucus) Nikator. Candragupta died in 300 BC (variant: 298) at his capital of Pāṭaliputra (the modern Patna). He was succeeded by his son Bindusāra, who reigned until 273 or 272 BC (variant: 268 BC).

Aśoka (a.k.a., Devānāmpriyaḥ Priyadarśī) ascended the throne as the third Mauryan emperor sometime between the years 280 and 267 BC (268 being the date most commonly given) and died in 233 or 232 BC (he was thus a contemporary of Antiochus II of Syria [261-246 BC] and Ptolemy II of Egypt [285-246 BC] — both of whom are mentioned in one of Aśoka's inscriptions). Many important events in Aśoka's reign are documented in the edicts. These were composed mostly in the Māgadhī language as influenced by other prakrits [colloquial cousins of Sanskrit] and were written in the Brāhmī or the Karoṣṭhī script. Aśoka had them carved on rocks and pillars throughout his realm; over 40 such inscriptions have so far been identified. Aśoka's successors were weak and by 187 BC the Mauryan dynasty had ended, to be succeeded by the Śūṅga, a dynasty founded by Puṣyamitra (r. 187-151), who may have been hostile toward Buddhism.

From all of these considerations (and others which we cannot now summarize) emerges the crucial point — viz., that there are basically two chronologies by which the Buddha's dates have most often been calculated, one called "the long chronology," the other called "the short chronology."

The "long chronology" — attested in the Sri Lankan chronicles (e.g., the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa*) and in other Theravādin sources like the Pāli *Samantapāsādikā* — has it that the Buddha died 218 years before the coronation of Aśoka.

Actually, there are two versions of the “long chronology.” The “traditional” or “uncorrected” version found in the Pāli chronicles of the Theravāda tradition gives a year corresponding to the year 326 BC as the date of Aśoka’s coronation. The traditional Theravādin dates of the Buddha (624-544) are calculated from this base. As early as the late eighteenth century, however, Western scholars noted a discrepancy between the Theravāda tradition’s dating of Aśoka’s coronation and the date for that event which may be calculated from historically more reliable ancient Greek sources — e.g. the *Indika* written around 300 BC by Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambassador to the Mauryan court. The Greek sources place Aśoka’s coronation approximately sixty years later than do the Pāli sources. The “long chronology” that follows the Greek sources and accepts the later date for Aśoka’s coronation is called the “corrected long chronology.” Both versions of the long chronology accept the traditional Theravādin claim that Aśoka came to the throne in the 218th year after the Buddha’s death.

However, a number of Indian sources preserved now in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan give what we have come to call the “short chronology,” according to which the Buddha died only 100 (rather than 218) years before Aśoka’s coronation.

Generally speaking, modern scholars who hold that the Buddha lived during the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC accept the “corrected long chronology.” Those who say that he lived roughly a hundred years later (i.e., during the late 5th and early fourth centuries BC) follow some version of the “short chronology.”

The “short chronology” is gaining favor because it seems to be well supported by a number of other kinds of evidence — e. g., the archaeological record, the Jain tradition’s view of the date of its founder Mahāvira (a contemporary of Śākyamuni), and calculations based on the lists of successive *vinayadhara* (Vinaya Masters).

The most recent and exhaustive treatment of the question of the Buddha’s dates — based on the whole range of traditional sources and taking in to account relevant modern scholarship — is a three-volume collection of essays in English, German, and French edited by Heinz Bechert and published by the Göttingen Academy of Sciences. It is entitled *The Dating of the Historical Buddha / Die Datierung des historischen Buddha*. Volume I appeared in 1991, Vol. II in 1992; Vol. III is still forthcoming. As the studies gathered together in this collection also refer, in their notes and bibliographies, to virtually all earlier studies and sources of any importance; they also comprise a nearly exhaustive bibliography on the subject. A selection of especially important articles from this collection deemed has also been published in India: *When Did the Buddha Live? The Controversy on the dating of the Historical Buddha: Selected Papers Based on a Symposium Held under the Auspices of the Academy of Sciences in Göttingen*, edited by Heinz Bechert. Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series, No. 165. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1995.

In Theravāda countries the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha are all annually commemorated on the day of the full moon, i.e., the fifteenth day, in the second month of the Indian Lunar calendar. This month is known in Sanskrit as “Vaiśākha,” in Pāli as “Vesākha,” and in several modern southeast Asian languages as “Wesak.” It corresponds roughly to late April - early May in the Gregorian solar calendar.

In traditional East Asia — according to the Chinese lunar calendar — the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha are commemorated, respectively, on the eighth day of the fourth month, the eighth day of the twelfth month, and the eighth day of the second month. In modern Japan, and wherever else the solar Gregorian calendar has been adopted even for religious purposes, these events are commemorated, respectively, on April 8, December 8, and February 8.