DIRECTIONS

# Buddhism and Children

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## *Scholars struggle with the story of the Buddha's son*

Buddhism tends to be very positively received in the West; in some contexts, it would be appropriate to say that Buddhism is in fact idealized. Although this bodes well for first impressions, the result is often one of sweeping simplifications, and it does not do the tradition justice. Among the prevalent oversimplifications circulating is the notion that Buddhism amounts to prolonged meditation sessions best practiced by thoughtful adults. Although meditation is an important ingredient of the Buddhist life, it is certainly not the only (or even the most primary) means by which communities engage with the tradition. When, however, silent meditation takes the lead in Buddhist representation, children are ostensibly removed from the equation. They cannot have much of a place in a tradition that focuses its energies on quiet contemplation. Any parent of small children is aware of that. If children want to engage with the tradition, a common Western assumption is that they will have to wait until they grow up.

In most Buddhist contexts outside of the West, however, children are (as one would naturally expect), very much part of the Buddhist landscape. They participate in the ritual life of their communities, attend Buddhist schools for children, listen to Buddhist stories, read Buddhist comic books, and tell Buddhist jokes. In some contexts, children even meditate, although perhaps not for the extended periods some adults enjoy. In other words, Buddhism in many non-Western contexts is not an exclusively adult occupation.

The problem, however, is that until recently, Buddhist scholarship has not paid much attention to the lives of children in Buddhist communities. Either following or creating the trend of identifying Buddhism as an adult activity, little scholarship has been produced on the theme of children or families. The field is changing, however, and a few books and articles have appeared recently that are beginning to bring these questions into focus. We are

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only at the beginning of these conversations, and there is still a long way to go.

Despite the limitations of the field, we can nevertheless explore some of the ways that Buddhism expresses care for its children. We will begin with the story of the Buddha's life and with his complicated relationship to his child. The Buddha's story functions as the ultimate narrative, with Buddhists throughout the world modeling their own behavior based on his. How he is understood to have treated his child therefore becomes a key resource in a discussion about children and the tradition.

The next section will focus on the most prominent of Buddhist institutions – the monastery – and will consider some of the ways it engages with children and cares for them. This article concludes with references to some of the traditional values promoted in Buddhist rhetoric and application of these values to the theme of this article.

## The Buddha and His Son

As mentioned above, the Buddha's hagiography is one of the centerpieces of the Buddhist tradition. His life story often functions as the model against which others carve out their own lives. The way he is understood to have related to his son often becomes the way other Buddhists will understand how they might relate to their own children.

The traditional account of the Buddha's life claims that he was a prince born in a lavish kingdom in northern India approximately 2,500 years ago. Not long after he was born, his father called the astrologers to read the stars in the hope of predicting the kind of life his son would lead. The astrologers provided a somewhat unusual analysis: If the boy remained a householder, then he would become a great monarch; if, however, he left home to pursue the life of religious homelessness, then he would become an extraordinary teacher.

According to some of the hagiographies, the king was uncomfortable with these pronouncements. He certainly did not want a religious teacher as an heir. He wanted a future king. Because he believed that exposure to suffering is what led men to the religious life, he decreed that his son be shielded from the painful realities of life and lavished him with sensual pleasures instead. He hoped the prince would never develop an interest beyond what was within his reach.

Unfortunately for the king, his plan did not succeed. The young prince eventually managed to escape his father's imposed limitations, and he encountered precisely what he was being protected from seeing: old age, sickness, and death. He then had a fourth encounter: a renunciant. It was at that moment, according to many accounts, that his destiny had finally been decided. The problem, however, was that he was a prince, destined for the throne. By choosing a life of renunciation, he was turning his back on his kingdom. Even more problematic, he would also be abandoning his wife and newborn son.

The ancient texts that deal with the Buddha's life tell different versions of this chapter in his hagiography. According to some, the future Buddha married and then left his wife after having impregnated her. According to others, he left her the night his son was born. Either way, the tradition is unanimous that he walked away from his family and abandoned his child.

Western Buddhist communities have often read into this story a clear indication that Buddhism is not interested in children. If the Buddha abandoned his son so early in the narrative, if he was willing to walk away from his wife and child, then it is no surprise that