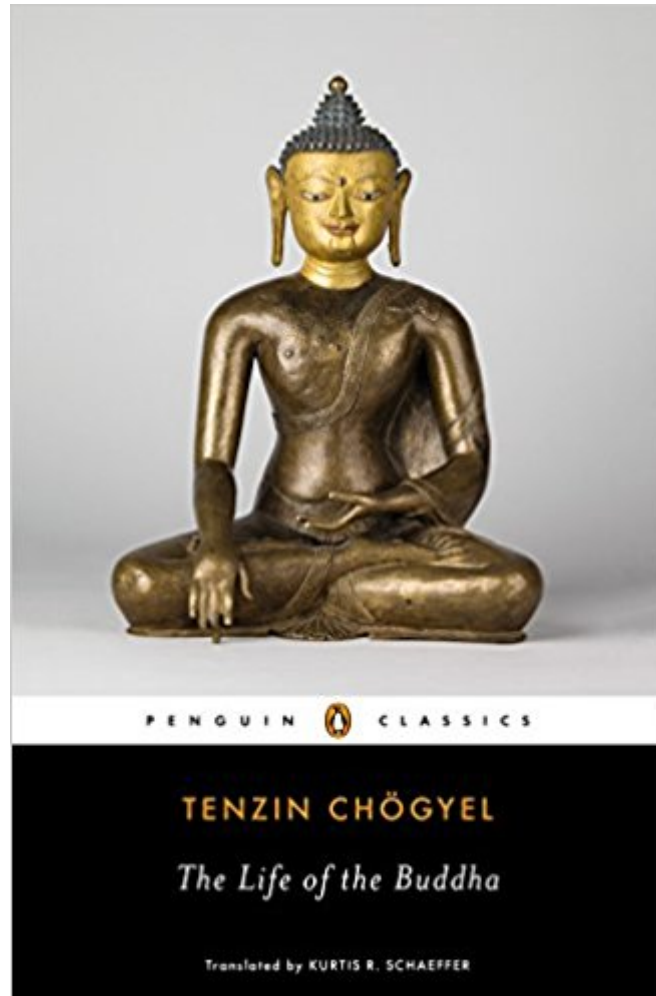




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# The Life Of The Buddha (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

A blueprint for a life of mindfulness, dedicated to the easing of suffering both for oneself and for others. The story of Shakyamuni Buddha's epic journey to enlightenment is perhaps the most important narrative in the Buddhist tradition. Tenzin Chögyel's *The Life of the Buddha*, composed in the mid-eighteenth century and now in a vivid new translation, is a masterly storyteller's rendition of the twelve acts of the Buddha. Chögyel's classical tale seamlessly weaves together the vast and the minute, the earthly and the celestial, reflecting the near-omnipresent aid of the gods alongside the Buddha's moving final reunion with his devoted son, Rahula. *The Life of the Buddha* has the power to engage people through a deeply human story with cosmic implications. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

TENZIN CHÖGYEL "GYEL (1701-1767) was a prominent Bhutanese intellectual and a Buddhist monk. KURTIS R. SCHAEFFER is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of

Virginia. His numerous publications include *The Culture of the Book in Tibet*.

**Introduction** The Buddha was a human being. He struggled, he succeeded, he failed. He made difficult choices. He made mistakes of the sort we all might make. And he persevered. He lived in childlike innocence until he witnessed the unyielding reality of human suffering—poverty, sickness, old age, and death. He struggled with the implications of this suffering for his life and the lives of others. He had a family. He left his family. He worked as a teacher, a leader, and a community builder. He worried about his legacy. He grew ill as an old man and died. The Buddha was a prince, the foremost younger member of a royal family and heir to the king's throne. He lived in utter luxury, wanting nothing. He received the finest education possible. He was a master of the arts, literature, athletics, and politics. He had many wives and lovers, and bore a son. He was to be a king, a god on earth. And then he cast the sweet life away when he realized that in spite of his exalted status he would still become ill, grow old, and die. The Buddha was a reincarnation, the rebirth of a person now dead. He was a series of human beings, reborn through countless lifetimes. He had many bodies, many incarnations, though he remained in some sense himself, a "he," an individual, indivisible yet multiple. And as a reincarnation he is no different, according to Buddhist doctrine, from any other living being, save that he eventually came to understand the fundamental role of ethical cause and effect—the engine of rebirth—in creating his many rebirths, his many experiences in this life and all that had come before it. Because he came to understand rebirth as yet another form of human suffering, he sought, and found, an end to rebirth. The Buddha was a god. He lived in celestial realms, in castles in the sky where gods enjoyed the divine fruits of their good acts over many eons. Yet the Buddha knew that even a god suffers from ethical cause and effect, that gods must descend from their celestial palaces if they wish to find an end to suffering, just like every other living being. He taught the gods the means to liberate themselves from the suffering that even they, as exalted celestial beings, experience. He was a god among gods. The Buddha is a bodhisattva, a living, thinking being whose only goal is to achieve enlightenment—to fundamentally transform his understanding of reality—in order to truly put an end to human suffering. The Buddha is a savior, a being whose empathy for the suffering of others is so profound that he cannot but act on their behalf. The Buddha was, is—ever will be—the cosmos. His "body" is coextensive with all that is. He is reality. As such he seeks, through the drama of human embodiment, to relieve the suffering that comes to those living beings who do not understand that they are this reality as well. According to Buddhist traditions throughout Asia, the Buddha holds each and all of these identities within his

capacious form. Stories of the Buddha from ancient, medieval, and modern traditions contain this multiplicity, at times emphasizing one aspect of his identity, at times another, yet always deep with potential meaning, overflowing with possibilities for readers from all walks of life. This is one such story. The life story of Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism who lived two and a half thousand years ago, is perhaps the most important narrative in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. While the great Tibetan, Bhutanese, and Mongolian masters of the past have had a more direct impact on the course and contours of Buddhism in Tibetan-speaking and Tibetan-reading lands, the story of the founder, Shakyamuni, defines the very shape and scope of Buddhism. A definition of suffering, the basic human problem, an analysis of the causes of suffering, an affirmation that human suffering can be alleviated, and a demonstration of the steps needed to escape suffering are integrated within the life story of a single human being, the Buddha. His story forms the blueprint for a life dedicated to the two fundamental challenges faced by people, the easing of suffering for oneself and for others. And if this most basic goal is integral to the Buddha's story, then any Buddhist leader in Tibet, Bhutan, or anywhere else in the world must emulate this story, must follow in the Buddha's footsteps, must live the life of a Buddha, "the Enlightened One." In Buddhist traditions of Tibet and the Himalayas this blueprint for an ideal Buddhist life was formally expressed in twelve major life episodes, "the twelve acts of the Buddha." The idea that the narrative of the Buddha's enlightenment could be reduced to a set of key episodes dates back to at least the fifth century CE, when the Analysis of the Buddha Jewel, a formative work for Indian and Tibetan notions that all living beings possess the ability to achieve enlightenment, outlined in a single verse Shakyamuni's career in twelve acts, though without any further elaboration. Indian Buddhist literature never utilized this concise narrative structure to develop a full account of the Buddha, from birth to death. The most elaborate classical life of the Buddha, the Living Out of the Game Scripture, ends with the Buddha's teaching career. It does not include his death, the central event that was the catalyst for the spread of Buddhism, the cause of much philosophizing over the centuries, and the conundrum that the living ubiquitously face. This is not to say that there are no narratives of the Buddha's death in Indian Buddhist literature. The Scripture of the Great Passing from Suffering, dedicated in its entirety to the last days of Shakyamuni, is one of the most beautiful works of the Buddhist canonical literature from South Asia. Yet it was left to later writers in different cultures, writing in different languages, to craft synthetic portraits of the Buddha's life from time immemorial through birth to death. Tibetan writers, however, capitalized on the twelve-act structure, and the story before

you now is one of the best examples of the genre. The structure is simple, and outlines the basic chronology of the Buddha's life:

- Life in heaven (prebirth)
- Descent to earth (conception and gestation)
- Birth (age 1)
- Education (ages 1 to 16)
- The pleasures of his royal harem (ages 16 to 29)
- Renunciation of house (age 29)
- Spiritual discipline (ages 29 to 35)
- Journey to Bodhgaya (age 35)
- Battle with demons (age 35)
- Enlightenment (age 35)
- Teaching (ages 35 to 80)
- Death (age 80)

The power of this biographical framework lies in the flexibility it allows individual authors: As long as these twelve major acts are treated, a writer is free to include more or less detail depending on one's intentions, be they primarily literary, didactic, historical, polemic, or otherwise. The author of the present biography, Tenzin Chöfey, uses this freedom to great effect. The jé khenpo, or chief abbot, of Bhutan, Tenzin Chöfey wrote this work during the golden age of Bhutanese literature, when biography was a major literary form. In his telling of the Buddha's life he endeavors at all times to tell a concise and quickly moving story that is at once exciting and emotionally engrossing. Occasionally he will stop to note an alternate version of a particular episode, or pause to speak directly to the reader about the proper way to pay reverence to the Buddha or to keep him in mind on holy days. Yet he never tarries long. Tenzin Chöfey is not interested in systematically laying out Buddhist doctrine or prescribing practice. His task is to tell a good story. The story may be quickly summarized. The Buddha, whom Tenzin Chöfey refers to as the Bodhisattva before his enlightenment in chapter 10, spends his penultimate life in the celestial realm of Tushita, where he teaches the gods and appoints a successor, the future Buddha Maitreya (chapter 1), to continue to instruct the gods after he departs. He then leaves Tushita Heaven to take form as a human child in an Indian queen, Mahamaya (chapter 2). After a painless and productive time spent teaching the gods from within his mother's womb, he emerges into this world in a virgin birth from his mother's right side (chapter 3). His first triumphant words as a baby suggest that the infant is certain of his future as a religious leader, while the predictions of the royal sages foretell that he is destined to become a great ruler. Whether he is to become a great king or a great religious master remains a matter of narrative tension, however, as the young hero seems to forget his preordained calling to the spiritual life. The young prince lives in the lap of luxury among his coterie of women, enjoying love, marriage, learning, the arts, and athletics—all of which he holds complete mastery over (chapters 4 and

5). Revulsion at these indulgences deep in the pleasures of the senses leads to the key moment in the Bodhisattva's young spiritual career, renunciation; chapter 6 treats his daring escape from the palace, and his refusal to fulfill the obligations of his station in life as a prince. Once away from the palace and ensconced within the wild of the forest, he begins to meditate. He begins by performing austerities—strenuous practices of mental and physical contemplative practice and self-denial—that inflict such profound injury to his body and his mind that he is unable to concentrate his mind at all, much less meditate (chapter 7). After six years he abandons these exhausting and ultimately futile self-defeating practices after he nearly drops from exhaustion and malnourishment, and sets about to find equilibrium between asceticism and overindulgence that will allow him to develop his mind. The Bodhisattva makes his final journey as an unenlightened being in chapter 8 when he walks to Bodhgaya, the site of his eventual realization under the Bodhi tree. But before this can happen he has one final task, an epic battle with the demon Mara, the personification of the fundamental challenges to human happiness: hatred, greed, and ignorance (chapter 9). After vanquishing Mara and his army, in a single, final night he completes the task that he set for himself eons ago, nothing less than a revolution in understanding. In the morning he sits, beholding the dawn's light with joyful, simple awareness (chapter 10). The Bodhisattva, now "the Buddha," rests with his hard-won achievement for a time, then embarks upon a forty-year teaching career that creates the Buddhist tradition (chapter 11). And yet, in the space of only a chapter, this career is over, and as he nears death, "the final passage from suffering," he bequeaths his teachings to his son, his close disciples, and all those who are ready to carry his tradition throughout India (chapter 12). The life of the Buddha in twelve acts has a long and rich history in Tibetan literature, stretching back centuries before the time of Tenzin Chöfê Gyel. Most Tibetan historians trace the form to the second-century Indian writer Nagarjuna, perhaps the most famous classical Indian Buddhist philosopher. Nagarjuna is best known for his work on the central concern of all Buddhist philosophy, the insubstantiality, or "emptiness," of physical and psychological reality. His fame as a philosopher and writer was so great for Tibetan intellectuals that just about any work could gain authority if attributed to him, and this is likely what happened with a short work in verse on the twelve acts of the Buddha. More historically cautious Tibetan intellectuals attributed the poem to the twelfth-century writer Jikten Gêfê npo. Be that as it may, the poem urges its readers to feelings of faith and humility that should, ideally, accompany the recollection of the Buddha's career. Nagarjuna's "Praise to the Twelve Acts" is included at the conclusion of *The Life of the Buddha*. THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA BY TENZIN CHÖFÊ GYEL The present work offers a

translation of one of the most engaging retellings of the Buddha's story in any language. It was composed in the middle of the eighteenth century, more than two millennia after the life of the Buddha Shakyamuni, by a prominent Bhutanese intellectual, Tenzin Chöfaygyel (in Tibetan, Rje Mkhän po Bstan 'dzin chos rgyal), who lived from 1701 to 1767. The full title of Tenzin Chöfaygyel's work is *The Life of the Lord Victor Shakyamuni, Ornament of One Thousand Lamps for the Fortunate Eon*. We may simply call it *The Life of the Buddha* and it is presented here in its entirety. Tenzin Chöfaygyel was a prominent leader in the Drukpa Kagyu ('Brug pa Bka' brgyud) school of Buddhism in Bhutan. He is most famous today in Bhutan for his service to the state as the tenth Lord Abbot (Rje Mkhän po) – the highest ecclesiastical authority – of Bhutan from 1755 to 1762 and for his influential history of Bhutan, *The Religious History of the South* (Lho'i chos 'byung), which he completed in 1759. He was ordained as a novice monk at the age of twelve in 1712, and received a first-class monastic education. By the time he was thirty-two he held major offices within the Bhutanese religious hierarchy, serving in the major religious and political centers of Bhutan – the palaces at Punakha and Wangdu, Tango Monastery, and elsewhere. He rose to the peak of the religious hierarchy in Bhutan when he was fifty-five years old, when he became responsible for the religious affairs of the state as Lord Abbot of Bhutan. In 1762, after eight years of government service, he retired from office and lived his final years in retreat. Tenzin Chöfaygyel was a prominent author in Bhutan's golden age of literary creativity. Although he was not the most prolific writer among the Lord Abbots of Bhutan – this distinction goes to his predecessor, the ninth Lord Abbot, Shakya Rinchen (1710–1759, Lord Abbot from 1745 to 1755) – by the time he was twenty-seven years of age, he was already a major biographer, having composed a lengthy narrative on the life of his teacher Tenzin Döfayndrup (1680–1728) upon the latter's death. He wrote several other works of narrative literature, a history of the Bhutanese state, and beautiful poetic liturgical works for monasteries and temples in central Bhutan.

interesting, easy to read....and contains information that says much about Buddha.....well worth the money !

I'm just getting into Buddhism and was really looking for more of a biography or dry factual account of the Buddha, but there was what appeared to be lots of embellishment here. A short read, enjoyable, but not what I was looking for.

Good!

A beautiful inspiring story, very easy to read, enjoyable and suitable for buddhists and those who are not. The point where this story fails is that it is very poorly detailed and not very historically reliable. The content of information is rather superficial and overloaded with mysticism and cosmic implications typical of the Mahayana tradition. I would also wish that Chogyel Rinpoche would have given us more detailed information about the second and third turn of the Wheel taught by the Buddha, but he says almost nothing about it. For me, this Bhutanese text becomes a complement to the other great biography edited by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli – The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon

great job!

nice book

There are quite a few ways people could engage with this book. If you are looking to learn about Buddhist ideas and practise (specifically directly applicable knowledge and technique) then I don't suggest you look elsewhere. But if, like myself, you hope to learn a little about the Tibetan (specifically Kagyu school) conception of Buddhism, then by all means read on. There is something intoxicating about the vision put forward by Chögyel, influenced as it is by the esoteric aspects of Hinduism and Bon Shamanism, and expressed in beautiful, poetic prose. While I gained some understanding through this wonderfully written and translated 18th Century text, I really could have used a comprehensive reading guide to unpack the countless allusions. As a stand-alone, many of the references are impenetrable. Having only lightly engaged with Tibetan Buddhist (most notably through The Monk And The Philosopher) I was slightly surprised by the intense focus on miracles, magical entities, demons, spirits, gods and alternate realms of existence. This side of Tibetan Buddhism holds an intense interest to me, and Chögyel's The Life Of The Buddha has helped fuel my interest into further research. A fairly quick and easy read. Worth your time.

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