

The Dual Nature of the Buddha's Physical Body as Depicted in the Pāli Canon: A Study of Human and Superhuman Attributes

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Abstract

The Buddha remains unique among the founders of the world's major religions in claiming to be neither a divine being nor a messenger of God, but rather simply a human being. While other religious figures are often depicted as gods or divinely inspired, the Buddha consistently claimed himself as a human, while also transcending ordinary human limitations. The Pāli Canon is the earliest textual source that provides foundational insight into the character of the Buddha, with both human and superhuman attributes. This research investigates how the Buddha's physical form is indicated in the Pāli Canon, in a subtle manner, striking a balance between human nature with transcendental qualities. In contrast, the Buddha is often depicted as a transcendental divine figure in

later Buddhist Texts including Pāli commentaries, Buddhist Sanskrit texts and various works belonging to Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. This diversity has resulted in enduring controversies about the Buddha's physical appearance. By employing a qualitative methodology of close textual analysis of relevant canonical passages this study intends to explore how the physical appearance of the Buddha was conceptualized in early Buddhism. However, while the exceptional superhuman characteristics are described, the Pāli Canon also indicates the Buddha as a figure of human dimensions, including descriptions of his physical requisites and limitations. This dual representation reflects how early Buddhism presents the Buddha as both a supremely enlightened teacher and a relatable human being.

Keywords: Composite Representation, Physical form of the Buddha, Pāli Canon, Early Buddhist Soteriology

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Introduction

The Buddha, also known as Siddhattha Gotama, was an Indian philosopher and the founder of Buddhism who lived in the 6th century BCE. Born into the royal Śākya clan, in a region spanning present-day Nepal and India, he was raised as a prince in luxury. Upon encountering the realities of human suffering, at the age of 29, he renounced the lay life and was ordained as an ascetic in search of truth and liberation from the cycle of rebirth and death (Saṃsāra). Afterward, he undertook six years of severe spiritual training and austerities he attained supreme enlightenment (Bodhi). Since then, he dedicated the rest of his life to teaching the Dhamma, the truth he had realized, laying the foundation for one of the major religions of the world: Buddhism.

The figure of the Buddha occupies a significant place among world religions—not only as a distinct philosopher, but also as a transcendent being whose human form has been deeply described and richly interpreted. According to the Pāli canonical literature, the Buddha's body is portrayed as more than just a biological entity; it serves to inspire devotion among followers while also elevating him to a supernatural stature. Nevertheless, the canonical texts present the Buddha as possessing both human qualities, such as birth, aging, illness, and death and superhuman attributes, such as the *mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇa*, or "symbolic physical marks of a great man," which in turn distinguishes him from ordinary human beings.

The descriptions of the Buddha's physical body found in Buddhist literature raise important questions about the exact nature of the Buddha, particularly the balance between his transcendence and humanity. As one of the earliest sources to address this topic, the Pāli Canon especially Suttas such as the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* and the *Brahmāyu Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* offers detailed accounts of the Buddha's transcendental physical appearance and the unique features that set him apart. At the same time, numerous other Suttas reveal the ordinary human characteristics the Buddha shared with others, such as aging, illness, and death.

This study seeks to explore the human and superhuman characteristics attributed to the Buddha's physical body in the canonical Pāli texts and how these details contribute to the understanding of conceptual the Buddha in early Buddhism within the broader context of Buddhist soteriology.

Research Problem

There is considerable scholarly debate regarding the physical appearance of the Buddha as portrayed in Buddhist literature. The Buddha's physical form is depicted with both human limitations and superhuman attributes. Mainly, when it comes to the Buddhist Sanskrit texts, the Buddha is portrayed as a superhuman figure beyond his human nature. The Pāli Canon can be identified as the earliest source that records the Buddha's appearance. In the Pāli texts, his appearance is depicted as a balance

between human and superhuman characteristics. Specifically, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis on how these seemingly contradictory characteristics coexist in the canonical texts and on the role of the Buddha as both a historical figure and an object of veneration.

Under this research, it is examined how the Buddha's human and superhuman physical characteristics are described in the Pāli Canon. Furthermore, in what ways do these descriptions shape the early Buddhist soteriology and philosophical understanding of the Buddha, and how the depiction of the Buddha's physical appearance in the Pāli canon reflects the tension between his human mortality and transcendental status are also examined in this study.

By addressing these questions, This study examines how the Buddha's human and superhuman physical characteristics are described in the Pāli Canon. It further explores how these descriptions shape early Buddhist soteriology and philosophical understandings of the Buddha.

Research Objectives

This study aims to identify and analyse the descriptions of the Buddha's human and superhuman physical characteristics as presented in the Pāli Canon. It also seeks to analyse the symbolic significance of these depictions within the context of early Buddhist soteriology. Significant attention is given to the selected passages of the Pāli Canon, which include details on both historical human existence and the transcendental

and enlightened features of the Buddha's physical appearance. Finally, this study seeks to examine how the concept of the Buddha is described in the Pāli canon as a human vs spiritual teacher and also as an object of veneration.

Research Methodology

Through this research, both the human and superhuman features attributed to the Buddha's physical appearance in the Pāli Canonical literature are examined with special attention to how these depictions contribute to shaping the concept of the Buddha in early Buddhism within the context of Buddhist soteriology. This research focuses exclusively on Pāli canonical literature and does not examine later works, including Pāli commentaries, Buddhist Sanskrit texts, and other works from various Buddhist traditions. By employing a qualitative methodology of close textual reading of key sections of the Pāli canon that deal with the physical form of the Buddha, this study aims to reveal how the concept of the Buddha is portrayed in early Buddhism, within the context of his human and transcendental physical appearance.

The Human Dimension of the Buddha's Physical Body in the Pāli Canon

The Buddha is proclaimed as the greatest teacher and a transcendent being among all sentient beings. Although Buddhist literature richly describes his supernatural powers, profound wisdom, and extraordinary spiritual qualities, he was also, fundamentally, a human being. Various passages in the Pāli Canon

make it clear that the Buddha was not a divine or celestial being, but a human with human needs and conditions.

The Buddha required all the basic physical necessities that ordinary human beings need. His body needed food, drinking water, shelter to protect himself, and medicine to recover from illness. His body underwent digestion and excretion, similar to other human beings. This human dimension of the Buddha is clearly reflected throughout the Pāli Canon.

Basic Physical Necessities

The Pāli Canon constantly mentions that the Buddha received food: he went on alms rounds and accepted offerings from the lay people. He also had clothing like other human beings to cover up his body. Furthermore, the Pāli Canon itself records that he stayed in various shelters, including monasteries, public rest houses, under trees, in caves, and in other suitable places. These accounts further reflect that despite his spiritual greatness; the Buddha lived within the human conditions and shared the physical realities of human life.

In the *Sahaseyya Sikkhāpada* (Bu Pc 5) of the *Pācittiya* section in the *Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga*, there is clear evidence that the Buddha experienced ordinary bodily functions, including excretion, like any other human being (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006, P. 56). According to the account, while journeying to Kosambi, the Buddha arrived at the monastery named Debara and stayed there overnight. Early the next morning, he went to the restroom

and, to ensure no one was present, cleared his throat, a gesture to alert anyone who might be inside. It was then that he realized Venerable Rāhula had spent the entire night in the restroom. At that time, Rāhula was still a novice (*sāmaṇera*), and the Buddha had previously established a disciplinary rule prohibiting fully-ordained monks from sharing a sleeping place with those who were not fully ordained. Rāhula, in strict adherence to this rule, had chosen the restroom as his sleeping place to avoid any breach of discipline.

This incident is significant as it reflects the human dimension of the Buddha. Similar to any other individual, he woke up in the morning and attended to his physical needs, including going to the restroom. Through this evidence from the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, it is clear that the Buddha lived within the boundaries of human physicality and required the same bodily requisites as other beings.

Moreover, in the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (*Pāsarāsi Sutta*) (MN 26), it is mentioned that the Buddha went to the Eastern Porch to bathe, and after bathing, he remained in his under-robe until his body had dried (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 394). This record clearly shows that the Buddha, like other human beings, took baths during his lifetime to clean his body and refresh himself. This implies that his physical body, too, required such care for its proper functioning. According to the *Papañcasūdanī*, the commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Sarathchandra, 2008, p. 179), it is further explained that, as a mark of a

Great Man, the Buddha had delicate and refined skin to which dust and dirt did not adhere. Therefore, he would wash his body without using soap or any cleansing agents. The commentary adds that the Buddha took such baths primarily for the purpose of adapting to seasonal changes (*utuggahaṇatthāya*). Similar instances of the Buddha bathing are also found in other suttas, such as the *Mahākaccāna Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (MN 133) of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 410) and the *Nāga Sutta* (AN 9.40) of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 106).

Diseases of the Buddha

It is a common characteristic of all physical bodies, including those of human beings, to be affected by various diseases and illnesses. Throughout his lifetime, the Buddha too experienced numerous ailments. This is evident in several parts of the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon. For instance, in the *Sakalika Sutta* (SN 1.38) of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 48), it is mentioned that the Buddha once injured his foot against a stone splinter. The resulting pain was described as intense, racking, sharp, piercing, harrowing, and disagreeable. Nevertheless, the Buddha endured it with mindfulness and clear comprehension, without becoming mentally distressed. The *Sutta* further notes that due to this pain, the Buddha had his outer robe folded in four, and he lay down on his right side in the lion posture with one leg overlapping the other. This account clearly illustrates

that the Buddha's physical body, like that of any other ordinary being, was susceptible to injury from sharp objects.

According to the *Devahita Sutta* (SN 7.13) of *Samyutta Nikāya* (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 313), on one occasion the Buddha was afflicted by winds and had developed some physical illness. Therefore, the Buddha asked Venerable Upavāna, who was the attendant to the Buddha at the time, to fetch some hot water for him. Then, as per the request of Venerable Upavāna, the Brahmin Devahita offered some hot water and a jar of molasses. Later, Venerable Upavāna went up to the Buddha and bathed him with the hot water. Then he stirred the molasses into the hot water and presented it to the Buddha. After that, the Buddha's illness has subsided.

As mentioned in the *Sāratthappakāsinī*, the commentary on the *Samyutta Nikāya* (Indarathana Thero, 2007, p. 262), it is further explained that when the Buddha was following six years of austerities, as he had very little food, such as a small amount of green gram juice, and no proper sleep, the wind element in his body became seriously disturbed. Even after enlightenment, although he had proper food occasionally, this illness might return from time to time.

According to the *Sanṅgīti Sutta* (DN 33) of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 354), once the Buddha instructed Venerable Sāriputta to deliver a Dhamma talk because he was experiencing back pain. Therefore, the Buddha left the Dhamma hall, folded

his outer robe in four, and lay down on his right side in the lion posture, with one leg overlapping the other, intending to rise at a certain time. Before that, after giving a Dhamma talk to the Mallas of the city of Pāvā, the Buddha told them that it was the proper time to leave and encouraged them to do so. He might have said so because he was suffering from a back pain.

It is evident from many other Suttas that the Buddha often asked one of his chief disciples to deliver Dhamma talks on his behalf due to his back pain. Similar incidents can be found in the Sekha Sutta (MN 53) of the Majjhima Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 28), the Avassutapariyāya Sutta (SN 35.243) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 356), the Paṭhama Naḷakapāṇa Sutta (AN 10.67), the Duttiya Naḷakapāṇa Sutta (AN 10.68), and the Nandaka Sutta (AN 9.4) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 220, 226, 378).

In the Jīvaka Vatthu of the Cīvarakkhandhaka (Kd 8) of the Mahāvaggapāli (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 692), it is recorded that on one occasion the Buddha's body was full of impurities, and he wished to take a purgative. Venerable Ānanda informed Jīvaka, the royal physician, about this. Jīvaka advised Ānanda to first oil the Buddha's body for a few days. Then, he gave the Buddha a mild purgative. After taking it, the Buddha bathed in hot water and purged. Jīvaka then instructed the Buddha not to consume mung-bean

broth until his body returned to normal.

In the Tatiya Gilāna Sutta (SN 46.16) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 168), it is mentioned that on another occasion the Buddha was sick and seriously ill. Venerable Mahā Cunda came to visit him, and the Buddha asked him to express his understanding of the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅgā). After listening to his reflections, the Buddha recovered from his illness. According to the Sāratthappakāsinī, the commentary on the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Indarathana Thero, 2007, p. 232), this illness was a fever caused by wind interacting with certain poisonous flowers.

In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) of the Dīgha Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 199), the Buddha clearly states that at the age of eighty, when the rainy season commenced while he was resided in the small village of Beluva, he fell seriously ill and was afflicted by dreadful pains, nearing death. In this Sutta, it is mentioned that the Buddha suffered from a disease called bloody diarrhoea (Lohitapakkhandikā). However, he endured the suffering calmly, with mindfulness and clear awareness. On that occasion, the Buddha told Venerable Ānanda: "I am now old, aged, burdened with years, having reached the end of life. I am eighty years old. Just as an old cart is kept going by being tied together with straps, so too, this body is kept going by being supported." This statement clearly shows that the Buddha's body towards the end of his life had become very weak and fragile.

The same Sutta further recounts that after the Buddha had accepted and eaten the meal offered by Cunda, the Smith, he fell severely ill with blood diarrhoea, again afflicted by intense pain, close to death (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 199). On his way to the city of Kusinārā, the Buddha became exhausted and asked Venerable Ānanda to fold his outer robe in four and spread it out, so he could sit and rest. He then expressed thirst and requested water. Venerable Ānanda initially hesitated, saying the nearby shallow stream had apparently been muddied due to the passage of five hundred carts and suggested instead the Kakutthā River, which was only with a short distance away with clean, cool and sweet water. The Buddha insisted three times that he fetch water from the shallow stream. This incident demonstrates that the Buddha also experienced severe thirst, just like ordinary human beings. Later, on multiple occasions during the journey, the Buddha became tired and lay down to rest, indicating his physical body is subjected to aging and illnesses.

Moreover, the Buddha, like ordinary beings, was also sensitive to physical comfort and discomfort. As recorded in the Jiṇṇa Sutta (SN 16.5) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 308), he once exchanged his own old, coarse, hempen rag robe—hard and rough to wear—with Venerable Mahākassapa's patched outer robe, which was soft and comfortable to the body. This further illustrates the human physical experiences that even the Buddha underwent during his lifetime.

The Superhuman Dimension of the Buddha's Physical Body in the Pāli Canon

The 32 Mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇa (Great Man's Signs)

According to the Pāli Canon, the Buddha possessed Thirty-two Signs of a Great Man (Mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇā) on his physical body. The Lakkhaṇa Sutta (DN 30) and Mahāpadāna Sutta (DN 14) of the Dīgha Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 236-287, 26-29), along with the Brahmāyu Sutta (MN 91) of the Majjhima Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 580-583), are among the earliest and most authoritative sources in the Pāli Canon that document these signs. According to the Buddha's explanation in the Lakkhaṇa Sutta, only two types of individuals possess these thirty-two signs: a Buddha and a Wheel-Turning Monarch (Cakkavatti Rāja). When these signs appear on someone's body, if he chooses to remain in household life, he is destined to become a universal monarch. However, if he renounces the world and adopts the life of a renunciant, he is destined to attain Buddhahood.

As mentioned in the above Suttas, the thirty-two signs of a Great Man (Mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇā) that the Buddha possessed are as follows:

1. Well-placed feet (suppatitṭhitapādo)

The Buddha had well-planted feet. He placed his foot on the ground evenly, lifted it evenly, and touched the ground evenly with the entire sole of his foot. This physical characteristic arose as a

result of his past lives as a human, during which he consistently and diligently engaged in skillful actions. These included virtuous conduct through body, speech, and mind; acts of generosity and sharing; observing moral precepts and the Sabbath; showing proper respect to his mother and father, ascetics, and brahmins; honouring elders within his family; and performing many other forms of wholesome behaviour.

2. Thousand-spoked wheels on the soles of the feet (*heṭṭhā pādatalesu cakkāni jātāni sahaṣṣārāni*)

On the soles of the Buddha's feet were thousand-spoked wheels, complete in every detail—with rims, hubs, and clearly defined divisions. He possessed this distinctive mark because, in his past lives as a human, he brought happiness to many. He eliminated threats, fear, and danger; offered just protection and security; and gave generous gifts adorned with all the appropriate offerings. He “conveyed happiness” (*sukhāvaho*), just as a wheeled cart conveys goods to others.

3. Long and deep heels (*āyatapaṇhi*)

The Buddha had long, well-formed heels, and his body was tall and straight-limbed. He acquired this sign because, in his past lives as a human being, he refrained from killing living beings, renounced the use of weapons, and lived with scrupulous kindness and deep compassion for all living creatures.

4. Long fingers (*dīghaṅguli*)

The Buddha had long, elegant fingers.

This mark was the result of his past lives, during which he gave up harming living beings, abandoned violence, and lived with gentleness and sympathy toward all sentient life.

5. Soft and tender hands and feet (*mudutaḷunahatthapādo*)

The Buddha's hands and feet were soft and tender to the touch. This characteristic arose from his actions in past lives as a human, where he brought people together through the four ways of inclusion: generosity, kind speech, helpful conduct, and impartiality.

6. Webbed hands and feet (*jālahatthapādo*)

The Buddha had hands and feet with fingers and toes connected by fine webbing. He acquired this sign because, in his past human lives, he unified people through the same four inclusive principles: giving, kind words, caring actions, and treating all equally.

7. High ankles (*ussaṅkhapādo*)

The tops of the Buddha's feet were arched, with high ankles. This mark arose from his past lives as a human being, during which he spoke meaningfully and with principle. He brought welfare and happiness to many by sharing beneficial teachings and guiding others toward the Dhamma.

8. Calves like an antelope (*eṇijaṅgho*)

The Buddha's calves were like those of an antelope—slender and graceful. He gained this mark because, in his past lives as a human being, he was

a dedicated and a thoughtful teacher of various professions, disciplines, moral conduct, and skills. He always considered, “How might they learn and practise quickly, without becoming exhausted?”

9. While standing upright, he can touch and rub the knees without bending (ṭhitako anonamanto ubhohi pāṇitalehi jaṇṇukāni parimasati parimajjati)

The Buddha was able to touch and rub his knees with both hands while standing upright without bending. He gained this ability because, in past lives, he deeply understood the people before him. He recognized both their shared and individual characteristics, and made just and appropriate distinctions: “This one deserves that; that one deserves this.”

10. Private parts ensheathed (kosohitavatthaguyho)

The Buddha’s private parts were naturally concealed. This arose from his actions in past human lives, where he reunited long-separated and estranged relatives, friends, and loved ones. He brought together mothers with children, fathers with sons and daughters, and siblings with one another—restoring relationships with joy and harmony.

11. Golden complexion; skin like gold (suvannaṇaṇṇo, kañcanasannibhattaco)

The Buddha had a golden complexion; his skin shone with the radiance of polished gold. This mark resulted from his past lives, during which he was gentle-natured and free of anger. Even

when severely criticized, he remained calm and kind, never displaying annoyance, hostility, or bitterness. He also offered soft, fine mats, blankets, and luxurious cloths made of linen, cotton, silk, and wool to others.

12. Fine skin; dust and dirt do not adhere (sukhumacchavi, sukhumattā chaviyā rajojallaṇi kāye na upalimpati)

The Buddha had delicate, refined skin—so fine that dust and dirt would not cling to his body. He gained this sign because, in past lives as a human being, he humbly approached ascetics and brahmins and inquired: “Sirs, what is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated and what should not? What leads to lasting harm and suffering? What leads to lasting welfare and happiness?”

13. Body hairs grow one per follicle (ekekaloṃo, ekekāni lomāni lomakūpesu jātāni)

The Buddha’s body hair grew one per pore, perfectly spaced and refined. This was the result of his steadfast commitment in past lives to refraining from lying. He always spoke the truth and remained truthful, being honest, dependable, and never deceiving the world with his words.

14. Hair stands upright, black, soft, curling to the right (uddhaggaḷoṃo, nīlāni, añjanavaṇṇāni, kuṇḍalāvattāni, dakkhiṇāvattakajātāni)

The Buddha’s body hair stood upright—black, fine, and curling gracefully to

the right. This characteristic arose as a result of his past lives, during which his speech was always meaningful and principled. He dedicated himself to educating others, bringing them welfare and happiness through the gift of the Dhamma.

15. Limbs straight like Brahmā's (brahmujugatto)

The Buddha's body was tall and proportioned, with limbs straight like those of Brahmā. This physical perfection was the result of his past lives as a human being, in which he gave up killing living beings, renounced violence in all forms—both rod and sword—and lived with scrupulous kindness and deep compassion for all creatures.

16. Seven prominent convexities (sattussado)

The Buddha had well-rounded, bulging muscles in seven parts of his body: both hands, both feet, both shoulders, and his chest. This distinctive physical trait was the result of his past lives as a human being, during which he generously offered delicious and nourishing foods—both cooked and fresh—as well as sweet and satisfying drinks. His bodily fullness and prominence arose as the karmic fruit of such acts of generosity.

17. Filled out between the shoulders (Citantaramso)

The Buddha's body was well-filled between the shoulders, signifying strength and balance. This mark

resulted from his past lives, where he consistently wished for the welfare, comfort, and protection of others. He thought: "How might they flourish—in faith, virtue, learning, generosity, Dhamma, and wisdom? In wealth, land, animals, and children? In families, friends, workers, and kin?"

18. Chest like a lion (sīhapubbaddhakāyo)

The Buddha's chest was broad and strong, like that of a lion. This characteristic reflects his past lives as a human being, during which he deeply cared for the welfare, comfort, and safety of others. He constantly thought: "How might they flourish in faith, ethics, learning, generosity, teachings, and wisdom; in wealth and grain, fields and land, birds and beasts, children and partners; in bondservants, workers, and staff; in family, friends, and kin?"

19. Body well-proportioned like a banyan tree; height equals arm span (nigrodhaparimaṇḍalo, yāvatakvassa kāyo tāvatakvassa byāmo, yāvatakvassa byāmo tāvatakvassa kāyo)

The Buddha's body was well-proportioned, with a circumference like that of a banyan tree, and his height equal to the span of his arms. This arose as in his past lives, he had the insight to understand the commonalities and differences among people. He recognized the unique needs of each individual and wisely made appropriate distinctions, thinking: "This one deserves that; that one deserves this."

20. Even and rounded upper back (samavattakkhandho)

The Buddha's torso was cylindrical, smooth, and full—not slender or skinny, but well-rounded and flourishing. This feature was the result of his past lives as a human being, where he cared deeply for the welfare and comfort of all beings. His thoughts consistently focused on how people might thrive in faith, ethics, learning, generosity, teachings, and wisdom, as well as in their material and social lives.

21. Extremely sensitive taste buds (rasaggasaggī)

The Buddha's taste buds were finely ridged and highly sensitive, spreading evenly from his throat. This sensitivity symbolized his past lives' compassion as a human being, during which he vowed never to harm any sentient being with fists, stones, rods, or swords.

22. Jaw like a lion (sīhahanu)

The Buddha had a powerful, well-formed jaw like that of a lion. This resulted from his past lives as a human being, when he refrained from frivolous or idle chatter. His speech was always timely, true, and meaningful—aligned with the Dhamma and discipline. He spoke at the right time, choosing words that were beneficial, concise, and purposeful.

23. Forty teeth (cattālīsadanto)

The Buddha had a full set of forty teeth. This trait arose because in his past lives, he refrained from divisive speech. He never repeated what he heard in one

place to sow discord in another. Instead, he brought together those who were divided, promoting harmony, delighting in unity, and speaking words that encouraged peace and reconciliation.

24. Even teeth (samadanto)

The Buddha's teeth were straight and evenly aligned. This was due to his right livelihood in his past lives. There, he refrained from falsifying weights, metals, or measures; bribery, fraud, cheating, and duplicity; mutilation, murder, abduction, banditry, plunder, and violence.

25. Teeth without gaps (aviraḷadanto)

The Buddha's teeth grew close together without any gaps. This was due to refraining from divisive speech. In his past lives, he never repeated in one place what he had heard in another to sow discord. Instead, he brought together those who were divided, fostering unity, rejoicing in harmony, cherishing concord, and speaking words that nurtured peace.

26. Very white teeth (susukkadāṭho)

The Buddha's teeth were even and perfectly white. This mark arose because, in his past lives as a human being, he gave up wrong livelihood and lived by right livelihood. He refrained from falsifying weights, metals, or measures; from bribery, fraud, cheating, and deceit; from mutilation, murder, abduction, banditry, plunder, and violence.

27. Large tongue (pahūtajivho)

The Buddha had a large and well-formed tongue. This was the result of his restraint from harsh speech in previous lives. He spoke gently—words that were pleasing to the ear, delightful, heartfelt, courteous, endearing, and agreeable to the people.

28. Voice like Brahmā or the sound of the cuckoo (brahmassarō, karavīkabhāṇī)

The Buddha's voice had the depth of Brahmā and the sweetness of a cuckoo's call. In past lives, he refrained from harsh and hurtful speech. Instead, he always spoke with gentleness, in a voice that was melodious, pleasant, and full of compassion—reaching directly to the hearts of listeners.

29. Eyes very dark in colour (abhinīlanetto)

The Buddha's eyes were deeply dark like sapphire, giving the impression of wide pupils and a warm, open gaze. This mark was born of his conduct in former lives, where he never glared, looked askance, or turned his gaze away. He approached others with sincerity and met them with kind, direct, and honest eyes.

30. Eyelashes like those of a cow (gopakhumō)

The Buddha's long, soft eyelashes were like those of a cow, enhancing the gentleness of his gaze. This feature arose because, in his past lives, he looked at others without hostility or cunning. He saw beings with loving-kindness, and his intentions were always

straightforward and pure.

31. A white, soft tuft of hair between the eyebrows (uṇṇā bhamukantare jātā odātā mudutūlasannibhā)

Between the Buddha's eyebrows grew a soft, white tuft of hair, fine like cotton-wool. This came to be because in his past lives, he was truthful, trustworthy, and never deceived the world with his words. He was a speaker of truth—firm and unwavering in honesty.

32. A protuberance on the crown of the head (uṇhīsasīso)

The Buddha had a cranial protuberance, resembling a turban. In former lives, he was the leader and guide in wholesome conduct—through body, speech, and mind. He inspired others through acts of generosity, moral discipline, observance of precepts, honoring parents and elders, and paying respect to ascetics and brahmins. Because he led others in righteousness, he received this highest mark of excellence.

When the Buddha was alive, various individuals approached him to examine whether he truly possessed the Thirty-Two Marks of a Great Man (mahāpurisalakkhaṇā). According to the Brahmāyu Sutta (MN 91) of the Majjhima Nikāya, a learned Brahmin named Brahmāyu sent his student Uttara to investigate these marks. Similarly, the Ambaṭṭha Sutta (DN 3) of the Dīgha Nikāya describes how a Brahmin named Ambaṭṭha examined the Buddha, and the Sela Sutta (Sn 3.7) of the Sutta Nipāta recounts a similar account involving Brahmin Sela. All of them confirmed

the presence of the Thirty-Two Marks, except for two: the ensheathed private parts (kosohitavatthaguyha) and the largeness of the tongue (pahūtajivha). In these instances, the Buddha revealed these marks using his psychic powers (iddhiyā), thereby confirming their presence.

Other Superhuman Characteristics of the Buddha

As stated in the Brahmāyu Sutta (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 586) and the Sāriputta Niddesa (Mnd 15) of Mahāniddesapāḷi in Khuddaka Nikāya (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 628), the Buddha's voice (brahmassara) possessed eight exceptional qualities:

1. Vissatṭha – distinct,
2. Viññeyya – intelligible or clear,
3. Mañju – sweet,
4. Savaṇīya – pleasant to hear,
5. Bindu – well-rounded,
6. Avisārī – flowing,
7. Gambhīra – deep,
8. Ninnādī – sonorous.

This voice was said to resemble that of the Great Brahmā (Mahā Brahmā) and was unafflicted by mucus or throat-related disorders.

According to the Gotama Buddhavaṃsapāḷi (BV 27) of the Buddhavaṃsa (Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series, 2006 p. 236), the

Buddha declared that his body emitted a fathom-deep halo (byāmapabbhā) that could rise up to sixteen cubits high. This is further illustrated in the Atthasālinī, the commentary to the Dhammasaṅgaṇī (Welagedara, 2008, p. 14-15), which states that in the fourth week after enlightenment, while the Buddha meditated in the jewel house (ratanaghara) and contemplated the Abhidhamma, a radiant six-coloured halo emerged from his body. These six colours were blue (nīla), yellow (pīṭa), red (lohita), white (odāta), orange (mañjetṭha), and a composite of the five (pabhārasavaṇṇa). This halo is likely the same one referenced in the Buddhavaṃsa.

Furthermore, the Mahāpadāna Sutta (DN 14) of the Dīgha Nikāya describes several superhuman features and events surrounding the birth of a Buddha. It is stated that, unlike ordinary women who carry a child for approximately nine months, the mother of a Bodhisatta carries him for a complete ten months. She gives birth while standing, not sitting or lying down, and the child is first received by celestial beings before being handed to human attendants. The Bodhisatta is born immaculately clean, untouched by uterine impurities such as mucus, blood, or amniotic fluid. To cleanse both mother and child, streams of hot and cold water descend from the sky. Remarkably, the Bodhisatta is also able to talk and walk immediately after birth, abilities not shared by ordinary beings.

Conclusion

When examining the concept of the Buddha, it is essential to consider both his physical appearance and his spiritual qualities. Across Buddhist traditions, there are ongoing discussions regarding the nature of the Buddha's physical form. Later Buddhist literature—such as the Pāli commentaries, Buddhist Sanskrit texts, and works from Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions—often portrays the Buddha as a transcendent, quasi-divine figure endowed with extraordinary powers that surpass ordinary human limitations.

In contrast, the Pāli Canon, as the earliest extant textual source, presents a more restrained and balanced depiction. While it does include references to superhuman features—such as the Thirty-two Marks of a Great Man and the Brahmā-like qualities of his voice—these elements are not consistently emphasized. Instead, the Buddha is frequently portrayed in recognizably human terms. He is depicted engaging in everyday activities such as eating, drinking, seeking shelter, wearing robes, bathing, and attending to bodily needs. Moreover, his body is subject to aging, illness, and ultimately death.

This study therefore suggests that many of the highly transcendental attributes elaborated in later Buddhist traditions are either absent or only marginally present in the Pāli Canon. Rather than presenting the Buddha primarily as a supernatural being, the canonical texts emphasize his humanity alongside his spiritual awakening, offering a more

grounded and historically plausible representation.

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