

Durga Kills the Buffalo Demon

The god Brahma granted a boon to Mahishasura, the buffalo demon, that no male could kill him. Thinking he was invincible, Mahisha led his demon army in a great battle with the gods and defeated them. Indra and the other gods ran to Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu and told them about the tumultuous battle and their defeat by the demons. From the anger of the gods a great energy emerged and took shape as the beautiful Goddess, Durga. All the gods gave her their weapons; the mountain god gave her a lion for her vehicle. Durga is therefore more powerful than all the gods together. The gods reminded her that they are male and cannot defeat the terrible Mahisha, and asked her to conquer the buffalo demon. She agreed, and the gods shout and cheer in anticipation of victory.



Mahisha heard the clamoring of the gods and sent his troops to investigate. They returned to tell the king of the demons about the magnificently beautiful and alluring Goddess they saw riding a lion. Enticed by their description, Mahisha asked Durga to marry him, but she refused him. The angry Mahisha then sent his troops to battle Durga's army. The Goddess's army defeated the demon troops, so Mahisha and Durga were left alone on the battlefield.

Mahisha ran to kill the Goddess's lion. Enraged, Durga threw her noose over the demon, but Mahisha had the ability to change his shape at will. He became a lion, so Durga cut off his head. He then became a man brandishing a sword, but Durga pierced him with arrows. Mahisha became an elephant and pulled Durga's lion with his trunk, but she cut off his trunk. Intoxicated with his power, the demon again assumed his buffalo form. Energized by her anger and the frenzy of battle, Durga stomped on Mahisha's neck and pierced him with her trident. The demon began to emerge from his own mouth, but the Great Goddess cut off his head and finally destroyed Mahisha. When the buffalo demon fell all the gods rejoiced and praised the Goddess, who promised to protect them forever.

This story is adapted by Elaine Craddock from the version translated and edited by Wendy O'Flaherty in *Hindu Myths*, 238-249.

The Birth of Ganesh



One day the Goddess Parvati wanted to take a bath. Having no servant of her own, she wanted someone to guard the door so she could bathe in privacy. So she rubbed some dirt off of her arm and formed a beautiful young boy. She installed him at the door and instructed him to keep everyone out while she bathed.

After a while the God Shiva came down from the mountain and wanted to see his wife Parvati. He tried to go into see her but the little boy at the door refused him entry. Shiva was enraged at being kept from seeing his own wife. He shouted angrily at the

boy, but he stood up to Shiva and continued to refuse him entry. So Shiva and his army fought with Ganesh, but the powerful son of Parvati would not be defeated. Finally, Shiva asked Vishnu to help him, so they went to battle with Ganesh until with Vishnu's help Shiva was able to behead Ganesh.

When Parvati found out that the gods had killed her son she was furious. In her grief and fury she resolved to destroy the world, and formed an army of saktis, or powers. At the Goddess's orders the army of saktis began to annihilate the world, including the gods. As the gods witnessed this devastation they felt hopeless and terrified, and decided to try to appease the angry goddess. Together with the sages they approached Parvati with reverence, propitiating her with praise and humility. Eventually Parvati responded with compassion to their entreaties, and told them that if her son was brought back to life she would stop her devastation.

Shiva told the gods to go north and cut off the head of whatever creature they first encountered. The first creature they encountered was an elephant, whose head they brought back and put on Ganesh's body. Through Shiva's power the boy was brought back to life as the beautiful and jolly god Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles. Parvati and all the gods rejoiced.

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THE DEFEAT OF MARA

The story of the Buddha, whose name means "the Enlightened One," is part history and part myth. The real Gautama Siddhartha was born in the 6th century B. C., a prince in the Shakya Kingdom of Northern India (now Nepal). Because he became a very great teacher of religious wisdom, his life story was reinterpreted in symbolic terms emphasizing his extraordinary nature.

Before he was born, his mother dreamed of a radiant white elephant descending from heaven and entering her right side. Because of this dream, the positions of the stars at the time of his birth, and the unusual marks on his body, the holy men at the palace foretold that this child would grow up to be a great leader of men. He would be either a powerful and influential king or a wise religious teacher. His father, a king himself and member of the warrior caste, wanted his son, of course, to be a king.

Therefore, from the time he was old enough to learn, Siddhartha's father gave him everything he needed to become a great king. He was given lessons in history and government and was trained in all the arts of warfare. When the proper time came, the king arranged a marriage for Siddhartha with the most beautiful and gentle princess in the land. The prince enjoyed his life in the palace, loved his wife, and for many years never questioned his father's rule, which forbade him to go outside the city walls.



The Buddha being born painlessly from his mother's side.

Then, one day when he was twenty-nine years old, he became restless and, disobeying his father, ordered his charioteer to drive him outside the city walls. For the first time in his life he encountered the suffering of mankind. He saw three things, each of which made him increasingly distressed and confused. He saw an old man bent over and barely able to shuffle along with his cane; a sick man moaning and groaning on his cot; and a corpse being carried off to the burning grounds. Each night he went home and thought about the things that he had seen. He realized then that he and his family could become sick, and that surely someday they would all become old and die. This made his heart sad and he began to worry about the suffering in the world.

On a fourth trip outside the city gates, he met a man with a shaved head who was dressed in a simple rough cloth and was carrying a begging bowl. When asked, the man answered that he was called "a homeless one." He had given up the world and its ways, his home and family, to seek freedom from the miseries of the world. The prince then decided that he would give up his palace life, his wife and newly born son, his jewels and silken clothes, and would become himself "a homeless one." That night he silently bid farewell to his sleeping wife and son and departed from the rich comforts of palace life.

Spirits of the earth held up the horse's hooves so no one would be awakened as he rode out of the city. When he was well outside the city walls and at the edge of the forest, he stopped and got off his horse. Using his sword, he cut off his long, flowing hair. Then he took off his heavy jewels and rich clothes. He gave these things to his charioteer and asked him to deliver a message to his father and family, saying that he had departed from his worldly life. He was going to live with the other hermits and yogis to seek liberation from the miseries of this world.



Siddhartha leaving his father's palace.



Fasting Siddhartha

Siddhartha studied with various Brahman wise men in the forest, but he became dissatisfied with their theories and talk. Then, he moved to another area and with the yogis he there underwent great trials. He would sit for long hours under the sun in uncomfortable positions. He fasted for days and weeks, becoming very thin and feeble, but still he did not become enlightened. Just as the teachings of the Brahmans had led him into greater confusion, now the pain he felt from these trials distracted him from his meditations. He decided to leave the yogis' mountain retreat because it was disconnected from the life of men and the problems he was trying to solve.

As Siddhartha walked near a town a young girl with a bowl of rice cooked in milk saw him. Her heart went out to this weak and hungry-looking person, and she offered him her food. Gratefully he took it and knew as he felt this food nourish his body that this was the right path to take. To deny the body, to deny the life-force itself, was not the way to bring understanding or relief from suffering. Feeling stronger, he became determined to sit in quiet meditation until he understood the cause of worldly misery.

With resolution as his only companion and support, he set his mind firmly toward the task of enlightenment and went to the foot of a Bodhi tree. Sitting on some fresh grass, he adopted the cross-legged position and vowed that he would not rise from that place until he had achieved his purpose. It is said that the world rejoiced when he made this vow and that the birds circled in the clear sky above him.

But Mara, the demon King of Passions, trembled and was afraid. His sons and daughters asked Mara why he was distressed. He answered: "Over there sits a great holy man. He has no weapons but is armed only with his vow and resolution, and he intends to destroy me. But I shall go to him and, as a swollen current breaks the banks of a mighty river, so shall I cause him to break his vow."

First, Mara sent his lovely daughters to tempt the meditating Siddhartha. But when their beauty and seductiveness did not stop him, Mara sent his army of horrid-looking demons. Some had animal heads; some had extra eyes and arms. They were equipped with weapons of all kinds: spears and arrows, swords, clubs, and stones. Hurling these weapons and making fearsome noises they charged the meditating Siddhartha, but he did not stir and the power of his concentration turned their weapons into flowers which dropped harmlessly to the ground.

Then Mara sent whirlwinds and earthquakes, but Siddhartha sat firm and cross-legged beneath the tree.



The temptations of Mara's hosts and Siddhartha touching the Earth, asking her to be his witness.

Finally, Mara called out to Prince Siddhartha, "If you are indeed so good and worthy of enlightenment, give me some proof." Siddhartha put out his hand and touched the earth, and Mother Earth herself spoke in an earth-shaking voice, saying, "I am his witness." At that moment Mara's power was weakened.

No longer bothered with doubt or sorrow, anger, fear, or desire, Siddhartha's mind grew clear and a great peace came over him. Seeking one last time to break the Buddha's concentration, the demon called forth torrential rains; the serpent king, wanting the prince to succeed in his task, curled himself underneath the prince and raising him up out of the mud, spread his broad hood over the meditating prince to protect him from the falling rain. Siddhartha never broke his concentration. He sank into a deep trance which lasted for forty-nine days. In this time the meaning of all things became clear to him. He had reached the state of perfect enlightenment. However, with this enlightenment there came upon the Buddha a sense of great isolation: how could it be possible to share this wisdom with men less wise than himself? Would anyone understand what he had to say? But, no sooner had this thought occurred to him than he felt great compassion for all mankind. He knew he must try to the best of his ability to teach his understanding of the Four Noble Truths (the causes of suffering) and the Eight-fold Path of Salvation to all who would listen. So, once again he set off with resolution, this time to the Deer Park of Sarnath, where he would preach his first sermon.

Story adapted from the version in *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita.