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THE BUDDHA

A Very Short Introduction

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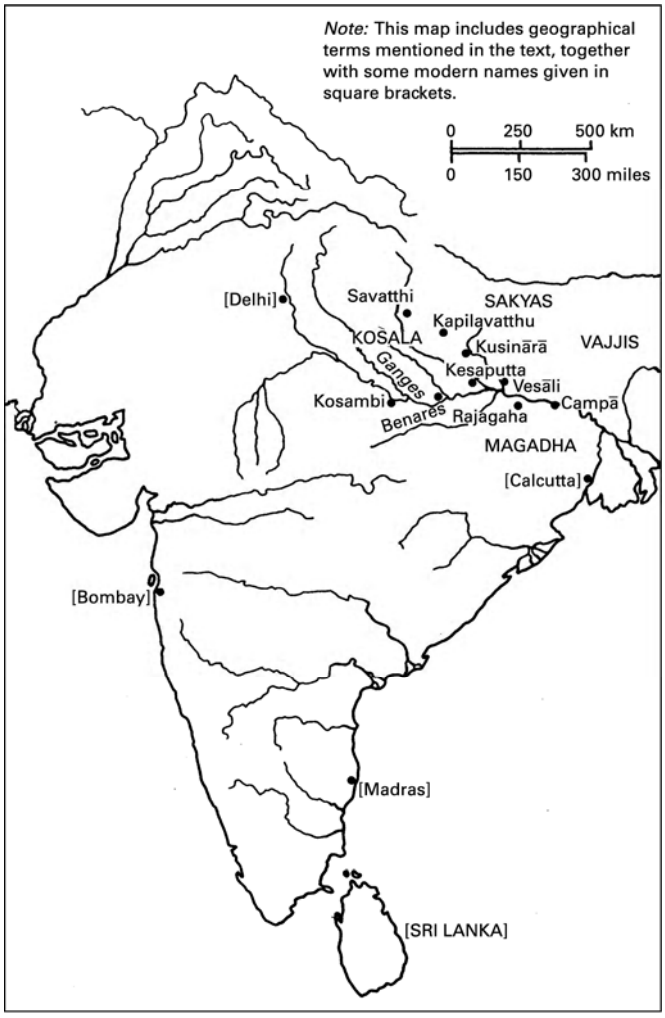
Preface

Until the last century the Buddha was probably the most influential thinker in human history. His teaching prospered throughout the subcontinent of India for more than 1500 years, and in that time it changed and diversified at least as much as Christianity did in its first 1500 years in Europe. By the thirteenth century AD, when the power of Buddhism was broken in its original home, it had long since spread to Tibet, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Sri Lanka, and it was making its way into South-East Asia. Buddhism's history in those countries was as complicated as it had already been in India.

I have not attempted to explain such a vast matter in this short book. I have only recounted the life of the Buddha and described the genesis and significance of his teaching. I have tried, however, to phrase this account so the reader will be able to see why Buddhism moved so easily across continents and survived so well through the centuries.



Map 1. Northern India and Nepal.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Among the ruins of Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of Sri Lanka, there rests alone on a pedestal above the grass a seated image of the Buddha in stone, slightly larger than life. The statue is conventional, probably more than a thousand years old, of a type found throughout Buddhist Asia. The legs are folded in meditation, the hands laid one upon the other in the lap. Buddhists hold that it was in this posture, seated beneath a tree more than 2500 years ago, that the Buddha was awakened, attaining decisive knowledge of the human condition and the unshakeable certainty that he was released from its suffering.

In its excellence, however, the Anuradhapura image is far from conventional. The back and head are disciplined and upright; but the arms are relaxed and the face reposes in tranquillity. The figure seems intelligent and serene, wed perfectly to the unmoving granite. Standing before it an elderly English socialist told me that in the whole mess of human history *this* at least – the statue and all it stands for – was something of which we could be proud. He said that he had no use for religion, but that he felt he had unknowingly been a follower of the Buddha all along.

An intensely private reflection, its disclosure prompted perhaps by the power of the figure: but what is remarkable is that it should be found in

so many others. Here, for example, is the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, by no means a Buddhist, writing in a similar vein:

> what have I learnt from the masters I have listened to, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have investigated, and that very science in which the West takes such pride? Simply a fragmentary lesson or two which, if laid end to end, would add up to the meditations of the Sage at the foot of his tree.

This testifies to the fascination the Buddha still holds for us. Is it justified? What does an Oriental seer, born in the middle of the first millennium before Christ among historical circumstances and a culture so different from our own, have to offer such very modern thinkers? This is the first question I have tried to answer.

And I have tried to answer it by writing a biography of the Buddha. That this is a reasonable strategy is by no means obvious, for history is full of figures whose significance lies very little in their personal lives and very much in their teachings alone. But the Buddha is peculiar in this regard, for his teaching and his life are intimately and inextricably mingled.

A brief biography

Let me illustrate this from traditional accounts of the Buddha's life, which have exerted tremendous influence over Buddhists and are now widely available in European languages. The Buddha was born the son of a king, and so grew up with wealth, pleasure, and the prospect of power, all goods commonly desired by human beings. As he reached manhood, however, he was confronted with a sick man, an old man, and a corpse. He had lived a sheltered life, and these affected him profoundly, for he realized that no wealth or power could prevent him too from experiencing illness, old age, and death. He also saw a wandering ascetic, bent on escaping these sufferings. Reflecting on what he had seen, he reached the first great turning-point of his life:

against the wishes of his family he renounced home, wife, child, and position to become a homeless wanderer, seeking release from this apparently inevitable pain.

For some years he practised the trance-like meditation, and later the strenuous self-mortification, which were then current among such wanderers, but he found these ineffective. So he sat down to reflect quietly, with neither psychic nor physical rigours, on the common human plight. This led to the second great change in his life, for out of this reflection in tranquillity arose at last awakening and release. He had 'done what was to be done', he had solved the enigma of suffering. Deriving his philosophy from his experience he then taught for forty-five years, and his teaching touched most problems in the conduct of human life. He founded an order of monks who were to free themselves by following his example, and they spread his teaching abroad in the world. He eventually died of mortal causes, like others, but unlike others he was 'utterly extinguished' (*parinibbuto*), for he would never be reborn to suffer again.

There are good reasons to doubt even this very compressed account, but at least the outline of the life must be true: birth, maturity, renunciation, search, awakening and liberation, teaching, death. This biography, with the two marked transformations, the renunciation and the awakening, gave the Buddha and his followers the dramatic plot with which to illustrate their belief and the psychological and philosophical model on which to found their thought. Dramatically the action centres on spiritual changes achieved by heroic personal application, while philosophically it centres on discoveries made within the Buddha's own mind and body.

Hence he said, 'it is within this fathom-long carcass, with its mind and its notions, that I declare there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world' (S I 62). Within these bounds what he suffered was suffered in

common with all mortal beings. For all mortals, in his words, 'birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering.' In his view these inescapable and pressing facts were discoverable by anyone through introspection into their own experience. Similarly the means of release were available to everyone. The meditation methods which he developed, for example, are based on such simple and available phenomena as one's own breathing. The morality he espoused was founded in clear and practical principles derived from his own life. The Buddha's laboratory was himself, and he generalized his findings to cover all human beings.

So the second question is, how did the Buddha change and develop? For it is this development which is, in one way or another, the subject of his philosophy. It is a question which has been of central concern to Buddhists, and it is one which the Buddha himself frequently answered. Sometimes he answered it directly by recounting part of his life. Elsewhere he answered it indirectly by stating that if one did X, then the following deleterious consequences would ensue, but if one did Y, then the consequences would be wholesome and conducive to liberation. Behind this lay the assumption that the Buddha knew this because he had witnessed the alternatives. He required of himself, as of his monks, adherence to one rule of evidence: 'that which you affirm [must be] that which you have realized, seen, known for yourself' (M I 265).

It does not follow from the autobiographical nature of the Buddha's philosophy, however, that an account of the Buddha alone would be adequate to explain it. For despite his taste for solitude he was part of his society and its history. He lived amid great and decisive social and intellectual changes, changes whose fruits he inherited and to whose further course he contributed substantially. His thought was revolutionary, but it was a revolution which had already been in the making for a long time. The image I have in mind is that of a wave of change which built up slowly, over centuries, touching every aspect of the lives of the ancient Indians. The Buddha was elevated to the crest of

this wave, and he enjoyed a wide view across human affairs. The problem is to assess how much of his vision he owed to his elevation, to his position in history and to the work of his predecessors and contemporaries, and how much to the keenness of his own sight.

The sources

What evidence do we possess to recount the life and circumstances of a man who lived 2500 years ago? For the life of the Buddha we rely almost entirely on the Buddhist scriptures, preserved in many oriental languages, which have at least the advantage of being very extensive. Those portions which are oldest and which most narrowly concern the Buddha, the *Basket of Discourses* (*Suttapiṭaka*) and the *Basket of the Disciplinary Code* (*Vinayapiṭaka*), take up several library shelves in their various versions. Most of these, furthermore, are represented as being utterances of the Buddha, each spoken on a particular occasion in a particular place. The intention of the Buddha's followers was evidently to preserve the actual words of their teacher in their historical setting.

How well did they achieve this intention? Let us look first at the formation of the Buddhist canon. The canonical discourses take various forms: sometimes they are dialogues into which the Buddha entered with followers of other teachings; sometimes they are answers to specific questions brought to him by his own monks; sometimes they are lessons directed to his monks; and occasionally they are sermons addressed to the laymen who did not leave their homes but were content to support those who did.

The monks were chiefly responsible for preserving this teaching, since it was largely directed to them. The Buddha and his monks were peripatetic for much of the year, but gathered together in separate monasteries for the four months of the rainy season retreat, during the North Indian monsoon. While wandering the Buddha and his monks spread the message abroad, but while in retreat they discussed and

rehearsed the teaching. Indeed, a few of the canonical discourses consist of discussions between monks. Throughout the canon are found slightly different versions of some doctrine or other, and this is no doubt partly attributable to elaborations at the hands of the monks, either during the Buddha's lifetime or after his death. But it also seems likely that the Buddha sometimes changed or improved his teachings, and that the dispersal of the monks allowed both earlier and later versions to be preserved among them, each in a different place.

It was after the Buddha's death that the real work of preservation began. The monks probably held a council shortly after that event, and almost certainly another was held a century later. At these councils they made an effort to establish or authenticate the then extant accounts of the life and teaching of the Buddha, and they were aware of systematic rules governing the acceptance or rejection of a discourse as authentic. Moreover the monks brought to the task of preservation a number of devices. They adopted from the culture around them or developed themselves methods of recitation and memorization. They gave many of the discourses a repetitious and formulaic shape, which facilitated such memorization. They used poetry, which was probably sung – though the Buddha may have already done this as well. And, most important, they divided the discourses into distinct but largely overlapping bodies of material, each of which became the responsibilities of certain monks to memorize and pass on. The scriptures were not written down until three or four hundred years after the death of the Buddha, but these oral and social methods ensured that his words were probably kept better than our print-bound culture would recognize.

This is not to say that the canonical materials are wholly faithful. Some of the Buddha's words were lost, others misunderstood. Some became formulae which were repeated in inappropriate contexts. Moreover the monks added a good deal themselves, and in particular the figure of the Buddha tended to be magnified. Indeed none of the languages in which

the canon now appears was the language of the Buddha himself, whatever it was, though one of them, Pali, is probably very close to it. From internal evidence it seems certain that these oldest texts had crystallized into roughly the shape in which we have them by the time of the second council or shortly thereafter. So at best we can hope to see the Buddha about as well as did his own disciples three generations after his death.

However, it took many Western scholars, working for more than a century, to conclude this much. For some time not too long after the second council the Buddhist order was riven by schisms, and as each group moved apart it preserved the old texts, but rearranged them. And indeed the principle throughout Buddhist history was that, whatever rearrangements occurred, nothing was discarded. But to the old material different schools added new material, and the now expanded canons of each group represented different emphases, and new doctrines, in one or other of the related North Indian languages of Pali, Sanskrit, or one of the Prakrits. These ancient developments took place within the Indian subcontinent, and of this period are preserved in an Indian language only the Pali canon in its entirety and some fragments in the other languages.

But much of the other material still exists in translation. For still later, slightly less than a thousand years after the death of the Buddha, Buddhism moved to China, and subsequently to Tibet, and a great deal of the material which has now been lost from Indian languages was translated into Chinese and Tibetan and thereby preserved. In these translated canons, however, the old teachings were now quite surrounded, and in effect obscured, by teachings different from those espoused by the Buddha. The Buddhist world, as Western scholarship found it in the nineteenth century, presented practices and opinions at least as varied among themselves as those among Christian churches.

It at first seemed easy to accept that the Pali canon, preserved by the

Theravadins (School of the Elders) of Sri Lanka Burma and Thailand, was the oldest and most genuine. This is what Theravadins themselves claimed. Since then, however, individual scholars have learned the Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese which are required to check such claims, and quite ancient texts have come to light from Central Asian hoards. It now appears that, though the Pali texts are still the single most useful source on the Buddha, in many respects they can be corrected and improved by readings from the Central Asian finds or from Tibetan and Chinese. Certainly the Tibetan and Chinese sources are indispensable for establishing what the oldest sources are. In this book the translations and terms are from the Pali sources, but I have used the conclusions of scholars working in other languages to supplement them.

These texts have many virtues, but they are peculiarly weak on one account, the facts that would make up the Buddha's *Who's Who* entry. Most troublesome is the Buddha's chronology. The scriptures give us licence to accept that he lived to a ripe age, eighty years, and that he taught for forty-five years. But the actual dates are another matter. Sources preserved in Sri Lanka and corrected by Western scholars yield a date for the Buddha's death in 483 BC. Sources preserved in Chinese suggest 368 BC. The question is still being actively debated, and will probably go on being debated, for in either case the argument depends upon a long and tenuous chain of inference. The problem illustrates a trait characteristic of the ancient Indians altogether: that they were very little interested in chronology but much exercised over philosophy. Hence we are in the paradoxical situation of having a better idea of what the Buddha thought than of what century he lived in.

The social world of Buddha's India

This is not to say, however, that the sources are weak on history. The Buddha was a practical man who often spoke through concrete examples from the life around him, and this reveals a great deal about

his world. The monks' efforts to conserve the Buddha's words in a realistic setting have the same effect. We learn about what occupations people pursued, how people classified each other, what kinds of political arrangements there were, and what religious institutions were current. It is possible to construct quite a rich and complex picture of the Buddha's India, a picture that can be corroborated from the scriptures of the Buddhists' rivals, the Jains. Indeed it may be said that with the Buddha India first enters history, for in any narrative account it is only at the Buddha's time that detail becomes clear enough to write with confidence of particular kings and states, particular economic arrangements, particular religious teachers and their doctrines.

This relatively static picture can moreover be set in motion by comparison with other sources. For the period preceding the Buddha we have the Sanskrit texts of the Brahmanical tradition (what was later to become Hinduism proper), the *Brahmaṇas* and *Upanishads*. These possess little of the revealing detail of the Buddhist scriptures, since they are the technical literature of a sacrificial, and later an esoteric, cult; nor do they refer to a single period, having been composed over many centuries. But they do testify that the earlier society was quite different in kind from that of the age of the Buddha. These differences are moreover confirmed by the archaeological record. A few centuries before the Buddha there were no cities proper and no states, only a series of small warrior principalities. At the time of the Buddha there were both cities and states, and a century or two after his death North India was to support the Mauryan empire, the greatest state in the subcontinent until the British Raj. The Buddha lived amidst the rise of Indian civilization, just as Socrates lived amidst the rise of Western civilization in ancient Greece.

There also developed in ancient India new and enduring habits of thought, which are in some respects so similar to our own that we have difficulty recognizing them at all. Here the comparison with ancient Greece is especially helpful, for only by looking back to that period of

our own history do we find these habits actually being formed. We now take for granted a language and a way of thinking in which we can talk about human societies in general, or discuss what a universal morality might entail. We are acquainted with the notion that fundamental questions may be asked about ourselves, and that the answers might apply broadly to people in quite different situations. Moreover we easily suppose that such matters can be discussed according to impersonal criteria of truth available to anyone. In sum, we are familiar with thought which is general not particular; abstract not concrete; and argued rather than certified by supernatural sanction, illustrated by customary imagery or sanctioned by tradition.

But when we look to Socrates and his predecessors in Greece, and to the Buddha and his forebears in India, these habits seem fresh and newly acquired. This does not mean that the earlier Greeks or Indians were unable to consider their nature or their society. They certainly did so. But they did so in a way that constrained their reflections within the narrow viewpoint of their own group. They spoke best for themselves and to themselves, and only someone born within the society could fully participate in the fruits of their thought. For their thought was symbolic, in the specific sense that it evoked or expressed – rather than questioned or explained – the shared experience and values of a relatively small-scale community. So long as that experience was shared, and so long as that community did not embrace too many disparate elements, there was no reason, indeed no occasion, for questioning the values.

But with the rise of cities and the growth of a complex, cosmopolitan community, experience was no longer shared nor values unquestioned. The easy correspondence between traditional thought and life no longer held. There were substantial changes in the forms of common life, and with those changes arose the possibility that those forms could be reconsidered, discussed, and reasoned over; people could now philosophize about them. This is the import of Cicero's dictum about

Socrates, that he 'first called philosophy down from the skies, set it in the cities and even introduced it into homes, and compelled it to consider life and morals, good and evil'. Much the same could be said of the Buddha. Neither was much interested in God, gods, or the supernatural, but both were passionately concerned with the ends and the conduct of human life.