

CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE BUDDHA

Those who are more familiar with Christianity than with any other faith often find Buddhism a very strange religion. It does not appear to have a God. It denies that there are eternal souls. The Buddha was merely a man who accomplished nothing that could not be achieved by any other mortal. Men and women, apparently, must save themselves, rather than be saved by the Buddha. Its constant stress on 'suffering' often caused western missionaries to preach that Buddhism only offered despair, whereas Christianity offered hope. If all this is so, it may be asked, how can Buddhism even count as a religion at all?

To some, the notions of 'no self', 'no God', 'no external saviour' appeal. To others, they appeal, and as a result these westerners find themselves drawn to Buddhism. Those who come do so for different reasons. Since Buddhism occurs in many varieties, it can satisfy many different spiritual needs which people feel.

It is the life of the traditional Theravadin monk which has captured the imagination of many popular writers. However, Theravada Buddhism is only one Buddhist tradition. The Mahayana forms include the Tibetans, with their complex and highly symbolic rituals, and with the Dalai Lama as their spiritual head. Then there is the Zen Buddhist, who tries to overcome the intellect by attempting to solve seemingly senseless puzzles. There are the 'Pure Land' sects, which made the buddhas objects of devotion, and there are the Nichiren sects of Japan, who seem to have material goals rather than 'other-worldly' ones.

Some seekers are attracted by Buddhism's meditative practices. Some have felt that elements of its teaching, such as rebirth, made sense to them. Others are attracted to the elaborate ritual devised by the Tibetans. Some find their way in through the peace movement, while, by contrast, others have studied oriental techniques of self-defence such as aikido or karate, and felt that they wanted to know more about the religion which is associated with them. For some western Buddhists it was not really a matter of conversion at all, they will say; when they discovered Buddhism, they recognised in its teachings something which they had believed all along: it was as if they had always been Buddhists without knowing it.

A few westerners turn to Buddhism in order to cope with emotional problems such as anxiety and depression. Some find solace and tranquillity in Buddhism, but others who are under emotional stress sometimes find the unfamiliar atmosphere of a Buddhist meditation hall a frightening experience. For this reason Buddhists sometimes actively discourage such people from taking up Buddhism, although most will try to give them the support they need. Religion is more than therapy; while most religions aim to alleviate human misery in any form, religion is for the healthy as well as the sick. To be medically sound is not necessarily to be spiritually advanced. Buddhism aims at a high spiritual goal which involves one's whole life, and is not just a technique for enabling an anxious student to pass an exam, or for injecting half an hour of calm into an otherwise hectic existence.

Although Buddhism attracts many westerners, the majority of Buddhists in the West are immigrants from Buddhist countries, and it is estimated that there are some 100,000

Buddhists in Great Britain, of which at least 20,000 are westerners. Whatever their differences, all Buddhists are familiar with the story of Siddhartha Gautama and how he became the Buddha by gaining enlightenment.

The Story of the Buddha

It was the sixth century BCE when Buddhism began in North India. At that time the brahmins (the highest caste, to which the teacher-priests belong) were studying and teaching scriptures known as the Vedas — hymns in praise of the gods — and performed animal sacrifices on behalf of the other, lower castes. India abounded with sages and scholars, who asked very profound questions about the world and about human existence. Was the world eternal or not? Was the soul distinct from body? What happens to the soul after death?

There was a bewildering variety of religions, but serious seekers were already familiar with ideas which were to become an integral part of Buddhism: nirvana (liberation), yoga (spiritual path), samsara (rebirth), dharma (teaching). Even the word 'buddha' was already familiar, meaning one who had sought and obtained spiritual awakening. It was in this environment that Siddhartha Gautama, the boy who was to become the Buddha, was born.

What follows is the legend of the Buddha. How much of it is literally true is anyone's guess: we cannot be sure, and, unlike the many Christians who have embarked on the 'quest for the historical Jesus', Buddhists are not particularly interested in discovering how much of the 'story line' is correct. More important is what the story teaches, and how it can help spiritual progress.

Siddhartha Gautama, it is said, was an Indian prince. Before he was born, his mother, Mahamaya, had a dream: a beautiful white elephant entered her womb through her side. When the brahmin teachers were asked what the dream meant, they replied that she would bear a child who would become either the king of all the world, or else an enlightened sage. Ten lunar months later, she gave birth to a son. When he was five days old, 108 brahmins were invited to the name-giving ceremony: of these brahmins, eight were experts at interpreting auspicious marks on a young child's body. Seven of them predicted that if he remained in the palace he would become a world ruler, and that if he left home he would become a buddha. The eighth brahmin was more definite: Prince Siddhartha was most certainly destined to become a buddha.

Since seven out of the eight brahmins had predicted two possible destinies for Siddhartha, his father, King Suddhodana was concerned lest the young prince should leave home to take up a religious life. Siddhartha was therefore enabled to enjoy every luxury that the palace could afford, and care was taken that the young prince should not see any sign of suffering or decay. It is even said that when flowers began to wither in the palace they were immediately removed so that Siddhartha would see no sign of unsatisfactoriness.

One day, Siddhartha persuaded his servant Channa to take him on an excursion outside his princely home. This journey proved to be a milestone in his life, for as he and his servant rode they had three encounters: first an old man; second, a sick man lying by the roadside; and finally a funeral procession. (In funeral processions in India it is customary to carry the corpse exposed, and Siddhartha would therefore have seen the dead body.) Siddhartha had never witnessed anything like this before, and Channa had to

explain to him that old age, sickness and death were not only part of human existence, but conditions that Siddhartha himself would experience one day.

All this came as a great shock to Siddhartha. In deep thought he returned homewards, pondering on the nature of human existence which permitted such things. There was a banquet in the palace that night, but Siddhartha refused to attend, preferring to remain in his own room.

The following day, Siddhartha ventured out once more, this time to the market square. There he experienced his fourth decisive encounter. There was a wandering holy man, who had renounced the world, begging for food amongst the passers-by. He had no material possessions, and wore nothing but rags; yet he looked serene, as if he had found inner peace. There and then Siddhartha decided that, since he had not experienced inner peace in the palace, he would give up his princely existence, and take up the life of a wandering ascetic.

That night, when his wife and young child were asleep, Siddhartha persuaded Channa to mount their horses and ride out of the palace grounds. When they had ridden far into the forest, Siddhartha removed his jewels, exchanged his clothes with Channa's, and parted company with him. (Westerners are sometimes shocked that the Buddha-to-be abandoned his wife and child. It is to be remembered that we are in the realms of legend here, not history, and Buddhists with whom I have discussed this point state that he must have discharged his parental responsibilities before his departure. The eastern family unit is a larger one than the western 'nuclear' family, and Siddhartha's family was rich, so he did not leave his wife and child destitute.)

Siddhartha wandered for six years as a religious ascetic. He met five other world-renouncing monks, who recommended severe austerities. According to one version of the legend, Siddhartha ate nothing more than one grain of rice per day! Yet the austere life did not provide Siddhartha with what he was seeking: he still felt that he had not found inner peace. In fact, austerity was beginning to affect the health of these wandering monks: they became as thin as skeletons and could scarcely walk. Siddhartha finally lost consciousness; the other five thought that he was dead, but he revived, and explained that he no longer believed that this was the path to enlightenment.

Siddhartha began to eat again. The other monks accused him of having given up the religious life, and abandoned him. Siddhartha was convinced that the way to gain inner peace was by avoiding extremes: he had experienced a life of luxury in the palace; he had experienced a life of austerity in the forest. Neither had brought the enlightenment which he sought. Siddhartha resolved that, having adopted a 'Middle Way', he would sit under a pipal tree and meditate, not moving from the spot until he had gained enlightenment.

He meditated for seven days, during which he was attacked by Mara (roughly, a Buddhist counterpart to Satan), who employed his armies against Gautama in a futile attempt to distract him from gaining enlightenment. Mara's armies represented the vices of lust, hunger and thirst, craving, sloth, fear, doubt, hypocrisy, hopes of earthly honours, and self-exaltation. However, by his previous existences Gautama had acquired sufficient virtues to withstand such temptations, and continued in meditation until he had reached nirvana.

Gautama gained many startling insights during this period of meditation. He received knowledge of all his former existences. (It is to be remembered that Buddhists hold that one is reborn many times before gaining enlightenment.) Some 530 previous lives are

recorded: 24 times as a prince, 85 times a king, 22 times a scholar, 42 times a god, twice a thief, once a slave and many times a lion, a horse an eagle and a snake. The stories of the previous lives of the Buddha are collected in popular folk tales known as the jatakas.

The Hare in the Moon

The jatakas enshrine simple moral and religious messages, such as the importance of fulfilling one's obligations, or the triumph of good over evil. One well-loved jataka is the story of the Hare in the Moon. The Buddha-to-be was reborn as a hare, and had three special friends — a monkey, a jackal and an otter. The hare preached to his friends about the importance of almsgiving, keeping the precepts, and observing days of fasting, when one should give food to beggars. A fast-day was approaching: the otter found some fish, the jackal a broiled lizard, and the monkey some bunches of mangoes. When the hare found some grass, he realised that although hares could eat it, one could hardly offer grass to a beggar. After careful thought, the hare decided what to do: instead of offering a beggar grass, he would offer his own body for the beggar to eat.

The mighty god Indra knew the hare's thought, and decided to test his sincerity. He disguised as a beggar, and went to the four animals. The otter offered fish, the jackal his broiled lizard and the monkey mangoes. When the beggar reached the hare, the hare instructed him to prepare a fire on which he, the hare, would cook himself. Being a god, Indra miraculously conjured up a fire, on to which the hare then jumped. Because Indra had proved the hare's sincerity, he also ensured that the fire would not burn him.

In order to remind humankind of the Buddha-hare's deed, Indra etched on the surface of the moon the figure of a hare. (This is why many Buddhists claim to see the contours of the moon as a hare, and not as the 'man in the moon' which westerners imagine.) The otter, jackal and monkey attained good rebirths for their generosity to Indra.

The 'moral' of the story is straight-forward: fulfilling one's religious obligations brings merit, and one should ideally practise compassion and generosity even to the point of self-sacrifice.

Buddhism and the gods

The jatakas also relate that the Buddha had 42 previous births as a god. It is therefore inaccurate to claim that Buddhism is an atheistic religion. Buddhists are prepared to believe that there may be gods, and that these gods might offer help with the problems of daily living, for example if a farmer wants a good harvest or if a student wants to pass an examination. Buddhist laypersons will sometimes pray to gods for these benefits, but this kind of prayer, although not discouraged, is not part of the Buddhist faith. Buddhists do not hold that there is one supreme God who has created and who sustains the world. Finally, the gods themselves are impermanent: although their existence is pleasant, it will come to an end, just as our human existences will end, and the gods, like humans and animals, are subject to samsara — rebirth.

Another insight which Siddhartha gained under the pipal tree was knowledge of what caused living beings to be born and reborn. It was because they were essentially ignorant of the laws which governed the world. As long as they remain ignorant, they will reap the effects of their deeds. This law is called the law of karma. 'Karma' means 'deeds' and the law of karma states that every deed has an effect on our pleasure or pain, either in this life

or in a life which is still to come. Once a living being sees how things really are, and how he or she is bound to this seemingly endless cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara), it becomes obvious that it is selfish desire which ties us to the wheel of samsara. Once ignorance and selfish desire are removed, enlightenment will be gained.

By following the 'Middle Way' Siddhartha gained the inner peace which he had sought. From that time on, Siddhartha Gautama was the enlightened one, the 'Buddha'. ('Buddha' means 'enlightened' or 'awakened'.) 'Buddha' is therefore a title, not a name, just as 'Christ' is a title, not a name. Of course there are important differences. The Buddha was a man, not a god, a divine messenger or a saviour. The Buddha was not unique, but is an example for others to follow. In theory, at least, all Buddhists are trying to reach this enlightened state, nirvana, although very few actually achieve it in practice during their present lifetime.

The Buddha begins to teach

After Siddhartha Gautama, now the Buddha, had attained nirvana, he met the five wandering ascetics again. They recognised that he had gained the inner peace which he was seeking and they asked him to explain what he had discovered. The Buddha preached his first sermon to them, near the town of Benares (now called Varanasi). In this sermon he explained the doctrine of the 'Middle Way' — the avoidance of excesses of wealth and poverty — and also what are known as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Although there are many types of Buddhism, and many schools of thought, all Buddhists would accept the Noble Truths and endeavour to follow the Path which the Buddha taught.

The Noble Truths are as follows:

- (1) The existence of unsatisfactoriness.
- (2) The cause of unsatisfactoriness.
- (3) The elimination of unsatisfactoriness.
- (4) The path to the elimination of unsatisfactoriness.

I have chosen the word 'unsatisfactoriness', clumsy though it is, since I believe it is the English word which translates most effectively the otherwise untranslatable word dukkha. Most writers on Buddhism use the word 'suffering' or — worse still — 'pain'. This not only gives the totally wrong impression that Buddhists are miserable people, but also describes only a part of dukkha. Dukkha occurs even when we are enjoying ourselves: a high-spirited party is dukkha, because it falls short of what we should truly be seeking. It should also be noted that, although it is only living beings that can suffer or feel pain, all the universe is unsatisfactory. For example, the this book is 'unsatisfactory', although clearly it cannot literally 'suffer'. It is unsatisfactory for various reasons: it does not have any colour illustrations, there is better quality paper on which it could have been printed, it depends on many factors for its continued existence (such as human care), and one day it will disintegrate or be destroyed.

The Buddha presented the Four Noble Truths just as a medical doctor of his time pronounced a diagnosis at a consultation. A doctor in sixth century India would first of all identify the illness (let us say, dysentery); he would next state its cause (contaminated food); then he would reassure the patient that the disease could be cured (the elimination

of dysentery); finally he would prescribe the cure (possibly a liquid diet and a suitable medicine). The Buddha was therefore a kind of ‘spiritual doctor’, someone who was able to diagnose what was wrong with the human condition and to prescribe a suitable remedy. The remedy is to be found in the Eightfold Path, which consists of:

- (1) Perfect view.
- (2) Perfect aspiration.
- (3) Perfect speech.
- (4) Perfect conduct.
- (5) Perfect livelihood.
- (6) Perfect effort.
- (7) Perfect mindfulness.
- (8) Perfect absorption.

I have deliberately chosen the adjective ‘perfect’ instead of ‘right’. (Both translations are equally possible.) This is because expressions like ‘right view’ often convey to westerners the idea of getting one’s facts right. To have ‘perfect view’, however, does not mean that there is a special creed which one is now able to believe; it is a matter of experiencing the truth rather than merely placing it in one’s mental filing cabinet.

Some comment on certain aspects of the Path is necessary. ‘Perfect view’ refers us back to the Four Noble Truths. ‘Perfect speech’ means more than simply telling the truth; it entails the avoidance of harsh speech, unprofitable speech and idle gossip. Sometimes spreading truths about people can be more damaging than spreading untruths. ‘Perfect livelihood’ means making one’s living in an honest and moral way; it would be considered wrong to earn one’s living by manufacturing armaments or dealing with alcohol. ‘Perfect effort’ has a much more precise meaning than ‘trying hard’: it means that one must take appropriate steps to prevent the causes for selfish desires arising. (One must avoid being tempted, not simply overcome temptation.) The sixth step therefore refers to the meditative practices, which are points seven and eight, and which will be revisited in a later chapter. The last is impossible to translate: essentially samadhi means the ideal result of meditation, the most important function of which is to recognise in a deep inner experience that there is no self. This is by no means easy subject-matter to digest, and it takes us on to Buddhist doctrines, which will also be explored later.

The Results of the Benares Sermon.

After listening to the Buddha, the five monks embraced his teaching, and decided to follow Gautama’s invitation to join him in forming a community of disciples. Thus, the first Sangha (community of monks) was formed. As the Buddha continued to preach, many more were added to the Sangha and to the ever-increasing numbers of lay followers. Many who came to heckle or confront the Buddha found themselves converted to Buddhism, even notorious criminals. Some people attributed the success of his preaching to miraculous powers, and there are many stories of the Buddha performing miraculous cures.

The Buddha had a message for society too. His followers rejected the Vedic scriptures and refused to take part in the animal sacrifices carried out by the brahmin priests. They did not worship the Vedic gods, since they did not believe that worshipping

the gods would bring one any nearer to nirvana. In addition, the Buddha taught that the class divisions of his society were far less important than distinctions between good and evil people. The true brahmin was not the one who carried out the prescribed religious ceremonies, but the one who did good, avoided evil and had a pure heart.

The message spreads.

For 45 years the Buddha travelled the length and breadth of North India, proclaiming these teachings, and attracting an ever-increasing number of followers. The Buddha's father heard of the enthusiasm which attended the teachings of the Buddha and his disciples, and he invited members of the Sangha to Kapilavastu, his home town. Instead of staying at the royal palace which he had abandoned many years before, the Buddha and his followers wandered from house to house doing their alms-round to obtain food. At first King Suddhodana was offended, but when he learned that this was their normal practice he accepted their custom, and undertook to provide one meal for the Sangha at his royal court. As a consequence, many members of the Buddha's family became his followers, including his former wife Yasodhara, his son Rahula, and the king himself.

When the Buddha was eighty years old he became unwell at the beginning of the rainy season. At one of his meals he inadvertently ate some contaminated food, and died after contracting dysentery. As he lay on his death-bed in a grove, he gave some final instructions to Ananda, his closest follower. His instructions were that followers find liberation for themselves not simply accepting his teaching on authority, but testing it out in their own experience. This does not mean of course that followers of the Buddha should devise any old set of teachings and practices they choose: a seeker must follow the Eightfold Path and the Precepts for a substantial period before that person is in a position to decide whether the Buddha's teaching is true.

The death of the Buddha is called his parinirvana. Death after reaching nirvana means that one never again returns to the realm of samsara (rebirth). This was the Buddha's first pronouncement after attaining nirvana; it is recorded in a famous Buddhist scripture called the Dhammapada, and is sometimes called the Buddha's 'Song of Victory':

Through many a birth in samsara have I wandered in vain, seeking the builder of this house (of life). Repeated birth is indeed suffering!
O house-builder, you are seen! You will not build this house again. For your rafters are broken and your ridge-pole shattered. My mind has reached the Unconditioned: I have attained the destruction of craving.¹

The 'house' is the life into which one is reborn, the house-builder is desire, and the ridge-pole is ignorance. Since the Buddha had eliminated his selfish desire and ignorance, they could no longer create and sustain a new 'house'.

Some religious founders have appointed successors to lead the community of followers. The Buddha did not do this, but stated that he was to be succeeded by the Dharma (the law, or teaching) and the Sangha (the community of followers). The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are sometimes known as the 'three gems' or 'three jewels' of Buddhism, and it is not uncommon to see the sign of the triple gem portrayed in Buddhist art.

Although the Dharma was declared to be one of the Buddha's successors, the Buddha did not leave any written teachings. After his death, the monks convened the First

Buddhist Council at Rajgir in North India, at which they recited the teachings which they faithfully remembered, and agreed upon them. It was several centuries before these teachings were finally written down: the first known collection of written teachings was made in Sri Lanka in the first century BCE.

These teachings are known variously as the 'Pali canon' (the scriptures were originally written in a language similar to Pali, and 'canon' means 'norm' or 'standard'), or the Tipitaka, meaning, literally, 'triple basket'. The reason for the latter rather curious name is that the Pali scriptures fell into three broad sections: there were disciplinary rules for the monks (the Vinaya-pitaka), statements of teachings or doctrines (Sutta-pitaka), and later elaborations (Abhidhamma-pitaka), mainly teachings about the human mind.

The language of the early Buddhist scriptures contrasted with that of the brahmins, who used Sanskrit. Although it might have seemed an advantage to have Buddhist scriptures in the common language, Sanskrit was the 'prestige' language used by the Brahmins, in much the same way as Latin was the 'prestige' language of the Christian Church until modern times. As a result, Buddhism was failing to attract the brahmins, who were already opposed to Buddhism since their caste status was being threatened by the Buddhists' disregard for caste. Religions are seldom popular with those whose vested interests are threatened by them.

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