

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES

General Editor: Karl H. Potter

The following volumes are published:

- I. Bibliography, Sections I and II, 3rd ed. (1995)
- II. Indian Metaphysics and Epistemology: The Tradition of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika up to Gaṅgeśa (1977)
- III. Advaita Vedānta up to Śaṅkara and His Pupils (1981)
- IV. Sāṃkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy (1987)
- V. The Philosophy of the Grammarians (1990)
- VI. Indian Philosophical Analysis Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika from Gaṅgeśa to Raghunātha Śiromaṇi (1993)

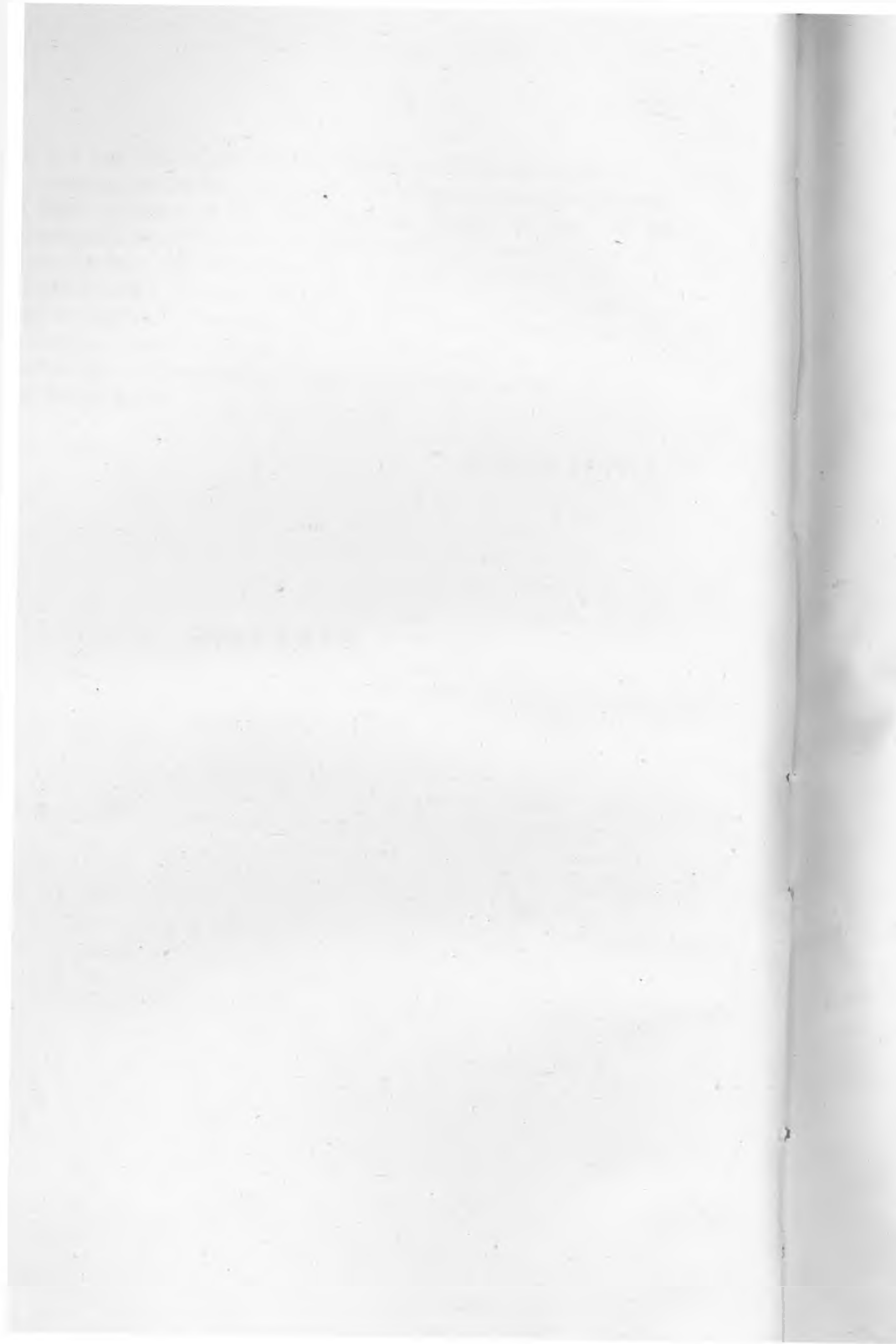
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHIES

VOLUME VII

Abhidharma Buddhism
to 150 A.D.

EDITED BY
KARL H. POTTER
WITH ROBERT E. BUSWELL, JR
PADMANABH S. JAINI
AND NOBLE ROSS REAT

MOTILAL BANARSIDASS PUBLISHERS
PRIVATE LIMITED • DELHI



THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA AND HIS TEACHINGS

Noble Ross Reat

I. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

It is generally accepted among scholars, with some reservations, that the historical Buddha was born in 563 B.C. and that he died in 483 B.C. This was a remarkable period in the history of India and the world as a whole. It is fascinating to ponder the fact that, give or take a few decades, it would have been possible during this period to assemble in one room the majority of the dozen or so most influential thinkers the world has ever seen. Confucius and Lao-tzu in China were formulating systems of thought that would guide one quarter of the world's population into the present century. In Persia and in Greece, Zoroaster and Socrates were formulating the ideological bases of the three great empires that dominated the classical history of the Western world, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman. In Israel, Jeremiah and Deutero Isaiah were formulating the principles of universal monotheism, which would later attain vast influence as a result of propagation by the followers of Christ and Muhammad. Yet no place on earth at this time was so intellectually and religiously stimulating as northern India, where the Buddha lived and taught. To gain some comprehension of the dynamism of this period in the history of India, it is necessary to look back into the mists of proto-history, where we know less of the events of entire millennia than we know of any single day in this century.

ANCIENT INDIA: THE BACKGROUND OF BUDDHISM

Two thousand years before the Buddha's time, in approximately 2500 B.C., a highly advanced civilization flourished along the valley of the Indus River in what is present-day Pakistan. The two major cities of this civilization are now known by the modern names of

he archeological sites at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. They rivalled any cities known to humankind at that time and for millennia afterward. Harappa and Mohenjo Daro do not appear to have been rivals, but rather cooperative centers of a unified civilization covering roughly the area of present-day Pakistan. This we suspect because the size of bricks for building and weights for use in beam balances are uniform throughout the Indus Valley archeological sites. A standard system of weights and measures throughout such a large area suggests a strong central government, or at least two cooperating centers of power at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro.

Both of these great cities were designed around an orderly grid of streets and avenues lined with one and two storey brick townhouses whose connected outer walls formed a barrier to the noise and dust from the street. Narrow alleyways through this outer wall led to the common courtyard of a dozen or so private dwellings in each city block, which thus formed a sort of neighborhood compound. Under the streets ran an extensive network of sewers, so that these great cities were probably more hygienic than most European cities were before the turn of the twentieth century. Some of the houses were equipped with flushing toilets and rooms for bathing which drained into these sewers. In addition to such pleasant domestic quarters, each city had an ample granary where emergency food supplies were stored, and numerous large municipal buildings and complexes which appear to have been palaces, assembly halls, government houses, and even perhaps schools and universities.

Our knowledge of such things today, at least for the time being, is necessarily vague and tentative, for the Indus Valley civilization had vanished entirely from human memory until its two major cities were unearthed by archeologists early in this century. As a result of this four thousand year gap, the Indus Valley writing system is a puzzle that has yet to be deciphered, nor is it likely to be deciphered unless the equivalent of a Rosetta Stone is unearthed from an Indus Valley site. Without being able to read Indus Valley writing, the nature of religious belief and practice in this ancient culture is largely a matter of speculation. Nonetheless, a few conclusions about the religion of this great civilization are now, widely if not universally, accepted among historians of India. These conclusions are based not so much on the positive evidence of archeological relics from the Indus Valley as they are upon the absence of appropriate evidence in their source of knowledge about the religion of ancient India, the *Veda*.

Until the rediscovery of the long forgotten Indus Valley civilization, the *Rg Veda* was our only source of knowledge about the religions of India before approximately 1000 B.C. The bulk of the *Rg Veda*

was not, however, composed in India. It was the sacred scripture of an invading nomadic horde related racially and linguistically to modern-day Europeans. Nonetheless, according to the Hindu religious tradition this ancient scripture, gradually compiled between 2000 and 1000 B.C., is the sole fountainhead of all the sacred knowledge of India, which is regarded as an elaboration of the eternal truths enshrined in the obscure hymns of the *Rg Veda*. Acceptance of the overriding authority of the *Rg Veda* is in fact one of the major criteria of Hindu orthodoxy. Nonetheless, when one examines these hymns critically, one finds very little if any evidence of many of the prominent characteristics of Hinduism or of Indian religion in general. Few of the major deities of classical Hinduism have convincing counterparts in the *Rg Veda*, nor is there any real foreshadowing of the almost universal Indian beliefs in an immortal soul, a tiresome round of rebirths determined by one's *karma* (moral action), and liberation therefrom. Instead, the *Rg Veda* offers praises to a pantheon of archaic deities scarcely recognizable in classical Hinduism.

These hymns of praise are intended to elicit from the deities immediate material benefits and finally a blessed afterlife in heaven, characterized as the blissful abode of the ancestors. Alternatively there is a hell of "blind darkness." In either case, the *Rg Veda* envisions only one earthly life, its aftermath determined primarily on the basis of whether or not one had been scrupulous in performing the proper rituals. Rituals relating to the afterlife were thought to create in heaven a subtle body (*tanu*) which one would join after death. This subtle body, it was thought, had to be maintained by continuing rituals performed on one's behalf by one's descendants. Otherwise one would fall into "blind darkness", which appears to be a metaphor for utter and final death. The *Rg Veda* does not appear to contain the concepts of an immortal soul, of rebirth, or of spiritual release therefrom.

Before the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization, it was difficult to imagine how the integrated complex of beliefs in a soul, rebirth and spiritual release from rebirth could have gained such prominence in Indian religion without having a basis in the *Rg Veda*. It was similarly difficult to imagine how the classical Hindu pantheon had developed from Vedic antecedents. After the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization, it seemed only natural to suppose that classical Indian civilization and religion had its origins in the common historical phenomenon of the conqueror being conquered intellectually by the conquered race, in this case the Indus Valley civilization. The prominence of female deities in the Indus Valley, in contrast to the male dominated pantheon of the *Rg Veda*, may account for the many

goddesses of Hinduism. The popular Hindu deity Kṛṣṇa, meaning literally "the dark one," might have found his way into the Hindu pantheon as a representative of the dark skinned indigenous inhabitants of India. There is evidence too of an Indus Valley deity associated with asceticism and wild animals, possibly a prototype of the Siva of classical Hinduism.

This last possibility is particularly intriguing, in that Siva is the favored deity of yogic practitioners. Essentially yoga is a system of meditative practice designed to *release* the *soul* from *rebirth*, rebirth being regarded as a tedious and pointless repetition of suffering, illness, old age and death. It seems possible, then, that the yogic triad of souls, rebirth and release derives from indigenous Indian religion rather than Vedic sources. History records two apparently indigenous religious traditions in India which claim to predate and to be independent of the *Rg Veda*, namely the Jainas and the Ājīvakas. Both systems are purely yogic in that they are solely concerned with release of the soul from rebirth. Given the absence of such doctrines in the *Rg Veda*, it appears that the claims of these traditions to independence and great antiquity may well be valid. If so, most of the characteristics of classical Hinduism can be explained by postulating a synthesis of Vedic and yogic religion which occurred in the first millennium B.C.

Such a synthesis appears to inspire much of the material in the principal *Upaniṣads*, composed between 800 and 300 B.C. These texts contain the first clear expressions of the fundamental doctrines of classical Hinduism, often set forth in terms which coordinate Vedic theistic concerns with yogic concerns regarding release of the soul from rebirth. The *Upaniṣads* accomplish this synthesis by highlighting a relatively minor Vedic theme which appears in only a few of the latest hymns of the *Rg Veda*—the question of the ultimate origin of the universe. They answer this question with reference to the yogic triad of souls, rebirth and release.

In its enthusiasm for heaping lavish praises upon its many deities, the bulk of the *Rg Veda* without apparent hesitation credits several deities with having created the universe singlehandedly. Some of the latest contributors to the *Rg Veda*, however, betray a conviction that the multiple gods themselves must have been the result of a single creative act by a more essential, unitary divine principle. The nature of this universal principle, according to the Vedic sages, is the greatest of all mysteries. The authors of the *Upaniṣads* seize upon the Vedic theme of the origin of the universe and elaborate it with reference to the yogic triad of souls, rebirth and release. They urge that the mystery of the origin of the universe is to be resolved by yogic introspection. They hold that such introspection will reveal

that the creative principle of the universe is in fact one's innermost self, which is identical to the universal self, in which all things and all beings are one. The manifold universe is an illusion, a dream, as are the apparently individual souls which perceive, experience and act, are reborn according to their karmic merit, and finally attain release. Release, according to many Upaniṣadic passages, is an awakening from this illusory dream. Actually, one only appears to suffer repetitive life, sickness, old age and death as an individual. Ignorance is regarded as the primary barrier to release from this illusory process, ignorance of the true origin and nature of the self or soul and of the true origin and nature of the universe.

By contrast, the purely yogic systems of the Jainas and Ājīvakas postulate the release of simple, individual souls within the context of an independently existing, objective universe. In these purely yogic systems there is no speculation regarding the origin of the universe. It is simply a given. It has always been here, and it will always be here. Yogic practices of austerity and introspection merely serve to purify the soul of the practitioner. When this purification is accomplished, the Jainas held that the soul would rise to the pinnacle of the universe and live there forever in bliss. The Ājīvakas held that the soul would simply cease to exist, and be released thereby from its countless sufferings through eons of rebirth. In either case, the impurity of the soul, rather than ignorance of the true nature of the soul and the universe, was regarded as the primary barrier to release from rebirth.

Both these doctrines bear some resemblance to Buddhism, which is uninterested in speculations regarding the origin of the universe, and which regards release from rebirth as a cessation of mundane existence. Buddhism thus belongs primarily to the yogic tradition of Indian religion. Buddhism originated, however, at a time when the religious and intellectual traditions of two great civilizations were in the midst of vigorous interchange and ferment, as is evident in the speculations of the *Upaniṣads*. There is no indication that the Buddha was specifically acquainted with any of the *Upaniṣads* which have come down to us, but there is ample indication that he was familiar with such speculations.¹

Early Buddhism is not, then, merely a variation upon the yogic theme of release of the soul from rebirth. This much is clear in the Buddhist denial of the soul. Instead, the Buddha participated in a critical and creative movement to synthesize ancient, traditional worldviews which vied for the collective heart of India in his time. By the time of the Buddha, this synthetic movement had become widespread and urgent. One must try to imagine the cultural impact of conquering or being conquered by an alien race, and then slowly

intermarrying over the centuries to form a unitary new race and culture. In the age of the Buddha, several remarkable thinkers began to attempt also to create a coherent unity from the religious and intellectual heritages of two great peoples in the process of becoming one.

Aside from the Buddha, other participants in this movement included the Upaniṣadic sages fomenting revolution within the ranks of Vedic orthodoxy, heterodox rag-draped or naked bands of wandering ascetics seeking or claiming to have found ultimate truth, and the more established orders like the Jainas and Ājīvakas. The movement included priests, princes, merchants, workers and out-castes, often indistinguishable as they pursued the search for ultimate truth within one group or another. The literature of ancient India abounds with such figures. Arjuna himself, the greatest mortal hero of Indian mythology, ponders in the *Bhagavadgītā* the alternative of quitting the battlefield for the serene life of a homeless holy man. Like the mythical hero Arjuna, many men, and fewer women, felt the lure of the simple life of the homeless ascetic and the single-minded search for truth. So many followed their urges that these wandering mendicants, who would have seemed a bizarre mob to modern Westerners, were a highly respected, even revered element of society.

EARLY LIFE OF THE BUDDHA: BIRTH TO THE GREAT RENUNCIATION

The most influential individual to emerge from this period of transition in ancient India was the Buddha, without a doubt the greatest historical figure of India. In the millennium following the life of the Buddha, the spread of Buddhism throughout East and Southeast Asia makes him arguably the most influential historical figure of the entire Eastern world. As the founder of a great religious tradition, the Buddha bears obvious similarities to Christ. It must be emphasized at the outset, however, that an inquiry into the historical Buddha is not analogous to the quest for the historical Jesus. Buddhism as a religious teaching claims to be valid independently of any special status of its founder. Even if it were to be discovered that the historical Buddha never existed, Buddhism as a system of thought and a spiritual path would nonetheless remain theoretically valid. As the Buddhist scriptures themselves state:

Whether or not Buddhas arise, constant is the status of truth, the law of truth, the relationship of cause and effect.²

The Buddha is again comparable to Christ in that very little reliable information concerning his early life is available. A royal inscription dating to within three hundred years of the event confirms that the Buddha was born in what is today southern Nepal and was a member of the aristocratic Śākya clan.³ He was born into a royal family with the surname Gotama (sometimes spelled Gautama), and his given name is said to have been Siddhārtha (Pali Siddhattha), which means "goal-accomplished." The word "Buddha," meaning "the awakened one," is a title, and it is technically improper to apply it to Prince Siddhārtha Gotama before the event of his enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. Instead, he should be referred to with his given name or as "the Bodhisatta" (Skt. Bodhisattva), which means "Buddha to be."

The voluminous scriptures which purport to contain the teachings of the Buddha provide little credible information regarding his early life. A few passages preserved in the Pali language by the Theravāda Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka have at least the appearance of historical fact. One such passage indicates that Siddhārtha's parents were at least minor royalty, and that the young prince lived in luxury in three different palaces, one for each of three Indian seasons.⁴ This same passage, corroborated by another,⁵ also records the Buddha as recalling that he was inspired to abandon this privileged life for the austere life of a wandering seeker of truth because of existential *angst* regarding the universal affliction of human life by old age, sickness and death. Several passages indicate that Siddhārtha's parents opposed his decision to become a wandering holy man and resisted it with tears and pleadings.⁶

There is little or no reason to doubt this basic scenario of the Buddha's early life: that he was a gifted, intelligent and privileged young man who, like many in his day, rejected the comforts of the household life in favor of the freedom of the mendicant seeker of truth. Legends of the Buddha's life recorded in the Pali canon and elsewhere amplify extravagantly upon this credible historical scenario. These legends add little to our historical knowledge of the Buddha's life, but they are revealing of the ethos of the time and of the way Buddhists regard the founder of their religion. The following legendary account of the early life of the Buddha draws upon several sources—the *Mahāvastu*, the *Lalitavistara*, and Aśva-ghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*—but is based primarily upon the *Nidānakathā* of the Pali canon, probably the earliest extant legendary account of the life of the Buddha. All of these treatments, in turn, appear to derive from two *sūtras* or discourses on the Pali canon. Both of these *sūtras*—the *Acchariyabbhutaḍḍhamma Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*—reveal how early

and how widespread was the tendency to mythologize the life of the Buddha.

Buddhist legends portray the Buddha's father *Suddhodana* as a mighty ruler of unimaginable wealth. His mother, the beautiful Queen *Māyā*, is said to have received numerous auspicious omens heralding the exalted status of the child she bore, most notably, a dream of a white elephant entering her abdomen when the prince was conceived. The birth is said to have occurred not in the royal palace at *Kapilavastu*, but in a nearby park at *Lumbini*, while Queen *Māyā* was on a pleasure outing. This detail may well be historical fact, but accounts of the birth itself can scarcely be accepted as such. The infant prince is said to have issued miraculously from his mother's side, immediately able to walk and speak eloquently, and to have proclaimed then and there his supremacy in all the world and his destiny to enlightenment. This miraculous infant, it is said, was endowed with the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of the superman. These vary in different accounts, but usually include wheel symbols on the soles and palms, perfect proportions of body and face, radiant, golden hued complexion, a protuberance on the crown of the head (*uṣṇīsa*), and a circle of hair between the eyebrows (*ūrṇā*), as commonly seen on Buddha images.

On the basis of these marks, King *Suddhodana*'s ministers predicted that the child was destined to supreme greatness, either as a universal monarch—a *cakravartin* or "wheel turner" of the mythical wheel of universal dominion—or as a spiritual savior of humankind. The ministers warned that if the sensitive young man ever came in contact with human suffering, he would be so overcome with compassion that he would abandon the princely life and embark singlemindedly on a quest for spiritual release from the sorrows of worldly life, thereby becoming the spiritual savior of the world rather than its political ruler. The king naturally preferred that his son follow in his own royal footsteps and rule the world as its righteous monarch, and so, as advised by his ministers, he is said to have constructed three magnificent palaces within which to isolate the young prince from any contact with the sorrow and suffering of the outside world.

And, so the legend goes, Prince *Siddhārtha* lived out his youth within the walls of these pleasure palaces. He was often the focus of miraculous events and quickly attained superhuman proficiency in all of the respected arts of the day, intellectual, military and amorous. He enjoyed a large company of the most desirable and adoring concubines imaginable, and at the age of sixteen wed in

old age, death, or indeed any form of suffering whatsoever. Despite these extraordinary protective measures, Buddhist legend asserts that in his twenty-ninth year the gods themselves conspired to bring the Bodhisattva in contact with four great visions which inspired him to embark on the quest for enlightenment. Most accounts say that Prince Siddhārtha was on a pleasure outing, driven by his faithful charioteer Channa, when he encountered for the first time in his life the sight of an old man, a diseased man, a corpse, and finally a radiantly serene mendicant holy man.

The first three visions, according to legend, had the effect upon the prince predicted by the king's ministers. He became preoccupied with the unavoidable sufferings of mundane life. The fourth vision inspired in him the resolution to renounce material well-being and enter the austere path of spiritual enlightenment. Because of his innate spirituality, he had realized spontaneously on the basis of these four experiences alone that even such extravagant worldly pleasures as he had enjoyed were doomed to pass away due to the ravages of old age, disease and death, and that in all the world only the simple contemplative life of the mendicant seeker of truth held the key to release from the ravages of these sufferings. As noted above, the Pali *sūtras* record the Buddha himself as indicating that contemplation of the universal misery of old age, disease and death inspired his search for truth.

As a result of these "four visions" Buddhist legend says that Siddhārtha summoned his charioteer Channa in secret and ordered him to saddle his horse Kaṇṭhaka so that he might flee from the palace. Despite the king's extensive measures to secure the palace, the three escaped and traveled to the bank of a river where Siddhārtha cut off his hair and changed his jewel-encrusted garments for rags from a rubbish heap. He then bid farewell to his beloved friends Channa and Kaṇṭhaka, and set forth on the path of seeker of truth. His charioteer returned alone to Kapilavastu with the sad news of Siddhārtha's departure, for the prince's faithful horse died then and there on the river bank, of a broken heart.

It is at this point in the life story of Siddhārtha Gotama that the protagonist emerges from the fanciful fabrications of legend onto the stage of history. From this point only can we begin to speak of the Buddha as a real historical personage. Nonetheless, the legendary material recounting the early life of the historical Buddha is important in the story of Buddhism for more than its imaginative charm. In the first place, when the hyperbole and miraculous elements are stripped away, the story is a credible account of the broad outlines of the early life of a precocious and privileged young

and how widespread was the tendency to mythologize the life of the Buddha.

Buddhist legends portray the Buddha's father Śuddhodana as a mighty ruler of unimaginable wealth. His mother, the beautiful Queen Māyā, is said to have received numerous auspicious omens heralding the exalted status of the child she bore, most notably, a dream of a white elephant entering her abdomen when the prince was conceived. The birth is said to have occurred not in the royal palace at Kapilavastu, but in a nearby park at Lumbini, while Queen Māyā was on a pleasure outing. This detail may well be historical fact, but accounts of the birth itself can scarcely be accepted as such. The infant prince is said to have issued miraculously from his mother's side, immediately able to walk and speak eloquently, and to have proclaimed then and there his supremacy in all the world and his destiny to enlightenment. This miraculous infant, it is said, was endowed with the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of the superman. These vary in different accounts, but usually include wheel symbols on the soles and palms, perfect proportions of body and face, radiant, golden hued complexion, a protuberance on the crown of the head (*uṣṇīṣa*), and a circle of hair between the eyebrows (*ūrṇā*), as commonly seen on Buddha images.

On the basis of these marks, King Śuddhodana's ministers predicted that the child was destined to supreme greatness, either as a universal monarch—a *cakravartin* or "wheel turner" of the mythical wheel of universal dominion—or as a spiritual savior of humankind. The ministers warned that if the sensitive young man ever came in contact with human suffering, he would be so overcome with compassion that he would abandon the princely life and embark singlemindedly on a quest for spiritual release from the sorrows of worldly life, thereby becoming the spiritual savior of the world rather than its political ruler. The king naturally preferred that his son follow in his own royal footsteps and rule the world as its righteous monarch, and so, as advised by his ministers, he is said to have constructed three magnificent palaces within which to isolate the young prince from any contact with the sorrow and suffering of the outside world.

And, so the legend goes, Prince Siddhārtha lived out his youth within the walls of these pleasure palaces. He was often the focus of miraculous events and quickly attained superhuman proficiency in all of the respected arts of the day, intellectual, military and amorous. He enjoyed a large company of the most desirable and adoring concubines imaginable, and at the age of sixteen wed in addition the most beautiful woman in the land, Princess Yaśodharā. Never was he allowed to experience or even witness strife, disease,

old age, death, or indeed any form of suffering whatsoever. Despite these extraordinary protective measures, Buddhist legend asserts that in his twenty-ninth year the gods themselves conspired to bring the Bodhisattva in contact with four great visions which inspired him to embark on the quest for enlightenment. Most accounts say that Prince Siddhārtha was on a pleasure outing, driven by his faithful charioteer Channa, when he encountered for the first time in his life the sight of an old man, a diseased man, a corpse, and finally a radiantly serene mendicant holy man.

The first three visions, according to legend, had the effect upon the prince predicted by the king's ministers. He became preoccupied with the unavoidable sufferings of mundane life. The fourth vision inspired in him the resolution to renounce material well-being and enter the austere path of spiritual enlightenment. Because of his innate spirituality, he had realized spontaneously on the basis of these four experiences alone that even such extravagant worldly pleasures as he had enjoyed were doomed to pass away due to the ravages of old age, disease and death, and that in all the world only the simple contemplative life of the mendicant seeker of truth held the key to release from the ravages of these sufferings. As noted above, the Pali *sūtras* record the Buddha himself as indicating that contemplation of the universal misery of old age, disease and death inspired his search for truth.

As a result of these "four visions" Buddhist legend says that Siddhārtha summoned his charioteer Channa in secret and ordered him to saddle his horse Kaṇṭhaka so that he might flee from the palace. Despite the king's extensive measures to secure the palace, the three escaped and traveled to the bank of a river where Siddhārtha cut off his hair and changed his jewel-encrusted garments for rags from a rubbish heap. He then bid farewell to his beloved friends Channa and Kaṇṭhaka, and set forth on the path of seeker of truth. His charioteer returned alone to Kapilavastu with the sad news of Siddhārtha's departure, for the prince's faithful horse died then and there on the river bank, of a broken heart.

It is at this point in the life story of Siddhārtha Gotama that the protagonist emerges from the fanciful fabrications of legend onto the stage of history. From this point only can we begin to speak of the Buddha as a real historical personage. Nonetheless, the legendary material recounting the early life of the historical Buddha is important in the story of Buddhism for more than its imaginative charm. In the first place, when the hyperbole and miraculous elements are stripped away, the story is a credible account of the broad outlines of the early life of a precocious and privileged young man of Siddhārtha's time. It is unlikely that the infant bore the major

and minor marks of the superman, that his parents' protectiveness was so extreme, or that their financial means were so extensive, but it is not at all unlikely that the historical Buddha was the cherished child of a wealthy chieftain who lavished parental attention and high expectations upon his son. It is not unlikely either that a young man of such great intelligence and sensitivity as to become one of the acknowledged saviors of humankind would have begun to question—in the face of the sufferings of others—the pursuit of power and luxury urged upon him by doting parents and admiring peers.

It is telling of the society of that day that the parents' primary anxiety, as recorded in the legends of the Buddha's early life, is that their son would opt out of society and follow the path of a mendicant seeker of truth. Many parents of their day must have had similar worries, as do ambitious parents of the present day. Siddhārtha's decision to follow the mendicant's path was a rejection of conventional society in favor of a controversial lifestyle, but a lifestyle nonetheless admired in his day as attracting the most intelligent and creative people and producing the noblest expressions of the values and aspirations of the society in which he lived.

Legends of the early life of the historical Buddha also reveal tellingly the religious beliefs and values of an important segment of Indian society in his day. Saviors were expected. They might be born to mortals. They were thought to perform miracles and consort with deities almost as a matter of course. Their task was to discover and teach the path that leads beyond the relentless suffering of this and future lives. In this exalted search, the gods themselves, while not denied, were thought to be merely assistants and well-wishers. The final salvation of humankind would be realized not through divine intervention, but through truth, discovered and taught by extraordinary human beings. These saviors would emerge from the ranks of the homeless, mendicant ascetics who walked the land in humble attire seeking only enough food, clothing and shelter to sustain their strenuous meditative and ascetic practices.

Such spiritual sentiments may not have been universal in the India of the Buddha's time, but they were certainly widespread. When the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha set out on the open road, after the "Great Renunciation" of home and family, he entered a richly varied and stimulating subculture, which is described with surprisingly vivid detail in the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Pali canon, the earliest record of the teachings he himself was eventually to give. The question of the historical accuracy of this record is discussed at length below. These *sūtras*,⁷ or discourses, do not specifically seek to give a connected account of the enlightenment and ministry of the Buddha,

and they doubtless contain much elaboration and hyberbole. Nonetheless, they include a surprising amount of material which appears to capture actual historical events and people in remarkable detail for literature of that age.

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

In the course of giving his religious discourses, after he had realized enlightenment, the Buddha is recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka* as making occasional reference to his own search for truth. The following account is reconstructed from those scattered references, primarily the *Ariyapariyesana* and *Mahāsaccaka sūtras* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*.⁸ While this account cannot be historically verified, there is little reason to doubt its basic truthfulness.

Soon after Siddhārtha left his home, he studied meditative techniques under two acknowledged masters, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Under their instruction he quickly mastered the uppermost levels of meditative trance, experiences of the "sphere of nothingness" and the "sphere of neither perception nor nonperception". In all, eight of these advanced levels of concentration are retained as important spiritual exercises in the teachings of the Buddha, but Siddhārtha did not accept the meditative attainments of either of his teachers as final enlightenment and release from the suffering of human existence.⁹

After studying with these two teachers, dissatisfied, Siddhārtha set out to seek enlightenment on his own. He soon attracted a band of five followers, and with them performed severe ascetic practices involving self-mortification and starvation. Such practices were common among seekers of the truth in his day, and were intended to liberate the immortal soul within from the mortal body it inhabited. The following purports to be the Buddha's own description of the rigors of the ascetic discipline he imposed upon himself.

I was unclothed, indecent, licking my hands. . . I took food only once a day, or once in two or seven days. I lived under the discipline of eating rice only at fortnightly intervals. . . I subsisted on the roots and fruits of the forest, eating only those which fell (of their own accord). I wore coarse hempen cloth. . . rags from a rubbish heap. . . clothes of grass and of bark. . . I became one who stands (always) refusing to sit. . . I made my bed on thorns. The dust and dirt of years accumulated on my body. . . I subsisted on the dung of suckling calves. . . So long as my own dung and urine held out, I subsisted on that. . . Because I ate so little, my limbs became like the knotted joints of withered creepers, my buttocks like a bullock's hoof, my protruding

backbone like a string of beads, my gaunt ribs like the crazy rafters of a tumble-down shed. My eyes were sunken deep in their sockets. . . My scalp was shriveled. . . The hair, rotted at the roots, fell out if I stroked my limbs with my hand.¹⁰

After some six years of such rigorous ascetic discipline, the Pali *sūtras* record the Buddha as saying that he realized that self-mortification would not lead him to the ultimate goal of enlightenment and spiritual liberation. He is said to have recalled that while his father was ploughing, as a child he had entered spontaneously into a tranquil condition later known as the first meditative trance (*dhyāna*, P. *jhāna*). He resolved at this point to pursue this more natural and wholesome means of spiritual development and to practice a moderate, middle path between self-indulgence and self-mortification. Later the term 'Middle Path' would name and epitomize the entire edifice of Buddhist doctrine and practice. As a result of this realization, the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha resolved to begin taking food in moderate but adequate amounts. He had known the extremes of sensual indulgence and mortification. He now rejected both as inhibiting spiritual progress, and developed the moderate daily routine that governs the lives of Buddhist monks to the present day. His five companions regarded this change as backsliding, and abandoned him in disgust.¹¹

Siddhārtha then carried on alone, going on an alms round in the morning, eating one moderate meal a day before noon, and spending the afternoon and evening in meditation, often late into the night. His progress was swift, and before long he sat before the fabled Bodhi tree (tree of enlightenment), a descendant of which still stands at Bodhi Gaya, near Patna in modern Bihar. As he sat cross-legged beneath this tree on the night of the Great Enlightenment, it is said that he resolved not to stand until he had attained final spiritual enlightenment and release. In the morning, he stood, having realized at the age of thirtyfive the ultimate attainment of men and gods: Buddhahood. From this point, it is proper to speak of him as the Buddha, 'the awakened one'.

Buddhist doctrine emphasizes that the specific content of the Buddha's experiences on the night of enlightenment can never be conveyed by mere words. *Sūtra* accounts say that the Buddha experienced the 'three knowledges': remembrance of his past rebirths in detail, knowledge of the past and future rebirths of other beings, and knowledge that he himself was free of all faults and illusions and would therefore never be reborn again.¹² This latter 'knowledge' is synonymous with the realization of liberation (*nirvāṇa*, Pali *nibbāna*). Buddhist legends recount the events of that night as a struggle between the Buddha's resolve and the temptations

and onslaughts of Māra, the Buddhist equivalent of Satan. In these accounts, Māra's terrifying armies and seductive daughters represent mythologically the terrors and temptations of mundane existence as well as the arduousness of meditational discipline. Such doctrines and mythological formulations, however, only serve to convey a slight hint of the content of the experience of enlightenment.

Because of the inexpressibility of enlightenment and liberation, and the difficulty of the path thereto, the Buddha is said at first to have despaired of ever being able to convey his discovery to others. Various deities are said to have intervened and encouraged him to teach the *dharma* (truth) and 'to open the door of deathlessness' to gods and men. The gods themselves informed him that the most capable recipients of his new teaching, his previous teachers Ājāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, had died. The Buddha then concluded that the people best qualified to understand his profound and subtle discovery were the five ascetics with whom he had undergone austerities. He is said to have been able to perceive with his miraculous "divine eye" that they were then staying at Sarnath, near Varanasi (Benares) in modern day Uttar Pradesh. Having journeyed to Sarnath, the Buddha was able to overcome the initial resistance of the five ascetics who had rejected him for abandoning the ascetic path, and thus gained his first followers.¹³

Divine intervention and clairvoyance aside, it would have been natural in the Buddha's time for a spiritual teacher with a new doctrine to propound to head for Varanasi, then as now the most sacred city of India. There is then little cause to doubt the *sūtras* in this detail. The *Sutta Piṭaka* also preserves what purports to be the first sermon of the Buddha after his enlightenment, the "Turning of the Wheel of Truth".¹⁴ As one might expect, this *sūtra* propounds the Four Noble Truths, an outline of the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism. For the next fortyfive years, until his death, the Buddha attracted to himself an ever growing band of followers. Ironically, Prince Siddhārtha had become, as his father had desired, a *cakravartin*, a "Wheel Turning Monarch", but the wheel he had set in motion with this first discourse was the death-conquering wheel of truth rather than the mythical world-conquering wheel of universal monarchy.

THE BUDDHA AND HIS FOLLOWERS

In the course of attempting to record the sermons of the Buddha, the *Sutta Piṭaka* also records incidentally a good deal of information regarding the personality, daily life and habits of the Buddha and some of his more prominent followers. Essentially, the Buddha taught a lifestyle and spiritual discipline whereby others could follow in