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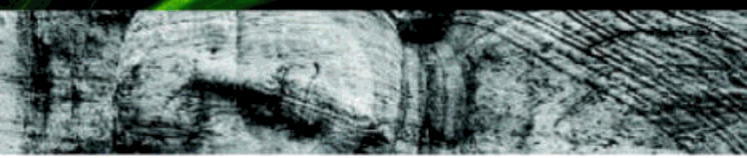
BASIC TEACHINGS of the Buddha



A NEW TRANSLATION AND COMPILATION, WITH A GUIDE TO READING THE TEXT, BY

GLENN WALLIS

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BASIC TEACHINGS *of the* BUDDHA

A NEW TRANSLATION AND COMPILATION,
with
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INTRODUCTION

A man of genius or a work of love and beauty will not come to order, can not be compounded by the best rules, but is always a new and incalculable result, like health. Don't rattle your rules in our ears; we must behave as we can.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

For millennia throughout Asia, the Buddha has been known as an "enlightened" figure whose vast wisdom illuminates the way to a life of meaning and genuine satisfaction. At present, in the West, his teachings are increasingly viewed by adherents, physicists, psychologists, and philosophers alike as exceptionally lucid descriptions of our human situation, and his prescribed practice of meditation as an effective means of awakening to that situation with clarity and equanimity.

The purpose of the present volume is to present the core teachings of the Buddha and, in so doing, engage the reader in an exploration of the Buddha's genius and of the beauty of his work. But since, as Emerson says, such a person and such a work never result from the limitations wrought by received convention, a book purporting to bring these two *to order* has some explaining to do. Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the subject knows that Buddhism comes in a staggering variety of cultural, doctrinal, and historical inflections. "Buddhism," it seems, may be qualified endlessly, evoking with equal ease images of flamboyant ritualism, luxuriant creativity, byzantine philosophizing, and tranquil contemplation. Just browse the shelves at your local bookstore: there is chanting Buddhism, meditating Buddhism, painting Buddhism, therapy Buddhism, martial arts Buddhism, Hollywood Buddhism, motorcycle maintenance Buddhism; there is Māhāyana Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism, Vajrayāna Buddhism, Zen, Vipassana, Tantric, Dzogchen, Pure Land Buddhism; there is

Japanese, Tibetan, American, Thai, and [insert country name here] Buddhism. Now, for $19.99, for a limited time only (let's hope), you can have Buddhism-in-a-box Buddhism!

How can we sort this all out? There are two crucial factors mitigating against the streamlining of "Buddhism" that many readers presumably desire. First, contrary to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Buddhism is not a "religion of the book." There is no single volume that contains the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha, in fact, wrote nothing at all. He wandered around a four-hundred-square-mile area of eastern India for forty-five years, verbally clarifying for others the nature of what he referred to as his "awakening"—his liberating insight into the nature of human existence. Eventually codified by the community of his followers in India and committed to writing in Sri Lanka, China, and beyond (this process is explained later), this nearly half century of teaching amounts to a virtual library of books. The second factor working against an easy solution to the present-day multiplicity of Buddhisms is the fact that although the Buddha became a renowned teacher with a substantial following during his lifetime, he never centralized his authority. Scholars speculate that the Buddha modeled his practitioner community on the power-sharing republican political structure of his own people, the Śākyas of northeastern India (see "Pronunciation of Sanskrit and Pāli Words"). In any case, shortly before he died, the Buddha insisted that no one assume the role of authority when he was gone. Hence, without a popelike figure to lay down the law, two predictable results manifested: the community splintered into numerous divergent sects and schools, and doctrinal disputes and variations in practice proliferated. The result of twenty-five hundred years of such diffusion is precisely the confusing cacophony of Buddhist voices beckoning us today from bookshelves and practice centers.

Can these voices be harmonized? Can so many Buddhisms be reconciled to the point of the *basic,* as the title of the present volume suggests? Do they all share some underlying commonality? If we want to claim that the varieties of Buddhism are fundamentally identical, as indeed many scholars and practitioners alike do, then an additional difficulty appears: What criteria will we use to locate that point of commonality? Remember the Greek mathematician Archimedes? He said that if he were given but a single fixed point on which to stand, he could move the

Earth off its foundation. Imagine that—is there such a point? Standing on the Earth, he would just revolve along with it; stepping off the Earth in order to gain a footing, he would fall into empty space. Similarly, we cannot locate a fixed vantage point—an Archimedean point—from which to make normative claims about Buddhism as a totality. We must formulate our claims either from within a particular tradition or from the outside altogether. The first stance is, from the perspective of the whole, too limited, while the second stance is, from the perspective of each particular tradition, too broad. This being the case, isn't the very notion of "basic teachings of the Buddha" vacuous?

THE JOURNEY OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

In the simplest terms, the basic teachings of the Buddha consist of his forty-five-year-long effort to clarify to others what he considered to be the essential knowledge (*buddhi*) for human well-being. He referred to his own insight into this knowledge as an "awakening" (*bodhi*). Hence, his followers eventually gave him the epithet *buddha*, "one who is awakened." It is of course from this appellation that we get the term "Buddhism." But how do we get from one man's specific teachings to myriad forms of Buddhism? The story of how the Buddha's basic teachings gave rise to the multiple doctrinal, linguistic, ritual, cultural, and institutional traditions that call themselves "Buddhist" is, of course, filled with minute, complex detail. The details, moreover, must be culled from several scholarly disciplines, including philology, archaeology, sociology, history, and anthropology, to name but a few. In the present section, I hope to convey to the reader an impression of the process whereby the Buddha's teachings became so many Buddhisms.

Part One: From Search to Community

The first part of the story covers the period from the Buddha's search for consequential knowledge to the codification of his teachings concerning this knowledge. This account is somewhat reconstructive and speculative in nature, though grounded in common sense and some historical data.*

* Readers interested in an extended biography of the Buddha can see John Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

After a six-year period of seeking out and training under reputable teachers, Siddhattha Gotama (ca. 480–400 B.C.E.; Sanskrit: Siddhārtha Gautama), the young man who would become known as the Buddha, isolated himself in a forest grove and strenuously applied himself to practice. Unlike for followers of the dominant social and religious group of the day, the Vedic Brahmans, "practice" for Gotama did not entail sacrificial and devotional actions aimed at coercing the divine forces held to be arrayed throughout the cosmos. Gotama had been inspired by adherents of the relatively new groups of practitioners who referred to themselves as *śramaṇas,* "seekers, wandering ascetics." Although there were significant differences among these *śramaṇa* groups, they shared a rejection of the presuppositions that underlay Vedic Brahmanism. These presuppositions included the status of the Vedas—the scriptural basis of Brahmanical knowledge and customs—as dogmatic revelation, the inviolability of the caste system (with Brahmans at the top), the presence of "divine" (*deva*) power, and the efficacy of rituals (created and administered by Brahmans) to manipulate these powers toward desired ends. Gotama saw merit, rather, in the ideas circulating among the *śramaṇa* communities concerning the causal role played by human thought, speech, and action (*karma*); the destructive influence of ignorance (*avidya*) regarding the nature of reality; the prospect of incessant painful existence (*saṃsāra*); and the possibility of releasing oneself from this human pain and dissatisfaction (*mokṣa, nirvāṇa*). Most important, perhaps, Gotama shared the basic orientation of the *śramaṇas* away from speculative supernaturalism and toward the actual establishment of human happiness here and now. This orientation would point as well to the necessity of meditation, rather than to devotion or sacrifice, as the primary practice in which to engage. Hence, sitting in his forest grove, under the shelter of a tree, Siddhattha Gotama exerted himself in meditation.

The fruit of his efforts was clear insight into the nature of reality. With this insight, Gotama could see the role that his mind played in shaping the various phenomena—sights, sounds, scents, tastes, feelings, and thoughts—that constituted his lived experience, or reality. He saw clearly a way out of the debilitating effects of what seemed to be ceaseless mental-physical-emotional reactivity to the incessant deluge of phenomena.

When his understanding was thorough and his knowledge com-

plete, Gotama, like some, though not all, *śramaṇas,* made the decision to teach others what he had discerned about existence. So he spent the rest of his long life, an additional forty-five years, walking around a section of eastern India talking to, debating with, and teaching men and women—carpenters, barbers, farmers, shepherds, wandering ascetics, philosophers, princes, and even kings.

Over time the Buddha, similar to many teachers even today, likely developed specific formulae in order to stabilize the expression of his teachings and to ease reception and memorization for those who listened. As his body of teachings expanded and his followers increased, the Buddha, furthermore, probably organized and classified his teachings into basic sections and subsections to ensure safe (mnenomic) storage and to facilitate accurate transmission. This stabilization was even more crucial in an environment such as the Buddha's, of oral, rather than written, expression, storage, and transmission.

During his lifetime, the Buddha's followers, or, literally, "listeners" (Sanskrit: *śrāvaka*), formed into a substantial group. This group was known as the *bhikkhu saṅgha,* "the community of mendicants." As the *bhikkhus* dispersed throughout India to teach, they carried with them this roughly codified idiom of the teachings, refashioning it into the local vernaculars of those who would gather to listen. Laypeople, too, became part of the larger *saṅgha,* supporting the *bhikkhus* materially. Soon, as merchants and traders, these laypeople would contribute to the spread of the teachings throughout Asia.

Some Buddhist traditions hold that shortly after the Buddha's death the *bhikkhu saṅgha* convened a council to determine the wording and fix the organization of his teachings. Such a council, or "communal recitation" (*saṅgiti*), seems commonsensical when we reflect on the fact that the *śramaṅas* ("wanderers"), *bhikkhus* ("begging mendicants"), and *parivrajakas* ("peripatetics") who constituted the Buddha's community had, even during his lifetime, carried the teachings far and wide into the diverse cultural, geographical, and linguistic regions of ancient India. It is certainly not difficult to imagine both the emotional and the practical necessity of a communal gathering after an event as pivotal as the master's passing. In any case, tradition holds that three months after the death of the Buddha, some five hundred *bhikkhus* gathered in Rajagaha in eastern India to hear and approve recitations of both the rules governing the community (*vinaya*) and the teachings

proper (*suttas*). Before each recitation, the reciting *bhikkhu* would say, "This is what I heard," indicating that he was recalling actual discourses he had personally heard the Buddha deliver. After each recitation the attending *bhikkhus* would debate the accuracy of the recitation and, eventually, confirm the wording. It is in this manner that the Buddha's teachings were stringently codified and the earliest Buddhist canon established. Since some schools' accounts of the first council mention rehearsal of a third category of teachings, we refer to the Buddhist canon from this date forward as the *tripiṭaka* (Pāli: *tipiṭaka*), "the three baskets," namely, *vinaya, sutta,* and *abhidhamma.* (These categories are explained further later.)

Part Two: From Canon to Transmission

The second part of the story of the Buddha's teachings covers the period from this initial codification to the present day. This story courses through the numerous fragmentations, proliferations, and cultural transmutations that the Buddhist schools and communities have undergone throughout history. Its telling is complex and meandering; it requires a careful analysis of the rich data of the sort mentioned in the previous section. Here, I can hope to give only a general impression of this process.*

Buddhist communities proliferated after the death of the Buddha. One primary reason for this development was the fact that the Buddha encouraged his followers to wander far and wide "for the welfare of the human multitude," teaching others according to their needs and in their local vernaculars. (Some communities, such as the Vedic Brahmans, cultivated technical languages, such as Sanskrit, for their teachings.) Another factor giving rise to the increase of Buddhist communities was the new tendency of the *bhikkhus* to reside permanently in settlements and monasteries, not just during the rainy season, as had been their way in the Buddha's day. The apparent ability of the Buddha's followers to attract patronage certainly contributed to this new state of affairs. The result of these developments was the simultaneous increase in the number of communities adhering

* Readers interested in a full account might want to consult Richard Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 2004).

to the Buddha's teachings and the institutionalization of these communities.

So by one hundred years or so after the Buddha's death, there were numerous Buddhist communities, distinct, in varying degrees, from one another, dotting the Indian landscape. It isn't hard to imagine the kinds of differences that would have arisen concerning interpretation of doctrine and implementation of the monastic regulations, not to mention the variations in letter and spirit introduced by diverse languages, geographical regions, and cultures. And all along, different groups of "reciters" (*bhāṇakas*) were preserving the body of orally transmitted teachings. These *bhāṇakas* were the *bhikkhus* assigned particular teachings to memorize and, when requested, recite. It is true that the *bhāṇakas* periodically checked their versions of the teachings with other *bhāṇakas;* nonetheless, differences arose and positions hardened. (To get a sense of the forces of instability and change inherent in this system, just think of the "telephone" game you played in grade school.) Tradition holds that a second council was convened in Vaisali around one hundred years after the first council to resolve the points of contention that had arisen. Although the differences under investigation largely involved monastic regulations, these concerns were apparently serious enough to be pushing the various communities toward schism.

And indeed, it is around this time that we may speak of independent Buddhist schools (*nikāyas,* literally "groups") with diverse doctrinal orientations and distinct institutional infrastructures. Tradition holds that there were some eighteen such schools by the time the millennium came to a close. Sometimes we can glean certain points of contention within the early Buddhist world from the names of these schools. There was, for instance, the Sarvāstivāda sect, which held that "all things exist" (*sarvam asti*), that is, that past and future phenomena have actual material existence. There was the Sautrāntika, who looked to the dialogues of the Buddha (*sūtras*) as the final arbiter or end (*anta*) of doctrinal authority. There was the Lokottaravāda, which had the doctrine (*vāda*) that the Buddha possessed supernatural (*lokottara*) qualities. Sometimes we can see the importance of a teacher lineage in a sect's name, such as the Dharmaguptaka ("followers of Dharmagupta"), or the provenance of the sect, such as the Haimavata ("from the Himālaya region"). Finally, there was the Theravāda (Sanskrit: Sthaviravāda). The Theravāda is the variety of Buddhism that

became dominant in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. Theravāda's self-understanding as a conservative tradition is revealed in the designation itself: "those who subscribe to the doctrine (*vāda*) of the elders (*thera*)." Indeed, throughout the centuries down to the present day, Theravāda has resisted the more substantive innovations that were developed within other Buddhist communities. Of the "eighteen schools" (the number shouldn't be taken literally), only the Theravāda has survived to the present day—although not without its own internal schisms.

The Theravāda is a particularly important Buddhist school for reasons other than its longevity and relative conservatism. According to Theravādin historical accounts, the great Indian emperor Asoka (270–232 B.C.E., that is, before the Common Era; replaces B.C., "before Christ") sent his son Mahinda, a Buddhist *bhikkhu,* to Sri Lanka as an ambassador of "the beneficial teachings" (*dharma*). There, Mahinda converted King Tisya and founded the first *bhikkhu saṅgha* on the island. (Similarly, Asoka's daughter is held to have founded the first order of *bhikkhunis,* or nuns.) With royal patronage underwriting the building of monasteries and supporting the *saṅgha,* Theravāda easily gained a powerful foothold in Sri Lanka and indeed has continued to flourish there to this very day.

But the histories report the occurrence of a potentially devastating event in the year 29 C.E. When Mahinda came to Sri Lanka, he brought with him the entire Buddhist canon (presumably via accompanying *bhāṇakas*). The traditional view (there is no actual evidence) is that the version of the canon transmitted by Mahinda was precisely that which was recited at the first council. Tradition holds, furthermore, that this original version was pristinely transmitted, memorized, mnemonically stored, and further transmitted for the next two hundred years, when the very existence of Buddhism on the island was threatened.

A Theravādin historical, or really quasi-historical, text, the *Dīpavaṃsa,* relates that during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abaya (29–17 C.E.), the kingdom was devastated by civil war. Realizing the precariousness of the Buddha's teachings—dependent, as they were, on the health of the monks and nuns who preserved them—and fearing their irretrievable loss, the monks recorded the teachings on birch bark and safely stored them away for future generations. It is interesting to note that one sense of the term *sutta,* which is cognate with the

English word "suture," is "to stitch together, to sew, to weave." (Our English term "text" also reveals the close relationship between ideas and textiles.)

The traditional view is that this version of the canon preserved both the original language and the original wording of the Buddha's teachings. As we will see, the matter is not so simple. But in Sri Lanka, at least, the teachings of the Buddha had found a safe, secure home.

In the rest of Asia, however, the story of the Buddha's teachings developed further. After the turn of the millennium and into the Middle Ages, contentious issues similar to those affecting the earliest communities would eventually give birth to two revolutionary developments within Buddhism. The first of these distinctly new directions is known as the Mahāyāna. Again, its very name—"the great (*mahā*) vehicle (*yāna*)"—reveals its adherents' view that it represents a monumental expansion from the older sects—which they referred to collectively, and pejoratively, as the Hināyana, "the small vehicle"—in both the doctrine and social application of Buddhism. Mahāyāna emerged at the beginning of the first millennium and spread to regions in northern India and beyond, to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The second great innovation flourished in India from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, after which Buddhism largely disappeared from the subcontinent. This revolutionary form of Buddhism is known as Vajrayāna, "the diamond (*vajra*) vehicle (*yāna*)," in reference to its claim to be in possession of practices that lead the practitioner to the indestructible (adamantine, or diamond-like) mind of a *buddha*. The popularity of the Vajrayāna in India corresponds precisely to the period when Tibetans were scouring India in search of Buddhist teachings, texts, and teachers to bring back to Tibet. In some cases they found what they sought in the great monasteries of eastern India; in other cases, in isolated forests, deserted charnel grounds, and mountain retreats. Thus, it is in Tibetan communities—now largely exiled in India, Europe, and North America—that the several varieties of Vajrayāna have been preserved.

Both of these new forms of Buddhism were characterized by creative literary developments. In Mahāyāna *sūtras* and Vajrayāna *tantras,* ingenious fashionings of ancient doctrines and practices were worked out and fresh, often startling, innovations developed. In contrast, the Theravāda endeavored to preserve what it understood to be the an-

cient forms of the teachings as expressed in their most ancient formulation, namely, the *suttas*. So, the threefold grouping of Buddhism into Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna as a means of arranging the many Buddhist sects and schools into basic family types can be used to organize the thousands of volumes that constitute Buddhist literature. Such a division is borne out in the three great collections of Buddhist literature, referred to by scholars as the Pāli canon, the Chinese canon, and the Tibetan canon. (These collections are discussed further shortly.)

So, as time went on, the Buddha's teachings meandered throughout ancient and medieval India, transmuting into the countless local vernaculars they encountered along the way. Who knows which ones and how many? They moved northward along the upper and lower Silk Roads, through Gandhara, Kashmir, Gilgit, and Tunhuang, coursing through China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. They traveled over the sea routes to the southeast, into Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia, coursing through Tibet and Nepal in the medieval period, through cultures high and low, through languages, time, and space, into the modern era, through England, Germany, France, and North America. In every instance, what counted as "the Buddha's teachings" transformed into the idiom of those who stood on the meandering pathway of those teachings, open-armed in acceptance. Really, this incessant meandering was wholly predictable. After all, what should we expect when a teacher, such as the Buddha, insists from the outset that his disciples go forth, no two in the same direction, and instruct others "in their native tongue"? Being in the service of "the welfare of the human multitude," how could the Buddha's teachings *not* exhibit such fluidity?

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It may create some perspective for the reader of a book titled *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*—a book, moreover, that presents a mere sixteen texts—to provide some hard numbers relating to the three abovementioned Buddhist canons. These numbers concern works held by the traditions to be "the word of the Buddha" (*buddhavacana*) only:

Pāli canon: 5,434 texts (classified as "teaching discourses," or *suttas*), plus fifteen book-length works (classified as "short works," or *khuddaka*, ranging between roughly nine modern printed pages and five hundred);

Chinese canon: 151 texts (translations of the previously mentioned *suttas,* but called *āgamas,* or "traditions"), 612 Mahāyāna works (*sūtras*), 572 Vajrayāna works (*tantras*);

Tibetan canon: 270-text *sūtra* section in 30 oversize-format volumes (includes a few *sutta* translations), 33 additional volumes of Mahāyāna *sūtras,* 300-plus *tantras* in 30 volumes.

(The canons include much more than the teachings of the Buddha. There are in addition some 300 volumes of monastic regulations, philosophical works, narrative texts, histories, commentaries, and even treatises on drama, medicine, and poetics.)

Tedious text-critical examinations of these canons by scholars yield a significant fact: through centuries of transmission, different canonical versions of the same text rarely reveal any but the most inconsequential differences. These differences mainly involve minor alterations in style, organization, and orthography. Furthermore, a comparative reading of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* and Vajrayāna *tantras* would lead most readers to conclude that even these works constitute innovations not so much in doctrinal substance as in style and tenor. There will always be exceptions to this consistency, but I believe that a careful analysis of Buddhist literature as a whole will generally show that "the basic teachings of the Buddha" somehow always remain the basic teachings of the Buddha.

THE IDIOM AND MEANING OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

Idiom

The Buddha purportedly asked those who would explore his teachings to examine both their idiom and their meaning. Narrowly construed, the idiom and meaning of the teachings are closely bound up with the phraseology and significance indicated by the Buddha himself and roughly replicated, we may assume, by his earliest disciples. But, contrary to the traditional view, we do not know what that wording was; in fact, we do not even know in which *language* the Buddha uttered those words. None of the versions of the teachings as we now have them is in a language that the Buddha would have spoken, and each reveals considerable editing over a considerable span of time. So,

the original—though without a doubt continuously developing—idiom and meaning being unavailable to us for examination, we must apply broader definitions of these terms.

For the purposes of the present book, the task of determining what counts as the proper phraseology of the teachings removes us some four centuries and fifteen hundred miles from our source (the Buddha in India), to the island of Sri Lanka. It was here, as explained in the preceding section, that around 29 C.E. the memory of the Buddha's idiom was transferred from actual oral utterance into literature. It is from the wording of this literature that I am deriving "basic teachings of the Buddha."

According to the ancient and venerable Theravādin tradition of Buddhism, this transference coursed directly from the lips of the teacher to the pen of the scribe. But we have seen how tradition, as Henry David Thoreau said of education, "makes a straight canal out of a meandering brook." So the question arises: How can we ever determine that it is at *this* particular point, at *this* particular bend, that a responsible rendering of the Buddha's teaching is to be found?

To answer this question, it may be helpful to take the metaphor further. As a waterway courses through the land, it deposits particularly generous amounts of fertile silt at certain points along the way. This silt provides the conditions for luxuriant vegetation; and this vegetation provides the conditions for vibrant life; so, over time, a civilization emerges there. Similarly, there are rich deposits in the topography of Buddhism; these deposits are the places where idiom and meaning have coursed into memory, and memory into literature.

Meaning

In imploring his followers to set off in separate directions to instruct people in their native tongues, the Buddha set the course for the manifold trajectories of idiom that are exhibited today in the various Buddhist canons. And just as idiom would course into canonical literature, meaning would crystallize into teacher-centric institution.

Today, a historically unprecedented number and variety of Buddhist organizations with roots in Asia have begun to settle and gain acceptance in twenty-first-century America as offering viable options for living and practice. A list of these organizations' charismatic founders would read as a who's who of international Buddhism through the ages:

Atiśa, Dōgen, Nichiren, Shinran, Milarepa, Naropa, Tsongkhapa, Lin Chi, Hōnen, Seung San, Shunryu Suzuki, Ajahn Chah, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu—the list would fill several pages. The institutions founded by this multitude of Buddhist teachers *all* lay claim to "the meaning of the Buddha." But since intra-Buddhist dialogue is remarkably non-polemic on the surface, this claim of privilege and purity of meaning does its work invisibly, for the most part.

So a historically responsible inquiry into "the meaning of the Buddha" must pick up on one of these institutional trajectories. Questions of the form "What did the Buddha mean by *X*?" can be broached only *via* the traditions—the lineage-based Buddhist institutions—whose texts, teachings, rituals, et cetera, constitute answers to the various questions of meaning. "What did the Buddha mean by *X*?" "Well, according to Dōgen and the Japanese Sōtō Zen tradition . . . On the other hand, according to Buddhaghosa and the Southeast Asian Theravādin traditions . . . And according to Marpa and the Tibetan Kagyü tradition . . ." Buddhist institutions, then, are the arbiters of "the meaning of the Buddha." And, being *arbiters* (the Latin term for "judge"), they can make the rules—can't they?

"No, they can't," I hear the Buddha say.

"Tell them not to rattle their rules in our ears," Emerson concurs.

And I imagine Emerson as my ally, pressing the matter further: "Do you, dear reader, seek a result that is *new and incalculable, like health*? Assuming that you do, and wishing that for you, this book has been conceived in a way that invites you to explore the idiom and meaning of the Buddha *behaving as you can,* as you are, just as you are. Doing so, who knows what (and whose) genius and beauty might come to order?"

Some Conclusions

We can draw several conclusions from the scenarios outlined in the preceding pages.

First, the idiom and meaning of the Buddha's teachings exhibit an equalizing measure of fluidity and stability. Though adaptable across cultural, linguistic, temporal, and geographical lines, a recognizable core of concerns animates the teachings throughout.

Second, our primary means of accessing the Buddha's idiom and meaning—other than a living teacher—is Buddhist literature. And all Buddhist literature, whatever its origins, is just that: literature. It is al-

ways words on the page, words in the ear. The terms used by the world's religious traditions, such as "canon," "scripture," "sacred work," "holy book," "the revealed word," are at heart just ways of dressing up crafted human compositions as pristinely "religious." Whether Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, or Christian, such works are *never* pristine: every page of every "sacred" work is smudged with the handprints of its creators through the ages. This observation is not meant to belittle the claims made by the multitude of humanity concerning their precious texts; it is simply an effort to remind the reader that we are concerned here *in the first instance* with literature, with compositions and writings, pure and simple.

Third, being literature, Buddhist textual material is always *tropological*. That is, it is always an instance of a particular and discernible *turn* (called a *tropos*, from the Greek, in literary studies)—a turn of speech (for the sake of rhetoric, recall, and memorization, for instance), a turn from utterance to narrative (from "what the Buddha said" to "what the Buddha's followers—and followers' followers ad infinitum—said the Buddha said"), a turn from *that* language and culture to *this* (Indian to Chinese to American), a turn from that community's concerns to this community's (mendicant to monk to lay; craftsman to businessperson to academic to you), a turn from the spoken word (*buddhavacana*, "idiom of the Buddha") to the written ("text," "canon," *sutta*).

The fourth conclusion that may be drawn is that the *writer* of a book on Buddhism stands, like Archimedes, on the spinning sphere of history; and the fifth is that the *reader* of a book on Buddhism stands, like Archimedes, on the spinning sphere of history. Although it would be convenient, for the sake of neatness, to do so, I find it impossible to refute the literary critic Harold Bloom's comment in this regard that "no reader [or writer], however professional, or humble, or pious, or disinterested, or 'objective,' or modest, or amiable, can describe any person's relationship to a prior text without taking up a stance no less tropological than that occupied by the text itself." This insight will prove valuable for our purposes here if it prompts the reader to reflect for a moment on the inevitability of such a stance (you within the flow of history) and the nature of your particular stance (we all bring to the material certain interests, hopes, biases). I hope, too, that Bloom's comment will pique in the reader an abiding suspicion toward any author who presents himself or herself, and the Buddhist material, as standing clear of all *turns*.

Finally, the Buddhist canonical collections are particularly rich deposits in the vast *idiomatic* topography of Buddhism. Since the Pāli canon preserves particularly ancient specimens of the Buddha's idiom, in the present volume "the idiom of the Buddha's teachings" means this particular formulation of the teachings. And it is, moreover, on the basis of this wording that I aim to explore "the meaning of the Buddha's teachings."

Why the Pāli Canon?

Why should we use the Pāli texts, the *suttas,* preserved by the Theravādin communities of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, as our basis for "the Buddha's idiom" as opposed to, say, the Chinese versions of the same old works, the *āgamas,* or even the later Mahāyāna *sūtras* or Vajrayāna *tantras*? There are three good reasons for this decision.

(1.) The Pāli canon is the only extant *complete Indian* collection of Buddhist texts. While there were certainly other whole collections, most of this literature would have been destroyed by the invading Islamic armies that, by the end of the twelfth century, had devastated the great Indian Buddhist monastic libraries. Since the Pāli collection had been transmitted as far away as Sri Lanka in the third century B.C.E., it was spared this fate. In Sri Lanka, the canon has been preserved with great care down to the present day by the lone surviving sect of ancient Indian Buddhism, namely, the Theravāda. This is not to say that the texts have not undergone alterations over time. In fact, to speak of *a* Pāli canon is somewhat misleading. There are, for instance, Burmese and Thai recensions of the canon—though nonetheless in Pāli—in addition to the Sri Lankan version. There are also plenty of instances of later scribal emendations. In fact, some of these alterations occurred as late as the twelfth century. But again, the insubstantiality of the disagreements between these versions serves more to accentuate the consistency of Buddhist textual transmission since the Buddha's own day than to reveal serious divergence. So, if your aim is to get as close to "the Buddha's idiom" as possible, the Pāli *suttas* are the logical starting point.

(2.) Linguistically, too, the Pāli canon holds an advantage over the Chinese and Tibetan collections. We don't know what the Buddha's mother tongue was. But assuming that he followed his own advice, he would have taught in the local dialects of his listeners. Scholars refer

to the vernacular languages spoken at the time of the Buddha as Middle Indo-Aryan, and distinguish it from Sanskrit, which was the learned language of the time. It is a common misconception that Pāli is one such regional vernacular. In fact, the term *pāli* simply means "text." Nowhere in the entire canon itself does the term appear; rather, it apparently derives from the usage in later commentaries on the canonical literature, which referred to the *pālibhāsā,* "the language of the texts." As might be expected from a two-thousand-year transmission history, Pāli, "the language of the texts," also exhibits linguistic features from other Middle Indo-Aryan dialects, as well as attempts to transform certain terms into Sanskrit—a process known as "sanskritization."

How do these points about language bear on my decision to translate from the Pāli? Look at an example close to home. William Blake's language, though fine English, sounds somewhat foreign even to present-day English speakers. Add to this everyday English usage his technical vocabulary, and Blake's language becomes nearly impenetrable. This, though his language is English and only two hundred years old. Now, imagine how Blake comes across in Mongolian. Then, imagine the Mongolian Blake translated into Japanese. Blake's technical vocabulary, which he chose with great care, can really only be roughly approximated in another language. But if I were a Japanese reader of Blake, I would want a translation from English, not from Mongolian. The Pāli *suttas,* of course, are certainly not to the Buddha what *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are to Blake. The *suttas* are *already* a translation—and an edited one at that. But this point adds even more ballast to the decision to look to the Pāli canon as the basis for what has become the multitudinous assortment known today as "the teachings of the Buddha." Simply put, the language of the Pāli canon mediates the conceptual world of ancient Buddhism, and probably of the Buddha himself, to an extent impossible for Chinese and Tibetan, or for that matter, English.

(3.) Just as students of the history of philosophy sometimes quip that the bulk of work done in their discipline is but a footnote to Plato, it is arguable that the bulk of the developments within Buddhism over the centuries are but elaborations on, local adaptations of, and cultural inflections of what we find in the Pāli texts. This goes for central Mahāyāna notions such as emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā;* Pāli: *suṇyatā* and

anattā) and compassion (Sanskrit and Pāli: *karuṇā*) as well as for foundational Vajrayāna ritual practices such as recitation of *mantras* for subduing hostile forces (Pāli: *mantas* and *parittas*). In this regard, the *suttas* can as a rule be shown to be the fountainhead of subsequent teachings, even those that have been radically developed. With the exception of a remarkably minuscule number of doctrinally anomalous traditions, the chorus of Buddhisms evoked in the first paragraphs of this introduction can, by and large, be traced to this source, to the *suttas* of the Pāli canon.

What Is a *Sutta*?

But what, precisely, are these *suttas* that I am claiming occupy such a prominent place in Buddhism as the basis of the teachings? The Pāli term *sutta* (the better-known Sanskrit equivalent is *sūtra*) refers to the dialogues that the Buddha engaged in with others. The reader will quickly notice, however, that as dialogues, these discussions are so radically one-sided as to be better viewed as discourses, or sometimes even lectures or speeches. Quite contrary to Socrates' dialogues as recorded by Plato, the Buddha's dialogues as recorded by his followers involve only the most minimal exchange of ideas. Whereas Socrates' interlocutors routinely offer thoughtful rebuttals, and even complex counterarguments, to his positions, the Buddha's conversation partners routinely appear merely as foils for his positions. That is certainly not to say that the Buddha's interlocutors don't pose difficult questions, make legitimate counterarguments, or flat out disagree with the Buddha. They do all of this and more. They do not, however, do so *vigorously enough* to satisfy what most of us, I imagine, would consider the basic requirements of a genuinely engaged discussion partner.

Why do the *suttas* present us with such weak interlocutors? Anyone with even a passing familiarity with Indian culture knows that it has a deep and ancient tradition of robust intellectual debate and religious skepticism. Given that fact, the *suttas* are certainly not full records of the Buddha's discussions with men and women who would have, in reality, often been formidable partners in dialogue: ascetics, mendicants, teachers, philosophers, princes, and kings. But partiality notwithstanding, I am unaware of any good reasons to doubt that the *suttas* do record accurate records of the *teachings* the Buddha imparted to his interlocutors. Herein may lie the reason for the apparent passivity of the

the *piṭaka* later than the other collections. All of these works are of anonymous authorship. The most well known of these are the *Dhammapada,* the *Jātaka* (stories, largely ethical in nature, of the Buddha's previous lives), and the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* (poetic expressions of realization by early male and female followers).

3. *Abhidhammapiṭaka.* The "basket of works elaborating on the teachings." This collection consists of seven works that examine specific aspects of the *sutta* material in minute detail. Themes of the various texts include enumeration of the elements (called *dhamma*) of existence, investigation of the unfolding of mental moments or factors; the nature of causation, and a description of personality types. One of the better-known texts in this collection is the *Kathāvatthu,* which contains an account of numerous contested points and views among the earliest schools of Buddhism (of which, at the time, the Theravāda was but one).

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The themes covered in the *Suttapiṭaka* constitute the core concerns of the Buddha. These themes include those that preoccupy our modern disciplines of psychology (for example, the nature of mind, the processes of perception), religion (the question of supernatural agency, the practice of meditation), ethics (the necessity and means of self-restraint and moderation), and philosophy (the nature of reality, the modes of knowledge). But despite this variety, in the end, the Buddha says, his teachings are like the salty ocean. As vast and various as they are, the teachings contain but a single taste: that of *awakening.* They teach slumbering, deluded, dissatisfied people the means to transform themselves into ones who are bright, clear, and wide awake.

A BUDDHA, A READER, AND A TEXT

In the Beginning: A Buddha, Maybe

Once upon a time, the Buddha was a bombastic braggadocio. Considering that he lived ensconced in his palace as the coddled prince Siddhārtha until he was nearly thirty years old, then isolated himself in remote forest thickets until middle age, what should we expect? He

certainly could not have developed any of the skills in interpersonal communication required for an effective "caravan leader" or "pointer of the way," as he would eventually refer to his teaching prowess. No, in the beginning, the fully awakened one was not so obviously "the teacher supreme."

In the beginning, the Buddha sat at the foot of a tree deep in the forest in a state of unutterable delight and ease. Rising after several days, he set out on the road to the deer park on the outskirts of Varanasi. He had determined to locate his five former companions, with whom he had practiced severe asceticism until being abandoned by them as a backslider. The Buddha's intention was to teach the group "the *dhamma,*" that is, the insights that led to his own realization of life's ultimate refuge, "unborn unsurpassable peace, unbinding, *nirvāṇa*." Here is the Buddha's own version of what happened next (this firsthand account can be found at *Majjhimanikāya* 26).

> An ascetic named Upaka saw me on the road between Gayā and the place of my awakening, and, on seeing me, spoke to me as follows. "Your faculties are clear, brother. Your complexion is pure and bright. Under whose supervision have you become a seeker? Who is your teacher? Whose teachings do you accept?" When this was said, I replied to Upaka in verse.
>
> "Master of all,
> knower of all, am I.
> Unstained among
> the things of the world,
> I abandon all.
> With the withering of craving,
> I am liberated.
> Having realized this condition
> completely on my own
> to whom should I point as a teacher?
>
> "I have no teacher;
> a person like me cannot be found.
> In this world with its resplendent beings,
> I have no equal.

"For, in this world,
I am highly accomplished.
I am the teacher supreme.
I, alone, am fully and soundly awakened.
Cooled am I, and quenched.

"To set in motion
the wheel of teaching
I am going to the city of Kasi.
In a world become blind,
I beat the drum of the deathless."

Upaka responded, "According to your claims, brother, you must be an infinite conqueror." To which I replied:

"Conquerors are those who, like me,
have dissolved habituated impulses.
I have conquered detrimental qualities.
Therefore, Upaka, I am a conqueror."

When this had been uttered, the ascetic Upaka said, "Maybe, brother," and, shaking his head, he set off on a side road.

"Master of all"? "Knower of all"? Having no peer even among the gods? How would *you* respond to such claims—spoken, no less, in ostentatious verse? *An infinite conqueror! Sure, brother. Whatever, brother. May it be so, bro! Maybe, brother, maybe.* Wouldn't you, too, just shake your head and walk away?

The Buddha's lesson—that a teacher must *earn* his prerogative to teach others—did not end there. Here are his own words:

Then, wandering gradually, I arrived at Varanasi, at the deer park in Isipatana, where the group of five mendicants were staying. They saw me coming from the distance and, on seeing me, made an agreement with one another as follows:

"Brothers, here comes the seeker Gotama, living luxuriously, slacking in his effort, and backsliding into luxury. He does not deserve to be greeted with words of reverence, or by our rising from our seats, or by us respectfully taking his bowl and outer robe. But a

> seat should nonetheless be prepared. If he wants to, he can sit down."
>
> But as I approached, the five mendicants were unable to keep their agreement. One of them, rising up to greet me, respectfully took my bowl and outer robe. Another prepared a seat. Another put out water for washing my feet. However, they still addressed me by name and as "brother."

The Buddha then told his five former companions that he should no longer be addressed by his given name. He was now an *arahant*—a person who is supremely accomplished. He was now a *tathāgata*—a person who has come to a realization of the nature of reality. He was now a *buddha*—a person who has awakened. But these claims, too, met with skepticism. The Buddha's former companions insisted it simply could not be the case that someone like him might attain such distinction in knowledge and wisdom. The discussion went back and forth in this manner as the Buddha persisted in his claims. Finally, he asked the mendicants to reflect honestly on his present demeanor, saying, "Have I ever spoken like this before?" Signaling a shift in their view of their former companion, the five responded with the sign of deference sought by the Buddha: "No, *bhante,* no, sir." So now the Buddha could begin teaching.

> Listen! The deathless has been realized. I will instruct you. I will teach you the way. Practicing as instructed, by realizing for yourselves here and now through direct insight, you will soon enter on and dwell in the ultimate refuge of the higher life, for the sake of which people properly go from their home into homelessness.

The Buddha says that he then proceeded to instruct the five men over a period of time until each realized for himself an insight so profound and genuine that he could joyfully declare: "My liberation is unshakable!"

In the Midst: A Model Reader

What should we make of the fact that the Buddha's first attempts to teach were met with such skeptical resistance? Something eventually enabled him to convince the group of five former companions that he

was indeed an *arahant,* a *tathāgata,* a *buddha,* as he claimed. What was it? Was it something that he said? Was it a change in his demeanor? To answer these questions, as well as the question of their meaning, I would ask you, the reader, simply to look into the midst of things. In doing so, I aim to impart something of the spirit with which you will, I hope, read this book.

Looking into the midst of things, we see, first of all, a model reader. Such a reader is in the midst of the story just presented. This reader is composed of the combined spirit of Upaka and each of the five mendicants. That is, we can see in these literary figures traits that would, if taken to heart, strengthen the empirical reader's reading. One quality that makes this figure a model is the *ability to resist* coming under the spell of flamboyant language. Religious literature is immediately recognizable as religious in large part because of its extravagant language. Such language is *not* inviting the reader to examine closely, much less argue with, the claims that it is conveying.

Recent research in the field of cognitive science suggests that, when coupled with certain social factors, there is a correspondence between the grand language of a religious proclamation and a person's inclination to accept that proclamation as plausible. Our minds are captivated, awestruck, and enchanted by correspondingly captivating, awesome, and charming language. Such language makes a spectacle of itself; it insists on being granted our attention or, more aptly, our devotion. In so doing, it weaves its way into our thinking patterns and lodges there, in much the same manner as a tantalizing piece of gossip courses easily through a social circle.

As provocative and potent as the Buddha's words appear, really he presented Upaka and the group of five with nothing but assertions dressed up in flamboyant guise. Each of these men resisted the seductive pull of such language, eventually compelling the Buddha to take a different tack. Ideally you, too, will resist an easy acceptance of the Buddha's words, examining them at the most basic level of meaning and usage. As we will see, the Buddha himself will insist on this approach; and he will do so for reasons that have everything to do with the very possibility of *your* insight "here and now" into matters of real consequence.

The reader in the midst of the text, then, is a model reader for an additional reason. This reader, while cautious, nonetheless *responds*

> pletely fulfilled and perfectly purified life of training. There are people who have but little dust in their eyes, who are falling away because they have not heard of the way (*dhamma*). They will understand the teachings (*dhamma*). I, too, will go—to Senānigama in Uruvela—to teach the *dhamma*. (*Saṃyuttanikāya* 1.4.5)

A close look at this passage will throw some light on certain issues at the heart of the present book. It will also allow me to make explicit to you some of my own views concerning the Buddha, the Buddha's teachings, the end of the teachings, and you, the reader of this book. In mentioning these points here, I am really hoping to create the conditions for a dialogue between the reader and the text (both the book as a whole and *suttas* in particular). Partly this effort involves giving my implicit argument—after all, *I* chose which *suttas* to include—a measure of explicit form; partly it involves providing the reader with some grist for debate.

The Buddha

> Of physiology from top to toe I sing.
> —Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

> The teaching of Buddhism is nothing special. It is just our human way.
> —Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

The view that the Buddha was through and through *human* would not, on the face of it, be disputed by most Buddhists throughout history. "A man; extraordinary, but human" is how one teacher has put it. Yet *listen* to a Theravādin Buddhist tell a story about the Buddha, *observe* a Zen or Pure Land practitioner ritually interact with a statue of the Buddha, *watch* a Vajrayāna or tantric practitioner recite *mantras* while gazing at a painted scroll depicting a *buddha* or *bodhisattva*. Do so, and a certain cognitive dissonance is unavoidable: they *say* "human," but they certainly *act* as if the Buddha, that statue, the *mantra*, the icon, even the *teacher*, possessed supernatural qualities.

Why must this obvious point about the Buddha's humanity be made? Well, because our brains seem to push in the other direction.