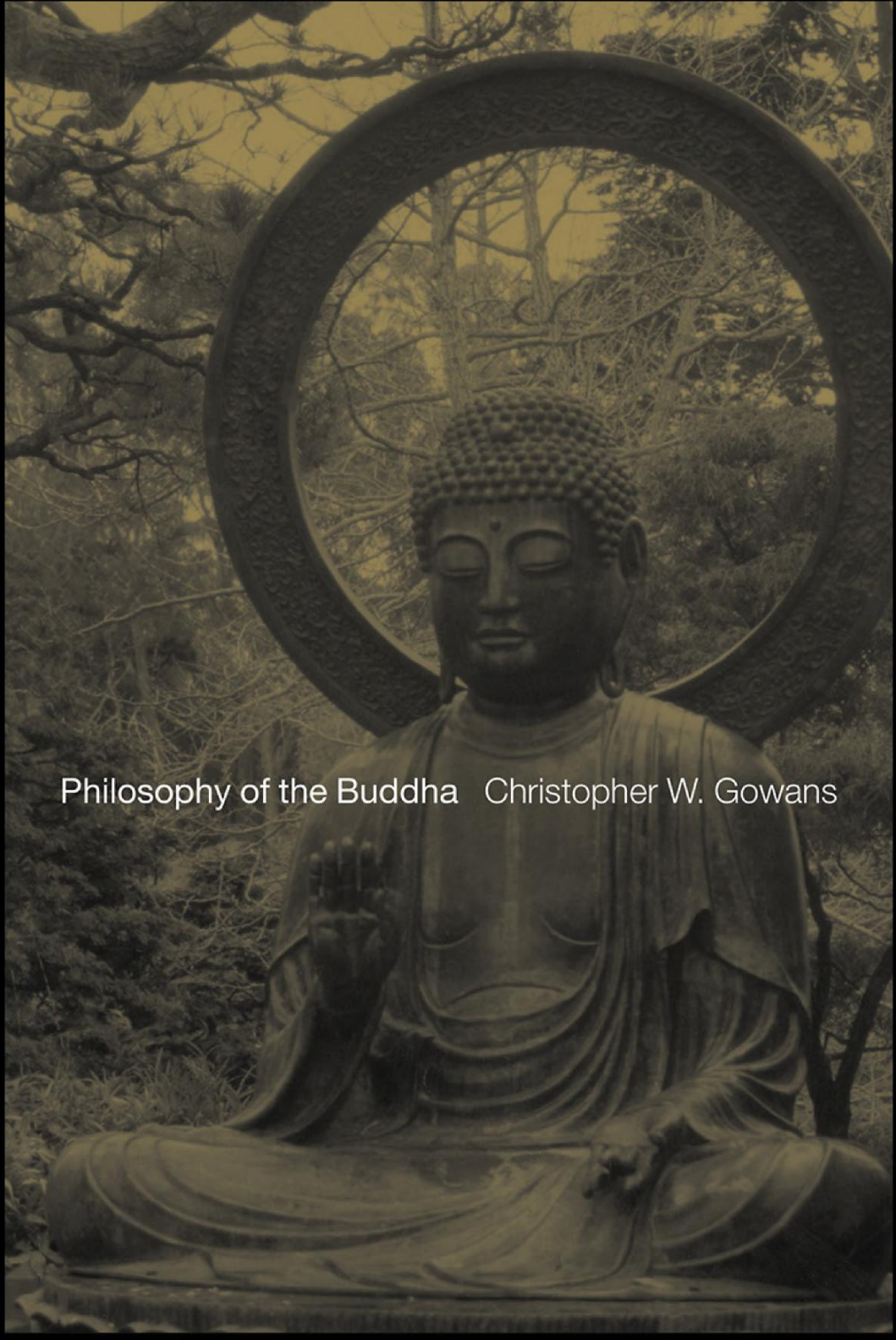

PHILOSOPHY OF THE BUDDHA

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FOR MY WIFE, COLEEN

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PREFACE

My purpose in writing this book is to provide a philosophical introduction to the teaching of the Buddha. It is intended neither as an apology nor as a critique, but as a thoughtful guide. I try to articulate the Buddha's teaching, explain how it could make sense, raise critical questions about it, and consider what he could say in response – all from the perspective of a philosopher trained in the West. I have the highest respect for the Buddha's teaching, and I take it seriously by reflectively engaging it. To a large extent, such critical reflection is encouraged by the Buddha himself. My hope is to motivate readers to take the Buddha seriously as well by thinking through his ideas and reaching their own conclusions about their value.

Many philosophers in the analytic tradition and elsewhere may view this as a quixotic enterprise at best. Yet there is now a well-established trend among some philosophers to look beyond the Western world in their research and especially their teaching. I wholeheartedly endorse this. But there are many dangers in this enterprise, and one of them is superficiality. I have endeavored here to focus on something rather specific, the teaching of the Buddha as represented in the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the *Pāli* canon, and to engage it in a serious philosophical way. It is still an introduction suitable for undergraduate students of philosophy. But the aim is to understand and reflect on the Buddha's teaching in a careful and detailed manner.

Aspects of Buddhism have been finding their way into the Western world for a couple of centuries. Increasingly in the last fifty years, a number of philosophers and scholars with a philosophical bent have been thinking in a sustained and insightful way about Buddhism and the possibilities for bringing Buddhist thought into dialogue with Western philosophy. I am greatly appreciative of their efforts and have benefited immensely from their work. A book of this sort does not lend itself to detailed scholarly disputation, but throughout I have learned much from others, both when I have agreed and not agreed with their interpretations and analyses. Many of these persons are referred to in the brief 'Suggested reading' section of each chapter. These are meant to guide readers to some pertinent philosophical discussions of the issues as well as to relevant sections of the *Sutta Piṭaka* (they are by no means exhaustive).

I have also profited a good deal from discussions of the Buddha's teaching in the *Theravāda* tradition. Though this book is not about that tradition, encounters with it have been natural insofar as it regards the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the *Pāli* canon as among its authoritative texts. Though I do not always accept traditional interpretations, I have always found it helpful to reflect on them. In general, I have tried to stay close to what is actually in the *Sutta Piṭaka* in contrast to what developed only later in the tradition. The one area where it was necessary to develop an interpretation at some length is the not-self doctrine (see part 2). What I say about it goes beyond but remains consonant with the spirit of the traditional understanding (and hence is contrary to revisions of this).

Sufficient quotations from the texts have been provided to give readers the flavor of the Buddha's teaching. But my main emphasis has been on explanation and evaluation. I urge readers to consult the original texts for themselves. Whenever possible, I have quoted more recent translations rather than the older ones of the Pali Text Society. The PTS translations are a tremendous resource and are always worth consulting. But their language is now rather out of date, and the newer translations are more available. For these reasons, the more recent translations are more suitable in an introductory guide. Likewise, my references are to the ordinary pagination rather than to the standardized pagination often used: the latter could be confusing to beginning students, while those already conversant with the texts should be able to move to other editions with comparative ease.

I have benefited greatly from comments on an earlier draft of the entire manuscript by Merold Westphal, Craig Condella, and an anonymous reviewer of this press. Dana Miller provided some insightful feedback on the chapters relating to Hellenistic philosophy, and Leo Lefebvre offered some helpful advice on my discussion of Buddhism and religion. A long conversation with Joseph Roccasalvo about Buddhism one afternoon was also of great value. Additionally, I have learned much from my students while teaching earlier versions of the manuscript in my sophomore philosophy classes the past two years.

Most of all, I was helped in a multitude of ways by my wife Coleen while preparing this book. She has read and commented on the entire manuscript, and we have had innumerable stimulating and illuminating conversations about Buddhism during the past several years. Her caring interest and encouragement, her knowledge and insight, her penetrating but respectful skeptical inquiries, and her numerous suggestions have all been of tremendous value. The book is dedicated to her. Without her loving and perceptive heart, I could not have written it. Finally, I am greatly appreciative of a rather different kind of support from my six-year-old daughter Hannah. Her regular energetic forays into my office while writing my book about 'Mr Buddha' have constantly reminded me of the life in terms of which these issues are so important.

ABBREVIATIONS

References are to page numbers, preceded by volume number in roman numerals when appropriate. Translations are sometimes altered slightly for the sake of uniformity.

L *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by M. Walshe, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987.

M *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

C *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 2 vols, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.

G *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, 5 vols, translated by F.L. Woodward, 1932–1936, Reprint, London: Pali Text Society, 1972–1979.

N *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, translated by N. Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999.

U/I *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha and The Itivuttaka: The Buddha's Sayings*, translated by J.D. Ireland, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997.

Part 1

THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING AS A PHILOSOPHY

1

OBSERVING THE STREAM

Followers of the Buddha are increasingly visible to people in Western societies. Most Buddhists live in Southeast Asia, China, Korea or Japan, but there are also significant Buddhist populations in countries such as Tibet, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Though accurate measurement is difficult, there are perhaps some 500 million Buddhists in Asia. Western awareness of Buddhists is not entirely new: Christian missionaries and colonial forces entered much of Asia centuries ago. But today, on account of increased ease of communication and transportation, and the general phenomenon of globalization, we in the West now have the opportunity, and sometimes the necessity, of interacting with Buddhists to an extent unprecedented in our past.

In fact, due to immigration and (to a much lesser extent) conversion, many Buddhists now live in Western countries. For example, there are probably at least one to two million Buddhists in the United States of America and significant numbers in European countries such as the United Kingdom and France. This too is not altogether a recent development: there were Chinese Buddhists in California shortly after the Gold Rush of 1849, and Buddhist societies began to spring up in some Western countries in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, closer to our time, books such as Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953) and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1951), along with the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Alan W. Watts, inspired a good deal of popular interest in Buddhism in the period after the Second World War. But in recent years, immigration to the West by Buddhists has increased, and so has interest in Buddhism among persons in the West, such as myself, who were not raised as Buddhists.

An indication of the current interest, and part of its cause, is the prominence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual head and political leader-in-exile. His efforts both on behalf of Tibetan independence from China and in support of inter-religious dialogue between Buddhism and Western religious traditions have attracted much attention. The Dalai Lama's book *The Art of Happiness* was on the *New York Times* 'best sellers' list for well over a year. There is also a small movement of 'Socially Engaged Buddhists' in some Western countries led partly by Westerners with a serious

commitment to Buddhism and partly by persons from traditional Buddhist countries such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk now living in France. Buddhism has even entered the arena of popular culture: in sports, advertising, television, movies, and rock music, occasional appearances of Buddhism may be found. Whether it is the golfer Tiger Woods, basketball coach Phil Jackson, actor Richard Gere, pop singer Tina Turner, or Adam Yauch of the rock group the *Beastie Boys*, it seems we have all heard of a celebrity who has proclaimed allegiance to some form of Buddhism.

In this context of increased awareness and interest, there are many reasons for persons in the West to inquire into Buddhism. One is to learn something about ourselves, to better understand our beliefs and values by comparing them with those of persons in cultures different from our own. A second is to understand something about those cultures, to comprehend how people in societies with Buddhist traditions live their lives. Related to this, a study of Buddhism may help us to interact better with Buddhists and Buddhist countries: it may enable us to approach these encounters in a more informed, responsible, and respectful way. Yet another reason is to see what we can learn from Buddhism, to ascertain whether an understanding of Buddhism might give us grounds for changing our own convictions and practices.

In some measure, this book may facilitate all these concerns, but its primary aim is the last, to reflect on what Buddhism can teach us. Specifically, the purpose is to help those with little or no knowledge of Buddhism to understand and evaluate the teaching of the Buddha from a philosophical perspective. Let us begin by reflecting on some key features of this approach.

1 The nature of this inquiry

We will focus on the teaching of Siddhattha Gotama, the person who became known as the Buddha (the enlightened one).[1] There are many ways of studying Buddhism that do not emphasize or go well beyond this teaching. For example, we might investigate the long history of Buddhism, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, in the Asian countries it has influenced. Or we might examine contemporary Buddhist cultures in those countries from the perspective of anthropology, sociology, or religious studies. These are all valuable approaches. But there is also merit in concentrating attention on what the Buddha himself taught. Both the history of Buddhism and its contemporary manifestations are large, complex, and diverse subjects: an introductory survey of them could be informative, but its sheer breadth would not tend to encourage in-depth reflection about what Buddhism might teach us. Though there are various ways of narrowing the field, an obvious approach is to focus on the source common to all Buddhist traditions – the teaching of the Buddha himself.

The Buddha said he taught all human beings a path for achieving enlightenment and well-being. As he approached his death, he laid particular

emphasis on the importance of this teaching. To his attendant, Ānanda, he said:

> Ānanda, it may be that you will think: 'The Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no teacher!' It should not be seen like this, Ānanda, for what I have taught and explained to you as *Dhamma* and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher.
>
> (L 269–70)

Buddhists everywhere revere as a source of wisdom and guidance the *Dhamma* of the Buddha, his teaching about the ultimate nature of reality and the way of life that accords with this. ('*Dhamma*' is the *Pāli* spelling followed here; the more familiar '*Dharma*' is in Sanskrit.) By examining this teaching, we will be studying the heart of all Buddhist traditions. Of course, these traditions have interpreted and developed the Buddha's teaching in strikingly different ways. For example, as we move from Sri Lanka to Tibet to Japan, the practice of Buddhism varies significantly. A full understanding of Buddhism would require investigation of these divergences, but they will not be our concern here. We will restrict ourselves to the teaching of the Buddha himself as we now know it.

Our aim is to understand and evaluate the Buddha's teaching. Some may object that evaluation is not a proper concern of non-Buddhists living in the West, that this is the prerogative of persons in Buddhist cultures. The Buddha himself provided an answer to this contention. He offered his teaching to all human beings, and he invited us all to reflect on what he taught and to learn from it. The intended audience of his message was not restricted to persons of a particular culture or tradition. In fact, the Buddha meant to radically challenge many of the values of his own culture. Moreover, from the northeastern corner of India where he taught some 2,500 years ago, the Buddha's teaching spread to societies such as China and Japan that were substantially different from his own. We accord the Buddha the highest tribute by accepting his invitation to seriously assess his teaching, not by flatly refusing to do so on the ground that it is the exclusive possession of another culture. By seeking to learn from the Buddha, we are not trying to tell others what they should believe: we are trying to ascertain what we should believe.

Finally, we will endeavor to grasp and appraise the Buddha's teaching from a philosophical point of view. That is, we will focus mainly on the philosophical aspects of the teaching, and we will seek to render these intelligible and to consider their worth by reflecting on them as a philosopher would. We will bring some characteristic perspectives, concerns, and habits of mind of philosophy to this teaching in order to illuminate it and examine what may be learned from it. Though there are several worthwhile avenues by which persons in the West might engage the teaching of the Buddha, philosophy is a natural one. Philosophy has played a central role in Western traditions, and

there is much in the Buddha's teaching that is philosophical in nature – for example, his ideas concerning the self, impermanence, and dependent origination. Moreover, his teaching gave rise to much explicit philosophical reflection in Asian cultures. Nonetheless, some may object that Western philosophical orientations are not suitable to comprehending and assessing the Buddha's teaching. The appropriateness and value of this approach will be explained at some length in chapters 4 and 5, but several preliminary points may be made here.

One form of the objection is the claim that, above all else, the Buddha taught a practice – an ensemble of dispositions, skills, and activities aimed at achieving ultimate well-being – and it is a distortion of his teaching to distill a theory from this practice and then consider the theory alone. Indeed, this would be a mistake. However, the practice taught by the Buddha does have theoretical dimensions, and there is much to be learned by focusing on these, so long as we do not lose sight of their practical context. A tradition developed early on in Buddhism that emphasized its theoretical elements (the *Abhidhamma* literature), and there is at least one important branch of Western philosophy (the Hellenistic tradition) that stressed its practical significance. This suggests that lines of communication are available by which persons with a Western philosophical perspective might constructively encounter the teaching of the Buddha.

Another form of this objection is the assertion that the Buddha taught a religion and not a philosophy. The first part of this contention presumably is correct, depending on what we mean by the term 'religion'. The Buddha did not believe in God and hence did not regard his teaching as divine revelation. But in many respects it is appropriate to consider his teaching a religion – for example, it centrally involves a notion of transcendence. However, that the Buddha's teaching is a religion in these respects does not entail that it is not, or does not include, a philosophy. The terms 'Christian philosophy' or 'Jewish philosophy' are not ordinarily considered oxymorons, and the existence of God is an important part of the theories of many canonical figures in Western philosophy. Though the purpose of our inquiry is not primarily comparative, we will see that there are numerous points of contact between the teaching of the Buddha and Western philosophical traditions.

A final challenge to a philosophical approach is the claim that the primary mode of understanding in Western philosophy is reason, whereas for the Buddha enlightenment is achieved not by reason, but by meditation. This is the most interesting objection, and it raises a serious issue that will be one of our principal concerns. Rational thought and discourse have been fundamental to much Western philosophy (though not all of it), and Buddhist meditation has played no role in its traditions. However, both the Buddha and many Western philosophers held that objective knowledge of reality and of how to live may be achieved by human beings. The teaching of the

Buddha challenges the belief, so typical in Western philosophy, that rational reflection is the main means of attaining this knowledge. The Buddha thought reason was valuable but insufficient for enlightenment, and he thought meditation was crucial. The meditation techniques he taught were intended to develop our powers of concentration and, in a special sense, observation. They were meant to take us beyond ordinary modes of understanding, but not outside all understanding. The fundamental role of meditation in the Buddha's teaching should be seen not as precluding an inquiry into this teaching from a Western philosophical perspective, but as providing a key issue for consideration in this inquiry. As we seek to make sense of the teaching of the Buddha, one of our concerns will be to determine if we have something to learn from meditation. Perhaps the primacy of reason commonly asserted by Western philosophers is ill-advised.

2 Guidelines for learning from the Buddha

It will help to have some guidelines for comprehending and assessing the Buddha's teaching in a philosophical way. These guidelines are not beyond controversy. We will need to consider one critique from the Buddha himself. Nonetheless, it is important to begin our inquiry with an awareness of some of the methodological issues involved in seeking to understand and evaluate his teaching. These two activities cannot be completely separated: evaluation obviously presupposes understanding, but we cannot fully understand something without recourse to evaluation. However, we will proceed by first discussing some principles of interpretation and then turning to some standards of assessment. In the next section (see pages 11–13), we will reconsider these in light of the Buddha's own pronouncements apropos the comprehension and evaluation of his teaching.

Objectivity

Our first goal is an accurate and insightful understanding of the Buddha's teaching. We should assume neither that a perfectly objective account is possible nor that any interpretation is as good as another. As we strive to understand, we are influenced by our own perspective, an ensemble of outlooks, interests, feelings, and capacities rooted in the particulars of our historical, social, and personal circumstances. This is inevitable and not entirely cause for regret. Without some perspective, we could not comprehend anything – for example, we could not understand without language, and whatever languages we know are the products of specific cultures and traditions. Since each of our perspectives differ in important ways, none of us can expect a fully objective account. On the other hand, we should not infer from this that all interpretations are on a par. We need not suppose there is a single correct interpretation to realize that some accounts may be better than others.

Even if conflicting interpretations are sometimes equally or incommensurably good, our goal should be to seek an understanding that is well-founded and illuminating. One reason for being aware of our own perspective is to ascertain the ways it both enables and hinders us from achieving this goal. Though we cannot escape our perspective, we can gain some distance from it and perhaps modify it. This may enable us to overcome some of our limitations and to understand the Buddha in a more accurate and penetrating way.

Honesty

We should be careful not to presume either that the Buddha's teaching must be pretty much the same as what we already believe or that it has to be radically different from what we think. Both mistakes have been made by some Western interpreters. For example, if we assume that all religions are really saying the same thing in the end, we may fail to see the deep differences between Buddhism and Christianity. Or if we suppose that the 'Eastern mind' is essentially different from the 'Western mind,' and that 'never the twain shall meet,' we may miss the fact that the Buddha addressed concerns of great importance to us. We need to be honest about what he did and did not say. Our aim should be to carefully determine the differences and similarities that actually exist between his teaching and our own beliefs. We may discover that there are real disagreements that must be acknowledged, but we may also find out that there is more common ground than we suspected.

Translation

The Buddha's words were first recorded in the ancient language *Pāli*, and were later translated into other languages such as Chinese and Tibetan. We will rely on translations from the *Pāli* canon. We should assume neither that no adequate translations are possible nor that the translations we have are without drawbacks. There are fairly accurate translations of most *Pāli* words into English, but often these are only approximately correct. Nuances of a *Pāli* word may be lost in its English counterpart, or connotations of the English word may be inappropriate to the *Pāli* term it translates. For example, the crucial term '*dukkha*' is commonly translated as suffering (as it is here), but this is misleading since '*dukkha*' has broader implications suggesting lack of satisfaction, contentment, or fulfillment. We need to be aware of such limitations. For some central terms, any translation is potentially misleading. In some cases – especially '*kamma*' and '*Nibbāna*' ('*karma*' and '*Nirvāṇa*' in Sanskrit) – we will follow the custom of leaving the words untranslated and providing a commentary on their meaning. There is a glossary of some important *Pāli* terms beginning on page 202.

the Buddha says will be immediately obvious. In fact, he gives reasons for being suspicious of what we think is obvious. But sooner or later, if we are to discover something important in the Buddha, his teaching must illuminate our deepest concerns, values, aspirations, feelings, and the like.

Selectivity

Finally, we need not suppose that we must accept or reject the teaching of the Buddha as a whole. Perhaps we can learn from some aspects of it, but not others. Historically, as Buddhism entered different cultures, it developed in diverse and sometimes conflicting directions. Often the Buddha's teaching was integrated into a native tradition in such a way that the teaching modified the tradition and the tradition also modified what was thought worthwhile in the teaching. For example, Japanese Zen Buddhism is rooted in the Buddha's teaching, but it is a distinctive cultural formation that differs significantly from many other forms of Buddhism. We should not assume our situation is any different. Understanding parts of the teaching requires consideration of the whole, but we might discover that some parts are more valuable to us than others.

3 The guidelines, the Eightfold Path, and the stream-observer

The guidelines just outlined express principles that I believe are reasonable in light of contemporary Western debates about methodology (discussion of these issues is often called hermeneutics). It would take us too far afield to consider recent critiques of these guidelines, but it is pertinent to our inquiry to ask to what extent they comport with the teaching of the Buddha. He was much concerned that his teaching be properly understood and evaluated. For example, just before his death he said to his followers that, if someone attributed a particular teaching to him, then 'without approving or disapproving, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the *suttas* [his discourses] and reviewed in the light of the discipline.' He said the purported teaching should be considered 'the word of the Buddha' if and only if it conformed to the *suttas* and discipline (L 255). With respect to evaluation, the Buddha encouraged his followers to 'examine the meaning of [his] teachings with wisdom' in order to 'gain a reflective acceptance of them' (M 227).

These passages show an awareness of methodological issues, but the Buddha did not teach anything comparable to the guidelines stated in the last section. However, there is reason to think he might have accepted, or at least might not have had reason to reject, many of these guidelines. The passages just quoted express a concern for objective understanding and reflective evaluation that is spelled out in many of the guidelines. Moreover, several of these

principles recommend a middle position between two extremes. This is in the spirit of a central motif in the Buddha, the idea that his teaching is a middle way. In addition, the contextual principle that interpretation of a passage may require reference to the Buddha's audience has long been a standard precept, taken to be implicit in his teaching, of 'Buddhist hermeneutics' (as it is called in the West). Of course, there are also some obvious differences. The Buddha did not have the concern about the influence of cultural and historical location on interpretation that is so common nowadays. Moreover, his convictions about the limitations of language in describing *Nibbāna* may challenge the extent to which coherence is a viable criterion in this respect. And he did not suggest that we might be selective in learning from his teaching.

Nonetheless, the central point to make in comparing the guidelines of the last section and the teaching of the Buddha is this: instead of proposing any such guidelines, the Buddha taught the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya aṭṭhangika magga*) to enlightenment, and he believed that only someone fully enlightened could properly understand and evaluate his teaching. The Eightfold Path is a long, complex, and difficult regime that is intended to radically transform us by means of an array of intellectual, moral, and meditative disciplines. Undertaking the path requires a long-term commitment. We cannot try it out for a few weeks and quickly see how well it works. For someone new to the teaching who is wondering if there is something to learn from the Buddha, a central question is whether there is any reason to make such a commitment in the first place. This person is not helped by being told that the ultimate standpoint for understanding and evaluating the teaching is only available to someone who has followed the Eightfold Path and achieved enlightenment. A person initially encountering the Buddha's teaching needs some advance assurance that there is truth in this teaching if he or she is to go farther. It is for this person that the guidelines in the last section are important. Following these guidelines might provide someone with this advance assurance. If it did, this person would have reason to undertake the Eightfold Path, and the training of the path may be expected to supersede the guidelines. (An interesting question, however, is whether the modern perspective expressed in the guidelines might give a contemporary follower of the Buddha reason to modify the Eightfold Path or our interpretation of it.)

The Buddha agreed that some initial assurance was required before beginning the Eightfold Path. He did not propose that people undertake it on blind faith. There is reason to think he might have been in broad agreement with many of the guidelines, understood not as a substitute for the Eightfold Path, but as instruments for determining whether or not to begin it. It will be convenient to have a label for the person contemplating this. The Buddha classified persons already on the path according to four levels of achievement towards full enlightenment. He called the lowest of these the stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*) – someone who has begun the journey across the river whose opposite shore represents enlightenment. Since a stream-enterer is someone

Piṭakas – came to be known as the *Tipiṭaka* ('Three baskets'). However, it was not until later, perhaps the first century BCE, that this teaching was first committed to written form, and it was much later yet that modifications of this canon came to an end. There now exist several versions of the *Tipiṭaka* in different languages, and while they substantially overlap, they are not identical.

In short, we do not have direct knowledge of the teaching of the Buddha. Instead, we have a large and diverse body of texts that purport to represent his teaching, but which are the product of a long period of oral transmission from memory as well as translation from one language to another. The distance from the Buddha's mouth to the texts we now possess is considerable (more so than in the case of written accounts of the teaching of Socrates or Jesus), and there is much room for modification and misunderstanding. To a limited extent, modern scholarship may inform us when texts are more or less likely to accurately represent what the Buddha really thought. But there is little prospect that we will ever know in detail how closely extant texts correspond to his actual teaching.

However, for our purposes we will follow tradition and consider the teaching of the Buddha to be the teaching expressed in these texts. We have no other access to what he said, and these texts probably accurately represent his instruction on the whole. Moreover, it is the teaching conveyed in the *Tipiṭaka* that has been influential in the world: what we now call Buddhism is fundamentally rooted in these texts and the various traditions that have interpreted them. (It should be recognized, though, that some traditions such as *Mahāyāna* Buddhism emphasize later texts, and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism is skeptical about the value of texts.)

The main versions of the *Tipiṭaka* available today are the *Pāli*, Chinese, and Tibetan canons. We will rely on the *Pāli* canon. In overall comparison with the other two, it is probably older, less interpretive, and closer to the language of the Buddha (it is not known exactly what language he spoke, but *Pāli*, a Middle Indo-Aryan language related to Sanskrit, has historical connections with it). Moreover, unlike the other canons, we have full, and for the most part readily available, translations into English of the relevant *Pāli* texts. The *Pāli* canon is the authoritative canon of the *Theravāda* tradition that prevails in Sri Lanka and parts of Southeast Asia. The purpose is not to side with this tradition in contrast with other Buddhist traditions, but to employ the texts of its canon to understand and evaluate the Buddha's teaching. In an introductory inquiry, this is the most sensible course. But it is not perfectly neutral. Though the *Theravāda* tradition takes the *Pāli* canon to express the original teaching of the Buddha, it is still the result of a long, interpretive history.

Of the three parts of the *Tipiṭaka*, we will focus on the *Sutta Piṭaka*. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* has great practical significance for Buddhist monastic communities, but it is comparatively less important for understanding the philosophical aspects of the Buddha's teaching. By contrast, the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* contains what in some respects are the most philosophical presentations

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