Part I

A sketch of the Buddha and the *Dhamma*

As the title suggests, **Part I** provides background information about both the society and culture, and philosophical and religious context in and from which the life and teachings of Siddhattha Gotama emerged. In this light, it considers how his experiences and teachings are both a product of and reaction to the "philosophies" and "religions" of his times.

While recognizing that our knowledge of the man who became known as "the Buddha" is based on limited historical evidence, the chapters of **Part I** try to piece together the basic strands of his biography and show how his life experiences shaped his philosophical views. They also propose a "philosophical reading" of the facts of the life of Siddhattha Gotama as an initial way to approach and understand the teachings of the historical Buddha. These chapters encourage the reader to consider why the fundamental beliefs and practices of this particular man were able to take root in India and flourish throughout Asia. They will also challenge the reader to consider why and how the cultural environments of India and Asia influenced and changed the teachings of the Buddha.

After initially considering "The life of Siddhattha" in **Chapter 1** and "The contexts for the emergence of Buddhism" in **Chapter 2**, **Chapter 3** presents the ideas, concepts, and terminology of "The basic teachings of the Buddha" as they are found in the earliest sources of the Pali texts and the Theravada tradition. The teachings to be covered include: the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path. The key concepts to be introduced include: *dukkha*, *tanha*, interdependent arising, *anatta*, *nibbana*, wisdom, moral excellence, and meditation. Finally, **Chapter 4**, "One Buddhism or many Buddhisms?" presents a first, rough sketch of subsequent Buddhist philosophical developments – in the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. As its title indicates, this chapter also raises the intriguing question of whether "Buddhism" denotes a single philosophical system or a complex network of distinct yet interrelated philosophies.

1 The life of Siddhattha Gotama

Key terms and teachings

Abhidhamma/Abhidharma: Pali and Sanskrit terms for the "higher" *dhamma/dharma* or teachings of the Buddha. These texts are the philosophical and psychological explanations, clarifications, and commentaries on the teachings of the Buddha contained in the *suttas/sutras*.

Buddha: Pali and Sanskrit title, derived from the word "*budh*," meaning to awaken, it is used for anyone who has achieved enlightenment (*bodhi*) or awakened to the truth about the way things really are. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha was a human being who, as a result of sustained disciplined practice, underwent a profound religious and spiritual transformation. This conception was considerably expanded by the Mahayana tradition to include numerous Buddhas from other worlds. The central function of a Buddha is to teach the *Dhamma* to unenlightened beings.

Dassana/Darsana: Pali and Sanskrit words for "seeing" or "vision," they refer both to what is sought in ritual practices (i.e., seeing and being seen by the gods) and to what is sought from a teacher or spiritual guide. In a philosophical sense, these terms refer to the "system" or "view" of a given thinker and his followers.

Dhamma/Dharma: Perhaps the most ambiguous Pali and Sanskrit terms, they refer to the order of the universe, the nature and proper functioning of things, the basic elements of a thing, the moral law, ethical duties, and truth.

Four Sights: Traditional account of the cause or causes of Siddhattha's renunciation and great departure from his "princely" life to his search for enlightenment. After living a sheltered life, Siddhattha and his charioteer, Channa, leave his home and encounter an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and an ascetic wanderer. The vision of these sights led Siddhattha not only to question his original view of things but also to

seek a solution to the suffering and dissatisfaction that are part of the human condition.

Jataka: The Pali term for "birth" and "pre-birth stories" that describe the former lives of the Buddha, Siddhattha Gautama. These tales contain more than 500 birth stories arranged in twenty-two books. Each claims to illustrate the qualities and actions that over the course of numerous lives prepared the way for the arrival of the historical Buddha.

Middle Way: Traditional English name for the enlightened path of the Buddha, *majjhima-patipada* and *madhyama-pratipad* in Pali and Sanskrit. At the most general level it is meant to capture the moral and ethical teaching of the Buddha that one's life and actions should steer a middle course between the extremes of hedonism and asceticism. In the metaphysical and epistemological realms, especially with regard to philosophical questions about human existence and human knowing, it refers to the fact that human souls are neither permanent and eternal nor annihilated, but *anatta* (i.e., lacking a fixed self) instead, and that the ultimate truth in all matters is always somewhere in the middle between extreme positions.

Samana*/*Sramana: Pali and Sanskrit terms for anyone who leads the life of a religious mendicant or homeless wanderer. As a group, they sought religious and/or philosophical knowledge about the meaning and purpose of life and the fundamental nature of reality. They also rejected the authority and teachings of the Brahmins or the Vedic "vision." The Buddha and his followers were part of this group of religious seekers or strivers.

Samgha: Sanskrit word for "group," this term designates the followers of the Buddha or the Buddhist community. The Buddhist community includes ordained monks and nuns, and male and female lay followers.

Siddhattha Gotama*/*Siddhartha Gautama: Pali and Sanskrit name of the man known as the historical Buddha. "Siddhattha" was his personal name and "Gotama" was his family or clan name. According to the Buddhist tradition he was born into a leading political family of the Sakya clan, and was also known as "Sakyamuni" – the sage or wise man of the Sakyas.

Sutta*/*Sutra: Pali and Sanskrit terms for "thread," they refer to the sayings or discourses of the historical Buddha, though they were neither written nor compiled by Siddhattha. In the Pali canon, they are gathered into five "collections" known as *Nikayas* (or *Agamas* in Sanskrit), and grouped according to their lengths. The Mahayana canon, on the other hand, includes many more texts and compilations than the Pali *Nikayas*.

Tipitaka*/*Tripitaka: Pali and Sanskrit terms meaning "three baskets," which refer to the texts of the Buddhist canon. These include, the

Sutta /Sutra Pitaka, or the basket of sayings or discourses of the Buddha, the *Vinaya Pitaka*, or the basket of monastic rules and discipline, and the *Abhidhamma/Abhidharma Pitaka*, or the basket of higher teachings.

Vedas: From the Sanskrit word, *veda*, meaning "knowledge," this term refers to the earliest collections of Indian religious texts. Strictly speaking, the *Vedas* include the *Rg Veda* (hymns to gods), the *Sama Veda* (songs and instructions based on the *Rg Veda*), the *Yajur Veda* (ritual verses and mantras), the *Atharva Veda* (hymns and magical formulae for ordinary life), the *Brahmanas* (ritual rules), and the *Upanishads*.

Vinaya: Name of the basket of teachings concerned with the monastic rules and discipline of the Buddhist community. These rules, which vary in number between 227 (for men) and 311 (for women), cover the day-to-day activities of the monastic community.

A disclaimer

Although there are many accounts of the life of the man who would become known as "the Buddha," and even more that continue to appear, almost every contemporary account of the life of the historical Buddha begins with a disclaimer about how little we actually know with certainty about even the most basic facts of his life. Although some scholars doubt his historical existence, most believe that we can be reasonably sure that Siddhattha Gotama did in fact exist. Yet aside from this most basic fact there are serious scholarly debates about many events in his life, including when he lived and when he died. Earlier scholars have dated his birth around 550–500 BCE. Recently, however, scholars have suggested a later date, perhaps as late as 350 BCE. Although the technical details of this debate need not detain us, it is important to be aware that scholars continue to study and investigate even this most basic question about his life.

For those who accept the actual historical existence of Siddhattha Gotama as the man who became "the Buddha," the basic facts of his life are really quite few. In fact, one of the most succinct accounts of his life can be found in Michael Carrithers book, *The Buddha*.

According to Carrithers:

> The Buddha was born the son of a king, and so grew up with wealth, pleasure and the prospect of power, all goods commonly desired by human beings. As he reached manhood, however, he was confronted with a sick man, an old

> man and a corpse. He had lived a sheltered life, and these affected him profoundly, for he realized that no wealth or power could prevent him too from experiencing illness, old age and death. He also saw a wandering ascetic, bent on escaping these sufferings. Reflecting on what he had seen, he reached the first great turning-point of his life: against the wishes of his family he renounced home, wife, child and position to become a homeless wanderer, seeking release from this apparently inevitable pain.
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> For some years he practiced the trance-like meditation, and later the strenuous self-mortification, which were then current among such wanderers, but he found these ineffective. So he sat down to reflect quietly, with neither psychic nor physical rigours, on the common human plight. This led to the second great change in his life, for out of this reflection in tranquility arose at last awakening and release. He had "done what was to be done," he had solved the enigma of suffering. Deriving his philosophy from his experience he then taught for forty-five years, and his teaching touched most problems in the conduct of human life. He founded an order of monks who were to free themselves by following his example, and they spread his teaching abroad in the world. When he died, he died of mortal causes and was wholly dead. But unlike other mortals he would never be reborn to suffer again.[1]

Interestingly enough, Carrithers himself admits that there are good reasons to doubt even this very compressed account of the Buddha's life. Nevertheless, he and many scholars believe that at least the outline of the events in Siddhattha's life must be roughly true. Why do they think this, and what does that outline look like?

An "ordinary" life

If we assume that Siddhattha Gotama was an ordinary human being like the rest of us (and not a divine being or god, as some forms of the later Buddhist tradition hold), we know he had a father, Suddhodana, and a mother, Maya, and came into the world in the usual way humans are conceived and born – postponing for the time being questions about *kamma* and rebirth. He is reported to have had a privileged youth, a sound moral upbringing, and a good education. Having enjoyed the benefits of a good family life, he married and had a son, but at some point, he began to question both the meaning and purpose of his life. Unlike most of us, however, he seems to

[1] Carrithers (1983), pp. 2–3.

have had experienced serious misgivings and even existential angst over the prospects of his life as he saw it unfolding. For reasons that were known only to himself (though the Buddhist tradition tried to capture them with its stories of the "Four Sights"), he renounced his wife, son, and family, his friends, his possessions, and his way of life in search of answers to life's greatest problems and questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? Why must I die? What happens after death? Why are things the way they are or seem to be?

The *samanas*

At first, having lived a life full of worldly comforts, Siddhattha decided to try the other extreme and pursued a life of ascetic practices. This was a viable option during his lifetime because many of his contemporaries were renouncing both the traditional forms of life as well as the emerging possibilities of the newly developing urban centers. These wandering philosophers and religious seekers were known as *samanas*.

Conceived of as a whole, the *samanas* can best be thought of as those who held the "heterodox" views of what I shall be describing as the "post-Vedic vision" in the next chapter. As a group, they not only rejected the authority and teachings of the *Vedas* and the Vedic tradition (i.e., the "orthodox" Indian view of life), but they also rejected the new kinds of life developing in the big cities. They wandered about free from the usual family commitments and obligations of ordinary householders, practiced ascetic austerities, and lived on alms. This kind of unencumbered life gave them the opportunity to think about, explore, study, and debate among themselves about the relative truth and value of various views of the meaning and purpose of life and how to live appropriately.

Among the more famous *samanas* were Mahavira and the Jains, Gosala and the Ajivaka fatalists, as well as other groups of materialists, skeptics, and yoga ascetics. Each group had its recognized leaders and teachers to whom others went for advice and guidance. It was to men such as these that Siddhattha first went for help with his religious and philosophical questions and problems.

According to the Buddhist tradition, Siddhattha is reported to have outdone even his most renowned teachers in his efforts to embrace a life of serious self-denial and rigorous austerities. At first, he sought the help

and advice of two yoga masters, Alara Kalama and then Uddaka Ramaputra both of whom taught and practiced different systems of meditation and mental concentration. Although Siddhattha quickly mastered both systems, in fact so quickly that each teacher asked him to lead their respective group of followers, he rejected their leadership offers because, while helpful with calming and stilling his mind, their meditative practices did not produce the goal he was eagerly seeking, i.e., enlightenment and the realization of the end of suffering. In fact, the early Buddhist tradition reports that the results of his ascetic practices were no better, and in some ways because of both their physical and psychological consequences, far worse than the outcomes of his earlier life choices and decisions. He continued to experience the same nagging doubts, questions, and uncertainties about his life but now they were exacerbated by grave physical problems.

The "Middle Way"

After six years of experiencing firsthand the frustrating futility of searching for answers at both ends of the material and psychological spectrum of goods and pleasures, Siddhattha, whose name means "one who has achieved his goal," subsequently renounced both his ascetic and hedonistic practices in favor of what the Buddhist tradition has called the "Middle Way" and achieved or realized enlightenment, i.e., he found or discovered what he took to be the answers to his questions. He then decided, or was persuaded by a god (as some early traditions hold), to offer his insights to others who were, like himself, willing to try and test his teachings against their own thoughts and experiences. Having taught a large number of people over the course of a long life, he eventually grew old and died. His effectiveness as both a teacher and a model of the kind of life that he thought was available to all of us, if only we were willing to try and diligently persevere in it, is vouched for by both the sheer number of his followers after his death as well as the durability of his teachings. Indeed, very few human beings have had the kind of impact or left the kind of legacy that Siddhattha Gotama did.

Living in a time of crisis

As we shall see in the next chapter, Siddhattha Gotama lived during the transition from what I shall call the "Vedic vision" to the "post-Vedic vision"

in classical Indian thought. The features of each of these visions as I shall outline them are meant to help capture, in a general way, the intellectual environment – the philosophical and religious contexts – in which and against which Siddhattha tried to formulate his own *dassana* or "vision."

As I have already tried to indicate, Siddhattha and his contemporaries found themselves living during an intellectually exciting, but challenging and demanding time. On the one hand, the material and social conditions of ordinary life were undergoing radical changes, as small kin-based and village-based communities were being absorbed and replaced by regional kingdoms and concentrated urban centers. At the level of the community, this meant that a rural, agriculturally based form of social life was gradually beginning to make way for an organized trade-based money economy localized in crowded and impersonal cities. What these changes meant for each individual is difficult to say, but there can be little doubt that there was a loss of traditional forms of living and social relationships, and a demand for specialized skills to survive and succeed in the changing economic marketplace. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how these kinds of changing material and social conditions would produce both excitement and concern and unease for people.

On the other hand, the intellectual environment was, presumably in response to these changing social conditions, alive with vigorous debate, discussion, and disagreement about the purpose and meaning of life, the value and place of traditional religious rituals and practices, and the long-term moral and ethical effects of new social roles and relationships. At the most personal level, there can be little doubt that individuals engaged in these kinds of philosophical debates were also concerned with questions about their personal destinies and the "karmic" consequences of their own thoughts, words, and deeds. It should not be difficult to imagine Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha, as such an individual.

I want to suggest that if we join the social and intellectual contextual features we have just been considering with the individual facts of the life of Siddhattha, we will get a more complete picture of the man and a better understanding of his teachings. In order to do this, however, we must consult the texts of his followers, since Siddhattha left no personal writings. What, we might ask, did the historical Buddha's immediate followers and the subsequent Buddhist tradition think was important to know about his life in order to understand and believe his claims?

An outline of Siddhattha's life

The basic outline of facts about his life seems clear and easy enough to understand. First, we can see that Siddhattha lived a privileged life. He clearly was not immediately concerned with the basic worries over food, clothing, and shelter. These practical concerns were taken care of by his father and his family. Second, he seems to have had an education in the basic knowledge of his culture and beliefs and he also seems to have been quite naturally curious and critical about the "why" of things. Third, he seems to have fulfilled his duty or obligation as an Indian man and good son to marry and produce a son of his own – so in that respect, at least, he was like any other "ordinary" Indian male. Fourth, despite all of his advantages in life, he seems to have experienced a profound dissatisfaction, perhaps bordering on depression, with the way things were arranged and how his life was proceeding. By some kind of fortuitous, fortunate, or simply karmic juxtaposition of personal qualities and worldly reality Siddhattha experienced a deep and profound unrest with both his life and the ways of the world. Fifth, his dissatisfaction was deep enough to lead him to renounce all of the pleasures and benefits of his comfortable life and to seek his own answers and solutions to the puzzles and questions about life, its purpose, and meaning. Sixth, his initial steps in the search for an answer led him to the opposite extreme of his early life. Having lived a life of worldly pleasure and satisfaction, Siddhattha turned away from these things, to a life of ascetic rigor and sustained self-mortification. Seventh, his experiences at the other end of the pleasure–pain spectrum eventually led him to search for a solution somewhere in the "middle" between hedonism and asceticism. Eighth, his personal commitment and spirit of determination to seek and not rest until the answers were obtained was finally rewarded with his enlightened realization of the truth about the world and himself. Ninth, having considered both his ability to teach his message and his audiences' abilities to understand him, and perhaps with the timely persuasion of a god, he decided to spend the last half of his life teaching others how to find their own way to the truth and liberation. Tenth, and finally, having lived to the ripe old age of eighty, he departed this earthly life and left his teachings as a guide to future seekers and followers of the *Dhamma* path.

When we place these facts of his life against the background of the culture and society in which he was born and raised, and consider the

context and conditions in which he lived, a clearer picture of who the historical Buddha was should begin to emerge. In order to help clarify and fill in the details of that picture, however, I want to return to his social situation and ask the reader to imagine, by way of a thought experiment, what it would be like to have the same experiences as Siddhattha or to be in Siddhattha's place. What would you be thinking, feeling, and doing, and why?

Thinking like the Buddha

As we have seen, the historical circumstances during the life of Siddhattha were characterized by significant shifts and changes in basic social, economic, political, cultural, religious, and philosophical ideas and structures. In order to help convey some sense of the excitement as well as the uncertainty, unease, and upheaval these changes were causing Siddhattha and his contemporaries, imagine, for a moment, moving to a new part of town, or to a new part of the country, or even to a new part of the world. Or recall if you can, your own educational and social transitions from the elementary grades to high school to college or the university and graduate school, and finally the move from "school" to the "real world" of gainful employment. Each of these changes and transitions is, to a greater or lesser degree, experienced simultaneously with both excitement and trepidation, with exhilaration and with concern.

On the one hand, these situations are exciting because of their freshness, uncertainty, and their latent possibilities. On the other hand, they are also times of fear, doubt, and anxiety, precisely because their very newness takes us beyond the comfort zone of our ordinary, everyday habitual experiences. In fact, even the slightest changes in our daily routines can sometimes be rather disconcerting because they force us to think and respond to the world in new, creative, and unusual ways. In these types of circumstances, as the current sayings go, we are forced to "think outside the box," and we must "respond in the moment" to unfamiliar situations. Yet what exactly do these sayings mean and how do they help us get a clearer picture of the life and teachings of the historical Buddha?

I want to suggest that if you reflect for a moment on the spectrum of experiences described above, or on the imagined scenarios of moving to other places, and also keep in mind the events in the outline of the life of