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PROLOGUE

Alongside Jesus and Muhammad, the Buddha remains one of the most significant figures in the history of religions. The religion that derived from the Buddha and his teachings is followed today by some 500 million people in both the East and the West. Like Christianity and Islam, it is a truly global religion.

This book tells how the story of the Buddha came to the West from its beginnings in the East in the fifth century BCE to the present.[1] It shows how the enchanted mythological figure of the earliest Buddhist biographies became the disenchanted historical Buddha of the modern West. In so doing, it will throw light on how the West discovered and appropriated Buddhism. But this book is not primarily a book about Buddhism in the West but about the founder of the religion and the imagining of his life in both East and West.[2]

For this reason, we begin in the first two chapters of this book with a composite account of the life and previous 'lives' of the Buddha. This is drawn from the biographies that arose in the first centuries of the Common

[1] BCE indicates all dates before the Common Era. CE indicates dates up to the year 500. Unannotated dates are to be read as Common Era.

[2] This distinction has, at times, been hard to maintain, not least because the teachings of Buddhism are intimately related to the 'lives' of the Buddha. Without going down many interesting rabbit holes, I have dealt with the teachings of Buddhism in those contexts where they relate directly to the Western understanding of the Buddha.

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Era. They reflect and reveal the 'enchanted' world within which the life of the Buddha was originally imagined – a world of the gods of the ten thousand world systems dwelling in multiple heavens, of the celestial palace in which the Buddha lived before his miraculous birth, of his superhuman powers and abilities from the moment of his birth, of the spirits and demons that dwelt all around him, of water and tree spirits, and of the temptations of Māra, the evil divinity of the sensuous realm.

In this sense, although these two chapters contain a modern *Western* account of the life of the Buddha constructed from the traditional Eastern biographies of the Buddha, they are intended to present a life of the Buddha to the Western reader that is sensitive to the way in which early textual Buddhism constructed his life as one that was enchanted, magical, and mysterious. Thus, the first two chapters on the life of the Buddha can be read as part of the recent process of the Western scholarly re-enchanting of the life of the Buddha. But they are also sympathetic to the lived experience of the Buddha within Buddhism. For it is the enchanted life of the Buddha that informs Buddhist faith and practice.[3] They also have a more practical purpose. I thought that, in order fully to appreciate the complex history of the Buddha's coming to the West as presented in this book, the reader would be well served by having a good knowledge of the life of the Buddha as it was originally imagined within the earliest Eastern narratives of his life, thus affording a contrast between

[3] See Bernard Faure, *The Thousand and One Lives of the Buddha* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022), p. 2.

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his developing afterlife in the West and his imagined life in the East.

This book proceeds from the assumption that Buddhism was only recognised as a religion in the West from the first half of the nineteenth century.[4] Thus, for this reason, until that time, the story of the Buddha moved from East to West as a series of glimpses and hints, errors and confusions, with occasional insights into the Buddhist path along with many false trails. It has come to us in textual fragments; or, perhaps, like bits and pieces of a jigsaw that don't necessarily fit together. So, it is a story that has, as a consequence, an episodic appearance. It was a matter of fits and starts. Thus, Chapter 3 moves from the 'naked philosophers' of India that were encountered during Alexander the Great's expedition to India in the fourth century BCE to Saint Jerome's report in the fourth century CE that the Buddha was born of a virgin. We especially examine the question of whether the Greek historians of antiquity were identifying Buddhists among the Indian philosophers that they encountered, the difficulties that we have in interpreting their words, and the care we need to take in coming to any conclusions that they were encountering followers of the Buddha. That said, with Clement of Alexandria and Jerome the first glimpses of the Buddha in the West are caught.

After the time of Jerome, the Buddha disappeared from the West. The dominance of Islam in Central Asia from the middle of the eighth century CE effectively severed relations between East and West. No fresh

[4] See Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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information about the religion of the Buddha was to emerge in the West until the middle of the thirteenth century when the Mongols subjugated Islam in Central Asia. Only then did the Buddha reappear in the West within an East imagined as a place of wonders – of unicorns, of dog-headed men, and of the mythical kingdom of Prester John. Thus, Chapter 4 demonstrates how, for the mediaeval West, the Buddha came to be seen as the chief of all idols. We explore the encounter between Mongols and Franciscan missionaries sent by the West to explore the intentions of the Mongols – John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck – along with the hopes and dreams of other travellers – of Marco Polo, Andrew of Perugia, and King Hethum of Cilicia.

Chapter 5 tells the story of the Buddha of Christendom, the ideal Christian ascetic. We begin with an account of the life of Saint Josaphat in *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century. As Saint Josaphat, the Buddha had become a saint in the Eastern Church by the tenth century and in the Catholic Church by the thirteenth. The story of Saint Josaphat demonstrates how, unbeknownst to the West, the life of the Buddha and the ascetic ideal that it symbolised were incorporated into the 'spiritual' life of mediaeval Christianity. It was only in the nineteenth century that it was realised that Josaphat was none other than the Buddha.

With the collapse of the Mongolian Empire in the mid-fourteenth century, the Buddha again disappeared. In Chapter 6, we examine the 're-discovery' of the Buddha when, during the 'Age of Discovery' in the sixteenth century, accounts from Catholic missionaries in China and Japan began to appear in Europe. Ironically,

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by the time that the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (1460–1524) arrived in India in 1498, Buddhism had virtually disappeared from the land of its origin, overwhelmed by Islam and Hinduism. But by then it had become the dominant religion of virtually everywhere else in Asia – in what is now Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, and (formerly) Tibet.[5]

Despite the inclination of the Jesuit missionaries to view all Asian idolatry as inspired by the Devil, they were instrumental in discerning that, while there were many idols referred to by many names, they were only local variations of a single figure: many idols, and many gods, but only one man – the Buddha. That said, it was a time of many imaginings, multiple confusions, and numerous blind alleys – of the Hindu understanding of the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, of the Buddha as the equivalent of the patriarch Noah or the gods Mercury, Wod, and Oden, and of the African origins of the Buddha – as he was variously read into fanciful eighteenth-century readings of the origin of all religions in the time of Noah and the universal Flood.

Chapter 7 explores the Copernican revolution in the Western study of Buddhism in the first fifty years of the nineteenth century. We will see how it occurred in two moments, the first of which was necessary for the second to occur. The first was the creation of the term 'Buddhism' at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Over the next fifty years, this term and a variety of linguistic variants in European languages appeared in the West and became the

[5] Depending on the context, I have variously used pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial names of Asian countries.

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norm. The second and crucial moment was the creation of Buddhism as an object defined predominantly in terms of its own textuality. Thus, from 1820 to 1860, Buddhism came to exist in the 'Oriental' libraries, institutes, learned societies, and universities of the West. It was discovered in its texts and manuscripts on the desks of the European scholars who laboriously learned the languages, read the texts, and translated, interpreted, and published them. Most importantly, we will see how it is that, in the early 1820s, the Buddha left the world of myth and began to become a figure in history.

Chapter 8 examines the way in which the life of the Buddha was 'demythologised', so that he was then worthy of comparison with other great men of history. He became the Light of Asia, the Indian Luther, a competitor of Jesus, the philosopher of a new rational philosophy and a this-worldly ethics for a disenchanted age. This was now a very human Buddha, neither a god nor a superman. This historical Buddha was to become normative within the West in the twentieth century, available for absorption into new forms of enchanted and disenchanted Western spirituality. The chapter ends with a discussion of the relation between myth and legend in the life of the Buddha in the modern West, leading to a discussion of 'naturalised Buddhism' in the Epilogue.

Thus, this book aspires to tell the story of the remarkable journey of the 'idea' of the Buddha from Bodh Gaya in the fifth century BCE to the present. It hopes to tell the story of how a human life devoted to finding the solution to the problem of human suffering in ancient India and to teaching others the path to freedom from it can prove just as exemplary in the modern world as in the past.

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1

Stories of the Buddha

The Many 'Lives' of the Buddha

It was the Venetian merchant and adventurer Marco Polo (1254–1324) who gave to the West its first account of the life of the Buddha. Between 1292 and 1295, Marco arrived in Sri Lanka. There, he heard the story of the life of Sergamoni Borcan. This Sergamoni, he tells us, 'was the first man in whose name idols were first made'.[1] In short, the Buddha was the origin of all pagan idolatry. Sergamoni was, the idolaters declared, 'the best man who ever lived among them. He was the first man they held holy and in whose name they made idols.'[2]

According to Marco, Sergamoni Borcan was the son of a great king who wished to renounce the world. The king moved Sergamoni into a palace and tempted him with the sensual delights of thirty thousand maidens. But Sergamoni was unmoved in his resolve. When his father allowed him to leave the palace for the first time, he encountered a dead man and an infirm old man. He returned to the palace frightened and astonished, 'saying to himself that he would not remain in this bad world but would go seeking the one who had made it and did not die'.[3] Sergamoni then left the palace secretly and

[1] Sharon Kinoshita (trans.), *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), p. 168.
[2] Ibid., pp. 168–9. [3] Ibid., p. 169.

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lived the abstinent life of a celibate recluse. 'Certainly', Marco declared, had he been Christian, 'he would have been a great saint with our Lord Jesus Christ'.[4]

Sergamoni Borcan was a name that Marco had learnt at the court of Kublai Khan (1215–1294) in China, for Sergamoni Borcan was the Mongolian name for the Buddha: Sergamoni for Śākyamuni – the sage of the Śākya clan – and Borcan for Buddha – the 'divine' one. The Buddha was also known as Bhagavān – the Blessed One, or Lord. His family name was Gotama (in the Pāli language) or Gautama (in Sanskrit).[5] Although it does not appear in the earliest traditions, his personal name was said to be Siddhārtha, which means 'one who has achieved his purpose'. This name has been 'retrofitted' to the Buddha because of his having become the 'enlightened one'.

We know the early Buddhist traditions about the life of the Buddha from two sets of literature in two closely related Indian languages: the earlier one in Pāli dating back to the first century BCE; the later one in Sanskrit from the first century BCE to the early centuries of the Common Era, subsequently translated into Chinese and Tibetan. The Pāli canon contains the scriptures of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition – that form of Buddhism still extant in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The Sanskrit texts come from Mahāyāna Buddhism – that branch of early Indian Buddhism that was to make its way into China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

[4] Ibid., p. 169.

[5] For ease of reading, except where necessary, I use the Sanskrit versions of names and terms.

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The earliest Buddhist traditions showed little interest in the biographical details of the life of the Buddha as such. To be sure, his teachings after his enlightenment within the Pāli literature especially were often derived from a particular context within his life. But it was, after all, the teachings of the Buddha – the Dharma as Buddhists call it – rather than his person that mattered. That said, we can discern a growing interest in the genre of biography, and especially the events of his life prior to his enlightenment, from the first century BCE up until the fifth century CE. This reflects the development within Buddhism of interpreting the Buddha not merely as a teacher but also as a divine and heavenly saviour – a figure in both the past and the present who can not only teach the way to liberation but can also personally assist in the individual's attaining of it.

Over these centuries there developed in both Pāli and Sanskrit continuous 'lives' of the Buddha from his birth (and before) to his renunciation of the world, his enlightenment, his teachings, and finally to his death. Thus, it is possible, on this basis, to tell a composite story of the life of the Buddha as it came to be imagined within early Buddhism by drawing on these various 'biographies' – especially the *Mahāvastu* (first century CE), the *Lalitavistara* (third to fourth centuries CE), the *Buddhacarita* (second century CE), the *Nidānakathā* (second to third centuries CE), the *Buddhavamsa* (second to first centuries BCE) and the scholar–monk Buddhadatta's commentary on it (fifth century CE), the *Jātaka* tales (500 CE), and the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta* (fifth century CE). And it was a version of one of these – probably the Pāli *Nidānakathā* – that led Marco Polo to recognise the distinctive 'saintly' qualities of the Buddha.

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These biographies were created in the context of competition between the Buddhist and the Brahmanical (or Hindu as we would call it) traditions on both sides of the beginning of the Common Era. Against the teaching of the Brahmans, the biographies emphasised that the Buddha both taught transcendent truth *and* incarnated it. Moreover, the texts stressed that not only the Brahmans recognised the superiority of the Buddha, but their own gods did so, too. Within the Christian tradition, the person and teaching of Jesus were thought both to fulfil and therefore to transcend the Jewish tradition out of which Jesus arose. Similarly, within the Buddhist tradition, the person and teaching of the Buddha were thought to fulfil and thereby supersede the Brahmanical tradition. It was a case of Brahmanical dharma versus Buddhist dharma. The biographies of the Buddha were intended to demonstrate the superiority of the Buddhist dharma over that of the Brahmanical.

The various lives of the Buddha have been so overlaid with myth and legend that it is almost impossible to separate fact from fiction. We might say that the attempt to separate the Siddhārtha of history from the Buddha of faith has been as difficult and just as unsuccessful as finding the Jesus of history behind the Christ of faith. Like the search for the historical Jesus, the search for the historical Buddha seems to be an undeniably modern Western preoccupation.[6] Nevertheless, that the

[6] For the recent modern debate, see David Drewes, 'The Idea of the Historical Buddha', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 40 (2017), pp. 1–25; Alexander Wynne, 'Did the Buddha Exist?', *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 16 (2019),

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