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The Buddhist Handbook

John Snelling

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Recently hailed as the fastest growing religion in the West, Buddhism now has groups and centres all around the world.

The Buddhist Handbook is well known as the classic guide to this increasingly popular spiritual tradition, which so many people find so helpful in their everyday lives. Now fully revised and updated, it includes indispensable information on:

The essential heart of Buddhism

Basic teachings and practices

The different schools

Meditation

The spread of Buddhism to the West

Who's Who amongst contemporary teachers, writers and practitioners

Accessible, informative, concise, this valuable book is intended to be read and re-read by both newcomer to the subject and practising Buddhist alike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Snelling was born in Wales in 1943 and brought up there and in London and Canterbury. After graduation with honours degrees in both English and Philosophy, he lectured at Maidstone College of Art for a number of years before leaving to travel in the East, where began an interest in Oriental religion and philosophy. From 1980 until 1984 he was General Secretary of the Buddhist Society. He was also Editor of the Society's quarterly journal, *The Middle Way*, which is believed to be the most widely circulated Buddhist periodical in the West, perhaps in the world. John Snelling wrote many books for both adults and children and numerous articles as well as stories, plays and features for radio and scripts for television. He lived in the Sharpham North Community in Devon for a number of years before his death, in January 1992.

The Buddhist Handbook

A Complete Guide to
Buddhist Teaching and Practice

JOHN SNELLING



RIDER

LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND JOHANNESBURG

A Note on Language

The scriptural language of Theravāda Buddhism is Pali, that of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sanskrit - both dead Indian languages. In many cases, the spellings of names and terms in the two languages are similar: *bodhisatta/bodhisattva*, *kamma/karma*, *Dhamma/Dharma*, *arahat/arhat*, *Gotama/Gautama*. I have not opted for a single standardized spelling throughout but generally have tended to use the appropriate spelling in the appropriate place, i.e. Pali when discussing Theravāda Buddhism, Sanskrit when discussing Indian Mahāyāna and Tantra. Variations of spelling will therefore occur in the text but should not prove an obstacle to understanding. Sometimes the appropriate alternative is given.

Caveat

Inclusion of any group or teacher in this Handbook does not imply endorsement of them by the author. This is in line with the traditions of Buddhism, which is not an authoritarian religion with a centralized authority that grants or with-holds the seal of approval. It is therefore up to the individual to test the ground for him- or herself, guided by common sense and the advice given by the Buddha himself, for example in the *Kalama Sutta* ([see here](#)).



Part 1
Prologue

1 Why Buddhism?

BUDDHISM HAS GAINED enormous ground in the West during the past 30 years. Recently it was hailed as the fastest growing religion in Britain. There are well over 100 groups and centres established here by now, more in the United States and an ever-increasing number in Europe too. There is every indication that the interest in Buddhism will continue to grow, for it clearly supplies some deep spiritual need in the people of the Western world that their established religious traditions fail to fully supply. One might well ask, then: *'What does Buddhism possess that is especially valuable and helpful?'*

Freedom from dogma and finding the truth for oneself

Buddhism does not demand that anyone accepts its teachings on trust. The practitioner is instead invited to try them out, to experiment with them. If he finds that they work in practice, then by all means he can take them on board. But there is no compulsion; and if he happens to find the truth elsewhere or otherwise, all well and good. This essential freedom from dogma is enshrined in the Buddha's words to the Kālāmas, a people who lived in the vicinity of the town of Kesaputta:

Come, Kālāmas, do not be satisfied with hearsay or with tradition or with legendary lore or with what has come down in your scriptures or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with liking for a view after pondering it over or with someone else's ability or with the thought 'The monk is our

teacher' *When you know in yourselves* 'These ideas are unprofitable, liable to censure, condemned by the wise, being adopted and put into effect they lead to harm and suffering', then you should abandon them.... (And conversely:) *When you know in yourselves* 'These things are profitable ...' then you should practise them and abide in them....¹

Tolerance

If one reserves the right to find the truth for oneself, one must logically accord the same right to others - and also respect them if they arrive at different conclusions. From this comes that basic tolerance that the world so acutely needs today. There have inevitably been exceptions - some Buddhists have fallen short of the very high standards set by the Buddha himself - but on the whole Buddhism has kept its record remarkably clean of inquisitions, pogroms, religious wars and massacres, heresy-hunting and the burning of books or people.

A liberal tradition of free inquiry

If Buddhism is a non-dogmatic tradition, not founded on a book or articles of faith, what makes a Buddhist a Buddhist rather than nothing in particular? To start with, there is respect for the Buddha himself and for the manner in which he conducted his own search for spiritual truth. From this directly stems a sense of belonging to the tradition that the Buddha established: a liberal tradition of free inquiry into the nature of ultimate truth. Then too there is a sense of community with others of a similar (though not necessarily identical) outlook.

Practical methods

If the Buddhist emphasis is on finding out for oneself, this necessarily places primary emphasis upon *direct religious experience*, as opposed to belief or blind faith. However, one doesn't in the normal course of events just receive deep religious experience as manna from above. Though that can of course happen, one generally has to make a conscious effort. So Buddhism does not so much offer *things to believe* as *things to do*: a vast array of spiritual practices, ranging from moral precepts that one can apply in one's everyday life and virtues that one can cultivate, to meditative practices (a profusion of these) which help to develop untapped spiritual resources: faculties like profound wisdom or clear-seeing and an all-embracing, selfless compassion. Put in Western terms, the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice is to engineer mystical experience: to penetrate the great mystery at the heart of life and find the answers to the knotty problems that have perennially engaged the most developed minds of the human race. This implies a complete spiritual transformation of the person as well.

Healing and transformation

C. G. Jung once wrote: 'The whole world wants peace and the whole world prepares for war. Mankind is powerless against mankind. And the gods, as ever, show us the way of Fate....'

This is a succinct summary of our contemporary dilemma. The world today is beset by many grave problems, social, psychological, ecological, economic - and of course the threat of nuclear destruction casts its shadow over all. Our planet has now very literally become a great time-bomb - and it is five minutes to zero-hour. As the final seconds tick away we seem hopelessly in the grip of deep

dark forces that we don't understand and over which we have no control.

Sometimes we project the evil outwards and lay the blame on other people and groups. Sometimes too politicians and social scientists claim to have solutions; but these are invariably partial and temporary, touching the surface and relieving superficial symptoms rather than getting down to the root causes. If we are honest, these root causes lie in the individual human heart, in *our* hearts, where a primitive but fanatical self-centredness holds sway. It is our own personal greed, hatred and delusion, collectivized and amplified on a massive scale, that cause our planet's grave problems. Yet just to see this is not enough. The dark forces within each of us must be acknowledged and brought up into the light. Then, through awareness and understanding, they can be transformed into the stuff of true wisdom and compassion. Buddhism offers us ways and means of doing this.

So we need Buddhism. And our world needs it too as never before.

2 The Heart of the Matter

What is the essence of Buddhism?

QUITE SIMPLY, IT is the great question of who or what we are, right here, now, at this very moment.

For you, the reader, this means nothing other than *who* or *what* is *right now* looking at *these* printed words on the page of *this* book.

Reflect on that for a moment. You see the letters of each word printed in clear black type on the bright white paper. As you stare they begin to vibrate a little, perhaps. The letters seem to stand out with super clarity for a second or two - and then go unstable....

But who is the reader that is looking at them?

Your initial reaction to this might be one of mild irritation. You have no doubt at all about the person who is reading these words. You call that person 'I' or 'me'. You have a name, a life-history, a profession or job, relationships, a nationality. If you were to turn away and seek out a friend or a member of your family, they'd know instantly who was confronting them.

But don't turn away. Continue to look at the words on the paper. If you're really concentrating on the book, your name isn't in your mind at the moment, nor your life-history; you're probably away from your job and your nationality isn't something of which you've been conscious since you last went abroad; and if you don't seek out anyone, you're not in a relationship. So what then is this 'I'? Right now, does it amount to anything more than a collection of thoughts and memories which are just

transitory and insubstantial things that come and go in the mind like clouds in the sky?

So, if you really concentrate single-pointedly on what's before your eyes at this very moment, there are only the words on the paper. Thin black or flat white. As for who's reading them, that's after all not really so very easy to say, is it? Perhaps you're now beginning to feel a little uneasy. Things are not what you thought they were. Something that you always took to be self-evidently present has gone - or at least is not so solidly present. Or perhaps you feel a slight sense of amazement, as though you've touched upon the edges of a great mystery.

Actually, you've touched the deepest mystery of all. Scientists may send spacecraft to distant planets or probe remote quarters of space with radio-telescopes. They may investigate the mysteries of the sub-atomic world with electron microscopes. But the thing that in fact they know least about is this great mystery that is right here with each one of us all the time. For like everyone else, they subscribe to the consensus view and don't give the matter a second thought. Thus in a very real sense they fail to see what's right under their noses.

Buddhism, however, is centrally concerned with this mystery and how to unravel it. In the first instance it is necessary to see through the great delusion of 'I', of the so-called *person*. Then it's a matter of finding out what is *really* there. And now the plot thickens, for to penetrate this mystery is to penetrate the ultimate mystery, the mystery at the heart of all things, and confront what the Christians call *God*, the Hindus *Brahman* or *Atman* - and it goes by other names in other religions. Buddhists, however, hesitate to put a name to it or say anything at all about it. It is, they maintain, something that cannot be grasped by the intellect or described in words. It can only be seen directly; but that seeing brings about something truly miraculous: a total transformation, no less. The veils of delusion fall away

and at last the world is perceived *as it really is*. At the same time a deep compassion also crystallizes: a pure, selfless kindness and caring born of an understanding of the unity of all beings.

In essence, then, Buddhism is quite simple. But simple things are often hard to fully realize, so people need all kinds of aids and supports. A vast superstructure has therefore grown up around the basic heart-core of the Buddha's teaching: mountains of philosophical speculation, a voluminous literature, monastic codes and ethical systems, histories, cosmologies, different types of ritual and meditation practice, institutions and hierarchies. All or any of it may be helpful in enabling the sincere practitioner to zero in upon the central issue – who or what is here, now – and to keep doing so until that great mystery has been completely realized. But it can also become a massive hindrance, entangling the all-too-errant mind in a thick undergrowth of secondary accretions.

When Shūan Chinken wrote his Preface to the *Mumonkan*, a great textbook of the Ch'an (Zen) school of Buddhism produced in China in the early 13th century, he complained that he had been practically forced to take up his brush. '*Don't use it, don't use it, for it will be yet another drop in the great lake,*' he urged,² implying that the true practice of Buddhism is about getting rid of thoughts and other mental bric-à-brac and confronting the central matter starkly and squarely; books, however, just contain more potential clutter for the attics of the mind.

This should be borne in mind when reading the present book. When the reader's mind begins to bulge and ache with useful facts, perhaps it might then be as well to let them all go for the time being and just return to the present moment and the great mystery of what is here, now. When we are fully aware and awake to this, then we confront the very heart of the matter.

Part 2

The Buddha

3 The Indian Background

BUDDHISM IS A child of India, a uniquely spiritual country. A concern for truth and a respect for that basic instinct in us that, if we heed it, urges us to reach for the highest spiritually - these have been and remain aspects of the Indian scene since time immemorial. Fundamental to the Indian religious outlook at its best³ is a basic liberalism that comes from an understanding that there are many paths by which the great mystery of Ultimate Reality may be approached. Allied to this is a fundamental tolerance: a willingness to listen, to learn, to change and to coexist with others with whom one may not necessarily agree. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of modern independent India, exhibited these noble qualities in his own life and work.

About 1500 BC, a race of nomadic herders who had long since migrated from the Central Asian steppe thrust their way into north-west India. They spoke an Indo-European language - an early form of Sanskrit - and for this reason are popularly known as Aryans. In the valley of the River Indus, which lies in present-day Pakistan, these Aryans found the remains of what had once been a civilization as advanced for its day as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Great cities - Mohenjodaro, Harappa - had stood here but had sadly long since begun to crumble into the dust. The Aryans were well-armed warriors. They thus had little difficulty in dominating north-west India and establishing supremacy over the people they found there. These included the once proud creators of the Indus Valley Civilization, who were probably of predominantly Mediterranean stock. It was the age-old story of energetic, patriarchal barbarians colliding with a more sophisticated but essentially decadent, matriarchal people. But the

Aryans did not destroy pre-existing culture; they learned from it, and they no doubt reinvigorated it. The civilization that afterwards developed and spread throughout India is therefore the result of the dynamic interaction of the Aryans with the other peoples of India.

The period of Indian history ushered in by the coming of the Aryans is known as the Vedic Age (c. 1500-500 BC), after a series of literary compositions of great antiquity known as the *Vedas* (*Veda* = 'knowledge').⁴ The oldest is the Rig *Veda*, a collection of 1028 poetic hymns. Of it Phiroz Mehta has written:

What is the Rig Veda? A collection of hymns, the earliest document of the human mind, representing, according to most scholars, the religion of an unsophisticated age, the creation of inspired poets and seers. Many of the hymns, it is said, are simple and naïve, in praise of nature gods and goddesses; some deal with formal ritual; and others, especially the last book ... present the results of conscious reflections on the origin of the world and on the Supreme Being.... They embody penetrating intuitions. But no system of philosophy is presented at this stage, for mythology and poetry precede philosophy and science....⁵

Three other Vedas later came into being:

- 1 The *Yājur Veda* - concerned with sacrificial formulae.
- 2 The *Sama Veda* - which is purely liturgical.
- 3 The *Atharva Veda* (the last) - mainly a book of spells.

At the centre of religious life during the Vedic Age lay the ritual of sacrifice. The world had been created by sacrifice and was maintained by sacrifice, it was thought. This was, however, completely controlled by the hereditary brahmin priesthood, who claimed that they alone were

fitted by birth to perform sacrifice and jealously guarded the secrets of its rituals. The most elaborate sacrifice was the *Ashvamedha* or 'Horse Sacrifice', which went on for about a year, involved a small army of specialist brahmins and the ritual slaughter of a large number of animals. It was an exceedingly costly affair.

At the social centre of the new culture, on the other hand, there developed a caste system, which divided the population up into various hierarchical groups: the brahmin priesthood (*brāhmaṇa*); the warriors and aristocrats (*kshatriya*); the traders and other professionals (*vaishya*); and the cultivators (*shūdra*). Later a sub-caste appeared: the Untouchables, who were probably of aboriginal stock and who strictly speaking did not have any caste at all. Caste probably existed in the Indus Valley Civilization and rested on a racial basis – the Aryans merely adapted it to their own purposes, taking care to reserve the higher echelons for themselves!

The caste system was a closed system; once born into a caste, there was no leaving it. Upward or downward mobility was unknown. And underpinning the whole thing was the notion of *Dharma*, a word with a range of meanings. Used in its widest, impersonal sense it can have connotations of universal law. Related to people, on the other hand, it can imply duty to family, to the surrounding sociopolitical matrix and religious duty. If a person lived dharmically, then, in his next incarnation, he might receive the reward of birth into a higher caste. This of course implies acceptance of the notion of personal rebirth or reincarnation.

The caste system has survived to a large extent to the present time, and has had its critics and its apologists. In its favour, it has been said that it helped establish a stable and well-organized society and fostered the virtues of patience, respect and responsibility. On the other hand, it is often criticized as being rigid, inhumane, unjust and the

root cause of that pernicious malaise known as oriental fatalism.

The spiritual health and richness of India owe rather less to brahminism than to an alternative tradition that had its roots in pre-Aryan culture. This was essentially an ascetic tradition and its exponents were not brahmins as a rule but rather kshatriyas of the warrior or aristocratic caste. They would renounce the world and go off singly or in small groups into the solitude of forest and mountain fastnesses. It has been suggested that some were merely drop-outs, casualties who had failed to adapt successfully to conventional social life. Others may have been in search of supernormal powers – the forerunners of the legendary fakirs who later astonished European travellers in India by magically charming snakes, levitating and performing the Indian Rope Trick. The best of them, however, certainly withdrew from their social duties for only the highest spiritual purposes. They no doubt practised meditation and other mystical disciplines, including forms of yoga. Such practices may date back to pre-Vedic times, for images of figures sitting cross-legged in yogic posture have been unearthed by archaeologists working in the remains of the lost cities of the Indus Valley. It has also been suggested that the shamanistic influences transported by the Aryans from their northern homelands may also have been at work here. By means of such practices, the ascetics were able to gain direct knowledge of exalted spiritual states (*jhānas* in Pāli; Sanskrit, *dhyānas*). An élite few came to know *Brahman*.

Brahman was Ultimate Reality, no less. It was said to be One and all-pervading, but formless and ineffable: a great mystery. Thus it was often referred to in negative terms: '*Neti, neti*' – 'Not this, not this'. It was identical, however, with the great mystery at the heart of every human being, so if a man asked what his true nature was, he might receive the classic answer: '*Tat tvam asi*' – 'You are That'.

In this, its immanent aspect, Brahman was known as *Ātman*.

These noble teachings, which really touched the spiritual heights, were recorded, though not in systematic form, in the 200 or so *Upanishads*, which were composed between about 800 and 400 BC. The most important are the *Isā*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Praśna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandūkya*, *Svetāśvatara*, *Chāndogya*, *Brihadāranyaka* and *Taittirīya*. Like the Vedas, the Upanishads are the work of great poets but ones whose lyrical inspiration was fully informed by profound insight.

Some of the ascetics who had gained direct knowledge of Brahman must have left their mountain caves and forest hermitages to return to the world to share their wisdom with their fellow men. They must have impressed the ordinary people very much – and made the brahmin priests look little better than self-serving traffickers in mumbo-jumbo. The brahmins were sensible, however. They may have scorned these ascetics and discouraged the ordinary people from listening to them, but they did not launch any kind of violent campaign against them – rather the brahmins sought to incorporate aspects of the alternative wisdom into their own teachings. Also, alarmed at the number of young men who were throwing up their family duties to take to the homeless ascetic life, the brahmins began to propound the notion of Four Stages of Life. Firstly one is a student, then a householder, later one retires and gradually loosens the bonds that tie one to the world, and finally, only when one has discharged all one's other dharmic debts fully, can one become a renunciate or *sanyāssin* and go off in search of religious truth.

Unfortunately, even the highest teachings seem invariably to undergo a fall when they are packaged for popular consumption by a professional priestly class. Thus it was with the Upanishads. The formless Brahman became formalized and eventually came to wear an

anthropomorphic face, that of the great god Brahma. And the equally elusive Ātman that once great sages had hesitated to mention save in negative terms, that too congealed into a permanent personal entity or immortal soul - the *jivātman*. It was part of the Buddha's project to point out these debasements of the once noble teachings of the Upanishads, which in their original and highest forms were quite consistent with his own teachings.

By the time that the Vedic Age was drawing towards its close, Vedic culture had spread down the plain of the River Ganges and the restless Aryan invader had been long since transformed from a pastoral nomad into a settled agriculturist. He had also integrated, insofar as the caste system facilitated integration, with the other peoples of the area. The clearing of the great Gangetic Plain for agriculture had also unleashed a vast untapped economic potential. The population grew and prosperity burgeoned, great trading cities emerged and with them a sophisticated urban culture and a new individualism. New forms of political organization developed too as the old tribes began to be replaced by more highly organized groupings. Tribal republics appeared, ruled by elected aristocracies drawn from the kshatriya caste, and these may have been less well disposed towards the prevailing brahmin orthodoxy than the kingdoms that also appeared at this time. These were more expansionistic than the republics and two of them, Magadha and Kosala, vied for domination of 'Middle Country', the central heartland of the Ganges Plain, which by the time of the Buddha's birth (563 BC) was the main centre of civilization in India.

Wealth and social change generate stress, and from stress come psychological and spiritual problems. At the same time the necessary leisure and surplus resources are also available for solutions to those problems to be sought. Thus the changes outlined above probably increased the numbers of people taking to the homeless life as followers

of the alternative spiritual tradition. But as life became more organized it also became expedient for those ascetics to abandon their old anarchic ways and become more organized themselves. They had also to demonstrate their seriousness and usefulness to society. Thus we find identifiable sects emerging, each with its own philosophy and practices, and centred around a *shramana* or teacher. The ascetics themselves were at first called *ājīvakas* or *parivajakas* ('homeless ones'; 'ones who had gone forth'). Five main sects can be determined:

- 1 *Ajivakas*. (As well as referring to ascetics generally, the term also referred to the followers of this particular sect.) The root teacher was Makkhali Gosāla and he seems to have taught a philosophy of utter determinism: the universe was a totally closed causal system but it was inexorably moving each person towards ultimate perfection, though the process would take untold aeons of time.
- 2 *Lokayatas*. (The Materialists.) As propounded by Ajita Keshakambalin, a contemporary of the Buddha, the philosophy of this sect held that a human being was composed of the four elements and into those his constituent parts were resolved at death, which was an utter finality - 'When the body dies both the fool and the wise alike are cut off and perish.' In life then a man should seek the maximum of pleasure possible.
- 3 *The Sceptics*. These held that the brahminical doctrines were mutually contradictory and that truth was utterly unattainable. They are said to have wriggled like eels out of every question put to them, but believed in cultivating friendliness and peace of mind.

4 *The Jains*. The Jains held life to be an extremely painful business and aspired to attain *moksha* or liberation from the painful cycles of endless rebirth by withdrawing to a high, rarefied spiritual state. To do so they sought to amass the necessary karmic merit by the practice of extreme forms of austerity and impeccably moral conduct. They were particularly preoccupied with the karmic consequences of killing or causing suffering to living beings, even microscopic ones. They thus took the virtue of *ahimsā* (harmlessness) to extreme lengths and some would sweep the ground ahead of them when they walked and wear gauze masks over their faces. The Jain philosophy, which was systematized around the time of the Buddha by Mahāvira, has followers in India to this day, though few of them are extreme ascetics.

The fifth sect, which was in time to spread so widely that for a time it became the predominant religion of all Asia, was founded by Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha, whose life and work we will look at in the next two chapters.

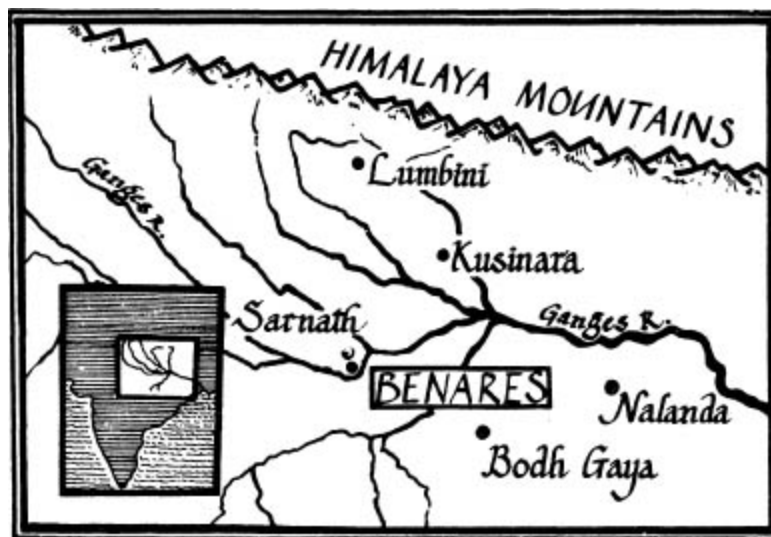
4 The Buddha: The Early Years

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE Buddha were comparatively late arrivals. There is no biography as such in the earliest Pali scriptures, but a skeletal one might be pieced together from scattered references. The Venerable Nānamoli Thera (Osbert Moore) did just this in his *Life of the Buddha* (Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1972). One of the first true biographies was the *Buddhacarita* ('Acts of the Buddha') of the 1st or 2nd century AD by the Sanskrit poet Ashvaghosha. A condensed translation of this appears in Dr. Edward Conze's anthology, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth, 1959 - a Penguin Classic). Various other versions of the Life were subsequently produced - many of them contain additions and embellishments not found in the earliest sources.

A brief outline of the Life

The man who was to become the Buddha was born about 563 BC of kshatriya stock at a place called Lumbini. This is situated in the Terai region of what today is the kingdom of Nepal, immediately below the Himalayan foothills on the northern edge of the plain of the River Ganges, due north of the holy city of Benares. He was given the name Siddhārtha and took the clan-name Gautama. His father, Suddhodana, has been variously described as the king or leader of a local people known as the Shakyas - or even just as a prominent citizen of Kapilavatthu, the Shakyan capital. The Shakyas were in fact just one of a number of more or less independent peoples then inhabiting this part of northern India who were politically organized into tribal republics ruled by elected aristocracies.

A remarkable man is deemed to require a remarkable birth. So it is said that prophetic dreams heralded the great event; that the Buddha-to-be was not conceived in the usual way but descended from the Tushita Heaven and entered his mother's womb in the form of a white elephant; that she carried him for ten months and then gave birth to him from her side and standing up; that he was born clean, unstained in any way but that nevertheless streams of water poured from the sky to wash both mother and child; and finally:



As soon as born, the Bodhisatta (Buddha-to-be) firmly standing with even feet goes firmly to the north with seven long steps, a white parasol being held over him (by the gods). He surveys all the quarters, and in a lordly voice says, 'I am the chief in the world, I am the best in the world, I am the first in the world. This is my last birth. There is now no existence again'.⁶

Unfortunately, Siddhārtha's mother, Mahāmāyā, died a week after giving birth to him, and her place in his life was taken by her sister, Mahāpajāpatī, who in the polygamous society of the day was probably also one of Suddhodana's wives.

Not long after the birth, a wise sage named Asita came to Kapilavatthu. He gasped with wonder and smiled when the infant was laid before him, for he at once noticed that there were 32 special signs on his tiny body. But then Asita began to weep and when asked why replied that he was not weeping for Siddhārtha but for himself. Siddhārtha would certainly grow up to be a fully Enlightened buddha, a Teacher of Men and Gods, but he, Asita, was old and would not live long enough to hear Siddhārtha's profound teaching.

Suddhodana was far from delighted when he heard this. He therefore determined to do whatever he could to prevent Asita's prediction coming true. Reflecting that it would be experience of the hard, ugly and painful things of life that would turn Siddhārtha's mind towards religion, Suddhodana decided that he would create a hermetic environment of comfort, beauty and pleasure for Siddhārtha. The real world would be utterly shut out.

Probably while Siddhārtha was still a boy it was sufficient for Suddhodana to see to it that he was just closely chaperoned. As he grew towards manhood and more disposed to take independent action, more elaborate security arrangements became necessary. So Suddhodana ordered three splendid marble palaces to be built: one for the hot season, one for the cool season and one for the rainy season. Siddhārtha was confined in the upper storeys of these and every kind of pleasure and luxury was laid on to make sure that he would not become bored. He lolled around in splendid robes of Benares silk, anointed by oils of the finest quality. He ate the most delicious foods, and armies of musicians, dancing girls and the most sensuous courtesans were on hand to amuse him.

One might have thought that such an environment would have produced a decadent hot-house plant, but by all accounts Siddhārtha grew up to be a splendid young man. He was good at his studies, very handsome, just and kind,

and he also excelled at all kinds of sports and martial arts. Those last talents helped him to win the hand of Yasodharā, his beautiful young cousin, who was desired as a wife by many young noblemen and princelings. Siddhārtha trounced all these other suitors easily in a series of contests and he and Yasodharā were married when he was still only 16. However, the mores of the day would no doubt have allowed him to enjoy the pleasures of numerous concubines as well. One child resulted from Siddhārtha's marriage to Yasodharā - a son, Rāhula, born when Siddhārtha was about 29.

No doubt information about life in the world beyond the walls of his pleasure palaces filtered through to Siddhārtha and aroused his natural curiosity. He was probably getting restless anyway. So a trip to the outside world was arranged, either with his father's knowledge or without it.

Siddhārtha made four fateful trips to the outside world, driven each time by his groom, Channa. On the first they encountered an old man, on the second a sick man and on the third a corpse being carried away to be cremated on the burning ghat. Having lived in pleasure palaces, completely insulated from such sights for nearly 30 years, the effect of these three encounters upon Siddhārtha was traumatic. Here were the true facts of the human condition: that men are susceptible to sickness, old age and death - all men: *even Siddhārtha himself...*

In order that life be tenable, most people suppress the reality and inevitability of death. Those who have been forced to confront it, however, will bear witness to the profound effect that it can have. A vital shock it always is, but one that can also bring about a sudden maturing of the whole personality by summarily clearing the mind of its usual clutter of trivial preoccupations and bringing into focus that which is of real importance.

The cloistered Siddhārtha received such a vital shock and at once all the pleasures and delights of palace life lost

their charm.

But he also made a fourth visit to the outside world with Channa. On that occasion they saw a *sadhu*, a wandering holy man such as one can see on the highways and byways of India even today. It is also significant that this man, who was to awaken Siddhārtha's dormant spirituality, was not a brahmin priest but a follower of the alternative *shramana* tradition. He was alone and dressed in rags, and clearly possessed nothing; yet there was a quality about his whole demeanour that deeply impressed Siddhārtha - a tranquillity that other men, for all their possessions and family connections, clearly lacked. *Perhaps, Siddhārtha wondered, he has discovered some secret; perhaps old age, sickness and death are no longer frightening for him....*

And now the conflict within Siddhārtha's heart became really intense. He had been awakened to the central problem of human existence, the problem of suffering, and also shown a potential way of finding a solution to it. This would, however, mean not only giving up all the material riches that he enjoyed but also walking out on his family: his father, who expected him to do his duty, and his wife and son, whom he loved deeply. His heart was wrenched this way and that. A large part of him longed to stay, and yet at the same time there was a powerful force within him, a force that *could not* be gainsaid, that was pushing him out into the unknown.

This conflict eventually reached its inevitable climax. Around midnight on the very night that his son, Rāhula, was born, Siddhārtha rose from his bed and dressed. Waking up Channa, Siddhārtha asked him to saddle up his horse, Kanthaka. Then they rode through the night until they came to the River Anoma, which divided the land of the Shakyas from the neighbouring kingdom of Magadha. On the far bank of the river a poignant ritual took place. Siddhārtha hacked off all his handsome jet-black hair, exchanged his silken robe for the ragged yellow one of a