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THE BUDDHA IN HISTORY AND TRADITION

This booklet is about the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, one of the greatest religions of our time. “Buddhism today” says Jawaharlal Nehru, in his ‘Glimpses of World History’ “is the religion of the greatest number of people in the world” (p.79). Nehru, a great son of India, calls the Buddha “the greatest son of India”.

On his Teachings, H.G.Wells, in his ‘Outline of History’ says that “it is clear and simple and in the closest harmony with modern ideas. It is beyond all dispute the achievement of one of the most penetrating intelligences the world has ever known” (p.315). Albert Einstein said that “if there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism”

This booklet is an invitation for young Sri Lankans to understand the Buddha, who was far ahead of his times. Since the life of the Buddha is sometimes covered with myth and legend, an attempt was made here to present the Buddha as a true historical figure who played a very important spiritual, social, philosophical and psychological role.

GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

In writing Pali and Sinhala words, the following conventions have been used:

A long vowel is indicated by a line over the vowel letter:

[ā]	ආරාම	ārāma	(monastery)
[ī]	නීල	nīla	(blue)
[ū]	රූප	rūpa	(form)
[ē]	චේතිය	cētiya	(stupa)
[ō]	බෝධි	bōdhi	(enlightenment)

A cerebral consonant is indicated by a dot below it:

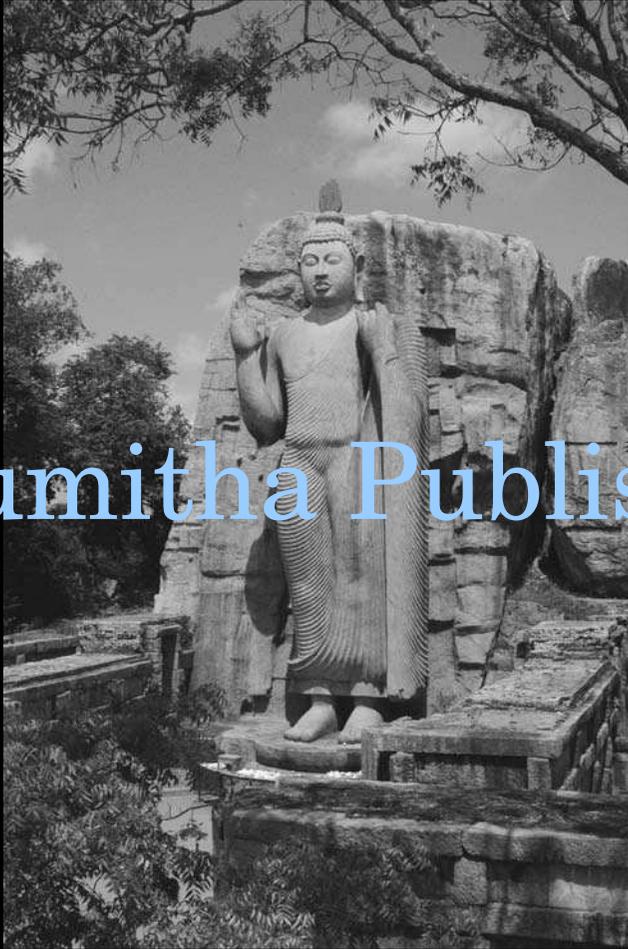
[ṭ]	කුට	kuṭa	(peak)
[ḍ]	අඩ	aḍa	(half)

An aspirate consonant is indicated by a letter followed by [h]

[kh]	දුක්ඛ	dukkha	(sorrow)
[gh]	දිග්ඝ	diḡha	(orig.)
[ch]	ඡත්ත	chatta	(parasol)
[jh]	මජ්ඣිම	majjhima	(middle)
[th]	අට්ඨ	attha	(eight)
[dh]	අඩ්ඨ	addha	(half)
[th]	ගාථා	gatha	(stanzas)
[dh]	බුද්ධ	buddha	(Buddha)
[ph]	ඵල	phala	(results)
[bh]	අභය	abhaya	(fearless)

The velar nasal consonant is indicated by a dot below [m]

[ṃ]	ධම්මං	dhammaṃ	(dhamma)
	සංඝ	saṃgha	(monks)



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THE BUDDHA,
THE HUMAN BEING

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1.1

The Buddha, the Human Being

Buddhism, one of the major religions of the world today, is followed by six hundred million people, mostly in Asia. It is so named after its founder, the Buddha. His name has no exact equivalent in English. Thus, it is usually translated into English as ‘The Awakened One’, ‘The Blessed One’ ‘The Enlightened One’ ‘the Exalted One’ ‘The Perfect One’ ‘the Worthy One’ and so on.

The Pali word ‘Buddha’ is related to the verb ‘bujjhati’ which means, according to the Pali Text Society’s ‘Pali-English Dictionary’ ‘to be ; wake to be enlightened, to perceive, to know, to recognise, to understand’. The Buddha is thus the one who was awakened to reality, who understood the Truth and who expounded it to the world for the good of the many.

The word ‘Buddha’ is thus an appellative, a title, and not a personal name like Jesus, Muhammed, Mahavira or Confucius. Any human being, who makes the necessary effort, can become a Buddha. A being who aspires to become a Buddha is called in Pali a ‘bōdhisatta’ [බෝධිසත්ත] in Sanskrit ‘bōdhisatva’ [बोधिषत्त्व] and in Sinhala ‘bōsat’ [බෝසත්].

The last human being to become a Buddha was an Indian prince who lived in the seventh century BC. The exact year of his birth is still a matter of academic debate. The generally accepted view in Sri Lanka and other Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos favours 623 BC as the year of his birth and 543 BC as the year of his death.

He bore the personal name, Siddhattha [සිද්ධත්ථ] Skt. Siddhārtha [सिद्धार्थ] Sin. Siduhat [සිදුහත්] and the family name, Gotama [ගෝතම] Skt. Gautama [गौतम] Si. Coyum [කොයුම]. He is often referred to as ‘Salya-rūmi’, the Sage of the Sakyas, or ‘Sakya-sinha’, the Lion of the Sakyas, retaining his link with the Sakya clan to which he belonged.

The life story of this historical figure has been the subject of several works, of which the ‘Nidanakatha’ [නිදාන කථා] is the only work in Pali. Sanskrit works include ‘Mahāvastu’, ‘Lalitavistara’ and ‘Buddhacharita’. The present chapter presents an outline of the life story of Siddhattha Gotama, the man who became the Buddha, a god among men.

1.2

Siddhattha, the Prince

“Just beside Himavanta there lives” said the Buddha “a people endowed with the power of wealth, the inhabitants of Kosala. They are ‘adiccas’ by family, ‘sakiyas’ by birth; from that family I have wandered out, not longing for sensual pleasures” (Pabbajja Sutta, Sutta Nipāta)

The Buddha was born into a royal family and spent the first twenty nine years of his life as a prince, learning all the arts and sciences necessary for state craft and, enjoying sensual pleasures. His family belonged to the kingdom of Kōsala, one of the most powerful of the sixteen great states (so āsa mahā janapadā) of India in the seventh century BC.

Pasēnadi, the king of Kōsala at that time, often claimed with pride that the Buddha was also a Kōsalan:

“bhagavā pi kōsalakō [භගවාපි කෝසලකෝ]

aham pi kōsalakō” [අහමිපි කෝසලකෝ]

(The Buddha is a Kōsalan, so am I).

His family belonged to the ‘khattiya’ (warrior) caste, one of the four main castes of ancient India, and to the Sakya clan, which had their capital in Kapilavatthu, Skt. Kapilavastu [කපිලවස්තු], Sin. Kimbulvat [කිම්බුල්වත්] on the foothills of the Himalayan range in modern Uttar Pradesh. His family bore the name of Gōtama and, his father, Suddōdana Gōtama, was the head of this clan.

His mother was Māyā, a princess of a neighbouring clan, the Kōliyas, who ruled in Devadaha. Siddhattha was their only child. He was born on the full moon day of the month of Vēsākha (April-May) in 623 BC, in a park known as Lumbini. His mother was on her way to her parents in Dēvadaha when the time was ripe for the birth of her son.

The young prince was named Siddhattha සිද්ධත්ථ, which means in Pali “wish (attha අත්ථ) fulfilled (siddha සිද්ධ)”. A week after his birth, his mother died and he was looked after by her sister, Pajāpati Gōtami. He married at the early age of sixteen a princess of his own age, Yasōdharā or Bimbā, daughter of his mother's brother, Suppabuddha. They had a son, Rāhula, thirteen years after their marriage.