

TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

In the
Buddha's
Words



An Anthology of Discourses
from the Pāli Canon

Edited and introduced by

Bhikkhu Bodhi

FOREWORD BY THE DALAI LAMA

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In the Buddha's Words



Tamed, he is supreme among those who tame;
At peace, he is the sage among those who bring peace;
Freed, he is the chief of those who set free;
Delivered, he is the best of those who deliver.

—*Anguttara Nikāya* 4:23

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THE DALAI LAMA

FOREWORD

More than two thousand five hundred years have passed since our kind teacher, Buddha Śākyamuni, taught in India. He offered advice to all who wished to heed it, inviting them to listen, reflect, and critically examine what he had to say. He addressed different individuals and groups of people over a period of more than forty years.

After the Buddha's passing, a record of what he said was maintained as an oral tradition. Those who heard the teachings would periodically meet with others for communal recitations of what they had heard and memorized. In due course, these recitations from memory were written down, laying the basis for all subsequent Buddhist literature. The Pāli Canon is one of the earliest of these written records and the only complete early version that has survived intact. Within the Pāli Canon, the texts known as the Nikāyas have the special value of being a single cohesive collection of the Buddha's teachings in his own words. These teachings cover a wide range of topics; they deal not only with renunciation and liberation, but also with the proper relations between husbands and wives, the management of the household, and the way countries should be governed. They explain the path of spiritual development—from generosity and ethics, through mind training and the realization of wisdom, all the way up to the attainment of liberation.

The teachings from the Nikāyas collected here provide fascinating insights into how the Buddha's teachings were studied, preserved, and understood in the early days of Buddhism's development. Modern readers will find them especially valuable for reinvigorating and clarifying their understanding of many fundamental Buddhist doctrines. Clearly the Buddha's essential message of compassion, ethical responsibility, mental tranquillity, and discernment is as relevant today as it was more than twenty-five hundred years ago.

Although Buddhism spread and took root in many parts of Asia, evolving into diverse traditions according to the place and occasion, distance and differences of language limited exchange between Buddhists in the past. One of the results of modern improvements in

transport and communication that I most appreciate is the vastly expanded opportunities those interested in Buddhism now have to acquaint themselves with the full range of Buddhist teaching and practice. What I find especially encouraging about this book is that it shows so clearly how much fundamentally all schools of Buddhism have in common. I congratulate Bhikkhu Bodhi for this careful work of compilation and translation. I offer my prayers that readers may find advice here—and the inspiration to put it into practice—that will enable them to develop inner peace, which I believe is essential for the creation of a happier and more peaceful world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tenzin Gyatso', written in a fluid, cursive style.

Venerable Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama
May 10, 2005

PREFACE

The Buddha's discourses preserved in the Pāli Canon are called *suttas*, the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit word *sūtras*. Although the Pāli Canon belongs to a particular Buddhist school—the Theravāda, or School of the Elders—the *suttas* are by no means exclusively Theravāda Buddhist texts. They stem from the earliest period of Buddhist literary history, a period lasting roughly a hundred years after the Buddha's death, before the original Buddhist community divided into different schools. The Pāli *suttas* have counterparts from other early Buddhist schools now extinct, texts sometimes strikingly similar to the Pāli version, differing mainly in settings and arrangements but not in points of doctrine. The *suttas*, along with their counterparts, thus constitute the most ancient records of the Buddha's teachings available to us; they are the closest we can come to what the historical Buddha Gotama himself actually taught. The teachings found in them have served as the fountainhead, the primal source, for all the evolving streams of Buddhist doctrine and practice through the centuries. For this reason, they constitute the common heritage of the entire Buddhist tradition, and Buddhists of all schools who wish to understand the taproot of Buddhism should make a close and careful study of them a priority.

In the Pāli Canon the Buddha's discourses are preserved in collections called *Nikāyas*. Over the past twenty years, fresh translations of the four major *Nikāyas* have appeared in print, issued in attractive and affordable editions. Wisdom Publications pioneered this development in 1987 when it published Maurice Walshe's translation of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Wisdom followed this precedent by bringing out, in 1995, my revised and edited version of Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli's handwritten translation of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, followed in 2000 by my new translation of the complete *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. In 1999, under the imprint of The Sacred Literature Trust Series, AltaMira Press published an anthology of *suttas*

from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, translated by the late Nyanaponika Thera and myself, titled *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. I am currently working on a new translation of the entire *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, intended for Wisdom Publication's *Teachings of the Buddha* series.

Many who have read these larger works have told me, to my satisfaction, that the translations brought the suttas to life for them. Yet others who earnestly sought to enter the deep ocean of the *Nikāyas* told me something else. They said that while the language of the translations made them far more accessible than earlier translations, they were still grappling for a standpoint from which to see the suttas' overall structure, a framework within which they all fit together. The *Nikāyas* themselves do not offer much help in this respect, for their arrangement—with the notable exception of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, which does have a thematic structure—appears almost haphazard.

In an ongoing series of lectures I began giving at Bodhi Monastery in New Jersey in January 2003, I devised a scheme of my own to organize the contents of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. This scheme unfolds the Buddha's message progressively, from the simple to the difficult, from the elementary to the profound. Upon reflection, I saw that this scheme could be applied not only to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, but to the four *Nikāyas* as a whole. The present book organizes suttas selected from all four *Nikāyas* within this thematic and progressive framework.

This book is intended for two types of readers. The first are those not yet acquainted with the Buddha's discourses who feel the need for a systematic introduction. For such readers, any of the *Nikāyas* is bound to appear opaque. All four of them, viewed at once, may seem like a jungle—entangling and bewildering, full of unknown beasts—or like the great ocean—vast, tumultuous, and forbidding. I hope that this book will serve as a map to help them wend their way through the jungle of the suttas or as a sturdy ship to carry them across the ocean of the Dhamma.

The second type of readers for whom this book is meant are those, already acquainted with the suttas, who still cannot see how they fit together into an intelligible whole. For such readers, individual suttas may be comprehensible in themselves, but the texts in their totality appear like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle scattered across a table. Once one understands the scheme in this book, one should come away with a clear idea of the architecture of the teaching. Then, with a little

reflection, one should be able to determine the place any sutta occupies in the edifice of the Dhamma, whether or not it has been included in this anthology.

This anthology, or any other anthology of suttas, is no substitute for the Nikāyas themselves. My hope is twofold, corresponding to the two types of readers for whom this volume is designed: (1) that newcomers to Early Buddhist literature find this volume whets their appetite for more and encourages them to take the plunge into the full Nikāyas; and (2) that experienced readers of the Nikāyas finish the book with a better understanding of material with which they are already familiar.

If this anthology is meant to make any other point, it is to convey the sheer breadth and range of the Buddha's wisdom. While Early Buddhism is sometimes depicted as a discipline of world renunciation intended primarily for ascetics and contemplatives, the ancient discourses of the Pāli Canon clearly show us how the Buddha's wisdom and compassion reached into the very depths of mundane life, providing ordinary people with guidelines for proper conduct and right understanding. Far from being a creed for a monastic élite, ancient Buddhism involved the close collaboration of householders and monastics in the twin tasks of maintaining the Buddha's teachings and assisting one another in their efforts to walk the path to the extinction of suffering. To fulfill these tasks meaningfully, the Dhamma had to provide them with deep and inexhaustible guidance, inspiration, joy, and consolation. It could never have done this if it had not directly addressed their earnest efforts to combine social and family obligations with an aspiration to realize the highest.

Almost all the passages included in this book have been selected from the above-mentioned publications of the four Nikāyas. Almost all have undergone revisions, usually slight but sometimes major, to accord with my own evolving understanding of the texts and the Pāli language. I have newly translated a small number of suttas from the Aṅguttara Nikāya not included in the above-mentioned anthology. I have also included a handful of suttas from the Udāna and Itivuttaka, two small books belonging to the fifth Nikāya, the Khuddaka Nikāya, the Minor or Miscellaneous Collection. I have based these on John D. Ireland's translation, published by the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka, but again I have freely modified them to fit my own pre-

ferred diction and terminology. I have given preference to suttas in prose over those in verse, as being more direct and explicit. When a sutta concludes with verses, if these merely restate the preceding prose, in the interest of space I have omitted them.

Each chapter begins with an introduction in which I explain the salient concepts relevant to the theme of the chapter and try to show how the texts I have chosen exemplify that theme. To clarify points arising from both the introductions and the texts, I have included end-notes. These often draw upon the classical commentaries to the Nikāyas ascribed to the great South Indian commentator Ācariya Buddhaghosa, who worked in Sri Lanka in the fifth century C.E. For the sake of concision, I have not included as many notes in this book as I have in my other translations of the Nikāyas. These notes are also not as technical as those in the full translations.

References to the sources follow each selection. References to texts from the Dīgha Nikāya and Majjhima Nikāya cite the number and name of the sutta (in Pāli); passages from these two collections retain the paragraph numbers used in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* and *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, so readers who wish to locate these passages within the full translations can easily do so. References to texts from the Saṃyutta Nikāya cite *saṃyutta* and sutta number; texts from the Aṅguttara Nikāya cite *nipāta* and sutta number (the Ones and the Twos also cite chapters within the *nipāta* followed by the sutta number). References to texts from the Udāna cite *nipāta* and sutta number; texts from the Itivuttaka cite simply the sutta number. All references are followed by the volume and page number in the Pali Text Society's standard edition of these works.

I am grateful to Timothy McNeill and David Kittelstrom of Wisdom Publications for urging me to persist with this project in the face of long periods of indifferent health. Sāmaṇera Anālayo and Bhikkhu Nyana-sobhano read and commented on my introductions, and John Kelly reviewed proofs of the entire book. All three made useful suggestions, for which I am grateful. John Kelly also prepared the table of sources that appears at the back of the book. Finally, I am grateful to my students of Pāli and Dhamma studies at Bodhi Monastery for their enthusiastic interest in the teachings of the Nikāyas, which inspired me to compile this anthology. I am especially thankful to the monastery's extraordinary founder, Ven. Master Jen-Chun, for welcoming a monk

of another Buddhist tradition to his monastery and for his interest in bridging the Northern and Southern transmissions of the Early Buddhist teachings.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
Be	Burmese-script Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana ed.
Ce	Sinhala-script ed.
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
Ee	Roman-script ed. (PTS)
It	Itivuttaka
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
Mp	Manorathapūraṇi (Aṅguttara Nikāya Commentary)
Ppn	Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga translation)
Ps	Papañcasūdanī (Majjhima Nikāya Commentary)
Ps-pt	Papañcasūdanī-purāṇa-ṭikā (Majjhima Nikāya Subcommentary)
Skt	Sanskrit
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Spk	Sāratthappakāsini (Saṃyutta Nikāya Commentary)
Spk-pt	Sāratthappakāsini-purāṇa-ṭikā (Saṃyutta Nikāya Subcommentary)
Sv	Sumaṅgalavilāsini (Dīgha Nikāya Commentary)
Ud	Udāna
Vibh	Vibhaṅga
Vin	Vinaya
Vism	Visuddhimagga

All page references to Pāli texts are to the page numbers of the Pali Text Society's editions.

KEY TO THE PRONUNCIATION OF PĀLI

The Pāli Alphabet

Vowels: a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, e, o

Consonants:

Gutturals	k, kh, g, gh, ṅ
Palatals	c, ch, j, jh, ñ
Cerebrals	ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ
Dentals	t, th, d, dh, n
Labials	p, ph, b, bh, m
Other	y, r, ḷ, l, v, s, h, ṃ

Pronunciation

a as in "cut"	u as in "put"
ā as in "father"	ū as in "rule"
i as in "king"	e as in "way"
ī as in "keen"	o as in "home"

Of the vowels, *e* and *o* are long before a single consonant and short before a double consonant. Among the consonants, *g* is always pronounced as in "good," *c* as in "church," *ñ* as in "onion." The cerebrals (or retroflexes) are spoken with the tongue on the roof of the mouth; the dentals with the tongue on the upper teeth. The aspirates—*kh, gh, ch, jh, ṭh, ḍh, th, dh, ph, bh*—are single consonants pronounced with slightly more force than the nonaspirates, e.g., *th* as in "Thomas" (not as in "thin"); *ph* as in "putter" (not as in "phone"). Double consonants are always enunciated separately, e.g., *dd* as in "mad dog," *gg* as in "big gun." The pure nasal (*niggahita*) *ṃ* is pronounced like the *ng* in "song." An *o* and an *e* always carry a stress; otherwise the stress falls on a long vowel—*ā, ī, ū*,—or on a double consonant, or on *ṃ*.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

UNCOVERING THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEACHING

Though his teaching is highly systematic, there is no single text that can be ascribed to the Buddha in which he defines the architecture of the Dhamma, the scaffolding upon which he has framed his specific expressions of the doctrine. In the course of his long ministry, the Buddha taught in different ways as determined by occasion and circumstances. Sometimes he would enunciate invariable principles that stand at the heart of the teaching. Sometimes he would adapt the teaching to accord with the proclivities and aptitudes of the people who came to him for guidance. Sometimes he would adjust his exposition to fit a situation that required a particular response. But throughout the collections of texts that have come down to us as authorized “Word of the Buddha,” we do not find a single *sutta*, a single discourse, in which the Buddha has drawn together all the elements of his teaching and assigned them to their appropriate place within some comprehensive system.

While in a literate culture in which systematic thought is highly prized the lack of such a text with a unifying function might be viewed as a defect, in an entirely oral culture—as was the culture in which the Buddha lived and moved—the lack of a descriptive key to the Dhamma would hardly be considered significant. Within this culture neither teacher nor student aimed at conceptual completeness. The teacher did not intend to present a complete system of ideas; his pupils did not aspire to learn a complete system of ideas. The aim that united them in the process of learning—the process of transmission—was that of practical training, self-transformation, the realization of truth, and unshakable liberation of the mind. This does not mean, however, that the teaching was always expediently adapted to the situation at hand. At times the Buddha would present more panoramic views of the Dhamma that united many components of the path in a graded or wide-ranging structure. But though there are several discourses that

exhibit a broad scope, they still do not embrace all elements of the Dhamma in one overarching scheme.

The purpose of the present book is to develop and exemplify such a scheme. I here attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the Buddha's teaching that incorporates a wide variety of suttas into an organic structure. This structure, I hope, will bring to light the intentional pattern underlying the Buddha's formulation of the Dhamma and thus provide the reader with guidelines for understanding Early Buddhism as a whole. I have selected the suttas almost entirely from the four major collections or Nikāyas of the Pāli Canon, though I have also included a few texts from the Udāna and Itivuttaka, two small books of the fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikāya. Each chapter opens with its own introduction, in which I explain the basic concepts of Early Buddhism that the texts exemplify and show how the texts give expression to these ideas.

I will briefly supply background information about the Nikāyas later in this introduction. First, however, I want to outline the scheme that I have devised to organize the suttas. Although my particular use of this scheme may be original, it is not sheer innovation but is based upon a threefold distinction that the Pāli commentaries make among the types of benefits to which the practice of the Dhamma leads: (1) welfare and happiness visible in this present life; (2) welfare and happiness pertaining to future lives; and (3) the ultimate good, Nibbāna (Skt: *nirvāṇa*).

Three preliminary chapters are designed to lead up to those that embody this threefold scheme. Chapter I is a survey of the human condition as it is apart from the appearance of a Buddha in the world. Perhaps this was the way human life appeared to the Bodhisatta—the future Buddha—as he dwelled in the Tusita heaven gazing down upon the earth, awaiting the appropriate occasion to descend and take his final birth. We behold a world in which human beings are driven helplessly toward old age and death; in which they are spun around by circumstances so that they are oppressed by bodily pain, cast down by failure and misfortune, made anxious and fearful by change and deterioration. It is a world in which people aspire to live in harmony, but in which their untamed emotions repeatedly compel them, against their better judgment, to lock horns in conflicts that escalate into violence and wholesale devastation. Finally, taking the broadest view of all, it is a world in which sentient beings are propelled forward, by

their own ignorance and craving, from one life to the next, wandering blindly through the cycle of rebirths called *saṃsāra*.

Chapter II gives an account of the Buddha's descent into this world. He comes as the "one person" who appears out of compassion for the world, whose arising in the world is "the manifestation of great light." We follow the story of his conception and birth, of his renunciation and quest for enlightenment, of his realization of the Dhamma, and of his decision to teach. The chapter ends with his first discourse to the five monks, his first disciples, in the Deer Park near Bārāṇasi.

Chapter III is intended to sketch the special features of the Buddha's teaching, and by implication, the attitude with which a prospective student should approach the teaching. The texts tell us that the Dhamma is not a secret or esoteric teaching but one which "shines when taught openly." It does not demand blind faith in authoritarian scriptures, in divine revelations, or infallible dogmas, but invites investigation and appeals to personal experience as the ultimate criterion for determining its validity. The teaching is concerned with the arising and cessation of suffering, which can be observed in one's own experience. It does not set up even the Buddha as an unimpeachable authority but invites us to examine him to determine whether he fully deserves our trust and confidence. Finally, it offers a step-by-step procedure whereby we can put the teaching to the test, and by doing so realize the ultimate truth for ourselves.

With chapter IV, we come to texts dealing with the first of the three types of benefit the Buddha's teaching is intended to bring. This is called "the welfare and happiness visible in this present life" (*diṭṭha-dhamma-hitasukha*), the happiness that comes from following ethical norms in one's family relationships, livelihood, and communal activities. Although Early Buddhism is often depicted as a radical discipline of renunciation directed to a transcendental goal, the Nikāyas reveal the Buddha to have been a compassionate and pragmatic teacher who was intent on promoting a social order in which people can live together peacefully and harmoniously in accordance with ethical guidelines. This aspect of Early Buddhism is evident in the Buddha's teachings on the duties of children to their parents, on the mutual obligations of husbands and wives, on right livelihood, on the duties of the ruler toward his subjects, and on the principles of communal harmony and respect.

The second type of benefit to which the Buddha's teaching leads is the subject of chapter V, called the welfare and happiness pertaining to the future life (*samparāyika-hitasukha*). This is the happiness achieved by obtaining a fortunate rebirth and success in future lives through one's accumulation of merit. The term "merit" (*puñña*) refers to wholesome kamma (Skt: *karma*) considered in terms of its capacity to produce favorable results within the round of rebirths. I begin this chapter with a selection of texts on the teaching of kamma and rebirth. This leads us to general texts on the idea of merit, followed by selections on the three principal "bases of merit" recognized in the Buddha's discourses: giving (*dāna*), moral discipline (*sīla*), and meditation (*bhāvanā*). Since meditation figures prominently in the third type of benefit, the kind of meditation emphasized here, as a basis for merit, is that productive of the most abundant mundane fruits, the four "divine abodes" (*brahmvihāra*), particularly the development of loving-kindness.

Chapter VI is transitional, intended to prepare the way for the chapters to follow. While demonstrating that the practice of his teaching does indeed conduce to happiness and good fortune within the bounds of mundane life, in order to lead people beyond these bounds, the Buddha exposes the danger and inadequacy in all conditioned existence. He shows the defects in sensual pleasures, the shortcomings of material success, the inevitability of death, and the impermanence of all conditioned realms of being. To arouse in his disciples an aspiration for the ultimate good, Nibbāna, the Buddha again and again underscores the perils of saṃsāra. Thus this chapter comes to a climax with two dramatic texts that dwell on the misery of bondage to the round of repeated birth and death.

The following four chapters are devoted to the third benefit that the Buddha's teaching is intended to bring: the ultimate good (*paramattha*), the attainment of Nibbāna. The first of these, chapter VII, gives a general overview of the path to liberation, which is treated analytically through definitions of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path and dynamically through an account of the training of the monk. A long sutta on the graduated path surveys the monastic training from the monk's initial entry upon the life of renunciation to his attainment of arahantship, the final goal.

Chapter VIII focuses upon the taming of the mind, the major emphasis in the monastic training. I here present texts that discuss the obstacles

to mental development, the means of overcoming these obstacles, different methods of meditation, and the states to be attained when the obstacles are overcome and the disciple gains mastery over the mind. In this chapter I introduce the distinction between *samatha* and *vipassanā*, serenity and insight, the one leading to *samādhi* or concentration, the other to *paññā* or wisdom. However, I include texts that treat insight only in terms of the methods used to generate it, not in terms of its actual contents.

Chapter IX, titled “Shining the Light of Wisdom,” deals with the content of insight. For Early Buddhism, and indeed for almost all schools of Buddhism, insight or wisdom is the principal instrument of liberation. Thus in this chapter I focus on the Buddha’s teachings about such topics pivotal to the development of wisdom as right view, the five aggregates, the six sense bases, the eighteen elements, dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths. This chapter ends with a selection of texts on Nibbāna, the ultimate goal of wisdom.

The final goal is not achieved abruptly but by passing through a series of stages that transforms an individual from a worldling into an arahant, a liberated one. Thus chapter X, “The Planes of Realization,” offers a selection of texts on the main stages along the way. I first present the series of stages as a progressive sequence; then I return to the starting point and examine three major milestones within this progression: stream-entry, the stage of nonreturner, and arahantship. I conclude with a selection of suttas on the Buddha, the foremost among the arahants, here spoken of under the epithet he used most often when referring to himself, the Tathāgata.

THE ORIGINS OF THE NIKĀYAS

The texts I have drawn upon to fill out my scheme are, as I said above, all selected from the Nikāyas, the main sutta collections of the Pāli Canon. Some words are needed to explain the origin and nature of these sources.

The Buddha did not write down any of his teachings, nor were his teachings recorded in writing by his disciples. Indian culture at the time the Buddha lived was still predominantly preliterate.¹ The Buddha wandered from town to town in the Ganges plain, instructing his monks and nuns, giving sermons to the householders who flocked

to hear him speak, answering the questions of curious inquirers, and engaging in discussions with people from all classes of society. The records of his teachings that we have do not come from his own pen or from transcriptions made by those who heard the teaching from him, but from monastic councils held after his *parinibbāna*—his passing away into Nibbāna—for the purpose of preserving his teaching.

It is unlikely that the teachings that derive from these councils reproduce the Buddha's words verbatim. The Buddha must have spoken spontaneously and elaborated upon his themes in countless ways in response to the varied needs of those who sought his guidance. Preserving by oral transmission such a vast and diverse range of material would have bordered on the impossible. To mold the teachings into a format suitable for preservation, the monks responsible for the texts would have had to collate and edit them to make them better fit for listening, retention, recitation, memorization, and repetition—the five major elements in oral transmission. This process, which may have already been started during the Buddha's lifetime, would have led to a fair degree of simplification and standardization of the material to be preserved.

During the Buddha's life, the discourses were classified into nine categories according to literary genre: *sutta* (prose discourses), *geyya* (mixed prose and verse), *veyyākaraṇa* (answers to questions), *gāthā* (verse), *udāna* (inspired utterances), *itivuttaka* (memorable sayings), *jātaka* (stories of past births), *abbhutadhamma* (marvelous qualities), and *vedalla* (catechism).² At some point after his passing, this older system of classification was superseded by a new scheme that ordered the texts into larger collections called Nikāyas in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, Āgamas in the North Indian Buddhist schools.³ Exactly when the Nikāya-Āgama scheme became ascendant is not known with certainty, but once it appeared it almost completely replaced the older system.

The Cullavagga, one of the books of the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka, gives an account of how the authorized texts were compiled at the first Buddhist council, held three months after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*. According to this report, shortly after the Buddha's death the Elder Mahākassapa, the de facto head of the Saṅgha, selected five hundred monks, all *arahants* or liberated ones, to meet and compile an authoritative version of the teachings. The council took place during the rains

retreat at Rājagaha (modern Rajgir), the capital of Magadha, then the dominant state of Middle India.⁴ Mahākassapa first requested the Venerable Upāli, the foremost specialist on disciplinary matters, to recite the Vinaya. On the basis of this recitation, the Vinaya Piṭaka, the Compilation on Discipline, was compiled. Mahākassapa then asked the Venerable Ānanda to recite “the Dhamma,” that is, the discourses, and on the basis of this recitation, the Sutta Piṭaka, the Compilation of Discourses, was compiled.

The Cullavagga states that when Ānanda recited the Sutta Piṭaka, the Nikāyas had the same contents as they do now, with the suttas arranged in the same sequence as they now appear in the Pāli Canon. This narrative doubtlessly records past history through the lens of a later period. The Āgamas of the Buddhist schools other than the Theravāda correspond to the four main Nikāyas, but they classify suttas differently and arrange their contents in a different order from the Pāli Nikāyas. This suggests that if the Nikāya-Āgama arrangement did arise at the first council, the council had not yet assigned suttas to their definitive places within this scheme. Alternatively, it is possible that this scheme arose at a later time. It could have arisen at some point after the first council but before the Saṅgha split into different schools. If it arose during the age of sectarian divisions, it might have been introduced by one school and then been borrowed by others, so that the different schools would assign their texts to different places within the scheme.

While the Cullavagga’s account of the first council may include legendary material mixed with historical fact, there seems no reason to doubt Ānanda’s role in the preservation of the discourses. As the Buddha’s personal attendant, Ānanda had learned the discourses from him and the other great disciples, kept them in mind, and taught them to others. During the Buddha’s life he was praised for his retentive capacities and was appointed “foremost of those who have learned much” (*etadaggaṃ bahussutānaṃ*).⁵ Few monks might have had memories that could equal Ānanda’s, but already during the Buddha’s lifetime individual monks must already have begun to specialize in particular texts. The standardization and simplification of the material would have facilitated memorization. Once the texts became classified into the Nikāyas or Āgamas, the challenges of preserving and transmitting the textual heritage were solved by organizing the textual specialists into

companies dedicated to specific collections. Different companies within the Saṅgha could thus focus on memorizing and interpreting different collections and the community as a whole could avoid placing excessive demands on the memories of individual monks. It is in this way that the teachings would continue to be transmitted for the next three or four hundred years, until they were finally committed to writing.⁶

In the centuries following the Buddha's death, the Saṅgha became divided over disciplinary and doctrinal issues until by the third century after the parinibbāna there were at least eighteen schools of Sctarian Buddhism. Each sect probably had its own collection of texts regarded more or less as canonical, though it is possible that several closely affiliated sects shared the same collection of authorized texts. While the different Buddhist schools may have organized their collections differently and though their suttas show differences of detail, the individual suttas are often remarkably similar, sometimes almost identical, and the doctrines and practices they delineate are essentially the same.⁷ The doctrinal differences between the schools did not arise from the suttas themselves but from the interpretations the textual specialists imposed upon them. Such differences hardened after the rival schools formalized their philosophical principles in treatises and commentaries expressive of their distinctive standpoints on doctrinal issues. So far as we can determine, the refined philosophical systems had only minimal impact on the original texts themselves, which the schools seemed disinclined to manipulate to suit their doctrinal agendas. Instead, by means of their commentaries, they endeavored to interpret the suttas in such a way as to draw out ideas that supported their own views. It is not unusual for such interpretations to appear defensive and contrived, apologetic against the words of the original texts themselves.

THE PĀLI CANON

Sadly, the canonical collections belonging to most of the early mainstream Indian Buddhist schools were lost when Indian Buddhism was devastated by the Muslims that invaded northern India in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These invasions effectively sounded the death knell for Buddhism in the land of its birth. Only one complete

collection of texts belonging to one of the early Indian Buddhist schools managed to survive intact. This is the collection preserved in the language that we know as Pāli. This collection belonged to the ancient Theravāda school, which had been transplanted to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C.E. and thus managed to escape the havoc wrought upon Buddhism in the motherland. About the same time, the Theravāda also spread to southeast Asia and in later centuries became dominant throughout the region.

The Pāli Canon is the collection of texts the Theravāda regards as Word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*). The fact that the texts of this collection have survived as a single canon does not mean that they can all be dated from the same period; nor does it mean that the texts forming its most archaic nucleus are necessarily more ancient than their counterparts from the other Buddhist schools, many of which have survived in Chinese or Tibetan translation as parts of entire canons or, in a few cases, as isolated texts in another Indian language. Nevertheless, the Pāli Canon has a special importance for us, and that is so for at least three reasons.

First, it is a complete collection all belonging to a single school. Even though we can detect clear signs of historical development between different portions of the canon, this alignment with a single school gives the texts a certain degree of uniformity. Among the texts stemming from the same period, we can even speak of a homogeneity of contents, a single flavor underlying the manifold expressions of the doctrine. This homogeneity is most evident in the four Nikāyas and the older parts of the fifth Nikāya and gives us reason to believe that with these texts—allowing for the qualification expressed above, that they have counterparts in other extinct Buddhist schools—we have reached the most ancient stratum of Buddhist literature discoverable.

Second, the entire collection has been preserved in a Middle Indo-Aryan language, one closely related to the language (or, more likely, the various regional dialects) that the Buddha himself spoke. We call this language Pāli, but the name for the language actually arose through a misunderstanding. The word *pāli* properly means “text,” that is, the canonical text as distinct from the commentaries. The commentators refer to the language in which the texts are preserved as *pālibhāsā*, “the language of the texts.” At some point, the term was misunderstood to mean “the Pāli language,” and once the misconception

arose, it took root and has been with us ever since. Scholars regard this language as a hybrid showing features of several Prakrit dialects used around the third century B.C.E., subjected to a partial process of Sanskritization.⁸ While the language is not identical with any the Buddha himself would have spoken, it belongs to the same broad linguistic family as those he might have used and originates from the same conceptual matrix. This language thus reflects the thought-world that the Buddha inherited from the wider Indian culture into which he was born, so that its words capture the subtle nuances of that thought-world without the intrusion of alien influences inevitable in even the best and most scrupulous translations. This contrasts with Chinese, Tibetan, or English translations of the texts, which reverberate with the connotations of the words chosen from the target languages.

The *third* reason the Pāli Canon has special importance is that this collection is authoritative for a contemporary Buddhist school. Unlike the textual collections of the extinct schools of Early Buddhism, which are purely of academic interest, this collection still brims with life. It inspires the faith of millions of Buddhists from the villages and monasteries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia to the cities and meditation centers of Europe and the Americas. It shapes their understanding, guides them in the face of difficult ethical choices, informs their meditative practices, and offers them the keys to liberating insight.

The Pāli Canon is commonly known as the Tipiṭaka, the “Three Baskets” or “Three Compilations.” This threefold classification was not unique to the Theravāda school but was in common use among the Indian Buddhist schools as a way to categorize the Buddhist canonical texts. Even today the scriptures preserved in Chinese translation are known as the Chinese Tripiṭaka. The three compilations of the Pāli Canon are:

1. The *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the Compilation of Discipline, which contains the rules laid down for the guidance of the monks and nuns and the regulations prescribed for the harmonious functioning of the monastic order.
2. The *Sutta Piṭaka*, the Compilation of Discourses, which contains the *suttas*, the discourses of the Buddha and those of his chief disciples as well as inspirational works in verse, verse narratives, and certain works of a commentarial nature.

3. The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, the Compilation of Philosophy, a collection of seven treatises which subject the Buddha's teachings to rigorous philosophical systematization.

The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is obviously the product of a later phase in the evolution of Buddhist thought than the other two Piṭakas. The Pāli version represents the Theravāda school's attempt to systematize the older teachings. Other early schools apparently had their own Abhidhamma systems. The Sarvāstivāda system is the only one whose canonical texts have survived intact in their entirety. Its canonical collection, like the Pāli version, also consists of seven texts. These were originally composed in Sanskrit but are preserved in full only in Chinese translation. The system they define differs significantly from that of its Theravāda counterpart in both formulation and philosophy.

The Sutta Piṭaka, which contains the records of the Buddha's discourses and discussions, consists of five collections called Nikāyas. In the age of the commentators they were also known as Āgamas, like their counterparts in northern Buddhism. The four major Nikāyas are:

1. The *Dīgha Nikāya*: the Collection of Long Discourses, thirty-four suttas arranged into three *vaggas*, or books.
2. The *Majjhima Nikāya*: the Collection of Middle Length Discourses, 152 suttas arranged into three *vaggas*.
3. The *Samyutta Nikāya*: the Collection of Connected Discourses, close to three thousand short suttas grouped into fifty-six chapters, called *saṃyuttas*, which are in turn collected into five *vaggas*.
4. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya*: the Collection of Numerical Discourses (or, perhaps, "Incremental Discourses"), approximately 2,400 short suttas arranged into eleven chapters, called *nipātas*.

The Dīgha Nikāya and Majjhima Nikāya, at first glance, seem to be established principally on the basis of length: the longer discourses go into the Dīgha, the middle-length discourses into the Majjhima. Careful tabulations of their contents, however, suggest that another factor might underlie the distinction between these two collections. The suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya are largely aimed at a popular audience and seem intended to attract potential converts to the teaching by demonstrating the superiority of the Buddha and his doctrine. The suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya are largely directed inward toward the Buddhist

community and seem designed to acquaint newly ordained monks with the doctrines and practices of Buddhism.⁹ It remains an open question whether these pragmatic purposes are the determining criteria behind these two Nikāyas or whether the primary criterion is length, with these pragmatic purposes following as incidental consequences of their respective differences in length.

The Saṃyutta Nikāya is organized by way of subject matter. Each subject is the “yoke” (*saṃyoga*) that connects the discourses into a *saṃyutta* or chapter. Hence the title of the collection, the “connected (*saṃyutta*) discourses.” The first book, the Book with Verses, is unique in being compiled on the basis of literary genre. It contains suttas in mixed prose and verse, arranged in eleven chapters by way of subject. The other four books each contain long chapters dealing with the principal doctrines of Early Buddhism. Books II, III, and IV each open with a long chapter devoted to a theme of major importance, respectively, dependent origination (chapter 12: *Nidānasaṃyutta*); the five aggregates (chapter 22: *Khandhasaṃyutta*); and the six internal and external sense bases (chapter 35: *Salāyatanasaṃyutta*). Part V deals with the principal groups of training factors that, in the post-canonical period, come to be called the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiyā dhammā*). These include the Noble Eightfold Path (chapter 45: *Magga-saṃyutta*), the seven factors of enlightenment (chapter 46: *Bojjhaṅga-saṃyutta*), and the four establishments of mindfulness (chapter 47: *Satipaṭṭhānasaṃyutta*). From its contents, we might infer that the Saṃyutta Nikāya was intended to serve the needs of two groups within the monastic order. One consisted of the doctrinal specialists, those monks and nuns who sought to explore the deep implications of the Dhamma and to elucidate them for their companions in the religious life. The other consisted of those devoted to the meditative development of insight.

The Aṅguttara Nikāya is arranged according to a numerical scheme derived from a peculiar feature of the Buddha's pedagogic method. To facilitate easy comprehension and memorization, the Buddha often formulated his discourses by way of numerical sets, a format that helped to ensure that the ideas he conveyed would be easily retained in mind. The Aṅguttara Nikāya assembles these numerical discourses into a single massive work of eleven *nipātas* or chapters, each representing the number of terms upon which the constituent suttas have

been framed. Thus there is the Chapter of the Ones (*ekakanipāta*), the Chapter of the Twos (*dukanipāta*), the Chapter of the Threes (*tikanipāta*), and so forth, up to and ending with the Chapter of the Elevens (*ekādasanipāta*). Since the various groups of path factors have been included in the Saṃyutta, the Aṅguttara can focus on those aspects of the training that have not been incorporated in the repetitive sets. The Aṅguttara includes a notable proportion of suttas addressed to lay followers dealing with the ethical and spiritual concerns of life within the world, including family relationships (husbands and wives, children and parents) and the proper ways to acquire, save, and utilize wealth. Other suttas deal with the practical training of monks. The numerical arrangement of this collection makes it particularly convenient for formal instruction, and thus it could easily be drawn upon by elder monks when teaching their pupils and by preachers when giving sermons to the laity.

Besides the four major Nikāyas, the Pāli Sutta Piṭaka includes a fifth Nikāya, called the Khuddaka Nikāya. This name means the Minor Collection. Perhaps it originally consisted merely of a number of minor works that could not be included in the four major Nikāyas. But as more and more works were composed over the centuries and added to it, its dimensions swelled until it became the most voluminous of the five Nikāyas. At the heart of the Khuddaka, however, is a small constellation of short works composed either entirely in verse (namely, the Dhammapada, the Theragāthā, and the Therīgāthā) or in mixed prose and verse (the Suttanipāta, the Udāna, and the Itivuttaka) whose style and contents suggest that they are of great antiquity. Other texts of the Khuddaka Nikāya—such as the Paṭisambhidāmagga and the two Niddesas—represent the standpoint of the Theravāda school and thus must have been composed during the period of Sectarian Buddhism, when the early schools had taken their separate paths of doctrinal development.

The four Nikāyas of the Pāli Canon have counterparts in the Āgamas of the Chinese Tripiṭaka, though these are from different early schools. Corresponding to each respectively there is a Dirghāgama, probably stemming from the Dharmaguptaka school, originally translated from a Prakrit; a Madhyamāgama and Samyuktāgama, both stemming from the Sarvāstivāda school and translated from Sanskrit; and an Ekottarāgama, corresponding to the Aṅguttara Nikāya, generally thought

to have belonged to a branch of the Mahāsāṅghika school and to have been translated from a dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan or a mixed dialect of Prakrit with Sanskrit elements. The Chinese Tripiṭaka also contains translations of individual sūtras from the four collections, perhaps from still other unidentified schools, and translations of individual books from the Minor Collection, including two translations of a Dhammapada (one said to be very close to the Pāli version) and parts of the Suttanipāta, which, as a unified work, does not exist in Chinese translation.¹⁰

A NOTE ON STYLE

Readers of the Pāli suttas are often annoyed by the repetitiveness of the texts. It is difficult to tell how much of this stems from the Buddha himself, who as an itinerant preacher must have used repetition to reinforce his points, and how much is due to the compilers. It is obvious, however, that a high proportion of the repetitiveness derives from the process of oral transmission.

To avoid excessive repetitiveness in the translation I have had to make ample use of elisions. In this respect I follow the printed editions of the Pāli texts, which are also highly abridged, but a translation intended for a contemporary reader requires still more compression if it is to avoid risking the reader's wrath. On the other hand, I have been keen to see that nothing essential to the original text, including the flavor, has been lost due to the abridgment. The ideals of considerateness to the reader and fidelity to the text sometimes make contrary demands on a translator.

The treatment of repetition patterns in which the same utterance is made regarding a set of items is a perpetual problem in translating Pāli suttas. When translating a sutta about the five aggregates, for example, one is tempted to forgo the enumeration of the individual aggregates and instead turn the sutta into a general statement about the aggregates as a class. To my mind, such an approach risks turning translation into paraphrase and thereby losing too much of the original. My general policy has been to translate the full utterance in relation to the first and last members of the set and merely to enumerate the intermediate members separated by ellipsis points. Thus, in a sutta about the five aggregates, I render the statement in full only for form

and consciousness, and in between have “feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ...,” implying thereby that the full statement likewise applies to them.

This approach has required the frequent use of ellipsis points, a practice that also invites criticism. When faced with repetitive passages in the narrative framework, I have sometimes condensed them rather than use ellipsis points to show where text is being elided. However, with texts of doctrinal exposition I adhere to the practice described in the preceding paragraph. I think the translator has the responsibility, when translating passages of doctrinal significance, to show exactly where text is being elided, and for this ellipsis points remain the best tool at hand.