

The Buddha and Buddhahood

Overview

The focus of this chapter is the enlightened being and teacher now generally known as “the Buddha.” When distinguishing the Buddha of our era from other Buddhas of the past and future he is called **Gotama Buddha**. In exploring the life story and status of Gotama Buddha, we examine the religious and cultural background of early Buddhism and introduce some of the basic teachings and institutions of Theravada Buddhism. We shall examine the various ways in which the Buddha and Buddhahood was regarded and defined in Theravada Buddhism, how this developed, and how it contrasts with understandings of the Buddha in other branches of Buddhism and in the West. The chapter discusses how the Buddha is always seen as beyond human, the product of lifetimes of effort, and one example of those who realize the truth, rather than a unique, one-time occurrence. How his super-human status and character changes is examined in the light of the ways his portrayal accommodates the needs of different genres of canonical text. Such adaptation is also observed diachronically in later **Pali** and vernacular literature: notions of Buddhahood and omniscience developed and were more closely defined over time. Aspects of the biography and of biographical depictions of the Buddha are examined, including how these expand backward in time to include the earlier stages of the career of the Buddha-to-be (*bodhisatta*) in previous lifetimes and under former Buddhas, and extend forward, through his **relics** (*dhātu*) and images to inhabit the lands to which Theravada spread long after the Buddha’s departure from life (his *parinibbāna*).

Master of the Universe

A Buddha is the only type of being to have mastered the universe, the realm of rebirth, and is no longer subject to it. The living world in Buddhism is made up of humans, animals, and a whole host of nonhuman beings. There are multiple **hells** and heavens, a hierarchy of gods including the great, powerful gods of the Indian religious worldview, such as Brahmā, **Sakka** (Śakra/Indra in **Sanskrit**), the dominant gods of the **Vedic** period, and later Viṣṇu (in Sanskrit)

and other gods of the Epic/purānic period. All these living beings, even the gods, are subject to the cycle of death and rebirth, *samsāra*. When the merit acquired by those enjoying divine rebirths runs out, they will die, like other mortals. In the case of cosmologically significant gods, such as the king of the gods, Sakka, another being is reborn into the divine position as soon as it is vacated. Similarly, the demerit generated from the evil committed in former lifetimes by hell-beings will eventually run out, and they will be able to move on from hell. This view that good actions create a store of merit that leads to good experiences and rebirths (as fortunate humans and deities) and that bad actions create a store of demerit that leads to bad experiences and rebirths (as unfortunate humans, animals, and hell-beings) underlies much Buddhist religious behavior, which aims at “making merit,” that is, performing good action. Such meritorious activity is also an important part of the path to becoming a Buddha. Since a Buddha has destroyed the unwholesome (*akusala*) mental states that underlie bad actions, a Buddha’s conduct is inherently good. What is meant by good and bad action is looked at in more detail later and in Chapter 5.

Although in Buddhism, unlike in monotheistic religions, gods cannot offer salvation to humans, they are often portrayed as supportive of the Buddha and as helping to make his teaching, the **Dhamma**, which is salvific, available to others. But it is only a human being who experiences a sufficient balance of freedom and suffering to aspire to leave *samsāra* completely. It is only a Buddha who has found and put an end to this cycle. He (and it is always a he) has attained *Nibbāna* “Enlightenment,” the literal connotations of which are both “bliss” and “extinction.” Other terms for the Buddha’s liberation include *bodhi/sambodhi* “Awakening,” *amata*, the deathless state – immortality in the sense of freedom from death, but not the retention of life – and *sabbaññutā* “Omniscience.” Not only is the Buddha no longer subject to rebirth, he also has extraordinary powers, powers of cognition and of physical ability.

The power of the Buddha’s mastery over *samsāra* can then be drawn on by his followers, not just for spiritual guidance but also for worldly matters. It is possible for other humans to gain individual Enlightenment, and freedom from *samsāra*, but only when a Buddha is accessible to make the Dhamma (teaching) available. This individual Enlightenment is called “arhatship” and an individual so enlightened an “arhat.” There is another type of enlightened being according to Buddhism. The *paccekabuddha* “solitary Buddha,” attains *Nibbāna* but, unlike the Buddha, does not make the Dhamma available for others. (For a discussion of *paccekabuddha* in the **canon**, see Anālayo 2010: 11ff.) The Dhamma, the “truth” or “teaching,” is eternal, in that it expresses “the way things really are.” It takes a Buddha to realize this truth. The further we are from the lifetime of the Buddha the harder it becomes to access the Dhamma, until eventually the world descends into an apocalypse. After this a new world order evolves and a new Buddha can arrive.

Each Buddha’s quest had lasted many hundreds of lifetimes, his success predicted in the presence of previous Buddhas. The Buddha of our era is Siddhattha Gotama, who is described in Buddhist narratives as being born into a royal family in northern India in circa. sixth- to fourth-century BCE. For non-Buddhists, Gotama is spoken of as the “historical” Buddha, that is, founder of the religion that became Buddhism, whereas the preceding Buddhas are regarded as mythological. For Buddhists he is one in a line of Buddhas. Theravada Buddhism dates the death (*parinibbāna*) of Gotama Buddha to 218 years before the consecration of the **Emperor Asoka** of north India. Traditionally the *parinibbāna* has been dated to the year 544/543 BCE and that is the year that the “Buddhist Era” of Theravada dating begins. To convert “Buddhist Era” to Common Era (CE), in the dates of publications, for example, we

subtract 544/543. However, by that calculation the Emperor Asoka lived in the fourth-century BCE. It has been possible to date Asoka quite accurately to the middle of the third-century BCE on the basis of the discovery and deciphering in the early nineteenth century of the inscriptions that he had engraved around his empire. His Rock Edict XIII mentions a list of kings to the northwest of his territory who are known to us from classical history: Antioch, Ptolemy, Antigonus Gonatus, Magas, and Alexander of Epirus (Pinsep in Thomas 1858: 16, Murti and Aiyangar 1951: 39–49). Scholars have therefore adjusted the Theravada chronology to date the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha to the early fifth-century BCE, that is, 478 BCE (e.g., Cunningham 1877: iii–iv) or 487/486 BCE. (Bechert 2004: 82. For a summary of the scholarship, see Hartmann 1991: especially 29–32). Texts belonging to a branch of Buddhism that prevailed in northern India calculate the Buddha's death as taking place far later, 100 years before Asoka. However, recent discoveries of archaeological remains from the mid-sixth-century beneath the **monastery** and the shrine commemorating the Buddha's mother *Māyā* at Lumbinī, identified in an **Asokan inscription** as the place of the Buddha's birth, may confirm the longer chronology (Cunningham 2013).

In the final lifetime of Gotama Buddha, his quest for Enlightenment lasted six years, between the ages of 29 and 35. He had abandoned his life of luxury in response to four famous sights. The four sights were all the more shocking because of the sheltered life of luxury he had lived until that point on account of his father's desire to avoid his exposure to any of the harshness of life lest it inspire him to seek the spiritual life. The first three sights, a sick man, an old man, and a dead man, made Gotama realize the inevitability of suffering, aging, and death for all of us. The fourth sight, a serene mendicant who had "renounced" the world, inspired him to seek a way out of the cycle of rebirth, *samsāra*. These sights and his escape from the palace form the visual narrative of his life in Buddhist art. Such scenes depict the four sites, the harem and his wife **Yasodharā** with their new-born son, Gotama slipping away on his white horse Kanthaka the sound of whose hooves are muffled by the gods, Kanthaka dying from grief on being sent back with the groom, the god Sakka catching in a reliquary the lock of hair that the Buddha-to-be cuts off, and the god Brahmā, associated with **asceticism**, providing the eight "requisites" for a monk, which include the **robes** and bowl (Herbert 1993: 7, 28–31).

In northern India at the time of Gotama Buddha, the dominant (though not universal) presupposition underlying the religions of the period was that all living beings were subject not only to death, but to rebirth and redeath (*samsāra*). In Buddhism, this is encapsulated in the teaching of the three characteristics (*ti-lakkhaṇa*) of all phenomena, not just living beings. The first characteristic is **dukkha**, literally "insecure," often translated as "suffering." The term suffering conveys one sense of the term *dukkha*, but, even though it has become a very widespread translation of this term into English, it is misleading in this context. For the adjective *dukkha* in Buddhism applies as much to pleasant and happy experiences as to negative ones. It also applies to objects (so not only to experiences). All these things, whether pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, are insecure, *dukkha*, in that they cannot last so cannot be relied upon. The second characteristic is that everything is **anicca** "impermanent." Thirdly, everything is characterized by **anattā** "lack of enduring self," or, put conversely, there is nothing that can be identified as an enduring self. This definition of the true character of all phenomena is an explicit rejection of other religious encapsulations of the truth that circulated in India at that time, including the notion of a pure, blissful, enduring and unchanging self. For Buddhism any aspect of humanity or human experience identified as a self can be shown on closer analysis either to be subject to change or to be a projection of an imagined entity onto what is in

fact a separate function. In Buddhism, an inert “self” or “soul” is irrelevant, since there is no way of experiencing or engaging with it and it has no function.

The soteriologies – doctrines relating to the path to salvation – that developed around the time of early Buddhism struggled with the fundamental question of what binds us to *samsāra* (the round of rebirth) and how to escape it. One path open to those seeking the answers to these questions was to become a “renouncer,” one of the wandering religious seekers who had left their home and possessions behind in the quest for spiritual truth. Gotama Buddha took this path, and so Buddhism is sometimes referred to as a “renouncer” tradition. Gotama tried out and excelled in the available teachings and practices of different renouncer traditions available in north India at the time, from **meditation** to various kinds of asceticism (the practice of austerities, such as extreme fasting – a practice reflected in skeletal depictions of the Buddha). Dissatisfied with their effect and realizing their limitations, Gotama gave up the extreme fasting he had been practicing and accepted food from the laywoman Sujātā, a favored scene in Buddhist depictions of his life (Herbert 1993: 35). Gotama then entered a state of meditation, which led to him achieving Awakening, *Bodhi/Sambodhi*, or Enlightenment, *Nibbāna*. This scene is one of the most common depictions in art and sculpture: in its simplest form the Buddha touches one hand to the ground to call the earth to witness his Enlightenment (Griswold 1957: 23, 31–41, Herbert 1993: 37). In more elaborate depictions, the earth goddess is shown ringing out her long hair beneath the Buddha, while Māra, the god who represents the temptations of *samsāra*, and his armies crowd the scene (Herbert 1993: 38–39). To some extent, the representation of the Buddha has become more standardized in Theravada as it has become more narrowly defined as an aspect of national identity, and we shall explore some of that process of defining the Buddha in the rest of the chapter. Yet it can be seen as an ongoing process in relation to Burmese depictions, for example. Charlotte Galloway observes that the diversity of Burmese Buddhism’s past and its present has been whittled down in its art. Twelfth-century Burmese art depicting the life of the Buddha was not confined to the Theravada sources we have identified here, and the rich and ongoing presence of *nat* (Burmese gods) and animist beliefs of Burmese Buddhism has only been excluded from the reform categories of Buddhism in the modern period. She writes, “[Since] Burmese Buddhism has consolidated as a Theravada tradition, (and) the iconography has become standardized and far less variable. To the casual viewer, the apparent sterility of later images, primarily in the earth-touching *mudrā* [hand gesture] and devoid of any subtleties of design, is misleading in the extreme” (Galloway 2002: 52).

In the earliest corpus of Theravada sacred literature, the **Pali Canon**, there are three *sutta* (teaching) texts in the **Sutta Piṭaka**, the second division of the canon, which give an account of Gotama’s Enlightenment. These are the *Bhayabherava Sutta*, “The teaching, Fear and Terror,” the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, “The teaching, the Noble Search,” and the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, “The teaching, the Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma” (also called “The First Sermon”). There is also an account of his Enlightenment in the *Mahāvagga* of the **Vinaya Piṭaka**, the first division of the canon which explains the rules for monks and **nuns** (Anderson 1999: 56). The accounts of the Buddha’s Enlightenment in these texts vary. In the *Bhayabherava Sutta*, the Buddha describes how he entered and progressed through the different meditative states called *jhāna* (see Chapter 6). In the first, desire and negative states of mind disappear and the meditator experiences joy and happiness, while at the same time engaging in reasoning and deliberation. In the second, the distraction of reasoning and deliberation disappear and he achieves concentration and one-pointedness of mind. In the third, joy disappears, and in the fourth, the meditator no longer experiences happiness, but the purity of equanimity and

mindfulness. These first four *jhāna* are called the *jhāna* of form and are equated with parallel cosmological realms (see Chapter 6). The next four *jhāna* are called the formless *jhāna*, again equated with parallel cosmological realms. The formless *jhāna* are the spheres of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of nothingness, and of neither perception nor nonperception. After these, Gotama then experiences the state of the cessation of perception and sensation. Returning from these states the Buddha then progresses through the form *jhāna* again and at the fourth attains Enlightenment. In the first watch of the night, while in the fourth *jhāna*, he directs his memory to his previous births, this being the first of the three knowledges he attains through his Enlightenment. In the second watch, he understands the coming into being and passing away of all beings, the second knowledge. In the third and final watch of the night, he realizes the four noble truths (see later text) and attains the destruction of the *kammic* “influxes,” *āsava*, that keep one in *saṃsāra* (Anderson 1999: 58). The other accounts of the Buddha’s Enlightenment differ in detail. In the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the Buddha relates how the Buddha left his previous teachers after achieving high levels of meditative experience, but which did not lead to an end of *saṃsāra*. He then sat down in a wood. Continuing his quest for “*nibbāna* ‘where there is no birth’, ‘where this is no old age’, ‘where there is no illness’, ‘where there is no death’, ‘where there is no grief’ and ‘where there is no stain’ . . . the Buddha attained *nibbāna* and proclaimed: ‘Knowledge and vision arose in me: release is unshakable for me, this is the last birth, there is no more becoming’” (Anderson 1999: 60).

The four noble truths are taught in more detail in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. The first truth is the “truth of suffering or pain” (or “insecurity,” as I proposed earlier): “Birth is pain; old age is pain; illness is pain; death is pain; sorrow and grief; physical and mental suffering; and disturbance are pain. Association with things not liked is pain; separation from desired things is pain; not getting what one wants is pain; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are pain” (Anderson 1999: 65). The second truth, “the truth of arising,” identifies craving for desire, existence, and the fading away of existing as the cause of pain and rebirth. The third truth, “the truth of cessation,” identifies that by letting go of craving, pain may end. The fourth truth, “the truth of the path,” names the “eightfold path” that must be followed in order to end pain. The eight components of the path are “right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration” (see Chapter 5). It has been suggested that these four truths are in the form of a medical formula that first describes the symptoms (suffering or pain, *dukkha*), then diagnoses the cause, then gives a prognosis of the possibility for recovery, and finally prescribes the treatment that will lead to that recovery (Gombrich 1988: 59). Carol Anderson points out that this analysis, which was introduced into Western scholarship in the late 1880s, became popular in spite of the lack of evidence for the Buddha drawing on a medical model (Anderson 1999: 189). The four truths have also often been treated as being the core teaching of Buddhism or as encompassing all the teachings. In her study of the variety of uses within the Theravada textual tradition, Anderson concludes that their simplification and popularity in Western writings is part of the colonial project of gaining control over Buddhism (Anderson 1999: 197). This way of reducing Buddhist teachings to a simple, single rationalized account has parallels in the ways in which the life of the Buddha was variously reinterpreted in earlier Western literature from a solar god, on the one hand, to a normal human being shorn of his supernatural or superhuman attributes, on the other hand.

In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* account, the universe is shaken by the event of the Buddha’s Enlightenment and then by the Buddha teaching the four truths to his five former companions (Anderson 1999: 2). According to the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, on realizing what he

had achieved, the Buddha initially felt disinclined to teach, lest the profundity of his realization was too difficult for others to grasp. He was persuaded to teach by three things: the god Brahmā appeared to persuade him that unless he made the effort to teach the world would be lost; the Buddha realized that the world contains people at different stages of spiritual maturation, likening this to a lotus pond in which different colored lotuses are at different stages of emerging from the mud, with some full blown above the surface; he remembered five former companions who had striven with him until they abandoned him for giving up his asceticism and who were now at a receptive stage of spiritual development (Anderson 1999: 60–62). He responded to these prompts because a Buddha is characterized by infinite wisdom *and* compassion. So Gotama returned in search of his former companions at the deer park in the town known as Sarnath in north India, where he taught the first sermon. These five men became his first disciples: while he taught two of them, the other three took turns to go and beg for alms food. The term for monk in Buddhism derives from this activity: *bhikkhu*, “monk” (Pali; *bhikṣu* Sanskrit), literally means “a man who desires a share/begs.” The female equivalent for *bhikkhu* is *bhikkhunī*. The first monk to join the Buddha’s monastic community, **Sangha**, is the first of these five companions, Aññāta Kondañña. The Sangha was later augmented by the nuns, the first of whom was Gotama’s aunt and foster-mother **Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī** (see Chapter 9).

A function of the narratives about the Buddha’s lifetime prior to his Enlightenment is “to establish that the *bodhisatta* chooses renunciation from a position of power more broadly. He is the best at everything to which he turns his hand. He could have [achieved] the highest goals a man in *samsāra* can wish for: a kingdom, wealth, wives, sons. Nothing that a man should achieve is left unachieved. He does not leave out of failure, but in order to choose a higher state of power. ... [He] practiced the greatest extremes of asceticism and experienced the highest meditative states that other teachers had achieved, but he found them wanting. He had to seek his unique path, the only one that truly bestowed freedom from death” (Crosby 2012: 94).

During his journey in search of the five former companions, the Buddha had come across two merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, to whom he gave four hair “relics” (*dhātu*) or physical reminders (*cetiya*). These, though, were not the first relics or reminders of the Buddha. Those were the topknot of hair he had cut off when he renounced to signify leaving behind the life of a householder which was taken by Sakka, king of the gods (Jayawickrama 1990: 86–97), and the golden bowl from which he had eaten the meal given by Sujātā, which found its way, through a whirlpool in the river, to the underworld of the *nāgas* (Jayawickrama 1990: 93), a class of semi-divine beings in the form of king cobras, who can take on the guise of human form and, like gods, became incorporated into Buddhist cosmology as protectors of the Buddha and his teachings. The hair relics given to Tapussa and Bhallika are particularly important for Theravada: the merchants took them to Burma and enshrined them in what was to become the Shwedagon pagoda, one of the two most important religious sites in Burma (Strong 2004: 76–80). This story is recorded in the fifteenth-century Kalyani inscriptions of King Dhammaceti now housed in a separate shrine at the Shwedagon, while the story of the two merchants is the subject of carvings on the eastern stairwell of the **pagoda** (Moore 1999: 142). The other bodily relics of the Buddha are from his funerary remains.

The narratives that the Theravada tradition has transmitted about the Buddha develop these themes: his extraordinary realization, his cognitive and physical powers; his compassion and his ability to read the needs and spiritual capacity of others; his connections with the sacred geography not just of north India but also of the regions in which Theravada flourished (Sri Lanka and

mainland Southeast Asia) in part mediated through his relics; his position in relation to the rest of the universe that is still subject to *samsāra*, including the supporting cast of a rich pantheon of gods; his place in a lineage of those not subject to *samsāra*, namely, the previous Buddhas and the future Buddha Metteyya who will come when Gotama's own teaching has disappeared. Finally, Theravada accounts for its own position in relation to the Buddha, identifying itself as the tradition that has continuously preserved the teaching, Dhamma, and the monastic discipline, *vinaya*, that began in the deer park where he met with his former companions and began to teach them. It regards its male monastic (Sangha) lineage as unbroken since Aññāta Kondañña.

The Buddha's departure from this life, his *parinibbāna*, which results from him choosing to give up his lifespan, is described in a canonical text called the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya sutta* 16). In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha names the Dhamma and *vinaya* as his successors to teach the community rather than naming any individual. He confirms the truth of impermanence – that even a Buddha's lifetime, though extendable, must end – yet in the same text also gives instruction on how to treat his physical remains, including the relics that remain from his cremation and the benefits of worshipping them. This leads to an interesting dichotomy in the tradition between his absence and ongoing presence, a subject of much debate in scholarship, which we shall explore in Chapter 2. We therefore have three kinds of legacy from the Buddha: Dhamma, the teachings; *vinaya* and the Sangha, that is, the monastic code along with those whose lives are governed by it; and physical reminders (*cetiya*) or remains of him (*dhātu*). These together form the three “refuges” of Buddhism: the Buddha (represented in living practice by his *dhātu* and other physical reminders of him), Dhamma, and Sangha. Each ritual occasion, each text in the Theravada tradition begins with a statement of homage to the Buddha, from a simple *namo buddhāya* to elaborate hymns of praise, often directed toward one of the Buddha images ubiquitous in Theravada societies, followed by the taking, three times, of the “three refuges”: *buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, “I take refuge in the Buddha,” *dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, “I take refuge in the Dhamma,” and *sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, “I take refuge in the Sangha.”

The Changing Character of the Buddha

While in each text the Buddha comes across as an individual with a specific character, his character varies in the different genres of literature that reflect these three legacies – the Buddha *dhātu*, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

The earliest sacred canon of literature for Theravada is the collection of works preserved in the Pali language, known as the Pali Canon or *tipiṭaka* (see Chapter 3). In the texts of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the first of the three main divisions of the Pali Canon, Gotama Buddha is the great authority to whom the mistakes of individual monks are reported, leading him to set up rules. There are no rival authorities to consider – the Buddha's word is law (Huxley 1996: 142–144). While the *Vinaya* may have developed over centuries, and there are significant variations between the different *vinayas*, each rule and variation on it is attributed to him. His word is absolute. His concern in establishing the rules relates to two main issues: whether or not the behavior in question is conducive to spiritual development and whether or not it enhances the reputation of the Sangha in relation to the broader community that supports it and from which members are recruited into it.

A body of commentaries on the *Vinaya Piṭaka* had developed by the fifth-century CE and continued to be written throughout Theravada history. The commentaries tackle what could

have been meant by different, potentially conflicting statements, showing an awareness of a chronological development within the Buddha's lifetime. One well-known development is the distinction that developed between the initial ordination procedure, the Buddha's personal invitation to come and follow him, and the more formalized ordination ritual. A division into two kinds of ordination also developed during the compilation of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. What was initially regarded as a single process of "going forth (from household life)," *pabbajjā*, and "approaching (a teacher)," *upasampadā*, became staged according to the fifth-century **commentary**, with the result that the *pabbajjā* now referred to the first "lower ordination," that could be undertaken by children as well as adults, and the *upasampadā* referred to the "higher ordination" taken only by men and women over the age of 20 (Crosby 2000: 464). Only after the latter ordination are monks and nuns subject to all the rules contained in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. All these changes are attributed to the Buddha.

When statements of the Buddha's are too concise to avoid future ambiguity, the commentaries extrapolate the meaning, but still with close reference to other statements by the Buddha in the *Vinaya*. The Buddha's position as the ultimate authority on *vinaya* matters is emphasized in the commentaries and throughout the periodic reforms seen within the Theravada tradition. For example, the *Samantapāsādikā*, the fifth-century commentary attributed to Buddhaghosa, rejected the wording for ordination rituals that had developed since the closing of the canon, insisting that only rituals performed using the words prescribed by the Buddha in the canon were valid (Crosby 2000). This then sets a precedent for later reforms, which have been an ongoing feature of Theravada history (see Chapters 3, 8, and 12). An entire monastic lineage could be destroyed if their rivals could demonstrate that they were not practicing *vinaya* according to the word of the Buddha, even though in the normal course of events *vinaya* is always adapted to the circumstances. Only the more serious rules are usually regarded as crucial, although great emphasis is also placed on rules and expectations of decorum, which might be regarded as minor and are slightly different in different cultural contexts, even in different Theravada societies.

The *Sutta Piṭaka*, the second section of the Pali Canon, records the teachings of the Buddha mainly as sermons in response to specific occasions. The sermons are set in a narrative framework noting the place where, and occasion on which, the Buddha taught them, and to whom. In these *Sutta Piṭaka* texts, unlike in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, his authority is often not assumed but established during the course of each text. He is persuasive, winning over those not necessarily convinced, ousting in competitions of wit, wisdom, or the performing of miracles, any rival teachers or worldviews. His compassion is expressed through his anticipation of the needs and potential of those he encounters, by identifying their psychological dispositions and by establishing the values (rather than the rules) by which monks and nuns should live for the ongoing spiritual well-being and health of the Sangha.

In later parts of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, as we shall see later, the Buddha moves from being an individual and authority for the teachings conveyed in each text to being the representative of a type, one in a line of Buddhas, the extraordinary manifestation of aeons' of determined effort, full of conviction regarding his future destiny. While the existence of former and future Buddhas is mentioned elsewhere in the canon, for example, in earlier *Sutta Piṭaka* texts such as in the "lion's roar of Sāriputta" cited later, details about them are rare (Collins 2010: 109). It is the later *Sutta Piṭaka* texts, such as the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, that offer details of a line of specific Buddhas with specific careers, families, and followers. These later texts are confident statements about the position of Buddhism and the Buddha. They exemplify the workings of *kamma* over time, offer teachings about meritorious action and the rewards available in future lifetimes, including the possibility of being reborn as members of a future

Buddha's family and retinue. The narratives and life summaries contained in these later texts communicate the extraordinary nature of the historical Buddha, and set the context for the aspiration to realize one's own full potential in the presence of the future Buddha Metteyya if one fails to do so under Buddha Gotama's teaching. This aspiration would come to dominate later Theravada expressions of spirituality, when *arhatship*, personal Enlightenment, had come to be considered rare, if not impossible.

One of these later *Sutta Piṭaka* texts, the *Jātaka* collection (see Chapter 4), contains the stories of the lifetimes of the Buddha-to-be (*bodhisatta*), understood by later tradition in terms of him fulfilling the ten perfections of Buddhahood. In the *Jātaka*, the Buddha's character is to some extent inconsistent, perhaps indicating the strain to accommodate stories that circulated in other milieux into the monastic corpus. In some stories, the *bodhisatta* is the ideal renouncer, in some he performs great acts of generosity or forbearance, so fulfills the "perfections." In other stories, he is heroic, but he may even be identified as the villain of the story or as a completely insignificant character merely observing the events of the narrative.

Like the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, the third collection of the canon, also contains expositions of the Dhamma, the doctrinal teaching. But, for the most part, it is not in the same narrative or poetic format. It does not employ the Buddha as the framing narrative. However, with its emphasis on the details of causality and the path to Buddhahood, unsurprisingly we find the very nature of the Buddha analyzed in the *Abhidhamma* (see Chapter 7). Indeed, the *Abhidhamma* culminates in its final book, the *Paṭṭhāna* (*Conditional Relations*), with an attempt to encapsulate the Buddha's understanding of causality. Moreover, important defining features of the Buddha in Theravada in contrast to in other forms of Buddhism are found in the *Kathāvatthu* (*Points of Controversy*), the fifth book of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. The aim of the *Kathāvatthu* is to refute heretical views, including views held by other Buddhist groups, that had developed by the time it was composed, 218 years after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, in the middle of the third-century BCE. One of the "heresies" refuted is that there might be more than one Buddha at a time (Shwe Zan Aung and Davids 1915: 354–355). Those who composed the doctrinal treatises and commentaries within Theravada consistently rejected the presence in the world of more than one Buddha at any time. To suggest otherwise is, for them, to suggest that Gotama Buddha is somehow an inadequate Buddha. The term *Mahayana*, literally "great way/vehicle" is a term that refers to a number of branches of Buddhism that identified themselves as such in relation to their acceptance of certain doctrinal positions and new texts that began to develop around the first-century BCE to first-century CE (Skilton 1994: 93). The forms of Buddhism now found in the Himalayas, Central and East Asia, though containing many variant forms of Buddhism, all identify themselves as Mahayana. In some forms of Mahayana, we also see the idea that certain Buddha realms are better than others. The Theravada understanding that all Buddhas were equal already appears in earlier sections in the Pali Canon. In a number of texts of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, including the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, we find the "Lion's roar of Sāriputta," in which the Buddha asks Sāriputta, one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha, to account for his assumption that there is no one greater than him (the Buddha):

Sāriputta, you in fact have no direct experience in this matter regarding the enlightened fully Awakened Ones of the past, future, or present. So how can you feel such certainty that you roar the roar of a lion, saying, "Lord, I have this conviction regarding you, the Lord Buddha: that there has never been another wandering holy man or priest with greater supramundane wisdom than you, Lord, in respect of perfect Awakening; nor will there ever be, nor is another such currently found"?

It is true, Lord, that I have no such direct experience, but I have witnessed the logical consequences of the Dhamma. Suppose, Lord, a king has a fortified city at the frontier, with solid foundations, solid walls and portal, and only a single gate. Suppose there was a clever gatekeeper, experienced and astute, stopping all strangers, and allowing those familiar to enter. On following the path all the way around that city he would not find a single break in the wall, nor a single hole, even big enough for a cat to slip through. He would be conscious of the fact that, whatever living beings that are visible to the naked eye enter or leave this city, they must all enter or leave by this very gate alone. This, Lord, is how I have witnessed the logical consequence of the Dhamma. Lord, all the Lord Buddhas in the past, have awakened to the highest full and perfect Awakening. Similarly, Lord, all the Lord Buddhas will awaken to the highest full and perfect Awakening. Similarly, Lord, the Lord Buddha who has become the enlightened fully and perfectly Awakened One now has awakened to the highest full and perfect Awakening. (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, abridged, translation Crosby)

In this passage, while the sameness of the attainment of Buddhahood is confirmed, it is not clear if this is a direct response to the question of whether there can be different levels of Buddhahood. However, the *Jātakanidāna*, a commentarial text that we shall examine in more detail later, does address this issue. Based on the late *Sutta Piṭaka* text, the *Buddhavaṃsa*, it gives an account of the 28 Buddhas culminating in Gotama Buddha. Each has a specific lifespan, physical body, named parents, wife, children, disciples, and a specific number of followers. Of the Buddha Maṅgala, the *Jātakanidāna* text states,

Whereas with other Buddhas their bodily radiance spreads to the distance of eighty cubits, it was not so with him, for the radiance of that Blessed One remained all the time suffusing the ten thousand world-systems. Trees, the earth, mountains, oceans, not excepting cooking pots and so forth, appeared as though covered with a film of gold. And his life-span was ninety thousand years. ... Beings went about their business at all times in the light of the Buddha as they do by day in the light of the sun. (Jayawickrama 1990: 39)

This passage suggests that Maṅgala Buddha is better than the other Buddhas, and the following passage of the text seeks to correct this impression:

Do not the other Buddhas also possess this power? It is not that they do not: if they so wish they could fill with their radiance the ten thousand world-systems or more. But on the other hand, as a result of a former resolution of the Blessed One Maṅgala, his bodily radiance remained permanently filling the ten thousand world-systems even as that of other Buddhas was confined to the depth of a fathom. (Jayawickrama 1990: 39)

In fact, the discussion about whether Buddhas differ continues in Theravada from the commentarial period to the modern day. The commentary on the *Khaggavisāṇa Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta* discusses whether a future Buddha is strong in wisdom, faith, or energy. Among the many vernacular biographies of the Buddha is one in Burmese called the *Maha-bokda-win* (*The Great Chronicle of the Buddha*). It is by the first “Tipiṭaka” monk of modern Burma, Ven. Vicittasārābhivāṃsa Tipiṭaka **Sayadaw** (1911–1993) (see Chapter 3). In it, he explains that Gotama Buddha needed a relatively short timeframe overall, between the moment of his prediction as Sumedha (see later text) to his Enlightenment, to perfect his perfections compared with other Buddhas, because he began stronger in wisdom (Vicittasārābhivāṃsa, 1960–1972, “Chapter VII on Miscellany” English translation U. Ko Lay and U. Tin Lwin, Section 14.1).

There is a genre of postcanonical texts that might be said to represent most the ongoing presence of the Buddha. These are the various types of **chronicles**: the Pali chronicles (*vaṃsa*) and the vernacular chronicles. Theravada chronicle literature tends to make a connection between the Buddha, across time and space, to the place or institution and in particular to the relics (*dhātu*) that are the focus of the *vaṃsa*. The Sri Lankan *vaṃsa*, for example, describe the Buddha visiting the island on three occasions, on one of the visits leaving behind the footprint at Siripāda that remains one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka to this day. The *Tamnan* vernacular chronicles of the Lanna region of northern Thailand record the history of individual relics and images. Angela Chiu explains, “there is an integral relation between place and Buddha agency; it is through place that Buddha agency is activated and expressed. The location of a relic is essential to its role in expressing Buddha agency” (Chiu 2012: 121). The arrival of the Buddha, his relics, or his image in a particular place is a sign of the merit of that place (Chiu 2012: 144). We shall see that this applies both to relics and images, especially images of historical, cultural, or political significance.

In the chronicles, the Buddha foresees the future greatness of a place, its importance to the future history of his teaching, so he visits and bestows a relic or allows his likeness to be sculpted as an image. Alternatively, his relics and images themselves express agency in choosing their location. Sometimes they remain invisible until a ruler worthy to be their custodian comes to the throne. Sometimes they decline to be enshrined in places they deem inappropriate and even change location with shifts in what we might term secular power. In the Chronicle of the Great Relic of Haripuñjaya (modern Lamphun in northern Thailand), the circa twelfth-century King Āditta discovers the relic when he tries to relieve himself in the outhouse at his new palace. He is thwarted in the execution of this objective by a crow attacking him. The crow reveals the reason:

Phraya White Crow, my grandfather, said that the Lord Buddha, when he was still alive, one day came to sit here and eat myrobalan [a kind of plum] and predicted that when the Tathāgata had gone to *nibbāna*, this place will be a great city called *mueang* Haripuñjayapuri, indeed. The place where the Tathāgata was sitting will be the dwelling place of the Suvannacetiya [golden relic chamber] of the Tathāgata’s relic of the chestbone, the relic of the fingerbone and granular relics of the Tathāgata filling one bowl which will be established here through Phraya Āditta. My grandfather then had me come here to guard and not let animals and people harm this dwelling place. (translation Chiu 2012: 129)

Even after the King has the palace moved, and digs down to retrieve the relics they retreat deeper into the ground, until he performs appropriate worship and invites the relics to emerge (Chiu 2012: 128–129). When the Arakanese Mahāmuni images allowed themselves to be moved in the eighteenth century, it marked a shift of power, the rise of Burmese over Arakanese supremacy, and the stories about the fate of these images continue to be contested (see Chapter 2).

These texts associate the Buddha’s visits, relics, and images with centers of power, that is, with a particular king, place, or region. Here the character of the Buddha reflects his physical and territorial authority. Three key Pali chronicles record the first of the Buddha’s three visits to the island of Laṅkā (modern Sri Lanka): the fourth-century *Dīpavaṃsa*, “Chronicle of the Island,” the fifth-century *Mahāvaṃsa*, “Great Chronicle,” and the *Vamsatthapakāsinī*, “Illumination of the Meaning of the Chronicle,” the commentary on the *Mahāvaṃsa* of uncertain date, judged to be either ninth- or eleventh- to thirteenth century (von Hinüber 1996: 92). It is in these texts that we see the most striking alteration

in the character of the Buddha. When the Buddha arrives on the island of Laṅkā, he encounters *yakkha*, the native inhabitants of the island. *Yakkha* are a kind of nature spirit, some benign and connected with fertility and wealth, others threatening and demon-like. Mostly, in Buddhist texts, the *yakkha* are converted to support the Buddha and his teaching. In the Pali Canon, when the Buddha tames nonhuman beings such as *yakkha*, he does so through kindness, as he does humans. In striking contrast to this, in these Sri Lankan chronicles he subjects and then exiles the *yakkha* using trickery and aggression. He uses his supernatural powers to conjure up torrential rains, hurricanes, stones, weapons, embers, ashes, mud, winds, storms, and darkness. He agrees to relieve the *yakkha* from this onslaught in return for space, but continues to afflict them with cold. When they request an end to this, the rug on which he is seated emits such heat that the *yakkhas* are driven to the coast while the Buddha and his rug expand to fill the entire island. Only then, when the *yakkhas* are terrified and vanquished, does he show any compassion. He brings the neighboring island Giridīpa “Craggy Island” close to them, allowing them to settle there, then moves it away from Laṅkā again (Gunawardana 1978: 97–98).

Gunawardana suggests that the *vaṃsa* account of the Buddha in this context is a political charter authorizing the later use of violence by Sri Lankan rulers in the name of the Buddhist religion (*sāsana*). The story reconciles the teaching of nonviolence in the Canon and the disdain for kingship represented in *jātakas*, because of the violence it entails, with the justification of extreme violence in the hands of the political powers that patronize Buddhism recorded in the later stages of the chronicle. Here the character and actions of the Buddha serve to teach that “violence is not invariably associated with evil, and that a distinction has to be drawn between violence committed in the interest of the *sāsana* and that motivated by greed” (Gunawardana 1978: 99–100).

The relics and images in Pali and vernacular chronicles represent the ongoing presence of the power of the Buddha, but may also have lives and adventures of their own. They extend the biography of the absent Buddha to new places and times. “They help legitimate empires here on earth and they further spread the dharma to places that the living Buddha never visited” (Strong 2004: 7). Chronicle literature tends to commence with a brief biography of the Buddha that then, through the Buddha’s visits, predictions, and authorization of relics and images of the narrative’s present, catapult us forward into the locality and time of the *vaṃsa*’s composition.

Finally, another important genre of Theravada literature in both Pali and vernacular languages is praise and devotional literature. In these texts, the most salient aspect of the Buddha’s character is his power, power derived from his status as one who has mastered *saṃsāra* (the round of rebirth). Such texts are used to harness that power, for *puñña* (literally “merit”), for protection, for personal assistance, or to install the powers of a Buddha into a Buddha image (see Chapter 2).

In their simplest form texts offering praise of the Buddha, *Buddhavandanā*, simply list the qualities of the Buddha. The most famous of these is the “Mirror of the Dharma” or “*itipiso*,” which lists nine qualities of the Buddha and was taught by the Buddha to his attendant the monk Ānanda in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*: “Thus indeed is that Lord Buddha, enlightened, fully and perfectly awakened, endowed with wisdom and conduct, a Sugata, knower of the world, the unsurpassed trainer of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, the Awakened, the Lord Buddha” (Endo 1997/2002: 167. See also Chapter IV on the individual components of this list.) These qualities of the Buddha, followed by parallel statements on the qualities of the Dhamma and Sangha, have become a standard component of Theravada litany.

Biographies of the Buddha

While a full biography of the Buddha as such is not found in the canon, episodes from his life are described in several *suttas*, as well as the introductory section of the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the division of the Canon that deals with monastic rules. As observed earlier, certain later canonical texts such as the *Jātaka*, *Buddhavaṃsa*, and *Cariyāpitaka* add a cosmic, multilife framework for the events in his present life. They explain his attainment of Enlightenment, his mastery over *samsāra* (the round of rebirth), as the culmination of many lifetimes of conscious effort. This effort began as a vow taken many lifetimes earlier to become a Buddha to save other beings from *samsāra*. To do this, the Buddha-to-be declined the opportunity to gain his personal Enlightenment, *arhatship*, under a previous Buddha. These texts also authorize his achievement through predictions of this future greatness in the mouths of 24 out of 27 previous Buddhas.

The earliest single, continuous biography found in the Theravada tradition, the *Jātakanidāna*, draws on the fragmentary information found across all these canonical works. The *Jātakanidāna* is the introduction to the commentary on the *Jātaka* book of the canon. The *Jātakanidāna* is mainly a prose text with quotations of verses that recount the same narrative more succinctly with the addition of a certain amount of commentary. As a biography, the *Jātakanidāna* is incomplete in that it does not extend up to the end of the final lifetime of the Buddha. It ends with the donation of a park to the Buddha by the lay devotee Anāthapiṇḍika. The end of the Buddha's lifetime is found in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* in the *Dīghanikāya*, the first section of the *Sutta Piṭaka* division of the Pali Canon (see Chapter 3). It provides a continuous account of the Buddha's final three months. However, the *Jātakanidāna* is complete at the other end of the Buddha's career, the start. It tells the story of his lifetimes from "Four *asaṅkheyyas* (periods beyond all reckoning) and a hundred and thousand aeons ago" (Jayawickrama 1990: 3) when he was born as the **brahmin** Sumedha, first took the vow to achieve Buddhahood and was predicted as destined to Buddhahood by the Buddha of the time, Buddha Dīpaṅkara.

The story of Sumedha forms the opening episode of *The Distant Epoch*, the first of the three sections of the *Jātakanidāna*. It is one of the most popular scenes depicted in Buddhist art. The *bodhisatta*, born into a wealthy brahmin family, realizes that the only way to take wealth with him to the next life is by giving it away in this. He does so, then lives as an ascetic. One day he comes across people repairing holes in a road in preparation for the Buddha Dīpaṅkara's visit. Rather than use his magical powers to join in the repairs, he fills the potholes by prostrating his body, asking the Buddha Dīpaṅkara and the 400,000 monks accompanying the Buddha to walk across him so that he may sacrifice his life to them. While lying there he makes the decision not to become a monk and gain arhatship under Dīpaṅkara's guidance, but to become a Buddha himself. The Buddha Dīpaṅkara recognizes that Sumedha is making the resolution to become a Buddha, and predicts his future success as the Buddha Gotama. Dīpaṅkara witnesses that the whole universe confirms the future success of his vow:

The omens that were seen when Bodhisattas of yore seated themselves cross-legged, they are seen to-day.

Cold is dispelled, heat is allayed. ... The ten thousand world-systems are silent and motionless; High winds do not blow, streams do not flow. ... Forthwith bloom flowers sprung on land and in water; today all of them have bloomed; All creepers and trees are at the same

time laden with fruit. ... Jewels sparkle. ... Simultaneously are heard strains of earthly and heavenly music ... the mighty ocean bends low. ... Ten thousand fires in hell are extinguished instantaneously. ... The sun shines bright and all stars are visible ... you certainly will become a Buddha. (Jayawickrama 1990: 22–23)

This event then is the beginning of Gotama's path to Buddhahood. For, encouraged by this, he ponders on the factors that lead to Buddhahood and realizes that he must fulfill each of the ten perfections, beginning with *dāna*, generosity:

Just as an overturned water-pot discharges its water holding back nothing ... so by giving everything in charity to supplicants that come to you ... without regard to wealth or fame or wife or child or one limb or the other of the body, you will become a Buddha, seated at the foot of the Bodhi tree. (Jayawickrama 1990: 25)

The examples of generosity presage future *jātaka* stories, including his final lifetime before the Enlightenment, the famous *Vessantara Jātaka* (see Chapter 4), in which the *bodhisatta* gives away his wife and two children as the ultimate display of generosity. Each Buddha in turn must prove his ability to make this sacrifice. A variation of this story, shocking from the perspective of the rights of wives and children, is repeated in the *Jātakanidāna*, for the Buddha Maṅgala. Buddha Maṅgala is the third of the list of 24 Buddhas, who each achieved Enlightenment in turn during the career of Buddha Gotama from the lifetime in which he vows to become a Buddha, and who each predict Gotama's future Buddhahood. There is a longer list of 27 previous Buddhas, which includes 3 who precede Gotama's "career."

Thereupon a yakkha by the name of Rough Fangs hearing of the Great Being's inclination towards charity went to him in the guise of a brahmin and asked him for his two children. The Great Being, who was overjoyed with the thought of giving his children to the brahmin, gave both his children away. ... The yakkha ... devoured the two children like a bundle of lotus roots while the Great Being looked on. No grief, not even to the extent of a hair's tip arose in the great Being as he looked at the yakkha and saw his mouth when he opened it disgorging a stream of blood like flame. But great joy and satisfaction rose from within his body as he reflected on the well-conferred gift. (Jayawickrama 1990: 40)

Such stories convey the Buddha-to-be's extreme capacity for generosity in comparison to the – by these standards – ordinary *dāna* of more ordinary mortals. They also convey the extent to which children and wives are seen as instruments in the religious career of their fathers or husbands, rather than as agents in their own right. This picture, however, is turned on its head at the culmination of the Buddha's career. After Buddha Gotama's own Enlightenment, he returns to his family home and, in appreciation of the crucial sacrifice his former wife had repeatedly made on his behalf, by enabling him to repeatedly abandon her, he helps her become a nun and achieve arhatship herself. He does the same for other members of his family, including his son Rāhula, who sets the model for childhood ordination (see Chapter 8). Whereas some northern Buddhist texts explain the suffering of the Buddha's wife and son as resulting from bad deeds in previous lifetimes, Theravada narrative, while still emphasizing the pathos of their plight, a pathos that sustains the popularity of these stories today, attributes their experience to lifetimes of good deeds. Just as a *bodhisatta* undergoes hundreds of lifetimes pursuing the perfections, so his wife and child/children accompany him on that journey, rehearsing time and again their role in relation to

him. They make their own vows and receive their own confirmations that they will be reborn in the family of the future Buddha Gotama (Crosby 2012: 84–88).

In another story about the Buddha Maṅgala as a *bodhisatta*, he sees a Buddha shrine and decides to turn himself into a human candle and sacrifice himself as a light offering to it. This theme is more familiar from Mahayana texts, especially the story of Bhaiṣajyagururāja in the *Lotus Sūtra*. They inspired the famous self-immolations of the 1960s protesting against the treatment of Buddhists by the Catholic Diem regime in Vietnam and then against the American/Vietnamese War and those in contemporary Tibet (see Benn 2007).

The account of Sumedha's vow in the *Jātakanidāna* and the predictions of his future Buddhahood by the 24 previous Buddhas is followed by brief allusions to key *Jātakas* (stories about the Buddha's former lifetimes) in which he fulfilled each of the ten perfections, based on the reorganization of select *Jātakas* in another late canonical text, the *Cariyāpiṭaka*. The culmination of his *bodhisatta* career is marked by his birth in Tusita heaven, where he remains till reborn as the baby of Māyā. These events are all retold as the first section of the *Jātakanidāna*, the "Distant Epoch."

The "Intermediate Epoch" opens with the destruction of the world, part of the cycle of time that marks the end of the religion, Dhamma, of the previous Buddha, but presages the arrival of a new Buddha. All the powerful gods then visit the *bodhisatta* in the Tusita heaven to prompt him that the time has come for him to become a Buddha. The *bodhisatta* then selects the most appropriate time, country, family, mother, and lifespan for his final lifetime. The intermediate epoch then covers the extraordinary events associated with his conception and childhood so familiar from Buddhist art. For the conception his mother Māyā is purified by the gods and dreams of a white elephant entering her right side. Soothsayers predict that the child will become an all-powerful emperor (*cakkavattī*) or a Buddha. Māyā gives birth to him standing clasping a Sāl tree as he emerges pure and standing upright (in this version we do not yet have him emerging from her right side). Two streams of water fall from the sky to anoint him. He takes seven strides and announces "I am the chief of the world" (Jayawickrama 1990: 71). The story continues with other auspicious signs and examples of the Buddha-to-be's prowess, and then his father's attempts to keep him from seeing the four sights mentioned earlier, the sick man, old man, corpse, and renouncer, to prevent his renunciation. Then follow two famous scenes: of the birth of his son Rāhula to his wife Yasodharā, and his disgust at seeing his dancing girls fallen asleep, the veneer of beauty removed, "some of them with saliva pouring out of their mouths, ... some grind their teeth, some others with their clothes in disorder revealing plainly those parts of the body which should be kept concealed for fear of shame" (Jayawickrama 1990: 82). Finally, he takes a last look at his son, resolving to return after his Enlightenment, and departs on the back of his horse Kanthaka, deities muffling the sounds of the horse, placing their hands under its hooves in order to avoid the departure being discovered. The story of his struggles with austerity, his battle with Māra, the representative of death and *saṃsāra*, who tries to both tempt and to terrify the Buddha into staying within *saṃsāra*, and finally his Enlightenment complete the "Intermediate Epoch." It concludes with the Buddha's recognition of the significance of the omniscience he has gained, two verses also found with the collection of poems of the *Dhammapada*, another book of the *Sutta Piṭaka* division of the Pali Canon:

Seeking the builder of the house I sped along many births in Saṃsāra but with no avail, ill is birth again and again.

O builder of the house, you are seen. Do not build the house again! All your beams are broken and the ridge pole is shattered. The mind that has gone beyond things composite has attained the destruction of the cravings. (Jayawickrama 1990: 100)

The “Recent Epoch” recounts the experience of the Buddha after his Enlightenment, including two of the scenes most frequently depicted in art: the attempts to seduce him by Māra’s daughters, “Craving, Aversion and Lust,” and the Nāga (King Cobra) Mucalinda wrapping himself around the Buddha and spreading his hood over him to protect him from a storm in the seventh week of his Enlightenment. Rather than emphasizing the teachings of the Buddha, as found in the first four collections (*nikāya*) of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the account in the *Jātakanidāna* emphasizes four things: the role of the gods in affirming and serving the Buddha; his encounter with the two ascetics who would be his chief disciples, Sāriputta and Moggallāna; his reconciliation with his family; and his acceptance of the first donations of monastic land for the Sangha, culminating with the purchase by the generous layman Anāthapiṇḍika of Jeta’s grove at Sāvattī by covering it in pieces of gold. At this point the text ends by praising the benefits accrued by the donor who dedicates monasteries, and on recalling the precedent set for this by the chief sponsors of the previous Buddhas (Jayawickrama 1990: 126–127). Thus, this last section is a form of *ānisaṃsa*, a text praising the benefits of specific types of donation. This testifies to the early development of the *ānisaṃsa* genre, a genre that has remained popular to this day but is usually classified as noncanonical and tends to be preserved in a mixture of Pali and vernacular language. The popularity of *ānisaṃsa* reflects its function in celebrating and affirming the relationship between the three gems (the Buddha and Sangha, who provide the gift of salvific teaching, the Dhamma), on the one hand, and the laity who provide all the material needs for the Buddha and Sangha, on the other hand. As we shall see in Chapter 2, to some extent the Buddha image takes on the role of receiving gifts and ensuring the ongoing presence of the perfections and the Dhamma for the 5000 years that the Dhamma endures after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*.

Later Biographies of the Buddha

The Buddha’s biography continued to evolve and find new forms in Pali as well as in vernacular languages. Buddha biographies in Pali include two ornate Pali poems, the twelfth-century *Jinālamkāra* by Buddhārakkhita (translation Gray 1894) and the thirteenth-century *Jinacarita* by Medhānkara (translation Duroiselle 1906), as well as the eighteenth-century *Mālānkāra Vatthu* (Jayawickrama 1990: xiii) and the circa fourteenth- to eighteenth-century *Jinamahānidāna*, which covers the same period as the *Jātakanidāna* but continues to include the distribution of the relics after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna* (von Hinüber 1996: 180). The biography that seems to have the widest distribution in Southeast Asia is the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, which dates at least as far back as the sixteenth century and possibly several centuries earlier. There are at least ten different versions of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. It is recorded in Pali as well as at least eight vernacular languages. Earlier versions cover the *bodhisatta*’s descent from the Tusita heaven, that is, his conception to his Enlightenment, hence its title, which means “First Awakening.” Later versions extended it to include Brahmā’s invitation to the Buddha to teach and the first sermon. Later still the text is extended to include the death of the Buddha (Laulertvorakul 2003: 27–30). An example of an extensive, relatively recent vernacular biography is the Burmese

Maha-bokda-win, mentioned earlier, composed by Vicittasārābhivaṃsa Tipiṭaka Sayadaw at the request of U Nu, commenced the year of the Sixth Council in 1956 and published between 1960 and 1972. The narrative period covered is from the prediction of Sumedha's future Buddhahood up to the distribution of the relics found in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. Vicittasārābhivaṃsa draws material from across the canon and commentaries, and discusses highly technical aspects of the nature of the Buddha and the perfections. He also provides biographies of the previous 24 Buddhas and some of the early monks and nuns. The resulting work is immense, covering over 5500 pages and published in six volumes. It was translated into English as *The Great Chronicle of the Buddha* (Lay and Lwin 1991).

The biography of the Buddha is also included in texts that seek to harness the power of the Buddha. "The Consecration of the Buddha," a text recited to empower Buddha images in Thailand (see Chapter 2) retells the key events of the Buddha's biography to the new image while transferring the power of each great event into the image. Visual biographies are probably more familiar to most Buddhists than written ones. **Temple** wall paintings, sculptures, and temporary festival art often depict key events in the Buddha's life. Some visual images appear not to be intended for display. John Strong has reported on a find of bronze figures representing scenes in the life of the Buddha concealed in a pagoda in northern Burma. The figures were intentionally hidden from view and only revealed after its collapse in 1912:

These included representations of the first jātaka, the story of Sumedha prostrating himself at the feet of the past Buddha Dipaṃkara; images of all the other twenty-eight previous buddhas venerated by the Buddha in his past lives; figurines depicting the Buddha's mother, Mahāmāyā, giving birth to him, the seven steps he took immediately after he was born; the signs of the old man, sick man, dead man, and ascetic that prompted him to go forth on his "great departure"; scenes of him cutting off his hair with his sword and of Indra receiving that hair relic in heaven; statuettes showing his Enlightenment and the events of each of the seven weeks following it; the first sermon he preached to his first five disciples' and various events from his teaching career, ending with the scene of his death and parinirvāṇa. (Strong 2004: 6)

Here, then, we have the story as told in the *Jātakanidāna*, but with the biography completed by the events right up to the *parinibbāna*.

The Buddha's biography, including the extended biography, informs many other forms of artistic expression and popular performance, from dance to shadow plays and puppet shows and songs, from popular communal songs to highly sophisticated court compositions. More recently, these scenes have recurred in comics, story books, novels, and films. Some modern retellings convey a particular socialist or egalitarian perspective, such as the controversial 1973 novel *Bawa tharanaya* (Worldcat OCLC number 486931505) by the Sri Lankan writer Martin Wickramasinghe (1891–1976), or performances among the Dalit **Ambedkarite Buddhists** of India (see Chapter 12), who are strongly influenced by Theravada.

Western films, like Western biographies until recently, tended to focus on the quest in this lifetime, from the four sights to his Enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree. While this may reflect a Western trope in the biographies of "great men," namely, "the quest," Skilton's analysis of Bertolucci's 1994 film *Little Buddha* reveals that the early availability of Buddha biography in the West plays a part: It seems that the screen play is influenced by the northern Sanskrit poetic biographical poem about the Buddha, the *Buddhacarita*, even though Theravada imagery is used, for example, Theravada robe colors for the Buddha. Only the first half of the

Buddhacarita was translated relatively early on into English, and so it is this first half that informs the screen play (Skilton 2011). Despite his later associations with the Theravada revivalist Anāgarika Dharmapāla (see Chapter 12), Edwin Arnold's highly influential biography of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, which became a best-seller when it was published in 1879, was likewise based on a northern Buddhist Sanskrit text. Arnold had been the principal of the Government Sanskrit College in Pune, India.

Buddha Nature in the *Jātakanidāna*

Jayawickrama observes that even though the *Jātakanidāna* biography of Gotama Buddha is later than some of the Sanskrit parallels, it nevertheless “is more faithful to the original Pali tradition” (Jayawickrama 1990: xv). It includes “some of the principles of Mahāyāna seen to occur already in works like the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*. The Pāramitās are recognized, but there is no reference to the ten *bhūmis* which find mention even in a work like the *Mahāvastu*, a book that marks the transition from early Buddhism to Mahāyāna” (Jayawickrama 1990: xv). The *pāramitā* or “perfections” are the qualities – ten in the fullest list – that a *bodhisatta* must perfect to become a Buddha in the developed scheme of the Buddha path. The *bhūmi* are ten levels of increasingly elevated stages of being a *bodhisatta* culminating in Buddhahood, the higher levels being hard to distinguish from Buddhahood, and this schema reflects an even more developed understanding of the path to Buddhahood important in Mahayana treatises. Jayawickrama points to the absence in the *Jātakanidāna* of the “docetic tendency” found in Mahayana Buddhism. **Docetism** is the belief a religious figure – in our case, the historical Buddha – was not in fact a real person present in the world, but an emanation of a divine being. “This [docetic] aspect is greatly accentuated in the Lalitavistara [c. 1st C BCE text of Sarvāstivādin Buddhism] where Buddha's appearance on earth is termed an “act of sport” (*lalita*), and he is exalted as a divine being. ... [In the *Jātakanidāna*, by contrast] the human character of the Buddha stands out pre-eminent. ... He is superior to all devas [gods] and men but is not a divinity who resides in *Sukhāvātī* [Pure Land/heaven of a Buddha]. The doctrines of the Tathāgatagarbha and *Trikāya* are foreign to the *Nidānakathā*” (Jayawickrama 1990: xiv–xv). The doctrines identified as absent in the *Jātakanidāna* are doctrines associated with different forms of Mahayana. The Tathāgatagarbha doctrine is the doctrine that we all have the potential for Buddhahood within us, which possibly developed in the third-century CE (Skilton 1994: 132). The *Trikāya* doctrine is a doctrine of *yogācāra* philosophy, which teaches that there are three (*tri*, Sanskrit) bodies (*kāya*) of a Buddha. There is the body of his perfected non-dual consciousness (*dharmakāya*, Sanskrit). There is his “enjoyment” body (*sambhogakāya*, Sanskrit), that is, his actual embodiment in heavens. Finally, the Buddha that people saw in the world preaching was not real. Rather it was his magical creation or emanation body (*nirmānakāya*, Sanskrit) (Skilton 1994: 127–128). This last is the most obvious example of doceticism in Buddhism, that Gotama Buddha was a magical creation, not physically present in the world. The absence of such doctrines in the *Jātakanidāna* allows us to see that Theravada's beliefs about the Buddha are distinctive from some of those which developed in Mahayana schools, and appear to be more conservative. Nonetheless, we do find that the Theravada understanding of the Buddha develops, and we shall return to those developments later.

Western Preconceptions of the Theravada Buddha

While it is true that Theravada never develops the level of docetism found in Mahayana, the Theravada understanding of the Buddha and its further development can be understood in terms, not perhaps of docetism, but **apotheosis**, the transformation into a god. For it is not only across genres that we see an alteration in the character of the Buddha, but also across time. While in the West there was a tendency to stress the humanity of the Buddha, the Theravada tradition has always grappled with his superhuman nature, the ways in which he was beyond ordinary humanity, as well as how one could gain access to him or his power after his *parinibbāna*, a topic to which we shall return in Chapter 2.

For Westerners the legacy of the Victorian and Edwardian view of the Buddha as a “rational renouncer,” who taught a message of universal truth and is now absent from the world remains strong. It is a view that suits convert Buddhism in the strongly atheistic or protestant context of much Anglophone western culture. Donald Lopez writes of this view emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, when Westerners began to realize that Buddhism was not the “primitive idolatry” it had first been categorized as, but a sophisticated religion:

What would become essential for Europe and America ... would be the Buddha's humanity; what once appeared to be the legend of another idol was in fact the portrait of an individual, an individual whose humanity would transcend the confines of ancient India, humanize the continent of Asia, and inspire the world by showing what can be done by a man who is not a god. For the Buddhist traditions of Asia, however, it was his identity with the Buddhas of the past ... that was his essence. (Lopez 2005: 31)

Certainly, as we shall in Chapter 2, Western scholars until recently combined this view of Buddhism as a rational religion with the assumption that Theravada is a representative of it in its early, uncorrupted form. This combination was then used to critique how Theravada was actually practiced in modern Asia. Embedded within this response was the colonial attitude of claiming direct access to the scriptural authorities of the religion and thus being in a position to judge “the natives.” A descendant of both protestant and colonial attitudes may be seen in a tendency in scholarship to “test” current practice against the texts, an aspect of which we will examine in the next chapter when we look at Buddha worship. This “testing” against the texts, however, is a possibility of all religions “of the book.” It has its precursors in the history of Theravada and also its parallels within modern Theravada. Sometimes, then, Western protestant academic responses converge with reform approaches within Theravada itself. In terms of understanding the nature of the Buddha, there is substantial support for the emphasis on impermanence and a “common-sense” religion focused on the here and now in some parts of the canon. However, the canon also attests to the belief in supernatural beings, the assumption of before- and after-lives, in the effectiveness of *kamma* across lifetimes and in the efficacious power of the Buddha and the Dhamma. Furthermore, one can trace in Theravada literature a process of refinement of what it means to be a Buddha.

In theological terms, some of the processes we see in the development of the status of the Buddha might be regarded as the natural processes of divinization applied to a human founder. As the Buddha becomes more and more exalted, his achievements are no longer seen as the outcome of an extraordinary individual's quest of a single lifetime. Rather such greatness must be the grand culmination of hundreds of lifetimes of effort marked by auspicious signs,

predictions of greatness, periods in heaven, noble descent, superhuman characteristics and a supporting cast of deities and royalty. One might see this also as an outcome of religious rivalry – just as kings acquired the accolades of rivals, the conquered, and the emulated, attributes initially attributed to an important figure in one religious tradition are claimed by rivals and emulators in relation to their own saints. One group attributes to its saints qualities beyond those of its rivals' saints. We can see that the Theravada development of its expression of what it means to be a Buddha is not an unthinking accumulation of all qualities imagined possible for a super or divine being, however. For example, the definition of the meaning of omniscience, “knowledge of everything,” an attribute of the Buddha, is developed in Theravada, but never to the extent that it literally means knowing everything all the time from all times. Such an understanding of omniscience was attributed to the Jina early on in Jainism. Jainism was a rival sect at the time of the Buddha – the Buddha refers to the Jina as a contemporary of his – so Buddhists were familiar with the Jain definition of omniscience, but that definition, which makes sense in terms of the Jain understanding of the soul, does not make sense in terms of the Buddhist understanding of no-self and of the processes involved in consciousness. That definition was therefore rejected (see later text) (Jaini 1974: 84–85).

The developing status of Buddha in Theravada literature

The term Buddha

We now think of the term Buddha, meaning “awakened,” as specifically referring to one who has become enlightened according to all the teachings of Buddhism. In Theravada it refers to the 27 previous Buddhas, Gotama Buddha, and the future Buddha Metteyya. But the term occurs in early Jain texts to refer to sages of both Jainism and other religious traditions. In contrast, in the Buddhist poems regarded as being among the earliest material in the *Sutta Piṭaka* the term is not used, even of the Buddha. At a relatively early phase of the Pali Canon, the term *buddha* occurs alongside others such as seer (*isi*) or brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*) to refer to different, respected holy men. It seems to go through a phase of meaning a very eminent person before becoming a term for Gotama Buddha in the narrative referring to the present, and then to the lineage of 28 Buddhas and the future Buddha Metteyya, when referring to the past and future (Endo 1997/2002: 7). The Buddha then uses the term to differentiate himself from all other beings, including separating himself off from humans: “I am not a god, not a gandharva [*gandhabba* in Pali, ‘heavenly musician’], not a yaksa [*yakkha* in Pali, see Chapter 2] not a human, but a Buddha.” Other terms used for the Buddha include *Bhagavā* “fortunate,” often translated as “The Blessed One,” *Sugata*, literally “gone to/in a good state,” and *Tathāgata*, “gone to/in such,” both usually left untranslated.

Over the course of the development of Theravada literature, there was a tendency to emphasize the universality of Buddhahood seen in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, one of the later texts of the *Sutta Piṭaka*. The *Buddhavaṃsa* describes a parallel path to Buddhahood for all 28 past Buddhas. There was also a tendency toward the elevation of the Buddha over the *paccekabuddha* and *arhat* (also known as the *sāvaka* – the “listener” or “disciple”).

Sometimes, in Western scholarship, the term *śrāvakayāna* (Sanskrit) is used as a nonpejorative term to refer to pre- and non-Mahayana forms of Buddhism including Theravada. However, the fifth-century author Buddhaghosa, who compiled the *Visuddhimagga*, often regarded as the epitome of Theravada orthodoxy, characterized the Buddhism he represented (that of the **Mahāvihāra** monastery of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, which would later come to define

Theravada) as consisting of these three soteriological paths (*yāna*): the path of the Buddhas, *buddhayāna*; the way of the individually enlightened, *paccekabuddhayāna*; and the way of the disciples or *arhats*, *sāvakayāna* (e.g., Ñyānamoli 1976: 43–44, citing the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, on which see Chapter 7). Although one of the definitions of Mahayana in early Mahayana *sūtras* is that it is the great (*mahā*) way (*yāna*) because it includes all these three paths, such statements have come to be reified as historically accurate distinctions between Mahayana and non-Mahayana. The distinction appears to be pan-Buddhist and it predates the emergence of Mahayana as a separate pathway within Buddhism (Dhammajoti 2011: 155). The fact that Theravada, too, explicitly includes these three paths challenges this widely accepted dichotomy. A distinction that is valid is that Theravada regards the *bodhisatta* (*bodhisattva*, Sanskrit) on the Buddha path as rare, whereas those forms of Buddhism identified as Mahayana came to formalize the *bodhisattva* vow to achieve Buddhahood as a vow that all should undertake.

Body and mind

While there is a tendency in Western literature to treat Buddhism as a religion of the mind, particularly Theravada with its relative lack of docetism, Theravada itself consistently understands the perfection of the Buddha in psychosomatic terms. In other words, they defined the Buddha in terms of both his wisdom or spiritual attainments, literally his “knowledge-power” (*ñāṇabala*) and his physical attainments, literally “body-power” (*kāyabala*). (See Endo 1997/2002: Chapters II and III respectively.)

One of the *ñāṇabala* attributes is his omniscience, in Pali *sabbaññūtā*, a compound of *sabba* “all” and (*ñ*)*ñūtā* “knowing/science” and so a literal equivalent of the Latin-derived English term “omniscience.” The main issue that arises in defining the Buddha’s omniscience, however, is understanding the referent of *sabba*: “all,” for example, whether it refers to all three times, that is, everything in the past, present, and future. A secondary issue is the nature of the “knowing,” for example, whether it means being constantly conscious of “all.”

In the canon, we find the following six “higher knowledges” (*abhiññā*) attributed to the Buddha: magical powers, divine ear (clairaudience), knowledge of the mind of others, remembrance of former existences, divine eye, and extinction of all influxes or defilements. The last three of this list are the three “knowledges” that the Buddha realized on his Awakening (see earlier text). The terms influxes and defilements translate the Pali words *āsava* (Sanskrit *āśrava*) and *kilesa* (Sanskrit *kleśa*). Both terms are evidence of the uptake in Buddhism of terms from the broader Indian religious milieu. The term *kilesa* literally means “stain,” but in Buddhism means the spiritual defilement of the individual as a result of their previous bad actions, *kamma*. The term *āsava* literally means “flowing towards,” so “influx.” In Buddhism, it means the taints or obstruction generated by engagement with sensual pleasure, life, ignorance, and false views. They predispose one to further *kammic* engagement and so it is only when one has destroyed them that one is free from further continuation in *samsāra*. The literal meaning of influx comes from a more materialistic understanding of *karma*, action, in the Indian religious context of the time. Traditions such as early Jainism regarded the influxes as a kind of karmic dust that colored, and weighed down the soul, the color and weight reflecting the relatively positive or negative quality of the action that generated this dust (Norman 1997/2006: 45–46).

As the distinction between the Buddha and the *arhat/sāvaka* becomes more marked, it is expressed through two different lists of ten knowledge-powers (*ñāṇabala*). The Buddha’s ten powers are that he knows (i) what is possible and impossible; (ii) causal connections in past, present, future; (iii) causal actions of all states of rebirth; (iv) the world and its elements;

(v) the spiritual states of human beings; (vi) the maturity of the spiritual faculties of other individuals; (vii) the higher meditative states; that he has (viii) retrocognitivity across several aeons; (ix) clairvoyance that allows him to see the death and rebirth of other beings in terms of their *kamma*; and (x) achieved the liberation of mind and of wisdom from destroying all mental defilements (Endo 1997/2002: 20–21, de Silva 1987: 39).

In contrast, the *arhat*'s ten powers are (i) realization of all composite phenomena as impermanent; (ii) seeing all sense pleasures as a pit of burning embers; (iii) the inclination to renunciation; and then, listed as items 4–10, the 37 factors of awakening (*bodhipakkhiyadhamma*, see Chapter 6), which summarize different ways of formulating or aspects of following the path to *arhat*ship (Endo 1997/2002: 20–21). The powers attributed to the *arhat*, then, all relate to the individual's realization of Enlightenment, a possibility in a single lifetime, in contrast to the Buddha's understanding of the spiritual situation and needs of all other beings, developed over multiple lifetimes. In early canonical material, this distinction is not made. The Buddha's disciples achieve the same realization, the same Enlightenment as him (Anderson 1999: 63).

The Buddha's achievements in the canonical text, the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, are phrased in terms of "Four Confidences" that relate entirely to the soteriological path. They are that no one can (i) accuse the Buddha of not being fully enlightened; (ii) accuse the Buddha of not being completely free of defilements; (iii) claim that what he declares are obstructions are not; and (iv) claim that the Dhamma he teaches does not lead to the cessation of *dukkha* (Endo 1997/2002: 24).

The physical powers, *kāyabala*, attributed to the Buddha in the canon include a range of statements about his great beauty and how his physical appearance reflects the occasion. In the *sutta* of the first sermon, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha's five former companions in the deer park initially plan to spurn him for having given up his asceticism, but when they see him they realize from his physical appearance that he has achieved greatness, so they welcome him. In the *sutta* on the last three months of the Buddha's life, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha comments on how he changes his appearance to pass unnoticed in the context where he is teaching, including among the different assemblies of gods. Toward the end of the same text, he is presented with a pair of golden robes. When Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, wraps the robes around the Buddha, he observes how the Buddha's skin appears to glow. The Buddha replies,

There are two occasions, Ānanda, when the hue of the Buddha's skin is so very pure, so cleansed. The first is the night on which the Buddha awakens to the unsurpassed full and perfect Awakening. The second is the night on which he attains final *parinibbāna*. Today, Ānanda, in the last watch of the night, between a pair of Sal trees in the Sal grove of the Mallas, the final *parinibbāna* of the Buddha will take place. (translation Crosby)

The physical attributes of the Buddha become formalized into a famous list of 32 marks of a great man. These include such attributes as wheels on his feet (mark no. 2), the whorl of hair between the eyebrows (no. 31), the distinctive bump on the Buddha's head, shaped like a royal turban (no. 32), a chest like a lion's, and long arms (no. 9). These are distinctive features on much Buddhist sculpture and in the last instances may even reflect the effects of the material sculpture on the conception of the Buddha's physical appearance. Other attributes reflect Indic ideals of beauty, such as his golden complexion (no. 11), a chest and jaws like a lion's (nos. 17 and 22), and long eyelashes shapely like those of a cow (no. 30). Still others are harder to explain, such as a long and flexible tongue (no. 27) and "privities within a sheaf" (Endo 1997/2002: 46).

Although these 32 attributes are listed in the *Lakkhaṇasutta*, a text in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, other texts in the *Sutta Piṭaka* are mostly unfamiliar with them (Endo 1997/2002: 45–47). In contrast, later texts, such as the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Apadāna* (a text that provides the stories of the former lifetimes of key characters in the Buddha's life), refer to them and also extend the list of 32 major marks with an additional list of 80 minor marks (Endo 1997/2002: 46–47). Moreover, not only the Buddhas, but their sons have the marks. For example, the *Apadāna* of Gotama Buddha's son Rāhula explains that Rāhula made the vow to become the future Buddha's son in a lifetime when he was serving food to a previous Buddha, and was filled with admiration for that Buddha's young son, whom he recognizes on account of these marks (Crosby 2012: 89).

Late *sutta* texts such as the *Jātaka*, *Buddhavaṃsa*, and *Apadāna* extend the lives of the Buddha and his immediate family and followers, providing them with extraordinary preparatory careers, including him in a list of other Buddhas, each of whom has a specific Buddha field where his Dhamma takes effect (as noted earlier). Two very late *Sutta Piṭaka* texts, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Niddesa*, are in effect early commentaries on the canon and seem to belong to the metaphysical *Abhidhamma* in genre (Chapter 7). This means that they seek to systematize and analyze the attributes to the Buddha found in earlier works. They further define the knowledge of a Buddha as uniquely including knowledge of the maturity of spiritual faculties, knowledge of the disposition of living beings, the ability to perform the twin miracle, and the attainment of great compassion, omniscience, and unobstructed knowledge.

The twin miracle is a feat performed by the Buddha at Sāvatti in response to a challenge by a rival wandering renouncer. When described in the canon (e.g., in the *Pāṭika Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*, DN III, 27), the miracle is relatively simple, in that the Buddha rises up into the air and emits fire. However, the commentary extends the description, such that the Buddha produces multiple miracles in pairs, multiplies himself, preaching different sermons directly suited to those present. At the end of performing the miracle, the Buddha then takes three enormous strides, traversing the earth, atmosphere, and heaven (similar to a feat elsewhere attributed to one of the incarnations of the Indic god Viṣṇu), to visit the deity his mother Māyā has become. It is on this occasion that he preaches to her, giving us the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (Chapter 7). It is called the twin miracle because “it requires the production of flames from the upper part of the Body and water from the lower part, then water from the upper part and flames from the lower part” (Anālayo 2009: 776, citing the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*). These texts and the early postcanonical text the *Milindapañha* (*The Questions of King Milinda*, translation Rhys Davids 1890–1894) state that this miracle can only be performed by a Buddha. However, a passage in the *Samyuktāgama* of the Sarvāstivādin canon mentions this miracle being performed by the *arhat* Dabba Mallaputta before dying, whereas the parallel passage in the Pali *Udāna* describes Dabba as rising in the air and cremating his own body, not performing the twin miracle. The Buddha's aunt, Mahājāpatī Gotamī (see Chapter 9) either alone or with 500 nuns, performs the twin miracle according the *Ekottarika Āgama*, also of the Sarvāstivādins, and the *Kṣūdrakavastu* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin *Vinaya* (Anālayo 2009: 776–777). Peter Skilling has traced narratives of the twin miracle across a large range of Buddhist literature and concludes, “The Mūlasarvāstivādins, Sarvāstivādins, Lokottaravādins, Mahīśāsakas, Aśvaghōṣa, and Asaṅga along with the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcaya*, *Eottarikāgama*, *P'u yao ching*, and *Book of Zambasta*, agree against the Theravādins that an auditor [*arhat*] as well as a Buddha could perform the *yamakaprātihārya* [twin miracle] ... The narrative literature of these schools or authors contains examples of the prodigy being performed by monks as well as nuns” (Skilling 1997: 315). The claim that the twin miracle can only be performed by the Buddha therefore appears to be a particularly Theravada attempt to carve out a unique definition for the Buddha.

Omniscience in the canon is expressed in terms of the Buddha knowing everything that is relevant to spiritual progress. In a famous passage of the *Sutta Piṭaka* (in the *Cūḷa-Māluṅkya Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 63), the Buddha rejects the relevance of a list of 14 metaphysical questions and replies with his famous imagery of a man shot by a poisoned arrow. The man refuses to have the arrow removed until he understands everything about who shot it, the bow that fired it, the arrow itself, how the arrow was made, and so dies. Similarly, monks should not waste their time on irrelevant metaphysical speculation since it does not lead to Enlightenment. By the time of the commentaries, however, the Buddha's omniscience includes knowledge of metaphysical matters, including all aspects of the universe, and the past *and* future as well as the present, in addition to complete knowledge about doctrinal matters.

The inclusion of the future, that is, of prescience or precognition, had a significant effect on commentarial interpretation. For example, in the opening scene of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha is approached by an advisor to King Ajātasattu who wants advice on whether or not to make war against the Vajjī confederacy. The Buddha comments that the Vajjī are so strong because of the harmonious and consultative way they meet and make decisions, among other things. The adviser understands this to mean that the King will first need to sow dissent to weaken the Vajjī before making war. The advice "allows the king to conquer the Vajjī, a historical event attested in other accounts. Commentator Buddhaghosa is at pains to point out that the Buddha speaks as he does in order to postpone the inevitable, gaining the Vajjis more time to make merit" (Crosby 2012: 86, note 14). As we move into early postcanonical texts such as the *Milindapañha* "Questions of King Milinda," we find that this ability to know the future begs the question of why the Buddha laid down the *vinaya* rules one at a time, when by looking ahead he could have prevented the wrongdoing that, on being reported to him, is the occasion for him establishing each rule. The answer given is that although a Buddha can know anything without obstruction, he must advert his mind to the object of his knowledge. This is in line with the analysis of the causal factors involved in the creation of the consciousness in the *Paṭṭhāna* of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (see Chapter 7). A mind, including a Buddha's mind, must take something as its object to be conscious of it. Even for the Buddha, omniscience is not omnipresent.

The theme of great compassion as an attribute specifically of the Buddha develops from the story of the Buddha choosing to teach, yet is also used in the commentaries to explain why the Buddha did things and appeared to experience needs that were clearly unnecessary for a *mahāpurisa*, a "great man." He behaves as if he is subject to the usual requirements of human life in order to make monks in the future feel better about their own needs.

We noted earlier some of the aspects of Buddhahood addressed in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. The *Kathāvatthu's* (*Points of Controversy's*) attempt to prevent some layers of docetism and apotheosis apparent in other schools is seen in the rejection of the following teachings: that the Buddha's ordinary speech is supramundane; that he never lived in the world; that he preached through a created figure; that he felt no compassion; that everything of him was fragrant; that Buddhas differ from each other; and that multiple Buddhas are present in all directions. The *Kathāvatthu* also contains refutations of attempts to downgrade the status of the *arhat* further than the Theravada differentiation between Buddha and *arhat* allowed (Endo 1997/2002: 168). The *Paṭṭhāna* (*Conditional Relations*) attempts to capture the content of the Buddha's omniscience about causality (see Chapter 7). *Abhidhamma* commentaries also develop the understanding of how the Buddha is physically transformed by his Enlightenment (his *kāyabala*), such that his body becomes entirely pure.

In the commentaries, we find further distinctions between the *arhat*, *paccekabuddha*, and *Buddha*. For the Buddha, the *vāsanā* “fragrance” or impressions of defilements (*kilesa*) no longer exert an influence, whereas on the arhat they do. The term *vāsanā* is more familiar in the *yogācāra* philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, yet, through the commentaries, is also found in Burmese Buddhism. This needs to be distinguished from the ongoing effect of *kamma*, which does influence even the Buddha. This ongoing effect of *kamma* can be seen in *Apadāna* stories about the Buddha’s former bad deeds that explain a headache or backache or other bad experience in the Buddha’s current life (Walters 1990) – although this possibility is contested in a number of commentaries (Appleton 2010: 26) – as well as in chronicles that explain damage to certain images of him (see Chapter 2).

A further development is the description of the Buddha as perfect even within the womb, where he awaits birth seated upright in meditation. We also see the increased emphasis on relics and their role in mediating the ongoing presence of the Buddha (see Chapter 2).

The Three *Parinibbāna* of the Buddha

According to the fifth-century commentaries, the Buddha undergoes three different levels of *parinibbāna* “Enlightenment” or “extinction.” The first *parinibbāna* is the Enlightenment under the *Bodhi* tree, when the Buddha’s defilements (*kilesa*) are extinguished. The second *parinibbāna* is when the Buddha gives up the five “aggregates” *khandha*, the psychosomatic constituents that make him a physically present person interacting in the world. In human terms, this is his death. The relics (*dhātu*) left after his cremation are then his only physical remains. The third *parinibbāna*, not mentioned in the canon, is the *parinibbāna* of those relics (Strong 2004: 223). For when the new Buddha Metteyya is about to begin his teaching the relics of the previous Buddha, Gotama, gather together and deliver a final sermon at Mahābodhi, the seat of the Buddha’s original *parinibbāna*. The belief in this final *parinibbāna* reflects an understanding of the Buddha’s ongoing presence in his relics and other physical reminders, that is, symbols and images. The development in understanding of the Buddha’s “bodies” continues in later Theravada literature. In addition to the physical body (*rūpakāya*) and the body of his teachings (*dharmakāya*) in the second layer of commentaries (such as those by Dhammapāla, circa eighth- or ninth-century CE) we find that the *dharmakāya* includes the spiritual qualities. There are three types of physical reminder of the Buddha, the physical relics, *dhātu*, that is, hair, nails, and bones, given either before or after death, the objects used by the Buddha, such as the bowl in which Sujātā offered the meal, and thirdly, indicators of the Buddha, such as footprints and even images. To this, the *Paṭhamasaṃbodhi* (see earlier text) adds a fourth type of physical reminder, that of the Dhamma, teaching. This type is more familiar from Mahayana Buddhism and noted in the packing of images with sacred texts in Tibetan Buddhism, for example. Yet the wearing of excerpts of sacred texts as protection and their insertion into *stūpas* and images are also found in Theravada Buddhism.

Surveying these developments in the understanding of the Buddha and the redefining of his uniqueness, we can see that Theravada, on the one hand, denies some of the docetism and apotheosis found in other Buddhist traditions. Nonetheless, it does reflect such tendencies and in some instances, for example with its emphasis on the Buddha’s monopoly on the performance of the twin miracle, goes beyond other forms of Buddhism in emphasizing the Buddha’s special character, and in denying such cultic status to any potential rival.

Summary

This chapter examined the core teachings, biography, and status of the Buddha. It did this in relation to the religious views that pertained in north India in sixth- to fourth-century BCE, explaining also how this date for Gotama Buddha, the Buddha of our era, is calculated. The way in which the character of the Buddha alters synchronically, adapted for the needs of different genres of literature, and diachronically, reflecting developing understandings of Buddhahood and the spread of Buddhism, allows us to see the Buddha as a figure representing different kinds of authority and expectations of what it means to have mastered *saṃsāra*, the realm of rebirth and suffering/insecurity. The notion of Buddhahood as an achievement taking multiple lifetimes is developed in later canonical literature to provide a defined career similar for all 28 past Buddhas and all future Buddhas. We also examined the evidence of the commentaries, chronicles, and later Pali and vernacular biographies. Other genres of literature related to the Buddha were noted, including their use in empowerment. The developing notions of and refinements to the definition of Buddha qualities, his wisdom, compassion, and physical attributes, were examined in some detail, allowing us to observe that aspects of apotheosis and docetism are found within Theravada since the earliest times and are the attention of exploration and expansion in the Theravada tradition, even while some such tendencies found in other forms of Buddhism are rejected. This was contrasted with Western emphases on the Buddha's humanity and a mistaken assumption that there is a Theravada "orthodoxy" that concurs with this view. Stories about the Buddha, his visits, images, and relics acted as political charters in the spread of Theravada and its patronage or "protection" by those holding worldly power – kings and, later, governments. They provide a link between the historical Buddha and Buddhists of the present. Representing the ongoing presence of the Buddha, they will come together for the Buddha's third and final *parinibbāna*, and his last sermon, in anticipation of the future Buddha Metteyya.

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