

HUSTON SMITH

Author of *The World's Religions*

and PHILIP NOVAK



# BUDDHISM

A CONCISE INTRODUCTION

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AND PHILIP NOVAK



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To all followers of the Dharma, and to others who are interested in exploring its potentials to improve individual lives and the course of history, the authors respectfully dedicate this book.

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## FOREWORD



This book reconceives the chapter on Buddhism from Huston Smith's *The World's Religions* and takes advantage of the additional space a book provides to go deeper into Buddhism's basics. Most important here, Theravada Buddhism (which was overshadowed by Mahayana when *The World's Religions* was written) is brought closer to getting its due. Then, on these foundations the book erects a second story, so to speak. The second half of the book, entirely new, tells the story of Buddhism's migration to the West, particularly to America.

In this happily co-authored book, the authors have worked over every page together with Smith taking the lead in its first half and Novak in its second. Then, for reasons that will be noted in due course, the lead swings back to Smith who wrote the Afterword on Pure Land Buddhism.

The partnership that went into the book proved to be a fortunate one in many ways. Apart from the fact that the talents of each author complement those of the other, Novak

wrote his doctoral dissertation under Smith at Syracuse University, and geographical proximity—Novak teaches at Dominican University in San Rafael, a half-hour's drive across San Francisco Bay from Smith in Berkeley—has allowed their friendship to age like old wine. One proof of its vintage is that they felt comfortable in raising their voices at each other when disputes arose as they invariably must in joint authorship. In every case, however, the differences were resolved in ways that both parties felt led to a better book.

Yet another way the authors complement each other is that between them their Buddhist practices cover both sides of Buddhism. Novak has been a lifelong practitioner of Theravada *vipassana*, while Smith was for fifteen years a disciple of Goto Zuigan Roshi in Mahayana Zen.

The authors wish to thank the book's editor, John Loudon, for conceiving and commissioning this book. The inducement it provided for them to clear eight months to wash their minds and spirits once again through the treasures of this great tradition came as a great refreshment, staking out as it were an oasis in their busy lives. Long, long ago the Buddha embarked on a search for a way to live life fully and vibrantly while facing unflinchingly the inexorable axioms of aging, sickness, and death. By the time of his death he had found such a way, and in the 2,500 years since, it has transformed the lives of the millions who have followed him.

Two other notes need to be added. The first concerns terminology. Buddhist vocabulary has come down to us in two ancient Indian languages, Pali and Sanskrit, and Sanskrit terms like *karma*, *nirvana*, and *dharma* are more familiar in the West than their Pali versions, *kamma*, *nibbana*, and *dhamma*. One might conclude that exclusive use of Sanskrit terms in a book like this would be the obvious way to proceed. But the matter is trickier. Sometimes the reverse is true



and Pali terms like *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (no-self) are better known than the Sanskrit *anitya* and *anatman*. Accordingly, our general rule has been to honor familiar usage rather than attempt to maintain consistency with one language. Exceptions to this rule occur only in Chapters 8 and 18, both on Theravada Buddhism, where out of deference to that tradition's close connection to Pali we use only Pali terms. Second, with the exception of terms like karma and nirvana, which have become part of the West's vocabulary, we italicize foreign terms the first time we use them but not thereafter.

It remains for us to acknowledge the invaluable aid we have received from others. A certain writer has said that everybody except myself has been my mentor and we resonate with that assertion. However, there are certain individuals who have been special sources of help and encouragement in this project. We would like to thank Dhananjay Chavan, John Kling, Donald Rothberg, Harry and Vivian Snyder, and Roger Walsh for their valuable suggestions upon reading parts or all of the text during various phases of its completion. Great thanks is also due to our production editor, Chris Hafner, for superb supervision. Tetsuo Unno's help with the book's Afterword will be acknowledged there. Of course, any defects that remain in the text are solely the author's responsibility. Finally, Novak would like to thank Dominican University of California for the sabbatical leave that freed him to work on this project.

Huston Smith and Philip Novak  
November 2002



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PART I



THE WHEEL OF  
THE DHARMA







## THE MAN WHO WOKE UP

Buddhism begins with a man. In his later years, when India was afire with his message and kings themselves were bowing before him, people came to him even as they were to come to Jesus asking what he was.<sup>1</sup> How many people have provoked this question—not “Who are you?” with respect to name, origin, or ancestry, but “*What* are you? What order of being do you belong to? What species do you represent?” Not Caesar, certainly. Not Napoleon, or even Socrates. Only two: Jesus and Buddha. When the people carried their puzzlement to the Buddha himself, the answer he gave provided an identity for his entire message:

*“Are you a god?” they asked.*

*“No.”*

*“An angel?”*

*“No.”*

*“A saint?”*

*“No.”*

*“Then what are you?”*

*Buddha answered, “I am awake.”*

His answer became his title, for this is what “Buddha” means. The Sanskrit root *budh* denotes both “to wake up” and “to know.” Buddha, then, means the “Enlightened One,” or the “Awakened One.” While the rest of the world was wrapped in the womb of sleep, dreaming a dream known as the waking state of human life, one of their number roused himself. Buddhism begins with a man who shook off the daze, the doze, the dreamlike vagaries of ordinary awareness. It begins with a man who woke up.

His life has become encased in loving legend. We are told that the worlds were flooded with light at his birth. The blind so longed to see his glory that they received their sight; the deaf and mute conversed in ecstasy of the things that were to come. Crooked became straight; the lame walked. Prisoners were freed from their chains, and the fires of hell were quenched. Even the cries of the beasts were hushed as peace encircled the earth. Only Mara, the Evil One, did not rejoice.

The historical facts of his life are roughly these: He was born around 563 B.C.E. in what is now Nepal, near the Indian border. His full name was Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyas. Siddhartha was his given name, Gautama his surname, and Sakya the name of the clan to which his family belonged. His father was a king, but as there were then many kingdoms in the subcontinent of India, it would be more accurate to think of him as a feudal lord. By the standards of the day Siddhartha’s upbringing was luxurious. “I was delicate, O monks, excessively delicate. I wore garments of silk and my attendants held a white umbrella over me. My unguents were always from Banaras.” He appears to have

been exceptionally handsome, for there are numerous references to “the perfection of his visible body.” At sixteen he married a neighboring princess, Yasodhara, who bore a son whom they called Rahula.

He was, in short, a man who seemed to have everything: family, “the venerable Gautama is well born on both sides, of pure descent”; fine appearance, “handsome, inspiring trust, gifted with great beauty of complexion, fair in color, fine in presence, stately to behold”; wealth, “he had elephants and silver ornaments for his elephants.” He had a model wife, “majestic as a queen of heaven, constant ever, cheerful night and day, full of dignity and exceeding grace,” who bore him a beautiful son. In addition, as heir to his father’s throne, he was destined for fame and power.

Despite all this there settled over him in his twenties a discontent that was to lead to a complete break with his worldly estate. The source of his discontent is impounded in the legend of the Four Passing Sights, one of the most celebrated calls to adventure in all world literature. When Siddhartha was born, so this story runs, his father summoned fortune-tellers to find out what the future held for his heir. All agreed that this was no usual child. His career, however, was crossed with one ambiguity. If he remained within the world, he would unify India and become its greatest conqueror, a *Chakravartin* (“Wheel-Turner”),<sup>2</sup> or Universal King. If, on the other hand, he forsook the world, he would become not a world conqueror, but a world redeemer. Faced with this option, his father determined to steer his son toward the former destiny. No effort was spared to keep the prince attached to the world. Three palaces and forty thousand dancing girls were placed at his disposal; strict orders were given that no ugliness intrude upon the courtly pleasures. Specifically, the prince was to be shielded from contact

with sickness, decrepitude, and death; even when he went riding, runners were to clear the roads of these sights.

One day, however, an old man was overlooked, or (as some versions have it) miraculously incarnated by the gods to effect the needed lesson: a man decrepit, broken-toothed, gray-haired, crooked and bent of body, leaning on a staff, and trembling. That day Siddhartha learned the fact of old age. Though the king extended his guard, on a second ride Siddhartha encountered a body racked with disease, lying by the roadside; and on a third journey, a corpse. Finally, on a fourth occasion he saw a monk with shaven head, ochre robe, and bowl, and on that day he learned of the life of withdrawal from the world in search of freedom. It is a legend, this story, but like all legends it embodies an important truth, for the teachings of the Buddha show unmistakably that it was the body's inescapable involvement with disease, decrepitude, and death that made him despair of finding fulfillment on the physical plane. "Life is subject to age and death. Where is the realm of life in which there is neither age nor death?"

Once he had perceived the inevitability of bodily pain and passage, fleshly pleasures lost their charm. The singsong of the dancing girls, the lilt of lutes and cymbals, the sumptuous feasts and processions, the elaborate celebration of festivals only mocked his brooding mind. Flowers nodding in the sunshine and snows melting on the Himalayas cried louder of the evanescence of worldly things. He determined to quit the snare of distractions his palace had become and follow the call of a truth-seeker. One night in his twenty-ninth year he made the break, his Great Going Forth. Making his way in the post-midnight hours to where his wife and son were locked in sleep, he bade them both a silent good-bye, and then ordered the gatekeeper to bridle his great white horse.

The two mounted and rode off toward the forest. Reaching its edge at daybreak, Gautama changed clothes with the attendant, who returned with the horse to break the news. “Tell my father,” said Gautama,

*that there is no reason he should grieve. He will perhaps say it was too early for me to leave for the forest. But even if affection should prevent me from leaving my family just now of my own accord, in due course death would tear us apart, and in that we would have no say. Birds settle on a tree for a while, and then go their separate ways again. The meeting of all living beings must likewise inevitably end in their parting. This world passes away and disappoints the hopes of everlasting attachment. It is therefore unwise to have a sense of ownership for people who are united with us as in a dream—for a short while only and not in fact.<sup>3</sup>*

Then Gautama shaved his head and, “clothed in ragged raiment,” plunged into the forest in search of enlightenment.

Six years followed, during which his full energies were concentrated toward this end. “How hard to live the life of the lonely forest dweller, to rejoice in solitude. Verily, the silent groves bear heavily upon the monk who has not yet won to fixity of mind!” The words bear poignant witness that his search was not easy. It appears to have moved through three phases, without record as to how long each lasted or how sharply the three were divided. His first act was to seek out two of the foremost Hindu masters of the day and pick their minds for the wisdom in their vast tradition. He learned a great deal—about *raja yoga*, the yoga of meditation, especially, but about Hindu philosophy as well;

so much in fact that Hindus came to claim him as their own, holding that his criticisms of the religion of his day were in the order of reforms and were less important than his agreements. In time, however, having mastered the deepest mystical states his teachers knew, he concluded that these yogis could teach him nothing more.

His next step was to join a band of ascetics and give their way an honest try. Was it his body that was holding him back? He would break its power and crush its interference. A man of enormous willpower, the Buddha-to-be outdid his associates in every austerity they proposed. He ate so little—six grains of rice a day during one of his fasts—that “when I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach I actually took hold of my spine.” He would clench his teeth and press his tongue to his palate until “sweat flowed from my armpits.” He would hold his breath until it felt “as if a strap were being twisted around my head.”<sup>4</sup> In the end he grew so weak that he fell into a faint; and if a passing cowherdess had not stopped to feed him some warm rice gruel, he could easily have died.

This experience taught him the futility of asceticism. He had given this experiment all anyone could, and it had not succeeded—it had not brought enlightenment. But negative experiments carry their own lessons, and in this case asceticism’s failure provided Gautama with the first constructive plank for his program: the principle of the Middle Way between the extremes of asceticism, on the one hand, and indulgence, on the other. It is the concept of the rationed life, in which the body is given what it needs to function optimally, but no more.

The experience also took his memory back to a day in his youth when, having wandered deep into the countryside, he sat down, quiet and alone, beneath an apple tree. The exer-

tions of a farmer plowing a distant field bespoke the eternity of labor necessary to wrest sustenance from the earth. The sun's slow, ceaseless passage across the sky betokened the countless creatures in the air, on the earth, and under the ground that would soon perish. As he reflected steadily on life's impermanence, his mind opened onto a new state of lucid equanimity. It was now calm and pliable, and the clarity of its seeing was marred by neither elation nor sorrow. It was his first deep meditation—not an otherworldly trance, but a clear and steady seeing of the way things are. And more, it was accomplished in the normal conditions of life without needing to subject the body to starvation.

Having turned his back on mortification, Gautama now devoted the final phase of his quest to a combination of rigorous thought and deep concentration. One evening near Gaya in northeast India, south of the present city of Patna, he sat down under a peepul tree that has come to be known as the Bo Tree (short for *bodhi*, “enlightenment”). The place was later named the Immovable Spot, for tradition reports that the Buddha, sensing that a breakthrough was near, seated himself that epoch-making evening vowing not to arise until he was enlightened.

The records offer as the first event of the night a temptation scene reminiscent of Jesus' on the eve of his ministry. The Evil One, realizing that his antagonist's success was imminent, rushed to the spot to disrupt his concentrations. He attacked first in the form of Kama, the God of Desire, parading three voluptuous women with their tempting retinues. When the Buddha-to-be remained unmoved, the Tempter switched his guise to that of Mara, the Lord of Death. His powerful hosts assailed the aspirant with hurricanes, torrential rains, and showers of flaming rocks, but Gautama had so emptied himself of his finite self that the weapons found no

target to strike and turned into flower petals as they entered his field of concentration. When, in final desperation, Mara challenged his right to do what he was doing, Gautama touched the earth with his right fingertip, whereupon the earth responded, “I bear you witness,” with a hundred, a thousand, and a hundred thousand thunderous roars. Mara’s army fled in rout, and the gods of heaven descended in rapture to tend the victor with garlands and perfumes.

Thereafter, while the Bo Tree rained red blossoms that full-mooned May night, Gautama’s meditation steadily deepened. During the first watch<sup>5</sup> of the night, Gautama saw, one by one, his many thousands of previous lifetimes. During the second watch, his vision widened. It surveyed the death and rebirth of the whole universe of living beings and noted the ubiquitous sway of the law of *karma*—that good actions lead to happy rebirths, bad actions to miserable ones. During the third watch, Gautama saw what made the whole thing go: the universal law of causal interdependence. He called it *dependent arising*, and later identified it as the very heart of his message.<sup>6</sup> Thus armed, he made quick work of the last shreds of ignorant clinging that bound him to the wheel of birth and death.

As the morning star glittered in the transparent sky of the east, his mind pierced at last the bubble of the universe and shattered it to naught, only, wonder of wonders, to find it miraculously restored with the effulgence of true being. The Great Awakening had occurred. Freedom was his. His being was transformed, and he emerged the Buddha. From the center of his joy came a song of spiritual victory:

*Through many a birth I wandered in this world,  
Seeking in vain the builder of this house.  
Unfulfilling it is to be born again and again!*



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