



*the*  
**LIFE**  
*of the*  
**BUDDHA**



Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli

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## THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA



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# THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

ACCORDING TO THE PALI CANON

Translation from the Pali,  
selection of material  
and arrangement by

**BHIKKHU ÑĀṆAMOLI**



BPS PARIYATTI EDITIONS  
ONALASKA, WA USA

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BPS PARIYATTI EDITIONS  
*an imprint of*  
Pariyatti Publishing  
867 Larmon Road, Onalaska, WA 98570  
www.pariyatti.org

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Published by Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1972, 1978, 1992.

Published with the consent of the original publisher.

Copies of this book for sale in the Americas only.

First BPS Pariyatti Edition, 2001

12 11 10 09 08 07 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN: 978-1-928706-12-0

**Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication**  
(Provided by Quality Books, Inc.)

The life of the Buddha: according to the Pāḷi canon / translation from the Pāḷi, selection of material and arrangement by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. — 1st BPS Pariyatti ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Originally published: 3rd ed. Kandy, Sri Lanka :

Buddhist Publication Society, 1992.

LCCN: 2001089640

ISBN: 978-1-928706-12-0 (pbk.)

1. Gautama Buddha. I. Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, d.1960.

BQ882.L54 2001

294.3'63  
QBI01-200487

Cover design by Amy Cao

Cover photograph by Jerry Davis

Printed in China on acid-free, wood-free paper.

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Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

Sabba-pāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā,  
Sacitta-pariyodāpanaṃ; etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ.

To do no evil deeds, to give effect to good,  
To purify the heart; this is the Buddha's teaching.  
D. 14



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## KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Vin.	VINAYA PIṬAKA
Sv.	Sutta-vibhanga
Pārā.	Pārājika
Sangh.	Sanghādisesa
Pāc.	Pācittiya
Mv.	Mahāvagga
Cv.	Cullavagga

### SUTTA PIṬAKA

D.	Dīgha-nikāya
M.	Majjhima-nikāya
S.	Samyutta-nikāya
A.	Anguttara-nikāya

### Khuddaka-nikāya

Khp.	Khuddaka-pāṭha
Ud.	Udāna
Iti.	Itivuttaka
Sn.	Sutta-nipāta
Dh.	Dhammapada
Thag.	Theragāthā

References are to the chapter (*khandhaka*) and section number of the Mahāvagga and Cullavagga; to the rule number for the other books of the Vinaya Piṭaka; to the discourse by number or by group and number for the main books of the Sutta Piṭaka; and to verse number for the Dhammapada and Theragāthā.

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

This volume is published from the posthumous papers of the late Venerable Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, whose life sketch appears at the end of this book. The bulk of the book had received its final form by the author himself and the typescript had been carefully and neatly prepared by him. The introduction, however, was marked as a draft and appendices mentioned in the manuscript were not found among the author's papers. More than half of the texts in this book had been published before, in serial form, in a fortnightly Buddhist periodical, *Buddha Jayanthi* (Colombo, 1954–1956), though some renderings were different. For the present version, the late author had revised and considerably expanded his translation of canonical texts and had added the ingeniously devised framework of the book, incorporating ample material from non-canonical sources. This arrangement of the book is explained in the prefatory section, "Voices."

He had also experimented with new renderings of a number of doctrinal and other terms. But in the case of five of these, the editor thought it advisable to return to the author's earlier renderings as they appeared in *Buddha Jayanthi* and in his translation of the *Visuddhimagga*. References to some of these few alterations have been made in the editor's footnotes. As shown by handwritten changes in the manuscript, the author had found that some of his new renderings could not be consistently applied in all contexts—a fact that contributed to the editor's decision to prefer the author's earlier renderings in those few instances.

NYANAPONIKA THERA

Forest Hermitage  
Kandy, Ceylon  
September 1971

## NOTE TO THE THIRD EDITION

In this Third Edition of the Venerable Nāṇamoli's now classic *Life of the Buddha* a few minor inconsistencies of rendering in the earlier editions have been corrected, and again, a very few minor awkward syntactical formations have been straightened out. In addition, several standard Pali doctrinal terms that the author had translated have been retained in the Pali, as they have already become sufficiently familiar to readers of Buddhist literature and are now integral to English-language Dhamma terminology. These terms are "Buddha" (almost always rendered by the author as "the Enlightened One," which occasionally has been kept here for special effect); "Dhamma" (rendered by him as "Law"); "Sangha" (rendered by him as "Community"); and "Nibbāna" (often rendered in the original edition as "extinction").

All notes to the text appear in the form of backnotes. Those notes followed by "Nyp." in parenthesis are by Nyanaponika Thera, those followed by "BB" are by myself. All others are the author's.

New to this edition, too, is the List of Sources, which should enable students of the Pali suttas to easily locate texts familiar to them from other readings. The original nucleus of this directory was compiled years ago by Bhikkhu Nāṇajivako, but it has been expanded to make it as inclusive as possible.

BHIKKHU BODHI

# INTRODUCTION

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How little the European public at the end of the 18th century knew of the Buddha and his teaching was underlined by Gibbon in a footnote to Chapter LXIV of the *Decline and Fall*; he says that “the idol Fo” is “The Indian Fo, whose worship prevails among the sects of Hindustan, Siam, Thibet, China and Japan. But this mysterious subject is still lost in a cloud which the researches of our Asiatic Society may gradually dispel.” The fact was that plenty of reliable information had actually come to Europe from the East, but it was not published and remained in manuscript form locked away in libraries. For example, the Jesuit missionary Filippo Desideri brought back a long and accurate account both of the Buddha’s life and of his doctrine from Tibet in the first quarter of the eighteenth century: it remained unpublished for two hundred years. Other accounts had fared likewise.

Meanwhile, though, the “cloud” of mystery was dispersed by the researches of the nineteenth century only to be replaced by one of controversial dust raised by scholars’ battles, in which the newly discovered personality of the historical Buddha seemed to vanish again. Nevertheless, this too thinned out, and by the turn of that century the Buddha’s historical existence was no more questioned, documents were assessed, and texts established. Of those documents (whose number is enormous) the Pali Canon, or *Tipiṭaka* as it is called, was, and is still generally considered to be, the oldest: somewhat older than its Sanskrit counterpart, though some Sanskritists resist this opinion. With that, the Pali scholar T.W. Rhys Davids was able to write, a little over a century after Gibbon: “When it is recollected that Gotama Buddha did not leave behind him a number of deeply simple sayings, from which his followers subsequently built up a system or systems of their own, but had himself thoroughly elaborated his doctrine, partly as to details, after, but in its fundamental points even before, his mission began; that during his long

career as a teacher, he had ample time to repeat the principles and details of the system over and over again to his disciples, and to test their knowledge of it; and finally that his leading disciples were, like himself, accustomed to the subtlest metaphysical distinctions, and trained in that wonderful command of memory which Indian ascetics then possessed; when these facts are recalled to mind, it will be seen that much more reliance may reasonably be placed upon the doctrinal parts of the Buddhist Scriptures than upon corresponding late records of other religions.”

European literature on the history of Buddhism is now very extensive, and likewise on its literature and on its doctrines. The great measure of agreement achieved in the fields of history and literature, though, is still not reflected in that of doctrine. There have been, and are, numerous and various attempts made to prove that Buddhism teaches annihilation or eternal existence, that it is negativist, positiv-ist, atheist, theist, or inconsistent, that it is a reformed Vedānta, a humanism, pessimism, absolutism, pluralism, monism, that it is a philosophy, a religion, an ethical system, or indeed almost what you will. Nevertheless, the words of the Russian scholar Theodore Stcherbatsky, written in the late 1920s, apply today: “Although a hundred years have elapsed since the scientific study of Buddhism has been initiated in Europe, we are nevertheless still in the dark about the fundamental teachings of this religion and its philosophy. Certainly no other religion has proved so refractory to clear formulation.”

All the books in the Pali Tipiṭaka that contain historical matter and discourses are composed in the form of anthologies. The Book of Discipline (Vinaya Piṭaka) consists of collections of monastic rules with accounts of incidents, sometimes very long, relating in some way to their pronouncement. The Discourses in the Sutta Piṭaka are grouped together under many and various headings, but never historically (history for history’s sake has not interested India much at any time). Consequently a consecutive chronological account of the Buddha’s life has to be pieced together from material scattered all over the Vinaya and Sutta Piṭakas. That those books do contain a picture complete in itself and strongly contrasting in its simplicity with the ornate and florid later versions (the Sanskrit *Lalita Vistara*, for example, which inspired Sir Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, or the less known introduction to the Pali Birth Stories in Ācariya Buddhaghosa’s

Jātaka Commentary). Compared with these, the account it provides of the period up to the Enlightenment seems as lean and polished as a rapier, a candle flame or an uncarved ivory tusk.

In compiling this account all the canonical material (except the Buddhavaṃsa) dealing with the period from the Last Birth down to the second year after the Enlightenment, and that for the last year, which is practically all the chronology the Canon itself provides, has been included. What chronological evidence the Canon itself offers has been given first place. The next most authoritative Pali source (how reliable, it is difficult to say) is the Commentaries of Ācariya Buddhaghosa (sixth century A.C.), which place a lot more of the canonical stories in order down as far as the twentieth year after the Enlightenment, adding details, and also the Devadatta story. They add as well, a number of non-canonical incidents, which have not been included here. Lastly, there is a late Burmese work, the *Mālāṅkāravatthu* (fifteenth century? translated into English by Bishop Bigandet under the title *The Story of the Burmese Buddha*), which dates some more canonical incidents; but it has probably no real historical authority at all and has only been followed for want of other guidance. These are the three sources for the arrangement of events, themselves contained in the Tipiṭaka. Other canonical events of special interest, although undatable, have also been included here and there and in the “middle period.” One or two incidents, notably the deaths of King Bimbisāra and King Pasenadi, which are only given in the Commentaries, have also been added (their source being clearly indicated) because they round off certain scenes. The principal aim in compilation has been to include all important events with complete coverage up till the twentieth year after the Enlightenment and the last year. Chapters 9 and 10 are unavoidably episodic. Chapter 11 has been devoted to descriptions of the Buddha’s personality. But “personality” is a subject of central importance in Buddhist doctrine, and so Chapter 12, “The Doctrine,” is necessarily implied by that. In Chapter 12 the main elements of doctrine have been brought together roughly following an order suggested by the Discourses. No interpretation has been attempted (see below, however, paragraph on “translation”), but rather the material has been put together in such a way as to help the reader to make his own. A stereotyped interpretation risks slipping into one of the types of metaphysical wrong view, which the Buddha himself has

described in great detail. If Chapter 12 is found rather forbidding, let the last words of Anāthapiṇḍika (Ch. 6) be pleaded in justification for its inclusion, and those who do not find it to their taste will not read it, or all of it.

Pali (whose literature is very large) is a language reserved entirely to one subject, namely, the Buddha's teaching. With that it is unlike Buddhist Sanskrit or Church Latin: a fact that lends it a peculiar clarity of its own without counterpart in Europe. It is one of the Indo-European group and is closely allied to Sanskrit, though of a different flavour. The style in the Suttas (Discourses) has an economic simplicity, coupled with a richness of idioms, that makes it a very polished vehicle hard to do justice to in translation. That is the main problem; but there is also another, the special feature of the repeated verbatim passages, sentences and phrases, which occur again and again. This peculiarity is probably due originally to the fact that these "books" were intended for recitation (we in Europe are used to formal repetitions in symphonic music in the concert hall, and even to refrains in poetry, but in prose we find it strange). To the reader unused to them these repetitions, in the extent to which they appear in the Pali, seem disagreeable on a printed page. They have therefore for the most part been elided in translation by means of various devices, though always with particular regard to preservation of the original architectural form of the discourses, which is one of the most notable characteristics of the Buddha's utterances. At the same time, however, some repetitions have been retained, exploiting as they do the valuable technique of "discovery of the familiar." Such repeats, if verbatim in the Pali, are verbatim in the English too. In translation two principal aims have been literalness of rendering and idiomaticness of the rendered version: two aims not easy to reconcile. Any translation distorts. Great care, however, has been taken to render technical terms consistently (avoiding "elegant variation"), and the Pali for these will be found against the English equivalents in the Index. The choice of English equivalents has also been made with great care and with a view to assisting a coherent examination in its English form of material suitable for a study of ontology and a theory of perception and cognition that is embedded in the Discourses (not by accident, it would seem).

There are instances where the Commentaries' explanation of word-

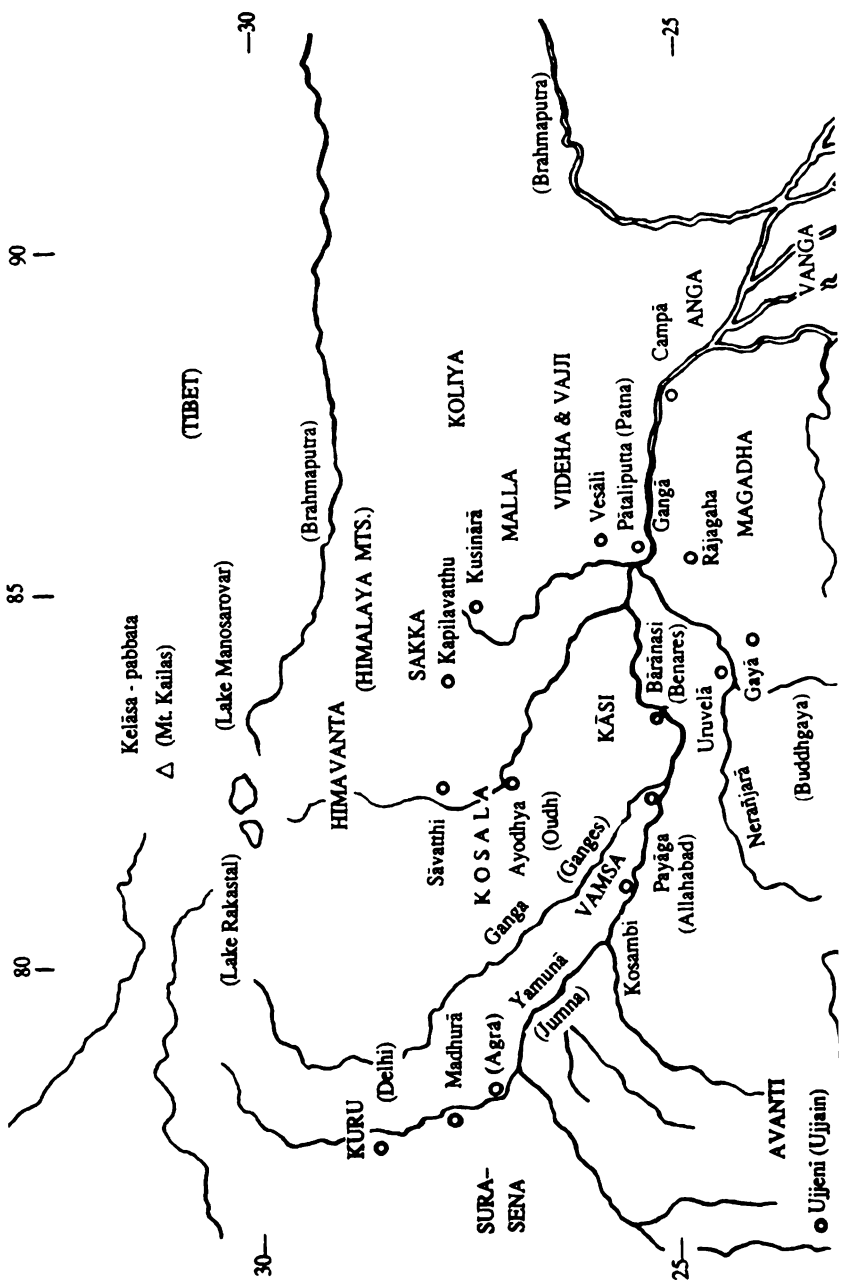
meanings conflicts with those given in the Pali Text Society's Dictionary. Preference has then, after consideration, been given to the former. The most important are dealt with in the notes.

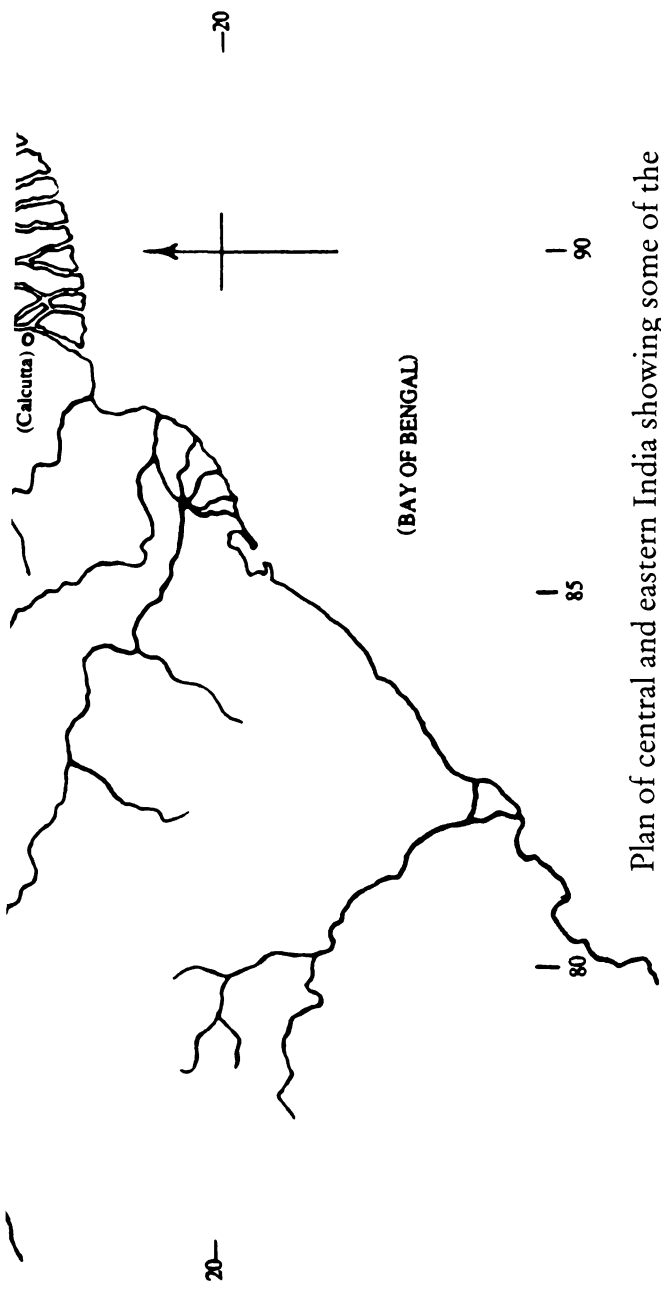
The pronunciation of Pali words and names is quite easy if these simple rules are followed: Pronounce 'a' as in countryman, 'ā' father, 'e' whey, 'i' chip, 'ī' machine, 'u' put, 'ū' rude, 'g' girl (always), 'c' church (always), 'j' judge (always), 'ñ' onion; ṭ, ḍ, ṇ, ḷ, with tongue on palate; t, d, n, l, with tongue on upper teeth; 'ṃ' as in sing; 'h' always separately, e.g. 'ch' as in which house, 'th' as in hot-house, 'ph' as in upholstery, etc.; double consonants always separately as in Italian, e.g. 'dd' as in mad dog (not madder), 'gg' as in big gun (not bigger), etc.; all others as in English. An 'o' and an 'e' always carry a stress, e.g. Pasenadi of Kosala, otherwise the stress always falls on a long vowel, ā, ī, or ū, or with a doubled consonant or 'ṃ,' even if consecutive.

Lastly, a word about the form of this compilation. The form of a "broadcast" (not intended for broadcasting) was suggested by the material itself, which as has been said was originally orally recited. The Vinaya Piṭaka itself suggests the "Voices" (see Ch. 16 and list of Voices preceding Ch. 1), which "rehearsed" the Canon at the Councils. The two "Narrators" are, as it were, two compeers. In contrast to what the "Voices" have to say, the "Narrators" parts have been deliberately flattened in style as well as kept to the minimum length.

BHIKKHU ÑĀṆAMOLI







Plan of central and eastern India showing some of the principal place names mentioned in the Pali Tipiṭaka with modern names in brackets (Sources: *Cambridge History of India*. Vol 1 Map 5, T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*)

## VOICES

**NARRATOR ONE.** A commentator, or compeer, of the present time, who introduces the others, and who represents a dispassionate onlooker with some general knowledge of the events.

**NARRATOR TWO.** A commentator who supplies historical and traditional information contained only in the medieval Pali commentaries (mainly those of the fifth century by the Elder Buddhaghosa). His functions are to give the minimum of such material needed for historical clarity and, occasionally, to summarize portions of the Canon itself.

**FIRST VOICE.** The voice of the Elder Ānanda, the disciple and personal attendant of the Buddha, who recited the Discourses (or Suttas) at the First Council, held at Rājagaha three months after the Buddha's attainment of final Nibbāna.

**SECOND VOICE.** The voice of the Elder Upāli, disciple of the Buddha, who recited the Discipline (or Vinaya) at the First Council.

**THIRD VOICE.** The reciter of events that took place actually during, or after, the First Council. He appears only in Chapter 16, and represents a member of the Second Council held one hundred years after the Buddha's attainment of final Nibbāna.

**CHANTER.** A reciter of certain verses in the form of short epics or hymns in the Canon not introduced with the traditional words of the Elder Ānanda, "Thus I heard," or included within the Discipline.

## THE BIRTH AND THE EARLY YEARS

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**NARRATOR ONE.** Indian history actually begins with the story of the Buddha Gotama's life: or to put it perhaps more exactly, that is the point where history as record replaces archaeology and legend; for the documents of the Buddha's life and teaching—the earliest Indian documents to be accorded historical standing—reveal a civilization already stable and highly developed which can only have matured after a very long period indeed. Now the Buddha attained his complete enlightenment at Uruvelā in the Ganges plain, which is called the "Middle Country." As distances are reckoned in India, it was not very far from the immemorial holy city of Benares. His struggle to attain enlightenment had lasted six years, and he was then thirty-five years old. From that time onward he wandered from place to place in central India for the space of forty-five years, constantly explaining the Four Noble Truths that he had discovered. The final Parinibbāna took place as it is now calculated in Europe, in the year 483 B.C. (traditionally on the full-moon day of the month of May). The period through which he lived seems to have been outstandingly quiet with governments well organized and a stable society, in marked contrast with what must have gone before and came after.

**NARRATOR TWO.** *Three months from the time of the Buddha's Parinibbāna* his senior disciples who survived him summoned a council of five hundred senior monks in order to agree upon the form in which the Master's teaching should be handed down to posterity. Among these five hundred, all of whom had realized enlightenment, the Elder Upāli was the acknowledged authority on the rules of conduct for the Sangha or monastic order, which are called the "Vinaya" or "Discipline." In lay life a barber, he had gone forth into the life of homelessness along with the Buddha's cousin, Ānanda, and others. He was appointed to recite before the council the rules of conduct together with the circumstances that caused

them to be laid down. The main part of the “Coffer of the Discipline” (the Vinaya Piṭaka) was composed there from his recitation.

When he had finished, the Elder Ānanda was invited to recite the Discourses. During the last twenty-four years of the Buddha’s life he had been the Buddha’s personal attendant, and he was gifted with an extraordinary memory. Almost the whole of the collections of discourses in the “Coffer of Discourses” (the Sutta Piṭaka) was composed from his recitation of them with their settings. The Elder Upāli began each account with the words *tena samayena* “the occasion was this,” but the Elder Ānanda prefaced each discourse with an account of where and to whom it was spoken, beginning with the words *evam me sutam*, “thus I heard.”

**NARRATOR ONE.** This narrative of the Buddha’s life is taken from those two “Coffers.” How they survived to this day is a story to be given later on; but here, to begin with, is the account of the Buddha’s last birth, told by himself and related afterwards at the Council by the Elder Ānanda. The words were actually spoken in the Buddha’s own language now known as Pali.

**FIRST VOICE.** Thus I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One<sup>1</sup> was living at Sāvatti in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park. Then a number of bhikkhus<sup>2</sup> were waiting in an assembly hall where they had met together on return from their alms-round after their meal was over. Meanwhile it was being said among them: “It is wonderful, friends, it is marvellous how the Perfect One’s power and might enable him to know of past Buddhas who attained the complete extinction of defilement, cut the tangle, broke the circle, ended the round, and surmounted all suffering: such were those Blessed Ones’ births, such their names, such their clans, such their virtue, such their concentration, such their understanding, such their abiding, such the manner of their deliverance.”

When this was said, the venerable Ānanda told the bhikkhus: “Perfect Ones are wonderful, friends, and have wonderful qualities; Perfect Ones are marvellous and have marvellous qualities.”

However, their talk meanwhile was left unfinished; for now it was already evening and the Blessed One, who had risen from retreat, came to the assembly hall and sat down on the seat made ready. Then he asked the bhikkhus: “Bhikkhus, for what talk are you gathered together here now? And what was your talk meanwhile that was left unfinished?”

What the bhikkhus and the venerable Ānanda had said was related, and they added: “Lord, this was our talk meanwhile that was left unfinished; for the Blessed One arrived.” Then the Blessed One turned to the venerable Ānanda: “That being so, Ānanda, explain the Perfect One’s wonderful and marvellous qualities more fully.”

“I heard and learned this, Lord, from the Blessed One’s own lips: Mindful and fully aware the Bodhisatta, the Being Dedicated to Enlightenment, appeared in the Heaven of the Contented.<sup>3</sup> And I remember that as a wonderful and marvellous quality of the Blessed One.

“I heard and learned this, Lord, from the Blessed One’s own lips: Mindful and fully aware the Bodhisatta remained in the Heaven of the Contented.

“For the whole of that life–span the Bodhisatta remained in the Heaven of the Contented.

“Mindful and fully aware the Bodhisatta passed away from the Heaven of the Contented and descended into his mother’s womb.

“When the Bodhisatta had passed away from the Heaven of the Contented and entered his mother’s womb, a great measureless light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared in the world with its deities, its Māras and its Brahmā divinities, in this generation with its monks and brahmans, with its princes and men.<sup>4</sup> And even in those abysmal world interspaces of vacancy, gloom and utter darkness, where the moon and sun, powerful and mighty as they are, cannot make their light prevail—there too a great measureless light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared; and the creatures born there perceived each other by that light: ‘So it seems that other creatures have appeared here!’ And this ten–thousandfold world–system shook and quaked and trembled; and there too a great measureless light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared.

“When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother’s womb, four deities came to guard him from the four quarters, so that no human or non–human beings or anyone at all should harm him or his mother.

“When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother’s womb, she became intrinsically pure, refraining by necessity from killing living beings, from taking what is not given, from unchastity, from false speech, and from indulgence in wine, liquor and fermented brews.

“When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother’s womb, no thought of man associated with the five strands of sensual desires came to her at all, and she was inaccessible to any man with lustful mind.

“When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother’s womb, she at the same time possessed the five strands of sensual desires; and being endowed and furnished with them, she was gratified in them.

“When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother’s womb, no kind of affliction arose in her: she was blissful in the absence of all bodily fatigue. As though a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread were strung through a fine beryl gem of purest water, eight-faceted and well cut, so that a man with sound eyes, taking it in his hand, might review it thus—‘This is a fine beryl gem of purest water, eight-faceted and well cut, and through it is strung a blue, yellow, red, white, or brown thread’—so too the Bodhisatta’s mother saw him within her womb with all his limbs, lacking no faculty.

“Seven days after the Bodhisatta was born, his mother died and was reborn in the Heaven of the Contented.

“Other women give birth after carrying the child in the womb for nine or ten months; but not so the Bodhisatta’s mother. She gave birth to him after carrying him in her womb for exactly ten months.

“Other women give birth seated or lying down; but not so the Bodhisatta’s mother. She gave birth to him standing up.

“When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother’s womb, first deities received him, then human beings.

“When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother’s womb, he did not touch the earth. The four deities received him and set him before his mother, saying: ‘Rejoice, O queen, a son of great power has been born to you.’

“When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother’s womb, just as if a gem were placed on Benares cloth, the gem would not smear the cloth or the cloth the gem—why not?—because both are pure, so too the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother’s womb unsullied, unsmearred by water or humours or blood or any sort of impurity, clean and unsullied.

“When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother’s womb, two jets of water appeared to pour from the sky, one cool and one warm, for bathing the Bodhisatta and his mother.

“As soon as the Bodhisatta was born, he stood firmly with his feet on the ground; then he took seven steps to the north, and, with a white sunshade held over him, he surveyed each quarter. He uttered the words of the Leader of the Herd: ‘I am the Highest in the world, I am the Best in the world, I am the Foremost in the world; this is the last birth; now there is no more renewal of being in future lives.’

“When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother’s womb, a great measureless light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared in the world with its deities, its Māras, and its Brahmā divinities, in this generation with its monks and brahmans, with its princes and men. And even in those abysmal world interspaces of vacancy, gloom and utter darkness, where the moon and sun, powerful and mighty as they are, cannot make their light prevail—there too a great measureless light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared; and the creatures born there perceived each other by that light: ‘So it seems that other creatures have appeared here!’ And this ten-thousandfold world-system shook and quaked and trembled; and there too a great measureless light surpassing the splendour of the gods appeared.

“All these things I heard and learned from the Blessed One’s own lips. And I remember them as wonderful and marvellous qualities of the Blessed One.”

“That being so, Ānanda, remember also this as a wonderful and marvellous quality of a Perfect One: A Perfect One’s feelings of pleasure, pain or equanimity are known to him as they arise, known to him as they are present, and known to him as they subside; his perceptions are known to him as they arise, known to him as they are present, and known to him as they subside; his thoughts are known to him as they arise, known to him as they are present, and known to him as they subside.”

“And that also I remember, Lord, as a wonderful and marvellous quality of the Blessed One.”

That is what the venerable Ānanda said. The Master approved. The bhikkhus were satisfied, and they delighted in the venerable Ānanda’s words.

M. 123; cf. D. 14



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