

TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA

Great Disciples *of the Buddha*



Their Lives,
Their Works,
Their Legacy

Nyanaponika Thera
& Hellmuth Hecker

EDITED BY BHIKKHU BODHI

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Nyanaponika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker

Edited with an Introduction by Bhikkhu Bodhi



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CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Credits	xi
Abbreviations	xiii
Editor's Introduction	xv
1. SĀRIPUTTA: THE MARSHAL OF THE DHAMMA	1
Prologue	3
The Quest for the Dhamma	4
<i>Early Life</i>	4
<i>The Original Aspiration</i>	11
<i>Sāriputta in the Jātakas</i>	13
Sāriputta the Man	16
<i>The Chief Disciple</i>	16
<i>The Helper</i>	21
<i>The Unresentful</i>	25
<i>Friendships and Relatives</i>	29
<i>The Meditator</i>	34
The Turner of the Wheel	39
<i>The Suttas</i>	39
<i>Expository Works</i>	44
<i>The Abhidhamma</i>	45
The Further Shore	47
<i>The Last Debt Paid</i>	47
<i>Cunda Sutta</i>	55
<i>Ukkacelā Sutta</i>	57
Discourses of Sāriputta	59
<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>	59
<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>	61
<i>Anguttara Nikāya</i>	61
<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>	64
2. MAHĀMOGGALLĀNA: MASTER OF PSYCHIC POWERS	67
Youth	69
Wandering and Spiritual Search	71
Finding the Dhamma	75

The Struggle for Realization of the Teaching	78
The Most Excellent Pair of Disciples	83
Moggallāna's Psychic Powers	88
<i>Penetration of Others' Minds (Thought Reading)</i>	92
<i>The Divine Ear (Clairaudience)</i>	93
<i>The Divine Eye (Clairvoyance)</i>	93
<i>Travel by Mind-Made Body (Astral Travel)</i>	94
<i>Telekinesis (Supernormal Locomotion)</i>	95
<i>The Power of Transformation</i>	96
Moggallāna's Previous Lives	97
<i>Moggallāna's Verses</i>	98
The Last Days of Moggallāna	100
Moggallāna's Death	101
3. MAHĀKASSAPA: FATHER OF THE SANGHA	107
Kassapa's Early Years	109
Bhaddā Kapilānī	112
The Sāmsāric Background	114
How Kassapa Came to the Buddha	117
Kassapa's Relationship to the Buddha	119
Encounters with Deities	123
Relations with Fellow Monks	125
After the Buddha's Parinibbāna	130
The Verses of Mahākassapa	133
4. ĀNANDA: GUARDIAN OF THE DHAMMA	137
Ānanda's Personal Path	139
Ānanda's Renown	141
The Buddha's Attendant	147
The Guardian of the Dhamma	150
Ānanda's Attitude Toward Women	154
Ānanda and His Fellow Monks	158
Conversations with the Buddha	161
Ānanda's Former Lives	163
<i>Jātaka 498</i>	164
<i>Jātaka 421</i>	164
<i>Jātaka 282</i>	165
The Last Days of the Buddha	166
After the Buddha's Parinibbāna	179

5. ANURUDDHA: MASTER OF THE DIVINE EYE	183
Early Life and Ordination	185
The Struggle for Arahantship	188
Anuruddha's Spiritual Path	191
Life in the Sangha	194
Anuruddha and Women	199
Anuruddha's Earlier Lives	204
The Buddha's Parinibbāna and Afterward	208
6. MAHĀKACCĀNA: MASTER OF DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION	211
Introduction	213
The Saṃsāric Background	214
Kaccāna's Conversion to the Dhamma	216
Various Incidents	219
The Elaborator of Brief Statements	222
<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>	224
<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>	229
<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>	232
Other Teachings of Mahākaccāna	234
The <i>Theragāthā</i> Verses	240
The Exegetical Treatises	242
7. GREAT WOMEN DISCIPLES OF THE BUDDHA	245
Visākhā: The Buddha's Chief Patroness	247
Mallikā: The Flower-girl Queen	255
Khemā of Great Wisdom	263
Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā: The Debating Ascetic	269
Kisāgotamī: The Mother with the Dead Child	273
Soṇā with Many Children	279
Nandā: The Buddha's Half-sister	282
Queen Sāmāvati: Embodiment of Loving-kindness	285
Paṭācārā: Preserver of the Vinaya	293
Ambapālī: The Generous Courtesan	300
Sirimā and Uttarā	304
Isidāsī: A Journey through Saṃsāra	310
8. AṅGULIMĀLA: A MURDERER'S ROAD TO SAINTHOOD	317
The Making of a Serial Killer	319
Aṅgulimāla Becomes a Monk	322

CONTENTS

“Born with the Noble Birth”	327
Aṅgulimāla’s Verses	330
9. ANĀTHAPIṆḌIKA: THE BUDDHA’S CHIEF PATRON	335
Anāthapiṇḍika Becomes a Disciple	337
The Wealthy Patron	341
Anāthapiṇḍika’s Family	345
Anāthapiṇḍika and His Friends	348
Discourses by the Blessed One	351
The Death of Anāthapiṇḍika	360
10. SHORTER LIVES OF THE DISCIPLES	363
The Householder Citta	365
The Bhikkhu Citta	372
Father and Mother Nakula	375
Notes	379
Bibliography	393
Contributors	395
Index	397

PREFACE

WHILE IN RECENT YEARS in the West oceans of ink have been expended on books dealing with the Buddha and his Teaching, the first two Jewels of Buddhism, the coverage given to the third Jewel, the Sangha, has been far from adequate. Even the meaning of the word “sangha” has been a matter of dispute, while for those without access to the original Pāli texts a dense cloud of obscurity still hangs over the Buddha’s original nucleus of disciples. This gap is all the more glaring because the very measure of the Buddha’s success as a spiritual teacher is to be determined by his skill in training his disciples. The canonical verse of homage to the Buddha hails him as “the unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed,” and thus the acid test for the validity of this claim must be the mettle of the men and women who submitted to his guidance. Just as the sun is valued not only for its own intrinsic radiance but also for its ability to illuminate the world, so the brilliance of the Buddha as a spiritual master is determined not only by the clarity of his Teaching but by his ability to illuminate those who came to him for refuge and to make them luminaries in their own right. Without a community of disciples to testify to its transformative power, the Teaching, the Dhamma, would be merely a package of doctrines and formal practices, admirably lucid and intellectually rigorous, but remote from vital human concerns. The Dhamma comes to life only to the extent that it touches life, ennobling its followers and turning them into models of wisdom, compassion, and purity.

The present book is an attempt to fill this gap in Western Buddhist literature with living portraits of twenty-four of the most distinguished disciples of the Buddha. The book evolved from a series of individual tracts on the great disciples issued by the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) under its well-known imprint, The Wheel. The first biography to appear was *The Life of Sāriputta* by the Venerable Nyanaponika Thera. This was first published in 1966 as an independent monograph, with no intention to initiate an ongoing series. In the same year, however, the German Buddhist author Hellmuth Hecker began publishing short biographical profiles of the great disciples in the German Buddhist periodical *Wissen und Wandel* (established in 1955 by Paul Debes). Over the next twenty years *Wissen und Wandel* carried forty-one such portraits, many quite short.

In the late 1970s the idea occurred to Ven. Nyanaponika, then the editor of the BPS, to follow up his study of Sāriputta with a line of Wheel titles on the other great disciples, using the articles by Dr. Hecker as a basis. Thus between 1979 and 1989 there appeared, as individual Wheel booklets, portraits of Mahāmoggallāna, Ānanda, Aṅgulimāla, Anāthapiṇḍika, Mahākassapa, Anuruddha, and eight prominent women disciples. These had been translated into English either by Ven. Nyanaponika himself or by others at his request. Finally, in 1995 I wrote a booklet on the Elder Mahākaccāna, which was the last to appear in the series.

Almost all the original articles by Dr. Hecker were considerably enlarged by Ven. Nyanaponika with additional material gathered from the Pāli Canon and its commentaries, and deepened with his own insightful reflections. In preparing this comprehensive volume from the original booklets I have made substantial alterations in almost all the older versions and added still more material to give a fuller picture of the disciple under scrutiny. The chapter on the women disciples has been expanded by the addition of four profiles that were not in the original Wheel, although a full-length treatment of individual women comparable to the studies of the leading male disciples was not possible owing to the sparsity of source material. A thorough stylistic revision of the original portraits was also necessary.

I have retranslated almost all the verses, which in the Wheel booklets were often quoted from older translations composed in a style that would strike present-day readers as stilted. To leaven the prose accounts I have added still more verses, particularly from the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*. Unless indicated otherwise all verse translations are my own, though my verse renderings from the two collections just named lean heavily upon the literal prose translations by K.R. Norman, published as *Elders' Verses*, parts 1 and 2.

I would like to thank my long-time assistant at the BPS, Ayyā Nyanasirī, who first reviewed the original Wheels with the idea of reissuing them in a single volume. I also thank Mrs. Savithri Chandraratne, who diligently and accurately typed the manuscripts into the computer. I am grateful to Wisdom Publications for its collaboration in the publication of this book, particularly to Sara McClintock, whose editorial comments led to major improvements.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

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“Shorter Lives of the Disciples.” Adapted from a translation by Mudita Ebert. First published as BPS Wheel No. 115 (1967).

Translations from the Pāli sources are by the respective authors, unless otherwise noted. Verse translations are by Bhikkhu Bodhi, unless otherwise noted.

ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (by section and sutta)
Ap.	Apadāna (i = Thera-apadāna, ii = Therī-apadāna; by chapter and section; Burmese-script ed.)
BL	<i>Buddhist Legends</i> (Dhp. Comy.)
BPS	Buddhist Publication Society (Kandy, Sri Lanka)
Comy.	Commentary
Dhp.	Dhammapada (by verse)
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (by sutta number)
Jāt.	Jātaka (by number)
Mil.	Milindapañha
MN	Majjhima Nikāya (by sutta number)
PTS	Pali Text Society (Oxford, England)
Pv.	Petavatthu
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya (by chapter and sutta)
Snp.	Suttanipāta (by verse, or sutta)
Thag.	Theragāthā (by verse)
Thig.	Therīgāthā (by verse)
Ud.	Udāna (by chapter and sutta)
Vin.	Vinaya (by volume and page)
Vism.	Visuddhimagga (chapter and paragraph of <i>The Path of Purification</i>)
Vv.	Vimānavatthu (by verse)

All references are to PTS editions unless otherwise noted.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE PLACE OF DISCIPLESHIP IN BUDDHISM

AS A RELIGIOUS FOUNDER the Buddha did not claim to be a divinely inspired prophet, a personal savior, or a deity incarnate in flesh. Within the framework of his Teaching, the Dhamma, his special role is that of a teacher, the Supreme Teacher who reveals the unique path to final deliverance. In the earliest form of the Teaching, as represented by the Pāli Canon, no essential difference divides the goal attained by the Buddha himself from that realized by his disciples. For both the goal is the same, *Nibbāna*, the perfect liberation of the mind from all constricting bonds and the consequent release from *samsāra*, the round of repeated birth and death.

The differences between the Buddha and his disciples concern, first, the temporal sequence of their attainment and, second, the personal qualities which they acquire through their realization of the goal. In terms of temporal sequence, the Buddha is the discoverer of the path to *Nibbāna*, while his disciples are those who tread the path under his guidance and thereby gain the fruit: “The Tathāgata, monks, is the originator of the path unarisen before, the producer of the path unproduced before, the declarer of the path undeclared before. He is the knower of the path, the finder of the path, the one skilled in the path. And his disciples now dwell following that path and become possessed of it afterwards. This, monks, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened One, and a monk liberated by wisdom” (SN 22:58).

In terms of personal qualities, the Buddha, as the founder of the *sāsana*, the teaching or “Dispensation,” possesses a vast array of skills and modes of knowledge that are not fully shared by his disciples. These cognitive faculties include not only certain thaumaturgical powers but also the unimpeded knowledge of the constitution of the world with its many planes of existence and a thorough understanding of the diverse mental proclivities of sentient beings.¹ Such faculties are necessary to enable the Buddha to fulfill his essential mission of establishing the Dispensation in the world at large and of guiding countless beings to liberation from suffering.

Since the Buddha's aim when he first “set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma” was to lead sentient beings to *Nibbāna*, the very structure of

his Teaching presupposes a relationship of discipleship between himself and those who hearken to his message. The Buddha is the fully enlightened teacher (*sattthā*); his Teaching (*sāsana*) is an injunction to undergo a particular course of training; and those who conform to the demands of discipleship do so by following his injunction (*sāsanakara*) and complying with his advice (*ovādapapaṭikara*). Even at the close of his ministry, as he lay on his deathbed between the twin *sāla* trees at Kusinārā, he declared that it was not by external acts of homage that the Tathāgata, the Perfect One, was properly worshiped, but by the consistent and dedicated practice of the Dhamma (DN 16).

The course of discipleship under the Buddha begins with an act of faith (*saddhā*). Faith, for Buddhism, is not an unquestioning assent to propositions beyond the range of possible verification but a readiness to accept on trust the claim that the Buddha makes about himself: that he is the Fully Enlightened One, who has awakened to the deepest, most crucial truths about the nature of sentient existence and who can show the path to the supreme goal. The placing of faith in the Buddha's Enlightenment is manifested by the process of "going for refuge" to the Three Jewels of Buddhism (*tiratana*): to the Buddha as one's mentor and spiritual guide; to his Teaching, the Dhamma, as the most perfect expression of existential truth and the flawless path to liberation; and to the Ariya Sangha, the community of noble ones, as the corporate embodiment of wisdom and spiritual purity. Faith necessarily leads to action, to the undertaking of the training, which in concrete terms means the implementation in one's life of the guidelines the Buddha has laid down for his followers. These guidelines vary widely in dependence on the situation and aptitude of the disciple. Certain sets of guidelines are more appropriate for lay followers, others more appropriate for monastics, and it is the disciple's task to make the right choice among them. But all such guidelines, originating from different starting points, eventually converge upon a single path, universal and unique, leading infallibly to the final goal. This is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to the cessation of suffering, with its three divisions of virtue (*sīla*: right speech, right action, right livelihood), concentration (*samādhi*: right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration), and wisdom (*paññā*: right view, right intention).

Those who accept the Buddha as teacher and attempt to follow his path are his *sāvaka* (Skt. *śrāvaka*), his disciples. The category of discipleship cuts across the conventional distinction between the monastic order and the lay community and thus embraces the traditional "four assemblies" of Buddhist followers: *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* (monks and nuns)

and *upāsakas* and *upāsikās* (laymen and laywomen). Although later texts of the Mahāyāna tradition speak of the *sāvakas* as if they formed a distinct class of disciples—a class contrasted unfavorably with the bodhisattvas—the early Buddhist scriptures do not know any such distinction but use the word *sāvaka* broadly to refer to all those who accept the Buddha as their master. The word is derived from the causative verb *sāveti*, “to inform, to declare,” and thus means those who declare the Buddha to be their master (or perhaps those to whom the Dhamma has been declared). In the early texts *sāvaka* is used not only as a designation for the Buddha’s disciples but also for the followers of other spiritual systems in relation to their own mentors.

TWO TYPES OF DISCIPLES

Within the wide circle of the Buddha’s followers a critical distinction is drawn between two types of disciples, the ordinary disciples and the noble disciples. The differences that divide them do not pertain to outward form and mode of life but to inward spiritual stature. Such differences will become clearer if we discuss them in the light of the worldview that underlies both the Buddhist tradition as a whole and the biographical profiles that constitute the substance of the present volume.

The compilers of the Buddhist scriptures accept as axiomatic a worldview that differs significantly from the picture of the universe bequeathed to us by modern science. This worldview is characterized by three basic and interrelated premises. The first is that the sentient universe is a multitiered edifice, with three primary realms divided into a number of subsidiary planes. The grossest tier is the *sense-desire realm* (*kāmadhātu*), which consists of eleven planes: the hells, the animal kingdom, the sphere of ghosts, the human realm, the sphere of titans, and the six sensuous heavens; of these, only the human realm and the animal kingdom are normally accessible to our natural sense faculties. Above the sense-desire realm is the *fine-material realm*, or the realm of subtle form (*rūpadhātu*), an ascending series of some sixteen exalted planes which are the ontological counterparts of the *jhānas*, the meditative absorptions; here the grosser aspects of matter have faded away and the beings enjoy far greater bliss, peace, and power than is ordinarily accessible in the terrestrial realm. Finally, at the pinnacle of the Buddhist cosmos is the *immaterial realm* (*arūpadhātu*), four planes of extremely attenuated nature corresponding to the four immaterial meditative absorptions (*ārūppajhāna*): here matter has disappeared completely and the denizens are of a purely mental constitution.²

The second axiom concerns rebirth. Buddhism holds that all unenlightened beings, those who have not eradicated ignorance and craving, are bound to be reborn within the three realms. The course of transmigration is without discoverable beginning. It is propelled from within by ignorance and craving, which drive the stream of consciousness from death to new birth in a repeatedly self-sustaining process. This uninterrupted succession of births and deaths is called *saṃsāra*, “the wandering on,” the round of repeated existence.

The third axiom is the principle that determines the sphere of rebirth. This is what the Buddha calls *kamma*, action, specifically volitional action. According to the Buddha, all our morally determinate volitional actions are subject to an inescapable law of retribution. Our deeds leave behind, in the ongoing stream of consciousness, a potential to produce results (*vipāka*), to bring forth fruits (*phala*), which appear when the accumulated *kamma* meets with external conditions congenial to its germination. *Kamma* determines not only the specific plane into which one is reborn but also our inherent capacities and propensities and the basic direction of our lives. The mode by which *kamma* operates is an ethical one: unwholesome *kamma*—deeds motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion—brings a bad rebirth and engenders pain and suffering; wholesome *kamma*—deeds inspired by generosity, kindness, and wisdom—leads to a good rebirth and to happiness and well-being.³

Since all experience within the round of rebirth is impermanent and unsatisfactory, the ultimate aim for early Buddhism is to break free from this self-generating cycle and thereby win the unconditioned state, *Nibbāna*, where there is no more birth, aging, and death. This is the goal the Buddha himself attained as the culmination of his own noble quest, and it is also the goal he constantly set before his disciples. The distinction between the two types of disciples pertains to their relationship to this goal. The class of ordinary disciples, which is by far the more numerous of the two, consists of those who are still technically classed as worldlings or commoners (*puthujjana*). Such disciples may have sincerely gone for refuge to the Three Jewels and may be fully devoted to the practice of the Dhamma, but despite their earnestness they have not yet reached the plane where liberation is irrevocably assured. They have not yet seen the Dhamma for themselves, nor eliminated the mental fetters, nor entered irreversibly upon the path to final emancipation. Their present mode of practice is preparatory in character: it is intended to bring their spiritual faculties to maturity so that, in due course, they may enter upon the supramundane path. Until that experience dawns, however, they must

wander on through the round of rebirths, uncertain of their future destination, still liable to moral lapses and even to rebirth in the lower realms.

In contrast to this class stands the class of noble disciples, the *ariyasāvaka*.⁴ These disciples have surmounted the plane of the worldlings, have arrived at the stage of irreversibility, and are assured of reaching the final goal in a maximum of seven more births. What has raised them from the status of a worldling to the plane of spiritual nobility is a radical transformation that has occurred at the very base of the mind. This transformation may be viewed from two complementary perspectives, one cognitive, the other psychological. The suttas refer to the cognitive aspect as the gaining of the vision of the Dhamma (*dhammacakkhu-paṭilābha*) and the breakthrough to the Dhamma (*dhammābhisamaya*).⁵ Such an event, altering one's destiny for all time, generally takes place after the disciple has fulfilled the preliminary requisites of the training and has been engaged in the practice of insight meditation (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*). As deepening insights into the true nature of phenomena bring to maturity the faculty of wisdom (*paññā*), at a certain point, when all conditions are ripe, the mists of ignorance momentarily disperse, affording the disciple an immediate glimpse of the unconditioned element, the Deathless, which is the precondition and final term of the whole process of liberation.

When this vision dawns the disciple becomes a true heir to the Buddha's message. The texts describe such a disciple as "one who has seen the Dhamma, reached the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma, who has overcome all doubt and perplexity, and become self-sufficient in the Master's Teaching" (e.g., at MN 74). Even though the vision may still be clouded and imperfect, the disciple has won access to the ultimate truth and it is only a matter of time until, by diligent practice, he or she brings this vision to its culmination in enlightenment (*sambodhi*), the complete experiential understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

The other aspect of the transformation which the disciple undergoes pertains to the constitution of the psyche. It consists in the permanent elimination of certain unwholesome mental dispositions called defilements (*kilesa*). For purposes of exposition, the defilements are usually classified into a set of ten fetters (*saṃyojana*), called thus because they hold beings in bondage to the round of rebirths. From the suttas it appears that in exceptional cases a disciple with a high degree of wisdom from previous lives can cut off all ten fetters at a single stroke, thereby advancing in one leap from the stage of a worldling to that of an *arahant*, a fully liberated one. The more typical process of attainment, however, is a calibrated one whereby the fetters are cut off sequentially, in discrete

clusters, on four different occasions of awakening. This results in a four-fold gradation among the noble disciples, with each major stage subdivided in turn into two phases: a phase of the path (*magga*), when the disciple is practicing for the elimination of the particular cluster of fetters; and a phase of the fruit (*phala*), when the breakthrough is complete and the fetters have been destroyed. This subdivision explains the classical formula of the Ariya Sangha as made up of four pairs and eight types of noble persons (*yadidaṃ cattāri purisayugāni aṭṭhapurisapuggalā esa bhagavato sāvakaśaiḥho*).

The first stage of awakening is called *stream-entry* (*sotāpatti*), because it is with this attainment that the disciple can properly be said to have entered “the stream of the Dhamma” (*dhammasota*), i.e., the Noble Eightfold Path that leads irreversibly to Nibbāna. Stream-entry is won with the first arising of the vision of the Dhamma and is marked by the eradication of the coarsest three fetters: personality view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), the view of a substantial self within the empirical person; doubt in the Buddha and his Teaching; and wrong grasp of rules and vows (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*), the belief that mere external observances (including religious rituals and penitential forms of asceticism) can lead to salvation. With the cutting off of these three fetters the stream-enterer is freed from the prospect of rebirth in the plane of misery (*apāyabhūmi*), the three lower realms of the hells, the animal kingdom, and the sphere of spirits or “hungry ghosts.” Such a one is certain to attain final liberation in at most seven more lifetimes passed either in the human world or in the heavens.

The next major stage of awakening is that of the *once-returned* (*sakadāgāmi*), who will be reborn only one more time in the human realm or in the sense-sphere heavens and there reach the ultimate goal. The path of once-returning does not eradicate any fetters beyond those already eliminated by the path of stream-entry. It does, however, attenuate the three root defilements—greed, hatred, and delusion—so that they arise only sporadically and then only in a mild degree.

The third path, that of the *non-returned* (*anāgāmi*), cuts off two deep roots of emotional turbulence within the psyche: the defilements of sensual lust and ill will, the fourth and fifth fetters, which are removed in all their manifold guises, even the subtlest. Because these two fetters are the principal ties that keep living beings bound to the sense-desire realm, the non-returned, as the name implies, never returns to this realm. Rather, such a one is spontaneously reborn in one of the exalted form-realm heavens called the Pure Abodes (*suddhāvāsa*), accessible only to non-returneds, and there attains final Nibbāna without ever coming back to this world.

The fourth and final stage of noble discipleship is that of arahantship (*arahatta*), which is attained by the elimination of the five subtle fetters that remain unabandoned even in the non-returner: desire for existence in the form realm and formless realm, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. As ignorance is the most deeply grounded of all the defilements, when the path of arahantship arises fully fathoming the Four Noble Truths, ignorance collapses, bringing all the other residual defilements along with it. The mind then enters upon “the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, attained by the destruction of the taints”—the state that the Buddha calls the unsurpassed consummation of the holy life.

The arahant is the fully accomplished disciple of early Buddhism, the perfect model for the entire Buddhist community. Even the Buddha himself, with respect to his liberation, is described as an arahant, and he declared the arahants to be his equals in regard to the destruction of defilements. For the arahant there is no further task to be achieved and no falling away from what has been achieved. He or she has completed the development of the noble path, has fully understood the true nature of existence, and has eradicated all the mind's bonds and fetters. For the duration of life the arahant abides in unruffled peace, in the experiential realization of Nibbāna, with a mind stainless and secure. Then, with the breakup of the body at the end of the life span, he or she reaches the end of the entire process of re-becoming. For the arahant death is not the passageway to a new rebirth, as it is for all others, but the doorway to the unconditioned state itself, the Nibbāna-element without residue of conditioned existence (*anupādisesa-nibbānadhātu*). This is the true cessation of suffering to which the Buddha's Teaching points, the final termination of the beginningless round of birth and death.

THE GREAT DISCIPLES

It is often believed that early Buddhism recognized only one Buddha—the Buddha Gotama, Sakyamuni—and that the conception of multiple Buddhas was an innovation belonging to the stage of Buddhist thought preceding the rise of the Mahāyāna. The Pāli Nikāyas, our oldest integral source for the most archaic phase of Buddhism, belie this assumption. The suttas regularly mention six Buddhas of antiquity, the predecessors of Gotama, and in one text (DN 14) the Buddha gives detailed information about their careers. Elsewhere he prophesies the arising of a future Buddha to be named Metteyya, who will rekindle the light of the true Dhamma in an age of spiritual darkness (DN 26). In the later literature of the Theravāda

school the list of past Buddhas is increased to twenty-seven. It was under the twenty-fourth of these a Buddha named Dīpaṅkara, that the being who was to become the Buddha Gotama received his original prediction to future Buddhahood.⁶

The specific function of a Buddha within the historical and cosmic process is to rediscover and proclaim the lost path to Nibbāna. For Buddhism, history does not unfold in a straight line from creation to apocalypse. It develops, rather, in repetitive cycles of growth and decline nested within the wider cycles of the cosmic process. World systems arise, evolve, and disintegrate, replaced by new world systems arisen from the ashes of the old. Against this background, boundless in space and time, sentient beings migrate from life to life within the three realms of existence. All existence within the round is burdened with suffering; it is transient, unstable, insubstantial, beginning with pain at birth and ending with pain in old age, sickness, and death. Periodically, however, from amid the dark labyrinths of saṃsāra, a being arises—always in the human realm—who unravels the intricate tangle of conditions that sustain this process of bondage and thereby discovers, by his own unaided wisdom, the lost path to Nibbāna, the unconditioned state of perfect bliss, peace, and freedom. This being is a Buddha.

A Buddha not only rediscovers the path to Nibbāna but he also establishes a sāsaṇa, a Dispensation, to give countless other beings the opportunity to learn the Dhamma and to tread the path to the goal. To facilitate progress along the path each Buddha founds a Saṅgha, an order of renunciant monks and nuns, who leave behind the household life to take upon themselves the full yoke of his discipline, the *brahmacariya* or holy life. Each Buddha teaches the Dhamma freely and openly to all four classes of disciples—monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen—showing them the courses of conduct that lead to higher rebirths within the round of existence and the path to release from the entire vicious cycle. Even for those who fail to reach the first stage of noble discipleship, the arising of a Buddha is still an auspicious event; for by going for refuge to the Three Jewels, making offerings to the Buddha and his Saṅgha, and undertaking the practice of his Teaching, beings plant seeds of merit with the most sublime potency for producing favorable fruits. Such seeds of merit, when they mature, not only bring lofty forms of rebirth, but lead these beings into contact with future Buddhas, thereby enabling them to hear the Dhamma again and, when their faculties are fully ripened, to attain realization of the paths and fruits of liberation.

From among their retinues of noble disciples every Buddha appoints a number of particular disciples as the most eminent in certain special fields.

First the Buddha appoints, at the head of the entire Sangha, two bhikkhus as chief disciples (*aggasāvaka*), who share with him the major responsibilities for the instruction of the monks and the administration of the Sangha as a whole. Of these two, one is also the foremost in wisdom, the other in the exercise of psychic powers. In the Dispensation of our present Buddha, Gotama, these two posts were held by the arahants Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna. In addition, every Buddha appoints one bhikkhu as his personal attendant (*upaṭṭhāka*) to look after his needs, to function as the intermediary between himself and the general public, and to accompany him on his preaching rounds. For our present Buddha, this post was held by the Venerable Ānanda, who was also known as the Guardian of the Dhamma for his role in preserving the Buddha's discourses.

These most elevated and intimate posts by no means exhaust the range of great discipleship. The Pāli Canon contains one chapter in the Aṅguttara Nikāya called the *Etadaggavagga* ("This-One-Is-Chief" Chapter; AN 1; chap.14) in which the Buddha creates eighty categories of great disciples: forty-seven among the bhikkhus, thirteen among the bhikkhunīs, and ten each among the male and female lay followers. For each of these posts he appoints a foremost disciple, though in a few instances a single disciple excels in several categories. For example, among the monks there is one who is foremost among "those with a gentle voice"—Lakuṇṭaka Bhaddiya; one who is foremost among those who compose spontaneous verse—Vaṅgīsa; one who is foremost among those who have gone forth out of faith—Raṭṭhapāla, etc. The Bhikkhuni Sangha is headed by two chief bhikkhunis: Khemā, who is foremost in wisdom, and Uppalavaṇṇā, who is foremost in psychic powers. But there is also a nun who excels in mastery over the discipline—Paṭācārā; one foremost in energy—Soṇā; one foremost in the recollection of past lives—Bhaddā Kapilānī, etc. Among the laymen there is a chief patron—Anāthapiṇḍika; a foremost preacher—Citta the householder; one foremost in attracting a retinue—Hatthaka of Ālavi, etc. And among the laywomen there is a chief patroness—Visākhā; one foremost in learning—Khujjuttarā; one foremost in spreading loving-kindness, Sāmāvatī, etc.

The canonical chapter on the great disciples is extremely terse, mentioning only the category and the name of the disciple appointed as pre-eminent in that sphere. It is to the Pāli commentaries, and in particular to the commentary on the *Etadaggavagga*, that we must turn to learn the background to these appointments. Such commentarial accounts certainly stem from a later period than the suttas, but although they betray their later origins with their profusion of legend and hyperbole, they indicate

clearly enough that the appointments related in the canon itself in each case consummate a process of spiritual growth that began long ago in the dim recesses of the past.

Each story, though differing in details, conforms to the same paradigm. During the Dispensation of a past Buddha a certain supporter of his sees him designate one of his disciples as preeminent in a particular field. Rather than strive for immediate attainment of the supramundane path under that Buddha, the devotee forms an aspiration (*paṭṭhanā, abhinihāra*) to attain, under a future Buddha, the same post of preeminence as that to which the great disciple was assigned. To prepare for the announcement of this aspiration, the devotee makes abundant offerings to the Buddha and his Sangha, pays homage at the Master's feet, and then declares his or her heart's resolve. The Blessed One then directs his mind into the future and sees, with his knowledge of omniscience, that the aspiration will succeed under a future Buddha to be named Gotama. Thereupon he gives the disciple the prediction (*veyyākaraṇa*) that the aspiration will be fulfilled. In the case of the two chief disciples, Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna, the initial aspiration was made under the past Buddha Anomadassī, the eighteenth Buddha preceding Gotama; in the case of the other great disciples, it was made under the Buddha Padumuttara, the fifteenth Buddha of antiquity.

After forming the aspiration and receiving the prediction, the aspirant to great discipleship must devote successive lives to the accumulation of the merits and knowledge necessary for its fulfillment. This requires the assiduous practice of ten sublime virtues called the *pāramī*, the Pāli counterpart of the *pāramitā* of Sanskrit Buddhism. The Pāli sources enumerate ten *pāramī*: giving, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.⁷ While the Mahāyāna systems regard the practice of the six *pāramitā* as the specific chore of the bodhisattvas, the candidates for supreme Buddhahood, later Theravāda doctrine (as represented by the Pāli commentaries) considers them as in some measure obligatory for all aspirants to enlightenment, whether as supreme Buddhas, *paccekabuddhas*, or arahant disciples.⁸

The difference between these three classes of enlightened beings concerns the length of time the *pāramī* must be fulfilled and the demands involved in bringing them to perfection. Candidates for supreme Buddhahood must practice the *pāramī* for a minimum of four incalculables (*asaṅkheyya*) and one hundred thousand aeons, and must fulfill them in three degrees of severity: ordinary, superior, and supreme. Candidates for the enlightenment of a *paccekabuddha* must fulfill the *pāramī* for two

incalculables and one hundred thousand aeons. In the case of arahant disciples the requirements vary considerably depending on the mode in which the final goal is to be realized. Those who aspire to be chief disciples must practice them for one incalculable and one hundred thousand aeons; candidates for great discipleship, for one hundred thousand aeons; and candidates for arahantship of lesser stature, for a correspondingly lesser period of time.⁹

This stipulation helps us to understand one particularly striking feature which runs through many of the biographical sketches that we will encounter in this volume: the astonishing speed and suddenness with which the great disciples attain realization. The wanderer Sāriputta, for example, on his first meeting with a Buddhist monk, became a stream-enterer while listening to a four-line stanza. Mahākaccāna, while still a court brahmin, attained arahantship at the end of a discourse by the Buddha. The royal consort Khemā attained arahantship even while still wearing her regal attire. At first impulse one might be tempted to dismiss such rapid attainments as just another example of hagiographic fervor, but when we take the saṃsāric background into account we can then see that such instances of “sudden enlightenment” are by no means as fortuitous as they might appear. Their abrupt occurrence is not a defiance of the normal laws of spiritual growth but the culmination of a long, slow process of prior preparation—spread out over countless lives against a vast cosmic backdrop—that nurtured all the requisites of enlightenment to maturity. It was because the disciples brought along, unknown even to themselves, such rich accumulations of merit and wisdom from their past existences that their initial encounter with the Buddha and his Dhamma could prove so immediately efficacious.

THE PRESENT BOOK

The present book is a collection of biographical profiles, of varying length, of twenty-four eminent disciples of the Buddha: one authored by the late Venerable Nyanaponika Thera (the life of Sāriputta), one by myself (the life of Mahākaccāna), the others all by Hellmuth Hecker.¹⁰ While we aim to be as informative as the scope of this volume will allow, our underlying purpose is not so much to weave together reams of factual data as it is to provide a source of inspiration and edification for those devoted to the spiritual ideals of early Buddhism. Our profiles rarely attempt to evaluate the various accounts of the disciples' lives from an objective standpoint in order to distinguish fact from pious fiction, and thus we make no pretense to unimpeachable historical authenticity. The

approach we have adopted places the author's perspective within the material, as that of an empathetic witness and advocate, rather than outside it as a disinterested scholar and judge. Whether or not all the events recorded in the texts actually occurred in the way they are reported is for us of less importance than the insights our sources give us into how the early Buddhist community viewed its models of the spiritual life. Thus, instead of attempting to sift through the material from a historicist point of view, we have recorded exactly what the texts themselves tell us about the great disciples and their careers, linking together the disconnected source citations with our own reflections and comments.

The proper way to approach this book, then, is as an exercise in contemplation rather than as an enterprise of objective scholarship. The Buddha says that contemplation of the noble disciples is an essential part of the meditative life. It is an aspect of the contemplation of the Sangha (*saṅghānussati*), one of the six recollections he frequently recommended to his followers.¹¹ To contemplate the noble ones, who broke the bonds of egotism and reached the heights of purity and wisdom, is a great encouragement for those who still find themselves far from deliverance. By their example these exalted persons inspire us with confidence in the emancipating power of the Dhamma. Their lives demonstrate to us that the spiritual ideals posited in the Teaching are not mere fantasy but can be achieved by real human beings struggling against the same human infirmities that we find within ourselves. When we study their lives we see that those great disciples had begun as ordinary human beings like ourselves, beset by the same hindrances, the same difficulties, that beset us. But by placing trust in the Buddha and his Teaching and by wholehearted application to the practice of the path they could surmount all the limitations we blandly take for granted and rise to a dimension of true spiritual nobility.

In the pages that follow we will explore the careers and characters of these great Buddhist disciples, who stand at the very fountainhead of the entire Buddhist tradition. We will examine their past-life backgrounds and early experiences, their struggles for enlightenment, their attainments and teachings, their activities as members of the Buddha's retinue, and (when known) the manner of their death. All this is just as much a part of the Buddhist heritage as the formal doctrines and practices of Buddhism: not mere fragments of ancient history, dead and vapid, but a living and luminous legacy that has come down to us at this critical juncture of human history, when our very survival hinges on the capacity for self-transcendence of the kind that these disciples so vividly demonstrate by their lives.

The principal criterion on which we relied in selecting disciples for study

was their spiritual stature and prominence within the Dispensation. This criterion, however, had to be balanced by another factor which severely limited our choices, namely, the availability of relevant source material. Contrary to expectations based on present-day attitudes, the amount of biographical data the classical texts contain on a particular disciple is not always proportional to his or her spiritual eminence and role in the Buddha's ministry. The Buddha's circle of great disciples included monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, who are extolled most highly by the Master, yet about whom hardly any noteworthy information has been handed down. To take but one example: the Venerable Upāli was the chief specialist in the Vinaya, the monastic discipline, and the monk responsible for the codification of the original *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the Compilation of Discipline, at the First Buddhist Council; yet the biographical information that has been preserved about him would barely fill a page. The problem of sparse source material becomes even more acute when we turn to the women disciples, as I will discuss at greater length below. But with the men as well, once we leave the circle of monks whose lives intersected most closely with the Buddha's, the accounts become terse even to the point of silence. Apparently, with their insight sharpened by the contemplation of the non-self nature of all phenomena, the ancient Buddhists were not particularly keen on compiling biographies of "selfless persons."

Despite this formidable limitation, by combing the canonical texts and commentaries we were able to collect sufficient material for biographical studies of twenty-four disciples. We begin with six chapters on elder bhikkhus or monks: Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna, the two chief disciples, who shared most fully the Buddha's burden of establishing the Dispensation through the forty-five years of his ministry; Mahākassapa, who became the de facto leader of the Sangha after the Master's demise and whose foresight ensured that the Dispensation would survive; Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant, whose prodigious memory enabled him to preserve the vast treasures of the Dhamma and protect it from the ravages of time; Anuruddha, another cousin of the Buddha, who excelled in the exercise of the divine eye, the faculty of supernormal vision; and Mahākaccāna, the foremost disciple in the detailed analysis of the Master's brief utterances. Although, in two or more of these biographies, accounts of the same incidents are sometimes repeated—for example, the early careers of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and the preliminaries to the First Council in the lives of Mahākassapa and Ānanda—we have retained these repetitions in order to keep each individual biography intact. Such repetition also serves to highlight the same incident from the personal per-

spectives of the different disciples involved and thus offers us a more complete picture of events.

The next chapter is a study of twelve outstanding women disciples, including both bhikkhunīs and laywomen. A sensitive reader might protest that by relegating all the women disciples to a single chapter, while devoting nine chapters to male disciples, the authors have shown an unfair sense of gender balance. To this complaint I, as editor, can only reply that the lack of proportion in the treatment of the male and female disciples does not stem from any bias on the part of the authors but reflects the distribution of material in the sources. While we would have liked to include studies of individual women comparable in depth and detail to the studies of the men, the material seldom lent itself to anything fuller than short sketches focusing on the events that led the women to seek refuge in the Buddha and their experiences of awakening. Sometimes, sadly, not even that much material was at hand. For example, Uppalavaṇṇā was the second chief disciple in the Bhikkhunī Sangha, yet her biographical sketch (in the commentaries) consists almost entirely of a long story of a previous life—straining on contemporary sensibilities—followed by a few terse paragraphs on her historical life as a nun in the Buddhist Order. The chapter on women disciples also includes one laywoman who did not reach any stage of noble attainment. This is Mallikā, the chief queen of King Pasenadi of Kosala. Although Mallikā did not attain stream-entry, and by reason of one bizarre moral lapse was even briefly reborn in hell, she was one of the most deeply devoted of the Buddha's supporters whose conduct was in all other respects exemplary. The nun Isidāsī, whose story concludes the chapter, was probably not a direct disciple of the Buddha, as internal evidence suggests her poem may have been composed even a century after the Master's demise; but as her story is found in the canonical *Therīgāthā*, and is of intrinsic interest, we have included it in this volume.

The chapter on the women disciples is followed by a portrait of a bhikkhu who does not rank among the eighty great disciples but whose life story is still of almost mythical stature. This is the monk Aṅgulimāla. In his early years he had been a serial killer of the cruelest and most brutal kind, but through the intercession of the Buddha he was converted from a life of crime to a life of sanctity and became the virtual "patron saint" of pregnant women. Next we will study the life and achievements of the Buddha's chief patron, the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, who offered the Buddha his favorite monastic residence and who represents in many respects the ideal lay Buddhist. Finally we will conclude our survey with a series of short sketches of four disciples, including the other prominent

lay disciple, Citta the householder, whose understanding of the Dhamma and skills in meditation won the admiration of many monks.

SOURCES

The principal source from which we have drawn material for our portraits of the great disciples is the Pāli Canon, the scriptural collection of Theravāda Buddhism, preserved in the Middle Indo-Aryan language now known as Pāli. This collection consists of three “baskets” or compilations: the *Sutta Piṭaka* or Compilation of Discourses, the *Vinaya Piṭaka* or Compilation of Discipline, and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* or Compilation of Philosophical Treatises.¹² This last compilation, consisting of technical tracts of psycho-philosophical analysis, was almost completely irrelevant to our purposes, while the Vinaya Piṭaka was of use primarily on account of its background stories to the disciplinary rules rather than its own proper subject matter, the rules and regulations of the monastic order.

The Sutta Piṭaka has thus turned out to be the foundation stone of our biographical studies. This compilation consists of four major collections: the *Dīgha Nikāya* or Long Discourses; the *Majjhima Nikāya* or Middle Length Discourses; the *Samyutta Nikāya* or Connected Discourses, short suttas in fifty-six chapters united by a common theme; and the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* or Numerical Discourses, short suttas structured according to a numerical pattern ranging from the Ones to the Elevens. It is in the Ones Division of the Āṅguttara Nikāya that we find the *Etadaggavagga*, the “This-One-Is-Chief” Chapter, where the Buddha designates the eighty foremost disciples.

Besides the four main collections the Sutta Piṭaka includes a fifth collection called the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, literally the Minor Collection, which yet turns out to be the most voluminous portion of this “basket.” Within this miscellaneous collection of texts we find four works especially relevant to the lives of the great disciples. Two of these form a pair: the *Theragāthā*, the Verses of the Elder Monks, consisting of 1,279 verses ascribed to 264 bhikkhus; and the *Therīgāthā*, the Verses of the Elder Nuns, consisting of 494 verses ascribed to seventy-three bhikkhunīs. In these works the elders of the ancient Buddhist Sangha relate in verse the events that led them to a life of renunciation, their attainment of enlightenment, and their insights into the Dhamma. Although many of these verses are purely didactic (and have parallels elsewhere in the canon) a significant portion are at least vaguely autobiographical, while even the didactic verses afford us glimpses into the personality of the disciple who utters them.

The third work of the Minor Collection that contributed to this book is the *Jātaka* collection. While the canonical *Jātaka* book consists solely of verses barely intelligible when read alone, the full *Jātaka* collection (found in the *Jātaka Commentary*) contains 547 “birth stories” in which the canonical verses are embedded. These stories relate the exploits and adventures of the Bodhisatta, the future Buddha Gotama, during his past existences as he fared from life to life accumulating the virtues that would flower with his attainment of Buddhahood. Nurtured by the luxuriant Indian imagination, these tales draw fable and fantasy into the service of the Dhamma as a medium for conveying lessons in Buddhist ethics. The stories become relevant to a study of the great disciples through their preambles and epilogues. The preamble relates the incident in the Buddha’s ministry which elicited from him the story to follow; often these incidents mirror events from the distant past that involved previous incarnations of his prominent disciples. In the epilogue the Buddha identifies the characters from the past birth with those dwelling in his present milieu (e.g., “Moggallāna was the elephant of those days, Sāriputta was the monkey, and I myself was the wise partridge”), thereby enabling us to discover the saṃsāric background of the disciples.

A fourth book of the Minor Collection, being entirely in verse and of late origins, has been used sparingly. This is the *Apadāna*, an anthology in which the monks and nuns who gained arahantship under the Buddha speak about their meritorious deeds in past lives and, occasionally, about their attainment of liberation in their last existence. The work has two main divisions: the *Thera-apadāna* or Tales of the Elder Monks (fifty-five chapters with ten tales each), and a much shorter *Therī-apadāna* or Tales of the Elder Nuns (four chapters with ten tales each).

The next body of source material we have drawn upon, second in importance only to the canon, is the Pāli commentaries. Among the numerous commentaries to the canon, four were of special value to our undertaking, apart from the *Jātaka Commentary* mentioned just above, which is in a class of its own. One is the commentary to the *Etadaggavagga* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, found in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, the complete commentary to the *Aṅguttara*. This is ascribed to Ācariya Buddhaghosa, the greatest of the Pāli commentators, who based his work on the ancient Sinhala commentaries (no longer extant) that had been preserved at the Mahāvihāra (the Great Monastery) in Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka. The commentary to this chapter gives biographical reports on each of the disciples declared preeminent in a particular sphere. Each story is molded upon a similar pattern. It begins with the occasion in the past existence when the disciple made his or

her original aspiration to chief discipleship, highlights incidents from a few past lives when he or she performed some deed of exalted merit, and then relates the events in the last life that brought the disciple into contact with the Buddha. Usually the story culminates in their appointment to the post of great disciple, but occasionally it continues beyond to relate incidents in their career as members of the Master's entourage.

Two other commentaries of biographical interest are those to the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*. These are both entitled *Paramatthadīpanī* and are attributed to Ācariya Dhammapāla of Badaratittha, who worked in South India, perhaps a century later than Buddhaghosa; they are evidently based on older documents and reflect the exegetical principles of the Mahāvihāra. These two commentaries partly replicate the material in the commentary to the Aṅguttara Nikāya (sometimes with interesting variations), incorporate substantial excerpts from the *Apadāna*, and also explain the incidents that prompted the disciples to utter the particular verses assigned to them.

Still a fourth commentary that proved to be a mine of useful material, even though often fanciful, was the Dhammapada Commentary. The authorship of this work is traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa, though this claim is sometimes questioned by present-day scholars. Underlying this commentary is the premise that each verse (or string of verses) found in the *Dhammapada* was uttered by the Buddha in response to a particular incident. The purpose of the commentary is to narrate the course of events that prompted the Buddha to speak that verse, but often it takes us back in time beyond the immediate background incident to the whole complex web of circumstances that culminated in the verse. Sometimes the commentary relates a cycle of background stories that even extends into previous lives, thereby revealing the kammic background to the happenings that unfolded around the Buddha and his disciples.

A NOTE ON METHOD

It should be stressed that apart from the background stories in the commentaries, none of the source material at our disposal contains anything even approximating connected, coherent biographies of the great disciples. Indeed, in the entire Pāli Canon we do not find even a connected biography of the Buddha; the earliest attempt at this, in the Pāli tradition, seems to be the *Jātaka-nidāna*, the introduction to the Jātaka Commentary. The commentary to the Etadaggavagga, which is our fullest source of biographical information on the disciples, tends to place greater emphasis on their past

saṃsāric history than on their careers under the Buddha, and other commentaries offer at most explanations of particular incidents rather than of entire lives. Thus the biographical profiles that make up this book had to be constructed piecemeal from the bricks and beams of the textual heritage, which we have attempted to fashion into orderly wholes with the cement of our own personal reflections and interpretative comments.

Further, to make our task even more difficult, the redactors of the Pāli Canon did not structure their narratives according to a principle of continuous flow, such as we would expect from a modern biography or even a news report. Being participants in an essentially oral tradition rather than a literary one, they preferred to treat events in a staccato manner, subordinating fluid literary grace to the pedagogical and mnemonic demands of their discipline. We can only hope that the narratives we have fashioned out of the abrupt, discontinuous flashes of events recorded in the ancient texts do not show too many obtrusive seams.

In our treatment of the material at our disposal we have tried to be as comprehensive as is realistically possible within the limits of a single volume such as this. We did, however, rely upon certain specific criteria to govern the selection of events to be included. In all likelihood these are basically the same as the criteria that the redactors of the Pāli Canon looked to when compiling the texts: namely, to select those incidents and anecdotes which most clearly convey a vivid picture of the disciple's character as a model for the Buddhist community to emulate, or which reveal distinctive aspects of his or her approach to the practice and understanding of the Dhamma. We also wanted to include some of the material on the past lives of the disciple; for although this is almost certainly legendary, it does disclose the way the early Buddhist community perceived the formative influences at work in that disciple's life. But as this material often had to be drawn from later texts like the Apadāna and Jātakas, we did not want to include so much that it would drive the more historically based material from the ancient Nikāyas into the background. The verses from the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* were also used. Sometimes, in a given biography, these are discussed all together in a section of their own, and sometimes they are integrated into the general profile.



This book can be used most effectively if the biographical profiles are read for the purpose for which they were originally written, namely, for spiritual inspiration and edification. They should not be read in the same frame of mind with which one reads a novel. It is suggested that the reader

should not try to read more than one chapter per day. One should “make friends” with the particular disciple one is learning about, reflect on his or her life and teachings, and seek to discover the universal implications that life story has for present-day humanity. Only on the next day, at the earliest, should one take up the next chapter. As these accounts can cast a spell of fascination over the mind, it is important to curb one’s curiosity and repeatedly remind oneself why one is reading this collection. The proper reason should be: not for the sake of interesting anecdotes and romantic images of a bygone period, but to uplift one’s spiritual vision with the living portraits of those who fulfilled the early Buddhist ideals of human perfection.