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The Significance of Former Buddhas in the Theravādin Tradition

RICHARD GOMBRICH

The Venerable Dr. Walpola Sri Rahula is distinguished as a scholar by his unique combination of qualities: a mastery of the minutiae of traditional and modern Buddhist learning, coupled with a catholic interest in world religions and world problems which sees Buddhism as a part of human civilisation. This breadth of perspective I cannot of course attempt to match; but it may serve as my excuse for offering in his honour a few conjectural observations on a subject which only makes sense in a comparative context: the question of the Buddha's originality.

For Buddhists the true doctrine, the Dhamma, exists eternally: it is the truth, true whether anyone knows it or not. This view of truth is quite familiar in the West. It is relevant to an important difference between Buddhism and Christianity as historical religions: for Christianity the historicity of Jesus is crucial and affects the authenticity of his message, whereas Buddhists believe that the Dhamma would be true whether the Buddha existed or not. This difference has influenced the attitudes taken by the adherents of these religions to the hagiographies of their founders, as Rahula has pointed out: 'Just as there has been a vigorous search for the "historical Jesus" by Christian and other Western-oriented scholars, so also among some Western Orientalists there has been a scholarly search for the "historical Buddha", the history of whom the Buddhists themselves never questioned and which had never interested them or posed a problem of importance for them.'

The importance of a Buddha is this: that he discovers the Dhamma and then proclaims it to the world. This simply makes it easier for others to realise the truth; they do not have to work it out for themselves from first principles, but can become acquainted with it through the words of the Buddha. To hear the doctrine is far short of realising its truth, but it is a useful short cut on the first stage of the long journey towards Enlightenment. This is the Buddhist position: as the true doctrine is always there, no true originality is possible in addressing this most important of questions, the question of salvation.

Now let us view the problem from another angle. If we compare Buddhism to the other world religions, we may be struck by the conscious and explicit originality of its founder. Most great religious teachers and founders of religious institutions, whatever their actual originality, have claimed that they were reformers rather than innovators; that they were reintroducing a true doctrine or correct mode of life which had been known before but had

been forgotten or corrupted. Often they have further palliated their originality by disclaiming full responsibility for their message, attributing it to an outside source — a god — of which they are but the mouthpiece.

The Buddha was completely different. The standard of orthodoxy in India was then, as it still is now, whether one paid lip service to the authority of the Vedas, and hence venerated the brahmins as the sole bearers of the Vedic text (which was not written down) and Vedic traditions. The functional equivalent in India of an atheist in western society is someone who does not accept the Vedas as authoritative. Such an acceptance does not imply any view of what the Vedas mean; it is simply the minimal statement that the Vedas are inspired and not to be questioned. There were several religious teachers living in India in the sixth century B.C. who rejected this claim and all that it implied; in particular, they rejected the brahmin claim to innate superiority. The Buddha discussed the question: 'Who is a true brahmin?' much as an Englishman of former times might have discussed the question: 'Who is a true gentleman?', and answered, as our understanding of the latter question implies, that behaviour, not birth, is the true criterion.² He also condemned the sacrificial cult which was the core of Vedic ritual, and insisted that to kill animals was always wrong.³

The Buddha was not in all respects the most iconoclastic teacher in his milieu; certainly his voice was not the angriest. But on two very important points he may be said to have gone the furthest. First, he not only condemned all ritual as useless — a radical position, but one in which he was not unique — but proclaimed a pure ethic of intention: the moral value of the act lies solely in the intention behind it.⁴ It may not have been pointed out before that this leads logically to the second aspect of his radicalism. That second aspect is that he not only rejected the authoritarian claims of the Vedas, claims made by their brahmin guardians, but he further rejected all claims that an authority could guarantee salvation, that blind acceptance of another's word could lead to the ultimate good.⁵ Certainly he regarded himself as authoritative in so much as he had seen the Truth; but confidence in his authority he declared to be no more than a prerequisite for beginning one's own spiritual quest. Given this start, any human being could attain to the same insight, and thus become equally authoritative.

For the maintenance of institutions in time and space an authority structure does seem to be necessary, and it is not surprising that a rudimentary one grew up in the Sangha even within the Buddha's lifetime; rather it is remarkable how rudimentary that structure has remained in some Buddhist countries. But this authority structure has always been concerned with externals, with orthopraxy, not with questions of orthodoxy or heresy. In matters of belief, Buddhism still lacks a formal authority structure, and it is every man for himself.

However, for the maintenance of a religious teaching this position is not really adequate. To attract newcomers, a view of non-empirical reality

requires more backing than the testimony of an isolated individual speaking for himself. The Buddha, after his Enlightenment, reached the decision to preach, and set out to do so. The first person he met was a wandering ascetic called Upaka. The Buddha made to him a triumphant announcement of his Enlightenment, to which Upaka replied: 'It may be so,' and proceeded on his way.⁶

How to guard against Upakas? The problem may have started in the next generation, with the Buddha's disciples; or perhaps it was already felt by the Buddha himself.

The Buddha took full responsibility for his message, and did not claim that it had been conveyed to him by a superior power; in this respect he followed the pattern of Indian religious teachers of his time. But he differed from them in his failure to authenticate his position by reference to a long line of teachers. Sages proclaiming bold ideas in the Upaniṣads at least presented their credentials by listing their teachers, their genealogy in sacred lore, all the way back to some mythical culture hero such as an inspired reciter of the original Veda. The fabrication of such a genealogy for the Buddha, however, presented insuperable difficulties. Not only did his account of his Enlightenment make it quite clear that it was all his own work, independent of any teaching; the story of his spiritual quest⁷ further specified that he had studied with two teachers and learnt all that they had to give him, but abandoned them as inadequate.

The Buddha's authentication could therefore only be mythological. It is here that we may find the fundamental *raison d'être* for the doctrine of previous Buddhas. A model lay close at hand, in Jainism. The Mahāvīra, who was a junior contemporary of the Buddha, saw himself as a reformer in the tradition of Pārśva, a teacher who had been dead for some time. He called himself and Pārśva 'Tirthaṅkara' – 'ford-maker'; the metaphor suggests that they helped others to cross the turbulent ocean of phenomenal existence. Mahāvīra held that Pārśva, like himself, was not a true originator, but continued a line of ford-makers stretching back to time immemorial. The universe proceeded in vast temporal cycles, and within the present cycle, within our part of the universe, he himself was the twenty-fourth Tirthaṅkara. There does not appear to have been a period before Jainism acquired the theory of the twenty-four Tirthaṅkaras, or any reason why the doctrine should not have been part of Mahāvīra's own teaching. That the analogous Buddhist doctrine of previous Buddhas was influenced by Jainism seems much more likely than that the Jains borrowed their doctrine from the Buddhists. In particular, the precise number 24, apparently original in Jain doctrine, probably entered Buddhism only some centuries after the Buddha.

However, important parts of the doctrine of previous Buddhas do go back to the early strata of the Buddhist Canon, and in particular to the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Firstly, the *Dīgha Nikāya* already contains the important Buddhist tenet, the relevance of which to our subject will soon appear, that the uni-

verse can have no beginning, since nothing can arise without a cause. It also contains various cosmological myths, not all of them *prima facie* compatible. None of them however deny the basic premise of all Indian cosmologies of that period, whether Hindu or heterodox: that the universe proceeds in vast temporal cycles. In general, each cycle begins with a golden age and declines towards a final holocaust, the decline being caused by a diminution of virtue, however defined, and signalised by an increase in misery, of which a decreasing life-span is the best index. Competing Buddhist cosmological theories were rendered compatible, probably first by early commentators on the Canon, by placing different kinds of cycles within each other,⁸ creating vast units with names like 'uncountable' (*asamkheyya*). The resultant picture was of an infinite universe proceeding through unimaginably lengthy cycles and epicycles of decline and resurgence. We find ourselves, a dot in this infinity, approaching the bitter end of a cycle of decline; but we are fortunate enough to be alive on one of those few oases in the eternal desert when the Dharma has been promulgated and our chance of salvation enhanced.

It is important to understand that this cosmology allows the line of Buddhas stretching into the past and the future to be infinite. That it *is* infinite is certainly the view that developed; it is however not stated in the earliest texts on the subject, though it may be implicit. The main text on previous Buddhas is the *Mahāpadāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya XIV)*.⁹ The Buddha's message in this lengthy sermon appears to be that the life of each person born to be a Buddha follows a rigid pattern, to which his own life has conformed. To illustrate this, he tells the story of Vipassin, six Buddhas back; how he was born to every luxury in a royal family, how he became acquainted with old age, sickness and death, while on visits to a park, and how he renounced the world, realised the truth, and founded a *sāsana*. Viewed historically, the sermon reverses the true situation: it claims that the Buddha's career has been patterned after that of his predecessors, while we can see that the account of his six predecessors is patterned on the story of Gotama's own life. The fact that the famous story of Gotama's luxurious early life and dramatic renunciation is not found in the Canon – in Pali literature it does not occur before the *Nidāna-kathā*, which in its present form need not antedate the fifth century A.D. – thus appears to be unimportant for determining its antiquity; its existence is presupposed by the story of Vipassin. To say, as E. J. Thomas did,¹⁰ that the story of Gotama is modelled on the story of Vipassin, seems far-fetched.

The Buddha gives accounts of the five other Buddhas between Vipassin and himself in identical terms. Of each he just records the same few details: the eon in which they were born, the maximum life-span in that period, their social rank (brahmin or *kṣatriya*), their family name, parents' names, birthplace, the ruling monarch,¹¹ the kind of tree under which they attained Enlightenment, the number of their direct disciples who became Enlighten-

ed, and the names of their two chief disciples and principal personal attendant. Almost all the proper names seem to be pure inventions of no significance whatever. About the numbers, two points are worthy of attention. The maximum life-span and the number of Enlightened disciples show consistent decline: Vipassin's personal disciples numbered millions, Gotama Buddha's only 1250; the life-span under Vipassin was 80,000 years, now it is only a hundred. On the other hand, there is a striking irregularity about the dispersion of the seven Buddhas in time. Vipassin lived ninety-one eons ago; the next two Buddhas both lived thirty-one eons ago; and the last three Buddhas before Gotama have all been in this same eon in which we are living. Gotama is thus the fourth Buddha within one eon — a fortunate state of affairs for us.

Let us now look at the former Buddhas in the bulk of the Canon: the four *Nikāya* and the other texts which are sure to be older than the *Buddhavamsa* (see below).¹² The first three of these six former Buddhas, Vipassin and the two who follow him, have no individuality which is not a direct reflection of Gotama Buddha. They are only mentioned in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, in a text¹² which virtually replicates part of that sermon, in lists and in the introduction to the *Sutta-vibhanga* of the *Vinaya-piṭaka*. This last passage¹³ says that those three Buddhas were slack about leaving texts for their disciples' guidance (giving them personal counselling instead), so that Buddhist practice did not long survive their deaths, whereas the converse is true of the last three Buddhas before Gotama: Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa. The last three occur in another text, the *Vepulla pabbata Sutta*.¹⁴ In this sermon the Buddha says that the beginning of *saṃsāra* is incalculable, unthinkable. He says of Mount Vepulla that under the three previous Buddhas it was larger; it is diminishing steadily, and so is the maximum life-span of the local inhabitants. He gives the name of the mountain and that of the inhabitants at each period, and specifies the two chief disciples of each Buddha. The content of the text is not interesting; but its existence may explain why these three Buddhas joined Gotama to form a sub-set, the Buddhas of our eon.

There is no other mention of Koṇāgamana. Kakusandha does make one distinctive appearance, in the *Māra-tajjaniya Sutta*.¹⁵ In this very odd sermon, the only one of which we know which seems to have been delivered on the toilet, Moggallāna tells Māra that in the time of Kakusandha Buddha he (Moggallāna) was a Māra called Dūsin and harried the monks. (We suspect that the tradition is garbled and that originally it was the present Māra who had been Dūsin — but that is another story.) Kakusandha only appears in the story to give his monks good standard advice about meditation on friendliness and on loathsomeness. That is all about Kakusandha. The only former Buddha who is referred to individually more than once in the bulk of the Canon is Kassapa, the last Buddha before Gotama. But, unlike the Jain Pārśva, he has no distinctive traits. There are a couple of stories

of his followers, and a couple of sermons are attributed to him, but the attributions seem arbitrary, and Kassapa Buddha remains colourless. This completes the tale of former Buddhas in the main body of the Pali Canon. These texts mention *no* Buddha before Vipassin.¹⁶

We know that Buddhas other than Gotama were actively venerated as early as Asoka, for the Nigālisāgara Pillar inscription records that the Emperor doubled the size of a stupa to Koṇākamana (as it calls him).¹⁷ The Chinese pilgrims who toured India in the first millennium A.D. saw many monuments to former Buddhas of which the erection was ascribed to Asoka. At Bhārhūt (second century B.C.) and at Sāñcī (first century B.C.) are represented sets of seven trees, and the set at Bhārhūt is actually inscribed with labels indicating that they are the trees under which the seven Buddhas mentioned in the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* attained their Enlightenment.

According to another text in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda Sutta*,¹⁸ the next Buddha, Metteyya, is due to appear during the next time-cycle, when the human life-span has again reached 80,000 years. So we find that the *Dīgha Nikāya* names altogether eight Buddhas, of whom the last five (the four above plus Metteyya) are said to arise in our eon.

Archaeological evidence shows that these two groups, of eight and of five, in both of which Gotama Buddha is penultimate, were important in Indian Buddhist iconography over a lengthy period. Maitrī (the more common Sanskrit name of (Pali:) Metteyya) was probably first added to the group of seven; Foucher claimed to have found his Enlightenment tree, the ironwood, depicted at Sāñcī.¹⁹ In Gandhāran art there is a frieze of a line of figures which Foucher is surely correct in identifying²⁰ as the seven past Buddhas plus Maitrī: seven figures are shown dressed as monks, while the eighth is a god or prince — the two are generally indistinguishable; this suits Maitrī, who is now in heaven awaiting his final rebirth as a prince (who will in due course renounce the world). At Ajañtā (probably fifth century A.D.) there is painted over the entrance to cave XVII a similar series of the seven past Buddhas plus Maitrī; while at Ellūrā there are on the third floor of cave XII series of seven seated Buddhas, dating from the first half of the eighth century, which may well represent the Buddhas from Vipassin to Gotama.²¹

On the other hand, Mireille Bénisti has plausibly argued²² that groups of five pillars found at the great Buddhist sites of Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and dating from the first centuries A.D. represent the five Buddhas of our eon. These five came to be associated with the four cardinal points plus the centre in a manner familiar to students of Mahāyāna iconography, in which a similarly disposed group of five great Bodhisattvas is a commonplace.

So far we have been discussing texts and traditions common to all ancient Buddhist schools. The rest of this paper will concentrate on Theravāda material, even though some of the conclusions drawn may be of wider

interest. In theory the number of Buddhas was soon acknowledged to be infinite, like time, and in the Buddhist schools which grew up in India the names of former Buddhas proliferate. At an early stage, however, the number twenty-four became standardised in the Theravādin tradition. This occurred with the composition, perhaps in the third or second century B.C., of the *Buddha-vaṃsa*, one of the last books to be added to the Pali Canon. This poem, 'The Lineage of the Enlightened', gives details of twenty-four Buddhas, with Gotama as the twenty-fifth, in almost identical terms. The first eighteen of these Buddhas we encounter here for the first time.

(The poem in fact mentions the names of twenty-seven previous Buddhas, but gives accounts of only twenty-four, omitting the first three. With Gotama one can thus recognise twenty-eight Buddhas, and I am told²³ that this, rather than twenty-four, is the number which became standardised in Burma.)

The number twenty-four, we may presume, was borrowed from Jainism.²⁴ As generations of mythographers passed, the number would no doubt have been superseded and forgotten had it not become fixed in Theravāda tradition by its association with a new theory. This theory mythologically connected these twenty-four Buddhas, and them alone, to Gotama Buddha, thus making them a distinct group.

In the earlier texts there is only one story²⁵ which predicates any direct connection between the future Gotama Buddha and an earlier Buddha: the story is that under the previous Buddha, Kassapa, he was a young brahmin called Jotipāla who heard Kassapa preach and became a monk under him. Now, however, a new theory proposes a more intimate connection between Gotama and previous Buddhas. This is that each future Buddha makes an *aspiration* in the presence of one or more previous Buddhas to attain Buddhahood, and that the Buddha before whom the aspiration is voiced predicts its successful fulfilment.²⁶ This theory could be said formally to introduce into Theravāda Buddhism what in Mahāyāna studies has been called 'the Bodhisattva ideal'.²⁷ Any future Buddha is a Bodhisattva (by definition), but with the appearance of this theory one formally becomes a Bodhisattva by taking a vow in the presence of a Buddha and receiving his prediction.²⁸ In another religion we might say that the Bodhisattva was uttering a prayer for future Buddhahood, and that the Buddha before whom the prayer was made was giving it his blessing; but the terms 'prayer' and 'blessing' both imply that outside agencies can influence one's spiritual progress in a way which Buddhists hold to be impossible. Nevertheless, the *feel* of the incident is certainly that of a religious aspirant receiving a blessing; and the form of the theory *suggests* that such a blessing, received in person, is a prerequisite for Buddhahood.

The mythological expression of this theory is the story of the twenty-four Buddhas, and in particular the story of Sumedha, which is known to almost every child in Theravādin countries. Twenty-four Buddhas back, the story

goes, lived a Buddha called Dīpaṃkara. (The name means 'lamp-maker', i.e. bringer of light, and its grammatical form, not a common one in Pali, recalls the Jain title Tirthaṃkara.) In the time of Dīpaṃkara, the being who was ultimately to become Gotama Buddha was born as a brahmin called Sumedha. Having become an ascetic, Sumedha was meditating one day when he saw by super-normal power that Dīpaṃkara and his monks were about to enter a city for alms. The citizens were making ready by mending the road. Sumedha flew down and volunteered to be responsible for a stretch. But before he could fill in a big puddle, Dīpaṃkara arrived. Sumedha prostrated himself full length in the puddle so that the Buddha and the monks could walk over him without getting muddy, even if it cost him his life. While lying before Dīpaṃkara's feet he made the aspiration for Buddhahood, and Dīpaṃkara then predicted that he would attain it as a Buddha called Gotama.

The chapter on Dīpaṃkara is by far the longest in the *Buddha-vaṃsa*. There are no interesting stories attached to the other twenty-three Buddhas from whom the future Gotama received predictions; the text merely lists what nowadays would be called their bio-data, and mentions in what form the future Gotama was born at that time and received his prediction. A Bodhisattva, once formally launched on his career by receiving a prediction, is always born as a male, and never in a form lower than one of the nobler animals. Thus under two Buddhas, the fourth and the nineteenth (Vipassin), the future Gotama was a semi-divine cobra (*nāga*), and under another, the eighth, a lion; but otherwise he was always born as a man or a god. Only one²⁹ of these twenty-four former lives of Gotama corresponds to any of the 547 which are the subjects of *Jātaka* stories, but after all those 547 are held to be but a selection from a vast series. Most of the *Buddha-vaṃsa* is quoted in the commentarial introduction to the *Jātaka* book, the *Nidāna-kathā*, and it is from this popular source that it entered the mainstream of Theravāda tradition.

The rule that a Buddha must have received a prediction at the feet of one or more former Buddhas was first applied to Gotama; but it is a general rule, and one which entails an infinite regress. This infinite regress gave the scholastic mythographers no trouble, because it harmonizes with the doctrine that the world can have no beginning. The *Nidāna-kathā* contains the first traces of attempts to provide some of the earlier Buddhas with former careers analogous to that of Gotama. Here is one example. In Gotama Buddha's last life on earth before his birth as Siddhattha Gotama, he was a prince called Vessantara who was so generous that on request he gave away his own children to a brahmin beggar. Now Mangala, the second Buddha after Dīpaṃkara, is related to have performed a similar feat — with a pathetically obvious attempt at one-upmanship: in the life corresponding to the future Gotama's life as Vessantara, Mangala was so generous that he gave his children on request to a man-eating ghou, disguised as a brahmin,

who proceeded to devour them before his eyes.³⁰ However, this story failed to gain popularity.

For a final glimpse of the infinite regress, we move forward in time to the *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*, a Sinhalese prose classic composed c. 1400 by the Ven. Dharmakīrti. The author introduced into his second chapter stories of lives of the future Gotama before his birth as Sumedha; according to this source, he made mental aspirations for Buddhahood during seven 'uncountable' eons and uttered such aspirations aloud during nine 'uncountables' in the presence of 612,000 Buddhas before his meeting with Dīpaṅkara. One story³¹ is placed at the point in time when this Dīpaṅkara made his original aspiration for Buddhahood, which he did at the feet of a Buddha who, confusingly, is also called Dīpaṅkara; to differentiate them the text calls them Purāṇa ('Ancient') and Paścima ('Latter') Dīpaṅkara. The story's focus of interest, however, is neither of these, but the future Gotama, who at this time is living as Purāṇa Dīpaṅkara's step-sister. Since no Bodhisattva can be female, we may deduce that it is the future Gotama's womanhood which makes it necessary to locate the story before his birth as Sumedha. Be that as it may, this is the only story known to me in which three spiritual generations — a Buddha, a future Buddha to whom that Buddha has given a prediction, and a person who will be given a prediction by that future Buddha — meet and interact.

We began this paper by mentioning an aspect of the Venerable Rahula's *academic* distinction. In conclusion we venture to mention an aspect of his *personal* distinction. He is a living refutation of the belief, widely held in the West, that Buddhism is gloomy and that Buddhist monks must be depressives; he dispels these two false views by both precept and example. His unflinching and inspiring cheerfulness cannot be the subject of an academic article; but it seems appropriate to draw attention here to a little-known story which calls into question an aspect of Buddhism's alleged pessimism.

Most systematic cosmologies seem to believe in decline,³² and the classical Indian ones were no exception. Observers have been impressed by the Buddhist belief that things are getting worse, and that there are vast expanses of time in which the absence of a Buddha's teaching makes the attainment of *nirvāṇa* almost impossibly difficult. Nor is this view alien to Buddhists: there is a widespread traditional belief in Ceylon that there are no longer any Enlightened people around;³³ and a famous mediaeval Sinhalese verse³⁴ has it that once one has fallen below human estate even rebirth as a human being — a prerequisite for salvation — is less probable than that a turtle living in the world-wide ocean and surfacing once a century should stick his head through the hole in a yoke floating around on the surface. But this is one-sided.

We have already drawn attention to the good fortune of the world's present inhabitants, who are living in an eon of five Buddhas³⁵ — the best

possible kind of eon, according to Buddhist scholastics. Chapter 2 of the *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*, to which we have already alluded, has an account of how the future Gotama first came to make a vow for Buddhahood — a natural subject of curiosity once one decides to take the story back beyond Sumedha. We have published elsewhere a translation of the main episode;³⁶ here it is the paragraph immediately preceding that passage which concerns us.

'At that time a certain Brahma king who was among the last of the non-returners had attained arhatship. He got up from his ecstatic trance and surveyed the world. He saw that there were not very many Brahmas left in the five Pure Abodes, and on investigating why that should be, realized it was because no Buddha had been born in the world for an Innumerable eon (or: for innumerable eons). He became very upset at the privation suffered by the world. He surveyed the whole world to see what heroic person was able to fulfil the qualities requisite for making a Buddha. Many thousands of Bodhisattvas he saw, who had vowed to become Enlightened, and were at that time fulfilling the Perfections; they were like lotus buds near to opening and longing for the sun's rays. At this sight he rejoiced. He thought: "Let me further increase the heroic efforts for the Bodhisattva's career, by causing yet more compassionate and heroic people to make vows for Enlightenment, to further yet more the welfare of the world." Yet again he surveyed the whole world, and saw our great Bodhisattva, who was able to discriminate all right and wrong, who was steadfast, whose intelligence was fine as a diamond and whose heroism never flagged, and who was capable of doing others good. Then he caused our great Bodhisattva to make a vow within his mind for Enlightenment.'³⁷

We have suggested in this article that the original function of former Buddhas was to authenticate the Buddha's message; and that they later acquired the function of ensuring the availability of that message by launching Bodhisattvas on their careers. Finally in the *Saddharmālaṅkāraya* the doctrine of former Buddhas had reached great mythological complexity. With their proliferation the former Buddhas almost became redundant: the world is now teeming with Bodhisattvas. Hardly a very pessimistic vision. But this is still not enough; another Buddha seems to be needed to help them along; and some anonymous god who is about to enter *nirvāṇa* is sufficiently upset about the shortage of Buddhas to take action and implant the seed of Buddhahood in another mind. His compassionate action, which recalls Gotama Buddha's hard-won decision to preach the Truth he had discovered, is on the very margin of Theravāda Buddhist orthodoxy, for the idea that a god can plant a resolve in a human mind is doctrinally dubious. But we read the above passage as religion, not as philosophy; and we gather from it that the gods care about the world, and will never let the supply of Buddhas run dry. Grounds for a little cheerfulness.

NOTES

- 1 Article 'Buddha' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 1974.
- 2 *Dhammapāda, Brāhmaṇa-vagga*.
- 3 A *locus classicus* for these attitudes is *Sutta-nipāta* 284-315 (*Brāhmaṇadhammika Sutta*).
- 4 *Anguttara Nikāya* III, 415 (*sutta* VI, 63, 11).
- 5 *Locus classicus*: *Anguttara Nikāya* I, 188-193 (*Kālāma Sutta*).
- 6 *Majjhima Nikāya* i, 171. Miss Horner translates: 'May it be (so)', which is also possible; this rendering too indicates a certain scepticism.
- 7 *Ariya-pariyesana Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 26 = i, 160-175, especially 163-7.
- 8 This process is charted towards the end of my chapter 'Ancient Indian Cosmology', pp. 110-42 in Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (eds.), *Ancient Cosmologies*, London 1975.
- 9 *Dīgha Nikāya* ii, 1-54.
- 10 This is the purport of his whole treatment of Gotama Buddha's early life in *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, London 1927; see especially pp. 27 and 55.
- 11 In the case of the first three Buddhas and Gotama this is identical with the Buddha's father, but this is not so for the other three. The translator T. W. Rhys Davids failed to notice this point.
- 12 *Samyutta Nikāya* ii, 5-9.
- 13 *Sutta-Vibhanga* I, 3, 1-3 (*Vinaya Piṭakam* ed. Oldenberg, III, 7-9).
- 14 *Samyutta Nikāya* ii, 190-3 (*sutta* XV, 20).
- 15 *Majjhima Nikāya sutta* 50 = i, 332-8.
- 16 We have relied on G. P. Malalasekere, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, London 1938.
- 17 Mireille Bénisti, 'Les stūpa aux cinq piliers,' *Bulletin de l'École française d'extrême orient* 58, 1971, p. 146.
- 18 *Sutta* XXVI = iii, 58-79. The reference to Metteyya is on p. 76.
- 19 Bénisti, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 20 A. Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, vol. II, Paris 1918, pp. 329-333 and fig. 457.
- 21 Bénisti, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
- 22 Bénisti, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-162.
- 23 By Professor H. L. Shorto.
- 24 The Jain 24 include Mahāvira, but the Buddhist 24 exclude Gotama.
- 25 *Ghaṭikāra Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 81 = ii, 45-54.
- 26 Thus for example the *Mahāvastu* expands the above story of Jotipāla to include a prediction: *Bhagavān Kāśyapa . . . Jyotipālaṃ bhikkṣuṃ vyākārṣit*. Ed. Senart, I, 332, line 2.
- 27 Rahula has been at pains to point out that Bodhisattvas are not unimportant in Theravāda. See especially his article, "L'idéal du Bodhisattva dans le Theravāda et le Mahāyāna," *Journal Asiatique* 1971, 63-70.
- 28 I have been reluctant to burden the text with technical terminology. The vow the Bodhisattva takes is in Pali called *pañādhī* or *pañādhāna*. The prediction is a *vyākaraṇa* or *vivarāṇa*; but in Sinhala that which is received is also known as a *varama*, which is better translated 'permission'. On the ambiguities of these terms see my article, 'Feminine Elements in Theravāda Buddhism, II: Buddha by his Mother's Blessing,' *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* XVI, 1972, 78-93.
- 29 Arindama, the Bodhisattva who received a prediction from Sikkhī (Buddha 20). On the other hand, under Kassapa the future Gotama received a prediction as Jotipāla (cf. note 26 above), and the story of Jotipāla is indeed canonical (note 25 above), but not included in the *Jātaka* book.
- 30 *Jātaka* i, 31.
- 31 *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*, ed. Kiriāllē Nāṇavimala, Colombo 1954, pp. 47-9.
- 32 Blacker and Loewe, *op. cit.*.
- 33 See my *Precept and Practice*, Oxford 1971, pp. 284-6.
- 34 Verse from the *Lōvāḍasaṅgarāya* by Vidāgama Maitreya Thera (15th century), quoted in a Buddhist Sunday school first year textbook. Y.M.B.A., Colombo 1961.
- 35 E.g. *Saddharmālaṅkāraya* p. 39.
- 36 'Feminine Elements . . .', pp. 79-80. Let me take this opportunity to correct an error in the translation, pointed out to me by the Ven. Rahula. The translation of the vow on p. 80 (in the original it is the Pali verse) should read: "Being enlightened I shall enlighten; being freed I shall free others; Having crossed I shall carry over the flood of *samsāra*, the great peril."
- 37 *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*, p. 41, para. 2. I am grateful to the Ven. Rahula for checking my translation.

Some Notes on the *Buddhavaṃsa* Commentary
(*Madhuratthavilāsini*)

MISS I. B. HORNER

The centenary of the Pali Text Society falls in 1981. To commemorate this event a Project has been established to publish as many translations as possible of the Commentaries, *aṭṭhakathā*, on the works in the Pali Canon. So far PTS has published translations of no more than five Comys,¹ three on works in the *Khuddakanikāya* and one on works in the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. Under the Project two more, namely PvA and VvA, should appear in the not too distant future. Both are on books in the *Khuddakanikāya*; both, together with *Jātakanidāna*, CpA and ApA, for example, are largely concerned with explaining the 'legendary' matter so much in evidence in the works they are commenting on;² and neither is of the formidable length of the Comys on *Vin* or the four great *Nikāyas*.

Concurrently with making a translation of Bv itself under the title *Chronicle of Buddhas*,³ I found that for its better understanding, its Comy, BvA, the *Madhuratthavilāsini*, called *The Clarifier of the Sweet Meaning* (CSM), should also be translated. This I proceeded to do. When I had virtually finished it but was still perplexed by terminology that seemed to me obscure, I was privileged to have willing and expert help from Dr Rahula. As he seemed as much attracted to this Comy as I am, I hope that the few points I have selected to bring forward here in tribute to his learning and in recognition of our years of friendship will be of interest to him. A very great deal from this Comy, rich but never diffuse or verbose, must perforce here remain unsaid. To some extent it has to be compared with other Comys to show how it adopts some of the explanatory devices common to them all; and to some extent I hope to indicate a little of the material more or less peculiar to it.

The *Buddhavaṃsa* itself opens with a description of a wonderful marvel for which there seems no parallel in the Pali Canon. In order to curb the derision of his arrogant Sakyan relations and put an end to their sneers – 'He's only a boy, a youngster, junior to us, a sister's grandson'⁴ – Gotama, very recently become a Buddha, decided to show them what kind of Buddha he was and of what kind his psychic potency. So, in the sky he constructed an exquisite Jewel-Walk and paced up and down on it to the amazement and jubilation of every sort of creature. Then Sāriputta together with five hundred arahants approached and questioned him about the resolve and the aspiration he had made for Buddhahood cons ago and about his fulfilment of the ten perfections.

After this opening Section there then begins the recital that forms the