

BUDDHA

His Life and His Teaching

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Walter Henry Nelson

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His Life and His Teaching

WALTER HENRY NELSON

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New York

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Penguin Putnam Inc.
375 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014
www.penguinputnam.com

Originally published in Great Britain under the title
Gautama Buddha by Luzac Oriental
First trade paperback edition 2000

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be reproduced in any form without permission.
Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nelson, Walter Henry.
[Gautama Buddha]

Buddha : his life and his teaching / Walter Henry Nelson.
p. cm.

Originally published: Gautama Buddha. London : Luzac Oriental, 1996.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58542-001-8

1. Gautama Buddha. 2. Gautama Buddha—Teachings. 3. Buddhists—India—
Biography. I. Title.

BQ882.N45 2000 99-041849 CIP
294.3'63—dc21
[B]

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This book is printed on acid-free paper. ☺

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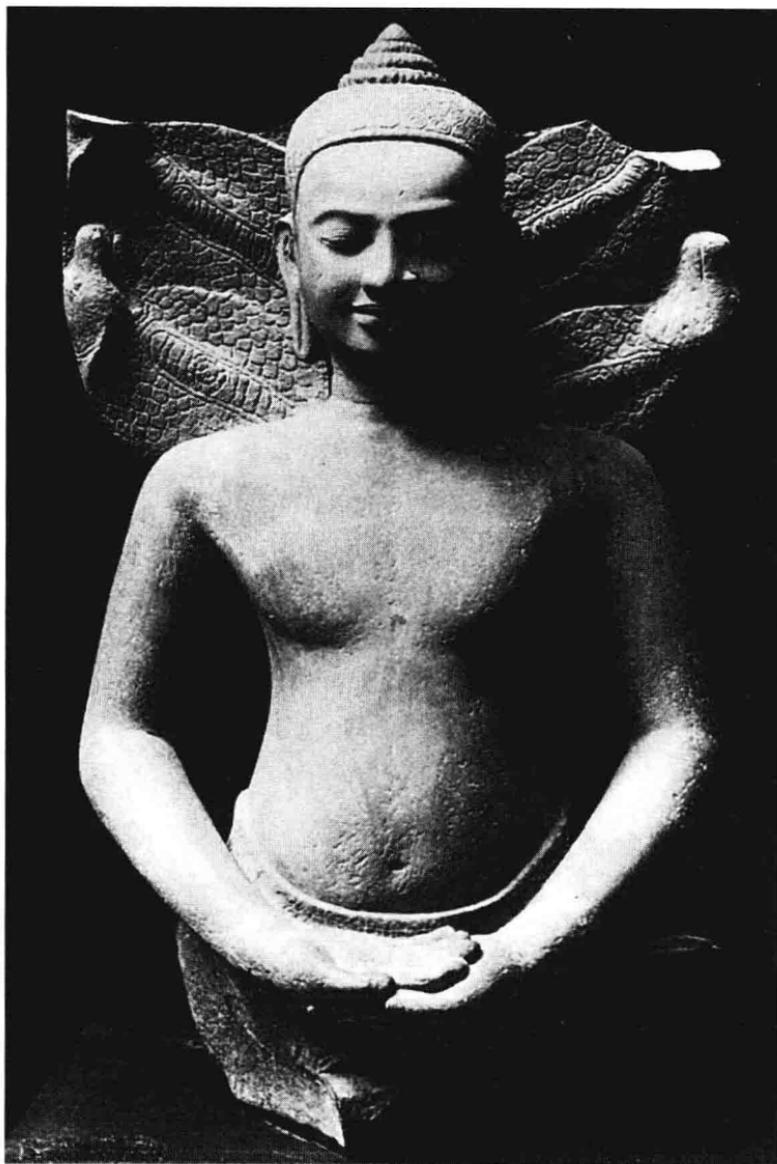
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Frontispiece: Mucalinda Buddha. Prah Kham, Cambodia.
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For Samantha Christine

Foreword

THE BUDDHA WAS A MAN. However extraordinary he was, however much myth and legend have attributed supernatural powers to him, he was a human and not a divine being. He was "a man self-perfected, one who had achieved the mind's enlightenment," as one Buddhist put it.¹ His teaching, transmitted orally at first and written down well after his death, explained the way towards such enlightenment; it has therefore often been regarded as psychology as much as the religion-philosophy which it came to be called.

Because the Buddha was a self-perfected man, he is of interest to all who search beyond materialism for a goal in life, and for a way towards attaining that goal. It is no matter whether it can be reached; the journey is worthwhile and may, indeed, be the goal itself. Nor does it matter whether one's questions are fully answered, for questions have always been of greater importance than any answers we are offered; indeed, it is in the question itself that we may find the answer we seek.

In our modern Western world we are as drowned in ready answers as we are starved of real questions. Indeed, such questioning is mocked, especially by those "intellectual sophisticates" who deride the search for Truth and Meaning; all too often, we are invited to participate in a materialistic, consumerist life whose moral injunction is "Shop 'till you drop!" and which urges us to confuse change with growth, "progress" with development. "Pigs for more pigs for more pigs," describes an economic view of "a world of frenzied producers [which] requires as its complement a world of frenzied consumers."²

Despite this, many of us recognise the absurdity and horror of living only to work more, so as to earn more in order to spend

more; the absurdity of finding meaning for our lives in a universe proclaimed to be without any ultimate meaning and purpose, and an aim in a life which we are cynically advised is aimless. It is to such people that this book is offered.

As the bibliography shows, there exists a wealth of books about Buddhism – indeed, far more than are included in that listing. Many are more academic than my own exploration of Buddha and Buddhism; while some seem speculative, scholastic or argumentative, there are others imbued with the understanding of writers who have penetrated deeply into the meaning of the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha. My own effort, meant as an introduction for the general reader, derives from my respect for Buddhism and the great traditional religions.

Buddhism itself developed into many forms since the Buddha died almost 500 years before the birth of Christ. Countless elaborate supernatural accretions involving Indian deities have transformed a simple if profound story of one man's struggle for self-perfection into an elaborate, complex, although often beautiful and charming, religious myth. These ancient legends, some of which are included here, are meant to evoke awe and inspire devotion, but the modern reader of course does not need to accept as literally true the feats of strength attributed to the Prince Siddhartha, for example, or the occasional intercessions of the gods to smooth the way for Gautama in his journey to enlightenment.

Over the centuries, many Buddhist schools and sects have come into being, as often as not related to those religions Buddhism encountered in the lands it penetrated; in Tibet, for example, it was married to forms derived from the country's ancient Bön religion, as well as to Hindu Tantric practices. That was inevitable; no matter, for the light of the Buddha and his original teaching, the *Dhamma*, shines also in these, as it does so profoundly in the Zen Buddhism of Japan. It is my hope that it may also shine through these pages.

Acknowledgements

MOST DEEPLY I AM INDEBTED to the late Christmas Humphreys who, while president of The Buddhist Society, London, of which he was the founder, read and commented upon a draft of this book; his encouraging letters, in which he expressed a liking of my fledgling effort, emboldened me to continue, while his own masterly books on Buddhism set an example as inspirational as impossible to emulate. Without his early encouragement, my book would certainly never have been completed or seen the light of day.

I am indebted to others as well, although it should of course be noted that only I can be held responsible for any shortcomings the book has. In New York, I was assisted in my research by William Stablein and received encouragement from Tibetan scholars as well as Buddhists prominent in delegations to the United Nations. In London, I was encouraged by Jeffrey and Nobuko Somers, and assisted editorially by my friends Ann Caplowe and Roy Ashwell. The interest and patience shown by Laurent and Susan Lacroix is also most appreciated.

Quotation from the following works is respectfully acknowledged: Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1927; paperback, 1975); D. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Suttas* (N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1969); Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (London: Penguin Books, 1951); J.-M. Dechanet, OSB, *Christian Yoga* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960); A. R. Orage, *The Active Mind* (N.Y.: Hermitage House, 1954).

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Buddha, or Prince Siddhartha Gautama as an infant, is from the collection of Mr and Mrs Jeffrey Somers, and is an ink painting by Sochu Suzuki, Zen Abbot of the Ryutakuji Temple, Mishima, Japan.

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