

Review: Dr H. Saddhatissa, *The Life of the Buddha*, Unwin Hyman Ltd, London, England, 1976 (1988 edn.)

Pages: 89

What Is History, What Is Legend?

This gives a readable account of the founder of one of the largest religions in the world.

Buddha's discovery of the "Four Noble Truths" including the fourth, the "Eightfold Path", are presented as filling a gap in Hinduism both regarding how to reach 'Nirvana' (i.e. not via Hindu asceticism), and preaching acceptance of the Untouchables under the harsh caste system. In this light it is understandable how it could have grown, and still face hostility in India today.

However, exactly how much of Buddha's history is trustworthy is unknown, considering his life was written down ~400 years after a council of 500 monks had rehearsed his teachings (the Discipline and the Discourses) for seven months. By comparison, the four gospels of the New Testament were all written at most forty years after Jesus's resurrection and possibly only twenty.

Another fatal flaw is Buddhism's disinterested dismissal of objective inquiry as "interfering" with spiritual progress. The universe does have a beginning, and therefore a Creator, meaning Buddhists are not subject to the "Law of Karma" when they die, but the Law of God. So the whole religion is based on a false premise.

Finally, Buddha managed to contradict himself with this self-defeating gem: "In all the world of me, and of the gods too, there is only one law - that all things are impermanent."!

Preface (pp. 7-8)

Sanskrit texts only became widespread in the West in the nineteenth century.

Sanskrit and Pali sources are used.

Buddha's ministry spanned 45 years.

I) The Golden Child (pp. 10-19)

Kapilvastu was the capital of the Sakya kingdom on the border of India and the Himalayas. The King Suddhodana married Queen Mahamaya of the land of Koliya. Their child was named Siddhartha ("wish fulfilled").

The Buddha is also called the "Perfect Being".

Buddha's birthday is said to be "thrice-sacred" as also is the day of his enlightenment and death.

The Indian caste system were the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Sudras (servants).

Buddha was from the Gautama Kshatriya clan (thus his name Siddhartha Gautama Buddha).

The sage Kala Deeala visited King Suddhodana after his son's birth and prophesied by whole-body palmistry that he would become a Buddha. The king asked eight other Brahmins to do the same and Kondanna said he would renounce the world and seek enlightenment.

"Buddha" means "wise one".

As a child, Buddha had a golden hue and metallic skin, and blue eyes.

His mother the Queen died when he was seven days old and his aunt Prajapati (also the King's mistress!) took him on and became Queen.

Siddhartha fell into meditation once when he was seven.

To thwart the prophecy, the King kept all old and sick people away from his son and only lavished luxuries and delights on him.

II) The Human Condition (pp. 20-25)

Siddhartha and servant Channa took a town visit and saw a hunched-up tired old man standing in the roadway and was shocked. In another ride he saw a very sick man. A third time he saw a funeral procession. After this he realised that life was suffering.

The fourth excursion was to an orange-robed ascetic who had renounced the world to seek a solution to the enigma of life. He had no home, sheltered in caves, and begged for food.

Siddhartha married Princess Yasodhara and exclaimed, “another bond to tie me!”. He then made up his mind to leave his wife and newborn without seeing him, returning one day after he was “enlightened”. He left to escape the misery of ageing, sickness, and death. His horse Kanathaka refused to move at first, and later dies of a broken heart.

III) Discovery (pp. 26-32)

People knew of Buddha by his family name Gautama. He first met with Brahmin Kondanna who joined him (the usual procedure was for a devotee to seek out some guru seeing as their were no officially recognised institutions).

Gautama studied hard under Alara who afterwards said, “You are equal to me now”. He and the companions then decided to dedicate themselves to strict fasting, becoming totally emaciated. He also held his breath for long periods, stayed out in the burning sun, and bathed in ice water in the winter. His clothing was filthy rags and he would sit in graveyards.

After six years of the above, he came to a banyan tree and sat down to meditate whereon a woman Sujata thought him a god and gave an offering in a golden bowl. He then went to the Neranjara river and made a prophecy that if the bowl floated upstream he would become enlightened, which it did. Finally, he went to the Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) and sat

down for seven days facing east, emerging on the seventh day of the Vesak festival (which was a full moon), He was thirty-five.

IV) The Middle Path (pp. 33-37)

Buddha's first sermon was "The Turning of the Wheel of Truth" which espoused three 'noble truths' of: suffering's reality; its cause of desire; solution of eliminating desire. The fourth 'truth' of the Eightfold path (or Middle Path) was also given. It is called the middle path since it rejects both asceticism and indulgence.

The path is right: understanding; thought; speech (don't be loud!); action; livelihood (no arms dealing, slave trading, selling alcohol, or working as a soldier, hunter or fisher); mindfulness; concentration.

There are also five mental hindrances: sensuality; ill-will; laziness; worry; scepticism.

Buddha also taught a doctrine of "no-soul".

V) The Community (pp. 38-61)

Buddhist monks became a member of the *Sangha*.

Buddha was peripatetic; wandering place-to-place teaching any would listen.

After Buddha spoke to King Bimbisara, he asked to be accepted as a lay disciple.

In Buddhist history Upatissa was a monk of great wisdom and Kolita had miraculous powers.

The Buddhist monk dedicates himself to a life of homelessness.

The untouchables were outside the cast structure of the Brahmanical religion and were restricted to menial labour. The Brahmins saw Buddha as a dangerous threat.

In recent years, many (several million) untouchables have renounced Hinduism for Buddhism.

Buddha supposedly levitated to convince one King of his teachings (who eventually became his follower).

Upon returning to Kapilvastu, Buddha ordained his son Rahula, aged seven, as a monk.

“Ananda” means “joy”.

Buddha initially disfavoured admission of women to the Sangha but eventually gave in, only that they were to be subjected to the authority of monks. Queen Mahapajapati became the first Buddhist nun.

Buddha’s foe Devadatta tried to kill him three times: by hiring assassins; casting a rock onto him; and sending an elephant.

VI) Compassion and Common Sense (pp. 62-80)

Buddha said, “In all the world of men, and of the gods too, there is only one law - that all things are impermanent.”

“Sanyas” are rigorous self-denials.

Through Buddha's advice, King Pasenadi became the champion of the balanced diet.

“It is by long association with a man that his integrity can be judged.”

Hindus believe the soul is a fragment of divinity destined to be re-absorbed by the Universal Soul.

“Truth” in Buddhism means fulfilment, not a description of objective reality.

“Those things which I have not revealed are not useful to the pure life.”

Buddha's famous elephant simile concludes that such is the case of people who have seen one aspect of reality and suppose they have seen the whole.

The Karmic doctrine says each man is responsible for his own salvation.

Monks are no less partial to jealousy, quarrelling and petty-mindedness.

“There is no companionship with a fool; it is better to be alone.”

VII) Nirvana (pp. 81-89)

Buddha went to Kusinara and settled in a grove.

“It is in the nature of all things that take form to dissolve again. Strive earnestly (to attain perfection’).” Such were the last words of Buddha whose remains were created.

After his death, in the city of Rajagaha, 500 monks were summoned by King Ajatasattu to form a Council and rehearse Buddha's teaching. It lasted seven months and created the Discipline and the Discourses. However, the material was only committed to print in Ceylon in 80BC. The material (“Tipitaka”) is divided into three sections: *Vinaya* [disciplinary rules], *Sutta* [Buddha's discourses], *Abhidhamma* [philosophical developments, but only in AD246].