INTRODUCTION

I should like to give a brief survey of the following topics as background to the first chapters of this book: 1. biographical data on the Buddha, 2. the origin of the Buddha legend, 3. the expression "to seek salvation" which I use in describing the goal of the historical Buddha.

1. Biographical data on the Buddha

Certain biographical information relating to the Buddha, including geographical names, can be accepted as being historically correct. But it is not easy to date things accurately from what is found in ancient texts. At present the following historical summary seems to be more or less acceptable. The Buddha, mostly known by the name of Gotama, was born in Lumbini as the son of Śuddhodana, who was a prominent member of the Śākya (P. Sakya, Sakka, Śākiya) clan ruling in this area but probably under the dominion of Kośala. His youth was spent in Kapilavastu (P. Kapilavatthu), where he later married and had a son named Rāhula. He left domestic life before his thirtieth year to become a wandering religious mendicant. For many years he sought to find a means by which salvation could be obtained and even practised extreme forms of castigation. He finally found a path to salvation. In the so-called Deer Park (the modern Sarnath) near Benares he acquired the first students of his teaching (dharma) which was meant more as a guide to personal experience than a theoretical truth. In the course of the years he travelled through Kaśi, Kośala and Magadha and the territories of the Śākyas, Mallas and Vṛjīs and established an order (saṅgha) of monks and later also nuns. At this point the names of the following disciples should be mentioned: Śāriputra (P. Sāriputta), Maudgalyāyana (P. Mogallāna), Ānanda and Devadatta. In all probability Śāriputra was

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1. Though not completely without reservations, for more details I recommend the chapter called "Date et vie du Buddha Śākyamuni" in E. Lamotte, Histoire, 12-25.
2. With the exception of "Gotama" the Śanskrit (abbreviation: S.) version of names is given. If the Pali version shows a great deviation, it is included in parenthesis with the abbreviation "P."
3. It is uncertain whether the ruins near the present Tilaurakota in Nepal are identical with Kapilavastu or the ruins near Piprāhwa in India.
4. A meeting with the Ajīvika Upagā (P. Upaka) prior to this is found in the transmission. In agreement with Bareau (Recherches 1963, 155-160) one can accept that the Buddha did not say the beautiful verses attributed to him on this occasion, but he seems going too far by denying that the meeting ever took place. (See O. v. Hinüber, Die Erforschung der Gilgit-Handschriften, Göttingen 1979, 31-32).
largely responsible for developments connected with the method of discriminating insight (S. praññā, P. paññā). Maudgalyāyana was thought to possess great magical power. Ānanda was the Buddha’s constant companion throughout his final years. All pronouncements on the doctrine which were considered to be proclaimed by the Buddha were later presented as being reported by Ānanda. Devadatta is said to have wanted to take over the supervision of the order from the Buddha; he advocated stricter rules of asceticism. He is reported to have made attacks on the Buddha’s life.

Influential laymen and laywomen gave aid to the order. Apparently at a very early stage the monks had access to parks where they could build huts against the monsoon rains; this was the beginning of the Buddhist monastery (vihāra). The Buddha often stayed in Śrāvasti (P. Sāvatthi), the capital of the kingdom of Kośala, in Rājagrha (P. Rājagaha), the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, and in Vaiśāli, the capital of the Vṛji confederation. He died about eighty years of age near Kuśinagarī (P. Kuśinārā).

Jina (‘‘conqueror’’) Mahāvīra the founder of Jainism also preached in the same area. According to Buddhist tradition he lived at the same time as the Buddha, but this is questionable. Ancient Buddhism does have certain elements in common with Jainism, especially some rules of asceticism. These rules could go back to the Jina or his predecessors. But in ancient Buddhism they function differently from those of Jainism. What is paramount in Jainism is that one abstains from karma (‘‘work’’) and expiates karma that has already been done by self-mortification, thereby liberating oneself completely from the burdening and obscuring material particles which penetrate the soul through work. In Jainism the soul is bond to a cycle of rebirth through karma and is robbed by karma of its innate qualities such as all-knowing and bliss. In ancient Buddhism when one refers to bad deeds, one follows the same lines as found in Jainism. What is bad is determined as transgression of the rules of asceticism, primarily the rule that no harm should be done to another’s person or property. Avoiding bad deeds, though, has a more direct function in ancient Buddhism (see chapter 6).

No trace of any influence from the oldest Upanisads can be found in what I consider the most ancient layer of Buddhism5. But there is some

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5 The possibility of some influence of the teaching ‘‘When all desires (kāma) in the heart dissolve, then the mortal becomes immortal, here he reaches the Brahman’’, found as a quotation (tad esa śloko bhavatī) in the Brhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad IV 4 7, can not be dismissed. But this could also be a reflection of Buddhist teaching and added later on (cf. Kaṭha-Upaniṣad VI 14). Arguments for the first possibility can be found in N. Aramaki’s contribution to the panel.
evidence of such influence in the method of discriminating insight (see chapter 9) and the technique of meditation in spheres (see chapter 12).

The traditional account of how the Buddha obtained enlightenment near Uruvilvā (P. Uruvelā, the modern Bodh-Gaya) has not been included in the foregoing short biography of the Buddha. As A. Bareau has shown this story is not found in the oldest sources, but can be explained by other reasons.

Nowadays one can read in even the most basic dictionaries that the Buddha lived in or around the period 560 to 480 B.C. The basis of the calculation of these dates can be found in the Ceylonese tradition which maintains that the Buddha died 218 years before the coronation of Asoka, which would mean that he obtained "nirvana" (nirvāṇa, P. nibbāna), i.e. died, in the year 544 B.C. At present Western scholars have corrected this date because the date of Asoka’s coronation can now be calculated with more accuracy (268/7 B.C.). According to tradition the Buddha lived for eighty years (e.g. MN 12 I, p. 82), so that the period of his life can be calculated as being from 566 to 486 B.C. Even though the opinion amongst scholars was that these dates were based on shaky historical grounds, they still felt the need to state a date and, in principle, saw no objection to their choice.

In a recent article H. Bechert argued that there are great objections to such an approach. For instance, in ancient lists of Buddhist "patriarchs" there are not enough persons found to easily bridge the 218 years between the Buddha’s "nirvana" and Asoka’s coronation. The old lists of elders should be accepted as being more reliable than later attempts at dating the Buddha’s life. In view of this fact Bechert poses that a second tradition should again be considered. This tradition originates in India itself and not on Ceylon and maintains that the Buddha died 100 years before Asoka’s coronation. A period of 100 years may be considered suspicious and consequently any thought of its being a valid possibility may be ignored. But a period of a 100 years fits Bechert’s

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"Earliest Buddhism" of the VIIth World Sanskrit Conference (Leiden, August 1987). It is called : Some Precursors of the Subconscious Desire in the Attaadāṇasutta.


observations better, and it does not need to be taken too literally. He proposes that the Buddha could have reached "nirvana" between 85 to 105 years before Asoka's coronation. It remains to be seen how Bechert will expand the evidence for his position and how he will make it concur with other facts in Indian history.

2. The origin of the Buddha legend

A schism took place in the Buddhist order a few decades before the coronation of Asoka. Amongst other things attributed to one group, the Mahāsaṅghikas, is the belief that the life of the Buddha is eternal and that the efforts to become an Arhat do not lead to impressive results. This seems to point to an attempt to reach salvation through the worship of the Buddha and not so much through following a path proclaimed or approved by him. This approach appears to be founded on a feeling of security that the Buddha gave to his followers during his life. The members of the other group, who were called Sthaviras (P. theravada) probably had a right to consider themselves the true inheritors of the Buddha's teaching. They now tried to salvage the ideal of Arhatship by devising a more difficult path to that goal. While following such an arduous path it could be useful to think of the Buddha as the (no longer living) preacher of salvation and the greatest example of one who had reached the goal. In this context the Buddha is not a manifestation of a supernatural being. But the Sthaviras probably learnt from the Mahāsaṅghikas that the divinity of the Buddha was extremely important for propagandizing the doctrine. Perhaps because of this aspect, they tried to compensate for the gap by creating miracle stories, even though these stories were not consistent with the sober doctrines they professed. As E. Frauwallner (The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature, Roma 1956) has observed, the author of the "Skandhaka" seemed to be very influential in utilizing such beliefs for the purpose of propaganda even though he drew from older sources. The first part of the Pāli Vinaya is an (adapted) version of the "Skandhaka", which originally also contained the nucleus of texts such as the Catuspariṣat-sūtra and the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra. The "Skandhaka" is based on ancient data, but often gives an interpretation and an extension of the story which can only be explained by the desire to compete with others for reasons of propaganda. What does seem to be a reliable report is that shortly before the Buddha's death an earthquake took place and it is possible that the Buddha explained this as an omen of his imminent...

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8 See Bareau, Les sectes, 58, 64.
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decease. According to the "Skandhaka" this earthquake was caused by the Buddha's decision to finally enter nirvana. The Buddha took this decision after Ananda had failed to ask him to continue his life until the end of this world period (op.cit. p. 156). Afterwards every important event in the life of the Buddha is connected with an earthquake (cf. DN 16, II p.107). This is only an example of a process of adaptation. I shall scarcely refer to the Buddha legend in the following chapters. The first volume of Buddhismus by H. Beckh (Berlin 1916) is still a good introduction to the Buddha legend; see also Lamotte, Histoire p. 713-759. The earliest Chinese transmission of the Buddha legend can be found in E. Zürcher, Het Leven van de Boeddha, vertaald uit de vroegste Chinese overlevering, Amsterdam, 1978 (without the episode of the death of the Buddha). See also U. Schneider, Einführung in den Buddhismus, Darmstadt, 1980, pp 46-56 for a discussion on the origin of parts of the legend.

3. The expression "to seek salvation"

I should like to make a few comments on the goal of ancient Buddhism. In the next chapters I shall sometimes state that the ascetic Gotama searched for "salvation" and found it as the Buddha and thereafter proclaimed it. This word "salvation" is in the first place a summery of all kinds of vague positive concepts which are found in the texts. Secondly the word "salvation" is chosen to erect a barrier against giving the negative terms (i.e., directed towards the avoidance of something) an absolute meaning, because they are predominant in the texts and are not vague. By frequently mentioning a negative objective—avoidance of rebirth, avoidance of suffering and death, and the avoidance of a transitory existence—the impression could arise that non-existence is better than existence and that this is goal enough. I do not deny that in the course of history some Buddhists were content with such an aim. But the majority always found this an unacceptable interpretation of the generally professed objective that one must overcome suffering. It is an objective where, indeed, there is always the danger of such a purely negative inter-

9 I am especially thinking here of MN 26 (I p.163,32; 165,15;166,35) kimkusalagavesi anuttaraṁ santivarapadāṁ pariyesamāno (searching for that which is beneficial, seeking the unsurpassable, best place of peace) and again MN 26 (passim), anuttaraṁ yogakkhemam nibbānaṁ pariyesati (he seeks the unsurpassable safe place, the nirvana). Anuppatta-sadattho (one who has reached the right goal) is also a vague positive expression in the Arhatformula in MN 35 (I p. 235), see chapter 2, footnote 3. Furthermore, sotthi (welfare) is important in e.g. SN 2.12 or 2.17 or Sn 269; and sukha and rati (happiness), in contrast to other places, as used in Sn 439 and 956. The oldest term was perhaps amata (immortal, immortality), see chapter 2, but one could say here that it is a negative term (compare note 10 in the section "An Outline...").
pretation, while it has the advantage of avoiding inadequate and misleading concepts which seem to be connected with positive objectives.

A special problem arises in connection with the way to salvation via discriminating insight (see chapter 9), as soon as it is stated that the sum of all parts of a person is not the self, while one does not know of a self separate from these constituents. In chapter 11 I show that the consequence of this reasoning might be that one who is delivered after death no longer exists. This conclusion can hardly be avoided, but it is not acceptable, probably because of the feeling that the Buddha could not have meant this interpretation. So one chooses to reject all theories about this question. At a certain point in history it is explicitly stated that the self does not exist outside the constituents. One would now expect that it can no longer be denied that the path to deliverance ends in nothingness. Oddly enough at the same time one strives to make nirvana, which is the “extinction” of a person on account of the cessation of the constituents (the person sometimes being compared to a fire and the constituents to the fuel), an independent entity. At least it now is described as something that cannot be considered non-existent. In the 16th chapter of Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga (p. 431-433) one finds a rejection of the opinion that nirvana does not exist (n’atth’eva nibbānam), as well as a rejection of the opinion that it can only be destruction (khaya). It is then stated that, in truth, nirvana is by its very nature not non-existent (paramatthena sabhiivato nibbānam nāvijjamānam). Finally a passage from the canon (Udana 8.3, Itivuttaka 2.16) is cited, “O monks, there exists the unborn, the unbecoming, the uncaused, the uncreated. If this did not exist, than there would be no escape for the born, the becoming, the caused, the created.”

The Buddhist doctrine of salvation though also concerned with the spiritual well-being here and now, seems firmly bound to the concept that one must continuously be reborn and die. If there is no rebirth, then one needs no path to salvation, because an end to suffering comes at death. And one can willfully make an end to life if there is unbearable suffering. But even if a modern Buddhist can no longer literally believe in rebirth10, he can apparently still be a follower of the Buddha in a significant way on the basis of the rejection of the purely negative interpretation of the goal. One could formulate the point of departure and the goal in this manner: to believe in a natural inheritance that is not suffering and to strive for an experience in which and after which the fear that suffering will be without end can no longer arise.

10 See Buddhismus der Gegenwart, hrsg. H. Dumoulin, Freiburg i. B. (Herder) 1970, 70 (Buddhadāsa in Thailand) and 138 (some Japanese Buddhists).