CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: BUDDHISM BEFORE THE NEW BRAHMANISM

1.1 The Original Context

Buddhism, we are often told, was a reaction against vedic Brahmanism. Vedic Brahmanism is the religion that finds expression in the Veda, an immense corpus of texts. Vedic Brahmanism, we are made to understand, is much older than Buddhism and was indeed the dominant religion in northern India, including the area in which Buddhism arose.

I do not share this opinion. I do not deny that many vedic texts existed already, in oral form, at the time when the Buddha was born. However, the bearers of this tradition, the Brahmins, did not occupy a dominant position in the area in which the Buddha preached his message, and this message was not, therefore, a reaction against brahmanical thought and culture.

I have argued this position at length in a book—Greater Magadha—that came out in 2007. In this introduction no full justice can be done to the arguments there presented. In order to understand what follows, it is yet necessary to be acquainted with some of its findings. These will here be briefly reviewed. Further information, arguments and references can be found in Greater Magadha.1

1 Geoffrey Samuel, in a recent publication (2008: 48 ff.; also 61 ff.) which however refers back to an earlier unpublished manuscript of Thomas Hopkins, presents on the basis of primarily archaeological evidence a notion of “two cultural processes moving more or less concurrently toward the use of iron and urbanization from two separate sources: one in the eastern Punjab, Rajasthan, the Doab, and northward to the Himalayas west of 81° longitude, identified with the Painted Grey Ware culture and the Aryans; the other—based on the Eastern Gangetic culture with its apparent initial connection to the Malwa-type cultural complex—in the region of Patna, in the valleys of the Ghagara and Gandak rivers northwest of Patna, and westward to the region around the lower Doab.” The two areas correspond to those distinguished in Greater Magadha. To the list of aspects in which the two “worlds” may have differed from each other, Samuel (p. 89 ff.) adds gender attitudes. Samuel is no doubt right in concluding (p. 343): “It seems to me that an initial tension between the values of the
We do not know exactly when the historical Buddha died. For a long time Buddhist scholars thought they knew. Most Western scholars agreed upon a date close to the year 480 BCE. Few scholars still accept this date. A study in which many participated has not led to a result upon which scholars agree. However, many of them approve of a date not too distant in time from the year 400 BCE, give or take a few decades in either direction. 400 BCE means before the incursion into India by Alexander of Macedonia in the second half of the fourth century BCE, also before the creation of a large empire in northern India by the Nandas and the Mauryas presumably from the middle of the fourth century BCE onward, and much before the Sanskrit grammarian Patañjali, whom we know to have lived around the year 150 BCE.

This Sanskrit grammarian provides us with some interesting information about the heartland of Brahmanism in his time. He calls it “land of the Āryas” (āryāvarta), and situates it essentially in the Ganges plain, between the Thar desert in the west and the confluence of the rivers Ganges (Gaṅgā) and Jumna (Yamunā) in the east. Exactly the same expression is used again in the Mānava Dharmaśāstra, a text that was composed three to four centuries later. Here, however, the “land of the Āryas” (āryāvarta) extends from the eastern to the western sea, and is therefore much larger than Patañjali’s Āryāvarta. This suggests that an important change had taken place between the second century BCE and the second or third century CE: The Brahmins of the second century BCE looked upon the eastern Ganges valley as more or less foreign territory, the Brahmins of the second or third centuries CE looked upon it as their land.

This change concerns the eastward spread of Brahmanism. This should not be confused with the move eastward of individual Brahmins, even though the two are connected. Brahmins carry the claim