BUDDHISM IN MALAYA

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PREFACE

In attempting to write a small book on a large subject, there are many apologies to be made, and it is difficult to know where to begin.

This book, however, has not been written for the learned minority—indeed, it would have been beyond our ability to do so. It is intended rather as a guide to some local Buddhist practices, and as a stimulus to further study in a religion which reaches such an important point in its history with the year 1956—namely, the 2500th after its foundation.

For the many omissions, particularly in the description of monastery and nunnery life, and for mistakes and inconsistencies, as in the Romanisation of Chinese names, we beg forbearance. There is no one to blame but ourselves. To all the dozens of people who have good-naturedly written letters and answered questions, we wish to record our sincere thanks; particularly to Miss Pitt Chin Hui of the Maha Bodhi School for useful information on many Buddhist matters; to Mr. S. T. Khoo for skilful photography and guidance in Chinese temples, and to Mr. Leon Comber for his most welcome advice and encouragement.

Lastly we wish to thank the Venerable Phra Maha Athorn of the Thai Temple, Singapore, who accompanied us on a tour of Thai, and other temples throughout the length of Malaya, and who has been a constant source of useful information throughout the writing of this book.

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"... the two elder daughters of Beow Chong Ong were married and their father wanted to marry off the youngest daughter, but she refused. Her father, in his anger, put out both her eyes. She disappeared and was found in the Mountain of Incense Trees. In after days, she was deified, and her two sisters as well. This is the Penang story, and it seems to be a variation of the legend of Miao-Shen, but in the orthodox version, Miao-Shen lived in the eleventh year of the Golden Heaven, 2587 B.C. Her fault was that she wanted to disgrace the family by becoming a Buddhist nun. She was beheaded by her father, and the tutelary God of the Soil (Tu-t’i lao-yeh), having taken the form of a tiger, bounded out of the forest and carried her off to the mountains. The Chinese believe that Miao-Shen was a disguise assumed by the Goddess Kuan-yin. . . . . ."

'The Chinese in Malaya' by Victor Purcell.
CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE OF BUDDHA

It would be easy if one could describe Buddhism simply as a philosophy or religion concerned with the life and teachings of Gautama, the Buddha. This may indeed have been true for a short time following his death, but it was not long before groups of people began formulating their own impressions of his teaching, thus creating different schools which sometimes disagreed on fundamental points of doctrine. At the time of Buddha's death, about the year 483 B.C., writing was uncommon in India and books were unknown. It is said that nothing was actually written down of his teaching for several hundred years after his death, and there is at least one authority who believes that the original teaching has not come through in any of the schools which are now generally known and accepted throughout the world. This is perhaps an extreme view and one that would certainly not gain hearing from either of the main schools of Buddhism in the world at present—the Mahayana, or Greater Vehicle, and the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle Schools. The relation of these two will be explained in a later chapter; at this stage it is important to consider more closely the historical personage of Gautama Buddha himself.

All the hundreds of little books on Buddhism, and some of the larger ones, differ enormously in their accounts of Buddha's birth and life. Several factors account for this. As mentioned already, there were no definite written records for a long time after his death, and much of the information which is now in print and in books was passed on from one generation to another by painstaking memorisation.

Clear evidence of this exists in certain Buddhist writings where the information is set out in a way which not infrequently sacrifices beauty or logical sequence for ease of memorisation. This method of preserving information may have had great effects not only on the story of Buddha's life
but also on Buddhist doctrine, and at least one authority (the
Encyclopaedia Britannica) has suggested that some of the vari-
tions in Buddhist doctrine may be due more to differing or
faulty memorisation than to actual differences in belief. At
one extreme of opinion it has been suggested that Buddha
may not have existed at all, and that all the stories which have
grown up around him as an actual person may be the purest
mythology, based on ancient beliefs concerning the stars and
other natural phenomena. This view is not widely held. It
is generally believed that he was an historical person, born
not far from what is today called Nepal, somewhere between
the years 540 and 567 B.C. Ceylon Buddhists however not
infrequently hold 623 B.C. as the year of birth, and even
amongst the many books written and published in Malaya
there are surprising differences of opinion. Despite this,
there seems to be some agreement in this part of the world
that the year 1956 will represent the 2500th in the Buddhist
Era, and if this is taken as dating from the year of Buddha’s
birth, then 544 B.C. would be nearer the mark than the more
usually quoted 567 B.C.

Whatever the exact date, Buddha was contemporary with
at least three other important religious figures. Confucius
was born in 451 B.C. in the Chou dynasty; Lao Tzu, if he
existed at all, in 604 B.C. and Mahavira, the founder of
Jainism, in 569 B.C. Accounts favouring the date 567 B.C.
often mention the Indian festival of the Asalha Full Moon Day,
and it said that on this day, his mother Queen Maya observed
eight precepts of good conduct, meditated, and went to bed
and dreamed a remarkable dream. She was taken to the
Himalayan Mountains. Entering a heavenly palace, she was
received by queens who bathed and clothed her and set
her to rest in a divine bed. The Buddha-to-be now appears
as a white elephant, and enters the palace carrying a white
lotus in his trunk. Circling the bed three times, the elephant
smites Maya’s side three times and “seems to enter the womb”.
We have seen this remarkable story in Indian paintings
brought from Colombo and hung in Chinese Mahayana temples
in the Federation. They are extremely arresting and full of
action, but it would be difficult to guess what was happening
without some previous knowledge of the story.
The Queen Maya conceived miraculously. On coming near to full term, she decided to go to her father's palace at Devadha, and accordingly set out from Kapilavatthu, which was the capital town of the area where they lived. These two places, together with the Lumbini Gardens where the child was eventually born, were all in the region of what is today called Nepal, and for this reason it has been suggested that Gautama Buddha was of Mongolian stock. This is merely speculative; there are no clear descriptions of his facial characteristics and no surviving pictures or drawings made during his lifetime. The conventionalised statue of Buddha has grown up through the ages on the basis of descriptions of his appearance in the Pali texts, and references to him in Sanskrit poetry. These include mention of the 'unhisa' or protruberance on top of the skull, long distended ear lobes, eyebrows 'like drawn bows', spiral curls to the hair, broad smooth shoulders, arms so long that he could touch his knees without stooping, flat soles to the feet, and finally, prominent heels.

It seems more than likely that Gautama Buddha was a Hindu of the Sakya clan, and that his father, Suddhodana, was chieftain of the clan, and at least a prince if not actually a king. As a child Buddha was christened Siddartha, and this stayed as his childhood name. Later in life he was called Gautama, and later still, Sakyamuni, which means: 'Saint of the Sakyas'.

Resting en route in the Lumbini Gardens, Maya unexpectedly began her labour, and delivered the child—according to traditional description—while standing up and holding onto the branch of a tree. Miraculously, with the help of devas, or nature spirits, the child was born into a golden net, and was handed safe and sound to Maya's followers. At the moment of birth, thirty-two wonderful things take place throughout the world; the blind can see, the deaf can hear, and the dumb can speak. Even the sufferers in Hell cease to suffer, and ten thousand worlds are filled with light. The Eastern imagination has soared to great heights in this and other events in Buddha's life, and it will be seen at once that to attempt even the broadest outline of the life of Buddha and his teachings is to plunge headlong into the problem of descriptive terms. Some dictionaries of religion make a good
job of it all in six inches of close printing, whereas there is a book on our shelves which seems dissatisfied with itself after six hundred pages. The tragedy of much that has been written on Buddhism is its obscurity. Even among the many explanatory booklets published in Malaya there are passages so heavily embroidered with adjectives and mystic symbolism that the meaning is lost. It is often difficult to steer a course between bare facts on the one hand and flowery symbolism on the other, and the birth story is a case in point. It is simple and safe to say: 'Gautama Buddha was born in the Lumbini Gardens' and to leave it at that. How much more interesting, however, to add:

“When the child is born, it takes seven steps forward, and exclaims with a lion’s voice: ‘I AM THE CHIEF OF THE WORLD: THIS IS MY LAST BIRTH,’ and again the thirty-two signs of joy appear in the earth and heaven.”

The number thirty-two recurs often throughout Buddhist accounts. Some state that Maya was a virgin for thirty-two months; sixty-four is the number of famous Brahmins sent by her husband to interpret her dream, and in later life, Buddha performed thirty-two healing miracles, and pointed to thirty-two beliefs concerning the immortal soul—all of which he believed to be wrong. There is in fact a tendency in Buddhism, perhaps more than in other religions, to enumerate things and to set them together into sets of definite numbers. Instances are the Three Refuges, the Five Precepts and the Ten Pre-requisites—all to be described in Chapter III.

Queen Maya and her attendants returned to Kapilavatthu, where a holy man inspected the child and forthwith proclaimed it as the Buddha-to-be. This displeased the child’s father, but so elated Queen Maya that having seen all the miraculous happenings, and realising that she had indeed given birth to the Buddha elect, died seven days after the delivery—literally, according to some accounts, of happiness.

The birthplace in the Lumbini Gardens is known with accuracy and is preserved today as a shrine. Hundreds of years after Buddha’s death, King Asoka of India discovered the spot and erected a tablet, and this was re-discovered in