

WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT

Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, originally published in 1959, is a classic primer of Buddhist teaching, a timeless resource for beginners and experienced students alike. I first read it in the 1970s, and was pleased to rediscover it a few years ago.

One day while looking at the book's cover (image at right), I realized that the background pattern in the upper area, behind the book title, was writing in Hebrew—not the familiar formal Hebrew printing, but a rough handwritten script. For instance, under the letter T in WHAT appears the word *Yisraelim* (יִשְׂרָאֵלִים) "Israelites"—from which I'd guess this text to be a passage from the Hebrew Bible.

Whatever it may be, such obviously Jewish scriptural material seemed out of place on a book about Buddhism. Not long after this discovery, I happened to meet the graphic designer from Grove Press at a local Zen Center retreat, and mentioned it to him. Apparently no one had ever noticed this anomaly before. As it happened, they were planning a new printing soon; could I find a more appropriate cover image? An interesting challenge.

The book was written by a Sri Lankan scholar/monk of the conservative *Theravāda* ("Way of the Elders") tradition, though his presentation includes the *Mahāyāna* ("Great Vehicle") as well. So I set about looking for some textual material, preferably the Buddha's own words, which would be regarded as foundational by all Buddhist schools.

The Buddha's teaching and the community he founded flourished in India for more than a thousand years, but were mostly eradicated during the Muslim invasions, surviving since in neighboring countries: the Theravada in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the Mahayana in East Asia and Tibet (whose particular form is also known as *Vajrayāna*, "Diamond Vehicle"). As a result, most of the Buddhist scriptures have been preserved only outside India, in the original vernacular Pali in the Theravadin countries, in Sanskrit (and local translations) in the Mahayana regions.

Some Internet research found pictures of Sri Lankan palm-leaf manuscripts (in the local Sinhalese script), none particularly suitable for the purpose in mind; I hoped to find something more universal in character. I learned of a couple of Internet discussion groups of Buddhist scholars, and sent queries to them, but received no reply. Finally I decided to see if I could produce something suitable myself.

The library of the local St. John's College has an excellent collection of Buddhist materials, including the definitive English translation of the *Digha Nikāya*, the first section of the Theravadin Pali Scriptures (the *Tipiṭaka*, "Three Baskets" of palm-leaf manuscripts), by Maurice Walshe (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*), wherein I found the following passage, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the record of the last days and passing of the Buddha:

Bhikkhus, it is through not realizing, through not penetrating the Four Noble Truths that this long course of birth and death has been passed through and undergone by me as well as by you. What are these four? They are the noble truth of suffering; the noble truth of the origin of suffering; the noble truth of the cessation of suffering; and the noble truth of the way to the cessation of suffering. But now, bhikkhus, that these have been realized and penetrated, cut off is the craving for existence, destroyed is that which leads to renewed becoming, and there is no fresh becoming.

(Digha Nikāya 16, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta 2.2)

I'd found an Internet site (www.tipitaka.org) which offers the entire Tipitaka in Pali, in the standard romanization used by Western scholars. I am far from fluent in Pali, or its parent Sanskrit, but, armed with knowledge of a few words and time and determination, I was able to locate the original Pali version of this passage, and copy it to my computer.

Then I transliterated the text, letter by letter, into the *Devanāgarī* देवनागरी script that is the standard writing system used for Sanskrit (and other north Indian languages) in recent centuries. Though no writing survives from the Buddha's own time, this recent/modern script is a direct descendant of the *Brāhmī* 𑀅𑀲𑀓𑀲𑀓 script used in the earliest Indian writing extant (the third century BCE "rock edicts" of the Buddhist Emperor Aśoka).

Here is the first sentence of the passage, in both the standard romanization and the Devanagari transcription:

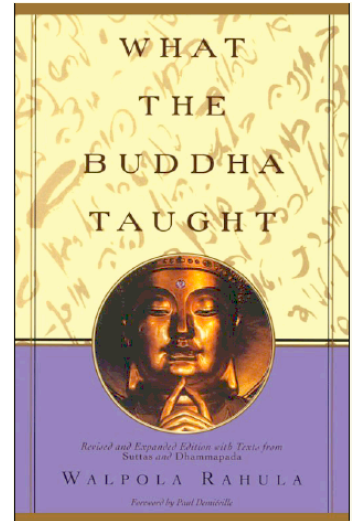
*Catunnaṃ bhikkhava ariyasaccānaṃ ananubodhā appaṭivedhā evamidaṃ
dighamaddhānaṃ sandhāvitaṃ saṃsaritaṃ mamañceva tumhākaṅca.*

चतुन्नं भिक्खवे अरियसच्चानं अननुबोधा अप्पटिवेधा एवमिदं
दीघमद्धानं सन्धावितं संसरितं ममञ्चेव तुम्हाकञ्च ।

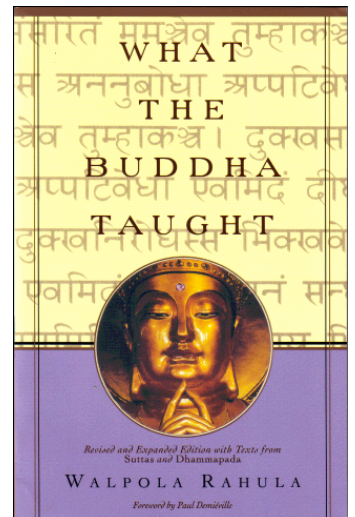
I checked my work with a couple of local Sanskrit scholars, and when they approved I printed it and sent it to the publisher. Who used it on the 2002 printing to replace the material previously in the background of the cover design.

नमो तस्स भगवतो अरहतो सम्मासम्बुद्धस्स ॥

Upāsaka Andrew Main, 2546 BE



What the Buddha Taught, 1986



What the Buddha Taught, 2002