

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter can only give some hints of details of chanting and its associated customs and meditative practices. These are often highly localized, perhaps growing over centuries through a kind of maturation process within the soil of local meditation practice, language, rituals and customs. Chants are various and highly precise in their function and intent: those that pursue chanting regard the form as a particular, specialized skill. While not usually regarded as the whole of the meditative way, chanting often, in practice, colours, enlivens and strengthens feeling for meditative practice as well as making a space in any group of people or assembly to be free from obvious hindrances and practise meditation.

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## Meditation and Southern Buddhism

# Six

There is a mountain in Sri Lanka which has become a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists. At dawn the reflection of Adam's Peak can be seen in the clouds in the distance, one of very few places in the world where solitary geographical positioning makes such a mysterious event possible. It also has another natural quirk: a yard-long slight indentation in the ground on the summit is in the shape of a smooth, flat and evenly planted footprint. It is said to be the place where the Buddha Gotama first visited the island, stepping over from India. Pilgrims make the long climb up on the night of the full moon to pay homage to the footprint, an ancient practice described by Marco Polo, and to watch the mountain's triangular shadow appear on the clouds in the distance as the sun rises behind and then gradually disappear. This arduous, meditative walk, made with the accompaniment of chants, breaks for 'plain tea' and chat, has made the place a central feature of the Sri Lankan sacred and psychological map as well as the obviously geographical one. Everyone should climb the peak once in their life (down-to-earth Sri Lankans joke that doing it twice is a bit extreme). The *genius loci* also ensures that it is at least one spot on the island where other traditions and beings feel welcome, as evinced in its several names. The footprint is said by the Moslem community to be that of the Biblical Adam, Hindus call it Sri Pada, to denote the arrival of Śiva, and its other name, Samanalakande, was coined from Sinhala as the place where butterflies are said to go to die.

The story is a demonstration of the way that the advent of Buddhism in a particular region comes to be steeped in legends, local custom, environment and even geological setting. In this chapter we will look at the way Buddhist meditation has developed in the countries of what has become called Southern Buddhism: Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos. Because traditions of practice have such an ancient ancestry, the cultures of these regions often exhibit features that link closely to and support the practice of meditation, so this chapter will also focus on some of these.

**SRI LANKA**

The first home for Buddhism outside India does seem to have been Sri Lanka, introduced through a mission sent by Emperor Aśoka under his son,

Mahinda. King Devanampiya Tissa (r. 250–210 BCE), after his conversion, undertook extensive building of the temple, the Thūparāma Dagoba at the then capital in Anurādhapura. The now lost Brazen Palace Temple was also built there which had, according to an ancient Sinhalese chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, nine storeys and housed one of the great early temples of Buddhism, the Mahāvihāra. It was here that Buddhaghosa supposedly stayed when he was writing his manual of meditation. A cutting from the bodhi tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment was supposedly brought over by Princess Sanghamittā, King Aśoka's daughter, and one has been growing at that spot in Anurādhapura ever since. Every year pilgrims still come and bathe the tree in milk.

Four deities are said to guard the island, who have acquired Buddhist connotations. The rich sacred geography of the island is also enacted by the frequency of the depiction of the sixteen *stūpas* dotted around it. The *Mahavamsa* lists these, and all of them are frequently honoured by their depiction on temples throughout the island. The Sinhalese perceived themselves, from the earliest times, as following the way of the Buddha. There seems to have been, as in Southeast Asia, a distinction between forest monks, who practised a great deal of meditation, and followed more the model of the Indian ascetic, and those of the village, whose Buddhist teaching was linked to education and pastoral care but who would practise some, if less meditation too. This polarity dates back at least to the sixth century. In the early days it seems that monasteries such as the Mahāvihāra were active meditative centres as well as places of intellectual and textual inquiry. Their traditions in all these fields have persisted with some breaks throughout Sri Lankan history. Certainly differences of approach seem to have been live issues. The Abhayagiri monastery, for instance, seems to have been much more in sympathy with meditative trends that were issuing from India which gave rise to what came to be known as the Mahāyāna schools. There seem to have been three schools or *nikāyas* in Sri Lanka in the early days, perhaps in part separated by different attitudes towards practice. In the twelfth century, under the auspices of King Parakkamabāhu, the system became more homogeneous, and the tradition came to be known as 'Theravāda', broadly following the guidelines of the old Mahāvihāra. At this time this name came to be used by Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia, perhaps primarily because of the Sri Lankan model's ability to accommodate the presence of local and state interests.



Figure 6.1 Reclining stone Buddha at Gal Vihara, Polonnaruwa

### The laity

The extent to which the laity in Sri Lanka practised meditation in the past is not clear. In the first part of the twentieth century there was a widespread idea that sitting meditation was for 'too difficult' for lay people – in some contrast to the popular understanding in, say, Thailand. As monks ordain for life, there is little movement in and out of the *saṅgha*, so few ex-monks around who may have had opportunities to practise it. Historically, however, Sri Lanka has always been a country steeped in vibrant and emotional rituals, such as the *paritta*, or blessings ceremonies, lay chanting and domestic ritual at home. These tend to be Buddhist, but with strong local elements, such as offerings to local gods, deities, and the spirits of various woods, lakes and mountains.

This has given local practice what we might call a multi-layered feel, where a small amount of sitting meditation is interspersed with ritual, blessings, chant and a touch of insight practice. Beings all around are remembered. For instance, a ceremony for a life event, at home or in the temple, involves providing food to the monks, chanting and blessings. The laity will make the offerings and join in at certain times with the chants. There will probably also be a few minutes of loving-kindness practice, and, perhaps, a short meditation on the breath. A talk may follow, about some aspect of the path, and if the occasion is to mark a death or the anniversary

of a death, there will be some element of insight practice in the reminder of the future state of the bodies of all beings. This mixture of listening, chanting, calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) is also rooted in a sense of place and beings all around. The merit from the event is usually 'shared', in a ceremony involving pouring water, as the wish is made that any benefit will go to the dead, and to all beings around and in the locality who may delight in the event or who may be unhappy and needing help. Sri Lankan monks – like those in many other Southern Buddhist traditions – tend to lead their guidance of the practice of loving-kindness for the laity with specific reference to known local places and areas. 'May all beings in x or y be well and happy' is a wish translated through ritual, and they, hope practice, into the participants' daily life and own surroundings. This practice is particularly favoured in Sri Lanka.

As so often in Buddhist settings, a simple ritual for a life event will have an earthiness, applicability and a sense of the festive all knitted in with other features of the teaching. Anyone who has attended many such events – on festival days, the anniversaries of the death of a relative or a friend – will be *bahusuto*, someone who has 'heard much', a complimentary epithet often employed by the Buddha to describe his followers. He or she will also be keyed in to many aspects of the teaching and basic meditative practice. This they can pursue further at some time, perhaps when they are old, a period in life which, in Southern Asian countries, is regarded as especially suitable for the practice of meditation. At other times a sense of the possibilities of meditation is present. Short meditations are also taught in schools, usually in the form of a loving-kindness practice. The whole evening ritual of dropping by a temple on the way home after work, central also in many Southeast Asian countries, involves the recollection of the qualities of the Buddha, *dharmma* and *saṅgha*. These are practices recommended by the Buddha and by Buddhaghosa under the heading of *samatha*. On full-moon day festivals the laity wear white, take precepts and spend a day at the temple. At these there are always many old people, particularly women, chanting and making offerings. The devotion and grace of this kind of *bhāvanā* is self-evident.

There are four times. And what are they? Hearing *dharmma* at the right time, discussion of *dharmma* at the right time, *samatha* at the right time, *vipassanā* at the right time.

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### FLOWER OFFERINGS

In Sri Lanka, flower offerings are made with particular care. The heads are taken of lotuses, frangipani and jasmine flowers and piled up in decorative arrangements on dishes, sprinkled with water and offered to the shrine with some ancient flower-offering verses. The person offering pays respects (*pūja*) with the colourful and scented flowers, and makes a wish that through the merit of offering there may be freedom; earthenware butterlamps are also lit, with twisted cotton wicks floating in coconut oil.

As these flowers are fading away, so this body of mine is moving towards dissolution.

The merit of the activity is then transferred to any gods, humans, animals or suffering spirits who may be nearby.

'Puppha pūja', <http://www.buddhanet.net/audio-chant.htm>

Buddhism in Sri Lanka has certainly suffered periods of decline. The island at times has not been a unified whole, and was divided, for instance, after thirteenth-century Tamil invasions. The ordination line for monks had to be reintroduced from Thailand in the sixteenth century and was lost for nuns entirely. Southern Buddhist nuns now adopt a *Vinaya* based on early precepts, but without a direct lineage that can be traced back to early times, as it can by nuns in Taiwan. The last few years of Sri Lanka's history have also been deeply troubled, with conflict between the Tamil and Sinhalese population, and the devastation of the recent tsunami. Despite this, the island still retains a reputation for its spiritual tradition. The monastic orders are thriving and its meditative heritage seems to have been sustained, for both men and women. There are many women who cannot ordain as the ordination lineage has been lost, but are called nuns, living by extra precepts in communities. There is a continued formation of temples, such as the Island Hermitage near Galle, and a number of new meditation centres, often in the forest regions. Some of these are open to the laity and to Westerners to stay for extended periods of personal practice. At a lay level, meditation has become more obviously popular, perhaps influenced by the number of tourists who have visited the island in search of teaching and somewhere for

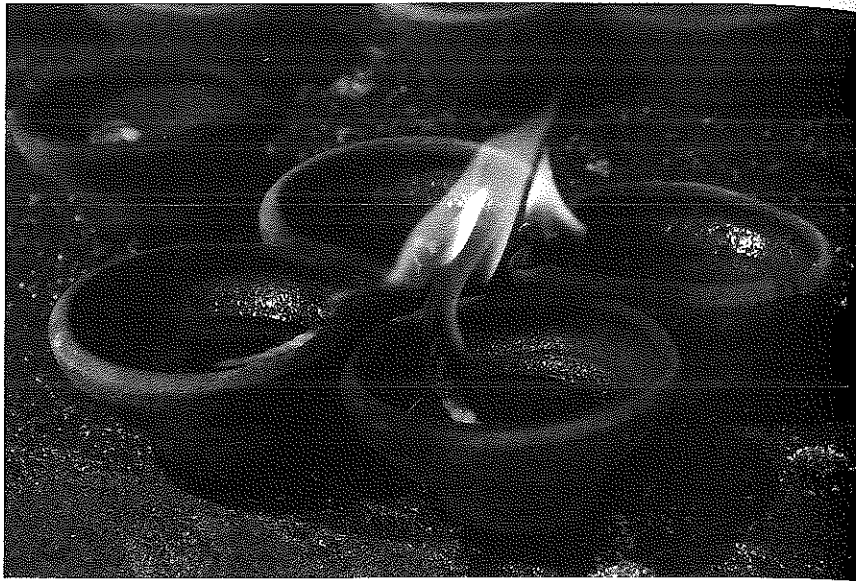


Figure 6.2 **Butter lamps in Sri Lanka: the wicks are made from twisted cotton, and dipped in coconut oil before lighting**

personal practice. Burmese insight methods have had some impact, as well as the trend for some Westerners interested in meditation to take monastic ordination. Despite setbacks, Buddhism is everywhere in Sri Lanka still. Wherever you go, from the earliest hours of the morning, Buddhist chants are heard continuously on radio; along major thoroughfares, alongside the fumes of petrol and roadside waste, you can always smell incense and burning coconut oil in butterlamp offerings at the many shrines on the way.

#### SOUTHEAST ASIA

Myanmar/Burma also has some legendary claims to an early Buddhist influence. Buddhism arrived in the very early part of the first millennium and still constitutes the major religion of the region. The ethnic groups are varied, and some, such as the Shan, have strong local practices linked to Buddhist ones. These include much-loved rituals such as the recitation of the *Vessantara-Jātaka*, a long festive event, where chant, listening and generosity (*dāna*) all contribute in various ways to what could be called local *bhāvanā*. The practice of meditation, despite the country's troubled political history, also seems to thrive there. The Burmese have a reputation for their *vipassanā* methods, although in practice there are many dedicated *samatha*



Figure 6.3 **Flooded temples at Inle Lake, Shan State, Myanmar/Burma**

practitioners too. A Buddhist nun from the region assured me she had a strong *vipassanā* interest – which she recommended to be done after extensive *jhāna* training. The authorities there are wary of some traditional Buddhist meditative traditions: this is in part because some magical Tantric practices conducted by a discredited monastic group brought other, unrelated, *samatha* practices into disrepute. Since the nineteenth century Myanmar has been the source of famous *vipassanā* teachings, such as those taught by U Ba Khin (1899–1971) and Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–82). They place less emphasis on *samatha*, although originally did not, as is commonly misunderstood, reject it. The effects of these methods were described by John Coleman, an ex-CIA agent taught by U Ba Khin. Through a painfully inexorable realization after a period of sustained practice, he saw bodily phenomena in their moving, ever-changing state. Recognizing that he cannot stop this, he ‘lets go’ and finds release:

As the attention moves slowly and with utmost concentration from feet to legs to arms to head each bit comes under the most microscopic scrutiny. It is the awareness of the movement and change and friction of the *kalapas* [microscopic energy-fields] which go to make up the body tissue, bones and blood which gives rise to the intense sensation of burning and ultimate

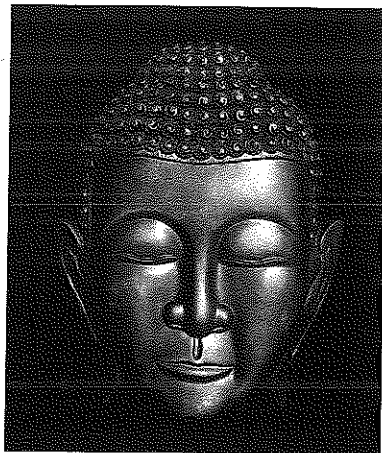


Figure 6.4 Face of the Buddha, Myanmar/Burma

transcending of ordinary consciousness. It is this state, which ... holds the promise of well-being and lifelong happiness.

Coleman (1971: 223-4)

The Buddha speaks of four effective routes to awakening, all of which seem represented by various schools now: *samatha* before *vipassanā*, *vipassanā* before *samatha*, the two yoked together and *dhamma*-excitement (A II 157). Could this be an illustration of the methods of the last?

In Myanmar, *Abhidhamma*, one philosophical line of the Buddha's teaching, is particularly revered, employed both as a meditative tool and subject for animated debate. The many Burmese monks who visit the West are highly trained in meditation, *Abhidhamma* and the *suttas*. Of these countries, Myanmar has a strong representation amongst the laity of active meditators, who do not regard arahatship as an impossible goal. In Laos and Cambodia, also longstanding Buddhist countries, the influence of practices described by Francois Bizot seems to be present. These involve ritual, an alchemical understanding of meditation as the transmutation of the 'base' to the refined, and meditation itself. Understanding derived from alchemy has had a dramatic effect on the formulation of terminology for *samatha* practice in particular. Local versions of *Jātakas* and post-canonical *Jātakas* are popular: those in Laos are apparently particularly funny.

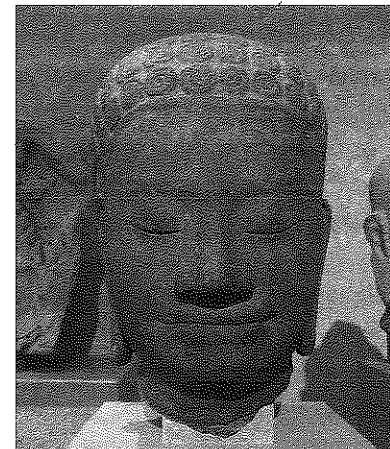


Figure 6.5 Stone head of the Buddha, Cambodia

#### YANTRAS

The idea of an innate Buddha nature is not anticipated in Pāli canonical texts, but the notion of a 'body' to be created through meditation practice does feature: the factors that produce *jhāna* are called 'jhāna limbs'. Perhaps influenced by Chinese Buddhism re-entering Laos, Cambodia and Thailand through waves of immigration from the twelfth century onwards, some later esoteric *samatha* schools suggest that the meditative process is like an alchemical one, or the development of an embryo. Khmer texts and rituals

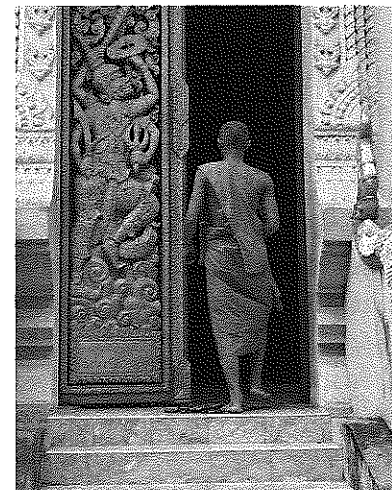


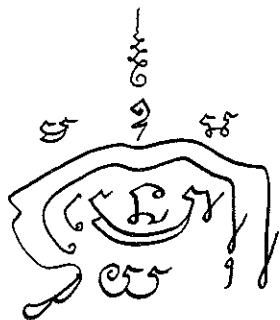
Figure 6.6 Young monk walking through a temple door, Laos

concerned with these ideas seem to date from the fifteenth century. These are often accompanied by *yantras*, designs or patterns that embody knowledge, a form of expression that has always been popular throughout Southeast Asia. Thai *yantras* in intricately decorative patterns describe stages of meditative practice; they are commonly engraved on the back of protective amulets that can be bought in markets throughout Southeast Asia.

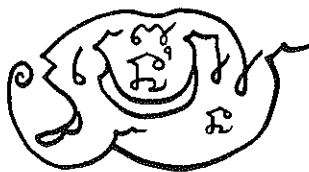
#### Na Yan: a modern explanation



The characters NA MO BU DDHA YĀ contain all that meaning [of the path], and can then themselves be drawn as yan, where the lines of the Khmer characters become the form of the yan, as in these two examples. NA *Golden Face* is also used as a symbol of *mettā*, or love:



To grasp the form of the yan is *samatha*, and to grasp the meaning is *vipassanā*. For the meditator, a yantra executed fluidly may indeed contain all that is symbolized by the form and the characters.



This is a non-linear, non-verbal process, and when language is transcended in this way, when the meditator penetrates the illusion of subject-object by 'letting go of the grammar', the limited self which depends for its existence on the object is also transcended. When one-pointedness arises in this way, *bhāvanā* is fulfilled. Whether the path-moment or one of the stages of concentration arise is another matter, depending on pre-conditions (or lack of conditions) in the meditator.

Paul Dennison (1997: 22–3), formerly Thanissaro Bhikkhu

In Thailand, Buddhism also has a long and eventful history. As in other Southern Buddhist countries, the meditative tradition is rich and highly differentiated. The forest centres of Northeastern Thailand in particular have produced teachers such as Ajahn Mun (1870–1949), Ajahn Maha Boowa (1913–) and Ajahn Chah (1919–92), who have had an enormous impact in the West. Thai practitioners are also particularly noted for taking *samatha* meditation to an advanced level. Ajahn Sudhiro, in common with some other Thai teachers, gives guidance in forms of *samatha* practice that are sometimes more fluid than those suggested by commentators such as Buddhaghosa, though his guidelines are also sometimes followed. Such methods teach, for those already experienced in meditation, *kasina* and space practices through the use of natural objects: a candle for fire, the sky for blue, a pond for water, the space between trees for space, and so on. The object is withdrawn for formless practice. The approach varies, but such teaching encourages a relaxed movement in and out of concentration, through the development of the masteries of adverting, entering, sustaining, emerging and recollection. This also ensures that the mind is flexible and joyful for the practice of insight. Variations in different monasteries are rich and indicate that the commentarial material, while often exploited, provides just one source for meditative practice. Lay practice exhibits strong meditative interest. There are some highly respected women teachers; some women live as nuns in communities where meditation practice is popular. In Thailand most men become monks for a short period as a kind of rite of passage. This means that a large proportion of the population have experience of monastic life, and some practise meditation. Boonman Poonyathiro, a monk for a number of years, teaches a form of *samatha* breathing mindfulness which, for experienced practitioners, links the breath in all four of Buddhaghosa's stages of counting, following, touching and settling to the four divine

abidings of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity respectively. Insight practice is conducted afterwards.

Southern Buddhist countries have a strong tradition of both *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation. Broadly speaking, *samatha* meditation involves the use of joy, the third *jhāna* factor and a factor of awakening, as an agent of transformation within meditation practice. For *vipassanā* meditation the key feature is *nibbidā*, variously translated as 'turning away', 'dispassion' or 'disenchantment' with the world. As the following extract from the Thai teacher of *samatha* and *vipassanā*, Ajahn Chah explains, this is not weariness in the conventional mundane sense of boredom, based on attachment. Rather it is an active turning to the factors which will bring purification and awakening to the mind:

The sense of world-weariness that grows with insight, however, leads to detachment, turning away and aloofness that comes naturally from investigating and seeing the truth of the way things are. It is free from attachment to the sense of self that attempts to control and force things to go according to its desires. The clarity of insight is so strong that you no longer experience any sense of a self that has to struggle against the flow of its desires or endure through attachment. The three fetters of personality view, doubt and blind attachment to rules can't delude you or cause you to make any serious mistakes in practice. This is the very beginning of the Path, the first clear insight into ultimate truth, and paves the way for further insight.

Chah (2006: 107)

The famously ascetic and rigorous forest teacher, Mahā Boowa, for instance, employed a system whereby concentration was developed as a means to wisdom, but for some meditators he taught wisdom as a means to concentration:

When wisdom has been nagging at those things to which the *citta* [mind] is firmly attached, what the *citta* knows about them cannot be superior to that which wisdom reveals, so the *citta* will then drop into a state of calm and attain *samādhi*.

Boowa (1973: 15)

There are endless permutations on the interplay between these two elements in various schools.

Richard Gombrich writes of Buddhism's early dissemination,

The major factor has no doubt been the power and beauty of its thought. It offered both a coherent universalist ethic and a way to salvation from suffering.

Gombrich (1988: 151)

In the countries where Southern Buddhism took root, it seems to have answered meditative as well as theoretical needs, which have continued as exploratory strands of the living tradition.

#### THE RECOLLECTION OF THE BUDDHA, DHAMMA AND THE SAṄGHA

The distinctions between schools of Buddhism were not as clear-cut in the early centuries as has sometimes been presented. Some elements that became important in meditative practice seem to reflect a sea-change in a climate of taste as much as a sectarian bias. One such feature, which emerged in the centuries after the Buddha's death, is an element of devotion, emerging at this time also in the Brahminical traditions. This did have a considerable impact on the way the Buddha is regarded, recollected, and, in some later schools worshipped, as he becoming increasingly an idealized and almost godlike figure. Although this is occasionally suggested in the early Pāli texts, it is not emphasized. Devotional and hagiographical elements later assumed a far greater importance in all schools of Buddhism.

In Buddhist temples, the figure of the Buddha sits at the centre of a richly various inhabited universe where all kinds of activities are going on. Temples in Southern Buddhist countries are filled with pictures of the Buddha's last lives, scenes where he is depicted renewing the Bodhisatta vow and manifold different expressions of the Buddhist path. The temple precincts also sometimes have other events going on. At festivals these may include dances, recitations, and plays. Outside Southern Buddhist temples there is often a shrine to local spirits and deities, who are honoured before entering the temple itself. The figure of Guan Yin, the Chinese Buddhist goddess of compassion, often has her own shrine in temples in Thailand. At these, visitors can pay homage, throw yarrow stalk oracles and make offerings before going into the shrine itself.

### THE BUDDHA: AS HISTORICAL FIGURE AND OBJECT OF DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE

The life story of the Buddha has had a powerful impact on the psychological life of Southern Buddhists, so it is worth describing a little about the way this works. The death of the historical Buddha, in his eighties, appears to have occurred in 405 BCE. There is no biography of Gotama Buddha from his own lifetime, but the process of writing biographies seems to have started soon after his death, with the *Jātakanidāna*, a narrative that contains his vow to become a Bodhisatta/Bodhisattva, an aspirant Buddha, many lifetimes previously. The verses of this are canonical, and so date from the earliest strata of texts. In the twentieth century, scholars assembled a chronological sequence of key events of the Buddha's life, also including incidents recorded in the various earliest texts.

It seems that the Buddha Gotama was born as the son of a chieftain or local princeling. Protected from seeing suffering in his youth, because his parents were anxious to encourage him to become a universal monarch and so avoid following the path of Buddhahood, he is introduced to *dukkha* through four signs. These were seen on journeys out from the palace in his youth: old man, sick man, dead man and in the figure of a solitary renunciate, an apparently free man. He then leaves his wife and son – though he goes back to teach them after his enlightenment – to pursue meditative, and then ascetic practices. For several years he mortifies the body and mind with a group of five ascetics. Realizing this is not the middle way, he accepts food, eating some milk rice given by a woman, Sujātā, and remembers a simple experience he had as a child, described in Chapter 1. On the night of the enlightenment he practises all the *jhānas* and remembers innumerable past lives. Finally he becomes enlightened, free from rebirth. For the next forty-five years he teaches the 'middle way' and the 'eightfold path', a way of practice that integrates behaviour in the world, meditation and the practice of wisdom.

There are a number of 'biographical' accounts of the Buddha that date from his lifetime and the centuries after his death, which often incorporate mythical and symbolic material. These include accounts of his earlier lives, as the Bodhisatta, the being bound for, or destined for enlightenment (*bodhisakta*), who will be discussed in the next chapter. These narratives, of interspersed biography and autobiography, are known as *Jātakas*, the partly canonical stories of his lives spent in preparation to become a Buddha. Often supplemented and even supplanted by local, non-canonical tales of a similar

type that have evolved throughout Southern Buddhist countries, they give a densely eventful imaginative landscape to the Bodhisatta vow and the quest for Buddhahood. Earlier rebirths as elephant, mouse, lion, horse, god, prince, priest or fisherman communicate a sense of the great diversity of experience necessary to teach others. Different registers or modes include the comic, the tragic, the melodramatic, the heroic, the farcical and the mundane, as the Bodhisatta is tested within a number of settings and different frames of reference, as if through interpenetrating leaves of understanding. Chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavāmsa* also relate mythological incidents, such as the Buddha visiting Sri Lanka, which validate the country's special link to the Buddhist tradition.

The extent to which such narratives, alongside the mythical content of material recorded in the *suttas*, such as his miraculous birth, are historically 'true' raises the same sort of questions we find being asked about sacred biography in other contexts. The Buddha's visit to Sri Lanka, for instance, could be compared to the kind of stories that developed about Christ, who is said in the Glastonbury Legends to have 'visited' England, an event suggested by William Blake's poem, 'Jerusalem'. The truth of such an incident is felt by Christians to reside in the experience of those that are inspired by the poem as a hymn of redemption and Glastonbury as a sacred site on an interior, Christian map. This is, perhaps, comparable to the position many modern Buddhists feel about the supernatural incidents or such late additions to the life story as the visit to Sri Lanka. The stories include many layers, including validation of the geographical, the political and the historical. While for many Asians much of this material is taken as literal truth, many Buddhists also appreciate such details and subsequent accretions as symbolic contributions to whatever the 'historical' life story may have been. We can all recognize or sense some psychological truth embedded in events, such as, in the life story, the routing of the armies of Māra on the night of the enlightenment, or, in later 'historical' myths, the Buddha's visit to various places. Likewise, when we read the accounts of the Buddha as the Bodhisatta spending earlier births 'in the past' either in the meditative heavens, or as a lion, cat or mouse in the animal realms, we can feel the range of sympathy and knowledge being suggested by what can also be seen on a metaphoric level. This applies both internally, to a knowledge of the levels of subtle experience possible for the human mind, and externally, to an understanding of the experiences of many other living beings, in all kinds of existence. The fully awakened mind demonstrated by the Buddha is said to 'know all worlds' and to be



a teacher 'of gods and humans': he understands the relationship between self and other, knower and known. Such stories provide great evidence of the scope and inventiveness of this understanding. In temples in Thailand, *Jātakas* are painted in vivid colours against a dark forest-green, black and grey wilderness as a background, which seems to suggest the world of the other, the different and the mysterious as well as the mundane. Layers of meaning seem to accrete around stories, chants, and rituals associated with the basic facts of the Buddha's life. Despite all kinds of apparent contradictions, these endlessly renewable and renewed elements of the Buddha's biography seem to sit comfortably with literal, historical facts.

In Southern Buddhism, the Buddha is regarded as a special kind of human, whose contact with the highest heavenly realms of experience and knowledge of the unfortunate realms is represented through stories of his past lives, in other bodily forms and accounts of his meditative experiences and teachings in his own lifetime. Features of his appearance and body in his last life are said to bear the imprint of the mythical, the magical and the godlike: and are, perhaps, to be taken as symbolic. It is worthy of note, however, that there are several places in the canon, such as the *Dhātuvibhaṅga-Sutta* (M III 237–47), where he is either mistaken for another monk or needs pointing out: if he had a remarkable appearance, it was one he could easily drop to look ordinary. He lived with his order by the same rules that they did. He rebukes one follower, Vakkali, for 'clutching the hem of his robe' from excessive devotion to him. In the *Mahāparinibbāna-Sutta* he gives instructions for what is to happen to his body after death, as if to accommodate devotional impulses: he also stresses, however, that his teaching and *Vinaya* are what he has left behind for others.

What is meant by a 'Buddha' changes in different locations and schools of practice. However, finding ways in which the awakened mind may be aroused through meditation on his figure, either as an internalized 'knower', a guide or, in Eastern schools, as an expression of a pre-existent state that can be rediscovered within the meditator, is a feature of most schools of Buddhist meditation, in most traditions. After his death, the Buddha was regarded a little like a god as well as a human. The inheritance the Buddha left behind was of his teachings, some autobiographical material, some biographical information and detail, some stories, some myths and some reminders that practice of the teaching is the best way to follow the teacher. Interpreting all these levels and the texts associated with them is an ongoing challenge for those attempting to understand Buddhist practice and doctrine.



Figure 6.7 Statues of the Buddha at teak wood factory, Chiang Mai

### THE THIRTY-TWO MARKS OF THE BUDDHA

Many legends and stories are associated with the birth of the Buddha. He was, for instance, said to have been born from his mother's side while she stood between two trees at Lumbinī, now in Nepal, half way between her husband's and her parents' home. According to stories told in most schools of Buddhism, the baby displayed thirty-two marks or signs on his body. These attributes indicated to wise men and seers who examined him that he would one day become either a universal monarch, who would rule the world by *dhamma*, not force (see Chapter 3), or a Buddha, the teacher of gods and humans. Some of these mythical marks seem symbolic, such as the turban-crowned head, and some demonstrate participation in the divine. For instance, the Buddha is said to have a voice like Brahma, the king of the heavens where rebirth is obtained through the practice of meditation, and the golden skin of Sakka, the king of the sense-sphere heaven where beings are reborn for practising generosity and restraint. Some of the marks are conventionally heroic: he is said to have the very long arms and lionlike chest associated with royal warriors in Indian epic. Others seem experiential, or, to put it another way, features that could be produced by anyone in a certain relaxed and alert frame of mind, such as evenly rounded shoulders. Some seem to be almost internal descriptions of meditative states: the mark

concerned with taste appears to be a subjective description, perhaps of meditative experience. Each mark is associated with a karmic action and result: for instance 'the golden skin' is the result of giving, and means that the person who possesses this characteristic will often be a recipient too. The whole list is used as an iconography for pictorial and sculptural depiction of the Buddha throughout Asia but also provides the basis for various meditative practices too. In Tibet it contributes to the visualization that creates an invoked and evoked form of the Bodhisattva within the mind's eye. In the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra* in India and derived Chinese Tiantai practices it comes to form part of a meditative walking and standing exercise. The practitioner imagines himself possessing each mark, as well as the Buddha, represented externally on the shrine, and then sees the impermanence of each, so using the mark both as an object for insight itself and as the basis from which to investigate the mind that perceives it.

The most mundane and 'grounded' mark is the first. The Buddha walks with an even tread, touching the ground with the whole of the foot. He possesses this mark because he has worked for the welfare of other beings, and, as a result of this, has a large following. The list demonstrates the way that the figure of the Buddha brings together attributes that indicate association with states of deep peace and bliss – his penultimate life was said to be in a meditative heaven – and those thoroughly down-to-earth and human. It is through all these attributes that he is said to be able to help other beings.

### LAKKHANA SUTTA

#### The Thirty-Two marks of the Great Man

- 1 He has well-supported feet.
- 2 On the soles of his feet wheels arise, with a thousand spokes, with hub and with rim, complete in every way and well defined within.
- 3 He has projecting heels.
- 4 He has long fingers and toes.
- 5 He has soft and tender hands and feet.
- 6 He has net-like hands and feet.
- 7 He has raised ankles like conch shells.
- 8 The lower part of his leg is like an antelope's.

- 9 Standing, and without bending, he touches and rubs around his knees with both palms.
- 10 He is one in whom that part which should be concealed by garments, is covered by a bag.
- 11 He is gold-coloured, his skin shines like gold.
- 12 He is one who possesses subtle skin; owing to the subtlety of his skin, dirt and sweat do not stick to his body.
- 13 He is single-haired, so that on his body single hairs arise, one to each pore.
- 14 He has hair pointing upwards; dark upturned hairs arise, black in colour, turning in rings, turning auspiciously to the right.
- 15 He is straight of frame like Brahma.
- 16 He has seven outflows on his hands, on his feet, at the tips of his shoulders, and at the top of the back.
- 17 Lion-like is the upper part of his body.
- 18 Filled is the hollow between the shoulders.
- 19 He is proportioned like the sphere of the banyan tree: as long as his body, so is the span of his arms; as far as the span of the arms, so long is his body.
- 20 Evenly rounded are the shoulders.
- 21 He releases the highest of tastes.
- 22 He has a lion-like jaw.
- 23 He has forty teeth.
- 24 He has even teeth.
- 25 Undivided are his teeth.
- 26 Very white are his visible teeth.
- 27 He has a mighty tongue.
- 28 He has the voice of Brahma, resembling the song of a karavika bird.
- 29 Very blue are his eyes.
- 30 He has eyelashes like those of a cow.
- 31 The filament arising between the eyebrows is soft like white cotton.
- 32 The great man is turban-crowned.

The thirty-two marks of the Buddha have become part of the iconography of the Buddha and, subsequently, Bodhisattvas, in most traditions of Buddhist art and meditative practice.

### MUDRĀ AND POSTURE

Throughout India, gesture has always been considered an important part of ritual, devotion and meditative practice. Ancient temple dance forms gesture becomes a kind of language, with the hands and the pose of the body expressing meaning in a way that would be understood by many present. Thai court temple dances also use *mudrā* to express, for instance, the qualities of the Triple Gem. The Buddha's life story also comes to be associated with different bodily postures and hand positions, which are translated into the physical form of Buddha images. The enlightenment is shown by the *samādhi* posture, with the hands cupped in the lap in meditation. The 'calling the earth to witness' gesture shows the Buddha touching the ground with the right hand. This posture is associated with *adhittāna*, or resolve. After asking the goddess of the earth to testify by invoking his generosity to monks in past lives, he routs Māra, sees his own worth to sit in meditation and determines not to move until he has become enlightened. Murals of the stages of the Buddha's life are widespread throughout Southeast Asian temples: Etienne Lamotte also identified thirty-four episodes from the Buddha's life at Sāñcī, India, in bas-relief depictions that predate literary evidence. In Thailand the symbology of these postures was codified during the third reign of the Chakri dynasty (1824–51) into a list of forty poses. In practice there are even more postures in this composite visual biography, often also associated with events in the life of the Buddha and depicted on temple walls.

### DAYS OF THE WEEK AND BUDDHIST THEORY

The assignation of postures to days of the week is a particular feature of Thai Buddhism (see Appendix B). The Thais, perhaps more than those of other Southeast Asian countries, have a great interest in astrology and such areas of symbolic correspondence. Birthdays are very important, and they will often make offerings to the *saṅgha* to mark them. Such interest constitutes what is, to them, a civilized and humane way in which any given person can feel part of a kind of Thai sacred folk calendar. The day of the week the person was born on, the month and the year of birth are all imbued with special import. The birth 'day', as well as the astrological configuration associated with the birthdate of any given person, lends people a separate identity – but also links them to a larger, universally applicable system of Buddhist correspondences. Those born on a Monday, like the present king, wear yellow on that day, as does anyone else on a Monday, or any occasion when people wish to mark allegiance to him. The wearer might also know

the posture in the Buddha's life with which Monday is associated and, perhaps, the factor of awakening specially intended for Monday birthdays: the first, mindfulness. Such a person may feel a passionate and animated sense of loyalty to the 'self' associated with that, but will not be too grudging on those whose birthday happens to fall on a Tuesday or Wednesday, who participate in other features necessary to render the system whole. Chinese, Indian and Thai astrological methods and systems, while heterogeneous, all link to one another in various ways and contribute to such subterranean alliances between quite different social groups. There is, for instance, a *stūpa* that is 'lucky' to visit, dependent on one's Chinese year of birth, such as rat, dragon or sheep. This is not just a practical way of preventing traffic jams to one site, which it certainly is. As well as linking the symbolic language of one culture to another, it also encourages an awareness of the importance of manifold and diverse contributing elements in any given 'field'. Indeed it seems to become an expression of an inclusive Buddhist folk world system, that allows Indian, Thai and Chinese world views all to work together, and even support one another, transcending local and national identity. New elements and new lists can be incorporated all the time.

### SEVEN FACTORS OF AWAKENING

In Thailand the factors of awakening are one of the most popular Buddhist canonical lists, for their applicability and for their capacity to arouse happiness in *bhāvanā*. As positive factors they are considered as antidotes to the hindrances. They are: mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. These may be developed at the beginning of the path and can be deepened at each stage. They can be aroused during daily life or, fully cultivated, can be employed to direct the mind to the meditation object and then to wisdom. All have to be aroused for the attainment of liberation. The list supplies the seeds of an understanding which can be taken just for fun but can also be used for specific development of factors within a meditative context. One canonical story recounts the factors being chanted for their healing power. Indeed it is thought that is particularly useful to work on the one for the day that it is at the moment, thus ensuring that the list is seen to provide continuously appropriate and

renewable guidance for different situations. There is thought to be a special association with the factor that links to one's own birth day. It should be emphasized, of course, that meditation is taught on the basis of temperament (*carita*), rather than such associations!

Monday mindfulness: *sati* (yellow)

Tuesday investigation of dhammas: *dharmavicaya* (pink)

Wednesday effort: *viriya* (green)

Thursday joy: *pīti* (orange)

Friday tranquillity: *passadhi* (blue)

Saturday concentration: *samādhi* (purple)

Sunday equanimity: *upekkhā* (red)

From the point of view of meditation practice, the factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*) provide the practitioner with a list useful for the articulation of problems and for giving encouragement and direction within the practice. The elements can be seen together, as a process working through any one meditation practice, or in the maturation of the meditation over a period of time. For instance, when one starts a job, like digging the garden, there is awareness of a field, and mindfulness. Investigation is then aroused by the act of digging as the types of soil and the stoniness of the earth are assessed. This allows effort appropriate to the job to be applied. Joy in the job in hand can then arise and, as work continues, this sometimes deepens into tranquillity. Concentration, or stillness, focuses on the job's completion. At the end of the task, the whole is relinquished with a satisfying sense of equanimity. This is a simple simile, but contains the principles which are useful for meditation too: problems can occur at any stage, and the process may not continue well. In breathing mindfulness meditation, with which this list is often associated in the canon, joy may become restlessness for instance, and may need a fine awareness of the breath to allow tranquillity to arise. At other points there may be a need for more effort, in directions suggested by the exploratory nature of *dharmavicaya*, exploration of *dhammas*, which will indicate within the breath areas of 'knot' or strain to help soften and refine the way effort can be applied. At the level of insight the list is also important. Mindfulness provides a ground in which the relationship, say, between 'name' and 'form' can be investigated. Effort is applied, and

joy arises when insight is obtained. This also needs to be tranquillized, stilled and brought to equanimity. The list of factors is frequently employed by the Buddha to describe supports to breathing mindfulness practice, to arouse both calm and wisdom, and by Buddhaghosa as a way of balancing the factors within meditation. As we shall see it features in most schools of Buddhism, as the penultimate grouping in the thirty-seven factors contributing to awakening, before the eightfold path (see Chapter 7). It is a good example of the way, in regions that have been Buddhist for some time, a key teaching comes to work on many interpenetrating levels. In this case this includes the theoretical, the meditative, 'folk-wisdom', the humorous, and, when applied to the days of the week, even the sartorial.

### THE RECOLLECTION OF THE SAṄGHA

#### The arahats

The assembly of the Buddha's followers, who have attained stages of awakening, are known as the *saṅgha*. The external embodiment and representatives of these are the orders of monks and nuns. Some modern Buddhists take all practitioners as an example of the *saṅgha*. While this possibility is not stated in canonical texts, the recollection of good friends is in one sutta recommended to a devout layman, Nandiya, after the Buddha and the *dhamma*, presumably to suggest a sense of community to him too. These constitute a refuge because they provide support, encouragement and teaching to others.

The following protective chant, of unknown antiquity, is very popular in Thailand and Cambodia. It pays homage to eight arahats, who surround the Buddha in a directional *maṇḍala*. The arrangement varies slightly from area to area. They appear to represent meditative qualities that complement one another: the quick intuition of Kondañña in the East faces the slow, careful kindness of the Buddha's carer in the West, Ānanda, whose awakening is delayed until after the Buddha's death. The austerity of the ascetic Kassapa, in the Southeast, contrasts with the relaxed, latent power of Gavampati in the Northwest. The custodian of the *Vinaya*, the monastic rules, which have remained intact for centuries in Southern Buddhism, is in the Southwest. Opposite is Rāhula, the Buddha's son, the embodiment of the new, in the Northeast. The two great disciples, Moggallāna and Sāriputta, at North and South, are often shown on either side of the Buddha, representatives of the two great complementary strands of spiritual work, calm and insight.

According to the texts, the friendship that existed between various members of the group was deep, and in these they often congratulate one another on their different strengths. As a group they demonstrate a diversity of approaches to the Buddhist path. Those who have reached awakening or enlightenment are free from defilements and follow a teaching that is of 'one taste', yet exhibit different strengths and skills according to their *kamma* and disposition. In the chant they are all called Buddhas: *sāvaka* Buddhas rather than fully awakened ones.

### **BUDDHAMĀṄGALAGĀTHĀ: THE BUDDHA'S BLESSING VERSES**

Among two-footed beings, the Fully Enlightened One is the best, sitting in the centre.

Kondaṇṇa sits in front of the Buddha, Kassapa to the Southeast,

Sāriputta at the Buddha's right-hand, Upāli to the Southwest,

Ānanda behind the Buddha, Gavampati to the Northwest,

Moggallāna at the Buddha's left-hand, and Rāhula to the Northeast.

These Buddhas are indeed auspicious, all well established here,

And we pay them homage and venerate them with offerings.

By their power may we always have security and happiness.

Thus, paying homage to that which is utterly worthy of homage,

The Triple Gem,

May I gain much fruit of good actions,

Overcoming by its power dangers and obstacles!

#### **Key**

*Kondaṇṇa*: the arahat who correctly predicted at Gotama's birth that he could only become a Buddha, and would not choose the option predicted by others that he might become a Universal Monarch. He became an ascetic and practised with the Buddha before his enlightenment. After the enlightenment he was amongst the five who heard the Buddha's first sermon and was first to understand its import.

(*Mahā*)*Kassapa*: an ascetic who, after practising severe austerities with no results for thirty years, meets a lay friend, Citta, a follower of the Buddha for thirty years. Despite not even being a monk, Citta had experienced great meditative bliss and peace in the four *jhānas*, and

was a stream-enterer (the first stage of awakening). Kassapa, stunned that a layman could achieve so much when he, by rejecting the middle way, had achieved nothing, immediately became a Buddhist monk. Soon afterwards he became an arahat. He always retained his love of wild terrain, natural beauty and asceticism, even when enlightened, and after he has become an arahat composes eloquent verses on the subject (Th 1051-90).

*Sāriputta*: the Buddha's chief disciple, of golden skin. Many aeons before he had made a vow to become the chief of the Buddha's followers. Renowned for his kindness, lack of pride and meditative skill, he is primarily esteemed for his great insight, teaching ability and love of highly detailed exposition. He is the disciple described by the Buddha as the greatest in wisdom, and is often depicted seating on the right side of the Buddha.

*Upāli*: a low-caste barber, who became a monk, in the first instance, as he was scared he would be punished on his return home after some Sakyan princes he was accompanying were ordained. At their request, he is ordained before them, so he will always have pre-eminence over them. He became the custodian of the *Vinaya*, the monks' rules, and would be consulted on any issues of procedure or behaviour amongst the *saṅgha*.

*Ānanda*: the Buddha's attendant and carer in the last years of the Buddha's life. Although a stream-enterer, he never achieved enlightenment in the Buddha's lifetime, and, famously, cried bitterly before the death of the Buddha. He persuaded the Buddha to found the order of nuns, but also forgot to ask him to extend his lifespan. A loving but 'human' monk, he often did the wrong thing, and is rebuked by others for certain failings. He seems to voice the worries and concerns of the 'common man'. He achieved enlightenment, after giving up hope of doing so, on the night before the First Council after the Buddha's death, just as he was going to bed. He is described as pre-eminent by the Buddha in a number of aspects, but is primarily known for his prodigious memory, which enabled him to remember all the discourses of the Buddha.

*Gavampati*: famed for his daily visits to the Heaven of the Four Kings, where he had a special seat, he is said to have taken a restorative nap

there each day. He was, however, capable of immense power. He is called upon by the Buddha to avert a flood with his psychic power when a river bursts its banks, while all the other monks are sleeping. He is sometimes associated with the four right efforts.

*Moggallāna*: a friend of Sāriputta, with whom he ordained. His skin was dark, like a blue lotus. He was famed for his great meditative mastery and is pre-eminent amongst the disciples for his psychic powers. He is associated too with great compassion, in his visits to beings in other, sometimes lower realms, whom he discerns with his Divine Eye. He is also renowned for a sense of mischief. By wiggling his big toe he causes a monastery full of backsliding monks to shake from the foundations, so terrifying them into good behaviour. He sits on the left-hand side of the Buddha, and is the second great disciple.

*Rāhula*: the Buddha's son, famed for his beauty, obedience and, until his enlightenment, some vanity. He is sent by his mother after the enlightenment to 'claim his inheritance'. He ordains as a monk, and after a short period becomes an arahat in his early twenties. The *Rāhulovāda Sutta* is given to him as a teaching by his father.

### Women arahats

There were said to be many women amongst the arahats too. Nuns and lay women give teachings sanctioned by the Buddha. Verses recorded in the *Therīgāthā* are worth reading for their autobiographical material, almost unknown in India at this period, the aptness of their observation of the natural world, the creativity of their use of domestic and physical imagery, and for an underlying humour and humanity. These are amongst the earliest spiritual poems in the world composed by women. Arahatsip, which is said to remove the defilements from the practitioner, does not seem to have diminished the character of these early meditators. One poem, for instance, by an ex-courtesan called *Ambapālī*, an elderly and enlightened nun, recalls her past beauty. In a long series of verses she works teasingly down her body, describing each aspect of her former glory, such as her hair, face and breasts, at first in lyrical terms suggestive of *kāvya*, an Indian poetic form – and then in its present ugly condition in old age. It is like a playful interchange between past and present, distilling the middle way neatly through the poetess' gracious and measured equipoise, that veers neither to attraction or disgust for her changing form.

### A FEMALE BEGGAR

One autobiographical poem was composed by a woman called *Candā*. Reduced to beggary, she encountered the nun *Paṭācārā* and her followers, who took pity on her, welcomed her and provided her with food. Because of the nuns' kindness, she decided to follow their teaching too, so she approached the elder nun and learnt meditation from her. Because she had already developed so much insight in the past, she soon became enlightened, possessing three special knowledges: the recollection of past lives, the arising and falling away of beings and the exhaustion of the corruptions, defilements producing further rebirths. Freed from her sufferings, and at last tasting happiness, she composed the following verses, which testify to the warmth of friendship that must have existed in the early *saṅgha*, and to the meditative guidance she had experienced from another nun.

Before, I was in a very bad way: without husband, without children,  
Without friends and without relatives, I did not find food or clothing.  
I took a stick and a bowl, and begged for food from family to family.  
Burnt by both heat and cold, I wandered for seven years.

And then I saw a nun. She had obtained food and drink.  
So I went up to her and said, 'Please give me the going forth, and accept  
me into a homeless state!'

This woman, *Paṭācārā*, had compassion on me, and accepted me into the  
order of nuns.

She gave me teachings, and urged me to go for the very best goal.

I listened to what she had to say, and I did just what she told me.

This lady's instruction was not in vain; now, possessed with the three  
knowledges, I am freed from the corruptions.

[Thi 122–6]

### The wife of the Buddha

It is important to mention that amongst the arahats and followers of the Buddha is the Buddha's wife, *Rahulamātā*, or *Yasodharā*, as she is known in some traditions. She too was on a long spiritual path, and had made a vow to be the support and spouse of the Bodhisattva as he makes his way to Buddhahood. They spent many lifetimes together, during which time she shows her loyalty and initiative, offering companionship towards him in

**TWO VERSES FROM AMBAPĀLĪ'S EXTENDED POEM**

Melodious was my call, like a cuckoo wandering around a thicket,  
Because of old age it stumbles about all over the place:  
What is said by the speaker of truth is not off the point!

Once upon a time my throat looked lovely, like a well-polished,  
exquisite conch shell;

Because of old age it is clapped out and bowed-down:  
What is said by the speaker of truth is not off the point!

[Thī 261-2]

the various trials depicted through many aeons. When her husband reaches his final goal, she decides to become a nun too, and also, after the practice of meditation, achieves awakening, as does their son. There is a large shrine to her in Nepal.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has considered some of the ways Buddhist meditative practice has evolved in Southern Buddhist countries. As with some other longstanding Buddhist regions, this has become highly varied, imbued with new theory, local ritual, folk understanding and custom in ways that highlight an interpenetration of levels of Buddhist teaching when it has been practised for a long time in a particular area.

**TIMELINES**

- 250-210 BCE Sinhalese King Devanampiya Tissa converts to Buddhism  
25 BCE Pāli canon recorded on palm leaves by King Vattagāmiṇi in Sri Lanka  
100 - Sri Lankan monks go to Myanmar and Thailand  
c.200 Chinese monks go to Vietnam  
c.377-700 Period of flourishing of Buddhist monasteries in Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka  
c.500 Indian monks go to Java, Sumatra and Borneo and establish Buddhism  
788-820 Borobudur built in Java  
850-1100 Temple construction in Angkor Wat, Cambodia

- 1057 King Anawartha of Pagan conquers neighbouring Thaton and establishes Buddhism there  
1165 Sinhalese king Parakkamabāhu promotes Theravāda  
c.1300 'Theravāda' becomes pre-eminent in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia, overlaying older elements  
c.1500 Temple at Angkor Wat converted to be Buddhist centre  
1520-47 Reign of King Phōtisālarāt, an active promoter of Buddhism, in Laos  
1753 Monks from Thai court reinstate Buddhist line in Sri Lanka  
1803 Sri Lankans ordained in Myanmar found Amarapura Nikāya in Sri Lanka  
1829 Thai prince Mongkut founds Thammayut monastic school

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