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Published in the United States

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First published as an Oxford University Press paperback 1996

Reissued 2000

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 0-19-285386-4

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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BUDDHISM

A Very Short Introduction

Damien Keown

OXFORD
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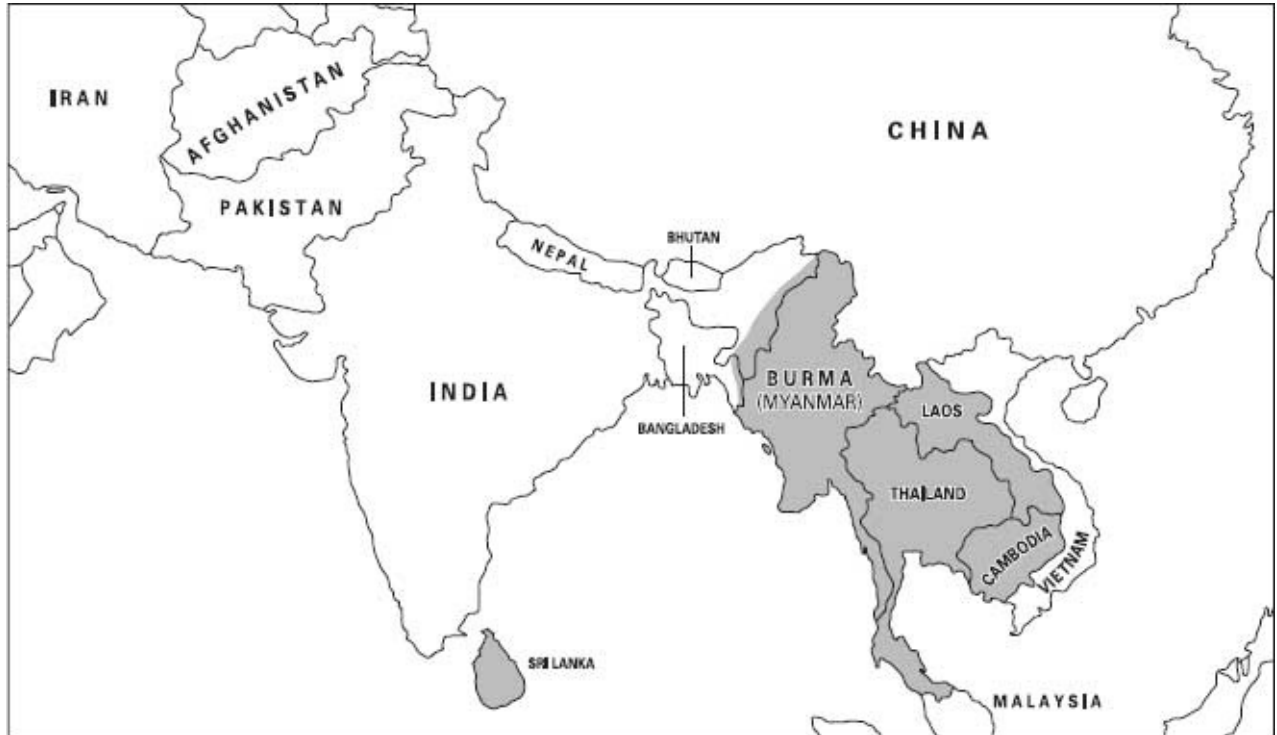
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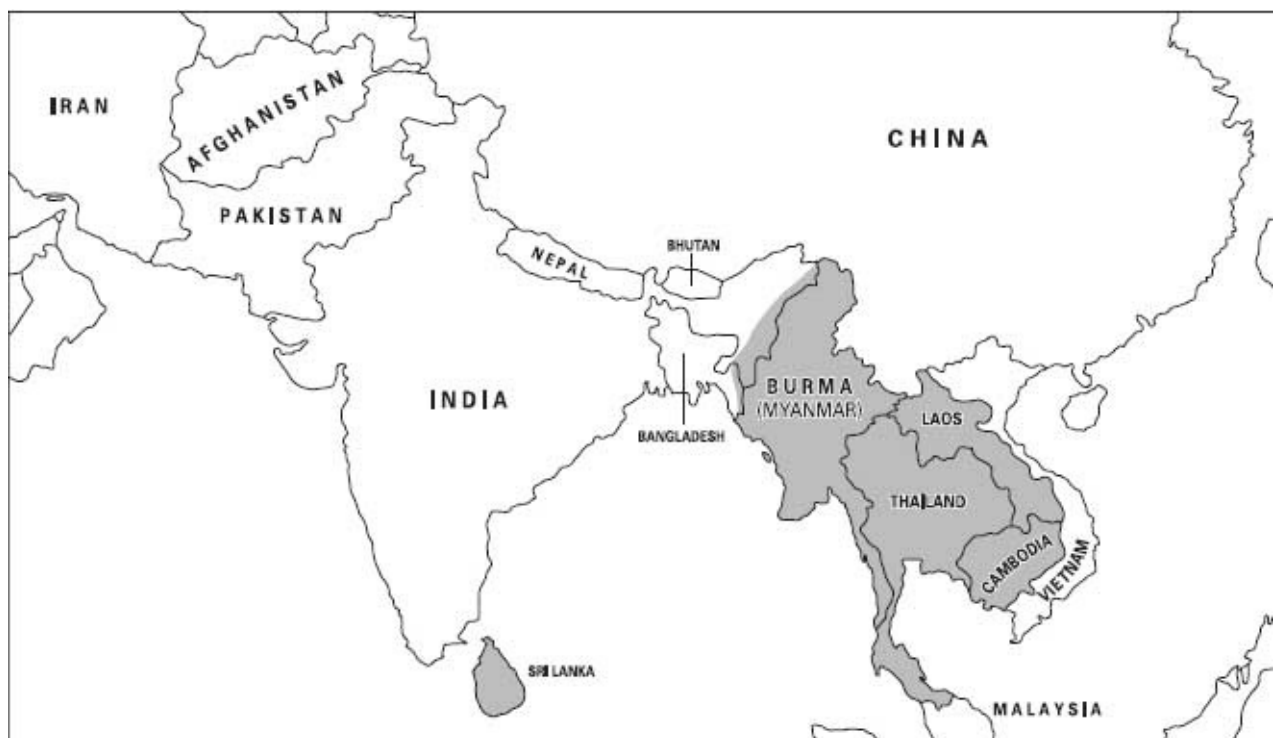
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1. India and the region where the Buddha taught and lived



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Acknowledgements

In writing this book I have benefited greatly from the suggestions of students, colleagues, and friends. The students who took my course on Buddhism at Goldsmiths College in the session 1995–6 cheerfully acted as guinea pigs while I tested draft chapters. I can only hope that the experiment was not too painful. I have also benefited greatly from the cumulative knowledge of my colleagues Lance Cousins, Peter Harvey, and Charles Prebish, who were generous with their advice and steered me away from errors and oversights. Any that remain are my own responsibility.

Finally, it gives me great pleasure to thank George Miller of OUP for his advice, support, and encouragement in seeing this project through from inception to publication. My gratitude also to Rebecca Hunt for her skill in making the production process so smooth and efficient. No author could have wished for more professional editorial support.

DAMIEN KEOW

Note on Citations and Pronunciation

From time to time the reader will encounter references in the form D.ii.95. These are references to Buddhist scriptures, specifically the Pali Text Society editions of the early Buddhist canon. The key to the reference is as follows. The initial letter refers to one of the four divisions (*nikāyas*) into which the Buddha's discourses (*suttas*) are collated.

D *Dīgha Nikāya*

M *Majjhima Nikāya*

A *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

S *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

The Roman numeral (ii) denotes the volume number, and the Arabic numeral (95) denotes the page number. Thus the reference D.ii.95 is to volume two, page 95, of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. A small number of references with the prefix *Vin* will also be encountered. These refer to a division of the Pali canon known as the *Vinaya* or Monastic Rule, which contains material relating to monastic life. Translations of the entire Pali canon have been published by the Pali Text Society. Other, more recent, translations are also available and are mentioned in the section on 'Further Reading' at the end.

Language and Pronunciation

Buddhist texts were composed in and translated into many languages including Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The convention, however, is to cite Buddhist technical terms in either their Pali or Sanskrit forms. In this book I will generally use the Pali form, except where the Sanskrit form has become established in English usage, as in words such as 'karma' and 'nirvana'. Transliterated versions of proper names which are common in the secondary literature (e.g. Ashoka) will also be retained. Sanskrit and Pali equivalents for the most important terms will be shown in brackets.

Transliteration from Sanskrit and Pali requires the use of diacritics such as in the letters 'ā' and 'Ṁ' seen above, since the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet are insufficient to represent the larger number of characters in Asian languages. A horizontal line (macron)

above a vowel lengthens it, such that the character ‘ā’ is pronounced as in ‘far’ rather than ‘fat’. For the most part the other marks do not affect pronunciation enough to be of any concern, with the following exceptions:

c pronounced ‘ch’ as in ‘choose’

ś or ṣ pronounced ‘sh’ as in ‘shoes’

ñ- pronounced ‘ny’ as in Spanish ‘mañana’

A dot beneath a consonant (ṭ, ḍ, etc.) indicates that the tongue touches the roof of the mouth when pronouncing these letters, to give the characteristic sound of English when spoken with an Indian accent.

Chapter 1

Buddhism and Elephants

The Buddha once told the story of the blind men and the elephant (*Udāna 69f.*). A former king of the town of Sāvattī, he related, ordered all his blind subjects to be assembled and divided into groups. Each group was then taken to an elephant and introduced to a different part of the animal – the head, trunk, legs, tail, and so forth. Afterwards, the king asked each group to describe the nature of the beast. Those who had made contact with the head described an elephant as a water-pot; those familiar with the ears likened the animal to a winnowing-basket; those who had touched a leg said an elephant was like a post, and those who had felt a tusk insisted an elephant was shaped like a peg. The groups then fell to arguing amongst themselves each insisting its definition was correct and all the others were wrong.

The study of Buddhism over the past century or so has resembled the encounter of the blind men and the elephant in many ways. Students of Buddhism have tended to fasten onto a small part of the tradition and assume their conclusions held true about the whole. Often the parts they have seized on have been a little like the elephant's tusks – a striking, but unrepresentative, part of the whole animal. As a result, many erroneous and sweeping generalizations about Buddhism have been made, such as that it is 'negative', 'world-denying', 'pessimistic', and so forth. Although this tendency to over-generalize is now less common, it is still found in some of the older literature where authors tended to exaggerate certain features of the tradition or assume that what was true of Buddhism in one culture or historical period held good everywhere.

The first lesson the story of the blind men teaches us, then, is that Buddhism is a large and complex subject, and we should be wary of generalizations made on the basis of familiarity with any single part. In particular, statements which begin 'Buddhists believe ...' or 'Buddhism teaches ...' must be treated with circumspection. We need to qualify them by asking *which* Buddhists are being referred to, *which* tradition of Buddhism they follow, *which* school or sect they belong to, and so forth, before these statements can be of much value. Some scholars would go further, and claim that the transcultural phenomenon known to the West as 'Buddhism' (the word 'Buddhism' only became established in Western usage in the 1830s) is not a single entity at all but a collection of subtraditions. If so, perhaps we should

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