


What  
the Buddha Taught  
by  
*Venerable Dr. W. Rahula*





*What the Buddha Taught* is one of the best books of introduction to Buddhism. Throughout the period of my teaching in the Buddhist Studies Faculty at Mahachula Buddhist University (1964–1974), it was prescribed for the first-year course of English Readings in Buddhism. After that, either some selected chapters or long passages in the book have, until today, been serving as central Buddhist readings for freshmen or second-year students in the university.

Besides readability, the present book covers all the important points of the Buddha's teachings. Dr. Rahula explains Buddhist principles clearly in simple language. His skilled way of presentation makes "What the Buddha Taught" Communicate itself well to people in the modern world.

It is a great pleasure to learn that the Haw Trai Foundation has made a decision to publish, by permission from the author, *What the Buddha Taught* for distribution in Thailand. The Haw Trai Foundation is a non-profit organization aiming at the furtherance of Buddhist study and research and at the dissemination of the Dhamma for the welfare and happiness of the people. Central among its activities is the publication of Buddhist works of high moral, literary or academic value. The selection of "What the Buddha Taught" for publication is really worthy of loud applause.

Phra Debvedi (Prayudh Payutto)\*

May 14, B.E. 2531 (1988 C.E.)

---

\* Phra Dhammapidok



The Buddha in walking posture at Buddhamonthon Park in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, constructed to commemorate the 2500th year of the Buddhist Era. (Height : 15.875 metres)

WALPOLA SRI RAHULA

*Tripitakavāgīśvarāchārya*

# What the Buddha Taught

*(Revised edition)*



*With a Foreword by*

PAUL DEMIÉVILLE

*and*

*a collection of illustrative texts translated from  
the original Pali*

HAW TRAI

ลิขสิทธิ์ การพิมพ์ในประเทศไทยเป็นของกองทุนบุญนิธิหอไตร

ISBN 974 - 00 - 0839 - 9

Fifth published in Thailand  
by Haw Trai Foundation Bangkok,  
B.E. 2547 (2004)

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



*Wat Raja-o-Rasaram  
Section Thaihouse North  
Khet Chomthong  
Bangkok 10150  
Thailand  
Tel. (662) 8937979*

# Contents

	Page
<i>List of Illustrations</i> .. .. .	vii
<i>Foreword</i> .. .. .	ix
<i>Preface</i> .. .. .	xi
<i>The Buddha</i> .. .. .	xv

## CHAPTER I

### The Buddhist Attitude of Mind

*Man is supreme—One is one's refuge—Responsibility—Doubt—Freedom of Thought—Tolerance—Is Buddhism Religion or Philosophy?—Truth has no label—No blind faith or belief, but seeing and understanding—No attachment even to Truth—Parable of the raft—Imaginary speculations useless—Practical attitude—Parable of the wounded man* .. .. .

I

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

### CHAPTER II

### The First Noble Truth: *Dukkha*

*Buddhism neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but realistic—Meaning of 'Dukkha'—Three aspects of experience—Three aspects of 'Dukkha'—What is a 'being'?—Five Aggregates—No spirit opposed to matter—Flux—Thinker and Thought—Has life a beginning?* .. .. .

16

### CHAPTER III

### The Second Noble Truth: *Samudaya*: 'The Arising of *Dukkha*'

*—Definition—Four Nutriments—Root cause of suffering and continuity—Nature of arising and cessation—Karma and Rebirth—What is death?—What is rebirth?* .. .. .

29

### CHAPTER IV

### The Third Noble Truth: *Nirodha*: 'The Cessation of *Dukkha*'

*—What is Nirvāṇa?—Language and Absolute Truth—Definitions of Nirvāṇa—Nirvāṇa not negative—Nirvāṇa as Absolute Truth—What is Absolute Truth?—Truth is not negative—Nirvāṇa and Saṃsāra—Nirvāṇa not a result—What is there after Nirvāṇa?—Incorrect expressions—What happens to an Arāhant after death?—If no Self, who realizes Nirvāṇa?—Nirvāṇa in this life* .. .. .

35

### CHAPTER V

### The Fourth Noble Truth: *Magga*: 'The Path'

*Middle Path or Noble Eightfold Path—Compassion and Wisdom—Ethical Conduct—Mental Discipline—Wisdom—Two sorts of Understanding—Four Functions regarding the Four Noble Truths*

45

The Doctrine of No-Soul: *Anatta*

*What is Soul or Self?—God and Soul: Self-protection and Self-preservation—Teaching ‘Against the Current’—Analytical and Synthetical methods—Conditioned Genesis—Question of Free-will—Two kinds of Truths—Some erroneous views—The Buddha definitely denies ‘Atman’—The Buddha’s silence—The idea of Self a vague impression—Correct attitude—If no Self, who gets the result of Karma?—Doctrine of Anatta not negative* .. .. .

51

## CHAPTER VII

‘Meditation’ or Mental Culture: *Bhāvanā*

*Erroneous views—Meditation is no escape from life—Two forms of Meditation—The Setting-up of Mindfulness—‘Meditation’ on breathing—Mindfulness of activities—Living in the present moment—‘Meditation’ on Sensations—on Mind—on Ethical, Spiritual and Intellectual subjects* .. .. .

67

## CHAPTER VIII

## What the Buddha Taught and the World Today

*Erroneous views—Buddhism for all—In daily life—Family and social life—Lay life held in high esteem—How to become a Buddhist—Social and economic problems—Poverty: cause of crime—Material and spiritual progress—Four kinds of happiness for laymen—On politics, war and peace—Non-violence—The ten duties of a ruler—The Buddha’s Message—Is it practical?—Asoka’s Example—The Aim of Buddhism* .. .. .

76

## SELECTED TEXTS .. .. .

91

Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*) .. .. .

92

The Fire Sermon (*Ādittapariyāya-sutta*) .. .. .

95

Universal Love (*Metta-sutta*) .. .. .

97

Blessings (*Maṅgala-sutta*) .. .. .

98

Getting rid of All Cares and Troubles (*Sabbāsava-sutta*) .. .. .

99

The Parable of the Piece of Cloth (*Vatthūpama-sutta*) .. .. .

106

The Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*) .. .. .

109

Advice to Sigāla (*Sigālovāda-sutta*) .. .. .

119

The Words of Truth (*Dhammapada*) .. .. .

125

The Last Words of the Buddha (from the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*) .. .. .

136

*Abbreviations* .. .. .

139

*Selected Bibliography* .. .. .

140

*Glossary* .. .. .

142

*Index* .. .. .

148



## Foreword

“What the Buddha Taught” is one of the best selling books on Buddhism in the west. It has been translated into many languages and has been reprinted several times since its first published in London in 1958.

The book suits people with varying degrees of knowledge of Buddhism. It includes chapters dealing with the Four Noble Truths, Buddhist Meditation, Buddhist way of life, and translations of many Suttas (The Discourses of the Buddha).

I firmly believe that “What the Buddha Taught” is an extremely valuable reference book for any one who has ever been interested or curious about Buddhism. No matter how long one has been Buddhist, he is always likely to discover something new, or realize how unsatisfactory his understanding of Buddhism really is.

Many Westerners visiting Thailand, the land of many beautiful temples, who would like to learn something about Buddhism will find this book ideal for them.

I met the author during my stay at Wat Buddhapadipa in London, and received permission from him to publish his book called “What the Buddha Taught” in Thailand. No one else is permitted to reproduce any part of this publication in any form, by any means, in Thailand during this time he has authorised me to take care of his copyright.

May the truth be seen by many.

*Venerable Chaokhun,  
Phra Metheevorrayarn*

“No God, No Brahma, can be called  
The Maker of this wheel of life:  
Empty phenomena roll on,  
Dependent on conditions all.”

(Visuddhimagga)

“By deeds, vision and righteousness,  
‘By virtue, the sublimest life--  
‘By these are mortals purified,  
‘And not by lineage and wealth.”

(M.iii,262)

“By oneself is evil done,  
By oneself is one defiled;  
By oneself is evil left undone,  
By oneself is one purified;  
Purity and impurity depend on oneself;  
No one can purify another.”

(Dhammapada)

# Foreword

by Paul Demiéville

*Member of the Institut de France,  
Professor at the Collège de France  
Director of Buddhist Studies at the School  
of Higher Studies (Paris)*

Here is an exposition of Buddhism conceived in a resolutely modern spirit by one of the most qualified and enlightened representatives of that religion. The Rev. Dr. W. Rahula received the traditional training and education of a Buddhist monk in Ceylon, and held eminent positions in one of the leading monastic institutes (Pirivena) in that island, where the Law of the Buddha flourishes from the time of Asoka and has preserved all its vitality up to this day. Thus brought up in an ancient tradition, he decided, at this time when all traditions are called in question, to face the spirit and the methods of international scientific learning. He entered the Ceylon University, obtained the B.A. Honours degree (London), and then won the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Ceylon University on a highly learned thesis on the History of Buddhism in Ceylon. Having worked with distinguished professors at the University of Calcutta and come in contact with adepts of Mahāyāna (the Great Vehicle), that form of Buddhism which reigns from Tibet to the Far East, he decided to go into the Tibetan and Chinese texts in order to widen his œcumenism, and he has honoured us by coming to the University of Paris (Sorbonne) to prepare a study of Asanga, the illustrious philosopher of Mahāyāna, whose principal works in the original Sanskrit are lost, and can only be read in their Tibetan and Chinese translations. It is now eight years since Dr. Rahula is among us, wearing the yellow robe, breathing the air of the Occident, searching perhaps in our old troubled mirror a universalized reflection of the religion which is his.

The book, which he has kindly asked me to present to the public of the West, is a luminous account, within reach of every body, of the fundamental principles of the Buddhist doctrine, as

they are found in the most ancient texts, which are called 'The Tradition' (*Āgama*) in Sanskrit and 'The Canonic Corpus' (*Nikāya*) in Pali. Dr. Rahula, who possesses an incomparable knowledge of these texts, refers to them constantly and almost exclusively. Their authority is recognized unanimously by all the Buddhist schools, which were and are numerous, but none of which ever deviates from these texts, except with the intention of better interpreting the spirit beyond the letter. The interpretation has indeed been varied in the course of the expansion of Buddhism through many centuries and vast regions, and the Law has taken more than one aspect. But the aspect of Buddhism here presented by Dr. Rahula—humanist, rational, Socratic in some respects, Evangelic in others, or again almost scientific—has for its support a great deal of authentic scriptural evidence which he only had to let speak for themselves.

The explanations which he adds to his quotations, always translated with scrupulous accuracy, are clear, simple, direct, and free from all pedantry. Some among them might lead to discussion, as when he wishes to rediscover in the Pali sources all the doctrines of Mahāyāna; but his familiarity with those sources permits him to throw new light on them. He addresses himself to the modern man, but he refrains from insisting on comparisons just suggested here and there, which could be made with certain currents of thought of the contemporary world: socialism, atheism, existentialism, psycho-analysis. It is for the reader to appreciate the modernity, the possibilities of adaptation of a doctrine which, in this work of genuine scholarship, is presented to him in its primal richness.

# Preface

All over the world today there is growing interest in Buddhism. Numerous societies and study-groups have come into being, and scores of books have appeared on the teaching of the Buddha. It is to be regretted, however, that most of them have been written by those who are not really competent, or who bring to their task misleading assumptions derived from other religions, which must misinterpret and misrepresent their subject. A professor of comparative religion who recently wrote a book on Buddhism did not even know that Ānanda, the devoted attendant of the Buddha, was a *bhikkhu* (a monk), but thought he was a layman! The knowledge of Buddhism propagated by books like these can be left to the reader's imagination.

I have tried in this little book to address myself first of all to the educated and intelligent general reader, uninstructed in the subject, who would like to know what the Buddha actually taught. For his benefit I have aimed at giving briefly, and as directly and simply as possible, a faithful and accurate account of the actual words used by the Buddha as they are to be found in the original Pali texts of the *Tipiṭaka*, universally accepted by scholars as the earliest extant records of the teachings of the Buddha. The material used and the passages quoted here are taken directly from these originals. In a few places I have referred to some later works too.

I have borne in mind, too, the reader who has already some knowledge of what the Buddha taught and would like to go further with his studies. I have therefore provided not only the Pali equivalents of most of the key-words, but also references to the original texts in footnotes, and a select bibliography.

The difficulties of my task have been manifold: throughout I have tried to steer a course between the unfamiliar and the popular, to give the English reader of the present day something which he could understand and appreciate, without sacrificing anything of the matter and the form of the discourses of the

Buddha. Writing the book I have had the ancient texts running in my mind, so I have deliberately kept the synonyms and repetitions which were a part of the Buddha's speech as it has come down to us through oral tradition, in order that the reader should have some notion of the form used by the Teacher. I have kept as close as I could to the originals, and have tried to make my translations easy and readable.

But there is a point beyond which it is difficult to take an idea without losing in the interests of simplicity the particular meaning the Buddha was interested in developing. As the title 'What the Buddha Taught' was selected for this book, I felt that it would be wrong not to set down the words of the Buddha, even the figures he used, in preference to a rendering which might provide the easy gratification of comprehensibility at the risk of distortion of meaning.

I have discussed in this book almost everything which is commonly accepted as the essential and fundamental teaching of the Buddha. These are the doctrines of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Aggregates, Karma, Rebirth, Conditioned Genesis (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), the doctrine of No-Soul (*Anatta*), *Satipaṭṭhāna* (the Setting-up of Mindfulness). Naturally there will be in the discussion expressions which must be unfamiliar to the Western reader. I would ask him, if he is interested, to take up on his first reading the opening chapter, and then go on to Chapters V, VII and VIII, returning to Chapters II, III, IV and VI when the general sense is clearer and more vivid. It would not be possible to write a book on the teaching of the Buddha without dealing with the subjects which *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism have accepted as fundamental in his system of thought.

The term *Theravāda*—*Hinayāna* or 'Small Vehicle' is no longer used in informed circles—could be translated as 'the School of the Elders' (*theras*), and *Mahāyāna* as 'Great Vehicle'. They are used of the two main forms of Buddhism known in the world today. *Theravāda*, which is regarded as the original orthodox Buddhism, is followed in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Chittagong in East Pakistan. *Mahāyāna*, which developed relatively later, is followed in other Buddhist countries like China, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, etc. There are certain differences, mainly with regard to some beliefs, practices and observances between these

two schools, but on the most important teachings of the Buddha, such as those discussed here, *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* are unanimously agreed.

It only remains for me now to express my sense of gratitude to Professor E. F. C. Ludowyk, who in fact invited me to write this book, for all the help given me, the interest taken in it, the suggestions he offered, and for reading through the manuscript. To Miss Marianne Möhn too, who went through the manuscript and made valuable suggestions, I am deeply grateful. Finally I am greatly beholden to Professor Paul Demiéville, my teacher in Paris, for his kindness in writing the Foreword.

W. RAHULA

Paris

*July 1958*

TO MANI

*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti*

‘The gift of Truth excels all other gifts’

# The Buddha

The Buddha, whose personal name was Siddhattha (Siddhārtha in Sanskrit), and family name Gotama (Skt. Gautama), lived in North India in the 6th century B.C. His father, Suddhodana, was the ruler of the kingdom of the Sākya (in modern Nepal). His mother was queen Māyā. According to the custom of the time, he was married quite young, at the age of sixteen, to a beautiful and devoted young princess named Yasodharā. The young prince lived in his palace with every luxury at his command. But all of a sudden, confronted with the reality of life and the suffering of mankind, he decided to find the solution—the way out of this universal suffering. At the age of 29, soon after the birth of his only child, Rāhula, he left his kingdom and became an ascetic in search of this solution.

For six years the ascetic Gotama wandered about the valley of the Ganges, meeting famous religious teachers, studying and following their systems and methods, and submitting himself to rigorous ascetic practices. They did not satisfy him. So he abandoned all traditional religions and their methods and went his own way. It was thus that one evening, seated under a tree (since then known as the Bodhi- or Bo-tree, 'the Tree of Wisdom'), on the bank of the river Neranjarā at Buddha-Gaya (near Gaya in modern Bihar), at the age of 35, Gotama attained Enlightenment, after which he was known as the Buddha, 'The Enlightened One'.

After his Enlightenment, Gotama the Buddha delivered his first sermon to a group of five ascetics, his old colleagues, in the Deer Park at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares. From that day, for 45 years, he taught all classes of men and women—kings and peasants, Brahmins and outcasts, bankers and beggars, holy men and robbers—without making the slightest distinction between them. He recognized no differences of caste or social groupings, and the Way he preached was open to all men and women who were ready to understand and to follow it.

At the age of 80, the Buddha passed away at Kusinārā (in modern Uttar Pradesh in India).

Today Buddhism is found in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Tibet, China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, Formosa, in some parts of India, Pakistan and Nepal, and also in the Soviet Union. The Buddhist population of the world is over 500 million.

