

EARLY  
BUDDHIST  
DISCOURSES



Edited and Translated by  
JOHN J. HOLDER

# **Early Buddhist Discourses**



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Edited, with Translations, by  
John J. Holder

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.  
Indianapolis/Cambridge

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12 11 10 09 08 07 06 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For further information, please address:

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.  
P.O. Box 44937  
Indianapolis, IN 46244-0937

[www.hackettpublishing.com](http://www.hackettpublishing.com)

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Cover design by Abigail Coyle  
Text design by Meera Dash  
Composition by Agnew's, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tipitaka. Suttapitaka. Selections. English. 2006.

Early Buddhist discourses / edited, with translations, by John J. Holder.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87220-793-5 (cloth)—ISBN 0-87220-792-7 (pbk.)

I. Holder, John J. (John Joseph), 1960– II. Title.

BQ 1192.E53 H65  
294.3'823—dc22

2005052842

ISBN-13: 978-0-87220-793-6 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-0-87220-792-9 (pbk.)

eISBN: 978-1-60384-002-6 (e-book)

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The manuscript for this book was written while I held a visiting research appointment at the Oriental Institute of Oxford University. The research appointment was made possible by a sabbatical leave from St. Norbert College. I am grateful for the support I received from both institutions for this endeavor.

While at Oxford, I was fortunate to have access to other Pāli scholars—no doubt, some of the best Pāli philologists in the world—who reviewed my translations and made suggestions for revisions. Thus, I would like to acknowledge the very generous help of Richard Gombrich, Alex Wynne, and Justin Meiland (now at Mahidol University in Thailand) in the preparation of the manuscript for this book. I am also indebted to Professor Karen Lang (University of Virginia) who, as the publisher's outside reader of the manuscript, offered many excellent suggestions that have been incorporated into the book.

Finally, two of my teachers deserve recognition for the influence they have had on me and thus on this book. The late Venerable K. Ariyasena taught me the Pāli language through a most intensive approach. Whatever skill I have in Pāli is due largely to the hours and hours of patient tutorship he provided to me at his monastery in Sri Lanka. Professor Harry Krebs (Dickinson College) introduced me to Buddhism both as a teacher and as a person whose character epitomizes the principles of Buddhism. This book is a product of the academic and spiritual journey into Buddhism that he instigated in me so many years ago.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### The Pāli Canon and Its Significance within Buddhism

This book contains new English translations of twenty philosophically important discourses from the Discourse Basket (*Sutta Piṭaka*) of the Pāli Canon. The Pāli Canon not only contains a substantial amount of textual material that is arguably the most reliable account of the Buddha's teachings but also offers some of the most profound philosophical and religious ideas ever expressed in any tradition at any time.

The Pāli Canon is recognized as a scriptural source for all Buddhist traditions, although it is more closely associated with the Buddhist tradition called "Theravāda"<sup>1</sup> that is prevalent today in the South Asian countries of Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. The Pāli Canon is so-called because it has been preserved in the middle-Indian language called Pāli. Pāli is a close relative to Sanskrit, the language in which some of India's most famous religious texts were written, such as the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The use of Pāli, however, is confined to Buddhist texts.

The Pāli Canon is a sizable body of material. The original Pāli version of the canon, as published in romanized script by the Pali Text Society, fills more than fifty volumes. Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism often refer to the canon as the "*Tipiṭaka*" (which literally means "Three Baskets"), because the material is grouped into three very large sections. The Discipline Basket (*Vinaya Piṭaka*) covers the rules and historical events related to the Buddhist monastic community, the "*Saṅgha*." The Discourse Basket (*Sutta Piṭaka*) contains by far the largest amount of material. It preserves the sermons and teachings of the Buddha and his earliest disciples. The "Higher Teachings" Basket (*Abhidhamma Piṭaka*) offers a systematic and detailed analysis of the Buddha's doctrines. This group of texts contains long lists of Buddhist concepts and philosophically sophisticated explanations that attempt to catalog comprehensively the Buddha's philosophy.

The texts of the Pāli Canon, as they exist today, show clear evidence of having developed over time. Often within a single discourse there are passages that almost certainly were constructed at different times; and some passages were very obviously assembled by interpolating material borrowed from

<sup>1</sup> "Theravāda" means "doctrine of the elders." In the past, scholars have called this tradition "Hinayāna" (literally, "lesser vehicle"). But this term is no longer used because it derives from a biased comparison with the other major Buddhist tradition called "Mahāyāna" (literally, "greater vehicle"). Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in India sometime around the first century B.C.E. and forms the basis for contemporary Buddhist schools in east Asia (China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet).

other sources.<sup>2</sup> The canon was preserved only in oral form until the first century B.C.E., when it was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka. According to the Theravāda tradition, the Pāli Canon was settled at the First Council held by the Buddha's monastic disciples in Rājagaha, immediately after the Buddha's passing. And although it is unlikely that this account is true, there is strong evidence that the texts preserve some material that goes back at least as far as the early third or fourth century B.C.E.—about a century after the Buddha's decease. So although almost no one in the scholarly community believes that the Pāli Canon is the verbatim teachings of the historical Buddha, many scholars do think that it provides to a substantial degree the spirit of the teaching of the historical Buddha and may well contain certain passages that recount the Buddha's own words.

Finally, it must be stressed that, whatever the historical facts about the material contained in the Pāli Canon, these texts are essential to any serious study of Buddhism. More than that, they contain ideas that inform and challenge contemporary students of philosophy and religion on a wide variety of issues.

## A Survey of Early Buddhism

The aim of a book of primary sources is to bring the reader into contact with the original material in as direct a way as possible so that the reader can make up his or her own mind about the meaning and cogency of the texts. Yet, to understand the ideas of the original texts requires seeing those ideas in relation to other ideas and relating specific doctrines to the larger context of the Buddha's teaching. For this reason, the following survey of the major points of early Buddhism should provide a helpful background to understanding the primary sources.

### The Historical Context of the Buddha's Teaching

Buddhism did not arise in a vacuum. The Buddha's teachings were formulated in response to the social and intellectual conditions of ancient India.<sup>3</sup> The fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.—when the Buddha lived and the canonical

<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that the canonical texts show evidence of corruptions, interpolations, and reconciliations with other texts, no effort has been made to stratify the texts along these lines in the translations presented here. Even though stratification of the texts may prove very important in answering certain scholarly questions about early Buddhism, it does not suit the purposes of this book.

<sup>3</sup> It must be remembered that the very idea of "India" as a single political or cultural unit is a very recent development that emerged from colonization by Western powers. Ancient India at

literature began to emerge—were times of great philosophical and religious ferment in ancient India. The Pāli Canon shows that the early Buddhists were aware of the literature of the Vedic tradition, its sacrificial cults, and even certain early Upaniṣads. Aside from the strands of Vedic religion and its Brahmanist (Hindu)<sup>4</sup> philosophy, there were materialists, determinists, Jains, and ascetics of various sorts at the time of the Buddha. In short, ancient India at this time was a veritable marketplace of different spiritual and philosophical systems.

The relationships between the ideas of the historical Buddha and those of his contemporaries have been very difficult to sort out, but a much clearer picture seems to be emerging. There is no question that the Buddha borrowed (and reconstructed) some philosophical concepts from other traditions, such as Brahmanism and Jainism. And yet the Buddha charted a very different course in his teaching from those of his contemporaries. Even where the Buddha borrowed a concept from another tradition, he often used the concept to prove a point very much at odds with the tradition from which it was borrowed. Perhaps of most importance, the early Buddhist texts depict the Buddha as engaged in critical dialogue with the other religious teachers and traditions of his day. From these dialogues, the modern reader can readily discern that, despite certain commonalities, the Buddha's *dhamma* contrasts sharply with the general approach of ancient Indian religion as exemplified by Brahmanist doctrines and practices.

The system of social class in ancient India figures prominently in the early Buddhist discourses. The social system of class and caste as we think of it today was not fully developed in the Buddha's time, but Indian society was already divided into four classes (*varṇā*): Brahmins, warriors and leaders (*khattiyas*), merchants and farmers (*vessas*), and laborers (*suddas*). The Brahmin class (priestly guardians of the Vedic religious cults) stands out in the Pāli Canon, because the Buddha singled out for criticism many of the Brahmins' religious doctrines and their claims to spiritual superiority.

In contrast to the Brahmins, the Buddha is identified with a very diverse group of religious seekers and teachers known collectively as "*samaṇas*" (Skt: *śramaṇas*). The *samaṇas* abandoned the domestic or household life and so lived detached from family life. Some *samaṇas* were recluses living deep in the woods or in the mountains, permanently apart from society; yet many

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the time of the Buddha was divided up into a number of small states, each of which had its own distinctive political system.

<sup>4</sup> Hinduism as we know it today did not exist in the Buddha's day, although many of the key ideas and texts that form the core of Hindu tradition were already evident. The term "Hindu" is of fairly recent, colonial, vintage. For historical reasons, therefore, "Brahmanism" more accurately references the set of traditions that formed the roots of today's Hindu tradition.