

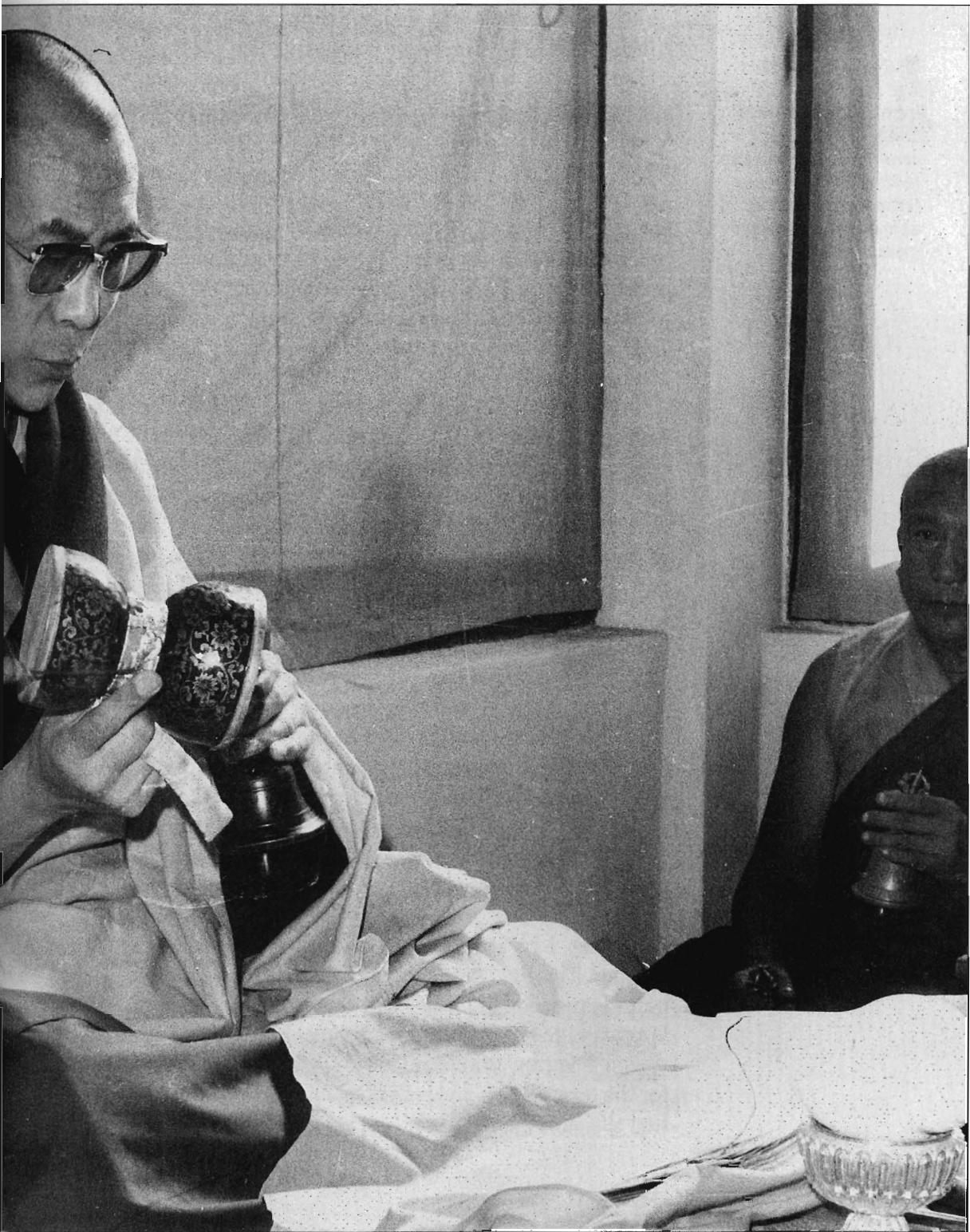
The Literature of Buddhism

Near the summit of Mt. Kaya in Korea, nestled amidst cascading mountain streams and a grove of trees, is one of Buddhism's most famous shrines—the Haein Temple complex. "The impermanence of all things" is marked by the brief appearance of cherry blossoms in spring and the brilliant foliage of flaming maples and golden oaks in the fall. Thousands of visitors come each year to the ninety-three wooden structures that include a monastery where monks chant Buddhist sutras day and night.

Yet the most important part of the Haein Temple is its library, housed in two buildings that are nearly 600 years old. They contain over 80,000 wooden blocks that were originally used to print copies of the Buddhist scriptures on rice paper.

The blocks were carved on the order of King Kojong of Korea in the fourteenth century. At the time, Mongol invaders occupied his country, and the king sponsored the project to ensure divine favor for the Koreans. Over a sixteen-year period, a total of 81,258 woodblocks were completed. Each birchwood block, carved on both sides, measures about nine by twenty-seven inches.





■ *Preceding page-*
The Dalai Lama, spiritual
leader of Tibetan Bud-
dhists, plays a small
ceremonial drum before
reciting the Kalchakra
(Wheel of Existence)
sermon in Bodh Gaya,
India.

The Koreans succeeded in driving out the Mongols, and the precious woodblocks were housed in the Haein Temple, near today's city of Taegu. Because the wood was specially treated to prevent decay, the blocks have survived to the present day. They make up the world's largest single collection of Buddhist scriptures.

As followers of the Mahayana tradition, the Koreans preserved its written forms. However, even this vast collection contains only part of the complete Buddhist canon. Both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism have some scriptures in common. But as Mahayana Buddhism spread, its literature greatly expanded. Today the combined writings of the many Buddhist traditions is more extensive than that of any other world religion.

Buddhism never had a single book such as the Bible or the Koran that all its believers accepted. Many schools of Buddhism concentrated on just one scripture as their guide, but later schools have added their own scriptures. Certain works, however, even if in different languages and slightly varied forms, are beloved by all Buddhists. The Buddhist scriptures are a treasure of wisdom that are an important spiritual record of humankind.

The Three Baskets

For five hundred years after the death of the Buddha, his followers memorized and recited his teachings. After the Parinirvana, the Sangha met to agree on the teachings of the Buddha. They preserved them orally, even though India had a written language. For in the Indian tradition, the actual speaking of the sacred words had a special value. The fact that most of the canon was in verse form and used standard opening phrases made memorization easier.

As the years passed, and differences crept into the religion, there was a greater need to commit the Buddha's teachings to writing. The first written Buddhist scriptures were recorded on palm leaves shortly after 43 B.C.E. in Ceylon. Written in the Pali language, they became the scriptural basis for Theravada Buddhism. They are called the Tipitaka, which means "three baskets"—for the texts, which were divided into three categories, were often literally stored in baskets.

The first basket is the Vinaya Pitaka, or “Basket of Discipline.” These writings concern the Sangha. They give Buddha’s rules of discipline for the monks and nuns. In addition, they provide information on the founding and history of the early monasteries.



The second part of the Tipitaka is the Sutta Pitaka, or “Basket of Discourses.” This basket includes the suttas (sutras in Sanskrit), or sermons and stories of the Buddha and his earliest disciples. In these, the Buddha describes his doctrine and the practices necessary to reach Nirvana. The Sutta Pitaka contains many of the most popular works of Buddhism. One of these is the last sermon of Buddha, called “Lamp Unto Yourself.” It concludes:

*Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves.
Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to
no external refuge. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp.
Hold fast as a refuge to the truth. Look not for refuge
to anyone besides yourselves.... (Alphonso-Karkala-238)*

This second basket includes the Theripatha—songs of devotion by the first Buddhist nuns. The Theripatha is the world’s earliest collection of sacred poetry by women. Among its authors was the Buddha’s aunt, his foster mother, Mahaprajapati.

The third basket is the Abhidhamma Pitaka, or “Basket of Metaphysics.” It contains commentaries on the teachings of Buddhism.

Later—by tradition at a council called by King Kanishka in the second century C.E.—Mahayana Buddhists collected their writings in Sanskrit. Called the Tripitaka, this collection is divided into the same categories and contains some of the same works as the Tipitaka. However, the Mahayana Buddhists claim that the Tripitaka contains doctrine that the Buddha revealed only to his most spiritually advanced followers.

Among the important works in the Mahayana Tripitaka is the Lotus Sutra. Like the Judeo-Christian Testaments, the Lotus Sutra is great literature. Its author, supposedly the Buddha himself, employs a wealth of images and parables to teach its message. One story is similar to the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son. The theme of the Lotus Sutra is universal salvation and the

✓ attainment of Buddahood by all believers. In East Asia, many Buddhists believe that the Lotus Sutra embraces and harmonizes the full spectrum of Buddhism.

The Jatakas

Among the most beloved works found in both the Tipitaka and the Tripitaka are the Jataka Tales. In these stories, the Buddha tells about his former lives. By tradition, the Buddha recalled all of his 550 previous states of existence while he attained enlightenment under the Bo tree.

Some of the most charming Jataka Tales describe his adventures in earlier rebirths when he took the form of an animal. The Buddha used these tales to explain his doctrine simply. The Jataka Tales remain popular today and have inspired Asian drama and art for centuries.

Each story begins with an event that caused the Buddha to relate it. In "The Hare Jataka," the Buddha and 500 of his followers arrive at the home of a devout layman, described as "a landowner of Savatthi." For seven days, the landowner treats them to the hospitality of his house.

At the end of the week, the Buddha praises the landowner for his generosity, saying that the "wise men of old lay down their lives for the beggars they met." Asked to tell about the past, the Buddha begins the tale.

A hare lived in a forest at the foot of the mountains, next to a river and a small town. The hare had three companions, an otter, a jackal, and a monkey. By looking at the moon, the hare saw that the next day would be a holy day. He taught his companions that they should fast and prepare to give food to any passing beggar.

The next day, the otter went to the river and smelled a string of seven red fish that a fisherman had buried in the sand. He dug them up and asked loudly, "Does anyone own these?" But since the fisherman had gone downstream, no one answered and the otter took the fish to his lair, saying, "In due time I'll eat them."

The jackal found in the hut of a field watchman two spits of meat, a lizard, and a pot of milk. He too called for the owner, but when no one appeared dragged them back to his lair, thinking, "In due time I'll eat them."

The monkey picked a bunch of mangoes from a tree in the forest, and placed them in his lair, saying, "In due time I'll eat them."

The hare went out and thought to gather grass to eat. But he realized that if a beggar came by, grass would not be a sufficient meal. "I have no rice nor oil," thought the hare. "So if a beggar comes to me I will give him my own flesh."

This resolution was so virtuous that it warmed the throne of Sakka in heaven. He disguised himself as a Brahmin and went to earth. First he came to the otter, who offered him the seven red fish. The Brahmin promised to come back on the next day. Then he went to the jackal, who offered the meat, lizard, and milk. Again the Brahmin said he would return. The same thing happened at the monkey's lair.

Finally the Brahmin came to the hare. The hare said, "You did well in coming to me for food. For I will give a gift that I have never given before. But you, as a moral man, will not have to take life. Go and make a fire and when it is ready I will leap into it and when my body is roasted you may eat my flesh."

The Brahmin used his supernatural powers to make a fire. The hare remembered that there might be insects in his fur, so he shook himself three times so that they would not be killed. Then he jumped into the fire. But he lay there as if he had entered a cave of snow.

"Brahmin," said the hare, "the fire you have made isn't even able to heat the fur on my body. How is this?"

"Wise man, I am not a Brahmin. I am Sakka come to test you."

The hare said, "Your efforts are useless, for if all the beings in the world would test my generosity, they would not find me unwilling to give."

"Wise hare," said Sakka, "let your virtue be proclaimed to the end of the world-cycle." Sakka took a mountain and squeezed juice from it, and with the juice drew the outline of a hare on the moon. Then he placed the hare on a nest of soft grass and departed for his celestial abode.

The hare and his friends lived happily and virtuously and passed away according to their deeds.



*Hare
on Moon*

Having finished the tale, the Buddha revealed that in this existence, the otter was Ananda, the jackal and monkey were two other of his followers, and the hare "was I myself." (adapted from *Stories of the Buddha*, ed. Caroline Rhys Davids)

The Way of Righteousness

No Buddhist scripture is more widespread than the Way of Righteousness (the Dhammapada in Pali; the Dharmapada in Sanskrit). It is a source of wisdom and comfort to all Buddhists. The Way of Righteousness is a selection of the brief sayings that the Buddha made during his forty-five years of teaching. There are 423 verses arranged in twenty-six chapters under such topics as friendship, thought, earnestness, punishment and evil.

The following selection gives a brief sample.

1. All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.

2. All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.

He who always greets and constantly reveres the aged, four things will increase to him: life, beauty, happiness, power.

129. All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death; remember that you are like unto them, and do not kill, nor cause slaughter.

135. Not nakedness, not plaited hair, not dirt, not fasting, or lying on the earth, not rubbing with dust, not sitting motionless, can purify a mortal who has not overcome desires.

252. The fault of others is easily perceived, but that of one's self is difficult to perceive; a man winnows his neighbors'

faults like chaff, but his own fault he hides, as a cheat hides the bad dice from the player.

277. "All created things perish." He who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way to purity.
278. "All created things are grief and pain." He who knows this becomes passive in pain; this is the way to purity.
279. "All forms are unreal." He who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain; this is the way that leads to purity.
334. The thirst of a thoughtless man grows like a creeper; he runs from life to life, like a monkey seeking fruit in the forest.



A Philosophical Exchange

The conversion of King Menander (also known as King Milinda) by Nagasena was a milestone in the spread of Buddhism. It also produced an important text of Buddhist literature—The Milindapanha, or "Questions of Milinda (Menander)." The Milindapanha is written as a dialogue between the two historical figures. King Menander asks Nagasena to explain puzzling or difficult Buddhist ideas. Nagasena's answers, often in story form, are used by Buddhist teachers today to illustrate key points of the Dharma. For example:

King Menander asked, "Why are men different in their natures? Some are long-lived, sickly, ugly or weak, while others are the opposite."

Nagasena's response is used to explain Karma. He replied: "Why is it that all vegetables are not alike, but some sour, and some salt, and some pungent, and some acid, and some astringent, and some sweet?"

"I fancy, Sir, it is because they come from different kinds of seeds."

"And just so, great king, are the differences you have mentioned among men to be explained. For it has been said by the Blessed One: 'Beings, O Brahmin, have each their own Karma, are inheritors of Karma, belong to the tribe of their Karma, are relatives by Karma, have each their Karma as their protecting overlord.'"

It is Karma that divides them up into high and low and the like divisions.”

“Very good, Nagasena!”

Similarly, the king asked Nagasena what it was that is reborn.

“Name-and-form,” said Nagasena.

This answer surprised the king. “The same name-and-form is reborn?”

“No,” said Nagasena. “But by this name-and-form deeds are done, good and evil, and by these deeds (Karma), another name-and-form is reborn.”

“If that is so,” said the king, “would not the new being be released from its evil Karma?”

Only if it were not reborn, said Nagasena. “But just because it is reborn, O king, it is therefore not released from its evil Karma.”

Nagasena gave several illustrations. For example, he said, a man lights a lamp to eat his evening meal. The lamp sets the thatch roof of the house on fire. The fire spreads to other houses until the whole village is burned.

The villagers blame the man with the lamp for setting their homes on fire. But the man replies that it was not the flame from his lamp, but another fire that burned their houses. “How would your majesty decide such a case?”

The king said he would rule in favor of the villagers, because the flame that destroyed the village was produced by the flame from the lamp.

“Just so, great king,” said Nagasena, “it is one name-and-form which has its end in death, and another name-and-form which is reborn. But the second is the result of the first, and is therefore not set free from its evil deeds.” This was the meaning of Karma.

The Lotus Sutra

The Saddharma-Pundarika, or “The Lotus of the True Law,” is one of the most important sutras of Mahayana Buddhism. In it, the historical Buddha teaches a disciple named Sariputra. The sutra is a justification of the additional features of Buddhism that appeared in the Mahayana forms of the religion. Among these are the “lesser vehicles,” such as the bodhisattvas.

The acceptance of these “lesser vehicles” as part of Buddhism is one of the differences between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Theravada followers teach only the Buddha’s original, stricter dharma, the “Great Cart” of the parable. The Mahayana author of the Lotus Sutra has the Buddha justifying the use of “lesser vehicles” as a way to assist all living beings toward spiritual perfection, or Buddhahood. To illustrate this principle, the Buddha relates the Parable of the Burning House.



Buddha asked Sariputra to imagine an old and wealthy man who owns a great house. The house is old, “the bases of its pillars rotten, the coverings and plaster of the walls loose.” It has only one door. Within live the man’s many small children.

One day the house catches on fire, and the owner escapes through the door. But he realizes that the children inside are not aware of the danger. The owner wishes to save them. Because he is strong, he considers carrying them through the door. But the door is small, and it may be difficult to gather the children together, for they are running around in all parts of the house.

Instead, the householder calls out to them, warning of the danger. But they do not heed his cries, for they are too young to understand even the meaning of “burning.”

The householder knows that the children love to play with toys. So he tells them that he has three toy carts outside for them to play with. Hearing this, they rush toward the doorway, each trying to be the first one through it.

Outside, however, the householder gives them something different. He is a rich man and gives each of them a real cart, drawn by bullocks and swift as the wind. He thinks, “Why should I give these children inferior carts, since they are precious to me?”

“Now, Sariputra,” asked the Buddha, “is that man guilty of a falsehood by first holding out to his children the prospect of three vehicles and afterwards giving to each of them the greatest vehicles only?”

“No,” answered Sariputra, “for it was only a skillful device to persuade his children to go out of the burning house and save their lives.”

Buddha replied that the householder is like the Buddha himself, who found a way out of this world of suffering and pain.

Having saved himself, he wished to save his children as well. But they are ignorant and think of enjoying themselves in the world. So he tells them of the three lesser vehicles. Attracted by them, the children will acquire the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths—the one single grand cart that will take them to Nirvana.