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## To do away with the name “Siddhartha”

### *Buddha’s name in the Theravāda Canon*

*English translation by Tarana Duhaut Brown*

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#### Summary

The analysis of the occurrence of the word *Siddhat*ha (skt Siddh rtha) in the most ancient Buddhist texts, those of the P li Canon of Therav da, brings to light the marginal, late and deviant nature of the use of Siddhartha as “Buddha’s name”. This name symbolizes the pressure of the legend and the trends that developed the legend about the real personality of the Buddha, as well as his original doctrine. The Therav da tradition therefore has no reason to use this word.

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#### Introduction

The present article stems from a surprise: the surprise of seeing how frequently the name *Siddhat*ha is attributed to the Buddha; a name I never came across throughout my long tryst with the most ancient Buddhist texts, those of the P li Canon of Therav da. This surprise brings about many questions: was *Siddhat*ha Buddha’s name? If the ancient texts don’t indicate that it was, then how, when and why did this name appear? And finally, in our view – that is based on the knowledge and correct practice of Therav da - what do we do with this word and most importantly, with whatever it represents?

First and foremost, it is necessary to look into how the Buddha is named or called in the canonical texts in P li (I); this allows to determine and analyse the place that the word *Siddhat*ha occupies in this corpus of texts (II); the analysis leads to our reflection on the ineptness of this word in the Therav da tradition (III).

#### I - What was “Buddha’s name”?

The Buddha (buddha, literally “the one who discovered” or “the one who accomplished”) is not a proper noun but defines someone who has attained the highest stage of spiritual evolution or Awakening (bodhi). What really then, was “Buddha’s name”?

The Buddha possessed the name of a tribe and a surname, but above all, he was attributed multiple names justified by his Awakening.

The name of his tribe

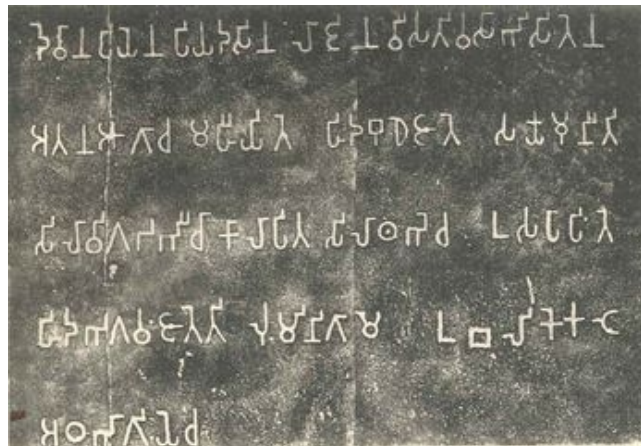
The Buddha was part of the community or the large “tribe” of the Saky , whose capital city was *Kapilavat*hu, in a region situated on the present India-Nepal border.

He was therefore often called Sakya-muni "the wise Sakya", mostly by outsiders looking to distinguish him from the multitude of spiritual masters of his time; or more commonly sakya-putra, "son of the Sakyas", to which one often added sakya-kula, meaning "of the Sakya lineage" and pabbajito, "the renunciant".

These appellations are those used in the most ancient written scriptures mentioning the Buddha: on the Rummindei Pillar erected by the emperor Aoka around 250 BC, or on the Piprawa urn which contains a portion of the Buddha's relics<sup>1</sup>.

« King Priyadarsi, Beloved of the Gods, crowned king for the past 20 years, has come in person to worship the place of birth of Buddha Sakyamuni... »

Inscription on the Rummindei pillar (Nepal)  
Brahmi script



His family name

The name of his family – an extended family or a "clan" – was Gotama.

Some therefore addressed him as Gotama, generally adding further elements to this name:

sama o gotamo sakyaputra sakyakul pabbajito  
ascetic Gotama, the renunciant, son of Sakya, of the Sakya lineage<sup>2</sup>

Employed by itself, the name seems to indicate some sort of familiarity, at times condescending, for example, when the name is used by those who consider themselves superior to the Buddha, like the deities.

nanda, the Buddha's faithful servant, who was also his first cousin, was called with the same name. For example, following the Buddha's parinibbana, while nanda was submerged with visits from disciples seeking consolation, a deity concerned about his spiritual progress appeared before him and reprimanded him thus:

Meditate, Gotama, and do not be negligent!  
How is this clamour going to help you? <sup>3</sup>

How the Buddha referred to himself

The Buddha most often spoke of himself in the third person, not out of vanity, but to underline the fact that he was just a conveyor of teachings and that his own person did not matter.

He referred to himself as Tathagata, a pre-Buddhist and probably non-Aryan word, to which tradition attributed, a posteriori, the etymology tatha, "thus" and gata, "to go" or agata, "to come", an interpretation seeking mainly to emphasize the adequacy between reality,

<sup>1</sup> « This depository of the relics of Bhagav Buddha, descendant of the Saky ... »

<sup>2</sup> S/D G I/3/255.

<sup>3</sup> nanda-sutra (S/SA I/9/5/225).

Buddha's teachings and his actions. The Buddha's life is a perfect illustration of his doctrine, the Dhamma, and his doctrine is a perfect explanation of reality:

All that the Tath gata said between the night of the Supreme Awakening and the night of his death, everything he said and presented, is "thus" and not otherwise, and for this reason he is named 'Tath gata': everything he says, he does and what he does, he says. And he goes by his word, and his word goes with his pace; we therefore name him 'Tath gata'.<sup>4</sup>

How did people address the Buddha

We have already seen that those outside of the community, of the Sa gha, generally addressed the Buddha by using his family name surrounded by details about his lineage and his status as a renunciant.

Lay or religious disciples addressed the Buddha (as they would to the most respected monks) by using bhante, a contraction of the word bhavante or bhadante. In all three cases, it is an extremely polite term, which is translated without much misinterpretation as "Venerable".<sup>5</sup> Bhante is still widely used nowadays within Theravada Buddhism.

Laudatory designations of the Buddha

In order to speak of the Buddha, including during his lifetime, his disciples used a multitude of terms.

These evoked his quality of being a master: the teacher (satth ), the instructor (akkh t ), the one who knows the way (vedag ), the spiritual friend (kaly amitta), the one who is perfect through his knowledge and the practices leading to it (vijj -cara a-sampanna), the perfect instructor of those who can be instructed (annutara-purisa-dhamma-s rath ), the teacher of men and divine beings (satth deva-manuss na )...

The terms also refer to his state of attainment: the Enlightened (buddha) or the one who is fully enlightened by his own efforts (samm -sam-buddha), the knower of the world (loka-vid ), the conqueror of the path (magga-jina), the victorious (jina), the governor of Dhamma (dhamma-r j ), the independent (sayambh ), he who is constantly vigilant (s da sata), the one who "went well" (sugata), he who achieved the goal (siddhattiha), the one who reached extinction (nibbuta), he who is liberated (arah )...

Finally, they also used purely laudatory names such as: the great sage (mahesi), the wise one at peace (muni), the protector (n tha<sup>6</sup>), the great man (mah -purisa), the great hero (mah -v ra), the one who has no equal (anuttara), the revered (bhava)...

Most of these epithets and qualities are enumerated in the morning and evening recitations which nowadays punctuate the lives of monks and lay practitioners. The three most common terms recited in the lands of Theravada Buddhism being bhagav , arah and samm -sam-buddha:

Namo tassa (« homage to ») bhagavato, arahato, samm sambuddhassa<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> P s dika-sutta (S/D G III/6/188).

<sup>5</sup> It appears 12 300 times in the core of the p li Canon.

<sup>6</sup> The term loka-n tha is too often translated as « Saviour of the world » or « Lord of the world », probably in order to imitate christianism; the only correct translation is « protector of the world » or « sanctuary of the world ».

<sup>7</sup> This formulation, recited during any religious ritual, is repeated three times, so that, given the tendency of the human mind to be distracted, it is pronounced with full awareness at least once. It is already mentioned in the sutti : Brahm yu-sutta (S/MAJ II/5/1/388), Samacitta-vagga (S/A G II/4/38) etc.

How does Siddhattha fit into this multitude of appellations?

## II - Siddhattha was not “the Buddha’s name”

The word siddhattha is present in the P li Canon, but very rarely as “the Buddha’s name” (A); when such is the case, it appears to be deviant additions of legendary elements (B).

### A – The word siddhattha in the Therav da Canon

The word siddhattha appears in the P li Canon but, except for very rare occasions, not as “the Buddha’s name”.

The word siddhattha

Siddhattha is a compound word, combining the past participle of the verb *sijjhati*, “to complete” or “to accomplish”, and the word *attha*, which means result of an endeavour, “profit” or “success”. It can therefore be translated as “[The one] who has accomplished his task”, or “has attained his goal”. The western transcription Siddhartha<sup>8</sup> comes from the Sanskrit version of the word.

Occurrences of siddhattha

The Therav da Canon, in the P li language, is composed of the Tipi aka (*ti*, “three” ; pi aka, “baskets”) and ancient Commentaries. The Vinaya-pi aka includes all the texts relating to the codes of conduct governing daily life within monastic communities; the Sutta-pi aka collects all the teachings attributed to the Buddha himself and to his most eminent disciples; the Abhidhamma-pi aka reorganises, using precise philosophical terminology, the doctrinal principles of the Sutta-pitaka in a systematic framework, which can be used to study the nature of mind and matter. Since the pi ak texts cannot be modified, abundant explanations are provided through commentaries (a hakath ) and sub-commentaries ( k ). The Tipi aka, compiled during the initial councils, was transmitted orally through recitation from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and recorded in writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. The Commentaries were composed until the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, and compiled later between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries; the Sub-commentaries were written from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century AD.

In this vast<sup>9</sup> canonical corpus, the word siddhattha<sup>10</sup> appears 256 times<sup>11</sup>, mainly in the Commentaries; the occurrences are distributed as follows:

Suti	68
Commentaries	182
Sub-commentaries	2
Vinaya	0
Commentaries	0
Sub-commentaries	2

<sup>8</sup> Popularised mainly by the title of the philosophical novel published in 1922 by Hermann Hesse.

<sup>9</sup> The Pali Text Society version, in roman letters, for the Tipi aka alone comprises 53 volumes (more than 15,000 pages) and can count up to 279 volumes if we include the Commentaries, translations, references and annexures.

<sup>10</sup> With all its variations.

<sup>11</sup> This is a very small number: comparatively, the name Gotama, listed solely as the nominative gotamo, appears 266 times in a single chapter of a single book: Majjhimanik ya’s Majjhimaapa sap i.

Abhidhamma	0
Commentaries	2
Sub-commentaries	0

Siddhattha: one of the Buddha's accomplishments

In the great majority of these texts, siddhattha is basically used in its simplest grammatical sense, as "having achieved his goal", in order to designate, among a multitude<sup>12</sup> of other laudatory labels, one of the Buddha's accomplishments.

For instance, one can find:

...katakiccena ni hitakiriyena siddhatthena vusitavos nena nir vara ena...  
 ...having accomplished his task, completed his action, achieved his goal, finished his achievements...<sup>13</sup>

or:

...nibbute lokan thamhi siddhatthe dipadutame...  
 ...having extinguished passions, protector of the world, having achieved his goal, the greatest of men...<sup>14</sup>

or:

...parinibbute sugate siddhatthe lokan yake...  
 ...perfectly liberated, happy, having achieved his goal, lord of the world...<sup>15</sup>

or:

...siddhata lokapajjota appameyya anopama ...  
 ...having achieved his goal, illuminating the world, limitless, unparalleled...<sup>16</sup>

In fact, some of the interlocutors address the Buddha in these terms:

...« siddhattha, nivatta »...  
 ... "you who have achieved your goal, you who have reached extinction"...<sup>17</sup>

Siddhattha : a Buddha of the past

Buddha, as outlined above, is not a proper noun but a term used to refer to one who has attained the highest stage of spiritual evolution, bodhi or Awakening. This ultimate stage of spiritual perfection has already been attained on multiple occasions in a distant past.

The most ancient Buddhist texts, such as the Mah pad na-sutta<sup>18</sup>, mention the names of six perfect buddhas having lived before the Buddha of our time.

The Buddha-va sa, "Genealogy of buddhas", in turn draws up a list of twenty-four buddhas: the fifteenth buddha of this list is named Siddhattha; he is not to be confused with the twenty-fourth buddha, the buddha of our age, Gotama.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in this type of sentence, isolating one of these labels as a "noun" is either due to lack of grammatical knowledge or bad faith.

<sup>13</sup> S/KHU/Milindapañhap i/III/5/2.

<sup>14</sup> S/KHU/Ther pad nap i/II/1/1.

<sup>15</sup> S/KHU/Ther pad nap i/XLII/6/124.

<sup>16</sup> S/KHU/Ther pad nap i/III/5/156.

<sup>17</sup> A /S/KHU/Dhammapada-a hakath /XIV/1/178.

<sup>18</sup> S/D G II/1.

The Buddha-vaṣa thus introduces the presentation of the fifteenth buddha of the past, successor of the Dhamadassi Buddha:

Dhammadassissa aparena siddhattho n ma n yako  
Nihanitv tama sabba , s riyo abbhuggato yath  
After Dhammadassi came a nobleman named Siddhattha,  
Having finished with all the darkness, having attained wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

And he thus refers to the sixteenth Buddha of the past, Tissa, successor to Buddha as Siddhattha (which would suffice to prove, if need be, that it doesn't refer to the last Buddha, the Buddha of our time):

Siddhatthassa aparena asamo appa ipuggalo  
Anantatejo amitayaso tisso lokaggan yako  
After Siddhattha came, unequalled, like none other,  
Eternal light, immensely renowned, Tissa, the Lord of the world.<sup>20</sup>

The Buddha of our time, Gotama, for his part, does not appear until the end of this long lineage:

Ahametarahi sambuddho gotamo sakyava hano  
Now comes the perfect buddha, Gotama of the Saky clan.<sup>21</sup>

Siddhattha: the name of the Buddha of our era

When it is not a laudatory epithet among numerous others and in the vast majority of occurrences, the word siddhattha only refers to a buddha of the past.

The attribution of the name Siddhattha to the Buddha of our era (or rather of the "first name" since his family name is Gotama) is however not totally absent from the canonical texts. But it can, and we will come back to this point, be considered abnormal or deviant; indeed two clues raise suspicion: on the one hand this appellation is very rare and never appears in the heart (māla) of the Canon; on the other hand, it always appears in the same Commentaries, in particular in two of them: the Commentaries of the Jātaka and the Commentaries of the Apadāna.

These include, for example:

suddhodanassa putto siddhattho  
Siddhattha, son of Suddhodana<sup>22</sup>

But almost all of the occurrences (26) refer, in very similar terms, to the episode during which Māra, personification of evil, tries to discourage the bodhisattva<sup>23</sup> during his meditation: he speaks to him on first-name terms or by calling him bho siddhattha, bho being a familiar way of addressing someone, of "casually speaking" to someone inferior<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Siddhatthabuddhavaṣo (S/KHU XII/18).

<sup>20</sup> Tissabuddhavaṣo (S/KHU XII/19).

<sup>21</sup> Gotamabuddhavaṣo (S/KHU XII/27).

<sup>22</sup> Suttaṅṇipāṭi-aṅgakaṭṭha (A /S/KHU//III/1/411).

<sup>23</sup> The term bodhisattva refers to a person who has decided to become buddha, and for this goal takes the long path of perfection through numerous lives; during his youth as well as his previous lives, and until his Awakening, such then is the stature of Gotama.

<sup>24</sup> Suttaṅṇipāṭi-aṅgakaṭṭha (A /S/KHU//III/2/446).

In the entire Canon, the name Siddhattha in reference to the Buddha of our time, appears only 32 times, divided as follows:

Sut	0
Commentaries	30
of which J taka-a hakath	7
of which Apad na-a hakath	14
Sub-commentaries	1
Vinaya	0
Commentaries	0
Sub-commentaries	1
Abhidhamma	0
Commentaries	0
Sub-commentaries	0

The emergence of siddhatthakum ro

The occurrences of Siddhattha used as the Buddha's first name are often accompanied by the word kum ro; this name designates the son of a person belonging to one of the two higher castes, the brahmana and the khatiya, or else the son of a king, rāja<sup>25</sup>.

One can thus find:

...suddhodanassa putto siddhattho nama kum ro...  
 ...the young nobleman named Siddhattha, son of Suddhodana...<sup>26</sup>

This combination of terms leads to the creation of a compound word, siddhatthakum ro by adjoining siddho, attho and kum ro, the construction of which is actually explained in a unique passage<sup>27</sup>.

One can thus find:

...suddhodanamah r jassa putto siddhatthakum ro...  
 ...the young nobleman Siddhattha, son of the great king Suddhodana...<sup>28</sup>

The use of this compound word is also very rare. It only appears<sup>29</sup> 36 times<sup>30</sup> throughout the whole Canon, mainly in the 2 aforementioned Commentaries:

Sut	0
Commentaries	32
of which J taka-a hakath	12
of which Apad na-a hakath	10

<sup>25</sup> We can also find, less frequently and in the same type of context, r jakum ro.

<sup>26</sup> Sutta-nipata-a hakath (A /S/KHU//III/1/411).

<sup>27</sup> Mah vaggayojan ( k /V/41/105).

<sup>28</sup> Ekakanipata-a hakath (A /S/A G/14/1/206)

<sup>29</sup> With all its variations.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, a little less because several of these texts mutually comment each other.

Sub-commentaries	0
Vinaya	0
Commentaries	2
Sub-commentaries	2
Abhidhamma	0
Commentaries	0
Sub-commentaries	0

## B - Siddhattha, or the intrusion of a portion of legend into the Canon

The use of Siddhattha as the Buddha's "first name" stands out as an intrusion in the canonical body: what is the meaning of this intrusion?

An intruder: "Prince Siddhattha"

We have observed that the use of Siddhattha as a proper name is accompanied by the designation of the future Buddha as kumaro. This simple word implies his belonging to a caste, in this case to that of the khatiya, the nobles; an assertion that is reinforced by the designation of his father, Suddhodana as a raja, a king, or perhaps even as a powerful maharaja.

However, these assertions, which are nowhere to be found within the heart of the pali Canon, belong to the legend of the Buddha, not to reality.

Indeed, the Saky community, as with most of the communities of this region, was isolated enough to be able to self-govern and to build an original political format not envisioned by Brahmanism: an oligarchy. Therefore, contrary to the assertions that were born out of misunderstanding, prognoses and subsequent retrievals of the same, the Buddha's father was not actually a "king" but an elected chief, and the Buddha was not a "prince".

Living his life on the fringe of the Vedic influence left the young Gotama with intellectual, social and religious liberty that allowed him to discover a reality and a path away from sclerotic classifications of the dominant Indian tradition. It is at the beginning of his peregrinations, while travelling the middle plains of the Ganges that the Buddha encountered the Brahmanic culture "with the critical gaze of someone who hadn't been educated to take its assumptions for granted"<sup>31</sup>: this new and prevalent context forced him to adapt his teachings to the codes and criteria of understanding of populations under Brahmanic influence.

The best example of both the Buddha's distance and his adaptation can precisely be provided by the question of his belonging to a caste. Brahmanic India was based on (is still based on) the division of society into four major castes (varnas): the brahmana (the purest, in charge of rites and religious teaching), the khatiya (skhatriyas) warriors and nobles, the vessa (skhatiyas), traders and farmers, and the sudda (skhatiyas), dependant manual labourers. Those who were not, for any particular reason (for example due to their non-Indian ethnic origin), enrolled in these hereditary groups were "casteless" (vasala) and could not take part in social life, except for a few functions that were considered degrading. When the Buddha came into contact with the Brahmans who were so

<sup>31</sup> Richard F. Gombrich, Theravada Buddhism, Routledge, Oxon (England), 2006.



attached to their caste, he could, as a member of a ruling family, accept to be classified as part of the high caste of "warriors" or "nobles", caste of the khat y , a term that his father had presumably never heard before. If the Buddha had not had the intelligence to make this effort of cultural integration, he would have been classified as "outcaste" and neither his person nor his teaching would have received such a warm welcome and support from the religious and political elites.

### The origin of the intrusion

#### The need for a legend

The ancient canonical texts, of which the P li Canon, the oldest and the most complete to have come down to us, contain very few details about the Buddha's life, more particularly about his life before Enlightenment.<sup>32</sup>

The absence of a complete and linear historical narrative about the Buddha Gotama's life should not be considered to be a flaw in Buddhism. On the contrary, it is the simple application of one his most important affirmations: "the Buddha and his teachings are one".

He, who sees the Dhamma sees me, who sees me, sees the Dhamma.

Seeing the Dhamma, he sees me, seeing me, he sees the Dhamma.<sup>33</sup>

The Dhamma and the Buddha being identical, the details concerning Gotama, like all the facts or the questions that are not relevant to the goal of extinguishing suffering, have been discarded. While the texts seem to make some apparent deviations from this rule, they are in fact opportunities to recall that the Buddha was a human being, subject to the laws of impermanence, which enhances his merit and reassures us of our own ability to attain enlightenment and the extinction of suffering. For the same reasons, until approximately the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., the Buddha was not portrayed: those who followed his teachings worshipped his memory through symbols<sup>34</sup> suggesting his presence by default, like an empty throne or his footprints, or by referring to the major events of his life, a lotus plant for his birth, a wheel for his first sermon, a tree for his Enlightenment and a funerary monument for his extinction.

Original depiction of the Buddha  
through symbols:  
footprints, wheels, lotus  
Gandh ra (dawn of our era).



<sup>32</sup> Which prompted Étienne Lamotte to assert: « writing S kyamuni's life is a desperate endeavour » - Histoire du bouddhisme indien, Tome 1, Louvain, 1958.

<sup>33</sup> Vakkali-sutta (S/SA III/1/5/87).

<sup>34</sup> This aniconism of the oldest form of Buddhism constituted a real breakaway from the profusion of representations of Indian deities.

It is in Gandhara, in the North-West of India, in kingdoms placed under the authority of Alexander the Great's successors, that "Greco-Buddhist" art was born at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. which was the origin of main-stream representations. At the same time, a more Indian iconology was developed by the Mathura school. However, despite the progressive introduction of personification, Buddhist art managed to preserve its only vocation, i.e. to remind the Master's disciples of the main points of his teachings, for which various parts of the body, various postures or various episodes of his life serve as an illustration.

This principle of primacy of Dhamma over its Teacher was shared by the first great disciples of the Buddha: for example, biographical details provided in the Canon with reference to Venerable Upali would hardly fill a page, even though he was considered to be a specialist in monastic discipline and he is the one who codified and recited the rules of Vinaya in the first council. And "once we leave the circle of monks whose lives intersected most closely with the Buddha's, the accounts become terse even to the point of silence. Apparently, with their insight sharpened by the contemplation of the lack of inherent nature of all phenomena, the ancient Buddhists were not particularly keen on compiling biographies of "selfless persons"<sup>35</sup>.

For the less advanced devotees, accustomed to the extraordinary profusion of Indian legends, or for the most enthusiastic religious worshippers, the Buddha seemed to deserve more and better than this silence. In order to answer this hagiographical craving, a Buddhist legend came to be.

#### Development of the legend

Towards the dawn of our era, the legend which until then had been limited to filling in a few biographical gaps<sup>36</sup> and adding a few embellishments to existing texts, flourished in Buddhist communities in the North-East of India. The life of the Buddha ceased to be associated with canonical texts in order to become autonomous texts mixing ancient sources, tales and legends, such as the *Lalitavistara* ("Multitude of Graceful Actions") of the Sarvastivada branch or the *Mahavastu* ("The Great Story") of the Lokottaravada branch of Early Buddhism. The hitherto disseminated episodes made way for complete life-stories, as in Vinaya of the Mahasravastivada stream, and for lyrical pieces such as *Avagaha's* *Buddhacarita*. Written at a time when the Mahayana school was becoming predominant, these texts were highly influenced by it. The Buddha was no longer depicted as an ascetic master, or even as a man, he became a superhuman being, whom even the most extreme terms could hardly describe. Each episode of his life was revisited and became miraculous, each place in his life became an indescribable paradise.

#### Resistance of the Pali Canon

The Buddhist tradition that was to gradually take on the name Theravada and whose centre was supposed to be located in the island of Ceylon managed to resist the enthusiastic waves of legends.

It achieved this for one simple reason: the content and organisation of the Pali Canon had been set during the Third Buddhist Council which was held around 250 BC in Paliputta, the

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<sup>35</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, Introduction: Venerable Nyanaponika Thera & Hellmuth Hecker, Great disciples of the Buddha: Their Lives, Their Works, Their Legacy, Wisdom Publications, Buddhist Publication Society 2003 (p. XXVII).

<sup>36</sup> Like, for example, the conception and birth of Gotama.

capital of the kingdom of Magadhā, under the reign of the emperor Aśoka<sup>37</sup>. These were more definitively set in writing in the aftermath of the Fourth Council held in Ceylon in 96 BC<sup>38</sup>. Even though some changes were brought to the text later and recorded during the following Councils, the fact of having made the texts of the Canon unalterable left only one possibility for those who wished to explain or complete these texts: to write commentaries or sub-commentaries. The most brilliant of the latter were compiled and integrated into the Canon, but in clearly separate sets and sections.

Besides this practical and material reason there exists a more fundamental and dogmatic one: the greater part of the Commentaries was written or compiled within the walls of the *Mahāvihāra* monastery in Anurādhapura, whose monks were fiercely opposed to ideas and exaggerations of the Mahāyāna, that were known in Ceylon by the term *Vetullavāda*, ideas which were accepted by their neighbours and competitors of the *Abhayagirivihāra* monastery.

This brief reminder seems to provide an explanation for the rarity of occurrences of *Siddhattha* as “the Buddha’s name” and his status as “prince” and the concentration of such occurrences in a handful of texts:

- these terms do not appear in the heart of the Pāli Canon and therefore can only be later inventions;
- they only appear in the Commentaries and are, therefore, not prior to the beginning of our era, and probably not prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century;
- they appear mainly in two Commentaries and could thus have been written by one single commentator, or a small group of commentators;
- they mainly occur in connection with one event, that of Māra’s temptation, mentioned in *Suttanipāta’s Padhānasutta*<sup>39</sup>, a *sutta* whose canonical status is sometimes considered doubtful because it was probably already influenced by the “Lives of the Buddha” that were flourishing in northern India<sup>40</sup> ;
- to comment on this episode belonging to the legend (and particularly highlighted by the legend), the aforementioned commentator would have had no choice but to use the terms of those spreading this legend, the Sinhalese monks like himself who belonged to an opposing heterodox current influenced by the Mahāyāna.

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<sup>37</sup> Born around 300 BC, died around 230 BC. Crowned around 270 BC. The very same emperor sent nine missions to teach the *Dhamma* in faraway places. It was during one of these missions, led by his son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅghamittā, both clerics, that Buddha’s Path was permanently established in the island of Ceylon (around 247 BC.).

<sup>38</sup> This body of work, which took about 12 years to complete, was carried out by a congregation of clerics, in the Āloka-vihāra rock temple in Ceylon.

<sup>39</sup> *Suttanipāta* (S/KHU/III/2).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Étienne Lamotte, *La légende du Buddha*, in *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, tome 134, 1-3, 1947, p.68-69.

## Sources of deviation

As with the more generalised deviation of the original texts towards more legendary texts in late traditions, this twist on the P li Canon is the result of misinterpretations, voluntary or not<sup>41</sup>, of canonical elements and the sayings of the Buddha.

The first form of deviation is based on the isolation and the misuse of one of the numerous laudatory epithets of the Buddha, *siddhatīha*, "having achieved his goal".

The second form is based on the confusion of the Buddha Gotama with one of the buddhas of the past, the Buddha *Siddhatīha*.

The third form of deviation is based on the attribution to Gotama Buddha of events belonging to the life of another perfect Buddha of the past, the Buddha *Vipass*. These plagiarized episodes<sup>42</sup> are those of the miracles accompanying conception and birth, of the luxurious life in three vast palaces, of the famous four outings during which the young "prince", hitherto preserved, discovered sickness, old age, death and asceticism, those of the nocturnal escape...

About the miracles surrounding the birth of the Buddha, Etienne Lamotte wrote :  
"It is as if pious biographers, unaware of the precise details of the birth of  
kyamuni, had later attributed to him a marvellous conception and birth,  
applying to him a legend intended to magnify the Buddha and the Cakravartin  
kings, a legend with predetermined themes. It is true that, from a theoretical  
point of view, one could support the opposite thesis and claim that the life of  
kyamuni served as a model and a starting point for the legend of  
Mah pad na; but this would mean implicitly admitting the miraculous character  
of the Buddha's life. It does not seem that respect for traditions should be  
pushed to this extent".<sup>43</sup>

The two forms of misappropriation above could find a justification in several canonical passages mentioning the points of coincidence between the perfect buddhas: they all reached enlightenment under a tree, they all hesitate to teach the Dhamma, all of them only give in at the insistence of a brahm<sup>44</sup>, and they are all accompanied by two principal disciples<sup>45</sup>... This real trend of assimilating all the buddhas had a specific significance, which was not the generalisation of miracles, but on the contrary, to affirm that the details of the buddhas' lives were of no real importance since their teaching was necessarily the same:

All the buddhas have exactly the same dhamma.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Translation errors or incomplete texts are not to be ruled out, but they have in any case been swept aside by the wind of legendary enthusiasm.

<sup>42</sup> Mah pad na-sutā (S/D G/II/1/4 sq.).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Étienne Lamotte, *La légende du Buddha*, op.cit.

<sup>44</sup> Milindapañha IV/5/10/10. The same text however emphasizes that the only thing the buddhas have in common is their attainment, but their historical reality obviously differ : « the bodhisattā can be distinguished from each other on four aspects : family, progression from one life to the next, longevity and body measures ; but there is no difference between them with regard to their physical appearance, morality, concentration, deep wisdom, liberation, knowledge and idea of liberation, state of Buddha as a whole » - Milindapañha V/3/2/2.

<sup>45</sup> Ukkacela-sutā (S/SA V/3/2/4/380).

<sup>46</sup> Milindapañha V/3/2/2.

Let me emphasise this point: the existence of buddhas of the past, buddhas of the future and buddhas of the present times (the arah ) was frequently used by the Buddha in order to reassure his disciples regarding the accessibility of Awakening, and also to curb any temptation of cult of personality; thus, when one of his main disciples, S riputīa, complimented him by stating that “nowhere is there another Saint or Brahman who has attained greater wisdom than the Awakening of the Bhagav ”, and that “there has never been and there never will be another one”; the Buddha admonished<sup>47</sup>: “S riputīa, you have no knowledge of the perfect buddhas of the past, future and present; why then did you express such an idea?”<sup>48</sup>.

By highlighting only the wonderful aspects of the buddhas, the legend and the currents that carry the legend, thus radically invert form and substance of what was taught by the Buddha himself.

The reference to “Prince Siddhatīha” being a symbol of this very inversion, how would the Therav da tradition relate to this reference?

### III - The name Siddhatīha is of no use to the Therav da tradition

We have established that Siddhatīha does not appear in the heart of the P li Canon and appears only marginally in the Commentaries. We also observed that Siddhatīha, like the other elements of the legend, often contradict the Dhamma. Moreover, they obstruct any historical research undertaken.

Hence, there are at least three reasons to consider that the use of the name Siddhatīha is irrelevant to the Therav da tradition.

Siddhatīha and his legend contradict the canonical choices

The absence of Siddhatīha in the canonical texts is not the result of a gap or a shortfall; on the contrary, it translates a deliberate will based on doctrinal stances affirmed by the Buddha himself.

The first of these affirmations is that the life of Gotama, son of the Saky , only becomes interesting when it becomes useful to his followers, i.e. from the time of his Awakening (including prior virtuous and meditative practices). The only details of his youth mentioned by the Buddha are aimed at highlighting, on the one hand, his radical decision to renounce to his worldly life and his capacity to overcome the false doctrines of his first teachers on the other. As for the details of his innumerable previous lives<sup>49</sup>, they are used to demonstrate that there are no shortcuts to attain liberation. It is a very long endeavour which includes an initial will and the assiduous practice of virtues<sup>50</sup>.

The only true “miracle” is that Gotama was able to attain perfect liberation through his very-own efforts. This makes totally superfluous the legendary inventions of miracles announcing his success (at the time of his conception and his birth). And to make Gotama out to be a prince living in extraordinary luxury is just as useless, if only to highlight the importance of his decision to renounce as proportional to what he renounced, which is neither flattering

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<sup>47</sup> This extremely rare reproach by the Buddha to his eminent disciple underlines how strongly the Buddha disapproved of the cult of personality.

<sup>48</sup> *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (S/DĪG II/3/145).

<sup>49</sup> Accounts of 547 among them, the most didactic ones, are found in the Jātaka-p li (S/KHU XIV & XV).

<sup>50</sup> The 10 transcendental virtues (p ramit ): charity, ethical conduct, renunciation of sensory pleasures, transcendental knowledge, effort, patience, search for truth, determination, benevolence and equanimity.

for the Buddha, nor encouraging for those of his disciples who had much less to lose than he did...

As we observed the second affirmation is that the teacher, be he as remarkable and as perfect as the Buddha, must obliterate his own self<sup>51</sup> in front of the truth taught:

The Tathāgata only shows the path.<sup>52</sup>

Usually placed at the beginning of the sūti, the biographical elements are therefore not intended to iconize the Buddha; they serve only two purposes: firstly, to authenticate<sup>53</sup> the sermons by indicating the place where they were delivered and the audience to whom they were addressed; secondly, to present the circumstances or the questions that brought about the sermons, since the Buddha speaks only when necessary.

The compilers of the Pāli Canon and the narrators of the later councils therefore rightly considered that neither Siddhathā nor the accompanying legends were necessary, thus applying the rule which the Buddha himself had set - that the Dhamma need only mention what is useful for spiritual progress:

The things I have learnt through direct practice, but have not taught, outnumber by far the ones I have taught. And why haven't I taught them? Because they are irrelevant to the goal intended, they are not important for leading a pure life, they lead neither to detachment nor to the extinction of suffering, nor to cessation, nor to appeasement, nor to deep knowledge, nor to Awakening, nor to nibbāna. That is why I have not taught them.<sup>54</sup>

Siddhathā and his legend are contrary to the Dhamma

The only reason that could justify the utilisation of legendary elements would be their use as a pedagogical tool: more attractive than the canonical sūti, less dry than the definitions and classifications of Abhidhamma, they would perfectly illustrate the Dhamma while satisfying the need for fantasy of the least advanced followers.

The mere example of the reference to "Prince Siddhathā" succeeds to demonstrate the weakness of this argument.

This reference, as we observed, introduces a whiff of caste<sup>55</sup> into the doctrine; it is therefore absolutely contrary to the teachings of the Buddha who constantly called out to do away with the caste system:

For he who possesses the unmatched qualities of knowledge and virtue, the system of caste (jātī-vāda) does not exist, the distinction of lineage (gotīa-vāda) does not exist; the attitude of constantly comparing does not exist; he does not say "you are as worthy as me" or "you are not as worthy as me".<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nowadays, in the Theravada countries, monks recite canonical texts holding their hand fans in front of them, symbolizing the obliteration of the person who recites.

<sup>52</sup> Dhammapada (S/KHU II/20/276).

<sup>53</sup> This authentication was necessary because the sūti were recited (by bhikkhū) and validated during the first « council » held a little while after the parinibbāna of the Buddha; that is why major texts from the Sūti-piṭaka begin with the words « as I have heard » – evāṃ me sutaṃ.

<sup>54</sup> Sappavāna-sūti (S/SA V/12/4/1/1101).

<sup>55</sup> A return to the idea of casteism can be found in the texts of later traditions; to cite an example, in Buddhacarita by Aśvaghoṣa (XIII/9), Māra uses the name of the Kātriya caste to address the Buddha.

<sup>56</sup> Ambaṭha-sūti (S/D G I/3/278).

We have also observed that this reference introduces into the doctrine, a hint of the cult of personality which is absolutely contrary to the Buddha's constant wish to fade behind his teachings. If one desires to revere the Buddha, no need to create a golden legend, respecting his teachings would suffice:

If a monk, or a nun, or a lay disciple, man or woman following the path of Dhamma, being on the way to harmony with the others, living in tune with the Dhamma, he or she is the one who respects the Tathagata, who worships the Tathagata, who reveres the Tathagata, he or she is the one who pays the highest homage to the Tathagata.<sup>57</sup>

The dubious nature of the instructional worth of legendary additions could be underlined for each one of them. For example, the departure of the young Gotama from the family home (the legend would say "from the palace") is thus narrated by the Buddha himself, in a very simple way:

I cut my hair and my beard although my father and my foster mother<sup>58</sup> opposed, their faces covered with tears; I took the yellow robe and left my family for a life without a dwelling.<sup>59</sup>

The detail of the parents' tears contradicts by itself the legendary version of the secret and nocturnal escape, like a thief, from a palace miraculously fallen asleep<sup>60</sup>, a version which can but surprise us because it is contrary to the nature, the will and the power of persuasion of the Buddha.

Gotama escapes from the marital bed, taking advantage of the magical sleep of the women in the palace  
Gandhara (III<sup>e</sup> siècle).



More generally speaking, the desire to embellish, arouse enthusiasm or admiration, the absolute wish to sustain in comparison with the fabulous Hindu gods and heroes, seems to be very far from the aim, content and form of the Dhamma: the Buddhist teachings are not

<sup>57</sup> Mah parinibbana-sutta (S/D G II/3/199).

<sup>58</sup> After the demise of his mother Māyā, Gotama was brought up by his father's second wife, his aunt Mahāpajāpatī; years later, she became the first Buddhist nun, she was the one for whom the Buddha gave up his initial reticence and accepted full ordination for women, making some changes and additions in the rules – Bhikkhunikkhandhaka (VIN IV/10); Mahāpajāpatī herself had two children, who later became the monk Nanda and the nun Nandā.

<sup>59</sup> Pāsāsi-sutta (S/MAJ I/3/6/277), Mahāśaccaka-sutta (S/MAJ I/4/6/371), Bodhirajakumarasutta (S/MAJ II/4/5/327), Saṅgaravasutta (S/MAJ II/5/10/475).

<sup>60</sup> This description seems to be copied from the 5th book of the Rāmāyana, which recounts the intrusion of the monkey-god Hanuman in Ravana's palace.

meant to stir passions but, on the contrary, to facilitate concentration and insightfulness. They encompass a beauty deeper than the flashy legends: the beauty of clarity, depth and wisdom.

The Buddha himself had, with lucidity, warned about the risk that his teachings could run:

In the future, there will be bhikkh who won't like to listen to the narrative of discourses comprising the words of Tath gata – profound, profound in their meaning, transcendent, pertaining to emptiness. They won't lend ear, won't set their hearts on knowing them, won't regard these teachings as worth understanding or mastering. But they will listen when the discourses that are literary works — the works of poets, elegant in sound, elegant in rhetoric, the work of outsiders, words of disciples — are recited. They will lend ear and set their hearts on knowing them. They will regard these teachings as worth understanding & mastering.

In this way could come about the disappearance of the discourses that are words of the Tath gata — profound, profound in their meaning, transcendent, pertaining to emptiness<sup>61</sup>.

Siddhattha and his legend are contrary to history

Canonical texts abound in signs which could lead to a minimal knowledge regarding the historical Buddha and his environment: in order to satisfy such curiosity, it is necessary and reasonable to separate the wheat (that which could have historical value) from the chaff (legendary elements); since the pioneering works by Hermann Oldenberg<sup>62</sup>, further analyzed by Hans Wolfgang Schumann<sup>63</sup>, this research has proven its aptness.

Moreover, neither Siddhattha, nor his princely status or the embellishments that come with it belong to history, because they do not figure in the most ancient texts and because they often even contradict history.

The same goes for the living conditions of the young Gotama, that he himself only briefly refers to and in very measured terms<sup>64</sup>, but which later became an extravagant abundance in the texts that followed; each deviation in vocabulary is worth being highlighted.

To take an example, the Buddha mentions that his family had “three residences: one for the cold season, one for the hot season, one for the rainy season”. Apart from the fact that it seems to be a tailored expression to symbolize material comfort<sup>65</sup>, the term used in the ancient texts is *paṇḍita*, which designates any concrete house built on foundations and accessible by a staircase; a luxury indeed at the Buddha's time, but a relative luxury; this straight forward definition, logically, should correspond to the most opulent houses, centuries before our era, in Kapilavastu, capital of the Saky . However, legendary texts render a very different version of this large town at the foothills of the Himalayas:

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<sup>61</sup> *Ī-suttā* (S/SA II/ 9/7/229).

<sup>62</sup> Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha : sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, Verlag Wilhelm Hertz, Berlin, 1881. In French : *Le Bouddha : sa vie, sa doctrine, sa communauté*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris, 1934.

<sup>63</sup> Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *Der historische Buddha: Leben und Lehre des Gotama*, Diederichs Gelbe Reihe, München, 2004. In French: *Le Bouddha historique*, Editions Sully, Vannes, 1999.

<sup>64</sup> *Sukhum Īa-suttā* (S/A G III/4/9/39).

<sup>65</sup> We can, indeed, find this expression used word for word for several other characters, like Kulaputta for example, one of the first lay listeners of the Buddha (*Pabbajj -kathā*, VIN III/1/7) or Anuruddha, nanda's half-brother (*Chasakyapabbajj -kathā*, VIN IV/7/1/330).



This city, unique in the world, scintillating with the splendour of precious stones (...), with its festive arbours, its arched gateways and pinnacles, each dwelling radiant with jewels (...). In the heavens, Indra has lost respect among the people as they see the glories acquired by the Saky (...). At night the moon rays fall on the silver palaces (...), by day the rays of the sun fall upon its golden palaces...<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

The study of the most ancient canonical texts which are available to us, proves beyond doubt the late (at least half a millennium after the parinibbāna of the Buddha), marginal (outside the core of the Canon, concentrated in two Commentaries) and deviant (contrary to the Dhamma) nature of the use of the word Siddhattha as "name of the Buddha".

The presence of the word Siddhattha attests, like all the accompanying legendary elements, the existence of the heated battle which took place at the beginning of our era between the original doctrine of the Buddha, advocating asceticism, detachment, extinction of passions, perseverant and neutral teaching of truth and the path, and the inventions, "discoveries" or interpretations of new currents, symbolized by -and based on- the development of an exuberant legend, misappropriating the doctrine and the practice towards an unlimited exaltation of the religion.

There is absolutely no doubt that the ancient traditions lost this battle; the Buddha himself had predicted that the refusal to make efforts, the difficulties of going against the current, the pressure of faulty doctrines, the need of more attractive words, the competition with the magnificence of the Indian pantheon, would deviate many an adept and many a renunciant from the Path.

Two millennia later, Siddhattha and his legend seems to be unanimously accepted and integrated into "Buddhism", not only by the simplifying and unifying West, but also in Asia, including in regions where the Theravāda tradition dominates, not only by a large portion of lay people but also by a number of scholars.

Raising the curtain on Siddhattha and his legend permits somehow to put up a form of resistance<sup>67</sup>, modestly, refusing to accept the simplifying unicity of "Buddhism", to remind that there exists a very ancient tradition -undoubtedly closest to the teachings of the Buddha- and to invite one to discover his texts; in a word to move away from the legend in order to rediscover the Dhamma.

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<sup>66</sup> Buddhacarita d'A vāgho a (I/3 sq.).

<sup>67</sup> This stream of resistance exists in the West, initially represented by several German personalities, scholars such as Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920) or monks ordained in Ceylon, like Nyanatiloka Mahāthera (Anton Gueth, 1868-1957) and Nyanaponika Mahāthera (Sigmund Feniger, 1901-1994), cofounder of the valuable Buddhist Publication Society.

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