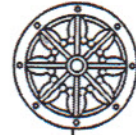


CHAPTER FIVE

Sacred Writings



Unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Buddhism has no single collection of writings to which all Buddhists adhere. There is nothing comparable to the Torah, the Bible, or the Quran. The Tipitaka is the most important of all Buddhist writings, but some schools of Buddhism have added their own sutras (sacred texts) to this holy text. This chapter takes a look at the Tipitaka and some of the Buddhists' principal sutras.

The Tipitaka

The Tipitaka is the most sacred of Buddhist scriptures. *Tipitaka* means "three baskets." The name derives from the early Buddhist practice of writing on palm leaves that were then stored in baskets. There are two important versions of the Tipitaka. One is the Pali Canon. Pali is an old Indian language that was the native language of Buddha. (*Canon* means "a collection of writings.") The other version of the Tipitaka is known as the Sanskrit Canon. Sanskrit is another ancient Indian language. Buddha delivered his sermons in Pali because he considered Sanskrit the language of intellectuals. When he talked to common people, he wanted everyone to understand what he was saying.

For 400 years after the death of Buddha, his teachings were not written down. They were passed along by word-of-mouth until sometime in the first century B.C., when monks on the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) recorded them on palm leaves. The first printed version of the Pali Canon did not appear until 1893. In that year, King Chulalongkorn of Thailand ordered that the scriptures be printed. The teachings became known as the Tipitaka.



The Pali Canon is divided into three parts or "baskets." These are the Vinaya Pitaka, the Sutta Pitaka, and the Abhidhamma Pitaka. (The word *pitaka* means "baskets.") These three parts are described below.

Vinaya Pitaka

The Vinaya Pitaka is the Basket of Discipline that applies to Buddhist monks and nuns. It is the oldest and smallest section of the Pali Canon. It contains 227 rules for bhikkhus (monks) and 311 rules for bhikkunis (nuns). It also includes stories behind the establishment of these rules, as well as comments and quotes by Buddha.

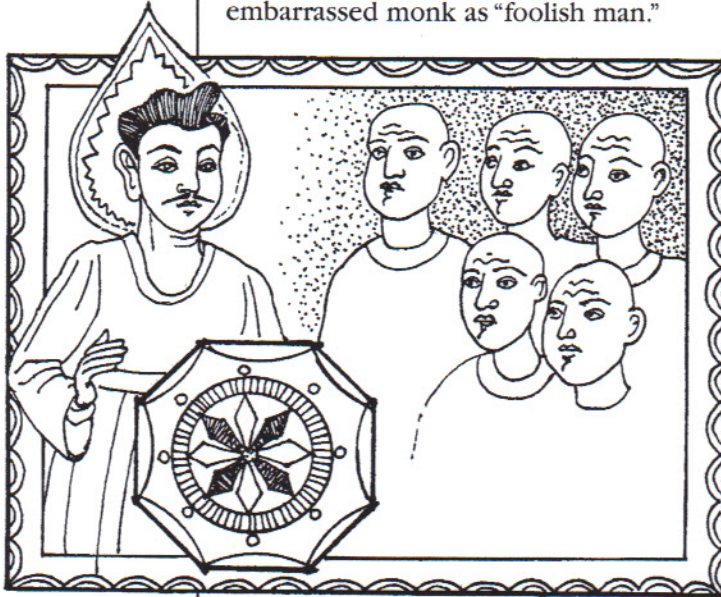
At first there was no written set of rules governing the actions of Buddhist

The name *Tipitaka* derives from the early Buddhist practice (shown above) of writing on palm leaves and then storing them in baskets. *Tipitaka* means "three baskets."



monks. (Nuns did not appear until later.) When one of the robed holy men behaved in an unbecoming manner, he was brought before the Buddha himself. The Buddha's form of punishment was to severely rebuke the offender. He would tell the monk that the offense for which he was charged was "not fit, not becoming, not proper, not lawful, not worthy, and ought not to be done." All the while, he addressed the embarrassed monk as "foolish man."

The *Sutta Pitaka* contains Buddha's first sermon which he is said to have preached to the five ascetics who had abandoned him when he rejected their extreme asceticism.



Usually, a reprimand of this type from the Buddha himself was enough to bring an errant monk into line.

When the Vinaya Pitaka was at last compiled into a set of written rules, it consisted of five separate books.

Sutta Pitaka

The Sutta Pitaka deals with dharma—the teachings of Buddha and his close disciples. It consists of over 10,000 *suttas*, or "talks" delivered during Buddha's lifetime. It is the most important part of the Pali Canon.

The suttas are grouped into five collections referred to as *nikayas*. The most important is called the *Kbuddaka Nikaya*, or the "Division of Short Books." One of these is the *Dhammapada*, which is considered to be the most popular

part of the Tipitaka because it contains 423 of Buddha's verses, in which he summarizes his beliefs. In it, Buddha discusses such topics as vanity, truth, righteousness, happiness, and pleasure. One source compares the *Dhammapada* to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Christianity.

The Sutta Pitaka also contains Buddha's first sermon. This is the sermon he is said to have preached to the five ascetics who had previously abandoned him. (See page 5, "The Search for the Truth" in Chapter One.) It is the sermon in which he revealed the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Abhidhamma Pitaka

The Abhidhamma Pitaka contains writings that explain Buddha's teachings. It is a part of the Tipitaka that is for serious study. Novice monks know not to disturb elder monks when they are discussing a part of the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

Words to remember:

Tipitaka
sutras

Pali Canon
Sanskrit Canon

King
Chulalongkorn

Vinaya Pitaka
Sutta Pitaka

Abhidhamma
Pitaka

Sutras

In Chapter Six, you will learn about the two major divisions of Buddhism. They are Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. For now, it is enough to know how the two differ in their views of the Tipitaka. To Theravada Buddhists, the Tipitaka is the final word. It contains the most important sermons and teachings of Buddha. Mahayana Buddhists, however, disagree with their southern counterparts as to which parts