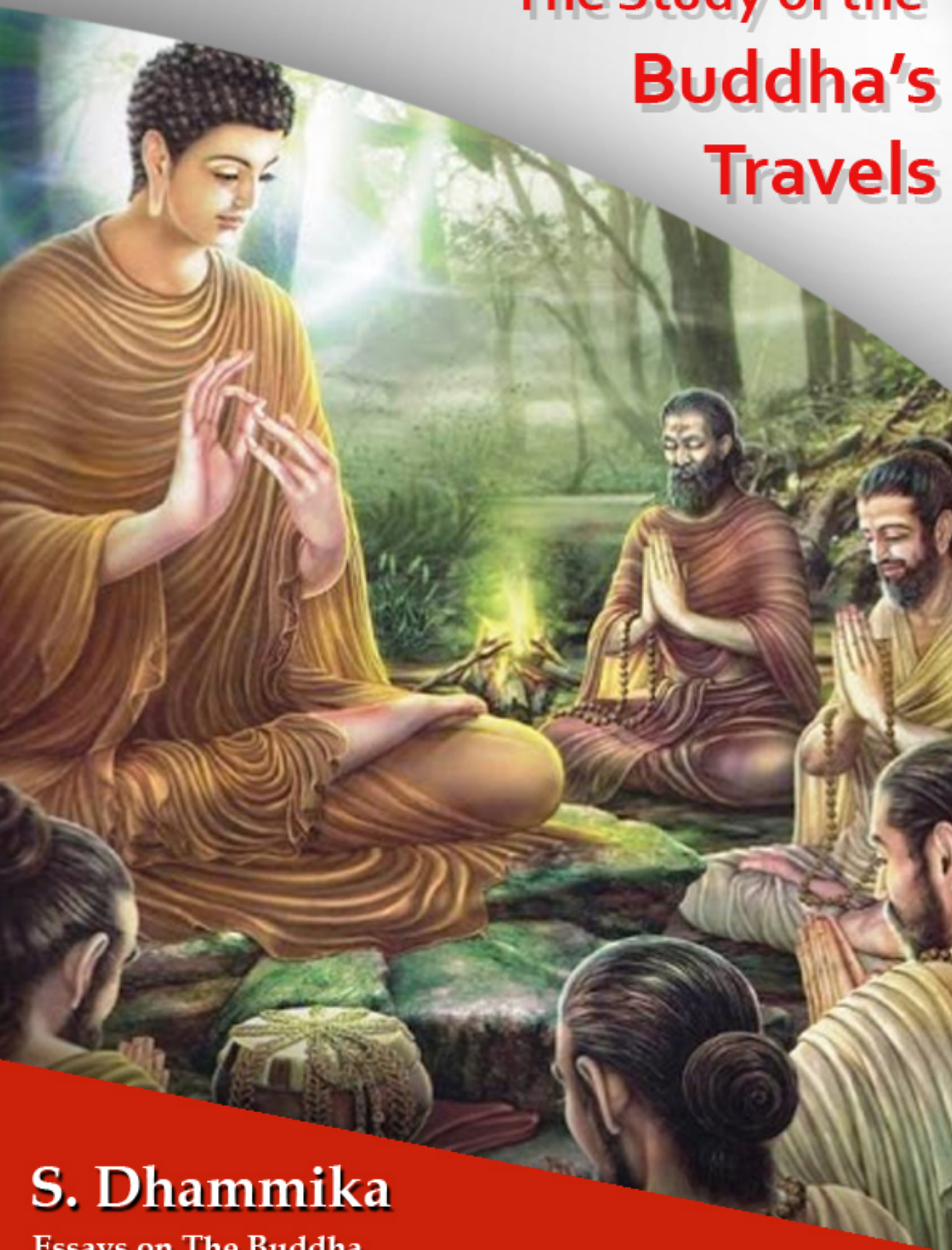


The Study of the Buddha's Travels



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Essays on The Buddha

A Study of the Buddha's Travels

The only two of the great religious teachers who were successful during their own lifetimes were Mohammed and Gotama Buddha. Both had long teaching careers and both lived to see their respective religions firmly established. Prof. Basham has written that Buddhism was a minor religion until its adoption and promotion by King Asoka. Basham bases his assumption on the fact that there is no archaeological evidence of Buddhism before Asoka's time but this seems to me to be a rather weak argument. What physical evidence are wandering ascetics, which are what the Buddha's disciples were, likely to leave? They established few permanent monasteries and those they did build were made of mud, bamboo and thatch. As for stupas, these did not become an important feature of Buddhist worship until about the 3rd century BCE.

The Pali Tipitaka offers ample and convincing evidence that the Buddha was well known throughout wide tracts of northern India and that his Dhamma attracted large numbers of converts from all classes, especially the elite. The highly critical attitude of Jains and brahmins towards the new teaching as recorded in the Tipitaka suggests that they saw it as a real threat. An important cause of the Buddha's success was no doubt his extraordinary personality. Even despite the great distance in time between him and us, the heavy editing of the *suttas* and their rather stilted language, the Buddha's warm and compassionate presence shines through on nearly every page. The logical consistency of his Dhamma must have been an important factor also. However, no matter how appealing a teacher or how common-sense a teaching is it will not attract converts unless they can come into contact with it. The Buddha was a missionary from the very beginning and this was, together with the two things mentioned above, the most important factor in the early success of his teachings. He had a still heart but a very mobile body.

According to the Tipitaka, almost the first thing the Buddha did after his enlightenment was to embark on a long journey in order to teach others what he had discovered. Equally significantly, his instructions to his first 60 disciples was that they should "wander forth" to teach others what he had taught them. The area in which the Buddha wandered during his life corresponds roughly to the modern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The furthest east he went which can still be identified is Kajangla, now Kankjol, some 18 kilometres south of Rajmahal, and the furthest west he is known to have gone is Mathura, some 180 kilometres south of Delhi. These two locations are nearly a thousand kilometres apart. The Buddha's movements northwards were of course limited by the then impenetrable jungles of the Himalayan foothills and it is unlikely that he ever went further south than the southern edge of the Ganges watershed. Still, this would mean that his wanderings covered an area roughly equivalent to 200,000 square kilometres, a huge area by any standards.

The evidence suggests that the Buddha only occasionally visited the outer edges of the Ganges valley. For example, he only visited Mathura once and he probably visited Anga in the east (i.e. Campa, Bhaddiya and Kajangla corresponding to modern Bhagalpur District) one or two times. Incidentally, I believe that Bhaddiya or Bhaddiyanagara as it is also sometimes called in the Tipitaka, can be safely identified with the village of Bhadariya some 12 kilometres south of Bhagalpur. Most of the Buddha's wanderings took place in the eastern part of this area, between the great cities of Savatthi, Rajagaha, Vesali and Kosambi.

The Tipitaka mention carriageways in towns and paths, roads and highways through the countryside. However, there is little doubt that these names referred to the frequency of traffic on these arteries, not to the quality of their paving or their width. All roads in ancient India were little more than dusty, rutted tracks in the summer and impassable rivers of mud in the rainy season. Banditry added to the risks of long distance travel.

Travellers on the road between Savatthi and Saketha were often robbed and of course the fearsome Angulimala was a robber and murderer who operated in forested areas around Savatthi (M.II,97;

Vin.IV,87). Once the Buddha and an attendant were on tour of Kosala when they came to a fork in the road. The Buddha said they should take one fork while the attendant said they should take the other. This debate continued for some time until in a huff the attendant put the Buddha's bowl down and walked off on the way he thought correct. He hadn't gone far before he was attacked by bandits who "struck him with their fists and feet and tore his robe" (Ud.90).

In the more remote districts travellers might have difficulty finding food, water and shelter. The Tipitaka mentions a traveller getting down on all fours to drink from a puddle in a cow's footprint because no other water was available, and of two parents lost in the wilderness who saved themselves from starvation by killing and eating their child. More normally though travel was just uncomfortable, tedious and undertaken only when necessary. And yet it seems that the Buddha spent most of his time on the road in order to reach as many people as possible. Such was his determination and compassion.

In keeping with the rules laid down by himself and in accordance with a long established *samana* tradition, the Buddha spent three months of the rainy season in one location and the rest of the year on what were called 'walking tours'. According to the commentarial tradition after the 20th year of his ministry he spent every rainy season except the last one in or near Savatthi, the capital of Kosala. The fact that more of his discourses are set in this city than in any other place suggests that there is some foundation in this tradition and if it is true he may have decided to limit his wanderings at that time due to age. He would have been 55 years old at the time. All the Buddha's journeys were undertaken on foot although as there are numerous rivers in the land he knew he must have often had to use boats or ferries despite being no specific mention of him ever actually doing this.

We read of monks once crossing a river by holding on to the tails and backs of a herd of cattle that was swimming across the same river suggesting that when there was neither bridges, boats or rafts, and that the Buddha might have had to improvise as these monks did. There is no mention of the Buddha travelling by carriage or cart. In only one place is he described as wearing sandals, so he probably went bare footed most of the time (Vin.IV,186).

The Tipitaka mentions the itinerary of many of the Buddha's journeys giving us an idea of the distances he sometimes travelled. For example, we know that within the first twelve months after his enlightenment he went from Uruvela to Isipatana via Gaya and Benares, spent the three months of the rainy season there and then travelled to Rajagaha via Benares, Gaya, Uruvela and Lativana. All these places can be identified with certainty and thus we can calculate that he must have walked at least 300 kilometres from Uruvela to Rajagaha. In the longest single journey recorded in the Tipitaka, he went from Rajagaha to Vesali to Savatthi and back to Rajagaha via Kitigiri and Avali, a round trip of at least 1,600 kilometres (Vin.IV,189). It is likely that he would have started a trip like this at the end of the rains retreat and arrived back in time for the next retreat nine months later. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know how much time these or any of the other journeys might have taken.

In the famous Mahaparinibbana Sutta we know that the Buddha went from Rajagaha to Kusinara via Nalanda, Patna and Vesali, a total distance of about 300 kilometres. According to the *sutta* he left Vesali after the end of the rains retreat (October) and of course he is supposed to have attained final nirvana in Kusinara on the full moon of Vesakha (May). This suggests that he took seven months to travel about 95 kilometres. Even allowing for the fact that he was old and in ill health this seems like a very long time. It should be pointed out that only later texts in the Tipitaka mention that the Buddha's *parinivana* took place at Vesakha and the *sutta* gives the impression that while his last journey was slow it was at a steady pace. It seems likely that the Buddha conducted his journeys at a leisurely pace.

The evidence suggests that the Buddha would wake before sunrise, go for *pindapata* in the nearest town or village just after sunrise and having eaten, would set off while it was still cool. He would walk until

the midday heat became unpleasant and then take an afternoon rest. If there was a village nearby he might stay until the next morning and if not, he might continue walking until he got to the next village. How long he stayed at a particular place would have depended on many factors – whether local people came to talk with and listen with him, whether food and water was available, whether the atmosphere was congenial. We know for example that he cut short his first stay in Rajagaha when people began to complain that too many young men were leaving their families to become monks (Vin.IV,43). Once he arrived in the village of Thuna to find that there was no water to drink because the brahman inhabitants, hearing that he was coming, had blocked up their wells with rice husks and cow dung (Ud.78). The warm and respectful reception that Buddhist monks get today was not always available to the Buddha and his disciples. He is often described as travelling with either 500 monks (a conventional number meaning “a lot”) or simply with “a large group of monks”. At other times he would dismiss his attendant and companions telling them that he wanted to wander by himself for a while (S.III:94).

The Buddha was not, as is commonly supposed, primarily a forest dweller. Of the four monasteries he founded and now identified by archaeologists – Ghositarama, Jivakarama, Jetavana and Veluvana – the first is actually inside the walls of the city while the other three are within easy walking distance of their respective cities. When staying in these places the Buddha’s accommodation would have been reasonably comfortable but when he was on the road the situation was very different and he would have to sleep in or take shelter in whatever was available. We read of him sleeping in a potter’s shed on grass spread on the floor (M.I,502). On another occasion, he arrived in Kapilavatthu and finding no proper lodgings, spent the night in Bharandu’s hermitage sleeping on a mat on the ground (A.I,277). Often he must have simply slept in one of the many mango groves that to this day are still to be seen near most north Indian villages. Finding him out in the open one winter’s night Hatthaka asked the Buddha if he was happy. He replied: “Yes my lad, I live happily. Of those who live happily in the world I am one.” Hatthaka expressed surprise at this, pointing out that it was the dark half of the month, the time of frost, that the ground was trampled hard by the hoofs of the cattle, the carpet of leaves thin, the wind cold and that the Buddha’s robe appeared to be thin. The Buddha reaffirmed that he was nonetheless happy (A.I, 136).

The Buddha must have also enjoyed the freedom his life of wandering gave him. For him “the household life is full of hindrances, a path of dust. Free as the wind is the life of one who renounces all worldly things” (D.I,62). However, moving from place to place had very important practical reasons behind it too, in a world without the communications that we take for granted it allowed him to spread his teachings far and wide. He was also aware that some personal contact with him was important, especially for newly ordained monks and nuns, and that this may have been a factor in determining in which districts he visited and how often (S.III,90). During his wanderings he might visit a district, teach, make some disciples, even ordain a few monks or nuns and then perhaps not come again for many years. If a monk from such a district wished to see him again he could simply set off to wherever the Buddha was staying at the time.

Sona Kutikanna was ordained by Mahakaccana and about a year later developed the desire to meet the man whose teachings he had committed himself to. He said to his preceptor: “I have not yet met the Lord face to face, I have only heard about what he is like. If you give me permission I will travel to see the Lord, the Noble One, the Awakened Buddha” (Ud.58). For lay disciples with domestic obligations undertaking a long journey to see the Buddha would have been more difficult and so they may have had to wait, perhaps many years, before they got to see him again. The Thapataya Sutta gives us some idea of the excitement caused in an outlying district when its inhabitants heard that the Buddha might be on his way to see him and how the excitement increased as word of his gradual approach reached them (S.V,348-349). Elsewhere we read of people’s anxiousness for news about the Buddha and of what he had been teaching.

Once a monk who had spent the rainy season with the Buddha in Savatthi arrived in Kapilavatthu. When people heard where the monk had come from he found himself deluged with questions about the Buddha (S.V,450). On another occasion a group of brahmins from Kosala and Magadha who had arrived

in Vesali, heard that the Buddha just happened to be in town and decided that the opportunity to meet him was one that was too good to miss. The Buddha had apparently given his attendant instructions that he was not to be disturbed while the brahmins were adamant that they would not leave until they got to see the famous teacher. Seeing this impasse, the novice Siha asked the attendant to tell the Buddha that there were three people waiting to see him. The attendant said he would not do this but he wouldn't object if Siha did. This was done, the Buddha asked Siha to put a mat outside his residence in the shade for him to sit on while he talked to the brahmins (D.I,151).

But the Buddha couldn't be everywhere at once and so monks and nuns would often take long journeys for the privilege of spending some time in his presence. For example, once while he was residing in Catuma at least five hundred monks arrived to see him (M.I,456). However, with him moving around a lot, it was not always possible to know where he was at any one time. In the beautiful Parayana Vagga of the Sutta Nipata we read of the 16 disciples of the ascetic Bavari setting out from the Godavari, probably from where it flows through Maharashtra, for northern India in the hope of meeting the Buddha. First they heard that he was at Savatthi and "wearing matted hair and dressed in deer skin" they headed there. They went through Kosambi and Saketa and arrived in Savatthi only to find that the Buddha had left some time previously. They followed his route through Setavya, Kapilavatthu, Kusinara, Pava and Vesali, finally catching up with him at the Pasanaka Shrine, (Barabar Hills north of Gaya) "and like a thirsty man going for cool water, like merchants going for profit, like a heat exhausted man going for shade, they quickly ascended the mountain" (Sn.1014).

There were undoubtedly as many languages and dialects spoken in the Buddha's India as there are today and this would have created special problems for him. Theravada tradition asserts that the Buddha spoke Pali although there is no mention in the Tipitaka of what language he spoke. Like merchants, diplomats and others whose professions meant frequent travel in different regions it is very likely that apart from his mother tongue, which would have been a dialect of Kosala, he was probably fluent in several other languages as well. In the Aranavibhanga Sutta he says that insisting on using one's own dialect in an area where another is spoken can only cause confusion and conflict. "It has been said, 'One should not stake too much on the local language...' How does one do this? In different regions they might call the same thing a *patti*, a *patta*, a *vittha*, a *serava*, a *dharopa*, a *pona*, a *hana* or a *pisila* (these are all different words for a bowl or dish). So whatever they call it in one region, one uses that word thinking, 'It seems this person is referring to that object' and one uses that word accordingly." These are the words of someone familiar with a range of languages and dialects and who was very open and practical about language.

The Buddha was equally open about regional customs as well. Once when he found some monks spending too much time bathing and playing in the water he made a rule that they should only bathe once a month. Later some monks who had been staying in an outlying region where people found their infrequent bathing revolting (not surprisingly!) reported this to the Buddha and he allowed them to bathe more often to accord with the customs of that region. Once again this is the kind of thing one would expect of an urbane, well-travelled individual. Whatever the Buddha was he was not parochial and no doubt his travels made him even more flexible and open-minded.