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The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon

Bhikkhu Nanamoli
Vipassana Publications (August 2001)
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Arguably the most definitive of the biographies of

Siddhartha Gotama, this book is also a fine introduction to the Pali Canon. The Theravadin tradition of Buddhism, whose scriptures are preserved in the Pali Canon, is considered by modern scholars to be the most authentic representation of the teachings spoken by the actual Buddha. Since a chronological sequence in the Canon is far from explicit, the work is then intended to be as accurate a presentation of the Buddha's life as could be drawn out from the existing materials.

Born Osbert Moore in England in 1905, the author was ordained at the Island Hermitage in Sri Lanka in 1948. He has translated many texts of Theravada Buddhism, including The Path of Purification. In this volume, he attempts to reconstruct a chronology of the Buddha's life, drawing primarily from the traditional texts.

The Pali Canon itself was preserved by oral tradition for approximately 500 years before it was put down in writing, so the language was rendered in such a way as to make it amenable to memorization. Nanamoli's text, due to the repetitive nature of the oral tradition that preserved it, is thus written in an austere language that can be, at times, tedious. The work should not be criticized on this account since it was intended to be an accurate translation of the original texts, which were preserved in this fashion. The Life of the Buddha is an excellent introduction to the Pali Canon for those who wish to study the most authentic and ancient of the Buddhist teachings, but as an introduction to the life of the Buddha or the Buddhist teachings as a whole, one would do well to read another of the more popular texts available that were composed with the sensibilities of the modern reader in mind.
DAVID COSENTINO (October 16, 2001)

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