The Buddha repeatedly stated that his teaching first and foremost dealt with the concept of dukkha (the more painful features of being human) (see the Glossary for a detailed explanation) and the liberation therefrom. All the details of the religion and everything else the Buddha said must be understood in this particular context. Hence, what follows is a story of how one man perceived his existential problem; his journey in search of a solution to it; his discovery of a solution; and how, according to one tradition, the Theravada, he helped others to achieve what he achieved. It is also a story of many men and women, both monastic followers and householders (laypeople), who have trod and continue to tread the path in order to minimize and eradicate their own suffering and that of all other beings.

The teaching of the Buddha has had many qualifying terms associated with it over the centuries. The term theravada (elders’ view) is one such. Theravada is, concurrently, a historical tradition of Buddhism, a way of interpreting and understanding the words of the Buddha, and a way of life and practice adopted and followed both by monks and nuns and by ordinary men and women.

As a historical tradition, Theravada represents how an early and presumably large group of monks (and nuns)—including its leading members, those directly associated with the Buddha—became known to posterity. It is believed that this tradition (at least for monks) continues unbroken up to today. What the tradition understood to be the words of the Buddha and how it interpreted those words comprise another sense of the term theravada. Finally and most important, it represents a spiritual practice nurtured and guided by the monastic tradition that is based on the interpretation of the words of the Buddha and has been adopted and developed by this tradition in the course of its practice. It is this third aspect of Theravada Buddhism that will be the focus of this book. The other two aspects will naturally have to be brought into the discussion, but only to the extent necessary to illuminate Theravada spiritual practices.
Theravada is considered the oldest of the three main traditions of Buddhism currently practiced in the world. Its core has traditionally been in the South and Southeast Asian regions. Of the other two traditions, Mahayana Buddhism has been dominant in East Asia, and Vajrayana Buddhism’s traditional home has been Tibet and its environs, as well as Mongolia. I use the term “traditional home” because these forms of Buddhism have moved far beyond their traditional habitats in present-day globalized society, a development to which I shall refer later.

The traditional classification tends to describe Theravada as a school belonging to the Hinayana. In the actual historical evolution of the Buddhist schools, what the Mahayanists identified as Hinayana are the two schools known as Vaibhashika and Sautrantika, which no longer exist. What they meant by “Hinayana” is not “small vehicle,” as has been commonly misunderstood, but the more pejorative “lowly vehicle.” The reason why the Mahayanists (practitioners of the “great vehicle”), who concentrated on the liberation of all sentient beings, looked down on members of the two schools was because the latter aimed at personal liberation by “being hearers,” meaning following the instructions of the Buddha, which in the eyes of Mahayanists was appropriate only for those with lower capabilities. Theravada, like the two Hinayana schools, made personal liberation the goal of its practice, thereby qualifying it to be called “Hinayana.” Historically, however, the designation was not applied to Theravada because of its independent development in areas, such as Sri Lanka, that received the religion as a result of Emperor Asoka’s mission to propagate Buddhism to the outskirts of the empire in the third century BCE.

The origin of Theravada goes back to the first gathering, or council, of followers that took place three months after the Buddha’s “passing away” (parinibbana; Skt. parinirvana). Once he had passed away, there was an immediate effort to codify his teaching. The need for this methodical organization of the words of the Buddha had something to do with his refusal to name a successor. What this effectively meant was that the disciples who had once been able to go directly to the Buddha for answers and explanations were now left with only his teachings as their ultimate source of guidance. The state of the
lessons the Buddha had taught by the time he passed away was compared to a heap of flowers, all varieties mixed together. This jumble of flowers had to be sorted out and organized into well-defined sections for easy reference and memorization. The first council was convened, accordingly, under the leadership of the Great Elder Maha Kassapa. The five hundred monks selected for the council were all elders (*thera*). To qualify as an elder according to the rules of the Buddhist monastic discipline one needed to have completed at least ten years after full admission to the community. Hence the tradition that sprung from this important event came to be called Theravada, or “The Elders’ View.”

The sources say that in the course of this council the words of the Buddha were classified into three baskets (*pitaka*)—namely, discourses (*sutta*), discipline (*vinaya*), and higher doctrine (*abhidhamma*). There is clear evidence that the third basket was developed in the course of the next several centuries and was not available, at least in a developed form, early on. Parts of the other two baskets were added later as well. However, what may have happened in the first council is that the basic division of the *dhamma-vinaya* into two (or three) baskets was determined. The Dhamma was classified into five collections called *nikaya*, and the *vinaya* was classified into five collections called *pali*. The arrangement of the Abhidhamma into seven treatises seems to have been the work of Theravadins that belongs to a later period.¹ In this manner, the arrangement of the words of the Buddha agreed upon at this historical gathering became the canonical basis for the tradition that subsequently evolved.

Measures were also taken to preserve the words of the Buddha for posterity. Leading disciples and their students were assigned to study and hold in memory different sections of the agreed-upon collections. With time these groups gradually became experts in their assigned collections, and from this we can get an idea of how ways of interpreting and understanding the words of the Buddha evolved over time. “The Elders’ View” also came to represent a distinct way

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¹ Refer to Appendix 2 for details on the works belonging to the three baskets.
of understanding what the Buddha had taught, as developed and preserved in the hands of the leading disciples and the successive traditions of their pupils.

THERAVADA AND EARLY BUDDHISM

Given the fact that Theravada is a way of interpreting and understanding the words of the Buddha, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between The Elders’ View and what is considered “early Buddhism.” Concepts such as “the words of the Buddha” and “what the Buddha [originally] taught” have increasingly become suspect in contemporary critical scholarship. To the middle of the last century, what was known among scholars as “early Buddhism” was the canon preserved by the Theravada tradition in the Pali language. T. W. Rhys Davids, who studied Pali in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) as a young civil servant of the British Empire, established the Pali Text Society in England and started publishing Pali canonical texts as early as the 1880s. Long introductions to these editions and the secondary books written by Rhys Davids and other scholars on the life of the Buddha and his teaching based on the Pali canon provided the first information on Buddhism to many Western readers and scholars. Their limited perspective during this period is understandable, as Chinese, Tibetan, and other versions of Buddhist literature were yet to enter the field of academic study. Today, however, many scholars do not consider the Pali canon as exclusively representing early Buddhism, because Chinese and Tibetan, as well as texts or fragments of texts belonging to lesser-known languages (such as Kharosti), are also included as representing an early phase of Buddhist literature. This means, for some scholars at least, that the concept of “early Buddhism” no longer represents any one clear-cut textual tradition, as had been understood in the West until very recently.

My approach to the issue—and consequently the method I have adopted in this book—will be somewhat different: I will defend the traditional Buddhist view of the Elders with respect to the early historicity of their tradition. While respecting modern historical and philological scholarship on this issue, I will nevertheless accept (1) that the words of the Buddha as organized by the early disciples is still the earliest recorded effort made in that direction; (2) that the
“three baskets” that were committed to writing in Sri Lanka toward the end of the first century BCE are the continuation of this tradition started immediately after the Buddha’s passing away (parinirvana); and (3) that this textual tradition has continued in the traditional Theravada countries without any great discontinuity up to the present. Consequently, I will treat the collection in Pali as the earliest available Buddhist literature.

The language in which this collection has come down to us, Pali, is considered by linguists as belonging to the Middle Indic period, with substantial additions of very archaic forms. Although traditionally the Theravadins believe that Pali is the language spoken by the Buddha, it is possible that it might not have been exactly the dialect the Buddha used. For instance, it is recorded that he rejected the elitist Vedic language for communicating his teaching and instead allowed his followers to use their own dialects for this purpose. This leads us to think that the Buddha might well have used a regional dialect like Pali for his sermons and other teachings. With its antiquity and its many “natural” and “speaker-friendly” characteristics—in contrast to the more elite “constructed” characteristics of Sanskrit according to Theravadins—Pali could be the closest we have to the language the Buddha spoke. This is not to say that the Pali canon is the earliest canon of Buddhism. But it is the earliest extant one.

Theravada and the early Buddhism associated with it are hard to separate, for the former is how the tradition reads and understands the words of the Buddha. Naturally, the Theravadins were of the opinion that they read the texts correctly, in the sense that they understood what the Buddha must have meant. Whether they in fact did so is not at issue here; they certainly thought they had. What is more important is to ascertain whether the tradition has been understood consistently and coherently or not. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the Buddha himself upheld consistency and coherence with what he had already said as the criteria for deciding whether any particular statement was in fact his, in the event one claimed it to be so in his absence. In other words, according to the discourses, when one knows the Dhamma (the doctrine/teaching of the Buddha) truly, in the sense of realizing the goal in full or in stages, one knows that the Buddha is fully enlightened, that the Dhamma leads to the goal,
and that the Sangha has really achieved this goal. If any understanding of the words of the Buddha leads its community of practitioners to this kind of conviction, then that reading has to be taken as consistent and coherent with what the Buddha taught.

If Theravada is defined as the way in which the words of the Buddha have been interpreted and understood by its followers known as Theravadins, the history of the tradition shows that it has been remarkably homogeneous, internal debates on specific issues of interpretation notwithstanding. It is a unique feature of the Theravada tradition that within it there are no individual teachers with their own different teachings. In other words, no second Buddhas have appeared within the tradition: liberated great disciples are revered as elaborators of what the Buddha said but not as innovators of any new Dhamma of their own; “different” teachers offer only differing approximations to the original teaching of the Buddha. Perhaps this could be the reason behind the remarkable homogeneity that has persisted within this tradition.

The tradition of Theravada interpretation is contained in the commentaries that repose at the great ancient Theravada monastery (Maha Vihara) in Sri Lanka. These were later systematized by the famous commentator Buddhaghosa and several others, and subsequently provided with subcommentaries written where Theravada prevailed. Thus, the main source material for this book will be the Pali canon as organized into the three baskets and the commentaries upon them. Having said this, I must also add that the interpretation of Theravada developed here is not a mere repetition of the tradition but a study of how this tradition has been understood and internalized by people in countries where it has been the main source of guidance and inspiration. The book also takes as its subject matter how people, not only in the traditional Theravada countries, but also from various geographical and cultural backgrounds all over the globe, continue to understand, internalize, and practice that tradition.

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE BOOK
The chapters of the book have been arranged in a manner that highlights this emphasis. The first chapter will briefly discuss the histori-
ical origins of Buddhism in India and locate the Buddhist “soteriology” in its proper social and religious context. The life of the Buddha, his search for liberation from suffering, and his realization of freedom from it will be the main focus of this discussion.

The second chapter will discuss what it means to be a follower of the Buddha—monastic or lay (household)—and the act of “taking refuge” in the “Triple Gem” (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha). I will also consider the nature of faith involved in the process and the basic religious practices involved. Chapter 3 will discuss the essence of the teaching of the Buddha including dependent co-origination, the four noble truths, the three trainings, the three characteristics of existence, and mindfulness meditation. Continuing the same theme, karma and its consequences are discussed separately in the fourth chapter.

Chapter 5 contains a brief exposition of the social teachings of the Buddha. The sixth chapter, which includes a brief historical sketch of the traditional Theravada countries, is a prelude to Chapter 7, which focuses on Theravada practices that have traditionally been a major influence on the cultures of these countries. The chapter discusses such specific practices as the varied forms of “merit acquiring,” social welfare activism, and the central role of the Buddhist monk in the whole process.

The concluding chapter will discuss Theravada Buddhism in the globalized world of today. In particular, the discussion will focus on Western Theravada Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism, and the movement of Theravada nuns, ending with a short meditation on the contemporary validity and relevance of Theravada Buddhism.