

# THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHISM

CLASSICAL TRADITIONS  
IN  
CONTEMPORARY  
PERSPECTIVE



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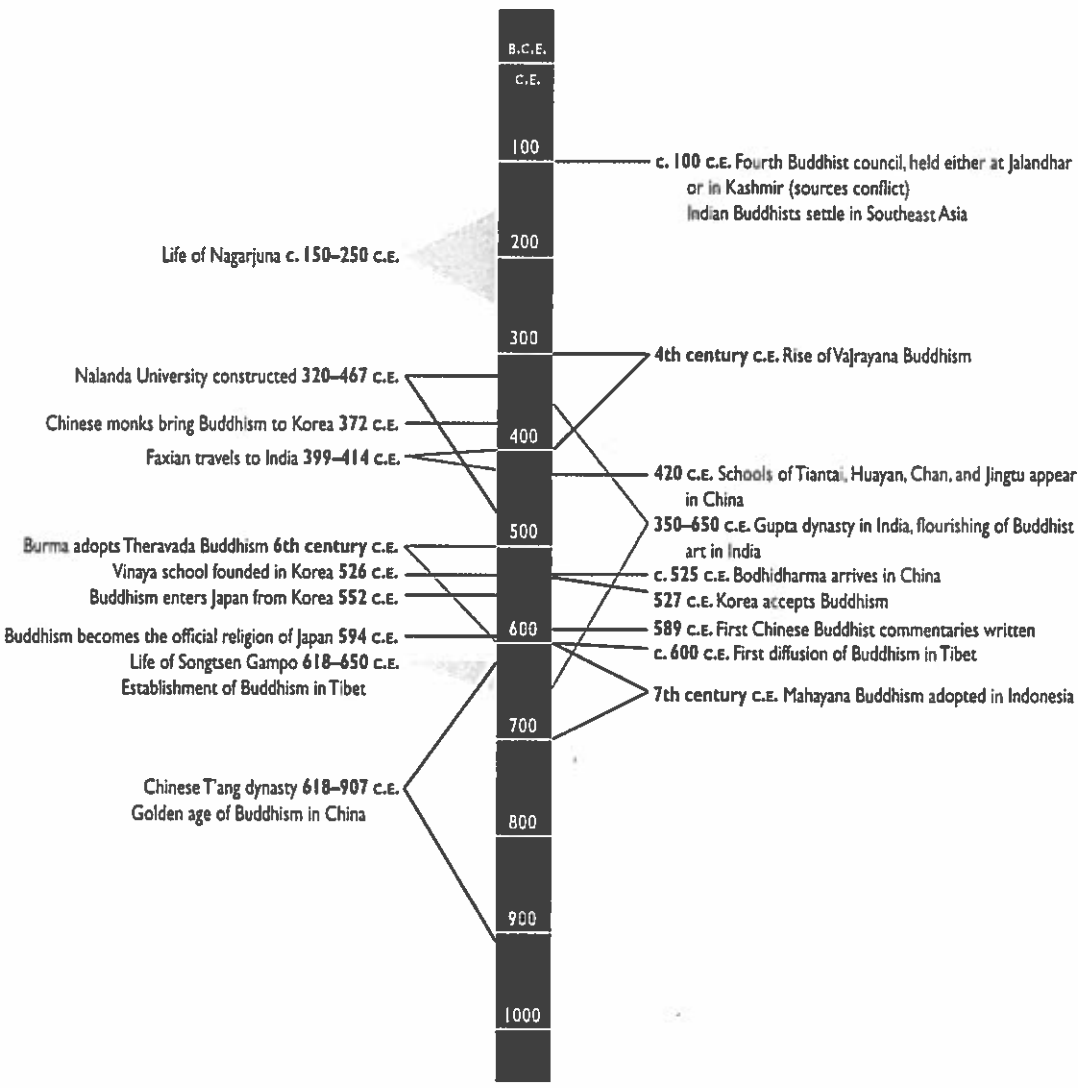
## PREFACE

Buddhism began humbly in a small village in what is now the southern plains of Nepal, when Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a local ruler, a prince destined to be king, made the decision to leave his home and family and his royal future, and set out in search of spiritual enlightenment. This was not, however, a self-ish abandonment of responsibility. Rather, he had seen and felt the sufferings of human beings in the world, and was deeply affected by this fundamental aspect of human existence, to the point that he was compelled to set out on a quest to alleviate this suffering, with no other motive than an intense compassion for his fellow human beings. After several years of intense spiritual striving, he discovered a clear and straightforward path to attain salvation, a means to escape the sufferings of the world, and he made the decision to share his discovery by teaching. The religion that Siddhartha Gautama founded, Buddhism, has in the course of its 2,500-year history spread to nearly every region of the world. To do so, it has had to adapt to a vast array of different cultural, linguistic, and geographical settings.

As it has spread, it has by necessity also changed, expanding to adapt to its myriad settings, incorporating local beliefs and prac-

tices, and shifting to accommodate the often-fluid social and political contexts in which it was situated. The Buddhist tradition embodies an incredible variety of beliefs and practices. There is no central Buddhist organization, no single authoritative text, no simple set of defining practices. Buddhism is, to its core, a pluralistic religion. It has absorbed local traditions, responded to historical events, and philosophically evolved and re-evolved. In many ways, it has been a religious tradition in perpetual flux.

Despite its incredible diversity, though, and its ever-changing character, there are also elements that cut across the many contexts in which Buddhism and Buddhists have flourished—beliefs and practices that, although perhaps slightly different depending on their specific settings, could be recognized and practiced by all Buddhists. For instance, Buddhists throughout the world recite the ancient formula known as the Three Refuges: “I go for refuge in the Buddha, I go for refuge in the *Dharma*, I go for refuge in the *Sangha*.” Furthermore, certain core philosophical tenets and beliefs that are said to have been articulated by the Buddha himself over 2,500 years ago still serve as the spiritual and ethical





## Chapter I

# HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Context out of which  
Buddhism Emerged

### The Brahmanical World

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, was by birth what we would now call a “Hindu,” and although Siddhartha was highly critical of the religion into which he was born, and although the movement that he founded broke with this dominant religious tradition in significant ways, Buddhism did not emerge from a religious vacuum. Indeed, it is important to recognize that Buddhism was at the start very much a reform movement from within Hinduism. It is thus essential to understand something of the social and religious world of sixth-century-B.C.E. India in order to understand the Buddha’s own religious worldview and why Buddhism

took the particular shape that it did. In order to understand the Buddha’s teachings, we must, in a sense, acquaint ourselves with the basic religious and philosophical vocabulary of the time.

The dominant religious system in the northern Indian world into which the Buddha was born is often called Brahmanism—the word “Hinduism” is a foreign label describing the diverse religious culture of India, first used by Arab traders in the eighteenth century—a religion based on a body of texts called the *Vedas* that had developed orally beginning around 1500 B.C.E.; this religious tradition is thus sometimes also called the Vedic tradition. The Vedic religious world was one inhabited by numerous gods, or *devas*—a word related to



the English word “divinity”—many of whom were personified forces of nature. Humans, although very much at the mercy and whim of these powerful beings, could nonetheless interact with and influence the *devas* by praising them and offering them sacrifices. In return, humans received boons from the gods—abundant crops, healthy sons, protection, and long lives.

A new genre of religious discourse began to emerge out of the Vedic religious world sometime between the seventh and the fifth centuries B.C.E., a body of doctrines known as the *Upanishads*. Although they would eventually become part of Hinduism, these texts—orally transmitted, like the *Vedas*—questioned the efficacy of the formal sacrifice and introduced new, essential religious ideas, many of which would eventually be adopted by the Buddha: the cyclical idea of rebirth (*samsara*), the ethical law of cause and effect (*karma*), the concept of liberation (*moksha*) from the world of *samsara* through the path of asceticism, and the importance of calming the mind through meditation (*yoga*).

As the ideas of the *Upanishads* began to spread in India, some individuals, mostly men of the educated class, took them to heart, and set out to experience the liberation that these ideas described. To do so, they renounced their ties to the material world—in order to be able to focus on their spiritual pursuits—and undertook spreading these new ideas even further, and debating philosophical and meditational points. These various religious seekers were called *shramanas*—literally, “wanderers”—and the earliest Buddhists saw

themselves as a subset of this general group of itinerant religious seekers. Also among these groups was Mahavira, the founder of another new religious tradition, Jainism.

At about the same time, important social changes were also in process along the Gangetic plains in northern India. Kingdoms began to emerge out of the traditional kinship structures that had governed social and political life for centuries, and with these kingdoms emerged cities and highly structured systems of government. Furthermore, trade routes began to develop between these cities, and with trade came both economic growth and the emergence of a merchant class. This latter group is particularly important in the emergence of Buddhism, for although they had economic status, the merchants and traders did not have religious status; the Buddha would offer them a new religious path that would allow them to develop that status in part through their material support of him and his followers.

### The Vedic Worldview and the Centrality of Sacrifice

The Sanskrit word *Veda* literally means “knowledge,” specifically, the specialized, divinely inspired knowledge contained within the verses of these massive texts. It is a knowledge that unlocks the power of the ritual, a knowledge that is, furthermore, the special province of the Vedic priests, known as brahmins.

There are several important aspects of the *Vedas* that should be noted at the outset

here. First, these were said to be revealed texts, called *shruti*—which means “heard”—by the Hindu tradition. They were said to have not been composed, but rather orally revealed to humans by the gods. The *Vedas* were thus authorless, not written but “heard” and remembered and passed down by the brahmins to other brahmins. As such, they were considered absolute authority, infallible truth. Furthermore, they were, and continue to be, considered by the Hindu tradition to be eternal, having always existed and forever existing, and thus were held not only to be perfect, but also to be, essentially, religious and social imperatives, rules to be followed absolutely. The *Vedas*, then, and the brahmins who protected and perpetuated them—and who were the only people who could speak and hear the Vedic verses and perform the Vedic rituals—were the hallmark of Indian religious orthodoxy, and it was precisely this exclusive and restricted sense of religious practice that would be challenged by the Buddha.

Perhaps because the *Vedas* were exclusively oral texts, sound (or *vac*) was considered to be the primary creative force in the world, a god (or sometimes goddess) in its own right—it is sound that unleashes the power of the sacrifice and also that which reproduces the structure of the world. Hence the *Vedas* contain verbal formulas called *mantras*, which, when recited, were thought to bring about creation. These formulas were in a language called “Sanskrit” (literally, “well formed”), which was the special language of the sacrifice and which embodied the properly constructed cosmos. These verbal formulas were memorized and passed down

from one person to another, and only special persons—brahmin priests—could learn, speak, and hear them.

The texts that make up the *Vedas* are a mixture of hymns of praise, myths, and ritual formulas. The ritual texts, particularly the group of liturgical texts called *Brahmanas*, present highly elaborate, often intricately detailed directions for how to properly perform sacrifices to the various gods, how many bricks to use in the altars, what offerings to make and when and by whom, and so on. Other Vedic texts, however, are directed to the many gods who control the cosmos. This, then, is a world in which the different gods are active forces in human life and, furthermore, in which the actions of these gods can be influenced by proper—or improper, as the case may be—ritual performance. The basic goal of the Vedic rituals was to maintain order—cosmic order among the realm of the *devas*, and, in a parallel sense, human order. The concept of order is indeed at the very core of the entire Hindu tradition.

The religious path expressed by the *Vedas* is one of “action,” the literal meaning of the word *karma*, and it is most fundamentally a path concerned with ritual. As such, this is a religious worldview concerned not primarily with salvation, with what comes after this life, but with this world—happiness, health, and wealth. Religion, in fact, was understood in early India to be a kind of work, which when properly performed produced worldly benefits. Thus, there is in the *Vedas* an emphasis on sacrificial action, or work, and on the correct performance of that action.

The hymns of the *Vedas* were chiefly composed for chanting at sacrifices, where animals, grains, milk, and clarified butter (*ghee*) were offered to the gods. On the most basic level, sacrifice was conceived of as a meal offered to the *devas* by the humans. The medium of these offerings was fire, or *agni*—both in an earthly sense (the word “agni” is related to the English word “ignite”) and in a divine sense (Agni was considered the god of fire). Fire was essential to the Vedic religious world because it had tremendous power: It (a) transforms the physical, material goods offered into “food” for the gods; (b) purifies the offerings made to the gods; (c) represents both creative and destructive energy; and (d) is the very basis of human domestic life (without heat and cooking, there can be no life). Thus Agni was one of the most prominent gods in all of the *Vedas*, the messenger between the human and the divine realm, the transporter of the dead, and, in some verses, the embodiment of all gods. As one Vedic verse puts it, “That which is Brahman (the whole universe, the prime mover), the priests speak of in various forms; they call it Agni” (*Rig Veda* 1.164). Furthermore, Agni was sometimes conceived of as heat, or *tapas*, which was also the purifying ascetic energy necessary for the proper performance of the ritual; the priests would prepare themselves for the ritual by generating *tapas*—created through various purification rituals and intense meditation—that burned off their spiritual impurities. As will be examined later, the Buddha took this basic idea, the purifying quality of heat, and directed it inward, rejecting the external understanding

of sacrifice and making the purification process an entirely internal one.

The sacrificial world of the *Vedas* was extremely complex, involving elaborate preparations to ensure the purity of the ritual priests, the sacred space, and the sacrificial offerings. The construction of the sacrificial fire altar, likewise, involved days of careful and exacting preparations. In fact, large portions of the *Vedas* consist of highly technical instructions as to how to perform these complex rituals. Finally, the sacrifices themselves would often go on for many days, involving dozens of priests and multiple offerings to multiple gods.

In the early Vedic period, probably beginning sometime around 1500 B.C.E., the gods were considered to be the creators and preservers of the cosmos, and these *devas* were the dominant focus of the religion. Gradually, as the Vedic worldview developed over several hundred years, the religious emphasis shifted, and the centrality of the sacrifice and the sacrificial priests was emphasized more and more. Thus, in later texts such as the *Atharva Veda*, the sacrifice itself was understood to be the re-creation, on a human level, of the cosmos. Indeed, in Vedic mythology, sacrifice is what creates the world. Thus, the priests who held the special and secret knowledge of the sacrifice were seen as having the fundamental knowledge of the universe, and thus the ability to control it. They were the focus of the religious world and the sole religious actors on the religious stage. It was they and they alone who knew the sacred texts and performed the sacred rituals. Significantly, it was precisely

this restricted, essentially elitist religious world—in which religious power and status was confined to a small group who inherited their positions—that the Buddha rejected and reformulated.

In addition to the ritual specialists who made up the brahmin caste, there was a subgroup of brahmins called *rishis*, or seers. On the most basic level, these were religious specialists who, through what we might call “mystical vision,” were able to see into the true nature of things, into the divine realm, and thus communicate with the gods. They gained this visionary insight in part through ingesting a substance called *soma*, which gave them a purified vision. What was *soma*? The answer to this question is not known, although scholars do know that it was some sort of a hallucinogenic plant—it has been conjectured that it was perhaps the fly agaric mushroom. At any rate, *soma* was ritually prepared—there are long portions of the *Vedas* devoted to the preparation and praise of *soma*—and then ingested by the special priests as part of the larger sacrificial rituals. *Soma* is also portrayed and praised in the *Vedas* as a god, much like the Greek god Hermes—an intermediary between the world of the humans and the world of the gods.

### The Vedic Gods

In many respects, the early Vedic gods are personifications of natural forces—wind, fire, rain, or sun. The gods are responsible for creation, which they effect through something

called *maya*, described as the art of the gods, a projection of the gods’ imaginations. The idea is that the gods give form to the powers that are already present in the cosmos, eternally, as part of the natural order of things; they do not, in this sense, create the powers, but rather make them manifest in the world. Hence, the gods are often described as craftsmen, “measurers,” using their “rulers” to form the world. Thus, a prominent early Vedic god is called Vishvakarman (“maker of everything”), and he is described as the divine architect or carpenter who fashions the world out of nothing.

Prajapati (“father of life”) is another Vedic creator god, described as at once the universe, time, sacrifice, and sacrificer. This is at times quite confusing: Prajapati emits all living beings via the sacrifice, and then he has to be put back together by the sacrifice because he himself has been sacrificed in creating the world; indeed, when the Vedic priests build the fire altar, with its 720 bricks, they are building Prajapati, who is the year (360 for the days, 360 for the nights). In this ritual, the priests are said to “reassemble” him, and the word to describe this process, not incidentally, is “sanskrit”—properly constructed, well fit. Here we can see the early articulation of a significant idea, a metaphoric rebuilding or reforming of the individual’s self that gets developed in later Indian religion. The sacrifice thus not only makes the cosmos come into being, but it also, on a human level, makes the person “complete.”

Another prominent Vedic god is Indra, to whom about one quarter of the verses of the

*Rig Veda* are devoted. He is described as the tireless consumer of *soma*, and as the archetype of generative forces. Furthermore, it is he who creates hurricanes, who pours down rain, and who commands all forms of wetness. He is thus associated with life and, at times, destruction. Most significantly, though, he is the benevolent leader of the Aryans—the nomadic tribes who settled in northern India and who are thought to have been the human authors of the *Vedas*—their great warrior and protector. Some of his epithets in the Vedic texts are the “destroyer of enemies and cities,” “bestower of prosperity” on humanity, and the “lord of heaven.” In significant ways, the image of Indra as model king will be adopted and reformulated by the Buddhists, who will conceive of the model king not as a god but, ultimately, as the Buddha himself.

A discussion of the Vedic gods could go on for many pages, but what is important to note, in the context of the rise of Buddhism, is that the world was conceived of in these hymns and myths as being formed and ruled by powerful gods, who often, through their whimsy or divine play, reeked havoc on the human realm. Humans could certainly—via hymns of praise and sacrifice—influence the gods, but ultimately they were, in this worldview, at the mercy of these often-capricious deities. The Buddha would reject this cosmological worldview outright, particularly this reliance on the whim of the gods, and instead would forcefully posit that humans and humans alone are responsible for their birth, their death, and, ultimately, their salvation.

### The Dynamics of Caste

In this examination of the religious and social context out of which the Buddha and Buddhism emerged, it is important to finally consider one of the most significant aspects of Brahmanical and Vedic religious and social life against which the Buddha reacted—what is most typically called “the caste system.” The Vedic religious world was hierarchical: the *devas* were at the top of this hierarchy (within the realm of the *devas* there were hierarchical divisions as well), and below them was the human realm, formally defined by the division of society into four classes, or *varnas*, membership in which was determined solely by birth. Although the caste system took many hundreds of years to develop, and was, at least initially, not so much a system—and certainly not the oppressive system that it has often been seen to be—as a means of understanding and prescribing social and religious roles, caste eventually developed into one of the defining aspects of the Hindu religious tradition.

At the top of this hierarchical social structure were the sacrificial priests, the brahmins. It was their role and duty to perform the religious rituals and to preserve and recite the *Vedas*—to memorize the thousands of verses in the texts, to chant them at the sacrificial rituals, and to pass these texts on to successive generations of brahmins orally. In so doing, the brahmins maintained the order, or *dharma*, of the divine world, assuring that the gods were appeased through sacrifice and ritual praise. Directly below the brahmins in

the hierarchy were the kshatriyas, the warriors and sociopolitical rulers. Just as it was the duty of the brahmins to maintain the order of the divine world, so was it the *dharma* of the kshatriyas to preserve order in the human realm. Below the kshatriyas were the vaishyas, the cultivators and keepers of domestic animals. It was their *dharma*, accordingly, to provide food and material goods. Below them were the shudras, the laborers and servants, whose *dharma* it was to ensure the cleanliness of the other three classes of humans.

Accordingly, this was a system not only of mutual dependence, but also of restriction. There was no upward mobility in this system. One Vedic text (the *Purusha Shukta* of the *Rig Veda*) that describes the creation of the universe envisions this social system as a human being who is sacrificed to create the world: the brahmins are the mouth of the human (because of their oral preservation and performance of the sacred verses of the *Vedas*); the kshatriyas are the arms (because they are the “strong arms” of the social world); the vaishyas are the thighs (the support of the body); and, significantly, the shudras are the feet (the lowest, but also in many ways the most fundamental). Thus, social and cosmic order, *dharma*, can only be maintained if each part of the body is present and “healthy.” Certainly, the feet are lower than the head, but without the feet the body cannot stand.

Although it seems that the Vedic understanding of caste bears little resemblance to the restrictive and oppressive system that later came to dominate Indian social and religious life—it was originally envisioned as a symbi-

otic division of labor and life—the Buddha himself was highly critical of this division of society. He saw the *jati*, or birth, model of dividing society, which was the basis of the caste system, as fundamentally oppressive, and rejected it outright. Rather, the Buddha posited that one’s own effort in each life determined one’s previous and future rebirths, and he also insisted that even the lowest members of the social structure could attain salvation by cultivating selfless compassion and by striving for self-awareness. Salvation, therefore, was not from a Buddhist perspective the special privilege of the brahmins, but was open to everyone.

### Time, Death, and Speculation in the Later *Vedas*

When the Buddha set out to find the path to enlightenment, he did so in order to conquer suffering and, ultimately, death, because he saw that it was continued rebirth—and thus also redeath—through time that was the very basis of suffering. But what was the prevailing understanding of these complex ideas at the time of the Buddha’s birth?

Time was considered in the early Vedic period to be eternal; the gods and the cosmos had always existed in one form or another, and would always continue to exist. The issue of what happens to humans at death was not a prominent topic. Rather, as we have seen, it was life that was emphasized, and the sacrifice was intended to provide for matters in this world by appeasing the gods. By the late Vedic

period, however, a certain note of anxiety can be detected in the Vedic discourse. The tone of the Vedic texts seems to shift, moving from the confident and remarkably unspeculative discussion of sacrifice to a troubling note of existential doubt. Questions begin to be raised about the nature of creation, about the relationship between the gods and the individual, and the very nature of death. In the tenth book of the *Rig Veda*, for instance, we find the question raised as to what there was in the beginning, before the world was created. Was there something, or was there nothing? What came before there was something? Does anyone know? Who created the creator? These are weighty questions, to be sure, questions that, in one form or another, are fundamental to virtually all religious traditions. Significantly, though, these questions remain unanswered in the *Vedas*, as if their human authors recognized the ultimate mysteries of the cosmos, and as if these authors wished, in the end, to invite further philosophical and existential speculation.

More specifically, the sages in the *Vedas* began to wonder whether or not there was some sort of afterlife. A kind of hell-like realm of prolonged suffering after death for those who lived poorly, who did not properly perform their religious and social duties, is sometimes discussed in the earlier texts, a realm that is overseen by the god Yama ("death"), although the nature of these hells, and how one ends up there, is generally laid out in rather vague terms. Essentially, death in the earlier *Vedas* seems to have been viewed as an inevitable end. The later texts, however, introduce

the concept of a "realm of the Fathers"—somewhat mysterious figures who are, like the gods, to be praised and worshipped—where one goes after earthly death. In other words, the seeds of the concept of rebirth were sown in the later Vedic period, and by the time the *Upanishads* were introduced (about which more will be said in the following section) the fate of the individual after earthly death became a primary concern of Indian religious thought.

This marks a profound moment in the development of Indian religion, recorded in the later Vedic texts—particularly evident in the *Brahmanas*, a genre of commentarial literature that provides a kind of running interpretation of the *Vedas*. It is this development that would eventually lead to the emergence of Buddhism: a shift in focus is evident, away from the quid pro quo world of the sacrifice, in which offerings are made to the gods in order to get earthly results, and toward a new search for the nature of the self, the nature of life—indeed, a search for the very nature of existence.

### The Challenge of the *Upanishads*

This shift in focus is recorded in the *Upanishads*, a group of orally transmitted texts that began to be composed in the last part of the Vedic period, from about the eighth through the sixth centuries B.C.E. The tone of these texts is very different from that of the majority of the *Vedas*. It is existentially speculative and profoundly philosophical. It

is in the *Upanishads* that what became the central tenets of Indian religious thought—ideas that formed the basis of Buddhist thought as well—are most clearly articulated: the concept of *samsara*, or the continuous cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth; the idea of *atman*, a permanent self that transmigrates through *samsara* (the Buddha, however, will reject this idea of a permanent self); the doctrine of *karma*, moral and ethical causality; and the possibility of *moksha* (in Buddhist terms, *nirvana*) or release from this world of rebirth.

In the *Upanishads* we no longer see a model, as articulated in the *Vedas*, of a cosmos populated by a multiplicity of gods who must be influenced via the sacrifice, but rather the *Upanishads* focus on the abstract divine principle underlying all of existence, which is called *Brahman* (not to be confused with the caste *brahmin*). And what is this power? “It is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the ununderstood understander. Other than It, there is no seer. Other than It, there is no hearer. Other than It, there is no thinker. Other than It, there is no understander. It is your *atman*, the inner controller, the immortal” (*Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 3.7.23).

The *Upanishads* are fundamentally ascetic in their orientation, advocating a religious life outside of society, a renunciation of worldly attachments. The sages who wrote them, who recorded the dialogues about the nature of the self, existence, Brahman, death, and release, rejected the Vedic involvement in things of this world. These texts locate the basic existential problem as the generation of *karma*, a word

that literally means “action,” but comes in the *Upanishads*—and in Buddhism as well—to refer to any intentional action that creates consequences or is performed with the anticipation of results, including, therefore, sacrificial action (which is, after all, fundamentally intended to create, to bear fruit). In order to break free from the binds of *samsara*—and it is essential to recognize that the Upanishadic sages saw rebirth as a negative phenomenon—one must find a way to stop generating *karma*, the actions that lead to rebirth, in the first place.

On its face, this may seem to be a relatively simple matter: if it is actions that create *karma*, then the solution to the existential state of human beings, to being stuck in the world of rebirth, must be the elimination of all actions. However, the Upanishadic sages recognized that it is extremely difficult to stop all actions. First, one must separate from the world of action—from sacrifice, from domestic life, from the ties of family. The *Upanishads* are thus sometimes called Forest Books, in that they advocate a simple life, removed from the hustle and bustle of the world, a life away, in the forest. Second, the *Upanishads* advocate a life of focused meditation (*yoga*) and philosophical introspection. *Yoga*, a word that literally derives from a Sanskrit verb meaning “to yoke”—as in to yoke an ox to a plow—is understood as means to the end here. It is a mental and physical technique of concentrating on a single reality, that of Brahman, which is sometimes described in the *Upanishads* as The One, and of cultivating the realization that one’s own self, one’s *atman*, is no different



than the divine whole of Brahman. According to the *Upanishads*, Brahman is not only the energizing force of the cosmos, but it is also the very self of the human being.

Thus, the *Upanishads* advocate a path of self-knowledge, a knowledge that results in the removal of a fundamental ignorance that creates the illusion that there is a difference between the individual *atman* and the absolute Brahman. This ignorance—which is sometimes called *maya*, or illusion—leads to grasping, to the generation of *karma*, and it is this *karma* that causes rebirth. Thus, release from the bonds of *samsara*, called *moksha*, is achieved through the elimination of ignorance about the nature of the self. One particularly illustrative dialogue, recorded in the *Katha Upanishad*, takes place between the god of death, Yama, and a brahman named Naciketas. Naciketas had won a boon from the gods, the ability to ask Yama any question he likes, so he asks the god about what happens after death: “When a man is dead, there is this doubt: Some say, ‘He exists,’ and some say, ‘He does not exist.’ I want you to instruct me in this matter.” Yama, though, begs him to ask something else, saying, “Even the gods had doubt as this.” But finally, after Naciketas repeatedly asks the same question, Yama instructs him, telling him that the only way to escape death, the only way to end the cycle of rebirth and attain salvation, is to “study what pertains to the self,” and in the process “leave both joy and sorrow behind” (*Katha Upanishad* 1.20).

To summarize, then, the transition from the Vedic to the Upanishadic worldview is marked

by a transformation of the concept of sacrifice, in which the external, formal sacrifice of the Vedic world is internalized. The outward action of the sacrifice, *karma*, is rethought and given an ethical and moral emphasis. Proper sacrifice is not in the *Upanishads* understood to be the offering up of material, into the fire of Agni, to be transported to the gods; rather, true sacrifice is the generation of an internal heat, or *tapas*, that burns off one’s desire and allows for the elimination of ignorance and, ultimately, *karma*. Furthermore, the prime religious actors of the *Upanishads* are no longer the ritual priests with their specialized knowledge of the construction of the sacrificial altar and the ritual formulas to be chanted during the sacrifice. Now the religious actors are ascetics, renouncers who cultivate the knowledge of the self and, ultimately, of Brahman.

### Conclusion

The period during which the *Upanishads* were being formulated and eventually recorded, roughly from about 800 to 600 B.C.E., was a period of tremendous religious fermentation. Indeed, the sixth century B.C.E. in India was one in which change was happening at an extraordinarily fast rate, historically. In response to the ideas that eventually were recorded in the *Upanishads*, a diffuse group of religious seekers calling themselves *shramanas* began to reject the structured Vedic social and ritual world, and instead seek insight outside of society. The *shramanas*, then, like their

Upanishadic counterparts—who, remember, were themselves brahmins—sought out the quiet of the forest and the jungle, where they could debate philosophical and religious matters among themselves, and where they could gain knowledge of their own nature, and, ultimately, of Brahman. Once they gained this understanding, they would be released from the world of *samsara* and believed they would attain eternal oneness with Brahman or some other form of salvation.

The techniques and ideas of the *shramana* movements varied considerably. Some advocated a harsh, extreme form of asceticism, denying themselves any pleasure at all, sometimes to the point of rejecting all nourishment; others advocated an extreme course of meditation, in which the renouncer would, essentially, meditate at all times; and still others took the opposite extreme, and advocated a form of renunciation that looked very much like hedonism. They engaged in whatever they pleased, free of any rules or constraints. Most of these movements we know very little about, since they are only mentioned in Buddhist and Hindu sources, and only mentioned as misguided. Two, however, stand out—the Ajivakas and the Jains.

For the most part, we know of the Ajivakas only through Buddhist and Jain sources, in which they are portrayed as the archenemies of true religious seekers, misguided and extreme. It is clear that they must have been very serious ascetics, practicing a much harsher ascetic course than either the Hindu renouncers or the Buddhists. To enter the Ajivaka order, for instance, one had to have all one's hair pulled

out, and then grasp a molten piece of metal. Their basic doctrinal stance was that there is no human causality, really no *karma*, in the sense that it is generally known. Instead, they proposed that there was an impersonal force called *niyati*, or fate; everything in an individual's life was predestined (not by any god, just by the impersonal force of the cosmos). Humans must go through 8,400,000 *kalpas*—a *kalpa* consists of 4,320,000,000 years—being born and reborn over and over again, at the end of which we become ascetics in the final birth: According to one Buddhist text, the Ajivakas held that “*Samsara* is measured as with a bushel, with its joy and sorrow and its appointed end. It can be neither lessened nor increased, nor is there any excess or deficiency of it. Just as a ball of thread will, when thrown, unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike take their course, and make an end of sorrow” (*Digha Nikaya* 1.47). This was, to be sure, not a terribly attractive worldview. We are, according to the Ajivakas, simply marching through one miserable life after another until we finally cease to exist.” Not much is precisely known about the Ajivakas, and scholars do not know why the Ajivaka movement did not catch on and survive, but one thing is clear: there was no place for the laity, making it very hard for them to gain either followers or patrons (needed to provide shelter and food, especially), and without either of these, it seems that this was a self-defeating religious tradition.

In contrast to the Ajivakas, the Jains did survive and, to a degree, continue to this day to flourish in India. Jainism was founded by

## ❖ THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHISM

Vardhamana Mahavira ("the great hero"), sometimes called a Jina ("victor"), or Tirthankara (a "ford maker," who makes a crossing point out of this world), who lived at almost exactly the same time as the Buddha. Not surprisingly, Buddhists and Jains share many religious ideas, although the two traditions also differ on many key points. Some of the basic Jain tenets include the idea that all things, including inanimate objects, contain a living force, or *jiva*, and each carries a certain karmic load. Higher forms, which have less karmic burden, also have volition, and animals and humans can affect their own *karma*. Austerity burns off *karma*. When the individual finally burns off all *karma*, he or she ascends to the realm of pure light for eternity (and the *jiva*, once there, remains individual,

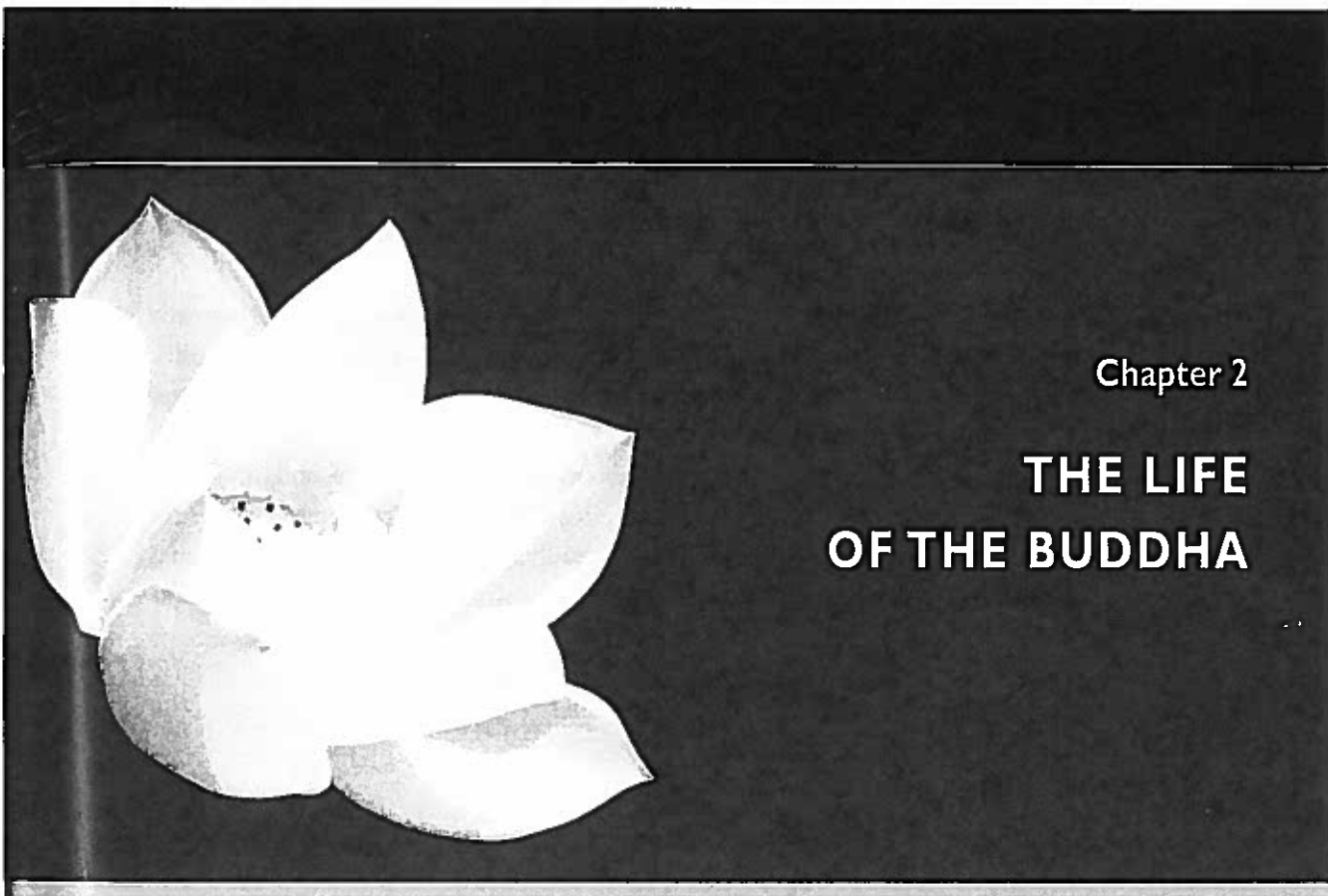
unlike in the Upanishadic view). Violence to other beings creates the most negative *karma*. Hence there is a real emphasis on *ahimsa*, or nonharm. Thus, Jains in India tend to be merchants, because it is one of the few trades that does not directly involve injuring other beings.

What is most important for the present context is to recognize that the Buddha and Buddhism arose out of this atmosphere of great religious flux, a sustained period of questioning the old religious and ritual values and practices. The Buddha certainly adopted the basic Indian religious vocabulary of his day, but he also crafted it into his own particular message, changing some basic ideas and rejecting others.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

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- 1 What was the Vedic understanding of sacrifice?
- 2 Describe the basic characteristics of the Vedic gods.
- 3 Why did the Upanishads critique the Vedic world?



## Chapter 2

# THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

**T**he Buddha's life story is really the very heart of Buddhism. Indeed, the story of the Buddha *is* the story of Buddhism. It is the orienting narrative for all Buddhists. In the language of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the Buddha is both a "model of" and a "model for" all Buddhists. He is not a god, but a human; he is the model of the perfect human, the perfect Buddhist. But his life does not, significantly, stand as some lofty, unattainable ideal. As such, then, his life is a model for all Buddhists, in that it is to be emulated, and, perhaps most importantly, Buddhism holds that anyone, from any position in society, can attain Buddhahood by emulating his exemplary model. Indeed, what his life story reveals is that the Buddha did not invent a

new religious ideal so much as he discovered it, and he did so through his own practice. Put another way, then, he did not attain the state of spiritual enlightenment as a gift from some divine being, but rather through his own efforts, and Buddhism holds fundamentally that these efforts can, and should, be repeated by anyone who cares to reach enlightenment.

The biography of the Buddha is very complex, and at times seems contradictory, a mixture of straightforward narrative, first-person teachings, and what often seem to be flights of mythological fancy. This complexity reflects the variety of sources for his biography: doctrinal texts, dialogues recorded after his death by his followers, mythic deeds, and simple parables. Whether these various accounts of

his life are fact or fiction is not really a concern for us here; rather, what is most important is to consider these sources as revealing essential points in the ongoing development of the Buddhist tradition.

### A Most Unusual Birth

Although Buddhism holds that the man typically referred to as “the Buddha” is one in a long

lineage of enlightened beings—he is typically understood to be the twenty-fourth Buddha, the next to last, preceded by Dipankara and followed by Maitreya, whose birth will signify the end of the cosmos and the enlightenment of all beings—the overwhelming focus of early Buddhism is on the person sometimes called “the historical Buddha,” that Buddha born into this particular world system.

## BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY



The workings of *karma* dictate that every intentional action and thought has cumulative consequences, not only in our present life, but also in our future rebirths. Buddhist texts describe in great detail thirty-one realms or planes (typically listed in descending order and divided into three “worlds”) into which beings can be reborn while still trapped in *samsara*. Each of these realms is necessarily impermanent. Thus, although those at the “top” of the cosmos are often described as utterly blissful, and rebirth there can last for aeons, eventually, all beings born there will be reborn elsewhere; likewise, beings born in the lower worlds—which include hellish births of extreme suffering, as the result of particularly negative *karma*—are eventually reborn elsewhere. Release from these realms is, as the Buddha taught, possible, but only after one has mastered the *dharma* and attained a state in which *karma* is no longer generated (this is enlightenment, or *bodhi*); for such beings, there is no further birth after death. This state

of enlightenment can only be attained from the human realm. In other words, even if one is born as a god in one of the higher planes of existence, one must “fall” from that realm and be reborn into the human plane of existence in order to attain ultimate salvation, *nirvana*.

### THE IMMATERIAL WORLD (ARUPA-LOKA)

The inhabitants of the four realms that constitute this world are made up entirely of pure mind. Although they are in the highest of the realms, relatively conceived, because they have no physical bodies, they cannot hear the Buddha’s teachings and must eventually be reborn in the lower human realm in order to obtain enlightenment.

- 31. Neither Perception nor Nonperception
- 30. Nothingness
- 29. Infinite Consciousness
- 28. Infinite Space

**THE FINE MATERIAL WORLD (RUPA-LOKA)**

The first five realms in this world are called the Pure Abodes (*suddhavasa*); they are accessible only to those who have attained a very high degree of religious progress: nonreturners and arhats. Further down in this realm are reborn beings of lesser, although still significant, spiritual attainment. All these realms are characterized as blissful states of meditation and joy.

27. Peerless *Devas*
26. Clear-sighted *Devas*
25. Beautiful *Devas*
24. Untroubled *Devas*
23. *Devas* not Falling
22. Unconscious Beings
21. Very Fruitful *Devas*
20. *Devas* of Refulgent Glory
19. *Devas* of Unbounded Glory
18. *Devas* of Limited Glory
17. *Devas* of Streaming Radiance
16. *Devas* of Unbounded Radiance
15. *Devas* of Limited Radiance
14. Great Brahmas
13. Ministers of Brahma
12. Retinue of Brahma

**THE SENSUOUS WORLD (KAMA-LOKA)**

The last seven realms in this world are called Pleasant, and include the realm of the lesser gods (including Mara, the god of delusion and death), as well as the realm of human beings. In the realm of Contented *Devas*, the “Tushita” realm, *bodhisattvas* are reborn before their final human birth, after which they attain *nirvana*. Significantly, *nirvana* can only be attained from the human realm, because it is only in this realm that the realities of *samsara*

and suffering can be fully understood and transcended.

11. *Devas* Wielding Power over the Creation of Others
10. *Devas* Delighting in Creation
9. Contented *Devas*
8. Yama *Devas*
7. The Thirty-three Gods
6. *Devas* of the Four Great Kings
5. Human Beings
4. Asuras
3. Hungry Ghosts
2. Animals
1. Hell

The Buddhist tradition holds that the man who would eventually become known as the Buddha was born near what is now the border between Nepal and India, in a small village called Lumbini. Although there has been considerable debate as to the exact dates of his birth and death, the Buddha seems to have lived in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. Importantly, though, the Buddha’s life story does not really begin there, but with the stories of his many prior births, stories that emphasize the development of the particular moral and ethical qualities that the fully enlightened Buddha would eventually perfectly embody. In some of these stories the Buddha-to-be is an animal; in others he is a god; and in still others he is a human. These prior lives are recorded in what are known as the *Jatakas*, a canonical collection of 547 stories that vary considerably in both length and detail.

In one of the most well known of these stories, the “Vessantara Jataka,” the Buddha-to-be

is in his penultimate birth, a *bodhisattva* (in this context, simply a being destined for enlightenment) named Vessantara, a prince who gives away his entire kingdom out of selfless generosity (in later Buddhist literature, Vessantara is celebrated as the embodiment of perfect

giving). When Vessantara dies, he is then reborn as a divine being in the Tushita heaven, where he waits for the time to be right until he is eventually reborn, this time as Siddhartha, a prince who becomes the Buddha.

### The Birth of the Buddha

The Buddha was born into a kshatriya family, and thus he was a member of the caste of warriors and kings and, importantly, not a member of the brahmin caste, the group of religious specialists in the Hindu tradition. His family were members of a clan called the Shakyas, and he was given the

name Siddhartha ("he whose goal will be accomplished") Gautama, although he is also referred to later as "Shakyamuni" (the "sage of the Shakyas"). This multiplicity of names can at times be confusing, since he is alternately called simply "the Buddha," "Shakyamuni," "Siddhartha," and "Gautama." Although he was not born into a brahmin family, it was from the start clear that Siddhartha would be



**FIGURE 2.1** *The Dream of Maya. This is a dream in which the Buddha-to-be is placed in her womb.*

an extraordinary human being, a man destined for greatness.

First, the Buddha's conception was immaculate, a detail that is not dwelled upon in later Buddhist texts, but which, at the very least, marks the young Siddhartha as a particularly special person, one who is also not tainted by the impurity associated with sexual activity in Indian thought. According to the early Buddhist tradition, the Buddha's mother, Mahamaya, dreamed that a white elephant—a standard symbol in Indian literature for royal power—implanted a fetus in her womb. She then discovered that she was, in fact, pregnant. Upon learning of his wife's unusual impregnation, Siddhartha's father, the king of a small state, summoned his royal sages to interpret the significance of his wife's puzzling dream. They predicted that the child would be a boy, and that he would be destined for greatness—either he would inherit his father's kingdom and become a great ruler (called a *Cakkavattin* in Pali, *Cakravartin* in Sanskrit) or he would leave his home and family and become a great religious leader (a *buddha*, or “an enlightened one”).

This aura of majesty and mysterious destiny is further emphasized in the basic outline of the story, recorded in several early Buddhist texts, of the Buddha's actual birth. In the final stages of her pregnancy, Mahamaya traveled to visit her family, and en route went into labor, giving birth to Siddhartha in a grove of trees near the humble village of Lumbini. In the standard depiction of this scene—in literary sources as well as sculptures and paintings—Mahamaya stands with one arm holding a

low-hanging branch of a tree, and Siddhartha emerges from the womb, frequently diving out of his mother's side, spotlessly pure. He is caught by a group of attendant *devas* (divine beings), often in a pure cloth or, sometimes, in a golden net. But the miraculous oddity of his birth does not end there: the baby, who is typically depicted more like a young boy than like a newborn, turns in each of the cardinal directions, determines that he is the foremost of all beings in the world, and then takes seven steps toward the east (the auspicious direction, which he will also face at the time of his enlightenment), and proclaims that he is the chief of the world. Certainly, this miraculous birth and the superhuman acts of this newborn may seem to be purely mythical. However, these feats are intended by the Buddhist tradition to emphasize the special qualities and powers of this most exalted of all persons.

### Palace Life

The young prince's mother died only a week after his birth. This is a detail that will become particularly significant after he attains enlightenment, because he magically transports himself to the realm of the Thirty-three Gods, where his mother has been reborn. There he preaches to her in order that she, too, can attain enlightenment. At any rate, Siddhartha is thus raised by his father's second wife, his mother's sister. All of the various accounts of Siddhartha's early life emphasize the luxury of the young prince's upbringing. On one level,



the opulence and privilege of life in the palace are appropriate to a royal context in India. On another level, however, the lavish surroundings of his early life stand in sharp contrast to the asceticism he will later embrace; the texts thus emphasize, through a considerable degree of overstatement, the dangers and distractions of material life and, perhaps more importantly, the effort it takes to leave such distractions behind. But there is more to the narrative of the Buddha's youth: because of the prediction of the sages, his father, Shuddhodana, kept him confined to the palace grounds, worried that he would take the predicted course of a renouncer rather than that of a great ruler. Indeed, the king made sure that young Siddhartha could see and experience only sweetness and light. In one sermon, delivered shortly after his enlightenment, the Buddha describes his childhood in this way:

*Bhikkhus [monks], I was delicately nurtured, exceedingly delicately nurtured, delicately nurtured beyond measure. In my father's residence lotus-ponds were made: one of blue lotuses, one of red and another of white lotuses, just for my sake. . . . My turban was made of Kashi cloth [silk from modern Varanasi], as was my jacket, my tunic, and my cloak. . . . I had three palaces: one for winter, one for summer and one for the rainy season. . . . In the rainy season palace, during the four months of the rains, I was entertained only by female musicians, and I did not come down from the palace. (Anguttara Nikaya)*

Within the confines of the palace, Siddhartha lived, essentially, a normal Brahmanical life, one appropriate to his royal status. He was being groomed to eventually become king: he thus passed from the student stage, in which he learned the tenets of the religion and the fundamental principles of kingship, to the beginnings of the householder stage. He married a beautiful young woman named Yashodhara, and at twenty-nine fathered a child, named Rahula. There is an intentional emphasis in the various biographical sources on the Buddha's life experience: although he did, to be sure, lead a sheltered life, he also experienced the full spectrum of human life, including the emotional attachments one forms with a wife and child.

The early texts describe the young prince's move to renunciation in various ways. Some portray it as a gradual realization of the suffering inherent in life, a slow awakening to his destiny. Others, however, emphasize his awakening to the illusory nature of his sheltered life, and to the harsh reality of the world outside of the palace, as a sudden realization. For instance, in the *Nidanakatha*, a later commentarial text, the young prince's awareness of the suffering outside of the palace walls is described as a series of visions. Although his father had labored to remove all unpleasantness from the confines of the palace walls, the gods conspired to enlighten the prince, to reveal to him the true nature of existence. It is significant that it is the *devas* who do this: the gods of Hinduism are, from a Buddhist perspective, also trapped in *samsara*, and thus are in need of the Buddha's teachings, just as much as humans are.

### Encountering Suffering

In perhaps the most widely repeated version of the story, one day the young prince persuaded his chariot driver, Chandaka, to take him outside of the gates of the marvelous palace his father had made for him, and there—out in the real world—he saw the first of four things that would transform his life. He saw an old man, and, puzzled at this “strange” human, he

asked his driver: “Good charioteer, who is this man with white hair, supporting himself on the staff in his hand, with his eyes veiled by the brows, and his limbs relaxed and bent? Is this some transformation in him, or his original state, or mere chance?” The driver answered that it was old age, and the prince asked, “Will this evil come upon me also?” (See From a Classic Text 2.1). The answer to the prince’s question was, of course, yes.

### FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 2.1

*The following is taken from the Pali Canon, from the Digha Nikaya account of the Buddha’s life in the palace. This passage is one of the best known in all of Buddhist literature—although there are many variations of the story, with slightly different details—and relates Siddhartha’s encounter with “the four sights.” In the passage, the prince convinces his chariot driver to take him outside of the walls of the palace—which represents a kind of fantasyland where there is nothing unpleasant—where he faces reality for the first time. The sights that he encounters are an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and a monk. Through these four encounters Siddhartha realizes that youth and health, and even life itself, are only temporary, and that in fact the world is characterized by impermanence, which engenders suffering. He also realizes that the only way out of this suffering is to find and follow a correct religious path—as represented by the monk he comes across.*

Now the young lord Gautama, when many days had passed by, bade his charioteer make ready the state carriages, saying: “Get ready the carriages, good charioteer, and let us go through the park to inspect the pleasure grounds.” “Yes, my lord,” replied the charioteer, and harnessed the state carriages and sent word to Gautama: “The carriages are ready, my lord; do now what you deem fit.” Then Gautama mounted a state carriage and drove out in state into the park.

Now the young lord saw, as he was driving to the park, an aged man as bent as a roof gable, decrepit, leaning on a staff, tottering as he walked, afflicted and long past his prime. And seeing him Gautama said: “That man, good charioteer, what has he done, that his hair is not like that of other men, nor his body?”

“He is what is called an aged man, my lord.”

“But why is he called aged?”

“He is called aged, my lord, because he has not much longer to live.” “But then, good charioteer, am I too subject to old age, one who has not got past old age?”

“You, my lord, and we too, we all are of a kind to grow old; we have not got past old age.”

"Why then, good charioteer, enough of the park for today. Drive me back hence to my rooms."

"Yea, my lord," answered the charioteer, and drove him back. And he, going to his rooms, sat brooding sorrowful and depressed, thinking, "Shame then verily be upon this thing called birth, since to one born old age shows itself like that!"

Thereupon the raja sent for the charioteer and asked him: "Well, good charioteer, did the boy take pleasure in the park? Was he pleased with it?"

"No, my lord, he was not."

"What then did he see on his drive?"

(And the charioteer told the raja all.)

Then the raja thought thus: We must not have Gautama declining to rule. We must not have him going forth from the house into the homeless state. We must not let what the brahman soothsayers spoke of come true.

So, that these things might not come to pass, he let the youth be still more surrounded by sensuous pleasures. And thus Gautama continued to live amidst the pleasures of sense.

Now after many days had passed by, the young lord again bade his charioteer make ready and drove forth as once before. . . .

And Gautama saw, as he was driving to the park, a sick man, suffering and very ill, fallen and weltering in his own water, by some being lifted up, by others being dressed. Seeing this, Gautama asked: "That man, good charioteer, what has he done that his eyes are not like others' eyes, nor his voice like the voice of other men?" "He is what is called ill, my lord."

"But what is meant by ill?"

"It means, my lord, that he will hardly recover from his illness."

"But I am too, then, good charioteer, subject to fall ill; have I not got out of reach of illness?"

"You, my lord, and we too, we are all subject to fall ill; we have not got beyond the reach of illness."

"Why then, good charioteer, enough of the park for today. Drive me back hence to my rooms."

"Yea, my lord," answered the charioteer, and drove him back. And he, going to his rooms, sat brooding sorrowful and depressed, thinking: Shame then verily be upon this thing called birth, since to one born decay shows itself like that, disease shows itself like that. . . .

Now once again, after many days the young lord Gautama . . . drove forth.

And he saw, as he was driving to the park, a great concourse of people clad in garments of different colors constructing a funeral pyre. And seeing this he asked his charioteer: "Why now are all those people come together in garments of different colors, and making that pile?"

"It is because someone, my lord, has ended his days."

"Then drive the carriage close to him who has ended his days." "Yea, my lord," answered the

charioteer, and did so. And Gautama saw the corpse of him who had ended his days and asked: "What, good charioteer, is ending one's days?"

"It means, my lord, that neither mother, nor father, nor other kinsfolk will now see him, nor will he see them."

"But am I too then subject to death, have I not got beyond reach of death? Will neither the raja, nor the ranee, nor any other of my kin see me more, or shall I again see them?"

"You, my lord, and we too, we are all subject to death; we have not passed beyond the reach of death. Neither the raja, nor the ranee, nor any other of your kin will see you any more, nor will you see them."

"Why then, good charioteer, enough of the park for today. Drive me back hence to my rooms."

"Yea, my lord," replied the charioteer, and drove him back.

And he, going to his rooms, sat brooding sorrowful and depressed, thinking: Shame verily be upon this thing called birth, since to one born the decay of life, since disease, since death shows itself like that. . . .

Thereupon the raja questioned the charioteer as before and as before let Gautama be still more surrounded by sensuous enjoyment. And thus he continued to live amidst the pleasures of sense.

Now once again, after many days . . . the lord Gautama . . . drove forth.

And he saw, as he was driving to the park, a shaven-headed man, a recluse, wearing the yellow robe. And seeing him he asked the charioteer, "That man, good charioteer, what has he done that his head is unlike other men's heads and his clothes too are unlike those of others?" "That is what they call a recluse, because, my lord, he is one who has gone forth."

"What is that, 'to have gone forth'?"

"To have gone forth, my lord, means being thorough in the religious life, thorough in the peaceful life, thorough in good action, thorough in meritorious conduct, thorough in harmlessness, thorough in kindness to all creatures."

"Excellent indeed, friend charioteer, is what they call a recluse, since so thorough in his conduct in all those respects, wherefore drive me up to that forthgone man."

"Yea, my lord," replied the charioteer and drove up to the recluse. Then Gautama addressed him, saying, "You master, what have you done that your head is not as other men's heads, nor your clothes as those of other men?"

"I, my lord, am one whose has gone forth."

"What, master, does that mean?"

"It means, my lord, being thorough in the religious life, thorough in the peaceful life, thorough in good actions, thorough in meritorious conduct, thorough in harmlessness, thorough in kindness to all creatures."

"Excellently indeed, master, are you said to have gone forth since so thorough is your conduct in all those respects." Then the lord Gautama bade his charioteer, saying: "Come then, good charioteer, do you take the carriage and drive it back hence to my rooms. But I will even here cut off my hair, and don the yellow robe, and go forth from the house into the homeless state."

"Yea, my lord," replied the charioteer, and drove back. But the prince Gautama, there and then cutting off his hair and donning the yellow robe, went forth from the house into the homeless state.

Now at Kapilavatthu, the raja's seat, a great number of persons, some eighty-four thousand souls, heard of what prince Gautama had done and thought: Surely this is no ordinary religious rule, this is no common going forth, in that prince Gautama himself has had his head shaved and has donned the yellow robe and has gone forth from the house into the homeless state. If prince Gautama has done this, why then should not we also? And they all had their heads shaved and donned the yellow robes, and in imitation of the Bodhisat they went forth from the house into the homeless state. So the Bodhisat went up on his rounds through the villages, towns and cities accompanied by that multitude.

Now there arose in the mind of Gautama the Bodhisat, when he was meditating in seclusion, this thought: That indeed is not suitable for me that I should live beset. 'Twere better were I to dwell alone, far from the crowd.

So after a time he dwelt alone, away from the crowd. Those eighty-four thousand recluses went one way, and the Bodhisat went another way.

Now there arose in the mind of Gautama the Bodhisat, when he had gone to his place and was meditating in seclusion, this thought: Verily, this world has fallen upon trouble—one is born, and grows old, and dies, and falls from one state, and springs up in another. And from the suffering, moreover, no one knows of any way of escape, even from decay and death. O, when shall a way of escape from this suffering be made known—from decay and from death?

(Earl H. Brewster, trans., in *The Life of Gautama Buddha*. New York: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1926.)

On two subsequent trips outside of the palace, Siddhartha saw a diseased man and then a dead man, and on each occasion had much the same discussion with the driver. These visions represent Shakyamuni's first encounter with suffering, with *dukkha* (Pali *dukkha*), and the experience transforms the

happy prince into a brooding young man. As Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita* (Life of the Buddha), written several hundred years after the Buddha's death, puts it, "[H]e was perturbed in his lofty soul at hearing of old age, like a bull on hearing the crash of a thunderbolt nearby." He wondered if perhaps this

luxurious palace life was all there was to life, whether it was truly real. He wondered what the nature of this suffering was, what its cause was, and, ultimately, what its antidote might be. He stumbled about the palace grounds in a profound existential crisis.

The fourth thing he saw, though, on his last trip outside the walls with his charioteer, was a wandering ascetic. Having encountered not only the *duhkha*—sometimes translated as “suffering,” but really “dissatisfaction”—that characterizes the world but also, in the ascetic, a potential way out of this realm of suffering, he began to wonder if perhaps this life as a good kshatriya son, husband, and father was not the proper course for him.

When he returned to the palace after this last trip, he was surrounded by beautiful women dancing and playing enchanting music for him. He drifted off to sleep, and when he woke up, in what some contemporary scholars see as a quite misogynistic image, he found all of the women asleep around him: he found them in every manner of disarray, some snoring, others drooling, some grinding their teeth, some “revealing what should be hidden,” looking like so many corpses piled together. In other words, he realized that what in one context seems like youth and beauty looks like decay and squalor in another. Thus, as with the insight he gained from the first three visions—old age, sickness, and death—he realized that the world is not what it seems on the surface, and that, in fact, like the makeup that the women wear, or the artificial cleanliness of the palace, the appearance of things masks their true nature. At this

moment, then, he resolved to leave the palace and go out into the world and wander in search of the truth.

### Departure

The story goes that Siddhartha sneaked out of the palace while everyone was asleep, first going to his sleeping father to whisper to him that he was leaving not out of lack of respect for him, nor out of his own selfishness, but because he had a profound desire to liberate the world from old age and death, from the fear of suffering that comes with old age and death—in short, from suffering. He also went to see his sleeping wife and newborn son—and here, the significance of the boy’s name, Rahula, “the fetter,” is particularly poignant. Although he was torn by the sight of the sleeping infant, as any parent would be, he resisted the urge to pick him up, knowing that the feel of the boy in his arms would weaken his resolve. Instead, he determined to return once he attained enlightenment and share it with his son. He then fled the palace on horseback and set off to find the path to salvation.

Many of the texts that narrate this story take pains to emphasize not only the internal struggle of the young prince, but also the sorrow caused by his departure. In a particularly poignant and poetic image, Ashvaghosha, in his *Buddhacarita*, says that Yashodhara, upon hearing that her husband had renounced his domestic life, had left her and her young child, “fell upon the ground, like a Brahmani duck without its mate,” a reference to the

beautiful brown ducks that are said to mate for life, and which, in Indian love poetry, are the very embodiment of true, enduring love—if one mate dies, the other is said to perish from a broken heart.

Although at first blush this emphasis on the emotional effects of Siddhartha's renunciation may seem paradoxical, these texts emphasize the almost heroic effort it takes to renounce the world; as for the pain and anguish left

in the wake of his departure, this seems to emphasize the seriousness of the renouncer's charge. Yes, there will be those who suffer in the short term—the Buddha's wife and child, his father, the common people who would have been his subjects had he become a Cakravartin. But this short-term suffering is a small price to pay for the ultimate liberation of the entire world.

## FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 2.2

*The following is taken from the Buddhacarita, a first-century-C.E. biography of the Buddha written by the Indian Buddhist Ashvaghosha. This passage recounts the process of Prince Siddhartha's decision to abandon his life of privilege in his father's palace. Two things, in particular, motivate him to do so: first, his encounter with the suffering, or dukkha, that characterizes human existence; and, second, his encounter with the shramana, the wandering ascetic who is seeking an end to this suffering. In this version of the story, Siddhartha leaves the palace in the middle of the night, and sets out to seek enlightenment, not, the passage emphasizes, simply for himself, but for all beings.*

### CANTO V

#### Flight

1. Though the son of the Sakya king was thus tempted by priceless objects of sense, he felt no contentment, he obtained no relief, like a lion pierced deeply in the heart by a poisoned arrow.
2. Then longing for spiritual peace, he set forth outside with the king's permission in order to see the forest, and for companions he had a retinue of ministers' sons, chosen for their reliability and skill in converse.
3. He went out, mounted on the good horse Kanthaka, the bells of whose bit were of fresh gold and whose golden trappings were beautified with waving chowries, and so he resembled a *karnikara* emblem mounted on a flagpole.
4. Desire for the forest as well as the excellence of the land led him on to the more distant jungle-land, and he saw the soil being ploughed, with its surface broken with the tracks of the furrows like waves of water.
5. When he saw the ground in this state, with the young grass torn up and scattered by the ploughs and littered with dead worms, insects and other creatures, he mourned deeply as at the slaughter of his own kindred.

6. And as he observed the ploughmen with their bodies discoloured by wind, dust and the sun's rays, and the oxen in distress with the labour of drawing, the most noble one felt extreme compassion.

7. Then alighting from his horse, he walked slowly over the ground, overcome with grief. And as he considered the coming into being and the passing away of creation, he cried in his affliction, "How wretched this is."

8. And desiring to reach perfect clearness with his mind, he stopped his friends who were following him, and proceeded himself to a solitary spot at the root of a jambu-tree, whose beautiful leaves were waving in all directions.

9. And there he sat down on the clean ground, with grass bright like beryl; and reflecting on the origin and destruction of creation he took the path of mental stillness.

10. And his mind at once came to a stand and at the same time he was freed from mental troubles such as desire for the objects of sense etc. And he entered into the first trance of calmness which is accompanied by gross and subtle cogitation and which is supermundane in quality.

11. Then he obtained possession of concentration of mind, which springs from discernment and yields extreme ecstasy and bliss, and thereafter, rightly perceiving in his mind the course of the world, he meditated on this same matter.

12. "A wretched thing it is indeed that man, who is himself helpless and subject to the law of old age, disease and destruction, should in his ignorance and the blindness of his conceit, pay no heed to another who is the victim of old age, disease or death.

13. For if I, who am myself such, should pay no heed to another whose nature is equally such, it would not be right or fitting in me, who have knowledge of this, the ultimate law."

14. As he thus gained correct insight into the evils of disease, old age and death, the mental intoxication relating to the self, which arises from belief in one's strength, youth and life, left him in a moment.

15. He did not rejoice nor yet was he downcast; doubt came not over him, nor sloth, nor drowsiness. And he felt no longing for sensual pleasures, no hatred or contempt for others. . . .

43. As the day departed then, he mounted, blazing like the sun with his beauty, to his palace, even as the rising sun climbs Meru, in order to dispel the darkness with the splendour of his self.

44. Going up to a chamber which was filled with incense of the finest black aloë and, had lighted candelabra glittering with gold, he repaired to a splendid golden couch inlaid with streaks of diamond.

45. Then the noblest of women waited with musical instruments on him, the noblest of men, the peer of Indra, just as the troops of Apsarases wait on the son of the Lord of Wealth on the moon-white summit of Himavat.



46. But even those splendid instruments, like though they were to the music of the gods, failed to delight or thrill him; the one desire of the saintly prince was to leave his house in search of the bliss of the highest good, and therefore he did not rejoice.

47. Thereon the Akanistha deities, supreme in austerities, taking cognisance of his resolve, all at once brought sleep there over the women and distorted the gestures of their limbs.

48. So one, as she lay there, supported her cheek on an unsteady hand, and, as if angry, abandoned the flute in her lap, dear though it was to her, with its decoration of gold leaf. . . .

57. Others, though really large-eyed and fair-browed, showed no beauty with their eyes shut, like lotus-beds with their flowerbuds closed at the setting of the sun.

58. Another too had her hair loose and dishevelled, and with the ornaments and clothes fallen from her hips and her necklaces scattered she lay like an image of a woman broken by an elephant.

59. But others, helplessly lost to shame despite their natural decorum and endowment of excellent beauty, lay in immodest attitudes, snoring, and stretched their limbs, all distorted and tossing their arms about.

60. Others looked ugly, lying unconscious like corpses, with their ornaments and garlands cast aside, the fastening knots of their dresses undone, and eyes moveless with the whites showing.

61. Another lay as if sprawling in intoxication, with her mouth gaping wide, so that the saliva oozed forth, and with her limbs spread out so as to show what should have been hid. Her beauty was gone, her form distorted. . . .

63. When the king's son saw the young women lying in these different ways and looking so loathsome with their uncontrolled movements, though ordinarily their forms were beautiful, their speech agreeable, he was moved to disgust:—

64. "Such is the real nature of woman in the world of the living, impure and loathsome; yet man, deceived by dress and ornaments, succumbs to passion for women.

65. If man were to consider the natural form of woman and such a transformation produced in her by sleep, most certainly his heedlessness in respect of her would not increase; yet, overcome by his impressions of her excellence, he succumbs to passion."

66. Thus he recognized the difference and there arose in him a desire to escape that night. Then the gods, understanding his purpose, caused the doors of the palace to fly open. . . .

83. Then he went forth out of his father's city, in the firmness of his resolve quitting without concern his father, who was devoted to him, his young son, his affectionate people and his unequalled magnificence.

84. Thereon he, whose eyes were long like stainless lotuses born of the mud, looked back at the city and uttered a lion-roar: "I shall not be entering the city named after Kapila, till I have seen the further shore of life and death."

85. Hearing his words, the troops of the court of the Lord of Wealth rejoiced, and the hosts of gods with joyful minds foretold the fulfillment of his resolve.

86. Other heavenly beings of fiery forms recognized his purpose to be of the greatest difficulty and, like moon beams piercing a rift in a cloud, produced a bright light on his frosty path.

87. But that steed, like a steed of the Sun, speeding on as if spurred in mind, and the prince traveled very many leagues, before the stars in the sky grew discolored with the dawn.

(*Buddhacarita: The Great Departure*. Translated by Samuel Beal. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 19. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1883.)

### The Buddha's Enlightenment

The canonical texts portray Siddhartha's decision to leave the palace in a variety of ways, although they generally emphasize that this was not a sudden, rash decision, but one that gradually developed through careful and thoughtful consideration of the ills that characterize existence, and the difficulty of escaping this suffering while still remaining involved in the world. In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, for instance, the young prince, just prior to his departure, states this difficulty quite clearly: "House life is crowded and dusty; going forth is wide open. It is not easy, living life in a household, to lead a holy-life as utterly perfect as a polished shell. Suppose I were to shave off my hair and beard, put on saffron garments, and go forth from home into homelessness?" (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.36.12). This simple realization, an affirmation of the ascetic path, became the basic template for all future Buddhist renunciates: in order to attain equanimity of mind, which is necessary to remove the bonds of attachment that give rise to suffering, one must separate from society. This separation is called "renun-

ciation" in Buddhism, and the way it is stated is particularly telling: to become a monk, one "goes from home to homelessness."

Siddhartha's quest for enlightenment led him first to the loosely structured *śramana* community that had formed in northern India. He first encountered two teachers whom the texts name as Alara Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra, and from them he received various spiritual insights and teachings, particularly meditational techniques and a basic yogic vocabulary consistent with that worked out in the Hindu *Upanishads*. From Alara Kalama he quickly learned to enter a meditational state of calm described as the "sphere of nothingness." Shakyamuni realized, though, that this was only a temporary state of equanimity, and not the enlightenment that he was seeking, and so he left Alara Kalama and took up study with Udraka Ramaputra. This time, Siddhartha quickly perfected a meditational state called the "sphere of neither perception nor nonperception," a blissfully calm state of mental equipoise. Again, however, he rejected this state as temporary, and therefore not the permanent state of enlightenment that he was

seeking. In other words, what he sought was not temporary relief from the *dukkha* of the world; rather, he wanted a permanent antidote to the *dukkha*.

He thus set out on his own path, and was quickly joined by five other *śramanas*. Together they began a course of extremely rigorous asceticism. Siddhartha applied himself with great effort to this radical lifestyle for six years; he perfected controlling his breath to the point that he suffered terrible headaches, stomach pains, and a burning sensation throughout his body; he practiced fasting, to the point that he could sit in meditation for many days on end, barely eating. The narratives of his life story say that he got to the point that he could exist on

a single sesame seed a day, then on one grain of rice, then on only one jujube. Eventually, he reached a state in which he was barely breathing, barely alive.

Because of so little nourishment, all my limbs became like some withered creepers with knotted joints; my buttocks like a buffalo's hoof; my back-bone protruding like a string of balls; my ribs like rafters of a dilapidated shed; the pupils of my eyes appeared sunk deep in their sockets as water appears shining at the bottom of a deep well; my scalp became shriveled and shrunk as a bitter gourd cut unripe becomes shriveled and shrunk by sun and wind . . . the skin of my belly came to be cleaving to my back-bone; when I wanted to obey the calls of nature, I fell down on my face then and there; when I stroked my limbs with my hand, hairs rotted at the roots fell away from my body. (*Majjhima Nikaya*)



**FIGURE 2.2.** *The fasting Buddha. Siddhartha is emaciated after engaging in severe asceticism prior to his enlightenment.*

He realized at this point that this could not be the way to enlightenment and abandoned these extreme ascetic practices, with the thought "Might there still be another path to awakening?" (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.36.30). He then remembered a passing moment in his childhood when he had slipped into a state of utter calm and equilibrium while watching a plow. He realized with this vision of a simple, mundane moment that rather than extreme asceticism, which could only lead to more suffering, he must return to this simple moment of calm, and thereby forge a middle path between the extreme asceticism that he had been practicing and the sensual indulgence of his former life in the palace.



**FIGURE 2.3** *Mara, the lord of death, threatening the Buddha. The Buddha defeated Mara and his armies, thus demonstrating the power of his enlightenment and “victory” over death.*

Siddhartha's fellow *śramanas* abandoned him at this point. They cursed and ridiculed him, denouncing him as weak-willed. He was thus left alone, emaciated and sapped of all physical and mental energy. A passing woman named Sujata, however, offered him a bowl of rice gruel, and with this modest nourishment Siddhartha sat down beneath a ficus tree, facing east, near the town of Gaya along the banks of the Phalgu River, and vowed not

to rise until he had reached his goal of true enlightenment. He made rapid progress.

In the middle of his meditations, however, he was challenged by an evil superhuman named Mara. Mara stands in Buddhist literature and art as the embodiment of temptations of all kinds, fear, delusion, and death, a being who would, as Buddhism became established, become perhaps the most well-known emblem of *duh.kha*.

## FROM A CLASSIC TEXT ❖ 2.3

*During his quest for enlightenment, Shakyamuni experimented with various modes of extreme austerities, to the point that he had nearly starved to death. A young woman, Sujata, came upon him in this emaciated state, and offered him a portion of rice gruel. Having taken in this modest nourishment, Shakyamuni sat underneath the Bodhi tree in meditation, having vowed not to move until he attained enlightenment. Hearing this vow, the evil being Mara, the Buddhist manifestation of death and desire, felt threatened. The source of Mara's power over beings was rooted in their attachment to sensuous pleasures and their fear of death. If Siddhartha could attain freedom from these attachments, which would lead to enlightenment, then Mara would lose his control over him and other beings who would follow in the Buddha's path. Mara thus unleashed a series of illusionary temptations to try to distract Siddhartha. All through these tribulations, however, the Buddha-to-be sat calmly and Mara, defeated, withdrew.*

## Defeat of Mara

1. When the great sage, the scion of a line of royal seers, sat down there, after making his vow for liberation, the world rejoiced, but Mara, the enemy of the good Law, trembled.
2. Him whom in the world they call the God of Love, him of the bright weapon and also the flower-arrowed, that same one, as the monarch of the activities of the passions and as the enemy of liberation, they style Mara.
3. His three sons, Caprice, Gaiety and Wantonness, and his three daughters, Discontent, Delight and Thirst, asked him why he was depressed in mind, and he answered them thus:—
4. "The sage, wearing the armour of his vow and drawing the bow of resolution with the arrow of wisdom, sits yonder, desiring to conquer my realm; hence this despondency of my mind.
5. For if he succeeds in overcoming me and expounds to the world the path of final release, then is my realm to-day empty, like that of the Videha king, when he fell from good conduct.
6. While therefore he has not yet attained spiritual eyesight and is still within my sphere, I shall go to break his vow, like the swollen current of a river breaking an embankment."
7. Then, seizing his flower-made bow and his five world-deluding arrows, he, the causer of unrest to mortal minds, approached the *asvattha* tree accompanied by his children.
8. Next Mara placed his left hand on the tip of the bow and, fingering the arrow, thus addressed the sage, who was tranquilly seated in his desire to cross to the further shore of the ocean of existence:—
9. "Up, up, Sir Ksatriya, afraid of death. Follow your own *dharma*, give up the *dharma* of liberation. Subdue the world both with arrows and with sacrifices, and from the world obtain the world of Vasava.

10. For this is the path to issue forth by, the famous one travelled by kings of olden time. It is ignominious for one born in a renowned family of royal seers to practise this mendicancy.

11. Or if, O firm in purpose, you do not rise up to-day, be steadfast, do not give up your vow. For this arrow that I have ready is the very one I discharged at Surpaka, the fishes' foe.

12. And at the mere touch of it the son of Ida, though he was the grandson of the moon, fell into a frenzy, and Santanu lost his self-control. How much more then would anyone else do so, who is weak with the decadence of the present age?

13. So rise up quickly and recover your senses; for this ever-destructive arrow stands ready. I do not discharge it at those who are given to sensual pleasures and show compliance to their mistresses, any more than I would at sheldrakes."

14. Despite these words the sage of the Sakyas showed no concern and did not change his posture; so then Mara brought forward his sons and daughters and discharged the arrow at him.

15. But even when the arrow was shot at him, he paid no heed to it and did not falter in his firmness. . . .

18. Then as soon as Mara thought of his army in his desire to obstruct the tranquillity of the Sakya sage, his followers stood round him, in various forms and carrying lances, trees, javelins, clubs and swords in their hands;

19. Having the faces of boars, fishes, horses, asses and camels, or the countenances of tigers, bears, lions and elephants, one-eyed, many-mouthed, three-headed, with pendulous bellies and speckled bellies;

20. Without knees or thighs, or with knees vast as pots, or armed with tusks or talons, or with skulls for faces, or with many bodies, or with half their faces broken off or with huge visages;

21. Ashy-grey in colour, tricked out with red spots, carrying ascetics' staves, with hair smoke-coloured like a monkey's, hung round with garlands, with pendent ears like elephants, clad in skins or entirely naked;

22. With half their countenances white or half their bodies green; some also copper-colored, smoke-colored, tawny or black; some too with arms having an overgarment of snakes, or with rows of jangling bells at their girdles;

23. Tall as toddy-palms and grasping stakes, or of the stature of children with projecting tusks, or with the faces of sheep and the eyes of birds, or with cat-faces and human bodies;

24. With disheveled hair, or with topknots and half-shaven polls, clothed in red and with disordered headdresses, with bristling faces and frowning visages, suckers of the vital essence and suckers of the mind.

25. Some, as they ran, leapt wildly about, some jumped on each other; while some gamboled in the sky, others sped along among the treetops.

26. One danced about, brandishing a trident; another snorted, as he trailed a club; one roared like a bull in his excitement, another blazed fire from every hair.

27. Such were the hordes of fiends who stood encompassing the root of the *bodhi* tree on all sides, anxious to seize and to kill, and awaiting the command of their master. . . .

33. But when the great seer beheld Mara's army standing as a menace to that method of *dharma*, like a lion seated amidst kine he did not quail nor was he at all perturbed.

34. Then Mara gave orders to his raging army of demons for terrifying the sage. Thereon that army of his resolved to break down his steadfastness with their various powers.

35. Some stood trying to frighten him, their many tongues hanging out flickering, their teeth sharp-pointed, their eyes like the sun's orb, their mouths gaping, their ears sticking up stiff as spikes.

36. As they stood there in such guise, horrible in appearance and manner, he was no more alarmed by them or shrank before them than before over-excited infants at play. . . .

56. Then a certain being of high station and invisible form, standing in the sky and seeing that Mara was menacing the seer and without cause of enmity was displaying wrath, addressed him with imperious voice.

57. "Mara, you should not toil to no purpose, give up your murderous intent and go in peace. For this sage can no more be shaken by you than Meru, greatest of mountains, by the wind.

58. Fire might lose its nature of being hot, water its liquidity, earth its solidity, but in view of the meritorious deeds accumulated by him through many ages he cannot abandon his resolution.

59. For such is his vow, his energy, his psychic power, his compassion for creation, that he will not rise up till he has attained the truth, just as the thousand-rayed sun does not rise without dispelling the darkness. . . ."

70. And when Mara heard that speech of his and observed the great sage's unshakeness, then, his efforts frustrated, he went away dejectedly with the arrows by which the world is smitten in the heart.

71. Then his host fled away in all directions, its elation gone, its toil rendered fruitless, its rocks, logs and trees scattered everywhere, like a hostile army whose chief has been slain by the foe.

72. As he of the flower-banner fled away defeated with his following, and the great seer, the passion-free conqueror of the darkness of ignorance, remained victorious, the heavens shone with the moon like a maiden with a smile, and there fell a rain of sweet-smelling flowers filled with water.

(*Buddhacarita: The Great Departure*. Translated by Samuel Beal. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 19. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1883.)

First, Mara attempted to plant doubt in Siddhartha's mind, and then sent his ten armies—an array of demons who represented the basis for illusion and grasping in the world, as well as hunger, thirst, craving, sexual desire, sloth, fear, and so on. Siddhartha defeated them simply by recognizing them for what they were. In later versions of the story, Mara then unleashed his daughters, lustful and voluptuous temptresses, in whom Siddhartha showed not even the slightest interest. Finally, Mara challenged Siddhartha's very right to enlightenment—if he was who he said he was, then who in the cosmos could prove this? In one of the most famous images in all of Buddhism, reproduced in countless sculptures—an iconographic form known as the *bhumisparsha mudra*, or “earth touching gesture”—Shakyamuni reached out with one hand, as he was meditating, and touched the earth, at which point the goddess of the earth bore witness to his right to the throne of enlightenment by creating a tremendous rumbling and shaking, and by making an ocean flow from her hair. Mara, terrified at this awesome display—and realizing that this man, the Buddha, was indeed about to realize his goal, was indeed about to conquer death—gathered his armies of illusion and lust, and fled, thoroughly defeated.

Siddhartha's path to enlightenment was then clear of any remaining obstacles, and he made rapid progress, meditating through the night, which, in the canonical accounts, was divided into three periods, or “watches.” In the first, he attained knowledge of his past lives; in the second, he gained the power to see the

past lives of other beings; and in the third, he attained insight into the causally conditioned nature of reality. As the sun rose, he achieved the state of perfect omniscience (in Pali, *bodhi*) and was, at this point, fully enlightened—the Buddha, the Awakened One.

After his awakening, at the age of thirty-five, the Buddha spent seven weeks at Bodhgaya, in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree, meditating on the various aspects of the truth, or *dharma*, that he had realized. He was initially hesitant to share his teachings, however, for he felt that the complexity of his meditational vision would be too hard for humans to grasp, and would, in fact, lead to further confusion and suffering: “I have realized this Truth which is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand . . . comprehensible by the wise. Men who are overpowered by passion and surrounded by a mass of darkness cannot see this Truth which is against the current, which is lofty, deep, subtle and hard to comprehend” (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.26.19).

At this point, according to the tradition, the gods—frequently Brahma himself, the Hindu god who is often called “the Creator”—came to him to convince him to accept his vocation as teacher, appealing to his compassion and assuring him that in fact there were people capable of understanding the *dharma*. One used the image of a lotus pond: in a lotus pond there are some lotuses still under water; there are others that have risen only up to the water level; and there are still others that stand above water and are untouched by it. In a similar way, in this world there are people of different levels of development.



Thus challenged, the Buddha determined to proclaim the insight he had gained. Initially, he wished to preach to his first two teachers, Alara Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra, but the gods informed him that they had both died. He thus decided to share his insight with the ascetics who were his early companions—the very ones who had rejected him—and set out on foot for the Deer Park in Isipatana (modern Sarnath), where he would offer his first discourse on the *dharma*.

### Conclusion

The Buddha's first "sermon," then, was given to the very ascetics who had earlier abandoned him during his meditations. It was a gesture of the Buddha's selfless compassion—he recognized that these ascetics, who had dismissed him for giving up too easily, were earnest but misguided in their efforts to find enlightenment, and so he sought them out first to set them on the correct path, the "middle path" between the extreme asceticism in which they were engaged and the hedonism that he himself had experienced in the palace. They gathered around him and he spoke what is known as the First Turning of the Wheel of *Dharma*, in which he laid out the basic outline of his knowledge and experience of enlightenment to these five ascetics. This first discourse represents, in many ways, the beginning of

Buddhism, since it is with the sharing of his personal religious experience that the Buddha really created Buddhism.

Tradition maintains that the content of that first sermon, which will be explored in the next chapter, was so powerful that these five disciples quickly—after a week—attained enlightenment, becoming *arhats*, or "worthy beings." These first five followers, in turn, went forth and began to teach the *dharma* that the Buddha had shared with them. This was the beginning of the Buddhist *sangha*, the community and institution of monks that is at the heart of the religion.

Among the many aspects of the Buddha's life story that stand out and that became central to the Buddhist tradition as it developed in India and beyond, two bear particular note. First, in the many versions of his life, it is consistently emphasized that the Buddha was not a god, but a human, and a human not from the highest rank of society. Thus, his life was to serve as the basic model for all future Buddhists. Second, the *dharma* was not divinely bestowed, but discovered, and discovered through an examination of the Buddha's own life experience. In other words, although one may not be born, like Siddhartha, as a kshatriya and may not, like Siddhartha, be marked from birth as an extraordinary human being, anyone, regardless of birth or status, can attain this same state of enlightenment.

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### STUDY QUESTIONS

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- 1 Why is the Buddha's life story so important to Buddhism?
- 2 Describe the Buddha's childhood.
- 3 Why did the Buddha reject palace life?
- 4 Why was the Buddha's abandonment of his family and social duty not selfish?