

## 2

# Buddhist Theory of Evolution

1. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL.....	2
2. SOMETHING MORE PEACEFUL .....	3
3. THE FOUR SIGHTS .....	3
4. THE DIVINE MESSENGERS .....	5
5. THE LORD OF DEATH .....	5
6. THE FOUR SIGHTS IN PERSPECTIVE .....	6
(a) Siddhārtha's spiritual maturity .....	6
(b) Purpose of life .....	7
7. RĀHULA.....	7
8. THE SLEEPING WOMEN .....	8
9. THE GREAT RENUNCIATION .....	8
(a) Māra.....	9
(b) The river Anomā .....	9
10. SIDDHĀRTHA THE ASCETIC .....	10
11. REFORM MOVEMENT .....	10
(a) Axial age.....	10
(b) Adaptations.....	11
12. PROBLEM OF RENUNCIATION.....	11
(a) The 4 stations of life .....	11
(b) Economic considerations.....	12
(c) Spiritual reason.....	12
13. BIMBISĀRA .....	12
14. ĀRĀDA AND UDRAKA.....	13
15. SELF-MORTIFICATION .....	13
(a) The Five Ascetics .....	13
(b) Mahā Saccaka Sutta.....	14
16. FUTILITY AND DANGER .....	14
(a) Dangers of sensual pleasures .....	14
(b) The emaciated Gandhāra image .....	14
(c) Siddhārtha collapses .....	15
17. THE MIDDLE WAY.....	16
(a) Parable of the lute.....	16
(b) Siddhārtha gives up self-mortification .....	16
18. THE BODHISATTVA'S LAST MEAL .....	17
(a) Sujātā.....	17
(b) Act of truth .....	17
19. THE BODHISATTVA'S DREAMS.....	17
20. THE BODHISATTVA'S DETERMINATION.....	18
(a) Svastika the grass cutter .....	18
(b) Māra's temptation .....	18
21. MARA'S ATTACKS .....	19
(a) The nine storms .....	19
(b) Final victory over Māra.....	20
22. THE PERFECT SELF-ENLIGHTENMENT .....	20
(a) The Great Enlightenment.....	20
(b) The first Buddha Word.....	21
READING LIST .....	22

## 2

# THE BUDDHIST THEORY OF EVOLUTION

## The Four Sights and the Search for Enlightenment

### 1. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

One of the greatest problems that fascinates as well as plagues philosophers and religionists since time immemorial is that of evil. While some thinkers try to solve this problem by way of a God-idea, the Buddha looks at the problem *in itself* without having to defend the problems of the God-belief.

The Buddha's method is comparable to a doctor who, instead of explaining "who" caused a certain disease, diagnoses and explains "how" it arises and passes away. Instead of looking for that cause outside oneself, the Buddha traces the cause—and the solution—within oneself, namely, the mind.

#### The three great evils

What makes it necessary for Buddhas to appear in this world is the need for someone to get rid of the three great evils common to all life: **old age, disease and death**. The earliest texts record that the Buddha himself told his disciples that it was the reflection on these three evils that had made it impossible for him to share the world's indifference to them. This reflection also stifled **the intoxicating joys of youth, of health, and of life** (A 1:145 f).

Instead of the legendary Four Sights (*nimittāni*), the **Sukhumāla Sutta** of the Pali Canon records a **reflection on the three evils**:

I was delicately raised, O monks; very delicate, exceedingly delicate was my upbringing. At my father's house **lotus ponds** were made: in one of them blue lotuses bloomed, in another white lotuses, and in a third red lotuses, just for my enjoyment. I used only sandalwood powder from Kāsī and my turban, my jacket, my undergarment and my tunic were made of Kāsī muslin. By day and by night, a white canopy was held over me, lest cold and heat, dust, chaff or dew should trouble me.

I had **three palaces**: one for the summer, one of the winter and one for the rainy season. In the palaces for the rainy season, during the four months of the rains, I was waited upon by female musicians only, and I did not come down from the palace during these months. While in other people's houses servants and slaves receive only a meal of broken rice with sour gruel, in my father's house they were given choice rice and meat.

Amidst such splendour and an entirely carefree life, O monks, this thought came to me: "An uninstructed worldling is sure to become old himself and unable to escape ageing, yet feels repelled, humiliated and disgusted when seeing an old and decrepit person, being forgetful of his own situation. Now I too am sure to become old and cannot escape ageing. If, when seeing an old and decrepit person, I were to feel repelled, humiliated or disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself." When I reflected thus, monks, **all my pride in youth (*yobbana,mada*)<sup>1</sup> vanished.**

Again I reflected: "An uninstructed worldling is sure to become ill himself and unable to escape illness, yet feels repelled, humiliated and disgusted when seeing a sick person, being forgetful of his own situation. Now I too am sure to become ill and cannot escape illness. If, when seeing a sick person, I were to feel repelled, humiliated or disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself." When I reflected thus, monks, **all my intoxication in health (*ārogya,mada*) vanished.**

Again I reflected: "An uninstructed worldling is sure to die himself and unable to escape death; yet feels repelled, humiliated and disgusted when seeing a dead person, being forgetful of his own

---

<sup>1</sup> For definition of *mada*, see MA 1:170, Vbh 350.

situation. Now I too am sure to die and cannot escape death. If, when seeing a dead person, I were to feel repelled, humiliated or disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.” When I reflected thus, monks, **all my pride in life (*jīvita,mada*) vanished.**

(A 1:145 f = A 3.38)

## 2. SOMETHING MORE PEACEFUL

As long as one is intoxicated, consciously or unconsciously, with youth, health or life, there is the will to live and the fear of death. The preoccupation with these three intoxications is further enhanced by our lifestyle and social customs. We tend of speak of aging, illness and death in euphemistic terms, or even avoid talking about them altogether. The greatest hindrance to seeing beyond youth, health and life is that one does not see something higher than these three intoxicants. This is clearly stated in **the Cūladukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M no. 14):

Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisattva, I too clearly saw it as it really is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, but **as long as I still did not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures**, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still be attracted to sensual pleasures.

But when I clearly saw it as it really is with proper wisdom how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and **I attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures**, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures.

(M 1:93)

In many ways, we are all still children, narcissistically running after personal, material and immediate goals. Our experiences are limited merely to our physical senses, or rather we are controlled in some ways at least by the physical senses of others. All we have are our sense-experiences, but whose true nature simply eludes us. And yet, in these very physical senses lie the tools for our own self-understanding. That is, when we understand their true nature. Often enough we are confronted with such **revelations** of the true nature of life, but they remain revelations, something awe-inspiring but nevertheless remaining external to our being. Revelations are only spiritually useful when we understand and internalize them, making them our **realization**. This was what happened when Prince Siddhārtha saw the Four Sights.

## 3. THE FOUR SIGHTS

Although the Pali Canon does not make any reference to the legend of the Four Sights, it contains the story of Vipāśyin (Vipassī), a past Buddha, who before his enlightenment, while still a prince, rode in his chariot out of the palace. On his way to the pleasure garden, he saw the Four Sights. This is what happened in the words of **the Mahāpadāna Sutta** (D no. 14):

And as he was being driven to the pleasure-park, Prince Vipāśyin saw **an old man**, aged, crooked as a roof beam, bent double, leaning on a walking stick, tottering, frail, youth long gone. At the sight, he said to the charioteer: “Charioteer, what is the matter with this man? His hair is not like other men’s, his body is not like other men’s?”

“My prince, that is what is called an old man.”

“But why is he called an old man?”

“He is called **old**, my prince, because he has not long to live.”

“But am I liable to become old, too, and not exempt from old age?”

“Both you and I, my prince, are liable to become old and are not exempt from old age.”

“Well then, charioteer, that will do for today with the pleasure-park. Return now to the palace.”

...and back at the palace, Prince Vipasyin was overcome with grief and dejection, crying: "Shame on this thing called birth, since one who is born must grow old!"

After many years, Prince Vipasyin (again) ordered his charioteer to harness the chariot. And as he was being driven to the pleasure-park, Prince Vipasyin saw **a sick man**, suffering and gravely ill, lying fouled in his own excrement and urine, lifted up by some and set down by others. At the sight, he said to the charioteer: "Charioteer, what is the matter with this man? His eyes are not like other men's, his voice (*saro*) is not like other men's?"

"My prince, that is what is called ill."

"But why is he called ill?"

"He is called **ill**, my prince, because he can hardly recover from his illness."

"But am I liable to become sick, too, and not exempt from illness?"

"Both you and I, my prince, are liable to become ill and are not exempt from illness."

"Well then, charioteer, that will do for today with the pleasure-park. Return now to the palace."

...and back at the palace, Prince Vipasyin was overcome with grief and dejection, crying: "Shame on this thing called birth, since one who is born must suffer illness!"

After many years, Prince Vipasyin (again) ordered his charioteer to harness the chariot. And as he was being driven to the pleasure-park, Prince Vipasyin saw a large crowd gathering, clad in many colours, and carrying a bier. At the sight, he said to the charioteer: "Charioteer, why are those people doing that?"

"My prince, that is what is called **a dead man**."

"Drive me over to where the dead man is." And Prince Vipasyin gazed at the dead man. Then he said to the charioteer:

"Why is he called dead?"

"He is called **dead**, my prince, because now his parents and other relatives will not see him again, nor he them."

"But am I liable to die, too, and not exempt from dying?"

"Both you and I, my prince, are liable to die and are not exempt from dying."

"Well then, charioteer, that will do for today with the pleasure-park. Return now to the palace."

...and back at the palace, Prince Vipasyin was overcome with grief and dejection, crying: "Shame on this thing called birth, since one who is born must die!"

After many years, Prince Vipasyin (again) ordered his charioteer to harness the chariot. And as he was being driven to the pleasure-park, Prince Vipasyin saw **one who has gone forth**, shaven-headed, wearing a saffron robe. At the sight, he said to the charioteer: "What is the matter with this man? His head is not like other men's, and his clothes are not like other men's."

"My prince, he is called one who has gone forth."

"Why is he called one who has gone forth?"

"My prince, by one who has gone forth we mean **one who truly follows Dharma (universal law), who truly lives in peace**, does good deeds, performs acts of merit, is harmless and truly has compassion for living beings."

"Charioteer, he is well called one who has gone forth...Drive the chariot to where he is."

And Prince Vipasyin questioned the man who had gone forth.

"My prince, as one who has gone forth I truly follow the Dharma...and have compassion for living beings."

Then Prince Vipasyin said to the charioteer: "You take this chariot and return to the palace. But I shall stay here and shave off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robes, and go forth from the household life into homelessness."

(D 2:22-30)

#### 4. THE DIVINE MESSENGERS

Nowhere in the early Pali texts is there any mention of **the Four Sights** (*nimittāni*) in connection with Prince Siddhârtha. Apparently, later Buddhists patterned the Siddhârtha legend following this beautiful story about Vipasyin. We find such a story, with some modification, in **the Nidāna,kathā**, the introduction to the Jātaka Commentary (which actually quotes the Mahāpadāna Sutta). Since this is going to be a drama of cosmic significance, the devas were given this important role of dramatizing the truth of the Three Great Evils and a hint of their solution. They came to be called the “**divine messengers**” (*deva,dūta*).

If this is an innovation on the part of the Commentators, one might rephrase the great modern artist Picasso’s famous statement: “We all know that religion is not truth. Religion is a lie that makes you realize truth....”<sup>2</sup>

In the Nidāna,kathā story, Prince Siddhârtha saw each of the Four Sights over four consecutive days. Attended by his charioteer Chandaka, Siddhârtha left Kapilavastu by the east gate for his pleasure park. His father had given orders that nothing unpleasant be allowed to offend the Prince’s eyes. But, the devas of the Pure Abodes who were watching over the Bodhisattva’s vocation, frustrated the precautions of the king and his ministers.

As a result, Siddhârtha suddenly found himself facing **an old man**, white-haired with age, wrinkled, toothless, and bent over his stick. Upon being told that this is a universal truth and that he, too, would not be spared, the Prince gave up his outing and turned backed.

The second time, the same scene was enacted outside the south gate of the city, where he encountered **a sick man**, lying in his own filth, attended to by others.

The third time, leaving by the western gate, the Prince encountered a funeral procession with **a corpse** simply wrapped in a shroud and carried on a stretcher followed by his parents, crying and moaning, their hair disheveled and beating their breasts.

At once, all life’s pleasures lost their appeal for the young Prince and to complete the conversion, the watchful devas needed to produce only one more episode. In the course of a fourth outing, there appeared **an ascetic**, bowl in hand, serene, eyes cast down, decently robed, and showing by his whole exterior the complete peace of his inner personality. This sight consoled the Prince by indicating to him the way of life, and from then he was ready for the religious vocation.

#### 5. THE LORD OF DEATH

The statement of three evils in Sukhumāla Sutta (A 1:145 f.) [1] apparently became the nucleus for **the Devadūta Sutta** (M no. 130), which adds the figure of King Yama, the god of death, as an interlocutor with one newly reborn in his realm, questioning him regarding **the 5 divine messengers**:

Then King Yama presses and questions and cross-questions him about **the first divine messenger**: “Good man, did you not see the first divine messenger appear in the world...a young tender infant, lying prone, fouled in his own excrement and urine?”

“Did it never occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, that ‘I too am subject to birth, I am not exempt from birth: surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind’?”

“Good man, did you not see **the second divine messenger** appear in the world...a man or a woman, eighty, ninety or a hundred years, aged, crooked as a roof beam, bent double, leaning on a

---

<sup>2</sup> Original quote: “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth...”. Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*. Berkeley: Univ. of Berkeley Press, 1968:264.

walking stick, tottering, frail, youth long gone, with broken teeth, gray-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy?”

“Did it never occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, that ‘I too am subject to old age, I am not exempt from old age: surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind’?”

“Good man, did you not see **the third divine messenger** appear in the world...a man or a woman, afflicted, suffering and gravely ill, lying fouled in his own excrement and urine, lifted up by some and set down by others?”

“Did it never occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, that ‘I too am subject to illness, I am not exempt from illness: surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind’?”

“Good man, did you not see **the fourth divine messenger** appear in the world, when a robber is caught, kings having many kinds of tortures inflicted on him: having flogged him with whips (and so on)...and having his head cut off with a sword?”

“Did it never occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, that ‘Those who do evil actions have such tortures of various kinds inflicted on them here and now; what more in the hereafter? Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind’?”

“Good man, did you not see **the fifth divine messenger** appear in the world...a man or a woman, dead for a day, for two days, for three days, bloated, livid, and oozing with impurities?”

“Did it never occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, that ‘I too am subject to death, I am not exempt from death: surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind’?”

(Abridged. M 3:178 ff; A 1:138 f; cf DhA 1:107, AA 1:36, the Makhadeva Jātaka)

## 6. THE FOUR SIGHTS IN PERSPECTIVE

It may seem difficult to understand why the Bodhisattva reacted so traumatically to the seeing of the three evils because we know that most people become accustomed or immune to seeing them from childhood on. One explanation is that his reaction is the ironic result of **Śuddhodana’s over-protective efforts** to shelter Siddhârtha from the realities of life. Haunted by the predictions that his son, the crown prince, might enter the religious life, Śuddhodana had apparently succeeded in keeping such sights from him until his manhood.

### (a) Siddhârtha’s spiritual maturity

If we accept the traditional account, then we could say that for Siddhârtha, at the mature age of 29, and looking at the four “divine messengers” for the first time, surely would be a traumatic experience. Two reactions from such encounters are possible—one would be that of **repression**, that is, that of an initial great shock followed by a subconscious forgetting of all the traumatic incidents.

The second reaction, and a historical one, confirming what the thoughtful Prince had suspected all along, is that of a feeling of **spiritual urgency or disillusionment** (*saṃvega*) (as described in the Devadūta Sutta) which would spur a thinking compassionate person on to find out the cause and cure for those ills. These encounters (or, if one were to take the four sight metaphorically—the thoughtful reflection on them) marked the turning point in the Bodhisattva’s career.

The **Milinda,pañha** contains an important remark regarding spiritual realization, put into the mouth, not of Nāgasena, but of king Milinda himself:

...there is no enlightenment when knowledge is not mature; when knowledge is mature, it is not possible to wait for even a moment: a mature mind cannot be denied.

(Miln 194)

In short, when a spiritually mature person sees the truth or realizes the true nature of life, he adjusts his life according to it, and so becomes a new person. Wisdom has arisen in him. When he shares this wisdom

with others to benefit them, compassion has arisen in him. Such a person is called a “True Person” (*sat, puruṣa/sappurisa*, M 1:287, 3:23).

### (b) Purpose of life

On a deeper level, we can ask ourselves the question: **what is the purpose of life?** All living beings, indeed all living things, grow old, but very few grow up. That is to say, most of us simply go through our life cycle, little different from a mosquito or a cockroach. We are born, we go through fragile infancy, and we reach adulthood; we seek for food and other supports of life; we reproduce; and we die. Then the whole cycle starts all over again. This is growing old without growing up.

Man is a highly evolved being, but mostly in the context of a species. This is a group development, physical and cultural at best. It has taken million of years for us to evolve in this way, but it is still a collective event as it were. As such, it is at best a lower evolution. There comes a point where this lower evolution leaves you contented, not wanting to grow further, through a false feeling of self-satisfaction.

Eventually, at one time or another, we get flashes of insight that reveal in our personal wisdom, how in reality alone we are; that we are really different from others, that we have inner goodness. But this true self cannot be realized because of external realities. This self-awareness, however, when cultivated more constantly and deeply leads one to a higher evolution. This is the arising of reflexive consciousness, **true self-awareness**.

When we realize that we are going through repeated cycles of habitual tendencies, especially negative tendencies, we want to break out of them. This is almost always difficult, if not impossible, to do so because of our environment, the company we keep; above all, our mindset. When we seriously make an effort to break out like the proverbial chicken that pecks its way through the egg-shell (V 3:3-5; M 1:104 = S 3:153), then we have begun on the path of higher evolution towards spiritual enlightenment [22; 3:14]. This was what made Prince Siddhārtha renounce the world.

## 7. RĀHULA

Realizing the futility and dangers of sensual pleasures and worldliness, Prince Siddhārtha decided to follow the way of the serene ascetic, the fourth sight he encountered. While he was mentally debating the idea of renunciation, he was abruptly interrupted by the news of the birth of a son. Contrary to expectation, he was not happy about it, exclaiming, “A fetter is born; a bond is born!” (P. *rāhulaṃ jātaṃ, bandhanaṃ jātaṃ*). When the king heard this, he decided that his grandson be named **Rāhula** meaning “impediment” or “fetter”.

On Siddhārtha’s way home through the streets of Kapilavastu, the women of the city leaned out of their windows to admire him as he drove by in his chariot. One of them, Kṛṣṇā Gautamī, a cousin (daughter of his father’s sister), filled with admiration, sang the following **nibbuta verse** (*nirvṛta, pada/nibbuta, pada*):<sup>3</sup>

Happy indeed is the mother,	<i>nibbutā nūna sā mātā</i>
Happy indeed is the father,	<i>nibbuto nūna so pitā</i>
Happy indeed is the wife,	<i>nibbutā nūna sā nārī</i>
Who has such a lord as this!	<i>yassāyaṃ īdiso patī.</i>

(DhA 1:85; J 1:61; ApA 65; DhA 34)

<sup>3</sup> The Pali term *nibbuta* (Skt. *nirvṛta*) is used here in its early original sense to mean “happiness, bliss, rest, ceasing”. For a discussion in this term, see K.R. Norman, “Mistaken Ideas about *Nibbāna*”, *The Buddhist Forum III*, 1995:222 f.

The maiden was actually praising the Bodhisattva, trying to win his heart. However, he thought differently:

When the fire of passion is extinguished, the heart is **happy**; when the fire of hate and the fire of ignorance are extinguished, it is **happy**; with the extinction of pride, false views and all the corruptions and pains, that is what is called **happy**.

The words of Kṛṣṇā Gautamī brought some peace of mind and a worthy lesson to him. “This woman has taught me where true happiness is to be found,” he thought (DhA 1:85). In gratitude, he gave her his pearl neck-lace, saying “Let this be a teacher’s present!” (J 1:61).

So we see here one of the interesting lesser known details in the Buddha’s life: it was this incident that probably gave Siddhārtha the hint that his problem was a spiritual one. The following event would confirm this notion.

## 8. THE SLEEPING WOMEN

On reaching home, Prince Siddhārtha found that his father had gathered together some of the most beautiful female dancers in the country to cheer him up. Female musicians played the sitar, the flute and the tambourine. They, however, only succeeded in putting the Prince into an uneasy sleep.

In the middle of the night, he suddenly awoke in a great spiritual agony “like a man who is told that his house is on fire” (J 1:61). And what he saw around him totally disgusted him: the sight of the musicians and dancers sprawling in their sleep in various indecorous postures. All those girls were supposed to be the prettiest and most charming in the country. Only a little while before, they had been posing enchantingly before him.

Now, they were scattered about the floor, some snoring like pigs, some with their mouths gaping wide open, some with spittle oozing from the corners of their mouths and dripping down onto their bodies and dresses, some grinding their teeth like hungry demons. Since sleep is not unlike death, the Prince felt as if he was in a charnel ground surrounded by corpses. He had only one thought: to flee from there.

At that moment, according to the Nidāna,kathā of the Jataka Commentary, the Bodhisattva stopped and thought, “I must see my son!” According to the Old Jātaka Commentary (in Elu or Old Sinhalese), quoted by Buddhaghosa, **Rāhula was seven years old** at that time (J 1:62).

Rising from his couch, he went to Yaśodharā’s residence. She was asleep with her hand on Rāhula’s head. With one foot in the doorway, the Bodhisattva stopped and looked for his newborn son whom he had yet to see. “If I were to lift the Princess’ hand to take my son in my arms, she would wake and hamper my departure. When I have reached my goal, I shall return to see him.” This is truly an insight into the compassionate nature of the Bodhisattva.

## 9. THE GREAT RENUNCIATION

The Jātaka Nidāna says that the Bodhisattva renounced the world when Rāhula was only seven days old (J 1:62). Although most later legends say that Siddhārtha renounced the world at 29, all the canonical stock passages on the renunciation say that he left the house

...while young, my hair coal-black, possessed of radiant youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness.

(Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta, M 1:164; Mahā Saccaka Sutta, M 1:240; Bodhi,rāja Kumāra Sutta, M 2:93; Saṅgārava Sutta, M 2: 212).

**(a) Māra**

It is difficult for us to fathom another person’s mind, least of all, the mind of the Bodhisattva as he leaves the palace in quest of spiritual truth. There are however numerous attempts at reflecting the challenges that confront such superhuman efforts, superhuman in the sense that their results affect future generations with promise of spiritual liberation. The shadow is darkest where the light shines brightest. In the light of Siddhārtha’s spiritual renunciation, a very dark shadow appears. According to legend, **Māra the evil one** attempts to prevent Siddhārtha from leaving the palace.

At that very moment, Māra came with the intention of making the Bodhisatta turn back; and standing in the sky, he said, “My lord, do not go forth. On the seventh day from today the treasure-wheel (*cakka,ratanam*) will appear to you. You will reign over the four great continents with their two thousand surrounding islands. Turn back, my lord!”

“Who are you?”

“I am Vasavatti.”

“Māra, I know full well that the treasure-wheel will appear to me, but I have no desire of sovereignty. I will become a Buddha causing the ten thousand world-systems to resound.”

Then Māra thought, “From now on, the moment you think a thought of lust, illwill or malice, I will know of it”; and followed him closely, sticking like his shadow, waiting for some slip.

(J 1:63)

This is the first of Māra’s many appearances to Gautama. Indeed, with this event, begins an interesting area of Buddhist studies, that of **demonology**, which is dominated by a single figure—that of Māra the evil one (Ling, 1962:43).

Some of this teaching [especially in the Majjhima, Aṅguttara and the Saṃyutta] [are] given in openly didactic form; elsewhere it occurs in semi-disguised form of legend, that is, stories of encounters with Māra by the Buddha and his followers. This legendary material nevertheless may seem to have a didactic import...

(Ling, 1962:43)

In this Chapter, we shall generally look at the figure of Māra on the level of *mythos*, that is, the language of mythology, as presented in the legends connected with the Buddha’s life. In the next Chapter, we shall examine Māra on the level of *logos*, that is, a scriptural analysis of his nature and function in the Buddha story.

**(b) The river Anomā**

On the full-moon day of the month of Āṣādhā/Āsaḷhā (June-July), 594 BCE, Prince Siddhārtha leaves the palace and his life of luxury in search of the Truth. His charioteer Chandaka accompanies him on the horse Kaṇṭhaka and they ride through three countries: the lands of the Śākya, the Kraudya (Koliyas) and the Mallas. By daybreak they have journeyed a distance of 30 leagues\*. Reaching the river Anomā, they leap over it and land on the farther bank (DA 1:57, 77; J 1:64, 4:119; SnA 382; DhA 1:85; UA 54; ThīA 2; VvA 314; DhsA 34).<sup>4</sup>

The river **Anomā** has been identified by Cunningham as either the Aumi River, which flows through the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh, or the Kudawa River, which flows through the Basti district of the same state (1871:486 ff.). Malalasekera, however, thinks that the word *anomā* (*na + oma*, “not shallow; glorious”) does not refer to an actual river, but merely descriptive of the river (DPPN 1:103). To support

<sup>4</sup> League (*yojana*). A *yojana* is the yoke of an Indian plough (J 6:38, 42). As distance, it is as far as can be covered by one yoke of oxen (about 7 miles or 1.6 km) (DhA 1:108, 2:13).

his notion, Malalasekera quotes the Jātaka Commentary story, where the Bodhisattva asks Chandaka the name of the river and Chandaka replies: “It is Anomā.” “Good,” says the Bodhisattva, “my renunciation shall also be *anomā*.” (J 1:64; cf. Thomas, 1949:61)

Judging that he had gone a sufficient distance to separate him from the Śākya courtiers sent out in pursuit by his father, Prince Siddhārtha stopped on the far bank of the Anomā. Giving his ornaments to his charioteer, he took his sword and cut off his long princely hair. It was then reduced, according to legend, to a two-finger length and curling rightwise, clung to his head, and like his beard, remained so throughout his life. He threw his hair and beard cuttings into the sky. They rose a league high and remained there, giving a sign that he would become the Buddha.

## 10. SIDDHĀRTHA THE ASCETIC

Śakra the king of the devas appeared, caught the hair and beard and placed them in a shrine in the Heaven of the Thirty-three. Then the ascetic Siddhārtha received **the eight requisites of a monk**—three robes, a bowl, a razor, a needle and thread, a girdle and a water-strainer. Some say that a Mahā Brahma, who had been his friend Ghaṭikara in former life, came and gave him these requisites. According to another source, when the ascetic Siddhārtha had cut off his hair, he exchanged his princely garments for the tattered rags of a hunter.

All the actions of Prince Siddhartha in transforming himself from a layman into an ascetic (*śramaṇa/samaṇa*) were witnessed by Chandaka his charioteer, for it was important for someone to be able to testify before king Śuddhodana that the sacrifice had been completely consummated and that there was no hope of seeing the prince again until he had attained his goal.

As for the horse Kaṇṭhaka, it knelt on its forelegs and licked its master’s feet with its tongue and shed hot tears. When the Bodhisattva sent Chandaka back, Kaṇṭhaka was listening to their talk, and thinking that it would never see its master again, died of a broken heart and was reborn as a *deva,putra* (ministering deity) in the Heaven of the Thirty-three (J 1:64 f.).<sup>5</sup>

## 11. REFORM MOVEMENT

### (a) Axial age

According to **Karl Jaspers**, the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE was the “Axial Age”, i.e. a turning point in human history. There was a great upsurge in intellectual and religious turmoil, and ideas and discussions were widespread. As there were neither books nor established centres of learning in ancient India, intelligent men and women sought and shared knowledge wherever crowds gathered—market-places, city gates and even highways.

The Buddha lived at a time when new confraternities or religious orders confronted the old brahminical system in the central Gangetic plain. Theologically, the brahminical religious establishment was known as *astikā* (lit. “those who think there is”), i.e. the “orthodox” establishment that affirmed the existence of such ideas as the Creator God and the priesthood of the brahmins as intermediaries between the human and the divine. The reform movement, in contrast, were known as *nāstika* (lit. “those who think there is not”) or the heterodox, since they reject the Vedas and the priesthood of the brahmins, and advocating direct experience of spirituality through insight.

In terms of practice, the members of the ascetic reform movement were generally known by the term *śramaṇa* (*samaṇa*). They rejected the teachings of the orthodox religious establishment, the brahmins or **brahmaṇa**. These factions were not only well known as religious groups but were also the intellectual

---

<sup>5</sup> The devaputra Kaṇṭhaka tells his story in the Vimāna, vatthu 81, vv. 15-22.

nucleus around which Indian theology, metaphysics and science were built. While the brahmins were mostly sedentary and a hereditary corporation with their traditional mantras, rites and rules, the *śramaṇas* constituted a strong **reform movement**, peopled mainly by the kshatriyas (members of the aristocratic warrior class) who (unlike the brahmins) did not maintain that religious knowledge was the exclusive privilege of any particular caste.

The members of this reform movement, also known as “wanderers” (*parivrājakā/paribbājaka*) or “ascetics” (*śramaṇā/samaṇa*) were not householders but eremites. They rejected the Vedas, abhorred brahminical rituals and were, as a rule, non-theistic. Since many of them who were celibate recluses, they could also be called “monks” [fr. late Greek *monakhos* ← *monos*, “alone”] but they did not lead cloistered lives. Some of them lived in the forest, either in huts or at the foot of trees or in the open, but most of the year, excluding the three-month rains-retreat, was spent wandering.

### (b) Adaptations

An example from the Dhammapada would show, in interesting contrast, how the Buddha (representative of the reform movement) reinterprets an orthodox doctrine and practice of his day:

Not by silence is one a sage,	<i>na monena muni hoti</i>
Who is confused and ignorant.	<i>mūlharūpo aviddasu</i>
Like one holding up a pair of scales,	<i>yo ca tulaṃ 'va paggayha</i>
The wise chooses the good.	<i>varami ādāya paṇḍito</i>

(Dh 268)

The *muni* belonged to a class of Vedic shamans or medicine men, specially associated with the god Rudra (a sinister god of illness) (Basham, 1989:16). The term *muni* literally means “silent sage”, and was used in later times to refer to ascetics of special sanctity. It was a term taken up especially by the Jains. The Vedas sometimes refer to the *muni* as being one “clothed in mind”, meaning they were naked (to express their non-attachment to the world).

In the Dhammapada verse, the Buddha plays on the etymology of the term *muni*, originally derived from √MAN, “to think” or √MUN, “to know”. While asserting that true spirituality is not one of ritual form (maintaining silence), but hiding one’s delusion and ignorance, the Buddha derives the term *muni* from √MĀ, “to measure”, hence the figure of the scales; that is, to measure or choose the good and reject the evil.

## 12. PROBLEM OF RENUNCIATION

In social terms, nothing is more against the stream (*paṭisotā,gāmī*, S 1:136; A 2:6, 214 f) of urban society (that centres around sexuality and family life) than **renunciation**, the voluntary commitment to a life of celibate asceticism. When Buddhism came to East Asia (especially China), the Buddhists often had to answer challenges against the question of renunciation. Even to this day, there is strong resistance to the idea of abandoning one’s family for the life of a celibate monastic.

“Is there any significance in renouncing the world? Was not the Buddha cold towards his wife and new-born child?” Such criticisms have been raised in the past by Hindus, particularly by those of the Mīmāṃsā school, which tends to value lay life; by Chinese Confucianists, whose life centre around the family and a structured society; and by Japanese nativist scholars of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### (a) The 4 stations of life

The Buddha was born at a time of great spiritual ferment in India (c. 500 BCE). It was a time when many intelligent young people went forth into homeless life to seek spiritual truth and solace. The

brahmins were alarmed at this development since its freelance nature would erode their religious authority and that they were also losing their own sons to this new **heterodox (nāstika) movement**, that is, those who rejected the Vedas to seek for truth beyond traditional rituals and scriptures.

To counter what were viewed as anti-establishment tendencies among the young, the orthodox (*astika*) brahminical teachers devised the doctrine of **the 4 stations of life (aśrāma)**, which divided the life of the twice-born (brahmins, *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya*) after initiation into four stages: the *brahmacarī* (celibate religious student), the *gṛhastha* (married householder), the *vānaprastha* (forest hermit) and the *sannyāsin* (wandering ascetics). The purpose of this doctrine was to keep asceticism in check and to confine it to men of late middle age. It was, however, never followed universally.

### **(b) Economic considerations**

The economic background of Siddhārtha's renunciation must also be considered. At least one scholar has argued that in ancient India only those who could ensure that their families would not be economically deprived were permitted to leave home to become wandering ascetics and religious. This would mean, therefore, that ancient Brahmanism and Buddhism belonged only to **the propertied class** and that Gautama Buddha was a representative of this social stratum (Walter Ruben 1954:121).

**Nakamura** argues that this criticism is not valid in regard to Siddhārtha's leaving home: "As his *saṅgha* grew in size, however, many troubled people not of the propertied class were admitted without distinction. The *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* clearly describe this." (2000:106 f.)

### **(c) Spiritual reason**

From a strategic viewpoint, even if Siddhārtha had remained in the palace, the fate of the Śākya would probably have been no different. Had Siddhārtha remained a prince and become a universal ruler (*cakravartī*), this would mean that he had to battle many other kingdoms and armies, causing the loss of uncountable lives and widespread hardships. Siddhārtha's greatness lies in the fact that, between the fate of his own clan, the Śākya (who were later annihilated by Kauśala), and the fate of humankind, he chose not to turn the wheel of the empire, but instead turned the Wheel of Truth. According to the **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta**, the Buddha, at the end of his life, told Subhadra (Subhadda), the last convert:

Twenty-nine years was I  
When I went forth to seek the good.  
Now over fifty years have passed  
Since the day that I went forth.

(D 1:151)

This clearly suggests that Siddhārtha left home **to resolve his question of what is good** (*kiṃ, kusala, -gāvesī*, M 1:163, 165, 166), "which means that in a sense his concern had a very large ethical component." (Nakamura, 2000:107).

As mentioned in the quote from the Milinda,pañha earlier on [6], king Milinda himself declared that "...there is no enlightenment when knowledge is not mature; when knowledge is mature, **it is not possible to wait for even a moment: a mature mind cannot be denied**" (Miln 194). Once the truth is seen, it cannot be unseen. In the case of Siddhārtha, he was moved out of spiritual agony to discover the liberating truth and later, out of compassion, to declare it to the world.

## **13. BIMBISĀRA**

According to Pali tradition, the Bodhisattva was 29 when he renounced the world. However, if we are to consider the lifestyle of the nobles and elite of ancient India--and the canonical *ipsissima verba* of the

Buddha that “while young, my hair coal-black, possessed of radiant youth, in the prime of life, I...went forth...” [9],--it is more likely that the Bodhisattva left home at around the age of 14 to 16.

The Bodhisattva is then said to have spent seven years in a spiritual quest. The seven years were divided into two unequal periods: one year of study, six years of self-mortification. According to the Jātaka account, before his period of study, the Bodhisattva, after spending seven days at Anupiya, went on foot to Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha.

In Rājagṛha, the Bodhisattva began to collect almsfood and came to the notice of the young prince (*kumāra*) **Śreṇīya Bimbisāra** (V 1:36). Historians say that he ascended the throne at 15 (around 543 or 546 BCE) [8:2a]. As such, Bimbisāra could not have been any older when he first met the ascetic Bodhisattva. Since the Bodhisattva is said to be five years older than Bimbisāra [8:4], the Bodhisattva must have been 20 or more likely a few years younger at their first meeting.

At dawn the next day, the young prince Bimbisāra visited the Bodhisattva who was staying at Pāṇḍava hill. The prince was impressed by the young Bodhisattva’s calmness and majesty, and on learning that the latter was of royal blood offered him a high position in his court. The Bodhisattva declined the offer saying that he was searching for enlightenment.

The prince then wished Bodhisattva success in his quest and requested the Bodhisattva to return to Rājagṛha after he had attained enlightenment to teach him (Bimbisāra) the Dharma for his own salvation (Mvst 2:199 f.) [4:20]. Such was the origin of a long friendship that was to last until the king’s tragic end [Chapter 9]. This important incident is also recorded in **the Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn no 27) [1:2].

#### 14. **ĀRĀDA AND UDRAKA**

From Rājagṛha, after his first meeting with Śreṇīya Bimbisāra, the Bodhisattva went forth in search of spiritual teachers. He approached **Ārāḍa Kālāma** (Ālāra Kālāma) and imbibed all that he taught. From him, the Bodhisattva learnt to develop the seventh Formless Absorption (*arūpa, dhyāna*), the Realm of Nothingness (*akiṃcany’āyatana*). The unenvious teacher, delighted at the pupil’s success, placed him on a level with himself. But the Bodhisattva was still unsatisfied as he had not found the answer to the true nature of life and the end of suffering.

Leaving Ārāḍa Kālāma, the Bodhisattva approached **Udraka (or Rudraka) Rāma,putra** (Uddaka Rāmaputta). Before long, the Bodhisattva attained the final stage of mental concentration, the Realm of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception (*naiva saṃjñā n’asaṃjñā’yatana*). This was the highest stage in worldly concentration when consciousness becomes so subtle and refined that it cannot be said whether consciousness exists or not. This was as far as any of the ancient sages could reach. Udraka Rāmaputra was happy over the Bodhisattva’s achievement and offered him the full charge of all his disciples. However, the Bodhisattva, still searching for the cause of suffering and the end of suffering, was not satisfied and took leave.

#### 15. **SELF-MORTIFICATION**

##### (a) **The Five Ascetics**

The Bodhisattva then made his way south with five companions towards the city of Gayā. The Bodhisattva and **the group of Five Ascetics** (*bhadra, vaggiya/pañca, vaggiya*) reached the village of Uruvilvā/Uruvelā and decided to stay in the pleasant grove beside the river Nairāñjanā/Nerañjarā. There, he practised various forms of self-mortification which were then deemed to be of great spiritual value.

Who were the Five Ascetics? According to the **Lalita, vistara**, the Bodhisattva met them at Udraka Rāmaputra’s hermitage and they followed him when he left Udraka. The Tibetan tradition say that they

were at the head of the three hundred (3 ascetics) and two hundred (2 ascetics) men sent by the Bodhisattva's father and father-in-law, respectively, to attend to him when he renounced the world.

According to the Jātaka **Nidāna,kathā**, the five companions were led by none other than **Kauṇḍinya** (Koṇḍañña), the youngest of the 8 leading brahmins out of the 64 brahmins who predicted that Prince Siddhartha would discover the Truth [1:6c]. The other 7 having died, he tried to rile their sons to follow him to attend to the Bodhisattva, but only 4 complied (Thomas, 1927:80). These four ascetics were the brahmins Bhadrīka (Bhaddiya), Vaśpa or Daśa,bala Kaśyapa (Vappa), Mahānāma Kulika and Aśvajit (Assaji).

### **(b) Mahā Saccaka Sutta**

In the **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M no 36), the Buddha describes various forms of self-mortification he practised. He bit his teeth together and pushed his tongue tightly to the palate until sweat streamed down from the arm-pits. The pain was so intense that it was like a strong man grasping a weak man by the head or throat and pressing tightly. Despite the great pain, he kept his mind detached and persisted in his effort.

However, seeing that such practices would not lead him to enlightenment, he stopped and tried another way. Then, he gradually controlled his breath until it was unable to pass through the nostrils and mouth forced its way through the ears with a terrible sound causing excruciating pain in the head and the stomach along with an oppressive heat all over the body.

When this, too, failed, the Bodhisattva went on to try another method: he reduced his food, sometimes gradually diminishing the amount and at other times taking only a very fine kind, until his body withered and his complexion sallow. When he touched his belly, he could feel his spine! When he tried stroke his body, the hair with rotten roots fell off!

## **16. FUTILITY AND DANGER**

### **(a) Dangers of sensual pleasures**

The Bodhisattva realized that self-mortification is not the way to salvation and three similes occurred to him in this connection. Firstly, those who have not detached themselves from sensual pleasures and whose minds still delight in them would not attain enlightenment whether or not they experience intense pain: they are like **pieces of wood fresh with sap and submerged in water**. They will never produce fire by rubbing against each other.

Secondly, those who have detached their bodies from sensual pleasures but whose minds still delight in them are again never in a position to attain enlightenment no matter what pain they go through: they are like **pieces of wood still fresh with sap**. Though far away from water they would not produce fire.

Thirdly, those who have detached themselves from sensual pleasures and do not delight in them, they are in a position to attain enlightenment whether or not they experience great pain: they are like **pieces of dry wood without any sap and which have been taken out of the water**. A person can produce fire by rubbing them together.

### **(b) The emaciated Gandhāra image**

There are at least three well known statues of the Buddha looking very emaciated<sup>6</sup> as described in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta:

---

<sup>6</sup> The image from Sikri now located in the Lahor Museum; the image from Takht-i-Bahi now in the Peshawar Museum; and the Jamalgarhi image now in the British Museum. (Brown 1997:108-110)

Because I ate so little, my body reached a state of emaciation. Because of eating so little, my limbs became like segments of vine stems or bamboo stems. Because of eating so little, my backside became like a camel's hoof. Because of eating so little, the projections on my spine stood forth like beads on a string. Because of eating so little, my ribs jutted out like the rafters of an old roofless barn. Because of eating so little, the gleam of my eyes sank far down in their sockets, looking like the gleam of water that has sunk far down in a deep well. Because of eating so little, my scalp shrivelled and withered as green bitter gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. Because of eating so little my belly skin adhered to my backbone, so that if I touched by belly skin I touched my backbone and if I touched my backbone, I touched my belly skin. Because of eating so little, if I urinated or defaecated, I fell over on my face right there. Because of eating so little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell from my body as I rubbed.

(M 1:246 f.)

**Robert L. Brown** wrote a paper<sup>7</sup> about Gandhāra images of the emaciated Buddha where he reminds us that there are two episodes of the Buddha where he fasts for long periods, for six years as a Bodhisattva, and for 49 days immediately following the Great Enlightenment. He admits that

The texts make clear that the Buddha had practiced such austerities to greater and more masterful extremes than any of the ascetics, and his rejection of these practices thus comes from one who has the moral authority of an insider who has mastered them.

(Brown, 1997:106)

However, he goes on to argue that although most people think that these images depict the Bodhisattva at the height of his self-mortification, on closer examination of the details on these images, they actually represent the Buddha fasting during the 49 days following the Great Enlightenment (Brown 1997:106, 112). Brown, however, fails to note perhaps the clearest evidence that it is the Buddha, not the Bodhisattva, who is represented in the Sikri and the Jamalgarhi images (and very likely in the Takht-i-Bahi image, too)---namely, the presence of **the halo or aureole** behind the image's head.

Xuanzang, in his journals, reports that “Both in old times and now, among the better classes and the poor, those who suffer from disease are accustomed to anoint the figure with scented earth, on which they get cured in many cases” (Xiyuji tr. Beal 128). These images, however, occur almost entirely in one small geographical area and from a short period of time (first four centuries BCE), that is, the Gandhāra area of what is now Pakistan (although there is one such image from Pagan in Burma in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE) (1997:105, 113). Brown however admits that “I do not know why the Gandhāran artists were drawn to the emaciated Buddha, but it may relate to their interest, shared with Greco-Roman artists, in artistic naturalism” (1997:114).

The image of pain and death, characteristic as they may be of the Bodhisattva's life, have little appeal to the Buddhists. As such, one possible reason for the almost total absence of such images in south and southeast Asia “is because it represents the Buddha embodying the very concepts of pain and death which he had overcome” (Brown, 1997:112).

### (c) Siddhārtha collapses

After six long years of practising self-mortification, the ascetic Siddhartha still did not realize his goal. One day, while walking up and down deep in meditation, he was suddenly overcome by severe pain. He fainted and fell. (J 1:67)

---

<sup>7</sup> “The Emaciated Gandhāran Buddha Images: Asceticism, Health and the Body.” In *Living a Life in Accord with Dhamma*, edd. Eilenberg et al. 1997:105-115.

The five ascetics rushed to Siddhârtha's aid—two of them propped him up, another massaged his legs, the third fanned him, and the fourth, not knowing what to do, wept.

It is said that even the devas panicked thinking that Siddhârtha had died. They raced to Kapilavastu and announced to King Śuddhodana, “Your son is dead!” But the king refused to believe it, remembering how, even as a child, Siddhârtha had meditated under the jambu tree.

## 17. THE MIDDLE WAY

### (a) Parable of the lute

Realizing the futility and danger of self-mortification, the Bodhisattva decides to try a different way. On reflection, he recalls his luxurious life in the palaces that is not conducive to spiritual growth. On the other hand, six years of self-mortification does not bring him spiritual insight either. The answer, as such, must lie somewhere in between—this is his first glimpse of **the middle way** (cf. V 1:181 f; A 3:374 f).

It was at this point, traditional legends have it, that Śakra, the king of the devas, rushes down from his heaven with a divine lute and appears before the ailing Bodhisattva. The lute has three strings: one very loose, one very tight, and the middle one well-tuned. When the loose string is touched, it makes a weak discordant noise. The tight string bursts at the touch. The middle well-tuned string sang a sweet sound. This dramatic **simile of the lute** is immortalized in the words of *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold (1879):

*“Fair goes the dancing when the sitar’s tuned;  
Tune us the sitar neither low nor high,  
And we will dance away the hearts of men.*

*The string o’erstretched breaks, and the music flies;  
The string o’erslack is dumb, and music dies;  
Tune us the sitar neither low nor high.”*

*(The Light of Asia, Book the Sixth)*

The use of the simile of the lute to point to the middle way is found in several places in the Canon itself though never in the context of the Bodhisattva's struggle for enlightenment. The best known lute story is the Buddha's admonition of the over-zealous practitioner **Śroṇa Koṭī,viṃśa** (Soṇa Koḷivisa), who was a musician before he became a monk (V 1:182 f.; A vi,55 = 3:373; cf. another simile of the lute, S 4:197 f.).

### (b) Siddhârtha gives up self-mortification

The Bodhisattva then recalls when, as a child, he meditates under a jambu tree during the Ploughing Festival and attains the first level of meditational absorption (*dhyāna/jhāna*). He then realizes that the secret of salvation lies in **the development of the mind**, and not through bodily torture. This momentous spiritual moments are recorded in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36):

I considered: “I recall that when my father the Sakya was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first Absorption, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with zest and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment?” Then, following on that memory, came the realization: “That is the path to enlightenment!”

(M 1:246 f.)

He describes the actual turning-point in his spiritual quest in these words:

I thought: “Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasure and unwholesome states?” I thought: “I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.”

I considered: “It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food—some boiled rice and bread.” And I ate some solid food—some boiled rice and bread. Now at that time five monks were waiting upon me. Thinking, “If our recluse Gotama achieves some higher state, he will inform us.” But when I ate the boiled rice and bread, the five monks were disgusted and left me, thinking: “The recluse Gotama now lives luxuriously: he has given up his striving and reverted to luxury.”

(M 1:246 f.)

At the time when the Bodhisattva needed their assistance most, the Five Monks left him for the Deer Park at Benares. But the Bodhisattva was not discouraged. He struggled on alone. One has to face the truth of reality all alone, if it needs be.

## 18. THE BODHISATTVA'S LAST MEAL

### (a) Sujātā

A rich woman of Senānī village (near Uruvilvā) named **Sujātā** had offered a prayer before a banyan tree asking the tree deity to give her a son as her firstborn. When she did get a son, she rejoiced and prepared herself to make an offering to the deity.

When her maid Purṇā saw the Bodhisattva sitting under the banyan tree, she thought that he must surely be the tree deity who had come to claim his offering. Both Sujātā and Purṇā came and offered the Bodhisattva some milk-rice in a golden bowl.

### (b) Act of truth

The Bodhisattva received the food. Then he went down to the Supraṭiṣṭhita Ford on the Nairāñjanā to bathe. After that, he dressed himself for his meal. He made all the rice into 49 small balls and ate them without any water. This was the Bodhisattva's last meal before the Enlightenment and the only one for the next 49 days.

After his meal, the Bodhisattva made an “act of truth” (*satya, kriya/sacchikiriya*) saying: “If I will today become a Buddha, let this bowl go upstream; if not, let it go downstream!” Then he cast the golden bowl into the water and immediately it shot upstream into the middle of the river.

The bowl then sank into a whirlpool and went to the palace of Kāla Nāga,rāja (the Black Serpent King). It struck against the bowls from which the three previous Buddhas of this world-cycle had eaten, made them sound “Killi-killi!” and stopped at the lowest of them. The Serpent King, hearing the noise, said: “Yesterday, a Buddha arose, today another has just arisen!” Then, he stood singing praises to him.

## 19. THE BODHISATTVA'S DREAMS

The night before the Enlightenment, the Bodhisattva had five dreams, clarifying that he would become Buddha. The Scriptures list the five dreams as follows:

- (1) The world appeared as a great couch, and the Himalayas as the pillow. His left hand was plunged into the eastern ocean, his right in the western, and his feet in the southern. This means that he would attain **supreme Enlightenment**.

- (2) A plant called *tiriya* (i.e. *kuśa* grass) grew out from his navel, and rose and touched the sky. This means that he would discover **the Noble Eightfold Path** which he would proclaim to human as well as heavenly beings.
- (3) White worms with black heads crept up as far as his knees and covered them. These were white-robed **lay followers** who find lifelong refuge in the Buddha.
- (4) Four birds of different colours came from the four quarters, and falling at his feet became entirely white. These are the four castes who, leaving the household life to join **the Sangha**, became the Buddha's disciples and realize the highest freedom.
- (5) He was walking to and fro on a mountain of dung but was not smeared by it. This meant that he would receive **the four basic requisites of a monk** (food, robes, shelter, medicine) and enjoy them without being attached to them.

(A 3:240; Mvst 2:136)

## 20. THE BODHISATTVA'S DETERMINATION

### (a) Svastika the grass cutter

Having passed the day in a grove of *sāl* (Pali, *sāla*) trees, the Bodhisattva went in the evening towards the Bodhi tree. Along the way, he met a grass-cutter named Svastika (Sothtiya) who, seeing the Bodhisattva's majesty, offered him eight handfuls of *kuśa* grass which the Bodhisattva took and spread out under the Bodhi tree on the east side. [Some say that Svastika was Śakra in disguise. (Abhiniṣkramaṇa Sūtra; Abhns:B 196)]

Then sitting down cross-legged and upright, the Bodhisattva firmly resolved:

Skin, sinew, and bone may dry up; my flesh and blood may dry up in my body, but without attaining complete enlightenment, I will not leave this seat!

(J 1:71)

### (b) Māra's temptation

Then, according to the **Padhāna Sutta**, Māra the Evil One appeared before the Bodhisattva and, pretending to be concerned, said:

A thousand parts (of you) belong to death,  
Only one of you is life;  
Live, good sir! Life is better—  
Living, you can do meritorious deeds!

From living the holy life  
And making sacrifices to the sacred fire,  
Much merit will be heaped up by you—  
What can you do with mental exertion?

(Sn 427 f)

Here, we see Māra as the preserver of the *status quo* in the negative sense. He tries to discourage those who are seeking personal development and entices them to keep to the "old ways". This Padhāna Sutta account is the first of two actual confrontation of the Buddha by Māra (the other is recorded in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta). [3:13]

In the **Padhāna Sutta** (Sn no. 28), Māra pursues the Bodhisattva for seven years like a dark hungry bird hovering “around a stone that looks like a piece of fat” (Sn 447 f.) but fails to discourage him. Then, he leaves the Bodhisattva in disgust. Overcome with grief, he lets his lute, the Bīlva,paṇḍu Vinā, slip from his arm (*tassa sokaparetassa vīṇā kacchā abhassatha*, Sn 449a). It is said that Śakra picked up the lute and gave it to Pañca,sikhā (SnA 394). The lute is so huge and powerful, it is said, that a sound it produces could reverberate for four months in earthly time!

The **Mahāvastu** counterpart of the Padhāna Sutta, however, has no equivalent of Sn 446-448, but has an interesting version of Sn 449, the closing stanza of the Sutta Nipāta, which has: “The lute fell from his arm-pit”. Jayawickrama says that this “suggests a confusion of a legend, the origin of which seems obscure”. Despite the Sn Commentary’s explanation, it does not solve the question of how Māra came by a vīṇā. The Mahāvastu parallel to Sn 449a reads: *tasya śokaparītasya vināśam gacchi ucchriti*, “**overcome with grief, his pride was all shattered**” (Mvst 2:240), which probably expresses the original idea that may have existed prior to the importation of the vīṇā from the developed legend which speaks of his daughters playing instrumental music as a part of their wiles. (Jayawickrama PBR 3,1:12).

## 21. MARA’S ATTACKS

### (a) The nine storms

Later accounts tell us that when the Bodhisattva was sitting under the Bodhi tree just before his Enlightenment, Māra appeared bearing a thousand arms, each holding a weapon, and seated on the fierce elephant Girimekhala said to be 150 leagues high. Surrounding him was a great and fearful demonic army which furiously attacked him with nine storms, one after another.

First, Māra stirred up a **raging whirlwind** that could uproot trees, destroy mountains and wipe out towns. But the wind died out when it reached the Bodhisattva—it did not even stir the hem of his robe.

Then Māra caused great clouds to gather and a **torrential rain-storm** to pour down causing a great flood which drowned the trees. But the waters did not reach the Bodhisattva—his robe was not wet even the size of a dewdrop.

Māra followed up with a **storm of rocks**, spitting fire and smoke. But as they reached the Bodhisattva they changed into heavenly garlands.

Then Māra raised a **storm of deadly weapons**—one-edged swords, two-edged swords, spears and arrows, smoking and flaming through the sky—to fall on the Bodhisattva. They became divine flowers and fell at the Bodhisattva’s feet.

Then, came a **rain-storm of glowing coal** that shot through the sky like red *kiṃsuka* flowers, but they scattered at the feet of the Bodhisattva like divine flowers.

Then Māra raised a **storm of burning embers** that shot through the air exceedingly hot, but they fell at the Bodhisattva’s feet as sandalwood powder.

Then he caused a **storm of fine sand** that smoked and flamed through the air, but it fell as divine flowers before the Bodhisattva.

Then Māra raised a **storm of smoking and flaming lava** to fall from the sky, but it changed into divine unguent at the Bodhisattva’s feet.

Māra thought that he could terrify the Bodhisattva with a **thick blinding darkness** that he made fourfold (like the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the waning moon, a thick forest, a dark cloud and midnight combined). But when it reached the Bodhisattva, it disappeared just like darkness before the brightness of the sun.

(J 1:72 f)

### (b) Final victory over Māra

Finally, the enraged Māra tried a desperate ruse. He used his last weapon—the **terrifying flying bladed discus (*cakr'āvudha*)** that could cleave a pillar of solid rock as if it were tender bamboo shoot. But, when he hurled it at the Bodhisattva, it hovered over him like a canopy of flowers. He challenged the Bodhisattva to get up from the seat under the Bodhi tree. Māra claimed that the seat was his and not the Bodhisattva's. The Bodhisattva replied that he had practised all **the Ten Perfections** at three different levels and made the five great sacrifices (of wife, children, kingdom, limb and life, J 6:552) and had perfected the way of good—therefore the seat belonged to the Bodhisattva. This is called the “Thunderbolt Throne” or “Diamond Seat” (*vajr'āsāna*).

When all his efforts were in vain, Māra challenged the Bodhisattva to prove his claim to enlightenment. Thereupon, **the Bodhisattva touched the earth with his right hand**. The earth shook and rumbled, and Sthavarā (Thavarā), Mother Earth, emerged from underneath in witness of his unsurpassed virtues. Some say that Māra's evil host sank into the ground; others say that Sthavarā wrung her long hair from which a great flood emerged and washed the demons away. Māra himself, surprised and terrified, fled.

This event is often commemorated in two common ways, ritually and iconographically. Among the Theravāda Buddhists of Thailand, it is commemorated when, after the conclusion of a merit-making ceremony, the water of dedication (*dakṣiṇ'odaka*) is poured away at the root of a tree. Iconographically, the Buddha's final victory over Māra (*māra, vijaya*) is depicted in the Buddha images showing the Earth-touching Gesture (*bhūmi, sparśa mudra*), the most famous of which is the Phra Buddha Jinarāj image in Phitsanulok, Thailand..

## 22. THE PERFECT SELF-ENLIGHTENMENT

### (a) The Great Enlightenment

On the full moon day of the month of Vaiśākha (Vesākha, April-May) in the year 588 BC (or according to modern scholars, c. 528 BCE), the Bodhisattva, then **only 35 years old**, attained the Perfect Self-enlightenment. Seated under the famous pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*, thenceforth known as the Bodhi tree) at Buddha, gayā, he developed various true knowledges or superknowledges (*abhijñā/abhiññā*).

The Buddha describes his experience of enlightenment in these words as preserved in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36):

I thought: “Why am I afraid of the pleasure (*sukha*) that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?” I thought: “I am not afraid of the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.”<sup>8</sup>

Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in **the first Absorption**, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with zest and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in **the second Absorption**.... With the fading away of zest as well... I entered upon and abided in **the third Absorp-**

<sup>8</sup> On the two kinds of pleasures, see for example the Araṇa, vibhaṅga Sutta, M 139.9 = 3:233.

**tion...** With the abandoning of pleasure and pain...I entered upon and abided in **the fourth Absorption...** But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to **knowledge of the recollection of past lives...** This was the first true knowledge .

(M 1:246-248)

It was during the first watch of the night (6.00-10.00 p.m.) that the Bodhisattva developed the first true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the recollection of past lives.** In the middle watch (10.00 p.m.-2.00 a.m.), he developed the second true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the perception of the arising and passing away of beings** which enable him to see the cycles of death and rebirth of other beings faring according to their karma. And, in the last watch of the night (2.00-6.00 a.m.), he developed the third true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the destruction of passions.** Understanding the nature of things as they truly are, finally he attained the Perfect Enlightenment and Nirvana.

### (b) The first Buddha Word

Among the first words of the Buddha, spoken after his Enlightenment, are those found in this famous Verse of Uplift (*udāna, gāthā*):

Through many a birth in this cycle of lives,  
I've wandered,  
Seeking but not finding  
The builder of this house.  
Painful is repeated birth.  
O house-builder, you are seen!  
You shall not build a house again!

All your rafters are broken  
And your ridgepole shattered!  
My mind has reached the Unconditioned!  
The end of craving has been attained!

(Dh 153-154)

This verse is very interesting and important. First of all, it confirms the doctrine of **rebirth**. Secondly, it **denies the Creator-idea**. Thirdly, the fact of **suffering** is realized to be universal. All these are affirmed through personal experience.

The second part of the verse gives the first summary of the Buddha's Teaching. First, there is the affirmation of his supreme discovery: "O house-builder, you are seen!" The term "house-builder" (*gaha-kāraka*) has two meanings: the Commentaries interpret it as "**craving**" but it can also be taken as the Creator (*iśvara, nirmāṇa*) idea.

The word "house" (*geha*) refers to this world itself physically and spiritually to **the cycle of rebirth** (*saṃsāra*). The "rafters" (*phāsuka*) are the passions that make one cling on to this world. The "ridgepole" (*gaha, kūṭa*) is **ignorance**, the cause of karma.

Finally, the Buddha announces his Perfect Enlightenment with the words "My mind has reached the Unconditioned! The end of craving has been attained!" The Unconditioned (*visaṅkhāra*) is a synonym for Nirvana. In the Vinaya, the Buddha compares his enlightenment to a chick breaking out of an egg:

“Brahmin, it is like a **hen with eight or ten or twelve eggs** on which she sat properly, properly warmed and properly hatched. Is that chick which should win forth safely, having first of all pierced through the egg-shell, having first of all pierced through the egg-shell with the point of the claw on its foot, or with its beak, to be called the eldest or the youngest?” he said/

“He is to be called the eldest, good Gotama, for he is the eldest of these,” he said.

“Even so I, brahmin, having pierced through the shell of ignorance for the sake of creatures going in ignorance, born of eggs, covered over, am unique in the world, utterly enlightened with unsurpassed enlightenment, I myself, brahmin, am the world’s eldest and highest.”

(V 3:3 f; cf. D 2:15)



## READING LIST

Brown, Robert L.

- 1997 “The Emaciated Gandhāran Buddha Images: Asceticism, health, and the body”. In Eilenberg, Diskul & Brown (edd.), *Buddhist Behavioral Codes and the Modern World*. Bangkok: Silpakorn University, 1997:105-115.

Gombrich, Richard

- 1980 “The Significance of Former Buddhas in the Theravādin Tradition”. In Balasooriya, S. et al (ed.), *Buddhist Studies in Honour of Walpola Rahula*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1980:62-72.
- 1996 *How Buddhism Began: The conditioned genesis of the early teachings*. London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone, 1996:75-80.

Harvey, Peter

- 2000 *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, values and issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000:31 ff.

Ling, T.O.

- 1973 *The Buddha*. London: Temple Smith. Ch. 7.

Nyanatiloka

- 1982 *The Buddha’s Path to Deliverance*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society. 1982:13-31.