



WARRIOR
of Peace

The Life of the Buddha

JINANANDA

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WINDHORSE PUBLICATIONS

Published by
Windhorse Publications
169 Mill Road
Cambridge
CB1 3AN

info@windhorsepublications.com
www.windhorsepublications.com

© Jinananda 2002

First Edition 2001
Electronic edition 2014

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Cover design: Alban Leigh

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN: 1 899579 32 X
ebook ISBN: 978-1-909314-47-4

Windhorse Publications would be pleased to hear about your reading experience with this ebook at:
info@windhorsepublications.com

References to Internet web sites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor Windhorse Publications is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

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About the Author

Jinananda, also known as Duncan Steen, was born in 1952 in Bedford, England. Brought up in the Church of England, which he enjoyed (thanks to the music and King James Bible), he took up Transcendental Meditation in 1970, and later studied Saṁkhya yoga in India, before discovering Buddhism in England. He was ordained within the Western Buddhist Order in 1986, when he was given his Buddhist name, which means 'Bliss of the Conqueror'. Since 1990 he has worked as an editor for his teacher, Ugyen Sangharakshita. He is the author of *The Middle Way: The Story of Buddhism* and an English version of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, both published by Naxos Audio Books, and *Meditating*, an introduction to meditation published by Windhorse. He has taught meditation and Buddhism at the West London Buddhist Centre for sixteen years.

Acknowledgements

The account of the Buddha's life that follows has been put together from many sources. If it has any virtues, they come from those sources. Its faults are all my own. Anything I have learned about Buddhism comes mainly from my teacher, Ugyen Sangharakshita, though I have taken inspiration and information from many other writers and teachers, some of whom are cited in a short bibliography, which I have restricted to biographical material about the Buddha. Translations from original texts have sometimes been simplified and abbreviated. I have used terms that are more familiar in their Sanskrit form, such as dharma and nirvāṇa, in preference to their Pali equivalents (*dhamma* and *nibbāna*) even when quoting from the Pali.

I am grateful to Naxos Audio Books for permission to publish the text of the first part of *The Middle Way*, which forms the basis of this book. I must also thank Siddhisambhava, Dharmachandra, Ruchiraketu, Kulananda, and Jnanasiddhi, for encouragement and criticism, and the Windhorse editorial team, Vidyadevi, Padmavajri, Pabodhana, Dhivati, and Portia, and Dharmashura and Jnanasiddhi (again) for giving me the time to revise the text. Special thanks go to Ashvajit, for graciously and unsparingly applying his keen nose for dubious views to the book even while it was careering towards the final stages of preparation for publication; and – as always – to Shantavira, the magisterial buffers of the Windhorse editorial process.

Jinananda
West London Buddhist Centre
March 2002

*This book is dedicated to Nicolas Soames,
with affection*

INTRODUCTION

THE SECRET OF AN ANCIENT SMILE

If you come to think of it, what a queer thing Life is! So unlike anything else, don't you know, if you know what I mean.
P.G. Wodehouse, *Rallying Around Old George*

On a full-moon night of terror and magic and transformation, a dark, skeletal figure sits under a tree by a river. He is just bones and sinews, skin and rags, his face a bearded skull, his eyes like burning coals at the bottom of two dark pits; and he is totally alone. At first sight he might seem to be just another piece of human wreckage thrown up in this place by a pitiless world, except that there is something lordly about him, an air of self-command and confidence, as if he knows precisely what he is doing and where he is going. Yet the truth of what occurs on that night is something that can never be explained, it is humanly inconceivable, and the next day the man is no longer there. In his place is the Awakened One, the Compassionate One, the Revealer of the Way to the heart of the mystery of life. What he knows is eternally unknowable, though it is before us in every breath we take. He will be called the Buddha, though he will be seen by no one. He will teach for fifty years, and he will say not a word. How shall we trace him then, the trackless one?¹

No one who saw the gaunt, ragged figure, sitting motionless day and night, would have seen anything out of the ordinary. Meditating ascetics were not an unusual sight in northern India in the fifth century BCE, any more than they are today, yet we have all seen images of this particular man sitting, legs crossed, eyes lowered, during those days and nights. There is decisive energy in the unshakeable poise of his posture, ineffable wisdom and fathomless compassion in his half smile.

This image remains, two-and-a-half thousand years later, the archetypal symbol of the spiritual quest. When nothing seems to make sense any more, it is his face that looks out at us with the assurance that there is another way. At about the same time as Greek philosophers were laying the foundations of Western science and philosophy, this man sitting beside that river on that night in ancient India was already demystifying the quest for truth. What he shared with his Greek contemporaries was a concern to explore fundamental human values based on an appeal not to the authority of God or revelation or holy books, but to reason and experience. The Buddha was plain and open in his methods:

Give me any reasonable person, who is sincere, honest and straightforward, and I will teach them the Dharma.
Dīgha-Nikāya 25.22, Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta

Buddhism, like Greek philosophy, arises out of a resolve to focus on essentials. It arises out of an understanding that life comes before religion – that one is a human being first, and a Buddhist – or

anything else – second. What, then, is so significant about what the Buddha had to say? Why was he accorded the title of Buddha, ‘one who is awake’?

What the Buddha uncovered is a natural training programme – natural in the sense of being based on an innate human capacity – by which anyone may turn their life around in order to explore and realize for themselves the ultimate nature of things. This is one way of describing what Buddhists believe he achieved – that he opened up the possibility, for anyone who makes the effort, of solving the riddle of life, not as a philosopher or a scientist, but as direct human experience. He offered a definite achievable goal for ordinary human life; in fact, he saw it as the only goal of a truly sane human life. And because this goal, this solution, was not theoretical, because it flies under the radar of all the ways in which we communicate and evaluate our experience, to speak of it in this or in any other way can be true only up to a point.

In some sense this was his message. What he came up with was not only a system of practice, but, more importantly, a clear perception of the truth of things as a straightforward practical affair, which only becomes complicated when we don’t take it up as a practice, when we don’t give ourselves to it. This, of course, runs entirely counter to the spirit of our information age. Information is power, it is said, and in some subtle way that is always what we want from the information we seek. We want to be in control of that power, rather than give ourselves to it; we want the use of the truth, not its practice; we want to find the truth out there, not bring it to birth from within; we want to be titillated by the truth, not transformed by it.

We have perfect reproductions of the greatest art and music at the press of a button to hold the silence and emptiness at bay. We have slow-motion replays so that we don’t have to pay attention. We have palm-top organizers so that we don’t have to remember things. We have instant editing on word processors, and cameras to release us from having to commit ourselves to the moment. We have ways of not having to live with our choices (liposuction, divorce). We can enjoy disembodied communication with almost anyone, whenever and wherever we want, with total control. With cars and planes we no longer have to belong to the environment that sustains us. We have a growing liberty to make something different happen, so as to avoid having to attend to what is. Our whole culture is built on the faith that dissatisfaction is avoidable for those with sufficient resources to throw at their predicament. So the Buddha’s insistence on the simple and immediate – that is, on turning our life here and now into a practice – makes his teaching in some ways an odd choice for multitasking individuals leading richly-layered lives.

If these discerning consumers do come to Buddhism, it is in search of things that appear to be unavailable elsewhere: calm, clarity, and compassion; freedom, peace, and joy; truth, beauty, and wisdom; self-mastery, fearlessness, and the overcoming of death. For most people, even for many who call themselves Buddhists, these ideals remain abstractions, and the price of turning them into lived experience remains too high. But a few people do get a glimpse or a sense of them as a real human possibility, and it is at this point that the familiar figure of the Buddha starts to come alive.

The Buddha starts to come alive when these grand ideals come closer to the surface, in the form of a hunger to be more honest, with ourselves and with the reality of things as it expresses itself in our situation, here and now. In the end, we want a living relationship with truth, which will also be a truthful relationship with life. That is why we keep going back to the figure of the Buddha, whose stillness and weight and presence seem slowly to deepen as we allow his silence to speak directly to our deepest most individual and most immediate concerns. If we sit with him long enough we may even, in the end, discover the ultimate secret of the universe encoded in the Buddha’s smile of compassion.

WHAT NATURE OF MAN BECOMES A BUDDHA?

Nothing is more wrong-headed than calling meaning a mental activity.

Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations

Who was this man? Where did he come from? And in what sense was he – in becoming a Buddha – no longer a man? Was he human? Or divine? The simple answer is that he was a man who transcended the predicament by which we define our humanity. However, this did not make him a god – the Buddha never claimed divine status. What we can say of his achievement, perhaps, is that he redefined – indeed re-evaluated – our humanity, bringing to it an awesome extra dimension of responsibility. So in order to understand a little of who he was, it is important to question our assumptions of what it is to be human. This is what Buddhist practice largely consists in: the attempt to take the living of our life more seriously, to make the predicament of being human the most important issue of our life, and to root out our deepest illusions about it.

For a Buddhist, to be born a human being is in no way a limitation. To be more precise, having self-awareness confers a limitless capacity for the development of wisdom and compassion; indeed, only the possessor of self-awareness is capable of such development. A mortal is not therefore a ‘mere’ mortal, for our awareness of mortality only sharpens our self-awareness. We are certainly not ‘creatures’. We are not the creation of some divine being or creative principle (usually called ‘God’). The man who became the Buddha did not see himself as such.

Nor did he see himself as the product simply of material forces. There is a view, usually called common sense, according to which our mental existence takes place inside our heads, and visionary experience is simply an aberrant product of this brain activity. This view leaves us with a mental, inner, and spiritual life that is somehow separate from our physical presence in the world, a kind of ghost realm locked away in our head – a ‘ghost in the machine’. This seems to be another hangover from our theistic heritage. It goes with the idea of the self or the soul being something hidden inside us. Stripped of its relation with God, this becomes itself a kind of little god, an autonomous and independent entity. Such a god is really a monster.

But if we perceive a common world through the senses, perhaps we share a mental or psychic world as well. Perhaps the forces driving us, whether benign or malignant, are more than just rogue psychological phenomena within our own minds. Perhaps they reflect our participation in other realms of existence, as real and magical as the one we tend to identify with so seamlessly. Perhaps we belong to the world and to others more intimately than we assume. At least, we have to appreciate that those who recorded the Buddha’s life did not see Gotama’s development into the Buddha as an essentially interior journey, but as a kind of cosmic drama, involving spirits, gods, and demons, in which the welfare of the world hung in the balance.

Thus the Buddha was born a man, but not in the sense of being constrained by that humanity. Balanced between the animal realm and non-corporeal forms of existence, and partaking of both, human beings are not regarded by Buddhists as inherently limited, sinful, fallen creatures, nor as just curiously privileged – if temporary – sequestrations of matter or energy. They are understood, rather, as being ideally placed to see into the nature of existence at whatever level, animal, human, or divine.

ICON OR PORTRAIT

Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of a man – the biography of the man himself cannot be written.

The Autobiography of Mark Twain

The reader of any literary life of the Buddha needs to be aware that they are getting a private and

individual experience of what once existed only as a collective, oral tradition, as sounds heard in the ear. ~~As we all know, stories that go round by word of mouth tend to change their shape, developing a~~ curious kind of truth or meaning of their own that is often rather different from the literal truth. The life of the Buddha comes to us in this way.

The ancient Pali records of the Buddha's teaching are vast and historically very important: from them we can get a very good idea of what he actually taught. But they also include legendary material, particularly with respect to his early life, and in none of the various accounts of his life before he began teaching can we be sure of disentangling the history from the legend. Our own world-view interprets the half-light at the edge of what we understand about the world and ourselves through the agency of scientists and psychologists rather than priests and seers. However, we must make do with the fact that the early Indian Buddhists visited the unknowable darkness of the past through myth and legend rather than by an accumulation of verifiable records and data: it was the only way they could do justice to the meaning of those events.

Thus, Enlightenment is not simply an extraordinary extension to ordinary human experience. It is not to be understood as an aspect of temporal experience at all. If it is anything, it is a freedom from that basic sense we have of being carried along on the river of time, or 'the going on and on of things' (which is the Buddhist expression for mundane life known in Sanskrit as *samsāra*). So one can really only do proper justice in narrative terms to the reality of Buddhahood by taking it out of the ordinary flow of life, by removing it altogether from the realm of human contingency. This is done by making it something that was always going to be achieved, and making all the effort of realizing it a kind of drama or game.

After his death, the Buddha's followers began to worship this eternal Buddhahood, and inevitably some of them began also to literalize it. Enlightenment had not arrived, after all, out of nowhere: the Buddha had discovered a truth that had been there all the time. If they could say that he had rediscovered it, that the truth of things had been realized before, this would solve what was a bit of a problem for them, which was the fact that the Buddha had not claimed any authority outside his own experience for the authenticity of his teaching; test it out for yourself, was all he had said. This did not seem enough to win the allegiance of people who wanted a proper track record for their faith. If it was not the word of God, it had at least to come down from a long lineage of teachers. So the early Buddhists decided that, just as the achievement of the Buddha's followers had depended on the Buddha's own achievement before them, so his Enlightenment in turn must have been projected from contact with a Buddha of some long-lost age. The timeless story of the Buddha-to-be became an eternal story, said to be that of any Buddha who ever appears – anywhere and at any time in the universe. These myths are put into the Buddha's mouth, but whether or not he himself played any part in originating them, we have no way of knowing.

Linking together an endless succession of Buddhas is the concept of the Bodhisattva, that is, 'a being dedicated to Enlightenment', who spends many lifetimes preparing for Enlightenment. Thus the Buddha's spiritual lineage was traced back not only through a succession of other Buddhas before him, but also through the succession of his own unnumbered lifetimes. 'Jātaka tales' are told of these previous lives, many of which – reworking a body of folk tales – go so far as to depict the Buddha-to-be in animal form, but still embodying the same qualities of heroic generosity, patience, and self-sacrifice of a Bodhisattva.

The eternal Buddhahood is also an infinite Buddhahood. If he, as a human being, did it, the possibility of Enlightenment opens up for everyone. In this sense the Buddha's Enlightenment redeems the unenlightened life. Gaining Enlightenment does not cut the Buddha off from the world he once

shared with the rest of us, but locates within that unenlightened existence an extraordinary potential, the jewel hidden in the dust-heap of our daily grind. That is, the Buddha's Enlightenment has gifted us all with the hidden potential to attain Buddhahood. It is this hidden jewel that the traditional narrative focus upon, rather than the dust-heap that we ourselves find so important. Their Buddha is an icon rather than a portrait.

In the following pages I have included only a little of this kind of mythical material, to give just a glimpse of the vertiginous perspectives that it brings to the story of Gotama's spiritual development. I have included more of the legends that simply dramatize the various turns in that development in an anecdotal way, somewhat in the manner of folk tales. I have also retained and even elaborated upon the appearances of gods and demons and other 'supernormal' phenomena in the Buddha's life, whilst drawing out the interior crises and developments – whether in Gotama himself, or in others who later meet the Buddha – that they reflect.

Just occasionally, I have interpreted legendary material in naturalistic terms, but by and large I have avoided doing so, for two reasons. Firstly, I do not want to suggest that what is being offered might be truly reliable guide to the actual circumstances of the Buddha's life, that if you take away the legends you are left with history; it would be nice to say that 'a shilling life will give you all the facts', but no biography of the Buddha can do this. Secondly (and on the other hand), I don't want to suggest that anything supernormal must necessarily be fictitious or symbolic – sometimes it may be, sometimes it may not.

The obvious problem with legends is that they are fuzzy from the historical point of view, especially with regard to dates. And the problem for any biographer of the Buddha is that it is quite difficult to make out the man beneath layer upon layer of religious 'brocade'. Where the legends give the impression that he was destined – in a literal sense – to become the Buddha, they cease to give us a realistic model of human growth from confusion and selfishness to wisdom and compassion: it is no longer a journey that we can make sense of in human terms; it fails to mark out Buddhahood as a hard won human achievement.

Even while we acknowledge an extraordinary spiritual genius, it is probably fairly important for 'post-Christians' not to envisage Gotama as being born 'without sin'. An awareness of his own human frailties propelled him on his original quest, and kept him on it to its conclusion – indeed, he embodied the most direct and honest confrontation of human weakness that we can imagine. Alongside the superhero we need to be aware of a figure sufficiently like ourselves to unsettle us a little.

Therefore, my aim is to try not to lose the spirit of the legends, whilst also offering a more human, developmental story with more of an interior dimension than the traditional narratives offer. I have tried to mesh the archetypal material with whatever clues we have to anything like a personal biography and I have taken the liberty of filling in these outlines with inferences, inventions, and speculations of my own (indicated at the end of the book) that might help the reader to make a link with the Buddha as a specific individual like ourselves, with existential and spiritual issues, inner and outer conflicts, like our own. Where I am, aware of being particularly presumptuous is in my account of the Buddha's Enlightenment: I have retained the traditional structure of the story, with its gods and monsters, but I have asked my own questions of the whole process and framed answers as best I could.

The Buddha's encounters and teachings after his Enlightenment are recorded in the Buddhist canon with much more detail, and mix more of what can be fairly assumed to have some historical basis with the legendary material, though again, I have not hesitated to give my own – necessarily prejudiced – interpretation of this material. Canonical texts are often formulaic and rarely individualize the inner experience – i.e. what is quintessentially individual – in the episodes they record, so in my account I

have taken the liberty of trying to sketch in a sense of something particular actually happening to individuals. ~~In a couple of cases I have pulled apart what seems to be a legendary story to look at it more critically, where it seems to have been developed to serve an 'ecclesiastical' agenda.~~

Overall, I hope I have tried to suggest a number of different layers or viewpoints to the story of the Buddha. My hope is that these will remind the reader of his or her own involvement in creating the meaning of that story. Nowadays we tend to explore our own nature as human beings not through religion so much as through narratives, through the shaping of life in novels, films, song, and so on. In these forms we find grave and fantastic reflections of our own desires and aspirations; we recognize ourselves in quite alien contexts. In so doing we can come to accommodate a sympathetic echo from the heart of almost any life as it unfurls in the imagination. Thus it is with the life of the Buddha; if we follow his story we will discover, in his fulfilled humanity, our own as it may be.

Whatever truth is enshrined in the teachings of Buddhism would be the same truth if the Buddha were discovered to be an entirely legendary figure and no historical evidence that he ever walked the earth at all could be found. It does not therefore matter from whom it came. What does matter is that it comes from human experience, that it is not communicated by a god. If the Buddha did not discover it we would still have to discover it for ourselves in our own life. Only in a life can any truth that may lie in the Buddha's Dharma – in his teaching of the truth and the way to it – be found.

To attain the human condition is difficult. The human condition is itself difficult. To hear the real truth is difficult. It is difficult for an Awakened One to appear.

Dhammapada 182

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Familiar things happen, and mankind does not bother about them. It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious.
A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*

The Buddha-to-be, named Gotama (which was his clan name) and later known as Sakyamuni or ‘sage of the Sakyas’, was born in the fifth century BCE to a leading family of the Sakya republic, occupying a region roughly the size of a county – about forty miles across – in the foothills of the Himalayas in what is now north-eastern India. His father, Suddhodana, was the elected head of a hereditary ruling class or oligarchy. Later, as all the republican states were absorbed by the great kingdoms of the Ganges basin, Gotama came to be described anachronistically as a prince, but he was more like the son of a chieftain. The Buddha’s upbringing was therefore probably better than royal; rather than suffering the idle luxury and sycophancy due to a prince, he grew up confident, urbane, and intelligent, skilled in the arts of peace and war, and looking up to nobody.

There are no facts of the Buddha’s early life of which we may be very confident. We can no doubt assume that his childhood was the same mixture of boredom and marvels as that of anyone else. For his traditional chroniclers, however, his development was not simply a matter of influence, circumstance, and character; for them, the Buddha-to-be was always dimly impelled by what he would become. For them, the past did not exist as a separate entity, and the future had to be welcomed into their presentation of the past in the form of myth.

The idea of a human being attaining to the most sublime ideal the human mind could contemplate seemed to them impossible without many previous lifetimes of spiritual development as a Bodhisattva, a ‘being dedicated to Enlightenment’. And the culmination of such a progress could not but commence with a correspondingly sublime entrance, heralded by earthquakes and miracles, and trumpeted by the gods.

On a full moon in midsummer, Queen Mahamāyā dreamed that she was carried off to the high Himalayas, where goddesses bathed and robed her, anointed her, and bedecked her with heavenly flowers, and a great elephant bearing a white lotus in his trunk came and circled three times round her bed, and then, smiting her right side, entered her womb. The next day, soothsayers brought in to interpret the dream said, ‘Be not anxious, O king, you shall have a son, and if he dwells in a house he will become an emperor; if he goes forth from the world he will become a Buddha.’ So the queen bore the Bodhisattva for ten months, like oil in a bowl, and when her time approached she asked leave to go to her own family at Devadaha. On the way she halted at the gardens of Lumbinī, where the *sāl* trees were in flower, the air hummed with bees, and the birds sported and sang. In this grove she reached up to a branch, which swayed down to meet her hand, and as she took hold of it she felt the pangs of birth begin. A curtain was set up about her, and holding to the branch she gave birth. The four great gods of purity caught the Bodhisattva in a net of gold. Two streams of water fell down from the sky on to the mother and child, and then he

stood on the earth, and in every direction before him lay many thousands of worlds, and in them gods and men making offerings to him as saying, 'There is none here your equal.' Then he took seven steps. 'I am the chief in the world,' he roared in his lion's roar.

Nidānakathā

He was lustrous and steadfast as the sun, and when the people looked upon him he held their gaze like the moon.

Aśvaghoṣa, Buddhacarita 1.12

In the ancient narratives the event is adorned with miracles in this way because it was not in itself miraculous. No doubt the infant Gotama came into the world trailing clouds of glory, but he did so like the offspring of the meanest peasant. He was a wonder, as all babies are, radiantly present, miraculous in his achievements, and imperious of utterance. But the significance of his birth lay in the fact that he began life like everyone else, and like any other child, his arrival was the greatest of blessings and as such the greatest source of anxiety.

On the day of Gotama's birth, a holy man called Asita, 'the black', had learned of the birth from the gods and had come down from the Himalayas to look upon him. After examining the boy carefully, Asita fell on his knees, shaking and weeping. The baby seemed to glow before his eyes, like molten gold or a goldsmith's furnace – bright as the autumn sun, and the stars at the new moon. Suddhodana was horrified, and stammered, 'But what is the matter?' The strange old man turned and grinned at him through his tears: 'Nothing, O king – there is nothing to fear. I weep only because when your son is a Buddha, I myself shall have passed away to be reborn in the triple heaven.'

'And yet I have no fear of death. For how can a man be born and not die? I weep because I shall not see the peerless Buddha, because I shall not hear the consummate Dharma, because I shall not see the Sangha with its ocean of virtues.'

Mahāvastu 40

His sadness is of course the regret of an old man who has missed his chance, but his tears also offer an intimation of the nature of Enlightenment – that it is not just a soul saved from saṃsāra for an eternity of bliss. Asita himself can look forward to being reborn in a heavenly realm, but he recognizes that his own attainment, lofty as it is, does not bear comparison with the universal blessing of Enlightenment.²

Suddhodana was gratified at the great seer's awestruck reverence before his son, but he was also aware that he was losing control of the boy's destiny – how might he divert him from the course that Asita had predicted for him? But his astrologers reassured him that the marks of a Buddha were also the marks of a great and righteous emperor who would bring peace and justice to the world. Discounting the extravagant hyperbole in which such prognostications were conventionally couched, this seemed to him a more likely outcome. Who would choose the apotheosis of mendicancy if he could ride in triumph through the prostrate cities of India? Indeed, the boy's future greatness needed to be a political one if the Sakyan clans were to survive in an unstable political situation.

He was given the auspicious name of Siddhattha, meaning 'he whose aim is accomplished'. It would remind Suddhodana of the vigilance he had to exercise in order to make sure that his son's aim in life would never rise any higher than dominion over an empire. Nothing in the boy's education and pastime could be allowed to awaken him from the soft, restless dream of mundane life. His mother died seven days after his birth, but thereafter Gotama was protected from anything that might alert him to the harsher realities of temporal existence, anything that might jolt him out of his full confidence in the joys of life.

His untamed energy ran free, his imagination raided the adult world for adventure, and the days seemed endless and infinitely varied and new. He played the perilous games of boys who have yet to conceive of their own mortality, and he got into scraps and scrapes. At the same time it seems that he had unusual powers of empathy with the suffering of others, and a story is told of the boy rescuing a

wounded swan that one of his relatives had shot: while the hunting party stood over him, arguing about who had fired the shot that brought it down, he concentrated on removing the arrow and binding the wound. He also experienced visitations of extraordinary happiness, and the gentle, bubbling laughter of the gods, that refreshed the long hours of his boyhood and brought a deep assurance to his heart.³

FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE

The true paradises are the paradises that we have lost.
 Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*

As he grew older, Gotama had to be more carefully protected from the emotional pressures and challenges of young adulthood. He was surrounded by courtesans, the most skilled in all the sensual arts, and he plunged into his pleasures as if he would tear the heart out of them, undeterred by purse-lipped priests or his tutors' pleas. Though he was able to melt their disapproval with his warmth and wit and sudden kindness, he was self-willed, even difficult, and unconcerned to win the approval of his elders and betters. He was brought up thinking of himself as an unlimited blessing, as one who did not have to conform to the expectations and limitations that others were taught to accept. Much later, the Buddha is said to have reminisced on his early years as follows:

I was very delicately raised. In my father's mansion pools were made in which lotuses flowered, red and blue and white. I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares. All my apparel, my turban, my tunic, my cloak, was of Benares cloth. Night and day a white parasol was held over me that I should not be troubled by the elements. I had three palaces, one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rains. For the four months of the rains, entertained by female minstrels, I did not come down from the palace.⁴
Anguttara-Nikāya 3.38

During the rest of the year, Gotama's training consisted in driving a war-chariot, javelin throwing, swordsmanship, and archery, for these were the accomplishments his social position required of him. The very name of his tribe, Sakya, literally means 'fierce', and Gotama had to live up to that name.

When he was sixteen, he was made to prove his fitness for marriage through his prowess with the bow. It was his favourite weapon. He was able to impart extraordinary power to the flight of his arrow seemingly without effort, without even using a particularly heavy bow. He had the patience and the concentration to practise for hours, persisting through extremes of physical exhaustion, till he had found his body drawing upon much deeper resources of energy, which seemed to rise up through him as he breathed, from the ground itself. And he would sometimes practise firing from a chariot, letting the flexible responsiveness of his body take care of the jolting of the wheels while his hands held his aim true to the target.

However, as he went up to demonstrate his archery to his prospective father-in-law, he became aware of a new feeling. His arms felt weak and heavy, and the bow trembled when he flexed it. The target seemed suddenly very small and far away. He was starkly aware of the sudden hush in the crowd of

spectators. The possibility of failure, of making an abject fool of himself, took him by surprise. Gotama addressed himself to this unaccustomed opponent as he would any other. He shrugged off the tension in his shoulders, breathed in deeply as he steadied his bow by locking his arm straight, and drew the string till it was level with his ear. As he released it he knew he had done everything right, and that he had failed completely. The arrow flew up and fell pathetically short of the target. A mixture of suppressed titters and groans came from the crowd.

He had been ambushed by fear, and stiffened up in an attempt to regain control. His fear of the crucial situation had overwhelmed him, throwing him off balance. He stood still. He could have blame a gust of wind, but he didn't. He did not try to make light of his failure or attempt to block out his fear of repeating it. Instead, he methodically readjusted the balance of his emotions to take account of his new feelings, together with the feelings of those watching, welcoming into the situation his awareness of what was at stake in the form of a sharper determination to realize the perfect shot, a total commitment of his life to this one moment.

He drew out a fresh shaft. As his attention settled upon the target, he was no longer aware of it as an object external to himself. The bow bent as easily and naturally as his breath filled his lungs. He was no longer trying to impose his will upon the arrow and the bowstring. The moment of releasing the arrow was decided by the bow and the target together. He did not even hear the applause, but ordered up his charioteer, and strapping himself into the war chariot, he proceeded to demonstrate his archery at full speed, firing off one arrow after another as the chariot rocked and bucked the length of the range.

He was himself again, the prince Gotama, and he would have his princess. Her name was Yasodharā and Gotama's father was delighted to observe the boy so much more flustered in the presence of the girl than he had been on the archery range. They were married, and Gotama was thereby initiated into the strange new experience of daily companionship with a girl who made infuriating demands on his patience, a relationship both delightful and difficult, full of unaccountable feelings and moods, that further stretched and tempered his character.⁵

Thus the world Gotama lived in conspired with his own determination and success in hiding from himself all the most disagreeable facts of life. In this, his situation was that of any happy, untroubled youth, intoxicated with his own vitality, and oblivious to the decline and mortality to come. But in Gotama's case, reality broke in upon him with such overwhelming force that he could not thereafter shut it away again. This event has been passed down to us in the form of the legend of the 'four sights'.

Siddhattha resolved one day to go out and see the sights of his native city, and his father, hearing of this, ordered that any people who were sick or maimed in body or mind should be kept indoors, so that the prince might not be distressed by what he saw. So Siddhattha set out with Channa, his charioteer, and marvelled at the beauty around him, while the people in their turn delighted in the noble grace of his countenance and bearing, for he was radiant with youth, his eyes clear, his hair coal black.

Suddenly, his attention was transfixed by a human figure unlike any other he had ever seen. It was a decrepit old man. 'Who is this man holding a staff, charioteer, with white hair and shuffling gait, his form bent, his eyes hidden beneath his brows? Why is he like this?'

'That is old age, sir, by which he is broken down – the ravisher of beauty, the ruin of vigour, the cause of sorrow, the destruction of delights, the bane of memories, the enemy of the senses.'

'Surely this condition is not common?'

'It is common to all the world, sir, and we must be content to have it so.'

Aśvaghoṣa, Buddhacarita 3.

Siddhattha was thunderstruck. Returning to the palace he found it empty of happiness. Seeking diversion he went out with his charioteer again, and once again his eye was caught by something he had never seen, at least never taken notice of, before.

'That man with a swollen belly, panting and shaking, his arms hanging loose, his face pale and staring, what is the matter with him?'

'He is afflicted, sir, with sickness. We are all subject to this evil.'

‘Alas for the scattered intelligence of men who can enjoy tranquillity in the midst of such calamity. Turn back, charioteer.’

Siddhattha trembled, it is said, like the moon reflected in ruffled waters. He went home, but took no pleasure there, so yet again he went out in his chariot, and yet again he beheld a strange sight.

‘Who is this, charioteer, that lies adorned and appearing not to breathe, borne by four men, and followed by mournful companions?’

‘This is a dead man, sir, a man who is finished with. His body will be disposed of like mere wood or straw. It is the final end of all beings, whoever they are.’

‘If this be the end appointed to all beings, how are the hearts of men so composed? How can a rational being stay heedless here in the hour of their doom?’

All these three sights had shaken Siddhattha to the core. The fourth, however, was of a radically different nature, though it had quite as powerful an impact. Riding out once more, his mind gripped by thoughts of the ineluctable end of all that he cherished in the world, Siddhattha caught sight of a man dressed not in the usual white garb, but in an old yellow robe, going barefoot from door to door with a begging-bowl. There was in this beggar’s comportment, his way of moving and looking, something that the prince obscurely recognized. There was a sense of composure and warmth, a silent integrity about him to which Siddhattha found himself responding from some deeply buried understanding of his own. ‘What manner of man is this,’ he asked, ‘so unswayed, as he appears, by the sorrows and delights of mortal beings? Is he a god, perhaps?’

The charioteer explained that the man was a *śramaṇa* or religious mendicant. Some of the *śramaṇas* were brahmins, the hereditary priestly caste traditionally entrusted with the task of placating the gods with sacrifices, and they retained their brahmin caste, practising Vedic rites as *śramaṇas*. But most were not: rather than negotiating with a higher power on behalf of the world, they had renounced the world altogether. Their aim was no longer that of simply securing a better reincarnation within *saṃsāra* (which means, literally, the ‘going on and on of things’ and refers to temporal existence generally, understood as including heaven realms and hell realms). Instead, they had embarked on a search for the truth that would bring them to their true self, to ultimate peace, *nirvāṇa*, deliverance from the whole never-ending process of life and death. In their search for the true self, they did not need the help of priests. It was an inner quest. They sought a truth that would be relevant not to the needs of society at large, but to the existential situation of the individual, whatever their position within society. Such seekers after truth wander India to this day, even as the caste system, from brahmin to ‘untouchable’, still dominates Indian society.

As this radical alternative opened up before him, Gotama’s whole world shifted on its axis. He could see that most people had come to an inner accommodation with the cruel reality they faced, allowing them to live as if they were free and independent of decay and death. He had observed the same sort of phenomenon on the political level: the Sakyan people in their pride pretended to themselves that they were a free people, when in fact they were already subject to the neighbouring king of Kosala and faced imminent destruction. Everywhere he saw lids going down on the truth, and easy smiles being painted over the top of them. And he saw how this attitude undermined people’s ability to respond with compassion to one another.

I considered how most people feel fearful, humiliated, and disgusted when they come across old age, sickness, and death in others, forgetting that they are subject to these things themselves. For myself, such a reaction did not seem fitting, and with this insight, all the intoxication of youth faded utterly from my heart.

Anguttara-Nikāya 3.38

His boyhood life of adventures and dreams had turned into daily business and anxieties, interspersed with joyless pleasures. He noticed that adults did not meet his direct gaze in the frank way of his

youthful playmates, and he heard always a double message in their voices. He became more and more aware of his own wretched and ignoble selfishness, while all around him he saw men and women bent over their drudgery, and beasts being whipped and goaded to tear up the earth and bear its fruits on their backs. The simple wonder of things had departed from his life, and the colour was leached from the world.

Most people he talked to took the view that life has its ups and downs, but that there was much to appreciate about it, and that it was morbid to dwell on its miseries – why not enjoy the bloom and the scent of the rose while it lasted? But Gotama found he could not close his mind off from the inevitable impermanence and decay of things in order to take fleeting pleasure in them. Dancers and musicians were brought in to entertain him, picnic parties were laid on for him, but he felt like a soldier on the eve of battle. He was only interested in becoming more sober.

His advisers sternly reminded him of his responsibilities, that he was just going to have to buckle down to the duties he had been born to; anything else would be unmanly self-indulgence, unbecoming a Sakyan – and irreligious: no doubt these śramaṇas were all very well in their way – no one doubted the sincerity – but no one could doubt either that they undermined family life, and where would it all end? Gotama replied, as he usually did, by asking for a clarification of such terms as ‘self-indulgence’ and ‘responsibility’.

Others suggested more sympathetically that he throw himself into something that would take him ‘out of himself’; but Gotama was not interested in forgetting what he had seen, which was, he had begun to realize, something as essential to accept as it was difficult. His own pain had opened his eyes to others, and just occasionally his usual fierce impatience with lazy servants, and his ironic disdain for the solemn vanity of the priests and the empty hilarity of his young friends, gave way instead to a sense of the infinite sadness of things, and with it an unaccountable benevolence for everyone he met. And there was a curious and exquisite sweetness in these moments of self-forgetfulness. What these intimations meant, he did not know, but that they meant something, he was certain.⁶

His wife was pregnant, a new life was on its way, and this news only threw into sharper relief the one certain fact of everything he valued most, which was that sooner or later, slowly or suddenly, it would be taken away. Childbirth had taken away his own mother, and the same killer was stalking his life again. And where it failed, others would succeed. In one form or another he saw the same enemy in control everywhere, ruining beauty and strength, cutting short all that was best in life. The kingdom of death was the greatest power on earth. But war was Gotama’s family trade, and he was going to find a strategy that would defeat it.

The priests told him that it was not given to mortals to understand their predicament, but that there was another world in which all was plain, and that when the gods of that world were honoured, they could give peace to the troubled spirit. These kindly clerics had little hope of being able to get through to him, and they didn’t. Increasing trade was bringing new ideas into the cities, where they called into question the assumptions of the local culture; and the traditional religion, with its prayers and sacrifices was being seen as increasingly irrelevant, particularly by young people. The more advanced priests insisted that the spiritual technology of sacrifice had become quite sophisticated – that it was no longer crudely propitiatory. However, the whole exercise was being superseded by a dramatic breakthrough in human understanding. This was the developing awareness – recorded in wisdom texts called the *Upanishads* – that rituals could be interiorized entirely, that reality or creation or power was to be sourced within. As the gods retreated from view, mortals were taking charge of – and responsibility for – the meaning of their own lives.

This responsibility was also a terrible burden, and Gotama was finding it increasingly difficult to sta

on an even keel – he found that the smallest upsets seemed to vibrate and echo through him till his mind seemed to splinter into pieces. He started to seek out any śramaṇas in the district and talk to them about their life; and whenever he did so he felt he had come home to his own kind and his own element. He had seen śramaṇas before; now he saw that here was something he could do himself. Always, he heard the same gentle song of the wanderer:

Since all the world must be destroyed,
I seek an incorruptible refuge.
I look with equal mind on kinsman and stranger,
For longing and hatred have passed from me.
I dwell wherever I happen to be,
At the root of a tree, in temple or on hill,
I seek the good without ties or expectations,
Accepting all that is freely given.

Aśvaghoṣa, Buddhacarita 5.18–19

It was as if his life up till then had been a pointless interruption of the real business of life. The rest of the world seemed to him to be sleepwalking, and he wished he could find the words to wake them up. At the same time, he was discovering that he was not yet awake himself, but only dreaming of being awake. He was told that there were only a few great teachers who had mastered the practices to cut off the flow of karma, or actions generating the self's reincarnation, and that to learn from them he would have to become a śramaṇa himself. He would have to make a progressive and painstaking effort to purify the way he lived in order to free what was real and true in himself from its entanglement in the web of his own desires. Otherwise, he would continue to hang there, to be consumed by the lord of death, for lifetime after lifetime.

Gotama weighed up the choice before him, and his reflections at this time were already planting the seeds of his Enlightenment: he was setting himself a clear agenda that only Enlightenment could fulfil.

Domestic life is stifling and dusty; the going forth as a wanderer is wide open. It is not easy to lead a holy life as beautiful and pure as a polished shell while hemmed in at home. Being myself liable to birth, to ageing, to decay, to death, to defilement, to sorrow, why do I seek what is liable to birth, to ageing, to decay, to death, to defilement, to sorrow? Why instead do I not seek the unborn, the unageing, the undecaying, the deathless, the undefiled, the sorrowless?

Majjhima-Nikāya 26.13, Ariyapariyesanā Sutta

His wife had known for a long time that he would leave. She could tell that his heart was no longer in their life together, and that there was nothing she could do about it. He had dropped enough hints to her, and she just hoped he would be back one day when he had got what he wanted. He went to his father to ask permission to go, and blessing on his quest. Suddhodana told him he was too young, that the natural time for contemplation would come round when he had fulfilled his worldly duties. Gotama promised to obey him if Suddhodana could in turn promise him just four things:

'My life is not to be subject to death or ill health, to the ravages of age, or to any reversal of fortune.' Suddhodana blustered: 'What you ask is ridiculous, as you very well know. Stop this foolishness at once.' But Gotama replied gravely, 'It is not right to restrain a man who wishes to escape from a house that is being consumed by fire.'

Aśvaghoṣa, Buddhacarita 5.34–7

THE QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

We are healed from suffering only by experiencing it to the full.
 Marcel Proust, *The Sweet Cheat Gone*

It is a curious circumstance, a technical discovery, that deliberately self-inflicted suffering will buy mana.
 Ted Hughes, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly', 1984

Who overcomes

By force hath overcome but half his foe.
 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book 1

Thus Gotama resolved to break out of his gilded cage, to go forth from the world. It seems that his departure was precipitated by the birth of a son, to whom he gave the name Rāhula – which carried in its meaning the sense of 'fetter', and was a wry acknowledgement of the strength of his attachment, as well as of his growing realization that the very sweetness of it was a trap. He now had everything to stand for, and that is why he had to go. Power and luxury were seductive snares but his young wife and child gripped at his heart. He was letting everyone down, he was leaving everyone he loved, and it had to be so. His goal lay in the opposite direction to all his mundane attachments.

At midnight he awoke, took a last look at his sleeping wife and child, blinked the brimming tears from his eyes, and called for his faithful charioteer to bring him his favourite horse. As he rode through the quiet streets, with Channa running behind holding the horse's tail, it is said that the gods muffled the clatter of the hooves, and made the gates of the city swing open without a sound, so that the two of them passed through unchallenged. As dawn broke, they reached the nearby border with the kingdom of Magadha, which was marked by the Anoma river. Channa expertly lashed together some fallen logs to make a raft, while Gotama cut off his beard and his hair. He was going to give his clothes to Channa to take back, retaining some simple robes he had brought with him, but a wandering huntsman came by, laying his snares, and Gotama exchanged his fine jewelled silks for the huntsman's patched and evil-smelling rags instead. When the now resplendent tramp had gone his way, they said their farewells and Gotama stroked and hugged his horse, whispering him a fond goodbye as well.

Then he was on his own. The hoofbeats died away down the forest track behind him. He had given up everything; he had renounced his very identity. His mind went back for a moment to when he was a boy, and he felt as if he were starting out on one of his adventures. Momentous as his decision was, he felt strangely carefree. Having made his decision he could think of his family and his tribe with

affection and gratitude, and a determination not to return without bringing them the treasure for which he was leaving them. As he pushed the raft into the river, he did not look back.

So began his long and terrible journey towards Enlightenment. The legends may give the impression that the Buddha was born to be Enlightened, that he was destined through innumerable lifetimes to lead humanity to its ultimate birthright. But Buddhahood could be attained only through the efforts of an unenlightened being, that is, through struggle, confusion, and wrong turnings. Like any other human being Gotama had always to consider that he might be mistaken. Gifted as he was, his was a normal, imperfect life, longing for more life, and at the same time yearning for escape.

He paddled hard to get into the main stream of the river, and then he could let the current take him on his way, down to the fertile plains where he would find the main centres of population. Eventually, he disembarked and abandoned his raft with a slight sense of regret – he hoped it would serve someone else after him. His first meal, coarse scraps left over from the midday fare of a simple peasant community, and handed to him in a gourd, made him retch just to smell it. But he was not unduly worried by this reaction. It was axiomatic with the śramaṇas that craving produced the karmic activity that sustained repeated rebirth, so his first task was to suppress his relish for food, and he reflected ruefully that this did not look too difficult to achieve with a begging-bowl.

But as he contemplated his reaction – and there were few things to distract him from this exercise, alone in a forest – he perceived that his disgust was a reverse image of his craving, a clear measure of it. And as the days and weeks went by, he found that his bowl was actually a marvellous mirror of his mind. One day he would be treated with respect and kindness, and given delicious food; the next he would be doled out slops and leftovers grudgingly and contemptuously, and in each case the door would be closed on him, and he would have to do something with the mental state that appeared to have been given to him by that encounter. There was more to craving than he had realized: in pinning the mind to certain objects, it restricted the mind's view, both of its objects and of itself. On the other hand, he found that by holding his mind unflinchingly to any object that came before it without allowing craving to pull it away, he could get a steady view of the nature of the mind in that moment.

Sleeping proved to be even more of a challenge than eating: when night fell, Gotama experienced a very simple, even animal, desire for a safe, comfortable place to rest. He lay down between the roots of a large tree, but he found he could not sleep – out of sheer terror: for the first time in his life he felt truly alone, cut off, an alien in the jungle, and he just shrank in on himself. The eerie silence of the night, and the sudden rustling and unearthly screeching of beasts of the forest made his skin crawl and his muscles stiffen, till he was shaking from head to foot, and he would leap up, his eyes wide and his breath roaring in his throat.

However, he discovered in time that what he had thought to be a reaction to something fearful was actually a distraction from his experience of fear. Reacting to it was a way of not being conscious of it. He was effectively frightened of his own fear; and fighting against experiencing it only made it worse. So over the nights that followed, he tried just to experience the fear as it built up, as it flooded through his mind, and as it faded away again. He observed that his mind could always find something to be fearful of, in the same way that it was always searching out something to desire – and something to hate, if only mosquitoes. Thus he gradually became familiar with the twists and turns of his own nature; he began to catch glimpses of the operations of his mind before it slipped back into the dense thickets of views and judgements, reactions and assumptions, in which it nourished its progeny of fears and cravings and furies unseen. Eventually, he even took to staying alone in haunted places, in charnel grounds and strange and ancient shrines, in order to lure his fears out into the open and confront them, and, most importantly, learn from them.⁷

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