

The Buddha

His Life and Teaching

by

Piyadassi Thera

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The Buddha

Introduction

“The ages roll by and the Buddha seems not so far away after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement. Personality counts today as ever, and a person who has impressed himself on the thought of mankind as the Buddha has, so that even today there is something living and vibrant about the thought of him, must have been a wonderful man—a man who was, as Barth says, ‘the finished model of calm and sweet majesty of infinite tenderness for all that breathes and compassion for all that suffers, of perfect moral freedom and exemption from every prejudice.’”¹

“His message old and yet very new and original for those immersed in metaphysical subtleties, captured the imagination of the intellectuals; it went deep down into the hearts of the people.”²

Buddhism had its birth at Sārnāth near the city of Vārānasi (Benares), India. With only five followers at the beginning, it penetrated into many lands, and is today the religion of more than 600 million. Buddhism made such rapid strides chiefly due to its intrinsic worth and its appeal to the reasoning mind. But there were other factors that aided its progress: never did the *dhammadūtas*, the messengers of the Dhamma, the teaching, use any iniquitous methods in spreading the Dhamma. The only weapon they wielded was that of universal love and compassion.

Furthermore, Buddhism penetrated to these countries peaceably, without disturbing the creeds that were already there. Buddhist missions, to which the annals of religious history scarcely afford a parallel, were carried on neither by force of arms nor by the use of any coercive or reprehensible methods. Conversion by compulsion was unknown among the Buddhists, and repugnant to the Buddha and his disciples. No decrying of other creeds has ever existed in Buddhism. Buddhism was thus able to diffuse itself through a great variety of cultures throughout the civilized world.

“There is no record known to me,” wrote T.W. Rhys Davids, “in the whole of the long history of Buddhism throughout the many centuries where its followers have been for such lengthened periods supreme, of any persecution by the Buddhists of the followers of any other faith.”

The Birth

The Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, lived over 2,500 years ago and is known as Siddhattha Gotama.³ His father, Suddhodana, the kshatriya⁴ king, ruled over the land of the Sakyans at Kapilavatthu on the Nepalese frontier. As he came from the Gotama family, he was known as Suddhodana Gotama. Mahāmāyā, princess of the Koliyas, was Suddhodana’s queen.

In 623 B.C. on a full-moon day of May—Vasanta-tide, when in India the trees were laden with leaf, flower, and fruit, and man, bird, and beast were in joyous mood—Queen Mahāmāyā was travelling in state from Kapilavatthu to Devadaha, her parental home, according to the

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1946) p.143.)

² Ibid., p.137.

³ In Sanskrit, Siddhattha Gautama.

⁴ The warrior class.

custom of the times, to give birth to her child. But that was not to be, for halfway between the two cities, in the beautiful Lumbini Grove, under the shade of a flowering Sal tree, she brought forth a son.

Lumbini, or Rummindei, the name by which it is now known, is one hundred miles north of Vārānasi and within sight of the snow-capped Himalayas. At this memorable spot where Prince Siddhattha, the future Buddha, was born, Emperor Asoka, 316 years after the event, erected a mighty stone pillar to mark the holy spot. The inscription engraved on the pillar in five lines consists of ninety-three Asokan characters, among which occurs the following: "*hida budhe jāte sākyamuni*" : Here was born the Buddha, the sage of the Sakyans."

The mighty column is still to be seen. The pillar, as crisp as the day it was cut, had been struck by lightning even when Hiuen Tsiang, the Chinese pilgrim, saw it towards the middle of the seventh century CE. The discovery and identification of Lumbini Park in 1896 is attributed to the renowned archaeologist, General Cunningham.

On the fifth day after the birth of the prince, the king summoned eight wise men to choose a name for the child and to speak of the royal babe's future. He was named Siddhattha, which means one whose purpose has been achieved. The brahmins deliberated and seven of them held up two fingers each and declared: "O King, this prince will become a *cakravarti*, a universal monarch, should he deign to rule, but should he renounce the world, he will become a *sammā-sambuddha*, a Supremely Enlightened One, and deliver humanity from ignorance." But Koṇḍañña, the wisest and the youngest, after watching the prince, held up only one finger and said: "O King, this prince will one day go in search of truth and become a Supremely Enlightened Buddha."

Queen Mahāmāyā, the mother, passed away on the seventh day after the birth of her child, and the babe was nursed by his mother's sister, Pajāpatī Gotamī . Though the child was nurtured till manhood in refinement amid an abundance of material luxury, the father did not fail to give his son the education that a prince ought to receive. He became skilled in many branches of knowledge, and in the arts of war easily excelled all others. Nevertheless, from his childhood the prince was given to serious contemplation.

The Four Significant Visions

When the prince grew up, the father's fervent wish was that his son should marry, bring up a family, and be his worthy successor; for he often recalled to mind with dread the prediction of the sage Koṇḍañña, and feared that the prince would one day give up home for the homeless life of an ascetic. According to the custom of the time, at the early age of sixteen the prince was married to his cousin, the beautiful Princess Yasodharā, the only daughter of King Suppabuddha and Queen Pamitā of the Koliyas. The princess was of the same age as the prince.

His father provided him with the greatest comforts. He had, so the story tells, three palaces, one for each of the Indian year's three seasons. Lacking nothing of the earthly joys of life, he lived amid song and dance, in luxury and pleasure, knowing nothing of sorrow. Yet all the efforts of the father to hold his son a prisoner to the senses and make him worldly-minded were of no avail. King Suddhodana's endeavours to keep away life's miseries from his son's inquiring eyes only heightened Prince Siddhattha's curiosity and his resolute search for truth and Enlightenment. With the advance of age and maturity, the prince began to glimpse the woes of the world.

On one occasion, when the prince went driving with his charioteer Channa to the royal gardens, he saw to his amazement what his eyes had never beheld before: a man weakened with

age, and in the last stage of ageing, crying out in a mournful voice: “Help master! lift me to my feet; oh, help! Or I shall die before I reach my house!”⁵

This was the first shock the prince received. The second was the sight of a man, mere skin and bones, supremely unhappy and forlorn, “smitten with some pest. The strength is gone from ham, and loin, and neck, and all the grace and joy of manhood fled.”⁶ On a third occasion he saw a band of lamenting kinsmen bearing on their shoulders the corpse of one beloved for cremation. These woeful signs, seen for the first time in his life, deeply moved him. From the charioteer he learned that even he, his beloved Princess Yasodharā, and his kith and kin—all, without exception, are subject to ageing, disease, and death.

Soon after this the prince saw a recluse moving with measured steps and down-cast eyes, calm and serene, aloof and independent. He was struck by the serene countenance of the man. He learned from Channa that this recluse was one who had abandoned his home to live a life of purity, to seek truth and answer the riddle of life. Thoughts of renunciation flashed through the prince’s mind and in deep contemplation he turned homeward. The heart throb of an agonized and ailing humanity found a responsive echo in his own heart. The more he came in contact with the world outside his palace walls, the more convinced he became that the world was lacking in true happiness. But before reaching the palace he was met by a messenger with the news that a son had been born to Yasodharā. “A fetter is set upon me,” uttered the prince and returned to the palace.

The Great Renunciation

In the silence of that moonlit night (it was the full-moon day of July, *Āsāḷha*) such thoughts as these arose in him: “Youth, the prime of life, ends in old age and man’s senses fail him at a time when they are most needed. The hale and hearty lose their vigour and health when disease suddenly creeps in. Finally death comes, sudden perhaps and unexpected, and puts an end to this brief span of life. Surely there must be an escape from this unsatisfactoriness, from ageing and death.”

Thus the great intoxication of youth (*yobbana-mada*), of health (*ārogya-mada*), and of life (*jīvita-mada*) left him. Having seen the vanity and the danger of the three intoxications, he was overcome by a powerful urge to seek and win the Deathless, to strive for deliverance from old age, illness, misery, and death not only for himself, but for all beings (including his wife and child) that suffer.⁷ It was his deep compassion that led him to the quest ending in enlightenment, in Buddhahood. It was compassion that now moved his heart towards the great renunciation and opened for him the doors of the golden cage of his home life. It was compassion that made his determination unshakeable even by the last parting glance at his beloved wife asleep with the baby in her arms.

Thus at the age of twenty-nine, in the flower of youthful manhood, on the day his beautiful Yasodharā had given birth to his only son, Rāhula, Prince Siddhattha Gotama, discarding and disdaining the enchantment of the royal life, scorning and spurning joys that most young men yearn for, tore himself away, renouncing wife and child, and a crown that held the promise of power and glory.

He cut off his long locks with his sword, doffed his royal robes, and putting on a hermit’s robe retreated into forest solitude to seek a solution to those problems of life that had so deeply stirred his mind. He sought an answer to the riddle of life, seeking not a palliative, but a true way out of suffering—to perfect enlightenment and Nibbāna. His quest for the supreme security

⁵ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ A I 146.

from bondage— Nibbāna (Nirvāna)—had begun. This was the great renunciation, the greatest adventure known to humanity.

First he sought guidance from two famous sages, from Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, hoping that they being masters of meditation, would teach him all they knew, leading him to the heights of concentrative thought. He practised concentration and reached the highest meditative attainments possible thereby, but was not satisfied with anything short of Supreme Enlightenment. These teachers' range of knowledge, their ambit of mystical experience, however, was insufficient to grant him what he so earnestly sought, and he saw himself still far from his goal. Though both sages, in turn, asked him to stay and succeed them as the teacher of their following, the ascetic Gotama declined. Paying obeisance to them, he left them in search of the still unknown.

In his wanderings he finally reached Uruvelā, by the river Nerañjarā at Gayā. He was attracted by its quiet and dense groves, and the clear waters of the river were soothing to his senses and stimulating to his mind. Nearby was a village of simple folk where he could get his alms. Finding that this was a suitable place to continue his quest for enlightenment, he decided to stay. Soon five other ascetics who admired his determined effort joined him. They were Koṇḍañña, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma, and Assaji.

Self-mortification

There was, and still is, a belief in India among many of her ascetics that purification and final deliverance can be achieved by rigorous self-mortification, and the ascetic Gotama decided to test the truth of it. And so there at Uruvelā he began a determined struggle to subdue his body in the hope that his mind, set free from the shackles of the body, might be able to soar to the heights of liberation. Most zealous was he in these practices. He lived on leaves and roots, on a steadily reduced pittance of food; he wore rags from dust heaps; he slept among corpses or on beds of thorns. The utter paucity of nourishment left him a physical wreck. Says the Master: "Rigorous have I been in my ascetic discipline. Rigorous have I been beyond all others. Like wasted, withered reeds became all my limbs." In such words as these, in later years, having attained to full enlightenment, did the Buddha give his disciples an awe-inspiring description of his early penances.⁸

Struggling thus for six long years, he came to death's very door, but he found himself no nearer to his goal. The utter futility of self-mortification became abundantly clear to him by his own experience. He realized that the path to the fruition of his ardent longing lay in the direction of a search inward into his own mind. Undiscouraged, his still active mind searched for new paths to the aspired for goal. He felt, however, that with a body so utterly weakened as his, he could not follow that path with any chance of success. Thus he abandoned self-torture and extreme fasting and took normal food.

His emaciated body recovered its former health and his exhausted vigour soon returned. Now his five companions left him in their disappointment, for they thought that he had given up the effort and had resumed a life of abundance. Nevertheless, with firm determination and complete faith in his own purity and strength, unaided by any teacher, accompanied by none, the Bodhisatta resolved to make his final effort in complete solitude.

On the forenoon of the day before his enlightenment while the Bodhisatta was seated in meditation under a banyan tree, Sujātā, the daughter of a rich householder, not knowing whether the ascetic was divine or human, offered milk-rice to him saying: "Lord, may your aspirations be crowned with success!" This was his last meal prior to his enlightenment.

⁸ For a detailed account see MN 36, trans. by I.B. Horner in *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I (PTS). See also R. Abeysekara, "The Master's Quest for Light" *Bodhi Leaves* A7. (Kandy: BPS).

The Final Triumph

Cross-legged he sat under a tree, which later became known as the Bodhi Tree, the “Tree of Enlightenment” or “Tree of Wisdom,” on the bank of the river Nerañjarā, at Gayā (now known as Buddhagayā), making the final effort with the inflexible resolution: “Though only my skin, sinews, and bones remain, and my blood and flesh dry up and wither away, yet will I never stir from this seat until I have attained full enlightenment (*sammā-sambodhi*).” So indefatigable in effort, so unflagging in his devotion was he, and so resolute to realize truth and attain full enlightenment.

Applying himself to the “mindfulness of in-and-out breathing” (*ānāpānasati*), the Bodhisatta entered upon and dwelt in the first meditative absorption (*jhāna*; Skt. *dhyāna*). By gradual stages he entered upon and dwelt in the second, third, and fourth *jhānas*. Thus cleansing his mind of impurities, with the mind thus composed, he directed it to the knowledge of recollecting past births (*pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇa*). This was the first knowledge attained by him in the first watch of the night. Then the Bodhisatta directed his mind to the knowledge of the disappearing and reappearing of beings of varied forms, in good states of experience, and in states of woe, each faring according to his deeds (*cutūpapātañāṇa*). This was the second knowledge attained by him in the middle watch of the night. Next he directed his mind to the knowledge of the eradication of the taints (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*).⁹

He understood as it really is: “This is suffering (*dukkha*); this is the arising of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.” He understood as it really is: “These are defilements (*āsavas*); this is the arising of defilements; this is the cessation of defilements; this is the path leading to the cessation of defilements.”

Knowing thus, seeing thus, his mind was liberated from the defilements of sense pleasures (*kāmāsavā*), of becoming (*bhavāsavā*), and of ignorance (*avijjāsavā*).¹⁰ When his mind was thus liberated, there came the knowledge, “liberated” and he understood: “Destroyed is birth, the noble life (*brahmacariya*) has been lived, done is what was to be done, there is no more of this to come” (meaning, there is no more continuity of the mind and body, no more becoming, rebirth). This was the third knowledge attained by him in the last watch of the night. This is known as *tevijjā* (Skt. *trividyā*), threefold knowledge.¹¹

Thereupon he spoke these words of victory:

Seeking but not finding the house builder,
I hurried through the round of many births:
Painful is birth ever and again.

O house builder, you have been seen;
You shall not build the house again.
Your rafters have been broken up,
Your ridgepole is demolished too.

My mind has now attained the unformed Nibbāna
And reached the end of every sort of craving.¹²

⁹ Mahā Saccaka Sutta, MN 36.

¹⁰ Elsewhere we see the defilement of false view (*diṭṭhāsava*) added to these as the fourth taint.

¹¹ MN 36/M I 249.

¹² Dhṛ 153–154. Trans. by Ñāṇamoli Thera.

Thus the Bodhisatta¹³ Gotama at the age of thirty-five, on another full moon of May (*vesākha*, *vesak*), attained Supreme Enlightenment by comprehending in all their fullness the Four Noble Truths, the Eternal Verities, and he became the Buddha, the Great Healer and Consummate Master-Physician who can cure the ills of beings. This is the greatest unshakeable victory.

The Four Noble Truths are the priceless message that the Buddha gave to suffering humanity for their guidance, to help them to be rid of the bondage of *dukkha*, and to attain the absolute happiness, that absolute reality—Nibbāna.

These truths are not his creation. He only re-discovered their existence. We thus have in the Buddha one who deserves our respect and reverence not only as a teacher but also as model of the noble, self-sacrificing, and meditative life we would do well to follow if we wish to improve ourselves.

One of the noteworthy characteristics that distinguishes the Buddha from all other religious teachers is that he was a human being having no connection whatsoever with a God or any other “supernatural” being. He was neither God nor an incarnation of God, nor a prophet, nor any mythological figure. He was a man, but an extraordinary man (*acchariya manussa*), a unique being, a man par excellence (*purisuttama*). All his achievements are attributed to his human effort and his human understanding. Through personal experience he understood the supremacy of man.

Depending on his own unremitting energy, unaided by any teacher, human or divine, he achieved the highest mental and intellectual attainments, reached the acme of purity, and was perfect in the best qualities of human nature. He was an embodiment of compassion and wisdom, which became the two guiding principles in his Dispensation (*sāsana*).

The Buddha never claimed to be a saviour who tried to save “souls” by means of a revealed religion. Through his own perseverance and understanding he proved that infinite potentialities are latent in man and that it must be man’s endeavour to develop and unfold these possibilities. He proved by his own experience that deliverance and enlightenment lie fully within man’s range of effort.

“Religion of the highest and fullest character can coexist with a complete absence of belief in revelation in any straightforward sense of the word, and in that kernel of revealed religion, a personal God. Under the term personal God I include all ideas of a so-called superpersonal god, of the same spiritual and mental nature as a personality but on a higher level, or indeed any supernatural spiritual existence or force.” (Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation*, pp. 2 and 7.)

Each individual should make the appropriate effort and break the shackles that have kept him in bondage, winning freedom from the bonds of existence by perseverance, self-exertion, and insight. It was the Buddha who for the first time in the world’s history taught that deliverance could be attained independently of an external agency, that deliverance from suffering must be wrought and fashioned by each one for himself upon the anvil of his own actions.

None can grant deliverance to another who merely begs for it. Others may lend us a helping hand by guidance and instruction and in other ways, but the highest freedom is attained only

¹³ A *bodhisatta* (Skt. *bodhisattva*) is one who adheres to or is bent on (*satta*) the ideal of enlightenment, or knowledge of the Four Noble Truths (*bodhi*). In this sense, the term may be applied to anyone who is bent on supreme enlightenment (*sammā-sambodhi*). A Bodhisatta fully cultivates ten perfections or *pāramī*, which are essential qualities of an extremely high standard initiated by compassion, and ever tinged with understanding, free from craving, pride, and false views (*taṇhā*, *diṭṭhi*, and *māna*) that qualify an aspirant for Buddhahood. They are: *dāna*, *sīla*, *nekkhamma*, *paññā*, *virīya*, *khanti*, *sacca*, *adhiṭṭhāna*, *mettā*, and *upekkhā*—generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, forbearance, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

through self-realization and self-awakening to truth and not through prayers and petitions to a Supreme Being, human or divine. The Buddha warns his disciples against shifting the burden to an external agency, directs them to the ways of discrimination and research, and urges them to get busy with the real task of developing their inner forces and qualities.

Misconceptions

There are some who take delight in making the Buddha a non-human. They quote a passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A II 37), mistranslate it, and misunderstand it. The story goes thus:

Once the Buddha was seated under a tree in the meditation posture, his senses calmed, his mind quiet, and attained to supreme control and serenity. Then a Brahmin, Doṇa by name, approached the Buddha and asked:

“Sir, will you be a god, a deva?”

“No, brahmin.”

“Sir, will you be a heavenly angel, a gandhabba?”

“No, brahmin.”

“Sir, will you be a demon, a yakkha?”

“No, brahmin.”

“Sir, will you be a human being, a manussa?”

“No, brahmin.”

“Then, sir, what indeed will you be?”

Now, understand the Buddha’s reply carefully:

“Brahmin, whatever defilements (*āsavas*) there be owing to the presence of which a person may be identified as a god or a heavenly angel or a demon or a human being, all these defilements in me are abandoned, cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump, done away with, and are no more subject to future arising.

“Just as, brahmin, a blue or red or white lotus born in water, grows in water and stands up above the water untouched by it, so too I, who was born in the world and grew up in the world, have transcended the world, and I live untouched by the world. Remember me as one who is enlightened (*Buddho ti maṃ dhārehi brāhmaṇa*).”

What the Buddha said was that he was not a god or a heavenly angel or a demon or a human being full of defilements. From the above it is clear that the Buddha wanted the brahmin to know that he was not a human being with defilements. He did not want the brahmin to put him into any of those categories. The Buddha was in the world but not of the world. This is clear from the simile of the lotus. Hasty critics, however, rush to a wrong conclusion and want others to believe that the Buddha was not a human being.

In the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A I 22), there is a clear instance in which the Buddha categorically declared that he was a human being:

Monks, there is one person (*puggala*) whose birth into this world is for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the gain and welfare and happiness of gods (*devas*) and humanity. Who is this one person (*eka puggala*)? It is the Tathāgata, who is a Worthy One (*arahat*), a Supremely Enlightened One (*sammā-sambuddho*) ... Monks, one person born into the world is an extraordinary man, a marvellous man (*acchariya manussa*).

Note the Pāli word *manussa*, a human being. Yes, the Buddha was a human being but not just another man. He was a marvellous man.

The Buddhist texts say that the Bodhisatta (as he is known before he became the Buddha) was in the Tusita heaven (*devaloka*) but came down to the human world to be born as a human being (*manussatta*). His parents, King Suddhodana and Queen Mahāmāyā, were human beings.

The Bodhisatta was born as a man, attained enlightenment (Buddhahood) as a man, and finally passed away into parinibbāna as a man. Even after his Supreme Enlightenment he did not call himself a God or Brahmā or any “supernatural being,” but an extraordinary man.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a Hindu steeped in the tenets of the Vedas and Vedānta, says that Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism, and even goes to the extent of calling the Buddha a Hindu. He writes:

“The Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion. He was born, grew up, and died a Hindu. He was restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilization.”¹⁴

But the Buddha himself declares that his teaching was a revelation of truths discovered by himself, not known to his contemporaries, not inherited from past tradition. Thus, in his very first sermon, referring to the Four Noble Truths, he says: “Monks, with the thought ‘This is the noble truth of suffering, this is its cause, this is its cessation, this is the way leading to its cessation,’ there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and light concerning things unheard of before (*pubbesu ananussutesu dhammesu*).”¹⁵

Again, while making clear to his disciples the difference between a Fully Enlightened One and the arahats, the consummate ones, the Buddha says: “The Tathāgata, O disciples, while being an arahat is fully enlightened. It is he who proclaims a way not proclaimed before, he is the knower of a way, who understands a way, who is skilled in a way (*maggaññū, maggavidū, maggakovidō*). And now his disciples are wayfarers who follow in his footsteps.”¹⁶

The ancient way the Buddha refers to is the Noble Eightfold Path and not any ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilization as Dr. Radhakrishnan imagines.

However, referring to the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, the architect of Indian independence, says: “By his immense sacrifice, by his great renunciation and by the immaculate purity of his life, he left an indelible impress upon Hinduism, and Hinduism owes an eternal debt of gratitude to that great teacher.” (Mahādev Desai, *With Gandhiji in Ceylon*, Madras, 1928, p.26.)

Dependent Arising

For a week, immediately after the enlightenment, the Buddha sat at the foot of the Bodhi Tree, experiencing the supreme bliss of emancipation. At the end of the seven days he emerged from that concentration (*samādhi*) and in the first watch of the night thought over the dependent arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) as to how things arise (*anuloma*) thus:

When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises; namely: dependent on ignorance, volitional or kamma formations; dependent on volitional formations, (rebirth or rebecoming) consciousness; dependent on consciousness, mentality-materiality (mental and physical combination); dependent on mentality-materiality, the sixfold base (the five physical sense organs with consciousness as the sixth); dependent on the sixfold base, contact; depend on contact, feeling; dependent on feeling, craving; dependent on craving, clinging; dependent on clinging, the process of becoming; dependent on the process of

¹⁴ *2500 Years of Buddhism*, Foreword, p. ix, Government of India, 1971.

¹⁵ Vin I 10; V 420.

¹⁶ Vin I 10; V 420.

becoming, there comes to be birth; dependent on birth arise ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Thus does this whole mass of suffering arise.

In the second watch of the night, the Buddha thought over the dependent arising as to how things cease (*paṭiloma*) thus:

When this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases; namely: with the utter cessation of ignorance, the cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of formations, the cessation of consciousness... (and so on). Thus does this whole mass of suffering cease.

In the third watch of the night, the Buddha thought over the dependent arising both as to how things arise and cease thus:

When this is, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises; when this is not, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases; namely: dependent on ignorance, volitional formations ... (and so on). Thus does this whole mass of suffering arise. With the utter cessation of ignorance, the cessation of volitional formations (and so on). Thus does this whole mass of suffering cease.¹⁷

The Buddha now spent six more weeks in lonely retreat at six different spots in the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree. At the end of this period two merchants, Tapassu and Bhallika, who were passing that way, offered rice cake and honey to the Master, and said: "We go for refuge to the Buddha and to the Dhamma.¹⁸ Let the Blessed One receive us as his followers."¹⁹ They became his first lay followers (*upāsakas*).

The First Sermon

Now, while the Blessed One dwelt in solitude this thought occurred to him: "The Dhamma I have realized is deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, beyond mere reasoning, subtle, and intelligible to the wise. But this generation delights, revels, and rejoices in sensual pleasures. It is hard for such a generation to see this conditionality, this dependent arising. Hard too is it to see this calming of all conditioned things, the giving up of all substance of becoming, the extinction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna. And if I were to teach the Dhamma and others were not to understand me, that would be a weariness, a vexation for me."²⁰

Pondering thus he was first reluctant to teach the Dhamma, but on surveying the world with his mental eye, he saw beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and dull faculties, with good qualities and bad qualities, easy to teach and hard to teach, some who are alive to the perils hereafter of present wrongdoings, and some who are not. The Master then declared his readiness to proclaim the Dhamma in this solemn utterance:

*Apārutā tesam amatassa dvārā
Ye sotavanto pamuñcantu saddham.*

Open are the doors of the Deathless.
Let those that have ears repose trust.

When considering to whom he should teach the Dhamma first, he thought of Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, his teachers of old; for he knew that they were wise and discerning. But that was not to be; they had passed away. Then the Blessed One made up his mind to make

¹⁷ Ud 1. See too the author's *Dependent Origination* (Wheel No. 15).

¹⁸ At this time there was as yet no Order (*saṅgha*).

¹⁹ Vin I 4.

²⁰ MN 26; I 167-68.

known the truth to those five ascetics, his former friends, still steeped in the fruitless rigours of extreme asceticism. Knowing that they were living at Benares in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Resort of Seers (modern Sārnāth), the Blessed One left Gayā for distant Benares, walking by stages some 150 miles. On the way not far from Gayā the Buddha was met by Upaka, an ascetic who, struck by the serene appearance of the Master, inquired: "Who is your teacher? Whose teaching do you profess?"

The Buddha replied: "I have no teacher, one like me does not exist in all the world, for I am the Peerless Teacher, the Arahāt. I alone am Supremely Enlightened. Quenching all defilements, Nibbāna's calm have I attained. I go to the city of Kāsi (Benares) to set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma. In a world where blindness reigns, I shall beat the Deathless Drum."

"Friend, you then claim you are a universal victor," said Upaka. The Buddha replied: "Those who have attained the cessation of defilements, they are, indeed, victors like me. All evil have I vanquished. Hence I am a victor."

Upaka shook his head, remarking sarcastically, "It may be so, friend," and took a bypath. The Buddha continued his journey, and in gradual stages reached the Deer Park at Isipatana. The five ascetics, seeing the Buddha from afar, discussed among themselves: "Friends, here comes the ascetic Gotama who gave up the struggle and turned to a life of abundance and luxury. Let us make no kind of salutation to him." But when the Buddha approached them, they were struck by his dignified presence and they failed in their resolve. One went to meet him and took his alms-bowl and robe, another prepared a seat, still another brought him water. The Buddha sat on the seat prepared for him, and the five ascetics then addressed him by name and greeted him as an equal, saying, "*āvuso*" (friend).

The Buddha said, "Address not the Tathāgata (Perfect One) by the word '*āvuso*.' The Tathāgata, monks, is a Consummate One (Arahāt), a Supremely Enlightened One. Give ear, monks, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you, I shall teach you the Dhamma; following my teaching you will know and realize for yourselves even in this lifetime that supreme goal of purity for the sake of which clansmen retire from home to follow the homeless life." Thereupon the five monks said: "Friend Gotama, even with the stern austerities, penances, and self-torture you practised, you failed to attain the superhuman vision and insight. Now that you are living a life of luxury and self-indulgence, and have given up the struggle, how could you have reached superhuman vision and insight?"

Then replied the Buddha: "The Tathāgata has not ceased from effort and reverted to a life of luxury and abundance. The Tathāgata is a Supremely Enlightened One. Give ear, monks, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you. I shall teach you the Dhamma."

A second time the monks said the same thing to the Buddha who gave the same answer a second time. A third time they repeated the same question. In spite of the assurance given by the Master, they did not change their attitude. Then the Buddha spoke to them thus: "Confess, O monks, did I ever speak to you in this way before?" Touched by this appeal of the Blessed One, the five ascetics submitted and said: "No, indeed, Lord." Thus did the Supreme Sage, the Tamed One, tame the hearts of the five ascetics with patience and kindness, with wisdom and skill. Overcome and convinced by his utterances, the monks indicated their readiness to listen to him.

The Middle Path

Now, on a full moon day of July, 589 years before Christ, in the evening, at the moment the sun was setting and the full moon simultaneously rising, in the shady Deer Park at Isipatana, the Buddha addressed them:

Monks, these two extremes ought not to be cultivated by the recluse. What two? Sensual indulgence, which is low, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, and conducive to harm; and self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and conducive to harm. The middle path, monks, understood by the Tathāgata, avoiding the extremes, gives vision and knowledge and leads to calm, realization, enlightenment, and Nibbāna. And what, monks, is that middle path? It is this Noble Eightfold Path, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Then the Buddha explained to them the Four Noble Truths: the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the arising of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.²¹

Thus did the Supreme Buddha proclaim the truth and set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma (*dhamma-cakka-pavattana*). This first discourse, this message of the Deer Park, is the core of the Buddha's Teaching. As the footprint of every creature that walks the earth could be included in the elephant's footprint, which is pre-eminent for size, so does the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths embrace the entire teaching of the Buddha.

Explaining each of the Four Noble Truths, the Master said: "Such, monks, was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the insight, the light that arose in me, that I gained about things not heard before. As long as, monks, my intuitive knowledge, my vision in regard to these Four Noble Truths was not absolutely clear to me, I did not claim that I had gained the incomparable Supreme Enlightenment. But when, monks, my intuitive knowledge, my vision, in regard to these Four Noble Truths was absolutely clear to me, then only did I claim that I had gained the incomparable Supreme Enlightenment. And there arose in me insight and vision: unshakeable is the deliverance of my mind (*akuppā me cetovimutti*), this is my last birth, there is no more becoming (rebirth)."²² Thus spoke the Buddha, and the five monks, glad at heart, applauded the words of the Blessed One.

On December 2, 1930, at the royal dinner at the King's Palace, Sweden, when it was his turn to speak, Sir C. Venkata Raman, the Nobel Prize winning physicist, left aside science and, to the surprise of the renowned guests, delivered a most powerful address on the Buddha and India's past glories. "In the vicinity of Benares," said Sir Venkata Raman, "there exists a path which is for me the most sacred place in India. This path was one day travelled over by the Prince Siddhattha, after he had gotten rid of all his worldly possessions in order to go through the world and proclaim the annunciation of love."²³

The Siṃsapa Grove

Once the Blessed One was living at Kosambī (near Allahabad) in the Siṃsapa Grove. Then, gathering a few *siṃsapa* leaves in his hand, the Blessed One addressed the monks:

"What do you think, monks, which is greater in quantity, the handful of *siṃsapa* leaves gathered by me or what is in the forest overhead?"

"Not many, trifling, venerable sir, are the leaves in the handful gathered by the Blessed One; many are the leaves in the forest overhead."

"Even so, monks, many are those things I have fully realized, but not declared to you; few are the things I have declared to you. And why, monks, have I not declared them? They, monks, are not useful, are not essential to the life of purity, they do not lead to

²¹ For a comprehensive explanation of these truths, see the author's *The Buddha's Ancient Path*; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha* (Wheel No. 17); Francis Story, *The Four Noble Truths* (Wheel No. 34/35); Nyanatiloka Thera, *The Word of the Buddha*. All published by BPS.

²² Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, S V 420.

²³ *The Bosat* (Vol. 5, No. I, 1942), Vajirarama, Colombo, p 8.

disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full understanding, to full enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why, monks, they are not declared by me.

“And what is it, monks, that I have declared? This is suffering—this have I declared. This is the arising of suffering—this have I declared. This is the cessation of suffering—this have I declared. This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering—this have I declared.

And why, monks, have I declared these truths? “They are, indeed, useful, are essential to the life of purity, they lead to disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full understanding, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why, monks, they are declared by me. Therefore, monks, an effort should be made to realize: “This is suffering, this is the arising of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.”²⁴

The Buddha has emphatically said:

One thing do I make known: suffering, and the cessation of suffering.²⁵ (*Dukkhaṃ ceva paññāpemi, dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ.*)

To understand this unequivocal saying is to understand Buddhism; for the entire teaching of the Buddha is nothing else than the application of this one principle. What can be called the discovery of a Buddha is just these Four Noble Truths. This is the typical teaching of the Buddhas of all ages.

The Peerless Physician

The Buddha is also known as the peerless physician (*bhisakko*), the supreme surgeon (*sallakatto anuttaro*). He indeed, is an unrivalled healer.

The Buddha’s method of exposition of the Four Noble Truths is comparable to that of a physician. As a physician, he first diagnosed the illness, next he discovered the cause for the arising of the illness, then he considered its removal, and lastly applied the remedy.

Suffering (*dukkha*) is the illness; craving (*taṇhā*) is the arising or the root cause of the illness (*samudaya*); through the removal of craving, the illness is removed, and that is the cure (*nirodha-nibbāna*); the Noble Eightfold Path (*magga*) is the remedy.

The Buddha’s reply to a brahmin who wished to know why the Master is called a Buddha clearly indicates that it was for no other reason than a perfect knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Here is the Buddha’s reply:

I knew what should be known,
What should be cultivated I have cultivated,
What should be abandoned that have I let go.
Hence, O brahmin, I am Buddha—
The Awakened One.²⁶

With the proclamation of the Dhamma for the first time, with the setting in motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma, and with the conversion of the five ascetics, the Deer Park at Isipatana became the birthplace of the Buddha’s Dispensation (*sāsana*) and of his Community of Monks (*saṅgha*).²⁷

²⁴ S V 437.

²⁵ MN 22; I,140.

²⁶ S V 588; MN 92; Vin.I,45; Thag. 828.

²⁷ In 273 B.C. Emperor Asoka came on pilgrimage to this holy spot and caused a series of monuments and a commemorative pillar with the lion capital to be erected. This capital with its four magnificent lions upholding the *dharmacakra*, “the Wheel of Dharma,” now stands in the museum of Sarnath, Benares, and

The Spread of the Dhamma

Thereafter the Buddha spent the vassa²⁸ at the Deer Park at Isipatana, sacred this day to over 600 million of the human race. During these three months of “rains” fifty others headed by Yasa, a young man of wealth, joined the Order. Now the Buddha had sixty disciples, all arahats who had realized the Dhamma and were fully competent to teach others. When the rainy season ended, the Master addressed his immediate disciples in these words:

“Released am I, monks, from all ties whether human or divine. You also are delivered from all fetters whether human or divine. Go now and wander for the welfare, and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the gain, welfare, and happiness of gods and men. Let not two of you proceed in the same direction. Proclaim the Dhamma that is excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, and excellent in the end, possessed of meaning and the letter and utterly perfect. Proclaim the life of purity, the holy life consummate and pure. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who will be lost through not hearing the Dhamma, there are beings who will understand the Dhamma. I also shall go to Uruvelā, to Senānigama, to teach the Dhamma.”²⁹

Thus did the Buddha commence his sublime mission, which lasted to the end of his life. With his disciples he walked the highways and byways of India enfolding all within the aura of his boundless compassion and wisdom. Though the Order of Monks began its career with sixty bhikkhus, it expanded soon into thousands, and, as a result of the increasing number of monks, many monasteries came into being. In later times monastic Indian universities like Nālandā, Vikramasilā, Jagaddalā, Vikramapuri, and Odantapuri, became cultural centres which gradually influenced the whole of Asia and through it the mental life of humankind.

After a successful ministry of forty-five years, the Buddha passed away at the age of eighty at the twin Sāla Trees of the Mallas at Kusinārā (in modern Uttara Pradesh about 120 miles northeast of Benares).³⁰

The Buddha’s Ministry

During his long ministry of forty-five years the Buddha walked widely throughout the northern districts of India. But during the rains retreat (*vassa*), he generally stayed in one place. Here follows a brief sketch of his retreats gathered from the texts:

1st year: Vārānasi. After the first proclamation of the Dhamma on the full moon day of July, the Buddha spent the first *vassa* at Isipatana, Vārānasi.

The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years: Rājagaha (in the Bamboo Grove, Veḷuvana). It was during the third year that Sudatta, a householder of Sāvattthī known for his bounty as Anāthapiṇḍika, “the

is today the official crest of India. The *dharmacakra* festival is still held in Sri Lanka.

Jawaharlal Nehru writes: “At Sarnath near Benares, I would almost see the Buddha preaching his first sermon, and some of his recorded words would come like a distant echo to me through two thousand five hundred years. Asoka’s pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperor.” (*The Discovery of India*, p 44)

²⁸ The “rains” is the three months of seclusion during the rainy season, i.e. from July to October in India.

²⁹ Vin I 21.

³⁰ It is interesting to note that this greatest of Indian *rishis* (seers) was born under a tree in a park, attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma at the Deer Park under trees, and finally passed away under the twin sāla trees. He spent most of his time in the open in forests and in the villages of India. The south branch of the Bodhi Tree was brought to Sri Lanka by the arhat nun Saṅghamittā, daughter of Asoka the Great of India, in the third century B.C. The oldest recorded tree in the world, it still flourishes at Anuradhapura.

feeder of the forlorn,” having heard that a Buddha had come into being, went in search of him, listened to him, and having gained confidence (*saddhā*) in the Teacher, the Teaching, and the Taught (the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), attained the first stage of sainthood (*sotāpatti*). He was renowned as the chief supporter (*dāyaka*) of the Master. Anāthapiṇḍika had built the famous Jetavana monastery at Sāvattḥī, known today as Sahet-mahet, and offered it to the Buddha and his disciples. The ruins of this monastery are still to be seen.

5th year: Vesāli. The Buddha kept retreat in the Pinnacled Hall (*kūṭāgārasālā*). It was at this time that King Suddhodana fell ill. The Master visited him and preached the Dhamma, hearing which the king attained perfect sanctity (*arahatta*), and after enjoying the bliss of emancipation for seven days, passed away. The Order of Nuns was also founded during this time.

6th year: Maṅkula Hill. Here the Buddha performed the “Twin Wonder” (*yamaka pāṭihāriya*). He did the same for the first time at Kapilavatthu to overcome the pride of the Sakyas, his relatives.

7th year: Tāvatisa (the Heaven of the Thirty-three). Here the Buddha preached the Abhidhamma or the Higher Doctrine to the deities (*devas*) headed by his mother Mahāmāyā, who had passed away seven days after the birth of Prince Siddhattha, and was reborn as a deva in the Tāvatisa.

8th year: Bhesakalā Forest (near Sumsumāragiri). It was here that Nakulapitā and his wife, a genial couple, came to see the Buddha, told him about their very happy married life, and expressed the wish that they might continue to live together both here and hereafter. These two were placed by the Buddha as chiefs of those that win confidence.

9th year: Kosambī—at the Ghosita Monastery.

10th year: Pārileyyakka Forest. It was in the tenth year that, at Kosambi, a dispute arose between two parties of monks owing to a trivial offence committed by a monk. As they could not be reconciled, and as they did not pay heed to his exhortation, the Buddha retired to the forest. At the end of the *vassa*, their dispute settled, the monks came to Sāvattḥī and begged pardon of the Buddha.

11th year: Village of Ekanāla (in the Magadha country). It was here that the Buddha met the brahmin farmer Kasibhāradvāja who spoke to the Buddha somewhat discourteously. The Buddha, however, answered his questions with his characteristic sobriety. Bhāradvāja became an ardent follower of the Buddha. It was on this occasion that the very interesting discourse, Kasibhāradvāja Sutta (Suttanipāta), was delivered. (Read *The Book of Protection* by this author (BPS).)

12th year: Verañja. The introduction of the Vinaya is attributed to the twelfth year. It was also during this retreat that the brahmin Verañja came to see the Buddha, asked a series of questions on Buddhist practices, and being satisfied with the answers, became a follower of the Blessed One. He invited the Master and the Sangha to spend the rainy season (*vassa*) at his village Verañja. At that time there was a famine. The Buddha and his disciples had to be satisfied with very coarse food supplied by horse merchants. As it was the custom of the Buddha to take leave of the inviter before setting out on his journeying, he saw the brahmin at the end of the *vassa*. The latter admitted that though he had invited the Buddha and his disciples to spend the retreat at Verañja, he had failed in his duties towards them during the entire season owing to his being taxed with household duties. However, the next day he offered food and gifts of robes to the Buddha and the Sangha.

13th year: Cāliya Rock (near the city of Cālika). During this time the elder Meghiya was his personal attendant. The elder being attracted by a beautiful mango grove near a river asked the Buddha for permission to go there for meditation. Though the Buddha asked him to wait till another monk came, he repeated the request. The Buddha granted him permission. The elder went, but to his great surprise he was oppressed by thoughts of sense pleasures, ill will, and

harm, and returned disappointed. Thereupon the Buddha said: “Meghiya, for the deliverance of the mind of the immature, five things are conducive to their maturing: (1) a good friend; (2) virtuous behaviour guided by the essential precepts for training; (3) good counsel tending to dispassion, calm, cessation, enlightenment and Nibbāna; (4) the effort to abandon evil thoughts, and (5) acquiring of wisdom that discerns the rise and fall of things.”³¹

14th year: Jetavana monastery, Sāvattihī. During this time the Venerable Rāhula, who was still a novice (*sāmaṇera*), received higher ordination (*upasampadā*). According to the Vinaya, higher ordination is not conferred before the age of twenty; Ven. Rāhula had then reached that age.

15th year: Kapilavatthu (the birthplace of Prince Siddhattha). It was in this year that the death occurred of King Suppabuddha, the father of Yasodharā.

16th year: City of Āḷavi: During this year Āḷavaka, the demon who devoured human flesh, was tamed by the Buddha. He became a follower of the Buddha. For Āḷavaka’s questions and the Master’s answers read the Āḷavaka Sutta, in the Suttanipāta. (See *The Book of Protection*, p.81 by this author, publ. by BPS.)

17th year: Rājagaha, at Veḷuvana Monastery. During this time a well-known courtesan, Sirimā, sister of Jivaka, the physician, died. The Buddha attended the funeral, and asked the king to inform the people to buy the dead body—the body that attracted so many when she was alive. No one cared to have it even without paying a price. On that occasion, addressing the crowd, the Buddha said in verse:

Behold this painted image, a body full of wounds,
heaped up (with bones), diseased,
the object of thought of many, in which there is
neither permanence nor stability.³²

18th year: Cāliya Rock. During this time a young weaver’s daughter met the Buddha and listened to his discourse on mindfulness of death (*maraṇānussati*). On another occasion she answered correctly all the four questions put to her by the Master, because she often pondered over the words of the Buddha. Her answers were philosophical, and the congregations who had not given a thought to the Buddha word, could not grasp the meaning of her answers. The Buddha, however, praised her and addressed them in verse thus:

Blind is this world;
few here clearly see.
Like a bird that escapes from the net,
only a few go to a good state of existence.³³

She heard the Dhamma and attained the first stage of sanctity (*sotāpatti*). But unfortunately she died an untimely death. (For a detailed account of this interesting story, and the questions and

³¹ The whole of this discourse is at A IV 354, Ud 34–37, and in brief at *Dhammapada Commentary*, I,287. In the elder’s verse (66) in *Theragāthā*, it is said that Venerable Meghiya was of a Sakyan Rājā’s family. The Dhammapada verses (33, 34) are as follows:

The unsteady fickle mind
Hard to guard and hard to control,
The wise man straightens
Even as a fletcher an arrow.

Like a fish jerked out of its watery abode
And cast on land, this mind quakes;
(Therefore) the realm of Māra
Should be abandoned.

³² Dhp 147

³³ Dhp 174

answers, see the *Commentary on the Dhammapada*, Vol. III, p.170, or Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, Part 3, p.14.)

19th year: Cāliya Rock.

20th year: Rājagaha, at Veḷuvana Monastery.

From the 21st year till the 43rd year: Sāvattḥī. Of these twenty-four *vassas*, eighteen were spent at Jetavana Monastery, the rest at Pubbārāma. Anāthapiṇḍika and Visākhā were the chief supporters.

44th year: Beluva (a small village, probably situated near Vesāli), where the Buddha suppressed, by force of will, a grave illness.

In the 45th year of his Enlightenment, the Buddha passed away at Kusinārā in the month of May (*vesākha*) before the commencement of the rains.

During the first twenty years of the Buddha's life, the bhikkhus Nāgasamāla, Nāgita, Upavāna, Sunakkhatta, Sāgata, Rādha, and Meghiya, and the novice (*sāmaṇera*) Cunda attended upon him, though not regularly. However, after the twentieth year, the Buddha wished to have a regular attendant. Thereon all the great eighty arahats, like Sāriputta and Moggallāna, expressed their willingness to attend upon their Master. But this did not meet with his approval. Perhaps the Buddha thought that these arahats could be of greater service to humanity

Then the elders requested Ānanda Thera, who had kept silent all this while, to beg of the Master to be his attendant. Ānanda Thera's answer is interesting. He said, "If the Master is willing to have me as his attendant, he will speak." Then the Buddha said: "Ānanda, let not others persuade you. You on your own may attend upon me."

Buddhahood and Arahats

Perfect Enlightenment, the discovery and realization of the Four Noble Truths (Buddhahood), is not the prerogative of a single being chosen by divine providence, nor is it a unique and unrepeatable event in human history. It is an achievement open to anyone who earnestly strives for perfect purity and wisdom, and with inflexible will cultivates the *pāramī*, the perfections which are the requisites of Buddhahood, and the Noble Eightfold Path. There have been Buddhas in the dim past and there will be Buddhas in the future when necessity arises and conditions are favourable. But we need not think of that distant future; now, in our present days, the "doors to the Deathless" are still wide open. Those who enter through them, reaching perfect sanctity or arahats, the final liberation from suffering (Nibbāna), have been solemnly declared by the Buddha to be his equals as far as the emancipation from defilements and ultimate deliverance is concerned:

Victors like me are they, indeed,
They who have won defilements' end.³⁴

The Buddha, however, also made clear to his disciples the difference between a Fully Enlightened One and the arahats,³⁵ the accomplished saints:

The Tathāgata, O disciples, while being an arahat, is Fully Enlightened. It is he who proclaims a path not proclaimed before; he is the knower of a path, who understands a path, who is skilled in a path. And now his disciples are wayfarers who follow in his footsteps. That, disciples, is the distinction, the specific feature which distinguishes the

³⁴ Ariyapariyesana Sutta, MN 26/M I 264.

³⁵ The word is applied only to those who have fully destroyed the taints. In this sense the Buddha was the first arahat in the world, as he himself revealed to Upaka.

Tathāgata, who being an arahat, is Fully Enlightened, from the disciple who is freed by insight.³⁶

Salient Features of the Dhamma

There are no dark corners of ignorance, no cobwebs of mystery, no smoky chambers of secrecy; there are no “secret doctrines,” no hidden dogmas in the teaching of the Buddha, which is open as daylight and as clear as crystal. “The doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Buddha shine when open and not when covered, even as the sun and moon shine when open and not when covered” (A I 283).

The Master disapproved of those who professed to have “secret doctrines,” saying, “Secrecy is the hallmark of false doctrines.” Addressing the disciple Ānanda, the Master said: “I have taught the Dhamma, Ānanda, without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrine; for in respect of the truths, Ānanda, the Tathāgata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher who hides some essential knowledge from the pupil.”³⁷

A Buddha is an extreme rarity, but is no freak in human history. He would not preserve his supreme knowledge for himself alone. Such an idea would be completely ridiculous and abhorrent from the Buddhist point of view, and to the Buddha such a wish is utterly inconceivable. Driven by universal love and compassion, the Buddha expounded his teaching without keeping back anything that was essential for man’s deliverance from the shackles of saṃsāra, repeated wandering.

The Buddha’s teaching from beginning to end is open to all those who have eyes to see and a mind to understand. Buddhism was never forced upon anyone at the point of the gun or the bayonet. Conversion by compulsion was unknown among Buddhists and repugnant to the Buddha.

Of the Buddha’s creed of compassion, H. Fielding Hall writes in *The Soul of a People*: “There can never be a war of Buddhism. No ravished country has ever borne witness to the prowess of the followers of the Buddha; no murdered men have poured out their blood on their hearthstones, killed in his name; no ruined women have cursed his name to high heaven. He and his faith are clean of the stain of blood. He was the preacher of the Great Peace, of love of charity, of compassion, and so clear is his teaching that it can never be misunderstood.”

When communicating the Dhamma to his disciples, the Master made no distinctions whatsoever among them; for there were no specially chosen favourite disciples. Among his disciples, all those who were arahats, who were passion-free and had shed the fetters binding to renewed existence, had equally perfected themselves in purity. But there were some outstanding ones who were skilled in different branches of knowledge and practice, and because of their mental endowments, they gained positions of distinction; but special favours were never granted to anyone by the Master. Upāli, for instance, who came from a barber’s family, was made the chief in matters of discipline (*vinaya*) in preference to many arahats who belonged to the class of the nobles and warriors (*khattiya*). Sāriputta and Moggallāna, brahmins by birth, because of their longstanding aspirations in former lives, became the chief disciples of the Buddha. The former excelled in wisdom (*paññā*) and the latter in supernormal powers (*iddhi*).

The Buddha never wished to extract from his disciples blind and submissive faith in him or his teachings. He always insisted on discriminative examination and intelligent inquiry. In no uncertain terms he urged critical investigation when he addressed the inquiring Kālāmas in a discourse that has been rightly called the first charter of free thought:

³⁶ S III 66.

³⁷ Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta, DN 16/D II 100.

“Come, Kālāmas. Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on reasons, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, ‘The ascetic is our teacher.’ But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome, these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to harm and suffering,’ then you should abandon them. And when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are wholesome, these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to welfare and happiness,’ then you should engage in them.”

To take anything on trust is not in the spirit of Buddhism, so we find this dialogue between the Master and the disciples: “If now, knowing this and preserving this, would you say: ‘We honour our Master and through respect for him we respect what he teaches?’”—“No, Lord.”—“That which you affirm, O disciples, is it not only that which you yourselves have recognized, seen, and grasped?” – “Yes, Lord.”³⁸

The Buddha faced facts and refused to acknowledge or yield to anything that did not accord with truth. He does not want us to recognize anything indiscriminately and without reason. He wants us to comprehend things as they really are, to put forth the necessary effort and work out our own deliverance with mindfulness.

You should make the effort
The Tathāgatas point out the way.³⁹

Bestir yourselves, rise up,
And yield your hearts unto the Buddha’s teaching.
Shake off the armies of the king of death,
As does the elephant a reed-thatched shed.⁴⁰

The Buddha, for the first time in the world’s history taught that deliverance should be sought independent of a saviour, be he human or divine.

The idea that another raises a man from lower to higher levels of life, and ultimately rescues him, tends to make man indolent and weak, supine and foolish. This kind of belief degrades a man and smothers every spark of dignity from his moral being.

The Enlightened One exhorts his followers to acquire self-reliance. Others may lend us a helping hand indirectly, but deliverance from suffering must be wrought out and fashioned by each one for himself upon the anvil of his own actions.

True Purification

In the understanding of things, neither belief nor fear plays any role in Buddhist thought. The truth of the Dhamma can be grasped only through insight, never through blind faith, or through fear of some known or unknown being.

Not only did the Buddha discourage blind belief and fear of an omnipotent God as unsuitable approaches for understanding the truth, but he also denounced adherence to unprofitable rites and rituals, because the mere abandoning of outward things, such as fasting, bathing in rivers, animal sacrifice, and similar acts, does not tend to purify a man or make a man holy and noble.

³⁸ MN 38/M I 264.

³⁹ DhP 276.

⁴⁰ S I 156.

We find this dialogue between the Buddha and the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja: Once the Buddha, addressing the monks, explained in detail how a seeker after deliverance should train himself, and further added that a person whose mind is free from taints, whose life of purity is perfected, and the task done, could be called one who bathes inwardly.

Then Bhāradvāja, seated near the Buddha, heard these words and asked him:

“Does the Venerable Gotama go to bathe in the river Bāhuka?” “Brahmin, what good is the river Bāhuka? What can the river Bāhuka do?”

“Indeed, Venerable Gotama, the river Bāhuka is believed by many to be holy. Many people have their evil deeds (*pāpa*) washed away in the river Bāhuka.”

Then the Buddha made him understand that bathing in rivers would not cleanse a man of his dirt of evil, and instructed him thus:

“Bathe just here (in this Doctrine and Discipline, *Dhamma-vinaya*), brahmin, give security to all beings. If you do not speak falsehood, or kill or steal, if you are confident, and are not mean, what does it avail you to go to Gayā (the name of a river in India during the time of the Buddha)? Your well at home is also a Gayā.”⁴¹

Caste Problem

Caste, which was a matter of vital importance to the brahmins of India, was one of utter indifference to the Buddha, who strongly condemned the debasing caste system. In his Order of Monks all castes unite as do the rivers in the sea. They lose their former names, castes, and clans, and become known as members of one community—the Sangha.

Speaking of the equal recognition of all members of the Sangha the Buddha says:

Just as, O monks, the great rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Aciravatī, Sarabhū, and Mahī, on reaching the ocean, lose their earlier name and identity and come to be reckoned as the great ocean, similarly, O monks, people of the four castes (*vaṇṇa*)... who leave the household and become homeless recluses under the Doctrine and Discipline declared by the Tathāgata, lose their previous names and identities and are reckoned as recluses who are sons of Sākya. (Udāna 55)

The Buddhist position regarding racism and racial discrimination made explicit at such an early age is one reflected in the moral and scientific standpoint adopted by UNESCO in the present century (*Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice*, UNESCO 1978).⁴²

To Sundarika Bhāradvāja, the brahmin who inquired about his lineage, the Buddha answered:

No Brahmin I, no prince,
No farmer, or aught else.
All worldly ranks I know,
But knowing go my way
as simply nobody:
Homeless, in pilgrim garb,
With shaven crown, I go
my way alone, serene.
To ask my birth is vain.⁴³

⁴¹ Vatthūpama Sutta, MN 7. See Nyanaponika Thera, *The Simile of the Cloth* (Wheel No. 61/62).

⁴² P.D. Premasiri, “The Buddhist Concept of A Just Social and Political Order,” *Young Buddhist*, Singapore.

⁴³ Sn 455, 456; Chalmer’s translation (Harvard Oriental Series).

On one occasion a caste-ridden brahmin insulted the Buddha saying. "Stop, you shaveling! Stop, you outcast!"

The Master, without any feeling of indignation, gently replied:

Birth makes not a man an outcast,
Birth makes not a man a brahmin;
Action makes a man an outcast,
Action makes a man a brahmin. (Suttanipāta, 142)

He then delivered a whole sermon, the *Vasala Sutta*, explaining to the brahmin in detail the characteristics of one who is really an outcast (*vasala*). Convinced, the haughty brahmin took refuge in the Buddha. (See *The Book of Protection*, p.91.)

The Buddha freely admitted into the Order people from all castes and classes when he knew that they were fit to live the holy life, and some of them later distinguished themselves in the Order. The Buddha was the only contemporary teacher who endeavoured to blend in mutual tolerance and concord those who hitherto had been rent asunder by differences of caste and class.

Upāli, who was the chief authority on the Vinaya—the disciplinary rules of the Order—was a barber, regarded as one of the basest occupations of the lower classes. Sunita, who later won arahatship, was a scavenger, another base occupation. In the Order of Nuns were Puṇṇā and Puṇṇikā, both slave girls. According to Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 8.5% of the number of those nuns who were able to realize the fruits of their training were drawn from the despised castes, which were mostly illiterate.⁴⁴

Chief Disciples

Rājagaha, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, was one of the first places visited by the Buddha soon after his enlightenment. As a wandering ascetic in the early days of his renunciation, he had promised King Seniya Bimbisāra that he would visit Rājagaha when he achieved the object of his search. King Bimbisāra was overjoyed at the sight of the Buddha, and having listened to his teaching, became a lay follower. His devotion to the Buddha became so ardent that within a few days he offered him his pleasure park, Veluvana, for residence.

Rājagaha during that time was a centre of great learning where many schools of philosophy flourished. One such school of thought had as its head Sañjaya; and among his retinue of two hundred and fifty followers were Upatissa and Kolita, who were later to become Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna, the two chief disciples of the Buddha.

One day when Upatissa was walking through the streets of Rājagaha, he was greatly struck by the serene countenance and the quiet, dignified deportment of one of the first disciples of the Buddha, the arahat Assaji, who was on his alms round.

All the strenuous endeavours to achieve perfection that Upatissa had made through many a birth were now on the verge of being rewarded. Without going back to his teacher, he followed the arahat Assaji to his resting place, eager to know whom he followed and what teaching he had accepted.

"Friend," said Upatissa, "serene is your countenance, clear and radiant is your glance. Who persuaded you to renounce the world? Who is your teacher? What Dhamma (teaching) do you follow?" The Venerable Assaji, rather reluctant to speak much, humbly said: "I cannot expound the Doctrine and Discipline at length, but I can tell you the meaning briefly." Upatissa's reply is interesting: "Well, friend, tell little or much; what I want is just the meaning. Why speak many

⁴⁴ See G.P Malalasekera and K.N. Jayatilleke, *Buddhism and the Race Question* (Wheel 200/201).

words?" Then the arahat Assaji uttered a single verse which embraces the Buddha's entire doctrine of causality:

*Ye dhammā hetuppabhavā
Tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha
Tesaṃ ca yo nirodho
Evaṃvādi mahā samaṇo.*

Whatever from a cause proceeds, thereof
The Tathāgata has explained the cause,
Its cessation too he has explained.
This is the teaching of the Supreme Sage. (Vinaya Mahāvagga)

Upatissa instantly grasped the meaning and attained the first stage of realization, comprehending:

"whatever is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of ceasing"
(*yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ*).

With a heart full of joy, he quickly went back to his friend Kolita and told him of his meeting with the arahat and of the teaching he had received. Kolita, too, like Upatissa, instantly gained the first stage of realization, having heard the Dhamma from his friend. Thereon both of them approached Sañjaya and asked him to follow the Buddha. But afraid of losing his reputation as a religious teacher, he refused to do so. Upatissa and Kolita then left Sañjaya—much against his protestations—for the Veḷuvana monastery and expressed their wish to become followers of the Buddha. The Buddha gladly welcomed them saying, "Come, monks, well proclaimed is the Dhamma. Live the holy life for the complete ending of suffering." He admitted them into the Order. They attained deliverance and became the two chief disciples.

Another great one who joined the Order during the Buddha's stay at Veḷuvana was the brahmin sage Mahā Kassapa, who had renounced great wealth to find the way to deliverance. It was the Venerable Mahā Kassapa, three months after the Buddha's passing away (*parinibbāna*), who called up the convocation of arahats (the First Council), at the Sattapaṇṇi Cave near Rājagaha under the patronage of King Ajātasattu, to collect and codify the Dhamma and Vinaya.

The Order of Nuns

In the early days of the Order, only men were admitted to the Sangha since the Buddha was reluctant to admit women. But there were many devout women among the lay followers who had a keen desire for a life of renunciation as nuns. Urged by their keenness, Pajāpatī Gotamī, the foster-mother of the Buddha, in the company of many ladies of rank, approached the Buddha, beseeching him to grant them ordination. But the Buddha still hesitated to accept them.

Seeing their discomfiture, and urged by their zeal, the Venerable Ānanda took up their cause and pleaded with the Buddha on their behalf. The Buddha finally yielded to this appeal, placing, however, eight cardinal rules on the ordination of women. Thus was established, in the fifth year after his enlightenment, the Order of Nuns, the Bhikkhunī Sāsana, for the first time in history; for never before this had there been an Order where woman could lead a celibate life of renunciation.

Women from all walks of life joined the Order. Foremost in the Order stood the Theris Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā. The lives of quite a number of these noble nuns, their strenuous endeavours to win the goal of freedom, and their paeans of joy at deliverance of mind, are graphically described in the *Therīgāthā*, *The Psalms of the Sisters*.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Psalms of the Early Buddhists—The Sisters*, trans. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids (PTS Translation Series).

At Kapilavatthu

While at Rājagaha, the Blessed One heard that his father wished to see him, and he set out for Kapilavatthu. He did not, however, go straight to the palace, but, according to custom, stopped in a grove outside the town. The next day the Buddha, with his bowl, went for his alms from house to house in the streets of Kapilavatthu. King Suddhodana, startled at the news, rushed to the Buddha and said; “Why, Master, why do you put us to shame? Why do you go begging for your food? Not one of our race has ever done so.” Replied the Buddha: “You and your family may claim descent from kings; my descent is from the Buddhas of old; and they, begging their food, always lived on alms.” Then explaining the Dhamma the Master said, “Be alert, be mindful, lead a righteous life. The righteous live happily both in this world and the next.” And so the king became established in the Path, he realized the Dhamma.

The Buddha was then conducted into the palace where all came to pay their respects to him, but not Princess Yasodharā. The Buddha went to her, and the princess, knowing the impassable gulf between them, fell on the ground at his feet and saluted him. Then relating the Candakinnara Jātaka, a story of his previous birth,⁴⁶ revealing how great her virtue had been in that former life, he made her an adherent to the Doctrine. Later when the Buddha was induced to establish an Order for women, Yasodharā became one of the first nuns and attained arahatship, highest sanctity.

When the Buddha was in the palace, Princess Yasodharā arrayed her son Rāhula in all his best attire and sent him to the Blessed One, saying, “That is your father, Rāhula, go and ask for your inheritance.”

Prince Rāhula went to the Buddha, stood before him, and said, “Pleasant indeed, is your shadow, sage.”

And when the Blessed One had finished his meal and left the palace, Prince Rāhula followed him saying, “Give me my inheritance, sage; give me my inheritance.” At that the Blessed One spoke to the Venerable Sāriputta: “Well then, Sāriputta, take him into the Order.”

Then the Venerable Sāriputta gave Prince Rāhula the ordination.⁴⁷ In the Majjhima Nikāya, one of the five original collections in Pāli containing the Buddha’s discourses, there are three discourses (Nos. 61, 62, 147) entitled Rāhulovāda or exhortations to Rāhula, delivered by the Blessed One to teach the Dhamma to little Rāhula. The discourses are entirely devoted to advice on discipline and meditation. Here is an extract from the Master’s exhortation in the Mahā Rāhulovāda Sutta:⁴⁸

Cultivate the meditation on loving-kindness (*mettā*), Rāhula; for by cultivating loving-kindness, ill will is banished. Cultivate the meditation on compassion (*karuṇā*), Rāhula, for by cultivating compassion, cruelty is banished. Cultivate the meditation on appreciative joy (*muditā*), Rāhula, for by cultivating appreciative joy, aversion is banished. Cultivate the meditation on equanimity (*upekkhā*), Rāhula, for by cultivating equanimity, hatred is banished. Cultivate the meditation on impurity (*asubha*), Rāhula, for by meditating on impurity, lust is banished. Cultivate the meditation on the concept of impermanence, (*anicca-saññā*), Rāhula, for by meditating on the concept of impermanence, pride of self (*asmi-māna*) is banished. Cultivate the meditation on mindfulness of in-and-out-breathing (*ānāpānasati*), Rāhula, for mindfulness of breathing, cultivated and frequently practised, bears much fruit and is of great advantage.

⁴⁶ Jātaka No. 485.

⁴⁷ Vin I 82–83. See Piyadassi Thera and J.F. Dickson, *Ordination in Theravāda Buddhism*, Wheel No.56

⁴⁸ MN 62. For a full translation, see *Advice to Rāhula* (Wheel No. 33).

Women in Buddhism

Generally speaking, during the time of the Buddha, owing to brahminical influence, women were not given much recognition. Sometimes they were held in contempt and in servility to man. It was the Buddha who raised the status of women and there were cases of women showing erudition in matters of philosophy. In his large-heartedness and magnanimity he always treated women with consideration and civility, and pointed out to them, too, the path to peace, purity, and sanctity. Said the Blessed One: "A mother is the friend at one's home. A wife is the highest friend of the husband."

The Buddha did not reject the invitation for a meal, though Ambapāli⁴⁹ was of bad repute. Whatever food she offered he accepted, and in return, gave her the *Dhammadāna*, the gift of truth. She was immediately convinced by the teaching and leaving aside her frivolous lay life, she entered the Order of Nuns. Ardent and strenuous in her religious practices, she then became an arahat.

Kisāgotamī was another woman to whom the Buddha gave the assistance of his great compassion. Her story is one of the most touching tales recorded in our books. Many more are the instances where the Buddha helped and consoled women who suffered from the vicissitudes of life.

Ministering to the Sick

Great indeed, was the Master's compassion for the sick. On one occasion the Blessed One found an ailing monk, Pūtigatta Tissa, with festering ulcers lying on his soiled bed. Immediately the Master prepared hot water, and with the help of the Venerable Ānanda washed him, tenderly nursed him with his own hands, and taught the Dhamma, thus enabling him to win arahatship before he died. On another occasion, too, the Master tended a sick monk and admonished his disciples thus:

"Whosoever, monks, would follow my admonition (would wait upon me, would honour me), he should wait upon the sick."⁵⁰

When the arahat Tissa passed away, the funeral rites were duly performed and the Buddha caused the relics to be enshrined in a stupa.⁵¹

The Buddha's *mettā* or loving-kindness was all-pervading and immeasurable. His earnest exhortation to his disciples was:

Just as with her own life
a mother shields from hurt
her own, her only child,
let all-embracing thoughts
for all that lives be thine.⁵²

⁴⁹ .A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists—The Sisters*, p 120.

⁵⁰ Vin I 302.

⁵¹ "To the north-east of the monastery of Jetavana," wrote General Alexander Cunningham in his *Archaeological Report*, 1862-3, "there was a *stūpa* built on the spot where the Buddha had washed the hands and feet of a sick monk.... The remains of the *stūpa* still exist in a mass of solid brick work at a distance of 550 feet from the Jetavana Monastery."

In General Cunningham's map of Sāvattihī (modern Sahet-Mahet), the site of this *stūpa* is marked H. in the plan. *Archaeological Survey of India* (Simla 1871), p 341.

⁵² Metta Sutta, *Sutta Nipāta*, 149, 149; Chalmer's translation.

Being one who always acted in constant conformity with what he preached, loving-kindness and compassion always dominated his actions.

While journeying from village to village, from town to town, instructing, enlightening, and gladdening the many, the Buddha saw how superstitious folk, steeped in ignorance, slaughtered animals in worship of their gods. He spoke to them:

Of life, which all can take but none can give,
Life which all creatures love and strive to keep,
Wonderful, dear, and pleasant unto each,
Even to the meanest...⁵³

Thus when people who prayed to the gods for mercy were merciless, and India was blood-stained with the morbid sacrifices of innocent animals at the desecrated altars of imaginary deities, and the harmful rites and rituals of ascetics and brahmins brought disaster and brutal agony, the Buddha, the Compassionate One, pointed out the ancient path of the Enlightened Ones, the path of righteousness, love, and understanding.

Mettā or love is the best antidote for anger in oneself. It is the best medicine for those who are angry with us. Let us then extend love to all who need it with a free and boundless heart. The language of the heart, the language that comes from the heart and goes to the heart, is always simple, graceful, and full of power.

Equanimity and Self-composure

Amid all the vicissitudes of life—gain and loss, repute and ill-repute, praise and censure, pain and happiness⁵⁴—the Buddha never wavered. He was firm as a solid rock. Touched by happiness or by pain he showed neither elation nor depression. He never encouraged wrangling and animosity. Addressing the monks he once said: “I do not quarrel with the world, monks. It is the world that quarrels with me. An exponent of the Dhamma does not quarrel with anyone in the world.”⁵⁵

He admonished his disciples in these words:

Monks, if others were to speak ill of me or ill of the Dhamma or ill of the Sangha (the Order), you should not on that account entertain thoughts of enmity and spite, and be worried. If, monks, you are angry and displeased with them, it will not only impede your mental development but you will also fail to judge how far that speech is right or wrong. You should unravel what is untrue and make it all clear. Also, monks, if others speak highly of me, highly of the Dhamma and the Sangha, you need not on that account be elated; for that too will mar your inner development. You should acknowledge what is right and show the truth of what has been said.⁵⁶

There never was an occasion when the Buddha manifested unfriendliness towards anyone—even to his opponents and enemies. There were those who opposed him and his doctrine, yet the Buddha never regarded them as enemies. When others reproached him in strong terms, the Buddha neither manifested anger nor aversion nor uttered an unkind word, but said:

As an elephant in the battlefield endures the arrows shot from a bow, even so will I endure abuse and unfriendly expressions of others.⁵⁷

⁵³ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*.

⁵⁴ These are the *aṭṭha loka-dhamma*, the eight vicissitudes of life.

⁵⁵ S II 138.

⁵⁶ D I 3.

⁵⁷ Dh 310.

Devadatta

A striking example of this mental attitude is seen in his relation with Devadatta. Devadatta was a cousin of the Buddha who entered the Order and gained supernormal powers of the mundane plane (*puthujjana-iddhi*). Later, however, he began to harbour thoughts of jealousy and ill will toward his kinsman, the Buddha, and his two chief disciples, Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna, with the ambition of becoming the leader of the Sangha, the Order of Monks.

Devadatta wormed himself into the heart of Ajātasattu, the young prince, the son of King Bimbisāra. One day when the Blessed One was addressing a gathering at the Veḷuvana Monastery, where the king, too, was present, Devadatta approached the Buddha, saluted him, and said: “Venerable sir, you are now enfeebled with age. May the Master lead a life of solitude free from worry and care. I will direct the Order.”

The Buddha rejected this overture and Devadatta departed irritated and disconcerted, nursing hatred and malice toward the Blessed One. Then, with the malicious purpose of causing mischief, he went to Prince Ajātasattu, kindled in him the deadly embers of ambition, and said:

“Young man, you had better kill your father and assume kingship lest you die without becoming the ruler. I shall kill the Blessed One and become the Buddha.”

So when Ajātasattu murdered his father and ascended the throne Devadatta suborned ruffians to murder the Buddha, but failing in that endeavour, he himself hurled down a rock as the Buddha was climbing up Gijjhakūṭa Hill in Rājagaha. The rock tumbled down, broke in two, and a splinter slightly wounded the Buddha. Later Devadatta made an intoxicated elephant charge at the Buddha; but the animal prostrated himself at the Master’s feet, overpowered by his loving-kindness. Devadatta now proceeded to cause a schism in the Sangha, but this discord did not last long. Having failed in all his intrigues, Devadatta retired, a disappointed and broken man. Soon afterwards he fell ill, and on his sick-bed, repenting his follies, he desired to see the Buddha. But that was not to be; for he died on the litter while being carried to the Blessed One. Before his death, however, he uttered repentance and sought refuge in the Buddha.⁵⁸

The Last Days

The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta,⁵⁹ the discourse on the passing away of the Blessed One, records in moving detail all the events that occurred during the last months and days of the Buddha’s life.

The Blessed One had now reached the ripe age of eighty; his two chief disciples, Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna, had passed away three months earlier. Pajāpati Gotamī, Yasodharā, and Rāhula were also no more. The Buddha was now at Vesālī, and the rainy season having come, he went together with a great company of monks to Beluva to spend the rains there. There a severe sickness fell upon him, causing him much pain and agony, but the Blessed One, mindful and self-possessed, bore it patiently. He was on the verge of death; but he felt he should not pass away without taking leave of the Order. So with a great effort of will he suppressed that illness and kept his hold on life. His sickness gradually abated, and when quite recovered he called the Venerable Ānanda, his personal attendant, and addressing him said:

“Ānanda, I am now grown old and full of years, my journey is drawing to a close. I have reached my sum of days, I am turning eighty years of age; and just as a worn-out cart, Ānanda, can only with much additional care be made to move along, so the body of the Tathāgata can only be kept going with much infusion of will-power. It is only when the

⁵⁸ Comy on the Dhammapada, Vol. I, p 147.

⁵⁹ DN 16, translated as *Last Days of the Buddha* (BPS).

Tathāgata, ceasing to attend to any outward thing and to experience any worldly sensation, attains to the signless (*animitta*) concentration of mind, and dwells in it—it is only then that the body of the Tathāgata is at ease.

“Therefore, Ānanda, be islands unto yourselves. Be your own refuge. Have recourse to none else for refuge. Hold fast to the Dhamma as an island. Hold fast to the Dhamma as a refuge. Resort to no other refuge. Whosoever, Ānanda, either now or after I am gone, shall be islands unto themselves, refuges unto themselves, shall seek no external refuge—it is they, Ānanda, among my disciples who shall reach the very topmost height! But they must be keen to progress.”

From Beluva the Buddha journeyed to the Mahāvana, and there calling up an assembly of all the monks residing in the neighbourhood of Vesāli, addressed them saying: “Disciples, the Dhamma realized by me, I have made known to you. Make yourselves masters of the Dhamma, practise it, meditate upon it, and spread it abroad: out of pity for the world, for the good and the gain and welfare of gods and men.”

The Buddha concluded his exhortation by saying:

My age is now full ripe, my life draws to its close;
I leave you, I depart, relying on myself alone!
Be earnest then, O disciples, holy, full of thought!
Be steadfast in resolve! Keep watch o’er your own hearts!
Who wearies not but holds fast to this Truth and Law
Shall cross this sea of life, shall make an end of grief.

Worn out with sickness, with feeble limbs, the Blessed One now journeyed on with much difficulty, followed by the Venerable Ānanda and a great company of monks. Even in this last, long, wearisome journey of his, the Buddha never failed in his attention to others. He instructed Cunda, the smith, who offered him his last meal. Then on the way, he stopped for Pukkusa, a disciple of Ālāra Kālāma, replied to all his questions, and so instructed him that Pukkusa offered himself as a follower of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

The Blessed One now reached the Sāla Grove of the Mallas at Kusinārā—the journey’s end. Knowing that here would be his last resting place, he told the Venerable Ānanda: “I am weary, Ānanda, and would lie down. Spread over for me the couch with its head to the north between the twin sāla trees.”

He then lay down on his right side, composed and mindful, with one leg resting on the other. Speaking now to the Venerable Ānanda, the Blessed One said:

“They who fulfil the greater and lesser duties, they who are correct in life, walking according to the precepts—it is they who rightly honour, reverence, and venerate the Tathāgata, the Perfect One, with the worthiest homage. Therefore, Ānanda, be steady in the fulfilment of the greater and the lesser duties, and be correct in life, walking according to the precepts. Thus, Ānanda, should you train yourselves.”

The Last Convert

At that time, a wandering ascetic named Subhadda, who was at Kusinārā, heard the news of the Blessed One’s approaching death; and in order to clear up certain doubts that troubled his mind, he hurried to the Sāla Grove to speak to the Buddha. The Venerable Ānanda, however, did not wish the Buddha to be disturbed in his last moments, and though Subhadda made several appeals, access to the Master was refused. The Blessed One overheard the conversation. He knew at once that Subhadda was making his investigations with a genuine desire for

knowledge; and knowing that Subhadda was capable of quickly grasping the answers, he desired that Subhadda be allowed to see him.

Subhadda's uncertainty was whether the leaders of the other schools of thought such as Pūraṇa Kassapa, Niḡaṇṭha Nātaputta, and others had attained a true understanding. The Blessed One then spoke:

“In whatsoever Doctrine and Discipline (*dhammavinaya*), Subhadda, the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, neither in it is there found a man of true saintliness of the first, or of the second, or of the third, or of the fourth degree. And in whatsoever Doctrine and Discipline, Subhadda, the Noble Eightfold Path is found, in it is found the man of true saintliness of the first, and the second, and the third, and the fourth degree.⁶⁰ Now, in this Doctrine and Discipline, Subhadda, is found the Noble Eightfold Path, and it, too are found the men of true saintliness of all the four degrees. Void are the systems of other teachers—void of true saints. And in this one, Subhadda, may the brethren live the life that is right, so that the world be not bereft of arahats.”

Hearing the words of the Blessed One, Subhadda gained confidence, and took refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Furthermore, he desired to be admitted into the Order, and the Buddha requested the Venerable Ānanda to receive him. Subhadda thus became the last convert and the last disciple of the Blessed One, and before long by his strenuous effort he attained the final stage of arahatship.

The Last Scene

Now the Blessed One, addressing the Venerable Ānanda, said:

“I have taught the Dhamma, Ānanda, without making any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrine, for in respect of the truth, Ānanda, the Tathāgata has no such thing as the ‘closed fist’ of a teacher who hides some essential knowledge from the pupil.

“It may be, Ānanda, that in some of you the thought may arise, ‘The word of the Master is ended. We have no teacher any more.’ But it is not thus, Ānanda, that you should think.

“The Doctrine and the Discipline which I have set forth and laid down for you—let them, after I am gone, be your teacher. It may be, monks, that there may be doubts in the minds of some brethren as to the Buddha, or the Dhamma, or the Sangha, or the path (*magga*) or method (*paṭipadā*). Inquire, monks, freely. Do not have to reproach yourselves afterwards with the thought: ‘Our teacher was face to face with us, and we could not bring ourselves to inquire of the Exalted One when we were face to face with him.’”

When the Buddha had thus spoken the monks were silent.

A second and a third time the Blessed One repeated these words to the monks, and yet the monks were silent. And the Venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One: “How wonderful a thing is it, Lord, how marvellous! Truly, I believe that in this whole assembly of the monks there is not one who has any doubt or misgivings as to the Buddha or the Dhamma or the Sangha, or the path or the method.”

The Blessed One confirmed the words of the Venerable Ānanda, adding that in the whole assembly even the most backward one was assured of final deliverance. And after a short while the Master made his final exhortation to those who wished to follow his teaching now and in the future:

⁶⁰ These four stages are: *sotāpatti* (stream-entry); *sakadāgāmi*, (once-return); *anāgāmi* (non-return); and *arahatta* (the final stage of sainthood). Arahantship is the stage at which fetters are severed and taints rooted out.

“Behold now, O monks, I exhort you: impermanent are all compounded things. Work out your deliverance with mindfulness (*vayadhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādettha*).”⁶¹

These were the last words of the Buddha.

Then the Master entered into those nine successive stages of meditative absorption (*jhāna*) which are of increasing sublimity: first the four fine-material absorptions (*rūpa-jhāna*), then the four immaterial absorptions (*arūpa-jhāna*), and finally the state where perceptions and sensations entirely cease (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha*). Then he returned through all these stages to the first fine-material absorption and rose again to the fourth one. Immediately after having re-entered this stage (which has been described as having “purity of mindfulness due to equanimity”), the Buddha passed away (*parinibbāyi*). He realized Nibbāna that is free from any substratum of further becoming (*parinibbāna*).⁶²

In the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta are recorded, in moving detail, all the events that occurred during the last months and days of the Master’s life.

In the annals of history, no man is recorded as having so consecrated himself to the welfare of all beings, irrespective of caste, class, creed, or sex, as the Supreme Buddha. From the hour of his enlightenment to the end of his life, he strove tirelessly and unostentatiously to elevate humanity regardless of the fatigue involved and oblivious to the many obstacles and handicaps that hampered his way. He never relaxed in his exertion for the common weal and was never subjected to moral or spiritual fatigue. Though physically he was not always fit, mentally he was ever vigilant and energetic.

Therefore it is said:

Ah, wonderful is the Conqueror,
who e’er untiring strives,
for the blessings of all beings,
for the comfort of all lives.

Though twenty-five centuries have gone since the passing away of the Buddha, his message of love and wisdom still exists in its purity, decisively influencing the destinies of humanity. Forests of flowers are daily offered at his shrines and countless millions of lips daily repeat the formula: *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, “I take refuge in the Buddha.” His greatness yet glows today like a sun that blots out lesser lights, and his Dhamma yet beckons the weary pilgrim to Nibbāna’s security and peace.

⁶¹ The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) records in moving detail all the events that occurred during the last months and days of the Master’s life.

⁶² The passages in quotations are taken with slight alterations from the “Book of the Great Decease” in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Dīgha Nikāya, Part II.