



CHAPTER II

B U D D H I S M

Buddhism begins with a man. In his later years, when India was afire with his message, people came to him asking what he was. Not "Who are you?" but "What are you?"

"Are you a god?" they asked.

"No."

"An angel?"

"No."

"A saint?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

Buddha answered, "I am awake."



Shrine at Bodh Gaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment.



THE MAN WHO WOKE UP

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"Are you a god?" they asked. "No." "An angel?" "No." "A saint?" "No." "Then what are you?" Buddha answered, "I am awake." His answer became his title, for this is what Buddha means. The Sanskrit root *budh* means to awake and to know. While the rest of humanity was dreaming the dream we call the waking human state, one of their number roused himself. Buddhism begins with a man who woke up.

His life has become encased in loving legend, but the basic facts are straightforward. He was born around 563 B.C. in what is now Nepal. Siddhartha was his given name and Gautama his family name. His father ruled one of the petty kingdoms that comprised India then, so Siddhartha's upbringing was luxurious. He appears to have been exceptionally handsome, and at sixteen married a neighboring princess, Yasodhara, who bore a son, Rahula.

Here, in short, was a man who seemed to have everything: social standing, appearance, wealth, a model wife, a child, and a throne he would soon inherit. Despite all this, however, there settled over him in his twenties a despond that was to lead him to abandon his lucky lot.

The cause of his discontent is impounded in the legend of The Four Passing Sights. When Siddhartha was born his father summoned fortunetellers to discern his future. All agreed that this was no usual child, but his career was crossed with an ambiguity. If he succeeded his father he would unify India and become a world conqueror, but if he forsook the world he would become a world redeemer. His father wanted the former destiny, so he spared no effort to keep his son on course. Palaces

and dancing girls were placed at his disposal, and orders were given that no unpleasantness be allowed into his courtly life. When he left the palace, runners were stationed to clear the roads of the old, the diseased, and the dead. One day, however, this order was neglected and Siddhartha saw an old man — gaunt, broken-toothed, trembling as he leaned on his staff. On another day he saw a body racked with disease, lying by the roadside. On a third outing he encountered a corpse. Having thus discovered the facts of aging, disease, and death, he saw on a fourth ride a monk with shaven head, ochre robe, and bowl; and learned from him of a path that renounces the world. It is a legend, this story, but it impounds the truth that it was the body's inescapable involvement with disease, decrepitude, and death that made him despair of finding fulfillment on the physical plane.

Once he had perceived the inevitability of pain and passage, fleshly pleasures lost their charm and he determined to follow the calling of a truth-seeker. One night in his twenty-ninth year he effected his Great Going Forth. Taking silent farewell of his sleeping wife and child, he mounted his great white steed and set off for a forest. Reaching its edge, he discarded his royal attire, shaved his head, and entered the forest to seek enlightenment.

Six years followed, during which his energies were directed to this end. The search was difficult, and moved through three phases. It began with his seeking out two of the foremost Hindu masters of the day and learning what he could from their tradition.

His next step was to join a band of ascetics and give their way a try. Was his body holding him back? He

Opposite: Chinese painting of one of the "The Four Passing Sights" which prompted Buddha to take up the spiritual path and seek enlightenment.



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would crush its interference. In every austerity he outdid his teachers, and eventually grew so weak that had his companions not rescued him with some warm rice gruel he would have died. This experience taught Gautama the futility of asceticism and inspired what was to become the first constructive plank of his program: the principle of The Middle Way between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence.

Having renounced mortification, Gautama devoted the final phase of his quest to a combination of rigorous thought and mystic concentration along the lines of Hinduism's raja yoga. Sensing at length that a breakthrough was near, he sat down one evening under what has come to be known as the Bo Tree (short for *Bodhi* or enlightenment), vowing not to arise until he had gained his goal.



by earnestly and steadfastly persevering in the Way.”

7. Right mindfulness.

No teacher has credited the mind with more influence over life than did the Buddha. The best loved of all Buddhist texts, *The Dhammapada*, opens with the words, “All we are is the result of what we have thought.” Among Western philosophers, it is Spinoza who stands closest to the Buddha on the mind’s potential. His dictum – “to understand something is to be delivered of it” – comes close to summarizing the entire Buddhist ethic. Both these thinkers saw ignorance, not sin, as life’s prime adversary.

To gradually overcome this ignorance, the Buddha counsels such continuous self-examination as to make us wilt (almost) at the prospect, but he thought it necessary because he believed that freedom – liberation from unconscious, mechanical existence – is a product of self-awareness. To this end, he asks us to see everything “as it really is.” If we maintain a steady attention to our thoughts and feelings, we see that they are not permanent parts of us. Everything, especially our moods and emotions, are to be witnessed non-reactively, neither condemning some nor holding on to others. A miscellany of other practices is recommended, some of which are these: The aspirant is to keep the mind in control of the senses and impulses, rather than being driven by them. Fearful and disgusting sights are to be meditated on until one no longer experiences aversion toward them. The entire world should be pervaded with thoughts of loving kindness.

Here is a Western observer’s description of monks in Thailand practicing this seventh step:

“One of them spends hours each day slowly walking about the grounds of the wat in absolute concentration upon the minutest fraction of every action connected with each step. The procedure is carried into every single physical act of daily life until, theoretically, the conscious mind can follow every step that goes into the generation

of a feeling, perception or thought. A fifty-year-old monk meditates in a small graveyard adjoining his wat, because he’s undisturbed there. He seats himself, cross-legged and immobile but with his eyes open, for hours on end – through the driving rain at midnight or the blistering heat of noonday. His usual length of stay is two or three hours.”

8. Right absorption.

This involves substantially the techniques we have already encountered in Hinduism’s *raja yoga* and leads to substantially the same goal.

In his later years the Buddha told his disciples that his first intimations of deliverance came to him before he left home when, still a boy and sitting one day in the cool shade of an apple tree in deep thought, he found himself caught up into what he later identified as the first level of the absorptions. It was his first faint foretaste of deliverance, and he said to himself, “*This is the way to enlightenment.*” It was nostalgia for the return and deepening of this experience, as much as his disillusionment with the usual rewards of worldly life, that led him to his decision to devote his life completely to spiritual pursuits. The result, as we have seen, was not simply a new philosophy of life. It was regeneration: change into a different kind of creature who experiences the world in a new way. Unless we see this, we shall be unequipped to fathom the power of Buddhism in human history. Something happened to the Buddha under that Bo tree, and something has happened to every Buddhist since who has persevered to the final step of the Eightfold Path. Like a camera, the mind had been poorly focused, but the adjustment has now been made. With the “*extirpation of delusion, craving, and hostility,*” the three poisons, we see that things were not as we had supposed. Indeed, suppositions of whatsoever sort have vanished, to be replaced by direct perception. The mind reposes in its true condition.



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The records offer as the first event of the night a temptation scene reminiscent of Jesus in the desert. Seeking to disrupt Gautama's concentration, Mara, the Evil One, first paraded voluptuous women, and when they failed in their purpose assailed the future Buddha with torrents of flaming rocks. These, though, turned into blossom petals when they entered the field of his yogic concentration. In final desperation, Mara challenged Gautama's right to do what he was doing, but he touched the earth with his right fingertip and the earth thundered, "I bear you witness." Mara fled in rout and raptures descended from heaven to clothe the victor.

Thereafter, while the Bo Tree rained red blossoms that full-mooned night of May, Gautama's meditation deepened until, as the morning star glittered in the transparent eastern sky, his mind pierced the world's bubble, collapsing it to nothing; only, wonder of wonders, to find it restored with the effulgence of true being. The Great Awakening had arrived. Gautama was gone. He had been replaced by the Buddha.

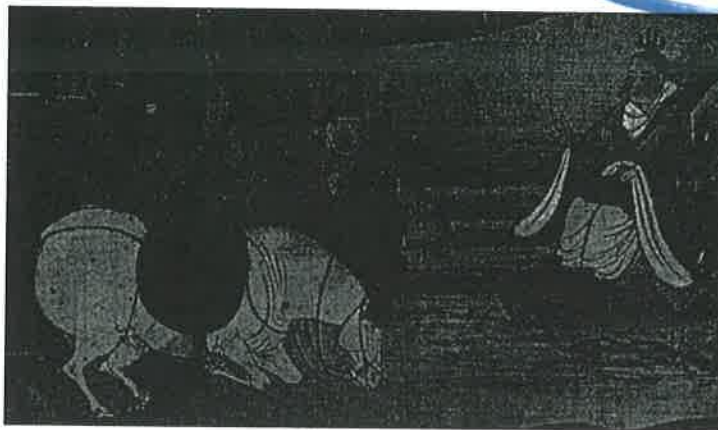
Mara was waiting for him with one last temptation. How could the Buddha expect people to understand truth as profound as that which he had discovered? Why not wash his hands of the whole hot world, be done with the body, and slip at once into perpetual nirvana? The argument almost prevailed, but at length the Buddha answered, "There will be some who will understand," and Mara was vanquished forever.

Nearly half a century followed in which the Buddha accomplished his mission. He founded an order of monks, challenged the deadness of *Brahmin* society, and accepted in return the resentment, queries, and bewilderment his stance provoked. His daily routine was staggering. In addition to training monks and overseeing the affairs of his Order, he maintained an interminable schedule

of public preaching and private counseling. What saved him from burning out under these pressures was his pattern of withdrawal and return. In overview, he withdrew for the six years of his quest and returned to the world for the next forty-five. But each year was likewise divided between nine months of teaching

and three months in retreat with his monks during the rainy season. His daily cycle, too, followed this mold. Three times each day he withdrew from his duties to meditate.

After an arduous ministry of forty-five years, at the age of eighty and around the year 483 B.C., Buddha died after eating some poisoned mushrooms that had gotten into a dish by accident. His valedictory has echoes through history: "All compounds grow old. Work out your own salvation with diligence."



Above: Chinese depiction of Buddha's farewell to his horse and groom, as he sets out on his search for enlightenment.



THE SILENT SAGE

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO READ the accounts of Buddha's life without gaining the impression that one has been in touch with one of the greatest personalities of all time.

Perhaps the most striking thing about him was his combination of a cool head and a warm heart. Clearly, he was a great rationalist. Every problem that came his way was subjected to cool, dispassionate analysis. But this objective, critical talent was balanced by a Franciscan tenderness so strong that it has caused his message to be subtitled "a religion of infinite compassion." Whether he actually risked his life to free a goat that was snagged on a precipice may be historically uncertain, but the act would certainly have been in character, for his life was one continuous gift to the famished crowds.

Socially, his royal lineage was of great advantage. "Fine in presence," he moved easily among kings and potentates, for he had been one of them. Yet his poise and sophistication seem not to have distanced him from simple villagers. Surface distinctions meant so little to him that he often failed to notice them. There was an amazing simplicity about this man before whom kings bowed. Even when his reputation was at its highest he would be seen, begging-bowl in hand, walking through streets and alleys with the patience of one who knows the illusion of time.

It is perhaps inaccurate to speak of the Buddha as modest, for he knew he had risen to a plane of understanding above others. But this is different from vanity or humorless conceit. At the final assembly of one of his *sangha's* (order's) annual retreats, the Exalted One surveyed the silent company and asked, openly and sincerely, for criticism. "*I summon you, disciples, to tell me: have you any fault to find with me in word or in deed?*"

Notwithstanding his own objectivity toward himself, there was constant pressure during his lifetime to turn him into a god. This he rebuffed categorically, insisting

that he was human in every respect. He made no attempt to conceal his temptations and weaknesses – how difficult it had been to attain enlightenment, how narrow the margin by which he had won through, how fallible he still remained. He admitted that the months when he was first alone in the forest had brought him to the brink of mortal terror. As one biographer remarks, "*One who thus speaks need not allure with hopes of heavenly joy. One who speaks like this of himself attracts by that power with which the Truth attracts all who enter her domain.*"

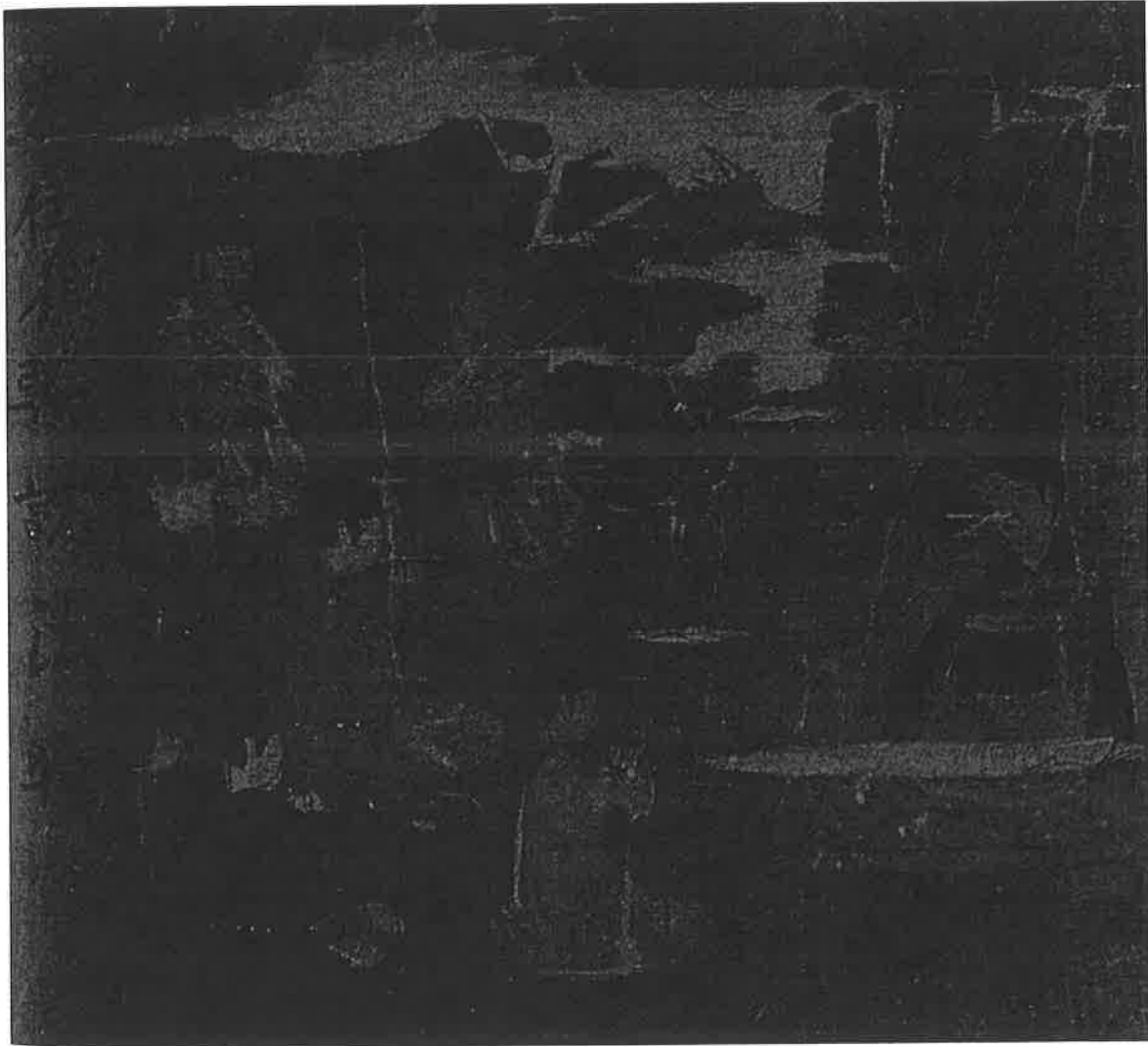
The Buddha's talents for leadership and organization were evidenced not only by the size to which his order grew, but equally by the perfection of its discipline. A king visiting one of their assemblies which was prolonged into the full-moon night burst out at last, "You are playing me no tricks? How can it be that there should be no sound at all, not a sneeze, nor a cough, in so large an Assembly, among 1250 of the Brethren?" Watching the Assembly, seated as silent as a clear lake, he added, "Would that my son might have such calm."

Like other spiritual geniuses, the Buddha was gifted with preternatural insight into character. Able to size up, almost at sight, the people who approached him, he seemed never to be taken in by appearances but would move at once to what was essential. We find a beautiful instance of this in his encounter with Sunita the flower-scavenger. Though Sunita was an outcaste, the Buddha saw the marks of sainthood "*shining within him like a lamp in a jar,*" and invited him to join his community.

The Buddha's entire life was powered by a strong sense of mission. Immediately after his enlightenment, he saw in his mind's eye the whole of humanity – people milling and lost, desperately in need of help and guidance. His acceptance of his mission without regard for personal cost won India's heart as well as her mind. "*Giving up family and treasure, in the beauty of his early manhood the monk Gautama went forth into the homeless state.*" But after his disciples had done their best with their



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praise, they found in their master depths their words could not reach. They revered what they understood, but there was more than they could exhaust. To the end he remained for them half light, half shadow, defying complete intelligibility. So they called him Sakyamuni, "silent sage (*muni*) of the Sakya clan," symbol of something that could not be described.

And they called him Tathagata, the "Thus-come," the "Truth-winner," the "Perfectly Enlightened One," "he who alone thoroughly knows and sees, face to face, this universe." *"Deep is the Tathagata, unmeasurable, difficult to understand, even like the ocean."*

Above: *Chinese painting of Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath.*



THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS



AFTER HIS ENLIGHTENMENT the Buddha proceeded directly to India's holy city of Benares. Six miles short of it, in a deer park at Sarnath, he preached his first sermon. It proclaimed his key discoveries, which came to be known as the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that life is *dukkha*. The word

is usually translated "suffering," and because the Buddha took it as his starting point, his religion has been charged with being pessimistic. That charge would hold, though, only if the Buddha thought the suffering he acknowledged was unrelievable; whereas in fact he was certain that it could be relieved. This shows that the "life" he diagnosed as suffering is unregenerate life, or life as it is normally lived. The Buddha did not doubt that it is possible to



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have a good time, but two questions obtruded. First, *how much* of life is enjoyable. And second, *at what level* of our being does enjoyment proceed. Buddha thought the level is superficial. Beneath the neon dazzle is darkness; at the core — not of all life but of unregenerate life — is the “quiet desperation” that Thoreau thought characterizes most lives. “*Lo! as the wind is, so is mortal life:/A moan, a sigh, a sob, a storm, a strife*” (Dhammapada).

Dukkha names this pain that to some degree skews all finite existence. The word was used in Buddha’s day to refer to wheels whose axles were off-center, and bones that had slipped from their sockets. (A modern metaphor might be a shopping cart we try to steer from the wrong end.) The exact meaning of the First Noble Truth, therefore, comes down to this: Life as typically lived is out of joint. Something is awry. Its pivot is not true. This restricts movement (blocks creativity), and causes undue friction (interpersonal conflict).

Having an analytical mind, the Buddha was not content to state this First Truth in general terms. He pinpointed four moments when life’s dislocation becomes especially evident: in the birth trauma, in illness, in old age with its decrepitude, and in the fear of approaching death. To these he added: to be separated from what one loves, and to be saddled with what one hates.

No one denies that life’s shoe pinches in these six places, which shows that it doesn’t fit. Why doesn’t it? Dropping metaphor in favor of the Buddha’s straightforward question: What causes *dukkha*, life’s suffering? The Second Noble Truth answers that question. The cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*.

Tanha is usually translated as desire, but here too it is wise to stay close to the original word, for *tanha* is a specific kind of desire, the desire for private fulfillment. When we are selfless we are free, but that is precisely

the difficulty, to maintain that state. *Tanha* is the ego oozing like a secret sore. It consists, not of all inclinations, but of those that pull against life as a whole; selfish inclinations that make demands for oneself at the expense, if necessary, of others. These demands bring suffering, because the law of life calls for seeing others as extensions of ourselves, not our rivals.

This is not the way people normally see others. Given a group photograph, whose face does one scan for first? It is a small but telling symptom of the devouring cancer that causes sorrow. Where is the man who is as concerned that no children go hungry as that his own children have food? Where is the woman who rejoices as much in her colleague’s promotion as in her own? Coddling our individual identities, we lock ourselves inside our skin-encapsulated egos and seek fulfillment through their enlargement. Fools to suppose that imprisonment can bring release! Can we not see that “*tis the self by which we suffer*”? Far from being the door to abundant life, the ego is a strangulated hernia; the more it swells, the tighter it shuts off the free-flowing circulation on which health depends, and pain increases.

The Third Noble Truth follows logically from the Second. If the cause of life’s dislocation is selfish craving, its cure lies in the overcoming of *tanha*, such craving. If we could be released from the narrow limits of self-interest into the vast expanse of universal life, we would be relieved of our torment. The Fourth Noble Truth prescribes how the cure can be accomplished. The overcoming of *tanha*, the way out of our captivity, is through The Eightfold Path.

Opposite: Swayambhunath, a Buddhist temple near Kathmandu.

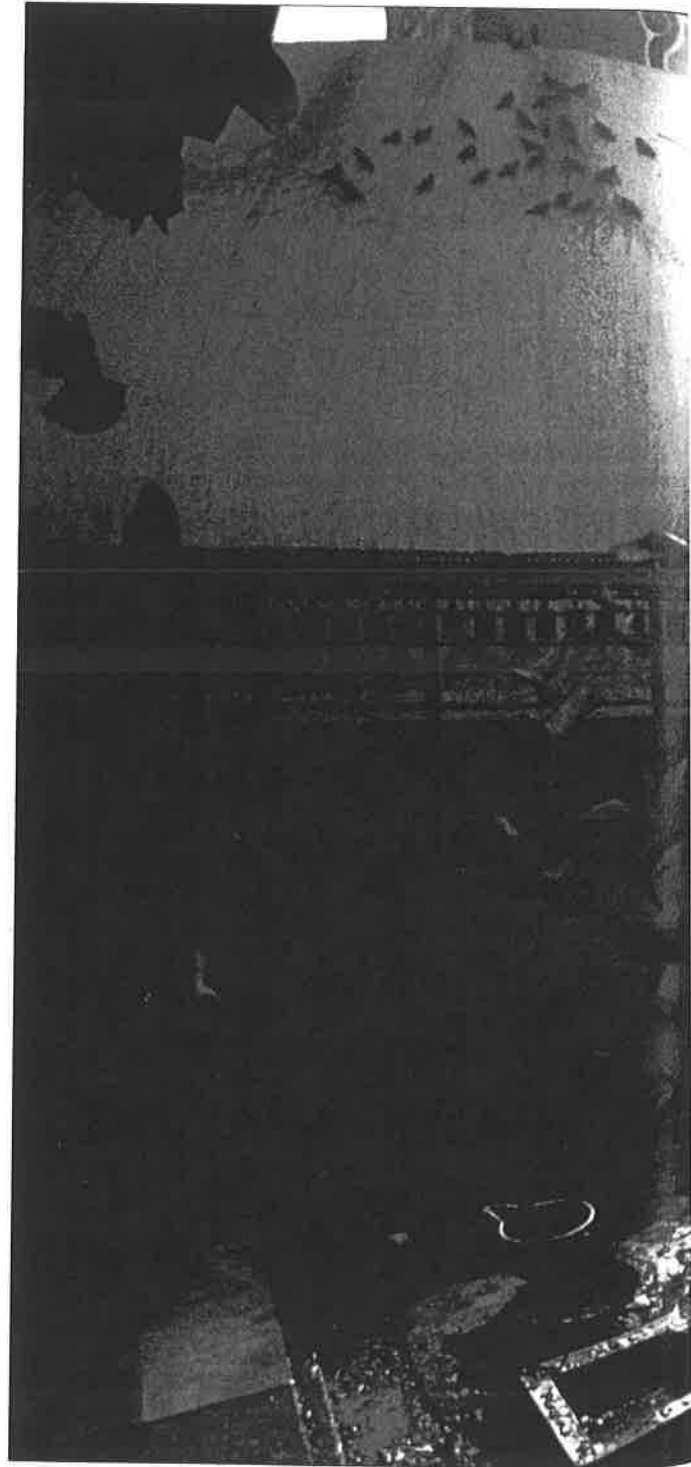


THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

THE BUDDHA'S APPROACH to the problem of life in the Four Noble Truths is essentially that of a physician. He begins by noting the symptoms that provoke concern: we experience more pain, less creativity, and more conflict than we feel there should be. From there he proceeds to diagnosis: what is causing these symptoms? His answer is *tanha*, the drive for private fulfillment. The prognosis is hopeful, for the cause of the symptoms can be removed. The Eightfold Path is his prescription for accomplishing its removal. It is a course of treatment, but not from without through pills or radiation. It is, rather, a course of training, like those that athletes undertake but with a moral aim. Its intent is to pick one up where one is and set one down a different human being, one that is cured of life's crippling disability.

The course consists of eight steps, but they are prefaced by a preliminary step that isn't explicitly stated but which the Buddha mentions so often elsewhere that we may assume that here he was simply presupposing it. This preliminary step is right association. No one has recognized more clearly than the Buddha the extent to which we are social animals, influenced at every turn by the "companioned example" of our associates. When a wild elephant is to be tamed, the way to begin is by yoking it to one that has already been through the ropes. By contact, the wild one comes to see that what is expected of it is not wholly incompatible with being an elephant. Training for the life of the spirit is not different. Without palpable evidence that progress is possible, discouragement is inevitable. Bees cannot make honey alone, and comparably, human beings will not persist on the Way outside the field of confidence and support that fellow travelers generate.

Worshippers outside Swayambhunath.





With this assumed step in place we may proceed to the steps of the path that are formally numbered.

1. Right knowledge.

To journey purposefully one needs a map, a sense of the lay of the land. We need to have some idea as to where we are and in which direction to proceed. It is this knowledge that the first step of the Path calls for and provides. Its substance has already been covered, for it consists of the Four Noble Truths. Those truths and the Path they lead to lock together. The fourth noble truth is the Eightfold Path, and the first step on that path is knowledge of the Four Noble Truths.

2. Right aspiration.

Whereas the first step summoned us to understand what life's problem is, the second counsels us to decide what we really want. Is it truly enlightenment, or do our affections swoop this way and that, dipping like kites with every current of distraction? Not until liberation is sought single-mindedly will our steps change from sliding sandbank scrambles into ground-gripping strides.

3. Right speech.

In the next three steps we take hold of the switches that control our destinies, beginning with attention to language. Here our first task is to *notice* our speech and what it reveals about our character. Instead of resolving right off to speak truthfully, we will do better to start with the easier exercise of noticing how often each day we find it necessary to deviate from the truth, for invariably we will find that we do so to protect something in us that is soft, flabby, and unattractive. Besides truth, our speech should proceed toward charity. False witness, idle chatter, gossip, slander, and abuse are to be avoided, not only in their obvious forms but also in their covert ones, for the latter – subtle, belittling, “accidental” tactlessness and barbed wit – are often more vicious because their animus is veiled.

4. Right behavior.

The Buddha detailed this directive in the Five Precepts that constitute the Buddhist version of the ethical half of the Ten Commandments:

Do not kill. Strict Buddhists extend this proscription to animals and are vegetarians.

Do not steal.

Do not lie.

Do not be unchaste.

For monks and the unmarried, this means continence. For the married it means restraint in proportion to one's interests in, and distance along, the Path.

Do not take drugs or drink intoxicants.

5. Right livelihood.

The word “occupation” is well advised, for our work does indeed occupy most of our waking attention. Buddha considered spiritual progress to be impossible if the bulk of one's doings pull against it. “*The hand of the dyer is subdued by the dye in which it works.*”

For those who are intent enough on liberation to give their entire lives to the project, right livelihood prescribes joining the monastic order and following its discipline. For the layperson it calls for engaging in occupations that promote life instead of destroying it. Some of the professions the Buddha considered incompatible with serious seeking were poison peddler, slave trader, prostitute, butcher, brewer, arms maker, and tax collector, wherein (in his day) profiteering was routine.

6. Right effort. The Buddha laid tremendous stress on moral exertion. The only way fetters can be shaken off is by what William James called “*the slow dull heave of the will.*”

“*Those who follow the Way,*” the Buddha said, “*might well follow the example of an ox that marches through the deep mire carrying a heavy load. He is tired, but his steady, forward-looking gaze will not relax until he comes out of the mire. Only then does he relax. O monks, remember that passion and sin are more than the filthy mire, and that you can escape misery only*”