

## The Buddha's Life - A TRUE CONTEMPLATIVE

The source of the Buddha's life here is drawn from the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* explained by Venerable

*Mahasi Sayadaw*

. It is the first discourse the Buddha gave to the group of five monks. If you wish to read the account for the Buddha's life in simple illustrations, you may want to visit

[here](#)

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These were the introductory words uttered by the Venerable Ananda when interrogated by the Venerable Mahakassapa at the First Council held just over three months after the passing away of the Blessed One. The Venerable Mahakassapa said to the Venerable Ananda:

"Friend Ananda, where was the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* delivered? By whom was it delivered and on whose account? And how was it delivered?"

The Venerable Ananda answered,

"My Lord, Venerable Mahakassapa. Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed One was staying at the Sage's Resort, the Pleasance of Isipatana (where *Pacceka* Buddhas and Enlightened Ones alighted from the sky), in the deer sanctuary, in the township of Benares. Then the Blessed One addressed the group of five bhikkhus, 'These two extremes, Bhikkhus, should not be followed by one who has gone forth from the worldly life.'"

The Introduction to the *Sutta* says the Blessed One preached the First Sermon to the group of five bhikkhus while he was staying in the pleasance of the deer sanctuary in the township of Benares. That is all the information that could be obtained from the introductory statement, which is bare and inadequate. It needs some elaboration and we propose to provide one by drawing materials from other *Suttas*, also.

The introduction to a Sutta explains on whose or what account the *Sutta* was taught by the Buddha. Introductions are of three kinds:

(a) The introduction which gives the background story of the remote distant past. This provides an account of how the Bodhisatta, the future Buddha, fulfilled the perfections required of an aspirant Buddha - beginning from the time of prophecy proclaimed by *Dipankara* Buddha to the time when he was reborn in the

*Tusita*

Heaven as a king of the

*devas*

named Setaketu. There is no need nor time to deal more with this background story of the distant past.

(b) The introduction touching on the background story of the intermediate period. This deals with the account of what passed from the time of existence in the *Tusita* Heaven to the attainment of full enlightenment on the Throne of Wisdom. We shall give attention to this introduction to a considerable extent.

(c) The introduction which tells of the recent past, just preceding the teaching of the *Dhammacakkha Sutta*

This is what is learnt from the statement "Thus have I heard. At one time . . ." quoted above.

We shall now deal with relevant extracts from the second category of introductions, drawing our materials from *Sukhumala Sutta* of *Tika Nipata*, *Anguttara Nikaya*, *Pasarasi* or *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* and *Mahasaccaka Sutta* of *Mulapannasa*,

*Bodhirajakumara Sutta*

and

*Sa*

*ngarava Sutta* of *Majjhimanikaya*, *Pabbajja Sutta*, *Padhana Sutta* of *Suttanipata*, and many other *Suttas*.

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## Noble and Ignoble Quests

### Bodhisatta and Worldly Pleasure

After the Bodhisatta had passed away from *Tusita* Heaven, he entered the womb of Mahamaya

Devi, the principal queen of King Suddhodana of Kapilavatthu. The Bodhisatta was born on Friday, the full moon of Kason in the year 68 of the Great Era, in the pleasure-grove of Sal trees called the Lumbini Grove and was named Siddhattha. At the age of sixteen, he married Yasodhara Devi, daughter of Suppabuddha, the Royal Master of Devadaha. Thereafter, surrounded by forty thousand attendant princesses, he lived in enjoyment of kingly pleasures in great magnificence.

While he was thus wholly given over to sensuous pleasure amidst pomp and splendour, he came out one day accompanied by attendants to the royal pleasure grove for a garden feast and merry-making . On the way to the grove, the sight of a decrepit, aged person gave him a shock and he turned back to his palace. As he went out on second occasion, he saw a person who was sick with diseased person and returned greatly alarmed. When he sallied forth for the third time, he was agitated in heart on seeing a dead man and hurriedly retraced his steps. The alarm and agitation felt by the Bodhisatta were described in the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* .

### THE IGNOBLE QUEST

The Bodhisatta pondered thus:

"When oneself is subjected to old age, to seek and crave for what is subjected to old age is not befitting. And what are subjected to old age? Wife and children, slaves, goats and sheep, fowls and pigs, elephants, horses, cattle, gold and silver, all objects of pleasures and luxuries, animate and inanimate, are subjected to old age. Being oneself subjected to old age, to crave for these objects of pleasures, to be enveloped and immersed in them is not proper."

"Similarly, it does not befit one, when oneself is subjected to disease and death, to crave for sensual objects which are subjected to disease and death. To go after what is subjected to old age, disease and death (what is not befitting and proper) constitutes an Ignoble Quest (*Anariya pariyesana*)  
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### THE NOBLE QUEST

"Being oneself subjected to old age, disease and death, to go in search of that which is not subjected to old age, disease and death constitutes a Noble Quest (*Ariyapariyesana*)."

That Bodhisatta himself was engaged at first in Ignoble Quest was described in the *sutta* as follows:-

"Now Bhikkhu, before my Enlightenment while I was only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, being myself subjected to birth I sought after what was also subjected to birth; being myself subjected to old age I sought after what was also subjected to old age."

This was a denunciation or stricture of the life of pleasure he had lived with Yasodhara amidst the gay society of attendant princesses. Then, having perceived the wretchedness of such life, he made up his mind to go in search of the Peace of nibbāna which is free from birth, old age, disease and death. He said,

"Having perceived the wretchedness of being myself subject to birth, old age, it occurred to me it would be fitting if I were to seek the incomparable, unsurpassed Peace of nibbāna, free from birth, and old age."

Thus, it occurred to the Bodhisatta to go in quest of *Nibbanic* Peace, which is free from old age, disease and death. That was a very laudable aim and we shall consider it further to see clearly how it was so.

Suppose there was someone who was already old and decrepit, would it be wise for him to seek the company of another man or woman who, like himself, was aged and frail, or of someone who, though not advanced in age, yet would surely turn old in no time? No, not at all judicious.

Again, for someone who was himself in declining health and suffering, it would be quite irrational if he were to seek companionship in another who was ill and afflicted with painful disease. Companionship with someone, who though enjoying good health presently would soon be troubled with illness, would not be prudent either. There are even those who, hoping to enjoy each other's company for life, got into wedlock and settled down. Unfortunately, one of the partners soon becomes a bedridden invalid, imposing on the other the onerous duty of looking after the stricken mate. The hope of a happy married life may be dashed when one of the partners passes away, leaving only sorrow and lamentation for the bereaved one. Ultimately, both of the couple would be faced with the misery of old age, disease and death.

Thus it is extremely unwise to go after sensual pleasures which are subject to old age, disease and death. The most noble quest is to seek out what is not subject to old age, disease and death.

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### **Renunciation of Worldly Life**

#### **THE RENUNCIATION OF THE BODHISATTA**

On his fourth excursion to the pleasure-grove, the Bodhisatta met a monk. On learning from the monk that he had gone forth from a worldly life and was engaged in meritorious pursuits, it occurred to the Bodhisatta to renounce worldly life, become a recluse and go in search of what is not subject to old age, disease and death. When he had gained what he had set out for, his intention was to pass on the knowledge to the world so that other beings would also learn to be free from misery of being subjected to old age, disease and death. A noble thought, a noble intention indeed!

On that same day and at about the same time, a son was born to the Bodhisatta's consort Yasodhara Devi. When he heard the news, the Bodhisatta murmured,

"An impediment (Rahula) has been born, a fetter has been born."

On learning of this remark of the Bodhisatta's father, his sire King Suddhodan caused his newborn grandson to be named Prince Rahula (Prince Impediment), hoping that the child would indeed prove to be a fetter to the Bodhisatta and become a hindrance to his plan for renunciation.

But the Bodhisatta had become averse to the pleasures of the world. That night he remained unmoved, unsolaced by the amusements provided by the royal entertainers and went into an early slumber. The discouraged musicians lay down their instruments and went to sleep there and then. On awakening in the middle of the night, the sight of recumbent, sleeping dancers repulsed the Bodhisatta and made his magnificent palace apartment seem like a cemetery filled with corpses.

Thus at midnight the Bodhisatta went forth on the Great Retirement riding the royal horse, Khandaka, accompanied by his courtier, Channa. When they came to the river Anoma, he cut off his hair and beard while standing on the sandy beach. Then after discarding the royal garments, he put on the yellow robes offered by the Brahma God, Ghantikara, and became a monk. The Bodhisatta was only twenty-nine then, an age most favourable for the pursuit of pleasures. That he renounced with indifference the pomp and splendour of a sovereign and abandoned the solace and comfort of his consort, Yasodhara, and retinues, at such a favourable age while still blessed with youth is really awe-inspiring.

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### Meeting Alara, the Great Ascetic

#### MAKING HIS WAY TO ALARA, THE GREAT ASCETIC

At that time the Bodhisatta was not yet in possession of practical knowledge of leading a holy life so he made his way to the then famous ascetic Alara who was no ordinary person. Of the eight stages of mundane jhanic attainments, Alara personally mastered seven stages up to the jhana consciousness dwelling on Nothingness (akincannayatana jhana) and was imparting this knowledge to his pupils.

Before the appearance of the Buddha, such teachers who had achieved jhanic attainments served as trustworthy masters giving practical instructions on methods of attainments. Alara was famous like a Buddha in those times. The *Theravada* literature was silent about him.

However, in

*Lalitavistara*, a

biographical text of the northern School of Buddhism, it was recorded that the great teacher had lived in the state of Vesali and that he had three hundred pupils learning his doctrine.

#### TAKING INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE HOLY SAGE, ALARA

How the Bodhisatta took instructions from the holy sage Alara was described thus:

"Having gone forth and become a recluse in pursuit of what is holy and good, seeking the supreme, incomparable Peace of *nibbāna*, I drew to where Alara Kalama was and addressed him thus: 'Friend Kalama, I desire to lead the holy life under your doctrine and discipline.' When I had thus addressed him, Alara replied, 'The Venerable friend Gotama is welcome to remain in this teaching. Of such a nature is this dhamma that in a short time an intelligent man can realize for himself and abide in possession of what his teacher has realized as his own.'"

After these words of encouragement, Alara gave him practical instructions on the doctrine.

## **REASSURING WORDS**

Alara's statement that his dhamma, if practised as taught, could be realized soon by oneself as one's own was very reassuring and inspired confidence. A pragmatic doctrine is trustworthy and convincing only if it could be realized by oneself and in a short time. The sooner the realization is possible, the more heartening it will be. The Bodhisatta was thus satisfied with Alara's words and this thought arose in him:

"It is not by mere faith that Alara announces that he has learned the dhamma. Alara has surely realized the dhamma himself, he knows and understands it."

That was very true. Alara did not cite any texts as authority. He did not say that he had heard it from others. He clearly stated that what he knew personally he had realized it himself. A meditation teacher must be able to declare his conviction boldly like him. Without having practised the dhamma personally, without having experienced and realized it in a personal way, to claim to be a teacher in meditation, to preach and write books about it after just learning from the texts on meditation methods is most incongruous and improper. It is like a physician prescribing medicine not yet clinically tested and tried by him, and which he dared not administer on himself. Such preachments and publications are surely undependable and uninspiring.

But Alara taught boldly what he had realized himself. The Bodhisatta was fully impressed by him and this thought arose in him:

"Not only Alara has faith, I also have faith. Not only Alara has energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, I also have them."

Then he strove for the realization of that dhamma which Alara declared that he himself had learned and realized. In no time, the Bodhisatta learned the dhamma which led him as far as the jhanic realm of Nothingness.

He then approached where Alara Kalama was and enquired of him whether the realm of Nothingness, which the latter had claimed to have realized it himself and lived in possession of, was the same stage as what the Bodhisatta had now reached. Alara replied,

"This is as far as the dhamma leads, of which I have declared that I have realized and abide in its possession, the same stage as friend Gotama has reached."

Then he utter these words of praise,

"Friend Gotama is a supremely distinguished person. The realm of Nothingness is not easily attainable yet Friend Gotama has realized it in no time. It is truly wonderful. Fortunate are we that we should light upon such a distinguished ascetic companion as your Reverence. As I have realized the dhamma, so have you realized it, too. As you have learnt it, so have I learnt to the same extent as you. Friend Gotama is my equal in dhamma. We have a large community here. Come, friend, together let us direct this company of disciples."

Thus Alara, the teacher, set up the Bodhisatta, his pupil, as completely equal to himself and honoured him by delegating to him the task of guiding one hundred and fifty pupils, which number was exactly half of all the disciples Alara had.

But the Bodhisatta stayed at the centre only for a short time. While staying there this thought came to him:

"This doctrine does not lead to aversion, to abatement and cessation of passion, to quiescence for higher knowledge and full enlightenment nor to *nibbāna*, the end of sufferings, but only as far as the attainment to the realm of Nothingness. Once there, a long life of 60,000 world cycles follows, and after expiring from there, one reappears in the

*Kamma*

existences and goes through the sufferings again. It is not the doctrine of the undying that I am looking for."

Thus becoming indifferent to the practice which led only to the *jhanic* realm of Nothingness, the



Bodhisatta abandoned it and departed from Alara's meditation centre.

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## **Meeting the Sage Udaka**

### **APPROACHING THE SAGE UDAKA**

After leaving Alara's place, the Bodhisatta was on his own for some time, pursuing the supreme path of tranquillity to reach the undying state of *nibbāna*. Then the fame of Udaka or Ramaputta (the son of Rama or disciple of the sage Rama) reached him. He drew to where Udaka was and sought to lead the religious life under the dhamma and discipline of the sage Rama. His experiences under the guidance of Udaka, how Udaka explained to him the dhamma, how the Bodhisatta was impressed with the doctrine and practised it, how he realized the dhamma and recounted to Udaka what he had gained, were described in almost exactly the same words as before.

We have, however, to note carefully that Udaka or Ramaputta, as his name implied, was a son of Rama or a disciple of Rama. The sage Rama was accomplished to go through all the eight stages of jhana and reached the highest *jhanic* realm of Neither Perception nor Non-perception. However, when the Bodhisatta reached where Udaka was, the old sage Rama was no more. Therefore, in asking Udaka about Rama's attainments, he used the past tense 'pavedesi'.

"How far does this doctrine lead concerning which Rama declared that he had realized it for himself and entered upon it?"

Then there is the account of how this thought occurred to the Bodhisatta:

"It is not only Rama who had faith, industry, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. I also have them."

There is also this passage where it was stated that Udaka set him up as a teacher.

"You know this doctrine and Rama knew this doctrine. You are the same as Rama and Rama

was the same as you. Come, friend Gotama, lead this following and be their teacher." And again the passage where the Bodhisatta recounted, "Udaka, the disciple of Rama, although my companion in the holy living, set me up as his teacher."

These textual references make it apparent that the Bodhisatta did not meet with the sage Rama, but only with Rama's disciple Udaka who explained to him the doctrine practised by Rama. The Bodhisatta followed the method as described by Udaka and was able to realize the stage of Neither Perception nor Non-perception. Having learnt the doctrine himself and realized and entered upon the realm of Neither Perception nor Non-perception like the sage Rama, he was requested by Udaka to accept the leadership of the company.

Where Udaka resided and how big his following was, was not mentioned in the literature of the *Theravadins*

. But Lalitavistara, the biography of the Buddha of the northern Buddhism, stated that Udaka's centre was in the district of Rajagaha and that he had a company of seven hundred strong. It is to be noted that at the time of meeting with the Bodhisatta, Udaka himself had not attained the *jhanic*

realm of neither Perception nor Non-perception yet. He explained to the Bodhisatta only what stage Rama had achieved. So when the Bodhisatta proved himself to be the equal of his master by realizing the stage of neither Perception nor Non-perception, he offered the Bodhisatta the leadership of the whole company. According to the

*Tika*

(Sub-commentary), Udaka later strove hard, emulating the example set by the Bodhisatta and finally attained the highest jhanic stage of neither Perception nor Non-perception.

The Bodhisatta remained as a leader of the company at the centre only for a short time. It soon occurred to him:

"This doctrine does not lead to aversion, to absence of passion nor to quiescence for gaining knowledge, supreme wisdom and *nibbāna*, but only as far as the realm of Neither Perception nor Non-perception. Once there, a long life of 84,000 world cycles is enjoyed only to come back again to the existence of sensual pleasures and be subjected to much suffering. This is not the doctrine of the Undying that I long for."

Then becoming indifferent to the doctrine which leads only to the realm of Neither Perception nor Non-perception, he gave it up and departed from Udaka's centre.

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## Practising Extreme Austerities

### PRACTISING EXTREME AUSTERITIES IN URUVELA FOREST

After he had left Udaka's centre, the Bodhisatta wandered about in Magadha, searching on his own the peerless path of tranquillity, the Undying *nibbāna*. During his wanderings, he came to the forest of Uruvela near the big village of Senanigama. In the forest he saw the clear, flowing river Nerañjara. Perceiving thus a delightful spot, a serene dense grove, a clear, flowing stream with a village nearby which would serve as an alms resort, it occurred to him: "Truly, this is a suitable place for one intent on effort," and he stayed on in the forest.

At that time the Bodhisatta had not yet worked out a precise system of right struggle. Austerity practices were, of course, widely known and in vogue throughout India then. Concerning these practices, three similes came to the mind of the Bodhisatta.

### THREE SIMILES

A log of snappy wood freshly cut from a sycamore tree and soaked in water cannot produce fire by being rubbed with a similar piece of wet sappy wood or with a piece of some other wood. Just so, while still entangled with objects of sensual desires such as wife and family, while still delighting in passionate pleasures and lustful desires are not yet quieted within him, however strenuously someone strives, he is incapable of wisdom, insight and incomparable full awakening. This was the first simile that occurred to the Bodhisatta.

Even if the sycamore log is not soaked in water but is still green and sappy, being freshly cut from the tree, it will also not produce any fire by friction. Just so, even if he has abandoned the objects of sensual desires such as wife and family and they are no longer near him, if he still delights in thoughts of passionate pleasures and lustful desires still arise in him, he is incapable of wisdom, insight or full awakening. This is the second simile.

According to the Commentary, this simile has a reference to the practices of Brahma dhammika ascetics. Those Brahmins led a holy ascetic life from youth to the age of forty-eight when they went back to married life in order to preserve the continuity of their clan. Thus, while they were practising the holy life, they would have been tainted with lustful thoughts.

The third simile concerns with dry sapless logs of wood not soaked in water. These logs of dry wood will kindle fire when rubbed against one another. Similarly, having abandoned objects of sensual desires and weaned himself of lustful thoughts and cravings, he is capable of attaining wisdom, insight and full awakening, whether he practises extreme austerity or whether he strives painlessly without torturing himself.

### **EXTREME AUSTERITY OF CRUSHING THE MIND WITH THE MIND**

Of the two methods open to him according to the third simile, the Bodhisatta considered following the path of austerity.

"What if now with my teeth clenched and my tongue cleaving the palate, I should press down, constrain and crush the naturally arising thought with my mind."

The Pali text quoted here corresponds with the text in the *Vitakka Sandhana Sutta* , but the method of crushing the thought with the mind as described in the

*Vitakka Sandhana Sutta*

was one prescribed by the Buddha after attaining enlightenment. As such, it involves banishment of any lustful thought which arises of its own accord by taking note of its appearance as an exercise of Vipassana meditation in accordance with the

*Satipatthana Sutta*

and other similar texts. The method of crushing the thought with the mind as described here refers to the practical exercises performed by the Bodhisatta before he attained the knowledge of the Middle Path and is, therefore, at variance with the

*Satipatthana*

method.

However, the Commentary interpretation implies suppression of evil minds with moral minds. If this interpretation were correct, this method, being concordant with *Satipatthana Sutta* and other texts, would have resulted in Enlightenment for the Bodhisatta. Actually, this method led him only to extreme suffering and not to Buddhahood. Other austerity practices taken up afterwards also led the Bodhisatta merely into wrong paths.

Austerity practice followed by the Bodhisatta at that time appeared to be somewhat like that of mind annihilation being practised nowadays by followers of a certain school of Buddhism. During our missionary travels in Japan, we visited a large temple where a number of people were engaged in meditation exercises. Their meditation method consists of blotting out a

thought whenever it arises. Thus emptied of mind (mental activity), the end of the road is reached, namely, Nothingness, i.e. Void. The procedure is as follows: young Mahayana monks sat cross-legged in a row, about six in number. The master abbot went round showing them the stick with which he would beat them. After a while, he proceeded to administer one blow each on the back of each meditator. It was explained that while being beaten it was possible that the mind disappeared altogether, resulting in Nothingness. Truly a strange doctrine. This is in reality annihilation of thought by crushing with mind, presumably the same technique employed by the Bodhisatta to crush the thought with the mind by clenching the teeth. The effort proved very painful for him and sweat oozed out from under his armpits, but no superior knowledge was attained then.

### **JHANIC ABSORPTION RESTRAINING THE BREATH**

Then it occurred to the Bodhisatta:

"What if I controlled respiration and concentrate on the breathless jhana?"

With that thought, he restrained the in-breathing and out-breathing of the mouth and nose. With the holding of respiration through the mouth and nose, there was a roar in the ears due to the rushing out of the air just like the bellows of a frog making a roaring noise. There was intense bodily suffering, but the Bodhisatta was relentless. He held the in-breathings and out-breathings, not only of the mouth and nose, but also of the ears. As a result, violent winds rushed up to the crown of the head, causing pains as if a strong man had split open the head with a mallet, as if a powerful man were tightening a rough leather strap round the head. Violent winds pushed around in the belly causing misery like being carved up by a sharp butcher's knife. And there was intense burning in the belly as if roasted over a pit of burning coals. The Bodhisatta, overcome physically by pain and suffering, fell down in exhaustion and lay still. When the deities saw him lying prone, some of them said,

"The monk Gotama is dead."

Other deities said,

"The monk Gotama is not yet dead, he is dying."

Again other deities said,

"The monk Gotama is neither dead nor dying. He is just lying still, dwelling in the state of *Arahat ship*."

In spite of all these painful efforts, no higher knowledge was gained

### **EXTREME AUSTERITY OF FASTING**

So it occurred to the Bodhisatta:

"What if I strive still harder, entirely abstaining from food?"

Knowing his thoughts, the deities said,

"Please, Lord Gotama, do not entirely abstain from food. If you do so, we shall instill heavenly nourishment through the pores of your skin. You shall remain alive on that."

Then it came to the Bodhisatta:

"If I claim to be completely fasting and these deities should instill heavenly nourishment through my pores and I should thus be sustained, that would be for me a lie."

The Bodhisatta rejected the deities offer saying that he refused to be injected with divine nourishment.

Then he decided to take less and less nourishment, only as much bean soup as the hollow of a hand could hold. Living on about five or six spoonfuls of bean soup each day, his body reached the state of extreme emaciation. The limbs withered, only skin, sinews and bones remained. The vertebrae became exposed in uneven lumps and protuberances. The widely dispersed bones jutted out, presenting an ungainly, ghastly appearance just as in the paintings of the Bodhisatta undergoing extreme austerity. The gleam of the eyes shrunk down in their sockets, looked like the reflection from water sunk deep in the well. The scalp had shrivelled up like a green, soft gourd withered in the sun. The emaciation was so extreme that if he attempted to feel the belly skin, he encountered the spinal column; if he felt for the spinal column, he touched the belly skin. When he attempted to evacuate the bowel or make water, the effort was so painful that he fell forward on the face, so weakened was he through this extremely scanty diet.

Seeing this extremely emaciated body of the Bodhisatta, the people said,

"The monk Gotama is a black man."

Others said,

"The monk Gotama has a brown complexion."

Again others said,

"The monk Gotama has the brown-blue colour of the torpedo fish."

So much had the clear, bright, golden colour of his skin deteriorated.

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## **Mara's Persuasion**

While the Bodhisatta strove hard and practised extreme austerity to subdue himself, Mara came and addressed the Bodhisatta persuasively in beguiling words of pity,

"Friend Gotama, you have gone very thin and assumed an ungainly appearance. You are now in the presence of death. There is only one chance left in a thousand for you to live. Oh, Friend Gotama! Try to remain alive. Life is better than death. If you live, you can do good deeds and gain merits."

The meritorious deeds mentioned here by Mara have no reference whatsoever to the merits accruing from acts of charity and observance of precepts, practices which lead to the path of liberation nor to merits which result from development of Vipassana Insight and attainment of the Path.

Mara knew of only merits gained by leading a holy life abstaining from sexual intercourse and by worshipping the holy fires. These practices were believed in those times to lead to a noble, prosperous life in future existences. However, the Bodhisatta was not enamoured of the blessings of existences and he replied to Mara,

"I do not need even an iota of the merits you speak of. You should go and talk of the merit to those who stand in need of it."

A misconception had arisen concerning this utterance of the Bodhisatta that he was not in need of any merits. It is that "'meritorious deeds are to be abandoned, not to be sought for nor carried out by one seeking release from the rounds of existence like the Bodhisatta.'" A person once approached me and sought elucidation on this point. I explained to him that when Mara was talking about merit, he did not have in mind the merits which accrued from acts of charity, observance of precepts, development of insight through meditation or attainment of the Path. He could not know of them. Nor was the Bodhisatta in possession then of precise knowledge of these meritorious practices; only that the Bodhisatta was then engaged in austerity exercises taking them to be noble ones. Thus, when the Bodhisatta said to Mara 'I do not need any merit,' he was not referring to the meritorious practices that lead to *nibbāna* , but only to such deeds as



were believed then to assure one of pleasurable existences. The Commentary also supports our view. It states that in saying 'I do not need any merit,' the Bodhisatta meant only the merit which Mara spoke of, namely, acts of merit which are productive of future existences. It can thus be concluded that no question arises of abandonment of meritorious practices which will lead to *nibbāna*.

At that time, the Bodhisatta was still working under the delusion that austerity exercises were the means of attaining higher knowledge. Thus, he said,

"This wind that blows can dry up the waters of the river. So while I strive strenuously, why should it not dry up my blood? And when the blood dries up, bile and phlegm will run dry. As the flesh gets wasted too, my mind will become clearer: mindfulness, concentration and wisdom will be more firmly established."

Mara was also under the wrong impression that abstention from food would lead to liberation and higher knowledge. It was this anxiety that motivated him to coax the Bodhisatta away from following the path of starvation. With the same wrong notion, a group of five ascetics waited upon him, attending to all his needs, hoping that this abstemious practice will lead to Buddhahood as they intended to be the first recipients of the sermon on liberation. It is clear, therefore, that it was a universal belief in those days that extreme self-mortification was the right path which would lead to Enlightenment.

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## Right Reasoning

After leading the life of extreme self-mortification for six years without any beneficial results, the Bodhisatta began to reason thus:

"Whatever ascetics or brahmins in the past had felt painful, racking, piercing feelings through practising self-torture, it may equal this, my suffering, not exceed it."

"Wherever ascetics or brahmins in the future will feel painful, racking, piercing feelings through the practice of self-torture, it may equal this, my suffering, not exceed it; whatever ascetics or brahmins in the present feel painful, racking, piercing feelings through the practice of

self-torture, it may equal this, my suffering, not exceed it. But, by this gruelling asceticism I have not attained any distinction higher than the ordinary human achievement; I have not gained the Noble One's knowledge and vision which could uproot defilements. Might there be another way to Enlightenment apart from this path of torture and mortification?"

Then the Bodhisatta thought of the time when, as an infant, he sat alone under the shade of a rose-apple tree, entered and absorbed in the first *jhanic* stage of meditation while his royal father, King Suddhodhana, was busily engaged in ceremonial ploughing of the fields nearby. He wondered whether this first *jhanic* method would be the right way to the Truth!

### **ABSORPTION IN FIRST JHANA WHILE AN INFANT**

The Bodhisatta was born on the full moon of Kason (April). It appeared that the royal ploughing ceremony was held sometime in Nayon or Waso (May or June) a month or two later. The infant child was laid down on a couch of magnificent clothes under the shade of a rose-apple tree. An enclosure was then formed by setting up curtains round the temporary nursery with royal attendants respectfully watching over the royal infant. As the royal ploughing ceremony progressed in magnificent pomp and splendour, with the king himself partaking in the festivities, the royal attendants were drawn to the splendid scene of activities going on in the nearby fields. Thinking that the royal infant had fallen asleep, they left him lying secure in the enclosure and went away to enjoy themselves in the festivities. The infant Bodhisatta, on looking around and not seeing any attendant, rolled up from the couch and remained seated with his legs crossed. By virtue of habit-forming practices through many lives, he instinctively started contemplating on the incoming, outgoing breath. He was soon established in the first *jhanic* absorption characterised by five features, namely, thought conception, discursive thinking, rapture, joy and concentration.

The attendants had been gone for some time now. Lost in the festivities of the occasion, they were delayed in returning. When they returned, the shadows thrown by the trees had moved with the passage of time, but the shade of the rose-apple tree under which the infant was left lying was found to have remained steadfast on the same spot. The infant Bodhisatta was sitting motionless on the couch. King Suddhodana, when informed, was struck by the spectacle of the unmoving shadow of the rose-apple tree and the still, sitting posture of the child. In great awe, he made obeisance to his son.

The Bodhisatta recalled the experience of absorption in the respiration *jhana* he had gained in childhood and he thought,

"Might that be the way to Truth?"

Following up on that memory, there came the recognition that respiration *jhana* practice was indeed the right way to Enlightenment.

The jhanic experiences were so pleasurable that the Bodhisatta thought to himself:

"Am I afraid of (trying for) the pleasures of jhana ?" Then he thought: "No, I am not afraid of (trying for) such pleasures."

### **RESUMPTION OF MEALS**

Then it occurred to the Bodhisatta:

"It is not possible to attain the jhanic absorption with a body so emaciated. What if I take some solid food I used to take? Thus nourished and strengthened in body, I'll be able to work for the jhanic state."

Seeing him partaking of solid food, the group of five ascetics misunderstood his action. They were formerly royal astrologers and counsellors who had predicted, at the time of his birth, that he would become an Enlightened Noble One, a Buddha.

There were eight royal astrologers at the court then. When asked to predict what the future held for the royal infant, three of them raised two fingers each and made double pronouncements that the infant would grow up to be a Universal Monarch or an Omniscient Buddha. The remaining five raised only one finger each to give a single interpretation that the child would most undoubtedly become a Buddha.

According to the *Mula Pannasa* Commentary (Vol.2, p.92), these five court astrologers forsook

the world before they got enchained to the household life and took to the forest to lead a holy life, but the *Buddhavamsa* Commentary and some other texts stated that seven astrologers raised two fingers each giving double interpretations while the youngest Brahmin, who would in time become the Venerable Kondanna, raised only one finger and made the definite prediction that the child was a future Buddha.

This young Brahmin, together with the sons of four other Brahmins, had gone forth from the world and banded together to form 'The Group of Five Ascetics', awaiting the Great Renunciation of the Bodhisatta. When news reached them later that the Bodhisatta was practising extreme austerities in the Uruvela Grove, they journeyed there and became his attendants, hoping 'when he has achieved Supreme Knowledge, he will share it with us. We will be the first to hear the message.'

When the five ascetics saw the Bodhisatta partaking solid food, they misunderstood his action and become disappointed. They thought:

"If living on a handful of pea soup had not led him to higher knowledge, how could he expect to attain that by eating solid food again?"

They misjudged him; thinking that he had abandoned the struggle and reverted back to the luxurious way of life to gain riches and personal glory. Thus, they left him in disgust and went to stay in the deer sanctuary in the township of Benares.

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## The Enlightenment

The departure of the five ascetics afforded the Bodhisatta the opportunity to struggle for final liberation in complete solitude. The *Mula Pannasa* (Vol. 2, p. 192) gives a description of how, working alone with no one near him for a full fortnight, seated on the throne of Wisdom (under the tree of Enlightenment), he attained Omniscience, the Enlightenment of a Buddha.

The Bodhisatta had gone forth at the age of twenty-nine and spent six years practising extreme austerity. Now at the age of thirty-five, still youthful and in good health, within fifteen days of resumption of regular meals, his body had filled up as before and regained the thirty-two

physical characteristics of a Great Being. Having thus built up strength and energy again through normal nourishment, the Bodhisatta practised the in-breathing, out-breathing meditation and remained absorbed in the bliss of the first jhana , which was characterized by thought-conception, discursive thinking, rapture, joy and one-pointedness of mind. Then he entered the second state of the jhana , which was accompanied by rapture, joy and concentration. At the third state of the jhana , he enjoyed only joy and one-pointedness of mind and at the fourth stage, equanimity and clear mindfulness (one-pointedness).

Early on the full moon day of Kason (April) in the year 103 of the Great Era, i.e. 2551 years ago, counting back from the year 1324 of the Burmese Era, he sat down under the Bo Tree (the Bodhi Tree) near the big village of Senanigama awaiting the hour of going for alms food. At that time, Sujata, the daughter of a rich man from the village, was making preparations to give an offering to the tree-spirit of the Bo tree. She sent her maid ahead to tidy up the area under the spread of the holy tree. At the sight of the Bodhisatta seated under the tree, the maid thought the deity had made himself visible to receive their offering in person. She ran back in great excitement to inform her mistress.

Sujata put the milk rice which she had cooked early in the morning in a golden bowl worth a hundred thousand pieces of money. She covered the same with another golden bowl. She then proceeded with the bowls to the foot of the banyan tree where the Bodhisatta remained seated and put the bowls in the hand of the Bodhisatta, saying,

"May your wishes prosper like mine have." So saying, she departed.

Sujata, on becoming a maiden, had made a prayer at the banyan tree:

"If I get a husband of equal rank and same caste with myself and my first born is a son, I will make an offering."

Her prayer had been fulfilled and her offering of milk rice that day was intended for the tree deity in fulfillment of her pledge. However, later when she learnt that the Bodhisatta had gained Enlightenment after taking the milk rice offered by her, she was overjoyed with the thought that she had made a noble deed to the greatest merit.

The Bodhisatta then went down to the river Neranjara and had a bath. After bathing, he made the milk rice offered by Sujata into forty-nine pellets and ate it. The meal over, he discarded the golden bowl into the river saying:

"If I were to become a Buddha today, let the bowl go upstream."

The bowl drifted upstream for a considerable distance against the swift flowing current, and on reaching the abode of the snake king, Kala, sank into the river to be at the bottom of the bowls of the three previous Buddhas.

Then the Bodhisatta rested the whole day in the forest glade near the bank of the river. As evening fell, he went towards the Bo tree, meeting on the way a grass-cutter named Sotthiya who gave him eight handfuls of grass. In India holy men used to prepare a place to sit and sleep on by spreading sheaves of grass. The Bodhisatta spread the grass under the tree on the eastern side. Then with the solemn resolution

"Never from this seat will I stir until I have attained the supreme and absolute wisdom" , he sat down cross-legged on the grass cover facing east.

At this point Mara made his appearance and contested for the seat under the Bo tree with a view to oppose the Bodhisatta's resolution and prevent him from attaining Buddhahood. By invoking the virtues he had accumulated through the ages, fulfilling the Ten Perfections such as Charity, etc., he overcame the molestations set up by Mara before the sun had set. After thus vanquishing Mara, in the first watch of the night through *jhanic* meditations, the Bodhisatta acquired the knowledge of previous existences; in the middle watch of the night, the divine eye ; and in the last watch of the night, he contemplated on the law of Dependent Origination followed by development of Insight into the arising and ceasing of the five aggregates of grasping. This Insight gave him in succession the knowledge pertaining to the four Holy Paths, resulting finally in full Enlightenment or Omniscience.

Having become a fully Enlightened One, he spent seven days on the Throne of Wisdom under the Bo tree and seven days each at six other places, forty-nine days in all, enjoying the bliss of

the fourth state of Fruition (Fruits of *Arahatship* ) and pondering long upon his newly found system of Law ( Dhamma ).

### **EXTREME AUSTERITY IS A FORM OF SELF-MORTIFICATION**

The fifth week was spent under the goat-herd (Ajjapala) Banyan tree and while there he reflected on his abandonment of the austerity practices: "Delivered am I from the austerity practices which cause physical pain and suffering. It is well that I'm delivered of that unprofitable practice of austerity. How delightful it is to be liberated and have gained Enlightenment."

Mara, who was closely following every thought and action of the Buddha, ever alert to accuse him of any lapses, immediately addressed the Buddha:

"Apart from the austerity practices, there is no way to purify beings; Gotama has deviated from the path of purity. While still defiled, he wrongly believes he has achieved purity."

The Buddha replied:

"All the extreme practices of austerity employed with a view to achieve the Deathless (the Immortal State) are useless, unprofitable much as the cars, peddles and pushing poles are useless on land, on the sand banks. Fully convinced that they are unprofitable, I have abandoned all forms of self-mortification."

The Commentary also mentions that extreme practices such as scanty diet, scanty clothing, constitute self-torture. That extreme austerity is a form of self-mortification should be carefully noted here.

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### **Giving First Sermon**

Having spent seven days each at seven different places, the Buddha went back to the goat-herd's banyan tree on the fiftieth day. Seated under the tree, he considered:

"To whom should I best teach the doctrine first? Who would quickly comprehend the Dhamma?" Then it occurred to him: "There is Alara Kalama who is learned, skilled and intelligent. He has long been a person having but little dust of defilement in the eye of the wise. What if I teach the doctrine to Alara Kalama first? He would quickly comprehend this Dhamma."

It is significant that the Buddha had tried to first seek out someone who would understand his teaching quickly. It is of utmost importance to inaugurate new meditation centres with devotees who are endowed with faith, zeal, industry, mindfulness and intelligence. Only such devotees as are in possession of these virtues can achieve penetrative Insight quickly and become shining examples for others to follow. Devotees lacking in faith, zeal, industry, mindfulness and intelligence or enfeebled in mind and body through old age can hardly be source of inspiration to others.

When we first launched on teaching the *Satipatthana Vipassana* Meditation, we were fortunate in being able to start off with three persons (my relatives actually) endowed with unusual faculties. They acquired the knowledge of awareness of arising and passing away (*udayabbaya nana*) within three days of practice and were overjoyed with seeing lights and visions accompanied by feelings of rapture and bliss. Such speedy attainments of results have been responsible for the worldwide acceptance and dissemination of the Mahasi

*Vipassana*

Meditation technique.

Thus, it was that the Buddha thought of teaching his first sermon to someone who would quickly grasp it and when he considered Alara Kalama, a deity addressed him:

"Lord, Alara Kalama had passed away seven days ago."

Then knowledge and vision arose to the Buddha that Alara had indeed passed away seven days ago and had, by virtue of his jhanic achievements, attained the Sphere of Nothingness ( *A kincannayatana*

Brahma Plane - the State of Immateriality).

### **MISSING THE PATH AND FRUITION BY SEVEN DAYS**



"Great is the loss to Alara of Kalama family,"

bemoaned the Buddha. As Alara was developed enough, he would have readily understood the teaching of the Buddha. He could have gained the Path and attained *Arahatship* instantly, but his early death had deprived him of this opportunity. In the Sphere of Nothingness, where only mental states exist without any forms, he could not have benefitted even if the Buddha had gone there and taught him the Dhamma. The life span in the Sphere of Nothingness is also very long, being sixty thousand world cycles. After expiry there he would appear again in the human world, but would miss the teachings of the Buddhas. As a common worldling he would do the rounds of existence, sometimes sinking to the netherworld to face great sufferings. Thus the Buddha bemoaned that the loss of Alara was very great.

It is possible in the present times that there are people deserving of higher attainments, but pass away without an opportunity of hearing the *Satipatthana* Meditation practice as expounded by us, or having heard the Dhamma thus taught but had not yet made the effort to put it into practice. The good people assembled here now hear what we are teaching should see carefully that such rare opportunities for their upliftment be not thrown away.

### **MISSING THE GREAT CHANCE BY ONE NIGHT**

Then the Buddha thought of teaching the first sermon to Udaka, son (pupil) of the great sage Rama. Again a deity addressed the Buddha:

"Lord, Udaka Ramaputta had passed away last night."

The knowledge and vision arose to the Buddha that the hermit Udaka had indeed died the previous night in the first watch and by virtue of his *jhanic* achievements had attained the state of neither Perception nor Non-perception ( *Nevasannanasannayatana*

*Brahma*

Plane). This sphere is also a state of immateriality, a formless state and its life span extends to eighty-four thousand world cycles. This is the noblest, the loftiest of the thirty-one planes of existence, but the Dhamma cannot be heard there. On appearing again in the human world, Ramaputta could instantly attain

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if he could but listen to the Dhamma because he was already so highly developed.

Unfortunately, he would not get such an opportunity again, having missed it by dying one night too early. The Buddha was thus moved again to utter in pity:

"Great is the loss to the hermit Udaka, the son (pupil) of the great sage Rama."

Then the Buddha thought again to whom he should give his first sermon. The group of five Bhikkhus appeared in his divine vision and he saw them living then in the deer Sanctuary in the township of Benares.

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## **Meeting with Upaka**

The Blessed One set out for Benares. Some previous Enlightened Ones had made the same journey by means of miracles. Our Lord Gotama Buddha, however, proceeded on foot for the purpose of meeting the naked ascetic Upaka on the way, to whom he had something to impart.

The *Buddhavamsa* Commentary and the Jataka commentary state that the Blessed One started on the journey on the full-moon of Waso. As the deer Sanctuary in Benares was eighteen yojanas (142 miles) away from the Bo Tree and the Blessed One made the journey on foot, the distance could not have been covered in one day unless done miraculously. It would be appropriate, therefore, if we fixed the starting date on the sixth waxing of Waso.

### **MEETING WITH UPAKA, THE NAKED ASCETIC**

The Blessed One had not gone far from the Bodhi Tree on the way to Gaya (six miles) when he came upon the naked ascetic Upaka, a disciple of the great leader Nataputta of the Naked Sect. On seeing the Blessed One, Upaka addressed him,

"Your countenance, friend, is clear and serene; your complexion is pure and bright. In whose name have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Of whose teaching do you profess?" The Blessed One replied:

Sabbabhibha sabbaviduhamasami  
Sabbesu Dhammesu anupalitto  
Sabbinjaho tanhakkhaye vimutto  
Sayam Abinnaya kamuddiseyyam.

I am one who has overcome all . . . (while common worldlings are affected by what is seen or heard, ending up in suffering, the Blessed One transcends all and remains serene, countenance clear).

Who knows all,  
I am one who has overcome all,  
I am detached from all things;  
Having abandoned everything, obtained emancipation,  
By the destruction of desire.  
Having by myself gained knowledge,  
Whom should I call my master?

The Blessed One made known his status more emphatically as follows:

na me acariyo atthi I have no teacher,  
sadiso me na vijjati One like me is not,  
sadevakasmim lokasmin In the world of men and gods,  
natthi me patipuggalo None is my counterpart.

Upon this Upaka wondered whether the Blessed One had gained the *Arahatship* . The Buddha replied:

Aham hi araha loka I, indeed, am the Arahat in the world  
Aham sattha anuttaro The teacher with no peer,  
Ekomhi Sammasambuddho The sole Buddha, supreme, enlightened  
Sitibhutosami Nibbuto All passions extinguished, I have gained Peace, *nibbāna* .

Upaka then asked the Blessed One where he was bound for and on what purpose.

"To start in motion the Wheel of Law, I go to the Kasis town. In the world of blind beings, I shall

beat the drum of the Deathless," replied the Blessed One.

Upon this Upaka queried: "By the manner in which you profess yourself, are you worthy to be an infinite Conqueror?"

And the Buddha said:

Madisa ve jina honti, Ye patta Asavakkhayam  
jita me papaka Dhamma, Tasamahamupaka jino.

"Those are the Conquerors who, like me, have reached the extinction of cankers. I have vanquished all thoughts, ideas, notions of evil (sinfulness). For that reason, Upaka, I am a Jina, a Conqueror, a victorious One."

Upaka belonged to the sect of naked ascetics under the leadership of Nataputta who was addressed by his disciples as Jina, the Conqueror. The Blessed One in his reply explained that only those who have really extinguished the cankers, eradicated the defilements, like him, are entitled to be called a Jina.

### **TRUTH IS NOT SEEN WHEN BLINDED BY MISCONCEPTION**

After this declaration by the Blessed One that he was truly an infinite Conqueror, the naked ascetic Upaka muttered: "It may be so, friend," shook his head and giving way to the Blessed One, went on his journey.

It is important to note carefully this event of Upaka's meeting with the Buddha. Here was Upaka coming face to face with a truly Enlightened One, but he did not realize it. Even when the Blessed One openly confessed that he was indeed a Buddha, Upaka remained skeptical because he was holding fast to the wrong beliefs of the naked ascetic sect. In these days too, there are people who follow wrong paths, refuse to believe when they hear about the right method of practice. They show disrespect to and talk disparagingly of those practising and teaching the right method. Such misjudgments arising out of false impression or opinion should be carefully avoided.

Even though he did not evince complete acceptance of what the Buddha said, Upaka appeared to have gone away with a certain amount of faith in the Buddha, as he came back to the Buddha after some time. After leaving the Buddha, he later got married to Capa (Chawa), a hunter's daughter, and when a son was born of the marriage, he became weary of the household life and became a recluse under the Blessed One. Practising the Buddha's teaching, he gained the stage of Once-returner, the Anagami. On passing away, he reached the Realm of Suddavasa Aviha , ( *Brahma* World), where he soon attained *Arahatship* . Foreseeing this beneficial result which would accrue out of his meeting with Upaka, the Blessed One set out on foot on his long journey to Benares and answered all the questions asked by Upaka.

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### Group of Five Monks

When the group of five ascetics saw the Blessed One at a distance coming towards them, they made an agreement amongst themselves saying,

"Friends, here comes the monk Gotama who had become self-indulgent, given up the struggle and gone back to a life of luxury; let us not pay homage to him nor go to greet him and relieve him of his bowl and robes. However, as he is of noble birth, we will prepare a seat ready for him. He will sit down if he is so inclined."

As the Blessed One drew near to them, they found themselves unable to keep to their agreement because of his illustrious glory. One went to greet him and receive the bowl, the second one took the robe and the third one prepared the seat for him. Another brought water to wash his feet while the other arranged a foot stool. But they all regarded the Blessed One as their equal and addressed him as before by his name Gotama and irreverently with the appellation "my friend." The Blessed One sat on the prepared seat and spoke to them:

"Bhikkhus, do not address me by the name Gotama nor as friend. I have become a Perfect One, worthy of the greatest reverence. Supremely accomplished like the Buddhas of yore, fully Enlightened. Give ear, Bhikkhus, the Deathless has been gained, the Immortal has been won by me. I shall instruct you and teach you the Doctrine. If you practise as instructed by me, you will in a short time, and in the present life, through your own direct knowledge, realize, enter upon and abide in *Arahatship*, the *nibbāna* , the ultimate and the noblest goal of the Holy life for the sake of which clansmen of good families go forth from the household life into homeless one."

Even with this bold assurance, the group of five Bhikkhus remained incredulous and retorted thus:

"Friend Gotama, even with the abstemious habits and stern austerities which you practised before, you did not achieve anything beyond meritorious attainments of ordinary men (you were not able to transcend human limitations . . . *uttarimanussadhamma* ) nor attain the sublime knowledge and Insight of the Noble Ones which alone can destroy the defilements. Now that you have abandoned the austerity practices and are working for gains and benefits, how will you have attained such distinction, such higher knowledge?"

This is something to think over. These five Bhikkhus were formerly court astrologers who were fully convinced and had foretold, soon after his birth, that the young Bodhisatta would definitely attain supreme Enlightenment. But when the Bodhisatta gave up privation and stern exertions, they had wrongly thought that Buddhahood was no longer possible. It could be said that they no longer believed in their own prophecy. They remained incredulous now that the Blessed One declared unequivocally that he had won the Deathless, had become a fully Enlightened One, because they held to the wrong notion that extreme austerity was the right way to Enlightenment. Likewise, nowadays, too, once a wrong notion has been entertained, people hold fast to it and no amount of showing the truth will sway them and make them believe. They even turn against those who attempt to bring them to the right path and speak irreverently and disparagingly of their well-wishers. One should avoid such errors and self-deception.

With great compassion and pity for the group of five Bhikkhus, the Blessed One spoke to them thus:

"Bhikkhus, the Perfect One like those of yore is not working for worldly gains, has not given up the struggle, has not abandoned the true path which eradicates the defilements; he has not reverted to luxury"

and declared again that he had become a Perfect One, worthy of great reverence, supremely accomplished and fully Enlightened. He urged them again to listen to him.

A second time, the group of five Bhikkhus made the same retort to him. The Blessed One, realizing that they were still suffering from illusion and ignorance, and out of pity for them gave them the same answer for the third time.

When the group of five Bhikkhus persisted in making the same remonstrance, the Blessed One spoke thus:

"Bhikkhus, ponder upon this. You and I are not strangers. We had lived together for six years and you had waited upon me while I was practising extreme austerities. Have you ever known me speak like this?"

The five Bhikkhus reflected on this. They came to realize that he had not spoken thus before because he had not attained Higher Knowledge then. They began to believe that he must have acquired the Supreme Knowledge now to speak to them thus. They replied respectfully,

"No, Reverend Sir. We have not known you speak like this before."

Then the Buddha said,

"Bhikkhus, I have become a perfect one worthy of the greatest respect ( Arahā ), supremely accomplished like the Buddhas of yore ( Tathagata ), by my own effort I have become fully Enlightened ( Sammasambuddho ), have gained the Immortal, the Deathless ( anātamadhigata ). Give ears, Bhikkhus, I shall instruct you and teach you the Doctrine. If you practise as instructed by me, you will in no time and in the present life, through your own direct knowledge, realize, enter upon, and abide in Arahātship, the *nibbāna* , the ultimate and the noblest goal of the Holy life for the sake of which clansmen of good families go forth from the household life into homeless one."

Thus the Blessed One gave them the assurance again.

The five Bhikkhus got into a receptive mood then and prepared themselves to listen respectfully to what Buddha would say. They awaited with eagerness to receive the knowledge to be imparted to them by the Blessed One.

What we have stated so far constitutes relevant events selected from the Intermediate Epoch of Introductions.

We now come to the Recent Past, introduced by the words "Thus have I heard," which gives an account of how the Blessed One began to set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma by giving the first Sermon.

The time was the evening of the full moon of Waso 2551 years ago as counted back from this Burmese era 1324. The sun was about to set but still visible as a bright, red sphere; the moon, bright yellow, was just coming up in the eastern skies. The Commentary on the *Mahavagga Samyutta* mentions that the first sermon was given while both the sun and the moon were simultaneously discernible in the sky.

The audience consisted of only the five Bhikkhus from the human world, but the *Brahmas* numbered 18 crores, and the *devas*, according to the *Milinda Panha*, innumerable. Thus when the five Bhikkhus together with *Brahmas* and *devas*, who were fortunate enough to hear the first Sermon, were respectfully awaiting with rapt attention, the Blessed One began teaching the *Dhammacakka Sutta* with the words: "Dve me, Bhikkhave, anta pabbajitena na sevitabba."

"Bhikkhus, one who has gone forth from the worldly life should not indulge in these two extreme parts (portions, shares) which will be presently explained (Ime dve anta)."



Here, *Anta* according to the Commentary interpretations, connotes grammatically *kotthasa* or *bhaga* which means share or portion or parts of things. However, in view of the doctrine of the Middle Path taught later in the Sermon, it is appropriate also to render *Anta* as extreme or end. Again, "part or portion of things" should not be taken as any part or portion of things, but only those parts that lie on the two opposite ends or extremes of things. Hence, our translation as two extreme parts or portions. The Singhalese or Siamese commentaries render it as *lanmaka kotthasa* meaning 'bad portion' or part, somewhat similar to the old Burmese translation of "bad thing or practice."

Thus it should be noted briefly first that "One who has gone forth from the worldly life should not indulge in two extreme parts or practices."

Katame dwe. Yo cayam kamesu kamasukhalikanuyogo-hino, gammo, pothujjaniko, anariyo, anattasamhito. Yo cayam attakilamathanuyogo-dukkho, anariyo, anatta-samhito.

What are the two extreme parts or practices? Delighting in desirable sense-objects, one pursues sensuous pleasure, makes efforts to produce such pleasures and enjoys them. This extreme part (practice) is low (bad), vulgar being the habit of village and town folks; common and earthly, being indulged in by ordinary common worldlings; not clean, ignoble, hence not pursued by the Noble Ones; profitless and not pertaining to the true interests one is seeking after. Such pursuit after sensuous pleasures is one extreme part (practice) which should be avoided.

Pleasurable sight, sound, smell, taste and touch constitute desirable sense-objects. Taking delight in such objects of pleasure and enjoying them physically and mentally, one pursues after these sensuous pleasures. This practice, which forms one extreme part is low, vulgar, common, ignoble and unprofitable and should not, therefore, be followed by one who has gone forth from the worldly life.

The other extreme part or practice which is concerned with attempts to inflict torture on oneself can result only in suffering. Abstaining from food and clothing which one is normally used to is a form of self-torture and is unprofitable. Not being clean nor noble, this practice is not pursued by the Noble Ones. Neither does it pertain to the true interests one is seeking after. Thus practice of self-mortification, the other extreme part of practice, should also be avoided. Avoiding these two extremes, one arrives at the true path known as the Middle Path.

## **THUS THE BLESSED ONE CONTINUED**

"Ete kho, Bhikkhave, ubho ante anupagamma majjhima patipada Tathagatena abhisambuddha cakkhukarani, nana karani, upasamaya, abhinna, sambodhaya, nibbānaya samvattati."

Bhikkhus, avoiding these two extreme parts, the Blessed One had gained the Supreme Knowledge of the Middle Path, which produces vision, produces knowledge and leads to tranquillity (stilling of defilements), higher knowledge and *nibbāna*, the end of all suffering.

Avoiding the two extremes,  
Rejecting wrong paths,  
The Middle Path is reached.  
Walking this true Path,  
Enlightenment is gained,  
*nibbāna* realized.

How the Middle Path, which is also known as the Eightfold Path, produces vision, knowledge and how it leads to tranquillity and Enlightenment will be dealt with in the [Dhamma Sections](#).

-The End-

(This is the very first portion of *The Great Discourse on the Wheel of Dhamma* by Mahasi Sayadaw)