Siddhārtha Gautama (Pali: Siddhattha Gotama) is the person the world has come to know as the Buddha, the "Awakened One." Gautama was born during a historical epoch when the Indian culture was open to his religious message of enlightenment, compassion, and peace. The sixth century B.C.E. in India was a time of social and religious change. New monarchies were established as empires were carved out by ambitious warrior kings. There was a growth of new and larger cities that replaced smaller tribal societies. Increase in trade also led to a richer money economy and the emergence of a well-to-do and powerful merchant class. With these changes, not only were the older social structures and cultural customs coming under question, but also the traditional religious viewpoints and institutions that were associated with them.

In this questioning intellectual environment, numerous schools of religious thought and practice emerged. Some religious leaders were emphasizing the mystical ideas of the more recently composed Upanishads rather than the ritual practices extolled by the older Vedic tradition. This Vedic tradition was the product of the Āryans who began to invade the Indian subcontinent around 2000 B.C.E. The Vedas contained hymns to the gods (devas) along with religious materials and teachings used in ritual sacrifices and in daily life. The earlier Upanishads, on the other hand, were being composed by spiritual masters, many of whom preferred yogic practice to Vedic ritualism.

While the earlier Vedas had emphasized the ritual worship of many gods, the Upanishads presented the more mystical belief in a universal and unitary spiritual Reality, called Brahman, which is the true essence, or Ātman (Self), of all things. It was believed that the personal realization of this divine essence through insight, matured in the depths of meditation, would lead one to spiritual liberation, or mokṣa. Liberation was understood to be release from karma (Pali: kamma) and rebirth. Karma was thought to be a subtle form of moral energy that results from one's good and evil actions. This
karmic energy was believed to determine what kind of rebirth one will experience after death. To gain liberation, according to the Upaniṣads, it is not enough to worship the gods; one has to destroy one’s karma and attain spiritual realization of the divine in all things in order to escape the rounds of rebirth. Only by the practice of spiritual discipline can one’s true Self, the eternal Ātman, find liberation from rebirth by merging with the divine Brahman.

This spiritual ideal not only challenged the value the Vedas gave to religious ritual but also clashed with the materialism found in the large cities and enjoyed by the newly rich merchant class. Moreover, while some people were disillusioned by the Vedic ritualism and urban materialism and were attracted to the ideal of liberation, they were also suspicious of the spiritual integrity of the learned priests and sages. These religious leaders were, for the most part, married and making a living from their teaching and ritual celebrations. People were therefore open to new religious movements that were formed as seekers for liberation left the cities and resided in the forests. Members of these new religious communities were called śramanā (Pali: sāmanā), or “strivers” for liberation and contentment. They often wandered ascetics who lived in poverty and begged for what they needed. Among these śramanā communities were the Jains, the Ājīvakas, the Materialists, and the Skeptics.

Jainism was founded around the time of Siddhārtha Gautama by Vardhamāna Jñātāputra, known as Mahāvīra, the “Great Hero.” This group taught that all beings have a “life principle” (jīva). This jīva is like an individual soul that is bound by karma and rebirth to the material world. The only way that one can free the jīva from this bondage is by severe asceticism. The Ājīvakas believed in rebirth, but not in the power of karma to effect the condition of one’s rebirth. One’s life is determined by fate, not by any moral or spiritual striving. Each life is fate as to how it will work itself out. One can find peace by accepting one’s life in whatever form it might take. The Materialists denied both karma and rebirth. Since for them there is nothing besides matter, when one dies, one’s self is annihilated. Therefore, the Materialists taught that contentment can only be found in the pleasures of a balanced life that includes enjoyable relationships with others. Finally, the Skeptics avoided the confusion that was caused by all these different viewpoints by simply withholding judgment. In this skeptical avoidance of the problems that so concerned others, they found a certain peace of mind.

As we shall see, on his spiritual quest Gautama joined a small group of śramanās for a time. However, in his teachings after his Awakening, he rebuked the shortcomings of the views and practices of the śramanā groups. He was opposed to the Jains’ rather mechanical notion of karma and their extreme asceticism. He felt that the Ājīvakas’ fatalism discouraged the vigor and effort needed to attain Awakening. The Materialists, he believed, were deluded in thinking that lasting happiness can be found in temporary enjoyments. And the Skeptics were simply wrong in doubting all views since some viewpoints can be proven true by meditative insight. Gautama also thought that one needs a certain “faith” that the spiritual life can lead to liberation in order to have the necessary commitment to attain that liberation.

THE EARLY LIFE OF SIDDHĀRTHA GAUTAMA

It was into this world of religious and cultural transition that Siddhārtha Gautama was born. The exact date of his birth is a matter of contention among scholars. Different Buddhist sources claim that Gautama died either 100 years or 218 years before the consecration of King Aśoka. Since that consecration can be plausibly dated anywhere between 280 and 267 B.C.E., and since Gautama is said in all Buddhist sources to have lived for eighty years, the date of his birth using these sources could be put between 578 and 447 B.C.E. On the other hand, scholars point out that the 100- and 218-year figures can also be seen as ideal numbers, hence the lack of consensus. Until recently, most modern scholars have accepted the earlier dating for Gautama’s life. But today, many scholars place his life fully in the fifth century B.C.E.

Scholars also point out that not only the date of Gautama’s birth but also stories about his life must be questioned in terms of historical accuracy. The complete biographies of Gautama’s life were written hundreds of years after his death and include legends not found in earlier texts. These later biographies include the Mahāvīra (“Great Story”) from the first century C.E.; the Lalitavistara (“Graceful Description”), also from the first century C.E.; and the famous Buddha-carita (“Acts of the Buddha”) written by Asvaghosa in the second century C.E. The older sections of Buddhist scriptures, called the Nikāyas or Āgamas, do not contain a full biography of his life, but only fragmentary references. Also, scholars point out that we have no historical evidence concerning the Buddha’s life to use in order to judge the value of even these earlier writings. However, it seems reasonable at least to tell the story of the Buddha’s life based on the earlier writings, with occasional mention of the more popular legends that appear in the later biographies. For sites related to the life of Gautama Buddha, see Map 1 in Chapter 3.

Birth

The earlier Buddhist scriptures say that the historical Buddha was born to the warrior-caste Gautama family of the Śākya clan in the state of Kosala. Gautama, meaning “most excellent cow,” should be understood in the context of cow veneration that was a custom in Indian culture. Śākya means “one who possesses power.” In the later tradition, the Buddha is given the title “Śākyamuni,” or “sage of the Śākya clan.” A personal name for the Buddha was not given in the earlier texts, but appears in later texts as Siddhārtha, meaning “one who has achieved his goal.” In early texts, Gautama’s father is named Siddhadana, meaning “pure rice.” This seems appropriate since the Śākya clan resided between the Ganges plains and the foothills of the Himalayas, a region in which rice is cultivated. Siddhadana is referred to in
the earlier texts as one of the council of rulers of the Śākya clan and leader of the town of Kapilavastu where the family lived. Later biographies of the Buddha claim that Śuddodana was actually a king. Early texts report that Gautama’s mother, Māyā, was in the garden of Lumbini near Kapilavastu when she gave birth to her son. Buddhists celebrate the birth of Siddhārtha Gautama on the full moon of Vaiśākha (April–May), which is the fourth month of the Indian calendar. An early text records a prophecy made by a hermit named Asita at the time of Gautama’s birth:

Holding the bull child of the Śākya tribe, he... examined him, and with joy in his mind raised his voice saying, “This is the supreme man, foremost among men... This prince will reach the heights of true Awakening; he will see the utmost purity and benefit many because of his compassion; he will turn the wheel of the Dhamma [Teaching] and his pure actions will be widely spread. (Sutta-nipāta, 679–700)

Later biographies relate the tragic story that seven days after giving birth to Gautama, Māyā died. In this account, Śuddodana later married Māyā’s younger sister, whose name was said to be Mahāprajāpati. Mahāprajāpati is also said in this story to have raised Gautama along with his half-brother, Nanda.

Youth

All Buddhist texts agree that Gautama grew up enjoying the luxuries of an aristocratic life. Reflecting on those days, he is reported in an earlier text to have said:

I was comfortable, extremely comfortable, incomparably comfortable. My father’s mansion had lotus pools of blue, red and white all for my benefit... Day and night a white canopy was held over me to protect me from the cold, heat, dust, chaff or dew. I had three palaces, one for winter, one for summer and one for the rainy season. During the rainy season, I was at the palace suited for the rains surrounded by female entertainers, and was never left alone. (Anguttara-nikāya, I, 145 ff.)

In later biographies, this luxury was explained with a legend concerning the conception of Gautama. In that legend, it is said that when he was conceived, his mother dreamed that a white elephant with a white lotus in its trunk entered her body. The astrologers interpreted this dream to mean that if Gautama married and remained a householder, he would be a great warrior and perhaps unite all of India, something that had not been accomplished up until that time. However, if he would leave the householder state and retreat into the forest like the śramana were doing, he would be a great religious leader. Śuddodana, who was certainly influenced by the fact that during his day many nobles were creating great empires throughout India, told the astrologers that he wanted Gautama to remain a warrior and not to wander off to follow the religious life. They responded that to ensure that Gautama would not pursue the religious life, his father should surround him with sensual pleasures and hide from him anything that might make him dissatisfied with his householder life. This story is important to Buddhists today because it defines the major distractions in daily life that keep a person from undertaking the spiritual quest: attachment to worldly pleasures and the security that wealth seems to offer.

Despite the many pleasures and luxuries enjoyed in his youth, Gautama was disturbed by certain negative aspects of the human condition that he could not avoid. After giving the previously quoted description of his comfortable life, the Buddha goes on to say that he could not help “observing old age in another person.” And when he would observe old persons as well as diseased persons and even corpses, he would feel “annoyed, ashamed and disgusted.” In other words, these sights would disturb the enjoyment of his riches and pleasures. However, this feeling of annoyance led him to feel ashamed because all persons, including himself, share the weaknesses of the human condition. In the end, he felt disgusted and despondent about his being subject to, and about his reaction to, human suffering and finitude.
Another early text indicates that once Gautama did happen upon a possible spiritual avenue to a deeper form of peace and happiness that is neither dependent on fleeting pleasures nor limited by the suffering human condition:

I remember well when my father was performing his duties and I sat under the shade of the Jambu tree along the path to the field. Separated from desires and from wholesome affairs, I achieved the first stage of meditation. This entailed the joy produced by these separations, and is accompanied by initial and discursive thought. I believed that certainly this was the way to Awakening. (Majjhima-nikāya, I, 246)

In due time, Siddhārtha Gautama married a young woman named Yaśodharā, and eventually they had a son, who was named Rāhula; the name Rāhula means "fetter." Some interpret this name to mean that Gautama considered the birth of his son to be an obstacle to his pursuit of the religious life. Others point out that while this may be true, there is every indication in the texts that Gautama loved his family very much. So, Rāhula was not so much an unwanted responsibility for Gautama, but was the cause of another bond of love to his family. In any case, the naming of Rāhula certainly indicates that Gautama was struggling with his love for home and family on the one hand, and the spiritual impulse to the religious life on the other. In the end, this latter impulse to find Awakening and answers to his questions about life became so strong that at the age of twenty-nine, he decided he must follow this impulse by leaving home and family to undertake a spiritual quest. Reflecting back, he would later say, "In this spring of my life, despite the tears shed by my parents, I shaved my head, put on robes, renounced my home, and became a homeless monk" (Majjhima-nikāya, I, 163).

The Four Sights

Gautama's struggle with the householder life and the religious quest noted in the early texts would later be woven into the story of the Four Sights. In this legend, as he approached his thirtieth birthday, Gautama found himself in the grips of a very painful struggle between his attachment to his "home," with everything his family meant to him, and his attraction to the "homeless" religious life, with its spiritual quest. This crisis was said to have been precipitated by Four Sights. It seems that one day while on a chariot ride, he passed beyond the area around his home that was secured by his father from anything upsetting. It is said that for the first time he saw a decrepit old man. When he asked his charioteer about this person's sad condition, the charioteer answered that the ills of old age are the fate of all people. Returning to the palace, Gautama fell into melancholy and could no longer find any enjoyment in the pleasures of his princely life.

On a second ride, it is said that for the first time Gautama saw a severely diseased man, and he understood more deeply that disease is not kept at bay by worldly power. Returning to the palace, Gautama's melancholy deepened.

On his third trip, for the first time he saw a corpse, and again he was faced with the ultimate fate of all humankind from which no amount of worldly security can keep one safe. Deeply depressed about the plight of the human condition, Gautama set off on a fourth trip and saw a religious hermit practicing meditation. The charioteer told Gautama that this person had left the material comforts of the householder life to seek spiritual liberation from the ills of the human condition.

Through these Four Sights, it is said that Gautama understood that the impermanent pleasures he had been enjoying were passing, that they could not provide a permanent happiness that the ills of life, represented by old age, illness, and death, could not destroy. He also understood that if he wanted to find that kind of lasting inner peace, he must follow the religious life. This is a lesson that all Buddhists are taught to apply to their own lives. As with Gautama, the nature of our shared suffering human condition, when faced with honesty and courage, presents one with a fundamental reason for following the religious journey to spiritual freedom and peace. In Gautama's case, his despondency is said to have lifted as he realized in the sight of a religious hermit that there is a solution to the dissatisfaction he found with his ordinary life.

The story then goes on poignantly to recount the deeply emotional parting of Gautama from his beloved family and home when he finally made the decision to pursue the religious quest for liberation. In the middle of the night, with firm resolve and motivated by a higher spiritual sense of duty, Gautama gazed for one last time at his cherished wife and son. Then with his charioteer, he left the city on horseback. Reaching the banks of a river, Gautama dismounted, shaved his head, and exchanged clothes with a passerby. Finally, it is said that Gautama sent his charioteer back to his father with a message explaining his actions, and then he set off on his spiritual quest called the "Great Renunciation."

THE GREAT RENUNCIATION

It is important to view the story of Siddhārtha Gautama's departure from his home in the social context of the sixth century. We must take into account that at that time the extended family, especially a well-to-do family like Gautama's, shared the responsibility of caring for all family members. So when Gautama set off on his pilgrimage to liberation, his wife and child would be cared for by his extended family. This certainly is not to deny the sense of loss that each member of the family must have felt because of Gautama's departure. However, his decision was not taken lightly, and he surely felt the pain of separation as he traveled on foot away from his home and loved ones. But, he believed firmly that he was responding to a higher spiritual calling—a calling that he could no longer resist. He had to go out to meet his destiny with total commitment.

According to the early scriptures, Siddhārtha Gautama journeyed south from Kapilavastu, across the Ganges River to the city of Rāja-gāra, the capital of the state of Magadha. Magadha was south of the state of Kosala where
Gautama had lived. It is said that in Rājagaha, Gautama begged for alms and inquired as to where the religious seekers in the area were living. Being told that they resided in the eastern foothills of Mt. Pandava, he went and stayed there for some time. While there, he is said to have been visited by King Bimbisāra, who tried to persuade him to give up his spiritual quest and return to the worldly life. Some scholars say that perhaps King Bimbisāra was seeking an alliance with the Śākya clan against Kosala, Magadha’s rival state. In any case, Gautama restated his decision to pursue Awakening and lasting peace, and later left the Rājagaha area.

**Spiritual Teachers**

In what is referred to in some of the later texts as “a short distance away,” Gautama found some ascetics and joined them for a time. However, he decided that they were “practicing a wrong path,” and then went to the hermitage of Āraḍa Kāḷāma, a teacher of meditation. The early texts say that Āraḍa taught his disciples how to attain “the state of non-existence” in meditation. Gautama attained this state, and was even asked by Āraḍa to help him teach in his community. However, Gautama responded, “This Dharma (Teaching) does not lead to avoidance, to separation from desire, to cessation, to peace, to wisdom, to true Awakening, and Nirvana (Pali: nībāṇa). It merely makes us attain the state of non-existence” (Majjhima-nikāya, I, 165). In other words, the meditation taught by Āraḍa produced a high state of absorption in which all forms of existence disappear. But when one emerges from that trancelike state, his or her life is still lacking in peace, wisdom, selflessness, and true Awakening.

After Gautama studied with Āraḍa, he went to stay with Udraka Rāmaputra, another teacher of meditation. Udraka taught Gautama the attainment of “neither perception nor non-perception.” Again, Gautama reached this highest state of meditative absorption, but found that it too did not produce the freedom from desires, inner peace, wisdom, Awakening, and Nirvana that were the goals of his spiritual quest. Although Gautama left Udraka as he had Āraḍa, it seems that he was influenced by both of these teachers. Early Buddhism included both of these types of formless absorbing meditation among its practices to foster an encouraging meditative “taste” of Nirvana.

**Asceticism**

After leaving Udraka, Gautama journeyed east to the area of Uruvela. Early texts state that Gautama practiced asceticism in that area for many years, during which time he seems to have struggled with Māra, a tempter spirit who seeks to entrap spiritual seekers in order to keep them in this world where he can influence their lives. In an ancient account of these temptations, Māra is said to have suggested that Gautama turn from his more spiritual “endeavor” and pursue doing good works along with making Vedic sacrificial offerings in order to accumulate good karma. In fact, this was a temptation to give up the search for Awakening because, in Buddhist thinking, moral behavior and ritual actions alone cannot produce the state of Awakening and Nirvana. Another early passage suggests that during his ascetic period, Gautama had to combat certain inner states of mind that are not conducive to the attainment of Nirvana, and also physical conditions that discourage spiritual advance. The text attributes these temptations and trials to Māra: “Your first army is desire, your second army is discontent, your third army is hunger and thirst, your fourth army is ceaseless clinging. Your fifth army is laziness and sleep, your sixth army is fear; your seventh army is doubt, your eighth army is pretense and stubbornness” (Sutta-nipāta, 436, 437).

The early texts state that it was at this time that five ascetics joined Gautama because they were so impressed with the degree to which he practiced self-mortification in hopes of spiritual freedom and Awakening. However, after several years of ascetic practice, Gautama was still unable to attain Awakening and Nirvana. He finally realized that the ascetic path was not the true way to the spiritual life he was seeking and decided to give it up. But what was the true way?

Facing this question, Gautama remembered the meditative state he had entered when he was a young boy sitting under a shady tree while his father was working. In that tranquil repose, his mind had attained a deep state of meditation that brought him a great joy and freedom from worldly desires and immoral thoughts. Overcoming his ascetic aversion to anything pleasant, Gautama considered turning to a more moderate way of spiritual practice that naturally welled up within him. Later, he would call this path the “Middle Way” because on the one hand it rejects the sensual indulgence he had enjoyed as a young man, and on the other hand it rejects the mortification of the flesh that he had practiced as an ascetic. The former ignores the spiritual journey, and the latter inhibits its progress by destroying the organic mind-body unity that is important for spiritual advancement.

Since his extreme fasting had left him emaciated, Gautama accepted some milk offered by a village girl, thus abandoning his extreme asceticism. But when his five companions saw that he had given up his fasting, they concluded that he had also abandoned his striving endeavor, and so they left his company in disgust. However, Gautama with renewed resolve then sat under what is called the Bodhi Tree (“Tree of Awakening”) near Bodhgaya, vowing to remain in that place until he attained Awakening. Later legends state that when Gautama gave up his asceticism, he sat under a sacred tree. While he was sitting there, a woman named Sujātā arrived at the tree and gave him a bowl of rice and milk. Sujātā, honoring a vow, had come to the sacred tree intending to place an offering under it.

**THE AWAKENING OF THE BUDDHA**

After regaining his strength, Gautama remained in seclusion on the banks of the Nairanjana River near Bodhgaya. The opposite shore was a popular place for ritual practices and ascetic sacrifices offered by both priests and
ascetics. Symbolically turning his attention away from both of those types of religious activities, Gautama began practicing meditation in order to seek liberation within himself. He sat under the Bodhi Tree, faced east, and vowed not to move from that place until he attained Awakening.

In later biographies, it is said that it was at this point that Mara appeared and presented Gautama with his temptations. According to these stories, Mara sends his armies that include such trials in the spiritual life as sensuality, discontent, doubt, fear, and so on. In some accounts, Mara sends his three daughters—Discontent, Delight, and Desire—to tempt Gautama. It is also said that when these temptations failed, Mara then questioned Gautama’s merit to become the Buddha, the Awakened One. While Gautama was protected from this temptation of self-doubt by his great merit, he had no one with him to witness to this fact. So, Gautama touched the earth asking for its witness that he was indeed worthy to become the Buddha. This action is represented by the earth-witnessing posture of the Buddha often depicted in Buddhist art. In response to Gautama’s request, there was an earthquake and the earth goddess appeared. This goddess wrenched a flood of water from her hair that had accumulated when Gautama had done ritual water-pouring after doing meritorious deeds in past lives. With the earthquake and flood, and as the sun was setting, Mara and his armies fled.

Buddhists see an important lesson in this legend, namely, that when one makes a sincere commitment to the true path of spirituality, there arise certain trials that test one’s resolve. There are trials that cause fear; one fears what might lie ahead in the journey, for example. There are trials of self-doubt wherein one feels unable to go ahead or unworthy of the ideal one is seeking. And there are the temptations that arise from one’s attachments to the world and the many sensual pleasures one finds in that world. One must have the faith or confidence to go ahead on the holy path despite these obstacles.

Enlightenment

Sitting under the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgaya on the night of the full moon during the month of Vaishaka, Gautama attained Awakening. The early texts say that he did so by ascending what are called the Four Meditations (dhyana; Pali: jhana). The first meditation is one of concentration free from sensual pleasure and base thoughts but with discursive reflection, elation, and deep joy. This is what he had experienced in his youth. The second meditation sets aside any discursive reflection for a deeper and more unified mental tranquility. The third meditation negates emotional elation, which is a hindrance to equanimity and clarity of mind. The fourth meditation transcends even joy so that its opposite: dejection or sorrow, is also transcended into a complete state of mindful equanimity. The mind, being purified at this point, is said to become stable, yet “soft and workable.”

Having reached this state of meditative clarity, Gautama chose not to “work” his mind into the higher meditative absorptions that he had learned from Arada and Udraka. Rather, he purposely focused his contemplation into a penetrating insight into the truth about existence itself. In this manner, he is said to have ascended to the highest level of Awakening (bodhi) through three stages. During the first watch of the night (evening), Gautama saw all of his own previous lives, one by one. During the second watch of the night (midnight), he saw the rebirth of others according to their karma, and the whole of existence appeared to him “as if in a mirror.” During the third watch (late night), he destroyed all mental and emotional impurities, selfish desires, false views, and ignorance. With pure and penetrating insight, some early passages say, he realized the dependent arising (pratitya-samutpada) of all existence, how all things dependently come to be what they are. Other passages say that he was able to realize (1) the dissatisfactory nature of existence (duhkha), (2) the cause of its arising, (3) the cessation of its arising, (4) and the path that leads to that cessation. Later, Gautama would call these the Four Noble Truths. By dawn, all ignorance had been extinguished, as Gautama’s Awakening was complete. He was now Gautama Buddha, Gautama the Awakened One.

With this description of his Awakening, we can better understand an early text’s presentation of the following words attributed to Gautama Buddha:

I truly made effort and endeavor, my thought was firm and undistracted, my body was tranquil and passive, and my mind was concentrated. I was free of desires and unwholesome thoughts, and though I still had initial thought and discursive thought, I had arrived at the first meditation with the joy created by such a separation. . . . [Having attained the second, third and fourth meditations.] In this manner my mind became concentrated, purified, cleansed, without defilement, pliable, flexible, established and immovable. I then directed my mind to wisdom raising the recollections of my past lives . . . recalling numerous past lives along with each individual appearance and detailed conditions. . . . This was the first light of wisdom attained during the early part of the night. . . . Then I directed my mind towards the knowledge of the birth and death of all living beings . . . I observed living beings die and be born . . . following the results of their karma . . . This was the second light of wisdom attained during the middle of the night. . . . Then, I directed my mind towards the knowledge of the wisdom that eliminates ignorance. At that time, I realized [the truth about] the dissatisfactory condition of life [its nature, cause, cessation, and path to its cessation]. . . . When I realized this, my mind was freed from the defilement of desire, my mind was freed from the defilement of ignorance, and as I became free, I realized that I was free . . . This was the third wisdom attained at the end of the night. (Majjhima-nikaya, I, 21ff.)

Nirvana

According to the early texts, the Buddha engaged in deepest meditation for four or more weeks in the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree. There, he enjoyed the Nirvana that he had attained by his Awakening. During that time, two merchants, Trapuasha and Bhallika, came from a nearby village and venerated him. After this offering, they asked to be received as lay followers, and the Buddha accepted them. However in this case, the Buddha did not preach the
Dharma (Pali: Dhamma), or his Teaching, to them. In fact, the Buddha wondered if humankind, given its attachment to the worldly life, could ever understand what he had realized. In one early account, it is said that he reflected: “How can I teach what I have realized through painful toil? For those who suffer from craving and ignorance, this Dharma is not easy to understand. It is contrary to the current of this world, profound and exceedingly subtle. . . . [It will be impossible to be seen by those clinging to greed and covered with ignorance]” (Samyutta-nikāya, I, 136).

In response to this hesitation of the Buddha, Sahampati Brahmacāri, said to be the most important god worshiped at that time, came to the Buddha and asked him to teach the Dharma to the world. He told the Buddha: “With eyes of wisdom . . . observe the people who are submerged in the sorrow of birth and death. Please teach the Dharma, there will be some who can become Awakened” (Samyutta-nikāya, I, 137). So, with his wisdom eyes, the Buddha surveyed the entire world, and saw that in fact there were some people who would understand his teaching. Out of compassion, he decided to preach the Dharma to the world. Then, the Buddha is said to have used his eyes of wisdom to determine whom he should teach. At first, he thought of his teachers, Ārāda and Udakā. But then he realized by his spiritual vision that they had both died. Next, he turned his vision toward the group of five ascetics with whom he had lived, and discovered that they were residing at Deer Park at Sarnath near the city of Benares. The Buddha then realized that they had the discipline necessary to understand the Dharma. So he left Bodhagāya and traveled 130 miles to Sarnath.

THE MISSION OF THE BUDDHA

By all accounts, the Buddha found his former companions in the Deer Park at Sarnath. At first the five ascetics resolved to shun him because he had abandoned their severe ascetic life. However, when the Buddha approached them, given his appearance, “they were unable to follow their own agreement.” The Buddha was then able to convince them that he had not returned to a lavish lifestyle, and the five ascetics decided to listen to his words. In the earlier texts, it is said that the Buddha taught them for a period of time. He would teach some of the ascetics while the others begged for alms. Eventually, the five came to understand the hindrances to Awakening and peace that are associated with this transitorial world. Then searching for emancipation from all hindrances, they found wisdom, Awakening, and Nirvana. Early texts record what has become known as the Buddha’s First Sermon. This First Sermon, as presented in the early texts, is most likely a formalized presentation of the kinds of things the Buddha did teach to his first disciples. We will look at these teachings in detail in the next chapter. For now it is enough to note that whatever the Buddha taught his first five new disciples, it brought them all to the attainment of Awakening and Nirvana. The Buddha referred both to himself and to these enlightened disciples as arhats (Pali: arahats), meaning “worthy ones.”

The Three Refuges

Through the Buddha’s instruction, the five ascetics attained enlightenment and received admission as celibate monks (bhikkhu; Pali: bhikkhus) into the Buddha’s new spiritual order, which he referred to as the Saṅgha, or “Community.” It is said that from the beginning of the Saṅgha, those who entered as celibate members and those who associated with it as lay followers all took what came to be called the “Three Refuges.” A Buddhist takes “refuge” in (1) the Buddha, (2) the Dharma, and (3) the Saṅgha. These Three Refuges are also called the “Three Jewels,” since by seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, one receives these three treasured gifts. The Saṅgha, in the “conventional” sense, includes just the ordained celibate monastics. However in the “pure” sense, the Saṅgha consists of all, including lay followers, who take the Three Refuges and have penetrated and lived the Dharma to the point that they can teach it to others.

In the Indian culture at the time of the Buddha, taking refuge was a formal act of submission to a person or god. One promised with this action to be a faithful follower of a being who could offer protection and benefits. The formal words of refuge-taking in Buddhism are: “I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the Dharma. I go for refuge to the Saṅgha.” So the word “refuge” here also carries the connotation of protection and help. In other words, in taking these refuges, one shows confidence that the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha can protect one from the dissatisfactory human condition of life and can help one reach the truly satisfactory attainment of Nirvana. In the words attributed to the Buddha by an early text, by taking the Three Refuges, one professes “clear confidence in the Buddha . . . the Fully Awakened One . . . perfect in knowledge and conduct . . . clear confidence in the Dharma taught by the Exalted One . . . that brings one near that which should be known by the wise . . . clear confidence in the Saṅgha of the followers of the Exalted One on the direct right path . . . without defects, which brings freedom” (Digha-nikāya, II, 93). Elsewhere in the same text, the Buddha makes clear that turning to him for refuge and help implies living in conformity with his Dharma: ‘He who, having entered on the course, lives in conformity with the Dharma . . . pays reverence to the Tathāgata [a title for the Buddha]” (Digha-nikāya, II, 138). It is also this living together of the Dharma that is at the heart of true refuge in the Saṅgha.

Important Conversions

According to the early texts, the next convert to the Saṅgha after the five ascetics was a wealthy young man from Benares named Yaśa. Yaśa, “disillusioned” with his luxuries and his indulgence in sensual entertainment, came to the place where the Buddha was staying. Later, Yaśa’s father, missing his son, came in search of him. The Buddha consoled Yaśa’s father, and in the end the father took the Three Refuges. Hearing the instruction the Buddha gave his father, Yaśa attained Awakening. Thus, Yaśa became the sixth
The Authenticity of the Buddha

Buddhism is a religion which does not insist on rituals; and being a Buddhist means something much more than participating in rituals. This is something I had to learn over time.

The very first ceremony I went through as a Buddhist was taking the Three Refuges. I was about eight years old and in the third grade. In my class, there were thirty-seven students, all of whom were Buddhists. The school arranged for us to attend this ceremony at one of the well-known temples in Bangkok.

We arrived at the temple in the afternoon and were guided to the hall with the main shrine. I remember the chief monk led us to recite the Three Refuges three times.

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dhamma.
I take refuge in the Sangha.

This ceremony was a public pronouncement that I am a Buddhist. But, I never bothered to think what it really meant to take the Buddha as my refuge until much later in life.

The Buddha was born in sixth century B.C.E. to a princely clan in an area which is now Nepal. He was brought up in a luxurious lifestyle, but when confronted with the problems of old age, sickness, and death, he was convinced he needed to know how we as human beings can get rid of this cycle of suffering. When a son was born to him, he decided to leave the worldly life and began a serious search for spiritual freedom.

At the age of thirty-five, after six years of practice, he was enlightened and came to be known as the Buddha... the fully enlightened one. The truth he discovered was simple yet profound: Life is full of suffering, there is a cause to this suffering, there is a cessation to this suffering, and there is a path leading anyone to freedom from this suffering. During the forty-five years after his enlightenment, the Buddha founded a group of followers (Sangha), first consisting of monks and later of nuns.

When I took refuge in the Buddha, how could that historical person truly be my refuge? The historical Buddha passed away some twenty-five hundred years ago, so he cannot really be of any help to me today. But over time, I understood that the Buddha could be meaningful to my life and spiritual salvation because he discovered the Truth that frees one from human bondage. More important than that, he made known his spiritual discovery as well as the path leading to it. That Truth was real for him, and it is real for me also. That salvational possibility was possible for him, and also for me.

With this understanding, I committed myself to putting the Buddha's teachings into practice, and that is how I really became a Buddhist. The authenticity of the Buddha does not lie just in his life, but in the enlightenment which made Prince Siddhartha the Buddha. That enlightenment is accessible to everyone. It depends on our effort to make it a reality for our lives.

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ordained disciple of the Buddha, and his father became his first official lay disciple. The two merchants who gave homage to the Buddha at Bodhgaya did not receive the Dharma, or enter the Sangha. Yaśa's mother and wife, who also came in search of him, both took the Three Refuges and thereby became the first women lay followers of the Buddha. Lay followers of the Buddha, both men and women, did not want to enter the celibate Sangha, but sought to benefit spiritually from the Buddha and his teachings by their association with the community of monks. Also, it is said that sixty-four of Yaśa's friends were converted to Buddhism under the guidance of the Buddha. This brought the number of enlightened members of the monastic Sangha to sixty-one, including the Buddha himself. Once the Buddha had these sixty disciples, he sent them out to preach the Dharma.

After living in nearby Benares for some time, early texts say that the Buddha returned to the Uruvelā area where he had attained his own Awakening. Then he is said to have gone to Rājagṛha, where he converted King Bimbisāra of Magadha. This was an important event since it led to many people in the Magadha area joining the Buddha. Also while the Buddha was in Rājagṛha, another major event in the early Sangha took place when two of the disciples of a noted skeptic converted to the Buddha and brought with them 250 of their followers. These two converts were Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, who became two principle disciples. Śāriputra was known for his wisdom and ability to teach the Dhamma. Maudgalyāyana was known for his psychic powers developed in meditation. There were other stories of how not just individuals, but whole groups of religious seekers joined the Buddha's Sangha. Later biographies relate that it was also at the time the Buddha resided at Rājagṛha that he converted Mahākāśyapa. Mahākāśyapa was known for his attainment in meditation, and he appears in the later legends of Zen Buddhism. He was also said to be the person who convened the First Buddhist Council when the Buddha died and who was responsible for organizing the memorization of the Buddha's teachings and precepts.

The later biographies also say that the Buddha went from Rājagṛha to his home town of Kapilavastu. There, he met with his father, stepmother, wife, and son Rāhula. While the rest of the family accepted him and even pledged homage to him, his son and his half-brother, Nanda, actually became ordained monks. It was also during this visit that Upāli became a monk. Among the Buddha's close disciples, Upāli had the greatest memory of the precepts and is said to have recited them at the First Buddhist Council. The Buddha's cousin, Ānanda, became a monk at this time, and went on to be the closest companion of the Buddha. Given his extraordinary memory and constant proximity to the Buddha, Ānanda was said to have recited the dialogues and teachings of the Buddha at the First Buddhist Council.

Monasticism

While the early texts do not mention Sudatta, a wealthy merchant from Śravasti, the capital of Kosala, later biographies stress the importance of his
Saṅgha became a model of ethical, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual life for the larger society. Eventually, Buddhist monasticism provided an extraordinary standard for humankind that was always an ideal for both personal and social fulfillment. For Buddhist monastics, monasteries became a haven for pursuing the spiritual life by being formed in the teachings and discipline of the Buddha. For Buddhist laypeople, the monasteries were oases of peace and goodness, communities that modeled what the enlightened life would be like if it were attained and lived by all society. The monasteries also provided places for moral and spiritual guidance, teaching, and the possibility for merit-making for the laity.

In administering the monastic Saṅgha, the Buddha shared many responsibilities with his enlightened followers. While traditional Indian religious sects reserved their teachings for an elite few, and their teachers retained personal control over their members, the Buddha allowed his representatives to ordain new members and entrusted his local monastic communities to manage their own affairs. The Buddha had great confidence in his enlightened followers and often recognized their expertise in teaching the Dharma. While the Buddha taught a number of “rules of discipline” to the monastic members of the Saṅgha, some of the minor precepts were open to change and even to being revoked if need be. The members of the Saṅgha were seen as equals, and the governing of the communities was democratic.

Social Concern

The Buddha not only founded his own religious communities but also spoke out about the broader social and political conditions of his time. According to the early texts, he often denounced the injustices of the caste system, and the Saṅgha was open to persons of all castes. The Buddha taught that respect should be earned by moral deeds and spiritual attainment, not given on the basis of one's birth. In terms of social violence, in one early text, after telling a story of a king who did not care for the poor, the Buddha says, “Thus, from not giving to the needy, poverty spreads; from the growth of poverty, stealing increases; when theft becomes more and more common, there is an increased use of weapons; when this happens, there is a greater loss of life” (Dīgha-nikāya, III, 68). Elsewhere in that text, there is another story in which a king is advised as to how to deal with such social conflict:

If your majesty were to increase taxes, that would be the wrong thing to do. If your majesty were to try to get rid of this problem by executions and imprisonment... the problem would not be ended. However, with the following policy, you can completely eliminate this problem. To those who are engaged in farming and raising livestock, let your majesty distribute needed grain and fodder. To those engaged in trade, give them the capital they need. To those in government service, assign them a living wage to meet their needs. Then all of those people will be intent on pursuing their occupations, and they will not harm anyone. (Dīgha-nikāya, I, 135)
The Gifts of the Buddha

Becoming a Buddhist was a slow process for me that began first with the intellect and only gradually shifted to a personal practice. Lacking belief and facing death and rational absurdity in my early twenties, I only found consolation in nature, an abiding natural order of existence. Living with this intellectual sense of nature for several years, and supported by the nurturing presence of being part of nature, softened my expectations and judgments.

This experience was confirmed and supported by the Buddhist practice of emptying oneself of false hopes and rigid ideas and the Buddhist patient acceptance of our dependent arising with all things. The Buddha’s teaching emphasized that misery is created by ourselves and that we need to become aware of the way emotions arise based on how we interpret what is happening to us. Calming ourselves and noticing the interpretations we are giving to events and what expectations are thus being frustrated give a certain distance from our misery and empower us. New and more positive interpretations and emotional responses arise by noticing alternative interpretations and responses. Just by taking time out to notice our emotions and alternative interpretations became a constant source of relief and positive thinking.

Another way that Buddhism has permeated my life has been its method of social reform. As a child of the social gospel and the 1960s, I was eager to save the world but was messed up emotionally. Buddhism taught methods of inner transformation as a basis for changing my sense of the world, and also gave gentler and more inclusive ways to act in the world. Gautama Buddha was a social activist, but he practiced dialogue and compassion, without stridency or righteous indignation. The easy temptation to condemn others, to demonize enemies, and to feel righteous in our militancy was completely absent from the Buddha.

Instead, stories about the Buddha’s life show the capacity to find goodness in those who are different from us and to emphasize our interconnections. Until recently, Buddhism has had a weak social gospel. But on looking at the forty-five years that the Buddha taught, one can find many practical ways in which he tried to bring about reform. Even though emperors and kings may have domesticated Buddhism into a passive monastic life, in the stories of Gautama Buddha we find a busy and effective social activist.

The gifts of the Buddha to the world are many. Formally, being a Buddhist means to take refuge in the “Three Jewels”: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Gautama Buddha is the founder of the Dharma (teaching) that I have found most true and most nurturing, and his life is a model for living this Dharma in compassionate and effective ways. His Sangha, the Buddhist community on which I rely, consists, I believe, of people from all religions and cultures who are filled with modesty, compassion, good humor, and appreciation for others, especially for those who are most different from them. And finally this Sangha, Dharma, and Buddha become just other names for the infinite mystery of the secret connectedness of all things in the midst of our dying and living.

David W. Chappell

This attitude of compassionate concern for those in need was modeled by the Buddha himself in dealing with people outside and inside the Sangha. One story in a later text tells of the Buddha’s intervention on behalf of five hundred bandits who were awaiting execution. The Buddha secured their release and gave them, by his teaching, what they really wanted, namely, spiritual as well as physical freedom. Another later story tells how the Buddha tended personally to one of his monks who was suffering from an advanced skin disease. Out of fear of contracting this disease, this person’s fellow monks had avoided any contact with him. One day when the Buddha was visiting their community, he discovered the man’s plight. Along with his disciple Ananda, the Buddha took a basin of water and a towel and washed the monk himself. Then he instructed the other monks with these words: “Monks, you do not have a mother or a father here who can tend to you. If you, monks, do not tend to one another, who is there to take care of you? Remember that whoever tends a sick person, as it were, tends me” (Mahāvagga, VIII, 26).

Women’s Ordination

One issue that arose in regard to the monastic life was that of allowing women into the fully ordained monastic Sangha. From the beginning, women were welcome as members of the lay community that was associated with the monastic Sangha. Then, according to later biographies, five years after his enlightenment the Buddha was visited by his foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī, who was accompanied by a large group of women. They asked to be ordained into the monastic Sangha. The Buddha is said to have rejected their request. But after more pleading, and with the intervention of Ananda, the Buddha accepted the women into the Sangha as ordained nuns (bhikkhunī; Pali: bhikkhuni).

In his discussions with Ananda about this issue, the Buddha made it clear that women could attain all the goals of his religion including full Awakening. So why his initial reluctance to admit women into the celibate Sangha? Scholars today surmise that one concern may have been that the relationship between the men and women in the monastic community would have made things more complicated. The men’s order needed time to become fully established and mature. Another concern may have had to do with the fact that many non-Buddhists did not like the practice of the celibate life for young men, and such a life for young women seemed even more unconventional and difficult to accept by the broader Indian society. So it would seem that any sudden influx of women into the communities at an early stage of their development would have caused problems both within these communities themselves as well as with the general population. Therefore, according to this interpretation, the Buddha took a cautious approach. Only when he felt that the time was right, when Indian society had accepted the Sangha as a valid religious entity, and when the community, represented by
Andō, was ready for this radical change, did he admit women into the monastic Saṅgha.

The Buddha gave the women monastics special rules resulting in a certain gender hierarchy. For example, the Saṅgha hierarchy is determined by how long one has been ordained, not by merit or personal attainment. However, in the case of nuns, they must treat all monks as seniors, even those who were ordained after them. Also, while any monk can reprove a nun, no nun can reprove a monk. On the other hand, since this hierarchy has nothing to do with attainment, its subordination of women does not indicate spiritual inferiority. Also, in order to prevent the monks from using the hierarchy to take advantage of the nuns, the Buddha instituted certain rules that safeguard the dignity and independence of the nuns. The monks could not demand work or service from nuns, and the nuns were not to be given any inferior spiritual instructions or ethical rules.

A text entitled The Verses of the Women Elders (Therīgāthā) records in seventy-three poems the lives and Awakening of early nuns in the Saṅgha. There are also early records of the Buddha giving high praise to certain nuns. Besides Mahāpācārī, who was the senior nun, Uppalavānā was considered one of the Buddha’s chief disciples. Khemā, the former queen of King Bimbisāra, was also respected as a chief disciple of the Buddha. Bhaddā Kapaliṇi was pledged by her family in marriage to Mahākāsapa, who became a leading monk in the Saṅgha. Later, Bhaddā Kapaliṇi became a nun and distinguished herself by her awakened memory of her past lives.

The Rebellion of Devadatta

Another issue addressed by the Buddha was brought about by his cousin, Devadatta, who had joined the Saṅgha. Early texts indicate only that Devadatta was lazy and annoyed the Buddha in various ways. However, in later stories, it is said that Devadatta, stimulated with ambition, wanted to gain control of the Saṅgha when the Buddha had grown older. He, along with an accomplice, actually tried to kill the Buddha, but the Buddha escaped each attempt on his life. For example, a rock intended to crush the Buddha is deflected by mountain peaks, and a wild elephant charging down a narrow street toward the Buddha turns around tamely because of the Buddha’s friendly thought. In each case, it is said that the Buddha dealt with Devadatta with gentleness, exhibiting his view that hatred is not deterred by hatred, but by loving kindness.

Later texts that were concerned about distinguishing Buddhism from extreme asceticism claim that Devadatta tried to gain control of the Saṅgha in another way. He attempted to make the precepts of the community more ascetically rigorous. Devadatta was said to have proposed five severe ascetic rules: Monks should dwell all their life in the forest, they should live only on alms that they beg, they should only wear robes made from gathered rags, they should dwell only at the foot of trees, and they should not eat fish or meat. The breaking of any of these rules would lead to expulsion from the Saṅgha. It is said that in the spirit of tolerance, the Buddha decided that all of these rules suggested by Devadatta would be permissible, but not compulsory. He only insisted that the monks not sleep under trees during the rainy season. Devadatta is said then to have tried to draw the monks away from the Buddha to follow his reform movement. However, in the end this attempt to gain leadership by producing a schism in the Saṅgha also failed. Again, throughout these trials brought upon the Buddha, his Dharma, and the Saṅgha, the Buddha maintained an attitude of compassion and loving kindness toward Devadatta.

THE LAST DAYS OF GAJTAMA BUDDHA

Because of his sense of mission to preach the Dharma, the Buddha spent much of his time in or around the towns and cities that were appearing on the Indian landscape. He is said by the early texts to have often resided in or around Sravasti in Kosala and Rājagṛha and Vaiśāli in Magadha. One early text tells a rather detailed story about the last days of the Buddha’s life. It states that near the end of the Buddha’s life, he was residing in the suburbs of Vaiśāli. As the rainy season was approaching, he went to a nearby village where he made his final monsoon retreat with a few of his disciples. During the retreat, the Buddha was struck by an extremely painful illness. In response to Ānanda’s concern, the Buddha said, “I have grown old . . . and have traveled down the road of life being in my eightieth year. I am like an old cart that can barely manage to hold itself together without the help of leather straps” (Dīgha-nikāya, II, 100).

One day after begging alms in Vaiśāli, the Buddha took his midday rest at a sacred tree. There, the story goes, he was visited by Māra, who encouraged him to end his life and attain final Nirvana (parinirvāṇa). The text indicates that the Buddha had not wanted to pass away until he had monks, nuns, and male and female disciples who were accomplished in the Dharma, who walked in the path of the Dharma, and who could teach the Dharma to others. Now that this holy life was well established, the Buddha responded to Māra that his passing would come in just three months. The Buddha is said to have at that time renounced his vital “life principle.” When this final renunciation occurred, there was a great earthquake accompanied by thunder.

Some time later, taking a final look at Vaiśāli, the Buddha departed and journeyed to the town of Pāvā, where he stopped at the mango grove of a blacksmith named Cunda. The Buddha instructed Cunda in the Dharma, and then took the food Cunda offered to him. The text says that after eating, the Buddha was struck by a severe illness that produced much pain. From the textual description of the illness, scholars conclude that he contracted food poisoning from eating either pork or a mushroom dish. However, the Buddha was able to rise from his illness and even walked to the village of Kuśinagara some distance away. At one point, he stepped off the road and sat under a tree to rest. Ānanda, at the request of the Buddha, brought him
some water to drink. At that moment, it is said that a pupil of Ārāda Kalāma named Pukkusa approached the Buddha. He engaged the Buddha in conversation about the “lofty powers” of Ārāda, and in the end, Pukkusa accepted the Buddha and became his lay follower.

Then the Buddha, along with a number of his monks, went into a nearby river to bathe and drink water. Emerging from the river, the Buddha lay down to rest and spoke to Ānanda about Cunda the blacksmith. The Buddha was concerned that Cunda would feel that it was his fault the Buddha died. So he instructed Ānanda as to what to say to console him. Then the Buddha traveled to another place nearby where he lay down between two sala trees. The Buddha lay on his right side, with his head to the north and one foot on top of the other. It is said that the trees burst into blossom and sprinkled the blossoms down onto the Buddha. As this happened, the text says that music and song was heard from the sky, and later even the gods gathered weeping over the Buddha’s passing. The Buddha acknowledged this homage, but noted that “supreme homage” is given to the Buddha when a disciple practices the Dharma properly.

At this point, the early story goes, Ānanda discussed with the Buddha what to do with his remains. Following this discussion, Ānanda went off some distance and wept with grief. The Buddha called for Ānanda to join him and consoled his grief. He reminded Ānanda, “Have I not already told you that all things . . . are subject to change . . . subject to decay—so how could it be Ānanda that anything should not pass away?” (Dīgha-nikāya, II, 144). The Buddha then compassionately praised Ānanda for the loving kindness and wholehearted care Ānanda had always shown to him. He concluded his words to Ānanda by encouraging him to continue to follow the path so that soon he could gain the freedom he was seeking. In his presence, the Buddha also praised Ānanda to the whole assembly of monks for his “remarkable and wonderful qualities,” noting that in the past, all Buddhas had such a remarkable chief attendant.

Some of the people from Kuśinagara came out of the town to pay their respects to the Buddha. One person who came to see the Buddha was a wandering religious person named Subhadra. At first, Ānanda would not let Subhadra speak to the Buddha because of concern for the Buddha’s condition. However, the Buddha compassionately requested that Subhadra be permitted to speak to him. Subhadra asked the Buddha about the attainment of other famous teachers, but the Buddha would not make such judgments about others. Instead, he taught Subhadra the Dharma. Subhadra converted and became his “last personal disciple.” When he finished instructing Subhadra, the Buddha turned to Ānanda and said, “You may think, The teacher’s instruction has ceased, now we do not have a teacher! But it should not be seen like this, Ānanda. For what I have taught and explained to you as the Dharma and the discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher” (Dīgha-nikāya, II, 154).

Finally, the Buddha asked his monks if they had any doubts or uncertainties about the Buddha, Dharma, or Saṅgha: “Ask monks! Do not later feel remorse thinking ‘The teacher was right there before us and we did not ask him face to face’” (Dīgha-nikāya, II, 154–155). When no one asked a question, the Buddha spoke his last words: “Now, monks, I declare that all the conditioned things of the world are passing. Attain your liberation with diligence!” (Dīgha-nikāya, II, 156). Following these words, the Buddha entered into meditation and passed away.

After the Buddha had died, members of the Malla clan from Kuśinagara wrapped his body in new cloth and held six days of mourning. On the seventh day, they cremated the Buddha’s body. It is said that messengers from seven clans, including the Buddha’s own Saṅkya clan, asked for relics. The Malla clan also requested relics. Those who received relics took them home and built stūpas (memorial mounds) for them. The bowl that collected the ashes, along with the ashes themselves, were placed under two other stūpas. These stūpas became centers for devotion to the Buddha. The Buddha himself is said to have proclaimed shortly before he died, “Whoever lays wreaths of flowers, or puts perfumes, or adds color to the stūpas with a devout heart will reap benefit and happiness for a long time” (Dīgha-nikāya, II, 142). There is also a legend that centuries later, King Asoka unearthed these relics and further divided them, enshrining them in eighty-four thousand stūpas throughout his empire in India.

As we can see, much of the Buddha’s time for the forty-five years after his Awakening was devoted to teaching the Dharma, founding the Saṅgha,
and forming his disciples in the path of the discipline. Even during the very moments before his death, the Buddha was carrying out these tasks compassionately for the good of others. Many people in India during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. were looking for new ideals to guide their lives, new ideas and practices that promised personal transformation, and new social forms of community life. The Buddha offered to the world his own spiritual experience, and he modeled that enlightened and nirvanic ideal with joy, loving kindness, and compassion. His Dharma offered others a path to attain the experience of Awakening and Nirvana and a way of living this ideal in daily life. His Sangha provided the spiritual guidance and social support necessary to achieve this ideal and to live out its freedom and peace as a witness to what is possible in human relationships. In the following chapter, we examine the experience of this path and ideal as they are presented in the teachings of the Buddha.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


