

first produces something and then realizes it. Even so, the element of nirvāṇa, which is realized through right practice, exists."

"Nāgaseṇa, do not clarify this question by obscuring it! Please explain it plainly and clearly..."

"All right, your majesty. There is this thing called nirvāṇa, which is peaceful, blissful, and exalted, and that is what a person realizes through right practice, by means of understanding karmic constituents according to the teachings of the Buddha, and wisdom. Just as a student may realize knowledge according to the instruction of his teacher, just so, your majesty, one may realize nirvāṇa through right practice, according to the instruction of the Buddha. And how is nirvāṇa to be recognized? It can be recognized through its safety, its freedom from mishap and danger, its tranquillity, its peacefulness, its blissfulness, its pleasantness, its excellence, its purity, its coolness. Your majesty, it is like a man who is being burned by a fire, a great pile of flaming sticks of wood, when by means of a great effort he escapes from there, out into the open where there is no fire, he realizes utter bliss. Similarly, your majesty, through right practice and proper concentration one can realize the utter bliss of nirvāṇa, in which the torment of the threefold fire of desire, hatred, and delusion has gone out." [...]

"Venerable Nāgaseṇa, is there a place where nirvāṇa is located—some-where to the east, south, west, or north, upward, downward, or sideways?"

"There is no place, your majesty, where nirvāṇa is located—neither to the east, south, west, or north, nor upward, downward, or sideways." "It seems to me, Nāgaseṇa, that if nirvāṇa cannot be located anywhere in space, then there is no nirvāṇa, and the realization of those who realize nirvāṇa is false. Let me explain. Here on earth, Nāgaseṇa, a field is where grain grows, a flower is where scent arises, a bush is where flowers blossom, a tree is where fruits ripen, and a mine is where gems are extracted, and whoever wants any of these things can go to its place and get it. Similarly, Nāgaseṇa, if nirvāṇa exists, there must be a place of its origin where one can seek it. But there is no such place of the origin of nirvāṇa, Nāgaseṇa, and, therefore, I say nirvāṇa does not exist, and the realization of those who realize nirvāṇa is false."

"Your majesty, nirvāṇa is not in storage somewhere. Yet it exists, and it can be realized through right practice and proper concentration. Similarly, fire is not stored up anywhere, yet it exists, and, if you rub two sticks together you will get fire." [...]

"Venerable Nāgaseṇa, things in this world come about due to karma, causes, and climatic changes. Tell me, is there anything not due to any of these reasons?"

"There are two such things in this world, your majesty: space and nirvāṇa. Neither of them is due to karma, causes, or climatic changes." "Venerable Nāgaseṇa, do not sully the word of the Buddha! Do not expound on a question while lacking knowledge! ... Nāgaseṇa, what you say about space is correct: it is due neither to karma, nor causes, nor climatic changes. But, Nāgaseṇa, in hundreds of ways the Blessed One ex-

plained to his disciples the path to the realization of nirvāṇa, but now you say nirvāṇa is not due to any cause!"

"It is true, your majesty, that the Blessed One explained to his disciples the path to the realization of nirvāṇa in hundreds of ways, but he never explained the cause of the appearance of nirvāṇa."

"Venerable Nāgaseṇa! Here we are going from darkness into greater darkness, from the woods deeper into the woods, from a thicket to a denser thicket. What you are saying is that there is a cause for the realization of nirvāṇa but no cause for the thing itself. But if, Nāgaseṇa, there is a cause for the realization of nirvāṇa, it itself must have a cause one can look for. Nāgaseṇa, a son has a father; therefore, one expects that father to have a father. A student has a teacher; therefore, one expects that teacher to have a teacher. A shoot has a seed; therefore, one expects that seed to have a seed. Just so, Nāgaseṇa, if the realization of nirvāṇa has a cause, one expects its appearance to have a cause...."

"Your majesty, nirvāṇa cannot be made to arise, and no cause for its appearance has been proclaimed. ... Listen, your majesty, could a man, by means of his ordinary strength, go from here to the Himalaya Mountains?"

"Yes, sir."

"But, your majesty, could that man, by means of his ordinary strength, bring those Himālaya Mountains here?"

"Certainly not!"

"Well, just so, your majesty, it is possible to describe a path going to nirvāṇa but not to say how nirvāṇa came to be here. Your majesty, could a man, by means of his ordinary strength, cross the ocean in a boat and arrive at the other shore?"

"Yes, sir."

"But, your majesty, could that man, by means of his ordinary strength, bring that other shore here?"

"Certainly not!"

"Well, just so, your majesty, it is possible to describe a path going to nirvāṇa but not to say how nirvāṇa came to be here."

Source: Translated from *The Milindapañho*, ed. V. Trenckner, reprint edition with the *Milinda-tīkā* (London: Pali Text Society, 1986), pp. 313–27, 268–70.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.4.3 The Attainment of Two Arhats

Discourses about nirvāṇa are an important source of information on Buddhist views on the subject, but they are not the only one. A number of texts also provide us with what amounts to personal testimonials of monks and nuns attaining nirvāṇa. Such experiences are sometimes portrayed as sudden breakthroughs to understanding, dramatic awakenings to reality-as-it-is, and

<sup>41</sup> Alternative English translation, T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 2:181–205, 103–5.

the verbal expressions of such enlightenment experiences are called "lon's roars." In other cases, however, the attainment of nirvāṇa is associated with much quieter experiences, like snow slipping off a leaf or, as in the second example below, like rain falling on the roof.

The *Verses of the Elders* and the *Verses of the Eldresses* (*Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*) are Pali canonical texts that contain several hundred "songs of enlightenment" uttered by monks and nuns upon their attainment of nirvāṇa, their becoming arahats. Arahats, as we have seen, attain enlightenment through their own efforts, but by following the teaching of a Buddha. In this they differ from Buddhas, who find their own path to enlightenment and then preach that path to others, and pratyekabuddhas, who find their own path but then keep it to themselves. Though the two selections that follow are illustrative of the arhat ideal that preponderated in the Theravāda tradition, it should not be forgotten that Nikāya Buddhism kept open the possibility of all three of the above attainments. Indeed, schools like the Sāvāsivādins compiled whole anthologies of stories (for example, the *Avadānaśāstaka*) recounting the various paths and attainments of Buddhas, pratyekabuddhas, and arahats (both male and female).

[A] [As we saw in 2.1.5, the nun Paṭicāra joined the sangha after suffering the loss of her entire family and almost going insane. As a nun, she then went on to attain nirvāṇa, something that occurred to her after taking a bath and getting ready for bed, just as she was putting out the lamp in her cell (nirvāṇa literally means "extinction"). She later recounted the experience as follows:]

Ploughing their fields, sowing seeds in the earth, men look after their wives and children, and prosper.

Why can't I, who keep the precepts and follow the teachings of the Master, attain nirvāṇa? I am neither lazy nor conceited!

After washing my feet, I note the water, and watch it going down the drain; that makes me collect and control my mind as though it were a noble thoroughbred horse.

Then taking a lamp, I enter my cell, thinking of going to sleep, I sit

down on my bed,

With a pin, I pull out the wick. The lamp goes out: nirvāṇa. My mind is freed.

[B] [The monk Giṃmāṇanda was invited by King Bimbisāra to dwell on the grounds of his palace, but then the king neglected to give him a place to live. As a result the monk stayed out in the open, and in compassion for him the gods stopped the rains from coming, thus causing a drought. The king worried about the drought, discovered what he had done, and sought to rectify the situation by building a proper hermitage hut for Giṃmāṇanda. Once it was built, the rains began to fall, and the elder, sheltered and dry, at peace and able to meditate, attained nirvāṇa. He expressed his enlightenment with the following verses:]

The gods have sent the rain; it is like a sweet song. In my thatched hut, comfortable, out of the wind, I dwell appeared. So, rain, gods, if you wish.

The gods have sent the rain; it is like a sweet song. In my thatched hut, comfortable, out of the wind, I dwell, my mind at ease. So rain, gods, if you wish.

The gods have sent the rain; it is like a sweet song. In my thatched hut, comfortable, out of the wind, I dwell, free from desire. So rain, gods, if you wish.

The gods have sent the rain; it is like a sweet song. In my thatched hut, comfortable, out of the wind, I dwell, free from hatred. So rain, gods, if you wish.

The gods have sent the rain; it is like a sweet song. In my thatched hut, comfortable, out of the wind, I dwell, free from delusion. So rain, gods, if you wish.

Source: Translated from *Thera- and Therīgāthā*, ed. Hermann Oldenberg and Richard Pischel (London: Pali Text Society, 1883), pp. 134-35, 38.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.5 THE PATH

Buddhists, of course, did not simply affirm the possibility of the attainment of nirvāṇa, described in the verses just cited as the absence of desire, hatred, and delusion. They also outlined a path for the elimination of desire, hatred, and delusion. The Noble Eightfold Path, as we saw in 1.6, set forth a method for attaining enlightenment that consisted of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Another way of describing it was to divide it into three basic components: moral practice (or life-style), wisdom (or intellectual insight), and meditation (or contemplative technique). These three components are like the legs of a tripod: they depend on one another and reinforce one another to the extent that you cannot have one without the others.

#### 3.5.1 The Refuges and the Precepts

The very first step in embarking on the path, whether as a layperson or as a monk or nun, is to take refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha). In Theravāda countries today, the refuge formula is commonly recited in Pali by monastics and lay alike on virtually every Buddhist occasion, and some repeat it every day as part of their own personal religious routine. It represents, therefore, not only a commitment but also a commitment to the Buddhist way. It is usually followed by a (re)commitment to upholding the five precepts, another mark of one's embarkation on the path. These five precepts are to abstain from killing, stealing, unchastity, lying, and drinking intoxicants. (For the third precept laypersons commit themselves not to complete chastity but to avoiding sexual misconduct.) In addition, on special

<sup>42</sup>Alternative English translation, K. R. Norman, *The Elders' Verses* (London: Pali Text Society, 1969-71), 2:14-15, 1:36-37. For the first selection, see also Susan Murocott, *The First Buddhist Women* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), pp. 33-34.