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# The Experience of Buddhism

## *Sources and Interpretations*

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SECOND EDITION

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### 1.3 THE GREAT DEPARTURE AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Two key events in the legend of the Buddha are his decision to leave his family and home to set out on a religious quest—an event known as his Great Departure—and his attainment, six years later, of bodhi (enlightenment)—an event that transforms him from being a bodhisattva (a being headed for enlightenment) into being a Buddha (an Enlightened or Awakened One).

The story of the Buddha's Great Departure was clearly informed by, and a model for, the ordination ritual of Buddhist monks. One of the first things that the Buddha does after leaving home is to cut his hair, to give up his princely clothes in exchange for the rough garb of an ascetic, and to embark, bowl in hand, on the rounds of a mendicant. The same events are ritually reenacted to this day by Buddhist monks, whose initial ordination ceremony, called their wandering forth (*pravrajā*), is marked by the shaving of their head, the exchange of their lay clothes for the robes of a monk, and the acquisition of their begging bowl.

The practice of abandoning one's home to adopt a life of religious mendicancy was, however, already widespread in the Buddha's time. It was, in fact, an age that saw all sorts of youthful questers (*śramaṇas*), not just Buddhists, seeking out teachers and striving for religious satisfaction in one way or another. It was an age of ferment, in which it was thought that enlightenment, salvation, and escape from the prison of repeated rebirths could come only by "dropping out," by quitting the householder's life with its pleasures and obligations. The Buddha's family—the Śākyā tribe—being of royal blood, was clearly opposed to the Buddha's Great Departure.

According to Buddhist legend, at the time of the Buddha's birth, some soothsayers had predicted that if he remained at home and inherited his father's throne, he would become a great cakravartin king, or "world-ruling" monarch. The Buddha's father, Śuddhodana, concerned for the future of his family line, understandably preferred his son's becoming a cakravartin king to his becoming a wandering quester. In the hopes of preventing his son's departure, he therefore made the Buddha a virtual prisoner in the palace, surrounding him with bevyes of beautiful women and encouraging his attachment to his principal wife, Yaśodharā, and to his newborn son. But all of this was in vain. The Buddha, on a drive in his chariot through the royal park, came across an old person, a sick person, and a corpse and became deeply distressed by the phenomena of old age, sickness, and death. When, on his next outing, he met a wandering śramaṇa who seemed to be at peace with the world, he was inspired to leave home and become a quester himself. Soon thereafter, according to what is perhaps the best-known version of the story, he was filled with disgust by the sight of the sleeping women of his harem, drooling, dissheveled, and snoring, and turning away from his wife and his child, whom he now called Rāhula (a fetter), he left home.

But Buddhist attitudes towards the family and home were more complex and varied than this account, informed by the misogynist attitudes of male monastics, would seem to indicate. The selection that follows, taken from a Sanskrit text, presents a noted variant to the story given above. Here the Buddha's father still tries to keep him at home, and the Buddha's repulsion at the sight of the harem women is still expressed, but his relationship to his

wife and child is radically different. Rāhula is not born on the eve of the Great Departure but only engendered then, when the future Buddha makes love to his wife to prove his manhood and to fulfill his duties to his family. To judge from her dreams, Yaśodharā is clearly aware, at least subconsciously, that her husband is about to leave her, but there ensues an interesting parallelism between his career as a quester and her own pregnancy, which develops at home. When he undertakes asceticism, she does likewise; when he fasts, she fasts; when he gets thin, she does, and the growth of the fetus within her is retarded; when he takes food again, she does so as well, and the growth of Rāhula within her resumes; finally, when he attains enlightenment at Bodhgaya, she gives birth at home, having, according to this legend, borne her son in her womb for six years! Here her son's name, Rāhula, is not associated with the word for fetter but with the divinity Rāhu, who eclipses the moon at the moment of his birth, just as his father, upon attaining enlightenment, is thought to outshine the sun.

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## The Night of the Great Departure

Then King Śuddhodana met with his brothers, Dronodana, Śuklodana, and Amṛtodana, and said to them: "The brahmin soothsayers and fortunetellers have predicted that my son . . . will become a cakravartin king if he does not leave home to become a wandering ascetic. Therefore we should watch the bodhisattva carefully . . . and keep the city well guarded."

So they encircled the city of Kapilavastu with seven walls and seven moats, and iron doors were put in each city gate. Very loud bells were attached to the doors, so that whenever the doors were opened, they could be heard up to a distance of a league around. They saw to it that the bodhisattva, in his palace, was constantly attended to by entrancingly beautiful women who danced, sang, and played instruments. Royal ministers, commanding armed men and riders, were posted outside on the walls, and they patrolled everywhere, keeping watch all around. Five hundred men were likewise stationed at the door to the bodhisattva's harem and ordered to sound the alarm in King Śuddhodana's quarters were that door to be opened. [ . . . ]

Now when the bodhisattva was in his harem, in the absence of other men, the women sought to amuse, delight, and seduce him by playing instruments. And it occurred to him: "Lest others say that the Prince Śākyamuni was not a man, and that he wandered forth without 'paying attention' to Yaśodharā, Gopikā, Mrgajā, and his other sixty thousand wives, let me now make love to Yaśodharā." He did so, and Yaśodharā became pregnant.

That night, in her sleep, Yaśodharā had eight dreams: she saw her own maternal line cut off, her marvelous couch broken, her bracelets broken, her teeth falling out, the braid of her hair undone, happiness departed from her house, the moon eclipsed by Rāhu, and the sun rising in the east and then setting there again.

And the bodhisattva, going to sleep, had five dreams: he saw himself lying on the great earth, with Mount Meru, the king of mountains, as his

pillow, his left arm resting in the great Eastern Ocean, his right arm in the great Western Ocean, and his feet in the great Southern Ocean. He saw an upright grass reed grow out of his navel and reach up as far as the sky. He saw large śakunaka birds, all white with black heads, standing at his feet and up as far as his knees. He saw other birds of various colors (*varṇa*) coming from the four directions and then becoming one color in front of him. He saw himself walking back and forth over a mountain of feces.

Seeing all this, he was pleased and thought: "From what I have seen in my dreams, it will not be long now before I attain highest knowledge."

Then Yaśodharā told the bodhisattva about her eight dreams, . . . and the bodhisattva reflected: "The dreams Yaśodharā has seen are surely related to her worries about my going away today; thus I will speak so as to make light of them." And in order to explain them away, he interpreted them as follows: "You say your maternal line was cut off, but is it not established? You say your couch was broken, but it is not broken; it is right here. You say your bracelets were broken, but see for yourself, they are not. You say your teeth fell out, but you yourself know they have not. You say the braid of your hair was undone, but it is itself; look, it is not undone. You say that 'happiness has left my house,' but for a woman, a husband is happiness, and I am right here. You say the moon was eclipsed by Rāhu, but is that not the moon over there? You say the sun rose in the east and then set there again, but it is now midnight and the sun has not yet risen, so how can it have set?"

At this explanation, Yaśodharā remained quiet. But then she said: "Lord, wherever you go, take me there with you." And the bodhisattva, thinking he was going to nirvāna [and would show her the way there], said, "So be it; where I am going, I will take you."

Now Indra, Brahmā, and the other gods, knowing the thoughts of the bodhisattva, approached him and said: . . . "Get up, get up, well-minded one! Leave this place and set out into the world! Upon reaching omniscience, you will save all beings."

The bodhisattva replied: "Do you not see, Indra? I am trapped in a net like the king of beasts. The city of Kapila is completely surrounded by a great many troops, with lots of horses, elephants, chariots, and very capable men bearing bows, swords, and scimitars . . ."

Indra said: "Good sir, recall your former vow, and the past Buddha Dipaṅkara's prediction [see 1.4.1], that having abandoned this world that is afflicted by suffering, you would wander forth from your home. We gods will arrange it so that you will be able to dwell in the forest this very day, free from all hindrances."

Hearing this, the bodhisattva was very pleased. Then Indra, Lord of the gods and causer of sleepiness, gave orders to Pāñcika, the great yakṣa general: "My friend, bring on sleep, and the bodhisattva will come down from his palace!" So he brought on sleep, and the bodhisattva came out.

Then, as had been prearranged by Indra, the bodhisattva came across his attendant Chandaka, and saw that Chandaka had succumbed to a deep sleep. With some effort, he managed to rouse him and spoke to him this verse:

"Ho! Chanda! Get up, and from the stable,  
quickly fetch me Kanthaka,  
that jewel of a horse;  
I am determined to set out for the forest of asceticism  
which previous Buddhas enjoyed  
and which brings satisfaction to sages...."

Then the bodhisattva, seeing that the king of horses, Kanthaka, stood ready, . . . mounted him, and with Chandaka holding on behind, he flew up into the air. This was out of the bodhisattva's bodhisattva-power, as well as out of the divine power of the gods.

And because of the departure of the bodhisattva, the divinities who inhabited the harem of the palace began to cry, and the tears of those crying divinities began to fall onto the earth. And Chandaka said: "Prince, drops of water are falling. Why is the god making it rain?" The bodhisattva replied: "The god is not raining, but, because of my departure, the deities who dwell in the harem of the palace are crying; their tears are falling down everywhere." And Chandaka, his own eyes filled with tears, heaved a long emotional sigh, and remained silent.

Then the bodhisattva, turning his whole body around to the right like an elephant, considered the following matter: "This for me is the last night on which I will have lain with a woman." And he further reflected: "I will depart through the eastern gate; were I to go out through another gate, my father, the king, would be upset that I, as prince, did not come to see him and take my leave at this final moment." Therefore he went and gazed upon King Śuddhodana, who was sleeping soundly. He circumambulated him and said: "Father, I am leaving not out of lack of respect, not out of lack of reverence, but for no other reason than that I wish to liberate the world, which is afflicted by old age and death, from the fear of the suffering that comes with old age and death. . . ."

Then, surrounded by several hundreds of thousands of deities headed by Indra and Brahmā, the bodhisattva crossed over to the other side. . . . And, unsheathing his sword, which was like a blue lotus, he cut off his hairknot and threw it very high into the air. It was taken by Indra, king of the gods, and received with great honor by the deities in his heaven, who instituted a Festival of the Hairknot. Also, the faithful brahmin householders in that place established a caitya called the Keśagrahaṇa [Receiving of the Hair] Shrine, which the monks still venerate today. . . .

## Receipt of the Robes

[After he had sent Chandaka back to Kapilavastu, together with the horse Kanthaka], there arose the matter of obtaining the bodhisattva's robes. Long ago, in that peerless city, there lived a certain householder who was rich, the possessor of great fortune and felicity, the owner of vast estates, as wealthy and well endowed as the god Vaiśravaṇa. He had married a woman from a family of equal status. They dallied, embraced, and made love, and a son was born. Similarly, in time, ten sons were born, and all of them, wandering forth from the householder's life, became enlightened on their own as pratyekabuddhas. Their mother was then old; she

offered to them some robes of hemp, but they said: "Mother, we are going to attain parinirvāna. We have no use for these, but King Śuddhodana will have a son named Śākyamuni who will attain unsurpassed complete enlightenment. You should pass these robes on to him. In that way, you will obtain great meritorious rewards."

After saying this, they performed the miracle of simultaneously glittering with both fire and rain showers, and passed away into complete final nirvāna. The old woman, at the time of her death, gave the robes to her daughter, telling her everything that had happened. In time, that daughter too became sick, and she, about to succumb to death, placed the robes on a tree, requesting the deity who dwelt in that tree to give them to the son of King Śuddhodana.

Now Indra, king of the gods, sees everything that happens down below. Thus, he went down and took the robes, and then, taking on the form of a hunter ravaged by old age, he dressed himself in those robes and went and stood on the bodhisattva's path, holding a bow and some arrows. And in due time, the bodhisattva came along that path and saw the hunter dressed in the monastic robe, . . . and he said to the man: "Ho! fellow! Those hempen clothes are fit for one who has wandered forth. Take these garments of Benares silk, and give me those in exchange."

The hunter replied: "Prince, I cannot give you these robes, because if I do, there may be others who will say that I deprived a royal prince of his life in order to steal his garments of Benares silk."

The bodhisattva said: "Ho, fellow! The whole world knows me and the kind of power that I have. Who is able to deprive me of life? Who would believe that you could kill me? Give without fear."

Thereupon, Indra fell at the feet of the bodhisattva and presented to him the hempen robes, and he received the bodhisattva's silken robes in exchange, . . . and taking them, he established among the gods in his heaven the Festival of the Benares Silk Robes. And the faithful brahmin householders in that place built a caitya called the Reception of the Monastic Robes Shrine, and the monks still venerate it to this day. . . .

Now the robes of hemp did not fit the bodhisattva's body, so he said: "Oh! May my hempen robes fit my body!" And just as soon as he had uttered those words, the hempen robes became the right size. This also was due to the bodhisattva's bodhisattva-power and to the divine power of the deities. . . .

## **Meeting with King Bimbisāra**

Then the bodhisattva reflected: "The city of Kapilavastu is still near. It would be best not to stay here; the Śākyā men could cause a commotion. Therefore, let me cross the Ganges."

So he crossed the Ganges and, walking along, reached the city of Rājagrha. Being skilled in all the arts and crafts, the bodhisattva then made a begging bowl of oleander leaves and . . . entered Rājagrha to go questing for alms. At that time, King Bimbisāra was walking on the terrace of his palace. He saw the bodhisattva and, impressed by his

demeanor, had his bowl filled with food. . . . [He then later went to visit him on nearby Mount Pāñdava.]

"I want to give you, for your enjoyment," he declared, "a bevy of women, unsurpassed riches. . . ."

"O, King," replied the bodhisattva, "I am a kṣatriya, a Śākyā, I belong to the solar clan, descendant of Ikṣvāku. I come from Kosala, a kingdom near the Himālayas. It is filled with riches and grain; I do not long for sensual pleasures."

"Sir," Bimbisāra then asked him, "for what purpose did you wander forth?"

The bodhisattva answered: "For unsurpassed complete enlightenment."

The king said: "Sir, when you attain unsurpassed complete enlightenment, then please turn your thoughts to me."

"I will do so," the bodhisattva replied, and he departed from Rājagrha.

## Study with Various Teachers

Not far from there, near Vulture's Peak, there was a hermitage of ascetics, and that is where the bodhisattva now went. He stayed there and meditated, engaging in those ascetics' practices. If they stood on one foot for a portion of the day, the bodhisattva did so for two portions. If they engaged in the painful practice of sitting between four fires with the sun shining overhead for one portion of the day, the bodhisattva did so for two. In this way they were amazed, and began to call him the great quester. . . .

The bodhisattva asked them: "Sirs, what is the purpose of your practice?"

And some said, "We want to gain the status of the god Indra"; and others said, "We want to gain the status of Brahmā"; and still others said, "We want to gain the status of Māra."

And the bodhisattva thought, "Indeed, these ascetics are caught in a whirlpool, practicing a wrong path."

So, finding that path inadequate, he went to the hermitage of Ārāda Kālāma. . . . He asked Ārāda what sorts of dharmas he had realized.

"O, Gautama," answered Ārāda, "everything up to the stage of nothingness."

The bodhisattva then declared: "The faith of Ārāda Kālāma is also my faith. The determination, the mindfulness, the concentration, the wisdom of Ārāda Kālāma are also my determination, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. The dharmas that Ārāda Kālāma has realized, up to the stage of nothingness, I will realize." . . .

[The bodhisattva then followed and completed all of Ārāda's practices, but he was not fulfilled by them.] "This path," he declared, "is not adequate for knowledge, not adequate for seeing, not adequate for unsurpassed total enlightenment."

And having thus determined Ārāda's path to be insufficient, the bodhisattva went to Udraka Rāmaputra. . . . He asked Udraka what sorts of dharmas he had realized.

"O, Gautama," Udraka replied, "everything up to the stage of neither perception nor nonperception."

The bodhisattva then declared: "The faith of Udraka Rāmaputra is also my faith. The determination, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom of Udraka Rāmaputra are also my determination, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. The dharmas that Udraka Rāmaputra has realized, up to the stage of neither perception nor non-perception, I will realize." . . .

[The bodhisattva then followed and completed all of Udraka's practices, but he was not fulfilled by them either.] "This path too," he declared, "is not adequate for knowledge, not adequate for seeing, not adequate for unsurpassed total enlightenment."

And having thus determined that path to be insufficient, the bodhisattva went on.

## The Practice of Austerities

Now King Śuddhodana, overcome by sorrow for his son, constantly sent out messengers to search for the bodhisattva. In this way, he learned that the bodhisattva had left Udraka Rāmaputra, departed Rājagrha, and was wandering around without any attendants. Having heard that, he sent three hundred servants to attend to him. And in the same royal city, the Sākyā Suprabuddha, Queen Māyā's father, heard the same news, and he sent two hundred servants. So the bodhisattva, surrounded by five hundred attendants, wandered in the forest of asceticism.

Soon, he reflected: "Dwelling in crowds is no good for discipline in ascetic practices and is antithetical to the search for the deathless state. Therefore I will retain five servants only and send the others away." So he kept two from the maternal side and three from the paternal side, and they attended to his needs.

Now, with his entourage of five attendants, he went on a journey to the south of Gayā, to Urubilvā, the village of Senāpati. There he found a lovely spot, a grove of trees near the Nairañjanā River. . . . And he sat himself firmly down at the base of a tree, clenched his teeth, placed the tip of his tongue on his palate, and grabbed, gathered, and pressed hard his thoughts with his mind. . . . [And he began to fast.] As he gradually took smaller and smaller amounts of food, his backbone became like a string of beads, and his buttocks became like the foot of a camel. Taking hold of his body from the front, he found he held it at the back. Taking hold of it from the back, he found he held it in front. He rubbed and stroked his body with his hands, and where he did so his hairs readily fell off. [ . . . ]

In the meantime, King Śuddhodana heard that the bodhisattva was practicing austerities, and he sent 250 spies to report on his activities. And Suprabuddha as well sent 250 spies. And they, every day, sent various reports back to Kapilavastu: "The bodhisattva is carrying out such and such an austerity." "He is eating a meal of one sesame seed, one grain of rice, one jujube, one pulse pod, one bean . . ." "He is sleeping on darbha grass."

Learning all this, King Śuddhodana became very worried about his son, and, his eyes clouded with tears, his heart and mind in torment, he suffered himself and began to make his own bed on darbha grass.

And the bodhisattva's wife, Princess Yaśodharā, . . . learning the news about her husband, was overcome with sorrow for him, and, her face wet

with tears, her ornaments and garlands cast aside, despondent, she too undertook austerities. She too began to eat meals of one sesame seed, one grain of rice, one jujube, one pulse pod, one bean, and she slept on a bed of straw. As a result, the child in her womb wasted away.

King Śuddhodana heard of her condition and reflected: "If Yaśodharā continues every day to receive news of the bodhisattva, and thereby to be stricken with sorrow for her husband, and to persist miserably in her asceticism, she will not be able to bear this fetus, and it will perish."

Therefore he undertook measures to ensure that no more news of the bodhisattva be told to Yaśodharā. . . . The spies were instructed to communicate any information about the bodhisattva only to Śuddhodana. And keeping what he heard secret, and hiding his own distress from Yaśodharā, he deceived the whole harem, and Yaśodharā regained her health. . . .

Meanwhile, the bodhisattva, who was practicing bodily austerities, thought: "No one engaged in the discipline of great ascetic striving has ever transcended suffering; therefore this path as well is not adequate for knowledge, not adequate for seeing, not adequate for unsurpassed total enlightenment." And he began to relax his strenuousness; and his body, which had been suppressed, became calm, . . . and his mind, which had been repressed, became one-pointed.

And he reflected: "What is the way that is adequate for knowledge, for seeing, for unsurpassed total enlightenment?" Then it occurred to him: "I remember when, as a boy, I sat down in the shade of the jambu tree while attending a festival at the place of my father Śuddhodana; at that time, I attained a trance state that was free from sensual desires, free from sinful and demeritorious things, thoughtful, reflective, arising from discrimination, and blissful. That must be the way, that must be the path that is adequate for knowledge, for seeing, for unsurpassed total enlightenment. . . ."

So the bodhisattva began to take substantial food, porridge and gruel, and he rubbed his limbs with ghee and oil, and he took a warm bath. . . . And gradually he regained his bodily strength, his vigor and energy, and, in time, he went to the village of Senāyanī. There, lived a villager named Śena. He had two daughters, Nandā and Nandabalā. They had heard that the bodhisattva was the prince of the Śākyas, who had been born in the foothills of the Himālayas on the banks of the Bhāgiratha River, not far from the hermitage of the sage Kapila, and that brahmin soothsayers had predicted he would become a cakravartin king. . . . So they prepared for him, in a crystal bowl, some sweetened milk-rice condensed sixteen times. . . .

Then the bodhisattva consumed the milk-rice, and, after washing the bowl, he threw it into the Nairājanā River. There the nāgas took hold of it. But the gods are aware of what happens down below, and Indra, king of the gods, took on the form of a garuḍa bird, stirred up the waters of the Nairājanā, terrified the nāgas, took away the bowl, and instituted a festival of the Bowl among the gods in his heaven.

Then the bodhisattva asked Nandā and Nandabalā: "What did you seek by virtue of your gift?"

They replied: "Blessed One, as a result of the merit of our gift and of our resolution, we would like to have you, the Prince of the Sākyas, as our husband, . . . you who, the soothsayers predicted, would become a cakravartin king."

The bodhisattva replied: "This is not possible; I am one who has wandered forth and have no desire for sensual pleasures."

They said: "Blessed One, if that is the case, let the meritorious fruit of this act of giving be your highest enlightenment." [ . . . ]

## **Enlightenment Obtained**

Then, having received some grass from the grass-cutter Svastika, the bodhisattva approached the foot of the Bodhi Tree, by the road pointed out to him by the gods. Getting there, he prepared a broad, nicely arranged, firmly established seat of grass. . . . And mounting this adamantine throne, he sat down with his legs crossed like a sleeping snake-king's coils. Holding his body upright and fixing his mind in front of him, he resolved: "I will not uncross my legs until the destruction of defilements has been attained." [ . . . ]

And in the first watch of the night, he inclined his mind toward achieving firsthand knowledge of the field of supernatural powers, . . . and he set himself to the task of remembering, in a firsthand way, his former births. . . . He recalled his many various previous existences: one birth, two, three, four, . . . ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, a thousand, . . . many thousands, . . . many hundreds of thousands. . . .

And in the second watch of the night, he inclined his mind to achieving firsthand knowledge of the transmigration of beings from one existence to another. With his pure divine eye transcending human sight, he saw beings dying and being reborn, of good caste and bad, low and high, in good rebirths, in unfortunate ones. . . . They were wandering in saṃsāra according to the evil inclinations of their sensual desires, birth, and ignorance. . . .

Then in the third watch of the night, he declared his intention to achieve direct perception of the destruction of evil inclinations, and disciplining himself and persevering, he meditated on the dharmas that are conducive to enlightenment. . . . And he truly realized: "This is the Noble Truth of Suffering; this is the Origination of Suffering; this is the Cessation of Suffering; this is the Noble Truth of the Way leading to the Cessation of Suffering." Knowing that and seeing that, he was then released from thoughts inclined to sensual desire, he was released from thoughts inclined to rebirth, he was released from thoughts inclined to ignorance. And released, he had a realization of his liberation: "Destroyed is my birth; consumed is my striving; done is what had to be done; I will not be born into another existence!" Thus the Blessed One attained to the highest enlightenment. . . .

## **Birth of Rāhula**

When the Buddha attained highest enlightenment, Māra, . . . the evil-minded One, was angry. Making himself invisible, he spitefully had his godlings announce to the city of Kapilavastu: "The bodhisattva

Śākyamuni, after practicing austerities and mounting the adamantine throne, has died on his seat of grass."

Hearing this, King Śuddhodana, together with his harem, the princes, and his ministers, was stricken with great sorrow, as was the whole population of Kapilavastu. And . . . Yaśodharā, remembering the qualities of her husband, fainted and fell on the ground. Recovering her senses when some water was sprinkled on her face, she lamented incessantly, her face ever filled with tears, her words choked with sobs, the women of the harem trying to console her.

Soon, however, seeing that her behavior was in response to a deception, some divinities who had faith in the Buddha declared, "The bodhisattva is not dead, but he has attained highest knowledge."

Hearing this, King Śuddhodana, together with his entourage and the population of Kapilavastu, was transported with great joy.

Now when the Blessed One attained highest knowledge, Yaśodharā gave birth to a son. . . . And King Śuddhodana, seeing this good fortune, was pleased, happy, delighted, filled with highest joy. He arranged for a great celebration in the city of Kapilavastu. . . . And because, at the time of the boy's birth, Rāhu had caused an eclipse of the moon, the bodhisattva's son was given the name Rāhula.

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Source: Translated from *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṃghabhedavastu, Being the 17th and Last Section of the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin*, ed. Raniero Gnoli (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977), 1:78–119.

## 1.4 REMEMBERING PAST LIVES

According to tradition, as we have just seen, during the three watches of the night of his enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha had a number of distinct experiences. In the first watch, he is said to have remembered systematically all of his previous lives, thereby not only showing his mastery over time but also reviewing the course of his karmic history. For it rapidly became clear, in the Buddhist tradition, that an achievement such as Buddhahood was not the result of the quest of a single lifetime, lasting only a few years, but the end product of a long series of previous lives devoted to the accumulation of merit and the practices of perfection necessary for the making of a Buddha. The story of the Buddha, therefore, was quickly extended to include hundreds of tales of his previous lives (*jātakas*), in which he is generally portrayed as the hero.

### 1.4.1 Planting the Seeds of Buddhahood

The number of one's previous lives is theoretically infinite, for the course of rebirth is beginningless. The process of becoming a Buddha, however, is not. It starts, as in the following *jātaka* story of Sumati (who in other versions of this tale is known as Megha or Sumedha), with a simple devotional gesture, such as the offering of some flowers, and with the making of a firm resolu-

tion, or vow, to attain Buddhahood at some time in the future. These relatively simple religious acts are seen as tremendously effective because they are directed toward and confirmed by a previous fully enlightened Buddha, in this case the past Buddha Dipamkara.

And here we come to another dimension of the developing tradition: early on, perhaps from the very start of Buddhism, it was thought that "our" Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, the sage of the Sakyas (Sakyamuni), was but one of a whole series of Buddhas who had succeeded one another over the aeons. Various lists of these previous Buddhas, sometimes specified as six or twenty-four but theoretically infinite in number, were established, as were lists of future Buddhas, also variously numbered but focusing on the next Buddha, Maitreya, presently awaiting his "turn" in residence in one of the Buddhist heavens.

In this vast scenario, however, one important rule seems to have been invariable: to become a Buddha, one first has to meet a Buddha and be inspired or awakened by him to begin the long process of the bodhisattva path, which may last hundreds of lifetimes but which will eventually lead to Buddhahood. The story of Sumati, then, is the legend of the bodhisattva Sakyamuni's "first" jataka, the tale of his initial awakening, when he met the past Buddha Dipamkara, long ago.

[Then the Buddha, recalling his former life, said to the monks: At that time,] there appeared in the world a Blessed Buddha named Dipamkara, completely enlightened as to knowledge and conduct, a Perfected One, knowing the world, the unsurpassed guide of those who are to be converted, a teacher of gods and humans.

Wandering here and there in the land, the Buddha Dipamkara came to the royal capital of Dipavati. There, ruled a king named Dipa, who spread prosperity, abundance, peace, and plenty among the people. And King Dipa invited the Buddha Dipamkara to enter the city with a resolute mind.

Now in a neighboring kingdom there was another king, named Vasava. He proclaimed a twelve-year sacrifice, at the end of which he put on display five great presents: a golden water jar with a handle, a golden food bowl, a couch made of four kinds of gems, five hundred pieces of gold, and a maiden adorned with all her jewelry. These, he declared, would be given to whatever brahmin was most accomplished in knowledge of the Vedas.

Not too far away, dwelt two youths who had studied the Veda. Knowing that it was the custom to give their preceptor a preceptor's fee and their teacher a teacher's fee, they were wondering how they would do this when they heard what King Vasava had proclaimed. "Those presents are as good as ours," they thought, "for who is there more learned and knowledgeable than us?" With this in mind, they set out for the great city of King Vasava.

In the meantime, the king had a vision of a divinity, who said to him: "Your Majesty, of the two youths who are coming, Sumati and Mati, give the offerings to Sumati. You have carried out a sacrifice for twelve years;

from the meritorious fruit of that act, you can now make a great offering to the youth Sumati, who is of the highest rank. . . ."

When the king saw the two youths approaching, filled with grace and charm, . . . he thought he should do what was recommended by the gods, so he went up to the first youth and asked, "Sir, are you Sumati?"

Sumati replied, "I am."

Then King Vāsava seated young Sumati on the highest seat, regaled him with food, and presented him with the five presents. The young Sumati accepted the first four of them, but he did not accept the gift of the maiden. "I am celibate," he explained.

The girl, seeing how gracious and charming young Sumati was, was filled with desire and love and pleaded with him, saying, "Brahmin, take me."

But he replied, "I cannot take you."

Now since King Vāsava had given away that girl as a present, he could not take her back again, . . . so she went away to Dipāvati, the city of King Dipa. Upon arrival there, she removed all of her jewelry and gave it to a garland maker, asking him, in return, to provide her every day with blue lotuses so that she could worship the gods.

In the meantime, Sumati took the four presents he had accepted and went and gave them to his teacher. His teacher agreed to accept three of them, but he gave the five hundred gold pieces back to Sumati. That very night, Sumati had ten dreams: he dreamed that he drank the great ocean; that he flew through the air; that he touched and clasped with his hand both the sun and the moon; that he harnessed the chariot of the king; and that he saw ascetics, white elephants, geese, lions, a great rock, and mountains. He then woke up and thought, "Who can clarify for me the meaning of these dreams?"

Not far from there lived an ascetic endowed with five supernatural powers. Accordingly, the young Sumati went to him . . . and asked him to interpret his dreams.

The ascetic said: "I cannot clarify the meaning of these dreams for you, but go to the royal city of Dipāvati. King Dipa has invited the Buddha Dipamkara there, . . . [and] he will be able to interpret your dreams. . . ."

Now, in the royal city of Dipāvati, King Dipa had requisitioned all the flowers from all the flower merchants in the land, thinking that in seven days, he would welcome the Buddha Dipamkara into the city. . . . And when all the flowers had been gathered by the king, the girl, who was now a devout worshipper of the gods, went to her garland maker and said, "Give me some blue lotuses; I wish to carry out the service of the gods."

But the garland maker replied, "Today, the king has taken all of the blossoms for Dipamkara's entrance into the city."

She said, "Go back again to the lotus pool and see if, through my merit, you cannot find some blue lotus flowers that have not been taken away."

The garland maker went there and saw that, through the power of her merit, seven blue lotuses had appeared in the pool.

"Please pluck them," she asked.

The garland maker replied: "I cannot pick them; I will be blamed by the king's men . . ."

But she insisted: "Pluck these blossoms and give them to me; they have appeared on account of my merits."

"How will you get them into the city without the knowledge of the king's men?"

"Pluck them, sir, and I will enter the city with them hidden in a water pot."

Thus reassured, the garland maker plucked the blossoms and gave them to her. She took them, hid them in a jar, filled the jar with water, and set out for the city.

Now, just at that time, young Sumati arrived in that place, and he reflected: "I should pay homage to the Blessed Buddha when I see him, but with what?" So he went from one garland maker's house to another, inquiring everywhere after flowers, but he did not find a single blossom. . . .

Then, in his search, he came to that garden and met the girl just as she was leaving. Out of the power of her merit, the blue lotuses suddenly emerged from her water pot.

Seeing them, Sumati said to her, "Give me five of those lotuses, and in exchange I will give you five hundred pieces of gold."

The girl said to Sumati: "Formerly you wanted to have nothing to do with me; now, you ask me for my lotuses. I will not give them to you!" But then she went on: "What will you do with them?"

Sumati replied, "I wish to honor the Blessed Buddha."

Thereupon, the girl said: "I too wish to give flowers to the Buddha. So what am I to do with these gold pieces? But I will give you these lotuses on one condition: if you, at the time of your offering them to the Buddha, make a formal, earnest wish to have me as your wife in life after life, saying, 'May she become my spouse in repeated existences.'"

To this Sumati agreed, . . . and the girl gave him five lotuses and retained two for herself. . . .

Then, starting at the city gate, King Dipa had the road cleared of all stones, gravel, and potsherds. He had flags, banners, and archways put up, bands of cloth fastened, and perfumed water and sandalwood powder sprinkled about. . . . And taking a hundred-ribbed umbrella, the king set out to meet the Buddha Dipamkara. And so did King Vāsava [who had come to the city] and all of their ministers. And King Dipa fell at the feet of the Blessed Buddha and declared: "Blessed One, take possession of this place."

Then the Blessed One, at the head of the community of monks, proceeded to enter into the city with proper mental preparation. And King Dipa held a hundred-spoked umbrella for the altogether enlightened Dipamkara, and so did his ministers, and so did King Vāsava and his ministers, but through his supernatural power, the Blessed One made it so that each and every one of them felt "I am holding the umbrella over the Blessed One!" . . .

Then the Blessed One, with proper mental preparation, set his foot down on the threshold stone of the city gate, . . . and immediately the earth shook in six ways. It shivered, shook, quaked, trembled,

grumbled, and rumbled. It is the norm, whenever Blessed Buddhas set their foot down on the threshold stone of the city gate with proper mental preparation, that various extraordinary marvels occur. The insane recover their minds, the blind can see again, the deaf become able to hear, the mute become able to speak, the lame become able to walk; women's difficult pregnancies become regular; those who are bound by fetters find their bonds have loosened; those who have been attached to enmity in birth after birth suddenly become full of love; calves break their tethers and are united with their mothers; elephants trumpet, horses neigh, bulls bellow, and parrots, myna birds, cuckoos, and pheasants warble delightfully; musical instruments, without being struck, make a sweet sound; ornaments put in boxes tinkle pleasantly; the places on earth that are high are made low, and the places that are low are lifted up; stones, gravel, and potsherds disappear; from midair, deities throw down divine blossoms, lotuses, lilies, aloe powder, sandalwood powder, tagara powder, tamāla leaves, and divine māndāra flowers. . . .

And there in the royal city of Dipāvatī, hundreds of thousands of living beings paid homage to the Buddha Dipamkara with flowers and incense and perfumes. Sumati and the girl also followed the Blessed One, holding their lotuses, but they were not able to get near him, surrounded as he was by the great crowd of people intending to worship him.

But the Blessed One then reflected: "This young Sumati is to become a great source of merit to this large crowd of people." So he magically fashioned a tumultuous rainstorm. In that way, the crowd dispersed, and, now that there was more room, Sumati was able to see the entrancing sight of the Blessed One, and great faith was engendered in him. Filled with faith, he tossed his five lotuses toward the Buddha Dipamkara; just as they fell, the Blessed One magically fashioned them into a canopy of flowers the size of a wagon wheel, which, suspended in the air, followed him when he moved and remained stationary when he stopped.

When the girl saw this, faith was engendered in her also, and she tossed her two lotuses to the Blessed One. And again, just as they fell, they were magically fashioned into canopies the size of wagon wheels and took up their position on either side of the Buddha's head.

Now, in that place, a lot of mud had been created by the heavy downpour. So the young Sumati went up to the Blessed Buddha, and on the muddy ground in front of him, he spread out his long hair and spoke this verse:

"If I am to become a Buddha, awakened to enlightenment, may you tread with your feet on my hair—on my birth, old age, and death."

And the Buddha Dipamkara trod upon the young Sumati's locks . . . and he made a prediction about him: "Freed from human existence, you will become an effective Teacher, for the sake of the world. Born among the Śākyas, as the epitome of the Triple World, the Lamp of all Beings, you will be known as Śākyamuni."

When young Sumati had received this prediction from the Buddha Dipamkara, he, at that very moment, rose up into the air to the height of seven palm trees. And his hair fell out, and other even better hair appeared in its place. And a great many people, seeing him aloft in midair,

made this firm resolve: "When this one attains to the highest knowledge, may we become his disciples."

And the girl too made a vow: "When you fulfill your resolve to become a Buddha, a guide, then I would be your wife, your constant companion in the Dharma. When you become completely enlightened, a most excellent trainer of the world, then I would, at that time, become your disciple...."

And King Vāsava taking the hair that had fallen from Sumati's head, counted eighty thousand strands of it. His ministers then said to him: "Lord, give each of us one of these hairs, and we will enshrine them in caityas."

So the king gave his ministers one hair each, and they, each going to their own districts, set up a caitya....

[What do you think monks? asked the Buddha.] He who was in that time King Vāsava, he is now King Bimbisāra; and those who were his eighty thousand ministers are now eighty thousand deities; . . . and she who was the girl, is now Yaśodharā; and he who was Sumati—that was myself, practicing the bodhisattva path.

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Source: Translated from *The Divyāvadāna*, ed. E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886), pp. 246–53.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1.4.2 The Last Past Life: The Story of Vessantara

Of the hundreds of tales that were and still are told by Buddhists about the exploits of the Buddha in his previous lives, the one that stands out as being the most popular is the Vessantara jātaka. There are many versions of this tale, which in South and Southeast Asia is as well known as the biography of the Buddha Gautama himself.

It recounts the penultimate life of the Buddha as Prince Vessantara, during which he perfected the practice of giving (dāna) and exhibited the sort of utter generosity that is born from compassion for others and from the realization of the truths of selflessness and impermanence. There is nothing that Vessantara will not give if it is asked of him. He gives away the white elephant of state to a neighboring kingdom, something that gets him in trouble with his own people. They chase him and his family away, but still he gives: his possessions, and then the chariot he is riding in. Together with his wife and children he proceeds on foot, and he seemingly reaps the rewards of his virtue, for the gods, and nature itself, end up providing him with food and a place to live. But then there are further tests: a wandering brahmin comes and asks for his children; another comes and requests his wife. Vessantara gives them all away, glad to be of service.

The Vessantara story is truly a poignant one, but its appeal is many faceted. Vessantara is an impressive example of someone who has taken one of the most commonly advocated lay practices of Buddhism—giving—to its furthest

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<sup>3</sup> Alternative German translation, Heinrich Zimmer, *Karman: ein buddhistischer Legendenkranz* (Munich: Verlag F. Bruckmann, 1925), pp. 42–60.

limits. Buddhists were not blind to some of the ethical difficulties involved in this practice. In a semicanonical text, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Milinda points out that Vessantara's generosity, though perhaps worthy of admiration, brought grief and suffering to his children and his wife. The monk Nāgasena, whom he is questioning, admits as much but then suggests that the end justifies the means; Vessantara's actions are comparable to rushing a sick person to a doctor by bullock cart, even though it inflicts pain on the bullocks. In the tale itself, the Buddha, remembering his own previous life, appears to say something similar: "It is not that he disliked his children but that he loved omniscience more." By perfecting practices such as dāna, he could become a Buddha, and by becoming a Buddha, he could help everyone.

In some versions of the story, after Vessantara proves his generosity, everything is restored to him. Like Job in the Bible, he was only being tested by the gods. In the following Pali verse rendition of the tale, presented as being recounted by the Buddha himself in the first person, this does not happen, and Vessantara ends up possessionless, wifeless, without children, and alone in a hermitage. Interestingly, it might be noted that this is much the same situation as that of a Buddhist monk, which Vessantara has here achieved though still a layperson.

My mother, Phusati, had borne me for nine months when, while circumambulating the city, she gave birth to me in the Street of the Merchants.

My name came neither from the maternal nor the paternal side of my family; because I was born there, in the Street of the Merchants, I was called Vessantara [Among the Merchants].

When I was eight years old, a mere boy, seated in the palace, I thought of making offerings.

I would give my heart, my eyes, and my flesh—even my blood! I announced I would give my body, if anyone were to ask me for it!

The sincerity of my thoughts was so unshakable and steadfast that Earth trembled, even up to the pleasure gardens of the gods on Mount Meru.

Every fortnight, on the uposatha days of the full and the new moon, I mounted the elephant Paccaya and went out to make offerings.

One day, brahmins from the kingdom of Kalinga approached me and asked me for my elephant, who was considered to be auspicious and brought good fortune to the state.

"Our country," they declared, "is suffering from drought, scarcity of food, a great famine; give us your excellent all-white elephant, the acme of its kind."

I did not hesitate. I gave what the brahmins asked me for. I did not keep back anything, I rejoiced at my gift.

It was not in my nature to turn down any request that came my way. I would not break my resolve....

Taking the elephant by the trunk, I sprinkled water from a jeweled vase in my hand, and by this gesture gave the elephant to the brahmins.

As I was doing this, once again, Earth trembled, even up to the pleasure gardens of the gods on Mount Meru.

Because I gave away the state elephant, the people of my country, Sivi, were angry. They assembled and voted to send me away from my own kingdom, saying, "Let him go to Mount Vāñka."

Unshakable and steadfast, I asked those who were throwing me out to grant me one wish: to be able to bestow another gift.

Thus asked, the people of Sivi accorded me my one wish, and I, beating a ceremonial drum, gave the great gift.

Then there was a great clamor, a frightful tumult; because of a gift, they had driven me out, but now I was giving gifts again!

I gave away elephants, horses, chariots, male and female slaves, cattle, money! I made the great gift! And then I left the city.

And when I was leaving the city, I turned to look at it one last time, and then too Earth trembled, even up to the pleasure gardens of the gods on Mount Meru.

At a great crossroads, I gave away my four-horsed chariot, and standing there by myself, without an attendant, I said to my wife, Maddī:

"You carry Kañhā; she is light and younger. I will take Jāli, her brother, who is heavier."

Maddī took up Kañhājinā, who was like a white lotus flower, and I took up the young noble Jāli, who was like the golden disk of the sun.

We four persons, well-born, refined, nobles, trod along that road, rough and smooth, heading for Mount Vāñka.

We asked whomever we met, going or coming along the road, "What is the way to Mount Vāñka?"

And they, seeing us, uttered words of pity and expressed their sorrow: "Mount Vāñka is far away."

When the children saw on a hillside trees laden with fruit, they whined on account of those fruits.

And seeing the children crying, those great tall trees, quite on their own, bent down and extended their branches to them.

Seeing this miraculous, marvelous, astonishing thing, Maddī, lovely in every limb, sang out in praise:

"A miracle! Marvelous, astonishing in this world! Because of Vessantara's glory, the trees have bent down of their own accord."

And out of compassion for the children, the spirits shortened the road, . . . and departing from there, we arrived at Mount Vāñka.

The king of the gods then spoke to the deity Vissakamma, who was endowed with great supernatural powers: "Build for them a hermitage, a pleasant well-made hut out of leaves."

Hearing Indra's command, Vissakamma did as he was told. And entering the quiet and peaceful grove, we four dwelt there on the mountain.

I and Queen Maddī, and both Jāli and Kañhājinā, dwelt there in the hermitage, comforting one another.

I was not useless: I watched over the children in the hermitage. And Maddī gathered fruit; she provided for three people besides herself.

While I was dwelling in the grove, a wanderer came to me and asked me to give him the children, both Jāli and Kañhājinā.

Seeing the suppliant there, I was filled with joy. And taking hold of both children, I gave them to the brahmin, Jūjaka.

While I was giving up my own children, again Earth trembled, even up to the pleasure gardens of the gods on Mount Meru.

Then, once more, Indra descended, and, taking on the form of a brahmin, he asked me to give him my virtuous, devoted wife, Maddī.

Taking Maddī by the hand, I gave her to him, filling his hands with water. I was gladdened by my resolve.

When Maddī was being given away, the deities in the sky rejoiced. And then too Earth trembled, even up to the pleasure gardens of the gods on Mount Meru.

I did not think twice about abandoning Jāli, my daughter, Kanhājinā, and my devoted wife, Maddī; it was all done for enlightenment.

It is not that I hated the children nor that I disliked Maddī, but that I loved omniscience. That is why I gave away those who were dear to me....

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Source: Translated from *Cariyāpiṭaka*, ed. Richard Morris (London: Pali Text Society, 1882), pp. 7–10.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.5 VIEWING THE COSMOS

In the second watch of the night of his enlightenment, as we have seen, the Buddha is said to have used the supernatural power of his divine eye to survey the entire world and all the beings in it, as they were dying out of and being reborn into the various realms of rebirth. One of the epithets of the Buddha is that he “knows the world.” He can directly perceive the situation of all beings everywhere—not just humans but also animals, ghosts, denizens of hell, gods—and he is aware of their suffering. Such an experience is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, it demonstrates the Buddha’s mastery over the element of space; second, it reflects his compassion for the beings of the universe; finally, as a total survey of the universe and all modes of rebirth in it, it confirms the fact that there is, in the whole of samsāra, no place of refuge, no escape from suffering.

### 1.5.1 The Hierarchy of Beings

A number of these themes are reiterated in the following passage, repeated verbatim in many Buddhist Sanskrit legends, where the vision of the cosmos, and the compassion that goes with it, are associated with the Buddha’s smile, a cosmic smile that illuminates the entire universe and alleviates the pain of beings in it.

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<sup>4</sup>Alternative English translation, I. B. Horner, *Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon, Part 3* (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), pp. 10–14.

Now it is the norm that whenever Blessed Buddhas manifest their smile, blue, yellow, red, and dazzlingly white rays issue forth from their mouth, and some go down and some go up. Those that go down enter the Sañjīva, Kālasūtra, Raurava, Mahāraurava, Tapana, Pratāpana, Avici, Arbuda, Nirarbuda, Aṭaṭa, Hahava, Huhuva, Utpala, Padma, and Mahāpadma hells. And in the hells that are hot, they become cold; and in the hells that are cold, they become hot. In this manner, the various sufferings of the hell-beings are allayed, and they ask themselves: "What is happening to us? Have we ended our stay here? Have we been reborn elsewhere?"

But then, in order to engender their faith, the Blessed One creates a magical image of himself, and seeing this image, they realize: "We have not left this place, nor have we been reborn elsewhere, but this being was not to be seen before; it must be by his power that our various sufferings have been alleviated." Their minds fill with faith at the sight of the magical image of the Buddha, they cast off the karma they have yet to suffer in the hells, and they take birth among gods or humans, where they become vessels of the Truth.

Those rays that go upward, enter the abodes of the various gods: the Cāturmahārājika, Trayastriṃśat, Yāma, Tuṣita, Nirmāṇarati, Paranirmitavaśavartin, Brahmakāyika, Brahmaṇapurohita, Mahābrahma, Parīttābha, Apramāṇābha, Ābhāsvara, Parīttāsubha, Apramāṇāsubha, Śubhakṛtsna, Anabhraka, Puṇyaprasava, Bṛhatphala, Abṛha, Atapa, Sudṛṣa, Sudarśana, and Akaniṣṭha heavens. In those heavens, they proclaim the facts of impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and nonself. . . .

After thus coursing through the great trichiliocosm, all of the rays then return to the Buddha's body. And if the Buddha wants to reveal a past action, they disappear into him from the back; but if he wants to reveal a future action, they disappear into him from the front. If he wants to reveal a rebirth in hell, they vanish into the sole of his foot; if he wants to reveal a rebirth as an animal, they vanish into his heel; if he wants to reveal a rebirth as a hungry ghost, they vanish into his toes; if he wants to reveal a rebirth as a human being, they vanish into his knees; if he wants to reveal the kingship of a balacakravartin [a world ruler who conquers by the force of arms], they vanish into his left hand; if he wants to reveal the kingship of a cakravartin [a world ruler who conquers by virtue of his righteousness], they vanish into his right hand; if he wants to reveal the enlightenment of a disciple, they vanish into his mouth; if he wants to reveal the enlightenment of a pratyekabuddha, they vanish into his ūrṇā [the growth of hair in the middle of the Buddha's forehead]; if he wants to predict the unsurpassed total enlightenment of a Buddha, they vanish into his usṇīṣa [the protuberance on the top of his head].

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Source: Translated from *Avadānaśataka*, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no. 19 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1959), p. 297.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Alternative French translation, Léon Feer, *Avadāna-çataka: cent légendes bouddhiques* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1891), pp. 10–11.

### 1.5.2 Karma and the Six Realms of Rebirth

Another aspect of the Buddha's second watch vision of the beings in the cosmos is, of course, his understanding of their karma, of the deeds they did to merit rebirth into or out of the various realms of the universe. The law of karma is a doctrine that Buddhism inherited from its greater Indian religious context. Simply put, it states that any moral act, good or bad, will bring about a correspondingly positive or negative result, either in this or in a future lifetime.

Buddhist tales of karma, just like the fire-and-brimstone sermons of Christian preachers describing hell, often have an admonitory purpose: to encourage good deeds and the avoidance of bad ones. What fascinated Buddhists, however, were the specifics of retribution, the particular acts committed and the particular sufferings or rewards that resulted from them.

A system of five (later, six) realms or "courses" (*gatis*) of rebirth came to be standard: the realms of humans, gods, animals, hell-beings, hungry ghosts, and (later) "titans" (*asuras*, or demonic antiheroes). The first two of these realms were deemed fortunate and the rest unfortunate, "fortune" and "misfortune" being measured not only by the amount of suffering involved in the realms but also by the access they afforded to the teachings of the Buddha.

Within these realms, however, all sorts of subdivisions came to be specified. This was, in part, a response to a need to elaborate on the workings of karma: Was it better to be reborn as a jackal or as a pig? Was it better to be a hungry stray dog or an intestinal parasite in the stomach of a rich person's well-fed dog? And what karmic deeds might result in any of these situations?

At the same time, just as there were obviously different species of animals and different castes and socioeconomic situations of humans, so too there were elaborated different "species" of hell-beings, of hungry ghosts, and of gods. Thus, whole texts were devoted to elaborating upon the categories of rebirth. The following work, attributed to the Buddhist poet Dhārmikā Subhūti, is a relatively late example of the genre, though it has its roots in the Buddhist Canon itself.

"Beings reap the fruit of actions—good or bad—which they themselves have done (there is no other doer) with their body, speech, and mind."

Thus thinking, the compassionate Teacher, master of the Triple World, proclaimed, for the sake of all beings, which acts had which fruits.

That is what I will speak of today, in brief, having heard what was said by the Buddha: the good deeds and the bad, to be done or shunned.

#### **Hell Realm**

People who slay living beings, out of greed, delusion, fear, or anger or who rear them in order to harm them are surely going to the Sañjīva hell.

It is called "Sañjīva" because beings there, during many thousands of years, are killed only to be revived (*samjivanti*) and killed again and again.

People who have angered their mother or father or relations or friends, who slander and lie, are destined for the Kālasūtra hell.

It is known as "Kālasūtra" because beings there are cut up with burning hot saws, the way lumber is cut, along lines made with a black chalk-line (kālasūtra).

People who have killed goats, sheep, jackals, hare, rats, deer, boar, and other living creatures are going to the Samghāta hell.

This hell is commonly given the name "Samghāta" because the beings there are all piled in a heap (samghāta), and, in that state, slaughtered together.

People who have made creatures suffer bodily and mental anguish and who are cheats and deceivers are going to the Raurava hell.

It is known as "Raurava" because beings there, continuously burned by an intense fire, let out a dreadful cry (ghoram̄ ravam̄).

People who have taken the wealth of kings, brahmins, or teachers and caused them suffering and those who take back what they have given are going to the Great Raurava hell.

It is called "Great Raurava" because of the great dreadfulness of the cries there and of the greatness of the heat of its fire. These are greater than those of the Raurava hell.

The person who causes creatures to be burned in a forest fire or any other fire will burn in the Tāpana hell, wailing in the midst of a great conflagration.

In this world it is given the name "Tāpana" because beings there suffer continuously from the intense burning torment (tāpana).

The person who is a nihilist, who declares the interchangeability of Dharma and non-Dharma, or who leads beings into misdirected ascetic practices will burn in the Pratāpana hell.

It is said to be "Pratāpana" because the intense fire there makes beings suffer an even greater torment (pratāpana) than they do in the Tāpana hell.

People who have angered beings of great virtue or who have killed a disciple of the Buddha or their mother or father or teacher will be reborn in the Avīci hell.

It is called "Avīci" because beings there are burned by such a horrible fire that even their bones are melted, and because, in the midst of their suffering, there is no interval (na vīci) allowing them any respite. . . .

## Animal Realm

By passionate attachment to sensual pleasures, people are reborn as geese, pigeons, donkeys, and other passionate animals; those who have erred through stupidity are reborn as worms.

Anger and malice cause rebirth as snakes; the prideful become lions; haughtiness causes rebirth as an ass or a dog.

As a result of jealousy, envy, aversion, and so on, beings become monkeys after death; those who are scurrilous, impudent, or of wanton nature will become crows.

As a result of killing, tying up, and whipping cattle and horses, beings are reborn as noxious spiders and scorpions.

People who are hostile and selfish become, after death, tigers, cats, jackals, bears, vultures, wolves, or other meat eaters.

People who are generous benefactors, yet get angry and are cruel, become nāgas with great wealth; those who liberally give up their possessions, yet who get angry and are arrogant, become lordly garudas.

Evil deeds of body, speech, and mind result in rebirth as an animal. Therefore, refrain from doing even the slightest such action.

### **Hungry Ghost (Preta) Realm**

People who steal food become kaṭapūtana pretas, who are deprived of energy and who feed on corpses.

Those who harm children and out of desire lead them astray are reborn as kaṭapūtanās, feeding on fetal matter.

People who are vile and utterly wretched, selfish and ever-lusting, are reborn after death as pretas with goiters.

The person who hinders the practice of dāna and who gives nothing himself will become an emaciated preta with a big belly and a mouth the size of a needle.

The person who hoards his wealth for the sake of his family, without enjoying it or giving it away, is reborn as a preta who receives only what is given as funeral offerings made to the dead.

The person who wishes to deprive others of their wealth and who gives only to regret it immediately becomes a preta consuming excrement, phlegm, and vomit.

The person who, out of anger, speaks unkind words that cut to the quick will, as a result of that act, be for a long time a preta with a flaming mouth.

And the person who causes strife, who has a fierce disposition and no pity, will become a preta agitated by fear, feeding on worms and various kinds of insects. . . .

### **Human Realm**

Among gods, asuras, and humans, nonviolence leads to a long life; violence gives rise to a short life. Thus, one should abstain from violence.

Leprosy, consumption, fever, madness, and other human diseases are due to killing, tying up, and whipping creatures.

People who steal others' property and give out nothing whatsoever will never themselves become wealthy, strive as they may.

One who takes goods that were not given but who also gives gifts will, after death, first become wealthy but then exceedingly poor.

One who neither steals nor gives nor is excessively niggardly will, with great effort, obtain a lasting fortune in the next life.

People who do not steal others' property, who are generous and free from greed, obtain what they wish: great wealth that cannot be taken away.

One who, in this world, makes donations of alms food will be reborn ever-happy: endowed with long life, good complexion, strength, good fortune, and good health.

One who makes offerings of clothes will become modest, good looking, and well dressed, enjoying life and cutting a handsome figure.

People who happily, without regret, make a donation of a dwelling, will, in a future life, be endowed with palaces and everything they want.

By virtue of a gift of a lamp, a person will come to have good eyes; by the gift of a musical instrument, a good voice; by the gift of beds and seats, ease and comfort. [ . . . ]

He who abstains from the wives of others will obtain the wives he desires; and he who stays away from his own wives, when the place and time are not right, will again be reborn as a man.

The man who does not restrain his thoughts and unites with the wives of others, or who finds delight in illicit parts of the body, will be reborn as a woman.

But the woman who is of good morals and little passion, who abhors her femaleness and constantly aspires to masculinity, will be reborn as a man. [ . . . ]

All karmic rewards resemble the acts of which they are the natural outcome: suffering from sin, happiness from good deeds, and a mixture of the two from a mixed deed.

## Asura Realm

One who is always practicing guile and deception but who does no injury, who is quarrelsome but generous, will become an asura-lord.

## Deity Realm

Those who do not long for pleasure for themselves and who do not rejoice in possessions become one of the four great divine kings, foremost of the planetary deities.

People who revere their mother, father, and family elders, who are generous, patient, and do not delight in strife, will be reborn among the gods of the Trayaśtrimśat heaven.

Those who are not fond of quarreling, whose minds do not delight in strife, who undertake only what is good, will go to the Suyāma heaven.

People of great learning, who are wise upholders of the Dharma, who desire liberation, go to the Tuṣita heaven.

People who themselves are inclined toward morality, giving, and discipline and who make strenuous efforts are certainly on their way to the Nirmāṇarati heaven.

Superior people possessing goodness, surpassing others in the virtues because of their giving, discipline, and self-control, will certainly become gods in the Parinirmitavaśavartin heaven.

By moral conduct one reaches heaven; even more so by meditation. From seeing all things as they are, one comes to the ultimate end of samsāra.

Source: Translated from Dhārmika Subhūti, *Ṣadgatikārikā*, ed. Paul Mus, in Paul Mus, *La lumière sur les six voies* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1939), pp. 217–89.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Alternative French translation, by Mus, *La lumière*, pp. 216–88.

## .6 REALIZING THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

In the third watch of the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha is said to have realized, among other things, the Four Noble Truths. If the experience of the first watch of the night can be termed "karmalogical" (having to do with the karmic deeds of the Buddha in his past life) and the second watch experience is thought of as "cosmological" (having to do with the various realms of rebirth in the cosmos), this third watch can be labeled "dharma logical" (having to do with the realization of the Buddha's Dharma, or "Doctrine").

In any case, the Four Noble Truths, which do form a sort of doctrinal core of Buddhism, are said to have been the subject of the Buddha's first sermon, at the Deer Park in Sarnath near Benares, an event known as the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of the Dharma. This sermon was delivered to the five men, Ājñāta Kaundinya and his companions, who were to become the Buddha's first monastic disciples. The sermon, therefore, marks not only the first preaching of the Dharma but also the establishment of the monastic community.

The Four Noble Truths can be stated as follows:

1. that life in all the realms of rebirth is, by definition, ultimately unsatisfactory, suffering (duḥkha)
2. that there is a reason for this suffering, an origination (samudaya) of it, which is connected to our ongoing desire, a thirst that we cannot assuage, a clinging to possessions, to persons, to life itself
3. that there is, however, such a thing as freedom from or the cessation (nirodha) of this unsatisfactory state, this suffering, which will come with the rooting out (rather than the mere assuagement) of that ongoing thirst
4. that the way to do this is to practice the so-called Noble Eightfold Path

This Path (*mārga*) is the same as the realization of the Middle Way, between the extremes of indulgence and asceticism, and it is for this reason that the Buddha (as in the selection below) often preached the Middle Way along with the Four Noble Truths.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the Buddha is said to have realized each of the Four Noble Truths in three ways: first, he came to "see" them; second, he engaged in "developing" them through practice; and third, he fully realized them in such a way that he had "nothing more to learn" about them. In this way, the Wheel of the Dharma was "thrice-turned," and the Four Noble Truths together have twelve aspects. The *Dharmacakrapravartana sūtra* (*Sūtra on Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma*) was incorporated into many Buddhist texts, both Pali and Sanskrit. The following is from a Sanskrit work said to be the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin school.

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Thus have I heard: Once, when the Blessed One was dwelling in Benares, at the Deer Park in Rṣivadana, he spoke to the "Fortunate Five," a group of elders who were his first disciples.

"Monks," he said, "for one who has wandered forth, there are two extremes. What two? On the one hand, there is attachment to sensual pleasures; this is vulgar, common, ignoble, purposeless, not conducive to a chaste and studious life, to disgust with the world, to aversion from passion, to cessation, monkhood, enlightenment, or nirvāṇa. On the other hand, there is addiction to exhausting the self through asceticism; this is suffering, ignoble, and purposeless. Monks, for one who has wandered forth, these are the two extremes. Staying with the Tathāgata's Noble Doctrine and Disciple, away from both of these extremes, is the middle course, fully realized [by the Buddha], bringing about insight, and conducive to tranquillity, disgust with the world, aversion from passion, cessation, monkhood, enlightenment, and nirvāṇa. . . .

"Furthermore, monks, there are Four Noble Truths. What four? The Noble Truth of suffering, the Noble Truth of the origination of suffering, the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering, and the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

"Now, monks, what is the Noble Truth of suffering? Just this: Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering. Involvement with what is unpleasant is suffering. Separation from what is pleasant is suffering. Also, not getting what one wants and strives for is suffering. And form (rūpa) is suffering, feeling (vedanā) is suffering, perception (samjñā) is suffering, karmic constituents (saṃskāras) are suffering, consciousness (vijñāna) is suffering; in sum, these five agglomerations (skandhas), which are the basis of clinging to existence, are suffering. This, monks, is the Noble Truth of suffering.

"And what is the [second] Noble Truth of the origination of suffering? It is the thirst for further existence, which comes along with pleasure and passion and brings passing enjoyment here and there. This, monks, is the Noble Truth of the origination of suffering.

"And what is the [third] Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering? It is this: the destruction without remainder of this very thirst for further existence, which comes along with pleasure and passion, bringing passing enjoyment here and there. It is without passion. It is cessation, forsaking, abandoning, renunciation. This, monks, is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering.

"And what is the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering? Just this: the Eightfold Noble Path, consisting of right views, right intention, right effort, right action, right livelihood, right speech, right mindfulness, right meditation. This, monks, is the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

"'This is suffering. . . . This is the origination of suffering. . . . This is the cessation of suffering. . . . This is the way that leads to the cessation of suffering': monks, from these basic mental realizations, according to doctrines that were not handed down from previous teachers, there were produced in me knowledge, insight, understanding, enlightenment, intelligence, and wisdom; illumination became manifest.

"This Noble Truth of suffering is to be thoroughly known. . . . This origination of suffering is to be given up. . . . This Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized. . . . This Noble Truth of the way

leading to the cessation of suffering is to be cultivated': monks, from this basic mental realization, according to doctrines that were not handed down from previous teachers, there were produced in me knowledge, insight, understanding, enlightenment, intelligence, and wisdom; illumination became manifest.

"This Noble Truth of suffering has come to be known thoroughly. . . . This origination of suffering has been given up. . . . This Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized. . . . This Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been actualized': monks, from this basic mental realization, according to doctrines that were not handed down from previous teachers, there were produced in me knowledge, insight, understanding, enlightenment, intelligence, and wisdom; illumination became manifest.

"And monks, as long as I did not perceive, with right wisdom, these Four Noble Truths as they are, thrice-turned and in their twelve aspects, I could not claim to have fully attained unsurpassed complete enlightenment, nor would there be produced knowledge in me, nor would I have realized certain emancipation of the mind. But since, monks, I did perceive, with right wisdom, these Four Noble Truths as they are, thrice-turned and in their twelve aspects, I know I have fully attained unsurpassed complete enlightenment. Knowledge was produced in me, and I did realize certain emancipation of the mind, liberation through wisdom."

Thus the Buddha spoke while he was residing in Benares, at the Deer Park in R̄ṣivadana. And hearing this explanation, the Venerable Ājñāta Kaundinya's understanding was awakened, and he attained the perfectly pure, pristine, unstained Dharma-eye into the nature of things. . . .

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Source: Translated from *Mahāvastu*, ed. Emile Sénart (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1897), 3:330–34.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.7 THE "DEATH" AND PARINIRVĀNA OF THE BUDDHA

Ājñāta Kauṇḍinya and his companions, as we have seen, became the first Buddhist monks and formed the initial core of what was to become the Buddhist monastic community. Soon, however, other disciples were attracted to the Buddha and his Teaching, and the new religion grew steadily (see 2.1).

The Buddha is said to have spent forty-five years wandering through northern India, preaching his Dharma, making converts, and firmly establishing his community. But like all compounded things, he too was subject to impermanence, and according to the legend, at age eighty, his "final extinction" (parinirvāṇa) took place in the small town of Kuśinagarī, between two śala trees. To this day, all over the world, this event marks the beginning (year 0) of the Buddhist calendar.

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<sup>7</sup>Alternative English translation, J. J. Jones, *The Mahāvastu* (London: Luzac, 1956), 3:322–27.