

BETWEEN THE LINES



An Analytical
Appreciation of the
Buddha's Life

VOL 1

Sylvia Bay

I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Mr Bay Kwang Boo, who had loved the Triple Gems and was devoted to supporting Sangha to the last days of his life. May he be well and happy wherever he is reborn and may he realise nibbana one day.

Acknowledgement

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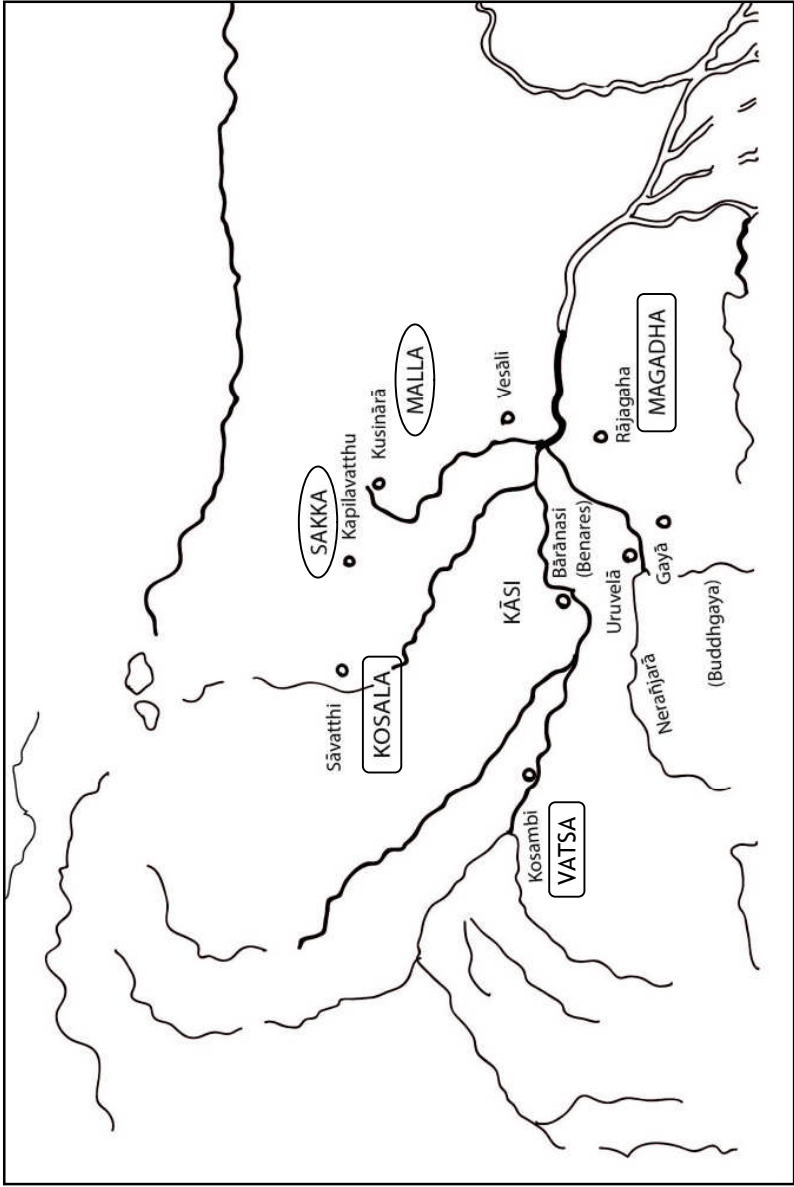
Abbreviations for Pali Canon texts

Vinaya Pitaka	Discipline 'Basket'
Para.	Parajika
Mv.	Mahavagga
Cv.	Cullavagga

Sutta Pitaka	Discourse 'Basket'
D.	Digha-nikaya (long collection)
M.	Majjhima-nikaya (middle-length collection)
S.	Samyutta-nikaya (connected collection)
A.	Anguttara-nikaya (numerical collection)

Khuddaka-nikaya	Minor Collection
Ud.	Udana (inspired utterances)
Sn.	Sutta-nipata (sutta collection)
Dh.	Dhammapada (path of Dhamma)
Thag.	Theragatha (verses of the elder monks)

Map of northeast India during time of Buddha



An Author's Request

I ask that you spare a moment to read this 'short' note before you plunge into the juicier substance in the main body. I would like to take this opportunity to explain three things: why I wrote this book, what is my approach, and what I hope the reader would take away from the reading experience.

Purpose of writing this book

a) To strike a balance between logic and faith

Much have been told and written about Buddha's life through the ages. Many of those stories would recount with delight the many wondrous tales of great magic and divine splendour that purportedly surrounded Buddha all his life. While entertaining and fascinating, those colourful tales may be a little difficult for the modern, more discerning readers schooled to expect scientific explanations to appreciate, much less swallow. Indeed, the more sceptical analytical mind might even be put off from Buddhism by the very same incredible stories

that had enthralled and entertained his ancient, more impressionable brethren. The challenge for me is to try and find that middle path of explaining the key milestone events in Buddha's life that would satisfy the critical, rational, modern reader without putting off the more devotional followers.

b) To unveil the historical Buddha

A key goal in this book is to tease out the historical Buddha from between the lines in the ancient Buddhist texts (hence the title). Buddha may well be divine as those texts maintain. But I believe that there is so much more to appreciate about Buddha if we see him as just a man. A mere mortal, pushing the limits of his own endurance, then realising *nibbana* on his own and finally successfully devising a method of guiding others to the same sublime realisation: I find that far more inspiring, more uplifting than if I were to see him as a divine being! (It is sometime hard to identify with divinity.)

Having said that, however, I must also add that the ancient storytellers had no ill intent when they embellished

Buddha's life stories. They were addressing an audience that was mostly uninformed, highly impressionable, and probably completely devotional in their approach towards Buddha. The way to touch their hearts, lift their spirit and cement their faith was to give them wondrous tales of divine powers, awesome greatness, and incomparable kindness and compassion.

c) To reconstruct Buddha's life story accurately yet convey it simply

There are many well-written, carefully-researched and thought-provoking biographies on Buddha's life by renowned scholars. Unfortunately, those books are often deemed too difficult for the general readers to appreciate. Conversely, there are also many books on Buddha written for the popular market. But those tend to be a little simplistic in substance, often inaccurate and are typically caught up with the myths and the magic. This book seeks to bridge the two divide. It aims to reconstruct Buddha's life story in a way that would meet the exacting research standards of scholars in terms of accuracy and reliability. At the same time, it remains readable and easy to digest

so that the general reader could finally learn about the historical Buddha (that scholars have known for a long time), and understand him better and be inspired.

Approach

The main source of reference for this book is the Pali Canon (also referred to as canonical texts). It is essentially a huge compilation of Buddha's teachings on a wide range of issues. The Theravada school believes that these texts were compiled just 3 months after Buddha's passing. Many modern scholars are generally inclined to go along with this because there are no compelling evidences to indicate otherwise.

I consider the Pali Canon a more dependable source of information about Buddha's life relative to later Buddhist literary works for two reasons. First, because I accept that the Canon was largely collated and compiled by contemporaries of Buddha, namely his disciples. They would know him better than anyone since because they had personally interacted and lived with him. Second, I also accept that the Pali Canon was compiled and

completed possibly within a year of his death. In contrast, most Buddhist literary works were produced a few hundred years later. It is reasonable to assume that the further the source of information from Buddha's time, the higher the chance of that material being corrupted. So the authenticity of the commentaries written hundreds of years later is therefore suspect. But we cannot completely disregard the commentaries otherwise we would be left with so little data on Buddha that it is barely enough for even a very basic impression. However, because the authenticity of later sources is suspect, we have to be very careful when we use those materials.

Learning points from reading experience

Finally, beyond just enhancing knowledge of Buddha, I also hope that this book would encourage the reader to be more probing and thinking when examining Buddhist texts and stories. It is perfectly consistent with Buddha's philosophy of learning to not just accept "teachings" at face value, but to ask questions, challenge assumptions and reflect critically. In Buddhism, we believe that true and lasting faith in *Dhamma* has to be

~ AUTHOR'S REQUEST ~

anchored on clear and thorough understanding of the concepts and the practice. And that has to be forged through critical examination and reflection and not just blind acceptance.

Finally, I must add the caveat that the conclusion in this book is but one version of Buddha's story, from the perspective of a scholar. There could be other interpretation of the same materials used, in which case, a slightly different picture of history may emerge. But that is alright: varied conclusions make for interesting debates and reflections.

Foreword

The Indian aristocrat who preferred devoting his life to discover *Dhamma* ('philosophy' and 'religion' defined the oriental way) rather than enjoying the luxurious life he was offered by his rich father has been 'lifted up' by his followers from history to myth, to legend and even to superstition. That was the reason why Samuel Beal called the biography of the Buddha he compiled "The Romantic Life of Gotama the Buddha". Even the life stories written by traditional Theravadins are full of events and descriptions one might consider more mythological than historical. Is his identity, then, deemed lost permanently for genuine seekers of 21st century? Or is it deeply hidden under the thick layer of glossy 'religious' literature?

In the Buddha's own terms, Enlightenment itself was like discovering a lost city; finding an ancient and forgotten path. It is natural, in this impermanent world, that cities get lost, ruined and forgotten; roads get old and abandoned. So are the philosophies and religions. In spite of the claims of clergy and pious devotees, creative

~ FOREWORD ~

literary men improvise, modify, change and even distort not only the teachings and texts but also the biographies of the founders of those traditions. However, the reality in relation to some religions may be comparatively less dark. Nevertheless, right thinking people cannot afford to take this as an excuse for refraining from 'exploration' in order to find the original shape of ideas and identify the real personalities of the great masters.

The bold title given to Sylvia Bay's book "Between the Lines" accompanied by the subtitle "An Analytical Appreciation of Buddha's Life" is self-explanative. Even though almost twenty six centuries of reproducing the biography has not completely distorted the original historicity and humanity of the Gotama Buddha, a critical analysis - or rather reading between the lines - can bring out much of the 'hidden' humanity of the great Master. Archaeologists have done their lot to establish historicity of the Buddha dismissing the so called sun-myth interpretation made by some early Western writers. Literary critics, historians and philosophers still have to read between the lines to appreciate the compassionate,

intellectual, cultured and rational characteristics of the great human being who revolutionised Indian thought.

The writer is not assuming either the role of a Buddhist apologetic or an intellectual bull fighter. She is a sober intellectual, well disciplined in systematic research techniques and motivated by genuine interest of portraying the Buddha who really lived. Every right thinking Buddhist should congratulate her effort to appreciate the 'real' Buddha through systematic vipassana.

Chandima Wijebandara

Buddhist Library Graduate School, Singapore

Chapter 1: Life as a Layman

If we depend solely on the Pali Canon, it is not possible to piece together much of a story of Buddha's lay life. There were only a handful of discourses that covered those early days, and they focused mainly on his wondrous birth, some biographic snippets (place of birth, name of parents, clan and caste), astrological prediction of his greatness, some mention of his luxurious lifestyle and that is about it.

The sparseness of data is not surprising because the Canon compilers' main concern was to put together Buddha's teachings (also known as *Dhamma*) as comprehensively as possible. They were not particularly interested in ensuring that Buddha's life was properly documented and accurately captured for posterity. On the rare occasion when the Canon did mention an event in

his lay life, it was mainly to make a *Dhamma* point or to impart a *Dhamma* lesson and not so much to record that event per se.

Thus in our reconstruction of the historical Buddha's lay life, it is inevitable that we have to turn to the commentarial literature for plausible data points. As mentioned earlier, however, those materials were put together centuries after Buddha's time so one cannot be completely sure how accurate or authentic they were. It is a challenge to decide what commentarial materials we can use because they sound plausible and what to discard because they were probably wrong.

In this chapter, I hope to reconstruct a reasonable account of Buddha's lay life that covers the milestone events from his birth to adulthood, with the help of canonical material and the more plausible data from commentaries. I shall also offer some thoughts about his relationships with the key people in his life.

First, here are some basic facts: it is not clear when exactly Buddha was born. The most that scholars

could agree on is that he was born more than 2,500 years ago, around 5th – 6th century BC.¹ There is greater consensus over where his ancestral home was: in Northeast India, in the region of Kapilavatthu. Buddha himself described it as “by the foothills of the Himalayas”.²

Birth

In any individual’s life, his birth must surely count as a critical milestone. What is the one thing that we celebrate for each other and ourselves year after year? Birthdays! We treasure the day we come into being, into existence and consciousness, and are thus able to enjoy sense pleasures and the thrill of being aware. So naturally, the ancient Buddhist storytellers were just as elated, indeed euphoric, about the birth of Buddha. I think it is inevitable that they would go a little overboard

¹ Sri Lankan tradition puts it at 624BC, UNESCO 623BC, others at 566BC, and some scholars at 490BC. “Siddhartha Gautama”, Cristian Violatti, published on 9 Dec 2013, http://www.ancient.eu.com/Siddhartha_Gautama/
² “*Pabbaja Sutta*: The Going Forth” (*Sutta Nipata* 3.1), translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 Nov 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.3.01.than.html>.

gushing about the miraculous events of his birth. In the minds of those ancient storytellers, surely such a great being as Buddha could not have a normal, average, run-of-the-mill type of birth. This is probably the reason why the canonical account of his birth was heavily into magic, miracles and divine presence. Below is a short summary of the canonical version of his birth.

a) Canonical version³: a divine birth

The start point of this version is our *bodhisatta* (the future Gotama Buddha) residing as a *deva* (deity) in *Tusita* heaven. When he passed away from there, he took conception in the womb of ‘Queen Maya’. The Canon then went into exuberant overdrive describing in vivid, vibrant details how heavenly beings across all heavens celebrated with gusto his conception. More incredible stories followed: ‘4 young deities’ were sent to guard the precious gestating embryo; his mother’s mind

³ The story of Buddha’s birth is found in “*Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta*: Wonderful and Marvellous”. I used the version translated from Pali by Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu and Bodhi Bhikkhu, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Buddhist Publication Society, 1995, pp. 979-984.

stayed pure and chaste throughout the pregnancy; she even had an ultra-sound image of him in the womb and saw that he was 'perfectly formed'! And it goes on.

Then 10 months on the dot (the Canon specifically stressed the timeline), the baby was born. The Canon reported that Maya gave birth to him 'standing up' and noted smugly that in contrast, "other women give birth seated or lying down'. The '4 deities' (the same security detail mentioned above) received the infant and presented him to Maya. Then "two jets of water appeared to pour from the sky, one cool and one warm, for bathing" the baby and his mother. The little infant was then said to have "stood firmly with his feet on the ground", took "7 steps north, and with a white parasol held over him, he surveyed each quarter and uttered the words": "I am the highest in the world; I am the best in the world; I am the foremost in the world. This is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being for me."⁴

⁴ Ibid., p. 983.

The above account, captured in the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, was purportedly delivered by Ananda, Buddha's personal attendant for over 20 years and closest cousin.

The *sutta* seemed to betray some puritanical value judgement. It hinted of a virgin conception, which is quite absurd since Maya was married and the couple would be under tremendous familial pressure to continue the lineage! I guess the straitlaced ancient storytellers could not wrap their mind around the fact that Buddha was conceived in the natural way. This prudish attitude also underpins the constant emphasis about how throughout the pregnancy, the mother was absolutely chaste and did not even have a single impure and lustful thought.

I personally have strong doubts about the authenticity of this *sutta*. Most of the *suttas* in the Pali Canon are quite focused on imparting *Dhamma* teaching. However, there is a very small number such as this one which does not appear to have an apparent *Dhamma* message and is primarily concerned with highlighting the magic, miracles and the supernatural in the stories. The

main purpose of those stories of marvel appears to be to gladden the relatively uninformed masses and inspire them on pure faith as opposed to guiding serious practitioners on *Dhamma*.

For those of us with deep devotional faith and are happy with a literal reading of these stories, I think there is no problem holding on to that belief as long as it does not undermine one's spiritual practice. But for the readers who find it hard to stomach the magic and fantasy and yearn for a more scientific explanation, I offer an alternate explanation.

b) Alternate account: a traumatic birth

If we approach the canonical account with a more critical and scientific eye, we may discern the following:

- That he was born outdoor, from the description about jets of water falling from the sky to bathe mother and infant. Could it be that it rained?

- That there was difficulty at delivery: perhaps it was a very long labour, ironically from the observation that she stood during childbirth. Could it be that she was walking around to ease her pain?
- That there was complication during delivery from the claim that the baby came out standing: was it a breech case and the baby's legs made an appearance first? That would excite the attendants and made for fond reminiscence in years to come.
- Could it even be a miracle that he survived at all if indeed there were all those complications at birth? Then surely his family and relatives would see him as much blessed by the deities to have survived his birth ordeal.

If we start from this basis, the story of his birth takes on a more ominous note. This is where we go to the commentarial literature for more details.

First, why was the mother giving birth in the open and not at home? Perhaps tradition was right after all! It

said that sometime in her final trimester, the future Buddha's heavily-pregnant mother returned to her ancestral home in Devadaha.⁵ (It was apparently the custom of the day for the mother to be looked after by her own family during her confinement.) It was along the way that she stopped to rest at a park in Lumbini (about 35km outside Devadaha). There she unexpectedly went into labour.

I suspect Buddha was born prematurely. It is highly unlikely that his family, which was all excited about the impending birth of the first-born child, would be so negligent as to let the mother undertake an exhausting journey if the birth was already due. (Of course, we are assuming that even at that time, the ancient Indians knew what the typical gestation period for a normal pregnancy was.) I find it rather odd that an entire stanza in the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta* was devoted to stressing that Buddha was born at "exactly 10 months". Why even bother to highlight the timeline if there was no problem about it? This is especially since it is an absurd claim to

⁵ Believed to be in modern Rupandehi district of Nepal.

begin with for how would the storytellers know that it was an exact 10-month pregnancy; even modern science could offer only a best guesstimate on when the tiny life was conceived.

Second, it must have been a most uncomfortable if not traumatic birth. Consider this: the baby was born not in the comfort of a home but on the road. Since they were not expecting him, it is highly unlikely that they had carried the necessary 'medical' facilities (word used loosely) on what they must have assumed would be a straightforward journey. Buddha was said to have been born during *Vesakha* (April-May). If that was so, it would have been the beginning of the hot season which meant even more discomfort for the mother in labour. (Indian summer temperature today is estimated to average 32°C to 40°C.)

Third, that she was traveling would greatly increase the health risk for both mother and child, complications at delivery aside. Childbirth conditions are unavoidably messy. Imagine what it must have been like on the road: the blood, the bodily fluids, the dirt and dust, animal dung (it's a park!), insects, germs, etc., and no

ready supply of clean water. Given the unsanitary conditions, is it any wonder that his mother had died shortly after childbirth?⁶ What are the odds that she was felled by either too much blood loss or some out-of-control infections (e.g., septicaemia).

But for the ancient Buddhist storytellers, it is unconscionable to allow such a happy occasion to be forever clouded by a tragedy such as the death of a mother without giving it a happily ever after twist. So Buddha's mother was given a rebirth in *Tusita* heaven. In the commentaries, there were also explanations to rationalise her death. And these go something like this: the mother had to die because the womb that conceived the Buddha was sacred and could not house another child. Or the mother had to die because her kammic force was used up after she gave birth to such a great being.

In any case, from reading between the lines, what is obvious and undeniable is that the first significant

⁶ In the *Acchhariya-abbhūta Sutta*, it was said that Maya died 7 days after her child's birth. Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 982.

milestone event in Buddha's life was a tragedy: his mother had died giving life to him.

Early life: fact and fiction

A well-known tale about Buddha's life goes like this: he was the only son and heir of King Suddhodana. When he was only 7 days old, a gifted astrologer by the name of Kondañña predicted that the baby prince would abandon his royal birth-right and the possible destiny of being an empire builder and instead become a famous spiritual teacher who would start a world religion. The fateful day of the prince's renunciation would come when he sees 4 sights: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic. His disturbed father then decided to cocoon the young prince in a world of excessive comfort and luxury, so that he would not see the 4 Sights and renounce his throne. (The story of the 4 Sights will be discussed in Chapter 2: From Home to Homelessness.)

The above makes for a charming story but the bulk of the tale is probably pure fiction.

For a start, we know that Buddha was not a lofty prince. His father, Suddhodana, was not a king but a respected elder of a warrior tribe called Sakya. (His mother was not a queen either although her name was indeed Maya.) The Sakyans were governed by a council of elders who apparently took turns to chair council meetings. Suddhodana would have had his turn at being the chairman of the Sakyan board. Sakyan ancestors were known to be proud, fierce and highly-successful warriors, which would suggest that Buddha's clan probably controlled large tracts of land and was wealthy and prosperous. The Sakyans enjoyed some political autonomy over their territory, which Buddhist history records as Kapilavatthu. But they were ultimately vassals accountable to a powerful kingdom called Kosala. During Buddha's time, the Kosalan king was Pasenadi.

Buddha was probably the elder son and thus heir to his father's position on the council and property. He had younger siblings: a half-brother Nanda, and half-sister Nandi. The Canon actually did not mention Buddha's lay name. This is not surprising since the Canon was compiled by his closest disciples who would

probably be in too much awe of their late teacher to refer to him by his name! It was from the commentarial literature that we were told that Buddha was called Siddhattha, which meant “Wish-fulfilled”. If indeed that was his name, then it would strongly suggest that he was much loved by his father and he had brought a sense of fulfilment. (From this point of the story onwards, I shall refer to Buddha as Siddhattha for convenience.)

Although he lost his mother at birth, young Siddhattha was probably not starved of love. He was brought up by his maternal aunt, Prajapati Gotami. Incidentally, Prajapati Gotami was also married to Suddhodana. It was apparently not uncommon for sisters to marry the same man.

We do not know if the above-mentioned fortune-telling session did take place. It could well have been since ancient Indians, like ancients (and even moderns) everywhere, were very much into fortune-telling and prophecies. But it is not important other than to make the point, albeit a minor one, that Siddhattha was destined for

greatness of epic proportion whether in lay or spiritual life.

Childhood

The Canon was almost silent on Siddhattha's childhood. From commentarial literature, we have bits of hints that he grew up with his many cousins and siblings (Prajapati Gotami's children). We can assume that being scions of the ruling elite, they would all have some education of sort, possibly a home tuition programme as opposed to being schooled in some stranger's house which was a common practice of the day. We catch a glimpse of them playing in the forests surrounding their village: hunting, horse-riding, or just exploring. The cousins clearly had their share of fights and fun, and were probably very close-knit as they grew up together. Perhaps that would explain why years later, many of his cousins left home to become monks in his *Sangha*: they had a lot of faith in him possibly forged from their time as childhood playmates.

We know that young Siddhattha led an extremely luxurious lay life which speaks volume about the Sakyan's wealth. His clothes were made of the best material that money could buy and were all imported from the fashion capital of the day, Kasi. He had the best food but they were so rich that even his servants and retainers ate well ("white rice and meat"). His father had 3 palaces constructed for him: one each for India's 3 seasons: the hot, the cold and the wet. During the wet season, Siddhattha would be holed up safely in his quarters and be entertained by constant music provided by an all-women singing troupe ('no men', he said). His residence was so large that his ponds for lilies were colour-coded! And he was so well sheltered and pampered that "a white sunshade was held over (him) day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me." His father was clearly sparing no effort to ensure maximum comfort for him.⁷

⁷ This entire paragraph is based on a *sutta*, Delicate, in the Book of Threes, Anguttara Nikaya. The version I referred to was translated by Bodhi Bhikkhu, [The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya](#), Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2012, pp. 239-240.

Preparing for Life's Responsibility

Like all well-meaning parents, Suddhodana probably had high hopes for Siddhattha. He would have wanted his elder son to eventually take his place in the council of Sakyan elders. We can assume that an important goal of Siddhattha's education would have been to prepare him for leadership responsibility, although we have no data on what that comprised.

Given his warrior caste lineage, Siddhattha would presumably have been taught war craft and fighting skills in his youth. He would be expected to at least be able to defend their ancestral land against bandits and ambitious rival tribes. Since we can surmise from various *sutta* that he had his cousins' respect, I think we can reasonably assume that he was at least a competent if not skilful warrior; given the martial nature of that society and the value it put on valour and martial skills. (So our Buddha quite possibly was strapping, hearty and strong!)

Implied in the commentaries, however, Siddhattha did not stand out amongst the young macho warriors.

There is a charming story of how his father had problems persuading their proud relatives to seriously consider Siddhattha as a possible son-in-law. Apparently, they thought he was not 'warrior-like' enough for their daughters. So Siddhattha had to give a public demonstration of his archery and horse-riding skills. It must have been quite an impressive performance because soon after, excited Sakyan fathers rushed home to have their daughters decked up and sent to him for marriage consideration. We are unable to verify this story but it makes for fascinating reading.

Conventional Lay Life

a) Troubled marriage?

In his mid-teens (said to be 16), Siddhattha married a first cousin, a daughter of his paternal aunt, Pamita. Siddhattha's wife was actually never mentioned by name in the Pali Canon. She was merely called Rahulamata (i.e., mother of Rahula). It was almost as if she was a non-entity for the Canon compilers, which in a way she was because she was irrelevant to *Dhamma*

practice. But for a story on Buddha's life, it is necessary to explain her role and place after all she was his choice for a 'life partner', short as that marriage had been.

The commentaries called her Yasodhara (among others)⁸ and claimed that she and Siddhattha were born on the same day. By commentarial account, it would appear that theirs was a love marriage because it was Siddhattha who picked her from amongst a group of eligible first cousins. (Incidentally, the Sakyans were genetic purists who intermarried with a neighbouring tribe called Koliyans to keep both their "bloodline" pure.)

Notwithstanding a happy start, things were clearly not "perfect" for the beautiful young couple. They remained childless after more than a decade of marriage. No reason was given why this was so but it probably was not for lack of trying. Up until he became an ascetic, Siddhattha was leading a typical lay life. And one of the

⁸ These include Bhaddakaccana, Subhaddaka and Bimbadevi. See G. P. Malalasekera, Dictionary of Pali Proper Names, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, reprinted 2008, vol. 2, pp. 741-744, for some fascinating details on Yasodhara.

critical responsibilities of any young men then, especially one of his social standing, was to produce a son and heir. There would have been intense family pressure on both him and Yasodhara to 'deliver the goods'.

It can also be reasonably surmised that the couple was not entirely open in their communication with each other. Siddhattha behaved not differently from the average man when he was troubled: he bottled up everything and brooded alone. He was clearly disturbed or stressed about life's issues but he did not confide in his wife.

Yasodhara was probably aware that Siddhattha was upset about something: she was intelligent and wise and so it is unlikely that she was oblivious to his emotional angst. But she might not have known exactly what was bothering him and she clearly did not expect him to run away. His abrupt departure was a sore point with her. Years later, after his enlightenment, when he returned to Kapilavatthu for a quick visit, the commentaries reported that she held back from going to him to pay her respect like all the other Sakyans did. She was said to

have thought along the line of 'If there is any virtue in me, the Noble Lord himself will come to my presence. Then will I perform reverence on him.'⁹

And Buddha understood her and her needs. After a very public reunion with the rest of his family, Buddha took his leave from the noisy alms offering ceremony and quietly went to Yasodhara's private quarters. It was a poignant reunion for Yasodhara. As soon as he entered her chambers, she prostrated before him and kissed and embraced his feet. It was almost as if she had to give vent to her pent-up love for him. And he let her do as she wished essentially setting aside his dictum that monks should not have physical contact with the opposite gender.

Interestingly, even though Yasodhara was deeply unhappy (and probably hurt) that her husband had left her so abruptly, she still loved him deeply. She tried to understand his motives and in her own way showed support. Her father-in-law Suddhodana told Buddha that

⁹ Ibid., p. 742.

she would carefully emulate his way of life in those years when he was a struggling ascetic. When she first received news that he had become an ascetic, she removed her jewellery, wore a plain yellow robe, ate only one meal a day, and slept on low hard bed. She also turned down all new suitors that her well-meaning relatives had tried to introduce to her.

Loyal and faithful to the end, Yasodhara subsequently became a nun under his Order. She was a dedicated practitioner who successfully realised nibbana, became an *arahant* and was amongst the best of his disciples who had attained great supernormal powers.¹⁰ Like many of Buddha's closest ones, she preceded him in death. She died at 78, 2 years before Buddha.

¹⁰ Anguttara Nikaya commentary said that only 4 disciples, namely Sariputta, Moggallana, Bakkula and Bhaddakaccana (i.e., Yasodhara) had the power to recall incalculable eras. Ibid., p. 743.

b) Unhappy fatherhood

Siddhattha became a father apparently after many years of marriage (at 29 by traditional account). His son was given the name Rahula, which according to one translation means “fetter”. Going by this translation, it is reasonable to conclude that the new father was not jumping with joy over his son’s birth. If anything, he seemed to see it as a burden, a shackle.

We do not know if Siddhattha did leave householder life on the exact night of his son’s birth as reported in the commentaries, but we know that his son was very young when he left. (A fuller treatment of the events of his departure from the palace would be covered in Chapter 2: From Home to Homelessness.) In fact, the child was so young that he had no memory of his father’s physical appearance. When Buddha returned to Kapilavatthu 7 years later to spread *Dhamma* amongst the Sakyans, Yasodhara had to point him out to Rahula from the scores of monks. According to Rahula’s own biography, he was 7 years old when he joined the *Sangha*. Going by simple arithmetic, tradition was right at

least on the point that Buddha did leave for the ascetic life when his son was just a baby. (More would be said about the encounter between Buddha and his son in Chapter 9: Return to Kapilavatthu, and their evolving relationship after Rahula joined the Order.)

c) Complex relationship with his father

We can make some reasonable observations about the nature of Siddhattha's relations with his father even though there are not many data points to be culled from the Canon. It is obvious that Suddhodana was a doting parent who indulged on his children quite excessively. Specific to Siddhattha, apart from showering him with luxurious material comfort, it would appear that he also did not interfere in his son's choice of a wife. That was significant because the usual practice of the day was the parents would pick the mate for their children, who often would not have a say on the matter. It would appear that Suddhodana was quite ahead of his time.

But like many father-son relations through the ages, it would appear that they were not particularly

communicative with each other and they had very different expectations and dreams. Suddhodana wanted an heir who presumably would bring glory to the clan on the fame and fortune front. Siddhattha was not going to oblige them: he was introspective and disinterested in the secular world. One can just imagine pragmatic Suddhodana being quite flabbergasted with his elder son's increasing fascination with spirituality. When Siddhattha finally left home to be an ascetic, Suddhodana must have been crushed. Years later, Buddha himself said that his parents (since his mother was dead, he must have been referring to his father and stepmother) "wept with tearful faces"¹¹ when he left home. It was clearly an unpleasant separation.

Suddhodana eventually came round to accepting his son's decision about his life. When he heard that his son had started teaching *Dhamma* as a teacher and founder of a new sect, he immediately despatched messengers to ask Buddha to come home for a visit. The old man clearly missed his boy and his love was so great

¹¹ Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, op.cit., p. 256.

that he would swallow his pride (he was only human so there must be some) and make the first overture for reconciliation. (A fuller story on their reunion will be covered in Chapter 9: Return to Kapilavatthu.) The happy ending for Suddhodana was he eventually realised *nibbana* at his deathbed with the personal guidance of Buddha. With that, Buddha had more than repaid his debt to his father.

A final thought

Siddhattha was just a regular guy while in his lay life. He married at the usual average age of the time, loved his wife yet was not totally upfront with her, produced the requisite heir, and had some differences with his father. He was also on the whole stressed with life's expectations like everyone else. When he left householder life at 29, he was already in the prime of adult life and quite possibly was on the verge of assuming responsibility for the family business. What was unique about him was when he gave it all up: fame, fortune, power and family, and went in search of happiness and peace of mind. It took tremendous

conviction, profound courage and phenomenal willpower and inner strength.

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves that Buddha had a full lay life before becoming a monk. He had known, understood, and experienced all aspects of life: the good and the bad, the joys and the pains, the gains and the trials. He had opted out of the secular world but he was not out of touch with life's mundane demands. It is this knowledge of the lay world that enabled him to have such deep empathy for the world and to be so successful in speaking the language of the average man and guiding him to spiritual success.

Chapter 2: From Home to Homelessness

This chapter will cover the period between Siddhattha leaving his home and family to be a homeless ascetic and the eve of the day he realised *nibbana*¹² and became the Buddha. His main focus during this 6-year period was the quest to understand why there was so much pain in life and how to achieve absolute mental peace and unconditioned happiness. This was also a

¹² *Nibbana* is the term used for the state of ultimate spiritual enlightenment and realisation in Buddhism. Upon realising this state, the practitioner is completely free from *dukkha* (often translated as suffering but it actually means the full range of unhappy, uncomfortable, unpleasant experiences) and will live life in unconditioned bliss and happiness. *Nibbana* literally means the extinguishing of a fire. For an excellent elaboration on *nibbana*, refer to “*Nibbana*”, by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Access to Insight, (Legacy Edition), 8 Mar 2011, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/nibbana.html>.

period of intense mental struggle and excruciating physical suffering.

The reference materials for the reconstruction of this period of Buddha's life are from mainly 2 types of sources: the more authoritative Pali Canon, and the less authentic but more colourful and entertaining commentarial literature. They have their respective unique themes and characteristics. In the Pali Canon account of his struggle for *nibbana*, the focus tended to be on the lonely battle in the mind of Siddhattha, and the pain and difficulties of the spiritual journey. While the Canon cheered Siddhattha's ultimate spiritual achievement and attainment, the celebratory mood was dignified, solemn and contemplative.

The commentarial literature had a very different emphasis. It tended to downplay the obstacles that he encountered and sometimes blamed them on the doing of a real-life evil deity called Mara. (In Buddhist stories, Mara is the number one villain whose key job was to obstruct Buddha in his *Dhamma* mission wherever and whenever possible. He is also the patron deity of every

imaginable bad motivation: greed, avarice, hatred, pride, laziness, and so on.) Siddhattha's struggle for enlightenment and *nibbana* is cast almost like a war between good and evil. The commentaries were more buoyant in trumpeting Siddhattha's ultimate spiritual triumph. Their key message seemed to be that he did it despite Mara's best efforts to stop him! And the *devas* and all heavens would break out in ruckus celebration at each major spiritual milestone.

Why did Siddhattha leave householder life?

Perhaps one of the most perplexing questions that had bothered many people through the ages, including even fairly staunch Buddhist lay supporters, is why did Siddhattha, at the prime of his life, a young father with a beautiful wife, and heir to the wealth and power of an ancient family, give up everything for a life of uncertainty, extreme hardship and deprivation of a wandering ascetic? Common follow-on questions are: was he not being irresponsible to abandon his wife and child? Was he not being unfilial to walk out on his parents and away from his duties towards them?

The traditional 'explanation' for why Siddhattha left householder life was his deep sense of life's suffering as a result of encountering 4 sights over different occasions. Three of them: an old man, a ghastly-sick person, and a funeral, reminded him of the suffering in life. After each of those encounters, Siddhattha would return to his palace deeply disturbed and unhappy. He would mull over the meaninglessness of life for days at the thought that sickness, old age and death was the natural lot of existence. Then at his fourth and final outing, he saw a shaven-headed ascetic in yellow robe, and had the brilliant insight that that represented the path to mental salvation. It was said that Siddhattha made the pivotal decision at that point that he would leave his home and family to become an ascetic.

The traditional story seems to allude that Siddhattha's renunciation was unavoidable and inevitable because it was his destiny to leave householder life, realise enlightenment, become a Buddha and then teach *Dhamma* for the rest of his life. The 4 Sights were thus like Pavlovian signals: the moment he saw them, he would feel the compulsion to go in search of *Dhamma*

and fulfil his destiny to be the enlightened Buddha. That mission is implied to be far more important than the mundane demands of life's responsibility. (Indeed, the point that his renunciation was inevitable and it was his destiny was already made in the prediction by the famous astrologer Kondañña when he was still an infant: that he would leave his home once he saw the 4 Sights.)

Thus, it would appear that the early Buddhist storytellers' response to the perennial question on why Siddhattha had abandoned his young family was to say that the act was unavoidable because it was his destiny to become a Buddha and save mankind. Incidentally, in the *Mahapadana Sutta*¹³ where the 4 Sights were mentioned, Buddha was actually recounting the life story of a predecessor, Buddha Vipassi, who lived "91 aeons ago". Buddha said Lord Vipassi left home upon seeing the 4 Sights. Therefore, strictly speaking, the 4 Sights was not our Gotama Buddha's autobiography. The inference that the 4 Sights also applied to our Buddha

¹³ Maurice Walshe translated, *Mahapadana Sutta* (Great Discourse on the Lineage), Thus Have I Heard: the Long Discourses of the Buddha, Wisdom Publications, London, 1987, pp. 199-221.

was this persistent line in the *Sutta* where Buddha uttered, “This, monks, is the rule”, implying that all buddhas-to-be would experience almost identical milestone life episodes.

Buddha’s own account on why he renounced lay life

The Pali Canon did actually capture Buddha’s explanation on why he left home to be an ascetic. The explanation is not as easily understood, but because it came from Buddha’s own mouth, I think we should take it as more credible. In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, Buddha told his monks that while he was still a lay man, he would observe the meaninglessness of life’s pursuits.¹⁴ To him, it did not make sense to chase after material goods,¹⁵ if

¹⁴ In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (The Noble Search), Buddha said, “What is ignoble search? Here someone being himself subject to birth seeks what is also subject to birth... Being subject to aging... sickness... death... sorrow... defilement... he seeks what is also subject to aging... sickness... death... sorrow... defilement.” Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 254.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 254, “And what may be said to be subject to birth? Wife and children are subject to birth, men and women slaves... goats and sheep... fowl and pigs... elephants, cattle, horses and mares, gold and silver are subject to birth. These objects of attachment are subject to birth...”

he himself had only a limited shelf life. Instead, it made more sense to go in search of unconditioned happiness¹⁶ i.e., the happiness that came from within one and did not depend on external factors. In the *Maha-Saccaka Sutta*, Buddha said it was impossible to practise and realise this unconditioned happiness if he were to remain in lay life. “Household life is crowded and dusty... It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell.”¹⁷

It would appear that the decision to renounce was thus prompted not so much by thoughts of saving humanity but by a desire to regain mental balance and equilibrium. It was about putting life's choices and priorities in perspective and figuring out how to regain happiness and inner peace so that there is some meaning in living.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 255, “Here someone being himself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeks the unborn supreme security from bondage, *nibbana*.”

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 335.

Did Siddhattha leave the day his son was born?

Another commonly repeated story about Buddha was how the birth of his son had triggered him to leave home when he did. Siddhattha was said to be in a park obsessing about life's problems, when he was sent word that Yasodhara had delivered. Siddhattha supposedly exclaimed "a fetter has been born", and decided that he had to get out of his home as soon as possible otherwise he was trapped. It was said that late that very same night, Siddhattha fled his ancestral home.

The Pali Canon did not mention this dramatic flight in the night. We also do not know for certain if indeed he left home that same day that the baby was born. If we go by the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* and Buddha's description of his parents crying at his decision to abandon lay life, it seemed to suggest that they saw him leave the house. That as opposed to the traditional version which is that he had fled his palace secretly in the dead of night.

Nevertheless, it is still quite telling that his son was named Rahula. Who would name a precious first-born

son “Fetter” (or Eclipse, which was the other translation)? Surely that cannot be an auspicious name. It is highly possible that the family, at the time of the boy’s birth, was dealing with some heavy, unpleasant emotions and the poor boy carried the burden of the memory in his name. The loss of an heir-apparent could be the cause of the heavy-duty emotions.

The Great Renunciation

a) ‘Bidding goodbye’

We have no data from the Canon to reconstruct Siddhattha’s fateful journey from home to homelessness on the day he renounced lay life. It could be because the actual departure itself had no particular *Dhamma* value, so Buddha did not comment about the event. But Buddhist storytellers through the ages obviously appreciated the entertainment value of the momentous occasion, hence the commentaries enthusiastically plugged in fascinating little details. We have no way of knowing whether those juicy little nuggets were historical

but they are worth repeating because they do enrich the story of Buddha's life and are inspiring.

The traditional story includes a mention that on the night of Rahula's birth, there was a clan party of sort (probably to celebrate the happy occasion), complete with dancing girls, loud music and free-flowing alcohol. Siddhattha got bored and fell asleep in the midst of the revelry, while the world got merrily drunk around him. When he awoke in the middle of the night, everyone was sleeping, drooling and/or snoring. Siddhattha was said to be aghast at the sight of the slumbering people and decided to make his escape while everyone was still out cold.

Then the commentaries injected a poignant moment in the tale of Siddhattha's great renunciation: his dropping by the bed chamber of Yasodhara presumably to take a last look at his wife and child and to bid a silent goodbye. He stood at the doorway to look at his sleeping family, so as not to wake Yasodhara. And then he left, by some account, without actually laying eyes on his newborn son. Depending on the skill of the storyteller, this

small scene is important and can contribute to mollifying the indignation of those listeners who questioned his reasons for abandoning his family. Here we see not an insensitive man intent on his own spiritual pursuits but a caring father and husband who did feel the loss and pain of separation but chose to press on because the spiritual mission was more important.

b) Out of the city gate

The part of the departure story that had arguably the most thrilling cinematographic details was the horse ride out of his palace to the city gate. Even super-villain deity Mara got into the act to try and stop Siddhattha from leaving lay life. Mara appeared in mid-air just before Siddhattha's horse reached the city gate and called out to him. Mara said if Siddhattha were to turn back and go home, in 7 days he would be a "universal monarch" (apparently the ultimate ambition of any full-blooded member of the warrior caste). Siddhattha flatly turned him down and pressed on. Furious, Mara vowed that he would shadow Siddhattha throughout his spiritual quest. Mara was said to be anxious about preventing Siddhattha

from becoming an ascetic because he knew that when that happened, it would only be a matter of time before Siddhattha would realise *nibbana*, become a Buddha and unveil *Dhamma* to the world. And then Mara's influence would wane greatly.

c) Across the river boundary

Meanwhile, the good deities tried to be helpful to Siddhattha too. They muffled the sound of his galloping horse's hooves and its neighing. They opened the city gate to let them out. It was not mentioned specifically but they could well have super-charged his horse for it was said to have made it across the Anoma River in one giant leap. (The Anoma River is the eastern limit of his relatives' lands.)

Once across the Anoma River, the story took on a more sombre tone. Siddhattha alighted from his horse, cut off his hair and beard, took off his rich aristocratic outfit and donned the simple robe of an ascetic. He then handed his expensive lay possession to his charioteer, Channa. Channa was the only human eyewitness to the

historic event. Siddhattha told Channa and Kanthaka (the horse) to return to Kapilavatthu, presumably to bid goodbye to his father on his behalf. According to the commentaries, Kanthaka was said to be so distraught at being separated from his master that on the way home, he collapsed and died of a broken heart. If indeed this had happened, I think it is more likely that Kanthaka had died from sheer exhaustion and not some psychological trauma. Depending on which source is used, the distance between Kapilavatthu and Anoma River is said to be 6 or 30 *yojanas*.¹⁸ During my research, I was unable to nail down conclusively what 1 *yojana* translates into. A study by a Japanese research institute said that 1 *yojana* is about 11.5km.¹⁹ Whether Kanthaka travelled over 66km that night or the more impossible over 330km, it would still have overtaxed him.

¹⁸ *Lalita Vistara* said 6 *yojanas* while the *Jataka* said 30 *yojanas*. Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 102.

¹⁹ Shoji Mori and Tsunao Motozawa, “A Study of Yojana – Re-examination of the Ancient Indian Measure of Distance”, Monograph Series 6, A Study of the Biography of Sakya-muni, based on the Early Buddhist Scriptural Sources. (<http://www.sakya-muni.jp/english/0001/0094monograph-series-no6/1-04article04/>)

While the above story is gripping, entertaining and even moving, unfortunately it should probably be taken with a pinch of salt. The main source of the great renunciation tale is the *Jataka*. The main objectives of *Jataka* stories have always been to impart moral lessons, to inspire the ancient audience and to attract new followers and not so much to record history accurately.

Possibly the only verifiable historical bit is the presence of Channa at Siddhattha's renunciation. Later in his life, Channa joined the *Sangha* but was a mediocre practitioner who was puffed up in his own self-importance because of his role as Buddha's charioteer at his renunciation. The Canon recorded that one of Buddha's last acts before his passing was to instruct the *Sangha* to excommunicate Channa for his excessive arrogance. Ironically, this bout of enforced isolation jolted Channa so badly that he turned to *Dhamma* practice for solace and eventually realised *nibbana*.

Nonetheless, there are a couple of observations worth mentioning. The melodrama of a nocturnal flight aside, I find it is highly plausible that Siddhattha did make

a beeline for the Anoma River. While we cannot be sure what that exact distance was, we can surmise that it must have been far: Siddhattha rode hard the whole night to complete the journey. Why would he do that? The Anoma River apparently marked the eastern limit of Koliyan territory. The Koliyans were his in-laws, Yasodhara's family. We can assume that his father-in-law would not be amused should he learn of Siddhattha's renunciation and 'abandonment' of his daughter. Should Siddhattha be found on his territory, there would be some hasty explaining to do. To the east of the Anoma River laid the land of another tribe, the Mallas. There his in-laws-cum-relatives would have no jurisdiction to capture him.

The freelance ascetic Gotama

Buddha did speak a little more about his time as a wandering ascetic and his spiritual quest. So we can pick up some useful data from the Pali Canon and have a rough sense of what those 6 years of struggle for *nibbana* were like.

It started off innocuously enough. Ascetic Gotama²⁰ spent his first week as an ascetic in a mango grove (*Anupiya Ambavana*) which was in the vicinity of the Anoma River. After that, he made his way towards Rajagaha, the ancient capital of a powerful and prosperous neighbouring kingdom, Magadha.²¹ Rajagaha was populous and wealthy, and clearly practised religious tolerance. That would explain why during Buddha's time, it played host to ascetics from several schools.

Ascetic Gotama had gunned for Rajagaha because he was looking for a teacher to help him resolve his burning question – how to overcome *dukkha* and achieve inner mental peace and bliss. When he started his quest, he did not assume that he would be able to discover the answer on his own. He was not so

²⁰ I shall be referring to him henceforth until his enlightenment as Ascetic Gotama to differentiate this period from his time as a lay man.

²¹ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 102. The commentaries said it took him 7 days to cover the distance of 30 *yojanas*. I have my doubts that Ascetic Gotama could cover over 330km in 7 days of walking. However, details aside, the point to note is within a relatively short time, he covered a vast distance which suggests that he had a clear destination in mind.

presumptuous that he would establish a new spiritual doctrine, complete with a new school and movement.

Chance meeting with King Bimbisara

Sometime quite early in Ascetic Gotama's stay in Rajagaha, there was a chance meeting between him and its young ruler, Bimbisara. This meeting was significant because Bimbisara would later become one of Buddha's most devout and generous royal patrons and was critical in helping to lay the foundation for the expansion of Buddha's school and spread of *Dhamma* in Magadha. (More would be said about Bimbisara's support for Buddha and the *Sangha* in Chapter 7 – Reaching Out to the Lay Community.)

Anyhow, their first crossing of paths happened one morning when Bimbisara caught sight of Ascetic Gotama on his alms round. Struck by Ascetic Gotama's good looks and dignified demeanour, Bimbisara told his men to

trail him.²² They followed him out of the city to the more remote and not so easily accessible Pandavapabbata (Mount Pandava).

Bimbisara subsequently paid Ascetic Gotama a visit. He was clearly taken by Ascetic Gotama when they met face to face for the first time. Bimbisara noted that the latter looked like he was from warrior background and would like to be his patron and make him wealthy.²³ Ascetic Gotama declined and said that he had just left behind his own family's great wealth when he renounced lay life and he was completely focused on his spiritual quest.²⁴ Bimbisara then supposedly requested that Ascetic Gotama come back to Rajagaha to teach him his doctrine when he had found his answers.²⁵ Possibly on

²² In the *Pabbaja Sutta* (The Going Forth), *Sutta Nipata*, Bimbisara said "Look at this one, sirs. How handsome, stately, pure! How consummate his demeanour! Mindful, his eyes downcast, looking only a plow-length before him, as one who's not from a lowly lineage; send the royal messengers at once to see where this monk will go." Thanissaro, Access to Insight, op. cit.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 285, footnote 4. Originally from *Sutta Nipata* commentary (SNA.ii.386), Pali Text Society.

account of this promise, Buddha made Rajagaha his first big city stop after his enlightenment.

Meditation practice

In ancient India, there was the belief that there were broadly two paths to achieving spiritual enlightenment: one, through meditation, or two, through torturing of the body in the belief that it could purify the mind. Ascetic Gotama chose to go with meditation.

His first teacher was Alara Kalama, a renowned meditation master of the Brahmanic tradition (mainstream religion of the day) with a large following of disciples. Alara Kalama taught Ascetic Gotama to attain to the “Sphere of Nothingness”, which is a very advanced form of meditation. Ascetic Gotama was a gifted student and very quickly mastered the method. He was so good that Alara Kalama invited him to jointly lead the school.

But Ascetic Gotama was restless and dissatisfied. He realised that in the Sphere of Nothingness, he was not getting any closer to understanding *dukkha* and

eradicating it. When he had confirmed with Alara Kalama that there was nothing more that the latter could teach him, Ascetic Gotama declined Alara Kalama's invitation to lead the sect jointly and left the community.

His next teacher was another renowned meditation master Uddakka Ramaputta, also of the Brahmanic tradition. Uddakka Ramaputta guided him to an even more advanced form of meditation that took him into the "Sphere of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception". But again he was disappointed: Ascetic Gotama mastered the technique quickly but found no relief to his sense of *dukkha* and no closer to understanding how to eradicate it. Uddakka Ramaputta offered to step down and make him the leader of the school, but Ascetic Gotama declined and left soon after to continue his spiritual quest.

Ascetic Gotama was a determined and focused seeker. He was clear in his mind what his goal was: to understand why the mind experience distress and how to eradicate that problem. He refused to be distracted by offers of celebrity status (which famous Indian yogis enjoyed even then), influence (over students and

devotees) and wealth (from devotional offerings). Those would have been his for the taking as his two famous teachers had offered him leadership role in their schools.

Self-torture

Instead, his quest took on a dangerous and ominous turn. When he decided that the answer he was seeking could not be found in the prevailing meditation methods of the day, he went on to check out the other path, namely, torturing of the body.

Ascetic Gotama did not do things by half measure. In his own words years later, Buddha told his monks that he had done things like going naked, starved, sleeping in the freezing cold, baking in the scorching sun, standing or squatting for exhaustingly long periods, pulling out his hair and beard, sleeping on a “mattress of spikes”, and even eating “dung of the young suckling calves” and his own “excrement and urine”, “as long as they lasted”.²⁶

²⁶ In the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (Greater Discourse on the Lion’s Roar), Buddha said “Such was my asceticism... that I went naked, rejecting conventions, licking my hands... I took food once a day, once every two

Amongst the more dangerous and painful ‘stunts’ he pulled included trying to stop respiration to the point of asphyxiation.²⁷ He was so extreme in forcing himself to stop breathing that he must have fainted, possibly quite often. (He said the “*devas*” started wondering if he was already dead.) It was clearly a physically excruciating and debilitating experience. Buddha described the pain as “extreme” and like “extreme forces sliced through my head, just as if a strong man were slicing my head open with a sharp sword”.²⁸

Yet another crazy ‘stunt’ he pulled was starving himself almost to the point of death.²⁹ In his own vivid

days... once every fortnight; ...I was an eater of greens or millet or wild rice... or grass or cow-dung... I was one who pulled out hair and beard... stood continuously... squatted continuously... used a mattress of spikes... I would go on all fours to the cow-pens... and feed on the dung of the young suckling calves. As long as my own excrement and urine lasted, I fed on my own excrement and urine... When those cold wintry nights came, I would dwell by night in the open and by day in the grove. In the hot season I would dwell by day in the open and by night in the grove.” Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 173-174.

²⁷ *Maha-Saccaka Sutta* (Great Discourse to Saccaka), Nāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 337-339.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 339-340.

and frightening account, Buddha said his body became so emaciated that "...my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems... my spine stood forth like a corded beads... my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old, roofless barn... my belly skin adhered to my backbone; thus if I touched my belly skin, I encountered my backbone and if I touched my backbone I encountered my belly skin... If I urinated or defecated, I fell over on my face there."³⁰

This is deeply disturbing reading. Clearly he was severely dehydrated, his body was in full starvation mode and he was slowly dying. His head and body hair started falling off, he was turning black.³¹ Even Mara the evil deity helpfully observed that "You are near death! A thousand parts of you belong to death and only a fraction of you is alive."³² Had he not pulled back from the precipice when he did, we might well have a very

³⁰ Ibid., p. 339.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 339-340.

³² *Padhana Sutta*: The Great Struggle (*Sutta Nipata* 3.2), translated from Pali by John D. Ireland, Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11), 30 Nov 2013, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.3.02.irel.html>

different outcome and a very different world today. Ascetic Gotama came very close to death: he himself probably knew that. But fortunately, he had the wisdom, courage and strength to change course. He stopped the self-torture method, reviewed his options and decided on a new approach, which he eventually named the 'middle path' (*majjhima patipada*). (More will be said about enlightenment and the middle path in Chapter 3: Enlightenment: *Nibbana!* Release!)

Concluding observations

Ascetic Gotama's quest for spiritual enlightenment was difficult, painful and heart-wrenching. It took at least 6 years, with the bulk of the time unfortunately spent on torturing the body. That decision to abuse the body was an unfortunate one because the damage wrecked in those years was so severe that it would appear that he never quite recovered properly. Buddha was in poor health in his later years: he had regular headaches, severe backaches and excruciating pain in his joints and all over the body. By the time he was in his 60s, Buddha

needed a full-time attendant, which probably speaks volume about his poor health.

It should also be noted that the 6-year struggle was a powerful demonstration of one man's extraordinary courage, phenomenal willpower and dogged determination. He was brought up in the lap of luxury, surrounded by beauty and wealth, and never going hungry or be at the mercy of the elements. He left all that for a life of complete uncertainty and vulnerability, almost assured hunger, deprivation and loneliness. For days on end, he lived in the wilderness, exposed to the elements, insects and animals. One cannot even begin to fathom the physical hardship, pain and mental suffering. Today it is easy to romanticise Buddha's struggle because his success was so complete, so deeply satisfying, and so awe-inspiring. But at that point when he started out, especially at the height of his struggle, he had no idea that he would succeed: only that he would die trying. It is important to put in perspective the overwhelming difficulties confronting Ascetic Gotama so that one may appreciate even more the miracle of his success in realising the sublime knowledge of *nibbana*. And

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hopefully, one may be inspired by his example to persevere on one's own spiritual journey even when the going gets tough.

Chapter 3: Enlightenment: *Nibbana!* Release!

The period covered in this chapter is from the point Ascetic Gotama decided to give up self-torture to the moment he realised *nibbana* and became the Buddha. During this entire period, Ascetic Gotama was completely alone, which means that he himself was the only direct source of information for what transpired. Buddha's own account which was captured in the Pali Canon was focused mainly on his meditation experiences before and during the Enlightenment event. He did not say much about his other more mundane encounters.

My approach, given the scarceness of data, is to tell the story with a mix of Buddha's own words (as captured in the Pali Canon), and some reference to the more imaginative, more fanciful tales of tradition that had been passed down through the centuries. But to ensure

that readers are not confused, I shall state clearly when the reference materials were historical and when I am using unverifiable sources. Where it is the latter, I will also attempt to offer some explanation as to the possible symbolic significance of the event.

Abandoning self-torture

We know that after 6 long years of painful struggle, at some point it suddenly struck Ascetic Gotama that he was approaching it all wrong.³³ Years later, in a recollection of the period, Buddha told his monks that no one could match him in terms of the length at which he would go to push himself in self-torture and yet he was unable to find spiritual peace and bliss. He surmised then that the method probably would not yield the answers he was seeking and he must look for another way.

³³ *Maha-Saccaka Sutta*, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 340.

Is *jhana* the path to *nibbana*?

As he was pondering over this puzzle, he suddenly recalled an incident that took place when he was still at home (and probably quite young). His own account of that very important recollection was actually quite sparse. All Buddha said was his father was busy, he was under the “cool shade” of a “rose apple tree” when he went into some meditative trance, which was the first *jhana*. Ascetic Gotama had wondered if that *jhanic* state “could be the path to Awakening?”³⁴

For such a critical moment in the spiritual quest to be so clinical and thin of details was probably unacceptable to the ancient storytellers. They earnestly filled in all the human interest bits. In the re-made version,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 340. Buddha recounted, “I considered: ‘I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhana*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born from seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment? ‘Then following on that memory, came the realisation: ‘That is the path to enlightenment.’”

young Siddhattha's first *jhanic* experience has an age: he was either 5 or 7 or even 9, depending on the account. This simple age differentiation is the first clue that the details of the colourful revised edition were probably not authentic: it is hard for storytellers across space and time to be consistent on made-up trivia. Anyhow, the colourful re-telling put the above occasion at a ploughing festival where his father 'was busy' with leading the ceremonies. Young Siddhattha was said to have been left under the 'shade of a rose-apple tree' to rest by his nannies. (At least the species of the tree was consistent with Buddha's recollection.)

Then the ancient storytellers got really creative and offer this dramatic scene. Instead of sleeping, young Siddhattha was quietly observing the world around him. He saw a lizard eating some insects that had been unearthed during the ploughing. The lizard was then attacked by a snake, which was in turn seized by an eagle. The little boy was saddened by the deaths he had just witnessed. He then sat cross-legged and started focusing on his breath.

And then the dramatised story merges with history again: both the Pali Canon and the ancient storytellers said that as Siddhattha went into “breathing” meditation (*anapanasati*), he got so focused that he unwittingly went into *jhana*. In contrast to the loud and colourful ceremony out in the field, under the tree, it was quiet, cool and peaceful. Siddhattha’s mind became very calm, light and happy, bright and focused.³⁵

Then fact and fiction diverge again. Depending on how exuberant the ancient storytellers, we have versions of him floating into the air as he remained deep in meditation, excitable nannies rushing to tell father of the levitation and awestruck father paying respect to young meditator, and so on and so forth; all very entertaining but probably just the work of overactive imagination.

For the spiritual quest, what was truly important is that Ascetic Gotama made the brilliant intuitive connection that *jhana* was the elusive tool necessary to help the mind concentrate so deeply that it attained that

³⁵ Ibid., p. 340.

level of calm, tranquillity, clarity and focus necessary to be able to realise Enlightenment knowledge. However, he also realised that because of the many years of abusing his body, he was physically too weak to be able to concentrate deeply enough to go into *jhana*. He needed proper nutrition to rebuild his strength and concentration. He started eating properly again, which actually merely meant “taking boiled rice and bread”.³⁶

Abandoned by his friends

We know that for the large part of the period when Ascetic Gotama was slowly but determinedly destroying his body in the most painful way, he had five companions earnestly and sincerely cheering him on. They looked after him, probably helped to keep him alive, and respectfully called him ‘the Contemplative’. They truly believed that self-torture was the key to spiritual enlightenment so the more he hurt himself, the more they

³⁶ Ibid., p. 340. I thought: ‘Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states? ...It is not easy to attain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated. Suppose I ate some solid food, some boiled rice and bread.’

were impressed and the more they were sure that he was just moments away from glorious “enlightenment”. They had followed him because they had hoped that when he was enlightened, he would guide them towards that attainment also. But when he started eating properly, they got disillusioned, disappointed and even disdainful and disgusted. They thought he had given up the struggle and was “backsliding into abundance”.³⁷ So they left him and went in search of their own answers.

This event has no spiritual significance per se but I think it does shed some light about Buddha’s compassion, magnanimity and capacity for forgiveness in how he handled his relationship with these five ascetics after his enlightenment. When they left him, it was not just a simple parting of ways between him and fellow practitioners. It was tantamount to a cruel act of abandonment and could have tragic results. Consider this: when they walked out on Ascetic Gotama, it was very soon after he started taking “boiled rice and bread”. What does that mean? I think it is reasonable to assume that

³⁷ Ibid., p. 340.

when they left him, he would not have recovered from severe starvation. He was near death when he stopped starving himself! He probably still needed care and help possibly just to move around, let alone going for alms and looking for food. Yet they left: one must wonder what could possibly upset them so much that they could not even muster enough compassion to hang around for an emaciated fellow practitioner? Were they so disgusted, so angry, that they could not wait to leave?

It must have stung Ascetic Gotama when it happened. Years later when Buddha recounted his 6-year struggle for enlightenment, he broke the flow of the story just to insert this short digression that his 5 “companions” left him “in disgust” when he stopped trying to starve himself to death.³⁸ Yet, Buddha never held their abandonment against them. When he realised *nibbana* and Enlightenment knowledge, they were amongst the first people he thought of to share his knowledge with. (For elaboration, see Chapter 5: Unveiling *Dhamma*.)

³⁸ Ibid., p. 340.

Lonely struggle for *jhana*

After the five companion-practitioners left him, Ascetic Gotama was all alone to struggle on. We know that he remained in the vicinity of Uruvela, near a border village called Senagami (which literally means ‘military village’). Incidentally, it would appear that he had been in Uruvela for a while already, quite likely from as far back as when he first started the self-torture routine. In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* which traced the early years of his quest for enlightenment, Buddha mentioned that he had settled down in a forest in Uruvela because he really liked the place: it had running water (probably River Neranjara) nearby and was close enough to human settlements that alms and food would not be a problem.³⁹

Ascetic Gotama’s priorities were to recover his health first and then to get into the meditative state of *jhana*. We know he spent quite a bit of time trying to achieve just the first *jhana*. Years later, Buddha told his cousin and a fellow monk, Anuruddha, how he had

³⁹ *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 259.

struggled for quite a while,⁴⁰ trying to eradicate several mental obstacles just to find his way back to the first *jhana*. He listed to Anuruddha a whole range of obstructive mental states which disrupted his concentration thus preventing him from going into *jhana*. Those included doubt, inattention, sloth and torpor, fear, elation, inertia, excessive energy, longing, and so on.⁴¹

As far as I know, this very critical struggle to achieve *jhana* was never really mentioned in any traditional Buddhist stories and could be found only in the Pali Canon. I am not sure why such a pivotal spiritual moment was left out of the popular literature. Perhaps talking about struggling for *jhana* just does not sound very entertaining, especially since the mass audience which was the target of Buddhist stories were not meditators and could not appreciate the difficulty, angst and triumph associated with meditation. Nevertheless, for a proper record of Buddha's spiritual quest, this pivotal moment must not be omitted from the popular memory.

⁴⁰ *Upakkilesa Sutta* (Imperfections), Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 1012-1015.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

24 hours to Enlightenment: symbols and tales abound

Instead, the following events were the hot favourites of storytellers through the ages. Some were mentioned by Buddha and captured in the Pali Canon. Others could be found only in stories put together several hundred years after Buddha's death.

a) Dreams that foretold his impending enlightenment

One perennial delight is five dreams that Ascetic Gotama had on the eve before Enlightenment. The dreams were recounted by Buddha in the *Supina Sutta*.⁴² He said, first, he dreamt that he was lying on a large bed that was the earth with the Himalayas as his pillow. His left hand rested in the eastern sea, his right in the western sea, and his feet in the southern sea. In his second dream, a woody vine grew out of his navel

⁴² “*Supina Sutta: Dreams*” (*Anguttara Nikaya*, Book of Fives, 196), translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11), 30 Nov 13, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an05.196.than.html>.

reaching to the sky. In the third, he saw white worms with black heads crawling up his legs and covering to the knees. In the fourth, four different-coloured birds flew from four directions to fall at his feet and turned completely white. And in the final dream, he saw himself walking back and forth on top of a giant mountain of excrement but he was not soiled by it. When Ascetic Gotama awoke, he knew that this was the day that he would attain enlightenment, become a Buddha, teach *Dhamma* and start a movement that would draw practitioners and lay followers.⁴³

In the *Supina Sutta*, Buddha himself explained the symbolisms. He said the first dream meant that he would awaken to Enlightenment knowledge. The second meant that when he had awakened to the noble eightfold path, he would teach it to both humans and celestial beings. The third was that many 'white-clothed' (i.e., practising) householders would go to him for refuge. The fourth was that people from the four castes would join his community, walk the path he prescribed, and realise

⁴³ Ibid.

nibbana for themselves. And fifth, Buddha would receive gifts of robes, alms, lodging and medicine but would not be attached to them.⁴⁴

b) Last meal before Enlightenment

Another hot favourite with storytellers is the story of Sujata offering Ascetic Gotama his last meal before he became a Buddha. It has been said that after this meal, he did not eat again until 7 weeks later, when he was ready to return to society and teach *Dhamma*. (More would be said about Buddha's time in extended spiritual retreat in Chapter 4: Legend of the 7 Weeks.)

I think it is a reasonable assumption that the meal offering did take place at a village near to where Ascetic Gotama had been meditating, which would be Senagami. There are at least 2 versions of the encounter between "Sujata" and Ascetic Gotama.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Version 1 has Sujata personally cooking a milk-rice concoction comprising sweet milk, honey and rice flour. For dramatic effect, it was said that the milk was from 8 particularly pampered cows of the thousands that her family owned. The concoction was boiled 'in a new pot' 'on a new stove'. The cooking process was apparently a breeze and the delighted Sujata instructed her maid (who was given the name Punna, meaning 'merits') to go outside the house and look out for a holy man that she could offer the food to. While on the lookout, earnest Punna caught sight of Ascetic Gotama from afar. She noted that he was shrouded by a brilliant golden light and ran to her mistress crying, "He is coming! Your eyes will be blinded by his splendour!" Ascetic Gotama was then invited into the house where Sujata 'bowed 7 times', and presented her specially-cooked milk-rice in a 'golden bowl' to him.

In version 2, which is more commonly told in Theravadan tradition, Sujata wanted to give thanks to a tree deity whom she had credited for enabling her to marry well and be blessed with a son. She had prepared an offering of milk-rice for the tree deity. She then sent

her maid ahead to sweep the area under the tree where she was going to make her offering. When her maid reached the tree, she found Ascetic Gotama meditating there. The excited maid mistook Ascetic Gotama for a tree deity and rushed home to tell Sujata that the tree god himself had made an appearance. Hearing that, Sujata was over the moon and even brought along a 'golden bowl' to contain her offerings. However, when she finally saw Ascetic Gotama, she thought that her maid was mistaken. Nonetheless, she was deeply impressed by the demeanour and the physical beauty of Ascetic Gotama. So she proceeded to offer her *dana* with essentially the words, 'Lord, accept my donation of milk-rice. May you be successful in obtaining your wishes as I was.'

In both versions, Ascetic Gotama ate the rich milk-rice and then threw the golden bowl into the River Neranjara with these words (or something to that effect), "If I am to succeed in becoming a Buddha today, let this bowl go upstream, but if it is not to be, let it go downstream." As soon as the bowl hit the water, it floated into the middle of the river, did a quick spin and rapidly started upstream. Then it was sucked into a whirlpool and

sank into the subterranean world, where it rested among the other golden bowls said to have been discarded by previous Buddhas.

Symbolism and Significance

I am not sure why Buddhist storytellers have paid special attention to meals offered to the Buddha to a point where they would carefully provide details about the offering: who gave the alms, what was his/her background, where was the alms given, and what was in the dish. Note that these are the same storytellers who neglected to mention his struggle for *jhana* (a pivotal spiritual moment) and to elaborate on the abandonment by the five ascetics (an emotionally-charged event).

A possible explanation could be that the storytellers themselves highly valued the concept of alms offering. Buddha himself provided the 'passport' for generations of storytellers to harp on the importance of

alms offering. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*,⁴⁵ he told Ananda that there are two meals offered to the Buddha that would yield incomparable merits to the donor: his last meals before he became the Buddha and before he passed away. Since stories on Buddha's life were meant primarily to gladden the masses and inspire their faith, it would make sense to highlight the opportunities for merit-making and the promise of a better future.

c) Kusa marks the spot

The next event that is mentioned in some⁴⁶ (but not all) traditional recitals of Buddha's last day as a struggling worldling was his meeting with a grass-cutter by the name Sotthiya, who gave him '8 handfuls of *kusa* grass'. This meeting with Sotthiya supposedly took place between his throwing the golden bowl into the river and looking for a suitable place to meditate for the night. Ascetic Gotama piled the *kusa* grass into a make-shift

⁴⁵ *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* (Last Days of the Buddha), Walshe, op. cit., p. 261.

⁴⁶ Found only in the commentaries, namely, Buddhavamsa commentary and Sutta Nipata commentary. Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 1300.

seat of sort, and sat down facing east. He then made a determination along the following line: ‘Even if my skin should dry up, even if my hand should wither, even if my bones should crumble into dust, but until I have attained supreme knowledge I shall not move from this seat.’⁴⁷

Symbolism and significance

Although this is not a particularly memorable incident and is not often quoted in stories, I thought it is worth mentioning because it seems to be heavy on symbolism.

First, the storytellers’ choice of *kusa* grass to be Buddha’s seat when he realised *nibbana* was probably deliberate. In ancient Hindu tradition, *kusa* grass is closely associated with Lord Vishnu and is worshipped by his followers. It is believed to have sacred purifying and healing properties. To me, this is a clue suggesting that the episode was a later day insertion: some Indian myth-spinner wanted to show the sacredness or divineness of

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 1300.

the event and selected a plant closely associated with divinity for Buddha's seat at his enlightenment.

Second and more importantly, that small patch of *kusa* grass was to mark the spot where Ascetic Gotama supposedly battled the evil deity Mara, who made one last-ditch effort to stop his enlightenment (more on the battle later in this chapter). This dramatic battle is often told with gusto by inspired generations of storytellers. (Everybody loves a good fight especially when the good guy wins!) Interestingly, the name "*kusa*" means sharp as in acute or skilful (*kusala*). Being skilful in the mind is just what is needed to defeat Mara, which is also taken to mean unskilful and unwholesome instincts.

Third, the grass-cutter's name, Sotthiya, is also very odd. It literally means "learned", and in those days that would be, in sacred learning. Why would the parents of a lowly-born grass-cutter name their son "learned", be it in sacred learning or secular knowledge?

So is it a coincidence that the literal meaning of the names of both the grass-cutter (knowledge and learning) and the grass (skilful and sharp) highlight some of the essential qualities for the growth of wisdom and spiritual progress? It is possible, although I am inclined to say that it is not likely. I think the *kusa* event possibly never took place. The early storytellers concocted it probably to highlight the critical importance of wisdom and skilful wholesome practice for realisation of *Dhamma*. They carefully chose names with obvious symbolism that the ancient audience being au fait with the language would not miss and would appreciate. This incident seen from the lens of double meaning would gain greater significance.

d) Battle with Mara

The battle with Mara is a very important and critical event in the story of the Ascetic Gotama's spiritual quest for enlightenment. It was the final hurdle that he had to overcome before he could realise enlightenment knowledge and experience *nibbana*.

There are 2 versions of the battle with Mara: one told by really creative cinematographic Buddhist storytellers down the centuries, and another told by the Buddha himself and captured in the *Padhana Sutta*.⁴⁸

Version 1: Battle without

In the version traditionally repeated to enthralled audience, the battle was a literal physical fight between Ascetic Gotama and Mara and his “10 squadrons” of bloodthirsty demons and monsters. Mara sat astride an elephant (the chariot of ancient India) which even had a name, Girimekhala. Mara went on the offensive immediately and showered the meditating Ascetic Gotama with “rain, hail, fire, thunder” (although I think they meant the more lethal ‘lightning’) and weapons. Ascetic Gotama fobbed off the attacks with his psychic powers. The war raged on through the night. In the end, an exhausted Mara demanded that Ascetic Gotama get up from his seat (remember the “*kusa*’ grass), which he said belonged to him. Mara’s soldiers applauded his

⁴⁸ *Padhana Sutta*, Thanissaro, op. cit.

belligerent demand and chorused, 'We are his witness'. One can almost imagine Mara smirking as he asked the lonesome Ascetic Gotama who would be his witness to his enlightenment. The future Buddha reached out his right hand to touch the earth and the earth roared, 'I will bear you witness'. Then the 'earth shook' (earthquake?) and Mara and his demonic army disappeared (or fled in disarray depending on the storyteller).

Version 2: Battle within

In Buddha's account as captured in the *Padhana Sutta*, it would appear that the celebrated battle with Mara was not a literal physical battle but an internal mental struggle. Mara was not a living evil deity as such but the negative thoughts that could plague a demoralised practitioner. It would appear that when Ascetic Gotama confronted Mara, he was still recovering from his near-fatal and self-imposed starvation diet and was clearly very weak and vulnerable. First off, Mara greeted him with, and I paraphrase, 'you are looking so

skinny and sick, you are more dead than alive!⁴⁹ He went on to say, “Live, good Sir! It is better to live. Living you may perform meritorious deeds... What is obtained from striving? It is difficult to enter the path of exertion, it is difficult to do, difficult to maintain.”⁵⁰

In such a weakened state, it is highly possible that Ascetic Gotama might have wondered if he should continue his quest knowing that there is a real chance that he could die. He might even have asked himself if the struggle was worth his death. Seen in this light, Mara’s address above takes on a different meaning: it was not so much an enticement by an evil deity to lure him away from the spiritual path, but a demoralised meditator wondering if he should quit the struggle and return to lay life.

One clue that hints strongly of this being an internal mental struggle as opposed to a literal physical battle is Buddha’s description of Mara’s “10 armies”. They

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

carried the odd names of ‘sense desires, discontent, hunger and thirst, craving, sluggishness and laziness, fear, indecision, disparagement of others and stubbornness, gain, fame, honour, prestige wrongly acquired and praising oneself while despising others’.⁵¹ Surely these are mental hindrances that could plague any meditator or spiritual seeker. It was almost as if Ascetic Gotama was rallying himself to press on with the practice even as he grappled with physical ailments and mental pain.

Perhaps at some point Ascetic Gotama gave himself a good shake and deliberately renewed his determination to press on. Using an analogy of being at war, he declared that “I wear *munja*-grass”⁵² and that “it was better to die in battle than to live defeated.”⁵³ He added that he was not going to be intimidated by Mara and his ‘10 armies’ and that he was going to fight so that

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. Access to Insight explained in a footnote that Indian warriors used to wear a tuft of a certain grass called *munja*, on their head or headgear, to indicate that they were prepared to die in battle and would not retreat.

⁵³ Ibid.

he would not regress spiritually. Finally, he vowed that he would destroy Mara, realise *nibbana*, teach the liberating knowledge to the world and his disciples would practise and attain the release. They were bold words indeed for one so sick and weak.

A final minor observation is that it would appear that in Buddha's version, the battle with Mara did not take place on the night of his enlightenment. In fact, that Ascetic Gotama was so emaciated and ill would suggest that this battle with Mara happened quite some time before enlightenment day, possibly just after he decided to stop self-torture. At that point, he could well be quite demoralised, possibly inflicted with some self-doubt, even have a sense of hopelessness and wondering how he should proceed with the spiritual quest. We must bear in mind that by then he had already spent 6 years struggling to find the answers. If he had not already some idea on how to proceed, wouldn't his mood hit rock bottom? After all, he was still just a simple struggling ascetic, and not an enlightened being.

What is truly amazing and worth highlighting is how he picked himself up from that low point. One can almost see him pushing up a figurative sleeve, gritting his teeth, squaring his shoulder and pressing on. As he put it and I paraphrase: 'I am not going to quit. I shall fight on. And I will succeed or die trying'. That is the fighting spirit that Buddha had left behind.

Enlightenment

Once we move away from the traditional stories of a bloody battle between Mara, his monstrous horde and the meditating Ascetic Gotama, a very different picture of the enlightenment night appears. In Buddha's account,⁵⁴ there was no physical battle. The night was quiet, calm and serene, quite a contrast to the rowdy chaotic madness of a battlefield scene traditionally painted. He sat and meditated through the night, from dusk (6pm or thereabout) to dawn (6am or so). In those 12 hours, Ascetic Gotama gain a succession of three sets of knowledge, the final of which led to his realising the

⁵⁴ *Maha-Saccaka Sutta*, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 341-343.

release of the mind, the letting down of existence's burden and the attainment of *nibbana*. In the next segment, I shall trace the last 12 hours of Ascetic Gotama's life before enlightenment and Buddhahood.

First Watch

The time concept of first, second and third watch was used by Buddha to differentiate the period he realised different sets of knowledge as he recounted his marathon meditation on the eve of enlightenment. The first watch is believed to be between 6pm and 10pm.

During this time, Ascetic Gotama went into deep meditation (*jhana*). His mind became sharply concentrated, bright, clear, pure and steady. The mind became a powerful tool that he used to examine the knowledge of recollecting past lives. Buddha recounted that he was able to "recollect" up to "hundred thousands" of lives and "many eons of cosmic contraction and expansion". More critically, he recollected those lives in great details: names, families, physical appearances, experiences of pleasure and pain, manner of death and

even manner of rebirth. He even remembered the food he ate for those lives.⁵⁵ He concluded with, "Thus with their aspects and particulars I recollected my manifold past lives... This was the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute."⁵⁶

Second Watch

The second watch is believed to be between 10pm and 2am. Still in deep meditation, he turned his mind to examining the knowledge of death and rebirth of beings. His exact words were "thus with divine eye ...I saw beings passing away and reappearing", which means that with his extrasensory vision forged through deep meditation, he literally saw beings dying and being reborn.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 341.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 341.

Up until this point, the knowledge he had gained through skilful meditation while impressive is not unique. It is his conclusion from his observations that was sheer intuitive brilliance. He said, he discerned how they were “inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate and I understood how beings pass on according to their *kamma*.”⁵⁷ He had connected the dots and concluded that any premeditated actions come with a *kammic* price tag. When one undertakes unwholesome and unskilful action, when one dies, one ends up in a “bad destination” including in the lower realms, in hell. Conversely, when one undertakes wholesome and skilful action, he will move on to a “good destination, in the heavenly world” when he dies.

Third Watch

The third watch of the night is believed to be between 2am and 6am. This was the critical moment when Asectic Gotama realised the final knowledge which enabled him to experience unconditioned peace and

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 341.

mental release, known as *nibbana*. This final knowledge was the comprehension of the cessation of defilements (*asavakkhaya ñāna*). His words were, “I directly knew as it actually is”, the nature of *dukkha*, the origin of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha* and the method of practice that will bring about the complete cessation of *dukkha*.⁵⁸ He added that he also realised the nature of mental defilements, what conditions would lead to their arising, their cessation and the method of practice that would bring about the cessation of mental defilements.⁵⁹

Note Buddha’s precise words about his enlightenment experience. He said, “When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge, 'It is liberated'. I directly knew: 'Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’⁶⁰ Thus, seeing and understanding the four

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 341-342.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 342.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 342.

noble truths and how they come to be is a pre-requisite for one to be able to experience the release of the mind, i.e., *nibbana*, unconditioned bliss.

Concluding observations

There is a propensity for the ancient storytellers to emphasise Buddha's divineness and to trumpet that he was destined for Buddhahood. They may well be right and he may well be semi-divine. However, I cannot help but feel that this emphasis about his godliness somehow diminishes the sheer magnitude of his brilliance and genius in cracking the code of the rounds of rebirths and figuring out the way to *nibbana*, all without guidance and the benefit of a road map! Consider this: Buddha had kindly drawn up a map for the rest of us (as he put it, he had 'pointed the way'). He had provided a detailed methodology on how to attain *nibbana*. He had left behind voluminous amount of discourses explaining repeatedly how to practise correctly. And still for countless Buddhist practitioners through the centuries, there have been bewilderment, confusion and even endless debates on the spiritual practice. Many more

have even assumed that they could not achieve spiritual success this life because the practice and path seem so obscure and sublime.

I prefer to see him as a bona fide human, if only to truly appreciate the magnitude of his sacrifice, his struggles and finally his achievements. His was a 6-year odyssey and he suffered so terribly! To see him as an ordinary man is to recognise the extraordinariness of his achievements!

Finally, this period is especially meaningful for generations of Buddhists because it is about Buddha's greatest moment of spiritual triumph. He overcame his own human proclivity towards unskilful negative tendencies namely, desires (*lobha*), ill-will (*dosa*) and delusional self-centredness (*moha*). He overcame the negative mental naggings that plague daily existence, such as restlessness, worries, perplexing doubts and confusion, tendency towards laziness and general disinterest. And above all, against the odds he realised for himself how the mind actually works, how to manage and control one's instincts, and finally to be able to create

the conditions that allow him to experience the unconditioned release, bliss and happiness. In any movie about a great man, this is the moment where the hero experiences his great victory and the movie will end on a high note. But for Buddhism, the Enlightenment event merely marks the beginning of an even more beautiful and remarkable story that spans another 45 years.

Chapter 4: Legend of the Seven Weeks – Significance of Symbolism

This chapter will trace the newly-enlightened Buddha's activities during the period between his enlightenment and his formal return to society where he gave his first *Dhamma* lesson to his former 5 companions, in Isipatana, Benares. According to tradition, Buddha's enlightenment was on the fullmoon day of *Vesakha*, and the first time he unveiled *Dhamma* was on the fullmoon day of *Asalha* (June-July period). That would mean that he continued to be in relative isolation post-enlightenment for 2 months or so. This is probably why Buddhist tradition claims that Buddha spent 7 weeks in retreat, after giving some allowance for him to walk from Uruvela to Benares for that first *Dhamma* lesson.

This is a challenging chapter to write. The canonical evidences are very thin: much of the basis for

the stories of the 7 weeks is from questionable sources. Buddha himself did mention a little of what he did during this period but only when he wanted to explain *Dhamma* points and not so much for record purposes. So he did not elaborate on his activities let alone putting them in chronological order.

Unfortunately, there is quite a bit of discrepancy between tradition's rendition of what transpired in those 7 weeks and Buddha's own account. I will lay down both versions and offer an explanation for the events that tradition included but were not mentioned by Buddha.

Tradition's account:

1) First week – Establishing concept of Dependent Origination (*Paticcasamuppada*)

According to the Pali Canon, Buddha spent an entire week under the *Bodhi* tree experiencing the bliss of *nibbana*. At the end of the week, he emerged from deep meditation and in the first watch of the night (6pm to 10pm) directed his mind to dependent arising in forward

order thus: “That comes to be when there is this; that arises with the arising of this; that is to say: It is with ignorance as condition that formations come to be; with formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six-fold base; with the six-fold base as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, being; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition ageing and death come to be, and also sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair; that is how there is an origin to this whole aggregate mass of suffering.”⁶¹

In the middle watch of the night (10pm to 2am), Buddha directed his mind to dependent arising in reverse order thus: “That does not come to be when there is not this; that ceases with the cessation of this; that is to say: With cessation of ignorance, there is cessation of formations; with cessation of formations, cessation of

⁶¹ *Bodhi Sutta* (Awakening) in *Udana* 1:3, translated from Pali by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Life of the Buddha: According to the Pali Canon*, BPS Pariyatti Editions, Seattle, 2001, p. 30.

consciousness; with cessation of consciousness, cessation of name-and-form; with cessation of name-and-form, cessation of the six-fold base; with cessation of the six-fold base, cessation of contact; with cessation of contact, cessation of feeling; with cessation of feeling, cessation of craving; with cessation of craving, cessation of clinging; with cessation of clinging, cessation of being; with cessation of being, cessation of birth; with cessation of birth, ageing and death cease, and also sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair; that is how there is a cessation to this whole aggregate mass of suffering.”⁶²

Finally, in the last watch of the night (2am to 6am), he directed his mind to dependent arising in both forward and reverse order.

Cast as above, it was as if Buddha was reviewing and consolidating in his mind the concept of dependant origination (*paticcasamuppada*). *Patitccasamuppada* is an extremely important concept in Buddhist philosophy. It essentially explains how the mind works, why the mind

⁶² Ibid., p. 31.

experiences *dukkha* and how *dukkha* could be extinguished such that the mind would experience unconditioned bliss. It is very interesting that there seems to be this suggestion that even after his enlightenment, Buddha took a week or so to thoroughly consolidate his understanding of *paticcasamuppada*. It seems to be making the point that *paticcasamuppada* is so complex and so profound that even the enlightened Buddha needed more time to sort it out in his mind.

Did this event happen? I think it most likely did since it was Buddha himself who spoke about it. That it was captured in both the *Vinaya* (monastic code of discipline) and *Nikaya* (discourses of Buddha) speaks volume about its significance and importance.

2) Second week – Gratitude to the *Bodhi* Tree

According to Theravadan tradition, in the second week post-enlightenment, Buddha stood before the *Bodhi* tree and without blinking stared at it for an entire week. He was said to be showing his gratitude to the tree that had sheltered him during the period of his struggle for

enlightenment. The tradition even provided trivial pursuit details like Buddha stood at “48 cubits north-east from where he had sat” during his pre-enlightenment marathon meditation.⁶³ This story proved to be very popular and in later time, there was even a ‘shrine of non-blinking’ (*Animisalocana-cetiya*) built (apparently by emperor Asoka in the 3rd century BC) at the spot where Buddha was believed to have stood.

Personally, I think this event never happened. It was not mentioned anywhere in the Canon. The main source of this is the *Jataka*, which is largely a collection of Sri Lankan folktales that were compiled and repackaged by later storytellers to be stories of Buddha’s previous lives. Some of the *Jataka* stories were culled from the Canon but most were not.

The question is why was a story of Buddha showing his gratitude to a tree introduced? We know that ancient Indians used to pay respect to select trees as part of their religious rituals. (If you recall, Buddha himself

⁶³ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 77.

was a beneficiary of that practice. His last meal pre-enlightenment was offered by Sujata, who happened to be there only because she was going to give thanks to tree deities.) My hypothesis is that the ancient Indian lay supporters might have yearned to continue the familiar ritual of paying obeisance to trees and the Buddhist forefathers decided to oblige but with a distinctly '*Dhamma*' twist. So the story goes that Buddha himself had shown gratitude to the *Bodhi* tree, which would make it perfectly legitimate for his followers to follow suit. But the moral of the story is it is a lesson in gratitude and not so much about paying obeisance to trees.

Beyond gratitude, it was also a clever symbolic choice. Not only is the *Bodhi* tree an impactful visual symbol of Buddha's enlightenment, it is also a *Dhamma* lesson in operation. The tree is alive and like all organic life form, it grows, it decays, it ages and it dies – impermanence here and now. The tree is thus a reminder of both Buddha and *Dhamma*, and of the practice and enlightenment.

3) Third week – Walking on a jewel path in the air

In this week, Buddha was said to have discerned through his 'mind's eyes' that the *devas* were sceptical if he had attained enlightenment. So to prove that he had, he conjured a 'jewel path' (this probably means either shining or beautiful) in the air, and walked up and down that path for a week. The source of this is the *Jataka* and the commentaries, which in my mind immediately raises a question about the authenticity of the story.

In the first place, I am not sure why Buddhist storytellers had felt it necessary to have Buddha proving his enlightenment to *devas*. It seems like an exercise in contradiction. If you recall, the commentaries had earlier gone into overdrive telling the story of the battle between Buddha and evil Mara on enlightenment night (see Chapter 2) and how earth had stood witness for Buddha when Mara challenged him to find an eyewitness who could vouch that he was enlightened. If mother earth, Mara and his minions already knew of Buddha's enlightenment, how in the world could *devas* not know? Why have a week which is essentially contradictory,

somewhat uneventful, and has no *Dhamma* value. (Note: with the exception of this week, every other one contained some *Dhamma* point, even if it was just a minor one.) I am wondering if this week was inserted just to make the number add up to '7' weeks because, as mentioned earlier, there was a 2-month gap between enlightenment and first *Dhamma* discourse.

4) Fourth week – Reflecting on *Abhidhamma*

Buddha was said to have created a 'jewel' chamber where he sat and meditated on *Abhidhamma*. His body and mind became so purified that 6 coloured rays emitted from his body – blue, yellow, red, white, orange and a mixture of the 5. (Blue represents confidence, yellow for holiness, red for wisdom, white for purity, orange for detachment and the mixture for all the noble qualities.⁶⁴)

⁶⁴ Piya Tan, "How Buddhism was Discovered: the 7 weeks after the Great Awakening", *The Buddha and His Disciples* lecture series, Singapore, 2002. Accessed 27 Dec 13, <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/BBB-3-How-Buddhism-was-discovered.pdf>

It makes for an inspiring story but that this event was not mentioned in the Canon at all does raise questions about whether it really happened. (I have yet to ascertain the source of this story.) Surely an event as momentous an achievement as implied by the miracles in the story would have been mentioned in some form at some point by Buddha to his monks? If it is not found in the Pali Canon, does that mean it never happened or that Buddha did not consider it significant enough for mention? Or was it that the leading monks of the First Council deliberately left it out? Is that even possible? It is a serious charge to level at well-practised monks for selective omission, and why would they do that? *Abhidhamma* is not exactly a threatening heretical practice.

The only other explanation for the above event missing from the pages of the Pali Canon is that it was a later insertion. The question is why was it inserted and for what purpose? My hypothesis is it was inserted by Buddhist commentators partial to the study of *Abhidhamma* to give this literature credence and spiritual authority. The problem about *Abhidhamma* has always

been its murky origin: unlike the *Vinaya* and the *Nikaya*, it was never mentioned by name at the first Buddhist Council that was held just months after Buddha's death to codify his teachings. Because of the lack of its mention at that august meeting, its sceptics would always argue that *Abhidhamma* was not taught by Buddha but was the work of erudite monks of later years. To give *Abhidhamma* a mention literally at the earliest days of Gotama Buddha's dispensation must surely add "weight" to the argument that it originated from Buddha and therefore has spiritual authority and legitimacy.

5) Fifth week – Temptation by Mara's daughters

Tradition has it that the highlight of this week was a visit by Mara's three beautiful daughters, *Tanha*, *Rati* and *Raga* (translated: Greed, Passion and Attachment). To avenge Mara's defeat at Buddha's hand on enlightenment night, they tried to disturb Buddha's meditation with seductive dancing amongst other

temptations. The Canon reported that Buddha remained unperturbed, and the girls eventually gave up and left.⁶⁵

While tradition highlighted the visitation by 3 temptresses, Buddha's own account of his encounter with Mara after his enlightenment was more chilling, a lot darker and quite a subject of controversy amongst discerning disciples and some scholars. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, Buddha told Ananda that Mara had visited him "just after enlightenment" and tried to persuade him to "enter *parinibbana*" (i.e., die) without teaching *Dhamma*. In reply, Buddha told Mara not to waste his breath, and that he would not go into *parinibbana* until he had successfully taught *Dhamma*, and groomed true practitioners who could keep the methodology of the practice alive for future generations.⁶⁶

If one were to take Mara as a real evil deity, then the above exchange would just be the perennial villain

⁶⁵ "Mara's Daughters" (S 4:25), Bodhi Bhikkhu, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000, pp. 217-220.

⁶⁶ Walshe, op. cit., pp. 250-251.

making yet another attempt to prevent Buddha from teaching *Dhamma*. Having failed miserably to stop Buddha from realising *nibbana* knowledge, he turned to plan B which was to get Buddha to die so that *nibbana* knowledge would never be unveiled to the world.

However, if one were to see Mara as a personification of one's own mind, specifically the darker instincts or thoughts, then what does the above 'exchange' mean? Some Buddhists would argue that Buddha being already enlightened would not have even an iota of Mara the dark thoughts in his mind. Therefore, the exchange had to be a literal conversation between Buddha and villain-*deva*. They may well be right. Nevertheless, I think a case can still be made for Mara being a mind-made object as opposed to it being evil divinity, without contradicting the understanding of what Buddha's enlightenment means.

First, we need to get away from concepts and assumptions. If we don't label Mara as dark, evil thoughts of the epic kind, but just a thought that arises, is it still so inconceivable that a realised being would consider not

holding on to his living force and just letting conditions of life ebb? We know from Buddha's own words to his closest cousin and attendant Ananda that he could manipulate his life span if he had wanted to. Perhaps it did cross his mind that there was nothing truly worth living for since he had achieved his goal of *nibbana*, so why not just let his life force go. It is not suicide if there is no desire about killing oneself per se, he was just not clinging to live.

If that were so, what changed Buddha's mind? Two things: his realisation that there were beings who could realise *nibbana* knowledge and experience unconditioned bliss; and his decision to spend the rest of his life teaching *Dhamma*. He decided that this was a meaningful goal.

Incidentally, Buddha did not specify to Ananda that the encounter with Mara took place on the 5th week: he merely said it happened soon after his enlightenment and while he was dwelling under the *Ajapala Banyan* tree. So, that this event took place does not mean that the events of the preceding 3 weeks actually did.

6) Sixth week – Naga King sheltered Buddha under the *Mucalinda* tree

It was said that in this week, Buddha was meditating under a *Mucalinda* tree when it unexpectedly began to rain heavily. A *naga* (serpent) king slithered out of his nest, coiled his body '7 times' around Buddha to keep him warm and placed his hood over Buddha's head to shelter him from the rain. The Canon said that the *naga* thought, "Let the Blessed One feel no cold or heat or touch of gadflies, gnats, wind, sun and creeping things." After 7 days, the rain finally stopped. The *naga* king then transformed into a Brahman youth and paid respect to Buddha.

Buddha then spoke the following stanza:

“Seclusion is happiness for one contented,
By whom *Dhamma* is learnt, and who has seen,
And friendliness towards the world is happiness
For him who is forbearing with living beings.
Disinterest in the world is happiness
For him that has surmounted sense desires.

But to be rid of the conceit 'I am'
That is the greatest happiness of all.'⁶⁷

This story was told by Buddha and was mentioned in both the *Vinaya* and the *Nikaya*. So despite the incredulous element of close encounter with the 'supernatural' kind, that it contained a specific *Dhamma* lesson increases its authenticity. Did Buddha really encounter a helpful and considerate *bona fide* serpent/snake? The story seems a little hard to swallow, at first. But upon closer reflection, it may actually not be that inconceivable. Here's a plausible explanation.

Assuming that there was an encounter with a real snake: is the size of the snake large enough to coil around a man a few times that implausible? Some species of pythons average 3m - 6m while the longest python in captivity has been measured at a cool 7.76m. So perhaps a really long snake did coil itself sedately around Buddha but did not attack him. It would have provided some physical protection against the elements

⁶⁷ *Mucalinda Sutta, Udana* (2:1), translated by Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 34.

and insects. Since it had been raining heavily for several days, the temperature must have been very low. Could it be that the cold-blooded snake went into some hibernation (which might explain its placidity)? Might it be that it was drawn towards Buddha in the first place because of his body heat? It could well have been seeking some warmth. But what the story does imply is both man and beast had resided in harmony and mutual assistance. When the rain finally stopped, perhaps the snake had uncoiled itself and went on its way leaving Buddha to reflect on the *Dhamma* points.

7) Seventh week – Alms by 2 merchants under the *Rajayatana* tree

The key event this week was the alms offered by 2 merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika.⁶⁸ The Canon said that the men were travelling from Ukkala when a deity, who was a relative in a former life, told them that there was a 'newly-enlightened' 'Blessed One' living at the foot of a *Rajayatana* tree. The helpful deity advised that they

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

should go and offer him alms of “rice cake and honey”, which would yield ‘great merits’ for a long time. The 2 merchants dutifully complied. The Canon included a cute story of how the 4 heavenly kings hand-delivered ‘stone’ bowls to Buddha so that he could receive the offering.

But the main highlight of this story is Tapussa and Bhallika’s request to be Buddha’s disciples. Buddha accepted and they became his first lay disciples. They took refuge in the Buddha and *Dhamma* (*Sangha* had not been established yet).

In the Burmese tradition, it is said that the merchants asked Buddha for an object to worship in his stead and he gave them 8 strands of hair. It was said that the 2 men had 3 strands enshrined in the stupa that was later rebuilt into the Shwedagon pagoda.⁶⁹

That this encounter was mentioned in the *Vinaya* does increase its authenticity, although I find it rather odd

⁶⁹ *Sasanavamsa* chronicle written in Pali by Bhikkhu Pannasami for the 5th Buddhist Council held in Mandalay in 1867.

that Buddha was not recorded to have taught any *Dhamma* to the merchants. If Buddha had supposedly addressed a snake the week before, why did he not say anything to these men who were his first supporters? Was it language problem? If the Burmese were right, those merchants were foreigners from a region in modern Myanmar. But then, the Burmese chronicle that reported the details post-dated the event by several centuries, which raises questions about its accuracy.

The other interesting observation is that by this account, the Canon has accorded a place of honour to the merchant caste as being Buddha's earliest supporters. During Buddha's time, the *brahmana* (members of mainstream religious caste) and *khattiya* (*warrior and often governing caste*) vied for social superiority and power. But the real money men were the *vessa* (trader or merchant caste). The *vessa* was critical to the expansion and consolidation of Buddhism: it was on the back of trading caravans that Buddhist monks could travel to distant lands to spread *Dhamma*. The traders were also amongst the most generous and biggest donors to the *Sangha* in Buddha's time. They

presented lands complete with housing facilities to the *Sangha* such as the monastery at Jetavana presented by multi-millionaire Anathapindika, and the Visakarama donated by foremost lay female supporter Visaka. Tapussa and Bhallika were thus the precursors to the likes of Anathapindika and Visaka.

Buddha's own account:

Unlike the traditional version, Buddha neither specified how long he spent in retreat nor chronologically laid down the events of that entire retreat period. We have only a best guess of the sequence reconstructed based largely on the different trees that Buddha had spent time under. The Canon captured Buddha detailing the sequence of trees he dwelled under.

1) First week – consistent with traditional account, Buddha was said to have reflected on and established the concept of Dependent Origination under the Bodhi tree.

2) Second week – meeting with haughty *brahmin*

Interestingly, Buddha's own account of his post-enlightenment retreat had a very different second week. He apparently meditated and enjoyed *nibbanic* bliss throughout the week under a different tree, the *Ajapala Nigrodha* (goatherds' banyan). At the end of this week, Buddha said he had an unexpected visitor. It was a *brahmin*, whom Buddha described as "haughty". The *brahmin* asked Buddha what a '*Brahmana*' was and what qualities defined a '*Brahmana*'.⁷⁰ (Since Buddha called him "haughty", presumably his was not a sincere search for answer, but possibly to test Buddha's knowledge.)

Buddha replied, "The *Brahmana* is one who is rid of evil things, not haughty, undefiled and self-controlled, perfected in knowledge, and living a holy life." For good measure, Buddha stressed that he could "rightly employ

⁷⁰ Buddha used the term *Brahmana* synonymously with the word *arahant*, which means a 'worthy one' or a 'pure one'. So in this context, the haughty *brahmin* was not asking for a definition of his caste but for whom Buddha would consider as worthy of carrying the title of 'noble and pure'.

the word ‘*Brahmana*’, if he is proud of nothing in the world.”⁷¹

3) Third and fourth weeks – under *Mucalinda* and *Rajayatana* respectively

In the Canon, Buddha’s third and fourth weeks were what tradition claimed he did during its version of the sixth and seventh weeks: respectively being sheltered by the *naga* snake and then being offered *dana* by Tapussa and Bhallika.

4) Subsequent weeks

a. Further insights

Then Buddha was said to have returned to the foot of the *Ajapala Nigrodha* tree. While there, he meditated for an extended period and had another intuitive insight. Buddha said that the “knowledge and vision” of the four foundations of mindfulness (*Satipatthana*) as the only

⁷¹ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 33.

path to *nibbana* arose in his mind.⁷² Clearly, even after enlightenment and his first taste of *nibbana*, Buddha continued to develop further insight into the methodology of creating the necessary conditions in the mind for the rise of intuitive wisdom and the realisation of *nibbana*. Those insights were not for Buddha's own spiritual growth because he was already fully enlightened. But they were critical to helping Buddha develop ideas on how to guide others to realise *nibbana*. How to purify the mind and calm it down? What should be done so that intuitive wisdom will arise? What are the signposts practitioners should look out for such that they know that they are on the right track? And so on.

⁷² In the *Brahma Sutta* (S 47:18), Buddha told the bhikkhus that the following insight occurred to him while he meditated under the *Ajapala Nigrodha* tree, "This is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the passing away of pain and displeasure, for the achievement of the method, for the realisation of *nibbana*, that is the four establishments of mindfulness." Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op.cit., p. 1647.

b. *Devas*' involvement in Buddha's decision to teach *Dhamma*

I find it very interesting that the canonical version of the retreat period mentioned that there were a few visits by 2 *devas* representing diametrically opposite positions on *Dhamma* work. As mentioned above, there was evil Mara trying to dissuade Buddha from teaching *Dhamma*, accusing Buddha of hypocrisy and impure practice,⁷³ and tempting him to die.

Then there was *Brahma* Sahampati who was like a one-being cheerleading team. The Canon had him congratulating Buddha whenever an intuitive insight struck the latter. Buddha also credited *Brahma* Sahampati for convincing him to teach *Dhamma*. In the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, Buddha told the monks that he was initially reluctant to teach *Dhamma* because he thought the world had too many attachments and would have too much difficulties understanding the practice and realising *nibbana*. Buddha said, "If I were to teach

⁷³ Ñānamoli, op.cit., p. 36.

Dhamma, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.”⁷⁴ But *Brahma* Sahampati pleaded with Buddha to ‘please reconsider’ because there were beings “with little dust in their eyes” who could understand *Dhamma*. ‘If they never had a chance to hear *Dhamma*, they would just “waste away”.’⁷⁵

Hearing the plea, Buddha recounted that “out of compassion for beings”, he “surveyed the world” and saw that *Brahma* Sahampati was indeed right. Buddha said, “Just as... some lotuses that are born and grow in the water thrive immersed in the water... and some other lotuses... rest on the water’s surface, and some other lotuses... stand clear, unwetted by it...”, so too he saw beings “with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities and easy to teach and hard to teach, and some who dwelt seeing fear in

⁷⁴ *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op.cit., p. 260.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

blame and in the other world.”⁷⁶ Then Buddha decided, so be it, he would teach *Dhamma*.

In the discussion above on the temptation of Mara’s daughters in the fifth week, I postulated that Mara could just be a thought that arose and it was of the nature that one might consider darker as opposed to epic evil. Similarly here, perhaps *Brahma* Sahampati was just a thought that arose but a positive one that tilted Buddha towards the decision to teach *Dhamma* as opposed to a real life deity on a mission to save *Dhamma* for mankind. So, perhaps it was Buddha himself who decided to teach *Dhamma* after weighing his considerations carefully, and not because he was prompted by another’s persuasion. The clincher for Buddha being that there were beings who could realise *nibbana* and they deserved a chance for that spiritual salvation.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 262.

Concluding thoughts

I think the fact that there was at least an 8-week gap between enlightenment and the first *Dhamma* sermon does suggest that Buddha had hesitated on whether or not to unveil *Dhamma*. The main reason for his initial reluctance was his uncertainty whether anyone could understand *Dhamma* because the path of the practice goes against the grain of human instincts. The thought of trying to explain something that was so sublime must have seemed daunting to him.

But beyond just the technical difficulties of teaching *Dhamma*, Buddha must also know that the proselytising journey was going to be tough, disturbing and potentially even hazardous. For a start, there were social convention and mundane prejudices to overcome. For instance, his youth alone already worked against him. Time and again he had to prove his substance and worth just because the world equated age with wisdom. He must also know that he would not be able to avoid being dragged into secular problems and troubles when he started interacting with the lay world. Indeed, in his

remaining 45 years, Buddha had more than his fair share of trouble with the secular world. He was caught up in royal court intrigue and politics, framed for rape and murder, and even periodically repudiated by the fickle masses. (Details will be covered in the later chapters in volume 2.)

Despite having some idea about the score, he still chose to turn back to society because he knew that there were individuals who could understand *Dhamma* and realise *nibbana* for themselves. He also knew that it was possible to impart a methodology of learning and practice that could be passed on to guide future generations of practitioners towards spiritual attainments and *nibbana*. The challenge for Buddha was to groom that first generation of successful practitioners (called *ariyas* or worthy ones) for they would be instrumental in keeping the fire of *Dhamma* knowledge burning.

Buddha's decision to turn back clearly reflected his compassion: as a realised being, his instincts would have been to turn away from the trivial, vexing, mundane world. He could have just enjoyed *nibbanic* bliss, be free

and easy in the mind, and live in relatively secluded places for the rest of his life. But he chose the far more difficult path and remained in society so that others could have a shot at unconditioned happiness and peace. In this regard, I think the greatest tribute that one can pay Buddha is to practise and see *Dhamma* for oneself, and realise *nibbana*.

Beyond just gratitude to Buddha and personal salvation, there is also a practical reason why it is critically important to have living *ariyas*, i.e., practitioners who had seen for themselves *Dhamma* and how it comes together. Without such practitioners, how could there be living testimony that *Dhamma* actually works, and that it is possible to realise the end of *dukkha*? So the moral obligation of anyone who calls himself a disciple of Buddha must be to try and realise *Dhamma* so that he knows what true *Dhamma* is, and then he is in a position to do his part to keep *Dhamma* alive for future generations of practitioners. And then he must teach for that would be the correct tribute to the Teacher.

Chapter Five: Unveiling Dhamma

This chapter marks the beginning of Buddha's return to society. The highlight here is Buddha unveiling *Dhamma* for the first time to the world. His first students were the 5 ascetics who had walked out on him just months earlier because they thought he had gone soft when he stopped the excruciating ascetic practice of extreme starvation and took some food.

To some extent, this is a relatively easy chapter to write compared to the previous 4 mainly because the data used to reconstruct this period was provided mainly by just one source – Buddha himself. There was no need to try and sieve facts from fiction; unusually, the ancient storytellers did not offer their own exuberant rendition of this pivotal event that was Buddha's inaugural *Dhamma* lecture.

Deciding on the first disciples

Once Buddha had made up his mind that he would teach *Dhamma*, he moved very fast. In his usual focused, determined and considered way, he was very clear about what he should do next. He would identify whom he should teach *Dhamma* to and he would go to them. Mindful that *Dhamma* was very subtle and could be understood only by one who has deep intuitive wisdom, Buddha carefully pondered through his list of potential candidates. He quickly decided based on the following criteria: they must be skilled meditators, were already spiritually inclined (as opposed to being caught up in material pursuits), and were wise and relatively open-minded. At the very minimum, they must be prepared to hear him out, and not be put off by his youth. (In ancient India, ageism was a real obstacle to spiritual learning!)

That was why the first two candidates he thought of were his two meditation teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, who had taught him the very advanced meditation on formless realms 6 years ago when he first started on his spiritual quest. They were

obviously very skilled meditators and were, according to Buddha, “wise, learned and discerning”. That they had separately offered the young Ascetic Gotama leadership positions in their schools despite his youth (he was then only 29) would mean that open-mindedness (and big ego) was not an issue. But unfortunately, they had already died: Alara Kalama just a week earlier and Uddaka Ramaputta only the night before.⁷⁷

Then he thought of the 5 ascetic companions who had patiently looked after him through his long self-torture period but were quick to judge him as a failure and left him abruptly when he stopped the destructive practice. He decided that they would do because they could “quickly” understand *Dhamma*.⁷⁸

Buddha never explained what prompted this observation. But I think it is reasonable to assume that they must have met his strict criteria, notwithstanding that they might be prejudiced towards him. They were

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 262.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 263.

obviously very sincere and serious practitioners who unfortunately had chosen the wrong painful path. (I think it is fair to assume that they were also practising self-mortification like Buddha, but perhaps not as excessively.) That they had been on the spiritual quest for a while already would suggest that they possibly had meditation experience so concentration and mental focus would not be a problem. They had no problem with his youth so ego and narrow-mindedness were non-issues. So if Buddha could overcome their personal angst with him, he would be able to get them to hear *Dhamma*. He probably knew them well enough (they spent 6 years together!) to have an idea on how to touch their hearts and minds. The next question was where to find them. Buddha said that he used his “divine eye” and saw that they were then staying in a deer park in Isipatana, Benares, some 200 miles from Uruvela. But Buddha was unfazed and decided he would go to them.

The first sceptic

Along the way to Isipatana, Buddha ran into an ascetic by the name Upaka. The latter was struck by

Buddha's physical appearance and stopped to have a conversation with him. Complimenting Buddha, Upaka said, "Your faculties are clear, the colour of your skin is pure and bright."⁷⁹ Guessing that this must be due to Buddha's spiritual practice, Upaka asked who Buddha's teacher was and what doctrine he ('the teacher', not Buddha) preached. Upaka assumed that because Buddha was a young man, he must be only a disciple. This would be a common assumption and prejudice that Buddha would encounter time and again.

Buddha replied essentially that he was self-realised and had no teacher, and that in fact he was going to teach his own doctrine to the world. Upaka was unimpressed and sceptical. In marked contrast to his initial friendliness, Upaka quite curtly responded, "ok, maybe", then he 'shook his head' and walked off.⁸⁰ He must have thought that Buddha was either deluded or a fraud and not worth his time. Buddha's first impromptu *Dhamma* sharing was a failure.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 263.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 263-264.

Three quick observations: first, clearly when Upaka first caught sight of Buddha, he saw something special. Otherwise there was no reason for him to say what he said when he stopped to make conversation. Yet, Upaka was quick to dismiss Buddha's claims to self-enlightenment. Why? I can think of only the youth factor: Upaka just could not believe that one so young could possibly be a spiritual master and a self-realised one at that. Upaka would not be the last sceptic blinded by the youth, and in the early days (or at least for as long as Buddha had black hair), Buddha had to work doubly hard to explain himself.

Second, I note that Buddha had his first rejection even before he started his first formal lesson. But he gamely shrugged it off and rather nonchalantly continued his journey to Isipatana. This is a good lesson to remember. In *Dhamma* work, it can be fraught with rejections and difficulties but one should be focused on the mission and just carry on regardless of the reception.

Third, it is interesting that Buddha did not try harder to explain *Dhamma* to Upaka. He replied to

Upaka's questions and then when Upaka showed disinterest, Buddha just let it be. I think the lesson here is *Dhamma* is for people who want it. If they are not interested, then one should let it be and move on. *Dhamma* sharing is not a deliberate conversion exercise. There should not be an ego in the sharing process that seeks to 'win' some religious/philosophical tussle for converts.

Delivering the First Discourse

The commentaries claim that Buddha took about a week to make the 200-mile trek between Uruvela and Isipatana. According to tradition, he reached the deer park on the full moon night of *Asalha* (June-July period). He immediately made a beeline for the 5 ascetics. When they saw him approaching, they were probably conflicted. Initially, they were still quite peeved with him. Agreeing amongst themselves, they said, "Friends, here comes the recluse Gotama who lives luxuriously, who gave up his striving, and reverted to luxury." They decided that they

would not even rise up for him or show any hospitality.⁸¹ ‘Let him sit down if he likes,’ they concluded primly. That was as far as they would go in concession to their once relationship. That they did not even want to stand up to greet him meant that they were not prepared to greet him as an equal. That was how low Buddha had sunk in their esteem.

But when he got near enough for them to take a good look at him, they could not help noticing that he looked ‘different’. They found themselves unable to keep their grudge. Not only did they go forward to greet him, they started fussing over him. One “took his bowl and outer robe”, another “prepared a seat” for him, and a third “set out water for my feet”.⁸²

However, although they were polite and respectful, they still believed that he was still their friend Gotama. Buddha had to repeat three times that he was no longer the same man they had left behind in Uruvela. He told

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 264.

⁸² Ibid., p. 264.

them that he had realised enlightenment knowledge, and had attained *nibbana*. They were sceptical. They replied how was it possible that he could succeed in his spiritual quest after he became 'self-indulgent' when he could not while torturing himself diligently.

Buddha did not answer their indignant retort directly. He merely said that he did not become 'self-indulgent' or give up the struggle. Again he offered to teach them *Dhamma* and said that if they were to practise as he instructed, they would also realise *nibbana* for themselves. It took him a while but they were finally convinced. And they opened their hearts and minds to him, and listened attentively.

This was the pivotal moment in Buddhist history: Buddha delivered the discourse that was to capture the essence of the practice, the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (aptly translated as Turning the Wheel of the *Dhamma*). That was the first time Buddha unveiled the core tenets of *Dhamma*, namely, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-fold Path.

Buddha began the discourse by saying that a practitioner should not subscribe to two diametrically extreme practices: either to be completely self-indulgent in sense pleasures or to engage in physical self-abuse and torture. He said that he had discovered a ‘middle path’ that would lead to amongst other things, knowledge, peace, enlightenment and *nibbana*. This middle path was the Noble Eight-fold Path, i.e., right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Buddha then explained the Noble Truth of *dukkha* (which has been loosely and inadequately translated as “suffering”).⁸³ He said birth, ageing, sickness and death were *dukkha* experiences. When one was separated from a loved one or was stuck with someone one disliked, it was *dukkha*. To be denied anything one wanted was

⁸³ There is no single English word that adequately explains *dukkha*. It is not suffering per se: suffering is too intense and gives the wrong impression. *Dukkha* is a spectrum of negative, unpleasant feelings ranging from something quite mild like being irritated or slightly annoyed to an intense distraught and grieving.

dukkha. In short, the “five aggregates of clinging”⁸⁴ were *dukkha*.

Next Buddha explained the origin of *dukkha*: which was craving, for sensual desires, for being and for non-being. And then there was the Noble Truth of the cessation of *dukkha*. Buddha described that cessation as ‘remainder-less’ fading and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of the craving. Finally, he spoke of the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*, which was the Noble Eight-fold Path.

Buddha summed up by saying that the nature of *dukkha* had to be fully understood, craving had to be abandoned, cessation had to be realised and the path had to be practised. He said that when he fully and completely mastered the above four truths, “knowledge and vision arose in him” and he knew that “this was his

⁸⁴ The ‘five aggregates’ are physical form, feeling, consciousness, perception and thought construction.

last birth” and that “there would be no more renewal of being”.⁸⁵

At the conclusion of this *Sutta*, one of the 5 ascetics, Kondañña, became the first man in Buddhist recorded history to attain the first stage of sainthood called *sotāpanna* (stream-winner).⁸⁶ He was also the first to ask to be a monk under Buddha. Kondañña’s spiritual breakthrough was a very critical development for the Buddhist faith. It was tangible proof of what Buddha had described as the spiritual path to mental release and unconditioned bliss. It was also testimony that Buddha’s methodology to help another realise enlightenment worked. For his other 4 friends, Kondañña’s spiritual

⁸⁵ “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the *Dhamma*” (S 56:11), Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op.cit., pp. 1843-1845.

⁸⁶ There are 4 stages of ‘sainthood’: *sotāpanna* (stream-winner), *sakadagami* (once returner), *anagami* (non-returner) and *arahant*. The *Dhamma* understanding of a stream-winner is such that his clinging energy is enough to yield at most another 7 rebirths. For the *sakadagami*, he would have at most 1 more human rebirth and if he has not realised *nibbana*, his next and last rebirth would be in the heavens. An *anagami* would be reborn in a plane called Pure Abode and realise *nibbana* there. An *arahant* is fully enlightened and will experience *nibbana* in this life. Upon death he will not have another rebirth.

success must surely increase their faith and strengthen their resolve to strive for a similar enlightenment experience and release.

As Buddha continued with *Dhamma* talk (no details given), two other ascetics, Vappa and Bhaddiya, also became *sotāpanna*, and likewise asked to become monks. The last 2 ascetics apparently took a bit more time to understand *Dhamma*. The small company split themselves up into 2 groups and took turns to collect alms so that the other could continue practising. Finally, Mahanama and Assaji also understood *Dhamma*, became *sotāpanna* and then asked to be monks.⁸⁷

The First Arahants

Once all the 5 ascetics had become *sotāpanna*, Buddha delivered the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* (Non-Self Characteristic). This is an extremely difficult discourse to understand conceptually, let alone realise it intuitively. It should be noted that Buddha did not teach this *Sutta* until

⁸⁷ Ñānamoli, op. cit., p. 46.

all the 5 ascetics had gained a deep enough insight of *Dhamma* that their worldview, their instincts, their priorities, were all changed. So clearly, this is not a discourse that the average non-practitioner or even spiritual neophyte could understand. But for completeness of the story, it had to be presented. But I will paraphrase and offer only a summary.

Buddha began by saying that “form is non-self.”⁸⁸ If form were self, one should be able to determine what state the form should be and accordingly choose not to experience *dukkha*. But precisely because form is not self, we thus experience *dukkha*. Likewise for feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness: they are all non-self and thus one cannot choose not to experience *dukkha*.

Then Buddha asked “...is form permanent or impermanent?” The monks replied, “Impermanent.” Buddha pressed on, since form was impermanent, then

⁸⁸ “The Characteristic of Nonself”, Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., pp. 901-902.

how could it be pleasant? And if material form was impermanent, and unpleasant, then did it make sense to regard it as “This is mine, this I am, this is my self?” Likewise for consciousness, feelings, perceptions and volitional formations: did it make sense to regard them as “This is mine, this I am, this is my self?”

Buddha concluded *Anattalakkhana Sutta* with “any form, whether past, future or present... should be seen as it actually is with correct wisdom thus: This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”⁸⁹ Following this sermon, all the 5 monks finally realised enlightenment knowledge and experienced *nibbana*.

Observations

Buddha lived on for another 45 years after Enlightenment. He was only 35 when his spiritual search ended, still at the prime of his life. He then devoted the rest of his life to teaching *Dhamma*. He was always cognizant of the fact that however long his life might be, it

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 902.

was still limited. He thus had to be selective so as not to waste invaluable time and energy on the disinterested or the foolish. Buddha's key criterion in deciding who to teach was that the person must have the capacity to understand *Dhamma* and at least enter the stream. If for whatever reason that person could not go to Buddha, he would spare no effort to go to that individual, regardless of age, gender, social or economic status. There were many instances of Buddha travelling long distances to deliver *Dhamma* to just one individual whose mind was ready. Such was his compassion to humanity and dedication to *Dhamma* work.

Buddha's first proselytising endeavour was an unqualified success. He spent just a few days personally guiding these 5 monks in their meditation practices before they realised and became the world's first fully enlightened *arahants*. Their enlightenment was significant because it was proof to Buddha that the method he had devised was effective in creating the necessary conditions in the mind such that it could see, understand and realise the sublime *nibbana*. He could now go forth and replicate this effort.

Chapter Six: Spreading Dhamma

The most significant events in this chapter are Buddha's conversion of three groups of people over what appeared to be mere weeks: Yasa and 54 friends, 30 young men and 3 Kassapa brothers with 1000 followers. After those ordinations, Buddha's following swelled exponentially from mere 5 to thousands and counting. Interestingly, the Canon provided a lot of details on this period. It is possibly because the Buddhist forefathers considered these early conversions an unprecedented success and wanted to ensure that they were captured for posterity to inspire future missionaries.

First Group: Yasa and 54 Friends

This conversion story began one dawn in Benares when Yasa, an only son to a fabulously wealthy merchant, was feeling very stifled and distressed about

his luxurious but meaningless existence. So he quietly left his house when everyone was still sleeping and aimlessly meandered towards the deer park in Isipatana.

At that time, Buddha was already awake and doing his walking meditation. He saw Yasa coming from afar and sat down by the side of the road to wait for him. The Canon mentioned that Yasa was mumbling to himself, saying, “It is fearful! It is horrible!” Buddha hailed him over with the words, “Here is not fearful and not horrible. Come, Yasa, sit down. I shall teach you *Dhamma*.”⁹⁰

Buddha’s words penetrated the dark despair in Yasa’s mind. Reassured and hopeful, he sat down by the Buddha. To calm Yasa down, Buddha started talking about a few themes that he knew would intrigue and fascinate Yasa (and apparently most people in his time). Buddha spoke of the merits of being generous, about why it was important to observe morality, and about the heavens (no details on what was covered here). Then he went on to explain “the dangers, the vanity and the

⁹⁰ Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 48, translating from Vin. Mv. 1:7-20.

defilement in sensual pleasures and the blessings in renunciation".⁹¹ (This method of teaching is known as gradual instruction, where a skilful teacher would start by explaining simple subject matters that the student could easily understand before going on to increasingly more complex ones until finally the Four Noble Truths.)

By now Yasa was probably quite calm. When Buddha discerned that Yasa's mind was ready, open, eager and trusting: he expounded on the Four Noble Truths: *dukkha*, its cause, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. Yasa intuitively understood the teaching and became a *sotāpanna* as he sat there listening.⁹²

Meanwhile, Yasa's household was in an uproar when his upset parents discovered that he was missing. They dispatched search parties. Yasa's father decided to check out the deer park at Isipatana himself, which suggested that it must have been one of Yasa's favourite

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁹² Ibid., p. 49.

haunts. (Incidentally, the name of the park, Isipatana, suggests that it was a congregation spot for philosophers and spiritual practitioners. *Isi* means sage and *patana* means place of landing.)

When Buddha saw the old merchant coming, he knew that the latter had the requisite wisdom to understand *Dhamma*. But Yasa's presence would be distracting for his father so Buddha made Yasa invisible even as the latter was still sitting there.

Hurrying along, the old man soon spotted Buddha sitting by himself. He called out to Buddha to ask if he had seen a young man. Buddha invited him to sit and promised that he would see his son soon. The old man gratefully complied. Buddha then repeated the same topics in the same sequence he had earlier given to Yasa. Like his son, the old man understood and became a *sotāpanna* just listening to the gradual instruction. He asked Buddha to accept him as a lay disciple and was the first person in Buddhist history to take refuge in the Triple Gems (Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*).

On Yasa's part, as he listened to Buddha's gradual instruction to his father, he realised full enlightenment knowledge and became an *arahant*. Buddha read his mind, knew that precise moment and discerned that Yasa would no longer go back to lay life. He then unveiled Yasa to his father. That was a poignant moment. Almost as if the old merchant intuitively knew that he had lost his son even as he had just found him, he exclaimed, "Yasa, my son, your mother is in sorrow and grieving. Give life to your mother."⁹³

Yasa did not answer. He looked at Buddha who then replied on his behalf. Buddha asked the old merchant to reflect on his own understanding of *Dhamma*. And then added that Yasa's understanding was much deeper than his, which meant Yasa no longer had any clinging in his heart. Was it possible for Yasa to go back to householder life and enjoy sensual pleasure? Buddha asked.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 50.

It must have been a difficult moment for the old merchant to know that his only son and heir was never going home. The old man was after all only a *sotāpanna* and his attachment to people and things was still strong. But he also had enough wisdom to accept that his son had achieved unparalleled spiritual success that brought him unconditioned happiness and peace. As a father, he would be happy for his son and possibly a little proud of his achievement.

The Canon actually did not capture the old man's mixed emotions. It merely said that the old merchant accepted that his son was now an *arahant*, and invited Buddha and Yasa to his house for alms offering the next morning.⁹⁴ It was a dry, clinical and almost staid record of a historic event. Anyhow, after his father had left, Yasa requested Buddha's permission to be a monk and was duly welcomed.

The same monotonous and detached tone was used to describe Yasa's meeting with his mother and his

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

wife, when he returned home for alms the next morning. The Canon said they paid respect to Buddha. He talked to them about *Dhamma*. They understood, became *sotāpanna*, took refuge in the Triple Gems, and then served breakfast. That's it: short, sharp and to the point.

I suppose to the Buddhist forefathers who were more concerned about inspiring the masses and winning converts than anything else, it would seem counterproductive to linger on any emotional angst that would inevitably follow the departure of a beloved son, husband or father for the *Sangha*. Nonetheless, it still makes for a rather surreal reading to see these real life people behaving impassively, when loved ones leave homes to be monks. This lack of human warmth and touch unwittingly gives an element of artificiality to the Canon.

Anyhow, soon after Yasa became a monk, 4 very good friends visited him.⁹⁵ Like Yasa, they were scions of rich and influential merchant families in Benares. They

⁹⁵ Their names were Vimala, Sabahu, Punnaji and Gavampati.

were curious as to why Yasa had become a monk. Yasa took his friends to Buddha and asked him to guide them. Following a short and succinct *Dhamma* talk, all 4 of them gained insight, became *sotāpanna* and also asked to be monks themselves. Soon after admission to the Order, they had more *Dhamma* discourses from Buddha and eventually became *arahants*.

Meanwhile, another 50 friends of Yasa (he was obviously very popular) from some of the leading families in and around Benares, visited Yasa for the same reasons as his other 4 friends above – they were curious. Likewise, he conducted them to Buddha who delivered his sermons and by and by, they all became *arahants* and joined the *Sangha*. Buddha's conversion exercise was clearly going phenomenally well, thanks to Yasa's incredible connections and Buddha's own outstanding teaching skills!

This was a critical milestone in Buddhist history: the Order now has 61 *arahants* (including Buddha and the first 5 monks). Buddha was ready to dispatch his small troop of *Dhamma* practitioners and teachers to the

world. He assembled them and said, "I am free from all shackles whether human or divine. You too are free from such shackles. Go now and wander for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and men. Teach the *Dhamma* that is good in the beginning, good in the middle and good in the end, with the meaning and the letter. Explain a holy life that is utterly perfect and pure. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who will be lost through not hearing the *Dhamma*. Some will understand the *Dhamma*."⁹⁶

Significance of Yasa's Conversion

Yasa's conversion was a very important achievement for Buddha, for at least two reasons. First, it paved the way for a rapid expansion of Buddha's following. It was not just 55 men who converted. As Yasa's experience had shown, their immediate families and close friends were also powerfully affected and might convert as well. More importantly, those individuals were

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

all members of leading mercantile families in Benares. That meant the budding new sect was probably able to enjoy strong material support from the local business elite.

Second, with the injection of 55 realised monks, Buddha was no longer the lone voice of *Dhamma*. These were men who had walked the talk, understood *Dhamma* fully and experienced *nibbana* for themselves. They were invaluable living embodiment of the teaching so people who saw them could see for themselves what *Dhamma* was about and be inspired to practise also. That there were 61 of them would mean *Dhamma* could now be spread far and wide and reach out to more people, more quickly.

It should be observed that Buddhism does advocate proselytising work. Buddha instructed his 60 newly-minted disciples to go teach *Dhamma* for the benefit of others. He even advised them not to travel together but to spread out and go alone in separate directions so that more grounds could be covered.

Two points are worth noting. First, Buddha asked them to go teach because they have fully understood *Dhamma* and have realised *nibbana*. I think this is a critical point to bear in mind. Those of us who share *Dhamma* should be mindful about our own practice and understanding. We do owe it to Buddha, *Dhamma* and our listeners that to the very best of our abilities, we do not misrepresent *Dhamma*. This is especially if we are still worldlings (*puthujjana*), i.e., that we have not caught even a glimpse of *Dhamma*. We need to be very careful not to let our ego stand in the way of *Dhamma*.

Second, the 60 monks were told by Buddha to just explain *Dhamma* and the practice. “Some will understand” because they have “little dust in their eyes”; left unsaid was that ‘some would not understand’. By this comment, it would seem that Buddha was quite ambivalent about whether or not the listener would accept *Dhamma*. All Buddha wanted was to give people a chance to hear *Dhamma* and then they can decide whether or not to embrace it. There was no need to force the issue or be agitated.

After despatching the 60 *arahants*, Buddha himself chose to walk all the way back to Uruvela, the site of his enlightenment. My hypothesis for his choice of Uruvela for his next missionary target is he was targeting the ascetic community that was thriving there, especially along River Neranjara. Buddha had stayed in that community for a few years and he would have personally known many of the practitioners there. Just as he had sought out his 5 former companions to share *Dhamma*, he was probably going back to guide more fellow practitioners. In any case, Buddha had always believed that practitioners had a few qualities that would enable them to understand *Dhamma*. Many were wiser than the average householder, had less clinging towards sensual delights, had some meditation practice and were prepared to make sacrifices for spiritual growth.

Second Group: 30 Young Men

Along the way to Uruvela, Buddha apparently made a little detour off the main road into the woods. He then sat at the foot of a tree and waited. At that time, a group of 30 friends with their wives were partying (or

picnicking) in the woods somewhere. One of them was single but paid a lady escort to accompany him (presumably so he would not feel left out). Anyhow, this lady escort stole from him and slipped away. Naturally the 30 indignant young men searched the woods for her, and eventually came upon Buddha. They asked if he had seen a woman. He asked why they were looking for her. They said that she had stolen from one of them. Buddha then asked, “What is better: to seek a woman or to seek yourselves?” They wisely chose the latter. Buddha then invited them to sit and began his gradual instruction. At the conclusion of the sermon, they all realised *Dhamma* in varying degrees though not complete, and asked to be monks. Buddha admitted them with a simple “Come, *bhikkhus*”.⁹⁷

Observations

This is a charming story but I did find it a little odd about the lack of details. In contrast to the earlier Yasa story and the next one about the conversion of 3 ascetic

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

brothers of the Kassapa clan, this one was almost barebones. It does not even have the names of the protagonists.

It may well be that the 30 friends were not prominent in the *Sangha* community and over time, their names were forgotten. However, I wonder if this story could have been inserted for its symbolism. The Pali Canon did not give the background of the 30 men. But in some accounts, they were said to be 'princes', i.e., *khattiyas*. Given that Yasa and his friends were *vessas* and the Kassapa brothers were *brahmanas*, with these *khattiya* 'princes', it would imply that Buddha would have support from all the 3 leading castes which monopolised the power and wealth of ancient India. Perhaps the intent was to show that right from the earliest of days, Buddhism had powerful supporters.

Third Group: 3 Kassapa brothers and 1000 followers

The Kassapa brothers were 3 matted-hair elderly ascetics who lived in the thriving Uruvela ascetic

community. The eldest and leader of the group was called Kassapa of Uruvela; the second, Kassapa of the River; and the youngest, Kassapa of Gaya. That they were all called Kassapa suggests that Kassapa was probably a clan or family name and not a reflection of lack of imagination on the part of their parents. Kassapa Uruvela had 500 disciples, Kassapa River had 300 and the youngest had 200.

I think Buddha had in mind the conversion of the Kassapa brothers when he decided to return to Uruvela. When he arrived there, he went straight to Kassapa Uruvela for permission to stay in his fire chamber. (The Kassapas were fire worshippers.) Kassapa said he personally had no objections but he thought it was a bad idea to stay in the fire chamber because a venomous *naga* snake with psychic powers lived there and would kill any trespasser. Buddha insisted and said, "Maybe he will not destroy me." After 3 rounds of arguing and opposing, Kassapa reluctantly gave in.

That night the territorial snake came and was outraged that a stranger was in its chamber. It blasted

Buddha first with smoke and then fire. Buddha retaliated with his own brand of fire, and that tit-for-tat sprouting of fires raged on. From the outside, the chamber looked like it was burning furiously. Kassapa's ascetics gathered to watch in horror thinking 'that poor handsome monk' had been burnt to a crisp.

The next morning, Buddha came out of the chamber with the *naga* contained in his bowl and he showed it to Kassapa, saying "This is your *naga*, Kassapa. His fire has been countered by fire." The *naga* was not hurt (the Canon made it a point to stress that). Uruvela Kassapa was impressed with Buddha's psychic powers but thought, "But he is not an *arahant* like me."⁹⁸

Next Buddha went to live in the woods near Kassapa's hermitage. Late that night, four Heavenly Kings dropped by to pay their respect to Buddha and then hung around. Their aura lit up the whole forest. The next day, when Uruvela Kassapa came to invite Buddha to join him for breakfast, he asked who the visitors were

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

the night before. His jaw dropped when Buddha said, “They were the Heavenly Kings. They came to hear *Dhamma*.” Impressed once again, but Kassapa still thought, “But he is not an *arahant* like me.”⁹⁹ The same happened in subsequent nights when Sakka (King of the *Tavatimsa* heaven) and then *Brahma* Sahampati visited Buddha: Kassapa persisted with his belief that he was the *arahant*.

One day, there was a grand sacrificial ceremony and people from neighbouring Anga and Magadha came eagerly with their large offerings of food. Kassapa began fretting that if his devotees found out about Buddha’s awesome psychic powers, they might switch allegiance. Buddha read his mind and for that day made himself scarce: he went somewhere else to collect alms.

The next day, Kassapa visited Buddha to invite him for breakfast. He then asked ‘where were you yesterday? We had prepared your meal but you did not come.’ Buddha told him that he knew of Kassapa’s worry

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

and decided to stay away from the ceremony. Kassapa was stunned that Buddha could read his mind. But still he persisted that Buddha was not an *arahant* like him.

And this went on. On one occasion, Uruvela Kassapa found out that King Sakka and other deities were eagerly waiting on Buddha. They brought him water to rinse his rag, delivered a stone for him to beat the rag, even bending a tree branch so that he could hang his rag. On other occasions, he discovered that Buddha could teleport at will to anywhere. Buddha could split logs with his mind, lit fires and put out fires. One wintry night, Buddha created 500 braziers from thin air for the ascetics to warm themselves after they had taken dips in the freezing River Neranjara. All throughout, Kassapa was convinced that he was superior because he was the *arahant* and Buddha was not.

One day, there was an unexpected rainstorm which resulted in a flash-flood. When Kassapa learnt that where Buddha was staying had been severely flooded, the sweet man quickly rallied his ascetics to row a boat in torrential waters to rescue Buddha. In his mind, he hoped

that Buddha had not been washed away. But when he got there, he saw that Buddha had caused the flood to back up into a wall of water around him and was calmly walking around on dry ground. Astounded, Kassapa called out to Buddha, who then floated up the wall of water into the boat. Once again Kassapa thought, “The great monk is very powerful since even the water has not overcome him. But he is not an *arahant* like me.”¹⁰⁰

Buddha had enough. He thought, “This misguided man will go on forever thinking ‘But he is not an *arahant* like me’.” He decided to shock Kassapa into rebooting his assumption. Buddha said, “You are neither an *arahant* nor are you on the way to becoming one,” and nothing that ‘you were doing would lead you to be an *arahant*’.¹⁰¹ Buddha’s words had the desired effect: stunned, Kassapa prostrated himself at Buddha’s feet and asked to be a monk in his Order. Buddha admitted him and then told him that he must allow his ascetic-followers to choose if they wished to join him. They too declared their

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 59.

desire to be monks. They then collectively cropped their hairs and threw those and all their fire sacrificial objects and furniture into the River Neranjara.

When Kassapa's younger brother, Kassapa River saw the floating debris, he was shocked and was worried that something had happened to his brother. Rounding up his followers, they rushed upstream to check up on their brethren, only to discover a whole bunch of shaven-head monks. Kassapa River asked his brother whether this was what he wanted. Uruvela Kassapa replied yes. That inspired Kassapa River to join him. So the newcomers cropped their hairs, threw their belongings and sacred objects into the river and asked Buddha to let them into his Order.¹⁰² Eventually, Gaya Kassapa and his men also followed their example and became monks.

Because the ascetics were devout fire-worshippers before their conversion, Buddha used the analogy of fire and burning to help them see how existence was fuelled and perpetuated and how it could

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 59-60.

be extinguished and cooled. Buddha said all mental experiences were perpetually burning with the fire of lust, hate and delusion. The eye, visible form, eye-consciousness, eye-contact and feelings were all burning with fire of lust, hate and delusion. The same applied to all the other experiences associated with the other sense organs and the mind: they were all burning with fire of lust, hate and delusion.

Buddha said, “Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards the eye, towards forms, towards eye-consciousness, towards eye-contact, towards whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition... Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion (his mind) is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: “Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ “Burning”, Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., p. 1143.

Concluding note

Within a few months of enlightenment, Buddha had successfully won converts amongst the economic, political and religious elites in the Magadha kingdom and neighbouring political entities. He was so successful because he was targeted in his proselytising efforts. While he did not discriminate on gender, ethnic group, social caste, economic standing or religious affiliation, Buddha had clear criteria about who was suitable and ready for *Dhamma*. There were certain features and characteristics common to many of the first batch of disciples that he had personally handpicked. They were all spiritual seekers with contemplative minds. Most were intellectually mature and had already spent some time asking philosophical questions about life and happiness. And they all had the potential to develop the intuitive wisdom necessary to understand and realise *Dhamma*.

At a personal level, Buddha was clearly an extremely skilled teacher-cum-trainer. *Dhamma* is so difficult to see let alone teach and yet Buddha was able to guide his disciples successfully to realise it. He was

able to achieve that because he was par excellent in picking the most appropriate topic or object of meditation that would make the deepest and most powerful impact on the minds he was guiding. Buddha was also sharp, precise and clear in his explanation so that his disciples would not be confused and would have clarity about the practice and the realisation knowledge. He was creative: he would customise *Dhamma* discourses for the individuals, using everyday examples and analogies that they could identify with, which helped them internalise the lesson. He was above all a brilliant orator and could command and hold attention and inspire masses.

But beyond the technical skills he commanded as a teacher and speaker, I do believe that Buddha was so successful also because of certain personality traits and qualities. The fact that he had no ego would mean that he had boundless *metta* (friendliness and loving-kindness) and *karuna* (compassion). Beings would be drawn to him. Those in distress would open up to him once their minds had calmed down. Even the most negative ones would find themselves somewhat pacified in his presence, and perhaps show some willingness to listen and learn. His

mind was completely balanced and he was unfazed by the external environment and conditions. So he would be a calming, soothing presence: a gentle balm to most sentient beings whose typical experience in life would be stress and distress.

Chapter Seven: Reaching Out to the Lay Community

This chapter introduces a new group of people, the lay supporters. This is an extremely important community. Its support has been critical for the survival of the *Sangha* and for the spread of *Dhamma* through the ages.

Of the lay supporters, the most important would be the ruling elite. It is not a problem if they are ambivalent but they cannot be hostile or oppressive. For if they were, any missionary endeavour could die a premature death. At the very least, the ruling powers must tolerate the monks' presence: they must not obstruct proselytising activities or harass the lay supporters. But if the elite are believers and supporters, then much can be achieved with their help. They are always among the richest people so they can help ensure food security and other material

support for the *Sangha*. They can also provide protection for and assure the safety of the *Sangha*. They could influence mass behaviour and choices. If they show support, their teacher of choice will gain in stature and credibility and win popular support.

This chapter will trace Buddha's first foray into the secular world after his enlightenment. The first major urban centre he visited was Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha kingdom. Rajagaha was a very important place to start proselytising work because of its large population and tremendous resources. As capital of a powerful and wealthy regional power, it would have visitors from all over the ancient world interested to trade with Magadha or to have diplomatic relations. In Rajagaha, Buddha could have easy access to a wide spectrum of people from distant places which he would otherwise not have had.

Converting Magadha's royal elite

The Magadhan king of the day was Seniya Bimbisara. He ascended the throne at only 15 years old,

and reigned for 52 years.¹⁰⁴ He had already ruled for about 9 years when he first met Ascetic Gotama (see Chapter 2: Home to Homelessness). Both men were in their 20s then: Buddha was 29 and Bimbisara 24. Perhaps that was why Bimbisara did not hold Ascetic Gotama's youth against him. In fact, he was so impressed by the young ascetic that he asked him to come back and share his spiritual findings when he was ready. Ascetic Gotama promised that he would. Bimbisara never forgot the impressive young ascetic and Buddha never forgot his promise.

When Buddha's entourage of 1000 monks walked through the city walls of Rajagaha, it must have been quite a sight. Even if the Buddhist forefathers had exaggerated the figure of 1000, it is reasonable to assume that the number was still quite large, possibly in the hundreds. So it was only a matter of time before Bimbisara learnt that his ascetic friend was back. Buddha's reputation had apparently preceded him also: Bimbisara had heard that Buddha was quite a masterful

¹⁰⁴ Malalasekera, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 285.

and wise teacher, very well-respected and well-practised. His doctrine was also popular and well-received.¹⁰⁵ Bimbisara decided to visit Buddha, who was staying in the Sapling Grove at the Supatthita Shrine¹⁰⁶ (perhaps a public park near some holy sites).

The Canon claimed that Bimbisara was accompanied by “120000 Magadhan *brahmana* householders.”¹⁰⁷ Even allowing for exaggeration, it is reasonable to assume that the crowd joining Bimbisara on his maiden call on Buddha must have been quite sizeable. Many if not most were probably just curious about the young teacher who could attract the attention of a powerful king. A stock passage was used in the Canon to describe how the visitors greeted Buddha: some paid homage (i.e., showing deep respect, probably adherents already), some exchanged greetings (just being friendly but non-committal), some saluted (a little more respectful), some called out their names (merely

¹⁰⁵ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 65, translating from Vin. Mv. 1:22.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

introducing themselves), and some just kept quiet and sat down (probably neutral or even critical observers).¹⁰⁸

Uruvela Kassapa's presence caused quite a stir. He was a very well-respected and influential ascetic teacher with both a large lay support base and a big following of disciples. The congregation started wondering who the real master was: Kassapa or Buddha. Buddha became aware of their thoughts and asked Kassapa to clarify. Kassapa rose from his seat, arranged his robe on one shoulder, prostrated with his head at Buddha's feet and said, "The Blessed One is my guide; I am a disciple."¹⁰⁹

The assembly was thoroughly awed. Uruvela Kassapa's reputation aside, he was also far older than Buddha and yet he paid the younger man the ultimate of respect. Their minds were now open to the teaching of Buddha and ready for *Dhamma*. The Canon claimed that on that day, the vast majority of them became *sotāpanna*,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

after listening to a sermon by Buddha. It is a fair assumption that a large number of Rajagaha power elite became devout lay supporters of Buddha that day.

Bimbisara himself also became a *sotāpanna* and was quite emotional. The *Vinaya* quoted him as saying that he had realised all his youthful aspirations. Aside from ascending the throne, he had aspired to meet and do honour to a saint, be guided by him and realise the teaching.¹¹⁰ Bimbisara then became Buddha's first royal lay supporter.

Establishing the first monastic settlement

Breakfast the next morning was at Bimbisara's palace. The king went around personally serving food to Buddha and the other monks. When the meal was over, Bimbisara had another gift for his guests. He offered a park for the *Sangha's* exclusive and perpetual use. The park, Veluvana (Bamboo Grove), was to be the first permanent Buddhist monastic settlement. Bimbisara

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

chose Veluvana because it was close enough to the city so that people would visit, yet remote enough such that it would not be disturbed by relentless daily traffic. Bimbisara described it as “unfrequented by day and quiet by night, undisturbed by voices, with an atmosphere of aloofness.”¹¹¹

It is highly likely that there were no built up living quarters for the monks in Veluvana at that point which meant that they were staying in the open with tree branches for shelter. We can infer this from 2 circumstantial evidences. The first is the evidence of omission: there was no mention anywhere in the Pali Canon about Bimbisara or anyone constructing shelter in Veluvana. If there were any proper lodging, the Canon would probably have gushed about it, as it did for the next major land offering to the *Sangha*, namely, Jetavana. (More will be said about Jetavana in volume 2.)

Second, sometime in the third year post-Enlightenment, which means two years or so after the gift

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 68.

of Veluvana, a rich Magadhan merchant visited the monastic sanctuary. He was impressed by the demeanour of the monks and wanted to do something for them. He asked them if they would stay in specially-constructed dwellings. They replied that Buddha had not allowed for such dwelling. He asked that they check with Buddha specifically if he would approve such dwellings. Accordingly, Buddha was asked and he replied yes. The merchant proceeded to have 60 shelters built within a day.¹¹²

Nonetheless, the gift of Veluvana was a very significant milestone in the history of Buddhism. Before Veluvana, the reach of *Dhamma* was mostly opportunistic: one had to be fortunate enough to cross path with either Buddha or one of his enlightened monks before one could have a chance to listen to *Dhamma*. With the establishment of Veluvana, anyone interested in *Dhamma* would know where to go for *Dhamma* sermons. The spread of *Dhamma* was thus less vulnerable to the vagaries of fate. Veluvana was probably an important

¹¹² Ibid., p. 87.

contributory factor why Buddha's fame and follower base expanded so rapidly in the early years in Rajagaha.

Buddha spent two *vassa* (rain retreats) in Veluvana: the second and third after Enlightenment. (His first *vassa* was spent in Benares.)

Contribution of King Bimbisara

A special note should be made about Bimbisara's unique and critical contribution to the expansion and consolidation of Buddhism in Magadha and its vicinity. Bimbisara was a devout, dedicated and driven disciple who took a deep personal interest in the health of the Buddhist fraternity. He was an intelligent and resourceful ruler, and now he applied his vast experience in governing to support *Dhamma* work. Note that one of his considerations of Veluvana's suitability was its accessibility to the town folks: he must have thought that Veluvana could serve as ground zero for *Dhamma* proselytising effort.

Bimbisara had also been known to take it upon himself to recommend that Buddha adopt some of the best practices of other sects to help popularise Buddhism. For instance, today it is a common practice with all the Buddhist traditions to have special *Dhamma* observances on full moon and new moon days. In those early days, there was no such practice. It was Bimbisara who first noticed that the other sects were meeting on “half-moons of the 14th and 15th and the quarter moon of the 8th to preach their doctrine”, and the event was very popular with the masses.¹¹³ He noted that the sects that held these gathering gained ground. (I guess in ancient India with hardly any nocturnal activities, such events would count as highlights of the month!) Bimbisara suggested to Buddha that the *Sangha* should do likewise, and Buddha agreed.

However, there were still some initial teething problems. As per their practice when monks met, they would observe noble silence. So at the first such gathering, they all sat in silence. The crowd which came

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 156-157, translating from Vin. Mv. 2:1-2.

for the *Sangha*'s inaugural tri-monthly observances "were annoyed and they murmured in annoyance, 'How can the monks... meet on these days and sit in silence as dumb as hogs? (Clearly the ancients were blunter with their criticisms.) Ought not *Dhamma* be preached?'" The monks overheard and reported to Buddha, who then approved that when they meet on those nights, they can preach *Dhamma*.¹¹⁴

Bimbisara was only 30 when *Dhamma* was established in Magadha. He ruled for another 37 years which provided quite a bit of time for the Buddhist community to expand rapidly in his dominion and to consolidate its support. Under his staunch patronage and protection, Magadha became a key sanctuary for the Triple Gems.

Success Bred Resentment

We know that Buddha's efforts to spread his teachings in Rajagaha were a huge success by any

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 157.

measure. He converted the king and large numbers of the rich and powerful of Rajagaha in just one *Dhamma* sermon. He now had use of a HQ to reach out to those who might be interested in his doctrine, i.e., non-believers who were open-minded, curious, intelligent and wise. At some point, he even won over members of other sects, including that led by a prominent teacher by the name Sanjaya. (More about this event will be discussed in Chapter 8: Buddha's Foremost Lieutenants.)

We don't know exactly when but sometime in those early days in Rajagaha, there was a brief period when some of its populace got really resentful at Buddha's success in winning converts. The Canon mentioned that people were muttering that "The monk Gotama is creating childlessness and widowhood, he is obliterating the clans. Already a thousand matted-hair ascetics have become monks under him, and these 250 wanderers and now these well-known clansmen have gone to lead the holy life under the monk Gotama!"¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 73, translating Vin. Mv 1:23-24.

Brief though it might have been, the animosity and emotions must have been intense. The monks went complaining to Buddha that they were being mocked as they went on their alms rounds. Buddha had to reassure them that this would not last ('only 7 days'¹¹⁶). Indeed, the mocking subsided. While the Canon would want to portray the defusing of tension as some mystical protection for Buddha and *Dhamma* work, perhaps the fact that Buddha was the King's teacher helped. The secular world is usually more sensitive to power and might: and the King was protective of the monks.

Final Thoughts

In the earliest day of Buddhism, it would appear that the people most drawn to *Dhamma* were society's elite: the political and economic privileged, the educated, the thinkers, the young and the brightest. Buddha's doctrine was seen as original, even radical, deeply thought-provoking and sublime. One might be inclined to dismiss the ancient Indians as intellectually less rigorous

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

than us. That would be a mistake for the evidence in the *suttas* does suggest that the intellectual community of Buddha's days were perhaps as demanding if not more than the modern day counterpart. There were scores of sects and they had an extremely vibrant and exacting debating tradition. They were very systematic and logical in their debate, there were constant challenges to Buddha and his monks on doctrinal issues, and those debating sessions were often well-attended by lay people, much like today's boxing championship matches. The bottom line is *Dhamma*, as propounded by Buddha is a philosophy that would appeal to the thinking, intelligent and wise. It is not a panacea for the superstitious and the blind-faithful. Only the wise practitioner can experience the true beauty of *Dhamma*.

Finally, Rajagaha marked an important turning point in the growth of the Buddhist community. Before Rajagaha, Buddha talent-spotted potential *arahants* and promising practitioners and brought *Dhamma* to them. The process of conversion was slow and sometimes tedious. After he had established himself in Rajagaha, seekers (both the genuine and unfortunately, the

charlatan) started flocking to join him. Buddha was gaining fame and drawing crowds. The *Sangha* grew exponentially. The once small cohesive and pure community of true practitioners was rapidly transforming both in feature and in character.

Chapter Eight: Buddha's Foremost Lieutenants

Buddha had thousands of disciples in his lifetime. Foremost amongst them were two very talented, capable and extremely charismatic young men: Sariputta and Moggallana. Buddha designated them as his first and second chief disciples respectively. These were designations accorded by Buddha in recognition that the two men were going to be his anchor lieutenants in consolidating the *Sangha* and spreading *Dhamma*. This chapter will trace how they came to join Buddha's *Sangha*, how Buddha personally guided them to realise their full spiritual potential and attain *arahanthood*, and how they contributed to the growth of the *Sangha* and *Dhamma*.

Chance meeting between Sariputta and *Bhikkhu Assaji*

Sariputta and Moggallana were from very wealthy, prominent and ancient ultra-conservative *brahmana* families.¹¹⁷ That meant that when they became ascetics as part of their spiritual quest, they effectively turned their backs on their familial religious beliefs and practice and possibly severely strained ties with their parents.

During the time when Buddha was in Rajagaha, Sariputta and Moggallana were also staying in the capital, training under a prominent teacher by the name Sanjaya. After a while, they became dissatisfied with their teacher's doctrine and had doubts about its efficacy. They quietly made a pact with each other: they would check out other schools and their doctrines, and keep the other apprised of their search.

¹¹⁷ Hellmuth Hecker, Maha-Moggallana, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1994. Last accessed 31 Dec 2013.
[Http:// www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/hecker/wheel263.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/hecker/wheel263.html)

One morning, Sariputta chanced upon the monk Assaji (one of Buddha's 5 companion-friends and first disciples) as the latter was going around on his alms round. Sariputta was struck by Assaji's demeanour and decided to observe him further. He trailed Assaji all over Rajagaha, and carefully noted his conduct and behaviour: how he moved, stopped, collected alms, held his head, and so on. After a while, Sariputta was sure that he had found his '*arahant*'. Uncomfortable about interrupting Assaji's alms round, he decided that he would shadow Assaji until there was an opportunity to ask him about his doctrine and teacher.

This must have lasted for quite a while because Sariputta followed Assaji all the way out of the capital to an isolated spot where Assaji stopped to have his meal. Sariputta finally went up to Assaji, had a short exchange of friendly greetings, and then asked, 'You look really good. Could you tell me who is your teacher'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., p. 70, translating from Vin. Mv. 1:23-24.

One can almost see Assaji smiling gently as he replied that he had only just become a disciple so he could not teach the *Dhamma* in much detail. But he could share “its meaning in brief”.¹¹⁹ Sariputta said he would be happy with whatever Assaji could share. Assaji’s ‘brief’ remark was immortalised as follows:

*The Perfect One has told the cause
Of causally arisen things;
And what brings their cessation, too:
Such is the doctrine preached by the Great Monk.*¹²⁰

Amazingly, Sariputta attained *sotāpanna*, on hearing this short stanza. He thought, “All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.”¹²¹ Sariputta was the first man in ‘recorded’ Buddhist history to have entered the stream without having even met Buddha!

An excited Sariputta hurried off to look for his friend and partner-in-*Dhamma*, Moggallana, to share his

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 71.

new knowledge. When Moggallana saw him, he noted that Sariputta looked “serene”, and his skin was “clear and bright”.¹²² Moggallana intuitively knew that something was different. He must have been really excited when he asked “Have you found the deathless? Where did you find it?” Sariputta said ‘yes’ and repeated word for word Assaji’s stanza. Like his wise friend, Moggallana also understood and became a *sotāpanna*, the second known person to realise *Dhamma* without guidance from Buddha. Clearly this pair was destined for much greater things.

Leaving Sanjaya

Ever the more impatient one, Moggallana was all ready to go seek out Buddha. But Sariputta reminded him that they had a responsibility to some 250 fellow practitioners in Sanjaya’s community. He thought that their friends should at least be told about what they had learnt and experienced and be given a chance to decide

¹²² Ibid., p. 71.

if they wished to join them in becoming Buddha's disciples.

It is a reflection of their charisma and the respect and trust they commanded that when their fellow practitioners were told of the two's decision to leave Sanjaya and join a different order, all of them voted unanimously to go with the pair. It was sufficient for them that Sariputta and Moggallana were convinced enough to switch teachers.

Sanjaya was shocked at the pair's decision to leave. He tried to entice them to stay by offering to make them joint-leaders of his sect. But when they declined and left, with the bulk of his disciples, Sanjaya collapsed, and "hot blood gushed from his mouth".¹²³ (Perhaps he burst a blood vessel.)

I take a short break from the main story to make a few observations about Sanjaya. First, I think notwithstanding the minor inconsequential role that

¹²³ Ibid., p., 72.

Sanjaya was reduced to in the Pali Canon, he must have been a very prominent teacher and philosopher in his time. Otherwise, the obviously very intelligent Sariputta and Moggallana would not have been drawn to his school. So this decimation of his sect would have destroyed his social standing and reputation, which would explain his physical collapse.

Second, the resentment by some in Magadha towards Buddha's success in winning converts (mentioned in Chapter 7), apparently started soon after Sariputta and Moggallana's defection obliterated Sanjaya's sect.¹²⁴ This would suggest that Sanjaya had fairly strong support amongst the lay populace, which is yet another 'proof' that he was not an inconsequential public figure.

Third, I suspect the Buddhist forefathers did not like Sanjaya much. In a way, the above vivid and gory description in the Canon about 'hot blood gushing' was completely unnecessary to the Sariputta and Moggallana

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

story. Could it be that the ancient storytellers somewhat relished his dramatic downfall? But we do not know why they disliked him, if indeed that was so.

Joining Buddha's Order

The very instance they left Sanjaya, the throng of practitioners went to Veluvana to look for Buddha. They probably were not sure where Buddha was but because they knew that the royal park had been given to his community, they at least had an address to start looking for him.

Fortunately for them, Buddha was with his monks in the park at that moment. He saw them coming in the distance and said, "Here comes these two friends, Kolita and Upatissa. They will be my chief disciples..."¹²⁵ (Kolita was Moggallana's family name while Upatissa was Sariputta's.) Buddha declared their exalted status even before they were formally introduced: clearly Buddha had

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

foreseen their tremendous potential to teach and spread *Dhamma*, and to guide and lead the *Sangha*.

As Sariputta and Moggallana prostrated at his feet and asked to be his disciples, Buddha welcomed them with, “Come *bhikkhus*, the *Dhamma* is well proclaimed; lead the holy life for the complete ending of *dukkha*.”¹²⁶

Guiding Moggallana

Tradition has it that Moggallana attained arahatship 7 days after becoming a monk. According to the Pali Canon, Buddha had followed Moggallana’s progress closely and had personally guided him. This is despite Moggallana not staying with Buddha during the critical period of his meditation. He apparently left Buddha at some point to stay at Kallavalamuttagama, a Magadhan village.

One day, while meditating alone, he became drowsy. Buddha was then at a deer park at Bhesakala

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

Grove, when he “saw” with his “divine eye” that Moggallana was dozing off as he sat trying to meditate. Buddha teleported to where Moggallana was valiantly struggling to stay awake.

Buddha then systematically led him through a series of mental and physical exercises to help keep his mind alert. He started by saying that Moggallana should stop using a particular object of meditation if using that made him drowsy. If changing the meditation object did not improve his alertness, he should try thinking, investigating and analysing *Dhamma*. (This would have the effect of injecting energy into the mind.) Should that fail, Buddha said to try “reciting in detail” *Dhamma* “as you have heard it”. (This would have been another mental stimulation exercise.) If all these mental exertions fail to sharpen his alertness, then it was time to get physical: Buddha suggested that he pull his ears, or rub his limbs, or just get up from the seat, wash the face, look around, look at the sky and stars, start meditating on light and day, or start walking about. If all these still fail, then

Moggallana should just lie down mindfully and sleep, Buddha said.¹²⁷

Buddha also spent a little time advising Moggallana on how to manage relations with the lay community. “Don’t approach families with a head swollen with pride,” Buddha said. “Now there are chores to be done in the families, and for this reason, when a monk turns up, people may not pay attention to him. The monk might think: ‘Who has turned this family against me?’” Thinking so, the monk might feel humiliated, become restless, and lose concentration.¹²⁸ Buddha also told Moggallana to avoid “contentious talk” and “bonding with everyone”, because these activities would cause the mind to be restless and lead the practitioner to have difficulties concentrating.¹²⁹

Now, Buddha was known to customise his teachings for the individual he was guiding. He knew

¹²⁷ “Dozing”, Book of Seven, Bodhi, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya, op. cit., pp. 143-146.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 146.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 146.

exactly what to say for maximum results, and how to nuance it precisely for clarity and quick understanding. So why did Buddha advise Moggallana to avoid being too close to lay followers? Perhaps that was Moggallana's problem that was obstructing his progress in realising *nibbana*: he was mixing too much with lay followers and was disturbed by their mundane problems ("contentious talk")? He was probably popular: we could surmise that he was charismatic by the ease at which Sanjaya's disciples just followed him and Sariputta and defected to Buddha's order. Lay followers likely had easy access to him: it would appear that he was staying near, if not in a village. After this talk, Moggallana was presumably highly motivated and returned to his meditation with vigour. In time, he finally realised *nibbana* and became an *arahant*.

Sariputta's experience

In contrast, Sariputta spent his training period in close proximity to Buddha. Sariputta might have even served as Buddha's attendant of sort. When the story of Sariputta's enlightenment moment began, we know that he was in a large cave that bore the name Sukarakhata

(Boar's Grotto). Sariputta was then "fanning" Buddha and listening to him giving a discourse to a visiting ascetic, Dighanakha. According to the Canon, Buddha essentially made 2 *Dhamma* points to Dighanakha. First, the body must be regarded as impermanent, *dukkha*, void and not self. When one was able to regard the body as such, one would abandon desire and affection for the body and drop the habit of seeing the world from the basis of I, mine and myself.

Second, there were three kinds of feeling: pleasant, painful and neutral. At any one time, the person could experience only one feeling, which meant that feeling would come and go, would form and dissipate, and would rise because of conditions. When a practitioner saw that, he became dispassionate towards feelings. With dispassion, lust faded away and his mind became freed. Knowledge would arise in him that this was liberation. And he would understand that 'Birth is exhausted' and there would be no more rebirth.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ *Dīghanakha Sutta* (To Dighanakha), translated from Pali by Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 603-606.

Then followed a rather odd casting, it said 'Sariputta thought, "The Blessed One (i.e., Buddha), indeed, speaks of the abandoning of these things through direct knowledge... speaks of the relinquishing of these things through direct knowledge.'" As he considered this, 'through not clinging, his mind was liberated from taints.'¹³¹

Reading carefully here, one may notice that the *Sutta* implied that the precise moment of Sariputta's attainment to *arahant* sainthood was when he concluded that Buddha had experienced for himself everything that he had just explained to Dighanakha. Note the expression: 'As he considered this' (i.e., Buddha's achievements), 'his mind was liberated from taints through not clinging'. It would appear that it was faith in Buddha that opened the door to Sariputta's realisation of *nibbana*.

It is perhaps quite ironical that one of the most brilliant analytical minds among Buddha's disciples,

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 606.

gained enlightenment through the simple, sometimes underrated quality of faith. For one glorious moment, faith must have made his heart sang with joy, his mind opened, and insight blossomed. Incidentally, Sariputta took a fortnight, a week longer than his best friend Moggallana, to realise *nibbana*.

Some final observations

Sariputta and Moggallana proved to be invaluable to the cause of spreading *Dhamma* and the effort of building the *Sangha*. Sariputta was second only to Buddha in terms of his ability to explain complex *Dhamma* concepts succinctly and clearly while Moggallana's psychic powers were bested only by Buddha. Sariputta was known to be able to just step in for Buddha in the midst of a *Dhamma* discourse and continue from where Buddha had left off. As for Moggallana, Buddha had been known to send him to neutralise lethal beings and resolve potentially deadly situations.

However, given that this is a book on Buddha's life, I would limit myself to just mentioning the points that

would add to our understanding of Buddha rather than elaborate on the work and achievements of these two great *arahants*.

Both men were clearly highly intelligent, very capable, effective and dedicated leaders with clear, deep sense of mission to spread *Dhamma* and consolidate the *Sangha*. They were charismatic, effective *Dhamma* speakers and teachers, highly skilled in meditation, wise, compassionate and immaculate in conduct. Such personalities are born to be their own CEOs, to create and lead their own organisations, to build empires and set legacies. Yet they chose to follow Buddha contentedly. To me, it serves to show just how much more awe-inspiring Buddha himself must have been to gain the respect and lifelong loyalty of such talented and brilliant men.

As first and second chief disciples, they were effectively the deputy leaders of the Order, although Buddha never actually set up formal office-holders with clearly defined roles and responsibilities to run the *Sangha*. Theirs was an informal leadership but they were

able to exercise tremendous influence in the *Sangha*. They had complete autonomy in the way they discharged their responsibilities. Buddha had complete trust in them and they were empowered to manage issues and situations as they saw fit. Buddha was clearly not into power and control so he had no problem just letting his two deputies run the shop, so to speak. The *Sangha* grew rapidly and thrived under their collective leadership.

Chapter Nine: Return to Kapilavatthu

In the cold season of the first year of his enlightenment, Buddha went home to Kapilavatthu for a short visit. It may not be immediately obvious to the casual reader, but this was a very interesting event. For the average person with the usual attachment to family, friends, home and possessions, Buddha's decision to go home might seem perfectly natural. After all, he had been away for almost 7 years: surely he would want to go home to see his loved ones.

But Buddha was not an average person. He was already enlightened. He had no more attachment to anything or anyone, not even to himself. In his mind, the only thing worth living for was to spread *Dhamma* and to keep the knowledge of *Dhamma* alive for future generations. At the point when he made the decision to visit Kapilavatthu, he was just getting started with the

mission of propagating *Dhamma* in populous Rajagaha. The *Sangha*, which was so critical to the mission of keeping *Dhamma* alive, was just established and required his personal attention. He had scores of newly converted disciples demanding easy access to him. To take a leave of absence when conditions were just coming together for the growth of *Dhamma* would seem at odd with his character, which had always been to stay focused on the mission. So why did he take time-off just to go home? What did he really want to do when he see his family?

What prompted the decision to go home?

Commentaries written many centuries after Buddha's death have generally claimed that he went home to oblige his father Suddhodana. They said that after Buddha's enlightenment, Suddhodana sent many messengers to ask him to visit. All the couriers failed to deliver the message because they had all become enlightened after listening to his *Dhamma* talk, and then decided to become monks. When that happened, they did not bother about delivering Suddhodana's invitation

anymore. Only one, by the name Kaludayi, remembered to tell Buddha about Suddhodana's request, even though he too was enlightened and had joined the *Sangha* after listening to a *Dhamma* talk. Kaludayi was a childhood friend of Buddha, and a trusted aide of Suddhodana.

I think what prompted Buddha to visit was a little more complex than Suddhodana's invitation although it did contribute to the final decision. I believe the more important reason is actually given in the Pali Canon but one has to read between the lines to tease it out. There is a poem by Kaludayi carried in the *Theragatha*, and it goes like this, amongst other things. "Fields are ploughed in hope, seeds are sown in hope...You, I feel, can do far more."¹³² "Let the Sakyans and Koliyans see you, facing the west, crossing the Rohini River."¹³³ (Rohini marked the boundary dividing Sakyan and Koliyan territories.)

Kaludayi was probably suggesting to Buddha that he should go back to Kapilavatthu and spread *Dhamma*

¹³² Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 76.

to his relatives. Perhaps Kaludayi believed that Buddha's relatives would be so inspired by him that they would convert in droves as soon as they see him "crossing the Rohini River". In fact Kaludayi even seemed 'anxious' to get started: he told Buddha that they should leave "now" because "now is a pleasant season for travel... for it is not too cold or over-warm".¹³⁴ It would appear that Buddha left for Kapilavatthu shortly after that conversation. It is possible that he was convinced by Kaludayi to go and spread *Dhamma* amongst their relatives and friends. Suddhodana's invitation was only the catalyst and perhaps provided the assurance that Buddha would be welcomed home.

Muted homecoming

However, contrary to Kaludayi's optimism, Buddha's homecoming was not particularly triumphant, at least not initially. It is telling that the Canon merely reported that when Buddha got to Kapilavatthu, he stayed in Nigrodha's Park and went to his father's house

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

only the next morning for breakfast.¹³⁵ There was no mention of cheering relatives to welcome him home. In fact, Buddha might have even stayed under the open sky the first night he was back in Kapilavatthu.¹³⁶ Nigrodha Park was then just an open forest with no man-made shelter. Could it be that the Sakyans did not know that he was back? I find that highly unlikely: how could the close-knit Sakyan community not notice a visiting monk, especially one who was a missing Sakyan heir.

The Canon did not give any clue as to why the Sakyans failed to roll out the 'red carpet'. But our ever dependable early Buddhist storytellers were unanimous in blaming the lukewarm greeting on the infamous Sakyan pride. They gleefully told elaborate tales about how Buddha had to perform fantastic magic feats to shock and awe his proud relatives into submission. For instance, Buddha was said to have to display the 'Twin Marvel', i.e., causing simultaneous appearance of jets of fire and water from all his limbs.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

The more discerning readers may dismiss those tales as mythology. I suspect there is some truth to the tales, not so much in substance but in spirit. I think when Buddha first got home, his relatives were not particularly welcoming and some might even have been downright hostile. They were not impressed with their 'black-haired young Siddhattha', a junior Sakyan with no tangible professional credentials when he left, and had yet to prove his spiritual credentials. Even his *Dhamma* might have struck them as being too complex, too baffling or too radical for their taste.

Buddha thus had his proselytising work amongst the Sakyans cut out for him. Until he could overcome their prejudice and all kinds of negative emotions, he would not be able to touch their minds and open their eyes to *Dhamma*. Therefore, one of his most immediate and challenging tasks must have been to overcome the emotional baggage of his kinsfolks, and not merely curbing Sakyan pride as such.

Oddly, unlike in the talkative commentaries, the Pali Canon was silent on how he managed to win them

over eventually. We just know that whatever he did, it worked. Buddha spent at most only months if not mere weeks in Kapilavatthu during that first visit. Yet by the time he left to return to Rajagaha, many of the young Sakyans had embraced *Dhamma* and a fair number had even become monks. That was a truly impressive feat considering that many of them had started out being negative towards him but ended up trustingly following him and his teachings.

Most important reunions:

There were three reunions during his homecoming that must have been particularly emotional and possibly even poignant. They were those with father Suddhodana, son Rahula and wife Yasodhara. But the Pali Canon is not into emotions so we are left with a rather staid, dry, sometimes abrupt account of two of those encounters: that with Suddhodana and Rahula. His reunion with Yasodhara did not even make it into the pages of the Canon.

The Pali Canon's clinical and dispassionate treatment of those highly-charged events was quite unsatisfying because it reduced Buddha into a somewhat two-dimensional cardboard character. (It was almost like he returned, he saw, he conquered!) A fuller account of those encounters would actually show up some beautiful qualities of Buddha. For me, the lesson is that although he was enlightened and detached, he remained deeply compassionate and gently considerate in the manner that he managed his loved ones and their emotions. He was mindful that they were still attached to him and were thus nursing emotional angst and heartfelt loss so he accommodated them and let them vent their feelings.

a) Reconciling with Suddhodana

I shall start by examining Buddha's reunion with Suddhodana. This was a very important event because had he failed to reconcile with his father, Buddha would have a much harder time converting his other Sakyan relatives. Reading between the lines of the Pali Canon, it would appear that Suddhodana might still be harbouring lingering unhappiness with his elder son even as he

yearned for the latter's return. Consider this: your beloved son is back after a long absence and you don't ask him to come home? You let him sleep out in the open? In the cold when temperature could fall to as low as 8°C? That seemed to be what Buddha had endured during his first night home. Why would Suddhodana not invite him to stay in the family house when it was he who had urged Buddha to come home? Going by the Pali Canon, we have no answers. Perhaps the old man just assumed that his son would come home on his own accord. Yet when your son didn't, surely a concerned father would check to see why he did not.

In fact if the commentaries were to be believed, not only did Buddha sleep in the open, it would appear that his father did not even invite him home for a meal. (Incidentally, the Pali Canon did say that he went home for breakfast, so the commentaries could well be wrong.) The commentaries explained that Suddhodana had assumed that his son would come home on his own accord to have his meals. The old man had supposedly reflected 'where else would he go if not home?' Suddhodana was shocked when he found out later that

Buddha was collecting alms on the Sakyan streets. He rushed to the scene and was distraught as he asked Buddha why was he begging? Was it 'to shame him'? Suddhodana's concern was all about his face and pride, and not about his son's plight and welfare. He was assuaged only when Buddha replied that this was not personal and that collecting alms was the correct way of life for him.

The disagreement between canonical texts and commentaries aside, I think it is reasonable to postulate that Suddhodana probably had unresolved emotional angsts with Buddha. His deep love for his son notwithstanding, Suddhodana was very much an average person with the usual sense of ego and entitlement. Perhaps he did expect his son to come home to him, as opposed to him going to his son for their first reunion meeting? Much as he finally reluctantly respected Buddha's decision to lead a spiritual life, he probably never understood that decision and its attraction, at least not for a while. This was why he subsequently had another episode of angst with Buddha for singlehandedly depriving him of heirs when Buddha ordained his other

son Nanda and grandson Rahula. (More details will be presented about these two ordinations later in this chapter.) Suddhodana told Buddha after Rahula was ordained, “I was already heart-broken when you left. And then you took Nanda and now Rahula! You are cutting me to the very core of my being!”¹³⁷ He then requested that the Buddha institute a rule that children must have their parents’ consent before being granted ordination.¹³⁸ Buddha acquiesced because it was a good rule to mollify parents of potential *Sangha* members (but of course it would not have applied in Rahula’s case since Buddha was technically the father).

Deep down however, Suddhodana did have tremendous respect for his son, which made it possible for Buddha to touch his mind and be able to teach him *Dhamma*. In the short time that Buddha spent in Kapilavatthu during his first visit, Suddhodana had the opportunity to listen to a few discourses by Buddha. He understood enough to realise the third stage of

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

sainthood, *Anagami* (Non-returner), by the time Buddha left. That meant that Suddhodana's next birth would be in a heaven called *Subhavasu* (Pure Abode) if he did not realise *nibbana* before death, and there he would continue to practise until full enlightenment.

Happily for Suddhodana however, as he laid on his deathbed four years later, Buddha visited again. After another *Dhamma* discourse, he fully realised enlightenment knowledge and became an *arahant*. Suddhodana was said to have enjoyed *nibbanic* bliss for 7 days before he passed away. At the end of life, Suddhodana had found complete unconditioned bliss and peace. That more than made up for all the worry, pain, disappointment and loss that he had experienced for many years, not least when Buddha walked out of lay life. (Actually, when Suddhodana became an *ariya* 4 years back, he would have already found considerable emotional and mental relief.)

Buddha, in his compassion, had come back for his father and helped guide him to realise *nibbana*. While Buddha was probably not even thinking about fulfilling

filial piety duties when he helped Suddhodana, the fact remains that this was the ultimate filial act. What is filial piety but to bring joy and happiness to one's parents and ease their discomfort. Buddha helped his father to realise and taste unconditioned peace and joy, helped him to a great death, and helped him never to be reborn and experience *dukkha* ever. What more can a parent want?

b) Guiding Rahula

The next relationship that warrants close examination is that between Buddha and his barely 7-year-old son, Rahula. The Pali Canon gave a very dry, rather bland and somewhat bare-bones account of their first meeting. It started by saying that Rahula and his mother were peering at Buddha and his entourage of monks coming for breakfast. She pointed out Buddha to the boy and said, "That is your father, Rahula. Go and ask him for your inheritance." Little Rahula boldly went up to Buddha, stood before him and seemed to have a brief moment of being awestruck. He blurted out, "Your shadow is pleasant, monk." Then in the usual no-frills canonical style, Buddha "stood up and walked away".

The little boy followed behind him saying persistently, “Give me my inheritance, monk. Give me my inheritance.” The Canon said Buddha considered Rahula’s demand and then instructed Sariputta to ordain Rahula.¹³⁹ (That’s it: short, abrupt and unsatisfactory.)

The Canon was silent on why Buddha made this snap decision. But the ever helpful commentaries added that Buddha decided that the inheritance Rahula was asking for would bring him only *dukkha*, and that it was better for him to be a monk and enjoy the spiritual inheritance that would bring him happiness. So Rahula became the youngest person in the history of Buddhism to join the Order.¹⁴⁰

Much has often been made about Buddha abandoning his young family when he became an ascetic at 29. But it is often overlooked that Buddha had subsequently actually voluntarily assumed the burden of

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 77-78.

¹⁴⁰ Incidentally, Buddha ordained another 7-year-old boy sometime later in his dispensation. That boy, Sopaka, became an *arahant* shortly after that thus becoming the youngest of Buddha’s *ariyas*.

looking after his little son when he had the boy ordained at 7 years old. While it may be argued that Buddha as an enlightened being would not feel burdened, the fact still remains that objectively, having a child with him was an inevitable imposition on his ease of movement and *Dhamma* work. We know that Buddha took the care of Rahula seriously. We see Rahula with him in various places so clearly Buddha was not an absentee father who left Rahula in the care of junior monks while he travelled all over northeast India to teach *Dhamma*.

So the question is why did Buddha do it? Why ordain Rahula when he must know that he would be subjecting his son to a hard, unpredictable and even dangerous life. This was ancient India! Man was still vying with beasts to be on top of the food chain and Man often lost. Moreover, even basic necessities were hard to come by. Buddha's own life and *Dhamma* work would be inconvenienced by having to care for a little boy.

I think the reason is he knew that his son had the potential to realise *Dhamma*. Like any parents who wish the best for their children, Buddha was prepared to make

the necessary sacrifices for Rahula's happiness. He could have left Rahula behind with his family who would continue to give the boy the best material care. But material-based happiness would always be transient and Rahula would never be truly happy. In contrast, if Rahula were to realise *nibbana*, he would experience unconditioned happiness for as long as life last. To Buddha, it was a no-brainer choice and if it meant that he had to carry the little Rahula burden, then so be it. That was Buddha's sacrifice that he bore for 12 years: Rahula joined the order at 7 and realised *nibbana* only at 19 years old. (More would be said about Rahula's enlightenment in volume 2.)

c) Missing Yasodhara

The above title is a pun: it is not about Buddha missing his wife but about the Pali Canon not even mentioning Yasodhara at all. In fact, her name was not even found anywhere in the Canon. She was just referred to almost by-the-way as 'Rahula's mother'. It is almost as if she was a non-entity whose existence was meaningful only because she gave birth to Buddha's son. I do not

think the Canon compilers hid her away deliberately. My hypothesis for her absence in the Canon is she was considered to have no real relevance for *Dhamma* practice so there was no need to give her air time.

However, I suspect Buddhist storytellers from later time realised that a story on Buddha's life is incomplete without a mention of his wife. So the commentaries written in subsequent centuries filled in the blanks and had Buddha having a poignant moment with 'Rahula's mother' on his first visit home. The wife also gained a name, Yasodhara. She was said to have held back from going to him to pay her respect with the other Sakyans at breakfast because she thought that if he considered her worthy enough, he would come to her instead. One can almost hear the collective sigh of romantic audiences across the ages when Buddha displayed understanding and consideration and without prompting went to her private chamber for their emotional reunion (well, at least on her part). (Details of that private encounter were covered in Chapter 1 on Buddha's lay life.) Commentaries tell us that Yasodhara subsequently

ordained as a nun and in time became an *arahant* with great supernormal powers.

Targeting Nanda

One of the first people Buddha focused his conversion effort on was Nanda, his younger half-brother and Suddhodana's son with Maha Prajapati Gotami. In fact, Nanda was the only Sakyan that Buddha was recorded as having initiated effort to ordain as a monk. Buddha paid special attention to Nanda in part because he saw Nanda's spiritual potential but also probably because he knew Nanda would not unilaterally choose to be a monk. (Nanda was a hot-blooded macho Sakyan who loved beautiful women.)

The commentaries said that Buddha went to 'hijack' Nanda on his wedding day. In the midst of all the wedding revelries, Buddha walked up to Nanda and handed him his alms bowl, and walked off. Nanda was stumped but out of respect for Buddha, he did not call out to his brother to take back the bowl. Instead he left his astounded bride and trailed after Buddha, still holding the

alms bowl and all the while hoping that at some point Buddha would turn around and take it back. Instead, Buddha returned to his lodging. Only there did Buddha turned around and asked Nanda if he would like to ordain as a monk. Nanda was most reluctant but out of respect for his elder half-brother, he said yes.

I am not convinced that the real story was so melodramatic. I find it hard to believe that Suddhodana would not try to stop Buddha from taking one more son from him if he had been near enough to know what was happening. If it was a wedding day, how could the father of the groom not be in the vicinity?

But I think that it was true that Buddha had indeed gone to Nanda and elicited his compliance to ordain. Nanda was the only one of the Sakyan monks who regretted joining the order. He missed his luxuries and could not get used to living the harsh life of a monk. There was a mention in the *Samyutta Nikaya* where Buddha reprimanded him for using 'well-pressed and well-ironed' robes and a 'glazed bowl' and "painted his

eyes”.¹⁴¹ (I am not sure what ‘pressed and ironed’ entailed in ancient India but he was presumably doing something special to improve the appearance of his robes, and he used make-up!) But what most upset Nanda was missing his ladylove. After 3 years in the robe, he was still pinning for her. He told Buddha that he was very unhappy being a monk especially when he thought of his Sakyan bride, “the loveliest in the land, with her hair half-combed” calling to him to return to her “soon”.¹⁴²

The Pali Canon said Buddha then took him to the heavens and showed him some 500 beautiful “pink-footed” deity-nymphs. (I’m assuming they are toe nails.) Asked who was more beautiful, the deities or his Sakyan bride, the completely mesmerised Nanda replied that his erstwhile ladylove was like a “mutilated she-monkey” without nose and ears compared to the deities. “She is

¹⁴¹ “Nanda”, Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, op. cit., p. 719.

¹⁴² “Nanda Sutta” (Ud 3.2), translated from Pali by John D. Ireland, Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11), 13 June 10, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.3.02.irel.html>.

not worth a fraction compared to them,” Nanda declared. Buddha told him to enjoy the holy life and he would guarantee that Nanda obtain the nymphs. Nanda happily took the deal, and said “I shall be content in living the holy life under the Lord.”¹⁴³

When the other monks learnt about Nanda’s amorous pact, they started teasing him. Feeling ashamed and dismayed, he went off by himself to practise, and eventually realised *nibbana*. He then told Buddha that he released Buddha from the promise and Buddha said that he already knew that. Clearly, Buddha was not wrong about Nanda’s *ariya* potential.

Conversion of Sakyans cousins

a) Anuruddha and Bhaddiya

It would appear that many young Sakyans were impressed by Buddha’s spiritual revolution. Several apparently left home to become monks, and some of

¹⁴³ Ibid., entire paragraph was from *Nanda Sutta*.

those who didn't felt some peer pressure to join their ranks. Buddha's first cousins, Mahanama and Anuruddha, had this odd conversation. The elder brother Mahanama told younger brother Anuruddha that one of them should join the Order because so many of their Sakyān cousins had already done so. Anuruddha was unimpressed and unmoved. He replied to the effect, 'You do it. I'm too used to the good life. I can't handle the hardship of being an ascetic.'¹⁴⁴

Mahanama said 'ok, he would do it' but before he left, he had better teach Anuruddha everything about managing their family farmland. On the pretext of guiding his brother who would inherit the responsibility of running the household and tending to the fields, Mahanama gave a detailed account of how the fields must be farmed.

Clearly unused to hard work, Anuruddha asked in dismay 'then when will the work end and I can relax'?¹⁴⁵ Mahanama ominously replied, "My dear Anuruddha, the

¹⁴⁴ Nāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 80-81, translating from Vin. Cv. 7:1

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

work never finishes; there is no end to the work. Our father and our grandfather both died while their work was still unfinished.”¹⁴⁶ Upon hearing that, Anuruddha lost his appetite for the lay life which he decided was too stressful: he was going to join the Order.

I am quite sure that it was not as straightforward as portrayed in the Pali Canon, i.e., 2 brothers innocently debating who should join Buddha’s Order and who would stay behind to look after the family business. If Mahanama was truly keen to be a monk, as his very persuasive arguments to Anuruddha would suggest, then why did he capitulate so quickly and agreed with Anuruddha when the latter said that he would be the monk. Mahanama did not even say ‘hang on a minute, I haven’t even decided!’ The next we heard, Anuruddha was asking his mother for permission to be a monk.

The question then is why was Mahanama trying to convince Anuruddha to quit lay life and join the *Sangha*? So that he could remove his brother from the family

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

scene and take over his share of the wealth? Mahanama was the elder brother and main beneficiary to the family fortune. He also took his father's place on the council. There was no need for him to get rid of his brother since he was already holding the lion's share of the inheritance.

My postulation is that this was about power and not money. The target was not Anuruddha but his best friend Bhaddiya, who was at that time a leader on the Sakyan council, possibly even the chairman himself. (Anuruddha's mother described Bhaddiya as "the royal Sakyan who is governing the Sakyans".¹⁴⁷) We know that Anuruddha and Bhaddiya were best friends. Anuruddha's mother told him that if Bhaddiya joined the Order, she would allow him to also. Deep down, she had expected that Bhaddiya would decline to be a monk.

If his mother had known about Bhaddiya and Anuruddha's strong friendship, Mahanama must know also. He probably knew that if he could persuade Anuruddha to join the Order, there was a good chance

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

that Bhaddiya might follow suit. And that was precisely what happened. Anuruddha pestered Bhaddiya to go with him to join Buddha's order. Unable to dissuade his persistent friend, Bhaddiya finally agreed. He asked for some time to settle his personal business and familial obligations. Bhaddiya wanted 7 years and one could almost hear a horrified Anuruddha determinedly bargaining it down to just 7 days.

So Mahanama got his way, if that was indeed his nefarious scheme. He eventually became leader of the Sakyan council and was the man in charge some years later, when their overlord king, Pasenadi of Kosala, came asking for the hand of a Sakyan daughter in marriage. The proud Sakyans were horrified at the request: they could not bring themselves to marry one of their pureblood daughters to an outsider, not even a king. But they dared not defy Pasenadi for fear of reprisal. So the resourceful Mahanama cleverly anointed an illegitimate daughter of his (with a slave) to be a 'Sakyan' and married her off to Pasenadi. This was the deceit that led to the vengeful slaughter of the Sakyans in Buddha's old age. (This tragic tale will be covered in more details in

volume 2.) The marriage ruse would add weight to my postulation that Mahanama had the political cunning and ambitions to manipulate his way into becoming the Sakyan leader.

A much happier fate awaited Bhaddiya: he was one of the first Sakyans to become an *arahant*. In the rainy season of that year, he realised *nibbana* with psychic powers. Like Buddha, he saw his past lives, he witnessed beings dying and being born again according to their *kamma* and he gained the knowledge of the destruction of defilements. He was so happy with his *nibbanic* experience that he could not help occasionally exclaiming, “Oh bliss! Oh bliss!”

Eventually some poorly-practised and judgemental monks went to complain to Buddha that Bhaddiya was acting inappropriately with his exuberant exclamations. “He must be dissatisfied with being a monk. Or he is remembering his former position as ruler,” they told

Buddha, the illogic of their charge clearly not obvious to them.¹⁴⁸

Buddha then summoned Bhaddiya to explain himself. Bhaddiya said that when he was a Sakyan leader, he was constantly surrounded and protected by guards. Yet he was “fearful, anxious, suspicious and worried.” But now that he was a monk, he no longer had those negative feelings. He “lives at ease, in quiet... with a mind like a wild deer.” (He probably meant that his mind now did not feel trapped or stifled, but was free and expansive.)

b) Four other cousins: Bhagu, Kimbila, Ananda and Devadatta

From the Pali Canon, we can discern that the strong support for Buddha amongst the Sakyan youngsters was not shared by the Sakyan elders. Anuruddha’s mother’s strong objection to his joining the *Sangha* was probably not unique. Hence the six cousins

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

(Anuruddha, Bhaddiya, Bhagu, Kimbila, Ananda and Devadatta) who wanted to join the Order had to concoct an elaborate scheme to deceive their elders before they could get to Buddha and be ordained. The Canon said that they marched their troops to the “parade ground in the pleasure park” as they routinely did. After all the pomp and ceremony, they dismissed the troops, raced off “across the border to another realm” (presumably Mallan territory next door), then disrobed themselves of their insignia and went off to look for Buddha.¹⁴⁹

Of the 4 cousins who defied their families to be monks, Bhagu and Kimbila lived in relative quiet and solitude and had a low profile. They were enlightened through their own efforts although we have occasional glimpses of them having *Dhamma* sessions with Buddha. But the other 2, Ananda and Devadatta, became very famous in Buddhist history for diametrically opposite reasons.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

Ananda was a first cousin of Buddha and was said to have been born on the same day as him. That Ananda chose to embrace *Dhamma* should not be surprising. He was one of the most unconventional and open-minded Sakyans, who was ahead of his time in terms of worldviews and values. He was also deeply compassionate, very considerate and caring. Those qualities were what prompted him to champion the cause of the Sakyans women to become nuns. (More would be said about the setting up of the Nun Order in volume 2.) This idea of having woman spiritual practitioners was so radical that Buddha himself caught considerable flak for allowing it. Even after decades, many in the *Sangha* were still vehemently opposed to that decision.

Ananda was also famous for being Buddha's energetic and devoted attendant for the last 25 years of his life. This meant that Ananda had personally listened to many of the discourses preached by Buddha during that period. Hence, at the First Buddhist Council, he was the designated lead monk to recite the *Nikayas* (discourses). (That council was a gathering of 500 *arahants* to collect, compile and codify Buddha's entire

teachings.) Although he was brilliant and wise, a sincere and dedicated practitioner, and a most engaging and competent *Dhamma* speaker, Ananda remained a *sotāpanna* for most of his life. He realised *nibbana* only after Buddha's death. Ironically, Ananda's attachment to Buddha had made it impossible for him to completely let go and realise *nibbana* during Buddha's lifetime.

In contrast, Devadatta was the number 2 supervillain in Buddhist history, after Mara the evil deity. He was Buddha's brother-in-law, Yasodhara's brother. He was thus a Koliyan and not a Sakyan. Devadatta was famous for being Buddha's key nemesis in the last years of his life. Amongst Devadatta's most serious offences were his attempts to wrest control of the *Sangha* leadership from Buddha, efforts to assassinate Buddha, and designs to split the *Sangha*. Generations of Buddhist commentators would provide gory details of his evil deeds and his resulting severe punishments. (Devadatta's story is elaborated in volume 2.)

Anyhow, in those early days, Devadatta was clearly not evil yet. He was young, impressionable and

was so inspired by Buddha that he was prepared to defy his family and give up his wealth and power for the homeless life. We need to remember that at that point of Buddha's dispensation, lay support for the *Sangha* was still patchy, and the life of a monk would have been hard, unpredictable and even dangerous. It would not be appealing to one who was not serious about the spiritual quest. At the very least, Devadatta must have been a sincere seeker once. He was a competent meditator and was able to gain psychic powers. This meant that he must have been able to set aside several negative mental tendencies (including craving and ill will) or he would not have been able to gain the deep concentration necessary for arising of psychic powers. But he lacked the wisdom to understand *Dhamma* and his psychic powers must have gotten into his head and became the Achilles' heels that tripped him spiritually.

c) Upali the Barber

The Sakyan cousins had with them a 'barber' by the name Upali when they fled to join Buddha. They left their regalia with Upali and told him to 'go back'.

Presumably they rewarded him for his loyalty and for being there for them because they said, “There is enough here for you to live on.”¹⁵⁰

But as Upali was making his way back to the Sakyan territory, he suddenly decided that it was a bad idea. “These Sakyans are fierce... they might even put me to death for being an abettor”¹⁵¹ in the cousins joining the Order. There were obviously intense differences within the Sakyan community towards Buddha: there were ardent supporters such as the abovementioned Sakyan cousins, and equally vehement detractors who might even kill abettors. (It is reasonable to assume that there must be Sakyans who resented the loss of young men to monkhood, and who would worry about the future of their tribe!) Upali feared for his life so much that he decided to be a monk also! He was ordained ahead of the Sakyan cousins at their request. They wanted Upali to be the senior monk so that they had to pay respect to him and subdue their own pride.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 82.

Upali was famous for being the lead monk to recite the *Vinaya* (disciplinary) rules at the First Council. He was widely respected in the *Sangha* for his knowledge of the *Vinaya* and Buddha himself had once declared Upali for being foremost among those who were learned in the *Vinaya*.

Concluding thoughts

I think it is fitting to conclude volume 1 in a chapter that is about Buddha going home. Although it was only a temporary visit, it is still an important though poignant closing of a chapter for his closest kin. They had this one chance of saying farewell to him properly for he was never coming back to lay life. Yet it was also a fortuitous reunion of sort for them because Buddha's homecoming gift was a spiritual practice that promised unconditioned bliss and a complete end to *dukkha*.

For Buddha, that he made this visit home was a testimony of his deep compassion and kindness. He must have known that he would have to deal with quite a lot of angsts, and it could well be most vexing and energy

sapping. But he did it anyway because he knew that his family needed this closure so that they could regain some peace of mind and be able to pursue their own spiritual development. Buddha's thoughtfulness paid off: his closest family members all succeeded in attaining minimally *sotāpanna* realisation. This is actually quite amazing as one might find that it is often easier to guide complete strangers with whom one has no emotional baggage than with one's own blood kin who may have built-in prejudices and biases.

His return to Kapilavatthu also had implications for the spread of *Dhamma*. Up until this point, Buddha had successfully converted only the people in Magadha kingdom. This was the first in-road into the Kapilavatthu region. From here, *Dhamma* was able to spread to the neighbouring tribe, namely the Mallas, who were to become staunch supporters of Buddhism. (It was in the Mallan village of Kusinara that Buddha subsequently passed away, and the Mallans handled the funeral logistics; details in volume 2.)

A final observation is the deep impact that the Sakyans' en masse conversion and ordination would make on the shape and development of the *Sangha*. They were a hardy, indomitable and talented group of people, well-educated, intelligent and trained for leadership roles. They would be a formidable presence in the *Sangha*, with their blood ties to Buddha enhancing their standing. The Sakyans produced the single most number of *arahants* in a family. This would mean many of the *Sangha* teachers and preceptors were Sakyans even though history might not have recorded that. A Sakyan (Ananda) and a close Sakyan associate (Upali) dominated the proceedings at the first Buddhist Council that was held to codify Buddha's teachings. The Sakyans were also responsible for the radical establishment of a Nun Order (discussed in volume 2). Unfortunately, it was also a Sakyan off-shoot (Devadatta) who created havoc in the *Sangha* when he tried to seize control of the leadership from Buddha. So this homecoming of the Buddha has far-reaching implications that were not obvious initially but were felt for years to come.

Glossary of Pali Words

Pali word	Meaning
<i>Anāgāmi</i>	“Non-returner”: this is the third of four stages of sainthood in Theravada Buddhist tradition. Upon death, a Non-returner will be reborn in a heavenly realm called ‘Pure-Abode’. There he will continue his spiritual practice until he realises <i>nibbāna</i> and then lives out his remaining life-force as an <i>arahant</i> .
<i>Arahant</i>	“Worthy or Noble One”: a title given to one who has realised the fourth and final stage of sainthood. Buddha had described him as having transcended ‘the round of birth and death and destroyed the taints’. He knows <i>Dhamma</i> fully, has experienced <i>nibbāna</i> , and is fully free in his mind.
<i>Ariya</i>	“Noble one: a generic term for any of the 4 levels of saints, namely, <i>sotāpanna</i> , <i>sakadagami</i> , <i>anāgāmi</i> and <i>arahant</i> .
<i>Bhikkhu</i>	Monk belonging to Buddha’s order and dedicated to practising his doctrine for spiritual enlightenment.
<i>Brāhmaṇa or brahman</i>	Priestly caste during Buddha’s time: its key social role was to perform religious duties as prescribed in the mainstream religious text, the <i>Vedas</i> . Its members have long maintained that they were worthy of the highest respect by virtue of their birth. Buddha disagreed and used the term to apply to those who had realised spiritual enlightenment.

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<i>Brāhma-vihāra</i>	Literally means “noble way of living”, it is a collective term for 4 sublime mental qualities, namely, compassion (<i>karuṇā</i>), friendliness or loving-kindness (<i>mettā</i>), empathetic joy (<i>muditā</i>) and equanimity (<i>upekkhā</i>).
<i>Dāna</i>	Generosity or giving: it is a very important instinct to cultivate in Buddhism and helps one to overcome his propensity to cling, to crave, and to have endless desires.
<i>Deva</i>	<p>Deity or divine beings: the conventional belief in Buddha’s India was they existed in several levels of heavenly realms, and enjoyed incredibly long lives under the most pleasant or happy conditions.</p> <p>See “The Thirty-one Planes of Existence” edited by Access to Insight, <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11)</i>, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sagga/loka.html</p>
<i>Dhamma</i>	In this book, the term is usually used to refer to Buddha’s teaching/philosophy. But it also has the following meanings: the law of Nature; mental qualities that must be cultivated for enlightenment; and a phenomenon in and of itself.
<i>Dukkha</i>	<p>Traditionally translated as ‘suffering’, the term actually means the entire range of negative experiences from mild discontent, to discomfort, annoyance, distress, and to the more extreme, pain, agony and suffering.</p> <p>See “Dukkha”, edited by Access to Insight, <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11)</i>, 5 Nov 13,</p>

	<p>http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca1/dukkha.html</p>
<i>Jhāna</i>	<p>This is a meditative state of profound stillness and concentration in which the mind becomes fully immersed and absorbed in the chosen object of attention.</p> <p>See “Jhana; <i>jhana</i>”, edited by Access to Insight. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 Nov 13, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-samadhi/jhana.html</p>
<i>Karuṇā</i>	<p>Compassion, one of the 4 <i>brahma-vihāra</i>.</p>
<i>Khattiya</i>	<p>“Warrior” caste likely to have been the predominant political power during Buddha’s time.</p>
<i>Mettā</i>	<p>Friendliness, loving-kindliness or goodwill, one of the 4 <i>brahma-vihāra</i>.</p>
<i>Nāga</i>	<p>Magical serpents.</p>
<i>Nibbāna</i>	<p>A state of being when the mind experiences liberation. The term literally means the “unbinding” of the mind from cankers and defilements that keep it shackled to rounds of rebirths. Term also connotes the extinguishing of fire: cooling, stilling, calming and peace.</p> <p>See “Nibbana: <i>nibbana</i>”, edited by Access to Insight, Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11), 30 Nov 13, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca3/nibbana.html</p>

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<i>Parinibbāna</i>	The complete cessation of the aggregates (i.e., physical form, feeling, perception, thought construction and consciousness) that occur upon the death of an <i>arahant</i> .
<i>Saṅgha</i>	In a conventional sense, it means the community of monks and nuns. At the ideal level, this refers to followers of Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least <i>sotāpanna</i> .
<i>Sakadāgāmi</i>	Once-returned: the second stage of sainthood where the individual weakens two fetters, namely, sensual craving and ill-will, in addition to having eliminated three others as a <i>sotāpanna</i> . He would have only one rebirth as human. This means that even if he had not realised <i>nibbāna</i> in that life, upon death, he would be reborn in a heavenly plane, where he would complete his spiritual journey.
<i>Satipaṭṭhāna</i>	Literally foundations of mindfulness: it is in essence a method of focusing the mind to observing closely 4 objects as they arise: body, feelings, mind and mental states. Through mindful and objective observation of these objects, the mind may be calm, quiet, clear and sharp enough to realise the nature of itself as it really is.
<i>Sotāpanna</i>	Stream-winner: the first stage of sainthood where the individual catches a glimpse of <i>Dhamma</i> for the first time, and eliminates three fetters that chain him to the cycle of rebirths. These fetters are belief in a Self, perplexed confusion about <i>Dhamma</i> and attached to rites and rituals (in the belief that they would bring spiritual salvation). He will be reborn a maximum of 7 times and none of

	<p>them in the lower states, such as in hell, as hungry ghosts or as animals.</p> <p>See “Path and Fruit”, Sister Ayya Khema, in http://www.buddhanet.net/ayyatalk.html</p>
<i>Subhavasū</i>	Pure Abode: a heavenly plane that only the Non-returner (<i>anāgāmi</i>) will be reborn in.
<i>Sutta</i>	<i>Dhamma</i> discourses preached mainly by Buddha although some were by his closest disciples. They number more than 10,000, and are compiled in 5 collections: known as long (<i>diḡha</i>), middle-length (<i>majjhima</i>), connected (<i>samyutta</i>), numerical (<i>anguttara</i>) and minor (<i>khuddaka</i>).
<i>Vassa</i>	Rains retreat: a 3-month period from July to October, corresponding roughly to the rainy season in India. During this time, the monk is required to stay put in one place.
<i>Vessa</i>	Trader or merchant caste during Buddha’s time.
<i>Vinaya</i>	<p>Rules of discipline governing the way of life for the <i>Sangha</i> members. It spans 6 volumes in printed text.</p> <p>For a good summary, see “Vinaya Pitaka: The Basket of the Discipline”, edited by Access to Insight. <i>Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11)</i>, 17 Dec 13, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/vin/index.html</p>

Pāli Canon

The Pāli Canon is a collection of scriptures of the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. Also known as *Tipitaka* ('Three Baskets'), it comprises three categories of teaching:

- *Vinaya Pitaka* – dealing with disciplinary rules for monks and nuns;
- *Sutta Pitaka* – discourses by Buddha and some leading disciples; and
- *Abhidhamma Pitaka* – literal translation “Higher” Dhamma, it is mainly a compilation of Buddhist philosophical or metaphysical thesis.

Commentarial literature

These are essentially addendum texts to the Pāli Canon. There are several such commentaries. Some scholars believe that the earliest amongst them could have been composed possibly as early as during the time of Buddha. Nevertheless, even for those their origin remains murky. Most of the commentaries were composed after 4th century AD, in Sri Lanka. Below is a sample list of commentarial literary work:¹⁵²

¹⁵² Refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_literature for a more comprehensive compilation on the commentarial literature.

1. *Atthakatha* – Commentarial works by Buddhaghosa and Buddhadatta both of 5th century AD, amongst others.
2. *Tika* – Commentaries to *Atthakatha*
3. *Dipavamsa* – The Island Chronicle (4th century AD)
4. *Mahavamsa* – The Great Chronicle (6th century AD)
5. *Culavamsa* – The Lesser Chronicle
6. *Mahabodhivamsa* – Account of the Bodhi tree of Anuradhapura (11th century AD)
7. *Thupavamsa* – Chronicle of the Great Stupa in Anuradhapura (12th century AD)
8. *Dathavamsa* – Poem on the sacred tooth relic of Buddha
9. *Samantakutavannana* – poem on Buddha's life and his visits to Sri Lanka
10. *Saddhamma-sangaha* – Ecclesiastical history of Buddhism (14th century AD)
11. *Cha-kesadhatuvamsa* – History of the six stupas that enshrine the Buddha's hair relics (14th century AD)
12. *Sāsanavamsa* – A Burmese history of Buddhism (19th century AD)

About the Author

Sylvia Bay has been dedicated to the study and practice of Buddha's teaching since 1992. She graduated with a B.A. (Hons) First Class, in Buddhist Studies from the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, in 2000 and joined the teaching staff of the Buddhist and Pali College (Singapore) in 2001. Since 2002, Sylvia has also been a regular speaker on Buddhist doctrine, Buddhist history, and the practical application of the Buddha's teachings in daily life, at the invitation of various Buddhist organisations in Singapore. This 2-volume series on the life of Buddha is her first major writing project. She will next work on a series of books that will explain Dhamma and its practice to the general reader. Sylvia also holds a B.Soc.Sci (Hons) from NUS and a Masters in International Public Policy from School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins.

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