

## 1.2 Last Meal, First Light

### The Buddha and the Middle Way

[Some symbols in the Buddha's life]

[Source: Piya Tan, "Buddhist Theory of Evolution" lecture 2  
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### 18. The Bodhisattva's last meal

#### (a) Sujātā

A rich woman of Senānī village (near Uruvelā) named Sujātā had offered a prayer before a banyan tree asking the tree deity to give her a son as her firstborn. When she did get a son, she rejoiced and prepared herself to make an offering to the deity.

When her maid Puṇṇā saw the Bodhisattva sitting under the banyan tree, she thought that he must surely be the tree deity who had come to claim his offering. Both Sujātā and Puṇṇā came and offered the Bodhisattva some milk-rice in a golden bowl.

#### (b) Act of truth

The Bodhisattva received the food. Then he went down to the Supatiṭṭhita Ford in the river Neraṅgarā to bathe. After that, he dressed himself for his meal. He made all the rice into 49 small balls and ate them without any water. This was the Bodhisattva's last meal before the Enlightenment and the only one for the next 49 days.

After his meal, the Bodhisattva made an "act of truth" (*sacchikiriya*) saying: "If I will today become a Buddha, let this bowl go upstream; if not, let it go downstream!" Then he cast the golden bowl into the water and immediately it shot upstream into the middle of the river.

The bowl then sank into a whirlpool and went to the palace of Kāla Nāga,rāja (the Black Serpent King). It struck against the bowls from which the three previous Buddhas of this world-cycle had eaten, made them sound "Killi-killi!" and stopped at the lowest of them. The Serpent King, hearing the noise, said: "Yesterday, a Buddha arose, today another has just arisen!" Then, he stood singing praises to him.

### 19. The Bodhisattva's dreams

The night before the Enlightenment, the Bodhisattva had five dreams, clarifying that he would become Buddha. The Scriptures list the five dreams as follows:

(1) The world appeared as a great couch, and the Himalayas as the pillow. His left hand was plunged into the eastern ocean, his right in the western, and his feet in the southern. This means that he would attain supreme Enlightenment.

(2) A plant called *tiriya* (ie *kusa* grass) grew out from his navel, and rose and touched the sky. This means that he would discover the Noble Eightfold Path which he would proclaim to human as well as heavenly beings.

(3) White worms with black heads crept up as far as his knees and covered them. These were white-robed lay followers who find lifelong refuge in the Buddha.

(4) Four birds of different colours came from the four quarters, and falling at his feet became entirely white. These are members of the four castes who, leaving the household life to join the Sangha, became the Buddha's disciples and realize the highest freedom.

(5) He was walking to and fro on a mountain of dung but was not smeared by it. This meant that he would receive the four basic requisites of a monk (food, robes, shelter, medicine) and enjoy them without being attached to them.

(A 3:240; Mvst 2:136)

## 20. The Bodhisattva's determination

### (a) Sotthiya the grass cutter

Having passed the day in a grove of sal (Pali, *sāla*) trees, the Bodhisattva went in the evening towards the Bodhi tree. Along the way, he met a grass-cutter named Sotthiya (Skt *Svastika*) who, seeing the Bodhisattva's majesty, offered him eight handfuls of *kusa* grass which the Bodhisattva took and spread out under the Bodhi tree on the east side. [Some say that Sotthiya was Śakra, the king of the gods, in disguise. (Abhiniṣkramaṇa Sūtra, Abhns:B 196)]

Then sitting down cross-legged and upright, the Bodhisattva firmly resolved:

Skin, sinew, and bone may dry up; my flesh and blood may dry up in my body, but without attaining complete enlightenment, I will not leave this seat! (J 1:71)

### (b) Māra's temptation

Then, according to the Padhāna Sutta, Māra the Evil One appeared before the Bodhisattva and, pretending to be concerned, said:

A thousand parts (of you) belong to death,  
Only one of you is life;  
Live, good sir! Life is better—  
Living, you can do meritorious deeds!

From living the holy life  
And making sacrifices to the sacred fire,  
Much merit will be heaped up by you—  
What can you do with mental exertion? (Sn 427 f)

Here, we see Māra as the preserver of the status quo in the negative sense. He tries to discourage those who are seeking personal development and entices them to keep to the "old ways". This Padhāna Sutta account is the first of two actual confrontations of the Buddha by Māra (the other is recorded in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta). In the Padhāna Sutta (Sn no. 28), Māra pursues the Bodhisattva for seven years like a dark hungry bird hovering "around a stone that looks like a piece of fat" (Sn 447 f.) but fails to discourage him.

## 21. Māra's attacks

### (a) The nine storms

Later accounts tell us that when the Bodhisattva was sitting under the Bodhi tree just before his Enlightenment, Māra appeared bearing a thousand arms, each holding a weapon, and seated on the fierce elephant Girimekhala said to be 150 leagues high. Surrounding him was a great and fearful demonic army which furiously attacked him with nine storms, one after another.

First, Māra stirred up a raging whirlwind that could uproot trees, destroy mountains and wipe out towns. But the wind died out when it reached the Bodhisattva--it did not even stir the hem of his robe.

Then Māra caused great clouds to gather and a torrential rain-storm to pour down causing a great flood which drowned the trees. But the waters did not reach the Bodhisattva--his robe was not wet even the size of a dewdrop.

Māra followed up with a storm of rocks, spitting fire and smoke. But as they reached the Bodhisattva they changed into heavenly garlands.

Then Māra raised a storm of deadly weapons--one-edged swords, two-edged swords, spears and arrows, smoking and flaming through the sky--to fall on the Bodhisattva. They became divine flowers and fell at the Bodhisattva's feet.

Then, came a rain-storm of glowing coal that shot through the sky like red *kimsuka* flowers, but they scattered at the feet of the Bodhisattva like divine flowers.

Then Māra raised a storm of burning embers that shot through the air exceedingly hot, but they fell at the Bodhisattva's feet as sandalwood powder.

Then he caused a storm of fine sand that smoked and flamed through the air, but it fell as divine flowers before the Bodhisattva.

Then Māra raised a storm of smoking and flaming lava to fall from the sky, but it changed into divine unguent at the Bodhisattva's feet.

Māra thought that he could terrify the Bodhisattva with a thick blinding darkness that he made fourfold (like the 14th day of the waning moon, a thick forest, a dark cloud and midnight combined). But when it reached the Bodhisattva, it disappeared just like darkness before the brightness of the sun. (J 1:72 f)

### (b) Final victory over Māra

Finally, the enraged Māra tried a desperate ruse. He used his last weapon--the terrifying flying bladed discus (*cakr'āvudha*) that could cleave a pillar of solid rock as if it were tender bamboo shoot. But, when he hurled it at the Bodhisattva, it hovered over him like a canopy of flowers. He challenged the Bodhisattva to get up from the seat under the Bodhi tree. Māra claimed that the seat was his and not the Bodhisattva's. The Bodhisattva replied that he had practised all the Ten Perfections at three different levels and made the five great sacrifices (of wife, children, kingdom, limb and life, J 6:552) and had perfected the way of good--therefore the seat belonged to the Bodhisattva. This is called the "Thunderbolt Throne" or "Diamond Seat" (*vajr'āsana*).

When all his efforts were in vain, Māra challenged the Bodhisattva to prove his claim to enlightenment. Thereupon, the Bodhisattva touched the earth with his right hand. The earth shook and rumbled, and Thavarā (Sthavarā), Mother Earth, emerged from underneath in witness of his unsurpassed virtues. Some say that Māra's evil host sank into the ground; others say that Thavarā wrung her long hair from which a great flood emerged and washed the demons away. Māra himself, surprised and terrified, fled.

This event is often commemorated in two common ways, ritually and iconographically. Among the Theravāda Buddhists of Thailand, it is commemorated when, after the conclusion of a merit-making ceremony, the water of dedication (*dakḥiṇ'odaka*) is poured away at the root of a tree. Iconographically, the Buddha's final victory over Māra (*māra, vijaya*) is depicted in the Buddha images showing the Earth-touching Gesture (Skt *bhūmi, sparśa mudra*), the most famous of which is the Phra Buddha Jinarāj image in Phitsanulok, Thailand..

## 22. The perfect self-enlightenment

### (a) The Great Enlightenment

On the full moon day of the month of Vesākha (Vaiśāha, April-May) in the year 588 BC (or according to modern scholars, c. 528 BCE), the Bodhisattva, then only 35 years old, attained the Perfect Self-enlightenment. Seated under the famous pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*, thenceforth known as the Bodhi tree) at Buddha, gayā, he developed various true knowledges or superknowledges (*abhiññā*).

The Buddha describes his experience of enlightenment in these words as preserved in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta (M 36):

I thought: "Why am I afraid of the pleasure (*sukha*) that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?" I thought: "I am not afraid of the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states."

Now when I had eaten solid food and regained my strength, then quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first dhyana, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with zest and pleasure born of seclusion. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second dhyana.... With the fading away of zest as well...I entered upon and abided in the third dhyana... With the abandoning of pleasure and pain...I entered upon and abided in the fourth dhyana... But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain.

When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives...This was the first true knowledge. (M 1:246-248)

It was during the first watch of the night (6.00-10.00 p.m.) that the Bodhisattva developed the first true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the recollection of past lives**. In the middle watch (10.00 p.m.-2.00 a.m.), he developed the second true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the the arising and passing away of beings** which enable him to see the cycles of death and rebirth of other beings faring according to their karma. And, in the last watch of the night (2.00-6.00 a.m.), he developed the third true knowledge, that is, **the knowledge of the destruction of the mental cankers**. Understanding the nature of things as they truly are, finally he attained the Perfect Enlightenment and Nirvana.

### (b) The first Buddha Word

Among the first words of the Buddha, spoken after his Enlightenment, are those found in this famous Verse of Uplift (*udāna, gāthā*):

Through many a birth in this cycle of lives,  
I've wandered,  
Seeking but not finding  
The builder of this house.  
Painful is repeated birth.  
O house-builder, you are seen!  
You shall not build a house again!

All your rafters are broken  
And your ridgepole shattered!  
My mind has reached the Unconditioned!  
The end of craving has been attained! (Dh 153-154)

This verse is very interesting and important. First of all, it confirms the doctrine of rebirth. Secondly, it denies the Creator-idea. Thirdly, the fact of suffering is realized to be universal. All these are affirmed through personal experience.

The second part of the verse gives the first summary of the Buddha's Teaching. First, there is the affirmation of his supreme discovery: "O house-builder, you are seen!" The term "house-builder" (*gaha, kāraka*) has two meanings: the Commentaries interpret it as "craving" but it can also be taken as the Creator (*issara, nimmāna*) idea.

## Background to Buddhism

## 1.2 Last meal, first light

The word “house” (*geha*) refers to this world itself physically and spiritually to the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*). The “rafters” (*phāsuka*) are the passions that make one cling on to this world. The “ridgepole” (*gaha,kūṭa*) is ignorance, the cause of karma.

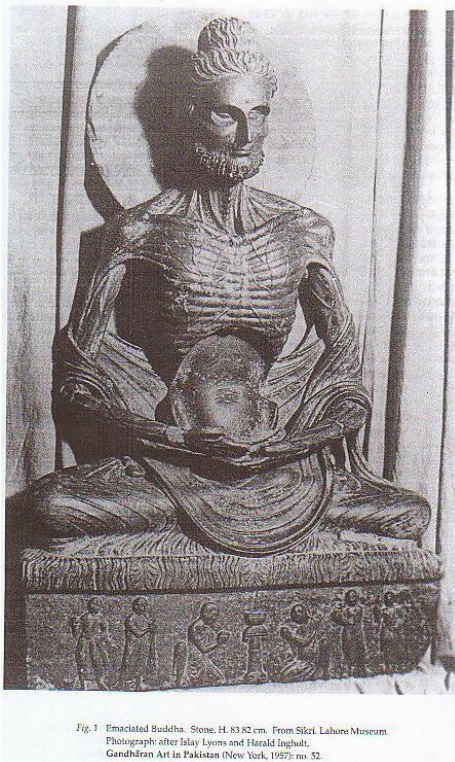
Finally, the Buddha announces his Perfect Enlightenment with the words, “My mind has reached the Unconditioned! The end of craving has been attained!” The Unconditioned (*visaṅkhāra*) is a synonym for Nirvana. In the Vinaya, the Buddha compares his enlightenment to a chick breaking out of an egg:

He said, “Brahmin, it is like a hen with eight or ten or twelve eggs on which she sits properly, properly warmed and properly hatched. The chick that emerges first safely, having first of all pierced through the egg-shell, having first of all pierced through the egg-shell with the point of the claw on its foot, or with its beak—would it be called the eldest or the youngest?”

“He is to be called the eldest, good Gotama, for he is the eldest of these,” he said.

“Even so I, brahmin, having pierced through the shell of ignorance for the sake of creatures going in ignorance, born of eggs, covered over, am unique in the world, fully enlightened with unsurpassed enlightenment, I myself, brahmin, am the world’s eldest and highest.” (V 3:3 f; cf D 2:15)

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When do you think the event depicted in this sculpture took place?

Buddha image from Sikri, now in the Lahore Museum, Pakistan. (2nd century CE)

Fig. 1 Emaciated Buddha. Stone, H. 83.82 cm. From Sikri, Lahore Museum.  
Photograph after Islay Lyons and Harald Inghedi,  
Gandhāran Art in Pakistan (New York, 1957): no. 52.