

# The Buddha's Life as Parable for Later Buddhist Thought

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## I. What the Biographies of the Buddha Teach Us

Through the material contained in the biographies of the Buddha, we looked earlier at the course of Buddha Śākyamuni's life (*Eastern Buddhist*, XX-2, Autumn 1987). There is much food for thought in this material and now I would like to focus on the personality of the Buddha depicted therein, as well as on some of the inferences we can draw from these sources. I am specifically interested in the dialectical structure of the biographies and the linguistic philosophy implied in how the Buddha's life story is presented. The latter topic also functions to open a discussion on the issue of how language was seen within the tradition. Granted that such concerns over the use of language and dialectical structure are not found in any explicit form in the traditional treatment of the story of Buddha's life; it is nevertheless true that these issues are imbedded in the original biographical materials. As such, it is hoped that this analysis will afford us an opportunity to glimpse one or two aspects of attitudes prevalent in the Buddhist community at the time these works were written, or at least those of the authors of these works.

*The Dialectical Structure of the Biographies.* The word "dialectic" is, of course, a Western philosophical term and not something found within the Buddhist tradition. Since the time of Zeno, Socrates and Plato, this term has been used to express an array of meanings.

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\*This is a translation of sections from the author's *Bukkyō no genryū* (Osaka: Asahi Karuchā Books, 1989). Portions of it have been adapted in collaboration with the author for the purposes of the present article.

Originally it carried a strong sense of "dialogue" and denoted the art of exploring the truth by exposing contradiction. Much later, in Europe, the word was used to denote a logical process based upon the unification of opposites both in subjective thought and, for some, the developments of history.

In my reference to "the dialectical structure of the biographies" above, my understanding is based upon the formula championed by Hegel of the three stages of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. When something is conceived or stated, this is a thesis; but this thesis always brings about its opposite, an antithesis. Both thesis and antithesis are true in a certain sense yet stand in contradiction. To resolve this tension, a third stage, termed "synthesis," is sought. Both thesis and antithesis must be negated because of their contradiction but they are at the same time preserved and unified in the synthesis; one might say they are reborn and fulfilled from a new angle. This process of inclusive cancellation as a means of resolving opposition is called *aufheben* in German or *sublation* in English. The format of these three stages of thesis, antithesis and synthesis is the basic scheme of dialectical movement or reasoning.

The dialectical process may continue on indefinitely, in that one may treat the synthesis as a new thesis, thus requiring an appropriate antithesis and ultimately a new synthesis as well. We can apply this structure not only to logical speculative thought but also to objective developments in history. For example, we may take one particular era of our history such as the Nara Period as the norm or standard. The next period, the Heian, is thus an antithesis (to the former) in which we find a new and different set of cultural assumptions. The subsequent Kamakura Period manifests an entirely new cultural perspective that negates the world order of both the Nara and Heian eras yet manages to retain elements of each. On a smaller scale, one easily finds the operation of this scheme of thesis, antithesis and synthesis within each of these periods. As a synthesis of these former periods, one could then take the Kamakura itself as a new thesis from which history further develops in the form of antithesis and synthesis. In any case, in this model of "dialectic" I see a parallel thought-process operating in the biographies of the Buddha.

*Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis in the Biographies.* The authors of these

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biographies of course had no knowledge of a concept like dialectics and it is unlikely they were consciously approaching their subject in this way. If we read these works with this structure in mind, however, they take on a typically Buddhist form of intelligibility. The first thing we encounter in the biographies of the Buddha is that he had the elite status of having been born a prince. In a treatment quite different from those describing the founders of Islam or Christianity, these works give flowery descriptions of the prince's upbringing in the three estates, built to make the three seasons of heat, rain and cold more comfortable; his married life with the elegant princess, Yaśodharā; and his indulgence in the sumptuous life of the palace. Young Siddhārtha is thus depicted as someone who reached the pinnacle of luxury, experiencing every worldly pleasure imaginable.

The next stage of his life, however, shows this same man at the age of twenty-nine leaving his home and family to plunge into a life of austerity—the exact opposite from the hedonism he previously exemplified. At this point the biographies stress the hardships he suffered continuously for six years, hardships so severe it is said no one else could have endured them. The resultant structure the authors of the biographies have laid out is such that the pleasures of his life are first described, then the pain, and finally the validity of both are denied. Although an austere lifestyle would seem the perfect antidote for the spiritual vacuity of a life based in sensual indulgence, the story of the Buddha is meant to show that in fact austerity is not the true path either. It, too, is rejected for the new alternative of meditation and it is here that the Buddha finds enlightenment.

Although the biographies of the Buddha in general appear in scriptural format, none were expounded by the Buddha himself. They developed gradually as the result of the work of many people gathering material over hundreds of years. In other words, these works were written not by the Buddha but by believing Buddhists living hundreds of years after the actual Buddha walked the earth. And it is apparent to us today that, for whatever reason, they viewed his life in a dialectical manner for this is how their works were composed. If this were not true, then how do we understand their felt need to begin their depiction of this great man by emphasizing his indulgent lifestyle? The story would have been sufficient if they had begun with his visits to the two teachers or his exploits of asceticism. But the authors of this literature

instead took what we may call a dialectical approach: sensual pleasure taken to its extreme, its subsequent renunciation expressed in a life of drastic austerity, and finally the realization that both paths are wrong which leads to liberation under the bodhi-tree. This structure suggests not only a dialectical view of life but also a sense that such is the basic nature of the Buddhist doctrinal standpoint known as the "middle-path."

*Taking the Middle Path.* It is well known that after his enlightenment experience, the Buddha delivered his first sermon in a place known as the Deer Park, located north of Benares. The contents of this talk constitute a sutta in Pali named, the *Turning of the Dharma-wheel (Dhammacakkapavattana-vaggo)* of which we have several versions translated into Chinese and Tibetan as well as a fragmentary text of the original Sanskrit. It begins with the Buddha directing his words to five monks in the following way:

There are two ends, O Bhikkhus, which a man who has given up the world must not pursue. What are these two? One is indulging in the pleasures derived from sensual desire; this is base, unsophisticated, ordinary, unworthy and yields nothing. The other is indulging in self-mortification; this is painful, unworthy and also yields nothing. There is a middle-path discovered by the Tathāgata, O Bhikkhus, which avoids these two extremes.

The appearance of the term, "middle-path," in the first sermon of the Buddha is significant because this locution expresses the central, most fundamental standpoint of Buddhism. Confucianism also contains a similar concept, usually translated as "the doctrine of the mean." But in Buddhism, the "middle-path" does not mean anything so noncommittal as standing between two opposing sides, deciding for both at the same time, or compromise by finding a vague middle ground. Middle-path in Buddhism specifically stands for an avoidance of both extreme points of view—an attitude which, while rejecting both sides, sublates them in the assertion of a dialectically higher, third position. I think we can assume that the authors of the biographies knew of this sūtra and were influenced by the fact that the first explanation of the Buddha's enlightenment is presented in terms of avoiding

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the extremes of both pleasure and pain in its affirmation of the doctrine of the middle-path.

The notion of the middle-path expounded in this sūtra is a simple one corresponding to real life experiences in which the extreme positions of pain and pleasure are transcended. However, in the Mahāyāna sūtras that came later we have an explanation of a middle-path between existence and non-existence. There is also a middle-path between the two arguments regarding the next world: eternalism (*śāśvata-drṣṭi*), which believes in a permanent substratum of existence, and nihilism (*uccheda-drṣṭi*), which denies any karmic consequences for one's actions. These are, in fact, all mutually connected within the concept of middle-path in Buddhism, which can perhaps be best explained in the following way.

When the Buddhists use the word, "existence," they understand it to mean a real substance comprising the central kernel of a true and real entity; thus, it is a permanently abiding substance, eternal and imperishable. The contrary position, non-existence, or nihilism as it is often referred, holds that nothing exists which is worthy of consideration. Arguing that all things return to non-existence (without consequence), it is basically the same as the doctrine which denies the validity of karma, for it posits a form of death as its ultimate principle.

Both of these positions are attacked in the Buddhist way of thinking as erroneous. The Buddha stressed that everything exists in a temporary form as a result of certain causes and conditions—there is no real, permanent substance present. This "real substance" is, therefore, empty. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self (*anātman*) is often used to illustrate this point. "Non-self" is the denial of the premise that there is any "self" which is taken to be something eternal, of real substance. It is said that a plethora of false conceptions arise from so-called substantialist or absolutist views of the self. To state the contrary, if there is substance to the self, this would imply that there should be no confusion in the world. Or, if this real substance existed but were somehow confused or lost, then, because it is permanent and unchangeable, it would be eternally impossible for this confusion to be transformed into enlightenment. These points were brought out in great clarity by the Mahāyāna philosophers.

The stance opposite to this belief in existence and eternalism is nihilism, the denial of future existence determined by karma, which is

also quite different from the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. An obvious example of the nihilist point of view would be to say that when something dies, it becomes non-existent. Therefore, it is meaningless to do good deeds or accumulate merit through a virtuous life. This leads to a sort of hedonism whereby one's guiding light is enjoying oneself in the present and ignoring the implications. Such thinking is most vulgar, for it implies that in the midst of our confusion we have no awareness of this confusion and therefore we also have no conception that the realm of enlightenment even exists.

Putting aside the later philosophical development of the concept of the middle-path in Buddhist thought, it is my conclusion that the authors of the biographies of the Buddha used the format elucidated in the Buddha's first sermon of pleasure→pain→middle-path in the structuring of their own narrative, and their own works thereby essentially can be seen as a concrete expression of the basic principle of dialectics.

*The Issue of Language in the Biographies of the Buddha.* The attitude toward language displayed in this biographical material is relevant to both linguistic thought and Buddhist doctrine. Of particular interest is the Buddha's ambivalence and in some cases even rejection of the value of preaching. This occurs immediately after the completion of his path to enlightenment and it is only after the intervention of an external agent, the god Brahmā, that Śākyamuni begins his journey to expound the Dharma.

Immediately following his experience of enlightenment, the Buddha spent several weeks alone in the same place. During this time it is thought he was savoring the joy of the Truth to which he had awakened. This period is referred to in the texts as "the bliss of the Dharma" (法樂). It was in such a state that he first spent one week sitting under the so-called bodhi-tree, then a week under an ajapāla-tree, another week under a mucilinda-tree, etc. This continued for either five or seven weeks, depending on the source.

During this time, two merchants passing by made an offering of food to the holy man, whereupon they both expressed their desire to commit themselves to the Buddha as their teacher. Śākyamuni accepted them and they are considered his first lay disciples. He gave them his blessing but no more: he did not expound the Dharma to these men. This may seem odd but it is common in India for people to feel so moved by their

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encounter with the spiritual presence of a holy man that they donate food or other gifts even without hearing a word of preaching. The episode is interesting because it is the only record of someone donating food to him during this period. Although people from the nearby village may have brought him food, it is not until later that he goes into the village on his own to beg for nutrition. Such was the nature of his absorption in the bliss of the Dharma.

*The Buddha's Hesitation to Preach.* During these weeks the Buddha's mind shifted back and forth. Should he share the joy of the truth to which he had awakened? And if so, to whom should he speak? He felt it imperative to expound his understanding in order to save others; and yet he could not help but agonize himself with the futility of the exercise. Even if he spoke, nothing might happen. What a pity if all the effort put into communicating the meaning of the Dharma produced no understanding in his audience! What is the point of endeavoring to get across a truth so subtle, so profound, that it cannot be perceived with the eyes of this world? No, it would make more sense to just keep silent and enter Nirvāṇa as such. This is how the Buddha's thinking went, leaning toward a decision to abstain from preaching altogether.

We often refer to this attitude as either the Buddha's refusal to preach or the Buddha's silence; it is certainly fair to assess this as in the very least a serious hesitation regarding the value of speaking about his experience. Then the god Brahmā realizes what is going on and rushes down from his heaven to beseech the Buddha to explain his enlightenment to others. It is a result of this so-called "supplication of Brahmā" (*EB*, XX-2, p. 21) that Śākyamuni Buddha lifts himself up and takes his first steps on what is to become a forty-five year journey of teaching.

Approximately two months pass between his experience of enlightenment under the bodhi-tree and his first sermon delivered in the Deer Park. It is noteworthy that the authors of the biographies insert into this period the Buddha's hesitation to preach and even his consideration of rejecting the notion entirely. This fact stands out as curious within the context of these biographies but also has important implications for the totality of Buddhism. I would assume that there are few examples in other religions of such a twist whereby the value of preaching is first denied and then affirmed. The general pattern seems to be, as in

the cases of Jesus and Mohammed, that upon realizing his identity as prophet, the founder immediately begins his task of spreading the gospel. But Buddhism is different.

It is in fact normal for one to feel the urge to tell someone close about anything significant that has happened, particularly something wonderful. To want to rush out and tell someone that you have just won the state lottery is simply what we call human nature; it would be the hiding of such news that would be rather irksome for most people. When someone experiences the joy of attaining faith it is certainly natural to think about how to share that exhilaration with another. In other words, whether it be gaining faith or realizing enlightenment, such a momentous experience naturally compels one to spread their joy to others, just like water flows downhill. Yet the Buddha did not react in this way; it was only after the pleading of the influential god Brahmā that he acceded to this urge. Of course the story of Brahmā descending to convince the Buddha to preach has no basis in historical reality. The inclusion of this vignette reflects rather the psychological process occurring within the Buddha himself.

Brahmā urged the Buddha with these words: "A sensible man who becomes rich donates his wealth to others. You have gained the jewel of enlightenment, so please share it with everyone." Elsewhere it is recorded that he reproved the Buddha by saying, "First you renounced your family and then underwent austerities for six years. Was not all this the result of a vow you made to save others? How can you turn your back on that vow because now you feel reluctant to preach?"

*The Meaning of the Refusal to Preach.* The obvious question here is, why did he feel preaching would be futile? Why did the Buddha see it as no more than an unprofitable waste of effort? Again, the biographies provide the reasons for this. First of all, the truth seen by the Buddha, the truth we call Buddhism, is not only most profound but also extremely subtle and exceedingly difficult to understand. Second, as most people are said to be "afflicted with lust and resentment, veiled by the darkness of ignorance," they lack the ability to understand such matters. In other words, even if the Buddha expounded his understanding of the truth and people did pay attention, his message would be too lofty and the audience too dull-witted to accept it.

The problematic of language lies at the bottom of this dilemma of



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how to communicate a message too subtle for man's mechanism of comprehension. Language is a vital tool we use for daily communication and preaching the Dharma is, on the whole, also accomplished through the medium of language. But language as such also has its limitations. No matter how accurate the language used, how can the ultimate truth be transmitted through such imperfect means? In terms of this language problematic, the Buddha's two objections to preaching may thus be restated as follows: first, the Dharma is too lofty to be reliably reduced to any linguistic device; second, because people trust in the efficacy of language too readily, many would merely nod their heads in agreement without actually grasping what was being said to them.

The first point about the Buddha Dharma being too lofty is particularly well-stressed in the later biographies. It is pointed out that since the ultimate truth, the so-called *paramārtha-satya*, is quite beyond the discrimination, conception or judgement of ordinary people, it can only be comprehended by a Buddha. For everyone else, it can neither be seen nor heard, neither grasped nor abandoned, neither accepted nor denied. It cannot be fashioned into any appropriate image which would make it fathomable. It cannot be spoken of in words or expressed in letters. It is empty, unattainable, quiescent (*śānti*), equal to Nirvāṇa.<sup>1</sup> This is how the biographies of the Buddha describe the content of enlightenment.

In the Sino-Japanese tradition, the content of enlightenment has described as both "inexplicable" (不可說) and "inconceivable" (不可思議). "Inexplicable" means it cannot be described in language because it transcends language. This is a direct statement about the limitations of language to handle the content of enlightenment. "Inconceivable" is not used here in its sense of bizarre or unexpected but should be taken literally to mean that the nature of enlightenment is beyond the scope of what we are mentally capable of conceptualizing or imagining. It

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<sup>1</sup> To say the Buddha attained enlightenment is the same as saying he achieved Nirvāṇa, for Nirvāṇa means the disappearance of all *kleśa* or mental afflictions. As long as his body remained intact, this was called "Nirvāṇa with a remaining support" (*sopadhīśeṣa-nirvāṇa*). When the Buddha's physical body ceased to function at the age of eighty, this was called "Nirvāṇa without any remaining support" (*nirupadhīśeṣa-nirvāṇa*).

may also suggest that we should not try to conceive of enlightenment. The term "inconceivable" expresses a conviction about the limitations of our intellectual framework, referring as it does to conception and judgement as the formal processes of that framework. As such, it also has specific relevance to the problem of language.

If the content of enlightenment is such that it cannot be explained with ordinary language and it is beyond normal human conceptualization, then this would preclude any meaningful exposition of the Dharma. It is therefore not surprising that the Buddha, who had seen a world beyond all language and concept, would reject the idea of preaching. The biographies even record that he felt he would only create misunderstanding if he were compelled to explain his realization.

What this also reveals, however, is the fact that Śākyamuni Buddha did not place much trust in language. Indeed this sentiment permeates the entire Buddhist tradition. The Ch'an or Zen school, for example, specifically emphasizes this point, as expressed in its well-known saying, "Not established on the basis of words; transmitted from mind to mind" (不立文字以心傳心). This phrase illustrates the Ch'an position that the ultimate is not communicable in words or concepts but can only be transmitted from one person to another at a special moment when one mind can "speak" to another directly. This principle expresses an urgent need to sweep away all illusory, non-substantial thoughts or concepts from one's mind, and is a rather blatant example of distrust in language.

*The Limitations of Words.* The fact that there is a limit to what language can communicate, or that we cannot fully trust this medium is not an abstract concept divorced from our daily lives. Everyone has had the experience of carefully explaining something to someone, of watching them concentrate on our every word as they nodded in understanding or approval, only to find out later that the listener came away with a completely different idea of what was being communicated. Words have only a "virtual" relationship with reality; they are signs affixed in the most arbitrary way and cannot possibly represent reality. If this were not the case, then the mention of the word "Fire!" would mean one's mouth would instantly burst into flames, or by saying "sweet" our mouths would taste sweet. Since words are merely signs,

they mean different things to different people and are naturally subject to misunderstanding.

For example, can the taste of sugar be explained to someone who has never seen nor tasted it? One may explain that it is white, sweet, etc., but this will probably only cause the listener to imagine other white things he has experienced before such as salt or snow. If asked what "sweet" means, we are nonplused. Rather than trying to explain it in words, it would be so much easier to bring some sugar and say, "Taste this!" The listener would then experience the flavor and *understand* the sweetness of sugar. This is a kind of awakening, an awakening to the meaning of "sweet." There is another Ch'an expression which expresses this principle: "Cold and warm are understood by oneself" (冷暖自知). That summer is hot and winter is cold are facts everyone knows by himself, not from someone else; it is in fact impossible for anyone to explain such things with language. Enlightenment is like this. It is not something to be explained or taught with words; it is something one leaps into by oneself, something one *understands* by tasting it alone.

*Complacency and Attachment to Language.* Yet while bemoaning the limitations of language we nevertheless seem to maintain a remarkable tendency to put deep faith in words. Given that all branches of learning, particularly philosophy, have developed through the medium of language, this is of course inevitable. Without language, nearly all academic studies would be quite impossible. Words like "inexplicable," for example, are not acceptable in academics. In fact one would probably say that scholarship is the struggle to express understanding despite an acute awareness of the vagueness and limitations of language. It is analogous to the Buddha finally deciding to commence preaching without full faith in language. At the same time, the enormous size of the Buddhist canon made up of thousands of texts full of ideas and concepts is testimony to the importance of language to the Buddhist tradition. The implacable dilemma is not language or literature per se; it is the excessive faith we place in them, i.e. our faith in and attachment to language as the means of conveying the truth.

This attachment to language reveals itself in our mistaken conviction that once we have thought over a matter and reached a conclusion, that decision arrived at by means of language expresses some form of reali-

ty. The person who relentlessly pursued the exposition of this fallacy was Nāgārjuna. Critically examining the common attachments people form to linguistic expressions as if they were true representations of reality, he showed how ideas expressed in words are only temporary postulations of relative meaning, and in fact are only “empty.”

The second reason why the Buddha initially refused to teach was the inability of his audience to comprehend him. The only comment in the biographies is that people are “afflicted with lust and resentment, veiled by the darkness of ignorance.” Here the word, “ignorance” implies a naïveté about the basis of words as well as an attachment to words. This is a summary of how the biographies describe the Buddha’s worry about being misunderstood:

Now if I endeavor to preach the Dharma, people will surely fall into confusion. That is, they would be unable to believe what I would be saying and instead respond with slander. As a result, they would fall into hell and undergo a variety of pain and suffering. For this reason, I will remain silent.

The Buddha is pointing out that despite his intention to awaken people, his preaching may confuse them instead. One should not simply assume that if only the true Dharma were preached, people would be saved; in fact it might even result in them falling into hell.

Here we see the Buddha’s deep consideration for others. It is not that the people will fall into hell because his teaching is false or improper; to the contrary, what is expounded by the Buddha is of course assumed to be the highest truth, the True Dharma (*saddharma*). When taught in words, however, even the highest truth gives rise to a certain amount of misunderstanding which can breed slanderous thoughts, and the karmic retribution for slandering the Dharma is to fall into hell. This fatal scenario stems from the mere use of language and from a common ignorance of the significance of the fact that words and the conceptualizations they embody have limitations. Thus, in contrast to the Buddha’s serious distrust of language, most people function with this linguistic overconfidence based on a conviction of the authority of language.

*Great Compassion Based on Emptiness.* When the Buddha ultimately embarked upon his forty-five years of teaching across the breadth of

India, he was motivated by the same consideration for his audience that initially led him to decline to preach at all. This event, undeniably momentous, was dauntingly difficult, for the Buddha had to force into linguistic form that which originally transcended language. Knowing that the expounding of his message would not flow readily from his experience of enlightenment, his new task of explaining the inexplicable was probably no less demanding than the physical and mental difficulties endured by the Buddha during his six years of austerities. It suggests that true and genuine preaching is never easy.

I think we should have no trouble in labelling as dialectic this particular series of events which first denies and then affirms the notion of preaching, in order to ultimately enact it by means of that denial. This dialectic process might not have been unrelated to the later Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness which was first delineated in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* and brought to completion by Nāgārjuna. And since we may assume that the literary genre of the Buddha's biography was being formed at a time parallel to the rise of Mahāyāna philosophical thought, if not slightly earlier, these biographies of the Buddha may be regarded as manifesting the first sprouts of emptiness philosophy.

The first meaning of emptiness is denial or negation. It is from the earliest period in Buddhism that teachings such as *anātman*, *nirvāṇa* or the labels mentioned above of inexplicability and inconceivability begin to appear, all indicating a movement in the direction of emptiness. Emptiness itself, however, is not exhausted with mere negation; there is always an aspect of affirmation. Affirmation, genuine affirmation, must arise in the midst of negation. Direct affirmation that does not pass through a phase of negation, i.e. that is not mediated by any negation, is of a lower order; and although there are undeniably such forms of affirmation, they should be understood properly as affirmations that nevertheless contain confusion. Nāgārjuna's lengthy explanation of emptiness was precisely for the purpose of clarifying this point.

"Truly empty, [hence] unfathomably existent" (真空妙有), a frequently occurring expression in Sino-Japanese Buddhism, expresses the idea that absolute affirmation is found in the midst of true emptiness. It means that when something is truly and totally negated as empty, it miraculously turns out to be an affirmation of a subtle form of being. Or, as the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* put it, "Form is no different from emptiness," meaning that "all matter, just as it is, is empty." The next

line, however, "Emptiness is no different from form," i.e. emptiness itself, just as it is, is matter, must also be remembered. The first line illustrates the truth from the side of negation, while the second line expresses it from the side of affirmation; in the middle is emptiness.

It goes without saying that the authors of these biographies did not compose their works based on the philosophical standpoints expressed by Nāgārjuna, and it would constitute an historical fallacy to suggest that we base our understanding of the Buddha's biographies upon the examples of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. The point I wish to make here, rather, is that this pattern of true affirmation emerging only after passing through a stage of denial is one ubiquitous in the Buddhist tradition. The need to reject both lifestyles of pleasure and austerity before treading upon the middle path is another expression of this. Is it not possible that the biographies' authors unconsciously assimilated this pattern into their writing? Considering the fact that the biographies could have been adequately established without this episode of his refusal to preach, it is difficult to understand otherwise the reasons for its inclusion.

In any case, the preaching of the Dharma does begin. Of course, though we are not gods like Brahmā, we would also be upset if the Buddha had decided to abandon any intention of preaching. With the exposition of his insight, the Buddha's religion thus appeared in the world; that is, it became ours. If the Buddha had actually put into practice his thought, "It is better to remain silent and enter Nirvāna in this way," Buddhism would have left no traces in history and his attainment of enlightenment would not have become part of world knowledge. If the Buddha had in fact decided to enter Nirvāna, departing this world without a trace, there would have been nothing anyone could have done about it. He merely would have followed the path known as that of the "Lone Buddha" (*pratyekabuddha*).

A *pratyekabuddha* is a person who has reached enlightenment on his own, without the benefit of a teacher. The Buddha could be seen as a typical example of this model, since he did leave behind Ālāra and his other teachers before venturing to sit under the bodhi-tree where he found enlightenment by himself. However, another aspect of a *pratyekabuddha* is that he is said to enjoy his liberation in private, without sharing it with others. In other words, by attaining enlightenment he has completed his "self-benefit" (*sva-artha*) but there is no

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sign of “benefitting others” (*para-artha*)—no preaching of the Dharma, no contribution to society. For this reason, the *pratyekabuddha* is considered a saint but only a Hīnayāna saint. The Buddha was different on this point. With his heart of great compassion he commenced preaching as an other-benefitting act for the specific purpose of relieving the anxieties of sentient beings. Therefore we do not speak of Śākyamuni as a *pratyekabuddha* but as a *buddha*.

The biographies of the Buddha thus narrate something of the subtle processes at work in the establishment of the religion. That is to say, we should not say Buddhism began with the enlightenment of the Buddha. It is only after the convincing words of Brahmā that the Dharma was actually brought forth by the Buddha. The entreaties of the gods are thus what enabled the founding of Buddhism.

*A Characteristic Buddhist Way of Thinking.* The above discussion hopefully makes clear one particularly characteristic aspect of Buddhist thought. In the Bible, for example, we have in the first chapter of John, “First there was the Word.” The Greek original for “word” is *logos*, which also could have been translated as “logic” but many favor “word” as the proper rendering. This “word” is God, the word of God, and is understood as taking physical form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus the word of Jesus is none other than the word of God and one is saved by believing in this.

The notion of the so-called transformation body of the Buddha (*nirmāṇa-kāya*) in Buddhism may seem close to the Christian notion of the embodiment of the “word” in physical form but in fact it denotes something quite different. In the Buddhist way of thinking, one cannot immediately agree with the statement, “First there was the Word,” because the Buddhists believe that somewhere prior to the word, at the very foundation of that word, there was first a denial of the word itself that took place before an exposition of the truth began. We can describe this by saying first there was negation, or first there was emptiness. Even if the Christian formula, “First there was the Word,” is changed to “First there was the God,” i.e. an absolute God, in terms of faith this still reflects an attitude of affirmation of the God/Word idea without any implication of negation. It is never thought that something could be lacking (i.e. negated) in God.

The “word” as understood by Buddhism is clearly the word of man,

not the word of God. Because words are signs created by man, they are necessarily relative and imperfect tools. But even words such as these have logic or can be said to include logic. From the Buddhist point of view, however, logic cannot be fully expressed linguistically as there is always a dimension to logic that transcends language. Thus truth is termed inexplicable or inconceivable. Nāgārjuna felt it was his job to destroy the attachments people held regarding the view that the structure of language is something perfect and that language can express truth or the realm of the absolute. By contrast, the Biblical sense of "Word" is the word of God, thus these are words that reflect the absolute and are of a wholly different nature from the words of mankind. In the person of Jesus Christ, one by one these words of God are brought into the physical realm and become human words. This conception is completely different from what is presented in Buddhism, where truth and/or logic exist on two qualitatively different levels described as relative (*samvṛti*) and absolute (*paramārtha*).

It would be a mistake, however, to think there is nothing even remotely similar in Buddhism to this concept of the "Word of God (*logos*)" taking physical form. I am thinking of the so-called "dharma-realm," or *dharma-dhātu*. *Dharma-dhātu* means something like "the source of the dharma," but the precise meaning of the word dharma can be problematic. Dharma may mean teaching, existence, rule, etc. and thus cannot be reduced to one English word. Let us assume in this context that dharma means existence or teaching. In this sense, *dharma-dhātu* represents the realm which is the source of every possible existence, or the source of all teachings about existence. It is beyond human language, inconceivable and completely equivalent to emptiness in its content. Enlightenment thus means to be enlightened to the *dharma-dhātu*, to see the *dharma-dhātu*. The *dharma-dhātu* can also particularize itself in such a way as to become the *dharma-kāya*, the dharma body of the Buddha. This manifestation is understood as the condensed essence of the *dharma-dhātu*. To put it in mundane terms, it is like invisible water vapor in the morning air crystallizing into dew. From the basic stuff called *dharma-dhātu*, the *dharma-kāya* of the Buddha is born. We may even say that when Śākyamuni experienced enlightenment under the bodhi-tree he attained the *dharma-kāya* as a Buddha. If we compare the *dharma-kāya* with the *dharma-dhātu*, the former is somewhat more concrete in a human way. But, as



even the *dharma-kāya* is neither visible nor inferable, more concrete forms of the Buddha-body are expressed as the body of enjoyment (*sambhoga-kāya*) and the body of emanation (*nirmāṇa-kāya*). Taking on the physical form of a human, they both emerge from the *dharma-kāya*. The *nirmāṇa-kāya* appears in the assembly of śrāvakas and other human beings for the purpose of preaching. The *sambhoga-kāya* is seen in the bodhisattva's assembly, standing between the *dharma-kāya* and *nirmāṇa-kāya*.

Seen from the Buddha's side, the fact that the Dharma is preached in a way that people can understand it is only possible at the stage of *nirmāṇa-kāya*. In the beginning there is first the *dharma-dhātu* and *dharma-kāya*, then when the *nirmāṇa-kāya* emerges out of the *dharma-kāya* the preaching of the Dharma takes place. Although the content of that preaching is of course truth itself, as it is none other than the *dharma-dhātu*, because it is conveyed through the medium of human language it too often happens that this invites an accretion of misunderstanding and confusion. Thus even the words of a *nirmāṇa-kāya* Buddha which make up the scriptures, simply because they are words, contain the possibility of error—this is the meaning of the Ch'an expression, "Not established on the basis of words."

*Preaching Without a Single Word.* The idea that words cannot transmit the truth is inherited and subsequently strengthened in the Mahāyāna tradition. In one Mahāyāna text, the *Sūtra of Exposition by Vimalakīrti* (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra*), there is a chapter entitled, "Entering the Teaching of Non-duality" (入不二法門品). "Non-duality" designates oneness, no distinction between subject and object or, as mentioned above in the phrase, "Form is emptiness," the fact that matter, just as it is, is empty. Over thirty bodhisattvas appear in this chapter and, one by one, explain non-duality from a variety of perspectives. Finally Bodhisattva Manjuśrī stands and says, "Everything that has been expressed by all of you is excellent but the fact that you have spoken it makes it a duality as well. If you do not explain anything, do not use any words, do not even say, 'I will not explain,' then you will enter non-duality." At this point, Manjuśrī turns to the lay disciple Vimalakīrti—the central character in this sūtra—and asks, "What do you think?" To this Vimalakīrti utters not a word but remains still with his mouth closed. Manjuśrī praises this by saying it is true non-

duality, and thus the chapter ends.

It should be clear by now that this exchange manifests the Buddhist idea of the inexpressible and is consistent with the Buddha's own silence. Mañjuśrī used every possible linguistic device in explaining how non-duality should not be expounded in words but Vimalakīrti put this into practice with his actions. Of course there would be no communication about what non-duality is if everyone maintained silence. The explanations offered by the thirty-odd bodhisattvas were all correct. If the Dharma were not preached, the Dharma would never be transmitted to anyone. But at the bottom of all this communication is silence, the negation of preaching itself. And this explanation is also correct.

The tradition has described this scene by saying, "The moment of Vimalakīrti's silence was like thunder." That is, the silence of Vimalakīrti reverberated throughout the room. There may seem to be an element of absurdity to the notion that silence can resonate like thunder, but it adequately describes the experience of understanding that suddenly rippled through the minds of the people gathered in that room on that occasion. This story shows how truth can be embodied in the midst of silence rather than words.

Having passed through a stage of just such a silence, the Buddha went on to preach for the rest of his long life. Preaching for forty-five long years, the Buddha encountered a variety of different people and it is said that he spoke in such a way that when his listener was simple-minded, even the simpleminded could understand, and when his listener was sharp, he provided an appropriate level of discourse for just such a person as well. Thus the number of his sermons was great, as reflected in the enormous size of the Buddhist canon.

Nevertheless, when we come later to the Mahāyāna sūtras, we find the phrase, "In forty-five years of preaching, not a single word was spoken." That is, during these forty-five years he talked and talked but the result was tantamount to not having said anything. Here we have another instance of the denial of preaching. This statement seems to say that what was preached with words was not the true preaching; in other words, what the Buddha preached was not words and letters per se, but a message of an entirely different order, and people should beware of the danger of being wedded to his words and the barriers this would create. In any case, such an attitude brings to mind the Bud-

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dha's own statement following his enlightenment that preaching was futile and he might as well just enter Nirvāṇa straight away. But in fact the preaching of the Buddha was not futile. The Mahāyāna message here is to remind us once again that language is less than perfect and that a conscious effort is required to resolve the paradox of going through language to grasp something that is beyond language.

### II. The Personality of the Buddha Śākyamuni

*The Man Himself.* I would now like to consider the portrayal of the man we call the Buddha as he is described in these biographical treatments. This is an important issue because the individuality of the Buddha had an enormous influence on the subsequent development of the religion; one might even say the character of the historical Buddha became the character of Buddhism.

I think there is little doubt that the spiritual aspect of human culture reached a new plateau in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. There may have been many extraordinary individuals earlier but it is not until this period that names of specific individuals were first recorded for transmission to later generations. For example, it is at this time that Socrates, Plato and other known philosophers emerged in Greece. In China, Confucius and the numerous scholars who succeeded him also begin to appear at this time. It seems that prior to this period there were no thinkers who could synthesize their ideas into a structured system. These centuries were, I think, a dawning period and, at the same time, a golden age in the history of man. Although thousands of years of material culture had developed among the Sumerians and Egyptians, for example, there was little the world had inherited in the way of rigorous thought from these earlier civilizations.

Alongside Socrates and Confucius, Gautama Buddha is thus one of the representatives of this period. All three of these men have been called "teachers of mankind." This stems not only from their impact during this dawning age in human history but also from their stature as educators representing a program of ideas with broad appeal outside their contemporary contexts. Though not without religious concerns, because of the stress Confucius laid on political and social issues and Socrates' focus on philosophy, the religious dimension to their teach-

ings has not been traditionally emphasized. By contrast, the Buddha possessed an outlook balanced in both religion and philosophy. Therefore it seems to me that Gautama truly fits the label of "teacher of mankind."

The Buddha's life shows some striking contrasts to that of Confucius, Socrates, et al. First of all, the fact that he lived until the age of eighty is unparalleled. Active as an itinerant preacher until only days before his death, I think we can infer that contact with so many people throughout his long life brought him to a rather mature level of understanding. Within these eighty years, his life should be seen properly as divided into two halves with the second portion beginning with his "attainment of the way" at the age of thirty-five. Turning points such as is seen in the case of the Buddha are rarely so clearly presented in other religions and philosophical traditions. Although somewhat unusual in the biographies of famous men in the West, such depictions of an individual's transformation through the experience of enlightenment or faith as is seen in the case of the Buddha are in fact quite common in Buddhist literature. If this contrast is indeed significant, then it would indicate one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Buddha and Buddhism as a whole.

The Buddha was born a prince of one of India's nation-states and as a result tasted the fruits of an aristocratic lifestyle quite early in life. Socrates was the son of a midwife; Confucius was born and raised in the family of a mid-level bureaucrat. Jesus was the son of a carpenter and was born in a stable; Mohammed was the son of a poor merchant. The stories of these other men are all enormously different from the circumstances of the young man who became the Buddha.

Just as Mohammed's filial situation is not usually stressed, Siddārtha's life in the palace has not been given any particular significance by the tradition but it cannot be denied that his education and upbringing had a substantial impact upon his thinking. We can, for example, specifically point to the way in which he turned a lifestyle steeped in luxury into a fierce asceticism. And this unusual experience of living at these two extremes, one so bitter and one so sweet, provided the Buddha with a broad base of experience. If one were to describe the character of this man succinctly, one could say he was gentle and fond of quietude but rational and possessed of a stern attitude toward the truth. This is the reason why I feel he is most deserving of the title,

“teacher of mankind.” Let us look at these points in more detail.

*Neither Politician nor Philosopher.* First of all, concerning politics, we know the Buddha did not have a political temperament. No one thinks of the Buddha as a politician. As such, he stands out in sharp contrast to contemporary India's Mahātmā Gandhi who, while being a major thinker, also threw himself into the political movement as a warrior fighting for India's independence. Another figure is that of Confucius who was undeniably a political thinker. Let us once again examine the “teacher of mankind” epithet in that context.

More than a philosopher, Confucius was someone who preached ethics and morals based on principles such as humanity and propriety, and devoted his energies to the implementation of these ideals both socially and politically. Endowed with a sturdy constitution, as a young man he was in charge of a school and worked in the government bureaucracy, where he rose to a high rank. He later spent fourteen years traveling throughout the land, visiting rulers to advise them on policy matters, in the process acquiring a superb reputation for his sagacity. Nevertheless, he was unable to find anyone who agreed to adopt his idealistic policies. Turning back to education in his later days, he died at the age of seventy-two. Although one cannot say he was successful as a politician during his lifetime, as the founder of the philosophy we call Confucianism the impact of his ideas over more than two thousand years of Chinese culture has been enormous.

Gautama Buddha's methods were different from those of Confucius in many ways. The Buddha found himself born into a society in India based on a rigid caste structure which divided everyone into four major groups: brahman (priests), ksatriya (warriors), vaiśya (general populace) and śūdra (slave). Here birthright strictly determined who worked under whom and even who enjoyed the privilege of learning and participating in religious ceremonies. Śākyamuni took a strong position against this social system, allowing everyone equal access to the Buddhist order. Many would expect this attitude as a matter of course in today's world but at that time the Buddhists were considered quite radical for their anti-caste stance. The story of Ānanda accepting and drinking the water drawn by the daughter of Caṇḍāla is told as a shocking anecdote in the sūtras because her family belonged to the un-touchable caste. Gautama Buddha's efforts to abolish the caste system

were the first in Indian history and his spirit of equality was maintained by the Buddhist tradition long after his death. Yet this attitude did not include an imperative to develop a political movement. The perspective upheld by the Buddha instead was religious: all are equal in terms of the absolute, and in this context distinctions of social class are meaningless.

To call the Buddha a philosopher in the same way Socrates is so regarded is also inappropriate. That the Buddha was extremely intellectual is apparent in the fact that the Buddhist religion as a whole is permeated with a rational, philosophical character. For example, the word *faith* as a core concept is almost entirely absent from the Buddha's teachings. Instead of *faith*, the emphasis in Buddhism is placed on *enlightenment*, an experience of understanding which we approach through intellectual means.

The word *philosophy* means "love of wisdom" in Greek. Socrates was just such a lover of wisdom and probably the first philosopher in human history. Insofar as the Buddha loved wisdom and sought enlightenment it is also possible to call him a philosopher. But philosophy in Europe has also come to signify an academic discipline aimed at the systematization of theory and the Buddha cannot be considered a philosopher in that sense. In lecturing on the proper way of living, Śākyamuni Buddha was, if anything, closer to Confucius. For the Buddha's theories sought to elucidate a form of praxis applicable to how we live rather than present a theoretical model of life based on purely rational argument.

*Uniqueness of the Buddha as a Religious Figure.* It is therefore in this sense of man's spiritual totality that we should see the Buddha not as politician or philosopher but as a religious figure. At the same time, it should be recognized that the word "religion" is used in a wide application of different meanings today and in some ways the Buddha's role would not be considered religious. The common religious role of shamanistic spirit possession practiced among primitive tribes since ancient times in which a shaman becomes a medium of communication between the spirit world and mankind is one which is never mentioned for the Buddha in the Buddhist records. There is no record, furthermore, of having acted as an oracle conveying a divine message, or having spoken in tongues.

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There is also a long tradition of prophecy in the Judaic and Christian traditions. In transmitting as well as interpreting the will of God regarding such crucial matters as the end of the world and the punishment or salvation of mankind, the role of prophet is so basic that it would be hard to imagine the European religious tradition without it. In the case of Gautama Buddha, however, there is no mention of prophecy either. Prophetic religion cannot be based on a pantheistic concept of God; it requires the establishment of a unique, monotheistic, absolute God. Therefore if the position is taken that religion requires communication of the will of an absolute God, then it must be denied that the Buddha was a religious person. As I have stated before, Buddhism is non-theistic; it does not recognize the existence of an absolute God.

There is also an expectation among some that a religious individual must live a tragic life. This way of thinking is similar to one which assumes that the greater the suppression of religion by worldly authority, the stronger an individual's faith in that religion becomes. The tragic death of Jesus on the cross led to numerous examples of martyrdom in Christianity. Martyrdom means proof, proving the truth of one's faith by offering one's own life in confronting oppression. This sentiment is, however, totally absent in the life of the Buddha. In fact, it cannot be found among his disciples or nearly anywhere in the Buddhist tradition. Even the examples of similar forms of behavior which arise in Buddhist cultures do so for entirely different reasons. Devoid of this tragic, political dimension, the life of the Buddha is instead described as eighty years of harmony, peace and quietude. The concept of tragedy is not entirely absent from Buddhist literature in that we have mention of King Vidūḍabha's massacre of the Śākya tribe as an event occurring during Buddha's lifetime. We know that he went into meditation when he learned of this horrific event but beyond this it is not depicted in a way as to suggest it had any specific impact upon his activities.

Although I believe many people found in Gautama Buddha someone spiritually charismatic to a remarkable degree, I am not sure if it is appropriate simply to call the Buddha a religious figure, at least from the point of view of European religion. All things considered, this comparison of the Buddha with Confucius, Socrates or Jesus brings us back to the original conclusion that probably the best way to describe the Buddha is as a "teacher of mankind."

*The Buddha as the Final Refuge.* Within the Buddhist tradition, people who conceived of the figure of the Buddha as a source of solace to the spiritually needy referred to him in this capacity as everyone's "final refuge." When baby chickens feel danger, they rush clucking to the breast of their mother hen. For the chicks, their mother's breast is just such a place of refuge. A human baby is really no different; in seeking the breast of its own mother it is seeking to connect with the locale of greatest comfort, free from anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

It is said that when people approached the Buddha, just the experience of meeting him, without asking any questions or hearing any of his words, softened their hearts and they felt as if they would bow down in reverence. Perhaps this is what is really meant by the references to the Buddha as a place of final refuge. This impact of the Buddha's presence upon others can be compared to an experience we might have today when someone whose personality we like joins a group and suddenly a meeting is turned into something enjoyable, something special. The fact that the Buddha was revered by his followers as "the final refuge" is due to his superior qualities as a human being which compelled people to see him as a source of liberation for everyone. What are some of those qualities?

*The Silence of the Buddha.* One element of this concept of refuge embodied by the Buddha's person is his love of quietude. He seems not to have been a particularly talkative person. India has had a long tradition of valuing argument, in which a person gains respect by overthrowing an opponent in debate. It is thought that the study of logic developed in India relatively early because of this debating tradition. Even today one meets many in the subcontinent who love to debate, raising their voices if necessary in order to subdue their opponents. But the Buddha only commented on issues he felt were important. Whenever he considered debate to be useless or even harmful, he responded to questions by simply closing his mouth and remaining silent. To one who loves to argue, this would be the height of absurdity.

The Buddhist scriptures make reference to a "holy silence." At the time of the Buddha we are not certain what sort of dwellings the monks lived in but they probably gathered in a series of small huts each of

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<sup>2</sup> See Psalm 46: "God is our Refuge" (—*Trans.*).



which could accommodate one or two persons. The phrase, "holy silence," is based on an incident in which the Buddha was casually strolling past a group of these huts when he overheard a heated debate among several bhikṣus gathered in one of them. He stopped and asked, "What in the world are you talking about?" One of them answered, "We were discussing such-and-such king who is very rich and such-and-such king who has a powerful army, and wondering who would win if the two of them were locked in battle. That is what we were talking about." The Buddha is said to have answered, "Do not talk about such things. As a bhikṣu, when you open your mouth, always talk about the Dharma. Remain silent about anything else." To wit, monks are only supposed to talk about truth and distance themselves from worldly chatter or political discussions. This is the origin of the phrase, "holy silence."

Out of such stories there developed a corollary expression known as "the silence of the Buddha," which manifests his attitude toward parlance or language. At times this phrase can refer to somewhat different aspects of the Buddha's attitude toward verbal communication, but generally it has been applied most commonly to the following incidents in which his feelings about speaking were revealed: his initial hesitation to preach after his realization of the truth at Buddhagāya; the stories of those occasions when the Buddha refused to answer questions because he felt that his words would be useless, misleading or even harmful to his audience; and the so-called "holy silence" mentioned above.

*The Buddha's Esteem of Rational Intelligence.* Another important aspect of the Buddha's charisma that contributed to the imagery of refuge was his intellect. Below are some examples from Buddhist literature that illustrate the rational, intellectual side of this man. First is the gist of a long speech taken from a story where he is admonishing his students, the bhikṣus:

You must not readily believe in something just because you have heard this or that rumor, or because everyone says so, or because it is so written in our books, or because of something your teacher has said. First, you must carefully examine the situation by yourself and then decide what is good and what is

bad, what is real and what is false. Only after understanding all this, should you begin to accept what you see or hear.

The Buddha is trying to give his students the self-confidence not to accept the truth-value of statements merely because they are repeated by many people or because they are made by someone with authority. Everything taught to the student should be scrutinized by the student himself until he has satisfied his own need for certainty—a striking appreciation of the value of skepticism.

Another passage displays a similar attitude:

To confirm something as truly gold, a wise man would burn it with fire or rub it on a touchstone before being certain that he is indeed holding gold. You should investigate everything I tell you in just the same way. Do not simply accept what I say out of respect for me.

Such esteem for intellectual doubt is rare in people in positions of power, particularly religious leaders who, on the whole, tend to take special pride in their own authority. A much more typical attitude is one which may be stated: “Believe in what I tell you for I would not lie to you.” Expressions of over-confidence like this one, however common, are the opposite of a rational approach to teaching and do not reflect a true religious perspective. There are occasions in the history of religion when one encounters expressions which brim with a similar self-confidence. Such sentiment is usually expressed, “Because it is written in the Bible or because it is recorded in the sūtras, all you need is faith in this [doctrine].” When the Buddha declared, “I am the Tathāgata,” or stated, “In heaven and earth, only I am to be revered,” he indicated the depth of his self-confidence. But at the same time, Śākyamuni Buddha also told his students not to blindly accept even his *own* words without careful evaluation. In this we also see his sense of commonality with his students.

The Sanskrit word for the sermons of the Buddha, *āgama*, means “coming hither.” Derived from the same root *gam*, we also have the word *adhigama*, meaning “rising up from below,” that is, studying, acquiring, realizing. Buddhism attempts to describe human experience as the fusion point where these two, the teaching from above and the experience from below, meet. The idea of “teachings” from above can

be found in all religions: a light shining from the heavens which illumines the dark road upon which we are travelling to show us the way. In Buddhism, however, that is not all. It is also necessary to have a realization rising from the bottom up wherein the same religious content as contained in the teachings is confirmed by means of one's own reason. Although later developments within Buddhism such as the Pure Land path lay greater stress on the teaching from above, the dimension of enlightenment from bottom up is not eliminated; it is merely postponed until the experience of Birth in the Pure Land. What I want to stress is that while the idea of holy teachings from above is universal, the additional requirement of an intellectual experience whereby these teachings are not only accepted but "understood" appears to be particularly Buddhist.

*The Stern Buddha.* Yet a third compelling element in the character of this rational Buddha who loved silence and harmony was a stern, severe quality. As mentioned earlier (*EB XX-2*, pp. 25-26), after reaching enlightenment, he returned home to Kapilavastu to be welcomed by his entire family, including his wife Yaśodharā, his son Rāhula and his father. It is thought that five or six years had passed between his attainment of enlightenment and this initial return. Yaśodharā brought their son forth and said to him, "This is your father. Now you should ask him for your inheritance." When Rāhula did as his mother bid him, his father said, "Fine," and proceeded to immediately shave his son's head and induct him into the order.

The motive behind Yaśodharā's actions was that both she and the Buddha's father Śuddhodana wanted to utilize the opportunity of his visit home to get the Buddha to yield his royal authority to his son, Rāhula. But in the eyes of the Buddha, the problem was not one of imperial authority. Saying bluntly, "The only thing I could ever have to hand down would be the Dharma," the Buddha paid no attention to the grief of everyone present, including that of his father, and made his son the heir to his religious movement, regardless of the political implications for his family's kingdom.

It was also at this time that the Buddha learned that his half-brother Nanda was about to wed a beautiful girl named Sundarī. On the night before the wedding the Buddha lured away the young man, and successfully convinced him to become a monk. But unable to forget

his lovely Sundarī, Nanda later found himself so overwrought with thoughts of his bride that he even considered escaping from the monastic order. Śākyamuni responded by taking Nanda up to Tuṣita Heaven to show him how magnificent women can truly be. Far surpassing the beauty of the women in this world, the Buddha said to Nanda, "That woman over whom you are distraught looks like a monkey [compared to these women]." Such stories as these involving the Buddha's relationship with his son and brother thus show us an extremely stern side of the man whenever matters of the Dharma were concerned.

*Skill in Preaching.* It is also thought that the Buddha was extremely skilled in communicating his message. In the *Sūtra of Exposition by Vimalakīrti* cited earlier, there is another famous phrase, "Preaching with one voice." This has been interpreted in various ways but basically this is how I understand it.

As everyone knows, because India is a conglomerate of different ethnic groups there is an enormous number of different languages spoken. Even today, there are fourteen officially recognized language groups. Despite efforts made by the government to gain the regional acceptance of Hindi as the national language, people from different parts of the country frequently remain unable to communicate with each other. As a result English is used as the common language in the national assembly.

At the time of the Buddha, this linguistic confusion was certainly no different. Yet when people of different language backgrounds listened together to the Buddha's lectures, each of them thought, "The Buddha is speaking in my language." In other words, although he was speaking in only one language or "one voice," everyone heard him in the same language as their own. This is the meaning of "one voice" in the phrase, "Preaching with one voice." It is also recorded that people generally felt, "Ah, the Buddha is speaking directly to me." No matter how many people may have been in the crowd of listeners, individually each person felt he was having a private conversation with the Buddha.

We should probably not assume that these stories are all true. It is not certain if the language used by the Buddha was the dialect spoken in the homeland of his Śākya clan or another dialect such as that spoken in the Magadha region. But in either case, someone from another part of India should not have been able to understand his ser-

mons. On the other hand, with an effective, appealing speaker one may think he understands even when in fact he does not, and many have experienced the feeling that someone "is speaking to me" when the message of the speaker has deep personal significance. Whatever the truth may have been, what these stories do tell us is that the Buddha was quite skillful in his sermons and drew many to hear him.

Although we cannot be certain which language the Buddha used in his preaching, we do know that it was not an exalted literary language like Sanskrit but rather an easily understood language of everyday life. There must have been a great variety in the content of his talks as well. One cannot consider the same talk to be truly effective if it is directed toward people both with and without education. Strictly speaking, everyone faces a different set of problems and the preaching of the Dharma correspondingly must also be of an infinite variety. For those who value logical discourse the Buddha adjusted his words accordingly; for the ignorant he spoke in such a way that even they could comprehend. But all these sermons were aimed at directing the listener toward some form of enlightenment. The Buddha was not attempting to bestow knowledge upon the ignorant; he was illustrating how they can be enlightened just as they are. There is the famous story of Cūḷapanthaka, for example, who was a fool unable to remember anything. He was given a broom by the Buddha and assigned the job of sweeping and cleaning, by means of which he became an Arhat. In this case, the Buddha did not preach a single word but merely gave the man a broom. Not preaching is thus another form of the Buddha's preaching.

Cūḷapanthaka's story shows how the Buddha also managed to communicate with silence when speaking would only increase the listener's bewilderment. On the other hand, in addition to a piercing logical analysis, the Buddha's use of language included the skillful encasing of his message in metaphor. Buddhist writings are enlivened with these metaphors, such as, for example, the evanescence of things being compared to a bubble of water or the morning dew. The metaphor of the burning house in the *Lotus Sūtra* is quite well known in East Asia. In this example a fire is spreading through a house but the people inside continue to enjoy themselves unaware of the danger around them—symbolizing how easily we can ignore the reality of a situation no matter how significant. Simplifying a complex discussion through the use

of metaphor or allegory is a particularly common feature of Indian literature and Buddhism is no less rich in this regard.

The Buddha's preaching thus has taken many forms. The Buddhist tradition came to characterize this by describing it as "prescribing the medicine to suit the illness" (應病與藥), or "preaching the Dharma in accordance with the ability of the audience" (對機說法).

"Prescribing the medicine to suit the illness" means simply selecting the medicine that is most appropriate to the patient's particular problem. Thus if someone has a cold, you prescribe cold medicine rather than something for the relief of stomach pain. "Preaching the Dharma in accordance with the ability of the audience" conveys the same meaning: one must consider the character and capacity of the listener when speaking. Śāriputra was a person with exceptional natural intelligence; Cūḷapanthaka on the other hand was born with little ability in intellectual matters. Both were disciples of the Buddha and both reached the goal of becoming an Arhat. There is no question that the preaching of the Buddha was modified in order to accommodate each of them. No matter how superbly one may deliver a college lecture, directing it at a child in kindergarten is a waste of time.

Here the word translated as "the ability of the audience" (*ki, ch'i*, 機) can also mean "chance," "opportunity," etc. Thus, "preaching the Dharma in accordance with the ability of the audience" can also be understood as taking the opportunity to elucidate the Dharma upon encountering certain individuals. This is one form of preaching wherein by seizing the chance to communicate, the speaker is adapting to the circumstances. If we think about it, this kind of opportunity exists around us in abundance and the Buddha simply took the initiative whenever he felt it was appropriate. Below is one story from the canon which serves as an excellent example of this notion of skillful preaching shaped to the ability of the audience, or medicine suited to the one's specific illness.

*Experience as Preaching.* There was once a woman named Kisā Gotamī, who married a rich man but for a considerable time was unable to conceive. Being unable to produce an heir and being from a poor family herself, Kisā (which means thin, emaciated) began to be treated coldly by her husband's family and her life became full of tension for her. Finally she did become pregnant and gave birth to a son,

## THE BUDDHA'S LIFE AS PARABLE

earning her the respect of her in-laws. Then tragedy struck—her child suddenly became ill and died. With her only key to happiness taken away, poor Kisā lost her senses. Clutching her dead baby, she ran through the village, hysterically crying: “Bring my child back to life!”

Someone who witnessed this spectacle took pity upon her and called her aside, saying: “Recently Gautama Buddha from the Śākya tribe has been staying with his disciples in a forest near our village. He is well-respected and someone who could probably do what you are seeking. Why don't you go and see him?” Elated, the young mother took her baby and went looking for the Buddha. When she found him, she asked, “Please, could you somehow return this baby to life?” The Buddha responded in this way: “I am terribly sorry about what has happened. All right, I will restore his life. Now go back to the village and bring me three or four poppy seeds.” Poppy seeds are, of course, from the same plant in which an extract is drawn to make opium, so Kisā assumed the Buddha was probably going to mix up some magic potion to bring her son back to life. Just as she was about to run off to get the seeds the Buddha added, “By the way, you must get them from a family that has never held a funeral. Go on now, I'll be waiting here for you.”

Not fully understanding the meaning of the Buddha's words, Kisā returned to the village and went on a house to house search, asking at each one for the seeds. Poppies are a common sight in the farms of India, so they all told her, “If it's poppy seeds you want, we have plenty.” When she then asked them, “Has your household ever held a funeral for anyone?” they all answered, “Of course. After all, both our mothers and fathers have died.” She then had to tell them, “In that case, I can't use the seeds.” She would then move on to the next one and repeat her query, but in every house she visited the reaction was the same: all had poppy seeds but none had never held a funeral.

As Kisā Gotamī walked from house to house, the meaning of the Buddha's words gradually sunk in. Her hysteria subsided and by the time she returned to the forest where the Buddha was staying, her countenance had become calm and composed. Of course her child had not returned to life but by now she had taken a long, hard look at the meaning of his death and the implications of death itself. Later she would join the ranks of the Buddha's disciples, eventually as a nun reaching the stage of Arhat.

The story illustrates another example of the Buddha's preaching, although in this case he did not say a word to his audience about the Dharma. There was no lecture about the philosophical implications inherent in the fact that everyone must die. All the Buddha did was to have Kisā Gotamī walk around her village. Though he did send her on an impossible errand, yet by this means she was able to realize one important aspect of the Dharma.

By what name should we call this type of preaching? It is not preaching with the spoken word. Rather this story illustrates how the Buddha could confront another person's entire existence with his actions at a time when that person was similarly putting her entire self into what she sought, although her motivation may have been quite different. We might call this "preaching by means of action" or "preaching with one's behavior." As a means of bringing his students to enlightenment, Te-shan (德山) of the Ch'an school was known for striking people with a stick thirty times. One also thinks of Lin-chi's (臨濟) scream of "ho! (喝)."

These are merely a few examples of the variety of different ways the Buddha preached the Dharma. In Kisā Gotamī's half-crazed state of mind, no matter what the Buddha might have said there was little chance he could have reached her that way. If someone had shouted "Ho!" it probably would not have helped much either. By the same token, responding to her with silence would not have saved her. Previously, when the Buddha obtained ultimate enlightenment under the bodhi-tree, he withdrew himself from the task of preaching. Once he had begun this work of disseminating his message, however, the Buddha could be quite "skillful in means" in finding the appropriate manner of communicating for a specific set of circumstances. The story of Kisā Gotamī is but one example of how, in order to get his message across, he could judge a particular person's situation and create an appropriate means of instruction.

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