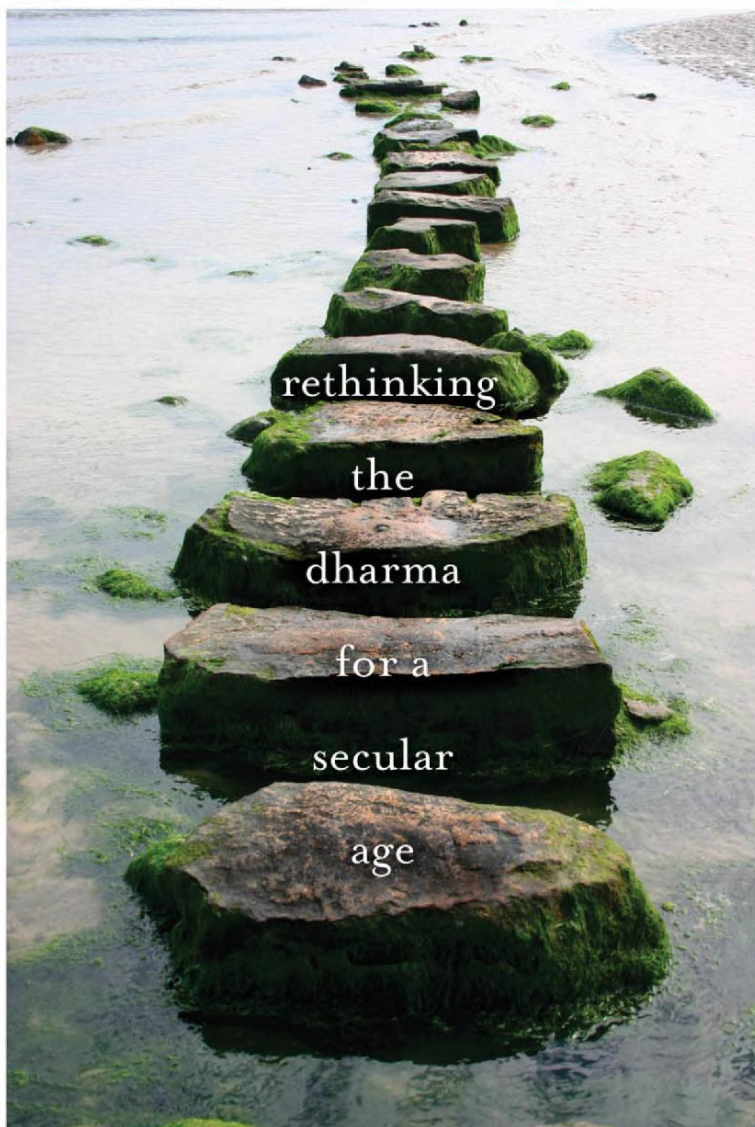


# after buddhism



rethinking

the

dharma

for a

secular

age

STEPHEN BATCHELOR

AFTER  
BUDDHISM



RETHINKING  
THE DHARMA FOR  
A SECULAR AGE

*Stephen Batchelor*

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## P R E F A C E

This book is an attempt to synthesize an understanding of Buddhism that I have been working toward since my first publication, *Alone with Others*, appeared in 1983. In the intervening thirty years I have published a number of other writings that have branched off in different directions but maintained, at least in the eyes of the author, a steady focus on a single question: What does it mean to practice the dharma of the Buddha in the context of modernity? My most recent publication, the essay “A Secular Buddhism” (2012), can be seen as a preparatory sketch of what I seek to flesh out in this book.

I am indebted to Geshe Tamdrin Rabten for training me in Tibetan Buddhist logic, epistemology, and philosophy, which provided the intellectual foundations for everything I have done since; Satya Narayan Goenka for introducing me to the practice of *vipassanā* and the early Buddhism of the Pali Canon; and Kusan Sunim for instructing me in the practice of Korean Sōn (Zen), which, together with mindful awareness, continues as the basis for my practice of meditation. While all of these Buddhist traditions have played an important role in my understanding and practice of the dharma, my interpretations of certain Buddhist doctrines may strike some readers as highly unorthodox.

My primary authority for understanding what the Buddha taught is the discourses of the Pali Canon. My inability to read Chinese is

the only reason I have not consulted the comparable body of texts preserved in the Āgama literature. The early records of the Sōn Buddhist tradition, composed during the Tang dynasty of China, likewise serve as an important source for my work. For the later Indian tradition, I have been inspired by the writings of Nāgārjuna and Śāntideva.

I have been influenced in my interpretations of Buddhism by the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Richard Rorty, as well as the Christian theologians Paul Tillich and Don Cupitt. In the field of Buddhist studies, I owe a debt of gratitude to the work of Richard Gombrich, K. R. Norman, Johannes Bronkhorst, and Gregory Schopen. I have been greatly helped in my understanding of the Pali Canon by the translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi, Eugene Watson Burlingame, I. B. Horner, John D. Ireland, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, Caroline Rhys Davids, and Maurice Walshe, as well as by Ñāṇavira Thera's interpretations of some of its key ideas.

Throughout this book I accept Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich's dating of the Buddha as c. 480–c. 400 BCE. In moving his dates eighty years nearer to our own time than those accepted by Buddhist tradition, Gotama becomes a contemporary of Socrates rather than Pythagoras, which brings him into closer proximity to the West's own historical self-awareness. I have based the core narrative of the life of Gotama on the account in the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school as preserved in Tibetan and translated by W. Woodville Rockhill in 1884. My previous book *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2010) reconstructed the story of the Buddha's life entirely on the basis of Pali sources. The version presented by Rockhill differs in a number of details, but the story is essentially the same. Since these two textual traditions were preserved at opposite ends of the Indian subcontinent, and since their preservers had no contact with each other for centuries, both texts were presumably based on an earlier version that was probably extant until the time of Emperor Aśoka (304–232 BCE), who was born only a century or so after the death of the Buddha.

As a rule, I give most proper names and Buddhist technical terms

in their Pali spelling, unless their provenance is clearly Chinese, Korean, or Tibetan. Since certain well-known terms such as “dharma,” “karma” and “nirvana” are now part of the English language, I have left them in their Sanskrit spelling. I have translated *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* as “mendicant” (rather than “monk” and “nun”) unless the context requires gender specificity, in which case I leave them in Pali. *Upāsaka* and *upāsika* are translated as “adherent” (rather than “layman” and “laywoman”), and *bhagavant* as “Teacher” (rather than “Blessed One”). I follow H. W. Schumann in spelling the name of the Buddha’s clan as “Sakiya” (rather than “Sakya” or “Shakya”). I have left the difficult term *tathāgata* (in most cases more or less synonymous with “buddha”) untranslated; I offer an interpretation of it in chapter 5, section 9. The discourse that tradition has titled *Turning the Wheel of Dharma* (*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*) I have rendered throughout as *The Four Tasks*. I provide a translation of this and other Pali texts to which I frequently refer in the appendix: “Selected Discourses from the Pali Canon.”

I would like to thank the following readers whose comments on the manuscript have contributed to the final form of the work: Darius Cuplinskas, Ann Gleig, Winton Higgins, Bernd Kaponig, Antonia Macaro, Ken McLeod, Stephen Schettini, John Teasdale, Gay Watson, Anne Wiltshire, and Dale Wright. Discussions over the years with my colleagues John Peacock and Marc Akincano Weber have been of great help in clarifying my understanding of early Buddhism. I am most grateful for the support of my agent, Anne Edelstein, as well as my editor, Jennifer Banks, copyeditor Mary Pasti, and the staff at Yale University Press. As always, I am indebted to the unconditional encouragement and tolerance of my wife, Martine. It goes without saying that any errors are my own.

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AFTER  
BUDDHISM

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I

AFTER BUDDHISM



So, Bāhiya, should you train yourself: “in the seen, there will be only the seen; in the heard, only the heard; in the sensed, only the sensed; in that of which I am conscious, only that of which I am conscious.”

This is how you should train.

—UDĀNA

( I )

A well-known story recounts that Gotama—the Buddha—was once staying in Jeta’s Grove, his main center near the city of Sāvatti, capital of the kingdom of Kosala. Many priests, wanderers, and ascetics were living nearby. They are described as people “of various beliefs and opinions, who supported themselves by promoting their different views.” The text enumerates the kinds of opinions they taught:

The world is eternal.

The world is not eternal.

The world is finite.

The world is not finite.

Body and soul are identical.

Body and soul are different.

The *tathāgata* exists after death.

The *tathāgata* does not exist after death.

The *tathāgata* both exists and does not exist after death.

The *tathāgata* neither exists nor does not exist after death.

They took these opinions seriously. “Only this is true,” they would insist. “Every other view is false!” As a result, they fell into endless arguments, “wounding each other with verbal darts, saying ‘The dharma is like *this!*’ ‘The dharma is not like *that!*’”<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha commented that such people were blind. “They do not know what is of benefit and what is of harm,” he explained. “They do not understand what is and what is not the dharma.”<sup>2</sup> He had no interest at all in their propositions. Unconcerned whether such views were true or false, he sought neither to affirm nor to reject them. “A proponent of the dharma,” he once observed, “does not dispute with anyone in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Whenever a metaphysical claim of this kind was made, Gotama did not react by getting drawn in and taking sides. He remained keenly alert to the complexity of the whole picture without opting for one position over another.

Gotama relates a parable as a commentary on the quarreling priests and ascetics. He tells of a king in Sāvatti who instructed his servants to gather together all the people of the city who had been blind from birth. He ordered an elephant to be brought before them, then led each blind person to the creature and had him or her touch a different part of the elephant’s body. Some rubbed the ears, some felt the trunk, some put their arms around a leg, some stroked the side, and some pulled the tail. He asked: “Now tell me: what is an elephant?” Some said an elephant was “just like a storeroom,” some said it was “just like a pillar,” and others said it was “just like a broom.” They argued—“An elephant is like this! An elephant is not like that!”—until a fight broke out, and they began beating each other with their fists.<sup>4</sup>

The moral of this story is that the dharma cannot be reduced to a set of truth-claims, which will inevitably conflict with other truth-

claims. Only by letting go of such views will one be able to understand how dharma practice is not about being “right” or “wrong.”

It is notable that the last six of the ten listed views have to do with the possibility (or not) of life after death, which suggests that the topic was much debated. Although the Buddha may have presented his ideas in the context of multiple lifetimes, this oft-repeated passage implies that he did so for cultural and pragmatic reasons alone. “Of that which the wise (*pañḍitā*) in the world agree upon as not existing,” he said, “I too say that it does not exist. And of that which the wise in the world agree upon as existing, I too say that it exists.”<sup>5</sup> On such matters, Gotama is content to accept learned consensus. To have affirmed the view that the mind is different from the body and will be reborn after death in another body would have made him no different from those wanderers and ascetics he declared to be blind.

In contrast to those who base their behavior on metaphysical truth-claims, the practitioner of the dharma as Gotama envisioned it takes into account the totality of each situation and responds in accordance with the principles, perspective, and values of the dharma. Since each situation in life is unique, it is impossible to predict in advance exactly how such a person will respond. Instead of asking “What is the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ thing to do?” the practitioner asks, “What is the wisest and most compassionate thing to do?” Many centuries after the Buddha, the Chinese Chan (Zen) patriarch Yunmen (c. 860–949) was asked: “What are the teachings of an entire lifetime?” Yunmen replied: “An appropriate statement.”<sup>6</sup> For Yunmen, what counts is whether your words and deeds are an appropriate response to the situation at hand, not whether they accord with an abstract truth.

The dharma is the whole elephant. It is comparable to a complex living organism, each part of which plays a role in animating the mysterious creature that breathes, eats, walks, and sleeps. Dharma practice exposes the limits of human thought and language when we are confronted with the puzzle of being here at all. All people, whether

devoutly religious or avowedly secular, share this sense of unknowing, wonder, and perplexity. That is where we all begin.

## ( 2 )

As an impressionable nineteen-year-old, I was inducted into an intact medieval Buddhist world that had had little contact with modernity. My Tibetan teachers had been exiled from their homeland for thirteen years and were confident that it would not be long before they returned. I soon found myself involved in far more than a study of the doctrines and practices of Buddhism. I became immersed in a refined culture of awakening, embodied by men and women who had been raised and educated in a world utterly different from the one I knew. My formative years, which would otherwise have been spent in a university in Britain, involved gaining intimate knowledge of and familiarity with the ways these people thought, spoke, and acted. I did not judge them with the detachment of an outside observer. I came to see myself as part of their world. I went native.

Total immersion in a living Buddhist culture allowed me to acquire an intuitive familiarity with a complex worldview worked out and articulated over many centuries. This familiarity provided me with the framework, concepts, and terminology needed to rethink the dharma. I believe that the arguments presented in this book remain entirely true to the logic of the dharma. I seek to torque that logic to bring the dharma into closer alignment with the needs and concerns of people living in modernity. In attempting to come up with a coherent and consistent account of Buddhist thought and practice, my aim is to produce what in Christianity would be called a *systematic theology*. I realize that many Buddhists may find some of what I say heretical. I can sympathize with them—for there is a part of me that also experiences a tremor of unease when I read what I have written.

Throughout my forty years of involvement in the dharma, I have spent a great deal of time pondering and agonizing over Buddhist

concepts in order to formulate an understanding of the dharma that is consistent with both core Buddhist teaching and the worldview of modernity. During these years the dharma has slowly broken out of the ghetto of “Oriental religion” and penetrated into the mainstream of contemporary culture. Buddhist imagery, concepts, and terms now crop up in the most unlikely settings: in tattoos and Hollywood movies, in literary novels and slick advertising campaigns. The practice of mindfulness, now widely adopted in health care, business, education, and other fields, has grown from a minority interest among dharma students into a global movement that draws people from all walks of life, most of whom have little interest in the traditional teachings or institutions of Buddhism. What I seek to provide in this book is a philosophical, ethical, historical, and cultural framework for mindfulness and other such practices, which are rooted in the earliest canonical sources but articulated here afresh.

I cannot pretend that my rethinking of the dharma has not been deeply influenced by the culture in which I was raised. As a modern Westerner, I cannot but consider Buddhism as a historically contingent phenomenon that has continually adapted itself to different circumstances. As the product of a Christian culture, I am drawn to recover a thoroughly human Buddha, whose life and deeds tell us as much about the dharma as the written record of what he said does. As someone who identifies with the Protestant movements within Christianity, I am skeptical of the authority and charisma of priests and seek a direct relationship with the dharma through my own study of the original texts. As a European, I am conscious of my indebtedness to the thinkers of ancient Greece who understood philosophy as a practice for the healing and care of the soul.

### ( 3 )

From the age of nineteen to the age of twenty-seven, I trained with lamas of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism, who taught me that ul-

timate truth was an emptiness of something that had never been there in the first place. I have sought to remain true to this idea ever since. I was told that the aim of Buddhist philosophy was to gain knowledge of such emptiness by rational analysis and inference, whereas the goal of Buddhist meditation was to focus on this insight until one achieved an immediate, nonconceptual understanding. This procedure of analysis and meditation was presented as the only way to gain enlightenment about the true nature of reality and thereby liberation from the ignorance that is the root cause of all suffering.

The realization of emptiness begins with an inquiry into what it means to be a self. When you try to get to the essence of a person, whether yourself or someone else, the quest goes on and on. It is not that no one is there—the uncanny sense of someone uniquely alive persists. But you will never arrive at an irreducible core of which you can say: “There! Found you!” In this sense, the self or person is said to be “empty.”

To understand the emptiness of a person is to realize that this seemingly irreducible core has never been there in the first place. Tibetan lamas use the technical phrase *rang bzhin gyis grub pa*, usually translated as “inherently existent” or “intrinsically real,” to describe what is to be negated. The phrase literally means “existing by virtue of its own face.” It implies that no matter where or how probingly you look, you will not find anything in this world that exists self-sufficiently by its own intrinsic nature, in its own right, independent of all else. Why? Because every single thing in this strange world of ours, from an elephant to the tiniest subatomic particle, is contingent on proximate and distant causes, on parts to which it cannot be reduced, and on words and concepts that render it intelligible in a particular human culture.

According to Geluk teaching, the emptiness of inherent existence is a simple negation (*med 'gag*) as opposed to an affirming negation (*ma yin 'gag*). This means that the absence opened up by emptiness does not disclose and thereby affirm a transcendent reality (like God or Pure Consciousness) that was previously obscured by one’s egoistic

confusion. It simply removes a fiction that was never there. Although human beings seem to be instinctively programmed (no doubt for evolutionary reasons) to see themselves and people they desire or hate as self-sufficiently real, such inherent existence turns out to be a chimera.

I have just summarized the standard understanding of emptiness as it would be taught today by a figure such as the Dalai Lama of Tibet. Rather than using the word “emptiness,” other Buddhist teachers might speak of “not-self” (*anattā*), which comes to much the same thing. Appearances, they will claim, are deceptive; unless we dispel the fiction of “self” or “inherent existence” we will never behold the true nature of things.

Yet when we consult the earliest Buddhist discourses, which are found in the Pali Canon and the Chinese Āgamas, we discover that Gotama does not speak about emptiness in this way at all. Reading these earliest texts, I feel as though I am encountering another dialect of the same language: it uses many of the same words but in a curiously different way. The *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness*, for example, begins with the Buddha’s attendant Ānanda posing a question:

“You were once living in Sakiya, sir, among your kinsfolk in the town of Nāgaraka. It was there that I heard you say from your own lips: ‘Now I mainly dwell by dwelling in emptiness.’ Did I hear that correctly?”

“Yes,” replies Gotama. “Then, as now, do I mainly dwell by dwelling in emptiness.”<sup>7</sup>

The word that jumps off the page here is “dwell,” which translates the Pali *viharati*. The noun form is *vihāra*, “dwelling” or “abode,” which has come to mean “monastery”—that is, a dwelling for monks. Yet to “dwell” or “abide” describes a primordial relation to this earth on which we live. Emptiness is first and foremost a condition in which we dwell, abide, and live. Another Pali discourse describes this emptiness as the “abode of a great person.”<sup>8</sup> Emptiness thus seems to be a perspective, a sensibility, a way of being in this poignant, contingent world. The

“great person” would be one who has cultivated such a sensibility until it has become entirely natural. Rather than being the negation of “self,” emptiness discloses the dignity of a person who has realized what it means to be fully human.

Such emptiness is far from being an ultimate truth that needs to be understood through logical inference and then directly realized in a state of nonconceptual meditation. It is a sensibility in which one dwells, not a privileged epistemological object that, through knowing, one gains a cognitive enlightenment.

The *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness* tells the story of a man who was searching for a way to live authentically on earth. Gotama starts his discourse with what is closest to hand: the villa in which he is staying with his mendicants. “In being empty of elephants, cattle, and horses, gold and silver, crowds of women and men,” he remarks, “there is just one thing of which this villa is not empty: this group of mendicants.” Yet a mendicant who finds this community too noisy and distracting will seek out the solitude of the forest, which is “empty of any awareness of villages or people.” Thus the mendicant regards the forest as “empty of what is not there. And of what remains, he knows: ‘This is what’s here.’”<sup>9</sup> Although the mendicant is no longer upset by the hustle and bustle of the world, he finds himself prone to the anxiety engendered by living in the forest.

To overcome this anxiety, the mendicant enters into progressively refined states of meditative absorption: on the earth’s expanse, unlimited space, unlimited consciousness, nothingness, and being-neither-aware-nor-unaware. But at each stage he finds that there is still something within him that gives rise to unease. So he abandons the deep, trance-like states for a “signless concentration of the heart.” Even so, he realizes that he is still “prone to the anxiety that comes from having the six sense fields of a living body.” Whatever the virtues of his signless concentration, it is nonetheless “compounded and contrived” and therefore “impermanent and subject to ceasing.”<sup>10</sup> Only at this point, having

exhausted the possibilities of meditating in sylvan solitude, does he realize that all these exercises are ultimately futile because they will come to an end.

He appears to have come full circle. Yet this very insight into impermanence grants him the peace of mind he has been seeking all along. “In knowing and seeing thus,” continues Gotama, “his heart is freed from the effluences (*āsava*) of desire, being, and ignorance.” But this is not the end of the story. “With none of the anxieties due to those effluences,” reflects the mendicant, “I am still prone to the anxiety that comes from having the six sense fields of a living body. This state of awareness is empty of those effluences. What is not empty is this: the six sense fields of a living body.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness* concludes with this insight: to dwell in emptiness means to inhabit fully the embodied space of one’s sensory experience, but in a way that is no longer determined by one’s habitual reactivity. To dwell in such emptiness does not mean that one will no longer suffer. As long as one has a body and senses, one will be “prone to the anxiety” that comes with being a conscious, feeling creature made of flesh, bones, and blood. And this would have been just as true for Gotama as it is for us today.

Here, emptiness is not a truth—let alone an ultimate truth—that is to be understood correctly as a means to dispel ignorance and thereby attain enlightenment. For Gotama, the point is not to understand emptiness but to *dwell* in it. To dwell in emptiness brings us firmly down to earth and back to our bodies. It is a way of enabling us to open our eyes and see ordinary things as though for the first time. As the Buddha instructed his student Bāhiya, to live in such a way means that “in the seen, there will be only the seen; in the heard, only the heard; in the sensed, only the sensed; in that of which I am conscious, only that of which I am conscious.”<sup>12</sup>

How, in the course of Buddhist history, did the concept of emptiness evolve from a way of dwelling on earth unconditioned by reactivity

into an ultimate truth to be directly cognized in a nonconceptual state of meditation? This is one of the key questions that I will seek to answer in the rest of this book.

## ( 4 )

From the age of twenty-seven to the age of thirty-one, I continued my Buddhist monastic training in a Sōn (Zen) monastery in South Korea, where the sole meditation practice was to sit facing a wall for ten to twelve hours a day asking oneself: “What is this?”<sup>13</sup> I have been guided by this impossible question ever since. It has led me away from a religious quest for ultimate truth and brought me back to a perplexed encounter with this contingent, poignant, and ambiguous world here and now.

The Sōn tradition originated in seventh-century Tang China as a reaction against the overly metaphysical concerns of the established Buddhist schools. It sought to recover the simplicity of early Buddhism by following Gotama’s example of sitting still beneath a tree in an uncompromising engagement with the primordial questions of what it means to be born, get sick, grow old, and die. The Sōn masters realized that the very way in which you posed these questions would determine the kind of “enlightenment” you might gain. A famous aphorism encapsulates this realization:

Great doubt—great awakening;  
Little doubt—little awakening;  
No doubt—no awakening.

The quality of your “doubt”—of the questions you ask—is directly correlated to the quality of your insight. To ask such questions viscerally will engender a correspondingly visceral awakening. To pose them intellectually, with “little doubt,” will lead only to intellectual understanding. For those who are not stirred by existential questions at all, awakening is not even conceivable. Sōn practitioners rejected the metaphysical learning of scholar-monks not because they disagreed with

their conclusions but because they disagreed with the way the scholars posed the questions in the first place. To practice Sōn means to ask these questions with the whole body, with “its 360 bones and joints and the 84,000 pores of one’s skin,” so that it becomes a “solid lump of doubt.” Moreover, the doubt needs to reach a critical mass, “like a red hot iron ball, which you have gulped down and which you try to vomit but cannot.”<sup>14</sup>

To sustain this kind of urgent perplexity entails learning how to remain in a balanced, focused, and inquiring frame of mind without succumbing to the seductive lure of “it is this” and “it is not that.” To pose a question with sincerity, you need to suspend all expectations as to what the answer might be. You need to rest in a condition of unknowing, vitally alert to the sheer mystery of being alive rather than dead. In this way, you cultivate a middle way between “it is” and “it is not,” affirmation and negation, being and nothingness.

To tread this middle way in practice is like walking a tightrope: the path is constantly wobbling and shifting. We inhabit a linguistic realm where we cannot avoid using terms like “is” and “is not,” and a moral realm where we are bound to express preferences and make choices. The polarities embedded in human consciousness are useful, if not indispensable, in providing a framework to guide our course through life. They are like the pole carried by the tightrope walker that provides the crucial stability to take the next step. The point, therefore, is not to reject dualities in favor of a hypothetical “non-duality” but to learn to live with them more lightly, fluidly, and ironically. The danger of duality, against which the Buddha warned his followers, does not lie in oppositional thinking itself. Rather, it lies in how we use such thinking to reinforce and justify our egoism, cravings, fears, and hatreds.<sup>15</sup>

( 5 )

According to one early Buddhist source, the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school, shortly after the awakening Gotama fell seriously ill

from eating some overly rich food donated to him by two passing merchants, Tapussa and his younger brother Bhallika. Māra—the demonic personification of death—entreated him to die and thus enter the final nirvana in which he would be finally released from all suffering. But Gotama refused. He declared:

I will not leave this world until I have men and women mendicants and men and women adherents who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, knowers of the dharma, trained in the dharma, walking in the path of the dharma, who will pass on what they have gained from their teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear; until they shall be able by means of the dharma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the sublime dharma.<sup>16</sup>

Gotama clearly envisaged a community in which all members—irrespective of their status as men or women, monastics (mendicants) or laity (adherents)—are entirely equal in the training they receive in the dharma, the practices they undertake to master and understand it, and the responsibility they have in communicating its message.

Such an egalitarian community is a far cry from what is normative in many Buddhist traditions in Asia today. Spiritual, moral, and doctrinal authority is generally the preserve of senior monks. Nuns—if they are afforded any recognition or status—play a largely subordinate role. Laypeople, no matter how devout, are often reduced to being providers for the sangha (the word means “community” but has come to refer to monastics alone) and encouraged to accumulate meritorious acts that will enable them to receive ordination in a future life. Not only does this state of affairs contradict and distort what appears to be the Buddha’s original intent, but it flies in the face of the values of equality and human dignity that characterize the modern age.

Those who campaign for the restoration of full ordination for women in Buddhism often cite this passage to show that the Buddha intended to establish an order of *bhikkhunis* (nuns) from the very out-

set of his teaching career.<sup>17</sup> The orthodox view—which seems to have been inserted into the canon by patriarchal hard-liners at a fairly early date—is that the Buddha was initially reluctant to accept women mendicants, gave in to their demands only under pressure from Ānanda, imposed upon them eight “heavy” (*garu*) rules, compared their presence in the community to a “blight” and “disease,” and predicted that they would shorten the life of the dharma in the world.<sup>18</sup> What advocates of women’s ordination fail to point out, however, is that the same passage endorses an equal role for men and women adherents in the practice and exposition of the dharma.

In keeping with Gotama’s initial statement of resolve, I would argue for a complete restoration of equality between mendicants and adherents of both sexes as practitioners and teachers of the dharma. To persist with the inequalities upheld by orthodoxy is unjust and anachronistic. Many of the most effective proponents of the dharma in our time have not been monastics but laypeople, men and women alike, among them such leading figures of Buddhism in twentieth-century Asia as Anagarika Dhammapala (1864–1933), who advocated a “Protestant”-style Buddhist reform in Ceylon; Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who led mass conversions of former *dalits* (Untouchables) to Buddhism in India; Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944) and Jōsei Toda (1900–1958), who established the Sōka Gakkai sect of Buddhism in Japan; Dr. D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), whose writings introduced Zen and Mahayana Buddhism to the West; and Saya Gyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971), who popularized the practice of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma. As Buddhism has spread through the Western world, many of the most influential teachers and writers have likewise not been ordained monastics but men and women whose authority has lain in their personal integrity and example rather than their ecclesiastical rank.

In today’s world, the notion that the ideal to which Buddhists aspire should be that of a celibate monk who embodies the values of fifth century BCE Indian asceticism and adheres to a set of rules determined by the circumstances of that distant place and time is questionable. I

have no objection to Buddhist monasticism: for many it might well offer the most appropriate and fulfilling way of practicing the dharma. But if we are to recover the kind of egalitarian community that the Buddha envisioned, practitioners will need to fundamentally reassess the power relations between mendicants and adherents and between men and women.

From a modern perspective, many of the traditional forms of Buddhism inherited from Asia appear to be stagnating. Their initial creativity and imagination have long dissipated, and their practitioners seem primarily intent on preserving time-honored doctrines and practices by endlessly repeating past teachings and instructions. When even a liberal and modernized church such as that of Anglicanism struggles to come to terms with women bishops and homosexual relationships, there seems little prospect that conservative Buddhist institutions will change their patriarchal stances in the foreseeable future. While admiring the work of those who seek to reform Buddhist traditions from within established schools, I suspect that any real change in Buddhist sensibility and identity will take place in the secular rather than the religious sphere.

For this reason, I will focus on the lives of some key followers of the Buddha who did not “leave home for homelessness” to become mendicants but remained fully active in the world. By piecing together the stories of such figures as Mahānāma (Gotama’s cousin who became chief of the Buddha’s Sakiya clan), Pasenadi (king of Kosala), and Jīvaka (court doctor in Magadha), I will try to restore the sense of a community that was not dominated by detached and saintly monks but embraced those from all walks of life. In a similar vein, I see no need to speculate on the serene perfection of the arahant—the archetypal Buddhist saint. I will concentrate instead on the experience of conversion to the dharma and the ongoing challenge entailed in cultivating a way of life that accords with its values. As we shall see, the Buddha described Mahānāma, Jīvaka, and several other adherents as “seers of

the deathless”: people who lived their daily lives in the world from the perspective of nirvana.

( 6 )

The word “religious” is notoriously difficult to define. The term has a long and confusing history, and its meaning has shifted and changed over time.<sup>19</sup> Here I will use it in two related but distinct senses. In the first sense, I understand “religious” to denote our wish to come to terms with or reconcile ourselves to our own birth and death. For many people, religious thoughts and acts are those that engage their deepest, core relationship to the totality of their life and what it means for them. This is what the theologian Paul Tillich called one’s “ultimate concern.” For Tillich, ultimate concern is the definition of faith, and that about which one is ultimately concerned the definition of God.<sup>20</sup>

In the second sense, I take “religious” to denote whatever formal means are employed—adherence to sacred texts, submission to the authority of monastics and priests, performance of rites and rituals, participation in spiritual retreats—to articulate, frame, and enact ultimate concerns. Secular critics commonly dismiss religious institutions and beliefs as outdated, dogmatic, repressive, and so on, forgetting about the deep human concerns that they were originally created to address. One can be religious in the sense of being motivated by ultimate concerns, without ever engaging in any overtly religious behavior, just as one can be religious in the conventional sense merely out of habit or custom, without being driven by an ultimate concern. Those who describe themselves as “devout atheists” are not entirely joking.

“Secular” is a term that presents as many problems as “religious.” The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his final letters from a Nazi prison before he died, foresaw the emergence of a “religionless Christianity,” which understands the message of the Gospels to be one of totally embracing the condition of the suffering world and letting go

of the superficial consolations of being a devout member of a Christian institution. “We are moving,” he wrote, “toward a completely religionless time.”<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, too, there seems to be no reason why avowedly “secular” people cannot be deeply “religious” in their ultimate concern to come to terms with their brief and poignant life here and now.

I also use the term “secular” in full consciousness of its etymological roots in the Latin *saeculum*, which means “this age,” “this *siècle* (century),” “this generation.” If we are secular, then, our primary concerns are those we have about *this* world—about everything that has to do with the quality of the personal, social, and environmental experience of being alive on this planet. A secular approach to Buddhism is thus concerned with how the dharma can enable humans and other living beings to flourish in this biosphere, not in a hypothetical afterlife. Rather than emphasizing personal enlightenment and liberation, it is grounded in a deeply felt concern and compassion for the suffering of all those with whom we share this earth.

Like many who came of age in Europe and North America after the traumas of two world wars, I was raised in a family that had abandoned any affiliation to formal Christianity. I was educated in a rationalist, humanist environment that encouraged me to question and doubt whatever I was told. I find it disturbing when Western converts to Buddhism with a background and upbringing similar to my own uncritically adopt beliefs—in karma and rebirth, for example—that traditional Buddhists simply take for granted. Such reactions as these mark me out as someone who has unashamedly internalized a secular outlook. Whatever form of Buddhism I advocate is bound to bear the imprint of a skeptical, this-worldly approach to the dharma. Such a perspective is in no way preferable or superior to a more traditional outlook—in many ways I envy those who do not have to struggle with orthodox Buddhist beliefs. My approach simply reflects an embedded cultural worldview that I could no more discard than I could willfully cease to comprehend the English language.<sup>22</sup>

Our current use of the terms “religious” and “secular” are determined by the senses they have acquired in modernity. Since they have no equivalents in any of the classical Buddhist languages, we must use them with caution when talking of premodern Buddhism. The same is true of the very word “Buddhism,” a term coined by Western scholars in the nineteenth century, which also has no equivalent in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan. For this reason, I prefer to use the word “dharma,” which I will not translate. At the same time, I cannot pretend that I am not a modern Westerner. I find myself bound to a language that is in many ways inadequate and misleading but, whether I like it or not, happens to be the one we speak.

What sort of Buddhism does a self-declared secular Buddhist like myself advocate? I do not envision a Buddhism that seeks to discard all trace of religiosity, that seeks to arrive at a dharma that is little more than a set of self-help techniques that enable us to operate more calmly and effectively as agents or clients, or both, of capitalist consumerism.<sup>23</sup> We could make the case that the practice of mindfulness, taken out of its original context, reinforces the solipsistic isolation of the self by immunizing practitioners against the unsettling emotions, impulses, anxieties, and doubts that assail our fragile egos. Instead of imagining a dharma that erects even firmer barriers around the alienated self, let us imagine one that works toward a reenchantment of the world. Doing so will require the cultivation of a sensibility to what might be called the “everyday sublime,” a theme that will be explored in chapter 9.

I do not see secular Buddhism as the end result of the *secularization* of Buddhism, which renders Buddhist ideas and practices palatable and useful for those who have no interest in committing themselves to the core values of the dharma. The kind of secular Buddhism I envisage would consider those core values to be a necessary framework for humans to flourish and to realize ultimate concerns. I will consider the nature of these values and the ways to internalize and enact them in chapters 2 and 3.

Buddhism today commonly impresses people as a slightly aloof

monastic religion committed to training its followers in meditation, morality, and philosophy. Historically, this version of Buddhism is very recent.<sup>24</sup> While it may accord with some of the idealistic representations that Buddhists have preserved of themselves in their textual memory, it ignores the complex relationships that actual Buddhist institutions had with the societies of which they were an integral part. In premodern Asia, the Buddhist *vihāra*, or temple, was a home for those who rejected or fell foul of the norms of society and aspired to cultivate higher values. Depending on the country, it could also be a farm, a granary, a courthouse, a fort, a school, an arts center, a hospital, a bank, an orphanage, a refuge for abandoned animals—as well as a place to perform religious rites (particularly for the deceased) and receive pastoral care. For some, it was also where they might find someone who could instruct them in meditation and philosophy.

One of the consequences of modernization throughout Asia has been to deprive Buddhism of many of its secular functions. While the pace and manner of change vary from country to country, the state has come to assume many of the roles (health care, education, the care of orphans) that was once the preserve of the temples. As a result, monks' and nuns' activities now often tend to focus on pastoral and spiritual matters. With the widespread adoption of mindfulness meditation in counseling and psychotherapy, even these functions are now being co-opted by secular bodies.

The shift toward a more secular approach to Buddhism is not new. As Buddhists sought to come to terms with modernity in the past century, a number of secularized variants of traditional forms arose. The worldwide Vipassana community, for example, has its origins in a reform movement among Burmese Buddhists toward the end of the nineteenth century. The aim of the reformers was to affirm an indigenous religious identity capable of standing up to the Christianity and rationalist humanism of the British colonial power. Contemporary Western forms of *vipassanā* meditation spawned the secular mindfulness movement, whose leading teachers are predominantly lay. The

Soka Gakkai, one of the largest global Buddhist movements today, started in Japan in the 1920s as an educational society affiliated with the Nichiren Shoshu school, founded by the thirteenth-century Buddhist reformer Nichiren Daishonin. Since 1992 it has distanced itself from the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and now operates as a primarily lay movement. In the late 1970s the Kagyu/Rimé lama Chögyam Trungpa explicitly envisioned a secular path of meditation, called Shambhala Training. Although Trungpa conceived of this path as separate from his Buddhist Vajradhatu organization, after his death the two were incorporated into what is now known as Shambhala Buddhism, one of the most active and successful Buddhist movements in the United States.

Despite the secular tone and lay teachers of these movements, all three have an ambivalent relation with the dogmas and hierarchies of the Buddhist institutions from which they originated. Although there may be a reduced public display of overt religiosity in their centers and a deliberate effort by teachers to present the dharma in terms of its psychological and social benefits, little effort has been made to critically reexamine the underlying worldview of Buddhism, in which are still embedded the cosmology and metaphysics of ancient India. To develop an understanding of Buddhism in any of these movements means confronting the traditional doctrines of karma, rebirth, heavens, hells, and supernatural powers.

The secular Buddhism I anticipate would be more radical than any of these secularized Buddhist movements. Its advocates would seek to return to the roots of the tradition and rethink and rearticulate the dharma anew. Just as the term “Tibetan Buddhism” describes the kind of dharma that evolved in Tibet, so, in its broadest sense, would “secular Buddhism” describe the kind of dharma that is evolving in this secular age.

Although many modern Asians are Buddhists who find themselves becoming secularized, I am a secular European finding out what it means to become a Buddhist. We might meet each other on the road, but we are heading in opposite directions. Just as their Buddhism is being challenged by secularity, so my secularity is being challenged by

Buddhism. My concern, therefore, is as much about imagining a Buddhist secularity as about imagining a secular Buddhism. We have seen what can happen to Buddhism when it becomes secularized, but what would happen to a secular perspective inflected by the principles and values of the dharma?

What is taking place between Buddhism and secularity is, at its best, an open-ended dialogue between two partners rather than an attempt by one partner to forcibly impose a viewpoint on the other. In *After Virtue*, the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes that “a living tradition . . . is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument . . . about the goods which constitute that tradition.”<sup>25</sup> Central to such a concept of tradition, he maintains, “is that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past, in which the past, if necessary and if possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view.”<sup>26</sup>

(7)

It is all very well for us to aspire to return to the roots of the tradition and rethink and rearticulate the dharma anew, but in practice how is this to be done? I am conscious of the ambitious and potentially arrogant nature of such an endeavor. I am likewise aware of my limited linguistic skills and incomplete knowledge of the vast range of canonical materials on which I could draw. I also acknowledge that much of our historical understanding of early Buddhism is still patchy and speculative. Nonetheless, I believe there is an urgent need for contemporary Buddhist voices to articulate a coherent ethical, contemplative, and philosophical vision of the dharma for our secular age.

The sheer quantity of early Buddhist texts in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan is both a blessing and a curse. The very wealth of

material raises serious difficulties of interpretation. The early canonical texts are a complex tapestry of linguistic and rhetorical styles, shot through with conflicting ideas, doctrines, and images, all assembled and elaborated orally over about three or four centuries before being committed to writing. Given the chorus of voices, how are we to distinguish between what is likely to have been the Buddha's word as opposed to a well-intended "clarification" by a later editor or commentator? We are not yet—and may never be—at a point where such questions can be answered with certainty.

As a practicing Buddhist, I look to the discourses not just to mine them for scholarly knowledge but to come to terms with my own birth and death. Rather than aspire to a detached, objective understanding of their content, I find myself engaged in a heartfelt and sometimes anguished conversation with them. I am eager to hear what these ancient voices have to say that might illuminate my present condition as a human animal on this ball of rock and water hurtling through space. In this sense, my secular Buddhism has a religious quality because it is rooted in "ultimate concerns." As someone who feels the urgency of such concerns, I am bound, therefore, to risk choices in selecting and interpreting texts now that may or may not turn out to be viable later.

To provide a template for this task of rethinking the dharma, I have found it helpful to distinguish between six broad voices that can be discerned in the early canonical texts:

- poetic voices
- dramatic voices
- skeptical voices
- pragmatic voices
- dogmatic voices
- mythic voices

These voices do not necessarily contradict one another. They may be complementary. But the tone and emphasis of each expresses a distinctive sensibility and outlook.

There is much finely crafted verse in the canon that approaches poetry in its rhythms and imagery, and numerous passages that use dramatic narratives to provide background or to make a moral or doctrinal point. The following verses from the Pali *Chapter of Eights* (*Atṭhakavagga*) exemplify a poetic voice that is also skeptical:

Wrong-minded people do voice opinions  
as do truth-minded people too.  
When an opinion is stated, the sage is not drawn in—  
there's nothing arid about the sage.

Nowhere does a lucid one  
hold contrived views about *it is* or *it is not*.  
How could he succumb to them,  
having let go of illusions and conceit?

The priest without borders  
doesn't seize on what he's known or beheld.  
Not passionate, not dispassionate,  
he doesn't posit anything as ultimate.<sup>27</sup>

In what is considered to be a very early text, we find here a voice that refuses to be drawn into affirming or negating an opinion, into making ontological assertions, or into asserting anything as ultimately true or real. The sage chooses to suspend judgment rather than get involved in disputes.

Such skepticism is challenging. It would require a great deal of discipline and effort to see the world and oneself in this way. Withholding judgment runs counter to how we are conditioned to think and speak. Thinking other than in terms of “it is” and “it is not” goes against the grain of language itself; it is disorienting and confusing. Yet Gotama tells his listeners, in his famous discourse to the Kālāma people, that “it is fitting for you to be perplexed, it is fitting for you to be in doubt.”

Do not go by oral traditions, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on reasons, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of the speaker, or because you think, “That wanderer is my guru.”<sup>28</sup>

This skeptical attitude is not an end in itself. Its value lies in opening up opportunities for human flourishing. For Gotama, the problem with holding firmly to an opinion or belief is that those who do so become “entangled in a thicket” or “trapped in a snare” that prevents them from making any movement along the path. The *Kālāma Sutta* continues:

When you know for yourselves, “These things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practised, lead to harm and suffering,” then you should let go of them.<sup>29</sup>

The point is to gain practical knowledge that leads to changes in behavior that affect the quality of your life; theoretical knowledge, in contrast, may have little, if any, impact on how you live in the world from day to day. In letting go of self-centered reactivity, a person gradually comes “to dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity.”<sup>30</sup> The transformation involved in the practice of the dharma is as much affective as it is cognitive.

The skeptical voice of the discourses harmonizes with their pragmatic voice. This is nowhere more explicit than in the parable of the arrow. The Buddha tells the story of a man who has been struck by a poisoned arrow and lies bleeding to death on the ground. Before allowing his friends to bring a doctor to remove the arrow, the man insists on knowing the name of the person who shot it, the place where he lives, the complexion of his skin, and so forth, down to such absurd details

as the kind of feathers on the arrow shaft: “whether those of a vulture or a crow or a hawk or a peacock or a stork.”<sup>31</sup> Gotama compares this man to someone who refuses to practice the dharma until he is given answers to the metaphysical questions listed above: whether the world is beginningless or endless, whether it is finite or infinite, whether the soul and body are the same or different, and whether a *tathāgata* exists or not (or both or neither) after death.

The purpose of the Buddha’s teaching is not to resolve doubts about the nature of “reality” by providing answers to such conundrums but to offer a practice that will remove the “arrow” of reactivity, thereby restoring practitioners’ health and enabling them to flourish here on earth.

All schools of Buddhism place great emphasis on the importance of practice. Yet most of them have come to rely on a dogmatic rather than a skeptical foundation for that practice. At the risk of making too broad a generalization, let me suggest that religious Buddhists tend to base their practice on *beliefs*, whereas secular Buddhists tend to base their practice on *questions*. If one believes—*pace* the second noble truth of Buddhism, that craving is the origin of suffering—then your practice will be motivated by the intention to overcome craving in order to eliminate suffering. The practice will be the logical consequence of your belief. But if your experience of birth, sickness, aging, and death raises fundamental questions about your existence, then your practice will be driven by the urgent need to come to terms with those questions, irrespective of any theory about where birth, sickness, aging, and death originate. Such a practice is concerned with finding an authentic and autonomous response to the questions that life poses rather than confirming any doctrinal article of faith.

The Sōn practice of asking “What is this?” entails a radical suspension of judgment about all beliefs—including Buddhist beliefs. Sōn teachers consistently challenge the student to turn away from abstract speculation and open their eyes to the everyday objects of the world. A student once asked the Chan master Dongshan (807–69): “What is the

Buddha?” Dongshan replied: “Three pounds of flax.”<sup>32</sup> A monk asked the teacher Zhaozhou (778–897): “Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” Zhaozhou answered: “The cypress tree in the courtyard.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than offer conventional answers, which would lead to potentially endless disputes, these men pressed their students to consider the far more baffling and urgent questions posed by ordinary things that were right in front of them but overlooked.

Despite the skeptical and pragmatic voices of the Pali Canon, there are also plenty of dogmatic voices. One statement that is often cited in contemporary Buddhist writings is this:

There is, monks, an Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded. If there were not this Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from what is born, become, made, compounded. But since there *is* an Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from what is born, become, made, compounded.<sup>34</sup>

This *ex cathedra* declaration of a transcendent reality lying beyond the conditioned world sits uncomfortably with the suspension of judgment and suspicion of ultimacy advocated elsewhere in the same body of texts. I will examine this passage in chapter 5.

Buddhism abounds in dogmatic claims. The four noble truths, the twelve links of dependent origination, the two truths, the end of suffering, not to mention elaborate theories about karma, rebirth, and nonhuman realms of existence—all are presented as self-evident facts revealed through the Buddha’s enlightenment and confirmed by his omniscience. We are not called upon to question them but to accept them as unshakable, non-negotiable foundations upon which to build our practice.

The different voices that can be detected in the early Buddhist canon are echoes of the different voices that speak to us in our own minds. There is no need to privilege any one of them. As I read the

discourses I find myself drawn by turns to a questioning voice that encourages doubt, to a reasonable voice that instills conviction, to a pragmatic voice that encourages what might actually work. Mythic voices—such as Māra’s as he encourages the Buddha to die rather than teach the dharma—occur frequently in the discourses but have grown silent inside our secular souls. Perhaps we no longer hear them because they originate in a long-lost enchanted world where gods and devils alike descended to earth to commune with human beings. Moderns suspect such voices to be either figments of the imagination or signs of incipient madness. Artists might still speak of muses and priests of exorcising the devil, but for many today such references belong to a twilight language of an archaic past.

## ( 8 )

While paying heed to the different voices in the canon, I am drawn to the skeptical and pragmatic ones. They stand out as most distinctive and original in Gotama’s teaching. Although dogmatic and mythical passages in the canon usually require interpretation, skeptical and pragmatic passages are also generally less ambiguous and more applicable. At the same time, I need to be constantly alert to the danger faced by every interpreter: the danger of unconsciously imposing my own views onto an ancient text and claiming that they were there all along.

My starting point in dealing with dogmatic statements is to bracket off anything attributed to Gotama that could just as well have been said by another wanderer, Jain monk, or brahmin priest of the same period. When he says that a certain action will produce a good or bad result in a future heaven or hell, or when he speaks of bringing to an end the repetitive cycle of rebirth and death in order to attain a final nirvana, I take such utterances to be determined by the common outlook of that time rather than reflecting an intrinsic element of the dharma. I thus give central importance to those teachings in Gotama’s dharma that *cannot* be derived from the worldview of fifth century BCE India.

Tentatively, I suggest that bracketing off such metaphysical views leaves us with four central ideas that do not appear to have direct precedents in Indian tradition. I call them the “four *P*’s”:

the *principle* of conditionality  
 the *practice* of a fourfold task  
 the *perspective* of mindful awareness  
 the *power* of self-reliance

Some time ago I realized that what I found most difficult to accept in Buddhism were those beliefs that it shared with its sister Indian religions, Hinduism and Jainism. In forming the common backdrop to so much of Indian thought, such beliefs cannot be exclusively identified with any one of these in particular. What I struggled with, therefore, was not a uniquely Buddhist teaching but the widespread worldview of ancient India (and beyond) that jarred with the one with which I had been raised. The bracketing off of such beliefs does not, in my opinion, result in a fragmentary and emasculated dharma. Instead, the result is what appears to be an entirely adequate ethical, contemplative, and philosophical framework for leading a flourishing life in *this* world.

In much of the rest of this book I will tease out the implications of these four *P*’s. For now, suffice it to say that I see Gotama’s vision to be primarily concerned with these fundamentals:

An understanding of *conditionality* as the context for  
 A *fourfold task*:

to comprehend suffering,  
 to let go of the arising of reactivity,  
 to behold the ceasing of reactivity, and  
 to cultivate an eightfold path that is grounded in the  
 perspective of

*Mindful awareness* and leads one to become  
*Self-reliant* in the practice of the dharma.

Focusing on the dramatic episodes scattered through the canon that recount Gotama's often-fraught dealings with his contemporaries allows his humanity to emerge with more clarity than if we concentrate on abstractions. In every alternate chapter of this book I will pursue this quest for the historical Buddha, but not by focusing exclusively on Gotama; rather, I will tell the stories of five members of his inner circle: Mahānāma (chapter 2), Pasenadi (chapter 4), Sunakkhatta (chapter 6), Jīvaka (chapter 8), and Ānanda (chapter 10). I am as interested in recovering a sense of the Buddha's social world as a sense of his person. Situating him within his relationships with different people makes it possible to construct a multifaceted and nuanced portrait of the man. Three of his close associates (Mahānāma, Pasenadi, and Jīvaka) were adherents rather than mendicants, and one of the mendicants (Sunakkhatta) disrobed. Apart from Ānanda, they have been largely ignored in Buddhist writings.

Forty years ago, the British scholar Trevor Ling argued that what we now know as Buddhism started life as an embryonic civilization or culture that mutated into an organized Indian religion.<sup>35</sup> The project of secular Buddhism builds on this insight. As we seek to articulate a way of practicing the dharma in the context of modernity, we can find vindication in a critical return to canonical sources and the recovery of an understanding of the Buddha's own complex world. One of the core questions that I seek to answer in this book is whether it is still possible to recover the dharma that existed prior to the emergence of Buddhist orthodoxies and then build upon that foundation an adequate ethical, contemplative, and philosophical practice that optimizes human flourishing in a post-credal age. Paradoxically, to imagine what might emerge after Buddhism, we need to go back to the time before Buddhism began.

## MAHĀNĀMA: THE CONVERT



[MAHĀNĀMA:] Kapilavatthu is rich and prosperous, populous, crowded, with congested streets. In the evening, when I enter the town after visiting the Teacher or worthy mendicants, I might encounter a runaway elephant or horse, a chariot or cart out of control, a man gone berserk. This disturbs my mindful recollection of the Buddha, dharma, and community. It occurs to me: “If at this moment I should die, what would be my destiny, what would the future hold?”

[GOTAMA:] Do not fear, Mahānāma! Do not be afraid! Your death will not be a bad one. A noble listener who possesses four things slants, slopes, and leans toward nirvana. What four? Here, Mahānāma, a noble listener has lucid confidence in the Buddha, the dharma, and the community. He possesses the virtues dear to the noble ones. Suppose a tree were leaning toward the east. If it were cut down, in what direction would it fall?

[MAHĀNĀMA:] In whatever direction it was leaning, sir.

[GOTAMA:] So too, Mahānāma, a noble listener who possesses these four things slants, slopes, and leans toward nirvana.

—SOTĀPATTISAṂYUTTA

## ( I )

Gotama's cousin Mahānāma, the chief of Sakiya, is not trampled to death by an elephant, nor run over by a chariot, nor attacked by a madman, as he worries he will be in the passage cited in the epigraph. In the end, to save the citizens of Kapilavatthu from the invading army of King Viḍūḍabha of Kosala, he pleads with the ruler to spare as many of his compatriots who can flee while he remains submerged in water holding his breath. Since Mahānāma was a friend of the king's father, Pasenadi, Viḍūḍabha agrees to the request. "Filled with anguish for his people, Mahānāma went down into the water of a pool. On the edge of the pool grew a sal tree, the branches of which fell into the water; they got entwined in his hair-knot, so that he was pulled under and drowned."<sup>1</sup>

I imagine Mahānāma as a man of small stature dressed in simple white clothes—speckled, perhaps, with flecks of mud around the legs—with a mustache, beard, and turban. Even as an important and wealthy person in Sakiya, he would have lived in a house built of wood, plastered with baked mud, and roofed with thatch. He may have described Kapilavatthu as "prosperous" and "populous," but it is hard to know its actual size or population. Its position on the North Road, the trade route that stretched a thousand miles from Magadha, a kingdom south of the Ganges, to Gandhāra, the easternmost satrapy of the Persian Achaemenid empire, in the northwest, might explain how it came to be a busy commercial center. We still do not know exactly where the town of Kapilavatthu was, however. Archaeologists speculate that it may have been near the village of Tilaurakot in southwestern Nepal, but until further excavations are undertaken, the location cannot be confirmed.

Sakiya was situated on the vast alluvial plain that separates the Ganges from the Himalayas. On a clear day a guard on the ramparts of Kapilavatthu would have looked out onto a flat patchwork of fields where rice, millet, mustard seed, and vegetables were cultivated. Be-

yond the fields extended forest, and to the north, visible above the canopy of leaves, hovered a distant line of snowy peaks.

Society in Sakiya consisted of lords (*khattiya*), who composed the ruling class and were the wealthiest landowners, and householders (*gahapati*), including merchants, farmers, and artisans. In addition, there would have been numerous menial laborers, servants, and slaves, whose existence is assumed but not often acknowledged in the canonical texts. On occasion wanderers (*samaṇa*) passed through town and spent the night in groves or parks. These were men and women who had renounced domestic life in search of wisdom and liberation, as a sign of which they shaved their hair and beards, dyed their clothes yellow or ocher, and supported themselves by going from door to door in search of alms.

According to the scholar Johannes Bronkhorst, Sakiya was located in a part of India where the doctrines of Brahmanism, including belief in a creator God and the divinely ordained caste system (*varṇa*), were neither widely known nor accepted.<sup>2</sup> The role of Brahmanism in defining the social and political order did not yet extend to most of the areas where the Buddha lived and worked. It was the dominant culture only in sections of western India, although its influence was already extending eastward along the course of the Ganges River. The pre-Buddhist *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for example, contains dialogues between brahmin sages that it says took place in Videha, to the east of the newly founded city of Benares. Videha was in the Vajjian Confederacy on the northern shore of the Ganges in the Buddha's time.<sup>3</sup> Peripatetic brahmins apparently served as priests and were hired to perform sacrifices and rituals, predict the future, and offer the consolations of spells and magic. Since the Pali discourses also mention "brahmin villages," there may have been small communities in the area that adhered to the principles of the Brahmanic religion.

The ubiquitous use of the phrase "wanderers and brahmins" (*samaṇabrāhmaṇā*) in the Pali discourses suggests that a clear division between these two types of practitioners already existed in the Bud-

dha's time. Although brahmins may not have acquired the prominence and respect for which they aspired, they appear to have established themselves as a distinct community with a strict and exclusive identity. Their lifestyle, customs, and rituals set them apart from the eclectic community of wanderers, which was filled with men and women from all walks of life advocating a wide range of views and engaged in varied styles of practice. While the brahmins insisted on unbroken family lineages—sacred teachings and rites were passed down from father to son over generations—the wanderers were beneficiaries of the surplus wealth and social mobility that characterized the beginnings of the second phase of urbanization in north India. Gotama and his followers formed one of the many *samaṇa* groups.

Around a century after Gotama's death, Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to Magadha, unhesitatingly employed the terms *brahmanes* and *sramanes* as his starting point for describing the "philosophers" he encountered during his ten years in Pāṭaliputta. He also notes that the brahmins "are best esteemed, for they are more consistent in their opinion."<sup>4</sup> Fifty years later, the Buddhist emperor Aśoka, in his thirteenth rock edict, noted that "there is no country, except among the Greeks, where these two groups, brahmins and wanderers, are not found."<sup>5</sup> Both sources confirm that this twofold division was well established in India by their time. It seems likely, therefore, that brahmins were already making their presence felt in the Buddha's world. Gotama's criticism of their beliefs and social practices was not, however, an attack on a supposed Brahmanic establishment but part of a struggle for philosophical ascendancy in which the brahmins were one among many competitors.

By tradition the Sakiyans were sun worshippers. Their folk religion also involved the propitiation and supplication of local spirits (*yakkha*) at moundlike shrines (*cetiya*) and the veneration of trees enclosed by wooden railings.<sup>6</sup> They would have taken for granted the widespread belief in a cycle of rebirth driven by the force of former acts (*karma*), which formed part of the indigenous beliefs of the peo-

ple in the eastern Gangetic basin. Their notion of rebirth would have been more the intuitive reflex of agriculturalists whose lives were tied to the cycles of rural existence than the kind of elaborate theory found in Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist literature that developed in subsequent centuries. At Mahānāma's time such ideas would have served more as a broad framework that provided a sense of continuity between past and future. The belief might also have encouraged fatalism, causing individuals to feel themselves subject to forces over which they ultimately had no control.

Mahānāma was a cousin of Gotama's on his father's side. Although we do not know their respective ages, they were of the same generation. They would have come from a similar background and quite possibly grew up together. The first we hear of Mahānāma is during the account of the Buddha's flight from Kapilavatthu to become a wandering mendicant. As Gotama was stealthily leaving, "suddenly he came across Mahānāma patrolling the city; but though his cousin begged and cried aloud, telling him of all the sorrow he was bringing to those who loved him, yet he pursued his way."<sup>7</sup>

We have no clear idea of how events unfolded at Kapilavatthu in the wake of Gotama's departure. The texts suggest that a struggle for power ensued, with Mahānāma eventually becoming leader of the Kapilavatthu assembly, the body that governed the affairs of the Sakiyan community. Initially, however, this position was held by another chief, called Bhaddiya, who does not appear to have been part of the Gotama family. It seems that Mahānāma did not make his move for power until after Gotama returned to Sakiya in the sixth year after his awakening and began attracting members of the nobility to his order of mendicants.<sup>8</sup>

A passage in the Pali Vinaya describes how Mahānāma, in collusion with his mother, manipulated this unstable situation to his advantage. Mahānāma's brother was the "delicately nurtured" Anuruddha, who was rich and spoiled, had different homes for each season, and enjoyed spending the Rains being entertained by female lutists. Mahānāma

proposed that someone from their branch of the Gotama family join the Buddha's order. Anuruddha refused, saying that the homeless life of a wanderer would be too harsh for him, and insisted that Mahānāma go instead.<sup>9</sup>

"Dear Anuruddha," said Mahānāma. "Let me remind you of what is involved in the household life. First the fields have to be ploughed; then they must be sown; then they must be watered; then the excess water must be drained off; then the fields must be weeded; then you must reap the crop; then you must tie the crop into bundles; then you must thresh the crop; then you must separate the chaff from the grain, collect the grain and bring it indoors. And you must do exactly the same the next year and the one after that. Dear brother, there is no end to this labour. When our fathers and grandfathers passed away, the work still had to go on. Very well. Now that you understand what is involved in the household life, I will go forth from home to homelessness."<sup>10</sup>

Confronted with the prospect of toiling in fields for the rest of his life, Anuruddha changed his mind. Perhaps because he was still below the age of majority, he asked his mother for permission to join the order of mendicants. "You two boys," she replied, "are so very dear to me. If you died, I could not bear being separated from you. So how can I, while you are still alive, allow you to leave me and go forth into homelessness?" Despite this show of maternal affection, she does not appear to have been entirely frank, for she relented and agreed that he could go on one condition: "If, dear Anuruddha, your friend Bhaddiya the Sakiyan chief goes forth from home to homelessness, then I will let you go forth as well."<sup>11</sup>

This Bhaddiya was "ruling over the Sakiyans" and thus stood in the way of whatever political ambitions her other son, Mahānāma, may have had. Initially, Bhaddiya resisted Anuruddha's entreaties to join the order, but he finally agreed to go in a week's time, once he had "handed over his duties to his sons and brothers."<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that Bhaddiya was already under pressure or threat to quit as chief of the Kapilavatthu assembly. Shortly after joining the order, while sitting

the ruler of Sakiya. It is possible, therefore, that the new assembly hall was erected to mark the appointment of Mahānāma as chief.

It was all very well for the Sakiyans to build a prestigious new hall in which to meet and conduct their affairs, but what power did Mahānāma, as chief of the assembly, actually possess? “The Sakiyans,” according to the discourse *On Origins*, “are vassals of the King of Kosala. They offer him humble service and salute him, rise and do him homage, and pay him fitting service.”<sup>19</sup> This subservient role is also implied by the Buddha’s comment to King Bimbisāra that he came from the “land of Kosala.” Since that exchange dates to the period prior to his awakening, Sakiya must have lost its independence as a self-governing republic by the time of the Buddha’s birth. Mahānāma was chief in name only. Within the jurisdiction of Sakiya he would have exercised authority as a magistrate to arbitrate in local disputes, he would have ensured the general peace, and he would have overseen the administration of the town and outlying villages. But he would also have had to raise taxes for a caravan of goods each year to send in tribute to King Pasenadi, his overlord in Sāvatti, the capital of Kosala.

A proud oligarchic republic, formed from unions of families and clans over generations, whose elders gathered in the assembly hall to conduct the community’s affairs, was now not much more than a province within the powerful monarchy of Kosala. The territory of the Sakiyans was squeezed between Kosala proper to the west, the impenetrable Himalayas to the north, and the republic of Mallā to the south. Like Sakiya, Mallā is described as having assembly halls in its main towns of Kusinārā and Pāvā, which Gotama was invited to inaugurate. Yet unlike Sakiya, Mallā is described in the discourses as one of the sixteen great states (*mahājanapada*) of India, and still operated as an independent republic.<sup>20</sup> Mallā must have had a close relationship with Kosala, since, throughout the Buddha’s lifetime, Mallān chiefs (Bandhula and then Dīgha Kārāyaṇa) served as commanders in chief of the Kosalan army. It would seem, therefore, that Mallā and Kosala functioned as an alliance, with political leadership given to the Kosalan king and military

command given to the Mallāns. The maintenance of such an arrangement depended on strong links of trust between the two states, but they, as we shall see, repeatedly broke.

By becoming chief of the Sakiyans, Mahānāma assumed a position that was still desirable enough for people to fight over but was compromised and weakened by being subordinate to the authority of the Kosalan court. When Mahānāma describes his fear of returning to Kapilavatthu at dusk, he may be expressing more than just concern about running into an untethered horse or belligerent troublemaker. His position was precarious, caught as he was between the forces of nature (horses and elephants, but also droughts and famines), invading armies or roaming militias (chariots), aggressive commerce (carts), and challenges to his authority (violent people). As we have seen, his predecessor, Bhaddiya, likewise confessed to being constantly afraid during his tenure as chief.

Bhaddiya's and Mahānāma's anxieties could be seen as a reflection of the broader uncertainties of their time. They lived during a period in Indian history when rural and agrarian communities that had remained stable for centuries were being replaced by centralized, expanding monarchies with standing armies. The very first cities—such as Sāvatti, Rājagaha, and Vesālī—were emerging in the eastern Gangetic basin, allowing unprecedented concentrations of people to live, work, and trade together. A cash economy was being introduced, bankers and merchants were amassing fortunes, and luxury goods were being transported up and down thoroughfares such as the North Road. The economic surplus generated by all this activity was able both to support a nonproductive body of homeless wanderers in search of wisdom and to pay the wages of professional soldiers. On a more local scale, Mahānāma would have had to deal with the appetites of his extended family, whetted by the new prosperity and opportunity.

Mahānāma's father was Dronodana, a brother of Suddhodana, the Buddha's father. Although we know nothing about Dronodana, Suddhodana is believed to have ruled the Sakiyan people at least until

his son left home at the age of twenty-nine. However, the discourses do not state anywhere that Gotama would automatically have become chief had he remained in Sakiya. Internally, Sakiya still operated as an oligarchy, where elders of the different families decided on who became their leader. It was not a hereditary system, in which the eldest son of the current chief succeeded his father upon the latter's retirement or death. Nonetheless, given Gotama's intelligence and charisma, as well as the account of Mahānāma's attempt to dissuade him from leaving, he would clearly have been a prime contender for the post.

Opposition to Mahānāma's rise to power would likely have come from the family of the Buddha's mother, Māyā, and his aunt (and step-mother) Pajāpatī. According to Pali sources, this branch of the clan was headed by Māyā and Pajāpatī's cantankerous brother Suppabuddha, who was bitterly opposed to Gotama. Suppabuddha was the father of the Buddha's wife, Bhaddakaccānā, whom Gotama left when he became a wanderer. Suppabuddha's animosity may have been driven by Gotama's humiliating abandonment of his daughter. One day Suppabuddha is said to have sat and drunk liquor in an alley in Kapilavatthu in order to block Gotama's way to where he had been invited to eat. A week later, he fell down the stairs of his house in pursuit of an escaping horse and was killed.<sup>21</sup> Although it is hard to know what these fragments of a story mean, they illuminate ongoing conflicts within the Buddha's extended family, which would have added to Mahānāma's woes.<sup>22</sup>

Another episode featuring Mahānāma suggests that Gotama was not always welcome in Kapilavatthu. A discourse tells of how the Buddha returns to his hometown and asks Mahānāma to find a suitable lodging where he could stay the night. Mahānāma was unable to find a room for his cousin and proposed that he stay with a man called Bhaṇḍu the Kālāma, with whom Gotama had studied meditation under the teacher Ālāra Kālāma. The Buddha accepts.

The following morning Mahānāma visits Gotama, who poses a question about the nature of "comprehension" (*pariññā*), a key term that refers to the first of the four tasks in the practice of dharma: com-

prehending suffering. With Bharaṇḍu sitting at his side, the Buddha explains to Mahānāma that there are three kinds of teachers: some who prescribe comprehension of sensual desire, some who prescribe comprehension of sensual desire and forms, and some who prescribe comprehension of sensual desire, forms, and feelings. He asks Mahānāma whether the goal of these three teachers is the same. But Mahānāma is given no chance to respond. Bharaṇḍu keeps repeating, “Say ‘the same,’ Mahānāma,” while Gotama keeps repeating, “Say ‘different,’ Mahānāma.” It looks as though the two men are teasing or provoking him. We never find out the right answer—assuming there was one. “For it then occurs to Bharaṇḍu: ‘the wanderer Gotama has criticized me several times in front of the influential Mahānāma. I had better leave Kapilavatthu.’ He then departed and never again returned.”<sup>23</sup>

Without any further background, it is difficult to make sense of this story. What is clear is that Bharaṇḍu regards Mahānāma as a powerful figure in Kapilavatthu, someone he cannot afford to cross. By contrast, he calls Gotama merely a “wanderer” and does not appear to hold him in any particular esteem. Perhaps Bharaṇḍu had established himself as a teacher in the town and was acquiring a following. What concerns him is that Gotama’s contradictory behavior makes him lose face in the eyes of Mahānāma. He is sufficiently troubled that he leaves town for good. Since the discourse concludes with Bharaṇḍu’s departure, we can assume that this was a desirable outcome.

### ( 3 )

Mahānāma’s duties as chief of Sakiya and his responsibilities as head of the Gotama clan notwithstanding, the discourses consistently portray him as a “stream entrant” (*sotāpanna*). The Buddha’s senior disciple Sāriputta explains that the “stream” is a metaphor for the eightfold path and that a person who has entered the stream is one who has made that path his or her own.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to find an English equivalent for

this evocative and core idea. As a metaphor, “to enter a stream” implies that one is no longer trapped in cycles of habitual behavior that lead nowhere but has been released from the grip of those habits to flow freely without impediment. This free flow is experienced as a way of being alive that affirms one’s autonomy and integrity. In other words, the path is no longer something Mahānāma believes in or aspires to; it has become his own.

A free-flowing life is contextualized within a framework of commitments and values. Just as a stream is guided along its course to the ocean by the banks between which it flows, so the eightfold path is sustained and directed by “lucid confidence” in the Buddha, the dharma, and the community. This way of life is autonomous in the sense of its no longer being determined by instinctive reactivity—in particular, the impulses of greed, hatred, and confusion. Indeed, the path itself has its source in a person’s direct experience of the suspension or absence of these impulses, which is the definition of “nirvana.”<sup>25</sup> This does not mean, however, that having once glimpsed nirvana, innate reactivity will never recur. Gotama was not psychologically naive. The experience of nirvana marks a turning point in an individual’s life, not a final and immutable goal. After the experience one knows that one is free *not* to act on the impulses that naturally arise in reaction to a given situation. Whether one chooses to act on impulses is another matter. Yet it is precisely this freedom that serves as the wellspring from which the stream of the path begins to flow.

Gotama declares Mahānāma to be one who possesses lucid confidence in the Buddha, the dharma, and the community and whose mind inclines toward nirvana.<sup>26</sup> Mahānāma has seen for himself the possibility of a radically different way of being in this world, a way that is no longer driven by his selfish appetites and fears but springs from conscious choices to think, speak, and act in accordance with the values of the dharma. We might compare his “stream entry” with the experience of undergoing a religious, philosophical, or political conversion. We do not know whether this occurred for him suddenly as a Dama-

in the person of the Buddha himself. (Would he, I wonder, have sided with Gotama even if he disagreed with him?) The passage suggests that the community was not always of one mind about everything and that the Buddha was at times content not to impose his view. Such a tolerant approach could have struck Mahānāma as a sign of indecisiveness and weakness, qualities he was struggling to overcome within himself. Living at a time of crisis, he longed for certainty and resolve in his teacher. But desperation easily turns into fanaticism. People adopt inflexible views as a comforting defense mechanism when they find themselves threatened and overwhelmed by forces they cannot control.

## ( 4 )

The *Shorter Discourse on the Mass of Suffering* recounts an exchange in Nigrodha's Park outside Kapilavatthu. Mahānāma greets the Buddha, sits to one side, and says:

I have long understood your dharma as saying: "Greed corrupts the mind, hatred corrupts the mind, delusion corrupts the mind." Yet at times, greedy, hateful, and deluded states overwhelm my mind and stay there. And I wonder: what state (*dhamma*) is still at work within me such that these greedy, hateful, and deluded thoughts keep invading me and won't go away?<sup>34</sup>

The Buddha explains how the "state" that lies at the root of Mahānāma's spiritual anguish is his sensual desire (*kāma*). It is not that Mahānāma fails to understand that sensual desire provides little gratification and often leads to much suffering. On the contrary, he appears to understand this well. But because he has no access to the kind of bliss experienced in deep states of meditative absorption, he remains in thrall to the joys of sensual desire.<sup>35</sup>

*Kāma* is a very old concept in India. As far back as the Rig Veda (X.129) we find an account of creation that describes how "in the be-

ginning there was sensual desire (*kāma*),” out of which the cosmos and its creatures evolved.<sup>36</sup> In Buddhist cosmology human beings are said to inhabit the world of sensuality (*kāmaloka*), which is ruled by Māra (the “devil”), known as Kāmadeva—the god of sensuality. *Kāma* is closely identified with passion and sexual lust, with the primary, instinctive urge to survive and reproduce. The passage from the *Shorter Discourse on the Mass of Suffering* presents it as more deeply rooted in our neurobiology than the greed, hatred, and confusion that periodically overwhelm us. *Kāma* is what makes greed, hatred, and confusion stick, linger, and fester in our minds.

In addition to the external conflicts that Mahānāma has to deal with in his public role as chief, he also suffers anxiety founded on his heightened awareness of the contradictions within himself. He has dedicated his life to the values taught by his cousin but, despite his best efforts, keeps finding himself invaded by the forces he strives to transcend. He is a tormented man, burdened by his duties to others and troubled by the irrepressible potency of his sensual nature. Although he finds his mind “invaded by thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion,” he is also someone who “slants, slopes, and leans toward nirvana.” There is no contradiction here; both conditions can coexist in one person.

Gotama is well aware that people cannot be neatly divided into saints and sinners. In the account of his awakening in *The Noble Quest* he declares that what he has understood is difficult to grasp because it “goes against the stream” (*paṭisotagāmi*).<sup>37</sup> To enter the stream of the eightfold path means to go against the stream of one’s reactivity, be that of one’s instinctive drives, social conditioning, or psychological inclination. By choosing to think, speak, and act otherwise than as prompted by these habits requires considerable resolve and commitment. For someone like Mahānāma, who is taking his first steps along this new path, it is hardly surprising that he finds himself feeling overwhelmed and battered by the power of those forces that surge within him.

This is understandable. If you start to confront your innate impulsivity instead of following its prompts and letting yourself get carried

away, the act of resistance itself seems to intensify the power of the reactions. The ensuing sense of powerlessness and frustration can easily turn into self-loathing. You become furious with yourself, not only for not doing what you want but often for ending up doing the very opposite of what you want. As this self-hatred grows and festers, it can mutate into the wish to harm and punish yourself for your weakness.

While pointing out to Mahānāma the dangers inherent in sensual indulgence, Gotama also warns him against the temptation of self-punishment. He gives the example of some Nigaṇṭhas (Jains) he once observed in Rājagaha who “practiced continual standing and experienced painful, racking, piercing feelings” in the mistaken belief that in this way they would overcome their weakness and thereby find the strength to achieve salvation.<sup>38</sup> The Buddha’s vision of liberation, by contrast, entails cultivating a middle way: the individual does not get trapped in either the dead end of sensual indulgence or its opposite, self-punishment.

Mahānāma has no intention of renouncing the world and becoming a mendicant. He is entangled in politics, suffers fear and anxiety, and cannot control his sensual desires. Yet he is also a stream entrant whose mind has “been fortified over a long time by faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and understanding” and inclines toward nirvana.<sup>39</sup> In another passage, he is described as a “householder” who “has found fulfillment in the *tathāgata*, has become a seer of the deathless, and goes about having beheld the deathless.”<sup>40</sup> Mahānāma is an eminently worldly figure, a complex flesh-and-blood individual very much like our own conflicted selves.

( 5 )

Mahānāma, the most prominent adherent of Gotama’s teaching in Kapilavatthu, asks the Buddha to explain what it means to be an adherent rather than a mendicant. The answer he receives would still serve to describe adherents in most Buddhist countries today. An adherent

is “one who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha”; an adherent accomplished in virtue is one who “abstains from killing; stealing; sexual abuse; lying; and psycho-active substances that lead to carelessness (*pamāda*)”; an adherent is endowed with “faith in the awakening of the *tathāgata*,” “dwells at home with a mind devoid of stinginess, freely generous and open-handed,” and “possesses understanding directed to arising and ceasing, which is noble and penetrating.”<sup>41</sup>

In most English translations, we find “lay follower” or “layman” rather than “adherent.” But “layman” is as problematic a translation of *upāsaka* as “monk” is of *bhikkhu* and “nun” of *bhikkhuni*. In each case we are using a term that implies a formal religious distinction that would not have existed at Mahānāma’s time. Such terminology is better suited to a later period in Buddhist history, when mendicants came to live apart in monasteries, functioned as priests, and depended on the laity to provide not only daily almsfood but the upkeep and protection of their institutions.

Literally, *bhikkhu* means “mendicant”; *upāsaka* is derived from the Pali *upāsati*, which means “to sit close by”—hence “adherent.” Although adherents provided alms and support for mendicants, it is questionable whether their respective roles mirror those of monastics and laity as we currently understand those terms today. The noble community (*ariya sangha*) that Gotama formed included everyone who had entered the stream of the eightfold path, irrespective of whether that person was a mendicant or an adherent. A mendicant may have undertaken training that entailed full-time dedication to the cultivation of the path, but training and dedication are no guarantee of insight or enlightenment. We find mendicants who abandon training and adherents (like Mahānāma) who, as stream entrants, remain committed to the path and declare unswerving faith in the Buddha.

Because it is widely believed (even by Buddhists) that the Sakiyans of Kapilavatthu lived in a society regulated by the norms of Brahmanism, it is assumed that adherents of the dharma converted from one set

of beliefs to another. The new adherents would thus have rejected belief in a creator God and an eternal soul, abandoned any commitment to the caste system, and had no further dealings with brahmin priests. In light of the recent scholarship like Bronkhorst's, this was almost certainly not the case. In becoming an adherent of the dharma, Mahānāma would have consciously adopted, perhaps for the first time, a coherent ethical, contemplative, and philosophical attitude toward his life. Since he would not have ascribed to Brahmanic doctrines, he would have had no need to reject them. Instead, he embraced a perspective on life and the world that transcended the parochial concerns of family and tribe and inspired him to live according to a universal set of values. Because anyone from any background could become an adherent, the community that one entered upon committing oneself to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha potentially included the whole of humanity. In this sense, Gotama's dharma opened the door to an emergent civilization rather than the establishment of a "religion."

## ( 6 )

Mahānāma may have struggled with his sensuality and his sexual desire, but he did not treat women as mere objects of his lust. He seems to have respected them and advocated an equal role for them as practitioners of the dharma. When he first heard Gotama teach in Nigrodha's Park, he was so delighted that he went home singing the praises of the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. When asked by his wife what he was talking about, he replied: "The arising of the Buddha is fruitful for us. Today the Buddha taught the sort of dharma such that upon hearing it, numerous beings attained great insights." She retorted: "When you say that 'the arising of the Buddha is fruitful for us,' that is true. Yet while it may be fruitful for you, it is not so for us. For the arising of the Buddha in the world is for the sake of men, not women." Mahānāma said: "Dear lady, do not say that. His compassion extends to all beings. You women should also go and listen to the dharma from him in person."<sup>42</sup>

his father, finds himself on a hunting expedition that takes him to a park near Kapilavatthu. On learning that elephants and horses of the son of Mallikā, the “slave,” have trampled the park, the Sakiyans are incensed and prepare to punish the prince for trespassing on their land. Viḍūḍabha chooses to hide rather than face their wrath and leaves a retainer with instructions to tell the Sakiyans that the prince has already left. Unable to punish Viḍūḍabha by cutting off his hands or feet or even killing him, they decide to purify the park of his presence by spreading fresh earth over his footprints, plastering over the walls he has touched, and sprinkling the whole place with scented water, milk, and flowers. When the retainer reports what has happened to Viḍūḍabha, the young prince declares: “Sirs. When my father is dead and I am king, my first act will be to put these Sakiyans to death. Promise me that you will support me in this undertaking.”<sup>47</sup>

This, as well as its parallel version in Pali, seems too far-fetched to be treated as history. Since the conclusion of the story turns on fears of the corruption of caste purity, it was almost certainly finalized at a later time, when Buddhists had eventually come to accept the assumptions of a Brahmanic worldview. We need to remember that such a legend would have been used to give moral guidance to the wider populace rather than serve as a training instruction for mendicants. Under these circumstances, it could easily have been embellished and expanded in repeated telling and come to reflect the changing worldview of its narrators.

The primary sources that have come down to us agree on one thing: that toward the end of Gotama’s life, Kapilavatthu was invaded and destroyed by the Kosalan army under King Viḍūḍabha. There is no way to know, at this distance in time and with such a paucity of data, the actual reasons why these tragic events occurred.

Possibly the Sakiyans resented King Pasenadi’s choice of an outsider—Mallikā—as his queen rather than a noblewoman from the Gotama clan, which would have united clan and royal families through marriage and accorded prestige to the Sakiyans within Kosala. Or per-

haps Viḍūḍabha was more offended by the way the Sakiyans regarded his mother than by the way they treated him. Ever since the time of the *Iliad*, nations have employed real or perceived slights to their queens as convenient pretexts for going to war. What seems clear is that the Sakiyans were being punished. Since pride is a trait frequently attributed to them as a people, it is reasonable to consider pride a possible cause of their downfall. Viḍūḍabha could thus be seen as Sakiya's nemesis, the agent of their destruction, who caused them to reap the consequences of their un-Buddhist sin of hubris. In the blunt terms of realpolitik, their destruction translates into the violent suppression of a potentially rebellious minority who threatened the stability and cohesion of the state. As a newly enthroned monarch, Viḍūḍabha may also have wanted to show any other group who had similar aspirations of independence how he would treat them if they sought to rise up against him.

As the troops were preparing to invade, the Buddha is said to have gone to the frontier not far from Kapilavatthu and sat beneath a tree that offered little shade. Viḍūḍabha rode up to him and asked why he did not sit in the shade of a banyan nearby. The Buddha replied: "Do not be concerned, great king. The shade of my kinsmen keeps me cool."<sup>48</sup> Moved by Gotama's compassion for his compatriots, Viḍūḍabha retreated, but eventually the army was ordered to attack. As Buddhist adherents who had vowed not to kill, the Sakiyans put up minimal resistance and retreated to the safety of the walled city of Kapilavatthu, where they waited, "watching from the tops of the ramparts, and sounding their trumpets."<sup>49</sup>

On the advice of his minister, Viḍūḍabha conveyed a message to the Sakiyans: "Although I have no fondness for you, yet I have no hatred either. It is all over, so open up the city gates." Trustingly, the Sakiyans let the king and his army into the city. But as soon as the troops were inside, Viḍūḍabha shouted: "I will shut the Sakiyans' mouths for good, I will exterminate them all!" Then the slaughter began, which, according to Pali sources, "spared not even children at the breast."

On hearing the tumult, Mahānāma ran outside and confronted Viḍūḍabha: “Sir, you came here on a promise; I beseech you to make me another. Spare the people!” Viḍūḍabha replied: “I will not spare your people, but you and your family may leave.” It was at this point that Mahānāma said: “Let as many of my people escape as can while I remain submerged in water.” Viḍūḍabha agreed, and “filled with anguish for his people,” Mahānāma went into the pool, only to drown when his hair was caught on the drooping branches of a sal tree.

In the Pali version of this story, however, Mahānāma untied his long hair, knotted it at one end, inserted his big toes into his hair, then tipped himself into the water.<sup>50</sup> This version confirms what is merely implied in the other account. His death was not the result of his hair becoming accidentally entangled in hanging branches (or, more likely, roots, since sal trees do not have such branches). Instead, this man, who once confessed to the Buddha how afraid he was about his own death, committed suicide. Out of compassion, Mahānāma sacrificed himself so that his people would be saved from the wrath of the soldiers. His leaning forward and toppling into the pond became a physical enactment of his “slanting, sloping, and leaning toward nirvana.” He surrendered himself to the radiance of the sun, reflected, perhaps, in the shimmering surface of the water.

## A FOURFOLD TASK



Whatever is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.

—SACCASAṂYUTTA

This is suffering, this is the arising, this is the ceasing, this is the path:  
(in each task) there are innumerable nuances, innumerable details,  
innumerable implications.

—SACCASAṂYUTTA

## ( I )

At the age of twenty-nine, having just fathered a first son, Gotama left Kapilavatthu and set out on a quest. “Though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces,” he recalled, “I shaved off my hair and beard, put on a yellow robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness.”<sup>1</sup> His quest was prompted by questions he could no longer ignore:

What is the delight (*assādo*) of life?

What is the tragedy (*ādhinavo*) of life?

What is the emancipation (*nissaraṇa*) of life?<sup>2</sup>

Life as he had known it until then had been “covered with dust,” its meaning obscured beneath layers of familiar thoughts and habits of mind, its vitality dulled by everyday comforts and attachments. By contrast, he found that “life gone forth was open wide,” exhilarating and rich in possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

According to tradition, it took around six years before he arrived at a satisfying resolution to these questions. What he discovered was not revealed to him in one shattering moment of enlightenment; he did not suddenly realize the nature of Truth or God. He talks of his awakening as a process rather than a state, a story rather than a statement. He describes it in a variety of ways, much as you might recount a journey from different perspectives, each revealing another facet or dimension of the whole experience. In reaching a resolution to his three questions, he recalls realizing that “the happiness and joy that arise conditioned by life, that is the delight of life; that life is impermanent, difficult, and changing, that is the tragedy of life; the removal and abandonment of grasping (*chandārāga*) for life, that is the emancipation of life.” Only when this threefold understanding was clear to him could he claim “to have found a peerless awakening in this world.”<sup>4</sup>

In *The Noble Quest*, which scholars regard as probably the earliest account of the awakening that has come down to us, Gotama speaks of it as a radical shift in perspective rather than an arrival at a set of answers to existential questions.<sup>5</sup> He describes the shift as leading him to the dharma itself:

This dharma I have reached is deep, hard to see, difficult to awaken to, quiet and excellent, not confined by thought, subtle, sensed by the wise. But people love their place (*ālaya*): they delight and revel in their place. It is hard for people who love, delight, and revel in their place to see this ground (*īhāna*): “because-of-this” conditionality (*idappaccayatā*), conditioned arising (*paṭīccasamuppāda*). And also hard to see

refuges were one's self and the dharma. He includes the self because internalizing the dharma into one's own heart and soul renders a person as autonomous and secure as an island, as radiant and illuminating as a lamp (in Pali *dīpa* means both "island" and "lamp"). "There is no other refuge," declared the Buddha, than the integration of the dharma into one's own life.<sup>10</sup> No priest or teacher, no church or temple, no sacred text, is of any help when you are confronting the existential issues of your life and death.

The lawfulness of conditioned arising implies that a life led according to the dharma is a life based on reason. The phrase "when this is, that comes to be" is a claim that when certain conditions prevail in the world, then certain results will follow, but it is also a description of the logical operation "if *p*, then *q*." The dharma that Gotama reached disclosed the possibility of leading a human life according to the norms of reason rather than those of common sense or tradition. The discourses are a showcase for Gotama's skill in dialectical reasoning. His authority is not that of a guru who imposes his views on his followers because of their faith in his enlightenment. He consistently debates with and persuades his interlocutors through the use of reason. Because his concern is to change the way people live, his reason is practical rather than theoretical. He uses reason to help others decide how to think, speak, and act. He has no interest in pursuing an abstract argument to demonstrate a purely theoretical truth. His practical reason is ethical. Its first principle could be stated thus:

Do no evil,  
Take up what is good,  
Purify the mind—  
This is the teaching of buddhas.<sup>11</sup>

In seeing conditioned arising as a "ground," Gotama implies that insight into conditionality provides "grounds" on which to act. Just as the German *Grund* (ground) means a "reason" for doing something, so does the Pali *ṭhāna* (ground). The dictionary gives the following defini-

tion of *thāna*: “ground for assumption, reason, supposition, principle, esp. a sound conclusion, logic, reasonableness.”<sup>12</sup> To live a grounded life, therefore, means to live a life founded on practical reason.

As long as people are primarily concerned with their place in the world, the rationale for their behavior will have to do with such things as maintaining their position in society, enhancing their status in the workplace, or improving their handicap at golf. Whether acknowledged or not, these would be the grounds or reasons for why they act in the ways they do. Practitioners of the dharma, by contrast, choose to do things for different reasons. Keenly aware of the new possibilities that keep opening up in a world that is conditional and changing, they seek to realize them in a way that is not predicated on habitual reactivity. Conditionality and nirvana thus become the underlying grounds or reasons for why they do what they do.

We must not forget that the dharma Gotama reached was a *twofold* ground. It includes the “stilling of inclinations” and the “fading away of reactivity,” which are synonymous with “nirvana.” In one of the *Connected Discourses*, he succinctly defines nirvana as the “ending of desire, ending of hatred, ending of confusion” (*rāgakkhayo dosakkhayo mohakkhayo*).<sup>13</sup> But since nirvana—like the dharma—is also described as “immediate, clearly visible, inviting, uplifting, and personally sensed by the wise,” then *khayo* (ending) cannot mean that desire, hatred, and confusion are over for practitioners and will not occur again.<sup>14</sup>

When a wanderer called Sīvaka asked what it meant for the dharma to be “clearly visible” (*sandiṭṭhiko*), Gotama responded by posing another question.

What do you think, Sīvaka: When there is greed within you, do you know “there’s greed within me,” and when there is no greed within you, do you know “there’s no greed within me”?

Yes.

With hatred, confusion, and those qualities of mind associated with greed, hatred, and confusion: When they are

within you, do you know they are present? And when they are not within you, do you know they are absent?

Yes.

It is in this way, Sīvaka, that the dharma is clearly visible, immediate, inviting, uplifting, to be personally sensed by the wise.<sup>15</sup>

By demonstrating to a non-Buddhist wanderer how the dharma is clearly visible whenever greed, hatred, and confusion are not active in his mind, Gotama shows that nirvana is not something realized only by devout Buddhists who have spent long years meditating in solitude. His awakening revealed to him that nirvana is immediately present right here and now as a ground on which to live one's life in this world. As he told the brahmin Jāṇussoṇī, a person who has let go of reactivity "neither plans for his own harm, nor for the harm of others, nor for the harm of both; and he does not experience in his mind suffering and grief. In this way, brahmin, nirvana is clearly visible."<sup>16</sup>

Nirvana can be compared to the sudden opening up of a space within one's experience when one's innate inclinations die down and reactivity fades away. One glimpses in such moments how one is free to act in a way that is not determined by reactivity, thereby enabling the use of practical reason to decide on another kind of future. But these moments of nirvanic emptiness are liable to vanish just as abruptly as they appear.

Gotama's awakening led him to see both what enabled and what inhibited human flourishing. Cultivating a clear vision of one's mortality and conditionality, committing oneself to a path of practical reason, and aspiring to respond to life in ways not determined by reactivity are how he saw a life grounded in dharma. But he also recognized that to see things in this way "is hard for people who love, delight, and revel in their place." As long as individuals remain preoccupied with place (*ālaya*), they will be blinded to their ground (*ṭhāna*). Although Gotama declared that such a ground was clearly visible, he acknowledged that it was "hard to see" (*dudasō*).

Since the terms *ālaya* (place) and *ṭhāna* (ground) have similar meanings in Pali, Gotama may be engaging in wordplay. What people assume to be their ground, he suggests, turns out not to be a ground at all but merely a temporary place to which they cling in the futile hope of finding existential security in a profoundly insecure world.

The places to which I belong are manifold: a race, a gender, an ethnicity, a culture, a nation, a city, town, or village, a social position, an employment, a political party, a religion (or lack thereof), not to mention a psychological and emotional identity as “me.” At different times I catch myself delighting and reveling in all of these things. Here I am: a white European male from Scotland, living in a village near Bordeaux, a middle-class intellectual, a writer and teacher liberal and green in politics, a secular Buddhist who spends a lot of time narrating, editing, and worrying about the story of me in my head.

It is impossible *not* to consider oneself in such terms. The Buddha may have no longer delighted and reveled in his place, but for as long as he lived he belonged to the solar lineage, was a subject of King Pasenadi of Kosala, the father of his son (Rāhula), a nobleman from the town of Kapilavatthu, a cousin of the Sakiyan chief, Mahānāma. And since he continued to inhabit the same body, nervous system, and brain with which he was born, I can see no reason why his primary intuitive sense of being the person he was would have changed significantly either.

To “leave home for homelessness” to become a wandering mendicant therefore means to relinquish a particular way of relating to one’s home or place rather than actually repudiating them. How many idealistic young men (like my younger self) have left behind their family and homeland in a grand display of renunciation to become a monk in a foreign land only to find that they have transferred all their delight and reveling in a place to something more exotic? To detest one place only to delight in another does not, from Gotama’s point of view, solve anything. Without a genuine change of heart in one’s core relationship to life itself, pursuing a “spiritual” vocation will be a waste of time.

Whatever comfort and security may be gained by identifying with a place are achieved at the cost of alienating oneself from one's ground. A place is seductive because it provides relative permanence and reliability in an impermanent and unreliable world. My sense of having a place reassures me about who I am, which is constantly affirmed both by the ongoing monologue in my head and by the way others address and treat me. Only when one's place is threatened—by the failure of a marriage, the loss of a job, the occupation of one's homeland, a crisis of faith, the breakdown of one's health, a psychological collapse—does one realize how fragile and tentative it is. At such moments one may be overwhelmed by a glimpse into the fascinating and terrifying abyss of one's ground.

Gotama describes conditioned arising, nirvana, and the dharma as things he sees (*dasati*), shows (*deseti*), and makes visible. His awakening was not achieved by gaining privileged knowledge of an ultimate truth but by seeing himself and his world in a radically different way. The existential shift he underwent might be understood perceptually as a gestalt switch, as when one suddenly sees two faces in profile rather than a vase or, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's example, a rabbit instead of a duck.<sup>17</sup> Place and ground are not separate states but two different ways of configuring the same life. I can configure myself as a person assured of his identity and place who unhesitatingly follows the bidding of his habitual reactions, or I can configure myself as a person balanced on a shifting, changing ground who aspires to respond to the unique demands of each situation unconditioned by reactivity. The challenge of practicing the dharma is to discover how to establish the optimal conditions under which a human life can flourish from its ground.

( 2 )

Gotama described the shift from place to ground that constituted his awakening as *paṭisotaḡāmi*, "going against the stream."<sup>18</sup> The experi-

over a lump on the ground, thinking it might be a succulent piece of food. But by pecking at the lump the bird discovers that it is a stone. The crow flies away in disgust. “Like a crow attacking a rock and becoming despondent,” says Māra to himself, “I attack Gotama and despair.”<sup>21</sup>

Māra, the personification of reactivity, is conquered not by eliminating every last reaction from one’s mind but by finding a way to become impervious to his attacks. We acquire freedom from reactivity yet without the reactivity ceasing to occur. If we observe these impulses and do not feed them, they will die down over time and diminish in frequency. But, as this text makes clear, Gotama continued to be subject to Māra’s attacks even after his awakening. As long as we are embodied in flesh, nerves, and blood, reactivity will be part and parcel of what it entails to be human.

I doubt that the Buddha used the same word *sota* (stream) in two conflicting senses by accident. Here he says that the practice of dharma “goes against the stream,” but as we saw in the previous chapter, he described the practitioner of the dharma as one who “enters the stream.” In the first case, *sota* denotes the stream of reactivity; in the second, it refers to the stream of the eightfold path. By combining these two metaphors, we arrive at an image of two streams of water encountering each other head on: the stream of the eightfold path flows into and goes against the stream of reactivity. The result is turbulence.

### ( 3 )

At some point, Gotama had to face the challenge of articulating what he had come to understand. Whether we accept the traditional account of the awakening as having occurred in the course of one moonlit night beneath a pipal tree in Uruvelā (Bodh Gaya) or we accept what I think is the more likely course, that it occurred gradually over many years of studying, learning, reflecting, discussing, arguing, and meditating in various groves and cities throughout northern India, in either case he had to make a decision to assume the role of a teacher and cease to think of himself as being on a quest.

At the conclusion of the account of his awakening to a twofold ground in *The Noble Quest*, Gotama reflects: “If I were to teach the dharma and others were not to understand me, that would be tiring and vexing for me. . . . Considering this, my mind inclined to inaction rather than action.”<sup>22</sup> This hesitation sounds a jarring note. It also conflicts with the passage from the Mūlasarvāstavāda Vinaya in which, shortly after the awakening, he explicitly declares to Māra his resolve to establish a fourfold assembly of men and women mendicants and men and women adherents to understand, practice, and teach the dharma. Since this episode is referred to in the Pali version of the *Great Discourse on the Passing*, it must originally have been included in that tradition, only to be suppressed in favor of the story preserved in *The Noble Quest*.<sup>23</sup>

In *The Noble Quest*, Gotama’s supposed reluctance to teach is a pretext to arouse the god Brahmā Sahampati from his slumber. The Buddha recalls how this god “knew with his mind the thought in my mind,” and “just as quickly as a strong man might extend his flexed arm, he vanished in the Brahma-world and appeared before me.” Once the deity rearranged his clothing, he commanded: “Let the Teacher reveal the dharma! There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are wasting [away] through not hearing the dharma!”<sup>24</sup>

With the appeal to divine authority, this account provides an egregious example of the Brahmanization of the early Buddhist community. After Gotama’s death, in a world where the social and religious norms of Brahmanism had taken root, the fortuitous appearance of Brahmā would have provided a convincing explanation of how Gotama was inspired to address the deluded world and teach the dharma. The Pali commentary to this passage goes further and says that Gotama “wanted Brahmā to entreat him to teach so that beings who venerated Brahmā would recognize the precious value of the dharma and desire to listen to it.”<sup>25</sup> Bluntly: the dharma is legitimate because it was sanctioned by God.

Introducing the apparition and the command of a deity means

that the Buddha's subsequent movements follow the script of a divinely inspired scenario; they do not represent a human struggle to articulate the dharma. *The Noble Quest* proceeds to describe Gotama's departure from Uruvelā; his arrival at the Deer Park at Isipatana, near Benares; his meeting with his five former companions in asceticism; his regaining of their confidence; and his repeated declaration "The deathless has been attained!" Any wanderer or brahmin of the day would have understood the utterance as shorthand for having reached one's goal. It says nothing distinctive about what Gotama understood. The text seeks to provide Gotama with legitimacy in a Brahmanized world but avoids mentioning the counterintuitive nature of his awakening. And rather than providing an account of what he taught, the text just says: "I was able to convince the mendicants of the group of five."<sup>26</sup>

Only one detail in this narrative might refer to a historical event. Shortly after setting off for Benares, Gotama encountered a wanderer called Upaka of the fatalist Ājīvaka school. "Your faculties are clear," remarked Upaka. "Your skin is pure and bright. Who is your teacher? Whose dharma do you profess?" In reply, Gotama declared (in a series of bombastic verses) that he had no teacher or counterpart and that no one understood things the way he did. Upaka responded: "'May it be so, friend.' Then, shaking his head, he took a bypath and departed."<sup>27</sup> The episode fails to present Gotama in a wholly positive light, and some of the phrasing is in an archaic form of Pali, which together suggest that such a meeting could have taken place. With its ironic tone, the story mocks charismatic authority. Gotama is left chastened. He had impressed Upaka with his presence but had signally failed to impress him with his words. On opening his mouth, he must have sounded like any guru of his (or our) time: gurus tend to be charismatic individuals whose claim to enlightenment rests merely on their own or their followers' say-so.

In recalling how he "set out to wander by stages to Benares," Gotama describes meeting Upaka on the road between Uruvelā and the town of Gayā. Yet Gayā is twelve miles to the northeast of Uruvelā,

while Benares lies one hundred fifty miles almost due west. Why would someone heading for Benares proceed in nearly the opposite direction? And when we recall that Gotama had just been seriously ill from eating rich food, it seems implausible that he would even have undertaken a long journey when the pre-monsoon heat would have been at its peak. As a wanderer, he would have also known full well that as soon as the Rains began, the roads would turn into quagmires. All these considerations raise the question as to whether he went to Benares at all.<sup>28</sup>

From the appearance of Brahmā onward, the episode reads like an attempt to present the Buddha as deferring to the cultural and religious norms of Brahmanism. Not only was Benares believed to be the great holy city of the brahmins, but the five ascetics with whom Gotama early on practiced the principles of ascetism were also said to be brahmins. Yet the oddest feature of the story is that three months later he returned from Benares with sixty converts, ending up at the very place where he had started out, Uruvelā, before heading (again) for Gayā, where, after converting a large number of matted-hair fire worshippers, he delivered the discourse *On Fire* on a hill outside the town. Why would he make a three-hundred-mile detour to the west before resuming his journey to Gayā and then Rājagaha in the east? Here is the reason given in *The Noble Quest*: “with the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I saw that (the five ascetics) were living in Benares in the Deer Park at Isipatana.”<sup>29</sup> For a modern reader, this appeal to clairvoyance to fill an explanatory gap casts further doubt on the credibility of the story.

As the Brahmanization of the Gangetic basin took hold, people came to take the Brahmanic worldview for granted. Even if the journey to Benares and the stay at the Deer Park never took place, it would have made perfect sense to them that the first discourse Gotama gave occurred in a sacred Brahmanic site, was delivered to brahmins, and was founded upon a distinctive claim as to what was true—that is, the four noble truths.

A far more likely scenario is that after his awakening the Buddha chose to spend the Rains with the small community of ascetics with whom he had recently been living across the Nerañjarā River in the nearby hills. It was probably to these men that he delivered what have come down to us as the first two discourses: *The Four Tasks* and *On Not-Self*. In economy of structure and refinement of argument, *The Four Tasks* bears the marks of a text worked and reworked over a long time. The different versions that exist in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan suggest that editing continued well after the Buddha's death. Yet since its core message lies at the very heart of Gotama's vision, a simplified form of the discourse—summarized perhaps in the slogan “Whatever is subject to arising is subject to ceasing”—was probably in use as a teaching device from a very early period. We know, for example, that when Gotama and his band of converted fire worshippers reached Rājagaha, Sāriputta is said to have uttered this slogan on gaining his first insight into the dharma.<sup>39</sup>

On the basis of what we know about the awakening from *The Noble Quest*, Gotama's primary challenge as a teacher would have been to translate his vision of the dharma as a twofold ground into the practice of the dharma as a way of life. He had to convert an insight about conditioned arising and nirvana into an ethical, contemplative, and philosophical discipline. He had to shape something that was private, intuitive, and inchoate into a form that was accessible to others, carefully reasoned and pragmatically structured. My hypothesis is that at some point he came to conceive of the twofold ground as a fourfold task.

In classical terminology, the fourfold task is this:

Suffering (*dukkha*) is to be comprehended (*pariññā*).

The arising (*samudaya*) is to be let go of (*pahāna*).

The ceasing (*nirodha*) is to be beheld (*sacchikāta*).

The path (*magga*) is to be cultivated (*bhāvanā*).

ing is the origin of suffering” and openness to the ambiguity, uncanniness, and ineffability of life as it reveals itself and withdraws from moment to moment.

On numerous occasions we find Gotama comparing the practice of the dharma to the skilled activity of a laborer or artisan. We saw how he likened the practitioner to a farmer irrigating a field, a fletcher fashioning an arrow, a carpenter shaping a piece of wood.<sup>35</sup> In another passage, he instructs his followers to develop concentration (*samādhi*), exertion (*paggaha*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) the way “a goldsmith would prepare a furnace, heat up the crucible, take some gold with tongs, and put it into the crucible. From time to time he would blow on it, from time to time sprinkle water over it, and from time to time just look on.”<sup>36</sup> He compares the person who practices mindful breathing to a “skilled wood-turner,” who “when making a long turn understands ‘I’m making a long turn,’ and when making a short turn understands ‘I’m making a short turn.’”<sup>37</sup> He likens the meditator who analyzes the elements of his body to a “skilled butcher who has killed a cow and is seated at a crossroads cutting it into pieces.”<sup>38</sup> The Buddha admires artisans’ mastery of the skills they employ so effortlessly and effectively. To master the dharma likewise requires more than just gaining a theoretical knowledge of its teachings. To practice the dharma requires know-how.

To embrace life with comprehension involves coping. It has more to do with how we get about, deal with conflicts, realize possibilities, and engage with others than with acquiring knowledge of the nature of the mind or reality. Comprehension requires the opposite of aloofness; it requires being embedded in a culture, a language, a society, not to mention a flesh-and-blood body that inhales and exhales, drinks and eats, pisses and shits.

The kind of knowing entailed in *pariññā* may therefore be more akin to *connaître* than to *savoir*, or to *kennen* than to *wissen*, to use French and German comparisons. The knowing of *pariññā* is like the ways in which we know a person, a piece of music, a path, a town. It comes from living or working with someone, spending many seasons in a

landscape, or slowly gaining an appreciation of a work of art. To comprehend *dukkha* is to comprehend life intimately and ironically with all its paradoxes and quirks, its horrors and jokes, its sublimity and banality. As we saw in the exchange between the Buddha and Mahānāma at Bharaṇḍu's lodging, comprehension is concerned with sensual desire, the physical world, and feelings.<sup>39</sup> As such, it extends far beyond the parameters of one's skin to include other people, animals, birds, insects, grasses, microorganisms—the entire biosphere.

On one occasion at Sāvatti, Gotama posed the rhetorical question “And what, *bhikkhus*, is comprehension (*pariññā*)?” to which he replied: “The ending of greed, the ending of hatred, the ending of confusion. That is called ‘comprehension.’”<sup>40</sup> Such comprehension is neither inflected nor determined by the habitual reactivity of being greedy, full of hate, or confused. In positive terms, we might describe it as an understanding that is openhearted, clearheaded, compassionate, and equanimous.

We have already seen that the phrase “the ending of greed, the ending of hatred, the ending of confusion” is the definition of nirvana.<sup>41</sup> If “comprehension” and “nirvana” are synonymous, then the four tasks must overlap. If the first task, to comprehend suffering, is equivalent to the ending of greed, hatred, and confusion, how does it differ from the third task, to behold the ceasing (of greed, hatred, confusion)—that is, the achievement of nirvana? The tasks emphasize different facets of a single experience. At times we might focus on comprehending the world in which we are embedded, and at other times we might focus on being aware that comprehension is devoid of attachment, aversion, and vanity. For this reason, I prefer to think of the tasks as combined into a single fourfold task.

( 5 )

**The arising (*samudaya*) is to be let go of (*pahāna*).**

We are creatures who react as we come into contact with the world through our senses. If what we meet feels pleasant, we react with at-

traction; if it feels unpleasant, we react with aversion; and if it feels neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we react with restlessness or boredom. To these reactions we could add guilt, self-doubt, vanity, inadequacy, anxiety, conceit, paranoia, expectation, wishful thinking, and so on. Such reactions are entirely natural. They are neither good nor bad. Strictly speaking, they are not even “ours.” They are simply what happens when an organism interacts with its environment. They are *what arises*.

The second facet of the fourfold task is to let go of what arises. This might seem contradictory. If what arises as a reaction to the world is just another natural feature of the world, then surely it falls within the scope of the first facet of the fourfold task as something else to be comprehended and embraced. How, you might reasonably ask, can I embrace *and* let go of a reaction at the same time? Another verse from the *Dhammapada* provides a clue:

The sage moves through a village  
Just as the bee gathers pollen  
And flies off without harming  
The flower, its color, or fragrance.<sup>42</sup>

The sage acquires what is necessary for survival, yet with a sensitivity of touch that leaves no trail of destruction in its wake. The person who lets go of reactivity does not shun involvement with the world but moves nimbly and lightly through it.

The word I am translating as “reactivity” is *taṇhā*, which literally means “thirst” or “craving.” Here is the definition of *taṇhā* found in *The Four Tasks*:

This is the arising (*samudaya*): it is craving (*taṇhā*), which is repetitive, wallows in attachment and greed, obsessively indulges in this and that: craving for stimulation, craving for existence, craving for nonexistence.<sup>43</sup>

*Taṇhā* is as complex an idea as *dukkha*. Just as “suffering” fails to convey the full sense of *dukkha*, so too does “craving” fail to convey the full

sense of *taṇhā*. If we understand *dukkha* as shorthand for “life,” we can think of *taṇhā* as shorthand for the myriad reactions that life provokes in us. In both cases, the terms flag a central feature of what they denote (the tragic in the case of *dukkha*; desire in the case of *taṇhā*), but that one feature is not sufficient to capture the entire spectrum of what is meant by the terms.

*Taṇhā*, as an element within the classical doctrine of the twelve links of conditionality, is what arises in reaction to the feelings that come from sensory contact with the differentiated world (*nāmarūpa*) of a conscious being. The reactions include hatred and indifference, loathing and boredom, as much as craving and desire. Nor is the arising of *taṇhā* just a series of isolated events; it is a self-reinforcing cycle. A conscious being “wallows” and “indulges” in worries, fears, obsessions, and fantasies. In response to a gnawing sense of lack, *taṇhā* supports a yearning to fill the inner void with ever more intense stimulation. Rooted in feelings of existential incompleteness and inadequacy, it inflates the ego and affirms one’s importance in the world. And whenever these strategies fail to deliver, it lapses into a hankering for intoxication, oblivion, and even death.

In describing greed, hatred, and confusion as fires, Gotama is aware of how reactivity flares up whenever a spark ignites it. Once it has flared up, a person tends to believe in and indulge it, thereby fanning the flames. In this way, reactivity both *amplifies* the pain initially experienced and *triggers* proliferating thoughts (*papañca*). The Buddha compared physical pain to being struck by an arrow, which is then unnecessarily amplified by a second arrow of mental disquiet and anguish.<sup>44</sup> In an alternative version of the links of conditionality, he spoke of how feelings of pleasure and pain give rise to perceptions that lead to thoughts that endlessly proliferate.<sup>45</sup>

Gotama recognized that human beings spend an inordinate amount of time absorbed in the amplifications and proliferations of reactivity. He talks of these responses as the “snares” or “fishhooks” of Māra. Once someone has been trapped or snagged, it is difficult, pain-

ful, and fruitless to struggle to wrench free, for that struggle is likely to be another variant of the very reactivity being struggled against. It just tightens the grip of the snare or embeds the hook's barb deeper in the flesh. People fail to understand why and how they keep getting "tricked" by the "beautiful and hideous shapes" conjured by Māra.<sup>46</sup> And, failing to understand, they become "like tangled balls of string."<sup>47</sup>

By remaining in thrall to repetitive, obsessive reactions, people also become increasingly vain and self-centered. Such reactivity (*taṇhā*) engenders clinging (*upādāna*) in the traditional twelve-link sequence of conditionality. A text in the *Connected Discourses* offers the account of clinging given to Ānanda that led to his conversion. The speaker is his preceptor, a man called Puṇṇa Mantāniputta.

It is by clinging, Ānanda, that "I am" occurs, not without clinging. It is by clinging to form, feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and consciousness that "I am" occurs, not without clinging. Suppose a vain young person would examine his face in a mirror or in a bowl filled with pure, clean water: he would look at it with clinging, not without clinging. So, too, it is by clinging to form, feelings, perceptions, inclinations and consciousness that "I am" occurs, not without clinging.<sup>48</sup>

What Puṇṇa describes here is not the everyday sense of "I am" but the obsessive self-regard of the narcissist, the person who sees the world solely in terms of his own desires and fears. Wherever such an egoist looks, she beholds only an image of herself reflected back. In considering others merely as means to realize her own ends, she loses the capacity to empathize, which leads to a spiral of alienation, loneliness, and despair.

Self-centered isolation is a state of inner "aridity" (*khila*). The discourse *On the Aridity of the Heart* presents this aridity as the very opposite of stream entry.<sup>49</sup> People who suffer from it are paralyzed by their doubts about their teacher (*satthar*), the dharma, and the community

*image  
not  
available*

( 6 )

**The ceasing (*nirodha*) is to be beheld (*sacchikāta*).**

The third facet of the fourfold task is to “behold the ceasing” (*nirodhaṃ sacchikaroti*), which is equivalent to becoming aware of nirvana. Here is the classical definition of “ceasing”:

This is the ceasing: the traceless fading away and ceasing of that reactivity (*taṇhā*), the letting go and abandoning of it, freedom and independence from it.<sup>52</sup>

This succinct description allows for nirvana to be understood in one of two senses: either as the ceasing of *taṇhā* or as freedom and independence from *taṇhā*.

The first sense of nirvana is traditionally understood as a quasi-mystical experience in which an accomplished meditator achieves sufficient calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) to bring his reactivity to a complete stop. But this interpretation makes nirvana accessible only to trained meditators, thus conflicting with the account of it as “immediate, clearly visible, inviting, uplifting, and personally sensed by the wise.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Gotama’s conversation with the wanderer Sīvaka implies that one can become aware of nirvana *whenever* greed, hatred, and confusion are momentarily inactive—irrespective of whether one self-identifies as a Buddhist or practices meditation.<sup>54</sup>

For the second sense of nirvana as freedom *from* reactivity, we again need to turn to the dialogues with Māra. Here, one becomes aware of nirvana whenever one understands reactivity for what it is and thereby gains freedom from its control. In this case, the experience of nirvana becomes possible even while in the throes of reactivity itself.

Unless we regard nirvana as clearly visible to ordinary people and accessible to them as a perspective from which they can live their everyday lives, it would be difficult to understand how “beholding cessation” could be an integral part of a fourfold task that is open to all. To *behold* and thus become aware of nirvana means consciously to affirm and

valorize those moments when you see for yourself that you are free to think, speak, and act in ways that are not determined by reactivity. Nirvana is a space of moral possibility, the gateway to an ethical life. This “dharma door” (as the Chinese call it) is always open, but is frequently blocked and hidden from view by the chimeras conjured by Māra. To become aware of this “clearing” in the jungle of reactivity and keep it in view is a task every bit as exacting and arduous as those of comprehending *dukkha* and letting go of *taṇhā*.

Nirvana is clearly visible the moment reactivity stops. *Sacchikaroti* (to behold) literally means to “eye” something, “to look for yourself.” At the conclusion of *The Four Tasks*, the “dharma eye” of one of the five ascetics, Koṇḍañña, is said to have opened, which led him to utter the phrase “Whatever is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.” The opening of the dharma eye is equivalent to stream entry. Koṇḍañña’s vision of nirvana came about as soon as he realized that just as reactions arise, so they invariably cease.

A sequence of texts in the *Numerical Discourses* names twenty-one householders and adherents (including Mahānāma, as well as Jīvaka, whom we will meet in chapter 8) who have found fulfillment in the *tathāgata*, have become seers of the deathless, and go about having beheld the deathless. They are said to have achieved this by virtue of embodying six qualities: “lucid confidence” in the Buddha, the dharma, and the community, together with “noble virtue, noble understanding, and noble liberation.”<sup>55</sup> “Deathless” (*amata*) is also defined as the “ending of greed, hatred, and confusion,” thus making it synonymous with both “nirvana” and “comprehension.”<sup>56</sup> This passage affirms how people fully engaged in the world as “seers of the deathless” had not only become aware of nirvana but lived their lives from its perspective.

This text has troubled traditional commentators because it presents householders as having achieved levels of insight and freedom that are usually reserved for arahants, who, according to orthodox belief, have to be celibate mendicants. Yet in terms of historical crit-

ical analysis, the difficulty of aligning a canonical text with orthodoxy makes it more likely to have been spoken by the Buddha himself—for the simple reason that it would not have served the interests of orthodoxy to add it later. By singling out these twenty-one relatively obscure figures in this way, we are provided with concrete examples of people who recognized, performed, and accomplished the fourfold task amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life in fifth century BCE India.

“Deathless” (*amata*) is another word for abundant life. If we think of Māra as death (the words *amata* and *māra* are both rooted in the Vedic *mṛ* = death), then to no longer be constrained by his armies is to be freed to live fully. Gotama does not think of the deathless as immortality—as the term is understood in Brahmanism—but as the positive absence of reactivity. Perhaps he is playing on the mythic sense of *amata* (like the Sanskrit *amṛta* and its Greek cognate *ambrosia*) as the divine nectar that grants eternal life.

The person who is aware of the deathless is one who dwells in emptiness. In the *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness*, we learned of a man who retreats to a forest and passes through the entire gamut of deep meditative states only to realize in the end that all such states are conditioned and contrived. “In knowing and seeing thus, his heart was freed from the effluences (*āsava*) of sensual desire, being, and ignorance.” This is yet another way of describing nirvana. But that was not the end of the story. “With none of the anxieties due to those effluences,” reflected the man, “I am still prone to the amount of anxiety that comes from having the six sense fields of a living body. This state of awareness is empty of those effluences. What is not empty is this: the six sense fields of a living body.”<sup>57</sup>

To behold nirvana is to realize that one is not beholden to the prompts of sensual desire, being, and ignorance. Yet the freedom enabled in this non-reactive space does not occur in a vacuum but within the context of “the six sense fields of a living body,” which are not empty at all but full of both anxiety and possibility. The challenge of

“beholding what ceases” is to learn how to live *in* and *from* the perspective of such emptiness—the “abode,” as Gotama put it, “of the great person”—all the while engaging with a world that constantly and unpredictably impacts one’s senses, triggering cascades of reactivity.<sup>58</sup>

One of the oldest passages in the canon from the *Chapter of Eights* (*Aṭṭhakavagga*) that was cited above as an example of a skeptical voice says:

Wrong-minded people do voice opinions  
As do truth-minded people too.  
When an opinion is stated, the sage is not drawn in—  
There’s nothing arid about the sage.<sup>59</sup>

The sage (*muni*) is concerned not only with what impacts his physical senses but with words and concepts that impact his mind. He is on guard against seductive ideas, compelling “images” of the world that seem to explain everything, and beliefs that provide heart-warming consolation. The problem with such ideas, images, and beliefs does not lie in whether they are “true” or “false.” There is something about the very way in which a concept is structured that limits and imprisons us. “A picture held us captive,” said Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. “And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”<sup>60</sup> There is something arid and barren about holding on to any position, even a Buddhist or Wittgensteinian one.

This healthy suspicion of opinion prevents the sage from getting drawn in to agreeing or disagreeing with a stated view. He may consider what was said in terms of its usefulness—whether it is appropriate for dealing with a situation at hand or resolving a specific dilemma—but does not let himself get lured into disputing whether it is true or false in any final, metaphysical sense. The sage has left behind the aridity of “place”; he no longer seeks certainty and finality to bolster the security of his ego. A sage lives from the fertility of a “ground” that responds creatively and spontaneously to the unfolding conditions of life.