



SHAMBHALA DRAGON EDITIONS

THE AWAKENED ONE
A Life of the Buddha



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Homelessness, Teachers, Asceticism

REACHING THE TOP OF A HILL outside Kapilavastu, the bodhisattva considered turning to have a last look in the light of the moon at the city where he had spent his life. He had just firmly resolved to continue without looking back, when Mara, the embodiment of self-deception, appeared suspended in the air before him.

“Do not go,” cried Mara, “for in seven days the golden wheel of universal sovereignty will appear, and you will become ruler over the whole world with its four great continents and myriads of islands.”

“Mara! I know you!” exclaimed the bodhisattva. “And well I know that what you have said is true. But rulership over this world is not what I seek, but to become a buddha in order to heal its suffering.”

Having been seen for what he was, Mara disappeared, but from that time on he clung to the bodhisattva like a shadow, waiting for the moment when weakness might appear.

The bodhisattva continued riding through the night and put a great distance between himself and Kapilavastu. In the morning he crossed a small river and dismounted on the far bank.

“Chandaka,” he said, “I am entering the life of homelessness in order to seek truth for the sake of all. It is time for you to take Kanthaka and go back to Kapilavastu and my father.” He handed his horse’s bridle to the

trusted servant. Then he took off his gold and jewel ornaments, including the royal diadem from his head, and gave them also to Chandaka to bring back.

Chandaka pleaded with the prince to give up his plan and return to the palace. He spoke of the grief his departure would cause his father and mother, his wife and child, his female attendants, his servants, and Chandaka himself. He spoke of the disappointment of all the Shakyans, his future subjects. But Siddhartha was firm. He took Chandaka's sword and cut off his long hair, which was gathered on top of his head in a princely coif. Then his attention fell on his robe of fine embroidered silk, and he thought how ill-suited it was for a wandering mendicant. He was puzzling over what alternative might be possible when a deer hunter stepped out of the forest onto the riverbank. He was wearing a simple saffron-dyed robe much like those worn by wandering mendicants. The bodhisattva greeted the hunter and offered to exchange clothing with him. The man was well pleased and soon departed in the prince's rich robe, while the bodhisattva, equally pleased, remained behind in the plain one. There was nothing to distinguish him now from an ordinary mendicant other than his lordly bearing and beauty of face and limb. Only a seer or a rare brahmin might have recognized the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks he bore upon him.

"Now go back and tell the king what you have seen," the bodhisattva told Chandaka.

But Chandaka found it extremely difficult to leave his lord alone and unattended. Now he pleaded to be allowed to remain and enter homelessness with him. The bodhisattva replied that the time was not yet ripe for him to enter such a life and firmly requested him finally to go do as he was bidden. Chandaka turned away weeping, leading the horse. Kanthaka now also sensed the parting. As he was being pulled away, he whickered to his master and tried to stand his ground. At last Chandaka, himself confused, managed to turn him, and the two crossed the river and disappeared into the forest. It is said that Kanthaka was unable to

bear separation from his beloved master and died on the homeward journey, leaving Chandaka with a double sorrow to bear.

NOW THE BODHISATTVA had gone from prince to beggar in an instant. He had won the life he had contemplated with longing. Freedom was his; all worldly bonds had been severed. But now he must face the raw and rugged challenges of survival, and never before had he ever had even to bathe or dress by himself. He was supported only by the knowledge that this was the course he had to follow if he meant to be victorious over birth, old age, sickness, and death. He resolved never to turn back until he had accomplished this victory, and he began his wandering.

Day by day he learned to beg food. At first, accustomed as he was to only the finest dishes, he was nearly unable to put the leftovers of crude fare he collected in his alms bowl to his lips. But gradually he became used to this coarse food and to sleeping on the ground with no shelter but trees or rocks.

As the bodhisattva wandered, it began to dawn on him that he would eventually have to find a teacher. It had not suited his father to provide him with extensive training in philosophy or meditation; thus he felt he had to learn what could be learned from spiritual teachers. He soon discovered that, as there were many wandering mendicants pursuing the holy life of homelessness, there were also many teachers professing the various doctrines and different methods of practice that the mendicants followed. The teachers lived in forest or countryside as hermits or as heads of mendicant communities, usually close to towns or villages where food could be begged. For their part, the people were used to mendicants. It was traditionally regarded as a good deed to provide them with the minimal sustenance they required to pursue their spiritual strivings.

The mendicant Gautama made his way south by stages across the Ganges to the country of the Magadhans. There he took to staying in a cave on Mount Pandava in the neighborhood of the Magadhan capital Rajagriha.

As he made his morning begging rounds in the city, Gautama made a strong impression on the townsfolk. His stately carriage and elegant speech, his fine hands and regal gestures, were not in keeping with the rough robe he wore or his beggarly station. Also his directness, his intense and beautiful face, and the quality of his composure compelled attention. As he went about the city gathering alms food, crowds, each day larger, gathered to bow to him with joined hands or merely to stare as he passed.

Word of the singular mendicant came to the king of Magadha, Bimbisara. Then one morning the king stood on the palace roof looking down upon the city, and he himself caught a glimpse of the bodhisattva. He was profoundly struck by the sight of him and immediately sent messengers to follow him and find out where he was staying. The messengers followed Gautama across fields and through groves until they came to the slopes of Mount Pandava. There they saw the bodhisattva sit down in front of his cave and, after suitably arranging his seat, slowly eat his meal. They saw him wash his hands and bowl in a nearby stream and then afterward remain sitting cross-legged in front of the cave in meditation. Then they returned to the king and reported what they had seen.

The king set out at once by road for Mount Pandava in his chariot, accompanied by his retinue. When he got there, encumbered though he was by his royal robes and ornaments, he did not hesitate to climb the slopes until he came to the bodhisattva's cave. Seeing the beautiful young man with broad chest and strong arms sitting there deeply composed in meditation, the king was moved again. He approached the bodhisattva and greeted him respectfully. Then he took a seat on a nearby rock. The king courteously inquired about the mendicant's health, and Gautama, responding with due form, asked suitable questions concerning the king's own welfare.

When the proprieties had been observed, Bimbisara said, "I can tell from your bearing and demeanor as well as from your speech that you are no ordinary mendicant seeker. You could only be the scion of some

noble and wealthy family. How is it that you have gone forth into homelessness while still so young? It is understandable and proper for a householder to abandon his responsibilities and seek the eternal verities when he has reached a certain age, when he has fulfilled his familial duties and his children are grown. Perhaps you have gone forth in the prime of manhood because some trouble has driven you. Or perhaps you are impatient and do not wish to wait long years for your inheritance. If either of those is the case, I stand ready here and now to offer you half my kingdom. For my eye sees clearly that you are suited to high estate and rulership. Why should one born to command men be wandering about as a homeless beggar? Or if you have been wronged by your own kin or driven out of your home, I am fully prepared to stand with you at the head of my armies. We shall conquer what is rightfully yours."

"Sir, you are kind," replied the bodhisattva. "But I have no need of your kingdom or your armies. Of my own accord I have left behind a great and prosperous kingdom. My father is Shuddhodana, son of the noble Gautama clan and king of the Shakyans in Kapilavastu. I have entered homelessness because I cannot accept the tyranny of sickness, old age, and death. These are the enemies I yearn to conquer. Against them your armies are powerless. Only through spiritual striving may I find a way to raise the victory banner against these ravagers of happiness. This is the goal I seek, and nothing can turn me aside from it. As to waiting till later, who knows how long one may live?"

King Bimbisara admired the young man none the less for having rejected both his generosity and his advice. He felt the conviction and wisdom in his words and was directly touched by them, realizing that he too was in no way proof against impermanence.

"Since I cannot dissuade you," he said, "my wish is that you may attain your great goal quickly and without obstruction. And when you do, please show me your favor and return to my country, and let my subjects and me benefit from your wisdom."

Gautama agreed to this, and the king arose and courteously took his leave.

SOON AFTER THIS, having heard of a highly reputed teacher, the bodhisattva traveled back north across the Ganges to the hermitage of the renowned sage Arada of the Kalama clan, not far from the city of Vaishali. When he got there he found that Arada had a large community of followers living round about him in the forest. Without hesitation, Gautama asked to see the teacher. One of the disciples conducted him into Master Arada's presence.

"Sir," said Gautama, "I wish to lead a holy life under your guidance. Please allow me to remain here and teach me your doctrine and practice."

Arada looked the bodhisattva over appraisingly and was impressed by what he saw. "Young man," he replied, "you may stay and be my student. My doctrine is such that a wise person may quickly learn it. Having learned it, he can enter upon the practice of it. Practicing it in meditation, he can quickly attain the knowledge possessed by his teacher through his own direct realization."

The bodhisattva explained to Arada how he had been shocked by the sight of old age, sickness, and death, and deeply troubled by the realization that whatever is born must always suffer from impermanence and sooner or later die. How frail and meaningless happiness had become! He had realized he must search to make a relationship with something that lay beyond birth, old age, sickness, and death. Yet all interests, desires, ambitions, and strivings—the very life of the senses itself—only seemed to draw one further into the cycle of existence.

Arada replied that Gautama's insight was accurate and explained his metaphysical views about an eternal principle lying beyond the world of the senses. Gautama quickly learned Arada's doctrine in detail. When he was able to recite it flawlessly and answer questions about it correctly, Arada gave him the instructions he needed to attain successive levels of meditative absorption.

The practice began with physical seclusion from distractions of the senses—going to a quiet place. Then it was necessary to withdraw the mind's attention from the tyranny of desire and aversion, lethargy and restlessness, attachment and doubt—all those factors that keep one caught up in the drama of the phenomenal world. Once Gautama had accomplished this, he experienced freedom from distraction by sense consciousness and the joy arising from this freedom, as well as a sense of physical well-being. But this state still had to be maintained through thoughts. In the next level of meditation, the guidance of thoughts fell away, and there was the new joy of unwavering concentration as well as of the physical well-being. In the third level, joy was recognized as an obstacle. Gautama attained a meditative absorption where there was neither joy nor suffering, only alertness and well-being. Finally even the solidity of well-being became too coarse, and only unperturbed wakefulness remained.

The bodhisattva was able to progress through these four levels of meditation with unusual swiftness. Sometimes he was able to move on to the next step without having Arada explain it to him. Then at last he went to the teacher, who told him, "These four levels of meditative absorption have taken you beyond material form. Still there are subtle levels beyond form that hold one a prisoner in the cycle of suffering. I will teach you how to rise above these."

Arada taught Gautama that he first had to free his meditative awareness from lingering attachment to the subtle form of an object. To do this, he must enter absorption upon that subtle form and then shift his awareness out beyond its boundaries. In this way he could attain the absorption on boundless space. When that too was recognized as a clumsy fixation, he was to shift his awareness from boundless space to the consciousness perceiving it. This brought the absorption on boundless consciousness. The last phase that Arada could teach him was the meditative absorption based on emptiness, which came from letting awareness relinquish the emphasis on perception that remains as a vestige in boundless consciousness.

Gautama was not very long in achieving the absorption based on

emptiness, and he went to Arada and told him of his accomplishment. Arada was deeply moved. He said to the bodhisattva, "I am very fortunate to have encountered a disciple as gifted as you. In a short time you have learned and directly realized everything I know myself. I have no more to teach you. Your spiritual realization is equal to mine. Why not remain here with us, and you and I together will lead this community?"

But Gautama still felt himself far from total liberation. The goal of enlightenment still lay before him. So he thanked Arada Kalama for all that he had taught him, and courteously took his leave.

GAUTAMA HAD HEARD of another well-known forest master by the name of Rudraka Ramaputra, whose community was not far away. He set out through the country and soon found his way there. He presented himself to the master and told him what he had learned and what he was seeking. Then he asked to receive Rudraka's teaching.

Rudraka's doctrine was more elaborate than Arada's but similar. The meditative practice also was along the same lines, but Rudraka had mastered one more level of meditation beyond that based on emptiness. This was the level of neither perception nor nonperception.

The absorption based on emptiness still contained an imbalance resulting from falling into emptiness by letting go of consciousness. The next absorption neither perceived a new object nor was it turning its attention away from any.

When Gautama, in a short time, had achieved this final level, he went to Rudraka and told him so. Rudraka declared that the young mendicant had now reached his own level of realization. Perceiving the intensity of Gautama's seeking mind and the clarity of his insight, Rudraka requested him to stay and take over sole leadership of the community.

Gautama was pleased with this honor, but he declined Rudraka's offer. He explained as follows. "Even though this doctrine and practice have great subtlety, still, even when one has reached the level of neither perception nor nonperception, although there is then liberation from

form and from formlessness, there is still something left over—the thing that has been liberated from them, a watcher of "neither perception nor nonperception." As long as such a watcher, which some call a soul, remains, though one may momentarily be secluded from the cycle of suffering, the watcher remains as a seed for rebirth. As soon as the situation changes, rebirth easily takes place again. This is just what happens now when I get up from meditating. No matter how profound my absorption, after a short time I get caught up again in the world of the senses. The basic causes and conditions for rebirth have not been extinguished! Complete liberation has not been achieved! Enlightenment must still be sought!"

Having explained in this way, the bodhisattva took leave of Rudraka Ramaputra and again resumed his wandering. He felt now that there was no more he could learn from teachers. His two teachers had set his feet on the path, but now the time had come for him to direct his own journey. He was determined to spare no exertion to attain enlightenment, his final goal.

He began traveling southeast and again crossed the Ganges. Then he moved by short stages through the country of the Magadhans. In the wild, uninhabited lands, he was sometimes plagued by fear, the kind of fear one feels when alone in a remote place. Walking through the forest and suddenly hearing the loud snapping of a branch behind him, he experienced dread. When such things happened, he deliberately worked to defeat his fear. He refused to move a hairsbreadth from the spot where the fear struck or even to change his posture until he had overcome it. Gradually he became better at this and began to seek out frightening places. He visited forest shrines in the middle of the night where terror made his hair stand on end and his skin crawl. He would not move from the spot until he had confronted the fear and subdued it.

At last he came to the region of Uruvilva on the Nairanjana River, not far from the little town of Gaya, a place where he decided to settle down and work on his task in earnest. "There," he later recounted, "I saw an agreeable plot of ground, a delightful grove, a clear-flowing river

with pleasant, smooth banks, and nearby a village as alms resort. I thought: This will serve for the struggle of a clansman who seeks the struggle.”⁵

Since he had entered homelessness, all about him he had seen holy men performing ascetic practices such as holding the breath, fasting, or meditating under the midday sun within a circle of fire. These practices meant subjecting oneself to tremendous hardship and pain, which seemed to be a way to subdue oneself, to conquer completely the desires and attachments that made one get caught up again and again in the transient world of birth, old age, sickness, and death. Since Gautama had failed to attain enlightenment through the methods he had tried so far, he now felt he must try asceticism.

The Buddha later recalled these times to his disciples. “I thought: Suppose, with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain, and crush my mind with my mind? Then, as a strong man might seize a weaker by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him and crush him, so with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained, and crushed my mind with my mind. Sweat ran from my armpits when I did so.

“Though tireless energy was aroused in me, and unremitting mindfulness established, yet my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful effort. But such painful feeling as arose in me gained no power over my mind.

“I thought: Suppose I practice the meditation that is without breathing? I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths in my mouth and nose. When I did so, there was a loud sound of wind coming from my ear holes, as there is a loud sound when a smith’s bellows are blown.

“I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths in my mouth and nose and ears. When I did so, violent winds racked my head as if a strong man were splitting my head open with a sharp sword. And then there were violent pains in my head, as if a strong man were tightening a tough leather strap round my head as a head-band. And violent winds carved

up my belly, as a clever butcher or his apprentice carves up an ox’s belly with a sharp knife. And then there was a violent burning in my belly, as if two strong men had seized a weaker by both arms and were roasting him over a pit of live coals.

“And each time, though tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness established, yet my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful effort. But such painful feeling as arose in me gained no power over my mind. . . .

“I thought: Suppose I take very little food, say, a handful each time, whether it is bean soup or lentil soup or pea soup? I did so. And as I did so, my body reached a state of extreme emaciation; my limbs became like the joined segments of vine stems or bamboo stems, because of eating so little. My backside became like a camel’s hoof; the projections of my spine stood forth like corded beads; my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn; the gleam of my eyes, sunk far down in their sockets, looked like the gleam of water sunk far down in a deep well; my scalp shriveled and withered as a green gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. If I touched my belly skin, I encountered my backbone too; and if I touched my backbone, I encountered my belly skin too; for my belly skin cleaved to my backbone. If I made water or evacuated my bowels, I fell over on my face there. If I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at its roots, fell away from my body, because of eating so little.”

Gautama continued for a long time to mortify himself through extreme hardship. In the course of this time, Mara frequently came to him and tried to arouse the fear of death in him. He spoke sweetly to Gautama of the goodness of life and of the merit an active life in the world could bring — if only he would abandon the practices that were endangering his life. Gautama always replied firmly that he cared nothing for mere survival, especially since it was impossible anyhow. He did not fear death; he was willing to sacrifice his life. He sought only liberation from life and death.

Word of Gautama’s activities had spread through the country among

the mendicant seekers. They told one another how the former prince had quickly equaled Arada and Rudraka but then declined leadership of their communities. Especially they told of how he had now given himself over to the most relentless extremes of asceticism imaginable and must soon attain liberation or die. Kaundinya, the young brahmin who had predicted at the time of his birth that he would become a buddha and who had long since entered homelessness himself, heard of these things, and he came to find Gautama. He brought with him four fellow seekers named Ashvajit, Vashpa, Mahanaman, and Bhadraka. These five became Gautama's followers, and they served him. They brought him his tiny pittance of food. When he was too weak to drink, they helped him drink. When he was too weak to wash himself, they helped him wash. When he was too weak to stand, they helped him stand. And they awaited the day when he would attain enlightenment and be able to guide them also to the goal.

3

Enlightenment

AFTER NEARLY SIX YEARS had passed in this way, Gautama was close to death. He also began to wonder whether he had gone as far as it was possible to go in the direction of self-mortification. Whatever extremes of pain and privation others had ever suffered through asceticism, he had now suffered too. Others might possibly have equaled his own sufferings, but they could not have surpassed them. He had traveled that path as far as it could go. That method had been fully explored. Yet he had not succeeded in lifting himself beyond the ordinary human state. Supreme knowledge and vision still remained beyond his grasp.

Might there be another way of attaining enlightenment?

He remembered the incident in his childhood, at the plowing festival, when he had spontaneously entered meditation. As he later recalled, "I thought of the time when my Shakyam father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree: quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unprofitable things I had entered upon and abode in the first meditation, which is accompanied by thinking and exploring with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion. I thought: Might that be the way to enlightenment? Then, following upon that memory there came the recognition that this was the way to enlightenment."⁶

Why should he be afraid, he wondered, of the pleasure he had experienced then in meditation? It was pleasure that had nothing to do with sensual desires or attachment to impermanent things. He came to the conclusion that there was no reason to shy away from pleasure and well-being that came from being firmly established in a meditative state.

And then he thought he could not attain that spontaneous pleasure in his extreme state of deprivation and weakness. He thought, "What if I should eat some rice and bread?"

So the bodhisattva ate some rice and bread. Kaundinya and his other four followers were disgusted, thinking he had given up the struggle and was indulging himself. Nevertheless, over the next days, he resumed taking one meager meal per day. His followers would have nothing to do with this, and they left him. Since he was still too weak to gather alms himself, young women from the village, who felt both pity and awe for him, brought him a little food each day. His strength and his fine radiant color began to return.

On the morning of the full-moon day of the spring month of Vaishakha, thirty-five years to the day after he was born, the bodhisattva made his way to the nearby Nairanjana River to bathe. Afterward he climbed out on the bank and sat down in a grove of trees. He was still a little weak but he was full of confidence. The night before he had had five auspicious dreams, and he was now certain that his goal could no longer elude him. He had dreamed that he was of immense size and the earth was his bed. The Himalayas were his pillow, and his left hand lay in the ocean on the east and his right hand in the ocean on the west. This he understood to mean that he would attain complete enlightenment. Then he had dreamed that a creeper sprouted out of his navel and grew high enough to touch the clouds. This he understood to mean that he would know the way to enlightenment. He had dreamed that little white insects with black heads covered his lower legs all the way up to his knees. This he thought betokened myriads of white-robed lay followers. He dreamed that birds of four colors came from the four

directions, and then they landed at his feet and all turned white. This he understood to mean that people of all four castes — priests, warriors, merchants, and servants — would attain enlightenment through his teaching. Lastly, he dreamed that he was walking on a mountain of dirt but did not himself get dirty. This meant that all his material needs would be met, but through understanding their purpose he would never become attached to them.

As he was sitting there, a young and beautiful dark-haired woman wearing a dress of dark blue cloth approached. Her name was Sujata. She was the daughter of the chief cowherder of the village. Sujata too had heard that the mendicant Gautama was once again taking food. Now out of regard for Gautama, but also because she was hoping to win the gods' favor so they would bring her a suitable husband, she had decided to make a special food offering to the noble-born ascetic. Taking the finest cream that could be gotten from the milk of her father's herds, she had boiled some rice for him, sweetened it with wild honey, and put it in the finest dish she could find in her house. Now she bowed with respect and awe and requested him to accept her offering. Gautama smiled and took the dish of rice. Hardly daring to look at him, Sujata bowed again and departed.

Gautama ate the delicious food, the best food he had had since leaving the palace. It made him feel strong and good. Then he rested in the grove until the heat of the day had passed. Toward evening he was pervaded by a strong sense of purpose. He was sure that the time had come for the accomplishment of his task. He got up and crossed the river. On the other side, he met a grass-cutter who gave him some tufts of soft kusha grass. He walked on until he came to a place that felt suitable, and there he made a seat with the kusha grass on the east side of a pipal tree. It is said that this was the same place where countless buddhas before him had attained buddhahood. Then Gautama swore a resolute oath not to stir from that seat until he had attained enlightenment, even at the cost of his life.

As Gautama settled firmly into the cross-legged meditation posture,