

WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

OLD  
PATH  
WHITE  
CLOUDS



THICH NHAT HANH

# Contents

## Book One

- [1. Walking Just to Walk](#)
- [2. Tending Water Buffaloes](#)
- [3. An Armful of Kusa Grass](#)
- [4. The Wounded Swan](#)
- [5. A Bowl of Milk](#)
- [6. Beneath a Rose-Apple Tree](#)
- [7. White Elephant Prize](#)
- [8. The Jeweled Necklace](#)
- [9. The Path of Compassion](#)
- [10. Unborn Child](#)
- [11. Moonlight Flute](#)
- [12. Kanthaka](#)
- [13. Beginning Spiritual Practice](#)
- [14. Crossing the Ganga](#)
- [15. Forest Ascetic](#)
- [16. Was Yasodhara Sleeping?](#)
- [17. Pippala Leaf](#)
- [18. The Morning Star Has Risen](#)
- [19. Tangerine of Mindfulness](#)
- [20. The Deer](#)
- [21. The Lotus Pond](#)
- [22. Turning the Wheel of Dharma](#)
- [23. Dharma Nectar](#)
- [24. Taking Refuge](#)
- [25. Music's Lofty Peaks](#)
- [26. Water Rises, Too](#)
- [27. All Dharmas Are on Fire](#)

- 28. [Palm Forest](#)
- 29. [Dependent Co-Arising](#)

### **Book Two**

- 30. [Bamboo Forest](#)
- 31. [I Will Return in the Spring](#)
- 32. [The Finger Is Not the Moon](#)
- 33. [Beauty That Does Not Fade](#)
- 34. [Reunion](#)
- 35. [Early Morning Sunshine](#)
- 36. [Lotus Vow](#)
- 37. [A New Faith](#)
- 38. [O, Happiness!](#)
- 39. [Waiting for Daybreak](#)
- 40. [Cover the Land in Gold](#)
- 41. [Has Anyone Seen My Mother?](#)
- 42. [Love Is Understanding](#)
- 43. [Everyone's Tears Are Salty](#)
- 44. [The Elements Will Recombine](#)
- 45. [Opening the Door](#)
- 46. [A Handful of Simsapa Leaves](#)
- 47. [Follow the Dharma](#)
- 48. [Covering Mud with Straw](#)
- 49. [Earth's Lessons](#)
- 50. [A Handful of Bran](#)
- 51. [The Treasure of Insight](#)
- 52. [Fields of Merit](#)
- 53. [Dwelling in the Present Moment](#)
- 54. [Dwell in Mindfulness](#)
- 55. [Appearance of the Morning Star](#)

### **Book Three**

- 56. [Full Awareness of Breathing](#)
- 57. [The Raft Is Not the Shore](#)

- [58. A Handful of Precious Earth](#)
- [59. The Net of Theories](#)
- [60. Lady Visakha's Grief](#)
61. The Lion's Roar
62. Sariputta's Roar
- [63. All the Way to the Sea](#)
64. The Round of Birth and Death
- [65. Neither Full nor Empty](#)
- [66. Four Mountains](#)
- [67. Ocean Poet](#)
68. Three Wondrous Gates
- [69. Where Will the Buddha Go?](#)
- [70. The Quail and the Falcon](#)
71. The Art of Stringing a Sitar
- [72. Quiet Resistance](#)
- [73. Hidden Rice](#)
- [74. Cry of the Elephant Queen](#)
- [75. Tears of Happiness](#)
- [76. The Fruits of Practice](#)
- [77. Stars in Your Eyes](#)
- [78. Two Thousand Saffron Robes](#)
- [79. Sandalwood Tree Mushrooms](#)
80. Be Diligent!
81. Old Path White Clouds

## [Appendix](#)

### [Chapter Contents and Sources](#)

## Parallax Press Books by Thich Nhat Hanh

*Be Free Where You Are*

*Being Peace*

*Breathe! You Are Alive*

*Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*

*Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*

*Cultivating the Mind of Love*

*The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion*

*The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*

*Finding Our True Home: Living in the Pure Land Here and Now*

*For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings*

*Freedom Wherever We Go: A Buddhist Monastic Code for the Twenty-first Century*

*Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*

*The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*

*The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*

*Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*

*Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community*

*Keeping the Peace: Mindfulness in Public Service*

*The Long Road Turns to Joy: A Guide to Walking Meditation*

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*Master Tang Hoi: First Zen Teacher in Vietnam and China*

*My Master's Robe: Memories of a Novice Monk*

*Opening the Heart of the Cosmos: Insights on the Lotus Sutra*

*Our Appointment with Life*

*The Path of Emancipation*

*Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other*

*Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book*

*Present Moment, Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses for Daily Living*

*Stepping into Freedom*

*The Stone Boy and Other Stories*

*The Sun My Heart: From Mindfulness to Insight Contemplation*

*Teachings on Love*

*Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake*

*Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*

*Touching the Earth: Intimate Conversations with the Buddha*

*Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*

*Understanding Our Mind*

# BOOK ONE

## Chapter One

# Walking Just to Walk

Under the shadows of the green bamboo, the young *bhikkhu*, Svasti, sat cross-legged, concentrating on his breath. He had been meditating for more than an hour in the Bamboo Forest Monastery, while hundreds of other *bhikkhus* were also practicing under the shade of the bamboo trees or in their own thatched huts.

The great teacher Gautama, whom people affectionately called the “Buddha,” lived in the monastery with nearly four hundred disciples. Although crowded, it was very peaceful. Forty acres surrounded the monastery, and many varieties of graceful bamboo from all over Magadha were planted there. Just a thirty-minute walk north of the capital city of Rajagaha, the Bamboo Forest Monastery had been given to Buddha and his community by King Bimbisara seven years earlier.

Svasti rubbed his eyes and smiled. His legs were still tender as he slowly uncrossed them. Twenty-one years old, he had been ordained three days earlier by the Venerable Sariputta, one of the Buddha’s senior disciples. During the ordination ceremony, Svasti’s thick brown hair was shaved off.

Svasti was very happy to be part of the Buddha’s community. Many *bhikkhus* were of noble birth, such as the Venerable Nanda, the Buddha’s brother, and Devadatta, Anuruddha, and Ananda. Although Svasti had not yet been introduced to these men, he had noticed them from afar. Even in faded robes, their noble bearing was unmistakable.

“It will be a long time before I can be friends with men of such noble birth,” thought Svasti. Yet, even though the Buddha himself was the son of a king, Svasti felt no gulf between them. Svasti was an “untouchable,” lower than the lowest and poorest caste according to the system of discrimination among the people of India at that time. For more than ten years, he had tended water buffalo, but for two weeks now, he was living and practicing with monks from all castes. Everyone was very kind to him, offering him warm smiles and deep bows, but he did not yet feel at ease. He suspected it



might take years before he could feel completely comfortable.

Suddenly, a broad smile emerged from deep within him, as he thought of Rahula, the Buddha's eighteen-year-old son. Rahula had been a novice in the community since the age of ten, and in just two weeks Rahula and Svasti had become best friends. It was Rahula who taught Svasti how to follow his breath during meditation. Rahula understood the Buddha's teachings well, even though he was not yet a bhikkhu. He needed to wait until he was twenty before he could receive full ordination.

\* \* \*

Svasti reflected on the time, just two weeks before, when the Buddha came to Uruvela, his small village near Gaya, to invite him to become a monk. When the Buddha arrived at his home, Svasti was out with his brother, Rupak, taking care of the buffaloes. His two sisters, Bala, age sixteen, and Bhima, age twelve, were there, and Bala recognized the Buddha right away. She began to run out to find Svasti, but the Buddha told her it wasn't necessary. He said that he and the monks traveling with him, including Rahula, would walk to the river to find her brother. It was late afternoon when they came upon Svasti and Rupak scrubbing down their nine buffaloes in the Neranjara River. As soon as they saw the Buddha, the young men ran up the bank of the river, joined their palms to form a lotus bud, and bowed deeply.

"You've grown so much," the Buddha said, smiling warmly at Svasti and his brother. Svasti was speechless. Seeing the Buddha's peaceful face, his warm and generous smile, and his brilliant, penetrating eyes, moved him to tears. The Buddha wore a saffron robe made of patches sewn together in the pattern of a rice field. He still walked barefoot as he had ten years before, when Svasti first met him not far from this very spot. Ten years before they had spent hours sitting together on the banks of the Neranjara and beneath the shade of the bodhi tree, just ten minutes' walk from the riverbank.

Svasti glanced at the twenty bhikkhus behind the Buddha and saw that they, too, were barefoot and clad in patched robes of the same color. Looking more closely, Svasti saw that the Buddha's robe was a hand-length longer than those of the others. Standing next to the Buddha was a novice about Svasti's age who looked at him directly and smiled. Buddha gently placed his hands on Svasti and Rupak's heads and told them he had stopped by to visit on his way back to Rajagaha. He said he would be happy to wait

while Svasti and Rupak finished bathing the buffaloes so they could all walk to Svasti's thatched hut together.

During the walk back, Buddha introduced Svasti and Rupak to his son Rahula, the young novice who had smiled so beautifully at Svasti. Rahula was three years younger than Svasti, but they were the same height. Rahula was a *samanera*, a novice, but he dressed much the same as the older bhikkhus. Rahula walked between Svasti and Rupak, handing his alms bowl to Rupak and placing his arms lovingly around the shoulders of his two new friends. He had heard so much about Svasti and his family from his father that he felt he already knew them. The brothers basked in the warmth of Rahula's love.

As soon as they arrived at Svasti's home, the Buddha invited him to join the bhikkhu community and study the Dharma with him. Ten years earlier, when Svasti had first met the Buddha, he expressed his wish to study with him, and the Buddha had agreed to accept Svasti as a disciple. Now that Svasti was twenty-one, the Buddha had returned. He had not forgotten his promise.

Rupak led the buffaloes back to Mr. Rambhul, their owner. The Buddha sat outside Svasti's hut on a small stool, while the bhikkhus stood behind him. With earthen walls and a thatched roof, Svasti's tiny home was not large enough for everyone to come inside. Bala told Svasti, "Brother, please go with the Buddha. Rupak is even stronger than you were when you began tending the buffaloes, and I am quite capable of taking care of the house. You have looked after us for ten years, and now we are ready to be on our own."

Sitting next to the rainwater barrel, Bhima looked up at her big sister without saying a word. Svasti looked at Bhima. She was a lovely young girl. When Svasti met the Buddha, Bala was six years old, Rupak three, and Bhima only an infant. Bala cooked for the family while Rupak played in the sand.

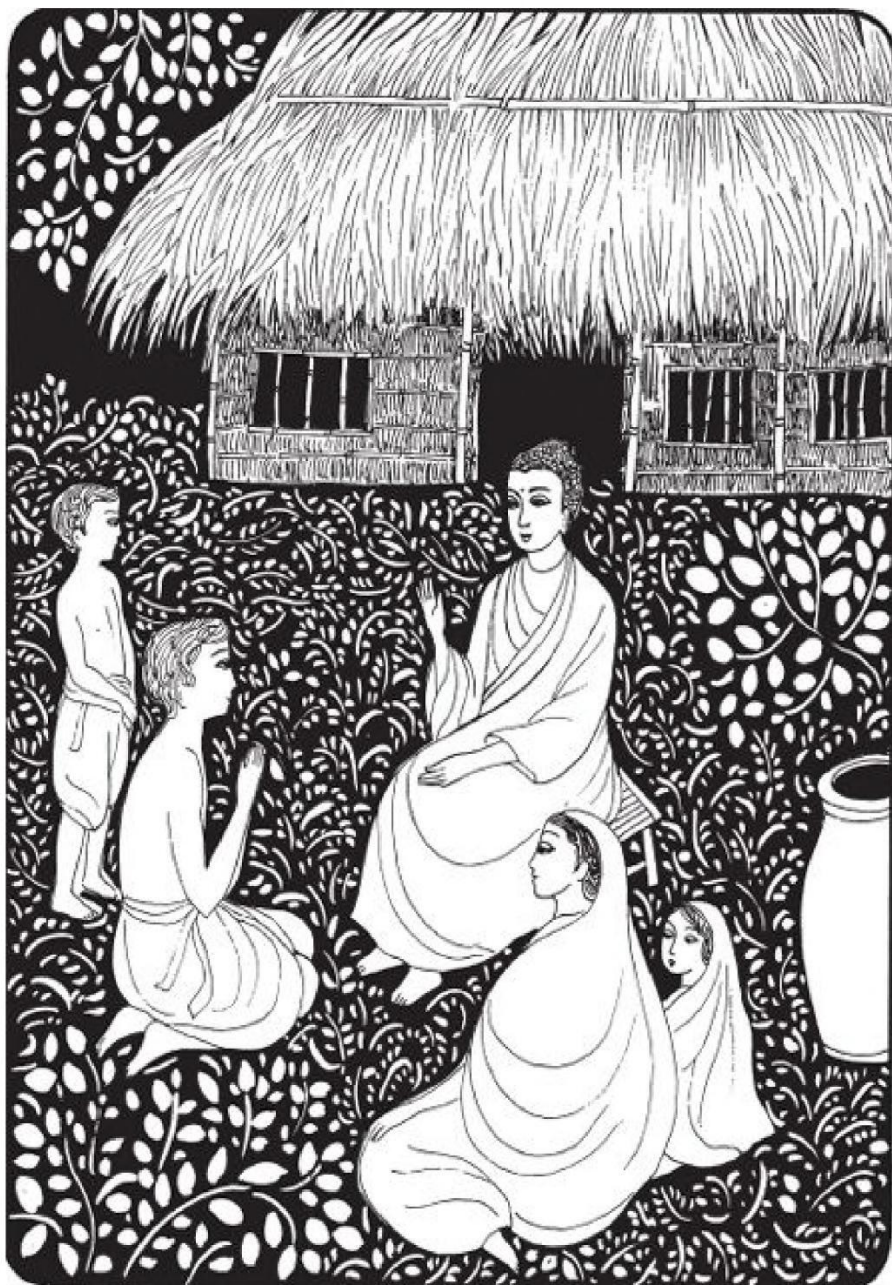
Six months following their father's death, their mother passed away in childbirth. Just eleven years old, Svasti became the head of the household. He found a job tending water buffaloes, and because Svasti was a good worker, he earned enough to feed his family. He was even able to bring buffalo milk home for little Bhima.

Realizing that Svasti was asking her about her feelings, Bhima smiled. She hesitated a moment and then spoke softly, "Brother, go with the Buddha." She turned her face away to hide the tears. Bhima had heard

Svasti mention his wish to study with Buddha so many times and she truly wanted him to go, but now that the moment had arrived, she could not hide her sadness.

Just then, Rupak returned from the village, and hearing Bhima's words, "Go with the Buddha," he understood that the time had come. He looked at Svasti and said, "Yes, brother, please go with the Buddha," and the whole family fell silent. Rupak looked at the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, I hope you will permit my brother to study with you. I am old enough to care for our family." Rupak turned to Svasti and, holding back his tears, said, "But brother, please ask the Buddha if you can come back and visit us from time to time."

The Buddha stood up and gently stroked Bhima's hair. "Children, please eat now. Tomorrow morning, I will return for Svasti so we can walk together to Rajagaha. The bhikkhus and I will rest beneath the bodhi tree tonight."



*The Buddha sat outside Svasti's hut on a small stool.*

As the Buddha reached the gate, he looked back at Svasti and said, "Tomorrow morning, you do not need to bring anything. The clothes you

are wearing are enough.”

That night the four siblings stayed up late. Like a departing father, Svasti gave them his last advice on taking care of each other and the household. He embraced each of them for a long time. Unable to hold back her tears, little Bhima sobbed while her oldest brother held her. But then she looked up, breathed deeply, and smiled at him. She didn't want Svasti to feel sad. The oil lamp cast a dim light, but it was enough for Svasti to see her smile, and he appreciated it.

Early the next morning, Sujata, Svasti's friend, came to say goodbye. The evening before, she had seen the Buddha when she was on her way to the riverbank, and he told her that Svasti would be joining the order of monks. Sujata, the daughter of the village head, was two years older than Svasti, and she, too, had met Gautama before he became the Buddha. Sujata gave Svasti a small jar of herbal medicines to take with him. They spoke only briefly, and then the Buddha and his disciples arrived.

Svasti's brother and sisters were already awake to see their brother off. Rahula spoke gently to each of them, encouraging them to be strong and to take care of each other. He promised that whenever he was nearby, he would stop in Uruvela to visit them. Svasti's family and Sujata walked with the Buddha and the bhikkhus to the riverbank, and there they joined their palms to say goodbye to the Buddha, the monks, Rahula, and Svasti.

Svasti was overcome with both fear and joy. There was a knot in his stomach. This was the first time he had ever left Uruvela. The Buddha said it would take ten days to reach Rajagaha. Most people traveled more quickly, but the Buddha and his bhikkhus walked slowly and with great ease. As Svasti's pace slowed down, his heart quieted. He was wholeheartedly immersing himself in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and this was his path. He turned around for one last glimpse of the only land and people he knew, and he saw Sujata and his family as mere specks merging with the shadows of the forest trees.

It seemed to Svasti that the Buddha walked just to enjoy the walking, unconcerned about arriving anywhere at all. So it was with all the bhikkhus. No one seemed anxious or impatient to reach their destination. Each man's steps were slow, balanced, and peaceful. It was as if they were taking a pleasant stroll together. No one ever appeared tired, yet they covered a good distance each day.

Each morning they would stop in the nearest village to beg for food. They walked along the streets in a single line with the Buddha at the head.

Svasti came last, just behind Rahula. They walked with quiet dignity, observing each breath and each step. Once in a while, they would stop while villagers placed offerings of food in their bowls. Some villagers knelt by the side of the road in respect. As the bhikkhus received the food, they quietly recited prayers for the people.

When they finished begging, they slowly left the village to find a place beneath some trees or in a grassy meadow where they could eat. They sat in a circle and divided the food equally, careful to fill anyone's bowl that was still empty. Rahula filled a jug with water from a nearby stream and respectfully carried it to the Buddha. After the Buddha joined his palms together to form what looked like a lotus flower, Rahula poured the water over the Buddha's hands and rinsed them clean. He did the same for everyone else, coming last to Svasti. As Svasti did not yet have a bowl, Rahula placed half of his own food on a fresh banana leaf and gave it to his new friend. Before eating, the bhikkhus joined their palms and chanted together. Then they ate in silence, mindful of each bite.

When they finished, some bhikkhus practiced walking meditation, some did sitting meditation, and others took a short nap. When the hottest part of the day had passed, they took to the road again, and they walked until it was nearly dark. The best places to rest for the night were undisturbed forests, and they walked until they found a good place. Each bhikkhu had his own cushion, and many sat cross-legged in the lotus position for half the night before spreading out their robes and going to sleep. Each bhikkhu carried two robes, the one he was wearing and another to use as protection against wind and cold. Svasti sat in meditation like the others and learned to sleep upon the earth using a tree root for a pillow.

When Svasti awoke the next morning, he saw the Buddha and many of the bhikkhus already sitting peacefully in meditation, radiating profound calm and majesty. As soon as the sun rose over the horizon, each bhikkhu folded his extra robe, picked up his bowl, and began the day's journey.

Walking by day and resting by night, it was ten days before they reached Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha. It was the first time Svasti had seen a city. Horse carts pressed through streets lined with crowded dwellings; shouts and laughter echoed everywhere. But the silent procession of the bhikkhus continued, as peacefully as when they strolled along the quiet riverbanks or between country rice fields. A few of the city dwellers paused to watch them, and a few, recognizing the Buddha, bowed deeply to show their respect. The bhikkhus continued their calm procession until they reached

the Bamboo Forest Monastery, just beyond the city.

News spread quickly throughout the monastery that the Buddha had returned, and within moments, nearly four hundred bhikkhus gathered to welcome him back. The Buddha did not say much but asked about everyone's well-being and meditation practice. He entrusted Svasti to Sariputta, who was also Rahula's spiritual instructor. Sariputta was the novice master of Bamboo Forest Monastery and watched over the studies of nearly fifty young monks, all of whom had been in the community for less than three years. The abbot of the monastery was a monk named Kondarma.

Rahula was asked to introduce Svasti to the ways of monastery life—how to walk, sit, stand, greet others, do walking and sitting meditation, and observe his breathing. He also showed Svasti how to wear the monk's robe, beg for food, recite prayers, and wash his bowl. For three continuous days, Svasti did not leave Rahula's side, so that he could learn these things well. Rahula put his whole heart into instructing Svasti, yet Svasti knew it would take years of practicing before he would be able to do these things in a relaxed and natural way. After this basic instruction, Sariputta invited Svasti into his hut and explained the precepts of a bhikkhu.

A bhikkhu was one who left his family in order to follow the Buddha as a teacher, the Dharma as the path that leads to awakening, and the Sangha as the community that supports one along the path. A bhikkhu's life was simple and humble. Begging for food helped foster humility and was also a means to be in contact with others and help them see the Way of Love and Understanding that the Buddha taught.

Ten years earlier beneath the bodhi tree, Svasti and his friends had listened to the Buddha speak about the path of awakening as the path of love and understanding, so it was easy for him to grasp all that Sariputta told him. Though Sariputta's face appeared serious, his eyes and smile radiated great warmth and compassion. He told Svasti that there would be a precepts ceremony to formally accept him into the community of bhikkhus, and he taught Svasti the words he would need to recite.

Sariputta himself presided over the precepts ceremony. About twenty bhikkhus attended. The Buddha and Rahula were there, adding to Svasti's happiness. Sariputta silently recited a *gatha*, and then shaved off several locks of Svasti's hair. He then gave the razor to Rahula, who completed the task of shaving Svasti's head. Sariputta gave Svasti three robes, a bowl, and a water filter. Because he had already been taught by Rahula how to wear the robe, Svasti put it on without difficulty. He bowed before the Buddha

and the other bhikkhus present to express his deep gratitude.

Later that morning, Svasti practiced begging for the first time as an ordained bhikkhu. The monks of Bamboo Forest Monastery walked into Rajagaha in several small groups, and Svasti was part of the group led by Sariputta. After taking just a few steps out of the monastery, Svasti reminded himself that begging was a vehicle to practice the Way. He observed his breathing and took each step quietly and in mindfulness. Rahula walked behind him. Although he was now a bhikkhu, Svasti knew that he had considerably less experience than Rahula. He resolved with all his heart to nurture humility and virtue within himself.



## Chapter Two

# Tending Water Buffaloes

The day was cool. After eating the noon meal in mindfulness, each bhikkhu washed his own bowl and placed his cushion on the earth to sit facing the Buddha. The many squirrels that lived in Bamboo Forest mingled freely with the monks, and some climbed up into bamboo trees to gaze down at the gathering. Svasti saw Rahula sitting directly in front of the Buddha, and he quietly tiptoed there and placed his cushion next to Rahula's. They sat together in the lotus position. In that serene and dignified atmosphere, no one spoke. Svasti knew that each bhikkhu was following his breath mindfully, waiting for the Buddha to speak.

The Buddha's bamboo platform was high enough for everyone to see him clearly. The Buddha had a relaxed yet majestic air like that of a lion prince. His eyes filled with loving compassion as he looked out over the assembly. When his eyes came to rest on Svasti and Rahula, the Buddha smiled and began to speak:

“Today I wish to tell you about the work of tending water buffaloes—what a good buffalo boy must know and what he must be able to do. A boy who cares well for water buffaloes is a boy who easily recognizes each buffalo under his care, knows the characteristics and tendencies of each one, knows how to scrub them, care for their wounds, chase mosquitoes away with smoke, find safe paths for them to walk, love them, find safe and shallow places for them to cross the river, seek fresh grass and water for them, preserve the grazing meadows, and let the older buffaloes serve as good models for the younger ones.

“Listen Bhikkhus, just as a buffalo boy recognizes each of his own buffaloes, a bhikkhu recognizes each of the essential elements of his own body. Just as a buffalo boy knows the characteristics and tendencies of each buffalo, a bhikkhu knows which actions of body, speech, and mind are worthy and which are not. Just as a buffalo boy scrubs his animals clean, a bhikkhu must cleanse his mind and body of desires, attachments, anger, and

aversions.”

As he spoke, the Buddha’s eyes did not leave Svasti. Svasti felt that he himself was the source of the Buddha’s words. He recalled how, years before, while sitting at the Buddha’s side, the Buddha would ask him to describe in detail his work of tending water buffaloes. How else could a prince raised in a palace know so much about buffaloes?

Though the Buddha spoke in a normal voice, each sound rose clear and distinct and no one missed a word: “Just as a buffalo boy cares for his buffaloes’ wounds, a bhikkhu watches over his six sense organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—so that they do not become lost in dispersion. Just as a buffalo boy protects his buffaloes from mosquito bites by building fires to create smoke, the bhikkhu uses the teaching of becoming awake to show those around him how to avoid the afflictions of body and mind. Just as the boy finds a safe path for the buffaloes to walk, the bhikkhu avoids those paths that lead to desire for fame, wealth, and sexual pleasure—places such as taverns and theaters. Just as a buffalo boy loves his buffaloes, the bhikkhu cherishes the joy and peace of meditation. As the boy finds a safe, shallow place in the river for the buffaloes to cross, the bhikkhu relies on the Four Noble Truths to negotiate this life. As the boy finds fresh grass and water for his buffaloes, the bhikkhu knows that the Four Establishments of Mindfulness are the nourishment leading to liberation. As the boy preserves the fields by not overgrazing them, the bhikkhu is careful to preserve the relationships with the nearby community as he begs offerings. As the boy lets the older buffaloes serve as models for the younger ones, the bhikkhu depends on the wisdom and experience of their elders. O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who follows these eleven points will attain arhatship in the span of six years of practice.”



*“As a buffalo boy finds fresh grass for his buffaloes, so a bhikkhu knows that the Four Establishments of Mindfulness lead to liberation.”*

Svasti listened in astonishment. The Buddha had remembered

everything he had told him ten years before, and was able to apply each detail to a bhikkhu's practice. Though Svasti knew the Buddha was teaching the entire assembly of monks, he also had the distinct impression that the Buddha was addressing him directly. The young man's eyes did not wander even once from the Buddha's countenance.

These were words to hold in one's heart. Of course, there were terms such as "six sense organs," "Four Noble Truths," "Four Establishments of Mindfulness," which Svasti did not yet understand. He would ask Rahula later to explain these terms, but he knew he understood the essential meaning of the Buddha's words.

Buddha continued to speak. He told the assembly about choosing a safe path for the buffaloes to walk. If the path was overgrown with thorns, the buffaloes would get cuts, which could become infected. If the buffalo boy did not know how to take care of wounds, his buffaloes could become feverish and even die. Practicing the Way was the same. If a bhikkhu did not find a proper path, he could become wounded in mind and body. Greed and anger could further poison his wounds until they grew so infected that the way to enlightenment became hindered.

The Buddha paused. He motioned for Svasti to come up and stand beside him. Svasti stood with his palms joined while Buddha, smiling, introduced Svasti to the assembly:

"Ten years ago I met Svasti in the forest near Gaya, just before I realized the Way. He was then eleven years old. It was Svasti who gathered armfuls of kusa grass, which I used for a cushion to sit beneath the bodhi tree. Everything I have taught about water buffaloes, I learned from him. I knew he was a good buffalo boy, and I know he will be a fine bhikkhu."

Everyone's eyes were on Svasti, and he could feel his ears and cheeks tingling and becoming very red. The men all joined their palms and bowed to him, and he bowed back to them. The Buddha then concluded the Dharma talk by asking Rahula to recite the sixteen methods of conscious breathing. Rahula stood, placed his palms together, and recited each method in a voice as bright and clear as a bell. When he finished, he bowed to the community, and the Buddha stood up and slowly walked back to his hut. After he did so, all the monks in the assembly took their own cushions and walked slowly to their own spot in the forest. Some of the monks lived in huts, but many slept and meditated outdoors, beneath the bamboo trees. Only when it rained very hard did they pick up their cushions and seek shelter in the residential huts or lecture halls.

Svasti's teacher, Sariputta, had assigned him to share a space outdoors with Rahula. When Rahula was younger, he had to sleep in a hut with the teacher who served as his guardian, but now he had a spot under the trees. Svasti was happy to be with Rahula.

Late that afternoon after sitting meditation, Svasti practiced walking meditation alone. He selected an empty path to avoid encountering others, but he found it difficult to remain concentrated on his breathing. His thoughts were filled with longing for his brother and sisters and the village at home. The image of the path leading to the Neranjara River rose clearly in his mind. He saw little Bhima lowering her head to hide her tears and Rupak caring for Rambhul's water buffaloes alone. He tried to chase these images away and focus on nothing but his steps and breathing, but the images continued to flood him. He felt ashamed that he could not devote himself to his practice, and he felt unworthy of the Buddha's trust. After walking meditation, he thought, he would ask Rahula for help. There were also several things the Buddha had said in his Dharma talk that morning that he had not fully grasped, and he was sure Rahula could explain them to him. Just thinking about Rahula encouraged and calmed him, and he found it easier to follow his breathing and each slow step.

Svasti had not yet had a chance to look for Rahula, when Rahula came looking for him. He led Svasti to a seat beneath a bamboo tree, and said, "This afternoon I met the elder, Ananda. He would like to hear all about how you first met the Buddha."

"Who is Ananda, Rahula?"

"He's a prince of the Sakya line and the Buddha's cousin. He became a monk seven years ago and now he is one of the best disciples. The Buddha loves him dearly. It is he who looks after the master's health. Ananda has invited us to come to his hut tomorrow evening. I too want to hear all about the time the Buddha was living in the Gaya Forest."

"Hasn't the Buddha already told you?"

"Yes, but not in detail. I'm sure you have a lot of stories to tell."

"Well, there isn't really much, but I will tell all I remember. Rahula, what is Ananda like? I feel a little nervous."

"Don't worry. He's very kind and friendly. I told him about you and your family, and he was delighted. Shall we meet in this spot tomorrow morning when we go begging for food? Now I must wash my robe so it will be dry in time."

As Rahula stood to leave, Svasti tugged lightly at his robe, "Can you sit

for just a while longer? There are some things I want to ask you. This morning the Buddha spoke about eleven points a bhikkhu must follow, but I can't recall all eleven. Can you repeat them for me?"

"I can only remember nine myself. But don't worry, tomorrow we can ask Ananda."

"Are you sure the elder, Ananda, will remember all of them?"

"Positive! If it had been one hundred and eleven, Ananda would still remember. You don't know Ananda yet, but everyone here admires his memory. It's incredible. He can repeat flawlessly everything the Buddha has said without leaving out even one tiny detail. Around here, everyone calls him the most learned of all the Buddha's disciples. So whenever someone forgets something the Buddha has said, they seek out Ananda. Sometimes the community organizes study sessions in which Ananda goes over the Buddha's basic teachings."

"Then we're very lucky. We'll wait and ask him tomorrow. But there is something else I want to ask you—how do you quiet your mind during walking meditation?"

"Do you mean to say that during your walking meditation other thoughts came into your mind? Like thoughts of missing your family?"

Svasti grasped his friend's hand, "How did you know? That's exactly what happened! I don't know why I miss my family so much this evening. I feel terrible, but I don't seem to have enough resolve to practice the Way. I feel ashamed before you and the Buddha."

Rahula smiled. "Don't be ashamed. When I first joined the Buddha, I missed my mother, my grandfather, and my aunt. Many nights I buried my face in my cushion and cried alone. I knew that my mother, grandfather and aunt missed me too. But after a while, it was better."

Rahula helped Svasti up to a standing position and gave him a friendly hug.

"Your brother and sisters are lovely. It's only natural for you to miss them. But you'll get used to your new life. We've got lots of work to do here—we must practice and study. But listen, when we get a chance, I'll tell you about my family, all right?"

Svasti held Rahula's hand in his own two hands and nodded. Then they parted, Rahula to wash his robe and Svasti to find a broom to sweep the paths clear of bamboo leaves.

## Chapter Three

# An Armful of Kusa Grass

Before falling asleep, Svasti sat beneath a bamboo tree and recalled the months he had first met the Buddha. He was just eleven years old then, and his mother had recently died, leaving him in charge of his three younger siblings. His youngest sister, an infant, had no milk to drink. Luckily, a man in the village named Rambhul hired Svasti to tend his water buffaloes—four grown buffaloes and one calf. And so Svasti was able to milk a buffalo cow every day and feed his baby sister. He tended the water buffaloes with utmost care, for he knew that he had to keep his job or his siblings would starve. Since his father's death, their roof had not been rethatched, and every time it rained, Rupak had to scurry about placing stone jars beneath the gaping holes to catch the rainwater. Bala was only six years old but had to learn to cook, care for her baby sister, and gather firewood in the forest. Though just a small child, she could knead flour into chapati bread for her siblings to eat. Rarely could they buy even a bit of curry powder. When Svasti led the buffaloes back to their stable, the tantalizing fragrance of curry drifting from Rambhul's kitchen made his mouth water. Chapati dipped in curry sauce cooked with meat had been an unknown luxury since his father died. The children's clothes were little more than rags. Svasti owned but one worn *dhoti*. When it was cold he wrapped an old brown cloth around his shoulders. It was threadbare and faded, but precious to him, nonetheless.

Svasti had to find good grazing spots for the buffaloes, for if he returned them to their stable hungry, he knew he would be beaten by Mr. Rambhul. In addition, he had to carry home a sizable bundle of grass every evening for the buffaloes to eat throughout the night. On evenings when the mosquitoes were thick, Svasti lit a fire to chase them away with the smoke. Rambhul paid him in rice, flour, and salt every three days. Some days, Svasti was able to bring home a few fish that he had caught along the edges of the Neranjara River for Bhima to cook.

One afternoon, after he had bathed the buffaloes and cut a bushel of grass, Svasti felt like spending a quiet moment alone in the cool forest. Leaving the buffaloes grazing at the forest's edge, Svasti looked about for a tall tree to rest against. Suddenly he stopped. There was a man sitting silently beneath a pippala tree, no more than twenty feet away. Svasti gazed at him in wonder. He had never before seen anyone sit so beautifully. The man's back was perfectly straight, and his feet rested elegantly upon his thighs. He held himself with utmost stability and inner purpose. His eyes appeared to be half-closed, and his folded hands rested lightly on his lap. He wore a faded yellow robe, which left one shoulder bare. His body radiated peace, serenity, and majesty. Just one look at him, and Svasti felt wondrously refreshed. His heart trembled. He did not understand how he could feel something so special for a person he hadn't even met, but he stood immobile in utter respect for a long moment.

Then the man opened his eyes. He did not see Svasti at first, as he uncrossed his legs and gently massaged his ankles and the soles of his feet. Slowly he stood up and began to walk. Because he walked in the opposite direction, he still did not see Svasti. Without making a sound, Svasti watched the man take slow, meditative steps along the forest floor. After seven or eight such steps, the man turned around, and it was then that he noticed Svasti.

He smiled at the boy. No one had ever smiled with such gentle tolerance at Svasti before. As though drawn by an invisible force, Svasti ran toward the man, but when he was within a few feet, he stopped in his tracks, remembering that he had no right to approach anyone of higher caste.

Svasti was an untouchable. He did not belong to any of the four social castes. His father had explained to him that the *brahmana* caste was the highest, and people born into this caste were priests and teachers who read and understood the Vedas and other scriptures and made offerings to the gods. When Brahma created the human race, the *brahmins* issued from his mouth. The *kshatriya* were the next highest caste. They could hold political and military positions, as they had issued from Brahma's two hands. Those of the *vaishya* caste were merchants, farmers, and craftspeople who had sprung from Brahma's thighs. Those of the *shudra* caste had come from Brahma's feet and were the lowest of the four castes. They did only the manual labor not performed by the higher castes. But Svasti's family members were "untouchables," those who had no caste at all. They were required to build their homes outside of the village limits, and they did the



lowest kinds of work such as collecting garbage, spreading manure, digging roads, feeding pigs, and tending water buffaloes. Everyone had to accept the caste into which he or she was born. The sacred scriptures taught that happiness was the ability to accept one's position.

If an untouchable like Svasti touched a person of a higher caste, he would be beaten. In the village of Uruvela, an untouchable man had been beaten severely for touching a brahman with his hand. A brahman or kshatriya touched by an untouchable was considered polluted and had to return home to fast and do penance for several weeks in order to cleanse himself. Whenever Svasti led the buffaloes home, he took great pains not to pass near any person of high caste on the road or outside Rambhul's house. It seemed to Svasti that even the buffaloes were more fortunate than he, because a brahman could touch a buffalo without being polluted. Even if, through no fault of the untouchable, a person of higher caste accidentally brushed against him, the untouchable could still be ruthlessly beaten.

Here, before Svasti, stood a most attractive man, and it was clear from his bearing that he did not share the same social status. Surely someone with so kind and tolerant a smile would not beat Svasti even if he did touch him, but Svasti did not want to be the cause of pollution of someone so special, and that was why he froze when he and the man were a few steps apart. Seeing Svasti's hesitation, the man stepped forward himself. Svasti stepped back to avoid coming in contact with the man, but the man was quicker, and in the blink of an eye had grasped Svasti by the shoulder with his left hand. With his right hand, he gave Svasti a tender pat on the head. Svasti stood motionless. No one had ever touched him on the head in so gentle and affectionate way, yet he felt suddenly panic-stricken.

"Don't be afraid, child," the man said in a quiet and reassuring voice.

At the sound of that voice, Svasti's fears disappeared. He lifted his head and gazed at the man's kind and tolerant smile. After hesitating for a moment, he stammered, "Sir, I like you very much."

The man lifted Svasti's chin in his hand and looked into the boy's eyes. "And I like you also. Do you live nearby?"

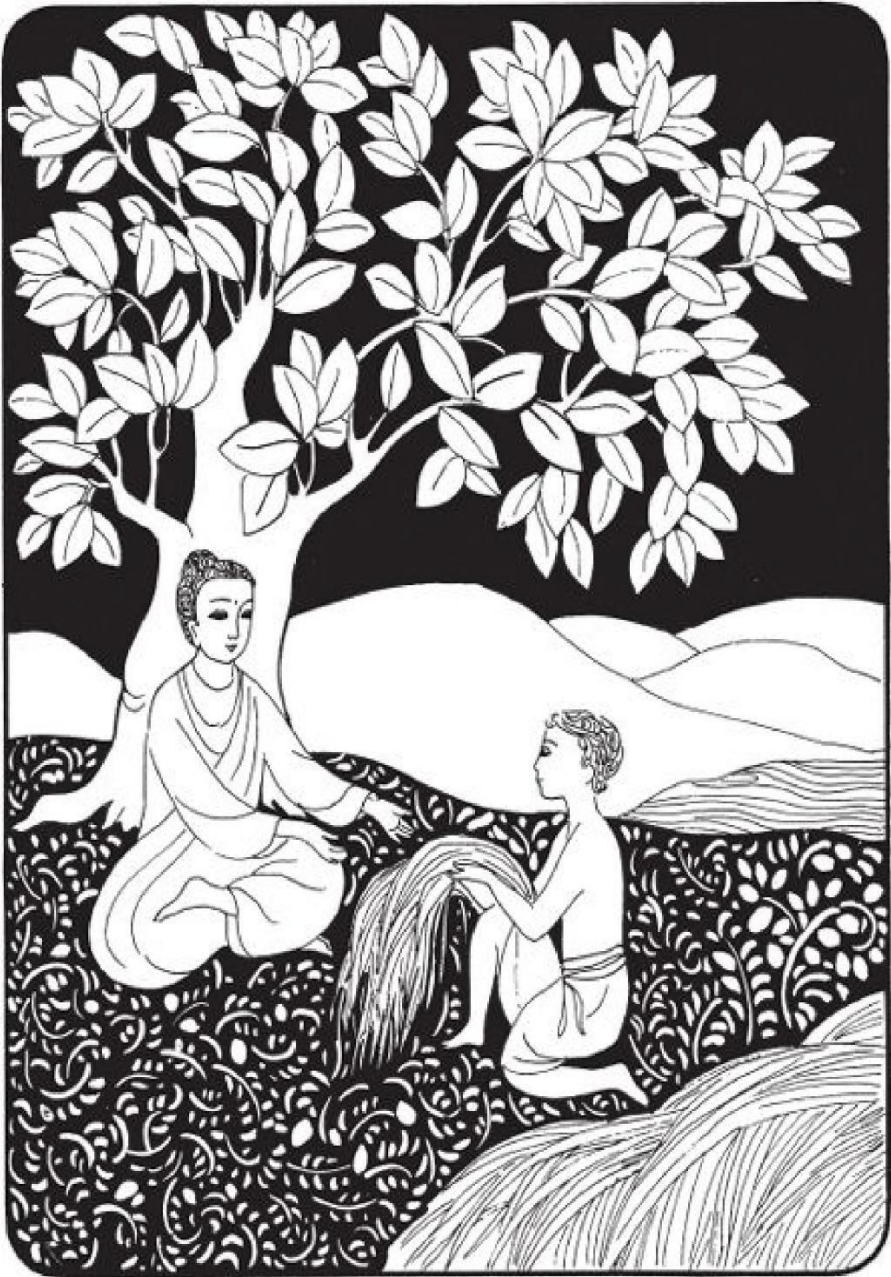
Svasti did not answer. He took the man's left hand in his own two hands and asked the question that was troubling him, "When I touch you like this, aren't you being polluted?"

The man laughed and shook his head. "Not at all, child. You are a human being and I am a human being. You can't pollute me. Don't listen to what people tell you."

He took Svasti's hand and walked with him to the edge of the forest. The water buffaloes were still grazing peacefully. The man looked at Svasti and asked, "Do you tend these buffaloes? And that must be the grass you have cut for their dinner. What is your name? Is your house nearby?"

Svasti answered politely, "Yes, sir, I care for these four buffaloes and that one calf, and that is the grass I cut. My name is Svasti and I live on the other side of the river just beyond the village of Uruvela. Please, sir, what is your name and where do you live? Can you tell me?"

The man answered kindly, "Certainly. My name is Siddhartha, and my home is far away, but at present I am living in this forest."



*Svasti offered Siddhartha an armful of kusa grass to use as a cushion.*

“Are you a hermit?”

Siddhartha nodded. Svasti knew that hermits were men who usually

lived and meditated up in the mountains.

Though they had just met and exchanged no more than a few words, Svasti felt a warm bond with his new friend. In Uruvela, no one had ever treated him in so friendly a way or spoken to him with such warmth. A great happiness surged within him, and he wanted to somehow express his joy. If only he had some gift he could offer Siddhartha! But there was no penny in his pocket, not even a piece of sugar cane or rock candy. What could he offer? He had nothing, but he summoned the courage to say, "Mister, I wish I had something to give you as a gift, but I have nothing."

Siddhartha looked at Svasti and smiled. "But you do. You have something I would like very much."

"I do?"

Siddhartha pointed to the pile of kusa grass. "That grass you have cut for the buffaloes is soft and fragrant. If you could give me a few handfuls I shall make a sitting cushion for my meditation beneath the tree. That would make me very happy."

Svasti's eyes shone. He ran to the pile of grass, gathered a large bundle in his thin arms, and offered it to Siddhartha.

"I just cut this grass down by the river. Please accept it. I can easily cut more for the buffaloes."

Siddhartha placed his hands together like a lotus bud and accepted the gift. He said, "You are a very kind boy. I thank you. Go and cut some more grass for your buffaloes before it grows too late. If you have a chance, please come and see me tomorrow afternoon in the forest again."

Young Svasti bowed his head in farewell and stood watching as Siddhartha disappeared back into the forest. Then he picked up his sickle and headed for the shore, his heart filled with the warmest of feelings. It was early autumn. The kusa grass was still soft and his sickle was newly sharpened. It wasn't long at all before Svasti had cut another large armful of kusa grass.

Svasti led the buffaloes to Rambhul's home, guiding them to cross a shallow section of the Neranjara River. The calf was reluctant to leave the sweet grass along the shore and Svasti had to coax her along. The bushel of grass on his shoulder was not heavy, and Svasti waded across the river together with the buffaloes.

## Chapter Four

# The Wounded Swan

Early the next morning, Svasti led his buffaloes to graze. By noon he had cut enough grass to fill two baskets. Svasti liked to let the buffaloes graze on the side of the river that bordered the forest. That way, when he finished gathering grass, he could stretch out in the cool breeze and not worry about the buffaloes wandering into someone's rice fields. He carried only his sickle, the tool by which he earned his living. Svasti opened the small fistful of rice Bala had wrapped in a banana leaf for his lunch, but as he was about to eat, his thoughts turned to Siddhartha.

"I could take this rice to the hermit, Siddhartha," he thought. "Surely he won't find my rice too humble." Svasti wrapped the rice, and, leaving the buffaloes at the forest's edge, followed the path to where he had met Siddhartha the day before.

From a distance he saw his new friend sitting beneath the great pippala tree. But Siddhartha was not alone. Before him sat a girl just about Svasti's age, dressed in a fine white sari. There was food already placed before him, and Svasti stopped abruptly. But Siddhartha looked up and called to him, "Svasti!" He motioned for the boy to join them.

The girl in the white sari looked up, and Svasti recognized her as someone he had often passed on the village road. As Svasti approached, she moved to her left to make a place for him, and Siddhartha gestured him to sit down. In front of Siddhartha was a banana leaf, which held a fistful of rice and a small amount of sesame salt. Siddhartha divided the rice into two portions.

"Have you eaten yet, child?"

"No, Mister, I haven't."

"Well then, let's share this."

Siddhartha handed Svasti half the rice, and Svasti joined his palms together in thanks, but refused the rice. He took out his own humble rice and said, "I've also brought some."

He opened his banana leaf to reveal coarse grains of brown rice, unlike the soft white grains on Siddhartha's leaf. He had no sesame salt. Siddhartha smiled at the two children and said, "Shall we put all our rice together and share it?"

He took half the white rice, dipped it in sesame salt and handed it to Svasti. Then he broke off half of Svasti's rice ball and began to eat it with obvious delight. Svasti felt awkward, but seeing Siddhartha's naturalness, he began to eat as well.

"Your rice is so fragrant, Mister."

"Sujata brought it," answered Siddhartha.

"So her name is Sujata," thought Svasti. She looked a bit older than Svasti, perhaps a year or two. Her large black eyes twinkled. Svasti stopped eating and said, "I've seen you before on the village road, but I didn't know your name was Sujata."

"Yes, I am the daughter of the village chief of Uruvela. Your name is Svasti, isn't it? Teacher Siddhartha was just telling me about you," she said, adding gently, "Svasti, it is more correct to call a monk, 'Teacher,' than 'Mister.'"

Svasti nodded.

Siddhartha smiled. "Well then, I don't need to introduce you two. Do you know, children, why I eat in silence? These grains of rice and sesame are so precious, I like to eat silently so that I can appreciate them fully. Sujata, have you ever had a chance to taste brown rice? Even if you've already eaten, please taste a bit of Svasti's rice. It is quite delicious. Now then, we can eat together in silence, and when we've finished, I'll tell you a story."

Siddhartha broke off a piece of brown rice and handed it to Sujata. She joined her palms like a lotus and respectfully accepted it. The three of them ate quietly in the deep calm of the forest.



*Siddhartha, Svasti, and Sujata shared a meal in mindfulness.*

When the rice and sesame were gone, Sujata gathered the banana leaves. She took a jug of fresh water from her side and poured some into the only

cup she had brought. She lifted the cup to offer water to Siddhartha. He took it in his two hands and offered it to Svasti. Flustered, Svasti blurted, "Please, Mister, I mean, Teacher, please, you take the first drink."

Siddhartha answered in a soft voice, "You drink first, child. I want you to have the first drink." Again he lifted and offered the cup to Svasti.

Svasti felt confused but didn't know how to refuse such an unaccustomed honor. He joined his palms in thanks and took the cup. He drank all the water in one long gulp. He handed the cup back to Siddhartha. Siddhartha asked Sujata to pour a second cup. When it was full he raised it to his lips and sipped the water slowly, with reverence and deep enjoyment. Sujata's eyes did not stray from Siddhartha and Svasti during this exchange. When Siddhartha finished drinking, he asked Sujata to pour a third cup. This one he offered to her. She put down the water jug, joined her palms, and accepted the cup of water. She lifted it to her lips and drank in slow, small sips, just as Siddhartha had done. She was aware that this was the first time she had ever drunk from the same cup as an untouchable. But Siddhartha was her Teacher, and if he had done so, why shouldn't she? And she noticed that she had no feeling whatsoever of being polluted. Spontaneously, she reached out and touched the buffalo boy's hair. It was such a surprise, Svasti didn't have a moment to move out of the way. Then Sujata finished drinking her water. She placed the empty cup on the ground and smiled at her two companions.

Siddhartha nodded. "You children have understood. People are not born with caste. Everyone's tears are salty, and everyone's blood is red. It is wrong to divide people into castes and create division and prejudice among them. This has become very clear to me during my meditation."

Sujata looked thoughtful and she spoke, "We are your disciples and we believe your teaching. But there does not seem to be anyone else like you in this world. Everyone else believes that the shudras and the untouchables came forth from the Creator's feet. Even the scriptures say so. No one dares to think differently."

"Yes, I know. But the truth is the truth whether anyone believes it or not. Though a million people may believe a lie, it is still a lie. You must have great courage to live according to the truth. Let me tell you a story about when I was a boy.

"One day, when I was nine years old and strolling alone in the garden, a swan suddenly dropped from the sky and writhed on the ground in front of me in great pain. I ran to pick it up, and I discovered that an arrow had



deeply penetrated one of its wings. I clasped my hand firmly around the arrow's shaft and yanked it out, and the bird cried as blood oozed from its wound. I applied pressure to the wound with my finger to stop the bleeding, and took the bird inside the palace to find princess Sundari, the lady in waiting. She agreed to pick a handful of medicinal leaves and make a poultice for the bird's wound. The swan shivered, so I took off my jacket and wrapped it around her. Then I placed her close to the royal fireplace."

Siddhartha paused for a moment to look at Svasti. "Svasti, I did not tell you yet, but when I was young I was a prince, the son of King Suddhodana in the city of Kapilavatthu. Sujata knows this already. I was about to go find some rice for the swan when my eight-year-old cousin, Devadatta, burst into the room. He was clutching his bow and arrows, and he asked excitedly, 'Siddhartha, did you see a white swan fall down near here?'

"Before I could answer, Devadatta saw the swan resting by the fireplace. He ran toward it, but I stopped him.

"'You may not take the bird.'

"My cousin protested, 'That bird is mine. I shot it myself.'

"I stood between Devadatta and the swan, determined not to let him have it. I told him, 'This bird is wounded. I'm protecting it. It needs to stay here.'

"Devadatta was quite stubborn and not about to give in. He argued, 'Now listen, cousin, when this bird was flying in the sky, it didn't belong to anyone. As I'm the one who shot it out of the sky, it rightfully belongs to me.'

"His argument sounded logical, but his words made me angry. I knew there was something wrong with his reasoning, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. So I just stood there, speechless, becoming more upset. I felt like punching him. Why I didn't, I don't know. Then, I saw a way to answer him.

"'Listen, cousin,' I told him, 'Those who love each other live together, and those who are enemies live apart. You tried to kill the swan, so you and she are enemies. The bird cannot live with you. I saved her, bandaged her wound, warmed her, and was on my way to find food for her when you arrived. The bird and I love each other, and we can live together. The bird needs me, not you.'"

Sujata clapped her hands together, "That's right! You were right!"

Siddhartha looked at Svasti. "And what do you think, child, of my statement?"

Svasti thought for a moment and then answered slowly, “I think you were right. But not many people would agree. Most people would side with Devadatta.”

Siddhartha nodded. “You are right. Most people do follow Devadatta’s view.

“Let me tell you what happened next. As we couldn’t agree on our own, we decided to take our concern to the adults. That day there was a meeting of the government in the palace, so we scurried to the hall of justice, where they were meeting. I held the swan and Devadatta clasped his bow and arrows. We presented our problem to the ministers and asked them to render judgment. The affairs of state came to a halt as the men listened, first to Devadatta and then to me. They discussed the matter at length, but they also were unable to agree. The majority seemed to be leaning toward Devadatta, when my father, the king, suddenly cleared his throat and coughed a few times. All the ministers suddenly stopped speaking, and—tell me if you don’t think this is odd—with total accord, they agreed that my argument was correct and that the bird should be given to me. Devadatta was beside himself with anger, but of course, there was nothing he could do.

“I had the bird, but I wasn’t really happy. Even though I was still young, I knew that my victory had been less than honorable. I was given the bird because the ministers wanted to please my father, not because they saw the truth of what I said.”

“That’s sad,” Sujata said and frowned.

“Yes, it was. But turning my thoughts to the bird, I took comfort in the fact that she was safe. Otherwise she surely would have ended up in a cooking pot.

“In this world, few people look with the eyes of compassion, and so we are cruel and merciless toward each other. The weak are always oppressed by the strong. I still see that my reasoning that day was correct, for it arose from love and understanding. Love and understanding can ease the suffering of all beings. The truth is the truth, whether or not it is accepted by the majority. Therefore, I tell you children, it takes great courage to stand up for and protect what is right.”

“What happened to the swan, Teacher?” asked Sujata.

“For four days, I cared for her. When I saw that her wound had healed, I released her, after warning her to fly far away lest she be shot again.”

Siddhartha looked at the two children, their faces quiet and serious. “Sujata, you must return home before your mother begins to worry. Svasti,

isn't it time for you to return to your buffaloes and cut more grass? The armful of kusa grass you gave me yesterday made a perfect cushion for meditation. Last night and this morning, I sat upon it and my meditation was very peaceful. I saw many things clearly. You have been a great help, Svasti. As my understanding deepens, I shall share the fruit of my meditation with both you children. Now I will continue sitting."

Svasti looked down at the grass, which Siddhartha had shaped into a cushion. Though the grasses were packed firm, Svasti knew they were still fragrant and soft. He would bring his teacher a fresh armful of grass every three days to make a new cushion. Svasti stood up and, with Sujata, joined his palms and bowed to Siddhartha. Sujata set out for home and Svasti led his buffaloes to graze further along the riverbank.

## Chapter Five

# A Bowl of Milk

Every day Svasti went into the forest to visit Siddhartha. When he was able to cut two bundles of grass by midday, he had lunch with Siddhartha. But as the dry season continued and fresh grass became more and more scarce, it was often late afternoon before he could visit his friend and teacher. Sometimes when Svasti arrived, Siddhartha was sitting in meditation, and the boy sat silently for a brief moment and then left the forest, not wanting to disturb his teacher's meditation. But when he found Siddhartha walking slowly along the forest path, he joined him, sometimes sharing simple conversation. Svasti also met Sujata frequently in the forest. Every day, she brought Siddhartha a rice ball with one condiment, such as sesame salt, peanuts, or a bit of curry. She also brought him milk or rice porridge or rock candy. The children had many occasions to talk with each other at the edge of the forest while the buffalo grazed. Sometimes Sujata brought her friend Supriya, a young girl Svasti's age. Svasti wanted to bring his brother and sisters to meet Siddhartha. He was sure they could cross the river at its most shallow point without difficulty.

Sujata told Svasti how she first met Siddhartha several months earlier, and how she had since brought him food every day around noon. It was on a full moon day. At her mother's request, she had put on a new pink sari and carried a platter of food to offer to the forest gods. There were cakes, milk, congee, and honey. The noon sun blazed. As Sujata neared the river, she saw a man lying unconscious on the road. She put down her platter and ran to him. He was barely breathing and his eyes were tightly closed. His cheeks had the sunken look of someone who had not had food for a long time. From his long hair, tangled beard, and ragged garment, Sujata knew he was a mountain ascetic who must have fainted from hunger. Without hesitating, she poured a cup of milk and eased it against the man's lips, spilling a few drops on them. At first he did not respond, but then his lips quivered and parted slightly. Sujata slowly poured milk into his mouth. He began to drink

and before long the cup was empty.



*“Child, please pour me a little more milk.”*

Sujata then sat along the riverbank to see if the man would regain consciousness. Slowly he sat up and opened his eyes. Seeing Sujata, he smiled. He pulled the end of his garment back up over his shoulder and folded his legs in a lotus position. He began to breathe, first shallowly and then more deeply. His sitting was stable and beautiful. Thinking that he must be a mountain god, Sujata joined her palms and began to prostrate

herself before him, but the man motioned for her to stop. Sujata sat up, and the man spoke to her in a soft voice, “Child, please pour me a little more milk.”

Happy to hear him speak, Sujata poured another cup and he drank it all. He felt how truly nourishing it was. Less than an hour before, he thought he was about to breathe his last. Now his eyes shone and he smiled gently. Sujata asked him how he had fainted on the road.

“I have been practicing meditation in the mountains. Harsh ascetic discipline has left my body weak, so today I decided to walk down to the village to beg for some food. But I lost all my strength getting here. Thanks to you, my life has been saved.”

They sat along the riverbank together and the man told Sujata about himself. He was Siddhartha, the son of a king who reigned over the country of the Sakya clan. Sujata listened carefully as Siddhartha told her, “I have seen that abusing the body cannot help one to find peace or understanding. The body is not just an instrument. It is the temple of the spirit, the raft by which we cross to the other shore. I will no longer practice self-mortification. I will go into the village each morning to beg for food.”

Sujata joined her palms. “Honorable hermit, if you allow me, I will bring you food each day. There is no need for you to interrupt your meditation practice. My home is not far from here, and I know my parents would be happy for me to bring you your meal.”

Siddhartha was silent for a moment. Then he answered, “I am glad to accept your offer. But from time to time, I would also like to go into the village to beg in order to meet the villagers. I would like to meet your parents and other children in the village as well.”

Sujata was very happy. She joined her palms and bowed in gratitude. The thought of Siddhartha visiting her home and meeting her parents was wonderful. She knew, too, that bringing him food every day would be no hardship, as her family was one of the wealthiest in the village. She did not mention this to Siddhartha. She only understood that this monk was important and that offering food to him was more beneficial than making a dozen offerings to the forest gods. If Siddhartha’s meditation deepened, she felt, his love and understanding could help relieve much suffering in the world.

Siddhartha pointed out the Dangsiri mountain where he had lived in the caves. “Beginning today, I will not return there. This forest is cool and refreshing. There is a magnificent pippala tree, which I shall make the place

of my practice. Tomorrow when you come with the food offering, please bring it there. Come, I will show you the spot.”

Siddhartha led Sujata across the river into the cool forest that bordered the other bank of the Neranjara River. He showed her the pippala tree under which he would meditate. Sujata admired its massive trunk and raised her head to gaze at the leafy branches, which spread out like an enormous canopy. It was a kind of banyan tree with leaves shaped like hearts with long pointed tails. The leaves were as big as Sujata’s hand. She listened to the birds chirping happily among the branches. It was a truly peaceful and refreshing spot. In fact, she had been to this tree before with her parents to make food offerings to the forest gods.

“This is your new home. Teacher.” Sujata looked at Siddhartha with her round black eyes. “I will visit you here every day.”

Siddhartha nodded. He walked Sujata back out of the forest and said goodbye to her at the riverbank. Then he returned alone to the pippala tree.

From that day on, Sujata brought rice or chapatis to offer to the monk, just before the sun began to cast shadows. Sometimes she also brought milk or congee. Once in a while, Siddhartha would carry his begging bowl into the village. He met Sujata’s father, the village chief, and her mother, who was wearing a beautiful yellow sari. Sujata introduced him to other children in the village and took him to the barber so he could have his head and beard shaved. Siddhartha’s health recovered rapidly, and he told Sujata that his meditation practice was beginning to bear fruit. Then came the day that Sujata met Svasti.

That day Sujata had come early. She listened as Siddhartha told her about meeting Svasti the day before. She had just said that she wished to meet Svasti herself when he appeared. Afterward, whenever she met Svasti, she never forgot to ask about his family. She and her servant, Purna, even went to visit Svasti’s hut. Purna was hired to work in Sujata’s household when her predecessor, Radha, died of typhoid fever. On these visits, Sujata brought used clothes still full of good wear for Svasti’s family to use. And much to Purna’s surprise, Sujata lifted baby Bhima in her arms. Afterward, she cautioned Purna not to tell her parents that she had held an untouchable child.

One day, a number of children decided to go and visit Siddhartha together. All of Svasti’s family came. Sujata brought her girlfriends Balagupta, Vijayasena, Ulluvillike, and Jatilika. She also invited her sixteen-year-old cousin Nandabala, who brought her younger brothers Nalaka, who

was fourteen, and Subash, who was nine. Eleven children sat in a semi-circle around Siddhartha, and they ate lunch together in silence. Svasti had instructed Bala and Rupak beforehand how to eat with quiet dignity. Even baby Bhima, sitting on Svasti's lap, ate without making a sound, her eyes open wide.

Svasti brought a new armful of fresh grass for Siddhartha. He had asked his friend Gavampati, also a buffalo boy, to watch over Mr. Rambhul's buffaloes so that he could have lunch with Siddhartha. In the fields, the sun blazed, but within the forest, Siddhartha and the children were refreshed by the cool shade of the pippala tree. Its leafy branches extended over an area wider than a dozen houses. The children shared their food with one another, and Rupak and Bala especially enjoyed chapati with curry and fragrant white rice dipped in peanuts and sesame salt. Sujata and Balagupta brought enough water for everyone to drink. Svasti's heart overflowed with happiness. The atmosphere was still and quiet, yet alive with the greatest joy. On that day, at Sujata's request, Siddhartha told them the story of his life. The children listened enraptured from beginning to end.



## *Chapter Six*

# Beneath a Rose-Apple Tree

When he was nine years old, Siddhartha was told about the dream his mother had before giving birth to him. A magnificent white elephant with six tusks descended from the heavens surrounded by a chorus of beatific praises. The elephant approached her, its skin white as mountain snow. It held a brilliant pink lotus flower in its trunk and placed the flower within the queen's body. Then the elephant, too, entered her effortlessly, and all at once she was filled with deep ease and joy. She had the feeling she would never again know any suffering, worry, or pain, and she awoke uplifted by a sensation of pure bliss. When she got up from her bed, the ethereal music from the dream still echoed in her ears. She told her husband, the king, of the dream, and he, too, marveled at it. That morning, the king summoned all the holy men in the capital to come and divine the meaning of the queen's dream.

After listening intently to the dream's content, they responded, "Your majesty, the queen will give birth to a son who will be a great leader. He is destined to become either a mighty emperor who rules throughout the four directions, or a great Teacher who will show the Way of Truth to all beings in Heaven and Earth. Our land, your majesty, has long awaited the appearance of such a Great One."

King Suddhodana beamed. After consulting the queen, he ordered that provisions from the royal storehouses be distributed to the ill and unfortunate throughout the land. Thus the citizens of the kingdom of Sakya shared the king and queen's joy over the news of their future son.

Siddhartha's mother was named Mahamaya. A woman of great virtue, her love extended to all beings—people, animals, and plants. It was the custom in those days for a woman to return to her parents' home to give birth there. Mahamaya was from the country of Koliya, so she set out for Ramagama, the capital of Koliya. Along the way, she stopped to rest in the garden of Lumbini. The forest there was filled with flowers and singing

birds. Peacocks fanned their splendid tails in the morning light. Admiring an ashok tree in full bloom, the queen walked toward it, when suddenly, feeling unsteady, she grabbed a branch of the ashok tree to support her. Just a moment later, still holding the branch, Queen Mahamaya gave birth to a radiant son.

The prince was bathed in fresh water and wrapped in yellow silk by Mahamaya's attendants. As there was no longer any need to return to Ramagama, the queen and the newborn prince were carried home in their four-horse carriage. When they arrived home, the prince was again bathed in warm water and placed next to his mother.

Hearing the news, King Suddhodana hurried in to see his wife and son. His joy was boundless. His eyes sparkled and he named the prince "Siddhartha," "the one who accomplishes his aim." Everyone in the palace rejoiced, and one by one they came to offer their congratulations to the queen. King Suddhodana wasted no time in summoning the soothsayers to tell him of Siddhartha's future. After examining the baby's features, they all agreed that the boy bore the marks of a great leader and would no doubt rule over a mighty kingdom that spread in all four directions.

One week later a holy man named Asita Kaladevala paid a visit to the palace. His back was bent with age, and he needed a cane to descend the mountain where he lived. When the palace guards announced Master Asita's arrival, King Suddhodana personally came out to greet him. He ushered him in to see the baby prince. The holy man gazed at the prince for a long time without uttering a word. Then he began to weep, his trembling body supported by his cane. Streams of tears fell from his eyes.



*King Siddhodhana's joy was boundless as he hurried in to see his wife and newborn son.*

King Siddhodhana grew alarmed and asked, "What is it? Do you forebode some misfortune for the child?"

Master Asita wiped the tears with his hands and shook his head. “Your majesty, I see no misfortune at all. I weep for myself, for I can clearly see that this child possesses true greatness. He will penetrate all the mysteries of the universe. Your majesty, your son will not be a politician. He will be a great Master of the Way. Heaven and Earth will be his home and all beings his relations. I weep because I will pass away before I have a chance to hear his voice proclaim the truths he will realize. Majesty, you and your country possess great merit to have given birth to such a one as this boy.”

Asita turned to leave. The king pleaded for him to stay, but it was of no use. The old man began walking back to his mountain. Master Asita’s visit sent the king into a frenzy. He did not want his son to become a monk. He wanted him to assume his throne and extend the borders of their kingdom. The king thought, “Asita is only one among hundreds, even thousands of holy men. Perhaps his prophecy is mistaken. Surely the other holy men who said Siddhartha would become a great emperor were correct.” Clinging to this hope, the king was comforted.

After having attained sublime joy giving birth to Siddhartha, Queen Mahamaya died eight days later, and all the kingdom mourned her. King Suddhodana summoned her sister Mahapajapati, and asked her to become the new queen. Mahapajapati, also known as Gotami, agreed, and she cared for Siddhartha as if he were her own son. As the boy grew older and asked about his real mother, he understood how much Gotami had loved her sister and how she more than anyone else in the world could love him as much as his own mother. Under Gotami’s care, Siddhartha grew strong and healthy.

One day, as Gotami watched Siddhartha play in the garden, she realized he was old enough to learn the graces of wearing gold and precious gems. She instructed her attendants to bring forth precious jewels to try on Siddhartha, but to her surprise, none rendered Siddhartha more handsome than he already was. As Siddhartha expressed discomfort at wearing such things, Gotami ordered the jewels to be returned to their cases.

When Siddhartha reached school age, he studied literature, writing, music, and athletics with the other princes of the Sakya dynasty. Among his schoolmates were his cousins Devadatta and Kimbila and the son of a palace dignitary, a boy named Kaludayi. Naturally intelligent, Siddhartha mastered his lessons quickly. His teacher Vishvamitra found the young Devadatta a sharp student, but never in his teaching career had he taught a student more impressive than Siddhartha.

One day when he was nine years old, Siddhartha and his schoolmates

were allowed to attend the ritual first plowing of the fields. Gotami herself dressed Siddhartha right down to the fine slippers on his feet. Attired in his royal best, King Suddhodana presided over the ceremonies. High-ranking holy men and brahmins paraded in robes and headdresses of every color imaginable. The ceremony was held next to the finest fields in the kingdom, not far from the palace itself. Flags and banners waved from every gate and along every roadside. Colorful displays of food and drink were laid out on altars crowded along the roads. Minstrels and musicians strolled among the throngs of people, adding mirth and merriment to the bustling festivities. Holy men chanted with utmost solemnity as Siddhartha's father and all the dignitaries of the court stood facing the unfolding ritual. Siddhartha stood toward the back with Devadatta and Kaludayi at his sides. The boys were excited because they had been told that when the rituals were over, everyone would enjoy a feast spread out on the grassy meadow. Siddhartha did not often go on picnics, and he was delighted. But the holy men's chanting went on and on for what seemed like forever, and the young boys grew restless. Unable to endure any more, they wandered off. Kaludayi held onto Siddhartha's sleeve, and off they went in the direction of the music and dancing. The hot sun blazed and the performers' costumes grew wet with perspiration. Beads of sweat shone on the dancing girls' foreheads. After running about among the scenes of entertainment, Siddhartha, too, grew hot and he left his friends to seek the shade of the rose-apple tree alongside the road. Beneath the cool branches, Siddhartha felt pleasantly refreshed. At that moment, Gotami appeared and, spotting her son, she said, "I've been looking all over for you. Where have you been? You should return now for the conclusion of the ceremony. It would please your father."

"Mother, the ceremony is too long. Why must the holy men chant so long?"

"They are reciting the Vedas, my child. The scriptures have a profound meaning, handed down by the Creator Himself to the brahmins countless generations ago. You will study them soon."

"Why doesn't Father recite the scriptures instead of having the brahmins do it?"

"Only those born into the brahmana caste are permitted to recite the scriptures, my child. Even kings who wield great power must depend on the services of the brahmins for priestly duties."

Siddhartha thought over Gotami's words. After a long pause, he joined

his palms and entreated her, "Please, Mother, ask Father if I may stay here. I feel so happy sitting beneath this rose-apple tree."

Giving in good-naturedly to her child, Gotami smiled and nodded. She stroked his hair and then returned down the path.

At last the brahmans concluded their prayers. King Suddhodana stepped down into the fields and, together with two military officers, began to plow the first row of the season, as cheers resounded among the crowd. Then the farmers followed the king's example and began to plow their fields. Hearing the people's cheers, Siddhartha ran to the edge of the fields. He watched a water buffalo straining to pull a heavy plow, followed by a robust farmer whose skin was bronzed from long work in the sun. The farmer's left hand steadied the plow while his right hand wielded a whip to urge the buffalo on. Sun blazed and the man's sweat poured in streams from his body. The rich earth was divided into two neat furrows. As the plow turned the earth, Siddhartha noticed that the bodies of worms and other small creatures were being cut as well. As the worms writhed upon the ground, they were spotted by birds who flew down and grabbed them in their beaks. Then Siddhartha saw a large bird swoop down and grasp a small bird in its talons.

Utterly absorbed in these events, standing beneath the burning sun, Siddhartha, too, became drenched in sweat. He ran back to the shade of the rose-apple tree. He had just witnessed so many things strange and unknown to him. He sat cross-legged and closed his eyes to reflect on all he had seen. Composed and erect, he sat for a long time, oblivious to all the singing, dancing, and picnicking taking place around him. Siddhartha continued to sit, absorbed by the images of the field and the many creatures. When the king and queen passed by sometime later, they discovered Siddhartha still sitting in deep concentration. Gotami was moved to tears seeing how beautiful Siddhartha looked, like a small, still statue; But King Suddhodana was seized with sudden apprehension. If Siddhartha could sit so solemnly at such a young age, might not the holy man Asita's prophecy come true? Too disturbed to remain for the picnic, the king returned alone to the palace in his royal carriage.

Some poor, country children passed by the tree speaking and laughing happily. Gotami motioned them to be quiet. She pointed to Siddhartha sitting beneath the rose-apple tree. Curious, the children stared at him. Suddenly, Siddhartha opened his eyes. Seeing the queen, he smiled.

"Mother," he said, "reciting the scriptures does nothing to help the worms and the birds."

Siddhartha stood up and ran to Gotami and clasped her hand. He then noticed the children observing him. They were about his own age, but their clothes were tattered, their faces soiled, and their arms and legs piteously thin. Aware of his princely attire, Siddhartha felt embarrassed, yet he wanted very much to play with them. He smiled and hesitantly waved, and one boy smiled back. That was all the encouragement Siddhartha needed. He asked Gotami for permission to invite the children to the picnic feast. At first she hesitated, but then she nodded in assent.

## *Chapter Seven*

# White Elephant Prize

When Siddhartha was fourteen years old, Queen Gotami gave birth to a son, Nanda. All the palace rejoiced, including Siddhartha, who was very happy to have a younger brother. Every day after his studies, he ran home to visit Nanda. Although Siddhartha was already of an age to be concerned with other matters, he often took little Nanda on walks, accompanied by Devadatta.

Siddhartha had three other cousins that he liked very much, named Mahanama, Baddhiya, and Kimbila. He often invited them to play with him in the flower gardens behind the palace. Queen Gotami enjoyed watching them play as she sat on the wooden bench beside the lotus pond. Her attendant was always ready to respond to her requests to bring drinks and snacks for the children.

With each passing year, Siddhartha grew ever more adept in his studies and Devadatta had a hard time concealing his jealousy. Siddhartha mastered every subject with ease, including the martial arts. Although Devadatta was stronger, Siddhartha was more agile and alert. In math, the other boys yielded to Siddhartha's brilliance. Arjuna, his math teacher, spent hours answering Siddhartha's advanced questions.

Siddhartha was especially gifted in music. His music teacher gave him a rare and precious flute and on summer evenings Siddhartha would sit alone in the garden and play his new instrument. Sometimes his songs were sweet and soft, while other times the sound was so sublime that listeners felt as though they were being carried high above the clouds. Gotami often sat outside as the evening shadows fell in order to listen to her son's music. She experienced deep contentment as she allowed her heart to drift with the sound of Siddhartha's flute.

As befitted his age, Siddhartha concentrated more intensely in his religious and philosophical studies. He was instructed in all the Vedas, and he pondered the meanings of the teachings and beliefs they expounded. He



devoted special study to the Rigveda and Atharveda scriptures. From the time he was very small, Siddhartha had seen the brahmins recite scriptures and perform rituals. Now he himself began to penetrate the subject matter contained in these sacred teachings. Great importance was given to the sacred writings of Brahmanism. The words and the sounds themselves were seen to hold great power, which could influence and even change the affairs of people and the natural world. The positions of the stars and the unfolding of the seasons were intimately connected to prayers and ritual offerings. The brahmins were regarded as the only ones capable of understanding the hidden mysteries of heaven and earth. They alone could use prayer and ritual to bring proper order to the realms of humans and the natural world.

Siddhartha was taught that the cosmos emanated from a Supreme Being known as Purusha or Brahman, and that all castes in society had issued from various parts of the Creator's body. Every person contained part of the essence of the transcendental Creator and that universal essence comprised a person's basic nature or soul.

Siddhartha devoted serious study, as well, to all the other brahmana texts, including the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. His teachers wanted only to instruct their charges in the traditional beliefs, but Siddhartha and his companions insisted on asking questions that forced their teachers to address contemporary ideas that did not always seem to accord with tradition.

On the days the boys were off from school, Siddhartha persuaded them to visit and discuss these matters with well-known priests and brahmins in the capital. Thanks to these encounters, Siddhartha learned of a number of movements in the country that openly challenged the absolute authority of the brahmins. Members of these movements were not only discontented laymen who wished to share some of the power that had long belonged exclusively to the brahmana caste, but they included reform-minded members of the brahmana caste as well.

Since the day young Siddhartha had been given permission to invite a few poor country children to his royal picnic, he had also been allowed to visit from time to time the small villages that surrounded the capital. On these occasions, he was always careful to wear only simple garments. By speaking directly with the people, Siddhartha learned many things that he had never been exposed to in the palace. He was aware, of course, that the people served and worshipped the three deities of Brahmanism—Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. But he also learned that they were manipulated and

oppressed by the brahmana priests. In order to have the proper rituals for births, marriages, and funerals, families were forced to pay the brahmins in food, money, and physical labor, regardless of how impoverished they were.

One day while passing a straw hut, Siddhartha was startled by mournful cries from within. He asked Devadatta to enter and inquire what was the matter. They learned that the head of the household had recently died. The family was wretchedly poor. The wife and children were piteously thin and dressed in tattered rags. Their house was on the verge of collapse. Siddhartha learned that the husband had desired the services of a brahmin to purify the earth before rebuilding their kitchen, but before providing these services, the brahmin demanded the man work for him. Throughout several days the brahmin had ordered him to haul large rocks and chop wood. During this time the man became ill and the brahmin permitted him to return home, but halfway home, the man collapsed on the road and died.

As a result of his own reflections, Siddhartha began to question some of the fundamental teachings of Brahmanism: why had the Vedas been given exclusively to the brahmana caste, why was Brahman the Supreme Ruler of the universe, and what was the omnipotent power that prayers and rituals possessed? Siddhartha sympathized with those priests and brahmins who dared to directly challenge these dogmas. His interest never waned, and Siddhartha never missed a class or discussion on the Vedas. He also pursued the studies of language and history.

Siddhartha liked very much to meet and have discussions with hermits and monks, but as his father disapproved, he had to find excuses to go on other excursions in the hope of encountering such men. These monks cared nothing for material possessions and social status, unlike the brahmins who openly vied for power. Rather, these monks abandoned everything in order to seek liberation and to cut the ties that bound them to the sorrows and worries of the world. They were men who had studied and penetrated the meaning of the Vedas and the Upanishads. Siddhartha knew that many such hermits lived in Kosala, the neighboring kingdom to the west, and in Magadha, which lay to the south. Siddhartha hoped that one day he would have a chance to visit these regions and study seriously with men such as these.

Of course, King Suddhodana was aware of Siddhartha's aspirations. He dreaded that his son might one day leave the palace and become a monk, and he confided his worries to his younger brother, Dronodanaraja, the father of Devadatta and Ananda.

“The country of Kosala has long had its eye on our territory. We must count on the talents of our young people, such as Siddhartha and Devadatta, to protect the destiny of our country. I greatly fear Siddhartha may decide to become a monk, as the Master Asita Kaladevala predicted. If this comes to pass, it is likely that Devadatta will follow in Siddhartha’s footsteps. Do you know how much they like to go out and meet with these hermits?”

Dronodanaraja was taken aback by the king’s words. After pondering a moment, he whispered in the king’s ear, “If you ask me, I think you should find a wife for Siddhartha. Once he has a family to occupy him, he will abandon this desire to become a monk.” King Suddhodana nodded.

That night he confided his concerns to Gotami, who promised she would arrange for Siddhartha to marry in the near future. Even though she had just recently given birth to a girl, a princess named Sundari Nanda, soon after, she began to organize a number of gatherings for the young people in the kingdom. Siddhartha joined these evenings of music, athletic events, and field trips with enthusiasm. He made many new friends, both young men and young women.

King Suddhodana had a younger sister named Pamita whose husband was King Dandapani of Koliya. The couple kept residences in both Ramagama, the capital of Koliya, and in Kapilavatthu. Sakya and Koliya were separated only by the Rohini River and their peoples had been close for many generations. Their capitals were but a day’s journey apart. At Gotami’s request, the king and queen of Koliya agreed to organize a martial arts competition on the large field that bordered Kunau Lake. King Suddhodana personally presided over the event to encourage the young people of his kingdom to develop their strength and increase their fighting skills. All the young people of the capital were invited to attend, girls as well as boys. The young women did not engage in the athletic contests but encouraged the young men with their praise and applause. Yasodhara, the daughter of Queen Pamita and King Dandapani, was responsible for welcoming all the guests. She was a lovely and charming young woman, her beauty natural and fresh.

Siddhartha placed number one in all the events, including archery, swordsmanship, horse racing, and weightlifting, and it was Yasodhara who presented him with his prize, a white elephant. With her palms joined and her head slightly bowed, in a voice noble and serene, she declared, “Please accept this elephant, Prince Siddhartha, for your well-deserved victory. And please accept my heartfelt congratulations.”

The princess's movements were graceful and unaffected, and her manner of dress elegant and refined. Her smile was as fresh as a half-opened lotus. Siddhartha bowed and looked into her eyes, saying in a quiet voice, "Thank you, princess."

Devadatta stood behind Siddhartha, unhappy to have won only second place. Upset that Yasodhara had not even noticed him, he grabbed the elephant's trunk and viciously struck it in a sensitive spot. Overcome with pain, the elephant dropped to its knees.



*Siddhartha placed number one in all the events. Yasodhara presented him with his prize, a white elephant.*

Siddhartha looked severely at Devadatta, “Cousin, that was outrageous.”

Siddhartha rubbed the tender place on the elephant’s trunk and spoke soothingly to it. Gradually the elephant stood up again and bowed its head in respect to the prince. The spectators applauded loudly. Siddhartha climbed upon the elephant’s back and the victory procession began. Under the guidance of its trainer, the white elephant carried Siddhartha around the capital of Kapilavatthu, and the people cheered. Yasodhara walked beside them with slow, graceful steps.

## Chapter Eight

# The Jeweled Necklace

As he grew into his teens, Siddhartha came to find palace life stifling, so he began making excursions beyond the city limits to see what life was like outside. He was always accompanied by Channa, his faithful attendant, and sometimes also by his friends or brothers. Channa was responsible for Siddhartha's horse carriage, and he and Siddhartha took turns holding the reins. As Siddhartha never used a whip, Channa did not either.

Siddhartha visited every corner of the Sakya kingdom, from the rugged foothills of the Himalayan mountains in the north to the great southern plains. The capital, Kapilavatthu, was located in the richest, most populated region of the lowlands. Compared with the neighboring kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha, Sakya was quite small, but what it lacked in area it more than made up in its ideal location. The Rohini and Banganga Rivers, which began in the highlands, flowed down to irrigate its rich plains. They continued southwards and joined the Hiranyavati River before emptying into the Ganga. Siddhartha loved to sit on the banks of the Banganga and watch the water rush by.

The local villagers believed that the waters of the Banganga could wash away one's bad karma, from both present and past lives, and so they often submerged themselves in the water, even at near freezing temperatures. One day, while sitting along the riverbank with his attendant, Siddhartha asked, "Channa, do you believe this river can wash away bad karma?"

"It must, your highness; otherwise why would so many people come here to wash themselves?"

Siddhartha smiled. "Well then, the shrimp, fish, and oysters who spend their entire lives in these waters must be the purest and most virtuous beings of all!"

Channa replied, "Well, at least I can say that bathing in this river will wash away the dirt and dust from one's body!"

Siddhartha laughed and patted Channa on the shoulder. "With that, I

certainly agree.”

On another day, as he was returning to the palace, Siddhartha was surprised to see Yasodhara in a small, poor village, with one of her maid servants, tending to the village children who were suffering from eye diseases, influenza, skin disorders, and other ailments. Yasodhara was dressed simply, yet she appeared to be as a goddess who had appeared among the poor. Siddhartha was deeply moved to see the daughter of a royal family placing her own comfort aside so that she could care for the destitute. She rinsed their infected eyes and skin, dispensed medicine, and washed their soiled clothes.

“Princess, how long have you been doing this?” asked Siddhartha. “It is beautiful to see you here.”

Yasodhara looked up from washing a little girl’s arm. “For almost two years, your highness. But this is only the second time I have been in this village.”

“I often stop here. The children know me well. Your work must give you a great feeling of satisfaction, princess.”

Yasodhara smiled without answering. She bent over to continue washing the girl’s arm.

That day, Siddhartha had a chance to speak with Yasodhara for a longer time. He was surprised to learn that she shared many of his own ideas. Yasodhara was not content to remain in her lady’s quarters blindly obeying tradition. She, too, had studied the Vedas and secretly opposed society’s injustices. And like Siddhartha, she did not feel truly happy being a privileged member of a wealthy, royal family. She loathed the power struggles among the courtiers and even among the brahmans. She knew that as a woman she could not effect great social change, so she found ways to express her convictions through charitable work. She hoped that her friends might see the value of this through her example.



*Siddhartha was deeply moved to see Yasodhara caring for the destitute child.*

Since the day he first saw her, Siddhartha had felt a special affinity for Yasodhara. Now he found himself drawn to every word she spoke. His father



had expressed a desire that he marry soon. Perhaps Yasodhara was the right woman. During the musical and athletic gatherings, Siddhartha had met many charming young women, but Yasodhara was not only the most beautiful, she was the one with whom he felt ease and contentment.

One day, Queen Gotami decided to organize a reception for all the young women of the capital. She asked Pamita, Yasodhara's mother, to help with the preparations. The young women of Kapilavatthu were invited, and each was to be presented with fine jewelry. Queen Pamita suggested that Siddhartha himself present each gift, much in the same spirit that Yasodhara had welcomed the guests that attended the martial arts contest. King Suddhodana and the members of the royal family would be present.

The party took place on a delightfully cool evening. Food and drinks were set out throughout the palace halls, while musicians entertained the guests. Beneath the bright, flickering lights of flowered lanterns, graceful young women arrived, wearing colorful saris shimmering with gold thread. One by one they passed before the royal dignitaries, including the king and queen. Siddhartha, dressed in princely garb, stood to the left behind a table covered with pearl necklaces and gold and precious gems to present to nearly a thousand young ladies.

At first Siddhartha had refused to present the gifts personally, but Gotami and Pamita had beseeched him. "It would be a great honor and happiness for any person to receive a gift directly from you. You should understand that," said Pamita with a convincing smile. Siddhartha did not want to refuse to provide happiness to others, and so he complied. But now, standing before the thousands of guests, Siddhartha did not know how he could possibly choose a fitting gift for each lady. Every young woman passed in full view of all the guests before approaching Siddhartha. The first young woman to be presented was Soma, daughter of a prince. As instructed by Pamita, she mounted the stairs of the royal dais, stopped to bow to the king and queen and all the distinguished guests, and then walked slowly toward Siddhartha. When she reached him, she bowed her head, and Siddhartha bowed in return. Then he offered her a strand of jade beads. The guests applauded their approval, and Soma bowed. She spoke her thanks so softly that Siddhartha could not understand her words.

The next woman was Rohini, named after the river. Siddhartha did not try to distinguish among the young women by selecting different jewels to match their particular grace and beauty. He picked up whichever ornament was next on the table and offered it to the next young woman. Thus the

presentation of gifts proceeded quickly even though there were so many young women. By ten at night, most of the jewelry had been given away. Everyone believed a young woman named Sela was the last in line. But just as Siddhartha thought he had completed his task, another young woman appeared from the audience and slowly made her way to the dais. It was Yasodhara. She was dressed in an ivory colored sari as simple and light as a cool morning breeze. She bowed to the king and queen. Ever graceful and natural, she approached Siddhartha, smiled, and asked, “Does your highness have anything left for me?”

Siddhartha looked at Yasodhara and then confusedly at the ornaments remaining on the table. He appeared flustered—there was nothing on the table worthy of Yasodhara’s beauty. Suddenly he smiled. He removed the necklace around his own neck and held it out to Yasodhara. “This is my gift to you, princess.”

Yasodhara shook her head. “I came here to honor you. How can I take away your own necklace?”

Siddhartha answered, “My mother, Queen Gotami, often says that I look better without jewelry. Please, princess, accept this gift.”

He motioned her to step closer so that he could place the shining beads around her neck. The guests burst into applause, and it seemed as if the cheers would never end. They all rose to their feet to express their joyous approval.

## *Chapter Nine*

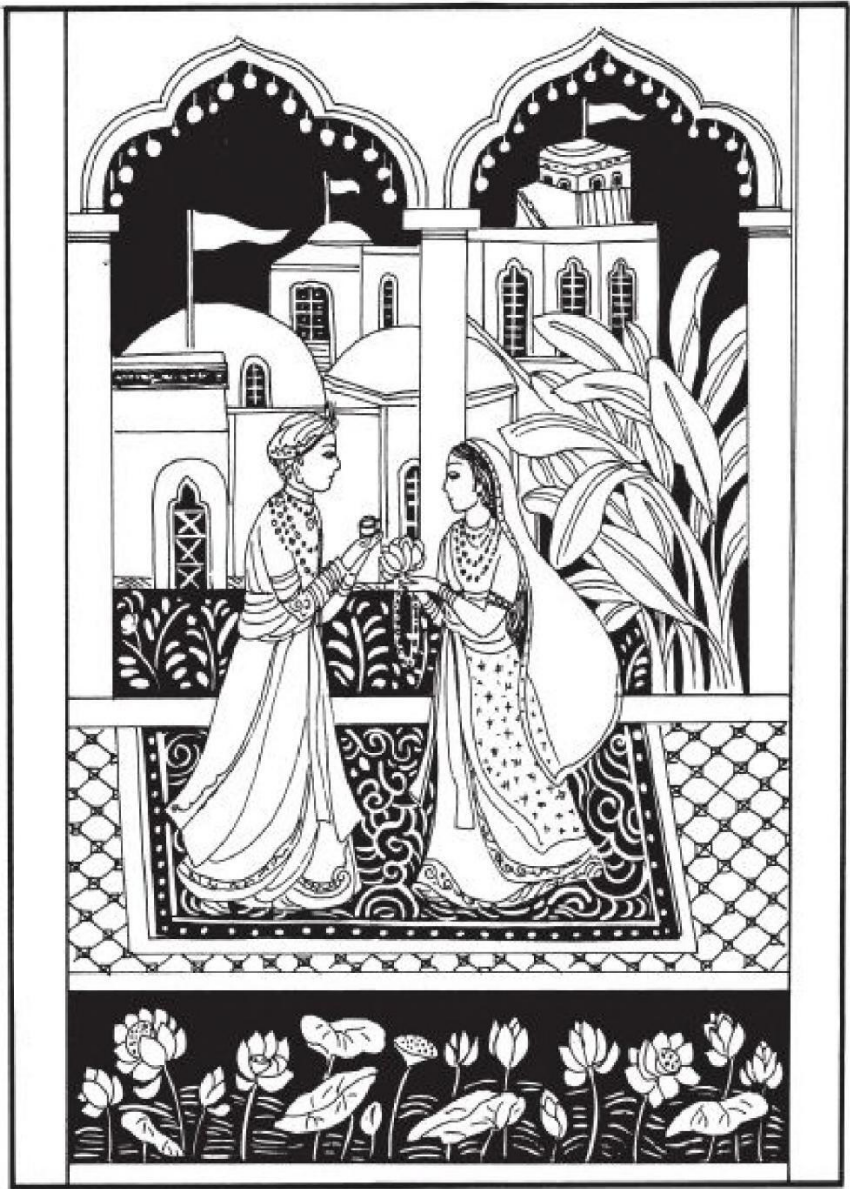
# The Path of Compassion

Siddhartha and Yasodhara's wedding took place the following autumn. It was an occasion of great joy and celebration for the entire kingdom. The capital, Kapilavatthu, was decked with flags, lanterns, and flowers, and there was music everywhere. Wherever Siddhartha and Yasodhara went in their carriage, they were greeted with resounding cheers. They also visited outlying hamlets and villages, bringing gifts of food and clothing to many poor families.

King Suddhodana supervised the building of three palaces for the young couple, one for each season. The summer palace was built on a beautiful hillside in the highlands, while the rainy season and winter palaces were in the capital city. Each palace had lotus pools, some for pale blue lotuses, some for pink, and some for white. The couple's fine garments and slippers, and the fragrant sandalwood they lit every day, were ordered specially from Varanasi, the capital of the Kasi kingdom to the southwest.

King Suddhodana was at peace, now that Siddhartha had followed the path he had wished his son to follow. He personally selected the finest musicians and dancers in the kingdom to provide continual and pleasant entertainment for his young son and daughter-in-law.

But happiness for Siddhartha and Yasodhara was not to be found in a pampered life of wealth and status. Their happiness came from opening their hearts and sharing their deepest thoughts with each other. They weren't moved by exquisite and savory foods or fancy silken clothes. While they could appreciate the artistry of the dancers and musicians, they were not carried away by the pleasures they offered. They had their own dreams—to find answers concerning the spiritual quest and the renewal of society.



*Siddhartha and Yasodhara's wedding was an occasion of great joy and celebration for the entire kingdom.*

The following summer, as they were driven to their summer palace by faithful Channa, Siddhartha's boyhood attendant, Siddhartha introduced Yasodhara to places throughout the kingdom she did not yet know. They

stayed several days at each location, sometimes spending the night in the homes of country folk, sharing their simple foods and sleeping upon their woven string beds. They learned a great deal about the way of life and the customs of each place they visited.

At times they encountered terrible misery. They met families with nine or ten children, every child racked with disease. No matter how hard the parents toiled day and night, they could not earn enough to support so many children. Hardship went hand in hand with the life of the peasants. Siddhartha gazed at children with arms and legs as thin as matchsticks and bellies swollen from worms and malnutrition. He saw the handicapped and infirm forced to beg in the streets, and these scenes robbed him of any happiness. He saw people caught in inescapable conditions. In addition to poverty and disease, they were oppressed by the brahmans, and there was no one to whom they could complain. The capital was too distant and even if they went there, who would help them? He knew that even a king had no power to change the situation.

Siddhartha had long understood the inner workings of the royal court. Every official was intent on protecting and fortifying his own power, not on alleviating the suffering of those in need. He had seen the powerful plot against each other, and he felt nothing but revulsion for politics. He knew that even his own father's authority was fragile and restricted—a king did not possess true freedom but was imprisoned by his position. His father was aware of many officials' greed and corruption, but was forced to rely on these same individuals to maintain the stability of his reign. Siddhartha realised that if he stood in his father's place, he would have to do the same. He understood that only when people overcame greed and envy in their own hearts would conditions change. And so his desire to seek a path of spiritual liberation was reignited.

Yasodhara was bright and intuitive. She understood Siddhartha's longings, and she had faith that if Siddhartha resolved to find the path of liberation he would succeed. But she was also quite practical. Such a search could last months, even years. In the meantime, sufferings would continue to unfold around them daily. And so she believed it was important to respond right in the present moment. She discussed with Siddhartha ways to ease the suffering of the poorest members of society. She had been doing work like that for several years, and her efforts eased some of the people's misery and brought some measure of peace and happiness to her own heart as well. She believed that with Siddhartha's loving support she could

continue such work for a long time.

From Kapilavatthu came pouring all manner of goods and servants to provide for the couple's summer needs. Siddhartha and Yasodhara sent home most of the servants, retaining only a few to assist them with the gardens, cooking, and housekeeping. And, of course, they retained the services of Channa. Yasodhara organized their daily life as simply as possible. She personally entered the kitchen to direct the cooking of simple meals pleasing to Siddhartha, and she cared for his garments with her own hands. She sought Siddhartha's guidance concerning the relief projects she intended to continue when they returned to the capital. Siddhartha understood her need to engage in social action, and he never failed to express his support. Because of this, Yasodhara placed even deeper trust in her husband.

But although Siddhartha understood the value of Yasodhara's work, he felt that her path alone could not bring true peace. People were entrapped not only by illness and unjust social conditions, but by the sorrows and passions they themselves created in their own hearts and minds. And if in time, Yasodhara fell victim to fear, anger, bitterness, or disappointment, where would she find the energy needed to continue her work? Siddhartha had himself experienced suspicion, frustration, and pain when he saw how things worked in the palace and in society. He knew that the attainment of inner peace would be the only basis for true social work, but he did not confide these thoughts to Yasodhara, because he feared that they would only cause her uncertainty and worry.

When the couple returned to their winter palace, they entertained a constant stream of guests. Yasodhara welcomed family members and friends with great warmth and respect, but she was most attentive when Siddhartha spoke with them about philosophy and religion and their relation to politics and society. Even while going back and forth to direct the servants, Yasodhara never missed a word of these conversations. She had hoped to discover among their friends some who might like to join her work for the poor, but few expressed interest in such pursuits. Most were more interested in feasting and having a good time. Yet Siddhartha and Yasodhara patiently received them all.

In addition to Siddhartha, there was one other person who understood and wholeheartedly supported Yasodhara's efforts—Gotami, the Queen Mahapajapati. The queen was most attentive to her daughter-in-law's happiness, for she knew that if Yasodhara was happy, Siddhartha would be

happy as well. But that was not the sole reason she supported Yasodhara's good work. Gotami was a woman of compassion and from the first time she accompanied Yasodhara on a visit to a poor village, she understood at once the true value of Yasodhara's work. It was not just the material goods given to the poor, such as rice, flour, cloth, and medicine, but the kind glances, helping hands, and loving heart of one willing to respond directly to those who suffer.

Queen Mahapajapati was not like other women in the palace. She frequently told Yasodhara that women possessed as much wisdom and strength as men and needed to shoulder the responsibilities of society also. While women did possess a special ability to create warmth and happiness in their families, there was no reason for them to remain only in the kitchen or in the palace. Gotami found in her daughter-in-law a woman with whom she could share true friendship, for like herself, Yasodhara was thoughtful and independent. Not only did the queen offer Yasodhara her approval, but she worked alongside Yasodhara as well.

## Chapter Ten

# Unborn Child

During this time, King Suddhodana expressed the desire to have Siddhartha spend more time at his side so that he could instruct his son in political and courtly affairs. The prince was invited to attend many official meetings, sometimes alone with the king, at other times with the king's court. Siddhartha gave his full attention to these affairs, and he came to understand that the political, economic, and military problems that beset any kingdom had their roots in the selfish ambitions of those involved in politics. Concerned only with protecting their own power, it was impossible for them to create enlightened policies for the common good. When Siddhartha saw corrupt officials feign virtue and morality, anger filled his heart. But he concealed it, as he did not have any alternatives to offer.

"Why don't you contribute ideas at court instead of always sitting so silently?" King Suddhodana asked one day after a long meeting with several officials.

Siddhartha looked at his father. "It is not that I haven't ideas, but it would be useless to state them. They only point to the disease. I do not yet see a cure for the selfish ambitions of those in the court. Look at Vessamitta, for example. He holds an impressive amount of power at court, yet you know he is corrupt. More than once he has tried to encroach upon your authority, but you are still forced to depend on his services. Why? Because you know if you don't, chaos will break loose."

King Suddhodana looked at his son silently for a long moment. Then he spoke. "Siddhartha, you know well that in order to maintain peace in one's family and country, there are certain things one must tolerate. My own power is limited, but I am sure that if you prepared yourself to be king, you would do far better than I have. You possess the talent needed to purge the ranks of corruption while preventing chaos in our homeland."

Siddhartha sighed. "Father, I do not think it is a question of talent. I believe the fundamental problem is to liberate one's own heart and mind. I



too am trapped by feelings of anger, jealousy, fear, and desire.”

Similar exchanges between father and son made King Suddhodana grow increasingly anxious. He recognized that Siddhartha was a person of unusual depth, and he saw how differently he and his son viewed the world. Still, he fostered the hope that over time, Siddhartha would come to accept his role and fill it in a most worthy way.

In addition to his duties at court and assisting Yasodhara, Siddhartha continued to meet and study with well-known brahmans and monks. He knew that the pursuit of religion was not just the study of the holy scriptures but included the practice of meditation to attain liberation for one’s heart and mind, and he sought to learn more about meditation. He applied all that he learned in these studies to his own life in the palace, and he shared these insights with Yasodhara.

“Gopa,” Siddhartha liked to call Yasodhara affectionately, “perhaps you should also practice meditation. It will bring peace to your heart and enable you to continue your work for a long time.”

Yasodhara followed his advice. No matter how busy her work kept her, she reserved time for meditation. Husband and wife often sat together silently. At such times, their attendants left them alone, and the couple asked their musicians and dancers to go perform elsewhere.

From the time he was small, Siddhartha had been taught the four stages of a brahman’s life. In youth, a brahman studied the Vedas. In the second stage, he married, raised a family, and served society. In the third stage, when his children were grown, he could retire and devote himself to religious studies. And in the fourth stage, released from every tie and obligation, a brahman could live the life of a monk. Siddhartha thought about it and concluded that by the time one was old, it would be too late to study the Way. He did not want to wait that long.



*Husband and wife often sat together silently.*

“Why can’t a person live all four ways at once? Why can’t a man pursue a religious life while he still has a family?”

Siddhartha wanted to study and practice the Way in the very midst of his present life. Of course, he could not refrain from thinking about famous teachers in distant places such as Savatthi or Rajagaha. He was sure that if he could find a way to study with such masters, he would make much more progress. The monks and teachers he frequently met had all mentioned the names of certain great masters such as Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. Everyone aspired to study with such masters, and each day

Siddhartha felt his own desire grow ever more urgent.

One afternoon Yasodhara came home, her face filled with grief. She did not speak to anyone. A young child she had tended for more than a week had just died. Despite all her efforts, she could not rescue the child from death's grasp. Overcome with sadness, she sat in meditation while tears streamed down her cheeks. It was impossible to hold back feelings. When Siddhartha returned from a meeting at court, she again burst into tears. Siddhartha held her in his arms and tried to console her.

"Gopa, tomorrow I will go with you to the funeral. Cry now; it will lessen the pain in your heart. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are heavy burdens each of us carries in this life. What has happened to the child could happen to any of us at any moment."

Yasodhara spoke between sobs, "Each day I see how true all the things you have said are. My two hands are so small compared to the immensity of suffering. My heart is constantly filled with anxiety and sorrow. Oh husband, please show me how I can overcome the suffering in my heart."

Siddhartha embraced Yasodhara tightly in his arms. "My wife, I myself am seeking a path to overcome the suffering and anxiety in my own heart. I have seen into the situation of society and human beings, but despite all my efforts, I have not yet seen the way to liberation. Yet I feel sure that one day I will find a way for all of us. Gopa, please have faith in me."

"I have never been without faith in you, my darling. I know that once you have resolved to accomplish something, you will pursue it until you succeed. I know that one day you will leave all your wealth and privileges behind in order to seek the Way. Only, please, my husband, do not leave me just now. I need you."

Siddhartha raised Yasodhara's chin and looked into her eyes, "No, no, I won't leave you now. Only when, when..."

Yasodhara placed her hand over Siddhartha's mouth. "Siddhartha, please say no more. I want to ask you something—if you were to have a child with me, would you want it to be a boy or a girl?"

Siddhartha was startled. He looked carefully at Yasodhara. "What are you saying, Gopa? Do you mean, can you be..."

Yasodhara nodded. She pointed to her belly and said, "I am so happy to be carrying the fruit of our love. I want it to be a boy who looks just like you, with your intelligence and kind virtue."

Siddhartha put his arms around Yasodhara and held her close. In the midst of his great joy, he felt the seeds of worry.

Still, he smiled and said, “I will be just as happy if it is a boy or a girl, just so long as the baby has your compassion and wisdom. Gopa, have you told Mother?”

“You are the only one I have told. This evening, I will go to the main palace and tell Queen Gotami. At the same time, I will ask her advice on how best to care for our unborn child. Tomorrow I will go tell my own mother, Queen Pamita. I’m sure everyone will be very happy.”

Siddhartha nodded. He knew that his mother would pass the news on to his father as soon as she learned of it. The king would be overjoyed and would no doubt organize a great banquet to celebrate. Siddhartha felt the ties that bound him to life in the palace tightening.

## *Chapter Eleven*

# Moonlight Flute

Udayin, Devadatta, Kimbila, Bhadya, Mahanama, Kaludayi, and Anuruddha were Siddhartha's friends who visited most often to discuss such things as politics and ethics. In addition to Ananda and Nanda, they would be Siddhartha's closest advisors when he became king. They liked to begin their debates after several glasses of wine. Giving in to his friend's wishes, Siddhartha often kept the royal musicians and dancers performing far into the night.

Devadatta could wax endlessly about political matters, and Udayin and Mahanama debated tirelessly every point Devadatta made. Siddhartha spoke little. Sometimes in the middle of a dance or song, Siddhartha would look over to find Anuruddha nodding, half-asleep, and obviously wearied by the evening's activities. He would nudge Anuruddha and the two would steal outside where they could watch the moon and listen to the nearby stream. Anuruddha was Mahanama's younger brother. Their father was Prince Amritodana, Siddhartha's paternal uncle. Anuruddha was an affable, handsome fellow, much admired by the court ladies, though he himself was not inclined to pursue romance. Sometimes Siddhartha and Anuruddha would sit in the garden until midnight. By then their friends had become too intoxicated or tired to discuss any more and had retired to the guest rooms, and Siddhartha would take out his flute and play beneath the bright moonlight. Gopa would place a small incense burner on a rock and sit quietly nearby, listening to the soft music rise and fall in the warm night air.



*Siddhartha played his flute for Anuruddha beneath the bright moonlight.*

Time flew, and the day for Yasodhara to give birth approached. Queen Pamita told her daughter she did not need to return home to give birth, as

Pamita herself was then living in Kapilavatthu. With Queen Mahapajapati, Pamita selected the finest midwives in the capital to assist Yasodhara. On the day Yasodhara went into labor, both Queen Gotami and Queen Pamita were there. A solemn and expectant atmosphere pervaded the palace. Although King Suddhodana did not show his presence, Siddhartha knew that the king anxiously awaited news of the birth in his own quarters.

When Yasodhara's labor pains began in earnest, she was led into the inner chamber by her attendants. It was only the noon hour, but suddenly the sky grew dark with clouds, as though a deity's hand had obscured the sun. Siddhartha sat outside. Although he was separated from his wife by two walls, he could clearly hear her cries. With each passing moment, his anxiety increased. Yasodhara's moans now followed one upon another, and he was beside himself. Her cries tore at his heart until it was impossible to sit still. He stood and paced the floor. At times Yasodhara's groans were so intense he could not quell his panic. His mother, Queen Mahamaya, had died as a result of giving birth to him, and that was a sorrow he could never forget. Now it was Yasodhara's turn to give birth to his own child. Childbirth was a passage most married women experienced, a passage fraught with danger, including the possibility of death. Sometimes both mother and child died.

Reminding himself what he had learned from a monk a number of months earlier, Siddhartha sat down in a lotus position and began to take hold of his mind and heart. This time of passage was a true test. He must maintain a calm heart even in the midst of Yasodhara's cries. Suddenly, the image of a newborn child arose in his mind. It was the image of his own child. Everyone had hoped he would have a child and would be happy for him once he did. He himself had hoped for a child. But now in the intensity of the actual event, he understood how immensely important the birth of a child is. He had not yet found his own path, he did not yet know where he was going, and yet here he was having a child—was it not a pity for the child?

Yasodhara's cries abruptly stopped. He stood up. What had happened? He could feel his own heartbeat. He observed his breath again in order to regain his calm. Just at that moment, the cries of an infant arose. The baby was born! Siddhartha wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Queen Gotami opened the door and looked in at him. She smiled and Siddhartha knew that Yasodhara was safe. The queen sat down before him and said, "Gopa has given birth to a boy."

Siddhartha smiled and looked at his mother with gratitude.

“I will name the child Rahula.”

That afternoon, Siddhartha entered the room to visit his wife and son. Yasodhara gazed at him, her shining eyes filled with love. Their son lay by her side, swaddled in silk, and Siddhartha could see only his plump little face. Siddhartha looked at Yasodhara as if to ask something. Understanding, she nodded her assent and gestured for Siddhartha to pick Rahula up. Siddhartha lifted the infant in his arms as Yasodhara watched. Siddhartha felt as though he were floating, and yet his heart was heavy with worry.

Yasodhara rested for several days. Queen Gotami took care of everything from preparing special foods to tending the fireplace to keep mother and child warm. One day after they returned home, Siddhartha visited his wife and son, and as he held Rahula in his arms, he marveled at how precious and fragile a human life was. He recalled the day he and Yasodhara had attended the funeral of a poor child, four years old. The body still lay upon its deathbed when Siddhartha and Yasodhara arrived. All signs of life had vanished, and the child’s skin was pale and waxen, its body no more than skin and bones. The child’s mother knelt beside the bed wiping her tears and then crying again. A moment later, a brahman arrived to perform the funeral rites. Neighbors who had kept an all-night vigil, lifted the child’s corpse onto a bamboo stretcher they had made to carry the body to the river. Siddhartha and Yasodhara followed the procession of poor villagers. A simple funeral pyre had been set up by the riverbank. Following the brahman’s instructions, the people carried the stretcher down to the river and submerged the body. They then lifted it back up and left it on the ground for the water to drain away. This was a purification rite, for the people believed that the waters of the Banganga River could cleanse bad karma. A man poured perfume over the funeral pyre and then the child’s body was placed upon it. The brahman held a lit torch and walked around the pyre while chanting. Siddhartha recognized the passages from the Vedas. After the brahman had circled the pyre three times, he lit it, and it soon burst into flames. The child’s mother, brothers, and sisters wailed. Before long, the fire consumed the little boy’s corpse. Siddhartha looked at Yasodhara and saw her eyes were filled with tears. Siddhartha felt like crying too. “Child, oh Child, where now do you return?” he thought.

Siddhartha handed Rahula back to Yasodhara. He went outside and sat alone in the garden until the evening shadows fell. A servant came looking for him. “Your highness, the queen asked me to find you. Your royal father



has come to visit.”

Siddhartha went back inside. The palace torches had all been lit and flickered brightly.

## Chapter Twelve

# Kanthaka

Yasodhara quickly regained her strength and soon was able to return to her work, while also spending much time with baby Rahula. One spring day, at Queen Gotami's insistence, Channa drove Siddhartha and Yasodhara out into the countryside for an outing. They brought Rahula along and a young servant girl named Ratna to help care for him.

Pleasant sunlight streamed down upon tender green leaves. Birds sang on the blossoming branches of ashok and rose-apple trees. Channa let the horses trot at a leisurely pace. Country folk, recognizing Siddhartha and Yasodhara, stood and waved in greeting. When they approached the banks of the Banganga River, Channa pulled on the reins and brought the carriage to a sudden halt. Blocking the road before them was a man who had collapsed. His arms and legs were pulled in toward his chest and his whole body shook. Moans escaped from his half-open mouth. Siddhartha jumped down, followed by Channa. The man lying in the road looked less than thirty years old. Siddhartha picked up his hand and said to Channa, "It looks as though he's come down with a bad flu, don't you think? Let's massage him and see if it helps."

Channa shook his head. "Your highness, these aren't the symptoms of a bad flu. I'm afraid he's contracted something far worse—this is a disease for which there is no known cure."

"Are you sure?" Siddhartha gazed at the man. "Couldn't we take him to the royal physician?"

"Your highness, even the royal physician can't cure this disease. I've heard this disease is highly infectious. If we take him in our carriage, he might infect your wife and son, and even yourself. Please, your highness, for your own safety, let go of his hand."

But Siddhartha did not release the man's hand—he looked at it and then at his own. Siddhartha had always enjoyed good health, but now looking at the dying man no older than himself, all he had taken for granted suddenly

vanished. From the riverbank came cries of mourning. He looked up to see a funeral taking place. There was the funeral pyre. The sound of chanting intertwined with the grief-stricken cries and the crackling of fire as the funeral pyre was lit.

Looking again at the man, Siddhartha saw that he had stopped breathing. His glassy eyes stared upward. Siddhartha released his hand and quietly closed the eyes. When Siddhartha stood up, Yasodhara was standing close behind him. How long she had been there, he did not know.

She spoke softly, "Please, my husband, go and wash your hands in the river. Channa, you do the same. Then we will drive into the next village and notify the authorities so they can take care of the body."

Afterward, no one had the heart to continue their spring outing. Siddhartha asked Channa to turn around, and on the way back no one spoke a word.

That night, Yasodhara's sleep was disturbed by three strange dreams. In the first, she saw a white cow on whose head was a sparkling jewel, as bright as the North Star. The cow strolled through Kapilavatthu headed for the city gates. From the altar of Indra resounded a divine voice, "If you can't keep this cow, there will be no light left in all the capital." Everyone in the city began chasing after the cow yet no one was able to detain it. It walked out the city gates and disappeared.

In her second dream, Yasodhara watched four god-kings of the skies, atop Mount Sumeru, projecting a light onto the city of Kapilavatthu. Suddenly the flag mounted on Indra's altar flapped violently and fell to the ground. Flowers of every color dropped like rain from the skies and the sound of celestial singing echoed everywhere throughout the capital. In her third dream, Yasodhara heard a loud voice that shook the heavens. "The time has come! The time has come!" it cried. Frightened, she looked over at Siddhartha's chair to discover he was gone. The jasmine flowers tucked in her hair fell to the floor and turned to dust. The garments and ornaments, which Siddhartha had left on his chair, transformed into a snake that slithered out the door. Yasodhara was filled with panic. All at once, she heard the bellowing of the white cow from beyond the city gates, the flapping of the flag upon Indra's altar, and the voices of heaven shouting, "The time has come! The time has come!"

Yasodhara awoke. Her forehead was drenched with sweat. She turned to Siddhartha and shook him. "Siddhartha, Siddhartha, please wake up."

He was already awake. He stroked her hair to comfort her and asked,

“What did you dream, Gopa? Tell me.”

She recounted all three dreams and then asked him, “Are these dreams an omen that you will soon leave me in order to go and seek the Way?”

Siddhartha fell silent, then consoled her, “Gopa, please don’t worry. You are a woman of depth. You are my partner, the one who can help me to truly fulfill my quest. You understand me more than anyone else. If in the near future I must leave and travel far from you, I know you possess the courage to continue your work. You will care for and raise our child well. Though I am gone, though I am far away from you, my love for you remains the same. I will never stop loving you, Gopa. With that knowledge, you will be able to endure our separation. And when I have found the Way, I will return to you and to our child. Please now, try to get some rest.”

Siddhartha’s words, spoken so tenderly, penetrated Yasodhara’s heart. Comforted, she closed her eyes and slept.

The following morning, Siddhartha went to speak to his father. “My royal father, I ask your permission to leave home and become a monk in order to seek the path of enlightenment.”

King Suddhodana was greatly alarmed. Though he had long known this day might arrive, he had certainly not expected it to take place so abruptly. After a long moment, he looked at his son and answered, “In the history of our family, a few have become monks, but no one has ever done it at your age. They all waited until they were past fifty. Why can’t you wait? Your son is still small, and the whole country is relying on you.”

“Father, a day upon the throne would be like a day of sitting on a bed of hot coals for me. If my heart has no peace, how can I fulfill your or the people’s trust in me? I have seen how quickly time passes, and I know my youth is no different. Please grant me your permission.”

The king tried to dissuade his son. “You must think of your homeland, your parents, Yasodhara, and your son, who is still an infant.”

“Father, it is precisely because I do think of all of you that I now ask your permission to go. It is not that I wish to abandon my responsibilities. Father, you know that you cannot free me from the suffering in my heart any more than you can release the suffering in your own heart.”

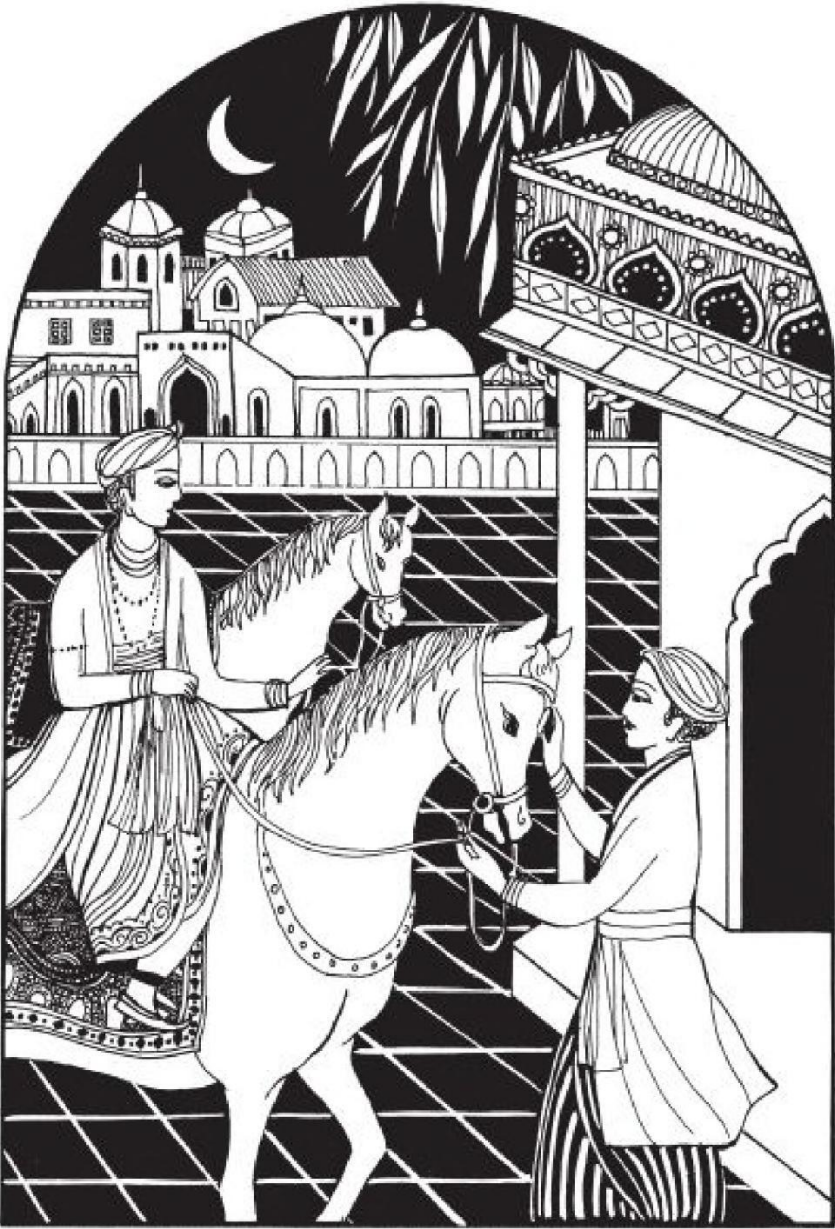
The king stood up and grabbed his son’s hand. “Siddhartha, you know how much I need you. You are the one on whom I have placed all my hopes. Please, don’t abandon me.”

“I will never abandon you. I am only asking you to let me go away for a time. When I have found the Way, I will return.”

A look of pain crossed King Suddhodana's face. He said no more and retired to his quarters.

Later on, Queen Gotami came to spend the day with Yasodhara, and in the early evening, Udayin, one of Siddhartha's friends, came to visit with Devadatta, Ananda, Bhadya, Anuruddha, Kimbila, and Bhadraka. Udayin had organized a party and had hired one of the finest dancing troupes in the capital to perform. Festive torches brightened the palace.

Gotami told Yasodhara that Udayin had been summoned by the king and given the task to do everything he could think of to entice Siddhartha to remain in the palace. The evening's party was the first of Udayin's plans.



*After preparing Kanthaka for a long journey, Channa asked Siddhartha, "May I accompany you?"*

Yasodhara instructed her attendants to prepare food and drinks for all the guests before retiring to her quarters with Gotami. Siddhartha himself went out and welcomed his guests. It was the full moon day of the month of

Uttarasalha. As the music began, the moon appeared above a row of trees in the southeastern sky.

Gotami confided her thoughts to Yasodhara until it was late and then excused herself to return to her own residence. Yasodhara walked with her to the veranda where she saw the full moon now suspended high in the night sky. The party was still in full swing. Sounds of music, talking, and laughter drifted from within. Yasodhara led Gotami to the front gate and then went on her own to find Channa. He was already asleep when she found him. Yasodhara awoke him and whispered, "It is possible the prince will require your services tonight. Prepare Kanthaka to ride. And saddle another horse for yourself."

"Your highness, where is the prince going?"

"Please don't ask. Just do as I have said because the prince may need to ride tonight."

Channa nodded and entered the stable while Yasodhara returned inside the palace. She readied clothes suitable for traveling and placed them on Siddhartha's chair. She took a light blanket to cover Rahula and then lay upon the bed herself. As she lay there she listened to the sounds of music, talking, and laughter. It was a long time before the sounds faded then disappeared. She knew the guests had retired to their quarters. Yasodhara lay quietly as silence returned to the palace. She waited a long time, but Siddhartha did not return to their room.

He was sitting alone outside, gazing at the radiant moon and stars. A thousand stars twinkled. He had made up his mind to leave the palace that very night. At long last, he entered his chamber and changed into the traveling clothes awaiting him there. He pulled back the curtain and gazed upon the bed. Gopa was lying there, no doubt asleep. Rahula was by her side. Siddhartha wanted to enter and speak words of parting to Yasodhara, but he hesitated. He had already said everything that was essential. If he woke her now, it would only make their parting more painful. He let the curtain drop and turned to leave. Again he hesitated. Once more he lifted back the curtain to take a last look at his wife and son. He looked at them deeply as though to imprint on his memory that familiar and beloved scene. Then he released the curtain and walked out.

As he passed the guest hall, Siddhartha saw the slumbering, dancing girls sprawled across the carpets. Their hair was undone and disheveled, their mouths hanging open like dead fish. Their arms, so soft and supple during the dance, now looked as stiff as boards. Their legs were tangled

across each other's bodies like victims on a battlefield. Siddhartha felt as though he were crossing a cemetery.

He made his way to the stables and found Channa still awake.

"Channa, please saddle and bring Kanthaka to me."

Channa nodded. He had prepared everything. Kanthaka was already bridled and saddled. Channa asked, "May I accompany you, prince?"

Siddhartha nodded and Channa entered the stable for his own horse. They led the horses out of the palace grounds. Siddhartha stopped and stroked Kanthaka's mane. "Kanthaka," he spoke, "this is a most important night. You must give me your best for this journey."

He mounted Kanthaka and Channa mounted his horse. They walked them to avoid making any loud noise. The guards were fast asleep, and they passed through the city gates easily. Once well beyond the city gates, Siddhartha turned for a last look at the capital, now lying quietly beneath the moonlight. It was there that Siddhartha had been born and raised, the city where he had experienced so many joys and sorrows, so many anxieties and aspirations. In the same city now slept everyone close to him—his father, Gotami, Yasodhara, Rahula, and all the others. He whispered to himself, "If I do not find the Way, I will not return to Kapilavatthu."

He turned his horse toward the south and Kanthaka broke into a full gallop.



## Chapter Thirteen

# Beginning Spiritual Practice

Even at a full gallop, they did not reach the border of Sakya until daybreak. Before them flowed the Anoma River, which they followed downstream until they found a shallow place to cross over with the horses. They rode for another spell before coming to the edge of a forest. A deer flitted in and out among the trees. Birds flew close by, undisturbed by the men's presence. Siddhartha dismounted. He smiled and stroked Kanthaka's mane.

"Kanthaka, you are wonderful. You have helped bring me here, and for that, I thank you."

The horse lifted his head and looked lovingly at his master. Siddhartha pulled out a sword tucked in his horse's saddle and then grasping his own long locks of hair in his left hand, cut them off with his right. Channa dismounted his own horse. Siddhartha handed him the hair and sword. He then removed his jeweled necklace.

"Channa, take my necklace, sword, and hair and give them to my father. Please tell him to have faith in me. I have not left home to selfishly avoid my responsibilities. I go now on behalf of all of you and all beings. Please, console the king and queen for me. Console Yasodhara. I ask this of you."

As Channa took the necklace, tears streamed from his eyes. "Your highness, everyone will suffer terribly. I don't know what I will say to the king and queen or to your wife, Yasodhara. Your highness, how will you sleep beneath the trees like an ascetic when all your life you've known nothing but a warm bed and soft blankets?"

Siddhartha smiled. "Don't worry, Channa. I can live the way others do. You must return to tell everyone of my decision before they begin to worry about my disappearance. Leave me here alone now."

Channa wiped his tears. "Please, your highness, let me stay here to serve you. Have mercy on me and don't make me bear such sorrowful news to ones I love!"

Siddhartha patted his attendant on the shoulder. His voice grew serious.

“Channa, I need you to return and inform my family. If you truly care for me, please do as I say. I don’t need you here, Channa. No monk has need of a personal attendant! Please, return home now!”

Channa reluctantly obeyed the prince. He carefully placed the hair and necklace inside his jacket and tucked the sword in Kanthaka’s saddle. He grasped Siddhartha’s arm in his two hands and beseeched him, “I will do as you say, but please, your highness, remember me; remember us all. Don’t forget to return after you have found the Way.”

Siddhartha nodded and smiled reassuringly at Channa. He stroked Kanthaka’s head. “Kanthaka, my friend, now return home.”

Channa held Kanthaka’s reins and mounted his own steed. Kanthaka turned to look at Siddhartha one last time, his eyes filled with tears no less than Channa’s.

Siddhartha waited until Channa and the two horses were out of sight before he turned toward the forest to enter his new life. The sky would now serve as his roof and the forest as his home. A sense of ease and contentment welled within him. Just at that moment a man came walking out of the forest. At first glance, Siddhartha thought he was a monk, for he was wearing the customary robe. But on closer inspection, Siddhartha saw the man was carrying a bow, and a quiver of arrows was slung across his back.

“You are a hunter, are you not?” asked Siddhartha.

“That is correct,” the man answered.

“If you are a hunter, why are you dressed as a monk?”

The hunter smiled and said, “Thanks to this robe the animals do not fear me and I am thus easily able to shoot them.”

Siddhartha shook his head. “Then you are abusing the compassion of those who follow a spiritual path. Would you agree to trade your robe for my garments?”

The hunter looked at Siddhartha and saw he was wearing royal garments of inestimable value.

“Do you really want to trade?” the hunter asked.

“Absolutely,” said Siddhartha. “You could sell these garments and have enough money to stop hunting and begin a new trade. As for me, I wish to be a monk and have need of a robe like yours.”

The hunter was overjoyed and after exchanging his robe for Siddhartha’s handsome clothes, he hurried off. Siddhartha now had the appearance of a real monk. He stepped into the forest and found a tree to sit

beneath. For the first time as a homeless monk, he sat in meditation. After a long final day in the palace and an autumn night spent on the back of a horse, Siddhartha now experienced a marvelous ease. He sat in meditation to savor and nurture the feeling of release and freedom that had filled him the moment he entered the forest.

Sunlight filtered through the trees and came to rest on Siddhartha's eyelashes. He opened his eyes and saw standing before him, a monk. The monk's face and body were thin and worn by a life of austerities. Siddhartha stood up and joined his palms together in greeting. He told the monk he had only just abandoned his home and had not yet had the chance to be accepted by any teacher. He expressed his intent to travel south to find the spiritual center of Master Alara Kalama and there ask to be accepted as a disciple.

The monk told Siddhartha that he himself had studied under Master Alara Kalama and that at present the Master had started a center just north of the city Vesali. More than four hundred disciples were gathered there for his teaching.

The monk knew how to get there and said he would be glad to take Siddhartha.

Siddhartha followed him through the forest to a path, which wound up a hill and entered another forest. They walked until noon, when the monk showed Siddhartha how to gather wild fruits and edible greens. The monk explained that it was sometimes necessary to dig roots to eat when there were no edible fruits or greens to be found. Siddhartha knew he would be living in the forests a long time and so he asked the names of all the edible foods and carefully noted everything the monk told him. He learned that the monk was an ascetic who lived on nothing but wild fruits, greens, and roots. His name was Bhargava. He told Siddhartha that Master Alara Kalama was now an ascetic and in addition to wild foraging, his monks begged for food or accepted what was brought as offerings to them from neighboring villages.

Nine days later, they reached the forest center of Alara Kalama, near Anupiya. They arrived as Master Alara was giving a talk to more than four hundred disciples. He looked about seventy years old and, though he appeared thin and frail, his eyes shone and his voice resounded like a copper drum. Siddhartha and his companion stood outside the circle of disciples and quietly listened to the Master's teaching. When he finished speaking, his disciples scattered throughout the forest to pursue their

practice. Siddhartha approached him and after introducing himself, respectfully said, “Venerable Teacher, I ask you to accept me as one of your disciples. I wish to live and study under your guidance.”

The master listened and looked intently at Siddhartha, and then expressed his approval. “Siddhartha, I would be happy to accept you. You may stay here. If you practice according to my teachings and methods, you will realize the teachings in a short time.”

Siddhartha prostrated himself to express his happiness.

Master Alara lived in a straw hut made for him by several of his disciples. Scattered here and there in the forest were the straw huts of his followers. That night, Siddhartha found a level place to sleep, using a tree root for his pillow. Because he was exhausted from the long journey, he slept soundly until morning. When he awoke, the sun had already risen and the songs of birds filled the forest. He sat up. The other monks had finished their morning meditation and were preparing to go down into the city to beg for food. Siddhartha was given a bowl and shown how to beg.

Following the other monks, he held his bowl and entered the city of Vesali. Holding a bowl to beg for the first time, Siddhartha was struck by how closely linked the life of a monk was to that of the laity—the monks were dependent on the lay community for food. He learned how to hold his bowl properly, how to walk and stand, how to receive the food offerings, and how to recite prayers in order to thank those who made the offerings. That day Siddhartha received some rice with curry sauce.

He returned with his new companions to the forest, and they all sat down to eat. When he had finished, he went to Master Alara to receive spiritual instruction. Alara was sitting in deep meditation when Siddhartha found him, and so he sat down before the master, quietly trying to focus his own mind. After a long time, Alara opened his eyes. Siddhartha prostrated himself and asked Master Alara to teach him.

Alara spoke to the new monk about faith and diligence and showed him how to use his breathing to develop concentration. He explained, “My teaching is not a mere theory. Knowledge is gained from direct experience and direct attainment, not from mental arguments. In order to attain different states of meditation, it is necessary to rid yourself of all thoughts of past and future. You must focus on nothing but liberation.”

Siddhartha asked about how to control the body and the sensations, and then respectfully thanked his teacher and walked away slowly to find a place in the forest where he could practice. He gathered branches and

leaves and constructed a small hut beneath a sal tree where his meditation practice could ripen. He practiced diligently, and every five or six days he returned to ask Alara's advice concerning whatever difficulties he was experiencing. In a short time, Siddhartha made considerable progress.

While sitting in meditation he was able to let go of thoughts and even of clinging to his past and future, and he attained a state of wondrous serenity and rapture, although he felt the seeds of thought and attachment still present in him. Several weeks later, Siddhartha reached a higher state of meditation, and the seeds of thought and attachment dissolved. Then he entered a state of concentration in which both rapture and non-rapture ceased to exist. It felt to him as though the five doors of sense perception had completely closed, and his heart was as still as a lake on a windless day.

When he presented the fruits of his practice to Master Alara, the teacher was impressed. He told Siddhartha that he had made remarkable progress in a short time, and he taught Siddhartha how to realize the meditative state called *the realm of limitless space*, in which the mind becomes one with infinity, all material and visual phenomena cease to arise, and space is seen as the limitless source of all things.

Siddhartha followed his teacher's instructions and concentrated his efforts on achieving that state, and in less than three days, he succeeded. But Siddhartha still felt that even the ability to experience infinite space had not liberated him from his deepest anxieties and sorrows. Dwelling in such a state of awareness, he still felt hindrances, so he returned to Alara for assistance. The master told him, "You must go one step further. *The realm of limitless space* is of the same essence as your own mind. It is not an object of your consciousness, but your very consciousness itself. Now you must experience *the realm of limitless consciousness*."

Siddhartha returned to his spot in the forest, and in just two days, he realized *the realm of limitless consciousness*. He saw that his own mind was present in every phenomenon in the universe. But even with this attainment, he still felt oppressed by his deepest afflictions and anxieties. So Siddhartha returned to Master Alara and explained his difficulty. The master looked at him with eyes of deep respect and said, "You are very close to the final goal. Return to your hut and meditate on the illusory nature of all phenomena. Everything in the universe is created by our own mind. Our mind is the source of all phenomena. Form, sound, smell, taste, and tactile perception such as hot and cold, hard and soft—these are all creations of our mind. They do not exist as we usually think they do. Our consciousness

is like an artist, painting every phenomenon into being. Once you have attained the state of *the realm of no materiality*, you will have succeeded. *The realm of no materiality* is the state in which we see that no phenomenon exists outside of our own mind.”

The young monk joined his palms to express his gratitude to his teacher, and returned to his corner of the forest.

While Siddhartha studied with Alara Kalama, he made the acquaintance of many other monks. Everyone was attracted by Siddhartha’s kind and pleasant manner. Often, before Siddhartha had a chance to seek food for himself, he found food waiting for him by his hut. When he came out of meditation, he would find a few bananas or a rice ball secretly left for him by another monk. Many monks liked to befriend Siddhartha in order to learn from him, as they had heard their own master praise Siddhartha’s progress.

Master Alara had once asked about Siddhartha’s background and so learned of Siddhartha’s life as a prince. But Siddhartha only smiled when other monks asked him about his royal past. He answered modestly, “It’s nothing of importance. It would be best if we spoke only about our experiences of practicing the Way.”

In less than a month, Siddhartha attained *the state of the realm of no materiality*. Happy to have achieved this state of awareness, he spent the following weeks trying to use it to dissolve the deepest obstructions in his mind and heart. But although *the realm of no materiality* was a profound state of meditation, it, too, was unable to help him. Finally, he returned to ask the advice of Master Alara Kalama.

Alara Kalama sat and listened intently to Siddhartha. His eyes shone. Expressing deepest respect and praise, he said, “Monk Siddhartha, you are profoundly gifted. You have attained the highest level I can teach. All I have attained, you have attained as well. Let us join together to guide and lead this community of monks.”

Siddhartha was silent as he contemplated Alara’s invitation. While *the realm of no materiality* was a precious fruit of meditation, it did not help resolve the fundamental problem of birth and death, nor did it liberate one from all suffering and anxiety. It did not lead to total liberation. Siddhartha’s goal was not to become the leader of a community, but to find the path of true liberation.

Siddhartha joined his palms and answered, “Venerable Teacher, the state of *the realm of no materiality* is not the final goal I am seeking. Please

accept my gratitude for your support and care, but now I must ask your permission to leave the community in order to seek the Way elsewhere. You have taught me with all your heart these past months, and I will be forever grateful to you.”

Master Alara Kalama looked disappointed, but Siddhartha had made up his mind. The next day, Siddhartha again took to the road.

## Chapter Fourteen

# Crossing the Ganga

Siddhartha crossed the Ganges River, known as Ganga, and entered deep into the kingdom of Magadha, a region renowned for its accomplished spiritual teachers. He was determined to find someone who could teach him how to overcome birth and death. Most of the spiritual teachers lived in remote mountains or forests. Tirelessly, Siddhartha learned the whereabouts of these masters, and sought out each of them, no matter how many mountains and valleys he had to cross. He continued his search through rain and sun, from one month to the next.

Siddhartha met ascetics who refused to wear any clothes, and others who refused to accept any food offerings, living on only the fruits, greens, and roots that grew wild in the forests. Exposing their bodies to the elements, these ascetics believed that by enduring extreme austerities they would enter heaven after they died.

One day Siddhartha said to them, “Even if you are reborn in Heaven, the suffering on Earth will remain unchanged. To seek the Way is to find a solution to life’s sufferings, not to escape life. Granted, we cannot accomplish much if we pamper our bodies like those who live for sensual pleasure, but abusing our bodies is no more helpful.”

Siddhartha continued his search—remaining in some spiritual centers for three months and in others for six. His powers of meditation and concentration increased, but he was still unable to find the true path of liberation from birth and death. The months passed quickly, and soon it was more than three years since Siddhartha had left home. Sometimes, as he sat in meditation in the forests, images arose in Siddhartha’s mind of his father, Yasodhara, and Rahula, and of his childhood and youth. Although it was difficult for him to avoid feeling impatient and discouraged, his strong faith that he would find the Way allowed him to continue his search.

During one period, Siddhartha dwelled alone on the hillside of Pandava, not far from the capital city of Rajagaha. One day he took his bowl and went



down the hillside to beg in the capital. His walk was slow and dignified, his countenance serene and resolute. People on both sides of the street stopped to gaze at this monk who walked as elegantly as a lion passing through a mountain forest. The royal carriage of King Bimbisara of Magadha happened to pass by, and the king ordered his driver to stop so that he could have a good look at Siddhartha. He asked his attendant to offer the monk food and to follow him to see where he lived.

The next afternoon, King Bimbisara rode to Siddhartha's dwelling. Leaving his carriage at the foot of the hill, he mounted the path with one of his attendants. When he saw Siddhartha sitting beneath a tree, he approached to greet him.

Siddhartha stood up. He could tell by his visitor's dress that he was the king of Magadha. Siddhartha joined his palms together and then motioned for the king to sit on a large rock nearby. Siddhartha sat on another rock and faced the king.

King Bimbisara was noticeably impressed by the monk's noble bearing and elevated manner. He said, "I am the king of Magadha. I wish to invite you to come to the capital with me. I would like you by my side so that I may benefit from your teaching and virtue. With you at my side, I am sure the kingdom of Magadha would enjoy peace and prosperity."

Siddhartha smiled. "Great King, I am more used to living in the forest."

"This is too harsh a life. You have no bed, no attendant to assist you. If you agree to come with me, I will give you your own palace. Please return with me to teach."



*King Bimbisara was noticeably impressed by the monk's noble bearing and elevated manner.*

“Great King, palace life is not well suited to me. I am endeavoring to find a path of liberation to free myself and all beings from suffering. Palace life is not compatible with the heart's quest of this monk.”

“You are still young, as I am. I have need of a friend with whom I can truly share. From the moment I saw you, I felt a natural connection with you. Come with me. If you accept, I will reserve half of my kingdom for you, and when you are older, you can return to the life of a monk. It won't be too late.”

“I thank you for your generous heart and offer of patronage, but I truly

have but one desire, and that is to find the path that can liberate all beings from suffering. Time passes quickly, Great King. If I don't use the strength and energy I now possess as a young man, old age will arrive too soon and I will feel deep regret. Life is so uncertain—sickness or death can occur at any moment. The flames of inner turmoil caused by greed, anger, hatred, passion, jealousy, and pride continue to burn in my heart. Only when the Great Way is discovered, will liberation be possible for all beings. If you truly feel affection for me, you will allow me to continue the path I have long pursued.”

King Bimbisara was even more impressed after hearing Siddhartha speak. He said, “It gives me great joy to hear your words so filled with determination. Dear monk, allow me to ask where you are from and what your family name is.”

“Great King, I come from the kingdom of Sakya. My family name is Sakya. King Suddhodana who presently rules in Kapilavatthu is my father, and my mother was Queen Mahamaya. I was the prince, heir to the throne, but because I wished to become a monk in order to seek the Way, I left my parents, wife, and son more than three years ago.”

King Bimbisara was astonished. “Then you yourself are of royal blood! I am most honored to meet you, noble monk! The royal families of Sakya and Magadha have long been on very close terms. How foolish of me to try to impress you with my position and wealth in order to persuade you to return with me. Please forgive me! Let me ask only this—from time to time, come to my palace and allow me to offer you food, and when you have found the Great Way, return in compassion to teach me as your disciple. Will you promise that?”

Siddhartha joined his palms and answered, “I promise that when I have discovered the path, I will return to share it with your highness.”

King Bimbisara bowed low before Siddhartha and returned down the hill with his attendant.

Later that day the monk Gautama abandoned his dwelling place to avoid the interruptions he feared would result from the young king bringing frequent offerings. Heading south, he looked for another place conducive to practice. He learned of the spiritual center of Uddaka Ramaputta, a great teacher who was said to have attained very deep levels of understanding. Three hundred monks were in residence at his center, located not far from Rajagaha, and four hundred other disciples practiced nearby. Siddhartha made his way there.

## Chapter Fifteen

# Forest Ascetic

Master Uddaka was seventy-five years old. He was venerated by all as though he were a living god. Uddaka required all new disciples to begin at the most elementary levels of practice, so Siddhartha began again with the simplest meditation techniques. But in just a few weeks, he demonstrated to his new teacher that he had already attained to *the realm of no materiality*, and Master Uddaka was impressed. He saw in this young man of noble bearing a potential spiritual heir, and he taught Siddhartha with utmost care.

“Monk Siddhartha Gautama, in *the state of no materiality*, emptiness is no longer the same as empty space, nor is it what is usually called consciousness. All that remains are perception and the object of perception. Thus, the path to liberation is to transcend all perception.”

Siddhartha respectfully asked, “Master, if one eliminates perception, what is left? If there is no perception, how do we differ from a piece of wood or a rock?”

“A piece of wood or a rock is not without perception. Inanimate objects are themselves perception. You must arrive at a state of consciousness in which both perception and nonperception are eliminated. This is *the state of neither perception nor non-perception*. Young man, you must now attain that state.”

Siddhartha left to return to his meditation. In just fifteen days, he realized the *samadhi* called *neither perception nor nonperception*. Siddhartha saw that this state allowed one to transcend all ordinary states of consciousness. But whenever he came out of this meditative state, he saw that in spite of its extraordinariness, it did not provide a solution to the problem of life and death. It was a most peaceful state to dwell in, but it was not the key to unlock reality.

When Siddhartha returned to Master Uddaka Ramaputta, the Master praised him highly. He grasped Siddhartha’s hand and said, “Monk

Gautama, you are the best student I have ever had. You have made enormous progress in such a short time. You have attained the highest level I have. I am old and not long for this world. If you will remain here, we can guide this community together and when I die, you can take my place as Master of the community.”

Once again, Siddhartha politely declined. He knew that *the state of neither perception nor nonperception* was not the key to liberation from birth and death, and that he had to move on. He expressed his deepest gratitude to the Master and to the community of monks, and took his leave. Everyone had come to love Siddhartha, and all were sad to see him go.

During his stay at Uddaka Ramaputta’s center, Siddhartha made friends with a young monk named Kondanna. Kondanna was very fond of Siddhartha and regarded him as a teacher as well as a good friend. No one else in the community except Siddhartha had attained *the state of no materiality*, not to mention *the state of neither perception nor non-perception*. Kondanna knew that the Master considered Siddhartha worthy to be his spiritual heir. Just looking at Siddhartha gave Kondanna faith in his own practice. He often approached Siddhartha to learn from him, and a special bond grew between them. Kondanna regretted his friend’s departure. He accompanied Siddhartha down the mountain and waited until he was no longer in sight before returning back up the mountain.

Siddhartha had accomplished so much with the masters reputed to be the two best meditation teachers in the land, yet the fundamental issue of liberation from suffering was still burning inside him. He realized that he probably would not be able to learn much more from any of the other teacher-sages throughout the land, and so he knew that he had to seek the key to enlightenment on his own.

Walking slowly west, between rice fields and across a long stretch of muddy lagoons and streams, Siddhartha reached the Neranjara River. He waded across it and walked until he reached Dangsiri Mountain, half a day’s walk from Uruvela village. The steep and rocky slopes ended in sawtoothed peaks and concealed many caves. Boulders as large as the homes of poor villagers perched on the mountainside. Siddhartha resolved to remain here until he discovered the Way to Liberation. He found a cave in which he could sit in meditation for long hours, and while sitting, he reviewed all the practices he had done for what was now more than five years. He remembered how he had advised the ascetics not to abuse their bodies, telling them that that would only add to the suffering of a world already

filled with suffering. But now as he considered their path more carefully, he thought to himself, “You can’t make a fire with soft, wet wood. The body is the same. If physical desires are not mastered, it is difficult for the heart to attain enlightenment. I will practice self-mortification in order to attain liberation.”

Thus, the monk Gautama began a period of extreme asceticism. On dark nights, he entered the deepest and most wild reaches of the forest, the mere thought of which was enough to make a person’s hair stand on end, and there he remained throughout the night. Even as fear and panic engulfed his mind and body, he sat without stirring. When a deer approached with its rustling sounds, his fear told him that these were demons coming to kill him, but he did not budge. When a peacock broke a piece of dead twig, his fear told him it was a python coming down from a tree, yet he still did not move, even as fear shot through him like the sting of red ants.

He tried to overcome all physical fears. He believed that once his body was no longer enslaved by fear, his mind would break the chains of suffering. Sometimes he sat with his teeth clenched while pressing his tongue against the roof of his mouth, using his willpower to suppress all fear and horror. Even when he broke into a cold sweat and his whole body became drenched, he did not move. At other times, he held his breath for long stretches until a roar like thunder or a blazing furnace pounded in his ears, and his head felt as though someone had taken an axe and cleaved it in two. Sometimes he felt as though his head was being squeezed by a steel band and his stomach slashed open like a goat’s by a butcher. And at times, he felt as if his body was being roasted over an open fire. Through these austere practices, he was able to consolidate his courage and discipline, and his body was able to endure unspeakable pain, but his heart was still without peace.

The monk Gautama practiced austerities in this way for six months. For the first three of these months, he was alone on the mountain, but during the fourth month, he was discovered by five disciples of Master Uddaka Ramaputta, led by his old friend Kondanna. Siddhartha was happy to see Kondanna again, and he found out that just one month after Siddhartha left the meditation center, Kondanna himself had attained *the state of neither perception nor nonperception*. Seeing there was nothing more he could learn from Master Uddaka, Kondanna persuaded four friends to join him in seeking Siddhartha. After several weeks, they were lucky enough to find him, and they expressed their desire to stay and practice with him.

Siddhartha explained to them why he was exploring the path of self-mortification, and the five young men, Kondanna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Assaji, and Mahanama, resolved to join him. Each monk found a cave to live in, not far from one another, and every day one of them went into town to beg for food. When he returned, the food was divided into six portions so that none of them had more than a small handful each day.

Days and months went by, and the six monks grew thin and gaunt. They left the mountain and moved east toward the village of Uruvela, on the bank of the Neranjara, and continued to practice in the same way. But Siddhartha's austerities began to alarm even his five companions, and they found it impossible to keep up with him. Siddhartha ceased bathing in the river or even taking his share of the food. On some days he ate just a shrivelled guava he happened to find on the ground or a piece of dried buffalo manure. His body had become terribly wasted—it was little more than loose flesh hanging on protruding bones. He had not cut his hair or beard in six months, and when he rubbed his head, handfuls of hair fell out as though there was no longer any space for it to grow on the bit of flesh still clinging to his skull.

And then one day, while practicing sitting meditation in a cemetery, Siddhartha realized with a jolt how wrong the path of self-mortification was. The sun had set and a cool breeze gently caressed his skin. After sitting all day beneath the blazing sun, the breeze was delightfully refreshing, and Siddhartha experienced an ease in his mind unlike anything he had felt during the day. He realized that body and mind formed one reality, which could not be separated. The peace and comfort of the body were directly related to the peace and comfort of the mind. To abuse the body was to abuse the mind.

He remembered the first time he sat in meditation when he was nine years old, beneath the cool shade of a rose-apple tree on the day of the year's first plowing. He remembered how the refreshing ease of that sitting had brought him a sense of clarity and calm. He recalled, as well, his meditation in the forest right after Channa had left him. He thought back to his first days with Master Alara Kalama—those initial sessions of meditation had nourished both body and mind, creating in him a deep ability to concentrate and focus. But after that, Master Alara Kalama had told him to transcend the joys of meditation in order to attain to states that existed beyond the material world, states such as *the realms of limitless space and limitless consciousness*, and *the state of no materiality*. Later, there had been *the*

*state of neither perception nor nonperception.* Always the goal had been to find a means to escape the world of feeling and thought, the world of sensation and perception. He asked himself, “Why follow only the traditions laid down in scripture? Why fear the joyful ease that meditation brings? Such joys have nothing in common with the five categories of desire that obscure awareness. To the contrary, the joys of meditation can nourish body and mind and provide the strength needed to pursue the path to enlightenment.”

The monk Gautama resolved to regain his health and to use his meditation to nourish both body and mind. He would beg for food again starting the next morning. He would be his own teacher, not depending on the teachings of anyone else. Happy with this decision, he stretched out on a mound of earth and peacefully drifted off to sleep. The full moon had just risen in a cloudless sky, and the Milky Way stretched clear and radiant across the heavens.

The monk Gautama awoke the next morning to the sound of birds singing. He stood up and recalled his decisions of the previous night. He was covered with dirt and dust, and his robe was so tattered and threadbare it no longer covered his body. He remembered seeing a corpse in the cemetery the day before, and he guessed that today or tomorrow people would lift it down to the river to perform the cremation ceremony, and the brick-colored cloth that covered it would no longer be needed. He approached the corpse and, reflecting quietly on birth and death, respectfully removed the cloth from the body. The corpse was that of a young woman, her body swollen and discolored. Siddhartha would use the brick-colored cloth as a new robe.

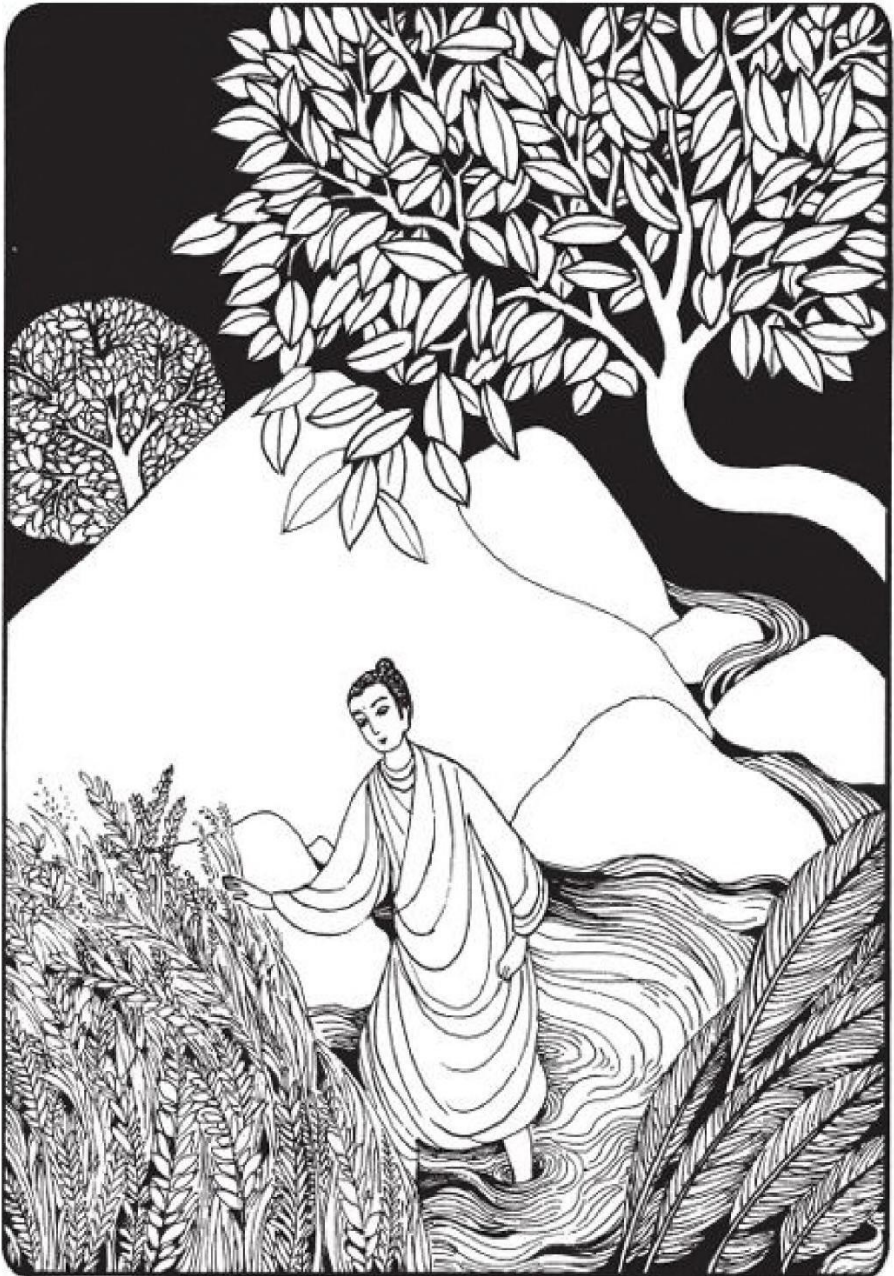
He walked to the river to bathe himself and at the same time to wash the cloth. The water was cool, and Siddhartha found it overwhelmingly refreshing. He enjoyed the pleasant feeling of the water on his skin, welcoming the sensation with a new state of mind.

He took a long time bathing, and then he scrubbed and wrung out his new robe. But as he went to climb out of the water, his strength failed him. He did not have enough energy to pull himself onto the bank. He stood quietly and breathed calmly. To one side he saw a tree branch leaning over the water, its leaves skimming the surface. He walked toward it slowly and grabbed onto it to support himself while he climbed out of the water.

He sat down to rest on the riverbank as the sun climbed higher into the sky. He spread out the cloth to dry in the hot sun, and when the cloth was



dry, Siddhartha wrapped it around himself and set out for the village of Uruvela. But before he had walked even halfway, his strength failed him, and, unable to catch his breath, he collapsed.



*But as Siddhartha went to climb out of the water, his strength failed him.*

He lay unconscious for some time before a young girl from the village appeared. Thirteen-year-old Sujata had been sent by her mother to carry rice milk, cakes, and lotus seeds to offer to the forest gods. When she saw the monk lying unconscious on the road, barely breathing, she knelt down and placed a bowl of milk to his lips. She knew he was an ascetic who had fainted from weakness.

When the drops of milk moistened his tongue and throat, Siddhartha responded immediately. He could taste how refreshing the milk was, and he slowly drank the entire bowlful. After a few dozen breaths he was revived enough to sit up, and he motioned Sujata to pour him another bowlful of milk. It was remarkable how quickly the milk restored his strength. That day he decided to abandon austerity practice and go to the cool forest across the river to practice there.

During the days that followed, he gradually began to eat and drink normally. Sometimes Sujata brought him food offerings, sometimes he took his bowl into the village to beg. Every day he practiced walking meditation along the riverbank, and the rest of the time he devoted to sitting meditation. Every evening he bathed in the Neranjara River. He abandoned all reliance on tradition and scripture in order to find the Way on his own. He returned to himself to learn from his own successes and failures. He did not hesitate to let meditation nourish his mind and body, and a sense of peace and ease grew within him. He did not distance himself or try to escape his feelings and perceptions, but maintained mindfulness in order to observe them as they arose.

He abandoned the desire to escape the world of phenomena, and as he returned to himself, he found he was completely present to the world of phenomena. One breath, one bird's song, one leaf, one ray of sunlight—any of these might serve as his subject of meditation. He began to see that the key to liberation lay in each breath, each step, each small pebble along the path.

The monk Gautama went from meditating on his body to meditating on his feelings, and from meditating on his feelings to meditating on his perceptions, including all the thoughts that rose and fell in his own mind. He saw the oneness of body and mind, that each and every cell of the body contained all the wisdom of the universe. He saw that he needed only to look deeply into a speck of dust to see the true face of the entire universe,

that the speck of dust was itself the universe and if it did not exist, the universe could not exist either. The monk Gautama went beyond the idea of a separate self, of *atman*, and, with a start, realized that he had long been dominated by a false view of atman as expounded in the Vedas. In reality, all things were without a separate self. Nonself, or *anatman*, was the nature of all existence. Anatman was not a term to describe some new entity. It was a thunderbolt that destroyed all wrong views. Taking hold of nonself, Siddhartha was like a general raising his sharp sword of insight on the battlefield of meditation practice. Day and night he sat beneath the pippala tree, as new levels of awareness awoke in him like bright flashes of lightning.

During this time, Siddhartha's five friends lost faith in him. They saw him sitting along the riverbank eating food offerings. They watched him speak and smile to a young girl, enjoy milk and rice, and carry his bowl down into the village. Kondanna said to the others, "Siddhartha is no longer someone we can rely on. He has abandoned the path halfway. He now concerns himself only with idly feeding his body. We should leave him and seek another place to continue our practice. I see no reason to continue here."

Only after his five friends had departed, did Siddhartha notice their absence. Encouraged by his new insights, Siddhartha had devoted all his time to meditation and had not yet taken the time to explain this to his friends. He thought, "My friends have misunderstood me, but I can't worry now about convincing them otherwise. I must devote myself to finding the true path. Once I have found it, I will share it with them." Then he returned to his daily practice.

During those same days in which Siddhartha made such great progress along the path, the young buffalo boy Svasti appeared. Siddhartha cheerfully accepted the handfuls of fresh grass the eleven-year-old boy offered him. Though Sujata, Svasti, and their friends were still children, Siddhartha shared with them some of his new understanding. He was happy to see how unschooled children from the countryside could easily understand his discoveries. He was greatly heartened, for he knew that the door of complete enlightenment would soon open wide. He knew he held the wondrous key—the truth of the interdependent and nonself nature of all things.

## Chapter Sixteen

# Was Yasodhara Sleeping?

**B**ecause he was from a poor family, Svasti had, of course, never gone to school. Sujata taught him a few basics, but he still lacked skill with words, and while recounting his story about the Buddha, he sometimes halted, unable to find the right words. His listeners assisted him. In addition to Ananda and Rahula, two others came to listen to his story. One was an elderly nun named Mahapajapati and the other was a monk in his early forties named Assaji.

Rahula introduced them both to Svasti, who was deeply touched to learn that Mahapajapati was herself Queen Gotami, the Buddha's aunt who had raised him from infancy. She was the first woman to be accepted as a nun in the Buddha's sangha, and she now served as abbess to more than seven hundred nuns. She had just traveled from the north to visit the Buddha and to consult with him concerning precepts for the bhikkhunis. Svasti learned that she had arrived only the previous evening, and her grandson, Rahula, knowing how much she would enjoy hearing all Svasti had to say about the Buddha's days in Uruvela forest, had invited her to join them. Svasti placed his palms together and bowed low before the abbess. Remembering all the Buddha had told him about her filled his heart with deep affection and respect. Mahapajapati looked at Svasti with the same loving warmth as she looked at her own grandson, Rahula.

Rahula introduced Assaji to Svasti, and Svasti's eyes lit up when he learned that Assaji was one of the five friends who had practiced self-mortification with the Buddha near Svasti's own home. The Buddha had told him back then that when his friends saw he had abandoned austerities to drink milk and eat rice, they left him to practice elsewhere. Svasti wondered how Assaji had come to be one of the Buddha's disciples, living here at Bamboo Forest Monastery. He would ask Rahula about it later.

Bhikkhimi Gotami assisted Svasti the most in his efforts to tell his tale. She asked questions about details that didn't seem important to him but

were of obvious interest to her. She asked where he had cut the kusa grass he offered the Buddha for a meditation cushion and how often he had provided new bundles of grass for the Buddha. She wanted to know if after giving the Buddha the grass, the buffaloes still had enough to eat at night. And she asked if he was ever beaten by the buffaloes' owner.

Much remained to be told, but Svasti asked permission to stop there for the evening and promised to continue the following day. But before taking his leave, he wondered if he could ask Bhikkhuni Gotami a few questions that he had held in his heart for ten years. She smiled at him and said, "Go ahead and ask. If I am able to answer your questions, I will be most happy to."

There were several things Svasti wanted to know. First of all, had Yasodhara really been sleeping or only pretending to be asleep the night Siddhartha pulled back the curtain before his departure? Svasti also wanted to know what the king, queen, and Yasodhara thought and said when Channa returned with Siddhartha's sword, necklace, and locks of hair. What happened in the lives of the Buddha's family in the six years of his absence? Who first heard the news that the Buddha had attained the Way? Who first welcomed the Buddha back, and did all the city come out to greet him when he returned to Kapilavatthu?

"You do have a lot of questions!" exclaimed Bhikkhuni Gotami. She smiled kindly at Svasti. "Let me try to answer them briefly. First of all, was Yasodhara truly asleep or not? If you want to know for certain, you should ask Yasodhara, but if you ask me, I don't believe she was. Yasodhara herself had prepared Siddhartha's garments, hat, and shoes, and placed them on his chair. She told Channa to saddle and ready Kanthaka. She knew that the prince would leave that very night. How could she sleep on such a night? I believe she only pretended to be asleep in order to avoid a painful parting for Siddhartha and herself. You do not yet know Yasodhara, Svasti, but Rahula's mother is a woman of great determination. She understood Siddhartha's intent and quietly gave him her wholehearted support. I know this more clearly than anyone else, for of all those close to Yasodhara, I was the closest, next to Siddhartha."

Bhikkhuni Gotami told Svasti that the following morning when it was discovered that Siddhartha had left, everyone, except Yasodhara, was in a state of shock. King Suddhodana flew into a rage and yelled at everyone, blaming them for not preventing the prince from leaving. Queen Gotami ran at once to find Yasodhara. She found her sitting quietly and weeping.

Official search parties were sent out on horseback in all four directions with orders to return with the prince if they found him. The southbound party met Channa returning with the riderless Kanthaka. Channa stopped them from going any further. He said, "Leave the prince in peace to follow his spiritual path. I have already wept and pleaded with him, but he is intent on seeking the Way. Anyway, he has entered the deep forests, which lie in another country's territory. You cannot seek him there."

When Channa returned to the palace, he lowered his head to the ground three times as a sign of remorse and took the sword, necklace, and locks of hair to give to the king. At that moment, Queen Gotami and Yasodhara were by the king's side. Seeing Channa's tears, the king did not rebuke him, but slowly asked about all that had taken place. He told Channa to give the sword, necklace, and hair to Yasodhara for safekeeping. The atmosphere in the palace was dreary. Losing the prince was like losing the light of day. The king retired to his quarters and refused to come out for many days. His minister Vessamitta was obliged to handle all palace matters on his behalf.

After being returned to his stall, Kanthaka refused to eat or drink, and died a few days later. Overcome with grief, Channa asked Yasodhara's permission to provide a ritual cremation for the prince's horse.

Bhikkhuni Gotami had recounted events up to that point when the bell for meditation rang. Everyone looked disappointed, but Ananda said they should not skip meditation, no matter how good the stories were. He invited them all to return the following day to his hut. Svasti and Rahula joined their palms and bowed to Bhikkhuni Gotami, Ananda, and Assaji before returning to the hut of their teacher, Sariputta. The two young friends walked side by side without speaking. The slow reverberations of the bell gained momentum like waves breaking one upon another. Svasti followed his breath and silently recited the gatha for hearing the bell: "Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true self."

## *Chapter Seventeen*

# Pippala Leaf

**B**eneath the pippala tree, the hermit Gautama focused all of his formidable powers of concentration to look deeply at his body. He saw that each cell of his body was like a drop of water in an endlessly flowing river of birth, existence, and death, and he could not find anything in the body that remained unchanged or that could be said to contain a separate self. Intermingled with the river of his body was the river of feelings, in which every feeling was a drop of water. These drops also jostled with one another in a process of birth, existence, and death. Some feelings were pleasant, some unpleasant, and some neutral, but all of his feelings were impermanent: they appeared and disappeared just like the cells of his body.

With his great concentration, Gautama next explored the river of perceptions, which flowed alongside the rivers of body and feelings. The drops in the river of perceptions intermingled and influenced each other in their process of birth, existence, and death. If one's perceptions were accurate, reality revealed itself with ease; but if one's perceptions were erroneous, reality was veiled. People were caught in endless suffering because of their erroneous perceptions: they believed that which is impermanent is permanent, that which is without self contains self, that which has no birth and death has birth and death, and they divided that which is inseparable into parts.

Gautama next shone his awareness on the mental states, which were the sources of suffering—fear, anger, hatred, arrogance, jealousy, greed, and ignorance. Mindful awareness blazed in him like a bright sun, and he used that sun of awareness to illuminate the nature of all these negative mental states. He saw that they all arose out of ignorance. They were the opposite of mindfulness. They were darkness—the absence of light. He saw that the key to liberation would be to break through ignorance and to enter deeply into the heart of reality and attain a direct experience of it. Such knowledge would not be the knowledge of the intellect, but of direct experience.

In the past, Siddhartha had looked for ways to vanquish fear, anger, and greed, but the methods he had used had not borne fruit because they were only attempts to suppress such feelings and emotions. Siddhartha now understood that their cause was ignorance, and that when one was liberated from ignorance, mental obstructions would vanish on their own, like shadows fleeing before the rising sun. Siddhartha's insight was the fruit of his deep concentration.

He smiled and looked up at a pippala leaf imprinted against the blue sky, its tail blowing back and forth as if calling him. Looking deeply at the leaf, he saw clearly the presence of the sun and stars—without the sun, without light and warmth, the leaf could not exist. This was like this because that was like that. He also saw in the leaf the presence of clouds—without clouds there could be no rain, and without rain the leaf could not be. He saw the earth, time, space, and mind—all were present in the leaf. In fact, at that very moment, the entire universe existed in that leaf. The reality of the leaf was a wondrous miracle.

Though we ordinarily think that a leaf is born in the springtime, Gautama could see that it had been there for a long, long time in the sunlight, the clouds, the tree, and in himself. Seeing that the leaf had never been born, he could see that he too had never been born. Both the leaf and he himself had simply manifested—they had never been born and were incapable of ever dying. With this insight, ideas of birth and death, appearance and disappearance dissolved, and the true face of the leaf and his own true face revealed themselves. He could see that the presence of any one phenomenon made possible the existence of all other phenomena. One included all, and all were contained in one.

The leaf and his body were one. Neither possessed a separate, permanent self. Neither could exist independently from the rest of the universe. Seeing the interdependent nature of all phenomena, Siddhartha saw the empty nature of all phenomena—that all things are empty of a separate, isolated self. He realized that the key to liberation lay in these two principles of interdependence and nonself. Clouds drifted across the sky, forming a white background to the translucent pippala leaf. Perhaps that evening the clouds would encounter a cold front and transform into rain. Clouds were one manifestation; rain was another. Clouds also were not born and would not die. If the clouds understood that, Gautama thought, surely they would sing joyfully as they fell down as rain onto the mountains, forests, and rice fields.



Illuminating the rivers of his body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, Siddhartha now understood that impermanence and emptiness of self are the very conditions necessary for life. Without impermanence and emptiness of self, nothing could grow or develop. If a grain of rice did not have the nature of impermanence and emptiness of self, it could not grow into a rice plant. If clouds were not empty of self and impermanent, they could not transform into rain. Without an impermanent, nonself nature, a child could never grow into an adult. "Thus," he thought, "to accept life means to accept impermanence and emptiness of self. The source of suffering is a false belief in permanence and the existence of separate selves. Seeing this, one understands that there is neither birth nor death, production nor destruction, one nor many, inner nor outer, large nor small, impure nor pure. All such concepts are false distinctions created by the intellect. If one penetrates into the empty nature of all things, one will transcend all mental barriers and be liberated from the cycle of suffering."

From one night to the next, Gautama meditated beneath the pippala tree, shining the light of his awareness on his body, his mind, and all the universe. His five companions had long abandoned him, and his co-practitioners were now the forest, the river, the birds, and the thousands of insects living on the earth and in the trees. The great pippala tree was his brother in practice. The evening star, which appeared as he sat down in meditation each night, was also his brother in practice. He meditated far into the night.

The village children came to visit him only in the early afternoons. One day Sujata brought him an offering of rice porridge cooked with milk and honey, and Svasti brought him a fresh armful of kusa grass. After Svasti left to lead the buffaloes home, Gautama was seized with a deep feeling that he would attain the Great Awakening that very night. Only the previous night he had had several unusual dreams. In one he saw himself lying on his side, his head pillowed by the Himalaya Mountains, his left hand touching the shores of the Eastern Sea, his right hand touching the shores of the Western Sea, and his two feet resting against the shores of the Southern Sea. In another dream, a great lotus as large as a carriage wheel grew from his navel and floated up to touch the highest clouds. In a third dream, birds of all colors, too many to be counted, flew toward him from all directions. These dreams seemed to announce that his Great Awakening was at hand.

Early that evening, Gautama did walking meditation along the banks of

the river. He waded into the water and bathed. When twilight descended, he returned to sit beneath his familiar pippala tree. He smiled as he looked at the newly spread kusa grass at the foot of the tree. Beneath this very tree he had already made so many important discoveries in his meditation. Now the moment he had long awaited was approaching. The door to Enlightenment was about to open.

Slowly, Siddhartha sat down in the lotus position. He looked at the river flowing quietly in the distance as soft breezes rustled the grasses along its banks. The night forest was tranquil yet very much alive. Around him chirped a thousand different insects. He turned his awareness to his breath and lightly closed his eyes. The evening star appeared in the sky.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

# The Morning Star Has Risen

Through mindfulness, Siddhartha's mind, body, and breath were perfectly at one. His practice of mindfulness had enabled him to build great powers of concentration, which he could now use to shine awareness on his mind and body. After deeply entering meditation, he began to discern the presence of countless other beings in his own body right in the present moment. Organic and inorganic beings, minerals, mosses and grasses, insects, animals, and people were all within him. He saw that other beings were him right in the present moment. He saw his own past lives, all his births and deaths. He saw the creation and destruction of thousands of worlds and thousands of stars. He felt all the joys and sorrows of every living being—those born of mothers, those born of eggs, and those born of fission, who divided themselves into new creatures. He saw that every cell of his body contained all of Heaven and Earth, and spanned the three times—past, present, and future. It was the hour of the first watch of the night.

Gautama entered even more deeply into meditation. He saw how countless worlds arose and fell, were created and destroyed. He saw how countless beings pass through countless births and deaths. He saw that these births and deaths were but outward appearances and not true reality, just as millions of waves rise and fall incessantly on the surface of the sea, while the sea itself is beyond birth and death. If the waves understood that they themselves were water, they would transcend birth and death and arrive at true inner peace, overcoming all fear. This realization enabled Gautama to transcend the net of birth and death, and he smiled. His smile was like a flower blossoming in the deep night, which radiated a halo of light. It was the smile of a wondrous understanding, the insight into the destruction of all defilements. He attained this level of understanding by the second watch.

At just that moment thunder crashed, and great bolts of lightning flashed across the sky as if to rip the heavens in two. Black clouds concealed

the moon and stars. Rain poured down. Gautama was soaking wet, but he did not budge. He continued his meditation.

Without wavering, he shined his awareness on his mind. He saw that living beings suffer because they do not understand that they share one common ground with all beings. Ignorance gives rise to a multitude of sorrows, confusions, and troubles. Greed, anger, arrogance, doubt, jealousy, and fear all have their roots in ignorance. When we learn to calm our minds in order to look deeply at the true nature of things, we can arrive at full understanding, which dissolves every sorrow and anxiety and gives rise to acceptance and love.

Gautama now saw that understanding and love are one. Without understanding there can be no love. Each person's disposition is the result of physical, emotional, and social conditions. When we understand this, we cannot hate even a person who behaves cruelly, but we can strive to help transform his physical, emotional, and social conditions. Understanding gives rise to compassion and love, which in turn give rise to correct action. In order to love, it is first necessary to understand, so understanding is the key to liberation. In order to attain clear understanding, it is necessary to live mindfully, making direct contact with life in the present moment, truly seeing what is taking place within and outside of oneself. Practicing mindfulness strengthens the ability to look deeply, and when we look deeply into the heart of anything, it will reveal itself. This is the secret treasure of mindfulness—it leads to the realization of liberation and enlightenment. Life is illuminated by right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Siddhartha called this the Noble Path: *aryamarga*.

Looking deeply into the heart of all beings, Siddhartha attained insight into everyone's minds, no matter where they were, and he was able to hear everyone's cries of both suffering and joy. He attained to the states of divine sight, divine hearing, and the ability to travel across all distances without moving. It was now the end of the third watch, and there was no more thunder. The clouds rolled back to reveal the bright moon and stars.

Gautama felt as though a prison that had confined him for thousands of lifetimes had broken open. Ignorance had been the jailkeeper. Because of ignorance, his mind had been obscured, just like the moon and stars hidden by the storm clouds. Clouded by endless waves of deluded thoughts, the mind had falsely divided reality into subject and object, self and others, existence and nonexistence, birth and death, and from these

discriminations arose wrong views—the prisons of feelings, craving, grasping, and becoming. The suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death only made the prison walls thicker. The only thing to do was to seize the jailkeeper and see his true face. The jailkeeper was ignorance. And the means to overcome ignorance was the Noble Eightfold Path. Once the jailkeeper was gone, the jail would disappear and never be rebuilt again.

The hermit Gautama smiled and whispered to himself, “Oh jailer, I see you now. How many lifetimes have you confined me in the prisons of birth and death? But now I see your face clearly, and from now on you can build no more prisons around me.”

Looking up, Siddhartha saw the morning star appear on the horizon, twinkling like a huge diamond. He had seen this star so many times before while sitting beneath the pippala tree, but this morning it was like seeing it for the first time. It was as dazzling as the jubilant smile of Enlightenment. Siddhartha gazed at the star and exclaimed out of deep compassion, “All beings contain within themselves the seeds of Enlightenment, yet we drown in the ocean of birth and death for so many thousands of lifetimes!”

Siddhartha knew he had found the Great Way. He had attained his goal, and now his heart experienced perfect peace and ease. He thought about his years of searching, filled with disappointments and hardships. He thought of his father, mother, aunt, Yasodhara, Rahula, and all his friends. He thought of the palace, Kapilavatthu, his people and country, and of all those who lived in hardship and poverty, especially children. He promised to find a way to share his discovery to help all others liberate themselves from suffering. Out of his deep insight emerged a profound love for all beings.

Along the grassy riverbank, colorful flowers blossomed in the early morning sunlight. Sun danced on leaves and sparkled on the water. His pain was gone. All the wonders of life revealed themselves. Everything appeared strangely new. How wondrous were the blue skies and drifting white clouds! He felt as though he and all the universe had been newly created.

Just then, Svasti appeared. When Siddhartha saw the young buffalo boy come running toward him, he smiled. Suddenly Svasti stopped in his tracks and stared at Siddhartha, his mouth wide open. Siddhartha called, “Svasti!”

The boy came to his senses and answered, “Teacher!”

Svasti joined his palms and bowed. He took a few steps forward but then stopped and gazed again at Siddhartha in awe. Embarrassed by his own behavior, he spoke haltingly, “Teacher, you look so different today.”

Siddhartha motioned for the boy to approach. He took him into his arms

and asked, “How do I look different today?”

Gazing up at Siddhartha, Svasti answered, “It’s hard to say. It’s just you look so different. It’s like, like you were a star.”

Siddhartha patted the boy on the head and said, “Is that so? What else do I look like?”

“You look like a lotus that’s just blossomed. And like, like the moon over the Gayasisa Peak.”

Siddhartha looked into Svasti’s eyes and said, “Why, you’re a poet, Svasti! Now tell me, why are you here so early today? And where are your buffaloes?”

Svasti explained that he had the day off as all the buffaloes were being used to plow the fields. Only the calf had been left in its stall. Today his only responsibility was to cut grass. During the night he and his sisters and brother were awakened by the roar of thunder. Rain pounded through their leaky roof, soaking their beds. They had never experienced a storm so fierce, and they worried about Siddhartha in the forest. They huddled together until the storm subsided and they could fall back asleep. When day broke, Svasti ran to the buffaloes’ stall to fetch his sickle and carrying pole, and made his way to the forest to see if Siddhartha was all right.



*Svasti joined his palms and said, haltingly, "Teacher, you look so different today."*

Siddhartha grasped Svasti's hand. "This is the happiest day I have ever known. If you can, bring all the children to come see me by the pippala tree this afternoon. Don't forget to bring your brother and sisters. But first go and cut the kusa grass you need for the buffaloes."

Svasti trotted off happily as Siddhartha began to take slow steps along the sun-bathed shore.



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In this book, the name of a revered person may appear with or without the prefix “Maha,” meaning great. For example, one of the Buddha’s beloved senior disciples, Moggallana, is sometimes referred to as Moggallana and sometimes as Mahamoggallana.

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