

A Challenge to Caste: The Teachings of the Buddha

By 600 B.C.E., the central spiritual question in Indian society was how to find liberation from karma and the painful cycle of rebirth. Upanishadic teachers and the school of religious thought exemplified by the excerpt from the *Bhagavad Gita* offered different but complementary answers, and both held out the possibility that anyone, regardless of caste, could find release in the present life by achieving a state of absolute selflessness. Regardless, Brahmin teachers continued to emphasize the four-fold division of society, and by about 300 B.C.E., the idea and even reality of caste divisions and duties would be pretty well established throughout most of northern and central India (but not yet in the south). Even before caste became fixed within the social-religious fabric of much of India, there was a widespread consensus—at least among Brahminical teachers—that conformity to one's dharma, no matter how lacking in perfect selflessness it might be, and slow karmic progress up the chain of caste through a series of reincarnations were the dual keys to release from the bonds of matter.

In opposition to this notion, some spiritual teachers offered their followers avenues to liberation that rejected the entire caste system, and not surprisingly, some of the most important of these challengers to caste were from the Kshatriya class. The most significant of them was *Siddhartha Gautama*, better known as the *Buddha* (the Enlightened One).

The Buddha and his doctrine are understandable only within the context of Hindu cosmology. Although he formulated a spiritual philosophy that denied certain concepts basic to what was emerging as classical Brahminical Hinduism, the questions he asked and the answers he offered were predicated on the world-denying assumptions that underlie all Indian spiritual thought.

Although grounded in Indian spirituality, *Buddhism* eventually expanded well beyond the cultural and geographic boundaries of India. By the first century C.E., the Buddha's teachings had been transformed into a family of related religious sects, many of which worshiped the Buddha himself as a divine being. For well over 2,000 years, Buddhism, in its various forms, has profoundly shaped the lives of countless devotees throughout South, Central, and East Asia and remains a vital religious force today.

The Path to Enlightenment

16 • THE BUDDHA, SETTING IN MOTION THE WHEEL OF THE LAW

Most details of the Buddha's life are uncertain. Unanimous tradition places Siddhartha Gautama's birth into a princely family residing in the Himalayan foothills of Nepal, but the written sources for his life and teachings, all composed long

after his time, differ as to his birth and death dates; the three strongest traditions are 624–544, 563–483, and 448–368 B.C.E. Significantly, all three agree that he lived to the age of 80. Recent scholarship, based on archaeological evidence, has led to a growing consensus that the approximate dates 480–400 make the most sense.

Tradition holds that the prince led a sheltered court life up to age 29, when he viewed human aging, suffering, and death for the first time. Shrinking in horror at these manifestations of misery, he fled his comfortable life, his wife, and his newborn son and became an *ascetic* (someone who denies the pleasures of the body in order to liberate the soul), determined to find a remedy for suffering. *Mendicant* (begging) ascetics, known as *Shramanas*, who rejected the religious traditions of the Vedas and the primacy of the Brahmins, were already a major religious force in India. Siddhartha Gautama, however, found that the ascetic life offered him no insight as to how one might escape the sorrows of mortal existence. In an act of desperation, he sat under a sacred *pipal* tree (see source 6, seals 2 and 3), vowing to meditate until he achieved his goal. Despite the attempts of the armies of *Mara*, “the Evil One,” the divine Lord of the Realm of Desire, to deflect Siddhartha from his course, he persisted. Shortly after his victory over Mara’s temptations, he achieved his goal. He was now *the Buddha*, the Enlightened One.

Legend tells us that seven weeks later, he proceeded to share the path to Enlightenment, which he termed the *Middle Path*, by preaching a sermon in a deer park at Sarnath in northeastern India to five ascetics, former companions and students who had abandoned him as a false teacher when he had renounced asceticism as the path to Enlightenment. Through the aura of compassion that he now radiated, as well as by the words of his first sermon, the Buddha converted these five into his first disciples. Buddhists refer to that initial sermon as “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law,” which means that the Buddha had embarked on a journey (turning the wheel) on behalf of the Law of Righteousness (*Dharma*). Now, at age 35, he had 45 years ahead of him to preach his doctrine.

Our text is a reconstruction of that sermon as preserved in a body of Buddhist literature known as the *Pali Canon*, which contains the most authentic texts relating to the Buddha and his doctrine known to exist today. Assembled as an authoritative collection, or canon, of orally transmitted remembrances during the period between the Buddha’s death and the late third century B.C.E., the texts were probably not written down in the form in which we have them until the late first century B.C.E. Composed in Pali, a language that is close to classical Sanskrit, they first appeared on the island of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) and traveled from there to Burma and Thailand, where they became the core canonical books of the branch of Buddhism known as *Theravada* (see Chapter 6). Each text is located in one of three groupings, or “baskets,” a designation that traces back to a time when the palm-leaf manuscripts of the texts were kept in three separate baskets. For this reason, the entire collection is known as the *Tipitaka* (also spelled *Tripitaka*), or *Three Baskets*. The following source comes from *The Discipline Basket*, which consists of a number of books that concern the discipline, or regimented life, of Buddhist monks and nuns.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What is the Middle Path? According to the Buddha, why is it the proper path to Enlightenment?
2. What are the *Four Noble Truths*, and how does one's total comprehension and acceptance of them lead to *Nirvana*, or escape from the cycle of suffering?
3. Buddhists call the Law taught by the Buddha *Dharma*. How does Buddhist Dharma differ from that of Brahminical Hinduism?

And the Blessed One thus addressed the five Bhikkhus.¹ "There are two extremes, O Bhikkhus, which he who has given up the world ought to avoid. What are these two extremes? A life given to pleasures, devoted to pleasures and lusts; this is degrading, sensual, vulgar, ignoble, and profitless; and a life given to mortifications: this is painful, ignoble, and profitless. By avoiding these two extremes, O Bhikkhus, the Tathagata² has gained the knowledge of the Middle Path which leads to insight, which leads to wisdom, which conduces to calm, to knowledge, to the Sambodhi,³ to Nirvana.⁴

"Which, O Bhikkhus, is this Middle Path the knowledge of which the Tathagata has gained . . . ? It is the Holy Eightfold Path, namely, Right Belief,⁵ Right Aspiration,⁶ Right Speech,⁷ Right Conduct,⁸ Right Means of Livelihood,⁹ Right Endeavor,¹⁰ Right Memory,¹¹ Right Meditation.¹² . . .

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of Suffering: Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering. Presence of objects we hate, is suffering; Separation from objects we love, is suffering; not to obtain what we desire, is suffering. Briefly, . . . clinging to existence is suffering.

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Cause of suffering: Thirst,¹³ that leads to rebirth, accompanied by pleasure and lust, finding its delight here and there. This thirst is threefold, namely, thirst for pleasure, thirst for existence, thirst for prosperity.

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering: it ceases with the complete cessation of this thirst,—a cessation which consists in the absence of every passion—with the abandoning of this thirst, with the doing away with it, with the deliverance from it, with the destruction of desire.

Source: T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, trans., *Vinaya Texts*, in F. Max Mueller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*, 50 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879–1910), vol. 13, pp. 94–97, 100–102, *passim*.

¹Ascetics. The term later was used to refer to Buddhism's mendicant monks.

²One of the Buddha's titles. It means "one who has gone thus," which is a way of saying "He who has arrived at the Truth."

³Total Enlightenment.

⁴The state of release from the limitations of existence and rebirth. The word means "extinction," in the sense that one has extinguished all worldly desires. In essence, it is *Buddha-hood*. Like the Hindu *Brahma-nirvana*, Buddhist *Nirvana* is a state of absolute being and nonbeing.

⁵Understanding the truth about the universality of suffering, knowing the path leading to its extinction, and realizing it is attainable.

⁶Preparing for the journey to Enlightenment by freeing one's mind of ill will, sensuous desire, and cruelty.

⁷Abstaining from lying, harsh language, and gossip.

⁸Acting honestly by avoiding killing, stealing, and unlawful sexual intercourse.

⁹Avoiding any occupation that harms directly or indirectly any living being.

¹⁰Going beyond simply acting morally, a person now avoids all distractions and temptations of the flesh.

¹¹Now that one has put aside distractions, one focuses the entire mind fully on important issues, such as life, suffering, and death.

¹²Total discipline of the mind, body, and spirit leading to a state of absolute awareness that transcends consciousness.

¹³Desire.

"This,
Path wh
Holy Ei
Right A
Right M
Memory
"As le
perfect
these fo
I knew

On a c
dwelling
Now it
putta,²

Source: T
cation," i
Translation
pp. 117–1

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Path which leads to the cessation of suffering: that Holy Eightfold Path, that is to say, Right Belief, Right Aspiration, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Endeavor, Right Memory, Right Meditation. . . .

"As long, O Bhikkhus, as I did not possess with perfect purity this true knowledge and insight into these four Noble Truths . . . so long, O Bhikkhus, I knew that I had not yet obtained the highest,

absolute Sambodhi in the world of men and gods. . . .

"But since I possessed, O Bhikkhus, with perfect purity this true knowledge and insight into these four Noble Truths . . . then I knew, O Bhikkhus, that I had obtained the highest, universal Sambodhi. . . .

"And this knowledge and insight arose in my mind: The emancipation of my mind cannot be lost; this is my last birth; hence I shall not be born again!"

The Poison Arrow of Needless Speculation

17 • THE BUDDHA, QUESTIONS THAT TEND NOT TO EDIFICATION

The *Pali Canon* contains thousands of sermons ascribed to the Buddha. Other than "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law," none is more famous or central to the Buddha's teaching than "Questions That Tend Not to Edification," also known as the "Poison Arrow." The sermon displays two characteristics common to most of the lessons ascribed to the Buddha in the *Tipitaka*: his use of earthy parables and analogies to convey his profound spiritual insights, and teaching by means of a dialogue between Enlightened Master and pupil.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Which issues or questions did the Buddha refuse to consider?
2. Did the Buddha consider such speculation simply a waste of time, or was there a more profound reason for his antipathy to the search for answers to such questions?
3. What does his refusal to speculate on these issues suggest about his core doctrine?
4. Now that you have studied these four Indian sources, you are ready for the Big Questions: What assumptions and values do Brahminical Hinduism and Buddhism share? Where do they differ? Which are more significant, the similarities or the differences? What conclusions follow from your answers?

On a certain occasion the Blessed One¹ was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana monastery. . . . Now it happened to the venerable Malunkya-putta,² being in seclusion and plunged in

meditation, that a consideration presented itself to his mind as follows:

"These theories that the Blessed One has left unexplained, has set aside and rejected—that the

Source: The Buddha, "Questions That Tend Not to Edification," in Henry C. Warrant, ed. and trans., *Buddhism in Translations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1896), pp. 117–122, *passim* (modernized).

¹The Buddha.

²One of the Buddha's disciples.