Chapter 3
The Buddha and his Message

The Road to Enlightenment

Gautama Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, was an only child. His mother died a few days after giving birth. Her sister then became the father's consort, he being the head of his clan, the Sakyans, a Himalayan people. It was a turbulent time in northern Jambudvipa, as the subcontinent was then known, with various kingdoms expanding and aggressive rajas on the march. Urban civilization was highly developed, agriculture productive, trade vigorous. Abundant forests gave livelihood to the hunter and shelter to the recluse. The prevailing belief-system was based on the Vedas and animal sacrifice played a large part in it. Members of the brahman caste knew the sacred chants and performed the sacrifices, and they vied with the warrior caste for supremacy in society. The Buddha belonged to the warrior caste, or *khattiyas*, and was critical of the pretensions of the brahmans and hostile to their practices.

He seems to have had his first 'spiritual' experience at a very young age, sitting under a rose-apple tree, an event prefiguring his Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree thirty-odd years later. We read that he was a serious and sensitive young man, and expert in archery, of which there was an established school among the Sakyans. But the verifiable details of his early life are few, as no contemporary record exists and the first biography was not written until hundreds of years later. There is much legendary material; indeed the Birth Stories, or *Jatakas*, are a veritable folklore dealing with his supposed earlier lives, as man or animal. But indisputable facts are few. We are told that he married and had a son. But what led to his abandonment of a life rich in worldly satisfactions for that of a wandering mendicant? The legends are colorful and there may be a deal of truth in them; but where there is so much doubt it is usually prudent to rely on the simplest account, and there we read that 'in the prime of youth' he cut off his hair and put on a wanderer's robe and went into the homeless life while his parents watched with tear-stained faces. This is the oldest version of the home-leaving. Later versions have him as a married man

in his late twenties. Do we have to choose between the two stories? Is it possible that he went forth twice?

Three names in particular have been preserved from the years leading up to the Enlightenment. The first is that of Alara, the Kalama sage, who was the seeker's first teacher. What impressed Siddhartha was that this man taught a doctrine which he had worked out for himself, not something accepted on faith. He took the Bodhisattva, or future Buddha, to the meditational stage called the Sphere of Nothingness, very advanced, but not final.

The second teacher's name was Uddaka, who taught a doctrine first realized not by himself but by his father, Rama. He took the Bodhisattva to the next stage of meditation, but again the seeker was left unsatisfied.

Then he joined up with five other recluses and devoted himself to the most extreme ascetic practices for a number of years. All in vain: he could not take the final step, the step to nirvana. At last he concluded that extreme asceticism was not the way. He remembered the moment in childhood when, sitting in the shade of a tree, he entered into a trance which combined pleasure and awareness, and he wondered if that might not be the way to Enlightenment. He asked himself if for some reason he might be afraid of taking the final step to nirvana and answered: 'I do not fear that happy state' – an early insight into one of the curiosities of human psychology, the fear of happiness and the reluctance to take the one step that will procure it.

So, to the disapproval of his five companions, who turned and left him, he took solid food again. It was given him, so the story goes, by a young woman named Sujata, a woman who has been all but forgotten by the male-dominated tradition. Her gift of food gave him the strength to make the final effort, and he attained full Enlightenment in the watches of that night at Bodhgaya, thus becoming the Buddha.

The Message

What is meant by this Enlightenment? It was an insight into the depths of the human condition and beyond it to the nature of the cosmos. The Buddha put it as follows: Two things I teach – *dukkha* and its ending. *'Dukkha'* is a word meaning the pain and incompleteness of life as ordinarily known; its ending is the fulfilment of life, while yet it is lived, by attainment to the transcendental state called *nirvana*. In other words, an aspect of reality not normally apprehended is discerned, contemplated and integrated into ordinary life.

This dual insight is expanded into the Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha*, its Cause, its Ending and the Way thereto. The Truth of the Way in turn is elaborated into the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Resolution, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Effort, Right Livelihood, Right Mindfulness, Right Contemplation. ('Right' has become the accepted term, but the Pali and Sanskrit prefixes mean something more like 'best' or 'highest'. 'Right' suggests method, the others quality.)

The early Buddhists, and perhaps the Founder himself, used lists and repetition to convey the Teaching to a largely non-literate society. Along with those given above there are the Three Jewels, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and the Five Precepts, which are the basis of Buddhist morality: to refrain from violence to all living beings, from theft, from lies, from sexual misconduct and from substances that dull the mind.

The nature of the Enlightenment is most succinctly conveyed by the dual insight of d*ukkha* and its ending, d*ukkhanta*, and is most easily considered under the headings of the Four Noble Truths, which make it known that *dukkha* is not something imposed by fate or deity but arises from a cause, and that its end is not a grace or favor but an effect. The legend has it that the Buddha was so reluctant to proclaim his message to the world that a god had to persuade him. We ask, what was there in it that made him doubt it would be understood?

If one word could encapsulate the message it would be intentionality. With the Enlightenment a new moral consciousness was born – or reborn, for the Buddha described himself as the rediscoverer of an ancient way trodden by the clear-sighted sages of old, but since overgrown with ritual and superstition. He taught that the inadvertent performance of a tabu act is not a cause of pollution, nor that of a good one a source of merit. Everything depends on intention. The boundaries of personal control and responsibility are thus extended and individuality begins to emerge from the communal blur.

Up to this moment we have always seen the Buddha in the company of others, even if only, as with his parents, when leaving them. Alara, Uddaka, the five monks, are his companions through the years of effort. Then he goes on alone fortified by Sujata's food. Like Jesus later in the wilderness and Muhammad in his cave, he has to know solitude, apartness, stillness, to make his discovery: that intentionality is the main thing, that the moral life is founded on conscious acts, and that these acts, good or bad, make man and the world what they are.

This was a radical insight and evidently the thought of imparting it to a society dominated by sacred lore and ritual was a daunting one. The depth of the Buddha's diffidence is indicated by the story of the god Brahma Sahampati's descent from the celestial realms to urge him to proclaim his

message. After some weeks spent in the neighbourhood of the Bodhi Tree, he set out to do so. By now, we are told, he had elaborated the so-called Chain of Causation, which, like the Four Noble Truths, has been observed to resemble a medical diagnosis, suggesting that the Buddha saw his mission to society as one of healing.

Both Alara and Uddaka were dead by this time, and the Buddha's first hearers were his five erstwhile companions. He told them that he could show them the way to immortality, which is not endlessly dying and being reborn, but freedom from the desire to live lives bound by time, however pleasant and prolonged time may be. Rebirth was a reality to these recluses and the wish to be finished with a routine that had long since lost its charm was real too. But austerity had been their chosen way and word of a gentler one was not at first to their liking. They heard him out however, and were convinced by the doctrine of the Middle Way – neither excessive austerity nor, at the other extreme, indulgence, but a vibrant moderation between the two. Later he would put it into an image for the benefit of a discouraged monk: that as a lute gives its true sound when properly strung, neither overdrawn nor slack, so the seeker should find his own best tuning, and not dwell at either of the extremes of tension, which are no good for the balanced life.

This doctrine of the Middle Way is literally central to life in the Dharma. There are few Buddhists in the West who would be tempted by the extremes to which Indian seekers even today will go in their quest for union with the One. But the doctrine has a far wider scope and far closer relevance than ascetic practice. It is a guide for life and a counsel in worldly as well as spiritual affairs. Its message obviously is moderation, but based on the premise that extremes are likely to be wrong and that even good ideas and practices are best not taken to their apparently logical conclusions. If history is a record of the follies and cruelties of mankind, those follies often begin as good sense and the cruelties as intended kindness.

So the Enlightenment then is associated with moderation, intentionality and a radical belief in man as the cause of his own and the world's destiny. This is the intellectual aspect of the Buddha's attainment. Its other aspect has been called shamanic, which is an adjective deriving from a word found in Pali as *samana*, in Sanskrit as *sramana*. This aspect refers to the Buddha's ability to see his previous existences, and the lives, deaths and rebirths going on in the world about him. There is to be noted in all this a movement from the personal to the general. The intellectual aspect makes it universal. Shamanic powers have been cultivated in many disciplines, and in some schools of Buddhism, especially the Tantric, they play an important part; but it is the intellectual aspect, with its intentional ethic at the core, which places the Dharma on the eminence it occupies in the spiritual history of mankind.

The Dharma Spreads

The Enlightenment occurred towards the middle of the Buddha's life of eighty years. If the first half may be described in terms of an ascent, the second may be seen as a high spiritual upland, not overtopped, in the view of his disciples, by any other peak or plateau. Yet it was always said by him to be a spiritual eminence that any of them, male or female, might attain by following the Noble Eightfold Path, and it would appear that in his lifetime there were many who joined him there.

In the course of time some of these men and women formed the Sangha, the Order of monks and nuns dedicated to living as closely as possible to the Buddha's ideals. One of the Sangha's most notable features was its democratic constitution, with members having a say in the making of decisions, and with positive allowance for dissent, even at the risk of weakening the organization. People came long distances to join the Order, and noting the hardship thus caused, the Buddha empowered his monks to confer ordination wherever they went. This greatly facilitated the spread of the Dharma, and at the same time validated the independence of local groups, bound fraternally by a simple code and linked by the passage of wandering monks, including the Buddha himself, who was always available for consultation but did not impose his authority. Likewise, the groups did not impose their authority on dissenters; these would detach themselves from the main body and go and set up their own sangha-cell elsewhere. Obviously a risk of fragmentation was thereby incurred, but it was deemed preferable to an unwilling conformity. Individual freedom and collective harmony were both honored, while at the same time criteria were established whereby orthodoxy was preserved.

Another factor that facilitated the acceptance of the Dharma was its communication in vernacular speech. There was no sacred language such as the Sanskrit of the Vedas. Language was seen as essentially a medium of human communication, not of divine inspiration. This must have helped in bringing the laity closer to the Order, there being no barrier between them of words charged with potent unintelligibility. Similarly all languages met as equals. Buddhism was not propagated in association with an imperial or a colonial regime administering native populations through a language not their own, one appropriating the domains of power and prestige to the disadvantage of native tongues. We do not know what language the Buddha spoke in his extensive wanderings, nor how widely the speech of his tribe was understood outside the Sakyan boundaries. There may have been a lingua franca used by traders over the vast Gangetic plain; it may be that he learned and spoke several languages or dialects. At all events linguistic and cultural intolerance, any more than its religious form, has not been a feature of Buddhist expansion, as it has of some

other religions. One may reasonably take it that the Buddha's dictum, not to extol oneself or disparage others, applies to language and culture as well as to beliefs.

The Happiness of the Buddha

As said earlier, the Buddha lived in troubled times, and we may attribute part of the success of his message to this fact. Long-established social forms were giving way before the rise of aggressive monarchs in the Gangetic plain. Independent republics and confederacies fell before their armies or were subverted by their agents. People looked at the beliefs and rituals that had seemed to serve their societies well in quiet times and found them wanting. They turned to new teachers and thinkers. The Buddha was but one of many. Mahavira, the Jain leader, is the best known of the others.

We read that all sorts and conditions of people – rajas, generals, priests, grieving mothers – made their way to the Buddha, wherever he might be, and found him always accessible. All these people, from the parricidal King Ajatasattu to the distracted Kisagotami, bereaved of her only child, found a courteous reception, and help in their troubles. As might be expected, the Buddha had words of wisdom and compassion for them, but in addition to this there was the quality of his personality which gained him the title of *Sugata*, usually translated as the Happy One. Some of his other titles have a more metaphysical ring. *Tathagata*, perhaps the best-known, is one such. What does it mean? Even its etymology is a problem. *Tatha* means 'thus', *gata* means 'gone', so in combination they should mean 'Thus gone'. But a*gata* means 'come', and attached to the first word gives 'Thus come'. Which is right? And what can 'Thus gone' and 'Thus come' mean to a modern reader? *Tathagata* is an imposing title, *Sugata* a simple one, yet it too asks a question. How in those troubled times, meeting all those troubled people, could the Buddha be happy?

The Buddha claimed to have found *dukkhanta*, the end of sorrow. *Dukkha* and *dukkhanta* comprise the dual insight he attained at the Enlightenment. At its simplest, *dukkha* means the basic distresses of life: the traumas of birth, illness, ageing, dying. But the Buddha knew all these, and many times over, if we accept rebirth as a fact. In his 'historical' life he was not always in the best of health, and in old age he described himself as resembling an old cart held together with thongs. So the 'end of sorrow' has more to it than physical health and vitality, and being *Sugata* is not the same as seeing the world in a rosy glow. There is another word that recurs in the Scriptures: it is y*athabhutam*, meaning 'in reality', 'in very truth', and it is used to describe the Buddha's perception of things. He sees things as they really are, and being a great teacher, he enables others to see things as they really are. It is a consequence of his having attained Enlightenment, an effect, as it were, of

nirvana. He sees things as they really are, and the first Truth enunciated by him is *Dukkha*, the pain of the world; it fills him with compassion, and yet he is called happy.

He was not so before the Enlightenment. Thereafter he was not otherwise. It was a defining moment, marking off the two parts of his life. The experience transformed him. It went deeper than any joy or sorrow he had known, and never grew weak or stale. No grief could undermine it, no pleasure rival its steady strength. Something beyond space, time and self he had found and made his own, but in such wise that it was everyone's; for although until the moment of death he had to live in the world of space and time, from the moment of Enlightenment he was free of the confines of self, so that when people brought their troubles to him they found a being without bias of temperament or intellect, a literally selfless image of the truth he had found.

Personality and Paradox

This is not just a string of fancy words. *Nirvana* means selflessness in the deepest sense. As said before, its synonym *vimutti* means freedom: in personal terms, freedom from self. Literally, *nirvana* means extinction of the fires of self, the flames that char and blacken our best endeavors.

But when the fires are out, is there nothing but smoke and ashes? The error here is to confuse self with being. What I call my self is not all that I am. To make sense of this ontological paradox two major Buddhist ideas have to be considered: that of *anatta* and that of *suññata.*

Anatta means 'non-self' or 'not the self'. It is used in connection with the Buddha's model of man. Whereas western systems of thought have traditionally given analyses of human nature as body first, with soul or mind second, and spirit third when the system is theological, the Buddhist analysis is in five parts or *skandhas*: body, feelings, intelligence, their activities and the consequences of these. Each of the *skandhas* – three constitutive, one active and one consequential – is said to be *anatta*, 'not the self'. It will be contended, naturally, that no one would dream of saying, 'My body is my self and there is no more to me than it'. On a philosophical level perhaps no one would, but in the 'real world' there is often a very real identification of the individual with a single faculty, a single skill, or even, in the industrial sphere, a single activity. The whole person is not seen, much less valued, as a whole person complete with body, feelings and mind. Reductionism rules, and the philosopher may be its victim as much as the manual worker. When the man or woman of intellect succumbs to Alzheimer's disease – when, as it were, Descartes can no longer say, 'I think…', it can be but small consolation to occupy the highest place on

the scrap-heap where used-up lives are thrown. In Buddhist terms, however, usefulness and value are not the same. Individuals are not valueless for being useless in terms of occupation. Their humanity never depended on whatever brought them wage or fame. We are not to be defined by what we do, nor indeed reduced even to what we do best. By the same token we are not to see others as anything less than fully human, however faulty they may be in one or more of the elements that make up their nature.

The Buddha said that none of the elements that make up the self is to be identified with the self. Each is *anatta*. But when we combine the five *anatta* elements do we not get a totality that is *anatta*? Does it not mean that the whole person is not the self? Here the second teaching is to be brought in, *suññata*, by means of which one can say, the self is not the whole person.

The usual translation of *suññata* is 'emptiness'. The concept is of central importance in Mahayana Buddhism where, in keeping with the therapeutic nature of the Dharma, 'it is a medicine to remedy the compulsive illusion-making habits of our minds, particularly to think of persons and things as separate, self-created and self-sustaining.'[1] The problem with this concept of emptiness is that it goes to such an extreme that everything is deemed empty, including the very idea of emptiness. To one who holds the Middle Way as central to the Dharma this has to be questionable, and some other understanding of *suññata* must be found.

One of the bugbears of translation is a terminological dogmatism by which a particular word comes to be accepted as the only possible equivalent of the original term. For a long time 'emptiness' seemed to have achieved this dubious distinction in respect of '*suññata*' even though it is really a rather unfortunate term, having generally negative connotations for people in the West. Buddhism makes much of the notion of 'skilful means' in its approach to teaching, but it was far from skilful to use so negative a term to describe a central idea in a religion already seen as negative by many westerners. Fortunately the term has now found at least one competitor. The Tibetan teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, suggested 'openness', a word which also accords better with the nature of Buddhism itself, as I have characterized it earlier.[2]

There is no need however to go to the opposite extreme and discard 'emptiness' altogether. Emptiness of prejudice, of preconceptions, of a vice or limitation, indicates a positive quality and in that relation at least the term should be retained. 'Openness' takes things further. A heart empty of hate is not the same as a heart full of love, and to become full of love it has first to be open to it. Here 'openness' is much the same as 'receptivity', a generally more

[1] John Snelling, *The Elements of Buddhism*, Element Books, 1990, p. 55.
[2] Trungpa, *The Dawn of Tantra*, Shambala, 1975, Ch. 5.

positive synonym. Pressing on more positively still – and the concept of *suññata* should allow this, for by its nature, it must be open to any number of interpretations – we come to such terms as 'responsiveness' and 'potentiality'. My heart is open and receptive to love but no love comes to it from an unloving world, and it cannot respond because there is nothing to which to respond. An empty heart meets an indifferent world. What then? *Suññata* becomes meaningful as potentiality. I realize I do not have to be loved before I love. The next positive step is realized, and out of my emptiness I generate love for the unloving world.

There are two discourses devoted to *suññata* in the Pali Canon, *Majjhima Nikaya* 121 and 122. In the first the Buddha is reported as saying: 'Abiding in *suññata* I abide in its fullness.' In the second he talks of the cultivation of an inner and an outer *suññata*, this in relation to compassion and to the welfare and happiness of others, his disciples in the particular instance. These discourses have been overshadowed by the elaborate Mahayanin developments of the idea, but they would appear to represent it in its basic form, and thus to be as near possible to the Buddha's own thinking. '*Suññata* in its fullness' is a very suggestive idea.

Even translated as 'emptiness' it has an intriguing paradoxicality. It may require all the possible equivalents in other languages to do it justice. There is one more that I would suggest here – 'otherness': that *suññata* is a part of us which we hold in readiness for that which is not our self, a part without which we cannot realize fullness of being. This would mean that our being is made up of the five *skandhas* plus *suññata*, of self and the capacity for otherness. Writing this I remember the opening and close of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself:* the first line of the poem begins, 'I celebrate myself and sing myself…'; the last is, 'I stop somewhere waiting for you'. If the first sentiment is perhaps impossible for a Buddhist, the second represents a conclusion in keeping with my idea of *suññata*. But the *anatta*-doctrine does not deny the self; it cautions against the misunderstanding and over-estimation of it. Self and *suññata* I understand as complementary, as representing the subjective and objective poles of being: actuality and potentiality. Contemplating the *skandhas* in the light of *anatta*, I see what is knowable in me, but, as Nagasena said to king Milinda, 'this person cannot be apprehended', and the inapprehensible I understand to be the contribution of *suññata*.

Devadatta's Conspiracy

But to return to the life of the Buddha, the *Sugata*, the Happy One. He is happy, it would seem, because he is, as far as humanly possible, selfless. Unhappiness cannot touch him because there is nothing to touch, that is, no self; there is only

suññata, in the fullness of which he abides. He suffers the pains of sickness and old age, but something deeper than these, deeper even than death, sustains him. He feels for others but not for himself. It is not happiness as we are likely to know it in this life, dependent on outer circumstance and inner mood, but is based in that mysterious region beyond the 'pairs of opposites', good and evil among them, so that the worst of men feel free to approach him and will be received fraternally. '*Sugata*' translates literally as 'well-gone', and the Buddha may be described as well-gone from self into *suññata*.

In the Buddhist tradition the worst of men was not some tyrannical raja or some murderous dacoit but a member of the Order, and indeed a cousin of the Buddha's. Devadatta is often likened to Judas, but that would seem to be unfair to the latter, since Devadatta not only conspired against the Buddha but attempted himself to kill him. As with Judas, who in the Gospels hangs himself and in the Acts of the Apostles throws himself from a rock, the circumstances of Devadatta's death are unclear. But we are assured that in the distant course of time he will come out of hell and eventually achieve nirvana. The wrongs he did the Buddha in his historical life, and in many previous existences, are held to his credit in some parts of the tradition as providing the tests necessary for the development of the Savior's virtue.

Be that as it may, the story of Devadatta, insofar as it can be disentangled from legend, is an interesting one. It seems to tell of dissatisfaction in the Order among a group who wanted a more rigid discipline, and were prepared to go into schism when they failed to get their way. Devadatta was their leader. He seems to have had wonderworking powers and not to have been averse to demonstrating them, contrary to the Buddha's injunction not to do so. He demanded that a number of new rules be established: that monks should live all their lives under trees in the forest; that they should never accept invitations to eat in a house but rely solely on alms; that they should not accept robes from the laity but dress in rags; that they should never eat meat or fish. The Buddha's answer was that, with the exception of sleeping under trees in the rainy season, the discipline already allowed for these practices, but that he would not make them compulsory. Devadatta then accused him of living in unseemly comfort and led his faction away.

The Buddha presently sent his two leading disciples, Sariputta and Mogallana, to talk to the monks, who soon saw their mistake and returned. Here again the Buddha showed forbearance, refusing to make a rule that they must be reordained, and accepting their admission of error as sufficient for reinstatement.

Devadatta is said to have made three attempts on the Buddha's life, beginning with an ambush by archers. The first of these lost control of his limbs upon seeing the Buddha, who told him not to be afraid, whereupon the man

threw down his weapons and confessed his criminal intention. He was duly converted, as were the others, leaving Devadatta to attempt the murder himself. He hurled a great rock down a hill as the Buddha was walking by. It struck against other rocks and stopped, but splinters wounded the Buddha, drawing blood from his foot. The monks pleaded with him to have a guard but he declined. Finally Devadatta set an enraged elephant upon the Buddha but the beast was overcome by the Buddha's emanation of love and did him no harm.

Devadatta's disappointment at his failure proved too much for him. (As the Buddha's cousin, he must have been getting on in years at this time: the Buddha was in his seventies.) His sins, we are told, led to his being punished in the deepest hell, where he will stay until they are purged. The Buddhist hells, or *nirayas,* are not unending. They too are part of the time-conditioned universe. In other religions hell is eternal, the punishment for offences against an Eternal Being, whose majesty requires eternal retribution. The Buddhist *nirayas* are more like Purgatory.

A few years after the trouble with Devadatta, the Buddha died. His last days were overshadowed by the destruction of his people.

The Sakyans seem to have had an extremely high opinion of themselves. The story goes that when the king of Kosala sought a wife of them they did not consider him good enough for their high-born daughters and passed off a serving girl on him as a suitable consort. They had a son, Vidudabha, who discovered the ruse practised on his father and vowed vengeance when he should be king. Eventually he deposed his father, and one of his first aims now was the punishment of his mother's and the Buddha's people. Three times it is said the Buddha prevailed on him to spare them, but when the Sakyans took to poisoning the Kosalan water supply he intervened no more, and they paid for their pride and wickedness with their lives.

The Parinirvana

The Buddha died not long after, near a village called Kusinara. His death took place in the shade of trees, as had his birth and Enlightenment. Right to the end, despite the concern of his attendant, Ananda, he received people, among them a celebrated courtesan and a troubled ascetic. The first to come and mourn him were the women of Kusinara. Then the tribesmen began arriving, and they almost came to blows over the possession of the cremated remains. When peace had been restored these were divided into eight portions and taken away by the tribesmen, to be housed in shrines throughout the Gangetic plain.

The Buddha's death is called his *Parinirvana*. The attainment of nirvana at the Enlightenment had left him free in terms of feeling and intellect; with the *Parinirvana* he becomes free of the body. The compulsion of karma is no more; he is not obliged to be born again. There is no residue of wrong-doing to be worked off, no higher goal to be attained, on earth or in the heavens. He is free in a sense that we, the unfree, can hardly comprehend.

Shortly before his death the Buddha was asked who should succeed him as leader of the movement. He declined to appoint anyone, saying the Dharma was sufficient as guide. This counsel for the independent-minded was not followed, however. The senior monk, Kassapa, took over and a succession was established. How things would have developed had the Buddha's wish been followed we can but speculate.