

## The Awakening

I'd like to briefly recap the last two weeks that we've spent discussing the life of Siddhatha Gotama, the man who would become the Buddha. He was born a prince and lived a life of general ease. He grew disturbed by the problems of old age, sickness, and death and left home to become a religious wanderer (*samana*).

He studied with two teachers: Alara Kalama and Udaka Ramaputta. Both of these teachers were highly skilled meditators who had attained very high levels of concentration. Gotama matched their accomplishments, but found that these meditative accomplishments did not bring about the end of suffering that he sought.

Gotama then entered on a period of practicing extreme asceticism in the forest. He ate scarcely anything and practiced very painful methods of meditation. Realizing that this is not productive, he eats a little food and begins practicing a gentler form of meditation that he remembered practicing spontaneously as a child.

This is how Gotama discovered the "middle path" that you hear about so often in relation to Buddhism. That term has been co-opted for various other meanings since then, but in its earliest sense, the "middle path" means a way of life in which one neither indulges in sensual pleasures nor intentionally inflicting harm on oneself.

When the Buddha was just about to reach enlightenment, on the very cusp, a message in the wind comes to Mara, lord of death. The voice whispers "Lord of death, your reign is over; The Buddha is seated by yonder tree and his meditations are about to bear fruit. Once he has attained that which he seeks he will teach others and finally no one will worship, fear and follow you."

Mara gets scared and runs down to the Buddha, atop his elephant with multiple sets of tusks and an army of demonic soldiers swirling around him. Here's a quotation from *The Life of Buddha*, by A. Ferdinand Herold, tr. by Paul C Blum:

Mara's army was a fearful sight. It bristled with pikes, with arrows and with swords; many carried enormous battle-axes and heavy clubs. The soldiers were black, blue, yellow, red, and their faces were terrifying. Their eyes were cruel flames; their mouths spewed blood. Some had the ears of a goat, others the ears of a pig or of an elephant. Many had bodies shaped like a jug. One had the paws of a tiger, the hump of a camel and the head of a donkey; another had a lion's mane, a rhinoceros' horn and a monkey's tail. There were many with two, four and five heads, and others with ten. . .

So with this terribly scary army Mara first tries to scare the enlightenment out of the Buddha, but the Buddha just smiles and nods. After a while, Mara decides that this is not working, and calls his three daughters: Tanha (the maiden of desire), Arati (the maiden of fulfillment) and Raga (the maiden of regret), and try again to tempt him, this time with lust rather than fear.

Predictably, it doesn't work this time, either.

So, practicing in this balanced way, Gotama sat down beneath a tree, determining not to move from that spot until he had attained perfect enlightenment. (Don't try this at home—it rarely ends well.) And he actually did it! In the suttas, he tells how he directed his attention toward three phenomena and came to perfectly understand them. These were:

1. His own past lives
2. The passing away and reappearance of beings
3. The ending of mental fermentations (*asava*)

As I understand it, at the time of Buddha, the various *samana* schools agreed on a few basic things. One was rebirth. When you die, you don't just vanish. You, or at least some aspects of you, appear elsewhere. They also agreed on the existence of things called *asavas* that kept one bound to this eternal cycle of suffering and rebirth. By eliminating the *asavas*, one could finally end the painful round of rebirth.

So it is this final realization with which we are most concerned: the ending of the *asavas*. The Pali term *asava* is variously translated as “effluents,” “pollutants,” or “fermentations.” These are impurities of the mind that were thought to bind beings to the eternal wheel of rebirth. So knowing how to bring the *asavas* to an end meant being able to escape the round of suffering and rebirth. So it is this knowledge that brought about *nibbana* (the end of suffering). And from this point on, we can call Gotama “The Buddha,” meaning the Awakened One.

He describes his awakening as follows:

When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental pollutants. I discerned, as it was actually present, that 'This is *dukkha*... This is the origination of *dukkha*... This is the cessation of *dukkha*... This is the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*... These are pollutants... This is the origination of pollutants... This is the cessation of pollutants... This is the way leading to the cessation of pollutants.' My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the pollutant of sensuality, released from the pollutant of becoming, released from the pollutant of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, 'Released.' I discerned that 'Birth is

ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.' (MN 36)

We should probably say a few words about the concept of *nibbana*, because this represents not only the culmination of Gotama's spiritual search, but also the goal of practice for many Buddhists.

The Buddha himself admitted the impossibility of really describing *nibbana*. It derives from a word that refers to a fire going out. It is often described in terms of what it isn't. It isn't suffering. It isn't part of the usual round of birth and death. An overly literal interpretation of "extinction" has sometimes caused Buddhism to be labeled as nihilistic. Western symbolism tends to view fire as positive and its extinguishing as a bad thing. Think of the end of *Othello*. In ancient India, fire was viewed as clinging to its source, as being stuck there. So when a fire goes out, it represents freedom, not death. So don't get into the trap of thinking of *nibbana* as oblivion.

Of course, when the Buddha says that something can't be described, that induces people to spill gallons of ink in attempts to do so. For our purposes, thinking about *nibbana* as "the end of suffering" is probably good enough.

So, the Buddha is now the Buddha. Now what? What do you do once you become enlightened? The Buddha was now faced with a big decision. He recognized that what he had discovered was not an easy truth and wouldn't be easy to teach to others.

This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, is excited by attachment, enjoys attachment. For a generation delighting in attachment, excited by attachment, enjoying attachment, [this Dhamma is] hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding. And if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me. (SN 6.1)

According to the suttas, at this point a deity named Brahma Sahampati appeared to the Buddha and begged him to teach the Dhamma, saying that there existed those "with only a little dust in their eyes" who would understand the Dhamma. The Buddha surveyed the world with his awareness, saw that this was true, and made the decision to teach.

As he contemplated how to begin his teaching career, he thought first of his former teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. Sadly, both of them had died. His

next thought was of a group of five monks who had followed him during his period of extreme asceticism. These monks had left him in disgust when he decided to eat. Still, when he returned to them, they recognized his achievement and became the audience for his first sermon, which described the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths.

Next week, Kat is going to tell us about that sermon and maybe some of the Buddha's other early teachings.