

# *Shakyamuni: Buddhism's Founder in Ten Acts*

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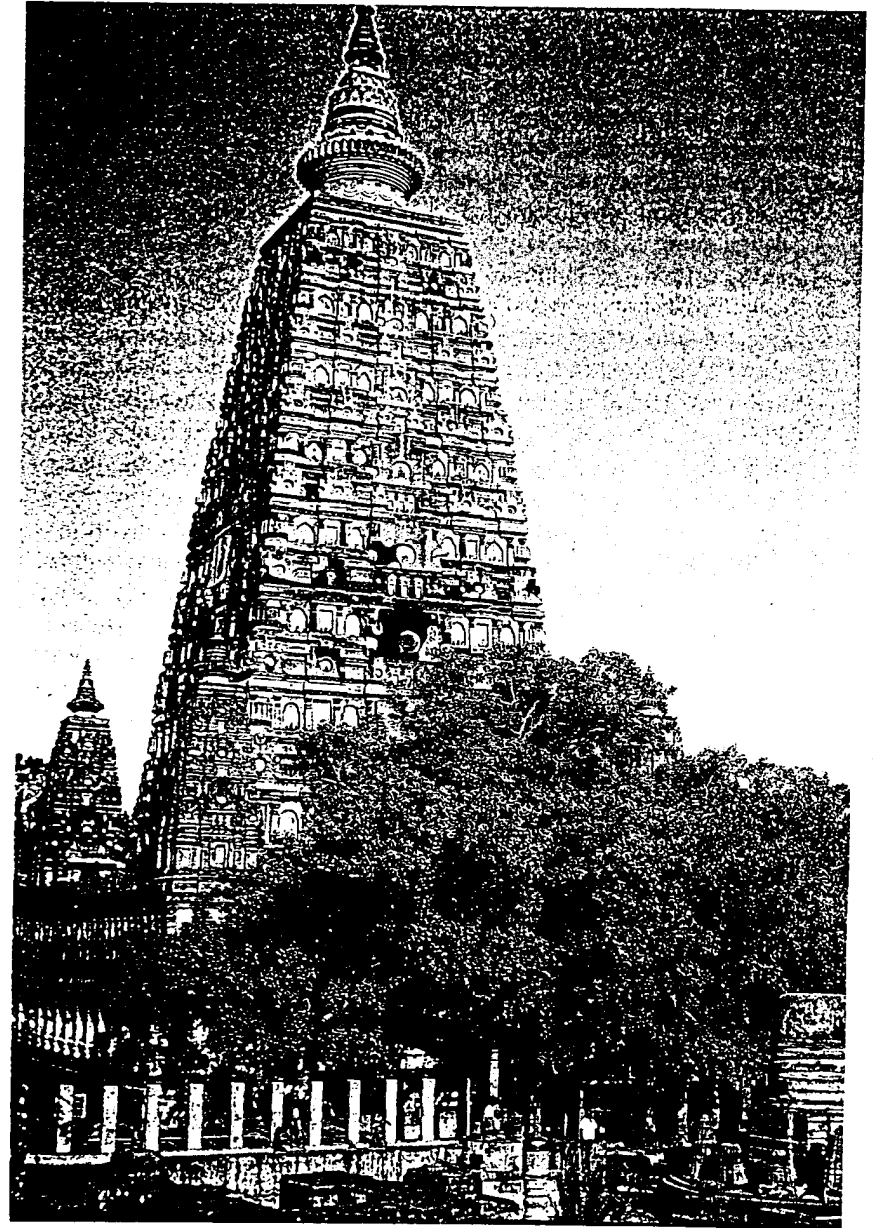
## **Introduction: The Historical Buddha in Contexts**

### *Four Buddhas: Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, Shakyamuni*

- In 402 C.E. Buddhism was coming into its own in China. Introduced five centuries earlier by Indian and Central Asian merchants eager for trade with the glorious Han dynasty, Buddhism had been treated with curiosity and contempt by Chinese nobles and Confucian scholars. By the fifth century, however, the Han was no more; it had splintered into sharply divided warrior states. Buddhism flourished in this dynamic new environment: monks worked miracles for kings; in return, kings established Buddhist institutes, centers for ritual, education, and art. On September 11, 402, a monk named Hui-yüan gathered 123 monks and lay followers for a solemn ceremony. The congregation kneeled before an image of Amitabha, a complete and perfect buddha who resides in Sukhavati, a paradise to the west. Hui-yüan taught that innumerable buddhas populate the universe, each inhabiting his own particular world, and among all these buddhas' worlds, Amitabha's Sukhavati is the most perfect. Lighting incense and sprinkling flowers, Hui-yüan's congregation vowed collectively to seek rebirth in Amitabha's Buddhist paradise.
- The fourteenth year of Emperor Ashoka's reign fell sometime around 254 B.C.E. Just six years earlier, Ashoka had conquered the eastern Indian territory of Kalinga (south of modern Calcutta) in a battle so bloody that it

turned his heart from war to religion. Hundreds of thousands died according to the traditional account. With this battle Ashoka established his preeminence over the Indian subcontinent. The extent of his empire was not matched again until the British raj, more than two millennia later. This powerful king now sought to pacify his peoples through religion, Dharma, rather than through arms. He legislated morality, established hospitals and veterinary clinics, and mediated between competing sects. By the end of his reign, Ashoka went so far as to forbid the killing of animals, from ants to rhinoceroses. But we are concerned with the fourteenth year of Ashoka's reign. For it was in this year that he doubled the size of a brick memorial dedicated to a buddha named Konakamana, who lived during an ancient golden age in which the human life span was thirty thousand years. Ashoka knew that thousands of centuries had passed since Konakamana Buddha taught the truth and established a community of monks. Ashoka also knew that Konakamana's truths had been long forgotten and his community had been long defunct. Ashoka does not tell us why he enlarged this memorial, the relic of a long, long dead buddha.

- Over the course of three days in July 1985, Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, broke with tradition. In Madison, Wisconsin, surrounded by a congregation coming from many countries, cultures, and ethnicities, the Dalai Lama taught an esoteric practice for the first time outside of Asia. He introduced his audience to a profound method for transforming themselves into living buddhas. Those members of the audience who would pursue these teachings with unwavering rigor could become a buddha named Kalachakra in this very life, in this very body. Well, almost this body. Actually, Kalachakra Buddha is blue black in color; he possesses four faces and twenty-four arms; he stands trampling on demons while he embraces and unites sexually with a consort. Though the Dalai Lama's teachings were unprecedented in Madison, the size of his American audience paled by comparison with the one hundred thousand people who attended a similar ceremony in Bodh Gaya, India, in 1971. Teachings and rituals associated with Kalachakra Buddha have long held great import for Tibetans. On the one hand, the religion of Kalachakra gives the serious practitioner a rapid means to realize Buddhism's highest ideal, complete and perfect buddhahood. On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhists believe that their presence at the Dalai Lama's ritual performance guarantees them rebirth in Shambala, a secret paradise on earth in which the religion of Kalachakra Buddha is the state religion.
- The Dalai Lama's Kalachakra initiation in Bodh Gaya attracted a multi-



Bodh Gaya, India  
(photo by Richard S. Cohen)

tude. Nearly two and one-half millennia earlier, Bodh Gaya was the site of a singular achievement. For it was in Bodh Gaya, under an enormous Bodhi tree, that a young warrior realized the ultimate truth and became the buddha known as *Shakyamuni*. Buddhists believe that many buddhas have walked the earth over the ages. But when non-Buddhists refer to “the buddha,” they usually mean this man who sat under a tree circa 453 B.C.E. Shakyamuni’s religion had a long history in India, remaining a vital cultural presence for nearly two thousand years. However, by the thirteenth century C.E. Buddhism was in severe decline. Monuments, which the faithful had once erected in Bodh Gaya to celebrate Shakyamuni, were neglected and crumbling. In the sixteenth century the temple built around Shakyamuni’s tree of awakening even came under the administration of Hindu priests. Fast forward to 1891, when Anagarika Dharmapala, the son of a wealthy furniture dealer in Sri Lanka, visited Bodh Gaya. Distressed by the sorry neglect of this most central pilgrimage site, he founded the Maha Bodhi Society with the aim of fostering its restoration. Dharmapala’s motives were missionary as well as devotional. Trained in the church schools of Sri Lanka’s colonial masters, he imagined that a renewed Bodh Gaya would serve as a center for the propagation of Shakyamuni’s teachings. Indeed, these teachings were particularly timely, for, in Dharmapala’s view, Shakyamuni Buddha was a man for the scientific era. He was a mortal, not a god; his doctrines were the products of rational analysis, not divine inspiration; his ethics were supported by reason, not legislated by divinity. Shakyamuni Buddha attained his transformative experience through individual effort, intelligence, and fortitude, and thus achieved something that every other human being could achieve as well.

### *What Is a Buddha?*

Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, Shakyamuni. Each is a buddha, literally one who has awakened. The term “buddha” is an honorific title given to any individual who has thoroughly realized ultimate truth to the highest degree. Although Buddhists universally regard Shakyamuni Buddha as the historical founder of their religious system in the current age, there is no evidence that Buddhists ever deemed Shakyamuni to be unique as a buddha. The rock-cut edicts of Emperor Ashoka provide the earliest extant evidence for Buddhism in India, and as I detailed above, Ashoka patronized a cult dedicated to a buddha other than Shakyamuni. One might say that buddhahood is true only if it is replicable, just as a scientific discovery is accepted only after experimental verification.

Broadly speaking, the buddhas’ perfection has two dimensions: wisdom and compassion. First, the title buddha itself defines buddhahood as a cognitive state. Buddhas possess insight and knowledge the rest of us lack. Thus the Sanskrit term *buddha*, concretely denoting “awakening from a slumber,” is related to metaphorical expressions for mental acuity such as *buddhi*, intelligence, and *bodhi*, enlightenment. As awakened beings, Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, and Shakyamuni possess an omniscient consciousness that utterly surpasses the ken of common humanity; their knowledge is bounded by neither space nor time; potentially they can perceive every facet of every datum — moral, material, emotional, intellectual — always. In short, as buddhas, Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, and Shakyamuni are capable of knowing everything worth knowing about everybody, past, present, and future. But crucially, this is not knowledge for its own sake: it is practical and liberative. The attainment of transcendent awareness enables buddhas to slough off the hindrances of mundane attachment. They extirpate the root causes of suffering. Even when they are *in* the world, they are no longer *of* the world. Considered from the perspective of their wisdom, there is little to distinguish these four buddhas one from the other. Their shared buddhahood makes them embodiments of the timeless truth. Thus, if one were to open a philosophical treatise that examined Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, and Shakyamuni from the perspective of their “Body of Truth,” one would find that body described in the singular: the Truth-Body of the buddhas.

The second dimension of the buddhas’ perfection is compassion. Omniscience benefits a buddha himself, but it also makes him a supremely effective teacher. A buddha’s compassion, the ground from which he interacts with others, is as consummate as his wisdom. When a person sets out on the impossibly arduous path to become a buddha, he does not say, “I want to become a buddha,” but rather, “I want to become a buddha for the sake of living beings.” Buddhist traditions often use the simile of a bird to express these twin perfections. A one-winged bird cannot fly, whereas the twin wings of wisdom and compassion enable a buddha to soar aloft. And so Buddhist traditions consistently emphasize the ongoing and active roles buddhas play in the lives of their adherents. Consider the following vignettes: Amitabha Buddha created Sukhavati, a paradise within which to follow the Buddhist path; Kalachakra Buddha empowered an esoteric and dangerous rite by means of which practitioners can traverse the entire spiritual path in a single lifetime; Shakyamuni Buddha walked the dusty paths of India for forty-five years, teaching by word and deed. Notice also that although every one of these buddhas is revered as a teacher of truths and a creator of means for spiritual realization, the longer vignettes presented at this chapter’s beginning highlighted the activities of their devotees as well: Amitabha *and* Hui-yüan, Kalachakra *and* the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Shakyamuni *and* Dharmapala.

Though equal in wisdom, these individual buddhas can be differentiated through how they are encountered by and are meaningful to human followers. If one opened a philosophical treatise that examined Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, and Shakyamuni from the perspective of the material body by means of which they assist others, one would find differences and distinctions among these buddhas described in minute detail.

### *Shakyamuni the Founder*

For Buddhists, every buddha is *both* the embodiment of a reality beyond time *and* an active participant in time. From the perspective of Western scholarship, however, the belief that Shakyamuni was only one among numerous buddhas cannot be substantiated. Shakyamuni was a historical individual; Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, and every other buddha (there are many!) were not. Granted, established facts about Shakyamuni's life are few: we are not certain when he lived or when he died; we do not know precisely what he taught; we do not really know how people regarded him in his own day. Despite this level of ignorance, however, few, if any, scholars doubt Shakyamuni's historical authenticity.

Another way of saying that Shakyamuni is Buddhism's founder is to say that every Buddhist culture, tradition, school, and society delights in his sacred biography. The birth of Shakyamuni, his abandonment of home and kin to become a mendicant, his spiritual awakening under the Bodhi tree, and his death at age eighty are all common themes in Buddhist lore. By contrast, some Buddhists celebrate Amitabha's accomplishments while others look on his tale as a fantasy. Fewer accept Kalachakra. And though most Buddhists believe in Konakamana's past terrestrial existence, most also ignore him. One way of distinguishing Shakyamuni from these other buddhas is through typology: Amitabha is a "celestial buddha," Kalachakra a "primordial buddha," and Konakamana a "buddha of the past." Some Buddhists consider buddhas of these various types to be more powerful than Shakyamuni, or more accessible to devotees. Nevertheless, though Shakyamuni is not the most important buddha for every community, as Buddhism's founder in the current age he always does have a place.

Despite this universal interest in Shakyamuni's life, there is no Buddhist equivalent to the Christian Gospels, written within fifty to one hundred years of the crucifixion, or even Ibn Ishaq's *Life of the Messenger of God*, composed little more than a century after Muhammad. No single story of this founder was written within the first century or two after he attained complete and final nirvana. Rather, a unified sacred biography evolved slowly over centuries. Particu-

lar discourses Shakyamuni gave, or particular miraculous deeds he is reputed to have performed, or places he frequented on a regular basis provided occasions for the telling of stories about his life. A pilgrim to the town of Gaya, for example, might go to the spot at which Shakyamuni gave the "Fire Sermon" and, while there, recollect the circumstances surrounding that discourse. Another pilgrim, visiting Vulture Peak where he taught the "Perfection of Wisdom," might reflect on how Shakyamuni's life incorporated that perfection. Still another might visit Vaishali, where Shakyamuni was offered a bowl of honey by a monkey, or Shravasti, where he defeated rival teachers in a contest of magical power. Over the course of centuries, local stories associated with these many life-events came together and were synthetically unified into a cohesive sacred biography.

Actually, the distinction to be drawn between Buddhism and Christianity or Judaism is even more radical. For biographical data on their founder, all Christians rely primarily on the four Gospels, and Jews on the Pentateuch. Few scholars of Judaism and Christianity regard the Pentateuch and Gospels as objective chronicles of past events, but many agree on their singular importance for recovering that past. By contrast, there is no one biographical text that all Buddhists accept as valid. Full biographies *were* written, but *many* were written, and not all agree about the facts of Shakyamuni's life or how to interpret those facts. This multiplicity is due in part to the fact that Buddhism was itself evolving at the same time as the evolution of Shakyamuni's legend. During the centuries after Shakyamuni's death, Buddhist communities fell into arguments over issues such as his nature as a buddha, how he became one, and what happened to him after death. The arguments were intimately connected with matters of biography, for Shakyamuni's biography itself was the paradigmatic model through which Buddhist truths were known, understood, and taught. Buddhology and biography cannot be disentangled: communities that disagreed over what it meant for Shakyamuni to be a buddha naturally disagreed over how he lived his life as a buddha; vice versa, variant conceptions of his acts as buddha required variant conceptions of his buddhahood. By reading these many biographies, it is possible to come up with some bona fide facts about his life, but distressingly few. And one must be careful. There are traditional biographies of Shakyamuni that appear to be virtually free of any mythological overlay; these almost read as modern, objective records of a great man's life. Although such nonmythologized representations of Shakyamuni appeal to modern sensibilities, one must keep in mind that they are actually no less ideological than highly miraculous accounts. What appears to be concern for accurate historical reportage in these biographies is a function of their theological conception of buddha, a conception that highlights Shakyamuni's humanity rather than his superhumanity.

Shakyamuni Buddha was born circa 488 B.C.E. with the given name



Shakyamuni buddha

(National Museum, New Delhi; photo by Richard S. Cohen)

Siddhartha (or Sarvarthasiddha) Gotama.<sup>1</sup> Though Siddhartha is often referred to as a “prince,” he was not the son of a king. Rather, the Shakya family into which he was born was a tribal clan that occupied a territory in the Himalayan foothills, near the current Indo-Nepalese border. In Kapilavastu, the clan’s center, Siddhartha’s father was an elder, perhaps even *primus inter pares*. The Shakyas are remembered as a proud and wealthy people. Young Siddhartha

1. Scholars are not certain of Shakyamuni Buddha’s dates. The traditional sources support two chronologies. The long chronology — based on Sri Lankan sources — places Ashoka’s coronation 218 years after Shakyamuni’s nirvana; according to this chronology, the buddha lived circa 566-486 B.C.E. The short chronology — based on Sanskrit and Chinese sources — places Ashoka’s coronation 100 years after Shakyamuni’s nirvana; according to this chronology, the buddha lived circa 488-368 B.C.E. This chapter focuses on Buddhism in India, using Indian sources. Accordingly I use the short chronology. The arguments surrounding this contentious and unresolvable issue can be found in Heinz Bechert, ed., *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991-92).

was raised to a life of pleasure and ease, reveling in his vigor and youth. The traditional story tells that his life was so sheltered that even as a young adult he remained utterly unfamiliar with old age, disease, or death. But at age twenty-nine, Siddhartha finally encountered these woes of human existence. As the story goes, Siddhartha was on a jaunt to a pleasure grove when he saw an elderly man ravaged by time. Siddhartha had never seen an old man before, and was troubled to learn that all humans are subject to age. Dumbfounded by the implications of this encounter, Siddhartha became even more disturbed when, on the next day, he headed out to the pleasure grove only to see a diseased man for the first time, afflicted by dropsy, frail and weak. Yet the inevitabilities of age and disease were overshadowed by the lesson Siddhartha received on his next day’s outing, when he beheld his first funeral procession, learning that all must die. This is not the end of the story, for on the fourth day Siddhartha saw an ascetic monk, who glowed with the peace of one completely at peace with time. Thus at the same moment that Siddhartha came to know the inevitability of suffering, he also came to know that suffering only *seems* inescapable. Inspired by his vision of the renunciant, the prince decided to seek peace for himself, freedom beyond all suffering and change.

Thus Siddhartha abandoned the royal pleasure. His youthful hedonism gave way to six years of zealous asceticism. Again, history here is inextricable from story: Siddhartha’s austerities are said to have been so severe that, according to one account, he ate only one juniper berry and rice grain per day. He became so thin that he could wrap his hand around his spine. This regimen went on for six years, until he realized that extreme physical mortifications were no more likely to lead to permanent peace than the joyful abandon of his youth. He then sought a middle path.

A visitor to India can still visit the spot where Siddhartha’s six years of self-torture began in hope and ended with repudiation. This same visitor can then walk several miles from that lonely place to Bodh Gaya, where, at the age of thirty-five, Prince Siddhartha became Buddha Shakyamuni. (*Shakyamuni* translates as “sage of the Shakya clan.”) From a doctrinal point of view, Siddhartha’s dissatisfaction with the world was predicated on a cosmology founded on the twin concepts of samsara and karma. “Samsara” is a term used to describe the cosmos inhabited by the unawakened. The literal translation, “wandering about,” is a clinical depiction of this world. Living beings wander from birth to death to a new birth in a new body. The cosmos within which we wander consists of five states — divine, human, animal, ghostly, and infernal — and there is no certainty as to which state one will enter upon death. One can be certain only that pleasures are fleeting and pain will be followed by more pain. Siddhartha sought release. He found his way out, first by contemplating the unsatisfactoriness of samsara, and then by elucidating its cause: karma. Lit-

crally “action,” karma is the force that drives beings to wander ceaselessly through samsara. Evil offenses force one toward a rebirth in the hells of cold and heat; good, meritorious deeds force one toward the shining heavens. But even the gods fall from celestial joys, and maybe directly down to a hell!

For six years Siddhartha sought to gain permanent release from the prison of his body by torturing and disciplining that body. He had no lasting peace to show for it. To find his way beyond samsara, he had to discover a path beyond bodily action. His “trick” was to see that karma, at its base, is a function of the mind. Thus, one of the most popular collections of Shakyamuni’s sayings, the *Dharmapada*, begins: “All things originate in mind, are distinguished by mind, are created by mind.”<sup>2</sup> Although the naive view holds that the movements of conscious volition are ineffective if not translated into physical activity, the awakened know that conscious volition itself is the heart of action. The will powers samsara. One is stuck in samsara because one desires; karmic bondage arises from an act of mind as well as from deeds one does, impelled by blind desire. Suffering is very real, but that suffering can be stopped. Siddhartha reasoned that if he could control his will, he could then bring an end to desire. Detached, he could still act in the world, but he would no longer create new karma. Upon his death there would be nothing to force him to wander about ever again. He would attain nirvana beyond the mundane cosmos. Under the tree in Bodh Gaya, Siddhartha discovered the truth that enabled him to will without attachment, to act without creating karma, to become a fully awakened buddha.

The next forty-five years found Shakyamuni wandering the north Indian countryside preaching by word and example. His first sutra (= doctrinal discourse) was spoken to a group of five renunciants who had attended him during his severe ascetic phase and then abandoned him when he sought a new way to liberation. In this discourse, entitled *The Turning of the Wheel of Law*, Shakyamuni taught four principles known to the liberated, the so-called Four Noble Truths: (1) the persistence of suffering, (2) suffering’s root causes, (3) the fact that suffering can be brought to an end, and (4) the practical means for ending suffering once and for all. A medical metaphor is often used to characterize this set of truths. Shakyamuni is the master physician who has (1) recognized the etiology of a disease, known as “existence”; (2) identified the vectors of that disease; (3) demonstrated a cure for the disease; and (4) prescribed a regimen for treatment. Hearing the four truths, this group of disciples also attained liberation from samsara. These five became the first members of Shakyamuni’s *sangha*, the Buddhist monastic order. Many were to follow. Shakyamuni’s life as a buddha centered on this *sangha*, which he cultivated

2. *The Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dharmapada*, ed. N. S. Shukla (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1979), p. 1.

through discourses on doctrine and correct action. He was equally conscientious about developing a cadre of lay disciples, individuals who did not leave their homes to seek final liberation but nevertheless affirmed Buddhist ideal and supported the monks and nuns. Finally at age eighty, Shakyamuni died one of the most exceptional men in history.

### *Shakyamuni and Other Founders*

At first glance Shakyamuni’s biography places him well within the company of the other religious founders discussed in this book. Like Moses, he left his native home and was a stranger in a strange land when he encountered the absolute. Moses saw a burning bush and spoke with God among the Midianites. Siddhartha was far from Kapilavastu when he comprehended the roots of suffering. Like Jesus, Shakyamuni’s realization of the highest humanity has led followers to view him as more than human. Four centuries after Jesus’ death, the Council of Chalcedon declared him to be “actually God and actually man”; five centuries after Shakyamuni, *The Lotus Sutra* declared him to be “ever present and unperishing.” According to this text, Shakyamuni’s death was a sham, an act to spur recalcitrant disciples to action. Like Muhammad, Shakyamuni wrote nothing himself; his words were collected and remembered by devoted followers. But whereas the Qur’an is held to have been compiled in an unalterable form in Arabic about twenty years after the Prophet’s death, the Buddhist canon remained in a state of flux for a millennium. And by contrast with Uthman’s edict to burn every leaf and codex that differed from the official Qur’an, Shakyamuni is remembered as authorizing the translation of his words into local languages. Not only that, new sutras were also composed throughout this period, accepted by some as Shakyamuni Buddha’s own words and rejected by others as forgeries. Like Confucius, Shakyamuni played the role of political adviser. But whereas Confucius wandered from state to state actively seeking a ministerial position through which to effect his social vision, Shakyamuni renounced his own royal power in favor of a homeless life.

Despite these parallels, a superficially comparative approach to Shakyamuni’s life would destroy any hope of exploring Buddhism from a perspective sensitive to traditional Buddhist concerns about this religious founder. For there is one fundamental difference between Buddha and the other figures discussed in this book. Consider Jesus. After his baptism on the river’s edge, Jesus heard a voice from heaven: “You are my favored son — I fully approve of you” (Mark 1:11).<sup>3</sup> Je-

3. Robert W. Funk et al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 39.

sus alone heard this voice. More important, only Jesus could ever have been addressed by this voice saying *these* words. Christianity is predicated on the singularity of Jesus, God's only Son. His life ending in crucifixion is a unique turning point for the cosmic order, never to be repeated. This tenet is articulated in the popular verse, John 3:16: "This is how God loved the world: God gave up an only son, so that everybody who believes in him will not be lost but have real life."<sup>4</sup>

One will never find Shakyamuni making such a claim for his own personal life and death. Indeed, numerous Buddhist scriptures reject such claims. One excellent example is the *Discourse on Serene Faith*, in which Shariputra, a disciple renowned for his insight, proclaims Shakyamuni's preeminent uniqueness: "It is clear to me, Lord, that there never has been, never will be and is not now an ascetic or Brahmin who is better or more enlightened than the Lord."<sup>5</sup> Shariputra is correct in one sense, for other buddhas are *just as* enlightened as Shakyamuni, neither more nor less. Still, far from soaking in the praise, Shakyamuni mockingly challenges Shariputra's shortsighted faith that discounts buddhas of past and future altogether.

And Shakyamuni does not differ from only Jesus in this regard. The personally unique status of Muhammad and Moses is crucial to the traditions they are claimed to have founded. As the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad is a singular figure (Qur'an 33:40). Muslims accept Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as prophets, but hold that only Muhammad received Allah's revelation in its most perfect and complete formulation. After Muhammad there can be no need for another prophet; to question his status as the last prophet is to question Allah's own perfection. Similarly, Moses is unique, his exceptional role for Judaism being summed up in the Torah's final verses: "And there has not arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10).

One might have wondered why, at this chapter's beginning, I introduced Shakyamuni Buddha in the company of Amitabha, Konakamana, and Kalachakra. Why emphasize commonalities among these buddhas rather than the obvious stark difference? Indeed, the grand theme guiding *The Rivers of Paradise* is that Buddhism — alongside Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, and Christianity — is a great personality religion, one that originated in, and centers around, the person, life, and experience of a single individual, i.e., Shakyamuni Buddha. This sounds like a very simple, straightforward project to implement, especially given that other buddhas, Amitabha et al., are not founders on this model. But now we see that to consider what a buddha is *for Buddhists*, who Shakyamuni is as a founder *for Buddhists*, is neither so simple nor

4. Funk et al., p. 408.

5. Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 417.

straightforward. A nuanced account of Shakyamuni as founder must emphasize his relationship with other buddhas, because for Buddhists, Shakyamuni's *nonuniqueness as buddha* is central to his status as founder. This is why I first presented Shakyamuni in the company of Amitabha, Konakamana, and Kalachakra. Shakyamuni is Buddhism's founder. Perhaps for a Western scholar seeking either Buddhism's origins or an essential commonality between Buddhism and other world religions, Shakyamuni's historical singularity as a founder may be the crucial fact. But if one truly seeks to foster global understanding through sensitivity to the differences among religions, then one must acknowledge that Shakyamuni's function as founder has not given him a singular status for Buddhists, who ironically use his teachings as a means for seeking, worshiping, emulating, and encountering *other* buddhas. Rather than attempting to conform Shakyamuni to a category that is not appropriate for him, it will be much more interesting and valuable to see how Shakyamuni is *not* a religious founder on the model of Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad.

Further, this point is not just apropos to the buddha; it holds for Buddhism as well. Historically Buddhism gained prominence in India as a missionary religion dedicated to fostering the happiness of the many through the dissemination of particular rituals and doctrines. Centuries after Shakyamuni's death, Buddhist monks and lay devotees began to influence the religious lives of peoples we now call the Thai, Burmese, Sri Lankans, Japanese, Laotians, Vietnamese, Mongolians, Chinese, Nepalese, Tibetans, Cambodians, Bhutanese (though they went by other names at the time). As diverse societies came to hear of the buddhas, to consider their teachings, to sample their rituals, Buddhist ideals, doctrines, and practices adapted to disparate social structures and cultural patterns. Just as Shakyamuni Buddha cannot be disengaged from the many buddhas, so what we call Buddhism, capital B, is in fact an array of many buddhisms, inextricably embedded within distinct locales. There ever only have been buddhisms, small b. Even in Shakyamuni's day, sociocultural factors played an important role in the formulation of doctrine, practice, and community. Shakyamuni's own Buddhism was ever just one buddhism.

### Why?

This introduction has sought to sketch an intellectual landscape within which Shakyamuni Buddha can be understood as a religious founder. We have seen that buddhas are perfected in terms of cognitive development and social activity, wisdom and compassion. From the point of view of wisdom, buddhas are ideal types or generic figures who embody the universal Truth; the historical dimension of their lives is beside the point. Yet, although all buddhas are equal in

their wisdom, they differ through their compassionate deeds. Thus Shakyamuni is the founder, and his acts as founder circumscribe his accomplishments as a buddha. But from the Buddhist point of view, status as the terrestrial founder of a religious order is only one thing a buddha might do, and not the most illustrious or effective by a long shot. Shakyamuni's historical acts as religious founder define him, but that role has to be placed within a much broader context: the infinite compassionate activities of all buddhas. This is the principle that permits Amitabha, Konakamana, Kalachakra, and Shakyamuni all to be buddhas and yet to play such different and unique roles within Buddhist traditions.

At this point you must be wondering why I am so concerned to problematize and contextualize Shakyamuni's historical role as Buddhism's founder. What does it benefit us to highlight the tension between a modern "scientific" approach to Shakyamuni as buddha and a traditional Buddhist approach? My reason for taking so much time to highlight these distinctions has much to do with the broader program of *The Rivers of Paradise*. Centuries ago Buddhism entered Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, and so on. Now, at the beginning of the third millennium of the common era, the buddhas are becoming meaningful to a new community of interest, albeit not as the founders of a path to devotion, faith, or salvation. This new community is Western academia. Yet another new buddhism is forming within academia's confines, adapting to a society that demands that one publish or perish and a culture whose highest value is the careful manipulation of data. Given this context, although the discussions of rituals, stories, doctrines, texts, communities, and institutions that follow are meant to introduce readers to Buddhism, that is not all they actually do. These discussions do not merely represent or reiterate data. They are creative. They play a role in the dynamic processes of creating new meanings for a new buddha. Thus, in keeping with this volume's broader aims, I hope to enable the reader to enter into a dialogue with Buddhism, allowing the religion's diverse concerns, categories, texts, and institutions to guide the conversation. My aim is to make Buddhism meaningful to this new community of interest by revealing what some Buddhists themselves have found meaningful about Shakyamuni Buddha as the founder of their religion.

If we are not self-conscious about prior assumptions we may bring to a study of Buddhism's founder and how our assumptions may differ from those traditionally held, we have no defense if accused of intellectual imperialism or epistemic violence. Thus the remainder of this introduction will explore this tension in three steps. First, we need to consider the categories through which Western scholars commonly analyze religious founders. In this regard the sociological writings of Max Weber are of singular importance. The second step is practical. Does the Weberian typology provide an adequate basis for under-

standing Shakyamuni Buddha? What does Weberian typology hide or obscure? Third, how can we represent Shakyamuni Buddha in a way that fulfills scholarly needs for historical accuracy and yet remains sensitive to traditional Buddhist understandings? Once this step is reached, we will be able to explore the doctrines, practices, and social formations associated with Shakyamuni as founder.

### *The Weberian Angle*

Within the study of religious authority, Max Weber holds a singular position. Born in Thuringia in 1864, this remarkable son of a wealthy industrialist can be considered the father of the sociological study of religion. Sociology, for Weber, was a scientific attempt to understand and interpret "social action," i.e., how people act in relation to other people as well as the meanings they attribute to their actions. Weber's sociological study of religion sought to interpret religion's effect on people's lives, in terms of both what people do and why they do it. Given this orientation, Weber focused on individual motivation rather than group dynamics. That is to say, his sociology sought empathetically to grasp how individuals consider their actions meaningful. He did not view people as mere functions within a social process, swept along by a tide outside their control.

This emphasis on individual motivation created a problem, however, for Weber was heir to two intellectual currents that coursed during the nineteenth century. The first was *Geisteswissenschaften*, the cultural sciences, which sought to understand the meaningfulness of subjective human action. The second was positivism. Chiefly associated with the physical sciences, positivism seeks knowledge from empirical facts, independent of human subjectivity. Positivist sociology held that all human behavior can be explained through generalized universal laws, which are "value-free." Consider, for example, a glass of water. You may subjectively judge the water in this glass to be "hot" or "cold." Such a value judgment is notoriously unstable: if you move your hand from 100-degree into 90-degree water, the second glass feels cool, but a movement from 80 degrees to 90 degrees warms the hand. Positivism sought to avoid such subjective value judgments. Rather than speak of "hot" and "cold," the positivist views temperature as the statistical average of molecular movement and explains the experience of changing heat as a subjective manifestation of the second law of thermodynamics, i.e., entropy within a system will increase to the maximum limit. The experience of "cooling" or "warming" is merely an epiphenomenon of heat transfer toward greater systemic entropy: values attributed to the system have no bearing whatsoever on the physical processes at work within the system.



One can readily see the reason for conflict between the approach to sociology as a cultural science, which explained action through reference to individual experience and meaning, and positivist sociology, which sought generalizable laws for human activity apart from any individual subject. Weber sought to reconcile these two, to draw generalizable laws from the study of human subjectivity. In order to accomplish this, he developed a theory of the "ideal type," the social equivalent of "temperature." A physicist will not attempt to describe the individual movement of every particular water molecule in the glass: temperature is a collective phenomenon best explained in terms of statistical analysis. It would be impossible to determine a "temperature" if there were no individual molecules in motion, but to read a "temperature," that physicist must generalize beyond the level of individual molecules. Similarly, an "ideal type" is an abstract model. An ideal type does not attempt to account for the particular social actions of any real, specific individual person. Rather an ideal type elucidates general classes of human activity, providing a norm by which a scholar can understand and analyze subjective behavioral realities. In this way Weber sought to construct valid causal hypotheses vis-à-vis human activity while circumventing the hermeneutic difficulties that arise within the study of subjective meaning.

The use of typology is not in itself problematic. In fact, I have already presented Shakyamuni Buddha as something of an ideal type. For Buddhists, the fine particularities of Shakyamuni's life are less important than his fulfillment of the generalized duties of a buddha. From a Buddhist perspective, Shakyamuni realizes the type *buddha*. Weber, too, treated Shakyamuni as participating in an ideal type, but for Weber Shakyamuni was a *prophet*. Here is the point at which conflict arises. As a Weberian prophet, Shakyamuni can be individually compared or contrasted with other prophets, such as Moses and Jesus. We gain a greater ability to generalize across cultures through the Weberian type. Perhaps we even gain the ability to specify general laws about the foundation and formation of religions. But the price we pay is the reduction of cultural specificity and native context. Is the gain worth the loss? The only way to answer this is to see what it would mean for Shakyamuni to be of the ideal-type prophet.

### *Shakyamuni as Prophet*

Weber defines the prophet as "a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment."<sup>6</sup>

6. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964 [1922]), p. 46.

This definition seems straightforward enough. We can paraphrase Weber: a prophet is somebody who, possessing great personal authority without having any evident preestablished basis for that authority beyond himself, takes it upon himself to bring truth to the world. According to traditional accounts, Shakyamuni realized the absolute only after he had tried and rejected several other spiritual paths available to him in fifth century B.C.E. India. Beneath the tree of awakening, this man developed a new meditative technique, directly perceived a "new" truth, changed his mode of being in the world, and gained a personal power that lay at the heart of his authority as teacher and leader of a monastic order. Shakyamuni possessed authority as a prophet, but it was an authority born of internal experience, not external institution. Similarly, the Christian Gospels record that Jesus' mission began after a voice from heaven called to him alone: "You are my favored son — I fully approve of you." No other person heard this divine pronouncement, but it was only after this experience that Jesus went out as a prophet among the people. Neither Jesus nor buddha had institutional, economic, or political underpinnings for their authority: their power came solely from themselves. In both cases personal power was also inextricably linked to a personal experience of the absolute. Indeed, this link between experience, religious meaning, and authority is central. For Weber, the "hallmark of prophecy" is that "personal revelation" is the basis of salvific authority.<sup>7</sup>

It certainly is possible to plug Shakyamuni into the Weberian ideal type of the prophet and to make comparisons based on that analysis. Insofar as Weberian analysis strives toward positivist truth, its analyses begin from "givens," data accepted by all parties as fact. Weber's givens, presupposed to have a transcultural, transhistorical reality, are *individuality* and *experience*. Thus, to treat Shakyamuni as a prophet, a scholar must single him out as "purely individual" and empathetically comprehend his "experience." Again, this can be done. But one wonders: What is the ideological basis for Weber's emphasis on individuality and experience? Can it be disentangled from the legacy of a sixteenth-century fervor for "justification by faith" that sought holiness outside the established ecclesiastical orders? How much does it rely on the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who almost single-handedly invented the concept of "religious experience" in the late eighteenth century? In short, to what extent is Weber's ideal type a specifically Protestant ideal? What would be at stake if one were to conform the buddha to this type? It "feels" far more ideologically charged to categorize Jesus as a "buddha" than to categorize Shakyamuni as a "prophet." But is that feeling justified? Is the ideal-type "prophet" as value-free as Weber may have believed? Though

7. Weber, p. 54.

pertinent, I will put these questions aside in favor of one other, far more crucial question. Weber defines the “prophet” in terms of individuality and experience. Have Buddhists themselves traditionally posited individuality and experience as fundamental categories? Indeed, the potential for conflict can be phrased in even stronger terms. What if Buddhism actively problematizes, mistrusts, or even teaches the invalidity of notions such as individuality and experience?

In fact, Buddhists have not traditionally treated their buddhas as individuals and have always been suspicious of experience. We have already found that Shakyamuni differs from other figures Weber calls prophets in that he is not viewed by Buddhists as purely individual or absolutely unique. There is only one Seal of the Prophets; there are many buddhas. Weber is conscious that a conflict such as this could arise, and preemptively asserts that “no radical distinction will be drawn between a ‘renewer of religion’ who preaches an older revelation and a ‘founder of religion’ who claims to bring completely new deliverances. The two types merge into one another.”<sup>8</sup> Here Weber would have us ignore one index by which Shakyamuni can be differentiated from Moses, Muhammad, and Jesus. Or more to the point, Weber would tell his readers to ignore the Buddhists’ own conceptualization of buddhahood. Buddhists believe that Konakamana (remember, the buddha whose monument Ashoka enlarged) established Buddhism when humans’ life span was thirty thousand years, that in the intervening myriad centuries this religion was lost, only to be “rediscovered” by Shakyamuni circa 453 B.C.E. Moreover, Konakamana was not the only buddha to precede Shakyamuni on earth as a founder; others came before Konakamana and still more will follow Shakyamuni. The buddhas are countless. But according to Weber, this doctrine should have no bearing on our comprehension of the buddha as a religious founder. Something might be gained by following this scholarly strategy, but something might also be lost.

Why does Weber seem to require us to so transgress actual Buddhist representations of the buddhas? Recall that Weber’s sociological approach to religion attempts to reconcile a meaning-based understanding of religious action with a positivist search for universal truths. Thus Weber’s ideal types are necessarily abstract and ahistorical, detached from the messy details that clutter up the lives of religious communities on the ground. He is less concerned with how Buddhists themselves have actually approached Shakyamuni than with aspects of buddhahood that are most generalizable *beyond* Buddhism. Thus Weber sets up a dichotomy. On the one hand is the “pure individual,” solid, definite, singular. On the other hand are qualities or activities abstracted from that individual; these are the human truths. This equation is placed in jeopardy by

8. Weber, p. 46.

Buddhism’s belief in multiple buddhas: if there is no individual, there can be no abstract truths of religious behavior.

Indeed, how might Shakyamuni be judged a pure individual? For Jesus et al. the criteria are clear: the traditions that look upon them as founders emphasize their uniqueness. But a scholar seeking Shakyamuni’s individuality cannot disentangle even the prosaic details of his life and career on earth from his role as a religious type. Let us take, for example, the seeming “fact” that Shakyamuni was eighty when he died. We cannot assume that the general understandings of temporal passage, life span, and death within which a Buddhist receives this information are the same as that within which you read it now. In fact, Buddhists have traditionally viewed human history as going back millions of years. Terrestrial time is a process of moral and spiritual decline. As human values and goodness diminish over the course of centuries, so the life span of human beings shortens. Thus, many mythological millennia ago, at the time of Konakamana Buddha, humans lived thirty thousand years. Even long before Konakamana was Vipashyin Buddha, when humans lived eighty thousand years. Now, at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, the life span is a mere one hundred years. So why did Shakyamuni not remain on earth for this full century? The scholastics tell us that buddhas need live out only three-quarters of their ideal span. Did Shakyamuni really live for eighty years? Is the scholastic doctrine a response to this *fact*? Or is the age of eighty itself attributed to Shakyamuni in accord with a Buddhist (or generally Indic) system of numerological values? We do not know; we cannot know. Shakyamuni’s death after eighty years may be as much a matter of scholastic norms as it is of human mortality.

This example of Shakyamuni’s life span can be multiplied. Buddhist literature is replete with instances in which Shakyamuni is about to do something, but before acting he stops and wonders, “Where did buddhas in the past perform this deed?” or “What did buddhas in the past do in this instance?” These clichés are telling indeed, for they starkly demonstrate that from a Buddhist point of view no aspect of Shakyamuni’s life was purely individual; his actions, teachings, associations, accomplishments were all predetermined by the fact that he was a buddha. Traditional biographies often represent the details of his life as determined by his participation in an ideal type. Every buddha who comes to earth and is born in India shares a life. For instance, every one of their mothers dies seven days after giving birth; every one awakens under a tree in Bodh Gaya, albeit the type of tree differs from buddha to buddha; every one teaches the same first sermon in the same place. To signal this compulsion of terrestrial buddhas’ lives to conform to a single, common, paradigmatic ideal, Sanskrit literature uses a particular discourse marker: *dharmatā*. When something is *dharmata*, it is natural, regular, in the order of things. Insofar as the

events in buddhas' lives are *dharmata*, we might say that the very nature of the world requires buddhas to act just as they do. A buddha who does not live an archetypal buddha's life is no buddha at all. (Recall that there are different buddha subtypes. Buddhas such as Amitabha and Kalachakra are not terrestrial, and therefore not required to conform to this pattern.)

If Buddhists do not valorize terrestrial buddhas as pure individuals, they are even more skeptical when it comes to experience. Weber understands experience to be self-evident and inexpressibly personal. His attempts to "understand" others across time and space, as well as his attempts to discover positivist truths about social action, suggest that he took a realist's view: sense experience provides valid information about reality. By contrast, Buddhism equates the naive acceptance of sense experience with ignorance; at the root of desire is a perverse equation between personal experience of the world and reality. Naive positivism is ignorance. Shakyamuni became liberated when he discovered that karma leading to rebirth is created by the will acting upon faulty understanding of the world's nature. Things are *not* really as they appear; liberation can occur only after one has unlearned habitual modes of experience. In fact, these reservations about gross experience developed over the centuries into a thoroughgoing skepticism about all experience. In the most arcane articulation, a buddha's wisdom, what he "experienced" under the tree, what gave him the charisma to be a Weberian prophet, is said to be *the creative nonexperiencing of no experience*. Thus for the Buddhists of Tibet, for instance, "the relation between . . . enlightenment and experience is not at all clear," in the words of Janet Gyatso.<sup>9</sup>

I have already suggested that biography is driven by typology: Shakyamuni the historical founder can never be separated from Shakyamuni the trans-historical exemplum. And so, this skepticism vis-à-vis sense experience has also found its way into traditional discussions of Shakyamuni the founder. One particularly graphic example is found in a sutra aptly named *On the Buddha's Secrets*. As is the case with other texts I have cited, this text is attributed to Shakyamuni, but most certainly was composed centuries after his death. This sutra's unknown author has Shakyamuni reveal a profound secret about himself from the perspective of perfect wisdom. The text claims that Shakyamuni never directly taught anything to anybody. From the hour of his awakening until the moment of his death, Buddhism's founder never spoke, never uttered a single syllable. Rather, Shakyamuni spent these decades under his tree suffused in awakening's bliss. According to this presentation of the buddha's secrets, whatever sermons and discourses unawakened folk believed they heard from Shakyamuni's lips were actually creations of their own ignorant minds. The fact that these imaginings came

across as doctrinal and moral truths can be attributed to the fact that they reflect Shakyamuni's silent perfection. In short, once one understands the buddha's secret, one knows that he never actively participated in the world and never actively founded anything. The religion that counts Shakyamuni as its founder was, in actuality, created through the mistaken perceptions of unawakened but faithful individuals who merely imagined that the buddha was teaching them.<sup>10</sup> The buddha is ever only what others make of him.

Let me emphasize that the conceptualization of Shakyamuni in the *On the Buddha's Secrets* is not common to all Buddhists. In fact, there is virtually no doctrine of any sophistication on which all Buddhists agree. Buddhism has no central church, no single leader, no single canon of scriptures. This is one reason why we must be reluctant to apply the Weberian ideal type of the prophet to Shakyamuni. The buddha we can know is only what his followers have made of him, which has been radically multiple, not purely individual. Weber, too, would make something of Shakyamuni. Seeking universal truths about human action, Weber needs a pure individual. To find one, he must re-create the buddha as he might have been before tradition mythologized him: a charismatic teacher of truth. But this is certainly a new buddha, and one that is no less made up than the others. Remember, we know of Shakyamuni's life from synthetic redactions of localized lore separated by centuries from Shakyamuni himself. To imagine that one can strip away two and one-half millennia of Buddhist tradition to reveal the pure individual who stands at the head of every tradition is both historically improbable and theoretically naive. This scholarly tactic requires one to devalue the plurality of traditions and their often divergent, often contentious claims to authority. And again one wonders, what unstated ideological and theological tendencies would make such a project seem natural and appropriate? Why does Weber think he can inquire about the buddha without also necessarily asking, "buddha for whom?"

### *An Alternative Approach to the Buddha*

How do we resolve this conflict between history and theology so that we can move forward to a discussion of buddha as founder? History, as I use the term, is the attempt to comprehend human phenomena within the specificity of their sociocultural, geographic, and temporal contexts; theology, by con-

9. Janet Gyatso, "Healing Burns with Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (March 1999): 113.

10. This is an interpretive paraphrase of citations in *Madhyamakāśāstra of Nāgārjuna with the Commentary: Prasannapadā by Candrakīrti*, ed. P. L. Vaidya and S. Tripathi (Darbhanga, India: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1987), pp. 265-66.

trast, situates social phenomena within the context of an essential, unchanging absolute or paradigm. Buddhist conceptions of the buddha and the Weberian conception of the prophet are both "theological." The buddha and the prophet function as ideal types precisely because they are constructed in such a way as to hush the ambient noise that surrounds real human activity. From the theological perspective, both typologies highlight essential characteristics, enabling one to perceive deep, universal truths. From the historian's perspective, by contrast, they create mere caricatures of a human being. Good scholarship in the study of religion is properly historical. If universal truths are to be found, they will be reached at the end of the scholar's investigation, not at the beginning; theological essences cannot provide a starting point for historical studies of religion. A historian's interest in such abstractions, rather, is confined to the consideration of how they give meaning to particular peoples in specific localized contexts. Thus the historian contextualizes norms that theologians designate as context-free, and historicizes norms that theologians set beyond the confines of history.

Looking at both Weber and Buddhism, we find theology. But which one enables history? On the one hand, there is the Weberian "prophet": an individual whose experience of the ultimate gives him the personal power and authority, charisma, to reject tradition and set out a compelling new path to salvation. On the other hand, the Buddhist "buddha" stands beyond all individuality, for perfection is perfection. All buddhas are equally wise, all equally compassionate. Not only is individuality impossible, it is undesirable, for individuality represents deviation from the perfected norm.

On the face of it, Weber's typology appears the more historical. Weber points us in the direction of somebody who happened to be born, to have a transformative experience, to teach and establish an organization, and then to die. These are commonplace events, able to be comprehended (if not performed) by almost anybody. Traditional Buddhist representations, by contrast, place Shakyamuni beyond all the happenstances of history: he is superhuman perfection. Nevertheless, the Buddhist view of Shakyamuni as founder allows for the better historical representation of Buddhism as a religion. This is because Weber constructs his ideal type by abstracting Shakyamuni from the processes of history and segregating him from all traditional communities. The lepidopterist comes to mind: a collector of beauty who must pin his beloved butterflies through the heart in order to closely observe their morphologies. But the historian's ideal of comprehending human phenomena within localized contexts cannot be realized if we approach Shakyamuni isolated from specific communities of interest. The so-called "search for the historical buddha," which necessarily stands at the beginning of Weber's study, reveals more about the sources of our sources than about Shakyamuni himself. But there exists a vast body of data, covering more

than two millennia and all the world, which reveals how actual Buddhist communities have looked upon Shakyamuni as their founder.

### *Shakyamuni as Founder: The Ten Deeds a Buddha Must Perform Before Entering Nirvana*

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced Shakyamuni in the company of his peers, plunging the reader into the sea of concentrated meanings and multiple values within which the term "buddha" floats. We saw that the multiplicity of buddhas inspires typological analysis at one level, while it invalidates all particularist typologies at another. Still, the encounter with Weber made clear that although every typology may be violable, we must nevertheless choose one. Not to choose at all is itself a distinctly theological choice. What matters most are the criteria upon which we choose. And so, in the remainder of this chapter I intend to represent Shakyamuni as founder, to show how Buddhism originated in, and centers around, Shakyamuni's person, life, and experience. But I will take my notions of origination, of personhood, of life, and of experience from Buddhists themselves.

As a buddha, Shakyamuni is neither "celestial" like Amitabha nor "primordial" like Kalachakra. Rather, like (the mythological) Konakamana before him, Shakyamuni is a "terrestrial buddha," a "historical buddha." He is a founder, and this status carries an existential burden. For as we have seen, Buddhists believe the lives of all terrestrial buddhas conform to a single predetermined pattern. Indeed, the earliest extant sacred biography associated with Shakyamuni, *The Great Story (Mahāvadāna Sūtra)*, actually recounts the life of another buddha altogether, named Vipashyin, who awakened when the human life span was eighty thousand years. This text presents Vipashyin's life as a model for that of Shakyamuni (and five other buddhas), not Shakyamuni's life as a model for Vipashyin.

To consider Shakyamuni as Buddhism's founder is to take seriously the fact that every living Buddhist tradition delights in his legend. *The Great Story* presents a pattern for the buddhas' sacred biography, but it was left to later scholastic authors to systematize that pattern. Buddhist traditions can be distinguished by how they particularize the buddhas' life as a set of *dharmata* (cosmically necessary) events. There are several such lists. The Theravada tradition of modern Sri Lanka, for instance, specifies thirty deeds in common for all buddhas; Tibetans, by contrast, homologize all terrestrial buddhas through twelve deeds. The Mulasarvastivada tradition, a sect that had great prominence in classical India, stipulates ten activities that all buddhas must accomplish before they can be said to have done their work as buddhas on earth. These lists of shared activities give us the best possible point of entry into an examination of

Shakyamuni as founder, because they reveal in detail what particular historical Buddhist communities considered a buddha's essential accomplishments as a participant in human society. These lists disclose, without ambiguity, how Buddhists looked upon Shakyamuni as their religion's founder, and why he was valued as such. The question of whether Shakyamuni "actually" performed any of the acts itemized on these lists is not raised by this study.

Buddhism has no central church, no single leader, no single canon of scriptures. Accordingly, although lists are common, and the logic underlying them universal, every particular list of shared deeds is somewhat idiosyncratic. My basis for choosing one list over the others is pragmatic. Which list enables the most effective introduction to Buddhism for this volume, *The Rivers of Paradise?* The Mulasarvastivada sect's ten acts. These ten may have been systematized as few as three hundred years after Shakyamuni's death, or as many as one thousand years. One cannot say. Moreover, the Mulasarvastivada list is probably not the oldest, nor has it been the most influential; but since no other scheme is significantly older or more universal, these caveats hardly matter. These ten are to be preferred over all the others because they are the most explicit about presenting the buddha as a religious founder. This list of ten is recorded in several works of Mulasarvastivada literature. Here I paraphrase the Sanskrit *Divine Stories*, which recounts episodes from the life of Shakyamuni and his followers.

It is the rule (*dharmata*) that living, breathing buddhas have ten essential duties. A buddha will not attain nirvana until:

- standing on the shore of Lake Anavatapta, he and his disciples recount rewards and punishments resulting from actions they performed in previous lives;
- he trains everybody he is able to train;
- he lives out at least three-quarters of a full life span;
- he establishes his parents in the Dharma;
- he delineates a congregational boundary;
- he displays a great miracle in the town of Shravasti;
- he shows himself descending from the heavens in the town of Samkashya;
- he appoints two chief disciples;
- he inspires another member of his retinue to aspire for the unexcelled, complete and perfect awakening of a buddha; and
- he predicts that somebody within his retinue will become a buddha in the future.<sup>11</sup>

11. *The Divyāvadāna*, ed. E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1987 [1886]), p. 150.

Note the logic. Final and perfect nirvana is absolute freedom from samsara, the abhorred domain of suffering, old age, disease, death, and rebirth. A buddha seeks nirvana as his ultimate aim. In order to gain this freedom, he must necessarily develop liberative wisdom: insight into the true nature of himself and his desires. This insight enables the awakened buddha to extirpate the roots of ignorance that have kept him circling in samsara and allows him never again to become entangled in karma's bonds. Once somebody has this insight, there would seem no reason for him to ever eat, defecate, stand, walk, or talk again. Yet the *Divine Stories'* author tells us that a buddha who has gained perfect wisdom has not done all he has to do. Insight is not enough. A buddha *cannot* realize nirvana until he accomplishes his role as a religious founder in full. A buddha must *necessarily* participate in social activities; he must predict, inspire, train, delineate and appoint, show, recount, and display. The ten acts named here are the deeds whereby this particular Buddhist tradition knew Shakyamuni to be its charismatic founder. More generally, these ten deeds point to Shakyamuni as a teacher, administrator, and wonder-worker, as a member of a family and member of a "church." In setting Shakyamuni apart as superhuman, these ten enable us to see him as very human indeed. In the pages that follow, I will take each of these ten deeds as the basis for an exploration of some aspect of Buddhist history, community, practice, or doctrine. Each of these ten essential duties is a highly compressed expression of an issue that has motivated and inspired Buddhists over the ages. By unpacking these events within a broad framework, we can come to generalize about the unique concerns and processes dynamically expressed in Buddhist history.

### Act 1: Living Beings and the World in Which They Live

It is *dharmata* that a living, breathing buddha will not attain nirvana until, standing on the shore of Lake Anavatapta, he and his disciples recount rewards and punishments resulting from actions they performed in previous lives.

Several weeks after Shakyamuni awakened, he sought his first disciples. Using divine vision, he saw that his own former teachers had died but that the five ascetics who had accompanied him during his exquisite bouts of self-denial were living near the village of Sarnath, 150 miles to the west. Shakyamuni traveled the long road. Far from being glad to see their old friend, however, these five, when they spied Shakyamuni at a distance, decided to snub him. In his ascetic phase Siddhartha had been a hero to the five. But once he gave up asceticism, having recognized that it was not the path to liberation, the Shakya became a back-

slider in their eyes, a spiritual weakling who did not deserve even common courtesies. Nevertheless, as Shakyamuni approached, his personal charisma was inescapable. Forgetting their hasty compact, one of the five offered the buddha a seat, one offered him water, and a third inquired about his health. Soon Shakyamuni was returning their hospitality through the gift of his first teaching, *Turning the Wheel of Law (Dharmacakrapravartana Sūtra)*. We will come to the content of this sutra later. For now suffice it to say, these five “got it.” They realized the truth by which one becomes free from the poisons that contaminate samsaric existence: hatred, desire, and ignorance. Recall that Buddhists consider the number of buddhas to be potentially infinite because the Dharma is universal, impersonal, and accessible to all, albeit with great difficulty. However, mere realization of liberative truth does not create a *complete and perfect buddha*; though liberated, these five were not buddhas. Rather, Buddhism calls them *arhats*, literally “worthies.” Like a buddha, an arhat has entirely freed himself from samsara’s afflictions. But status as an arhat falls short of buddhahood for two reasons. First, an arhat’s insight is shallower than that of a buddha; his knowledge is less broad. Second, a mere arhat does not maximize his worth as a teacher or storehouse of spiritual merit. A buddha is completely wise and completely compassionate. An arhat, by contrast, need only be wise and compassionate enough to effect his escape from samsara. The conversion of these five and their attainment of arhatship mark the beginning of Shakyamuni’s career as a teacher. Traditional biographies remember him as swiftly swelling the ranks of arhats — fifty here, one hundred there — until the congregation of arhats numbered more than one thousand.

Years later Shakyamuni recollected that it was incumbent upon him, as a buddha, to travel with a group of 500 arhats to the shores of Lake Anavatapta. He could not attain complete and final nirvana until this deed was done. It was no picnic! Lake Anavatapta (lit. “not well heated”) is located high in the Himalaya’s northernmost reaches, on the far side from India. Given that these worthies were beyond desire, they did not complain about the cold. And besides, though frigid, Anavatapta is an especially beautiful spot for an arhat summit: its waters, filled with golden jewel-encrusted lotuses the size of chariot wheels, are the source of India’s great rivers, including the Ganges. But don’t book *your* ticket too soon, for the only agency that can fly you to Anavatapta is magic. This congress of 500 arhats by the lake was exclusive indeed.

The meeting at Lake Anavatapta is not counted as essential to Shakyamuni’s role as buddha because of the stark beauty it evokes: yellow-red robes in somber silhouette against a background of snowy peaks. Rather, this event is privileged because its paradoxes betoken vast spiritual power. Anavatapta’s far shores are virtually unattainable, yet 500 men stood there and told stories. These 500 were Shakyamuni’s contemporaries, yet they vividly recounted de-

tails from their past lives. As arhats, they had sought and attained liberation from the effects of worldly acts, yet their stories lionize the effects of worldly acts. In fact, as the Mulasarvastivadin list of ten deeds has it, the gathering of arhats on Anavatapta’s shores was a celebration of karma’s workings, an opportunity for these arhats to explicitly tie their current attainments to actions performed by bodies long dead. The meeting on Lake Anavatapta’s shore illustrates that the seemingly most unattainable goals can be attained; the seemingly impossible has already been realized by others whose own progress started in the simplest of acts. Thus, within this story of Shakyamuni’s life we hear other stories:

Shariputra, one of Shakyamuni’s two chief disciples, tells that he was fortunate enough to come into contact with the buddha, to become an arhat, because in a previous life he paid obeisance to other holy men. The good karma produced through his acts of reverence and devotion to these past worthies gave him the merit necessary to be in the right place at the right time when a full and perfect buddha was born.

Uruvilvakashyapa, an early convert, tells of a previous life in which he came upon a stupa, a burial mound, containing the remains of an ancient buddha named Kashyapa. This memorial had fallen into disrepair, but Uruvilvakashyapa rebuilt it (possibly providing a model for Emperor Ashoka, who enlarged the stupa of Konakamana Buddha). As a result of this simple ritual act, Uruvilvakashyapa enjoyed a divine rebirth for many millennia. When he returned to the earth as a human being, he was born into a prominent and wealthy family. Uruvilvakashyapa credits to this devotional act to Kashyapa’s stupa his ability to become a monk in Shakyamuni’s community and a perfected arhat.

The worthy Shaivali tells how he constructed a stupa for Kashyapa Buddha; Revata relates a story in which he offered medicine to monks in Vipashyin Buddha’s *sangha*; in a previous life, Vagisha looked upon a stupa for Vipashyin Buddha with reverence and burnt incense in worship. Every one of these arhats ties his ultimate liberation back to a simple act of piety. Perhaps they could not have gained liberation except through a careful knowledge of Shakyamuni’s Dharma. What we learn here is that they would not have met Shakyamuni except as the fruit of a good deed done toward another buddha in the past. Neither Shaivali, Revata, Vagisha, nor Shariputra, nor Uruvilvakashyapa, nor any of the remaining 495 arhats will ever be born again, thanks, ultimately, to proper action.

When the other arhats ask Shakyamuni for his own stories, he takes the discussion in another direction altogether. Rather than recounting his own past triumphs, Shakyamuni’s tales of past lives have him going to hell as the result of his moral failings. We learn that Shakyamuni once lured his brother into a for-

est and then killed him, greedily coveting the entire inheritance for himself. In another life Shakyamuni was a young brahmin who befouled a saintly man's food out of jealousy. Other lives have him lying, encouraging immorality, and committing more murder. Though it may be surprising to see Buddhist literature highlight Shakyamuni's failings, there would have been little didactic benefit from the buddha recounting his own past good deeds on Anavatapta's shore. There exists an entire genre of Buddhist literature dedicated to Shakyamuni's positive development as a holy man throughout his past lives: the *jataka* tales. But to show the power of karma, whereby the one who is now known to be morally perfect once merited hell — now that's a story! These tales of Shakyamuni's weakness are like early acts in a play that people watch again and again because they know and anticipate the happy ending.

Let us now move beyond the stories themselves and into the physical and spiritual world they illuminate. For the event at Anavatapta was deemed crucial to Shakyamuni's identity as a terrestrial buddha precisely because these stories illustrate the nature of the cosmos and the efficacy of religious action therein. First, these stories point toward the structure of samsara, the realm of action, retribution, and rebirth. Uṛuvilvakashyapa says he went to heaven for several millennia as a result of his rebuilding the memorial to Vipashyin Buddha; later he became a human being. Shakyamuni sent himself to hell through his evil deeds. Yet other tales of Shakyamuni's previous lives tell of his deeds as a rabbit, a tree spirit, a monkey, or a king. These stories assume a cosmos divided into domains that contain living beings of distinctly different types. Buddhists call this cosmos *samsara*. They envision it as a spinning wheel, a Wheel of Becoming. A god named Death, Mara, grasps this wheel tightly in his claws and fangs, engulfing samsara. At the wheel's hub one finds hatred, desire, and ignorance, the impulses that force beings around this pointless circle of death and redeath. Held in Mara's grip, propelled by psycho-moral failings, samsara has five principal divisions.

Within samsara, the most desirable domains are the heavens, which can be reached only through great merit. In these paradises gods inhabit glorious palaces; their senses are filled with unimaginable bliss; their every desire is swiftly realized. But unlike the Christian heaven, which is otherworldly and lasts forever, Buddhist heavens are on a continuum with samsara's other destinations. Gods die, to be reborn according to their merit. Moreover, gods usually do not win a second consecutive life in heaven. They are so engrossed in the enjoyment of selfish pleasures that millennia pass before they remember that their divine abode is a reward for good karma. They recall this only in their last week of life, for gods know when they will die as well as their future fate. The greatest suffering in all of samsara is said to be that of a god who knows he will be reborn in the hells, at the far end of the moral cosmos. There in the hells the

dissolute and meritless meet untold tortures involving knives, or boiling, or intense cold. Again, Buddhist hells differ from the Christian hell in that they are purgatorial; they are temporary abodes in which to experience the effects of previous evil deeds. Unlike with the heavens, however, one can get stuck in the hells indefinitely; after all, this realm is a breeding ground for further acts of ill will, malevolence, and hatred. Nevertheless, I have also heard a Tibetan monk teach that the very first step Shakyamuni took toward buddhahood was in a hell, where a benevolent thought flickered briefly in his head.<sup>12</sup> Superior to the hells, a third samsaric destination is the realm of the "hungry ghosts," beings with impossibly thin necks and impossibly large bellies, whose overwhelming hungers are insatiable. And one step above the ghosts we find the animals, fated to suffer early death due to either human exploitation or the law of the jungle. Finally, the fifth possible destiny is our own. Birth as a human being is looked upon as favorable, perhaps the most favorable. Humanity allows for joy. But no human is so happy as to forget the inevitability of suffering, whose recognition is the beginning of the spiritual path. Only human beings are likely to ask: "Is this as good as it gets?" and then to seek an answer.

This is the state of affairs in which we find ourselves. This is the bad hand we have been dealt but nevertheless have to play for all it is worth. According to Buddhist literature, there is no basis for inquiring about a dealer in this cosmic poker game, a prime mover of this wheel, a God existing before or beyond time. The game is here; the rules are set. Scholars often describe karma's workings as an impersonal and ineluctable law, on the model of the second law of thermodynamics, or Murphy's Law. One cannot suspend this law any more than one can a law of physics. Even Mara, the lord of samsara, cannot escape the effects of his actions; he will die and be replaced by another Mara. The impersonality of karma has a curious corollary: Buddhists make no attempt to explain samsara's ultimate origin. There is no myth that tells the beginning of time. Samsara has *always* existed. Still, though samsara has no known beginning, it need not be endless. This is not a mere game of chance. One *can* win. Witness the 500 arhats gathered on the shore of Lake Anavatapta.

Let us take a closer look at one of their stories for indications of how to win at the game of life. Here is the tale told by an arhat named Vagisha:

Ninety cosmic aeons have passed since I last experienced a bad rebirth. Rather, I have been born as god and human being due to my spiritual merit.

12. This story is found in the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, a collection of Buddhist tales popular throughout Central and East Asia. For the story see *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, trans. Stanley Frye (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1981), p. 222.

Not that I was a particularly good man. My merit is due to a single simple encounter: I saw the *stupa* of Vipashyin Buddha and venerated it. I covered the *stupa* with perfumes, garlands, unguents, which I purchased for sixty cowrie shells, and because of which I will never fall into an evil state again. For a mere pittance, I have received great good fortune. I have become an *arhat*, cooled the passions, and attained nirvana. Truly, if I performed worship to Vipashyin's *stupa*, having perceived a perfect buddha therein, that caused great excellence. Therefore, someone who knows the many virtues of a perfect buddha should perform honor to *stupas*: this will bear great fruit.<sup>13</sup>

The *arhat* Vagisha begins his tale aeons in the past, when he encountered a *stupa* dedicated to the still more ancient Vipashyin Buddha. *Stupas* are monuments dedicated to a saint or a buddha. Typically they contain sacred relics, vestiges of their resident holy man, that are interred in a casket deep within their core. The author of Vagisha's story would have considered this *stupa*'s relics to have still been very much alive, infused with Vipashyin Buddha's own moral virtue, absolute wisdom, and profound benevolence. Thus, to comprehend this text one must understand that, for its audience, the encounter with a buddha's *stupa* is tantamount to a direct bodily encounter with the buddha himself. Indeed, Vagisha tells us as much when he says he perceived a perfect buddha therein. It is almost surprising how abbreviated this tale is. Vagisha saw Vipashyin Buddha's *stupa* and performed some simple rituals. The next thing we know, Vagisha is a liberated *arhat*. Note that the author makes no mention of meditation, or mystical experience, or even personal realization of truths about the world. Rather he matter-of-factly declares that it was his reverence for the *stupa* that bore this great fruit. How is it that karma can make mere rituals of reverence so powerful that they seem to catapult Vagisha to the state of a liberated *arhat*, beyond Mara's grasp?

Karma is thought of as a "law," so let us look to a professional "lawbook," a treatise on Buddhist doctrine: the *Compendium of Metaphysics* (*Abhidharma-kośa*), written in the early fifth century C.E. by a scholar-monk named Vasubandhu. This text became a standard part of the monastic curriculum in India and influenced Buddhism's intellectual development in China, Japan, and Tibet as well. The *Compendium's* analysis of karmic law starts from the commonplace connection all Buddhists make between action and the mind: action is volition, first, and secondarily the physical and verbal deeds produced by volition. This fundamental predication of action as a mental event has crucial ramifications. With the exception of somatic reactions (for which the motivating volition is insignificant), all karma has a moral aspect: it can be good, bad, or indetermi-

nate. Good actions produce merit, leading to a desirable recompense; bad actions lead variously to the hells, the realm of hungry ghosts, or the animal kingdom. Thus, when Vasubandhu speaks of generosity, for instance, he characterizes it as a good volition and the resulting bodily or vocal action, having a desirable recompense. Applying this principle to Vagisha, we would not look to the mere lighting of incense or to bodily prostration as the force behind his liberation. Rather, his narration emphasizes that his worship of Vipashyin's *stupa* was motivated by his perception of a perfect buddha therein. An attitude of reverence and devotion, even faith, underlay Vagisha's physical deeds. Recall, by contrast, the stories Shakyamuni told on Anavatapta's shore: his past mental attitudes of jealousy, hatred, and ill will sent him down to the hells.

All is still not clear. One moment Vagisha is worshipping Vipashyin's *stupa*, the next moment (albeit ninety cosmic aeons later) he is an *arhat*. This aspect of Vagisha's story does not quite fit a simple ledger-book understanding of karmic recompense. Living beings circle in samsara because of their accumulated karma. But here it seems that a ritual act, albeit one of devotion to a buddha, erased Vagisha's karma. What happened? Does not karma's "law" require Vagisha to receive his retributions, felicitous or miserable? Did this karmic act abrogate karmic law? To address these questions, let us peer deeper into the *Compendium of Metaphysics*. Generosity, for Vasubandhu, is the paradigmatic meritorious action. Through Vasubandhu's analysis of generosity, we can understand the deeper mechanisms at work in Vagisha's story.

Every act of gift giving has three elements: giver, recipient, and gift. We have just seen that the giver's motivations have a profound effect on an action's karmic outcome. But for Buddhists the recipient's identity is just as important a factor in determining the quality and quantity of the karmic benefit derived from an act of giving. An agricultural metaphor is commonly used in explanation. Generally, a lazy farmer who neglects his daily chores should not expect a bumper crop. But if such a farmer is clever enough to plant his seeds in rich loam and lucky enough to receive rains in a timely fashion, he may nevertheless receive a bumper crop, even if he spends most days drinking at the bar. In fact, although this farmer is himself good for nothing, he will reap a richer harvest than an industrious worker who plants seeds in bad soil, has no system for irrigation, and receives no rain. A clever, skillful giver "plants" his "seeds" in the best possible "field of merit." The better the field, the more wide-ranging and immediate the effects. To illustrate the "excellence of the field of merit" as a factor influencing karmic recompense, Vasubandhu tells of a monk who instantly became a woman because he insulted the community of monks, saying, "You are nothing but women!" For me, the most striking example of this principle comes from an account of modern Burma: There is a monk who abandoned his monastic residence, choosing instead to live in a cave. Because this monk renounced even the barest of quarters,

13. *Le Congrès du Lac Anavatapta (Views de Saints Bouddhiques)*, ed. Marcel Hofinger (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1982), pp. 62-63.



## Act 2: Suffering and Its Origin

It is *dharmata* that a living, breathing buddha will not attain nirvana until he trains everybody he is able to train.

local people began to look upon him as especially holy, and therefore a superior field of merit. Even though he had already relinquished one monastery, wealthy patrons built three more in his honor. All four stand empty, a testament to this monk's virtue.<sup>14</sup> Within Vagisha's story, Vipashyin Buddha is the field of merit. In fact, buddhas are the supreme fields of merit, according to Vasubandhu's *Compendium*. A volition directed toward that field becomes supercharged (to mix metaphors). The transformation undergone by the giver, far from being subtle, is overt and absolute. In fact, Vasubandhu suggests that proper action — mental, physical, and verbal — directed toward a buddha advances one through the stages of the spiritual path straightaway, catapulting one straight to the ultimate fruit. He writes: "The learned rely upon the blessed one and his Dharma, even with the marrow of their bones. For, by mere faith, those who completely trust in the buddha overcome heaps of evils. They overcome splendid divine and human births. They arrive at their final refuge in nirvana. This is why buddhas are considered the unsurpassed field of merit."<sup>15</sup>

Does Vasubandhu's claim that faith in the buddhas overcomes the effects of evil deeds abrogate the law of karma? Let's leave that answer to the buddhalogicians. This analysis of Vagisha's story has enabled us to understand why a particular community of Buddhists believed that it was necessary for Shakyamuni to gather with his arhats on the shores of Lake Anavatapta in order to tell stories about the relationship between their present attainments and deeds done in previous lives. Mythological trappings here — the meeting occurs in a place inaccessible to the average person; the gathered arhats display knowledge not held by the average person — are a rhetorical device for marking this event's seriousness. On the shore of Lake Anavatapta, people whom the buddha led to perfection tell some basic truths about playing the game of life: namely, the law of karma can be inexorable and unforgiving, but the faithful worship of a buddha gives one the power to escape Mara's grasp. One can imagine a merchant, living in fourth century C.E. India, considering himself fortunate indeed that Shakyamuni had come to earth one thousand years earlier, giving him the opportunity to pay homage to a buddha's stupa. Epigraphic sources record the names of many such Buddhists. From what we can tell, moreover, these religious folk were rather excited about the prospect of passing several cosmic aeons in the heavens until their attainment of arhatship under a future buddha.

14. Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 414.

15. *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya of Ācārya Vasubandhu with Sphuṭārthā Commentary of Ācārya Yaśomitra*, ed. Dwarikadas Sastri (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1987), verse 7.34, p. 1099.

Shakyamuni's final day is remembered as a scene of remarkable calm. Surrounded by well-wishers, monks, lay devotees, even gods, Shakyamuni placidly uttered his last words, lay down, and died. That final utterance — "Whatever is constituted through karma necessarily passes away" — held nothing new. This message was the doctrinal heart of the *Dharma-vinaya* (doctrine and discipline) that Shakyamuni promoted while wandering the roads of northern India for forty-five years.

In fact, months earlier Shakyamuni had already declared his mission nearly complete. During the rainy season of his eightieth year he became so ill, his pains so sharp, that Ananda, the buddha's personal attendant and closest friend, feared he would die. But despite great suffering, Shakyamuni willed his life to continue. At that time the community of monks (*bhikṣu-sangha*) was scattered throughout northern India. The buddha deemed it "improper" to achieve complete, final nirvana without the *sangha* at his side. When told of this plan, Ananda misinterpreted his master's resolve. Ananda thought Shakyamuni was holding on to life because he had not yet given the complete course of his teachings. When Ananda told the buddha of his concern — not only that he feared to lose his beloved master but also that he was anxious for Shakyamuni to give the *sangha* a final exhortation and final instructions — Shakyamuni blew up at him. "Do you really think, Ananda, that I am a closefisted teacher who conceals teachings? Do you believe there are still truths I did not yet teach to others?"<sup>16</sup>

Shakyamuni had kept nothing back. And on the last day of his life this was confirmed. Reclining on his deathbed, which had been laid between two *sal* trees at the outskirts of Kushinagara village, Shakyamuni exhorted his community: "Ask, O monks, do not hold back! If someone has doubts or confusion about the buddha, the Dharma, or the sangha, or about suffering, its cause, its cessation, or the path: ask and I will answer!"<sup>17</sup> Silence followed, broken finally by Ananda stating the obvious: not a single member of the buddha's community doubted or was confused. Shakyamuni applauded Ananda's words. He told Ananda that what his friend suspected through faith, he himself knew through the unsurpassed insight of a buddha: every member of his community had

16. *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, ed. E. Waldschmidt (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1950-51), p. 196.

17. *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, pp. 390-92.

been trained as thoroughly as possible. Shakyamuni accomplished one of the ten tasks that a living, breathing buddha *must* accomplish, and was thus free to attain complete, final nirvana.

Although this task was the final necessary confirmation of Shakyamuni's success as a religious founder, it directs us toward the early days of his career. Mulasarvastivadin Buddhists in India believed that Shakyamuni would not have entered nirvana until everybody who could be trained was trained. But to understand this tenet we might look back to Shakyamuni's first discourse, in which he turned the wheel of Dharma for five companions in Sarnath's deer park. The *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra* begins with Shakyamuni glossing lessons learned from his own life. From birth until the renunciation of family and home at the age of twenty-nine Siddhartha enjoyed a life of luxurious pampering. Like a god, he experienced no obvious pain and gave no thought to his future, in this life or the next. Once he realized the inevitability of old age, disease, and death, however, Siddhartha left home, after which he passed six years torturing his body in a search for immortality. The fact that neither hedonism nor asceticism gave him lasting wisdom, happiness, or freedom becomes the starting point for Shakyamuni's teaching: "There are two extremes that should not be followed, discussed, or indulged by one who has gone forth from the home. What are these two? On the one hand, there is attachment to the indulgence of sense pleasures within the passions; this is low, common, vulgar, and the way of ordinary people. On the other hand, there is attachment to self-mortification; this is painful, ignoble, and yields no profit."<sup>18</sup> Having set the scene thus, Shakyamuni then tells his audience that once he abandoned these two extremes he discovered a "middle path" toward insight, wisdom, awakening, and ultimately nirvana. His realization of this middle path came from recognizing a set of fundamental truths, the so-called Four Noble Truths: suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, the path leading to the cessation of suffering. In short, the four truths Shakyamuni taught in his first sermon are Buddhism's *theodicy*, for they rationalize the possibility of liberation in the face of samsaric evils.<sup>19</sup> These four truths are among the few doctrines that all Buddhist communities share, albeit interpretations thereof vary greatly from place to place. The remainder of this section will focus on the first two of these four

18. *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, ed. Raniero Gnoli (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1978), 1:134.

19. The term "theodicy" — literally "the justice of God" — was coined by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) to describe the philosophical reconciliation between belief in a perfectly benevolent, omnipotent God and the undeniable fact of evil. Contemporary scholars of religion have broadened the scope of Leibniz's "theodicy" such that the term can be used for philosophical/scholastic inquiries into the ultimate origins of evil in general, without any necessary reference to a God.

truths: suffering and its origin. The following sections will treat the third and fourth truths, in turn.

Buddhist theodicy, the religious explanation for how the world got to be the sorry place it is, begins with the fact of suffering. The First Noble Truth is *dukkha*, a term that connotes suffering, unsatisfactoriness, dis-ease, unacceptability, imperfection. Ultimately, for Buddhism, *dukkha* is not a fact about the world, but rather a fact about living beings' (mis)apprehensions thereof. Beings cause their own suffering. But to know how that is so, we must understand the nature of nature itself. The theodicy of *dukkha* begins with a metaphysical analysis of samsaric existence. Let us look at how *dukkha* is explained in the *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra*: "What is the Noble Truth of *dukkha*? Birth is *dukkha*. Old age is *dukkha*. Disease is *dukkha*. Death is *dukkha*. Separation from the pleasant is *dukkha*. Contact with the unpleasant is *dukkha*. Not getting what you want, though you strive after it: that too is *dukkha*. In brief, the five aggregates, which are the basis for clinging to existence, are *dukkha*."<sup>20</sup> Here Shakyamuni presents several explanations for why samsara is unsatisfactory. The first two are clear enough. Physical pains associated with biological existence are inescapable, even for Shakyamuni himself. Additionally, mental anguish awaits anybody who expects the world to conform precisely to his will. While writing about this Buddhist truth, my body suffers minor itches and aches; I struggle to find the correct word; sometimes I work for an hour and then erase everything. These quotidian annoyances are the background noise of samsaric existence; the death of one's child, war, and chronic illness are the first truth's crescendo. Let me emphasize that most Buddhists do not take the truth of *dukkha* to mean that everything is miserable always, that nobody is ever happy, or that ecstasies are impossible. Quite to the contrary, *dukkha* is made all the more poignant by the fact that happiness *is* possible. Satisfaction, unfortunately, always gives way to dissatisfaction. Cosmologically this is expressed by the belief that it is much easier to fall from the heavens than to rise from the hells.

Buddhism succeeded as a missionary religion in part because its theodicy starts from premises that are readily confirmed through empirical observation: change involves suffering. If Buddhism's analysis of samsara never transcended this level of naive experience, however, it would have had no more profound impact than a bumper sticker reading "Shit happens." But after characterizing *dukkha* according to physical and mental factors, Shakyamuni's sutra presents a third characterization: the five aggregates, which are the basis for clinging to existence, are unsatisfactory. This statement brings us to the core of Buddhism's analysis of samsara. Needless to add, this point requires further elaboration.

20. *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, 1:137.

Let me begin this analysis with a question. When I complain that “my back aches” or “I’m hungry,” who is being talked about? Who, or what, is the “I” to which such statements refer? Is the “I” my back or stomach? Is it my hair, neck, skin, or eyes? My forty-six chromosomes? Is the “I” something physical at all? Perhaps the “I” is contained in my upbringing, name, education, religious affiliation, ethnicity, sexual preference? Is it emotional or mental in nature? Perhaps my perceptions, imaginings, thoughts, loves, hates, fears, longings? Perhaps the “I” is self-awareness itself: I think, therefore “I” ache? Page after page could be scribbled with possibilities. But the project is doomed. What makes me “me” cannot be reduced to a single physical phenomenon, or social phenomenon, or mental phenomenon. Not *one* of these is correct. When I say “my back aches” or “I’m hungry,” the “I” to which these statements refer cannot be reduced to a single mundane referent.

If the basis of my individuality is not mundane, perhaps “I” can be identified through an *ultimate* referent. Perhaps the “I” to which these statements refer is a soul, like that described by Augustine in a 415 C.E. letter to Jerome, where he writes that the soul is immortal and incorporeal and that its fall into sin is due not to God but to its own free choice. After all, when articulating these complaints, I do have the sense that the “I” to which they refer is the same entity that, as a boy in 1968, believed he invented the word “magnetism.” Was not that selfsame person in my mother’s womb in 1962? Somehow “I” have not changed, even though everything about me — body, mind, knowledge, emotions — has. That thing which Augustine names the soul is called the *ātman* in Sanskrit. Hindu literature speaks of this atman as unchanging, immortal, and real. For Hinduism this atman is the essential Self/soul inherent in every person. Indeed, before Siddhartha discovered the Buddhist middle path, he believed this of the atman as well. This Shakyamuni prince tortured his body attempting to subdue the atman, believing that such Self-control would free the atman from the prison of nescience, liberating it into the immortal, changeless bliss that is its proper being.

But according to the buddha’s biography, Siddhartha renounced raw asceticism en route to his recognition of Buddhist truths. His rejection of asceticism was not just a matter of changing his religious practice. It had a metaphysical component as well. One cannot achieve liberation through controlling the atman because there is no atman. The belief in the existence of an atman is the core mistake resulting in the *duhkha* of samsara. Above I asked who, or what, is the “I” referred to in the complaints, “my back aches” and “I’m hungry.” Shakyamuni sought that answer for six painful years. Finally he discovered the answer by rejecting the question. Beings suffer because they ask this question, because they pursue its answer, because they expect a solution. The belief that there is an “I” that suffers is the fundamental mistake underlying samsaric suf-

fering. This doctrine is known in Sanskrit as *anātman*, no-Self: there is no real, existent, independent, unchanging, ontologically stable “I.”

The question then becomes, whence do beings get the notion that they have a stable Self? This brings us back to the *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra*. The first two types of *duhkha* Shakyamuni describes are physical and mental. The third is existential: “the five aggregates, which form the basis for clinging to existence, are unsatisfactory.” These five aggregates are the basis for clinging to existence because they are the basis for the mistaken belief in an atman. *Anatman*, no-Self, is the characteristic Buddhist doctrine, explained by analyzing the “I” into five parts or aggregates (*skandha*): (1) matter, (2) sensations, (3) perceptions, (4) karmic constituents, (5) consciousness. To understand how these five *skandhas* become the basis for a mistaken notion of Self, let us first consider each in turn. The aggregate of *matter* is straightforward: it includes bodies as well as the material world in which those bodies live. The aggregate *sensation* refers to the feelings bodies experience through contact with the material world. The third aggregate, *perception*, is the cognitive faculty whereby one identifies sensations and categorizes them: this taste on my tongue belongs to a “bagel,” that visual impression is a banana tree. *Karmic constituents*, the fourth *skandha*, are comprised of volitions produced in reaction to perceptions. Recall that karma, at base, is a matter of will. When I have the *sensation* of a tickling on my *material* skin and *perceive* that it is a mosquito, the repugnance I feel impels me to kill the mosquito: this volition is a *karmic constituent*. Actually, there is more than one karmic constituent involved in this act, for this volition to kill includes other mental factors, such as anger, ignorance, a false sense of self, and conceit. Finally *consciousness*, the fifth aggregate, is the most difficult of the *skandhas* to characterize because, unlike the others, it does not really *do* anything. Consciousness is a bare awareness, abstract mental action, without which there could not be sensation, perception, or volition. In short, according to Shakyamuni, the “I” to which the statement “I’m hungry” refers is not an individual identity but a series of five constituents, one physical, four mental. For comparative purposes, note how far this diverges from Cartesian modernism. For Buddhism mind and body may be distinguished but not divided.

Living beings make a cognitive error when they imagine the existence of a Self. The Self is a by-product of the *skandhas*’ psychophysical processes. I think “I’m hungry” when a consciousness of my stomach’s void yields a sensation. This leads to the perception “hunger.” This impels me to get up and make soup. However, when my stomach grumbles, I do not analyze this process into aggregate moments. For me there is just one simple equation: “I” + hunger = feed! The perceived sensation becomes a basis for the conception of a personal identity, as well as volitions directed toward the gratification of that identity. In real-

ity, however, this "I" is merely an epiphenomenon of the aggregates. The Self is a second-order perception, born of a mind that synthesizes experiences across time into a narrative whole. That is to say, at one moment "I" am hungry, at another moment "I" am itchy. The Self comes into existence when a mental consciousness senses a connection between these two "I's" and conceives a common identity uniting them. The mistake comes when that conventional, nominal, and synthetic Self comes to be conceived as really real, or as preexisting the psychophysical process that created it. The atman is a mind-ache far more pernicious than any backache. Perception gives way to karmic conditioning: karma is what keeps beings stuck in samsara. Just as hunger impels me to make soup or a backache impels me to shift my position, the perceived sensation of a real Self impels me to protect and preserve that Self at virtually any cost. In short, the imagined existence of a Self conditions me to circle in samsara. To refer back to the buddha's first sutra: "The five aggregates, which are the basis for clinging to existence, are *duhkha*."

Let us get our bearings. Shakyamuni, on his deathbed, invited the assembled monks to allay any doubts and confusions concerning the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path. None of the monks in Kushinagara asked a question. We are seeking to learn what those monks had learned and to know what they knew. We have discovered that the first truth, *duhkha*, implies a metaphysical analysis of samsaric existence. Samsara is unsatisfactory and imperfect and involves suffering. One of the fundamental markers of this imperfection is the unceasing changeableness of things. Recall that "samsara" literally means wandering around: impermanence (*anitya*) is a constituent factor of samsara. Thus Buddhist scriptures directly equate these two: whatever is impermanent is *duhkha*, unsatisfactory. The next stage in the Buddhist explication of samsara is to explain why it is so unstable. If there was such a thing as a permanent, immutable Self, then things would not change and pleasure would never give way to pain. But within samsara there is no Self, or permanence, or stable ultimate. Archimedes, the Greek physicist, said, "Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand and I will move the earth." One might imagine Shakyamuni saying the same thing: "Give me a stable place in samsara and I will find permanent satisfaction therein." For Buddhism, that utopia is nowhere to be found.

Whereas the First Noble Truth analyzes the nature of the world in which we live — samsara is unsatisfactory, impermanent, and insubstantial — the Second Noble Truth turns its attention away from our environment to living beings themselves. In striving to understand how suffering arises, it asks: What is wrong with beings such that they remain stuck in samsara? This Noble Truth blames the victims, for the victims are responsible for their own suffering. The *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra* reads: "What is the Noble Truth of the arising of

*duhkha*? The thirst for continuing existence that accompanies pleasure and passion, delighting in this and that."<sup>21</sup> "Thirst" (*tṛṣṇā*) here is a synonym for will or volition, the importance of which we already know. The most pernicious volition is the thirst for continuing existence. But just as analysis of the First Noble Truth revealed that perceived suffering was only the most obvious manifestation of a more thoroughgoing problem with samsara — namely, that what we consider a unitary Self can be analyzed into five aggregate parts — so thirst is only the most obvious explanation for the arising of *duhkha*. At the analytic heart of the Second Noble Truth one finds an insidious and entrenched root: ignorance (*avidya*). Because of ignorance, people make mistakes when they perceive sensations. And because volitions are based on perceptions, a wrong perception can result in a dangerous volition. These mistakes can be both empirical and metaphysical. Thus Buddhists speak of "four misapprehensions" caused by fundamental ignorance, resulting in the unquenchable thirst for continuing existence: the mistaken perception of the impermanent as permanent, the mistaken perception of the Self-less as possessing a Self, the mistaken perception of the repugnant as delightful, and the mistaken perception of the unsatisfactory as satisfactory.

An image drawn from contemporary culture may help clarify the linkages between impermanence and *anatman* and thirst and ignorance. When one watches a movie, one is really viewing celluloid moving in front of a projection lamp at twenty-four frames per second. Yet, although this process can be given a simple material explanation, one's experience of the movie is not an experience of well-lit frames, but of living characters who arouse myriad feelings, sensations, and emotions, which often linger long after the movie is over. A movie is meaningful only to the extent that its celluloid is viewed by an audience that mentally processes the visual sensations and perceptions into a story, and forgets that it is "just a movie." Nevertheless, although a good film may teach or inspire or weigh on one's mind, one would be judged misguided, even delusional, if one developed so obsessive an emotional attachment to movie characters that one believed it possible to meet Rhett Butler himself or Holly Golightly herself. It is just a movie. The celluloid film can be cut into thousands of individual frames; those frames can then be separated and scattered across all the earth. If someone picks up a single random frame of celluloid, where is Rhett's swagger or Holly's pizzazz? Out of context, could a single frame of colored film inspire love or fear? In the final analysis the film is rubbish to be disposed of in an ecologically sound manner and forgotten. What we call the Self can similarly be cut into "frames," the five *skandhas*; each of these parts, in turn, changes from moment to moment to moment. The Self comes about when a mental conscious-

21. *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, 1:137.

ness, reflecting on this process, mistakenly imagines a continuity between “frames” and then reifies that imagined continuity into a reality. One might reverse this continuing personal existence as the hero of one’s life-movie, but it is no more real than Rhett Butler or Holly Golightly. Passionate attachment to the impermanent, unsatisfying, Self-less stuff of samsara is misguided, even delusional. Because of attachment, pain leads only to more pain.

If ignorance is the source of *dukkha*, what then is the source of ignorance? A monotheistic religion might answer this question by attributing this lack of thorough insight to God or to Satan. After all, Yahweh could have made Adam omniscient. But he did not. In fact, he made the Tree of Knowledge off-limits. Genesis suggests that we were much better off when we were ignorant of our ignorance, and we have Eden’s snake to thank for the *dukkha* implicated in self-awareness. But for Buddhism time has no beginning; samsara, no Creator. The roots of ignorance, rather, are fixed within ignorance itself. The name for this doctrine is *codependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda)*. Nothing about samsara can be attributed to a cause outside samsara. Everything within samsara comes about through the adventitious recycling and realignment of elements always already present within samsara. This was the doctrine to which Shakyamuni referred when he uttered these final words: “Whatever is constituted through karma necessarily passes away.” Nothing in samsara is self-originated or wholly self-contained. Were such a thing to exist, it would be unproduced and not be subject to change. Everything in samsara exists through the concatenation of causes and conditions, physical and mental. As causes and conditions change, so entities are created and destroyed. The psychophysical bases that sustained Shakyamuni’s terrestrial existence came to an end eighty years after his birth. To expect that it would be otherwise is to demonstrate one’s ignorance. Why mourn?

Codependent origination is the Janus face of no-Self. On the one hand there is no Self, because self-identities are composite, conditional, relational, made up of parts. On the other hand, because everything in samsara is composite, everything in samsara is devoid of independent self-existence. Ignorance of this circle of equivalences is the ultimate source of misery. Not surprisingly Buddhist scholastics developed a complex schema through which to explain samsaric causality, which presents codependent origination as a chain of twelve links joined in a beginningless circle. The power in this illustrative analysis lies in the fact that it coordinates the First and Second Noble Truths, setting the processes of *dukkha*, samsaric existence, and ignorance into a lucid pattern. Indeed, Shakyamuni’s biography grants this doctrine a privileged position. For Siddhartha became Shakyamuni, man became buddha, by understanding the interconnections among these twelve links. According to this doctrine (the links are in italics):

1. because of *ignorance*, for which no origin is postulated, beings create *karmic volitions*;
2. because beings create *karmic volitions* through their thoughts, words, and physical actions, they maintain a *consciousness* that continues between births;
3. because *consciousness* continues between births, it can enter a womb and enliven the *mental and physical attributes* of a developing embryo;
4. a living being must have *mental and physical attributes* in order to have *sense organs*;
5. without the *sense organs* there could be no *contact* with mental or physical stimuli;
6. the *contact* between sense organs and sense stimuli enables the experience of *sensations*;
7. *sensations* of pleasure and pain are the necessary precondition for *thirst*, the desire to increase pleasure and stop pain;
8. when one *thirsts* to enjoy positive experiences and escape negative ones, one *grasps* after continuing samsaric existence;
9. the result of *grasping* for samsaric existence is *becoming*, the continuance of psychophysical processes from life to life;
10. the processes of *becoming* naturally result in *rebirth* after death;
11. whenever one takes *rebirth*, one is guaranteed to experience:
12. *old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, distress, and dismay.*

Not only does this doctrine incorporate the interrelationships among the five aggregates (the psychophysical basis for samsaric misery), but it shows how those aggregates are inextricably linked to impermanence, to suffering, and to the causes of *dukkha*, thirst and ignorance. Well, not quite inextricable. Under the Bodhi tree Shakyamuni saw the twelve limbs of codependent origination. But he also saw that he could break this chain. If he could do away with ignorance, he could do away with the karma that fueled samsaric existence. If he could have sensations but not thirst, then the grasping that leads, ultimately, to rebirth and redeath could be eradicated.

When Shakyamuni ascertained that nobody at his deathbed was in need of further training, he perceived that the gathered monks had thoroughly comprehended that whatever is in samsara exists within a web of mutable relations. To understand what happens when those relations are brought to an end, we must move on to the next deed required of a living, breathing buddha.

**Act 3: Nirvana and Its Aftermath**

It is *dharmata* that a living, breathing buddha will not attain nirvana until he lives out at least three-quarters of a full life span.

One must feel sorry for Ananda: he can be blamed for the buddha's timely death. In the final year of Shakyamuni's life, not long after he criticized Ananda for thinking him a closefisted teacher, the buddha hinted to Ananda that he need not pass away. Shakyamuni and Ananda were sitting in a grove on the outskirts of Vaishali — two old friends who had shared many adventures during their long lives. Shakyamuni remarked aloud upon India's vibrant beauty and the sweetness of human life. And then, in an offhand manner, the buddha observed that someone who possesses superhuman powers can stay alive for thousands of years, through the entire course of a cosmic age. While developing perfect wisdom and compassion, Shakyamuni had also perfected his control over matter and mind to such a degree that he could perform seemingly miraculous feats. In the past he had flown. He had shot fire out of his shoulders and water out of his feet. He had even created duplicates of himself so numerous that the universe appeared to be filled with buddhas from top to bottom. Now, having completed more than three-quarters of the full 100-year life span for a human being of his day, Shakyamuni seemed ambivalent about his accomplishments. He had fulfilled his duties as a buddha and could attain complete, final nirvana whenever he wanted. But for a second, even a third time, Shakyamuni remarked on the sweetness of human life and his own ability to preserve that life indefinitely. Not taking the hint, Ananda listened without remark.

Shakyamuni's observations were not lost on Mara, however. This divine lord of samsara and champion of passion had long considered Shakyamuni his nemesis: whenever an arhat gained nirvana, Mara lost another subject from his domain. Though Mara could not cause Shakyamuni to fall from buddhahood, he could hasten Shakyamuni's own nirvana. So after Ananda left the buddha's side, Mara approached, showed proper reverence, and said: "Pass away, Lord! This is the time for the buddha's nirvana." Mara reminded Shakyamuni that when he had first awakened, they made a pact. The buddha would attain final nirvana after he accomplished every goal he set for himself as a religious founder, after he was secure in the knowledge that his disciples remembered his words, comprehended his teachings, and obeyed his disciplines. That is, after his religion was widespread and popular. Shakyamuni had accomplished all this. And thus, whereas Shakyamuni seems to have wanted Ananda to ask him to remain alive indefinitely, the buddha instead heeded Mara's request that he pass beyond samsara, and promised to enter final nirvana three months hence. Later Shakyamuni told Ananda of the encounter with Mara. One can almost

see the lightbulb turn on in Ananda's head as he wails and whines, "Please stay alive! Please stay alive!" Too late.<sup>22</sup>

This richly textured anecdote works on several levels, confounding and contextualizing the First and Second Noble Truths. We should have expected to see the buddha as passionless, unattached, and perfectly placid. But Shakyamuni here is melancholy with nostalgia. He accomplished his every aim as a religious founder; he left home to bring an end to birth and death; he preached, organized, exhorted, and disciplined. Now on the verge of his ultimate liberation, he looks back to human life as sweet, samsara as vibrant with beauty. It goes without saying that this representation of Shakyamuni's ambivalence about his final nirvana tells us far more about his followers' feelings than his own. This same paradox underlies the ambivalent requirement that every terrestrial buddha perform ten worldly acts before his nirvana. Until a buddha passes away, his personal aims are not fulfilled, but as soon as he achieves nirvana he is no longer present. The sweetest of humans, the most vibrantly beautiful of men, is gone. One might compare Shakyamuni here with Jesus as presented in the Gospel according to Mark. At the midpoint of this Gospel, Jesus bravely prophesies his passion: he will suffer, be put to death, and rise (from the dead) (8:31). Yet in Gethsemane Jesus pleads for God to relieve him of the chalice of death (14:36), and with his last breath Jesus despairs because of God's abandonment (15:34). Christian theology would make little sense without Jesus' death and resurrection. Nevertheless, this death is ever treated as a tragedy of unequalled magnitude. Without his death, Jesus is not the Christian Christ; without nirvana, Shakyamuni is no buddha, just a great man, a wise teacher, a compassionate friend. In both cases, followers' ambivalence vis-à-vis the founder's necessary absence is transferred onto the psychology of the founders themselves. That Ananda bewails Shakyamuni's nirvana, "Please stay alive," is rhetorically flat. That Shakyamuni himself claims that "human life is sweet" and all but asks Ananda to request him to enjoy it indefinitely, poignantly highlights frailties common to humanity even as it demonstrates that such frailties need not detract from spiritual majesty.

The requirement that a buddha live out three-quarters of his life span is a shorthand for Buddhist ambivalence about the inevitability and finality of Shakyamuni's nirvana: go, he must, but not too soon. This pool of attachment to Shakyamuni beyond death was a wellspring for religious creativity within Buddhism. Later in this section I will introduce several strategies Buddhists used to make the absent buddha present. One such strategy, mentioned above in the discussion of Vagisha, is the offering of devotion to a memorial stupa which has been enlivened with a buddha's relics. The imaginative force of

22. These events are described in *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, pp. 204-20.

Shakyamuni's presence thus constituted only becomes evident in light of notions of his absence as defined by the doctrinal concept of nirvana.

To comprehend what is at stake in the nirvana of a buddha, let us return to the *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra* for the Third Noble Truth: "What is the Noble Truth of the cessation of *dukkha*? The total eradication of that very thirst for continuing existence which accompanies pleasure and passion, delighting in this and that. It is salvation, abandonment, exhaustion, passionlessness, cessation, pacification, disappearance."<sup>23</sup> Note that the Third Noble Truth is cessation (*nirodha*), not nirvana. This seems a minor distinction, but it points to an important matter of terminology. The term "nirvana," as used in colloquial English, usually refers to what Buddhists call "nirvana that is final and complete in all its parts" (*mahāparinirvāṇa*), because nothing comes after it. This *mahāparinirvāṇa*, attained at death, can be still more formally designated as "nirvana without any residue," because it is achieved only when all residual karma from the buddha's previous lives is used up; its attainment is simultaneous with the dissolution of the five aggregates. I shall discuss this nirvana at greater length below. Nirvana without residue is preceded by "nirvana with residue," also known as nirvana-in-this-world: the direct fruit of realizing and perfecting the Third Noble Truth.

Let us turn to the night of Shakyamuni's awakening, to see how he achieved the cessation of *dukkha*. Siddhartha awakened over the course of a night, conventionally split into three "watches." During the first watch he focused his superhuman eye on his own past lives. Above we saw several arhats describe the thread, tying actions performed in one life with results in another. During this watch Siddhartha surveyed the fabric of his own karmic existence as woven out of hundreds of thousands of lives. In the second watch of the night he turned his gaze from himself to others. He saw that karma controlled the destinies of all living beings, from gods to humans to the denizens of hell. Finally, in the third watch, he intuited the inner logic of karma and samsara, and systematized Buddhism's characteristic doctrines: the Four Noble Truths, *anatman*, codependent origination. At last he shouted, "My birth is finished. I have lived the holy life. What had to be done is done. I will not be born into another existence." Now Shakyamuni Buddha, he was "awakened," for when the veils of ignorance fell from his eyes he saw samsara for what it is — unsatisfactory, impermanent, and insubstantial — and he no longer clung to the stuff of samsara. He had attained nirvana, but a this-worldly nirvana. Although he would never again create karmic volitions through ignorant grasping, he still had karmic residues left from previous lives. Now he could become a virtuoso of karma. He could lucidly express his will in order to accomplish his aims, and

he could do so without becoming stuck. A simile is often used to explain how a buddha acts in the world after his awakening. The buddha is likened to a magician who creates the illusion of an unimaginably beautiful woman. You or I might think this woman is real, and become besotted with lust. But only the most foolish magician would fall into this trap by forgetting that she is an illusion, his own creation. Though Shakyamuni remained *in* the world for forty-five years after his awakening, his attainment of this-worldly nirvana meant that he was no longer *of* the world. He could eat, teach, even work magic, without imputing a false substantiality upon himself, his deeds, or his audience.

Forty-five years later we find Shakyamuni offering to use his superhuman abilities to prolong his life beyond the span determined by the effluvia of old karma. Without Ananda's cooperation, however, the buddha had no excuse to exercise this power. Thus he passed his last three months visiting old haunts as he slowly journeyed to Kushinagara and his complete, final nirvana. "Nirvana" translates literally as "blowing out," as when a wind snuffs out a weak flame. Whereas nirvana-in-this-world is attained when all desires are quenched, complete and final nirvana is coincident with the elimination of all suffering and all further samsaric existence. This differs from death. For the common human being, death does not radically rupture the psychophysical process associated with the five aggregates. At death a body made of "gross matter" gives way to one made of "subtle matter," continuing the karmic process. This is why, to reiterate a point from above, the First Noble Truth equates the five aggregates with *dukkha*: they are the objective bases for the thirst for continuing existence. But with Shakyamuni's final breath, he no longer had *karmic constituents*. The fuel that powered his body, his sensations, his perceptions, and his consciousness, was used up.

Imagine a lit candle whose wick has burned out and whose wax is now gone. The flame goes out. Would one say that the flame extinguished itself? Or that the lack of wick or wax *put* it out? The active voice is just not appropriate here. Something happened, but one cannot point to a cause or agent for the event. Rather, the flame went out because the conditions for its continuing existence simply ceased to be. The cessation of *dukkha* occasions nirvana but does not cause nirvana. In fact, complete and final nirvana has no cause, because whatever has a cause is subject to conditioning, and by definition nirvana is the unconditioned. Indeed, according to Buddhist ways of thinking about life and death, the attainment of complete and final nirvana should not even be called "death." Death is one moment in the five aggregates' ongoing process, an important moment of transition from life to life. Complete and final nirvana, by contrast, comes about through cessation of all karmic causes and conditions. *Mahāparinirvāṇa* occurs when the causes of *dukkha*, and therefore *dukkha* itself, are no more.

23. *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, 1:137.

When a candle's flame goes out, bereft of wax and wick, where does the flame actually "go"? Metaphors of place are common in representations of nirvana. Thus English translations have the buddha "approach nirvana," "enter nirvana," or "attain nirvana." Similarly, Buddhist writings use the image of "the city of nirvana" with a certain frequency. Such metaphors inspire comparisons between nirvana and the heavens or paradise. But this is conceptually incorrect. For Buddhists, heavens and paradises are part of samsara. Final nirvana, by contrast, is not a place a buddha goes after death, nor is it a state he attains, a fruit of his practice, or a reward for his virtue. Were nirvana a place or state or reward, it would then be brought into existence in dependence upon specific causes; it would be conditioned, subject to vagaries of time and circumstance. However, none of these things are true of nirvana. Nirvana is more profitably compared to empty space: infinite, omnipresent, unchanging, without variation, unconditioned, calm, and real. Neither space nor nirvana has a beginning or end. Neither has positive attributes or characteristics. Indeed, nirvana is so difficult to characterize because it is essentially abstract. Paradoxically, attempts to concretize nirvana through the predication of attributes only obfuscate nirvana's inconceivable truth. Just as empty space can be defined only through differentiation from materiality, so nirvana's reality can be expressed only by differentiating it from samsara. Samsara is characterized by suffering, impermanence, and insubstantiality, but there is no suffering in nirvana, it is not impermanent, nor is it insubstantial. Samsara is conditioned by causality. Nirvana is unconditioned and uncaused. Samsara is fueled by thirst, born of ignorance. Nirvana is attained through liberation, born of wisdom. Samsaric processes are characterized by the bricolage of becoming. Nirvana is what remains when everything is subtracted.

In one famous encounter, a monk named Malunkyaputra threatened to give up his robes if the buddha did not address several ultimate questions that had theretofore been left unanswered. Among these, Malunkyaputra asked, "Does the buddha exist after attaining nirvana? Or not exist? Or both exist and not exist? Or neither exist nor not exist?" Malunkyaputra's threat was to no avail. Shakyamuni still refused to answer. He rejected these questions as irrelevant because their answers would not deepen Malunkyaputra's understanding of *duhkha* or karma. Even if Shakyamuni's answers are unavailable, the questions themselves bear further reflection. Hold the question in your mind — Does the buddha exist after attaining nirvana? — and ask yourself whether you can conceive of existence without it being spatial in some way. Were the buddha to exist after nirvana, it would have to be *somewhere*. Similarly, nonexistence can only be imagined as a lack of presence. Without spatial and temporal dimensionality, "existence" and its lack are inconceivable. Although scholastic philosophers might deplore inaccuracies involved in conceptualizing nirvana

through spatial predicates, the majority of Buddhists through the ages have not been scholastic philosophers. Buddhists have long wondered, "Where is the buddha now that he attained nirvana?" And they have usually answered that question with "He is accessible right here, right now." Indeed, although Buddhists all accept Shakyamuni's complete and final nirvana as a fact, few have ever let that stand in the way of their religiosity. Ananda did not ask Shakyamuni to prolong his life, but Buddhists have taken it upon themselves to re-present the buddha ever since his nirvana. They have done so in spatial terms because they have wanted to interact with the buddha, to have access to him, to be in his presence. The history of Buddhism can be written as a history of these re-presentations: creative abrogations of final nirvana's finality.

Indeed, traditional tellings of Shakyamuni's biography do not end with his realization of *mahaparinirvana* in Kushinagara. Events surrounding the disposition of his body are integral to his life's story. Those gathered at Shakyamuni's side at his final nirvana witnessed a material body becoming progressively empty of personal vitality. The buddha was gone, but his material body remained to be cremated, the customary form of disposal for a revered holy man. Almost immediately after Shakyamuni's cremation, however, a dispute arose over who would possess the remaining relics of tooth and bone not consumed by the fire. The people of Kushinagara claimed these relics for themselves, since Shakyamuni had chosen their territory for his final nirvana. But the people of seven other territories swiftly learned of Shakyamuni's passing, and all demanded the relics. At first, the people of Kushinagara refused. Finally, to stave off a war over the relics, all eight peoples reached an entente. Shakyamuni's remains were distributed equally. Each of the eight measures of tooth and bone was then housed in a memorial stupa. Though the buddha was in nirvana, he was also present at each of these eight memorials.

Why would people have been willing to go to war over charred bone fragments from a dead holy man? One can certainly adduce socioeconomic factors, such as prestige, or income from a popular pilgrimage site. But in line with this chapter's focus on native explanation, we might instead revisit the conception of the buddha as a "field of merit," the doctrine that the qualities of a gift's recipient influence the karmic fruits of giving. On the shore of Lake Anavatapta, Vagisha claimed that he gained the ability to become an arhat merely by making a cheap gift of scented water and garlands to a stupa housing Vipashyin Buddha's remains. Similarly, a donative inscription found at Ajanta, a fifth century c.e. Indian monastery, declares that wise people engage in acts of intense devotion to the buddhas because the offering of even a single flower guarantees them heavenly rebirths and final liberation. According to this inscription's author, the wise know that, among all fields of merit, buddhas are the most fertile. Conflict over Shakyamuni's relics arose because people conceived them as be-



ing charged with spiritual power that could be accessed and harnessed through the appropriate exercise of ritual technology. One of the most striking examples of a king's employment of a relic comes from first century B.C.E. Sri Lanka, where King Dutthagamani is remembered as having installed a relic of Shakyamuni in his spear before marching out to battle with the Tamils. Dutthagamani won.

When one considers the posthumous conflict over Shakyamuni's remains in light of the Noble Truths, there seems to be a notable confusion. The doctrine of no-Self holds that what we commonly consider a "person" is really the psychophysical integration of five distinct components. If Shakyamuni, when alive, is only tentatively a "person," then after death his bones, separated from all vital energies, should certainly be seen for the mere physical objects they are. At best, relics might be mementos of the man Shakyamuni was, but certainly not equivalents for the buddha himself. On this chain of reasoning, it would seem inconsistent for Buddhists to revere relics as a field of merit. Be that as it may, however, the simple fact is that Shakyamuni's relics were conceived as being infused with Shakyamuni's life, as endowed with his vitality, as enclosures for his person, and as houses for his presence. Thus Vasubandhu's *Compendium of Metaphysics* claims that the karmic retribution for destroying a stupa containing buddha relics equals that for harming a flesh-and-blood buddha: immediately upon death, the perpetrator is doomed to rebirth in the lowest hell. Similarly, the reward for building a reliquary stupa is the same as that for providing a monastery to shelter the buddha's flesh and blood: a glorious rebirth in the high heavens. In the long run, little was lost by Ananda's failure to ask Shakyamuni to remain alive indefinitely: Buddhists simply never let him go.

One of the most complete explorations of a buddha's continuing life-after-nirvana is found in a sutra entitled *On Commissioning Buddha Image*.<sup>24</sup> As the title suggests, this scripture does not discuss bodily relics per se. Rather it treats images, and explains that one who commissions a buddha image will receive "heaps of merit, piles of merit, immeasurable, extraordinary, heaps of merit seemingly without end." In line with the tales told on Lake Anavatapta's shore, this sutra also promises donors that they will "attain buddhahood, and quickly approach peaceful *parinirvana*." How is this possible? The sutra asks this same rhetorical question, and then answers it. "What is the cause for the limitless power that arises as the fruit of fashioning a buddha image? I say, O monks, although the blessed lord buddha has entered into *mahaparinirvana*, when one sees an image of the buddha it is as if he has entered not into

*mahaparinirvana*." Simply put, he who has eyes will see the buddha where he sees an image. In an important sense, the very word "image" here is misleading. One might commonly think of an "image" as lifeless matter made into a simulacrum of a human being by human agency. But in this case an "image" is one more living material form taken by a buddha. This idea is very clearly expressed in an inscription from Buddhist Central Asia: "Hail to the buddhas having the bodies of buddha-images!"<sup>25</sup>

Let us conclude this section. The requirement that a buddha live out three-quarters of a common human life span introduces a fascinating and crucial dimension of Buddhism. In his capacity as a religious teacher, Shakyamuni is most closely associated with doctrines contained in the first two Noble Truths: to escape samsara's sufferings one must gain insight into no-Self, for that wisdom alone enables one to end the craving that fuels karmic existence. The Third Noble Truth holds that such cessation is possible. *Mahaparinirvana*, the complete dissolution of all associations with samsara, is the "logical" consequence of this third truth. But we have seen that simultaneous with this systematic, scholastic doctrine, Buddhists also believed Shakyamuni's presence continues after his nirvana. His power inheres in physical objects which can be associated with him. Bodily remains left from the cremation pyre are the most obvious relics, but other traces of his terrestrial existence came to be treated as living equivalents as well. A partial list would include golden statues, reliefs pressed in wet clay, the tree he sat under on the eve of awakening, his robes and bowl, manuscripts containing his sutras, palm leaves scratched with the formula of codependent origination. These things were not Shakyamuni's equivalents merely because as icons or as symbols they referred to him. Rather, like bodily relics, these objects' power was believed to inhere directly in their materiality. Their stuff was the stuff of buddhahood. *On Commissioning Buddha Images* explains: "Somebody who makes a *stupa* or image of the blessed one enjoys sovereignty over heaven and earth perpetually, for a span equal to the number of atoms in the *stupa* or image. In fact, the blessed one showed relics belonging to previous buddhas and [his own] bodily remains because each and every single minute atom produces a marvelous heap of merit."<sup>26</sup> This is a very different understanding of what a buddha is, and why he gains nirvana, from that posed by the strictly scholastic interpretation based on the Noble Truths. According to this sutra, the buddha lives and dies precisely because he wants to serve as a source for relics. Paradoxically, the belief that the buddha has completely passed away and the belief that he may be perpetually present are both conse-

24. Adelheid Mette, "Zwei kleine Fragmente aus Gilgit — 1: Tathāgatabimbakārāpaṇa-sūtra (Gilgit-Ms. No. 18), 2: Devatāsūtra und Alpadevatāsūtra (aus Gilgit-Ms. No. 13)," *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 7 (1981): 133-51.

25. H. W. Bailey, "Hvatanica IV," *Bulletin of the London School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1940-42): 895.

26. Mette, p. 138.

quences of the doctrine of *mahāparinirvana*. Shakyamuni's absence allowed for his presence to expand materially without limits, but that material expansion was possible only because he had gone entirely beyond samsara.

#### Act 4: Morality, Meditation, and Discernment

It is *dharmata* that a living, breathing buddha will not attain nirvana until he establishes his parents in the Truth.

Leading up to his final life on earth, Shakyamuni realized a fancy that captures every child's imagination at least once: he chose his own parents. The buddha was a god, king over Tushita Heaven, before he took birth as Siddhartha Gotama. As the time approached for the great being's final life, he surveyed the earth for the best couple belonging to the best family living in the best place, just as other incipient buddhas did prior to their final births. He espied Shuddhodana, the leader of the royal Shakya clan, and his wife, Mahamaya, who was beautiful, moral, and had once expressed the desire to be the mother of a buddha. Shakyamuni-to-be would make her wish come true. Ten lunar months after conception, Mahamaya was standing in a garden grove, holding a tree, when young Siddhartha passed painlessly through her side. The gods Indra and Brahma caught him, while warm and cool waters fell from the heavens washing and refreshing mother and child. To end the scene, the newborn boy took seven steps in each of the four cardinal directions, declaring this to be his final birth.

Thrilled, young Siddhartha's parents soon learned that the birth of so remarkable a child carries a dear cost. His given name, Siddhartha, literally means that he was the fulfillment of his parents' every wish. But Mahamaya died seven days after giving birth, as is the fate of every terrestrial buddha's mother. She was reborn in a heaven, to be sure. But the god-of-gods was now a baby on earth. Shuddhodana found himself in a tenuous position as well. In India it is customary for a child to bow before and touch the feet of his elders as a sign of obeisance. But in Siddhartha's presence, Shuddhodana was the lesser. On the day of his birth, Siddhartha was brought to a shrine dedicated to the Shakyas' guardian deity. Though the Shakyas customarily prostrated themselves to the deity, on this day the god bent down to a baby. In a later miraculous incident, Shuddhodana found himself so taken with awe that he, the father, fell at the feet of his own son. What inspired Shuddhodana to act so? Although the sun had nearly set, the shadow of a tree under which Siddhartha sat remained steady as if it were still noon.

Shuddhodana was merely caught up in the moment when he saw the unmoving shadow. For, despite this brief excitement over Siddhartha's spiri-

tual merit, Shuddhodana wanted his son to become a world-conquering king. He was mortified when Siddhartha abandoned family and renounced worldly power in search of liberation. Six years after his awakening, Shakyamuni returned home to Kapilavastu, swiftly winning many converts among his former friends and kin. Yet Shuddhodana remained aloof. He had seen a statue come to life; he had seen the miraculous shadow. Shuddhodana reflected that his son had been honored by gods in the past, yet here in Kapilavastu his retinue was entirely human. Full of pride, Shuddhodana paid no heed to his son's teachings.

Once the buddha recognized the source of his father's pride, however, he staged a grand scene. Late one night Shakyamuni entered a windowless chamber having four doors and invited a great assembly of gods to hear a discourse on the Dharma. Seated on a high throne, Shakyamuni was surrounded by thousands of shining, resplendent, perfect, and glorious gods. Celestial sentries were placed at the four doors to guard against intrusions by mere humans. The trap was set. When Shuddhodana came near the building, he saw an unearthly glow escaping from beneath its doors. He heard the sweet timbre of the buddha's voice. But he could not enter. Trying all four doors, Shuddhodana was turned away, rebuffed again and again. The sentries' own glory whetted Shuddhodana's appetite for the wonders within. Finally Shakyamuni discerned that Shuddhodana's head would explode were he kept apart from the divine assembly any longer. The buddha revealed himself. Eyes and heart satisfied, Shuddhodana's mind was ripe to hear the Four Noble Truths. Then and there, Shuddhodana destroyed the belief in a Self with the thunderbolt of knowledge. He celebrated, proclaiming that his own son had done something for him that nobody else had ever done: not his father, mother, or king, not the gods, ancestors, renunciants, priests, or any other kinsman. Shakyamuni had done something for himself as well, since a buddha cannot attain nirvana until he converts his father to the Truth.<sup>27</sup>

Few stories in the Buddhist canon match this one for its revelation of the buddha's *modus operandi* as a teacher, which combines deft wit with limitless power. Buddhas are practical jokers on a cosmic scale — place the emphasis on *practical*. There is nothing mean-spirited or self-aggrandizing in the “con” Shakyamuni works on his father. He has one intention only: to set his father onto the path toward wisdom, awakening, and ultimate liberation. This path is the final one of the four truths. And though it comes at the end of the list, in a practical sense it belongs at the beginning, for dissatisfaction with life naively lived leads one to start out on the road to the city of nirvana. More formally, the Fourth Noble Truth is described as a path having eight parts. Thus the *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra* declares:

27. *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, 1:195-99.

What is the Noble Truth of the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*? It is the Noble Eight-Limbed Path, i.e., 1) correct view, 2) correct intention, 3) correct speech, 4) correct action, 5) correct livelihood, 6) correct effort, 7) correct mindfulness, 8) correct concentration. . . . Cultivate the Noble Eight-Limbed Path in order to comprehend *dukkha*! . . . Cultivate the Noble Eight-Limbed Path in order to destroy craving! . . . Cultivate the Noble Eight-Limbed Path in order to realize the cessation of *dukkha*!<sup>28</sup>

In an important sense, the entirety of what we call “Buddhism” can be comprehended as the imaginative elaboration of this “path” metaphor. Although the *Turning the Wheel of Law Sutra* describes the Buddhist path as having eight parts, scholastic thinkers traditionally rearrange the parts and organize them under three general headings. Buddhist practice is a matter of *morality* (correct speech, action, livelihood), *mental discipline* (correct effort, mindfulness, concentration), and *wisdom* (correct view, intention). Let us consider each of these three in turn.

Morality is the foundation of the religious life. Unless one lives morally, one cannot have the serenity or mental stability necessary for pursuing deeper truths. This is one reason that a buddha must fix his parents on the path to liberation before attaining nirvana himself. Compassion does not allow a buddha to “enjoy” nirvana while his own parents continue to inflict suffering on themselves; as a perfect buddha, Shakyamuni was also a perfect son. More specifically, morality is defined as the intentional and willful restraint of one’s body, speech, and mind from the commission of actions that would cause harm to oneself or to others. Functionally, one is expected to avoid ten unwholesome activities: murder, theft, sexual misconduct, false speech, slanderous speech, harsh speech, frivolous speech, covetousness, ill will, and false views. This list of ten unwholesome activities should *not* be compared with the Hebrew Bible’s Ten Commandments. One is culpable for violating biblical commandments insofar as one accepts them as God’s law. But the ten activities listed above are not interdicted by order of the buddha. Their violation is not sinful, but stupid. When one kills or calumniates another, that activity injures the other, to be sure. But because karma is fundamentally a matter of volition, such a deed is perhaps even more deleterious to its perpetrator.

Although avoidance of harm, *ahimsa*, is the foundation of the Buddhist moral life, it is also possible to increase the karmic benefits of morality by taking on vows or commitments to abide by specific moral restraints. It is good not to kill others. But within a karmic calculus it is far better to vow that one will avoid killing others, and then to abide by this vow. The act of vowing intensifies and stabilizes the volition. There is a recognition that not all beings are ca-

pable of making the same commitments. This is another point of disjunction with the biblical commandments. All Hebrews are required to observe God’s orders, but Buddhism places no one under an obligation to accept any vow of moral restraint. Indeed, a butcher who vows not to kill will do himself more harm than good. A butcher truly concerned about his karma will find another line of work before he makes this vow.

Because the moral restraints are voluntary, their acceptance has served as an index through which to distinguish communities of interest within Buddhism. A dedicated layman or laywoman, for instance, is known by his or her adherence to a set of five restraints, the so-called *pañcaśīla* (an abridgment of the ten unwholesome actions listed above): not to kill, not to take what is not given, not to commit sexual misconduct, not to lie, and the avoidance of intoxicants. Dedicated lay folk may also visit a monastery twice a month to study or make merit, at which time they will take an additional three restraints upon themselves, such as not to eat after the noon hour. Note the situational nature of morality. The articulation of a vow — “For today only, I will not eat after 12:00 P.M.” — creates a universe in which karmic effects accrue to activities that normally have no moral value. Whereas it usually makes no difference whether or not a layman eats after 12:00, on the day he makes this vow the act of eating after 12:00 is karmically harmful, even immoral. The definition of certain specific actions as moral or immoral can be situational, personal, and fluid.

Indeed, not to belabor the point, even suicide and killing another are appropriate when not acting so would result in even greater harm. In a previous life Shakyamuni-to-be was the captain of a ship carrying five hundred merchants and their wares to a distant port. Unbeknownst to the traders, one of their number was a thief, who intended to murder them in their sleep and take their fortune for himself. A sea-god warned the captain of the evil that was about to transpire on his ship. After some deliberation, Shakyamuni-to-be realized that radical action was necessary:

He thought, “There is no means to prevent this man from slaying the merchants and going to the great hells but to kill him.” And he thought, “If I were to report this to the merchants, they would kill and slay him with angry thoughts and all go to the great hells themselves.” And he thought, “If I were to kill this person, I would likewise burn in the great hells for 100,000 eons because of it. Yet I can bear to experience the pain of the great hells, that this person not slay these five hundred merchants and not develop so much evil karma. I will kill this person myself.”

As a result of this quick action, the would-be robber was reborn in paradise and the buddha-to-be, far from going to hell himself, was freed from 100,000 aeons

28. *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, 1:137-38.

of samsaric suffering.<sup>29</sup> This story celebrates the killing of the evil man because, had the captain not acted thus, five hundred merchants would have been murdered. Here is the interesting twist: Shakyamuni-to-be did not kill the pirate in order to save the traders' lives; rather his compassion was directed toward the would-be assailant. Shakyamuni-to-be was motivated by a desire to prevent the thief from committing grievous evil. Through an act of moral murder, Shakyamuni-to-be saved the thief from himself.

Beyond the laity Buddhism has novices — monks-in-training or students being educated at monastic schools — who are subject to ten rules. Beyond these groups are the fully ordained monks and nuns. As we have already seen, the Buddhist religious life is not simply a matter of restraint. Buddhist lore overwhelmingly celebrates the positive virtue of generosity, especially when directed toward fertile fields of merit such as the buddha or his community of monks. Indeed, whereas the buddha is deemed the supreme source of merit because he is perfectly wise and compassionate, even ordinary monks are treated with great respect, precisely because of the great number of moral restraints they undertake. Numbers of rules differ from sect to sect within Buddhism, but the monks of contemporary Sri Lanka and Thailand, for instance, are subject to 227 rules. These monastic regulations range from broad-scale restraints, such as celibacy, to micro-level controls over personal behavior: monks may not slurp and belch when they eat, nor may they smile so broadly as to show their teeth. Nuns are under an even larger burden, constrained by 311 rules of conduct. The social world being such as it is, this superabundance of restraint does not make nuns a greater source of spiritual merit than monks.

After Shakyamuni had gained his first converts and was certain that, as arhats, they thoroughly comprehended the Dharma, he sent them out to spread his teachings “for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world.” The buddha’s inclusion of correct speech, correct action, and correct livelihood as “limbs” of the Path demonstrates that social harmony is fundamental to Buddhist definitions of worldly good and worldly happiness. However, Buddhism is not early Confucianism: social harmony is not an end in itself. Though one must be existentially right with the world, liberation requires renunciation. True separation from the world is impossible, however, as long as one imagines substance where there is no substance or permanence where there is no permanence. To cease grasping, one must be able to see the world as it really is, and that, in turn, requires intensive training. He who has eyes, let him see. But one does not simply “have” the eyes. Correct sight is a matter of cultivation, which is the focus of Buddhist teachings on mental discipline.

29. *The Skill in Means (Upāyakaṣālya) Sūtra*, trans. Mark Tatz (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), p. 74.

What we commonly call “meditation” in English is *bhāvanā* in Sanskrit, “cultivation” or “mental culture.” *Bhavana* has two aspects: mental quiescence and liberative insight. The former can be thought of as a skill or craft, and is not specific to Buddhism. In fact, Shakyamuni’s biographies record that he learned the techniques of mental quiescence from other teachers. Insight, by contrast, is uniquely Buddhist, for it is the fruit of a controlled mind that focuses on Buddhist truths. To gain insight, one begins with a mind that is tranquil and imperceptible, on the one hand, but supple and alert, on the other. Thoroughgoing insight into reality requires a mind that can focus on a mental image or idea with complete clarity and without wavering. The teachings of quietude promote this intense ability to concentrate, commonly spoken of as “one-pointed consciousness.” The elements of the Noble Eightfold Path associated with mental discipline — correct effort, correct mindfulness, and correct concentration — are grouped together because these three are necessary factors for the stabilization of the mind.

In order to describe the processes of concentration associated with undistracted quiescence, Buddhists rely on a cosmological model. The contemporary imagination conceptualizes the universe as a series of exponentially increasing magnitudes of space, expanding from home to city to country to planet to solar system to galaxy to galactic cluster to supercluster. The ability to apprehend or study these domains requires increasingly powerful and sensitive instruments. Similarly, meditative concentration brings the mind into ever deeper inner worlds within inner worlds. The processes of concentration begin by fixing attention upon a material object such as a circle of color or the sensation of one’s own breath in the nostril. This object merely serves as a convenient basis for stabilizing the mind. Success is first achieved when one is able to quiet the random distractions that carry the untamed mind this way and that. Although concentration techniques begin with material objects, the gross material world falls away when one-pointed awareness is attained. The mind, stable in itself, moves beyond the senses to a state of mental activity that focuses on the awareness of the awareness of a material object. This is called the first stage of trance (*dhyāna*). This trance is an enstatic state: one has penetrated the inner reaches of the material world. Beyond this trance are three more, each attained through ever deepening concentration. By penetrating the awareness of materiality, one attains a second level of trance, characterized by effervescent joy; the third level moves one beyond joy into stable bliss, and the fourth trance brings one to a place of absolutely stable equanimity. But this is not the end of the inner cosmos. Beyond these four trances are four levels of existence utterly detached from all materiality: infinite space, infinite consciousness, absolute nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-nonperception. This final trance, neither-perception-nor-nonperception, brings one to the edge of samsara, the very