

Avatamsaka: Little Pilgrim

A Buddhist Fantasy

by
Ko Un

Translated by
Brother Anthony of Taizé
with Young-moo Kim

Contents

Little Pilgrim	4
1. Dawn over the Son River	4
2. The little pilgrim's first steps	6
3. Night at Ajay ferry	8
4. Climbing the mountain.....	10
5. Alone beside the Brahman Sea	13
6. One grain of sand.....	16
7. The Eight Sorrowful Precepts.....	19
8. Kina Monastery	22
9. Seiya returns to life.....	25
10. An old, blind woman sings a sad song	28
11. A twelve-years-long journey	31
12. Love in the mist	34
13. The sleep I produce	37
14. Twelve years of dreams	40
15. The Valley of Fire	43
16. Maitrayani dances.....	44
17. Eyes like a lotus.....	48
18. Journey to Shramanamandala	51
19. Two boys together	54
20. A generous welcome	57
21. The eater of ashes	60
22. No meeting without first parting	64
23. Every song yields a flower.....	66
24. With Iryon again.....	70
25. Tell the mountain.....	72
26. Travelling with the past.....	75
27. Make-believe executions	78
28. Free yourself from life and death	81
29. Your light's tomb	84
30. Journey down an eternal river	87
31. In quest of Nandihara	90
32. Sumera and Sanuita	97
33. Sunlight Park	101
34. A hairy fellow	108
35. The song of Avalokiteshvara	113
36. Cloud-net the giant	119

37. The Place of Enlightenment.....	124
38. The goddess of night	129
39. Love in the clouds	133
40. A cloud rising from every pore	138
41. Liberation in singing and dancing	143
42. The thirty-seventh teacher	148
43. A mountain demolished, wisdom comes	153
44. Night spirits and night	159
45. Journey through the void	162
46. Returning northward	165
47. Gopa	170
48. Back in the north	174
49. Kapilavastu	179
50. In Indra Heaven	184
51. Vishwamitra.....	188
52. Shilpabhijna's lesson	189
53. Crossing rivers.....	193
54. Fresh water for the thirsty	197
55. A night with Ajitasena	201
56. After Shivaragra	205
57. A teacher from the next world.....	210
58. Meeting while far apart.....	213
59. One drop of water in the sea	217
60. For the unknowing world.....	223
Author's Afterword	227
A note on the names.....	228
A note on the Buddhist terminology	233
Index	233

Translator's Note

While he was still a Buddhist monk, Ko Un began to write this fantasy version of the story of the wanderings of little Sudhana. The story comes from the *Gandavyuha*, which is found at the end of the great *Avatamsaka Sutra*. In 1969 he published the first portion of the story under the title 어린 나그네 *Little Pilgrim / Traveller*. Soon after, he became a leading spokesman in the national resistance to the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee, before being imprisoned during the coup staged by Chun Doo-hwan in May 1980. On being released from prison in 1983 he married and moved away from Seoul. He then returned to the unfinished story and the completed version was published in 1991 as 화엄경 *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Some time after that, Ko Un met the famous Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, who expressed interest in having the translated story published by his movement's press, Parallax Press, in Los Angeles. The press agreed and I translated the whole of Ko Un's long story, with its mass of technical Buddhist terminology. It was felt that Ko Un's text was in need of intense editing if it was to speak to an American readership. I duly produced an edited version which was then polished by the press's own editor.

The edited version *Little Pilgrim* published in 2005 by Parallax Press was almost one third shorter than the Korean edition. The original, unedited translation remained in my files and now that the published edition has long been out-of-print, with no prospect of a new edition, I am putting online the full text as Ko Un wrote it and I translated it. Its lengthy period of writing is reflected in the very different stages of Sudhana's journey, which owe virtually nothing beyond some of the names to the *Gandavyuha*. It is essentially a kind of Bildungsroman. The early chapters reflect Ko Un's youthful, romantic, sensual exuberance. The central portion is marked by a form of "social Buddhism" while the later sections depend on the more complex, intellectual aspects of Buddhist philosophy.

Perhaps the main interest of the work is its presentation in narrative form of Buddhist doctrines which defy chronological ordering. There are few truly Buddhist novels of any kind, and Ko Un's work is in many ways a modern fantasy, rather than a standard novel.

Avatamsaka: Little Pilgrim

1. Dawn over the Son River

The river was beginning to loom into view beyond a cluster of hibiscus trees hanging in a kind of drunken stupor. It flowed hurriedly onward in the early morning light, the sound of its rippling subdued. For little Sudhana, that glimpse of the river constituted his first awareness of the world as he regained consciousness.

“He's coming back to life. . . he's alive!” Manjushri rejoiced. The child had been rescued the evening before, as he came floating close to the river bank. All night long, the aged pilgrim had kept watch beside him on the sandy shore of the vast triangular reach where the Son River united with another river before flowing down to join the Ganges.

“The world's all dark,” Sudhana murmured, “the Himalaya's snowy peaks must have died!” He gazed toward the river in the dim light of early dawn. Manjushri's companions were busily rolling up the tents of their little encampment.

“This little fellow knows all about snowy peaks! Ha ha, mountains dying! Who ever heard of such a thing?” Asvajit asked, in his usual skeptical tone. The bodhisattva Manjushri stayed silent for a moment, then replied: “A child knows everything, just as a river at dawn knows everything. The reeds and trees along the banks of the Son know that the far-off Himalayas are dark. To know one grain of the sand on this shore is to know the whole universe.” He spoke in a low voice, as if eager not to interrupt the river's murmur.

* * * *

They were in the northern regions of what is now called India. All the nation's frontiers and fortresses were in a state of unprecedented alert. King Virudhaka had determined to wipe the entire Shakya clan of Kapilavastu from off the face of the earth. The barbarity with which he conducted his campaigns had left the shores along the tributaries of the Ganges littered with corpses, all the farmland laid waste, every building razed. Toppled fortifications lay spread across the region, walls that had taken generations to build. Every night the ruins rang with fearful screams; theft, rape, and murder had become commonplace among those who survived.

The whole Son River Valley was once a thick forest of sal trees but they had all been burned to ashes. One day, in the estate deep inside the sal forest where he had been born, Sudhana's nurse had bound him to a raft made out of some bits of rough wood and set him floating down the river. Sudhana's entire family had perished in the flames that consumed their great manor house. Only the nurse escaped, with Sudhana. She hid him in her old home for a while, before finally taking refuge in the rushes down beside the stream.

* * * *

“What's your name, Grandad? I'm called Sudhana.”

The aging Manjushri rejoiced as he contemplated the bright-eyed child.

“I'm called Manjushri.”

“Do you live near here? Why is there no hair on your head?”

“I always live by the roadside.”

“By the roadside? With no house?”

“No; my home is in the sleeping fields, under the sleeping trees, beside the sleeping river.”

* * * *

It had all begun the evening of the day before, as Manjushri was admiring the spectacular sunset. He had once seen the Buddha himself touched by the beauty of a sunset, and he was seized with emotion at that memory. The tragic beauty of sunset, that ultimate beauty, gave him yet deeper faith in the truth of the Sage's words: All things vanish in splendor.

All things in themselves are evanescent. With the recognition of that truth, the sight of the sunset profoundly affected the seventy-two year old Manjushri. Just then Parthivi had come rushing up. He fell on his knees in front of the aged sage, rose, and stood pointing towards the river. Manjushri went off after Parthivi with the slow steps of an old pilgrim. The monsoons had set in and the river had swollen, spreading wide beyond its banks. It was flowing very fast. Darkness was spreading over the twilight Son basin.

“Over there, Master!”

The ever-faithful Parthivi pointed towards the sandy shore further along the river's edge. They moved in that direction. The plank-built craft was no masterpiece of shipbuilding, to be sure, but it was sturdy enough, more reliable than a simple skiff, at least. Yet the little boy who lay tied on top of it seemed to be dead.

“I saw it being swept down, so I swam out and brought it in. I could hear a faint sound of crying coming from the boat, you see. And look. . . he's still breathing!”

“Ah, what a jewel of a child! Let's carry him into the quiet of the camp. He needs to be cared for.”

This they duly did, and Manjushri's companions spent the whole night striving to restore Sudhana to life. Before he had fully regained his strength, Sudhana asked in the ringing tones of the Son valley dialect, so clear his voice seemed to pierce the air: “Where am I, Grandad?” His bewilderment was only natural, for his nurse had waited until he was asleep before sending him floating downstream. No wonder he wanted to know where he was.

“Well,” Manjushri gently explained, “this is a sandy beach at the lower end of the Son River. I was here only once before myself, about ten or so years ago. But the fighting hasn't reached here, so it's quiet. In the days to come, we're hoping to care for people who have suffered from the war.”

“Grandad, I want to go home. There's plenty to eat there, and lots of slaves, and elephants to ride on. Where am I?”

The old man had an inner vision of Sudhana's house. First he saw a palatial mansion built of stone blocks carted down from mountain quarries, filled with every kind of treasure; then it turned into a heap of smoking rubble. He opened his eyes and the vision faded, giving place to Sudhana's face.

“No,” he said, “there's no call for you to go back there. I'll show you the way you must go.” He pulled him to his feet. Only a moment before, Sudhana had looked as though he could barely stagger, yet now, astonishingly, he had regained his full health and strength. Manjushri rejoiced again.

“Look at that old sal tree branch. In a mysterious manner, that branch is showing you the way. That is the way you must go, Sudhana.”

The Sage bowed towards the tree with joined hands, then gave Sudhana a gentle shove in the back, as if pushing a boat off from the shore. Morning broke, and Sudhana the orphan found himself alone in the world.

Go. See that branch pointing the way.

Trees know the past, and they tremble in the wind.

Follow the way their branches point.

2. The little pilgrim's first steps

For all his warm and generous heart, the old man abandoned Sudhana there, in the middle of a completely empty beach. The way he was abandoned overwhelmed Sudhana with intense loneliness, but the aged Manjushri in his wisdom knew that Sudhana had received a solemn mission: he was to experience life in the world entirely on his own.

The Son River came flowing down through vast stretches of swamp, yet the sand on the beach was bright and clean. The fateful branch of that morning's sal tree was casting a clear shadow across the sand. The branch's shadow was pointing toward Ajay Ferry, where the roads from Rajgir, Jetavana, Magadha, Koshala, and Chaldadu met before turning north and west along the Ganges and on towards other kingdoms. So Sudhana set off in the direction indicated by the tree, and pursued his path weeping, his loneliness glowing warm between the tears.

Strange to say, from that moment onwards Sudhana could never recall anything that had happened in his life before he encountered Manjushri. All his past had been blotted out by the few words that the bodhisattva had whispered in his ear as he pushed him away along the path he was to follow: "We'll surely meet again". Those words remained with him, a secret imbedded deep in Sudhana's infant heart.

Houses lay in ruins along the roadside, and in places the oleander trees of the wind-breaks had toppled, but the road stretched into the distance, white and endless. Beyond the grassy plains, it continued as far as Ajay ferry, a flourishing center of civilization in those days, the main trading-point for the whole lower Ganges Valley. There were normally huge flocks of tropical birds here but the recent fighting had driven the birds to seek other havens; all that remained were a few black-headed herons, perched on one leg near muddy pools in the fields, distracted and dazed. Even when Sudhana threw stones at them, they would merely flap one wing idly, making no effort to fly away.

Sudhana soon sensed new energy flowing through his limbs. He set out through the vast, midday solitude. Nobody was in sight as far as the horizon in any direction, and after a while he felt he was the only person alive in the world. No longer crying, he began to strike up a friendship with the road; he even started to talk to the various objects along the roadside. He addressed a tree:

"Tell me, tree: I'm almost ten, but you're at least fifty; so why are you still like a child?"

"While I'm with you, I'm nine years old too."

"Do you know the Himalayas?"

"No. But I know all the animals hereabouts. They gather here and howl when the moon rises."

A big yellow flower hanging on one branch of the neighboring tree, intervened.

"You two're having a nice time. Let me play with you, too."

Abruptly, a palm tree across the road spoke up and scolded the other trees sharply :

"Stop! There's someone waiting for Sudhana in the camel trainer's house at Ajay ferry. Go quickly. If you stay here, you'll get caught in the monsoons!"

At that, all the other trees, all the leaves, the flowers and grass in the fields, even a grasshopper sitting beside a dead snail's shell, urged Sudhana to hurry:

"Go quickly! Go quickly!"

"Very well," he replied, "trees, holy trees, until we meet again, goodbye."

As he set off along the road, Sudhana gazed towards Ajay ferry, that lay not so far ahead. The wind bore toward him a smell compounded of a mixture of human griefs and joys -- poverty, disease and cares, with the laughter of young girls who laugh for no reason, and many other things -- as he hastened on towards the sweetness.

* * * *

It was early evening by the time Sudhana arrived at Ajay, where all the fruit on the trees hung glowing green. Candles were guttering on the street-side stalls, and every street seemed to leap and dance by their light. There were so many trees everywhere! Slow, plaintive melodies rang out, sacred scriptures sung to harp accompaniments. Cows wandered aimlessly along the evening streets. He went on, looking for the camel-trainer's house down near the ferry landing, where the sound of the river was loudest. Candles burning here and there inside the houses kept the darkness at bay. The night was being forced back, pierced with shining holes. Arriving at the house, Sudhana stood at the gate, unable to speak on account of the stillness of the light that filled the wide courtyard.

*Darkness does not linger
but wanders to and fro.
Flowing from dark frangipani leaves,
the darkness becomes
the whole world's light and dark.
Darkness is the wheel of darkness,
all the world is the wheel of the world,
as darkness wanders to and fro, here and there.*

Squatting in front of the flickering candles, little Sudhana closed his eyes for almost the first time since he had opened them that morning and seen the venerable old Manjushri, and they filled with wandering darkness.

3. Night at Ajay ferry

The garden was enclosed by a living fence composed of bamboos and sal trees; it was drenched in the rich scent of sal flowers. Someone was weeping, a young girl by the sound of it, but that soon ceased. "Is anybody there?" Sudhana called out towards the light-filled courtyard, "is anyone home?"

The Son could clearly be heard flowing nearby. A young girl emerged from a room, wearing a white sari that left one of her shoulders exposed. Night nestled on her brow, where the silver mark of Buddha had not yet been set. She saw Sudhana standing beside a sal tree.

"Is this the camel trainer's house?"

A little exclamation issued from her lips.

"You must be the child the Master sent? Am I right?"

She rejoiced, though tears still filled her eyes.

"Father has passed into nirvana. He was still breathing until a moment ago, waiting for you. . ."

Crossing the clean yard on bare feet, the girl led Sudhana to the room where her father lay dead. The room too was filled with the scent of flowers. The candles here were not fluttering, but shone humbly with a steady glow. The daughter introduced herself to Sudhana. Her name was Iryon; she was fourteen years old, already a young woman of dazzling beauty.

"Father was wounded in the side, resisting soldiers in the war; his wound wouldn't heal, and now he's dead. . . . Father entered into nirvana with his eyes open, hoping the promised child would come. Will you close his eyes, please?"

She bent gracefully and uncovered the body. The dead man's open, staring eyes were grotesque, but Sudhana closed them with a light gesture, and the body became just an ordinary corpse.

"It's nearly midnight. We must bring father to the riverside for cremation. The bearers have been sleeping, but they'll soon be here. Even without Manjushri's holy presence, you've arrived, so father's spirit will not be sad."

People could be heard approaching the house. Going out, they saw the bearers bringing a bier adorned with lotuses. Following the dead man's wishes, they omitted all the rites of the brahmans and simply loaded the body onto the bier, which set off with the little pilgrim leading the way. Walking behind the cart, the girl showed no sign of grief. Odd? Not really. Surely it is grief at death that is odd?

A single candle lit their way, burning with such intensity that it was not in the least dimmed by the fresh night breeze. Passing through the still crowded market area around the ferry point, they followed a dark path upstream along the river bank, moving through the night without waking any of the things that were asleep. Other workers had already arrived and pyres were burning brightly at the cremation site. All around the circular clearing, trees reared high into the night sky, forming a dense wall.

The old man's body was solemnly fetched down from the bier on which he believed he would be carried to the Pure Land of Amitabha. Sudhana shut his eyes. After a few minutes the smoke from the body formed a column rising towards the dense tree-tops. Iryon stood watching her father's cremation at a spot from which her lovely face was clearly visible in the firelight. The still hot bones were collected from the ashes, placed in a stone basin and reduced to powder. The workers left after gulping down the wine they had brought with them. Sudhana handed Iryon the casket holding her father's ashes.

"Come on. This must be scattered on the river. The Son has received the remains of this town's dead for centuries now."

"You mean we must go down to the shore?" Sudhana asked.

“No. First we'll go home and prepare things for the journey. You and I have somewhere to go today, a place father told me about before he died.”

Sudhana followed her. It was early morning by the time they reached the house. Reverently placing the box containing her father's ashes on a pedestal in the center of the yard, Iryon quickly went to her room and emerged carrying bundles that must have been prepared in advance. She got Sudhana to strap them to his back, while she took up the casket. Holding it on a level with her forehead, she blew out the candles that were still burning brightly here and there. The whole house grew dark.

Sudhana walked ahead, carrying a candle. The previous day he had covered ten miles and during the night he not slept a wink, yet now he felt full of energy, as if invisible pinions were bearing him on, despite the accumulated fatigue. They untied the rope holding a skiff to its mooring-post and got in. It was hard work crossing the dark river. Sitting astraddle in the boat, Iryon manipulated the oars with a skill that seemed to derive from long practice, nudging the nose of the boat back upstream whenever it began to turn downstream. She furled the oars and Sudhana handed her the casket. Since she was not rowing, the boat began to drift down on the current. Iryon opened the box by the light of the candle and sprinkled handfuls of the dust it contained on the water, then sent the empty box floating away too. The ashes slowly mingled with the stream.

The girl spoke to Sudhana, reflecting the beauty of the light shining across the water: “Now father is united with the Son. The Son is nirvana.” As she rowed, Sudhana snuggled close against her breast and enquired, “Where are we going? Aren't we going home?”

“We've left home, just like father. There's a place father told me about.”

The night began to withdraw from the river. They heard foxes barking; a swarm of fireflies approached across the water and vanished toward the distant shore. The river grew wider as dim light spread all over it. Low down in the sky above the plains to the east, the pink of dawn was peeping from between clouds shaped like fearsome blades; the newborn morning seemed to be bringing great sorrows in its train. A few fish rose to the surface, churned the water, and disappeared again. Iryon skillfully brought the skiff to the shore.

Unawares, Sudhana fell asleep. When he awoke it was already broad daylight and rain was falling. Along the wharves, women were up and about, drawing water. Iryon forced the still sleepy Sudhana to walk; he advanced more asleep than awake. They washed in a side-stream, then Iryon produced things to eat from the bag she had brought. Not looking at Sudhana, she spoke again: “Father asked me to tell you something. If you want to find the Truth, first you must meet the monk Meghashri in Sugriva Mountain. He asked me to be sure to tell you that, then he died.”

Sudhana responded as if a spirit was taking hold of him. He fired off a volley of questions: “Truth? Sugriva Mountain? Where's that?”

Iryon sprang to her feet. “If you go that way to the forest surrounding the city of Patna, there's a fork in the road. While we're on our way there, think carefully: is it to be the mountain, or me?” She pulled him to his feet and got him walking, like a mother teaching her infant child its first steps. “Look! The spot where the road divides!” They walked on towards it without any further words, each one absorbed in secret thoughts.

“What have you decided, little Sudhana?”

“I like you!” On hearing his reply she almost leaped for joy, but then he added, in a louder voice, “I'm going to the mountain. I want to learn what I don't know.” Her happiness faded. She took off a bracelet and handed it to him. “Off you go then. We'll meet here in two years' time. At the Fish Festival! I'm going to Rajgir to find the Crown Prince. Perhaps I'll marry him instead.”

She did not linger, but hurried away. Sudhana took the left-hand fork, leading towards the highlands. Far away, Sugriva Mountain towered, caught in a mass of clouds.

4. Climbing the mountain

Sudhana was resting at the foot of the mountain with a group of peddlers and hunters. One of the huntsmen, who had a hawk perched on his shoulder, called out: "Hey! How does a kid like you come to be travelling all alone?" He poured a measure of water from a leather pouch and gave it to Sudhana. As he drank, the hawk gazed at him without any animosity; it was older than he was and looked bigger too.

"I don't know," he replied curtly.

"Would you like to see my hawk fly?" Sudhana was interested in anything to do with the hawk, so he nodded. A cold smile appeared on the hunter's lips.

"This hawk has lived with me so long, it'll surely die with me. I think of it as my wife. It's caught me all sorts of birds and wild animals. Just take a look at the muscles here in my arm; all that comes from eating the meat this hawk has caught."

One of the peddlers, who had been playing a flute with no great skill, butted in: "A fine wife you've got, to be sure, hunter!" The old huntsman made no response but merely looked at Sudhana and shouted an order to the hawk in an unknown tongue. The hawk sprang from his shoulder and went soaring off, its wings stirring up a breeze like that from the fans around an Empress's throne. The hawk drew their eyes higher and higher, rising until at last it seemed poised, a single dot, motionless in the void. Its owner looked smug and murmured:

"That's fine, fine! But sometimes it goes even higher, until these old eyes of mine lose sight of it altogether. There are times when I leave it flying high above and go on; a few days later, while I'm walking along a road in some quite different place, it'll suddenly land on my shoulder. It never fails to catch something, even if it's only one small chick."

"How many years have you and the hawk been together?" Sudhana asked. "For a long time, now. The year my wife died, I was in the forest at Kari; it had hurt its wing and was flapping around on the ground so I caught it, cared for it, then tamed it."

The hawk shifted its position in the sky high above them, came hurtling to the ground not far away, then rose again. All the power of the hawk was expressed in that movement. It brought them a wild hen in its talons. The hen's comb was already drooping, its eyes were covered with a kind of white membrane, but it was still alive. As soon as its master had taken its prey, the hawk flew lightly into the branches of a dwarf gum-tree nearby and perched there.

"Let it go free, mister!"

"What did you say, boy?"

"It's wrong to kill wild animals. We all live together. Don't we?"

This last question was shouted at the hawk. He snatched the hen away from the man and hugged it to his breast.

"Hey, hawk. While you're around, this hen'll be scared. Get away from here."

At once the hawk spread its wings and flew off, sending a few leaves fluttering to the ground; the hunter and the peddlers were dumbfounded. Sudhana put the hen down. It glanced fearfully around, then scuttled away, tottering on wobbly legs.

"You know how to talk to hawks, too! Where did you learn that kind of magic? You sneaky little rascal!"

The hunter addressed Sudhana with greater circumspection than before, but there was hostility in his attitude. Sudhana braced himself: "From now on that hawk will go flying after truth, it won't kill any more animals." On hearing that, the hunter sprang up and dealt him a blow that knocked him to the ground. He went on to deal similar blows to each of the peddlers in turn, sending them all sprawling.

"You bastards!" the furious hunter cried, "Darling! Sweetheart! You bitch! Come back here, at once, come back or I'll. . .!" and he went running off in the direction the hawk had gone.

“Hey! This fellow's special!” one peddler exclaimed, “Let's get out of here before he brings a curse down on us!”

Luckily, some of them knew Sudhana's native dialect. The hunter had known only a few words of it, while some of them spoke it fluently. The road reached the mountain, and Sudhana parted company with the peddlers, who were heading for a pass. He began to climb a sheer path that rose almost vertically up the cliff; the valleys grew deep, ridges towered aloft.

“Why doesn't Meghashri come down into the world with all its suffering, put wrong things right, serve as guide to the wretched? What's the point of being all alone up in the clouds? I really can't understand grown-ups at all!”

As he approached the midway plateau, completely exhausted, the mist grew thicker; not really mist, but the clouds that always shroud Sugriva Mountain. He touched the silver bracelet circling his wrist. He felt lonely, afraid.

“Where are you, Iryon? Did you marry the Prince?”

He was so weary that he had no idea how long he had been wandering in the clouds. He wept, thinking of Iryon that he had left behind. He called her, afraid of the mist, but the clouds only swallowed his voice. He climbed frantically upwards. The cloud-belt ringing Sugriva Mountain ended not far from the spot where Sudhana finally collapsed. In the sleep that came to him there he dreamed of Iryon. He saw her beauty; her dazzling flesh was veiled in thin silk.

He woke to feel something clawing at his shoulder. It was the hawk! It struck him once more on the shoulder with its wings, then flew up into the air. He slowly came to himself. Below, all was wrapped in an ocean of clouds; above him soared the mountain's five great peaks, jutting sharply into the cold blue sky. He rose with new energy flowing through his veins. The hawk guided him from above, slowly moving ahead of him. Sudhana felt that its guidance was something sacred.

“Thank you, dear hawk, thank you!”

He climbed each of the first three peaks that towered above the highest point of the plateau, but Meghashri was nowhere to be seen. He lost hope. He stared up at the hawk, as it too looked for the monk. All at once, it flapped its wings and flew like an arrow straight toward the foot of the fourth peak. Seeing that, Sudhana exclaimed, “Saved!” and climbed on despite the wounds on his legs caused by falling rocks. At some point in his climb, the hawk left him. Sudhana discovered that the path up the fourth peak was unlike the others. They had been nothing but ordinary mountain tracks, while here there were stairways of piled rocks at intervals along the way. The path wound up across the high cliff that formed the base of the northern face of the mountain's main peak and ended in a huge cave.

A white vapor wafted gently from the mouth of the cave, rather like the beard of some ancient mountain spirit. The old monk, however, was not inside the cave but seated in the lotus position on a pedestal placed in front of it, plunged in deep meditation. Sudhana called out, “Master!” There was no reply. He wondered if it wasn't perhaps a statue and threw a stone that struck the monk's chest. He merely opened his eyes and glared at Sudhana, who had endured such great torments to reach him.

“The old camel-trainer's dead, Master!” No reply. “Master Meghashri?” “I heard you. Come on over here.” The stern expression melted into a warm smile. “You're a remarkable fellow, little Sudhana. Many have aspired to reach this place, yet only you have succeeded.”

“I've come to find the truth about everything, Master.”

“Right, but let's talk about all that stuff slowly, after we've had something to eat.” He giggled and at the same time made a whistling sound. As if in response to his call, a host of raccoons and squirrels, hares and unicorns, wolves, leopards, lizards, and wild horses emerged from the seemingly empty mountain-top stillness. Sudhana tried to hide behind the monk's tattered robes.

“It's alright. I call these my children.”

The animals produced a collection of chestnuts, mangoes, and the fruit that gives longevity, which they had brought clasped in their hooves or gripped in their teeth. They had food in abundance. Meghashri, Sudhana, with several of the animals, retired into the cave for the night when the vast evening sky was hung with stars. There they lay down to sleep.

“Everything in this world is sacred. All things are truth and teachers of truth. These animals asleep beside us are your masters, too.”

Sudhana had no sooner heard these words than he fell asleep. The next morning the animals had gone, leaving only the two of them.

“Where did they go?” he enquired.

“They've either gone to the meadows lower down, or up to the high ridges, Sudhana. Why don't you go and spend some time with them?”

“Won't they gobble me up?”

The old monk laughed and shook his head. Sudhana took his morning meal of fruit and water, then ran out in search of freedom in the marvelous beauty of the high, pure mountain.

5. Alone beside the Brahman Sea

Sugriva Mountain is rugged and harsh; its icy upper reaches are so bleak that even alpine plants find it hard to flourish there. The tedious life of utter solitude led by Meghashri was very hard to understand, for sure. Yet little Sudhana grew accustomed to it after being with the old hermit for only a few days.

“Teach me! Teach me something!” Sudhana would wheedle, but already the old monk's eyes would be closed, and he would sit plunged in deep meditation for the rest of the day. Apart from the mere fact of spending the days together, Meghashri never taught Sudhana anything. Yet Sudhana absorbed each and every thing that emanated from the monk, like a chicken pecking eagerly at scattered grain. After all, if you spend a long time with a person, you gradually become one with them. Once wine has matured, it becomes fragrant; its scent travels far and permeates deep into everything around. Meghashri's whole being had so matured that not only Sudhana but even the mountain highland mists were affected by the truth emanating from him.

When Sudhana tickled Meghashri's back with an elm twig and begged, “Teach me!” he would shout: “You little mustard seed of a brat! What could I ever teach you? Look at those hills and clouds, look at those red and green plains beneath the clouds. Look your fill! Look until you can't close your eyes even when you sleep, until you eyes are gone for ever. Heaven and earth are beautiful, aren't they?”

His shouting gushed out like water forcing its way through a barrier, then he sealed his lips again with equally profound significance. In those moments, Sudhana had the impression that it was not Meghashri speaking, but a spokesman declaiming a message on his behalf then vanishing again. Without being taught, Sudhana learned many things from the monk's silence.

The wind blowing over the mountain often turned into a veritable tornado, the birds and animals living there, even the smaller rocks, found themselves whirled up into the air. When the gardenia flowers blossomed, a special gardenia wind blew; not a single petal fell to the ground, they were all swept up into the sky and their scent mysteriously filled the air. Once, Sudhana was whirled up into the air by such a wind, but luckily he escaped with only minor injuries. One day, when the gardenia wind was over, Meghashri found himself obliged to cut off a little toe, that had been festering for quite a while, using a knife of his own making.

“It hurts a bit. . . I've got nothing to teach you. I once met a noisy drunkard called Sagaramegha at an inn down on the river, you ought to go and look for him. My truth isn't a touch on his. He's a remarkable old fellow, not a day dawns but he's sobering up from the night before. . . . Yes, it hurts. It hurts just a bit.”

He spoke indifferently. Sudhana still had no intention of leaving Meghashri: “I don't want to go! I won't! Up here I feel like I'm way above everyone else.”

“You little rascal!” The monk's eyebrows were trembling as he spoke, “You little mustard seed of a brat! What a fool!” He handed him a slip of paper with a few words written in Sanskrit, then landed him a wild kick with the foot from which he had just removed the little toe. Sudhana went sprawling.

In reality, the little pilgrim did not resent being kicked out like that. On the contrary, he had already made up his mind to leave. Now he knew which way to go. The great difference between his ascent and his descent was the difference between not knowing the way and knowing the way. The road dropped down the slope at the end of the plateau and stretched across the southern plains. He walked on for a time, then turned his head. How remarkable! At first, whenever he looked back, there had been the eternal soaring fastnesses of Sugriva Mountain comforting him with their mysterious beauty; but now the mountain had vanished!

All around, as far as the eye could see, was an endless expanse of grasslands.

Sudhana began to feel lonely again, but there was no one he could turn to for company. Holding Meghashri's message tight against his breast, becoming more adult with the help of the solitude, Sudhana murmured an incantation to the wind that he had heard Meghashri reciting to himself.

The few days spent in the mountain had given Sudhana sufficient strength for his long journey; he walked with no effort. Even in the midst of the darkness that began to spread at sunset from the western forests across the plain, he walked on and the road remained obediently beneath his feet. The presence of this child, walking onwards even in his sleep, seemed to send the night itself to sleep.

* * * *

He travelled on for three days and nights, with only brief moments of rest, until the sea loomed before him. During the journey he slept in dry fields of reeds, covered with dried lotus leaves, or rested under trees. Now, here he was on this path beside a sea covered with myriads of tiny waves. The sea was indigo, with a single boat floating on it. As the little craft drifted closer to the shore, it became apparent that the sail was in tatters. It looked as if they had only just managed to make land after being caught in a violent storm.

"Ahoy, there!" Sudhana took off the white turban he was wearing and waved it. The ship was heading for a natural breakwater that Sudhana had yet to reach. He hurried towards it. A man climbed out of the boat; he was young and on his shoulders he was carrying an old man apparently at death's door. He lowered him to the ground in a bare stone-built hut close to the landing.

"Where have you come from?" Sudhana asked. But the young man had split open a coconut and was holding it for the old fisherman to sip the milk, not even looking round. It was the old man who noticed Sudhana first.

"Who are you? Where did you come from, child?"

"I've come from Sugriva Mountain."

"And where are you going now?"

"I don't know. I'm on my way to look for an old drunkard called Sagaramegha. Do you know who he is?"

"No. I only know the sea, nothing else. My grandfather and my father, they both died at sea, you know."

Sudhana pulled out Meghashri's paper and showed it to them.

"Hum. . . Why this is the kind of writing that I learned as a child. Let me see, now. . . Hum. Hereby. . . yes, 'hereby receive three tonic pills from this child Sudhana. I gave him three pills' worth of health, help, and dreams, so this child will take the value of three pills off your drink bills.' That's what it says! Oh, ha ha ha!"

The old fisherman, who had narrowly escaped death at sea, laughed until his sides ached after he had read the note; the youth did the same. Unexpectedly, the young fisherman spoke up, "I have heard of Sagaramegha. He lives in the desert not far from Sagaramukha city but he's all the time away from home, always on the move."

Sudhana was startled to hear him. It seemed that Sagaramegha must have been guiding him! Sagaramegha! That was it! He must find Sagaramegha! The youth looked up at the boat's sail and spoke: "He's been living there for twelve years now, in a house out in the desert near Sagaramukha; I hear he just sits, staring at the sea. I've never seen him. They say he's always drinking and that if he runs out of wine, he throws a handful of sand into the sea; then the whole ocean turns into wine and he laps it up. I've heard that when the sea is wrapped in darkness or whipped up by a storm, he roars at it like a lion, all night long. . . I plan to meet him some time, too. I'll take you to the harbor at Sagaramukha tomorrow in our boat."

The next morning Sudhana took leave of the old man and sailed off with the youth

towards Sagaramukha. He had replaced the old torn sail by a new one made of white hemp.

All things, once humbled, become the sea and all things, once humbled, become waves on the sea to which the heavens are ever descending . . .

The midday sea! The clouds were as white as arsenic, while the sea was so blue it seemed resolved to color all the innermost recesses of Sudhana's body a deep indigo. The sunlight poured down, turning the innumerable crests of the dark blue waves into flashing blades and splintered mirrors. Behind the city walls rose white domes, watchtowers, and roofs. They were arriving at Sagaramukha, whose name means Ocean Door.

6. One grain of sand

As the young fisherman's boat sailed on, Sudhana gazed at the extraordinary spectacle of the shore and opened his heart to the first stirrings of the monsoon, for a sea-breeze had begun to blow from the south.

“Look! There are sea-birds following us over there!”

“They always do. Those birds know me well. Yesterday, before I ran into that storm out in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, they warned me by wheeling around my ship's mast. It sounds as if this is your first time at sea?”

“My first time at sea. . . . You know, out at sea like this, human beings seem very small. People appear insignificant, compared with the sea and the sky.”

The youth first made the sail a bit more taut, then turned the bar to change the boat's direction. Once the youth felt happy with the way the sail was taking the wind, he relaxed, grasped a long spear and plunged it into the water. A few moments passed. As the boat sailed on, they saw a great silver fish flapping on the surface, pierced by the spear. The young fisherman drew it up, scraped off the scales and cut it into thin slices; then he opened his monkey-leather pouch and produced some salt that he sprinkled on the raw fish.

“Eat up. You won't come across anything as tasty as this again. Eat your fill.” They devoured the fish with gusto.

“Why do people kill fish and eat them?”

“All life is the fruit of death. But here we are, little pilgrim! We've almost reached Sagaramukha; get ready to disembark!”

Floating in the harbor they could see a host of sailing ships, skiffs, and rafts. On board the ships, sailors were dancing exotic dances and singing incomprehensible tunes. Sudhana was arriving in a land where he could not understand the language. It made him feel nervous. The young fisherman brusquely pointed out the direction of the desert beyond the city walls where Sagaramukha was living, abandoned his hitherto kindly attitude, and turned the boat back in the direction they had come from.

Sudhana found himself alone on an unfamiliar harborside. The city itself lay some way away from the landing, which formed a flourishing market village of its own; there, products from every part of the country were brought and traded. It was crammed with jewels and cereals, exotic fruits, fish from the sea, meat from the mountain regions, bamboo wares, musical instruments, carpets from central Asia, beautiful female slaves, all kinds of perfumes, incense, herbal tonics, and much more besides. The market was the place where life happened.

A fruit vendor shouted at Sudhana to buy her wares, then tossed him a sweet fruit and told him to eat it, using the Garinga dialect that he could not understand. If you ignored the scar on her face, she was a very beautiful, desirable woman. Taking the fruit, Sudhana headed westward towards where Sagaramukha lived. The market and lanes around the harbor formed a large town of their own, and no matter how hard he walked, it was some time before the end appeared.

Finally, Sudhana emerged from the port's crowded market area. The desert began on the far side of a strip of land occupied by sparse plantations of coconut trees, followed by stagnant marshlands. The desert was hot, even in the evening. The soles of Sudhana's little feet were scorched by the hot sand, in spite of being protected by shoes made of wild boar leather from Sugriva Mountain.

The desert shone white and infinitely still. Strewn with crab shells and conches, it stretched sparkling as far as the distant coast. Sudhana turned his back on the last glories of lingering twilight that had been floating on the darkening sea, and finally reached Sagaramukha's cabin. It was built of lumps of volcanic basalt; the doors had fallen off and lay

scattered by the sea.

“Is there anyone home? Is the venerable Master Sagaramegha at home?”

There was nobody inside the hut, nothing but the bones of a dead bird strewn in one corner of the sandy floor; it could hardly be called a room, it was a mere open-sided shelter. Still, it was all solid stone walls except for the doorway, and that kept it from being as hot as the desert outside. A wine flask was hanging on one wall; it was empty, except for a faint odor of liquor.

“Where can he have gone?”

Sudhana fell into despair although Sagaramegha's house had not seemed the kind of place likely to inspire such feelings. Now he could not even deliver the message from Meghashri. He decided to spend the night there, mainly because he had no other ideas. There was no one to take care of the little pilgrim. The sound of the waves boomed loud. In the southern sky, a new moon had risen and was shining on the sea. Sudhana hummed to himself, then murmured, and finally began to cry. Light from the city's watchtowers could be seen in the distance, and the night sky was paler in the direction of the harbor market lights. But the stone house where Sudhana lay was still and dark as if dead.

At dawn, the sound of the waves fell asleep. Oddly enough, he awoke as soon as they were no longer audible. Their noise had not troubled his sleep but the stillness when the sound stopped woke him at once.

“Well, I never! Even though the venerable Sagaramegha isn't here, I've learned all that I was supposed to learn from him. This house is still his house, even if he's not at home. It's the body for a spirit that comes to dwell for a short moment in this world. The body is inhabited by the spirit, then falls vacant and rots away.”

This illumination came to him soon after he had drunk some water to quench his thirst. Sudhana fell asleep again. All the desert sands had started to weep in unison and their crying had lulled him back into a deep sleep.

The world is all sand and there are as many Buddhas and bodhisattvas as there are host upon host of grains of sand; in every space the size of a grain of sand on the seashore, or of one mustard-seed in the fields along the banks of the Ganges, hosts of Buddhas and bodhisattvas are offering themselves for the sake of every living being. Thus the sight of one grain of sand teaches me.

He was woken again by the morning light. Sudhana left the house without regrets; by spending one night there he had become an adult. He had gone about four miles across the desert when he felt something lumpy under his feet. He dug down into the sand and uncovered the body of a tramp stinking of wine.

“Venerable Sagaramegha?”

“Yes. How dare you wake me up?”

The body came alive and began to roar at Sudhana. A few days before, Sagaramegha had got completely drunk and before falling asleep he had covered himself with sand to keep warm. He had been absorbing the air contained in the sand while he slept.

“Where the hell are you going, you rascal? This desert'll make a skeleton of a mite like you in a flash. A fearless rascal you are, too, or perhaps just a rascal!”

Sudhana handed Sagaramegha the note from Meghashri. He made as if to throw it away, then unfolded it and peered at Sudhana.

“Mmm. . . This fellow Meghashri is a mean kind of friend! To think he's so scared of what effects karma (links of cause and effect) may bring! Why! Sending a little rascal like you to write off my debts? The rogue!”

While he was ranting in this manner, Sagaramegha showed brief signs of weariness but in a trice every last trace of it was dispelled and he tapped Sudhana on the shoulder.

“You little rascal! You're quite something, you know!”

Sagaramegha made Sudhana follow him in a direction completely different from his previous course, along the beach where waves came rushing in full of vigor, but left nothing more than a patch of weak foam behind them. He took a handful of sand that he tossed into the sea; one section of it turned into wine. It was quite extraordinary. He waded out into the water and began to drink.

“Hey, you rascal, come and drink, too! Drinking is the only thing you'll ever learn from me.” Sudhana took a mouthful, and walked on along the desert shore with the vagabond Sagaramegha, drunk and staggering slightly.

7. The Eight Sorrowful Precepts

Sagaramegha ate nothing, merely filled his empty stomach with liquor. Sudhana, too, had no chance to eat any of the dried fruit contained in his travelling bag but was obliged to travel onwards sustained only by mouthfuls from Sagaramegha's bottle.

"I'm drunk all the time. Liquor is fool's medicine. You can become a fool, too, if you drink. . . All Wisdom and the roots of Wisdom, the very roots of Compassion will die, your heart will be filled with utter Folly. Yet Folly too is like a Buddha's enlightenment."

"Did your Venerable Drunkenness ever meet Siddhartha walking along the shores of the Ganges?" Sudhana mentioned something he had heard from the monk Meghashri.

"Never. . . But he's not the only Buddha, you know; there have been others from ancient times, and in many ages in many worlds other than this. . . Hmmm, Siddhartha? If he's really the Buddha, he came into this world much too soon. . . He came without first getting rid of all the suffering, without abolishing sorrow. This is still a world of suffering, so the Buddha is a suffering Buddha too. But. . . the Buddha is not, was not in the beginning, and is innumerable, not one; I and you, we all are Buddhas."

Sudhana said nothing.

"Still, if he has come, he can't really have come too soon. When anything comes or appears, it comes when it has to come, appears when it has to appear. I feel bad today. I've drunk too much; my body isn't obeying orders. Rascal, just. . . give me. . . a hand."

The tipsy Sudhana walked on, supporting the drunken Sagaramegha's weight until they reached the desert's lowest point. There Sagaramegha collapsed. There was no one near, no sign of life. The desert formed a universe composed entirely of white sand, utter silence, a scorching space. Sagaramegha was dying. His fingers one by one, his hands, his arms, his feet, his shoulders, his waist, all were dying, until it was time for his breast, his mouth, and ears to die.

"If you cross this desert, you'll find the region of Sagaratira on the banks of the river Godabari. We've gone about four miles so you only have another two hundred or more to cover. There you'll find Kina, with the temple of Supratishthita, a most humble man. Take me there."

Sagaramegha did not survive so long. He had no sooner stopped talking than he became a lifeless corpse. Little Sudhana gazed around. All he could see in the desert valley were some bones half buried in the sand. He shook Sagaramegha, who had lost the smell of wine at death and was already beginning to smell rotten, but his rigid corpse showed no signs of movement. A corpse quickly rots in the fiery heat of a sandy desert. It rots in solitude, unvisited by even a single fly. Sudhana covered the body with sand. He took with him the wine-bottle that Sagarmegha had carried.

"Silly old sage. . ." he sniffed, "silly way of dying. . . he left his bottle behind and left this stupid place. . ."

Sudhana was faced with a very long journey. He thought of returning to Sagaramukha or its adjacent harbor, but the desert stretching around him seemed to be forbidding him to turn back.

"Let's get on. Let's go forward. Forward. There's a fine place out there ahead. It has clouds that can't be seen anywhere else, and heavenly flowers, and heavenly songs, and in the midst of it lives the ascetic Supratishthita in a temple set in the sky."

Little Sudhana had recovered from the effects of the wine; he gathered his wits and made a sign of reverence in the direction he was heading. In his heart he prayed to be guided.

* * * *

Sheltered by his prayer, he walked for six whole days. Luckily he experienced no sandstorms or those dreaded sandquakes. He was almost out of drinking water, so from his pack he

drew out a dew-cloth coated with gum and unfolded it to collect the great nighttime dew drops that were in reality the tears of the stars hanging clustered in the sky. So long as he did not sleep too late, he would find a few drops of dew collected in the hollow center of the cloth. If he slept late, though, they evaporated as soon as the sun rose.

Filled with new energy, he walked on for another three days. He saw dry lightning playing in the clouds. Despite all his efforts, it became harder and harder to resist the fatigue that threatened to bring him to his knees. Just then, Sudhana chanced to look towards the desert horizon, and noticed a long, drawn-out cortege snaking along. He went running towards it. It was one of the Garinga desert caravans, that set out directly across the great desert whenever traffic was interrupted by floods of the Manadonajay River. Some caravans were composed of camels, others of horses; the one Sudhana spotted was clearly a caravan of camels. Horses were quicker but might run short of food and water, whereas a caravan of camels was a moving oasis.

As he ran, Sudhana tore off his white turban and waved it. He collapsed before he could reach the band of travellers, but the wife of the caravan's leader dismounted, pulled him to his feet, and took him in her arms. Once he was mounted on a camel and had drunk some water, he soon regained his strength.

Sudhana experienced intense relief when the caravan finally arrived at the seaside town of Kina, with its green trees and bustling crowds, after the long desert crossing. He was freed from the great burden of the empty desert, that he seemed to have been carrying along with him for so long now. What new and lovely life! The soaring coconut trees, the sal tree flowers with their delicate scent, mysterious melodies played on unknown instruments, people greeting one another, laughing, the smell of living human bodies, and -- fresh water! After his long journey through the desert, Sudhana experienced all these things with a feeling close to tears.

He filled Sagaramegha's empty wine bottle with the pure fresh water. Henceforth, he would live on the road, knowing it to be his only true home. He would cling to no person, no moment of happiness, but frequent only the ways of one who walks the unending paths of the seeker of truth. No one could change Sudhana into someone else.

Sudhana slept deeply in one of the inns of Kina, but he could not forget the song he heard as he slept:

*I offer this flower,
I offer my love :
a flower that blooms then fades,
a flower that is lovely
but soon fades and dies.
As dew falls at sunset
the flower is lovely.
It only exists for that one moment.
I offer this flower.
I offer my love
Not something blooming for ever
but a flower that blooms then fades.*

Sung in a very soft voice and accompanied by the plucked strings of a lute, the words penetrated his sleep.

On rising next morning, Sudhana swept and cleaned the wide inn yard and the floor of the vast halls used for parties, in return for having been allowed to sleep there. Then he left. Sudhana should only have needed one day, starting out in the early morning, to reach the temple of the venerable Supratishthita but having missed his way and getting lost in the thick forest, he had a hard job finding the temple, although it was visible from the higher points of the woodland. When he finally reached the walls of the dilapidated monastery, he found the gates

tightly shut. As he stood fretting outside, flowers began to rain down from the sky, the clouds grew dazzlingly bright; Supratishthita and a whole train of devotees were returning to earth after a walk through the heavens. Sudhana was spellbound. He fell prostrate, stretched full length on the ground in reverence before the descending sage, who addressed him.

“The venerable Sagaramegha was my friend in many previous lives. He would drink while I sang. My songs moved the heavenly gods. I sang for his heart and when he drank, his heart was different from that of all the other drunkards in this world. So he entered nirvana out there in the desert?”

“How do you know that?”

“Ha ha! I knew you would come, that you'd come after overcoming all kinds of hardship. In future, Sudhana, you are destined to become the bearer of great truths for the world. My existence is so unconditioned that I can walk through the heavens, thanks to my wisdom in unhindered living. You will become like me, once your wisdom reaches a state where it is completely unhindered. Look at me. Look at me. Yet I don't even know what the eight Sorrowful Precepts are!”

He spoke warmly as he adjusted his robes.

8. Kina Monastery

The little pilgrim followed Supratishthita into the temple compound. The temple was an extraordinary place. It was divided into different sections, one for the highest monks, one for their assistants, another for the ordinary laity; it had one main shrine, and many rooms where devotees could practice meditation. Sudhana found a number of novices his own age who had left home to enter the monastic life. The venerable Supratishthita presented him to them.

“Did you really come from so far away? Did you come across the desert? Are you an infant Buddha?”

They were happy; they hoped to become his close friends. Their eyes were bright and clear, their skin was soft, their voices pure. He went with them to their clean quarters in the novitiate. After that, he had no chance to meet Supratishthita. For a devoted seeker of truth like Sudhana, with the thirst burning within him, the hours spent in the company of the young novices seemed like so much wasted time. Still, Sudhana easily returned to the ways of childhood he had so long lost sight of, sharing time with them without the least pretence or insincerity. They were busy learning by heart lines from ancient scriptures composed high up in the Himalayas, and they could already recite a good number. Moreover, it seemed that they were skilled in meditation.

When it was time for sleep, one of the novices came to Sudhana and pulled his pillow away. Sudhana's head hit the floor.

“Sudhana! Are you asleep already?”

“You aren't keeping the rules about sleep?”

Sudhana challenged the boy, whose name was Amidahwa; he was the wisest young monk in the novitiate, the bastard son of a merchant from the land of Chu, beyond the Himalayas. His face was white as snow, his eyes dark brown; a beautiful face. Sudhana followed him out into the dark moonless night. Cautiously they entered the temple's portrait hall.

“Come on. I've got something to show you,” Amidahwa whispered. In the portrait hall a candle, never allowed to go out, was glimmering faintly. Portraits of aged brahmans, devout and stern, were displayed along the walls of the hall's galleries. It was an eerie place. Amidahwa came to a halt before one of the portraits; unlike the others, it bore no halo.

“This brahman was an expert in astronomy and geography. I learned a lot from him until last year. If I failed to study properly, he used to flog himself. It hurt me as much as if I was being whipped. He was really an original teacher. And do you know, just before he went into nirvana, he told me something when we were alone together.”

“What was that?”

“He said that there is a huge lake hidden underneath this temple.”

“What?”

“Wouldn't you like to go down and visit that lake?”

Sudhana followed Amidahwa as he lured him on. Passing through the long galleries of the portrait hall, they crossed towards the oldest of the buildings. It dated from the very foundation of the temple, and was more deeply revered than any other part. Only the highest of the brahmans went there to offer special prayers and rituals alone; no one else could enter it without permission. Amidahwa made Sudhana swear not to tell anyone that they had been there. Utterly still and dark, the ancient shrine was like a treasure-chest hidden in the very heart of the temple. Passing through several rooms, they came to one where they pulled up the floorboards and a bitterly cold breeze came gusting up.

“Follow me! No one can see now if I light a candle,” Amidahwa said, and a flame sprang up, revealing his face. He transferred the flame from the tinderbox to a candle. They

cautiously set foot on a subterranean stairway that began immediately below the floorboards, and descended with a growing sense of tension. They continued on down for a long time. Once they reached the foot of the stairs, they found themselves in an open space and set out along a stone-paved path. That path led down into the far depths of the earth. Sudhana began to wonder if Amidahwa was not some kind of goblin. It felt as though they walked on until it was daybreak above ground.

“Sudhana! Sudhanananana!”

Amidahwa's cry rang out, only to be taken up and amplified in a great booming echo. Sudhana jumped.

“Shut your eyes!”

Sudhana duly shut them.

“Right. Now open your eyes.”

He opened them. “Ah!” he exclaimed. As Amidahwa had said, a lake lay spread before them, vast like a sea. He could not understand how the lake had been hidden by the darkness and had only appeared after he opened his eyes.

In the last of the worlds that had preceded this present world, the site of Kina temple had been a beautiful lake. When that world had been annihilated according to the laws of universal destruction, the lake had remained buried below the ground, surviving beyond its age into the present.

“My teacher discovered this lake; he told me about it just before he died. Not even Master Supratishthita knows about it yet.”

Again, the words reverberated loudly and were hard to understand. The lake was utterly dead. Its beauty was not that of the world above. There were no people in sight, no fish leaped in play, no trees grew thickly. Yet it was a beautiful lake. It was a fossil lake. A beautiful landscape of a former era, this lake surviving from the past was now forever dead.

Without warning, Supratishthita appeared in front of them.

“Why, Amidahwa, did you really think I was unaware of the existence of this lake? Of course I know about it. There's no halo painted on that teacher's portrait because he was too much attached to his lake; it cast such a cloud across his detachment and untrammelled freedom that he did not deserve the honor of a halo.”

He turned to Sudhana. “Keep on along the shore of this lake, and you'll find another way back to the upper world. Once there, make your way to Vajrapura. It has a neighborhood, the Healing Village, where a healer by the name of Megha is busy saving all those with leprosy and deformities, mad people and mad dogs too, as well as everyone suffering from fevers. You must visit him.”

Obedient to Supratishthita's command, Sudhana walked on along the shore of the lake on the stony path. His shadow stretched out over the water. Meanwhile Master Supratishthita and Amidahwa took the way leading back to their temple. The path beside the underground lake was as long as any road in the world above, and it wearied him. Sun and moon had left that world; it only shone with the dim luminescence emanating from those ancient ruins, a glow that scarcely sufficed to relieve the darkness. As he walked, Sudhana was amazed to discover a young girl, stretched out on the ground where a house had once stood.

“How weird! What can she be doing here?”

Sudhana had grown used to the lake's eerie stillness, but somehow he felt that the girl's presence was at odds with the reality of this underground realm.

“Can you understand what I say?”

The girl nodded. Her fine eyebrows outlined delicate eyes, from which hope had ebbed away until only despair remained. She was sick.

“I was born on the shores of this lake, the youngest daughter of a wealthy father, a doctor. But the kingdom of Indra became infected with a mysterious disease and many people

died; I should have died too. When all had been annihilated, the world of the kingdom of Indra came to an end, leaving me here like this. I was meant to die but I did not, and survived into this new world. I am sick with a disease that can never be cured. Tell me, what country are you from?"

"Well, I don't. . ." He felt ashamed, as he detected on her disease-ravaged face the traces of a very ancient beauty. "Come with me, up into the present world. I'm on my way to the world in which you are meant to be reborn."

Sudhana raised the girl up and set her on his back. She was so light that she added nothing to his weariness as he walked. Once laid on his back, she fell asleep. In the glow emanating from the lake and the pale glow seeping from between the rocks, their faces seemed to have lost every tinge of lively hue, but their hearts were filled with the bright tints of breaking day.

"We've made it! Look, there's daylight ahead!"

Sudhana breathed a sigh of relief as he encouraged her.

"Once we leave this lake behind, there's a doctor called Megha who can cure every disease. I'm on my way to meet him. You'll be able to get well there, too."

They climbed a flight of stairs for a long while. Finally they emerged from the doorway of a cellar. Waiting for them they found the stifling heat of the sunlit world and the nauseating stench of life with every kind of piercing noise. For a time they felt such pain that they seemed to have been struck blind and deaf; they had come back into the world. After setting the girl down, Sudhana gazed out at the vast cloud-covered city that he assumed must be Vajrapura. Neatly joined to the great walled city was a smaller city, with a third beside it, and trees could be seen growing thickly inside the city walls. The country was prosperous.

"Come on!"

The girl's body had been like a fossil but now life had returned to it, and for the first time she hesitated to let Sudhana carry her. Her face was beautiful. She had a small scar like a slight wrinkle on one side of her broad forehead. They entered the third of the cities. Vajrapura seemed to have enjoyed great good fortune and to be overflowing with an ancient peace.

"This must be the place; the country where I'm to be reborn, I mean!" the girl rejoiced.

Sudhana opened his eyes wide. "What do you mean?"

He was amazed to see her becoming more and more at home in the place.

9. Seiya returns to life

Megha's hospital was at the end of a gallery built of white bricks on the far side of a vast courtyard full of carts bringing new patients. A guide had come out on to the gallery and was waiting for Sudhana.

"This way," the guide said, but the girl who was following behind Sudhana shook her head. "No, it's this way," she said, leading them towards a small gallery to the left of the hospital building. The guide was bewildered, for the place where she was heading had once been the hospital's main entrance, but was now a passage used by no one but Megha himself.

It was apparent from the confident way she walked that she felt as familiar here as if she had been at home. Until now, Sudhana had been leading her; now he found himself following her. It was very mysterious. Her body was bright with the light of life awakening after long death; Sudhana's heart raced.

Megha had his residence in the most secluded part of the hospital. As she headed towards that room, the girl's steps seemed more and more like those of one possessed, her face shone with a hitherto unseen joy. The guide had no choice but to follow along behind her. Megha had just finished treating an old peasant for swamp-fever and was taking a drink, when the girl came hurrying in.

"Here we are, this is the place. My room was right next door to this one. Yes, this is the place. I spent a whole month lying sick in here. But the bed's gone."

She was muttering to herself, unaware of what she was saying. Megha was astonished. The guide left and he invited Sudhana to sit down, then looked at him with an expression that seemed to be asking who this girl was. Sudhana said nothing. Megha suddenly noticed the faint mark on the girl's forehead and exclaimed in astonishment, "It can't be! Are you not Seiya?" But the girl had no recollection of her name. Megha rushed towards her. The girl was surely his dead daughter, Seiya! The daughter whose body he had cremated in a remote forest clearing, under which there was said to be an underground lake, had come back to life! Could he be dreaming? Yet this was no dream!

Seiya had recognized her father's room and the hospital, but that was all; she could not recall who Megha was. His daughter Seiya, who had died five years before, was alive, had come back to him! This was something that not even he could understand. He had always felt responsible for her death, too. He had not been skillful enough to save his own child! He had become a Buddhist when the Buddha and his disciples passed by Vajrapura soon after his daughter's death. After that, he had erected a shrine to Seiya in his hospital grounds, fervently praying for her bliss and proclaiming the truth of Buddha. And now his daughter had come back!

Megha led Sudhana and Seiya to a dining-place out in the garden. Once again Seiya hastened on ahead, obviously familiar with the place. They sat down on bamboo chairs set around a table. The garden was full of every kind of flower and tree; butterflies fluttered low over the green lawn. Sudhana savored the most sumptuous food he had tasted since he began his journeys. The room prepared for Sudhana that evening was on the upper floor of Seiya's private pavilion, on the far side of the garden's woodland grove. It was a magnificent room, although the outer door was simply woven out of reeds. It was spread with carpets from central Asia, and there was a stove burning cow-dung set in the wall to offset the chill of evening, that contrasted sharply with the heat of the day.

Late in the evening, Megha came to Sudhana's room. Sudhana, still awake, welcomed his host.

"Why are you not asleep yet, little pilgrim?"

"The evening is so beautiful. On such a night, even without sleep the body craves no

rest, sir.”

The old man was silent.

“Do you know this child who came with me?”

Megha was taken aback to see how Sudhana seemed able to read his secret thoughts.

“Yes, I know her. She is my daughter. My dead daughter. My dead daughter is alive again.”

“Perhaps she returned because there is a task remaining for her in this world.”

“Where did you find her?”

“Beside the underground lake.”

“The underground lake?”

“That's right, sir.”

“What land are you from? Why have you come here?”

“I came to meet you. I do not know where I was born.”

“Really? Why did you want to meet me?”

“Because the venerable Supratishthita told me to.”

“Supratishthita? Why, it's been so long since we met! I treated his hand when he hurt it once, many years ago. You, young pilgrim, are in search of truth, I can tell. You are truly a good child. The truth stays in no place. Whoever journeys in quest of truth already has the truth. The truth never stays in one place but is found in hearts like yours, little pilgrim, like flowing water, as they move on and on in quest of it.”

After they had exchanged these words, Megha went back to his room on the other side of the wood. On the evening of each new moon and at each full moon, such as tonight, many people would gather in the doctor's shrine for what was called “Megha's night watch” as he taught:

“Bodhisattva awakening means releasing all beings from their sufferings, becoming a fire to burn away avarice and self-love, becoming a cloud bringing rain, becoming a bridge so that all sentient beings and all living creatures can cross the river of life and death. Behold. I enter the sea that contains all these properties of bodhisattva awakening and lay down my name within the sea. I lay down all my words within the sea. What became of the diseases I have cured, once they left the bodies they were tormenting? Where did they go? Behold. I lay down all diseases in the sea too.”

Megha's words rang out from beside the shrine's high altar, ablaze in the darkness with great candles. Sudhana, realizing what freshness and marvelous youth were unceasingly springing up within the aged Megha, communicated his feelings to Seiya and she too sensed it.

One day, Megha asked Sudhana if he would not stay there and live with Seiya while he taught him his healing skills and knowledge of the truth. It is a supremely holy task to heal diseases and lead those thus cured towards the truth. Megha's wisdom recognized that Sudhana had the talents needed to inherit such a task, but he could not accept his proposition and at last Megha came to understand:

“If what I suggest is not agreeable to you, you should go southward, on a journey long enough for you to grow more, and when you reach a place called Vanavasin down in the south, you will meet a great man by the name of Muktaka who has completed all his tasks.”

A few days before, Sudhana had received a cut on his arm from Seiya.

“I believe that in this world there is no body and no spirit that does not bear a wound. I want you to give me my wound.”

With those words, she had held out her arm to him. Bright red blood had emerged. Then Sudhana shed his blood, too, from the wound that the girl gave him.

“Sudhana, you can never settle anywhere. You will always be a pilgrim, I know. This wound is a sign of our parting.”

Her eyes as she spoke seemed to have wept themselves dry; speechless, she endured

her grief with empty eyes. Soon after, Seiya fell ill again. Her father felt sure she would die, yet more than ever he made every effort to heal her. Love had brought the dead girl back to life, in the hope that she might experience love, but that did not happen and now love drew her back again into death.

Sudhana left Megha's hospice. As he set out from the city of Vajrapura, the monsoon season now over, he gazed southward to where the line between sky and earth stretched as clean as if he had drawn it himself -- a long journey. A master lived in that distant place who had attained the final freedom. That was why the little pilgrim was unable to stay to savor love.

10. An old, blind woman sings a sad song

Sudhana passed through any number of provinces and nations, until one night he stood in the moonlight outside the city of Ijan, one young boy sunk deep in melancholy. The rice standing thick in the outlying fields was ripe for harvest. Cold moonlight was pouring down and hosts of insects were chirping in the moonlight. Just then, Laritha's plaintive song, "Ragini," rang out, echoing Sudhana's feeling of melancholy arising from the long journey and his thoughts.

*Moon, moon,
you know everything.
Tell me now :
Where is the love my heart is seeking?
I grow sick and old. Where is he?
Flowers, drenched in dew,
you know everything.
Tell me, for I am alone.*

The song recalled painful memories. It was a sad song, almost sad enough to drive sorrow away. He felt that could not stand hearing that song again this evening. He had heard it before, when he spent a night in a desolate compound in the city once ruled by King Yuma. It was a melancholy place, full of grief-stricken women with the saddest voices. The king had ordered them to live there together.

Sudhana had met an old, blind singer, and she had told him the story of her life. She was the only daughter of a poor farmer from the lowly sudra caste. Her father having died of a snake bite, she had been sold to relieve her mother's poverty, thanks to the opportune passage of an official from the royal music department who was in search of girls who could sing.

She had passed the test, had entrusted the land and house to her mother, and went to live as a slave in the singers' compound. She was only four years old at the time. One night, when the moon was full, that official had said,

"Listen, my girl. This is your last moon, so look your fill at it!"

She had gazed up at the moon; she was at an age when human memory and knowledge are just beginning to awaken. She felt tears flow from her young eyes; then suddenly, someone grabbed her from behind. She could not move. An iron skewer, heated red in the fire, gouged out her two eyes. She screamed with pain, then fainted. When she came to her senses again, she was blind.

"Here you have to sing sad songs. If you are going to sing sad songs, ordinary sorrows will never be enough. Sorrow at a father's death, sorrow at losing a home are not enough. You need an overwhelming gulf of sorrow. Henceforth you will draw your sorrow from darkness and despair, the enduring bitterness of being blind. Now you can sing the saddest songs in all the land."

For the next two years she learned to sing under a constant rain of kicks and blows. When she was seven she appeared before the king for the first time and sang for his birthday. The king was deeply moved by Laritha. It was the middle of the day when she sang, yet the sorrow in her childish voice was such that the daylight grew dim; even the animals in the palace came to hear her.

When she was fourteen, she was destined for the king's bed. For the seven nights preceding the full moon, she belonged to the king. Then her private parts were mutilated with a sharp knife and she was left unable to couple with any other man. Singing became her entire life. Fifty years of song went past, she grew old. After King Yuma died, there was no one left to hear her sing.

“The man I loved most was King Yuma; he was the man I most hated, too.”

That was the tale the old blind singer had told Sudhana. The songs that old woman sang were full of a youthful ardor and contained a more intense bitterness of grief than those of any of the younger singers in the village.

“In my singing, it has been my fate to be blessed by Brahma. I am happy in my songs.”

She had become an artist and spoke as one. Hearing her sing, Sudhana was able to rid himself of all the illusions he had been harboring. It was as if dawn's azure darkness had come to lodge within his ears. Songs emerging out of deep sorrow can give rise to tremendous joy.

A long time had passed since he had heard that woman's song, and on hearing it here tonight in the moonlit night outside Ijan he felt tears sting his eyes. He was happy. Her songs had been transmitted to this distant land. Songs are quicker than the wind.

Sudhana awoke the next morning when the shadow of the sal tree moved away from his face. It was already midday. He set out again. Sound asleep, the guards at the city gates did not even realize that a stranger had entered the city. They were not alone; the officials were asleep, the people were asleep, even the priests were asleep. If ever a foreign army entered the city, they would most likely fall asleep too, by osmosis. It was a land full of sleep.

Sudhana walked on alone through streets full of silence. It was scorching midday. A solitary elephant was trundling its way ever so slowly down the middle of the main street. Elephants know everything. It was walking along with an air of immense stupidity, appearing to know nothing at all, when in fact it knew about all the past lives of everything. Sudhana was dripping with sweat; nonetheless he went running after it and pulled at its tail. In a flash the ungainly beast wrapped Sudhana in its trunk and swept him up to the howdah on its back. He had no choice but to sit there and let the elephant carry him where it would.

“You must be bored, young pilgrim. I know I am.”

The elephant glanced round at him as it spoke. Sudhana nodded.

“I'm on my way to Vanavasin.”

“That's still a long way away.”

“I don't care. Nowhere is near or far for me. Wayfaring is my goal.”

“Why are you going there?”

“You already know. You know where I came from. If you know that, you know everything.”

The elephant gave a shrug. Sudhana nearly fell off.

“I'll take you there. I'm getting old. I've lived at least a hundred and sixty years in this world of pain. Once I've brought you there, I'll go into the forests of Vanavasin and quietly leave the world.”

They enjoyed a pleasant journey, for they got on well together, happy in their shared sense of the world's impermanence, accepting the way time and space flowed on around them.

“I rarely carry people. My grandfather was the king's elephant, but I've never even seen the king. That's why I'm wandering on my own through the world like this -- though I did once carry a girl, called Iryon.”

“Iryon? Did you say Iryon?”

“Why?”

“Where was it?”

“Up in the north, near the city of Rajgir.”

“Was she alone?”

“Yes. It was just after she had danced before the Crown Prince and he wanted her for his bride, but she ran away. The palace guards were after her. So I galloped off with her on my back, then I tossed her into the lake. A crocodile carried her to the far shore on its back. I don't know what became of her after that.”

“Ah, dear Iryon!”

“Is she a friend of yours?”

Sudhana suddenly felt homesick for the north. Yet he was heading ever farther south. When, if ever, would he see the rivers, the lakes, and the kingdoms of the north again? Perhaps he might perish by some southern roadside. There were already what seemed like ten whole years behind him. When would he turn northwards? The sight of the haze shimmering on the horizon filled him with despair.

“So you are from the north too.”

Sudhana nodded.

“You are sad.”

“You know how to be sad? But you have to feel sad. There's no living in this world without sadness. After all, in one sense even Siddhartha's compassion comes from sorrow.”

“I saw him and his companions once, you know. The king and his court were all on their knees before them. There must have been nearly two hundred disciples following Siddhartha.”

“So where is he now?”

“He's like you. He never stays anywhere long, they're always on the move, I don't rightly know where they are now.”

They pursued their way until at last the first of the cities of Vanavasin appeared on the far side of a river. They advanced upstream along the river bank. Buffalo were wallowing in the water to escape from the heat; people were swimming and playing. Sudhana longed to join them, but the elephant headed for the ferry, where a great log raft carried them across. So they arrived in Vanavasin, after a journey on which his mind seemed to have matured a dozen years.

“Where does the venerable Muktaka live?” he asked some children playing by the roadside. They pointed the way with tiny fingers. Sudhana had come across high mountains and over deep rivers. He was still young, but his heart was deep and he had left behind him childish ways. He headed for Muktaka's house with a grave expression on his face. The house stood in a forest as large as a small country.

11. A twelve-years-long journey

Sudhana abruptly had the impression that his journey down to Vanavasin in quest of Muktaka had really taken twelve years. Yes, it must have taken that long. And it had been so full of vicissitudes along the way, that in the end the reason why he was making the journey had grown vague in his mind, rather like the way the eyesight of an old man weakens until he can no longer distinguish clearly the outlines of things. Surely, the journey had been that long.

“What am I doing here?” Sudhana wondered.

While he had been resting, the elephant that had been his companion for the last ten months had somehow disappeared and in his absence Sudhana inevitably fell into a state of despondency. He had learned a great deal from the elephant. The animal knew all about everything, humbly yet cunningly, but deliberately kept its knowledge concealed and did not boast of it. Yet through the chinks of its long perorations and ungainly progress, it clearly revealed how much it knew, like a little stream.

*There was never a moment
when I was not wild flowers in the field.
There was never a moment when I was not water babbling.
There was never a moment when I was not birds or beasts.
There was never a moment when I was not a weary seagull
forced to fly from island to island.
There was never a moment when I was not a beggar.
I am father, and stars, and the bright morning star.
I am a rainbow after rain
and like all these things
there was never a moment when I was not an elephant.*

Those were the lines the elephant had recited as they drew near to Vanavasin, heavily, as though its whole body was filled with thick, black blood. Now he had arrived where that good master lived. He had to meet him, yet his hand could not open the closed door; his feet seemed stuck to the ground where he stood. Suddenly the door in front of him opened and a man appeared. He did not realize at first that this was the venerable Muktaka. The man placed his hand on Sudhana's shoulder and drew him inside. The room was a solemn space. Pillars of vast girth rose at intervals. He shuddered. It felt cold.

“You have been travelling a long while, huge aeons of time. Come and sit down.”

“Are you the master?”

Muktaka's eyes laughed. The wrinkles surrounding them spread in a fine lacework. How could an old face be so like a flower? The whites of his eyes remained as clear as those of a child. They had not been sullied by the dust of time or of life. His was the highest innocence, clear and calm, never once troubled by anger. Yet if anything fell under the scrutiny of those eyes, no secrets could stay hidden. His whole body was one vast mirror.

“You've come all this way, yet I've nothing at all to show you. Try looking at that blank wall. There are all kinds of pictures that can come out on a blank wall.”

He had no sooner spoken than a woman's face loomed up. It was Laritha! Surely it was the old blind singer! Her pale jade-like blind eyes seemed to shine brighter here than when Sudhana had met her in person.

“Do you know that woman? I'm sure you do. This mural represents the woman's songs that you treasure so much. But now you must get rid of all that. Never treasure a song for too long. Songs are real songs when they are sung once or twice, then forgotten.”

Sudhana lowered his head.

“Look. Look at the blank wall again, young pilgrim.”

Laritha's face had vanished and instead there appeared the whole course of the ten directions of the universe, and fragments of the journeys of Siddhartha with his disciples, of his innumerable past lives. Time passed. Once again the wall was bare.

“Young pilgrim. Many people strive to form attachments and possess things; you have set all that aside, and travel onwards intent on gleaning grains of truth in the fields of truth, the truth that other people have left behind. I never leave this spot, yet here I can encounter all the Buddhas everywhere in the ten-directioned universe, I can encounter bodhisattvas here, and I can meet you here, too. Yet the Buddhas do not come and I do not go to them. Your coming here too is not a matter of your coming here. Neither have I gone to you. The Buddhas are murals, the bodhisattvas are murals, perhaps you and I are murals too, all things are painted murals and dreams.”

This encounter was supremely good for Sudhana, who had now withdrawn into himself. The melancholy occasioned by his long journey had melted away like Himalayan ice in a tributary of the Ganges. Sudhana took his leave and gazed out across Vanavasin. The landscape was utterly devoid of any person or sign of human labor; it lay there alone. He felt as though even a single human figure would have destroyed its beauty. At last Sudhana set off, following Muktaka's instructions, in search of Saradhvaja in the southern realm of Milaspharana.

My life will ever be on the road.

What teacher should I seek?

The road is my parents, the road my teacher.

Born on the road, I will die on the road.

Road, road, my road!

Once past the plains, the road entered the hills. Seeing around him birds from the north, he guessed that in the region of the Himalayas winter had come. “You and I are the same,” Sudhana murmured as he gazed out across the plains where the migrant birds had made their home. The hill paths led him deeper into the forests.

Once past Mount Sadal, the traveller has to cross a very dangerous marsh. Sudhana cautiously set out on his journey through the marshes. It only took him three days to emerge, although Muktaka had told him it might take a month. Sudhana thought he must have meant another Milaspharana, so he asked a passing pilgrim if there was another such place.

“You mindless numbskull! Another snake with ten heads, yes, that there may be, but there's only one Milaspharana!”

He roared out his reply. Sudhana enjoyed his roaring.

“Look, it's my destiny to live like this but how come a little fellow like you is out on the road? Where are you from?”

Sudhana gestured towards the far north.

“Hmm. They say there's a weird fellow who's appeared up north calling himself the Buddha. You northerners must be a wretched lot!”

“Have you ever been in the north?”

“When could I ever go that far? Perhaps in my next life. Why have you come all the way down here from the other end of the world?”

“I don't know.”

“You stupid vagabond, get out of here.”

Despite such rough jokes, he liked this shabby pilgrim. He seemed deliberately to be masking a very noble mind. Perhaps this pilgrim had received enlightenment in his solitude. Sudhana ventured a wild guess.

“You aren't by any chance the venerable Saradhvaja, are you?”

“What? How do you know Saradhvaja?”

“Do you know the master Muktaka?”

This time the pilgrim looked hard at Sudhana. Sudhana knelt before him.

“Indeed. There is only one Saradhvaja, too. I am the Saradhvaja you are looking for. You've come to beg for truth. But I don't know any truth. I don't know women, or money, or fields, or orchards. There's no reason why I should know any truth. People looking for truth are all mindless dolts like you. Go on, get out of here!”

Sudhana gazed sadly after the old man as he hurried off. Why was he so unkind? Saradhvaja turned round and shouted.

“Go and visit my wife. I've cast her off, you can have her. She's full of truth!”

12. Love in the mist

Sudhana gazed after the retreating figure of old Saradhvaja. "How very mysterious!" he muttered as he made his way up to Saradhvaja's hillside lodge. He had been one of the richest men in the land and no one ever knew why he had suddenly dressed up as a shabby pilgrim and gone rushing away like that. Certainly, Sudhana never had a chance to fathom him.

He was ushered into a guest-room, that stood in a pavilion isolated in the midst of thick woodland. He asked to meet Saradhvaja's wife but the servant told him to wait until the next morning. The sea could be seen in the distance; as the evening closed in, it came alive with countless lamps. In the middle of the night, the lamps vanished from view and the air grew suffocatingly thick with a sea mist. All night long an ox could be heard lowing what seemed to be a lament at the death of a beloved cow. The sound made Sudhana feel sad. Nobody he knew had ever died; the death of his father and mother and all the others had left no trace in his memory. Yet this sadness seemed to suggest that someone close to him had died. Iryon? Meghashri? Laritha? He shook his head. Sleep refused to come, as if it had lost its way in the fog and could not find him.

At daybreak he walked out into the mist, which was no longer last night's stifling blanket but now offered him the sense of freshness he desperately needed. The forest floor was strewn with white sand. The fog had infiltrated its way between the trees, filling every space beneath them, every least nook and cranny, and was eddying thickly. He was led toward Saradhvaja's manor house, and soon he could not have found his way back.

He slowly became aware of a woman standing beneath one of the dead trees. He composed himself; his flesh no longer tingled. He had come this far quite unconsciously. Women glimpsed at dawn are insubstantial things. Perhaps this was a spirit, or a homeless phantom; unless ancient southern animals could transform themselves like this? Gradually, as he approached her, the woman's figure became more distinct through the fog. Once the details of her appearance could be seen clearly, he lost all power of decision. It was very disconcerting; his mind was dependant, no longer his own, to the point that it had quite left him and now depended entirely on the woman, or on someone else.

"I am so fond of mist at dawn that I came out before you. I've been summoning you with my arts. Holy youth, most excellent and handsome youth. In these parts I am known as Hehua, it means "Sea Flower." Follow me now, please."

She was dressed in a thin sari that scarcely covered her breasts, on which lay a gold necklace of the finest workmanship. Her dress was of an azure so delicate it seemed almost white. She came from the North. Her face and breast were milky white. The rules by which Sudhana had been living and that had been made firmer by his travels, all collapsed in a heap. He fell deeply in love. The truth that could be firmly contained in a single idea vanished.

Hehua was in her thirties, when sensuality is at its peak. From her body emanated a fragrance like that of gardenia flowers. Sudhana became fully adult in a moment. They walked away from the ocean towards a grove of black sea-pines that rose like a cliff ahead of them. There they found a stone-built cottage covered in ivy. Entering the cottage, Sudhana was taken aback on finding it full of the most priceless treasures. It seemed remarkable that such things could be left there without anyone coming to carry them off.

Sudhana found himself sitting on a couch covered in silks from the west. He took a glass of wine and a piece of dried bony fish to break his fast. He drank, gnawed, and almost at once found himself filled with tremendous strength. His empty stomach was completely filled. Just then Hehua let her sari drop to the ground and slid down beside him. The flame that had long been buried deep in his heart came bursting outward. As the sun rose beyond the sea and the mist was struggling to contain its light, they fell into each other's arms. There each of them

began to experience love for the first time.

Hands and breasts, valleys and hills all came alive, moved, rose, grew thirsty. He wrenched her ecstasy from her and made it his, she drew his passion out of him to make it her own. They were so intensely one that if one felt pain the other flinched. They were replete in the union of their bodies. The whole world was theirs.

Morning had fully come and on the bed sheets there were stains of fresh blood. Their bodies were crusted with salt. The most perfect peace swept over them, as if to show how close is the similarity between peace and death. The mist was still chill. For a moment Sudhana had a fleeting impression that he could once again hear the ox lowing that he had heard the evening before.

“This is my first time. You're the first man I ever made love with. My husband never so much as touched me. Shall I cover you up? Are you thirsty?”

“I'm alright. The mist has lifted a bit.”

“So it has.”

The mist was indeed clearing. Pale sunlight was weakly entering the cottage through a window.

“My husband left yesterday. He grew up in poverty but then became the richest man in Marikara. Now he feels that he no longer needs to be rich and has left home. Until now he could think of nothing but amassing money and land. That's why he never laid a finger on me even though I was his wife. If something is to be done properly, that's how it has to be done, it seems. You should do likewise. That's how you should make love.”

Sudhana lay silent.

“A few days ago my husband said that a visitor would soon be coming, sent by an old-time friend of his. He ordered me to be devoted to that visitor. I don't come from here, I was sold up in the north. My husband bought me to be his wife with thirty gold rings.”

Now Sudhana could understand a little of what had happened back in Saradhvaja's mansion. With that understanding sleep overtook him. The woman also fell into a deep slumber. At noontide, the mist vanished like a reptile sliding into its hole. The deep blue sea lay quiet.

In their sleep, the two of them dreamed the same dream. The woman was leading Sudhana here and there through the estate, in which there were many villas. There were also shrines consecrated to the king of the kinnara (heavenly musicians). In the flower-beds, plants from north and south were growing in profusion; Hehua taught Sudhana their names one by one as they walked hand in hand. As they slept they clasped each other's hand. Just as they were crossing a stream at the far end of the estate, Hehua slipped and fell in. The water was deep but Sudhana leaped in after her. They both sank. Each of the sleepers gave a piercing scream and woke up. Emerging from their single dream, they embraced tightly.

“Ah! It was a dream, wasn't it?”

“Why? What were you dreaming about?”

“About falling into the water!”

“You mean, we were both having the same dream?”

They rose and gazed out at the sea. On the dining table outside the house servant girls had already prepared a meal. They sat down together; Hehua had become a sweetly smiling newly-wed wife.

“I don't suppose you've ever met Siddhartha?”

“No, never.”

“I have never seen him either. And yet. . . .”

She asked nothing more about Siddhartha. Perhaps she had decided to wait until Sudhana said something more about him. She loved Sudhana. If his clothing so much as shook in the breeze, she showed concern. She was overflowing with such love that she might have hurt him, simply to be able to treat the wound. She was love, love incarnate or perhaps, rather, a

vain attempt at love.

From that day, Hehua threw open the ponderous gates at the entrance to the estate, went to the great central house and, having summoned all the poor, both low class and brahmans, began to distribute to each the riches and lands accumulated by Saradhvaja.

“It's what my husband wanted. He used to say that riches were like the rise and fall of the tide. He reckoned that once they had been accumulated they had necessarily to be dispersed again.”

She laughed gaily as she spoke. She was attached to no treasure apart from Sudhana. It seemed that if she were ever able to free herself of her attachment to him, she would leave the world and become a disciple of Siddhartha. Saradhvaja's goods and victuals were merrily distributed among a host of beggars and peasants, to say nothing of the estate's many servants and slaves, who all received their proper share. Heavenly divinities and spirits came down wrapped in clouds and took part in the distribution.

The lovely Hehua had decided to join Sudhana in his travels. As her husband had given away his goods, now she gave away the entire estate. Sudhana was deeply impressed by the dramatic way she rid herself of everything. He had no idea how little time she had left to live. She did not know it herself. They were oblivious of everything except their love. They hastily set out on a pilgrimage through the southern kingdoms.

13. The sleep I produce

Sudhana and Hehua left, walking along the shore to avoid the curious stares of the many servants and former slaves, and set off towards the forests in the land of Samudravetadin.

“At last I've got rid of everything!”

“No, you've not rid yourself of me!”

His heart raced at the way this woman, older than himself, had come bursting into his life. For some reason he had not prevented her from coming with him. It would be wrong to attribute it to love, since Sudhana had already shaken off all love's constraints.

The shore was at first composed of sand but soon they found the way blocked by white cliffs and the path became rugged. They walked on, until they arrived at the top of a steep slope.

“If I should die, I want you to throw my body into the sea to feed the fishes. I want to share my flesh with the fish.”

Sudhana was astonished by her words. Still, he nodded. Since leaving the garden, she was no longer the same woman as the one who had fallen in love with him a few days before. She was inhabited by a vague renunciation. In spite of her boldness in setting out to follow him for love, she was casting a shadow of melancholy over the blue sea.

“Why do you keep heading south, ever further southward, when Siddhartha is in the north?”

“Truth is not only found with the man who speaks truth, it can be found in every place. I have been following this path since I was a small child. South or north mean nothing to me.”

She did not reply, instead she joined her hands and bowed towards the ocean. As Sudhana was leading the way up the rugged slope, Hehua suddenly stepped on a piece of weathered rock in the cliff face and slipped. Her hand escaped from Sudhana's grasp. It all happened in a flash. She fell into the sea far below at the foot of the cliff. By the time Sudhana reached the edge of the cliff, there was nothing to be seen but the usual waves.

“It can't be! It can't be!”

As he walked back and forth, crazed with horror, a strong gust of wind suddenly bore Sudhana upwards and tossed him onto a rock.

“If I should die, I want you to throw my body into the sea to feed the fishes.”

He recalled Hehua's last words to him. His elbow was bleeding and the bones in his shoulders were throbbing, but otherwise Sudhana was unaffected by being thus hurled aloft. The woman's words pierced through the pain.

“All things are the same. All things are transitory. My love has attained the sea.”

He wept and so gave vent to his grief as he prayed towards the sea for her soul's happiness. In the distance, dry lightning flashed across the parched sky and vanished. Soon the far-off sound of thunder reached him. He still could not rise from that spot. All he saw there was a precipitous cliff track made by passing animals.

“It can't be! It can't be!”

He beat at his body with a small stone as he screamed. He struck hard and soon his breast, shoulders, and legs were covered with deep wounds. Blood streamed down. He gave full expression to his grief, then, once he was exhausted, he fell asleep. When he awoke, he did not know where he was. His wounds had been anointed with ointment. He was bewildered. He tried to raise himself, but his body refused to move. It hurt. He was in a sumptuous room hung with jade-beaded blinds. Perfume filled the air. It was clearly a woman's room.

“Ah, you're awake!”

A girl appeared before him. She was tranquil and Sudhana merely gazed at her, asking nothing.

“One of our servants brought you in. Your wounds were so deep and you'd lost so

much blood that you were unconscious. There are lots of wild animals out there. . . you've been lucky.”

“Who are you?”

“Hehua's friend Asha.”

“What?”

“The tide brought Hehua's clothes to shore just below our house. Hehua outlived her appointed span of life by nine days and nights, only because she wanted to encounter your truth and love. Wandering seeker after truth, you must forget about her now and drink this water.”

Asha offered him a draught of pure water from the slopes of an extinct volcano. Drinking the water, he realized that he was still alive. And that Hehua was dead.

“You travelled many, many miles in search of the truth about the world before you reached this spot. The things I can teach you are like a grain of sand set beside a mighty mountain. What can I offer you? I am offering you one draft of water.”

“Asha is far too gracious towards a wandering child like me.”

“As a pilgrim you obtain truth along the way; what truth can you gain from a woman like me? Nonetheless, since you have been destined to visit this place, rest here and take your fill of truth.”

Her voice rang like the strings of an instrument, like the sound of the eastern coast's gentle breeze. She had ceased to speak and her words emerged now as song.

“Little pilgrim, if Hehua was only a dream, the truth you seek is also a dream. . . .”

She began to reflect: *You say you hear something? The Buddhas of all directions come and speak to me, as I go and listen to them. How could I listen alone? The people of every nation listen, every person listens and I listen too.*

Midnight waves, you ever come and speak to me. How could one wave ever exist alone? Ah Buddha, vast ocean! People of every nation, every person, one day as morning dawns will accomplish Buddhahood in one place, one moment, just as the waves pile up grains of sand.

Sudhana fell into a deep sleep. In his sleep he saw sea swallows flying through a pure bright sky. Asha laid her gold necklace on his sleeping breast and quietly stroked it with her delicate hand. She could communicate with people even as they slept.

By the time Sudhana awoke, the sun had set behind the mountain peaks and the approaching evening darkness was bright with the glow of sunset. His sleep had been good, a sleep full of blossoming flowers, of growing fledgling birds. An old fisherman's dream of long-ago childhood. Asha was showing him her body, which was as lovely as her song had been, covering only the frontal parts with a thin cloth through which her flesh glowed bright.

“Now you must spend the night with me. It is the time when the two of us can meet at the deepest level.”

She led him down a long gallery, maids curtsying as they passed, until they reached her room. It was adorned with every kind of precious ornament.

“All these jewels come from every kind of mountain, sea, or rock; but they are wretched things, only useful for gaining truth. Today I have gained the most precious of all treasures in you, little pilgrim.”

They lay down together on her bed, but there was none of the love-making there had been on Sudhana's encounter with Hehua. They simply lay there in the closeness of a young mother with her firstborn son, or like two people who have been walking side by side along the same road for a long time, knowing nothing of each other's name or home.

“My pilgrim Sudhana!”

“Lady Asha!”

They had nothing else to say to one another, words had abandoned them. What they had not lost was the meaning that exists before words, the meaning behind words, the meaning bright as sunbeams that cannot be expressed in words. That meaning matured in their sleep like

wine. In the far distance volcanoes rumbled and produced pure water.

14. Twelve years of dreams

Samudravetadin was a small city in southern India, wrapped in the sound of waves. As he arrived there on the back of the elephant, Sudhana was sleeping the long sleep such waves inspire. Finally the elephant tilted its vast back and deposited Sudhana on the ground. It was the elephant he had previously parted company from! Where had it come from? How had this happened? How could he have been put back onto the elephant's back as he slept?

“Ouch!”

Sudhana woke and rubbed his behind, that was smarting from his sudden fall to the ground, thoroughly bewildered.

“Where are we?”

“We have just passed Samudravetadin.”

“But what about Asha? Hehua? Saradhvaja?”

The twelve years he had spent in his dream fell away from him like branches from a tree struck by lightning.

“Little pilgrim! You are still only a little pilgrim. Those twelve years were a dream I gave you. Since the moment you got off my back in Vanavasin, you have been unable to distinguish between dream and reality. Actually, you have been sound asleep all the time it took us to reach this spot. That first taste of passion for a woman was really only part of your dream. But now you and I must part. First I carried young Iryon, and now I've carried you; I will never again bear anyone on my back. Farewell. One day you will meet young Iryon again. There is to be no end to your travels, young pilgrim.”

Sudhana stood dumbfounded, gazing after the elephant as it strode away into the coconut groves without so much as a glance behind.

“But did my dream last twelve years then?”

He looked down at his body. He had not grown. There was no sign of his having become a young man able to make love with women. It had all been a dream, as he rode along on the elephant's back. His arrival in Vanavasin, and his encounters with Saradhvaja, Hehua, and Asha had all taken place in a dream! Now he had woken from the dream, it was gone. Did that mean that all the space between Vanavasin and Samudravetadin was a world that existed only in his dreams? Once he was awake, Sudhana found it very hard to convince himself of the difference between reality and that long long dream. He gazed at the reality surrounding him. He saw the capital city of the kingdom of Samudravetadin bathed in the dazzling rays of the setting sun. He thought of entering the city but he remembered that the elephant had given him no instructions.

“I ought not to turn back towards the past. My road always lies ahead of me.”

He got up. He was starving but had nothing to eat in his bundle. He began to walk. After riding for so long on the elephant's back, his legs should have been unaccustomed to walking; yet he found himself able to walk without effort, as though he had spent the last days on foot. The old blind woman's song from within his dream came vaguely to his mind. He tried to imitate it, but a song as intensely sad as that was beyond his capability.

Just as he took the road through the forest, striving to resist the pangs of hunger, he encountered a band of travelling peddlers. One of them, a middle-aged man, handed Sudhana a piece of coconut.

“You're starving! Where are you going that demands such sacrifices?”

He spoke with fatherly concern. Sudhana found himself quite unable to make any reply. So far, every person he had met had told him of another person he should meet, giving him a goal on his journey in quest of truth. But here he was now, having woken from his dream on the elephant's back, without any goal.

“We're on our way to visit the seer Bhishmottaranir-ghosha. We always offer him a share of whatever profits we make. We believe that if we do that, he'll use the money to bring up our grandchildren after we die. He's already lived several hundred years. They say he lives uniquely on the roots of dead grass he digs up. Come along with us and meet him.”

He felt obliged to follow them. Now he had a goal again. His steps became light and cheery. No longer hungry, no longer alone, for the first time he could feel sure that all this was real. His dream of the beautiful Asha and Hehua began to fade. Sudhana was unable to understand why such a dream had taken hold of him. Perhaps the foundation for the experiences he had dreamed was already laid within him? In which case, it might have been intended to show him that this world is all nothing but a dream?

The forest was deep and the darkness of night had already filled the pathways. Once they were through the forest full of cedars, jambu trees with their sweet fruit, flowering ulpara and patma trees, the darkness along the road grew bright with starlight. Suddenly, they heard sounds of life. The noise grew louder and louder. They could see lamps and candles shining out over a wide open space.

“Not only merchants like us, many other people too gather to hear the seer speak. If you see his eyes by day, they always seem clear as dewdrops.”

A moment later, the sage himself appeared before them, sitting on dried grass spread under a tree, dressed in clothes of bark, looking immensely benevolent. The people bowed down before him but he made no returning gesture. His silence was designed not to dispel the meaning of their gesture by any reaction on his part.

“Master, I have brought this young wayfarer with me. I beg you to strew noble aims on his life and mine.”

The man drew out a coin, that he handed to a nearby disciple. The seer gazed at Sudhana with quiet joy.

“You have been travelling for a long time, indeed. You have dreamed a long dream, too. What do you think, have you found all the truth you were looking for?”

Sudhana was astonished. He was at a loss what to reply to this seer who knew all his past life. Other seers came and joined him where he was sitting. Each of them harbored a halo less than that of the master at the center. Bhishmottaranir-ghosha addressed the other seers.

“Look at this child. Do you not see that he has already attained supreme enlightenment and is now intent on working for the good of all living creatures? He was weary but has now received new light. He will give more light than any candle or star, for he is intent on gaining yet brighter wisdom.”

After this, he sank into meditation for a while, then spoke again.

“Young pilgrim. Make your heart into sand, grind and grind the granite of your heart, pound the granite peaks of Mount Mara-deva that rises high by the shores to the south into sand to stifle the waves that break on the southern shores. Then break each one of those grains of sand and empty your heart completely. Fill the empty space of your heart with a voice that will cover every length of time, a single night, a single day, every length of time, seven days or nights, one month, one year, a century, a thousand years, ten thousand, any length of time, the vast immensities of a hundred million aeons. For as you know, the voice is the origin of everything.

“Young pilgrim. As I am here but not here, you too are not really here. Holy indeed. Young pilgrim. You have made this night holy for me by this meeting with you.”

The merchants who had brought him left. Sudhana spent that night with the seer on his huge bed of dry grass. The seer, who lived on roots, slept on dry grass and wore clothing of bark, spent the night in the open air without concern for the falling dew. The seer did not utter another word, yet Sudhana learned many things thanks to him. His smile was like the arrival of wonderful news. His sleep was like a humble guest from a distant place.

The candles went out. Starlight flooded their sleep. Sudhana lay welcoming the dew that dropped along the beams of starlight. His whole body was soaked in azure. Perhaps that starlight existed alone, the star from which it came having burned out and died many thousands of light-years before. Only think how many incarnations Sudhana must have lived through during the long journey of the light to earth! And how many more awaited him! Endlessly. Endlessly. Endlessly.

The next morning the seer and Sudhana drank a little water from a warm spring and shared a meal of roots.

“Little pilgrim, how did you enjoy your dewy sleep? We spent one whole night together! Now you must go southward to meet a brahman in the land of Ishana. In his enthusiasm, he keeps hurling himself onto the rocks of Sword Mountain, then into the Valley of Fire; there's no dewy sleep with him! He's my half-brother by my mother's ninth husband.”

Sudhana accordingly took his leave of the forest, of the olpara flowers and their sweet scent. Supplied with roots to eat by the sage, he set off along the road he was to follow. At some time or other he had heard of Sword Mountain in the land of Ishana. Rising sharp like a sword, gales were constantly striking against it and being slashed apart. At a swampy point along the road, Sudhana lost his way. Just then a hawk appeared, making circles in the sky.

“Oh! Friend hawk! It's been so long!”

It was the same hawk that had guided Sudhana at the very beginning, when he was searching for the monk Meghashri. As before, one of its wings was white. Seeing that Sudhana had recognized it, the hawk swooped and made a sign with its wings before setting off in a particular direction. The road soon reappeared, directly below the hawk. Sudhana had the impression that the hawk had forced the road to appear before his waiting feet.

“Dear friend, how did you come as far as this? How is it you did not forget me, and have come so far?”

15. The Valley of Fire

Sudhana now entered a scorching land. His brow was soon burned by the sun; it ached and throbbed. Born on a river bank far in the north, the young pilgrim was now experiencing the south's equatorial high noon. Sudhana had to find the Valley of Fire without being able to learn the way from anyone along the wayside, for no one ever went there. Yet that part of Sword Mountain in which it lay could be seen from the outskirts of the city, covered with flames.

Contrary to local, superstitious legends, the fire was in fact the product of the only active volcano in southern India. Defying the heat cooking him like a pig in a cauldron, he passed between the flames and began his ascent of Sword Mountain. Soon he found himself walking over slopes embedded with razor-sharp blades of basalt. It felt like his feet were being cut to ribbons.

He suddenly stared. A solitary ascetic was tearing up the ground and trampling on the rocks with almost insane gestures, his whole body bathed in blood. That man was more terrifying than either mountain or valley. It was the brahman priest Jayoshmayatana. A remarkable man, indeed! By the time Sudhana reached him, his feet too were bleeding freely. Yet oddly enough they did not hurt. He was astonished to find that the wounds inflicted by this mountain, which the city people never dared to approach, were quite insignificant. The eyes of the old brahman monk blazed. His whole body seemed to be bathed in flames.

“Master monk, your whole body is covered with blood and bright flames. It's too hot here. I am called Sudhana, I'm a pilgrim and I've come to visit you.”

“Young. Far too young. Yet holy.”

For a moment Jayoshmayatana stopped making his jerky movements and spoke.

“Don't be afraid to climb the mountain like me, don't be afraid to hurl yourself into the Valley of Fire. I've repeated these gestures more than a hundred thousand times now, and I am encountering truth.”

At that, Sudhana stepped back a pace. In the priest's gaze a terrifying spirit seemed to be lurking. Among all the people he had visited, this was the first one he doubted and could not simply believe. He wondered if he were not perhaps a demon?

It is hard to be born in this world, hard to be born a man with burning heart and bleeding flesh.

It is hard to encounter the truth and also hard to encounter evil spirits, hard to attain a daemon's truth, hard to live with such truth!

Why do I hurl myself into the Valley of Fire?

Just as Sudhana was thinking that Jayoshmayatana must be an incarnation of evil, a ball of flame erupted from the Valley of Fire and turned into the Brahma gods from the Ten Heavens, who addressed Sudhana:

There has been nothing to scold until now, yet today I scold your heart. Child, look at this man. Listen to what he says. Why should you think he is an evil spirit? This man's blood gives birth to wisdom. This man's fire enlightens the homes and ways of every nation. This man has drawn fire in the Valley of Fire and he has become fire.

He is a holy man, child, so throw away your empty thoughts, hurl yourself into the Valley of Fire. After a night there, your darkness and every darkness will vanish.

Sudhana cast one glance down at the vast plain of Ishana, stretching away in an endless panorama of splendor. Then he saw the dead souls of all sentient beings gathering above and flocking towards him in solemn assembly. He closed his eyes and threw himself forward. Burn me. Burn me up entirely. When he came to himself again, five kinds of light were emanating from his body and as the light fell on the rocky sword-points nearby, it transformed them into dazzling sculptures of fire. And the old brahman's crimson eyes and body had been purified.

“Thanks to you, my eyes of crimson fire, my body of crimson fire and crimson blood have at last found sleep. I could never have attained this purified body without you. Thank you. Many, many thanks indeed.”

“How wonderful, Master. As I entered the flames, my body was filled with intense well-being!”

Sudhana was glad. Sacred bliss flowed from his penance. Now he no longer feared sword or fire. Now he knew that swords, fire, and evil spirits too, were all love. He realized that all evil was bodhisattva. Evil was Buddha, all fear was compassion.

Now that he had attained that measure of wisdom, he left Sword Mountain, then gazed back at it from below. He saw that the rugged mountain, with its sharp rocky spurs, was being consumed by the flames enveloping it. As it burned, it began to crumble and collapse.

“Go and visit the maiden known as Maitrayani. Take the north-western road. Henceforth my work is done.”

The old brahman priest had spoken those final words in a loud voice, before hurling himself into the midst of the burning mountain. Some time later, all the inhabitants of the nearby village came flocking to contemplate the dramatic end of Sword Mountain.

“Now the old brahman Jayoshmayatana has completed his acts of penance, making reparation for the adulteries of his mother, the sins of his half-brothers in fighting and killing one another, the appetites of the people in his home village, and the wickedness of the nation's evil statesmen!”

The aged speaker was weeping as he spoke. Sudhana bowed his head.

Once again, Sudhana was obliged to set out on his journey. Over the first hills, the road lay like a white sash stretching to the horizon across endless grassy plains unlike any he had hitherto seen. Then it touched the sky, where a great mass of clouds towered at the horizon.

It was already night when he finally crossed the plains of Simhavijumbhita and reached the city. It was a nation where everyone slept all day, rose in the evening and did all their life's business in the night. The deep night was full of a busy hubbub. However, the darkness was thick with fog; people made a lot of noise but they could not see one another plainly. Everything they did was pale in the fog, like writing partly erased. On account of the fog, the senses of hearing and smell and touch were more highly developed in that land than the sense of sight.

“I smell a stranger.”

Several people near Sudhana murmured. In a flash, Sudhana too developed the same acute sense of smell.

“You are right. I am a pilgrim from afar and going yet farther.”

He asked the way to Maitrayani's home.

“If you would be so good as to follow those girls in front of you. She is their teacher, so please follow them and you will find her.”

Even old men spoke to the young boy in respectful tones. Sudhana hurried forward, the lamplight wavering in the fog. The girls were very beautiful. They walked with downcast eyes. Their hair hung in long tresses down their backs.

“I'm following you; I want to meet Maitrayani.”

“Ah!”

A cry of surprise rang out briefly, then one said in a voice full of modesty and feeling, “It's alright; come with us.”

Sudhana was happy. He was quite fascinated and dazzled, unable to decide which of the four was the most beautiful. When the five of them reached Maitrayani's home, the garden was already crowded with girls arriving from all directions. Sudhana's heart began to beat quickly. He felt infinitely happy. In an instant, he had become fluent in Tamil.

16. Maitrayani dances

One of the girls, Siyina, led Sudhana to Maitrayani's room. She explained: "Tonight Maitrayani is going to dance for the repose of the souls of the dead, drawing dead and living into unity. First, she will dance until midnight for the repose of the dead and then from midnight onwards, after the dead spirits are all asleep, she will dance to calm the souls of the living. That is the effect of her dances. Dancing is the most sacred task a woman's soul can perform, so I hope you will watch Maitrayani dance."

Since she would soon have to dance, Maitrayani was quite motionless, like the silence of strings before they are plucked in performance. Indeed, she seemed to be hoarding up every least movement. There was a faint smile on her face but that did not mean she was moving. The smile had been there before he entered the room. Now her lips alone moved, as she spoke:

"I once heard a report that a little pilgrim in the north had set out on an unending quest for truth. And tonight I am permitted to see him. You are most welcome, most welcome indeed."

"Mistress Maitrayani, my name is Sudhana."

"Is the brahman Jayoshmayatana well?"

"He is in heaven now."

"Ah, so he's gone. His task must have been completed. I still have many things left to do. You are like me, you still have a lot to do."

Just then a serving-girl parted the bead curtain and made a sign with her eyes. A faint shadow passed over Maitrayani's brow, that Sudhana alone noticed. Her expression grew calm as she rose; Sudhana and Siyina preceded her out of the room. They went out into the garden, where the mist was thick. Here and there great lamps glimmered as if deadened by the mist. An empty space was left in the center of the throng to serve as a stage for the dance. Two elderly women, musicians of great skill in the harp and the horn, were sitting there with their eyes closed. The stage for the dance was raised above the seats of the spectators.

Maitrayani threw a cloak of feathers over her fifteen-year-old body and stepped briskly onto the stage. She was no longer the girl who had spoken a little while before. She stood there, utterly composed. She closed her eyes. A spirit was about to enter her body, it would serve as the guiding divinity that would create the dance in the darkness within her.

At the end of the invocation, during which the power of the dance's guiding spirit named the souls of the dead, the dance began. Starting with her finger-tips, then running up her long arms and slender neck, her very hair began to tremble. Then the sleeping harp and horn awoke and at first induced a mysterious chill breeze with their peaceful measures but soon rose and fell louder and louder, a needle-tipped pain between the notes.

The first part of Maitrayani's dance was devout, the second more spectacular, while the third part attained such a peak of frenzy that the dancer seemed no longer to be human at all. She had just reached that point, when the groans of dead spirits could be heard breaking through the silence of the young women gathered in the courtyard. Their groans pursued the melody of the accompanying harp and horn up the scale; harp and horn were mercilessly shaken, the women playing them too, even the young girls were shaking. At the beginning of the fourth section, the dance of the underworld, the spirits grew calm; the instruments, players and spectators regained their previous serenity.

As the fourth section came to an end, a water-lily could be seen blooming on the back of Maitrayani's hand. The hand waved once violently in the air, then froze; sweat broke out on the spectators' faces like so many drops of rain. They seemed pale with relief, as if aware she had just passed a dangerous turning-point between life and death. Maitrayani's youth ensured survival, yet every scrap of energy went out of her. As the spirit left, her beauty reached a point of near despair. All the young girls worshipped, bowing their heads to the ground. Then Maitrayani allowed herself a smile.

It was already past midnight. Maitrayani drank one glass of a drink made from the

juice of roots from the region of Poona in which fresh pine leaves had soaked. As she drank, Sudhana watched. He could see the eerie indigo fluid passing down her throat, for her flesh had become almost transparent. Then each of those present was offered a glass of the same liquid.

The mist had thinned a little, the lamp-light seemed brighter, as Maitrayani began a dance for the salvation of those still alive. For this, she was wearing nothing but a light robe of feathers. Beneath it, her body was naked. Instinctively, Sudhana looked around him. The only men present were himself and an old gardener. He realized that entry was forbidden to men.

This time the dance was not divided into different sections. It was a single movement, representing the process of bringing under control and putting to rest a fierce wind that has begun to blow over vast plains. Soon the robe had gone flying off, landing on the heads of some of the girls, and Maitrayani's naked body, devoid of any shame, moved with a pure effortlessness towards a state in which she conformed to all the laws of dance and in so doing transcended every one of them. By this dance, it was said, all living people and beasts regained their original unspoiled nature and entered a state of utter ecstasy.

As Maitrayani's dance reached its climax, all the bygone sorrows in Sudhana's heart melted away into the early morning. All the pains and sorrows he had undergone came one last time to mind, then he felt them melt away coldly, like thin, high clouds in the northern, autumn air. Maitrayani's voluptuous dance came to an end just as the first pale fingers of early dawn were lighting up the sky behind the grove of yura trees. Once again she received a deep salutation from all who were present.

The girls parted, each one treasuring a great store of emotions in her breast. Siyina approached Sudhana.

“Young lord, you are to remain here. Maitrayani, who is so much more beautiful than I am, wants you to stay.”

She looked disappointed as she went away with the others, brushing through the leaves of the yura trees. The lanterns they had carried on arriving were extinguished. When Sudhana turned back after watching her depart with the rest, he found one of the serving-women standing beside him.

“Maitrayani is waiting for you.”

They passed the terrace and entered a corridor inside the house. He found Maitrayani in a room different from that in which he had met her on his arrival. There was a bed of precious wood and a high chest in which to store things. It was an ordinary room, but fragrant with freshly-sprinkled perfume.

“I would like you to rest here for today. If you care to wash, there is a spring at the end of the corridor. . .”

Day had already fully dawned, and Sudhana had not slept. Soon the beaded door-curtains rattled and Maitrayani came in, after finishing her bath. She was carrying a cup of cold water for him to drink, and a bowl of cold water, with a hempen towel.

“I'll just rub you down with this. You must be exhausted after staying up all night.”

She lifted him up and removed his clothes as if he were her son, then moistened the towel and carefully wiped his body with it. She did not hesitate, seeming perfectly at ease.

“Now rest. When evening comes and you wake up, come to my room just opposite. Rest.”

Sudhana soon fell asleep. When he woke up, evening had come. He knocked at the door that lay beyond the beaded curtain and a voice invited him to enter. Maitrayani had been up for some time; there was nothing left of sleep in the room's atmosphere.

“Let's go out into the back garden.”

They went to sit on chairs arranged under the trees in the garden behind the house.

“There is nothing more mysterious than the instant when you begin to know a stranger. You must have experienced many such moments of mystery, Sudhana?”

He rose and followed her out across wide lawns shrouded in mist. She led the way. Maitrayani seemed perhaps only one month older than Sudhana; her happiness communicated itself to him directly. It became contagious. Passing beyond the lawns, Maitrayani entered a grove of palms and yura trees standing on a rise. There a small shrine had been built, adorned with exquisite metalwork. He had never seen a place where intricate workmanship expressed such solemnity.

“Now look at this shrine of Vairochana. In each of its pillars of glass, in each of its walls of diamond, in each of its mirrors, in each of its golden bells, in each of its decorations, in the form of each of its treasures, as water reflects the moon or shadows, you will find reflected the practice and teachings of every Buddha, a spectacle of unsurpassed virtue. The teaching of the Buddha has spread as far as our Tamil lands, you see.”

Then she continued,

“I have encountered innumerable Buddhas, so I prepared this shrine. Each of them has brought me through a different gateway to the threshold of truth.”

Her eyes flashed as she laughed.

17. Eyes like a lotus

“Farewell, then. No one can take hold of running water. Farewell. The most sorrowful greeting in our tongue is the word we say on leave-taking. For it is hard to meet again.”

Sudhana accepted Maitrayani's parting words. She cut off a lock of her hair and gave it to him. He tried to refuse it, but she pushed it into his bundle. Once again, he was on the road. His next destination, she had told him, the Land of Trinayana, lay in a wilderness on the far side of a desert, a very long journey. The journey was going to be hard, on account of the heat. In his despair, Sudhana longed to be able to dream away the passage of another twelve years.

This time the journey was utterly real. The desert : its endless horizons, poisonous white clouds, his own shadow, isolated clumps of coarse grass stubbornly surviving in the desolate plain, paths across stretches of soft basalt pebbles, the bones of dead cows. . . . worse still, not one of those lifeless things would speak to him. Here there were no talking mango trees or speaking elephants. The desert stretched on and on. It was more like a vast river than a desert; once he had passed beyond it, he found himself in a wilderness. Apart from prickly agaves and bundles of weeds, it held nothing but brown rocks that looked like so much rusty gravel, and barren earth. It was the harshest and most desolate waste in the whole of nature.

Once he had passed the desert, Sudhana began to feel weary. But there was no succor for him in that wilderness. His flesh seemed to be melting away like the moon vanishing in clouds. The despair that takes hold of those who grow weary on the way across desert and wilderness led him to rush wildly after mirages and go sprawling. He knew nothing beyond the ruins of nature now. Sudhana forced his eyes wide open, hoping by so doing to put an end to a mirage that he could see wavering far away over the wilderness. It failed to help, though, and the mirage continued to float there. It looked like a flourishing city, no matter how hard he strove against the mirage.

If Sudhana succeeded in reaching the end of the wilderness, it might have seemed like a miracle, but it was not really one. It was rather a victory gained by his resolve, fortified as he was by the suffering his long journeys had yielded, the firm conviction that the truth he was seeking was no false goal, and the joy of his own simple, youthful tenacity.

He collapsed just as he reached the far edge of the wilderness and he was carried on a stretcher to the doctor at the region's hospice for travellers. He recovered his wits as he arrived there. By chance, the doctor had sent a servant into the wilderness that morning to collect some dried bones and that servant discovered the moribund body of Sudhana. The doctor employed his skills to save Sudhana.

“It's terrible, and so young, too. Coming across the wilderness like that! This child is not human, he can't be human!”

The old doctor was glad when Sudhana woke up.

“Where are we?”

“Ah! This is the land of Trinayana. Where have you come from, all that way across the wilderness?”

“I'm a pilgrim. Do you know the monk Sudarshana?”

“There is no reason why I should.”

Sudhana stayed in the hospice for three days, receiving treatment. After leaving the hospice, he went roaming in search of the monk, but no one seemed to have heard of him. In the course of his quest, happening to enter a tavern to beg for something to eat, he heard the old woman at the counter say, “We ought to sell this wretched child to Sudarshana.” He pricked up his ears, and questioned her. From her he learned the way leading up into the Pathless Mountain and set out hastily. But once he came near the place, he was unable to discover in which direction the monk's dwelling lay.

The country was extremely poor. The king, being very rapacious, squeezed his people like so much washing, robbing them of their harvests as well as any profit they might make, squandering everything on women. Years before, Sudarshana had tried to rid the land of its wicked king but had failed, and fled deep into the mountain. After the king became quite insane, the order to capture Sudarshana was rescinded and he was allowed to go on living deep in the lonely hills. There he became a hermit. One day, he met a travelling monk who had once met Siddhartha; he developed for himself the few basic teachings he learned from him.

After he had crossed several ridges, Sudhana was overjoyed to discover at long last a small hermitage sheltered from the wind in a hollow beside the road he was following. He hurried towards it, falling and hurting himself as he went. There, the ageing Sudarshana was staring at him in utter amazement.

“Where have you come from?”

“I’ve come looking for the monk called Sudarshana.”

“Are you on your own?”

“Yes.”

“Who told you where to find me?”

“Some old woman in a tavern. . .”

“Confound the old bitch!”

Sudhana felt disappointed. Was this foul mouthed yokel really Sudarshana? But he had nowhere else to go.

“Go over there, cut that rice and set it to dry. Then you’ll get something to eat. The rice is ready to harvest.”

He spoke roughly. Sudhana took up a long scythe and began to cut the rice. As he was cutting, he slashed his hand.

“What the hell are you doing! Give it here!”

He snatched the scythe away from him and began to cut the rice, great handfuls at a time. When old Sudarshana had cut all he felt like cutting, he took Sudhana to the hermitage and they shared a meal of cold rice. Just as they were eating the coarse fare, a fox came trotting up.

“You bloody useless son of a fox! Why didn’t you tell me this kid was on his way? Get out of here! Be off!”

He yelled until the fox slipped away.

Sudhana spent the night there, having found Sudarshana living a harsh life as an unmarried laborer. The next day, he was astonished to find that old Sudarshana, who had been so violent, had withdrawn into almost total silence, as if he had been struck dumb. He was just the same as he must have been before Sudhana’s arrival. He was nothing more than a farmer out harvesting rice, digging up potatoes, weeding the fields. There was nothing visibly monkish about him. Yet his eyes were translucent as lotus flowers. The only particularity about him were the three moles on his breast that could be seen when he stripped off his upper garments to work.

The mountain highlands were deep and secretive. There was neither sight nor sound of any other person all day long. Perhaps they were the only two people who had ever passed that way. The hermitage that Sudhana had spotted was a cabin Sudarshana had built on his arrival out of tree trunks. The hillsides rang constantly with the songs of birds and the calls of wild animals. Sun and moon set early there. The nights were long.

“Sudhana! Aren’t you bored?”

It was only on the morning of the third day that Sudarshana addressed a kind word to Sudhana. That kindness was sufficient to send Sudhana rushing into his arms in a flood of tears. The monk gently caressed Sudhana’s back.

“Don’t you want to go back to Maitrayani?”

“No. I can never go back to a place I've already been.”

“She's my daughter, you know.”

“What?”

“That child went walking off across the deadly wilderness. She's a terror, to be sure! I reckon she sent you here because she misses her dad.”

Sudhana was taken aback. How could he ever have guessed? But if it was true, he had served as a bridge for the natural affection that remained alive deep in the hearts of father and daughter, though both had renounced the world. A bridge between people was a good thing to be.

“Little pilgrim seeking for truth! We're deep in the hills up here. You may have come looking for me but I've got nothing I can teach you in just a day or two. I'm an old monk, a monk who spends all his time farming. If you farm, nothing happens in a day or two. You have to spend a year; ten years, even. It's already fifteen years I've been separated from that daughter of mine. All that while I've sown and worked the fields here alone. If I know any truth, it's only that.”

Sudhana resolved to pause for a time on his long journey. He felt sure that there must be truth hidden deep inside this ordinary farmer that Sudarshana had become. It might only be a matter of a cabbage or a turnip, but might that not be a fresh, new kind of truth, completely removed from any kind of abstract ideas about the world? This lonely farmer deep in the hills working without rest inspired the little pilgrim; Sudhana began to put down deep roots, unwilling to leave.

18. Journey to Shramanamandala

“Back in those times, I made a journey to the kingdom of Shramanamandala.”

Old Sudarshana was speaking.

“Everywhere I looked, I could see vast fields. It's the region that produces most of south India's rice. Yet, strange to say. . . in all those fields, there was not a soul to be seen. The paddy fields divided themselves up of their own accord and produced a crop in the selected area. Yet in the several months I spent there, I never once saw anyone out in the fields. There's no way of knowing who ploughs the ground, or who sows the seed, who does the weeding, who drives away the birds that flock there, or who harvests the crop.”

“Because you never happened to see them, I suppose?”

Sudhana butted in. Sudarshana blinked sadly and shook his head.

“No. I was always expecting somebody to appear. Sometimes I lost my temper and shouted out over the fields, 'How come this rice is being harvested without one single person visible anywhere?’”

They stopped talking for a moment. It was as if old Sudarshana had been tossed back into the empty plains of the kingdom of Shramanamandala, his face grew tense with anguish. The moon rose. It was already late evening. The child and the old man were both struck with a feeling that they were the only two people alive that night.

“You don't have to respond to what I'm telling you. I know how unlikely it sounds. I came to realize that the cultivation of those wide-stretching fields in the kingdom of Shramanamandala was not being done by human hands, Nature was doing it all by herself. It seemed alright for people to forget for a long while about land they had cleared and cultivated. All they had to do was receive a full crop of rice and wheat and beans. The farmers had not been troubled about the use made of their land. They didn't mind if somebody else sowed seed on their land. The point is, there are lots of fields all over the world, but what the farmers there had learned was that nowhere in this world can be considered “mine.” If I was hunted by the king and ended up living here in these mountains, it was because in the course of my journey I learned something from those farmers who never let anyone see them. It's a fact!”

“You really mean to say that you never once saw a farmer in those fields in the kingdom of Shramanamandala?”

“Why do you keep asking me questions? I've done everything I could to keep you from doubting. Why are you asking that?”

Then the old man added in a quiet voice:

“I did see someone, once! It was one day at dawn. We old people wake up early. You'll wake up at dawn, too, when you're old. I had resolved to leave that place. It was dawn on the day I was due to depart. Outside the window of the empty house I was staying in, a bulbul bird was singing. Wanting to see the bird, I went outside; the sky was just becoming light. There I saw an old man walking along, with the plain stretching endlessly behind him as far as the horizon. That farmer was walking along freely, walking for the mere sake of walking, freely like Eternity itself.”

He looked like someone who had spent the night out in the fields and was now on his way back to his wife at home. Only he no longer had a wife, or children; no longer had the house that had been their joy. That farmer, the first person he had seen in those dawning fields of grain, cancelled out the emptiness of the natural world that had filled the endless plains until he appeared.

Sudarshana had been about to rush towards the farmer. But his feet seemed fixed to the ground. So he called out in a loud voice. It was just as the sun was about to rise, the moment when the whole eastern part of the sky begins to take on the tints of sunlight. He heard no reply

from the farmer. He simply went on walking. He seemed to be walking for some reason and at the same time for no reason, Sudarshana felt that the distance separating them was growing. Perhaps this farmer appearing in the early morning fields was not a human being at all? Perhaps he was only a phantasm? For with the rising of the sun, the light became dazzling and he could see nothing; at that moment the farmer became invisible, disappeared.

“I suppose that farmer was a product of my thoughts,” Sudarshana pondered. “As I was hoping someone would appear, waiting for someone to appear, I can quite believe that my thoughts gave rise to that farmer's form in the early morning plains on the morning of the very day I had decided to leave. I was an exile, banished by the king of the Land of Trinayana and that was the moment the idea came of returning home. I came up into these mountains; I am living here in imitation of that phantom farmer.”

“Did you ever meet Siddhartha?” Sudhana asked.

“No. I never met him. But I did once meet one of his disciples. And in my heart, I am all the time meeting Siddhartha. It's like the love that keeps a woman's husband present in her heart even though he is absent, the love of a wife looking after the children at home while her husband travels around as a peddler. It's not only Siddhartha, either. I meet all the other enlightened beings, too.”

At that moment, little Sudhana clearly felt Sudarshana's truth entering him. After sowing the seed, Sudhana stayed in the hills until the sun had ripened the harvest during the short dry season. In the course of that everyday farming life, thanks to the old monk Sudhana was able to feel that anyone, if they are endowed with wisdom, possesses the laws of the universe within them, that between any such person and the universe there will be the simple words, “Come and play with me,” the pure meeting of child with child, like a shaft of light piercing the gap between dream and reality in a dream.

“Sudhana, my child. How hard your hands and feet have grown. If you work in the fields, your hands and feet and your whole body grow hard. Not your heart, though. I still distinguish between body and heart. That is the only thing I can do. You ought to go to the land of Shramanamandala where I used to live. There's a child called Indriyeshvara there who once looked after me when I was sick. You and he are the same age, you'll be able to grow more childlike and play children's games together.”

“He lives by a river, doesn't he?”

“How do you know that?” Sudarshana asked in amazement.

“It just came into my mind.”

His eyes shone and were full of laughter. The old monk took some of the fruit he had stored up for emergencies and put them in Sudhana's bundle. The little pilgrim took his leave of the mountain farm he had grown so fond of. A cluster of snakes went with him to the foot of the mountain to see him off. Once he had left the mountain they went squirming back.

Sudhana returned to the life on the road that he had abandoned for a time. As the falling rain soaked his clothes, he realized that this life on the road was his true happiness. The rain was untouched by any wind; it fell straight down. The road lay idle in the rain.

There was no clear dividing line to show where the land of Trinayana ended and the next nation began. In days gone by, an army opposed to the king had gathered near the southern frontier; traces of the villages the rebels had lived in could still be seen, although nobody lived there now. Here and there between the rebels' houses the little pilgrim glimpsed bones of men and horses, as well as fragments of bowls in stone and metal. He spotted some elephant bells. He picked them up and shook them. They jangled.

“What a desolate spot. It looks as though nobody's living here. This kind of desolation where people once lived is the reason I'm on my way to meet Indriyeshvara.”

Sudhana followed the road through a forest, only to find beyond it a bleak wasteland where the road simply vanished. The only living things were thorny bushes, thistles, and the

poorest of poor agaves, all of which served to underscore how completely nature had fallen into ruins there.

Shramanamandala's main city, Sumukha, dominated the sandy shores of the Aso River, standing at the meeting-point of various roads that followed the meanders of the deep river as it flowed on in all its splendor. Unlike other such arrivals, this time Sudhana was not tired, despite the long journey. The five city gates always stood open and a rich blend of people from many countries was living within the city walls. There you might find descendants of gods and descendants of demons, people from Arabia and Ceylon, to say nothing of tribes resulting from the intermarriage of divinities with brahmans. Yet there had never once been any conflict between all those different groups and tribes gathered within the city; the morality that underlay such a peace was something quite extraordinary.

Sudhana asked the way to the sandbanks along the Aso River. A young musician from Ceylon, completely naked, followed along behind him, playing a quiet tune on his flute that gave the impression of darkness creeping over the earth at sunset. Just as he left him, Sudhana glimpsed a child playing alone on the white sand. The river was blue, the sand white like moonlight. There the young lad called Indriyeshvara was busily building houses of sand then demolishing them again.

“Hey! Indriyeshvara!”

Sudhana called him. Taken aback, he waved in Sudhana's direction.

“I've come to visit you. That's how I know your name.”

“What's your name?” Indriyeshvara shouted back across the river that divided them.

“I'm called Sudhana!”

19. Two boys together

Actually, Sudhana had no idea of his own age. After the long dream that had seemed to last twelve years, he had no idea of how much time had really passed. His relationship with time had become strangely blurred, like a landscape viewed by someone who has been sick for a long time. As soon as he set eyes on the boy he longed to know his own age.

“Indriyeshvara, how old are you?”

But he just shook his head, taking up a handful of sand and letting it trickle between his fingers.

“I don't know. It's like this sand trickling away if you pick it up. How old are you? We must be about the same age, surely?”

“I don't know either.”

“Then our age has run away from us.”

With that, Indriyeshvara flopped down onto the sand. Sudhana followed suit, and lay sprawling on the sand in the warm evening.

“How did you meet that old man? Sudarshana the monk, I mean.” Indriyeshvara questioned him. “That old man taught me many things. Once, when I was so sick that I forgot the words I had learned, the things I remembered, even my own mother, he embraced my unconscious body and prayed all through one moonless night, until my senses were restored. As I was coming round, I wondered why the world was so dark. I thought that the world was always plunged in a rainy moonless night. As my wits returned, the darkness frightened me and quite unconsciously I began to call for my mother. That was my first step towards recovering the world and the people I had forgotten about. He saved my life. Yet he lived as though he was always hiding, on the run from something, and when spies from his own land turned up here one day, he disappeared without more ado. He must have sent you so that we can search for truth together! It doesn't matter how old we are.”

“Indriyeshvara, when I hear you talk of the past, I feel like doing the same!”

“No need, I know you. I know your past. We're already old friends; in the centuries past we've slept together, shared life together in a hundred or more lives. You must remember our friendship.”

Sudhana gazed out at the darkening stream. Their bodies were covered with sand. With the flow of water, over the course of centuries, the great rocks and cliffs of the loftiest peaks had been reduced to sand, and the rocks having become sand in union with the river, the sand knew all that the rocks had known. In the deep evening stillness, the sand was very gently weeping. After they had enjoyed their happiness for a while, Indriyeshvara offered a suggestion.

“Sudhana, tomorrow's the new moon. Let's visit the plains around Surajong village across the river. There we won't be bored for a moment, all night long.”

“Why? What's going to happen?”

“We'll see the most ecstatic dance in the whole world.”

“Fine. Let's go.”

They rowed across the river in a dug-out boat made from the trunk of a nine-hundred-year-old tala tree toward the fourth of Surajong village's landing-stages. At first, they had to overcome the resistance of the river's current, but then, feathering the oars, they were carried by the stream to the fourth landing. There were already red curtains dangling at all the market stalls in the village, a sign of festival, and the girls had all adorned their foreheads and cheeks with daubs of red; their faces seemed on fire. Night was just falling. The lamps at the stalls were blazing brightly.

Sudhana and Indriyeshvara waited in a remote spot, until a noisy band of village boys and girls vanished in the direction of the plain, then followed after them. The night was cloudy,

not a single star could be seen. They kept tripping and stumbling on the unfamiliar path until, finally, they arrived at a place where no sound could be heard from the river. Since the great roar of the rapids was completely inaudible, they must have come a long way. The plain seemed to have hardened under the tension of the night, poised for something to happen.

“There are lights!”

Indriyeshvara spoke. They were walking along a rather dull, level stretch of the plain, when suddenly a light blazed up. Then lights spread thickly along the horizon, like a ghostly will'o the wisp, until there seemed to be a complete wall of fire across the plain.

“I'm frightened.” Sudhana murmured.

“It's alright. This is my second time.” Indriyeshvara replied.

Their two hearts had already formed a tight bond with the flame; they were being drawn towards it. The deeper the night became, the more the area covered by the light seemed to deck itself with an uneasy tension. As they arrived, the oldest of the leading citizens was just getting up onto the circular stage. Men and women from all the different tribes of Surajong were gathered, listening to the chieftain's speech, that was brief and soon over. As soon as he descended from the stage, the entire assembly dropped to the ground in a deep prostration.

A girl made her entrance, concentrating deeply and bringing her whole body into stillness. Raising slender arms and lifting her head, she let her hair fall free as her body grew tense before she began to dance. The fan that the chieftain was holding dropped into the flames. At that, the girl began the opening dance. Until she began to spin her whole body around, she looked like a statue standing there in the light from the many fires.

In the spirit dance she was performing, the girl's own will had withdrawn and her body became a spinning top immersed in divine possession. Then the girl stopped spinning, and as her dance changed, the chieftain began to beat on a drum. At once, every villager present joined in a frenzied spirit dance, that seemed to drop down upon them. Groans, cries, exclamations, and lamentations rose above the frantic dance in which their sorrows and their very bodies were forgotten. The dance lasted far into the night with never a pause for rest.

Indriyeshvara and Sudhana watched the dance hidden in a nearby patch of marsh, fearful of its intensity. The night grew ever darker. The night was so full of the dance that nothing could penetrate it.

“You only have to see such a dance to realize that dancing is a festival where people's wills, the wills of all sleeping things, enter bodies and become manifest. That dance is danced just once a year, on the last day of the ninth month. The people here believe that on that day the holy gods come down to be with them. As they dance, many drop dead.”

All through the night, Sudhana vibrated to the dance in terror. The two boys fell asleep at dawn. When they awoke, it was already early in the morning. All the people had left the place; no one could be seen. The ground was littered with the dead bodies of those whose spirits had departed heavenward in the course of the dance. They looked like the sleeping bodies of living people.

“The bodies are simply left lying here, and by this time next year only the completely clean bones are left. Then those bones are thrown down to the Dragon King's palace below the River Aso,” Indriyeshvara explained.

Sudhana came across the body of the girl who had danced first the night before.

“It's her. The girl who danced last night.”

Indriyeshvara nodded and spoke sorrowfully.

“That girl came across the river to see me not so long ago. She swam all the way across that wide river in secret.”

“Really? You mean, you knew her?”

“Yes, I knew her. Not only that, I was very fond of her. It was because she invited me that I came here last night. She was that chieftain's grand-daughter.”

“You must be feeling sad.”

“Yes, very. But at least I still have the song she sung me:

A flowing river knows everything, knows the future of everything, while a little boat knows nothing at all. I am a little boat, just floating down the omniscient river. Little boat! Tossing all it knows into the river. My little boat just floats down with the river.

Indriyeshvara sang quietly.

“Sudhana, I've shown you the death of the girl I loved. I've nothing else left to show you. Now you must go floating in that dug-out down the Aso River, as my song described. You should tie up the boat at the nineteenth ferry-landing and disembark at the entrance to the city known as Samudrapratishthana.”

“You mean, you're staying here?”

“Yes, I'll go on living here caressing the sand. My dancing girl has disappeared and you are leaving me, too. All I have is sand.”

“Samudrapratishthana is a long way away.”

“Yes, a very long way. But you need far-away places to visit. You'll be meeting a beautiful woman. There's no need for you to know her name. Her divine powers will be guiding your craft. I once met her in just the same way.”

“In that case, I'll do as you say.”

Indriyeshvara first rowed the boat toward the river shore, but then changed direction and approached a sandbank. Sudhana found himself alone in the boat. Indriyeshvara briskly pushed the craft off. Rejected by its owner, the boat selected a particular eddy in the river and began to float downstream. Sudhana waved at the steadily diminishing solitude of Indriyeshvara. Then the sandbank too shrunk to a white streak and disappeared. The river was flowing far more rapidly than it seemed. He felt sad. 'The little boat knows nothing at all. . .'

Sudhana wept as he tried to sing a snatch of Indriyeshvara's song. Perhaps it was true. Knowing is not the same as realizing. It was necessary to float down the river, tossing away everything he knew and returning to the original emptiness of knowing nothing. A new happiness came to Sudhana as he journeyed downstream.

20. A generous welcome

After he parted from Indriyeshvara on the river bank opposite Surajong, young Sudhana had ample leisure to savor solitude, for he met nobody on his long journey, begun in previous existences, down the serene river. From time to time, a breeze blowing over the river made the boat rock; that was all. Along the river banks, manifold species of trees clustered together or mingled with trees of other kinds. Farther down, a wilderness took the place of those luxuriant woodlands, a wasteland on which it seemed that not a single blade of grass had ever grown since the creation of the world.

He saw houses built out over the water, under which naked girls could be glimpsed bathing. Sometimes he encountered an old boatman on a passing skiff. Yet young Sudhana exchanged not one word with any of them. He merely waved a hand. He waved at the leaves on the trees, at the people, at the cliffs along the river, at the shadow of the cliffs along the river, at the plains, then left them behind.

Observing the various boats -- some crossing to the other shore at each ferry-point, others drifting downstream or struggling against the current on their way between ferry-stations, and the boats catching fish near each ferry -- he was able to distinguish between regions of poverty and regions that were key points for traffic or where trade was flourishing.

After just a few such ferry-crossings, he found himself in a different kingdom, with a tributary of the main river serving to mark the frontier. He passed nineteen ferry-stations in four different kingdoms; the kingdom of Samudrapratishthana lay at the estuary of the Aso River, on the coast of the Indian Ocean.

At the landing-stage he parted company with the boat that had shared his journey thus far. Tied to a stake at the ferry landing, the boat had already lost its former owner, Indriyeshvara, and now it was losing Sudhana too. "Once across a river, you abandon the boat you took." The little pilgrim recalled that saying, together with another of the same kind, that he disliked: "when you point at the moon you forget the finger that points." We should value all that helps us reach a goal, he felt. So Sudhana poured a libation of water over the boat in token of gratitude, before leaving it there. Just then, a would-be passenger came hastening along the jetty. The man was carrying his young daughter.

"Little fellow, lend me your boat. My daughter is sick, I have to go to Candana-tree ferry-station by the sea so she can be treated."

"You're welcome to take it. I've finished with it."

"Tell me, child, you aren't by any chance on your way to visit the wealthy lady, the beautiful Prabhuta, are you?"

"I am indeed. How did you know?"

Sudhana hesitated before replying. Prabhuta? He did not know her, yet he felt an interest awaken in him.

"Up on the jetty there, you'll find a man on his way to her manor. Just follow him."

The father boarded Sudhana's boat with his sick daughter, untied it, and floated off on the current. Sudhana saw the girl's smile one last time. Approaching a food-stall on the jetty, he obtained something to eat, his first cooked meal for a long time. Then he entered the inn in search of the man who was on his way to Lady Prabhuta's house.

The fellow in question belonged to a poor family that lived as brigands up in the north. His right hand having been amputated with an axe, he had become a beggar as another way of relieving people of their belongings, and had come wandering southward, until he heard reports that Lady Prabhuta gave out free food, something poor people are always looking for, and was now on his way there.

Without any words passing between them, they left the hustle and bustle of the ferry

and set out along a quiet path over the meadows. The paddy fields were in full growth, the breeze was sending waves racing across them. Beyond the plains, a hill rose. The hill offered a broad expanse of green shade between the forests, like a pleasure garden. The road led everywhere. Many people were coming and going, while many others were taking their rest along the wayside.

They quickly saw that those resting there had come with the same goal as themselves. Going on ahead, Sudhana found out the way. Although boundary signs from olden days forbidding entry remained, Lady Prabhuta's vast estate was freely open to everyone. For these other people, it was a place to get their fill of food, for him it was a place to get his fill of wisdom.

Just as Sudhana reached the great main gates, they slowly swung open. Already crowds were streaming in through several other gateways. The manor was composed of a number of immense buildings. Yet the central house was simpler than the rest. That was where he found Lady Prabhuta. She was sitting in an unpretentious pose, her beauty was in need of no make-up or jewelry, and her face harbored a constant smile addressed to all those who came to visit her.

Around her stood a group of equally beautiful young girls, in clothing so diaphanous that it revealed much of their bodies beneath. Yet those girls' beauty awakened no desire; on the contrary, it had the power to abolish desire. The beauty of the girls surrounding Lady Prabhuta was on a par with hers, but each maintained her own beauty with complete freedom and kindled an individual temptation that transcended all sensual, carnal pleasures and attained a high splendor. Beauty at its utmost extreme gives birth to the norm of nothingness. Confronted with Lady Prabhuta, Sudhana bowed in reverence.

"I am a young wayfarer passing by. Please satisfy my starved mind as you satisfy starved stomachs."

Astonished and delighted at the same time, she stood up. The small bowl set in front of her shook slightly as she rose.

"Wayfarer, you are sacred, most sacred. At last I have met you, after waiting so long. Ah, at the joy I feel on meeting you, all the illumination I have so far received seems to have become unenlightened darkness. Look at this little bowl."

He looked into the bowl. There was nothing in it. A man who had come in and was standing behind Sudhana spoke:

"I was longing to eat fine rice with honeyed oysters, and this bowl is full of it. How can an empty bowl suddenly fill with the food I desire? Truly you are sacred, Lady Prabhuta."

"Oh, the next in line is in quest of food and his food has already appeared. Here you are, take it."

With a slightly regretful air, she transferred the food to a dish some of the girls were holding. They handed it to the man. Lady Prabhuta gazed at Sudhana.

"Young pilgrim, in your heart of hearts you desired nothing. Your wish did not materialize in my bowl. But I have new food ready for you, food never before seen, the food of the high heavens and the deep seas, of the springs deep in the hills."

She delved with her empty hands into the empty bowl and handed something to Sudhana. It was nothing. Sudhana received it.

"little pilgrim, holy traveller. I can provide the food that one hundred people, a thousand people, as many people as there are motes of dust in the whole universe, desire. Besides that, I can supply at will the clothing, head scarves, and necklaces, even the carts and the boats that they desire. All, high and low, once they have received food, adornments, goods from me, experience a rise in position."

She continued to speak in a low voice.

"Consider these beautiful young girls. They have purified their hearts with me, setting

aside their individual beauty and giving everybody the food and the other things they hope for, to make each of them able to journey through the limitless worlds in the ten directions in the space of a single thought. Yet the food in this bowl never diminishes. This is the bowl of bodhisattva nature that never decreases and can always give.”

As he stood beside her, Sudhana felt deep emotion at the spectacle of Lady Prabhuta making and sharing out at will food and ornaments to so many people. . . .

*Unending as the void,
raining down like the beads of Mount Sumeru,
inexhaustible,
beautiful Lady Prabhuta!
Beauty too is never exhausted.*

Just then it began to rain slightly over Lady Prabhuta's vast park and the guests thronging to visit her took shelter in the various buildings or under the encampment's tents. That was when Sudhana sang for her. The young woman rejoiced,

“Young wayfarer, holy wayfarer, come to my home! To my home! Ah, precious maids, usher him in with your beauty!”

She began to implore some of the young girls. Candles were being lit on the innumerable candelabra surrounding the main building. Night came, beautiful. The sound of the maidens' lovely songs was like birdsong.

“Lady, give me food too.”

On hearing those words, Sudhana realized that his empty stomach had been filled; likewise he could not help noticing that after the maidens' jade-hued songs had come to an end, the songs did not vanish, they could still be heard.

21. The eater of ashes

“Come to our dormitory. There's lots of room, you must come and sleep there with my maids and me. Often myriads of stars like cosmic dust come to sleep with us in our room. The breezes too.”

Sudhana let himself be guided to the dormitory by Prabhuta's delicate hand. The maids followed Prabhuta and Sudhana. The dormitory in the main building was enormous, like a lake at the end of a long walk. The windows had no curtains, beyond them was a glimpse of the forest, the forest canopy, and the sky. Seeing them enter, the stars in the sky began to twinkle and gradually drew closer. He realized now what she meant by saying that she slept with the stars.

Lady Prabhuta made Sudhana lie down at her side. All the maidens took their places side by side, like a fan being folded.

“I am only called 'Lady' because I lead these maidens; I too am a maid. I am a husbandless wife, a widow with no dead husband.”

The revelation of her virginity sent Sudhana into a deep sleep.

“Ah, Lady, this child wayfarer already knew that!”

“What?”

“Even a passing wayfarer can tell, by the first things he sees: your ladyship's sacred outstretched hand and your smile tell him that.”

“Yes, such is this wayfarer's wisdom. It is high, the highest of all, the wayfarer's wisdom is higher than anyone else's.”

She caressed his brow and breast and limbs with her palm. Sudhana sank deeper into childlike slumber. In his dreams he found himself with the Lady Prabhuta again. In reality, he was lying close beside her; in his dream they were even closer. Yet as they strolled through the grounds of her estate together in his dream, Sudhana sighed to think that soon he would be obliged to leave.

“It is not possible to restrain what flows. You cannot restrain water or the wind or all the immensities of time. I could not make you stay here, even if I wanted to. I could not. I cannot command a bird to perch on a branch, so how could I make you stay?”

“For me, things that stay in one place all part from me, as I flow on. If I decided to settle somewhere, everything else would flow off instead. I have never once lived in one place. Up in the north, there are people who live beneath trees that span a hundred and fifty generations, until the trunk rots into the ground, but that is not for me”

“That is because the kind of life, spent in meditation, or in pilgrimage, depends on the karma of each. Wayfarer, my lovely pilgrim -- you should visit Vidvan who eats ashes.”

As he dreamed, she told him the story of Vidvan's life. He belonged to the ancient royal family of the Dekkan highlands. Once the kingdom had collapsed, he had fallen to the level of the poorest families. Such had been his misery that he had almost nothing to eat. He had been reduced to pondering whether he should choose beggary or theft. The art of living? Or the politics of living? Begging is an art. Theft is politics. He chose to belong to the haves, became a robber and broke into the palace occupied by the new king who had taken power in the ruined land.

The moon was on the wane as he made his way into the royal bedchamber. No one knew the royal palace better than he. He gathered together a hoard of valuable booty and was about to leave when he noticed a bowl of ashes beside the sleeping king's water bowl. He gulped the ashes down madly, too hungry to realize what it was he was eating. He was free to escape with a great hoard of precious jewels, yet could not resist a handful of ashes. His stomach was full.

Once he was full, his wits returned and he realized that he had been eating ashes. "Ah! Ashes are enough to satisfy hunger!" he exclaimed aloud.

The king was sound asleep, after all the festivities of the previous evening; he did not wake up. Beside the king lay a girl's thin dress. Vidvan tossed onto it all the things that he intended to carry away.

"Sir, new king!"

He shook the king. The waking monarch was startled and afraid. He trembled in dread.

"King, sir; take me prisoner. I've just realized that I can eat ashes when I'm hungry. Make me your prisoner and punish me!"

His voice sounded pathetic as he urged him to summon the royal guards. But the king saw that he meant what he said and gave him gifts of rubies before guiding him through the maze leading out of the palace grounds at dawn. From that moment, the king began to govern wisely while Vidvan continued his newly consecrated life, homeless and eating ashes, until he ended his life as a saint.

Sudhana awoke and realized that he had been dreaming again. Sudhana looked around the vast room. Beside him, Lady Prabhuta's beautiful sleeping face could clearly be seen.

"Even asleep, you know everything with the wisdom of one who loves!"

He addressed her sleep. Then he left the girls' dormitory and went wandering off through the dark gardens. People had retired to the estate's various big houses and the outdoors encampment, to the ferry-station, or to their own homes. The luxuriant garden lay empty. Why did he feel as though the whole world was empty as he stood there?

"Right. There's no need for me to stay here any longer. Only I don't know where to find Vidvan."

Yet he did know. Because the sleeping Lady Prabhuta revealed to Sudhana what she wanted to tell him. Hadn't she filled his stomach when she knew he was hungry? He heard her voice ringing through the early morning air.

"You can meet Vidvan. You can meet him for sure."

That sent him out through the great gates by which he had entered, almost as if he was being driven out. In the early daylight, an iguyol tree, growing taller than any other kind of tree, rose high as a hill in the level plain. An old tramp was squatting alone under the tree. Just as Sudhana was passing, the drowsing tramp stretched and got to his feet.

"Where are you going so early? Early in the day, you have to let the road go on sleeping a bit more. You're too impatient."

"Why are you sleeping here, old man? There's too much dew. There are plenty of tents in the camp, yet you sleep under a tree!"

"I'm a leper, people drive me away."

"What?"

"I'm the leper Vidvan."

"You? Are you Vidvan? I was on my way to look for you."

"Really?"

The old leper replied in a dull voice then rose ponderously. He had cut off a rotten toe the previous evening. The severed toe lay by the roots of the tree. Without any further need to talk, they left the outer gardens of Prabhuta's estate. They did not return to the ferry but instead took the inland road that began at the ferry-station.

"It's not what I had heard. I didn't know that you were sick like this. Do you know Lady Prabhuta?"

"Is there anyone she doesn't know? She is loved by every man, every male animal; even the male trees love her. Shall I tell her about my being a leper? Funny little wanderer!"

Vidvan laughed hollowly. Just then the glow of the rising sun lit up the far horizon, that gradually passed from yellow to red.

“I’m originally of royal blood, you know. Ha ha. Who isn’t of royal blood, after all? When the kingdom collapsed, I became a beggar. I went into the king’s room to steal and got hold of his jewels. They multiplied. I gave all my wealth to the poor, then I met Siddhartha and built one wing of his monastery. He wanted me to be a bodhisattva but in order to enjoy a bodhisattva’s bliss they say you have to experience one kind of human suffering in your own body. So the reward I got for having built a wing of his monastery was this leprosy. The most painful kind of leprosy, too. Ha ha. That’s how it goes. I’ve lived my past and present lives without any division between them.”

Learning of the old man’s past, Sudhana felt ashamed of his initial reluctance to walk beside him.

“Did you really meet Siddhartha?”

“Of course.”

“What did he look like?”

“Hmm. He’s the most handsome of all the Shakya tribe with their thirty-two kinds of beautiful faces. Listen!”

Sudhana listened. The “Song of Unending Bliss” could be heard echoing far away. With the song, the majestic pinnacles and temples of Mahasambhava rose into sight.

“Let’s go together. My temple of Seven Treasures is waiting with its empty darkness. When I open the doors, the darkness comes rushing out and perishes weeping in the sunlight outside. Look how the light shines on those pinnacles and temples. Yet inside they are full of darkness waiting for me. I must quickly go and take off my leprosy; it’s like a suit of clothes. To know how joyful a thing bliss is, I have to know how painful leprosy is. How could I ever experience unending bliss without undergoing the Four Sufferings: birth, age, disease, death; and the Eight Sufferings: those four, together with parting from what we love, meeting what we hate, failing to attain our aims, and all the ills of the five *skandha* (aggregates that make up our personality)? As I cut off my toes one by one I’m gaining my joy. You have to know that truth, don’t you?”

Vidvan’s temple of the Seven Treasures in Mahasambhava seemed to contain all the treasures and riches of the whole world. Jewels rose in great heaps and the ornaments of the temple were beyond compare with anything that Sudhana had seen.

“I am a bodhisattva who makes bodhisattvas. Look. The darkness is going to come out weeping, you’ll see.”

He heaved the doors open, the darkness duly came rushing out and perished. Old Vidvan stroked the empty air, as if to comfort the dying darkness.

“Look! Fix your whole heart on the center of the empty air. See how all creatures become bodhisattva in the empty air. Look! Look!”

As he gazed into the air where he was pointing, he saw that the empty air at that point was seething with sick, poor, angry, sorrowful people, hosts of people wounded in wars. Thanks to the welcome Vidvan offered, they were becoming bodhisattvas and they danced as they sped away in all directions. It seemed like a dream.

“I help people rid themselves of their desires for love and food and sleep. I was the one who made you wake up early back there in Lady Prabhuta’s room. But you’re too impatient. That’s why I told you to consider the sleeping road. I can only perform my task for each person once. Look, they are turning into bodhisattvas, then as bodhisattvas they are reborn and take on the sufferings of life again. It’s a life of greater suffering they take on now. There is no bodhisattva life without living creatures. Without sentient beings there can be no bodhisattva and no Buddha.”

Sudhana saw how old Vidvan’s pure face was changing back into the disfigured face of a leper. He realized that Vidvan’s very face had become a bodhisattva and had enjoyed unending bliss.

The airborne festival that had materialized so splendidly before his eyes vanished again, and with it the temple of the Seven Treasures. They found themselves walking over an ancient battleground, strewn with rusty fragments of swords, human bones, and bits of shields. Vidvan was limping. Another toe had fallen off.

“Off you go now. Southward, go south. I really don't know why you chose a life heading southward. It's a shame.”

“Where should I go? Who should I meet?”

“Ha, this little leper! Now you take my leprosy, and off you go. It's a shame you asked me to teach you that.”

All suffering is known by one suffering.

Taking one suffering on yourself,

you affirm the world of suffering.

by your suffering self.

So suffer,

then cast off that suffering. . .

22. No meeting without first parting

After parting from Vidvan, Sudhana went on his way in deeper solitude than ever. His eyebrows had fallen off; he had become a leper child. He was surprised to discover that his fingers no longer obeyed him, because of the sickness. In a few days' time he would be cutting them off. Vidvan had gone scuttling away after giving him this new suffering, like someone freed from a great burden. What was this leprosy he had inherited? Who was Vidvan? What had been accomplished at their parting? He had become a suffering pilgrim, obliged to follow whatever path seemed to offer a way of overcoming his sufferings.

“My path exists, even if no one tells me where it lies. I have to make my road as I go. For me, every road is newly made.”

Once past the inland grasslands, he found himself passing through vast ruins. There was a path made by wild animals.

*The city of flowers becomes
a city of ashes; changes
occur a hundredfold each day.
While I live through several lifetimes,
the things that change before me
form the road to every kingdom.
Sudhana composed a hymn out of his own feelings and sang it to soothe his pain.
See, all is vanity.
This, and that, and infant I,
my leprosy's pain : all vanity.
My path is vain.
The truth I seek is equally vain.
But I walk along this endless path
to gain that vanity,
burdened with leprosy.*

In the midst of those inland ruins, Sudhana let drop one of his fingers; then, crossing the brow of a hill, he came upon a coastal region dotted with windbreaks of coconut and oleander trees. There one woman called out to other women:

“Ratnachuda is about to leave the world!”

The message was repeated by those women to yet others, transmitted from one field to the next beneath the windbreaks.

“Ratnachuda? Ratnachuda leaving this world?”

Sudhana's mind had grown weak from the long journey and the pain of his sickness; the women's words filled him with horror like fresh blood spilt by an axe.

“Who is Ratnachuda?”

Sudhana had no sooner hurried up to them with his question than all the women screamed out:

“Help! Help! A leper bringing ill luck!”

And they all ran off in dread. He felt sad. He had become a leper, unable to speak to people, or greet them, or ask them the way. Indeed, the women's husbands might very well come running along and take him prisoner. He headed for the main highway that ran past their fields. A grove of oleanders grew between the fields and the road; there the burning sunlight was filtered and turned into cool shade. But he felt uneasy. The oleanders had so far taken no heed of him, but now one branch spoke up.

“Young visitor! Visitor passing by! Leave your sickness hanging here and go on your way. How will you be able to meet the person you are to meet if you are carrying that kind of

disease with you? Just leave it hanging here.”

He pricked up his ears and gazed around. One dead branch was waving alone. He hung up on it the whole heavy load of leprosy he was carrying in his heart.

“No hesitation before hanging it up, eh? It must have been terribly painful.”

There was nothing he could say. He sensed that all his pains had left him.

“Farewell now, little pilgrim.”

Other branches, too, bade him farewell. Temporarily refreshed, he hurried on. He had lost one finger, that was all. His eyebrows began to sprout again. When he had crossed the fields and was near the outlying houses of the town, some men appeared and blocked his way.

“You're a leper!”

“You leper!”

Then one of them came up to Sudhana and examined him closely.

“Hey, your old woman made a mistake. He's no leper.”

They grew milder. There was some muttering, then the mob broke up and dispersed. Sudhana had been fully prepared for them to grab him and fling him into the sea, but he found himself able to go on living. A girl was approaching, her head covered. As he felt inclined to rest, he sat down under an ailanthus tree and watched her. As she passed she turned and looked at him.

“Are you on your way to see master Ratnachuda?”

Sudhana nodded, recklessly. Ratnachuda? Right, the time must have come. The scarf covering the girl's head swayed and waved. He had seen her somewhere before. Some far away experience was coming close. What was it? At first he could not recall.

“Who can she be?” he wondered

“Are you not the lord Sudhana?”

“Indeed I am. And you?”

“I... Ah, lord Sudhana. I am Iryon.”

How long had it been? His first love; how long had it been since they had met? And now here was Iryon again. Meeting her here. How long? The earth they were walking on heaved; a passing earthquake. The whole landscape swayed. They came very close to one another, yet they did not embrace.

“I have been staying with master Ratnachuda. He is about to leave this world. He told me a visitor was coming and I should go out to welcome him.”

“Iryon.”

“I went to the capital and was going to marry the Crown Prince but the night before the wedding I swam across the river and escaped from the city by the waterways. I've been roaming around like this ever since.”

“Just like me, Iryon.”

“Now we have met. We must not part again.”

They rested again when they reached a place from where they could see the outer walls of Ratnachuda's city. They were obliged to walk a little, then rest, walk, then rest again. They were so happy that words refused to come. When many words are needed, words refuse to emerge.

“My lord Sudhana has gained much wisdom and experience. What greater joy can there be? What greater?”

His hand caught in her white hand was pearly with beads of sweat.

23. Every song yields a flower

Unexpectedly reunited with Iryon, Sudhana entered the city of Simhapota. All the people were walking about with bowed heads. Passing along the main street that was thus plunged in sorrow, they reached Ratnachuda's residence behind the city's principle administrative building. Ratnachuda was lying robed in violet, his hair and eyebrows shone white.

"Welcome. Welcome." Sudhana was perplexed. A look from Iryon reminded him that Ratnachuda had been expecting him.

"Welcome. I have been waiting for you. The time has come for me to go where I must go."

He made everyone else leave the room; Iryon and Sudhana remained alone with him.

"This city of Simhapota was in earlier times the capital of a great nation. Regretting the destruction of that nation, my ancestors established a kingdom modelled on it. That was over a thousand years ago. ... But if you go westward to the pine grove on a hill overlooking the sea, you will find buried there the song made at the establishment of the former kingdom and the song of the foundation of this nation a thousand years after. Or that may be a myth. ... People here don't believe it ... so ... you two ... must go and dig up those songs. ... I was waiting ... to tell you that ... now ... everything ... is ... finished. ..."

Iryon passed the tidings to the people outside. Those who had left the room returned. His old wife and aging daughter entered, followed by his chief secretary and members of his staff. Ratnachuda had been sick for the last fourteen years, and at last death had come. Closing his eyes, he had departed quietly. Sudhana could not understand why Ratnachuda had died as soon as he arrived.

Two days passed, then Ratnachuda was cremated on the shore at the end of a grandiose ceremony. His ashes were sprinkled on the sea, which grew so intoxicated with the honor done to it that it began to roll wildly. The little pilgrim could not leave at once, on account of Ratnachuda's dying wish. He felt about Ratnachuda's death in the same reverent way as he might have felt about his own father's death in days gone by.

The new moon rose and hung suspended like an arched eyebrow. As soon as the moon disappeared again, they left the city and hastened westward. The sea lay dead, untouched by the slightest breeze. Sudhana was carrying tools to dig through earth and stones, as well as a lantern; he and Iryon soon reached the place of which Ratnachuda had spoken. They put up an awning to keep off the dew, then rested. It was long past midnight. The sound of the weeping ghosts of fish came faintly from the far horizon of the ocean.

Iryon had been there once with Ratnachuda. At that time, she said, he had seemed about to tell her something, then had not done so. When the dying Ratnachuda had spoken to Sudhana, the listening Iryon knew almost exactly where the place must be.

"It's here. Under these bulwarks." She pointed out the place to Sudhana, and at once he began to dig. It was hard work. Just as dawn was breaking, their tools struck a large metal object, a great bronze bell.

"It's a bell, lord Sudhana! It was a bell he meant! Now we only have to dig it out."

Sudhana and Iryon cut arrowroot vines, threaded them through the two ears at the top of the ancient bell, and hauled it up. It was not particularly heavy. As soon as the bell was dug out, in the empty space beneath it, beautiful singing sounds gathered in a little cluster and began to rise above the ground.

"Ah! It's singing!" Iryon marvelled. The sounds merged one by one into a number of different songs. There was the song sung by girls a thousand years before in the ancient kingdom, then the song that had been sung a thousand years later when the Ratnachuda dynasty

had begun its reign.

*God, I offer you my body.
By this body,
comfort all who are sad in the world.
By this body's song,
comfort the world's wretched folk.
Who can do that?
None but a god can comfort the world.
A god, and all gods.
Then:
I am mother of the moon.
Giving birth to the moon,
I brought light to dark paths.
Now, you wayfarers,
wash your weary hearts
nineteen times in moonlight.
And next:
Every bell's sound,
after sleeping a while,
will one day blossom as flowers,
will bloom as white camellias by the sea.
Ah, renew
Yes, renew this world.*

Those ancient songs, long buried silent in the ground, had lain there fossilized; who can express the emotion the two experienced that morning as the melodies turned into songs again? Once each song was out, it would never be heard again. Each vanished into the morning sky, a song already heard.

Every bell's sound after sleeping a while
will blossom one day as flowers. . . .

Sudhana realized that the sound of the bell and its songs had all turned into flowers. Those lines struck Sudhana like a thunderbolt and he looked about him. Iryon was the first to speak: "Look! Flowers! Camellia flowers, white camellias. White camellias..."

The grove of ancient trees was blossoming with camellia flowers, in quantities such as had never before been seen along that coast. The echo of the bell and the songs from a thousand years before had remained enclosed in the ground as a shell encloses a pearl, and had at last emerged. In all that time, so many songs had flowed on and away. The wandering poets who had composed the songs, and all the girls who had sung them, had all flowed on and away. Yet these fossil songs, buried beneath the bell and grown rusty as only songs can rust, had at last echoed once in the open air, then had turned bud by bud into pure white camellia flowers. In bestowing those songs and the scent of the flowers on the young pilgrim, the dying Ratnachuda had fulfilled his task.

"Iryon! For the coming time, let's travel together. The soil here is fertile and produces abundantly, but we have to make our hearts more fertile still, and more abundant. Let's go down, drink one sip of water from Ratnachuda's well, then leave."

"I will follow you wherever you go." She followed him down the hill. They passed the ancient palaces of Simhapota city and entered the home where Ratnachuda had lived. Iryon told the people there to build a pavilion for the bell they would find lying on the hill, and let the ocean hear its tones. Iryon had been living as Ratnachuda's adopted daughter and had monopolized his last reserves of love. She urged her older siblings to build the pavilion quickly, since it had been Ratnachuda's last wish.

After drinking a mouthful of water, she and Sudhana set off to the farewells of all the city's nobles. He refused the many gifts they offered, only filling his bundle with dried fruit from a tree that Ratnachuda was said to have planted himself, as food for the journey. Walking along with Iryon beside him, Sudhana felt far happier than when he had been alone. Previously he had been obliged to walk wrapped in his own silence, unless a tree or an animal or something happened to address him. More than that, Iryon had been his first love, the first person he had met after being rescued by old Manjushri and his company; and now here they were, walking together after a long parting.

“Here the road divides. This road is the one I came by, this is a new one.”

“We'll take the new road.” They set off along the new road he had pointed to. Before they had gone very far, they encountered a storm moving along the foot of a mountain and were forced to seek shelter from it. It turned into a torrential deluge and if they had not succeeded in finding shelter in the mountain's grim caverns, they would probably have been swept away. They were obliged to shelter in separate caves, for each was scarcely big enough to contain one person. Sudhana found himself alone, squeezed into a narrow cave. He had nothing, he could not even call out to Iryon.

As the downpour grew fiercer, he heard a sudden groan. Iryon! Defying the danger, he made his way to her cave. It was a perillous undertaking. A great boulder offered itself in Sudhana's place, and was swept away over the precipice. Iryon had almost been forced from her cave by the storm; the wind was so strong it had edged its way under her and was sucking her out. Sudhana threw himself on top of her and their senses came alive. Previously, they had been afraid of the storm, but now, overpowered by passion, they lost all fear.

They wedged themselves firmly against the little cavern's rocky vault and sides, and held each other tightly, until their bodies became one. Desire took control; an immense surge of power flowed between them and blotted out the storm. Later, soaked in sweat, they let their bodies dry in the sound of the receding wind, still locked in an embrace. As their inner maelstrom came to an end, the storm too moved away. Outside the cave, light drizzle was falling, trembling in the breeze that had replaced the gale.

“It's alright now. There's danger in staying here any longer. Lions will soon be coming.” She urged him up, then crawled out of the cave. The storm was over.

“Lord Sudhana. . . let's settle down together somewhere.”

She looked unexpectedly fragile.

“Settle down? No, that's impossible.”

“One danger gives rise to even greater dangers. I have never encountered such danger since I escaped from the Crown Prince's fortress.”

“Have you already forgotten Master Ratnachuda's wish? You mustn't. We have endlessly to walk on with strength renewed.”

“What is there ahead along the road? Is there anything but storms? If once you find truth, then what? Think how many there are who fail to find anything.”

“Siddhartha seems to be a single person but there are as many Siddharthas as there are innumerable living beings. For every human being there is necessarily a bodhisattva.”

“But what have you discovered so far?” She questioned and appealed at the same time. But he remained unmoved. “Lord Sudhana, you are my husband.”

“Not so. I am no one's husband.”

“Your seed has already entered my womb.”

“Not so. The seed of the storm has entered there.”

“How so? The seed of the storm?”

“My seed is only in myself. You must give birth to a storm and so govern the evil in this world.”

Iryon was in despair. The person she loved would not do as she wanted. Sudhana

simply drew her after him as he walked on along the road from which the storm had cleared away.

24. With Iryon again

The kingdom of Simhapota city and the nation of Vetramulaka are neighbors but since each has wide territories, the two capitals lie far apart. The two young pilgrims had great difficulty in reaching the city of Samantamukha. Iryon's feet had swollen until she could walk no farther. When she saw an elephant being led by a boy as they neared the city, she mounted the elephant for the rest of the journey.

Once the long journey was over, Iryon quickly recovered her spirits. Now she no longer bothered Sudhana. In her womb, the little pilgrim's seed had begun to grow. She descended from the elephant in front of a shop selling fragrances, perfumes and incense. The city rose like a hill, dominating the smaller townships around it.

"Why, it's a couple of little pilgrims! How tired they must be! Just look how pale their faces are! Come in and rest." The store owner's wife carefully guided Iryon into their house.

In that region, wayfarers were in complete safety, for the punishment for failing to welcome travellers properly was extremely severe. The woman could quickly tell that Iryon was pregnant: "You should stay here for nine or ten months. We only need sell a little of this fragrance and we'll be able to look after you properly and you can give this land a fine baby. Home is wherever you're born, after all."

Iryon was put to bed in a rocking couch and given stewed plums to drink. Once Sudhana and Iryon were in their room, they found themselves left to themselves for the night, like any newly-wed couple. Sudhana was sunk in deep melancholy.

"Spend ten months here?" He shook his head.

"Why not live here? Lord Sudhana, once you've seen the baby born, you can leave or do as you like. You are tired from so much travelling. Sleep now."

"You sleep first." Sudhana went outside and walked restlessly up and down near the city gate. A cacophony of flutes was coming from a cluster of nearby taverns, each marked by long white banners, where soldiers and travellers and the local youth were busily drinking. Sudhana ventured inside one. He had no money to pay for a drink, so he simply sat down at an empty table and looked at the people around him.

"Pilgrim, have a drink." One old man tossed Sudhana a bottle. He drank. He had sometimes drunk the wine produced by fermented fruit but this was the first time he had ever drunk liquor produced from grain. His head reeled. He seemed to be spinning.

"Where have you come from?"

"From Simhapota city."

"You seem to be from farther away than that."

"Perhaps so."

"Why did you come here?"

"I'm just roaming from one place to another."

"Right. I understand. This handsome young man is a wandering ascetic, a homeless pilgrim in quest of dharma (teaching of truth). That's it, isn't it? I'm right. Ah! A sacred task. I too. . ."

"Are you a pilgrim too, sir?"

"No. Nowadays. . . But my older brother, he's eighty-nine, he's up in Mount Samantanetra. I was with him for a time but then I became a drunkard and ended up here. I enjoy drinking, I'm a master drinker. Ha ha. . . Whereas you. . . on closer inspection. . . hee hee. . . you like a bit of skirt, I see. And with your peachy complexion, too. Ha ha."

The old man's laughter only slipped between his teeth but it rang out loudly.

"Who are you, old man?"

"Me? No need for you to know that. Go and visit my brother, old Myohyang..."

Then they both got very drunk. Sudhana was in no condition to see if he himself was drunk or how much. That night, Sudhana left Iryon behind and followed the old drunkard outside the city and up into the harsh and lofty heights of Mount Samantanetra. The path they took formed a stone stairway stretching on up into the dark sky. As he climbed, the fumes of alcohol began to clear and with sudden intensity he remembered Iryon, and his seed contained within her womb. For the first time he suffered as a person, as a husband, as a father.

“Hey, you think you're having a hard time now, with only enough suffering to make the ground sink a bit? In times to come, aren't you going to have to bear suffering heavy enough to bring down heaven and earth, paradise and hell, if you're going to save all the world's beings, innumerable as grains of sand? And you worry about trifles?”

“How do you know about my sufferings?”

“Ha ha ha. It's not me who knows, it's the drink. Try a drop of this.” He handed him his liquor, that was making a sloshing noise in the flask. The full moon was shining brightly, the mountain was very high. The moon seemed to be floating below them.

“Liquor's a fine thing. Leaving wife and kid behind is good too. Your wife can meet any number of other men. The kid will grow up okay without a father. If it has a dad, it grows up stupid in its father's shadow. Better grow up alone from birth. Ah, I'm drunk, I'm very drunk. You go on alone. There's no need for me to go any farther, I prefer drinking. If you meet my brother, give him my best regards. Scold old Myohyang on my behalf: tell him to get off to heaven. What's he think he's doing up in this mountain, unable to get rid of attachments?”

Sudhana found himself alone on the dark mountain slope, dumbly gazing after the retreating figure of the old drunkard until he vanished. He longed for Iryon and thought of going back, but the moment he made a step on the downward path a rock came rolling down onto the path, blocking it. Sudhana's whole body shuddered. Just then, the moon rose.

“Who's there?” He pricked up his ears. “Who's there and where are you from?” He felt relieved, recognizing that booming sound as a human voice.

“I'm looking for Myohyang.”

“Ho, and so late at night. . . Come on up here.”

Just as day was breaking, he reached a small hermitage, perched below the mountain peak. It was farther than the sound of the voice had suggested. Up there, it was already early morning. He had spent the whole night climbing the mountain. Old Myohyang, so old that he seemed near death, was waiting. His eyes were bright and steely; a mane of white hair rose above his face.

“Young pilgrim, you must rest. You have come a long way. Who would have thought anyone would come as far as you have? Get some sleep first. Those you left behind down there are alright, so get yourself some sleep.”

Sudhana did as he was bid and fell into a long, deep sleep to recover from all the journeys he had made. The whole mountain fell asleep with him. The morning sunshine began to stream down brightly on Sudhana, and the mountain, and old Myohyang, who had gone back to sleep too, but their sleep with its deep darkness kept the sunlight at bay. A single hawk, with burning pinions, was hovering in the sunlight.

25. Tell the mountain

“All things must be lost. And you have lost them. You have lost what you had to lose. Along the way you have lost much and by that loss you have gained much. . . and how could you fail to lose those things that you can never take care of? Today, you have lost the girl and the seed you left down at the mountain foot.”

Several months had passed since Sudhana had climbed Mount Samantanetra. The sky was damp with a thick mist, the whole countryside below the mountain was veiled from view by the same mist. Old Myohyang's white hair hung moistly as he spoke what seemed to be a prayer to Sudhana. Sudhana showed no surprise at the old man's words, but sat there stiffly, as if struck deaf. Only the sound of rain falling on leaves and grass pierced his deafness.

“The world comes into being through loss. You too. The time has come for you to leave this mountain and set out on a very long journey. This is the moment for you to lose this mountain while I lose you.”

Only now did the little pilgrim listen and reply: “I am a migrant by nature, and yet it seems that I ought to stay longer in this place. There is more I should learn from you, master.”

“Not so. Not so. What makes you think you can only learn from me? You must learn from many people, many mountains and rivers, trees and stones, from each crumb of each clod of earth, from every grain of sleeping sand. There is nothing that is not your master, even the least grain of dust.”

Old Myohyang shook Sudhana once with his bony hand, then turned resolutely away and went into his cave. There was nothing more Sudhana could say to him. The rain-shrouded mountain was hidden, there was no knowing what lay in which direction. Leaving that place, from which the mountaintop cave was already invisible because of the rain and mist, he began his journey down, step by step.

* * * *

Since the night he had arrived, for several months he had lived with only the mountain, the teacher, and himself. During that time, he had learned something of Myohyang's life before he went up into the mountain. Unlike his younger brother, the drunkard down in Samantamukha, Myohyang had had a young wife he truly loved. When she died in a plague, he had become a healer as a way of praying for her soul's repose, and his intense love for that one woman grew into a love reaching out to neighbors and to many people living in many places. He devoted nearly ten years of his life to roaming the vast southern regions, treating the sick.

Finally, it became hard for him to continue. He had caught various diseases from people he had healed. He dragged his disease-ridden body up into the fastnesses of Mount Samantanetra, where no one could see him. Once there, he recovered after being drenched in storms for forty days. He did not leave again after that, and apart from the time a few years later when his younger brother stayed with him for a while, he had severed every tie with the world. There Sudhana had found him.

“Holy master. How can I attain enlightenment? How can I achieve bodhisattva nature and follow the path of enlightening?”

The old master replied sorrowfully to what Sudhana asked him: “Everywhere in the cosmos, everywhere in each clod of earth, even one small as a mustard seed, everywhere in the air, even a spot small as a mote of dust, in every place a bodhisattva is sacrificing its life for the sake of all living beings. All is full of growing enlightenment, as all living beings encounter bodhisattvas and they suffer together. Consider the air. Consider each clod of earth, each pebble. They are all bodhisattvas. If they are not, what is? Ah, young man, your awakening cannot be like mine. How could my bodhisattva awakening be like what you are destined to find through your long journeying? You are my teacher.”

“How could I ever presume such a thing?”

“Not so. Not so. Once I knew the diseases of all living beings and I learned how to vanquish them. I burned my fragrances for everything troubled by wind and cold, by heat and every kind of sickness, by spirits and poison and magic spells, washed them with fragrant water, dressed them in fragrant clothes, and restored them to life. I brought cooling to those consumed by passion, compassion to those without compassion. By the encounter of all living beings with fragrance as I burned my fragrances, the worlds in all ten directions became full of bodhisattvas and I was permitted to see them. But I am no better than my brother, and now I am no better than you.”

He repeatedly showed how ten kinds of wisdom are not worth one seed of practice, while without practice ten kinds of wisdom are pointless. Living a totally untroubled life up in the mountain, Sudhana learned how to pray for all living beings, and soon he was praying for sky and clouds, moon and stars, as well as for the rocks around him, for fir trees and old trees, for animals' bones, but above all for dead people's spirits.

“I am glad. Truly. By your prayers many bodhisattvas are made glad, many living creatures are being released from their inherited karma.”

The old man would praise his disciple just as the evening sky was aflame with dazzling splendor. They loved one another and by that love, they were able to experience an incomparable bliss. By that love, they were able to know all things. Wisdom is nothing other than the fruit of love. If they had not loved one another so deeply, their sharing of wisdom would have been in vain. They loved, and love made everything known.

“Ah, now go to sleep. Even the stars are full of drowsiness. All that remains is for everything to sleep like us.”

Sending a laugh ringing out into the night, Old Myohyang used to throw himself down where he was, and Sudhana would likewise flop down. They lived on a diet of pine needles and milled mountain rice.

* * * *

Now Sudhana was on his way down the mountain. When he reached the city of Samantamukha at the foot of Mount Samantanetra, he found that it was cloudy but not raining. He headed for the perfumer's shop.

“At dawn yesterday your baby died and was cremated. Its mother scattered its ashes on the sea and left for who knows where. Why are you so late returning?”

The woman at the shop was still full of pity for the hardships Iryon had suffered on the journey. Sudhana was sobbing all alone. She gave Sudhana something Iryon had given her before leaving. It was a handful of ash, wrapped in a white cloth. The ashes were not so much ash-hued as nearly pure white.

“...my seed has been burned up...”

Sudhana could not finish the phrase. He took the little bundle and went out to the place where the dead of the brahman caste were cremated. The sea was a dark ash hue, reflecting the cloudy sky above. Waves were breaking in white surf. Sudhana scattered the ashes there but instead of being swept away by the waves, they came flying up into his face, making him choke.

After standing vacantly for a while, looking out to sea, he bade farewell to the city of Samantamukha and walked on along the shore. At the point where he left the shore, he suddenly met Myohyang's drunkard brother.

“You've just come down from the mountain.”

“It's been a long time since we met. Why aren't you drinking?”

“I've forgotten all about liquor. I've nothing left to forget. Nothing left except staring hard at the sea.”

“Master Myohyang says. . .”

“Shut up. No need for that kind of message. Aren't you curious about your wife Iryon?”

“Why?”

“That young woman will always be somewhere out there ahead of you. Hurry after her.”

“I’m not someone to go running after a woman.”

“Follow what you like, the dharma or the woman. No point in distinguishing between them. I don’t make any distinction between the dharma and liquor. None at all.”

The Old Drunkard collapsed onto a sand dune, apparently drunk even without drinking. Waving one hand, he seemed to be telling him to go. Sudhana took up a handful of sand, scattered it on him, and set out. The shore stretched endlessly away but he did not follow it; instead he directed his steps toward a road that led off from there. The previous day’s rain had stopped; Mount Samantanetra looked very far away. It rose faintly in dark green hues and it seemed unreal to think that his old teacher was living up at the top of that mountain. He set off along the meadow road, after bowing several times towards the mountain.

26. Travelling with the past

Sudhana walked on for a long while among fields that had been abandoned and left fallow, recalling one by one all the teachers he had met. With such thoughts, his journey was never wearisome. Keeping company with the past, drawing the past into the present, he was enabled to go on walking while the teachings of his former teachers of truth murmured all together in his heart.

A vivid image emerged from earlier memories; he recalled the hawk. He had met it first while he was with that band of hunters, when he was about to climb Sugriva Mountain, and they had met again once after that, when it had shown him the way. Where was it now? Had it died? Was it no longer able to dominate the air, to soar hour after hour through the vast lofty skies? Ah, if it had completed its destined course in this world, to what other world might it have gone to continue its free soaring?

As he reached the depths of that memory, something suddenly dropped spinning a little way ahead of him. Merrily spinning with light flicks of its feathers, it came dropping down from high above. As soon as he saw it drop, he raised his head and stared skyward. "Ah, the hawk! That hawk! The hawk I met before!"

Sudhana came zooming back into the present, as he gazed up at the hawk. It hovered motionless in the sky. He waved; at once it made a turn and dropped lower. The hawk described a slow circle down through the sky and settled in front of Sudhana on the branch of an old tree. The branch broke; it flapped its wings fiercely, changed position, and settled cautiously on the remaining stump. It was very old. The hawk furled its wings, pecked at its claws with its beak, and stared piercingly at Sudhana with obvious signs of joy.

"What a long time it's been, hawk. How old you've grown. I'll be old like you one day."

The hawk said nothing, though it understood all that Sudhana said.

"Where have you been travelling around, until now..."

Sudhana had scarcely spoken when the old hawk flapped its ancient wings, soared into the air, and began to trace a huge circle.

"I know, you've travelled a lot too, like me. You're like me. You've met a host of teachers. Why, you're like my shadow."

So they travelled on together, one on the ground, the other in the air. Their happy journey went on for many miles, until they reached an encampment of nomads not far from the city of Taladhvaja. It was on a coastal plateau, where wild flowers were blooming in profusion. At the far end of the plateau rose white city walls, with towers and spires soaring above them.

When Sudhana reached the camp of the nomads, however, the nomads began to explain over and over again the atmosphere of terror reigning inside the city of Taladhvaja, in a dialect he could not fully understand, urging him not to go there. They made gestures showing that he would be taken prisoner and executed if he so much as went into the city.

Sudhana had had a happy journey, but was utterly weary after so much walking, so he stayed there with them. The old hawk flew on over Taladhvaja and disappeared. The sun set and the western horizon seemed ablaze with red flames, but gradually the rising tide of night surged over all. There was a sound of weird chattering in the nomads' dialect and a woman came in, bringing Sudhana a meal of mutton laid out on a tray. He had grown up on a diet of raw vegetables and grasses but he broke off a fragment of that precious food and ate it. It stank.

The next morning Sudhana left the still sleeping camp and reached the city gates as day broke. There were soldiers there on night watch; others were posted on guard-duty at the watch-towers along the city walls. Yet Sudhana did not receive the rude welcome he had been told to expect; he avoided the guards, and made his way into the city through an unwatched postern gate.

The city lay under curfew until sunrise; no early-rising women could come out to draw water at the wells. Even the livestock was still asleep as Sudhana strutted on alone down the main street. From time to time a watchful squadron of troops mounted on elephants would pass, but at those moments he hid under the street-side stalls.

Sudhana soon learned that the citizens were not asleep; they had been awake since daybreak and were alert, peering through cracks in the walls. As soon as he hid beneath the market stalls, a hand grabbed him. "What are you doing? If you walk about the streets now, you'll be executed. Come inside quickly..."

He waited until the sun rose. When it was already broad daylight and perfectly legal to walk about, he walked through the area until he reached the gates of the ruler's main residence.

"Who goes there?"

Sudhana made a gentle reply to the sentinel's rough question: "I have come to pay my respects to king Anala, the ruler of Taladhvaja. I have come all the way from the distant north at the risk of my life, in order to catch one glimpse of his majesty."

The man seemed to be an officer in the palace guards, for he personally gave him permission to enter the palace.

"If you want to have an audience with his majesty, you'd best go to the execution grounds at midday; seventy-seven criminals are due to be punished. Turn left at the main palace, go on until you see a black banner hanging on a high pole. Head for that. That's where the sentences will be carried out."

Sudhana shuddered. What the nomads had told him had not been lies, after all. He wondered why he had come. From the moment last night when the nomads had told him not to go, a resolve to enter the city had taken possession of his mind, while his steps had led him firmly towards the town. If the king was guilty of dreadful crimes and put many people to death, what call was there for him to meet him? What could he hope to learn from such an evil ruler?

He reached the black banner and found the executioners, all dressed in black, dancing a grim dance. On the central terrace, king Anala was sitting on the royal throne, gazing down at the dance. The area was marked off by luminescent pennons, and surrounded by a host of ministers, generals, and soldiers. A truly dreadful atmosphere reigned.

An executioner first read out the crimes of each one, then carried out the prescribed punishment. Some were rolled in mattresses soaked in oil and burned to death, others had both eyes put out, some lost ears and nose, or had all four limbs lopped off with an axe, while some had ropes tied around their wrists and ankles, then the ropes were tightened and they were torn apart in a gory punishment that left the executioner covered in blood.

Some died with their eyes shut, some spat towards the throne where king Anala was seated, some died gazing at the soldiers with hate-filled eyes, while others died shouting; it all added to the tension reigning there.

"It's not possible. It's not right. Why ever did I come to meet this wicked king?" Sudhana was on the point of withdrawing when a voice fell on him from the empty air.

"Young pilgrim, you have to learn that even the wickedest king in the world can be your teacher. Don't leave. Go and meet him."

On hearing the voice, that sounded oddly like the voice of Old Myohyang up on Mount Samantanetra, he looked again towards the scene on the execution ground. The executions had been going on without interruption since midday; now evening was drawing in. With nightfall, torches and candelabra had been lit. The place reeked of blood. As it grew darker, the number of soldiers increased, their surveillance over the crowd at the site doubled and tripled. Just as the seventieth of the criminals had been dealt with, Sudhana lost consciousness and collapsed. He was carried out on to the execution area by some soldiers.

"This child is a stranger here. Perhaps he's a spy for the neighboring kingdom of Keema." One of the soldiers spoke in a loud voice. The silence was immediately broken by a

loud clamor.

27. Make-believe executions

King Anala sent the captain of the palace guards down to see who had caused such a commotion in the grim silence of the execution area. Now Sudhana lay at his feet, waiting for the royal command. Everyone was holding their breath. With the exception of the dead bodies of those who had been executed, even the criminals who had received their punishments were staring in frank curiosity at this child who had suddenly plunged into the midst of their dreadful torments.

“Child! Where did you come from?” King Anala questioned Sudhana himself.

“I am a passing traveller. For those already punished, there is nothing to be done, but I beg you to pardon at least some of those still waiting.”

“You wretched, presumptuous child!” On hearing his words, the captain of the guard seized his scabbard, drew out his sword, and prepared to behead Sudhana. The king made a sign with his hand. “We'll take this child into the palace. That's enough for today. Put the remaining criminals back into prison.”

King Anala led Sudhana into the main palace building and sat facing him; the awe-inspiring princely appearance he had hitherto harbored had changed into a most affable manner. “Where did you come from, young pilgrim?”

“I am a mere foolish traveller, knowing neither where he has been nor where he is going,” Sudhana replied in clear, steady tones.

“What was the reason you bade me cease punishing wicked men?”

“In order to prevent you from becoming even more wicked.”

“Hmmm.” The king ordered the captain and the rest of his escort to leave the room. The two of them were alone. “Little pilgrim, won't you stay here with me?”

“I am a wandering pilgrim. How could a wanderer ever stay for long in one place?”

“No. You can live here.”

“Listen. You refuse to recognize those who do not obey you. Therefore the unhappy spirits of the unjustly executed throng round that execution place like so many drops of dew. Those who do not obey you are still your subjects. All who submit to your every word are not on that account your true subjects. You must listen to those who oppose you.”

The king listened silently, his eyes shut. “That is true. What you say is right.” He tore off his resplendent robes as he spoke. “Young pilgrim, your words are amazing and true. But know that I caused that atrocious spectacle on the execution place by the laws of illusion and transformation. It was not intended for you, but for the eyes of wicked people. I confect the illusion of criminals, and the mere sight of their punishment causes many people to abandon their evil ways. I don't have it in me to kill so much as a single ant, let alone another human being. Those seventy people who have undergone punishment since midday were not human beings at all, but emptiness robed in human form. Now do you understand what I am, young pilgrim?”

Sudhana was amazed. The ruler watched him with amusement.

“Am I not king Anala, the lord of this place?”

“You are king Anala, sir, I know.”

“Not at all. I am not really king Anala of this city of Taladhvaja at all. I am that aged hawk that has been travelling along with you. I am no king, I don't kill innocent people as criminals. Go and look. I am merely a roaming beggar bringing this world's evil to its senses by the laws of illusion and transformation. I am really nothing more than an aging traveller, no different from you.”

Sudhana left the palace and hurried towards the execution ground. What previously had seemed a ghastly spot where ghosts might appear at any moment, was an utterly peaceful

expanse of meadow. The sight gave young Sudhana a shock. No corpses. No reek of blood. A gentle breeze was ruffling the grass. He went back to the palace.

“Look at my palace.” It was a magnificent building, adorned with gold and silver, rubies and every kind of jewel. “My accumulated karma of merit enables me to enclose myself in this kind of splendour. Yet since my karma is an empty thing, this too is empty. Behold.”

Before Sudhana's eyes, what had been a resplendent palace turned into an empty ruined hovel. What had happened? Another shock lay in store for him. There was no sign of king Anala. All he could see was a hawk, that seemed to have flown out through a hole gaping in one wall of the tumbledown shack. The bird caught the light in such a way that it seemed to be leaving a trail of fire, as it vanished into the distance.

“Ah, friend hawk! You were teaching me, in the shape of the wicked king Anala of Taladhvaja city!”

Sudhana turned his back on that ruined hovel without the least regret and hurried off down the unending road in the direction the hawk had flown. He passed the emptinesses of Taladhvaja city, walking fast yet with even less fatigue than usual. Glancing behind him, he found no trace of the imposing city anywhere. All that remained was the encampment of the nomads, receding over the skyline. The nomads, like Sudhana, had been deluded by illusion into thinking they could see Taladhvaja city before them.

All night long, Sudhana walked between the fields without taking rest. He pushed on through the darkness with rapid steps as if something was pursuing him. Then, just past midnight, he collapsed.

“Pilgrim, where have you come from? This is Suprabha city” Sudhana was woken by the sound of a woman's voice questioning him; it was morning. He opened his eyes; the road sank down under seven levels of fortifications until it passed into an underground cavern and divided in a maze of tunnels. The houses were richly adorned with white silver and shone so brightly that no darkness could ever come creeping down the streets where they stood, on account of the silver's brightness. It was a magnificent sight. Oxen with horns of pure gold wandered freely up and down the underground streets, gently drooling white foam. Passers-by went so far as to collect the foam and drink it.

Sudhana continued farther downwards until a marvelous temple rose in the very heart of the subterranean city. With the help of a few of the citizens, he made his way to King Mahaprabha of Suprabha.

“Let's go in. Any one can meet our country's king whenever they wish.” Sudhana's guide led him along blithely. Entering a glittering pavillion they found the young King Mahaprabha sitting alone, completely without any guards, harboring a beautiful smile.

“King Mahaprabha, I am a passing traveller.”

“You are welcome, young pilgrim. I am glad, very glad.”

“You must possess great spiritual knowledge to have established so vast an underground kingdom. I beg you, impart a small portion of it to me, even though it be but one ten-thousandth part. I am hungry for spiritual knowledge, I starve for want of truth.”

“Pilgrim, what do you think of this kingdom.”

“Truly, it is sublime.”

“Yet this underground kingdom is a place which different people see in different ways. To wicked men, white silver and pure gold look like so much cow dung, while the people look like blood-soaked phantoms. You have seen things as they are, you are like one of us. All the people of this land have attained the broad vision of the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) heart, living in unity and trust, with no strife among them. They see all that exists with purest eyes, knowing silver as silver, gold as gold and milk as milk. They see things as they are.”

At a sign from the king, flowers blossomed in the underground plaza, clouds drifted by, music rang out, the people joined hands and began to dance.

“Behold, young pilgrim. In this way all things existing turn into dance. But that dance is not something arising lightly; each heart has to grow deeper and deeper until it becomes the dance of a complete full moon. Every least turn in the lightest dance is the manifestation of a divine inspiration emerging from within, transcending the ecstasies of the deepest wisdom. Now you too, young pilgrim, should go outside and join in the dance.”

Listening to the king's words, Sudhana saw clearly that this dance by the citizens that he and the king had been watching together was not something that could be expressed or performed by just anyone. It only occurred because the whole subterranean world was full of the broad vision of the Mahayana heart. He seemed to glimpse something of the reason why this underground city was buried so deeply. Sudhana, joining in their dance, turned round and round the city plaza. He felt infinitely happy. In the midst of the dance, a girl came up to him and took his hand.

“When you go out from here, head for Sthira city. Visit my sister, she's a devotee there.”

Goodness knows how long he danced. The dancing did not tire him. It felt like a breeze rising above a lake. Finally, Sudhana took his leave of the beautiful, young King Mahaprabha. The king offered him a pair of newly-made, magic sandals.

“If you wear these shoes as you walk, they will know where you want to go and take you there accordingly.”

Sudhana left behind his old shoes, made of arrowroot vines, and put these new shoes on. At once, they began to walk with quick steps, as if in a hurry to get started on the journey. He returned upwards to the surface of the world. Above, it was as bright as it had been below. The main difference was that, unlike in the streets below, it was very hot.

“That's right,” Sudhana murmured to himself as the shoes hurried along, “I have to walk on in this hot and painful universe, feeling heat and pain with all who live.”

Where have you gone, old hawk?

Dear old hawk,

you turned into an imitation king for me,

then into a youthful king --

so where have you gone? Where are you?

However, the destiny uniting the hawk with Sudhana's travels was now complete; it never appeared to him again. Encounter is the mother of parting, and sometimes parting's son. The experience of meeting followed by parting is the shape endlessly taken by this world's unfolding course. Such were his thoughts as he walked along.

28. Free yourself from life and death

At the end of several days of hard walking, Sudhana reached the city of Sthira. Since ancient times, Sthira had been a trading center, exchanging with the lands to the west in one direction, and with the remote northern ports in the other. As a result, traders from the north had settled there. Sudhana entered one house and rested a moment in the citrus-scented shade of the garden. An old man approached him, his large eyes full of melancholy seemingly fixed in meditation.

“You're not from these parts, are you?”

“No sir, I am a pilgrim.”

“That is what I thought. Are you not from the north?”

“What? Why, yes sir, I am.”

“Then you have come a very long way. I too came a long way, by sea.” The old man addressed the young pilgrim gravely. Although he was a trader, Sudhana was struck by the way he seemed deeply immersed in inner reflection.

“So where are you going now? Don't you ever think of going back home?”

“No sir. I have left home for good.”

“Ah, a homeless ascetic, a homeless sage. In that case, I hope you will meet a beautiful devotee living here before you leave. She is young and holy. I have often seen her bathing in the forests. Her body does not awaken any desire; it always seems only to reveal heavenly beauty.”

Hearing the old man's words, Sudhana grew curious about the devotee. But he was so tired that in the end he simply fell asleep. In his dreams, the devotee spoke to Sudhana: “You have come a long way.” She was very lovely. She had been born out of a vast lotus blossom, two hundred and fifty yojanas in diameter with eighty-four thousand petals, each one holding a million drops of dew that each radiated a thousand rays of light. She was a young woman who had severed all attachment with this world and dwelt only in the imagination or the world of concepts.

Many years before, she had undertaken a long journey to a temple in the central highlands, where dwelt a venerable master whose mother had died in childbirth. He grew up in the temple, where he lived until now he was over ninety years old. Thanks to his lifelong practice of meditating on a skull, he had attained the power to see the Western Paradise as a land composed entirely of glass. The glass composing it was everywhere flawless, with no trace of darkness at all. He saw that the road to Paradise was marked by a golden cord. People from all over the Dekkan highlands came to visit him, venerating his transcendent wisdom, as the devotee had done.

When she arrived, the old brahman master did not meet her as he did all the others who came. Instead, he hid and refused to see her. Just before that, while walking in the grove of jewel trees, he had glimpsed the beautiful devotee as she descended from her palanquin and walked towards the temple; his faith in the Pure Land Paradise, that he had spent ninety years developing and perfecting, crumbled and collapsed completely at the sight of the woman's beauty.

“Beautiful. So beautiful. How can I call that beauty illusion and falsehood?” the old monk lamented, as he hid watching her. He had never even looked at a woman before, certainly never embraced one, so completely he had cut all bonds with the present world. He was utterly unworldly, considering women to be merely one kind of object pertaining to the world. The appearance of the devotee brought the old monk into direct relationship with the world for the first time in his life, and also the last.

That old monk, who had until now had so deep a sense of the world beyond, whose

only thought had been for that other world, suddenly saw his entire universe fall apart because of one woman. He was at last reduced to the ordinary, lonely, human being he had been born to be.

Although the devotee knew he did not intend to meet her, she did not leave at once. After all, she had risked death in order to come and meet the venerable master, so stubborn was her devotion to the Pure Land. Night fell. The old monk suddenly appeared in front of the lodging that had been assigned to her, looking rather like an old tree stump. The woman came hurrying out and knelt in reverence at his feet, that were nothing but packets of bones. As her brow touched his feet, a fire sprang up and began to burn the old man. She was amazed at the sudden conflagration, but as the old monk was consumed in the flames, she saw unfolding in her own heart the vast lotus blossom of the Pure Land Paradise with its eighty-four thousand petals.

After that, the woman made pilgrimages to various lands, sowing seeds of the joys of the world beyond in this sweltering, painful, present world. Then at last she returned home to Sthira. As Sudhana dreamed, he heard the woman speak to him:

“Lose this world's evil passions, pilgrim. Lose its life and death. Yet those passions, and even that life and death, are the first steps towards Paradise. The desire that gives rise to evil passions is at the same time the source of the Western Paradise. I have nothing else to show you. In one of our past incarnations, you were my master and I was your slave. But now you have seen my beauty, that of Paradise, and I have seen your sacred wisdom.”

Sudhana was unable to hear all that she said, for in his dream he tried to seize her hand, failed, and awoke. He had slept for a long while. The old merchant from the north had waited beside Sudhana as he slept and now he spoke: “First you must wash, then let's go to meet the maiden.”

Sudhana had already encountered the devotee and her beauty in his dream. So he shook his head. “It is not necessary for me to see the devotee. Many other encounters are waiting for me in my next destination, I must set off for that.”

“Surely you do not mean to leave yet?”

“Yes. Many thanks. I must be leaving now. That will be the same as seeing the devotee.”

The old man tried to restrain Sudhana but despite his efforts, Sudhana shouldered his bundle, casually stood up, and went out.

“It is hard to encounter the good in this world, but still...”

The young pilgrim left, and the old northern merchant felt sorry for him as he hastened on through the hinterland of Sthira, intending to meet the devotee alone.

*Striving to give all living things a believing heart
Striving to reduce all living things' fever of desire
Striving to transform all living things' evil passions
Striving to give all living things knowledge of truth
Striving to help all living things renounce enmity
Striving to help all living things uproot wrong will
Striving to purify all living things' dharma --
I visit all the masters of the southern lands.*

The city of Tosala was famed for its community of unorthodox ascetics and Sudhana hoped he would meet them on reaching the city. He knew that although truth is revealed by contact with truth, it can also be discovered through encountering attitudes opposed to truth, as well as in things having no apparent connection at all with truth.

What would those mysterious ascetics prove to be? They were apprehended by people viewing them as unity in multiplicity, appearing sometimes as one and sometimes as four, sometimes as a crowd that broke up and went each one his way. Yet no one knew if really they

were one or four or a crowd. Sudhana felt no need to know whether they were one person dividing into many or many becoming one. Beside a stream, he reckoned, it is enough to know the stream.

Tosala was in ruins. Within the city there existed no government, no king, no soldiers. Yet the inhabitants were living without disorder. The young pilgrim had never even known such a nation existed.

“Where is the king's palace?” he asked.

“There's no king here, so naturally there's no king's house either. Here everyone was a king in a previous existence, so it's impossible to choose one person to be king; all are equally untitled citizens. Ours is a very proud nation, high beyond compare with any other nation.”

Sudhana recognized that the peace arising from this land's lack of a governing body was a splendid thing. So often he had seen that kings and rulers, rather than defending a nation, were the main reason why a nation could not enjoy peace and stability. When no one is higher or lower, when all are close, when all are equal in solidarity, then all are closely united side by side. “Upper and lower” gives rise to pain and conflict, “side by side” knows none of that. Yet the ambitions of living things always struggle upwards, while those who have taken the upper places try to keep control over the others in order to preserve their superior position.

Sudhana saw that for people to be free of this world's evil desires, free from life and death, first and foremost the distinction between the governing upper and the governed lower class has to be abolished. Sudhana understood that the unorthodox ascetics were people who did not accept the idea of particular, individual sanctity, but preferred to appear as a crowd, or three or four, as a communitarian incarnation of truth.

Long before, a volcanic eruption had devastated Tosala, which had previously been the most flourishing city of the whole southern region. With the destruction of the city, the people had gone to live in the nearby lowlands. Seeing that no one was returning to the city, a group of ascetics and strangers had come along and established a nation with neither king nor army. The lowland area in which the ascetics chose to live lay behind the sea wall, below sea-level; if ever the sea-wall were breached, there was a risk it would be flooded but the ascetics were far beyond being troubled by any such danger.

People of Tosala, wild flowers

bloom in your ruined city.

Yet this is your land:

no sound of another land's trumpets,

no invading darkness.

29. Your light's tomb

Sudhana was suddenly challenged by harsh voices : “Where are you rushing off to like that? A fine pilgrim you are, tramping through all the wide world to your heart's content with those tiny feet.”

“Are you the ascetics of Tosala?”

“It's true that we're ascetics. But we're not the only ones. You must know that the whole of nature, as well as each and every person and animal in Tosala are all ascetics.”

“All ascetics?”

“Of course; everything in the realms of the lower, middle, and upper heavens is engaged in spiritual training, so-called 'asceticism'. All at some point or other become bodhisattvas, so that the title bodhisattva is unnecessary. If all are becoming Buddha and bodhisattva, surely there is no reason to make a distinction between “Buddha nature” and all living creatures? At this moment you and we and the ground we are treading on, all of us are in a process of striving and growth. The very motion of the whole universe is a process of profound spiritual growth. All change, all life and death, loving, and hating, all is asceticism, training and growth. Isn't it? Isn't it?”

They addressed him in voices that re-echoed in the hills ahead.

“Young pilgrim, like everybody in this city, we have become one with the whole of humanity and with an appearance like theirs, with their voice, we live in quest of truth.”

Sudhana received an inexpressible sense of fellowship from their many words, which in turn became a multiple joy. He asked, “Master ascetics, why do you stay here? Why don't you come walking with me round all the lands here in the south, teaching the ways of ascetic living?”

“That's a very good question. But everything has already attained a state in which those ways have been taught and learned. There is no empty place anywhere. There is not one empty spot in all the whole, wide universe. Everywhere is full of encounters between bodhisattvas and beings. That is where truth arises. Here in this city where we are, as well as in all the places you visit in search of wisdom, there is the Buddha nature and the Mahasattva bodhisattva nature proper to that place. No matter where we are, we are present to all the worlds beneath the four heavens. You are living in just the same way, little pilgrim.”

“My name is Sudhana.”

“Ah, we have heard your name from passing travellers. Word of a holy young man who travels endless roads in search of truth has already brought joy to all the inhabitants of the southern regions. Holy pilgrim, Sudhana.”

“Now I must leave Tosala city.”

“You mean to leave so soon? You leave one, you meet another; you exchange a few words in the time it takes the heavens to let drop just a few pearls of light, then you leave again. And that is a fine thing, indeed. Why not pay a visit to Utpalabhuti in the land of Parthurashtra? She's an old woman who sells blue lotus perfumes.”

Sudhana left them and began again to walk along the far-reaching road, advancing alone like a solitary wild goose that has lost its flock flying through the far-reaching immensities of heaven.

. . . Here I am on my way towards Utpalabhuti's house in the unfamiliar land of Parthurashtra. What am I going there for? Does that person really have anything to teach me? Does anyone have anything to tell me, to teach me? So far I have learned nothing at all. I have heard nothing at all. I have nothing at all to give. It was all mere illusion. Surely my world of experience is the scaffold where illusions are put to death. Yes, I have nothing at all. Nothing, nothing. . .

A song came drifting toward him, sung by Utpalabhuti as she waited for him.

I know every perfume.

*Since the time I was four
until now my hair is white,*

I have been selling all kinds of perfumes.

I know the perfumes in the dragon's store.

*If you burn just a little of the perfume
that arises when two dragons battle,
a vast fragrant cloud will cover the sky
and for seven days it will rain perfumes.*

*If you get wet in that perfumed rain,
your clothes will become flowers of csuma and sunama,
attracting the bees that frequent such flowers.*

*After one breath of the perfume from those flowers,
for a week your whole being will brim with joy.*

I know every perfume.

I know the sandal-wood perfume from Mount Maraya.

*Anointed with that oil,
you may enter a furnace unscorched,*

I know every perfume.

I know the perfume of invincibility.

*Apply that fragrance to war-drums or conches,
it attaches itself to the sounds they make
and fills the enemy army with thoughts of love.*

I know every perfume.

I know the aguilaria perfume from Lake Anabadala.

All crimes are abolished by its scent.

I know every perfume.

I know the nomiforma perfume from the Himalayas.

It provokes deep meditation of a pure woman's beauty.

I know the bamboo perfume from the heaven of Nirrti.

Only apply it and you become free as the birds in flight.

I know every perfume.

I know how to grind them, burn them, apply them.

*I know the perfume of perfumed majesty
from the prayer-halls in the Heaven of Indra.*

I know the perfume of pure offerings from Suyama Heaven.

I know the sontabara perfume from Tusita Heaven.

I know the perfume of Fragrant Flower Heaven.

I know every perfume.

*Through them I bring into being
the bodies of Buddhas
and enlightening Mahasattvas.*

Combining with her perfumes, old Utpalabhuti's song bewitched Sudhana. As her fragrances spread with the song, they yielded dazzling images of multiple worlds; his mind was delivered from the melancholy inspired by his long journey, he found himself once again overflowing with joy.

“Ancient lady, many thanks and thanks indeed. How can I ever repay you for having bestowed on me the gift of this sublimest fragrance?”

“Not at all, young pilgrim. I have longed to learn one truth, ten billion truths, following

you. I am weary of this perfume business and find no way to the truth. I beg you, go in my place along many roads, meet many bodhisattvas, many creatures, many evil spirits, receive their truths, and burn this perfume, apply this perfume. Sacred monk of the road, holy, holy, holy young monk of the road.

“With this old body of mine I speak many words. I have never once spoken as much as now. I have simply produced perfumes and sold them. But perfume's wealth is not worldly wealth. Now I have seen this beautiful young monk, I am content. I have drawn my perfume songs out of this aged breast of mine; now there is nothing left there. It is I should be thanking you.”

“Lady, I shall never be able to repay you for your kindness; not in a future incarnation, not in all my future lives.”

He left after receiving from Utpalabhuti a piece of solid perfume from the Heaven of Skillful Transformations. Now, whether the sun set and night fell, or night passed and daylight rose, as moon followed sun and sun followed moon, all things appeared to him in a dazzling light, nothing in the world was hidden.

“Soon you will reach Vasita River. You should cross that river by the ferry.”

Following her instructions, he pursued his path towards a place where the river valley was luxuriant with reeds. The river was flowing white, quite empty. At the ferry-station, one ancient boat with a single oar was tethered to the shore and faced into the current as the river flowed on down. Everything was very quiet. A loud noise had never once been heard there.

It had been a long time since Sudhana encountered a river. It was so wide that it gave the illusion of being a lake; it flowed on serenely. The water was shining, white and dazzling. All the previous night's stars appeared to have fallen into the stream and lay floating there. A strong breeze scoured Sudhana's flesh.

Float down this river ... float down in this old boat ... every river reaches the sea ... where upstream and downstream meet ... reaches the darkening sea ... is left as a crust of white salt on the shore.

So float on down the river ... eyes closed ... lips shut ... every scrap of dharma set aside.

Float down alone ... winds will blow ... night will fall and float down with you.

When you reach the sea ... proclaim ... there is no one in pain ... anywhere in this world.

The sound of a song being sung in a low voice reached Sudhana's ears, creeping like the dusk in the evening twilight, from a simple hovel beside the ferry landing, faintly, as if it had long lain buried underground. Just as the song ceased, he reached the place from which it had been issuing. There he found a man lying plunged in sorrow, one hand clasped to his brow.

“May I . . . may I come in?”

On hearing his words, the man rose silently and gazed at Sudhana. He spoke: “It has been a very long time, little pilgrim.” “Do you know me?” Sudhana asked, startled. He shook his head. “I always say that to everyone. . . I am the ferryman here on this River of Liberation. But since there hasn't been anyone headed downstream for months now, I just wait here in silence like this, day after day. Where are you going?”

30. Journey down an eternal river

Sudhana looked at the middle-aged ferryman and their faces grew bright with identical smiles.

“My name's Vaira, what's yours?”

“Sudhana.”

The ferryman suddenly pointed at the river and laughed. Then he turned and considered his young visitor. “Let's get rid of names. . . Names are a big hindrance to people. The hosts of nameless bodhisattvas are free of that.”

“I've got a name, but it's never been used much. No one ever got tired of speaking my name.”

“So much the better. Cast any name that has no one to speak it into this white River of Liberation. Ha ha ha.” His laugh was slow, like a swelling wave. “Where are you headed?”

“I have to keep going with nowhere to go. I have to go where the ferryman decides, where the ship's bow decides, where the river decides.”

“Ah, that's good. It's been worth waiting a long time for such a passenger. It's good, very good.”

“Have you been ferryman here for very long?”

“Oh yes, I have been ferrying people here for a very very long time; since before I was born, before my parents were born, before the Buddhas of ancient times were born. Only look at this age-old oar. It is all my parents and teachers.”

“You must know the river very well?”

“I still don't know it so very well. The course of the stream is all the time changing, it's always turning into a new river. That means I keep turning into a new ferryman too. Ha ha ha.”

“It's everywhere the same. Everything changes in the same way as this river.”

“You know, when I look at the river, it's not the water that's flowing, it's me. I'm ceaselessly flowing on. Everything flows in the same way.”

Vaira the ferryman reached out his hands from within the long sleeves of his coat and untied the boat's painter. After Sudhana had boarded the craft, he too got in, seized the oar, and entrusted the vessel to the current. They began to float rapidly downstream as the boat moved into the centre of the river, where it was gently borne along. The ferryman lay down, reclining in the bottom of the boat.

“With the fares I get, I buy clothing and fruit for the poor. Then I teach them the river's wisdom. If you want to go all the way down this river, you have to stop and rest at several ferry stations. I buy fruit and cheap cloth as I go. By the time we reach the sea, we have become sages full of wisdom. Then I ply the oar and remount the river, or go across to the landing on the opposite bank. I have been ferryman in the fair land of Amrita, and in the land of Sumiya across the River of Liberation. *Ah, dear waters of Liberation! Carry us quickly down to the sea, to meet the ocean's dragons and their new-born babes.*”

As if struck by a sudden thought, Sudhana drew out his dry reed flute and tried a few notes. Songs drifted near and were absorbed into the flute. He did not at once blow on the song-filled flute, but replaced it in the darkness of his bundle.

“Ahah, you've made a good catch of songs. There'll be sounds of the river forming part of those songs, I reckon.”

Then they both fell asleep. The sleeping boat, bearing the sleeping pilgrim and the sleeping ferryman, wafted on untrammelled on dreaming wavelets. The river, apparently eager to prolong their happy journey, grew deeper than before, extending their journey into an even longer one.

Here on this river ... this is the way I think ... the way I seek ...the way I frequent all mankind.

I produce the hidden treasures of isles that lie on the ocean's floor. I know dragons' homes, palm tree homes, homes of evil demons and the homes of every Buddha.

I know the ocean's whirlpools, the ocean's deeps, the spots where the waves are rough, the place where sun, moon, and stars roam and the thirty-eight beasts prowl.

I carry people up and down this river and bring them back to the world. I show them nothing of the fearful river, the fearful sea, I simply fill the ocean with wisdom.

This is the way I think ... the way I seek ... the way I frequent all mankind.

Listen ... the river's voice is my voice. You find peace by the sound of my voice ... letting all float away on this river ... crossing this river ... with this river ... I flow.

Sudhana was awakened by a song emerging from the flute he had put back into his bundle. At first it was a girl's voice, but as the song went on it turned into the low rough voice of Vaira the ferryman. Just as the song was ending, the boat reached some rapids where the river's murmur grew into a roar. The ferryman opened his eyes and looked hard at Sudhana. They both burst out laughing. Sudhana had become one with the river, had attained the river's wisdom and deep insight.

“Are you not human?”

“Ha ha, if I'm not human, those river birds are no river birds. But I have no idea if I'm human or what I am.”

A mist swiftly covered the whole area.

“Ah, the mists of the land of Nandihara. They're designed to welcome travellers.”

In the mist, the smell of the river was thickly mingled with a kind of drowsy perfume.

“How old are you, ferryman?”

“Me? The same as you, little pilgrim.”

“That's not possible. I'm still a child.”

“Once I'm reborn in the next world, I'll be younger than you, won't I? Therefore there can be no question as to which of us is younger or older. We're the same age.”

“But in that case, this river is the same age as we are, too?”

“Surely, surely. What you say is right.”

It is far to that ocean where Mahasattvas are born and die untainted by any evil desires, alert to the outcome of all wickedness, constantly dwelling in wisdom, liberated from all humanity's karma.

I'll reach that far-away ocean when the time is ripe, yet that ocean lies very near, very near.

Whenever there was a pause in their conversation, the river that was bearing them along would sing to them. Sudhana had the impression that he had cast away the long journey he had hitherto made, all the way from the north after his escape from death down to this southern land, and was just now starting out for the first time. That filled him with a fresh happiness as he eagerly gazed around him. Out here on the waters of the River of Liberation he had truly become a new pilgrim.

Vaira's river simply flows. Who will simply flow with his river? At the ferry outside Kutagara, what setting sun or moon can keep this river from flowing on?

Here in the south, Buddha's enlightening wisdom brings tears of joy to this river, this boat, this pilgrim.

A particular moment on a long journey can make us forget all the previous journey. In this way beginnings arise in endings. Sudhana's journey was beginning now, at the very end of a very long road.

Be born again. Be born again. Be born again, several times, several hundred times, several trillion times.

The ferryman fell asleep again. Each time they awoke from sleep, it was as if they had been reborn. As soon as the ferryman was asleep, his pilgrim companion felt terribly lonely. This time he could not fall asleep with him. Gradually, the river grew wider and the flowing stream filled his pure young eyes. Sometimes birds would fly close to the craft, settle on the stern and rest for a while.

Sudhana opened his bundle, drew out the things it contained, and began to throw them one by one into the river. No further need for the dry reed flute, throw away the dried fruit, the hawk's feather, Iryon's ghost, the scrap of netting received from a fisherman, throw everything away, and then the bundle's wrapping too. He even felt inclined to cast himself into the river.

“Why are you throwing all that away? You still have to carry it with you.” Awaking from his sleep, the ferryman spoke sharply, abandoning his previous simple smile. “The things of this world possess a certain force, without which you will never get free of the world. If you throw your body away, who will be left to throw your heart away? You still have to carry your body about with you. A body is not just a body. Without a body, how will you be able to incarnate a bodhisattva heart? The body is the temple of the heart. . .”

The ferryman seized his oar, beat roughly at the waves, and brought them safely through a section of raging rapids. The river had become a vast, surging torrent, their boat something very small on the surface of its mighty flow; it seethed, foaming and roaring. When they emerged from the regions covered in mist, cliffs and meadows appeared on the river banks, while white clouds went drifting past above their heads.

“We're almost there. But it was a long journey. Infinitely long. This river is endless.”

“You're right, ferryman. We travel on without any end. To travel endlessly, I have to travel an endless path in this life as if I were endlessly enduring the torments of a bodhisattva. I shall never become an enlightened being. I shall just go on and on experiencing life in the course of endless reincarnations.”

“Truly sacred pilgrim! You speak like a bodhisattva!” The ferryman embraced the little pilgrim. The boat floated on down the wide, white river. For a long while they floated on down, locked in that embrace. “Holy pilgrim! You and I are higher than the heavens, deeper than the sea!” The boat heard those words and rocked in response. From far below, a buried ray of light broke the surface.

31. In quest of Nandihara

Sudhana turned his back on the river. After taking his leave of Vaira, he set out down the road the aging ferryman had indicated. Every time Sudhana met a new teacher, it was as though he experienced a new birth of confidence. Having met with twenty-five masters and learned from them, he was ready to attain full bodhisattvahood. At present, bodhisattvahood was no longer a goal lying ahead of him but was rapidly becoming the substance of his daily life. Sudhana was no longer pursuing a road, the road was hastening toward him. It was now a living road, one that only dies when the person dies. As Sudhana advanced further and further towards the south, the road absorbed him more and more. The road was not always simply a level meadow path; it had its rough passages, its steep ascents. Sometimes it was covered with a layer of crimson gravel.

Sudhana lost his way and went wandering for a while in the forests along the middle reaches of the River Krishna. He mistakenly followed tracks made by animals instead of human paths. He was lost there for two days. Then he came across a band of savages armed with hunting spears. He gazed brightly at their white teeth and dark eyes. They seized one of his feet, turned it over, and examined the sole. They were astonished to see a bare sole that had clearly walked many thousands of miles. Their leader gave an order; a hunter hoisted Sudhana onto his shoulders and little by little forced a way out of the forest. At the end of about half a day's journey, Sudhana found himself standing alone on a road with a village in sight before him.

The village was composed of a market extending all the way along both sides of a central road. It was the kind of market where, if a rumor arises on either side, it spreads everywhere in a flash like wildfire. Yet, although Sudhana walked the whole length of the road, there was not a soul in sight. All that could be heard was the sound of a cowbell somewhere, and a woman weeping. Perhaps the oldest villager had just died? Or had died a year before and this was the anniversary of his death? Or was this a village of death, with not a living soul in it? Suppose the bell and weeping were mere illusions?

Sudhana firmly set all such thoughts aside. He was feeling a little weak and rather weary, but the road continued to give him joy. Once past Madras, he would reach the city of Nandihara that the ferryman had directed him towards. He recalled the words of Vaira the boatman. Or rather those words began to walk with Sudhana along the road. Not only people, but people's words keep you company when you are walking.

"Sudhana, I know all about working my ship's wood and metalwork and sails, and judging the strength or weakness of the wind filling its sails. The people and animals I carry are able to travel peacefully. They lose all fear of the ocean of torment arising from birth and death in this world, they receive power to transform that ocean into an ocean of wisdom. Little Sudhana, you and I both have the power to change the ocean of desire, the ocean of the entire Buddha cosmos, into a blue ocean of perfect purity."

In next to no time Sudhana was standing at the top of a hill close to the port of Madras. The sight of the indigo ocean suddenly appearing to east and north, as well as his destined southern regions, transformed young Sudhana's tiny heart into a cosmic vastness, transformed the little pilgrim's loneliness. Sudhana devoured the ocean with his eyes. His heart was replete with grief mingled with joy.

Sudhana resolutely pursued his journey, leaving Madras behind him, although he longed to spend a few days there. His heart ached for people and human community. It was one of the world's great ports; fishing and trading, farming and hunting, were all flourishing there. He wanted to savor a little bit more of the world, but left after getting just one meal and a day's provisions, without more ado.

I follow this road at the proper time.

I follow this road at the proper time.

Without this road, how could I meet this lovely world's tomorrow?

Songs bring something into being in places where there is nothing. A song is no dream but the real world.

The countless ecstasies of silence are a garden welcoming a full moon. One breath of wind is surely no wind at all but an extension of the truth I must cherish?

Behold the face of the full moon. Though it only brush the face, the wind is invisible. The wind is, yet is not, and though it is not, it passes by.

Surely these countless ecstasies are this world's every song?

Sudhana came across a soft, moist road that it was a pleasure to walk on. It was a gentle road soaked by rain brought by the seasonal winds a few days previously, and was now drying out. Half a day passed in a flash. As evening was drawing in, the smell of stabled animals told him he was approaching a village. He did not have to walk so fast; he was very weary. A patch of forest loomed up, already yellowing now that the rains were over and the dry season was setting in. At a point where his road met other paths in a crossroads and turned into a broad highway, an inscribed stone stood in the neighboring meadow. It marked the frontier of Nandihara. He encountered a young woodcutter emerging from the forest, his wheeled cart loaded high with firewood. He asked him about Nandihara.

“It is a vast city, without gates or walls. This forest forms the city walls. But where are you from? Are you going to visit someone in Nandihara?” The woodcutter questioned him sternly.

“I am a wanderer from the north. I am on my way to meet the venerable Jayottama in the land of Nandihara.”

“Jayottama the venerable? That plutocrat? You can go wherever you like in this kingdom, you will always be walking on lands belonging to him. This whole land belongs to him.”

“Do you know him?”

He shook his head. “He meets three hundred people every day. When will you ever get a chance to meet him? I reckon you've wasted your journey.”

“Not at all. I'm sure I'll get to see him.” Little Sudhana had journeyed far and wide, he had received instruction from many teachers, and had constantly been astonished to discover that everything in the world was the eternal truth he was seeking.

Here and there, the forest was interrupted by broad stretches of field and swamp; in the swamps, crocodiles lay gaping. He entered an avenue lined with stone sarcophagi facing the east. Beyond rose high buildings of immense majesty. The clothes the people wore were made of fine, soft materials. Sudhana enquired of one pretty girl as to the whereabouts of Jayottama the venerable. She made a sign with her hand to follow her and went on ahead of him, talking as they went.

“He is my uncle. Normally, people have to stay here at least five months, just to meet him for as long as it takes to blink fifty times. There are so many waiting to see him. Visitors here are never able to get a single room, there are so many waiting. But at this evening's family party, my uncle will be present without attendants or guards. I'll arrange for you to meet him briefly then.”

The girl esteemed people from other nations. Sudhana might be shabby after his long journey, yet she perceived his essential quality. “You have reached this place at the end of a very long journey. In you, worthy traveller, this land is supremely blessed. I believe that my uncle will be glad to welcome you too.”

All this was a source of no little joy to Sudhana. He followed the girl into her family mansion. She led him to one of the twelve buildings composing the compound, where he entered a room and settled down to wait. The empty room was fragrant with incense. He was

served a nourishing meal. A bright light was kindled in an oil lamp as night fell. Time flowed on.

Later that evening, he heard someone coming, and the girl led a tall, elderly man into the room. The man was weary. Glancing back at the girl, who was called Sumera, the daughter of his youngest sister, he spoke:

“Truly, it is as the delightful Sumera has said; among all the countless people I have so far met, this young seeker of truth ranks highest. Sumera, you have done well in bringing this young fellow to meet me.”

Sudhana bowed down to Jayottama's feet in greeting, then rose and stood pondering in his heart. The room had grown cool and warm with truth and compassion. The whole cosmos, brahmans, and atmans, all burning in a single mass, trembled and swayed.

“Holy master, I have come thus far in quest of enlightening ways and bodhisattva works and now I have met you. Tell me, I pray: by what means may I be enabled to stir the leaves on the trees in the forest with bodhisattva wind and breath?”

Jayottama replied to his silent, heart-sprung question.

“Child, little Sudhana, you are good, most good. You have already penetrated deeply into the realm of truth. I have bought lands and earned fortunes, not only in this kingdom of Nandihara but in every kingdom, until I need envy no king in this world. I have established no less than nine new kingdoms with my own hands; but for a long time now I have found my main pleasure in meeting people of every nation and speaking to them, not about money but about truth and universal justice. I only wonder why I did not do so from the start.”

Jayottama the venerable did not look like the owner of a thousand billion gold coins, of mountains of cowrie-shell cash, to say nothing of endless stretches of land. He had rid himself of everything. He was dressed in clothes of thin, coarse hemp. He was performing penance for his wealth.

“Doctrines that are no doctrines must be thrown aside. If there are any people advocating ways that are not the Way, they must be converted and brought to knowledge of the rightful Way. And since the most precious thing in the world is peace, it is better that you and I should be killed before we fight, so that peace can be reborn. Once minds are fixed in that direction, all mankind will live as bodhisattvas in a life of complete detachment, as if all the prisoners in hell or in the stinking prisons of the western land of Muro had been set free and were singing praises to heaven.”

“You are a high and most high master.”

“Not so. I am low as the ocean floor. I have not yet said everything; let's go out and pass the night beneath the old lailai tree where I always sleep and watch. We could spend three whole days and nights just talking of the merits and virtues involved in bodhisattva living.”

The aged master invited his niece to accompany him and they went out into the early dawn, where the morning star was about to rise. Sudhana followed them. Suddenly the sage began to sing.

How good you are, first dawn. Deepest night is good, midday by lotus ponds is good, the red glow of dusk at twilight is good, but you, first dawning, son of truth, you are best of all. The sage from the north perceives the truth of dawn and declares you are best of all.

Following them, Sudhana saw that although the venerable Jayottama had spoken of going beneath the lailai tree, the place was more like a vast cavern; the light of heaven could not enter, sunlight had never penetrated there. Jayottama sent away the various servants who were waiting in the tree's cavernous shade and began to address Sudhana, loving his wise intelligence. His words created a whole new cosmos, one established between their two hearts, that had the power to expand the sacred relationship uniting the old sage, the young boy, and the maiden to the infinite. Its power was derived from the shade beneath the immense tree, and was totally invisible to the eye of ordinary onlookers.

Late that night, Sudhana was briefly able to close his eyes. While he slept, Sumera left the shelter of the tree and returned to her home. Sunk in delicious slumber, Sudhana dreamed a dream. In some marvelous way, in his dream he was once again on his way to meet Jayottama. Only now his surroundings were quite unlike those he had actually experienced.

In his dream, he saw agaves everywhere. Before him stretched a silent desert in which the agave spikes seemed to have slashed all the sounds of the wind to death. He felt his spirits leave him and go scurrying hither and thither over the desert vastness. He felt empty, quite empty, full of dread. All the truths that Sudhana had heard until now were utterly useless. Every time he had heard a truth, his heart had leaped for joy and he had felt as if he had become the greatest man in the world. Now not a trace remained of any of that joy. Tears welled up. He found himself lamenting that the road Vaira the boatman had indicated to him had turned out to be so utterly desolate. Even if the path had been gentle and easy, even if it had not led across a desert, he would still have hated this life spent wandering at other people's behest. He yearned to turn into a tree. He yearned to become a house, to become a village and its inhabitants, a kingdom's population.

Yet although he grumbled about his path, no hatred or resentment entered Sudhana's heart. He felt like a fool. There was not a hope of seeing a single tree anywhere in this desert, not a single bird. Yet, desert though it was, there was no sign of camel bones emerging from the ground, not one human skull belonging to some poor wretch who had expired with a final rictus. The path was so remote. Little Seiya, Midarani, and oh, my dear Iryon. He recalled all of them in turn. Stranger still, he even recalled Sumera, although she still lay in the future, like a bright moon.

“What's happened?” He felt a sudden shock. He had been in an unending expanse of desert, but now the setting of his dream had changed to another kind of reality. Looming before him was a grove of sal trees that still lay far ahead. Illusion? No. He blinked several times, he could still see the sal tree grove. It was most puzzling.

Sudhana finally arrived on the grassy plains of Nandihara, the city that the ferryman had told him about. He inhaled deeply the sweet fragrance of the thickly growing grass. The grass was withering. Thanks to the landscape, a solitude which had shown itself to no one else surrounded Sudhana, as in the beginning of the world.

“All flowers are flowers of emancipation. Not one of them is enslaved by illusion. Yes, when this world is done, no need to pass through multiple kingdoms to reach the kingdom of Amitabha. I might as well become a bird and stay in the sky, or turn into a flower and live in the fields.”

Sudhana's innocent steps led him on toward a place where the meadows were cultivated. There he hesitated, as if struck by the smell of men. The leather slippers he had received somewhere along the way were worn out. It was a pity, they had been good for walking. How far had he come?

Someone was coming towards him, dressed in tattered long-sleeved clothes, priestly robes. It was an aging, wandering monk. He had a rough beard and piercingly bright eyes; wild eyes. Not the kind of eyes you usually find in a great mind. Suddenly, the light faded from his eyes, his swaggering gait faltered, then seemed to collapse. He began to mutter in a low voice.

“Fancy letting such a kid out in these plains. How could such a thing happen?”

His voice began to shake. “Here. Would you like a drink of water?” He drew a leather water pouch from the belt of his robes. The water was tepid and tasted strongly of wild animals. Sudhana took just one sip and handed the pouch back. The little pilgrim felt that having encountered the water he should avoid becoming too attached to it.

The old monk questioned him : “Where have you come from? Where are you going?”

Sudhana made no reply. Their dialogue continued without a word being spoken aloud.

“Tell me.”

“Surely the answer lies in what you have said, water-giving sir. The answer is fully contained in your question. I am on my way to meet Jayottama the sage in Nandihara city.”

“Jayottama the venerable? Who rid himself of the art of becoming rich and mastered the art of the wind's blowing, of the water's flowing, of breathing in harmony with wisdom? You don't want to go running after that kind of fellow, with his bony scrap of learning; come roaming with me, I'll teach you the art of sleeping and having fun.

“I was so surprised just now, coming across you like this. Even frightened. There's nothing more frightening than something looking like a man in a vast open plain with not a soul in sight. You gave me such a fright, it blasted my sleep to smithereens and muddled my sense of emancipation. You're a fearful little chap, you know. Or rather, not so much fearful as dazzling. I want to become one with you.”

“For a thousand billion aeons we were one, for all the ages of eternity. Why, living creatures are not separate entities but are all returning into imminent oneness, surely?”

“True. True. Why, you are teaching me. When I was a child, I travelled from place to place like you. I followed fire worshippers and went gadding about with old Jains. But all I got out of it was diseases; I found myself alone in the world. What I'd lost was life. So nowadays I reckon nothing's better than sleeping in the shade after a meal. Sleep is peace and freedom. And there is nothing as new as waking up from sleep.”

“So in future you intend to sleep for a few million hours?”

The eyes of the old monk in his tattered robes flashed wildly again, as he sank into deep reflection. Time passed. Abruptly he began to laugh until he was drooling. His eyes became those of a clown. It was not just his mouth or his face; his whole body was full of laughter. He must be mad. No, he was laughter incarnate. Sudhana realized with a shock that he must be a great spiritual master. Sudhana felt a glimpse of the intensity of the level of power reached by the man, who had attained heights he could never aspire to.

“Who are you, sir?” Sudhana spoke aloud to the old traveller for the first time.

“Who, me? I'm the Old Sleeper of Nandihara, Old Sleep himself, everyone knows me.”

“Where are you going now?”

“Me? A long way away. To bask in the sun during the dry months and sleep a bit.”

“Have you no home?”

“None. Maybe I'll build myself a house one day, as the men of the west build themselves big tombs.”

“Isn't a house the beginning of all forms of attachment?”

“It certainly is. And to the fool, the hills are water. A house likewise. But you can't trust a houseless person. No way of knowing anything. Without a home, he'll vanish although he says he loves you. He leaves his country, he leaves you and me. What's left once he's left everything? Is that where truth is? What's the use of that kind of truth? I'm a wanderer myself, but I dislike wanderers. Not worth a single firmly rooted nettle. A house is where you go back to. No truth without a home. That's dharma.”

The Old Sleeper picked a wayside flower and began to roll it between his long-nailed fingers. Sudhana guessed that in time gone by he had been a most devoted seeker after truth. He sensed that even after he had become disillusioned with that kind of life, he could never fit into ordinary society and had ended up offering a vague caricature of himself. That must be it! He must have lived for a time with a beautiful girl then been rejected by her. Essence had been defeated by forms!

Little Sudhana felt happy at his intuition. In that happiness, the old man became more likeable. He rather wanted to live with him, to be able to eat and sleep whenever he pleased, like a fat pig. Not unlike the companionship of the monk Han-shan and the vagabond Shih-te in the mountains of China many centuries in the future.

“Off you go now. My path is calling me.” Those were his last words. He considered

his attachment to Sudhana to be a passing illusion. Sudhana set off again, alone. He encountered woodlands and tranquil streams, the scent of human life grew stronger. From the forest emerged the rustling sound heard just before a breeze passes, causing the breeze to arise and in a flash turning woodlands into a windswept forest. Birds could be heard singing here and there above the sound of the wind. One old snake had been about to move out from the shadows into the sunlight but changed its mind and settled down in a coil. It made no move to intercept Sudhana as he passed by. All the world's creatures were in harmony.

As soon as he left the forest behind, he found rough houses scattered around and shacks perched in trees with ladders hanging from them. The children came crowding around Sudhana, a few adults trailed along behind him. The sight of a strange boy like Sudhana was a great event. Children and adults alike were utterly poor but each and every one wore a cheerful smile. The joy of the poor is the greatest thing in the world. It is so authentic. Poverty lodged in sincerity is mother of joys. For the little pilgrim, one of the joys gained by the fatigue of traversing a myriad of worlds was that given by being here in this poor forest village on the outskirts of Nandihara. An adult addressed him.

“Just ask us the way. We'll tell you exactly.”

“I am on my way to the place of instruction far from sorrow and anguish in the grove of trees near Nandihara.”

“Why, you speak another language from ours! You don't need to ask the way, just keep walking straight ahead.”

“Many thanks.”

“On the contrary, it is we who should thank any traveller deigning to pass by our wretched village. Farewell.”

Sudhana realized that with the passing of time and the multiple changes it brought, poverty would in the end be abolished completely. The contention that poverty would never be dispelled from this world was a weak one, for he kept discovering that the truth he was seeking and the solution to the problem of poverty were one and the same. The truth belongs to the earth, not to heaven.

At last, the gates of Nandihara opened wide. A few wild fowls were idling there, three oxen sprawled motionless; a scene of utter lassitude. Then abruptly the three oxen rose and came charging towards Sudhana, breaking his dream.

* * * *

It had all been a dream! He awoke in the vast cool shade of the lailai tree. The sage was already awake, deeply immersed in his dawn meditations. That was how he passed his days.

“You're awake. Little pilgrim, Sudhana. You have spent one night here. This place is yours; make yourself at home, have no cares, do what you like. Wash in the running water, go three score paces to the outhouse and relieve yourself.”

They ate a light breakfast of fruit. Then Sumera came out to them. She was wearing a different dress from the day before. Her dark hair, not yet dry, hung moist.

“Sudhana, in my dreams last night I was you, and had lived my whole life on the roads.”

For some reason, he felt embarrassed. “Oh, I merely dreamed that I was still on my way here to meet the sage Jayottama. Passing over a desert. . .”

“Sudhana, my uncle says that each and every grain of sand in the desert of Nandihara is a diamond seed of the world to come. It means you walked over diamonds to reach us.”

“I saw poor people too.”

“The day is surely coming when the poor and those who are rich like my uncle will no longer be enemies. That will be the Pure Land Paradise. That is one of my uncle's dearest wishes.”

The shade was vast and unending. At the far edge of the shadow, a group of people

had gathered. Jayottama's servants were admonishing them individually. They were sending away all those who had come to seek Jayottama's advice in private that day. Sudhana felt very sorry for them. Realizing what he was feeling, Sumera spoke.

“Sometimes. . . a teaching that you come to hear, then you cannot, you have to wait longer, in the end penetrates most deeply. Something you get without pains or difficulty easily slips through the fingers. You know the law of the sand, don't you? If you try to pick up one handful of sand, it all slips away.”

32. Sumera and Sanuita

After lunch, Jayottama the sage made his way to a vast garden, where a crowd had gathered and was waiting to hear his afternoon sermon. Left alone with Sudhana, Sumera looked at him and spoke. Her words sounded like a modest reply to a question he had gravely addressed to her, although he had asked nothing: “They say that my name comes from long long ago, from Sumer, the first nation in the history of the world, set between west and north. Later it collapsed and its people were scattered eastward, southward, and far to the west. My ancestors came from the land of Sumer. Nowadays the name alone remains, drifting hither and thither.”

Sudhana replied, “True, at the very beginning of humanity's pain-filled history the land of Sumer manifested truth, the truth about the four stages of life: rising and flourishing, decaying and death.”

*Leave the grove,
leave the shade and darkness.
There is a joy,
pierced by arrows of sunlight,
where you and I are abolished.*

This grove might be full of truth, a poet had once sung in those words, inspired by the grove, that the inexhaustible magnanimity depicted in the *Avatamsaka (Garland) Sutra* could only be encountered by leaving it. Yet Sudhana had been deeply impressed by the place since his arrival, he longed to talk to everybody here. Not only the sage Jayottama and his niece Sumera, but everyone he met obviously belonged to the clan of wisdom and compassion. However, the difference between the language they used and the languages known to Sudhana left him with only very limited means of communication.

All the destined relationships between creatures in this world, to say nothing of all the attachments resulting from those relationships, arise through language. Once we are liberated from diversity of languages, there will be a single language everywhere. Surely, the truth that the seven Buddhas of the former worlds and the Buddha of this present world discovered was that all this world's false appearances are the result of verbal relationships?

Yet Sudhana knew that a world of torments was the mother that gave birth to the Lord Indra's paradise. If this dark world is a place of pain, it is at the same time a world where suffering is endured. Why are we born into this world of torment, pain, and sorrow? Bodhisattva nature might even sometimes involve provoking armed uprisings, in order to put an end to those tyrants who cause others to suffer, reducing their wickedness to ashes.

While Sudhana was immersed in these thoughts, Sumera had somehow vanished from before him, and a young boy was sitting in her place. Or had Sumera simply assumed another form? Even more astonishing was the sermon the boy was preaching; the strong impression it made attracted Sudhana's attention as he returned from his reflections.

“. . . Like you, I do not simply live here. I too am a wanderer with the whole world before me. A wanderer constantly on the move through the whole universe's realms of form and formlessness. I have spent time in distant galaxies. Boarding a shooting star, I have traversed the dark voids of space. I have ridden on the wings of the wind and crossed the great southern ocean for a full forty-nine days. I knew who you were from the very beginning. In the future we'll be brothers too. I knew you from the moment you entered Nandihara.”

Sudhana replied rather curtly, “Who are you?”

“I am known as Sanuita.”

Again he questioned him, “Are you not Sumera? If you are not Sumera, where has she gone?”

The reply came softly: “Whether I am Sumera or not is not an important question. What matters now is simply the fact of you and I being together. We are united as brothers in truth.”

“For me, you matter, but Sumera matters too.”

“True. Everything in this world is vanity, all is lies, and yet we are not the only ones to consider that it is wrong to despise even the least of this world's motes of dust or scraps of refuse. This world is a strict school, where every single thing without exception is a master, faithfully observing the Way. Even if a person has committed a heinous murder, that person still possesses Buddha nature. Sudhana, you know the girl called Midarani, don't you?”

Sudhana was displeased by this business of Sumera and Sanuita. He felt slightly insulted by the way Sanuita had taken Sumera's place. And now here he was having to hear this Sanuita boy talking about Midarani! He recalled memories of Midarani from days gone by; he had not forgotten her. The memories had remained, buried deep in his heart, and were now returning to him like water overflowing from a bucket. Rippling on the surface of his liquid memories came the thought that this present moment must surely be the result of his dazzling encounter with her and all that she had taught him.

“Young master Sudhana, I was born as Midarani's twin sister, but I was destined from birth to a life of wandering. At last, I found myself here, where I was adopted as a foster-daughter by Jayottama the sage's sister. The person who sent me here told me that my ancestors were from Sumer, which is why Jayottama gave me the name Sumera. After my foster-mother died, I came to serve my uncle in this grove. But just now I prayed to be changed into a man's shape so that I could accompany you, and have become Sanuita. My uncle has charged me to go with you further and further south, across the great river, until we find Sinhavijumbhita in the city of Kalingvana. He even said that if you were willing, I could stay with you for ever on your pilgrimage.”

At first Sudhana could not understand but then he began to grow accustomed to not understanding. His sense of something unnatural about Sanuita changed into naturalness. He felt that with Sanuita as his companion, life would be happier than when he was travelling alone. He decided to free himself, abandoning his previous life of lonely journeying.

“Very well. Birds in flight prefer to fly together, too. They never fly directly one behind the other, so as not to get in the way of each other's forwards flight; they always fly slightly separated from one another in order not to hinder the beating of the other's wings. Let's travel together in the same fashion. Our sweat will dry in the heat of the sun and the warmth radiating from the earth.”

Sudhana was about to go across to take his leave of Jayottama the sage when Sanuita stopped him. “Uncle has already taken his leave of us. It would disturb him if we tried to say goodbye. He's in the middle of his sermon.”

“Very well. Farewells are superfluous.”

Passing through the woodland universe, they emerged from Nandihara. As they finally left the shade behind them, two splendid shadows faithfully followed them. It was extremely hot. They had to walk for a long while before they grew accustomed to such fiery heat. Sanuita was well-equipped with the water-bag and the pouch full of powdered dried fruit needed by any traveller setting out on a long journey. He was provided with far more than Sudhana, who had always lived on the road.

They set off up a hill road as the sun was setting. Their journey knew no distinction between day and night. Sanuita's feet soon began to trouble him. Their mountain path was already wrapped in darkness. A few birds were still flying in the quickly darkening sky, chattering scolding complaints at those birds that had already settled to roost in the woodland branches. Sudhana felt a bird's droppings fall on his forehead.

Sumeru, Mountain of the World! Blazing Sumeru, imbuing with dazzling brightness

the host of those that come flocking to you!

Brightness of that blazing host! Brightness such that night can come to birth nowhere in this world! Sumeru! Not mountain now, but brightness!

In the night, the hillside road lay dark but Sanuita's song brought light like a bright sunlit day bursting from their hearts. Gradually, though, their journey began to fill with pain, the pain that naturally comes to those who travel. The pain was unfamiliar to Sanuita; to Sudhana it was like coming home.

At last, one rainy dawn a few days after they had hailed the second full moon of their journey, they reached the great river they had been hoping to find. In the early light, the water sounded like the clashing of swords. The river was known as the Boundless Stream and it flowed as its name suggested with boundless vastness into the two boys' hearts. Sudhana and Sanuita were completely exhausted. They soaked their aching feet in the water, and were at once made well.

Day was just breaking in the east. The hills on the far side still lay under the power of darkness, the night's obscurity not yet fully banished. Sudhana stood rekindling his resolve in the midst of the eastern sky, that shone solemn as this world's first steps. He breathed deeply. The world is destined to vanish in the space of a single breath. Just then Sanuita spoke :

“Sudhana! I have completed my task. I must now entrust this world to you and close my eyes for ever.”

“No!” Sudhana was unsure what thunderbolt had struck him. Sanuita handed him the pouches he had been carrying. One of his legs had already begun to stiffen. Sudhana massaged the leg with all his strength, in vain. Yet he continued to rub, trying to keep Sanuita's other leg from stiffening in the same way.

“You'll recover. Brace up. The forests of Kalingavana are not far now. Look at the river. See how powerfully the water is flowing.”

It all happened so quickly. Sanuita gazed weakly at the river, staring at the stream with eyes where the living light of life was already nearly extinguished; for them there was no river. His dead eyes and Sudhana's lonely eyes were staring together at the river looming pale in the dawn.

“I loved you. That was why I changed into a boy and came all this way with you. In the midst of vanity the world is true, and I, Sumera, was false in the midst of truth. The magic spell by which I transformed myself tarnished the truth.”

Then Sanuita's eyes closed. He was dead. Sudhana shook the dead Sanuita, or rather Sumera, once. It was a corpse. It had ceased to be a person more quickly than the time taken to speak those last words. Sudhana could not begin to comprehend. He had no need of extra sorrows.

He laid his companion's body, now reduced to a mere object, in a grassy meadow. The ground was moist. It took him half a day to gather firewood for the pyre. After the rain, it was hard to find any wood dry enough. As the sun stood high in the zenith, Sudhana hastily set about the cremation, with the help of an elderly tramp. But it was evening before the body had been reduced to ashes and a bundle of bones. The two of them offered worship to the sacred Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the worlds in ten directions. They prayed that they would receive the essence of the life that by burning was now being returned to its components of earth, water, fire, and wind.

Sudhana was feeling hungry. The old tramp burst out laughing: “Poor kid, you've lost your young comrade, and you've got old me instead.”

“Thank you, sir. Without you, how could I ever have got this funeral done? It seems that not one gesture of ours in this world is possible without some kind of destiny.”

After they had boarded the ferryboat, they continued to talk to the sound of the oars striking the water. The ferryman spoke in a chiding tone: “Throw those bones into the water.”

Sudhana had been treasuring the bundle of relics but now he did as the ferryman said and threw the bones into the water. The tramp asked where he was headed.

“I'm on my way to Kalingavana.”

“Ah, Kalingavana! That forest belongs to a wealthy witch who has forgotten all about this world's poverty. There are no beggars like me there.”

“Not so. If there are poor people in the world, no place can belong to the rich. Come with me.”

“Why should I go somewhere where one cranky bitch tricks and lies until she gets hold of people's minds with magic, then makes them mad so that they spend all day dancing in a frenzy? I'd rather go roaming up and down this river bank, thank you all the same.”

“Come with me.”

“No, I won't. I can't stand these people who are all the time talking about the Way and Hell.”

The oar that had been cleaving the water suddenly struck the tramp's shoulders. The ferryman, who had until then been rowing sleepily, was glaring fiercely.

“You seven hundredth avatar of an aging tramp! How dare you go jabbering away like that? I feel like chucking you in where it's deep.”

“You only have to row us across, what are you hitting me for?”

“Cut the chatter and go with the kid.”

“I won't.”

“You will, You wretch! Truth rarely comes near any creature; how can anyone fail to seize that truth and enlighten his sad situation if they have the chance?”

The boatman lamented to the empty air in the early hours. There was a landing stage built out into deep water; Sudhana and the tramp got out onto it. The boatman drifted away in his boat across the stream again. The tramp was grumbling to himself.

“I wish I hadn't come across. Food has no taste this side. Even when you manage to get some, food has to have some taste. . . “

Sudhana remembered words the boatman had spoken, it already seemed ages ago: “If you take the left of the three highways before you, you'll arrive at Kalingavana late at night when the kugira bird is fast asleep. There you'll find night with its songs and dances is just like day.”

33. Sunlight Park

Rousing himself from trifling thoughts, Sudhana glanced back at the tramp following him. Why, where had he gone? Until a few moments ago, the little metal bell dangling from the belt that held his tattered clothes together had been tinkling as if in a dream, but now there was no sound of it. There was no sign of the begging bowl he always carried about with him, a bowl such as poor people use. In short, everything associated with the tramp, and the tramp himself, had parted company from Sudhana.

He found himself wondering whether, behind the shape of that foul-mouthed ruffian of a beggar, there might not have been someone who had rid himself of all worldly desires. Someone for whom even journeying in search of truth like Sudhana was merely one more form of desire. In which case, perhaps the boatman who had struck the tramp was another such person? Sudhana shuddered with a sudden thrill.

First Sudhana had lost Sanuita, then he had been separated from the old tramp; now he was alone again, as he always had been in his travels. The way of solitude was one of the many ways that open in the search for truth. He was obliged to be on his own. The day was over, the impatient evening star had already risen. The river that he had left behind was now running alongside him, on account of the turns in the road he was following. The water fowl were speeding homewards. It was night.

Sudhana sang to himself as he walked on. Then he stopped singing because the mice and wild cats were out, hunters and hunted. A sharp cry rose and was stilled as a mouse was caught. Death was afoot. It was not only the wild cats that were killing. This whole world and time advance by death, that puts an end to all living creatures.

As Sudhana reached the forest of Kalingavana, the hitherto impenetrable night was turned into day by a flood of light. Sudhana's whole being was filled with a transparency of increasing brilliance, his body grew so empty that it was perfectly capable of admitting the light. Streaming light and streaming songs, with streaming fragrances, welcomed Sudhana into the heart of the forest. His eyes were dazzled, his ears rang, his nostrils quivered for excess of delight. Men and women of all ages arrayed in long trailing robes, knowing nothing of sleep or repose, were living there in utter peace.

Arriving, he sighed at the thought that Sanuita and the mice had died. A girl sitting beside a spring saw him and spoke: "Wash your feet in this water, young guest." Sudhana bowed in greeting, then proceeded to drink from the spring before washing his face and feet. After that he enquired after the nun Sinhavijurm-bhita.

"All the visitors who come here are looking for her. A long time ago, I was the same. If you go that way, you'll find Sunlight Park. That's where she is."

There were reports that before Sunlight Park came into the charge of the nun Sinhavijurm, a blacksmith of Kalingavana Forest had equipped his son with wings in early childhood; he would collect every ray of sunlight that fell there. Then, flying up into the sunset glow, he would gather all the departing sunbeams, until after thirty-three years the place was full of sunshine, by which time the sunbeams had lost all thought of leaving for anywhere else. From time to time, that vast mass of light would join with the entire forest of Kalingavana and dance, although nobody could foresee when that would happen.

On a lion-throne at the center of the park sat the nun Sinhavijurm, one foot posed on the ground beneath. Without speaking, Sudhana began to move to the right, circumambulating around the nun and the crowd surrounding her. At that moment the nun turned and smiled at him.

"You are good, very good, most good indeed. Good and most good son of this world." Words of high praise emerged from her lips and entered Sudhana's ears. He

experienced a kind of fullness. He suddenly felt at home with the wealth of Kalingavana forest, where you are rich even with nothing, full without eating, and where one set of clothing is a fortune. Surely this Kalingavana was a reality in which peoples' most beautiful wishes were fulfilled? Here there was no difference between dream and reality. Every face harbored a smile bright as a flower. After turning for a long time, Sudhana at last came to a halt before her and asked his question.

“Sacred nun, my heart has been intent on seeking the way of righteousness since I was a child, but I am eager to know how a bodhisattva learns the works of enlightenment and advances along the way of enlightening. Will you expound this to me?”

His concern with the truth was so utterly sincere that a kind of dance emanated from the whole of Sinhavijurm's body. She answered in song :

Child, you have turned a hundred million times. How can you be a questioning guest and I an answering host?

Once you have seen me, do not consider my bright form. Once you have seen the Buddha, cast the Buddha's form away. Once a creature knows nothing of creaturely forms, as a babe knows nothing of its own form, all the variety of this world turns into Buddha nature.

Once you have seen the teaching, do not look at its form and when you come to see that all teaching is a dream, the true teaching will appear as darkness at the end of light. Joy ... Joy ... When shall we leave today's work? ... Joy ...

Sudhana said nothing further to the nun. His inmost heart yearned to speak, more than his lips. Sinhavijurm felt the same. Her heart spoke, “Child, you are light as I am light.” This was no sooner spoken, than Sudhana realized that his body was a star or a fire, sun or moon, radiating dazzling light. He was amazed. Light such as this lay hidden within the depths of every human heart, waiting for the world. Light came bursting from his hands too, and from his breast. His heart addressed the nun: “Look! Look! My breast's darkness has all become light, shining bright. How can the bodhisattva way not be clear? It's brightly visible.” Her heart quickly contradicted him: “Not so. Not in this way. All is not yet done. There are still many places left that you must visit, Sudhana. You are a man of the road. You will live and die on the road.”

Sudhana completed his appointed time in the forest of Kalingavana. It was a matter of a single night. He awoke from a brief sleep, known in those parts as the sleep of jewels, to find his body light as a feather. Rousing himself, he found he was reclining on Sinhavijurm's bosom; it felt soft, her breast was buxom and her whole body lay at peace.

“You are good. You slept the sleep of jewels and now your eyes will not close again, even if you do not sleep for a long time.”

Hearing those words, he gazed up and saw numerous lion- thrones scattered about the forest; on each of them exactly the same Sinhavijurm was holding a different person to her breast. Sudhana's dark blue eyes grew wide.

“Holy nun, how many hundred bodies do you have?”

“According to the doctrine, or needs and means, many. In ages to come, you too will encounter a host of living creatures in hundreds of bodies. Buddhas and bodhisattvas encounter one hundred billion beings in one hundred billion bodies.”

“Lady nun, my body yearns to be multiplied one hundredfold and to shed one hundred times as much light into the darkness.”

“Good you are, and so it shall be, good indeed.”

“Lady, once away from here, outside of this garden of Kalingavana lie the mortality and pain that none can avoid, the oppression and spoliation that mark the relationships between the four castes and the multitude of secondary castes. Have you forgotten that?”

“Ah, infinitely good. In times to come, by the flood emanating from here and spreading across the world, this forest will fill all living creatures with the love within my breast, untying

all bonds as naturally as winter passes in the north and springtime follows. Is it not true, Sudhana, that you too are learning about such things by your life of journeying, with the aim of bringing them about?"

"Holy nun, Lady Sinhavijurm, you are most truly righteous and beautiful."

"All thanks, all thanks. Child, it would be sufficient if by my gratitude the realm of Amitabha might be established."

Sudhana arose from her embrace and mingled with the many other people who were there. An old man sent his son to pay reverence to Sudhana and they began to talk. Without realizing it, he and the boy walked away from Kalingavana forest and its park full of sunlight. Finally they found themselves outside of the forest. It was the reality in which Sudhana and the boy had to go on living.

"My name is Vasumitra. You're Sudhana, aren't you?"

The boy spoke as if barring the way to Sudhana, seemingly intent on dissolving the remains of Sinhavijurm's light still lingering inside him. He nodded.

Vasumitra spoke again. "My father's a shepherd, he brought me up as his only child. My mother died when I was born. My father always held me with one hand, even when he led his flocks. We came all this way to the land of Kalingavana because my father wanted to entrust me to Sinhavijurm so that I could become a bodhisattva radiating light like her. And yet. . . no matter how hard Sinhavijurm tried, I was only a little boy, it was a great disappointment to my father. I stayed a full two weeks in the Sunlight Park, not once leaving it. Yet the light never entered my body. She gave up, saying that I could become a Buddha of light slowly, after stone and gravel became Buddhas first. That was when I was entrusted to you. My father and the nun together. . ."

"Entrusted to me?"

"That's right."

"Vasumitra!"

"Yes."

"Perhaps I may entrust you to someone else as well. The road I am following is not the right path for someone like you."

"Don't worry about the future now. With today's sky, there is nothing I need."

Sudhana realized with a sudden pang that within the boy lay concealed an enormous, unshakable power that no force could prevail on. The discovery emerged like a drop of blood. That was it. Not all the light in Kalingavana's Sunlight Park could ever fully illuminate this boy. The boy was too deep a precipice for the light. At the very foot of the cliff within him was a place the light could never reach. Vasumitra possessed an utterly invincible, creaturely ignorance that left those with bodhisattva wisdom, even those with supernatural light and wisdom, quite helpless. The boy's power seemed to belong to the concept of zero, the totally empty zero prior to the emergence of one. Before the might of zero, all living creatures and Buddhas were less than nothing.

"Do you know where you're going?"

"No idea."

"This is the way back to my home. I'll show you where I come from. Now that father has been freed of pain and has found peace in the light of Kalingavana forest, I had to come out like this and go home instead."

Sudhana decided to abandon his itinerary completely to the boy's freedom. The lad seemed to exhale the fragrance of an unparalleled boldness like the scent of an aromatic flower, he would simply follow him. The more he looked, the more he saw that although he was never preening before mirrors, the boy was quite unique; he had never come across anyone to match him among all the people he had met. The boy was utterly beautiful.

"I am a sinner; back in former worlds I robbed people of their lives. I'm only a child,

but. . . The charm of this world's fledglings is one more tip of the inherited effects of deep and ancient sin. One woman was so bewitched by me that when I wouldn't do as she wanted, she took the sharp bone of a cow, slit open her stomach and put an end to herself. That was several lives ago.

That's my problem; I can't escape from the torment of recalling all that happened in previous existences. The sheep that nourished me with their milk in my childhood are the result of my having once or twice thrown them something to eat in long-ago lives. Then there was a woman, already married, who couldn't stop thinking of me after we exchanged a few words; in the end she fell into a decline and died. The daughter of a passing foreigner once clasped my hand for a moment; she fell so desperately in love that she grew mad and threw herself into a stream. That must have been along the upper reaches of the Indus.

"Then. . . but I'd better stop there. Yet in this world I am just a child. . . I have never once thought that I was a beautiful boy or an ugly child. Beauty and ugliness are the shadows of falsehood. Even when I saw Sinhavijurm, not a single thought came to me. No sense of admiration or of wonder, either."

Sudhana began to grow accustomed to Vasumitra, who seemed equipped with absolutely nothing beyond the simple fact of having been born. The new world of this boy, completely free of any kind of attachment, was becoming part of Sudhana's world too. They grew closer as they went along, talking together. When they stopped talking, the ensuing silence brought them closer still. Soon, the people back with Sinhavijurm in the Sunlight Park in Kalingavana forest had lost all significance for them. As Sudhana listened to the boy, he sometimes grew so immersed in his own thoughts that he completely lost track of what the boy was saying.

At a given moment, Sudhana replied very belatedly to something the boy had said long before. The passage of time seemed to have come to a halt for a while. What he said was an unexpected response. Vasumitra opened his eyes wide and suddenly burst into peals of laughter. Sudhana felt a fool.

"Alright. After all, loosing your senses completely for a time, then abruptly picking up the thread of a previous conversation, is one of the ten kinds of consciousness, I suppose."

"Vasumitra, you can't say that the death of those people was your fault. It was their own *karma*. *Karma* is not merely a matter of what you and I do. *Karma* is a far vaster sea than mere sin. Things that are not sins are part of *karma* too."

The boy's laughter ended abruptly at these words, his eyes shone like a dark evening sky. In his gaze gleamed a limitless assent to what Sudhana had said. Continuing the thread of a past topic had produced an ecstatic new present moment. They grew even closer than before.

The boy responded enthusiastically. He loved talking: "When father made me go off with you like this, it was because he reckoned that unlike with those women, with you alone there would be no risk of mistakenly falling in love or anything."

"Ha ha, you never know."

"You can't laugh off that kind of thing; that's why I gave up laughing. On account of those people losing their lives, for a long time afterwards I could never get to sleep. I would lie all night long listening to the cries of the animals roaming the hills beyond the village. Those animals became my teachers. They were the best teachers I ever had. There will be no more nights like that now. When I learned from the cries of the wild animals, I mean. Once I emerge from sleep, it soon becomes clear that this world is calling me."

"That's right. The so-called world is an impermanent thing designed to retain us here."

"Impermanent?" The boy's shrill voice cleft the air.

"Yes, impermanent. The world never stays exactly as it is. Always moving, that's the world. Even mothers are impermanent. Enlightened beings too. Fundamentally, every living creature in the world was once a Buddha, enlightened being. Then that Buddha put on robes of

karma and became the living creatures of a thousand million aeons.”

For some unknown reason, Sudhana was no longer the listener, he had become the speaker. The expression on Vasumitra's face was different from when he was in the forest of Kalingavana. To use Sudhana's term, it showed beauty's impermanence.

In the distance, the road seemed to drop out of sight. It was receiving the scorching sunlight and reflecting it harshly out into the world. The road's clay was turning into sand. Among all the things humans make, nothing is more impressive than a road. Here, though, the road was beginning to turn back into a desert. The boy told him that this was the place old men down south call “The Harsh Harsh Desert” or “Desert of Death” or “The Desert of Bones.”

The desert began to absorb their words, that were growing increasingly excited. They lacked the supplies of food and water needed if they were to cross such a place. They had not reckoned seriously with a desert. Sanuita had died for lack of water, and this desert was even more arid. In such a situation, would they find a way of survival, or might a dead Buddha give birth to a new frisky Buddha? Abruptly, Vasumitra laughed. They were two little boys wandering in the midst of a desert, more lost than in search of truth. Fortunately, the sunbeams were obscured by a layer of clouds and only continued to burn high above in the sky. The sand blazed like an oven. Even Sudhana was not accustomed to such weather. Just then Vasumitra caught hold of Sudhana's hand. That touch had the effect of putting an end to Sudhana's torments caused by the heat. Sweat oozed from their palms. What was this! The boy had turned into a girl! Vasumitra!

Nearly half way across the desert, human skeletons rested where they had fallen after a final mocking snigger, a dead laugh half buried in the sand. Vasumitra explained : “These are the skeletons of people who came from over there. The bones of those who started from here are at the other end of the desert. Nobody dies only half way across a desert. People have to fail to attain goals they have almost reached. You have already passed many such critical points. Once across this desert you will come to a high and rugged region. There lies Ratnavyuha. Once there, I will give myself to you. That is where I come from.”

The boy's sudden transformation into a girl troubled Sudhana more seriously than the matter of finding an answer to her words. He had come to depend on Vasumitra as he had Sanuita, who had followed him before. His throat was burning. His legs kept threatening to give way. He was hungry. He was utterly empty, with not a scrap of anything inside his heart. Not one bird could be seen flying above them. Nothing but clouds. Once in a while, dessicated forest blocked their way. The tenacious will to advance that had been so strong in him failed to manifest itself, although the will itself had not disappeared.

The desert was silent. Devoid of all attachment and desire, it was the immutable Buddha of ancient days, long lost in obscurity. On they walked. As they passed mile after mile of Buddha desert, truth came to birth out of their dreams and reality. Very early in the dawning hours of the third day, mountains began to loom into Sudhana's field of vision, very far away.

“Sudhana. That's the mountain where the city of Ratnavyuha lies. The grassy plains at its foot are the home of all my family's ancestors.”

Sudhana remembered something he had heard from an ascetic in Sinhavijurm's Sunlight Park, about a wise young woman. He had heard that if anyone afflicted with passion or folly exchanged a few words with her, it would melt away; if they just held her hand once, it would vanish; if they simply sat down for a moment beside her, it would slip away; if they once saw her stretch, the passions and follies of a infinity of ages would all go flying away. On the heels of that memory came the thought of Vasumitra. He glanced across at her and grew convinced. Might not the boy, or rather the girl, walking along the road with him be that very woman? He called to mind the people who were supposed to have died on account of Vasumitra: “Why do you think the people who met you died so easily?”

To that there was no answer. Heaven and earth were tinged crimson to permit the

rising of the sun in the east. Vasumitra could see the image of her own past lives in the effulgent splendor of the sun rising.

“In times past. . . in many worlds. . . in one world I lived as a woman so poor that she had to prostitute herself. Before I went to sell myself to a brothel, I surrendered my body to my own father. I recklessly cried out that since he had given me my body, I could only sell it to other men after surrendering it to him. There was nothing to eat, father was reduced to catching wild cats for food, but after he had taken my virginity he hanged himself in a tree. At that time I suffered more from hunger than from grief at my father's suicide. Thinking that I had been soiled, I rushed to the swamps at the foot of Ratnavyuha. I devoured mouthfuls of foul mud and stinking lumps of clay, even drank the water from latrines. Then I lived in the stacks of rice-straw that lay here and there over the fields until my body was free of the stench. After that I became the plaything of every man who came along.

“A few lifetimes later, I became my former father's wife. He was rich, with vast estates and crowds of servants. My husband was old and I was young, yet we lived in good harmony. Then one day, as I was out buying a mass of gold, I saw a band of a hundred beggars passing by. I threw them the mass of gold. Without realizing it, I was performing an act of almsgiving.

“In another past life I was among the followers of a sage who crossed the Ganges up in the north proclaiming the truth about shunning pain and enjoying bliss, as well as the truth concerning the vanity of all that exists. We were no different from that band of beggars. Afterwards, I kept searching for truth until I came to a point beyond which I again began to live in lust and greed. Finally, I was born as the daughter of my present father, we lived as workers on a cattle farm. One day I set eyes on you and changed into a boy for the first time. That brings us to today.”

Sudhana's heart was too full for words. Vasumitra's past, told as they continued their journey, was a more perfectly just reality than any reality.

“Vasumitra! You are that wise woman, aren't you?”

“I am a mere girl, that's all.”

“Lady!”

“Young man. . . In my last life, a very handsome customer gave me his seed and I had a baby. I brought him up with what I earned as a whore. . . but when he was five, he fell sick with cholera and died. After that I went mad, giving myself away to drunkards, peddlers, thieves, beggars and all, without taking a penny.”

“Oh, holy bodhisattva, desireless desiring.”

Sudhana screamed out the words, unable to endure the pain the girl's words were provoking in his heart and stomach.

“I'm sick. . . Lady! I can't. . . go. . . on any farther.”

Sudhana collapsed at the point where the desert came to an end. The girl challenged him where he lay: “Sudhana, do you want to add to the skeletons in the Desert of Bones? Or do you want to encounter the truth in Ratnavyuha? The pain you feel is good, it is the pain resulting from the elimination of the last dregs of desire remaining within you. But you must get up.”

A flock of birds flew past, the first birds they had seen for a long time. The sun burst out of the ground and rose crimson. Darkness fled, abandoning a multitude of places and Sudhana's pain began to fade away. The girl pulled him up. They stood standing together. Their long shadows stretched as far as the grassy meadow that lay at the end of the desert. They drank from the spring that bubbled there, then began to walk again.

That evening they reached Vasumitra's home village at the foot of the citadel of Ratnavyuha. It was only on arriving there, that he realized her name was the same as that of her village. They went to one wing of the empty house on the farm where Vasumitra had lived before, where they slept profoundly.

When Sudhana woke, it was night. He looked at Vasumitra, visible in the starlight. He felt that there was no beauty in the world, save that of newly opened flowers and that of this girl. In the ground beneath the place where they lay, a new stream of water had opened and could be heard gurgling as it flowed. A new world would surely open beneath the ground. At the same time, he could hear the sound of people in the heavens calling for a new world to open in the heavens, too. Ordinary ears take that sound for the wind. Night of Ratnavyuha. Night of *Avatamsaka (Garland) Sutra meditation*.

34. A hairy fellow

The southern dawn broke. High in the air, the leaves on the trees formed layer upon layer of wide-cast shade. As soon as the sun had risen, not a trace of the previous night's darkness remained in the trees' green shade; everything was utterly new. Vasumitra's face was marked by a beauty more exalted than that of the most lovely divine being in the entire Buddha cosmos. Sudhana was astonished to see how her face shone full of darkness.

She brought her hands together for a moment, in the direction of the sun, then parted them. They strolled from the open shed of the farm in Vasumitra village, where they had been resting, towards the mossy brink of a small spring nearby. Sitting by the spring, they filled their empty stomachs with cold ewes' milk that the village women brought them.

“Sudhana! Embrace me. Then all your desires will be consumed in flames.”

Unexpectedly, Sudhana shook his head: “No. I want to dream about you, love you, stay with you for ever, but I must leave. If I kiss your lips, passion will rise; if I embrace you, I will sink deeper into the mire of desire, since I am a creature. Perhaps in some distant future I will come to visit you. But I have to pursue the road toward enlightenment. I cannot stay with just one teacher, or one beautiful girl, or one single world. The road is my life. There is nothing in this world that can rival the road. The Buddha too is a son of the road, its offspring.”

“Good, good, Sudhana! Now you have nothing more to hear and learn from me.”

“That is not so. Even now I can scarcely see the morning light of the sun of deliverance reverberating on the heavy leaves of those trees. I am the very least of your disciples in this world.”

“Ah, young master Sudhana! There is nothing left you can learn from me. If you keep heading southwards from here, you will reach the land of Shubha-paramgama, where the hermit Veshthila lives. He is completely unworldly and owns absolutely nothing. You must visit him and receive his guidance in bodhisattva living. He is a teacher that I myself followed for a long time, only he kept bowing down before me, though I was his pupil, like flowing water always seeking the lowest place.”

Sudhana went into the city of Ratnavyuha. A child from one of the village farms served as his guide. He looked around curiously for a while. The sun was already sinking low when Sudhana returned to Vasumitra in the village outside the city walls. But she was not there. Sudhana waited. As the sun was setting Sudhana rose to his feet, and set out along the twilight road. He had no reason to make any distinction between day and night.

“Off we go. Off to meet this fellow Veshthila. Leave the lovely lady behind, off to the hairy fellow.” He did not wait any longer for Vasumitra but set off. Probably she had deliberately gone away somewhere in order to permit this departure. Beauty demands resolute departures. The night clung closely to him. He was alone. That girl had been extraordinary, true, but as soon as he left her beauty and freedom behind him, he realized that his own heart was completely empty. It was as if he had callously parted from himself too.

Now Sudhana had parted forever from his twenty-eighth teacher, the boy-girl Vasumitra. He entered a new world, as if he had crossed a frontier into another country. Night is vaster than day. Sudhana entered the state of samadhi (single-minded concentration). That is the holiest form of journey possible in this world; that summit of solitude is the traveller's strength.

Sudhana's samadhi journey pursued its way along a tranquil night road, the first for a very long time. He was able to walk as cheerfully as a song, to walk as if in an often practiced, well-mastered dance. Finally he reached Shubha-paramgama. The journey had been an easy one; he never needed to ask the way.

Although the cities in that country were called cities, they possessed neither gates nor

walls. Here there was simply a twelve-foot-high stone set in the highway, dividing it in two, that served as the city gate. Children were playing around it. For some reason there were no sleepyheads among the city's children. At crack of dawn, even before day had bannished night, the children would come dashing out of doors. If they said that someone had “not stirred a leg though it's daybreak”, they meant that person was dead. Sudhana questioned the children: “Hey, do you know the hermit Veshthila?” The children instantly nodded.

“How do I get to his house?”

One replied, his big black eyes shining: “It's a shanty down at the far end of the town. If you go straight down this road, you can't miss it. If you go there, he'll give you something to eat. Our hairy teacher lives there.”

The town was run down, poor with that kind of generalized poverty that is the price of a few people's wealth. The road led between houses with no doors. Obviously this was a land that was poor and incapable of cleanliness. Instead of hurrying past such a spectacle, Sudhana slowed down, carefully scrutinizing this and that aspect of the place. Shubha-paramgama, although its name meant “that which has reached the opposite shore,” did not in the least resemble Nirvana. The ruler was appointed as monarch for life by the emperor of the neighboring kingdom of Jong-vaidurya, and one man had been reigning for the last forty years. Everything worth having had been carted off to the capital city of Jong-vaidurya, be it girls, sheep, or fruit.

Shortly before Sudhana's visit there had been a large-scale revolt. A band of poor people had stormed into the royal palace, where they had all been slaughtered. That day, the number of those “not stirring a leg though it's daybreak” was at least five hundred.

Sudhana was immensely hungry, as was only right in such a place. He took out and devoured a handful of the dried mango flour he had brought with him. He arrived at the shack at the far end of the town. Beside the shack rose a tall tree virtually devoid of branches, enjoying its loftiness.

“Any one at home? Any one at home?” He heard no reply. He entered briskly, for there was no door. Obviously the house had not been empty long; there was no dust on the floor, there were no spiders' webs dangling along the walls. For no particular reason, Sudhana sighed.

He murmured to himself: “This would be a good place to spend the rest of my life. It's good enough to keep out the rain and wind in the monsoon season. Good enough to ward off epidemics during the rains. Good enough for me to grow old in, like other grown-ups.”

Sudhana saw that this house had no dignity in the eyes of people, which was not to say he despised it; on the contrary, it convinced him that this would be a good place for him to be, better than any impressive palace. He made himself at home, stretching out on the floor. There was not much dust. During his night journey he had hardly been able to sleep, and he soon fell asleep. He stretched out his legs and arms. He did not turn onto his right side in proper ascetic style, he looked just like any urchin. His sleep was a form of self-abandonment. On account of the occasional movements of his mouth, he seemed to be playing all alone.

It might be said that sleep is the death separating two lives. Awakening is a rebirth. Then perhaps the sum total of our constant repetition of such deaths and rebirths day by day is what leads us to leave this world for ever. If we try to see sleep, or death, as part of life's samsara (rotation), they can be considered as ports or moments of rest. Each separate rotation of samsara shows us that with the endless cycles of samsara there is no end to anything in this world.

“What sluggard's come crawling in here? Get up! Get up!” At the same time as the voice roared out, Sudhana felt a kick. He opened his eyes, without any great sense of surprise. The hermit Veshthila was staring down at him, the lower part of his face completely covered by a thick black beard. A smile spread over his savage-looking face.

“Who the heck are you?”

“Hermit, sir, you know very well who I am, so why ask?”

“Ha, what a chap! I took you for a kid playing on the ground and you're a kid playing in the heavens.” He clicked his tongue in wonder. Sudhana jumped up, then knelt at the hairy hermit's feet in token of respect.

“I have come to learn the way of enlightenment, the deeds that a bodhisattva should perform. I came because I heard that your holiness teaches the great works of enlightening as profusely as your beard.”

“Ah ha, you brat. Now you're awake, out you go and have a good piss, then come back. Bodhisattva, Mahasattva, what's it matter? We'll lie here for a time, then you can eat until your stomach's so full it booms like a drum.”

Sudhana was astounded, most of all perhaps by the way the hermit had known that his bladder was bursting. Of course, it was normal for people to piss right after waking up from sleep. But the hermit's words had seemed to indicate a deeper power of insight as well. As he went out to relieve himself in a field not far from the shack, his thoughts went back to earlier childhood days, precocious youth though he still was. It was as if the land of Shubha-paramgama had the invisible power to take people back into the past. Wisdom takes people back to their childhood.

“Brat, this hairy Veshthila has one thing he's proud of. What? The fact that he's reached vimukti (liberation from the cycles of life and death). Ha ha ha. But the name I've taken to mark my emancipation is “Not-entering-Nirvana.” Rather cumbersome, I fear. Not dying, not entering Nirvana is the name of my liberation, and its very essence.

“Listen to what I mean, idiot. There is no final entering of Nirvana for a Buddha or all the Buddhas of the world. They only make a show of going into Nirvana, in order to help living creatures live better lives. Real Buddha nature is a matter of not having any such thought as “a Buddha has entered Nirvana”, or “a Buddha is now entering Nirvana”, or “a Buddha will later enter Nirvana”. Every single thought of mine reveals the works of the Buddhas of all the worlds. Have you properly understood my boast?”

“What level have your thoughts, your samadhi (concentration) attained?” Suhana asked.

“That prickly artichoke of a question is a flint striking fire, I reckon. When I attain vacuity at the heart of thought, when nothingness weeps at the heart of samadhi, where all worlds and all things are forgotten, when that moment grows deeper in a stillness where all sounds have fallen asleep, at moments like that it has been possible for me to see the many Buddhas of this world being born, one by one. I have seen the ancient Buddhas Kashyapa, Kanakamuni, Krakuchchanda, Visvabhu, Shikhin, Vipashyin, Tishya, Pushya, Yashottara, and Padmottara, and besides them, in a single moment, I have seen one hundred Buddhas, one thousand Buddhas, one hundred thousand, one hundred million, a billion, a trillion, a quadrillion, a quintillion, more, far more, as many Buddhas as there are motes of dust in the world. And not only that. But that's enough chattering for today, let's go out. Once you've seen this country, other countries have nothing to show. In this country the entire human situation is completely recapitulated. Suffering, and poverty, and ignorance. So what's the use of seeing all those Buddhas?”

“But don't many more Buddhas need to come into being in such a place?”

Veshthila was delighted by Sudhana's bright questioning. “How right you are. You have a real right to be here. You are good, and good you are. You are like an oasis after a desert crossing.”

Veshthila the hermit sang alone, his heart swaying.

Where the sea secretly ends, it knows a river's touch; ah, the touch of waters salt and fresh!

Beyond that water, a mountain rises. What beauty in Mount Potalaka's buried treasures! In that Mount a holy creature lives amidst flowing waters, udumbara trees and crab

apples, all the beauty of this world.

Beauty! Dancing layer on layer of beauty. That holy one is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Cross the sea and visit him. Ask him about merit, the greatest merit. He will instruct you, ah, all night long like the waves, like the bright sunset shining over the waves. He will instruct you like the bright full moon shining over the waves on a moonlit night.

Compared to him, I am less than a cesspool.

The song contained the route that Sudhana was to follow. Veshthila could no longer restrain within his power the little pilgrim ever advancing in his quest for truth.

The hairy hermit and Sudhana left the shack and went wandering through the city's back alleys. Everywhere they went, the king's palace, all of gold, could be seen rising in dazzling splendor. Yet the whole place was like the home of death. There were no people walking through the streets. Every street and road in the kingdom could be monitored from the watchtowers of the palace, and nobody was allowed to move around without permission. Naturally the palace was already informed that Sudhana had walked down to the shack. As they were passing in front of a house in a back lane two soldiers from the king's palace guard came hurrying up.

“We can't have people just roaming around this country at will. Go home. As for you, hairy fellow, you being some kind of Buddha or wild dog, you're all the time roving around wagging your head and raving, chattering away then begging, or talking nonsense to kid pilgrims like this, you're the worst good-for-nothing in the whole of Shubha-paramgama. Get home with you. Get home.”

For once the old hermit, who was all the time guffawing and putting on fearsome airs, showed signs of respect. “Let's be off.” As soon as Veshthila was well clear of the soldiers, he burst out laughing again. “I wanted to go the gate that you came into the city by, but I can't. Such is life. There are children waiting for me there, it's the only place where children can gather. Those children are my pupils. They're orphans. They live in the city orphanage. I go there once a day. I collect food and clothing, that I give to those kids. Then I teach them this world's basic principles out in the fields; they're clever enough to grasp what I say.”

They returned to the shack, sat down on the floor and stretched out their legs. The hairy hermit went and fetched two ears of boiled maize. He sniffed them. They were a bit stale but still edible. Sudhana greedily devoured his. The long day was drawing to a close. A few carrion crows were flying through the red twilight glow. The hermit spoke, apparently to himself.

“I really used to be able to see lots of Buddhas. This world is so full of Buddhas, there's not one empty spot. And there's not a single place where there isn't a bodhisattva offering itself for living creatures. This world is sacred. There is nowhere that isn't Buddha. Nowhere left to spit, nowhere to piss. I came to see that here in Shubha-paramgama the lepers, even the wicked king, even the king's soldiers, are all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. When I'm out in the field pissing and shitting, I see Buddhas there too.”

“So why don't they do any good to the world?”

“That is something you will have to find out for yourself.”

“The lot of this world's living creatures is so painful; until I discover what to do. . .”

“This world's suffering and poverty, sickness, exploitation, and oppression do not disappear so readily. Yet the karma of those responsible for them has its own limitations. Whenever someone believes that they are disappearing, the power to make them disappear comes welling up.”

“Hermit master, I am not making these long journeys just for myself. I am travelling for the good of all those I meet and all those I do not meet. Therefore the strength that allows me not to give up comes springing up.”

“Good for you. This world's Buddhas are just the same. I have seen all the Buddhas,

from the first to the last. I have been enabled to see everything, from the first setting out of a *bodhi* (awakening) heart, the planting of bodhi roots, the acquisition of assiduity and supernatural gifts, the establishing and fulfilling of the Great Vow, the entry into the place occupied by bodhisattvas. . . then once become a Buddha, the world purified and glorified with and for the sake of all living creatures. . . finally exploring all the unlimited means of promulgation in order to bring living creatures closer to Buddhahood. I remember all that they did. Only. . .”

“Only. . .”

“Only I have done nothing myself, except open the liberation of not-entering-Nirvana. The liberation of all living creatures in the cosmos, not just of myself, has not been granted to me. Go south. Like I told you in the song, go to Avalokiteshvara in Mount Potalaka.”

Following Veshthila's advice, he decided in future to journey by night to avoid at least a little of the daytime heat. He stayed there one more day and set out the next evening. Inwardly he swore to come back some time in the future to do something for these people so sunk in ignorance they scarcely knew they were alive. That was something that Veshthila the hermit equally hoped for. It was clear that Sudhana would have to return and promulgate truth in all those places in which he had found it.

To the south-west, beyond prairies and marshes, lay the sea of Indra. Once across that sea, he would have to follow the banks of the river he found there. Sudhana was always beginning again.

35. The song of Avalokiteshvara

Mount Potalaka, in the southern Indian realm of Marigukta, is not so much a mountain, more a towering world. Around it, a whole community of thickly clustered towns and villages had grown up. Sudhana arrived at an ancient village on the mountain's southern flank, surrounded by huge trees of vast girth and great age. Their shade bestowed a religious aura on the place. It was not only those trees. In the village there were quite a number of people aged ninety and more. He heard from the slaves that the villagers were so old that when a child was born there, its face at once took on adult features. They likewise claimed that no newborn baby was ever heard crying there.

“Suppose I decided to become an old man here in this village? But what am I saying? I'm not going to grow old here. I'm on my way to meet the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.”

He asked an old slave in the village where Avalokiteshvara could be found, who replied that he was to be found a little farther to the west. He asked again in the next village. They replied that he should go just a little farther. That “little farther” proved to be a whole day's journey. As a result, he had a whole day in which to prepare to meet Avalokiteshvara.

Suddenly, he felt thirsty. His thirst brought him a sound of water. It came from a stream flowing through a ravine in one easy portion of the mountain. Pushing through the brushwood, he drank a few gulps of water. He would have liked to have drunk more but a traveller must never fill his stomach with water.

A shadow was floating on the rippling stream. He turned and looked up. No need to ask, the person standing there must surely be the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. He was not alone. Clustered behind him was a tangled mob of many other bodhisattvas. Sudhana had never imagined there could be such a gathering of bodhisattvas beside a stream like this. He rejoiced, and joined his hands in greeting. The scene, with the little pilgrim joining his hands and bowing low, was like an ancient picture painted on the wall of a cave by an artist from beside the Indus.

“Welcome.”

“My name is Sudhana.”

“Last night in a dream a hermit from the north came and told me your name. So you are Sudhana.”

Sudhana felt even happier. He neither asked nor demanded anything from the bodhisattva. The shawl over Avalokiteshvara's shoulders was of simple woven cloth.

“I am a flower, you are a flower in bud. Welcome.”

One of the triads, groups of three Buddhas found in traditional Buddhist iconography, represents the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara standing at the left side of the seated Amitabha, while the bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta stands at his right. Avalokiteshvara is an incarnation of the compassionate love that delivers all creatures from suffering. If the bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta stamps his foot once, the entire Buddha cosmos trembles, but when Avalokiteshvara reveals himself to living creatures, he does so in thirty-three different forms, adjusted to the ability of each one. By the multiple forms of his various incarnations, he indicates that light, sound, smell, taste, and each phenomenon, are all sources of bodhisattva enlightenment. With his thousand hands and thousand eyes, there is no place in this world that he cannot touch and see; in one head he has eleven faces, so that he can perceive at the same time the world in all six directions--above and below, before and after, left and right. Such is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

The bodhisattva form that Sudhana encountered was his most essential form, that known as the “Sacred Avalokiteshvara”. He is at the same time present in the far away Western Paradise and in this world. He is also a poet singing in the vast limitless regions of southern India. On encountering the bodhisattva, Sudhana felt poetry welling up within his heart; he

became a poet.

*Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara!
Cloud of truth,
light of all virtues,
root of all strength,
torch of all wisdom,
gathering of all wisdom,
this world's fullest feast. . .*

Sudhana praised the bodhisattva in his heart with this poem, and at once the bodhisattva responded in similar praise.

“Your great vow and compassionate heart are so firmly established, you are like the diamonds deep inside Mount Potolaka.”

Sudhana spoke: “Holy bodhisattva, how can a bodhisattva achieve enlightening works and advance along enlightening ways?”

A cloud was wrapped round one of the bodhisattva's hands. With that hand he touched the crown of Sudhana's head. The boundaries between reality and unreality dissolved.

“I abolish people's fears. I stand at the left hand of Amitabha in that world beyond, to ensure that no fear remains in the essential consciousness of creatures in their flight from this world to the world beyond. Equally, for all this world's creatures I banish fear in terrible situations, banish fear from extreme situations, banish fear of death, fear of wicked kings and powerful lords, I likewise banish fear of poverty, fear of sickness, fear of shame and disgrace, of idleness and darkness. In addition, I banish fear of the way things change and are changing, lovers' fears of parting, fear of encountering an enemy, fear that makes heart and body tense, all the fear felt as anxiety and care, the fear of not having what one longs to have, and the fear of wandering in bad places: I banish them all.”

As he heard these words, Sudhana's whole body was filled with new strength. His lips longed to repeat the words he had just heard from the bodhisattva. Then the bodhisattva began to recite a poem in a serene voice. It was a voice that revived the weary soul:

*You have reached this place, son of the wind, child whose heart and body are unclad.
You are circling around me. I am ever in this mountain. If I am not Utter Compassion I am not
who I am.*

*Ah, lovely child pilgrim. I am in this mountain, in its diamond caverns, my body empty
yet full of every kind of pearls. I am in this mountain by my freedom in detachment, sitting on
a lotus-flower throne.*

*Hosts of heavenly gods, the dragon god, Asura demon, the ghosts of Chin and Garura
and Najol, those kith and kin keep me company. I tell them of my truth and wisdom concerning
compassion, of my fear-banishing truth.*

*You, young pilgrim, breath of wind, have come all this way to meet me in order to float
on the ocean of virtue by your exalted heart, by your high mind, in order to float on the ocean
of virtue like a sailing ship, by your heart now prostrate at my feet.*

*To learn enlightening deeds from me, to gain the enlightening deeds of the northern
bodhisattva Samantabhadra, you never weary in distant journeys. I am duly bound to learn
from you the practice of pure, deep, intrepid compassion.*

*Look, what seems a net of light, light spreading far, broad, broader, spreading wide,
spreading wide as the void: that wide-spreading my power bestows. Blessings, a hundredfold,
at once majestically adorn this world.*

You have come this far, breath of wind, you have come here with your heart profound. I touch your brow and at once, like you, like a long-travelling pilgrim, I long to throw open wide for you the gateways of liberation. You must perceive how we two are together here in the midst of truth.

Tell me, where can a doorway be a doorway? The doorway too is merely a cloud. Majestic cloud, regard with pity all living things. Vast cloud, open wide.

Having completed every vow, I long to become one with every human sorrow, to sacrifice myself for love. I undergo endless pain and distress, yet whoever calls my name is delivered of all pain.

Listen, pilgrim child. In prison or fettered, in chains, shackled, face to face with an enemy, those who invoke my name will find their sufferings vanish, vanish like the wind.

Listen, all who are condemned to die. When the executioner wields his sword, and your soul is about to leave the body, if you invoke my name the sword will melt and turn into water.

When a close friend or neighbor suddenly becomes your foe and turns against you, invoke my name. Then all bitterness melts and on river banks flowers bloom.

If any of my children, falling from cliffs along dangerous paths, invoke my name in the midst of the void, not a hair of their head will be hurt.

Little pilgrim child, breath of wind, when life in this world is ended, once born into the Pure Land Paradise, if you want to meet masters from many worlds, if you want to move through all the worlds, if you want to move without constraint, invoke my name. Invoke my name a single time, pilgrim attaining perfection of desire. No matter where my name is invoked, I will come hastening. Coming before the people there, I will embrace them. I will stay with them. They will come to my world and be born there. Becoming bodhisattvas with me, they will go everywhere doing good.

As for you, my child, Sudhana, breath of wind, I was like you in former times long ago. In order to help and save all living creatures in every world under three thousand skies, I formulated great vows and daily fulfilled them.

Sudhana, the task of moving through all the worlds in ten directions, attending on many masters, is your task.

Listen with ears of wisdom, behold with eyes and body full of compassion, and if this task brings you joy, you are already a son of truth, truth's little pilgrim, Sudhana, Sudhana, little breath of truth's own wind.

The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara finished his poem and remained silent for a while, then beckoned Sudhana to come nearer. Now he began to talk quietly, like a father or grandfather.

“As I was singing, you received all my teaching. I think there is no one as wise as you. I have entered the gates of bodhisattva liberation but could not pass beyond the works of a bodhisattva Mahasattva. How can I for ever live in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha? After all, I came from other places and only very late came rushing into the Buddha's teachings. How can I always be practicing Buddha works?”

Sudhana's heart was full of joy after hearing the bodhisattva's poem. His few words, his one poem, were rich with thousands of kinds of actions and virtues. Sudhana was already

very close to being such a bodhisattva. He rose, then knelt with his right knee on the ground and bowed to touch the bodhisattva's feet. Now it was his turn to address a poem to the bodhisattva. The poem came bursting from inside him, quite spontaneously.

*Beings of this world, the six worlds,
the heavens too, all together,
the demon Asuras, the host of bodhisattva Mahasattvas,
all together, join in praise, give praise and say:
"Holy Buddha's wisdom is vaster than the ocean."*

*Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master,
succoring all living creatures everywhere equally,
before you, all suffering is mere dew.
You can carry the earth away.
You can dry up the seas.
You can break down great mountains
and spread out plains.*

*Oh, holy, compassionate bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.
How with this worthless infant heart
shall I ever praise enough
such great wisdom and such virtue?*

*Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master.
Joining with all who have been brought to understanding,
I will praise your exalted majesty.
With all my heart I serve and I revere you.*

*When Mahabrahman was in his heavenly realm,
Mahabrahman's light set fire to his whole heaven.
Now your essential nature rises in full splendor
in the midst of this world's living creatures.*

*Face like the full moon rising,
appearance like the rainbow after rain,
like Mount Sumeru soaring,
like the morning sun rising above the southern sea,
dazzling joy of bodhisattva being,
of deer running in meadows in the Dekkan highlands,
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master,
like campaka and golden flowers growing together,
like white pearls strung on a necklace,
you are a flower, a flower.*

*In union with you
how shall we not obtain incomparable bodies?
how should the whole world not hear
the sound of Buddhas and bodhisattvas breathing?
Others, coming after me,
have already entered truth
so I have this task of praise.*

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, my master.

The moment Sudhana's poem ended, the bodhisattva leaped up joyfully and caught Sudhana's light body in his arms. The bodhisattva was embracing one small boy, but in embracing that one little pilgrim, he was embracing the whole world. The bodhisattva was one mass of joy. His joy was a heaven born of earth. If sorrow is the tears of earth born in heaven, that joy is the bliss of the bodhisattva who loves all creatures. In which case, sorrow is the pain of the bodhisattva who loves all creatures. The bodhisattva's joy is at the same time his sorrow. Such is compassion.

After spending a while strolling amidst the mountain's glorious flowers, with the bees and butterflies drawn to those flowers, they were making their way back to the bodhisattva's lotus-shaped throne when suddenly the mountain shook with what seemed an earthquake.

"He's coming!" the bodhisattva said, gazing up into the indigo-colored sky.

"The bodhisattva Ananyagamin must be on his way. He always arrives like this when he comes."

Coming to this world from the empty reaches of space to the east, the bodhisattva touched the earth, landing with one toe on the loftiest summit of Mount Cakravada. The world was utterly transformed and made new by his enlightening power. The power of the bodhisattva Ananyagamin has the power to put to flight the six worlds' trillion aeons of sufferings and seeds of pain. The bodhisattva of the new world in the eastern reaches of space had arrived. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara addressed Sudhana: "Did you see Ananyagamin the bodhisattva come into this world?"

"Yes, I saw him.

"Now you must go to that holy bodhisattva. I am the lowest person in this world. You must go and assist the bodhisattva, learning more of the deeds bringing enlightening."

"I will follow what you say. When night falls, I will ask the starlight the way. I have no need to ask the way to Ananyagamin the bodhisattva of any person."

"Good. You are good. Sudhana, indeed." Sudhana perceived the bodhisattva's immense virtue; he had set aside all his majesty and with complete humility of heart put himself lower than all living creatures to serve them all.

Now Sudhana's way led him along a narrow grassy path at the foot of Mount Potalaka. At the point where that grassy track joined a highway, Ananyagamin the bodhisattva was waiting. If an enlightening being happens to be somewhere, it is not that they are living there; they are simply waiting for someone to arrive, just as in a big marketplace you will always find water ready to extinguish a fire waiting for a fire to break out.

"Teacher, teacher, I'm full of the food the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara has just given me. But still I'm looking for more. I have passed through innumerable previous lives of gluttony, and I've inherited their effects."

"Ah, you are most true, little pilgrim."

"Teacher, what world have you come from? From how far away. . . how long has it been since you were here before?"

Ananyagamin the bodhisattva spoke quietly, as if murmuring to himself: "Little pilgrim, you have already learned all there is to learn, you are fully fed. My words will make no difference. Yet saying just one word makes birds fly in the sky. Where did I come from and how long since I was last here? Those terms are foreign to me. The question is so deep that all this world's brahmans and monks together can never find the answer. None but a bodhisattva can know. I came here from a world in space to the east plentifully supplied with good things. But since one aeon is a speck of dust, and one speck of dust ten thousand aeons, how can anyone tell how long it is since I was here before? Even I don't know. Head south from here. There's one ancient city there, where Mahadeva, the lord of heaven, is waiting for you."

Sudhana had never been told that Ananyagamin the bodhisattva is often said to be

Avalokiteshvara's shadow. He had completely forgotten that Avalokiteshvara has a thousand hands and thirty three bodily forms. He nonetheless sensed that exactly the same perfume emanated from the bodhisattva of this world, Avalokiteshvara, and the bodhisattva from outer space, Ananyagamin.

Two masters, each from different worlds! But since the same perfume comes from both, the two masters must be one, after all. Fresh shoot of grain emerging, bearing two seedling leaves, the old life in that other world all done, now a new infant world has come into this. Bodhisattva coming to all living creatures for each and every creature, always new world! First beginning of a new world!

Sudhana did not at once set out southward towards the city of Dvaravati as Ananyagamin had told him. Instead he stayed there, since he had been travelling for so long. Sudhana let go of mind and body, dropping them to the ground.

“If I've not learned all the truth in this world from the masters I've met so far, I'll not learn it all from the masters I meet in the future, either. Let's have some fun. Let's have fun, playing in this water here. I'm going to enjoy myself.”

36. Cloud-net the giant

Sudhana had soon forgotten all about going to Dvaravati. The flocks of birds heading homeward disappeared into the glories of the setting sun, and after losing sight of them Sudhana fell into a dream, a long dream, long like a river flowing into the sea. It was less a dream than a world lasting one whole lifetime. In that world he was in turns an old man with white eyebrows, a woman of about forty walking around with a lotus blossom in her hand, and a youth on a bay horse galloping unrestrainedly. He was also a wild flower blossoming in the fields, fluttering in the breeze, then he turned into an insect in the undergrowth, that chirped day and night untiringly, until a sound of thunder frightened it, at which it turned into a wild dog running through meadows covered with dogwort.

At last he awoke from his dreams. To Sudhana, reality now felt unreal. Compared to the world of his dreams, reality was stale and flat, filled with tedium. He had forgotten all about his joy on meeting the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara or his delight on encountering Ananyagamin the bodhisattva. So naturally he had no reason to think of the city of Dvaravati down in the south that they had told him about. As he stared north and south, east and west, he knew the freedom of a child who cares not a jot for anywhere. Precisely, going anywhere meant the eternal standstill of going nowhere. But at the same time, such a standstill was the eternal motion of all journeying.

This time, even reality had turned into a new dream for Sudhana. This world had become a dream world, while the world he had dreamed about had changed into reality. The sun was shining, the clouds were gathering in towering masses as they followed the wind northwards. Now and then, lizards scurried away from under his feet. Far away, a village could be seen. As evening fell, the inevitable smoke of burning horse dung rose as supper was cooked.

This was a world after Sudhana's own heart. This was what he had learned. There was nothing more to be learned. Originally there were no teachers in the world! There were no fathers! No kings! No gods! No lords of the Three Worlds! Everything that exists was all the time changing randomly. Everything in the whole universe was complete impermanence. Movement and annihilation. So what was all this majestic universe, if not the music of the cosmos? Surely freedom from all obstacles was the means of getting free of one's self?

*Forth I go, clad in bodhisattva amour!
Then I strip off that armor,
become a gust of wind touching a blade of grass!
What bodhisattva laughter fills the road I follow
with my naked bodhisattva body,
devoid of any stain!
Bodhisattva wisdom! Great vow!
But then I make all those things
less than this world's briefest dream!
Forth I go, along the long road
with nowhere to rest,
all on my own, a child!*

As Sudhana's improvised song issued from his lips and rang in his ears, the trees around grew into a luxuriant forest. It was cool in the forest and finally he stopped perspiring. Thanks to the cool forest, Sudhana realized that he had a faculty of memory. In the midst of his memories the thought of the city of Dvaravati in the south, where he was meant to be headed, came rising like a daytime moon. With that memory, Sudhana was restored to full humanity again.

The road went on, winding along the edge of the forest, and soon he reached a sizeable

village. The people living there were of larger-than-usual height, and little Sudhana felt as if he had returned to an earlier period of his childhood. He asked an elderly woman if this was not by any chance the town of Dvaravati. She promptly enfolded him in her arms and swept him up into the air.

“Oh you marvelous child, seeking truth from Mahadeva in Dvaravati city. What a blessing that you should pass our village. Everyone here knows Dvaravati city; why, even the owls know it. Come and rest in our house for a while before you go on. Come along.”

Sudhana found himself borne willy-nilly to her house. It was more like a palace than a house. The shade cast by trees kept off the sunlight. He accepted a cup of honeyed water. Despite the old clothes she wore, that woman was in fact immensely wealthy.

“Little sage, what do you think of this house? It's too big, isn't it? I bought it after becoming rich by selling water and grain in times of drought. They say that this world's wealth is just a fine name for theft, though I gained my wealth by my own efforts. But I can't take it with me; I'll have to leave it all behind when I die. So before I go, I want to make this house serve truth. Of course, truth is not something owned by one person, everybody has it; therefore I have decided to make someone the owner of this house who shares the title of truth with everybody. I thought I might offer it to the great master Cloud-Net Mahadeva whom you're on your way to visit, but he already owns the heavens, and far larger houses, forests, and fields, so I want to give it to some other sage. If you come back here one day, I would like to give you this house and all my fortune; what do you say?”

Sudhana made no reply. She went on talking in gasps.

“There are no worse shackles in this world than the fact of owning things, are there? That's why ridding yourself of all possessions is the first step towards enlightenment, isn't it? But getting rid of something can't be done by throwing it away, it has to be offered to someone, doesn't it? But surely it's right to say that not possessing things in this world does not mean throwing them away or offering them to another individual; it means owning them in common. That's right, surely. Just as people and animals and all of nature possess the sunlight together. . . .”

The woman went on and on talking, apparently not expecting any reply and not even aware that she was merely repeating what she had already said. It was a very one-sided conversation. In the end, the rich woman's hospitality was limited to that one cup of honeyed water, for Sudhana suddenly rose from his chair.

“Dvaravati city is only half a day's journey away, you can soon get there. Take the left-hand road at the foot of the nine-hundred year old tree at the entrance to the village. It leads straight to the North Gate of Dvaravati city. Farewell, little pilgrim.”

Behind the woman's many words lingered a silence deep like that in a well; Sudhana bowed in greeting, paying respect to that hidden silence, then turned to leave.

“Don't be surprised by Mahadeva's size. Being physically big is nothing.”

Sudhana hated rushing, so he only reached the northern outskirts of Dvaravati city the next morning, at the end of a leisurely night's journey. Although the North Gate was not the main entrance to the city, it was wide enough to admit one hundred people at a time with room to spare. A pure breeze was blowing out through it. Following the directions of the guards, Sudhana made his way towards an elevated area inside the city walls. The gigantic figure of Mahadeva could be seen sitting there from far away. Sudhana headed straight toward him. It was not so much a matter of hurrying; rather it was as if Mahadeva had such a firm hold on him that he could not even struggle. The sun was high in the sky; heaven and earth stood brow to brow.

The very little child bowed to the immense foot of the towering spirit of the heavens, Mahadeva, then joined his hands in respectful greeting: “Sacred Mahadeva, come down from heaven to fill the world. I set my heart on attaining perfect enlightenment when I was still at

my mother's breast. Yet still I have not been able to come to knowledge of enlightening ways, virtues, and works. Before I set out on my long journey, I was told that you would readily instruct me, and therefore I have come seeking you, treading the ground with my little feet.”

Before Sudhana had reached the end of his greeting, the spirit abandoned the serious manner with which he had been delivering a thundering sermon to a group of disciples, sprang to his feet, opened his four hands, seized four handfuls of sea water, and washed his face with them. For a moment, a fragment of the sea was alive in each hand with waves that had been breaking in the ocean, before they smashed against his face. Sudhana had been told that physically big things are nothing, but now he felt afraid. Humans were quite different from this spirit of heaven. It was certainly true that Mahadeva, who had come down from heaven to take up residence in this world, was different from ordinary human beings. He only had to grab hold of this earthly world with his four hands and nothing would remain. It was as though a spirit left over from the age of the dinosaurs had come wandering into the human world.

Sudhana was even more astonished to hear issuing from Mahadeva's lips an extremely gentle, affectionate voice. It was more like a song than speech.

Resplendent child! Resplendent eyes! Resplendent life! Why, you are a son of light! I can learn no darkness from you. I am Mahadeva, spirit of heaven, my name is Cloud-net by reason of my Cloud-net liberation, so speak my name aloud.

Resplendent child, today, you indeed are my joy, with your truth-seeking journey through endless months and distant lands. Most exalted pilgrim. Amidst all the flowers, you are the rarest. You are like the morning sun, like the stars along evening roads. Ah, someone like you is always travelling through this world's places of piety. You are my joy today, my joy.

The giant Mahadeva, Cloud-net, filled his heart to the brim with joy, then taking what remained, he filled the hearts of Sudhana and his disciples with his giant's measure of joy. He began to tell Sudhana about Cloud-net liberation. He started by showing how every aspect of reality is part of a world of extraordinary illusion.

The city of Dvaravati was full of all kinds of flowers, all kinds of perfumes, all kinds of flying banners, all kinds of gorgeous clothing, all kinds of lovely singing, and a hundred thousand million trillion lovely girls. The giant Mahadeva spoke.

“Resplendent child, you are the purest person in the whole world. All the things I have shown you are the breath of the perfumed ocean of the Lotus Paradise. Only by offering that breath to others can a Buddha's virtue become infinite. Just as I have given this breath to you, so you too, later, must distribute it to all living creatures.

“The holiest of all deeds is the work of bestowing on others. Let your bestowing be unconscious, practice the selflessness that communicates selflessness to selflessness. This world's joy in having is not worth one hundred thousand million trillionth part of the joy of giving.

“Vigilance, like giving, is a holy work. This world is full of desires. In this world of desire, maggots feast on dung, pigs in summer smear themselves with their shit, drunkards have to be tied up, thieves steal people's belongings, criminals are handed over to the executioner, the blind lead the blind and both fall into a pit, boats put out to sea and encounter storms. In this world where people fall into desire and cannot escape, the fragrance of the way of the Precepts is identical with the fragrance of the flowers.

“I cannot help loving all this world's living creatures with their ways of desire. That is why I employ different enlightening expedients. For example, first I reveal myself to a man in a girl's beautiful body, I arrange things so that he grows interested in her and begins to feel lust, whereupon I show him that same girl dying, her body rotting, being devoured by birds and wild animals, stinking so badly that if he once goes close the stench clings to him for three or four years, no matter how often he washes.

“After that I show him the same girl in the shape of a fearsome ghost, her red hair covering a body black as storm clouds, her belly drooping, her teeth sticking upwards, human skulls for ornaments, her hands wielding sharp knives, cursing and swearing, shouting all kinds of slander; seeing her in that shape, the man will never again be able to love another beautiful woman. It is at that precise moment that I show him the way of liberation.”

His four hands once again seized water from the four oceans, with which the great god washed not only his own face, but Sudhana's and his disciples' faces too. It was not only Sudhana's face; his whole body was wet, as if he had been fully immersed. The giant spoke: “You have all received my water and been washed.”

Friends of mine, even heavenly spirits, having lived without the Precepts, went to hell. The whore Marunga learned the Precepts and went to heaven. The lowly members of north India's Shakya tribe went to heaven by the Precepts while brahmans rejected the Precepts and went to hell. King Kali turned into an animal, his sons too all became wild animals, then went to hell.

The Precepts are like parents, like a torch, like a great boat on a stormy sea. Praiseworthy indeed, the Precepts for this world of desire, a way of virtue.

The spirit's huge finger touched Sudhana's head. “There. Now you can speak my words.” He spoke in a kind of whisper. Large body and little body had lost their significance, Mahadeva and Sudhana were united. Now Sudhana found himself charged with the task of preaching Cloud-net liberation. Cloud-net now listened while Sudhana began to preach, their roles reversed:

Heavenly spirit. There are so many bodhisattvas in this world that every joint of every living creature's bones is in receipt of boundless compassion. Yet since that was still not enough, you yourself came down, spirit of the heavens above.

Now one little travelling child will speak, having received Mahadeva's teaching. Listen now ... Listen ... Listen with ears of earth, not heaven's ears, not heaven's cloud-net; listen with ears caught in the net of the earth. Enlightening virtue has been sown in this world's one small child.

The proud may rave, but soon, falling on their knees, they will surrender to superior powers. Shown sights of blood being drunk, flesh devoured, they will fall to their knees. The lightning sword drops on the fools, the folly of all that host will be destroyed with sky-rending fury.

How could it stop there? All deeds of evil will be brought to an end like a double rainbow shining after rain, at the entry into heaven of all the works of goodness.

Hearing Sudhana sing thus, the enormous spirit knelt down and turned into a vast mountain range. The mountain spoke: “Now the reason for my descent into this world of pain has been abolished. Little sage, meeting you has given me the strength to return to the heavens. Thanks, many thanks.”

Weeping, Sudhana interrupted him: “That cannot be, great spirit of heaven. Giant Cloud-net Mahadeva, master. If you came down to this world with such an enormous body, that was not to show off your size, but to manifest clearly the vastness of your task and teaching. . . Master, in encountering you I am not of this one world, but of five hundred different worlds. With most earnest devotion I embrace your teaching.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“I embrace your teaching three times over.”

Resplendent child, my light, light of the pure essence of all, now the meaning of our meeting is fulfilled. I who merely obtained at length Cloud-net liberation, I who merely managed to snap off a single branch, how should I attain the immensities of virtue held by the hosts of great enlightening there beyond the seas?

That power with which the heavenly lord Sakrodevendra smote to pieces the myriad demons of evil desire -- power like the ocean, capable of extinguishing all the fires in every single living creature -- power snuffing out all the flames of lust endlessly burning in all living creatures -- power like storms, abolishing all the attachments present in every living creature -- how could I aspire to possess such sacred enlightening powers?

Resplendent enlightening child, with bright eyes of enlightenment, you should go to the grove of bodhi trees in the land of Magadha in Jambudvipa. There, you can meet the earth spirit of the place, the noble Sthavara. While I am of heaven, she is of earth, which means she has deeper virtues.

Sudhana was profoundly impressed by the sincerity with which Mahadeva the heavenly spirit, the Cloud-net giant, finally took the lowest place, after appearing so majestic and solemn. Out of all the immense quantity of truth contained in what he had said and not said, Sudhana realized that a few words, a song, were lodged in his heart like a final bequest.

Perfumes of candana, kunkuman, agila, and musk are the finest perfumes known on earth, yet what comparison can there be between them and the actions and virtues found in bodhisattvas' love for every living creature? Enlightening bodhisattva fragrance, enlightening bodhisattva fragrance, enlightening bodhisattva fragrance. . . not only north, south, east, west, above, below, but in the very center too, bodhisattvas' enlightening fragrance! The whole Buddha cosmos, all full of enlightening bodhisattvahood, until there is not so much as a space for the seed of a single living being.

Sudhana knelt before the great spirit Mahadeva and bowed to the ground three times; then rising to his feet, he looked up for one final gaze, only to find that there was no trace of him anywhere. Not a single one of his disciples was left, either, Dvaravati city was completely deserted. The leaves on the trees were turning and dancing to the sound of the wind, that was all. Sudhana longed to reach the earth's underground heart. That was where the noble Sthavara must live. He was shouting in his heart: "I must go, I must go, deep into the earth's darkness."

Sudhana was now on his way to the southern regions of Magadha, a country composed of areas inhabited by ten separate peoples, speaking different languages. Sudhana's goal was the place of enlightening that lay there. On arrival, Sudhana would have to find the hidden tunnel leading down to the underground world. His wisdom had already come to a firm conviction as to the whereabouts of the tunnel. His pace was brisk.

After he had left, he could not see any sign of Dvaravati city when he looked back. There was nothing to be seen but a floating mass of low white clouds. Once more, Sudhana was a pilgrim on the road. With every step he was becoming an adult and a bodhisattva, but his journey, in which he would preserve for ever his childlike purity of heart, stretched on to the ends of this world's heavens and earth. Sudhana was not a person but a journey. A pilgrimage.

37. The Place of Enlightenment

Sudhana's path had previously led ever farther southward but now it turned toward the northeast, where the land of Magadha lay. Crowds of people were coming and going along the road; carts left deep ruts in the water-softened ground as they passed. One skinny merchant travelling alone kindly insisted that Sudhana should ride with him. He refused at first but finally yielded to the merchant's insistence that he must rest his feet sometimes on such a long journey. A mass of tropical flies were swarming over the horse's back, but it never paused in its regular steady pace.

He learned that the merchant's son, who did business just outside the city walls, was a believer in the Buddha. The merchant was very proud of having such a son. He was equally boastful about the words of the Buddha that he had heard from his son, and he communicated them to Sudhana. Perhaps because he wanted other passers-by to hear what he was saying, he spoke very loudly. Gradually, though, his voice grew smaller, while his attitude grew increasingly reverent. He had begun by boasting about his son, but now he was talking about truth.

"You're very young, compared to my son. I bet you're no good at business. Yet there's something about you, something that charms even an old fellow like me."

By this time he seemed completely humble in his attitude toward Sudhana. He recalled how the Buddha had told his disciples that he was "your friend." Suddenly he remarked to Sudhana, happy as a little child, that they were walking along like two close friends. Sudhana was happy too: Friends! Friends of truth!

The merchant was perfectly sincere in considering Sudhana as his friend. Seeing that, Sudhana began to feel affection for him, too. Between the two, the equal affection that exists between friends had begun to grow, just as the Buddha had said to his disciples, "I am your friend; since you have accepted me as your close friend. . . this mortal body can throw off death."

The social morality of the first band of Buddhist believers along the Ganges, who had no Absolute Being in their creed, could be summed up as friendship: the fellowship, in Magadha and throughout the cosmos, between the Buddha and all living creatures, teacher and disciples. Therefore Siddhartha shook his head when his disciple Ananda said that being together with a good friend was contrary to the demands of the Way, and corrected him: "Ananda, you are wrong. . . Having good friends and being with a good companion is all the sacred Way."

When the disciple Sariputra asked Siddhartha if having a friend was not conform to the whole sacred Way, he replied in admiration: "You are right, Sariputra; you are right, Sariputra, what you say is right. Yes, the whole of it." All living creatures in the whole Buddha cosmos constitute a universe that is in the act of passing from solitude to the fellowship of bodhisattva being.

Sudhana got down from the merchant's cart on the banks of a river from where the gates of Magadha could be seen far away on the other shore. He would have to cross by ferry. Each bade the other farewell with hands joined in greeting. The merchant's cart was already moving off into the distance.

The water was a tawny color; great clumps of grass were floating down. Yet although the river was filthy, quite a lot of people were sitting with both feet soaking in it. Time meant nothing to them, as it often does to people with nothing to do. Their hearts were praying to go flowing with the river, down to the distant sea, the sea being the great equalizer that abolishes all distinctions of class. Their lips were constantly murmuring, "Ahoma. Ahoma." One young man among them addressed the murmuring crowd. His words had the power to awaken the river bank's lethargic mood.

“I have been listening as I came. There are many rivers, with names such as Ganges, Yamuna, Azerbatti, Sarabu, Maharago, Puligoni, but once each river reaches the sea, it loses its name and is simply called the great ocean. In the same way, if the four castes of *ksatriya*, *brahman*, *vaysya*, and *sudra* come together, according to the sacred teachings and commandments, all four main castes and the innumerable subsidiary castes will vanish, the Buddha's world alone will remain and flourish. Let us send all our desires, fantasies, and defilements floating away with the stream. Let us make Magadha and the whole world here into Amitabha's own world, by a liberation like that given by the sea.”

Sudhana was so touched by these words that he began to sob. He wept for a long time. When his tears stopped, he recalled that he had intended to visit Sthvara, but now he felt convinced there was no reason for him to meet the spirit. The little pilgrim spent no more time lingering on the shores of that meaningful river. He leaped onto what was now the third ferry to come across.

How was it possible that such a filthy stream could be sacred for these people? Perhaps it was because the people who suffered most in life could recognize a message of salvation embodied in the river's very filth? The little pilgrim passed over the river in an ancient boat poled by a boatman so old he had lost eyebrows, like a leper.

The city he had previously seen far off to the northeast seemed no nearer now he had crossed the river. On and on he walked, and still it loomed far away. After a passing downpour the air was cool. Suddenly, the figure of the giant Cloud-net appeared to his imagination. “Have you forgotten the way? This is the wrong road,” the figure scolded him, then vanished again. Sudhana stopped in his tracks. He had unthinkingly taken the broadest path at a point where five roads met. He went back the way he had come.

A battalion of soldiers was stationed at the road junction and their presence had given rise to a temporary, untidy settlement, full of merchants and whores. Sudhana asked one tradesman about the earth spirit preaching in the shade of a grove of bodhi trees at Magadha. “What? Why do you want to know about such things? What are you doing, visiting earth spirits and things of that kind?” All he could get were mocking replies.

He noticed a quiet road unmarked by the wheels of any carts, hidden behind the crossroads checkpoint. Sudhana felt sure that was the road he had to take, yet there was almost no trace of human passage in that direction. After journeying on for nearly half a day, he arrived at a lonely grove of bodhi trees.

Here and there in the grove, a large number of ascetics, practitioners of contemplation and meditation, were sitting with crossed legs, plunged in their inner worlds. The grove was full of their deep, quiet breathing. At the sight of them, Sudhana was abruptly seized with an intense fatigue. He sank down on a soft spot at the foot of one of the trees, stretched out his legs, and instantly fell into a deep sleep, his first for a long time.

In his dreams, Sudhana seemed to see a host of earth spirits sitting here and there in the grove, in place of the ascetics he had observed before he fell asleep. The spirit sitting nearest to Sudhana seized hold of his clothing and said, “This is the light to which all living creatures will turn for help in the future. You are also light.” Then the spirit added, “You will have power to bring all living creatures' passions to rest in a cool place like this.” While Sudhana knew that he was dreaming, he could not wake up.

“You have already entered the gardens of truth, the grove of truth. This grove of bodhi trees is a Place of Enlightenment. You are worthy to gird your brow with the silk cloth of truth. You will dig deep in the mines of truth and distribute truth's jewels to all living creatures. Don't breathe out, now, hold your breath. Be still. Someone's coming.”

The little earth spirit, apparently growing frightened, composed itself into a pious attitude. A moment passed; the whole grove rang with a great crash as if it had been struck by a thunderbolt. Yet it was not a thunderbolt, nothing had changed anywhere. Sweat pearly on

Sudhana's palms. Suddenly every trace of shade and darkness vanished from the grove and it was filled with a bright light. Within that light all the earth spirits and their leader Sthavara appeared. The majestic goddess's voice rang out and made the grove resound. She was larger than the spirit of heaven Sudhana had just met.

“Behold. The bodhi grove Place of Enlightenment in Magadha is full of all the treasures of every world under the three thousand heavens. Look. Resplendent with a wealth of joy on account of this one child, the world ought to be moved to exultation. All places now are full of music. The world is all one beautiful song. Those in heaven, and the demons, too, beings not human and cows, elephants, lions, insects and snakes, all are rejoicing, entranced by the music. The hundreds, the thousands of rich veins of precious gems buried deep below the ground are bursting upward, beginning to dance, entranced by truth and music. Behold, rain is falling. Let the sweet-scented rain drench you. Its perfume is the breath of the most sacred being in this world, the words of its simplest child. Behold, this child who has come.”

All the earth spirits in the grove turned their eyes towards Sudhana, rejoicing. Sthavara continued to speak.

“You have done well, young pilgrim. You have sown seeds of good in this place, you have done well to come here; it is full of the jewels of truth produced by all your incarnations. Well done, indeed.”

Sthavara stamped once with her great foot on the ground where she stood. All the spirits stood mute in amazement as it split open to reveal a vast store of treasure. The goddess spoke. “Young pilgrim, full of light. All these treasures are the result of the good you have done. They are yours. Take them.”

But Sudhana calmly shook his head. “No. These may have been sown by me, yet it is right that the harvest should belong to all living creatures. In this world my only wealth is my body, by which I can travel in quest of truth. All I desire is the day when, by these treasures, all the world's poverty, evil, and discord will be changed into wealth, perfume, and song, that day and nothing more.”

Sudhana attended the earth spirits' midday meal. First they drew water from a spring deep in the forest, then they took roots of trees, washed them in the water, and distributed one to each to eat. Sweet and sour tastes mingled. Each one received a draught of water to drink. After their meal, all the earth spirits returned to their places, leaving their mistress Sthavara alone with Sudhana in the bodhi tree Place of Enlightenment. She breathed out deeply, a breath that seemed to be drawn from deep underground. Then she spoke.

“No one could ever overpower or defeat me. Because my great body was filled with the power by which I fulfill all living creatures' prayers, no matter where I lived or went, the task of granting all living creatures' supplications was always waiting for me. Before I became what I am now, I lived in a world where I pursued a bodhisattva exactly like I am now, begging her to grant my prayers. Among the gods, the bodhisattvas, the Buddhas, each without exception has at some time been demon, ghost, beast, and bug. Each Buddha has had to put off the karma that brings human beings to death; each bodhisattva has had to lose the memory of the violence of demonhood; every god has been bandit and beggar. The mother of the holiest bodhisattva was a woman of the streets. It was only in the midst of that kind of human life and existence that light could appear. You are that light. Now I will drop to the ground. I will snap like a dead branch from a tree.”

Gradually, Sudhana was beginning to see that the goddess Sthavara was a bodhisattva incarnating a sorrowful and gentle sense of motherhood. She was worthy to be lord over the earth spirits that governed the globe. Compassion emerges out of wildness, suggesting an ending.

“Young pilgrim. . . From the time of the Lotus Buddha many aeons ago, I lived like a pious shadow, ever following bodhisattvas with reverence and respect, in pursuit of a reward.

So a bodhisattva heart simply came to be reflected in my heart, bodhisattva sorrow and wisdom entered my heart, where they began to grieve and shine. While you. . . there was once an age, countless aeons ago, as many ages ago as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru, that age's name was the Solemn Age, the name of that age's world was Moon Pavilion World, the name of that world's presiding Buddha was the Green Jade Buddha. It was from that Buddha that I received recognition and entered the state of liberation. Since then, while as many ages have passed as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru, countless aeons have passed, continuing in this liberation, and all through this present age, I have encountered innumerable Buddhas, greeting them and serving them. As a result I went to live in the world of the earth spirits, dwelling amidst subterranean darkness, and earth, and rocks, and jewels, and the water that flows underground, and the creatures living in that cold water. Now for a moment of earthly time I have come out into the world, and am breathing, absorbing the light, welcoming the wind.

“There is no difference at all between me and any clump of grass you encounter along the road. Now you must cross this great country until you are completely exhausted. At that time you will arrive at a river brimming with water, the Ganges, frequented by more bearers and seekers of truth than any other river in the world. Once across the river, you come to the city of Kapila-vastu. It is a small town, its walls too are low in height. It has no moat surrounding it. If you arrange to arrive there by night, Vasanti, goddess of night, will welcome you. Go to her and hear from her all that I have not been able to tell you, about enlightening ways and enlightening works. You will stay in that place a long time. A few days of talking will not suffice.”

Following Sthavara's indications, Sudhana set out. He woke from his lengthy dream. This spot, where the good works of all his lives had been accumulated, seemed to him nothing more than a miserable roadside inn. He walked on along the forest path as it plunged deeper into the grove of bodhi trees, brushing against the ferns. There was no trace left of all those ascetics, not one of the earth spirits he had met in his dream remained, the grove was completely empty.

The forest ended and a grassy plain teeming with deadly snakes opened before him. Sudhana pulled out the shoes that he only wore in rough places, with lamb-skin laces, put them on and smeared the heels with a paste made from the fruit of weeds that snakes, worms, and reptiles find repulsive.

See, the way that long headed south now leads the traveller to the north. Turning his back on the bright Southern Cross he used to gaze at in times of hunger, turning his back on countless billions of ages, considering the past as so much wind, he marches on, following the enlightening path leading to countless billions of future ages.

After that first encounter with Manjushri he travelled on, meeting all kinds of teachers, but, ah, the faces of teachers still unmet: dew on grass-tips ... dew on grass-tips ... blue sky gleaming fragmentary between the clouds on a cloudy day.

The wind pressed against Sudhana's back. “Walk quickly,” the wind seemed to be saying, on your way to meet your love you should have the wings of the wind at your heels. If he washed his clothes in the grassland streams and put them on still damp, the wind would dry them in a flash. Sudhana had barely got half way across the grasslands when he was forced to his knees by a tremendous fatigue. There was not a scrap of shade; he lay gasping in the sunlight and was on the point of losing consciousness for good when a miracle occurred.

Out of the blue, furious storm clouds filled the sky, lightning flashed, thunder pealed. At the sound of the storm, Sudhana revived. Heavy rain began to pour down, beating on him hard. He opened his mouth in an attempt to drink some of the rainwater, but the impact of the raindrops made his tongue sting. Still, that rain restored Sudhana to life. He walked the rest of the way late at night. A single light could be seen in the distance, the light at the guardpost on Magadha's northern frontier.

*Still onwards. Still onwards.
Bodhisattva being lies far ahead.*

38. The goddess of night

It was no easy task to cross the vast land of Magadha. It involved a constant fight with the horizon. As he marched on, utterly exhausted, even Sudhana, that most valiant of valiant travellers, had to resist the desire to collapse, until he finally reached a place where he could rest. At last, the Ganges! It felt like a whole lifetime. The southern region's hills, rivers, and unending fields, that had so far been the scene of his pilgrim-quest for truth seemed like a daydream, and only this present moment, here on the banks of the Ganges, felt real. The little pilgrim kept crying with weary eyes, shedding silent tears. Neither sorrow nor joy. Nothing at all.

There on the banks of the Ganges, where hibiscus trees were pushing their branches up into the sky, Sudhana called to mind his dramatic encounter with the bodhisattva Manjushri. He had been so very young then. That distant past was newer than anything that had happened since, painfully new, newer than tomorrow, than the obscurity of the future that he had never yet once glimpsed. The past never dies.

How could death ever abolish the past history of the multiple bodies that were illuminated by the five hundred and forty-seven previous incarnations of Siddhartha Shakyamuni? His history was constant newness during those five hundred and more lives. Integrity is always new and young. Siddhartha inspired his disciples with that newness. He lived eighty-two lives as an ascetic, ruled as king in almost sixty, was a high official in twenty-seven lives, and lived twenty-two lives as a member of the brahman caste. He equally spent ten or twenty lives each as a teacher, a plutocrat, a prince, and a priest. He lived as a merchant, too, and an elephant-trainer, as a worker at a pottery kiln, and as an artisan and a farmer, as a travelling acrobat and a barber, as a robber, and a good-for-nothing conch-shell blower, as the most dreaded bandit among all thieves, as a sailor on the high seas, and equally as a blacksmith, a gambler, a drummer, a carpenter, a ghost, a heavenly spirit, a dragon king, and a phoenix. Besides all that, he also lived as a monkey, a lion, a deer, an elephant, as cow, and as horse, rat, dog, pig, as dove, hen, partridge, as cuckoo, blackbird, lizard, and fish.

Why, it may be asked, is this constant cycle of reincarnations necessary? Because enlightening bodhisattvas are eager for action? But can life as a bandit bringing chaos to Varanasi, or as a gambler always stirring up trouble, be considered proper for a bodhisattva? Is Sudhana's itinerant way of living in accord with this model of Buddha living? Had the child pilgrim's journeys been no different from reincarnations as various people through cycles of life and death?

Evening had come. After the rain, the river was turgid and rough. The current flowed on, not alone but bearing dead animals, tree trunks, and all kinds of rubbish. This filthy river was sacred by its filth. Ganges, made sacred by everything, Ganges of ancient days. Just then the day's last raft succeeded in reaching the shore from the opposite side, at great risk, after being swept downstream like an arrow by the raging torrent and only gaining the landing stage by three times more pole strokes than it normally took. The wild-looking boatman, whose eyes seemed to smoulder, called out to Sudhana, who was sitting there lost in thought.

“Are you crossing over? Come on, if you want to fall in and drown.”

Sudhana was called back to the unfamiliar present from his meditation on the past days of the Ganges and the incarnations of the Buddha by these passing words. Walking over the sodden turf, he boarded the raft.

Once across the Ganges, the shade cast by the thickly growing broad-leaved trees began to cool him. Coming after the dreary dampness out on the river, that cool shade restored his spirits. Sudhana had returned at last. He was in the region of Kapilavastu, where Siddhartha, the scion of the house of Shakya, had been born and from where he had left home. Now his

father, the king Suddhodana, was dead and the land had become a fief of the kingdom of Magadha. Because the Buddha had shunned his worldly responsibilities, Kapilavastu had been brought to that miserable pass. Truth had grown, but his clansmen were wretched.

The night in Kapilavastu was bright, no watchmen were necessary. The full-moon festival was just over. On such a night, in days gone by, Siddhartha's mother, Queen Mayadevi, went fasting to her newly made-up bed after the moon had risen, and dreamed her prophetic dream. The town was in uproar, the people having been excited by the festival.

Sudhana went looking for the night goddess Vasanti, the former teacher of the earth spirit Sthavara. But he found that nobody knew anything of the goddess who presided over the night. Indeed, there was no one in sight in the streets at all. As usual when he was at a loss, he withdrew into himself where he was provided with a clue as to what was real.

Leaving the main streets, he turned aside into a lane near the city walls and found himself in a poor, low-caste neighborhood. It was a neighborhood where no brahman had ever set foot. Suddenly, he saw a blind man calmly advancing all alone down the dark street. As he walked through the darkness, far from the bonfires at the town center, he made a moaning sound. Sudhana addressed him.

“I wonder if you know Vasanti the night goddess?”

The moaning stopped.

“Ha ha. What a fool, to ask a human being about a spirit. Off you go, into the dew-fields outside the town. Go and ask the dew.”

Sudhana experienced no sense of relief at returning to his old haunts, instead he was captivated by the immensities of the cosmos revealed in the night sky. The cosmos never grows old. There were red stars and green. He could see stars he had never seen before. He had the impression that the night sky was overflowing with stars like water. What need was there of any night goddess in such a glorious night?

Just then the stars shining in the heavens were abruptly extinguished, the sky grew completely dark, and the beautiful night goddess Vasanti appeared in the air, surrounded with a bright halo. She was voluptuously beautiful, robed in thin cloth of gold; her long hair hung deep bluish-black, her eyes were blue like lotus flowers. The stars began to shine again, but now they were all clustered about her.

Every aspect of her beauty, every single pore of her skin, was occupied in bringing all the creatures in the world out of darkness into light. Without that, it would not have been true beauty. That was why she was not only called the goddess of night, but also of light. By her perfect beauty she washed Sudhana free of every trace of fatigue.

“Sacred goddess of night, my heart is set on perfect universal enlightenment. I beg you to let me rely on you and instruct me in the ways that lead to all truth. Enable me to gain the power I need to devote myself entirely to pure works in the heart of that truth.”

“How good you are. How glad I am, as goddess of night, to meet one pure young boy. All the power of truth will fill you utterly, the way will shine bright with light for you, since you give your life unstintingly. . . . When people are on the look-out on dark nights for elves, or thieves, or wicked creatures, when clouds and mists hang thick, or when storms and typhoons sweep down, when they encounter dread and disaster, I could not endure it if I did not do all I can to help.

“For creatures in difficulties, I become a travelling companion, a singing bird, or a comforting, effective herb, I shed light, too, and serve as a whore for some fellow enslaved by sexual desires. Then on the following day I turn into a mountain spring and free that same fellow of all his thirst.

“But in this world, creatures' dread and disaster, poverty and disease and ignorance, and class divisions between creature and creature, are every day increasing more and more, so I am obliged to increase too, a thousand bodies, ten thousand bodies, and have not yet

accomplished it. Fire dies out under the feet of a bodhisattva.”

As the night goddess spoke, a sigh issued from her lovely lips. Then she spoke a poem. Many poems have been composed in Kapilavastu. It seems as though the gods love poems as much as people do.

*My liberation : banishing darkness.
Living beings, following their nature
all yield Buddhahood.
So the more this world is full of beings,
the greater the fullness of Buddha nature.
Bodies rotting by the roadside,
bloated bodies floating down the Ganges:
amidst all that carrion, flowers bloom,
Buddha is born,
basis of the world.
I am the cause of all the phenomena in the cosmos
and the cosmos is the cause of me,
great opening of the gate of liberation
for the ten-directioned universe.
Enter by this gate,
go through this gate and far away.
Oh, pure Vairochana Buddha.
Every speck of dust,
every darkening of the air yields
liberation under sleeping bodhi trees.*

Hearing this poem, Sudhana rejoiced with a familiar joy, as if he had recited the poem too. He questioned the night goddess.

“Among the teachers I visited in my travels, there were many different kinds of people. Little girls and whores, too. More recently, I have begun to meet divine beings. There is no difference between human beings and gods. An age when gods and humans are no different is an age of wisdom. I am afraid that if I cannot gain wisdom now, I shall never be able to rid myself of my folly. Please, tell me about your past, dear goddess of night. Today arises from history, the future arises from history, so I am eager to hear from you, my teacher of today, about the virtues of your past and all your incarnations.”

“You are good, most good, little pilgrim. You are already attaining the great awakening liberation where all the ages of eternity lie open in a single mote of dust, each single grain of sand. Long, long ago, as many aeons ago as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru, there was an age called the age of Silent Light. The world that evolved during that aeon was called the World of the Jewel of Good Fortune. Fifty billion Buddhas were born into that world. In the midst of that world's fourth heaven rose the kingdom of Lotus Flower Glory, the king of which was Cakra-varti whose name means Hill of Marvelous Teaching. Ruling over that fourth heaven, his kingship established perfect bliss for all living creatures. The king's wife loved poetry and singing, dancing and music, only going to sleep late at night. One night, the Goddess of Night came hurrying to wake her, saying that the Buddha of Glorious Adornment had attained perfect illumination in the forest lying to the east of the palace, and led her there.

“That wife of King Cakra-varti began to serve the followers of the Buddha of Glorious Adornment. I am today's incarnation of that queen. I spent the following ages, comparable to eight billion atoms of Mount Sumeru, entirely absorbed in the enjoyment of the pleasures and good fortune I received, so that I was not able to qualify to become a bodhisattva. In the midst of the agonies experienced by living beings in all the hells and purgatorial realms and demon worlds, bodhisattvas great and small were coming into being, while I spent every day enjoying

myself, enticed by times of abundance.

“That aeon came to an end, another ten thousand ages passed, then in the age before this present one, the aeon of Homelessness, when five hundred Buddhas were born, I was the daughter of a wealthy family and was again led by the Goddess of Night to a newly enlightened Buddha and served him. I would wash the Buddha with my chaste hands, then bow down before him, covering his feet with my lovely hair, until as a result of the freedom bestowed by the wisdom I acquired there I was enabled to look back over all my past lives.

“Little pilgrim, now I have come to live on the river banks outside this city in this small land to the south of the great snowy mountains in this world of pain, turned into a goddess of night, my beauty surrendered to the darkness, and here I live helping all creatures escape from danger, lightening their darkness by love and wisdom. But for me as for you there comes a time to leave this place. That will be in good time.”

The lovely voice of the night goddess, the voice itself rather than the things it said, brought the dawning of a new day glowing in the east. Sudhana had no further need of darkness. The dark was withdrawing from him like an ageing animal. The night spirit Vasanti could no longer serve as his teacher. Vasanti spoke with dignity a final message.

“Good youth, you must cross the Ganges and head south again. At the bodhi grove in the land of Magadha there is a great night spirit, Samantagambhirashrivimala-prabha, from whom you must receive instruction as I myself did once. That is where you must go. I may be a night goddess, there you will find the great night spirit who leads all the rest of us.”

By his encounter with the beautiful Vasanti, Sudhana had grown considerably more mature. He was a young man, all full of new freshness as if just emerging from water. But he was obliged to submit his youth to his childhood, for the sake of his continuing quest for truth.

Pure night-time spirit, body of lovely being! All night long I saw you; you were like the enlightening Manjushri. Spirit of night, you bring hills and river into being by your outstanding virtue.

Pure night-time spirit, body of hidden teaching! Now I see you, in equality of past, present and future, rejecting all distinctions and divisions. You bring oceans and islands into being by your wisdom frequenting every world.

Oh, night-time spirit, incarnate in many different bodies! Moon and stars float in night's vast empty void. Spirit, love, shedding light by your body in eighty-four thousand different points, protecting creatures lost in long dark nights, creatures confronting beasts and thieves ... Night-time spirit ... Night-time spirit ... What end can there be to your virtue's immensity? High teaching's joy I grasped on meeting you, thanks to that perseverance, delighting in the first Precept, loving this world. What end can there be to your virtue?

When Sudhana and morning met outside Kapilavastu, he was asleep -- partly because he had been awake all night long, but really he was sleeping the sleep of someone who has come back to old haunts after long travels through unfamiliar lands.

39. Love in the clouds

The road leading away from Kapilavastu was crowded. All were equal on this road, as nowhere else: traders heading for the various branches of the Ganges, pilgrims, ascetics, even members of the four castes. Not, of course, that low-caste people stared with head held high as processions of strongly-built brahman priests passed by, but once the brahmans had passed, members of the lower castes could take the same road with heads raised boldly.

Until now, there has been no need to distinguish clearly between the various kinds of road taken by Sudhana, although basically they can be divided into three kinds. There were roads where, after he had met a teacher the teaching simply continued and then, going on from that road, a road where once Sudhana's heart had digested that teaching he could go on by himself, and then, from somewhere along that road, a road would begin that promised to lead to the new master he was to meet and that master's teaching, finally leading him to the master. Until now Sudhana had pursued his travels along those three kinds of road.

All the masters Sudhana encountered indicated sincerely the masters they had learned from, sometimes adding that their master was more outstanding or holier than they themselves. In this way Sudhana visited his masters' masters, adding to the number of his own masters as he went along and advancing farther out into the depths of the ocean of truth. He had now met his thirty-third master, had ventured out into the thirty-third ocean of truth, and he had reached the center from which he could never turn away. The very center of truth! The remotest seas in the midst of the ocean! It made no difference that the highway leading from Kapilavastu towards Magadha felt familiar to him; with a deep sense of solitude his journey was sustained by his last teacher's poem and strength.

Ordinary people walked along the road, nobles travelled in carriages, and soldiers in war chariots. The merchants had innumerable teams of pack animals. Sudhana was frequently covered in dust after the passing of speeding carts that stirred up milky clouds behind them.

Someone walking close behind him addressed Sudhana. "Hey, you there. . . you, young man in front." Before he could turn round, the man had caught up with him. The more Sudhana seemed puzzled and unrecognizing, the more delighted the man seemed to be.

"It really is you! I met you once before. Down south, it was. I'd fallen among thieves and been robbed of everything. With nothing to eat for several days I was sick, I collapsed and just then you passed by and rescued me. The dried fruit and the draught of water you gave me saved my life."

Sudhana tried to recall if this man had crossed his path at some point in the past, but could remember nothing.

"Back then, I wanted to know at least your name, since I owed you my life, but you just gave me two little coins and went away. It was in the shade of a two-hundred year old palm tree."

"If you say so."

"I'm glad to see you. At last I can repay the kindness you did me."

"There is nothing you have to repay. I have never done anyone a kindness."

"No, no, you saved my life. Tell me your name."

Sudhana felt embarrassed.

"There is a name I use in my quest for truth, but I don't have any name for someone who wants to repay a kindness. I have never helped anyone like you."

The man was dumbfounded by Sudhana's cold words.

"What?"

The fellow examined Sudhana once more.

"You mean, it wasn't you who saved my life?"

Sudhana spoke even more icily.

“That's right. I have never once done anyone a kindness.”

Illumination dawned. This fellow trailing along beside him wanting to repay a kindness was a metamorphosis of the night spirit Vasanti. He addressed the man again:

“Go back. I am quite capable of meeting my next teacher on my own. Go back. In Magadha, the night spirit of Magadha is all I need. Here you're no goddess at all, you're just a cloud of dust.”

A teacher he had deeply revered he now called “just a cloud of dust”! The night spirit, in the guise of the man in tattered clothes, was not saying that she had been saved by Sudhana earlier in this life. The truth of the matter was that some hundred or so incarnations before, she had been saved from agonies of death by starvation and sickness by a previous incarnation of Sudhana.

Every lie spoken in this world has been true at some point in the turning cycles of our reincarnations. In that sense, every lie is true. Suppose that man had told Sudhana, not that he was his benefactor but that he was his enemy, that too would have been true. Because, very probably, in some previous existence the two might well have met in the role of enemies.

The man dropped back and, as soon as a side-road presented itself, took it. The night spirit Vasanti finally vanished, just like a cloud of dust. At present, Sudhana had no inclination to be with her or with any other teacher. Her poem might be necessary, he had no need of her in any additional transformation. Sudhana's austere freedom, constantly breaking down all the unrealities of the traveller's life through his experience of lengthy journeying, formed music of a cosmic order. Cosmos, you are song. You are bodhisattva living. Bodhisattva living means setting out from self towards the cosmos.

It was with a heart longing for the desire of bodhisattvahood to rise within him, for that wisdom to give rise to a cloud filled with compassion for all living creatures, and to cover with that cloud all creatures' sufferings, that Sudhana, pure and perfect in his wise heart, set out along the path that was his, leaving Vasanti's transformation and disappearance behind him. That was a road of the kind that was bound to lead at last to a rendez-vous with the next teacher.

That was not to be, however. Instead, Sudhana entered a fantasy in which he had already found the night spirit in the bodhi grove of Magadha. The spirit Samantagambhira-shrivimala-prabha was already standing there before him.

The first question he wanted to ask emerged spontaneously, maybe from his lips, or his tongue, or it may have been from his skin, or from the deep recesses of his heart. Anyway, it emerged.

“Holy being, I have already attained perfect universal illumination, but I do not yet know how bodhisattvas enter the position in which they should live, or act within it.”

That first question emerged from Sudhana and immediately vanished. The spirit that had appeared in Sudhana's fantasy uttered a roar.

“Little pilgrim, I can see I'm going to have to put up with a deal of sorrow on your account. I am a god of darkness and night. By my darkness and night, I abolish from every last corner of this world the difference between high and low, noble and base -- no more rich and poor, either. Much more than that, if a bodhisattva chooses its enlightening position and sees it as something high and noble that all ordinary creatures should look up to, that is not bodhisattva living at all. Bodhisattva living would be great winds and furious waves sweeping that position away completely. More like a huge pillar of fire, consuming that position utterly. Little pilgrim, if you think that bodhisattva position and form are contained in the life of wisdom and compassion you have found, rid yourself of that life here and now. Get rid of it and start to cry. Little wanderer, put an end to your travels, go home, hurl a soldier's spear into the distance, kill some creature.”

As these words rang in his fantasy, Sudhana's body was covered with dew-like sweat;

he realized how right it all was. Bodhisattva position! Dog position! Bug position!

Sudhana continued his journey. The bodhi grove of Magadha lay on the far side of two cities the size of Kapilavastu. Magadha, being so vast, had no lack of large walled cities. Yet still it was always trying to annex small, weak lands. Sudhana several times had to undergo identity checks. Soldiers were on guard at the crossroads, glaring as they scrutinized all the people passing.

“I'm on my way to meet this country's Night Spirit.”

The soldiers laughed at Sudhana's reply.

“You must be a bit weak in the head, kid. How else would you ever have the idea of saying you were off to meet the evening ghosts or whatever?”

“There's a spirit of night in this country's nights.”

“You idiot. Even if there used to be such night ghosts, they took to their heels and disappeared at the sight of war; they're gone!”

“No. They stay through times worse than war, far more dreadful. As long as night follows day, they stay. . .”

“There's no telling some people anything. Off with you, then, to your bodhi grove. Perhaps there's a ghost or something in the forest there. Keep on down this road.”

And the checkpoint soldier sniggered as he pointed out to Sudhana the way to go. Though he might receive this kind of treatment, Sudhana felt no call to feel angry or ashamed. He was simply glad that he was able to keep on towards the bodhi grove without having to ask the way. The road rose upwards. It was a very gentle slope and led up to a veritable highlands. The vast plateau was utterly empty, with nothing in sight. With not one single bird to be seen, the open space was simply full of itself. High above, in the deep blue sky, a face was dimly looming. To Sudhana's eyes, that mirage was the Night Spirit; neither male nor female, the spirit of night. As some southern god had once said, “I am the ungendered god, never wearing the form of men, free of the sorrows of women,” and as there is much to be done in the midst of this world's day and night, male and female, so the spirit of night too had other tasks to perform besides the care of darkness and night.

By the time Sudhana reached the bodhi-tree grove, the sun was sinking and the heat of the day had decreased somewhat. Once past the grove that surrounded the spacious main hall and other buildings comprising the place, Sudhana followed the high wall in search of a gateway, at a loss as to where he should go. Doors were hanging open at regular intervals. Not one of them was shut. They had no particular reason to be there at all. The local people called those doors “never closing eyes.” Actually, the doors were firmly shut once every few years, while the devotees living inside the walls underwent strict training, after which the doors were opened again so that they could experience more intensely the freedom of being able to come and go at will.

Those who came visiting the Night Spirit here were mostly people who had been deprived of kingdoms or cities by more powerful lands, people alienated from the world. The Night Spirit hated the king of Magadha particularly. He said he was resolved to bestow darkness and blindness on a king so devoted to greed, domination and inhuman repression, to pillaging and destruction. Only not even a night spirit could match the power wielded by the king of Magadha. The spirit merely swore that the strong bear their downfall within themselves.

By entering the open doors, Sudhana became one of the place's inhabitants; nobody recognized him as a pilgrim. He was able to go quite naturally to the building where the Night Spirit Samantagambhirashrivimala-prabha was sitting. Someone spoke.

“Now is a good time to listen to the teaching of the Night Spirit, who has now attained bodhisattva heart. Let's go.”

Several people had gathered, Sudhana among them. Sudhana's feet were the only ones covered with the fatigue of a long journey. As soon as the disciples approached, the Night Spirit

began to speak. Its lips had been yearning for people eager to grasp the truth. It was not they who had gone to find the spirit, the spirit had been waiting for them.

“A good boy, indeed. In this world, when a child does something to help its mother, people praise it by calling it good but beyond that, the term good qualifies those who are able to melt away all the inheritance of past evils and in its place instill the formless sound of the wind. To attain such goodness, in order to perform bodhisattva works in all fullness, you must equip yourselves with ten kinds of observance of the *dharmā*. Observance of the teaching is like a floating branch encountered in a flowing stream. Thanks to that stick one can survive and not sink below the surface.

“As the first observance, enter into singleness of mind, and behold the Buddha's face. As the second observance, behold the Buddha's body with eyes free of defilement and desire. As the third observance, be conscious of Buddha bliss and virtue. As the fourth observance, observe the light of Buddhahood and the endless realm of things. As the fifth observance, behold how light is emerging from each of the Buddha's pores. As the sixth observance, behold the resplendent five-hued flames issuing from each of the Buddha's pores. As the seventh observance, for at least one moment adopt the Buddha's body and bring consolation to all living creatures. As the eighth observance, receive the Buddha's voice and steer the cart of the threefold world. As the ninth observance, invoke the Buddha's name unendingly. As the tenth observance, become aware of the unimpeded power in the relationship between Buddha and all living beings. Good people, by means of these ten observances, you will be able to perform bodhisattva deeds in proper fashion.”

The spirit's lips were like the place's doors: once open, there was no shutting them. The spirit continued.

“There is someone among you who has come here after meeting the spirit Vasanti. Addressing you, I find that the teaching you heard and have brought here is sacred wisdom such as I should be carrying myself; there is nothing more for you to hear from me. It is true that I instructed her before, but now she has attained such a state of advanced bodhisattva being, with those songs of hers that contain in their every word the whole of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*'s teaching, that she is no longer my disciple but my teacher. I am an old night spirit, unworthy to touch the soles of her feet.

“Now, for you who have come after meeting her, there is a teacher you must meet after leaving here; she's a master among masters, she can string this world's ten thousand teachings on a single thread and hang it round her neck. If you go to her, a few days of instruction will not suffice at all. Time with her is infinite, it lasts like the fathers of aeons. She's not far away. Not far. It's the great bodhisattva Pramudita-nayanajagad-virocana who dwells near here beneath a bodhi tree. In one way she is all living creatures, in another she is a bodhisattva beholding all living creatures. You see, I have set within you a few of my humblest words, spoken between teacher and disciple. Off you go now.”

Sudhana was deeply impressed by his encounter with the humble heart of this bodhisattva who adopted absolutely the lowest position of all. Sudhana, who had asked such a bodhisattva how to gain the position of a bodhisattva, could only plunge his own foolishness into a feeling of intense sorrow, rather than pain, passing through a despair comparable to that felt by a stone as it plunges over the brink of an appallingly lofty cliff. Sudhana longed to forget all he had ever learned. He longed to demolish the mound of truth he had hitherto accumulated and turn the spot into a patch of level ground. He longed to become an empty plain.

Sudhana offered the night spirit a poem.

Bodhisattva.

*You offered the sticks of the ten observances,
offered them to me in my passage over distant seas
but I had not the strength to seize even one of them.*

*Bodhisattva,
bodhisattva,
you have rejected the position of bodhisattva.
Hidden in one corner of Magadha's warfare
bodhisattva works have grown and grown
until one day such ancient wars will melt away.
Bodhisattva,
as I leave,
with all my body, all my heart,
I believe in those works,
I praise those works.*

In response to this poem by Sudhana, the night spirit sketched a smile, then produced a hymn in reply.

Good child, you did not come to learn from me but to instruct me. You came with nothing to learn from me. Your eyes are like those of Pramudita-nayanajagad, your future teacher, whose eyes are always sparkling full of starlight. Your eyes too are full of starlight.

Thanks to your eyes, I have revealed a bodhisattva's body in one part of my night. Good child, as you are a bodhisattva, you search the threefold universe, wherever creatures are, staying nowhere long.

Good child, I have nothing to give you. I'd like to give you some of the dark night in my care. I beg you to receive my darkness in your heart.

Sudhana duly welcomed the spirit's darkness into his heart. It was not clear how large the darkness was but Sudhana was able to see that it was a vessel of truth and a home of compassion, as he gazed down the quiet garden. Just as the spirit of night finished teaching, darkness fell over the buildings in the bodhi grove. It was night. Obligated to watch over all the evening's various worlds, the spirit left the hall.

Sudhana resolved to stay there for the night and the others decided to stay with him. They too were not residents of the place, but ascetics belonging to a community of brahmins from a small country, who had come to visit the spirit. Sudhana withdrew into his solitary fantasies. There the teacher he was to meet next, Pramudita-nayanajagad-virocana, appeared to him like a phosphorescence floating on the dark sea, like an ecstasy.

40. A cloud rising from every pore

The next morning dawned utterly new, full of the foresty smell of the grove of bodhi trees. In a place where a thousand billion aeons had flourished and died, it was a newness that seemed to stand at the first beginning of the world. There was no yesterday, only today. In the midst of Sudhana's pilgrimage, which had occupied his entire childhood, unrolling with neither origin nor end, a new day of this kind was a source of quite unparalleled joy. On this marvelous morning Sudhana, about to set out in quest of yet another evening spirit, Pramuditayanayanajagad-virocana, enjoyed an absolutely perfect, powerful joy. Wonderful, wonderful. How can anything be this wonderful? Can there really be days dark with the outgrowths of hell, full of the sufferings of all living beings?

For the first time, there came to Sudhana the thought of the vast *Avatamsaka* universe of the four continents in the world-mountain Mount Sumeru. Ultimately, newness is a kind of infinity. Situated in the monsoon season, this morning was filling the grove with the stillness that precedes rain. In the stillness, Sudhana's journey was renewing the hellish regions of a southern land in one of the four continents in Mount Sumeru. There was joy in his thoughts, as Sudhana reflected how, once they are equipped with the empty heart that comes after laying aside this world's harsh existence, each and all come to realize that they can only be one atom floating in the limitless infinity surrounding Mount Sumeru. Wonderful.

Back at the bodhi grove, at the moment when the night spirit had indicated where he would find yet another night spirit, Sudhana had found himself plunged deep in thought: "Why am I being forced all the time to meet night spirits and night goddesses like this? Because the world is dark! Because this world's suffering, its sorrows and pain are night! No, because this world's dazzling light is born in darkest night! Because in order to live in this world I have to become better acquainted with darkness! What is darkness or night, really?"

The bodhi tree he was seeking was not far from the grove where he spent the night. He would only be able to meet the night goddess Pramudita once the sun had gone down, when he knew she would be seated on a lion throne in the right-hand lotus hall. Since for once he had no long journey before him, he had ample time to rest. In Magadha's magnificent forests the paths were shaded and free of heat. In the shade, comprised of mingled light and darkness, there was nowhere where it could be said to be bright, even at noon. The spirit of night would be able to appear without difficulty. He rested, in order to drive the last remnants of stubborn fatigue from where they lodged deep in his bones.

The spirit of night came to meet him ahead of time. Sudhana did not realize it; he was merely thinking about her, but those thoughts were inspired by the spirit of night. His thoughts themselves belonged to the night goddess, Pramudita.

He pondered: "Aren't my encounters with true knowledge all for the sake of courage, wisdom, vows, suffering for all creatures, and bodhisattva acts? If so, perhaps I have no further knowledge to look for? I've already laid down the firm basis of the virtue I need; from now on it's surely more urgent to set out along paths of bodhisattva being. After all, if I have too many teachers, there'll be no me left. What can I gain by meeting yet another night spirit?"

In the end, however, Sudhana's thoughts failed to prevent him from travelling on to meet his teacher. "Together with a child bodhisattva there has to be an adult bodhisattva and an old one, too. Only then is it possible to embrace the ocean of wretched creatures that no one in this world has any thought of caring for. How could one little pilgrim solve all the world's problems on his own? I must ask and seek unceasingly. Off I go. Off to meet the night spirit Pramudita."

He straightened his legs and stood up. The grove of bodhi trees was fragrant. He left the grove and walked across a nearby meadow. There the sunlight was beating down but the

moment he entered the next grove the heat stopped pursuing him. He found himself advancing towards the lotus hall on the right-hand side, where there were not so many people. One old man from Khosala saw a baby at a young woman's breast and abruptly remarked, his fierce eyes flashing, that the child must recently have completed its purification in hell and been reborn into this wicked world. He added that ever since his own son had died, he found life in this world just the same as being in hell. After his son died and fell into hell, whenever he shed tears in mourning for his son, in hell the hot tears became a scalding bath in which his son was boiled, while his wife's tears turned into ice in hell, in which their son was frozen solid. He felt there was a terrible linkage of punishments between this world and the next, and he had come to visit the night spirit Pramudita on account of his torment.

Sudhana looked at him and the little baby at its mother's breast in turn. He said nothing, only sighed. The sound of the father weeping at the thought of his son was transformed into the screams of demons and pierced the ears of his son in hell as part of the punishment for his sins. What grief; even love can become a source of pain. Thus the son suffering torments in hell, and the weeping and the tears of sorrow for the son who had died, all were a chastisement that had to be endured.

Whenever Sudhana found joy in the truth he was seeking for, invariably suffering came to contradict it. Together with the others, he waited in the grove for night to fall. Finally night came. Then the night spirit Pramudita emerged from among a band of the Buddha's disciples and came in their direction, murmuring quietly.

“So far I have been listening to others. Now it's my turn to speak.”

The woman spoke softly. She took her place in the midst of the lotus calix, her followers and those who had come to visit her likewise sat down. A moment of weighty silence passed. It seemed that the baby's breathing was the only sound to be heard. Even the mosquitos fled. The fires were no longer burning. Suddenly there came the sound of a windmill turning. The sound of a water-wheel. After those sounds had continued for a long while, there came the sound of a fire burning. Even Sudhana stared all around. There was nothing on fire. The sound of flames faded, then unexpectedly they began to hear ocean waves. With the sound of the waves came cries of people in distress. The night was deep by now. The lands beneath the sea gave voice to a rending earthquake roar. Next came the sound of mountains crumbling and city walls toppling, people screaming, and the voices of the king of the Gandharvas, of the king of the Asura demons, the lord Garuda, the king of the Kimnara, king Mahoraga, even Brahma's voice was heard. The voice of Yama the king of the underworld, too. The people assembled there were able to identify the various voices, without the night goddess identifying them. Once those grim voices were over, they heard from the heavenly realms the voices of celestial Apsaras and Shravakas, of Pratyeka-buddhas and bodhisattvas. In contradiction with what had gone before, these were truly sacred voices. After the voice of the bodhisattvas, the sound of maidens along the banks of the Ganges began to ring out. Their voices was the most lovely sound in all this world. More beautiful even than the voices of bodhisattvas.

By these voices, a vocal votive offering was made to all the divinities in this world and the cosmos, invoking the consolation of the diminishing of all forms of suffering.

“Which of these voice did you like the best?”

Pramudita asked affectionately.

The old man advanced and replied.

“Goddess of night. . . Rather than the voices of Apsaras and Shravakas, more than the voices of bodhisattvas, I listened hardest to the voice of Yama king of hell. The reason is that if I hear any good sound here on earth it turns into the most agonizing torment for my son in hell, the eight varieties of cold and heat, with frost and fire freezing him first then burning him to a frazzle.”

Hearing what he said, the goddess Pramudita remained silent for a while. Tears flowed

from her eyes. Her tears glowed, they were visible to the people standing there in the dark. The old man rose.

“Goddess of night. Please, do not weep. If you shed tears, that plunges my son in hell into boiling water.”

The goddess rose and firmly prevented the old man from speaking.

“No. Old man, your tears and mine are no longer causing your son any pain. Henceforth let there be many tears, much sorrow, much compassion; for then not only the living creatures in hell, but all this world's sentient beings will be set free of their chains of poverty, disease, loneliness, oppression, and deprivation.”

The night goddess Pramudita had no sooner spoken than she gazed up into the topmost branches of the night grove, as if seeking the heights of Mount Sumeru. All the people who were gathered around her followed her example and raised their heads. There was nothing there but darkness. In the grove's darkness no sky was visible; yet it was not so far from there to the vastness of outer space where eighty trillion Buddhas might appear.

Stricken with sorrow, the bodhisattva Pramudita began to manifest the miraculous sign known as the “sign of clouds.” The shapes of all the phenomena of the universe became visible in clouds emerging from each of her body's lovely pores. Words flowed gently from her lips in cosmic speech:

I am goddess of night. I dwell in this world with human beings, with all creatures on earth and wing, in flood and wind. When any of those creatures die and cannot be reborn, but wander, lost, I unfold and show a limitless world to those wandering sentient beings, I, the goddess of night, who dwell with them, with human beings and all creatures, the spirits of all creatures.

Behold: there is a heaven called Akanistha, the highest world of the fourth dhyana heavens, among the eighteen heavens in the realms of pure form.

As she spoke those lines, the remote world of Akanisthadeva that lies far beyond cosmic Mount Sumeru was sketched in the darkness. Before the solemn spectacle of that world spreading in the clouds that arose from the pores of the night goddess's body, Sudhana was too deeply moved for words. As she spoke on, the night spirit Pramudita made visible on her clouds all the worlds comprising the realms of desire and of pure form:

There is a heaven called Sudarsah, a world in which all retributions appear. Such is Sudarsanah heaven.

There is Atapta heaven, a world without dependance or confrontation. There, cool detachment once gained, all torments melt.

There is untroubled Avrha heaven where the sufferings of the worlds of desire are stripped away and everywhere is peace.

Behold, the heaven called Barhatphala. My pores and that heaven are one. The inhabitants there are five hundred leagues tall and each lives three aeons enjoying human life.

There is Punyaprasavas heaven, where lifetimes of bliss last 250 aeons.

There is cloudless Anabhraka heaven. Clouds may issue from my pores but nothing can be shown of that heaven, for it is the cloudless state above all clouds, the ultimate freedom of heavenly beings.

There is Sarvatraga-vimala heaven, of universal purity, a place infinitely pure.

There is Apramanasubha heaven, where a lifetime lasts a full twenty-three aeons.

There are also Parittasubha heaven, Abhasvara heaven, Amitabha heaven, Paritabha heaven.

There is Mahabrahman heaven, the realm of the king who commands the first dhyana heaven, the realm of the Heavenly King who lives in a gorgeous palace commanding this world of pain.

There are Brahma-purohita and Brahma-parisaday heavens. There is

Paranirmitavasavarti heaven, the highest world in the realm of desire, the world where Mara lives, lord of the heavens of desire -- that world where pleasures turn into human form and grant every pleasure to your heart's content, a world where men and women satisfy their every lust simply by gazing at one another, that lovely world where the thought of having a son brings a son into being on your knees. One day and night in that heavenly realm lasts sixteen hundred years in the human world.

There is Nirmanarati, a world whose denizens ever emit light and live for eight thousand years. If male and female once exchange smiles in that place, they consummate union and a baby is born that is twelve years old on the day of its birth.

There is Tushita heaven, a joyful place set a hundred thousand leagues and more in the void above Mount Sumeru, where a palace rises made of precious jewels in which the denizens of that heaven live: the Tushita heaven of the Buddha Maitreya. There are inner and outer halls there; in the inner hall, Maitreya teaches all who dwell there. The outer hall is a place of delight, the courts of joyful Tushita Heaven.

Below that come the Heaven of Four Kings, Trayastrimsa, and Suyama heaven, two worlds immersed in thoughts of sex.

Nirmanarati and Paranirmitavasavarti heavens above them are wandering worlds.

Tushita heaven alone is neither submerged nor wandering, but enjoys the pleasures of the five desires during lifetimes lasting four thousand years. Four hundred years in human terms are a single day in Tushita heaven.

You think those multiple heavens are all? There is more to show: King Gandharva, with his sons and daughters, mighty Kumbhanda who sucks out human vigor, the Dragon king Nagaraja who lives beneath the sea, Yaksa with his sons and daughters, Lord Asura, King Yama, all the Sravakas and Pacceka-Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, my friends, my gods, the gods of earth, of water, fire, and wind, the spirits of rivers, of seas and of mountains, spirits of forests, the spirits of this grove -- this grove of bodhi trees -- other spirits of trees, spirits of day and we spirits of night, spirits of the void ... Behold, coming back now: a spirit of the night.

Her words were a poem, she seemed like one of those gandharvas (supernatural creatures) who make music for the Lord Indra in his heaven. Like a gandharva, that never eats food but lives on incense, she spoke on and on without any sign of thirst or hunger, as she portrayed all those celestial worlds in the clouds emerging from her pores. Sudhana was enthralled by an intense emotion. He struggled to his feet to extol the goddess, for his legs were numb. He began to speak: "Goddess of night, accept my praises. I am a pilgrim, ever in quest of teaching." The goddess's maids and all the people around paid heed to Sudhana's voice.

Ah, how great is the offering you make to the Buddhas of all the worlds on behalf of every wretched living creature.

The clouds arising from each of your pores bear the entire Buddha cosmos and truly there is nowhere you have not been in so many worlds, encountering the teaching, graceful through long aeons, being born and dying in so many worlds.

Is there anywhere you cannot go, bearing every burden of karma and all majesty? Those gathered here have been born and have lived in each of the worlds you revealed, and now have returned; those gathered here have been born and have lived in each of the words you spoke, and now have returned.

You too, the clouds once spread, the world once revealed, have come back and sat on the lotus throne. In the space of a single night, we have experienced all the phenomena of the whole cosmos, and now have returned; we have heard every voice, and now have returned. What more is there for us to hear? What more need is there for us to go in quest of a world, in quest of palaces veiled in clouds?

You are holy. You, spirit of night, are truly holy ... holy.

The spirit of night was deeply moved by Sudhana's hymn of praise. Abruptly she rose,

swept down to where Sudhana was, and seized him in a warm embrace. Sudhana swooned at the perfume emanating from Pramudita's opulent flesh.

“Ah, even though I were to unfold the details of every world, I could never find another bodhisattva seed to equal you. You are Sudhana, aren't you? You have travelled through all the lands of the south in quest of teachers?”

“Yes.” Sudhana's reply was brief, he was speechless for joy.

“Hearing your song, I saw a world full of brightness, I who ever live in darkness. All my pores are asleep, yet I see a world of brightness.”

“Spirit of night, since you have gained liberation, surely I too may enter into that liberation?”

“Most surely you may. Sudhana, you and I have experienced time together in several worlds in our previous lives. Therefore the shadow of your wisdom is floating quietly on the surface of my wisdom's stream.”

Sudhana felt firmly convinced that he had shared previous lives with the night goddess. He rejoiced and was glad. In the heart of that night's darkness, his heart opened wide, emitting bright rays of light far and wide. Standing beside them, the old man felt himself freed of the suffering caused by his son in hell. While he was listening to the night goddess's Cloud Sermon, his son's burden of guilt had all been expiated and he had been freed from hell. Although he did not know the reason yet, the old man was already able to sense new joy welling up inside his heart like water in a spring.

Sudhana and the spirit of night, Pramudita, spent the rest of the night together under the trees. The darkness lasted long; then as day broke, the birds began to chirp and sing. Suddenly the spirit of night disappeared, murmuring: “We must meet again tonight. I still have much to tell you.”

Sudhana found one bodhi leaf clasped between his fingers, her gift to him. He withdrew a little from the others and closed his eyes. In the darkness, while his eyes were shut, he thought back over the events of the night before. The magic powers the goddess had displayed had been the fruit of her tremendous beauty. All the realms of desire and pure form she had shown them had become one with her beauty, and that had brought the beauty of each heaven out of isolation into unity. Sudhana began to see the world from that standpoint, with eyes closed; with eyes tightly closed.

See, in all my thoughts, in my every thought, in every valley of every thought, in every empty space: the majesty of the Buddha world filling all the universe, the Avatamsaka's four dharma-realms -- realm of the phenomenal, with differentiation; realm of the noumenal, with unity; realm where things phenomenal and noumenal are interdependent; realm where phenomena are interdependent. Ah! Sublimest summit, summit of sublimity! Flower emerging in a heap of broken darkness!

41. Liberation in singing and dancing

It was one of those mornings when all this world's beauty seems immensely fragile, as if on the verge of dissolution. Sudhana felt compelled to set out on a journey longer than ever before. He rose to his feet in the dark, almost indigo-hued shade of the grove, resolved to move at least to a different grove. Sudhana sensed that although the goddess Pramudita had said she hoped to meet him again, she actually meant that there was no further need for them to meet. Indeed, he felt that if he met her again, she would not be the bodhisattva Pramudita but a quite different teacher. It dawned on Sudhana that, in a way, truth has the power to make someone into a different person every time you met them.

The next grove was extremely dark. The sunlight never penetrated its thick tangle of nutmeg trees, full of ancient darkness. With the pure heart of someone who has slept his full, Sudhana grew accustomed to the gloom. Yet the nutmeg grove was full of premonitions, as if something was about to happen.

*Joy by night
as a seeker
finds someone hiding --
joy by night
as someone hiding
is found by a seeker --
the gods applaud,
insects chirp for joy.*

Despite the gloom, Sudhana pushed deeper among the trees. With the song he had composed keeping him company, he passed between the huge trunks, until he heard the sound of a stream. Just then a scent like that of gardenia flowers came wafting past. Next, a clamor arose in that direction, but he could not make out if it was a sound of humans, of beasts, or of gods. He kept on towards the sound of the stream. The sound of water tinkling in the gloom was so piercing, Sudhana felt sure that it must be the voice of the teacher he was seeking. He called out in a loud voice.

“I am glad to meet you, holy teacher, dwelling in the liberation of this grove's inmost recesses.”

At that, a human voice rang out from the sound of the stream: “Who are you?”

“I am a northerner in quest of bodhisattva life.”

“You have come a long way, most excellent child.”

Having congratulated Sudhana, the voice continued: “I am Jahshri, a spirit of darkness.”

“Master, divine spirit, my name is Sudhana.”

“Excellent. Each breath of yours, each word of yours is fragrant perfume.”

Sudhana was glad. He was as glad of this exchange of words with the spirit of darkness as a blind man might have been. The perfume emanating from his body and the scent he had perceived just before were one and the same. Then he realized that the sound he had heard just now was that of his own voice. He concluded that he had encountered his own perfume and voice, completely detached from himself. The spirit of darkness cast off the darkness enfolding it and revealed itself to Sudhana.

“Look at me now, little pilgrim. I am Jahshri, the source of this grove's darkness.”

As the spirit spoke, a bright smile spread across its utterly gentle face and it murmured, apparently to itself, “You have had a long hard journey, my child.”

The spirit was a splendid sight. Light was streaming from between its eyes, but remained hazy on account of the light shining from the rest of the face. It even had something lonely about it, like the light from a distant star. It was obviously rather unexpected to find that

a spirit of darkness was a spirit of light; as if, in the end, darkness was the same as light. The spirit of darkness, or rather of light, had gathered around itself not only its own light but all the world's light. In consequence, its light was shining everywhere in the world; not only that, for the light, after first shining on the world, came back through Jahshri's gentle smile and penetrated the crown of Sudhana's head, filling his whole body. Sudhana's happiness seemed to pierce the heavens. It filled the seas and seemed to be on the verge of becoming a mirage.

"I am glad to meet you, sacred spirit."

Sudhana was so happy that he repeated his initial greeting. It was the kind of repetition you would expect from the innocent heart of a much younger child. The spirit began to diminish the splendor of the light it had initially revealed.

"Child, your joy is too perfect by far. I have nothing to give you in exchange for your joy. I think the best I can do is show you my true form."

As it spoke, it uttered a sigh like that of someone in anguish. The spirit began to assume a simpler appearance, abandoning the light and beauty that had until now adorned it. The light radiating from its entire body, especially from the center of the brow, faded and went out. All that remained was the smile, something essentially human. The gloom, too, became the green shade found in any grove. Then the spirit of darkness began to tell Sudhana stories about its past lives, as if it were Sudhana's father or uncle. They had been standing, but soon they sat down together on the ground at the foot of a centuries-old anantha tree.

"Long, long ago, many many ages before this present world, I was a young girl. I met that world's bodhisattva, Samatabhadra, and at his encouragement set off on a journey. In order to provide a lotus-flower throne for Sariputra to sit on, I offered up the precious necklace that hung around my neck. It had been passed on to me by my mother. She had inherited it from her mother, as she had from hers. . . and so it was passed on to me. It was something that I was expected to pass on to my daughter; only I gave it up for Sariputra's throne."

"Divine spirit, most sacred teacher."

"Listen further. Thanks to that necklace, I established firm roots of good karma merit, I was able to get free for ever from the effects of bad karma. I was reborn in the heavens, as well as on earth, always enjoying a comfortable life. I was able to become a ruler, a leading citizen, but naturally I could not help asking myself if it was right to become a ruler or heavenly spirit by virtue of good merit. I only had to say one word, I received at once whatever I wanted; if I spoke, condemned criminals were granted their lives, even seconds before they were to be executed. All the people considered my rule to be blessed and bowed down towards me three times or more every day. The treasures of mountains and oceans were offered before me. My subjects went so far as to say that the food they ate, the clothes they wore, their houses too, were all effects of my gracious rule. I was indeed a sovereign the whole world looked up to. And yet. . ."

Jahshri broke off the tale and began to sing in a low voice,

Any bliss enjoyed in this world is the fruit of ten thousand people's ten thousand suffering lives. So henceforth I will become a beggar -- become a joy filling a moment in ten thousand lives -- flowing like a spring in the early dawn.

When the spirit of darkness had finished singing, it took the fruit it had been holding, broke it in half, and the two of them ate together; the fruit was both sour and sweet, it stilled his hunger. They rose from where they had been sitting at the foot of the anantha tree and started to stroll slowly through the shady forest clearings. Jahshri began to reminisce again, whether continuing the previous tale or starting a new thread was hard to tell.

"I came to a decision. Late one night, I resolved that henceforth I would not be served, I would become a servant. To follow that path, I left the palace. . . I had scarcely begun to travel before I fell ill and only survived thanks to the help of one humble fellow, then I became the slave of a member of the warrior caste as that fellow was until, after more than ten years, I and

several others of the same lowly class escaped from the slave camp and went to live in mountains that were covered with eternal snows.

“During those ten years of life as a slave, I came to see clearly how wrong this world's system of wealth and honor is. I got to know many poor people who had to endure countless torments so that the rich and powerful could flourish. What then were the so-called roots of the good karma I had received? What was the sense of my offering up that precious necklace? What was the value of the throne of Sariputra? What was my good karma merit worth?

“I wandered through the mountains, pondering those questions, until I found myself separated from those I had run away with. I got lost while I was out looking for something to eat, and could not find the way back. For three days I wandered through the trees and shrubs of that mountain's valleys, until I glimpsed a kite hovering in the sky visible between the trees; I walked in the direction it was flying and arrived at a mountain village of the Allia tribe. There I met the gentlest people in the world, among them one old man from whom I heard talk of many Buddhas.”

As the spirit continued this tale, it would sometimes break off and sing. The old man left that place with her and they went to where the Buddha lived in company with a large number of other Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and disciples. There she became a disciple and attended the Buddha with great devotion. The doubts nagging at her gradually eased, and she sensed that she was turning back into the girl she had been before she had offered up the necklace. All she lacked was the necklace itself, that had been a family heirloom for so many generations. There was no way she could know that the necklace was buried deep in the mud at the roots of a lotus that was blooming in a pond not far from the throne occupied by the Buddha of that place. The necklace she had offered had summoned her. Her ignorance of the fact was a credit to her virginal purity.

*One young girl
had a necklace, a family heirloom.
She offered up that precious necklace
to provide a lotus pedestal.*

*A merchant received that necklace,
exchanged it for the pedestal's stone slab
and it became the stone-mason's daughter's;
she soon left this world.*

*The now ownerless necklace,
following its previous owner's intention,
found itself thrown into a lotus pond
where a lovely lotus grew.*

*Tangled among the lotus roots,
long sunk in that watery dirt,
though hidden in a gloomy marsh
it summoned its former owner.*

Then the story continued. The girl visited many other places inhabited by Buddhas and bodhisattvas, no less than five hundred places in all, meeting Buddhas and bodhisattvas, disciples and pilgrims of every caste. She drew water for them to wash with, in exchange for something to eat, and took care of them when they were sick. Nobody knew where she got the strength from, she worked so hard. She received high praise from Buddhas and bodhisattvas alike. At the four hundred and ninety-fifth station on her pilgrimage, she was praised in the words, “Her vow made in a previous life began with the sage Samatabhadra and today has

become a great river.” There they knew that her existence had been marked by an encounter with the bodhisattva Samatabhadra.

Abruptly she left her tasks within the shrine and went to join the humble folk outside, sharing their poverty and disease, their ignorance, and their violence. Out there she tried to discourage one gangster, who raped her. After that she passed from one man to another and ended up working in a bar, where she enchanted everyone with her sad songs and beautiful dances. It was said that she could raise a nation up and bring a nation down by her songs.

The five-hundredth station in her successive lives was in a forest grove not far from that bar and one day she went to visit the Buddha there with the bar owner and his family. On arrival, she offered her songs and dances at a party to welcome the gathered company, in the presence of a host of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and disciples. Delighted by her performance, the Buddha sent out a ray of light to her. Receiving the light, she became a goddess more beautiful than any hitherto seen, and enjoyed the Buddha's love.

Ah, such bliss!

Bliss nothing can surpass --

receiving Buddha's light,

receiving Buddha's love --

bliss nothing can surpass above,

bliss nothing can surpass below,

as I am born and die a trillion times --

one lotus blossom.

Jahshri, the spirit of darkness, having recited and sung thus far, shook Sudhana's shoulder, for he seemed to be dreaming.

“I . . . I can't be compared with the night goddess Pramudita who sent you here, and I'm nothing at all compared with the goddess of darkness and night, Prashantaruta-sagaravati, that I want to send you to. All I have attained is the right to approach the gates of liberation and tread on the grass growing outside. After you leave here, you have to visit yet another divinity; ultimately, every so-called divinity in the universe has to become human. So-called gods are really human forms, human words, human living and dying.”

Sudhana asked a question.

“Teacher, the liberation you have acquired, of what kind is it?”

“Your question is a good one. This can't be the first time you ask it. An emancipation is one emancipation and a multitude, each separate emancipation reveals a thousand peaks, ten thousand peaks of other forms. As for me, rather than entering into an emancipation, I have merely sniffed the smell of one. Emancipation is love. The intense love between the giver of the light and the receiver of the light. No one has ever been emancipated alone. When an I and a you are present, then there is emancipation.”

Sudhana slapped himself for joy: emancipation was not achieved alone! That was the brightest message he had heard from Jahshri the spirit of darkness. He made repeated prostrations at the spirit's feet. At the ninth, the spirit tried to restrain him but he refused to stop. “Please, let me go on. Accept my veneration.” Sudhana, full of an emotion close to tears, seemed more dignified than Jahshri. So while Sudhana continued to make his prostrations, the spirit of darkness made prostrations before Sudhana in return. Within the grove, their prostrations were the only movement; all else stood motionless with bated breath. Even death was frozen motionless.

Behold, this awakening being, great being, forever attaining the perfection of discipline, produced all illuminations, all forms, all sounds and lights, then went on to illuminate the perfection of knowledge of every dharma and gained a smile from every Buddha, gained the approval of every good teacher, gained applause and veneration from all living beings, then went on to illuminate every heart alive, bringing about all life, all death, bringing

about all vows and hopes, until those vows and hopes brought about tomorrow, and tomorrow, every tomorrow, far into the future, brought about the endless road this world must follow.

Once Sudhana had reached the edge of the forest, he silently parted company with Jahshri; there was no need for words of farewell between them. Sudhana headed off in the direction Jahshri indicated; Jahshri went back along the way they had come. The spirit was wearing a skirt that rippled in harmony with its steps. Was Jahshri female, then? Or was it simply that the spirit had once been a young girl, a whore, a dancing girl, and a singer.

Sudhana had eaten nothing besides the fruit Jahshri had shared with him, yet he felt no hunger. Rather, he felt heavy, as if he had swallowed something filling. Sudhana was a youth now; there was a metallic tang to the smell of his body. Yet he was blessed in that, every time he met someone new, he became the child Sudhana once more; Sudhana, the eternal boy! Perhaps his pilgrimage too was destined to continue for ever, eternally? He set off in search of the night goddess Prashantaruta-sagaravati whose name had echoed in the music-like tones of Jahshri's speech.

Sudhana left the forest far behind him. Finally the day drew to a close; rooks were flocking together. He had crossed from Jahshri's grove to Prashantaruta's. Instead of a grove composed mainly of nutmeg trees, this place offered a confusion of all kinds of trees, thick forest and sparse undergrowth mingled. This was a world where no one was in charge; all lived together in community. It was a night-time world full of moonlight and starlight, far better suited than sunlight for gatherings of spirits of night and darkness. As he passed from one evening grove to the other, Sudhana kept his eyes firmly shut. After spending so long in darkness and thick shade, he might have been blinded if he had opened them in the sunlight.

Once he reached the new grove, he had a different impression; it felt more like a crowded village than a grove, with people running up to him from all sides with questions: "Who are you?" "Where are you from?" "What do you want?" Even the birds perched among the branches and leaves troubled Sudhana; every single one of them was chirping loudly. Sudhana imitated birdsong and greeted the birds.

A young boy was coming toward him along a sparsely-grown forest path, the boy destined to welcome Sudhana. He should have been out living in the real world, with its division between strong and weak, and governed by rulers. He had abandoned that world, preferring the older ways of community living.

42. The thirty-seventh teacher

The boy introduced himself: "I'm Sanantha."

"I'm Sudhana. I'm from the north."

"From the banks of the Ganges?" The boy seemed pleased. They walked deeper into the grove, talking as they went. Each was so full of respect for the other that their exchanges had a rather self-conscious awkwardness. It was almost as if they were afraid that some older man, overhearing them, might mock their grave manner. Consequently, they seemed to be reading from the script for a play.

"I too left the banks of the Ganges several years ago."

Sudhana was surprised: "Really? From which region?"

"I came from Rajagriha, the capital of Magadha."

"I've been there," Sudhana exclaimed, "just after the low-lying areas had been ravaged by floods."

"When sudden disaster befalls people, I consider that every distinction between good and evil ceases to exist."

Sanantha had a rapid way of speaking and he obviously enjoyed debates. Sudhana was not prepared to engage in that style of conversation. He changed the topic.

"I'm on my way to visit Prashantaruta-sagaravati."

"Oh, that spirit of darkness that talks in ten different ways? This whole forest is inhabited by spirits, you know. Anyway, I want to meet him too, so let's go together. He's just one spirit of darkness, you know, he's not their special representative, or a major focus of worship. There's no one like that here; here all gods are equal. But he is the spirit most experienced in the quest for truth. He's the ugliest one, too."

"The ugliest. . .?"

"Early in a previous childhood, one of his father's enemies nearly killed him. He survived the attack, but grew up with a squashed face, a snuffly nose, and protruding eyes. Those have still not disappeared; so although he is now a spirit, he is an ugly, flat-faced spirit."

Then he began to murmur to himself: "Why does everything have to have previous lives -- gods, humans, beasts, even the tiniest creatures? Why do they all have to inherit vestiges of their previous lives? Why is there no end to the samsara (cycle of reincarnations) linking past lives to this life and to all the lives still to come? Everything that happens in this world is so incomprehensible."

Sudhana sensed that if Sanantha was so fond of debating, it was because he was full of a deep sadness. He wondered why he was living in this realm of spirits.

"Do the spirits of darkness experience human thoughts and feelings?"

"Of course! They're human too. Aren't 'god' and 'spirit' just other words for 'human beings'? Although I'm living here in this world of spirits, I've never once experienced any difference because I was a mere human. Being a divine spirit may be the outcome of some kind of stress or strain in the process of becoming human, I don't know. If the real world grows harsh, they turn into empty talk; when ordinary reality grows more peaceful, they come closer to reality, they become almost a fact. But all of them, even the high god of Indra heaven and the other spirits, are just phantoms that have lost all power over reality. They're all just phantoms, the whole lot of them; Buddha's just a phantom, too. I'm the son of the man who tried to kill Shakyamuni, Sudhana. Are you surprised?"

"Is that really true?"

"Yes, it's true. Do you hate me? You may have begun to hate me. It happened after you had already set out on your journey to meet teachers in the southern regions, at the command of Manjushri the sage, the bodhisattva of wisdom who assists the Buddha."

“You seem to know a great deal about me.”

“Yes, I know about you. I came because Prashantaruta sent me out to welcome you. I am to serve as the link between the two of you.”

“You mean the spirit knew that I was coming?”

“Of course he knew. Jahshri, the sage in the grove you have just come from, sent news about you borne on the wind through the empty air.

“Spirits send messages through the empty air?”

“Yes, but that's no miracle. They have power over the void precisely because they have no power in reality.

“We're nearly there now. You know, people often say they've arrived when they still have quite a long way to go. It gives comfort and encouragement to the weary, but it's a lie, all the same. Let's tell a lie: 'We've already arrived.' Ha ha.”

Sanantha was obviously a great talker. His chatter comforted Sudhana after his endless pilgrimage, while at the same time it helped him adjust to this new environment. Without his being aware of it, Sudhana's heart had reverted to being the simple heart of a child. The maturity aquired during his encounter with Jahshri had dissolved, he was a child again.

Prashantaruta, the spirit of night and of darkness, had reached so high a state that he was free of the darkness and night over which he had charge. Nonetheless, the two boys were walking through the thick shade of a dense thicket of trees, into which no sunlight could penetrate. When night fell, the spirits would set about their nocturnal duties there. While all the natural universe is asleep, there is work to be done: caring for that lonely, silent world. The night-watch is one of the main tasks of the spirits of darkness and night.

Prashantaruta was quite as ugly as Sudhana had been told he would be. His eyes stuck out, his nose was crushed. He looked like an old frog. Only his voice rang out thunderingly.

“Sudhana? Is that your name?”

“That's right.”

“What's all this about bodhisattvas? You've come to find out more about bodhisattva deeds?” Sudhana was taken aback. “You came all this way to ask about that? My, what stupid creatures there are, to be sure.”

It was unfortunate that Prashantaruta's voice was so harsh. It was rough, as though the spirit was all the time shouting curses at everyone he talked to.

“What the hell makes people go running all over south and north India? Why the devil do they think they have to leave the place where they were living to go looking for truth, for eternal laws? Don't they realize how useless any laws they find are going to be? Idiots! Believe laws exist, they grow infinitely big; then decide they don't exist after all, they shrink and shrink until in the end they sink into the ground, and isn't that what's called dharma? To say that by sitting in a cool breeze under a tree and meditating, they come to a knowledge of the Way, what junk!

“Our heart is really Buddha? Our heart is really dharma? Our heart is really the entire universe? Where the hell did that heart thing come from, then? I reckon the heart of beasts and trees and piles of rock is much closer to that bloody dharma than all those people who will fabricate anything; they have no reason or need at all for any such study or any such heart.

“Still, this is a really marvelous forest, isn't it? People practicing the Way keep coming here. If poor people who toil all day in dusty markets set aside their daily misery and enter the forest, which knows no worldly cares, within less than a month their weary faces grow bright, their bloodshot, pus-blurred eyes grow clear as ponds.

“On the other hand, if you take one of the forest's most revered ascetics and just for a few days put him where the poor work, in no time at all his eyes become turgid like those of a rotting fish. That only shows that each of this world's realities, each environment, each history produces the people who live in them.”

Sudhana had the impression he was being slapped first on one cheek, then the other.

“You said your name was Sudhana? It's all very well travelling around trying to find out the ways of the world, but if it's with the idea of seeking for truth or learning about bodhisattva deeds, you've been wasting your time. If you want to find out about bodhisattva deeds, go and look in a pigsty. It's pigs that are bodhisattvas. Don't they get as fat as they can, then give all that flesh as ham and bacon for people to eat?”

“People think they can become bodhisattvas by sitting in a forest? What bloody bodhisattva is that? Even hell is too good for them. Bodhisattva is the title given to those who give and give of themselves for the good of all living creatures. You think that's a common thing? Lifetime after lifetime, on and on, pouring out your blood, sweating away, and then maybe, maybe not, once, becoming a bodhisattva. Sudhana! Take your first master, the bodhisattva Manjushri. Or rather, take his master, Shakyamuni the Buddha. Do you think he became Buddha by sitting in a forest grove? Not on your life. It was one tiny drop of dew resulting from having given of himself and dying, over and over again, for a hundred billion aeons.

“Sudhana, if you really want to meet bodhisattvas, you have to meet pigs, or scorpions, or thieves who have been imprisoned dozens of times, all this world's filthiest, most poisonous, most loathsome scum. They're the ones who are on the way toward bodhisattva deeds. Bodhisattva means suffering. Blood and pain. Sorrows. A child crying for grief because it's lost its mum, that's bodhisattva. A widow, that's bodhisattva. You'd better be kind to some widow with that fine young male body of yours. Then the widow'll go to heaven and you'll forget hell too. Ho ho ho.”

The sage Prashantaruta laughed with his ugly face. He lifted a gourd bottle to his lips and drank from it slurpingly. It contained wine made from a fruit found in the forest's hillside caves. He sighed, “Ah. Very good, very good. Have a drink, Sudhana.”

Sanantha nodded, indicating that he should drink. Sudhana took a mouthful and swallowed. He felt himself grow dizzy, then he became quiet; sleep approached. He began to doze, first sitting, then lying down. At once the forest spirits, all the spirits of darkness, came swarming near, covering themselves with robes of leaves. Prashantaruta too was robed in leaves. Turning round and round about Sudhana, they danced, performing their duty as spirits of darkness and night by watching over Sudhana's sleep. The dance was rhythmic, though their hands remained still. They grew elated. Maggots infesting filthy places are for ever wriggling in joy; likewise the forest's spirits were forever dancing and shouting.

Sleep well ... sleep well ... sleep well your avidya sleep of ignorance ... sleep well your bodhi sleep of awakening ... sleep your fill, then awaken ... sleep your fill, then awaken ... awaken and dance ... once you're Buddha, dance ... once you're bodhisattva, dance ... infinities of living creatures, dance ... sleep well ... sleep well, little pilgrim ... sleep well, Sudhana ... Sudhana, sleep well ... both eyes closed, sleep well ... both legs stretched out ... sleep well ... breast ... navel ... windpipe ... earholes ... nostrils ... sleep well too ...three karmas of old and new ... sleep well ...all the world ... sleep well ...realms of desire, of pure form, of formlessness ... and void beyond them all ... sleep well ... sleep well.

The spirits' dance filled the forest clearings, causing the leaves to lose their freshness and fall, withered out of season. As they were trampled in the dance, a stench of dead leaves filled the air. The dance came to an end, the spirits returned to their places, and Sudhana woke. Sanantha, who had likewise been sleeping, woke too. The sage Prashantaruta laughed as though he were unable to laugh properly. He looked far more benign than before they had fallen asleep.

“That was a good sound sleep, to be sure. The first thing to do on arriving here is to get some sleep. Once that's done, we all become one family, since sleep and darkness are one and the same thing. Right, now that we three are all one family, let's be off to the forest's dark Place of Silence.”

They made their way towards a part of the forest that was thickly overgrown with ferns and moss. Yellow goldfinches were skipping from branch to branch, chirping; one even perched for a moment on Prashantaruta's shoulder, then sped away, releasing its droppings. "Look, it wants to play!" He exclaimed. Prashantaruta was merrier than before. He apparently preferred the company of birds and beasts to that of his fellow gods or of human beings. Sudhana suspected that in one of his recent incarnations he had been a bird.

In the Place of Silence there was nothing but silence; it was secluded and still, the proper place for Prashantaruta to be. In the midst of its stillness he was truly a spirit of darkness and night, able to hear low murmurs like those of the sea. "It's good here," he muttered, and straddled a moss-covered rock. They sat in a triangle, as if preparing for some kind of discussion or debate, and Sanantha spoke up. In his innocence, he was bold -- even in the presence of Prashantaruta or any of the other spirits.

"Young Sudhana's main question in coming here seems to have been about *samsara* (cycles of reincarnation) and the fruits of karma."

"Surely the best would be to ask him directly."

"No. Sudhana and I have already talked about it in our hearts. My father is no longer alive, but I want to talk about how he intended to kill the Buddha Shakyamuni. My intention is not at all to take sides with my father and attack the Buddha. If I did that, I would soon get into a fight with Sudhana, who's really one of the Buddha's disciples. I am Sudhana's comrade and Sudhana is my true comrade."

"Come on. Get to the point," Prashantaruta urged him.

"No matter where you go, all over India, in the torrid regions, in the icy regions, Siddhartha alone is considered holy, while my father Tevadatta is universally execrated as a wicked, would-be assassin. Now, one fundamental part of Buddha's truth is the accumulation of karma and retribution from past lives. In that case, surely it's because in one of my father's previous incarnations one of Shakyamuni's past incarnations intended to kill him, that in this present life there was that attempt by my father to kill Shakyamuni the Buddha. Why do people never mention that, and simply judge what he did as a crime limited to this present world? Thanks to my father's error, I have come to the conviction that this world's truth, if there is indeed justice in that truth, is an egalitarian truth, distributed equally to all, including the wicked and those who have fallen far from the truth.

"You recall how Shakyamuni's disciple Maudgalyayana was assassinated by a zealot belonging to another sect? That too has to be seen as the outcome of an inherited history of retribution, involving that zealot and Maudgalyayana. It happened a long time ago, but I only recently heard about it, and it helped me gain a deeper understanding of Buddha truth. Sudhana! Surely you're not going to stay silent? You're not going to tell me that Prashantaruta is a spirit of darkness and night, and therefore doesn't give a damn about what happens in the daytime out in the sunlight?"

Prashantaruta's ugly face broke into a grin; it was such a broad smile that it completely replaced the ugly face with a new one. "Of course he's not!" he beamed, "but Sanantha, how is it you're arguing so wonderfully, today of all days?"

"If I'm speaking well, it's because of all the words emerging from the silence of this Place of Silence, where Sudhana and I have become comrades. In the presence of Sudhana, rocks, or caves, or grains of sand, or rain still unformed in the sky, all begin to talk. Sudhana's visits to his teachers oblige them to open their mouths. Young Sudhana has nothing to learn. How should he not know all about bodhisattva being and bodhisattva works? He cast aside everything he once knew, and turned into someone not knowing anything before he set off to travel through the hot lands of the south. That is the pure thread linking his present life with his past lives, stretching on like a road."

Sudhana was bewildered to find that Sanantha was saying things that he should be

saying, and more. He approached him and made a deep prostration. Sanantha bowed in return.

“Master,” said Sanantha.

“Master,” said Sudhana.

Meanwhile, the spirit of darkness and night, Prashantaruta, merely nodded at the sight of their exchanges. Sanantha rose and sang.

Lovely master, though your face is repulsive, lovely master, though you cursed and swore; this pilgrim child who came so far is blessed in the words we exchanged as comrades, in the words that held all the master's teaching.

Master, each day speaking all manner of things, how is it that here you stay silent and only nod your head?

Liberation like a cloud! Gentle rain, pouring down on our dry ground! In order to achieve that goal, first, offer yourself for others; then my words, meant for every creature, will all be accomplished in you.

Second, practice the Precepts.

Third, persevere, endure.

Fourth, advance untiringly, advance; for any who do not advance, wisdom is utter foolishness.

Fifth, keep lips sealed, think quietly; then the garments of the giddy, the wind-whirled, are stilled and turned into stony cliffs.

Sixth, practice prajna wisdom, ask where are the reefs and deeps in the vast ocean of the Three Worlds.

Seventh, practice upaya skills; no truth can be gained without preparation -- the blooming of one lotus flower at a dry stem's tip is the spreading of truth by upaya skills.

Eighth, stir up great longing; all was nothing but breath till now but you are advancing in a great enterprise. So dream, establish directions, take vows.

Ninth, gain the needed strength, for how can any creature without strength cross the waters of travail?

Tenth, purify yourself. What joy when truth is found in every place of purity!

Lovely master, if you do not speak, I will speak. I will be you. Lovely master ... Most lovely master.

Sudhana silently listened to his song. One leaf dropped to the ground. Prashantaruta stood up: “Alright! You don't need me any more. Off you go, Sudhana, to Prabhava-ta. You can go with him if you like, Sanantha. Sudhana at least has a lot of places to go. Your feet are restless, like a horse's hooves just before it gallops off. But you can't shake off the bridle of us spirits yet. You still have a host of spirits' works and games to stare at. Off with you, now, you beggar of truth. You orphan of truth. You greenhorn of truth!”

With those final words, Prashantaruta rose and left the Place of Silence, while Sudhana and Sanantha were still sitting on the rocks with their covering of damp moss. They did not even have time to wave to his retreating back. Seen from behind, the spirit looked quite different, immensely impressive. Sudhana spoke: “Sanantha, I'm leaving alone. You still have a lot to do here, I know.” He stood up and Sanantha rose, too. He had tears in his eyes.

Tears of sadness pearl in the eyes of the sharp-tongued debater.

Profound is the echo of songs from distant deserts, truly profound.

43. A mountain demolished, wisdom comes

Sudhana left Sanantha in the vast forest where he had met Prashantaruta and followed woodland paths for three full days. Whenever he felt hungry, he managed to obtain fruit from passing spirits or nymphs. At last, he emerged from the forest and set out along a road that cut across a plain of red earth, studded here and there with solitary agaves. His eyes had grown accustomed to very dark places and deep shade; here he found himself having to close them, unable to keep them open in the searing daylight with the sun blazing down.

The weather was so hot that he came across a bird that had dropped from the sky, overwhelmed. He picked it up and examined it. It was already dead. He laid the dead bird on a hot slab of rock and soon it was half-cooked. He tore off the feathers and ate it. Thanks to it, Sudhana was able to get the strength he needed to cross the scorching plain and he set out again with slightly quicker steps.

Further along, he realized that someone was catching him up with rapid strides. "Young man!" a voice called out behind him. Sudhana turned round. It was a woman of about thirty or so. She was clad in a voluminous sari but her body's fulsome curves were clearly discernible. In the midst of the plain where everything was ablaze in the sunlight, the sight of this woman sheltering her opulent flesh while the road behind her blazed, struck Sudhana like a kind of dream.

"Where have you come from; where are you going?"

"I am following you, child."

"Me? Following me?"

"I've been wandering through the southern regions and now I'm on my way north. In the south I've become more and more depraved. I've had seven husbands in a short period of time, and over twenty lovers, to say nothing of a host of other men. I've reached a point where I feel absolutely no shame, even when I talk about it. I consider that such a life is my fate. It must be fate, the outcome of all my previous lives; I don't know why it is. No matter where I am, men go crazy over me, like flies clustering round a piece of rotting meat until maggots appear. And I could never reject any of those men, but welcomed them and even enjoyed myself with them for a moment. Then after the fun was over, I would always suffer as a punishment and my heart would bear yet another wound. Anyway, travelling through all the southern realms, I've had my fill of joys and pains. Now I'm leaving my southern depravity behind me; I'm on my way north to the snowy peaks and the salvific banks of the Ganges, in the hope of washing away my degradation. As I came along the road I saw you ahead of me and thought, "ah, that little pilgrim is the purest, truest light of truth in the world." So I began to hurry, casting off my usual laziness. From now on, after having followed you, I mean to rise early and go out into the fresh new air before dewfall and sunrise. Would you like some of these?"

She concluded her long speech by offering Sudhana some dried meat and mangos. Sudhana was astonished by her abrupt confession and the food. But he accepted both, then spoke.

"I am from the northern realms. When all the states along the banks of the Ganges were consumed in the flames of warfare, I left there and have been travelling through the southern realms ever since."

The woman offered sufficient reason for a man to lose his heart to her on sight. It would be no exaggeration to say that she was a masterpiece of beauty, produced by all the gods working in concert. She had just described herself as a depraved woman who had passed through the hands of countless men; yet she still possessed, or rather had only just now attained, the mature peak of her feminine charms. They outshone the road itself; even the scorching plains lost their force. As a result, the two were able to walk quickly on along the road.

“This woman is no whore. This woman is a bodhisattva. Perhaps she's the bodhisattva I'm to visit next.”

Sudhana sighed a secret sigh. Sweat that had until now refused to emerge on account of the heat broke out on his breast.

“My name is Mani. My daughter's name is Gopa.”

“You have a daughter?”

“I had a daughter I abandoned along a road near the city of Kapilavastu when I fled from the north, years ago. If she's still alive, she'll be about your age. I was starving on account of the war, so one day, without thinking I went into the house belonging to a rich man's estate manager and stole some food, but he caught me and raped me for my attempted theft. What with hunger and then rape, I was completely out of my mind when I got away from there; I left my little girl where she was and went rushing blindly off, far far away.

“I couldn't go back to look for her after that. Then I met up with a general belonging to the military caste. He promised that he would go and fetch my little girl for me, so I gave him my body. But after a few months, he left me and went off to other battlegrounds. Then my mind went odd and I started to head farther and farther south. My mind got better as I wandered from place to place in the south, but my body became every man's plaything.”

Sudhana learned from the woman just what one person's life could be like. In the light of the immense timespan covered by history, it was a mere speck. But as he heard the woman's story of her past life, it inevitably seemed an endless series of vicissitudes. Refusing to make abstraction of time, Sudhana thought reverently of the distance she had covered in her wanderings. The reverence was different from when he met some saint or sage. Sudhana felt as though a nail was being hammered home in his head. It was not the same as feeling pain directly, more like experiencing the pain of the person closest to us.

The road they were followed ended at a small stream, which they would have to cross by a bridge of logs and stepping stones. Sudhana went first. In midstream, as the woman was crossing over the stepping stones, her foot slipped and she fell into the rapidly flowing current. After a moment, Sudhana looked back; the woman was up to her thighs in the rapids and striving in vain to reach the log bridge. Sudhana ran back and seized her by the wrist; the woman scrambled up onto the logs. She was soaked almost from head to foot. Her sari was not very thin but still the contours of her body were clearly visible, and Sudhana averted his eyes. The woman's gaze took on a new expression, becoming a piercing stare full of sensual energy directed at the virgin child. But it quickly faded. Instead, Sudhana's heart began to throb.

“It must have rained a lot upstream. Come on, let's get across.”

Now the woman walked ahead. Her back was delightful too. What sign was there in that beauty of all the men she had been with? None. Perhaps what she had told Sudhana had been a pack of lies? If not, there was no believing the reality of that woman's flesh, so utterly beautiful and refined. After crossing the stream, they continued on their way. The woman's clothing soon dried as she walked. At the foot of a high mountain, the road divided. A farmer's mud hut stood there. Sudhana asked where he might find Prabhava-ta, the spirit of darkness and night. The farmer answered roughly.

“Why there have to be spirits in this world, I really don't know. Spirits are junk. They can't sow seeds and they can't have kids with girls like that.”

He scrutinized Mani's opulent body as he spoke. The farmer's wife scowled.

“You must go this way,” the farmer said.

“Which is the northbound road?” Mani asked.

“You'll have to go on alone; it's the other one.”

The farmer pointed in the opposite direction to Sudhana's. The two of them felt a pang of regret. Sudhana headed for the gorge leading up to the mountain area where Prabhava-ta resided, after taking his leave of Mani, joining his hands. She stood there vacantly for a moment,

then set out along the road heading to the northern realms. Perhaps they might meet again. The feeling was no clear prophecy but enough for their present separation not to be too sorrowful. Sudhana thought of Mani's daughter, with a premonition that in later times he might meet them both again. He walked with no trace of hurry as the path led upwards. Ahead, an extraordinary, precipitous cliff began to loom; it seemed to suggest the harsh world of manhood opening before him.

The sound of a naka-ara drum could be heard. The drum was an instrument invented in India in ancient days by spirits. The drum-making spirit Kaneshiji developed the art of drumming then taught it to human beings. Especially, it used to be said of the naka-ara drum that anyone, human being or animal or insect that heard it would forget all their previous sufferings. That was why, when fortifications were being built, or when slaves were breaking stones, or performing other arduous tasks, the supervisors would beat on a drum twice a day. Likewise, if anyone died working, a drum would be beaten three times before the grave was filled in.

Perhaps somewhere farther up the quarry-scarred ravine that Sudhana was climbing, someone had died? There must be slaves in these southern kingdoms, too. The south's attitude towards its slaves was once even more terrible. Now, time had passed, and when a slave died a drum was beaten and prayers were said for his soul, at least, something that would have been unthinkable only a few years before. Sudhana felt a little uneasy, but did not let it trouble him as he kept on up the steep path. A few dozen yards farther up, he reached the mouth of a huge cave in the mountainside. On the empty space in front of the cave, several spirits were celebrating funeral rites for one of their companions. The drum beats had not been for a slave's funeral but for a spirit's.

For a while Sudhana stayed where he was, not going down but observing the funeral from above. That spirits die too came as a surprise, of course, but even more surprising to him was the way he had known at a glance that he was watching a spirit's funeral. Then, intent on associating himself with the burial rites, he made his way down. Nobody paid attention to the unknown boy. Each of the spirits was emitting its particular perfume, Sudhana alone brought no scent, apart from the sweaty smell of someone who has walked a long way.

The spirit who seemed to be the leader of the group advanced towards the body, that was covered with leaves from an asukasu tree, and cried out in a loud voice:

In order that you may be born a better sage than a spirit, leave now Sarvanagararak's obscurity behind you. Go, and no lingering along the way! Go! Aoma ... Aoma ... Aoma

Sudhana felt sure that this must be Prabhava-ta, the master sage of the place. He was very old, his white hair blossomed around a swarthy face, but he was still vigorous. The copper knob of the long staff he was holding was fashioned in the shape of a serpent's head, oddly fascinating. After a final greeting with hands joined, the spirit reverently took up the staff again and struck the ground three times. The dead spirit's burial procession now began. As the procession moved away across the stony mountainside, all joined in singing "Aoma." The song resonated among the stones, reverberating in the ravine and sending back a solemn echo. Sudhana advanced and spoke up boldly.

"Holy sir, wise master of the great cave of Sarvanagararak, I have come to visit you here and I bow down before you."

"I am just now returning from seeing off a dead companion. Encountering you is to encounter life after sending off death. Young seeker, you are admirable."

"Wise Prabhava-ta, I have nothing to ask except the nature of bodhisattvas and the way of bodhisattva living. Have you embarked upon the bodhisattva way?"

"Young seeker, as you knew in coming here, I am nothing more than a spirit of darkness. However, during this present aeon I have pronounced the bodhisattva vows and, passing through one existence after another, I have crossed the threshold of bodhisattva being. As a means of working towards the fullness of bodhisattva works, for myself as for others, I

have been given charge of this world of darkness. If I once embark on bodhisattva deeds, I have no reason to express in words what bodhisattvas are, or the bodhisattva way. Once sleep and waking, birth and death, have all become part of the work of redeeming all living creatures from their defilement, there is nothing more to be said. Here I can only speak about bodhisattvas. Listen, little seeker.”

After that introduction, he began to unfold the solemn mystery of the ten *dharani* (incantation) wheels.

*Dharani wheel,
immersed in the ocean of all dharma laws.
Dharani wheel,
keeping in mind all dharma laws.
Dharani wheel,
receiving the clouds of pure dharma laws.
Dharani wheel,
pondering the wisdom of many Buddhas.
Dharani wheel,
sound of the spoken names of many Buddhas.
Dharani wheel,
contained in the vows of the three ages' Buddhas.
Dharani wheel,
entering the ocean of concentration
that quickly yields all perfection.
Dharani wheel,
entering the ocean-like screen
of all creatures' past karma
and washing away that karma-screen's filth.
Dharani wheel,
quickly restoring every karma-screen ocean
to pure smooth waves.
Dharani wheel,
displaying the wisdom that knows everything,
boldly advancing to attainment.*

*Taking these ten dharani wheels
as part of a family of a hundred thousand wheels
we speak them always ... always
for the sake of all living creatures.*

Behold, I came swimming from that ocean of dharma.

It was really wonderful. If Sudhana examined the teachings of the ten dharani wheels, there was nothing new at all, he felt nothing of the deep impression made by a teaching heard for the first time. Yet not withstanding, on account of the liveliness and the power of the voice speaking the words, it sounded like a completely new and hitherto unheard teaching.

Prabhava-ta the sage had his home in the deepest part of the cave, at the end of the longest of the various tunnels into which the cave divided. For anyone accustomed to plains and wide-open spaces, the cave seemed a hell by comparison; for all ordinary people, the cave was darkness incarnate. Sudhana entered there following the spirit of darkness, and realized that the spirits had nothing to be afraid of, for they had chosen to live in darkness like this. If Sudhana had been there on his own, the cave would have seemed like pitch-black hell to him, too.

Prabhava-ta the sage was overflowing with dignified majesty. If he once uttered “Aoma,” every spirit would open its mouth and utter the sound in imitation. The spirit whose funeral they had just celebrated was a young spirit that Prabhava-ta had loved dearly. The master realized that his beloved disciple had died because the time allotted to his immersion in the world of spirits had been shortened, so that he might advance on the way of bodhisattva living. “What a splendid fellow!” he had rejoiced, in the joy of a world of spirits for whom death is joy, which explains why their funerals are joyful celebrations. Sudhana had witnessed one such celebration; the sage Prabhava-ta could not have been happier, on account of that and the arrival of this young visitor.

“Young seeker, you have suffered much in coming here. You ought to sleep for a while.”

Sudhana found it hard to get to sleep. The sense of oppression from being confined within the cave, and the darkness, made him feel tense to the very tips of his hair, while the marrow in his bones ached. He experienced a dread akin to that of death by asphyxiation. Still, the spirit of darkness made sure that the dread did not overpower him and after a while, he succeeded in falling into a light sleep. Prabhava-ta the sage sang a song that served as a lullaby. In the dark cave, the song became a fundamental reverberation; echoes gave birth to echoes that in turn gave birth to further echoes, until the entire cavern became one vast echo, the cavern's own Garland Sutra. Yet still Prabhava-ta's song remained a song.

Long, long ago, as many aeons as the square of all the atoms in the world, there was once an age -- its name was Spotless Flame.

The karma of the infinity of living creatures appeared, and the Body of Transformation, that fashions one by one their forms. Finally those were established as flowers whose ending none can know.

Into that network were placed as many different fragrances as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru.

All the vows made in former times by those who understand came hastening, formed into flowers whose end none can know. Ah, sublime flowers! as many as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru, adorned with as many petals as four thousand times the number of atoms in Mount Sumeru.

On each is heaped a hundred billion trillion cities in each of which as many Buddhas have been born as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru and after each had entered nirvana, a thousand different debates arose.

Those Buddhas' teachings were divided in ten times a thousand different ways and each then, as is only natural, engendered hosts of infant teachings, until at last they all lay rocking like the waves of some vast sea.

Soon the last age came, a world of defilement and evil arose, where corrupt ascetics fought each other, caught up in tiny questions of scruple, so that all great virtue was utterly lost.

Kings and brigands were just the same, the dignity of a girl and a nation just the same, human quarrels and justice just the same. Everywhere, talking was popular. It became impossible to live alone in silence.

Then one seeker preserving the true dharma declared: “For countless ages now, enduring every kind of suffering, you have extinguished every burning torch.

I have risen far into the air -- the height of seven tala trees into the air -- and with this body have spread the red clouds at nightfall, put to death all passions, disputes, have attained a heart of wisdom on behalf of all living creatures.

In this way, Buddha's truth has arisen again for another sixty thousand years."

At that time too there was a woman, a seeker; she and a hundred thousand women of her tribe, entering every samadhi consciousness, received all the different dharanis.

Good seeker, the one who re-established the true teaching is the bodhisattva Visvabhadrā in the north. The woman who re-established the dharma was myself, I, Prabhavata.

As soon as the spirit brought his lullaby to an end, Sudhana woke up. As he woke, the darkness lifted. Sudhana, like Prabhavata, was united by blood ties with the darkness deep in the cavern. There was not a trace of dread remaining in him.

"Henceforth there is to be a succession of Buddha after Buddha, as many as there are atoms in Mount Sumeru."

Sudhana realized that the whole world is always full of Buddhas, and that all our successive lives are periods of time linked by one Buddha after another.

44. Night spirits and night

Sarvanagararak's chief spirit, the sage Prabhava-ta, indicated to Sudhana the spirit he should visit next. The spirit's name was Anrak; he had his lodging in another part of the same cavern but he was not there; he had gone into the outside air. What was now the mouth of the cave had once been its center, before a volcanic eruption had split the cavern into two parts. Some spirits reckoned that the place where there used to be a cave could still be considered a cave and Anrak the sage was one such. It was nonetheless rare for any of them to go outside in the daytime. Night spirits are far too accustomed to the gloom inside the caves or the nighttime. Spirits' eyes are only bright and real when they have the gloom of forest or cave, or the darkness of night. When Sudhana arrived, it was deep night, the stars seemed to have come pouring out of doors to play. A number of spirits had emerged and were lying or sitting around, absorbing the dew with their wispy robes. Sudhana spoke up.

"I'm looking for Anrak the sage."

The spirits had been chattering and joking with one another; a silence had fallen, then Sudhana emerged. A youthful spirit lying beside Anrak spoke.

"You're looking for Anrak?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

Sudhana made no reply.

"You want to learn how to eat and play and sleep? Anrak's a spirit who knows nothing beside eating and playing and sleeping, you know. Do you still want to meet him?"

"Yes."

Sudhana answered firmly. Then the spirit next to this bothersome fellow, who had been gazing up at the pole star, called out to Sudhana.

"I'm Anrak. Why are you looking for me? Ah, I know, you're the kid who arrived during the funeral just now. Then you must have met Prabhava-ta?"

"Yes, I've met him. I've come to you because he sent me."

"Well, let's see."

Anrak left his companions and took Sudhana up onto the stony mountainside.

"When the sun sets, the lotus blossom that has been wide open closes and everybody goes home; all things that have life, in mountains or water or any place, return to their homes while those that have nowhere to go are left wandering. What's your name, little pilgrim?"

"I'm called Sudhana."

"Sudhana, that's a very fine name. Everything has a name; that's the way in which everything reveals its particularity. Sudhana, why you're really Sudhana Buddha."

Anrak was beginning to like Sudhana.

"So, Sudhana, I suppose you want to ask me about bodhisattvas and bodhisattva ways?"

"That's right."

"The bodhisattva is first of all someone able to feel compassion. In compassion, wisdom and mercy unite, abandoning everything they possess, both self and possessions. It's a mistake to adorn the Buddha world with too many treasures. It's getting to a point where Amidabha Buddha's Pure Land, the heavenly realms, all kinds of places, are all turning into expensive hells. Please, Sudhana, never look for truth in any such places. First of all, there must be no possessions. Look closely. The spirits here have no private goods or jewels, of course, no clothes beside what they are wearing now. The world is not a matter of owning things; it's birth and death."

Sudhana listened.

"Sudhana, I'll sing you an old song. Do you want to hear it?"

“Yes, I'll listen. I'll listen very carefully.”

The spirit Anrak began to sing with a very gentle, girlish voice. The stars in the heavens drew a little closer.

Long ago in the capital city of Sara, before the virtuous youth was born, everything was out of joint. Streams, ponds, and wells had all dried up. Fields and gardens lay barren, nothing but a plain strewn with bones.

Then that youth appeared, like fresh rain falling from dark clouds, and everything in the southern climes came alive. Diseases vanished from one and all, hungry stomachs were filled, captives in prison and chains were freed.

Thus this world gained peace; all the many creatures of this world beheld one another like father and mother, loved one another like sister and brother. All suffering was banished and a craft lost on the widespread seas found the pole star that it sought.

Sudhana began to sing the song together with Anrak. One person's song is pregnancy, two people singing is birth.

“Sudhana, let's be going,” Anrak spoke a little roughly, “Come on, let's go. I'm going to leave here with you this evening. I want to leave the sacred gloom inside this cave and become a wanderer like those stars up in the sky. . . Only I won't be going to visit people like you.”

Sudhana set out in the footsteps of Anrak, along a hard rocky ridge path gleaming in the starlight, up hill and down, on and on. The spirit spoke more humbly now: “I have no truth to teach you. You are a pilgrim of truth, but you've found someone who has no truth to teach. I'll have to learn from you. Times have changed, spirits now have to hear truth from humans, have to go looking for truth. I've been listening too. Far up there in the north, did you know there's a teacher appeared they call Shakyamuni Buddha? He goes from place to place making everyone equal, the four castes, the eight, the forty, the four hundred. . . I'd love to have the job of guarding that teacher's couch. But really I want to help every living creature, not just one Buddha. There are lots of people to serve the Buddha, without me. But foolish creatures and foolishness are lonely things. There's no pain worse than loneliness, Sudhana.”

Sudhana uttered not a single word; it was as though his lips were sealed. He could not help being deeply moved by Anrak's words, he found what he said quite breathtaking. He was struck with wonder at the thought of how many teachers there were in the world, this teacher and that, and those not called teachers but teachers all the same. The world was absolutely full of teachers. If you stayed with just one teacher, that was to reduce him to a puff of air.

Sudhana spoke the praises of Anrak.

Master,

wise Anrak.

In sending me off,

in taking your leave

and coming with me,

you have abandoned your post,

you have left a holy place.

Master,

wise Anrak,

as I travelled in the south

I received many favors

from a host of teachers

but how can I ever repay the favor

you have shown me here this night?

Master,

you are a father to me.

*Wisest Anrak,
stay with me
forever.
Master ... Master.*

Tears welled up in his eyes; starlight came dropping down and turned them into starlit tears. The tears flowed down, hot tears. Somewhere a horse could be heard neighing. Anrak, following behind Sudhana now, pronounced not a single word more. He seemed to have been struck quite dumb.

45. Journey through the void

Sudhana accompanied Anrak to the region where his comrade Prabha lived. There too hosts of spirits were rushing about. Sudhana had never realized that there were so many spirits of darkness and night in the world. He had imagined that all the world's work was done by day, that at night there was nothing to be done but sleep. He had imagined that only people unable to get to sleep stayed awake at night, that only guards on night watch stayed awake at night, that only bats fluttered among the night-time branches. Yet if the night, which after all represents half the total of our time, is truly part of life in the world, it is only right that there should be tasks occupying the hours of darkness. The spirits of this place were charged with darkness and night, to say nothing of the day-time shadows. Their work was other than the tasks and travails of the day, however. All they had to do was welcome the night, take charge of it, and savor it. For the night was a silence, in which the spirits of darkness embraced and were embraced by that loving stillness like a mother and child joined in a single embrace.

As soon as Prabha saw Anrak, there was an explosion of joy like the outburst after anticipation when two blind lovers meet.

“Anrak! After all this time!”

“Prabha! Yes, it's been such a long time.”

They began by bowing with joined hands in formal greeting, then seized each others hands, but finding that still insufficient, they ended up with arms wrapped round each other's waist. It was just like human affection. Spirits are indeed the shadows of human beings.

“I got bored sitting on king Mani's lion throne all the time, so I've run away like this. It's wonderful to see you, Anrak!”

Their friendship knew no limits. It was Anrak who broke off their effusions and started to talk.

“How come you're strolling around down here on the ground, instead of travelling far and wide through the void? Aren't you supposed to be up there, Prabha?”

“Yes, that's right. My way lies through the void. Only if you spend too much time up there, you forget about everything except the creatures of the realm of formlessness. Yet those are mere abstractions, unless they are related to the creatures down here on this earth, here in the southern Indian kingdoms. That's why I prefer the *nirmanakaya* (*body in which the Buddha appears on earth*) to the *dharmakaya* (*true body of essential Buddhahood*). Yet in the end, compared with the *dharmakaya* (*body of essential Buddhahood*), the *sambhoga-kaya* (*body of Buddhas in paradise*) or the *nirmanakaya* (*body of their earthly incarnations*) are mere physical objects, nothing more.”

“So that's why you're walking about down here in your own region, this homeland of spirits, then.”

“Ha ha, that's about the shape of it, yes.”

“Well!”

Neither of them was taking any notice at all of Sudhana, standing there beside them. Anrak and Prabha had forgotten him in the joy of their renewed friendship. Now Anrak presented him to Prabha.

“Look, I've brought the loveliest human in the whole world to see you. He's one for truth. He'd already gained illumination into bodhisattva ways, but off he's set again, visiting far away kingdoms asking still more about bodhisattva ways. This fellow frequents the Buddha's truth both inside and out. He's met robbers and whores, good people and bad, young girls and wizened old men. Thanks to them he's come now to visit shady spirits like you and me, who live in the dark places.”

“A tremendous fellow, indeed. Welcome.”

“Wise Prabha, having come here, I want to have you as my teacher while I am here, and even after I leave again.”

Sudhana joined hands with a deep feeling of reverence. Anrak took his leave of them.

“Well, I'll be going back now. Sudhana, have a good stay here, and a safe further journey. I am gladder to have met you than if I had met a Buddha, gladder than a weary horse on finding water.”

Prabha took Sudhana by the hand and led him up onto the spacious top of a sparsely wooded hill. There he heaved a sigh.

“You humans are so profound. I mean, there's so much truth contained in just your pretty little face.”

He had gained a complete impression of Sudhana's appearance despite the darkness, and now he gazed happily at him. With his breath, Prabha spread out in the dark void an image of the whole natural world. He could see the form of every kind of living creature portrayed there. It was like a vast fresco painted by the void, only the fresco was alive.

“Sudhana, this isn't a picture or charade that I've deliberately made up for myself. It's the true picture of all living creatures. By making all creatures visible in this way, I'm able to help at least a little those who are suffering as I traverse the immensities of the void. Compared to the Buddha up there in the north at the foot of the Himalayas, you might find what I'm doing quite ludicrously childish. Yet for me, the small deeds I am doing for people's benefit are the greatest there can be.”

“Wise Prabha, master, you cannot imagine how happy I am, listening to what you say.”

“Many thanks. I would like to set your joy as a crown on my brow.”

Prabha was a spirit of darkness, but also of revelation. He revealed all this world's distinct parts and the shadows of those distinctions. He revealed shining images of the shadows of sun, moon, and stars, revealed images that varied with individual creatures' hearts and minds, revealed creatures' differing images and identical images, revealed their varying hues, revealed the dignity contained in certain images, revealed images of those who could move freely at will anywhere in the ten-directioned worlds, revealed all living creatures growing from childhood, revealed images of supernatural beings speeding at random like clouds, and images utterly fulfilled after being of benefit to other living creatures. And far more. Images were revealed of creatures' good karma merit being fostered, images of the dharma being upheld, images of bodhisattvas' extraordinary vows being made, images of light illuminating the ten-directioned world, images of the world's darkness being dissolved by Buddhas' light. Images of wisdom were revealed and of pure-natured bodies freshly detached from every atom of dust, images of all creatures being brought to understanding, images of distinctions being dissolved in light, images of the final stage when all passions are gone, images so strong they could never be broken, images of Buddhas' power, images of truth throwing off all constraints and exulting like a galloping horse.

That revelation gave Sudhana more than enough knowledge for a whole lifetime about the multitude of living beings and Buddhas. Sudhana quite lost all thought of himself, inebriated by the sight of the realities of the ten-directioned universe revealed by Prabha. Having once seen the various revelations offered by the spirit Prabha, Sudhana realized that ten different kinds of mind had arisen within himself, not precisely categorized but arising as ten different varieties of thought. The first was a thought that the spirit Prabha was actually Sudhana himself. The second was an insight into the fact that the spirit Prabha was thinking of himself as Sudhana. Third, the spirit Prabha was a thought exposing bodhisattva works. Fourth, the spirit Prabha was a thought achieving the Buddha's laws. Fifth, the thought that the spirit Prabha was doing great good to Sudhana. Sixth was a thought making it possible to perfect the works of Samantabhadra, casting off all else. Seventh, a thought containing all the blessings and wisdom needed to follow bodhisattva ways. Eighth, a thought that the spirit Prabha would become more

illustrious than he was as yet. Ninth, a thought that the spirit Prabha contained the roots of a new karma of good merits. Tenth, a thought that thanks to the spirit Prabha, he would gain much and be enabled to advance along bodhisattva ways.

These thoughts in Sudhana communicated themselves to the spirit Prabha and became a power enabling him and all other bodhisattvas with him to perform innumerable bodhisattva works.

“Many thanks, Sudhana. Thanks to you, I am now enabled to advance along bodhisattva ways. At last I shall be able to do what I have been so much wanting to do! As a token of my gratitude, let me tell you about my past experiences, shall I?”

Sudhana nodded, his eyes shining brightly. The spirit continued in song, as normal. Spirits may begin a discussion or a debate, or any other kind of conversation, with spoken words, but at a given point they always turn to song. Actually, the rhythms of song are contained within their words from the outset, and finally emerge.

Long ago, infinite aeons ago, utterly long ago, there was a world known as The Universal Light.

In the course of one aeon in that world ten thousand Buddhas were born and there was one kingdom whose king was called The Light of Monks.

That king was just but fierce and the people feared him. His prisons were forever full. Even for slight faults, for minor crimes, even completely innocent people were taken to fill his prisons.

His son, Heart of Monks, felt sorry for those prisoners. He resolved to appeal to the king: “Consider those unfairly treated, those captured, those accused, the innocent in prison. Hear their groans, the groans of their families. There are prisons and prisons: all the outside world too is one vast prison. So with a compassionate heart, behold your people's bitter tears.” Then he knelt before his father.

The king leaped up, and exclaimed impetuously: “Seize this rascal at once, guilty of a crime against his father's laws, and kill him in the harshest way.” His father having commanded that, the crown prince suddenly became a criminal condemned to death.

Then the Buddha of the Dharma-wheel came and loosed the chains of the prince and all in prison, scattering them over the face of the earth. At which they all attained liberation and remained as inheritors of the Dharma-wheel Buddha, serving unfailingly all the Buddhas coming after him, serving them in successive births and death, births and deaths until they, like me, became for a while the spirits of night, of darkness, of daytime shadows, of the gloom in caves, and even in mouse holes, before setting out once again on bodhisattva ways.

The spirit Prabha sang thus far, then stopped as if there was nothing more to be said.

“I do not know where you are to go next. Henceforth you alone must decide what you will do in these perilous lands. After your visit, the spirits in the bodhi-tree groves and training places, and all the other spirits too, will stay spirits no longer. All will enter the ocean of bodhisattva being; I too, of course. . . . So goodbye now, wherever it is you're going!”

The spirit Prabha left with rapid steps, as if called away on urgent business; Sudhana had no time for more than a single cry:

“Farewell, master.”

Where should he go? The early morning birds were beginning to flutter their wings, and take flight. They flew up into the red glowing sky that precedes the sunrise.

“To start with, in the direction the birds are flying!”

Sudhana accordingly set out in that direction. The slopes of the highlands near the lower reaches of the Godapari river were waiting for him.

46. Returning northward

Sudhana was already familiar with the place he was heading for. Yet it did not simply lie beyond the nearby mountains. He was finally leaving the lands of the south. The Godapari river basin formed a broad expanse of arable land capable of furnishing three crops of rice in a year, but usually the land was left fallow after being planted once or twice. Sudhana crossed a section of fields left idle. In the course of his itinerary through the south he had almost never felt hungry or tired, thanks to the magical or supra-real powers of his various masters; but now he was leaving behind the primitive times of those southern realms and reverting to the real Sudhana again.

The further he trudged, the longer the road seemed. His feet were blistered and at times his legs ached to the bone. When he rested, then forced himself to stand up though he was longing to rest longer, his whole body felt heavy. In addition to all that, mosquitos and other tropical insects were busily sucking blood from his shoulders and legs. If reality away from his masters' supra-reality was like this, what must be the torments of the people living in the realities of hell? Buddha living must involve not just spiritual preaching about such people, but advancing along a political path, the bodhisattva path, where you were supplied with the strength it took to redress that reality. Constantly confronted with such thoughts, Sudhana acquired a new degree of fervor for the bodhisattva way that he had been longing for, day and night alike.

Arriving in Kurnul, where there were large deposits of anthracite, Sudhana was able to beg a lift down the river on a log raft. He had reached the region where the southern tip of the Dekkan highlands rose from the plains. The river pierced its way through a thick jungle swarming with wild beasts and alligators, before bringing Sudhana without mishap to the main market along the lower reaches of the Godapari river. The Bengal Sea opened immediately in front of him. This was the trading port for the region of Amarabathi.

Here Sudhana was delighted to come across Mani again. Now that he had lost the power emanating from his masters, he could no longer understand a word of Tamil or Telagu. Still, since this was a trading port, he was able to ask his way thanks to a few words of the universal business language that people used. Loneliness comes at the point where language fails; when words cease, no neighbors remain. It was at just such a moment that he came across the lovely lady Mani. She had been the mistress of a local trader but had recently left him, after he had given her innumerable presents of gold and precious stones.

“Our destinies will not allow us to meet only once.”

Mani addressed the little pilgrim courteously and with deep seriousness: “Follow me,” so Sudhana followed her, happy to see her again, but with a degree of anxiety. After travelling alone for a long time, anxiety on meeting someone is only natural, but this was something different. The odor of her heavy scent made Sudhana's heart race. What could be the secret of Mani's power? She had men wherever she went, yet her beauty remained rock-firm, utterly unshuffled.

They penetrated deep into the port's teeming alleys before climbing up to a tall building perched on a hill with a view overlooking the whole bay. It was a banquet hall much frequented by rich merchants, where good wines and delicacies of land and sea cooked in Bengali style were always available. Mani ordered the special party menu, where thirty-six different kinds of food were served at a vast table.

“Now, if you're going to leave the world of darkness down here in the south and head northwards to the world of light, you'd better eat some of this delicious food. There's no truth in hunger. Truth is when you can eat well and relax properly. Isn't that right?”

Sudhana made no reply, but began slowly to eat just one or two of the dishes that kept

being served.

“You're really a special kind of person.”

Mani stopped eating and gazed fixedly at Sudhana. Sudhana restrained himself. One of the guests at another table walked across. He was the vice-governor of Amarabathi.

“If you leave here and go north, I suppose the Aryan bastards will soon be falling for you in a big way. Those scoundrels know nothing except how to fight, steal people's land, kill, rob, and enslave. While they're busy panting in delight at the pleasures of your lovely flesh, we southern Dravidians will march in and take back the land that used to belong to us. Then we will unite the whole world and make you our goddess. You're surprised I think of making a lovely woman from Punjab in the north a goddess in the south? But if you look at all the gods and spirits of the earth, at the thirty-three orders of deities filling the heavens above the earth, to say nothing of all the other spirits, divinities, gods and goddesses that exist, you'll find that they were all human beings back long ago.”

Mani remained dumbstruck.

“So have a good time with your pretty boy here. I'm sure you must be fed up with old men like me. After all, you walked out on Huncha, and he's the wealthiest man in town.”

The mockery was embarrassing to listen to, but Mani put a bold face on it. To begin with she had frowned, but then she seemed to have resolved to take all the mockery he cared to offer, and went so far as to harbor a slight smile as she dipped a piece of mutton into a bowl of sauce and nibbled at it. When the vice-governor finally left, she even laughed lightly, her eyes at the same time mocking and inviting.

“Oh dear, poor Sudhana! Come on now, eat up. All he said may be true, or it may not. A dog's bark may be truth to one pair of ears and a dog's bark to another, it all depends. Come on, eat up.”

Mani poured an unfamiliar infusion into his tea cup. Sudhana sipped it while tasting dishes of fish and meat. A subtle fragrance rose from the tea. Actually, it was not tea at all, but a very rare kind of wine that was originally only drunk by the queen of the great kingdom of Asimakha in the Dekkan highlands but was now widely drunk by aristocrats and wealthy people. Sudhana grew happily drunk. The lady Mani was drunk already. Her low voice began to flow in a captivating song. She was second to none, not only as regards the beauty of her face and body, and her remarkable erotic and amorous skills, but also in singing and dancing. Her song was perhaps about her own destiny in life. Sorrow and darkness nestled within it.

*Rolling low, flying high,
most strange, the way handless dice
vanquish people with hands.
The sight of scattered dice on the gaming table
inspires an icy feel
but the magical powers contained within them
kindle a fire in the gambler's breast
like a blazing brazier.*

*Such is the end of the woman
who promised a hundred years to a gambler.
Along the endless road of wandering,
her mother's heart broke in a thousand pieces
on account of her children.
The accumulated debt weighs heavily on her
as she seeks wealth down roads
she would rather not take,
plotting secret schemes of whoredom.*

Such a woman glances at other people's homes by night.

She did not sing the whole song through, for Sudhana was overpowered by the wine. Instead, she summoned the manager of the high building and asked for a room where they could rest. She held Sudhana in a tight embrace as she helped him into the room; it was cool on account of the palm grove directly behind it.

“Ah!”

Mani sighed deeply as she gazed down at Sudhana's supine body.

“Purest man I have ever met! Most noble and most handsome man! I regret nothing, though I were to be sent to hell, never to emerge again!”

Tears poured from her eyes, tears of desire. For a long time Sudhana hovered in a state somewhere near dreaming, then he awoke. He was naked and his body, that had been soaked in sweat, had been wiped clean. He began to remember. The lady Mani, who had come with him to the tower, was nowhere to be seen. Three golden bracelets lay at his feet. He jumped up and inspected himself. There was nothing special. He felt refreshed, as though someone had chastely washed him. A faint perfume rose from his skin; it smelt like the perfume that Mani used.

Sudhana left the room and returned to the tall building where their banquet had been spread. Only one group of customers was left. The manager greeted him as he left. He could not help feeling somewhat lonely. He called for a carriage and rode down to the harbor.

“At last I have completed all my travels down here in the south. And everything I have learned in the south has proved useless. Now I'll head north and look for more truth, then I'll abandon that, too. Along bodhisattva ways even truth and dharma, even Buddhahood and bodhisattva nature, are obstacles. I'll bury myself in the midst of all creatures, racing and bounding like a small animal. Ah, the holiness of that mingling.”

Sudhana boarded a coastal sailing ship that was leaving the Amarabathi port of Masulli for Bijaga. It was a merchant ship. The wind filling the sail drummed on the canvas with a dull sound which combined with the sound of the water dashing against the ship's prow as it plowed through the waves, restoring Sudhana to some sense of the sea's reality.

The trader took two days to make the journey from Masulli to Bijaga. To the east stretched the ocean that knew no end, to the west was the shore beyond which could be seen dark green forests, with the lighter green of fields between the trees, and stretches of sand. The sea in the Bay of Bengal was the same deep blue as the great ocean at the farthest southern tip of the continent that Sudhana had once glimpsed from the western extremity of the Khoz mountain range in the region of Cochin. His eyes were full of the sky, bluer than blue with an azure hue that seemed to sob.

Sudhana finally reached the port of Bijaga late at night, three days later; they had been obliged to make a detour to avoid pirates. Torches were burning here and there along the harbor wharfs. He took his leave of the ship's captain and disembarked ahead of anyone else. He had been suffering from sea-sickness but as soon as his feet touched dry land he began to recover. He made his way to an inn frequented by sailors and lay down. He felt very tired and fell into a deep sleep at once. Sudhana fell sick in that wharfside inn and was obliged to spend a second night there. The boatmen generously gave him medicine and he improved a lot after taking it.

Sudhana heard the sailors talking about many other lands. There was nowhere they could call home, they had no final goal; they would drop anchor in port, spend a few days resting, with wine, women, and song, then sail off across the seas to some other distant port. Among the sailors were Negroes from a remote continent, and Arabs who had left their flocks of sheep in the desert and run away to sea. Like all sailors, they had a host of tales to tell. Sudhana was especially interested to hear one of them tell how he had once seen the bodhisattva of the sea, Avalokiteshvara, rising above the horizon.

Sudhana decided to prolong his stay there by another day, less on account of his

sickness than because of these tales. But the sailor who had seen Avalokiteshvara was unable to stay chattering any longer in the inn, his boat being due to leave, and there was no one else Sudhana could hear that kind of talk from. He went out onto the quayside, bought himself a bowl of stewed fruit, then returned and climbed up onto his hard bunk, where he lay down and sank into the dreams that were waiting for him. Sudhana dreamed that he had already reached the north, the land of Koshala, the banks of the Ganges, the Punjab to the west, and even, beyond Kapilavastu, the Lumbini grove where Siddhartha was born.

. . . Seen from a distance, the sal trees of the Lumbini grove looked like green clouds clustered together. In their shade it was always cool. In the grove stood one tree that was man-made; leaves, branches, trunk, all were artificial. Clothes that had belonged to dead people were hanging randomly from its branches. Sudhana found that very funny, like a kind of children's game. Twenty million billion woodland spirits were gathered about precisely that tree. It was enough to inspire immense awe. The main goddess of the grove, Sutejo-mandala-ratishri, was throned below the tree with bright beams of light issuing from her eyes. Sudhana approached until he was standing before her.

There was an enormous amount of business going on before her. Innumerable goddesses were gathered there, and each of them was all the time hastening away somewhere at Sutejo's bidding. She was constantly talking about bodhisattvas being born in the Bengal sea. As she did so, the goddesses around her became bodhisattvas and one by one sank into the sea. It was an immensely solemn sight.

“Go quickly, go quickly. Someone is eagerly waiting for you. Go quickly.”

She kept urging them away. Although goddesses were all the time turning into bodhisattvas and vanishing into the sea, still an innumerable crowd of goddesses ready to become bodhisattvas remained. Sutejo stopped speaking for a moment. The stream of goddesses turning into bodhisattvas and vanishing into the sea stopped as well. Sudhana came close to her and bowed low.

“Holy, most holy, you open the bodhisattva way and send bodhisattvas to their place of work. I still do not understand how to attain the fullness of bodhisattva awakening and be born a bodhisattva performing bodhisattva works. I have travelled all over the southern lands, now I am here.”

“I already know you. Your name is Sudhana.”

Her voice was very bright. It was so beautiful, you longed to absorb it. Perhaps all living creatures' sufferings were abolished by the mere fact that such a beautiful voice existed in the world. The extinction of pain! Surely that is in itself a lovely song.

Sudhana's dream continued, although meanwhile in Bijaga the night was nearly over.

. . . The goddess Sutejo was like a mother in her kindness to Sudhana. Her heart overflowed with a familiar gladness that seemed to be saying, “My son has returned!”

“My dear child, what a hard time you have had on your journeys. I made a vow in a long-ago life that means I have to take care of every bodhisattva as they come to birth. Having made such a vow, I found myself born in this lovely Lumbini grove near Kapilavastu in one small mountain kingdom, part of Jambu-dvipa to the south of Mount Sumeru, below the four heavens of this world of pain. After I had spent a century here waiting for one bodhisattva to come down, he arrived at last from the Tushita heaven. It was the Buddha Shakyamuni. Just before he was born, this grove was filled with omens, solemn in their sacredness.

“First, the ground grew smooth, pits and bumps disappeared, all became an expression of equality. Second, the thorns and pebbles and unclean things in the grove vanished, and instead there was soft ground composed of rich humus, expressing the fragrance of the earth. Third, the grove's sal trees put down roots until they reached water deep underground, signifying the mind that prevents easy falls or destruction. Fourth, the fragrance issuing from the ground indicated that the earth is the site of a better fragrance than the heavens. Fifth, the

way the forest was adorned with festive banners, scrolls, and every kind of solemn magnificence signified that this world is a festival of ecstasy. Sixth, all the plants burst into flower, expressing the highest beauty. The seventh omen was similar.

“Eighth, all the spirits of the realm of desire and the realm of pure form that were in this world of pain, the heavenly beings, the sea spirits, yaksa demons, celestial Gandharvas, Asura demons, the mythical Garudas and Kimnaras, the snake-headed Mahoragas and the horse-headed Kumbhandas, all the major divinities, gathered reverently in serried ranks, symbolizing wholeness. Ninth, the heavenly nymphs from the realm of desire, all that were present in the entire Buddha cosmos, the female dragons, yakshas, Gandharvas, all the female spirits stood facing the Pillakcha tree. Tenth, all the Buddhas in the four directions each emitted light from their navels, illuminating the world far and wide, manifesting the birth of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Seeing these ten different portents, I was so happy that I leaped for joy.

“At last, a new born babe issued from the side of the lady Maya, the wife of the captain of Kapilavastu; it all seemed like a shadow, an hallucination, a dream, a spell, even the newborn child Buddha's words, “I am the greatest being above and below the heavens,” spoken after he had walked seven steps, felt like a dream. Only after all that, did I awaken out of those shadows, hallucinations, dreams, and spells, and bowed down before the spot beneath the tree where the child had been born.

“My dear child, I can do no more than guess at the emancipations contained in such portents, you must visit a teacher who knows the higher things. In your presence, I am nothing more than a leaf beaten from a tree by a slight shower. Lovely little visitor, I pledge myself to a day in another incarnation when we can devote ourselves together for the benefit of all living beings; share my pledge as you go your way.”

Sudhana felt infinite respect and affection for Sutejo, goddess of the grove that flowed around him like a stream and he spoke a song in her praise:

*Oh teacher,
you are just like a mother to me.
How can it be that I should learn
dharma-teaching from just one Buddha?
I must visit ten thousand Buddhas,
ten billion Buddhas,
learn ten billion dharmas,
comprehend ten billion times.
Oh teacher,
I kneel beneath your skirts,
I kneel before your foot,
kneeling
not in the submission of a slave
but in love for the dharma
and bodhisattva's will.
Accept me here,
oh teacher,
teacher just like a mother to me;
accept my reverence,
accept my fervent heart.
as the birds sing
in this lovely holy grove,
as the birds fly
in this grove,
accept my heart.*

47. Gopa

In this way, Sudhana had left Bijaga down in the south far behind him and had already visited Sutejo, the great goddess of the Lumbini grove far to the north, for his dreams too were reality. The following morning, to his joy, there was a boat leaving, and he hurried down to the quay. Normally, no boat would have been heading north. The next port was Suba at the mouth of the river Mahanadi. According to the sailors, there was unrest along the frontier with the kingdom of Magadha, that ran between Suba and the various branches forming the delta of the Ganges. Magadha shared a common frontier with the kingdom of Angka on all four sides, but it was not an entirely peaceful settlement.

The ship Sudhana boarded was extremely old. To make matters worse, it was overloaded with freight as well as passengers; the sea was rough, too. Their present trip being extremely perilous on account of the unruly nature of the northern parts of the Bengal sea, boats were reluctant to leave port, but when the merchants offered to pay a higher rate their boat set sail at once.

The ship's captain was an old man who had spent more than fifty years at sea, yet he was still hale and hearty, with a white beard two spans long beneath his chin. He somehow set everyone's mind at rest. One whole day and night passed, it was only at daybreak on the following morning that the waves breaking against the ship's prow took on a gentler note, the sea mingling now with the fresh water emerging from the estuary of the river Mahanadi. It was still quite dark when Sudhana disembarked, together with a few other people and a team of oxen.

Sudhana wandered through the streets of Suba in the early light. The streets were deserted, still strewn with refuse left from the day before. He headed for Kharak, on the indications of a merchant he had sailed with. He had decided to take the mountain road across Magadha, descending by way of Gaya and Rajagriha. Fortunately, he had two companions on the journey; he had passed mountain forests and steep cliffs so many times in the southern lands that he had had enough of them. Once past the mountain ranges of Magadha, endless plains spread beyond. The Ganga, uniting with a host of other rivers, would become the Ganges and flow on powerfully before once again dividing into the dozens of separate branches forming its delta and emptying into the Bengal Sea. Step by step, the little pilgrim was approaching home.

In Kharak, they hastened to purchase food and medicine, and relief supplies, as well as herbs to repel snakes and wild animals. The two merchants also equipped themselves with weapons to ward off attacks from bandits. One of them, called Jihol, was on his way to Sarnat, the other was a barter-tradesman on his way to Koshala on the far side of the Hindustan plains. Yet neither was transporting much in the way of goods; their baggage must have been dispatched by another route. One of them seemed to be a drug-dealer, judging from the characteristic odor hanging about him.

Jihol looked to be about forty, the drug-smelling fellow must be around thirty; both were much older than Sudhana. Sudhana had a rich store of past memories; he had only to summon them up to banish boredom completely. He had momentarily forgotten his two companions, immersed as he was in recollections of his journeys.

“Hey, young fellow! Let's rest for a while.”

Jihol spoke. They had been walking for a long time and were at the top of a rise that offered a good place to rest. All kinds of flowers were in blossom on its slopes. The sight of a crimson snapdragon reminded him of Mani; he shook his head. Jihol had the soft gentle face of a mountain sheep. He offered Sudhana something to stave off his hunger, and some water.

“Just take a little. Being too full when you're walking is sometimes worse than being hungry.”

Where walking was concerned, Sudhana was second to none, but Jihol was well acquainted with the ways of the road. He had already spent thirty years as a wandering merchant, from the time he was fifteen until now, going to every possible part of north, east, and southern India, as well as the western regions along the Indus. He had never once cheated a dealer or anyone. As they set out once more, they began to open their hearts to one another. Beyond the streets of Kharak, once past the forest road to the west, they reached the Mahanadi river once again. The three travellers found a small boat making its way upstream against the current. The boatman was an old man with only one eye, who looked like someone with many tales to tell. His face and neck were deeply scarred; there were obvious traces of iron fetters on his wrists, too, as he plied the pole.

“And why might you all be going this way?” he asked, as if interrogating them.

“Because it's the fastest way through to the plains,” the drug peddler replied.

“Fast, it may be, but once you're across Shiva lake, you're into a forest teeming with tigers. Then beyond that, the road to the north takes you up over steep mountain ridges. One prince of Magadha declared the whole region a hunting preserve and forbade anyone to enter it, so that it's become a paradise for wild animals. And yet, no, as a matter of fact, up in those mountains there are more hermits than there are tigers.”

Jihol realized that by hermits, he actually meant gangs of bandits, and that the boatman was charged with bringing the bandits supplies and news from the estuary and lower reaches of the river. The regular thrusts of the pole soon drove the boat far inland. From the banks of the river there were moments when bird calls sounding like human voices would come bubbling up, but there was no sign of human life anywhere until suddenly they glimpsed a column of pale smoke rising from a grove of trees. Jihol gaped.

“What's that over there?”

The old boatman replied, “It's a place where people live.”

He headed in that direction and made the boat fast. The three of them followed him ashore. A naked, savage-looking youth advanced towards them. He cast a piercing glance at the travellers, and questioned the boatman with his eyes.

“Merchants heading for the northern plains. I'm taking them up as far as lake Shiva.”

The man spoke : “Don't you know that's forbidden territory? Didn't you realize?”

“I knew, of course. But the boss doesn't have his headquarters up there any more. He's moved to the gold mining region down south.”

“What? You mean he's just dumped us here?”

“Not at all; this is still part of the chief's territory. Only nowadays the boss doesn't purloin things, unless they belong to the rich, or government officials; he only confiscates regular tributes or stolen goods being transported out of weak countries by more powerful ones. Apart from that, he's given the order not to touch anything.”

It was obvious from this conversation that the boatman was in direct contact with the robber leader's headquarters, and that the savage-looking man had been left in sole charge of this portion of the river bank. The fellow had a rough way of speaking; it seemed he was browbeating the old man, but it was not really so. The old boatman was of a much higher rank, for sure. The man started to murmur to himself.

“They say a saint they're calling the Buddha has arisen up there in the Himalayas. Times have come when saints will even start appearing among thieves, I reckon. Our chief's a saint, a real one. . . He'll end up as a king, taking control of all the riches in the whole of India and using them to feed the people. He'll establish a kingdom. He's already in secret collusion with the queen of Patna; the king up there's a mere dummy. If Patna joins with the regions controlled by the boss, even Magadha will be obliged to pay tribute at every twist and turn. More than that. He'll be sending a viceroy to take control of the kingdom of Ashimakha in the south.”

The boatman's eyes glittered, his voice was sonorous. This was no runaway ignoramus of a peasant; he was more likely to be one of the boss's chief lieutenants. Moving all over Kharak and the Mahanadi river in the guise of a boatman in charge of a tiny craft, he kept in touch with robbers and leaders alike.

The two of them went into a hut. Time passed and still they did not emerge. The remaining band of young toughs was observing Sudhana and the two merchants. Near the mud hut they could see mounds of supplies and a store of rice covered with dried grass. There were more youths in that direction.

Sudhana had a sudden insight. The whole world was being shaken. Existing nations were declining, writhing in the throes of some kind of new power. Conflicts were arising in many places. Life and property were being destroyed by warfare. Little Sudhana's lifetime had begun in the midst of just such a chaos. Now, returning northwards, he was finding the world to be a truly frightening place. Even bandit gangs were establishing kingdoms. But after all, the founders of nations were all brigands anyway. Kings were nothing more than bandit-leaders. A kingdom was something its chiefs played with and disposed of as they liked. There was no call to consider any nation sacred. So-called kingdoms were the first thing that had to be abolished in any truly sacred age. It didn't matter how much a bandit chieftain might favor the poor and humble; the moment he became a king he was bound to fall into corruption. Sudhana's heart, guided by truth, was unshakable but he wondered sadly how much truth could achieve in the face of the world's great disorder. The two merchants were looking very worried. At last the old boatman appeared. The naked fellow stayed inside.

“Let's be off.”

They boarded the boat. Lake Shiva was a beautiful spot. Jihol lamented how the world could contain such beautiful places hidden away, serving only as the hiding place of brigands. Sudhana merely felt himself blessed to have been born in India at all. Lake Shiva was once, long ago, the site of a nation's capital city; the spirits of the place had drawn the city down and this lake appeared in its place. That explained its name. It seemed that the disaster had been explained as being due to the wrath of Shiva, the goddess of destruction. Unexpectedly, the old boatman knew any number of things.

“The lake may be beautiful, it contains thousands and thousands of alligators; it's also known as the lake of hell.”

The boat in which they were to cross the lake was not the tiny craft in which they had come upstream. At a wharf by the lakeside they found a relatively large boat, capable of holding a fair amount of baggage. It was a rowing boat with two men assigned to it, the old boatman took charge as captain of the crew. The ripples on the lake spread brightly like so many mouthfuls of water. The lake breeze began to rise as the boat went bobbing on, with nothing to restrain it. One of the dreaded alligators scraped the boat's prow with its rugged back and vanished into the distance. The old man laughed as he shouted out.

“Once we're across, suppose I clap you in chains and lock you up for a few days?”

“What?”

The drug-dealer's face turned an earthy color.

“Ha ha ha, don't worry. I'll get you safely onto the northern shore of Lake Shiva. I've never once been known to harm anybody. I don't commit great sins like those high brahmins and soldiers, who walk around putting on airs while they have their slaves beaten to death all the time. Their sins are so heavy that very soon now they'll be wiped from the face of the earth.

“You'll already have guessed that I'm in charge of this area, one of the leaders of the mountain hermits. As to why I'm telling you this about myself, well, there are two reasons. First, because I want you to know that we are not murderous bandits, as the brahmins and ruling classes claim, and second, because the time has come when it is alright for the world to know about me. We're going to establish the greatest nation in the world, covering the whole

of central and southern India. It's already been founded. One day you'll be its subjects, like me.”

“Did you hear that the Buddha has appeared up in the north?”

The old man nodded.

“That teaching, once it spreads across the world, will turn the whole world into Buddha's kingdom. The Buddha is the teacher of past, present, and future, of the realms of desire, of pure form, and of formlessness.”

The old bandit boatman had attained a bodhisattva heart. Any who boarded his boat attained the same heart. On the northern shore of lake Shiva there was a well-built wharf. Several boats were moored to it.

“We'll land here.”

48. Back in the north

Sudhana and Jihol found themselves alone on the wharfside, at the northern end of the vast expanse of water. The young drug-dealer said he would stay with the old man, and remained in the boat. Perhaps he thought his drug dealing would develop and be protected if he was in collusion with the bandits. He seemed to have plans regarding the distribution of drugs that were due to arrive there soon. The prospect of a sturdy walker like Jihol crossing over to Magadha with Sudhana looked to be a good one. Jihol began to chatter ten to the dozen. He was particularly curious about the Buddha. Sudhana replied cautiously; some questions he avoided, others he answered with a mere look.

The woodlands along the northern shores of lake Shiva, that lay within the frontiers of the kingdom of Magadha, were full of trees belonging to quite different species from those found on the southern shore, while the mountain path they were following was thick with moss and ferns. Birds went carolling ahead of them. The sound of their footsteps ceased as they paused for a while, captivated by the silence cast by the deep shadows reigning in the forest.

Jihol spoke : “Look! There's a town down there. It's Gaya! Gaya!”

“Gaya!” Sudhana echoed the word in his heart. Yet there was a world of difference between the Gaya that so delighted Jihol and Sudhana's Gaya. For Jihol, Gaya had been the home of a woman whose memory was deeply engraved in his heart from the past. Her death had driven Jihol out on his life of roaming. If only that woman, whom he had loved with a deep passion, had remained alive, they would no doubt have gone to live as a happy couple somewhere on the outskirts of Sarnat in the land of Khash. But she had fallen into the river and drowned one day, when a ferry had capsized on the Yamna, a tributary of the Ganga. Jihol visited that spot once every year. He would pray for her repose, then go on to Sarnat, where they had first met, and pray there too. The love inscribed deep in his heart had not faded, despite the passing of time. And although he went hawking his wares through many lands, he had never once had eyes for any other woman; she had been his only love. Now they had passed the crest of the mountains forming the central massif of Magadha, and his love was brought to the boil again by the intense emotion he felt on seeing his love's former home of Gaya far below, surrounded by the groves of trees that covered the plains.

“This time last year, I was here looking down on Gaya. You might say that I exist only because Gaya exists for me to visit once a year. Gaya is my love's capital city. Ah, Gaya!”

Sudhana gazed at Jihol's face; it shone brightly, sending dazzling beams glittering between the forest shadows. He was over forty; his face was marked with a love-longing that resembled sadness, it was a blissful face. A love between man and woman capable of transcending death in this way must surely be a sacred thing. It seemed no different from the unbounded compassion of an illuminated being for all living creatures. If it was permitted to stay fixed in compassion for just one woman, then that could only be a model of all compassion. Plunged in these thoughts, Sudhana looked down at Gaya again.

Gaya was where Shakymuni Buddha attained the ultimate illumination of truth. For Sudhana, Gaya was the sacred place where the most sacred teacher in the world had attained enlightenment; that filled him with a feeling of reverent awe, as if all the teachers he had hitherto met in the course of his travels were met together here.

“Jihol, that town of Gaya is sacred for me too. It's the place where the Buddha grasped the great dharma. My free wandering is all on account of the dharma taught by the Buddha.”

“I want to visit that man you call the Buddha too. I have just one thing I want to ask him: Buddha! What was the world before the dharma you gained understanding of came into being? And what will become of the world now that your dharma has been made widely known, or in the distant future? That's what I want to ask”

Sudhana longed to be able to inspire Jihol with a dream. He seemed full of resolve as he spoke: “The woman from Gaya alive in your heart is really a kind of Buddha.” He continued in song:

*Beneath the sixty-three heavens
below Mount Sumeru,
amidst the host of living creatures
that are not yet perfect in insight,
the love of man and woman
reaches the sixty-third heaven.
For how could the laws governing
this whole Buddha cosmos
exist apart, separate from that love
beneath the sixty-three heavens
below Mount Sumeru?*

It was the kind of song Sudhana sometimes composed and sang to amuse himself. After the song, his heart was full of grave feelings, like someone emotionally old. He had at last set foot once again on northern soil. Kapilavastu, that he had seen in his dream, was now gradually drawing nearer in reality. Yet he still had a long road to travel before he reached there.

The meadowlands of the great Indian plains are endless. There rivers meander like tangled skeins of thread. The horizon, too, stretches endless, seemingly intent on showing that this world itself is unending. Those meadows were the birthplace of the teaching of the equality of all things that Shakyamuni had proclaimed. Sudhana expected to see Gaya appear between the trees at any moment; yet although they had already caught sight of the city from above, now they saw it no more. In the end, the town they had thought they could reach in less than a day turned out to be a good two days' march away.

When Sudhana reached Gaya, the gates were open but it was time for the cows to come out to eat the grass from which the dew had just dried. The soldiers guarding the gate had laid aside their spears; the townsfolk were standing along the roadside inside and outside the city walls. Arriving there, Sudhana was invaded with a sudden feeling that he had come home. Since earliest childhood, he had travelled all over the river plains of the north, growing up in a tribal society where the cow was venerated as a sacred animal. If Shakyamuni chose the elephant rather than the cow to symbolize the dharma, making the elephant a sacred animal, it may have partly been a way of rejecting the brahmans' blind veneration of the cow. When he said that elephants knew their previous incarnations while cows did not, he was expressing a similar idea.

They spent their first night in Gaya in a dyer's shop; the people there were acquaintances of Jihol's. The following day Sudhana would part company with Jihol. He was eager to go on alone across the Indian plains, walking until he reached Kapilavastu, that lay waiting like a kind of fountainhead far ahead of him. From Gaya, Sudhana headed eastward to the royal capital. From there he took various ferries until he arrived at Patna, the capital where all the tributaries of the Ganga were united in a single river. There, Sudhana fell sick from the fatigue of his long journey. The disease gave rise to a sense of insecurity that shook his previous confidence in his own body.

He was surprised to find that the person treating him was a follower of the Buddha. His name was Suthei. For a while he had been a lay devotee attached to a monastery of the Buddha's followers up river to the west in Sarnath, in the forests of Benares. But after the death of his father, who had been a doctor, he had in turn become a famous doctor in the capital of the united river. He was all the time thinking of Shakyamuni. He seemed unwilling to let Sudhana go, begging him to live with him there in Patna. Sudhana replied: “You have left the Buddha's side, that does not mean you have left the Buddha's ever-spreading dharma. Having

once met you, I am surely destined to meet you again. But first I must visit many other lands. Patna alone cannot be my home.”

A few days passed; he was still in need of treatment, but he plucked three leaves from an ash tree close to the house, that was built over the water, put them on his bed, and left secretly. Luckily, the house's little skiff was there; he was able to use it to row to the shore. From there, Sudhana turned and looked back at the house where Suthei had been caring for him. He was just in time to see Suthei himself vanishing behind the blinds, where he had been hiding. Suthei had anticipated Sudhana's departure and had even put the empty skiff ready for him to use. Sudhana suddenly sensed that the pack on his back was somehow heavier. He put a hand inside and found it contained rice for a long journey, medicine, and even a splendid, leather water-bottle. Sudhana's heart was full of a gratitude close to remorse; he found himself unable to leave immediately but lingered for a while before setting out again.

He took the land route along the river bank as far as Vaishalla, where he took a rowing boat upstream to the port of Khushinakara in the land of Malla. Old men and children rode for nothing, and Sudhana still looked like a small child. On the journey upstream from Vaishalla to Khushinakara, Sudhana could not close his eyes for a second, so entranced he was by the landscape, that was more beautiful than anywhere else in India. Yet the old men showed no great interest in the scenery; they just sat there nodding, their faces buried in snowy beards. Perhaps beauty needs to be unfamiliar; they were so accustomed to it all, it was nothing but their ordinary surroundings.

Sudhana was fortunate to meet commoners belonging to the vaysya caste who were leaving Khushinakara and heading northwards. They foresaw that very soon the town would become the site of a conflict between the older tribal leaders and the partisans of the newly arising monarchy, and were taking advantage of a power vacuum provoked by the current insecurity to get away. They had split into small groups of a few dozen people each and were skillfully passing from one grove to the next, escaping from the lack of freedom they had endured in this land they had tilled for so long. Sudhana slipped into the midst of one such group and was now walking farther and farther north, submerged in the towering grass of the plains.

On reaching the northern frontiers of Malla, Sudhana found himself confronting a vast mountain range. Had it come down from the heavens? No, it was the snowy mountains, the Himalayas that all the lands of India revered. The Himalayas! Had not the Buddha himself often come close to them and gazed at the chain of white peaks soaring heavenward, these very peaks? Nothing he had seen in all his travels could compare in majesty with the immensity of the Himalayas. They were more sacred and beautiful than anything he had hitherto seen. They were a teacher far loftier, deeper, and more remote than any of the teachers he had so far met. They were no mere mountains, they were a totality that brought to every person, every heart a sense of fullness. Sudhana composed and sang a poem:

A
O
Ma
Himalayas
A
O
Ma
Himalayas
Set outside this world of pain
Himalayas
By you indeed
The world exists.

A
 O
 Ma
 Om
 Om
 Om
 O Himalayas!
 One who beholds you
 becomes indeed a person,
 becomes a Buddha.
 Om
 Himalayas decked with everlasting snows,
 Himalayas,
 ruling this whole world,
 home of many gods!
 Himalayas turned toward the Buddha
 who has come to the world escorted by those gods.
 No matter where I go henceforth
 I will say I have gazed on the Himalayas,
 I have gazed on the Himalayas.
 I will say
 I gazed at the Himalayas and I wept hot tears
 full of joy and sorrow.

Sudhana stood entranced by the distant view of the snowy mountains, until they were no longer visible in the darkness. The next day he let the other travellers go on their way and entered into deep meditation, sitting facing the mountains alone. At long last the walker had turned into a sitter. All the next day he sat meditating. Filled with truth's joy, he was beyond the bonds of time. He could feel no hunger, did not realize he had stopped breathing when he held his breath, felt no call of nature. So intense was the bliss provoked by the Himalayas. There was no particular reason why he should know that the Buddha or the gods were bliss itself. Sudhana's tears welled out.

Sitting there, he longed ardently to know how a bodhisattva leads all living creatures out along bodhisattva ways. In other words, he gained a further level of illumination into the bodhisattva way about which he had already learned so much in the course of his travels. He recalled Gopa, the Shakya woman of Kapilavastu that the goddess of the Lumbini grove had told him to visit, in the dream he had had beside the sea of Bengal in Kharak. Having now gazed at the mountain home of the gods, Sudhana was seized by a longing to meet the most noble-minded woman in the world. After three days spent before the mountains, Sudhana set out along a highway arriving from the south-west. It was busy with the carts of merchants and people travelling on foot. He even encountered a man from as far away as Lahore in the western Punjab region. Sudhana joined him.

“Where are you going?” he asked

“I'm on my way to Kapilavastu. Of course, ultimately I'll be going back to Punjab.”

“Kapilavastu? That's where I'm going too. I need to meet Gopa, a holy woman of the Shakya clan living there. I have a lot to learn from her.”

“What? Gopa? Lady Gopa of the Shakya clan?” The stranger was astonished. “But I'm on my way to meet that same holy and beautiful lady too.”

Quite unexpectedly the two of them found they shared the same goal. The young man was no ordinary merchant or pilgrim; he possessed a particular grace and depth. He must be about twenty-five. His gaze was penetrating, his expression frank and open. When they reached

the end of the road over the plains and arrived at the river crossing, they found the river in flood, with water pouring down from the direction of Malla. They were unable to cross at once, so they sat beneath a tree, watching the torrent roll swiftly past. Collecting bundles of hay, they prepared a bed for the night. The thick clouds meant that they spent the night without one glimpse of the stars. There were plenty of mosquitos, though. Sometimes waving the mosquitos away, sometimes letting them be, they talked about the experiences each of them had had.

It turned out that the youth was equally someone always on the move, visiting sages and ascetics with long years of study behind them. Only he had had no contact with the Buddha's teachings. He said he had heard something about Shakyamuni; somewhere he had heard how he had walked seven steps at birth and cried out in a loud voice that he was the most exalted person in the world. Nothing more.

The floods abated the next day and they were able to share a boat across with several other travellers. Kapilavastu came into view. The small, tidy town seemed to be beckoning to them. Sudhana's steps were borne along by the wind.

49. Kapilavastu

Sudhana was now in reality walking along the path in the beautiful grove lying between Kapilavastu and the Lumbini grove, that he had seen in his dream. He and his youthful companion advanced toward a spot where a great crowd of young girls were gathering herbs. One girl was guiding them. The young bodhisattva, the lady Gopa came towards them and circumambulated them once to the left in greeting. The maiden herb-gatherers looked incredulous; it was customary for visitors to circumambulate Gopa once, moving to the right, before approaching her.

“Guests who have attained bodhi (awakening) are dispensed from formal observances; I have performed the ritual greeting instead of you. Welcome. Splendid, most splendid, little visitor, walking all this way with never a pause. You too, young visitor from the western world. Does this place please you? Kapilavastu is small and weak as a nation, but when it comes to truth it sheds light like the sun on all the world. Shakyamuni Buddha was born here; some of his family still live here. They too follow the Buddha's teaching as newly discovered truth.”

Gopa's voice was gentle, as if she had never encountered any of this world's pain. A light sari barely veiled her body, whose white flesh showed her to be of Aryan stock. Sudhana was dazzled. He could think of nothing to ask, it all remained locked in the depths of his heart. But Gopa seemed to be able to converse directly with his heart, and she replied directly.

“Good youth, two good youths. You have come here to ask about bodhisattva works and the nature of bodhisattva being. You already have hearts longing for *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* (*perfect universal enlightenment*). When bodhisattvas perfect the practice of the ten laws, they attain a wisdom that resembles Indra's net, where every pearl reflects and contains every other. The first of the ten involves being attentive to the teaching of the sages, like you who have visited so many sages; the second is the attainment of immense faith; the third is the purification of lust into longing; the fourth is the accumulation of wisdom and blessings; the fifth is to pay attention to Buddha's teaching; the sixth is to be always closely serving in the heart all the Buddhas of past, present, and future; the seventh is the faithful performance of bodhisattva works; the eighth is to obtain the blessing of the Buddhas of past, present, and future; the ninth is the emergence of a compassionate heart from a pure heart; the tenth is to cut with a single stroke the cycle of birth and death by the power of prajna (enlightening wisdom).”

Sudhana longed to express his insight to the bodhisattva Gopa as she recited the details of the ten laws.

“Lady bodhisattva of the Shakyas, I would prefer to do without the ten laws you have just recited. For if I become too fascinated by the details, I might concentrate on them and grow attached to the power of the ten laws. I would rather devote myself by the practice of utter freedom in detachment and be like the birds in this grove.”

The man from Lahore standing beside Sudhana appeared deeply impressed by these words. Gopa spoke in a loud voice.

“Wonderful. Wonderful. I have long been enouncing these ten laws; at last I have found someone who really understands them. Today is a great day. A great day. Tomorrow, tomorrow too will be a great day. The future stretches far away. All that remote future is this present day's blessing. Wonderful, little pilgrim.”

The incomparably beautiful Gopa rose. All the maidens who had been sitting around her rose too. The traveller from Punjab spoke up.

“Young Sudhana may be young, but as we were coming here from Khushinagara I discovered that he has attained illuminations of a depth I shall never be able to equal. Yet here in your presence, Sudhana seems to have attained yet one more level of splendor. I think it must be on account of joy at the teaching to which your glory has been added.”

“Wonderful. Pilgrim come from afar, I cannot praise enough your truly humble heart. How long will you stay here?”

“Tomorrow, Sudhana and I must depart from here. We are heading in different directions. I am just setting out on the journey, while Sudhana has always lived on the road. I am at the beginning of the end.”

Gopa began to sing. Song and discourse were one. Her song was discursive.

*Innumerable gatherings of Buddhas and creatures across innumerable aeons of time!
Innumerable future offerings of those gatherings.*

See, offerings from all the particles of this world. See, offerings from the world of the particles of all the tiny worlds arising in this present world. Ocean of the vows made in all past worlds. Ocean of dharma. Ocean of bodhisattva living. Ocean of truth like magic, most true.

Remaining here, remaining here, bodhisattvas, no matter how long ago born, are now born for the first time. Bodhisattvas, no matter how short their enlightenment, pierce through past present and future and bloom as a gentian, its perfume delicate each dawn and dusk.

Although Gopa, ruler of the grove garden of Kapilavastu, was the daughter of a brahman, here she was simply a bodhisattva, no longer a brahman or a member of the Buddha's clan. Her beauty touched all living creatures, and all the micro-organisms in all living creatures. Not her speech but the song, which came welling up of itself from her deep emotion, was her most powerful lesson. Sudhana nearly wept for happiness.

Gopa came closer to Sudhana and spoke : “Whether you leave tomorrow or not, I want you to meet Maya, the mother of the Buddha, the lady Maya.”

“But surely, after Siddhartha was born, she was taken with a fever and died?”

“Her death was no death. Whenever she has something to do in this world, she comes back to life. I very much want you to see her. But first there is someone else you must meet, not in reality but in a dream.”

Sudhana went into the quarters of the male devotees, just beside the bodhisattva's garden. He was allocated a cool sleeping space there. Weary, he lay down on one side and bade sleep come. The songs of night birds disturbed him but soon he was asleep. He sank into a long dream. In his dream he saw an ancient city of long ago. It was the capital of Jambu-dvipa at the south of Mount Sumeru, the most outstanding of all the eighty-four billion cities, holding a population equal to that of all the other eighty-four billion cities. In ponds inside the city, lotus flowers were blooming blue, red, yellow, and white, while the moats around the city were adorned with jewelled balustrades and jewelled nets. Along the wide roads leading away from the city toward other towns, there stretched orchards and groves, and clusters of jewelled ornaments. The perfumes worn by the crowds of men and women travelling along the roads blended with the scent of many flowers. That city's king had a harem of eighty-four thousand queens, concubines, and maids; he had five hundred ministers of state, and five hundred sons. The crown prince Prabhava-ta was the son of queen Padma. Since early childhood he had the singular gift of being able to adopt thirty-two different forms. The soles of his feet were smooth as mirrors and bore marks like the print of a wheel, while his hands were soft as cotton. His fingers were long and slender, with a delicate membrane spreading between them. His heels were round, his feet highly arched. His whole figure was graceful, bright and beautiful, his body firm and well-rounded like that of a deer, though if he stretched his arms downwards, his hands came below the level of his knees, like an elephant's trunk. His sex was hidden, withdrawn inside his body like that of a stallion, and just as large if aroused. Black hair grew from every pore; the hair on his head was tawny and swept to the right, orderly like a conch shell. His flesh was golden in hue, his skin was so soft and smooth that dirt did not adhere to it. He had seven smooth round bosses on his soles and palms, shoulders and brow. His arms hung easily, his backbone did not project, his whole appearance was fulsome and harmonious like a tree. His

lower chin and breast were like a lion's. His neck bore three birthmarks; a constant radiance shone out from him in all directions. His forty teeth were pure, white, regular and closely-set, his tongue was red and long and so broad it could cover his whole face, his clear voice was pleasant to all who heard it. His eyelashes were blue, neat and lustrous; he kept blinking with the upper eyelid like a cow; his irises stood out sharply from the white of his eyes. His face was perfect like a brightly shining moon, his eyebrows fine, arching like rainbows, the down covering the center of his brow was pure white, while the fleshy bulge on the crown of his head was like nothing so much as an altar-covering.

On a given day, the prince Prabhava-ta duly emerged from the citadel, in precisely the form just described. He was riding in a chariot all of gold, at the head of a retinue of twenty thousand men. The procession was majestic to see. Just then another, equally impressive procession appeared, advancing towards it. It was led by a maiden from the capital city of Siri, the girl's name too was Siri and when she first saw the prince, she was captivated by him.

She had defied her mother's disapproval to meet him.

“Mother, I beg you to let me serve him. If I can't, I'll die for sure.”

It was presumptuous for the daughter of a mere commoner to wish to have as husband this prince, whose bearing was that of the great king Cakra-varti himself. But her resolve was so strong that there was no stopping her. Advancing before the prince, she began to sing:

*Prince, apart from you
there is no one in all this world.
In all this world,
no one kindles my heart
apart from you.
It is you I long to serve,
prince destined to become king Cakra-varti.
In your infinite compassion,
accept my heart.*

The prince Prabhava-ta and the young Siri were immediately united by a mutual love so strong that no power could part them. Their eyes shone, their hearts throbbed; both were full of joy. Learning from her that the Buddha's teachings were being promulgated in one school in his land, the prince grew fascinated by the Buddha's dharmā and became a Buddhist on the spot. Such was the change provoked by the loving Siri. Their love matured in the grove, and the truth they venerated together penetrated deeper into them. The prince was eager to go and inform the king his father about all that had happened. He united the maiden's procession with his own and returned to the palace.

There the king, hearing now for the first time of the Buddha's teaching, was so delighted he began to sway in a kind of dance before the prince and his lady Siri.

“I possessed everything except the dharmā but now I have learned from you the Buddha's law. I will devote the rest of my life to the study of the Buddha's teaching, I and my people will believe the Buddha's teaching and practice it faithfully. What joy.”

The king surrendered the kingship to the prince and set out to join the followers of the Buddha. After a ceremony where water was poured onto the crown of the king's head, he left the palace accompanied by representatives of all ten social classes. Thus the prince Prabhava-ta became king and the maid Siri became his queen. They spent long years together, during which they had many children, devoting themselves to the truth and the nation's welfare, and their mutual love. At last they opened the gates of liberation and were admitted to the realm of emancipation, where ideas of truth and nation and even love are mere cumbersome trifles.

Sudhana awoke from his dream. The early morning grove was astir with birdsong. Sudhana went to a little stream, sipped water from his cupped hands, and left the place. Now he was on his way to meet the lady Maya. Ordinary people would consider any claim that a

long-dead person was still alive to be a mere lie. But Sudhana believed firmly that the long-dead Maya was alive, and believed too that such belief possessed a power capable of making the thing believed become a reality. Shakymuni Buddha's mother had left him motherless while he was still a new-born babe. He had grown up at his aunt's breast and had adopted her as his second mother as he grew up, until the time when he became the heir apparent.

At the thought of going in search of Maya, Sudhana felt a strong hesitation. He wondered if he wasn't being rash, setting off on such a quest. He paused for a while on the road he was following. He was even considering not trying to meet her. He was tormented by a hesitation he had never experienced before. Just then a yellow urunga bird flew away from a branch, causing one of its leaves to fall. At the same moment a voice echoed from the sky above the forest:

*The form of the lady Maya
can only be seen
with the eyes of Samanta-bhadra.
I cannot see her,
I cannot see her.
Why should I go in quest of her?
Shall I ever see her form,
hear her voice,
receive her teaching?*

The voice echoed precisely the questions occupying Sudhana's heart; he was astonished. It was the voice of the divinity of the air, one of the spirits protecting Kapilavastu. The spirit's words, transformed into petals falling from the sky, dropped onto Sudhana's head.

“Young pilgrim, come with me. Today your heart's true nature is to be celebrated.”

Sudhana followed the spirit. A host of spirits were hastening hither and thither, busy with various tasks. Each and every one encouraged Sudhana.

“You will continue to seek for knowledge of the good with a humble heart, in the future as hitherto, serving everywhere on every frontier of the whole great universe with the ten-directioned void around. Wonderful. You are truly wonderful.”

From that moment, Sudhana lost all notion of whether the spirit was leading him to Kapilavastu or somewhere else. His heart had left reality and was passing into a quite other world; he could not distinguish whether the places he was passing through were real or imaginary. Amidst the acclamations of the spirits, he arrived at a place where he could see the majestic form of an exalted lady. Sudhana felt dizzy. It was the lady Maya. Sudhana groaned inwardly.

Light was emanating from Maya; yet it was no ordinary light. Her pure body was not fixed and limited. She was revealing that she was capable of manifesting freely everything in the world and outside the world, for she was constantly changing. She appeared as a female demon, as a woman from the heaven of Paranirmita-vasavarti, then turned into a woman from the heaven of Nirmanarati before becoming a nymph from Tusita heaven, transformed into a woman from Suyama heaven, became a woman from Trayastrimsa heaven, then changed into a woman from the realm of the Four Heavenly Kings, before appearing as a dragon, a yaksa, a gandharva, an asura, a garuda, a kimnara, a mahoraga, and a human-yet-not-human woman. The lady Maya was the sum of all women. Ultimately, she was a woman who had formulated the desire to become the mother of all bodhisattvas who live for the sake of all sentient beings.

As Maya appeared in multiple bodily forms, Sudhana too manifested himself in numerous bodies, all of them advancing before the lady Maya and bowing in deep reverence. Sudhana, or rather the Sudhanas addressed the Mayas.

“Sacred lady, the bodhisattva Manjushri bade me fix my heart on total illumination and untiringly seek for every kind of knowledge of what is good. Since then, obedient to his

instructions, I have visited many places where knowledge of the good is available and after many wanderings I have reached here. I beg you, holy lady, speak for my benefit. How does a bodhisattva embark on bodhisattva works, and attain full bodhisattva wisdom? With this question alone I have travelled throughout southern India and will now travel all over the north as well. I beg you, speak.”

The lady Maya smiled at Sudhana's words, and replied, “Faithful child, my own Sudhana. Will any one be so foolish as to advance and deny that, as I am mother of all bodhisattvas, you are my son? My own Sudhana, my son, my truth. At last you have come to me, now listen to what I say.”

The lady Maya had risen and was leading Sudhana by the hand. All the host of lovely maids who venerated the lady Maya stood in a circle around them, singing in clear voices matching their beauty. Their song brought clouds rising.

Bliss that entered holy Maya's womb!

Glory that emerged from holy Maya's womb!

Joy heard in every part of the world

in the sound of new-born baby Buddha's crying.

There we long to live. There we long to live.

50. In Indra Heaven

Now Maya and Sudhana were alone. Her appearance suddenly changed into that of an ordinary housewife from any of the villages in the great Indian plains; her style of speaking, too.

“I left this world seven days after giving birth. When I died I felt so sorry for the baby, that I could not even close my eyes. That sorrow matured into the compassion I needed to become a bodhisattva in the world into which I was reborn. First, I lived in one place in the Tusita heaven and one place in hell, encountering creatures with good and bad karmas. Now I have come into this world, where the child I bore has grown up and become a Buddha, in order to help the truth my former son is developing. That is why I am sitting here with a son of truth like you.

“This is what I have to tell you, Sudhana : Never put compassion forward too soon. Compassion has to rise early, but should stay at the back, right back at the back of the end.

“By the source and wisdom of bodhisattva being, I received a liberation enabling me to fashion things as if by magic, bringing into being in the world things that did not exist. That is why I was able to become mother of bodhisattvas. I entered the pure-blooded governing clan here in Kapilavastu in the southern regions of Jambu-dvipa and bore a child from my right side. I gave birth in no house, but by the roadside. Then later I died by the roadside, at the age of eighty. I not only gave birth to that child. Every time any of the bodhisattvas were reborn, I had to become their mother. At the moment when I gave birth there in Kapilavastu, I saw how all the bodhisattvas of the ten-directioned worlds were filled with transformations and majestic glory. My womb is a dwelling where all the bodhisattvas of the world abide, coming and going freely. Yet with all those bodhisattvas, I become no larger, as I become no slimmer when they are all outside in the world. So in the world I am known as “mother of bodhisattvas” and “mother of the Buddha.” They call me “mother of transformations” too, because the transformation involved in receiving the bodhisattva seed and giving birth to a bodhisattva signifies all this world's transformations. I was always the Buddha's mother, from the moment when the first Buddha of the present aeon, Krakuchchanda, was born; after him came Kanakamuni Buddha, then Kasyapa Buddha, and finally the present Shakyamuni Buddha.

I was merely their mother, I felt no attachment to that motherhood. If I left the world seven days after giving birth in Kapilavastu, it was because I did not want to be limited to being his mother. I have returned now to give birth to the bodhisattvas that have to come into this world. And also to meet you here.”

The lady Maya underwent another transformation. She once again became a sacred bodhisattva, majestic in stature. Her way of speaking changed too. Her voice took on the tones of someone reciting from Sacred Scriptures.

“Little pilgrim, Sudhana. I have been the mother of every Buddha: the Lion Buddha, the Great Dharma Light Pillar Buddha, the Marvelous Eye Buddha, the Pure Kusuma Flower Buddha, the Marvelous Flower Omen Buddha, the Sage Buddha, the Temple Buddha, the Marvelous Will Buddha. . . “

She recited several hundred names.

“I was the mother of all these Buddhas. Throughout all the Buddha cosmos in this present aeon, I have had no other role but motherhood. At the same time as I became mother, each of those embracing the compassion needed to enter this world's darkness and pain and coming to be born in every part of Vairochana's Padmagarbhhalokadhatu World intent on bodhisattva works and will, chose to have me as their mother.

“Sudhana, there is a reason why I have recited one by one all the different Buddhas' titles in your hearing; the mere omission of even a single Buddha's name is like abandoning

one of this world's myriad creatures. Little pilgrim, in this world more Buddhas than there are grains of sand on the shores of the Ganga are constantly hastening toward all living creatures, and you should hear the sound of their breathing. You should become familiar with that quietness.”

A long time passed; the lady Maya pronounced the names of all the Buddhas one by one, teaching Sudhana. As she did so, she gazed at him with eyes full of tears, recalling with longing each of the Buddhas whose mother she had been.

“From here you must journey up into the heights of heaven above. When you reach Indra Heaven's lofty realm, you will meet Surendrabha, the daughter of its ruler. She will inform you of bodhisattva ways with more vigor than I can. I have grown old with so much childbearing.

“Now, everything has been said. Off you go. As you hurry on your way, you will turn into a bird and fly up until you reach Indra Heaven. Heavenly maids are the loveliest of all, so hurry off now, fulfill your happiness with their loveliness.”

Maya rose and left for an unknown world. She left as soon as she had told Sudhana to leave. After gazing a while at her retreating figure, Sudhana too set out on his new journey. From the parklands skirting Kapilavastu, Sudhana took the long road leading towards the city of Saravastha in the land of Koshalā. Sudhana expected to be drawn up to heaven late at night, midway along the road that had been indicated to him. So far, Sudhana's journeys had all been situated on the earth, outside his imagination. Even the bleak brown and grey emptiness of the Dekkan highlands had been part of the earth's surface, and therefore not outside of Sudhana's real world. But the maiden that the lady Maya had indicated was not to be found on earth but in the heavens. He was being called to make a journey far different from any he had so far made, to reach that Indra Heaven.

Along the road leading away from Kapilavastu, the red glow of evening set the whole heavens ablaze; the forests gleamed gold, then faded into the growing twilight darkness. The night passed; it was already early morning, but not yet dawn. All lay sound asleep; the whole of nature was plunged in solitude. Sudhana slept for a moment, then opened his eyes. A shooting star appeared in the sky, flaming brightly. Someone could be heard moving in the darkness. It was a woman. She whispered, “Follow me. I will guide you.”

Sudhana felt sure that this was a celestial maiden come down from Indra Heaven. In a flash, wings sprang from his shoulders; he turned into a bird and went flying up into the heavens with the maiden.

There was no telling how high he had flown, but as night lifted from the face of the earth far below, not a single detail could be distinguished clearly. There seemed to be nothing at all left on earth, all was pure emptiness. Finally the earth itself vanished completely and the heavens grew dark; from time to time they flew past stars in the bluish gloom, and various heavenly realms. Sudhana flew on without a trace of fatigue. It was only as they approached Indra Heaven that the maiden spoke.

“I was charged to guide you from the world of Jambu-dvīpa. I have guided many visitors, but I have never seen one make this laborious ascent as lightly as you, or follow me so precisely. You must have studied much in order to be able to reach the Indra Heaven. The higher you fly, the more mere human strength is unavailing. I could never bring anyone this far, before. Either they died for lack of breath along the way or they fell back onto the earth where they had lived previously. Look, we have arrived.”

She had no sooner spoken, than the gates of Indra Heaven swung open. The gates were pellucid. The heavenly realm was situated at the topmost peak of Mount Sumeru, in the vastnesses of outer space, and constituted the second of the six heavens of the Realm of Desire. Also known as Trayatrimśa, at its center was the realm of Indra, around which in all four directions lay eight heavens, making up the full thirty-three.

The king's daughter Surendrabha came forward to welcome Sudhana.

“You have labored hard to reach this distant place. Welcome. I welcome you with all this heaven's joy.”

Surendrabha was of outstanding beauty. Her beauty was such that it inspired those beholding it with hopes it would remain eternally, in betrayal of the truth that everything changes. Her words only served to increase her loveliness. They were like drops of water spangling leaves, that fall to the surface of a pond. Surendrabha led Sudhana to her room. It was full of the perfume of heavenly maidens. They sat down together, as if they had known one another for years, smiling at each other. The maiden spoke.

“Child, the only thing I have to tell you concerns the Precepts, revealed and not revealed. When they have become part of oneself, they serve to open the gates of emancipation as we practice the Buddha's *dharmā*. Yet the gates of emancipation are not emancipation itself. Once within those gates, you still have to perform innumerable bodhisattva actions before attaining emancipation; thus the gates are not gates but the performance of bodhisattva incarnations, with repeated cycles of birth and death. Only so can there be the illumination in which the Five Accumulations, the Twelve Places, and the Eighteen Precepts are transformed and vanish. Then, practicing the dharma giving entry to the thirty-seven classes of wisdom, practicing the ten *Paramita* (*perfections*) and the first steps of all the observances, soon this world comes to perfect harmony. That perfection of harmony can only be attained, though, by one who has passed through all the ancient aeons of the past, the Utpala Flower Age, the Good Earth Age, the Wonderful Virtue Age, the Nameless Age, the Wonderful Light Age, the Inexpressible Glory Age, the Supreme Omen Age, the Sunrise Age, the Excellent Nature Age, and the Wonderful Moon Age, meeting as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand in several hundred rivers like the Ganga.”

Sudhana did not respond to anything Surendrabha said. Only one of them was speaking, yet it felt like the most perfect of conversations. Sudhana felt able to hear more than what she had so far said, perhaps on account of the rapturous emotions provoked in him by her extraordinary beauty.

She continued: “Every present moment is a moment that existed somewhere previously. The present moment is always a copy of the past, while the past lives by reason of the present. Once all this heaven and the world below show compassion, thanks to the emancipation you receive and the bodhisattva nature you attain, all will achieve newness, as a present containing countless past aeons. Child, young man, that time is inscribed in your future destiny. The world of that time will be ruled by its children; all the adults and old people will simply play chess, or sing, or yawn.

“In order to work for such a world, the time has come for you to return to Kapilavastu in the world below. Kapilavastu is a rare and wonderful place. True, it is a small, weak city, yet from it arises a smoke that spreads all over the world. I want you to go and meet the children there. One younger than you is waiting for you. They say that I am beautiful, yet I believe it is only because I reflect your beauty. At the very heart of all forms of beauty lies a beauty arising from liberating emancipation, as well as from illusion. All that is yours.”

Sudhana was speechless for joy. He sang inwardly.

Surendrabha, maiden,

before you I rejoice.

Your beauty brings joy,

not only to me

but to everything in this world,

even to what is not.

Ah, beauty is heaven's joy,

the joy of Indra Heaven.

*Go where we may, to any world,
your beauty
is one with that world's beauty.
Unavoidable,
incalculable,
without sun moon or stars,
without distinction of light and darkness --
beauty,
Surendrabha, maiden.*

51. Vishwamitra

He opened his eyes. He recognized the place where he was lying; it was no heavenly realm, but somewhere in the middle of the Grove of Five Hundred just outside Kapilavastu! He showed no sign of surprise but reacted quite normally, as if he had woken up in the same place he had laid down in the night before. He made his way from the grove to a village beneath the walls, where the *vaysya* people lived, to beg something to eat. He managed to collect some mango gruel, a few steamed roots, and three wild fruits. He gulped the food down quickly, like a bird. After planting the stones from the fruit, he went into the town and asked for the house of Vishwamitra the kid.

“Vishwamitra? That good-for-nothing? Isn't he back in prison again? Anyway, if you go down this alley, you'll come to a neighborhood whose people are a mixture of low-class and outcaste *achut* blood. Ask for that Vishwamitra trash down there. And where might you be from, might I ask? Very handsome, I must say. . . Odd company for a brat like Vishwamitra.”

Sudhana felt that this was getting more and more interesting, as he headed for the houses where people lived whose blood was partly *sudra* and partly outcaste.

“I'm looking for a child called Vishwamitra.”

“My, if a mountain hermit hasn't deigned to drop by. Vishwa! Vishwa! There's a wizard looking for you!”

As soon as the urchin called, a youth threw open the rickety plank door of a crumbling mud hut.

“What's up? What's all the racket about?”

It was Vishwamitra the kid.

“Are you Vishwamitra?”

“That's me. Have you come to arrest me?”

“No, I've come to learn things from you.”

“What? Learn from me? There's a laugh!”

Sudhana looked puzzled.

“What fools there are! You're no better than a squirrel and look at you, roaming all over the place talking nonsense like this!”

“Vishwamitra! You're supposed to teach me all about Buddha's dharma and the laws of emancipation!”

“What? You fool! Idiot! Buddha? Is Buddha your dad? Your dad's whore! To think of there being people like you in the world. The world's too kind, a heck of a lot too kind. Get out of here. If you want another good fright, try those houses over there. There's a little kid there called Shilpabhijna. Go and get stoned with him, you wretched little pup! What filthy luck I have, today again, filthy. Yeuch.”

Sudhana moved away. As he went, he felt an acute sense of satisfaction bathing him, as if something had just burst. Vishwamitra the kid! Manjushri Bodhisattva? Samantabhadra Bodhisattva?

52. Shilpabhijna's lesson

The people of Kapilavastu had to endure more sorrows and torments than any other in all the northern regions. A minute city-state squeezed between a number of great nations, it had almost no proper territory of its own outside the walls. No one recognized the glory of its great families, that had come down from the Himalayan heights, apart from that of the Shaykas.

With the kingdom in such a position, its inhabitants never knew a day without hardship. The tensions with the surrounding nations, as well as within its own ruling class, were ancient in origin. Sidhartha may have been Crown Prince, his father Suddhodana was not able to rule particularly well. Like most of the other rulers and princes, he oppressed his subjects. He merely ended up serving the interests of the rulers of the great kingdoms around his. He is said to have reflected deeply after his son's departure, but still he left no very remarkable list of achievements behind him.

In such lands, sorrows and pains serve to make the people far more deeply thoughtful than elsewhere. Pessimistic ideas, that this present world is bound to be bad, abounded; some people became vagrants, despising the world and mocking its folly. That may be why there was such a wide variety of eccentrics in Kapilavastu. Vishwamitra the kid was one. But was he simply an eccentric? Or was he Manjushri, that he reminded Sudhana of? Or an incarnation of Samantabhadra?

Immersed in thoughts of Vishwamitra, Sudhana walked towards the neighborhood where Shilpabhijna lived. Shilpabhijna was a true prodigy. He was only six years old, yet there was no aspect of worldly ways that he did not know. In particular he had unequalled knowledge of a philosophy based on Indian phonemes. Part of the Buddha's own teaching was rooted in that same science.

Sudhana sat before the young scholar, without asking a single question. There were other visitors before him. They were advanced in age, obviously enlightened brahmans. It seemed that they wanted to hear more from the scholar, for they stayed sitting there although they had already heard his remarks to them. Shilpabhijna's voice was the only childish thing about him.

“Listen to the sounds I make. When I say A, I enter deeply through a door of Wisdom, the 'Revelation by bodhisattva powers that the essence of all dharma is unborn'. When I say Ra, I enter deeply through a door of Wisdom, its name is 'Detailed knowledge appearing far and wide until all is infinite'; when I say Pa, I enter deeply through a door of Wisdom, its name is 'Detailed wisdom illuminating far and wide the equal age of the realm of dharmas'; when I say Cha, I enter deeply through a door of Wisdom, its name is 'Abolition of distinctions of light by wide-turning wheels'; when I say Na, the name is 'No period can be relied on or remained in'.

“When I make the sound La, the name is 'Abolition of defilements with the rejection of reliance on nominal categories'; when I say Da, the name is 'Upaya (strategic skills) that never surrender'; when I say Ba, the name is 'Training-place of the diamond wheel'; when I say Ta, the name is 'Everywhere perfect wheel'; when I say Sa, the name is 'Ocean brightness'; when I say Pha, the name is 'Everything released and dwelling peacefully'; when I say Tha, the name is 'Perfect light in moon and stars'; when I say Ya, the name is 'All distinctions brought together in a pile'; when I say Shtha, the name is 'Light shining bringing passions to rest'; when I say Kha, the name is 'Incessant gathering of clouds'; when I say Sah, the name is 'Great downpour of rain'; when I say Ma, the name is 'Rapid manifestation of rainbow light'. They are like a host of mountain peaks.”

Little Shilpabhijna had reached that point, when rain began to pour down. The stream running through the town, which had been like a rotting swamp, filled to the brim quickly with the new water. Then the sun came out again, as if to ask if it had really been raining, and all the

town's white buildings shone dazzlingly. Sudhana reckoned that this was all caused by the mystic powers of Shilpabhijna's voice, and felt even more fascinated by him. The six-year old Shilpabhijna resumed his teaching.

“When I say Ga, I enter deeply through a door of Wisdom, its name is 'Vast accumulation of wheels'; when I say Taa, the name is 'Light without distinctions, true likeness made equal' When I say Ja, the name is 'Pure living after total immersion in the ocean of this world'; when I say Swa, the name is 'Thought of all the majesty of Buddhas'; when I say Dha, the name is 'Detailed investigation of the entire accumulated dharma'; when I say Sha, the name is 'Following the glorious wheel of the teaching of the Buddhas'; when I say Ka, the name is 'Brightness of the wisdom appearing before causation'; when I say Ksha, the name is 'Brightness yielding wisdom when all the oceans of karma are brought to rest'; when I say Stha, the name is 'Unfolding of pure light removing the defilements of lust'; when I say Znya, the name is 'Gateway of wisdom transcending the world'; when I say Ha, the name is 'Lantern of wisdom gaining all creatures but without self or others'; when I say Pah, the name is 'Majesty perfecting all palaces'; when I say Tcha, the name is 'Wheel covering the light of expedients bringing increase of ascetic accomplishments'.

“Then, when I say Sma, I enter deeply through a door of Wisdom, its name is 'Glory of seeing Buddhas in every one of the four directions'; when I say Hwa, the name is 'Splendor of cymbals yielding powerful means to scrutinize all microscopic beings'; when I say Tsa, the name is 'Unrestricted entry into the ocean of all virtues'; when I say Gha, the name is 'Splendor of strong cymbals harboring all dharma clouds'; when I say Tha, the name is 'Making the sight of the Buddhas in all ten directions similar to empty space by essential power'.

“When I say Nha, the name is 'Entry within the boundaries not complete so long as the wheel of letters turns'; when I say Pha, the name is 'Utterly perfect place for all living creatures once enlightened'; when I say Ska, the name is 'Wheel of light shining far and wide illuminating every place by unimpeded oratory'; when I say Isa, the name is 'Wisdom expounding all the Buddha's dharma'; when I say Scha, the name is 'Entering all the cosmic realms of living creatures and shouting everywhere the great sound of dharma-thunder'; when I say Dah, the name is 'Bringing enlightenment to all living creatures, opening Buddha's frontiers by speaking dharma selflessly'; when I say Rha, the name is 'The distinctive splendor inherent in all dharma vehicles'.

Little Shilpabhijna spoke, then he yawned, just like a six-year-old ought to yawn.

“While I was addressing you, the forty-two gates of Wisdom became my foundation and all my words flowed freely, enabling me to enter deeply the infinite, innumerable gates of Wisdom.”

Sudhana stepped forward.

“Shilpabhijna, little sage. I want to know how to enter directly into those deep gates of Wisdom, those liberations. Can it only be done by means of those sounds?”

“Either you can attain liberation by using the sounds I have just pronounced, or you can try to practice the ten laws.”

“What are they?”

“To possess wisdom; diligently to search after knowledge of the good; to be dauntlessly upright; to abandon lustful passions; to be ever pure in righteous works; to venerate right *dharma*; to see that the essence of *dharma* is emptiness; to abolish bad opinions; to practice righteous living; to observe sincere wisdom. Bodhisattva living is not an end to studies; bodhisattva living is the reason for studying.”

The six-year-old child rose to his feet. Sudhana and his companions rose too. A crimson dusk was covering the green of the grove's trees with a layer of scarlet. The flocks of flying birds were tinted red and gold, the whole sky soared aloft, as if formed of precious metals. Shilpabhijna spoke a few last words.

“You see, I have only a very little knowledge of the gates of liberation. Bodhisattvas and Mahasattvas combine the complex laws governing life in the world and away from the world with unusual powers and miraculous arts, sounds, writings, calculations, knowing them without lingering over them; they likewise have deep knowledge of prescribing medicines and casting magical spells, so if any creature has been possessed by a demon, fallen under an enemy's curse, or been struck down by black arts, or if they are being pursued by the dead, have gone mad, or been poisoned in some way, they are able to help them recover completely from all those mysterious afflictions. In addition, they know where to get mysterious gems and rare substances of great price -- gold, silver, jade, pearls, gems, coral, sapphire, mani, mother-of-pearl, quartz, agate, copper, iron, zinc, stone, and fine incense, as well as knowing the different varieties and the proper price of each. The bodhisattvas keep constant watch over all the places where people live, be it cities or hamlets, fortified towns or royal palaces, gardens, rocks, springs, forests, or ponds. They possess within themselves six hundred and sixty-three different fine appearances. They establish by comparisons which things are more or less admirable. They know how to suffer and heal; they recognize good and bad fortune; they know whether a person will live long or die early, and although they possess so many fine appearances, they know that that is nothing compared with a fine voice, but they equally know that no voice however fine can be compared to true good fortune. They fully realize that the karma bringing a mass of good fortune into being cannot be changed, that the relationship of fruits and rewards is unchangeably decided. They are equally well versed in astronomy, geography, prophecy, hidden mysteries, the dual principles of yin and yang, phrenology, fortune-telling, bad stars or disasters, catastrophic storms, the calls of birds and animals too. As for travel by land and sea, propitious and inauspicious omens, the rhythms of good and bad harvests, the world's peace and disorder, all the ways of the world are known and utterly familiar to them. They can also distinguish clearly between the various ways of escaping from this world, so that they speak with deep, precise deliberateness after scrutinizing forms and appearances, aware of wills and conscious of names, practicing and acting accordingly. Thereby they gain wisdom in the eyes of all, without doubting, without hindrance, without folly, without dullness, and without care, without failing. . .”

He finally reached the end of his phrase.

“Just outside the walls of the capital city of Magadha, you will find a small village. A woman named Bhadrattama is living there. I want you to meet her. I have grown very old now.”

“What? How can you say you're old, when you're so young?”

“Oh but I can. I'm six years old. Six-year-olds can be the oldest people in the world too. Now be off. I have nothing more to say. You're taking all my sounds' gates of Wisdom with you, I'm dead broke. Be off with you.”

Shilpabhijna the child sage left Sudhana standing there and walked away. Then Sudhana set off alone, for his companion had decided not to go to Magadha but to Khashi in search of a brahman sage, taking a different road. It was most odd. Quite marvelous, really. How on earth could a six-year-old talk in that way about Buddhas and liberations of earth and space? Where had he got that breadth of learning about sounds? And not only sounds; there could surely be no one who could equal him in erudition.

Once again he began walking tirelessly along a long-stretching road. Yet there were far more waterways than roads leading from Kapilavastu to Magadha, all of them impossible to cross without the aid of ferries. For Sudhana, compared with the endless overland routes taken in the south, a journey through a region like this, with its constant alternation of roads and ferry-crossings, was immensely more agreeable. First of all, he had travelling companions. Villages and towns followed one another almost without interruption, so that he never found himself in any kind of extreme hardship. He had no need to travel with a pack holding emergency supplies or reserve stocks. Whenever the moment came, he was always able to get

a handful of rice in this region, that had grown accustomed to offering hospitality to pilgrims.

He crossed the Srina river and spent the night sleeping under a tree. Then he crossed another river. Travelling in this way, it took him a full two weeks to reach Rajagriha in the land of Magadha. The moon had grown full and begun to wane in that time. Sudhana at once sensed that the nights in Rajagriha were full of music. Within the city walls, in the groves, and even in darkened houses, no one was to be seen; yet every single person was singing to the sound of an instrument or unaccompanied. Sudhana had once heard from a traveller that the people of Rajagriha recited and memorized not only songs but stories and poems too, passing them on from one generation to the next. Now the city's evenings were not only full of music, they throbbed with history too.

Sudhana found the night in Rajagriha truly beautiful. He felt so happy he could not get to sleep. Moonlight poured down from on high far into the night while the stars dipped close to the earth, blazing brightly. By their light, the stars seemed to want to tell humanity something. One who can grasp their meaning is a true sage. If this is true, there are words waiting to be heard everywhere in the world. One who can hear those omnipresent words is a servant of truth. Sudhana's ear was able to detect virtually all sounds, revealing his inner depths.

On the following morning, leaving behind him the joy that had kept him open-eyed all night long, he left the city by the eastern gate. The fair-skinned woman was easy to find. Bhadrattama was glad to see Sudhana, as if she had been expecting him. She addressed him in a torrent of words:

“Young pilgrim, of all those teachers you've met, not one of them was fit to be anybody's teacher. You kept asking about bodhisattva ways and the gates of liberation. You've travelled hither and thither, and now all the way here, asking, asking, always asking exactly the same question, always trying to get a deeper understanding of your initial question. Wonderful. My precious visitor.

“Young pilgrim, you've got nothing to ask me about. You've got nothing left to ask anybody about. Those who ask have already found the answer for themselves as they ask the question. You know very well that your question returns to you as its own answer. If really there is something that you still want to know, even a single leaf's worth about, go south to the city of Bharukaccha where you'll find a man called Muktasara the wise. He's a goldsmith, he's bound to have a lot of gold in his house. Yet you'll not find a single scrap of gold in his house.”

Bhadrattama's heart contained a great store of affection. Sudhana left before he was able to see just how kindhearted she really was.

53. Crossing rivers

Sudhana crossed any number of rivers. On every ferryboat, there were plenty of other travellers just like himself: truth-seeking travellers, hawking travellers, as well as homeless roaming beggar-travellers. However, such a life of wandering was only possible for members of the warrior *ksatriya* caste or the *vaysya* caste immediately below it. The lower castes and the untouchables had to obey orders and enjoy none of the wanderer's freedom, never putting so much as one foot in front of the other freely, serving the noble classes, the *brahmans* and *ksatriyas*, the rulers and the administrators, generation after generation.

The truth about equality that Shakyamuni taught was intended to do away with that system. Naturally, his teaching provoked such intense opposition from the *brahmans* and *ksatriyas* that the crowd following Shakyamuni was quickly labelled “a seditious mob” or cursed as “a gang of mindless fools”. The murder of Shakyamuni's disciple Maudgalyayana by a brahman youth from the land of Vaishalla was inspired by similar considerations. Brahmans used to swear at the members of the newly formed groups of Buddhists in exactly the same terms as they used for lepers: “That band of beggars, the trash of India!”

The more Sudhana enjoyed the freedom of being able to cross one river after another, the more convinced he became that the wounded existences of all those low-class people deprived of such freedom to travel prevented his own freedom from being complete.

The waters of the Ubilla flowed deep and green. It would soon flow into the Ganges. As he crossed that river, Sudhana kept repeating to himself how important it was that Shakyamuni's declaration of the equality of all should be put into practice all over India.

The ferryman was a hollow-cheeked old man from Punjab, his face black as earth. As the boat drifted downstream in the turbulent waters at the center of the river, a youth began to pour out a stream of abuse at him.

“You peasant scum! Just talking to a serf like you is an insult to the dignity of my class. You trash, why don't you drop dead? Old folk like you ought to die and get over into the world beyond or rest in peace, anyway. Why do you have to go on living so miserably, waving oars that you can't even row with? To think that I got into a boat steered by filth like you! It's a disgrace on me and on my father too! Pshaw.”

The youth drained a bottle of wine and tossed it into the river.

“There, that's how you ought to die,” and he thrust the old ferryman over the side. Sudhana rose and was about to go to the boatman's rescue but although he might be old, the man was quite strong enough; he struck out powerfully, rescued the oar as it floated away, and grabbed the iron ring at the stern of the boat.

All the passengers clustered round the drunken young man, who was apparently a *ksatriya*. One travelling peddler advanced with a wild expression, grabbed the youth by the throat, and pulled him to his feet.

“I reckon today's a good day for me die. You can't imagine how worthwhile it is to die ridding the world of a wretch like you. You less than insect! You scorpion-scum born after a scorpion screwed your mother.”

He screamed his remarks and hurled the young man into the river. The ferryman, who had just escaped death himself, made a grab at the young man but the peddler forced him to sit down.

“Let him drown.”

The youth came to the surface once or twice, before finally sinking out of sight. A few moments later, his dead body could be seen floating away down the river. All the passengers on the boat felt their hearts grow heavy.

The boat touched shore. Silently, people went their various ways. Sudhana remained

alone, standing on the wharf. The boat they had come on was returning empty, with no passengers. On reaching midstream, the old boatman very gently slipped from the boat and vanished beneath the water. There was no time for even a single prayer. The empty boat floated off downstream, two oars and a pole hanging from its sides.

Sudhana touched the river, that had just brought death to two people, and bowed his head. He wondered, with a pang of regret, what could be the use of all the truth he had spent his life searching for. He resolved to meet the teachers he still had to meet as quickly as possible, then get away from truth with all its high-blown words and plunge into the thick of human life.

He headed for the city, that was surrounded by flat meadowlands. Muktasara's private guards were patrolling the streets. After going through strict formalities, Sudhana was led to the sage's house in a grove to the north of the city. The sage looked prosperous. Servant girls were fanning him with fans of eagle plumes; he ordered them out. His great girth made it hard for him to endure the heat.

"In my youth I spent a full twenty years living underground. Down in gold mines, copper mines, tin mines, it's cool, never hot like this. At first it was horrible, like being buried alive, but the horror vanished after about a month. One day I struck a light from flint to look for something and saw there were insects down there. They were emitting a pale light from their shells. Those insects are called hell-bugs; if an empty space occurs underground they never leave it empty, they settle there. Down below, it's not just solid earth, not all rocks and stones. There are the dry channels of ancient streams, and caves where the ground has split open. And there are living creatures down there too. After I discovered those hell-bugs, I began to think that human beings could live down there for a long time, too. Once convinced of that, I dug out gold with much greater zeal. I lived a mole's life, or rather a hell-bug's, down in that gold mine. When I finally came up loaded with gold, I was so glad to be back that I rushed straight out and the daylight made me blind. I spent another three years working blind in iron and tin mines. Now I've come back to this upper world and live a prey to this wretched heat. And what possible cause might there be for you to have come visiting a fellow like me, young man? Did someone tell you to visit me?"

"Yes, Bhadrattama in the land of Magadha."

"Bhadrattama? Ah, you mean Bhadrattama the Best of the Good. I know that Amazon. She went off with all my gold. She took it without my consent, saying she had to build a monastery to house the Buddha and his disciples when they came to the land of Magadha in the future. A whole half cartload of gold. I'm someone who doesn't so much as nod if a cousin of mine starves to death beside me, yet I was completely bowled over by that Amazon's talents. I spoke to her, I did. I said: "You brigand of a woman, won't you come and live here with me?" To which she replied that I was destined to go on living with gold and copper, so we'd better wait for some future existence. Ha ha ha. So what do you want of me?"

"I've come to learn bodhisattva works."

"Uh? Bodhisattva? What's bodhisattva? You've come to learn about such things from me? Everything odd seems to be happening today.

"Well, since you've come so far, take a scoopful of copper from over there as you leave. Use it to build yourself a house to live in and come to your senses. That's in return for having been sent by that Bhadrattama woman. Stop wandering around talking rubbish about bodhisattvas and I don't know what else, and once you're in your right mind again, just live a normal life."

Receiving no response from Sudhana, the rich man made a sign to the maid servants to take Sudhana into a separate building, that lay concealed deep among the trees. When he was inside, they bolted the door fast. Sudhana found himself in a dark room. From outside the door he heard the man's voice.

"I thought I'd give you gold to take with you, but you're not interested in things like

that, I see. So try eating the darkness in there instead.”

From the stale damp smell lingering in the room, Sudhana could tell that it had been unused for a long time. The floor was made of wooden planks. After a while he heard the sound of mice moving somewhere.

Sudhana whispered to himself: “In this world it's always a lie to say you're alone. It is utterly impossible for me to be alone in this world. That's it. I must go out into the very midst of the world. Going out into all those places will make me truly myself. Until now I was becoming myself by my journeys to various places and teachers.”

Locked in the dark room, Sudhana tearfully offered up fervent prayers for all the places he had been in. It must have lasted a long while; he began to feel hungry. There was no sign of life outside. He settled without more ado into a lengthy meditation. He entered a state of non-thinking, free of darkness and hunger. Plunged in deep meditation, Sudhana dimly heard the sound of the bolt being slid back and the door being opened. The old man called out in a loud voice.

“What have you been doing in the dark. Are you alive or dead?”

Sudhana emerged from his meditation. “I haven't enjoyed such a good moment for a long time.”

Muktasara fumbled for Sudhana's hand and grabbed it.

“Little pilgrim. I am a very foolish, old man, unable to enter so much as a single one of the eighty-four thousand doors of your mind. I may have gone south to the gold mines of Madras and Mysore and brought back all the gold I mined, I may have loaded myself with brass, the alloy of copper and tin, and sold it for a high price, but I've acquired no other wisdom since my ancient ancestors came from among the Dravidians. Why do you ask a man like me to teach you?”

“There is something I have learned from you already. I am deeply grateful to you. Beyond thanks, I am obliged to eulogize you.”

“Don't drive me into yet further sin.”

“Not at all. You are a hidden sage. Your hands may have been full of golden treasures, you never forgot the treasures of the heart. . .”

“Marvelous, marvelous. Little pilgrim, I was intending to give you a mass of gold as I sent you on your way. I failed completely to recognize you. A visit from you to a fellow like me is a blessing. It would not be right for me to be the only one to receive it. There's a man in this town called Suchandra. In his house there is always light, not at all like the gloom reigning here. Go and talk once with that man so rich in light. I treated you badly and made you starve, if you go there you can be sure of a generous welcome.”

“Not at all. I can never be hungry here. I am filled with the virtue you have given me. My heart is overflowing with joy, thanks to the virtue you have given me. I have come to realize that the darkness in this building is the best possible place for a person to study.”

Muktasara spoke, apparently to himself:

“It's true that last year a sage called Dharmapari came to practice meditation and yoga here for a while; when he left, he had been cured of a chronic sickness. . .”

Sudhana realized that the building had been no mere empty room, but a place of meditation.

*Everywhere in the world,
no matter where, is a place of meditation.
Passing fertile fields,
I reached this isolated building.
One practicing meditation here
attains wisdom passing beyond the triple world.
Many thanks.*

*For the path that lies ahead of me
after this place of meditation
can only be Buddhahood,
can only be bodhisattva nature,
can only be the divinities of the heavens.*

Sudhana prostrated himself before Muktasara with an overflowing heart, then set out again. Night was past, daybreak had come. He pondered again on the death of that old boatman. He thought of how he had taken his boat to come and visit the sage. Muktasara had revealed nothing at all of himself, he was so completely humble. All his words and deeds had been those of a gold miner, as if he had known nothing of the reason for Sudhana's visit. He had merely come into that dark room at daybreak and thrown out a few ambiguous words at random. All he had done was mention the passage of Dharmapari the previous year.

Sudhana's journey took him more than half the day. He obtained a few crab-apples from an old woman selling them at the ferry-landing. Eating two of them for his lunch, he boarded the boat, which was reserved for members of the warrior caste. Sudhana's class was not checked, since he was only a child, but he was able to board the boat chiefly on account of his face's beauty. With so much mixed blood around, there were bound to be any number of boys with Sudhana's looks.

Everything was behind the times in the lands of Anka and Magadha, renowned for their isolation. In particular, Magadha was never a brahmanistic region, and as soon as the Buddha's new message emerged everybody adhered to it; it quickly became a buddhist region and the wealthy Suchandra that Sudhana was on his way to visit had already heard the Buddha's dharma. Sudhana had a companion, an old man wearing a shabby turban.

"Ah, you wretched little pratiya!" he growled at Sudhana.

The word *pratiya* was frequently used to signify a base or wicked person. It was not unreasonable of Sudhana's companion to speak to him harshly as some one of lowly origin. He had no shoes on his feet and his clothes were certainly not made of any expensive cloth.

"You are a *pratiya* too, I think." Sudhana growled back. It was enough to break the ice between them.

"Ahah, you're a smart little pilgrim."

"You are quite smart yourself, sir."

"Ho ho."

"Let's rest. Your feet are hurting."

54. Fresh water for the thirsty

Suchandra was not at all a loveable person, he was not kind at all; he did not treat Sudhana like a guest. It was October and it rained every day; the sun had not shone for months in a monsoon season that seemed to know no end, here in the regions south of the Ganges. All night long there was no sound but the falling of rain. Yet Suchandra's reluctant attitude towards Sudhana was not entirely the fault of the weather. Of course, the arrival of a dripping wet visitor is enough to increase anyone's melancholy.

“Welcome to the lands of rain.”

The words seemed forced out. Yet Sudhana was not worried by the impression Suchandra gave.

“There is everything in India. It's a marvelous country.”

“Hmm, there are even people capable of surviving unending monsoons every few months. What part are you from?”

“Before I met Muktasara the sage I was in the north and before that I made a pilgrimage through the south.”

“Look, I didn't ask anything about before or after Muktasara the sage. That fellow is all the time sending me people I'm in no position to sit making leisurely conversation with. What region were you born in?”

“It was where the Jamuna, the Son, the Ganga, and the Ghaghara rivers meet; but I lost my parents when the great kings occupied our lands in battle. I was orphaned when I was four years old. But I'm not an orphan now, my body is lodged in the truth taught by Shakyamuni, my home is the triple cosmos, my family the four forms of life.”

Suchandra listened to the words that poured without a pause from Sudhana's lips and unconsciously rose to his feet, trembling.

“What's your name?”

“Sudhana.”

“Sudhana! Then I've heard about you. That's right, from the captain of a trading ship down in Kharak harbor. You're the child who walked all the way across the Dekkan highlands. Why, you're just the kind of first class fellow this country needs.”

Suchandra's expression became intense. He took Sudhana by the hand and led him down a long corridor away from the entrance hall, deeper into the house. They came to the family's communal bathroom. Immersed in the hot water, Suchandra's ample beard swayed to and fro like water-weed. His body was twice the size of any normal person's, yet flesh and bone were so powerfully built that he did not look fat. It was a very long time since Sudhana had enjoyed a hot bath. Multiple layers of fatigue seemed to melt away.

They could not bring themselves to leave the steam-filled bathroom quickly. Sudhana lingered in the tub, while Suchandra lay reclining on a couch, body and mind relaxed completely.

“Sudhana, I was by origin a brahman but I know all the suffering my father went through; he was reduced to serfdom among the *vaysyas* after being left helpless because of the *ksatriyas*' loss of power. More than any other, the Indian world is marked by suffering. Because of this conflict of castes, I despaired of ever escaping, thinking that I was doomed to die at the end of a lifetime spent plowing the lands of the warriors as a serf. My father died out in the fields while harvesting. I was only twelve. I went to scatter his ashes in the river, then escaped down it as far as the port at Kharak. I got work at a fish store in the harbor. The owner's sister became my wife and I managed to get a small shop of my own. From that day on, I limited myself to one meal a day and began to save. I never so much as set eyes on shoes; I always went barefoot. By the end I was in charge of six stores. I had sons. The elder went playing on

the beach at low tide, the returning tide caught up with him, and he drowned; I don't know what became of the other one. He would have been your age by now. Once they were both gone I realized that the wealth I had acquired was nothing at all. I joined a group of ascetics who believe in the water gods of the Bengal Sea and became a wandering holy man, going with them in their boat. They spend all their time sailing the seas, practicing mortification.

“Two years of that kind of mortification were enough to rid me of grief at the death of my son. Then I began to think of all the happiness those two sons of ours had given me as they grew up. Of all the love they had inspired in me. That had been enough. Not even the grief of losing them both could match that happiness. After that I was able to go back to where I had come from. I left the port at Kharak, came here and took up farming. I say farming, but I have no idea where my fields are, it's all in the hands of my clerks and administrators and stewards.”

“But for how long do you intend to hold on to all your lands and riches?”

“What do you mean?”

“Can't you give your lands to Shakyamuni's groups of monks? Then your wealth will serve to help people who are suffering. The sufferings of those who have nothing are terrible. I have seen those sufferings in every place I have visited, south and north alike.”

“You are very bold.”

“Not at all. Because you and I are here naked like this, we can see that, no matter what anyone in this world may have, they have nothing.”

“Why that is exactly what I have been thinking.”

Sudhana saw into the rich man's heart and rejoiced. He spoke urgently.

“After all, you have attained your goals. You became the richest man along the Bengal coast and now you own most of the fertile fields in this region. What more do you want? Now it's time for you to become rich in dharma, rich in truth.”

“Rich in truth!”

“Yes, but in that case you first have to rid yourself of all your previous wealth. Like rotten meat or a tattered rag.”

“Like rotten meat!”

“Yes, it's only then that you can start to amass riches of truth. After all, we have lived through a multitude of lives before this present existence. What do you have left from all those past lives? Nothing at all. It will be the same with today's worldly wealth. Such things really are mere bubbles, it's not just words. Shakyamuni Buddha makes it utterly clear that they're mere foam, utter emptiness. It is a Buddha's task to fill that emptiness with compassion. You and I, as Buddhas, have to perform that task.”

Until this moment, Sudhana had listened to the words of his teachers, but now he himself began to speak. He had changed from being a learner into being a teacher. Suchandra seemed to be holding back his own words, in order to listen to what Sudhana was saying. Or perhaps he had spoken of his past only in order for Sudhana to be able to speak now.

“You mean I have to go and find Shakyamuni Buddha?”

“No. Not now anyway. If you wish to join the ranks of Shakyamuni's monks, that wish will surely be realized. After all, he can be found after only a ten days' walk from here; there is no problem about it.”

“Have you any idea what kinds of disciplines you have to observe if you become his follower?”

“First you have to study how to arrive at bodhisattva ways and the gates of liberation. There are ten kinds of laws.”

Sudhana got out of the bath-tub. He was cooking in the hot water.

“The ten laws are: never to refrain from good knowledge; never to forget the thought of seeing the Buddha; never to neglect to go in search of the good knowledge of Buddhas and bodhisattvas to serve and venerate them; never to turn away from those who preach knowledge

of the good with much learning and wisdom; never to refrain from listening to the ways of *paramita* (*perfection*); never to refrain from listening to teaching concerning the practice of *bodhi* (*enlightening*); never to abandon the three gateways of liberation; never to refrain from the four laws where Brahma-deva dwells; never to refrain from the essence of all wisdom.”

“Can I gain present enlightenment?”

“Yes, surely. You need only experience the heart of the Prajna-paramita (perfection of wisdom) and if you and it are in harmony, you will gain enlightenment into all that you see and understand.”

“And if I simply hear talk of *Prajna-paramita*, can I gain present enlightenment?”

“Not immediately. The reason is that you have to have knowledge of the true essence and nature of the whole *dharma* before you can gain enlightenment into the Perfection of Wisdom.”

“You mean the *tathata* (*thusness*) of supreme enlightenment? Can we not gain enlightenment just by hearing mention of *tathata*?”

“Oh no. You can never gain enlightenment just by hearing. There is a story: in a vast desert, without springs or rivers, one hot summer's day a man is walking from the west towards the east when he meets someone coming from the east. He asks, 'I am thirsty now; where can I go to find water and shade?' The one coming from the east replies, 'Keep heading east; you will find the road divides to left and right. If you take the road to the right you will reach a shady oasis, and a spring of cool water'. What do you think? Will that man be able to quench his thirst just by thinking of going?”

“Obviously not.”

“Right. Bodhisattva living is just the same. You cannot gain enlightenment into the entire *dharma* just by hearing, thinking, and understanding by wisdom. The desert is the reality of birth and death. The man coming from the west is every living being, experiencing the three poisons of greed, anger, and folly, the one coming from the east dwells in all wisdom as Buddha, as bodhisattva, with an equal knowledge of the nature of the entire *dharma* and having received a sincere will. Taking the cool water and being freed of thirst and heat is to be enlightened for oneself as regards that true path.”

“That makes sense.”

“Let's leave here now. You led the way in, now I will lead you out.”

Suchandra was happy as a child : “Today I have at last been freed of the melancholy I have suffered from for so long. Thanks to your teaching. I feel infinitely happy.”

Sudhana and Suchandra left the bathroom and returned to the entrance hall. Outside, the rain was pouring down as if it would never stop. The monsoon season's humidity soon soaked into Sudhana's refreshed body. They drank cups of hot tea. Then Suchandra spoke.

“You've already heard about my past but there is something from even earlier that I want to tell you. There is something I can recall from a previous existence. Before being born here as an Indian in this present world of Jambu-dvipa, I was a human being too. Only then I lived on the other side of the Himalayas, as a Tibetan. I was a shepherd in the Tamilt basin. Though I was a shepherd by calling, I played the flute so well that reports of my skill filtered out into the world beyond. I received my master's permission to go as far as the capital city, to take part in a flute-playing competition. While I was there, I met a peddler from beside the Indus who had come round the western end of the Himalayas, crossing the Pamir highlands. He invited me to go with him to see somewhere better than Tibet, so I went back with him over the Pamir highlands.

“We nearly died there but survived and reached a great city on the banks of the Indus. Alas, misfortune was awaiting the peddler who had brought me there. He was murdered by youths belonging to another tribe, in revenge for having killed a man from their clan in days gone by. So there I was, a complete stranger, a starving orphan, alone in that terrible heat,

unable to speak or understand a single word of the language. Then someone who was on the run after committing a crime persuaded me to go with him to Simla in the Punjab. From there I fell in with people moving further and further east and journeyed on, until I fell sick in a cave somewhere and died.

“Yes, I died there. The life after that was this present one. I was able to become an Indian in my new existence.”

“You know, you were able to become an Indian in passing from one life to another, but for a creature to become a Buddha and set out on bodhisattva paths is a matter of this present moment, once the heart has made a firm decision. That is why Shakyamuni, after his first sermon, caressed the disease-ridden body of an untouchable who had come to him. As he touched him, he said to his first three disciples, 'Behold, here is India's Buddha'. At once the sickness went out of the poor wretch and he became a follower of the Buddha.”

“Fine words indeed.”

“That man had already received recognition from Shakyamuni but nonetheless he insisted on starting his studies from the very beginning, as the most stupid disciple would. He prepared the food for the community and did the washing up after they had eaten; he would go on lengthy errands at times when it never stopped raining, like here now, or enter forests teeming with poisonous snakes to gather rare mushrooms; or late at night he used to draw water from streams when the mud had settled, all the time asking the Buddha's other disciples about how to study well. The ten kinds of law he asked about then are still remembered today.”

“I would like to hear what they are.”

“Since the bodhisattva way includes ten laws leading to liberation, they are the Law of Liberation.”

Suchandra sat upright, uncrossing his legs.

“The first is to shun every law that does not lead to good; the second is to never to fail to keep each and every one of the precepts laid down by the Buddha; the third is to shun all lust and envy; the fourth is always to offer all veneration to the Buddha; the fifth is to practice every kind of virtuous work; the sixth is to pursue wisdom; the seventh is to cultivate all proper means of spreading the dharma; the eighth is the pronouncing of the great vow; the ninth is to observe fully all renunciations; the tenth is to cultivate assiduity in devotion. If a bodhisattva practices these ten laws fully, a deep and far-reaching illumination of liberation cannot fail to arise.”

Sudhana made a complete prostration before Suchandra, in sign of admiration. Suchandra likewise made the deepest prostration possible before Sudhana. The two of them remained with their brows pressed to the floor, as if unable to tear them away again. At last Sudhana raised his head and spoke almost inaudibly.

“Master Suchandra, indicate where I should go.”

Sudhana spoke in what seemed a baby's fretting tone. Suchandra responded in a kind of lullaby.

“Be off with you. You are to meet a man whose name signifies 'Form that Knows No End', Ajitasena. There you will find a bottomless ocean. Pour out water and fill it.”

“I will. Here too the rain is falling into a bottomless ocean, perhaps in that place it will also be raining.”

“I'm off to look for that Shakyamuni Buddha you told me about. Either in this life or the next; if not in the next life then in a later one, on another shore. . . .”

55. A night with Ajitasena

The next day he crossed the river Prana and entered an inn, where the carts of some merchants about to set off on a long journey were parked. The inn's huge gates were decked with ivory; it was known as the Ivory House. He enquired where he might find the Sonorous City and a young monk a few years older than himself approached him.

“I live in the Sonorous City. Last night a great magnate there, Ajitasena, received a message from Suchandra in a dream; that's why I've come out here this morning. In the dream, Suchandra said that a child pilgrim was on his way, that he should not wait to open the door to him, but send someone to meet him at the river crossing and respectfully accompany him. Now and then Suchandra and Ajitsena meet in their dreams like that, in spite of the great distance separating them.”

The Sonorous City lay a hard day's walk from the place where they had met. They walked with rapid steps, like scurrying animals, and dust puffed up beneath their feet. It was late at night when they arrived at the foot of the enormous city walls. As they approached, a murmuring had become audible and now the sound was loud. Yet the villages below the walls lay peacefully plunged in untroubled sleep.

The city gates swung open and Sudhana followed the young monk down the main street. Along both sides of the road great fir trees stood in weighty silence. The street was spread with sand that shone out white in the dark.

Ajitasena was extremely rich but he only took one meal a day. At first he had become rich by selling chariots and arrows, swords and spears to the neighboring cities when there was war between them and his home city of Shiapara. He had been a tight-fisted miser. When his uncle lay sick and dying, he refused to pay for so much as a single dose of medicine. Then one day, a young assassin from his home city broke into his bedroom and plunged a knife into the bed. He survived because he always slept in an adjacent room, as a precaution in case anyone broke in. He hastily pulled at the bell cord and the assassin was caught in the garden.

After a whole week's interrogations, Ajitasena learned that the youth was the son of Sadaham, who had been like a sworn brother to him when he was a child. One month later, the young man stood before Ajitasena and spoke out boldly.

“You have made yourself rich by betraying your native city. The rich have no birthplace, no fatherland, I know. That's why I was given the job of killing you.”

“How many other gangsters are there behind you, villain?”

“You get your power from wealth; I get mine from right. Threaten and torment me as much as you like, trying to find out who is behind me. You'll not get so much as a single mustard seed out of me. You'd better hurry up and die. Die before you can kill me, and be reborn in another world as a nice little animal. Villain, you call me? You're the villain.”

Ajitasena screamed at his subalterns: “Take him away and cut off his head.” They dragged the youth out, but along the way Ajitasena's men took to the city's sewers with the youth and escaped from the city through a drainage outlet. On hearing what had happened, Ajitasena received such a shock that he fell sick. He kept having nightmares, in which the young assassin appeared and plunged his knife into his throat.

When at last he was able to get about again, he had repented of his past ways. He gave out food to the beggars and poor folk at the city gates, and even to untouchables, as well as setting up places where they could live in his vast forest domains. Needless to say, he also sent numerous gifts to his original home city of Shiapara, together with titles to land and to farming rights.

At the same time he sent for famous brahman scholars, but then, as he was listening to their teaching, he heard news that a new teacher, more excellent than the brahmans, Shakya-

muni Buddha, had arisen. He made visits to a Buddhist monastery in the highlands where he was then living, learned the “Middle Way” of Buddhism, accepted the Precepts and became a deep believer in the dharmā. Now, ten years later, his virtue in the Way had become as famous as his wealth. People generally gain virtue by disposing of their wealth, but he had gained virtue and wealth together and was considered to be at the same time master of wealth and master of the dharmā; he came to be known as “Old Double Master.”

Sudhana rested well in a guest room, then on the following morning paid a visit to Ajitasena, who was already an old man. He murmured something to himself as Sudhana came in.

“Why, he's just like Sadaham's son. How long destiny stretches, to be sure.”

Sudhana caught nothing of what he said. He showed absolutely no interest in the wealth that Ajitasena had accumulated but simply stood there in front of the old man and laughed innocently; truth so obviously had nothing to do with wealth and riches. Without even asking him why he was lying down, Sudhana remarked: “Yesterday I found my ears were no longer working, because of the noise from this Sonorous City.”

“Surely it doesn't matter how much noise there is, it won't bother you once you're used to it. . . And then again. . . The Buddha's dharmā is the same. Perhaps. . . what we call the Buddha is something that we make in our own image.”

Sudhana seemed to have heard everything he needed to hear. He went on: “I have already heard all you want to say from master Suchandra. You always tell people to dismiss far from them everything that would shatter their thoughts of living justly, to banish to distant lands all that kills those who live justly. You also tell people to scold the idle and to get rid of women who dress in white. You teach ten laws of dismissing and banishing, but I think you tell people not to banish to distant lands creatures unable to rid themselves of their possessions? That means you teach eleven laws, not ten.”

“Eleven laws, you say!” Old Ajitasena lay speechless before Sudhana, an old sick man who had at last cast aside like a sloughed skin the authority with which he had for years on end dominated everybody. It was certainly hard to understand how he had had power enough to persuade even the lord of the Sonorous City to bestow riches on him.

“Eleven laws!”

Ajitasena did not send Sudhana away; they spent the rest of the day together. His eyes opened and closed while he lay there, unaware of the passing hours. Finally, he sent a servant girl to fetch the manager responsible for the daily running of his estate. He was out inspecting orchards and opium-poppy patches outside the main domain; he jumped on a horse and came galloping home.

“In the next few days I want you to distribute everything I own, some to my home town and the rest to the people in and around this city.”

The majordomo was astonished and made as if to protest.

“My lips have learned not to speak two different words; that includes not saying the same thing twice.”

The majordomo glared piercingly at Sudhana, as much as to say, “This villainy is all your work.” Sudhana rose to his feet, considering that he had no reason to stay there any longer. Ajitasena gazed up at Sudhana smilingly, then addressed him affectionately.

“If you go out of the South Gate, you will find Dharma village. Living there is the brahman Shivaragra. It does not matter if we meet once a year, once every three years, or once every four years, it's always as if we had met only the day before; he never changes. Most brahmans despise the dharma. They call it 'beggars' nonsense' and us 'seditious rabble,' but he's not like that. Nowadays, brahmans are like wild beasts; they swear that the dharmā and Shakyamuni Buddha must be got rid of. The brahmans' days are over, though. Go and see Shivaragra. He's a far better teacher than I am. I'm mere straw compared to him. He's a butterfly

flitting high above the straw. . . .”

Sudhana left the mansion unaccompanied, refusing any help in finding his way through the city. The estate around the house was so vast, he had to pass through nineteen intermediate gates and eighteen little gardens. As he emerged from the Sonorous City, the hitherto constant noise suddenly stopped. The people out working in the fields exclaimed that it could only mean that Ajitasena had entered the Paradise of Bliss, for they were convinced that the sound emanating from the city was in fact the sound of his breathing.

Dharma village was a haven for old people; many of its inhabitants were centenarians. Despite frequent epidemics and poor standards of living, there were more than thirty of them there, while another ninety were between seventy and eighty. In contrast, children were few and far between. There were a quantity of families where only one son had been born for the last five or seven generations.

Sudhana approached Shivaragra as he emerged from his house during a break in his afternoon meditations and observed the proper decorum by circumambulating about him once to the right. He was a hundred years old.

“Sacred master, I beseech you to instruct me.”

“How can the whole world be expressed in a few words? In the course of the lifetimes that have brought you here, you have already attained bodhisattvahood; what can an old brahman like me teach you? Just spend a few days here before you go on. Resting is a kind of study too. Of study, I say. You say you're Sudhana? I met Manjushri Bodhisattva once. In a grove on the banks of the Jamna river. . . He talked about you. He was worried to tears, wondering where your travels had taken you, what teachers you had met. . . .”

“Manjushri Bodhisattva!” Sudhana invoked him mutely. Shivaragra's expression became that of a playful imp.

“I made a joke with Manjushri back then, too. I said, 'You mean Sudhana's your son. After you left home and gained all that wisdom from the Buddha's dharma, didn't you make another kind of prayer and go with a woman? Isn't that how he was born?' That's what I said to him, but you know, he paid not the slightest attention. He just went on thinking about you, about whether you would be able to walk on the scorching roads, and whether you were wearing sandals, even if they were only tied on with string.

“I'm glad you've come. You must have walked over pretty scorching roads on the way. Rest your feet for a while in Dharma village. Forget about hearing lessons from a worn-out old brahman like me.”

He went on and on talking: “You know about this place. They say that if you once pass this way, you gain an extra ten years of life to practice your piety in. Won't you express such a wish, young as you are?”

He laughed. Sudhana realized that this old brahman was a master of vows. An initial yearning, by the banishing of passion, leads to the blooming of a flower. Then by prayers and vows for the attainment of truth, each living creature advances towards bodhisattva truth. So the yearning grows vaster. That yearning is no illusion or fantasy, no mere night's dream. Or if it is a dream, it is the dream of every living creature. Sudhana felt convinced that the brahman Shivaragra knew absolutely everything about the stage he had reached. That was why the hundred year old brahman could be satisfied with nothing but heart-to-heart communication in his conversation with Sudhana. They limited themselves to the exchange of a few words, as fish occasionally rise to the surface of a stream, then sink again.

Shivaragra pulled out a little string instrument of antique style and accompanied himself on it while he sang. The bliss shining on his aged face suggested someone who never had to worry about getting milk as a baby, who never had to worry about food while growing up. Yet in fact he had been an orphan, and for long periods he was nothing but skin and bones on account of wars and droughts. He had never known anything that might be termed youth,

until he had risen in caste, thanks to a distant relative who was a brahman, and had embarked on a life of ascetic observances. His song went on. Looking closely, it became apparent that the aged fingers plucking the seven strings had no nails. Sudhana recognized that even in this world's havens of bliss and peace, there is no one that does not bear a past history and previous lives marked by pain and struggles with poverty.

If there's a river, it can be crossed.

If there's a river, it can be crossed.

Why say that river cannot be crossed?

If there's a river, it can be crossed.

I'll make a little boat --

a big boat would take too long.

If there's a river, it can be crossed.

*Ah, surely the loveliest thing of all
is a newborn babe crossing a river*

at its mother's breast.

If there's a river, it can be crossed,

it can surely be crossed.

He withdrew his fingers from the instrument and closed his eyes. He had fallen asleep. Sudhana removed the instrument, then he climbed up on to the empty couch in the center of the spacious room and lay down. The couch was made of woven reeds, his side felt cool.

The old brahman Shivaragra and Sudhana took leave of each other in their dreams. The two of them were dreaming a single dream.

"You have nothing more to learn. Just a few more visits, and the way of bodhisattva living will open before you."

"Not so, I am still far from that."

"Ha ha. Not at all. Until now you have been travelling around in search of truth and the dharma, visiting various masters, but really you were paying visits to yourself, instructing yourself. . . How do you expect me at my age to speak empty words to you?"

"I am ashamed, deeply ashamed."

"Well yes, of course. In the presence of truth, in the midst of truth, we always feel ashamed."

They slept for a long time. The hour at which Shivaragra normally went to begin his meditations passed. The elderly brahman from the adjacent room wandered in and shook Shivaragra. "Children sleep so soundly," he muttered.

56. After Shivaragra

Leaving the village after receiving that last lesson from the old brahman, Sudhana found himself reflecting: “Ah, surely, if my task is once finished, I'll have nothing left to do? Not at all. Then I'll be one with every living creature in the immensities of the Buddha cosmos, I'll sing and dance with them all.” He made a pledge to that effect.

Sudhana sensed acute wonder : to think that the wealthy people he had met had managed to live as they had. Each had become his teacher, and had been like a flower come to bloom. A flower in bloom! It was as if Sudhana, in his journeys as a little pilgrim, had been bent on visiting flowers in every place, rather than finding teachers. Yet it might also be true that the flowers that had appeared before his eyes could only be flowers because he had entered the way of bodhisattva living. Everything seen with bodhisattva eyes blooms as a flower of bodhisattva life. He recalled a story he had heard.

There once was a rich man who was hardened by greed. He ordered the wretched food his servants ate to be limited to one meal a day. Seeing that, the great god Indra transformed himself and took the rich man's form, while he was away enjoying himself. He entered the house, opened the storerooms, called all the servants together and tearfully addressed them: “I have treated you harshly all this while, but at last I have freed myself of my greed and repented of my treatment of you.” Then he invited them to take anything they liked, be it jewels, or land, anything.

After that, Indra, still disguised as the rich man, turned to the mistress of the house, their children and relatives, and the servants: “Soon the form of the greed I have rid myself of is going to appear, looking just like me. You must beat the villain and drive him away.”

The master of the house duly returned. The men keeping the gates beat him black and blue and drove him away. “You wicked pack of greed. Away with you!” Their shouts could be heard as far as the borders of his estate. At which the greedy master, full of resentment, went to find a friend and the two of them entered the house together, only to see another master exactly like him sitting there.

Then his wife and children set about him with sticks and clubs, screaming: “You wicked pack of greed, can't we get rid of you?” Driven out a second time, he went to the king and appealed for help. The two masters presented themselves at the palace and the king spoke. “Let whichever of you is the true master produce some secret sign to prove it.” The master of the house at once lowered his clothes to reveal a hidden mole. The disguised Indra showed an identical mole. The king thought of another test. He pretended to order the execution of the man's youngest daughter. Both masters burst into tears.

With that the king gave up, lamenting, “I'm just an ordinary mortal, there's nothing more I can do.” He commanded them to go to the Buddha, who was reported to be travelling through a neighboring kingdom. So they went to present themselves before the Buddha.

As they reached Jetavana-vihara, the Buddha saw them coming and exclaimed, “A god in disguise!” At once Indra resumed his true form and vanished. The greedy man was left standing alone. The Buddha told him, “Now go home.” But he stood there lamenting, “Even if I go home, there's nothing left, so what's the point?” Then the Buddha said, “You can give all you have to others and stay with me, if you wish to make such a vow.”

He made that vow, then returned home. There, he found that all his accumulated wealth had been restored. From that moment the householder cast off his greed and began to live for others.

Manjushri had once enquired about the origin of the name “Sudhana” (it means “Good wealth”) and had discovered that it, too, was originally connected with material riches. At the moment of Sudhana's conception, a jewelled tower was said to have risen from the ground in

the courtyard of his parents' great mansion, sheltering a hidden treasure. When the child was born, again the tower and the treasure had appeared, this time a visible treasure of five hundred vessels bearing jewels, clothing and food. Therefore the name "Sudhana" had been given to the child.

Determined to draw the child's fortunes away from material wealth and toward the *dharma*, Manjushri had taught him the Buddha's commandments. As his delight lay in virtue, he whole-heartedly pronounced the vow expressing his determination to gain supreme illumination, before setting out on his interminable journey.

The old brahman Shivaragra had given him directions: "Look for some friends. They will be holier teachers than I am," and he had set out on another long journey. Crossing a region where the Ganges divided into numerous branches, he again headed southward. The city of Sumanamukha he had been told to visit would not be easy to reach. The road to the city was not Sudhana's alone; the young pilgrim Samantavyuha, whom Sudhana would never meet, was on his way there too.

What kind of a child was this Samantavyuha? In a world aeons before, he had witnessed the virtues of a former Buddha and from him had received understanding of the depths of *samadhi* (concentration).

*Like a thousand suns rising
and suddenly shining forth,
dear lord of Boundless Light,
you are difficult to meet
even once in boundless aeons.
I gaze up at you as at the sun.*

*I stand here in your light
and my anguish melts away like ice.
What joy! High above all joys,
the joy that fills my heart.*

A Buddha of an earlier age, on hearing this song of praise, had said to Samantavyuha: "You have done well, little Samantavyuha! The sentient beings of all ages to come will rely on you. You will purify this world with your light and your compassion. . . I am overflowing with joy, for a *bodhichitta* mind (mind eager for awakening) has arisen within you. I have only one thing to add: no one negligent can ever know the deep ocean of *upaya* (strategic skills and means). You will only be able to complete your task by attaining the power of assiduous devotion."

His teaching about assiduous devotion was virtually identical with the main contents of what was to be Shakyamuni's last sermon in a later age, contained in the pages of the *Mahaparinirvana-sutra*:

Everything in the world is heading towards destruction. You must fix your minds without negligence on truth.

Clearly, Sudhana's pure and innocent child's heart was almost identical with that of Samantavyuha in that aeon long ago, when the world of the Garland Sutra, the world of bodhi-sattva activity, had revealed itself to him. In the same way, as far as possession of a child's heart was concerned, there could be no difference between Sudhana and his many teachers in the southern lands, in the Dekkan highlands and along the course of the Ganga, apart from the difference of age and profession.

Sudhana's itinerary kept changing. He would travel by night for a few days, then by daylight for a while. At last he encountered a phantasmagoric guide. As they journeyed on together, he found he had left the surface world and was once again in the underworld. He descended deep, with no thought of returning.

This underground world lay hundreds of fathoms below ground; yet it finally developed into an enormous carnival. Down there, not only humans but all kinds of creatures were fraternizing together. There were bugs and ants, wild cats and monkeys living with Dravidians, as well as predators from the southern forests that lived with the rest without harming them. Believe it or not, turtles were standing erect like giraffes, having fun as they attempted to dance, most unskillfully.

On closer inspection, swarms of ants all clustered together were likewise seen to be dancing.

Tathata (essential thusness)!

This darkness is light.

This darkness is liberation.

This darkness is compassion.

Essential suchness, tathata.

A glance to one side showed that the song was issuing from a group of snails and inchworms singing in harmony:

You will see how majestic

are the countless Buddha worlds

that lie in one single atom,

in a single pore;

yet how like an illusion!

Can lies exist in this realm of dharma?

Can truth be like an illusion?

How majestic, the countless Buddha worlds!

You will see.

After seeing,

you will hear.

After you hear

eight thousand hymns sung in reality,

you will know they are like an illusion.

In one place, a group of blind old men were dancing in a circle and singing:

The future Maitreya

dwells in blind darkness.

Though it be darkness,

stars moon and sun are surely there.

With eyes closed,

far away places can be seen

as clearly as if near by.

Buddha-tree flowers can be seen

blooming there,

lovely buddha-tree flowers can be seen.

Ah, you come to put to an end every life's pain.

Today's true Wisdom,

putting to an end every life's pain.

Deeply moved by the blind men's dancing and singing, Sudhana noticed a group of fresh young girls and boys holding hands and dancing, a little way away. Abruptly, the phantasm that had guided Sudhana on the way down vanished without a trace. Sudhana realized that this was a world peopled by illusory phantasms. After finishing their dance, the boys and girls split up and went in small groups to sit on the hills of their underground world. One girl emerged from among them and headed for Sudhana.

“You have come all this way!”

“This world of yours is a happy place.”

“My name is Shrimati. Let's go over there. That's where young Shrisambhava is.”

“Ah, Shrisambhava, Shrimati,” Sudhana spoke their names in tones of deep respect, “I have attained a heart ready for the ultimate awakening but I still am not clear as to how a bodhisattva should perform bodhisattva deeds to advance along the bodhisattva path. I beg you to instruct me.”

Hearing his words, Shrisambhava made a rapid reply. It emerged so rapidly that it nearly overlapped with Sudhana's question: “How can we know the full extent of your great pilgrimage after truth? Ours is merely the condition of phantasms, an incomprehensible condition of selfhood, one that goes roaming all over the country, concealed behind visible realities, united with reality's pain, distress and sorrow, the facts of mortality, old age, sickness, and death. That heart of yours that asks the question is best equipped to become our answer. After all, even liberation is a phantasm. How could we know anything that is not a phantasm?”

The power contained within those few words was such that Sudhana abruptly grew taller and began to radiate light from every part of his body. Sudhana had a song on his lips, ready to express all he felt, but Shrimati whispered earnestly to him in a clear voice: “Master Sudhana, once you leave here, passing the swamps and plains to the south, you will reach the sea. On the shore there is a vast garden known as Samanta-vyuha Park and in the midst of it is a tower called the Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments. There resides Maitreya Bodhisattva. This underworld carnival is about to vanish; this spot will turn back into a world of darkness waiting for the carnival yet to come.”

Sudhana spoke, “But what about all these joyful dances and songs?”

Shrimati whispered again to Sudhana, smiling at him with her inborn beauty, “I wish I could follow you. But I have work to do with Master Shrisambhava. We have to reveal anew the invisible world of pure Buddha nature to all the creatures that have come here, before we send them on their way.”

He took his leave, circumambulating three times round her. Observing that Shrisambhava was some way away, busily giving good advice to a number of people, wild beasts, and tiny creatures, he reckoned that it was not necessary to say goodbye to him, and left without more ado. He set off up the incline leading out of the underworld without any guide. It was dark but he was able to find his way even in the dark, thanks to the light filling his eyes.

Emerging from beneath the ground, he stood for a while on the surface of the earth with closed eyes. Unlike most other roads, the one he found himself on was lined with palm trees. The tang of the ocean had already begun to penetrate his nostrils. The sun was blazing strongly but the burning heat was tempered to some extent by a breeze coming off the sea.

He had no sooner passed a white sandy beach and once again set off down the highway, than Samanta-vyuha park appeared. As he entered it, he could see the Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments, a tower soaring up until it touched the sky. It was not built by slaves at the command of some lord or rich potentate, or by the labors of prisoners of war. It was said to have arisen uniquely through bodhisattvas' virtues and wisdom, as they offered up the power of their thoughts and their vows, their unconditioned freedom, their supernatural gifts, for the sake of all living creatures.

This was the tower where Maitreya Bodhisattva resided. Thanks to his practice of an infinite number of virtues, as soon as Sudhana pressed his brow to the ground beneath the tower in veneration, the teaching set at its very topmost pinnacle communicated itself to him, with all the bodhisattva's joy. It was a response to a lengthy poem that Sudhana had pronounced. Sudhana's hymn of praise began: *This tower is my dear lord's home, bringing the world benefit by the bright wisdom of compassion. Once my dear lord, receiving the water of ultimate enlightenment on his head, has entered the exalted state of Buddhahood. . .*

After Sudhana had finished reciting fifty-five poems, Maitreya Bodhisattva welcomed him and recited poems in his praise, one hundred and seventeen of them. This Maitreya, who deigned to dedicate such lengthy poems to a little disciple coming on a visit, was himself still very young. In his last incarnation, Maitreya must have been brimming with the most prodigious premonitions, like the blazing rays of the setting sun, more than any of the Buddha's other ten great disciples. That is shown in Shakyamuni's prophesy concerning the world that would come after his, the Dragon Blossom World of the final Buddha Maitreya, that would be more sublimely beautiful than any other future age, thanks to the sorrow occasioned by his own death.

It was very remarkable that Sudhana should have come to visit Maitreya Bodhisattva. Now, at least for a moment, he was able to experience in the present something that still lay five billion six hundred and seventy million years in the future. He sighed deeply.

57. A teacher from the next world

Sudhana had undoubtedly set out along the highway leading to the coast of the kingdom of Anga. Yet he discovered that the very foot of the majestic tower in which Maitreya Bodhisattva dwelt was swathed in a mass of clouds. It was morning by now, for he had slept through the night. An elderly man was busy sweeping up the scattered bits of cloud. Finding that to be an odd sort of employment, Sudhana cautiously ventured a question: "Are those clouds?"

The man was taciturn; he did not reply at all for a while.

"They are clouds, aren't they?"

"You sloughed off scab of a visitor, can't you use your eyes? If these aren't clouds, what are they?"

Sudhana felt snubbed: "In that case, are we up in the mountains?"

"You think this is a mountain? Not at all. This is the outer yard of the Inner Courts of Tushita Heaven. The topmost pinnacle of the Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments rises in this garden. You thought you were walking along an ordinary road, but it wasn't, it was the road to heaven. Clouds are sometimes called the shadows of wisdom, but sometimes they're the dregs of obscurity."

Sudhana was completely at a loss. He had taken a road leading up to heaven! During his travels in the south, he had heard a rumor that Maitreya had fallen sick and died while still only a child, after a short life marked by wonderful talents, asceticism, and compassion. So was the Maitreya Bodhisattva in this Tushita Heaven a bodhisattva yet to be born into the present world? Or was he now a bodhisattva waiting for the next age, having already died one last time and returned to his home here?

Sudhana perceived that a voice was proceeding from each of the building's pillars:

"This tower is a place drawing one aeon into all, all aeons into one."

"This tower is a place drawing one world into all, all worlds into one."

"This tower is a place drawing one dharma into all, all dharmas into one."

"This tower is a place drawing one creature into all, all creatures into one."

"This tower is a place drawing one Buddha into all, all Buddhas into one."

The little pilgrim ceased to consider it strange that he was up in the sky, here in Tushita Heaven. Instead he became a poet and began to improvise a set of fifty-five new canticles, inspired by the voices emerging from the pillars.

Just as he had finished singing, Maitreya returned to the Tushita Heaven from the world below. The young Maitreya came accompanied by the garuda (phoenix) with golden wings and the snake-headed mahoraga, he was surrounded on all sides by heavenly beings, dragons, the four heavenly kings who guard Indra's Brahma Heaven, and a hundred thousand living creatures. The bodhisattva Sudhana had come to meet arrived after him and came to him from outside, not inside the tower. Advancing before him, Sudhana fell at his feet. Immediately, Maitreya spoke Sudhana's praise in a thunderous voice, reciting no less than one hundred and twenty canticles. On first meeting this nameless, wandering child, he responded to the child's praises by far longer hymns of praise. It was a moment of intense emotion.

"Bodhisattva, oh, bodhisattva," Sudhana kept whimpering and could not help but break into tears. As he wept, he made repeated prostrations, innumerable prostrations. He had never made so many in his life before. More than that, even, for each prostration was full of multiple other prostrations so that in the end he must have made tens of thousands of them.

Maitreya will ultimately emerge as the Buddha of Love. Then he will redress this present world and reveal it as a world made new, emerging as the Buddha of the Dragon Blossom World as it opens towards infinity in all directions, seated beneath the *Naga-pushpa*

(*Dragon Blossom*) Tree. Therefore he quickly completed his lives in the present world and removed himself from it. He has not yet opened the Dragon Blossom World. He will now travel here and there, visiting every place, while the suffering of creatures grows more intense. The creation of a new world can never come about without wandering and fumbling. The chaos the cosmos experienced in its initial myriad of aeons was no different.

Maitreya Bodhisattva led little Sudhana and all the great crowd toward the Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments, the door of which opened at a snap of his fingers. There, everything belonged to the world of the innumerable. There are no words to describe the stately jewelled palaces and balustrades within it, while innumerable udumbara flowers, innumerable padma blossoms, innumerable *kumuda* flowers, and innumerable pundarika flowers bloomed in gorgeous profusion.

There were drawings portraying the course of Maitreya's present and past lives, that could all be taken in at a glance, as well as portrayals of the innumerable forms in which he had manifested himself. And more. Far more.

Sudhana was now meeting Maitreya in order to associate himself deeply with the liberation of all living creatures to which he had consecrated himself by such great vows, while Maitreya Bodhisattva had at once included him among his followers, uniting him with them in one community by a blazing shaft of light. They breathed in harmony together, in such extreme joy that clouds of light blazed from his every pore, billowing forth like drifting clouds.

Nonetheless, he could not retain the young pilgrim at his side. He was obliged to send the wanderer on his way, for after this he still had to meet his first teacher, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and his last, Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Practice. Their relationship stretched far into the future, so for now Maitreya, for whom this parting was far from easy, placed his beloved Sudhana in a cloud chariot and sent him back earthwards.

As he approached the earth, Sudhana gazed down at the Himalayas, spread in a majestic panorama below him. As he dropped towards the earth's lacework of rivers brimming with pure water, Sudhana made a promise to himself: "In order to hear one single word of doctrine spoken by the Buddha concerning bodhisattva works, I am prepared to hurl myself into a Buddha cosmos full of flames and endure the torment of the fire."

The surface of the world was a sad and lovely place.

Down I go ... down to the world ... where I must meditate, work, stay alert, even while I sleep ... down I go ... to forests bowing in the breeze ... to rivers rippling in the breeze ... to banners streaming in the breeze ... down I go ... to the world where I must live ... Down I go.

Sudhana's heart was beating faster than ever, faster than a sparrow's heart: he was going to meet his first teacher, the Bodhisattva Manjushri. At last! Sudhana had fully agreed, with nothing either to add or subtract, with all the praises of Manjushri he had heard during his time in the Tushita Heaven from Maitreya, who had just returned from spending time with Manjushri.

As he left Maitreya, first circumambulating him several times to the right and bowing to touch his feet, their two childhoods had become as one. That oneness would bring about his meeting with Manjushri. Accordingly, the more Sudhana's mind was filled with thoughts of Manjushri, his first teacher, the more those coincided with thoughts of young Maitreya his compeer. Now that Maitreya Bodhisattva, his most influential teacher, had become his friend, Sudhana's heart grew increasingly alert.

Sudhana had reached the point where a meeting with Manjushri, had become inevitable. A long-lasting affection had preserved the innocence of both master and pupil. Once again, Sudhana recalled Maitreya's words in praise of Manjushri to the deep surfaces of his heart.

"Good boy, little pilgrim. I will show you what kind of bodhisattva your teacher Manjushri is. I will show you how he has penetrated the practice of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva

and become perfect. My dearly loved, little boy, first above all in truth.”

Maitreya had caressed the little pilgrim's head and shoulders as if he were his own brother. Then he spoke. It was a solemn eulogy, yet spoken in tones light as the sound of a babbling stream while they grew even quieter.

“The vow made by Manjushri Bodhisattva lies beyond the reach of the other ten thousand billion myriads of bodhisattvas. Ah, little Sudhana, his practice and perfect performance are amazing, while his vow has been so often repeated it knows no bounds. He is bodhisattva indeed. His wisdom does not mean he is foolish in human terms; he is a bodhisattva in whom wisdom is exactly identical with physical reality.

“What person is there, no matter how senior, who can go down to the lowest place and fetch up the highest wisdom, as Manjushri Bodhisattva has done? Indeed, Manjushri Bodhisattva has been the mother of ten thousand billion myriads of Buddhas, the teacher of ten thousand billion myriads of bodhisattvas. He was not content to stop at that degree of wisdom. From ancient days in times long past he has entered into a state of liberation and fulfilled all the works of Samantabhadra, until none can tell which is Manjushri and which Samantabhadra.”

Sudhana recalled the sound of Maitreya's voice. Dropping ever lower at first, like a rushing stream, then like the whisper of the wind scouring mountain heights, or like raucous voices of farmers outside city walls as they celebrate with songs, after harvesting the corn, shaking their shoulders and dancing in circles, it had made Sudhana's heart tremble.

Joy at the prospect of meeting his teacher ahead and sorrow at parting from his teacher behind mingled in Sudhana, as he boarded a skiff at twilight to cross the Ganga at a point where its width was not too great. The oar creaked and spread a pattern of ripples over the flowing water. Fish rose, made slurping noises, then sank again. They seemed to be bidding him welcome and he greeted the little creatures in return.

Sudhana headed for a village where lights were already shining here and there, over the silent dusky riverside lands. He did not bother to go in quest of a place to sleep. He came across a mound of straw onto which he simply threw himself down. When Sudhana awoke, a pair of eyes was gazing down at him; they belonged to the daughter of the nearby house.

“There are two empty rooms in our house. . . and you sleep here like this.”

The girl seemed to be reproaching him, even as she expressed her pity.

“Thank you for your concern.”

“What concern? We deserve a severe punishment for not having welcomed a visitor correctly. I'm going to prepare breakfast for you; I beg you not to refuse. Come along. First you can wash your face. . . .”

He followed the girl from the spot where he had slept into the house. It was a prosperous house, not brahman or ksatriya caste, but its tidy yard was full of the simple dignity of those frugal folk who treasure every last grain of corn, in the belief that it is their's as a gift from above.

Sudhana hungrily ate the offered food. Sumanamukha was still far away.

58. Meeting while far apart

Sudhana spent one more night in that place. The daughter of the family inhabiting the main house was an Aryan girl, bubbling with memories of previous lives. She gave Sudhana new clothing as simply as if they had been brother and sister.

“Those clothes you're wearing are too shabby for someone going back to visit their teacher. You should have new clothes, ready to contain a new heart.”

Sudhana was puzzled. Still, as soon as the girl had put the clothes down and gone out, he changed into them. They seemed to have been made for him. His body adjusted to its new dress.

“That's better. Now you are ready to meet again your first master. You met him before by the stupa in Salavana, the sal tree grove necropolis near Kushinagara. When you are in old clothes, no fresh joy arises on meeting truth or teachers.”

“What? Have you seen my master the bodhisattva Manjushri? How do you know that I am his disciple?”

She merely laughed in reply. Sudhana took his leave of the girl and soon arrived in front of a huge dolmen, half a day's walk from Sumanamukha city in the land of the Universal Gateway. From the slope where it stood, there was a wide view out over any number of rivers, marshy swamps, and plains. The view was made more striking by the almost complete absence of trees. Sudhana wondered where the Buddha's Sangha (monastic community) of disciples might be now, that band of followers founded by the sage from the Shakya clan. No doubt his teacher Manjushri must be among them as they moved on, never able to stay in one place, like a ship on the river.

Sudhana awoke from these thoughts, that seemed to rise echoing from the vast plains lying before his eyes. Now his heart's deep longing was all centered on his first teacher. His daily existence had always been directed towards the future, yet now everything else was powerless before the memory of that moment in the distant past when he had met the master, a tiny wartime orphan in a grove surviving alongside of the ruins left by war.

He was longing for his teacher, when suddenly his master's hand stretched out from a far-off place, one hundred and ten yojanas away, and caressed his head as he stood there. A teacher is always in touch with his pupil, and the love between them has such power that it seems the master could caress his pupil's head from far away as if he were close beside him. Now that had become a reality -- and not only his teacher's hand. His voice echoed from very nearby, between the sound of their breathing.

“Well done!”

How Sudhana had been longing to hear that one word.

“Well done, Sudhana. As long as you live you will be able to fashion skeletons with piles of stones and teach them the way of harmony. The day will come when one by one those stone skeletons will come to life and dance for joy at the law of the identity of all things you have attained.”

Sudhana was obliged to hear his master speak his praises.

“If you had not possessed deep vows and belief, how could you have survived the long ordeal of visiting all those teachers in the southern realms? Surely, at some point, you would have turned aside and given up, overwhelmed with immense fatigue. Or you might have been content to make do with the few fruits harvested in the course of a small number of visits, giving up the ascent of the mountains on which the greater fruits are found. Sudhana! Sudhana!

“If that had happened, you would never have been able to do the works contained in the nature and principles of the dharma, never have been able to perform the works involved in coming to know everything, knowing a little, knowing deeply, and then knowing the essence

so completely that you enter and possess it. Sudhana. Well done!

Sudhana could never forget the initial jubilation with which he had begun his journey. It had been his life's first joy. There are ten *bhumi* (*lands, stages*) that represent the ten stages of arduous formation required for a bodhisattva to attain the supreme *uttara* (*enlightenment of Buddhahood*), and the first of them is *pramudita-bhumi*, (*the Land of Joy*).

However, to attain this first land of joy, there is no avoiding the strenuous ascent through the ten grades of faith, the ten steps of wisdom, the ten lines of action, the ten goals, and the forty steps. Sudhana had already fully reached this stage in previous lives; accordingly he was able to enjoy so chaste a rapture at the very beginning of his earthly pilgrimage. At the height of his ecstasy of joy, he had truly seen every kind of flower blooming in the midst of the limitless expanses of the whole world's heavens, as far as the infinite horizons of the desert. That is what the *Avatamsaka* realm is.

By the end of his pilgrimage in the south he had attained the second land, *vimala-bhumi* the Land of Purity, the third, *prabhakari-bhumi* the Land of Radiance, the fourth, *archismati-bhumi* the Blazing Land, the fifth, *sudurjaya-bhumi* the Land Hard to Conquer, and the sixth, *abhimukhi-bhumi* the Land in View of Wisdom.

With the attainment of the sixth land, *prajna* (*enlightening wisdom*) is perfect and complete. In other words, perfection has been achieved through self-discipline to one's own great benefit. Beyond this point, by attaining the seventh land, *durangama-bhumi* the Far-reaching Land, the eighth, *achala-bhumi* the Immovable Land, the ninth, *sadhumati-bhumi* the Land of Good Thoughts, and the final tenth, *dharmamegha-bhumi* the Land of Dharma Clouds, it becomes possible to pass from self-benefit to the perfection of works of altruism. Immediately ahead of him, one step away and blocking his path like a vast abyss under a dawning sky, lay the ultimate state of Buddhahood. Sudhana had now reached that stage.

He abruptly let the entire issue drop and instead requested his master for further teaching, with an artless question.

“Master, how did you arrive at your present position in the exalted world you have attained?”

The question was less a question than a query full of his desire to share for a moment the love arising from all the truths that they had experienced together in one common heart as master and pupil, although they had never once met again. Manjushri was delighted with Sudhana's question, that came like flowers blossoming in a flowerless spot, it was so bright and clear.

“My dear Sudhana. Once any bodhisattva achieves the ten dharmas, they reach my world at the opportune moment.”

Sudhana pressed him further: “What are those ten?”

“You know them already; the first is perfection by illumination in the unborn dharma; the second is the *dharmas* that is never abolished; the third is the *dharmas* that is never lost; the fourth is the *dharmas* that never comes and goes; the fifth is the *dharmas* that lies beyond words; the sixth is the *dharmas* that can never be expressed in words; the seventh is the *dharmas* spoken without conceits; the eighth is the *dharmas* that cannot be spoken; the ninth is the silent *dharmas*; the tenth is the holy one's *dharmas*. Once any bodhisattva has perfectly mastered these ten, they enter my world at the opportune moment.”

Sudhana drew from his unconscious mind images of the scene when Manjushri, obliged to leave the company of the Buddha, had spoken about the truth and the worlds to a gathering of two thousand or more at the foot of the great stupa in Salavana, the grove of sal trees to the east of the city of Punyaprasavas. He combined that with his own memories of his first meeting with the master as an orphan, soon after the end of a battle. He did this to reveal to himself the fact that the essential task and the things he had suffered were one and the same. He abruptly returned from the past to the present.

“Master, what do you mean by your world?”

“It is the place where all bodhisattvas are.”

“What is the place where all bodhisattvas are?”

“The first and fundamental principle is the place where all bodhisattvas are.”

Until he reached the fifth of the ten lands, *sudurjaya-bhumi* the Land Hard to Conquer, Sudhana's confidence in his own grasp of the truth had often wavered. Once there, though, he had attained a state in which there was no more wavering or turning aside. From that point it was possible to reach a position of self-perfection in a state where there was no more dwelling in cycles of life and death, and no dwelling in nirvana, either.

As his re-discovered teacher had just told him, he could henceforth fix his sights on the world of altruism, since he had entered the decisive state of awakening by the experience of a reality without birth and death, an absolutely irreversible state, the state of no-birth. From that moment all bodhisattvas made of clay and sand could crumble, he now possessed the wisdom of a diamond bodhisattva that would never dissolve in any wind or stream.

Then passing far beyond the world of confusion, attaining the seventh land, *durangama-bhumi* the Far-reaching Land, just as Sudhana himself passed from one land to another in the south in his acquisition of dharma, begins the discovery of the innumerable worlds of Buddhahood, leaving behind all classifications, all concepts.

After that, once the eighth and ninth lands have been attained, one arrives at the final awakening, that comes as an unbearable downpour of rain, the heavens emptying down, that can only be embraced by the vast ocean itself. That downpour of rain issues from the great cloud of *dharma* truth. This rain, and the bodhisattva receiving it, signify the way all creatures' anguish and suffering are alleviated by being drenched in the rain of the great *dharma* truth. This is the tenth land, *dharmamegha-bhumi* the Land of Dharma Clouds.

After the seventh land, *durangama-bhumi* the Far-reaching Land, Sudhana's virtue was already expanding, as something not his own but the world's, while the essence of the wisdom the little pilgrim had so far acquired was transformed from mere *prajna* (*wisdom*) into *karuna* (*compassion*). Then the whole world, the entire Buddha cosmos, once drenched by the torrents of that great compassion, could at last fulfill the task first entrusted to it by the Buddha's *dharma*.

How could Shakyamuni alone be Buddha?

Buddha?

*All the many Buddhas
are Vairochana Buddha
the Buddha of light.*

*This world we live in,
that world of stars and sun and moon,
I myself, are we not all Vairochana Buddha?*

*See rivers overflowing
after heavy rain.*

Is not Vairochana Buddha in them too?

Then is Shakyamuni not Buddha?

The future Buddhas to left and right of Shakyamuni --

*Manjushri bodhisattva,
Samantabhadra bodhisattva --
are they not Buddhas too?*

Sudhana cast a glance towards the ancient stillness lingering along the lotus-studded edges of a little lake, then followed his master away from that spot beside the dolmen outside Somana city. Among all the thoughts flashing like lightning through Sudhana's mind, the foremost was the highest principle. Actually, that first principle itself was the teaching he had

received from his very first teacher. It followed that Manjushri bodhisattva must be the embodiment of the first principle.

It was late when they paused to take their meal, the sun was already setting beyond the network of rivers, canals, and marshes that stretched as far as the eye could see. It could scarcely be called a meal, consisting as it did of the sparse victuals Sudhana was carrying in his pack, yet master and pupil considered it a veritable banquet.

“This is very good.”

“It's food I got before coming here.”

“Very good.”

The master repeated the same words several times. As he did so, he gazed at where before them the river ran white as if swollen by rain, perhaps because they had made mention of heavy rain as they talked, for the weather had so far been clear. Then he spoke to Sudhana very quietly. If it had not been for Sudhana's sharp ears, only the void might have heard.

“There is just one person left for you to visit. After all, the search for supreme awakening is not for yourself alone. Don't bodhisattvas seek it for the benefit of all sentient creatures? But where will you go to seek it? I have received food from your hands, now my work on your behalf is done. How I have waited for this day.”

His teacher spoke in sorrowful tones. Sudhana could not reply to such a master in any brilliant ornate form of address. He might have lips, no words emerged from them. He was full of words that, if they once emerged, would simply vanish into thin air. The sun had reached the western horizon. For one last moment its disk blazed crimson. Then the whole world seemed to have been dyed blood-red. Flocks of birds flew across the crimson sky in orderly formation.

The master had stretched out an arm across one hundred and ten yojanas from a far away spot to caress his pupil Sudhana, then that one hand had become a whole body accompanying Sudhana. Now he withdrew his hand again across those one hundred and ten yojanas and Manjushri disappeared from Sudhana's side, leaving not a trace behind him. Time flowed on. Sudhana stood still, not uttering a word, facing the place where the master had been sitting. Ah, the master was no longer there! Yet he had been there!

Sudhana recalled the simple way his master had kept repeating, It's good, it's good, very good, as they had shared that makeshift meal in the light of the setting sun.

On the following morning, Sudhana felt no trace of fatigue as he opened his ears to the songs of the dawn's busy birds. He had been in such a state of stillness that he could no longer hear the sound of the river fretting once in a while in its course. He murmured to himself.

“Why, those water fowl have greater freedom than I do.”

The complete thoroughness with which Manjushri had vanished from before Sudhana, leaving not a trace behind, had perhaps been intended as a kind of silent lesson, to the effect that now wisdom had to be transformed into love and practical care for all living creatures. Perhaps that was the final lesson.

Only one problem lay ahead of him. That was his meeting with Samantabhadra bodhisattva. Sudhana himself was now advancing as a bodhisattva, no longer as a mere child seeker. Having successfully completed each and every stage of his quest, his bodhisattva way had begun. The end was the beginning.

His final meeting with Samantabhadra bodhisattva would signify that his bodhisattva way had indeed begun. First, though, he could not avoid the experience of standing there alone, having cast off Buddhas, instructors, and all else. It was an icy sensation of solitude, like standing on the peak of a high mountain and being swept by a chill wind rising from below. Or rather it was like that new dimension of solitude felt when first we rise and stand on two feet, after crawling on all fours since birth.

In order to discover where Samantabhadra bodhisattva might be, Sudhana first aroused in himself a new yearning for the world.

59. One drop of water in the sea

In the Buddha's solemn assemblies, Manjushri's wisdom always shone out on his left, while on his right Samantabhadra's will for action reached towards the darkneses of all living creatures. In this present world, Samantabhadra is sometimes said to have been born into the third grade of the *vaysya* caste, but it is not certain. People belonging to that caste are normally merchants, farmers, or shepherds. Such people do not come from the priestly brahman caste, or the military ksatriya caste to which the Shakyas belonged.

In any case, he was not a non-Aryan aboriginal; he may have been an Aryan belonging to the common classes. The vast majority of the servant caste were survivors of barbarian tribes or the descendants of non-Aryan subjugated by the Aryan. Yet although this caste was completely distinct from any of the others, in one way or another they were all closely linked, although divided by a mixture of races.

The mythical union between Shiva and his bride Khali already signifies the intermingling of the gods of the aborigines with those of the Aryan. Samantabhadra was born as the son of precisely one such mixed-race family and had passed through a number of ascetic sects before converting to Buddhism and becoming the bodhisattva of practice. He, the foremost of all bodhisattvas together with Manjushri, not only possesses all the virtues of practice and action, he can even lengthen lives. He is usually depicted mounted on a white elephant or meditating, sitting on a lotus flower throne.

It so happened that once, when the Buddha was already growing old, he was on the point of leaving the Sitavana grove that formed part of the cremation ground just outside the royal capital, where he had been staying; it was a place inhabited by the low castes. One day, someone set loose two mad elephants outside the north gate of the city, in the hope that they would trample him to death.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva saved his teacher in that moment of crisis. He uprooted an old tree and blocked the path of the maddened elephants charging towards his master. A nightmare from the previous night had repeated itself in reality; Samantabhadra's very dreams were acts of *samadhi* (*concentration*).

When Manjushri, his first teacher, advised him to meet Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, Sudhana was filled with a childlike yearning; he gave him advice now not as a teacher but as a bodhisattva and his equal in bodhisattva standing. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva! At present he had no further need of hymns. That was *bhutatahata* (*the essential thusness*) beyond all words, that constitutes the fundamental enlightening. Once all erroneous thoughts have been banished, the whole heart purified and made spotless, all the appearances of the phenomenal world are united in the likeness of wind and waves on the ocean. Inevitably, when the wind drops, the waves grow still; then the sky's clouds and all phenomena appear reflected in it. That is awakening. It is the fundamental awakening, the fundamental realm of truth, Vairochana, the essential reality of all things. It is the very universe itself. Perhaps the vastness of Buddha nature itself? Or *sagaramudra-samadhi* (*the specific insight of the Buddha*), all phenomena mere reflections in the ocean?

For the little pilgrim, encountering his first teacher, Manjushri Bodhisattva, at the end of his long journey through every kind of storm and vicissitude, came above all as the confirmation of the truth he had discovered. Sensing acutely how important it was, Sudhana's emotion was such that he was unable to make any distinction between the two bodhisattvas, uniting the wisdom of Manjushri with the practice and love of Samantabhadra. Great Wisdom, Great Liberation, Great Pity, Great Practice, if divided, always blend into one again.

By now Sudhana's longing for his fifty-third encounter, with Samantabhadra, had reached such intensity that it began to shine in his heart like a bright beacon of fire. He saw

Samantabhadra's image contained in the flames. Sudhana was filled with wonder, as he attained a new stage of bodhisattva life, dharmamegha where the clouds of dharma drop endless dew.

His last visit was to Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, who had appeared before him, sitting on a lotus throne before the Buddha. The throne was the same as that on which the Buddha sat, for he served the Buddha as the cosmic Buddha Vairochana, and himself held the rank of a *nirmanakaya* (*Buddha incarnate in human form*).

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva was surrounded by a crowd of some two thousand. At the center of the crowd there were bodhisattvas, *arhats* (*celestial being*), monks, nuns, and lay devotees of both sexes. They included a cluster of children even younger than Sudhana, while sucklings gazed up at Samantabhadra as they sucked milk from their young mothers' breast.

Sudhana stood in the midst of this assembly, as Samantabhadra delivered a sermon on the opening section of the *Avatamsaka* (*Garland*) *Sutra*. As soon as he had finished, he stretched out a hand and caressed Sudhana's head.

“You've come at last! Good, very good boy!”

The words were accompanied with a smile full of love and joy. He climbed down from the lotus throne where he had been sitting, in token that he was welcoming Sudhana as a fellow bodhisattva. They and all the people assembled about them broke into rapturous smiles.

“Sudhana, Sudhana Bodhisattva!” Samantabhadra spoke the young pilgrim's name as if in confirmation. Then he murmured to himself. “With such a bodhisattva in it, how lovely the world is!”

He turned to Sudhana. “When did you see me before?”

Sudhana was almost too immersed in joy to reply. His reply was his joy. “I saw you when I first saw Manjushri Bodhisattva.”

“How very true.”

It was time to eat. The community only ate once a day, shortly before midday. With bo trees casting their shade across the dry grass, the place was not too hot. Samantabhadra gave Sudhana a share of the food, which members of the crowd had received by begging. It was rough fare, and there was very little of it, yet all -- bodhisattva and arhat, as well as all the monks -- began to eat contentedly. Sudhana duly followed suit and ate. The bodhisattva chewed each mouthful a hundred times before swallowing, and every time he swallowed, he looked at Sudhana and smiled brightly.

“While we are eating, there are many people starving. Helping them, giving them food, is part of the bodhisattva's task.”

Until now Sudhana had almost never heard such words. Bodhisattvas and teachers had all spoken about “*dharma*” and “truth” or “the universe.” Not that they had never mentioned living creatures and the need to succor them, but talk like Samantabhadra's, of how creatures were starving, was certainly a great rarity.

“It would not be right if the so-called supernatural powers I have achieved did not bestow the ability to see where people are starving. What place can there be for truth if people have nothing at all to eat? Not that creatures can live by bread alone; there also has to be the food of truth, the food of *dharma*, the *dharma*'s offerings of food.”

Sudhana composed a very short poem in his heart.

Infinite number of creatures

in the whole Buddha cosmos!

Infinite number of worlds!

Infinite number of Buddhas, of bodhisattvas!

Without a mouthful of food to eat,

how can compassion be received?

How can compassion be given?

How in mutual compassion

can one flower emerge?

Samantabhadra had been given responsibility for delivering sermons, while the Buddha was away for a few days in company with his senior disciple Kashyapa, the younger Ananda, and Subhuti. Now the morning sermon and the midday meal were finished, so he took Sudhana with him to a grove, where they rested their limbs and relaxed for a while.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva pillowed his head on his arm, with a sign to Sudhana to do the same. Master and teacher had become the closest of friends, in a relationship completely unmarked by formalities. Every last trace of authority and deference had melted away.

“Little bodhisattva!” Samantabhadra spoke quietly. “Just as you journeyed for so long from place to place in the southern realms, meeting teachers and attaining bodhisattva status. . . so I, too, have been born and have died, been reborn and died, since long ages ago, through many lives, with enlightenment as my goal. Yet on reflection, the fact that I have completed my works and vows as a bodhisattva following the Buddha amounts to nothing more than a drop of dew brought into being by long practice of devotion. You must have seen how lovely a drop of water looks, as it pearls in the heart of a lotus leaf. It amounts to nothing more than that. . . . In all that time I have seen countless Buddhas; I have attained countless enlightened hearts, performing every kind of worship and offering, practicing every kind of good wherever I went, without pause, as our breathing never stops.

“Sudhana Bodhisattva, now you have seen me, you must also see my *dharmakaya* (*true Buddha nature*). In that way you must be born again within my *dharmakaya*.”

“But Bodhisattva, can I really be born again within your true nature?”

“Yes indeed. For it is none other than Vairochana Buddha. Vairochana is the pure, essential Buddha nature.”

At that moment Sudhana saw that every one of the pores on Samantabhadra's body, and all the minute pores hidden within his body, were each filled with innumerable Buddhas. Around each of those innumerable Buddhas crowds were assembled like clouds. Sudhana had now become capable of seeing such microscopic realities with his ordinary, weak eyesight.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva had almost nothing left to say to Sudhana. Perhaps that was his way of transcending the distinction between emptiness and being, that was only much later to be expounded in detail, first by Nagarjuna, then by Vasubandhu.

“Listen carefully. Pure essential Buddha nature cannot be measured against anything or likened to anything in any world whatever. Every comparison is just so much trash, for Buddha nature transcends all worlds, beyond emptiness and being alike.

“If anything, it is like a dream, or like a picture drawn in the void. Listen carefully. Even if you could count the number of drops of water comprising each wave that breaks on the shore, could you ever count a Buddha's meritorious achievements?”

“I have one last thing to say, Sudhana. You are equal to the Buddha and all the bodhisattvas. Henceforth, the people you encounter will not be Buddhas and bodhisattvas or any kind of teacher, they will each and every one of them be a living creature that you will have to meet with wisdom and compassion.”

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva had spoken, breathing deeply between each phrase. Now he rose.

“I have finished.”

He caressed Sudhana's head one last time, then resumed his place on the lotus throne. The light shining from the bodhisattva's back as he went out into the sunlight was not a mere reflection of the sun, for mingled in it was light shining from within himself. The result was like dazzling sunlight and undazzling moonlight. Clearly, bodhisattvahood was light.

Until now, Sudhana had always known where to go next on leaving a teacher. One master had invariably indicated the next. But now he had no further need of those directions and promptings. Sudhana's lengthy journey had reached its end.

Blessing of fifty-three teachers!
Blessing of having visited
innumerable places!
Now, with that blessing complete,
blessing of the road I must pursue for myself!

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva was an ancient bodhisattva, adorned with the accumulation of the many sacrifices he had made in many different worlds. Surely that was what Sudhana would imitate in turn. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva! Last bodhisattva met by the little pilgrim, bodhisattva of *parinamana* (*vicarious merits*)! In him were concentrated the compassion and works found in all bodhisattvas.

Among the followers of Shakyamuni Buddha, he was always to be found working in the Buddha's shadow, while the light streaming from his body was such that even his shadow dazzled every eye. It was he, too, who accomplished the proclamation of the *Avatamsaka (Garland) Sutra* in the course of eight assemblies held in seven different places.

The first and second were held in the plains of north India, the third in *Trayastrimsa*, the fourth in *Suyama-deva*, the fifth in *Tushita-deva*, and the sixth in *Paranirmita-vasavarti-deva*, all in the heavens. Once the teaching had established a metaphysics capable of uniting heavens and earth, it returned to earth in a final act of vicarious offering, and the seventh and eighth were held here, the last in the central Indian monastery of Jetavana, where the Buddha and the first community often sojourned.

This last section already included the tale of Sudhana's lengthy pilgrimage! And now Sudhana had attained all that was prophesied about him in the final portion of the *Avatamsaka Garland Sutra*, the *Gandavyuha*; he had nothing more to expect from Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, the originator of the Sutra, for he had reached the state of utter liberation and detachment.

Sudhana felt a wind blowing from every direction. It was not the same as a whirlwind. When he faced east, it was an east wind; if he turned to face the north, it became a north wind. When he faced south, the wind came blowing from the southern regions he had travelled through for so long. His body was wrapped in winds from the four cardinal points, from all eight directions. Sudhana stood there in the wind, in such poverty that apart from his pure being itself, there was nothing anyone could hope to receive from him. Then the winds enabled Sudhana to hear their voices. By them he came to understand that he was being called for in many parts of the world.

He perceived that the wind coming from the east was laden with the tang of the sea. That was a smell he had grown familiar with in the course of his journey up from the south along the coast of the Bengal Sea. He gazed heavenward. The sky was completely empty, with no trace of the heavenly realms, be it of *Trayastrimsa*, or *Suyama-deva*, of *Tushita-deva*, or of *Paranirmitavasavarti-deva*.

The reason lay in the heart. Since there was nothing stirring within his heart, of course there was nothing visible in the sky. One huge bird was floating there; it was a Himalayan kite, a species that had never been known to frequent those parts. It seemed to have no intention of ever moving away. It hung poised in one spot, unfamiliar, its huge wings spread wide.

With a child's curiosity, Sudhana wondered how a bird from the Himalayan regions could possibly have flown this far. He only knew that he had recalled the sea by its smell, and by the Himalayan kite he recalled the towering mountains, that soared up and up until they touched the sky. Then, instead of heading back towards the mountains, the kite flew off eastward. With a start, the little bodhisattva realized that the kite was indicating the direction he should first go in. He felt intensely hungry. And for no apparent reason he also felt intensely sad. Too sad to cry. That sorrow spoke to Sudhana:

Little pilgrim!

*Now
 your path
 has opened in heaven,
 has opened on earth,
 has opened in the midst of the sea
 toward a greater land
 toward a greater world
 than any you have so far attained.
 Little pilgrim!
 How could your path
 be limited to that alone?
 Ah, your path
 lies open before you --
 as multiple as the grains of sand by the Ganges,
 as long as an asankhyeya kalpa unending age,
 an ayuta myriad in number,
 an indescribable wonder,
 infinite in quantity,
 lasting a moment,
 a split second,
 one ksana flash --
 your path lies open as zero quantity.
 Ah, your path is yourself!
 Can a single hair ever grow
 anywhere on your body?
 Little pilgrim!
 For ever
 and ever the same
 little pilgrim, never growing old!
 Will there ever be,
 anywhere in this world,
 samadhi awareness as deep
 as that in your young heart?
 You, you, little pilgrim,
 are the first embodiment of truth.*

Sudhana found himself completely alone. There was no teacher left for him to visit. His was a mature sorrow, caused by a state of masterlessness. In the end, the *samadhi* (*state of awareness*) of Manjushri, his first teacher, and of Samantabhadra, his last, had been nothing but expediencies to bring Sudhana to himself. Or had it all been nothing more than dreams? What had it been?

When he had met the lady Maya, he had longed deeply to meet her son, Gautama Buddha, but now he could wait for him no longer. It was almost as though the teachers he had met had all been the Buddha. Besides, it might be several years before the Buddha returned to the community now presided over by Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. He had left to go preaching in the west, where epidemics were reportedly wide-spread, the roads thickly strewn with people starving in a famine resulting from recent wars. The Buddha and his companions had gone into the midst of all that suffering.

Sudhana simply told himself that he would meet the Buddha and his followers some other time, not now, and set out on his own journey. He headed east. His path lay in exactly the opposite direction from the Buddha. As the river entered its lower reaches, countless tributaries

flowed into it. Downstream the water seemed to expand, surging against the banks as if it would overflow its bounds.

“Hey, little wanderer!”

A voice called him from a boat out in midstream.

“If you go that way, there's nothing but the ocean cliffs. You'd better come aboard my boat.”

The speaker was an eighty-year-old boatman, his face deeply wrinkled. The boat touched shore and Sudhana climbed in. Beneath the glow of the setting sun, the boatman spread its sail and the boat hurried seaward.

60. For the unknowing world

As the little pilgrim recalled what Samantabhadra, his last teacher, had said, rain began to fall. His words, "I address you as nothing more than a single drop of water in the limitless ocean of Buddhahood," might have been a drop of the rain that was beginning to fall.

Thanks to his lengthy journeyings, he had acquired an experience and knowledge of the world that those who have not made such a journey cannot imagine, no matter how hard they try. Sudhana's heart was firmly lodged there. No one can look into the world's abyss and remain unchanged. In appearance, the little pilgrim was as before, but soon his accumulated knowledge would begin to transform his appearance.

He felt a deep melancholy as this inward change began to effect an outward transformation. His dream of setting off on a long journey and perhaps meeting the Buddha some years later was growing dim. Wasn't he going in the opposite direction to that taken by the Buddha and his followers? What kind of fate was waiting for him in the eastern region beside the Bengal Sea? With this new encounter with sorrow, his memories of the innocent joys he had hitherto enjoyed seemed to be fading into a previous existence.

The boat bearing the little pilgrim sped on down the lower reaches of the river, borne along in midstream by the powerful current. The old boatman simply held on to the rudder and nodded quietly, almost asleep. Watching him, Sudhana could not help thinking how truly Indian the man was. He was able to put his sorrowful feelings to rest for a while at the sight of the sleepy old boatman.

Sudhana began to nod too. The boat hurried onwards, while in it the two of them nodded themselves asleep, completely detached from the boat's speed and the current lending them its speed. By the time Sudhana woke, they had passed the estuary where river water and salt water met, and he was drenched by the moist sea air. Behind him, the boatman was awake and was staring back at the distant coastline.

"Have you done with dreaming?" The old boatman spoke gruffly, "Even when you wake out of a dream, you're still in a dream. No matter how deep the life of devotion you led, it was all nothing but games in a dream, wasn't it?"

The old man interrogated him insistently.

"So where do you intend to go next?"

Sudhana made no reply.

"Here we are, out in the open sea. If you don't want to go on living, you only have to give the sharks a chance. Bengal Sea sharks are famous for their ferocity. A friend of mine fell sick; he asked me to take him on board. I brought him here and Plop! he jumped in. The sharks' fins came racing along in a flash. Do you know why I'm telling you all this without your asking? It's because there are a few last words I want to say, before I offer myself as food for the sharks."

"What do you mean?"

"This is the end of me. Once they're dead, all our ancestors and all the people of the Ganges basin end up here in this ocean of death, floating down as scraps of bone or ashes, if not as naked corpses, all intent on taking leave of this world. I'm off to the Dragon King's palace down under the waves. If you have somewhere to go, take this boat and go there. . . after all, you boarded it in the first place because you had somewhere to go, didn't you?"

Actually, Sudhana heard almost nothing of the old boatman's excited gabbling. After his visits to so many different teachers, he was still in a stupor, with no sense of real concern about what might be going to happen next. Even sacred sayings were nothing more than mirages looming between the waves.

It was only when he heard the boatman saying that he had come out into the middle of the sea to put an end to his life, that he fixed his eyes on him. The boat they were in was not

very old. Prow and stern, the mast too, all were freshly painted, there was nothing old or worn in sight. It was a boat that would last a hundred years, capable of surviving in any of India's rivers and seas.

A fish, similar to a flying fish, soared above the listless waves then plunged down. Again there was nothing but the waves. Sudhana was gazing out at the point where the fish had vanished, when he felt the boat rock slightly and looked behind him. There was no sign of the old boatman, in the boat, in the waves, or anywhere. While Sudhana had been looking in the other direction, he had slipped into the water. There had been no splash, he had dropped into the sea in a trice, unobserved. The rough stone that had been lying at his feet had vanished too. He must have tied a rope round the stone, fastened the rope to his waist, and dropped with it into the sea.

Little Sudhana Bodhisattva made several circles in the vicinity, awkwardly manipulating the oars after raising the tiller. From now on he would have to row the boat himself. He took a while to reflect on the death of the boatman. He sensed that he would have had something more to say about the way he was going to separate himself from life by dying. As normal, this caused a feeling of regret, but he recognized that the man had gone as he had resolved to go. Now here he was, forced to be a very awkward boatman out in the open sea.

He soon acquired a fair degree of skill in manipulating the oars, but he had great difficulty in getting the sail up; The boat kept rocking from side to side. Finally the sail was up, and once it had caught the wind and was billowing nicely, he fixed it securely. The waves began to slap sharply against the boat's prow. Relying on the wind in his sail, he turned away from the sea and headed for the distant shore, visible as a mere white line with a trace of green above it, the green being all that could be seen of the coastal forests.

He entrusted the job of getting there to the boat and entered a state of deep concentration. A voice reached him from the depths of the sea, caused by his meditation.

Sudhana, you have already witnessed one death. There was no trace of his impending decease, yet there can be no doubt that the man who was with you has quit the world. Sudhana, you could not go after him as he died. No matter how great a bodhisattva you are, there has to be something in this world you cannot control. Suppose you set your mind on knowing everything in this world, then the fact that, all unbeknown to you, there is something or some place in this world you cannot know would veil completely your attainment of purification, on account of your misguided conception. If you were to penetrate rashly into the very core of the truth about life, how could you bring anything new into this world? You have to return from here onto dry land and set out towards the unknown creatures you will meet there.

Did that mean that little Sudhana would continue a life of wandering? Did it mean that before him stretched a life of travelling, on top of all the journeys he had so far made? Sudhana recognized at once that the words reaching him from the sea, rising from thousands of fathoms below the surface, were a message from the palace of the Dragon King.

He abruptly sensed that he was hungry and thirsty. A wave striking the prow splashed against his legs and he came to himself. Looking up, he saw that the boat had come close to the shore, the east Indian coast with its vast stretches of sand, overshadowed with palm trees, mango trees, peach blossom trees, all growing in such profusion that no matter how hard the east winds might blow, their force was tempered into a gentle breeze by the time it reached the world beyond the ancient barrier of trees, with its paddy-fields, swamps, and meadows, its roads and rivers busy with carts and boats.

The little bodhisattva looked for a spot to tie up the boat; a harbor lay farther to the south. There he lowered his fine boat's sail and tied the painter to a bollard on the quay. The luxuriant woodlands behind the village were somehow summoning Sudhana urgently. Leaving the harbor behind him, Sudhana took a road leading into the forest.

He was weary from the hours he had spent adrift at sea. Once he was deep in the forest,

he spread a layer of withered plants on the ground and sat down. Ferns and other flowerless plants grew delicately beneath the trees, never touched by sunlight. His heart felt utterly peaceful, as the young bodhisattva settled into the lotus position beside a tree and enjoyed a time of rest, deeply absorbed in meditation.

A little later he quietly opened his eyes at the approach of jabbering voices. This group of about thirty people belonged to the lowest, achut caste. They were despised untouchables, one passing touch from whom was thought to defile. Yet the Buddha had welcomed them as equals. Rising to his feet, Sudhana greeted them. They simply blinked their huge dark eyes, not saying a word. These were innocents, simple-minded halfwits who had no inborn sense of the distinction between words and silence. They had big mesh bags full of fruit slung over their shoulders, while some were carrying long ladders, poles and other implements.

Sudhana walked briskly past them as they stood there, sinister to look at but inwardly full of an infinite simplicity. They made way for him. From behind him he seemed to hear words he could not understand. Probably something meaning that he would have great hardships if he took the wrong turning. His way lay before him. Undoubtedly, his journey eastwards after leaving Samantabhadra, down the river, out into the sea and back, had been his first view of the world into which he had to go.

The little pilgrim had completed his journey. It had brought him to sublime heights. As a consequence of his immense pilgrimage, from Manjushri at the start to Samantabhadra at the end, he had attained bodhisattva stature. Now he had unlimited freedom, utterly unrestricted freedom of choice. He had crossed the sea to far away worlds and encountered the creatures there too. Until now, his teachers had been of various classes and kinds but each had been the same, a teacher instructing him. From now on, no matter where he went, the people he met would not be teachers but simply living creatures, and since the essential nature of every living creature is Buddha nature, in the end it meant he would be meeting a multitude of Buddhas.

On the first day, or was it the second, of his journey through the forest, he came across a little boy. He was about ten years old, and he was crying. As soon as Sudhana asked why he was crying, the answer came: "My mother died." Sudhana asked how long ago she had died; he intended to suggest they pray for her repose. He thought the prayers for her repose would bring comfort to the child. The crying stopped the time it took to reply: "A while ago". Once again, Sudhana asked :

"Yesterday? Or the day before?"

The child replied he didn't know exactly, but about ten years ago. Sudhana was taken aback. Then from within his heart, like a sudden slap on the knees, glee came surging up. It was characteristic of the people of India that when they said, "just here", they might mean anything up to a million leagues away, while "a little while ago" might mean ten years or it might signify several hundred aeons. For them, time meant primeval time, while time taken without the cosmic realities of primeval time was nothing more than the foam left by the waves that come crashing onto a sandy shore. Surely that is the unfolding of the cosmos of empty eternity, the coming into being of the infinities of cosmos and selfhood.

The little bodhisattva Sudhana would visit many places in the world, appealing for love. He would attain the gateway of universal union, where subjective and objective, active and passive fuse into one, entering into unrestricted freedom in the Avatamsaka Garland Dharma Realm where the particular and the general, the general and the particular, active and passive, passive and active alternately fuse together and part again.

Yet whether at this high level or at the most basic level, the principle of the identity of differences which establishes unity between different natures is always the same. Unless the resplendent *Avatamsaka (Garland)* is seen at one and the same time as a madman's ravings and a Buddha's *samadhi (state of awareness)*, there is nothing but hell waiting.

The little pilgrim and the weeping child emerged from the depths of the forest and

headed together for the harbor.
“Come on, let's be off.”

Author's Afterword

Some time in about 1959, while I was a Buddhist monk engaged in “*Son*”* Meditation, a senior monk, the Venerable Unho, told me I should read the *Avatamsaka (Garland) Sutra*. In those days I was young and brash; I felt that I knew it already, having studied it with the Venerable Myongbong in a recently published translation.

When Master Unho told me to read the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, he really meant that he wanted me to compose a long epic poem on the endless wanderings of the child Sudhana in his quest for truth, described in *The Gandavyuha (Entry into the Realm of Reality)* that forms the last book of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

He spoke warmly: “The novelist Ch'un-won intended to write it, but couldn't. If only you could take his place. . .” But in those days I had no interest in writing epic poems, so I did not take up the task that Ch'un-won, who was Unho's second cousin, had left unfulfilled. I merely made a noncommittal response and left it at that.

Looking back, I can see two reasons for my lack of interest. First of all, I did not believe that I could portray Sudhana properly with my limited poetic skills. Secondly, it was a time when I was far more attracted by the *Prajna-paramita (Transcendental Wisdom) Sutras*, especially the *Diamond* and *Heart Sutras*, than by the complex, fundamental principles of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. I could not feel any enthusiasm for the *Gandavyuha* and was not interested in Sudhana.

It was only after I had gone much further in my own life's wanderings that I realized how close Sudhana's quest was to my own. I had left the monastic life by that time, but not the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. In 1969, I began publishing regular installments of a tale entitled “The Little Pilgrim” in the *Dok-so* newspaper, not an epic poem but a tale in prose. Once publication there ended, the text was published in book form in 1974. That volume contained the first thirty chapters of the present work.

I ought to have gone on writing, but at that time I was going through an irreligious phase. Friends and former colleagues kept encouraging me though, and at last it is finished, twenty-two years after I first began writing.

The Venerable Unho, who first proposed the task, died many years ago.

According to the traditional account, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* belongs among the earliest teachings of the Buddha but was at first transmitted in a number of separate sections, only being brought together as a unified work long after the *Lotus Sutra* had been compiled. Later, the original Sanskrit version was mostly lost. The *Gandavyuha* is reputedly the oldest extant among the sutras.

At first, we are told, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was a total failure. It was so far removed from the commonly received Buddhist ideas of the times that it could not be easily understood. Seeing that it would not do as a starting point, as a stopgap measure the Buddha preached Sutras with other subjects. Even such leading disciples as Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, though they were present when the Sutra was preached at the Jetavana monastery in Shravasti, were unable to grasp the truth contained in it, for “their eyes were covered with thick darkness”. A later Chinese commentator compared them to deaf mutes. Since all who heard it were deaf and dumb, preaching the Sutra had apparently been a waste of time.

Avatamsa means a garland, used as a general image of the Buddha's teaching. The “garland” here represents the realm of Vairochana, the transcendent Buddha, adorned with lotus blossoms and jewelled flowers of all kinds. The *Gandavyuha*, which comes at the end of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, is the record of little Sudhana's quest. Once his heart has been awakened,

he sets out on a journey through southern India in search of the deeds expected of a bodhisattva (an awakened being who awakens others). In the course of this, he visits fifty-three teachers. With the teachings he receives, from his first teacher, Manjushri, to his last, Samantabhadra, he attains the high state of bodhisattvahood he had been seeking.

Yet some of his teachers have almost no connection with Buddhism; among them are brahmins, slaves, merchants, boatmen, children, prostitutes, and heavenly spirits. This is an expression of the conviction that truth can be gained from anybody. Sudhana discovers that the whole world is full of the truth which the Buddha realized, and this endless pursuit of truth has influenced the thinking of many who lived long after him.

All through the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, not only the *Gandavyuha*, there are constant references to the sea, both the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It looks beyond the borders of India from its very beginning. There is even said to be a relationship between it and the Koran. It is clear that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* has been read and has shed its influence on an international scale; not only India but also the West, as well as China, have learned from it. With the whole world as its stage, the pilgrimage of Sudhana covers a vast area. As it shows that truth is limitless, the world of the *Gandavyuha* is naturally of tremendous scope.

In the course of writing, I reflected my own states of mind in this work. Inevitably, then, the beginning, middle and end vary as I varied. This can most easily be seen in the lyricism of the early chapters, the social awareness of the middle section, and the more specifically Buddhist language I employed towards the end. This work may constitute the best expression of my own life's progress.

Quite frankly, the story of Sudhana's travels related in the *Gandavyuha* cannot be read without long periods of considerable boredom. If the present work reproduces this effect, the fault lies with my limited literary skills.

I end with a final thought for the Venerable Unho.

Ko Un, 1991.

* The Korean word “*Son*” is derived from the Chinese “*Ch'an*,” which represents the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, as is the Japanese form “*Zen*”. The term refers to a form of meditation in which dualistic distinctions are eliminated.

Translators' Note

A note on the names

The Korean text mostly uses names of characters and locations taken from a Chinese version of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. One of the fullest versions of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was translated into English by Thomas Cleary (published with the title *The Flower Ornament Scripture* by Shambhala in 1993). There the names are given in their Sanskrit or Pali forms. The names used in Cleary's translation have been followed wherever possible.

However, there are some teachers, as well as many other characters, whose names have been invented by Ko Un, not taken from the *Sutra*. These have been rendered in various ways: transcribed phonetically, translated into English or, for the names of teachers, replaced by names from Cleary's version.

In the notes below, names taken from Cleary's translation are unmarked. Others are marked as follows:

* marks names of characters not found in Cleary's “Flower Ornament Scripture”.

marks names taken from Cleary by the translators, although the Korean uses a different name. The numbers refer to the fifty-three teachers of the *Sutra*. Ko Un has added a few more encounters, usually with women or boatmen, that are not counted among the fifty-

three.

Explanations of the meaning of names (indicated by =)are mainly taken from Li Tong-xuan's Guide to *The Gandavyuha* translated by Thomas Cleary (Shambhala, 1989).

Chapter 1

Manjushri = Noble and Gentle

Sudhana = Good Wealth

Chapter 3

* Ajay ferry (place name)

* Iryon

Chapters 4 - 5

Sugriva Mountain = Mountain of Marvelous Peaks

(1st teacher) Meghashri = Glorious Clouds

Chapters 5 - 7

Sagaramukha = Ocean Door (place name)

(2nd teacher) Sagaramegha = Ocean Cloud

Chapters 7 - 8

Sagaratira (place name) = sea shore

(3rd teacher) Supratishthita = Well Established

Chapter 9

Vajrapura (place name)

(4th teacher) Megha = Cloud

Chapters 9 - 11

Vanavasin = Forest Dweller (place name)

(5th teacher) Mukataka = Liberated One

Chapters 11 - 12

Milaspaharana (place name)

(6th teacher) Saradhvaja = Ocean Banner

* Hehwa = Ocean Blossom

Chapters 13 - 14

Samudravetadin = Keeper of the Ocean Door (place name)

(7th teacher) Asha

Chapter 14

Nalayur = Not Lazy (place name)

(8th teacher) Bhishmottaranir-ghosha = He who utters a fearsome sound

Chapter 15

Ishana = Long and Straight (place name)

(9th teacher) Jayoshmayatana = Overcoming Heat

Chapters 15 - 16

Simhavijumbhita (place name)

(10th teacher) Maitrayani

Chapter 17

Trinayana = Three Eyes (place name)

(11th teacher) Sudarshana

Chapter 18 - 19

Shramanamandala (place name)

Sumukha (place name)

(12th teacher) Indriyeshvara

Chapter 20

Samudrapratishthana = Ocean Foundation (place name)

(13th teacher) Prabhuta = Perfected

Chapter 21

Mahasambhava = Great Production (place name)

(14th teacher) Vidvan = Knower

Chapter 22

* Iryon again

Chapter 23

Simhapota = Lion Foundation (place name)

(15th teacher) Ratnachuda = Jewel Topknot

Chapter 24 - 25

Vetramulaka (place name)

Samantamukha (place name)

* perfumer's wife

* Mount Samantanetra = Universal Eye

(16th teacher) * Myohyang = Wonderful Perfume (Old Drunkard's brother)(cf. the
16th teacher in the Sutra, Samantanetra the perfumer)

Chapter 26

Taladhvaja = Bright and Clean (place name)

(17th teacher) King Anala = Tireless

Chapter 27

Suprabha = Beautiful Light (place name)

(18th teacher) King Mahaprabha = Great Light

Chapter 28

Sthira (place name)

(19th teacher) Nameless devotee (= Achala)

Chapter 29

Tosala = Production of Happiness (place name)

(20th teacher) Devotees (= Sarvagamin)

Parthurashtra = Vast Territory (place name)

(21st teacher) Utpalabhuti

Chapter 30

(22nd teacher) Vaira = Independent

Chapter 31

Nandihara = City of Happiness (place name)

(23rd teacher) Jayottama = Supreme Victor

Chapter 32

* Sumera

* Sanuita

Chapter 33

Kalingavana = Struggle (place name)

(24th teacher) Sinhavijumbhita = Lion Stretch

Ratnavyuha = City of Jewel Arrays

(25th teacher) Vasumitra = Friend of the World

Chapter 34

Shubha-paramgama (place name)

(26th teacher) Veshtila = Embracer

Chapter 35

Mount Potalaka (mountain)

(27th teacher) Avalokiteshvara = Sound that Illumines the World

(28th teacher) Aanayagamin = He who proceeds directly

Chapter 36

Dvaravati = Having a Door (place name)

(29th teacher) Mahadeva = The Great God (of heaven)

Chapter 37

(30th teacher) Sthavara (earth spirit) = Stable

Chapter 38

Kapilavastu = Yellow City (place name)

(31st teacher) Vasanti (night spirit) (called *Spring Growth)

Chapter 39

(32nd teacher) Samantagambhirashrivimala-prabha = Glory of Universal Wisdom
(night spirit)

Chapter 39 - 40

(33rd teacher) Pramudita-nayanajagad-virocana (night spirit)

= Joyful eyes illumining the world

Chapter 41

(34th teacher) Jahshri (night spirit) (abbreviated from the Sutra's Samanta--
sattvatrano-jahshri)

Chapter 42
(35th teacher) Prashantaruta (or Prashantaruta-sagaravati) (night spirit) = Ocean of
Tranquil Sound

Chapter 43
* Mani
* Sarvanagarak (place name)
(36th teacher) * Prabhava-ta = Awe-inspiring Virtue
(Sutra = Sarvanagarak-shasambhavate-jahshri)

Chapter 44
(37th teacher) * Anrak = Happy
(Sutra = Sarvavrikshapraphullanasukhasamvasa)

Chapter 45
(38th teacher) * Prabha = Light
(Sutra = Sarvajagadrakshapranidhanaviryaprabha)

Chapter 46
Lumbini Grove (place name)
(39th teacher) Sutejo-mandala-ratishri = Glory of the Sphere of Good Power

Chapter 47
* Magadha (name of kingdom)
* Jihol (travelling companion)

Chapter 48
* Lake Shiva (place name)
* Gaya (place name = Bodh-gaya)
* Patna (place name)
* Suthei

Chapter 49
Kapilavastu
(40th teacher) Gopa = Protecting
* Prince Prabhava-ta (in dream)
(41st teacher) Lady Maya (Mother of Siddharta Gautama)

Chapter 50
Indra Heaven
(42nd teacher) Surendrabha

Chapter 51
Kapilavastu
(43rd teacher) Vishwamitra

Chapter 52
(44th teacher) Shilpabhijna

(45th teacher) Bhadrottama = Best of the Good

Chapter 53

Bharukaccha (place name)

(46th teacher) Muktasara

Chapter 54

(47th teacher) Suchandra

Chapter 55

* Sonorous City (place name)

(48th teacher) Ajitasena = Form that knows no end

Dharma Village (place name)

(49th teacher) Shivaragra

Chapter 56

Sumanamukha (place name)

(50th teacher) Shrisambhava and Shrimati

Chapter 57

Samanta-vyuha Park = Great Array

(51st teacher) Maitreya

Chapter 58 (in the Korean, this chapter follows chapter 54, which is clearly wrong: the meeting with Manjushri has to come directly before the final encounter with his counterpart Samantabhadra.)

(52nd teacher) Manjushri (= Noble and Gentle)

Chapter 59

(53rd teacher) Samantabhadra = Universal Good

A note on the Buddhist terminology

Index

anuttara-samyak-sambodhi perfect universal enlightenment Kimnara (397)

naka-ara drum (304)

Parittasubha heaven (342)

Abhasvara heaven (307)

abhimukhi-bhumi the Land in View of Wisdom (307)

achala-bhumi the Immovable Land (476)

achut caste (476)

aeons of the past (502)

aguilaria (413)

Ahoma (179)

Akanistha (269)

Akanisthadeva (306)

Amidabha (306)

Amitabha (269)

Amitabha (199, 220, 244)

Anabhraka heaven. (246)
 Ananda (307)
 Ananyagamin (268)
 Aoma (251)
 Apramanasubha heaven (343)
 Apsaras and Shravakas (307)
 archismati-bhumi the Blazing Land (304)
 arhan (476)
 arhat (486)
 Asura (487)
 Asura demon (308)
 Asuras (247)
 Atapta heaven (249)
 Avalokiteshvara (306)
 Avatamsaka Garland Dharma Realm (243, 244, 370)
 Avatamsaka Garland Sutra (504)
 Avatamsaka Universe (492)
 avidya sleep of ignorance (300)
 Avrha heaven (330)
 awakening (306)
 Barhatphala heaven (485)
 bhumi lands (306)
 bhutatathata the essential thusness (475)
 bodhi awakening heart (485)
 bodhisattva (241)
 Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (152)
 bodhisattva Mahasattvas (249)
 Brahma (249)
 Brahma gods from the Ten Heavens (304)
 Brahma-deva (86)
 Brahma-parisaday heaven (441)
 Brahma-purohita heaven (307)
 Buddha (307)
 Buddha nature (34)
 Buddha Shakyamuni (177)
 Buddha, enlightened being (372)
 Buddhas Kashyapa, Kanakamuni, Krakucchanda, Visvabhu, Shikhin, V (225)
 Cakra-varti (238)
 campaka (284)
 castes of ksatriya, brahman, vaysya, and sudra (250)
 Chin (269)
 cintamani pearls (247)
 circumambulating (247)
 Cloud-net liberation (217)
 cusma (261)
 dharma (178)
 dharma truth. (412)
 dharmakaya true body of essential Buddhahood (146)
 dharmakaya true Buddha nature (356)
 dharmamegha where the clouds of dharma drop endless dew (489)

dharmamegha-bhumi the Land of Dharma Clouds (486)
 dhyana heavens (476, 479)
 Dragon King's palace (306)
 durangama-bhumi the Far-reaching Land (499)
 Eighteen Precepts (476, 478)
 emancipation (412)
 expedients (320)
 first Buddha (262)
 first dhyana heaven (408)
 Five Accumulations (307)
 four castes (412)
 four dharma-realms (219)
 Four Heavenly Kings (311)
 Gandharva (405)
 Gandharvas (308)
 Garuda (304, 308)
 Garura (304, 466)
 gates of emancipation (247)
 Great Vow (412)
 Hall of Vairochana's Solemn Adornments (241)
 Han-shan and the vagabond Shih-te (462)
 Heaven of Four Kings (202)
 Heaven of Indra (308)
 heaven of Nirmanarati (179)
 heaven of Paranirmita-vasavarti (405)
 Heaven of Skillful Transformations (405)
 heavens of desire (180)
 horse-headed Kumbhandas (307)
 Indra (373)
 Indra Heaven (455)
 Indra's Brahma Heaven (326, 409)
 Indra's net (466)
 Indra's paradise (397)
 inherited karma (207)
 Jambu-dvipa (153)
 Jetavana (372, 400)
 Kanakamuni Buddha (492)
 Kaneshiji (408)
 Kapilavastu (342)
 karma (372)
 karma merit (224)
 karuna compassion (315)
 Kasyapa Buddha (479)
 kinnara heavenly musicians (408)
 Krakucchanda (70)
 ksatriya (408)
 ksatriya caste (427)
 ksatriyas (484)
 Kumbhanda (427)
 Law of Liberation (308)

law of the identity of all things (444)
 liberation (474)
 Lotus Buddha (309)
 Lotus Paradise (274)
 Lumbini grove (261)
 Mahabrahman (370)
 Mahaparinirvana-sutra (250, 307)
 Mahasattva bodhisattva (459)
 Mahasthamaprapta (177)
 Mahayana Great Vehicle (244)
 Mahoraga (166)
 Maitreya (304, 466)
 Maitreya Bodhisattva (307)
 Manjushri (462)
 Mara (486)
 Maya (307)
 Mayadevi (373)
 Mount Mara-deva (280)
 Mount Sumeru (82)
 Myo-hwa (123, 400, 411)
 Naga-pushpa Dragon Blossom Tree (179)
 Nagaraja (467)
 Nagarjuna (308)
 Najol (490)
 nirmanakaya body (247)
 nirmanakaya Buddha incarnate in human form (356)
 Nirmanarati (486)
 Nirmanarati heaven (307)
 Nirvana (308)
 nomiforma (234)
 Pacceka-buddhas (179)
 Paramita Perfections (308)
 Paranirmita-vasavarti-deva (412)
 Paranirmitavasavarti heaven (492)
 parinamana vicarious merits (307, 308)
 Paritabha heaven (491)
 Pillakcha tree (307)
 prabhakari-bhumi the Land of Radiance, (373)
 prajna wisdom (476)
 Prajna-paramita perfection of wisdom (476, 479)
 pramudita-bhumi, the Land of Joy (441)
 Pratyeka-buddhas (475)
 Precepts (304)
 Punyaprasavas heaven (262, 412, 448)
 Pure Land of Amitabha (306)
 Pure Land Paradise (11)
 realm of desire (205)
 realm of formlessness (307, 373, 411)
 realm of pure form (356)
 realms of desire (306)

realms of pure form (306)
 sadhumati-bhumi the Land of Good Thoughts (306)
 sagaramudra-samadhi the specific insight of the Buddha (476)
 Sakrodevendra (486)
 samadhi awareness (264)
 samadhi concentration (494)
 samadhi consciousness (237)
 samadhi contemplation (348)
 samadhi single-mindedness (458)
 Samanta-bhadra (233)
 Samanta-vyuha Park (404)
 Samantabhadra (462)
 Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Practice (247, 417, 486)
 Samatabhadra (468)
 sambhoga-kaya body of Buddhas in paradise (315, 319)
 samsara cycle of reincarnations (356)
 samsara rotation (325)
 Sangha community (235)
 Sariputra (473)
 Sarvatraga-vimala heaven (268, 315)
 Seven Treasures (307)
 Shakyamuni Buddha (130)
 Siddhartha (408)
 snake-headed Mahoragas (34)
 sontabara (373)
 Sudarsah (179)
 Sudarsanah heaven (306)
 Suddhodana (306)
 sudurjaya-bhumi the Land Hard to Conquer (280, 417)
 Sumeru (476, 478)
 sunama (210)
 Suyama Heaven (178)
 Suyama-deva (179, 308, 405)
 tala tree (492)
 tathata thusness (348)
 ten dharani wheels (441)
 ten dharmas (345)
 ten directions (477)
 ten directions of the universe (248)
 ten kinds of observance of the dharma (62)
 ten laws (296)
 ten laws (397, 421)
 Three karmas (440)
 Three Realms (331)
 Three Worlds (334)
 threefold world (256)
 Trayastrimsa (296)
 Trayastrimsa heaven (308, 492)
 Trayatrimsa (405)
 Tushita heaven (411)

Tusita Heaven (307, 465)
Twelve Places (179, 405, 407)
upaya skillful means (412)
upaya skills (458)
uttara enlightenment of Buddhahood (334)
Vairochana (475)
Vairochana Buddha (96, 283, 485)
Vairochana's Padmagarbhalokadhatu World (490)
Vasubandhu (409)
vaysya (490)
vimala-bhumi the Land of Purity (427, 484)
vimukti - liberation from the cycles of life and death (476)
Visvabhadrā (237)
Western Paradise (348)
world-mountain Mount Sumeru (170)
Yaksa (300)
yaksa demons (308)
Yama (373)
Yama (308)
yojanas (304)
(170, 474, 481)