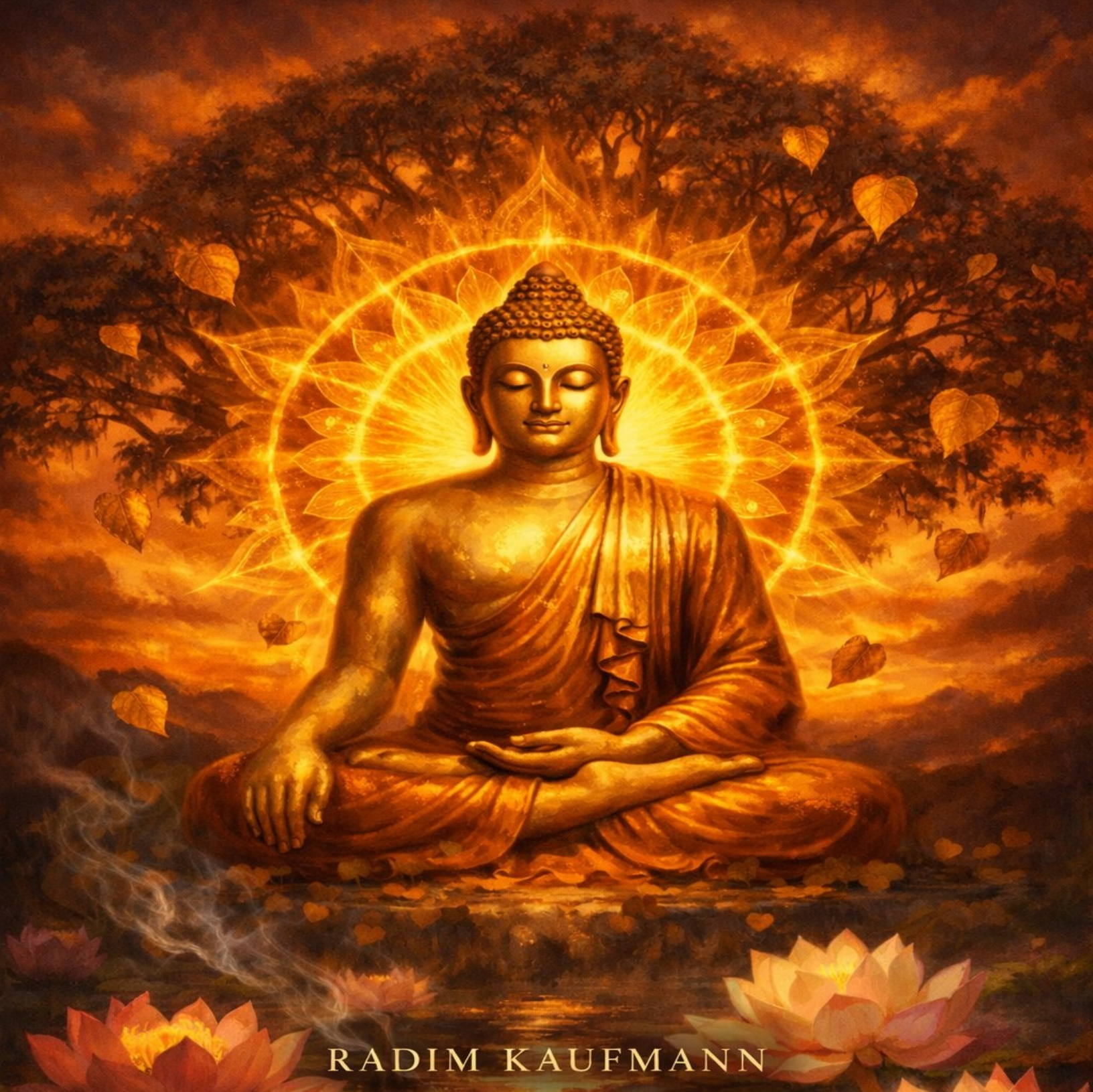
THE STORY OF BUDDHISM

The Path from Suffering to Enlightenment



RADIM KAUFMANN

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Published by Radim Kaufmann

2026

www.radimkaufmann.com

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First Edition, 2026

ISBN: 979-8-2556-4318-9

Introduction

Two and a half thousand years ago, in the foothills of the Himalayas, a young prince abandoned everything — his throne, his family, his wealth, and his future as a king — to answer a single question: Why do human beings suffer? His search for an answer would give birth to one of the most transformative and enduring spiritual traditions the world has ever known. This book tells that story.

Buddhism is not merely a religion in the conventional sense. It is a philosophy of mind, a science of consciousness, a practical guide to living, and above all, a path. The Buddha himself never claimed to be a god or a prophet. He was a man who woke up — the word *Buddha* means simply "the awakened one" — and he spent the remaining forty-five years of his life sharing what he had discovered with anyone willing to listen.

What makes the Buddhist story remarkable is not only its antiquity but its extraordinary adaptability. From the monasteries of Sri Lanka to the temples of Japan, from the meditation halls of Tibet to the mindfulness apps of Silicon Valley, the core insight of the Buddha has traveled across every continent and every century, reshaping itself to meet each new culture while never losing its essential message: that suffering has a cause, and that cause can be understood and overcome.

This book follows the arc of that journey. It begins with the life of Siddhartha Gautama — the prince who became the Buddha — told as a continuous narrative in the tradition of storytelling rather than scholarship. From there, it explores his teachings, the community he founded, the great councils that preserved his words, the emperors who spread his message, and the diverse schools that arose as Buddhism flowed across Asia and eventually the entire world. The final chapters examine the sacred texts, the meditation practices, and the resurgence of Buddhism in the modern era.

Whether you come to this book as a practitioner, a student of history, or simply a curious reader, my hope is that you will find in these pages what the Buddha himself offered to the world: a clear-eyed look at the nature of human experience, and a practical path toward greater wisdom, compassion, and peace.

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PART ONE

The Life of the Buddha

Chapter 1

The Prince of the Shakyas



The ancient city of Kapilavastu at the foothills of the Himalayas

In the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, in a region of northern India that would one day become Nepal, there existed in ancient times a kingdom called the Shakya realm. It was the sixth century before the birth of Christ, a time when the world was still wild and vast, when empires rose and fell like waves upon an unseen ocean. The Shakyas were a warrior caste, proud and fierce, known throughout the region for their strength and courage. Their capital was a city called Kapilavastu, a place of bustling markets, temples, and gardens where merchants from distant lands brought spices, silks, and exotic goods.

At the heart of this kingdom ruled a king named Suddhodana, whose name means "pure rice." He was not the greatest king of his age, nor the most powerful, but he was wise

and protective, beloved by his people for his justice. Suddhodana had taken as his principal wife a noble woman named Mahamaya, whose beauty was said to match that of the celestial goddesses. The queen was wise, virtuous, and beloved throughout the kingdom. She came from a neighboring kingdom as was the custom, joining her fate to that of her husband and the Shakya realm. For years they had no heir, and this weighed upon the king's heart, for without a son to carry on his lineage and protect his kingdom, what would become of the Shakyas after his death?



Queen Maya's dream of the white elephant descending from the heavens

Then came the night that would change the course of the world. Queen Mahamaya fell asleep in the royal palace and dreamed a dream of extraordinary power and beauty. In her dream, she saw a white elephant of transcendent radiance descending from the heavens. This was not an ordinary elephant, but a being of luminous grace, its form shimmering with silver light. The elephant circled her three times and gently entered her womb. When the queen awoke, she knew with absolute certainty that her time of waiting had ended. She was

pregnant with a child who would be no ordinary prince.

The king summoned his advisors and wise men, the brahmins who read the signs of heaven and could interpret the mysteries of birth and destiny. When he told them of the queen's dream, they conferred in hushed, reverent tones. Then their chief came before Suddhodana with a weighty prophecy. "Your Majesty," he said, "the child born to your queen will be a being of extraordinary destiny. The sacred signs indicate two possible paths for this child. He may become the greatest king ever known—a universal monarch who will rule all the lands under heaven with justice and wisdom, wielding power such as no ruler has known. Or, if he is exposed to the knowledge of suffering, if he renounces the world and embraces a spiritual path, he will become a Buddha—one who is awake, an enlightened being who will save all humanity from suffering."

King Suddhodana heard these words with mixed emotions. The prospect of a son was joyful, but the second possibility troubled him deeply. He wanted an heir to his throne, a prince to inherit his kingdom and continue the glory of the Shakyas. The thought that his son might instead abandon the palace and seek spiritual enlightenment filled him with dread. In that moment, a resolve crystallized in the king's mind. "Then I shall ensure the first destiny comes to pass," he declared. "I will shelter this child so completely from any knowledge of suffering that he will never even think of renouncing the world. He will be a king without equal, and the Shakya realm will flourish."

As the months passed and the queen's time drew near, preparations were made. The palace was readied for the birth of the heir to the Shakya throne. Gardens were adorned with flowers brought from throughout the kingdom. Gifts arrived from neighboring regions, each ruler eager to honor the birth of a prince. And throughout the kingdom, people whispered of the great destiny that awaited the child who was about to enter the world.



The birth of Siddhartha in the Lumbini Gardens

At last, in the spring of the year, the great night arrived. It is said that as Queen Mahamaya went into labor, she took hold of a branch of the sal tree in the Lumbini Gardens, and there, standing upright in that sacred place, she gave birth to a son. The child emerged into the world pure and radiant. It is told that when he was born, light filled the heavens, and at that very moment, earthquakes trembled across the land—a cosmic acknowledgment that a being of destiny had entered the world. The child was given the name Siddhartha, meaning "one whose aim has been accomplished." Seeing him for the first time, King Suddhodana wept with joy, already imagining the future glories of the Shakya kingdom under the rule of this remarkable child.

Notes — Chapter 1

1. The Shakya clan (Śākya) and Kapilavastu.
The Shakyas were a kshatriya (warrior) clan of the Himalayan foothills. Kapilavastu is identified with either Tilaurakot in Nepal or Piprahwa in India — a scholarly debate still unresolved. The sixth century BCE is the accepted period, though some scholars place the Buddha's birth c. 563 BCE, others c. 480 BCE.

2. King Suddhodana (Śuddhodana, "pure rice").
In Pali:

3. Queen Mahamaya (Māhāmāyā, "great illusion" or "great power").
She died seven days after the Buddha's birth. Her sister Mahapajapati Gotami became the child's adoptive mother — and later the first Buddhist nun. The name

4. The dream of the white elephant.
The Pali text (

5. The prophecy of the two paths.
The sage who delivers the full prophecy is Asita (in later accounts), who weeps because he is too old to live to see the enlightenment. The eight brahmins give divergent signs: seven hold up two fingers (indicating two possible destinies); only Kondanna holds up one finger, prophesying with certainty that the prince will become a Buddha. Kondanna later becomes one of the first five disciples.

6. The birth at Lumbini.
Queen Maya gives birth standing, holding the branch of a

7. The name Siddhartha (Siddhārtha).
Pali:

Editorial Notes

E1. [CONDENSED] The traditional accounts include elaborate descriptions of thirty-two major marks (mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa) and eighty minor marks present on the newborn prince's body — signs that identify a great being. These have been summarized rather than enumerated.

E2. [RETAINED] The miraculous elements of the birth — light filling the heavens, cosmic tremors — are retained as the tradition's way of expressing the extraordinary nature of the event, not as claims about literal meteorology.

E3. [HISTORICAL NOTE] The political status of Suddhodana is here rendered as "king," following the popular tradition. The Pali sources suggest he was more likely an elected headman (gaṇapati) of a republican clan — one of the many small oligarchic republics of northern India in this period. The word "kingdom" is used throughout this retelling in its popular rather than its technical sense.

Author's Note

The birth narratives of the Buddha present the reader with an immediate question: how literally should they be taken? The white elephant, the cosmic signs, the walking and lotus-printing immediately after birth — these are not the language of biography. They are the language of sacred story.

I have retained them, because to remove them would be to misrepresent the tradition. The Buddhist texts are not trying to report facts in the modern journalistic sense. They are trying to communicate something about the nature and significance of what happened. When they say that light filled the world at the Buddha's birth, they mean: something unprecedented happened here. The ordinary categories do not apply. This child is different.

Whether one takes these signs literally or symbolically, the historical fact underneath them is remarkable enough: sometime in the fifth century BCE, in the foothills of the Himalayas, a man was born who would, within his lifetime, set in motion a revolution in human thought that has not yet ended.

— R.K.

Chapter 2

The Palace of Pleasures



The three magnificent palaces of King Suddhodana

From the moment of his birth, Prince Siddhartha was treated as a being apart from ordinary humanity. King Suddhodana was resolved to fulfill his design: to create a world so filled with pleasure and beauty that his son would never suspect the existence of suffering. To accomplish this extraordinary goal, the king constructed for his son not one palace, but three—each more magnificent than the last. There was the palace for spring with its eternal gardens of flowers in bloom, the palace for summer with its cooling waters and refreshing breezes, and the palace for winter with its warm chambers and glowing fires. Each served a different season, allowing Siddhartha to remain always in perfect comfort, never experiencing the inconvenience of weather or the slightest discomfort.

Within these palaces, everything was arranged with meticulous care to sustain pleasure and avoid any hint of pain or suffering. The prince's chambers were decorated with the finest silks and tapestries brought from the distant cities of the East. Musicians played the most beautiful ragas on lutes and flutes throughout the day. Dancers, the most graceful and skilled in all the kingdom, performed for his entertainment. The finest cooks prepared delicate dishes from ingredients gathered across the known world. Perfumed gardens bloomed within the palace walls, and skilled gardeners ensured that every flower remained in perfect bloom, that no blemish or decay could be seen. Servants attended to his every whim, and his father spared no expense in creating what might be called the most complete world of pleasure ever constructed.

As Siddhartha grew, he was provided with every education that befitted a prince. He learned the martial arts—archery, swordsmanship, horsemanship, and the strategic arts of war. He mastered the sciences of his time: mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. He studied the sacred texts of the brahmins and the philosophy of the great teachers. He was taught music, poetry, and the arts of conversation and statecraft. In every discipline he excelled, possessing a keen mind and natural grace. Yet throughout all these years, one thing was strictly forbidden: any contact with the world beyond the palace walls. Siddhartha had never seen a poor person, never witnessed the face of sickness, never encountered old age, never even contemplated the reality of death. In this way, his father hoped to keep him innocent of the knowledge that might awaken in him the desire for spiritual truth.



Prince Siddhartha and Yasodhara together in the palace garden

As Siddhartha entered his youth and became a man, King Suddhodana determined it was time for the prince to marry. He chose for his son a beautiful and virtuous woman named Yasodhara, daughter of one of the Shakya nobility. She came from a family of great refinement, and she was said to match the prince in grace and intelligence. The marriage was celebrated with ceremonies that lasted for days, and the entire kingdom rejoiced. Yasodhara joined Siddhartha in the palaces, and she too became part of the world of pleasures that the king had constructed. The two grew to love one another deeply, a love that transcended the arrangements of family and kingdom.

Years passed in this state of golden contentment. Siddhartha and Yasodhara lived together in luxury and beauty, surrounded by every comfort imaginable. It seemed that the king's plan had succeeded perfectly. The prince appeared to have every reason to be satisfied with his lot, to embrace his destiny as a great universal monarch. He had no reason even to imagine that there might be anything beyond the palace walls worth seeking. Yet unknown to everyone, including perhaps himself, a different destiny was ripening like fruit in the hidden

reaches of his heart.



Prince Siddhartha on the palace balcony gazing into the night

Then one spring, when Siddhartha was twenty-nine years old, something began to shift within him. He had everything that the world deemed valuable—wealth beyond measure, beauty surrounding him, love from a devoted wife, respect as the heir to a kingdom. And yet, as he walked through the palace gardens on a quiet evening, an unfamiliar feeling stirred in his breast. It was not dissatisfaction exactly, nor ungratitude. Rather, it was a kind of questioning, a whisper in his soul that could not be ignored. The gardens that had always seemed so perfect now struck him as somehow hollow. The musicians' songs, so beautiful, seemed to speak of something their melodies could not quite capture. The pleasures that had sustained him began to feel like a golden cage, beautiful perhaps, but a cage nonetheless. And at the center of this new awareness was a single, terrible, unavoidable question: "Is this all there is?"

Notes — Chapter 2

1. The Three Palaces.

The Pali tradition describes three palaces for three seasons — cool, warm, and rainy — reflecting the luxury of a prosperous kshatriya household. The number three may be symbolic rather than strictly historical.

2. Yasodhara (Yasodharā).

Her name means "bearer of glory." The Pali sources call her Bhadda Kaccānā. She appears in the later tradition as a devoted figure who is said to have observed the same austerities as Siddhartha during his years of renunciation.

3. Rahula (Rāhula).

His name is often translated as "fetter" or "eclipse," reflecting the Buddha's awareness that his son's birth bound him further to worldly life. Rahula later became a monk and is described as foremost of those who desired training.

Editorial Notes

E1. [CONDENSED] The Jataka tradition provides elaborate accounts of Siddhartha's courtship and marriage. These have been condensed into the narrative essentials.

Author's Note

The palace chapters are the most novelistic in the Buddhist biographical tradition. They describe Siddhartha's life with a psychological richness that suggests later elaboration — yet the essential portrait of a man who had everything and felt the emptiness beneath it rings true.

I have tried to render Yasodhara as a full human being, not merely a prop in her husband's story. The tradition itself does this: she is described as devoted, perceptive, and eventually enlightened in her own right.

— R.K.

Chapter 3

The Four Sights



Prince Siddhartha and charioteer Channa riding out of the palace gates

Troubled by his vague and persistent unease, Siddhartha began to insist that he be taken beyond the palace walls to see the city and the surrounding lands. His father, sensing that something in his son's contentment had shifted, reluctantly agreed, but only under carefully controlled conditions. The prince would be escorted only through the most beautiful parts of the city, where nothing unseemly could be seen. The streets would be cleared of beggars and the poor. Everything would be arranged to present the world in its most pleasant and appealing light. It was a last, desperate attempt by the king to maintain the illusion he had so carefully constructed.

One morning, Siddhartha set out in his chariot with his faithful charioteer, Channa, a man who had been raised with him and was devoted to him completely. As they traveled through the streets of Kapilavastu, Siddhartha gazed out at the world he had never truly seen. The people seemed happy enough, going about their daily business, and yet something was not as it had been described to him. There was a texture to life, a reality that could not be entirely hidden even with careful arrangement. As the chariot moved through the city, Siddhartha suddenly saw something that made him cry out and demand that the chariot be stopped. There, on the street, was an old man.

The old man was bent and frail, his hair white, his skin wrinkled and sagging. He moved slowly, painfully, with a stick to support his weight. His eyes were clouded, and he coughed with a sound like wind through dead leaves. Siddhartha stared at this figure with shock and incomprehension. He turned to Channa with urgency in his voice. "What is this?" he demanded. "Who is this man? Why does he look like this? Why does he move so slowly?" Channa's face grew troubled. The charioteer knew in that moment that the carefully protected world was beginning to crack. "My lord," Channa said slowly, "this man is old. It is the nature of all beings to grow old if they live long enough. Hair becomes white, strength fails, beauty fades, and the body becomes weak and full of pain." Siddhartha felt something constrict in his chest. "You mean," he asked, "that I too will become like this? That my body will decay and weaken?" "Yes, my lord," Channa replied quietly. "It happens to all beings without exception."



The Four Sights: old age, sickness, death, and a wandering ascetic

Siddhartha was shaken by this discovery, but the charioteer took him back to the palace, and his father tried to distract him with new entertainments and pleasures. Yet the seed had been planted. The prince's mind returned again and again to the image of the old man. He had encountered for the first time the reality of aging, the inevitable decline that awaited every living being. Some days later, the prince again insisted on venturing into the city. His father reluctantly agreed, taking the same precautions as before. But fate, or karma, was at work, and the arrangements made by men could not prevent what was meant to unfold.

On this second journey, as the chariot moved through the streets, Siddhartha suddenly saw another figure that filled him with terror and revulsion. There was a man lying on the ground, covered with strange marks and sores. His skin had an unhealthy pallor, and he was gasping for breath, his whole body trembling. "What is this?" Siddhartha cried out, his voice shaking. "Why is this man suffering so? What has happened to him?" Again, Channa found himself bearing difficult truths. "My lord," he said, "this man is ill. He suffers from sickness.

It is another condition that comes to living beings. The body can become diseased, can malfunction, can cause great suffering. Even kings and princes are not immune from sickness." Siddhartha felt despair wash over him. First aging, now sickness. The world was not as he had understood it at all.

Yet there was more to come. A few days later, the prince again went out, and this time he encountered something even more terrible. There on the ground lay a figure completely still and lifeless. The body was being prepared for cremation, wrapped in cloth, and carried by mourners whose faces were stricken with grief. "What is this?" Siddhartha asked, though some part of him already knew the answer. "This is death, my lord," Channa replied, unable to meet his eyes. "All living beings must eventually die. This is the one thing that is certain for all creatures—youth becomes age, beauty becomes decay, life becomes death. No one can escape it." Siddhartha was plunged into a state of shock and grief. The comfortable world he had known was revealed as an illusion. Everything he had valued—beauty, youth, pleasure, life itself—was temporary, unreliable, destined to end in loss and suffering.

But the fourth sight was yet to come, and it would point toward a path through the darkness. Days later, as Siddhartha ventured out once more, he saw a figure unlike any he had encountered before. It was a wandering ascetic, a renunciate who had abandoned worldly life to seek spiritual truth. The man was simply dressed in a single robe, carrying a begging bowl, his face peaceful and serene. He walked without hurry, seemingly untouched by the suffering that plagued all other beings. When Siddhartha asked who this man was, Channa explained that such men had given up all possessions and all family ties, dedicating themselves entirely to spiritual practice. Despite their poverty and hardship, many such renunciates seemed to have found a peace that the wealthy and the comfortable did not possess. In that moment, an idea was born in Siddhartha's mind. If aging, sickness, and death were inevitable, perhaps the answer was not to struggle against them within the world, but to transcend them entirely through spiritual awakening.



Siddhartha alone at night, unable to sleep after encountering the Four Sights

Notes — Chapter 3

1. The four sights (cattāro nimittāni).

The four sights — old age, sickness, death, and the renunciant — function as the pivotal revelation in all versions of the Buddha's biography. Whether literal or symbolic, they represent the confrontation of a sheltered consciousness with the fundamental conditions of existence.

2. Channa (Channa).

The charioteer Channa (Sanskrit: Chandaka) serves as Siddhartha's guide through the world outside the palace walls. He later becomes a monk, though initially proud and difficult.

3. Kanthaka (Kaṇṭhaka).

The Buddha's white horse is said to have died of grief after carrying his master to the forest on the night of the Great Renunciation.

Editorial Notes

E1. [RETAINED] The divine staging of the four sights — gods manifesting in human form — is retained as the tradition's theological framing of a cosmically intended awakening.

E2. [HISTORICAL NOTE] Modern scholars note that illness, age, and death would have been visible to any prince in a normal Indian city. The narrative of concealment is better understood as spiritual allegory.

Author's Note

The four sights are among the most psychologically acute images in world religious literature. What the story describes is not merely a sheltered young man discovering that people get sick and die. It describes the moment when knowledge becomes felt knowledge.

We all know we will die. Most of us manage to live most of the time without fully registering this. The Buddha's singular quality — even before his enlightenment — was that he could not stop registering it.

— R.K.

Chapter 4

The Great Renunciation

From the moment Siddhartha encountered the realities of aging, sickness, and death, his inner world was transformed beyond recovery. The comfortable certainties of palace life had dissolved. The pleasures that had once sustained him now felt hollow, even cruel—diversions designed to distract from truths that could not be escaped. He began to withdraw from the social life of the court, spending long hours alone in meditation or simply sitting in silence, his mind turning over and over the great questions that had been awakened in him. What was the nature of suffering? Was there a way beyond it? Was there a freedom from the cycle of birth, aging, sickness, and death?

Yasodhara noticed the change in her husband with deep concern and sorrow. He grew quieter, more distant, present in body but elsewhere in spirit. King Suddhodana, sensing that his carefully constructed world was crumbling, redoubled his efforts. He arranged ever more elaborate entertainments, summoned the most skilled musicians and dancers, organized festivals and tournaments. He increased the guards around the palace to prevent Siddhartha from venturing out unescorted. But these measures were like trying to hold back a river with one's hands. The questioning that had begun in Siddhartha's heart could not be silenced by distraction.



Siddhartha watches Yasodhara and newborn Rahula sleeping — his last farewell

As the weeks passed and spring gave way to early summer, Siddhartha's resolve had crystallized into something unshakeable. He knew with absolute certainty that he could not remain. The call of the spiritual path was not a preference or a wish—it was an imperative as fundamental as breathing. To stay would be to betray not only himself but, in some deeper sense, all beings who suffered as he had witnessed them suffering. He made his decision in silence and told no one.

But the compulsion was too strong to resist. On a night in late spring, when the moon was full and the palace lay sleeping, Siddhartha rose from his bed. He stood for a long moment looking at his sleeping wife and the infant Rahula, born only days before. The sight of them tore at his heart with an almost physical pain. He knew what he was doing—knew the grief it would cause, knew the years of absence, perhaps permanent absence, that lay ahead. And yet he could not turn back. He pressed his hands together in silent prayer and farewell, then turned and walked away.



The Great Departure — Siddhartha gallops into the night on Kanthaka

With his faithful charioteer Channa at his side, Siddhartha made his way through the sleeping palace, past the guards whose eyes seemed miraculously heavy with sleep. They reached the stables where Kanthaka, his white horse, stood waiting as if he had known this moment would come. They rode through the palace gates and into the dark, wide world beyond. The moon lit their path. Siddhartha did not look back.

When they had traveled far enough from Kapilavastu that the palace could no longer be seen, Siddhartha stopped at the bank of the Anoma River. Here, at the edge of the forest, he dismounted. He removed his royal robes and his jewels and handed them to Channa along with Kanthaka, whose eyes, it is said, wept tears as large as coins. Then Siddhartha took a knife and, in one decisive motion, cut off his long princely hair. He exchanged his fine clothes for the simple robe of an ascetic. The prince was gone. A seeker had taken his place.

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Expanded credits · November 17, 2026