

## ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

*He who would be what he ought to be must stop being what he is.*

*Eckhart*  
*(from Meister Eckhart by Franz Pfeiffer--1857)*

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The best way to start is to start. We'll begin with a story.

Around 600 years before the time of Christ in a small, mountainous region lived a king who was not particularly powerful in relationship to his neighbors, but he was an honest, fair, kindly man. In his early years, his greatest source of worry was the fact that he had no heir, so you can imagine his elation when he found that his youngest wife was pregnant. All the signs pointed toward a son, and when the time came, to his great relief, the child turned out to be a fine, healthy boy.

As was the custom, the tiny prince was formally presented to the realm in a short ceremony. People came from all over the kingdom to pay homage to the king's first born son, and with them was a gray haired saint named Asita. They say that when the saint saw the child, he bowed low and was visibly shaken. The watchful king was hardly expecting such a reaction from so venerable and honored an individual, so with respect but no little trepidation he stopped the saint and asked, "Why have you acted this way? Is there something the matter? What do you see?"

"There is nothing to fear," replied the old man. "I am sorry my life is so near its end. I would like to have seen in which direction the prince will go."

"I don't understand?" protested the king.

"This child will grow up to be one of two things," continued the saint. "He will either become a great leader of men or he will become a great teacher of souls--a holy man."

Becoming anxious, the king demanded, "What will determine the path taken?"

"If the prince sees disease, old age, and death before he comes of age, he will take the spiritual path. If he sees none of these things, he will follow in your footsteps and become king with your death," was the answer.

The king was horrified. Holy men were accepted and honored within the culture of the land, but they were usually ascetics who had renounced the world. They often lived their lives in the seclusion of mountain caves. The king needed a son, an heir, someone to follow him and take up the reins of leadership when his time came to step across the line into the other worlds. So in desperation, the king decided then and there he had to insure his son's choice; he had to guarantee the prince never came in contact with disease, old age, and death before his maturity.

The king's plan was simple. He began by creating a world for his son that was so pleasurable, so enchanting and wonderful, that only a madman would ever want to leave it. A luxurious palace--a small city unto itself--was built. Inside those walls, the prince's every need was satisfied. His days were happy; his companions were young, bright, entertaining, full of life. The young royal grew up in a nurturing atmosphere completely unfettered by the pressures and tensions of the outside world. It was the perfect fantasy; there was nothing imaginable in the way of possessions or earthly expectations that could have made the prince's earlier years more contented.

Still, there *was* one privilege he was not afforded. Under no circumstance was the prince allowed to travel outside the walls of the palaces. In that way, his father's watchful eye and careful planning never allowed the prince to come into contact with disease, old age, or death during his younger years. But as the prince became older, he became more and more interested in knowing about the outside world. After all, he reasoned, if I am to be king some day, I need to know about my people.

Arguments followed--first little ones, then big ones. It was so silly, thought the prince. Why can't I go outside the palace? The king was definitely on the spot. He couldn't explain the reasons behind the ban, but neither did he dare lift it. So in desperation, he called a meeting of his closest advisors and asked for suggestions. At the meeting, one of the more worldly of the group suggested, "How better to snare the heart and clip the wings of a man than through the love of a woman. The prince needs a wife!"

It was brilliant--a bit sexist, but brilliant nonetheless. The search began immediately. The king required a noble-born woman, one of beauty, modesty, virtue, culture, kindness. And lo and behold, he found her--a princess of such grace and beauty that upon meeting, the prince's heart was hers. Having fallen deeply in love, they married and within the first year she bore the prince a son.

With the change in situation, the king began to feel more secure. And when the prince next asked his father for permission to tour the city, the king granted his son's request. Still, the king was no fool--he wanted no part of the holy man's prophesy. So a few days before the big event troops were sent to scour the city and remove the old and infirmed to the countryside.

On the appointed day, the streets were gaily decorated. Young, healthy, happy people lined the route as the prince left the palace for the first time and rode in his great chariot through the city. All went well until out of the crowd, seemingly from nowhere, stepped a leper, all distorted and scarred and consumed with hunger. Hollow eyed, emaciated with bulging stomach, he stood before the chariot to the horror of all. The prince turned to his trusted charioteer and demanded to know what he was seeing. And although the charioteer knew of the prophesy and didn't want to say, he had no choice but to explain disease to his master.

Bewildered, the prince demanded to be taken back to the palace. He brooded for days. But he finally came out of his depression with clear resolve. He wanted to see more of the outside world . . . he wanted to visit the city again.

The king was understandably beside himself throughout the episode and quite displeased with his son's reinvigorated desire to go exploring once again. Unfortunately, the king's ministers believed it would do grievous

psychological damage to the prince if he were denied. So under duress, the king relented.

Just as before, the troops scoured the city for days before the prince's sojourn. When the prince rode his chariot through the gates for the second time, there were only beautiful people waiting for him just as before. And just as before, the trip went well until, as if out of thin air, there stepped an aged man. The entourage stopped as the prince stared. "What is this?" he demanded.

It was then that he learned of old age.

The second revelation upset the prince even more than the first. Back to the palace he went, deeply depressed. He stayed that way for months. He ate little; he slept little. There were long periods when he would go into deep meditation, ignoring his wife and child and all the luxuries around him. His health declined and he became progressively more obsessed with the state of affairs outside the walls. He wanted to see more; he wanted to know more; he wanted another trip into the city.

It surely was no surprise that the king refused. He loved his son and he could see the sincerity of his son's desire, but he deeply feared his son's loss. In the end, it was the prince's wife who interceded. She, too, was deathly afraid of losing her beloved husband, but she saw no alternative. "He is in such a depression," she said. "If you don't do something soon, I fear he will die."

The king realized there was only one way he would be able to keep his son. He had to face the fates. If he let the prince go into the city one more time, and if he could beat the prophesy during that trip his son would be his. It was a gamble, but the king knew he had no other choice.

As could be expected, the preparation before departure was feverish. The day came; the journey began. Within a few hundred yards of the great gate a young lad stepped out from the crowd, clutched his throat in agony, and proceeded to die right there on the spot. The charioteer struck his forehead with his palm, invoking the age-old gesture that says, "I don't believe this is happening," and the prince learned that day about the last of the three scourges named in the prophesy. That day he came to see death.

The prince returned to the palace, not so much in shock as had been the case before, but more in deep thought. He considered the encapsulated world in which he had grown up, all the luxury and happiness and lack of want, and he began to see what an illusion it all was. Everything would some day change--his beloved wife and child would grow old, possibly become sick, and at some time would die. And it wasn't just his world that was so threatened. It was in the same for everybody. The more he thought, the more he wondered: How can I continue to mindlessly live in this world of luxury and fantasy when I know that all around me is pain? For the sake of his loving wife and son, his family, his people, for all mankind, he decided he had to learn the cause of pain, suffering, and sorrow, and he had to find a path that would lead to the cessation of those terrible specters.

The guards at the gate were doubled and the alert was on: the prince was not to be allowed to leave the palace. Yet the die was cast. On the night of his departure, the prince tenderly kissed his sleeping wife and child. He and his charioteer then carefully made their way to the south gate where, mysteriously, the guards had all fallen fast asleep. The two opened the huge door--a gate that normally thundered when moved. It swung effortlessly and without a sound that night . . . or at least so the story goes.

The prince and his charioteer rode deep into the countryside before stopping. Once there, the prince got down from the chariot, removed his fine clothes, and put on the attire of a beggar. After an emotional farewell, he alone went by foot into the forest and far away from his father's domain.

As a conventional mendicant, the prince's presence was notable. He began his search by visiting a local guru. His question was simple: "What is the cause of suffering, and what is the path to the cessation of pain and sorrow?" He mastered the ideas of that first teacher in no more than a few days and, seeing the old saint had no real answer, moved on. The prince visited guru after guru. None of the venerable sages had a complete answer for him. With time, he came to realize that if the answer was anywhere he would have to find it on his own, so he took up the path of asceticism.

His regimen was severe--only a few grains of rice per day for the body and seclusion and endless meditation on his state of being for the soul. So harsh was his discipline that other ascetics came from all parts just to watch and marvel from afar. After five years of this, just about the time his body was ready to succumb, the prince came to realize that even the path of total self-denial was not taking him where he wanted to go. He broke off the effort and crawled up to a nearby road where a milk maid found him and, taking pity upon him, fed him.

The prince lived. He strengthened himself and, when he was finally able, did what he had come to know he had to do. He sat down in a comfortable, shaded spot, and went into deep meditation.

It is hard to know the kinds of things that went on in that meditation, but like Christ in the desert, it is believed that Temptation presented itself in every way possible. As Sir Edwin Arnold said in his book, *The Light of Asia*, "Mara (the personification of Temptation, also referred to as the Prince of Darkness) sent his mighty legions against (the teacher to be--our prince)."

As the story goes, the coalesced presence of Fear enshrouded the steady-minded prince and, having probed with all its might, fell away unable to find a foothold within the prince's Being. Then came the terrible specter of Hatred, immense in its power and proportion having been fed by the thought-energy of every human who had ever exercised that most destructive of forces. No foothold did that terrible specter find.

Those having failed to shake the prince, others came, each in its turn: beguiling Pride, then Insecurity, Vanity, and Arrogance; the Sin of Self--"the 'I' that sees only itself" (Arnold); Self Righteousness and its brother, Self Righteous Anger; and Doubt. They all came, each searching for that one unclean motive through which it could attach . . . all failing.

Last came--Kama--the king of Passion:

. . . and round him (the prince) came into that lonely place bands of bright shapes", says Arnold, "with heavenly eyes and lips singing in lovely words and praise of Love to music of invisible sweet chords, . . . for who hath grieved when soft arms shut him safe, and all life melted to a

happy sigh, and all the world was given in one warm kiss?  
. . . Yet nothing moved the mind of our prince. (Arnold)

It is said that only after all else had failed, Mara presented the prince's lovely wife who came with eyes brimming to plead that her beloved master might give up his impossible task and return to her lonely arms. But the prince saw that in returning, he would forfeit the one and only gift that was worthy of her, the understanding of the cause of suffering and the path to the cessation of pain. He stood firm in his effort and the figure vanished.

Once Mara was defeated and his legions had fled the meditation, the prince came into insights vast beyond the perceptions of this small universe.

(He) saw those Lords of Light who hold their worlds by bonds invisible, how they themselves circle obediently round mightier orbs which serve profounder splendor . . . Depths and heights he passed transported through the blue infinitudes, marking--behind all modes, above all spheres, beyond the burning impulse of each orb--that fixed decree at silent work which wills evolved by wordless edict the darkness to light . . . the dead to life to fullness void . . . Having none to bid, none to forbid, this is past all gods immutable, unspeakable, supreme, a Power which builds, unbuilds, and builds again, ruling all things accordant to the rule of virtue, which is beauty, truth, and use . . . (Arnold).

Becoming *One with the Mind of God* is the way some might put it. But however you say it, the prince went to the heart of All and found the answer to his question. He saw the source of pain and suffering and he came to know the path to its cessation.

The last temptation Mara put in the way of that enlightened one was quite straightforward. "You are a fool if you go into the world and teach," Mara said. "Humanity is low. Men are wrapped up in their own little worlds. They will never understand the depth of what you have seen. Don't waste your time. Go and enter the bliss of nirvana. You have earned the right . . . take it!"

Indeed, there was nothing between the prince and the gates of nirvana . . . the enlightened one had won the right to merge with the All, the Mind of God. But as his insight sounded the personal minds of men, our prince saw once more the need that was there. So in the deepest of compassion he said, "I will teach. Let those who can understand, understand." With that Mara's vanquishment was complete and the Enlightened One proceeded down the road to the Deer Park in Sarnath--outside of Benares--where he gave his first sermon.

The man's name?

In the West, we call him *the Buddha*.

The word *Buddha* is not really a name. It is a title much like the Greek word *Christos* from which we get the title Christ. Both are generic terms used to honor those who have achieved a particularly advanced state of spiritual awareness.<sup>1</sup> If the traditions that exist within the East are correct, the world has seen many Buddhas . . . Jesus among them.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in his father's kingdom at the base of the Himalayas in India around 600 BC. Only seventeen words were written about him at the time of his life . . . a simple notation about the birth of a prince. His teachings were originally passed down from teacher to student by word of mouth but were later put into written form (*The Chataka Tales*, for instance, are stories about Siddhartha's earlier lives; the *Dhammapada* is a collection of the attributed sayings of the Buddha, etc.). The Buddha, Siddhartha, held the energies of an Avatar<sup>2</sup> for thirty years. His work was amongst a people who, though not saints, had a tradition of meditative contemplation and a deep reverence for the holy man. His presence was not construed as a sign from God that his people were somehow chosen to be above others; neither was it believed to have political significance--to be a sign that it was time to throw off the bonds of a conqueror as was believed to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, the word *Christos* translates as "the anointed".

<sup>2</sup> The Sanskrit word *Avatar* means "world teacher."



case with the Jewish Messiah. To his followers, the Buddha's presence was accepted simply as an opportunity to grow and evolve spiritually.

His message was centered on the cause of pain and suffering and the path to the cessation of pain and suffering.

The hope is that in reading the story of the Buddha you will have gained a more sympathetic feel for the motives that underlay the Buddha's efforts along with a deeper insight into the origins of modern-day Buddhist beliefs.

More important, if the Buddha saw to the heart of suffering and sorrow, and if he understood the path to the cessation of suffering and sorrow, the question arises: What did he say about those things?

It would certainly be easy enough to give you the skeleton of those teachings. I could, for instance, present what the Buddha called *the Four Truths*. The problem is that if I did, they could easily seem cold and harsh. Why? Because westerners don't generally have the cultural, historic, and philosophic background needed to really understand what his words were meant to convey.

In short, the teachings of the Buddha are extremely benevolent--they just don't seem so from a Western perspective. And therein lies the problem. To be able to truly understand the teachings of the Buddha, not to mention all the other exotic Eastern topics that have come into the West in the last few hundred years, one needs bits and pieces of information upon which to build a perspective from which one *can* understand the East. Our next five or six gatherings will be dedicated to providing that information.

