

Siddhartha

By Hermann Hesse

Translated from the German by Ruth Martin

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Translator's Foreword

Hermann Hesse began work on *Siddhartha* in 1919, in the aftermath of the First World War. Despairing of the realities of the mechanised age, industrial warfare, and German nationalism, he had moved to a remote village in Switzerland earlier that year. The psychoanalysis he had undergone with Dr Josef Bernhard Lang, a disciple of Carl Jung, had already begun to turn his focus away from the modern world and towards the life of the mind. (Hesse would become a patient of Jung himself for a brief but intense period in 1921.) His physical retreat into the mountains gave him time and space for deeper self-examination. *Siddhartha* is perhaps the ultimate product of this introspective turn.

The book is also rooted in another aspect of Hesse's biography. The son of missionaries whose mother was born in India, Hesse had always had an awareness of

Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, but as he grew older his interest in Buddhism and the culture of India grew. In late 1918 he read and reviewed Karl Eugen Neumann's *Reden Gotamo Buddhos*, a collection of 'speeches' by the Buddha translated into German, and praised its 'genuine Indian tone in the German language'. This is what Hesse himself was aiming for in *Siddhartha*: an archaic, poetic style to reflect the story's setting in an imagined India of 500–600 BC, a style somewhere between scripture and fairy tale, with heavy use of repetition, assonance, and alliteration.

But there is a second layer to this text: Hesse, whose vocabulary was influenced by his own Christian background and the period in which he lived, was writing in the early 1920s for a European audience, most of whom were also raised in the Christian and Jewish faiths. He was looking at the tenets of Buddhism and older Hindu beliefs through this lens, and describing them with the Christian-inflected German words available to him: *Erlösung* (salvation); *Sünde* (sin); *büßen* (to do penance). The Buddha himself 'preaches a sermon' in the grove of Jetavana. Hesse's India is a fictional place, an invention of a twentieth-century European mind – as he hints

in the book's subtitle, '*Eine indische Dichtung*', where *Dichtung* might be translated as 'fiction' or 'tale'. This more modern layer also has to be reflected in the translation – and a new translation adds a third, contemporary, linguistic, cultural, and historical layer to the reading experience.

Over the hundred years since its first publication, there have been several English translations of *Siddhartha*. The first, by Hilda Rosner, was completed in 1951, a good decade before Hermann Hesse's death. This edition went on to develop a life of its own that Hesse could never have predicted, chiming with the ideas of the Beat Generation and the hippy movement, and gaining immense popularity with the American and English counterculture of the late 1950s and '60s. These readers saw Hesse as a radical kindred spirit – a different view from that of his original readers in the 1920s, for whom *Siddhartha* was an obvious descendent of German Romanticism. In the nineteenth century, Goethe and Heine, among other German writers, had spread an idealised image of India as a place where spiritual people lived tranquil, rural lives. In the German imagination, the subcontinent was a counterbalance to Enlightenment rationality, a place of

sensual and spiritual exploration, and Hesse was a fairly traditional proponent of this popular idea.

More than seventy years on from the first English translation, today's readers will bring yet another historical context to their reading of *Siddhartha*. In a globalised world, India is now a place of megacities and rapid growth as much as a destination for spiritual seekers. Discussions of cultural appropriation have also changed Western attitudes towards authors writing about cultures and ethnicities that are not their own. But twenty-first-century India has embraced Hesse, with a Hermann Hesse Society founded in Kerala in 2005, and the *Hindustan Times* reporting in 2022 that *Siddhartha* has now been translated into several Indian languages, including Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali, and Marathi.

We bring this complexity to *Siddhartha* as readers; the same is true of translators. I can't, and shouldn't, separate myself from the time and place in which I am translating. *Siddhartha* is a centenarian now, with a long and eventful life of translation and interpretation behind him, and it is impossible for me to put myself entirely

in Hesse's shoes and ignore either this history or my own context as translator. To give just one example of the bearing that translating in 2025 might have on my choices: where Hesse's German uses a default masculine pronoun to refer to a hypothetical 'anyone' or 'someone', I favour a more neutral 'they'. That default masculine has a different, exclusionary effect on today's reader, one that doesn't reflect Hesse's original intention – though he was of course writing in a far more male-dominated world. I have also chosen not to italicise foreign words; it would draw attention to them, make them seem Other and exotic, and pull the reader out of Siddhartha's world for a moment to consider its 'foreignness' in a way that I don't think is necessary or helpful.

In 2025 it is also tempting to translate some instances of '*das Ich*' – the self – as 'ego'. This is the decision that Freud's early English translators made for his use of '*das Ich*', and there can be no denying that Hesse was influenced by psychoanalysis as well as Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. But 'ego' feels too jarringly modern here; it has only come into common English usage since Freud and Jung, while '*das Ich*' is much older. 'Self' it is, then, even if that choice might seem to disregard one aspect

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

of the book's history. In other respects I have tried to honour Hesse's cultural context, and his understanding of Buddhism in particular. He refers to the Buddha as 'Gotama', rather than the more familiar 'Gautama', though his is still a legitimate spelling – Pali rather than Sanskrit – and so it remains in my English version, as do most other variant spellings from the original. The only exceptions to this rule are where it might create confusion: Hesse uses 'brahman' for both brahmin, the social class of priests and scholars, and Brahman, the supreme, indestructible spirit and ultimate reality of the universe. The Malay word '*pisang*', meaning plantain or banana, is probably a souvenir from Hesse's long trip to Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Sumatra in 1911; this too remains.

I found the translation of this book to be a meditative experience, the clarity and gentle rhythm of Hesse's sentences carrying me along like Vasudeva's river. I hope that I have managed to recreate the experience for English-language readers, and that this classic work of German literature will speak to you as it has to me.

– Ruth Martin

Part One

To my admired friend, Romain Rolland

The Brahmin's Son

In the shade of the house, in the sun on the riverbank by the boats, in the shade of the shala woods, in the shade of the fig tree, Siddhartha grew up, the beautiful son of a brahmin, a young falcon, alongside his friend Govinda, another brahmin's son. The sun browned his fair shoulders on the riverbank as he bathed, as he performed the ritual ablutions, made the ritual offerings. Shadows flowed into his black eyes in the mango grove as he played boys' games, as his mother sang, as the ritual offerings were made, as his father the scholar gave his lessons, as the wise men conversed. Siddhartha had already begun to join the wise men's conversations, and practised his debating with Govinda, practised too the art of contemplation, in the service of meditation. He already knew how to speak the OM in silence, the

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word of words, saying it silently into himself with the inward breath, saying it silently out again with the outward breath, his soul composed, his forehead wreathed with the lustre of a clear mind. He already knew the Atman that dwelled in the innermost part of his being, indestructible, at one with the universe.

Joy leaped in his father's heart to think of his son, the eager scholar, the boy thirsty for knowledge; he saw a great sage and priest growing within him, a prince among brahmins.

Bliss leaped in his mother's breast when she saw him, saw him walk, sit down and rise again, Siddhartha the strong, the beautiful, walking on slender legs, greeting her with perfect decorum.

Love stirred in the hearts of the brahmins' young daughters when Siddhartha walked through the streets of the town, with his shining forehead, with his royal glance, with his narrow hips.

But his friend Govinda, the brahmin's son, loved him more than any of them. He loved Siddhartha's eyes and

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sweet voice, he loved his walk and the perfect decorum of his movements, he loved everything that Siddhartha said and did, and most of all he loved his spirit, his lofty, fiery thoughts, his fierce will, his noble calling. Govinda knew that Siddhartha would never become an ordinary brahmin, a lazy official making offerings, a greedy merchant of incantations, a vain, empty speechifier, a wicked, cunning priest, or a good, stupid sheep in a flock of multitudes. And nor would Govinda become such a one, a brahmin like 10,000 others. He wanted to follow Siddhartha, the beloved, the magnificent. And if Siddhartha one day became a god, if he joined the ranks of the Shining Ones, then Govinda would follow him, as his friend, his companion, his servant, as his spear-carrier, his shadow.

And so everyone loved Siddhartha. He gave joy to all, and was a delight to all.

But Siddhartha took no joy, no delight in himself. Strolling the rosy paths of the fig garden, sitting in the blue shade of the grove of contemplation, washing his limbs in the daily purifying bath, making his offerings in the deep shade of the mango wood, the boy with the

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perfectly decorous gestures, beloved by all, a joy to all, carried no joy in his own heart. Dreams and restless thoughts came to him, flowing from the river water, glittering from the stars at night, melting from the sun's rays; dreams came to him and a restlessness of the soul, smoking from the offerings, sighing from the verses of the Rig Veda, trickling from the lessons of the old brahmins.

Siddhartha had begun to harbour discontent. He had begun to feel that his father's love, his mother's love, and the love of his friend Govinda would not always delight, fill, and satisfy him, would not suffice for all time. He had begun to suspect that his revered father and his other teachers, the wise brahmins, had now imparted most of their wisdom, the best of it, had already poured its richness into his waiting vessel, and that vessel was not full, the mind not content, the soul not quiet, the heart not satisfied. Ablutions were good, but water was water; it did not wash away sins, it did not heal the mind's thirst, it did not quench the heart's fear. Sacrifices and invoking the gods were virtuous things – but was that all? Did the offerings bring happiness? And what about the gods? Had Prajapati really created the world? Was that

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not the Atman, He, the Only, the All-in-All? Were the gods not incarnations, created like you and me, transient and bound by time? Was it good, then, was it right and meaningful, was it the ultimate act to make offerings to the gods? To whom else should offerings be made? Who should be honoured but Him, the Only, the Atman? And where was Atman to be found, where did He dwell, where did His eternal heart beat, where but in your own self, in your innermost being, the indestructible essence within every person? But where, where was this self, this innermost being, this ultimate? It was not flesh and blood; it was neither thought nor consciousness, so the wisest of men taught. Then where – where was it? And was there another path worth seeking that would lead to that place, to the self, to me, to the Atman? Ah, but no one would point him down that path, no one knew it; not his father, nor the teachers and sages, nor the sacred sacrificial chants! The brahmins and their holy books knew everything, they had studied everything and more than everything, the creation of the world, the beginnings of speech, and food, and of the inward and the outward breath, the ordering of the senses, the deeds of the gods. Their knowledge was endless – but what was

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all this knowledge worth, if you did not know the One and Only, the most important, the only important thing?

Of course, many verses in the holy books – splendid verses – especially the Upanishads of the Sama Veda, spoke of this innermost and ultimate being. ‘Your soul is the whole world,’ they said; and they said that in sleep, in deep sleep, a person enters their innermost core and dwells in the Atman. These verses contained wonderful wisdom; all the knowledge of the wisest men was gathered in their magical words, pure as honey gathered by bees. No, one must not ignore the vast learning within these verses, gathered and preserved by countless generations of wise brahmins. But where were the brahmins, the priests, the sages or penitents who not only possessed this deepest knowledge, but had experienced it themselves? Where was the person who could use their knowledge to carry this dwelling-in-the-Atman over from sleep into waking, into life, into every step, every word and deed? Siddhartha knew many venerable brahmins, his father above all, a pure man, a scholar, supremely venerable. His father was an admirable man, silent and regal in his demeanour, pure in his life, wise in his words, and in his head dwelled fine and noble

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thoughts – but did he, who knew so much, therefore live in bliss and peace? Was he not someone who searched and thirsted? And, thirsty as he was, did he not have to drink again and again from sacred springs, from the offerings, the books, the brahmins' discussions? Why did this impeccable man have to wash away sins day after day, and purify himself anew? Was the Atman not in him, did the wellspring not flow in his own heart? It must be found, the wellspring in one's own self; it must be embraced! All else was seeking, diversion, and error.

Such were Siddhartha's thoughts; this was his thirst, this his pain.

Often he would recite words from the Chandogya Upanishad: 'Indeed, the name of Brahman is Satyam – verily, he who knows this enters into the heavenly world every day.' Often the heavenly world seemed close, but he had never quite reached it, never fully quenched his thirst. And of all the wise men, of the wisest he knew, whose teaching he enjoyed, none had ever quite reached the heavenly world, ever fully quenched his eternal thirst.

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‘Govinda,’ said Siddhartha to his friend. ‘Govinda, my friend, come and sit with me under the banyan tree, and we will practise meditation.’

They went to the banyan tree and sat down, Siddhartha here and Govinda 20 paces away. As he sat, ready to speak the OM, Siddhartha murmured the verse over and over:

Om is the bow, the soul its arrow;

Brahman is the arrow’s mark,

At which to aim unswervingly.

When the customary time for the meditation exercise had passed, Govinda got to his feet. Evening had fallen, and it was time for the evening ablutions. He called Siddhartha’s name, but Siddhartha did not answer. Siddhartha sat engrossed, his eyes fixed on a distant mark, the tip of his tongue protruding between his teeth; he seemed not to be breathing. Thus he sat, swathed in meditation, thinking the OM, his soul an arrow let fly towards Brahman.

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Once, some samanas came through Siddhartha's town, ascetic pilgrims, three scrawny men, worn and weary, neither old nor young, shoulders dusty and bloodied, bodies sun-scorched and almost naked, wreathed in loneliness, foreign and hostile to the world, strangers and haggard jackals in the realm of man. In their wake drifted a hot scent of silent zeal, destructive service, pitiless self-denial.

In the evening, after the hour of contemplation, Siddhartha said to Govinda: 'Early tomorrow morning, my friend, Siddhartha will go with the samanas. He will become a samana.'

Govinda turned pale upon hearing the words and seeing the resolve in his friend's determined face, unwavering as an arrow let fly from a bow. At first glance, Govinda saw: it is beginning; Siddhartha is going his own way, the first shoots of his destiny are sprouting, and mine with them. And he turned pale as a dry banana peel.

'O Siddhartha,' he cried. 'Will your father allow it?'

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Siddhartha turned to look at him like a person waking from sleep. Quick as an arrow, he read Govinda's soul, read the fear there, the submission.

'O Govinda,' he said softly. 'Let us not waste words. Tomorrow at daybreak I will embark on the life of a samana. Speak no more of it.'

Siddhartha went into the little room where his father sat on a raffia mat, and stood behind him and remained there until his father felt his presence. Then the brahmin spoke. 'Is that you, Siddhartha? Then say what you have come to say.'

Said Siddhartha: 'With your permission, father. I have come to tell you that I wish to leave your house tomorrow and join the ascetics. I wish to become a samana. I hope my father will not object.'

The brahmin did not speak. He was silent for so long that the stars drifted across the little window and changed their pattern before the silence in the room was broken. The son stood, quiet and unmoving, arms folded; the father sat, quiet and unmoving on the mat, and the stars

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shifted in the sky. Then the father said: 'It is unseemly for a brahmin to speak harsh and angry words. But displeasure moves my heart. I do not wish to hear this request from your lips a second time.'

Slowly the brahmin got to his feet. Siddhartha stood quietly, his arms folded.

'What are you waiting for?' his father asked.

Said Siddhartha: 'You know.'

Reluctantly his father left the room, and reluctantly he went to his bed and lay down.

When an hour had passed and no sleep came to his eyes, the brahmin rose and paced back and forth, then left the house. He looked in through the window of the little room and saw Siddhartha standing, arms folded, unmoving. His pale outer garment shimmered. With unease in his heart, Siddhartha's father went back to bed.

When an hour had passed and no sleep came to his eyes, the brahmin rose once more, paced back and

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forth, stepped outside, and saw the moon had risen. He looked in through the window of the little room and there stood Siddhartha, unmoving, arms folded, the moonlight reflecting on his bare shins. With a troubled heart, Siddhartha's father returned to bed.

And he came again an hour later, and again two hours later, looking through the small window, seeing Siddhartha there in the moonlight, in the starlight, in the darkness. And came again from hour to hour, saying nothing, looking into the little room, seeing the boy there unmoving, and his heart filled with rage, filled with unrest, filled with fear, with pain.

And in the final hour of the night before daybreak, he returned once more, stepped into the room and saw the boy standing there, and the boy seemed tall and like a stranger to him.

‘Siddhartha,’ he said. ‘What are you waiting for?’

‘You know.’

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‘Will you go on standing and waiting until daybreak, and noon, and evening?’

‘I will stand and wait.’

‘You will grow tired, Siddhartha.’

‘I will grow tired.’

‘You will fall asleep, Siddhartha.’

‘I will not fall asleep.’

‘You will die, Siddhartha.’

‘I will die.’

‘And you would sooner die than obey your father?’

‘Siddhartha has always obeyed his father.’

‘So you will give up your plan?’

‘Siddhartha will do what his father tells him.’

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The first light of day fell into the room. The brahmin saw that Siddhartha's knees were trembling slightly. He saw no trembling in Siddhartha's face; the boy was staring into the distance. And then his father knew that Siddhartha was no longer with him and in his home; he had left already.

He touched Siddhartha's shoulder.

'You will go into the forest, and become a samana,' he said. 'If you find bliss in the forest, then come and teach me bliss. If you find disappointment, then come back and together we will make offerings to the gods once more. Now go and kiss your mother, and tell her where you are going. For me, though, it is time to go to the river and perform the first ablution.'

He took his hand from his son's shoulder and went out. Siddhartha staggered when he tried to walk. He caught himself, bowed before his father and went to his mother to do as his father had bidden him.

In the first light of day, as he left the still-silent town on slow, stiff legs, a shadow emerged from the last hut

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where it had been lurking, and joined the pilgrim. It was Govinda.

‘You have come,’ said Siddhartha, and smiled.

‘I have come,’ said Govinda.

With the Samanas

On the evening of that day, they caught up with the ascetics, the scrawny samanas, and offered their companionship and obedience. They were accepted.

Siddhartha gave his tunic to a poor brahmin on the street. Now, he wore only his loincloth and the earth-coloured, unstitched cloak. He ate only once a day, and the food was never cooked. He fasted for 15 days. He fasted for 28 days. The flesh melted from his thighs and cheeks. Hot dreams flickered in his bulging eyes, the nails on his withering fingers grew long, and a dry, bristly beard covered his chin. His gaze turned icy in the presence of women, and his lips curled with disdain when he passed through a town of well-dressed people. He saw merchants trading, princes going out to hunt,

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mourners weeping for their dead, whores offering their bodies, doctors tending the sick, priests setting the day for sowing seed, lovers loving, mothers feeding their babies – and none of this was worth a glance; it was all lies, it all stank, stank of lies, it was all an illusion of meaning and happiness and beauty, all unacknowledged decay. Bitter was the taste of the world, and life was torment.

Siddhartha had a goal, a single goal: to become empty, empty of thirst, empty of desire, empty of dreaming, empty of joy and suffering. To let the self die and be a self no longer, to find the peace of an empty heart, and in selfless thought become open to miracles – that was his goal. When the self was defeated and dead, when every obsession and every urge in his heart fell silent, then the Ultimate must awaken, the innermost being beyond the self, the great secret.

Siddhartha stood silent in the fierce noon sun, burning with pain, burning with thirst, and went on standing until he could feel neither pain nor thirst. He stood silent when the rains came, and water dripped from his hair onto shivering shoulders, shivering hips and legs,

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and the penitent went on standing until shoulders and legs ceased shivering, until they were still and quiet. He crouched silent in the thorn bushes, blood dripping from his burning skin, pus from his boils, and Siddhartha remained there, stiff and unmoving, until the blood stopped flowing, until nothing stung, nothing burned.

Siddhartha sat upright and learned to save his breath, learned to get by with shallow breaths, to hold his breath. Starting from the breath, he learned to calm his heart-beat, learned to slow the beats of his heart until they were few in number, almost none.

Instructed by the eldest samana, Siddhartha practised casting off his self, practised meditation under new samana rules. A heron flew over the bamboo woods – and Siddhartha took the heron into his soul, flew over the forests and mountains, was a heron, ate fish, felt a heron's hunger, uttered a heron's croaking cry, died a heron's death. A dead jackal lay on the sandy shore, and Siddhartha's soul crept into the carcass, became a dead jackal lying on the beach, distended, stinking, rotting; he was torn apart by hyenas, skinned by vultures, turned to bones, to dust, drifted over the land. And Siddhartha's

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soul returned, died, decayed, turned to dust, tasted the dismal exhilaration of life's cycle and, with a fresh thirst, waited like a hunter for the gap through which he could escape that cycle, the gap where the end of causes and an eternity without suffering would begin. He killed his senses, killed his memory, slipped out of himself and into a thousand other forms, becoming an animal, becoming carrion, stone, wood, and water, and each time found himself waking once more to see the sun shining, or the moon. He became himself again, moving through the cycle, feeling thirst, overcoming the thirst, feeling a new thirst.

Siddhartha learned much with the samanas, learned to take many paths away from the self. He walked the path to selflessness through pain, through the voluntary suffering and overcoming of pain, of hunger and thirst, of weariness. He walked the path of to selflessness through meditation, through emptying his mind of all ideas. This and other paths he learned to walk; a thousand times he left himself, persisting for hours and days at a time in the not-self. But however far the paths led away from the self, they always ended back at the self once more.

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Siddhartha could flee the self a thousand times, linger in nothingness, in animal or stone, but the return was inevitable, the hour inescapable when he would find himself back in the light of the sun or moon, in shade or rain, a self once more, Siddhartha once more, feeling again the torment of the cycle to which he was confined.

At his side lived Govinda, his shadow, walking the same paths, making the same efforts. They seldom spoke to one another beyond what their service and practices required. From time to time they would walk through the villages together, begging for sustenance for themselves and their teachers.

‘What do you think, Govinda,’ Siddhartha asked one day as they were begging. ‘Do you think we have progressed? Have we reached a goal?’

Govinda answered: ‘We have learned, and we are still learning. You will be a great samana, Siddhartha. You learn every exercise quickly, and the old samanas have often admired you. One day you will be a saint, O Siddhartha.’

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Said Siddhartha: 'That is not how it seems to me, my friend. What I have learned thus far with the samanas, O Govinda, I could have learned faster and more easily. I could have learned it at any inn where the whores ply their trade, my friend, among the carters and the dice-players.'

Said Govinda: 'Siddhartha is joking with me. How could you have learned to meditate, to stop your breathing, how could you have learned not to feel hunger or pain there, with those miserable people?'

And Siddhartha said softly, as if talking to himself: 'What is meditation? What is leaving the body? What is fasting? What is stopping one's breath? It is an escape from the self, a brief escape from the torment of being a self, a brief numbing of the pain and senselessness of life. This escape, this numbness is what the ox-driver finds in a hostelry, when he drinks a few cups of rice wine or fermented coconut milk. Then he no longer feels his self, no longer feels the pain of life, and finds a brief numbness. Falling into slumber over his cup of rice wine, he finds the same thing Siddhartha and Govinda find when they

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slip out of their bodies in long exercises, and dwell in the not-self. So it is, O Govinda.'

Said Govinda: 'So you say, O my friend – and yet you know that Siddhartha is no ox-driver and a samana is no drunkard. The drinker may well be numbed, may well escape and rest for a little while, but he returns from his delirium and finds everything just the same; he has not grown wiser, has gained no knowledge, has not risen a step higher.'

And Siddhartha said with a smile: 'I don't know; I have never been a drinker. But I do know that I, Siddhartha, find only brief numbness in my exercises and meditations, and am just as far from wisdom, from salvation, as a child in the womb, O Govinda.'

Another time, when Siddhartha and Govinda left the forest and went to the village to beg for a little sustenance for their brothers and teachers, Siddhartha began speaking, and said: 'Well now, Govinda, are we on the right path? Are we approaching knowledge? Are we approaching release and salvation? Or are we perhaps

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walking in circles – we who thought we were escaping the cycle?’

Said Govinda: ‘We have learned much, Siddhartha, and have much still to learn. We are not walking in circles, but upwards; the circle is a spiral, and we have already climbed many of its steps.’

Siddhartha answered: ‘How old, do you think, is our eldest samana, our venerable teacher?’

Said Govinda: ‘Our elder is probably around 60 years old.’

And Siddhartha: ‘He has lived to be 60 and not reached nirvana. He will live to 70 and then 80 – and you and I will live just as long, practising and fasting and meditating. But none of us will reach nirvana; he will not, and neither will we. O Govinda, I believe that of all the samanas in the world, perhaps not one, not a single one will reach nirvana. We find consolation, we find numbness, and we learn ways to deceive ourselves. But what is really essential, the path of paths – that we will not find.’

‘Please,’ said Govinda. ‘Please do not speak such frightening words, Siddhartha! How can it be that, among so many learned men, so many brahmins, among all these strict and venerable samanas, all these seekers, all these profoundly dedicated, holy men, none of them will find the path of paths?’

But Siddhartha said, in a voice laden with both sorrow and mockery, a soft voice, somewhat sad, somewhat mocking: ‘Soon, Govinda, your friend will leave this path of the samanas he has walked so long with you. I am suffering from thirst, O Govinda, and my thirst has not lessened on this long samana path. I have always thirsted for knowledge, always been full of questions. I questioned the brahmins, year after year, and the holy Vedas, year after year, and the pious samanas, year after year. Perhaps, O Govinda, it would have been just as good, just as clever and as helpful to question the hornbills or the chimpanzees. It has taken me a long time to learn, O Govinda – indeed, I am still learning – that a person cannot learn anything! In fact, I believe that what we call “learning” does not exist. All that exists, O my friend, is a knowledge that is everywhere; it is Atman, and it dwells within me and you and every other being.

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And thus I am starting to believe this knowledge has no worse enemy than the desire for knowledge – learning.’

Then Govinda stopped on the street, raised his hands and said: ‘Please, Siddhartha, do not affright your friend with such talk! Truly, your words strike fear into my heart. And just think: wherein lies the holiness of prayer, the worthiness of the brahmin’s status, the holiness of the samanas, if things are as you say, and there is no learning?! What, O Siddhartha, what then would become of everything on earth that is holy, that is precious and worthy?’

And Govinda murmured a verse to himself, a verse from an Upanishad:

He who, in contemplation, his mind purified, immerses himself in Atman,

His heart’s bliss cannot be expressed in words.

But Siddhartha said nothing. He thought over the words that Govinda had uttered; he thought them through to their conclusion.

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‘Yes,’ he thought, standing with his head bowed. ‘What remains of all that seemed holy to us? What remains? What has proven itself worthy?’ And he shook his head.

One day, when the two young men had lived nearly three years with the samanas, sharing their practices, a report reached them by various routes, a rumour, a legend: a man named Gotama had appeared, the Exalted One, the Buddha; he had overcome the suffering of the world within himself and brought the wheel of reincarnation to a halt. He moved around the countryside, teaching, surrounded by disciples, with no possessions, no home, no wife; he wore the yellow robe of an ascetic, but his brow was serene. He lived in bliss, and brahmins and princes bowed before him and became his pupils.

This legend, this rumour, this fairytale echoed around, its scent wafting through the air. In the towns the brahmins spoke of it, and in the forest the samanas; the name Gotama, the Buddha, reached the young men’s ears again and again, in fair words and foul, adored and defamed.

As when a plague ravages a land, and there are reports of a man somewhere, a sage, an adept whose word and

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breath are enough to cure anyone who has sickened with the pestilence, and these reports spread through the land and are discussed everywhere, and many believe them, many doubt, but many also set off at once to seek out the sage who might help them – in just such a way did this legend spread, the perfumed legend of Gotama, the Buddha, the sage of the Sakya clan. He possessed the highest knowledge, so the believers said; he recalled his past lives, had attained nirvana, and would never return to the cycle, never plunge back into the murky stream of incarnations. Many splendid and incredible things were claimed of him: he had performed miracles, bested the devil, spoken with the gods. But his enemies and the unbelievers said that this Gotama was a conceited womaniser who spent his days on high living, that he scorned the sacrifices, was no scholar, and knew neither the spiritual exercises nor the mortification of the flesh.

Sweet was the legend of the Buddha; the scent of magic rose from these reports. The world was sick, and life hard to bear – but look, it seemed a fresh spring rose here, and a messenger was calling out, his voice comforting, mild, and filled with noble promises. Wherever the rumour of the Buddha spread in the lands of India,

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young men listened and felt a longing, a hope. In the towns and villages, the brahmins' sons welcomed every pilgrim and stranger who brought reports of the Exalted One, the Sakyamuni.

The legend had reached the samanas in the forests, too, had reached Siddhartha and Govinda – it had trickled through to them drop by drop, each drop heavy with hope, heavy with doubt. They spoke little of it, for the elder of the samanas was no friend of this legend. He had heard that this supposed Buddha had once been an ascetic and lived in the forest, but had then returned to luxury and worldly pleasures, and he scoffed at this Gotama.

‘O Siddhartha,’ said Govinda to his friend one day. ‘I was in the village today, and a brahmin invited me into his house, and inside was a brahmin’s son from Magadha, who had seen the Buddha with his own eyes and heard him teaching. Truly, then it hurt to breath, and I thought to myself: “Would that I too, would that we both, Siddhartha and I, should live to hear the teachings from the lips of the Perfect One!” Tell me, friend, should

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we not also go and listen to the teachings from the lips of the Buddha?’

Said Siddhartha: ‘I always thought that Govinda would stay with the samanas. I always believed he would live to be 60 and then 70 years old, and still be practising the arts and the exercises of a samana. But see, I have not known Govinda well enough; little did I know of his heart. So now, dearest friend, you want to take a new path to where the Buddha is teaching.’

Said Govinda: ‘You like to mock. And may you always do so, Siddhartha! But has not a desire awakened within you, too, a need to hear these teachings? And did you not once say to me you would not walk the path of the samanas much longer?’

Then Siddhartha laughed, in his own way, with a shade of sadness and a shade of mockery in his voice, and said: ‘You have spoken well, Govinda, and remembered rightly. But remember what else I told you: that I have come to mistrust and tire of teaching and learning, and that I have little faith in words that come to us from teachers. But very well, my friend, I am ready to hear those teachings

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– though I believe in my heart that we have already tasted their best fruit.’

Said Govinda: ‘Your willingness delights my heart. But, tell me, how is this possible? How can the teachings of Gotama have yielded their best fruit to us before we have heard them?’

Said Siddhartha: ‘Let us enjoy these fruits and await more, O Govinda. The fruit that Gotama has already given us consists of him calling us away from the samanas! Now let us wait patiently to see whether he has more and better fruit to offer us.’

That same day, Siddhartha told the elder that he had decided to leave. He did so with the politeness and modesty befitting a disciple and pupil. But the samana flew into a rage at the two young men wanting to leave him, and shouted and uttered coarse oaths.

Govinda was shocked and embarrassed, but Siddhartha brought his mouth close to Govinda’s ear and whispered to him: ‘Now I will show the old man that I have learned something from him.’

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And this is exactly what he did, by walking up to the samana, his soul at peace, and holding the old man's gaze, making him spellbound and silent, weakening his will, bending him to Siddhartha's own will, silently ordering him to do what he demanded. The old man fell silent, his eyes fixed, his will weakened, his arms hanging at his sides, powerless against Siddhartha's spell. Siddhartha's thoughts vanquished the samana's, and the old man had to do what they ordered. And so he bowed several times, made gestures of benediction, and stammered out a pious blessing for their journey. And the young men returned the bows with thanks, returned the blessing, and said their farewells.

As they walked, Govinda said: 'O Siddhartha, you learned more with the samanas than I knew. It is hard, very hard to enchant an old samana. Truly, had you remained there, you would soon have learned to walk on water.'

'I have no desire to walk on water,' said Siddhartha. 'I will leave such arts to the old samanas.'

Gotama

In the town of Savatthi, every child knew the name of the Sublime Buddha, and every house was ready to fill the begging bowls of the Buddha's disciples, the silent supplicants. Close to the town lay Gotama's favourite stopping place, the grove of Jetavana, which had been gifted to him and his followers by the rich merchant Anathapindika, a devoted admirer of the Exalted One.

All the tales they had been told, all the answers to the questions the two young ascetics had asked on their search for Gotama had pointed to this place. Arriving in Savatthi and stopping to enquire about him at the first house they came to, they were offered food and, as they took it, Siddhartha asked the woman who had given it to them:

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‘Please, bountiful lady, be so kind as to tell us where we might find the Buddha, the Worthy One, for we are two samanas from the forests, and we have come to see the Perfect One, and to hear the doctrine from his lips.’

Said the woman: ‘Truly, you have come to the right place, samanas from the forests. Know that the Exalted One is at present in Jetavana, in the garden of Anathapindika. There, you pilgrims may spend the night; there is room enough in that place for all the countless people who flock to hear the doctrine from his lips.’

Govinda rejoiced at this, and joyfully he cried: ‘Well, then our destination is reached and our path at an end! But tell us, O mother of pilgrims, do you know the Buddha? Have you seen him with your own eyes?’

Said the woman: ‘Many times have I seen the Exalted One. Many is the day when I have seen him walk the streets, silent in his yellow robe, holding out his bowl for alms at the doors of the houses, and carrying his full bowl away.’

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Govinda listened, enchanted, and wanted to ask and hear much more. But Siddhartha urged him to walk on. They said their thanks and left, and scarcely needed to ask the way, for many pilgrims and monks from Gotama's retinue were also walking to the grove of Jetavana. And when they arrived that night, there was a constant stream of arrivals, of people calling out, asking for a place to sleep and receiving one. The two samanas, accustomed to life in the forests, found some shelter quickly and quietly, and rested there until morning.

As the sun rose, they saw to their astonishment what a great horde of believers and inquisitive people had spent the night here. Monks clad in yellow walked every path of the glorious grove, and here and there they sat beneath the trees in contemplation, or in spiritual discourse.

The shady gardens were like a busy city where people swarmed like bees. Most of the monks departed for the town with their begging bowls to collect food for the midday meal, the only meal of the day. Even the Buddha himself, the Enlightened One, went out begging in the morning. Siddhartha recognised him at once, as if a god

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was revealing the Buddha to him. He saw a simple man in a yellow habit, a begging bowl in his hand, walking silently away.

‘See here,’ said Siddartha to Govinda under his breath. ‘This is the Buddha.’

Govinda studied the monk in the yellow habit, who seemed no different from the hundreds of other monks. And soon Govinda, too, saw that it was he. And they followed after and contemplated him.

The Buddha went modestly on his way, sunk in thought, his silent face neither joyful nor sad, though seeming to wear a peaceful inward smile. With his hidden smile, silent and calm, not unlike a healthy child, the Buddha strolled, wearing the robe and placing his feet on the ground like all his monks, according to precise rules. But his face and his tread, his silent downcast gaze, his silent dangling hand, and every last finger on his silent dangling hand spoke of peace, of accomplishment; they did not seek or imitate anything, just breathed gently in an unfading quietness, an unfading light, an untouchable peace.

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Thus Gotama strolled towards the town to collect alms, and the two samanas recognised him solely by his perfect calm and his silent presence, which bore no hint of seeking, no will, no imitation, no effort; only light and peace.

‘Today we will hear the doctrine from his own lips,’ said Govinda.

Siddhartha gave no answer. He was not so curious about the doctrine, which he did not believe would teach him anything new; he had already heard what the Buddha taught, just as Govinda had, over and over, albeit from second- and third-hand reports. But he looked intently at Gotama’s head, at his shoulders, his feet, his silent dangling hand, and it seemed to him that each joint of each finger on that hand was the doctrine, that it spoke and breathed and exuded the perfume and the gleam of truth. This man, this Buddha, was true right down to the movement of his little finger. This man was holy. Never had Siddhartha so revered a person, never had he loved a person as he loved this man.

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The pair followed the Buddha to the town and then turned back, unspeaking, for they themselves meant to go without food that day. They saw Gotama return, saw him take a meal in the company of his disciples – what he ate would not have satisfied a bird – and saw him withdraw to the shade of the mango trees.

But that evening, when the heat abated and the camp came to life and everyone gathered, they heard the Buddha teach. They heard his voice, and that too was perfect: perfectly calm, perfectly peaceful. Gotama taught the doctrine of suffering: the origin of suffering, and the path that led to the end of suffering. His quiet words flowed from him, calm and clear. To live was to suffer, and the world was filled with suffering, but salvation from suffering had been found, and anyone who walked the path of the Buddha would find that salvation. The voice of the Exalted One was gentle but firm as he taught the four noble truths and the eightfold path, as he patiently walked the familiar path of the doctrine, the examples, the repetitions. His bright, still voice floated over the listeners like a light, like a starry sky.

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When the Buddha finished speaking – night had already fallen – many a pilgrim came forward and asked to be admitted to the community, taking their refuge in the doctrine. And Gotama accepted them, saying: ‘You have listened to the doctrine, which has been proclaimed. Join us, then, and wander in holiness, to put an end to all suffering.’

And see there: Govinda, shy Govinda, also stepped forward and said: ‘I too take my refuge in the Exalted One and his doctrine,’ and asked to become a disciple, and was accepted.

Soon after, when the Buddha had retired for his night’s rest, Govinda turned to Siddhartha and spoke eagerly: ‘Siddhartha, it is not my place to reproach you. We both heard the Exalted One, and we both listened to the doctrine. Govinda heard the doctrine, and he took refuge in it. But you, my admired friend, do you not wish to walk the path of salvation, too? Would you rather hesitate, rather wait?’

Siddhartha woke as if from sleep when he heard Govinda’s words. He looked long into Govinda’s face.

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Then he spoke, in a soft voice with no trace of mockery in it: ‘Govinda, my friend, you have taken the step and chosen the path. O Govinda, you have always been my friend, and always walked a step behind me. Often have I thought: “Does Govinda have no wish to take a step alone, just once, without me, as his own soul dictates?” See, now you have become a man, choosing your own path. May you walk it to the end, O my friend! May you find salvation!’

Govinda, who did not yet fully understand, repeated his question in impatient tones: ‘Speak, I beg you, dear friend! Tell me that you, too, my wise friend, can do nothing but take refuge in the sublime Buddha!’

Siddhartha laid a hand on Govinda’s shoulder. ‘You did not hear my blessing, O Govinda. I will repeat it: May you walk this path to the end! May you find salvation!’

At this moment, Govinda realised that his friend had left him, and he began to weep.

‘Siddhartha!’ he lamented.

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Siddhartha spoke kindly to him: 'Do not forget, Govinda, that you are now one of the Buddha's samanas! You have renounced home and parents, renounced your past and property, renounced your own will, and your friendship. The doctrine wills it so, and the Exalted One wills it. You willed it, too. Tomorrow, O Govinda, I will leave you.'

The friends strolled for a long time among the trees, and then lay down for a long time without sleeping. Over and over, Govinda pressed his friend to tell him why he would not take refuge in Gotama's doctrine, and what errors he had found there. But each time Siddhartha denied him, saying: 'Be content, Govinda. The Exalted One's doctrine is very good; how should I find an error in it?'

In the early morning, one of the Buddha's oldest monks walked through the garden, calling up all those who had newly taken refuge in the doctrine, to clothe them in the yellow robe and instruct them in the first lessons and duties of their role. Govinda tore himself away, embraced the friend of his youth one final time, then joined the procession of novices.

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But Siddhartha wandered the grove, lost in thought.

There he came across Gotama, the Exalted One, and when he greeted him respectfully and saw the Buddha's eyes brimming with benevolence and stillness, the young man gathered his courage and asked the Illustrious One for permission to speak to him. The Exalted One silently nodded his assent.

Said Siddhartha: 'Yesterday, O Exalted One, I was granted the privilege of hearing your wonderful doctrine. My friend and I came from far away to hear it. And now my friend wishes to stay with your people; he has taken refuge in you. But I will set off on my pilgrimage once more.'

'As you wish,' said the Illustrious One politely.

'I speak too boldly,' Siddhartha went on. 'But I would not like to leave the Exalted One without telling him my sincere thoughts. Will the Venerable One give a moment of his time to listen?'

Silently the Buddha nodded his assent.

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Said Siddhartha: ‘There is one thing, O most Illustrious One, that I admired in your teaching above all else. Everything in your doctrine is completely clear and proven: you show the world as an eternal chain, complete and never broken in any place, wrought from causes and effects. Never has this been seen so clearly, never presented so irrefutably. Every brahmin’s heart must truly beat faster when, through your doctrine, he sees the world as perfectly connected, seamless, clear as crystal, dependent on neither chance nor gods. Whether it be good or evil, whether life is suffering or joy may remain undecided, and perhaps this is not essential. But the unity of the world, and how all that happens in it is connected; the way that everything, large and small, is borne along by the same stream, by the same law of cause and effect, birth and death – all this shines brightly from your sublime doctrine, O Perfect One. But, according to that same doctrine, this unity and congruity of everything is interrupted in one place. There is a small gap through which something strange, something new streams into this unified world, something that was not there before and cannot be shown and cannot be proved – and that is your doctrine of overcoming the world, of release and

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salvation. But this small gap, this small breach, smashes and revokes the whole eternal and unified law of the world. Please forgive me for raising this objection.'

Gotama had listened in silence, unmoved. And now the Illustrious One spoke, in his kind, polite, clear voice: 'You have heard the doctrine, O brahmin's son, and have done well to consider it so deeply. You have found a gap in it, an error. May you continue to think on it. But, hungry as you are for knowledge, heed this warning about the thicket of opinions and arguing over words. Opinions are worth nothing; they may be beautiful or ugly, clever or foolish, and anyone may cleave to them or reject them. But the doctrine you heard from me is not an opinion, and its aim is not to explain the world to those who are hungry for knowledge. No, its aim is release from suffering. This is what Gotama teaches, and only this.'

'Please do not be angry with me, O Exalted One,' said the young man. 'I did not speak to you in this way to seek a dispute, to argue over words. Truly, you are right: opinions are of little worth. But let me say one more thing: never for a moment have I doubted you. Never for a moment have I doubted that you are the Buddha,

that you have reached your goal, the very highest goal that so many thousands of brahmins and brahmins' sons strive to reach. You have found salvation from death. It has come to you through your own seeking, on your own paths, through thought, and meditation, and knowledge, and enlightenment. It has not come to you through teaching! And – such is my thinking, O Exalted One – salvation comes to no one through teaching! No other person, O Illustrious One, can be told in words and through teaching what happened to you at the hour of your enlightenment! The doctrine of the enlightened Buddha contains much, and teaches many to live righteously and avoid evil. But there is one thing this doctrine, clear and honourable as it is, does not contain: the secret of what the Exalted One himself experienced, he alone among hundreds of thousands. This is what I thought and realised as I listened to you teach. This is why I will go on my way – not to seek a different, better doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all teaching and all teachers behind, and reach my goal alone or die. But often will I think of this day, O Exalted One, and this hour, when my eyes beheld a saint.'

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The Buddha's eyes looked in silence at the ground, and his inscrutable face shone in silent, perfect equanimity.

'May your thoughts,' the Illustrious One said slowly, 'be not in error. May you reach your goal. But tell me: have you seen the horde of my samanas, my many brothers who have taken refuge in the doctrine? And do you believe, unknown samana, do you believe that they would all be better abandoning the doctrine and returning to the life of worldly pleasures and desires?'

'Far be it from me to think such a thing!' cried Siddhartha. 'May they all abide by the doctrine, and may they reach their goal. It is not my place to judge another's life. For myself, and myself alone must I judge, must I choose, must I decline. We samanas seek release from our self, O Exalted One. Were I one of your disciples, I fear that my self might seem to come to rest and release me, but this would be false; in truth it would live on and grow large, for I would have made the doctrine, and my discipleship, and my love for you, and the fellowship of the monks into my self.'

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With a half-smile and an unshaken, bright friendliness, Gotama looked the stranger in the eye and took his leave with a scarcely visible gesture.

‘You are clever, samana,’ said the Exalted One. ‘And you speak cleverly, my friend. Guard against too much cleverness!’

Away the Buddha strolled, and his gaze and his half-smile remained forever lodged in Siddhartha’s memory.

‘I have never seen a person look and smile, sit and walk in such a way,’ thought Siddhartha. ‘And truly I wish that I too could look and smile, sit and walk that way – so free, so dignified, so hidden, so open, so childlike and mysterious. Truly, only someone who has found a way to enter the core of their being looks and walks in such a way. Very well: then I too will seek a way to enter the core of my being.’

‘I have seen one person,’ thought Siddhartha, ‘a single person, before whom I had to lower my eyes. I do not want to lower my eyes before any other, not again. No

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other teaching will beguile me, since this man's teaching did not beguile me.'

'The Buddha has robbed me,' thought Siddhartha. 'He has robbed me, and given me more than he took. He robbed me of my friend, who believed in me and now believes in him, who was my shadow and is now Gotama's. But what he gave me was Siddhartha – myself.'

Awakening

As Siddhartha left the grove where the Buddha, the Perfect One, remained, where Govinda remained, he felt that his former life was also left behind in this grove and severed from him. And as he walked slowly away, he contemplated this feeling, which filled him completely. Deep was his contemplation; he sank down to the bottom of the feeling as if through deep water, down to where its causes lay – for seeing the causes of a thing, it seemed to him, was true thought, and it was thought alone that turned feelings into knowledge. Then they were not lost, but became real and began to radiate what was in them.

As he walked slowly away, Siddhartha ruminated. He realised that he was no longer a youth, but had become a man. He realised that he had shed something, like a

snake sheds its old skin, and a desire that had been with him throughout his young life had gone: the desire to have teachers and to hear their teaching. He had left the last teacher he had encountered – yes, even the greatest and wisest teacher of all, the Most Holy One, the Buddha. He had needed to part ways with him, had been unable to accept his doctrine.

As he thought and walked, he slowed his pace and wondered: ‘But what was it that you wanted to learn from teaching and from teachers? What was it that those who taught you much still could not teach you?’ And he realised: ‘It was the self whose sense and essence I wanted to learn. It was the self I wanted to escape, to overcome. But I could not overcome it, only deceive it; I could not escape it, only hide myself from it. Truly, nothing in the world has occupied my mind so much as my self, and this puzzle: that I live, and am an individual, separate, and detached from all others, that I am Siddhartha. And I know less about Siddhartha than about anything else in the world!’

Walking slowly away, thinking, Siddhartha stopped, gripped by this thought, and at once another sprang

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from it, a new thought: 'If I know nothing about myself, if Siddhartha is such a stranger to me even now, then there is only one reason for that: I was afraid of myself. I was running away from myself! I sought Atman, I sought Brahman, I tried to hack this self to pieces, to peel back all the layers from its unknown innermost part and find the kernel, the Atman, life, the divine, the ultimate. But in so doing, I lost myself.'

Siddhartha opened his eyes wide and looked around; a smile filled his face, and a deep sense of awakening from long dreams flooded through him right down to his toes. And at once he walked on, quickly, like a man who knows what he needs to do.

'Oh,' he thought, taking a deep breath in. 'Now I do not want to let Siddhartha slip away from me. No more will I begin my life and my thinking with Atman and the suffering of the world. No more will I kill myself and hack myself to pieces, to find a secret in the rubble. No more will I learn from Yoga-Veda, or Atharva-Veda, or the ascetics, or any doctrine. I will learn from myself, become my own pupil and learn to know myself, to find the secret of Siddhartha.'

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He looked around as if seeing the world for the first time. The world was beautiful, it was colourful, it was strange and puzzling! Here was blue, here yellow, here green; sky and river flowed, forest and mountains stared, all beautiful, all mysterious and magical, and in the middle of it all was Siddhartha, the Awakening One, on the way to himself. All this – all this yellow and blue, river and forest – passed through Siddhartha's eyes and into him for the first time. It was no longer Mara's conjuring, no longer the veil of maya, no longer the meaningless, random variety of the visible world, scorned by deep-thinking brahmins who spurned variety and sought unity. Blue was blue, river was river, and even if the One and the Divine dwelled hidden in the blue and the river within Siddhartha, still it was the way of the Divine to be yellow here, blue here, there the sky and there the forest, and here Siddhartha. Meaning and essence were not somewhere behind things, but in them, in everything.

‘Oh, I have been so dull and stupid!’ he thought as he quickly walked away. ‘When someone reads a text and seeks its meaning, they do not scoff at the signs and letters and call them deception, random chance and worthless shells; they read the letters, study and love them, one

after another. But I, who wanted to read the book of the world and the book of my own being – I have dismissed the signs and letters in favour of a preconceived meaning; I called the visible world deception, called my eyes and tongue random and worthless illusions. No, all that is over now; I am awakened, truly awakened and have been born this very day.’

As Siddhartha thought these things, he stopped walking once more, suddenly, as if a snake lay before him on the path.

For it had suddenly become clear to him that, like a man awakened or a newborn, he must start his life anew, from the beginning. When he had left the grove of Jetavana that morning, the grove of the Exalted One – already awakening, already on the path to himself – it had been his intention, had seemed only natural and obvious to him that, after the years of his ascetic life, he would return to his home and his father. But now, in this moment, stopping as though a snake lay in his path, he also awoke to this insight: ‘I am not the person I used to be; I am no longer an ascetic, or a priest, or a brahmin. So what would I do at home, with my father? Study? Make

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offerings? Practise meditation? All that is over and no longer lies on my path.'

Siddhartha stood motionless and, for a moment, for the length of a breath, his heart froze. He felt it freeze in his breast like a small animal, a bird or a hare, as he saw how alone he was. He had been without a home for years, and had not felt it. Now he felt it. Even in the most distant meditative state, he had always been his father's son, a brahmin, a scholar of high standing. Now he was just Siddhartha, the awakened one, nothing more. He drew in a deep breath, and for a moment he froze and shuddered. No one was so alone as he. He was not a nobleman who belonged to the nobility, a craftsman who belonged with craftsmen and found refuge with them, sharing their life, speaking their language, or a brahmin living among brahmins, or an ascetic taking refuge in the status of samana. Even the loneliest hermit in the forest was not uniquely alone; he too had a sense of belonging, and held a status that was his home. Govinda had become a monk, and a thousand monks were his brothers, wore his garb, shared his beliefs, spoke his language. But Siddhartha – where did he belong? Whose life would he share? Whose language would he speak?

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From this moment, as the world around him melted away and he stood solitary as a star in the sky, from this moment of cold and despondency Siddhartha emerged, more self than before, more solid. He felt that this had been the last shudder of awakening, the last pains of birth. And at once he strode on, his tread fast and impatient, but no longer towards home, to his father, no longer going back.

Part Two

To Wilhelm Gundert, my cousin in Japan

Kamala

Siddhartha learned something new on every step of his journey, for the world was transformed and his heart enchanted. He saw the sun rise over wooded mountains and set over the distant palm-fringed beach. He saw the stars arrayed in the night sky and the crescent moon floating like a boat in the blue. He saw trees, stars, animals, clouds, rainbows, boulders, herbs, flowers, stream and river, the glitter of dew on the morning shrubs, high mountains blue and pale in the distance, songbirds and bees, wind blowing silvery in the rice fields. All this variety and colour had always been there, with the sun and moon shining above the rush of rivers and the hum of bees, but in earlier times Siddhartha had seen it as nothing but a fleeting, deceptive veil before his eyes, to be mistrusted, to be pierced with the mind and

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obliterated, since it was not the essence of things, which lay beyond the visible world. But now his liberated eye lingered on this side of the veil, seeing and recognising the visible, seeking a home in this world, not seeking the essence, not aiming at something beyond. The world was beautiful when one regarded it thus, without seeking, as simply as a child does. Moon and stars were beautiful, so too were stream and bank, woods and crags, goat and iridescent beetle, flower and butterfly. It was beautiful to walk through the world in this way, so childlike, so awakened, open to what was near, without mistrust. The sun burning his skin felt different, and so did the cooling forest shade; stream and cistern tasted different, so too did pumpkin and banana. Short were the days, and short the nights; each hour flew by swift as a sail on the ocean, and beneath the sail was a ship filled with treasures, filled with delights. In the forest Siddhartha saw a tribe of monkeys swinging through the treetops, high in the branches, and heard their wild, lusty song. Siddhartha saw a ram follow and mate with a ewe. In a reedy lake he saw a pike hunting, driven by evening hunger, schools of young fish fluttering and flashing ahead of it as they leaped from the water in fright. The

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urgent scent of strength and passion rose from the ripples in the eager hunter's wake.

All this had always been there, and Siddhartha had not seen it; he had not been present. Now he was present. He belonged here. Light and shade passed into his eyes, moon and stars into his heart.

As he walked, Siddhartha also remembered all that had happened in the garden of Jetavana, the doctrine he had heard there from the divine Buddha, his farewell to Govinda, the conversation with the Exalted One. He recalled every word he had spoken to the Exalted One, and realised to his surprise that he had said something he had not yet known. He had told Gotama that the Buddha's treasure and secret lay not in his teaching, but in what was unutterable and unteachable: his experience at the hour of his enlightenment. Siddhartha was now setting out to experience the same thing, and was already starting to experience it. Now, he needed to experience himself. He may have long known that his self was Atman, of the same eternal essence as Brahman. But never had he truly found that self, for he had tried to catch it in a net of thoughts. If the body was not the self,

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and the play of the senses was not, then thinking was not the self either; it was not reason or learned wisdom or the learned art of drawing conclusions and spinning new thoughts out of old. No, the world of the mind was part of the world, too, and killing the chance self of the senses just to fatten up the chance self of thought and scholarship led nowhere. Both thought and senses were pretty things, and the ultimate meaning lay hidden behind both; both should be listened to, played with, and neither should be scorned or overestimated. The secret voice of the innermost place spoke from both, if one listened. He would strive for nothing that the voice did not tell him to strive for, spend time on nothing but what the voice advised. Why had Gotama sat down, in that hour of hours, beneath the bo tree where enlightenment came to him? He had heard a voice, a voice in his own heart telling him to seek rest beneath this tree, and he had not attended first to mortification, sacrifice, ablution or prayers, to food or drink, sleep or dreams; he had obeyed the voice. Obeying only the voice, ignoring orders from without, being ready in this way – that was good, it was necessary; nothing else was necessary.

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In the night, sleeping in a ferryman's straw hut by the river, Siddhartha had a dream. Govinda stood before him in the yellow robe of an ascetic. Sadness was written on Govinda's face, and sadly he asked: 'Why have you forsaken me?' At this he embraced Govinda, threw his arms around him, and as he held Govinda tight and kissed him, Govinda was no longer himself but a woman, and from this woman's robe sprang a full breast, and Siddhartha laid his head upon it and drank, and sweet and strong was the milk from this breast. It tasted of woman and man, of sun and forest, of flower and animal, of every fruit, every desire. It made him drunk and dazed. When Siddhartha woke, the pallid river shimmered through the door of the hut, and in the woods an owl cried, deep and melodious.

At daybreak, Siddhartha asked his host, the ferryman, to take him across the river. The ferryman rowed him across on his bamboo raft, and the wide water shimmered red in the morning light.

'This is a beautiful river,' said Siddhartha to his companion.

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‘Yes,’ said the ferryman. ‘A very beautiful river, and I love it above all else. Often have I listened to it, often looked into its eyes, and always have I learned from it. One can learn a lot from a river.’

‘I thank you, my benefactor,’ said Siddhartha, as he climbed onto the far bank. ‘I have no gift for you as my host, nor any payment. I am a homeless man, a brahmin’s son and a samana.’

‘I saw that in you,’ said the ferryman. ‘And I expected no payment from you, and no gift. You will give me that gift another time.’

‘Do you believe that?’ asked Siddhartha merrily.

‘I am certain of it. That, too, I learned from the river: everything returns! You too will return, samana. Now farewell! May your friendship be my payment. And may you think of me when you make offerings to the gods.’

They parted from one another with smiles. And with a smile Siddhartha rejoiced in the friendship and kindness of the ferryman. ‘He is like Govinda,’ he thought, smiling.

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‘Everyone I have met on my journey is like Govinda. All are grateful, though they deserve thanks themselves. All are submissive, all wish to be a friend, to obey, to think little. People are children.’

Around midday he walked through a village. Children were rolling about in the street outside the mud huts, playing with pumpkin seeds and shells, shrieking and wrestling, but all fled shyly from the strange samana. On the far side of the village, the road led through a stream, and at the edge of the stream knelt a young woman, washing clothes. When Siddhartha greeted her, she looked up at him with a smile, and he saw the whites of her eyes flash. He called out a blessing common among travellers, and asked how much further it was to the big city. At this she rose and came to him, her moist lips shimmering beautifully in her young face. She joked with him, asked if he had eaten, and if it was true that samanas slept alone in the forest at night and were permitted no women with them. And she set her left foot upon his right and made the gesture that a woman makes when she is inviting a man to engage in that form of lovemaking that the instruction books call ‘climbing the tree’. Siddhartha felt his blood warming; at that moment,

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his dream came back to him, and he bent his head and kissed the brown tip of her breast. Looking up, he saw her smiling; desire was written on her face, her narrowed eyes imploring and yearning.

Siddhartha too felt a yearning, and the source of his sex moved – though since he had never before touched a woman, he hesitated a moment, even as his hands were poised to reach for her. Just then, with a shudder, he heard his inner voice saying ‘No.’ Then all the magic seeped from the young woman’s smiling face, leaving nothing more than the misty eyes of an animal in heat. He stroked her cheek kindly, turned from her and, with a light tread, vanished from the disappointed woman’s sight into a bamboo thicket.

Before the evening of that day he reached a large city, and was glad, for he longed for people. He had spent years in the forests, and the ferryman’s straw hut where he had stayed the night had been the first roof above his head in a long time.

On the outskirts of the city, by a lovely unfenced grove, the wanderer encountered a small train of servants laden

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with baskets. Among them, on the red cushions of an ornate palanquin carried by four bearers, their mistress sat beneath a brightly coloured sun shade. Siddhartha remained at the entrance to the pleasure grove and watched the procession, the manservants, the maids, the baskets, the palanquin, and the lady in the palanquin. Black hair was piled atop a very fair, very tender, very clever face, with bright-red lips like a freshly split fig, eyebrows plucked and painted in high arcs, and clever, watchful, dark eyes. A long pale throat rose from a green and gold outer garment, and pale hands lay at rest, long and narrow with broad gold bands around the wrists.

Siddhartha saw how beautiful she was, and his heart laughed. Deep was his bow as the palanquin drew near, and rising again he looked into the fair, lovely face, read for a moment what was written in the clever eyes beneath their soaring brows, and breathed a faint, unfamiliar perfume. The beautiful woman nodded and smiled – a brief moment – then vanished into the grove, her servants behind her.

And thus, thought Siddhartha, I am entering the city under an auspicious sign. He was tempted to step into

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the grove at once, then thought better of it, and only now did he become aware of how the servants had regarded him, with scorn and mistrust and dismissal.

I am still a samana, he thought, still an ascetic and a beggar. They will not let me remain here as I am, or step into the grove. And he laughed.

He asked the next person who came down the road about the grove and the name of this woman, and learned that it was the grove of Kamala, the famous courtesan, who owned a house in the city as well as the grove.

Then he entered the city. Now, he had a goal.

In pursuit of his goal, he let the city lap him up; he drifted in the current of the streets, stood in the squares, rested on stone steps by the river. Towards evening he befriended a barber's boy, whom he had seen working in the shade of an archway and then praying in a temple to Vishnu. Siddhartha told the boy stories of Vishnu and Lakshmi. He slept that night by the river, where the boats were moored and, early the next morning, before the first customers came to the shop, he asked the

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barber's boy to shave his beard and cut his hair, comb it and anoint it with fine oils. Then he went to bathe in the river.

In the late afternoon, when the beautiful Kamala approached her grove in the palanquin, Siddhartha was standing at the entrance. He bowed and received the courtesan's greeting. But then he beckoned to the final servant in the procession, and asked him to tell his mistress that a young brahmin desired to speak with her. After a while the servant returned, asked the waiting man to follow him, led the following man silently to a pavilion where Kamala lay on a daybed, and left him alone with her.

'Were you not outside yesterday, and greeted me?' asked Kamala.

'I certainly saw you yesterday, and greeted you.'

'But did you not have a beard yesterday, and long, dusty hair?'

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‘You are perceptive, my lady; you have seen everything. You saw Siddhartha, the brahmin’s son, who left his home to become a samana, and was a samana for three years. But now I have left that path and come to this city, and you were the first person I encountered here, even before setting foot in the city. This is what I came to say to you, O Kamala! You are the first woman to whom Siddhartha has spoken without downcast eyes. Never more will I cast down my eyes when I encounter a beautiful woman.’

Kamala smiled and played with her peacock-feather fan. And asked: ‘Did Siddhartha come here just to tell me this?’

‘To tell you this, and to thank you for your beauty. And if it does not displease you, Kamala, I would like to ask you to be my friend and teacher, for as yet I know nothing of the art in which you are a master.’

At that, Kamala laughed loudly.

‘Never in my life, friend, has a samana come to me out of the forest, wanting to learn from me! Never has a

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long-haired samana in a torn old loincloth come to me at all! Many youths come to me, brahmins' sons among them, but they come in handsome clothes, they come in fine shoes, with perfumed hair and money in their pouches. This, samana, is the state in which youths seek me out.'

Said Siddhartha: 'Already I have begun to learn from you. Even yesterday, I learned. And already I have shaved my beard, combed my hair and oiled it. These are paltry things that I still lack, excellent woman: fine clothes, fine shoes, money in my pouch. Know that Siddhartha has taken on much harder tasks and accomplished them. How could I not accomplish what yesterday I undertook to do: to become your friend and learn the joys of love from you? You will see I am eager to learn, Kamala; I have learned much harder things than what you are to teach me. So, tell me: is Siddhartha not enough for you as he is, with oil in his hair but with no clothes, no shoes, no money?'

Laughing, Kamala cried out, 'No, dear sir, he is not yet enough. He must have clothes, handsome clothes, and shoes, handsome shoes, and a lot of money in his pouch,

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and gifts for Kamala. Do you know that now, samana from the forest? Have you learned it?’

‘I have learned it well,’ cried Siddhartha. ‘How could I not learn what comes from such lips! Your lips are like a freshly split fig, Kamala. Mine too are fresh and red, and will fit yours, you will see. But tell me, lovely Kamala, have you no fear of the samana from the forest who has come to learn love from you?’

‘Why should I fear a samana, an ignorant samana from the forest, who consorts with jackals and has no idea what women are?’

‘Oh, the samana is strong, and he is fearless. He could force you, beautiful girl. He could carry you off. He could hurt you.’

‘No, samana, I do not fear that. Has ever a samana or a brahmin feared that someone might come and lay hands on him, and rob him of his learning, and his piety, and his profundity? No, for they are his alone, and he gives of them only what he chooses, and only to those he chooses. It is the same with Kamala and the joys of love, it is the

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selfsame thing. Lovely and red are Kamala's lips, but try to kiss them against Kamala's wishes and you will not have a drop of sweetness from them, though they can give so much! You are eager to learn, Siddhartha, so learn this: love can be begged, bought, or freely given, it can be found in the street, but it cannot be stolen. The path you suggest is the wrong one. And it would be a great shame if a handsome youth like you were to take such a wrong-headed approach.'

Siddhartha bowed and smiled. 'It would be a shame, Kamala, how right you are! It would be a terrible shame. No, I shall lose no drop of sweetness from your lips, nor you from mine. And so Siddhartha shall return when he has what he now lacks: clothes, shoes, and money. But tell me, lovely Kamala, will you give me one more small piece of advice?'

'Advice? Why not? Who would refuse advice to a poor, ignorant samana who consorts with jackals in the forest?'

'Dear Kamala, tell me, where should I go to obtain those three things the soonest?'

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‘Many would like to know that, friend. You must do what you have learned, and have people give you money for it, and clothes, and shoes. That is the only way for a poor man to acquire money. So what can you do?’

‘I can think. I can wait. I can fast.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Nothing. No, wait, I can write poetry. Will you give me a kiss for a poem?’

‘If your poem pleases me, I will. What is it called?’

Siddhartha considered for a moment, and then spoke this verse:

In her shady grove walked lovely Kamala;

At the gate stood the brown samana.

Deep was his bow to the lotus blossom. And his thanks was a smile from Kamala.

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Better than an offering to the gods, he thought,

Is an offering to lovely Kamala.

Kamala clapped her hands loudly and her golden bangles rang.

‘Your poetry is beautiful, brown samana, and truly, if I give you a kiss in return, I lose nothing in the trade.’

She drew him to her with her eyes, and he lowered his face to hers and placed his lips upon the lips that were like a freshly split fig. Kamala kissed him for a long time and, to his astonishment, Siddhartha felt her teaching him, felt her wisdom, her mastery of him as she pushed him away and lured him in, and he felt that behind this first kiss stood a long, patient, well-practised line of kisses, each different from the one before, all awaiting him. He stood still, breathing deeply, and in that moment he marvelled like a child at the wealth of knowledge and learning that opened up before his eyes.

‘Your poetry is very beautiful,’ cried Kamala. ‘If I were rich, I would give you gold coins for it. But you will be

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hard-pressed to earn what you need with poems. For you need a great deal of money if you are to be Kamala's friend.'

'How well you can kiss, Kamala!' Siddhartha stammered.

'Yes, I can, and that is why I have no lack of clothes, shoes, bangles, and all beautiful things. But what will become of you? Can you do nothing but think, fast, and compose poetry?'

'I know the sacrificial songs,' said Siddhartha. 'But I no longer want to sing them. I know magic incantations, but I no longer want to say them. I have read the scriptures...'

'Wait,' Kamala interrupted him. 'You can read? And write?'

'I certainly can. Many can.'

'Most people cannot. Even I cannot. It is very good that you can read and write, very good. You will have some use for the magic incantations as well.'

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At that moment, a maidservant came running and whispered in her mistress's ear.

'I have a visitor,' cried Kamala. 'Make haste and disappear, Siddhartha, and take heed: no one must see you here! Tomorrow I will receive you again.'

But she ordered the maid to give the pious brahmin a white overgarment. Before he knew what was happening, Siddhartha was led away; the maid took him by a roundabout route to a summerhouse, where she gave him an overgarment, then led him into the bushes and urged him to leave the grove at once without letting anyone see him.

Content, he did as he was told. He was accustomed to the forest, and left the grove and climbed the hedge without making a sound. Content, he returned to the city, carrying the garment rolled under his arm. At the door of a hostel where travellers were going in, he begged silently for food, and silently accepted a piece of rice cake. Perhaps as early as tomorrow, he thought, I will not have to beg for food.

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Suddenly, he felt a flash of pride. He was not a samana now, and it did not befit him to beg. He gave the rice cake to a dog and went without.

‘Simple is the life that people live here in the world,’ thought Siddhartha. ‘There are no difficulties. When I was a samana, everything was hard, effortful and, in the end, hopeless. Now everything is easy, easy as the lesson in kissing that Kamala gave me. I need clothes and money, nothing more, and these are small goals, near at hand, which do not rob a person of his sleep.’

He had already determined where Kamala’s townhouse was to be found, and there he went the following day.

‘All is well,’ she called out to him. ‘You are expected at Kamaswami’s house; he is the richest merchant in the city. If he likes you, he will take you into his service. Be wise, brown samana. I have had others tell him of you. Be friendly towards him, for he is very powerful, but do not be too modest! I do not wish you to become his servant; you must become his partner, or I shall not be pleased with you. Kamaswami is beginning to grow old

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and complacent. If he likes you, he will entrust many things to you.'

Siddhartha thanked her and laughed, and when she learned he had eaten nothing that day or the day before, she had the servants bring bread and fruit, and served them to him.

'You have been lucky,' she said in parting. 'One door after another has opened for you. How does such a thing happen? Do you have magic powers?'

Siddhartha said: 'Yesterday I told you I knew how to think, to wait, and to fast, and you thought these things were of no use. But they are of much use, Kamala, as you will see. You will see that the ignorant samanas in the forest learn and master many fine things that you cannot. The day before yesterday I was still a ragged beggar, but yesterday I kissed Kamala, and soon I will be a merchant and have money and all the other things you value.'

'Alright,' she conceded. 'But how would you fare without me? What would you be without Kamala's help?'

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‘Dear Kamala,’ said Siddhartha, drawing himself upright. ‘When I came to you in the grove, I took the first step. I had resolved to learn love from the most beautiful of women. From the moment I made that resolution, I knew that I would carry it out. I knew that you would help me; the very first time you looked at me at the entrance to the grove I knew it.’

‘But what if I had not wanted to?’

‘You did want to. See, Kamala: when you throw a stone into the water, it hurries to the bottom by the quickest path. So it is when Siddhartha has a goal, and makes a resolution. Siddhartha does nothing, he waits, he thinks, he fasts, but he passes through the world like a stone through water, without doing anything, without bestirring himself; he is drawn down, he lets himself fall. His goal draws him in, for he does not admit into his soul anything that might prevent him from attaining his goal. That is what Siddhartha learned with the samanas. It is what fools call magic, which they think is worked by demons. Nothing is worked by demons – there are no demons. Anyone can work magic, and anyone can reach their goals, if they can think, and wait, and fast.

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Kamala listened to him. She loved his voice, and the look in his eyes.

‘Perhaps,’ she said softly, ‘it is as you say, friend. But perhaps it is also that Siddhartha is a handsome man, that the sight of him is pleasing to women, and that is why luck comes to him.’

With a kiss, Siddhartha took his leave. ‘May it be so, my teacher. May the sight of me always please you, and may luck always come to me from you!’

With the Child People

Siddhartha went to see the merchant Kamaswami. He was shown into a grand house, where servants led him past expensive carpets into a chamber where he awaited the master of the house.

Kamaswami entered, a quick, sleek man with greying hair, cautious eyes, and a covetous mouth. Host and guest exchanged warm greetings.

‘I have been told,’ the merchant began, ‘that you are a brahmin, a scholar, but that you are seeking employment with a merchant. Have you fallen on hard times, brahmin, to seek employment?’

‘No,’ said Siddhartha. ‘I have not fallen on hard times, nor have I ever known them. Know that I have come to you from the samanas, with whom I lived for a long time.’

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‘If you lived with the samanas, how can you not have known hardship? Isn’t it true that the samanas have no possessions?’

‘I have no possessions,’ said Siddhartha, ‘if that is what you mean. This much is true. But it was my own choice, and so it is not a hardship.’

‘But what do you live off, if you have no possessions?’

‘I have never considered it, sir. I have had no possessions for more than three years, and never considered what I should live off.’

‘So you lived off what other people had.’

‘That may be so. But the merchant, too, lives off others’ wealth.’

‘Well said. Although he does not take from others and give nothing in return; he gives them his wares.’

‘This, it seems, is the way things are. Everyone takes, everyone gives – such is life.’

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‘But let me ask: if you have nothing, then what do you give?’

‘Everyone gives what they have. The warrior gives his strength, the merchant his wares, the teacher lessons, the farmer rice, the fisherman fish.’

‘Very true. And what is it that you have to give? What is it that you have learned, and can do?’

‘I can think. I can wait. I can fast.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I believe it is all.’

‘And what use is that? Fasting, for example – what is that good for?’

‘It is very useful, sir. If a person has nothing to eat, then fasting is the wisest thing they can do. If, for instance, Siddhartha had not learned to fast, then he would need to take up some kind of work at once, with you or elsewhere, for hunger would force him to. But Siddhartha

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can wait; he knows no impatience, he knows no hardship, he can be beset by hunger for a long time and laugh at it. That, sir, is what fasting is good for.'

'You are right, samana. Wait a moment.'

Kamaswami went out and returned with a scroll that he handed to his guest, asking, 'Can you read this?'

Siddhartha looked at the scroll, on which a sales contract was written, and began to read it aloud.

'Splendid,' said Kamaswami. 'And will you write something for me on this slate?'

He gave him a slate and a stylus, and Siddhartha wrote and gave the slate back.

Kamaswami read: 'Writing is good; thinking is better. Cleverness is good; patience is better.'

'Your writing is excellent,' the merchant said approvingly. 'We will have much else to discuss. But, for today, I ask you to be my guest and take up residence in this house.'

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Siddhartha thanked him and accepted, and from then on lived in the merchant's house. Clothes and shoes were brought to him, and a servant prepared a daily bath for him. Twice a day a sumptuous meal was brought in, but Siddhartha took only one meal a day, and ate no meat and drank no wine. Kamaswami explained the nature of his business, showed him wares and warehouses, showed him accounts. Siddhartha learned much that was new to him, heard much and spoke little. And, mindful of Kamala's words, he never subordinated himself to the merchant, but made him treat Siddhartha as his equal, yes, as more than his equal. Kamaswami went about his business with care and often with passion, but Siddhartha regarded it all as a game, whose rules he was taking pains to learn, but whose substance never touched his heart.

He had not stayed long with Kamaswami before becoming a part of his business dealings. But daily, at the hour she appointed, Siddhartha went to visit the beautiful Kamala, wearing handsome clothes and fine shoes, and soon bringing gifts. Her clever red lips taught him many things. Her tender, supple hand taught him many things. In matters of love he was still a boy, inclined to throw

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himself blindly and insatiably into pleasure as into the boundless deep, and she was thorough in teaching him that one cannot take pleasure without giving it, and that every gesture, every caress, every touch, every look, every part of the body, even the smallest, has its secret, and awakening it brings happiness to those who know how. She taught him that, after making love, lovers must not part without each admiring the other, without having been both conquered and conquering, so that neither would feel surfeited and bored, or that they had used or been used by the other. He spent wonderful hours with the beautiful and clever artist, becoming her pupil, her lover, her friend. With Kamala was where the value and meaning of his current life lay, not in Kamaswami's business.

The merchant tasked him with writing important letters and contracts, and grew accustomed to discussing all important matters with him. He soon saw that Siddhartha understood little of rice and wool, shipping and trade, but that his instincts were good, and that he surpassed the merchant in calm and serenity, and in the art of listening and seeing into the hearts of strangers. 'This brahmin,' said Kamaswami to a friend, 'is no real

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merchant and never will be. He has no passion for making deals. But he has the secret of those to whom success comes naturally, be it a lucky star at his birth, or magic, or something he learned with the samanas. He seems only to play at trading; it never touches his heart, never rules him, and he never fears failure, is never troubled by loss.'

The friend advised the merchant: 'Of the business that he does for you, give him a third of the profits, but let him bear the same portion of the losses, when they occur. That will make him more eager.'

Kamaswami followed this advice. But Siddhartha paid little heed. If profits came in, he accepted them graciously; if losses befell him, he laughed and said, 'Oh, see, this has gone badly!'

He really did seem indifferent to the business. One day, he travelled to a village to buy up a large rice harvest. But when he arrived, the rice had already been sold to another merchant. All the same, Siddhartha stayed several days in the village, played host to the farmers, gave their children copper coins, attended a wedding feast,

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and returned entirely satisfied with the trip. Kamaswami reproached him for staying so long, for wasting time and money. Siddhartha answered: 'Do not chide me, my dear friend! Nothing has ever been achieved by chiding. If there has been a loss, let me bear it. I am very satisfied with this trip. I met many kinds of people, a brahmin has become my friend, children sat on my lap, farmers showed me their fields, and no one took me for a merchant.'

'This is all very nice,' Kamaswami cried indignantly. 'But you are a merchant, are you not? Or did you travel only for your own pleasure?'

'Certainly,' Siddhartha laughed. 'Certainly I travelled for my own pleasure. What other reason could there be? I saw new people and places, was received with kindness and trust, and found friendship. You see, my friend, had I been Kamaswami, I would have returned angry and in a great hurry as soon as I saw my purchase thwarted, and time and money really would have been lost. But my days there were good; I learned things, enjoyed pleasures, and hurt neither myself nor others with anger and haste. And, should I ever go there again – to buy a future harvest

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or for some other reason – I will be welcomed by kind and cheerful people, and will congratulate myself for not departing in haste and displeasure at that earlier time. So let it be, my friend, and do not hurt yourself with chiding. If the day should come when you think: “This Siddhartha is doing me harm”, then say the word and Siddhartha will go on his way. But until that time, let us each be content with the other.’

In vain did the merchant try to convince Siddhartha that he was eating Kamaswami’s bread. Siddhartha ate his own bread, or rather they both ate the bread of others, the bread of all. Siddhartha never had an ear for Kamaswami’s worries, and Kamaswami had many worries. If a trade was underway and threatened to fail, if a shipment of goods seemed lost, a debtor unable to pay, Kamaswami could never convince his partner that it was useful to waste words on worry or rage, to crease one’s forehead, to sleep badly. Once, when Kamaswami reproached him, saying that everything Siddhartha knew he had learned from him, Siddhartha replied: ‘Please do not make fun of me with such jokes. From you I learned what a basket of fish costs, and how much interest to charge on a loan. This is where your knowledge lies.

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I did not learn to think from you, dear Kamaswami; seek instead to learn that from me.'

In truth, his heart was not in the deals. They were useful for earning him money for Kamala, and they brought in far more than he needed. Otherwise, Siddhartha's concern and curiosity was all for the people whose business, craft, troubles, amusements, and follies had once been as strange and distant to him as the moon. But, easy as he found it to speak to everyone, to live with and learn from everyone, he was still keenly aware that something separated him from them, and this something was his samanahood. He saw people living in their childlike or animal way, which he both loved and scorned at once. He watched them struggle, suffer, and turn grey over things that, it seemed to him, were not worth the price: money and small pleasures and small honours. He saw them chide and insult one another, saw them wail over pains a samana would smile at, and suffer over deprivations a samana would not feel.

He was open to everything these people brought to him. He welcomed the merchant offering canvas for sale, welcomed the debtor seeking a loan, welcomed the

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beggar who told him the story of his poverty for an hour, though he was not so poor as any samana. He treated the wealthy foreign merchants no differently from the servant who shaved him, and the street vendor he allowed to cheat him of small amounts when he bought bananas. When Kamaswami came to complain of his troubles or reproach him over a piece of business, he listened gladly, with curiosity and wonder, tried to understand, agreed as much as seemed necessary, then turned away to speak to the next person seeking his attention. And many came to him, many to trade with him, many to cheat him, many to sound him out, many to play on his sympathy, many to hear his advice. He gave advice, and sympathy, and gifts, allowed people to cheat him a little – and this whole game and the passion with which all people played it occupied his mind just as the gods and Brahman once had.

From time to time, deep within his breast, he sensed a faint, dying voice, faintly warning, faintly lamenting, though he could barely hear it. And then for an hour he would see that he was living a peculiar life, that everything he did was a game, and he might be cheerful and sometimes happy, but real life was still flowing past

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without touching him. Like a juggler with his balls, he played with business deals and with the people around him, watching them, having fun with them, but the heart and the wellspring of his being were not in it. The spring still welled, but it seemed far away, flowing and flowing invisibly with no more bearing on his life. And several times he was shocked by these thoughts, and wished that he too might throw himself wholeheartedly into all the childish business of the day, might really live, really act, really enjoy and live, as more than a mere bystander, an observer. But always he returned to the beautiful Kamala, to learn the art of love, to practise the cult of pleasure in which give and take become one, more than they do anywhere else. He conversed with her, learned from her, gave advice and received it. She understood him better than Govinda had, and was more like him.

Once he said to her: 'You are like me: you are different from most people. You are Kamala, nothing else, and within you is a silence and a refuge that you can enter at any hour and be at home with yourself, as I can. Few people have it, and yet they all could.'

'Not all people are clever,' said Kamala.

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‘No,’ said Siddhartha. ‘That is not the reason. Kamaswami is just as clever as I, and yet he has no inner refuge. And others whose minds are like those of small children do have such a refuge. Most people, Kamala, are like falling leaves that drift and spin through the air, and falter and tumble to the ground. But a few are like the stars, which chart a fixed course, and no wind touches them; they carry their law and their course within them. Among all the scholars and samanas, of whom I have known many, one was of this kind, a perfect man; never will I forget him. He is Gotama, the Exalted One, the preacher of that doctrine. A thousand disciples hear his teaching every day, follow his prescripts every hour, but they are all falling leaves, who carry no doctrine or law within themselves.’

Kamala looked at him and smiled. ‘You are speaking of him once again,’ she said. ‘These are your samana thoughts.’

Siddhartha fell silent, and they played the game of love, one of the 30 or 40 different games that Kamala knew. Her body was as supple as a jaguar’s, and as a hunter’s bow; anyone who had learned love from her was an

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expert in many pleasures, many secrets. She played a long time with Siddhartha, drawing him in, pushing him away, compelling and enfolding him, delighting in his mastery until he was conquered and rested exhausted at her side.

The hetaera leaned over him, looking long into his face, into his now-tired eyes.

‘You are the best lover I have seen,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘You are stronger than the others, more supple, more wilful. You have learned my art well, Siddhartha. One day, when I am older, I should like to bear your child. And yet, my dear, you are still a samana, and do not love me; there is no person you love. Is it not so?’

‘It may well be so,’ said Siddhartha wearily. ‘I am like you. You do not love, either – or how could you practise love as an art? Perhaps people of our kind cannot love. The child-people can do it; that is their secret.’

Sansara

For a long time Siddhartha had lived the worldly life with its attendant pleasures, without belonging to it. His senses, which he had suffocated in his hot samana years, were once more awakened, and he had tasted wealth, tasted lust, tasted power; and yet for a long time he had remained a samana at heart, as clever Kamala had rightly seen. It was still the art of thinking, of waiting, of fasting that steered his life, and the people of the world, the child-people, were still strangers to him, as he was to them.

The years slipped by and, swaddled in prosperity, Siddhartha scarcely felt their passing. He had grown rich, with his own house and servants, and a garden by the river outside the city. The people liked him, and came

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to him when they needed money or advice, but no one was close to him, except Kamala.

That high, bright, awakened state he had once experienced at the height of his youth, in the days after Gotama's sermon and his parting from Govinda, that tense expectation, that proud solitude without teachers or their doctrines, that lithe readiness to hear the divine voice in his own heart, had slowly faded into memory; soft and distant was the whisper of the holy spring that had once rushed inside him. True, much that he had learned from the samanas, from Gotama, from his father the brahmin, had remained in him for a long time: moderate living, pleasure in thought, hours of mediation, secret knowledge of the self, of the eternal self that is neither body nor consciousness. Much of it had remained in him, but one after another these things had sunk down and the dust had settled over them. Just as a potter's wheel, once spun, keeps turning for a long time and only gradually tires and slows, so the wheels of asceticism, of thinking, of differentiating had kept spinning in Siddhartha's soul, and were still in motion, but now they had slowed and faltered and were close to stopping. Slowly, as moisture seeps into a dying tree

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stump, slowly filling and rotting it, worldliness and indolence had seeped into Siddhartha's soul, slowly filling it, making it heavy and tired, putting it to sleep. His senses, though, had come alive; they had learned and experienced much.

Siddhartha had learned to do business, to exercise power over people, to enjoy himself with women; he had learned to wear beautiful clothes, instruct servants, bathe in perfumed waters. He had learned to eat soft and carefully prepared meals that even included fish, meat, and fowl, spices and sweets, and to drink wine, which makes a person lethargic and forgetful. He had learned to play dice and chess, to watch dancers, to be carried on a palanquin and sleep in a soft bed. But he had always felt different from the others and superior to them, he had always looked on them with a little mockery, with a little mocking disdain, the same disdain that a samana always feels for worldly people. When Kamaswami was ill, when he was angry, when he felt offended, when he was plagued by a merchant's worries, Siddhartha had always looked on him with mockery. But, slowly and imperceptibly, as the harvests passed and the rainy seasons, his mockery had grown tired, his superiority

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more silent. Slowly, amid his growing wealth, Siddhartha himself had become something like the child-people, a little childish and fearful just as they were. And yet he envied them, all the more as he grew more like them. He envied them for the one thing they possessed and he did not, for the importance they attached to their lives, their heartfelt joys and fears, the anxious but sweet happiness of their constant infatuation. These people were forever infatuated with themselves, with women, with their children, their honour or money, their plans and hopes. But he did not learn this from them, this one thing, this childish joy and childish folly; he learned only what was unpleasant, which he himself disdained.

Increasingly, he would linger in bed in the morning after a convivial evening, feeling dull and tired. He would grow irritable and impatient when Kamaswami kept him a long time with his worries. He would laugh too loudly when he lost a game of dice. His face was still wiser and more spiritual than others, but it seldom laughed, and it was coming to resemble a rich man's face, with dissatisfaction, sickness, discontent, indolence, and lovelessness inscribed in its features. Slowly the soul-sickness of the rich was taking hold of him. Like a veil, like a thin

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mist, weariness settled on Siddhartha, slowly, a little thicker every day, a little murkier every month, a little heavier every year. As a new dress ages over time, losing its lovely colour, acquiring stains and creases, loosening at the seams, and here and there sad threadbare patches appear, so Siddhartha's new life, begun after his parting from Govinda, had aged, losing colour and shine with the passing years, acquiring creases and stains, and in the hidden folds whose ugliness was already beginning to show here and there, disappointment and disgust were gathering. Siddhartha did not notice. He noticed only that his bright, certain inner voice, which had once awakened in him and guided him through his glory days, had grown quiet.

The world had taken him captive, with its desire, covetousness, indolence, and lately also that vice he had always disdained and mocked above all: greed. Property, possessions, and riches had finally taken him captive as well; no longer were they games and fripperies to him, but fetters and burdens. It was a strange and cunning path that had led Siddhartha into this final and most despicable dependency, and it ran through games of dice. Ever since he had ceased in his heart to be a

samana, Siddhartha had begun to play that game on which money and valuables were gambled – a custom of the child-people that he used to play with a serene smile – with increasing ire and passion. He was a feared player, and few dared take him on, so high and brazen were his stakes. His desperate heart needed this game: gambling and frittering away the miserable money produced in him a furious joy, and was the only way to show his dislike for wealth and the merchants' idols with such clarity and scorn. So he played for high stakes, showing no mercy, hating himself, disgusted with himself, winning thousands, losing thousands, gambling away money, jewels, gambling away a country house, winning again, losing again. That fear, that terrible and oppressive fear he felt as the dice were thrown, as he fretted over the high stakes he was risking – he loved this fear and sought always to renew it, always to increase it, to tickle it into greater intensity, because this fear alone still brought something like happiness, something like intoxication, something like a heightened experience to his jaded, tepid, dull life.

And after each big loss he began plotting ways to gain new wealth, went more eagerly about his business,

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pressed his debtors harder, because he wanted to keep playing, to keep squandering, to keep showing his disdain for these riches. When Siddhartha lost, he lost his serenity, he lost his patience with defaulting debtors, his kindness to beggars, and his desire to give away or lend his money to those who petitioned him. Having gambled away 10,000 on a throw of the die, he grew stricter and pettier in his business, and sometimes dreamed of money at night! And no matter how often he awoke from this ugly spell, and saw his face in the mirror on the bedroom wall grown older and uglier, and was overcome with shame and disgust, he kept fleeing, fleeing into more games of chance, into the daze of lust and wine, and from there back into the business of amassing and acquiring. In this senseless cycle he ran himself ragged, ran himself old and sick.

One day, a warning came to him in a dream. He had spent the evening with Kamala, in her lovely pleasure garden. They had sat under a tree and talked, and Kamala had spoken thoughtful words, words that concealed sadness and weariness. She had asked him to tell her of Gotama, and could not hear enough about him, how pure his eyes were, how still and lovely his lips, how kindly his smile,

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how peaceful his tread. Siddhartha had to speak of the sublime Buddha for a long time, and Kamala sighed and said: 'One day, maybe soon, I too will follow this Buddha. I will give him my pleasure garden, and take refuge in his doctrine.' But after that she aroused Siddhartha's lust, and bound him to her with painful ardour in her lovemaking, biting him and shedding tears, as if wanting to wring the last, sweet drops from this vain, fleeting pleasure one final time. Never had it been so strangely clear to Siddhartha how close lust is to death. Then he lay at her side, Kamala's countenance close to his own, and beneath her eyes and at the corners of her mouth, clearer than ever before, he read a fearful script, a script of fine lines and soft furrows, a script reminding him of autumn and of age. Siddhartha, who was now in his 40s, had already noticed grey hairs of his own here and there among the black.

Weariness was written on Kamala's lovely face, weariness from walking a long path that had no joyful goal, weariness and the early signs of withering, and a hidden, as yet unspoken, perhaps even unknown fearfulness: the fear of age, of autumn, of having to die. He took his

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leave of her with sighs, his soul filled with reluctance and secret fearfulness.

Then Siddhartha spent the night in his house with dancers and wine, playing the superior with those of his own standing, though he no longer was. He drank a lot of wine and went to bed long after midnight, weary and yet agitated, close to tears and to despair, and lay there a long time, sleepless, his heart filled with a misery he thought he could no longer bear, and a disgust that ran through him like the tepid, unpleasant taste of the wine, the too-sweet, insipid music, the too-soft smiles of the dancers, the too-sweet perfume of their hair and breasts. But, more than anything, he was disgusted with himself, his own perfumed hair, the wine-taste of his mouth, the slack weariness and reluctance of his skin. Like a person who, having eaten or drunk too much, vomits it all up in torment and yet is glad of the relief, the sleepless man wished to rid himself of these pleasures, these habits, this whole meaningless life and his own self, in a monstrous wave of disgust. It was only as the day dawned and the early bustle began on the street outside his town house that he fell into a doze, his mind dulled for a few

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moments in a semblance of sleep. In these moments, he had a dream:

Kamala kept a small, rare songbird in a golden cage. He dreamed of this bird. He dreamed that the bird, which always sang at daybreak, had fallen silent, and when he realised this, he went to the cage and looked in, and there was the little bird lying dead and stiff on the cage floor. He took it out, weighed it in his hand for a moment, then threw it away, out into the street, and at that moment he felt a dreadful terror, and his heart ached as though he had thrown all that was precious and good away with that dead bird.

Waking with a start from this dream, he was engulfed by a deep sorrow. There was no worth, no meaning, it seemed to him, in having steered his life to this place; nothing living, nothing in any way precious or worth keeping had been left in his hands. He stood alone and empty, like a shipwrecked man on the shore.

Gloomily, Siddhartha took himself off to a pleasure garden that he owned, locked the gate behind him, sat down beneath a mango tree, and felt death in his heart

and horror in his breast; he sat and felt what was inside him dying and withering and reaching an end. Gradually he collected his thoughts, and in his mind he walked the whole path of his life over again, from the very first days he could remember. When had he felt happiness, or true bliss? Oh yes, many times had he felt such things. In his boyhood he had tasted them; when he had wrung praise from the brahmins, he had felt them in his heart: 'A path lies before the one who had excelled in the recitation of sacred verses, in disputing with the scholars, and assisting with the offerings.' Then he had felt it in his heart: 'A path lies ahead of you to which you are called; the gods are waiting for you.' And again as a youth, when the goal of all contemplation, retreating ever higher, had drawn him with it, pulling him away from the mass of fellow seekers, when in pain he had struggled to find the meaning of Brahman, when each piece of knowledge attained only kindled a new thirst in him, and among that thirst, among his pain, he had felt it again: 'Go on! Go on! You are called!' He had heard this voice when he left his home and chose the life of a samana, and again when he left the samanas for the Perfect One, and left him too, setting off into the unknown. How long it was since he had heard that voice, since he had scaled any

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heights; how flat and dull was the path he had followed these many years without any lofty aim, without any thirst, without elevation, satisfied with small pleasures and yet not fulfilled! All these years, without knowing it, he had tried and longed to become a person like all these other people, these children, and along the way his life had become far poorer and more miserable than theirs, for their goals were not his and nor were their worries; this whole world of Kamaswami people had been just a game to him, a dance to watch, a comedy. He was fond of Kamala and Kamala alone; she had been precious to him – but was she still? Did he still need her, or she him? Were they not playing an endless game? And was it necessary to live for this? No, it was not! This game was called sansara, a game for children that might be lovely to play once or twice or 10 times, but over and over again?

Then Siddhartha knew that the game was ended, and he could play it no more. A shudder ran through him, and he felt that something inside him had died.

All that day he sat beneath the mango tree, thinking of his father, thinking of Govinda, thinking of Gotama. Had he needed to leave them to become a Kamaswami? He

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was still sitting there when night fell. Looking up, he saw the stars, and thought: 'Here I sit under my mango tree, in my pleasure garden.' He smiled to himself. Owning a mango tree, a garden – was it necessary, was it right, was it not just a foolish game?

This too was at an end, and it died within him. He stood up and took his leave of the mango tree and of the pleasure garden. Having eaten nothing that day, he felt a powerful hunger, and thought of his house in the city, his chamber and his bed, the table piled with food. He smiled wearily, shook himself, and took his leave of these things.

In that same hour of the night, Siddhartha left his garden and the city, never to return. Kamaswami sent people out to search for him and kept them looking a long time, thinking he had fallen into the hands of robbers. Kamala sent out no search party. When she heard that Siddhartha had disappeared, she did not wonder at the news. Had she not always expected it? Was he not a samana, a homeless man, a pilgrim? She had felt this most of all when they were last together, and amid the pain of loss she rejoiced that she had held him so close to

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her heart one last time, and felt so completely possessed and permeated by him.

When news of Siddhartha's disappearance first reached her, she went to the window, where she kept a rare songbird in a golden cage. She opened the cage door, took out the bird, and set it free. She watched for a long time as it flew away. From that day on she received no more visitors, and kept her house closed up. And after some time she realised that her last encounter with Siddhartha had left her pregnant.

By the River

Siddhartha wandered in the forest, already far from the city, knowing only that he could not go back, that the life he had led for many years was over and done with, savoured and sucked dry until it disgusted him. The songbird in his dream was dead. The bird in his heart was dead. Deeply entangled in sansara, he had sucked disgust and death into himself from all sides, as a sponge soaks up water until it is full. He was weary of everything and filled with misery, with death, and there was nothing left in the world to tempt him, to delight or console him.

He longed ardently to be rid of himself, to have peace, to be dead. Oh, would a lightning bolt not come and strike him down! A tiger come and devour him! Was there no wine, no poison that would bring numbness, memory

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loss, and sleep, and no more waking! Was there no dirt with which he had not besmirched himself, no sin or folly he had not committed, no dullness of the soul he had not laden upon himself? Was it still possible to live? Was it possible to breathe in and out again and again, to feel hunger, to eat again, sleep again, lie with women again? Was this cycle not exhausted and finished for him?

Siddhartha came to the great river that ran through the forest, the same river across which, as a young man leaving Gotama's town, a ferryman had once taken him. At the riverbank he stopped and stood, hesitating. Tiredness and hunger had sapped his strength – and why should he go on? Where was he going, with what goal? No, there were no more goals now, nothing but a deep, sorrowful longing to shake off this whole desolate dream, to spew out this stale wine, to put an end to this abject, disgraceful life.

A tree hung low over the water, a coconut tree, and Siddhartha leaned his shoulder against it, laid his arm around the trunk and looked down into the green water that flowed and flowed beneath him. He looked down and found himself filled with the desire to let go and

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fall into this water. The water reflected an unearthly emptiness, answering the terrible emptiness in his soul. Yes, he had reached the end. There was nothing left but to extinguish himself, shatter the shoddy picture of his life, throw it at the feet of the gods to the sound of their mocking laughter. This was the great purge he had longed for: death, and the shattering of the incarnation he hated! May the fish eat him, this dog of a Siddhartha, this lunatic, this spoiled and decaying body, this slack and abused soul! May the fish and crocodiles devour him, and demons tear him limb from limb!

With a grimace he stared into the water, saw his face reflected there, and vomited into the reflection. In deep weariness he loosened his arm from the tree trunk and turned a little, meaning to drop straight down, to sink beneath the water's surface once and for all. He lowered himself, eyes closed, towards death.

Then from distant regions of his soul, from the past days of his exhausted life, came a sound. It was a word, a syllable, which he spoke to himself without thinking, in a babble, the old word that began and ended all brahmins' prayers, the sacred OM, meaning something like 'the

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perfect' or 'perfection'. And in the moment that the sound of OM touched Siddhartha's ear, his slumbering spirit suddenly woke and saw the folly of his deed.

Siddhartha was deeply dismayed. So this was how things stood with him; he was so lost, so gone astray and abandoned by all knowledge that he could seek death, with this desire, this childish desire swelling within him: to find peace by annihilating his body! All the torment of recent times, all the disenchantment and despair had failed to achieve what this one moment had, as the OM pierced his consciousness: he recognised himself in his misery and error.

OM! He spoke it to himself: 'OM!' And he remembered Brahman, remembered that life was indestructible, remembered everything divine that he had forgotten.

But this was just a moment, a lightning bolt. At the foot of the coconut tree Siddhartha sank to the ground, felled by weariness, murmuring the OM; he laid his head on the roots of the tree and fell into a deep sleep.

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Deeply he slept, and dreamlessly. It was a long time since he had known such sleep. When he woke hours later, he felt as though 10 years had passed, and heard the quiet flowing of the water without knowing where he was or who had brought him here. He opened his eyes wide with wonder to see trees and sky above him, and recalled where he was and how he had come here. And yet this took a long time, and the past seemed veiled, immensely distant, immensely far away, immensely indifferent. He knew only that he had left his former life (when he first awakened, he felt that his former life was a past incarnation from long ago, a fledgling version of his present self); that he had left his former life, had even wanted to throw his life away, such was his disgust and misery, but had come to his senses by a river, beneath a coconut tree, with the sacred word OM on his lips, and then had fallen into slumber and, having awakened, was looking at the world like a new man. Softly he spoke the OM to himself, the word with which he had fallen asleep, and felt that his long sleep had been nothing but a long, meditative OM, the word and the thought, a complete immersion in the OM, in what was nameless and perfect.

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But what a wonderful sleep it had been! Never had sleep left him so refreshed, so renewed and rejuvenated! Perhaps he really had died, had drowned and been reborn? But no, he recognised himself, his hand and his feet, recognised the place where he was lying, this self in his breast, Siddhartha the headstrong, Siddhartha the strange – but this Siddhartha was also transformed, renewed, strangely fresh, strangely awake, joyful and curious.

Siddhartha sat up and saw someone opposite him, a stranger, a shaven-headed monk in a yellow robe, sitting in a pose of contemplation. He studied the man, who had neither hair nor beard, and before long he recognised this monk as Govinda, the friend of his youth, Govinda, who had taken refuge in the sublime Buddha. Govinda had aged, but his face still wore the same look, which spoke of eagerness, loyalty, seeking, and fearfulness. But when Govinda, sensing his gaze, opened his eyes and looked at him, Siddhartha saw that Govinda did not recognise him. Govinda was pleased to find him awake; he must have been sitting here a long time waiting for him to wake, though he did not know him.

‘I was sleeping,’ said Siddhartha. ‘How did you come here?’

‘You were sleeping,’ replied Govinda. ‘It is not good to sleep in such places, where snakes are often found, and where the creatures of the forest roam. I, sir, am a disciple of the sublime Buddha, the Sakyamuni, and was walking this path in pilgrimage with a number of my fellow monks when I saw you lying asleep in a place where sleeping is dangerous. And so I sought to wake you, sir, and when I saw that you were sleeping very deeply, I stayed behind and sat with you. And then, it seems, I who meant to watch over you fell asleep myself. Poorly have I served you; tiredness overcame me. But now that you are awake, let me go on my way and catch up with my brothers.’

‘I thank you, samana, for watching over me,’ said Siddhartha. ‘You disciples of the Exalted One are kind indeed. Then you may go.’

‘I will go, sir. May the gentleman be always well.’

‘Thank you, samana.’

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Govinda made the sign of farewell and said, 'Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Govinda,' said Siddhartha.

The monk stopped.

'Forgive me, sir, but how do you know my name?'

At this Siddhartha smiled.

'I know you, Govinda, from your father's hut, and from the brahmins' school, and from the offerings, and from our journey to the samanas, and from that hour in the grove of Jetavana when you took refuge in the Buddha.'

'You are Siddhartha!' Govinda cried aloud. 'Now I know you, and cannot understand why I did not know you at once. Welcome, Siddhartha! Great is my joy at seeing you again.'

'I am happy to see you, too. You have been the guardian of my sleep, and again I thank you for it, though I had no need of any guardian. Where are you going to, O my friend?'

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‘I am going nowhere. We monks are always wandering, except in the rainy season, always moving from place to place, living according to the rules, proclaiming the doctrine, receiving alms, moving on. It is always thus. But you, Siddhartha, where are you going?’

Said Siddhartha: ‘It is the same with me, friend. I am going nowhere. I am simply travelling. On pilgrimage.’

Govinda said: ‘You say you are on pilgrimage, and I believe you. But forgive me, O Siddhartha: you do not look like a pilgrim. You are wearing the garb of a rich man, the shoes of a gentleman, and your perfumed hair is not the hair of a pilgrim, not the hair of a samana.’

‘Indeed, my friend, you are perceptive, and your sharp eye sees everything. But I did not say that I am a samana. I said: I am on pilgrimage. And that is so.’

‘You are on pilgrimage,’ said Govinda. ‘But few pilgrims wear such clothes, few such shoes, and few have such hair. Never in the many years I have been on pilgrimage have I encountered such a pilgrim.’

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‘I believe you, my dear Govinda. But now, today, you have encountered such a pilgrim, in such shoes, with such garments. Remember, my friend: fleeting is the world of forms; fleeting, more than fleeting are our garments and the appearance of our hair, and so are our hair and body themselves. I wear the clothes of a rich man, that is true. I wear them because I have been a rich man, and wear my hair like worldly people and voluptuaries, for I have been one of them.’

‘And now, Siddhartha? What are you now?’

‘I do not know. I am as ignorant of that as you are. I am wandering. I was a rich man, and am no longer; what I will be tomorrow, I know not.’

‘You have lost your riches?’

‘I have lost them, or they me. I have mislaid them. The wheel of physical forms turns swiftly, Govinda. Where is Siddhartha the brahmin? Where is Siddhartha the samana? Where is Siddhartha the rich man? What is fleeting changes swiftly, Govinda, as you know.’

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Govinda looked for a long time at the friend of his youth, with doubt in his eyes. And then he bade him farewell as you would a nobleman, and went on his way.

Siddhartha watched him go with a smile on his face, still loving this loyal man, this fearful man. And how could he have failed to love anyone or anything at this moment, at this splendid hour after his wonderful sleep, steeped in the OM? This was the magic that the sleep and the OM had worked in him: he loved everything, was filled with a joyous love for everything he saw. And this, so it seemed to him now, was what had made him so very sick before: he had been unable to love anyone or anything.

Siddhartha watched the monk walk away with a smile on his face. The sleep had greatly invigorated him, but he was plagued by hunger, having eaten nothing for two days, and the time when he had been hardened to hunger was a distant memory. He thought of that time with woe, but also with laughter. All those years ago, he recalled, he had boasted of three things to Kamala, the three noble and unsurpassable arts he had mastered: fasting, waiting, thinking. These had been his possessions, his power and his strength, his trusty staff; in the diligent,

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arduous years of his youth he had learned these three arts, and nothing else. And now they had all left him: fasting, waiting, and thinking. He had exchanged them for the most miserable and transient of things, for sensual pleasure, luxury, and wealth! It was a strange thing that had befallen him. And now, it seemed, he really had become one of the child-people.

Siddhartha contemplated his situation. He found thinking hard, and had no real desire for it, but he forced himself.

‘Now,’ he thought. ‘Since all these transient things have slipped away, I am standing under the sun just as I did in childhood: I own nothing, can do nothing, am capable of nothing, and have learned nothing. How wonderful it is! Now, when my youth is gone, my hair half grey, and my strength dwindling, now I am starting all over again, as a child!’ Once more, he could not help but smile. Yes, strange was his destiny! Things had gone downhill for him, and now he was facing the world empty and naked and ignorant once more. But he could feel no anguish at this – no, he even felt an urge to laugh, at himself and at this strange, foolish world.

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‘Things are going downhill for you!’ he told himself, laughing – and as he said it, his eye fell on the river, and he saw the river too going downhill, meandering always downhill, and singing joyfully as it went. This pleased him greatly, and he gave the river a friendly smile. Was this not the river in which he had wanted to drown himself, once, 100 years ago – or had he dreamed it?

‘Truly, my life has been strange,’ he thought. ‘It has taken some strange detours. As a boy, my life was all about gods and sacrifices. As a youth, it was all about self-denial, thinking and meditating; I sought Brahman and venerated the eternal in Atman. But as a young man I followed the penitents, lived in the forest, suffered heat and frost, learned to hunger, taught my body mortification. And how wonderful was the knowledge that then came to me in the teaching of the great Buddha; I felt knowledge of the unity of all things circulating in me like my own blood. But I also had to take my leave of the Buddha and of that great knowledge. I went and learned the pleasures of love with Kamala, and trade with Kamaswami, amassed money and squandered it, learned to love my belly, and to flatter my senses. Many years it took me to lose my spirit, to unlearn thinking, to forget unity.

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Slowly, taking many detours, I have changed from a man into a child, a thinker into a child-person. And yet this winding path has been a good one, and the bird in my breast has not died. But what a path it was! I have had to pass through so much ignorance, so many burdens, so much error, so much disgust and disappointment and sorrow, just to become a child and start from the beginning again. But it was right! My heart says yes to it, my eyes laugh at it. I have had to feel despair, to sink down to the most foolish thought of all, the thought of suicide, so that I could experience grace, and hear the OM again, and truly sleep and truly awaken. I had to become a fool to find Atman in me again. I had to sin to be able to live again. Where else might my path take me? Foolish is this path; it runs in loops, perhaps even in a circle. Let it go where it will – I will walk it.’

A wonderful joy welled up in his breast.

‘Where,’ he asked his heart, ‘where did you find this joyfulness?’

‘Did it come from the long, sound sleep that did me so much good? Or from the word OM that I spoke? Or from

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escaping, fully escaping, and being free at last and standing like a child beneath the heavens? Oh, how good to have escaped, to have freed myself! How pure and lovely the air is here, how good to breathe! In the place from which I fled, everything smelled of ointments, of spices and wine and surfeit and sloth. How I hated the world of the wealthy, the gourmands, the gamblers! And how I hated myself for staying so long in this terrible world! I hated and robbed myself, poisoned and tormented and made myself old and wicked! No, never more will I imagine, as I once liked to, that Siddhartha is wise! But this is a good thing that I have done, this pleases me, and I must rejoice in having ended this hatred of myself, and ended that dull and foolish life! I praise you, Siddhartha: after so many years of folly you have had an idea once more, and taken action; you heard the bird singing in your breast and followed it!

Thus he praised himself and delighted in himself, and listened inquisitively to his belly, which was rumbling with hunger. He felt that in these recent times and days he had eaten up a portion of suffering, a portion of misery and spewed it out again, had gorged on it to the point of despair, of death. It was good this way. He could have

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stayed much longer with Kamaswami, making money, squandering money, feeding his belly and letting his soul die of thirst; he could have lived much longer in this gentle, cushioned hell, had he not arrived at this moment of complete desolation and despair, the very worst moment when he had leaned out over the flowing water, ready to destroy himself. He had felt despair and deepest misery, but had not succumbed to it, and the bird, that joyful wellspring and inner voice, was still alive – this was the source of his joy, and his laughter, and the beaming face beneath the greying hair.

‘It is good,’ he thought, ‘to try for oneself everything one needs to know. I learned as a child that worldly pleasures and riches are not righteous. I knew it all my life, but only now have I experienced it. And now I know it, not only with my mind, but with my eyes, my heart, my stomach. It is well that I know it!’

He thought long about his transformation, and listened to the bird as it sang for joy. Had this bird not died inside him? Had he not felt its death? No, it was something else that had died within him, something that had longed to die for many a year. Was it not what he had once tried

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to kill, in his fervent, ascetic years? Was it not his self, his small, fearful, and proud self, which he had battled for so many years, but which had always conquered him and returned after every killing, forbidding joy, feeling fear? Was it not this self that had finally expired, here in the forest by this lovely river? Was it not this self's death that had made him so childlike, so filled with trust and joy, so fearless?

Now Siddhartha also guessed why as a brahmin, as a penitent, he had fought this self in vain. He had been hampered by too much knowledge, too many sacred verses, too many rules of sacrifice, too much mortification, too much doing and striving! He had been prideful, always the cleverest, the keenest, always one step ahead of everyone, always the wise and spiritual man, always the priest or the sage. And his self had crawled into this priesthood, this pride, this spirituality, and sat tight there and grown, while he imagined he was killing it with fasting and penitence. Now he saw it, and saw that the secret voice had been right: no teacher could ever have released him. For that, he had to go into the world, lose himself in pleasure and power, women and money, become a merchant, a dice-player, a drinker and

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a greedy man, until the priest and the samana in him were dead. This was why he had needed to endure these ugly years, the disgust, the emptiness, the meaninglessness of a dull, lost life, endure them to the very end, to the point of bitter despair, when the pleasure-seeking Siddhartha, the greedy Siddhartha could die, too. He had died and a new Siddhartha had woken from sleep. He too would grow old, he too would one day have to die; Siddhartha was transient, as all creatures are. But today he was young, he was a child, a new Siddhartha, and he was filled with joy.

He thought this as he listened, smiling, to his belly, listened gratefully to the buzzing of a bee. He looked happily into the flowing river; never had a body of water pleased him so much as this one; never had the voice and the metaphor of moving water made such a strong and beautiful impression on him. He felt the river had something particular to tell him, something he did not yet know, something that was waiting for him. Siddhartha had wanted to drown himself in this river, and the old, weary, despairing Siddhartha had drowned in it today. But the new Siddhartha felt a deep love for this flowing water, and decided not to leave it again so soon.

The Ferryman

‘I want to stay by this river,’ thought Siddhartha. ‘It is the same river I once crossed on my way to the child-people, when a kind ferryman took me across. I will go to him; my path once led from his hut into a new life that is now old and dead – may today’s path and today’s new life proceed from there as well!’

Tenderly he gazed into the flowing water, the clear green, the mysterious crystal lines it was drawing. He saw pearls of light rising from the depths, silent bubbles of air floating on the surface, the blue sky reflected there. The river gazed back with a thousand eyes, green, white, crystalline, sky-blue. How he loved this water, how it charmed him, what gratitude he felt towards it! He heard the newly awakened voice speak in his heart,

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and it said: 'Love this water! Stay by it! Learn from it!' Oh yes, he wanted to learn from it, listen to it. 'Anyone who understood this water and its secrets,' he thought, 'would understand much else besides, many secrets, all secrets.'

But today, he saw only one of the river's secrets, and it gripped his soul. He saw that this water ran and ran, it was always running; it was always there, always and forever the same, and yet new at every moment. Oh, who truly grasped this, who understood it? He did not; he felt only an inkling stirring within him, a distant memory, divine voices.

Siddhartha got to his feet; the hunger ravaging his body had grown unbearable. Absorbed by this feeling, he walked on, taking the path upstream along the bank, listening to the water flowing, listening to the hunger growling in his belly.

When he reached the ferry, the same boat was lying ready, and the same ferryman who had once taken the young samana across the river was standing in it. Siddhartha recognised him, though he too was much aged.

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‘Will you take me across?’ he asked.

The ferryman, astonished to see such a fine gentleman alone and on foot, took him aboard and pushed off.

‘You have chosen a beautiful life for yourself,’ said the passenger. ‘It must be a beautiful thing to live by this water day after day and float upon it.’

With a smile, the man swayed as he pulled the oars. ‘It is beautiful, sir, as you say. But is not every life and all work beautiful?’

‘That may well be. But I envy you yours.’

‘Oh, you might soon tire of it. This is not a life for people in fine clothes.’

Siddhartha laughed. ‘I have been judged by my clothes once already today, and regarded with mistrust. Ferryman, won’t you accept these clothes, which are a burden to me? For I must tell you, I have no money to pay the fare.’

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‘The gentleman is making a joke,’ laughed the ferryman.

‘I am not joking, friend. See, you took me across this water once before without a fare, out of the goodness of your heart. Do the same today, and accept my clothes in payment.’

‘And will the gentleman travel on without clothes?’

‘Ah, my dearest wish is not to travel on at all. My dearest wish, ferryman, would be for you to give me an old loincloth and keep me here as your assistant, or rather your apprentice, for first I must learn to row the boat.’

The ferryman gave the stranger a long, searching look.

‘Now I recognise you,’ he said at last. ‘You once slept in my hut, long ago now, it must be more than 20 years since, and I took you across the river, and we bade each other farewell like good friends. Were you not a samana? I cannot recall your name.’

‘I am Siddhartha, and I was a samana when last you saw me.’

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‘Welcome, then, Siddhartha. My name is Vasudeva. I hope you will be my guest again today and sleep in my hut, and tell me from where you have come and why these handsome clothes are such a burden to you.’

They had reached the middle of the river, and Vasudeva pulled harder on the oars against the current. He worked quietly, with strong arms, his eyes on the stern of the boat. Siddhartha sat and watched him, and recalled how, on that final day of his samana life, love for this man had stirred in his heart. He accepted Vasudeva’s invitation gratefully. When they reached the far bank, he helped him tether the boat to the stakes. Then the ferryman asked him to step into his hut and offered him water and bread, which Siddhartha ate with pleasure, as he also ate the mangos that Vasudeva offered.

Afterwards, as sunset drew near, they went to sit on a tree trunk by the river, and Siddhartha told the ferryman of his beginnings and his life, just as he had seen it passing before his eyes earlier that day, in the hour of his despair. His tale went on deep into the night.

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Vasudeva listened closely. He took all that he heard into himself, origins and childhood, all the learning, all the seeking, all the joys and hardships. This was the greatest of all the ferryman's virtues: he could listen as few others can. Without Vasudeva saying anything, the speaker would feel him absorbing their words, silent, open, waiting, never ignoring a word, or looking impatiently for one, dispensing neither praise nor rebuke, just listening. Siddhartha felt what happiness it is to confide in such a listener, to pour one's own life into his heart, all one's seeking and suffering.

But towards the end of Siddhartha's tale, when he came to speak of the tree by the river, and how far he had fallen, and the sacred OM, and how he had woken and felt such love for the river, the ferryman listened twice as closely, completely absorbed, his eyes closed.

But when Siddhartha stopped talking, and a long silence had elapsed, Vasudeva said: 'It is just as I thought. The river spoke to you. It is a friend to you, too, and speaks to you as it does to me. That is good, it is very good. Stay with me, Siddhartha, my friend. I once had a wife, and her bed was next to mine, but she died long ago, and I

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have long lived alone. Come and live with me now; there is room and food enough for both of us.'

'I thank you,' said Siddhartha. 'I thank you and I accept. And Vasudeva, I must also thank you for listening so well to me. There are few people who really know how to listen. And I have met none who do it as well as you. This, too, I will learn from you.'

'You will learn it,' said Vasudeva. 'But not from me. It was the river that taught me to listen, and it will teach you, too. See, you have already learned from the water that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, to seek the depths. The wealthy gentleman Siddhartha will become an oarsman; the learned brahmin Siddhartha will become a ferryman. This the river told you. You will learn the rest from it, too.'

Said Siddhartha, after a long pause: 'What rest, Vasudeva?'

Vasudeva stood up. 'The hour is late,' he said. 'Let us go to bed. I cannot tell you the rest, O my friend. You will learn it, and perhaps you know it already. See, I am no scholar, and I do not know how to speak or think. I know

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only how to listen and be pious; I have learned nothing else. If I could say the rest and teach it, then perhaps I would be a sage, but I am just a ferryman, and my task is to take people across this river. Many have I taken, thousands, and none has seen my river as anything but an obstacle on their journey. They were travelling to money and business deals, weddings and pilgrimages, and the river was in their way, and the ferryman was there to take them quickly over the obstacle. But a few among those thousands, very few, no more than four or five, stopped seeing the river as an obstacle. They heard its voice, and listened, and the river became sacred to them as it has become to me. Now, Siddhartha, let us go and rest.'

Siddhartha stayed with the ferryman and learned to row the boat, and when there was nothing to do on the ferry he worked with Vasudeva in the rice field, gathered firewood, and picked the fruit of the pisang trees. He learned to craft an oar, mend the boat, and weave baskets, and was pleased with everything he learned. The days and months passed swiftly. But the river taught him more than Vasudeva could: he learned from it constantly. Above all, he learned to listen, to hear with a

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silent heart, with a waiting, open soul, without passion, without desire, without judgement, without opinion.

He lived in friendship beside Vasudeva, and from time to time they spoke, exchanging words that were long-considered and few in number. Vasudeva was no friend of words, and seldom did Siddhartha move him to speak.

‘Have you,’ Siddhartha once asked him, ‘learned this secret from the river, as I have: that there is no time?’

A bright smile spread across Vasudeva’s face.

‘Yes, Siddhartha,’ he said. ‘Do you mean that the river is everywhere at once, at the source and at the mouth, at the waterfall and the ferry, the rapids, the sea, the mountains, everywhere at once, and for the river there is only the present moment, not a shadow of the past, nor a shadow of the future?’

‘I do,’ said Siddhartha. ‘And when I learned it, I looked at my life, and it too was a river, and what separated Siddhartha the boy from Siddhartha the man and Siddhartha the old man was not real; it was nothing but

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shadows. Siddhartha's past lives were not in the past, and his death and return to Brahma did not lie in the future. Nothing was and nothing will be; everything is; everything has being and presence.'

There was delight in Siddhartha's voice; deeply had this revelation pleased him. Was not then all suffering time, all self-torment and fear time, did all that was difficult and hostile in the world not disappear, vanquished, as soon as one had vanquished time, as soon as one could think time away? He had spoken with delight, but Vasudeva merely beamed at him, nodded his silent confirmation, stroked Siddhartha's shoulder, and turned back to his work.

And then once, in the rainy season when the river swelled and the water roared, Siddhartha said: 'Is it not true, O my friend, that the river has many voices, a great many voices? Does it not have the voice of a king, and a warrior, and a bull, and a night bird, and a woman birthing a baby, and a man heaving a sigh, and a thousand other voices?'

'It is thus,' Vasudeva nodded. 'All the voices of creation are in its voice.'

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‘And,’ Siddhartha went on, ‘do you know what word it speaks when you manage to hear all its 10,000 voices at once?’

Vasudeva’s face laughed merrily, and he leaned over to Siddhartha and spoke the sacred OM in his ear. And this was the same word that Siddhartha had heard.

And every time Siddhartha smiled, his smile grew more like the ferryman’s, almost as wide, shining with happiness from a thousand small creases, just as childlike, just as ancient. Seeing the two ferrymen, many travellers took them for brothers. Often they sat together in the evenings on the tree trunk, both listening quietly to the water, which was not water to them, but the voice of life, the voice of being and eternal becoming. And sometimes they would think the same things as they listened to the river – a conversation from the day before yesterday would be in both their minds, or the face and fate of one of their passengers, or death, or their childhoods – and then, when the river had told them something good, they would look at each other at the same moment, both thinking exactly the same thing, both pleased with the same answer to the same question.

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There was something about the ferry and the two ferrymen that some travellers sensed. It sometimes happened that a traveller, having looked into the face of one of the ferrymen, would begin to tell their life story, would tell of suffering, confess evil, ask for comfort and advice. Or they might ask permission to spend the evening with them, to listen to the river. And, sometimes, inquisitive people would seek them out, having been told that by this ferry they would find two sages, or magicians, or saints. The inquisitive people asked many questions, but received no answers, and they found neither magicians nor sages, just two friendly little old men, who seemed mute and a little peculiar or touched in the head. And the inquisitive people laughed, and told each other that the folk who spread such empty rumours were gullible fools.

The years passed and no one counted them. Then, one day, some wandering monks came, followers of Gotama, the Buddha, and asked to be taken across the river, telling the ferrymen that they were returning to their great teacher in haste, for news had spread that the Exalted One was sick and dying, and would soon die his final human death and enter into salvation. Before long another troop of wandering monks came, and then

another, and neither the monks nor most other travellers could speak of anything but Gotama and his approaching death. As if flocking to a battle or a king's coronation, people came streaming from everywhere and from all sides, gathering in great hordes like ants, streaming as if drawn by some enchantment to where the great Buddha awaited his death, where this immense thing would happen and the great Perfect One of the epoch would enter into splendour.

At this time, Siddhartha thought often of the dying sage, the great teacher whose voice had persuaded entire peoples and awakened hundreds of thousands, whose voice he, too, had once heard, whose holy countenance he had once looked upon with reverence. He thought kindly of him, seeing the Buddha's path to perfection in his mind's eye, and recalled with smiles the words he had spoken as a young man to the Exalted One. They had been proud and precocious words, he now felt, and he smiled to remember them. He had now realised that he was not separated from Gotama, whose teaching he had been unable to accept. No, there was no teaching that could be accepted by any true seeker, anyone who truly wanted to find. But someone who had found could

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approve any and all teaching, any path, any goal; nothing now separated that person from all the thousands of others who lived in the eternal, who breathed the divine.

On one of these days, when so many were making the pilgrimage to be with the dying Buddha, so too Kamala, who had once been the most beautiful of courtesans, set off to be with him. She had long since withdrawn from her former life, given her garden to Gotama's monks, taken refuge in the doctrine, and was a friend and benefactor to pilgrims. At the news of Gotama's approaching death she set off on foot, simply dressed, together with young Siddhartha, her son. She walked the river bank with her little son, but the boy soon tired, wanting to go home, to rest, to eat, growing defiant and tearful.

Kamala had to rest often with him; he was used to getting his own way, and she had to feed him, comfort him, chide him. He did not understand why he had to accompany his mother on this arduous and sad pilgrimage to an unknown place, to see a stranger, a holy man who lay dying. Let him die; what did it have to do with this boy?

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The pilgrims were not far from Vasudeva's ferry when little Siddhartha made his mother rest once more. By now, Kamala herself was weary, and while the boy chewed a banana she sank to the ground, closed her eyes for a while and rested. But then, suddenly, she let out a plaintive cry; the boy looked at her in alarm and saw her face pale with horror, and a small black snake slithered out from under her dress, having bitten Kamala.

Now they both hurried down the path to find other people, and near the ferry Kamala collapsed and could go no further. But the boy began to wail dolefully, and to kiss and embrace his mother, and she joined him in his loud calls for help until the sounds reached Vasudeva's ears as he stood by the ferry. Quickly he came and took the woman in his arms, carried her to the boat, and the boy went with them, and soon they all reached the hut where Siddhartha was standing at the stove, lighting the fire. Looking up, the first thing he saw was the boy's face, which was strangely familiar, a reminder of a forgotten time. Then he saw Kamala, whom he soon recognised, though she was unconscious in the ferryman's arms, and now he knew that the boy with the familiar face was his own son, and his heart leaped in his breast.

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They washed Kamala's wound, but it was already black and her body was swollen; a remedy was poured down her throat. She came round to find herself lying on Siddhartha's bed in the hut, with Siddhartha, whom she had once loved so dearly, leaning over her. It was like a dream, and she looked into her friend's face with a smile; only slowly did she become aware of her situation, and she recalled the bite and called out anxiously for the boy.

'He is with you, do not worry,' said Siddhartha.

Kamala looked into his eyes. She spoke with a tongue made heavy by the poison. 'You have aged, my love,' she said. 'And your hair is grey. But you are like the young samana who once came to me in the garden with no clothes and dusty feet. You are much more like him than you were when you left me and left Kamaswami. Your eyes are like his, Siddhartha. Ah, I too have grown old – do you still know me?'

Siddhartha smiled. 'I knew you at once, Kamala, my love.'

Kamala pointed to her boy and said: 'Do you know him, too? He is your son.'

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Her eyes grew hazy and then closed. The boy wept, and Siddhartha took him on his knee, letting him weep, stroking his hair, and the sight of the child's face called to mind a brahmin prayer he had learned as a little boy himself. Slowly he began to speak it, his voice lilting, the words flowing back to him out of the past, out of his childhood. And the lilting voice calmed the child, who now let out only an occasional sob, and finally fell asleep. Siddhartha laid him on Vasudeva's bed. Vasudeva was standing at the stove, cooking rice. Siddhartha threw him a glance that he returned with a smile.

'She will die,' said Siddhartha quietly.

Vasudeva nodded, and the firelight from the stove danced on his kindly face.

Once more Kamala returned to her senses. Her face was twisted in pain, and Siddhartha's eyes read the suffering on her lips, on her pale cheeks. Silently he read it, attentive, waiting, his mind absorbed by her suffering. Kamala felt it, and her eyes sought his. Looking at him, she said: 'Now I see that your eyes have changed, too. They are quite different now. How should

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I recognise you as Siddhartha? You are him, and you are not.'

Siddhartha did not speak; silently his eyes looked into hers.

'Have you done it?' she asked. 'Have you found peace?'

He smiled and laid a hand on hers.

'I see it,' she said. 'I see it. I, too, will find peace.'

'You have found it,' Siddhartha whispered.

Kamala looked steadfastly into his eyes. She thought of her intended pilgrimage to Gotama, to see the face of a perfect being, to inhale his peace – and instead she had found Siddhartha, and it was good, just as good as seeing Gotama. She tried to tell him, but her tongue would no longer obey her. Silently she looked at him, and he saw the life in her eyes ebbing away. When the final wave of pain filled her eyes and broke, when the final shudder ran through her limbs, his finger closed her eyelids.

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Long he sat, watching her face at rest. Long he contemplated her mouth, her aged, tired mouth with its thinning lips, and recalled that once, in the springtime of his life, he had compared these lips to a freshly split fig. Long he sat, reading the pale face, the weary lines, filling himself with the sight, seeing his own face lying there just so, every bit as white, as lifeless, and at the same time seeing both their faces young, with red lips and burning eyes. The feeling of presence and simultaneity, the feeling of eternity, suffused him fully. At this hour he felt, more deeply than ever before, the indestructibility of every life, the eternity of every moment.

When he arose, Vasudeva had prepared rice for him. But Siddhartha did not eat. In the stall where their goat lived, the two old men piled up straw for a bed, and Vasudeva lay down to sleep. But Siddhartha went out and sat all night in front of the hut, listening to the river, the past eddying around him as all the periods of his life touched and enveloped him at once. But from time to time he rose, went to the door of the hut, and checked that the boy was still sleeping.

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Early in the morning, before sunrise, Vasudeva came out of the stall and went to his friend.

‘You have not slept,’ he said.

‘No, Vasudeva. I have been sitting here, listening to the river. It has told me much, and filled me deeply with healing thoughts, with the thought of unity.’

‘You have suffered, Siddhartha, but I see that no sadness has entered your heart.’

‘No, my friend; why should I be sad? I who was rich and happy have become and richer and happier still. I have been given the gift of my son.’

‘And your son, too, is welcome in my house. But now, Siddhartha, let us go to work; there is much to do. Kamala died on the same bed where my wife died long ago. And we will build Kamala’s pyre on the same hill where I built my wife’s pyre.’

While the boy slept, they built the pyre.

The Son

Shyly the son stood and wept at his mother's funeral, and shyly and gloomily he listened to Siddhartha greet him as his son and welcome him to Vasudeva's hut. He sat sallow-faced for days on the hill of the dead, refused to eat, closed off his gaze, closed off his heart, railed and fought against fate.

Siddhartha was kind and let the boy do as he pleased, honouring his grief. Siddhartha understood that his son did not know him and could not love him as a father. And slowly he also came to understand that the 11-year-old was a spoiled boy, a mother's boy, accustomed to wealth, to fine food and a soft bed, accustomed to ordering servants around. Siddhartha understood that the grieving, spoiled boy could not suddenly and meekly content himself with a life among strangers and in poverty. He did

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not force him; he did chores that the boy should have done, and always saved the best food for him. He hoped to win him over slowly, through kindness and patience.

He had called himself rich and happy when the boy came to him. But as time passed and young Siddhartha remained a gloomy stranger, as he displayed a proud and defiant heart – refusing to work, disrespecting his elders, stealing from Vasudeva’s fruit trees – Siddhartha began to understand that it was not peace and happiness his son had brought him, but pain and worry. Still, he loved him, and the pain and worry of love was dearer to him than peace and happiness had been without the boy. Since young Siddhartha had joined them in the hut, the old men had split their work. Vasudeva had returned to tending the ferry alone, while Siddhartha worked in the hut and the field, to be with his son.

For a long time, many long months, Siddhartha waited for his son to understand him, to accept his love, and perhaps return it. For many long months Vasudeva waited, watchful; he waited and said nothing. One evening, after a day when the boy Siddhartha had once again tormented his father greatly with his defiance and moodiness and

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had broken both rice bowls, Vasudeva took his friend aside and spoke to him.

‘Forgive me,’ he said. ‘I am talking to you as a friend. I can see you are torturing yourself, and I see that you have sorrows. My friend, your son is a worry to you – as he is to me. This fledgling is accustomed to another life, another nest. He did not run away from wealth and the city like you, out of disgust and surfeit; he had to leave it all behind against his will. I have asked the river, O my friend. Many times have I asked it. But the river laughs at me, and at you, and shakes itself at our foolishness. Water wants to be with water, youth with youth, and your son is not in a place where he can thrive. You should ask the river, too, and listen to it!’

Siddhartha looked with sorrow into the kindly face, in whose many wrinkles dwelled an abiding serenity.

‘Can I part from him, then?’ he said quietly, ashamed. ‘Give me more time, friend! You can see that I am fighting for him, wooing his heart, trying to capture it with love, friendship, and patience. The river will speak to him one day, too; he too has a calling.’

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Vasudeva's smile blossomed more warmly. 'Oh, yes, he has a calling; he too is part of the life eternal. But do we know, you and I, what he is called to, what path, what tasks, what suffering? His suffering will not be small; his heart is proud and hard, and such people must suffer greatly, err greatly, do much wrong, burden themselves with much sin. Tell me, my friend, you do not discipline your son? Force him? Beat him? Punish him?

'No, Vasudeva, I do none of these things.'

'I knew it. You do not force him, beat him, order him around, because you know the soft is stronger than the hard, water stronger than rock, love stronger than violence. Very good; I commend you. But perhaps you are wrong to think you are not forcing him, or punishing him. Are you not chaining him up with your love? Do you not shame him daily, and make things harder for him with your benevolence and patience? Are you not forcing this haughty and spoiled boy to live in a hut with two old banana-eaters, to whom even rice is a delicacy, whose thoughts cannot be his, whose hearts are old and quiet and beat differently to his own? Is all this not forced upon him, and felt as punishment?

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In dismay, Siddhartha looked down at the earth. Softly he asked: 'What do you think I should do?'

Said Vasudeva: 'Take him to the city, to his mother's house; some servants will have remained. Give him into their care. And, if there are none, then take him to a teacher, not for the sake of learning, but so that he might be with other boys and girls, and in the world that is his own. Have you never thought of it?'

'You see into my heart,' said Siddhartha sadly. 'Often have I thought of it. But see, how can I give him into the care of this world, with that ungentle heart of his? Will he not become wanton, will he not lose himself to pleasure and power, will he not repeat all his father's mistakes, and risk becoming entirely lost in sansara?'

Bright was the ferryman's smile; he touched Siddhartha's arm gently and said: 'Ask the river about it, friend! Listen to it laugh at your question! Do you really believe that you committed all your foolish acts to save your son from them? And can you protect your son from sansara? How? Through doctrine, and prayer, and warnings? My friend, have you quite forgotten that tale, that instructive tale

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of the brahmin's son Siddhartha, which you once told me here in this place? Who protected Siddhartha the samana from sansara, from sin, and greed, and folly? His father's piety, his teachers' warnings, his own knowledge and searching: were these things enough to save him? What father, what teacher could have protected him from living his own life, from besmirching himself with life, burdening himself with guilt, drinking the bitter draft, and finding his own way?

'My friend, do you believe that anyone is spared from having to walk this path? Your little boy, perhaps, because you love him, because you want to spare him all that suffering and pain and disappointment? But even if you died for him 10 times over, you could not take the smallest part of his fate from him.'

Never had Vasudeva spoken so many words at once. Siddhartha thanked him kindly, went into the hut feeling despondent, and lay sleepless for a long time. Vasudeva had told him nothing that he had not already thought and known himself. But it was knowledge he could not act upon; stronger than this knowledge was his love for the boy, his tenderness, his fear of losing him. Had

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he ever lost his heart to anything this way, ever loved a person so blindly, so painfully, so uselessly, and yet so happily?

Siddhartha could not follow his friend's advice, could not give up his son. He let the boy order him around and disobey him. He stayed quiet and waited, each day beginning afresh the unspeaking battle of kindness, the soundless war of patience. Vasudeva too stayed quiet and waited, with kindness, wisdom, and forbearance. They were both masters of patience.

One day, when the boy's face reminded him a great deal of Kamala, Siddhartha suddenly recalled the words that Kamala had spoken to him a lifetime ago, in the days of their youth. 'You cannot love,' she had told him, and he had agreed and likened himself to a star, and the child-people to falling leaves, and yet in her words he had sensed a hint of reproach. Truly, he had never been able to lose himself in another person and entirely give himself to them, to forget himself and commit the follies of love for the sake of another; never had he been able to do this, and all those years ago this had felt like the greatest difference between him and the child-people. But

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now that his son was here, Siddhartha had truly become one of the child-people himself, suffering for another's sake, loving another, becoming lost and foolish for the sake of love. Now, late in life, he too felt this strongest and strangest passion, which caused such terrible suffering – and yet he was blessed, renewed, enriched by it.

He knew all too well that this love, this blind love for his son was a passion, something very human; it was sansara, a cloudy spring, dark water. And yet he also felt it was not worthless; it was necessary, and came from within his own being. This pleasure should be paid for, this pain suffered, these follies committed.

The son, meanwhile, let him commit his follies, let him woo him and humble himself daily for his whims. This father had no qualities to delight him, and none he might have feared. He was a good man, this father, a good, kind, gentle man, perhaps a very spiritual man, perhaps a saint – but none of this could win the boy over. This father was tedious, keeping him captive in his miserable hut, he was tedious, and when he countered disrespect with smiles, cross words with kindness, and wickedness with benevolence, this was the cunning old man's worst ruse.

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The boy would much rather have been threatened and mistreated by him.

There came a day when the young Siddhartha's mind rebelled and he openly turned against his father. The latter had asked him to go and gather kindling. But the boy did not leave the hut; he stood there, defiant and angry, stamped his feet, clenched his fists, and in a mighty outburst screamed hatred and scorn in his father's face.

'Fetch your own kindling!' he spat. 'I am not your servant. Oh, I know you would not hit me; you do not dare – and I know you are always punishing me and trying to make me feel small with your piety and your forbearance. You want me to be like you, just as pious, just as gentle, just as wise! But hear this: I would become a street robber and murderer just to spite you, and go to hell, rather than become like you! I hate you; you are not my father, even if you were my mother's lover 10 times over!'

The boy's rage and sorrow overflowed in a foaming rush, spilling over his father in 100 ugly, wicked words. Then he ran away and did not return until late that evening.

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The next morning, however, he was gone. And gone too was a small basket woven of two-coloured raffia, in which the ferrymen kept the copper and silver coins they received in payment for their services. The boat was also gone; Siddhartha saw it lying on the far bank. The boy had run away.

‘I must follow him,’ said Siddhartha, who had been trembling with grief since the boy’s outburst. ‘A child cannot walk alone through the forest. He will die. We must build a raft, Vasudeva, to cross the water.’

‘We will build a raft,’ said Vasudeva. ‘To fetch back our boat, which the boy stole. But the boy himself you should let go, my friend; he is no longer a child, and can take care of himself. He seeks the path to the city, and he is right – do not forget that. He is doing what you neglected to, looking after himself, steering his own course. Ah, Siddhartha, I see you suffering, but your pain is of a kind that one may laugh at – and you will laugh at it yourself soon enough.’

Siddhartha did not answer. He had already picked up the axe and was beginning to make a raft of bamboo, and

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Vasudeva helped him to bind the canes together with reeds. They made their way across, with the current carrying them a long way downstream, and then pulled the raft back up along the other bank.

‘Why did you bring the axe?’ asked Siddhartha.

Vasudeva said: ‘In case the oar of our boat has been lost.’

But Siddhartha knew what his friend was thinking. He was thinking that the boy would have thrown away or broken the oar to avenge himself and to hinder their pursuit. And in fact there was no oar in the boat. Vasudeva pointed to the bottom of the boat, and smiled at his friend as if to say: ‘Can you not see what your son is trying to tell you? Can you not see that he does not want to be followed?’ But he did not put this into words. He got to work making a new oar. But Siddhartha left him and went to seek the runaway. Vasudeva did not stop him.

Siddhartha had been walking through the forest for a long time when he realised that his search was in vain. ‘Either,’ he thought, ‘the boy had such a head start that

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he had already reached the city, or, if he was still on his way there, he would hide from Siddhartha, his pursuer.' As he went on thinking, he found that he was not worried for his son, who he knew in his heart had not died or faced any danger in the forest. All the same, he kept going without rest, no longer thinking to rescue him, but simply hoping to see him again. And he did not stop until he reached the outskirts of the city.

When he came to the wide road near the city, he paused at the entrance to the beautiful pleasure garden that once belonged to Kamala, where he had seen her in the palanquin for the first time. That day rose to the surface of his soul, and he saw himself standing there as a young man, a naked, bearded samana with dust in his hair. Siddhartha stood for a long time looking through the open gate into the garden, where he saw monks in yellow robes walking beneath the beautiful trees.

For a long time he stood in contemplation, seeing images, listening to the story of his life. For a long time he stood, looking at the monks and seeing in their place the young Siddhartha, the young Kamala walking beneath the tall trees. He saw himself clearly, being entertained

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by Kamala, receiving his first kiss, looking back with pride and scorn on his former life as a brahmin, embarking with pride and longing on his worldly life. He saw Kamaswami, the servants, the carousing, the dice players, the musicians, saw Kamala's songbird in its cage, lived it all over again, inhaled sansara, grew old and weary once more, felt once more the disgust, the desire to do away with himself, and was healed once more by the sacred OM.

When he had stood for a long time at the garden gate, Siddhartha saw it was a foolish longing that had brought him to this place. He could not help his son, and must not cling to him. Deep was the love he felt in his heart for the boy who had fled, like a wound, and yet he knew that the wound was not made for him to burrow around in; it must instead blossom into a shining flower.

He was sad that the wound had not yet blossomed and did not shine. The place where the goal of his desire had been, the thing that had drawn him after his fleeing son, was now empty. Sadly he sat down, feeling something die in his heart, sensing emptiness, seeing no joy ahead, no goal. Deep in thought, he sat and waited. This he had

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learned by the river, this one thing: to wait, and have patience, and to listen. And he sat in the dusty street and listened to the weary, sad beating of his heart, waiting for a voice.

For many hours he squatted there, listening, seeing no more images; he sank into emptiness, let himself sink without seeing a path ahead. And when he felt the wound burning, he spoke the OM in silence, filled himself with the OM. The monks in the garden saw him and, as he squatted there for many hours, dust settling in his grey hair, one of them came and laid two pisang fruit before him. The old man did not see him.

A hand touched his shoulder and woke him from his torpor. At once he recognised this touch, this tender, bashful touch, and came to his senses. He stood up and greeted Vasudeva, who had come after him. And as he looked into Vasudeva's kindly face, into the fine creases that seemed filled with nothing but smiles, and the serene eyes, he smiled, too. Then he saw the pisang fruit lying before him, and picked them up and gave one to the ferryman, eating the other himself.

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Then he and Vasudeva walked back through the forest in silence, home to the ferry. Neither spoke of what had happened that day; neither said the boy's name, or talked of his escape or of the wound. In the hut, Siddhartha lay down on his bed, and when Vasudeva came to him some time later to offer a bowl of coconut milk, he found him sleeping.

OM

The wound burned for a long time. Many were the travellers who came to the river with a son or daughter, and Siddhartha could never ferry them across without envying them. 'So many, so many thousands possess this most precious happiness,' he thought. 'Why not me? Even wicked people, even thieves and robbers have children, and love them and are loved by them, but not me.' His thoughts had grown simple and unreasoning, so very like the child-people had he become.

The way he looked at people had changed; he saw them with less cleverness and pride, but more warmth and curiosity, more concern. When he ferried passengers of the usual kind – child-people, merchants, soldiers, womenfolk – they seemed less strange than they once

had. He understood them, understood and shared a life that was guided not by thought and insight, but by drives and desires. He felt as they did. Although he was close to perfection, and bore his final wound, these child-people seemed like his brothers, and their vanities, greed and ridiculous preoccupations lost their ridiculousness for him, became understandable and loveable, even deserving of respect. A mother's blind love for her child, a conceited father's stupid, blind pride in his one small son, a vain young woman's desperate, blind longing for jewels and men's admiring glances – all these drives, all these childish urges, all these simple, foolish, but immensely strong, strongly alive, strongly asserted drives and desires no longer seemed childish to Siddhartha; he saw people live for them and achieve incredible things for them, going on journeys, fighting wars, bearing immense suffering and immense burdens, and he could love ordinary people for this, he saw life, saw what was alive and indestructible, the Brahman in each of their passions, each of their deeds. These people were loveable and admirable in their blind loyalty, their blind strength and doggedness. They lacked nothing, and the only advantage that sages and thinkers had over them was a mere trifle, one tiny thing: consciousness, the

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conscious knowledge of the unity of all life. And sometimes Siddhartha even doubted whether this knowledge, this thought should be valued so highly; might it be just the particular childish preoccupation of thinking people? Were they not just thinking child-people? In all other ways, worldly people were equal to sages, and often far superior to them, just as animals, in their dogged, unwavering pursuit of what they need can sometimes seem superior to people.

In Siddhartha's heart a realisation was slowly blossoming, slowly ripening: he was realising the true nature of wisdom, the goal of his long seeking. It was nothing but a readiness of the soul, a secret art, an ability to think the thoughts of unity, and to feel and inhale that unity at every moment, in the middle of life. Slowly this realisation blossomed in him, and shone back at him from Vasudeva's old, childlike face: harmony, knowledge of the eternal perfection of the world, smiling, unity.

But the wound still burned, and Siddhartha thought of his son with longing and bitterness, harbouring a tender love in his heart, letting the pain eat away at him,

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committing all the follies of love. This flame would not go out by itself.

One day when the wound was burning fiercely, Siddhartha, driven by longing, rowed across the river and climbed out of the boat, meaning to go to the city and look for his son. It was the dry season and the river flowed gently, quietly, but its voice was strange: it was laughing! It was quite clearly laughing. The river laughed at the old ferryman in a bright, clear voice. Siddhartha stopped and leaned down to the water to hear better; in the silently moving water he saw his face reflected, and that reflected face reminded him of something long-forgotten, and after some consideration, he found it: this face was like another that he had once known and loved and feared. It was like the face of his father, the brahmin. And he recalled how, many years ago, as a youth, he had forced his father to let him go with the penitents, bade him farewell and left, never to return. Had his father not suffered the same agonies on his account that he was now suffering for his own son? Had his father not died alone, without having seen his son again? Would Siddhartha not face this same fate? Was it not a comedy,

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a strange and foolish thing, this repetition, this running in a fateful circle?

The river laughed, 'Yes, it was so; everything that was not suffered to its conclusion and resolved would return, and the same pain would be suffered over and over again.' Siddhartha, however, climbed back into the boat and rowed back to the hut, thinking of his father, thinking of his son, laughed at by the river, at odds with himself, inclined towards despair, and no less inclined to laugh along with the river at himself and at the whole world. Ah, but still the wound did not blossom, still his heart fought against fate, still serenity and victory did not shine out of his suffering. And yet he felt hope, and when he had returned to the hut, he felt an unvanquishable longing to open his heart to Vasudeva, to show and tell everything to this master of listening.

Vasudeva was sitting in the hut, weaving a basket. He no longer rowed the boat; his eyes had begun to weaken, and his arms and hands along with them. Only the joy and the serene benevolence of his face was unchanged and radiant.

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Siddhartha sat down with the old man and slowly began to speak. He told Vasudeva what they had never spoken of before, of his walk to the city when the boy left, and the burning wound, and his envy when he saw happy fathers, though he knew what folly it was, and how he fought in vain to quell these desires. He told Vasudeva everything, even what was most shameful. Everything could now be said, everything shown; he could tell it all. He revealed his wound, told his friend how he had fled earlier that day, a childish runaway crossing the river, wanting to walk to the city, and how the river had laughed.

He spoke for a long time while Vasudeva listened with a silent face, and Siddhartha felt his listening more strongly than ever, as his own pain and fears flowed away, his secret hope flowed away and washed back to him from the other side. Showing his wound to this listener was like bathing it in the river, until it was cool and one with the river. As he went on speaking, admitting and confessing everything, Siddhartha felt more and more that this listener was not Vasudeva the man; this motionless listener was drawing his confession into himself like a tree sucks up rain; this motionless

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listener was the river itself, God himself, the eternal. And as Siddhartha stopped thinking of himself and his wound, this knowledge of Vasudeva's altered being took possession of him. The more he felt it and entered into it, the more he saw that everything was natural and just as it should be, that Vasudeva had been like this a long time, almost always, and it was only that Siddhartha had not recognised it, and in fact he himself was scarcely different from Vasudeva. He felt that now he was seeing the old Vasudeva as people see the gods, and that this could not last; in his heart, he began to bid Vasudeva farewell. And all the while, he went on talking.

When he had finished, Vasudeva turned his kindly and now slightly dimmed eyes on him without speaking, simply radiating silent love and serenity in his direction, understanding and knowledge. He took Siddhartha's hand, led him to the seat on the riverbank, sat down with him, and smiled at the river.

‘You heard it laughing,’ he said. ‘But you did not hear everything. Let us listen, and you will hear more.’

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They listened. The river's song was gentle, and sung in many voices. Siddhartha looked into the moving water and saw images there: his father, lonely, grieving for his son; Siddhartha himself, lonely and likewise bound to his distant son with the bonds of longing; his son appeared, and the boy was lonely, too, striding covetously down the burning path of his young desires. Each was focused on his own goal, each obsessed with that goal, each suffering. The river's voice was pained as it sang a song of yearning, as it flowed yearningly towards its goal, and mournful was the sound of its voice.

'Do you hear?' asked Vasudeva's silent eyes. Siddhartha nodded.

'Hear better!' Vasudeva whispered.

Siddhartha tried to hear better. The images of his father, himself, his son flowed together; Kamala too appeared and flowed away, and so did Govinda, and other images, all flowing into one another, all becoming the river, all pressing towards their goal as the river, yearning, desiring, suffering, and the river's voice was filled with longing, with burning pain, with insatiable craving. The

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river pressed on towards its goal; Siddhartha saw it hurrying, a river composed of himself and those close to him and all the people he had ever seen; all the waves and waters hurried, suffering, towards goals, many goals, the waterfall, the lake, the rapids, the sea, and all goals were reached, and from each there proceeded a new goal, and the water turned to steam and rose into the sky, became rain and fell from the sky, became springs, became streams, hurried anew, flowed anew. But the yearning voice had altered. It was still there, sorrowful, searching, but other voices had joined it, voices of joy and pain, good and evil, laughing and mourning, a hundred voices, a thousand.

Siddhartha listened. He was entirely a listener now, entirely absorbed in his listening, quite empty, sucking everything in and feeling that now he had truly learned to listen. He had heard the many voices in the river before, but today they sounded new. It was impossible to tell the voices apart, the joyful from the weeping, the child from the man; they all belonged together, and wails of yearning and wise laughter, screams of rage and the groans of the dying had all become one, woven together and connected, entangled in a thousand ways. All of it

together, all the voices, all the goals, all the yearning, all the suffering, all the desire, all good and evil, all of it together was the world. All of it together was the river of events, the music of life. And when Siddhartha listened closely to this river, this thousand-voiced song, without straining to hear either the suffering or the laughter, without binding his soul to any one voice and entering into it with his ego, but hearing them all as a whole, as one, then the great suffering of a thousand voices consisted of a single word: OM; perfection.

‘Do you hear?’ Vasudeva’s eyes asked once more.

Brightly shone Vasudeva’s smile, radiating from all the wrinkles of his aged countenance, as the OM floated over all the voices of the river. Brightly shone his smile as he looked at his friend, and bright was the selfsame smile that now appeared on Siddhartha’s face. His wound blossomed, his pain shone, and his self flowed into the great unity. At that hour, Siddhartha ceased wrestling with fate, and his suffering ceased with it. On his face blossomed a serene knowledge no longer opposed by any will, which has seen perfection, which embraces the river of

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events, the flow of life, and is filled with compassion and goodwill, committed to the flow, part of the great unity.

When Vasudeva rose from the seat on the riverbank, and looked into Siddhartha's eyes and saw the serene knowledge shining there, he touched his shoulder quietly, in his gentle and tender way, and said: 'I have been waiting for this hour, my friend. Now that it is come, let me go. Long have I awaited this hour; long have I been the ferryman Vasudeva. Now it is time. Farewell, hut; farewell, river; farewell, Siddhartha!'

Siddhartha bowed low before Vasudeva as he took his leave.

'I knew it,' he said, softly. 'You will go into the forests?'

'I will go into the forests, and into unity,' said Vasudeva, beaming.

Beaming, he went on his way, and Siddhartha watched him go. With deep joy, with deep solemnity he watched him go, the motion of his feet filled with peace, his head filled with radiance, his figure filled with light.

Govinda

One day, Govinda was resting with other monks in the pleasure garden that the courtesan Kamala had given to Gotama's disciples. He heard them talking of an old ferryman who lived by the river a day's walk from the garden, and who many people took to be a sage. When Govinda resumed his wandering, he chose the path to the ferry, eager to see the ferryman. For although he had lived his whole life according to the rules and was revered by the younger monks for his age and his modesty, the restlessness and the seeking in his heart had never been extinguished.

He came to the river, and asked the old man to take him across, and when they got out of the boat on the other side, he said: 'You have done much for us monks and

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pilgrims, taken many of us across the river. Ferryman, are you not a seeker, too, looking for the right path?’

Said Siddhartha, smiling from his aged eyes: ‘Do you call yourself a seeker, O venerable one, though you are advanced in years, and wear the robe of Gotama’s monks?’

‘I may be old,’ said Govinda. ‘But I have not ceased searching. And I never will; it seems to be my purpose in life. You too have searched, it seems to me. Will you give me a word, my esteemed friend?’

Said Siddhartha: ‘What should I have to tell you, venerable one? Perhaps that you search too much? That you are too busy seeking to find anything?’

‘How do you mean?’ asked Govinda.

‘When a person searches,’ said Siddhartha, ‘it is easy for their eyes to see only the thing they are searching for. They cannot find anything, allow anything in, because their mind is always on what they are seeking; they have a goal, and that goal is their obsession. Seeking means

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having a goal. But finding means being free and open, having no goal. You, venerable one, may really be a seeker, for in pursuit of your goal, you overlook many things that are right before your eyes.'

'I still do not quite understand,' said Govinda. 'How do you mean?'

Said Siddhartha: 'One day, O venerable one, several years ago, you were on the bank of this river, and saw a man sleeping there, and sat down to watch over him. But, O Govinda, you did not recognise that sleeping man.'

Astonished, as if spellbound, the monk looked into the ferryman's eyes.

'Are you Siddhartha?' he asked timidly. 'I would not have recognised you this time, either! Heartily I greet you, Siddhartha, heartily I rejoice in seeing you again! You have changed much, my friend. And you have become a ferryman?'

Siddhartha laughed warmly. 'A ferryman, yes. Some people have to undergo great changes, Govinda, they

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have to wear all manner of garments, and such a one am I, my friend. Welcome, Govinda – please stay the night in my hut.’

Govinda stayed the night in the hut and slept on the bed that had once been Vasudeva’s. He asked the friend of his youth many questions, and Siddhartha had to tell him many stories of his life.

The next morning, when it was time to begin the day’s journey, Govinda said – though he hesitated before speaking the words – ‘Before I go on my way, Siddhartha, allow me one more question. Do you have a doctrine? Do you have a belief, or some knowledge that you follow, that helps you to live and do right?’

Said Siddhartha: ‘You remember, dear friend, that as a young man, when we lived with the ascetics in the forest, I came to mistrust teachers and doctrines, and turned my back on them. That has not changed. And yet I have had many teachers since that time. For a long time, my teachers were a beautiful courtesan, a wealthy merchant, and a dice player. Once, a wandering disciple of the Buddha was my teacher; he sat with me when I

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fell asleep in the forest, on pilgrimage. I learned from him and am grateful to him, more than grateful. But I learned most from this river, and from Vasudeva, the ferryman who came before me. He was a very simple man, not a thinker, but he knew the essential things as well as Gotama; he was a Perfect One, a saint.'

Govinda said: 'It seems to me, Siddhartha, that you are still fond of mockery. I believe you, and I know you have not followed a teacher. But have you not found, if not a doctrine, then certain thoughts and insights that are yours and that help you to live? If you would care to tell me something of them, it would delight my heart.'

Said Siddhartha: 'I have had thoughts, yes, and insights, from time to time. Sometimes, for an hour or a day, I have felt knowledge the way one feels life in one's heart. I have had thoughts, but it would be hard for me to pass them on to you. See, my Govinda, this is one of the thoughts I have found: wisdom cannot be passed on. The wisdom that a sage tries to pass on always sounds like folly.'

'Are you making a joke?' asked Govinda.

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‘I am not joking. I am telling you what I have found. You can pass on knowledge, but not wisdom. You can find wisdom, you can live by it, you can be borne up by it, you can perform miracles with it, but you cannot express it in words or teach it. This is what I sometimes felt, even in my youth, and what drove me away from teachers. And I have found another thought, Govinda, that you will take for a joke or a piece of foolishness, but it is my best thought: for every truth, the opposite is also true! And this is how: a truth can only be spoken and wrapped in words if it is one-sided. Everything that the mind can think and words can express is one-sided, it is all half, all lacking wholeness, roundness, unity. When the sublime Gotama spoke of the world in his teaching, he had to divide it into sansara and nirvana, illusion and truth, suffering and salvation. We cannot help but do the same; there is no other way for one who wishes to teach. But the world itself, all that exists around us and in us, is never one-sided. A person, or a deed, is never all sansara or all nirvana, never all holy or all sinful. It seems so because we are under the illusion that time is real. Time is not real, Govinda; I have experienced this over and over. And, if time is not real, then the span that

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seems to lie between world and eternity, suffering and serenity, evil and good, is also an illusion.'

'How?' asked Govinda, fearfully.

'Listen well, my friend, listen well! The sinner that I am and that you are is a sinner, but one day he will be Brahma once more, he will reach nirvana and be a Buddha – and now see: this “one day” is an illusion, a mere metaphor! The sinner is not on the path towards Buddhahood, he is not learning and developing, although our minds cannot imagine it any other way. No, the sinner is already the future Buddha, now, today – his future is already here, and you must honour the developing, possible, hidden Buddha in him, and in yourself and everyone else. The world, my friend Govinda, is not imperfect, and nor is it on a slow path to perfection: no, it is perfect at every moment. All sins already carry grace within them, every small child has their ancient self within them, every baby has death, and all mortals eternal life. It is impossible for any person to look at another and see how far along their path they are; a Buddha waits within robbers and dice players, and the robber waits within brahmins. In deep meditation it is possible to suspend time, and see

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all the life that has been, is, and will be all at once, and then everything is good, everything is whole, everything is Brahman. And so what is seems good to me: death seems like life, sin like holiness, wisdom like folly; this is how it must all be, and it requires only my agreement, my willingness, my loving understanding to find it good; it can only nurture me, and never harm me. My body and soul have taught me that I needed sin very much, lust, and greed, and vanity, and the most shameful despair in order to learn to stop resisting, to love the world, to stop comparing it with some world I imagined and wished to see – a world of perfection conjured by my mind – and leave it as it is, and love it, and be glad to be part of it. These, O Govinda, are some of the thoughts that have come to me.'

Siddhartha bent to pick up a stone from the ground and weighed it in his hand.

'This,' he said, playfully, 'is a stone, and at some future time it may be earth, and the earth will become plants, or an animal or a person. At one time I would have said: this stone is just a stone; it is worthless and belongs to the world of maya – but, because in the cycle of transfor-

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mation it has the potential to become person and spirit, I must acknowledge that it, too, has worth. At one time I might have thought that way. Today I think: this stone is a stone, but it is also animal, also God, also Buddha. I do not honour and love it because it could one day become this or that, but because it is always already everything – and I love it because it is a stone, and appears to me here and now as a stone. I see value and meaning in each of its veins and hollows, in the yellow, the grey, the hardness, the sound it makes when I knock on it, the dryness or moisture of its surface. There are stones that feel like oil or soap, and others like leaves, like sand, and each is special and prays the OM in its own way; each is Brahman, but at the same time and to the same degree it is a stone, oily or spongy, and that pleases me and seems wonderful to me, deserving of worship. But let me say no more of this. Words do not properly convey this secret meaning; things always become slightly different in the telling, a little false, a little foolish – and this too is very good and pleases me greatly. I embrace the fact that what is treasure and wisdom to one man always sounds foolish to another.’

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Govinda listened in silence. He paused before speaking again.

‘Why did you tell me this about the stone?’ he asked, hesitantly.

‘It was not my intention. Or perhaps what I meant was that I love this stone, and this river, and all these things we can contemplate and learn from. I can love a stone, Govinda, and a tree, or a piece of bark. They are things, and one can love things. But words I cannot love.

And so doctrines are not for me: they have no hardness, no softness, no colours or corners, smell or taste; they are made of nothing but words. Perhaps all the words are what prevents you from finding peace. For salvation and virtue, sansara and nirvana are nothing but words, Govinda. There is no thing that is nirvana; there is only the word nirvana.’

Said Govinda: ‘Nirvana is not just a word, friend; it is a thought.’

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Siddhartha went on: ‘A thought – that may be so. I must confess to you, my friend: I do not see much difference between words and thoughts. To speak plainly, I do not hold thoughts in very high regard, either. I have more regard for things. Here on this ferryboat, for instance, the man who came before me was my teacher, a holy man, who for many years simply believed in the river, and nothing else. He had heard the river’s voice speaking to him, and he learned from it, it educated and taught him, the river seemed a god to him, and for many years he did not know that every wind, every cloud, every bird, every insect is just as divine and able to teach as the river he so venerated. But when this holy man went into the forest, he knew everything, more than you or I, without teachers, without books, all because he had believed in the river.’

Govinda said: ‘But are what you call “things” real, then, and essential? Are they not maya’s illusion, nothing but image and appearance? Your stone, your tree, your river – are they then realities?’

‘This too troubles me greatly,’ said Siddhartha. ‘Things may be an illusion, or they may not; if they are, then I too

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am an illusion, and so we are alike. That is what makes them so dear and admirable to me: they are like me. For that reason I can love them. And here is a doctrine you will laugh at, Govinda: it seems to me that love is the most important thing. Great thinkers may hold it important to see through the world, and explain it, and disdain it. But all I want is to love the world, not to disdain it, not to hate both it and myself, but to regard it and myself and all life with love and admiration and reverence.'

'This I understand,' said Govinda. 'But this is the very thing that the Exalted One recognised as deception. He commands goodwill, mercy, sympathy, tolerance, but not love; he forbids us from binding our hearts to earthly things with love.'

'I know,' said Siddhartha. His smile shone golden. 'I know, Govinda. And see, here we are in the thicket of opinions, arguing about words. For I cannot deny that my words about love stand in contradiction, in apparent contradiction to Gotama's words. And this is precisely why I have such a great mistrust of words, for I know that this contradiction is illusory. I know that I am one with Gotama. How should He not know love, He who

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recognised all that is human as transient and insignificant, and yet loved humanity so much that he spent a long, arduous life helping people, teaching them! Even in his case, even when it comes to your great teacher, the thing is dearer to me than the words, his actions and life more important than his speeches, the gestures of his hand more important than his opinions. It is not in his speech or thought that I see greatness, only in his actions, his life.'

The two old men were silent for a long time. Then Govinda, bowing in farewell, said: 'Thank you, Siddhartha, for telling me your thoughts. Some of them are strange, and I have not understood them all immediately. Be that as it may, I thank you, and wish you peaceful days.'

(But secretly, he thought to himself: this Siddhartha is a curious person, who expresses curious thoughts, and his doctrine sounds foolish. The Exalted One's pure doctrine sounds different, clearer, purer, more understandable, containing nothing strange, foolish or ridiculous. But Siddhartha's hands and feet, his eyes, his forehead, his breath, his smile, his greeting, his tread, are all unlike his thinking. Never, never since our sublime

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Gotama passed into nirvana, have I met someone and felt he was a saint. Only with this Siddhartha did I feel this way. His teaching may be strange, his words may sound foolish, but his eyes and his hand, his skin and his hair, everything about him radiates purity, peace, serenity, a mildness and holiness that I have not seen in anyone since the final death of our exalted teacher.)

And thinking this, conflicted in his heart, he leaned again towards Siddhartha, drawn in by love. Deeply he bowed before the quietly sitting man.

‘Siddhartha,’ he said, ‘we are old men now. I doubt that we will meet again in this lifetime. My dear friend, I can see that you have found peace. I confess that I have not. Give me one more word, esteemed friend, something that I can grasp and understand! Give me something to take with me on my path. For my path is often onerous, often dark, Siddhartha.’

Siddhartha merely looked at him with the same, silent smile. Govinda – fearful, yearning – stared fixedly at his face; his eyes were filled with pain and eternal seeking, eternal failing to find.

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Siddhartha saw it and smiled.

‘Lean down to me,’ he whispered in Govinda’s ear. ‘Lean in. Yes, and come closer still! Kiss my forehead, Govinda.’

Govinda, amazed and yet drawn in by great love and a kind of presentiment, obeyed his words, leaning in and touching Siddhartha’s forehead with his lips – and a wondrous thing occurred. While his mind lingered on Siddhartha’s curious words, while he was still trying reluctantly and in vain to think away time, to imagine nirvana and sansara as one, and even feeling a certain scorn for his friend’s words that conflicted with the tremendous love and reverence he also felt, this happened:

His friend Siddhartha’s face vanished, and instead Govinda saw his many other faces, a long line of them, a flowing river of faces, hundreds, thousands, all coming and passing away, and yet all seeming to be present at once, constantly changing and renewing themselves, and yet all of them Siddhartha. He saw the face of a fish, a carp, its mouth wide open in terrible pain, a dying fish with the life going out of its eyes – he saw the face of a newborn child, red and wrinkled, twisted with crying

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– he saw the face of a murderer as he stuck a knife into another person’s body – and at the same second he saw the criminal kneeling in chains, his head sliced off by the executioner’s sword – he saw the bodies of men and women naked in the positions and struggles of frantic love – he saw bodies laid out, still, cold, empty – he saw the heads of animals, boar, crocodile, elephant, bull, bird – he saw gods, saw Krishna and Agni – he saw all these figures and faces in a thousand relations to one another, each helping the others, loving them, hating them, destroying them, giving birth to them anew, each one a death wish, a passionate, painful acknowledgement of transience – and yet none died; each was only transformed, reborn, always gaining a new face, with no time separating one face from the next – and all these figures and faces rested, flowed, conceived each other, drifted away and streamed into each other, and a thin layer was always stretched over them all, thin, insubstantial and yet real, like thin glass or ice, like a transparent skin, a bowl or shape or mask made of water, and this mask smiled, and this mask was Siddhartha’s smiling face, which Govinda’s lips were touching at that very moment. And Govinda saw that this mask was smiling, a smile of unity above the flowing forms, a smile of simultaneity above

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the thousand births and deaths. Siddhartha's smile was exactly the same as the silent, fine, inscrutable, perhaps benevolent, perhaps mocking, wise, thousandfold smile of Gotama, the Buddha, which he had looked upon in awe a hundred times. This, Govinda knew, was how the Perfect Ones smiled.

No longer knowing whether time existed, whether this vision had lasted a second or a hundred years, not knowing if there was a Siddhartha, a Gotama, an I and a You, wounded in his innermost being with a sweet-tasting wound as if from a divine arrow, enchanted and baffled to his core, Govinda stood for a short while, bent over Siddhartha's silent face, which he had just kissed, which had just been the scene of all incarnations, all becoming, all being.

His countenance was unchanged after the thousandfold depths closed up again beneath its surface; his smile was still, it was quiet and gentle, and perhaps very benevolent, perhaps very mocking. Siddhartha smiled just as the Exalted One had.

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Govinda bowed low, and tears of which he was unaware streamed down his aged face as, like a fire, a feeling of deepest love and most humble veneration burned in his heart. He bowed low, down to the earth, before the man who sat there unmoving, whose smile reminded him of everything he had ever loved in his life, everything that had been precious and sacred to him.