Buddha:
First Sermon - The Middle Path
(c. 6th Century BCE)


Prince Siddhartha Gautama, shrinking in horror at the many manifestations of misery in this world, fled his comfortable life and eventually became an ascetic. The ascetic life offered him no enlightenment as to how one might escape the sorrows of mortal existence. After abandoning extreme asceticism in favor of the Middle Path of self-restraint, Gautama achieved Enlightenment in a flash while meditating under a sacred pipal tree. He was now the Buddha.

Legend tells us he then proceeded to share the path to Enlightenment by preaching a sermon in a deer park at Benares in northeastern India to five ascetics, who became his first disciples. Buddhists refer to that initial sermon as "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law," which means that the Buddha had embarked on a journey (turning the wheel) on behalf of the law of Righteousness (dharma).

The following document is a reconstruction of that first sermon Although composed at least several centuries after Siddhartha Gautama's death it probably contains the essence of what the Buddha taught his earliest disciples.

SETTING IN MOTION THE WHEEL OF THE LAW

And the Blessed one thus addressed the five Bhikkhus [monks]. "There are two extremes, O Bhikkhus, which he who has given up the world, ought to avoid. What are these two extremes'? A life given to pleasures, devoted to pleasures and lusts: this is degrading, sensual, vulgar, ignoble, and profitless; and a life given to mortifications: this is painful, ignoble, and profitless. By avoiding these two extremes, O Bhikkhus, the Tathagata [a title of Buddha meaning perhaps "he who has arrived at the truth"] has gained the knowledge of the Middle Path which leads to insight, which leads to wisdom which conduces to calm, to knowledge, co the Sambodhi [total enlightenment], to Nirvana [state of release from samsara, the cycle of existence and rebirth].
The Eightfold Path

"Which, O Bhikkhus, is this Middle Path the knowledge of which the Tathagata has gained, which leads to insight, which leads to wisdom, which conduces to calm, to knowledge, to the Sambodhi, to Nirvana? It is the Holy Eightfold Path, namely,

Right Belief [understanding the truth about the universality of suffering and knowing the path to its extinction],

Right Aspiration [a mind free of ill will, sensuous desire and cruelty],

Right Speech [abstaining from lying, harsh language and gossip],

Right Conduct [avoiding killing, stealing and unlawful sexual intercourse],

Right Means of Livelihood [avoiding any occupation that brings harm directly or indirectly to any other living being],

Right Endeavor [avoiding unwholesome and evil things],

Right Memory [awareness in contemplation],

Right Meditation. [concentration that ultimately reaches the level of a trance],

This, O Bhikkhus, is the Middle Path the knowledge of which the Tathagata has gained, which leads to insight, which leads to wisdom, which conduces to calm, to knowledge, to the Sambodhi, to Nirvana.

The Four Noble Truths

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of Suffering: Birch is suffering; decay is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering. Presence of objects we hate, is suffering; Separation from objects we love, is suffering; not to obtain what we desire, is suffering. Briefly,... clinging to existence is suffering.

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Cause of suffering Thirst, which leads to rebirth, accompanied by pleasure and lust, finding its delight here and there. This thirst is threefold, namely, thirst for pleasure, thirst for existence, thirst for prosperity.

"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering: it ceases with the complete cessation of this thirst, -- a cessation which consists in the absence of every passion with the abandoning of this thirst, with doing away with it, with the deliverance from it, with the destruction of desire.
"This, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Path which leads to the cessation of suffering: that Holy Eightfold Path, that is to say, Right Belief, Right Aspiration, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Endeavor, Right Memory, Right Meditation....

"As long, O Bhikkhus, as I did not possess with perfect purity this true knowledge and insight into these four Noble Truths... so long, O Bhikkhus, I knew that I had not yet obtained the highest, absolute Sambodhi in the world of men and gods....

"But since I possessed, O Bhikkhus, with perfect purity this true knowledge and insight into these four Noble Truths... then I knew, O Bhikkhus, that I had obtained the highest, universal Sambodhi....

"And this knowledge and insight arose in my mind: "The emancipation of my mind cannot be lost; this is my last birth; hence I shall not be born again!"

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS:

1. What is the Middle Path? Why is it the proper path to Enlightenment?

2. What are the Four Noble Truths?

3. How has the Buddha reached the point of escaping the cycle of rebirth?

4. How does one free oneself from this world?

5. Is it correct to call Buddhism "world denying"?