

## CHAPTER 2

# HIS STRUGGLE FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Easy to do are things that are bad  
and not beneficial to self,  
But very, very hard to do indeed  
is that which is beneficial and good.

—Dhp 163

### *Struggle*



Meeting with disappointment, but not discouraged, the Ascetic Gotama seeking for the incomparable peace, the highest truth, wandered through the district of Magadha, and arrived in due course at Uruvelā, the market town of Senāni. There he spied a lovely spot of ground, a charming forest grove, a flowing river with pleasant sandy fords, and hard by was a village where he could obtain his food. Then he thought thus:

Lovely, indeed, O Venerable One, is this spot of ground, charming is the forest grove, pleasant is the flowing river with sandy fords, and hard by is the village where I could obtain food. Suitable indeed is this place for spiritual exertion for those noble scions who desire to strive. (Ariyapariyesana Sutta, MN 26)

The place was congenial for his meditation. The atmosphere was peaceful. The surroundings were pleasant. The scenery was charming. Alone, he resolved to settle down there to achieve his desired object.

Hearing of his renunciation, Kondañña, the youngest brahmin who predicted his future, and four sons of the other sages—Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma, and Assaji—also renounced the world and joined his company.

In the ancient days in India, great importance was attached to rites, ceremonies, penances and sacrifices. It was then a popular belief that no deliverance could be gained unless one leads a life of strict asceticism. Accordingly, for six long years the Ascetic Gotama made a superhuman struggle practising all forms of severest austerity. His delicate body was reduced to almost a skeleton. The more he tormented his body the farther his goal receded from him.

How strenuously he struggled, the various methods he employed, and how he eventually succeeded are graphically described in his own words in various suttas.

Mahā Saccaka Sutta (MN 36) describes his preliminary efforts thus:

Then the following thought occurred to me:

“How if I were to clench my teeth, press my tongue against the palate, and with (moral) thoughts hold down, subdue and destroy my (immoral) thoughts!”

So I clenched my teeth, pressed my tongue against the palate and strove to hold down, subdue, destroy my (immoral) thoughts with (moral) thoughts. As I struggled thus, perspiration streamed forth from my armpits.

Like unto a strong man who might seize a weaker man by head or shoulders and hold him down, force him down, and bring into subjection, even so did I struggle.

Strenuous and indomitable was my energy. My mindfulness was established and unperturbed. My body was, however, fatigued and was not calmed as a result of that painful endeavour—being overpowered by exertion. Even though such painful sensations arose in me, they did not at all affect my mind.

Then I thought thus: ‘How if I were to cultivate the non-breathing ecstasy!’

Accordingly, I checked inhalation and exhalation from my mouth and nostrils. As I checked inhalation and exhalation from mouth and nostrils, the air issuing from my ears created an exceedingly great noise. Just as a blacksmith’s bellows being blown make an exceedingly great noise, even so was the noise created by the air issuing from my ears when I stopped breathing.

Nevertheless, my energy was strenuous and indomitable. Established and unperturbed was my mindfulness. Yet my body was fatigued and was not calmed as a result of that painful endeavour—being overpowered by exertion.

Even though such painful sensations arose in me, they did not at all affect my mind.

Then I thought to myself: ‘How if I were to cultivate that non-breathing exercise!’

Accordingly, I checked inhalation and exhalation from mouth, nostrils, and ears. And as I stopped breathing from mouth, nostrils and ears, the (imprisoned) airs beat upon my skull with great violence. Just as if a strong man were to bore one’s skull with a sharp drill, even so did the airs beat my skull with great violence as I stopped breathing. Even though such painful sensations arose in me, they did not at all affect my mind.

Then I thought to myself: 'How if I were to cultivate that non-breathing ecstasy again!'

Accordingly, I checked inhalation and exhalation from mouth, nostrils, and ears. And as I stopped breathing thus, terrible pains arose in my head. As would be the pains if a strong man were to bind one's head tightly with a hard leather thong, even so were the terrible pains that arose in my head. Nevertheless, my energy was strenuous. Such painful sensations did not affect my mind.

Then I thought to myself: 'How if I were to cultivate that non-breathing ecstasy again!'

Accordingly, I stopped breathing from mouth, nostrils, and ears. As I checked breathing thus, plentiful airs pierced my belly. Just as if a skillful butcher or a butcher's apprentice were to rip up the belly with a sharp butcher's knife, even so plentiful airs pierced my belly.

Nevertheless, my energy was strenuous. Such painful sensations did not affect my mind.

Again I thought to myself: 'How if I were to cultivate that non-breathing ecstasy again!'

Accordingly, I checked inhalation and exhalation from mouth, nostrils, and ears. As I suppressed my breathing thus, a tremendous burning pervaded my body. Just as if two strong men were each to seize a weaker man by his arms and scorch and thoroughly burn him in a pit of glowing charcoal, even so did a severe burning pervade my body.

Nevertheless, my energy was strenuous. Such painful sensations did not affect my mind.

Thereupon the deities who saw me thus said: 'The ascetic Gotama is dead.' Some remarked: 'The ascetic Gotama is not dead yet, but is dying.' While some others said: "The ascetic Gotama is neither dead nor is dying but an arahant is the ascetic Gotama. Such is the way in which an arahant abides."

### ***Change of Method: Abstinence from Food***

"Then I thought to myself: 'How if I were to practise complete abstinence from food!'

Then deities approached me and said: 'Do not, good sir, practise total abstinence from food. If you do practise it, we will pour celestial essence through your body's pores; with that you will be sustained.'

And I thought: 'If I claim to be practising starvation, and if these deities pour celestial essence through my body's pores and I am sustained thereby, it would be a fraud on my part.' So I refused them, saying 'There is no need.'

Then the following thought occurred to me: 'How if I take food little by little, a small quantity of the juice of green gram, or vetch, or lentils, or peas!'

As I took such small quantity of solid and liquid food, my body became extremely emaciated. Just as are the joints of knot-grasses or bulrushes, even so were the major and minor parts of my body, owing to lack of food. Just as is the camel's hoof, even so were my hips for want of food. Just as is a string of beads, even so did my backbone stand out and bend in, for lack of food. Just as the rafters of a dilapidated hall fall this way and that, even so appeared my ribs through lack of sustenance. Just as in a deep well may be seen stars sunk deep in the water, even so did my eye-balls appear deep sunk in their sockets, being devoid of food. Just as a bitter pumpkin, when cut while raw, will by wind and sun get shrivelled and withered, even so did the skin of my head get shrivelled and withered, due to lack of sustenance.

And I, intending to touch my belly's skin, would instead seize my backbone. When I intended to touch my backbone, I would seize my belly's skin. So was I that, owing to lack of sufficient food, my belly's skin clung to the backbone, and I, on going to pass excreta or urine, would in that very spot stumble and fall down, for want of food. And I stroked my limbs in order to revive my body. Lo, as I did so, the rotten roots of my body's hairs fell from my body owing to lack of sustenance. The people who saw me said: 'The ascetic Gotama is black.' Some said, 'The ascetic Gotama is not black but blue.' Some others said: 'The ascetic Gotama is neither black nor blue but tawny.' To such an extent was the pure colour of my skin impaired owing to lack of food.

Then the following thought occurred to me: 'Whatsoever ascetics or brahmins of the past have experienced acute, painful, sharp and piercing sensations, they must have experienced them to such a high degree as this and not beyond. Whatsoever ascetics and brahmins of the future will experience acute, painful, sharp and piercing sensations, they too will experience them to such a high degree and not beyond. Yet by all these bitter and difficult austerities I shall not attain to excellence, worthy of supreme knowledge and insight, transcending those of human states. Might there be another path for enlightenment!'"

### *Temptation of Māra the Evil One*

His prolonged painful austerities proved utterly futile. They only resulted in the exhaustion of his valuable energy. Though physically a superman his delicately nurtured body could not possibly stand the great strain. His graceful form completely faded almost beyond recognition. His golden coloured skin turned pale, his blood dried up, his sinews and

muscles shrivelled up, his eyes were sunk and blurred. To all appearance he was a living skeleton. He was almost on the verge of death.

At this critical stage, while he was still intent on the highest (*padhāna*), abiding on the banks of the Nerañjarā river, striving and contemplating in order to attain to that state of perfect security, came Namuci,<sup>22</sup> uttering kind words thus:<sup>23</sup>

“You are lean and deformed. Near to you is death.

A thousand parts (of you belong) to death; to life (there remains) but one. Live, O good sir! Life is better. Living, you could perform merit.

By leading a life of celibacy and making fire sacrifices, much merit could be acquired. What will you do with this striving? Hard is the path of striving, difficult and not easily accomplished.”

Māra reciting these words stood in the presence of the Exalted One.

To Māra who spoke thus, the Exalted One replied:

“O Evil One, kinsman of the heedless! You have come here for your own sake.

Even an iota of merit is of no avail. To them who are in need of merit it behoves you, Māra, to speak thus.

Confidence (*saddhā*), self-control (*tapā*), perseverance (*virīya*), and wisdom (*paññā*) are mine. Me who am thus intent, why do you question about life?

Even the streams of rivers will this wind dry up. Why should not the blood of me who am thus striving dry up?

When blood dries up, the bile and phlegm also dry up. When my flesh wastes away, more and more does my mind get clarified. Still more do my mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration become firm.

While I live thus, experiencing the utmost pain, my mind does not long for lust! Behold the purity of a being!

Sense-desires (*kāmā*) are your first army. The second is called aversion for the holy life (*arati*). The third is hunger and thirst<sup>24</sup> (*khuppiṭṭhā*). The fourth is called craving (*taṇhā*). The fifth is sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*). The sixth is called fear (*bhīru*). The seventh is doubt<sup>25</sup> (*vicikicchā*), and the eighth is detraction and obstinacy (*makkha-thambha*). The ninth is gain (*lobha*), praise (*siloka*) and honour (*sakkāra*), and that ill-gotten fame (*yasa*). The tenth is the extolling of oneself and contempt for others (*attukkamaṣana-paravambhana*).

22. Another name for Māra. According to the Pali Commentaries there are five kinds of Māras: i. deity Māra (*devaputta*), ii. passion (*kilesa*), iii. kammic activities (*abhisankhāra*), iv. aggregates (*khandha*), and v. death (*maccu*).

23. Padhāna Sutta, (Sn iii.2)

24. Resulting from voluntary poverty.

25. That is, indecision as to the certainty of the goal.

This, Namuci, is your army, the opposing host of the Evil One. That army the coward does not overcome, but he who overcomes obtains happiness.

This Muñja<sup>26</sup> do I display! What boots life in this world! Better for me is death in the battle than that one should live on, vanquished!<sup>27</sup>

Some ascetics and brahmins are not seen plunged in this battle. They know not nor do they tread the path of the virtuous.

Seeing the army on all sides with Māra arrayed on elephant, I go forward to battle. Māra shall not drive me from my position. That army of yours, which the world together with gods conquers not, by my wisdom I go to destroy as I would an unbaked bowl with a stone.

Controlling my thoughts, and with mindfulness well-established, I shall wander from country to country, training many a disciple.

Diligent, intent, and practising my teaching, they, disregarding you, will go where having gone they grieve not."

### ***The Middle Path***

The ascetic Gotama was now fully convinced from personal experience of the utter futility of self-mortification which, though considered indispensable for deliverance by the ascetic philosophers of the day, actually weakened one's intellect, and resulted in lassitude of spirit. He abandoned for ever this painful extreme as did he the other extreme of self-indulgence which tends to retard moral progress. He conceived the idea of adopting the Golden Mean which later became one of the salient features of his teaching.

He recalled how when his father was engaged in ploughing, he sat in the cool shade of the rose-apple tree, absorbed in the contemplation of his own breath, which resulted in the attainment of the first jhāna (ecstasy).<sup>28</sup> Thereupon he thought: "Well, this is the path to enlightenment."

He realised that enlightenment could not be gained with such an utterly exhausted body: Physical fitness was essential for spiritual progress. So he decided to nourish the body sparingly and took some coarse food both hard and soft.

The five favourite disciples who were attending on him with great hopes thinking that whatever truth the Ascetic Gotama would comprehend, that would he impart to them, felt disappointed at this unexpected change of method and leaving him and the place too, went to Isipatana,

26. Warriors wear Muñja grass crest on their heads or on their banners to indicate that they will not retreat from the battlefield

27. *Saṅgāme me matam seyyo—Yañ-ce jīve parājito*

28. See Ch. 1, p. 4.

saying that “the Ascetic Gotama had become luxurious, had ceased from striving, and had returned to a life of comfort.”

At a crucial time when help was most welcome his companions deserted him leaving him alone. He was not discouraged, but their voluntary separation was advantageous to him though their presence during his great struggle was helpful to him. Alone, in sylvan solitudes, great men often realise deep truths and solve intricate problems.

### ***Dawn of Truth***

Regaining his lost strength with some coarse food, he easily developed the first jhāna which he gained in his youth. By degrees he developed the second, third and fourth jhānas as well.

By developing the jhānas he gained perfect one-pointedness of the mind. His mind was now like a polished mirror where everything is reflected in its true perspective.

Thus with thoughts tranquillised, purified, cleansed, free from lust and impurity, pliable, alert, steady, and unshakable, he directed his mind to the knowledge as regards “the reminiscence of past births” (*pubbe-nivāsānussati-ñāṇa*).

He recalled his varied lots in former existences as follows: first one life, then two lives, then three, four, five, ten, twenty, up to fifty lives; then a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand; then the dissolution of many world cycles, then the evolution of many world cycles, then both the dissolution and evolution of many world cycles. In that place he was of such a name, such a family, such a caste, such a dietary, such the pleasure and pain he experienced, such his life’s end. Departing from there, he came into existence elsewhere. Then such was his name, such his family, such his caste, such his dietary, such the pleasure and pain he did experience, such life’s end. Thence departing, he came into existence here.

Thus he recalled the mode and details of his varied lots in his former births.

This, indeed, was the *first knowledge* that he realised in the first watch of the night.

Dispelling thus the ignorance with regard to the past, he directed his purified mind to “the perception of the disappearing and reappearing of beings” (*cutūpapāta-ñāṇa*). With clairvoyant vision, purified and super-normal, he perceived beings disappearing from one state of existence and reappearing in another; he beheld the base and the noble, the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the miserable, all passing according to

their deeds. He knew that these good individuals, by evil deeds, words, and thoughts, by reviling the Noble Ones, by being misbelievers, and by conforming themselves to the actions of the misbelievers, after the dissolution of their bodies and after death, had been born in sorrowful states. He knew that these good individuals, by good deeds, words, and thoughts, by not reviling the Noble Ones, by being right believers, and by conforming themselves to the actions of the right believers, after the dissolution of their bodies and after death, had been born in happy celestial worlds.

Thus with clairvoyant supernormal vision he beheld the disappearing and the reappearing of beings.

This, indeed, was the *second knowledge* that he realised in the middle watch of the night.

Dispelling thus the ignorance with regard to the future, he directed his purified mind to “the comprehension of the cessation of corruptions”<sup>29</sup> (*āsavakkhaya ñāṇa*).

He realised in accordance with fact: “this is sorrow,” “this, the arising of sorrow,” “this, the cessation of sorrow,” “this, the path leading to the cessation of sorrow.” Likewise in accordance with fact he realised, “These are the corruptions,” “this, the arising of corruptions,” “this, the cessation of corruptions,” “this, the path leading to the cessation of corruptions.” Thus cognising, thus perceiving, his mind was delivered from the corruption of sensual craving; from the corruption of craving for existence; from the corruption of ignorance.

Being delivered, he knew, “Delivered am I,”<sup>30</sup> and he realised, “rebirth is ended; fulfilled the holy life; done what was to be done; there is no more of this state again.”<sup>31</sup>

This was the *third knowledge* that he realised in the last watch of the night.

Ignorance was dispelled, and wisdom arose; darkness vanished, and light arose.



29. *Āsavas* (defilements)—are those which flow right up to the topmost plane of existence with respect to spheres, or right up to the *gotrabhū* state, with respect to mind-flux. There are four *āsavas*, viz.: sense-desires (*kāma*), becoming (*bhava*), false views (*diṭṭhi*) and ignorance (*avijjā*). In this particular text only three are mentioned. Here *bhava* means the desire to be born in the realms of form and formless realms (*rūpa* and *arūpa bhava*).

30. *Vimutto'smi*.

31. *Khiṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇiyaṃ nāparaṃ itthattāyā'ti*.