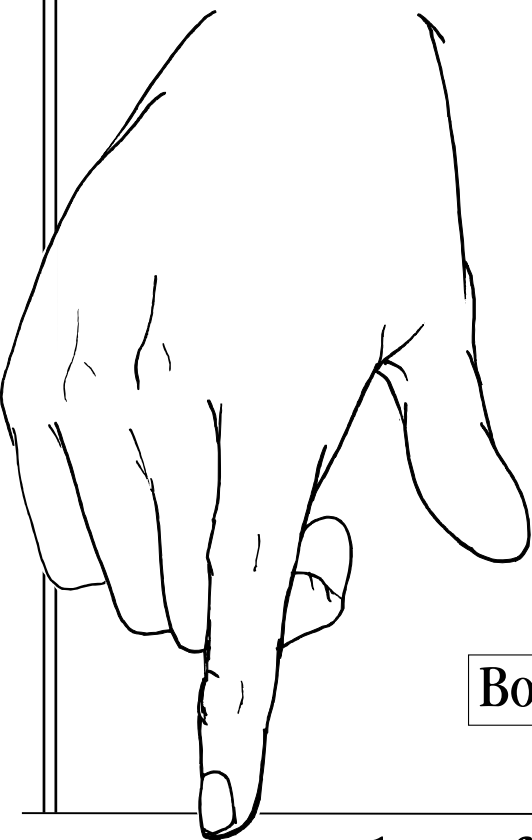


# Touching

the

# Earth



Books One to Four

A Poem on the Life of the Buddha

by Grevel Lindop

# Touching the Earth



## A Poem on the Life of the Buddha

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Grevel Lindop

Books One to Four

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## Note

This poem is an attempt to give some account of the life of the Buddha and certain events surrounding it.

As planned, it will eventually consist of thirty-two Books, telling the story of the Lord Buddha's life from birth to *Parinibbāna*<sup>1</sup>—and even beyond, since it will end with the Enlightenment of his closest disciple, Ānanda, after his Master's passing away. The Master's own attainment of full Enlightenment will be placed at the centre of the poem, probably in Book 16.

The poem is based on traditional sources: passages in the *Vinaya*, *Suttas*, *Jātakas* and other early texts. These are explored and integrated in the light of imaginative vision, with the intention of bringing out the human, mythical and cosmic depth and significance of the events.

The reader will soon be aware that the writing does not aspire to be either 'original' or 'modern'. The matter is traditional, and since the poem records events which take place in an archaic society, and must encompass the speech not only of peasants and thieves but of kings and deities (both no doubt schooled in all the subtleties of ancient Indian rhetoric), a colloquial modern style would have been out of place. Rather, the style and perspective draw on the resources of both western and eastern epic poetry. The poem aims to be accessible to a twenty-first century

1 Final Passing Away.

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reader or hearer, whilst standing outside literary fashions.

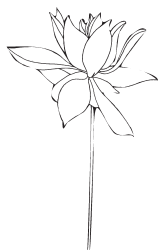
As to form, the poem is written in a five-stressed line, rhyming in couplets. Often this is the familiar iambic pentameter, but at many points, for reasons of pace or emphasis, more syllables are added. The five-stress pattern, however, remains unbroken.

A few words about the title may be helpful. It has many meanings but three in particular may be mentioned. *Touching the Earth* is, broadly, a poem about the earth and our place in it and on it; more especially, it is concerned with that point in the cosmic cycle at which the timeless, perfect and deathless touches this world of time, suffering and death, rather as an immense golden wheel might touch the ground at just one point; and most specifically the title refers to the 'Earth-Touching' gesture with which, on the night of the Enlightenment, the *Bodhisatta* affirms his unshakeable place on the earth and his unbending determination to complete his task.

May the writing, reading and transmission of this poem be for the benefit of all sentient beings!



# BOOK ONE



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## The Argument

(i) The poet invokes the Gods Who Have Power Over the Creations of Others to inspire his song. (ii) The hermit Asita in meditation is told by the Gods of the Thirty-Three that the future Buddha, having ended his sojourn in the heaven of the Delighted Gods and descended into a human womb, has been born at Kapilavatthu. (iii) Asita travels to the city of Kapilavatthu, where the King, his former pupil, tells him of the miraculous events surrounding the birth of the new prince. (iv) Asita sees the child and predicts his future Buddhahood; then weeps, foreseeing that he himself will die too soon to hear the teaching.

---

(i)

**T**he mountain laced with copper underfoot  
Is veined with miners' tunnels; but the root  
Of the matter lies deeper, nearer the heart  
Of this red outcrop, where the stories start  
And myth like water gathers into springs  
Soaked clear by passage through so many things  
Only a stone-cold purity remains,  
Distilling past the sandstone's crystal grains.

Under the cliff, impacted rockfalls keep  
The boundaries of that poem-haunted sleep  
Where Arthur lies, ringed with companions,  
War-gear, horses: a heap of strength that once  
Pointed the future. Who will open the stone  
Now, or pursue those passages alone?  
Lone steps are hard, and these lead further still:  
Past the recesses of the human will,  
Past kings and futures, past the bedrock of earth,  
Past language, past the origins of birth,



---

Past the self's trace.

You Gods who take delight

In the creations of others, turn your sight

Into this place a moment: ladies and lords

Clothed all in flame and music, give and take words

Once more at least with man, before this age

Plunges into forgetfulness, the page

Unwritten, music stilled, the algae rank

On shrunken pools where former poets drank.

There is still time. Utter one syllable

For us: let it unfold in its long fall

Through number, music, light, into our world,

Our speech, where—like a seed darkly unfurled

By the wet earth that hides it—it can unseal

Fragrance, colour, fragility, the real

Uncontemplated pattern of an art

Where beauty flowers from wisdom of the heart.

Be generous: without you we are dumb,

And stammering to your threshold I have come

Bringing matter that asks all that you can

Lavish on any work of god or man.



---

Harsh and uncouth these words; none now can speak  
In harmonies like those the Italian, Greek,  
Latin or Sanskrit poets used to sing  
In different times; our Anglo-Saxon making  
Was hammered goldwork once, sharp and abrupt,  
Kingship, swordplay and fire, the bright ale cupped  
In unflawed metal. We'll use what we can find,  
Golddust among the gravel; transmute the mind  
As best we can, offer it to the Lord,  
The lightbringer, the teacher who restored  
The lost path for our age.

Give me your breath  
To praise once more that way past birth and death,  
Outside the worlds but starting from this ground,  
A prince's life, a Buddha's, his who found  
Safety, coolness, a lamp, a jewelled gate,  
A garden where the unspoiled virtues wait.

All is impermanent. That teaching must  
Itself at last lie hidden in the dust,  
Waiting another who will understand  
Its subtle pattern, drifted with the sand



---

Of our confusions, clear it once again  
And show the world a path out of its pain.  
But now the way stands open: for a time  
Echoes of breathborn words can hold sublime  
Limpid harmonics of a perfect truth,  
Rainbows in scattered shells. And if uncouth  
Or alien workmanship surround the theme,  
The intention's good: let these strange makings seem  
A kind of tribute, like that Viking hoard  
Thrust under salt turf where the Atlantic roared  
And banged the cliffs: naively huddled in,  
Coins, brooches, sword-hilts, and among the thin  
Coiled earth-clogged gold and silver, a carved stone  
Buddha-statue, palmsized treasure thrown  
There by what tides of sea, thought, commerce? Hurl'd  
And cherished in a rockfast Northern world  
Where no trees grow.

The budding forests still  
Clothe all the lower slopes of this rough hill;  
The wind harps on an alphabet of trees—  
Beech which is *book* in the old languages,



---

Oak which is *door*. It is a March full moon,  
The time's propitious. While the afternoon  
Holds on, familiar things keep shape, but light  
Will take their substance soon, we enter night  
And all things change. So we must leave our time,  
Our insubstantial world; music of rhyme,  
Even, grown strange to us as it becomes  
A tuned percussion of forgotten drums,  
A patterning of voices heard in dreams,  
Light chiming in the mind's unruffled streams  
Whose fountains are in other worlds. From here  
Guide us, bright ones, through song and memory, steer  
Our course over the ocean of this story,  
Strange, human, limitless, told for the glory  
Of the three jewels, in hope of blessing all  
Beings: past, present, future; large or small;  
In every world. And now, an end to doubt:  
Step past the line, the threshold. Time to set out.



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(ii)

Always there have been some who explored  
The octaves of the universe, and poured  
The mind's energies into contemplation,  
Refinement of the heart, bright penetration  
Of the one to the One; hunting in the mazes  
Of world and mind for the well-hidden places  
Where peace is found, to touch or pass through the circle  
Of living light that binds in the conceivable.  
One such was Asita. How he had come  
To the bare rocky cleft that was his home  
Nobody knows; but as a hermit there,  
A bright-eyed wrinkled sage with matted hair,  
He lived, poor as a bushman, owning a thin  
Cotton robe, a foodbowl, antelope-skin  
Rug for a seat, a wooden staff, no more.  
Fed by the villagers downhill, who were in awe  
Of his piercing gaze and gift of prophecy  
(And begged at times the herbal lore which he



---

Dispensed only a moments of real need),  
He lived a life from which both fear and greed  
Seemed long since fallen away. In the rock's shade  
Or under a liquid blaze of stars he made  
An art of stilling the breath, distilling the thin  
Mountain air to a radiant essence within  
The gaunt, scarred body, mind poised like a hawk  
Riding clear airs of thought, hearing gods talk  
Sometimes, or merging with silence.

On this day  
When his heart, turning homeward, found its way  
Down through the spacious frequencies of thought  
Towards our world, its subtle hearing caught  
Ripples and happy turbulence of sound  
(As a shifting wind will bring scraps of fairground—  
Music to a child's ear in a summer noon)  
And focusing attention there, he was soon  
Engulfed by a laughing cloud of gods at play,  
As a swimmer is seized by a wave and wrapped in spray.  
Their poignant happiness was like a perfume  
That flowered and broke in textured eddies, bloom

---

Of windflung silk, powder of nebulous stars,  
A musical laughter in counterpoint over bars  
Of time profound and intricate in the measure  
Of a world whose earth is intellectual pleasure.

Gathering his attention, Asita framed  
A question, willed towards this gentle, unnamed  
Shoal of companions: 'Happy ones, if you can pause  
From the wheel of the dance that carries you, what cause  
Sets you laughing and shakes the subtle air  
With sharper joy than a human heart can bear?'

And 'Long—' the answer rang like an echo, 'Long  
By the string of time that threads up the world's song  
Have we waited for truth, we the Thirty-Three,  
Have we watched the blossoms grow on the great world-tree,  
Grow and fade, and the petals fall to the ground,  
And never among them one new truth was found  
Until our grandsires, the Gods who Dwell in Delight,  
Took up the flower whose sweetness puts to flight  
Greed, hatred, darkness—the baby born but once  
In a great year of the universal aeons;  
Who will untangle the intricate world like a ball



---

Of string; the master falconer whose call  
Will summon gods like hawks to his hand; the child  
Whose open eyes will break the spell that beguiled  
Beings since memory started. Wakeful he passed  
From our world into the womb; and now for a last  
Time is born, and now is wrapped in sleep,  
Not dreaming the path he must tread, or how he will keep  
Faith with the quest the Awakened Ones in turn  
Fulfil: enmeshed in human life, to learn  
Alone, entire, the lost and single way  
Which Buddhas can proclaim, and only they.'

Laughing, they tumbled back into their dance  
And turned away; but Asita seized the chance,  
Concentring all his being, to cry out, 'Where?'  
And a floating chord unwound on the quivering air  
To 'Kapilavatthu'.

Only the echo remained.  
He bedded awareness once more into the woodgrained,  
Sunburnished statue of his body, stiff  
And dusty on a stone ledge where the cliff  
Was fractured into shelves, and boulders made,





---

From noon to dusk, a just-sufficient shade  
While heat poured over a steep valley, filled  
With trees, except where thumbsized fields were tilled  
And threads of silver, quivering, ran between  
Pale strips of barley and the forest's green.  
Asita shivered too; and a cold flame  
Lit up his heart; then crushing sweetness came  
So that he staggered as he rose to stand,  
Pressing the rockface with a childish hand,  
Seeing his past and future form a ring—  
Act, result, process forged into one thing  
Past human knowing. Kapilavatthu: there  
He'd start and end: a life spent to prepare  
For what would dawn in that remembered town.  
He stood to pray; then took his first steps down  
The straggling cliffpath to his shelter; clear  
And timeless, now his last journey drew near.



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(iii)

A journey into stories. While the sun  
Travelled to the horizon, and the dun  
Grainfields gave way to sparse-bushed plains, he walked  
Through villages and heard how people talked—  
And questioned him—about the king's new son:  
Happy, wanting excitement. Asita gave none:  
Out on the mountain, what could he have heard?  
Even from gods, he would not broach a word  
Of anything he had himself not seen.  
Rumours of miracles, of signs that mean  
Different things to different people, had spread  
And multiplied. Asita shook his head,  
Keeping his judgment clear for what he should find  
(As a village doctor cuts through a crowd to unbind  
A wound and judge for himself, not by the loud  
Excited contradictions of the crowd).

Near nightfall he paced unhurried up the hill  
Crowned by the city walls, a wisp of sun still  
Trembling at the world's edge like a last drop



---

Of molten gold; but as he reached the top,  
Resting briefly above the dusty ascent,  
That gold fell into darkness; the gatekeepers bent,  
Each shouldering a leaf of the city gate  
That groaned in its curved groove with all the weight  
Of squared timber, iron sheathing, massive bolts.  
Asita stepped forward; but like one who revolts  
From leaving a heavy task unfinished, the man  
Slammed his gate into place and briskly began  
Unhooking iron chains to lock round its pair,  
Muttering merely 'Too late.' But the other took care  
To peer through the gathering dusk. 'Let the Rishi come in,'  
He gasped, and threw back his weight to reverse the spin  
Of the polished hinges at the last instant. Taking  
Note of the omen, the seer entered; and making  
His way up the sloping street, he heard the boom  
As the gate closed and the crossbeam thudded home.  
Up smoothpaved streets he walked, seeing the glow  
Of household lamps through fretted rosewood throw  
Faint stencillings of gold across his tread,  
Hearing laughter from gardens, music that led



---

Soft voices into labyrinths of sound,  
And on the cooler night airs that surround  
A man pacing alone as darkness blooms  
About him, breathed woodsmoke, incense from rooms  
Where shrines were honoured, spices and sweet wine  
From family meals, perfumes from every vine  
And flowering plant that revels on stone walls  
To flood the air with sweetness as night falls—  
Yet unenticed. And as a needle drawn  
Toward a single pole, his mind was borne  
On the meniscus of the senses, clear  
Above what touch, taste, smell, the eye or ear  
Might bring, but not engaged; aiming alone  
For that one point, which must be seen and known.

It brought him to the palace steps, and there  
He stood to wait, withdrawing all but bare  
Attention from his body, resting upright  
Without a thought, his mind spacious as night  
Over the settling town. The stars cohered,  
Time was unreal.

In due course footsteps neared,



---

A man knelt: might the Sadhu speak with the King?  
Asita took a long breath, and collecting  
His strength around it stepped across the threshold,  
His dusty feet human against the cold  
Polish of marble floors and the piled silk  
Of rugs; and then (once water, perfumes, milk,  
Offered for washing and refreshment, were gone)  
A single minister ushered him on  
To a carved doorway, gathered a curtain aside—  
And Asita glimpsed an eager face that defied  
Yet invited memory to know it, as with a complete  
And happy abandon the King rose from his seat,  
Stepped forward and bowed to the ground. Asita touched  
The curled hair in blessing, his own heart clutched  
By sudden, forgotten warmth. Suddodana  
Rose, weeping and laughing. 'My more-than-father,'  
He said, 'You come from the past quicker than thought:  
Within this hour I ordered that you should be sought  
Tomorrow, at first light, and begged to come—  
Or begged to let me stand by your mountain home  
Barefoot on rock or snow until you would speak,



---

If need were, But my heart is crammed and I seek  
Your knowledge more than I did as a tongue-tied boy  
When first you taught me.'

Asita paused to enjoy,  
A moment, his own hovering sense of the strange  
In the familiar, the constant sparkle of change  
Between remembered boy's face and man's,  
The self-importance and self-command, the glance  
Quick, childlike, but masked. Compassion rose  
Within him for this one, as for all those  
Who wield the enormous toy of power, and find  
Its bias growing native to the mind.  
He smiled 'You have a son?' They sat; and the King  
Told his story.

'Great sage, as the planets bring  
In the circle of time what is old again to light,  
It seems we live in days of legend. Tonight  
My son sleeps in a room across this court,  
Yet into our mere human house was brought,  
It seems, in the hands of gods. Ten months ago,  
Maya, our queen, as often, went to bestow



---

Gifts and alms on the poor and the Brahmin priests  
And other ascetics—for no banquet feasts  
Her heart so much as giving of good gifts,  
Above all when the moon's energy lifts  
Such acts in power. It was a full-moon day,  
As now. Returned in the noon heat, she lay  
To rest, silk-shaded in an upper room  
But cooled more richly by those webs the loom  
Of dreams throws round the sleep of innocent minds:  
For with that sudden heart-leap that unbinds  
The playful spirit from the heaped body's trance,  
She found herself pillowed, lifted at once  
Dizzily high over a diamond-range  
Of our cragged, needled Himalaya; and strange  
Generous faces, bearded, laughing-eyed,  
Elaborately-crowned, rose at each side  
And the bed floated raftlike on their hands  
Who can lift mountains, or eclipse whole lands  
With a palm's shadow. And so the Four Great Kings,  
Guardians of space, gentle protectors of beings,  
Gatekeepers of the directions, carried her



---

With no more than a summer-breeze's stir  
Through ice-clear air down to a golden house  
Perched on a silver mountain; perilous  
The pinnacles and rifts of shining snow  
That walled it from the clouded world below.  
But in its court a sunmeshed lotus-pool  
Asked her to bathe. She plunged, stretched, floated, cool  
And weightless in the water until she was beckoned  
By three maidens. One towelled her dry, the second  
Gave her perfumes and garlands, and the third led  
Under the golden gables to a bed.

She lay, and sighed; and so, asleep, she dreamed  
She slept again; and as she slept it seemed  
She dreamt: sleep within sleep, world within world,  
Dream within dream, as the shut lotus is curled  
Inside the bud, and the bud deep in the pool  
Dreams of the light.

It seemed the air was full  
Of music, and she lay under a tree  
Whose woven branches were the harmony  
Of stars and numbers, and where bright birds sang





---

Garlands of language, fugues of speech that rang  
With praise of waking. And she turned to see  
Approaching, treading the soft grass delicately,  
A royal elephant, unharnessed, white  
As rice or quartz. He bowed down at her right  
Side, then knelt, reached forward with his trunk  
And gently, suddenly struck her. She would have shrunk,  
Awake, from such a blow; but, as she dreamed,  
It caused no pain or shock; the creature seemed  
To pass into her body; and remained  
Under her heart, a white pearl that retained  
Its radiance visibly within her flesh,  
Diffusing soft light through the body's mesh  
Of nerve and vein: a full moon clouds enclose,  
Or sun transfused through petals of a rose.

‘She woke. And soon we learned she was with child:  
But ten months’ talk had still not reconciled  
The Brahmins’ various theories of her dream—  
If the child would be hero or god, supreme  
In war, wealth, luck or wisdom, or consigned  
To some strange destiny still undefined—

---

When, with her maids, the Queen set out today  
For Devadaha, six hours' journey away,  
To see her parents and—she hoped—give birth  
In her own city. Above the rutted earth  
And dust of the long road her palanquin  
Floated like a gold ship, shadowed within  
By silk curtains, steered by courtiers' hands  
Sensitive to the road's uneven demands,  
Until they came to Lumbini—a grove  
Midway between our cities. There, above  
The road, green branches make a roof, and throw  
Light-shaken shadows to the grass below,  
And paths fold in among the flowering trees:  
Dim labyrinth where songbirds and wild bees  
Take refuge from the sun. The cavalcade  
Paused here. The Queen stepped down into the shade  
To rest through the hot hours; and pacing in  
The cool, she felt her labour-pangs begin.

    'She had no choice, but called her ladies round,  
Who gathered in a circle and unwound  
A bale of cotton cloth to improvise



---

Seclusion for her. In that grove there rise,  
Everywhere, silver trunks of the sal trees,  
And reaching up, she caught at one of these,  
Grasping a bough which seemed, she said, to bend  
Like her reflection towards her, so its end  
Was well within her reach. It took her weight  
And there, standing, she bore our child—as fate  
Decreed, quite unprepared. And yet all thought  
The gods were there, that shining hands first caught  
The child descending, before human hands  
Could grasp him; that the atmosphere (which stands  
Hushed and palpably dry at noon) was swept  
By sparkling dews, as if gods laughed and wept  
And brandished winds, until, seeming to share  
The after-shock of birth, both earth and air  
Trembled as though the pillars of the world  
Moved on their plinths. Some said white flowers, pearly  
With fresh dawn-dew, sprang where his footsoles pressed  
The grass an instant, when the nurse (to test  
His strength and fortune) held him near the ground  
To stride as newborns will; that he looked round



---

As if he recognised each person there,  
In that brief moment when the mind, still clear,  
Not yet subdued to its fresh childish mould,  
Can pierce one with the wisdom of the old—  
And then became all child, turning to rest,  
Content and sleepy, on his mother's breast.  
These are the stories. Now, Sage: interpret them!

The King sat back. Asita thumbed the hem  
Of his cotton robe; considered the weave of events,  
And the thread of the story unwinding.

‘O King, these portents’  
(He said) ‘may be real or unreal. But if this one saw,  
Or that one, and what is seen makes a pattern, the law  
For the seer is this, to interpret the pattern alone,  
Not regarding the separate motive of this one or that one.  
I see such a pattern unfold. One thing is clear,  
That by his own wish this child is born here—  
By wish, the first step of the road to power,  
Has chosen out a proper place and hour  
To enter the world. What else may lie ahead  
Is still unfixed. And nothing can be said



---

By one who has not seen the prince; the eye  
Elaborates whole poems round points that lie  
Quite lost to memory. Let him be brought here:  
His past, and the scope of his future, may appear.'

The King considered. 'The boy may be asleep:  
Long is the journey to birth, and the pathway steep  
A child must take to gasp in human air.  
He rests in his mother's arms. Let him nestle there,  
Untroubled, tonight at least: a nurse can take  
Child from mother by day, when he happens to wake.'

But Asita shook his head, the sunk eyes sparkling:  
'Not long do such great beings sleep, O King!  
Such beings are inclined to wakefulness.  
But for us who would know them, one hour more or less  
May measure our opportunity. Time is short.  
Already the signs may be fading. Let him be brought!'

The King shivered, acknowledging what was said,  
In full, at last. With a movement of the head  
Called an attendant, spoke, and rose from his seat.  
Asita cleared his heart of thoughts, the deceit  
Of desire and expectation, to follow silent



---

(Inwardly, outwardly) the King and the servant  
Down walks that passed a garden intricate  
As an astrolabe tilted towards the great  
Etched living silver disc of the moon, then turned  
To the dark of a hall where a shaded oillamp burned.

(iv)

Out of the mothering darkness a woman stared  
A moment, then let fall a curtain. King and longhaired  
Ascetic waited, suspended, knowing as men  
The depth of a hidden female world. Unshaken  
The lamp's flame stood at centre of the night  
And they stood without speaking. Then in a bright  
Bustle of laughter and shawls three women swept  
Through the arch and knelt. She in the centre kept  
Close-wrapped in her arms a child, swathed in raw silk:  
And where the fringe brushed the child's cheek, its milk—  
White cleanliness was stunned by the gold light  
Of the boy's complexion, for to Asita's sight



---

The new skin blazed like fire.

Before she could lay  
(Respectful) the child at his feet, he felt himself sway—  
As if fainting—forward, but gripped his staff, to kneel  
Abandoned, at the child's feet, where he could feel  
The light of the mind break over him in waves,  
His heart torn loose by joy, like a man who saves  
Himself—barely—by one hand that still keeps  
Gripped to a raft while an ocean current sweeps  
Over him, through him, ebbing and stilling at length  
To let him draw breath and gather in his strength.  
Raising his eyes he looked, as a child at a child:  
And the boy knew him, and understood, and smiled.

Nonplussed in delight, Asita's heart was stilled  
On the verge of astonished laughter. The hall had filled  
Behind him with courtiers, servants, all who could come  
To witness some great and strange event, but the thrum  
Of subdued voice and eager thought could not blemish the space  
Of silence where old man and child paused face to face.

The placid hands' unfolding of the cloth  
Ceased, and Asita broke his gaze, though loath



---

To take his eyes from those blue depths, to look  
At the naked shining child. As a written book  
To us, were the body's marks to the sages of old:  
Proportion, feature and subtle aura told  
Their own story to those who had eyes to see,  
And Asita, entranced, contemplated a body  
Of the perfect human archetype, complete  
From the lightcrowned head to the wheelmarked hands and feet:  
The thirty-two great and eighty lesser signs  
Focused to living utterance, the lines  
Of the ancient verses breathing and expressed  
Through harmony of head and limbs and breast,  
The tides of versatile energy within  
The gentle radiance of the golden skin—  
Signs of a world-emperor, or, more,  
A freer of worlds; the melodious cries, the jaw  
Like a little lion's, made for uttering truth  
Soundly, sweetly,—told that neither in youth  
Nor in great age would this one turn away  
From his self-set task. Not in an hour or a day  
Would these marks fade.





---

Then, like an aged oak  
Transfixed and shuddering when the lightning-stroke  
Pierces it to the core, and every vein,  
Flooded with power, flourishes again  
Gold crackling leaves of energy and fire—  
That lifts its head a moment, towering higher  
To grapple earth and sky with crooked hands,  
Uttering thunder while its body stands  
Bridging the worlds—As it rose full height  
And turned towards the King, his eyes alight  
With more than human joy:

‘Tonight, O King,  
The world’s great year wheels round to its new spring;  
Now human hands and woven cloth can hold  
A child whose touch will turn the age to gold,  
A prince whose empire will outspread the span  
Of space and memory allowed to man;  
Who in the battle of a single night  
Will scatter greed and hate in headlong flight;  
Yet, scorning thrones and palaces, will love  
An empty mountain or a forest grove,



---

And seated at the wild fig's knotted root  
Break in his mouth the three worlds' sweetest fruit  
While serpent-kings, furred round the ancient tree,  
Sway gold-tiled hoods to make his canopy.

Out of all farmers this one shall be best,  
Raising from one ploughed furrow boundless harvest  
Where no seed sprouts; pilot of matchless craft,  
Over the pitching seas shall steer a raft  
To carry myriads into safety, far  
From the world's hunger and the heart's grim war—  
Sleepless steersman whose quiet eye will find  
A hidden starmap for the clouded mind.  
Look at him well: your child is the new sun  
By whose long light the coming age will run.

Not all will hear: though he teach gods and men,  
The fevers of the world will rage again;  
Cities like this in gold will rise and set,  
War-driven fleets on hostile seacoasts fret,  
Blood clot, iron shriek, forests fall, envy kill,  
Delirious creatures hunt new wealth to spill;  
But while the faintest echo of his voice



---

Persists, there will remain a different choice,  
A hidden pathway which this prince shall teach  
By which, through the heart's stillness, all may reach  
Safety, coolness, clear light, a jewelled gate,  
A garden where the unspoiled virtues wait.'

Asita ceased. Silence unbearable,  
Shining, filled with knowledge, held the hall  
And each one understood; until mere thought  
Resumed, and mind's simplicity was caught  
In desire and doubt. The King, his face in a glow  
Of achievement, turned to Asita, and slow—  
Measuring his words in caution and respect,  
Began, 'Master, if this child's future is decked  
With such weight of glory and power, if he is to reign  
Over a world and an age, we must think how to train  
His heart, his mind, his body for the task  
That comes to his hand. For horse and bow, we shall ask—  
And have—the great masters of each from the ends of the earth;  
For law and noble conduct, one of his birth  
Is already prepared; and the rest our court shall teach.

But that which causes an emperor's arm to reach



---

From ocean to ocean is something more than these:  
He must be wise; must cherish the ancient verses,  
Know their four meanings and root them into his heart;  
Then go beyond them, having the skill to part  
Truth from seeming; to measure depth and height  
In the thoughts of men and the ways of wrong and right,  
Nurturing his empire as the farmer his field,  
Knowing laws of ripeness and rawness, of when to yield  
While time does its work—and when to strike with a shock  
That leaves time staggered, crushing the moment like rock  
Powdered under the chariot-wheel's iron rim.

‘To be such was not my fate. But if for him  
These gifts are prepared, he must be rightly led  
To grasp and wield them. Years ago you departed,  
Master, when I came of age, your work complete,  
As it seemed. And since the hour when I took the seat  
Of kingship in this hall not a day has passed  
But I have thanked the gods for the seed you cast  
With judgment and open hand into a mind  
Then heedless and barren enough. And still I find  
That out of your words has grown whatever I know





---

'I weep for myself: the sage who has mastered breath  
Now chokes on his sobs. The seer has seen his own death.  
No oil, alchemy, mantra will sustain  
The lamp at its last flare, that drops again  
To grease, soot, darkness. The shadows close apace:  
Out of the coming light I turn my face.  
Not I am the teacher, O King, but he: who will reach  
The world's one path, and sing its steps into speech  
When I am gone—hurled far into the bowl  
Where lives are mixed: doomed to repeat the whole,  
Perhaps, of what I have lived before I stand  
Again where I may touch with human hand  
The hand of one who opens that locked door.  
Thinking myself rich, I have been a poor  
Fool in all but delusions. Wiser, I know  
That I know nothing. I honour him, and I go.'  
Seizing the staff, he strode down the long hall  
And the crowd parted before him, silent: his footfall  
Echoed among the roofbeams.

As he stepped out  
Alone to the garden, his body was wrapped about



---

In a haze of gentle fire, and over the hills,  
Igniting the air, the sun's first light, that spills  
Like gold from the crucible, flooded the orchards, the plain,  
The glinting housetops: and Asita paused, his pain  
Dissolved in mysterious joy. (Does it matter, he thought,  
That the gift is not mine? Let it at least be brought  
To one who can use it.) Descending as the town woke,  
He asked for the house of his sister's son and spoke  
Briefly, carefully to him; then turned away  
To reach the city walls while still the day  
Kept the last spacious coldness of the dawn.

Those gates (patterned with ivory and horn)  
Opened to let him pass; and we lose sight  
Of his frayed outline, shrinking as the light  
Grows keener, trudging maybe against the slopes  
Of cold Himalaya, tracing the twisted ropes  
Of mountain streams up to the snowline, breath  
Drawn harder, fainter, as life poured towards death  
Insistently now: to sit at last, perhaps,  
Near some skydazzled summit where the caps  
And cornices of snowglazed mountains shone,



---

Cloudbannered, diamond-edged, and the mind, set on  
Endless unstained awareness, fading at last  
Like a white bird lost on a white sky, passed  
Out of life into life.

Asita, friend,  
Brother and semblance, from the aeon's end  
These words distantly greet you—who must wait  
In some high realm the expiry of your fate,  
Caught in a happiness that takes too long.  
May some bright echo reach you from this song!  
Both speak of wonders that we never saw—  
You early, and I late. Such is time's law:  
Our human brevity wounds like a knife.  
Shall we meet, Asita, in some other life?

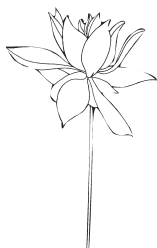






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# BOOK TWO




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## The Argument

- (i) The Brahmins assemble to give the young Prince a name. Eight of them, specialists in the interpretation of bodily signs, make predictions about his future career, seven foreseeing two possible courses for him, the eighth (the boy Kondañña) only one. (ii) Queen Maya dies and is reborn in the Heaven of the Delighted Gods. (iii) King Suddodana conceives a plan to deter his son from choosing the life of a religious ascetic.

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(i)

 way of putting it: unsatisfactory—  
But we must make the best of these refractory  
And double-natured creatures, words, compound  
Of air with notion, mental image with sound  
Fetched from the body's gleaming caverns and hard  
Vibrating gristle and bone, the outbreath jarred  
To rich harmonics where it drags the reed  
Of the mortal throat. And after all, some seed  
Of a world, a truth, a poem is involved  
In the layers of every note we utter. Unsolved  
Riddles of truth and poetry await  
The gentle army of one hundred and eight  
Brahmins who process on the fifth day  
To the palace gates: for all know it is they  
Who now must balance the mysteries and proclaim—  
Auspicious, confident—the new Prince's name.

Greeted with drums and flutes, they take their place  
One by one in the council chamber, each face

---

A phrase in the human lexicon of moods  
From the wryly observant down to the one that broods  
Importantly on its learning: dusky bees  
Impelled to swarm for a few hours in these  
Unaccustomed halls; and then, having conferred,  
Part, to disclose the honey of a word.

And chief among them were the seven who came  
To know the child, more than to choose the name:  
To read the body's marks, and so declare  
The implicit poem of life configured there  
With all its colours, ambiguities,  
Terror or brightness. And the first of these  
Was Rāma, gentlest scholar of the age,  
Smiling and unremarkable, a sage  
Whose wisdom was unblemished friendliness  
That opened minds, allowed hearts to confess  
Things secret even from themselves. With him  
Came Dhaja, like his opposite: a grim  
Ascetic figure, taller than the rest,  
Gaunt and deep-eyed, a face that seemed possessed  
Of more insight than body could sustain,



---

Startling to onlookers, knowledge as pain  
Willingly suffered but unquenchable.  
Then Lakkhana the wizard, strangest of all,  
Came hung with amulets, lined and tattooed  
Like a wizened tree steeped in the depth of a wood  
Talking with things not human for so long  
That the sigh of an unleafed branch or an insect's song  
Brought messages from the corners of the world  
To his long-lobed ear. Beside him, Mantin's pearled  
Rosary floated between the finger and thumb  
Of a master of mantra, to whom the Vedas would come  
As living thought for utterance, every word  
A realm of experience, vowel and consonant heard  
As flute and drum of the gods, or the blood and bone  
Of the human body, another's or his own.  
Suyama next, whose watchful eye could split  
The dying breath from the thought that follows it,  
Knowing the maze behind the worlds, the room  
Of countless doors between deathbed and womb  
Where, half-asleep, half-waking, mind selects  
A life where past deeds ripen to effects;



---

Subhoja, master of eating, healer who worked  
Through diet, cleansing the body of humours that lurked  
(Hot, frigid or tasteless) in stomach or blood,  
Cleansing the heart or the mind with the tincture of food  
From herb, fruit, root, salt, giving delight or surprise  
To the body's absorption; one whose experienced eyes  
Read physical form and complexion in a long look.  
And, entering last of the seven, Sudatta took  
His seat and smiled to the boy Kondañña, who bowed  
And sat by his master's rug, modest and proud  
To attend this penniless teacher, who preferred  
(Though noble) to live precariously as a bird  
Without a nest, having given away his own  
House, lands, and cattle; throughout the kingdom known  
As a teacher of giving; and, in famine or feast,  
As the alms of the day decided, had not ceased  
To give time, learning, thought to all who would ask.

But now, with suitable ceremonies, the task  
Of interpretation and naming must begin.  
The King greets the assembly; the child is brought in  
And the web of analysis spun, with chanting of songs,



---

Reflection washed and brightened, what belongs  
To the mind's surface is quietened and thought  
Settled. The means to the needed end are brought.

Minutes or hours later, the King, from the rim  
Of a huge dream mandala, falls awake. Before him  
Stands Lakkhana. 'Will your Majesty please to hear  
What must now be spoken?' Suddodana nods, the fear  
And excitement rippling within, but his face a serene  
Mask, relaxed and suitably kingly. Between  
Speech and song, and as if reciting a tale  
From a very long distance, Lakkhana's old and frail  
But placid voice begins; and one by one  
Each of the seven sets forth his conclusion:

'The Prince's destiny is spoken by signs  
Borne on his body. The forms, proportions and lines  
Tell of one who in previous lives prepared  
For birth at this time. No effort has he spared  
To perfect the virtues: he carries the thirty-two marks,  
Of which most heroes bear one or two—mere sparks  
Which here unite in a blaze. For such a one  
There are two paths; no more. Prepare: your son





---

Will either be king of the world, and rule as his own  
The sun-swept, ocean-rimmed earth; or reject the throne,  
Go forth in rags, a wandering hermit, and find  
New happiness to nourish humankind,  
Being a Buddha, an Awakened One,  
By whose long light the coming age will run.

‘So much for his fate. As for the choice of name,  
Let it be Siddhattha—The One who Achieves his Aim.’

Speechless and moveless Suddodana sat, transfixed  
With delight and dismay, turned to stone by mixed  
Emotions like one in a mountain-dream who sees,  
On every side, treasures and precipices  
And cannot take a step from the peak where he clings  
Until he wakes to the comfort of usual things.  
But there was no waking.

Lakkhana’s voice again:

‘So say the seven. But if you would entertain  
A different view’—He caught Sudatta’s eye,  
Who nodded, suppressing a smile, ‘the boy would try  
His skill. Though young, he has a certain gift  
For this seeing.’ Suddodana, dazed, made the effort to shift



---

His attention to where the boy Kondañña knelt,  
Shy and eager. Their eyes met, and the King felt  
(In his extremity) comforted, refreshed,  
And reassured by those dark eyes, long-lashed  
As a calf's, and as gentle, as if what the boy might say  
Could only settle and heal. 'Let him speak as he may.  
No oracle could be stranger than what we have heard.'

    'Two paths there are for such a one, no third,'  
Kondañña sang, 'To judge by the outer signs.  
But subtler yet are truths beyond forms and lines:  
For him not two paths open here but one.  
Barefoot he shall leave the carpet for ways untrodden,  
His seat the root of the world's primordial tree,  
Richer than kings the splendour of his poverty.  
Do what you like, he will reject the throne,  
Go forth in the ascetic's robes, alone,  
And after untold hardships he will find  
New happiness to nourish every kind  
Of being; a Buddha, an exalted one,  
By whose long light the coming age shall run.

    'So much for his fate. As for the choice of name,



---

Let it be Siddhattha, the One Who Achieves his Aim.'

Tears filled Suddodana's eyes. With more than love  
He looked at his son in the nurse's arms; and above  
The confusions of his heart, friendship arose  
For the soft-spoken youth Kondañña, who outplayed those  
Serious Brahmins at their own game. But there caught,  
In a soft recess of his heart, a barb, as he thought,  
Abruptly, of his dynasty ended, the realm  
Lawless, the palace looted, his son at the helm  
Of no world-state but a gaggle of priests like these  
Who dared affront him with two-faced prophecies—  
Respecting decorum, he bit back his anger and bowed  
Correctly, then turned to leave, the silent crowd  
Of seers behind him.

At the door a man knelt:  
Suddodana paused, stiffly, like one who felt  
His self-control shattering. But he waited to hear  
The message. 'O King, the Queen is sick and we fear  
Her doctors are helpless. For all that they do and say,  
Moment by moment her life is ebbing away.  
I came reluctantly: your ministers



---

Would not have you disturbed, but the Queen's sisters  
At last lost patience and sent me.'

'They did right.'

Tired and burdened, into the heavy night  
Suddodana stepped, and—silently cursing all  
Priests, doctors and oracles—made for the women's hall.

(ii)

A name is given, a name is emptied out.  
Maya's breath hovers between the worlds. About  
Her bed all day the women have come and gone,  
The attendants, the doctors. She will answer to none:  
Lovely and absent as a girl in a dream  
She drifts further; heart and senses seem  
Already fixed elsewhere, and with the hours  
Breath and pulse grow fainter, a strange light flowers  
Golden within her body; her hands and face,  
Cool to the touch, give light in the shadowed place  
That she will not see. It tinges the King's lined cheek



---

As he bends above her, retracing the unique  
Perishing beauty in fear and tenderness;  
And later Subhoja, who will watch, and confess  
That he cannot and will not act, that a change occurs  
Which may not be hindered. The light grows, the pulse  
falters,  
The breath hovers.

The jewelled spider, mind,  
So careful to anchor her web to the world and bind  
Thing after thing to its sticky rose-window, feels  
The guyropes slip; the silk pavilion reels  
As wall after wall billows away into space  
On the winds of impermanence. Pattern is lost, the race  
Of change is all: swept on that current, the mind  
In calm or terror abandons itself, to find  
What lodging it can.

So while her husband's lips  
Set stonier than ever on hard silence, the Queen slips—  
Mindful, fully aware, her faculties  
Hardly shaken by the breaking body's  
Spasm as the last thread snaps—into the Heaven  
Of the Delighted Gods, translated where riven



---

Hearts hurt by the gap between truth and word  
Are healed, the forest-gardens steadily watered  
By songs rained from a matrix of sweet meaning  
Which is that world's nature.

The dawn-cold keening  
Of court ladies, prompt in the mourning-ritual,  
Rises behind the King as he leaves the hall  
At first light. He sends for Pajāpati,  
The dead Queen's sister, who is quick to agree—  
Happy, though weeping—that now the Prince is her care.

The Brahmins depart, having no more business there  
For the time being. By the palace gate  
Sudatta and the boy Kondañña wait  
For Suyama to join them. The elders speak of the deathbed  
And of the newborn; though of what is said  
Nothing survives to the after-times but a word  
Suyama speaks at parting—overheard  
(Remembered, pondered, taken to heart) by the boy:  
'She looked,' he says, 'as if she had died of joy.'

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(iii)

But anxious cares preoccupy the King.  
The hours of needed rest to his bed bring  
Only a savage wakefulness, the taut  
Neck hard against the indifferent pillows; caught  
In a closed circle, thought fingers in turn  
Its troubles, a string of iron beads that burn  
With restlessness and loss. No second heir  
Will his beloved Queen and consort bear;  
No other wife will comfort or delight  
As she did: that moon gone, a shapeless night  
Descends. With sour wonder he views his flesh  
And sees death there, how time and age will thresh  
The last of youth and vigour from this skin  
And leave a white-haired husk. Sealed up within  
The breathing beauty of Siddhattha lies  
All his life's treasure. The King's lidless eyes,  
With doubled vision, stare at his son's fate—  
Either the warrior-king of one vast state,  
Sheer to the earth's edge, throned in this very house



---

(Gables of hammered gold, door-panels lustrous  
With sheets of pearl), his every utterance law,  
Godlike in generosity, and in war  
A fist of lightning; or (starved and in scraps  
Of some coarse cloth, picked at random perhaps  
From rubbish-heap or cemetery), profound  
In learning, yes—but thrust to the background  
Of history, on obscure paths where the so-called wise  
Tease out their hearts on useless mysteries—  
Teaching some yogic system best ignored  
By practical men, some training whose reward  
Might be a heavenly birth, after long pain:  
Hideous waste for one who could attain  
Deification here, and among men,  
If he would grasp the sceptre.

Action, then—

Firm and decisive, while the future still  
Hovers, unsettled! But—the uncertain will  
Baffled—the King rolls over on the bed,  
Fists clenched, the hard obsessions of the head  
Angular in his pillow. The bare wall





---

Meets his gaze either way. Then, after all,  
The whole thing may be fantasy. And force  
May not be wise. What is the natural course  
For a son, for a young prince? To enjoy  
Great princes' pleasures; have what every boy  
Desires—weapons and horses, and the chance  
To learn the play of combat; to watch girls dance,  
And feast, taste courtesy and power, and then  
Marry, be king, and shape the world of men  
As a great emperor. What more natural?

What thorns are in this couch to stab at all  
Postures of comfort? The deep-eyed sages say  
That fear of death is what drives men away  
In solitude to seek the deathless. Well—  
Why mention death? Let it be death to tell  
The Prince of death, or sickness, or old age,  
Things that infect the gifted mind with rage  
To escape what's natural. Let him live in bliss;  
Let him have palaces that outshine this  
As a pearl does a pebble! Wrap him round  
With music, beauty, gardens! Let no sound



---

Come there but laughter, nightingales, the flute—  
Let young and lovely voices drown the brute  
Mutter of suffering from the world beyond.  
Later he'll listen. First, let him grow fond  
Of living in the heaven of great kings  
While still a boy. Will he renounce such things?  
Never.

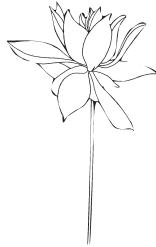
Suddodana breathes more easily. Plans  
For halls, lakes, gardens, multiply. He scans  
The pastel fields of vision: world within world,  
Small realms of lovely detail are unfurled,  
Jewels inside jewels. Plunged in their radiant deeps,  
Dreaming of beautiful prisons, the King sleeps.





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BOOK THREE:  
THREE PALACES



---

## The Argument

- (i) King Suddodana builds the Three Palaces to ensure that his son, Prince Siddhattha, grows up without knowledge of the world's suffering. In sleep, the young prince dreams of one of his past lives as King of the Deer. The Spring Palace described.
- (ii) The Summer Palace described. The prince dreams of searching the worlds for an unknown treasure of great price. (iii) The Palace of the Rains, and nature of the prince's education.

---

(i)

**A**nd into that labyrinth we must enter also,  
As walls and courts rise, echo beyond echo  
In cement of the human dream of security, stones  
Climbing, timbers branching, and all the weapons  
Of the gentle architect, forester, mason deployed  
To shelter desire from its end, that it be not destroyed  
In the earthquake of freedom, but displaced and displayed  
In the king's care, the body's comfort, the paradise made  
To keep rain from the perilous seed that will shatter the wall  
If it chance to grow. But the songs of the builders fall  
Equal with birdsong and the sway of the wind  
On the child's happy ear, that is not yet inclined  
To judge how time takes shape, how as he grows  
The doors of the palaces of the seasons close.

Lingering in other spaces, when he sleeps  
The mind, not yet weighed down with language, sweeps  
(We have all known this) gulfs of memory, there  
Meeting bright scenes from earlier lives, aware

---

Neither of strange nor familiar, merely afloat  
In wonderless wide attention. Where some note  
Or colour draws a focus, hearing or sight  
Points the whole consciousness: swifter than light,  
The mind dives sparkling down into the pool  
Of memory, to surface with the full  
Shape of a past life fragile in its grip,  
Inscrutable object whose components slip  
Through the web of perception, yielding as they run  
Heart-shaking stories. Under another sun  
The child plays as a stallion or a hare  
On plains of endless grass, breathing an air  
Orchestrated with the fragrance of flowers  
Conceived in an ecology not ours  
But possible once, in some cosmos whose scope  
And structure bloomed in the kaleidoscope  
Of endlessly-shaken saṃsāra.

The stag freezes

(The grass uncropped, time stopped) as the nostril teases  
Sour scents from the breathed harmony of the plain;  
The eye reads nets in the grass, the tongue tastes the stain



---

Of death that reeks in the air from hunters nearby—  
And his heart turns to the herd, and though he will die  
For the act, he rounds on them, hurling his brothers and wives  
Into panic and headlong stampede, as they run with their lives  
(Confused, indignant) far from the spread of the mesh.  
And the hunters stand up, uncertain, their need for the flesh,  
Bone, sinew, horn, hide of the life-giving deer overruled  
By awe at this kingly sacrifice.

Blood cooled,  
Hair prickling as at the presence of a god  
Or ancestral spirit, they kneel where the fleeing herd trod  
The grass to a green chaos, and offer some scraps  
Of food to the towering creature—who knows, perhaps,  
For one clear moment, what it means to be man.  
And on that knowing, the child-mind leaps the span  
Of worlds and aeons, and the dream gives way  
To the dreamless, the nurse's hands, the palpable day.

But the calendar of days is a palace of stone,  
And the young prince learns to speak and to walk alone  
Despite the careful hands and eyes full of love  
In cushioned, carpeted rooms on a terrace above



---

Courts, gardens and groves whose outwards boundary  
Is an unasked question. Here for the spring he can see,  
At dawn, the peacocks' tails scattering frost  
And run to join them, his empty footprints lost  
When sun dissolves the white lawn into mist;  
Watch branches bud, cables of creeper that twist  
Like dry ropes on the trellis break into flower  
With showers of scarlet petals; or spend the hour  
Of sunset near warm braziers in a room  
Lit by soft lamps where music fills the gloom  
Of shadowed corners, and a nurse tells stories  
Fetched from the distant world, while fragile glories  
Of heat and gold fret and collapse to show  
Men, mountains, battles in the charcoal glow  
Under his eye.

(ii)

And when the sun began  
To glow white-hot with summer, when no fan,  
Curtain or fountain cooled the air enough



---

For comfort, it was time to take the rough  
But pleasant roads into the hills, a ride  
Through cloud and hanging forest, where the side  
Of the bare mountain let the pathway grip  
Above the trees, and sudden streams would slip,  
Rattling between the rocks, across the way,  
And vanish into silence. As the day  
Ended, their route would turn into a fold  
Between hills, a side-valley, the last gold  
Of sunset answered by the golden-glistening  
Roofs of the summer palace. The boy, listening  
To darkness spangled with hoof-beats like stars  
On the cold cobbles, met the sharp aromas  
Of wet earth, trees, waterfalls as he stepped  
Out of the curtained litter.

And when he slept,  
Night was a jewel of resonant dark, a sphere  
Of cloudblownd space and stars dropped like a tear  
From time's eye into a room without a roof,  
Where constellations slid and the moon wove a woof  
Of changing tracks across the open sky



---

Above his bed. Wakeful for hours, he could lie  
To watch the tree that spread its branching maze  
Into the sky, the leaves among its forked pathways  
Singing with air, underlit by the gold of a lamp,  
Ghosted one moment by the drift and vamp  
Of a startled owl treading air with its giant vans,  
Confronting the watchful face, and then with avoidance  
Of the human world soaring again to the dark.  
A wonderful room and a wonderful bed, where the bark  
Of the living trunk met the gold leaf of the frame  
(Art dovetailed into nature) and the same  
Wind flexing the high tops of the tree  
Stirred gently the bed, so that the prince rode nightly  
On the planet's unceasing breath, and under his head  
Were grasped and infixed the tortuous roots that led  
To earth's interior.

And yet the means  
Of a strange trouble. Sometimes, transfixing the scenes  
That melt and cohere in the plausible world of sleep,  
A hunger would waken, an anguish, a longing to keep  
Faith with some promise forgotten and speechless; a taste



---

For some fruit imagined and lost in an unmapped waste  
Of dustclogged lands, a love for some jewel that slipped  
Through a crack in the floors of the world.

In dream he stripped

The layers of sleep from his eyes and dreamt that he woke  
And stared at the tree above him, each bough like the spoke  
Of a giant wheel from whose rim the worlds were hung,  
A labyrinth turning and shining. Astonished, he clung  
To the trunk by crevice and knot, and started to tread  
A ladder of branches, a forking of limbs that led  
Into cities and cloudscapes, palaces jewelled with snow,  
Temples of sleeping statues, rooms with a window  
That looked over undreamt countrysides, feastings of quick-  
smiling, slow-speaking gods who would offer the thick  
Cold rim of a heavy dark wine-cup and urge him to drink  
Their thought-spilling wine. And all the while, striving to think  
Of what had been lost, and where, he would gaze at the place  
With an empty heart, knowing and finding no trace  
Of the unnamed thing he hunted.

Then with the glare  
Of the barefaced moon in his eyes, he would find the air



---

Cold on his body and merely a handful of leaves  
In his grasp. Down through the branches (whose bulk deceives  
The eye to look like strength) he would dream that he fell  
Through the bed, through the earth, where the roots  
wriathed down to Hell

Like copper cables, darkly glowing with heat  
Along cramped caverns of the heart's defeat  
To where preoccupied souls ranted, or chewed  
The leavings of self-damaged lives. He viewed  
With sad astonishment those twisted flames  
And crushed perspectives, the addictive games  
Played out by shrinking mazes lost inside  
Themselves and still constructing space to hide  
Further and deeper, tunnelling their own hurt—  
And even here, would kneel to sift through dirt,  
Fire, blood for that unnameable treasure he sought,  
Locked under rock and root.

But, with the thought  
Of that odd quest, he would draw breath and find  
Himself buoyed like a diver through the blind  
Bulk of abrasive earth and, surfacing,  
Would lie in light until silence would bring



---

The cup of dreamless sleep full to his lips  
And he would taste and smile.

As your dream slips

At morning to the edges of the mind  
And, dazzled by the normal light, you find  
Only some teasing images that lurk  
Later in the day's corners, so the work  
Of these few dreams unravelled, and no trace  
Stayed to disturb the time's untroubled face  
In the serenity of summer. At most  
The child would hunt intently for some lost  
Pathway or hidden garden or bright fish  
Oracular with secrets in the coolish  
Depth beyond arm's reach in the marble tank  
Fed by a hillside stream.

And as the sun sank

Into the opal spaces of the hills  
And bars of light cut gold across the tendrils  
Of high leaf or late flower above the gorge  
Under the palace garden, he would forge,  
With his nurse-aunt Pajāpati, a bond



---

In secret, as they stood to gaze beyond  
The horizon's furthest points, and guess at where  
His king-father might be, and wish that there,  
That instant, he might think about his son,  
And so be pleased.

And thus the prince could run  
All the more eagerly to kneel and greet  
His father, when the court made its retreat  
From the hot towns; and he would mount with pride  
Into his father's saddle, or sit beside  
Him plotting moves at chess, or on a throne  
With room for two, plan kingdoms of his own,  
In the wide happy world. And the king smiled,  
Wise in the management of his wonder-child.

And the gods smiled too, those singers in darkness, light  
Hinters in thought, dream-givers of the night,  
Hearteners of our endeavour. And as well  
(They sang) quench suns with a tear, or use the shell  
Of a walnut to wedge the earth's tectonic plates  
As set the wit of a king against what awaits  
The age-deep vow of a Bodhisatta. Yet



---

Their patience is long: they watch, they do not forget  
How the tree must grow, the stream flow at its own pace,  
How forest must fall, and mountain move, for the face  
Of the gem to be sheer and brilliant at the last,  
Water-clear, space-pure, sun-bright, and free of the past.

(iii)

But still the knotted thread must be untied.  
This pencil-lead is drawn from the carbon inside  
A forest tree, swallowed millennia deep  
In tides of molten stone, that settled to keep  
Pure pockets of graphite, and reward the pick  
Of a random miner. By the simplest trick  
Of crystal, the same carbon might have set  
To diamond, coldest of stars, upheld by the net  
Of energy that lives within the earth,  
Within all things. But out of its fiery birth,  
Its long sepulchral sleep, mere graphite came,  
Clayed to this pencil-lead; and here the name





---

Of man or god or tree is patterned out  
In its ash-smudge as the black thread winds about  
Over the paper, driven by hand and mind—  
Which in Siddhattha's time and place the kind  
Years disallowed. Through thought and word alone  
Knowledge was passed, and writing was unknown.

So memory—to us a crowded space  
Where each new thing obliterates some trace  
Of what was there before, a closet full  
With half-known scraps, from whose debris to pull  
Even the plainest thing seems (as we grow  
Older and duller) a task we undergo  
With gathering reluctance—was to them  
A limitless, well-ordered scope, the hem  
Of a bright ocean, deepening through time  
Where each thing held its place, and from the chime  
Of the child's first singsong prayers to the labyrinthine  
Lore-catalogues of the bards, an unblemished line  
Of interwoven songs and picturings  
Held each man's or woman's knowledge, the sacred things  
Of lover or soldier, the farmer's proverbial lists



---

And inherited calendars, the learned jurist's  
Recited body of cases, the merchant's tables  
Of exchange and account, the measures and variables  
For currency and commodity. With these  
Each saw inwoven life's events and places  
Patterned by sun and moon in their intricate dance  
Across the unfolding stories.

For us, one inheritance  
Has eaten all the rest. The alphabet—  
First lesson we learn—has taught us how to forget  
What memory, mindfulness, recollection are for.  
Those letters are full of death. Never more  
Will learning root itself in the heart as a vine  
Of song to flower in our thinking, and align  
Knowing with saying and being.

Happier  
In an unlettered time, Siddhattha learned in order  
Of song and speech the nineteen kinds of things  
Proper to the education of kings.

Let the great Memory resonate once more  
With the song of the rains, their shattered music pour



---

Drumming and trilling along the tilted roofs  
Of the third house, the Palace of Rains, as the ironshod hoofs  
Of the horses of Indra's chariot were heard  
Breaking the dam of the clouds, and the coppersmith bird  
Tapped in the chinks of the wind as the first drops fell—  
A music lost in percussion of water, pell-mell  
Rattling and hammering, harmonies multiplied  
To hissing and seething cataracts, the dried  
Crazed clay beds of the gulleys fed and released,  
The fields turned to mud, then mirrors.

Prince and priest

Would watch the earth and sky join into one  
And taste in every breath the sacred fusion  
Of above and below; then turn again to their song,  
The rainlike chanting of knowledge. And so the long  
Thread of the teaching was spun and woven: the tale  
Of the gods and the world's making; the tempered scale  
Of communities and their customs; the patterns that build  
Cities and temples, and order the well-filled  
Memory's rooms; training of muscles and lungs  
For health of the body and breath; and all the tongues



---

Of the sacred past and the neighbouring peoples; command  
Of horse and chariot; and the sensitive hand  
That governs the reins of the treasury, using gold  
As spur or curb, ready to give or withhold  
As occasion demands; music, the master-science  
That models the flow of time and the shapes of silence;  
Medicine, adjusting the body's allotted blend  
Of humours and energies, its implicit end  
An endless life, untroubled, vigorous;  
The lore of the three Vedas, their mysterious  
Stanzas that glint with archetypal truth  
Like rugged opals; the bow and sword, which youth  
Takes up for sheer pleasure; and with the same  
Exuberance, the rules of that great game  
Called war, the chess of princes, which they play  
With friends to fill the leisure of a day  
Or year, cities and plains their chequer-board,  
The happy teams of living chessmen poured  
Across the land to do their masters' will  
And bring the prizes home by luck or skill;  
Sowing and reaping, the seasoned eye and hand



---

By which a farmer husbands the living land;  
The chronicles of the past; the stars' dance;  
And the starlike patterns of logic, which enhance  
Native wit to an analytical tool;  
The rites, rituals, sacrifices that rule  
The occasions and stages of life, when priests and king  
And people stand together, offering  
Inwardly, outwardly, what is due to the gods;  
And equally deep, but cooler and purer, the methods  
Of number and calculation, the shining net  
That sorts and measures the world; and, subtler yet,  
The making of verse, which spins speech into song  
And spreads it over the face of the world, a tongue  
Shared between man and his world.

Such were the things  
Thought proper for the education of kings;  
And kinglike, Siddhattha learned; so deft his mind  
In the placing of thought, that he left his teachers behind,  
Seeing depths beyond depths in what they had to tell,  
Renewing their grasp of what they knew too well,  
Mending gaps that had worn in the ancient lore



---

With the rubbing of time. At last, kneeling before  
Suddodana, the oldest confessed, 'No scope  
Remains for our teaching. The leg of the antelope  
Bounds through the grass no faster than his thought  
Through fields of learning. Now, we should be taught  
By him, if that were proper. Perhaps at last  
It will be. But the learning of the past  
He has drunk at a mouthful. We can do no more.'  
Suddodana nodded, and, as often before,  
In a quandary between apprehension and pride  
Smiled, frowned, pondered, shook his head, and sighed.

And so the motherless child in the perfect house  
Learned what was proper, the precarious  
Knowledge of men. In a world of the young  
And beautiful, the charmed musical tongue  
And a myth of immortality he lived,  
And the grain of human suffering was sieved  
From all that he learned like grit from the white rice.  
Like the Yāma Gods, who dwell above the caprice  
Of good and ill luck (their island universe spun  
Beyond the grappling-hooks of moon and sun



---

That drag us into misery) he seemed,  
Like one who lived a timeless time and dreamed  
Of no awakening.

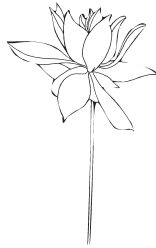
But three palaces  
There are, in which all beings dwell, and these  
Are called Arising, Going-on, and Decay:  
From nanosecond to cosmic cycle they stay  
Unshakeable and even the Yāma Gods  
Turn pale at last as the ruby dice fall and the odds  
Cut off their time. Their garlands wither, their friends  
Turn forgetful away and each vast lifespan ends  
Facing the gate of death and birth once more.  
This is the knowledge we must taste or ignore,  
As our choice may be. And so the thread runs on  
Until we follow the path of the king's son.  
But for Siddhattha the season is early still,  
The lightning holds its tongue, and he has his fill  
Of his father's simple, palatial dreams—those proud  
Stones insubstantial as frost, or fire, or cloud.



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BOOK FOUR:

PLOUGHING





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## The Argument

- (i) A dream of turmoil and equanimity.  
(ii) Prince Siddhattha attends the annual Ploughing Festival; resting, he spontaneously enters the First Meditation. (iii) The miracle of the rose-apple tree. Devadatta, the Prince's cousin, conceives envy against him and tries to emulate him.

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(i)

**I**t was a bloody sea, but it smelled of paint  
And pollution, oil and traffic fumes. The quaint  
Chrome and fins of our craft were American  
1950s or '60s, the streamlined grin  
Of voracious technology crafted into steel  
And polished with cellulose. I sat at the wheel  
Trying to steer through a gridlock of similar craft,  
Hungry machines patched and scarred fore and aft  
With rips, gouges, bullet-holes. On the scum  
Of the surface our wake boiled dully the way we had come  
(Was it concrete or water?) where refuse bobbed and oil  
Dragoned in smeary rainbows. With infinite toil  
I edged the car—if car it was—through the crowd  
Which was also a wall of noise, even the loud  
Thud of the hi-fis and radios partially drowned  
By shouting, gunfire and, on occasion, a sound  
That might be a bomb or collision.

Who was there

---

With me, in that strange hulk we seemed to share  
By unspoken agreement, I have no idea.  
Family? Friends? The one thing that was clear  
Was the need to survive and find a way through, though to what  
Or whom was unknown. Each moment only the hot  
Sun, the humidity and the imminent chance  
Of death or injury entered cognisance  
Though I became aware by degrees of the state  
Of my fellow-contenders, trying to navigate  
That chaotic ocean in overloaded hulls  
That plunged and listed as they grabbed hair in handfuls,  
Fought with knives or swerved in the effort to throw  
One another off balance. What might lie below  
In the fathoms of what was now clearly a sea,  
I preferred not to ask. Whatever it might be  
Was perhaps no worse than the sharklike craft we drove  
Or the faces that glared from the windscreens or loomed above  
The seatbacks of open convertibles, grimly intent  
On murder and piracy. Others there were, who leant  
From windows to cry for help or rescue, before  
Their vessels sank or were boarded by ruffians. The more



---

We tried to make way through the crush, the more futile became  
Our efforts. And looking around, I saw the same  
Burning ocean of battle and misery spread  
To the limits of sight.

But then, just where sight ended,  
Appeared a small spot which differed from the rest,  
Though how is unsayable, for in the briefest  
Instant I found myself there, and stepping ashore  
Or wading through mild shallows with the roar  
And panic already receding, making way  
To a small gate or harbour-mouth; again, I can't say  
Which, or what, it was; but that it curved in  
Between oddly-turned posts, like the waist of a violin—  
Forgive the strangeness; this is a dream, after all—  
And passing through, I found the whole agony fall  
Away, and a kind tranquillity take its place,  
A ceasing of monstrous tensions, and of the disgrace  
Of being dragged by desire and loathing. Free,  
Secure and safe without security  
Or fixture, I was neither in loneliness  
Nor one among many; a beginningless

---

And absolute peace was there; or, simply, it was:  
Neither one nor many, with nor without a cause,  
Neither permanent nor in time, moving nor still,  
Natural, self-evident, simple. And visible  
Beyond, in its endless contortions, was that sea  
Still beating and blazing.

Almost reluctantly  
I turned to face the thought that here, and here,  
By some picture, pageant, reflection or faint flavour,  
Saṃsāra and nibbāna might be known,  
At least in symbols. And with that realisation  
I knew I dreamed; and somehow found my way  
To breathing and body and light and the palpable day.

(ii)

And so things follow the logic we least expect  
Or can grasp: the cause is evoked by the effect,  
The timeless gently ruffles the surface of time,  
The song enchants events to disclose the rhyme.



---

And year by year the ploughshares trouble the earth,  
Wounding the land to evoke the healing birth  
Of food; for the crops are all that stand between  
Prosperity and famine; they are the green  
Bride of the farmer, ripening to the gold  
Protector of thrones. And for a king to hold  
The plough-handles himself is no disgrace,  
And once was honour and duty, for the face  
Of the land is changed by what its farmers do,  
And a ruler must know the earth and accept as due  
The earth's deep judgement on him.

So, at each new year,  
It was Suddodana's custom to appear  
With courtiers, nobles, all those who would come  
To feast and secure prosperity for the kingdom  
By ploughing the first furrow. One hundred and eight  
Were the ploughs then gathered to inaugurate  
The new season, and of these all but one  
Were silver-sheathed and shone like the new moon  
When its blade engraves the pale sky; but one for the king  
Was massy with gold, like the sun when at his rising



---

He cuts through mist, and grows, and seems to stand  
Poised on the threshold of the chilly land  
Ruling his first furrows of dark and bright  
Between the hills that stand against the light.

Along the tracks banners and streamers flowed,  
Rapid footsteps of children, litters turned in from the road  
To the field paths; village women with soft-swaying tread  
Pacing along, each with a tower on her head  
Of flowers, fruit, rice well-balanced, brought for the feast,  
Horsemen with jingling harness, each proud on his beast  
With embroidered bridle and silverworked saddle; and thick  
As the pulse of the blood in the veins, the continuous music  
Of drum, flute, gong, string, voice that rippled and sang  
As the breeze came and went, bringing the heart-stirring tang  
Of cool clod and forest leaf, while under the eye  
Of heaven the clouds gather; the earth and sky,  
Loaded with gifts like bride and bridegroom, await  
Their marriage, which the plough will consummate.

And now from his silk-bridled pony the Prince dismounts  
In a ring of solicitous court-ladies, and counts  
The crowds of subjects he has never seen,



---

The rippling banners sailing by the green  
Fringes of forest; and gazes last at the plough  
His father will drive, and to which even now  
The stockmen are yoking a pair of white bullocks with gold-  
Tipped horns and garlanded necks, and struggling to hold  
The swaying, reluctant heads of the nervous beasts  
For anointment and blessing by the Brahmin priests  
Until the King steps forward to his work  
And the well-trained beasts shoulder ahead. With a jerk  
That shakes the gold frame, the plough bites and runs deep  
While the King's arms feel the shock, and strive to keep  
The line straight, as the people follow and make  
A clamour like brilliant birds in the ploughman's wake.

Meanwhile, from a tent of silk on a nearby hill,  
Siddhattha watches, admiring his father's skill  
And considers the joy of farming. He understands  
Nothing of the bent back and blistered hands,  
The work before dawn, the weather that can spoil  
The hope of careful months by turning the soil  
To burnt brick or seething torrent in a bad year,  
The petty feuds over boundaries and water, the fear





---

Of disease, insects, wild animals ruining the crop.  
All he knows is the beautiful tillage, and at the top  
Of the field, libations and blessings. The furrow is ploughed.

And now the nobles will follow. The noise of the crowd  
Swells with the blaring of bullocks. The silver ploughs shine,  
Dragged by the milkwhite teams towards the skyline  
Through the sun's increasing glare. The distant songs  
And drummings continue. But Siddhattha longs  
For some seclusion from the turbulence  
Of crowds and flags. Pacing a short distance  
From the silk tent and the ladies who start to prepare  
The midday meal, he finds a place whose air  
Is cool, where a turn of the hillside keeps away  
The insistent noise, and winds from the mountains play  
In foliage of a small rose-apple tree  
That casts a circle of shade. Gratefully  
He spreads his mantle and sits. Fully at peace,  
He lets his eyes close, tasting the release  
From so much happy distraction, feeling the flow  
Of soft air lapping his body, and the slow  
Tide of the breath as it enters and turns back,



---

A thread through the pearl of the body, neither slack  
Nor taut but smooth as silk and growing more still  
As it draws his attention, and the playful will  
Refines and calms it. One moment it seems that his sight  
Is filled with a sphere of soft and immaculate light,  
And without hesitation he enters.

Only a seer  
Would notice then how the gods of the trees draw near,  
How the goddess who dwells in the rose-apple spreads a net  
Of gossamer gold above him, a canopy set  
With pearls of dew and gems of shadow, to turn  
The glare of sun aside, lest it should burn  
The skin of the child whose luck or destiny  
Has led him to pick up the long-lost key  
To an ancestral palace.

From the forests  
And fields the spirits come, and while he rests  
Sphered in happy contemplation, they kneel  
To pay him homage, rank on rank, a wheel  
Of infinite imagined colours spread  
Around him. So he stays, undistracted,



---

For a long time. And this will be his land  
To cultivate: the mind, where he will stand  
Supreme of kings, of all farmers the best,  
Raising from one ploughed furrow boundless harvest.

(iii)

Better not speak of luck or destiny:  
Both miss, one way or the other. What we see  
Is a trace, a pattern in the opening-out  
Or infolding of worlds, in which are wrapped about  
The passions and motives of beings—whether love,  
Imagination or hatred, or sloth that can move  
Only as others impel. To start on a quest  
Throws ripples that spread through time and space, expressed  
In a life or the facets of many lives. Each act  
Is an edge of one infinite diamond, whose exact  
And intricate structure patterns realms and ages,  
Yet is empty as space, time, number, the myriad images  
Born from the ocean of mind. Some long-past vow



---

Has gone to the making of worlds, so that here and now  
A prince sits under a tree.

But noon has passed,  
The clamour has slowly died down and the ladies at last  
Are tired of decorous waiting. The dishes are laid,  
Untouched and waiting on the spread brocade.  
At length Pajāpati and her women go  
In search of him and there, in the hill's hollow,  
Stop, fall silent and hold their breath as they see  
The prince sit quiet under the rose-apple tree.

The gentle hands with their long fingers, laid  
So plainly, one on one; the light that played  
As from an unseen smile within the face  
And cast a soft light in the shadowed place—  
A place whose shadow stood, and had not turned  
Though the sun rode far up, and should have burned  
By now into this place—held them in awe  
For a long moment. Then, to tell what they saw  
At once to the one who must hear it first, they run  
Lightly to the King's tent, with news of his son.

Drawn in his wake, the crowds of courtiers flow



---

Along the wood's edge to that sheltered hollow  
Where the rose-apple's shadow floats in the face of the sun  
Spreading its coolness over the silent one  
Who sits like those Gods who Stream with Radiant Light  
And subtly makes the sheltering darkness bright  
With a shining serenity. Then the King feels a chill  
And a trembling run over his body; against his will  
Bows his head in apprehension and awe  
At sight of his son, feeling the deepest law  
Of his being assert itself, the disturbing rise,  
Against his resolve, of those long-fought memories,  
The half-rejected knowledge and prophecy  
That could sweep away the well-dressed ramparts he  
Has built to preserve his kingdom.

Among the rest  
Of the gazing crowd, one pair of eyes is sharpest  
In appraising the scene. Here is Siddhattha's cousin,  
Devadatta, his mother's sister's son,  
Who has long cherished a curiosity  
About the prince, and who this pet may be,  
Pampered in his three palaces, kept away



---

From common sight, forbidden even to play  
With the children of warrior families. Now he sees  
That the stories are true, and the rumour of prophecies  
Has a basis. And what he recognises is power:  
A child who can hold the worlds back for an hour,  
Or the shadow of worlds, which is (after all) the same,  
Since appearance is what must count in the human game  
Of the self and the others.

As the prince opens his eyes  
And smiles, and bows to his father in modest surprise  
At finding the court assembled round his feet,  
Devadatta watches that shadow recede. Then, replete  
With questions, doubts, projects, he walks in the wood,  
And ponders what trick it may be, that well understood  
Would make such things possible. And, a tenacious child  
Not easily diverted, nor reconciled  
To leaving a secret intact, he gives his mind  
To what he can guess of that power, determined to bind  
Natural things to his aim.

Sure that of those  
Simplest to hold must, certainly, be shadows



---

(For had not the Princeling controlled one?) he set his will  
Daily, in garden or forest, to hold still  
Some patch of rebellious darkness, or grasp the gloom  
Thrown by the shutter in some silent room.  
The fickle purplish patch would float and change  
In space, or eye, or mind, or rearrange  
Itself to a dark kaleidoscopic star,  
As concentration grew. But efforts are  
Coloured by motives; while, with all the force  
Of angry attention, he could not stop the course  
Of sunbeam or speckled shadow, still his thought  
Grew hard and sombre with relentless effort.  
Though the lightfooted shadows would not stay,  
The darkness grew within him day by day.

