

Prince Siddhartha, while living in luxury, remained perplexed about the meaning of life. After seeing the four visions — an utterly helpless old man; a sick and forlorn man; a grief-stricken group, carrying the corpse of their beloved for cremation; and a recluse, serene and composed, wandering to seek Truth — he decided to renounce the world and search for a way out of the suffering of aging, sickness, and death.

He practiced six years of self-mortification, tormenting his body, but the goal was still unachieved. Finally he gave up and applied himself to the “Mindfulness of In-and-Out Breathing,” and successfully entered the first, second, third and fourth meditative states of absorption. Thus cleansing his mind of impurities, he directed it to the Knowledge of the Recollection of Past Births, followed by the Knowledge of the Disappearance and Reappearance of Beings of varied forms, in good and woeful states of existence, each faring according to his deeds. Finally, he directed his mind to the third Knowledge of the Destruction of the Taints, and became Buddha—The Awakened One. He silently uttered:

*Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsara,
Seeking, but not finding the builder of this house.
Painful is repeated birth.
O! Housebuilder, you are seen, you shall build no house again.
All your rafters are broken. Your ridgepole is shattered.
My mind has attained the unconditioned.
Achieved is the End of Craving. (Dhp. 153-154)*

The “house” implies the body. The “builder of this house” implies craving — craving for sensual pleasures and existence. To satiate these cravings, beings perform actions that leave behind karmic potential, and that karmic potential carries on and produces new life, with sickness, aging and death lying in wait. “Ridgepole” implies ignorance. Ignorance means not knowing the Four Noble Truths — the suffering of life; the origin of suffering, which is craving; the cessation of suffering through the destruction of craving; and the path to the cessation of suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path.

Having found the builder of the house and shattered the ridgepole, he attained the unconditioned—Nirvana. Out of compassion for other beings who are still caught in the pool of sensuality and becoming, Buddha wandered far and wide preaching his message of love and liberation. Understanding how beings reap what they have sown, he urged us:

Avoid evil, cultivate good, purify the mind.

One avoids evil by self-restraint—not harming others based on the understanding of the law of karma. One cultivates good by performing charity, service, etc., grounded in loving-kindness and compassion for all sentient beings. These two will pave one’s way to happiness in this life and the life after.

One purifies the mind by practicing concentration and insight meditation. Concentration makes the mind serene, clear, peaceful, and radiant, having removed the hindrances that block the clarity of the mind; insight sees mind and body as they really are as impermanent, suffering and not a self.