

REBECOMING

CENTRAL TO THE DHARMA IS THE CONCEPT OF SAMBARA, THE CYCLE OF BIRTH, AGEING, DEATH AND REBIRTH – THE IDEA THAT, JUST AS THE FLAME OF A DYING CANDLE SETS A NEW CANDLE BURNING, AT THE DEATH OF A LIVING BEING A NEW ONE COMES INTO EXISTENCE.

“Whatever things have an origin must come to cessation”, taught the Buddha. At the end of life, the body dies, and the components that make up the personality dissolve. He did not teach that the personality, or even the soul, lives on after death to be reborn in a new body. His words are often explained by the analogy of a candle: just as a dying flame can light a new candle, so the dissolution of one personality

Below Tibetan monks accompany a deceased lama (a Tibetan teacher of the Dharma) to the cremation oven. Attending cremations, and even autopsies, keeps Buddhist monks mindful of the teaching of anitya, or impermanence.

gives rise to another. “There is rebirth of character”, explained the Buddha to a Brahmin who asked if his soul would be reborn, “but no transmigration of a self. The thought-forms reappear, but there is no ego-entity transferred. The stanza uttered by a teacher is reborn in the scholar who repeats the words.”

IMPERMANENCE

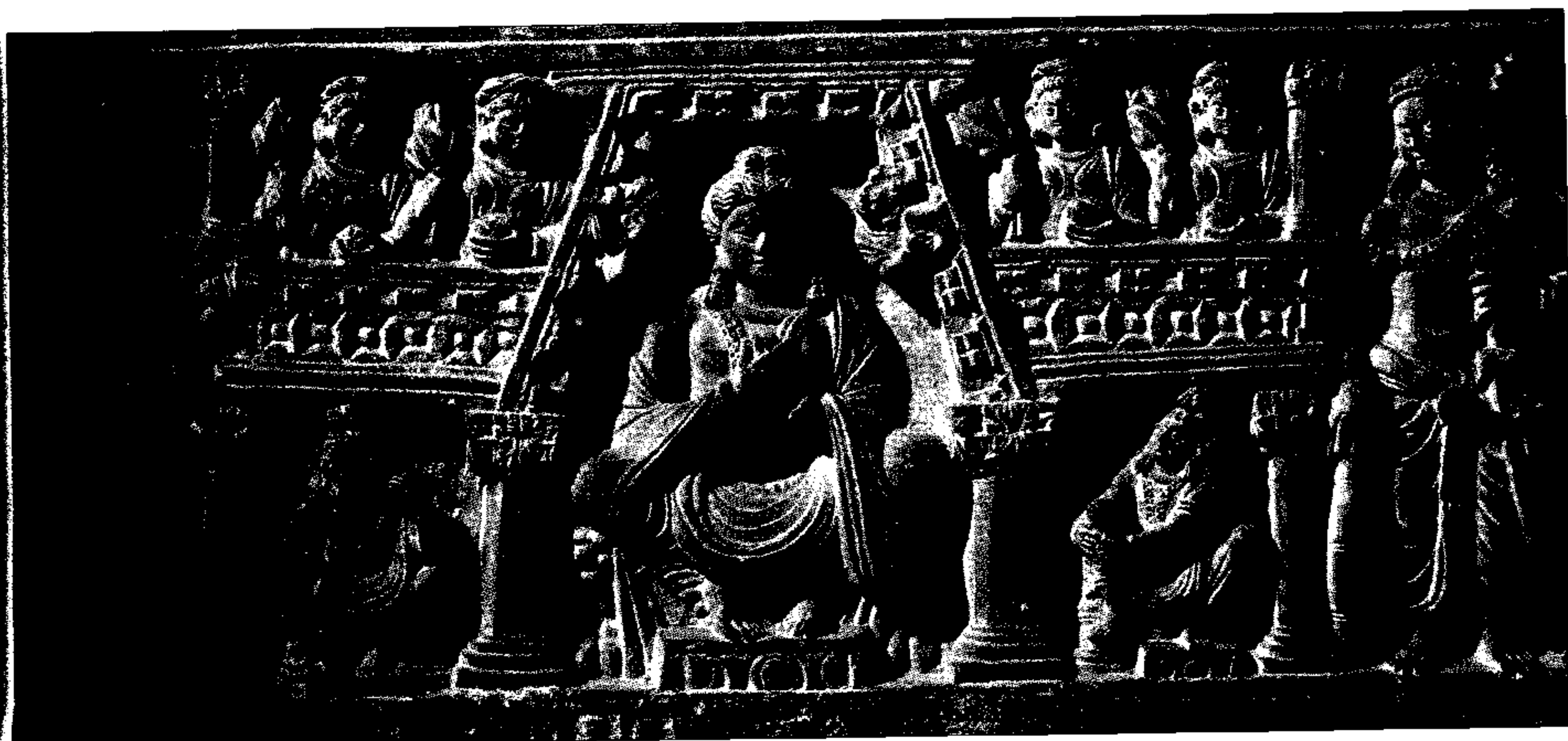
Buddhism celebrates the happiness that youth, success, friendship, love and parenthood can bring, but happiness is not the Buddhist goal. The Buddha-Dharma instils the message of *anitya*, or impermanence: youth, excitement, joy, contentment pass away; sorrow and sickness dog the lives of many,



Above The cycle of samsara (which translates from Sanskrit as ‘the wandering’) is started again at birth. Being born into the human realm is fortunate, and offers the opportunity of eventual enlightenment.

and bereavement and death are inevitable. All these experiences are *duhkha* – forms of suffering that range from dissatisfaction to misery, pain and grief. If we wish to understand the reality of our existence, we must recognize, as





Above The Bodhisattva Maitreya is an enlightened being, but out of compassion for humankind he waits in his heaven to be reborn on Earth as the future Buddha.

did the young Siddhartha Gautama when he encountered old age, sickness and death, that suffering is inescapable. Further, if living and dying bring suffering, then repeated living and dying must bring the greatest suffering.

KARMA

Buddhist thought does not see suffering as punishment for having offended a god or gods. The Dharma teaches that people's unhappiness and suffering are the effect of their own harmful actions. The moral choices people make consciously and intentionally impact on their futures, and in

this way individuals shape their own destinies. Bad actions, such as violence, greed, hatred and selfishness, harm others and also those who commit them. The resulting karma accumulates through a lifetime and must be expiated by suffering. No buddha can forgive it, and it does not expire when the body dies. It lives on after death, eventually to be reborn.

HEAVENS AND HELLS

The Buddha's last words were "Decay is inherent in all component things". Even death and rebirth are impermanent. After death, unenlightened living beings enter into one of five or six forms of rebirth, depending on their karma. They can be reborn in a hell – a place not of damnation but of purification, where evil deeds committed during earthly



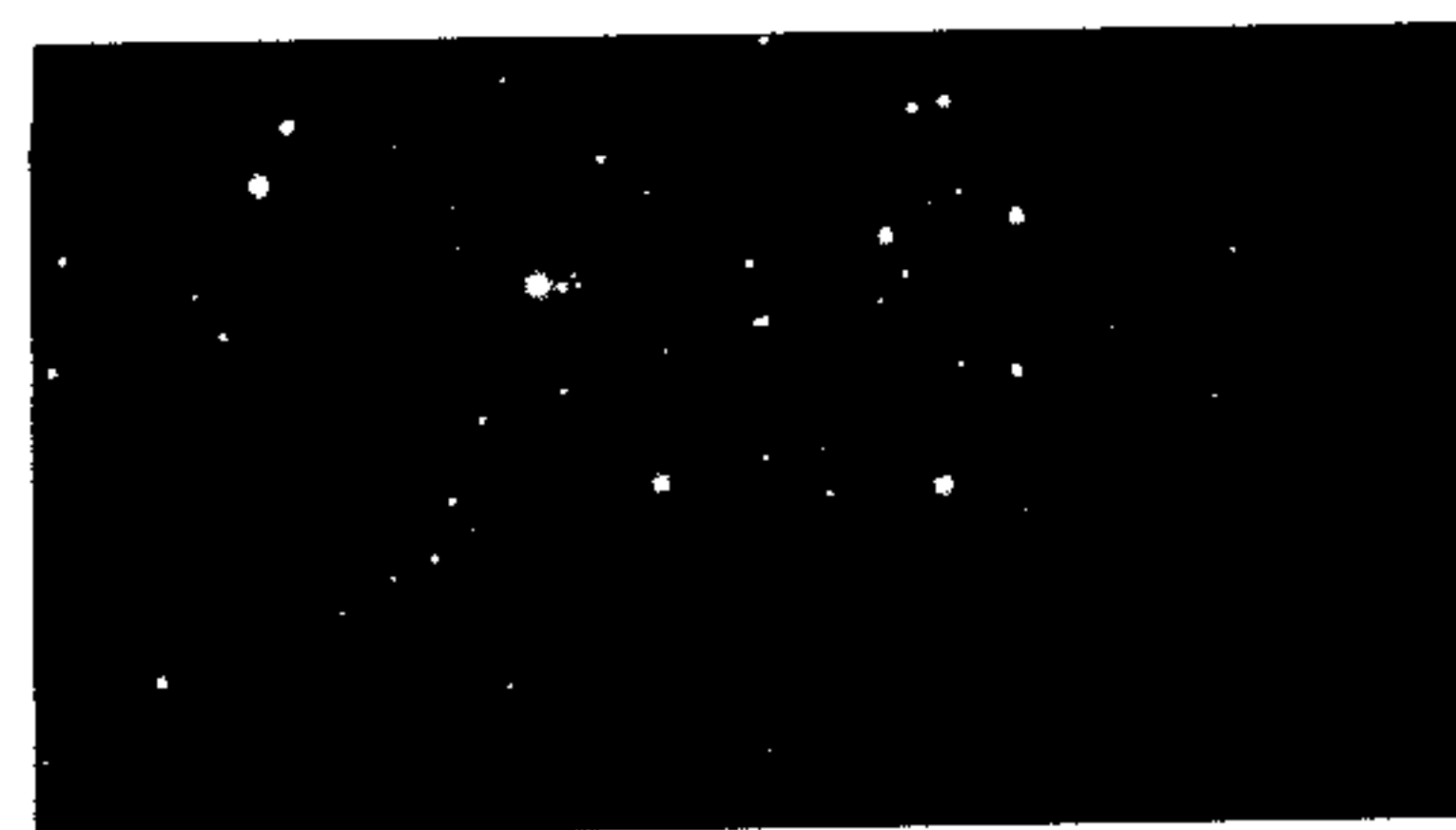
Above Hells form the lowest level of existence in the Buddhist universe. This Khmer relief from Angkor Wat shows servants of Yama, Deva of Death, stringing up and beating those in debt to evil.

existence are punished by torment. When the evil is expiated, the being is released, to be reborn into a higher realm. Beings can be reborn as any kind of animal life, a ghost, a human or a god.

Reborn beings inhabit any of 31 realms, or states of existence, in the Buddhist universe. The upper realms are heavens, the mansions of the gods. Animals, humans, even the gods in their multi-level heavens, are all subject to the law of the Dharma and must attain enlightenment to end the cycle of death and rebirth that results from karmic cause and effect.

THE IDEA OF REINCARNATION

Buddhists speak of 'rebirth', 'rebecoming' or 're-death' rather than 'reincarnation', which has a narrower meaning: the rebirth of the soul in another body. In Hindu doctrine, for example, the immortal soul, or *atman*, is repeatedly reborn in the body of a living being. "Worn-out garments are shed by the body. Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller within the body. New bodies are donned by the dweller, like garments", declares the *Bhagavadgita*, an important Hindu text. Achieving moksha, or enlightenment, frees the soul from reincarnation. The Buddha-Dharma shares the idea of rebirth with the Hindus, Jains and Sikhs, but rejects the idea of an immortal soul that lives on, unchanging, after death, as well as the belief that humans are reborn only as humans. They may be reborn as animals, or as ghosts – disembodied former humans whose worldly desires made them slaves to attachment.



Above Just as new star clusters, such as the Pleiades, form from the dust of dying stars, so everything in the Buddhist universe passes through a cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

THE AWAKENING

SIDDHARTHA'S QUEST WAS TO END THE ETERNAL CYCLE OF DEATH—BIRTH—REBIRTH AND THE SUFFERING OF ALL SENTIENT BEINGS, BUT HE COULD NOT ACHIEVE ENLIGHTENMENT UNTIL HE HAD FOUND A MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN HEEDLESS LUXURY AND ASCETIC SELF-DENIAL.

After cutting himself off from his family and making himself homeless, Siddhartha Gautama sought teachers. From the first, he learned the doctrine of the non-existence of all things, and from the second, he learned that there is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. They taught him techniques such as slow breathing and holding the breath to help control the mind, but these, once learned, did not seem to bring

him greater insight. The beliefs of these Brahmans did not resonate with him or help him find his real self. Moreover, he did not manage to conquer his cravings for food, sleep, sensual pleasure and sex.

Siddhartha joined a group of strict ascetics living in the open, quickly adopting a regime of fasting and meditation. He mastered all they knew, and achieved deep trancelike states, but the years of extreme asceticism had weakened him, and by this time he was wasting away. The 32 marks of the 'Great Man', noted at his birth, had disappeared from his body, and he almost died.

THE MIDDLE WAY

Siddhartha decided that asceticism was not the way to enlightenment. As he meditated in a forest beneath a banyan tree, a young mother, Sujata, offered him a bowl of milk rice. Sujata had been visiting the forest in order to supplicate a tree spirit for the gift of a son. Now pregnant, she

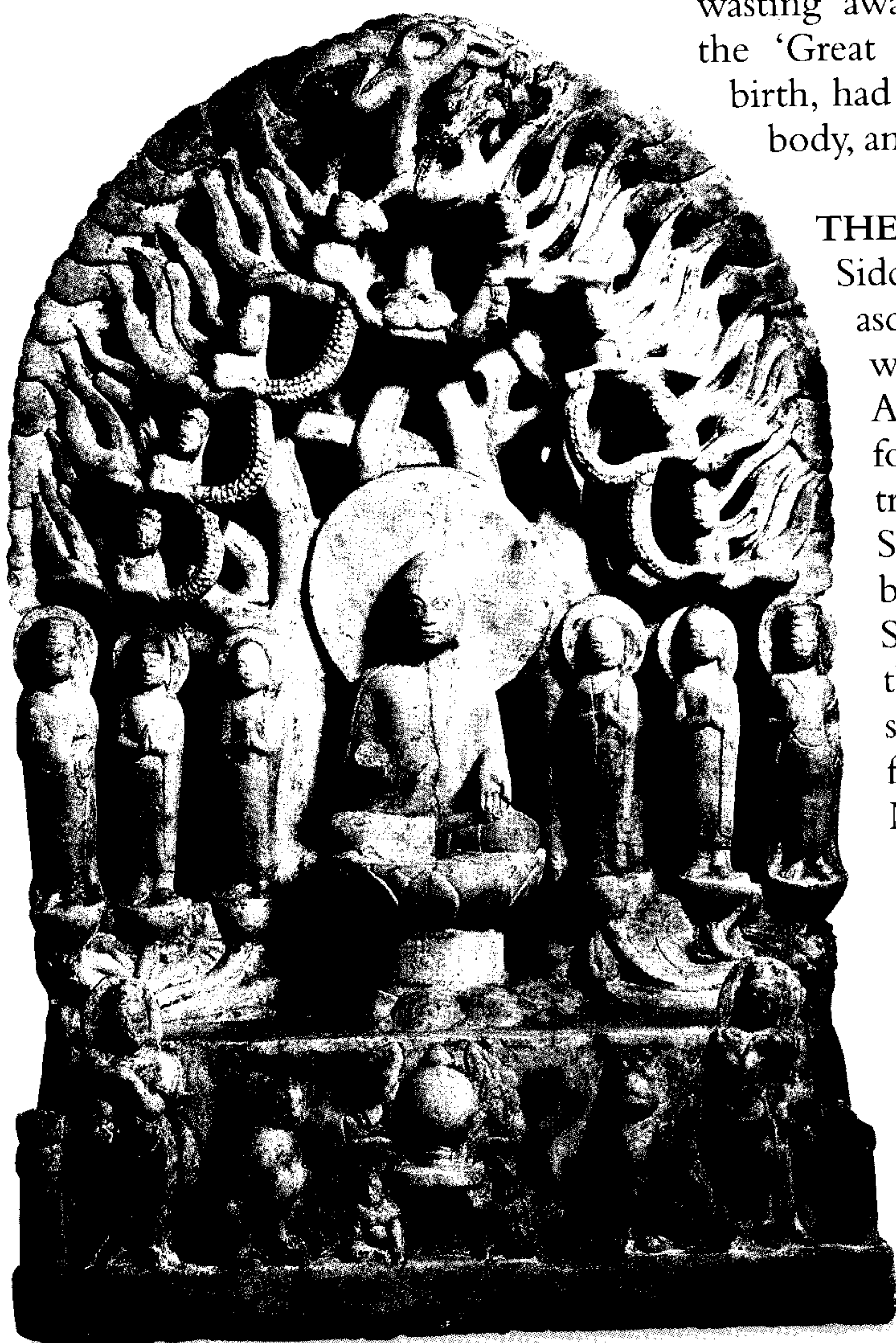
Left This 6th-century stele from China shows the enlightened Buddha as abhayadana, the bestower of fearlessness, seated on a lotus, symbol of purification and enlightenment, with his disciples and bodhisattvas.



Above Monks, princes and bodhisattvas surround the Buddha as he sits beneath the Bodhi tree in this 2nd-century BCE Kushan stone relief carving in the Indian Museum at Sarnath.

returned to give thanks with the rice and, mistaking Siddhartha for the tree spirit, she offered it to him. He accepted the gift, and divided it into 49 portions, on which he subsisted for 49 days. His strength returned and, with it, the bodily marks of the great man.

Below Assailed by the demons of Mara, whose name means 'killer', Siddhartha touched the Earth as a testament to his right to enlightenment. The Earth responded with a loud and vigorous tremor.



Disillusioned at his apparent loss of willpower, five disciples who had joined him went their separate ways and Siddhartha continued alone.

No one existed, Siddhartha realized, who could show him how to achieve enlightenment; he had to find his own way. He understood that this must be a 'middle way' between extremes of self-indulgence and asceticism. Keeping the body strong and healthy was one part of this; so too was cultivating attitudes of mind and behaviour that bring calm.

Working on putting these thoughts into practice, Siddhartha wandered toward the bank of the Niranjana River at Uruvela (now Bodhgaya in Bihar). Aware that the time of his enlightenment was near, he sat, facing east, beneath a pipal (sacred fig) tree, to meditate quietly, vowing to persist until he had attained spiritual awakening.

Below The reliefs at Borobudur in Indonesia tell stories of the Buddha's life from the Lalitavistara. Here, Siddhartha Gautama bathes in the Niranjana River.



MARA, 'THE EVIL ONE'

Mara is the name given to the ruler of the World of Desires, governor of the cycle of death and rebirth. Fearful that Siddhartha's enlightenment would illuminate his own shadowy realm, Mara struggled with him beneath the Bodhi tree. First, his demons taunted Siddhartha with fire and darkness, then his three beautiful daughters tried to distract Siddhartha from his meditations. But they failed.

In a final assault, Mara, as Lord of the World, claimed that Siddhartha's seat beneath the Bodhi tree and the gift of enlightenment were his by right. Siddhartha recalled the many compassionate deeds he had performed as proof of his own right to enlightenment. Mara called upon his demons, who shouted their support of their master's claim, then he challenged Siddhartha to find someone to testify to the truth of his words. In response, Siddhartha touched the Earth with his right hand, supplicating it to bear witness to his past acts of compassion.

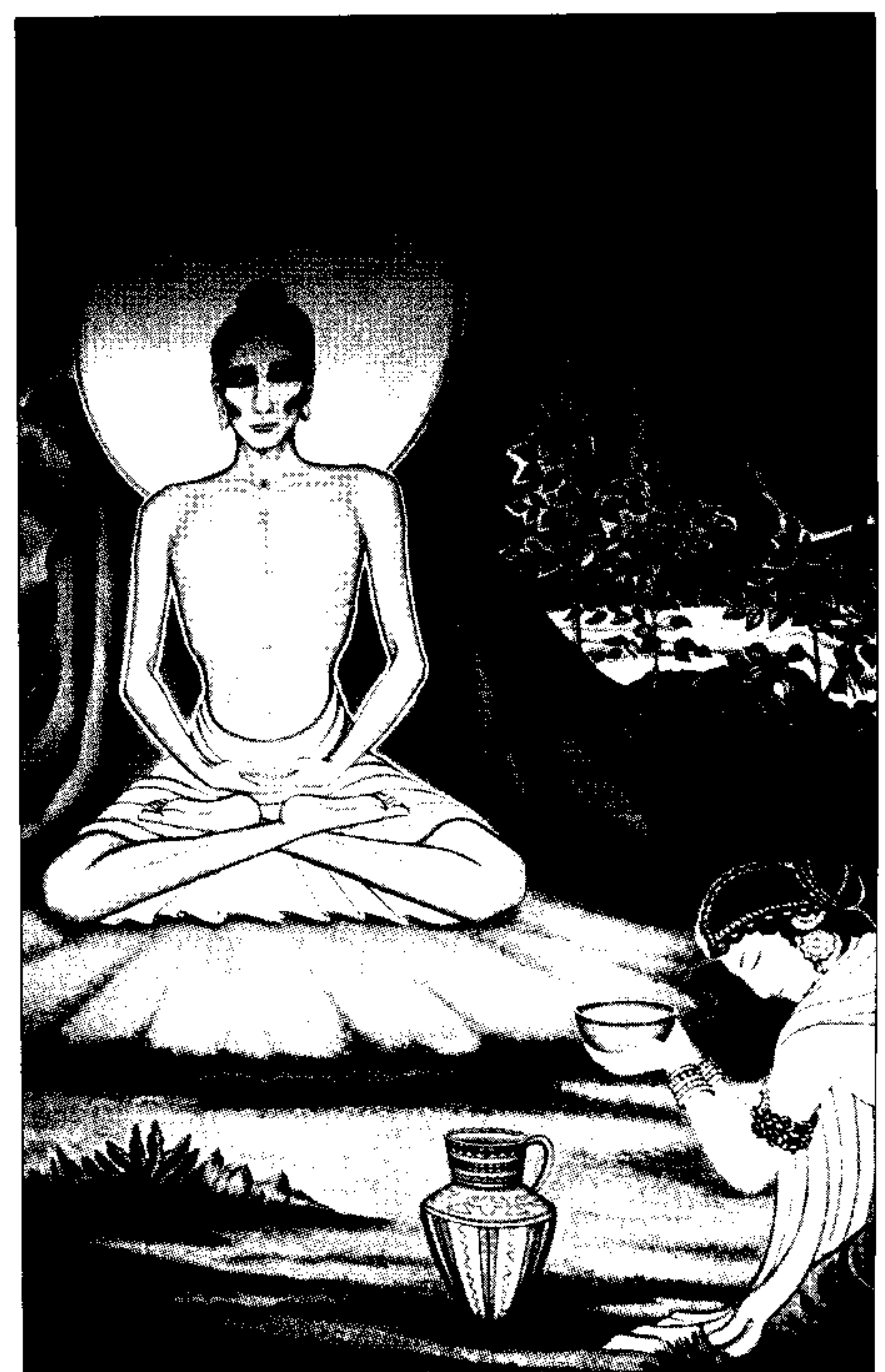
ENLIGHTENMENT

As he meditated, he was attacked by the powers of Mara, the tempter, the deva or spirit associated with death and rebirth. Mara represents the forces of the mind that militate against liberation and enlightenment. Siddhartha refused to be disturbed by Mara's barbs, which turned to flowers in the face of his calm.

The Awakening took place in three phases. First, Siddhartha fell into progressively deeper stages of

meditation; then he recalled his past lives and saw the past lives of others. Finally, he understood the Dharma, or law, the causes and effects that keep the cycle of death and rebirth in motion. From this point on, he was called the Buddha, 'the Awakened One'.

Below Sujata offered the meditating Siddhartha Gautama milk rice in a golden bowl. Since a monk may not keep any precious object, he threw the bowl into a river.



THE BUDDHIST UNIVERSE

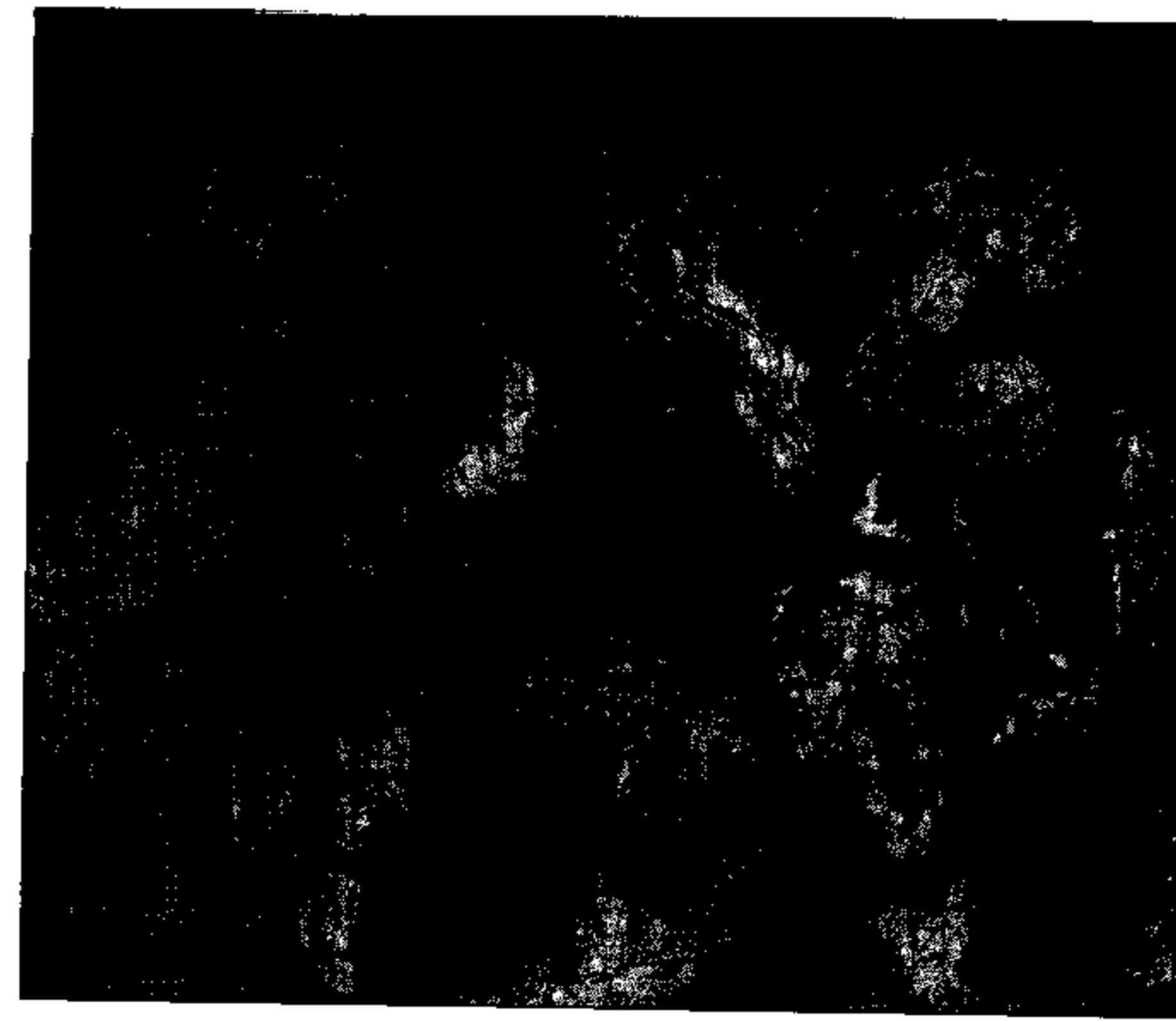
UNENLIGHTENED BEINGS INHABIT THREE SPHERES OF EXISTENCE IN THE BUDDHIST UNIVERSE, WHERE THEY DWELL IN SEPARATE REALMS. THE KARMA THEY ACCUMULATE DURING THEIR LIFETIME DETERMINES WHETHER THEY ARE REBORN INTO A LOWER OR A HIGHER REALM.

Buddhists see the universe as consisting of three worlds or spheres, which are inhabited by beings living out their cycles of birth-death-rebirth. The lowest is the Sphere of the Senses and Desires; above it is the Sphere of Form – the world of subtle matter; and the highest is called the Sphere of Formlessness – the realm of incorporeal beings. The spheres are subdivided into 31

levels, or realms, each inhabited by a different category of being. The lowest realm is Hell, while at the top is a heaven of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception. Here consciousness is transcended and only the mind exists.

SPHERES OF REBIRTH

It is possible to be reborn into any realm, or sphere, of the Buddhist universe, since samsara, or the

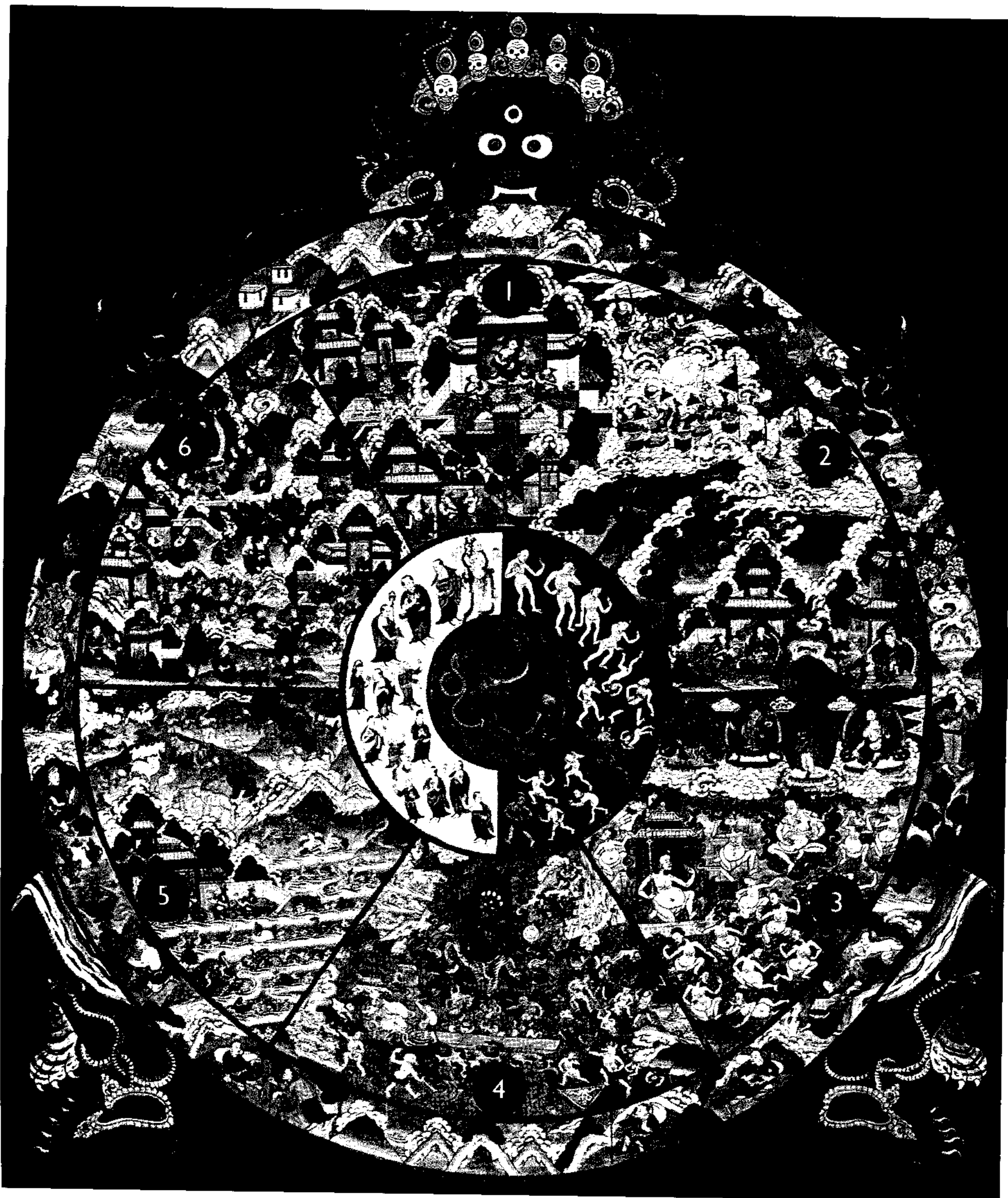


Above 'The Burning Cauldron', a section from the 12th-century Japanese Hell Scrolls, which depict 7 of the 16 lesser hells described in the Sutra of the World Arising.

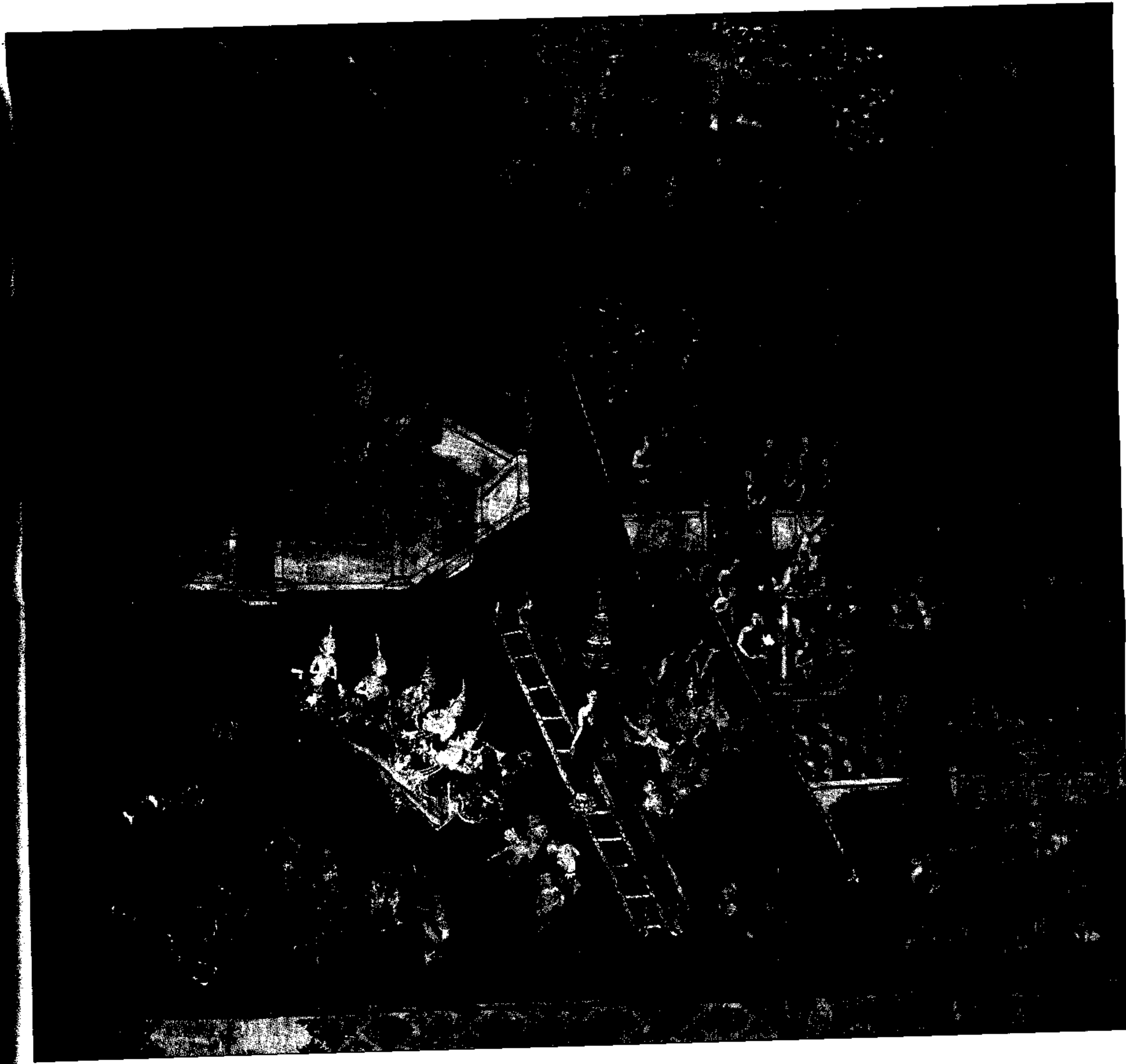
cycle of rebirth, takes place inside and between the three spheres. To be born into the Sphere of Formlessness is to be close to liberation, but it is also possible for inhabitants of the lower spheres to become enlightened. Those who attain enlightenment no longer inhabit the spheres of existence.

To be reborn as a human, high up in the Sphere of the Senses and Desires, is a beneficial destiny for any being, because humans have ample opportunity to make spiritual progress toward achieving enlightenment and thus ending the cycle of samsara. However, those who have accumulated 'good' karma may be reborn at a higher level. To be reborn into one of the many levels inhabited by the gods is a challenge: existence there is blissful, yet gods must still strive to attain enlightenment and escape samsara. If they do not, they may be reborn into a lower sphere.

Below the human realm are the realms of 'bad destiny', where beings who have accumulated



Left The six segments of the Wheel of Life represent the six realms of rebirth in the Buddhist universe. Clockwise: 1. Gods, 2. Titans, 3. Animals, 4. Hell, 5. Ghosts, 6. Humans.



Above This Thai temple painting shows the Buddha visiting his mother in one of the lower of the 26 heavens of the Buddhist universe, and afterward descending to Earth.

'bad' karma may be reborn. The lowest realm consists of various hells, where evil deeds are punished by torments such as fire and freezing. In the Buddhist universe, once evil deeds have been expiated, release follows, and beings are reborn into a higher realm.

To be reborn into the animal kingdom is undesirable, since animals, whose understanding is limited and whose lives may be naturally short, or shortened by predators, have little opportunity to achieve enlightenment. Ghosts – former humans driven by insatiable cravings – inhabit the third realm and, some scriptures claim, there is a fourth realm inhabited by warlike Titans, who are enslaved by attachment to violence and power.

LEVELS OF MEDITATION

Meditation is the central practice in almost every school of Buddhism because it provides a superhighway to enlightenment. Novices begin with exercises in concentration and mind control, but once they have achieved deep states of trance, called dhyanas, they enter the Sphere of Form. As they master advanced meditation techniques, they may pass from these lower levels and enter the Sphere of Formlessness, where they may attain the meditation levels of Infinite Space, Infinite Consciousness, or even higher.

The Pali texts and later scriptures record that the Buddha managed to reach the seventh and eighth levels – the Realm of Nothingness, where body and mind separate, and of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception – which are on the same plane as the highest levels of the Buddhist universe. From there, he passed into nirvana.

THE WHEEL OF LIFE

The Wheel of Life (Bhavacakra, literally 'Wheel of Becoming') represents samsara. At its hub are a pig, a snake and a cock. These are the 'Three Poisons' that hinder spiritual development. The pig symbolizes greed, the snake hatred and the cock delusion. Delusions are negative traits, such as ill will, stubbornness, worry and laziness. The three animals pursue each other, keeping the wheel in motion. Delusions are obstacles to enlightenment, and individuals must overcome their negative traits or remain in samsara.

Rebirths are shown in the circle around the hub of the wheel: the right, black half depicts figures falling into the 'bad destinies', from which rebirth is almost inevitable, and the left half shows the ascent into levels of existence that offer hope of liberation.

Yama, Lord of Death, whose three eyes symbolize impermanence, harm and non-self, grasps the wheel. His five skulls represent freedom from old age, sickness, death, decay and rebirth.

Below A detail from a Wheel of Life illustration shows the central disc and the black-and-white circle around it.



THE GREAT DEPARTURE

SUPERNATURAL BEINGS CALLED DEVAS APPEARED AT SPECIAL POINTS DURING SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA'S LIFE. IN HIS YOUTH, THEY MADE HIM AWARE OF HUMAN SUFFERING TO ENSURE THAT HE FULFILLED HIS DESTINY: TO SEARCH FOR A WAY TO OVERCOME IT.

One day, the Buddha's story continues, Siddhartha was riding in his chariot beyond his father's estate when, approaching the city, he passed an old man shuffling along, bent over a stick, weak and vulnerable. Startled, Siddhartha turned for an explanation to Channa, his charioteer, who told him that the man was aged, and explained that old age, with its infirmities, is the lot of all humanity. Siddhartha returned home, but his thoughts troubled him, preventing him from enjoying the pleasures of his life.

The next day, he drove out again. This time the devas placed in his path a man afflicted with disease. Siddhartha's life had been so sheltered that he knew nothing of illness, but he learned from his charioteer that disease and pain are the burden of humankind. Saddened, he returned home.

Below This illustration from a Chinese sutra (scripture) depicts the Buddha's dissatisfaction with his comfortable life and his decision to leave home to live as an ascetic in the forest.



The following day, Siddhartha set out once more, and at the city gate, he saw a corpse that was being carried to the funeral pyre by grieving mourners. Channa informed him that death is the ultimate, inescapable fate of all living beings.

THE SHRAMANA

Distraught, but still wanting to learn about life, Siddhartha made a fourth journey with Channa. This time they passed a poor man who, though he was begging for alms, seemed calm, self-possessed and free from malice. Channa explained that this man was a *shramana*, a wandering ascetic who had renounced the attachments of society and had gone into the world alone to live a homeless existence in search of spiritual fulfilment.

Shuddhodana was anxious that his only son should gain influence in society and become a leader, and he had filled Siddhartha's life with entertainments and other distractions. He also hoped that Siddhartha's newborn son, Rahula



Above Siddhartha Gautama's great encounter with old age, sickness and death showed him that his perception of life had been flawed. His youth, health and happiness would not last, but, inevitably, he would grow old, become ill and die.

(the name means 'tie' or 'impediment'), would bind him to his home and family. However, Siddhartha was deeply impressed by the demeanour of the renunciant he had met and was becoming increasingly disillusioned with his own life of ease.

RENUNCIATION

Among many religious and philosophical trends that arose in India during the 1st millennium BCE was the *shramana* movement. These 'wanderers', many of whom rejected the beliefs of the Brahmans and their rigid adherence to sacrifices described in the Vedas, were forging new beliefs and philosophies. Foremost among them was Mahavira, the reformer of Jainism and a near-contemporary of the Buddha. Many *shramanas* sought to end the cycle of birth-death-rebirth by achieving purity of the soul, or oneness with the Ultimate Reality. *Shramanas* engaged in public debates with orthodox Brahmans and with each other on these issues.

By the 5th century BCE, it had become an established tradition in northern India that, having performed their social duty by marrying and supporting a family, men would renounce family life and caste privileges and seek enlightenment through study and meditation and by living the austere life of a mendicant.

FINAL DEPARTURE

On Siddhartha's 29th birthday, beautiful dancing girls entertained him until he fell asleep. Later that night, he awoke to find that the women asleep around him were no longer so attractive. He was overcome with revulsion at his pointless existence, and his mind filled with thoughts of impermanence, suffering and death.

The idea that a person's soul is reborn after death to live another life was a widely held belief at that time, but to Siddhartha, the prospect of repeated lives and

deaths now seemed abhorrent. He therefore resolved to abandon his home and family to search for a way to end this cycle of suffering by living the meditative existence of a *shramana*.

Before leaving, he visited his sleeping wife and son. Resisting the temptation to hold Rahula and awaken them both, he vowed to revisit his son after his enlightenment. He then left his home, riding his horse, Kanthaka, with Channa, his charioteer, clinging to its tail. Devas intervened to silence the sound of the horse's hooves.

Heading south-east, the men reached the River Anoma. There, Siddhartha cut off his hair, exchanged his rich apparel for a mendicant's garb and returned his horse and charioteer to his father as evidence of his renunciation.



Above Seated on his horse Kanthaka, Gautama Siddhartha takes the first step on his path to enlightenment, as shown in this 19th-century painting of the Great Departure from Wat Ratchasitaram in Thon Buri, Bangkok.

Below By abandoning his fine clothes and jewellery and cutting off his hair, Siddhartha renounced his privileged life and signalled that he would follow the path of an itinerant mendicant.

