

From Roberto Calasso, Ka

When he was inside his mother's body, the Bodhisattva settled down in contemplation. He looked through the transparent skin. He never moved until he was born. Meanwhile, Maya dreamed of an immense white elephant, experiencing a pleasure she had never known before.

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The Bodhisattva's life was coated by a uniform film like the thin walls his father, Shuddhodana, had had built around the palace park. Whatever happened, there was always something slightly artificial and suspect about it. Why did the Bodhisattva only meet creatures of his own age? Why, whenever he approached the boundaries of the park, did the path veer off into thick vegetation that hid any trace of walls and turn back? Was this the world—or a piece of temporary scenery whose real purpose was to hide the world? One day the Buddha would sum up those years in a single sentence: "Once, before I left my father's house, I could easily obtain the five qualities of sensory pleasure." That was all he said. Characters, faces, adventures, emotions: all smoothed out in just one sentence.

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It was May. There was a full moon. That night the Bodhisattva had five dreams. Upon waking, he thought: "Today I will achieve the bodhi, the awakening. Everything will be exactly as before, as now when I woke up. But I will consider all that happens as now my mind is considering those five dreams."

During the second quarter of the night of awakening, the Buddha remembered his previous lives. First one, then two, then five. Soon he stopped counting. Names appeared—and he would say: "That was me." He saw places—and said: "That was me." He saw passions flare and fade. He saw people dying—and said: "That was me." A throng of faces, clothes, towns, animals, merchandise, roads. He went on watching. He had stopped repeating "That was me." And suddenly he realized he was watching the lives of others. He didn't notice any fundamental difference. He pressed on, amazed, but amazement was a constant in these migrations through time. True, he could no longer say: "That was me." But was that really so important? He could still recognize the joy—and above all the suffering. The scenes he had lived through and those he had not lay side by side, each attracting the other, like leaves in a pond. The light they emanated fused into one. As soon as the eye retreated, they became a thread of beads, each with a slightly different color, and here and there a small chip.

For seven days after the awakening the Buddha remained seated. Then he got up and gazed long at the fig tree that had protected him. He looked over every inch of it with an elephant's eye. After fourteen days the Buddha got up again and

began to walk. He wasn't going anywhere in particular. Not far away, Mara collapsed, defeated. He wrote on the ground with his stick.

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The Buddha's life was ever tinged by colors of sunset and uncertainty. He wanted nothing better than to appear, announce the doctrine, and disappear. For him, everything sprang from the casual occasion, from what he encountered along the road. As for the doctrine, he decided to announce it only on the insistence of an unknown brahman with whom he had fallen into conversation one day—and who turned out to be Brahma himself. The Buddha let events take him to the point where the word dropped from the branch. Thus even what was soundest seemed precarious, chancy. The epoch demanded it. Things had changed from the days of the preceding Buddhas, when life was long and people accumulated merit. The Law's sun still shone, but the light it spread was weak now. As the venerable Mahakashyapa said: reality was sick.

The Buddha's gesture was meant to counter a secret enemy: possession. That mental life is continually invaded—by what? powers? call them what you will, in any event elements that agitate—was revealed to the Buddha as the ultimate slavery, that bondage to which all others lead back. Mental life: objects looming before us, without respite, taking over, obsessing us. The gesture of grasping, of reaching out, like the monkey's lean paw. This is the most precise image of mental life: restlessness, the pathetic tension of the monkey among the branches of a big tree. He who reaches out to grasp is himself grasped, possessed by the mental object that looms up and imposes itself. There is only one circumstance in which this doesn't happen: if one is able to recognize a common trait in all those objects:emptiness.

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That life is "sweet" the Buddha announced when he was eighty years old, a few days before dying. It was the beginning of the rainy season. The Buddha said to his monks: "Split up and go your ways. Go wherever you have friends, in small groups. I will stay here with Ananda. He will look after me." When they were alone, the Buddha was afflicted by a violent bout of sickness. As soon as he was feeling better, the Buddha told Ananda that he wanted to go back and see a few places near Vaishali that were dear to him. They reached a clearing that opened out toward a vast horizon. The Buddha asked Ananda to stop. He had pains in his back again. Ananda laid out the Buddha's mat under a mango tree. Then he sat down next to him. The Buddha looked into the distance. He said: "Splendid and many-colored is the Island of the Jambu, and sweet the life of humans."

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The Buddha's last words were: "Act without inattention."