



Buddha and Attendants, c. 182 BCE, Gandhara.

Buddhism

All of Indian philosophy can be divided into two main branches, the *orthodox* traditions which accept the authority of the *Upanishads* and the *heterodox* traditions which reject some aspect of the teachings of the *Upanishads*. Buddhism, along with Jainism, are heterodox philosophies that developed in response to the *Upanishads*. Buddhism developed for over a thousand years in India and during that time it separated into two main branches. The older form of Buddhism is called *Theravada* (School of the Elders) and this form of Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in most of southeast Asia—Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand. This form of Buddhism focuses on the

teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BCE), the Indian prince who became enlightened and was thus forever after known as the *Buddha* (the awakened one). He is also sometimes known as *Shakyamuni* (the sage of the Shakya clan). The teachings of the Buddha were memorized for several hundred years by monks who regularly chanted the teachings. Several hundred years later the teachings of the Buddha were written down in the Pali language (a derivation from Sanskrit) and collected in work that is simply called *The Pali Canon*. Around the first century of the common era a different form of Buddhism developed in northern India called *Mahayana* (the Great Vehicle). Mahayana Buddhism would spread north from India into Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet and then eastwards into China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan. Mahayana Buddhism is also the dominant form of Buddhism today in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore. In this reading we focus on Theravada Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha collected in *The Pali Canon*.

The Buddha

Like Arjuna, the prince who faces the dilemma on the field of dharma in *The Bhagavad Gita*, Siddhartha Gautama was also a prince. He would have been familiar with the basic teachings of the *Upanishads* and his life story tells a traditional Indian tale of one who embarks on a quest for enlightenment or *moksha*, liberation from *samsara*. In the story it is said that his father, the king, had heard a prophecy that his son would either be a great king or a great spiritual leader. Since he wanted his son to follow his footsteps and rule his kingdom, the king tried to protect his son from being distracted by the outside world and thus prevented him from ever leaving the palace. The story is obviously a myth that was told to make a particular point and the point is that the first part of Siddhartha's life was one in which he had everything anyone could ever wish for—he was a prince enjoying the princely life and he had a beautiful wife and a young son. Supposedly, in this story, he never experienced suffering. It was only when he was already in his late twenties that he gets his charioteer to take him outside the palace and see the outside world. The significance of the charioteer should not be lost. Just as it was Arjuna's charioteer, Krishna, who would explain to him the teachings of yoga, Siddhartha would be directed by his charioteer to take up the quest for enlightenment. On four successive trips outside the palace compound Siddhartha sees the four sights

or signs. On the first three trips he sees an old man, then a sick man, and then a corpse. Of course, it is not likely that the historical Siddhartha never witnessed sickness, old age and death in his first twenty nine years. Surely, he must have experienced sickness and seen his parents and grandparents age, and most likely he must have witnessed death. The point of the story is to suggest that the first part of his life was focused on the pursuit of pleasure and happiness and it was only when he saw old age, sickness, and death that he would take up the quest for enlightenment. On the fourth journey outside the palace he sees a man sitting in meditation and when he asks about that, his charioteer tells him about the teachings of yoga and the quest for enlightenment. The basic point of the story is to emphasize that it is the experience of sickness, old age, and death that leads one to take up the quest for liberation from *samsara*, the round of rebirth or reincarnation that leads one to come back again and again to this world.



Emaciated Shakyamuni, 3rd CE, Gandhara

According to the story, Siddhartha thus leaves behind his princely life, leaves behind his wife and young son, and enters the forest on a quest for enlightenment. Though it may seem harsh and perhaps even irresponsible to us for Siddhartha to leave behind his family, the quest for enlightenment is regarded in India as the highest aim of life and is thus still very much respected and honored today. Siddhartha then spent six years studying yoga under various teachers. In his quest for enlightenment Siddhartha took up various ascetic practices, even almost starving himself to death in an effort to break the attachment to the body and its desires. Then, finally, one night Siddhartha Gautama sat under a tree and in a state of deep meditation experienced enlightenment. The tree still grows in a place called “Bodhi Gaya” in India and is known as the “Bodhi Tree” (the tree of enlightenment). Exactly what this enlightenment experience was and the implications of this experience is the basis of the Buddha’s teachings in *The Pali Canon*.

It seems that at least part of what the Buddha realized is that the whole quest for immortality that is the goal set out in the *Upanishads* was perhaps a distraction from the central problem, which is simply the problem of suffering. The most important and central teaching of Buddhism is said to be the teaching of *interdependent arising* (*pratitya samutpada*). This is the insight that all things arise and pass away through interdependence with other processes. If this is true, then there is no soul in the sense suggested by the *Atman* hypothesis in the *Upanishads*. In the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* it is emphasized that the soul within (*Atman*) always was and always will be. It was never born and will never die. Buddhism is a rejection of the teachings of the *Upanishads* in accepting the notion of *interdependent arising*. From this it also follows that everything is impermanent. Whereas the *Upanishads* taught that true reality is unchanging, Buddhism teaches that reality is constantly changing.

The Buddha’s enlightenment experience came as a result of understanding the problem of suffering. As it was the experience of old age, sickness, and death that led Siddhartha to take up the quest for enlightenment, his first teaching, the famous teaching of the “Four Noble Truths,” is a



A Footprint of the Buddha, 3rd-4th C.E. Gandhara.

teaching that puts forth a solution to the problem of suffering. The teaching might best be remembered as similar to a visit to a physician. The First Noble Truth is the truth of the sickness, and the sickness is the problem of suffering. The Second Noble Truth is the diagnosis, and this says that the cause of suffering is attachment or desire. The Third Noble Truth is the prognosis, and this prognosis is quite optimistic—it says that there is a cure for this sickness. The cure involves understanding *nirvana*. This word is understood at the Buddhist notion of enlightenment. Literally, *nirvana* means to ‘blow out’ or ‘extinguish,’ and if one reads the Third Noble Truth carefully, it is evident that what gets blown out in *nirvana* is the cause of suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth is then the prescription. This prescription is the Eightfold Path. This path involves right thinking and right attitudes and practices, but also involves deeper and deeper states of meditation. This image on the left, *A Footprint of the Buddha*, indicates the Four Noble Truths. If one looks carefully on the four toes one recognizes the swastika symbol, an ancient Indian symbol that merely meant “Noble.”

Included in the selections from *The Pali Canon* below, there is the first teaching of the Four Noble Truths. There is also another famous teaching called “The Fire Sermon.” Here the Buddha is explaining that “everything is burning.” Basically, what he is saying is something like “to live is to burn.” This is true enough, for if there were not a fire within, one would simply be dead. The Buddha goes through the parts of the self explaining how all is burning. The problem of suffering concerns just how we are burning or what we are burning with. Until one has conquered the problem of suffering the normal human condition is that we are burning with the three poisons. These three poisons get translated differently, and in this translation it is “lust,” “hatred,” and “delusion.” The Buddha suggests that there is a solution and perhaps in understanding the point of “The Fire Sermon” that the central question of Buddhism can be raised. I will attach a short video clip from a documentary film simply titled “The Buddha.” In this clip one hears two experts explaining the point of “The Fire Sermon.” The first explains that the point is that we must put the fire out. The second person, the poet W.S. Merwin explains that perhaps the point is not to extinguish the fire, but rather to change the fuel with which we burn. The point is that through meditation one can see through the problem of suffering and in blowing out the cause of suffering, one does not extinguish the fire itself, but rather turns the three poisons around to their opposites.

The final selections from *The Pali Canon* are from a text called the *Dhamapada* (footsteps of the Dharma). These lines illustrate that early Buddhism might simply be thought of as a kind of psychology. The text suggests that the problem of suffering is mind-made and thus can be solved through changing one’s mind. It is easier said than done, of course, and this requires taking up the Buddha’s prescription of the Eightfold Path.

Selections from the Pali Canon

Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth

(Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta)

The Teaching of the Four Noble Truths

Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once living in the Deer Park at Isipatana (the Resort of Seers) near Bārānasi (Benares). There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus:

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be practised by one who has gone forth from the household life. What are the two? There is devotion to the indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, common, the way of ordinary people, unworthy and unprofitable; and there is devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable.

"Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathāgata has realized the Middle Path: it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*. And what is that Middle Path. . . ? It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the Middle Path realized by the Tathāgata, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*.

"The Noble Truth of suffering (*Dukkha*) is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering--in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

"The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (craving) [*Taṇhā*] which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation).

"The Noble Truth of the Cessation (*Nibbāna*) of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.

"The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view; right thought; right speech, right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration.

"'This is the Noble Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*)': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, should be fully understood': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before. 'This suffering, as a noble truth, has been fully understood': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the Origin of suffering': such was the vision . . . 'This Origin of suffering, as a noble truth, should be abandoned': such was the vision, . . . 'This Origin of suffering, as a noble truth, has been abandoned': such was the vision, . . . with regard to things not heard before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering': such was the vision. . . 'This cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be realized': such was the vision, . . . 'This Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been realized': such was the vision, . . . with regard to things not heard before.

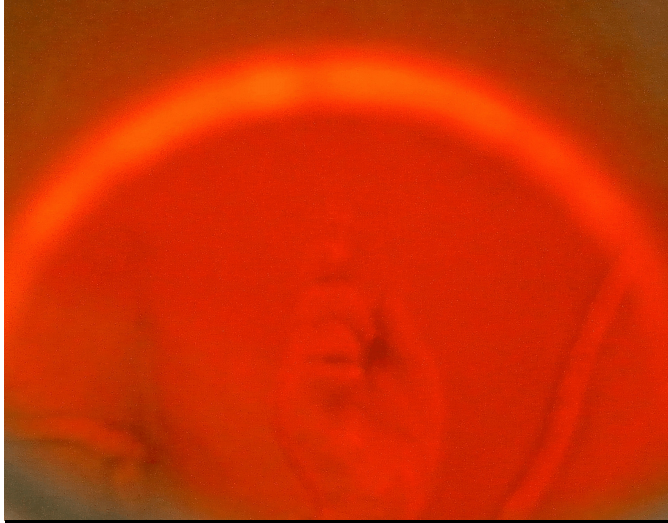
"This is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering': such was the vision, . . . 'This Path leading to the Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be followed (cultivated)': such was the vision, . . . 'This Path leading to the Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been followed (cultivated)': such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before.

"As long as my vision of true knowledge was not fully clear in these *three* aspects, in these twelve ways, regarding the Four Noble Truths, I did not claim to have realized the perfect Enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its gods, with its Maras and Brahmas, in this world with its recluses and brāhmaṇas, with its princes and men. But when my vision of true knowledge was fully clear in these three aspects, in these twelve ways, regarding the Four Noble Truths, then I claimed to have realized the perfect Enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its gods, its Maras and Brahmas, in this world with its recluses and brāhmaṇas, with its princes and men. And a vision of true knowledge arose in me thus: My heart's deliverance is unassailable. This is the last birth. Now there is no more re-becoming (rebirth).

This the Blessed One said. The group of five bhikkhus was glad, and they rejoiced at his words.

(*Samyutta nikāya*, LVI, 11)

The Fire Sermon
(*Ādittapariyāya-sutta*)



Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once living at Gayasla in Gaya with a thousand bhikkhus. There he addressed the bhikkhus:

"Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning? "Bhikkhus, the eye is burning, visible forms are burning, visual consciousness is burning, visual impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the visual impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of

delusion; I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"The ear is burning, sounds are burning, auditory consciousness is burning, auditory impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the auditory impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The nose is burning, odours are burning, olfactory consciousness is burning, olfactory impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the olfactory impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The tongue is burning, flavours are burning, gustative consciousness is burning, gustative impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the gustative impression, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The body is burning, tangible things are burning, tactile consciousness is burning, tactile impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the tactile sensation, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust. . . .

"The mind is burning, mental objects (ideas, etc.) are burning, mental consciousness is burning, mental impression is burning, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the mental impression, that too is burning. Burning with what?

Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion; I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

"Bhikkhus, a learned and noble disciple, who sees (things) thus, becomes dispassionate with regard to the eye, becomes dispassionate with regard to visible forms, becomes dispassionate with regard to the visual consciousness, becomes dispassionate with regard to the visual impression, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of the visual impression, with regard to that too he becomes dispassionate. He becomes dispassionate with regard to the ear, with regard to sounds. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the nose. . . with regard to odours. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the tongue . . . with regard to flavours. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the body. . . with regard to tangible things. . . . He becomes dispassionate with regard to the mind, becomes dispassionate with regard to mental objects (ideas, etc.), becomes dispassionate with regard to mental consciousness, becomes dispassionate with regard to mental impression, also whatever sensation, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, arises on account of mental impression, with regard to that too he becomes dispassionate.

"Being dispassionate, he becomes detached; through detachment he is liberated. When liberated there is knowledge that he is liberated. And he knows: Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, what has to be done is done, there is no more left to be done on this account."

This the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were glad, and they rejoiced at his words.

While this exposition was being delivered, the minds of those thousand bhikkhus were liberated from impurities, without attachment.

(Samyutta-nikāya, XXXV, 28)

Universal Love

(Metta-sutta)

He who is skilled in good and who wishes to attain that state of Calm should act (thus):

He should be able, upright, perfectly upright, compliant, gentle, and humble.

Contented, easily supported, with few duties, of simple livelihood, controlled in senses, discreet, not impudent, he should not be greedily attached to families.

He should not commit any slight wrong such that other wise men might censure him. (Then he should cultivate his thoughts thus:)

May all beings be happy and secure; may their minds be contented.

Whatever living beings there may be—feeble or strong, long (or tall), stout, or medium, short, small, or large, seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born and those who are yet to be born—may all beings, without exception, be happy-minded!

Let not one deceive another nor despise any person whatever in any place. In anger or ill will let not one wish any harm to another.

Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.

Let one's thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world—above, below and across—without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.

Whether one stands, walks, sits or lies down, as long as one is awake, one should maintain this mindfulness. This, they say, is the Sublime State in this life.

Not falling into wrong views, virtuous and endowed with Insight, one gives up attachment to sense-desires. Verily such a man does not return to enter a womb again.

Selections from
The Dhammapada

1

All (mental) states have mind as their forerunner, mind is their chief, and they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts, with a defiled mind, then suffering follows one even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox.

2

All (mental) states have mind as their forerunner, mind is their chief, and they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts, with a pure mind, happiness follows one as one's shadow that does not leave one.

5

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love. This is an eternal Law.

25

By endeavour, diligence, discipline, and self-mastery, let the wise man make (of himself) an island that no flood can overwhelm.

33

This fickle, unsteady mind, difficult to guard, difficult to control, the wise man makes straight, as the fletcher the arrow.

35

Hard to restrain, unstable is this mind; it flits wherever it lists. Good it is to control the mind. A controlled mind brings happiness.

82.

Even as a lake, deep, extremely clear and tranquil, so do the wise become tranquil having heard the Teaching.

85

Few among men are they who cross to the further shore. The others merely run up and down the bank on this side.

165

By oneself indeed is evil done and by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone and by oneself indeed is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one can purify another.

277

'All conditioned things are impermanent (*anicca*)', when one sees this in wisdom, then one becomes dispassionate towards the painful. This is the Path to Purity.

278

'All conditioned things are *dukkha* (Ill)', when one sees this in wisdom, then he becomes dispassionate towards the painful. This is the Path to Purity.

279

'All states (*dhamma*) are without self (*anattā*)', when one sees this in wisdom, then he becomes dispassionate towards the painful. This is the Path to Purity.

387

The sun glows by day; the moon shines by night; in his armour the warrior glows. In meditation shines the brāhman. But all day and night, shines with radiance the Awakened One (*Buddha*).

* * *

All selections from Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, second edition (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

KEY TERMS

Sanskrit, (Pāli)

बुद्ध

Buddha

Buddha

Awakened One

A fully enlightened human being, one who has attained *Nirvana*.

धर्म

Dharma (dhamma)

Dharma (Dhamma)

Duty, Law, Virtue, Morality, Righteousness

in Buddhism used in various meanings:

1) The cosmic law underlying the world; 2) the teachings of the Buddha; 3) Norms of behavior and ethical rules; 4) Manifestations of reality, of the general state of affairs; thing, phenomenon; 5) Mental content, object of thought, idea; 6) term for the so-called factors of existence which the Theravada tradition considers as building blocks of the empirical personality.

संघ

saṅgha (saṅgha)

Sangha

Society, Association, Community

Originally in Buddhism the *Sangha* referred to the monastic order. More broadly the term refers to the Buddhist community.

प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद

pratitya samutpāda (paṭicca samuppāda)

Pratitya Samutpada (Paticca Samuppada)

Dependent arising, Conditioned arising

A central doctrine of Buddhism which holds that all psychological and physical phenomena constituting individual existence are interdependent and mutually condition each other.

अनात्मन्

anātman (anatta)

Anatman (Anatta)

No-Self

The doctrine that says no self exists in the sense of a permanent, eternal, integral, and independent substance within an individual existent.

अनित्य

anitya (anicca)

Anitya (Anicca)

Impermanence, Transitoriness

The doctrine that everything that exists must pass away.

दुःख

duḥkha (dukkha)
Duhkha (Dukkha)

Suffering, Sorrow, Pain, Difficulty

The 1st Noble Truth of Buddhism holds that all life involves *dukkha*. Literally, *dukkha* means something like “having a broken axle-hole.”

तृष्णा

trṣṇā (taṇhā)
Trishna (Tanha)

Desire, Thirst, Attachment

The 2nd Noble Truth of Buddhism holds that *trishna* is the cause of *dukkha*.

निर्वाण

nirvāṇa (nibbāna)
Nirvana (Nibbana)

Enlightenment, Bliss

The 3rd Noble Truth of Buddhism holds that *dukkha* can be extinguished through the cessation of *trishna* leading to *nirvana*. Literally, *nirvana* means “blown out,” “extinguished.” *Nirvana* is the goal of enlightenment for Buddhists.

अर्हत्

arhat (arahant)
Arhat (Arahant)

Worthy One

One who is free from all fetters, defilements and impurities through realization of *Nirvana* in the fourth and final stage, and who is free from rebirth.

तथागत

tathāgata
Tathagata

The ‘Thus-Gone’ or ‘Thus-Come’ One

An epithet for the Buddha. The Buddha is the one who has crossed over the river of *dukkha* to the other shore of *nirvana*; or one who has come to the shore of *nirvana*.

प्रज्ञा

prajñā
Prajna

Wisdom, Intelligence, Knowledge

करुणा

karuṇā
Karuna

Compassion

स्कन्ध

skandha (khandha)
Skandha (Khandha)

Aggregate

Originally the term referred to the trunk of a tree, particularly the part where the branches begin. In Buddhism there are five *skandhas* or branches of the self: form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

The Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit, Pali)

- 1) The truth of suffering (*duḥkha, dukkha*)
- 2) The truth of the cause of suffering (*trṣṇā, taṇhā*)
- 3) The truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirvāṇa, nibbāna*)
- 4) The Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering

The Eightfold Path (Sanskrit, Pali)

- 1) Right View or Understanding (*drṣṭi, ditṭhi*)
- 2) Right Resolve or Intention or Thought (*saṃkalpa, sankappa*)
- 3) Right Speech (*vāc, vācā*)
- 4) Right Action (*karmānta, kammanta*)
- 5) Right Livelihood (*ājīva*)
- 6) Right Effort (*vyāyāma, vāyāma*)
- 7) Right Mindfulness (*smṛti, sati*)
- 8) Right Concentration (*samādhi*)

The Five Aggregates (Sanskrit, Pali)

- 1) Bodily Form (*rūpa*)
- 2) Sensation (*vedanā*)
- 1) Perception (*saṃjñā, saññā*)
- 1) Mental Formations (*saṃskāra, saṃkhāra*)
- 1) Consciousness (*viññāna, viññāna*)

QUESTIONS

1. What are the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha in his first sermon? How are they linked?
2. How does the Buddhist notion of enlightenment, as indicated by the term '*nirvana*,' contrast and compare with the Hindu notion of *moksha*?
3. How is it that the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) can be said to be the central doctrine of Buddhism? How do the teachings of impermanence (*anitya*) and no-Self (*anātman*) follow from this central teaching?
4. If there is no *Ātman*, what is the self according to the Buddhist analysis? What are the five groups of processes that constitute the self from the Buddhist point of view?
5. How does *The Fire Sermon* explain the Buddha's central teaching concerning liberation?