

The Buddha's First Sermon and the Original Patterns of the Middle Way

Shoson Miyamoto

After six long years of strenuous ascetic discipline following his renunciation, Śākyamuni entered with deep resolution into a new life of *satori*, characterized by *dhyāna*-meditation and deep thought. While keeping intact the spiritual powers accumulated through religious practice, the years of his youth devoted to physical training, cultural accomplishments, reflective thought and leisurely enjoyments were brought to life, and the revolutionary ideal of society to be created by the cooperative venture of true individuals was born. The subject which connects, unites, and revives the lay life he had known as a prince and the priestly life he had spent as a recluse were newly realized as the "Middle Way of Pleasure and Pain" through his own experience. He further developed this into the "Middle Way of Eightfold Noble Path," based upon the cumulative experience of his Aryan forebearers, endowed with rich common sense and an open-minded spirit. In fact, he called it the ancient path (*purāṇa magga*⁽¹⁾) traversed by men of the old. In this way he deepened the individual experience of the Middle Way of Pleasure-Pain into a Way substantiated by the wisdom of the ages and inherited as a legacy of the whole Aryan people. This *satori* was a realm, still unknown to mankind, cultivated by Śākyamuni with great courage and effort. There is no statement more alive and powerful, filled with moving spirituality, than the brief expression of *satori* in all the biographies of the Buddha, the teachings in the Āgamas, and the records of the Vinayas. Truly, the

(1) S. N. XII 65 Nagara, Vol. II, p. 106, "purāṇa-magga".

(2) The Buddha's First Sermon and the Original (Shoson Miyamoto)

satori of the Buddha was born from a gifted individual's full experience of many-faceted life, given depth and breadth by the humanity of an ancient race. And it is indeed a thing of wonder that the brief, but living and coherent, account of the enlightenment experience remains with us to this day.

The First Sermon, titled the Initial Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, delivered at the Deer Park on the outskirts of Benares is in part as follows:⁽²⁾

O monks, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth as a wanderer. What two? Devotion to the pleasure of sense, a low practice of villagers, a practice unworthy, unprofitable, the way of the world (on one hand); and (on the other) devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable. By avoiding these two extremes the Tathāgata has gained knowledge of that Middle Path which gives knowledge, which causes calm, special knowledge, enlightenment, Nibbāna.

And what, monks, is that Middle Path which gives vision..... Nibbāna? Verily, it is this Aryan Eightfold Way, to wit: right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, monks, is that Middle Path which gives vision.....Nibbāna.

Now this, monks, is the Aryan truth about ill.....the Aryan truth about the arising of ill.....the Aryan truth about the ceasing of ill.....the Aryan truth about the practice that leads to the ceasing of ill.....

Here is found the original pattern of *satori*, as well as the beginnings of Buddhism. Without the *satori* of Śākyamuni, Buddhism would not

(2) Tathāgatena-vutta, S. N. LVI Saccasamyutta II Dhammacakkapavattana-vagga, Vol. V, p. 421.

exist today; but it is also true that the teachings would not have spread if his *satori* were not open to mankind which could strive for a cooperative world of *satori*. It is said that Śākyamuni entered a period of reflection after his enlightenment experience, wrestling with the dilemma of whether or not to transmit his experience to others. He finally decided to keep his discovery to himself, concluding that there was a difference between himself and the others. Yet he broke through his impasse and a new realm was unfolded when he chose to become an agent for the *satori* of others.

Realizing the basic form of *satori* in the Middle Way of Pleasure-Pain and the Middle Way of Eightfold Noble Path, Śākyamuni uttered the lion's roar which reveals his confidence and dignity as the teacher of men and which echoes his greatness in stature to be equal to the world he confronted:⁽³⁾

“All conqueror, I, Knower of all, From every soil and stain released,
Renouncing all, craving ceased,

Self-taught: whom should I Master call?

That which I know I learned of none, My fellow is not on the
earth, Of human or of heavenly birth To equal me there is
not one.

I truly have attained release. The world's unequalled teacher I.
Alone, enlightened perfectly,

I dwell in everlasting peace.

Now to Benares Town I press To set the Truth-Wheel whirling
round In this blind world I go to sound

The throbbing drum of deathlessness.”

The Buddha entered an active missionary life to share his newly won experience with others for the benefit and welfare of mankind. He first travelled to the Deer Park far away from Buddhagayā, seeking the five ascetics with whom he had lived for the past six years. When the Buddha

(3) M. N. Ariyapariyesana-sutta, Vol. I, p. 171.

(4) The Buddha's First Sermon and the Original (Shoson Miyamoto)

had abandoned the practice of self-mortification as a hindrance to the quest for truth and restored the health of his body and mind to enter the new life of *satori*, the five monks had cursed him as a backslider who had fallen into the ways of luxury. The Buddha meets the five ascetics again, and tells them that he did not choose the easy life, but rather that he gained a new *satori* through the Middle Way. Partly justifying his actions, he explained the newly-experienced Middle Way of Pleasure-Pain, as well as the Middle Way of the Noble Eightfold Path. Since it is a direct expression of "his own experience," it takes the form of a monologue which is a very significant fact.

As the title of Buddha's First Sermon indicates, it is a Turning of the Wheel of Dharma and it is made to convince the five ascetics of the value of his *satori*. Thus the principal section is the exposition on the Four Noble Truth, and the monologue on *satori* is none other than an introduction. The composition of the First Sermon consists of (1) Middle Way of Pleasure-Pain, 苦樂中道 (2) Middle Way of Eightfold Noble Path, 八正道中道 and (3) Four Noble Truth (四諦說 *Cattāri-ariya-saccāni: dukkha-samudaya-nirodha-magga*, i. e. pain, cause, extinction, and path) which does not contain the expression for Middle Way in the context. However the 4th Truth of Path or Practise, being the Middle Way in reality, is the basis for the development of Bodhisattva ideal. Thus the Four Noble Truth is the standard expositin of the Buddha's experience, being objectively presented with logic and reason for the first time and open to the public. Actually, however, it consists of two sections, (1) the monologue on the exprience of *satori* and (2) the repetition of the Four Noble Truth, since the section on the Middle Ways of Pleasure-Pain and Eightfold Noble Path has an independent structure in both style and contents. From a literary standpoint, the combination of these two sections appears awkward, but this lack of sophistication is thought to contain the authentic, original exposition.

The five bhikkhus were serious students who decided to accompany Śākyamuni because he was a prince when he first renounced the worldly

life, thus they lacked the pioneering zeal to open new realms hitherto unknown to mankind. Not having the open-mindedness and the wide experience of a man of royal birth, the five bhikkhus probably failed to grasp the full implication of the "*satori* of Middle Path" when it was first presented to them. Undoubtedly, strenuous efforts had to be made before they could become awakened to open the eyes of dharma. It was necessary to repeat the explanation many times as well as to present the ideas from different viewpoints. This is the section traditionally known as "the thrice revolved twelvefold Wheel of Dharma 三轉十二行法輪. It shows how difficult it is to convey the proper understanding of *satori*. Even in ordinary communication, such as that of a public lecture, each listener has his own interpretation which invariably differs from the others. It was not only befitting but only natural that the exposition on *satori* begins with the Middle Way of Pleasure-Pain and the Middle Way of Eightfold Noble Path, since they are the expressions of Śākyamuni as both a religious figure and a socio-historical being. Next it was important that the theory and structure of nature and life, phenomena and existence, were systematically clarified. In clinical medicine the patient's illness is first observed then the cause of illness is analyzed from various angles, and finally the cause itself is pinpointed. The cause is never singular; it is always plural. The doctor and the patient cooperate to regain health, striving for this goal by proper treatment, medicine, care, and prognosis.⁽⁴⁾

The application to spiritual health of this medical process of relating effect to cause, method to goal, resulted in the Four Noble Truth. Thus, the Four Noble Truth of pain, cause, extinction, and path includes a scientific theory of phenomena, besides the concern for individual existence. Although the problem of *satori* and nirvāṇa is found in the Middle Way Principle, the absolute nature of nirvāṇa is clearly posited in the truth of extinction (*nirodha*) of the Four Noble Truth. It is juxtaposed against the relative phenomena of the truths of pain and cause of pain. The intermediary and

(4) Zō-agon 15, Taisho 2, 105 ab.

(6) The Buddha's First Sermon and the Original (Shoson Miyamoto)

connecting factor between these two contrasting worlds are secured in the truth of path (*magga*) and the self of Middle Way penetrating time and space. Thus in both theory and practice the Four Noble Truth is well organized.

Although records state that the Buddha turned the wheel of Brahma (*brahma-cakka*)⁽⁵⁾, it is the turning of the wheel of dharma (*dhmma-cakka*)⁽⁶⁾ which rightfully makes him a Buddha. In the three types of victorious men mentioned in *Kautilya* (XII, 1) there are those who conquer lands and riches, there are the cruel ones who capture women and children, and in contrast to these two types are those victorious in the dharma (*dharma-vijayi*)⁽⁷⁾ under whom the conquered are content to uphold the laws of the ruler. In the *Selastta* of *Suttanipāta* the *cakravarti-rāja*⁽⁸⁾ is said to be the conqueror of the four quarters, the ruler of the India-centered world, the king among kings, who possesses the 32 marks of a great being, carries the seven jewels, and "who conquers by means of the dharma (*dhmmena-abhivijaya*) and not by the staff (*adandena*) or the sword (*asatthena*)." The *cakravarti-rāja* "relies on the dharma, worships the dharma, respects the dharma, meditates on the dharma, reveres the dharma, has the dharma as a banner, has the dharma as a drum, and makes the dharma his master." He is the possessor of freedom (*vassavattin*), who holds the actual powers of political, economic and military affairs, and who is popular among the masses and received their support. The ideal of a ruler for all India, in fact, for the whole world was conceived with the understanding that the duties of the ideal Aryan ruler would be fulfilled. The *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* relates the following words of the Buddha to Subhadda, who requested the final teaching of

(5) A. N. Catuka Nipāta, 3 Uruvelavagga, 23 Loka, p. 24; Itivuttaka, verse 112, p. 123.

(6) Suttanipāta, III Mahāvagga, 11 Nalaka-sutta, pp. 132-136.

(7) Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Asoka* (Delhi: Rajkamal Publications, 2nd ed. revised, 1955), p. 163.

(8) Suttanipāta, III Mahāvagga, 7 Selasutta, p. 109.

(9) See the author's article on cakravarta-rāja and Middle way in "Butsuda no Rinri-kan" in *Kōza Bukkyō*, Vol. I, pp. 24-32 (Tokyo: Daizo, 1959).

the master on his sickbed:

“O Subhadda, I renounced the world at the age of 29 to seek the highest good. O Subhadda, more than 50 years have passed since I renounced the world. I have walked only in the realm of truth and dharma. Aside from this, there is no samaṇa.”⁽¹⁰⁾

In light of this passage, we see how appropriate Buddhism is as a teaching for the ruler who is victorious in the dharma. It is this respect for the dharma (*gāraṇa*) which led King Asoka to inscribe the famous rock edict, “the victory by means of the dharma is the highest victory,” making him the fitting symbol of the classic Indian ruler, *cakravartirāja*. The *satori* of the Buddha is the fundamental source for the ideals of victory and rule by the dharma, as found in the *Selasutta* of the *Suttanipāta* (nos. 554, 555) “Gotama the Buddha as the Enlightend One is the unsurpassed ruler of dharma and turns the wheel by the dharma.” Although the reign by the dharma is an ideal of the Aryan ruling class, the factor to transform it into a nation devoted to peace and culture are not contained within it. The reason is that such an ideal can be realized only by relying upon something both within it and transcending it. Although the Buddha's “logic of *śūnyatā*” is a negation, as well as a transcendence, it is penetrated with the Middle Way logic of transformation which leads to creation and fulfillment. The spirit of dharma is necessary and transformation by the Middle Way, 中道轉入, is absolutely required for *cakravarti-rāja* turning into *dharma-cakravartirāja*. This “bodhisattva ideal of the Middle Way” which flows from the truth of Buddha is the essence of the reign by dharma, 正法治國. Buddhism has much to offer to world culture, because of such a frame work of thought found in the original patterns of Buddha's *satori*.

Among the rock edicts of King Asoka, the Calcutta-Bairāt edict gives the names of seven sūtras which the ruler must uphold to have the dharma live eternally in his land. Since the seven types of dharma

(10) Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta, D. N. 16, Vol. II, p. 151.

(8) The Buddha's First Sermon and the Original (Shoson Miyamoto)

provide excellent clues for understanding the Buddhism of Asoka's period, scholars have made many inferences to identify the exact sūtras. The most problematic is the first sūtra, *Vinaya-samukase*.⁽¹¹⁾ The American scholar E. J. Edmunds inferred that this points to the First Sermon, the Sūtra on the Initial Turning of the Wheel of Dharma. The Japanese scholar Ui Hakuju also agreed that it refers to the First Sermon in the *Mahāvagga* of the Vinaya, but at that time many scholars opposed this, and interpreted it to mean simply a respect for the Vinaya. Among them were Max Walleser, C. A. F. Rhys Davids, and Edward J. Thomas. But as I once demonstrated in my "Study of the Buddha's First Sermon," this word *samukase* has a meaning common with *sāmukkaṃsika* (excellent, as much as standard) and is used in the following way: *Buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikā dhamma-desanā*. Many examples of this usage is found in the Vinaya and Āgama. A passage which would correspond to Asoka's *Vinaya-samukase* is the sermon on the Four Noble Truth given to Yasa and his family:

In this way pain, cause, extinction, and path, which was the Buddha's most superior sermon, was taught. (atha yā Buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikā dhamma-desanā tam pakasesi: dukkaṃ samudayaṃ nirodhaṃ maggaṃ.)

This is found in *Udāna* V. 3, D. N. 3 *Ambaṭṭha-sutta* (Chinese *Jhō-agon* 14, no. 20), M. N. 56 *Upāli-sutta* (Chinese *Chū-agon* 32, No. 133), and so forth. The most appropriate for our purpose here is the account in the *Mahāvagga* of Vinaya. The reason for Asoka's quotation from this source, rather than from the Sūtra on the Initial Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, is probably due to the fact that he was more deeply touched by young Yasa's devotion to the Buddha. The exposition of the Four Noble Truth in the former sūtra was made for the benefit of the five ascetics who were professional priests, but the Four Noble Truth taught

(11) "Butsuda Saisho Seppō no Kenkyū" in *Shakyō Kenkyū*, new volume XI, no. 12, pp. 1-29, 1934.

to Yasa and his family was the First Sermon given to laymen. It is greatly possible that this fact left an unforgettable impression upon the lay believer Asoka. It is also significant that the Four Noble Truth was clearly noted as the First Sermon and that this was re-affirmed by King Asoka. The reason is that Four Noble Truth, based upon the Middle Way principle of non-duality, is the first and foremost doctrine which contains a systematic theory concerning the relative and the absolute, phenomena and existence. It is also called *Buddhānaṃ sāmukkamsikā dhammadesanā*⁽¹²⁾ or the "Buddha's sermon on the most superior dharma", that is, the Buddha's sermon on the standard principle of dharma, 最勝法説, because it is the principle of religion and philosophy in contrast to the lay ethics of *dāna*-giving, upholding precepts, and seeking birth in heaven, which is generally called "*ānupubbi-kathā*, gradual instruction or sermon in the regular order." The Middle Way of this superior, religious aspect and of this secular aspect was later to be developed into the theory of double truth absolute and relative: "*paramārtha-saṃvṛti-satya*".

When King Asoka once asked for an one-word explanation of Buddhism, the priests replied: it is *vibhajja-vāda* 分別説. As I have demonstrated in my study, *The Middle Way Thought and its Development*,⁽¹³⁾ when the Buddha was posed a problem, such as that of karma, he analyzed it from various angles, studying the truth of the matter together, and letting the conclusion fall where it should. He took this method of "gaining the answer in the rightful place." This appealed to reason for its logic, it called forth a response from the heart for its spirit of harmony, and it strengthened the will for the practice of good. Such is the non-exclusive and creative standpoint of "analysis based on the Middle Way."⁽¹⁴⁾ This

(12) "Butsuda Saisho Seppō ni tsuite" in *Bukkyōgaku no Shomondai* (Volume Commemorating the 2,500th Anniversary of Buddha's Birth), pp. 338-342 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1935).

(13) *Chūdō Shisō oyobi sono Hattatsu* 中道思想及びその發達 (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1944), pp. 74-78, 134-137, 138-152, 153-164.

(14) "Funbetsu, Kaiye, Yūye to Būkkyō Shinjitsu" in *Bukkyō no Konpon Shinri* 佛教の根本眞理 (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1956) pp. 35-54.

(10) The Buddha's First Sermon and the Original (Shoson Miyamoto)

eventually developed into a formal study of truth called the *Vibhaṅga*, and it helped clarify the concepts of dharma and *artha*. Moreover, it became the propelling force behind the abhidharma research into dharm. Its Mahāyāna developments are to be found in Harivarman's *Satyasiddhi*, Nāgārjuna's "*Satya-parīkṣā*" based on the Middle Way in *Madhyamaka-Kārika*, and among scriptures the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. In the latter it created the most famous phrase of Mahāyāna Buddhism, "all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature, 一切衆生悉有佛性." This was further studied from the standpoint of the "Middle Way of Buddha-nature, 佛性中道."⁽¹⁵⁾ It is the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* which succeeds in elucidating that the Middle Way is *vibhajja-vāda* and *vibhajja-vyākaraṇa*.⁽¹⁶⁾ The impact it had on the Middle Way studies of Chih-i (538-597) and Chi-tsang (549-623) in China is immeasurable. In Japan the effect on Dōgen (1200-1253) and Shinran (1173-1262) of the Middle Way in the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* was epoch-making.⁽¹⁷⁾ Dōgen wrote "The Chapter on Buddha-nature" in his *Shōbōgenzō*, which is a monumental work in the history of Buddhist thought, and Shinran newly discovered that "the diamond faith is the agent of absolute non-duality," 金剛信心絕對不二之機也, by realizing that faith is Buddha-nature. In doing so, Shinran quotes the long passage on Ajataśatru's conversion and repentance in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* from the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*.

In the First Sermon the Middle Way of Pleasure-Pain, that of the

(15) "Daihatsu Nehangyō no Chūdō-setsu" in *Chūdō Shisō*, op. cit., pp. 409-426.

(16) Franklin Edgerton: *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar, and Dictionary*, Vol. II, p. 494, *Vibhajja-vyākaraṇa*: elucidation (response to a question) by analysing or distinguishing (different aspects involved beyond what the question itself raised): Mvy 1659; cf. Pali AN I, 197. 21. *vibhajja-vyākaraṇi-yaṃ pañham*, explained comm. II. 308. 27. Vol. II, 516, *Vyākaraṇa*: there are four technical kinds of *vyākaraṇa*, answers to questions, Mvy 1657-61, *ekāṃśa*-, *vibhajja*-, *paripṛcchā*-, and *sthāpaniya-vyākaraṇa*.

(17) "Dōgen no Chūdō Shisō" in *Indogaku-Bukkyōgaku-Kenkyū*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (1964), pp. 1-19. *Kyōgyōshinshō Shōkan Kōdoku* (Kyoto: Higashi Honganji Ango Office, 1957), p. 28. "Shinran no Ki-hongan to Kyōgyōshinshō no Kōzō" in *Indogaku-Bukkyōgaku-Kenkyū*, Vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 293-314.

Eightfold Noble Path, and the Four Noble Truth are followed by a repetition of the Four Truth, that is, the famous "thrice revolved twelvefold Wheel of Dharma." The following significant statement is made in the concept of truth of pain, cause, extinction, and path:⁽¹⁸⁾

In the dharma which has never been heard before, the eyes have opened, knowledge is born, wisdom is born, spiritual power is born, light shines forth, and they have been recognized universally.

This new concept of truth was repeatedly taught to the five monks, and the first to attain *satori* was Koṇḍanna, who opened the eyes of dhamma.⁽¹⁹⁾ The others followed, and the six arahats together formed the first saṅgha in Buddhist history. The creator of this new beginning, as well as the discoverer of the new *satori* at its base, is none other than Śākyamuni. It is only natural then that it is said of him that he was "the one who first cultivated the path which had never been cultivated, the one who made known the path which had never been known, and the one who taught the path which had never been taught."⁽²⁰⁾ In the modern world many Western scholars have come to recognize that the Buddha opened a new epoch in human history with a new ideal and a new spirit, but the contents of the new have never been clarified. My work, *The Middle Way Thought and Its Development*,⁽²¹⁾ is an attempt to clarify this problem.

(18) Tathagatena-vutta, S. N., Vol. V, pp. 422 and so forth.

(19) "Shōbō Kenkyū no Atarashii Oboegaki" in *Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyō-gaku Kenkyū Kiyō*, No. 21, (1962), pp. 38-39.

(20) Sambuddho, S. N. Vol. III, p. 66; Pavāraṇā, Vol. I. p. 191; Gopaka-moggallāna, M. N., Vol. III, pp. 8-9, 15.

(21) "Shakuson no Atarashii Tachiba," in *Chūdō-shisō*, op. cit., pp. 35-38.
 "Chūdō no Genshikei to Konpon-chū no Tachiba" in *Bukkyō no Konpon Shinri*, op. cit., pp. 93-112. The author's English essay "The Formation of the Self in Buddhism,- the Agent on the Path to Enlightenment" in *Bukkyō Shisoshi Ronshu* (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan Press, 1964) pp. 1-18.