

Meeting the Divine Messengers *

by Bhikkhu Bodhi

The traditional legend of the Buddha's quest for enlightenment tells us that throughout his youth and early manhood Prince Siddhartha lived in complete ignorance of the most elementary facts of human life. His father, anxious to protect his sensitive son from exposure to suffering, kept him an unwitting captive of naiveté.

Incarcerated in the splendor of his palace, amply supplied with sensual pleasures and surrounded by merry friends, the prince did not entertain even the faintest suspicion that life could offer anything other than an endless succession of amusements and festivities. It was only on that fateful day in his twenty-ninth year, when curiosity led him out beyond the palace walls, that he encountered the four "divine messengers" that were to change his destiny. The first three were the old man, the sick man, and the corpse, which taught him the shocking truths of old age, illness, and death; the fourth was a wandering ascetic, who revealed to him the existence of a path whereby all suffering can be fully transcended.

If in this process of awakening we must meet old age, sickness, and death face to face, that is because the place of safety can be reached only by honest confrontation with the stark truths about human existence. We cannot reach safety by pretending that the flames that engulf our home are nothing but bouquets of flowers: we must see them as they are, as real flames.

When, however, we do look at the divine messengers squarely, without embarrassment or fear, we will find that their faces undergo an unexpected metamorphosis. Before our eyes, by subtle degrees, they change into another face -- the face of the Buddha, with its serene smile of triumph over the army of Mara, over the demons of Desire and Death.

The divine messengers point to what lies beyond the transient, to a dimension of reality where there is no more aging, no more sickness, and no more death. This is the goal and final destination of the Buddhist path -- Nibbana, the Unaging, the Unailing, the Deathless. It is to direct us there that the divine messengers have appeared in our midst, and the good news of deliverance is their message.

** Also commonly referred to as the Heavenly Messengers, the Four Sights, or the Four Teachers*

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