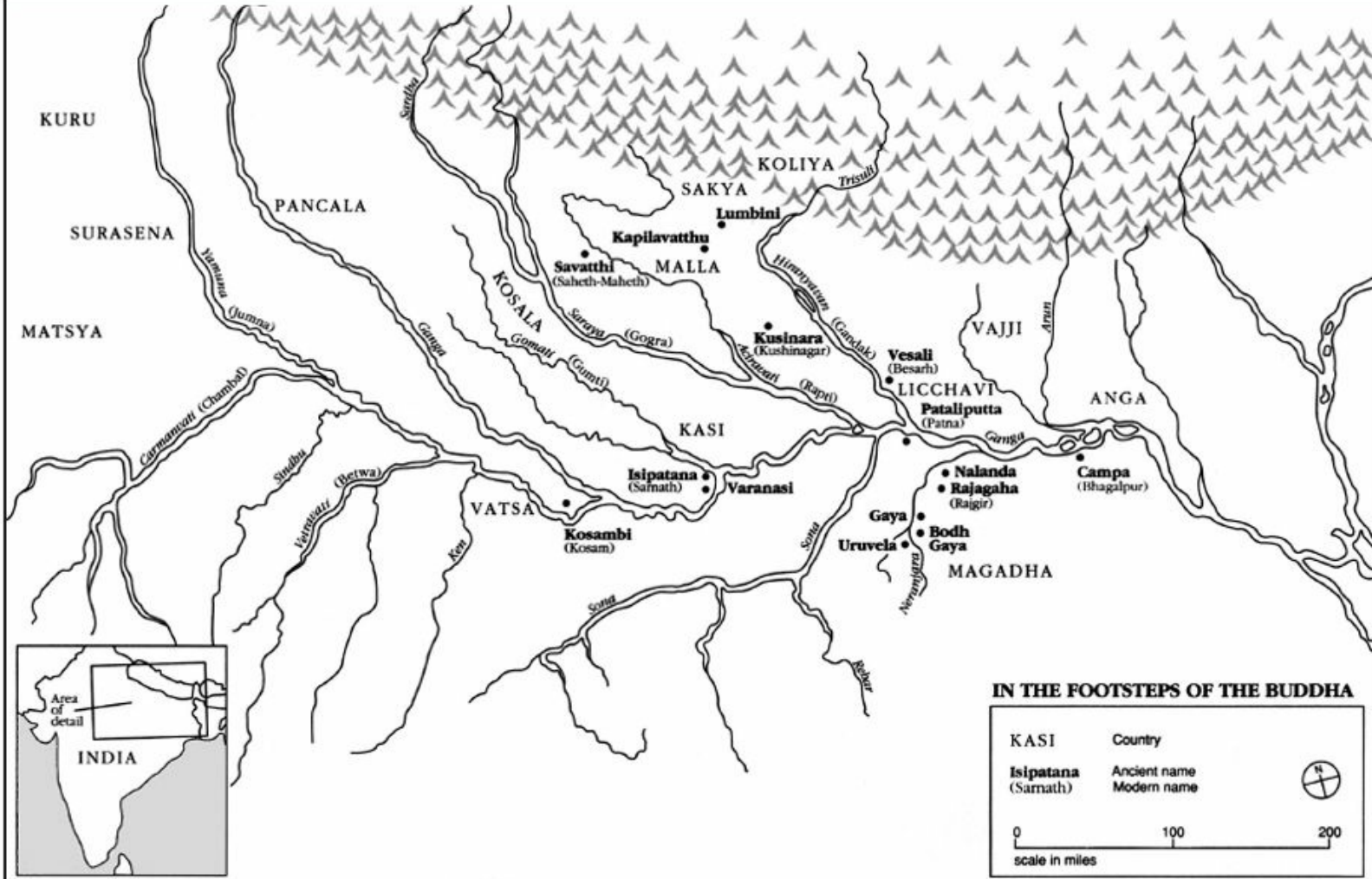


WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

OLD PATH WHITE CLOUDS



THICH NHAT HANH



Chapter One

Walking Just to Walk

Under the shadows of the green bamboo, the young *bhikkhu*, Svasti, sat cross-legged, concentrating on his breath. He had been meditating for more than an hour in the Bamboo Forest Monastery, while hundreds of other bhikkhus were also practicing under the shade of the bamboo trees or in their own thatched huts.

The great teacher Gautama, whom people affectionately called the “Buddha,” lived in the monastery with nearly four hundred disciples. Although crowded, it was very peaceful. Forty acres surrounded the monastery, and many varieties of graceful bamboo from all over Magadha were planted there. Just a thirty-minute walk north of the capital city of Rajagaha, the Bamboo Forest Monastery had been given to Buddha and his community by King Bimbisara seven years earlier.

Svasti rubbed his eyes and smiled. His legs were still tender as he slowly uncrossed them. Twenty-one years old, he had been ordained three days earlier by the Venerable Sariputta, one of the Buddha’s senior disciples. During the ordination ceremony, Svasti’s thick brown hair was shaved off.

Svasti was very happy to be part of the Buddha’s community. Many bhikkhus were of noble birth, such as the Venerable Nanda, the Buddha’s brother, and Devadatta, Anuruddha, and Ananda. Although Svasti had not yet been introduced to these men, he had noticed them from afar. Even in faded robes, their noble bearing was unmistakable.

“It will be a long time before I can be friends with men of such noble birth,” thought Svasti. Yet, even though the Buddha himself was the son of a king, Svasti felt no gulf between them. Svasti was an “untouchable,” lower than the lowest and poorest caste according to the system of discrimination among the people of India at that time. For more than ten years, he had tended water buffalo, but for two weeks now, he was living and practicing with monks from all castes. Everyone was very kind to

him, offering him warm smiles and deep bows, but he did not yet feel at ease. He suspected it might take years before he could feel completely comfortable.

Suddenly, a broad smile emerged from deep within him, as he thought of Rahula, the Buddha's eighteen-year-old son. Rahula had been a novice in the community since the age of ten, and in just two weeks Rahula and Svasti had become best friends. It was Rahula who taught Svasti how to follow his breath during meditation. Rahula understood the Buddha's teachings well, even though he was not yet a bhikkhu. He needed to wait until he was twenty before he could receive full ordination.

* * *

Svasti reflected on the time, just two weeks before, when the Buddha came to Uruvela, his small village near Gaya, to invite him to become a monk. When the Buddha arrived at his home, Svasti was out with his brother, Rupak, taking care of the buffaloes. His two sisters, Bala, age sixteen, and Bhima, age twelve, were there, and Bala recognized the Buddha right away. She began to run out to find Svasti, but the Buddha told her it wasn't necessary. He said that he and the monks traveling with him, including Rahula, would walk to the river to find her brother. It was late afternoon when they came upon Svasti and Rupak scrubbing down their nine buffaloes in the Neranjara River. As soon as they saw the Buddha, the young men ran up the bank of the river, joined their palms to form a lotus bud, and bowed deeply.

"You've grown so much," the Buddha said, smiling warmly at Svasti and his brother. Svasti was speechless. Seeing the Buddha's peaceful face, his warm and generous smile, and his brilliant, penetrating eyes, moved him to tears. The Buddha wore a saffron robe made of patches sewn together in the pattern of a rice field. He still walked barefoot as he had ten years before, when Svasti first met him not far from this very spot. Ten years before they had spent hours sitting together on the banks of the Neranjara and beneath the shade of the bodhi tree, just ten

minutes' walk from the riverbank.

Svasti glanced at the twenty bhikkhus behind the Buddha and saw that they, too, were barefoot and clad in patched robes of the same color. Looking more closely, Svasti saw that the Buddha's robe was a hand-length longer than those of the others. Standing next to the Buddha was a novice about Svasti's age who looked at him directly and smiled. Buddha gently placed his hands on Svasti and Rupak's heads and told them he had stopped by to visit on his way back to Rajagaha. He said he would be happy to wait while Svasti and Rupak finished bathing the buffaloes so they could all walk to Svasti's thatched hut together.

During the walk back, Buddha introduced Svasti and Rupak to his son Rahula, the young novice who had smiled so beautifully at Svasti. Rahula was three years younger than Svasti, but they were the same height. Rahula was a *samanera*, a novice, but he dressed much the same as the older bhikkhus. Rahula walked between Svasti and Rupak, handing his alms bowl to Rupak and placing his arms lovingly around the shoulders of his two new friends. He had heard so much about Svasti and his family from his father that he felt he already knew them. The brothers basked in the warmth of Rahula's love.

As soon as they arrived at Svasti's home, the Buddha invited him to join the bhikkhu community and study the Dharma with him. Ten years earlier, when Svasti had first met the Buddha, he expressed his wish to study with him, and the Buddha had agreed to accept Svasti as a disciple. Now that Svasti was twenty-one, the Buddha had returned. He had not forgotten his promise.

Rupak led the buffaloes back to Mr. Rambhul, their owner. The Buddha sat outside Svasti's hut on a small stool, while the bhikkhus stood behind him. With earthen walls and a thatched roof, Svasti's tiny home was not large enough for everyone to come inside. Bala told Svasti, "Brother, please go with the Buddha. Rupak is even stronger than you were when you began tending the buffaloes, and I am quite capable of taking care of the house. You have looked after us for ten years, and now we are ready to be on our own."

Sitting next to the rainwater barrel, Bhima looked up at her big sister

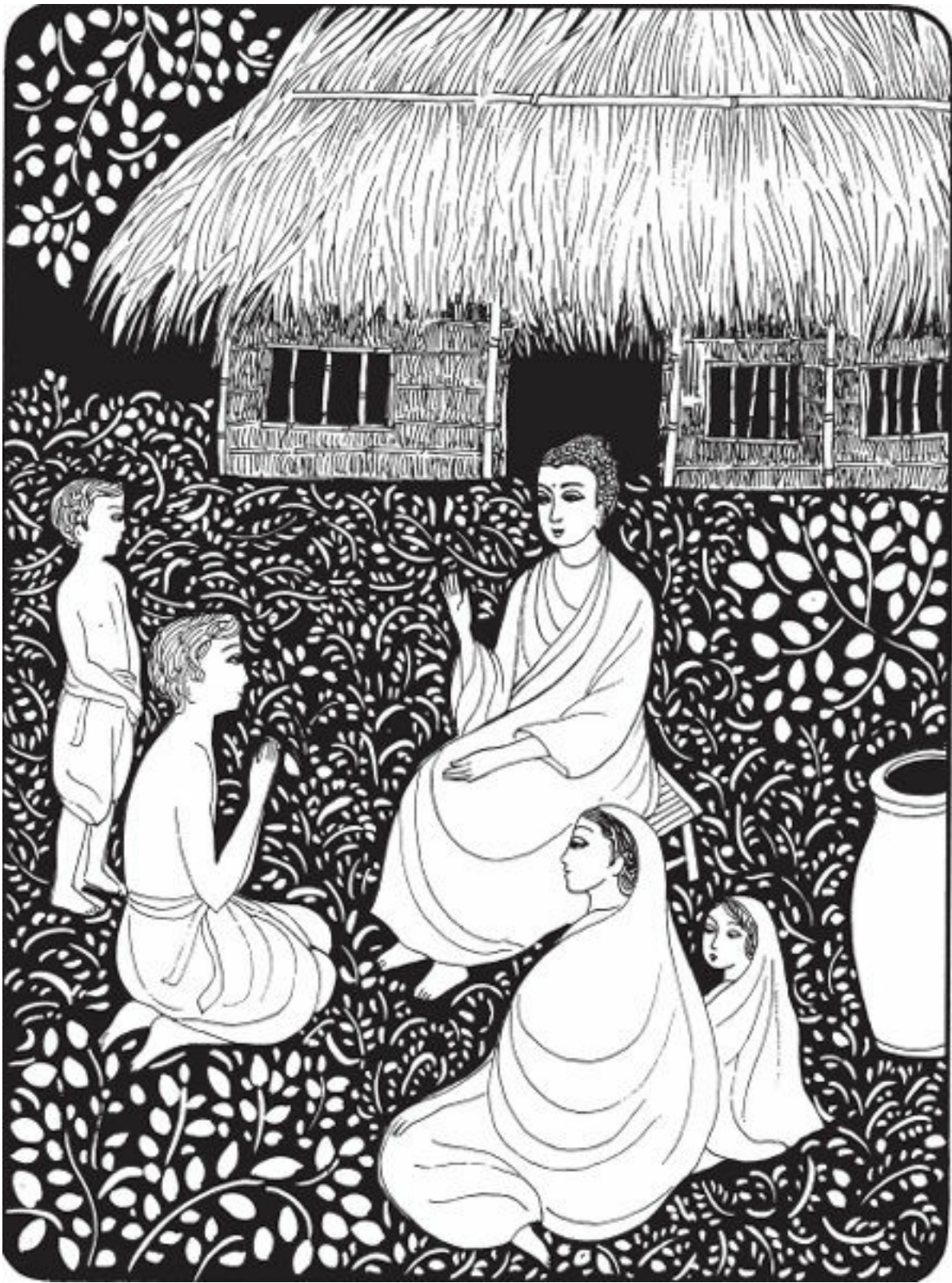
without saying a word. Svasti looked at Bhima. She was a lovely young girl. When Svasti met the Buddha, Bala was six years old, Rupak three, and Bhima only an infant. Bala cooked for the family while Rupak played in the sand.

Six months following their father's death, their mother passed away in childbirth. Just eleven years old, Svasti became the head of the household. He found a job tending water buffaloes, and because Svasti was a good worker, he earned enough to feed his family. He was even able to bring buffalo milk home for little Bhima.

Realizing that Svasti was asking her about her feelings, Bhima smiled. She hesitated a moment and then spoke softly, "Brother, go with the Buddha." She turned her face away to hide the tears. Bhima had heard Svasti mention his wish to study with Buddha so many times and she truly wanted him to go, but now that the moment had arrived, she could not hide her sadness.

Just then, Rupak returned from the village, and hearing Bhima's words, "Go with the Buddha," he understood that the time had come. He looked at Svasti and said, "Yes, brother, please go with the Buddha," and the whole family fell silent. Rupak looked at the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, I hope you will permit my brother to study with you. I am old enough to care for our family." Rupak turned to Svasti and, holding back his tears, said, "But brother, please ask the Buddha if you can come back and visit us from time to time."

The Buddha stood up and gently stroked Bhima's hair. "Children, please eat now. Tomorrow morning, I will return for Svasti so we can walk together to Rajagaha. The bhikkhus and I will rest beneath the bodhi tree tonight."



The Buddha sat outside Svasti's hut on a small stool.

As the Buddha reached the gate, he looked back at Svasti and said, "Tomorrow morning, you do not need to bring anything. The clothes you are wearing are enough."

That night the four siblings stayed up late. Like a departing father, Svasti gave them his last advice on taking care of each other and the

household. He embraced each of them for a long time. Unable to hold back her tears, little Bhima sobbed while her oldest brother held her. But then she looked up, breathed deeply, and smiled at him. She didn't want Svasti to feel sad. The oil lamp cast a dim light, but it was enough for Svasti to see her smile, and he appreciated it.

Early the next morning, Sujata, Svasti's friend, came to say goodbye. The evening before, she had seen the Buddha when she was on her way to the riverbank, and he told her that Svasti would be joining the order of monks. Sujata, the daughter of the village head, was two years older than Svasti, and she, too, had met Gautama before he became the Buddha. Sujata gave Svasti a small jar of herbal medicines to take with him. They spoke only briefly, and then the Buddha and his disciples arrived.

Svasti's brother and sisters were already awake to see their brother off. Rahula spoke gently to each of them, encouraging them to be strong and to take care of each other. He promised that whenever he was nearby, he would stop in Uruvela to visit them. Svasti's family and Sujata walked with the Buddha and the bhikkhus to the riverbank, and there they joined their palms to say goodbye to the Buddha, the monks, Rahula, and Svasti.

Svasti was overcome with both fear and joy. There was a knot in his stomach. This was the first time he had ever left Uruvela. The Buddha said it would take ten days to reach Rajagaha. Most people traveled more quickly, but the Buddha and his bhikkhus walked slowly and with great ease. As Svasti's pace slowed down, his heart quieted. He was wholeheartedly immersing himself in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and this was his path. He turned around for one last glimpse of the only land and people he knew, and he saw Sujata and his family as mere specks merging with the shadows of the forest trees.

It seemed to Svasti that the Buddha walked just to enjoy the walking, unconcerned about arriving anywhere at all. So it was with all the bhikkhus. No one seemed anxious or impatient to reach their destination. Each man's steps were slow, balanced, and peaceful. It was as if they were taking a pleasant stroll together. No one ever appeared tired, yet they covered a good distance each day.

Each morning they would stop in the nearest village to beg for food. They walked along the streets in a single line with the Buddha at the head. Svasti came last, just behind Rahula. They walked with quiet dignity, observing each breath and each step. Once in a while, they would stop while villagers placed offerings of food in their bowls. Some villagers knelt by the side of the road in respect. As the bhikkhus received the food, they quietly recited prayers for the people.

When they finished begging, they slowly left the village to find a place beneath some trees or in a grassy meadow where they could eat. They sat in a circle and divided the food equally, careful to fill anyone's bowl that was still empty. Rahula filled a jug with water from a nearby stream and respectfully carried it to the Buddha. After the Buddha joined his palms together to form what looked like a lotus flower, Rahula poured the water over the Buddha's hands and rinsed them clean. He did the same for everyone else, coming last to Svasti. As Svasti did not yet have a bowl, Rahula placed half of his own food on a fresh banana leaf and gave it to his new friend. Before eating, the bhikkhus joined their palms and chanted together. Then they ate in silence, mindful of each bite.

When they finished, some bhikkhus practiced walking meditation, some did sitting meditation, and others took a short nap. When the hottest part of the day had passed, they took to the road again, and they walked until it was nearly dark. The best places to rest for the night were undisturbed forests, and they walked until they found a good place. Each bhikkhu had his own cushion, and many sat cross-legged in the lotus position for half the night before spreading out their robes and going to sleep. Each bhikkhu carried two robes, the one he was wearing and another to use as protection against wind and cold. Svasti sat in meditation like the others and learned to sleep upon the earth using a tree root for a pillow.

When Svasti awoke the next morning, he saw the Buddha and many of the bhikkhus already sitting peacefully in meditation, radiating profound calm and majesty. As soon as the sun rose over the horizon, each bhikkhu folded his extra robe, picked up his bowl, and began the

day's journey.

Walking by day and resting by night, it was ten days before they reached Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha. It was the first time Svasti had seen a city. Horse carts pressed through streets lined with crowded dwellings; shouts and laughter echoed everywhere. But the silent procession of the bhikkhus continued, as peacefully as when they strolled along the quiet riverbanks or between country rice fields. A few of the city dwellers paused to watch them, and a few, recognizing the Buddha, bowed deeply to show their respect. The bhikkhus continued their calm procession until they reached the Bamboo Forest Monastery, just beyond the city.

News spread quickly throughout the monastery that the Buddha had returned, and within moments, nearly four hundred bhikkhus gathered to welcome him back. The Buddha did not say much but asked about everyone's well-being and meditation practice. He entrusted Svasti to Sariputta, who was also Rahula's spiritual instructor. Sariputta was the novice master of Bamboo Forest Monastery and watched over the studies of nearly fifty young monks, all of whom had been in the community for less than three years. The abbot of the monastery was a monk named Kondarma.

Rahula was asked to introduce Svasti to the ways of monastery life—how to walk, sit, stand, greet others, do walking and sitting meditation, and observe his breathing. He also showed Svasti how to wear the monk's robe, beg for food, recite prayers, and wash his bowl. For three continuous days, Svasti did not leave Rahula's side, so that he could learn these things well. Rahula put his whole heart into instructing Svasti, yet Svasti knew it would take years of practicing before he would be able to do these things in a relaxed and natural way. After this basic instruction, Sariputta invited Svasti into his hut and explained the precepts of a bhikkhu.

A bhikkhu was one who left his family in order to follow the Buddha as a teacher, the Dharma as the path that leads to awakening, and the Sangha as the community that supports one along the path. A bhikkhu's life was simple and humble. Begging for food helped foster humility and

was also a means to be in contact with others and help them see the Way of Love and Understanding that the Buddha taught.

Ten years earlier beneath the bodhi tree, Svasti and his friends had listened to the Buddha speak about the path of awakening as the path of love and understanding, so it was easy for him to grasp all that Sariputta told him. Though Sariputta's face appeared serious, his eyes and smile radiated great warmth and compassion. He told Svasti that there would be a precepts ceremony to formally accept him into the community of bhikkhus, and he taught Svasti the words he would need to recite.

Sariputta himself presided over the precepts ceremony. About twenty bhikkhus attended. The Buddha and Rahula were there, adding to Svasti's happiness. Sariputta silently recited a *gatha*, and then shaved off several locks of Svasti's hair. He then gave the razor to Rahula, who completed the task of shaving Svasti's head. Sariputta gave Svasti three robes, a bowl, and a water filter. Because he had already been taught by Rahula how to wear the robe, Svasti put it on without difficulty. He bowed before the Buddha and the other bhikkhus present to express his deep gratitude.

Later that morning, Svasti practiced begging for the first time as an ordained bhikkhu. The monks of Bamboo Forest Monastery walked into Rajagaha in several small groups, and Svasti was part of the group led by Sariputta. After taking just a few steps out of the monastery, Svasti reminded himself that begging was a vehicle to practice the Way. He observed his breathing and took each step quietly and in mindfulness. Rahula walked behind him. Although he was now a bhikkhu, Svasti knew that he had considerably less experience than Rahula. He resolved with all his heart to nurture humility and virtue within himself.

Chapter Two

Tending Water Buffaloes

The day was cool. After eating the noon meal in mindfulness, each bhikkhu washed his own bowl and placed his cushion on the earth to sit facing the Buddha. The many squirrels that lived in Bamboo Forest mingled freely with the monks, and some climbed up into bamboo trees to gaze down at the gathering. Svasti saw Rahula sitting directly in front of the Buddha, and he quietly tiptoed there and placed his cushion next to Rahula's. They sat together in the lotus position. In that serene and dignified atmosphere, no one spoke. Svasti knew that each bhikkhu was following his breath mindfully, waiting for the Buddha to speak.

The Buddha's bamboo platform was high enough for everyone to see him clearly. The Buddha had a relaxed yet majestic air like that of a lion prince. His eyes filled with loving compassion as he looked out over the assembly. When his eyes came to rest on Svasti and Rahula, the Buddha smiled and began to speak:

“Today I wish to tell you about the work of tending water buffaloes—what a good buffalo boy must know and what he must be able to do. A boy who cares well for water buffaloes is a boy who easily recognizes each buffalo under his care, knows the characteristics and tendencies of each one, knows how to scrub them, care for their wounds, chase mosquitoes away with smoke, find safe paths for them to walk, love them, find safe and shallow places for them to cross the river, seek fresh grass and water for them, preserve the grazing meadows, and let the older buffaloes serve as good models for the younger ones.

“Listen Bhikkhus, just as a buffalo boy recognizes each of his own buffaloes, a bhikkhu recognizes each of the essential elements of his own body. Just as a buffalo boy knows the characteristics and tendencies of each buffalo, a bhikkhu knows which actions of body, speech, and mind are worthy and which are not. Just as a buffalo boy scrubs his animals clean, a bhikkhu must cleanse his mind and body of desires, attachments,

anger, and aversions.”

As he spoke, the Buddha’s eyes did not leave Svasti. Svasti felt that he himself was the source of the Buddha’s words. He recalled how, years before, while sitting at the Buddha’s side, the Buddha would ask him to describe in detail his work of tending water buffaloes. How else could a prince raised in a palace know so much about buffaloes?

Though the Buddha spoke in a normal voice, each sound rose clear and distinct and no one missed a word: “Just as a buffalo boy cares for his buffaloes’ wounds, a bhikkhu watches over his six sense organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—so that they do not become lost in dispersion. Just as a buffalo boy protects his buffaloes from mosquito bites by building fires to create smoke, the bhikkhu uses the teaching of becoming awake to show those around him how to avoid the afflictions of body and mind. Just as the boy finds a safe path for the buffaloes to walk, the bhikkhu avoids those paths that lead to desire for fame, wealth, and sexual pleasure—places such as taverns and theaters. Just as a buffalo boy loves his buffaloes, the bhikkhu cherishes the joy and peace of meditation. As the boy finds a safe, shallow place in the river for the buffaloes to cross, the bhikkhu relies on the Four Noble Truths to negotiate this life. As the boy finds fresh grass and water for his buffaloes, the bhikkhu knows that the Four Establishments of Mindfulness are the nourishment leading to liberation. As the boy preserves the fields by not overgrazing them, the bhikkhu is careful to preserve the relationships with the nearby community as he begs offerings. As the boy lets the older buffaloes serve as models for the younger ones, the bhikkhu depends on the wisdom and experience of their elders. O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who follows these eleven points will attain arhatship in the span of six years of practice.”



“As a buffalo boy finds fresh grass for his buffaloes, so a bhikkhu knows that the Four Establishments of Mindfulness lead to liberation.”

Svasti listened in astonishment. The Buddha had remembered everything he had told him ten years before, and was able to apply each detail to a bhikkhu’s practice. Though Svasti knew the Buddha was teaching the entire assembly of monks, he also had the distinct

impression that the Buddha was addressing him directly. The young man's eyes did not wander even once from the Buddha's countenance.

These were words to hold in one's heart. Of course, there were terms such as "six sense organs," "Four Noble Truths," "Four Establishments of Mindfulness," which Svasti did not yet understand. He would ask Rahula later to explain these terms, but he knew he understood the essential meaning of the Buddha's words.

Buddha continued to speak. He told the assembly about choosing a safe path for the buffaloes to walk. If the path was overgrown with thorns, the buffaloes would get cuts, which could become infected. If the buffalo boy did not know how to take care of wounds, his buffaloes could become feverish and even die. Practicing the Way was the same. If a bhikkhu did not find a proper path, he could become wounded in mind and body. Greed and anger could further poison his wounds until they grew so infected that the way to enlightenment became hindered.

The Buddha paused. He motioned for Svasti to come up and stand beside him. Svasti stood with his palms joined while Buddha, smiling, introduced Svasti to the assembly:

"Ten years ago I met Svasti in the forest near Gaya, just before I realized the Way. He was then eleven years old. It was Svasti who gathered armfuls of kusa grass, which I used for a cushion to sit beneath the bodhi tree. Everything I have taught about water buffaloes, I learned from him. I knew he was a good buffalo boy, and I know he will be a fine bhikkhu."

Everyone's eyes were on Svasti, and he could feel his ears and cheeks tingling and becoming very red. The men all joined their palms and bowed to him, and he bowed back to them. The Buddha then concluded the Dharma talk by asking Rahula to recite the sixteen methods of conscious breathing. Rahula stood, placed his palms together, and recited each method in a voice as bright and clear as a bell. When he finished, he bowed to the community, and the Buddha stood up and slowly walked back to his hut. After he did so, all the monks in the assembly took their own cushions and walked slowly to their own spot in the forest. Some of the monks lived in huts, but many slept and meditated outdoors, beneath

the bamboo trees. Only when it rained very hard did they pick up their cushions and seek shelter in the residential huts or lecture halls.

Svasti's teacher, Sariputta, had assigned him to share a space outdoors with Rahula. When Rahula was younger, he had to sleep in a hut with the teacher who served as his guardian, but now he had a spot under the trees. Svasti was happy to be with Rahula.

Late that afternoon after sitting meditation, Svasti practiced walking meditation alone. He selected an empty path to avoid encountering others, but he found it difficult to remain concentrated on his breathing. His thoughts were filled with longing for his brother and sisters and the village at home. The image of the path leading to the Neranjara River rose clearly in his mind. He saw little Bhima lowering her head to hide her tears and Rupak caring for Rambhul's water buffaloes alone. He tried to chase these images away and focus on nothing but his steps and breathing, but the images continued to flood him. He felt ashamed that he could not devote himself to his practice, and he felt unworthy of the Buddha's trust. After walking meditation, he thought, he would ask Rahula for help. There were also several things the Buddha had said in his Dharma talk that morning that he had not fully grasped, and he was sure Rahula could explain them to him. Just thinking about Rahula encouraged and calmed him, and he found it easier to follow his breathing and each slow step.

Svasti had not yet had a chance to look for Rahula, when Rahula came looking for him. He led Svasti to a seat beneath a bamboo tree, and said, "This afternoon I met the elder, Ananda. He would like to hear all about how you first met the Buddha."

"Who is Ananda, Rahula?"

"He's a prince of the Sakya line and the Buddha's cousin. He became a monk seven years ago and now he is one of the best disciples. The Buddha loves him dearly. It is he who looks after the master's health. Ananda has invited us to come to his hut tomorrow evening. I too want to hear all about the time the Buddha was living in the Gaya Forest."

"Hasn't the Buddha already told you?"

"Yes, but not in detail. I'm sure you have a lot of stories to tell."

“Well, there isn’t really much, but I will tell all I remember. Rahula, what is Ananda like? I feel a little nervous.”

“Don’t worry. He’s very kind and friendly. I told him about you and your family, and he was delighted. Shall we meet in this spot tomorrow morning when we go begging for food? Now I must wash my robe so it will be dry in time.”

As Rahula stood to leave, Svasti tugged lightly at his robe, “Can you sit for just a while longer? There are some things I want to ask you. This morning the Buddha spoke about eleven points a bhikkhu must follow, but I can’t recall all eleven. Can you repeat them for me?”

“I can only remember nine myself. But don’t worry, tomorrow we can ask Ananda.”

“Are you sure the elder, Ananda, will remember all of them?”

“Positive! If it had been one hundred and eleven, Ananda would still remember. You don’t know Ananda yet, but everyone here admires his memory. It’s incredible. He can repeat flawlessly everything the Buddha has said without leaving out even one tiny detail. Around here, everyone calls him the most learned of all the Buddha’s disciples. So whenever someone forgets something the Buddha has said, they seek out Ananda. Sometimes the community organizes study sessions in which Ananda goes over the Buddha’s basic teachings.”

“Then we’re very lucky. We’ll wait and ask him tomorrow. But there is something else I want to ask you—how do you quiet your mind during walking meditation?”

“Do you mean to say that during your walking meditation other thoughts came into your mind? Like thoughts of missing your family?”

Svasti grasped his friend’s hand, “How did you know? That’s exactly what happened! I don’t know why I miss my family so much this evening. I feel terrible, but I don’t seem to have enough resolve to practice the Way. I feel ashamed before you and the Buddha.”

Rahula smiled. “Don’t be ashamed. When I first joined the Buddha, I missed my mother, my grandfather, and my aunt. Many nights I buried my face in my cushion and cried alone. I knew that my mother, grandfather and aunt missed me too. But after a while, it was better.”

Rahula helped Svasti up to a standing position and gave him a friendly hug.

“Your brother and sisters are lovely. It’s only natural for you to miss them. But you’ll get used to your new life. We’ve got lots of work to do here—we must practice and study. But listen, when we get a chance, I’ll tell you about my family, all right?”

Svasti held Rahula’s hand in his own two hands and nodded. Then they parted, Rahula to wash his robe and Svasti to find a broom to sweep the paths clear of bamboo leaves.

Chapter Three

An Armful of Kusa Grass

Before falling asleep, Svasti sat beneath a bamboo tree and recalled the months he had first met the Buddha. He was just eleven years old then, and his mother had recently died, leaving him in charge of his three younger siblings. His youngest sister, an infant, had no milk to drink. Luckily, a man in the village named Rambhul hired Svasti to tend his water buffaloes—four grown buffaloes and one calf. And so Svasti was able to milk a buffalo cow every day and feed his baby sister. He tended the water buffaloes with utmost care, for he knew that he had to keep his job or his siblings would starve. Since his father's death, their roof had not been rethatched, and every time it rained, Rupak had to scurry about placing stone jars beneath the gaping holes to catch the rainwater. Bala was only six years old but had to learn to cook, care for her baby sister, and gather firewood in the forest. Though just a small child, she could knead flour into chapati bread for her siblings to eat. Rarely could they buy even a bit of curry powder. When Svasti led the buffaloes back to their stable, the tantalizing fragrance of curry drifting from Rambhul's kitchen made his mouth water. Chapati dipped in curry sauce cooked with meat had been an unknown luxury since his father died. The children's clothes were little more than rags. Svasti owned but one worn *dhoti*. When it was cold he wrapped an old brown cloth around his shoulders. It was threadbare and faded, but precious to him, nonetheless.

Svasti had to find good grazing spots for the buffaloes, for if he returned them to their stable hungry, he knew he would be beaten by Mr. Rambhul. In addition, he had to carry home a sizable bundle of grass every evening for the buffaloes to eat throughout the night. On evenings when the mosquitoes were thick, Svasti lit a fire to chase them away with the smoke. Rambhul paid him in rice, flour, and salt every three days. Some days, Svasti was able to bring home a few fish that he had caught along the edges of the Neranjara River for Bhima to cook.

One afternoon, after he had bathed the buffaloes and cut a bushel of grass, Svasti felt like spending a quiet moment alone in the cool forest. Leaving the buffaloes grazing at the forest's edge, Svasti looked about for a tall tree to rest against. Suddenly he stopped. There was a man sitting silently beneath a pippala tree, no more than twenty feet away. Svasti gazed at him in wonder. He had never before seen anyone sit so beautifully. The man's back was perfectly straight, and his feet rested elegantly upon his thighs. He held himself with utmost stability and inner purpose. His eyes appeared to be half-closed, and his folded hands rested lightly on his lap. He wore a faded yellow robe, which left one shoulder bare. His body radiated peace, serenity, and majesty. Just one look at him, and Svasti felt wondrously refreshed. His heart trembled. He did not understand how he could feel something so special for a person he hadn't even met, but he stood immobile in utter respect for a long moment.

Then the man opened his eyes. He did not see Svasti at first, as he uncrossed his legs and gently massaged his ankles and the soles of his feet. Slowly he stood up and began to walk. Because he walked in the opposite direction, he still did not see Svasti. Without making a sound, Svasti watched the man take slow, meditative steps along the forest floor. After seven or eight such steps, the man turned around, and it was then that he noticed Svasti.

He smiled at the boy. No one had ever smiled with such gentle tolerance at Svasti before. As though drawn by an invisible force, Svasti ran toward the man, but when he was within a few feet, he stopped in his tracks, remembering that he had no right to approach anyone of higher caste.

Svasti was an untouchable. He did not belong to any of the four social castes. His father had explained to him that the *brahmana* caste was the highest, and people born into this caste were priests and teachers who read and understood the Vedas and other scriptures and made offerings to the gods. When Brahma created the human race, the *brahmans* issued from his mouth. The *kshatriya* were the next highest caste. They could hold political and military positions, as they had issued

from Brahma's two hands. Those of the *vaishya* caste were merchants, farmers, and craftspeople who had sprung from Brahma's thighs. Those of the *shudra* caste had come from Brahma's feet and were the lowest of the four castes. They did only the manual labor not performed by the higher castes. But Svasti's family members were "untouchables," those who had no caste at all. They were required to build their homes outside of the village limits, and they did the lowest kinds of work such as collecting garbage, spreading manure, digging roads, feeding pigs, and tending water buffaloes. Everyone had to accept the caste into which he or she was born. The sacred scriptures taught that happiness was the ability to accept one's position.

If an untouchable like Svasti touched a person of a higher caste, he would be beaten. In the village of Uruvela, an untouchable man had been beaten severely for touching a brahman with his hand. A brahman or kshatriya touched by an untouchable was considered polluted and had to return home to fast and do penance for several weeks in order to cleanse himself. Whenever Svasti led the buffaloes home, he took great pains not to pass near any person of high caste on the road or outside Rambhul's house. It seemed to Svasti that even the buffaloes were more fortunate than he, because a brahman could touch a buffalo without being polluted. Even if, through no fault of the untouchable, a person of higher caste accidentally brushed against him, the untouchable could still be ruthlessly beaten.

Here, before Svasti, stood a most attractive man, and it was clear from his bearing that he did not share the same social status. Surely someone with so kind and tolerant a smile would not beat Svasti even if he did touch him, but Svasti did not want to be the cause of pollution of someone so special, and that was why he froze when he and the man were a few steps apart. Seeing Svasti's hesitation, the man stepped forward himself. Svasti stepped back to avoid coming in contact with the man, but the man was quicker, and in the blink of an eye had grasped Svasti by the shoulder with his left hand. With his right hand, he gave Svasti a tender pat on the head. Svasti stood motionless. No one had ever touched him on the head in so gentle and affectionate way, yet he felt

suddenly panic-stricken.

“Don’t be afraid, child,” the man said in a quiet and reassuring voice.

At the sound of that voice, Svasti’s fears disappeared. He lifted his head and gazed at the man’s kind and tolerant smile. After hesitating for a moment, he stammered, “Sir, I like you very much.”

The man lifted Svasti’s chin in his hand and looked into the boy’s eyes. “And I like you also. Do you live nearby?”

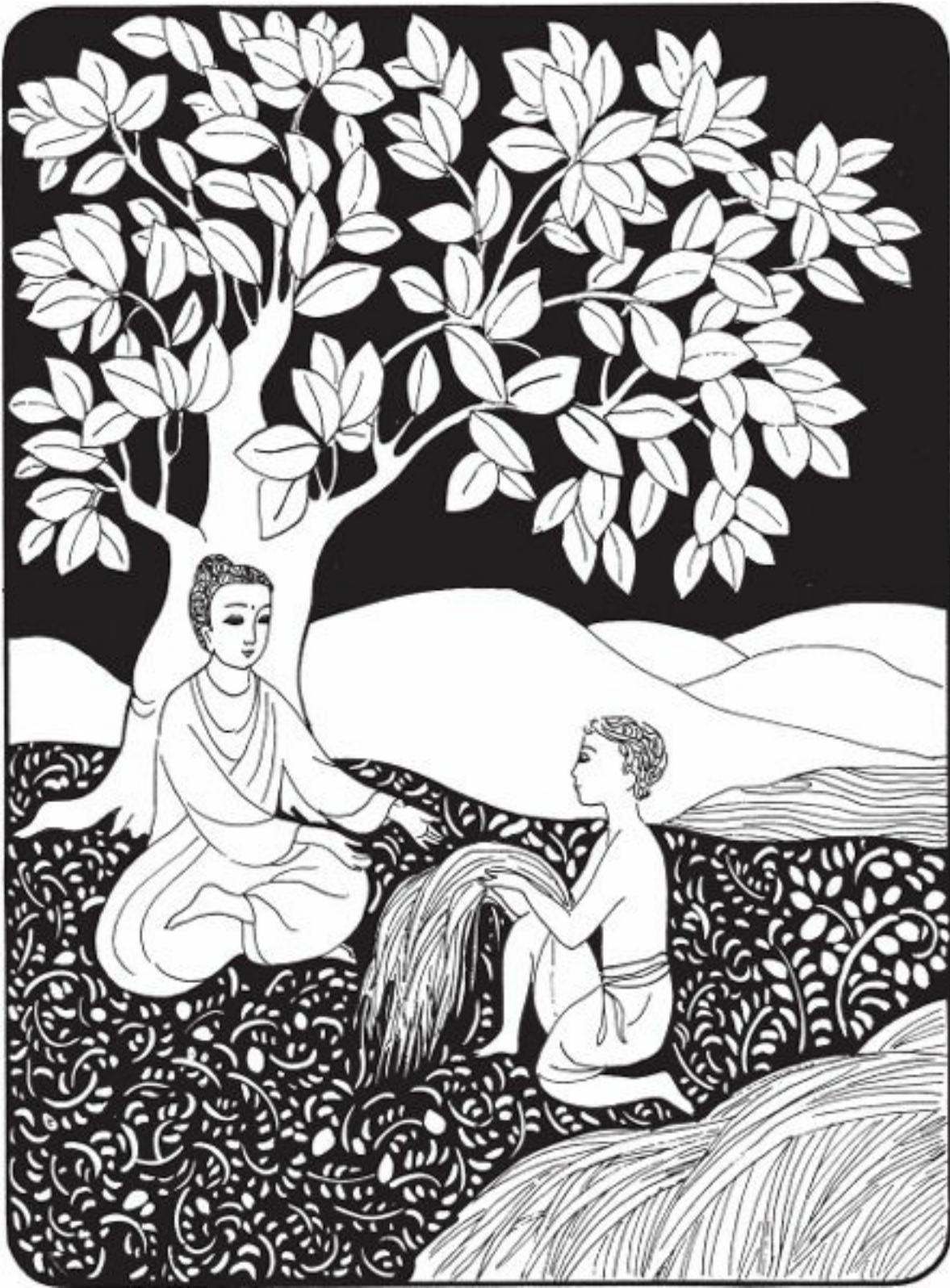
Svasti did not answer. He took the man’s left hand in his own two hands and asked the question that was troubling him, “When I touch you like this, aren’t you being polluted?”

The man laughed and shook his head. “Not at all, child. You are a human being and I am a human being. You can’t pollute me. Don’t listen to what people tell you.”

He took Svasti’s hand and walked with him to the edge of the forest. The water buffaloes were still grazing peacefully. The man looked at Svasti and asked, “Do you tend these buffaloes? And that must be the grass you have cut for their dinner. What is your name? Is your house nearby?”

Svasti answered politely, “Yes, sir, I care for these four buffaloes and that one calf, and that is the grass I cut. My name is Svasti and I live on the other side of the river just beyond the village of Uruvela. Please, sir, what is your name and where do you live? Can you tell me?”

The man answered kindly, “Certainly. My name is Siddhartha, and my home is far away, but at present I am living in this forest.”



Svasti offered Siddhartha an armful of kusa grass to use as a cushion.

“Are you a hermit?”

Siddhartha nodded. Svasti knew that hermits were men who usually lived and meditated up in the mountains.

Though they had just met and exchanged no more than a few words, Svasti felt a warm bond with his new friend. In Uruvela, no one had ever

treated him in so friendly a way or spoken to him with such warmth. A great happiness surged within him, and he wanted to somehow express his joy. If only he had some gift he could offer Siddhartha! But there was no penny in his pocket, not even a piece of sugar cane or rock candy. What could he offer? He had nothing, but he summoned the courage to say, "Mister, I wish I had something to give you as a gift, but I have nothing."

Siddhartha looked at Svasti and smiled. "But you do. You have something I would like very much."

"I do?"

Siddhartha pointed to the pile of kusa grass. "That grass you have cut for the buffaloes is soft and fragrant. If you could give me a few handfuls I shall make a sitting cushion for my meditation beneath the tree. That would make me very happy."

Svasti's eyes shone. He ran to the pile of grass, gathered a large bundle in his thin arms, and offered it to Siddhartha.

"I just cut this grass down by the river. Please accept it. I can easily cut more for the buffaloes."

Siddhartha placed his hands together like a lotus bud and accepted the gift. He said, "You are a very kind boy. I thank you. Go and cut some more grass for your buffaloes before it grows too late. If you have a chance, please come and see me tomorrow afternoon in the forest again."

Young Svasti bowed his head in farewell and stood watching as Siddhartha disappeared back into the forest. Then he picked up his sickle and headed for the shore, his heart filled with the warmest of feelings. It was early autumn. The kusa grass was still soft and his sickle was newly sharpened. It wasn't long at all before Svasti had cut another large armful of kusa grass.

Svasti led the buffaloes to Rambhul's home, guiding them to cross a shallow section of the Neranjara River. The calf was reluctant to leave the sweet grass along the shore and Svasti had to coax her along. The bushel of grass on his shoulder was not heavy, and Svasti waded across the river together with the buffaloes.

Chapter Four

The Wounded Swan

Early the next morning, Svasti led his buffaloes to graze. By noon he had cut enough grass to fill two baskets. Svasti liked to let the buffaloes graze on the side of the river that bordered the forest. That way, when he finished gathering grass, he could stretch out in the cool breeze and not worry about the buffaloes wandering into someone's rice fields. He carried only his sickle, the tool by which he earned his living. Svasti opened the small fistful of rice Bala had wrapped in a banana leaf for his lunch, but as he was about to eat, his thoughts turned to Siddhartha.

"I could take this rice to the hermit, Siddhartha," he thought. "Surely he won't find my rice too humble." Svasti wrapped the rice, and, leaving the buffaloes at the forest's edge, followed the path to where he had met Siddhartha the day before.

From a distance he saw his new friend sitting beneath the great pippala tree. But Siddhartha was not alone. Before him sat a girl just about Svasti's age, dressed in a fine white sari. There was food already placed before him, and Svasti stopped abruptly. But Siddhartha looked up and called to him, "Svasti!" He motioned for the boy to join them.

The girl in the white sari looked up, and Svasti recognized her as someone he had often passed on the village road. As Svasti approached, she moved to her left to make a place for him, and Siddhartha gestured him to sit down. In front of Siddhartha was a banana leaf, which held a fistful of rice and a small amount of sesame salt. Siddhartha divided the rice into two portions.

"Have you eaten yet, child?"

"No, Mister, I haven't."

"Well then, let's share this."

Siddhartha handed Svasti half the rice, and Svasti joined his palms together in thanks, but refused the rice. He took out his own humble rice and said, "I've also brought some."

He opened his banana leaf to reveal coarse grains of brown rice, unlike the soft white grains on Siddhartha's leaf. He had no sesame salt. Siddhartha smiled at the two children and said, "Shall we put all our rice together and share it?"

He took half the white rice, dipped it in sesame salt and handed it to Svasti. Then he broke off half of Svasti's rice ball and began to eat it with obvious delight. Svasti felt awkward, but seeing Siddhartha's naturalness, he began to eat as well.

"Your rice is so fragrant, Mister."

"Sujata brought it," answered Siddhartha.

"So her name is Sujata," thought Svasti. She looked a bit older than Svasti, perhaps a year or two. Her large black eyes twinkled. Svasti stopped eating and said, "I've seen you before on the village road, but I didn't know your name was Sujata."

"Yes, I am the daughter of the village chief of Uruvela. Your name is Svasti, isn't it? Teacher Siddhartha was just telling me about you," she said, adding gently, "Svasti, it is more correct to call a monk, 'Teacher,' than 'Mister.'"

Svasti nodded.

Siddhartha smiled. "Well then, I don't need to introduce you two. Do you know, children, why I eat in silence? These grains of rice and sesame are so precious, I like to eat silently so that I can appreciate them fully. Sujata, have you ever had a chance to taste brown rice? Even if you've already eaten, please taste a bit of Svasti's rice. It is quite delicious. Now then, we can eat together in silence, and when we've finished, I'll tell you a story."

Siddhartha broke off a piece of brown rice and handed it to Sujata. She joined her palms like a lotus and respectfully accepted it. The three of them ate quietly in the deep calm of the forest.



Siddhartha, Svasti, and Sujata shared a meal in mindfulness.

When the rice and sesame were gone, Sujata gathered the banana leaves. She took a jug of fresh water from her side and poured some into the only cup she had brought. She lifted the cup to offer water to Siddhartha. He took it in his two hands and offered it to Svasti. Flustered, Svasti blurted, “Please, Mister, I mean, Teacher, please, you

take the first drink.”

Siddhartha answered in a soft voice, “You drink first, child. I want you to have the first drink.” Again he lifted and offered the cup to Svasti.

Svasti felt confused but didn’t know how to refuse such an unaccustomed honor. He joined his palms in thanks and took the cup. He drank all the water in one long gulp. He handed the cup back to Siddhartha. Siddhartha asked Sujata to pour a second cup. When it was full he raised it to his lips and sipped the water slowly, with reverence and deep enjoyment. Sujata’s eyes did not stray from Siddhartha and Svasti during this exchange. When Siddhartha finished drinking, he asked Sujata to pour a third cup. This one he offered to her. She put down the water jug, joined her palms, and accepted the cup of water. She lifted it to her lips and drank in slow, small sips, just as Siddhartha had done. She was aware that this was the first time she had ever drunk from the same cup as an untouchable. But Siddhartha was her Teacher, and if he had done so, why shouldn’t she? And she noticed that she had no feeling whatsoever of being polluted. Spontaneously, she reached out and touched the buffalo boy’s hair. It was such a surprise, Svasti didn’t have a moment to move out of the way. Then Sujata finished drinking her water. She placed the empty cup on the ground and smiled at her two companions.

Siddhartha nodded. “You children have understood. People are not born with caste. Everyone’s tears are salty, and everyone’s blood is red. It is wrong to divide people into castes and create division and prejudice among them. This has become very clear to me during my meditation.”

Sujata looked thoughtful and she spoke, “We are your disciples and we believe your teaching. But there does not seem to be anyone else like you in this world. Everyone else believes that the shudras and the untouchables came forth from the Creator’s feet. Even the scriptures say so. No one dares to think differently.”

“Yes, I know. But the truth is the truth whether anyone believes it or not. Though a million people may believe a lie, it is still a lie. You must have great courage to live according to the truth. Let me tell you a story about when I was a boy.

“One day, when I was nine years old and strolling alone in the garden, a swan suddenly dropped from the sky and writhed on the ground in front of me in great pain. I ran to pick it up, and I discovered that an arrow had deeply penetrated one of its wings. I clasped my hand firmly around the arrow’s shaft and yanked it out, and the bird cried as blood oozed from its wound. I applied pressure to the wound with my finger to stop the bleeding, and took the bird inside the palace to find princess Sundari, the lady in waiting. She agreed to pick a handful of medicinal leaves and make a poultice for the bird’s wound. The swan shivered, so I took off my jacket and wrapped it around her. Then I placed her close to the royal fireplace.”

Siddhartha paused for a moment to look at Svasti. “Svasti, I did not tell you yet, but when I was young I was a prince, the son of King Suddhodana in the city of Kapilavatthu. Sujata knows this already. I was about to go find some rice for the swan when my eight-year-old cousin, Devadatta, burst into the room. He was clutching his bow and arrows, and he asked excitedly, ‘Siddhartha, did you see a white swan fall down near here?’

“Before I could answer, Devadatta saw the swan resting by the fireplace. He ran toward it, but I stopped him.

“‘You may not take the bird.’

“My cousin protested, ‘That bird is mine. I shot it myself.’

“I stood between Devadatta and the swan, determined not to let him have it. I told him, ‘This bird is wounded. I’m protecting it. It needs to stay here.’

“Devadatta was quite stubborn and not about to give in. He argued, ‘Now listen, cousin, when this bird was flying in the sky, it didn’t belong to anyone. As I’m the one who shot it out of the sky, it rightfully belongs to me.’

“His argument sounded logical, but his words made me angry. I knew there was something wrong with his reasoning, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. So I just stood there, speechless, becoming more upset. I felt like punching him. Why I didn’t, I don’t know. Then, I saw a way to answer him.

“‘Listen, cousin,’ I told him, ‘Those who love each other live together, and those who are enemies live apart. You tried to kill the swan, so you and she are enemies. The bird cannot live with you. I saved her, bandaged her wound, warmed her, and was on my way to find food for her when you arrived. The bird and I love each other, and we can live together. The bird needs me, not you.’”

Sujata clapped her hands together, “That’s right! You were right!”

Siddhartha looked at Svasti. “And what do you think, child, of my statement?”

Svasti thought for a moment and then answered slowly, “I think you were right. But not many people would agree. Most people would side with Devadatta.”

Siddhartha nodded. “You are right. Most people do follow Devadatta’s view.

“Let me tell you what happened next. As we couldn’t agree on our own, we decided to take our concern to the adults. That day there was a meeting of the government in the palace, so we scurried to the hall of justice, where they were meeting. I held the swan and Devadatta clasped his bow and arrows. We presented our problem to the ministers and asked them to render judgment. The affairs of state came to a halt as the men listened, first to Devadatta and then to me. They discussed the matter at length, but they also were unable to agree. The majority seemed to be leaning toward Devadatta, when my father, the king, suddenly cleared his throat and coughed a few times. All the ministers suddenly stopped speaking, and—tell me if you don’t think this is odd—with total accord, they agreed that my argument was correct and that the bird should be given to me. Devadatta was beside himself with anger, but of course, there was nothing he could do.

“I had the bird, but I wasn’t really happy. Even though I was still young, I knew that my victory had been less than honorable. I was given the bird because the ministers wanted to please my father, not because they saw the truth of what I said.”

“That’s sad,” Sujata said and frowned.

“Yes, it was. But turning my thoughts to the bird, I took comfort in

the fact that she was safe. Otherwise she surely would have ended up in a cooking pot.

“In this world, few people look with the eyes of compassion, and so we are cruel and merciless toward each other. The weak are always oppressed by the strong. I still see that my reasoning that day was correct, for it arose from love and understanding. Love and understanding can ease the suffering of all beings. The truth is the truth, whether or not it is accepted by the majority. Therefore, I tell you children, it takes great courage to stand up for and protect what is right.”

“What happened to the swan, Teacher?” asked Sujata.

“For four days, I cared for her. When I saw that her wound had healed, I released her, after warning her to fly far away lest she be shot again.”

Siddhartha looked at the two children, their faces quiet and serious. “Sujata, you must return home before your mother begins to worry. Svasti, isn’t it time for you to return to your buffaloes and cut more grass? The armful of kusa grass you gave me yesterday made a perfect cushion for meditation. Last night and this morning, I sat upon it and my meditation was very peaceful. I saw many things clearly. You have been a great help, Svasti. As my understanding deepens, I shall share the fruit of my meditation with both you children. Now I will continue sitting.”

Svasti looked down at the grass, which Siddhartha had shaped into a cushion. Though the grasses were packed firm, Svasti knew they were still fragrant and soft. He would bring his teacher a fresh armful of grass every three days to make a new cushion. Svasti stood up and, with Sujata, joined his palms and bowed to Siddhartha. Sujata set out for home and Svasti led his buffaloes to graze further along the riverbank.