



*“Good, Siddhartha said, let the word be sent
That Channa yoke my chariot: at noon
Tomorrow, I shall ride and see beyond.”*

The Light of Asia

Chapter 5

The Four Encounters

As time went on, Siddhartha felt restless and wanted to see what lay outside the palace where he was a virtual prisoner, even though conditions were idyllic. His father redoubled his efforts to make life in the palace more attractive. Feasts were organized and all was done to make sure he would not see any evidence of sickness, old age and death, as one of the astrologers had predicted that such sights would have a profound effect on him. But it was not enough.

"It was treason if a thread of silver strayed in the tresses of a singing girl or nautch girl and every day the dying rose was plucked." (The Light of Asia)



Three panels from Borobudur showing scenes of dancers and musicians. They illustrate the very strong influence India has had on performing arts in Southeast Asia.

Siddhartha asked his father for permission to go out but his father was worried. So, the streets were decorated with flowers and anyone who was old or sick was told to stay indoors while the royal chariot progressed through the town.

The head coachman, Channa, was in charge and knew why such measures had been taken.

The Four Encounters

On the first day, Channa and Siddhartha set off. The prince was very much interested in all he could see. There should have been nothing untoward happening.

But the gods had decided otherwise and they created an old man, wrinkled, hobbling along with great difficulty. No one else but Channa and Siddhartha could see him. The prince asked his coachman why this man looked so bad and Channa, who should have known better, but was deceived by the gods, answered truthfully that it was normal for everybody to get old and lose the advantages of youth. This left Siddhartha sad and worried.

On the second outing, in similar circumstances, they came across a sick man. Again, Channa had to admit that everyone could become ill. The prince was even more worried.

On the third outing, they came across a corpse and this was the time when Siddhartha was told that all men were mortal, which upset him even more.

Channa had to report these incidents to the king who was at a loss to understand how these had come to pass, but he could see that his son was deep in thought.

There was a fourth encounter (with or without Channa, versions differ) when the prince came across an ascetic. He questioned the man, asked him why he had abandoned all pleasures and sat here with a begging bowl. The ascetic replied that he was looking for deliverance from suffering.

The prince returned home even more concerned about all he had seen but kept thinking about his last encounter. He had been most impressed by the serene countenance of the ascetic and felt that, maybe, he should embark on a similar path.

His father did not know what to do.



Some of the depictions of the 4 encounters are quite graphic particularly when it comes to the corpse!

Top Hpaung Daw pagoda, Myanmar

Centre Nha Trang, Vietnam

Bottom left Lamphun, Thailand.

Bottom right Sihanoukville, Cambodia

Page 29 Svay Pope Pagoda, Phnom Penh, Cambodia



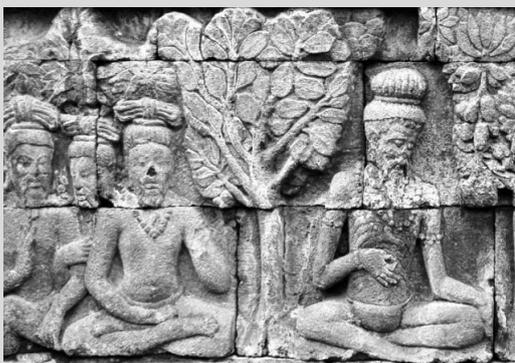
Borobudur

Many of the panels shown so far come from Borobudur. **This temple, the largest Buddhist monument in the world, was built in the 9th century on the island of Java in Indonesia.** At that time, Southeast Asia had been strongly influenced by India and many of the kingdoms practised Hinduism or Buddhism, sometimes a mixture of the two. The dynasty that built Borobudur practised Buddhism, but a form of Buddhism, called Tantrism, which stressed an esoteric approach to the doctrine. It is thought that the monument itself was an initiation path for the faithful to meditate on the 5000+ panels that cover the inside walls. Part of these panels are devoted to the portrayal of the life of Gautama. (*below, meeting the old man, who is shown on the left*)



Ascetics

Curiously, virtually all the representations of the meeting with the ascetic portray him as dressed like a Buddhist monk, which may seem rather anachronistic. There were many ascetics at that time, and there still are as, traditionally, in India, the last phase of a man's life should be devoted to religious retreat. Ascetics are usually portrayed "with matted hair", as seen on the relief on the left, or wearing a tiger skin, showing that they have taken refuge in the forest.



Left Borobudur

Right Wat Ream, Sihanoukville

