

## AFTERNOON READING

±4:20	Teacher Liaison	When Teacher rings hand bell after 4:20, closes work in the room Checks with Teacher and returns to hall
	Timekeeper	Leads walking meditation before afternoon reading begins Begins meditation period
4:30	Cantor	After a few minutes ❖ “Please pass out the sutra books”
	Volunteers	Pass out sutra books
	Cantor	Leads afternoon reading (see next) A short reading can be repeated; try to leave some time to sit in silence between the reading and supper
	Cantor	“Please collect the sutra books”
	Volunteers	Collect sutra books and sit down
	All	Sit in meditation

## IF THE READING TAKES PLACE IN THE EVENING

6:30	Cantor	After a few minutes ❖ “Please pass out the sutra books”
	Volunteers	Pass out sutra books
	Cantor	Leads evening reading (see next) A short reading can be repeated; try to leave some time to sit in silence between the reading and the end of the period
	Cantor	“Please collect the sutra books”
	Volunteers	Collect sutra books and sit down
	All	Sit in meditation

## SELECTIONS FOR THE AFTERNOON READING

*(Corresponds to page 2-1 of the Sutra Book)*

### ○○○● from The Record of Linji ○

Followers of the Way, as I look at it, we're no different from Shakyamuni. In all our various activities each day, is there anything we lack? The wonderful light of the six senses has never for a moment ceased to shine. If you could just look at it this way, then you'd be the kind of person who has nothing to do for the rest of your life.

If you don't have faith in yourself, then you'll be forever in a hurry trying to keep up with everything around you, you'll be twisted and turned by whatever environment you're in and you can never move freely. But if you can just stop this mind that goes rushing around moment by moment looking for something, then you'll be no different from the ancestors and buddhas. Do you want to get to know the ancestors and buddhas? They're none other than you, the people standing in front of me listening to this Dharma talk!



If you want to be no different from the ancestors and buddhas, then never look for something outside yourselves. A moment of pure light in your mind—that is the Dharmakaya, the Essence-body of the Buddha lodged in you. A moment of undifferentiated light in your mind—that is the Samboghakaya, the Bliss-body of the Buddha lodged in you. A moment of nondiscriminating light in your mind—that is the Nirmanakaya, the Transformation-body of the Buddha lodged in you. These three types of bodies are you, the person who stands before me now!

What is it, then, that knows how to preach or listen to the Dharma? It is you who are right here before my eyes, this lone brightness without fixed shape or form—this is what knows how to preach the Dharma and listen to the Dharma. If you can see it this way, then you'll be no different from the ancestors and buddhas. As I see it, there are none of you incapable of profound understanding, none of you incapable of emancipation.



Followers of the Way, this thing called mind has no fixed form; it penetrates all the ten directions. In the eye we call it sight, in the ear we call it hearing; in the nose it detects odors, in the mouth it speaks words; in the hand it grasps, in the feet it runs along. Basically it is a single bright essence, but it divides itself into these six functions. And because this single mind has no fixed form, it is everywhere in a state of emancipation.

Just get so you can follow along with circumstances and use up your old karma. When the time comes to do so, put on your clothes. If you want to walk, walk. If you want to sit, sit. But never for a moment set your mind on seeking buddhahood. Why? A person of old said, “If you try to create good karma and seek to be a buddha, then Buddha will become a sure sign you will remain in the realm of birth and death.”



Followers of the Way, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. If, wherever you are, you take the role of host, then whatever spot you stand in will be a true one. Then whatever circumstances surround you, they can never pull you away. You don't have to strive for benefits, benefits will come of themselves. Even if you're faced with bad karma left over from the past, or the five crimes that bring on the hell of incessant suffering, these will of themselves become the great sea of emancipation.

As I see it, there's no Buddha, no living beings, no long ago, no now. If you want to get it, you've already got it—it's not something that requires time. There's no religious practice, no enlightenment, no getting anything, no missing out on anything. At no time is there any other Dharma than this.

Followers of the Way, this lone brightness before my eyes now, this person plainly listening to me—this person is unimpeded at any point but penetrates the ten directions, free to do as you please in the threefold world. No matter what environment you may encounter, with its peculiarities and differences, you cannot

be swayed or pulled awry. In the space of an instant you make your way into the Dharma-realm. If you meet a buddha you preach to the buddha, if you meet an ancestor you preach to the ancestor, if you meet a hungry ghost you preach to the hungry ghost. You go everywhere, wandering through many lands, yet never become separated from your single thought. Every place is clean and pure to you, your light pierces the ten directions, the ten thousand phenomena are a single thusness.



If you want to be free to be born or die, to go or stay as one would put on or take off a garment, then you must understand right now that the person here listening to the Dharma has no form, no characteristics, no root, no beginning, no place you abide, yet you are vibrantly alive. All the ten thousand kinds of contrived happenings operate in a place that is in fact no place. Therefore the more you search the farther away you get, the harder you hunt the wider astray you go. This is what I call the secret of the matter.



The way I see it, one shouldn't be averse to anything. Suppose you yearn to be a sage. Sage is just a word, *sage*. There are some types of students who go off to Mount Wutai looking for Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. They're wrong from the very start! Would you like to get to know Manjushri? You here in front of my eyes, carrying out your activities, from first to last never changing, wherever you go never doubting—this is the living Manjushri!

Your mind that each moment shines with the light of nondiscrimination—wherever it may be, this is the true Samantabhadra, the bodhisattva of action. Your mind that each moment is capable of freeing itself from its shackles, everywhere emancipated—this is the method of meditating on Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion. These three act as host and companion to one another, all three appearing at the same time when they appear, one in three, three in one.



Followers of the Way, here and there you hear it said that there is a Way to be practiced, a Dharma to become enlightened to. Will you tell me then just what Dharma there is to become enlightened to, what Way there is to practice? In your present activities, what is it you lack, what is it that practice must mend?

What are you looking for? This person of the Way who depends on nothing, here before my eyes now listening to the Dharma—your brightness shines clearly, you have never lacked anything.

[adapted from Burton Watson, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi*]

(Corresponds to page 2-4 of the Sutra Book)

○○○● Rainer Maria Rilke, The Ninth Duino Elegy ○

Why, if this interval of being can be spent serenely  
in the form of a laurel, slightly darker than all  
other green, with tiny waves on the edges  
of every leaf (like the smile of a breeze) —: why then  
have to be human — and, escaping from fate,  
keep longing for fate?...

Oh *not* because happiness *exists*,  
that too-hasty profit snatched from approaching loss.  
Not out of curiosity, not as practice for the heart, which  
would exist in the laurel too...

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything here  
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way  
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.  
*Once* for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,  
just once. And never again. But to have been  
this once, completely, even if only once:  
to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

And so we keep pressing on, trying to achieve it,  
trying to hold it firmly in our simple hands,  
in our overcrowded gaze, in our speechless heart.  
Trying to become it. — Whom can we give it to? We would  
hold on to it all, forever... Ah, but what can we take along  
into that other realm? Not the art of looking,  
which is learned so slowly, and nothing that happened here. Nothing.  
The sufferings, then. And, above all, the heaviness,  
and the long experience of love, — just what is wholly  
unsayable. But later, among the stars,

what good is it—*they are better* as they are: unsayable.  
For when the traveler returns from the mountain-slopes into the valley,  
he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead  
some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue  
gentian. Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house,  
bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—  
at most: column, tower... But to *say* them, you must understand,  
oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves  
ever dreamed of existing. Isn't the secret intent  
of this taciturn earth, when it forces lovers together,  
that inside their boundless emotion all things may shudder with joy?  
Threshold: what it means for two lovers  
to be wearing down, imperceptibly, the ancient threshold of their door—  
  
they too, after the many who came before them  
and before those to come..., lightly.

*Here* is the time for the *sayable*, *here* is its homeland.  
Speak and bear witness. More than ever  
the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for  
what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act.  
An act under a shell, which easily cracks open as soon as  
the business inside outgrows it and seeks new limits.  
Between the hammers our heart  
endures, just as the tongue does  
between the teeth and, despite that,  
still is able to praise.

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,  
you can't impress *him* with glorious emotion; in the universe  
where he feels more powerfully, you are a novice. So show him  
something simple which, formed over generations,

lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.  
Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished; as *you* stood  
by the rope-maker in Rome or the potter along the Nile.

Show him how happy a Thing can be, how innocent and ours,  
how even lamenting grief purely decides to take form,  
serves as a Thing, or dies into a Thing —, and blissfully  
escapes far beyond the violin. — And these Things,  
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,  
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.  
They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,  
within — oh endlessly — within us! Whoever we may be at last.

Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,  
*invisible*? Isn't it your dream  
to be wholly invisible someday? — O Earth: invisible!  
What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?  
Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer  
need your springtimes to win me over — one of them,  
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood.  
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first.  
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration  
is our intimate companion, Death.

Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future  
grows any smaller... Superabundant being  
wells up in my heart.

[translated by Stephen Mitchell]



*(Corresponds to page 2-6 of the Sutra Book)*

○○○● **Shitou Xiqian, Taking Part in the Gathering** ○

*[Shib-toe Shee-chee-en]*

The mind of the great Indian Immortal  
moves seamlessly between East and West.  
It's human nature to be quick or slow,  
but in the Way there are no northern or southern ancestors.

The mysterious source of the bright is clear and unstained;  
branches of light stream from that dark.  
Trying to control things is only delusion,  
but hanging onto the absolute isn't enlightenment, either.

We and everything we perceive  
are interwoven and not interwoven,  
and this interweaving continues on and on,  
while each thing stands in its own place.  
In the world of form, we differentiate substances and images;  
in the world of sound, we distinguish music from noise.

In the embrace of the dark, good words and bad words are the same, but in the  
bright we divide clear speech from confusion.

The four elements return to their natures  
like a child to the mother.

Fire is hot, the winds blow,  
water is wet, the earth solid.

The eye sees form, the ear hears voices,  
the nose smells fragrance, the tongue tastes salt and sour.

Everything, depending on its root, spreads out its leaves.  
Both roots and branches must return to their origin,  
and so do respectful and insulting words.

The darkness is inside the bright,  
but don't look only with the eyes of the dark.  
The brightness is inside the dark,  
but don't look only through the eyes of the bright.  
Bright and dark are a pair,  
like front foot and back foot walking.

Each thing by nature has worth,  
but we notice it is shaped by its circumstances.  
Things fit together like boxes and lids,  
while the absolute is like arrows meeting in mid-air.  
When you let these words in, you encounter the ancestors;  
don't limit yourself to your own small story.  
If you don't see the Way with your own eyes,  
you won't know the road even as you're walking on it.  
Walking the Way, we're never near or far from it;  
deluded, we are cut off from it by mountains and rivers.  
You who seek the mystery,  
in daylight or in the shadows of night, don't throw away your time.

[translated by Joan Sutherland & John Tarrant]

*(Corresponds to page 2-8 of the Sutra Book)*

○○○● from **Yongjia Xuanjue, Song of Realizing the Way** ○

*[Yoong-jee-ab Shwan-ju-ay]*

There is someone at peace,  
walking in the Tao, beyond theories,  
not fleeing delusion, not seeking truth.  
Even ignorance is buddha nature itself;  
the illusory body is the body of the Way.

When we meet what is real,  
there is nothing at all.  
The original nature of things  
is the unnamable vastness.  
Thoughts, feelings, and sensations come and go  
like clouds in the empty sky;  
wanting, hating, and ignorance appear and disappear  
like bubbles on the sea.

When we touch the bottom of reality,  
there is no distinction between self and other,  
and the realms of hell instantly dissolve.  
No bad fortune, no good fortune, no loss, no gain;  
you won't find such things in awakening.  
For years dust has built up on the uncleaned mirror;  
now let's clear it, once and for all.

Traveling alone, walking alone,  
the awakened ones follow the way of freedom,  
singing an old, clear song.  
They have a natural, elegant style,  
but tough and bony bodies,  
and pass unnoticed through the world.

We know that the Buddha's children  
can be poor in material things, but not in the Way.  
They carry a priceless jewel within;  
They use it to help whomever they meet,  
and it never fails them.

People will slander and abuse you  
but they are trying to set fire to the sky with a torch;  
in the end they'll tire themselves out.  
even scandal-mongering sounds sweet to my ears;  
immediately everything melts  
and I enter the inconceivable,  
the place beyond thoughts and words.  
To be rich in Zen is to be rich in expression:  
The full-moon brilliance of meditation and wisdom  
does not get stuck in emptiness.  
This is not something you accomplish alone;  
it's the essence of buddhas as numerous as the sands.  
Walking is meditation, sitting is meditation;  
speaking or silent, active or quiet, we are at peace.  
Even facing the sword of death, our mind is unmoved;  
even drinking poison, our heart is at rest.

Since I realized what was not born,  
I have felt neither joy nor sorrow  
at any honor or disgrace.  
When you truly awaken,  
you lose the sense of your own merit.  
You cannot find such freedom  
in the complex strivings of our world.  
Good deeds might get you to heaven,  
but it is like shooting an arrow into the sky;

when its force is spent, the arrow falls back to earth,  
and bad fortune follows good.

Just take hold of the root—  
never mind the branches!  
The moon shines on the river,  
the wind stirs in the pines—  
whose gift is this long, beautiful evening?  
The seal of buddha nature  
has marked the depths of my mind  
and I wear dew and the fog, the clouds and mist.

Don't look for truth,  
don't cut off delusion.  
Truth and delusion have no shape,  
but this no-shape is neither empty nor not empty;  
it is the true shape of buddha mind.  
When the mind-mirror is clear, it shines without obstruction.  
illuminating the universe,  
reaching realms as countless as the sands.  
Everything in the cosmos is reflected in the mind,  
and this clarity has neither inside nor outside.

If you cling only to emptiness, denying cause and effect,  
your confusion will bring disaster on you.  
Clinging to emptiness, rejecting the world of being,  
you escape drowning by jumping into the fire.  
Grasping after truth and rejecting delusion are just clever lies.  
If you practice meditation without understanding this  
It's like mistaking a thief for your own child.

You miss the treasure of the Way,  
and lose whatever power you have gathered,  
and this disaster comes directly from your thinking.

One Nature pervades all natures;  
one Way encompasses all individual ways.  
One moon is reflected in many waters;  
all the reflected moons are that one moon.  
The body of all the buddhas suffuses me,  
and my nature is one with the Way.  
One stage of awakening contains all stages;  
it is neither matter, nor mind, nor activity.  
All the teachings are fulfilled in a moment;  
in the blink of an eye, time comes to an end.

All the categories and names and negations-  
have nothing to do with awakening.  
Beyond praise, beyond blame —  
awakening is as boundless as space itself.  
Right here is eternity, full and serene;  
you won't find it by looking somewhere else.

You can't acquire it, and you can't lose it;  
in the midst of not attaining —  
that's when you attain it.  
Eternity speaks in the silence;  
in words you hear its silence.  
The great way opens and there is no obstacle in front of you.

[translated by Joan Sutherland]

(Corresponds to page 2-11 of the Sutra Book)

## ○○○● Annie Dillard, This Is the Life ○

Any culture tells you how to live your one and only life: to wit, as everyone else does. Probably most cultures prize, as ours rightly does, making a contribution by working hard at work that you love; being in the know, and intelligent; gathering a surplus; and loving your family above all, and your dog, your boat, birdwatching. Beyond those things, our culture might specialize in money, and celebrity, and natural beauty. These are not universal. You enjoy work and will love your grandchildren, and somewhere in there you die.

Another contemporary consensus might be: You wear the best shoes you can afford, you seek to know Rome's best restaurants and their staffs, drive the best car, and vacation on Tenerife [*Teb-neb-REEF*]. And what a cook you are!

Or you take the next tribe's pigs in thrilling raids; you grill yams; you trade for televisions and hunt white-plumed birds. Everyone you know agrees: this is the life. Perhaps you burn captives. You set fire to a drunk. Yours is the human struggle, or the elite one, to achieve ... whatever your own culture tells you: to publish the paper that proves the point; to progress in the firm and high title and salary, stock options, benefits; to get the loan to store the beans till their price rises; to elude capture, to feed your children or educate them to a feather edge; or to count coup [*koo*] or perfect your calligraphy; to eat the king's deer or catch the poacher; to spear the seal, intimidate the enemy, and be a big man or beloved woman and die respected for the pigs or the title or the shoes. Not a funeral. Forget funeral. A big birthday party. Since everyone around you agrees.

Since everyone around you agrees ever since there were people on earth that land is value, or labor is value, or learning is value, or title, necklaces, degree, murex shells, or ownership of slaves. Everyone knows bees sting and ghosts haunt and giving your robes away humiliates your rivals. That the enemies are barbarians. That wise men swim through the rock of the earth; that houses breed filth, airstrips attract airplanes, tornadoes punish, ancestors watch, and you can buy a shorter stay in purgatory. The black rock is holy, or the scroll; or the pangolin is holy, the quetzal [*ket-zabl*] is holy, this tree, water, rock, stone, cow,

cross, or mountain--and it's all true. The Red Sox. Or nothing at all is holy, as everyone intelligent knows.

Who is your "everyone"? Chess masters scarcely surround themselves with motocross racers. Do you want aborigines at your birthday party? Or are you serving yak-butter tea? Popular culture deals not in its distant past, or any other culture. You know no one who longs to buy a mule or be named to court or thrown into a volcano.

So the illusion, like the visual field, is complete; it has no holes except books you read and soon forget. And death takes us by storm. What was that, that life? What else offered! If for him it was contract bridge, if for her it was copyright law, if for everyone it was and is an optimal mix of family and friends, learning, contribution, and joy—of making and ameliorating—what else is there, or was there, or will there ever be?

What else is a vision or fact of time and the peoples it bears issuing from the mouth of the cosmos, from the round mouth of eternity, in a wide and parti-colored utterance. In the complex weave of this utterance like fabric, in its infinite domestic interstices, the centuries and continents and classes dwell. Each people knows only its own squares in the weave, its wars and instruments and arts, and also the starry sky.

Okay, and then what? Say you scale your own weft and see time's breadth and the length of space. You see the way the fabric both passes among the stars and encloses them. You see in the weave nearby, and aslant farther off, the peoples variously scandalized or exalted in their squares. They work on their projects—they flake spear points, hoe, plant; they kill aurochs or one another; they prepare sacrifices--as we here and now work on our projects. What, seeing this spread multiply infinitely in every direction, would you do differently? No one could love your children more; would you love them less? Would you change your project? To what? Whatever you do, it has likely brought delight to fewer people than either contract bridge or the Red Sox.

However hypnotized you and your people are, you will be just as dead in their war, our war. However dead you are, more people will come. However many more



people come, your time and its passions, and yourself and your passions, weigh equally in the balance with those of any dead who pulled waterwheel poles by the Nile or Yellow rivers, or painted their foreheads black, or starved in the wilderness, or wasted from disease then or now. Our lives and our deaths count equally, or we must abandon one-man-one-vote, dismantle democracy, and assign six billion people an importance-of-life ranking from one to six billion—a ranking whose number decreases, like gravity, with the square of the distance between us and them.

What would you do differently, you up on your beanstalk looking at scenes of all peoples at all times in all places? When you climb down, would you dance any less to the music you love, knowing that music to be as provisional as a bug? Somebody has to make jugs and shoes, to turn the soil, fish. If you descend the long rope-ladders back to your people and time in the fabric, if you tell them what you have seen, and even if someone cares to listen, then what? Everyone knows times and cultures are plural. If you come back a shrugging relativist or tongue-tied absolutist, then what? If you spend hours a day looking around, high astraddle the warp or woof of your people's wall, then what new wisdom can you take to your grave for worms to untangle? Well, maybe you will not go into advertising.

Then you would know your own death better but perhaps not dread it less. Try to bring people up the wall, carry children to see it—to what end? Fewer golf courses? What is wrong with golf? Nothing at all. Equality of wealth? Sure; how?

The woman watching sheep over there, the man who carries embers in a pierced clay ball, the engineer, the girl who spins wool into yarn as she climbs, the smelter, the babies learning to recognize speech in their own languages, the man whipping a slave's flayed back, the man digging roots, the woman digging roots, the child digging roots—what would you tell them? And the future people—what are they doing? What excitements sweep peoples here and there from time to time. Into the muddy river they go, into the trenches, into the caves, into the mines, into the granary, into the sea in boats. Most humans who were ever alive lived inside one single culture that never changed for hundreds of thousands of years; archaeologists scratch their heads at so conservative and static a culture.

Over here, the rains fail; they are starving. There, the caribou fail; they are starving. Corrupt leaders take the wealth. Not only there but here. Rust and smut spoil the rye. When pigs and cattle starve or freeze, people die soon after. Disease empties a sector, a billion sectors.

People look at the sky and at the other animals. They make beautiful objects, beautiful sounds, beautiful motions of their bodies beating drums in lines. They pray; they toss people in peat bogs; they help the sick and injured; they pierce their lips, their noses, ears; they make the same mistakes despite religion, written language, philosophy, and science; they build, they kill, they preserve, they count and figure, they boil the pot, they keep the embers alive; they tell their stories and gird themselves.

Will knowledge you experience directly make you a Buddhist? Must you forfeit excitement per se? To what end?

Say you have seen something. You have seen an ordinary bit of what is real, the infinite fabric of time that eternity shoots through, and time's soft-skinned people working and dying under slowly shifting stars. Then what?

*(Corresponds to page 2-14 of the Sutra Book)*

○○○● from Roberto Calasso, *Ka* ○

When he was inside his mother's body, the Bodhisattva settled down in contemplation. He looked through the transparent skin. He never moved until he was born. Meanwhile, Maya dreamed of an immense white elephant, experiencing a pleasure she had never known before.



The Bodhisattva's life was coated by a uniform film like the thin walls his father, Shuddhodana, had had built around the palace park. Whatever happened, there was always something slightly artificial and suspect about it. Why did the Bodhisattva only meet creatures of his own age? Why, whenever he approached the boundaries of the park, did the path veer off into thick vegetation that hid any trace of walls and turn back? Was this the world—or a piece of temporary scenery whose real purpose was to hide the world? One day the Buddha would sum up those years in a single sentence: "Once, before I left my father's house, I could easily obtain the five qualities of sensory pleasure." That was all he said. Characters, faces, adventures, emotions: all smoothed out in just one sentence.



It was May. There was a full moon. That night the Bodhisattva had five dreams. Upon waking, he thought: "Today I will achieve the bodhi, the awakening. Everything will be exactly as before, as now when I woke up. But I will consider all that happens as now my mind is considering those five dreams."

During the second quarter of the night of awakening, the Buddha remembered his previous lives. First one, then two, then five. Soon he stopped counting. Names appeared—and he would say: "That was me." He saw places—and said: "That was me." He saw passions flare and fade. He saw people dying—and said: "That was

me.” A throng of faces, clothes, towns, animals, merchandise, roads. He went on watching. He had stopped repeating “That was me.” And suddenly he realized he was watching the lives of others. He didn’t notice any fundamental difference. He pressed on, amazed, but amazement was a constant in these migrations through time. True, he could no longer say: “That was me.” But was that really so important? He could still recognize the joy—and above all the suffering. The scenes he had lived through and those he had not lay side by side, each attracting the other, like leaves in a pond. The light they emanated fused into one. As soon as the eye retreated, they became a thread of beads, each with a slightly different color, and here and there a small chip.

For seven days after the awakening the Buddha remained seated. Then he got up and gazed long at the fig tree that had protected him. He looked over every inch of it with an elephant’s eye. After fourteen days the Buddha got up again and began to walk. He wasn’t going anywhere in particular. Not far away, Mara collapsed, defeated. He wrote on the ground with his stick.



The Buddha’s life was ever tinged by colors of sunset and uncertainty. He wanted nothing better than to appear, announce the doctrine, and disappear. For him, everything sprang from the casual occasion, from what he encountered along the road. As for the doctrine, he decided to announce it only on the insistence of an unknown brahman with whom he had fallen into conversation one day—and who turned out to be Brahma himself. The Buddha let events take him to the point where the word dropped from the branch. Thus even what was soundest seemed precarious, chancy. The epoch demanded it. Things had changed from the days of the preceding Buddhas, when life was long and people accumulated merit. The Law’s sun still shone, but the light it spread was weak now. As the venerable Mahakashyapa said: reality was sick.

The Buddha's gesture was meant to counter a secret enemy: possession. That mental life is continually invaded—by what? powers? call them what you will, in any event elements that agitate—was revealed to the Buddha as the ultimate slavery, that bondage to which all others lead back. Mental life: objects looming before us, without respite, taking over, obsessing us. The gesture of grasping, of reaching out, like the monkey's lean paw. This is the most precise image of mental life: restlessness, the pathetic tension of the monkey among the branches of a big tree. He who reaches out to grasp is himself grasped, possessed by the mental object that looms up and imposes itself. There is only one circumstance in which this doesn't happen: if one is able to recognize a common trait in all those objects: emptiness.



That life is “sweet” the Buddha announced when he was eighty years old, a few days before dying. It was the beginning of the rainy season. The Buddha said to his monks: “Split up and go your ways. Go wherever you have friends, in small groups. I will stay here with Ananda. He will look after me.” When they were alone, the Buddha was afflicted by a violent bout of sickness. As soon as he was feeling better, the Buddha told Ananda that he wanted to go back and see a few places near Vaishali that were dear to him. They reached a clearing that opened out toward a vast horizon. The Buddha asked Ananda to stop. He had pains in his back again. Ananda laid out the Buddha's mat under a mango tree. Then he sat down next to him. The Buddha looked into the distance. He said: “Splendid and many-colored is the Island of the Jambu, and sweet the life of humans.”



The Buddha's last words were: “Act without inattention.”