

# BUDDHA

A POEM

WHICH OBTAINED  
THE CHANCELLOR'S MEDAL  
FOR  
ENGLISH VERSE  
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BY

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# BUDDHA

“Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,  
Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait resistance.”

DU BELLAY.

“It is true, Simha, that I preach extinction, but only the extinction of pride, lust, evil thought and ignorance, not that of forgiveness, love, charity and truth.”

BUDDHA, *The Sermon to Sadhu Simha*.

DEEPER in time than the mind understands  
Were shaped the crumbling contours of earth's lands,  
And from a wilderness of mist and night  
The still Himálayas rose in scarps of light.  
Before men lived, man and the earth were one—  
A world unshaped beneath the flaming sun;  
Within the cloud of fabled centuries  
Ganges and Indus and the tropic seas  
In darkness were conceived, in darkness thrust  
Upon the world of tempest and of dust.  
Chaotic night in which the seas began  
Begot the body and the power of man,  
And in the scoriac pits of barren earth  
Were strown the seeds of elemental birth.  
Time made the individual forms from dust  
And builded Everest from the earth's crust,  
And fashioned man apart, and darkly wrought  
The frame of life. This word the Buddha taught  
That all the beauty and the mystery  
Of all the living land that eyes may see,  
And all man's power, are risen from the void.  
The fashion and the form shall be destroyed,  
The frame corporeal shattered as a sherd,  
Void shall be freed in void, the life interred:  
Above the body and the fleshly sense  
Looms up a spectre of Impermanence.

It is the changeless secret of our pain  
The Buddha taught, that we who turn again  
After our many births to void,—that we  
Cling to man's individuality.  
The understanding of man's misery  
Was given to him who found beneath the Tree,  
From pain released and from joy's aftermath,  
The Middle Way, the Noble Eightfold Path.

Closed round with triple walls, made blind to truth,  
Made blind to man, Gautama in his youth,  
Shut from the earth, stumbling, untaught, at strife,  
Put by unread the parable of life.  
The hills and flowering lands were lost to him;  
Walls of the palace shut him from the dim  
Vision of temples in the shimmering day,  
White paths, and waggons in the ringing way,  
The din of earth's bazaar; there peepul leaves  
Wavered above the fretted temple eaves  
In vivid fields where nature manifold  
Rose in strong beauty from the fibrous mould,  
Nature which is the flower that falls to seed,—  
Blossom of dawn, at dark a stricken weed:  
That book of truth was hidden from his eyes;  
The palace dome shut out from him the skies  
And the clear dawn that sings, the dusktide still;  
Often the golden palace hall would fill  
With passing sun, a chancing folly gleaming,  
Momently spun above his bowed head dreaming.  
Through that great hall the lovely dancers swayed,  
Like twilight shapes, from niche and colonnade  
In the reflected day of jewelled panes;  
Sometimes the shining birds from unwall'd plains  
Flitted as shadows on his walls, and song  
Spoke from the flowering world. And there rose strong  
Music of every carven instrument

Through that great hall, a mist of tone and scent  
Mingling and parted, instant and remote,  
Mountainous flood or fall of mote on mote  
Of whirling gleams; all a world's mystery  
Snared in a sound. The hand of luxury  
Touched him and made him blind, so that he groped  
Baffled and pathless for a truth unhopéd,  
A truth not understood, distant, perverse,  
The truth whose witness was the universe.

Then in a day it seemed the swift dance swinging  
Beneath those walls, the riot and the singing,  
Told of a meaning that no voice had spoken.  
Truth rose a vision there, the toil was broken,  
The sensual toil that held him; love's caress  
Died from his lips that closed on nothingness;  
The impermanence of all terrene desire,  
Passion and thirst, the yearning and the fire,  
Was shown to him. That day the music seemed  
A cry from the far world of which he dreamed,  
Eager and still, that thrilled above the sea  
Of dancing forms receding. Silently  
He beckoned Channa to him, and they went  
Together from the hall of merriment  
And passed out to the city in the sun.  
Then as they trod the paths there followed one  
Who came before them in the populous way,  
Wizened and bowed and feeble, robed in grey;  
"This is the shape of Age," then Channa said,  
"Whom death attends, to lay the wrinkled head  
In earth, and close the eyes." And there came by  
Others; a sick man lisped with mouth awry,  
Who paused before them, clothed in loathly gear;  
And as they looked on him there passed a bier,  
The grey corpse laid upon the wood unmasked;  
"Shall I then also die?" Gautama asked. . .  
Dusk gathered softly, and the curtained air

Quickened with curling dust; the rout and blare  
Of market ended, peace of night began;  
Now in the time of stillness came a man  
Begging an alms of them, clasping his bowl,  
Who said, "In Contemplation lies the goal  
Of life; all man's desire is changeable,  
O Prince; peace only is immutable;  
Body and Self are as a temporal dress  
Bringing all grief, and all man's bitterness" . . .  
Night rose upon the inane lands of sky  
A wilderness of stars that soundlessly  
Voyaged apart, nomad, remote from men;  
Gautama praised the yogi, parting then,  
And turned toward the starlit palace hall,  
Saying, "The star, even as man, is thrall  
To his own shape, torn from the void and whole."  
Troubled, he watched the slow clouds sagging roll  
Above the slender towers, darkening  
The flickering lights of sky; then wondering  
Entered the palace hall that gleamed unstirred.  
From obscure colonnades, rustling, he heard  
Winds of the garden, the low winds, dissever  
Leaf from thin leaf, and knew it was for ever  
He must depart from all that in life past  
He had desired and praised, and go at last  
Among the paths of earth, servant of Good.  
He crossed the palace hall, a moment stood  
Raising the jewelled net that masked from sight  
The palace garden, paused, and to the night  
Passed out, assured. The new moon's pitted rim  
Gleamed as an unsheathed sword preceding him.

After wide wandering of many days  
He came among bowed trees where the sun's rays  
Broke not, and rested there, taking for food  
Scant millet seed and wild fruits of the wood,

And made his home, that he might there attain  
Perfect Enlightenment through body's pain.  
And the years passed, yet still the temporal mesh  
Prevailed; his eyes grew hollow and the flesh  
Wrinkled and ill and weak, still unreleased.  
There came a day of summer when he ceased  
The austere strife that brought no dawn of light,  
And sought earth's towns and fields, the eremite  
Turned wanderer again. Sujáta brought  
Him rice-milk in a gold dish richly wrought;  
He ate and was revived, knowing all passed  
The suffering, hearing the call at last  
To seek the Tree of Wisdom in the grey  
Roads of the woods. Silent he took his way.

He found strange peace there. All the woods were shrouded  
With shadowy banners, and the swift unclouded  
Sunlight stooped down in veering wraiths of gold;  
And he came so to gladness manifold,  
And he came so where there seemed end of all  
Striving and hate, the individual  
Clinging to life, the grief and thirst for love.  
Now as he took his way, circled above  
Kingfishers following, and many birds  
Dusk-plumed, that sang uncomprehended words;  
Serpents and peacocks and the company  
Of devas followed to the sacred Tree,  
And snake-girls fluting, and the nága king,  
And every beast and creature, hastening.  
From the green cavern of the arching Tree,  
Tossing, rose up a vision suddenly—  
The host of Mára tramping, a dark rout,  
Dwarfs stooping low, hailed on with pipe and shout,  
Misshapen, blind, lips drooped as in disdain,  
The incarnate forms of evil and of pain;  
But at the fall of dusk the host was gone  
When in his thought, cloudless, the still light shone

Of perfect revelation, and at peace  
In the veiled woods the Buddha found release  
From the delusions of the living dust—  
Man's striving and man's yearning and man's lust.

In hazardous ways of earth, with hands unskilled,  
From unsubstantial clay men dreaming build  
These walls that shrine the house of life, these walls  
Of Self, that stand not when the lone house falls,  
These boundaries wherein dreamers would keep  
Garnered the senses' harvest they would reap,  
This confine where we would for ever hold  
The spirit's riches firm as quarried gold;  
But from the pit of night a swift wind springs  
Shrouding the lintel with unearthly wings,  
Shrouding the doorway of that house with death;  
And the dream boundaries fall at a breath.  
From what dim source man rose we do not know,  
Nor to what moonless sea the life-streams flow,  
But through all worlds the eternal Master sends  
His voice, "Nothing begins and nothing ends."  
The eternal matrix bears, the eternal tomb  
Receives, remoulds the children of the womb,  
And both are joined as one, the source and grave  
As one, beneath time's shadowing architrave.  
How shall the Self endure? since Self is torn  
A moment from the void without a bourn.  
"This passing dream, this ghost to which we cling,  
This is the Self, this is the suffering."

Once to Benares' Deer Park when the day  
Waked the still town, came in the blossoming way  
A teacher who had knowledge of life's land,  
And spoke this word, that men might understand.