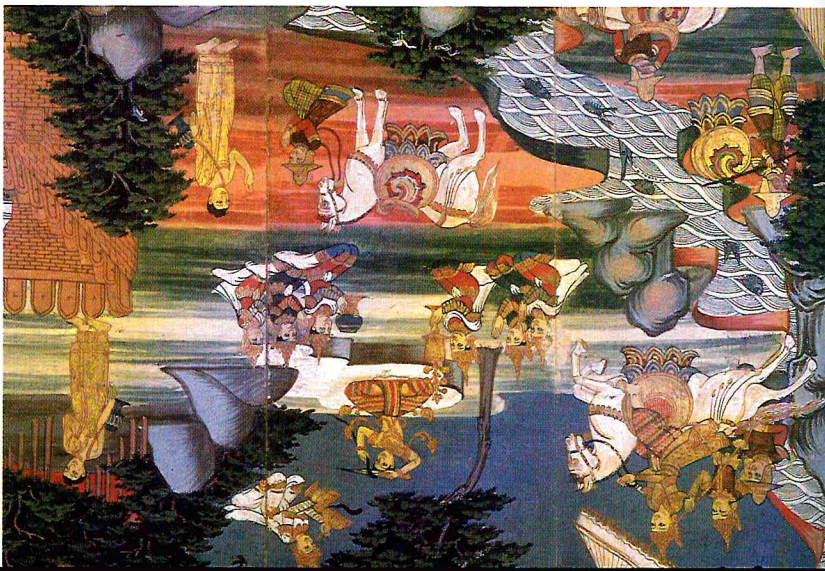




16.5 The Prince Becomes an Ascetic

Prince Siddhartha's experiences with suffering **transformed** him. Suddenly, his royal life seemed empty. He wanted to find the happiness and peace that the ascetic had found. Siddhartha decided to give up his old life and search for **enlightenment**. Becoming enlightened would mean finding deep truth and freedom from suffering.

One night, the prince asked his driver to take him to the forest. At the edge of the dark woods, Siddhartha removed his royal robes, sandals, and jewels. He cut off his hair with a knife. He put on a simple robe and carried only a small bowl for **alms**, or gifts of food. Wishing his driver farewell, Siddhartha began his life as an ascetic.

Siddhartha met other ascetics as he wandered the forests and fields. Like him, they wanted to understand the nature of the world. They believed that they could reach enlightenment through meditation. While meditating, the ascetics sat quietly and focused their minds on spiritual questions. Siddhartha quickly became an expert at meditation.

The ascetics also **denied** themselves many basic needs. For example, they stayed up all night without sleeping. They sat in the hot sun without shelter. They held their breath for several minutes. They also fasted, or stopped eating, for many days at a time. They hoped to find spiritual truth through self-denial. Siddhartha continued to follow the way of the ascetics for

some time. He became terribly thin from lack of food. According to Buddhist tradition, he became so thin that he could touch his stomach and feel his backbone. Eventually, he became unhappy with this extreme way of living. And he had not yet found the key to enlightenment.

enlightenment the state of gaining spiritual insight and finding universal truth; the goal of Buddhists

alms goods or money given to the poor

When Siddhartha began his search for enlightenment, he gave up riches to live the simple life of an ascetic.