

Tape PO5: The Cave **by Sangharakshita**

The cave was situated in the middle of a sandstone ridge, three hundred feet above the rice fields and mango groves. It was a man-made cave. Just when a niche in the soft brown rock had been deepened and widened to form a cave no one knew, but it must have been hundreds of years before. But all events, for as long as even the oldest man in the village could remember, or remember his grandfather remembering, the cave had been occupied - especially during the rainy season.

It had been occupied by a succession of holy men, either singly or less frequently in twos and threes. Some of the holy men who occupied the cave went naked, others wore yellow or white or red cotton garments, or even garments of bark. Most were shaven-headed, while those who were not shaven-headed generally had shoulder length hair, or wore their long braided locks piled high up in coils on their heads. The holy men passed their time in a variety of ways. Some fasted, some meditated, some repeated the teachings they had heard, and some – those occupying the cave in twos and threes – engaged in discussion. They were even some holy men who did nothing at all, unless it were to watch the clouds moving across the sky, or listen to the shrill churring of the cicadas.

Sumana was shaven-headed, wore yellow garments and spent much of his time meditating, or at least trying to meditate. He had occupied the cave for nearly three years. Originally it had been his intention to occupy it only for the duration of the current rainy season. But having found staying in one place more conducive to meditation than wandering from village to village all the time, as he had been in the habit of doing, he had decided to stay in the cave indefinitely. Sumana was a follower of a famous if somewhat controversial teacher who had appeared in the middle country a few decades earlier. This teacher was generally known as the Buddha, or Enlightened One, though his Bhramin critics called him in derision, the mundika, or shaven-headed one.

Strange to relate Sumana had never actually met the Buddha, for though his wanderings had been quite extensive, he somehow had never managed to be in the same place at the same time as the Buddha, who was himself on the move for the greater part of the year. He had however been the personal disciple of a holy man who in his younger days had spent a whole rainy season in the company of the Enlightened One, and was never tired of singing his praises. Sumana had met the holy man six rainy seasons earlier not long after the memorable day, when at the age of nineteen, he had left his father's mansion in search of something that would give greater meaning to his life. In the teaching of the Buddha as explained by the holy man he had found what he was looking for. With the holy man therefore Sumana had stayed, and the holy man whose name was Aniruddha shaved Sumana's head and clad him in yellow garments. He had also taught him how to meditate, as well as teaching him the poems and the lists of doctrinal categories that summarised the Buddha's message, and had to be learned by heart. Then, when Sumana had been with him for two years, Aniruddha had told him that from now onwards he should wander from place to place.

“The water is pure that flows, the holy man is pure who goes,” he had said, quoting a

jingle that was very popular with the followers of the Enlightened One.

So Sumana had gone, and had kept on going. For nine months he had wandered from village to mud-walled village, and from town to orchard-girt town, rarely spending more than a single night in the same place. Usually he started out quite early in the morning, well before the golden or crimson disk of the sun had risen above the horizon, and when the sky was still bright with stars. In the hot season he started out thus early in order to avoid having to travel during the middle part of the day when the heat could kill. While in the cold season he did so because he would be too cold by that time to sleep any longer, and needed to walk to get warm.

Some mornings found him making his way along the narrow embankments between the rice-fields. Others found him following a desultory track through the jungle, or even taking advantage of a stretch of royal highway where he might pass a string of bullock carts on their way to market, or be himself passed by a horse-drawn chariot. After walking for four or five hours, Sumana would generally come upon a village, or at least a cluster of huts, where he could beg his food.

Some holy men were wont to bawl out, "Give Food!" on entering a village, but such was not the practice either of the Buddha himself, or those holy men who acknowledged him as their teacher and exemplar, and it was not Sumana's practice. He would go from house to house, at each house standing silently outside the door until a handful or two of rice was dropped into his bowl, or until it became obvious that he was not going to get anything. Occasionally he would be roughly told to go away.

"We want no bald-heads here!" an unfriendly Bhramin might exclaim.

When his bowl was sufficiently full, Sumana would retire to a mango grove, or if there was no mango grove nearby, to the foot of the village banyan tree, or to a quiet corner in someone's veranda, or even to an empty cow shed, and there consume his one meal of the day, which in accordance with the practice of the Buddha and his holy men had to be finished by noon. His meal over Sumana would rest for a while, after which he might meditate, or talk with any villagers who had gathered round until it was time for him to seek a lodging for the night.

In some villages especially those in which the Buddha's name was already known and honoured, he would be asked to give an account of the teaching he professed to follow. Whenever that happened he would recite one of the poems, or one of the lists of doctrinal categories that he had learned from Aniruddha, and then explain it line by line or item by item in his own words. Often he would illustrate a point by telling a story, for the villagers liked to hear stories, and Sumana himself enjoyed telling them. Occasionally questions would be forthcoming. Sumana would answer them. His answers would lead to further questions, and in this way there would develop a discussion that might last far into the night.

Not all Sumana's days had ended in this congenial fashion. More than once in the course of the nine months for which he had wandered, he had walked all day without coming upon a village or even a cluster of huts where he could beg his food. More than once therefore he had perforce slept on an empty stomach. On one dreadful

occasion he had been lost in the jungle for three days and three nights together, and had had to live on fruits and berries. Nor had this been his only misadventure.

One morning as he picked his way among the boulders of a dried-up riverbed, he had been suddenly surrounded by five or six fierce looking men all armed with swords. The men had seized him, bound his hands and feet with a length of creeper, and deposited him behind a rock. From their conversation he gathered that they were worshipers of the Great Mother, and were looking for a young man to sacrifice to her on the next new moon day. Whether he himself was to be the sacrifice, Sumana never discovered. His captors having fallen asleep [over] after emptying a pot of liquor, he had worked his hands free and untied his feet, and making a quick but quiet escape had carried on walking.

Thus Sumana had certainly obeyed Aniruddha's instructions. He had gone, and he had kept on going. But though he had gone and had kept on going to his dismay Sumana had found that the second half of Aniruddha's jingle was not being fulfilled. The holy man had indeed gone, but the holy man was not pure. Purity of course meant mental purity, and mental purity was achieved through meditation, in which the mind freeing itself from attachment to earthly things rose to a higher, more radiant state of consciousness wherein Truth could be directly perceived. Since wandering from place to place had the effect of weakening a holy man's attachment to earthly things, wandering from place to place made it easier for him to meditate, and easier therefore for him to achieve purity of mind. Such at least was the theory.

In practice Sumana had not found matters quite so simple. Wandering from place to place might indeed have had the effect of weakening his attachment to earthly things, though he could not be absolutely sure of this. But it had also had the effect of making him restless and anxious, and restlessness and anxiety were he knew as much a hindrance to meditation (and therefore as much a hindrance to the achievement of mental purity) as was attachment to earthly things. He had tried to meditate twice a day, in the morning before setting out, and in the evening before lying down to sleep. More often than not however he would be either too restless to be able to sit in the meditation posture for very long, or too worried about meeting with wild beasts, or not getting his daily dole of rice, to be able to collect his thoughts. Sometimes he would be simply too tired to meditate either because cold or hunger or the hardness of the ground had prevented him from sleeping, or because he had been walking all day. After nine months he had therefore not been sorry when the hot season being at an end, and the rainy season about to begin, he was obliged to stop wandering from place to place at least for the time being, and could take up his abode in the cave.

He had found the cave by accident. He had entered the village towards the end of the afternoon when it was too late for him to beg his food. The villagers had been quite friendly and had not only given him a refreshing drink, but told him that if he cared to stay overnight they would be glad to provide him with food in the morning. He could stay at the cave they added. By that time it was quite dark. A boy had therefore been deputed to show him the way to the cave, and having crossed fields and forded streams they had scrambled up to the ridge and Sumana had found himself inside the cave, and trying in complete darkness to find a corner where he could sleep.

In the morning he had crawled to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The sun was high in the blue sky and the earth flooded with golden light. Below him were the darkly wooded slopes of the hill, beyond the last of the slopes the brown and green patchwork of fields and groves, and beyond the patchwork, the grey roofs of the village, from which wisps of smoke rose straight into the clear air, while beyond the village, encircling everything and extending to the very horizon, was the vast expanse of the jungle with here and there a hill showing ship-like above the sea of green.

Sumana had been deeply moved by the sight. He had wanted to spend the whole day at the mouth of the cave simply gazing at the scene. He had wanted to gaze at it not just for one day, but every day; and then he had had an idea. The rainy season was about to begin, and for the three or four months of the rainy season holy men, including those holy men who were followers of the Buddha, instead of wandering from place to place stayed in one spot. Why then should he not spend the coming rainy season in the cave, provided the villagers had no objection and provided of course he could beg his food at their doors each day? Fortunately for Sumana the villagers had had no objection at all. They had been overjoyed that there would again be a holy man staying in the cave.

As the headman of the village put it, giving expression to the general sentiment, "To have a holy man staying in the cave brings good luck to the village."

Sumana had therefore taken up his abode in the cave and had spent the rainy season there. In fact he had now spent three rainy seasons in the cave, as well as three cold seasons and three hot seasons. For in the course of the first rainy season he had made an important discovery. He had discovered that he meditated better, and achieved mental purity more easily, when he stayed in one spot and did not wander from place to place. At the end of the rainy season he had therefore decided not to resume his wanderings. Nor had he resumed them since. He felt rather guilty about this, especially when the jingle that was so popular with the followers of the Enlightened One happened to come into his head,

"The holy man is pure who goes," it would insist, "The holy man is pure who goes."

At such moments, Sumana would be inclined to feel he was not a real holy man. He would also wonder what Aniruddha would say if he knew that his erstwhile disciple was no longer wandering from place to place as directed. What the Buddha would say he dared not think.

During his first rainy season in the cave Sumana's movements had naturally been rather restricted, as they also were, though to a lesser extent, during the subsequent rainy seasons. The rains were notoriously heavy in that part of the world, and he ventured out each day only to make a quick dash down the slippery hillside and through the flooded fields to the village for food, sometimes sheltering himself beneath a broad green plantain leaf. The practice of storing up food from one day to the next was frowned upon by the more ascetic holy men, and Sumana tried to avoid doing this.

During the other two seasons he was able to move about more freely and his activities tended to follow a definite pattern. Rising before dawn he washed in water from a

rock-hewn cistern beside the entrance to the cave then sat on the ledge in front of the cave and meditated for two or three hours. At least he tried to meditate. Though no longer restless and anxious he still found it difficult to sit in the meditation posture for very long, difficult to collect his thoughts, and even more difficult to rise to that higher, more radiant state of consciousness wherein Truth can be directly perceived. All the same there occasionally were times when he really was able to meditate, when he really did achieve mental purity, and this being so he felt less guilty about not wandering from place to place.

When he had finished meditating Sumana relaxed his limbs, and sat for a while simply gazing at the sun-drenched prospect before him, and allowing the silence unbroken save for the occasional birdcall to sink deep into his heart. To his surprise he then sometimes experienced greater peace of mind than when he was actually meditating.

Next came what for his first year in the cave had been the most difficult part of Sumana's day, the taking of his morning bath. The taking of the bath itself presented no difficulty. Sumana took it in the sparkling waters of the stream that having tumbled down through the rocks of the hill on which the ridge was situated, flowed through the fields and groves and on past the village to the jungle. What made the taking of his bath difficult was the fact that three or four girls from the village also took their morning bath in the stream, or at least started taking it there when they discovered Sumana was doing so.

At first the girls kept well down stream, but then growing bolder they started moving a little farther upstream with every day that passed until Sumana was not only hearing their every shriek and giggle, but also seeing far more of their persons than it was proper for a holy man to see, as was obviously their intention. Aniruddha having told him what to do in such circumstances, Sumana henceforth took his bath later and farther up stream. But it was of no use. The girls also took their bath later and farther up stream and Sumana started finding it quite difficult not to look in their direction. Indeed he was sometimes surprised to find his heart racing and the blood pounding in his ears as he made his way down to the stream. One day the oldest of the girls having wriggled out of her clothes swam up to Sumana as he stood waist deep in the water his back towards her and her companions and playfully splashed him. Sumana simply gathered up his yellow garments and fled.

Fortunately an old man who was working in the fields saw the incident and must have spoken of it to the other villagers, for from the following day the girls took their bath almost within the shadow of the village where their elders could keep an eye on them, and where they were out of Sumana's sight. The matter did not end there for Sumana however. For many a night he was troubled by dreams in which a hoard of naked women dragged him down into the water and seduced him afterwards turning into hideous demons who mocked him for having broken his vows. It was months before the dreams faded completely, but fade they did and from that time onwards the taking of his morning bath was no longer the most difficult part of Sumana's day but often in the hot season especially the easiest and most delightful.

From the stream, Sumana went straight to the village and there begged his food. On most days his bowl would be full after he had visited no more than six or seven

houses, and as there were nearly three hundred houses in the village he did not need to visit any one house more than once or twice a year. Thus he was neither burdensome to the village, nor likely to become dependent on, even attached to, particular families, faults of which the Buddha according to Aniruddha was constantly exhorting his holy men to beware.

When the earthenware bowl in his hands had been filled, not just with rice, but also with lentils and curry and sometimes with sweetmeats (for the handsome young holy man was quite popular with the housewives of the village, some of whom viewed in him in the light of a prospective son-in-law or brother-in-law) Sumana returned to the cave sometimes following one route through the fields sometimes another, always being careful not to frighten any snake or lizard that he might come across as it lay basking in the sun. Back in the darkness and coolness of the cave he ate the food he had begged, eating as slowly and mindfully as he could, and trying to remember that he ate simply to sustain life as he strove to achieve mental purity and perceive Truth.

When he had finished eating he washed his bowl with water from the cistern and put it in the sun to dry. He then took a short rest it being axiomatic among the Buddha's holy men that after their one meal of the day, which naturally tended to be a heavy one, time was needed to allay what they called "digestion fatigue". Digestion fatigue having been allayed, Sumana spent the afternoon doing such things as mending his yellow garments which were always catching on thorny branches and tearing, sweeping out the cave, and repeating aloud as many as he could remember of the poems and lists of doctrinal categories he had learned from Aniruddha.

Twice a month on the full moon and new moon days he shaved hair and beard with the razor that together with three yellow garments, a belt, a water-strainer, an alms bowl and a needle was one of the eight personal belongings permitted to those holy men who were followers of the Buddha. Towards evening he sat out on the ledge in front of the cave and gazed at the darkening landscape until it was time for him to meditate. On his opening his eyes the sky would be ablaze with stars, and for an hour or more he would gaze at the stars as in their tens of thousands they flashed and glittered in the depths of space, or he would watch the moon rising, or mark a comet suddenly trail its fiery pennant across the face of the heavens.

Occasionally when there was a moon the more thoughtful of the village men would come and sit on the ledge with Sumana in the moonlight. For a while they would sit there together in silence as though unwilling to break with the sound of human voices the greater silence of nature by which they were surrounded. When he felt the silence between them had lasted long enough, Sumana would start reciting a poem or a list of doctrinal categories. At first he recited very softly, then more and more loudly. By the time he finished, Sumana's companions would have roused themselves as though from deep sleep, and he would start explaining the poem or list. Questions and answers followed as well as a certain amount of discussion, just as they had followed on similar occasions during his wandering days. And as on these earlier occasions discussion might last far into the night. The only difference was that in the case of the discussion that took place on the ledge in front of the cave there was an element of continuity from session to session in as much as the same men tended to be present each time. Discussion could therefore go deeper.

So deep did it sometimes go that there were nights when Sumana sat gazing at the stars his mind full of thoughts long after the others had left. There were thoughts about the universe, about the human condition, about death, about meditation and mental purity, about Truth. There were also thoughts about his present way of life for although his meditation had improved Sumana still felt guilty about staying in one spot, still was inclined to feel he was not a real holy man, and still wondered what Aniruddha not to speak of the Buddha would think of him. At times there were even thoughts he dared not acknowledge as his own, and which he therefore tended to push to the very back of his mind.

One windy morning shortly before the start of the rainy season, Sumana was begging his food in the village when he saw a stone's throw ahead of him another holy man evidently also begging his food. Wandering holy men were not an uncommon sight in the village and at first Sumana did not take much notice of the newcomer. In any case he was a little preoccupied that morning. There had been a discussion on the ledge in front of the cave the previous night, and thoughts from the discussion were still very much in his mind, especially thoughts about his present way of life. So much were they in his mind that he was not surprised to find after a few minutes that without realising it he had come right up behind the other holy man who must have slowed down. Like Sumana himself the newcomer was shaven-headed and wore yellow garments from which Sumana concluded that he was probably a follower of the Buddha. He did not ask him about this however, for it was not the custom of the Buddha's holy men to speak when begging their food. After visiting a couple more houses therefore, Sumana left the village and made for the cave. Half way up the hill he became aware that the other holy man was following him. Not that he was actually able to see him, but he could hear the stones rattling downhill from beneath somebody's feet and he knew that it was the other holy man. Sure enough it was not long before the latter had come into view, and was making his way along the ledge [to which] where Sumana was standing. As Sumana could now see, he was a little above average height and about the same age as Aniruddha, who was rather more than twice the age of Sumana himself.

"If you have no objection friend," said the stranger, speaking in a dialect with which Sumana was not wholly familiar but which he understood well enough, "I shall take my meal here on this ledge with you."

Naturally Sumana had no objection and soon the two holy men were sitting side by side on the bare rock and working their way through the contents of their respective bowls, eating slowly and mindfully and of course in silence. When they had both finished Sumana brought the other holy man water for washing his bowl, and offered him a bamboo toothpick. These small services the newcomer accepted in silence, but with a friendly smile. It was a smile that Sumana hoped meant conversation, for the young holy man very much wanted to talk to his unexpected visitor. He wanted to ask him who he was, and where he came from, and why he had followed him to the cave and taken his meal with him there on the ledge. But friendly as the newcomer's smile was it apparently did not mean conversation, at least not just then. For having made use of the toothpick Sumana had offered him, he stretched out his legs and closed his eyes with the evident intention of taking a short rest, presumably to allay digestion

fatigue.

Sumana therefore had to restrain his desire to talk, for among the Buddha's holy men, and Sumana was now convinced that the newcomer was one of these, it was not etiquette for a younger holy man to initiate conversation with an older one, much less still to ask him personal questions. He had to restrain his desire to talk for quite a long time. Having rested the Elder, as Sumana mentally now called him, composed himself for meditation and the young holy man felt obliged to follow suit. They meditated for what to Sumana seemed an age, that is the Elder meditated, for Sumana tried with varying degrees of success to collect his thoughts and purify his mind. When the Elder at last uncrossed his legs and leaned back against the rock, as Sumana had done much earlier, the sky was more grey than blue, and the first stars had appeared. But even then, the Elder did not say anything. For an hour or more he sat gazing at the stars as Sumana himself had so often done. Only then, when the objects of his contemplation had filled the sky with their brightness and Sumana had begun to think that his visitor was about to depart as unaccountably as he had arrived, did the Elder turn to the young holy man and speak.

"If you have no objection friend," he said, speaking in the same dialect as before, "I shall spend the night with you in your cave."

Once again Sumana had no objection adding this time, he would be glad of His Reverence's company, that the cave was spacious enough to accommodate five or six persons, that he himself had lived there alone for the last three years, that the cave was warm and dry, and free from bats and scorpions, and that there was always water in the cistern even if at times it might be less pure, less fresh than one could desire. To all this and much more of similar tenor the Elder replied with the same friendly smile with which he had acknowledged Sumana's services earlier on. But so warm was the smile and so full of understanding, as by the light of the stars Sumana could easily perceive, that the young holy man not only felt that his common-place remarks had met with complete acceptance, but felt that the Elder without actually saying anything had responded to each one of them individually. When he lay down on his bed of leaves that night two feet away from the Elder it was therefore with a feeling that there had been conversation between them after all. Perhaps there had been, and there was much for him to look forward to the following day.

The following day was in fact a very happy one for Sumana. The Elder of course left his bed long before Sumana left his, but apart from that he and the young holy man did everything together. They meditated together, they took their bath in the stream together, they begged their food in the village together, Sumana walking a few paces behind the Elder as was proper, they returned to the cave together, they ate together and they took a short rest together. After they had rested however the Elder seemed to be in a more communicative mood than he had been the previous day. With the same friendly smile that already made such an impression on Sumana, he proceeded to recite one of the poems summarising the Buddha's message, then nodded for Sumana to do likewise. In this way, with each of them in turn reciting a poem or list of doctrinal categories, they spent the greater part of the afternoon, pausing only when Sumana's stock of poems and lists was exhausted. The Elder then questioned Sumana about the meaning of some of the more difficult words and phrases, evidently in order to test his knowledge of the Buddha's teaching. So gentle and so sympathetic was the

questioning that Sumana did not feel he was being questioned at all, much less still that he was being cross-examined as he had sometimes felt when Aniruddha catechised him. Instead he felt stimulated and excited, even inspired, and replied to the questions with as much ease and freedom as if they were not coming from any external source but from the depths of his own being.

Nonetheless he was conscious of a vague disquiet. Though most of the poems and lists the Elder had recited were already known to him, a few were not only quite unknown, but were somewhat at variance he thought with the Buddha's teaching. According to the Buddha's teaching, the spiritual life consisted mainly in the progressive elimination of negative mental states. The hitherto unknown poems and lists spoke of it as consisting mainly in the development of positive mental states. Were they perhaps an unauthorised addition to the Buddha's teaching, and if they were what was their source? But before Sumana could question the Elder on these points, the latter had composed himself for meditation and the young holy man was obliged to wait.

Prior to their actually meditating the Elder announced that providing Sumana had no objection he would be spending a few more days with him, a proposal to which Sumana at once joyfully assented.

For the next few days therefore Sumana and the Elder continued to meditate, bathe, beg, eat and rest together. They also continued to spend the greater part of the afternoon reciting poems and lists of doctrinal categories, Sumana of course had to repeat himself each time, and the Elder continued to test the young holy man's knowledge of the Buddha's teaching. The Elder also gave Sumana detailed explanations of some of the more abstruse and cryptic of the poems and lists, making everything so clear, and at the same time so interesting, that Sumana's confidence in his new companion grew like a bamboo in the rainy season, and he quite forgot about the questions he had wanted to ask.

One afternoon that confidence suffered a severe blow. The Elder having explained a poem on the subject of perceiving Truth with even more than his usual clarity, Sumana had felt moved to tell him how he had wandered from place to place for nine months, having found that despite going he was not pure, he had taken up his abode in the cave one rainy season, and had now lived there for three years. He also told him that although he was meditating better and achieving mental purity more easily, he felt guilty about not leading a wandering life and sometimes doubted if he was a real holy man.

To all this the Elder had replied, not without a gleam of amusement, "Being a holy man is nothing to do with wandering from place to place, and nothing to do with not wandering from place to place."

Nothing to do with wandering from place to place! Sumana had been quite shocked by this apparent repudiation of the way of life enjoined upon him by Aniruddha, a way of life to which despite his long sojourn in the cave he still felt himself to be in principle committed. The questions he had wanted to ask and which he had forgotten came back to him with redoubled force, and for one dreadful moment he thought the Elder must be one of those renegade disciples who Aniruddha had once told him interpreted the Buddha's teaching according to their own whims and fancies, and in

this way did a great deal of harm. But although Sumana's confidence in the Elder suffered a severe blow, the blow did not prove mortal. This was partly because the Elder went on to explain what being a holy man really meant, and partly because Sumana himself was in any case beginning to suspect that there was a good deal more to the Buddha's Teaching than he had imagined, and that the Elder had spent in all probability more time with the Buddha than had Aniruddha. The young man's confidence in his new companion therefore soon recovered from the blow it had received, and once again grew like a bamboo in the rainy season. What was more, he found that when he and the Elder meditated together he was able to collect his thoughts and achieve mental purity more easily than ever before. He also found that he no longer felt guilty about not leading a wandering life.

By this time the clouds had begun to gather on the horizon, and the first faint rumblings of thunder could be heard. The rains were approaching. Sumana was therefore not surprised when on the morning after his fifth night in the cave the Elder announced that he would be leaving the same day. The two of them had just finished meditating, and though they did not usually talk at this hour Sumana fervently hoped that on this occasion at least the friendly smile that had accompanied the Elder's announcement really did mean communication. During the short time that they had spent together the young holy man's confidence in his companion had not only grown like a bamboo in the rainy season, but also had like the mythical seven-year bamboo put forth a milk-white flower, the flower of affection. Now that they were about to part, perhaps forever, Sumana realised how much he had come to like the Elder. He liked him much more than he had ever liked Aniruddha, much more than... but here Sumana's courage failed him. He became aware of thoughts he had hitherto not dared to acknowledge as his own, and which he had therefore tended to push to the very back of his mind. He also became aware that the Elder was looking at him, and in fact questioning him, but questioning him so gently and so sympathetically that once again he did not feel he was being questioned at all.

"Why was it do you think, that even though you wandered far and wide for nine months you never actually met the Buddha?"

Sumana could of course have replied that it was because he had somehow never managed to be in the same place at the same time as the Buddha who in any case was himself always on the move. But instead he told the truth.

"I suppose I never met the Buddha because I did not really want to meet him," he said.

"But why did you not want to meet him?" persisted the Elder. "Was he not your teacher's teacher, and was it not in his teaching that you had found what you were looking for when you left your father's mansion? Surely the Buddha of all the people in the world should have been the one you were most anxious to meet."

Sumana was sorely perplexed by these questions. The Buddha was indeed Aniruddha's teacher, and it was indeed in the Buddha's teaching as explained by Aniruddha that he had found what he was looking for when he left his father's

mansion. These were the facts and he could not deny them. He had no wish to deny them. Why then had he not wanted to meet the Buddha? Why having been told to wander from place to place did he not managed to find his way to the Buddha, fall at his feet and tell him how glad he was to have met with his Teaching and how grateful he felt to Him for discovering it and making it known to the world?

Eventually with the help of the Elder, help given he knew not how, the answer to the question emerged. It emerged from the very back of Sumana's mind, from that dark hinterland of consciousness to which it had been relegated during the time he had spent with Aniruddha and where it had remained hidden ever since.

"I didn't want to meet the Buddha," he faltered, "because I don't really like the Buddha."

At last the shameful secret was out. Sumana more than half-expected the Elder to be shocked and horrified, and would not have been really surprised if he had at once shaken the dust of the cave from his feet leaving his erstwhile companion to his own sinful devices.

But the friendly smile did not waver, and when the Elder spoke it was as gently and as sympathetically as before.

"But how can you say that you don't like the Buddha when you have never met him?"

Sumana thought for a moment. Many memories came back to him.

"Well," he said at last, "I may not have met the Buddha, but I've heard quite a lot about Him. Aniruddha was always singing His praises, as was indeed right and proper. He used to praise Him for His Wisdom, His mindfulness, His energy, His skill in debate. But most of all he used to praise Him for His severity and strictness, especially His strictness. 'The Buddha's so strict', he would exclaim admiringly, 'His disciples hardly dare breathe in His presence.' As a result I developed a sort of dislike for the Buddha, even though it was in His Teaching that I had found what I was looking for.

"I felt that if ever I met the Buddha he would be sure to criticise me. He would criticise me for getting up late, criticise me for not eating slowly and mindfully, criticise me for forgetting so many poems and lists, [not to speak of me] not to speak of criticising me for not collecting my thoughts and purifying my mind. There was hardly anything for which he would not criticise me.

"If he was here now," he added with a rye smile, "I expect he would criticise me for talking to you so much."

"Do you really think he would?" asked the Elder, the words falling softly and gently as dewdrops on the petal of a lotus flower.

But before Sumana could reply, there came a sound of stones rattling downhill from beneath somebody's feet, and soon another holy man could be seen scrambling up onto the far end of the ledge. The newcomer was shaven-headed, wore yellow

garments and was of about the same age as the Elder whom he indeed strikingly resembled. Having paused for a moment, to get his breath he advanced briskly towards Sumana and his companion who were standing before the entrance to the cave. As Sumana was the nearer to him of the two he did not at first see the other but as he drew closer he caught sight of him over Sumana's shoulder and his wrinkled, kindly face at once lit up.

"There you are Lord!" he exclaimed with a hasty genuflection. "The good people in the village told me I should find you here. It took me longer than I thought to deliver your messages and on the way I..."

But Sumana heard no more; neither did he hear what the Elder said in reply.

"Lord", he repeated to himself in wonder, "The newcomer had addressed the Elder as 'Lord'".

Among the followers of the Buddha, only the Enlightened One Himself was referred to or addressed in that way. What could it mean?

Involuntarily he turned to the Elder as if seeking an explanation. As he turned the well-known form was suddenly transfigured by a brilliant golden light like a cloud at sunset. So brilliant was the light that Sumana closed his eyes, at the same time falling at the Buddha's feet with a great cry.

When he opened his eyes there was no light other than that of the morning sun, and the Buddha and the newly arrived holy man were quietly chatting.

"Ananda has been telling me," said the Buddha, "that according to local opinion the rain will be here in a day or two, and that he and I ought to be on our way. He also tells me that we don't have to beg our food today as the villagers are going to give us a special meal in the village hall. They've asked us to be there a little early, so perhaps we'd better go and take our bath straight away."

The three of them accordingly made their way down to the stream now no more than a trickle of silver over the white stones.

As was their custom the Buddha and Sumana took their bath in silence, and without being in the least in a hurry. Ananda on the contrary not only kept feeding bits of news to the Buddha, but seemed bent on completing his ablutions as quickly as possible. He had to go on ahead he explained catching up his bowl, in order to make sure that the villagers had made proper arrangements for the Buddha's reception.

It was very quiet after he had left. The only sound to be heard was that of the water gurgling over the stones. The Buddha and Sumana finished taking their bath then followed after Ananda, though at a more leisurely pace. They did not speak, but shortly before they reached the village the Buddha turned round and looked at Sumana with a smile that penetrated the young holy man's heart to its very depths.

"Do you still not like the Buddha?" the smile seemed to say.

And deep in his heart Sumana could only reply, "No, I like Him very much. I think I like him even more than I liked the Elder."

On their arrival at the village hall the Buddha and Sumana found Ananda helping to put the finishing touches to an elaborate arch of welcome. It was evident that he was already quite popular with the villagers. On catching sight of the Buddha, he dropped the piece of greenery he was holding, darted forward and after making the Buddha pass beneath the arch round which were assembled the village elders, ushered Him into the hall and to the seat of honour.

The meal that followed was the best that Sumana had seen for a long time (not that a holy man was really supposed to notice such things) and members of the villages leading families not only served the Buddha and his two disciples with their own hands, but as etiquette required, continued to press further helpings upon them long after they had "withdrawn the hand from the bowl" as the phrase went. During the meal Ananda told Sumana that he had given the villagers a good scolding the previous day for not inviting the Buddha earlier, and for allowing him to beg his food from door to door like any ordinary holy man. They had protested that they had not known it was the Buddha.

"Not known it was the Buddha!" Ananda had retorted. "Surely you are able to know a Buddha when you see one!"

But the villagers were not so sure. Neither was Sumana. The special meal being over, members of the leading families brought water for the Buddha and his two disciples to wash their hands, and offered them toothpicks. The rest of the villagers were then admitted, and the Buddha recited verses of benediction and gave a short talk on the importance of leading an ethical life and practising generosity. On such occasions at least two or three people usually came forward at the end of the talk and asked the Buddha to accept them as his followers, but this time nobody came forward and after waiting a few minutes the Buddha rose to his feet, Ananda and Sumana following suit. Clouds had now overspread half the sky, and Sumana realised with a pang that it was time for the Buddha and Ananda to be on their way and for him to return to the cave. Already the more pious of the villagers were thronging round the Buddha and touching his feet in farewell.

Sumana allowed them to finish, then went and knelt before the Buddha placing the palms of his hands on the ground and his head on the Enlightened One's feet. He kept his head there for some time, so overcome by emotion that he was unable to speak. When he at last stood up Ananda patted him on the back and whispered a few words of encouragement. The Buddha Himself was silent. He remained silent for a long time. When he did speak it was with the same friendly smile that Sumana knew and loved so well, and his words were at once an invitation and a command.

"Come Sumana," he said, "you have stayed in the cave long enough. Ananda knows a place where the three of us can spend the rainy season together. Others will perhaps join us there."

When the Buddha and Ananda left the village, Sumana therefore left with them. The villagers stood on either side of the dusty track to see them go. There were several

whom Sumana recognised, among them the boy, no longer a boy, who had shown him the way to the cave; the girls, now girls no longer, who for a while had made the taken of his morning bath the most difficult part of his day; and those more thoughtful men who when there was a moon had sat with him in silence on the ledge, until it was time for discussion. He would miss them as no doubt they, perhaps for different reasons, would miss him. At the same time he was glad to have met the Buddha, glad to be leaving the village with him and Ananda, glad that the three of them were stepping out together along the same dusty track. And when they had gone four or five miles, there was a sudden rumbling of thunder directly overhead and a few big drops of rain fell.

“We must hurry,” said Ananda.

But Sumana was looking back at the ridge, now silhouetted against a rapidly darkening sky. A new phase of his life as a holy man was about to begin, and for a moment he stood lost in thought. Then recollecting himself, he turned and caught up with the others who had already quickened their pace. The cave was left vacant for the next holy man.