



Setting out - Before we begin

02 - Gotama's Intoxications

This document is an extract from the full chapter, which is available for download in the table via this link: <https://raft2freedom.org/raft-to-freedom-downloads/>

Violence gives birth to fear. Just look at people and their quarrels. I shall describe the sense of urgency in the way it was experienced by me. When I saw people thrashing about, like fish in a small puddle turning on one another, fear entered my heart. I saw nothing stable in the world. Everywhere, all things are changing. Wanting a place for myself, I saw that every spot was already taken. I was distressed by conflict everywhere. Then I saw an arrow here, so very hard to see, embedded in the heart. When struck by that arrow, you run around in all directions. But when that same arrow has been plucked out, you neither run nor sink into despair.

— Gotama, Attadanda Sutta (Sn 4.15) (a composite rendition drawing on several published translations of this sutta, not a single translator's exact words)

Gotama (the Buddha) was born into wealth and privilege, in a turbulent political era, with every comfort provided. Despite this, a profound unease grew in him. He came to see his comfortable life as a kind of denial he called 'intoxication' - an absorption in youth, health and the continuity of life itself. It meant ignoring that ageing, illness and death come for everyone. This dis-ease crystallised into a single image: an arrow embedded in the heart, so subtle it is hard to see. It drives us to run restlessly in all directions, seeking escape. This is dukkha - the stress and unsatisfactoriness at the root of even a materially comfortable life.

Gotama named four raw truths that broke through his denial: the world is unstable, has no shelter, has no owner, and is insatiable. These propositions drove him to leave his life of privilege and begin what he called the Noble Search - a search for lasting freedom. This is distinct from the Ignoble Search most of us pursue: seeking happiness in things that are themselves impermanent. His six-year search tested two extremes. Advanced meditation brought profound calm, but it proved temporary. Severe self-punishment brought only exhaustion. Both were dead ends. From this, he discovered the Middle Way: a balanced path between indulgence and self-denial, met not as a grim battle but as skilful, compassionate effort.

Throughout, he named the inner forces of doubt, temptation and old habit that tried to pull him off course as Māra - the saboteur we still meet within ourselves today.

Gotama's story is, in many ways, our own. His restless search for solid ground in an unstable world, and his discovery that neither indulgence nor self-punishment could end that restlessness, mirrors our own patterns of escape. The self-reflections that follow invite us to find our own arrow, our own gilded cage, and our own Four Propositions at work in our present life.

Self-reflections

Take a few moments for honest self-inquiry, approaching these questions with a caring and curious mind:

- 1 Reflect on a time when external comforts or acquisitions failed to bring me lasting peace. How did this arrow of dissatisfaction make itself known to me? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 2 In what ways has my life sometimes felt confined by duties, expectations, or inner turmoil? What would open space feel like for me? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 3 Reflect on the two extremes of indulgence and self-punishment. Do I recognise a pattern of swinging between these in my own life? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 4 When have I noticed myself 'running in all directions' instead of pausing to recognise the arrow? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 5 What are the 'golden bars' of my own gilded cage? (for example, a comfortable but unfulfilling job, a relationship based on habit, a reliance on digital distraction). What does this comfort cost me? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 6 Of Gotama's Four Propositions (the world is unstable, has no shelter, has no owner, is insatiable), which one resonates most strongly with my own experience today? Why? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 7 What was one small, unhelpful practice or belief I have already discarded on my journey? What did I learn from letting it go? [\(view card\)](#)
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Journaling prompts

Use your journal to explore these themes further:

- 1 **Committing to the journey:** The Noble Search begins with a powerful resolve. Write down your own intention for this journey. What kind of peace are you searching for? What commitment are you making to yourself as you begin to build your raft?
- 2 **Materials for your raft:** Gotama's story shows him gathering and discarding materials for his journey. What materials from his experience - such as courage, clear-seeing, self-compassion, or the willingness to discard

what doesn't work - feel most essential for you to gather for your own raft right now?

- 3 **An act of self-compassion:** Gotama realised that punishing his body was a dead end. Write about one way you can abandon self-punishment this week and offer yourself an act of nourishment or care instead.
- 4 **A weather report from the dangerous shore:** Write a short weather report from your dangerous shore today. What are the prevailing winds (habitual thoughts)? What are the hidden reefs (triggers)? What storms (emotional reactions) have passed through recently?
- 5 **Dialogue in the gilded cage:** Write a short dialogue between the part of you that wants to stay safe and comfortable in the gilded cage and the part that yearns for the open space of the Noble Search. Let both voices speak honestly without judgment.
- 6 **The Four Propositions in your life:** Choose one of the Four Propositions (unstable, no shelter, no owner, insatiable). Write about a specific time in your life when you experienced the truth of this proposition directly. How did it feel? What did it teach you?
- 7 **Daily GOTAMA check-in:** At the end of the day, revisit the acronym. Which step (Ground, Observe, Taste, Acknowledge, Map, Awaken) felt most alive? Which do you need to strengthen tomorrow?

For a printable reminder to carry this stage's practice into daily life, see the Daily Intentions card: <https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/appropriate-r-espone-daily-intentions.png>

Remember to remember

Gotama was an ordinary man who had some extraordinary insights. His own raft was six years in the building - a rigorous testing of teachings and practices, keeping what served him and discarding what did not - and it carried him from suffering towards freedom. He left home at the age of 29, "*while still a black-haired young man endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life*" (Ariyapariyesana Sutta, MN 26). He died 51 years later, an old and homeless beggar, at peace with himself and the world. Even after he had woken up to how life really is, he continued to practise for the rest of his days; he was still subject to pain, but he chose not to suffer for it.

His is not the story of a saint who was somehow spared our difficulties, but of an ordinary person who recognised them fully - and it was this recognition, not any special immunity from pain, that let his freedom begin. We are not being asked to leave home or to walk for six years; we are simply being invited to notice our own arrow, and to trust that seeing it clearly is itself the first stroke of the oar.

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.

— Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (1961)

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