The second of the four noble truths of Gautama the Buddha is primarily concerned with man’s ego-centric desires which, according to the Master, are the cause of all the sufferings in life. In the Buddha’s own words:

This is the noble Truth as to the cause of suffering: it is the ignorant craving, which leads to rebirth, and is associated with desire-detachment, seeking pleasure everywhere, the craving for happiness in this life or in a future life. (Allen, *The Buddha’s Philosophy* 38)

This second Aryan truth, according to A. J. Brahman, forms the core of Buddhist philosophy. He says:

Gotama’s [sic] philosophy may be summed up in a simple, clear and obvious principle .... : Desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration; therefore, to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained. (15)

The doctrine of the Buddha about desire may be enumerated as follows: old age, death and all the suffering, which life entails, are caused by “jati”—birth. The cause of “jati” is becoming, coming into being
“bhava.” “Bhava is the “karmic” agent of rebirth. Rebirth is caused in turn by powerful attachment or “upadana.” “Upadana” is the craving for and clinging to life. It typifies attachment to worldly things which the human beings grasp at, supposing they will quench the craving thirst. The cause of this worldly attachment, then, is craving —“Tanha” (Skt. Trishna) or desire for sentient existence, which Edwin Arnold describes as

... that thirst which makes the living drink
Deeper and deeper of the false salt waves
Whereon they float, pleasures, ambitions, wealth
Praise, fame, or domination, conquest, love;
Rich meats and robes, and fair abodes and pride
Of ancient lines, and lust of days, and strife
To live, and sins that flow from strife, some sweet
Some bitter. (166)

As a tragic poet, Frost appears to know the dreadful consequences of man’s evil desires, and the necessity of purging those desires in order to prevent suffering. Says the poet in “To Earthward”:

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young;
The petal of the rose
It was that stung. (227)
Discussing Frost’s use of the word “sacred,” Manorama Trikha observes that “it is not a purgation which was aimed at in the great tragedies of Sophocles and Shakespeare.” She adds: “It purges the soul of its despair and induces the realistic intelligence among the sufferers that the desires of the heart are ‘forbidden desires’ as Robert Bridge’s nightingale wisely surmises.” The critic, therefore, concludes that “Frost’s ‘tragic vision,’ unlike that of contemporary poets has a kind of moral earnestness” (209).

This does not, however, mean that as a poet and a man Frost is without desires. He is indeed just the opposite. Says John Ciardi:

Frost burns with the appetite of life. The essence of [his] tragic characters is that they ask of life more than ordinary men are moved to ask. They are terrifying and exalting because they are seared by passion: call it terror in the Sophoclean sense or call it the impassioned life force, this poet is not only the lover but the demon lover. (qtd. in Trikha, *Poetry of Clarifications* 130)

So it is passion, or in a broader sense, desire that creates Frostian tragedy. Trikha points out that in his quest to find some sense in life, Frost begins with the study of complex human personality, and looks deep into “the black presences that inhabit the mind.” The poet is certain that “inside is where we’ve got to get.” According to the critic, these
psychic experiences mainly emerge out of the poet's personal life and family surroundings. She continues:

It was more than enough to introduce [Frost] closely to the dangerous, destructive and dark forces working "inside" man. He is closely acquainted with (even through his own morbid moods) how the "inner weather" blurs the vision, dislocates the aims, and spoils life. Frost knows that the causes of these stormy tensions lie in various instincts, emotions, sentiments, prejudices and pervasive logic which come into play dangerously in life and leave it chaotic. (131)

"The black presences that inhabit the mind," "the dangerous, destructive and dark forces working 'inside' man," and the "inner weather" that spoils life — all these things which Trikha mentions — may be rightly construed as man's diabolic desires. So one can argue that, like the Buddha, Frost too believes that man's desires are responsible for his anxieties, tensions and frustrations in life.

The poem "After Apple-Picking" supports this argument. It is primarily a poem about man's insatiable craving and its consequences. As William Doreski maintains, the poem deals with "the iconographic status of the apple as repository of the plenitude of desire" (40). The critic adds that the poem "deconstructs the code-relation between the symbol of desire and actual desire" (43). Apple, as it is known, is a traditional Biblical symbol of human desire. It was the desire to be as
Gods that prompted Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of knowledge. This original sin still haunts man. Says Russell¹:

To those who have but little of power and glory, it may seem that a little more would satisfy them, but in this they are mistaken; these desires are insatiable and infinite, and only in the infinite of God could they find repose. (Power 8)

Once Adam ate that apple, he brought the curse of labour and its fatigue upon himself. Lust became a driving force in his life, and death his inevitable end. Ever since, the descendants of Adam and Eve, whether with hands or minds, needed to reach and to “pick,” and then to suffer. So the very title of the poem suggests the universal theme of man’s ceaseless effort to fulfil his desires, and its consequent tragedy. Dorothy Judd Hall seems to endorse this view. According to her, this poem has a religious dimension which the poet “was reluctant to let surface.” She points out that the poem contains a series of “sensory afterimages,” and remarks:

I notice the backward glance [the poem] casts toward the Garden of Eden where the first apple was picked, dooming Adam’s progeny henceforth to bodily labour, fatigue, and mortality. Mythically, the poem is about “fallen” man, “overtired” from a day (a lifetime?) of hard work. (Robert Frost 3)
Man's ambition is sky-high; it instigates him to soar higher and higher to dizzy heights of power and glory. The opening lines of the poem suggest this idea: "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still" (68). The ladder, a means to climb upward, here becomes a metaphor of human endeavour to conquer even the heights of heaven, the abode of God. It was the same sin which Adam committed by eating the apple, the forbidden fruit of desire, to become as powerful as God Himself. The history of sin and suffering thus repeats.

When Frost was once asked whether the phrase "Toward heaven" had any religious meaning behind it, he replied that "It's just a matter of afterimagery." This afterimagery brings back to one's mind man's death and ascendance to heaven. So the term "Toward heaven still" implies that man's ambition to reach the realm of God ultimately results in his death; or to be more precise, ambition destroys man.

The poem seems to convey the message that however one tries to gratify one's desires, those desires remain unsatisfied. Says the apple-picker: "And there's a barrel that I did n't fill / Beside it, and there may be two or three / Apples I did n't pick upon some bow" (68). Lost himself completely in the endless strife to satisfy his greed, man soon grows sick and old, and gets disgusted with the wild goose chase for desire-gratification. The apple picker admits his defeat: "But I am done with apple-picking now" (68).
This is a very familiar idea to the Buddhists who hold that the craving will cannot be tamed by gratifying one's desires. As Annie Besant observes,

If you seek gratification of desire you will never find happiness, for every desire that is gratified gives birth to a new desire, and the more desires you gratify the more open mouths there are which demand that they shall be filled. (13)

In this connection Annie Besant quotes an ancient Buddhist scripture: “As well might you try to put out a fire by pouring upon it melted butter, as try to get rid of desire by filling with it the objects of desire” (13). That must be the reason why the Buddha called upon his followers to renounce worldly pleasures, to reduce their material needs to the minimum and then to lead an austere life. He told them:

Eat your food to satisfy your hunger and drink to satisfy your thirst. Satisfy the necessities of life like the butter-fly sips the flower, without destroying its fragrance or its texture. (Carus 214)

The poem “After Apple-picking” seems to warn the desire-hunters that weariness and death await them, and that they have to ultimately submit before that reality. The intoxicating and captivating worldly pleasures will, at last, make the desire-hunters drowsy and blind. The apple-picker feels drowsy, and “winter sleep” hangs upon his eye lids.
He says: “Essence of winter sleep is on the night, / The scent of apples: I am drowsing off” (68). What makes the apple-picker weary is explained in detail by Judith Oster:

Unfulfilment is the inevitable result of desiring too much, and it seems that the desire, the aspiration, the striving, or the to ‘pick’ so much is a greater cause, or perhaps it is the underlying first cause of the weariness we feel in the poem. (24)

Too much of desires confound the senses of man, and to him everything appears to be strange. The desires are false and illusory, and they distort the mind of man with hallucination. As Erich Fromm points out,

The average person, driven by insecurity, greed, fear, is constantly enmeshed in a world of fantasies (not necessarily being aware of it) in which he clothes the world in qualities which he projects into it, but which are not there. (75)

The desires haunt the apple-picker even in his dreams. In dream “Magnified apples appear and disappear, / Stem and blooms end, / And every fleck of russet showing clear” (68). Desires strain the mind of the apple-picker; the more he tries to pick apples, the more difficult the exercise becomes. Says he: “I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend” (68). However, he collects loads of apple, and now he is extremely tired both in mind and body. He murmurs: “For I have had too much/Of
apple-picking: I am overtired/Of the greatest harvest I myself desired” (69).

Some apples fell on the earth, and they became “of no worth.” Those desires which are gratified become worthless in one’s eyes. Further, the poet implies that all the desires have to come down to reality. Judith Oster’s observation on this part of the poem is worth quoting in full:

Desire, art, human souls, human endeavour must touch the earth. We know how Frost feels about necessity for all human creation, all human feeling to touch the earth, to be in touch with the facts and with reality. (242)

At the end of the poem, the apple picker doubts whether his sleep was an ordinary sleep or a hibernation or death itself. There are many images in the poem like “winter sleep” and “hoary grass” which suggest death. Dorothy Judd Hall would like to interpret “human sleep” as “sleep of death — an afterimage of our life time” (Robert Frost 4). According to Doyle, though this is not a poem about death on the first level, “to think of sleep as death is a reasonable extension of the central idea of the poem.” The apple-picker says that what his day has been filled with will follow him into sleep. Doyle argues that “it is an easy step to extend the idea to what his life has been filled with will follow him into death — traditionally spoken of as a greater sleep” (30). Cleanth Brooks
also believes that the sleep in the poem suggests "the sleep of death" (116).

So one can draw the conclusion that the poem is about death as well as about desire, and that by putting these two themes together in a single poem Frost perhaps wanted to remind us that desires, whether they are fulfilled or not, cause nothing but misery in life where everything ends in decay and death.

This is indeed a favourite idea of the Buddhists. In the words of D. T. Suzuki,

The desire to possess is considered by Buddhism to be one of the worst passions with which mortals are apt to be obsessed. What, in fact, causes so much misery in the world is the universal impulse of acquisition. (120)

The Buddhists are of the view that man's sensual cravings originate out of ignorance, and in course of time they cause sufferings and misfortunes. Here is a brilliant exposition of the Buddhist idea of man's sensual desires — their origin and development — given by Annie Besant:

Coming into this world of which he knows nothing, man will naturally be strongly attracted to that which gives him pleasure by contact which makes him feel that which he recognises as joy or happiness. Thus attracted to every-thing which appears to him desirable, he will often find that the
gratification of desire is followed by suffering ....And over and over and over again he will have this experience; constantly reiterated he will find this lesson which is taught him by external universe. (3)

The apple-picker is, most probably, fascinated by the colour and taste of apple which, as we have already seen, represent desire which, in the words of S. S. Barlingay, is “colourful” and “tasteful” (174). He thought that it would fetch abundance and joy; but he had only abundance, not joy. Fatigue and frustration were the rewards for his toil. Now the question is why the apple-picker is unhappy in spite of the fact that he had “load on load of apples” with him. Perhaps Russell gives a convincing answer to this question, on behalf of the Buddhists:

The man who acquires easily things for which he feels only a very moderate desire concludes that the attainment of desire does not bring happiness. If he is of philosophic disposition, he concludes that human life is essentially wretched, since the man who has all his wants is still unhappy. He forgets that to be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness. *(The Conquest of Happiness 23)*

The sin of the apple-picker is not only that he picked apples, but also that he picked baskets full of them. His hands were too full to receive the blessings of heaven. As St. Augustine once remarked, “God
wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full – there’s nowhere for him to put it” (qtd. in Lewis 84).

The apple-picker is old and solitary in his suffering. “Ice,” “winter sleep,” and “hoary grass” are some of the images in the poem that suggest old age and death. The use of “myself” in the line “Of the greatest harvest which I myself desired” indicates the loneliness of the apple-picker. Furthermore, his harvest wholly depends upon himself; he himself desired it; he has to struggle with it alone. One wonders why even in his old age, solitariness and suffering, he does not win the God’s attention. A Buddhist poem gives the right answer to this query:

I cried aloud to god, that stood in fire
But God, it seemed, had heard of my desire
Before,
And as I prayed upon the floor
His children all about him, said,
Not raised his head,
‘Well, why not drop it?’
(Humphreys, Buddhist Poems 22)

The apple-picker refuses to drop the apples: “There were ten thousand fruit to touch, / Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall” (69). And hence his sufferings.

Man’s refusal to let fall the bundle of his desires, and the consequent confusion and embarrassment of him, is the main theme of
Frost's poem, "The Armful." Here the "parcel" can be taken as a metaphor for man's boundless desires which always make him more and more greedy for possession. Central to the poem is the figure of man as a juggler, as he makes his way through life. Whenever he tries to stoop down and seize one parcel, he loses some other off his arms and knees. The "parcels" of every ilk, "bottles," "buns" are too slippery and wide-ranging to be balanced or reconciled at once. Man's limitations and weaknesses in a world of desires are suggested in the poem. The downward movement in the poem reveals quite plainly the limitations under which the speaker labours and the loss he suffers. Its "extremes" almost aggressively chaotic, the armful forces him to "stoop down," then to "crouch down," and finally to "sit down in the middle of them all." Then, finding himself at the limit of his powers, he loses balance altogether. "I had to drop the armful in the road," he tells us, "And try to stack them in a better load" (267). This is indeed a great moment of realisation of the futility of man's desire for more and more possessions.

What the Buddhists have to say about man's desire for possession can be summed up in the words of D. T. Suzuki:

The desire to possess is considered by Buddhism to be one of the worst passions with which mortals are apt to be obsessed. What, in fact, causes so much misery in the world is the universal impulse of acquisition. As power is desired, the strong always tyrannise the weak; as wealth is coveted,
the rich and the poor are always crossing swords of bitter enmity. International wars range, social unrest ever increases, unless this impulse to get and to hold is completed. (120)

The desire for possession in man seems to exist basically on the personal level, but in some poems such as “Build Soil,” Frost makes it clear that if men are not careful, this malevolence within an unfeeling universe can become systematised in social, economic, and political terms. In his analysis of the poem “Build Soil” James L. Potter remarks:

The burden of the longer poem (“Build Soil”) is that social organisation is artificial and is inclined to accentuate the bad in man, such as his greediness. Frost argues for unsociability, for individualism; he says one must build one’s own intellectual and spiritual soil rather than dissipate it by collaborating weakly with human society. (120)

Says the poet in “Build Soil”:

In your sense of the word ambition has
Been socialised – the first propensity
To be attempted. Greed may well come next.
But the worst one of all to leave uncurbed,
Unsocialised, is ingenuity:
Which for no sordid self-aggrandisement,
For nothing but its own blind satisfaction
(In this it is as much like hate as love),
Works in the dark as much against as for us. (319)
James L. Potter observes that “The emphasis here is on the greed that is potential in human nature and which Frost believed socialisation or social planning of any kind would be likely to encourage.” Potter adds that we may be struck by the similarity between the greed suggested here and the cruelty evinced in “A Brook in City,” for the life of the brook was sacrificed to man’s commercial desires (118-119).

Perhaps it is this realisation that makes the speaker in the poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” to express his inner urge for the renunciation of worldly desires. What the apples represents in the poem, “After Apple-picking,” the woods does in the present poem. The symbolic significance of “woods” in Frost’s poems in general and in this poem in particular has been already discussed by a number of critics. All of them agree that the woods in Frost represent some inner impulses, and for a Buddhist scholar who reads “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” has reasons to believe that these inner impulses are nothing but man’s desires, and that the poet’s decision to leave the woods shows his inner urge to renounce those desires.

In Buddhist scriptures “vana” has two meanings: lust and forest (Radhakrishnan, The Dhammapada 167), and the Buddhist “Nirvana”—a combination of two words “nis” and “vana”—literally means a liberation from lust and the similar evil desires. Rhys Davids maintains that the Buddhist Nibbana or Nirvana is “a departure (ni-vah) from that craving
called 'vana’” (174). In *The Dhammapada* the Buddha asks his followers to “Cut down the (whole) forest, not the tree (only); danger comes out of the forest.” He further says, “Having cut down both the forest and desire, O mendicants, do you attain freedom” (Radhakrishnan 148-149).

*The Dhammapada* says again:

He who having got rid of the forest (of desire) gives himself over to the life of the forest (of desire), he who, free from the forest (of desire), runs back to the forest (of desire),--look at him, though free, he runs into bondage. (167)

So the Buddhists insist, more than anything else, on destroying the forest of desire before becoming a monk. Says Chitsu, the Zen poet:

No more head shaving,
Washing flesh.
Pile high the wood,
Set it aflame. (Stryk and Ikemoto 43)

The image of forest is very common in Buddhist literature, and it often evokes contrastive feelings like fear and horror on the one side, and beauty and joy on the other. Balakrishna Govind Gokhale points out that there are a number of Buddhist verses ('Theragatha' verses and 'Therigatha' verses) in which monks and nuns fondly recall many an hour spent in the presence of the primeval forest, with its floors covered with flowers, resounding with the warbling of the birds and thrilled with the dance of the peacock, the roll of thunder or the gentle rustling of
leaves in the morning wind. At the same time, as we have already seen, in some other Buddhist scriptures, *The Dhammapada* for instance, the forest, representing desire, becomes an image of darkness and fear. Gokhale, therefore, remarks that in Buddhist literature “The forest almost becomes a mysterious presence with its own identity and personality, solemn, majestic, fearsome and attractive” (86).

In Frost’s poems, especially in his first book *A Boy’s will*, we find the imagery of woods, trees and leaves used repeatedly. The quiet drama of youthful love portrayed in the subjective lyrics of *A Boy’s Will* takes place within the constant shadow of surrounding trees. In fact, the trees are themselves part of this drama, and not simply a descriptive background. This is evident in such poems as “Going for Water” and “A Dream Pang” in which the act of withdrawing into “forest” and “wood” becomes the very subject of the poem. In the first poem, husband and wife enter a wood together on a moonlit autumn evening to get water from a brook. In the second, the poet dreams that he has “withdrawn in forest,” his song “swallowed up in leaves....” The overtones here is, of course, romantic; but there are many other occasions when the poet closes his windows against the woods and turns inward. This becomes more apparent as the poet grows older, and as his perception of life broadens. In “Leaves compared with Flowers” he confesses that “leaves are all my darker mood,” and finally he reaches a point when he cannot be enticed into the dark woods at all. John T. Ogilvie takes notice of the
contrastive feelings that the recurrent imagery of forest evokes in Frost’s poetry. He says: “There is lurking terror in [Frost’s] woods as well as keen pleasure, numbing loneliness as well as quiet satisfaction; one can as much lose himself there as find himself” (76).

“In Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” too we find the two contrastive aspects of forest: the woods are “lovely,” and at the same time “dark and deep,” and so they contain the opposites — beauty and horror. However, here, by juxtaposing the opposite nature of the woods, the poet seems to suggest that human desires for worldly pleasures, like the lovely woods, are outwardly beautiful and alluring, but, again like dark and deep woods, they are inwardly calamitous and treacherous; or, in other words, they are serpents under rose. The strong fascination for sensual desire deceives and ultimately destroys man. Says The Buddhacharittha:

For deer are lured to their destruction by songs, moths fly into the fire for its brightness, the fish greedy for the bait swallows the hook; therefore the objects of sense breed calamity. (Asvagosa 157)

Desire grows out of attachment, and attachment arrests one’s free movement, and it means that desire is stasis, or cessation of activity, or sleep; while journey is movement which demands detachment and liberation from bondages. As Roberts W. French points out “the
attraction of the natural scene ["lovely woods"] promised no revelation, but only stasis, a cessation of activity suggestive of death" (162). The poet’s indecision for a moment, when he stood there enamoured by the enchanting beauty of the woods, can be therefore interpreted as his death-wish — the wish for attachment to worldly allurements which means total passivity. But the wish is only momentary, and the poet decides that journey — suggestive of movement and life — is better than stasis, suggestive of death. Theodore Morrison is thus right when she observes that the poem does not describe a death wish, but rather the “the thought of life” against a sober backdrop (184).

The speaker in the poem appears to be a wanderer, but not an aimless one, because he has some “promises to keep”; and therefore, his journey does not look like an ordinary one, but a sort pilgrimage in pursuit of a greater goal in life. His arrival in the woods is a turning point in his journey, because he meets one of the greatest hurdles on the way to his ultimate goal, namely the woods, representing human desires. Whether to stay in the midst of the woods, or to leave them is the question before him, and this is a spiritual crisis common to all seekers of truth. Says a Buddhist proverb: “Long to the watcher is the night / To the weary wand’rer along the road, / To him who will not see the truth’s light, / Long is the torment of his chain of births” (qtd. in Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy 412).
The spiritual torment of the speaker is most probably caused by his fascination to the woods, and it seems that the speaker was conscious of this weakness of his mind even before he came to the woods. The craving for material pleasures was, in short, haunting the traveller all through his journey. This is evident from the fact that he recognises the woods even at the first sight itself: "Whose woods these are I think I know," says he. We feel, therefore, that the speaker has been so far travelling along the road of sense gratification, and hence his spiritual torment. As Annie Besant observes,

"[I]f you be travelling along the line of the gratification of desire, then no matter how much you refine it, you are travelling along a road that is practically an endless circle, and that will always leave you unsatisfied and never give you the bliss which is the goal of the spirit in man. (14)"

"Stopping by Woods---" can be interpreted as a poem about spiritual transformation. The most dramatic part of the poem, namely, the speaker's decision to leave the woods and continue the journey, marks the beginning of this transformation from a worldly life of desires to a spiritual life of freedom and adventure. It seems that the speaker is now disgusted with the sensual allurements of woods; they no longer satisfy his spiritual quest for eternal peace and joy, and so, he chooses the endless path before him — the path leading to his mind and spirit.
Annie Besant describes as follows the spiritual crisis of a man in a similar situation:

[After a while, by this absence of satisfaction which is pain, the realisation comes to the soul that this is not the road, and he grows weary .... And then finally he learns his lesson, and he turns away from that which is without; he turns within; and then he finds the beginning of peace, the first touch of real, of essential satisfaction. (14-15)

The spiritual transformation naturally involves mental conflict and agony; and here we find the speaker, caught between sensual desires and spiritual quest, represented by the woods and “the promises to keep” respectively. “The promises to keep” can be taken as the promises to his family or friends or to the society at large, but one feels that these promises are, more than anything else, the promises to his own inner self. The speaker is now completely disenchanted with the “lovely woods,” because he realises that the woods are more “dark and deep” than “lovely”; and therefore, he turns away from that which is without, and turns within. The conflict between the two opposite aspects of woods — “lovely” on one side and “dark and deep” on the other — as well as the conflict in the mind of the speaker between worldly pleasures and spiritual pursuit, is thus resolved. To be precise, the speaker comes out triumphant in the moral struggle with the sensual desires, and chooses the right path to his salvation.
In this context a Buddhist scholar remembers that the Buddha is an archetype of this kind of a moral struggle and triumph. Living in the midst of the abundance of worldly pleasures, young Siddhartha learnt that all the earthly powers and glory are transient and deceptive, and that they result in distress and sorrow. A. J. Brahm speaks about Siddhartha’s final renunciation as follows:

Abundant pleasures of the princely life [Siddhartha] knew first hand. But no matter how lavishly he was supplied, he always wished for more than could be had. Finally, when about thirty years of age, he listened to the counsel of the wise men of his time: the root of life’s troubles lies not in insufficiency of objects but in desiring. Surrendering his royal robes for ascetic rags and his palace for a begging bowl, he went in search of ‘nirvana,’ the peace that knows no frustration. (17)

The Buddha, in the words of Rhys Davids, thus “left the shady tree for the crossways” (104) in search of peace and truth, as the speaker in Frost’s poem does. But one thing is intriguing: though the Buddha left the shady tree of worldly comforts, and chose a life of thorns in the streets, his journey at last took him to a forest; whereas, the pursuit of the speaker in the poem takes him out of the woods. To the Buddha, his palace with all the God’s plenty would have appeared like a wild forest, and the real forest was to him an ideal abode for contemplation and meditation. The two different aspects of the forest in Buddhist literature
is once more evident here. Coming to Frost's poem, the dark and deep woods can be taken as the physical projection of the speaker's inner wilderness from which he is struggling hard to escape. The real woods are lovely, but the woods of the mind are dark and deep. Again, the woods of the mind are so mysterious that the more you cut them down, the more they grow. Says The Dhammapada:

Just as a tree, though cut down, can grow again and again if its roots are undamaged and strong, in the same way if the roots of craving are not wholly uprooted sorrows will come again and again. (Mascaro 83)

The speaker in the poem seems to be aware of it, and therefore he wants to go miles and miles away from those woods.

John Ciardi maintains that in this poem three elements work upon the speaker – his relation to the world of the owner, his relation to the brute world of the horse, and the presence of the unknowable world (15). Of these the second one – the speaker's relation to the brute world of the horse — is of special interest to one who attempts to read the poem in the Buddhist perspective. According to Balakrishna Govind Gokhale, elephant or horse is a stock image in Pali literature and the two animals, therefore, become archetypal in the early Buddhist artistic ideas. Gokhale points out that these two animals are symbols “used to portray the conception of the Bodhisatta and his renunciation” (87).
Frost used the image of elephant in his poem “To Anxious for Rivers”: “The world as we know is an elephant’s howdah; / The elephant stands on the back of a turtle; / The turtle in turn on a rock in the ocean” (379). Though these lines have a remote resemblance to the Indian mythological concept of the origin of the universe, as described in The Bhagavatham, it is difficult to assume that the image of elephant here has any Buddhist connotations. However, the image of horse used in “Stopping by Woods – ” seems to have an association with the Buddhist renunciation. In “Stopping by Woods – ” the horse, which “gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake” (224), and which thus reminds his master that it is high time to leave the woods of worldly allurements, can be associated with the theme of renunciation in the poem. Louis Mertins is of the view that the horse in the poem is Frost’s favourite horse named “Billy” which was short for Bellerophon, the horse in Greek mythology who had conquered Pegassus. “Giving his old plow horse a name from the classics,” says Mertins, “was Frostian enough” (71). It would not be far-fetched to believe that Frost, by obliquely mentioning his horse “Billy” in the poem, was perhaps suggesting the idea of flight into a new world of joy and peace by renouncing the world of sensual allurements and temptations.

“The Road Not Taken” is also about a traveller who confronts a spiritual crisis (comparable in many ways to the crisis of the traveller in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”) during his journey, probably,
in pursuit of greater goal in life. The crisis of the speaker is with regard to the choice between two roads which diverged in the "yellow wood." The significance of woods in Frost's poetry is already discussed, and therefore, one cannot ignore the "yellow wood" in the present poem, and one begins to feel that the roads and the woods in the poem have some kind of a mysterious link between them, and it is worth examining in detail.

It is widely recognised that "The Road Not Taken" is one of the many poems of Frost "that have such acts of choice as their dynamic center — choices that have been made or that must be made, choices that have not been made" (Nitchie 158). Roads symbolically signify this central theme of the poem, namely, the acts of choice; and the woods, as we have already found, represent human desires. So the roads and the woods, put together, can be taken to mean choice of human desires, and this reading is supported by Lawrence Perrine. He states that "the general meaning of the poem is ... an expression of regret that the possibilities of life-experience are so sharply limited." Perrine continues: "The person with a craving for life, however satisfied with his own choice, will always long for the realms of experience that had to be passed by" (Sound and Sense 230).

The theme of choice-making occurs in a number of Frost's poems like "The Trial by Existence," "Into My Own," "Love and a Question,"
"Storm Fear," "Wind and Window Flower" and "The House Keeper." In these poems Frost presents man essentially as a choice-making creature, and he seems to maintain that it is the capacity of making conscious choice that principally distinguishes man from the lower forms of life. Furthermore, Frost seems to believe that this faculty of making his own choice determines a man's destiny. Nitchie supports this view when he says that Frost's principle is "What we live by we die by." The critic adds:

> What we live by is precisely the capacity to make crucial choices; once that is gone, once we reach the point of having only petty choices to make, we are, to all practical intents and purposes, dead. (164)

According to Nitchie, it is largely this point that accounts for the pathos of such a poem as "Old Man's Winter Night" or of such characters as Silas in "The Death of the Hired Man," or the woman in "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" (164).

That man is the moulder of his own destiny is a favourite idea in Buddhism too, and it finds eloquent expression in The Dhammapada:

> By oneself the evil is done, and it is oneself who suffers: by oneself the evil is not done, and by one's self one become pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself: no man can purify another. (Mascaro 59)
Choice-making is a highly complex matter, especially when it involves human desires which confound man’s thoughts and disable him from taking a firm decision. The spiritual crisis in the poem grows out of this doubt and indecision in the mind of the speaker. Yvor Winters cites “Road Not Taken” as a typical example of a poem “of a man who one might call a spiritual drifter.” However, Winters admits that the poem has “definite virtues.” He says:

In the first place, spiritual drifters exist, they are real; and although their decisions may not be comprehensible, their predicament is comprehensible. The poem renders the experience of such a person, and renders the uncertain melancholy of his plight. (61)

The melancholy of the speaker in the poem is precisely on account of the conflicting thoughts of doubt and indecision in his mind, and they are represented by the two diverging roads. The two roads, though they look different in the initial reading of the poem, have in effect no distinction at all. As Sohn and Tyre point out, the second reading of the poem reveals that there is no real objective evidence to prove the poet’s claim that the road he has chosen is “less traveled” (71). Further, the concluding lines that “I took the one less travelled by, / And that has made all the difference” (105) — which are indeed ambivalent — can be taken to mean that difference between the two roads is negligible. (“It’s a tricky poem, very tricky,” said Frost (qtd. in Robert Pack 10), and it
seems to be absolutely right in this context). Sohn and Tyre add that “Since he has no rational basis for choice, [the speaker] is thrown back on whim or impulsive desire to ‘decide’ which is the less used road” (71). So it becomes almost clear that the desire plays a vital role in the choice of the second road, and again one feels that even if the speaker had chosen the first road, it would not have made much difference in his life. Sohn and Tyre rightly observe that “The speaker does not tell us in the last line exactly what difference has been made by his choice” (71). Altogether, the poem leaves the final impression that preference of one desire to the other does not resolve man’s mental or spiritual crises; instead it all the more confounds and complicates the human predicament.

A Buddhist scholar would be interested to relate the road in the poem to “path,” a word which is frequently used in Buddhist literature. In this connection Nathan Cervo’s analysis of the poem is significant. Nathan Cervo remarks that “on the level of conscious meaning, the word ‘road’ is misused,” and that “The correct word would have been ‘Path’ ” (42). The critic explains that road is, etymologically speaking, a synecdoche for the “way travelled by carts, cars, chariots, by anything advancing by means of wheels.” According to Cervo, the cultural unconscious equates road with ‘rota’ (Latin, wheel). He adds that the word path on the other hand, from old English ‘Paeth’ (cognate to Latin
“pes,” which means foot, step, pace), would oppose the idea of advancing by foot to that of advancing by wheel (42).

Some other observations of Nathan Cervo about the poem are also interesting to a Buddhist scholar who would like to see the poem as a study of man’s choice of desires and its problems. The Buddhists believe that “The cause of evil is man’s inordinate desires for self” (Humphreys, *Buddhism* 123). According to Buddhism, man’s evil desires stem from his egoism, and hence, Paul Carus states that “there is no wrong in this world, no vice, no evil, except what flows from the assertion of self” (39). Cervo in his analysis of the poem traces some elements of the ego. He says:

Fundamental to the poem’s stated intimation of the truth about human existence, as sensed by Frost, is the idea of ‘rut’ (the track carved out by wheels from the surface over which they travel) in its relationship to the ego (cf. “I” 2, 3, 4, implied in 6, 13, twice in 15, 16, 18, 19). In the poem’s tragic intuition, egoism is figured as a wheel, an Ixionian torture (cf. Virgil, “Ixionii rota orbis”), which gouges out a road in the image of its own flange (42).

Cervo continues that the “this” of line 16 is revealed to be “that” of line 20, and that the identity of “this” and “that” is basically the same as the identity of the two ego-roads. The critic concludes:
The diabolic aspect of the ego, the fact that it transcends the normal, and normative, appointment of a human lifetime, is suggested in the phrase “ages and ages hence,” which evokes the circular repetitiveness of Ixion’s wheel in hell. (43)

The speaker in the poem, according to William George, assumes three personae — his younger, older and middle-aged selves. William George adds:

Compared with the middle-aged self, both [younger and older selves] are given to emotion, self deception, and self-congratulation, and both face a decision which the middle-aged speaker sees with more objective eyes than do his younger and older selves. (230)

The objectivity of the middle-aged speaker can be taken as the objectivity of middle position — a position which, according to Lawrance Thompson, Frost, as a poet and philosopher, always liked to take. Thompson quotes Mark Van Doren in this connection who says: “Mr. Frost’s place ... is and always has been singularly central. He has had nothing to do with the extremes where most of our shouting has been heard” (Fire and Ice 182).

In “The Road Not Taken” the younger speaker takes the second road, and the older speaker will perhaps regret the choice. It implies that given a chance the old speaker will have chosen the first road. The
middle-aged speaker seems to mock at the choices of both these roads, because he may be intuitively aware of the fact that the preference of one choice of desire to the other is not the way to peace and happiness, but to indecision and melancholy, as the first two speakers experience, and therefore, his choice, if he makes one, will be most probably a middle path — the path leading to the annihilation of desire, similar to the Buddhist Middle-path or the Eight-fold path. The Buddha says:

The best of paths is the Eight fold; the best of truths the four sayings; the best of virtues passionlessness; the best of men he who has eyes to see. This is the path, there is no other that leads to the purifying of the mind. Go on this path; if you go on this way, you will make an end of pain. (Burtt 44)

The indecision of the speaker in “Road Not Taken” can be compared to the “weary considerations” of the speaker in “Birches.” The speaker says:

It’s when I am weary of considerations,  
And life is too much like a pathless wood  
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs  
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping  
From a twig’s having lashed across it open. (122)

“The dominant metaphor in the poem,” says Judith Oster, “is, in fact, not birches, but swinging birches” (61). The swinging is variously interpreted as the swing “between the reality of earth and the call of the
spirit" (Oster 61), and as representing life as “a matter of going and coming back, of accommodating the real and the ideal within the dipping arc of the birch tree – the motion of one’s sensitive experience” (Ogilvie 68). One can also take it to mean that the swinging of the protagonist between two desires makes him aware of the necessity of keeping a balance between the two extremes. According to Judith Oster, once again in this poem “we see Frost’s typical ‘between-ness,’ the pull of contraries that keeps him in balance” (61). Oster adds that “The triumph of that boy’s swinging is in his learning how to keep his poise” (62). The poem says:

[The boy] always kept his poise  
To the top branches, climbing carefully  
With the same pains you use to fill a cup  
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.  
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,  
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. (122)

Climbing high, kicking outward, the need to escape, those girls, those heaps of broken glass, and later the desire “to get away from earth a while” – all these suggest that in life what requires is poise, the art of keeping balance.

Frost’s preoccupation with the idea that the extremity of human passions, whether it is the passion of love or the passion of hatred, causes suffering and destruction is evident in his poem “Fire and Ice.”
Speaking about the poem Manorama B. Trikha rightly observed that “The real objective of the poet is to present the cataclysmic power of the violently clashing basic human passions — love and hate — symbolically referred as ‘fire’ and ‘ice’” (Poetry of Clarifications 175).

The poet heard some people saying that the world will end in fire; he also heard some others saying that it will end in ice. As a man who tasted desire, the poet favours the first contention that the world will end in fire. At the same time, the poet knows “enough of hate,” and thus realises that hate also is capable of destroying the world. In short, fire and ice, symbolising the intensity of love and hatred respectively, are equally capable of bringing about destruction. The analogy of fire and ice employed here establishes a comparison, and not necessarily a contrast, between the two extremes of human passions — love and hatred. What the poet seems to imply here is that these antithetical human passions — love and hatred — are poisonous to life. The use of the word “suffice” in the last line of the poem signifies that both fire and ice, though antithetical, have the same potential for ruin and destruction. Here is the answer to the question that Sohn and Tyre raise: “Why do you think [Frost] chooses ‘suffice’ to express this destruction rather than a stronger word like ‘exterminate’ or ‘annihilate’?” (59).
The central idea of the poem that extremity of human passions is destructive approximates with the Buddhist doctrine that all the human sufferings are rooted in unrestrained passions, either of love or hatred. In his first sermon at Benaras immediately after his enlightenment the Buddha told his disciples:

Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the cause of pain: the craving which tends to rebirth, combined with pleasure and lust, finding pleasure here and there; namely the craving for passion, the craving for existence, the craving for non-existence. (Burtt 30)

Frost seems to have learnt from his experience this great truth about human desire and its inherent potential for destruction. He says, “From what I have tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire” (220).

For a Buddhist scholar who studies the poem, the image of fire is of great significance, mainly because of the fact that this image frequently occurs in Buddhist scriptures, especially in “Fire Sermon” in which it represents man’s boundless and insatiable quest for sensual pleasures. In the “Fire Sermon” which the Buddha delivered to a great congregation of priests while he was dwelling in Uruvela, the Master said:

All things, O priests, are on fire. And what, O priests, are all these things which are on fire? The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions
received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire. And what are these on fire? With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire. (Warren 352)

Frost’s use of the two contrastive images — fire and ice — representing two opposite passions, is also of great interest to one who reads the poem in the light of Buddhism. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant reports that Frost commented to her on this poem thus: “All we do in life is a clarification after we stir things up” (264). This statement implies the poet’s urge to find a way out of the two extreme passions in life. Manorama Trikha speaks about Frost’s treatment of the paradoxes:

Behind Frost’s strong wish to confront the paradoxes lies the original impulse to create an order closely resembling the order of the Universe, that is, order in chaos. Assured of the fact that the “secret sits” in “the middle”, Frost anticipates that the possibility of discovering some kind of pattern or truth cannot be eliminated. (167)

A Buddhist scholar recalls that it was by avoiding the extremes in life that the Buddha attained the enlightenment or eternal truth of the middle path, which leads to the ultimate wisdom of Nirvana, and taught his followers that
These two extremes, monks, are not to be practised by one who has gone forth from the world. What are the two? That conjoined with the passions and luxury, low, vulgar, common, ignoble, and useless; and that conjoined with self-torture, painful, ignoble, and useless. Avoiding these two extremes the Tathagata has gained the enlightenment of the Middle Path which produces insight and knowledge, and tends to calm, to higher knowledge, enlightenment, Nirvana. (Burtt 29)

So extreme passions, according to Buddhism, is the hurdle on the way to the attainment of liberation and wisdom, and hence the Master's exhortation to avoid them so as to reach the final goal of endless peace and tranquility. In short, too much of heat is as dangerous as too much of coldness. A wise man, therefore, keeps aloof from the extreme passions, as Frost does in "Fire and Ice." Frost's detachment from the extreme passions of love and hatred becomes clear from the opening lines of the poem: "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice" (220). The expression "Some say," repeated twice here, indicates the poet's objectivity and aloofness. He is, perhaps, aware of the fact that it is desire-attachment that generates frustration and sorrow. As the Buddhist scripture "Ariya Sacca" says, "Sorrow is caused by ignorance which results in desire-attachment" (Allen, Buddha's Words 17), and the scripture adds, "Sorrow can be eliminated by the elimination of desire-attachment" (23). The liberation from desire-attachment also paves the
way to insight and wisdom. Another Buddhist scripture “Udayamanava Puccha” states:

Insight comes with the abandoning of desire and lust, when one ceases to worry and be distracted, and when one ceases to be careless and to act unskilfully. (Allen, *Buddha’s Words* 79)

So the Buddha exhorts his monks in the “Fire Sermon”:

[T]he learned and noble disciple conceives an aversion for the eye, conceives an aversion for forms, conceives an aversion for eye-consciousness, conceives an aversion for the impressions received by the eye; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, for that also he conceives an aversion. (Warren 352)

It is said that the Buddha’s “Fire Sermon” enabled his disciples to liberate themselves from the bondage of attachments to extreme passions. The “Fire Sermon” concludes with this remark: “Now while this exposition was being delivered, the minds of the thousand priests became free from attachment and delivered from the depravities” (353).

The Buddha’s “Fire Sermon” serves two purposes: firstly, it brings to light the evils of wild human passions; and secondly, it makes people aware of the need for non-attachment to sensual cravings. Frost’s short poem “Fire and Ice” also seems to serve the same two great purposes of
exposing the dangers — including the destruction of the world — of
extreme human passions, and then invoking obliquely to maintain a
detachment from those burning passions. Untermeyer is right when he
observes as follows:

The poem “Fire and Ice” is a masterpiece of condensation.
Here, wrapped in an epigram, is a speculation concerning
the end of the world and the beginning of wisdom. *(Robert
Frost’s Poems 241)*

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1 Bertrand Russell was one of the western intellectuals who was tremendously impressed by
the Buddhist teachings. B. Sangharakshita says that “Russell has gone so far as to declare
that if he were compelled to choose between the religions of the world he would choose
Buddhism”(406).

2 The psychological term “afterimage” means an image or sensation that stays or comes
back after the external stimulus has been withdrawn.

3 Donald J. Greiner, for instance, maintains that “Frost’s woods should be read primarily as
woods, secondly as death, and thirdly as that which entices man to respond to the dark and
deep within himself” (240). Jean Gould points out, “Certainly from his earliest poems, the
deep woods symbolised for Frost the lure of life’s darkest mysteries, the temptation to be
led into the maze of nature’s insoluble secrets” (231). According to Frank Lentricchia, the
woods in Frost has a subjective as well as an objective phase. He adds that “it [the woods]
is more thoroughly bathed in the dark recesses of his inner life than any other objects in his
[Frost’s] poems” and that “the woods radiates in Frost’s language the destructive urges of
self” (88). Malcolm Cowley speaks about the woods in Frost thus: “The woods play a
curious part in Frost’s poems; they seem to be his symbol for the unchartered country
within ourselves, full of possible beauty, but also full of horror” (102).