WAKING UP THE BUDDHA

A Service by Fritz Hudson
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Introduction for All Ages

Long ago in the far away land called India, there lived a young prince. The prince was the king's oldest son and the king did everything he could to make his son happy so he would grow to love his position as much as the king did and would want to be king himself when his father died. The king built his son a winter palace and a summer palace, the one warm and filled with carpet and the other cool with huge windows. The king provided his son with playmates from the beset families and brought him teachers to help him become good at every sport known in the kingdom. But the king was worried about his son. Even though he was handsome and a strong young man, he had a tendency to become thoughtful and spend hours by himself in his room. The king was afraid his son might be over-sensitive and easily shocked or hurt, or he did his best to protect him from any pain or displeasure by keeping him within the palace walls and letting him experience only the best life has to offer. And by and large, the prince was quite happy.

When, the prince was in his mid-twenties, he became ever more quiet and sad. The king got more and more anxious for soon his son must find the energy to take over the kingdom himself. To ignite the young man's spirit of adventure and whet his appetite for power, the king proposed that the prince and his best friend Chanda get in a magnificent chariot and go out and tour the kingdom. When the prince agreed, the king immediately sent orders that all the roads the prince would travel should be made new and all the buildings along the way should be painted and only the best people in the kingdom should be invited to line the roads to greet the prince.

When the day came, the prince and Chanda mounted the royal chariot and went out through the palace gate. The people cheered, the prince smiled, and the horses pranced along. All was going well. Then all of a sudden the chariot horses reared up in fright at something in the road. The prince looked down and there he saw an old man who staggered from the sidewalk into the street. The prince gasped to see the old man struggling to raise himself, his clothes tattered and torn, his back bent, his cheeks all hollow, his mouth toothless, his skin wrinkled, dry, sagging. In all his 28 years, he had never seen an old person.

The prince turned to Chanda and asked, "What is this?"
"This is an old man. This is the fate of all people who live out their years," Chanda replied.
"Does this truly happen to all people?" the prince asked incredulously.
"Yes, it is the common lot of all," Chanda said.

The prince immediately became totally lost in agonized rumination and forgot all about his adventure. The chariot returned to the palace and the prince went to his room.

When the king learned what had happened he went to see his son.
"You have fed me lies," the prince complained.
"You have raised me as a deceived youth who sees the world as a place of beauty and happiness. Yet today I discovered the truth of life."

The king tried to convince his son that life was not all aging and decay outside the palace walls. He tried to encourage him to venture out again to see whether life on balance wasn't more joy than sorrow.

At first the prince refused, preferring to stay in his room and think. After a week, however, the prince consented to his father's proposal. The king sent out a new order that all the aged and decrepit people be kept off the streets when his son passed. The prince and Chandra again mounted the chariot and went out through the gate. This time they traveled farther and were beginning to relax and enjoy themselves when the prince looked off to the side of the road and caught sight of a person hardly able to stand. The woman coughed violently and spit up blood and cried out is agony. She had open sores on her body that huge flies gathered around.

Again the prince was struck dumb.
"What is this?" he asked Chanda. He had never seen disease before.
"This is a sick person," replied Chanda. "Her body has turned against her and she is in great pain. This is a fate which befalls many people, both good and bad, without cure." Again the prince was greatly taken aback and the trip was cut short. The chariot returned to the palace.

Now the prince locked himself in his room. No one could explain or justify the fact that such pain existed and nobody did anything about it. After a few weeks he sent word to his father that he wanted to go out again and see whether old age and disease were the common lot of people, and once again the king tried desperately to see that all old and sick people were confined to their houses the day the prince went out. Despite all his precautions, however, the king could not spare his son one final sight. Just as the prince's chariot turned down one street, it came upon a funeral procession where, as is the Indian custom, the body was carried on the shoulders of the male family members and could be seen stiff and expressionless while the mourners trailed behind beating their chests and wailing. Again the prince had to ask Chanda what it was he witnessed. He had never seen death before. And once again Chanda had to inform him that this too was the common lot of every human being, that they would one day be carried lifeless as this one was to the sorrow of all his or her family and friends.

The prince felt a cold shudder go through his body. He felt faint. "So this is where life leads," he thought. "And all the time I have been wasting my time with fun and sports. There can be no more joy until I can quell these fears." And the prince returned to the palace to consider how to do that.

He had seen old; he had seen disease; he had seen death.
"Where does all this misery come from and what can we do to escape it," he wondered. After thinking about this for a few days, the prince Chanda and said, "This time I want to go out through the gate without any chariot or fanfare. I want to go to the market place and see what people are really like."

So out they went a fourth time. This time they proceeded on foot, and when they came to the market place, the prince stood in awe of all he saw there: people buying and selling; people arguing to get what they want at a low price or sell at a high price. Everyone seemed seemed worried and desperate. Everyone but one man. Standing in the middle of all the confusion, the prince saw a man dressed in a simple yellow robe standing quite still and calm, seemingly untroubled by all the commotion all around him. Before him he held a simple basket and from time to time people would put money and food in this basket.

The prince asked who he was. "That is a monk," Chanda replied, "a holy man. He has given up wanting things. He allows others to give him money or food so they will feel touched by his calm and his peace."

Finally the prince saw some hope in his life. Finally he saw more than silly playing and ignorance on the one hand and old age, disease, and death on the other. He no longer had any desire to be a king with no answer to the pain of life. Now all he wanted was to be a monk. That night the prince went out through the gate one more time, this time by himself. He left his riches behind him forever, and he went into the forest to learn to be a monk. In fact, he became the most famous monk ever

known. There are millions of people who have looked to him for guidance for years and years and years. He is called the Buddha.

From Long Ago and Many Lands
by Sophia Lyon Fahs

Sermon

Thirteen years ago, when I arrived as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix, Arizona, I discovered that one of the rituals established there was an annual celebration of Hana Matsuri, the Japanese recognition of the Birth of the Buddha. In that community, home to many Japanese immigrant farmers, this celebration was the highest profile event in asian religion, as Asian New Year or Tet is here. So, like now here, that was the time our church program there focused on what we draw from that strand of human religious heritage.

In our Hana Matsuri celebration, we followed the Japanese practice of setting a statue of Siddhartha Gautama in a large flat bowl, filling the bowl with sweet tea, placing it on a platform in the center of the sanctuary and surrounding it with cut flowers. The ritual, first for our children following a story, was for them to come forward to dip tea from the bowl wok and pour it over the statue's head, and then to take a flower with them back to their classes. At the end of the sermon, we performed the same ritual as adults, pouring the tea and taking a flower as we went out into our coffee hour.

Among the stories we told in those services was the one Kim told today. Children, I think, can begin to see the possibility that Siddhartha Gautama has something to say to them when they understand that he began as a spoiled brat who gradually awakens to the pain and suffering intrinsic to life - awakens to age, illness, and death - and then resolves not to be overwhelmed by them. I've always found inspiration in that story; I'd told it my prior churches, as well. But I'll tell you that the ritual, when I arrived in Phoenix, was very uncomfortable for me. I had enough trouble with teaching and practicing God worship. But this felt like idol worship, even worse, to me. But I in my openness to new experiences, I followed the ritual as I told the stories, because it was part of that church's practice, just like the joys and sorrows bowl was part of your practice when I came here. There's far more to the Buddha's story, of course. So I'd like first to share with you more of it, the parts tell of his adulthood and I think, speak to ours. But then, at the end, I'd like to share with yoiu how my feelings for that Hana Matsuri ritual evolved in Phoenix, and why.

First the story:

Siddhartha Gautama was 29 years old when he abandoned family and position to seek spiritual truth. The religious world into which he strode the day he entered the forest was in great turmoil. Brahmanic priests who controlled the temples and claimed sole authority to interpret the ancient Vedic sources had become hopelessly corrupt. And in the spiritual void left by their corruption, two reform movements had arisen. One movement was intellectually focused, pursued by independent groups of scholars who formed communities in the wilderness to interpret the ancient Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, and to revive their truth. The other movement, known to us as the Jains, was physically focused. It was pursued by individuals who renounced all material goods and lived in constant meditation as hermits and ascetics in the caves in the mountains and along the riverbanks of the forest.

Siddhartha first chose to seek a satisfying response to the suffering of age, disease and death among the scholars. And at first he was completely enthralled with their analyses and discussion. Gradually he became a fully respected participant in their work. But then, with more time, he saw that much of the arguing eventually became circular and many of those who spoke were more concerned with their

own image in the group than they were with the fate of humanity. (I wonder if some of our experience in Unitarian Universalist congregatios, might have echoed his.) Disappointed, after three years in such communities, Siddhartha left that work to seek a new path to ending humanity's plight.

This time, he went deeper into the forest. Searching hard, he eventually found some Jain ascetics. From them he learned the practice of meditation and self-denial. After a time, he threw himself into their practices, hoping that by cleansing his body of all impurities, his mind would be opened to the realities of suffering and to the path to their transcendence.

Over the next three years Siddhartha's young, strong and beautiful body began to waste away in his devotion to this discipline. He became a sagging bag of skin and bone. If you were here last week, the picture I showed you of the sitting Buddha statue, with all its ribs showing, represents that stage of his life. Eventually, Siddhartha could no longer walk. As it happened, he came to rest by a stream. His eyes grew more sunken; his cheeks ever more hollow. Eventually he lay moaning by that stream near death. And yet no spiritual message came. He felt the fullness of the inevitable pain of life, but he saw no escape from the despair of its meaninglessness.

Now, completely powerless as he was to save himself, saving power came to Siddhartha from another. A young woman, Sujata, came to the stream to get water. She saw that bag of bones in all his misery. She lifted Siddhartha's head; she gave him something to drink. She forced him, ever so slowly, to eat the barest morsel of rice. She stayed with him all morning, and then she left food and water for him to eat and drink. Siddhartha had to face the undeniable fact that the Jain approach to salavation was literally a dead end. He resolved to eat and drink. Slowly he began to edge back from the brink of death.

When Siddhartha could finally stand, he hobbled a short distance from the stream to a great mucalinda tree. He could sit there among the trunk-like roots and be protected. There he could also meditate on his life to that point. He wondered whether he had made a huge mistake, whether he could in fact have invested his life more meaningfully as a king than as a spiritual seeker. At least as a king he could have made life easier for his people even if he couldn't have saved them from old age, disease, and death. Somehow, Siddhartha still could not embrace that half-a-loaf compromise. He wondered then whether he should simply admit that there was no escape from suffering and death, that his quest was entirely futile. He found that he was still unwilling to accept that defeat, but he could feel himself being swept with the conviction that though there was an answer, he was obviously not the right person to reveal it; he was just to weak, too frail; someone stronger than he would have to find it. Psychologically, spiritually, he felt himself sinking, spiraling faster and faster, further and further into an abyss. Then, somehow, he fell slower; he touched some kind of bottom; his spirit seemed somehow to rebound. And as it rose again, a whole new sensation began to grow. He began to feel totally disengaged from life and yet strongly attracted to it. He experienced himself as outside his body with no desire for any of its pleasures; yet he knew profoundly that Sujata's compassion for him was the source of his own liberation, the spark of his continuing life. He began to to play, to experiment spiritually, with allowing that compassion become the very essence of his being.

That was when Siddhartha apprehended, in what seemed like absolute, ultimate terms, the source of human suffering. He saw that the aging, of illness, of death grow inexorably out of human attachment: attachment to body, to life, to meaning, to anything. And he, in this transcendent state, knew that finally he had escaped from the grasp of that attachment. If he wanted to, in fact, he could easily choose to completely give himself into the ecstasy of Nirvana and leave his bodily life behind forever. In this dream-like state, he even saw Mara, the god of evil, encouraging him to complete his well-deserved escape. Yet once Siddhartha recognized this temptation for what it was, he found that the essential compassion of his new being quickly asserted itself. "No," he said, "Until I can bring this release to all humanity, until the least of the people can find deliverance from attachment, from craving, tanha, until all who are sick or mourn or die can find salvation, I shall not enter into Nirvana."

With that decision, Siddhartha Gautama sensed himself returning to his body. His mind grew clearer. When he reached full consciousness, he knew that he had become the Buddha, the one who had awakened. He was 35 years old.

From that day until his death 45 years later, the Buddha traveled throughout North India teaching and living out the insight he had received under the Mucalinda, or the "Bo" tree. He taught what he knew and what he felt all adults would be better off knowing. The kernel of his teaching is found in what he called "the Four Noble Truths." The first is that existence is painful - birth is painful, estrangement is painful, sickness is painful, old age is painful, death is painful. The second is that the cause of life's pain is to be found in desire, in craving, in our appetite to please our senses, to become involved with one another and with the things and experiences this life affords. The third truth is that deliverance from pain can only come with the cessation of desire, with becoming detached from our sensual and experiential appetites. The fourth truth is that there is a way, an eight-fold path, to become detached from this desire.

The eightfold path, however, is not merely a discipline of either intellectual analysis or physical self-denial. While the Buddha taught spiritual detachment, he did not teach disengagement from life. Remember, the real source of the Buddha's enlightenment was not asceticism, but the compassion which rescued him from an ascetic's death.

The eight-fold path is an ethical discipline teaching right speech, right action and right livelihood. Of his commandments setting limits on life, two require personal physical abstinence, from sexual involvement and intoxicants, but the other three require abstinence from interpersonal actions, from killing, lying and stealing. The Buddha's teachings are known as "the Middle Path," because they strike a balance between focusing on our personal behaviors and our social behaviors. An adult could do much worse than to take this knowledge from her or his encounter with the Buddha today.

For me, however, encountering the Buddha is primarily an encounter with a spirit, a spirit of many forms and shades. Behind his teachings, his truths and paths, I see assumptions, convictions, attitudes which touch me far deeper than knowledge.

First, the Buddha assumes that human suffering and pain are essentially no one's fault. People are basically good beings seeking their way out of a shared dilemma. This basic conviction leads the Buddha to respect his listeners. He expects us to be able to discern whatever truth may be found in his teachings out of our own experience, and with the exercise of our own minds. He says to Upala, the noted Jain yogi who wishes to to become his follower, "Approach with caution, Upala. Think it over carefully so that you do not make a hasty decision." This allegiance to the authority of logic and experience also leads the Buddha to grow, to learn new applications of his own teachings as he gets older. At first and for a long time, the Buddha would not allow women into his band of followers. He allowed men of all castes and backgrounds, a revolutionary move for Indian culture 2500 years ago, or even today, but he couldn't bring himself to cross the gender barrier. His chief disciple, Ananda, however, would not let him rest in this restriction. To him, it just didn't stand the test of logic, the Buddha himself promoted. Finally the Buddha relented saying, "It is time that women are the equal of men and they have a corresponding spirit which it is not my will to dismiss." He learned. He changed.

Second, the Buddha knew the limits of his own knowledge. In the Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha's middle length discourses, the story is told of how the disciple Melunkyaputta complained that his teacher was not answering many of the fundamentally vexing questions of life. Was the world eternal or not eternal? Is the world finite or infinite? Are the soul and the body identical or are they different? Does one who attains perfection exists after death or does she or he not exist? If the Buddha could not answer these questions, Melunkyapatta said he could continue as a disciple.
The Buddha replied,

"Malunkyaputta, anyone who can say 'I will not live the religious life under the Blessed One (the Buddha) until the Blessed One shall explain such questions to me,' will die, Malunkyaputta, before the Tathagata (the Buddha) has ever explained this to him.

"It is as if a man had been wounded by a poison arrow, and his friends and kinsfolk were to procure for him the best physician available. But the sick man were to say, 'I will not have this arrow removed until I have learned whether the man who wounded me belonged to the warrior caste, the Brahman caste, the agricultural caste, or the menial caste.

"Or again if he were to say, 'I will not have this arrow removed until I know the name of the archer.'

'Or to say such trivial things, one after the other, as 'It shall not be removed until I know the size of the marksman, or what village he comes from.'

"That man would die, Malunkyaputta, without ever having learned the these answers. In exactly the same way, anyone who says,'I shall not lead the religious life until I know the answer to all questions concerning the nature of the world, and of immortality,' that person person would die, Malunkyaputta, before he could find the answers"

"The religious life does not depend upon any dogma. And whether any dogma is true or not, pertains or not, does not really matter. Whether the world is eternal or not, or whether immortality exists or not, is beside the point. For there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair. I can prescribe for the extinction of these things, and this makes for a religious life."

In this spirit, conviction with an openness to change, force with an attitude of humility, the Buddha lived out a full adult life, eighty years. He remained detached yet involved, right up to his carefully controlled death in the company of his closest followers. His parting words to them were: "Decay is inherent. Work out your salvation with diligence."

And so must we all - each of us must work out our own salvation with diligence, from the innocence of childhood through the bittersweetness of advancing age. I must confess, in my own diligent efforts to work out my salvation, that I have so far found something wanting in the knowledge the Buddha brings. To this point, I can't help feeling that they embody a kind of defeatist approach to life, an unwillingness to really commit ourselves to each other and to the experience of the human community, to experience the joys of commitment because of the inevitable pain of disengagement. Perhaps I'm still a spoiled brat. I suspect I've seen much of the misery Siddhartha saw as a prince, but I surely have yet to feel the depth of its pain as he Siddhartha did by the streambed.

Still, even if I do not yet see the world as the Buddha saw it, even if I cannot yet affirm his knowledge, I can now sense the power of his spirit. And at this stage of my life, with my own openness amidst conviction, my own humility in power, I have something to give and take from the Buddha. In Phoenix, I learned though no longer a child, I grew over those years from the physical ritual of pouring the tea and taking the flower - not as the worship of an idolized God but as a reenactment of my continuing relationship with a dead, spiritual ancestor. For to pour the tea, I had to look at the statue, to make sure the tea ran over its head. And in so doing I was forced to recognize the power of one human life, and to contemplate the power of my own. Can my convictions, my actions draw some strength from Siddhartha's? And to take the flower, I had to touch it, to sense its contact with the Buddha's feet. And in so doing I was forced to recognize that he and I walk on the same earth, struggle with the same life in all its riches and limitations. Can my search be better grounded by contact with Siddhartha's? Each year in Phoenix, I found that my answer to those questions was reaffirmed in that simple ritual at levels far deeper than thought, deeper even perhaps than experience. I felt, more than thought, that there is life here, life shared

over two and half centuries of time and half a world of distance. It was a give and take between me and Siddhartha that continues, now even though its been six years since I've actually repeated the acts. Pour the tea. Take the flower, I invite you, as you can.