

PLENTY OF NOTHING

*Opening speech by Zen Master Wu Kwang
at Buddha's Enlightenment Day,
Providence Zen Center, December 5, 1998.*

Once a student, while in a particular mind set, said to me, "If I hear one more talk about Buddha's enlightenment, I think I'll scream." This raises a question as to the purpose of our coming together to celebrate, commemorate, and recollect Buddha's enlightenment.

At Providence Zen Center, there hangs a calligraphy which reads:

*Buddha went to Snow Mountain.
Sat, don't know. Six years passed.
Saw a bright star, got enlightenment.
Without thinking, full universe.*

The essence of Buddha's enlightenment is in the last line: "Without thinking, full universe." Two aspects are pointed out here: "full universe" and "without thinking." "Full universe" means "nothing" is not nothing. To think "nothing" is nothing is like the old Gershwin song from the opera, *Porgy and Bess*: "I got plenty of nothing." That means you are carrying a big bundle of nothing around with you, *i.e.* you are clinging to nothing. However, the second line of the song says, "And nothing's plenty for me." "Nothing" truly perceived and practiced means that without holding or grasping, we clearly connect with everything we encounter or touch, moment by moment, and that truly is the practice of manifesting Buddha's enlightenment as "full universe."

As for the second part, "without thinking," there is a poem by an ancient Zen Master named Shu An:

*With incense burning, I sat quietly on the south terrace
all day long with mind collected and all worries
forgotten. I had not ceased my mental activity with a
view to removing delusions, but there was not a thing
to think about.*



When we truly come to that place where we perceive, "I don't have to get rid of anything," and "there is not a thing to think about," then we attain "without thinking, full universe," and that is Buddha's enlightenment.

There is an interesting slant on the story of Buddha's enlightenment presented in the "Revelation of the Eternal Life of the Tathagata" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Essentially, what the Buddha says in this chapter is that "it is only to inspire and encourage practice that I tell the story of leaving home, sitting under the bodhi tree, and attaining complete enlightenment. In truth, that teaching is only to inspire and encourage the practice of people who are of a dull or lesser capacity." Truly, he says (in the way that is only found in the style of Indian sutras), "the time since I actually attained enlightenment is very, very, very long." Then he presents an analogy: suppose you were to take all the sands of the Ganges River—not just one Ganges River, but perhaps a thousand Ganges Rivers—and then start to walk east, and about every third eon drop one grain of sand to the ground, and measure the time it would take to drop all of these grains of sand... "well, actually, my enlightenment occurred long before that!" That means infinitely long ago. To calculate it is impossible, and to think about it within the limitations of concepts like time and space is also impossible. We would say, "already" from the very beginning it was there.

Therefore, it behooves us all to recognize our dull and limited capacity and to feel a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to come here and recollect and celebrate the event of Buddha's enlightenment so as to encourage our ongoing practice.

So thank you all for coming and supporting each other, and thank you Shakyamuni Buddha for recognizing our dullness and pointing it out to us, and pointing us toward the enlightenment of "no enlightenment."

In December, no leaves obscure the bare brown trunk of the tree in the yard.

