

This Is the Bodhi Tree

Zen Master Wu Kwang

This dharma talk was given at the Mahabodhi Temple in India, during the Whole World Is a Single Flower tour in October 2011.

I thought I would talk about three different versions of Buddha's enlightenment story. But first I want to tell a little anecdote.

Quite a few years ago at the Providence Zen Center we invited a teacher named Stephen Levine to come and give a weekend workshop together with Zen Master Seung Sahn. Stephen Levine, as some of you may know, wrote a number of books on death and dying, and he did a lot of work with people who were dying. His practice is mostly from the Vipassana tradition.

During this workshop he told a story. At the time of the Korean war, the American Zen poet, Gary Snyder, was trying to get into Japan. But immigration, because of the Korean war, was very tight there. They kept him waiting for many, many hours before they would let him go through. While he was there sitting, he wrote a short Zen poem. The poem said:

*Making a cup of green tea
I stopped the war*

So then Stephen Levine elaborated on what this poem meant. He said, "If you want to understand what 'making a cup of green tea, I stopped the war' means, it would be something like this: Mindfully I pick up the kettle, mindfully I walk to the sink, mindfully I fill the kettle with water, mindfully I walk to the stove, mindfully I put the kettle down on the stove, mindfully I reach for the knob! Mindfully, I watch the water as the fire begins to make it boil. Mindfully, as the water boils, I lift the kettle from the stove. Mindfully, I pour the water over the tea. Mindfully, I hold the cup to check the temperature. Mindfully, when it's ready, I strain the tea leaves, and then mindfully I drink the tea and feel the taste of it."

I was listening to this, and I thought, "Well, Stephen, that is very good teaching and we should all practice like that sometimes. But the Zen way of 'drinking a cup of green tea, I stopped the war' would be a little bit different than that. So what is the Zen way? It would be: I heat up the water, I pour the water over the tea leaves, I drink the tea. KATZ! Aaaaaaah."

In one version of the Buddha's enlightenment story in the traditional Pali sutras it says that the Buddha sat under the tree and in the third watch of the night he perceived the chain of causation in ascending form and descending form, and then he became enlightened. So what does it mean? The chain of causation is the twelve links of causation in traditional Buddhism, starting with ignorance as the first link. And to be honest I can never remember all of these twelve links. But it goes something like this: starting from primal ignorance I begin to form something, and I begin to conceptualize and begin to make something out of my experience, dualistically. Then desire arises. Like and dislike arises. And then I begin to cling and attach to like and dislike and ultimately that leads to old age and death. So that's the chain of causation in the ascending form. And the descending form would be just the reverse.

If we put that in Zen Master Seung Sahn's language, it means something like this: you make, you hold, you attach, then you get. And if you don't make, and don't hold, and don't attach, then you perceive your primary ignorance of the fact of existence as it is, and you wake up.

In that version of Buddha's enlightenment, you could say that is a psychological individual mapping. I have ignorance, I make things, I begin to cling to something, and I get attached and then the world of desire appears and then I'm caught. If I can mindfully perceive that and let

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go, let go, let go, let go—as Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, don't make anything, don't hold anything, don't attach to anything—then POW! It all comes down and everything becomes clear. That's a psychological mapping, individual kind of chain of causation from one thing leading to another, and we get caught gradually.

In the Zen version of Buddha's enlightenment the story is a little bit different. It says that Buddha under the bodhi tree fiercely determined not to move until he got awakening. And he sat there so long that weeds began to grow up through his sitting mat, a magpie made a nest in his head, and spiders made webs on his eyebrows. As someone in the New York Zen Center told me once when I told this story, magpies are very loud birds! So if you sit practicing with a magpie nest on your head, you have to really be determined. And according to this story, on the eighth day of December, when he began to get up from his meditation, he perceived the morning star and suddenly—POW!—awoke. And then, according to the story, it says he proclaimed, "Now I perceive that from the very beginning all beings are imbued with the Buddha nature." Another translation of it says, "I and all beings and the great earth together attain the way." So that statement—I, all beings, and the great earth attain the way—is not just an individual psychological mapping. That's a statement of interdependent causation. I and all beings and the world itself all together interdepend and interconnect, and so my enlightenment is not just for me.

In the Zen tradition, at least in Korea and Japan, they set Buddha's enlightenment day in the twelfth month on the eighth day. In some traditions, like the Theravadin tradition, they say that Buddha's birthday, Buddha's enlightenment day, and Buddha's paranirvana day—his death day—all occurred on the same full moon day. That's what is usually called Vesak Day. Prince Siddhartha was born in Lumbini. But Shakyamuni Buddha was born here under the bodhi tree. The great Thai meditation master, Ajahn Chah, said there's a meaning behind the fact that we celebrate Buddha's birthday, Buddha's enlightenment day, and Buddha's death day all on the same day. Ajahn Chah said at the moment the Buddha attained enlightenment, he died as a small being and was born as a great being.

Here's the third version of Buddha's enlightenment. Once at a Buddha's Enlightenment Day ceremony at Providence Zen Center, Zen Master Seung Sahn stood up to give a short dharma talk. He said in the traditional Zen story, it says Buddha perceived the morning star and got enlightenment. He said that was OK at that time but if Buddha was born today, his enlightenment would not be

to perceive the morning star. He said, "This is what Buddha's enlightenment now would be," and he went like this [*gestures*], as if he were crying tears of suffering.

Many of us have come here [to India] and had culture shock. To a certain degree, this isn't new for me. I come from New York City, and there's a lot of homelessness in New York City. At one time, I used to walk to work in the morning, which was about a mile and a half, and I would pass many homeless people begging on the way to work. You began to realize that you couldn't reach into your pocket and help each one of them, it would just be impossible.

Our practice is based on finding your center and making your center steady. Sometimes we say, "make your center strong." I like the word "steady" better. Steady, steady. Not moving. Steady. It's not not-moving in a rigid sense; it's steady.

Part of our practice of don't know means when we are confronted with overwhelming ambiguity and contradiction in the world we live in, we have to be able—if we are going to be helpful both to ourselves and to others—to keep our center steady. As it says in one of the sutras, "the bodhisattva attains tolerance of the inconceivable." To be able to tolerate the inconceivable means to keep your center steady in the midst of many ambiguities and contradictions, and realize that you can't just immediately start to try to help in certain kinds of situations. You have to stay with your own sense of not knowing what to do. To face your own feeling of helplessness. Out of that, something appears. And then we can be helpful to each other and to the world around us.

Thank you all for listening. And I just have one final piece of advice: whatever else you do, don't drink the water.

Does anyone have a question?

Question: I have a question about the bodhi tree here. This is the original bodhi tree or a descendent of it. How could we respond to assertions that this happened 2,500 years ago? We don't really know what happened.

Zen Master Wu Kwang: That's what I just said. You have to cultivate tolerance of the inconceivable. We don't know what this means. For some people, it means a lot to them.

Question: You say Buddha was born on one full moon day, and died on another full moon day. What does this full moon mean? Why full moon?

ZMWK: I didn't say that. That's what tradition says.

Q: Is there some kind of meaning? Why full moon?

ZMWK: You can make a lot of meanings out of the full moon. There's a kong-an in the Blue Cliff Record. Zen Master Un Mun one day said to the assembly, "I don't

ask you about before the full moon day, but after the full moon day give me one word!" No one in the assembly responded. So he answered himself, and said, "Every day is a good day."

[*Laughter, applause.*]

Zen Master Bon Soeng: Maybe this is some from the last question . . . I think there's a bit of tension: A lot of us Western practitioners, we don't really believe in a lot of the Buddhist stuff. And yet there's also something, some deep meaning in it. I think in our group maybe there's some tension between cynicism and devotion. I wonder if you could speak to that.

ZMWK: Cynicism and devotion. I'll repeat the question. In Jeff's opinion—or probably talking to many people he's gleaning this—we don't emphasize a strong devotional faith in something, and so for many people, on the one hand, there's a certain cynicism about all this, and on the other side there is something about devotion. And of course, devotion, if used correctly, is a very valuable thing connected with practice, a very important part of practice. What you're devoted to, you put energy into. You can be devoted to it from an emotional center or from a will center. If I'm devoted to sitting and I love the idea of Zen sitting and Zen teaching, then I have a devotion to that, but I may not have a strong emotional feeling about it in the normal sense of the word.

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If you become cynical about something, then you've already made something and you're already caught. You're not open. You're not having don't-know mind at that time. On the other hand, if you swallow something whole and don't digest it and get some personal connection with it, then it becomes a kind of blind faith or blind devotion. Somewhere in the middle there is something useful here.

Over the years, in visiting many of these places in China and Korea and now here, I've noticed that, whether you believe in these things literally or not, when you come into a place like this there is a certain feeling here. It's undeniable. If you just let yourself be open to that, that is nourishing to your practice.

I'll give an example. One time we were in Korea for one of these Whole World Is a Single Flower conferences. We went to visit the temple where Kyong Ho Sunim got enlightenment. Kyong Ho Sunim was Zen Master Seung

Sahn's great grandteacher.

It was hot that day, like this. It was quite a walk up toward the temple through a lot of people selling this and that and the other thing. We finally got up to where the temple was, and his hermitage was somewhere behind it. I was exhausted by that point and I sat down on the porch of the Buddha hall. I just sat there and suddenly I had this little experience, you know. And then Zen Master Dae Gak came by. I said, "You know, I was sitting here and I just had this very nice experience."

And he said, "You see that mountain over there and that mountain over there and the way the mountains are configured here and here? This is the power point of the temple." He understood geomancy. I don't know anything about geomancy. Geomancy, for those of you who don't know, is like the acupuncture points of the earth. They usually build temples at certain points where there's a meeting of certain mountain configurations and water flowing and I don't know what else. I didn't know anything about that. I just sat down on the steps, and I was exhausted; I just wanted to rest. I think there is something about these places. It isn't just some blind faith that brings so many people to these places year after year after year.

If Buddha actually practiced here and attained something, there's a strong point there to begin with. And if then many, many, many generations afterward enhanced this place, it's like recharging a battery over and over. There is something here.

Maybe one more question.

Question: Does that mean we're attached to this location?

ZMWK: [*Laughs.*] Are *you* attached to this location?

Don't attach to this location: *use* this location, find something, and then pass this location on to everybody else!

Using the location is different than attaching to this location. If you think that this place is the only place where you can have something, then you're attached to this location. Zen tradition or some other esoteric tradition will say, "What is the bodhi tree?" *This* is the bodhi tree. You can use something like this as an aid, as something helpful.

Thank you. ♦

