

Buddha's Enlightenment Day 2011

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[Raises Zen stick over his head, then hits table with stick.]

Every day people are born. Every day people die.

[Raises Zen stick over his head, then hits table with stick.]

The Buddha understood this point and realized there is no life, no death.

[Raises Zen stick over his head, then hits table with stick.]

Life is life, death is death.

KATZ!

Happy Buddha's Enlightenment Day!

We all know the story. Siddhartha Gautama was sitting under the Bodhi Tree, he looked up, saw the morning star and *boom!* he got enlightenment. And ever since then this story has been an inspiration to spiritual seekers because, let's face it, we believe the Buddha got something and we want to get what he got. Did he really get anything? Even before he saw the morning star he already had a taste of enlightenment at the banks of the Niranjana River.

Siddhartha had been practicing very hard for many years. He had been following the advice from different teachers who told him that in order to find the answer he was looking for he needed to give up worldly pleasures and subjugate his body. To this end, he exposed himself to the elements, endured many trials, and brought himself almost to the point of self-destruction. He was really, really thin and weak, nothing but skin and bones. It was so bad that he almost drowned when he bathed in the Niranjana River. In one version of the story, Sujata, a girl from the nearby village, seeing how famished he was, said to him, "It looks like you are really hungry. Can I bring you some food?" Siddhartha asked what her name was, and when she told him he replied, in a Zenlike style, "Sujata, I am very hungry. Can you really appease my hunger?" Perhaps he was not only referring to his physical hunger but also to his spiritual hunger. Sujata nodded, offered him milk and rice pudding, and told him, "Yes, this will appease your hunger." I like to imagine that what Sujata offered him was a delicious bowl of kheer, the nice rice dessert that you can find at an Indian restaurant.

The moment Siddhartha tasted Sujata's offering he had a profound realization: he had been too hard on himself. You can imagine how good that kheer must have tasted after eating very little for many years. He probably felt good, happy, thankful. He felt his strength coming back. At the first taste he understood cause-and-effect; he attained just like this: when hungry eat; when tired sleep. That, for me, was Siddhartha's first taste, literally, of enlightenment.

Today we celebrate Buddha's enlightenment. But what

did he attain? Under the Bodhi Tree Buddha realized that the body has life and death but original nature has no life or death. After six years of strong practice he understood himself 100 percent. The Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, on the other hand, lived a simple life and attained enlightenment after hearing one sentence from the Diamond Sutra: "Do not become attached to any thoughts that arise in the mind." At that moment, he also understood himself 100 percent. He told the Fifth Patriarch, "Human beings have north and south, but in Buddha nature is there north and south?" Buddha saw a star and got enlightenment, Hui Neng heard a sentence and got enlightenment. Are these the same or different?

In Zen we talk a lot of talk about life and death, and sometimes we may take this literally. But life and death happen in this moment, right in front of our eyes. "Life and death" point to the never-ending appearance and disappearance of phenomena. If you pay attention when you are sitting in meditation, and even sometimes in your daily life, you will notice that thoughts appear and thoughts disappear, that feelings appear and feelings disappear, that impulses appear and impulses disappear, that sounds appear and sounds disappear.

In the Wake-Up sermon Bodhidharma said, "Sages don't consider the past. And they don't worry about the future." At some level we understand that yes, the past is gone and the future is not yet here, and that all we have is the present, or so we think. Bodhidharma continues, "Nor do they cling to the present." That is a very interesting point: we have to let go even of the present! How do we not cling to the present? He concludes, "And from moment to moment they follow the Way." Moment to moment. Sounds familiar? If we keep a clear mind then each moment is enough, each action is complete. Moment by moment there is no life, no death. Moment by moment, just like this is the truth.

The star that the Buddha saw is still up in the sky. I hope that tonight you remember to look up and, without thinking, see it as for the first time.

[Raises Zen stick over his head, then hits table with stick.]

A star appears. Is that birth?

[Raises Zen stick over his head, then hits table with stick.]

A star disappears. Is that death?

[Raises Zen stick over his head, then hits table with stick.]

The sky itself is beyond birth and death.

KATZ!

Watch your step on the way out. ♦