

## SYRAP II

### 1. The Buddha

Learn about the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, as a great man whose teachings show the way to inner peace through compassion and wisdom

#### A. Review early life

The Sakya clan ruled a small country in northern India. Their leader was King Suddhodana with his Queen Maya. Being with child, the queen left to stay with her family till the child was born. Resting at Lumbini's Garden, the child was born there on the eighth day in April in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. He was given the name Siddhartha. Today the date is celebrated as Hanamatsuri ("Flower Festival") or Buddha Day.

One day, Prince Siddhartha noticed a tiny bird pull a worm out of the ground and ate it. Soon after, a hawk ate the tiny bird. Seeing this, he concluded that living things could exist only by killing and eating other living things. He began to think deeply about the meaning of life.

Prince Siddhartha decided to observe the world outside the palace gates. Leaving the Eastern gate, he saw an emaciated old man. He wondered if he would become old like that man. Later he left the Southern gate and saw a man wasted by illness. When he left the Western gate he saw a funeral procession. He realized that life was just one endless round of life and death and suffering. Leaving the Northern gate, he saw a monk who had abandoned the ways of the world. He saw that the monk was noble and dignified so resolved to become a monk one day.

#### B. Review Sakyamuni's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree

Prince Siddhartha's desire to seek the Way continued to grow so when he was 29 years old he gave up the life of a prince, left his family (king, queen, wife, and son) to seek the Way.

Making his way south to a forest next to the capital city of Rajagrha in the country of Magadha, the greatest thinkers assembled. Siddhartha began to question these great thinkers but he soon realized that they did not have the answers to satisfy his search.

Determined to seek the truth, he joined five ascetics who lived in a forest next to Uruvilva Village. Their practice was so strict he consumed only a grain of rice or sometimes nothing at all. After six years of this severe lifestyle, he realized he would never attain Awakening by following this

course. Leaving the mountain, he washed himself in the Nairanjana River and accepted milk-porridge from Sujata, the daughter of a village elder.

After regaining his health, Siddhartha sat under a large bodhi tree (pippala) on the outskirts of the town named Gaya. He vowed not to rise until he attained Awakening and he began to meditate.

King Mara appeared to distract Siddhartha from attaining Buddhahood. He threatened Siddhartha with a flaming sword. Since this did not work he turned himself into a desirable woman, but Siddhartha successfully overcame the external threat and internal seduction of his base passions. On the eighth day of the twelfth month, Siddhartha was released from the unawareness that causes agony over old age, illness, and death. He became Awakened to the Way of Absolute Truth.

He was now 35 years of age. From that time on, he was referred to as Sakyamuni Buddha. Sakyamuni means “sage of the Sakya clan” and Buddha means “Awakened One.” He is quoted as saying, “We are not noble because of the family into which we were born. Rather, we become noble as a result of our actions.” We honor Sakyamuni Buddha today because of his Awakening and the compassion and deeply wise actions that flowed from it.

#### C. Learning about his first sermon

After his Awakening, Sakyamuni Buddha was convinced he needed to share it with others. He wanted to share his understanding with the five ascetics who were performing their practice in Mrgadava on the outskirts of Varanasi, about 125 miles away from Gaya. They weren't going to listen to him because he abandoned the Way, but as Sakyamuni approached they noticed he now overflowed with strength and confidence. Seeing this newfound change, they decided to listen to him and this first dharma talk was referred to as “Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion.” With this dharma talk, the “Three Treasures” were complete – the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha (disciples who gathered around the Buddha.) Spreading the teaching is like the turning of a wheel, and this is the activity Sakyamuni Buddha engaged in until the end of his life.

Sakyamuni Buddha disregarded the caste system in India and considered everyone to be on an equal social level. When he traveled around India spreading the dharma, he stayed in different towns in various kingdoms. He also stayed at the homes of the poor as well as the learned and wealthy. In this way he spread the dharma crossing all social strata and the boundaries of all kingdoms. He developed a tremendous following

because he took into account the personalities of the people in order to teach effectively. Everyone was overwhelmed by his gentle and compassionate nature.

Sakyamuni Buddha taught the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path in his first sermon. He maintained that choosing the extremes of pleasure and ascetics was no benefit but recommended the Middle Way.

#### The Four Noble Truths

- Life is Suffering

Sakyamuni Buddha said that life was unavoidably connected to suffering. The four types of suffering are birth, old age, sickness, and death. He added four more: parting from those we love, having to associate with those we dislike, being unable to acquire what we wish, being attached to the five elemental aggregates' of which our body, mind, and environment are composed. This is the truth of life.

- Truth of the Cause of Suffering

Sakyamuni Buddha taught that the basic cause of suffering is our worldly desires, or bonno. They are called "blind " passions because we can see them in others but we fail to see them in ourselves. When we seek the root of our greed, anger, and unawareness, we see our egotism. Making our decisions based on our egos, wanting everything to turn out the way we want is the cause of our suffering.

- Transcending Suffering

The awareness that our blind passions are the cause of our suffering will help to stop our suffering, but also we would need to give up the egotistic mind and heart. Our blind desires will no longer control us.

- The Eightfold Path

The way to transcend the ego is to follow the Eightfold Path.

1. Right View means the right point of view that does not put the self first. If one can maintain the right point of view, focus on others, and open to receive life experiences with a mind towards personal growth.
2. Right Thought is produced by our inner voice, and motivates our actions. Nurturing right thought will be a process and journey we can experience and benefit from if we can be aware, open, and accept our life and ourselves.
3. Right Speech arises from our thoughts. It is what we say that can set in motion energy positive or negative. We should say things that will help others.
4. Right Conduct arises from our thoughts. It is what we do like being kind, smiling at others, and thinking about the needs of others rather than yourself.

5. Right Livelihood is to earn one's living without hurting others. If we do things to maintain the focus off ourselves and to appreciate the world around us will continue over into our working lives.
6. Right Endeavor is to understand the amount of effort and resources needed to accomplish the task. If one maintains the ideal of the Middle Path in one's endeavors, then one will be able to discern what is reasonable and appropriate.
7. Right Mindfulness is to be aware of what we are doing in the present moment, doing the best we can, and in full appreciation of what we are experiencing and of all the things that surround us. Reflect the truth through love, joy, compassion, and equality. It means to have one's mind filled with the love and wisdom of Buddhahood. In this awareness we can appreciate Amida Buddha.
8. Right Meditation is allows us to center ourselves and to calm our minds. It means serenity in life. When our minds are serene, we are able to reflect the truth about life and all things.

#### D. Learning about his later sermons

The key to understanding the Dharma or reaching the truth is Dependent Origination. This means all things are related by "cause", "condition", and "result." All things in this world are interdependent and interconnected.

The Buddha said the "dharma of dependent origination" couldn't be refuted because even if I, Shakyamuni Buddha, had not come into this world the truth is the truth. We must use reason to solve our problems, and recognize the causes and conditions that brought them about. The Buddha taught in this fashion that the cause of all suffering exempts no one. The basic cause of this suffering is unawareness.

Therefore, the solution to our suffering is to look into ourselves and become aware of the problem. Just the intellectual understanding of dependent origination is not enough. We must change our viewpoint so that we see and respond to the world with interdependence.

The basic principles of Buddha-dharma are reflected in the following concepts of dependent origination and the true aspect of life.

"All conditioned things are impermanent." All things change in relation to causes and conditions.

"Phenomenal things exist only because of conditions, therefore, they have no substance." Nothing exists independently or statically.

"Nirvana is peace." If we can transcend suffering, we are able to live with untroubled peace of mind.

## 2. Amida Buddha

To arrive at an understanding of Amida Buddha as the “ultimate reality” an omnipresence of infinite compassion and infinite wisdom.

### A. Review the sacred story

Sakyamuni Buddha spoke at Vulture’s Peak near Rajagrha to explain about Amida Buddha. He told the story of a king who renounced his throne and was given the name Dharmakara. He resolved that he would save human beings from suffering. He made forty-eight vows and promised he would not become a Buddha until it was possible for all beings to be born in the Pure Land.

For an inconceivably long time, he devoted his life to performing the duties of the bodhisattva until he attained the highest, perfect Enlightenment. Realizing wisdom and compassion, he became Amida Buddha. By becoming Buddha, he fulfilled his vows and accomplished the liberation of all humanity.

Sakyamuni reassured the people to trust completely in the Teaching and to recite the Name of Amida Buddha, “Namo Amida Butsu,” for the great compassion and wisdom of Amida would always be with them.

Amida Buddha is ultimate Compassion and Wisdom. Amida is neither a creative nor a destructive force. Amida is neither forgiving nor judgmental, neither merciful nor vengeful. Amida Buddha asks for nothing; Amida Buddha simply beckons all to his Pure Land. Amida’s Vow is therefore an unconditional promise of compassion and liberation.

### B. Review the 48 Vows

The Larger Sutra tells the story of Hozo Bosatsu (Bodhisattva Dharmakara) who made 48 vows and mediated and worked for countless number of years to fulfill all the vows. Of the 48 vows, the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow is most important because here he aspires for the universal salvation of all beings. It reads, “Upon my attainment of Buddhahood, if sentient beings in the ten quarters, who have sincerity of heart, hold faith, and wish to be born in my land, repeating My Name perhaps up to ten times, would not be born therein, then may I not obtain the Great Enlightenment.”

The Primal Vow (18<sup>th</sup> Vow) of Amida, is concerned with those whose abilities are so finite and weak that they can never hope to attain Buddhahood. Amida, therefore, put His labor of love into the sacred name – Namo Amida Butsu. This Nembutsu is the embodiment of purity, truth, goodness, beauty, wisdom, and peace. In other words it embodies all the highest values and qualities both conceivable and inconceivable, which Amida was able to perfect in His infinitely

long period of meditation and practice. Sentient beings in every corner of the universe hear His name and accept it with a simple, trusting heart.

The phrase *Namo Amida Butsu* contains all the essentials for liberation. Hearing the intent of the Name becomes “entrusting” and reciting it becomes “practice.” Amida Buddha embraces all beings and “takes us in, never to be abandoned.” While hearts and minds are hurt and distressed in everyday life, and awareness of the Truth is obstructed by ignorance and blind passions, human beings cannot see Amida, yet they are always enveloped by the light of Great Compassion and protected by it.

Although the term *Namo* have the meanings such as “to rely upon, to entrust to” it is not a conscious, self-directed activity. Actually, Amida Buddha has already accomplished the “trusting.” Amida Buddha is calling us even before we have entrusted ourselves to Amida. Thus, the human intonation of “*Namo Amida Butsu*” is, in effect, the resonance of Amida’s call, assuring liberation.

Sakyamuni is the historical being that founded a spiritual teaching and taught about Amida Buddha’s liberation. Sakyamuni urged everyone to experience the Buddha’s Primal Vow and assured them of its Power. Amida represents ultimate reality, which is beyond time and space. Sakyamuni Buddha and Amida Buddha are the “Parents of Compassion.” Amida Buddha can be considered the mother of our “emancipation,” while Sakyamuni Buddha can be considered the father of the “teaching” about that emancipation.

### C. Pure Land

The Pure Land Path is faithful to Shakyamuni Buddha’s desire to open a way for all humans to be awakened. In the *Smaller Sutra* the Pure Land is described as:

Beyond a hundred thousand kotis of Buddha-lands westwards from here, there is a land called ‘Perfect Bliss.’ In that land there is a Buddha called Amida who is expounding the Dharma at this moment.

...(I)n the Land of Perfect Bliss there are many pools of seven kinds of jewels, full of water with the eight excellent qualities. The bottoms of the pools are covered entirely with sands of gold. On the four sides of the pools, there are stairways made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal...There are lotus flowers, as large as chariot wheels, growing in the pools. Those of blue color emit blue radiance; those of yellow color emit yellow radiance; those of red color emit red radiance; and those of white color emit white radiance. They are exquisite, wonderful, fragrant and pure.

The Pure Land is the land created by Amida Buddha’s Vow-Power that developed from fulfilling the vows he made as a bodhisattva. Since the purpose of Amida Buddha’s Vow is to engage all sentient beings, the world that was created in

response to that Vow is the ideal world that everyone envisions. We simply accept the Pure Land as the “world that is awaiting us.” It is the ultimate reality that transcends the present life with all its imperfections and illusions.

One aspect of being born in the Pure Land is that it is an end for negative characteristics and resulting karmic suffering. The other aspect, however, is that it allows everyone to attain limitless life and higher wisdom, and to work as a bodhisattva for the benefit of all sentient beings, endlessly.

### **Sources**

*Jodo Shinshu: A Guide* 2002

*Jodo Shinshu: A Guide* 2004

*Young Peoples' Introduction to Buddhism*

“HOZO” Quarterly Journal of the Shin Buddhist Project - Fall 2003, Winter 2003.

Spring 2004, Winter 2004

## **Suggested Activities**

### **A. Historical Buddha**

1. Create a timeline or a map tracing Sakyamuni's life and showing the sites of significant moments in his life.
2. Discuss personal items in your life today that are precious to you and write in a journal the possibility of sacrificing all of it to seek a monk's life.
3. Plan a Hanamatsuri service for your temple.
4. Plan a Bodhi Day service for your temple.
5. Discuss with your group the meaning of life. How could you make life more meaningful for someone in your community?
6. Give a dharma talk to your group about a part of Four Noble Truths or Eightfold Path. Be sure to connect the ideas to everyday life or an incident that happened to you.
7. Discuss with your group why the Buddha was so successful in talking to people and getting them to understand the Dharma. Plan an activity that would help a younger or older group understand the Dharma.
8. Look at yourself. Compare yourself from one year ago to today. How have you changed? Make a poster to show the aspect of yourself that has changed – the before and after picture.
9. Book review – titles of books that would help discussions

## B. Amida Buddha

1. Discuss with your group the reasons there are so many stories to explain situations like the Jakata Tales, Boddhisattva Dharmakara, birth of the Buddha.
2. Discuss with your group Amida Buddha and Sakyamuni Buddha and make a T-chart comparing them.
3. Discuss with your group the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow – the Primal Vow
4. Discuss with your group about the Pure Land. Draw a picture to show your interpretation of the Pure Land. Make a 3 dimensional object, a video, a photograph, etc.