

Awakening with the Buddha

A community Bodhi Day service talk
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Good morning everyone. It is my great privilege and pleasure to speak to you on this auspicious day. Today, we commemorate a major event in world history, the spiritual awakening of Gautama Buddha who changed the history of the world. The religious movement we now call Buddhism began around 535 B.C.E. when Siddhartha Gautama experienced his "Awakening" to the truth of his life and ours. The repercussions of this movement are still rippling through the world, as Buddhism has penetrated every major culture and nation.

Gautama was around 35 years of age when he experienced what we call "Awakening" or "Enlightenment." He saw things as they really are, and in that moment became a religious "Realist."

By the time Buddha passed into complete Nirvana around 485 B.C.E., after an active life of 80 years, his new movement had become a lasting monastic Order with a significant following of disciples. It has continued to spread and evolve on the stage of history now for almost 2,600 years, producing a body of literature or Sutras, rules of discipline and various forms of literature and institutions in many countries till the present time. It has taken many forms in South and North Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

Now it has taken root in the West where it has gained followers among all levels of the population. According to one recent study, the sociologist of religion, Robert Wuthnow, judges that Buddhism has influenced as many as four million people in the United States through meditation practices, literature and academic or on-line courses. Other studies have estimated that the number of Buddhist adherents scattered over our country together total about two million followers in many traditions. Given the number of publications, which have increased astronomically since I myself began to study Buddhism, there is a wide interest, if not commitment, to Buddhism.

Since I began my own study in the mid-1950s, we find 50 years later that almost all major universities, state and private, have departments of religion and resident Buddhist scholars.

Though our society is in a state of turmoil and confusion, and we are involved in yet another debilitating war, people are still seeking the truth for their lives and to understand the world we all live in. Interest in spiritual issues has never been stronger or more widespread than it is today. We are beginning to realize that most of the issues in our society and culture have a deep spiritual root. All violence -- personal, family, social, and national -- has, or rather, lacks a true spiritual basis.

These problems have a background in our competitive, materialistic culture. Racism, sexism, drug trafficking and the modern slavery of 'human trafficking' represent a deep misunderstanding of reality and the distortion of the human spirit. It is clear that many, many people are not awake to the true nature of their lives.

However, in this hour, in this sacred and beautiful Temple, we come together to commemorate that important event when Siddhartha Gautama attained "awakening" and became The Buddha, the "Awakened One" who is not only the Teacher of the ancient Sakya clan (Sakyamuni), but the universal Teacher of both gods and men. His truth is timeless and Cosmic.

He is the Awakened One, who, awakened to the truth of all existence, offered it to the world, wherever living beings wander in the darkness of ignorance and delusion, gripped by greed and anger, anxious because of hatred and suspicion, or oppressed by superstition and religious fears.

Buddha's awakening was a process, which began when he emerged from his father's palace and culminated in the event of Awakening. Gautama left home to confront the realities of his world, presented by the problems of birth, illness, old age and death, the four marks of impermanence. He awoke to the direction he should go when he encountered a tranquil monk. Inspired by this example, he renounced the life of pleasure and self-indulgence he had followed for 29 years.

In a dramatic scene, Gautama abandoned his family and home, tripping over sleeping dancing girls and fleeing on his steed, accompanied by his faithful attendant. Cutting off his hair and changing his elegant clothes to simple robes, Gautama began his process of awakening.

He sought out several famous teachers to guide him, only to find them inadequate. He left those teachers, taking up with a band of seekers. Together they sought the truth, but Gautama found that following the crowd was not sufficient to reveal the truth. So he left his friends and engaged in an independent search.

In his spiritual journey he found that depriving the body of food and rest, while restraining the mind by stopping thought through ascetic practice, was not useful. He realized that we must have a sound mind in a sound body to awaken spiritually.

While he was meditating, in a state of near-starvation, a young woman found him and brought him cereal to nourish his body. He was soon refreshed and energized.

We think that Gautama gained awakening totally on his own. However, we forget the offering of this young woman, Sujata, whose compassionate act restored his body and enabled him to continue on his path to awakening. This may be Gautama's first awakening to Interdependence, a key concept which became the centerpiece of his teaching.

Gautama's path to Awakening is marked by a series of leavings or departures; he left home (Shukke); he left teachers; he left friends; he left all extremes behind and put all duality aside. He renounced completely all forms of bondage which obstruct spiritual awakening.

These elements are noted in Buddha's first sermon in Benares where he outlines the Four Noble truths of 1) suffering (here we might use other terms such as dissatisfaction, frustration, futility, surfeit, anxiety) 2) the cause or condition of suffering lies in our passions while the 3) resolution of our suffering lies in the 4) Eightfold Noble Path. The Eightfold Path details a way of disciplining our behavior, speech and thought, thereby defusing or removing our passions.

Gautama taught the Middle Path between the extremes of pleasure and pain. He calls for Balance in the quest for truth. Further severe deprivation of the body produces delusions as many stories from world religious literature show. REPRESSION is like holding steam inside a boiling kettle. It WILL eventually explode. We can and must learn to re-direct human energies in less self-centered and destructive ways.

A central principle of Gautama was the principle of Interdependence. This principle makes clear that no one attains anything totally on his or her own. We are all involved in a great net of mutual interaction. We are all interconnected, interactive and obviously interdependent.

We Buddhists like to talk a lot about the concept of interdependence. Yet, have you ever noticed how people try to do everything by themselves even when it is clear they need help? Persisting on their self-willed path, people refuse to consult with others or resist accepting choices that make it easier for everyone involved. However, interdependence instructs us that ALL of our acts affect others. It takes an 'Awakening' to become aware of, and open to, choices that can benefit others, as well as ourselves. Individualism is a delusion.

Related to interdependence is Gautama's important spiritual insight of no-soul or no-essence in things, including ourselves. Buddha was indicating that human life is an interacting process, not a fixed, static condition. The essence of life in nature, as well as ourselves, is change, growth, flexibility and adaptability. Buddhists should be most open to the unfolding possibilities that confront us in our dynamic life process just as the surfer catches the wave and rides it to the shore.

So far the story of Gautama's Awakening is an interesting account, a model or paradigm for all of us on the path to Awakening. However, as a story of a now dim and distant past, the story means little unless we, too, give reality to the process of Awakening through our own Awakening to the truth of our lives. Buddhism is a teaching of Awakening. Unless we awaken, Buddhism has little meaning in our contemporary world. Buddhists must become aware and enlightened people in all areas of experience, if we are to serve our world and those who live in it.

What do we awaken to? Of course, each person's path is unique. Gautama struck out on his own path. He found that he could not just follow other peoples' prescriptions or demands. He had to find his own way. Gautama had an independent spirit which led him to go beyond his present limitations. He became self-aware in contrast to those who are simply self-conscious. He thought outside the box.

Buddhism teaches us to awaken to our responsibility for creating positive relations in the world. It offers us freedom from the bondage of ego and passion. As we contemplate the process of Gautama's Awakening, we must recognize that the ancient story is not merely a story, but a pattern for our own experience. It is the story of a transformation as Gautama awoke to the realities of suffering in his life and world. Gautama transformed to a spiritually independent seeker, taking responsibility for his own life, and engaging in the discovery of the truth that would liberate himself and others.

We cannot simply imitate Gautama, renouncing the world, family, teachers, or friends, but we can share his process of Awakening by becoming aware of the ego-bondage that distorts our lives, our own value priorities, our complicities with the evils in society, our own contribution to the conflicts that arise in our lives. Our deep reflection on Buddhist teachings will aid us in making better choices that will enhance our lives, as well as the life of others and reduce the conflicts, and violence in our world.

Human history is at a crossroad. Will we have perpetual war or can there be peace and mutual acceptance? How can people live together without destroying each other? Today is the time to make Gautama's Awakening our own Awakening. It is only through both our individual and 'collective' awakening as a Buddhist community, that the spirit of Buddhism can counter the forces of division, hatred and prejudice, while enlarging the boundaries of compassion and peace, locally and globally.