

## **The Buddha's Teaching from Experience**

Good morning. Welcome to this mini-rohatsu sesshin where we commemorate the enlightenment and life of the historical Buddha.

Fitting to the occasion, let's look into the Buddha's experience and the teaching that comes from it. How can what happened more than 2500 years ago be of interest in our time?

There's a formulation in the Sanbo Zen lineage – founded by Yasutani and Yamada Roshis – that “our fundamental position is to stand at the origin point of Buddhism through the Dharma gate of Dogen Zenji.” What does it mean to stand at the origin point through a Dharma gate?

The origin point of Buddhism means Shakyamuni-Buddha and his awakening experience. And that we follow the example and teaching of Shakyamuni with the aim of realizing and manifesting our own awakened nature.

How to actualize this aim – of realizing and manifesting our own nature – is traditionally established as correct zazen practice. This is the Dharma gate of Dogen Zenji. In Zen Clare Sangha we say we sit (practice zazen) to forget ourselves. The expression to forget ourselves comes from Dogen; forgetting the self is often a synonym for awakening in Zen.

So let's take up the origin point – Shakyamuni-Buddha himself. It's good for us to know his story and how his awakening reflects in his teaching.

Siddhartha Gautama was born around 567 BC in a small kingdom just below the Himalayan foothills. Siddhartha translates as “the one who accomplishes one's purpose.” His father was chief of the Shakya clan. It was prophesized 12 years before Siddhartha's birth that he would become either a universal monarch or a great sage. To prevent him from becoming an ascetic, his father kept him within the confines of the palace walls.

So it was, Siddhartha grew up in princely luxury, shielded from the outside world. He had, as we might say today, everything. And yet, it was not enough.

Something – something as persistent as his own shadow – drew him into the world beyond the castle walls. There, in the streets of Kapilavastu, he encountered three simple things: a sick man, an old man and a corpse being carried to the burning grounds. Nothing in his life of ease had prepared him for this; he hadn't seen it before. When his charioteer told him that all beings are subject to sickness, old age

and death, Siddhartha could not rest. Returning to the palace, he passed a wandering ascetic walking peacefully along, wearing the robe and carrying the bowl of a *sadhu*.

This experience beyond the castle walls was a compelling call to awakening for Siddhartha. Without willing it, he found himself asking deep and fundamental questions. *What does it mean to be born into a body subject to sickness, old age and death? Is there an answer to the problem of suffering? What is the meaning of human life?* These sorts of questions.

Struggling with such questions, he resolved to leave the palace in search of the answers. Without waking them, he bade his wife and child a silent farewell, then rode to the edge of the forest where he exchanged his fine clothes for the simple robe of an ascetic.

With these actions, Siddhartha joined a whole class of men who had dropped out of Indian society. As long as anyone could remember there had always been *rishis* – homeless wanderers devoted to yoga, meditation and ascetic practices. There were a variety of methods and teachers – atheists, materialists, idealists, dialecticians – and Siddhartha investigated them. The forest and the market-place were teeming with the sounds of argument and opinion. In this it was a time not unlike our own time.

Siddhartha settled down to work with two teachers. He learned how to discipline his mind and how to enter the concentration of mind that is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. But recognizing this was not liberation, he left the teachers.

Then, for six years, along with five companions, Siddhartha practiced austerities and concentration. He drove himself mercilessly, pitting mind against body. His ribs stuck through his wasted flesh and he seemed more dead than alive. This long period of ascetic training convinced Siddhartha that true awakening was not a product of asceticism. So he abandoned it, and his companions left him.

Siddhartha entered a village where a woman named Sujata offered him food. Nourishing himself, his strength returned. He then went to sit under what later became known as the Bodhi tree. He spread a grass mat underneath, crossed his legs and sat.

When the Buddha seated himself beneath the Bodhi tree, it is said he made the following resolve: “Let only skin, sinew, and bone remain, let the flesh and blood

dry in my body, but I will not give up this seat without attaining complete enlightenment.”

He sat, having listened to all the teachers, studied all the sacred texts and tried all the methods. Now there was nothing to rely on, no one to turn to, nowhere to go. He sat solid and unmoving and determined as a mountain.

Finally, after six days, on December 8, his eye opened on the rising morning star, so it is written, and he realized that what he had been looking for had never been lost, neither to him nor anyone else. Therefore there was nothing to attain, and no longer any struggle to attain it.

“Wonder of wonders,” he is reported to have said, “this very enlightenment is the nature of all beings, and yet they are unhappy for lack of it.” Quoting the sutras, Yamada Roshi said when Siddhartha attained his great enlightenment, he was astonished by the magnificence of the essential universe and, quite beside himself, exclaimed “All sentient beings have Buddha (Awakened) Nature. But owing to their delusions, they cannot recognize this.”

So it was that Siddhartha Gautama woke up at the age of 35, some six years after leaving the palace, and became the Buddha, the Awakened One, known as Shakyamuni, sage of the Shakyas. It is recorded that for seven weeks he enjoyed the freedom and tranquility of liberation. At first he had no inclination to speak about his realization. There is a gatha in one of the Sutras where he says, “Profound peace without limit, such is the Teaching I have found. But no one would be able to understand this, therefore I shall remain in the forest,” he said.

It is written that Shakyamuni surveyed the world with his awakened eye and saw that everyone was trying to achieve happiness, but most were doing the opposite of what would work to achieve it. Then, at the very moment he was deciding not to teach but stay in the forest, the true and unconditional compassion arose in him. He saw his ability to create the right situation. He no longer had the idea that he had to save people, did not think of himself as a Teacher, but whenever the situation presented itself he dealt with it spontaneously. Legend has it that Brahma – chief of the 3000 worlds – requested the Awakened One to teach since there were those “whose eyes were only a little clouded over.” The Buddha agreed to teach.

Shakyamuni’s two former teachers had died so he sought out the five ascetics who had left him. When they saw him approaching Deer Park in Benares they ignored him, since he had broken his vows of asceticism. Yet they found a radiance about

his presence that changed their minds. They prepared a seat for him and listened as the Buddha turned the wheel of the dharma, the teachings – for the first time. (These five ascetics became the original sangha.)

The First Noble Truth of the Buddha states that life is characterized by *duhkha* – a composite Sanskrit word for suffering, pain, ill being, sorrow, discomfort, *that which is difficult to bear*. Duhkha is a response to mortality, the fleetingness and insubstantial nature of everything.

The truth of duhkha is the basis of Shakyamuni’s well-known statement: “I teach one thing and one thing only – that is suffering and the end of suffering.” To that end, he taught the Noble Eightfold Path. This path is the way of freeing oneself from dukkha.

Translating duhkha as anguish, Robert Aitken Roshi sums up the Four Noble Truths as follows: 1) Anguish is everywhere, 2) There is a cause of anguish, 3) There is liberation from anguish, and 4) Liberation is the Eightfold Path.

“I teach one thing and one thing only – that is suffering and the end of suffering.” How you may ask did Shakyamuni teach this?

It’s interesting to investigate how the Buddha taught. When still in the forest, he saw his ability to create the right situation and to come forth spontaneously whenever the situation presented itself. His vision inspired him to teach, to help.

For 45 some years the Buddha walked through the villages and towns of India, speaking in the vernacular, using common figures of speech. It was just simple conversation. More important was the whole situation he created. It was said that the Teaching was often given before he opened his mouth. That is why we find in the Sutras that all kinds of people from different parts of India attended his talks, saw and met him, and all could understand him. Sometimes without asking, they received and knew the answers to their questions.

The Buddha made skillful use of the circumstances and conditions before him. He taught a woman to practice mindfulness while drawing water from a well. Shakyamuni never claimed to be any kind of deity or divine being, but just a human being, who had certain experiences and achieved the awakened state of mind.

The term *freedom of being* is sometimes used to describe how the Buddha lived and taught. This is the freedom that helps us express our ingenuity and creative

power through natural and spontaneous functioning – which can be blocked if we rely only on formal methods and techniques – or become too mechanical.

There's the example of a centipede. This centipede had great skill in using 100 legs at once. His difficulty arose when he stopped walking naturally as shown in this verse:

*The centipede was happy quite  
Until a toad in fun  
Asked him "Which leg follows after which?"  
This worked the centipede's mind to such a pitch  
He lay distracted in a ditch  
Considering how to run!*

All of us have some experience of this, isn't it? It's the paralysis of analysis, procrastination, thinking something to death, a seeming inability to act simply and straightforwardly. Such experience helps us appreciate freedom of being, and encourages our practice of letting go and being present.

Dogen Zenji said that "assisting the mind to return to its original state is the essence of zazen. He looked to the true spirit of Shakyamuni, where an appeal is made to fluid and direct intuition, rather than static and rigid logic.

Back to the origin point – Shakyamuni Buddha. So what else can be said about the Buddha's teaching? Put simply, the path taught by the Buddha can be divided into three parts: *silā, samādhi and prajñā*. These are Sanskrit terms for ethical conduct, concentration and wisdom and awakening. Or translating the Sanskrit into the vernacular: *clean up your act, concentrate your mind, and use your concentrated mind to investigate reality and wake up*. These three elements embody all the bodhisattva precepts we study for *jukai*.

Shakyamuni Buddha insisted that disciples see for themselves, otherwise his teaching would be for naught. The village woman had to draw the well water for herself to see about mindfulness. "Be a lamp onto yourself," the Buddha said. Don't accept anything I say without knowing it for yourself.

Let me close this morning with a story that shows how the Buddha helped a woman know for herself. It is the story of Kisagotami.

Kisagotami was a young woman in the time of Shakyamuni. She married into a wealthy family. But her in-laws didn't treat her well and she was having a difficult

time in life. She gave birth to a baby boy. Then the in-laws treated her much better.

Unexpectedly, before its first birthday, the baby got sick and died. Kisagotami literally went insane with grief. Her mourning became hysterical, she lost her senses. She carried the dead child in a hipsling wherever she went. The village people shook their heads in pity as she walked by, and soon began calling her “Kisa, the madwoman with the dead baby.”

One day, passing by a grove where Shakyamuni Buddha and his followers were staying, Kisagotami had a sudden thought: “They say this Buddha is a great healer. Maybe he can bring my baby back to life.”

So she swept through the crowds around the Buddha and boldly approached him. “World Honored One,” she said, “I’ve come to you because I believe you can bring my child back to life. Please help me!”

Shakyamuni looked into Kisa’s eyes and saw the grief-twisted mind behind them. He reached out to her, held both her hands, and said, “Kisagotami, I can only bring your baby back to you if you help.”

“Help?” asked Kisa. “Yes! Yes! Of course!” she said. “I’ll do anything – anything you ask of me if only you bring my baby son back. What must I do? Tell me quickly, so that I may do it.”

“Go back to your village,” said the Buddha, “and bring me a mustard seed from a house where no one has died. With this mustard I can bring your baby back to life.”

Kisagotami’s heart flooded with joy at these words. “A mustard seed!” she said. “Why I’ll bring you a basket full of mustard seeds!”

“I only need one,” said the Buddha.

So Kisa quickly returned to her village and went to the first house she saw, and urgently knocked on the door. “O please,” she said, “do you have any mustard seeds? It’s for my baby. Will you please give me a mustard seed?”

“Yes of course,” said the woman of the house, “I have mustard seeds and I’ll give you as many seeds as you want.”

“I only need one,” said Kisagotami.

“Well you wait here and I’ll get your mustard seed.” The woman of the house

went to her kitchen, returned with the seed and gave it to the young woman.

“Thank you, thank you,” said Kisagotami, “now my baby will live again.” “What do you mean?” asked the woman of the house.

“Shakyamuni the great sage will bring my child back to life with this precious little mustard seed,” Kisagotami said, her heart racing. Then she remembered the Buddha’s words. “O, I forgot to ask you, has anyone died in this house?”

“Yes,” said the woman, “my father died last year.”

“O,” said Kisa, “I’m sorry for you. Death is terrible. I know because I carry my dead baby with me. Thank you for your kindness, but I’ll have to find the mustard seed elsewhere. I have to find a mustard seed in a house where no one has died.”

So she quickly went to the next house. Again she was cordially received and a mustard seed was offered to her. Again Kisa asked “Has anyone died in this house?”

“Yes my husband passed away last spring,” said the woman of house.

“O,” said Kisagotami, “how terrible for you to be left alone. I am sad for you. Now I have to find my mustard seed somewhere else.”

So Kisa continued her pilgrimage going from house to house, knocking on door after door. Each time she was offered a mustard seed. But, each time she was told of a death that had occurred in that house. And each time Kisagotami’s heart met the ones who told her of death after death. In house after house, it was a parent, an aunt, or uncle, a brother or sister a son or daughter, or a baby just like Kisa’s own baby. With each visit the woman’s heart sank deeper and deeper. But her eyes became clearer and clearer.

Kisagotami managed to visit every house in her village. She mourned with each person who received her. There was not a single house where her mustard seed could be found. The mustard seed had become magical. The famous magical mustard seed from a house where no one has died.

And Kisagotami was different. Her eyes were no longer crazed. Her mind was clear. She still mourned the death of her baby but now she also mourned the deaths of all the people in all the houses she had gone to. Even the animals. All who had died. She now saw that no one was spared. From the richest household to the poorest beggar’s hut, death had struck. All. Without discrimination. The sorrow in

her heart was for all.

So Kisa returned home. She wrapped her baby in funeral garments. She went to her kitchen. She took a tiny mustard seed from its container, and placed it next to her baby's heart. She took and placed the child on its funeral pyre and finally took leave of her baby.

Some days later, Kisagotami went to the camp of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Buddha saw her coming. He rose and went to her. He saw from her walk there was a difference. Her gait was solemn and steady. He saw her eyes were clear. "So Kisagotami have you found your mustard seed?"

"Yes, I found it. But not the one I was looking for. The mustard seed I found I placed in the funeral garments of my child. I now see all things die. Whatever is born dies. Every child, mother, king, man, woman. We don't know when."

The Buddha nodded, "Yes, so it is Kisagotami. And now you know the truth of it."

Kisagotami went on to become a nun in Shakyamuni's assembly. Some years later she wrote this poem of her experience.

*I've practiced the great 8 fold Way  
Straight to the undying.  
I've come to the great peace,  
I've looked into the mirror of the Dharma.  
The arrow is out,  
I have put my burden down,  
What had to be done has been done.*

How inspiring Kisagotami's poem – how wonderful Shakyamuni helping her to be free!

Time is up this morning, thanks for your attention. May all be well.

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