

The Pilgrimage to Awakening

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A formal dharma speech given on Buddha's Enlightenment Day ceremonies at Providence Zen Center on December 6, 1986.

Holds the ceremonial Zen stick above his head, brings the point of it down on the altar table with force.

Buddha saw a star, got enlightenment.

Hits the table again.

Guchi's attendant saw a finger, got great enlightenment.

Hits the table a third time.

Today we celebrate Buddha's enlightenment, but we also celebrate Guchi's attendant's enlightenment. Which one is greater? Which one?

KATZ!

Today is Saturday.

This is the traditional form. Everybody is familiar with it. We celebrate this experience because it's worth celebrating.

Shakyamuni Buddha - Shakyamuni means "the awakened one." That means, prior to his enlightenment experience, he was not awake; he was asleep. In the Buddhist scriptures we often read that the way we live is as if in a dream. So it is our job, according to the Buddha and the patriarchs, to awaken from this dream.

That's what happened one day to this person called Gautama Buddha. That's also what happened to Guchi's attendant. So we celebrate their experience, but of course, this experience is not just limited to Buddha or Guchi's attendant. At any moment this experience can be ours. Someone asked about enlightenment and having problems in our lives. It's hard for people to understand how someone can be practicing very hard and still have many problems. What's the relationship?

Here we are in this moment. What more does there need to be? This moment is a very precious moment, and if I've been saying that a lot in my dharma talks lately, it's because I'm coming to appreciate this more. You can never

regain this moment. Once it's gone, it's gone forever. Zen Master Seung Sahn puts it a little differently. He says, "Time does not wait for you." Every moment of our life we have this incredible chance; every moment of our dream we have this wonderful chance to wake up. Then we can experience this moment and it can become truly ours. Buddha saw a star and experienced something. What did he experience?

There's an interesting story about Master An Sang who had a dream. In his dream he went to Maitreya's place. I don't know where that place is, but it must be a very nice place where people are practicing very hard, because the moment that Master An Sang got there, he was in an assembly full of monks. He was given the third seat, one of the seats of honor in front of the assembly. Then an old monk who was head of the assembly knocked three times with the gavel on the table and said, "And now the dharma speech will be given by the monk of the third seat."

Master An Sang also hit the table with the gavel three times and said, "The teaching of Mahayana goes beyond the four propositions and the one hundred negations. Listen carefully. Listen carefully."

What does this mean? If we listen carefully, if we see carefully, if we pay attention to this present moment, then maybe we can find out the true meaning of Master An Sang's dream. If we want something, if we are attached to something, then we are losing this moment. When we lose this moment, in a way we are losing our life. So our life, our practice, is to become alive. Not to lose this moment means we can then be the awakened ones.

Maybe one moment we are awake and the next moment we fall asleep. Then we travel into our dream world and lose this awakening. In the past while talking about the growth of our School, I used the image of an avalanche, how it starts off very small and very subtly. One person, two people, a Zen center starts, and then grows and grows. And it has grown.

It's the same way in our practice. It starts off innocently. Just for one moment we make a moment of "try mind" - in order to become clear, to help others. This one moment has its own special symbolism, because it is the beginning of the dharma avalanche in our life. We lose it and we try again. Maybe this next try is not as fast, because we are busy in our lives and have many things to accomplish, but there comes a time when we try again. Then maybe we again lose it, this effort mind, this "try-mind," this mind that tries to be awake in the present, to "be here now" as a famous book said long ago. We lose that, and we go off again into our dream world.

Whether it is caused by our ignorance or laziness or some kind of attachment, we lose that try-mind. Then, again there is the energy of this first precious moment of effort, and the second, and the third. Something is happening, so we try again. We try a little more, and before we know it we are wearing grey robes and a kasa. Many things start to happen, and the process continues because we cannot stop. Whatever we do, somehow coming to this kind of assembly, and making a decision, however weak, to try this practice will bear fruit.

At the university I came to the conclusion (this was my great "intellectual enlightenment") that we live in order to die properly. In a way, our life is a preparation for our death. I still think this is not a bad conclusion. There will come a culmination of this vehicle when we have to put it aside. If we want something or are attached to something, this process can be very painful. If we can stay awake, this process can be very wonderful.

At that time I was disenchanted with the world of politics, through which I was hoping to make the world a better place. I started reading about yoga and Buddhism and the mind and what is our human potential, our potential as sentient beings. At that time the question of life and death became very fascinating. I enjoyed reading about great masters passing away. There are many accounts, and one that fascinated me was about the famous Chinese layman called Pang.

Layman Pang was a family man, and it was said that his entire family - his wife, son, and daughter - had attained enlightenment. He became famous when one day he put all of his worldly possessions in a cart and pushed the cart into a river. I believe his wife and son left him after that. I don't know whether it was a coincidence or had something to do with his action, but they separated amicably. He stayed with his daughter, who made things out of bamboo and sold them in the market.

He was also a poet. In a way, he lived like a monk, but he would never cut off his hair or wear a monk's robes. He used to go around and challenge all the teachers to Dharma combat.

When Layman Pang understood that it was time to die, he made the announcement in advance. When the day came, he washed and put on nice robes and sat on his cushion in his hut. He told his daughter, "Let me know when the sun is at the zenith." After a while, his daughter came into the hut and said, "The sun is being eclipsed." The Layman said, "Are you sure?" The daughter went out and came back in and said, "Yes it's being eclipsed. You'd better take a look."

When he went out of the hut, she quickly climbed onto his cushion, sat in meditation position, and died. He came back inside and saw her sitting in his place, dead. He said, "Oh, you beat me to it," or something to that effect. "Wonderful, now I cannot pass away. I have to take care of business. There has to be a ceremony for her."

In those days it was the custom to make a fire, burn the corpse, and then spread the ashes around. For one week Layman Pang postponed his death and took care of this business. Then he sat down, composed himself, and also died. A friend, with whom he had left instructions, performed the ceremony for him, burned his corpse and spread his ashes around. Half of the family was now gone.

Word got back to his wife, who was living with their son. They were supporting themselves by farming. The wife said, "Oh, that stupid old man

and that foolish girl - they had to do that without letting me know." She went out into the fields and told the son, who was working the ground with a hoe. He made an exclamation, "SSSSAAAA!" Then he stood for a while and died, standing up.

The mother said, "Oh, that idiot son of mine." Then she went around to take care of business, said good-bye to all her friends, and disappeared. There was never a trace of her again.

This story fascinated me because our practice means to really become alive. That's what I understood. It also means being able to die, but most importantly it means the death of what we call "the dream." The basic truth of Buddhism is impermanence. Nonetheless, we continue to grasp that which cannot be grasped, because it's impermanent. In this way, we go from life to death.

On my last trip to Poland, we did a kind of religious pilgrimage. Originally our idea was to have an ecumenical meeting of Zen Master Seung Sahn with people from different religious traditions, but things did not work out. When we planned the meeting, we just picked a date, and by some coincidence it was exactly the date of a meeting of many religious leaders in Assisi, Italy, called together by the pope. So our pilgrimage came to be held in the spirit of Assisi. This was very nice because it was something the Polish Catholic Church could relate to and which opened many doors.

Usually a pilgrimage means visiting some special place or person that is important to our direction in life. This pilgrimage was to several places in Poland of special significance to Polish Catholics, in particular. (There are no holy Buddhist spots in Poland yet, but soon there will be.) Still it had special meaning for us as Buddhists. There were some parallels we could draw between this pilgrimage and the pilgrimage of our lives. The pilgrimage itself was not so special, because we are all pilgrims. The pilgrimage we have undertaken is simply the pilgrimage to become awake.

Whatever the outward form of our pilgrimage was, whatever the outward form of this assembly is, whatever the outward form of our jobs or any activity we are involved in is, the point is always the same, because we have undertaken a kind of vow. Sometime in our life we made a decision to find our true self or to help all beings. But how can I help all beings? What is this "I" that is going to help all beings?

We don't know. Our way is the way of our pilgrimage, is the way of "don't know." That's the basic speech form of our teaching. That is, what are we doing at this moment? Let's not lose it. This way of "don't know" or "enlightenment" or "true pilgrimage" or "true life" or "true death"; how can we make this way real in our life? With each moment, how can we make it work, make it ours?

In traditional Buddhist teaching, we talk about the "four difficult things." To be born with this human body is considered the first "difficult thing." For most of us it was very easy. We just appeared. The next difficult thing is to hear

about the Dharma, and the next is finding a keen-eyed teacher. The final difficult thing is what we call "enlightenment." But traditional teaching says that the most important thing is to find a keen-eyed teacher. If we find one, if we get good teaching, then surely someday we will all become awake. "Someday" may be far away. Somebody said, "Buddha's enlightenment is far away." Maybe this moment now is better. Why wait?

Before, Buddha saw a star and Guchi's attendant saw a finger. In order to find this, we must find good teaching. So listen carefully, listen carefully.

Hits the altar table with the Zen stick.

A great teacher once said, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form."

Hits the altar table again.

A great teacher once said, "No form, no emptiness."

Hits the altar table a third time.

A great teacher once said, "Form is form, emptiness is emptiness."
Which one of these teachings can help us? Which one of these teachers can help us? Which teacher is our true teacher, our enlightenment teacher, our Buddha teacher?

KATZ!!

Thank you.
(Bows to the assembly.)

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