

ZEN notes



SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY There has always been doubt about the exact date of the Buddha's birth--somehow there is about seven years' difference between our chronology and the records existing in Ceylon. Usually the Buddha's birthday is celebrated in southern Buddhist countries on the full moon day of May, but in eastern Buddhist countries we celebrate his birthday on April 8th, moon calendar. So it is about this time of year.

In the sutras--the holy scriptures of Buddhism--the Buddha's mysterious and wonderful story is recorded. Of course, to glorify him, his first disciples added to the facts and then later disciples in each generation kept adding more details to the story of his birth, until through 2500 years it became elaborated into a complete mythology. But behind these elaborations we can see some truth. His father was a rajah of Kapilavastu, a city of the Shakya tribe in India; his mother was a queen, Maya by name, whom the people called Mahamaya.

According to the custom of the country, when the birth of the child was approaching, Queen Maya went back to her father's house. She was the daughter of another Shakya tribe. The Shakyas were divided from ancestral times into two parts, one living a little distant from Kapilavastu, about two days journey away. The castle was built on

the farther side of the river. The procession of the queen slowly approached her father's castle, with many elephants and camels, soldiers, and also many pedestrians, musicians, historians, and court ladies bearing incense pots and musical instruments to celebrate Maya's confinement. At noontime she suddenly fell ill and took refuge from the hot sun in a garden by the roadside, called Lumbini Vana. There was a little pond--the water was clear and cool, and a seat was spread under a tree. The story goes that when the Buddha's birth was nearing, the tree--like a willow--drooped its branches over the mother and covered her entirely with its shade. She held the branches with her hand and the Buddha came forth from under her arm.

According to the description, as soon as he was given birth by his mother, the infant stood and walked seven steps in the four directions, then stood in the center and pointed to the sky and the earth and said: "Between heaven and earth I am the only one to be revered."

One could never believe that an infant could say such strange words, but later disciples, to adore him, put these lines into the sutras. We don't know just which monk wrote these words, but from them we can think many things about the Buddha and his religion.

In accordance with this description in Sanskrit, the Buddha's birth image is drawn or carved



A question that frequently arises is: do Buddhists pray? One answer to this was Sokei-an's in January ZEN NOTES. Here is an article prepared by Dr. George B. Fowler for *Fellowship in Prayer* that handles this question from another angle, addressed primarily to non-Buddhists.

MEDITATION NOT PRAYER

Zennists, or for that matter Buddhists of any sort do not pray--they meditate. Buddhist meditation is a tremendous subject, a subject so vast it would take volumes to exhaust it. It ranges all the way from confronting an object to annihilating the annihilation of an object and ultimately achieving a realization that is beyond any level of so-called consciousness. If a Zennist were asked if it were necessary to meditate on one's mind his answer would be: "No." If he were asked: "On what then are you meditating?" his answer would be: "Nothing."

One technique for meditation which is more widely followed in India and Japan than elsewhere is that of identification with the object of contemplation. By thus identifying with the object of concern, the Buddhist at his best grapples with and solves his problem. But, and this next statement must be emphasized, he does not thereby ignore other methods of meditation. In the Japanese Zennist tradition the greatest problem is that of life itself; koans are special traditional devices to be used only under the guidance of a Zen master; many persons who have never had any Zen practice seem somehow to have hit upon a way of life that enables them to live the tranquil existence of an awakened mind.

In meditation the Buddhist sits quietly--some time every twenty-four hours--and endeavors to attain that state of consciousness and serenity realized by the Buddha under the Bo-Tree at Buddha-Gaya. That meditation through which the Indian sage, Gautama, attained nirvana (Buddhahood) was a samadhi (identification with highest enlightenment). From the fact of his years of struggle, his years of meditation, and his final victory over delusions both within and without his mind, the Buddha is often called Tathagata (he who has thus attained). This victorious meditation of Gautama resulted in his becoming a Buddha (awakened one). Since Buddhists believe profoundly that all beings are essentially Buddha, the great awakening (satori) of the sage Gautama is the greatest event

in history to Buddhists. Every year in early December countless monks in the monasteries in Buddhist lands make a special effort to attain enlightenment in commemoration of the great event under the Tree of trees.

The Buddha's attainment of enlightenment--realization of THIS--understanding of REALITY (no names are adequate to denote this highest degree of the interfusion of mind and the surroundings of mind) has inspired uncountable works of the heart, brains, and spirit in Asia over the last 2500 years. This supreme meditation by the Indian sage, Gautama, is the inexhaustible inspiration of the Buddhist life of meditation. It is the key to Dharma (consciousness which is intrinsic in all sentient beings--nothing personal in it, hence the Law) for the Sangha (fellowship of all sentient beings, especially the faithful in Buddhism). Accordingly, one can speak of the life of meditation as the Buddhist equivalent to the life of prayer.

The Rinzai Zen School of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan differs from all other religious patterns in its uncompromising emphasis on *zazen* (sitting meditation) as the foundation of the religious life. No other school of Buddhism has practiced the method of *zazen* with more persistence and boldness. And *zazen* is the disciplined sitting practiced since time immemorial in the best *sodos* (monastic halls) of Japan. In this tradi-

tional sitting at regular intervals at an appointed time and place, the Zennist monk or layman (*koji*) establishes the true foundation of his life.

How does a Zennist proceed in this, the most important element in his religious life? Unless he be a monk, he affirms daily and demonstrates hourly that there are many different paths--all leading to the serenity of Zen--all with meditation at their core. If he be a wood-cutter, he practices that craft with integrity. If he be a house-keeper, he makes his house a home. If he be a soldier, he does his duty in accordance with the finest traditions of the military service. *Laborare est orare!* As Zennists frequently say: "Walk straight on!" or: "I never saw a man lost on a straight road! There is no other way!" Often newcomers to Zen mistake this "straight road". The chief factor in practicing the Zen of work is meditation--meditation in all aspects of the work process. The true Zen student ends by being a competent artist in his work because he has fully identified with his role in the world.

If his work life has been thus integrated, the Zennist can turn his attention to "truing up" his view of the world. Here the five great delusions of mind (*skandhas*--shadows) of Buddhist terminology can be of assistance in his meditation practice. These five *skandhas* are found in the Agamas, the earliest known books of Buddhistic teachings. These

five great shadows can be envisioned as five concentric spheres or layers of consciousness--each with a different meaning. Each must be confronted, penetrated, and annihilated to be useful on the path to Reality.

The first skandha is rupa (appearance). Here the Zennist identifies with, experiences, and realizes the true nature of the world of form in his meditation. To think straight about the ocean of sight, sound, taste, smell touch and mentation is a prime duty of the Zen Buddhist. Soon the disciplined sitter realizes that appearance is not what it seems. It must be annihilated. Next comes *vedana-skandha* (precepts). Labels, words, signs are attached to appearances. This is the world of chatter--of mere verbalism. It is not enough. The Zennist must annihilate it.

The following three shadows of consciousness belong together in a unity of three. First comes *samjna* (concepts). *Samjna* is the world of thoughts, of logic, of thought systems, of systems of philosophy--the world of reasoned explanation. *Samjna* is that activity of mind best found in the Occident, the intellectual heir to the mind of Greco-Roman antiquity. Second comes *sanskara-skandha* (imagination, mood). Here are the seeds of thoughts, of feelings. Third comes *vijnana-skandha* (consciousness, at times conscience). Here the Zen mediator tries to realize the restricted nature of man-made yardsticks--especially his own per-

sonal measuring norms.

On the seat of mind--mind meditating on MIND--in MIND--the sitter ultimately realizes and destroys these five skandhas he has found useful on his way of disciplined living in meditation. Indeed, the aim of Buddhist meditation is to destroy delusions of consciousness, and thus to attain the tranquility of mind known as *nirvana*.

Buddhists know one thing exists--one entity: THIS. When the Buddha urged his disciples to understand *rupa* (appearance) he was talking about what THIS is. Buddhists call THIS: Dharma-kaya (reality). They do not attain to realization of THIS by reason, but by intuition. Once they have studied and realized and annihilated the five shadows of mind, the foundation on which to build the Buddhist life is laid and the Way of Dharma lies straight ahead for the faithful sitter. The Way of Meditation is the famous Middle Way of the true Buddhist.

In temples of the Rinzai Zen School, those practicing zazen before commencing their discipline of sitting repeat the four great vows:

"Sentient beings are numberless, I take a vow to enlighten them all.

Worldly desires are endless, I take a vow to uproot them all.

The gates of Dharma are manifold, I take a vow to enter them all.

The goal of Wisdom is ever beyond, I take a vow to attain it."

The meaning of religion in the Orient differs from that in the Occident, so that many people think that an Oriental religion like Buddhism has no characteristic that can be named religion, because Buddhism has no God and no prayer and no worship. Of course, from our understanding, Buddhism has prayer, offerings and sacrifice, but we use different words to express these things.

The meaning of religion to us is the source of life and the base of our knowledge. With it, we control our emotions, we understand, and we judge right or wrong in our daily lives. Like a river, religion has a source; like a mountain, it has a summit--if a mountain has no summit, we do not call it a mountain. Anything that is the foundation of our life or our understanding or our universal existence we call religion.

The Buddhist prays, but he does not ask some bigger power than the human being to bring him happiness. Through prayer, the Buddhist tries to reach, and to become one with the greater power that is beyond the power of all human beings. We call this meditation. Meditation is not really a good translation of Dhyana or Samaya. In our practice, we keep our concentration upon our own consciousness. Samaya means to become one with the universe. In Samadhi we become one with the object that we are confronting. There are many technical terms that express this practice for which there are no equivalents in English. To contemplate, concentrate, meditate--none are equivalent to the Sanskrit. If you wish a better understanding of Buddhism, you had better use its original terms.

You may ask: "Why worship images?" From our standpoint, an image is a symbol of ourselves--our mind, our attitude of mind. This sometimes covers the whole universe. We are absorbed in some great power or feel ourselves as boundless light. Sometimes we feel that we are the light that is subdivided from the universal light, or we may feel that our mind is like a seed kept a long, long time in earth, awaiting the spring. Sometimes we feel we have a wisdom not created by any power outside ourselves, a wisdom

that has existed from the beginningless beginning, that will exist to the endless end...I am hungry--I move my arm to take food, I eat. But who digests? I digest, but while I am doing it, I do not know it. You may cover your eye, but you cannot help seeing. You may stop the mind from thinking for a while, but you will dream--dreaming comes although you do not intend it. All is just one power of universe. You can call it Selfhood, but it has no ego. This is not myself, not yourself--then who is this? This is the first question of all thinkers. To have the answer you must enter into your own consciousness. Then what is consciousness? The first gate is this Samaya--to enter it and receive everything at once upon your mind. Do not bend to any particular object; hear all sound at once, think all at once--think nothing. You will realize that mind has rhythm, that the mind travels swiftly from one point to another. There are many kinds of Samadhi in this Samaya. In Samadhi, when you concentrate subjectively we call it Dhyana, we tear out the film between THIS and THAT and become one with THAT. This is religious existence.

Whenever I worship an image--sky, pebble, stone--or my own heart, I always feel that all religious people, in all religions, have this experience. So it is not necessary to talk philosophy. We feel happiness because we know our own place. We know we are in the bosom of the great Infinite, and we do not give it a name. You may go there through the road of Christianity. I through the path of Buddhism. The one who takes the path of Shintoism--I am the son of a Shinto priest--is a ritualist; in Shintoism there is no theory, absolutely no word of teaching--just worship.

All religion is nothing but a pathway to reach the summit of the great mountain. You can reach the summit from many directions. There are no two truths in the universe. Reaching the summit, you will be Buddhist, Christian, or something else, but the summit is the same. Meditation is not only one way to reach the summit--it is certainly the best way to reach the summit of religious experience.

with the infant standing on a lotus flower and pointing at the sky with the finger of his right hand, at the earth with the finger of his left hand. Of course the Buddha never said these words--don't believe such things--but the idea was conceived by Buddhist monks and Buddhism has accepted this.

A Buddhist does not try to realize God by repeating prayers, nor does he try to reach God by reasoning, like a philosopher. The Buddhist avoids both of these attitudes, although in later Buddhism there were many different sects, such as the T'ien-t'ai in China, that tried to realize the idea of the Buddha by metaphysical thinking. But the Buddha did not take such an attitude. The Buddha's Buddhism was, so to speak, only this realization, in Japanese, satori. He had left his friends, brothers, teachers Ramaputra and Kalama, and went alone to meditate under the Bodhi tree. All of a sudden he realized: THIS is God, THIS is All. The endless sky is the extension of this body and the earth, covered with mountains and divided by rivers, is also this very body, and trees and weeds, insects, flowers, animals, and other human beings are also Buddha's body, and this soul is the soul of the universe, the soul of God. He realized that prayer is not necessary to prove God. All of a sudden--"THIS is THAT." This is his standpoint. From that day, the Buddhist takes the attitude: Between heaven and

earth I am the only one to be revered. This is the Buddha's standpoint and it is Buddhism.

In ancient days and even today, there are three types of attitude towards God. One is that you think God is in heaven and, kneeling down upon the ground, your head bowed, your brow pressed to the stone, you invoke God in heaven with a sincere and humble spirit. In that moment, you think your mind reaches heaven and God listens to you--and your prayer is answered. Then when you return to daily life, you and God are separated. You think you are here and God is in heaven.

Another type is shown by the one who thinks in metaphysical terms, philosophically. We think of this type as some figure carved like Rodin's Thinker, who puts everything into words--tree and sky and mountain and bird have nothing to do with him except in words--he must always think thoughts. This is another type of attitude towards God.

The Buddhist does not take either of these attitudes. He is with God every moment, day and night, twenty-four hours inseparable. Without thinking a word, he grasps the conclusion and never forgets. Without using thought, reasoning--when we clasp our hands, for instance--we know what IT is.

In Buddhism, it is the Buddha's body that we worship, that is the highest. We do not call it God, we call it Dharmakaya. And I come next. All that I do is

third. We take refuge in Buddha, IT is Dharma. We take refuge in our SELF. And we take refuge in Sangha, in all of us. These are the Three Refuges of Buddhism.

So each year we celebrate the birth of the Buddha, and I hope that as long as I live I stay in this New York and celebrate his birthday here every year. And I hope that you understand the meaning of the Buddha's birthday. Between heaven and earth THIS is the only one to be respected--because THIS is Buddha and Dharma and Sangha. This is ME. Because this is the Buddhist standpoint you must grasp it firmly. This is our standpoint and it is true Buddhism. In our open eyes, in our daily mind--we have faith. *Reconstructed by Vanessa Coward from a special lecture given in 1936.*

For other special messages by Sokei-an for the Buddha's birthday, see ZN I/4, VI/4, VII/4, XI/4.

ANNOUNCEMENT

May 18th, Wednesday evening at 8:15, Ruth F. Sasaki, in New York for about a month, will officiate at a special commemoration service for Sokei-an. During the following weeks some talks may be scheduled. Please check with the Institute office for dates as no further announcement will be made. (MU 4-9487)

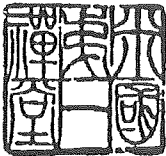
DETACHMENT It is characteristic of Buddhism that its followers learn to be detached. At the end of their lives, their attitude is serene. They do not struggle, and they give up everything. Knowing that the end of their days is approaching, they keep themselves in quiet meditation upon that moment when consciousness will come to an end. This is a most remarkable attitude. You may have seen pictures of Japanese or Chinese prisoners standing in a row with joined hands as they are about to have their heads cut off. They have no fear, hatred, or mental disturbance on their faces as they calmly await the end. Of course any religious person will take the same attitude. And he who is about to cut off their heads realizes that he is not doing so because of his own desire--he is not their enemy. It has happened quite naturally that they should meet, one playing the part of executioner and the other the part of victim. Knowing that it is a natural circumstance, they are not enemies--they even sympathize with one another. In Japan, the one would say: "Ready, my friend?" "Yes, friend."

The Buddha put great emphasis upon this detachment. It is really the first gateway into Buddhism.

Reconstructed from an article noted by Audree Kepner in 1933.

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