

ZEN NOTES



ON THE TWENTY-FIVE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF THE BUDDHA By RUTH FULLER SASAKI

TWENTY-FIVE hundred years ago more or less, in the Lumbini Garden of what is now the country of Nepal, Maya, consort of the lord of the Shaka clan, gave birth to a son who was called Siddhartha, but whom the world was to know as Shakamuni, the Sage of the Shakas, or still better as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. In the intervening centuries this child, born heir to a petty kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas, has become one of that small group of men who, throughout world history, have truly influenced the course of the stream of human life. For the larger part of the peoples of central and eastern Asia he stands as the supreme spiritual leader of all time.

The religion of which the Buddha was the founder is known in the West as Buddhism. In its completed form it may be likened to a magnificent religious edifice, of which the Buddha's first sermon delivered to the five ascetics in the Deer Park at Benares was the initial stone, and his forty-nine years of teaching up and down the length and breadth of the Ganges valley, the original building. From their indigenous beliefs the various peoples who took shelter under its broad eaves added to it decorations not always, perhaps, consonant with the intent of the original builder. And generation after generation of great minds in India, Ceylon, Burma, China, Tibet, and Japan enlarged and elaborated the first simple structure, bringing it into a strange yet remarkable harmony with the often antithetical elements of their varied cultures. In recent centuries, however, this spacious spiritual home has been allowed to fall gradually into disrepair. True, attempts have been made to restore it, but as we restore a treasured inheritance from the past. True creative energy has been lacking or elsewhere directed, with the result that the building, beautiful and revered as it is, has become in many ways unsuited to the present day.

It is scarcely two hundred years since the first information about this great religion began to trickle into Europe and America. As the scriptural texts of Buddhism gradually became available through the energy of scholars such as Max Muller and Mr. and Mrs. Rhys-Davids, to name only three, the philological problems posed by the texts and the ethical, religious, philosophical and metaphysical doctrines expounded in them were considered to be the unique province of

scholars. Only at the beginning of this century, with the arrival in the West of such representative figures of the living religion as Dharmapala of Ceylon, Shaku Soyen of Japan, and T'ai-hsu of China, did ordinary men and women come to know even the name of Buddhism. At first it seemed merely a bizarre and exotic teaching from the mysterious East. But as the Pali texts were little by little translated into English for those who would to read, men here and there in the West found in them noble instruction for a noble life, in its essence universally suitable, and affirming the unspoken and perhaps even as yet unformulated knowing in their own hearts. In the past twenty-five years, with the increase of personal contacts between East and West, with the more frequent publication of texts translated into European languages, and with the appearance of a constant stream of books and articles by scholars and laymen on hitherto uninvestigated aspects of Buddhism, this once unknown religion has now become an important field of study and research, and a way of religious life for a growing number of Westerners.

It is a deep satisfaction to me that this 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth has awakened the peoples of Buddhist lands to a renewed interest in their greatest religious heritage. I hope that this will be a year in which Buddhists everywhere will take the time and make the effort to re-think their religion and to re-evaluate it. I hope this will be a year in which they will seriously and energetically consider how they may revivify it and adapt it to modern men in the industrial age, how they can assist those of us from the West who have found in Buddhism our spiritual home to a better understanding of its profound intuitions and many-faceted teachings, and how, together with us, they may further its now clearly discernible movement toward the farther East, which is the West.

It has been largely through the translations of the scriptures of the Pali Canon, now practically completed, that westerners have come to know the doctrines of Buddhism. Some of the scriptures written originally in Sanskrit have been translated, and a very few from the Chinese Canon. But since both of these expound doctrines considerably later than those of the Pali texts, and since they have been translated more or less at random in relation to the consecutive development of Buddhist thought, it has often been difficult for the average person to understand how they relate to the earlier Buddhism, and sometimes even to understand how they relate to it at all.

The major part of the Pali scriptures is dominated by the figure of the historical Buddha, by him who was conceived and born as a mortal man, who became a husband and father, then a recluse, then a wandering teacher, and who, suffering from an apparently not uncommon illness, died at the age of eighty while lying on a mat under the twin sala trees at Kushinagara surrounded by grieving disciples. This is the Buddha whom most of us in the West have come to know, to revere, and to love. Our Far Eastern friends must not be offended if we exhibit some surprise when we find how little mention they make of him and even how relatively few of them know him. It is my hope that another outcome of this 2500th anniversary of the birth of the historical Buddha will be their rediscovery of Buddha the man.

When we survey the entire range of the Buddha's life, we cannot but be struck with the fact that it was a complete expression of the doctrines of Buddhism lived in human life. The Buddha was first and foremost a man, just as you and I. That he was a religious genius is also true. But God or a god he never was. Later generations have seemed to remove him from the human realm, and undoubtedly the masses of Buddhist adherents, in the Far East especially, have regarded him as super-human. But when the doctrines and scriptures which seem to present him thus are penetrated and their profound implications clearly understood, we see them to be the efforts of minds naturally given to symbolical expression to state the simple yet wondrous fact that it is man who is Buddha. As Hakuin Zenji said: "Apart from men where shall we seek Buddha?" This is the message of Buddhism.

But what transformed the man born Prince Siddhartha into the man who was the Buddha? It was his Enlightenment, or, as I prefer to call it, his Awakening. At the moment when, after six years of practice, sitting under the Bodhi-tree in the cool of the Indian dawn he gazed upon the morning star and the last veil vanished from before his inner eye--at that moment he became the Buddha. That moment was momentous beyond all reckoning for the generations of men who were to follow and will be for those yet to come. For all Buddhists the Awakening is the crucial event as are the Crucifixion and the Resurrection for all Christians. Just as there is no Christianity without the sacrificial death and the resurrection of Jesus the Savior, so without the Awakening there is no Buddhism.

But for the moment I shall leave the Enlightenment and ask you to recollect what led to it. For the Buddha, as for us, what came before this experience was of the utmost importance. Without a primary impetus it could not have taken place. We are told in the scriptures that the parents of the young prince surrounded him with all that a heart could desire, so they thought. But one day, on an excursion outside the castle, he saw an old man, on another a sick man, and on another a corpse lying by the roadside. He was overwhelmed by this first acquaintance with old age, pain, and death. Compassion for suffering humankind flooded his heart and an irresistible urge arose within him to do something to alleviate this suffering, to find a final answer to it. The calm face of a holy man seen in his fourth excursion gave promise that by following the way of the recluse he might ultimately find the answer he must seek. Here we should note an important point, too often glossed over in the telling of the story. What the young prince sought was not escape from suffering for himself; it was the resolution for all men of the problem of suffering. Until we entirely put aside the desire for enlightenment for ourselves and dedicate ourselves to seeking enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, the first step in the Buddhist life has not been taken.

And when the Awakening has been achieved, if its fruits as expressed in every thought and action of our life are not spontaneously rededicated to the same all-embracing purpose, our awakening has been no true awakening. With the Enlightenment, the Buddha's life as a recluse came to an end. The remaining forty-nine years of his life after the supreme moment under the Bodhi-tree constitute his revelation of the content of his Awakening. It was a life completely devoted to teaching men how to attain what he had attained and to lessening the pain in every suffering heart, high or low, with which he came in contact. Hence he is called the Great Physician. Few, if any scriptures recount a life more noble, more selfless, and more truly human. Please reread it.

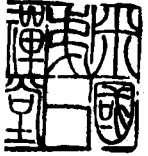
And so the Buddhist life consists of three steps: the decision to seek enlightenment, the practice leading to and the attainment of enlightenment, and the living of the experience of enlightenment in daily life. For the first step we are not asked to believe in any doctrine expounded by any teacher or by any book, or even those doctrines taught by the Buddha. The truths of Buddhism will reveal themselves to us as we progress on the Buddhist Way. But faith in one thing we must have, the unshakable and indestructible faith that in our intrinsic natures we are Buddha. And further, a stern and indomitable determination to seek to realize our Buddhahood, though it takes an entire lifetime, even up to and including the day of our death.

The practices advocated for the achievement of this realization vary to some extent in the different schools. But there is one practice upon which all agree, and which for lack of a better term we of the West call meditation, the practice followed by the Buddha. This meditation is not a meditation upon a belief or a doctrine or upon anything outside ourselves. It is from the beginning to the end a meditation upon our own mind.

In the Zen Sect, of which I have for over twenty years been an adherent and disciple, we call our meditation *zazen*, literally "sitting meditation." When we have learned to sit correctly in the same position

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as that in which the Buddha sat, we turn our minds in upon our mind and hour after hour, day after day, month after month, investigate our own mind. To find out who we truly are, who or what is that true Self beyond the self, is the great problem which we set ourselves. Who am I? For what man is this not the paramount question! Whether he be monk or layman, the question remains the same; the method of practice remains the same; and the ultimate answer will be exactly the same--now as in the distant past. The Japanese, the European, the Burmese, or any other man observing his own mind, will pass through the same stages step by step until he finally comes face to face with, sees into, and at last realizes his own original and intrinsic nature--Buddhahood. This realization of the Buddhahood of man is the realization of the fundamental Truth of Buddhism. It is the ever-welling source of eternal life. It is Nirvana.

The world has changed much since the time of the Buddha. Our lives today are largely dominated by the machine and subjected to continuous noise and confusion. But struggle for power and struggle against power, suffering, poverty, disease, greed, pain, were all present in the world in the Buddha's time as in our own, and probably will be present for a long time to come. The prescription offered by the Great Physician was not primarily a prescription for the suffering of the physical body. It was a prescription for the suffering of the mind. For when the mind is at peace, when a man has returned to his original home, however confused and painful the outer world may be, within himself he is at ease. And it is only from minds that are at ease that any sane solution for the external problems confronting us can possibly come.

The Buddha's own Awakening was the deep and immovable foundation upon which he erected the original structure of his religion. From his Enlightenment and from that of others who have followed his Way through the centuries, the edifice of Buddhism has been constructed. Its repair and its further enlargement to serve the needs of the present depend wholly upon the efforts of men of today who are truly enlightened. There is no other way to accomplish this great task than for every Buddhist to return to the path first blazed by the Sage of the Shakas, and sitting quietly in the midst of the surrounding turmoil, to look deeply into his own original nature. Having realized that Buddhahood to which he and every other man is a rightful heir, he will be able to direct the intrinsic wisdom with which his mind is now illumined toward assisting in the restoration of his ancestral home to a greater grandeur and usefulness than it has ever known. That this may come about is my final wish for this memorable year.

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