

Bodhi Day

by Rev. Don Garrett

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Today is the traditional celebration of the Buddha's enlightenment, or Bodhi Day, so-called because of the tree under which it took place – a Bodhi tree, actually a kind of ficus that grows to tremendous size.

This is an interesting holiday celebrating the founder of a major world religion in that it doesn't celebrate his birth like Christmas does in Christianity. It celebrates an event: the moment of enlightenment.

Bodhi Day celebrates the awakening of the Buddha, the moment that he "Got it," when he clearly saw suffering, the causes of suffering and the path of freedom from suffering.

But it all began when Prince Siddhartha realized that his life of privilege kept him from seeing life clearly.

Of course, there had been a conspiracy. His parents had worked so hard to protect him from the pains and sadnesses of life that he didn't even know that they existed. Living in the royal palace, his every wish was granted, every desire satisfied, he grew up happy and secure, bright and thriving. He had friends and companions, servants and teachers, all of whom were in on the conspiracy to keep him happy and free of sadness.

Eventually Siddhartha married and began a family. A peaceful path to kingship and a life of inspirational leadership seemed secure as well. But then one day, so the story goes, he eluded his protectors and left the castle and walked the streets of the city. And he was deeply troubled by what he saw. First, he saw a person who was wracked with sickness, pain, and sadness. Then he saw an old man, bent and weak, full of pain and sadness, too. And then he came upon a corpse lying in the street, the body of someone who had died that day.

He was stricken by what he saw and suddenly saw through the conspiracy his parents had created to keep him safe and happy. He realized that power and

riches couldn't keep him safe from sickness, old age, and eventually, death. He grew sad and confused, troubled by what he had seen.

Then he saw something else: a man walking along the street. He could see that there was something different about him. He was old but strong and straight, wearing just a scrap of clothing. But there was something about this man, his eyes were clear and keen and peaceful, his step so gentle that he seemed to kiss the earth with each step. He asked and learned that this was a holy man who lived in the forest, fasting and mastering his desires in order to be free from suffering. Siddhartha decided then and there to leave his life of leisure and learn from the holy men in the forest.

Siddhartha wandered until he found the venerable Master Alara Kalama, who helped him to master many profound meditation practices. But after a number of months, Siddhartha decided that, while useful, these practices were not the goal he sought. So he wandered farther, studying with various groups of monks and ascetics, learning what they had to offer but never satisfied in his quest.

After several more years he met the Master Udakka, seventy-five years old and surrounded by hundreds of devoted disciples. Siddhartha studied with Udakka, mastering level after level of spiritual challenges until Udakka told him that he had accomplished everything he had to teach. Udakka suggested that Siddhartha assume his role of Master teacher when he died, but Siddhartha declined, realizing that if this was all he could learn here, it still was not enough.

Siddhartha left Master Udakka and returned to the forest alone. He reasoned that, since the two best teachers in the land had failed to show him the way to liberation from suffering, he would have to continue the quest on his own. He decided that he needed to learn how to overcome the bodily entanglements of fear and desire altogether. He practiced severe asceticism and mortification in his quest, pushing his body beyond its limits of hardship, exercise and fasting. Five of Master Udakka's former disciples joined him in the forest and they became a small community of dedicated practitioners, intent on achieving the ultimate liberation.

But these extreme practices began to take their toll on Siddhartha. He finally realized that he was following yet another dead-end path. As Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in *Old Path White Clouds*, “. . . then one day, while practicing meditation in a cemetery, Siddhartha realized with a jolt how wrong the path of self-mortification was. The sun had set and a cool breeze gently caressed his skin. After sitting all day beneath the blazing sun, the breeze was delightfully refreshing, and Siddhartha experienced an ease in his mind unlike anything he had felt during the day. He realized that body and mind formed one reality which could not be separated. The peace and comfort of the body were directly related to the peace and comfort of the mind. To abuse the body was to abuse the mind.”

He then resolved to regain the strength of his body with good food, care, and rest. But he was so exhausted and depleted that he could barely make it out of a river where he had bathed. He collapsed and lay unconscious for a long time before “a young girl from the village appeared. Thirteen-year-old Sunjata had been sent by her mother to carry rice-milk, cakes, and lotus seeds to offer to the forest gods. When she saw the monk lying unconscious on the road, barely breathing, she knelt down and placed a bowl of milk to his lips. . . . When the drops of milk moistened his tongue and throat, Siddhartha responded immediately. He could taste how refreshing the milk was, and he slowly drank the entire bowlful. After a few dozen breaths he was revived enough to sit up, and he motioned Sujata to pour him another bowlful of milk. It was remarkable how quickly the milk restored his strength. That day he decided to abandon austerity practice and go to the cool forest across the river to practice there.”

Early each day Siddhartha sat at the base of a Bodhi tree in deep meditation, and each day Sunjata brought him food. Later another young boy named Savasti brought him armloads of cut grass on which to sit and rest. He gratefully accepted their help and redoubled his efforts and finally succeeded in realizing the nature of suffering, its cause and the path to freedom from suffering.

He realized that people suffered because they didn't understand how things really were. They looked at things and events and thought they were happy when good things happened, and that they were unhappy when bad things happened. Siddhartha realized that happiness was only possible in the present

moment, and that when people lost touch with the present moment, they suffered. He also saw that people are much more connected to each other and everything than they thought they were, and that their ideas of separateness caused suffering, too.

Siddhartha realized that stepping into the present moment was like waking up out of a dream. This is why he called himself “the awakened one,” the word for which is “Buddha.”

Sujata brought some of her friends to see the strange man she’d found. He was very peaceful and very friendly, so they liked to be with him. The first food they brought him on the morning we celebrate as Bodhi Day was tangerines. So the very first lesson that the Buddha taught was how to taste and enjoy a tangerine in the present moment.

Buddha and the children had a very pleasant time together. They understood what he meant right away. Eventually, though, the Buddha began to feel that he should tell others what he had learned so they wouldn’t have to suffer any more. But he doubted that anyone would be interested. After all, why would people want to wake up when they weren’t sleeping? Why should they learn to live in the present moment when they were already there? It’s as though the Buddha had the solution to a problem people either didn’t know they had or assumed that it was just the nature of life – the way things were – and that looking for a solution was pointless anyway.

But the Buddha was moved to compassion by the children, who had understood his teachings so quickly. And he found that, even though many people found his teachings strange and confusing, they were affected by the profound peace and happiness he radiated. People wanted to be happy and peaceful, just like the Buddha. So they listened and tried to understand.

The Buddha has been gone for about 2700 years now, and his teachings still seem strange to many people. There is still a lot of suffering – people get sick, people get old. People don’t get what they want, and they do get what they don’t want. Sometimes people are happy, but usually only for a short time, because something else happens that they don’t like, and then they’re unhappy again.

It's hard to sell people on the idea that there is an end to suffering. It just doesn't seem to make sense. It's an outrageous claim; it's too much. It's like saying you can make the sun come out in the middle of the night. But there was something about the Buddha that made people believe in him. He was so incredibly peaceful and happy that everyone could see that there was something very different and special and good about him.

But we don't have the Buddha to talk with us, to tell us how to end our suffering. And although I've studied Buddhism and understand some of it, there's no reason you should believe me when I tell you that there can be an end to suffering. I'm just a normal person without all that happiness magic the Buddha had.

So I won't claim that, all of a sudden – poof! – suffering will disappear from your life. Maybe you'll still suffer but, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you learn to suffer well, you suffer much less." Maybe you can be a little calmer and peaceful, maybe a little bit happier.

First, I invite you to find the present moment, the place where happiness is possible. We'll do this by paying attention to our breathing, because that's something we're already doing right now. We usually hurry from one moment to the next, like an arrow flying through time, or like a needle pulling a thread through a stack of paper. The sheets of paper are like the moments of our life, and we're always in a hurry to pull the needle of our attention into the next sheet, into the next moment.

The Buddha taught that we miss most of our lives by hurrying into the next moment, that each moment is like a huge sheet of paper with many things on it, things that we miss when we're just trying to poke a hole through the next one instead.

We'll start out by paying attention to our breath, using some very simple ideas. First, everybody stand up and shake! Get loose! We've been sitting here for a while and you want your blood to be moving a little bit. OK, now let's sit down again.

Now pay attention to your breath. It might help if you put one hand on your stomach, just below your navel. That way you can feel your hand move when

you breathe. You're breathing in and out, over and over again, aren't you? Let's just look at that. So when you breathe in, I invite you to think, "in." And when you breathe out, just think, "out." That's right, "in," "out." You're probably thinking some other things, too, and that's all right. But pay attention to the breath going in and out, just the way you usually breathe. In and out.

After a while, you may notice that you're getting a little bit calmer, that your breath is slowing down. So now, let's change our words. When your breath goes in, think, "My breath is deep." And when you exhale, think, "My breath goes slow." You can shorten them to "deep," when you breathe in, and "slow," when you breathe out. That's right, "deep," "slow." Deep, slow.

You may be feeling a little bit different with your breathing now. Now it's not such a new thing that I'm telling you to pay attention to. You may be settling down, feeling a little more peaceful than you did before. So let's change the words again. Now, when you breathe in, think, "I am feeling calm," and when you breathe out, "I feel at ease." The one-word version would be, just, "calm" on the inbreath and "ease" on the out. That's right, "calm," "ease." Calm, ease.

Maybe this is feeling a little better now. Your thoughts and worries are a little bit farther away. Maybe you're starting to feel good, sitting here and breathing together. Let's change the words to go with that feeling. So when you breathe in, say, "smile." And don't just say it. You can really smile now when you breathe in. When you see pictures of the Buddha, he always has that little smile on his face. It could be that you're starting to feel a little bit of that Buddha smile of calm happiness that is waiting for us in the present moment. So we think, "smile" on the inbreath. Now that we're smiling, when we breathe out we can let go of all the tightness and worry that we might have brought in here with us. So when we breathe out, let's say, "release," as we let go of all the tensions in our bodies and minds. OK: "smile" on the inbreath, and "release" on the outbreath. Smile, release.

Now we're sitting here breathing together. Where are we? Well, we're in this sanctuary, but where are we in time? We're breathing together right now in the present moment. Past is past and future is future, but for right now, we're just sitting here breathing. So let's notice that, too. When we breathe in, let's think,

“This is the present moment.” This is the best part of time. This is when happiness is possible. So when we breathe out, let’s notice that, thinking, “I know this is a wonderful moment.” When we breathe in, we think, “present moment.” And when we breathe out, we think, “wonderful moment.” We can even shorten this one further: “now,” and “wow.” Now, wow.

Now that we’re all here together in the present moment, I invite you to take a look around. Everybody might look a little bit fresher, a little bit brighter now. This is because you’re dwelling in the present moment. You can see the magic of life in each person. And maybe you can feel it in yourself, too.

It’s like the old story of the man frantically looking for the keys to his treasure by a curb under a streetlight. When asked where he lost them, he says “I lost them in my house.”

“Then why are you looking for them out here?”

“Because the light’s better here.”

The Buddha taught that we fail to find the treasure of peace and happiness that is available to us in the present moment because we look for it everywhere else but where it is. We think that if we could only get what we want, learn what we need, avoid this or that tragedy, or just get rid of something really annoying, we would finally be happy. Today we celebrate the Buddha’s discovery that we have all we need for happiness and peace right here and now if we just let go of our preoccupation with the past and the future. The rich gifts of life and love, joy and fulfillment are ours for the taking.

Thanks, Buddha. Happy Bodhi Day!

May it be so.