The Heart of the Buddha-Dharma

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I

The Many Buddhas

The Historical Buddha

Amid the vernal splendor of Lumbini Garden, Gautama, the Buddha, was born in 566 B.C., as son of a wealthy and powerful king, Suddhodana, the ruler of the Sakya clan, at Kapilavastu in the modern state of Nepal. The Buddha was given the name Siddhartha, which means, “He who has attained his aim.”

Rejoicing over the birth of his heir, King Suddhodana made elaborate arrangements to see that
nothing was lacking in the life of the prince. For his mental and physical education, sages, soldiers and athletes from all parts of the country were summoned to the castle. Whether it was knowledge requiring the highest of intellect or games taxing the utmost of his physical prowess, the young prince showed remarkable skill of mastery. At nineteen, he was married to Princess Yashodara who bore him a son, Rahula. The royal couple lived amidst inconceivable luxury.

In spite of this unsurpassed beauty and comfort that surrounded the prince at all times, Siddhartha felt deep despair. He wanted to go out to seek the Light of Truth. The faint stirring in his heart steadily grew stronger until at last he could not restrain himself from cutting the fetters that bound him to this existence. Leaving his sleeping wife and son, he went forth into the still Indian night with great resolve to find salvation for himself and his fellow men. He was twenty-nine years of age.

For six years he mingled with ascetics and hermits practicing the difficult system of salvation they taught and subjecting his body to the severest of disciplines, but he realized that the extremes of asceticism, like luxury, led one nowhere. The truest path to Enlightenment, he found, lay in patient and systematic examination of all aspects of life, and discovering the solution to its sufferings.
As he quietly meditated under the Bodhi Tree, there developed in him a deep spiritual insight into the nature of existence. When the day ended and the first stars showed their lights in the sky above, Gautama attained Enlightenment, the highest wisdom man has yet reached. One by one the heavy doubts of life and death, of sorrow — its cause and cure—vanished; the great mystery finally had been solved. He became Buddha, the Fully Enlightened One.

He spent the remaining forty-five years of his life in a labor of love and compassion, and his Teachings spread the whole breadth and length of the country. He passed away at the age of eighty, leaving the following message to his sorrowful disciples: “The Dharma which I have given you shall be your Teacher, when I am gone.”

So great has been the influence of this Dharma that today it is estimated one-third of humanity pays homage to his Noble Teachings.
When the Buddha reached eighty years of age, he began to feel the fatigue of a lifetime of spreading the Dharma. At thirty-five, he had attained Enlightenment and for the following forty-five years, he wandered on foot the whole breadth of northern India teaching the Way of Wisdom and Compassion. When he finally felt he could no longer continue his mission, he asked his disciples to accompany him on his last visit to Vaisali, a city he loved, a city of beautiful towers and palaces, of green meadows and sparkling rivers. The Buddha however, could not reach Vaisali and had to stop to rest in Kusinagara. There, in Kusinagara, he passed away quietly between two sal trees.

As he lay down between the trees, his disciples gathered around him, knowing that the Buddha's end was near. To his disciples the Buddha said,

“My disciples, my last moment has come, but do not forget that death is only the passing of the physical body... the true Buddha is not a human body, it is Enlightenment. A human body must die, but the wisdom of Enlightenment will exist forever in the truth of the
Dharma and in the practice of the Dharma...”

And then he said,

“Make of yourself a light. Rely upon yourself; do not depend on anyone else.”

In these immortal words, the Buddha taught us that there was something greater than the physical body. He was pointing to the power of Enlightenment, a power that all beings possess. Too often attached to the visible body, we forget the invisible, potential power the human body possesses — to enlighten ourselves and to help others become enlightened. This is the true energy of human life that never perishes. The physical body dies but this energy never dies. Make of yourself a light. These are powerful words.

We must search for the inner light, which is the infinite Buddha within. Nobody can find the Buddha for us. Each person must find the Buddha within him or herself. And when we find the Buddha, we realize that it was this Buddha — the great power of Wisdom and Compassion — that has been operating within us throughout timeless time.
Amida Buddha

In the Jodo Shinshu school of Buddhism, Amida Buddha symbolizes the timeless, unending power of wisdom and compassion operating throughout the universe. *Amida* stands for *Amitabha* and *Amitayus*. *Amitabha* is Infinite Light and *Amitayus* is Infinite Life. Light is the symbol of Supreme Wisdom and Life is the symbol of Infinite Compassion. Infinite here means “all embracing.”

By the very nature of the power of wisdom and compassion, Amida Buddha completes the enlightenment of sentient beings. Why is it that we are incapable of completing our own enlightenment? — essentially because we are tainted by egocentricity and selfishness. Therefore, one must come to a realization of their existential limitations and awaken to the wisdom and compassion of Amida Buddha.

With this religious insight comes a deeper dimension of existence. From the lower level of the small individual self of everyday life consciousness, we rise to a higher level of consciousness to become fully awakened to the universal consciousness of Amida
Buddha. This faith in Amida, this inner light of wisdom, becomes a dynamic force within our lives.
The correct term for Buddhism is Buddha-Dharma. Buddha-Dharma has two definitions: the teaching of the Buddha and the teaching that guides all beings to Buddhahood. The latter points to the true purpose of the Buddha-Dharma: the ultimate goal for humanity is to attain Buddhahood, or to become enlightened.

Buddhism is a religion of personal realization and awakening and so is often compared to a mirror in which one reflects their thinking, action and words.
Unless he looks in the mirror, no man will really see himself; even a little smear of dirt on his face cannot be perceived without the aid of the mirror. And all the more imperceptible are his thoughts, actions and words without means for evaluation and reflection.

In an everyday life beset with sufferings — birth, old age, sickness, death, and all the other complications and frustrations felt by everyone — Buddhism gives us an insight into our lives, and teaches us not to flee, but to understand. Thus even in the midst of suffering, the Buddhist is able to appreciate life. The Buddha-Dharma guides us by enabling us to understand our true nature, and thus we can cultivate and improve our self through discipline.

Buddhism is a religion of wisdom and compassion; it teaches that true wisdom is always accompanied by compassion and compassion is always founded on wisdom. The message of Buddha was that we have moved within the power of wisdom and compassion for too long — in ignorance. The supreme task of life is the realization of this great power of wisdom and compassion within: to understand this innate potential energy and to work for its complete fulfillment for our own Enlightenment as well as for the Enlightenment of others.