

## On the Occasion of Buddha Day 1990: The Future Task of Buddhism

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### INTRODUCTION

North California is a unique area in the world where almost all living forms of Buddhism are represented. Included are not only Theravāda Buddhism from Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, but also other important schools of Buddhism from China, Tibet (including Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya, and Gelug orders), Korea, Japan (including Rinzai and Sōtō Zen, Nichiren and Jodo-Shinshu), and Vietnam. Most of them have their own centers or temples with leading monks or priests and a sizable number of followers. A cooperative organization was formed to represent these groups called the Buddhist Council of Northern California, and every year they have gotten together to celebrate the Vesakha Festival in May. Originating in the Theravāda tradition, the Vesakha Festival commemorates Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and *parinirvana*. Under the name of "Buddha Day" this Vesakha Festival has been held by the Buddhist Council of North California as the most important event common to all member schools.

In 1990, they celebrated the 12th Annual Vesakha Festival on May 6 at Dwinelle Hall, University of California, Berkeley. The following text is the key address which I was asked to deliver on that occasion. My main concern in this address was to clarify the most appropriate way to celebrate Buddha Day for all of us despite the great diversity of various Buddhist traditions, especially in regard to the difference in the view of Gautama Buddha held by Theravāda, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism, and also to show the future task common to all Buddhists in this turbulent world

situation. I was pleased that after my address two Theravāda monks, one from Sri Lanka, the other from Thailand, came up to me and equally expressed their agreement and appreciation.

### ADDRESS

Distinguished representatives, priests and laymen from various Buddhist groups all over Northern California! Today, we gather together here to celebrate the Buddha Day, Vesakha ceremony. In this occasion, we celebrate the birth of Śākyamuni Buddha, but also commemorate the Buddha's enlightenment and *parinirvana*. This is an important Buddha Day for all Buddhists and this year we have the 12th Annual Buddha Day festival.

It is important, however, for us to think about what is the most appropriate way to celebrate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinirvana*. Of course, we would like to honor the Buddha as the founder of Buddhism, our Lord and Great Teacher. Is it, however, good enough for us to honor Śākyamuni Buddha as the object of our worship and celebration? I don't think it is good enough. Should we not, in truly honoring him, awaken to the Buddha Dharma by ourselves, and begin to walk on the same Buddha path as Śākyamuni Buddha? We should not take Śākyamuni Buddha merely as an object that we honor, but, rather, we would follow and live Buddha's Way by ourselves, subjectively and existentially. To me, this is the most appropriate way to celebrate Buddha Day.

According to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, shortly before his death Śākyamuni addressed Ananda, one of his ten great disciples, and others who were anxious at the prospect of losing their master:

O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves and do not rely on external help. Live the Dharma as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the Dharma. Look not for assistance to anyone besides yourselves.

Obviously, when he said to his disciples, "Do not rely on external help," and "Look not for assistance to anyone besides yourselves," he included himself in the term "external help" and he also included himself in "anyone besides yourselves." He said this despite the fact that he, Śākyamuni Buddha, had been a teacher of Ananda and others for many years. It may not, however, be clear at first how the following two passages in the set A and the set B in his statement are related to each other:

Set A: "Rely on yourselves," and "seek salvation alone in the Dharma."

Set B: "Be ye lamps unto yourselves," and "Live the Dharma as a lamp."

In this address, Śākyamuni did not mention his own identity with the Dharma in some exclusive sense. Instead, he explicitly identified the Dharma with the individual disciple. All this implies that the identity with the Dharma is not unique to Śākyamuni Buddha, but is common to all people. Further, he emphasized in the concrete situation of his death everyone's direct identity with the Dharma and this identity is without external help or mediator.

And, yet, in Buddhism, despite the identity of a particular individual with the Dharma and despite the identity of Śākyamuni himself with the Dharma, the Dharma is beyond everyone—

beyond even Śākyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. The Dharma exists by itself universally apart from any human existence. Śākyamuni Buddha is not a creator of the Dharma, but a discoverer of the Dharma. This is the reason the *Samyutta Nikaya* states:

Regardless of the appearance or non-appearance of the Tathāgata (Śākyamuni Buddha) in this world, the Dharma is always present.

Yet, who is rightly qualified to talk about the Dharma in its absolute universality? Is one who has not realized the Dharma qualified to talk about it? Certainly not! For, if it is the case that one does not realize the Dharma in her- or himself, then one understands the Dharma and its universality merely conceptually, and thereby that the total universality of the Dharma becomes an empty or dead universality. Hence, only one who has realized the Dharma with his or her whole existence can properly talk about it in its total universality. Although the Dharma transcends everyone, including Śākyamuni Buddha, and is present universally, there is no Dharma without someone to realize it. Apart from the realizer, there is no Dharma. In other words, the Dharma is realized as *the Dharma* in its universality only through a particular realizer. Śākyamuni Buddha is none other than the *first* realizer of the Dharma of our era. He is not, however, the *only* realizer of the Dharma. But, it is also true that without Śākyamuni no one would have known the existence of the Dharma functioning throughout the world. He is indeed the *first* realizer of the Dharma. This is why he has been regarded as the founder of Buddhism.

In the sense that Śākyamuni is a realizer of Dharma in its total universality, he may be said to be a center, not *the* center of the Buddhist religion. The significance of Śākyamuni's historical existence is equal with that of every other realizer of the Dharma, except that Śākyamuni was the first, and supremely realized the Dharma.

cal existence is equal with that of every other realizer of the Dharma, except that Śākyamuni was the first, and supremely realized the Dharma.

How can we hold to those two apparently contradictory aspects of the Dharma: that is its total universality, on one hand, and its dependency upon a particular realizer, on the other? The answer lies in the fact that the realization of the Dharma is nothing but the *self-awakening of Dharma itself*. Your awakening of the Dharma is, of course, your own awakening. It is your awakening to the Dharma in its complete universality. But this awakening is possible only by overcoming our self-centeredness, *i.e.*, only through the total negation of ego-self. Our self-centeredness is the fundamental hindrance for the manifestation of the Dharma. Originally the Dharma is present universally, but due to our self-centeredness, it does not become manifest to us. Therefore, when the self-centeredness is overcome and the selflessness is attained, *i.e.*, *anatman* is realized, the Dharma naturally awakens to itself. Accordingly, the self-awakening of the Dharma has the following double sense. First, it is *your* self-awakening on the Dharma in your egoless true Self. Secondly, it is the self-awakening of *Dharma itself* in and through your whole existence. In other words, a particular individual's self-awakening to the Dharma and the Dharma's self-awakening are not two, but one.

It was on the basis of this self-awakening of the Dharma that Śākyamuni said, without any sense of contradiction, "Rely on yourselves," and "seek salvation alone in the Dharma." His statements, "Be ye lamps unto yourselves," and, "live the Dharma as a lamp" are complementary and not contradictory. To ultimately rely on one's self is not to rely on the ego-self, but rather on the "true self" which realizes the Dharma. Just as Śākyamuni's awakening was the self-awakening of the Dharma in the double sense mentioned above, that is, on the one hand, it is *his own* self-awakening of the Dharma, and, on the other, it is *the Dharma's* self-awakening, so anyone's awak-

ening to the Dharma can and should be the self-awakening of the Dharma in the same sense.

This is the basic standpoint of Buddhism, which after his awakening was clarified by Śākyamuni himself throughout his life and particularly, as mentioned before, as he approached death. Some time after the *parinirvana* of the Buddha, Buddhism began to experience various schisms and thus it developed into Theravāda, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and so forth. However, all forms of Buddhism are fundamentally based on the above basic standpoint of Buddhism, that is the self-awakening of the Dharma in the double sense, as discussed above. Considering this basic standpoint of Buddhism clarified by Śākyamuni himself, I think the most appropriate way of celebrating Buddha Day is not to merely honor Śākyamuni Buddha as the object of our worship and celebration, but for each one of us to awaken to the Buddha-Dharma by ourselves and live and practice Buddha-Dharma subjectively and existentially.

Then, what is the Dharma which we should awaken to, live and practice? It is the law of *pratitya-samutpada*, that is the law of dependent co-origination. This law means that everything in the universe is co-arising and co-ceasing and is interdependent with each other, that nothing exists independently; nothing has its own enduring fixed ownbeing. I believe this law of dependent co-origination is a very powerful and effective principle for the world, and that this is true not only for the past, but also for the future.

In harmony with the law of *pratitya-samutpada*, Buddhism is not a monotheistic religion which is based on one absolute God. It does not reject the standpoint of others. Again, Buddhism is not some kind of pluralism, or some kind of polytheistic religion which has many deities without one integral principle. Being based on the law of dependent co-origination, Buddhism is neither monotheistic nor polytheistic, but non-dualistic. It can give life to everything, without reducing

everything into one substantive principle. And yet, at the same time, Buddhism can embrace everything in the dynamic oneness of non-duality.

The contemporary world is rapidly shrinking due to the remarkable advancement of technology. Jet airplanes fly everywhere, and electronic communication happens almost instantly. In this shrinking world, however, the difference and opposition among various value systems and ideologies becomes more and more conspicuous. How to integrate this pluralistic world situation without marring the features of the culture and religion of various nations? This is the urgent issue which human kind is facing today. The future task of Buddhism is to apply the law of dependent co-origination to this world situation and to try to

establish a dynamic and yet harmonious world. For the Buddhist law of dependent co-origination can serve a powerful and effective principle to cope with the above urgent issue for the future of humanity.

Let us take on, then, the future task of Buddhism! Let us awaken to the Buddha Dharma and become fully and compassionately human. Let us join hands in fellowship and live and practice the law of dependent co-origination and in this way let us build a better world where all beings in the ten quarters, including self and others, men and women, nations and races, humans and nature, all may live harmoniously and peacefully.

*Gate, Gate, paragate, parasamgate bodhi, svaha!*