

Dharma Childhood

Vesak, 2010

The apple blossoms are in full bloom, the vegetable garden is waiting for seed and the new babies of the woods are exploring this marvelous world into which they have stumbled. About one hundred lifetimes ago, at this same time of year, only on the opposite side of our planet, it was spring again, what, in that part of Asia, is called Vesak, the May full moon. One of the new babies of that time, appeared. He would grow into a unique and unparalleled individual in our history.

This child whose names - Siddhartha, a personal name, Gautami, a family name, Shakyamuni, a clan name - defined him as a prince-in-waiting. As with any parents, his were thrilled to welcome him. Then came the fine print, the good news and the bad news about this baby. The king's own fortune teller gave the good news first. The baby boy would grow up to be an extraordinary being, one who would lead people as none had before and usher in a new era in the world. Mom and Dad were now thrilled. Then, the bad news - there's always a down-side - the fortune teller couldn't say if the boy would do so by taking over the family business, namely the Kingdom of the Shakas, or would abandon the royal world and establish a new spiritual realm. Mom and Dad were now not so thrilled.

Most of us know the rest of the story. The boy's childhood reveals more and more of his special nature. The King tries to isolate him from anything but his royal birthright. The Four Sights - a baby, a sick person, an aging person and a corpse. The flight in the night. The years of searching and self-exploration. The long dark night of temptation. The Awakening at dawn. The decades of teaching and foundation of the Sangha, and finally his own death.

OUR DHARMA CHILDHOOD

We have told and retold this story many times and, while it is important for us to remember that birthday and childhood, today, I want to talk about two other birth and childhood stories.

The first one is the story of your own Dharma childhood. Unlike Shakyamuni, I'm willing to bet that none of you came from your mother's womb and immediately stood up and began walking about. Even if that did happen, I doubt lotus flowers sprung up from each of your footsteps. Correct me if I'm wrong.

I'm expecting that all of us are similar in being born as Dharma practitioners during our adult years and that we share a similar infancy as children of Shakyamuni. This can be confusing, on the one hand,

because we are all intelligent well-educated adults. We have read hundreds of great books, studied teachings from over the world and know a great deal about our spiritual selves. We've each spent more hours sitting on our butts in a practice room than we care to calculate. On the other hand, when we examine the lives of great dharma practitioners - for example, Saicho, who spent 20 years on a storm-blown mountain top, and dedicated his entire life to establishing our tradition in Japan - our privileged lives and comparatively tiny practice experience and knowledge may feel on the slim side.

We must remember that our dharma career is never cumulative. We don't practice for twenty years and retire with some colourful diploma to be mounted on a wall at home. Our growth as spiritual selves is a gradual process but one in which each moment of practice is as crucial as the last. Awakening can appear in any moment but not without moment by moment attention and effort. The Way is a Path.

All of us approach this practice and wisdom in similar but also unique ways. *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* describes no less than 25 distinct styles of practice, all guaranteed to lead us to Buddha-hood. Each one of us brings our unique life experience and talent to whatever practice we engage in. So, just as each of us has a unique story, we have unique practice stories.

Today is a day about childhood and it is instructive for us to remember that we too are still in the childhood of our practices. As any child we have to remain curious

and exploratory in our approach to the possibilities of practice. This is not a time to say "Oh I won't do that. Its too this or too that." As all children we grow most when we allow ourselves to be open to the benefits of whatever practices are presented to us. As children we can only set any practice aside after we know it, not before.

Our Sangha is one of such experimentation. We are not what in Japan is known as a "single-practice school", be that just sitting, just chanting, just *paramita* practice or just ritual observance. Our tradition is called *Ekayana*, the unifying way, meaning we appreciate the unity of all practice forms.

As such we will benefit ourselves most when, like any child, we allow ourselves to wander about in the Dharma, drinking from all the wells presented to us, perhaps stopping here and there to drink more deeply as our disposition suggests, and perhaps at times practicing some single practice.- not because it is the *right* one, but because it is *our* way, a way born from our sincerest explorations. Ours is a way of trust, risk, adventure, and a willingness to follow those of greater experience in to new understanding.

OUR SANGHA CHILDHOOD

We are in another childhood this year too, that of our Sangha. Some of us have been practicing together for five years or more and our practice may have settled into patterns and habits. And now, as with the days when we suddenly stop playing in the backyard all day and begin sitting in chairs in buildings full of other kids and adults,

we are here offered a new stage of our Dharma maturation.

We have begun to redefine our practices and align them more consciously with a new tradition, the Tendai. This offers us incalculable opportunities for deepening our practice, and I urge all of us to take advantage of this as we can. However, as with our other childhood, we must never abandon our roots and pre-schooler habits. We still need to take time to play in the less structured and more familiar learning spaces of our spiritual lives. No matter what tradition we may align with, we are, first and foremost, the children of the Buddha and our Way takes its direction from that teaching.

Unlike our own childhoods, where we are shuffled through grades and told to abandon things along the way, in our Sangha we are welcome to practice at the introductory and basic ways as long as that makes sense to us. As I have taken to saying, Red Maple began by offering a “ground floor” spiritual experience, open to all and appropriate for all. That will not disappear, since it represents the core practices which we all share and upon which we build our unique practice style and strength.

Some of us, at our own pace, may want to take the stairs up to the second floor or the third, where we can deepen whatever practice form we wish, in ways which have established supports and guidance. None of this disparages or devalues the ground floor, only opens up to us wider and more profound opportunities to learn and grow.

Our Sangha is stepping into its own adolescence, a mix of maturation and awkwardness, of confident steps forward and shaky moments of doubt. All of us here are ready to take on that challenge in whatever way suits our disposition. As with our own bodily adolescence, we know things cannot stay the same and are not sure exactly where we are going. Equally with that experience, we are guided by more mature practitioners who can support and inspire us, so that we move into our future without regret or fear.

CONCLUSION

Vesak is one of the happiest festivals of our calendar. It reminds us of what we have been and are offered by each moment - a full and seamless experience of who and what we are. The child born so long ago did not save us nor change the world. He did, however, open us up to the possibility of our own Awakening. He taught us that, with our efforts and through the guidance of succeeding generations of practice we can, as did he, grow up to the truth of our own lives.

On each cushion in this space is both a child of the dharma and a Buddha. On this Vesak we can, like the unfolding blossoms in the yard, greet this spring as both the child and the Buddha.