

Gesshin Greenwood

The Dharmic Life

Week One: “We Are The Buddha”

April 1, 2019



Hi, my name is Gesshin Greenwood. Welcome to *Tricycle* magazine’s online Dharma Talk series. This is “The Dharmic Life” series, where we’re going to talk about the Buddha’s life and what it means to us. In this first talk, I’m going to discuss the first noble truth and the first section of the Buddha’s life.

I picked this topic of the Buddha’s life because when I was thinking about what to talk about, I remembered my time practicing in a convent in Japan. I ordained as a Zen nun in the Soto Zen tradition in my early 20s, and spent about five years practicing in monasteries there.

When I was practicing at the convent—which was very strict—every once in a while an older nun would come to the convent and bring snacks. We’d go to the dining room and make tea, she would give us snacks, and then she would just talk about the Buddha. It was the most fun I think I ever had, because it was about just being together, eating, and talking about this wonderful person that we should aspire to be. So that is the inspiration behind this talk. If you have some snacks feel free to get them, have some tea, and we’ll talk about the Buddha.

The story of the Buddha is the story of a prince who lived in India around 500 BCE. His name was Siddhartha until he received the name Buddha, which means “He who has awakened.” Even though this is represented in religious texts as some magical, mystical story that depicts the Buddha as a god, I think it’s important to realize that not only was the Buddha a human being, but he’s also all of us. We’re all the Buddha. We are not only the Buddha, but we are every aspect of the Buddha’s story. That’s a big point in this series. We are the Buddha’s father and we are the Buddha’s family. We’re the god of delusion and we’re also enlightenment. We’re all of these things.

According to legend, Prince Siddhartha’s father received a prophecy that his son would grow up to be either a great king or a great sage. The king wanted his son to be a great ruler, so he spent all his time and effort trying to shield his son from anything unpleasant that would make him want to leave the palace. He gave him all the best toys and food. When he grew up, he gave him access to the best entertainment and the most beautiful women to try to distract him and keep him inside the palace.

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If we assume that everyone in this story is ourselves, one way to interpret the father is as a representation of the part of us that is constantly trying to fix the external world in order to make ourselves happy. He’s constantly manipulating things. He’s the part of us that looks to sex, food, alcohol, and television, or whatever you do to try to cover up the monotony and exhaustion of daily life. He has a very human impulse.

Recently, I went camping in Joshua Tree National Park with my husband. When we got there it was really hot. It was about a hundred degrees. As soon as we set up camp, we were exhausted and tired, and everything we did became about cooling down. Then when we were cool, we asked “How can we get more energy?” and everything became about that. We took a nap and then we drank Red Bull. Then I thought, “How can I have more fun?” I became very aware of how everything we were doing was just to alleviate basic unsatisfactory experiences we were having.

We got in the car and drove to a part of the desert that had a sign warning us about a swarm of bees. We got out of the car but there literally was a swarm of bees, so we had to get back in the car. We kept driving and saw a beautiful sunset—it was really beautiful—but then it immediately got dark, so we had to go back to the camp and cook dinner. It was just one thing after another, which is kind of what life is.

It doesn’t mean that it’s always unpleasant, that it’s always bees. There are swarms of bees sometimes, but there are also beautiful sunsets and time spent with loved ones. But this series of desires, needs, and unpleasant things does happen.

Eventually, the Buddha discovered what were later dubbed the four noble truths, which are observations about how the world and the human mind operate. In fact, I think it’s more useful to think of these truths as observations.

The first observation is that there’s no end to the things we want to do to make ourselves happy. As in the story I was describing, if we’re not tired and hot, then we’re bored, or we’re running away from a swarm of bees in the desert. Again, this is not to say that there aren’t beautiful things. There’s a Walt Whitman poem that reads, “Urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world,” and this is what I’m talking about. It’s this constant urge to go forward.

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Eventually, the prince decides that he wants to see the world outside the palace. He plans a trip to the city and he takes his best friend, a charioteer, with him. The prince’s father makes an effort to hide all of the unpleasant things in the city, all the old people and sick people, and make it beautiful.

But when Siddhartha goes out, his father hasn’t hidden everything, so he does see an old person, a sick person, and even a corpse. He’s never seen any of these things before. He turns to his friend and asks, “What is that?” The charioteer says, “It’s a sick person.” Siddhartha asks, “Is this going to happen to me?” and the charioteer says, “Yes, even to you, all of these things will happen, old age, and death.” Siddhartha is very disturbed by this, but eventually he sees an old sage—an old wise man—walking through the town, and he feels inspired by what that old wise person represents. He decides that he wants to go out into the world and figure out what’s up with suffering.

A lot of us come to practice after the death of a loved one, or a bout of illness. We come to this practice because we have become intimate with suffering in a way that we hadn’t before.

This is what I think this part of the Buddha’s story is telling us. Oftentimes, suffering really is the spark that begins our spiritual path. The abbess of the convent where I trained, Aoyama Roshi, would say “My suffering is my capital,” because Buddhist nuns, in particular, don’t have a lot of money. They’re not making a lot of investment. The thing we have that’s really valuable is suffering, because it’s the material that we can work with to help us progress in the spiritual path.

Siddhartha was so disturbed by what he saw, and so inspired by the holy man, that he decided to run away and pursue the holy life. He left his wife and child in the middle of the night and went to the forest. He traded his beautiful clothes for beggar’s clothes.

Despite his best efforts to keep his son from leaving, Siddhartha’s father was not able to have his son do his bidding. If you have children, you might know that this is a common problem in parenting. If you want your children to be children forever and you don’t want to let them go, that’s going to cause problems. I said earlier that everybody in this story represents part of us. The other way in which we are the father in this story is that we identify way too strongly with our children, and I don’t just mean our literal children. I mean the external phenomenon in our

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life that are unfolding and that we believe belong to us. We believe it's a reflection of us, that everything that's happening is about us. When we encounter pain, we make it our pain, and then it becomes suffering. We so rarely see that there is a universal experience of pain, and it's not actually our pain. Siddhartha's father didn't just want to protect his son out of love. He also wanted Siddhartha to become a great ruler, because he was a ruler. It was all about him and he wanted his son to continue his legacy. He saw his son as an extension of himself.

My mother and I were always close when I was growing up. We talked a lot, I could tell her anything, and she was really close with my boyfriend in high school. When I went to college, I think it was really heartbreaking for her. When I came home on breaks everything would be fine for the first week or so. But then when I got ready to go back to school, we'd always get into huge screaming arguments before I left. It took a couple of years of this same pattern repeating before we both realized that she was so unhappy about me going back to college that she would make conflict to express her unhappiness about it. I think this is a really common thing for parents when they have to let their children go. It's very painful. One time when I was going away to college, I gave her a mix CD. One of the songs on it was by Sweet Honey in the Rock, and the lyrics of the song are:

"Your children are not your children
they are the sons and the daughters of
life's longing for itself.
They come through you
but they are not from you.
And though they are with you
They belong not to you.
You can give them your love
but not your thoughts,
They have their own thoughts.
You can house their bodies, but not their souls,
for their souls dwell in a place of tomorrow,
That you cannot visit,
not even in your dreams.
You can try to be like them,

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but you cannot make them just like you.
Try to be like them,
but you cannot make them just like you.”

It’s a great song, I recommend listening to it. I love the line, “They are the sons and the daughters of life’s longing for itself,” because we can say the same thing about pain. Our pain is not our pain. It is the son and the daughter of life’s longing for itself. It’s the result of this urge that I was talking about, this procreant urge. This is the condition of life. This is the reason for suffering. Life is not bad, and life’s longing for itself is not bad. This procreant urge is not bad either. It’s actually quite amazing and beautiful. It’s why any of this exists.

But when we attach onto the pain and make it our pain, we cause ourselves to suffer. If we could loosen the grip on our children a little bit, on our pain, and on our ideas, if we could understand that they are not ourselves, then we would suffer less. Our pain is not our pain. We can give it our love, but not our thoughts. It has its own thoughts. We can and should give our children love, and we can give our pain our love.

The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh talks about how we should take care of our anger. It’s quite useful to take care of these things that are occurring in and around us. This is really important. We’re not trying to forcefully push away pain or suffering, but we are also not trying to hold onto it like the father in the story. All we have to do is care for our pain and hold it with a loose grip. Love our pain, and let it have its own existence. That’s not about us. Love your children with all your heart, and let them go outside of the palace walls.

This was the first part of my talk on the Buddha’s life, and we talked about the first noble truth. In the next section, we’re going to talk about what happens after he leaves the palace and the second noble truth, so I hope you join me. Thank you.