



April Guide 2002

Hanamatsuri, April 7

Bathing the Baby Buddha

The founder of our Center, Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An, often said that the Buddha's birthday is everyone's birthday. Ven. Karuna will be sharing some stories of baby Prince Siddhartha at Sunday service. Please join us in bathing the baby Buddha as we celebrate the Buddha's birthday in Japanese style on Sunday, April 8, followed by a potluck luncheon in the Zendo garden. Please bring a vegetarian dish or drinks to the lunch. If you would like to bake a birthday cake please call the office to let us know.

The historical Buddha was born 2643 years ago in a garden at Lumbini in the Himalaya mountains, as Queen Maya was attempting to get from Kapilavastu to her parents' home in Devadaha. She held onto the branches of a fragrant sala tree and gave birth to the prince, who was bathed by the gods with sweet waters and flowers falling from the heavens. He supposedly took seven steps as lotus flowers bloomed under each footfall, and raising his right hand towards the heavens and his left to the ground, declared, "Under heaven and above the earth, I am the most honored one. This is my last birth. I will put an end to the suffering of birth, old age and death."

While the traditional day observed differs from school to school, we observe the Japanese date of the Flower Festival Hanamatsuri. In May we celebrate the traditional Vaisakha (the triple blessed day of his birth, enlightenment and death) with a retreat. The Hanamatsuri ceremony ends with all of us reenacting the bathing of the new born prince.

Pot Luck Lunch for Abbess'62nd Birthday

This year our Abbess, Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, turns 62, so we are holding a party for her on Sunday, April 21, following our Sunday service. If you have any talent, such as singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, flower arrangement, poetry reading, martial arts, etc., call our office at (213) 384-0850, and we will add you to our talent lineup that afternoon. The party will begin at 1 pm with a potluck luncheon, followed by a lineup of cultural activities. The program will run until 3 pm. Please bring drinks or a

vegetarian dish to share. Gifts are not necessary.

A Taste of Chocolate

by Rev. Gunaratna Sarika, the first prisoner to take the eight precepts of a Dharma Teacher

During my years of incarceration within this “barbed wire monastery” (12 now) it has become obvious to me that unless I was willing to apply the Buddhadharmā to my daily life I would never really know the benefits of Buddhist practice.

We can talk until blue in the face, but until we actually take a piece of chocolate and put it into our mouth, our tongue actually tasting the chocolate, we can never know what chocolate is really like. No matter how many books we read or how much we hear about this thing called chocolate, we are only basing any knowledge we have on what others have told us, with no actual experience of our own.

Meditation is like this. We must actually engage in the practice of consistent meditation both on our zafus (or rolled up prison blankets) and in our daily lives if we hope to realize the very real benefits of this practice. I truly cannot emphasize this enough. For me, there is just no other way.

Over the years and through the graciousness of those at IBMC, I have been privileged to write to numerous fellow prisoners throughout the United States who are interested in Buddhist practice, as well as numerous other practitioners. So many of them tell me, “I really want to be fully engaged in real dharma practice, but I just don’t know how.” My response to them, all of them, is simply to just do it.

Trust me, there is no magic wand, no real secret, no mysterious pill. No, there is only you, engage in your daily life as it happens. Nothing more, but surely nothing less.

It is a matter of getting in touch with our inner environment and then working with it once we do. My dear root teacher, the Ven. Sarika Dharma, when she was physically with us was fond of telling me, “Gunaratna, worry about your own inner environment and your outer environment will take care of itself.” I now share the same with each of you. “Worry about your own inner environment and your outer environment will take care of itself.” I say this not really to repeat her, but based on my own I have discovered the truth of her wise words in my daily life.

The Indian sage S’antideva said that we should allow no thought to develop into action unchallenged. Of course, to do this we must be willing to be open and absolutely honest with ourselves. We must proactively seek out ways to facilitate our daily practice. Then we must actually sit on our cushions and get down to

practice, accepting whatever comes as is, without expectatiions of any kind.

Some, I know, will see this as an ardupous task. To be honest, at times it truly is. But we must persevere, remembering that the result of our individual practice benefits all sentient beings. In this we are not seeking our own individual liberation, but the liberation of all sentient beings.

Nowhere can I find Sakyamuni Buddha, nor any other legitimate Buddhist teacher, promising anyone a rose garden in this process. However, they all echo one another in the promise of results from our own individual genuine [ractice.

This also requires our bravery. As once we seriously begin to practice we suddenly find that we are alone, completely alone within ourselves. There is nothing to hide behind. We are comp;etely exposed. Here we completely, alone with our mental darkness. Here we are alone in this secret place of no masks, no facades. No one is here but you, the you that only you can really know: this we must face, just as it is.

In Buddhism we are taught that there are no teachers, just mirror-holders. We, each of us, must be willing to be brave and look into this mirror. We do this by eating the chocolate, instead of merely talking about it.

Another of my dear teachers, the Venerable Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, is fond of saying, "Meditation is not merely to be seen as some technique,. Instead, meditation should be seen as a window into our daily lives." Meaning that we need to take into all that we do, the same degree of mindfulness and concentration that we utilize in our formal sitting practice. our practice should always be there.

If all we do is present ourselves for formal practice on the weekends as if we were some so-called weekend warriors, not only do we rob ourselves of the full benefit of formal practice, we also rob those around us of this benefit as well.

In this Ohio prison we have the same thing. We are only permitted to come together for congregate services once a month when our local Buddhist volunteer is permitted into the prison. For some this is the only time when they engage in any form of practice. I find it hard to believe that anyone, especially those who claim to be Buddhists, cannot find 10-15 minutes a day to sit in meditation. Perhaps this could be when you first awaken in the morning, or when you are on your lunch hour, or in the evening before you retire for the night. My point is that we must be creative here in America, where life tends to be chaotic and seemomgly non-stop in this fast paced degenerate age.

We too have had to be creative over the years to actively find time for Buddhist practice in a primarily anti-Buddhist, pro-Bible-Belt

Christian environment, even to the point of having to file a civil lawsuit against the Ohio prison system for violation of our constitutional rights to religious freedom. (This suit is still pending.) As I said we must be proactive in developing our individual practice, as no one can do this for us.

Another example of creativity is that of this environment in which I live, an environment of ten open 224 man dormitories, where the noise and chaos is a constant, prisoners yelling to one another, radios playing, guards keying their walkie talkies, PA systems blaring; it is endless chaos. And yet by being observant, we have discovered ways of facilitating our practice. For me this begins at 4:00 am, before anyone gets up. For others this is during our institutional count times, while for others it is on the prison yard. To coin an old adage, "Where there's a will, there's a way."

Please understand that I am not saying that Dharma study does not have its value. But, if all we ever do is read, never applying anything to our daily lives, we are left with nothing but words on paper. I ask you, in and of themselves what good are mere words on paper?

September 11th, if nothing else, has truly brought home to me how very precious human life is. This being so, I have come to realize more so now than ever before, how truly short this life is. A life that though here today might quite possibly be gone tomorrow. How can we afford to waste such an auspicious opportunity?

I, for one, know that what I am asking of each of you is no easy thing. I say this because ours is a practice that is truly rooted in the trenches of this samsaric condition. But if we are to achieve liberation for ourselves as well as for all other sentient beings, we most absolutely need our meditation practice, not only on our cushions, but in every aspect of our daily lives. Of this I have complete faith. Based not on some blind faith principal, but on my own practical experience. If you need guidance, you have the great and auspicious karmic virtue of having access to the monks at IBMC. These kind and compassionate individuals are ready and willing to support and guide you just as you support them. They have all been so kind to me in their huge support and valued guidance in my practice. Ever willing, standing there on the sidelines, ready to assist, to encourage, to guide, to point the proverbial finger to the moon, I feel safe in saying we, all of us, are here for each of you.

My dear friends, in closing, I join palms together in the deep appreciation of all of you in your numerous efforts on behalf of all sentient beings. Now, I hope each of you will join me in eating this chocolate bar.

May all sentient beings benefit from our dharma connection, efforts and daily practice.

Upekkha (Equanimity)

by Bro. Ksanti, Tom O'Connell

When Rev. Karuna asked what the subject of this Dharma talk would be and I answered "Equanimity." Victor laughed. "What do you know about equanimity?"

The truth is nothing much. Which is why I wanted to take it as a topic. There are terms in Buddhism that circle and haunt you --- like No Self. It's a core concept and you can't just let it sit there. Something memorized and parroted back. You have to come to some personal understanding of it so it fits in with everything else. It makes the clock tick. Maybe that's why clocks fascinate the Dalai Lama. They don't work if you have any left over pieces. With No Self, it took a long time to get my arms around that -- but now I see how I come together. A confluence of habits, fears, defenses, and rewards. And how that works with Impermanence and Suffering and Rebirth.

Equanimity is like that. It always seemed to hang out there. Hard and unattainable. Too pure for the Buddhism I want to live my life by.

Equanimity was mentioned in Kathy's last Dharma talk about the five hindrances. And in Rev. Kusala's talk on the Dhyana states. Something achieved after joy and well being are dis-carded and only equanimity and wakefulness are present.

It's one of the seven factors of Enlightenment:

1. Mindfulness
2. Investigation
3. Energy
4. Rapture
5. Tranquility
6. Concentration
7. Equanimity

It's one of the 10 perfections. (I know there are six but four got added later. And when I did the search on the Internet this is what came up):

1. Generosity
2. Morality
3. Renunciation
4. Wisdom
5. Energy
6. Patience
7. Truthfulness
8. Resolution
9. Loving-Kindness
10. Equanimity

It's one of the 4 Brahmaviharas:

1. Loving kindness

2. Compassion
3. Sympathetic joy
4. Equanimity

But what is it? How does it work with the other concepts it gets listed with?

Since perfection and enlightenment for me seem a very long way away I want to focus on what it means in terms of the Brahmaviharas. The four boundless states are considered friends on the way to Nirvana. Ayya Khema called them the "four highest emotions." They help in dissolving the idea of a separate self -- so I seem to be keeping to my obsessions.

One definition given is "even-mindedness based on insight into the nature of things." Its near enemy is indifference and its far enemy is anxiety.

I started out thinking it was something like most people's experience with a Lotto ticket. You buy it, dream about what you might do with the money, check your numbers and find out you lost. That covers the Near Enemy -- indifference. And the Far Enemy -- anxiety. You bought it so you're not indifferent. I doubt anyone suffers anxiety about not winning. And losing is a minor disappointment. Can anyone live his or her life like that?

No. It's makes it too trivial; besides as trivial as it is there's a disappointment and if I won-- that's a whole different story.

But looking at disappointment: Charlotte Joko Beck in her book *Everyday Zen* does suggest we look at those minor disappointments as part of our practice. Look at their source, what our expectation was, what our attachment was. Really look at it and find something out about ourselves -- and strengthen our equanimity.

But I didn't have a context, somehow to see it at work in the mundane world we live in.

So, I went to the Internet. "A worldly person, who has no Right Understanding of the Dharma, cannot stand on his feet or keep his mind well-balanced when he is faced with the vicissitudes of life. On such occasions 'Upekkha' is the only remedy that can assist a man to stand up like a firm rock, unmoved or unshakable by the wind."

Another entry and one that came closer to the humane answer I was searching for was on the Buddhnet site:

"Looking into life we notice how it continually moves between contrasts: rise and fall, success and failure, loss and gain, honor and blame. We feel how our heart responds to all this happiness and sorrow, delight and despair, disappointment and satisfaction, hope and fear. These waves of emotion carry us up and fling us

down; and no sooner do we find rest than we are in the power of a new wave again. How can we expect to get a footing on the crest of the waves? How shall we erect the building of our lives in the midst of the ever restless ocean of existence, if not on the Island of Equanimity?"

There were several entries like that. Achieving Upekkha means accepting and understanding Suffering, Impermanence, and No Self. The three characteristics of existence. That's the insight into the nature of things. The Right Understanding. That and an acceptance of our karma. Our past actions return to us. They are ours. We own them. For good or ill. Accept them because "in everything that befalls us we only meet ourselves." I felt I was coming closer to an answer.

There's a story in Zen Flesh, Zen Bones that seemed to be the answer but something seemed missing.

The Zen Master Hakuin was praised by his neighbors as one living a pure life.

A beautiful Japanese girl whose parents owned a food store lived near him. Suddenly, without any warning, her parents discovered she was with child. This made her parents angry. She would not confess who the man was, but after much harassment at last named Hakuin.

In great anger the parents went to the master. "Is that so?" was all he would say.

After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he has lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbors and everything else the little one needed.

A year later the girl-mother could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth-that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the fish market.

The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologize at length, and to get the child back again.

Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was: "Is that so?"

This past year or so has not been the best of times for us. I have become familiar with those waves of emotion I mentioned earlier. Most often I have fought them off with the near enemy -- indifference. But recently one morning at about 5am the far enemy took over.

Anxiety. As I lay there turning into a quivering lump of sweaty anxiety, I finally just said, "I surrender. Whatever is going to happen will. I've done everything I can." And then, and I don't think it was a psychotic moment, another part of me said, "Give yourself a break. Give yourself the next three hours to sleep. I'll take care of things." And for the next three hours this other part

took care of me. I felt as if I was being cradled by a mother with a mother's love and concern. When I became restless it was there to soothe me.

It was the missing part. Allowing myself to feel love and compassion, in this case for myself, let me accept what was happening to me. I had built an armor of indifference around myself to avoid the pain -- but I was shutting off the rest of life and life will not be shut out. Opening myself to it let me sleep, but also let me get over myself. See that this will change. That I had made choices, done things that set this up. Accept my karma. That in the final analysis it wasn't worth getting so worked up about. I had Victor, Tess, Friends, the Sangha, and my practice. In short a life worth living.

Hakuin's "Is that so?" doesn't seem to do justice to the loving-kindness, compassion, probably sympathetic joy felt when the child and its mother were reunited, and the equanimity that held it all. Because I don't think equanimity is this bastion of strength that gets pummeled from all sides. I think it contains, holds, the muck and mire of life, keeps us whole and able to experience the fullness of life and provide the mud that nourishes the lotus.

Irrational Fears & Our Egos

By Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma

An irrational fear can be identified as a fear without a rational basis. Of course, the question is how do I know if a particular fear is irrational? Since what may to me be irrational may to you be totally rational. I think here of people who had the irrational fear that their country would be attacked for "no reason." For instance, there have always been doom sayers. But what about the English or French who feared early on in the 1930's an attack upon their country. Or those here in the U. S. who were afraid of a major terrorist attack? A year ago we would have called them doom sayers and perhaps even laughed at their irrational fears. Today we would acknowledge that their fears were rational.

Fear, after all, arises out of our own experiences, whether real or imagined, which grips us.

I would say that rational/irrational is a matter of degree rather than of something quite different. An irrational fear of heights or snakes is not so different from the fear of crossing a busy street. We all are possessed at one time or another by fear. Bro. Ksanti mentioned his fears in his last talk. He was able to control those fears by giving into them: by telling himself to let go and sleep.

Over the past 32 years at the center, I have had the opportunity to watch people with a lot of fears: some more irrational than others. I can tell people, "don't worry. That will never happen." But that does not mean that it will allay their fears. For instance, back 22 years ago when Dr. Thien-An died, fear was rift in both the

American and the Vietnamese communities. The Vietnamese feared that their community would fall apart, because Thich Thien-An was the only person who could keep them together. That fear was not irrational: it was actually plausible: within one year the community was beginning to splinter into: new arrivals vs older arrivals, between northern and southern emigrees, between older and younger generations. This split still continues and marks the separations within the community. Each group fears and distrusts the other. There are those older Vietnamese who fear, irrationally in my view, that if they ever visited Vietnam, they would be thrown in to jail and disappear; that the visit of the water puppets to America was actually part of a communist plot rather than a cultural exchange. Their fears grow out of what they experienced in Vietnam 30-35 years ago. But all of those old leaders are either dead or close to it and no longer hold power.

The Americans, on the other hand had their own fears: the Center would not survive or its direction would change. I particularly remember one of the residents standing in front of the center and telling me in all earnestness: the Center is changing direction: it is becoming totally a Zen center. I know this because Shinzen tells me he is going to turn it into a pure Zen center." Shinzen was a young monk who was living at the center at the time and running our meditation class and most of the retreats. I do not know who she thought I was or what my role was. I tried to tell her that that her fears would not come true, that the center would continue in its ideals of having Theravada and Vajrayana teachers, as well as Mahayana ones, particularly Zen. But she was convinced of her view and was warning me of what was coming. Of course, it never came true, nor did Shinzen attempt to change the direction of the Center. But for awhile, her paranoia infected others and made the atmosphere a bit uncomfortable.

Two years ago when Dr. Havanpola Ratanasarsa died, similar fears gripped the Center: The Mahayanists feared the Theravadans were taking over; the Theravadans feared they would be kicked out. Some of the straights feared that the gays were gaining too much favor: that the Center was becoming a "gay center." The gays feared that when I was no longer in charge, they would be removed. To which my reply is: "Nonsense!" This Center was founded on the ideal of presenting Buddhism in all its forms to seeking Americans. That basic philosophy, I hope, will always remain in tact. It is what distinguishes us from all other Buddhist centers.

I do not want this center to close its doors to gays because of homophobia. I am secure enough in my own sexuality, or lack of it, to not fear gays. And I certainly hope that all people will be the same. I know that some people may be troubled by our open policy regarding all people: regardless of gender, age, religious or ethnic background or lifestyle differences, including sexual orientation. That does not worry me, There are other centers which they can attend. There have always been gays who attended IBMC: of course, 30 years ago they remained in the

closet. I remember the fear that attacked some of our male residents that they would be approached when they discovered one of the residents was gay. Of course, they did not have the same reaction to a Lesbian who was living here. And to any gays who attend IBMC I say, "Show me who the homophobes are in our midst. I do not believe that they exist." So, again, I say "Nonsense" to all the irrational fears. Now, do not go off into your own reactions at this time. Do not think, but, but. Hear everything I am saying.

Today Vajrayanists are having more problems. Seven months ago New Yorkers were flocking to embrace Tibetan Buddhism. But after the the attack on the World Trade Towers many of those people have become troubled by the Dalai Lama's stance. In fact, Richard Gere, I understand, was booed at a Madison Garden event of raising funds to help the families of those who were lost, when he suggested that we should try to talk about the attacks, rather than engage in retaliation; and the Dalai Lama has cancelled events in the U.S., not just because of his recent health problems. Fear among Americans has risen to great heights: we are the only country which was supposed to be immune to terrorism: these fears have reached tremendous heights when people are labeling others as unpatriotic if they suggest that we are incurring terrible karma by our reactions and should explore alternatives.

But let us look at fear in general. Fear is one of our most abiding hindrances. Why does it arise? It arises whenever our egos become threatened. For instance, it comes from the seventh consciousness, wherein lies our ego. Whenever our ego is threatened, fear arises and with it all the physical reactions that accompany it: tightening of the chest, shortness of breath, balling the hands into fists, the increase in adrenalin, etc.

When that happens how can we allay it? I would suggest that the way to overcome fear is to directly approach it rather than to run from it. There was a Zen master, Song Ryong Hearn, who used to talk here on occasion. He would say "The way to exorcise a ghost is to approach it." Fear is one of those ghosts we need to exorcise. For instance, you will never overcome the fear of flying by remaining on the ground. You have to get into the airplane and confront your fears. But how do you do that? Possibly the best way is by practicing what your reactions would be when confronted by the particular fear.

I have a friend who is a Gestalt therapist who teaches his clients how to confront their fears by having them sit quietly in meditation, then imagine the situation they fear most until they begin to experience the symptoms of fear. At that point he has them practice letting go: concentrating on their breathing, etc. He also asks them "Why do you fear this so much: What is the worst that can happen to you?" Then he helps them to confront that fear. Usually the fear is of death or of losing control, of disappearing into madness from whence they can never return.

Eventually, after a number of sessions of doing this, they slowly begin to lose the fear, eventually getting the phobia under control. I used to have a terrible phobia about heights. I could not even watch a movie scene where heights came into play. You remember the rooftop scene in Mary Poppins where the chimney sweeps were dancing around? I never watched that scene. It scared me too much. In the summer of 1977 I did a lot of overseas flying, about 15 airtrips in all. I began to exorcise myself of my fears by meditating, repeating over and over again, "Namo Quan Te Am Botat." I allowed my belief in the saving grace of Kwan Yin Bodhisattva to overtake my fears. I do not know if she actually helped me or if my chanting itself allowed me to confront my fears. Eventually I cured myself of my phobia. I still do not like heights, but at least I can walk to the edge of the Grand Canyon and look over it without the fear that I am going to slip and fall a mile to my death.

Whenever you find yourself gripped by fear, I suggest that you take three deep breaths of air and get into contact with your environment. When we become seized by fear we shut off one or more of our senses. So, feel the floor or table or chair where you are sitting. Reach out and feel its texture. Smell the air around you and notice the complexity of scents in it; look at the colors around you; hear the sounds going on: the cars in the street, the birds chirping, your cat crossing the floor, etc. Immerse yourself totally in your environment. In other words, be in the here and now totally, rather than in your fears. To put it more simply, just let go.

Then chant, over and over again a simple mantram: If you believe in Kwan Yin Bodhisattva, chant Namo Kwan Yin Bodhisattva or Namo Quan Te An Bo-tat; if not, chant to the Buddha: Namo Sakyamuni Buddha or the great chant that we use in exorcisms: Om mani Padme hum, or even the three refuges: Buddhan saranam gacchami, Dharmam saranam gacchami, sangham saranam gacchami. Chanting is a form of meditation, a very effective one when we are overcome by emotion. In fact, I always suggest that people use chanting rather than silent meditation when they are undergoing serious emotion, such as grief.

So, remember, when you are gripped by fear, breathe deeply, immerse yourself in your environment and do chanting. I hope that this will help everyone to more effectively deal with their fears.

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