

The Buddha, Hakuin, Birth and Death

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01 The death of Dharmarakshita; the life of the Buddha – conditions for spiritual life

Thank you very much, Padmadaka. Brothers in the Dharma. I'm going to dedicate this talk to a very good friend of mine who I've just heard died. I have to mention this, because it's upset me quite a bit. He's an Order member by the name of Dharmarakshita who lives in India. He was in his 70's and he seems to have died of a heart attack. He really was a good friend to me, especially when I first went to India, and too, a very close disciple of Sangharakshita. So, this evening – I'm not going to say more about him now – but this evening we are in the puja going to, I want to do something for him, so our puja's going to be dedicated to him. He loved singing, and he wrote songs, so I think we might do some singing.

So, yesterday I spoke about the different types of Ch'an, the different types of Zen. The first of these, we saw is Tatagatha Ch'an, Tathagatha Zen. The Ch'an of the Buddha, the Ch'an of basic Buddhism, basic practice. That's our practice of Ch'an and Zen. We also saw that as far as the Zen tradition is concerned, the Buddha is the origin of the tradition. Ch'an and Zen practitioners are followers of the Buddhadharma, the Buddha Way. And yesterday I spoke of the Buddha as the original Ch'an master, the original Zen master, and I told the story of the Buddha holding up the golden flower. There were no words, the teaching was holding up the golden flower. And in the Great Assembly, in all of those people, only Kasyapa, only Mahakasyapa, understood. And he smiled, signifying his seeing, his knowing, his understanding of what the Buddha was communicating. It's interesting, somebody came to me yesterday after the talk and said the first time they went along to a centre, the Order member told this story – told it very well. And as soon as they heard that story that was it, they were hooked on Buddhism. This is Osadha, who lives with us. Sanghapala told this story, that was it. He was off. I'd never heard that before, that was lovely.

So today I want to look into the life of the Buddha. I want to see how his life brings out certain features that resonate throughout the Ch'an and Zen tradition. For many of you this material will be very familiar, so I would ask you to listen with a fresh mind, listen with beginner's mind. You know this story back to front, but listen again. For Buddhists, for those who have committed themselves to the Buddhist path, the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is the center of their lives. This is why we have an image of the Buddha at the center of our shrine room. The Buddha is the embodiment of the great ideal, the great spiritual ideal, the human ideal, of Enlightenment. And that ideal of Enlightenment of course consists of two great aspects, as you know: wisdom - seeing things as they really are, and love, compassion, an overwhelming desire to release others

from suffering. Buddhists are those who strive to awaken wisdom and compassion in their lives - awareness and friendliness, to begin with, in their lives. That's why we do the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana, we're on the path there of wisdom and compassion. If you think of nothing else other than awareness and friendliness you really can't go wrong.

What's hugely important here is that the Buddha was not born the Buddha. He became the Buddha. He discovered the way to Enlightenment, the way to Awakening, and realized that everybody could do the same. He didn't, in that sense, regard himself as unique. Wisdom and compassion are a possibility for everyone, enlightenment a possibility – a potential – in everyone. But how did the Buddha attain enlightenment? How did he get onto that path to enlightenment? In a way, the conditions for waking up to the path weren't that good, weren't that propitious, in that the Buddha – it's better if we call him Siddhartha at this stage – came from a royal family. He lived in conditions of great wealth, power, privilege and comfort. And so in a way there was nothing in the environment that was particularly painful or difficult, that would make you think. It was a smooth existence. It's the kind of existence where you can become very complacent; comfortable, a lot of enjoyment. So environments like that, although pleasant, can in fact make spiritual life more difficult. We like to have things nice and smooth, nice and easy, nothing to shake us up, that's what we look for. But, you know, if it's difficult you're very fortunate. Hakuin once said, "The best conditions for spiritual growth are when it's painful, when it's difficult, when you're tired, when you're ill, when it's noisy, when there's people around that you don't particularly want to be with, *that's* the best time to make spiritual progress."

Many of us in the modern west live, in a way, in a similar kind of position to Siddhartha. Everything is really very comfortable. There's lots of options, lots of choices, plenty of food, plenty of opportunities. For Siddhartha, however, this kind of life was utterly claustrophobic and confining, this is how he found it. In one text we find him characterizing his early life, very simple words, as: "Cramped is this life at home, dusty indeed its fear." He felt cramped, restricted in this sphere, this circle. The atmosphere was dusty, nothing was moving, so it was just gathering dust and dirt, just stuck in the rut of convention. This "dust" is just the same way of talking about the stench that master Yunmen spoke about, the stench of our own selfhood, the stench of our own shit – it's the same stuff, except the Buddha was more polite than Yunmen.

02 Noticing sickness, old age and death; the end of intoxication; the beginning of deep awareness

So life at home was stagnant - pleasurable, colourful, with the different palaces, with all the family members, with the dancing girls, and the girl musicians, and the servants – but at its heart it was utterly stuck, dusty, stagnant, profoundly boring, meaningless. Not only did Siddhartha feel cramped and confined, he had problems. Big problems. Not psychological problems, you could call them existential problems.

He began to notice things as if for the first time. He started to notice sickness and illness. The strong, youthful, handsome body gets sick, starts to just break down for a while. He started to notice old age. The strong, youthful body starts to get aches and pains. You start to notice as people get older that they bend over, that there are some gray hairs, and that just seems irreversible - that old age, that aging. The youthful body ages, decays, and in the end, dies. So he started to notice death. The lifeless body is carried away to the burning ground, is just laid on a pile of wood and cow dung and is consumed in the flames – turned to dust and ashes, that's it. So this was all very deeply troubling for Siddhartha.

He noticed too that peoples' attitude to illness, old age and death was very strange. He noticed that they felt aversion to it. They recoiled when they encountered it. That was kind of the instinctive response – they pulled away, they felt disgust, they felt almost a kind of humiliation in the face of it. And he realised, thinking about this, that this happened because they didn't recognise, they didn't understand that illness, old age and death *would* happen to them, inevitably it would happen to them. So, that recoiling was a way of trying to avoid that truth. So, they had no empathy – no real deep empathy for others – because they couldn't recognise this happens to everyone.

At some point he had a kind of insight. He recognised that illness, old age and death would all happen to him, there was just no avoiding these things. They were inherent to reality, inherent to his reality. And it had an incredibly sobering effect. He said that all the vanity, all the intoxication – the word is *mada*, intoxication – left him. The intoxication with health, the intoxication with youth, even the intoxication with life, just left him. So he had a profound sobering up. He started to feel deeply contemplative, deeply meditative. Started to not be able to relate to what was going on around him. Sometimes this happens. I remember with my father's death a couple of years ago that I didn't sort of grieve exactly, I just felt sort of thrown into a state of contemplation - sort of turned inside - and I found it very difficult to relate to what was going on around me, I couldn't think straight.

At some time as well, Siddhartha had other experiences as well at this time, great openings, as you might call them, profound meditation experiences. He saw a field being plowed. He saw the weather-beaten plowman bent over, and just really weathered. This man had been plowing the fields year in and year out. The toiling oxen, the cut earth, the cut worms. He saw life, toil, death, and it became a kind of vision of the whole of life. And what arose in him was a profound empathy, a profound feeling of, "Is this all there is? Is this what life is?" He felt love, he felt compassion, but then he started to enter into profound meditative experiences, as if seeing life more deeply opened up these more profound levels of consciousness, these openings. And he became more and more concerned with the issue of life and death - the *problem* of birth and death, the *problem* of life and death. You are born, you live, you die, but what for? Just to live? To die? Just to suffer? What? Why?

03 To Go Forth - under the sky; different values; no easy answers; asceticism; spiritual crisis

And we find him, in his early life, longing for a completely open life - without constraints, without dust, a completely open life - to get to grips with this issue. The problem of birth and death. "Life at home may be cramped and dusty, but life Gone Forth," he said, "is wide open." Life Gone Forth is wide open. "Gone Forth, you live out under the open sky." Quite literally, in the Indian tradition. You live out as a wanderer. And eventually he decided to Go Forth. That's the traditional term - capital "G," capital "F" - Go Forth. Leave home, clan, caste, country. He adopted the patched, discoloured robe of the wanderer, cut his hair right off, and although his family grieved - they didn't want him to go - he just left. To wander, to get to grips with the vital matter of birth and death, of life, to get right to the bottom of it, right inside it.

It's interesting when you tell the story of the Buddha's Going Forth - I've found this in doing Buddhism courses, or even just chatting to people and people know a bit about Buddhism - they can get a bit annoyed that the Buddha went forth, that traditionally, it's said, that he left his wife and child, which is even more emotionally loaded. And even some Buddhists in the modern west are uneasy about it as a kind of paradigm, a kind of model. Isn't it selfish, isn't it self-centered to leave that? Well, of course, we wouldn't actually be here, having this conversation traditionally if the Buddha hadn't left home, which is kind of interesting. It can seem like that - it can seem selfish - but it's actually nothing of the sort.

Sometimes life presents you with extremely difficult choices. Deep inside yourself you feel moved, called to get to grips with things, deeply. And that seems to set you apart from those you love, those you care for, those who love you, those who care for you. They just don't seem to see life like that. You see life in such diametrically opposed ways. They say, "Life is for family. Life is for career. Life is for money. There's nothing deeper to look for. Just be a decent citizen, why look deeper? It seems so perverse, so weird." And you can find yourself in that poignant, painful position of either having to stay and compromise, even forget the problem of life and death, or go and leave those you love. They might even turn into enemies, which is of course the last thing you want. It's very painful, very poignant, but it does happen. These choices do come up. Friends of mine have really had to grapple with this, and there's no easy solution.

And leaving home and following the spiritual life doesn't necessarily supply easy, immediate answers either. Siddhartha's quest didn't do that - he didn't kind of Go Forth and then everything was, you know, he walked into the spiritual sunset and everything was kind of sorted out, it wasn't like that. He studied and practiced with the great teachers of his time. It's said he mastered their teaching and tamed what they taught, which is seemingly a profound level of meditation, and an apparently eternal, transcendent, formless state. But although that was all very well and good, as far as he was concerned it did not reveal to him the deep meaning of existence, it didn't provide any answers, any clues, to the matter of life and death. He still felt dissatisfied. There was still the great question, the problem, of birth and death, always. Even when he was

offered the leadership of various spiritual communities because he was so brilliant, he could not accept. Something was driving him on, his deep intuition was driving him on. A kind of faith, if you like, was driving him on, to really get to grips with this problem, this great matter, of birth and death.

He plunged into severe ascetic practice, which was popular at the time. Really pushing himself, forcing himself - fasting, not washing, practicing breath control until he'd almost passed out, pushing the body to the limits, shunning all pleasure to get at the truth. He became a kind of leader, or was regarded as a leader, of a religious group - five ascetic friends who regarded him as their kind of guru. And after six very tough years he actually realised that he'd got nowhere. Nowhere at all. Which is quite a thing to acknowledge when you've been going down a particular track for a long time, it seems, well, it seems a bit like, "Oh, I've wasted all this time." But he realised that he was going nowhere. In fact, where he was going was death, without getting to grips with the nature of things.

And he had a great spiritual crisis. He couldn't go forward, he couldn't carry on, in extreme asceticism. That would just lead to death. At the same time, he couldn't go back home – there was no going back. He was really up against the sheer cliff face. He couldn't go forward, he couldn't go back. So, he took food, he cleaned himself up, started to look at things differently. At which his ascetic friends just left. They said he'd kind of given up the struggle. And they left him on his own, just with himself, to find another way into this great matter of birth and death.

For Siddhartha there were no precedents, in that there was no Buddhism, no Dharma. Just himself and his deep spiritual yearning. So, he's regarded as the great pioneer. We call him *the* Buddha because, according to Buddhist tradition, he kind of hacked through the jungle to the Dharma, to the way things are. He discovered what was beyond birth and death, or what was inside birth and death, alone. This is why we have him sitting here, at his Enlightenment.

04 Hakuin - early life; wandering

But even when you're in Buddhism - those who've come after Siddhartha, living in a Buddhist culture, with monasteries and teachers and the records of the masters readily available – it doesn't mean that you have the answers. The problem of birth and death, and what to do with life, remains, it seems. And this was the state of the great Japanese master Hakuin.

When he was a young boy – he wasn't known as Hakuin then, that was his Buddhist name that he was given later in life, but we'll just call him Hakuin – he was brought up in a pious Buddhist family. But he was keenly aware from a very young age of the impermanence, the fragility, of all things. There's a very touching story where one day he's at the seaside with his family and he's watching the waves come in and go out, come in and go out, the ebb and the flow. And it's windy, and the clouds are scudding across

the sky. There's all this movement, there's all this change going on, and he became suddenly overwhelmed with this change, this transience, this impermanence. And he kind of fainted, he just got completely overwrought by all this change. It was all happening too fast. And he said around this time, "Mother! Is there nothing that doesn't change?" It's so poignant, this. I find this very, very poignant. When you lose somebody you love, you ask that question. You're told repeatedly in Buddhist tradition that things are impermanent, but you know, when you lose those you're close to you just have to ask this question, "Why does this happen? Is there no way that we can prevent this from happening?" "Mother, is there nothing that doesn't change?" So he was really desperate. And she would tell him, being a devoted Buddhist herself, "Well the Buddha's teaching. That doesn't change."

And Hakuin would love to hear her tell stories of the Buddha. But it wasn't always a consolation for him. His mother used to take him and go along to talks at the local Nichiren temple where the monks would preach on the White Lotus Sutra, and you know, it was all very kind of basic pious stuff, I suppose. And one of the lecturers described very vividly the burning hells you go to if you harm living beings, and Hakuin found this just too much. He was very, very sensitive to this sort of thing. And he was absolutely terrified. He wouldn't even take a bath because he didn't like the fire burning under the bath and the big cauldron that you would step into. It would just remind him so much of this description of these hells, and particularly of change and transience, of death. It was all very, very distressing for him.

And his mother said, "Well, worship the family deity." So he'd do that. There was a kind of family deity, I guess, some kind of Shinto deity who he'd worship. And he'd keep asking the question, "Take away these sufferings, make things permanent." And he'd try and test this out and it would always fail. He even worshipped Kwan Yin, Avalokitesvara, and even she couldn't protect him from the impermanence of things. And his father would often mutter about, "Well, you're wasting your time, and you're wasting good lamp oil worshipping these deities."

Eventually, after getting permission from his parents, at fifteen he joined a monastery. He decided, "Well, I've got to get to grips with this. I can't live in any other way." He went to a monastery, but even in this monastery there were no answers. There were lectures on the White Lotus Sutra, there were lectures on Dharma, but there was nothing that was telling him what to do about birth and death, what to do about life. It was all very dull and formal. There was nothing to do with how you could get to grips with the meaning of life.

So at seventeen, Hakuin – like the Buddha, like Siddhartha – became a wandering monk, an Unsui as it's called in the Japanese tradition, an Unsui. A monk drifting with the clouds and floating with the water in search of the Way. That's really lovely, isn't it? And he was always asking the question, Hakuin, "When shall we escape birth and death?" He visited monasteries and teachers to ask them this question. This is an ancient Ch'an and Zen tradition, going around visiting teachers, putting the question to them, practicing with them. And at Zen Soji Temple, Zen Soji Monastery, a very famous

monastery, he came across a story that really shook him. Shook him root and branch, that just intensified his problem. It's a great story, you could call it the story of Yen Tu's Shout.

05 The story of Yen Tu's shout; Hakuin loses faith; Master Bao's calligraphy school

Now Yen Tu was one of the great Ch'an masters of China. He was said to have had a backbone of iron. Really can image. He was strong and powerful and a rare adept. It was said that he could cut through the false views and bring people to awakening in just a word. Just a word would do it if the monk was sufficiently tuned up. But Yen Tu lived in a time of great disturbance in China. Armies of bandits were marching around looting monasteries, it was a time of anarchy. They would loot monasteries and they'd kill anyone who stood in their way, anyone who wouldn't give them tribute, wouldn't give them money. If monasteries wouldn't cough up on that visit, they were just cut down.

And one day a band of brigands came to Yen Tu's monastery and all the monks, all his disciples, just ran for it when they saw the armies coming. They were just out the door and they were running, and who can blame them? But Yen Tu would not move. He just sat still, steady - in the Zendo, in the shrine room, the meditation hall - eyes looking straight ahead, just sitting in meditation with that backbone of iron. Completely absorbed in his practice. He wasn't going to move for anybody. So he just sat, and the bandits - very rough, ugly, merciless men - just surrounded him with their swords and knives and spears and axes. "Where are our gifts, priest? Where is our payment? Where's our tribute?" And they just hustled around him, pushing, shoving, insulting him. And Yen Tu just did not move, did not speak didn't acknowledge them. This was his place, this was his practice. And then, of course, the blows just started to rain in. The blades started to come down. The slashing, the cutting, the piercing, and he just sat silent and still as he was cut down. And suddenly, he just shouted a great "KA!" which was heard for miles around, and died.

For Hakuin, this was a truly terrible story. There was absolutely no romance in this story for him. It was just completely terrible. There was no glory in this, as far as he was concerned. He just saw this old monk - this great enlightened man, apparently, who'd practiced so hard - just being cut down by bandits in a deserted temple, in a deserted monastery, who'd just smashed the place up. He just heard, not a great shout, but a screaming in terrible pain. And Hakuin just lost all faith in Zen practice. He said, "If a great, virtuous monk like that can suffer so, what's in store for me? What's going to happen to me? Surely there is nothing more worthless than a Buddhist monk."

He gave up Buddhism and decided to devote himself to the study of Confucianism, Taoism, and he was a pretty good calligrapher and poet, so he took up calligraphy and poetry. And he went off to the great master of calligraphy, master Bao, who was great teacher, a teacher I admire. He was so strict that everybody left except Hakuin. [Laughter] I think that's the sign of a great teacher. I really think that's great - you're so

strong and good, you're not trying to please anybody and they all leave you. But Hakuin didn't. And there are some quite touching moments where master Bao is sick. Hakuin just stays and tends him. But eventually he had another great crisis, because he realized, "I'm never going to be one of the great poets. I'll be nothing like Li Po and Tu Fu. I'll never be a great calligrapher." Although, actually, Hakuin is regarded as one of the great Japanese calligraphers and poets. But he thought, "I'm never going to be one of the greats." And this just piled on the crisis again. And it led him back to getting to grips with the burning question of birth and death, of life, what is it all about? Again he was being pressed up against the cliff face.

06 What are we to do? Koan; Dogen's evocation of koan; the koan of other people; being torn

So, in both the Buddha's life and Hakuin's life we find this intense questioning and searching. This intense desire to understand the true nature of existence. If life ends in death, if life is painful, what is its meaning? What is one to do, what are we to do? Neither of them, Siddhartha or Hakuin, were satisfied with easy answers – even good Buddhist answers.

This burning sense of a question, a problem, is central to Zen practice. It's what's known in Japanese as a *koan*. *Koan* is a translation of the Chinese word *gong'an*, which literally means "public case." What Dogen calls the "*koan* of ancient precedent." Usually this *gong'an*, this *koan*, is a riddling exchange between two Zen masters, or master and disciple, which is kind of contradictory, which kind of brings up a problem. Probably one of the most famous, the most famous, is the question put to master Chao-chou, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature, master?" And master Chao-chou says, "No. Mu." Now, it just sounds weird, doesn't it? We can't relate to it. But that would have been a real problem in China and Japan, a real problem. Because in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist culture and thought, pervasive over Chinese and Japanese culture, is the idea of original, primordial enlightenment. Every thing has Buddha-nature. This is what the sutras say, this is what the tradition says. It's an idea for us, but it actually pervades Chinese and Japanese culture. Everything has Buddha-nature. It's *not* an idea. You inherit that kind of view of life. But then, you have no higher authority than the great master Chao-chou asked about a dog saying, "No. Doesn't have Buddha-nature. Not. Mu." And the disciple has to go away and meditate on *that*. "All things have Buddha-nature, but the great master Chao-chou says 'No' about this dog. But everything has Buddha-nature! No!" And back and forth. [Laughter] Sounds hard to relate to, but you know, you can imagine if you really do take the tradition you've inherited - of original enlightenment, of inherent enlightenment - that's in you. And then you hear that the great master says "No," and you take both equally seriously. It's going to be a big problem which you have to resolve. Especially when your own teacher is standing over you with a big staff and asking you for the "answer." [Laughter] Hakuin himself, his practice was to meditate on *mu*, no. And perhaps we'll hear a bit more about that later on, in another talk.

So that's the *koan*, the *gong'an*, of ancient precedent. But we can also think of *koan* in a different way. Dogen again - and he was a thirteenth century Japanese master - speaks as well of the *koan* realized in life. And the *koan* of daily activities. And Dogen's discussion of this, like most of his discussions of everything, is extraordinarily profound, and I can't really explore all of that here, but mainly because I don't understand it. But one of the points that he makes is that *koan* is everywhere. Life itself and all aspects of life can become *koan*, can become a question to penetrate, to ponder. Everything can reveal and show the true nature of reality. So Buddhist practice, then, from a certain point of view, can be regarded as the opening up of questions - the opening up of problems. Buddhist practice will actually generate questions and problems and conflicts and dualities for you. And because of this it means opening up the search for deeper meaning, it means opening up the possibility of becoming a deeper and bigger person, because these problems can only be resolved on a deeper level, on a higher level.

In the case of the Buddha and Hakuin, it's *the* big problem of life – the big question. What is it? What to do? What does it mean? I'm sure that you've all felt that too, feeling it now maybe. Why am I here? Why have I come on this retreat when I could have had a really nice Christmas at home? [Laughter] What am I doing here? Or maybe that question of “why I'm here” has brought you here. Has actually brought you here. You might even have come here with all kinds of dilemmas in your life about how to live. Shall I do this? Shall I do that? Shall I live there, with them, or shall I go there with them? Do I go or do I stay? [Laughter]

You could say, there's the *koan* of other people, the *koan* of people. This is why *sangha* is a practice, a wonderful practice. It's not just a kind of support structure for our practice, its also itself a *koan*. There are these people you're with who you're kind of united by because of your common spiritual endeavor, but on the other hand, well sometimes you just find some of them just *completely* weird. [Laughter] And difficult and painful, and you can't throw them out, and you don't want to leave, so you've got to resolve it more deeply – it's a *koan*. I think that one of the main *koans* in the FWBO, in the Order, is other people, which means ourselves, of course.

So, you're often torn equally between these things, these opposites. It could be things like the life of activity versus the life of calm. I've certainly felt this at times, recognising that I get a lot out of spending a lot of time with people, teaching the Dharma, being very active, and it's very stimulating. But feeling that I'm out of touch sometimes with something deeper. And then, doing more and more on my own, say being on solitary retreat, I like that. But I'm missing something through not being with people. That can be a very, very difficult dilemma. Or you might have a seeming conflict – I've noticed this with some friends of mine – a conflict between spiritual life and artistic life. Seems to be a big conflict. Do I put everything into meditation, and working to develop the Dharma? Or do I put everything into the arts? That can be a conflict, a real conflict for people. I've seen it.

Often these conflicts are about much deeper issues. Probably somewhere you could track it back to the deep issue of birth and death – to the *koan* of “what?”

07 What the Dharma gives in response; searching for the Unmade; Siddhartha's beginner's mind – coming back to original inspiration

And often we shy away from these conflicts, we retreat from this kind of questioning, these real deep existential problems. We cover them over. We distract ourselves from them. And we can think of Buddhism and the spiritual life as somehow meaning avoiding any type of difficulty, avoiding any kind of tension. Somehow Buddhism should just make everything okay. You know, it just kind of smoothes over. “No, you’re all right.” And if you see somebody sometimes kind of going through it, in conflict, the tendency is to want to kind of smooth it over for them. But, it’s not actually like that when you get into the Dharma deeply. Because you’re looking, whether you know it or not, into the vital matter of birth and death. The great matter of life itself.

What Buddhism is doing, what Dharma does, it gives you the tools, the means to engage with these deep questions in the most creative way - meditation, through developing awareness, through developing friendliness. It’s actually giving us a creative way of engaging with the great matter of birth and death. Spiritual friends, that’s what they should be doing as well. These things are kindling in us the interest, the desire, to look at life.

The Buddha characterized his own search, in later life, as the *Aryapariyesana*, the Noble Quest, the Noble Search. *Pariyesana* is translated as “quest” or “search,” but it comes from a root meaning, “desire” - “intense desire.” His own search was the expression of a profound spiritual interest and spiritual desire - spiritual love, if you like. He speaks, when he talks about the Aryan Quest, of searching for an unmade, an unborn, an un compounded, an unbecome. What does that mean? I remember when I first came across those words “unmade, unborn, un compounded, unbecome.” I just found it completely thrilling - it seemed so mysterious. This is how Buddhist terminologies themselves can become *koans*, can become questions calling you to penetrate the mystery.

The Buddha had a sense, an intuition, that there’s something more than what is simply presented to the senses and the grasping mind - more than a purely material existence. And it’s that intuition of the heart that Siddhartha went back to when he sat alone in the forest, after giving up his asceticism. He went back to his beginner’s mind. He went back to his early experiences. Somehow he’d forgotten that very pure, very fresh spiritual intuition and longing. Somehow he’d got distorted, if you like, on his quest. So he went back, as it were, to that beginner’s mind - back to his fresh, youthful experience watching the plowing and how the meditation opened up naturally, out of empathy and loving-kindness.

And it’s said that he recalled that *dhyana* state and he entered into it quite naturally. But the texts say that he didn’t cling to it, he didn’t kind of settle in it. He somehow had a sense that, well, the thing is not to kind of hold on, not to cling, not to turn it into

something other than it is. So it just opened into a deeper meditation. And it went on like this, just his meditation opening up. But he had this sense to not cling, to not settle - to enjoy deeply, profoundly, but to let go at the same time. It's a wonderful teaching, a wonderful description. He actually started to look and see with his profoundly concentrated and expanded mind right into the heart of birth and death. But it all came out of that fresh beginner's mind. Even, it's said in the text, just to bring the point home, even with the attainment of enlightenment and his great insight, he says, "I never let that bliss, that ecstasy, that came from that take me over." So even in enlightenment, there's a letting go.

So, it's important, this. It's important to come back to our original inspiration – holding it lightly, not clinging to it in a very rigid way – but coming back to our original inspiration, our original faith, our original desire and interest to follow the spiritual life. If you get lost, trace yourself back to your original inspiration.

08 Words of three Zen Masters - Dogen, Hakuin, Ryokan

Now we could, at this point, spend some time looking at the way in which the Buddha spoke of his Enlightenment. How did he describe what he saw when he looked with the Eye of Wisdom into the heart of birth and death? We could do that, but it's very good to recall that the Buddha himself said that his Enlightenment, his Bodhi, is beyond all words or thoughts, or conception. Beyond all subject and object. If you're thinking, you're in subject and object. He also spoke of it as boundless freedom and liberation therefore. If you wanted the best description of Enlightenment, probably the best thing to do is to read the life of the Buddha and read the stories of his loving and compassionate activity, then you'll probably get the best idea of what that Enlightenment might be like. So I don't want to do any of the descriptions that come from the Indian tradition. I want to leave you, instead, with some comments from three Japanese Zen masters. They evoke something, I think. Maybe get you questioning, looking into things, looking into life more deeply – looking into the mystery of birth and death. Because perhaps it's not about going beyond birth and death, it's about looking into birth and death more deeply. First of all I'm going to read a teaching by the great Dogen. It goes like this:

'Plants and trees, and thicket and forest are impermanent; as such, they are Buddha-nature. Humans and things, and bodies and minds are impermanent; thus, they are Buddha-nature. Countries and lands, and mountains and rivers are impermanent because they are Buddha-nature. Supreme Enlightenment, because it is Buddha-nature, is impermanent. The perfect piece of nirvana, because it is impermanent, is Buddha-nature.'

And then there is Hakuin. After much striving, many upsets and spills, much ecstatic breakthrough, and many tough and difficult days, we find him on retreat - in an abandoned, rough old temple - and he's sitting. Meditating, meditating into the depths of the dark night. And outside the snow is falling - falling and falling and falling. Flake after white flake. Falling on roof and trees. Hakuin, his name means "whiteness,"

suddenly seeing deeply the meaning of an ancient *koan* from the Buddha's teaching. The *koan* that goes: "A young girl's power of meditation surpasses that of the Buddha's wisest disciple." And then, suddenly, naturally, Hakuin awakens. He knows directly, and he expresses his realization in a simple poem:

*'If only I could share it,
the soft sound of snow
falling late at night from the trees
at this old temple.'*

So I wanted to show in this talk how the Zen tradition follows the Buddha. It continues the great essential themes of Buddhist life and practice. So it's best to end with a poem of the great Japanese Zen poet Ryokan, who lived in the eighteenth century. It's a poem about impermanence, about not wasting time. It's also a devotional poem to the Buddha, one who has penetrated that impermanence – who lives by impermanence:

*'Even if a man lives a hundred years,
his life is like a floating weed,
drifting with the waves.
East and west continually.
No time for rest.
Shakyamuni renounced nobility
and devoted his life to preventing others from falling into ruin.
On the earth eighty years,
proclaiming the Dharma for fifty.
Bestowing the sutras as an eternal legacy.
Today, still a bridge to cross over to the other shore.'*