

So, last week Kevin talked a little bit about Aging, Sickness, and Death, and why we think all these things suck, and why they don't have to necessarily. When we recognize the impermanency of all things--that nothing lasts forever, and that because of this we really have no "self" to lose, no "self" to be attached to--we remove suffering. Obviously this is simpler said than done, but you get the point.

This week, I'll be talking about the Buddha's own death, which is a reminder to us that the Buddha, no matter how we interpret him as a religious leader and figure, was very human. In my own tradition, we tend to deify the Buddha, making him a human symbol or manifestation for enlightenment, which I think he was, BUT we still must recognize his basic humanity. The Buddha did not teach from the position of someone who is beyond human life: he dealt with aches, sicknesses, and pains just like all of us. And he died like all of us.

In fact, the Buddha's death is pretty ignoble, all things considered. While other religious leaders are dying for everyone's sins, or disappearing mysteriously, the Buddha died of food poisoning. Well, not technically—some medical readings interpret it as a mesenteric infarction, but the gist of it is he was weakened and died from a bad reaction to food. Yup: he had some bad pork (or mushrooms, depends how you read it) that a lay person offered him, got sick from it, and died. Some stories say that he made sure he was the only one who ate it, so as to protect others, which I s'pose makes it slightly more noble, except for the fact that, y' know, anyone else probably would've just had a gut ache for a day or so. So, he didn't really take the bullet for anyone.

Of course, different versions of the story aggrandize the Buddha's death in a lot of ways: Gods and people by the thousands surrounding him, the earth shaking, the heavens roaring, etc. But even in these fantastic stories, the Buddha seems pretty down-to-earth: he refuses the offerings of the masses over and over again, wanting instead to just lie quietly by himself.

At the Buddha's passing, the big question came up: Who takes over from here? Does someone else lead the sangha? The Buddha said no: after his death, he said that the Dharma--the teachings he gave--will lead the sangha. This would ensure that no one would take over as an ultra-personality, becoming the mouthpiece for Buddhism, espousing ideas not true to the Dharma.

Now, don't take this as if Buddha is preserving his place as the eternal leader of Buddhism—in fact, I read this as the opposite. By establishing the Teachings as the head of the faith, this asserts that our practice does not center around any person or being—not even the Buddha himself—but around the truths which he happened to realize. Those truths have nothing to do with him himself.

The Buddha's last few words essentially summarized all of Buddhism, I think. One of the last things the Buddha said, as Kevin told us last week, was: "All things are impermanent, remember this and live your life thusly." This, I think, is the single most important part of Buddhism: long lists of Perfect and Flawless Qualities of the Blah-Blah-Blah are all well and good, but all things in Buddhism are expressions of this impermanency. When you can recognize and accept

impermanency in all things, and you genuinely live your life with this in mind, I think you've realized the most important part of Buddhism. *All things are impermanent—live your life thusly.*

Now, the very last thing the Buddha said is, I think, perhaps the most important for us as practitioners. At his passing, his closest friend and attendant, Ananda, was weeping, but the Buddha soothed him by saying: “Be a light unto yourselves: do not go to anything else for refuge. Hold fast to the Dharma. Look not for refuge in anything except for yourselves.”

Now, I know what a lot of you might be thinking: “Don't we do a lot of refuge taking in Buddhism?” In fact, to become Buddhist, one takes refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. I mean, look at our liturgy: We say time and time again that we take Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. In the Mahayana version of the Buddha's passing, there's a lot of talk about Bodhi-nature—the inner and true state of Enlightenment in each of us, which is not beyond us, but is a part of us that goes unrecognized—and it is to this that we take our refuge ultimately. While Theravadans refute the Mahayana interpretation of this idea, I think we can all agree that in each of us is the equal possibility for enlightenment. Even if we don't have Buddha-NATURE, we all definitely believe in the Buddha-POTENTIAL of all.

So, when we bow to an image of the Buddha, and we say “I take refuge in the Buddha,” we are not only thanking and honoring the historical Buddha who is dead, and in my tradition more universal Buddhas who live on in their own ways, but we are more so bowing to the Buddha-potential that lies within each of us. When we are lights unto ourselves, we find self-sufficiency and longevity in our practice.

As we reach the end of the semester, and thus a hiatus in our services, I want to remind you all that your practice does not depend on any group or authority: it lies fully within each of you. While there will always be the Dharma to teach you more and more, the Dharma can only be learned if YOU choose to read it; while the members of this community and all other Buddhist communities will be there to support you along the Path, only YOU can walk that path; while there is always the example of the Buddha to look to for inspiration in the face of hardship, that inspiration means nothing until YOU recognize your own capability to overcome the obstacles of practice.

I'd like to end this dharma talk repeating, again, the last words of the Buddha as a reminder to all of us here: “Be a light unto yourselves: do not go to anything else for refuge. Hold fast to the Dharma. Look not for refuge in anything except for yourselves.”