

What did the Buddha discover?

[Talk given by Michael Eido Luetchford at a retreat in the Lotus Centre in Prague in June 2005]

Around 450 BC, a prince of the Sakya Clan in northern India, living a luxurious and materially comfortable life in his father's palace, noticed that a life which is based on the material aspects of living alone does not make us feel satisfied. Although he had every material comfort, was married with a wife and son, and was heir to his father's throne, deep down he felt dissatisfied. Intuitively he felt that something was missing, and not being able to get rid of this feeling of dissatisfaction with his life, he decided to search for what was missing.

Leaving the palace, he wandered around and eventually made contact with a group of ascetic Yogins, who lived out in the open in the forest, and by denying themselves all physical comfort and only eating the minimum amount of food to keep alive, they pursued the higher levels of spiritual consciousness that they believed could be attained by a spiritual practice called *dhyana* which means "meditation". They sat with legs crossed in the traditional "lotus" posture that we can see in so many early statues of the buddha. They starved themselves, and by this means, they stimulated their minds to create and enter higher realms of the spirit. They believed that at the ultimate level of consciousness they would be able to observe the fundamental events that create the world. They believed that the world consisted of fundamental particles, which they called "dharmas", which came into existence, stayed in this world for a limited time, and then disappeared from existence. They believed that all existence was based on this cyclic coming into existence and going out of existence of dharmas. They also believed that, at higher levels of spiritual consciousness they could actually experience this fundamental creation and destruction of reality. It was their aim to reach these higher levels by their own spiritual efforts.

The young prince was caught by their zeal in their quest for attainment of the highest state, and joined them. He joined their small community in the forest, sat with them, starved himself with them, and pursued the same goals for around six years or so. But although he practiced sincerely and with great commitment, gritting his teeth in his

practice, and denying himself those things that part of him craved for, he could not feel satisfied. Intuitively he felt that what he was searching for, what was missing in his life, was not to be found in these ascetic practices, in the highest levels of consciousness that his companions were seeking. So at last he left them. His dream had been shattered.

Legend has it that as he walked out of the forest, he bumped into a girl herding goats, who offered him a gourd of warm goats' milk to drink. Accepting it, he realised that to eat is important. To drink is important. After the years of denying himself any kind of physical satisfaction, he felt the simple happiness of drinking warm milk.

He set up camp on the edge of the forest, under a large tree. The weather in India was warm enough to live outside, and his six years of ascetic practice had hardened him to living a simple life. The Yogin's practice of *dhyana* had become second nature to him. He felt very comfortable sitting on a simple cushion, with his body held vertical, head balanced on his shoulders, and his legs folded up in the lotus posture. He sat in his simple camp and contemplated his situation. He realised that he had been deeply dissatisfied with his life of material comfort in the palace of his father. And at the same time, he was forced to acknowledge that his dream of attaining some special state of consciousness with his ascetic Yogin friends had been broken. In this aimless state he sat.

One evening, while sitting on his cushion late into the evening, he noticed the stars shining above him in the clear sky, and he felt at peace. Suddenly it occurred to him that to feel at peace just at that moment was enough. In that moment, he realised clearly that what he had been searching for for so many years was right there in front of him. He realised that the whole of his life existed right there in that place, just at that moment. The whole of his life, and the whole of the world felt just right as it was. His dissatisfactions dissolved.

Amazed that the answer to his problems was so simple, he continued to reflect on his experience for the next month or so, and he realised that he had attained some kind of deep balance in his life. At last the internal conflicts that had driven him from the palace to the forest, and from the forest to his present camp had settled down, and he

felt that he had found a middle way between the two extremes that had formed the basis of his life that far. On the one hand, the extreme of material pleasure, and on the other hand, the extreme of spiritual zeal. He felt that he had at last noticed another way, which was neither one, nor the other, but somehow existed between the two.

The days passed and he realised clearly that sitting in the posture of *dhyana* was in some way connected to his balanced state. He felt that, although he had learned to sit in this way in pursuit of unattainable spiritual goals, the practice itself was immensely valuable. He was in fact sitting in a posture where the weight of his upper body was nicely balanced over his cushion. In that posture, he didn't need to make strenuous efforts to sit upright. It seemed natural to do so. He realised intuitively that this balanced posture was deeply connected to his simple realisation about his life. He felt that through this simple sitting posture, he had returned to his natural state as a human being.

The prince felt at peace. But there was still something that urged him on. He felt a sense of mission rising within him. Just sitting in his camp feeling at peace with the world, in the end was not enough for him. He realised that he needed to try to explain to his ascetic friends what he had realised. How would he explain to them the simple experience that had turned his life around? How could he put it into words? Surely they would misunderstand. But he felt that he should try. In fact he could not stop himself from trying.

So he left his camp to seek out his five friends. After some time, he found them in an open area of forest and approached them. Seeing their old friend coming, the ascetics did not feel at ease. They thought that the prince had abandoned them, and wondered what he wanted. Then they noticed how well he looked. He looked positively radiant! They welcomed him and he sat down with them.

“Since leaving you, I have come to a deep understanding of myself and the world, and I have woken up” he said. What kind of understanding, what kind of awakening?” they asked dubiously.

“I don’t know whether I can explain, but let me try. I have noticed from my own life that there are some fundamental truths about life. Let me explain. For example, we often feel dissatisfied. We feel dissatisfied if our life is based only on the pursuit of material comfort, physical pleasure. We also feel dissatisfied with a life that is based on a spiritual search for perfection. Human beings seem to wobble between these two states, but we feel deeply dissatisfied with both. I have noticed that a lot of this dissatisfaction comes from our attitude. We want to get something. We want to escape from something. We want to be better than we are. It is this wanting itself that creates our dissatisfaction. And the more we want something different, a different state, a different life, a different world, the more dissatisfied we feel. But I have found another truth. I have found a way of being that is in the middle between these two states that generate dissatisfaction. I have found a middle way. Sitting in the balanced posture of *dhyana* under my tree, I have noticed that really I am only living here at this moment. Although I often think about the past, or dream about the future, they are not real. But sitting in *dhyana*, both of those dissatisfactions disappear, and I am at peace in this present moment.”

The awakened one’s five friends were astonished. The truth of what he said had hit them in exactly the right spot. “And I have noticed one other truth,” he said. “There is something that can be called ‘reality’. Yes, in fact it is reality that you my friends have been seeking with your pursuit of dharmas. But it does not exist in higher realms of spiritual consciousness; it exists here in this place, now at this very moment. It is not a yet-to-be-attained state. It is not seeing dharmas; it is a universal Dharma. It is an all-embracing reality, and we all exist unseparated from this reality. We are already part of it. It is already part of us. Yet it is a whole, not formed of parts. The Universe is whole. Although we think that we are separate from it, we are not. Although we experience our bodies as separate from it, they are not. This reality is almost impossible to put into words, but it is real. It is this moment. It is our life itself. It is the Universe itself. When I sit in *dhyana*, I am experiencing this wholeness, this Dharma, this reality. This truth embraces all other truths. But it cannot be understood with the mind alone. Understanding the nature of myself and the world like this, I am free at this place. Free at this time.”

The truth of the awakened-one’s words hit his five friends like thunder.

And so, 2400 years later, in a different continent, in a different culture, we rediscover the same realisation of the awakened-one – the Buddha – again and again in our daily lives. Sometimes trapped by our dreams. Sometimes caught in our memories of what happened in the past. Sometimes seeking a life that is better than this one, seeking a self that is better than the self we already are. We create our own dissatisfaction. And if we are lucky enough to stumble upon the truth that the Buddha found, we too can fold our legs on a cushion, sit with the body held vertical, and discover for ourselves that we are just here, in this place. That we are living just at this moment. And we experience the same state that the Buddha experienced so many years before.