

THE BUDDHA'S LEAVING HOME

A Reflection by Dean Scotty McLennan
for the Multifaith Parents' Weekend Worship
Memorial Church, Stanford University
February 24, 2002

The selection from the Pali Canon that you heard Helen McCaffrey read tells the classic story of the historical Buddha's leaving home. A rich prince who grows up in luxury and ease some 500 years before Christ comes to face the realities of disease, aging and death. He feels the need to leave his parents' palace and go out into the real world to learn about the suffering that virtually all of us encounter sooner or later. He wants not only to learn about suffering, but also to find a way for humankind to overcome it. An idealistic young man leaves home to find teachers and learning experiences that will help him grow up and deal effectively with the complexities and difficulties of life, with the ultimate hope of leaving the world a better place than he found it. That sounds like why a lot of people leave home to go to college.

In the Buddha's case, he shaves off his hair, puts on the yellow robes of a monk, and wanders off homeless with some ascetic teachers. Not surprisingly, as the Buddhist scriptures tell us, his parents "wished otherwise and were grieving with tears on their faces." Students are far from homeless here on the farm at Stanford, and not many of them shave off all their hair and put on robes, but there are often parental tears nonetheless as students leave the nest after some 18 years of living at home. My message to parents today -- which I'm struggling with myself, since my two teenaged sons have just recently left home -- is to try, gracefully, to let your children go. My message to students today is to try, gracefully, to try to include your parents and family in your new life. I hope one or the other message is relevant to the rest of you, since at one point we've all been children, and a number of us have been parents as well.

In Hermann Hesse's novel Siddhartha, where the title character is not the Buddha, but lives at the same historical time at the Buddha, and actually meets him at one point, there's a very poignant scene of leave taking. Siddhartha has decided that his worthy parents have "already passed on to him the bulk and best of their wisdom" (3),¹ and as a seeker he wants to leave home and join some wandering ascetics who are passing through town. On the

evening that he asks his father's permission, his father responds, "It is not seemly for Brahmins to utter forceful and angry words, but there is displeasure in my heart. I should not like to hear you make this request a second time." Siddhartha's reaction is simply to remain standing silently in the same spot. "Why are you waiting?" asks his father. "You know why," answers Siddhartha. (7)

The father goes to bed, and awakens several times during the night to find his son, Siddhartha, still standing silently in the same place. By daybreak the father realizes that Siddhartha "could no longer remain with him at home -- that he had already left him." So, he finds the grace to say to his son: "You will go into the forest and become a Samana [that is, an ascetic]. If you find bliss in the forest, come back and teach it to me. If you find disillusionment, come back, and we shall again offer sacrifices to the gods together." (9) How beautiful to begin to develop an adult relationship with one's own children, to be willing to be taught by them and just to spend time with them, without judgment or demand.

Unfortunately, though, in this novel the son Siddhartha never finds the grace to try to include his parents in the new, fulfilling life he finds. He never returns home. Only after he has a son of his own, loves him deeply, and then loses him permanently in turn, does Siddhartha realize what he has lost in not maintaining a relationship with his own father, who by then is dead. [Quoting from the novel:] "Siddhartha looked into the river and ... saw his father, lonely, mourning for his son; he saw himself, lonely, also with the bonds of longing for his faraway son; he saw his son, also lonely, the boy eagerly advancing along the burning path of life's desires; each one concentrating on his goal, each one obsessed by his goal, each one suffering." (109) Near the end of the book, Siddhartha explains to a friend, a Buddhist monk, that in all his searching for enlightenment, he's finally found that "love is the most important thing in the world." (119)

I grew up next door to a Baha'i family, and I was always impressed with that religious tradition's central commitment to unity. The vision is very broad: promoting worldwide unity of nations, races and religions. The whole world is ultimately to be seen as a single family, but there's also great emphasis put on unity within the family of parents and children. This extends, for example, to a firm rule of children not being able to marry until such time as both parents state their approval and welcome the new son-in-law or daughter-in-law into their family. Love is

central to the Baha'i approach to life, and love means something far beyond romanticism. It emanates originally from God, and exists all around us if we are only able to be open and accepting of it.²

Christianity has also been known historically for affirming love as the centerpiece of what it means to be human and to find fulfillment. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them,"³ according to the First Letter of John in the New Testament. Christianity for a thousand years also unconsciously taught the story of the Buddha. It happened through Saint Josaphat, whose story was extremely popular in medieval Christianity. Josaphat was a young prince who abdicated his throne and went off as an ascetic to seek moral and spiritual truth.⁴ By the nineteenth century, the authenticity of Saint Josaphat was challenged within the Christian Church, because by then it had become clear that his was really the story of the Buddha, which had come to medieval Europe from India by way of Muslim sources, circulating in Arabic, which in turn were traceable to the Manichees in Central Asia and from there back to the original story of the Buddha. So, in effect for a thousand years the Buddha himself was a Christian saint.⁵

Of course, in many ways the Buddha's story is a universal human story of children coming of age, of parents' nests emptying, of the perennial search for truth and meaning. The ideal, as I see it, is that one's leaving home take place with blessings for the journey. The ideal is that one's leaving home take place in the context of love, which is ever renewed and never ending. So, parents, may you try, gracefully, to let your children go, and children, may you try, gracefully, always to include your parents in the new life that you find upon your way. And may blessings be upon you both. AMEN.

NOTES

-
1. The quotations in this reflection are from Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha (New York: New Directions, 1951). Page references are in parentheses in the text.
 2. Joseph Sheppherd, The Elements of the Baha'i Faith (Shaftesbury, Great Britain: Element Book, 1992), p. 84.
 3. I John 4:16.
 4. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), p. 8.
 5. Ibid., pp. 8-9, 20.