

Dharmette: Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 15, 2010

There's a Zen story – a koan of sorts – that has to do with a Chinese Zen Master who was sick. I don't know how sick he was. And another Zen teacher, or maybe a senior student, came to his room to see how he was doing. He asked, "How are you doing?" The reply was, "Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha." That's the end of the story.

It refers to a Chinese Buddhist myth that the sun lives for a really long time, and the moon for only a short time. The moon changes over the month. It disappears and comes back. So the moon has a very short lifetime, and the sun has a very long lifetime. A Sun Buddha is a Buddha that has a really long lifetime, and a Moon Buddha is a Buddha that has a very short lifetime – but they're both Buddhas. They're both awake. They're both here. And the Zen Master who is sick – maybe he's really sick, or maybe he's dying – and he's unconcerned about it. He just is what he is.

Bo Lozoff, a Dharma teacher who taught in prisons for a long time, wrote a story, which I read many years ago. It was similar. Someone is really sad, or maybe depressed. And in the story, the advice given to the person who's sad is: "When you're sad, just be a Sad Buddha."

What does that mean: Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha, Sad Buddha, Happy Buddha? I think many of us have ideals about what we're supposed to be like when we come to that glorious, wonderful day when we finally get enlightened, and we live happily ever after in enlightened retirement. We can't wait until that day, right? But maybe there's no such day. There's this day – this is how you are now. You can be a Sad Buddha, Happy Buddha, Moon Buddha, Sun Buddha. Who knows what kind of Buddha you're going to be? You just are who you are.

There's some way of taking on how you are and not making it a problem. You can be relaxed about how you are, and accept that this is how it is. Sometimes there are Challenged Buddhas – Buddhas who have problems with their family [laughs], or with their work or something. And then there are Buddhas who have it easy at work, or easy with their family, or they've figured out how not to work [laughs]: Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha; Challenged Buddha, Peaceful Buddha. It's like this right now. This is how it is. There is something liberating – something freeing – about not needing it to be different: not needing to define it in some way other than how it is, but rather taking it as it is now. Just relax, and don't make it a problem – this is how it is!

It's easy to say that all kinds of things shouldn't be the way they are. It was raining recently. You can step in a puddle, and all this mud sprays up on your beautiful pant leg. So now you're a Dirty Buddha. You were a Clean Buddha, but now you're a Dirty Buddha [laughs]. You can get upset and angry that your pant leg is dirty. You probably want to go home at some point and clean it up, but now you're just a Dirty Buddha.

This is a smoggy day, and so you're a Buddha with asthma. You're a Buddha who is being poisoned by the smoggy air. Then the rain comes, and the air is clean, and now you're a Clean-Breathing Buddha. It's like this.

What is it that's liberating about this approach? What is it that actually helps you – in some very profound and deep way – to be who you are? When we had all that loud noise on the street earlier today, the little talk I gave was about becoming the sound, rather than resisting it, fighting it, or thinking it should be different. Just become the sound – be a Grinding Buddha. And, grinding away, just sit there.

I was reminded this week of a story from many years ago: 1995 or so. There was an American Buddhist Teachers meeting at Mount Madonna. Robert Aitken Roshi, who died earlier this year in his 90s, was there. He was a beautiful older man, like the Dean of American Buddhism, who had been studying Zen since the late 1940s. He was a Zen teacher in the koan tradition, where the practice is to engage in these Zen statements or questions. He was getting ready to retire, and was talking as an elder statesman to all these Buddhist teachers about his koan practice, about how he taught koans, and how it all works. It was a nice talk. Then someone asked him if he would please give an answer to a koan before he retires, before he ended his talk [laughs] – just give one answer. He said, "Okay." When he was a newish Zen student in the late 1940s, he was visiting Nyogen Senzaki, who was one of the very first Buddhist Zen teachers in America – he came here in 1905. Apparently

Nyogen Senzaki was a very dignified man. He wore elegant clothes, had an elegant little apartment, and he had this elegant Chinese bowl with a spiral going from the bottom of the bowl to the outer rim. Nyogen Senzaki held up the bowl and said, "This spiral – is it spiraling out, or is it spiraling in?" That was the koan – the idea that he gave Aitken Roshi to work with. So Aitken Roshi, who was really old, was going to offer the answer to that koan to all these American Buddhist teachers at the meeting. He was sitting down, and it took him a while to stand up. But he got himself out of his chair, and stood there in front of this whole crowd of people. Standing there in the open space, he lifted up his arms, and spread them straight out at 90 degrees to his body. And then with big, open arms, he swirled all the way around in one direction, and all the way around the other direction, and then promptly, he bowed. That was the answer. He became the bowl – he was the swirling. Rather than saying whether the spiral was going in or out, he became it. He became the Bowl Buddha – the Spiral Buddha.

What kind of Buddha are you today? Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha?

And in a few minutes, a lot of us are going to become Cleaning Buddhas.