

LIFE BY NUMBERS

Val Ryan

The number 22 represents Buddha. This brief summary of his life and what he learned on his journey, hopefully, will inspire further exploration. Buddhism is not so much a religion as a philosophy. While there are specific precepts and tenets, it's a value system that teaches us to understand the natural order and how to live within it. Buddha's story is one of riches to rags and his discovery of the Middle Way. Remaining centered in the mind is the path to Enlightenment.

Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama in 563 BCE to a noble family. The first 29 years were spent within the palace walls surrounded by splendor, his every desire fulfilled. After pondering the big questions, like his own existence, Siddhartha ventured out into the world. What he saw was pain, suffering, old age and death. Realizing there must be a way to end the cycle, he decided to find a solution. He left his wife and newborn child in search of this truth. According to John Snelling in *The Buddhist Handbook*, he "sought out the most distinguished teachers of the day." But their way was self-mortification, denial of the flesh and recognizing that deprivation was the opposite of luxury, he struck out on his own. Snelling continues, "Siddhartha made himself [comfortable] beneath... the famous Bodhi Tree... determined to sit in meditation here until he found an answer to the problem of suffering. While in this deep state he "saw through his "I" or ego, saw that... it was an illusion" and from this illumination came to know the Middle Way. The key to inner peace is restructuring our thought process so that equanimity prevails.

It begins with learning the four noble truths, which are; that suffering exists, suffering exists because of self-centered desire, suffering can be eliminated, and suffering can be eliminated by following the Eightfold Path. He understood that existence, what we call reality, is an illusion of the mind. When the mind is comprehended objectively and dispassionately, our attachment to all we think, see, hear, feel, taste and touch is revealed as the source of life's pain. Clinging to illusion perpetuates the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth known as Samsara. By developing non-attachment and following the Eightfold Path, we can break free.

The Eightfold Path is as follows; Right Understanding refers to fully grasping the four noble truths. Once accepted, we live in harmony with all things, from traffic jams to personal tragedies. Right Thought means clearing the mind of fetters like jealousy and malice that "obstruct progress to perfection" and the attainment of a "pure mind," as stated by H. Saddhatissa in *Before he was Buddha*. If I made a mistake, I used to think, "I'm so stupid. Why did I do that?" Now I ask, "What can I learn from this to handle it better next time?" Right Speech is "refrain[ing] from telling lies... idle gossip" and remembering to always "address people in a... tolerant manner." (Saddhatissa) It's also about saying what you mean and meaning what you say. This one would put politicians out of business. Right Action deals with issues like killing, stealing and self-indulgence, particularly drugs and alcohol.

Right Livelihood means no employment that involves "any kind of deceit or exploitation" or activity that "causes harm or injustice to others." (Saddhatissa) This puts a crimp in corporate America's style. I had umpteen jobs, all requiring unethical, immoral and sometimes illegal conduct. I quit in '93 after realizing I couldn't spend one more

minute in that soulless existence. Right Effort includes being kind, generous, patient and determined. Right Mindfulness “is the development of intellectual awareness in the service of spiritual progress.” (Saddhatissa) And, Right Concentration is meditation; sitting in the lotus position, breathing deeply, practicing daily and training with a qualified yoga instructor. However, any activity that helps you quiet the mind is meditative.

When the four (22) noble truths are fully incorporated into your being and the Eightfold Path followed, balance is achieved, Enlightenment within reach. William Blake said it best, “When the doors of perception are cleansed, all will appear as it truly is, infinite.”

Comments or questions? Contact Val Ryan at 803.750.7117 or ryanmystic@earthlink.net.

Suggested Reading:

The Buddhist Handbook The Complete Guide to Buddhist Schools, Practice, and History

By John Snelling

Before He as Buddha by Hammalawa Saddhatissa

Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse

Jesus and Buddha The Parallel Sayings by Marcus Borg

Einstein and Buddha The Parallel Sayings by Thomas J. McFarlane