

Quick Dharma Series

Independence Day

by Gyoshin

When Shakyamuni leaves the palace and his family in search of the answers to his burning questions he proclaimed his own "Independence Day." Some have suggested that abandoning his family was an inauspicious start for a journey of the spirit. Literalists always have problems. The message of the story is not to be found in a literal understanding, but rather, that the true journey of the spirit can only begin when one takes full responsibility for one's own journey. Later, in the story, he returns to family and they join his much larger family – the *Sangha*. Leaving was, for Shakyamuni, "Independence Day."

Later, when Shakyamuni searches out the religious leaders of his day he finds the traditional answers unsatisfying. For his journey to continue he must leave behind these traditional religions and philosophies. Once again it was "Independence Day."

Next he tried extremes of spiritual practices – fasting and asceticism. Here he teaches us not to allow extremes of spiritual practice to crowd out life. Life calls us to community: not to isolation in esoteric spiritual practices. Failing miserably in the practice of extremes (almost to the point of death) he once again seeks his own unique path. Another "Independence Day."

Now the moment of true independence comes.

He finds the deeply profound nature of impermanence.

Coming to terms with impermanence is one of the most truly liberating experiences possible. All things are changing, becoming, moving on. We each in our own uniqueness have different ways of living with this impermanence. Even the forms of Buddhism in America are changing and moving on.

Yet there are other moments of independence in the history of Buddhist thought. When Amida made his vow to liberate all beings who called upon him, another way burst forth. The distance between the Buddhas and today's individuals became exceedingly short. A direct connection emerged between Amida and each individual, making the teaching lineages very short. Zen speaks of this short lineage when it asserts that it is a "special transmission outside the scriptures; no dependence on words and letters; direct pointing to our essential nature." It is yet another "Independence Day."

The mythic stories of antiquity tell us of another moment of independence that arrived when a ray of light emanated from Amida and created the Kuan Yin. She embodied compassion in a most creative way. Her name means “She-Who-hears-the-Cries-of-the-world.” She is described as responding to the unique needs of every individual. She is the destroyer of the “one size fits all” model of oppressive forms of religious dogma. The principle foundation of Kuan Yin's compassion is in the recognition of individual diversity. This is the message in all the delightful folk tales of her varied manifestations.

The theme of independence runs deep in Buddhism. Karida Buddhist Sangha is an “independent” Buddhist Sangha. Our Sangha determines its own practices, and ordains its own Dharma Teachers, and chooses its own style of expression as it seeks to shape a unique American Dharma. At the same time we honor the teaching-learning lineages – both long and short. There is a deep truth to be found in understanding that our lives can be both independent and yet connected to all other lives. This understanding is bound up in the celebration of spiritual diversity and ultimately lays the foundation for the earth to be able to celebrate its own “Independence Day.”