

# Yaza 2009

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It was going to be a long night.

The shadows beneath the bodhi tree lengthened and were gathered into the growing gloom as evening fell. Siddhartha Gautama sat up straight on a mound of kusa grass. He had had long nights before (as you all have had) staying up at night arguing, or watching old movies on television, or getting drunk, or nursing a sick child or relative. Oftentimes at the palace of his father the revelries, the entertainments, stretched long into the night.

Having left the palace, having left the entertainments, having left what had been his life, Siddhartha had set out to discover the nature and meaning of his life and of all lives. Despite the entertainments, despite the revelries, despite the arguments, despite the wars, despite policies and prayers, despite theories and hopes and fears, Siddhartha had found that there was a fundamental sense of problem — of unsatisfactoriness. This had been kept from him throughout his childhood and even as a young adult. And so, when he discovered it in himself and then saw it mirrored in the gaze of everyone that he met, he knew that sense of unsatisfactoriness with a rawness that nothing could distract him from.

He called this “dukkha”. Often, this is translated as “suffering”. But the roots of the word, “du” and “kha” mean “obstruction” and “space”, like the space in the centre of a wheel that the axle passes through being obstructed so that either the axle cannot pass through the wheel, or the wheel rolls unevenly, jarringly. The space of Experience is so vast, so rich, so open and vivid. And yet there’s a fundamental sense of poverty, a fundamental sense of problem.

What is this?

This is what Siddhartha had set out to discover and to find, as he put it, a “cure” for. He trained in various meditative disciplines, learning to do this or that with his mind. He could provoke all kinds of interesting experiences. But like all experiences, they came and went. And he found that that was the most interesting thing about those and about all experiences, this coming and going: impermanence.

There is a sense of dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, because we want things to be solid, we want things to be certain, we want to be certain. We want to be certain about ourselves and about our world.

And yet everything is coming and going. Everything in our lives, everything in our cultures are structured to pretend that things are solid and stable. It rarely occurs to us when we are happy, angry, lustful, bored or sad that we will not always feel this way. It often doesn’t occur to us that our habits, the things to which we have become accustomed, are not how the world is.

It often doesn’t occur to us that the world was not always this way.

For example, most of us are used to going into a room by ourselves, or with a sexual partner, or perhaps with a crying child, to go to sleep at night. We think we need seven hours of sleep or eight hours of sleep. We go to sleep at this time and we wake up at this time, and that’s just how things are. But things have not always

been this way. It's only over the last several hundred years that there are rooms designated for sleeping.

Generally, throughout most of human history, night began when you could no longer see the lines on the palm of your hand. In that growing darkness, you would lie down and sleep. But generally, around midnight, perhaps 1:00, you would wake up, go to the washroom, as we call it, and if you could afford candles or something of this nature, you might read, you might do this or that task. And after two or three hours, you might lie down again and then sleep until the dawn.

Siddhartha's long night was not just a matter of going without sleep for one night. He had determined, finally, to give up all the strategies of attention that are habitual to self-image — to the sense of a self — and all of the meditative strategies that he had learned and simply pay attention to the coming and going of experience itself. He vowed that he would not get up from sitting until he had seen through and seen directly the cure for dukkha.

And his mind unraveled. He didn't follow any of the threads of thought: any of the images, any of the feeling tones that rose and fell. He let them just fall, one after the other, without holding on to, backing away from, or becoming any of them. He did this so completely, it is said, that as the watches of the night progressed, he saw through and saw directly that this process of becoming — becoming this kind of self, that kind of self, any kind of self at all — was the cause of dukkha. It is said that he saw through all of his memories, all of his tendencies, and saw through the attempt to become any kind of being whatsoever: he saw through the nature of himself and all beings.

We practise yaza, sitting through the night, once a year to commemorate bodily the practice and realization of Siddhartha Gautama, who became Sakyamuni Buddha. It is an opportunity for us to experience how body-mind is throughout the night. We put aside our usual bedtime and all of our night-time habits and instead choose to sit up straight throughout the night.

It would be nice if each of you had a very long night as the Buddha did. In the morning, when he saw the last star still in the sky, there was no longer anyone there at all.

So, please have a long night. And enjoy yourselves.