

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY LECTURE
Sunday, April 12, 1970
San Francisco

The April—April the eighth is the day we celebrate Buddha's birthday in China and Japan. As you know, Buddha was born as a prince of Shākya tribe—a king of Shākya tribe. And when he was born in the Lumbinī Garden,¹ *nāgas*² poured sweet tea. That is why we pour the sweet tea. But actually we don't know the historical origin about this because we have not much record about the sweet tea.

But—but we have record about the festival we have—we had right now. Maybe in Japan they started to mix this kind of tea for the infant Buddha. And in China and in Japan, the infant Buddha statue is very lovely and very tiny. The largest one in Japan is maybe fifteen inches high, which is in Todai-ji Temple, where the big Buddha is.³ As the Vairochana Buddha in Todai-ji is big, the infant Buddha is also big. But usually infant Buddha for this ceremony is as small as this [gestures?].

In Japan, right n- [partial word]—nowadays we celebrate around eighty—around eighth of April on Sunday. Here in America, Japanese people celebrate his birthday mostly also around eighth on Sunday. The other day when we have meeting, we had, you know, beautiful cake for the birthday, and then some of them celebrated Buddha's birthday right here, singing "Happy Birthday" [laughs, laughter]. I think that is the first, you know, happy birthday song for the Buddha [laughs, laughter]. Many things is happening here! [Laughter.]

Zen group in America, including Zen Center, [are] developing—developing so rapidly. And after, you know, painting the hall and decorating flower shrine, and cleaning up various rooms and hallway, we have this ceremony. This is, I think, very meaningful thing. The flower shrine and altar we have right now is very tentative one—not permanent one. I think this is very meaningful.

The Sōtō practice is something like this always—something had been—has been something like this. We are trying to improve the way we celebrate Buddha, the way we decorate altar. But if we lose the spirit this is—maybe in this way could be very, you know, awful thing, you

¹ The Lumbinī Garden or Grove is located near the capital of the Shākya kingdom in present-day Nepal.

² *nāga* (San.): literally, serpent or dragon; a benevolent half-divine creature.

³ One of the Seven Large Temples of the Southern Capital. The Great Buddha, cast in bronze and dedicated in 752, is housed in the Daibutsuden.

know, to just decorate without taking care of things. Like ambulatory [traveling?] actor, you know, goes around various place without not much, you know, artistic sense. But if we practice—continue to practice—like we have been practicing our way in America, something which is very meaningful and beautiful will result.

Celebrating our Zen Center effort, headquarter of Sōtō School in Japan promised us to give us another maybe \$3000, and they allowed me to wear yellow robe. That is the robe I weared for the first Buddha's birthday in Zen Center. I don't know why, but I—I do not like that kind of, you know, beautiful [laughs]. Some things too beautiful.

But today I felt something quite different feeling. I appreciate their appreciation of our effort to develop Buddha's way, which was—which has been transmitted more than 2500 years. This is the most meaningful thing. In this way, if we make our effort, something will result in this country. And as the Buddhist—bodhisattva vow is to continue our way forever. If so, Buddha's teaching, something which was told by Buddha, will be developed forever. With this spirit we should celebrate Buddha's birthday, even [though] the way we celebrate is not perfect.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript. Entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape by Bill Redican (12/30/99).