

mortality? We know that is futile. We are entertained by the fantastic myths of the immortal Greek gods, and the stories of the Holy Grail with its elixir of immortality, and Ponce de León leading the conquistadores on a fruitless search for the fountain of youth. We chuckle at the legendary Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang who sent a delegation of virgin boys and girls to far-off lands to seek out potions that would confer long life. We might think that Siddhartha was after the same thing. It's true that he left the palace with some naïveté—he would not be able to make his wife and child live forever—but his search was not futile.

WHAT BUDDHA FOUND

Without a single scientific tool, Prince Siddhartha sat on a patch of *kusha* grass beneath a *ficus religiosa* tree investigating human nature. After a long time of contemplation, he came to the realization that all form, including our flesh and bones, and all our emotions and all our perceptions, are assembled—they are the product of two or more things coming together. When any two components or more come together, a new phenomenon emerges—nails and wood become a table; water and leaves become tea; fear, devotion, and a savior become God. This end product doesn't have an existence independent of its parts. Believing it truly exists independently is the greatest deception. Meanwhile the parts have undergone a change. Just by meeting, their character has changed and, together, they have become something else—they are “compounded.”

He realized that this applies not only to the human experience but to all matter, the entire world, the universe—because everything is interdependent, everything is subject to change. Not one component in all creation exists in an autonomous, permanent, pure state. Not the book you are holding, not atoms, not even the gods. So as long as something exists within reach of our mind,

even in our imagination, such as a man with four arms, then it depends on the existence of something else. Thus Siddhartha discovered that impermanence does not mean death, as we usually think, it means change. Anything that changes in relation to another thing: even the slightest shift, is subject to the laws of impermanence.

Through these realizations, Siddhartha found a way around the suffering of mortality after all. He accepted that change is inevitable and that death is just a part of this cycle. Furthermore, he realized that there was no almighty power who could reverse the path to death; therefore there was also no hope to trap him. If there is no blind hope, there is also no disappointment. If one knows that everything is impermanent, one does not grasp, and if one does not grasp, one will not think in terms of having or lacking, and therefore one lives fully.

Siddhartha's awakening from the illusion of permanence gives us reason to refer to him as the Buddha, the Awakened One. Now, 2,500 years later, we see that what he discovered and taught is a priceless treasure that has inspired millions—educated and illiterate, rich and poor, from King Ashoka to Allan Ginsberg, from Kublai Khan to Gandhi, from H. H. the Dalai Lama to the Beastie Boys. On the other hand, if Siddhartha were here today, he would be more than a little disappointed, because, for the most part, his discoveries lie fallow. That is not to say that modern technology is so great that his findings have been refuted: No one has become immortal. Everyone must die at some point; an estimated 250,000 human beings do so every day. People close to us have died and will die. Yet we are still shocked and saddened when a loved one passes away, and we continue to search for the fountain of youth or a secret formula for long life. Trips to the health food store, our bottles of DMAE and retinol, power yoga classes, Korean ginseng, plastic surgery, collagen in-

jections, and moisturizing lotion—these are clear evidence that we secretly share Emperor Qin's desire for immortality.

Prince Siddhartha no longer needed or wanted the elixir of immortality. By realizing that all things are assembled, that deconstruction is infinite, and that not one of the components in all creation exists in an autonomous, permanent, pure state, he was liberated. Anything that is put together (which we now understand to be everything) and its impermanent nature are bound together as one, just like water and an ice cube. When we put an ice cube in our drink, we get both. Just so, when Siddhartha looked at someone walking around, even the healthiest person, he saw this person as both simultaneously living and disintegrating. You might think this doesn't sound like a fun way to live, but it can be an amazing ride to see both sides. There might be great satisfaction. It is not like a roller coaster of hope and disappointment going up and down. Seeing things in this way, they begin to dissolve all around us. Your perception of phenomena transforms, and in a way becomes clearer. It is so easy to see how people get caught up in the roller coaster, and you naturally have compassion for them. One of the reasons you have compassion is that impermanence is so obvious, yet they just don't see it.

"FOR NOW"-NESS

By nature, the act of assembly is bound by time—a beginning, a middle, and an end. This book did not exist before, it appears to exist now, and eventually it will fall apart. Similarly, the self that existed yesterday—that is, *you*—is different from the self that exists today. Your bad mood has become good, you may have learned something, you have new memories, the scrape on your knee has healed a little. Our seemingly continuous existence is a series of beginnings and endings bound by time. Even the very

act of creation requires time: a time before existing, a time of coming into existence, and an end to the act of creation.

Those who believe in an almighty God generally do not analyze their concept of time, because God is assumed to be independent of time. To give credit to an all-powerful, omnipotent creator, we must factor in the element of time. If this world has always existed, there would be no need for creation. Therefore it must not have existed for a period of time before creation, and thus a sequence of time is required. Since the creator—let's say God—necessarily abides by the laws of time, he, too, must be subject to change, even if the only change he has ever gone through has been creating this one world. And that is fine. An omnipresent and permanent God cannot change, so it's better to have an impermanent God who can answer prayers and change the weather. But as long as God's actions are an assemblage of beginnings and ends, he is impermanent, in other words subject to uncertainty and unreliable.

If there is no paper, there is no book. If there is no water, there is no ice. If there is no beginning, there is no end. The existence of one very much depends on the other, therefore there is no such thing as true independence. Because of interdependence, if one component—the leg of a table, for example—makes even a small shift, then the integrity of the whole is compromised, unstable. Although we think that we can control change, most of the time it's not possible because of the countless unseen influences of which we are unaware. And because of this interdependence, the disintegration of all things in their current or original state is inevitable. Every change contains within it an element of death. Today is the death of yesterday.

Most people accept that everything born must eventually die; however, our definitions of "everything" and "death" may differ. For Siddhartha, *birth* refers to all creation—not just flowers and mushrooms and human beings, but everything that is born or

assembled in any way. And *death* refers to any kind of disintegration or disassembly. Siddhartha had no research grants or assistants, just the hot Indian dust and a few passing water buffalo as witnesses. So equipped, he realized the truth of impermanence on a profound level. His realization was not as spectacular as finding a new star, it was not designed to propound moral judgments or to establish a social movement or religion, nor was it a prophecy. Impermanence is a simple mundane fact; it's highly unlikely that one of these days, some mischievous compounded thing will become permanent. Even less likely would be our ability to prove such a thing. Yet today we either deify Buddha or try to outsmart Buddha with our advanced technology.

AND YET WE STILL IGNORE IT

Two thousand five-hundred thirty-eight years after Siddhartha walked out the palace door—at the time of year when many millions of people are celebrating, making merry, and anticipating a fresh start, the time to remember God for some, the time to take advantage of discount sales for others—a catastrophic tsunami shook the world. Even the most coldhearted of us gasped in horror. As the story unfolded on television, some of us wished that Orson Welles would interrupt to announce that it was all a fabrication, or that Spiderman would sweep down to save the day.

There is no doubt that Prince Siddhartha's heart would have broken to see the tsunami victims washed ashore. But his heart would have been even more broken by the fact that we were taken by surprise, proof of our constant denial of impermanence. This planet is made of volatile magma. Every land mass—Australia, Taiwan, the Americas—is like dew, about to drop from the grass. Yet construction of skyscrapers and tunnels never stops. Our insatiable deforestation for the sake of disposable chopsticks and junk mail only invites impermanence to act more