

“Buddha’s Nature”
Appearing in the Winter 2005 issue of
Just This
From the Austin Zen Center



In the traditional story of the Buddha’s enlightenment, there comes a time when Mara, the tempter, has nearly exhausted his many strategies in an attempt to move the young monk from his steadfast seat. In his frustration, Mara gathers his energy one last time and confronts Guatama by asking him on what basis he could possibly verify his liberation or confirm his enlightenment. In response, the Buddha says nothing. He does not implore the heavens for protection, nor does he does mount an intellectual or theological challenge to defeat Mara. He performs a very simple act. He touches the earth.

In this story we are offered a powerfully elegant symbol which can be seen as the Buddha’s very first teaching. By touching the earth he counters Mara and demonstrates clearly that enlightenment is not a special state of mind, a sophisticated concept, a holy event, a philosophy, or a belief. It is closer to the earth, to our bodies, to what is ordinary, whole, and simple.

Liberation is freedom from all that we habitually use to define ourselves as separate and special and therefore opens us to the vast, interconnected, impermanent world we live in. And this liberation is found right in the middle of this mysterious, never-ending dance we call life and death. It is no other than nature – Buddha Nature, human nature - our nature.

Like many of you, I am sure, I spend an inordinate amount of time indoors. I sit at a desk, work in front of a computer, speak with clients, or teach classes. I sit in a zendo, which is climate controlled (thank goodness!) and sleep protected from the elements (for which I am deeply grateful). However, in this conventional, comfortable world, we easily become entranced and forget that we are animals living on a planet that does not consult us about its changes. Most of the time we imagine we are safe and secure from the randomness and violence of nature's impersonal movement until something like a hurricane or earthquake reminds us that we are not in charge. The Four Noble Truths are the reality of nature. They are not abstract concepts to ponder. They can be touched and known intimately, just as the Buddha reached down and touched the earth on that clear morning.

This past summer I was fortunate enough to lead a retreat on the Big Island of Hawaii where, as many of you probably know from your own experience, the raw forces of nature come together in dramatic and powerful ways. I have led retreats in Hawaii for several years and always enjoy the beauty and intimacy with nature that living in that kind of tropical environment affords. However, I had never been to the Big Island and had never seen an active volcano. The day we planned to hike to the lava flows was a beautifully clear day. The volcano was flowing with great force and we were excited by the opportunity to hike, with our guide, over wild and primitive old flows to reach the ocean where the lava was actually creating new land.

Our group set out late in the afternoon from the retreat center on the south part of the island, driving only a few miles to reach the edge of the lava flows that marked the furthest reaches of the last destructive eruption which had slowly and relentlessly moved across this part of the island more than ten years ago. We parked on hardened lava that had devastated farms, homes, and businesses. Highway signs stuck up through the gray folds of cooled lava. We drove on asphalt that disappeared under the old flow and reappeared in places that were spared. Finally we reached a place to park. It is hard to describe what it was like being on what seemed like the edge of the earth. We looked out across miles of what a prehistoric landscape must have looked like. This was a world that was unfamiliar, blank, and devoid of

life. As far as we could see, there was nothing but the undulating folds of crusty, hardened lava. In the distance to the right we could see the volcano towering above the wasteland. On the left, we could barely make out the coastline marked by plumes of steam where the lava was pouring into the ocean. We planted our long bamboo poles topped with flashing lights so we could find our way back to the cars in the dark and set out on a two-hour hike toward the active flows.



As daylight faded, the shadowy lines on the volcano's slope began to glow red. The white plumes of steam began to take on a pink glow. Hiking steadily, we fell into a rhythm, looking for ways to move across the uneven landscape in the fading light. It became a kind of walking meditation at times. For long periods we fell silent, picking our way along the ridges and through the shallow valleys. At other times we spoke about the landscape we were encountering, our weariness, or whatever friendly conversation came to mind. Now and then we would come across a tiny fern tucked in some crevice, growing alone. Other than these tiny immigrants, there were no signs of life and certainly no human reference aside from our little group crunching along. We were walking across land that was new. Likely no human had ever walked exactly where we were walking. We were not on

the National Park side of the flows and we never saw another human being. At one point I jokingly said, “When do the dinosaurs show up”?

Finally, we began to feel the heat. We approached the outflow of lava coming off the mountain where it plunged into the ocean and exploded. The waves didn't think about what it would mean to pound into the red magma. The molten rock didn't consider what would happen as it rolled into the cold water. Nature simply moved. The entire primitive scene didn't mind our witnessing nor did it take us into account. At one point, along with a few other foolish souls, I decided to walk toward a second tower of steam further up the coast. It was completely dark by this time and we walked by the light of our flashlights. Only a few hundred yards along the way I stopped and slowly turned, shining the beam of my flashlight all around in a large circle. I could then see that we were completely surrounded by small steam vents. The earth was getting hot under our feet and the sulfurous smell was stronger. We were walking directly in top of rivers of lava. There was no way of knowing how stable the earth was under our feet or when we might fall through the crust if we walked on.

At that moment I felt a terror and a vulnerability that I had never felt before. This anxiety wasn't some neurotic worry racing around in my head. It wasn't even a fear in response to some ordinary outside event. This was a primal knowing that I had no idea if the very ground under my feet would support my weight. My “idea” of all of this didn't even really matter. It was just exactly as it was. I could see and feel, undeniably, that nothing was permanent or solid around me. Everything was in violent flux and moving perfectly and beautifully along with everything else. I wasn't special and nature wasn't particularly concerned about “me”. I was standing there, vulnerable and very awake in the midst of the steam and the wind and darkness. The three marks of existence were the simple, concrete truth at that moment – suffering, dependent origination, and no-self.

I returned to where the more sane members of the group were sitting and joined them. We silently watched the beauty of the shoreline being formed in front of our eyes. I reached down and touched the earth. Splinters of crystallized silica stuck into my fingers as I picked up a small chard of broken lava. I bled a little. A small price to pay for the reality that nature had shown me.

It is said that on his deathbed the Buddha admonished his followers to not base their faith on what he had said, but to wholeheartedly investigate for themselves the truth of the teachings. I am grateful for the teachings that were offered that night. I was fine despite a few lava splinters, some fatigue, and several uncomfortable blisters on my feet. The two-hour return

hike was challenging, but we eventually found our way back safely. We had touched and shared something beyond our ordinary lives that night, and the treasures we were offered were verified by the ways we touched the earth – that unpredictable, beautiful, terrifying, life-giving earth.

