

WHY MEDITATE, OR WHY SHOULD WE TRAIN

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The essence of Buddhism comes in finding the Truth for ourselves, and then making it real in our lives. There is little or no merit in simply calling ourselves Buddhist unless we are trying to do something about ourselves. Buddhism is not a passive religion where someone else takes care of our spiritual salvation. To succeed we need to actively, patiently cultivate the desire to train. Unless the willingness to try to meditate and keep the Precepts is present, a priest or teacher can do little. After all as my Master, Rev. Master Jiyu, often said: "The Buddhas and Ancestors do but point the way; thou must go alone." What then must be done to cultivate this willingness? What does Buddhism teach? The purpose of training is to free ourselves from the bonds of birth and death. In the introduction to the *Shushogi*, Dogen Zenji writes:

The most important question for all Buddhists is how to understand birth and death completely for then, should you be able to find the Buddha within birth and death, they both vanish. All you have to do is realise that birth and death, as such, should not be avoided and they will cease to exist for then, if you can understand that birth and death are Nirvana itself, there is not only no necessity to avoid them but also nothing to search for that is called Nirvana. The understanding of the above breaks the chains that bind one to birth and death therefore this problem, which is the greatest in all Buddhism, must be completely understood.¹

In my experience training only becomes vitally important when we truly acknowledge the first of the Four Noble Truths, i.e.:

...the existence of suffering. Birth, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, not to get what one wants and existence itself as the world knows existence, are suffering; all these things are karmically acquired.²

Trying to deepen this acknowledgement and give it perspective, in *Rules for Meditation*, Dogen Zenji urges us to train by saying:

Of what use is it to merely enjoy this fleeting world? This body is as transient as dew on the grass, life passes as swiftly as a flash of lightning, quickly the body passes away, in a moment life is gone.³

We cling to this life with its impermanence and unsatisfactoriness because we do not understand that that very clinging causes the discomfort that we feel. The Buddha described the cause of unsatisfactoriness in the second of the Four Noble Truths:

...that of the origin of suffering, which is craving, and this can be three-fold; it can be sensual, spiritual or material.⁴

Sekito Kisen in *Sandokai* writes:

Here born, we clutch at things and then compound delusion, later on, by following ideals;⁵

If we cling to the positive aspects of this world, we can develop a spiritual difficulty that my Master called "The Love and Light Syndrome." This emphasizes the apparent joy and beauty of the world. This emphasis tends to obscure the first and second of the Four Noble Truths. If, on the other hand, we

cling to an awareness of, a pushing away of, the apparent negative aspects of this world, we tend to fall into negativism, cynicism and despair. Cynicism and despair tend to obscure the third and fourth of the Four Noble Truths:

*The third Truth is the extinction of suffering; thus Nirvana is possible in this life for it is the control of greed, hate and delusion.*⁶

*The fourth Truth is the Eightfold Path which leads to the maintaining of the cessation of suffering.*⁷

A first step in cultivating our willingness to train is to be willing to take off the colored glasses through which we tend to view the world. We need to work on a willingness to stop trying to make the world appear to be a permanent, lovely, joyful place. We also need to work on trying to stop making the world and our lives appear to be negative, threatening, and purposeless:

*...for, without fail, evil is vanquished and good prevails;*⁸

We change our lives and do our training by allowing ourselves to become aware of those things in our lives which cause suffering to ourselves and others. What we need to deal with are those things over which we have control. There are many things in our lives that we willfully do (or do not do) that we know are not good for ourselves or helpful to others; these deliberate actions cause us to dislike or to be dissatisfied with ourselves. This is the real breakage of the Precepts. Willful disobedience to one's own heart, one's Buddha Nature as revealed through the Precepts and meditation, is what creates suffering and causes the most painful and long lasting karma.

If we haven't yet seen how our actions, particularly our habitual actions, cause this suffering for ourselves and others, it is important not to worry or judge our training. This is an opportunity to work on patience, trusting that in the fullness of time, if we persevere in the practice of Buddhism, we will see what we need to see and, eventually, what we need to do, and this practice will give us the strength to do actually do it.

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¹*Zen Is Eternal Life*, by Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1999, 4th Ed., p. 94

²*Ibid*, p.11

³*The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1990, 2nd Ed. Rev., p. 99

⁴*Zen Is Eternal Life*, Op. Cit., p. 11

⁵*The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, Op. Cit., p. 60

⁶*Zen Is Eternal Life*, Op. Cit., p. 11

⁷*Ibid*, p. 12

⁸*Ibid*, p. 95