

4-08-00

REVEREND SUZUKI'S SESSHIN LECTURES by Trudy Dixon

Zen Center's annual week Sesshin (concentrated period of meditation) was held this year from August 10 through August 15th. During the Sesshin, the main theme of the daily lectures given by Master Suzuki was "The Traditional Way" of Buddhism transmitted from Buddha down through the Patriarchs to the present day. His opening talks concerned the sutras and rituals which are part of the daily zazen practice in the zendo of Sokoji Temple. The following is a rough paraphrase of some of what Master Suzuki said.

To understand what the "Traditional Way" of Buddhism is and to actualize it in one's own life are the most important points in being a sincere Buddhist. The Traditional Way of Buddhism, although it is dependent upon no particular form for its expression, the sutras and rituals handed down to us from the Patriarchs are a great help to us. A part of the ritual which may be particularly difficult for Americans to understand and accept is the bowing. After zazen (sitting meditation) we bow to the floor nine times in front of Buddha's altar, each time touching the forehead to the floor three times and lifting the palms of the hands. (The story of the origin of this practice is that during Buddha's lifetime, there was a woman who wished to show her respect for Buddha, but who was so

poor that she had no gift to give. So she knelt down and touching her forehead to the floor spread out her hair for him to pass over. The deep sincerity of this woman's devotion inspired the practice of bowing to this day). In our American culture there are no traditional forms through which we are accustomed to show respect towards a Buddha -- a human being, who was not a god and who nevertheless attained perfection. Lacking such forms, there is a danger of neglecting or forgetting to respect Buddha, the Perfect One. This kind of respect is an essential part of the Traditional Way. If we practice zazen just for the sake of our own self-improvement or to attain Enlightenment, our practice will be one-sided, and the true spirit of Buddhism will be lost. Because in America there is particular danger of this one-sidedness, we bow nine times to Buddha after each zazen practice, when in Japan it is customary to bow just three times.

Reverend Suzuki's own master, Ian Kishizawan, greatly stressed the importance of bowing in practice. (He himself developed a visible callus on his forehead from his practice of bowing!) Bowing to the Buddha is actually to bow to oneself - to one's own true nature. You, yourself, are Buddha. (In a later lecture, Master Suzuki said that a common misunderstanding of the practice of bowing arises from our dualistic analyzing of the experience of bowing. We always think "I bow to Buddha." But actually, when you bow, as Buddha himself did, there is no you and there is no Buddha; there is only the independent act of bowing which covers unlimited time and space.

But to say that you and Buddha are one can lead to another misunderstanding for someone who does not have the experience of zazen practice. It is true that you yourself are Buddha, and yet at the same time you are also Buddha's disciple. In the sutras, this is expressed by the words: "Not one; not two." You and Buddha are one and at the same time two. If your tendency in practice is to think: "Whatever I do is all right for Buddha nature is everywhere, and everything has Buddha nature; there is no good or bad, right or wrong," then the sutras say to you: "Not one?" (i.e., you are not just Buddha, but also Buddha's disciple; you are taking the lazy way of practice and not trying hard enough; your understanding of Buddha nature and the deep truth of "no good, no bad" is very superficial). On the other hand, if you are unduly discouraged and self-critical, and dismiss your practice as not very good, then the sutras say to you: "Not two." (i.e., you and Buddha are one; on each moment of your practice, Buddha nature is there, whether you are aware of it or not. It is Buddha himself who is practicing zazen; how can you say that it is not good?) These two aspects of reality -- the duality of oneness and the oneness of duality -- are essential to a true understanding of our bow based on the experience of zazen.

After bowing, the Prajna Paramita Sutra is recited three times; once to Buddha and his first disciples (Arhat); once to the Patriarchs, and once to our ancestors. The Prajna Paramita Sutra is the teaching which Buddha, after his Enlightenment, gave to his disciple, Sariputra, saying: "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form." One meaning of this sutra is that our ordinary perception and understanding of things is illusory. Usually we do not perceive things as they really are. We mistake for real and permanent what is actually constantly changing. This is true of human beings too when they are caught by the idea of self. This theory of the transiency of all things is one of the basic tenets of Buddhism, and an understanding of it is essential to follow the Traditional Way.

Before breakfast at the weekly Saturday morning meditation practice, and before each meal during sesshin, sutras and gathas are chanted. One of the most important phrases in these chants is: "May I, along with all sentient beings, achieve renunciation of the three attachments." "Renunciation" can also here be translated "emptiness" or "detachment". The three attachments refer to the three aspects of giving and receiving; the giver, the receiver, and the gift which is given. Giving should be a free act, unhindered by calculation of amount and reward. The receiver likewise should not be greedy; he should be grateful for what is given to him, but on the other hand he should not be overly humble. And we should not discriminate the gift itself. The attitude of renunciation or detachment consists in not evaluating the thing as good or bad. (Thus it is helpful in our practice to recite these words before each meal.)

After going over the sutras and rituals, Master Suzuki devoted the remaining lectures to general discussions of the Traditional Way to help us understand how we can actualize it in our daily lives. The following is the gist of his talk on Wednesday evening of sesshin.

In the morning we say the Prjna Paramita Sutra the first time to Buddha and the Arhats (the first disciples). Part of the prayer that the priest or leader of zazen says at this time is that we may attain sah-myo roku-tsu (三明六通). San-myo means the three powers of mind; roku-tsu means the six powers of mind; the former is contained in the latter. Power of mind means the power to fully understand sentient beings and our own human nature. The first power of mind is the capacity of sight and the second power is that of hearing. To understand someone we must first see with our eyes and then we hear what they say with our ears. The third power is the cognitive capacity to understand the words that we hear. The fourth power is to understand what is really meant by what was said. (Not just to understand the words, but to understand what the person means to say by them.) The fifth power is to comprehend the mind of the person speaking and to understand why he suffers. Finally, the sixth power is to perceive human nature as it really is - as pure Buddha nature itself.

In order to obtain to the sixth power of mind, it is necessary to annihilate all evil desires and

all thought of self. The way to its attainment is understood in different ways by the Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhists. For Hinayana Buddhists, the lower powers of mind are hindrances to the attainment of the sixth power of mind. But to the Mahayana Buddhist, when you see or hear or think, it may be done in the sixth way. For the Hinayana the lower faculties are obstacles and the seat of evil desires; they tend to take an annihilistic attitude with regard to them. The Mahayana attitude is more positive and not so strict in a physical sense. But with regard to the idea of self, Mahayana is more strict than the Hinayana. The sixth power is emancipation from all ideas of self; to perceive in the sixth way is to see or hear or think, but not from an egoistic or self-centered point of view. To have any idea of self involved in your perception is to be prey to evil desires; what you then perceive is not reality and you can have no true understanding of human nature or sentient beings.

There is an old Chinese story which illustrates the power of mind or understanding when one is truly free from any idea of self. A famous old Zen master, Esan was taking a nap, his face to the wall. His disciple, seeing that he was asleep, passed by very quietly to avoid awakening him. But Esan turned over and soon awoke. His disciple said: "Oh, did I disturb you? Why not sleep some more." But Esan only answered: "I had a wonderful sleep and dream? Do you know what it was?" His disciple at these words, left the room without replying and came back with a basin of fresh water and a towel. Esan washed his face, saying: "That's wonderful!" Then a second disciple came into the room. Esan asked him the same question: "I had a good sleep and a wonderful dream; can you tell me what my dream was?" The second disciple left the room and came back with a cup of fresh tea! Esan was delighted with his two disciples. He said: "Why, my two disciples are even better than Sariputra!" (Sariputra was one of Buddha's first disciples, a disciple of great Mahayana spirit, the one whom Buddha addresses the Prajna Paramita Sutra.)

This story has deep meaning. Most people want to help others and try very hard. But it may be quite difficult to know how to help people. In order to help another it may be necessary truly to understand him. For this, the sixth power of mind, or absence of any idea of self is necessary. Our traditional way transmitted from the Patriarchs is the way of the sixth power of mind. When you are one with what you are doing, there is no idea of self. The transmitted way of practice is to become one with what you are doing, and to practice without cessation to express this oneness. To do something is to help others, and at the same time to help yourself. When you sleep you help yourself, and you help others too. When you take a cup of tea, you help others and you help yourself. Even if you sit alone in the zendo (meditation hall), you are helping others. And even if you do something quite different, you are sitting in the meditation hall. Practice is one. It is continuous and uninterrupted; there should be no discrimination of activities. Your attitude when helping yourself should be the same as when you help others. You are all quite sincere when you are helping yourselves; how about when you are helping others? We find it easy to want to help those we like.

So practice is not just to come to the zendo and sit in meditation posture; it is in everything you do in your everyday life. It is, for example, to anticipate the wish of someone and bring a bowl of water, if such an activity be done with true zazen spirit (without thought of self). If your attitude is right, when you help another, you help yourself and vice versa. Sitting in zazen is the easiest, safest way to help yourself and to help others. It may be pretty hard to help others by kind words, by giving some good gift, or in some special way. Trying to help often creates more problems than it solves. But if you sit in zazen you will come to respect yourself and others will then respect you. Then you can help them quite freely and naturally, without imposing any burden of obligation or gratitude.*

If you think zazen is some particular thing you are doing right here, you are quite mistaken. Practice is each moment every day all year long; over and over we repeat our activity. Our practice is like 10,000 miles of iron road. We run on iron tracks in a straight line, never stopping. The tracks are iron, not gold or silver. There is no special way for sages and another for fools; both are the same train. There is no special person for Buddhism, Buddhism is for everyone; there is no special activity of sitting for Buddhists -- everything you do should be practice.

You remember the famous Zen master Joshu, the one who always sat in a broken chair. Once a young monk came to visit him, and Jo-shu asked: "Have you had breakfast?" Jo-shu was not talking about rice-gruel! (But rather Enlightenment!). But this monk was very brave and confident, and he answered: "Yes, I have!" (i.e., I have attained Enlightenment and know everything and am quite ready to converse with you on any subject!) Jo-shu replied: "Well then, wash out your bowl!"

That is our way - step by step. After eating, wash your bowl. It is always the same on the same iron road. Sometimes you want to take an airplane, but that is not the right way! You should always stay on the train.

There is an old story about three animals crossing a river; a hare, a fox, and an elephant. The hare skipped across on the surface (using stones?); the fox swam across, but the elephant walked slowly steadily across, touching bottom with each step. The traditional way of Buddhism is the last, and in our practice we should all be elephants.

* In Model Subject #39 of the "Blue Cliff Records" (Hekigan Roku), Un-gan asked Do-got: "That great Bodhisattva of Mercy (i.e. Avalokitesvara, Kwanyin or Kwannon, often represented with one

- ⑥ thousand arms and one thousand eyes, symbolizing the all pervading mercy) - how does he manage to use those many hands and eyes (in helping sentient beings)? Do-go said: "It is like when, in the dark night, we straighten out our pillow with our hand (though not being able to see with our eyes),

EDITOR'S NOTE

Although these are not the exact words of Master Suzuki, Trudy did not take notes during the lectures, they are Trudy's understanding of the lectures as she wrote them from memory after Sesshin. Although they do not convey Master Suzuki's thought and lectures exactly, we hope that they will give those of you who did not attend the Sesshin an idea of what the lectures were about.