
Practising Together

Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech - Ales, September 2008

In coming together for this sesshin we have all, more or less consciously followed this aspiration to realise the most profound dimension of our life. We call this: the mind of awakening; the Buddha mind, which engages, which begins to function first when we become aware of a certain malaise, something unsatisfying in our lives. This is what Shakyamuni calls *dukkha*, the first Noble Truth; the fact that something is not quite right in our lives.

That fact we perceive this, more or less consciously, pushes us to practice the Way.

As soon as we enter the dojo we join our hands in *gassho*; we bow towards Buddha. From this moment a connection is formed, a relation with Buddha. Initially, it is our own Buddha nature that encourages us to come; as if it itself *aspired* to actualise, to *realise* itself. And so in coming to the dojo and practising we engage with Buddha, with all the Buddhas and the Patriarchs who have realised the Way in the past. They are symbolised by the posture of the Buddha on the altar.

This is to say we do not practice alone. In one sense we are alone, in another we are completely together with the others. Together in the dojo and together in the community of all those who have followed this Way in the past and have transmitted it.

All the rituals of Zen are nothing other, finally, than the celebration of this. At the same time together, here and now, in this dojo: this is a communion of the same practice, the expression of the same realisation; this is an expression of our gratitude towards those who have consecrated their lives to transmit this, and who permit us to realise the Way, here and now.

When we concentrate on the practice, here and now, the practice of *zazen*, the practice of *gassho* and *sanpai* – chanting, *samu* – when we concentrate the same way in daily life, and life together in the *Sangha*, then this experience of all the Buddhas of the past actualises itself in us.

With its help we discover a dimension of life which is completely beyond the limits of our ordinary mind; of our small ego: an existence in unity with all beings. This is what “All beings are Buddha nature” means.

All beings are this unitary existence. Each one has its own position, different from others’ but at the same time, deeply connected, deeply together, sharing the same interdependence, the same solidarity.

To go on sesshin is to actualise, to realise, this interdependence. To deepen it and to celebrate it; gratefully. It is receiving the gift of transmission which has been given to us, and become one who, in turn, transmits it to others; in the sharing of a common practice.

And so the true *bodaishin*, the true mind of awakening, is not solely the aspiration to realise the most profound dimension of our lives and thus awaken: it is also, fundamentally, to make the vow to help others - all sentient beings - to realise this Awakening themselves, this liberation...

This is why we say that the mind of awakening, the bodhisattva mind, signifies making the vow to 'pass to the other shore,' the shores of *nirvana*, before we ourselves do. This idea of "before oneself" originates at the birth of Buddhism, at a time when the goal of the practice was to pass, definitively, out of *samsara*, and to penetrate nirvana – a final extinction.

So obviously, there is a 'before' and there is an 'after'. Ultimately, there is nobody who can take our place. This is a little contradictory to the compassion of a bodhisattva, a Buddha.

It's exactly this ideal of extinction in a final *nirvana*, which is questioned by Buddhism of the Great Vehicle, Mahayana, and particularly the Lotus Sutra.

What is of the utmost importance is non-separation: between *nirvana* – the extinction of all the causes of suffering; greed, hatred, ignorance – and *samsara* – the world of phenomena, with its parade of illusions, and its attachments.

It's precisely in the non-separation of these two worlds, seeing them as both sides to the same reality, that the bodhisattva continues to practise in *samsara* whilst living liberation.

To be a *bodhisattva* is to feel connected to all beings; to completely abandon all trace of egotism; to realise supreme Awakening here and now; in the same moment you enunciate, you repeat your vow to come to the aid of all beings. To be a *bodhisattva* is to live in harmony with all this...

As such, there is no notion of 'before' and 'after;' how can others pass 'before' you when there is no separation? Living *nirvana* is realising, in each instant, shared practice, practice with others, in the mind of non-separation.

This living nirvana, this Awakening is not something like an object of desire; like a bag of sweets attached to a maypole which one must absolutely grasp with the maximum of effort.

It's rather our way of living, right here and now, in harmony with zazen: in harmony with the Way. It is letting go of all our egoistic tendencies in the sharing of this joyful experience...

What I wish for you all is that you continue to experience this, to practice and transmit; because *sesshin* doesn't end at any given moment, like the time we say goodbye. Our whole lives become *sesshin*, in our intimacy with the Way.