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# The second of the Great Vows of the Bodhisattva

**Teisho by Roland Yuno Rech - La Gendronnière, August 2007**

The second of the great bodhisattva vows is *bonno mujin seigandan* :  
" attachments (*bonno*) are countless, I vow to overcome them all".

What's a *bonno* ? *bonno* means that which troubles the mind and creates suffering. We could say that *bonno* are really the base of Buddha Dharma. Since all the teachings of Buddha are motivated by the desire to cure human suffering, we can thus consider that the teaching of the Four Noble Truths is totally based on resolving *bonno*, the causes for suffering.

In this *teisho*, I will proceed as Shakyamuni often did himself : identifying the problem, examining the cause, seeing if there's a possible solution and describing the possible remedies.

## *Bonno*: What are they?

There are many *bonno*. When sitting in zazen we see a large number of our illusions pass by. In daily life, we see them less often simply because we are living amongst them . We allow ourselves to be led by *bonno* and we don't even realize that we are under the influence of illusion, or of an attachment. We only realize it after the fact, when suffering arises; and then we say : it was really a *bonno*.

There are 800 *bonno*. Ten are considered as 'fundamental' and I will now present them to you.

First, there are those dealing with coveting, desire, greediness. That means the desire to obtain what we consider as an object leading to satisfaction. However, a distinction must be made between objects of desire and natural human needs. We are living beings, sentient beings, interdependent with the environment and therefore not self-sufficient. This means that we have natural needs like food, clothing, shelter, a certain amount of recognition from others and even emotional attachment. These needs are natural and inherent to living beings. Needing to eat or needing a roof to protect oneself from bad weather is obviously not a *bonno*. But all sorts of *bonno* become « attached » to these natural needs . For example, needing to eat can become gluttony, a small *bonno* which can become greed, food becoming the need to fill a void, often an emotional one. For instance, someone eats a piece of chocolate as soon as they feel frustrated about something : even during sesshin at the Gendronniere, where sweets are sold at the grocery shop to practitioners who have sore knees and are so patient in zazen and who need consolation. This can become a *bonno* because it can lead to destroying one's health. Even on a deeper level, this desire to fill a void goes beyond natural needs and keeps us from developing awareness of a much more basic lack than just looking for pleasure or consolation. The fundamental subject of this *teisho* is that the biggest *bonno*, greediness, which is at the base of the society in which we live, is linked to a fundamental lack of recognition : the lack of spiritual realization. Even if we develop greediness by accumulating all sorts of objects of satisfaction, we will never be satisfied if we bypass awakening to the true dimension of our existence, which can give meaning to this life, irregardless of what we obtain.

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So, you can already see that the fundamental remedy for all *bonno* is awakening. It is the meaning of the sentence *bonno soku bodai*, which can be translated as : *bonno* are directly satori, awakening. We will come back to this equivalence between *bonno* and satori. It is the starting point towards awakening.

The second *bonno* is hatred, or without going that far, impulsiveness, rejecting what we don't like : anger, impatience, everything which is an ego manifestation considered as unsatisfactory and wanting to distance ourselves from it. This includes criticism, insults, karma of words, physical violence, etc.

The third *bonno* is ignorance. There is all sorts of ignorance. The first is not knowing oneself. Not knowing oneself means not knowing one's own *bonno*. Not recognizing how our *bonno* drive us and lead us means that there's no chance of liberating from them. Ignorance also means ignoring the true nature of our existence, not knowing that we are already, as ourselves, Buddha : we are already this Buddha nature and if we ignore it, then it is as if we are astray. That is what ignorance means : we wander through life like ghosts, sometimes believing that we think we have found the meaning of our life, when it is just a short or long term passing desire. But we remain astray, we just develop this belief.

The fourth *bonno* is pride, everything dealing with excessive love of oneself, of one's own image : its source is ego attachment.

All *bonno* are interdependent. Ignorance develops ego attachment; ego attachment stimulates coveting, greediness, and leads to aversion for things we don't like.

The following *bonno* are relative to erroneous viewpoints (beliefs) and everything they produce.

For Buddha, the main erroneous viewpoint was the belief in a substantial ego, the *atman*, which serves as a base for attachment to the little ego.

The Buddha criticized a lot of other erroneous points of view, like believing in the eternity of our own ego, or the annihilation of it after death. According to Dogen, and like Buddha, this type of belief blocked entering in the Way. It meant denying karmic law, denying the middle path where there is neither eternity, nor annihilation, but where there is the development of samsara, which is the linking up in the cycle of the twelve link chain of causation. Denying is a *bonno*, it is one of the great causes of suffering which prevents one from liberating themselves.

Another erroneous viewpoint is the belief in salvation through rituals. During Buddha's time, brahmen imagined they could use their rituals to liberate their « clients » from the cycle of suffering. According to the teachings of Buddha, this belief is an obstacle to liberation.

The desire to realize certain ecstatic states is a speculative intellectual viewpoint. Some practitioners of zazen have this *bonno* and try to achieve some special type of state in zazen. Another *bonno* is skepticism which generally develops doubt and limits true engagement. This, here, is not a question of beneficial doubt, which means questioning oneself about truth or error, which is something positive enabling the deepening of understanding. Doubt becomes a *bonno* if we systematically question the validity of the Dharma, which would be a way of not engaging oneself in the Way.

One of these doubts is based on the disbelief of liberation, like fatalism which is a great *bonno* (like when one says : « it's my karma, that's just the way it is, nothing can be done about it... »). Alcoholics or drug abusers think this way. This doubt leads to a vicious cycle one condemns

themselves to not being able to change things because they don't think there's a solution. Laziness is another *bonno*. For example, not being able to get up in the morning to practice zazen is a real *bonno*.

Agitation of the senses also exists, always on the lookout for something to satisfy oneself.

Lacking modesty (a « healthy » amount of reserve) and moral consciousness is another *bonno*...

There are ten so called « basic » *bonno*, but we shouldn't attach importance to the quantity since they are in fact infinite !

## CAUSES OF *BONNO*

Everyday during the ceremony, we chant the desire to resolve these *bonno*. It must therefore be understood that their causes are multiple. That's what Buddha understood the day he awakened.

The fundamental cause is being born. As of birth, a body develops with sensory organs which come in contact with objects, leading to pleasant or unpleasant sensations. These sensations lead to desire, which leads to attachment, which leads to desire for prolonging one's life into a future one in order to continue pursuing these objects of desire, leading to a new birth, etc.

To summarize, this is the chain of the twelve *innen*. Buddha, who could have said as Cioran « it is the inconvenience of being born », wanted to realize non-birth. In Mahayana Buddhism, the way of understanding Buddha's teachings is not a question of not being reborn. Rather, it's realizing the non-birth of our ego and liberation in the phenomenal world. We vow to continuously being reborn in this world of phenomena, not because of our *bonno*, but thanks to the first *bodhisattva* vow, *shujo muhen seigando*, the vow to save all beings. Is this vow a *bonno* ? It can become one, because the ego finds value in being someone able to help and to save. We could become full of our own importance this way. Even a master with many disciples can fall into this type of illusion.

What are the other causes of *bonno* ? Aside from non-awakening, one of the main causes is due to the reaping of past karma.

In *Vijnanavada*, the school of consciousness, it is said the consciousness of human beings is full of the seeds of past karma at a more or less unconscious level. And when these seeds germinate, they create the impression of meeting phenomena. In this case, if we think that the cause of *bonno* is past karma and that we don't want to go back to the past, a fatalistic view could appear. But in the teachings of the Buddha, past karma can be healed. Of course it can still produce its affects, but they can be lessened by repentance, which is a fundamental practice in Buddhism. Repentance doesn't mean guiltiness, which is a *bonno* dealing with self-hatred. On the contrary, by recognizing our past errors, we promise not to repeat them: it's a sign of benevolence towards oneself. Repenting not wanting to create anymore bad karma. Another cause of *bonno* is ignorance. We spoke about that in the context of the twelve *innen*, and also with regard to ego attachment. You can see that the causes of *bonno* are *bonno* themselves, a self-sustaining process.

## REMEDIES FOR *BONNO*

Before bringing up the important point of remedies, we can ask ourselves the question : must a *bonno* really be cured?

I would like to remind you of the *mondo* between Nyojo and young Dogen, then 26 years old traveling in China with Nyojo.

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Dogen asked what *shin jin datsu raku*, (dropping off of body and mind) meant.

Nyojo replied : « It's total concentration on the practice of zazen. At that moment the five desires and the five obstacles, globally the ten *bonno*, are resolved. »

Dogen noticed : « By saying that, aren't you teaching Hinayana, the Small Vehicle ? It seems that I've already heard *bonno soku bodai*, *bonno* are awakening. »

Nyojo gave this answer which seems essential to me and guides the way I want to practice and teach the Way : « A disciple of Buddha must not neglect any of the teachings of Buddha, one mustn't create categories between the Small and Great Vehicle. »

Nyojo continued : « Someone who abandons even just a small *bonno*, one single attachment, meets Buddha face to face. » This moment of letting go of a *bonno* is a moment of awakening. Following, in the Genjo *koan*, Dogen said : « Ordinary people delude themselves about awakening, Buddhas clarify their illusions. » This means that clarifying one's illusions is a fundamental remedy. If we don't see to what extent we are deluding ourselves, we have no chance of getting out of it. In zazen, from the moment we see these *bonno* or these illusions cross our minds and we let them become clarified by the *hishiryō* consciousness of zazen, meaning a consciousness which does not become attached, then this view in zazen on *bonno* is enough to purify them : it is a great remedy. Recognizing a *bonno* as a *bonno* is going half the way to liberation. Most of the time we don't recognize *bonno*, we see them as normal passions in life. We tend to justify our *bonno* by thinking that they put some spice into life. Recognizing *bonno*, we recognize suffering, and also the non-awakening coming from it. We see the risk of by-passing what is essential in life, wasting our time pursuing all types of *bonno*, and we then understand that that's the greatest suffering. If I were about to die, I think I would suffer greatly if I realized that I was completely wrong, that I missed what was essential in life.

Two methods exist for curing *bonno*: concentration and observation, which must be examined down to observation of their emptiness, the emptiness of our ego as a creator of *bonno* and the emptiness of the objects for satisfying what we chase after. This diminishes the attraction to the process : *bonno*, attachment, karma, etc.

Master Deshimaru always said : the remedy for *bonno* in Buddhism of the Great Vehicle is the realization of *ku*, emptiness. Each day when we chant the Hannya Shingyo, we recite the key phrase : when the *bodhisattva* practices *shōken*, right observation, he clearly sees that the five aggregates are emptiness. It is the fundamental remedy. Zen masters have used this remedy a lot.

One day, Eka came to see Bodhidharma, telling him that his mind peaceful, that he suffered a lot, and he asked for help to pacify his mind, meaning liberating it from *bonno*. Bodhidharma answered him : « Show me your mind and I'll pacify it. » Eka ended up realizing that his mind was ungraspable. Bodhidharma then said : « In that case, if you have really realized *shin fuka toku*, the mind is ungraspable, your mind is already pacified. »

Practicing zazen means being intimate with that.

Eno's question to Nangaku « what is it ? » which we've already spoken about in another *teishō*, is another example.

Realizing that our mind is ungraspable is realizing emptiness: this comes back to realizing Buddha nature and liberation. Strangely, few people awaken to that. I believe that everyone is afraid of emptiness, because we are often mistaken about the meaning of emptiness. We are afraid of the void : but emptiness is not the void. Because of this mistake, we are unable to penetrate this dimension of *ku*. For example, in zazen we don't stop mulling over our thoughts,

we do everything not to see the emptiness of all this ruminating : we occupy the mind in order to not see. I suggest that even briefly, you experiment with really letting go and experience *shin fuka toku*, not trying to recreate an object to seize.

Another *mondo* between Eka and Sosan, the second and third patriarchs, clarifies the same question. Sosan a leper, persuaded that his bad past karma made him ill, comes to see Eka (in fact a lot of people who have cancer think like Sosan, adding a depressive and guilty feeling to their illness). Eka simply said to him : « show me your past karma. » But this past karma is ungraspable. And Eka says : « So, you are already purified. » Effectively, Sosan , cured from leprosy became the third Zen patriarch. It is the cure through observation of emptiness. Many people think that this is a dangerous approach. If people went to see a psychotherapist doing what Bodhidharma did by saying « what are you suffering from? Show me your sufferings », it is not so sure that they would awaken, and it's really too bad. Maybe we don't have enough confidence in this cure.

To awaken to emptiness, Buddha invented skillful means, and in Buddhism, capabilities have been developed, which are not really stopgap measures.

When it comes to greediness, for example, a cure would be to practice generosity, giving. Instead of frontally attacking chocolate craving, we can just recognize it and say: ok, I'll have some later, or share it with everyone.

The cure for hatred, to hostility, consists in practicing benevolence and compassion. This might seem a little hypocritical : sometimes we say that it's better to act naturally and to say what we think. But hatred cannot be resolved through more hatred. Quite on the contrary : aggressive people tend to create aggressiveness around them, like in marital disputes ! But in order to practice this benevolence when facing hatred, it is necessary to understand what makes one hate or what we hate about the other person. Often we can't stand certain aspects of those who have the same traits that we find unbearable in ourselves. Recognizing one's own *bonno* is a remedy for this hatred : it is not a question of becoming indulgent. Rather it's accepting that we have these *bonno* and not repressing that. So when we see our own *bonno* manifest in someone else, instead of feeling hatred or disdain, we can almost feel tenderness through identification. This leads into a motion towards benevolence and breaks the vicious cycle. As for ignorance, it can be resolved through observation and lucidity. This is the base of our practice. Every phenomenon in life is an occasion to learn to know oneself and to receive the Dharma. Our practice consists in making ourselves available and receptive to all of life's teachings, not just to *sutra*. If we are truly animated by *bodaishin*, the awakened mind, all phenomena are *genjo koan* : they point towards a deep truth and can help us to awaken. The practice of *zazen* makes our mind receptive to the teaching of phenomena which helps dissolve ignorance, the fundamental cause for *bonno* and suffering. That's what the third vow says, *hommon muryo seigan gaku*: the Dharma gates are countless and studying them is an opportunity to awaken. Don't give up opportunities which come about in front of you.

There is a simple and radical approach in Zen in general to cure *bonno*. It begins with concentration : not letting the mind be led by impulsiveness, desires or emotion. Remain completely centered on the *hara*. Thus having the capability to let go. But this is not sufficient, because in this manner, the root of the *bonno* is not cut. The *bonno* just become inoffensive because we don't concentrate on them enough to follow them. Buddha always said that concentration, *samadhi*, was not the true awakening which is the result of understanding, of wisdom.

According to Shakyamuni's point of view, in Zen it is taught that *bonno* are resolved through

wisdom, through observation of emptiness, *ku*, as well as of the ego which leads us to our *bonno* and the objects we pursue due to these *bonno*.

In the famous *mondo* between Dogen and his Master Nyojo, regarding *shin jin datsu raku*, body and mind drop off, being the essence of zazen, Nyojo says : « When we practice zazen as such, the five desires and five obstacles are severed ».

The five desires are desires relative to the five senses and also relative to sex, cleanliness, wealth, food, fame and sleep. The five obstacles are greediness, anger, sleep, doubt and remorse. These five desires and five obstacles are severed through meditation practice encompassing concentration and observation, hence wisdom. This is the essence of the teaching of Zen regarding *bonno*.

A little further on, Nyojo quotes a Mahayana *sutra* about the famous question of *bonno soku bodai*, 'bonno are directly satori', which preoccupied Dogen. Nyojo specifies something important for us : Buddha taught to people who had many desires and obstacles ; in other words, *bonno*. They thought that abandoning these *bonno*, means nirvana, awakening. But to those who were attached to awakening, to nirvana, which is even more serious (dangerous) than being attached to *bonno*, he taught that *bonno* are nirvana or awakening itself. Buddha's intention is always therapeutic, adapted to the person before him. If you have many desires, if you are obsessed with money or power, you are taught that it's the cause for your suffering so you have to let go of all that. However, if by abandoning all these *bonno* you become obsessed with nirvana, satori, the inverse remedy would be to realize that these *bonno* are emptiness and therefore no different from nirvana and satori. It was a dangerous lesson which was not intended for us. Few people among us are obsessed with nirvana and awakening, but that existed in Buddha's sangha where many ascetics wanted to become arhat. Buddha taught them that *bonno* were also satori, which demonstrates that the teaching, like the remedies, must always be adapted to each person. A cure for one could be a poison for another.

Another *sutra* of Buddha Shakyamuni also dealt with cures for *bonno*: the *Mulaparyaya sutra* : « All obstacles. » (this *sutra* is one of the *Mahjimanikaya*, middle *sutra*. They are Theravada *sutra* : the *Mulaparyaya* is the second one in the collection.) It's title « All obstacles » means 'all *bonno*'. In this *sutra*, Buddha does not describe *bonno* in terms of their nature, but in terms of their remedies. Buddha positions himself here as a master and therapist who wants to help beings get rid of their sufferings. Many obstacles, *bonno*, are described there.

The first ones are *bonno* which can be overcome through judgment (perception), meaning wisdom, right observation. These [*bonno*] are thoughts which trigger or increase desires, or which develop ignorance or the desire for existence, continuing to exist in one's present condition. They are also all vain thoughts, like the following questions : did I exist in the past before my birth, what was I in past lives, what will I become after death, or even, who am I, etc. ? For Buddha, these are vain questions. Zen masters often asked their disciples : who are you ? I reminded you before of Eno's question to Nangaku : what comes as such ? (what is it?). Eno asked this question to make Nangaku realize that it was in vain. And this is how he awakened : after seven years of meditating on this question, he ended up realizing that he couldn't answer it. And the impossibility of answering the question « who am I ? » opened his mind to awakening. This impossibility didn't lead to regrets. On the contrary, it led to great liberation : what I am is ungraspable and the only thing to do is to harmonize with that. And that becomes awakening

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Zen masters hence proceed with *koan*. Buddha directly taught that it is in vain to be preoccupied by all that, one shouldn't waste time with *koan*. Regarding these obstacles overcome by judgment and the questions one asks themselves, if unluckily we find answers to them, we come to false conclusions. For example about if we have an eternal soul, *atman* ; or not. This type of metaphysical answer is a *bonno*, an illusion for Buddha who called them a « jungle of opinions ». For Buddha, attachment to metaphysical concepts is a great *bonno*. We become attached to notions, concepts, and that becomes an obstacle to liberation. The remedy to these obstacles is meditation of the Four Noble Truths, which enable liberating from the illusion of an ego and above all, doubt. People who want metaphysical answers to questions like : Who am I ? Where was I before my birth ? What will I become after my death ?, are always filled with doubt. Instead of concentrating on the right practice which would liberate them here and now, they become lost in speculation.

The second type of obstacle are those which can be cured by the controlling one's senses. It's not a matter of eliminating one's sensations, desires or emotions, but being able to control them so that they just pass over and then we don't become carried away by them. This is exactly what we do in zazen. Whatever the *bonno* or arising thought may be in zazen, we remain seated, facing the wall, and still. Without realizing it, we develop the ability to be in contact with *bonno* without being led away by them. This is a great liberty because it means we don't need to « kill » what is impulsive or creates desire in us. It isn't necessary to become insensitive : it's just a question of being able to be aware when it appears, in order to not become impulsively led away and carried into actions creating horrible and painful karma for ourselves and others.

Next there are obstacles which should be overcome by proper use, which is more concrete. In most of the *sutra* available today, Buddha was speaking to monks because they were the ones who transmitted the *sutra*. But many of Buddha's teachings to laypeople have been lost, not retransmitted, and deal with this question. For « proper use », clothes should just be worn to avoid nudity and to protect the body from cold or sun. They shouldn't be used to attract attention or for fashion reasons. Clothes mustn't be a decoration for the ego: and in this sense, the *kesa* is the best garment. Then there's food which should be only used for keeping the body in good health and to enable leading a life in harmony with the Way. In the same manner, he speaks about the home. Everyone needs a roof to protect them against weather conditions and to provide a place suitable for meditation practice. The home mustn't be a testimony to luxurious living , etc. Lastly, medicine must be used to maintain good health. Buddha was already anti-doping ! For example, ginseng is a good remedy for fatigue, but it shouldn't be used as an aphrodisiac stimulating desires which wouldn't be just a substance for good health. Other obstacles, like heat or cold, are overcome through endurance. Nowadays we heat our homes in the winter and create coolness with air conditioning in the summer, which wasn't possible in Buddha's time. This is in line with Tosan's teachings when he was asked what the place was where it is neither hot nor cold, and he answered: « it is the place where when it's hot, we feel totally hot and when it's cold, we feel totally cold. » Tosan's lesson wasn't only about hot or cold, but also about life and death : he proposes being totally one with the present moment, totally accepting what is, here and now. If we are one with heat in the present moment, we don't miss not feeling cool and the heat becomes a lot less dramatic. The process is the same for sore knees during zazen : if we grapple with the knee pain, the pain increases. Becoming one with sore knees lessens the pain. Obstacles overcome through endurance are numbered as such : hunger, thirst, horseflies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, criticism and mean speech, body aches and illness. Buddha recommended considering all of them with wisdom and

to endure with patience. He concluded by saying : « Thus oppressive and burning obstacles no longer appear. » This doesn't mean that this phenomena disappears; however, they stop being obstacles depending on how we face them. In the past at the Gendronniere, we did zazen outside and in the evening we got bitten by mosquitoes. Some people fought with the mosquitoes, twitching their faces and becoming angry : zazen was hellish for them. But if we just let the mosquito bite us, kind of just by giving a little blood, the mosquito bite was accepted and very quickly we no longer paid any attention to it : it was still there, but no longer created an obstacle.

Other obstacles must be overcome by avoiding them. Here is the list : wild animals, snakes, thorns, deep holes, sitting in incorrect and overly luxurious chairs, places of ill repute like cabarets, and creating friendship with unworthy people. This last point is very important especially for beginners. A *bodhisattva*, on the contrary, can spend time with « evil-doers » because he could eventually help them since he would be strong enough to influence them. Beginners would be better off surrounding themselves with good friends having a good influence on them and not deterring them from practicing zazen.

Other obstacles must be avoided by steering clear from them : these are our own thoughts, such as malevolence, hatred and greediness.

The last category includes obstacles which must be overcome by spiritual development. Seven practices are considered as essential elements for awakening or leading to awakening. These are the seven factors of awakening :

- The first practice is attention. Many obstacles and annoying errors arise in life because of a lack of attention. In Zen we speak more about concentration which is a fundamental factor for awakening.
- the second is examination of the Dharma, of the Law. This is what we do during workshops when we study the teachings or think about on them
- the third one is energy, one of the *paramita (shoji)* : effort, the ability to concentrate on the right practice, keeping one's concentration and continuing. This is the *gyoji* in sesshin for instance.
- the fourth factor of awakening is joy. Master Deshimaru was often joyful, as monks and nuns often are. Ryokan was joyful. This joy is the product of lightening up one's karma, like when putting down a heavy load : we feel light, liberated.
- the fifth is tranquility : far from agitation, not having too many desires, being content with what one has, in a state of concentration. Along with energy, these were the final teachings of Buddha and Dogen before dying. In Zen they are called the eight satori of the great man (person).
- the sixth factor is concentration, something essential in the practice of zazen.
- the seventh factor of awakening is equanimity : it is very important, because if we are affected too much by suffering, it becomes difficult to the live of a *bodhisattva*. Certain people wonder if it's a good idea to continue practicing zazen when there's so much misfortune in the world. This question is often asked during *mondo*. If we consider all the suffering in the world which the media speak about, we could become disturbed and feel guilty : equanimity is therefore fundamental. Equanimity also helps when it comes to caring for those who suffer because too much empathy does not always help the treatment. All therapists know this.

So why did I want to evoke this *sutra* ? To demonstrate that in the original teaching of Shakyamuni, we notice that Buddha uses many skillful means to help all beings. In Zen, we tend to be too absolute and concentrate on only one thing. For certain people, zazen is the cure for



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all. In a certain way, this is true, but it is neither wise nor skillful in many cases. Zazen cannot be recommended as the only solution for many people suffering . Even if it's basically true, it might not be the right care at a certain moment. Buddha used an assortment of means, each one appropriate for each situation in order to cure *bonno*.

To fulfill our *bodhisattva* vow *bonno mujin seigandan*, 'I vow to extinguish all *bonno*', it is a good thing to remain centered on our zazen practice and it is also useful to study the teachings of Buddha which propose other remedies.

All of these remedies are the product of wisdom which comes from zazen.