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# The three seals of the Dharma

## From suffering to awakening

### Teisho by Roland Yuno Rech – December 2015

The origin of zen practice is the Buddha's awakening to the universality of suffering. Birth, illness, old age and death are suffering, not getting what you want or losing what you are attached to is suffering. In short, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering. The two great characteristics of existence, impermanence and emptiness, are suffering for those who do not understand and accept them, i.e., those who remain identified with their ego.

The cause of this is ignorance, the non-awakening which produces desires and hatreds: these are the three poisons from which the correct practice of zazen, i.e., with wisdom (*e*) and compassion (*kai*), can free us. The three seals of the Dharma: *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta* give way to the fourth: nirvana. Buddhism is therefore not a pessimistic approach, but a path to liberation and authentic happiness, provided one is not attached to it. From the origin, its practice was stated to be the Eightfold Path, expressed in zen as *kai, jo, e*.

How can this be realized practically; how can the three seals of the Dharma be transformed into enlightenment?

These three seals are the characteristics of existence: impermanence; non-self or vacuity and the suffering that results from not accepting them. Zazen makes us realize a mind that does not dwell on anything: *hishiryo*. It does not identify with any thought, does not dwell on anything, regain its natural fluidity. This is what Sensei called "returning to normal conditions", stopping transmigrating according to our desires and aversions which make our life a samsara.

Birth is suffering because it is a separation: we learn to become an individual by building an 'ego' that rejects what it thinks is 'not me': others, nature, the whole universe. Doing that, we find ourselves cut off from our roots, from our interdependence with all existences and we always feel that something is missing. This is how the chain of desires for all sorts of objects begins. But in the end, all of them turn out to be unsatisfactory, because what we are really missing is to find our native unity with all beings.

To achieve this, we must stop thinking with words and rediscover thinking with our whole body. Zazen allows us to realize *shinjin datsu raku*, the abandonment of our five aggregates of attachment which form our false Self, and this is possible through correct, intuitive and immediate concentration and observation, because - at our birth - it is not an ego which is born, but a transitory form of the Buddha nature which appears. Zazen helps us to get rid of the illusion of this ego by ceasing to take ourselves for what we are not. Thinking with the body allows us to find our unity with the whole universe. This is the spirit of faith, of non-two symbolized by *gasshô* and the hands in *hokkai jo in*. It is what favors the spirit of compassion, benevolence and solidarity. It is also what allows an attitude of love and respect for nature, without which true ecology is impossible. This is why the realization of non-birth is *nirvana*, the

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extinction of attachments caused by the three poisons: greed, hatred and ignorance. Thus, our delusion is the starting point of *bodaishin*, “an evil for a good”, summarized by the expression “*bonno soku bodai*”.

Through the practice of zazen, the spirit of discrimination ceases to direct us: we no longer separate noble and vulgar. And *samu* is part of the practice of the Way on the same level as zazen, the study of the sutras or the ceremonies, all gathered in the same *gyoji*.

Diseases are the second aspect of suffering mentioned by the Buddha. Although the practice of zazen strengthens homeostasis by reducing stress, it does not prevent illness, because there are many causes of illness, including our environment. Taking care of oneself becomes a practice that gives us also the opportunity to be helped and therefore to feel gratitude for all the caregivers. It is also an opportunity to meditate on impermanence and to ask ourselves more deeply what we really want to live for. Illness also makes us feel solidarity with all sick beings, like the bodhisattva Vimalakirti.

Old age is another inevitable factor of suffering, because of all the losses it brings. It makes us work on letting go and also allows us to develop the wonderful “spirit of the grandmother”. As for death, it is a part of the natural process and ceases to be a scandal. Zazen trains us to die to our ego and to be reborn from moment to moment. Death is only a passage followed by a new birth, conditioned by the strength of our *karma* or our wishes. But zazen is also the experience of the eternal present.

Not getting what we want or losing what we are attached to are two other aspects of suffering with which we are familiar. The object of our desire always escapes us in the end and that is why the five aggregates of attachment are suffering. But zazen makes us experience that the five aggregates are emptiness. Therefore, “there is no one who suffers” and the mind is free from all obstacles.

Thus, the Buddha-Way, far from being pessimistic, opens a life perspective with a positive meaning, by transforming our sufferings into *koan* that give us the opportunity to awaken and therefore to liberate ourselves with all beings.

The Dharma shows us the way and the means to overcome obstacles. It also shows us that our delusions are part of the reality of our life: even if we love flowers and regret their fall, our love and regrets are *inmo*, the reality as it is: without substance, like our dreams.

Our vows are also like a dream: saving all beings is doubly impossible because each one can only awaken through his own practice. In the end, it is practice that saves us, by putting us in touch with our true nature, which is the bodhisattva Kannon. As Eno wrote: it is this buddha nature that really saves beings.

It is also impossible because, as the Diamond Sutra reminds us, as long as we believe that there are beings to be saved, we are still attached to a notion of being, of ego, and we are no longer an awakening being, a true bodhisattva, and compassion is painful. In other words, the bodhisattva participates in the suffering of beings through his ego and liberates them through the non-ego.

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To be a bodhisattva, we must be like children again and practice "*Yuge zanmai*" the *samadhi* of play, the *mushotoku* mind.