

February 2017

Greetings,

I hope everyone is getting by this winter with all the difficult conditions. Spring is almost here.

Because I feel the articles in newsletter from the Serene Reflection Dharma Association would be a benefit to all, I would like to give you another opportunity to subscribe. All you have to do is [click this link](#) to launch an email message with the subscription address already entered in the "To" field (alternatively, you send an email yourself to newsletter.srda@gmail.com). Then just enter "subscribe" in the subject and click send: no need for a message; we just need your email address. Thereafter, when a new issue is published you will receive an email with only a link to the newsletter on the SRDA website. (Note that the email will provide an easy option for unsubscribing, should you wish to do so in the future.)

The articles from this month's newsletter follow below, and here's a link to the latest (February) newsletter:

http://serenereflectiondharma.org/newsletter/2017/Feb/news_2-17.htm

With all my heart,

Rev. Basil

The Merit That Fills the Universe

Rev. Master Koshin Schomberg

North Cascades Buddhist Priory

Most astrophysicists currently believe that there are about 100 billion galaxies in the universe and that there are an average of about 100 billion stars in each galaxy. Thus there are about 100 billion x 100 billion (or 10 to the 22nd power) stars in the universe.

As amazing as that number is, the currently dominant theory views this amount of matter and energy as constituting only about five percent of the total matter and energy in the cosmos. The other ninety-five percent is made up of two mysterious components: "dark energy" (estimated to make up about 70% of the known universe) and "dark matter" (estimated to make up about 25% of the universe).

Dark matter and dark energy are called "dark" because they are "dark" to our senses and to the instruments that we use as extensions of our senses. Their existence is inferred from the behavior of other phenomena (stars and galaxies) that we can detect directly.

Here is an interesting analogy:—Just as, in looking out upon the universe, we do not see most of what is there, so in looking at our own lives and the world around us, we can easily fail to see most of what is there. When we see in this more limited way, we see a world of hopes realized and unrealized, a world of tangled problems, obstacles and miseries. And what we see in this way can seem to be all there is.

Such a world is a very small part of the whole of existence. The greater part of existence is made up of "the merit that fills the universe."

I think of that underlying merit, which permeates every place and every time, as "the Goodness of the Eternal." Our innate capacity to recognize this Goodness is the real meaning of the word "faith."

Faith is not a form of inference, yet in our analogy with dark energy and dark matter, faith is analogous to the scientists' inference that dark energy and dark matter exist.

Imagine that one day a scientist finds a way to directly detect dark energy and/or dark matter. In our analogy, this direct experiencing of something heretofore only inferred is analogous to the experience of enlightenment. For in the experience of enlightenment an individual human being directly experiences that Goodness that had been intuitively recognized through faith.

When beings indulge in greed, hate and delusion, suffering is created. Yet even the creation of suffering happens within the greater context of the fundamental Goodness of existence. And this is also true when karma comes due and the seeds sown in greed, hate and delusion grow to full fruition and are reaped in sorrow. It is equally true that the cleansing and conversion of karma happens within the greater context of the merit that fills the universe. It does not fundamentally matter to the Goodness of the Eternal whether or not we undertake the cleansing and conversion of karma. Yet if we do undertake it, we will eventually come to recognize that it is because of the Goodness of the Eternal that we are able both to begin upon and complete this greatest of all human undertakings.

Thus, there is always good reason to look up spiritually. No matter what is happening, it is always helpful to look up, implicitly trusting the Goodness of the Eternal. Similarly, no matter what is happening, it is always unhelpful to look down and despair.

Suppose a scientist is able to detect dark matter and/or energy directly. The other scientists will say, "You claim to have detected these mysterious objects. But we won't be sure of the truth of your claim until we can duplicate the results of your experiment."

Similarly, in the spiritual life, one person can directly experience the Goodness of the Eternal, and tell others about what he or she has experienced. But hearing about another's experience of enlightenment is not the same as having one's own experience. Each person has to do his own training and have his own experience.

The merit that fills the universe is an inexhaustible reservoir of generosity. It is "Love beyond our wildest dreams"—an expression sometimes used by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, whose life so magnificently exhibited that generosity and Love.

We train in meditation and the Precepts in order to root our lives in the Goodness of the Eternal—to harmonize with It and allow It to manifest in and through the mind and body which, mistakenly, we so often think of as "ours," but which in fact belong to It. When there is such harmony, our actions of thought, word and deed naturally accord with the merit that fills the universe and, in a sense, add to it.

How can one add to that which is already infinite?—There is infinite *potential* within the merit that fills the universe. Through our training and enlightenment, some of that potential is actualized and can be put to use by the Eternal. Thus the merit of training flows on and on beyond all horizons, beyond life as we know it and beyond death as we know it.



Distractions in Training

Rev. Master Basil Singer

Seattle Dharma Refuge

When the craving to possess

emerges before your eyes,

do not persist in following its perverting path.

When you allow gratification and dissatisfaction

to compete within you

they will create a sickness in your heart.

If you are not aware of the deeper purpose
for which we train,
you toil in vain however pure your thoughts.¹

This verse is from the magnificent poem composed by the thirtieth ancestor in our lineage, Great Master Seng-ts 'an (J. Sosan). The poem's teaching has inspired me to give a recent series of talks based on it. Teachings like this mean a great deal to me because they tell me how to really train, what to remember that pulls me away from my training and meditation, and the reason to live within the immaculate flow of the Eternal that has no judgment, only unconditional love and Great Wisdom. As the poem says,

The All-embracing is perfect
and, like the great vault of space,
It lacks for nothing and has nothing in excess.

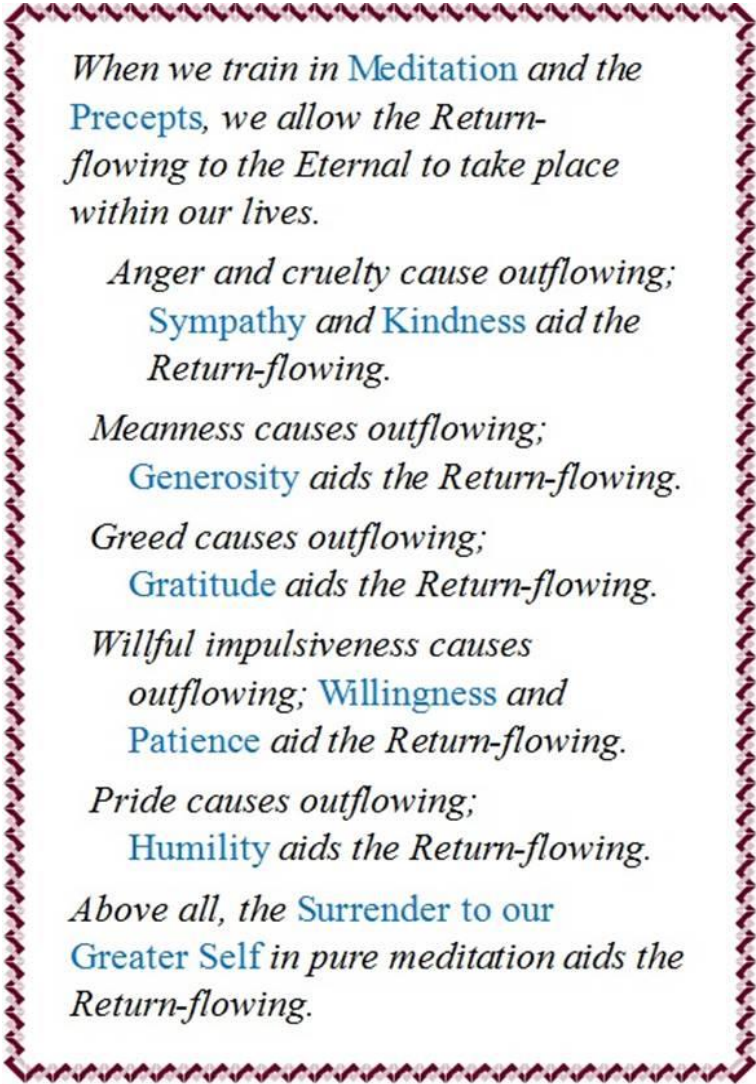
Because we are good at grasping after
or pushing away,
we are not one with It.

Elsewhere in the poem Great Master Sosan says, "Do not chase after external entanglements." This is one of my biggest spiritual distractions. I know from experience that I chase after external entanglements when I am having personal difficulties or I am in some kind of emotional or spiritual pain or dis-ease. Sometimes I look to my friends for a refuge they cannot provide, and at other times I turn to various forms of entertainments to distract me. Or, I find myself resorting to an unhealthy fascination with current events. Or—and this may be my personal "Achilles heel"—*food*. I also know from experience that these distractions do not work in the long run. They might provide temporary relief to the painful symptoms I might be experiencing, *but they do not treat the underlying causes*.

There are two things I have found that truly help when my pain tempts me to resort to external distractions. One is to watch myself and make extra effort in being mindful of the thoughts, emotions and things for which I am particularly vulnerable—that really "push my buttons" and stimulate what I crave. Another is to take refuge in the Eternal in pure meditation. When I do, the habitual energy of my old desires and attachments are washed by the magnificent flow of the Eternal, which is full of stillness and love. I find that when training converts the self, I enjoy things much more and I can let them go more easily and not grasp after them. And, my meditation and training in being mindful helps me be sensitive to those situations

that pull me out of meditation and my still center. Seeing the Eternal in all externals and not craving them has really helped me to live a much more still and peaceful life. This takes ongoing training in meditation and mindfulness. Well worth it!

The guidance and example of those senior to me in the sangha have been of immense help to me over the years in dealing with entangling external distractions, for which I am very grateful. A teaching that is especially insightful and helpful to myself and a number of other trainees is found in Rev. Master Koshin's book about the Buddha's teaching on Dependent Origination ([click here for a pdf copy](#)). In fact, I have framed it and it hangs in my apartment as a continual reminder of how my actions help or hinder my relationship with the Eternal. ([Click here for a printable PDF version.](#))



*When we train in **Meditation** and the **Precepts**, we allow the Return-flowing to the Eternal to take place within our lives.*

*Anger and cruelty cause outflowing;
Sympathy and Kindness aid the Return-flowing.*

*Meanness causes outflowing;
Generosity aids the Return-flowing.*

*Greed causes outflowing;
Gratitude aids the Return-flowing.*

*Willful impulsiveness causes outflowing; **Willingness and Patience** aid the Return-flowing.*

*Pride causes outflowing;
Humility aids the Return-flowing.*

*Above all, the **Surrender to our Greater Self** in pure meditation aids the Return-flowing.*

1. Shushogi, pp. 101-103 in *Zen is Eternal Life* by Reverend P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., Fourth Edition, 1999. Shasta Abbey Press, Mount Shasta CA.