

July 2017

Greetings!

I hope everyone is enjoying their summer. In Seattle, we have had beautiful weather and consequently the roof garden has flourished, having its best year ever. Things are moving along quite well.

I have written two articles for the Serene Reflection Dharma Association, and will reprint them in this email. I was going to leave it at that, but something came up for me that I have heard from a lot of people, especially at this time of year. With the weather beckoning people outdoors and time off from work, it often throws people off their regular routines. We all want to enjoy ourselves and have a good time during the summer, which is not a problem when we keep up our meditation, spiritual training, and mindfulness. It only becomes a problem if it leads to putting one's training on the back burner. Once we take our training and meditation for granted, thinking that we'll just get back to it when we're less busy, this opens ourselves up to the emergence of the "egocentric self". We have previously discussed at length how this leads to a life filled with dis-ease and suffering. The self will always find an excuse to minimize our training as they are at cross purposes with each other. When the self takes charge, we open ourselves up to greed, hate, and delusion. For myself, and many others I have spoken with, cynicism and sarcasm come into prominence, and total acceptance and stillness fall by the wayside. I know for myself that this causes me great suffering.

Our training and meditation really allows us to see when we have moved away from our stillness and the purity and love of the Eternal. So, especially at this time of year, when distractions can be great, let us be mindful of our choices. I cannot emphasize enough to stay with your practice. The rewards will be great.

Have a wonderful summer!

With all my heart,
Rev Basil

Purify Your Own Heart

Rev. Master Basil Singer

Seattle Dharma Refuge

Recently I became aware that the Third Pure Precept^u, "Do Good for Others," has another expression in the ancient scriptures: "Purify Your Own Heart." This really hit home with me in light of my actions of thought and speech during the recent election cycle. Like many people, it seems, of whatever political persuasion, I hardened my heart against those with different points of view. In effect, I polluted my heart with self-righteous ideas and opinions and denied the ideas of others. I refused to consider their intentions and point of view, even if I disagreed with their approach. In effect, I denied them their Buddha Nature.

A wonderful aspect of pure meditation (even if sometimes painful) is that if we practice sincerely and with an open heart, it shows us the suffering we're causing ourselves and others and the need to change our ways. In this case, although it took some time, eventually my meditation showed me quite powerfully the pain that my hard-hearted opinionation was causing myself and others. This shock of recognition inspired my deep regret, and also made me recognize that my hardened heart was similar to those with whom I had a problem. The resulting *sange*^[iii] prompted me to apologize to those upon whom I had inflicted my opinions. Letting go of my hard-hearted attitude felt like a load of rocks dropped from my back, and my relief was great. As Dogen says in the [*Shushoqi*](#)^[iiii]

Contrition before the Buddhas brings purification and salvation, true conviction and earnest endeavour: once aroused, true conviction changes all beings, in addition to ourselves, with benefits extending to everything including that which is animate and inanimate.

This experience truly roused my conviction to refrain from making this mistake. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett points out a direct connection between the First Pure Precept, *Cease from Evil*, and the Third, *Purify Your Own Heart*: "Know that to purify the heart is, indeed, to have the intention and practice of refraining from all evil whatsoever."^[iv]

My own experience with this situation has inspired me to remind the various meditation groups I visit how vitally important it is to be ever mindful of our thought and speech. Keeping our thought and speech pure helps keep our Heart open and maintain generosity of spirit for others and ourselves. This is not easy, I know, because there are things and people that push our buttons and cause us to want to close down and harden our hearts against them. But as we are taught in our very first meditation instruction, when we simply let these thoughts and emotions naturally arise, observe them, *then let them go* they will be washed and purified by the compassion of the Eternal. Saying this seems simple enough, but actually *putting it into practice* can be challenging even after years of training. It is difficult because we are trying to convert deeply habituated forces of negative habit energy that we have generated in this life and inherited from past lives. This can blind us to the suffering we're creating.

Rev. Master Jiyu said about the Third Pure Precept:

The feeling of refraining and of purifying the heart is one of the most exquisite feelings there is. It is a feeling of ... "becoming more spiritual..." Since another way of referring to the spirit is the pure inner "water" wherein the "Moon" of Truth is reflected, this is also known as "becoming full of Light."^[v]

And in her commentary on this Precept in the *Kyojukaimon*, where it is expressed as "Do Good For Others," she makes clear that doing good for others first requires ceasing from evil: "Do not set up a chain of causation that will cause others to do wrong; do not do that which will cause another to grieve; do not do that which will result in your creating karma for another being; do not accidentally set the wheel of karma in motion."^[vi] Elsewhere in this regard she said:

Dogen says that to purify the heart is the very same as to refrain from evil. The refraining itself is the purification. So don't worry about how to purify your heart, just refrain from evil. The purification will happen automatically, as a result of refraining and of meditation. We do not have to worry about the analysis of how or why, just refrain from that which is not to be done. [lviii](#)

This is an important reminder that *first* we must do something about ourselves: purify our hearts by training in pure meditation and mindful application of the Precepts, which is to “refrain from evil.” If we try to *willfully* “do good for others” we most often step on toes and make a bit of a mess. Of course, we do need to take action at times, and our training helps us to respond to people and situations from a place of centered stillness, a place of compassion, sympathy, and empathy. And that is truly doing good for others.

In talking about this recently to the meditation groups, I mentioned that if anyone had anything to add to this article they were welcome to contribute. The following are one trainee's observations.

Rev. Basil once pointed out that when the selfish self arises, there is almost a physical sensation of feeling the heart harden as we push away that which we don't want or cling to that which we do. Sort of a claustrophobic feeling, if you will. His observation has proven to be of great help to me, and I've learned to observe that symptom in myself when greed or hate arise. (Delusion, however, is much harder to observe: more elusive, seductive, more insidious than the other two.) The sensation is a timely reminder that something is going wrong: I am beginning to feel a tangible discomfort and I can alleviate that by letting go of the urge to insist that the world conform to my desires. This is a better use of the will, and I recommend it.

There's a willfulness that seems to be in the way of the needed softening of my heart. Rev. Master Kōshin has a metaphor he uses to describe this conundrum: we must get ourselves out of the driver's seat.

I understand my True Heart to be my Buddha Nature. I have no doubt that it is void, unstained, and pure. All I need to do is to take refuge there, setting aside all concerns about purity and impurity. Taking refuge in the Buddha Nature softens the brittle accretions of willfulness and allows my thoughts, words, and deeds to be informed by, to flow from, my True heart. Taking refuge in this way helps me to become a vessel for something much deeper and more compassionate than my ordinary selfish self.

In closing, it must be recognized that at any point in our training there will be people and situations that “push our buttons” and cause our hearts to harden and for our training to go off the rails. I speak from recent experience, when my reactions to a situation made me realize that I needed to do extra meditation, be more still, and let the Eternal wash and cleanse my thoughts and emotions. This proved to me yet again that our first, last, and best recourse in difficult times is to ask for the help of the Eternal through pure meditation and to let our actions of body, speech, and mind be guided by the Precepts. When we do these things, we purify our heart and are truly good for all.

[i] The Three Pure Precepts are expressed in the Soto Zen tradition as: Cease From Evil, Do Only Good, Do Good for Others.

[ii] “SANGE (J), contrition, confession, repentance. The sincere recognition of all that is wrong within one and the acceptance of one’s past karma. Sange is the true source of religious humility and a principal gateway to enlightenment.” Glossary, [Zen is Eternal Life](#) (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, Fourth Edition, 1999), p. 328.

[iii] Excerpted from *Zen is Eternal Life*, *ibid.*, pp. 94-103.

[iv] [Roar of the Tigress, Volume Two](#) (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2005), p. 164.

[v] *Ibid.*, p. 158

[vi] [Kyojukaimon and Commentary. Giving and Receiving the Teaching of the Precepts.](#)

[vii] *Roar of the Tigress*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

Dogen’s Rules for Meditation

Rev. Master Basil Singer

Seattle Dharma Refuge

A scripture that is recited in Soto Zen temples every day has been extremely helpful to my training. It explains *why* we do this training and meditation, *how* to do it, and tells of the pitfalls. The scripture is called, [Rules for Meditation](#), written by Great Master Dogen Zenji.

In this article I am going to focus on the opening of the scripture. There, Great Master Dogen tells of his spiritual problem (*koan*) that he had at the beginning of his training. He wondered, since we are taught that we all have the magnificent flow of the Eternal (the Buddha Nature), why do we have to do all this meditation and training? Eventually, through his own training and meditation, he discovered the reason. A metaphor came up for me about this that has been helpful for both myself and others I have shared it with.

Let's say we buy a piece of property with an underground stream of pure, clear flowing water. We could move in knowing that we have this stream, but that alone really won't help us: We have to bring the water up to us, and that means digging a well. We'll assume that external machines and devices can't help us, so the digging must be done by hand. And this is hard work, because we have to labor arduously through rocks, boulders, hard clay, sticky clay, and so on but we're motivated by our need for this pure, life-giving mountain water.

After we reach the stream we have to work on a way to get it up to us so we can drink it and enjoy its life-sustaining benefits. We must build some kind of pulley system with a bucket to get the water from its depths up to us. And once we do, our work is not done. We have to haul the water where it's needed so we can enjoy a refreshing glass of water, a cleansing shower, a restorative cup of tea or coffee, and so on. And this requires constant labor: we must keep going back to the well, winching up the bucket, and hauling it where it's needed. If we stop, we die of thirst.

Spiritually, there is deep within us a magnificently generous flowing of the Water of the Spirit—the Buddha Nature—that nourishes us. The upstream Source of this spiritual Water originates in the compassion, wisdom, and non-judgmental love of the Eternal that sustains our spiritual life if we but access It. And Great Master Dogen realized that, although the stream of the Water of the Spirit is always flowing within us, we must “dig our well” and find It if we are not to die of spiritual thirst. It is the *effort* we put into *practicing* mindfulness, meditation, and actualizing the Precepts that enables us to access the spiritually sustaining flow of the Water of the Spirit. If we don't practice, the magnificent pure water is untapped and unused by us. When we do practice, we can drink of the Water of the Spirit and live in peace and stillness and move away from ongoing suffering. Well worth it!

Another thing Great Master Dogen mentions at the beginning of the scripture is to let go of “opposites.” When we get into opposites it's as if we throw karmic “rocks” into our spiritual “well” that block our access to the Water of the Spirit. We don't recognize that the stream is not ours alone; that the Buddha Nature flows equally *for all*. The result is that we delude ourselves that some beings have It and some don't, or that some beings have less of It and others more. Some example opposites that we're prey to include race, gender, nationality, sexual

preference, political orientation, animals to protect and others to kill, and so on—each of us has our list. And allowing ourselves to be influenced by opposites clogs the well with judgmentalism and the resulting spiritual thirst causes us suffering and dis-ease.

I would like to end with one more metaphor. When I was the gardener at North Cascades Buddhist Priory we had a big garden. Some of this garden was far away from the water source. We had hoses up to 100 feet. Sometimes I would go to water and nothing would come out. I would then have to follow the long hose back to find where it was kinked and blocking the flow. I would then have to unkink and straighten the hose to get the water to flow. That's what we have to do with being mindful when we get caught up in the opposites. When we let go of a particular opposite the water can flow again and we can move away from delusion and suffering. When the Water flows, it can nourish everything with Its Purity.