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"THE FORTUNATE AND ONGOING DISASTER OF LAY LIFE"  
a teisho by John Tarrant, Roshi

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This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues.

Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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THE FORTUNATE AND ONGOING DISASTER  
OF LAY LIFE  
John Tarrant, Roshi

Good Buddhists know that the thing to do is to renounce the world, attain enlightenment and lead other beings to safety. But if you are a Zen person, you don't get off so easily. We find Buddha in the heart of delusion, we find stars in the deepest night. When Hakuin said, "This very body is the Buddha," he didn't mean after we've gained enlightenment or taken vows, he meant right now, in the chaos.

I think of the old story of the warrior who did zazen with such energy that all the mice in the house grew still until he had finished. His wife remarked on this and he said, "Well, this won't do, I'll have to try harder." His zazen deepened and soon, as he sat, the mice came out and played all over him, completely unafraid.

This story tells about inclusion. It implies that even mice have their contribution and worth and that we don't want to shut too much of their world out. This means not only the outer world as the field of enlightenment but also the inner world - the disturbed zazen, the immense proliferation of fantasies, the distractions. If lay life has a virtue, it is in this inclusiveness.

In the Indian world that Buddhism grew from there seems to have been a fairly clear distinction between lay and monastic lives. One was a householder for the first part of life and then, when family obligations were finished, one was free to seek enlightenment. But nothing is really this orderly and Shakyamuni fractured this way of seeing things by abandoning his obligations before they were completed and so making lay life somehow second class. Primeval Buddhism certainly saw things this way. There was a split between the pure monastic world and the contaminated householder world.

It was the advent of the Mahayana that clouded this view once more. Vimalakirti, a layman, became a hero, and the Bodhisattva ideal was of one who had compassion, who saved others and who did so by walking unharmed through the fires of the world. Now this is quite a different path. The image of enlightenment has changed. The original idea of nirvana was a cessation, extinction, a snuffing out, as of a lamp. Perhaps we should call it endarkment. It implies a stoic view of things. Life was seen as so contaminated that the end of it was the best thing of all. The Mahayana, and the Zen image is more optimistic: to light a lamp and pass it on. Beings are worth saving, even stones are beings, and consciousness is a great project.

The monastic life then becomes less a way station on the path out of life and more of a matter of practical choice within life, a skilful means. We put a fence around the training hall to get containment, so that the energy we pour in does not leak out. The training hall is a kind of alchemical vessel. Only if it is in some degree sealed off can we get enough heat to change the lead into gold. This is the great virtue of monastic life. All transformation needs its guardians and monastic life provides them. But its project enlightenment and compassion - is no longer different from the lay project.

Both lay and monastic worlds have their pathologies. The pathologies of the monastic life seem to be about clinging to purity. Purity is not a natural thing and needs to be guarded. Another way to say this is that monasteries tend towards monotheism - a single and orthodox view of reality. The monastic consciousness doesn't believe in fantasies or in the arts because it doesn't like the confusion of multiple views. Monasteries like rules because when we make a rule we gain the illusion that we have dealt with the problem. This monotheism relates to the inner life as well. Samadhi and concentration states are often highly valued. This is what the Chinese masters called the sword that kills - the koan that drives all thoughts away, annihilating every other content in the mind. Then enlightenment will come and there will be no more real problems.

The status of women and children always seems to suffer in monasteries. This is because they always bring in more real problems. Women have a special role as distractions, human affections being the one thing most difficult to put boundaries around. Women have been excluded, or they are included but asked to act like men, or they're asked to act like women, but to not have children, or they're asked to not bring their children around the sesshin. Even women's monasteries seem to have a patriarchal air - rigid and hostile to the obligations of the heart. Women in temples are often given the archetypal task of representing the world and its weight, its messiness. Naturally a woman will object because her real developmental task is something independent of the way a man reacts to her.

The pathologies of a lay life relate to a kind of getting lost, a forgetting of the quest, an unconscious immersion in the world. So much time is spent changing diapers or watching the stock market ticker that zazen never gets up enough steam to bring about a real change. We are so close to the greed, the sadness, the anger and the ignorance that it's impossible not to get stained by them. We come home from the hospital and can't stop thinking about the baby who died. The world penetrates us.

But this wounding of consciousness can be the essence of the

Bodhisattva life. The Bodhisattva legend is of one who puts off her own enlightenment in order to save others. On the face of it, this is an absurdity, but like many absurdities it contains a very deep story. An old koan goes like this: "Why is it that perfectly accomplished Bodhisattvas are attached to the vermilion line?" The red line is the line of passion- of sorrow and the love of the world. Our perfection cannot connect with others. Only through our weaknesses do we grow. It is the field of our failures and problems that is the place of Bodhisattva action and the development of character after enlightenment. The Bodhisattva's enlightenment is not something that makes her invulnerable to the world but open to it. It is closely linked to love. This weakness, this permeability, is the strength of the lay life.

The lay view asks itself unanswerable questions such as, "What does enlightenment mean?", trying to link the experience of eternity to the smell of the morning coffee. It assumes there will always be problems and failures. It wonders what its dreams mean and always misinterprets them. It gets lost in symbol and metaphor. The monastic view is uninterested in meaning and tends to think enlightened people don't dream.

Obviously there are people in monasteries who are immersed in the world and people outside of monasteries who try to stay unsullied by the world. Most of the Western monasteries today have some degree of what I am calling lay consciousness,. And yet it is the monastic consciousness that has preserved Buddhism down through the ages and this is a powerful argument in its favour.

The virtue of the lay point of view is that it brings a fertilizing muddle into the serenity of the temple. Blackberry pie, sex, a new car, lessons for the little girl, these distractions and frivolities are themselves the Buddha Way. A coherent temple existence seems, at least from the outside, to be difficult. Fortunately, a coherent lay existence is impossible.

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