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THE FUTURE OF ZEN BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

by  
ROBERT AITKEN, Roshi

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I have been commissioned to do a paper for the forthcoming (July, '87)  
conference  
on World Buddhism in North America that will be titled, The Zen  
Buddhist Movement in  
North America: Retrospect and Prospect". I have the first draft  
finished, and here are  
some excerpts. (The conference will be held in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and  
is sponsored  
by the Zen Lotus Society under the direction of the Korean teacher Samu  
Sunim.)

The Middle Way is the Sangha form that we choose, the nature of our  
organisation  
and the practice we follow as members. Organisation and practice are  
intimately interrelated matters, but they can be examined separately and  
in categories.

Regarding the organisation: The Buddha's teaching is our guide. You  
and I have no abiding self, but rather we are temporary aggregates,  
individually and socially, depending on each other for our lives and our  
identities. The Sangha that is grounded in this teaching will have a  
number of distinctive qualities.

First, like all beings, the Sangha will have its own personality. This  
will be partly a synthesis of the personalities of its members and its  
teacher, and partly a "je ne sais quoi" spirit that cannot be precisely  
identified. This personality will have a virtuous power that will  
radiate the teaching so long as it is not turned back upon itself in  
self-congratulation.

Next, the Sangha will be grounded in certain rituals - a meditation  
meeting with ceremonies that make it a spiritual home, just as a secular  
home is grounded in the ceremonies of greetings, common meals, in-  
jokes, bedtime stories, and so on. The spiritual home is a particular  
place, a temple perhaps, but it can carry over into the secular home if a  
corner is made sacred with an image, flowers, candlelight, incense, and  
meditation practice, and if gathas are included as grace before meals and  
at other occasions such as bedtime. In this way, the secular home  
becomes spiritual, enhancing the virtues of both spirit and family.  
The Buddha Sangha is then an aggregate of households.

Among the rituals of the Sangha there should, I am sure, be refuge in the  
Three Treasures and acceptance of the Three Pure Precepts and the Ten  
Grave Precepts. As monks of ancient times came together to renew their  
vows every fourteen days, so the lay Western Sangha can work out periodic  
renewal ceremonies that confirm the way of right action. The Tiep Hien

ceremony of renewal is an instructive model. We are in the world but not of it. Like lotus flowers in the fire, we bloom in the world of desires including our own, conserving our energies for the Dharma wheel, and maintaining the Buddha's noble path as our own.

Other rituals should, I believe, be forms of communication for sharing, healing, and reconciliation. Many of these can be adapted directly from Theravada ceremonies, some can be taken from contemporary Christian and humanistic movements. The sharing and healing rituals of Rissho Koseikai that bring lay leaders into member families to help with problems of disaffection are very interesting models. All such rituals confirm our interdependence, and offer intimate engagement as a way of realisation. Depth psychology, the interpretation of dreams, and the study of folklore can be important supplements to sharing and healing rituals.

The Zen centre programme should, I believe, also include academic study of Buddhism. Traditionally, Rinzai Zen in particular has offered little teaching of other forms of Mahayana, and even less of classical Buddhism. Yet Zen is a Buddhist stream, and the various formulations - the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Four Abodes, the Six Paramitas, the Three Bodies of the Buddha - and the many sutras are essential lights on our path. There also should be a supplementary study of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the pantheon, for these archetypes can be personalised as inner guides toward compassion and understanding.

Finally, if indeed the Sangha is all-inclusive, then the Buddha Sangha is merely a sub-family of the larger community, and engagement in the neighbourhood, city, nation, and world is also the way of turning the Dharma wheel. As a Sangha, we can offer specific programmes to the homeless or the imprisoned. We can speak out against injustice, violence and war - and the exploitation of forests and lakes.

It must be communication, not just projection. The systemic illness of Western society that has infected the world arises directly from the neglect of perennial values that Buddhism shares with other religions, so when we speak, we communicate best with language that is common to all and with actions that resonate across sectarian lines.

The way of Zen Buddhism in the West should, I think, recall the perspective of the Buddha in a relevant manner for lay people. Most people tend to get locked into a quite dreary round of tasks, and experience little peace or harmony. Yet if Nirvana and Samsara are the same, we must find upayas that can keep such unity clear at all times.

For this there are three options for meditative practice within the Zen tradition. The first is koan practice, the second is shikantaza or "pure sitting", and the third is the way of mindfulness through gathas and mantras. These three ways inform each other, and can be combined or blended. The choice of one of these options, or two or the three of them together - reflects the karma, personality and aspiration of both student and teacher.

Koans can be called arcana, points of quest, matters to be made clear - that enlighten the dark night of the spirit, and release the self from its limited preoccupations. The points are examined during periods of withdrawal, some no longer than a single breath, some for extended periods, with concentration fuelled by a profound questioning spirit.

The essence of this meditative practice is shikantaza, which is pure sitting, not merely sitting. I hear shikantaza described as watching perceptions come, identifying them, and letting them go. I don't think this is adequate. Shikantaza is a matter of sinking into one's bones and sinews and facing the bare emptiness of the mind. This mind is both inside and outside - neither inside or outside.

The third meditative option, the path of mindfulness through gathas and mantras is exemplified by the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh. Repeating the verse:

Breathing in, I calm body and mind;  
Breathing out, I smile;  
Dwelling in the present moment,  
I know this is the only moment.

you are brought to your breath and to the personal realisation that all beings are indeed Buddha, beginning with yourself. Acknowledging your need to mature and to understand, acknowledging your past mistakes, it is all right to be where you are now in your practice.

In my view, the practice of Zen Buddhism in the future must include all three of these options. I do not list them in order of importance because all are important and they depend upon each other. First, there is the practice of focussing on arcana and experiencing the primordial truths of purity, harmony and variety; second, there is the practice of grounding this focus in the empty, silent samadhi of the vast and boundless universe; and third, there is the practice of using reminders that keep the lotus of the Buddha Dharma blooming in the midst of all the demands of our busy lives.

All this in a setting of a Buddha Sangha that is not preoccupied with its own identity, that holds ceremonies of refuge, accepting precepts and renewing of vows, that seeks the most open communication possible, and reaches outward into the larger community. This is for me an ideal image of a balanced Sangha.

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