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REALIZING OUR TRUE NATURE - Questions and Answers
Taizan Maezumi Roshi

An un-dated lecture, most likely delivered in the mid- or late 1970s, made available to Sydney Zen Center in a xeroxed form.

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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REALIZING OUR TRUE NATURE

Questions and Answers with Taizan Maezumi Roshi

Q: Roshi, what do we mean by one's "true nature?"

A: Let us think about what one's "true nature" means. In our case, practicing together, we may say it is a synonym of "Buddha nature." And this "Buddha nature" or "true nature" of oneself is explained using such terms as: "original self," "original face" or "Mind;" sometimes as "Muji," "the cypress tree in the garden," "thusness" or "reality;" each according to the context of the doctrine or the teachings.

When we consider this true nature as the Buddha nature, it will clarify our understanding to observe the Buddha nature from three different standpoints: The first one is called 'Shoin Ryoin', the Buddha nature inherent in all beings, whether enlightened or not, The next one is 'Ryoin Bussho', the Buddha nature which is manifested when one begins to practice the Dharma. And the last one is 'Enin Bussho', the Buddha nature of one who has attained enlightenment.

Making a simple analogy, the 'Shoin Ryoin' is like gold which is in the ground. Regardless of whether or not people realize it, there is gold underground. The second one, 'Ryoin Bussho', is the Buddha nature by virtue of which we are able to recognize where and how to extract the gold. The third one, 'Enin Bussho', is like whatever tools you use to take the gold out and get it into your hands.

Q: Can everyone realize this "true nature?"

A: In connection with this analogy, we may understand that all of us have the Buddha nature, or rather, we are nothing but the Buddha nature. Yet, if we don't become aware that we already have the gold in our hands, we cannot be satisfied until we do have it. In order to have it, we have to do something to get it. If anyone wants to have

gold in his hands without making any effort to get it, he simply can't have it. In order to realize one's Buddha nature, if one doesn't do anything in order to realize it, it will be impossible to have it. On the contrary, if someone really wishes to do it, s/he will get it done sooner or later.

Q: How is it that some people won't realize it?

A: Using the analogy, everybody knows that gold is someplace in the ground; in some places there is gold, and in other places there is not. If we dig in the wrong place, it's in vain, regardless of how hard we try. So in order to realize this Buddha nature, we have to have the right means and the right direction in which to pursue our efforts to find the gold.

Q: What would be the right direction?

A: Let's reflect upon the words of Dogen Zenji: "It is not a matter of being smart or dull, well-learned or foolish, but if one practices wholeheartedly to find out what the Way is, that is nothing but the accomplishment of the Way."

The point is this: straight-forward whole-heartedness in accord with one's practice. These famous words of Dogen Zenji, "Isshiki ino bendo", mean "To practice the Way with whole-heartedness," or "To become one with whatever you do." In other words, 'to become one is the key. When you really become one with whatever you do, that is the realization of the Way'

So that whether everyone realizes his true nature or not is dependent on the individual. Even being lazy and not doing anything still is nothing but the Buddha nature. That is to say, one has gold and yet he does not think so. So he simply does not realize his own nature.

There is a famous analogy by the Buddha: A very poor man had a friend who was very rich. One time they met together, had a few drinks, and eventually the poor man fell asleep. Looking at this poor man, the rich man felt sorry for him, and, without letting him know, slipped a precious jewel into his garment. After parting from his rich friend, the poor man returned to his life as a beggar without knowing he had that precious jewel. After some time, they met again, and the rich man was surprised and asked him, "I gave you that jewel. Why did you not use it to make your life comfortable. And the poor man said, "No, you never gave me anything!" So the rich friend reached into the garment where he put the jewel, took it out, and showed it to him.

Q: Roshi, how can we strengthen our faith in order to practice better?

A: This is a very fundamental thing. Faith is a very fundamental, very important matter in life. To strengthen our faith is almost always a synonym for bettering our practice.

When we have faith, it is necessary to examine in what we put our faith. We have a proverb, "To believe in the head of a dried, dead sardine has power to chase away evil spirits." As a matter of fact, we believe in all sorts of different things: such as money, fame, ideas, thoughts, ideologies, emotions and feelings. In order to practice better, we must have our faith in the right way

What is the right way? It is to put our faith in whatever the Buddha

and the Patriarchs say, to put ourselves wholeheartedly into it and practice diligently. So, regarding the right direction, have strong faith in yourself, in the fact that your life is itself nothing but Buddha nature. To have strong faith in this fact and to practice in accordance with what the Buddha and the Patriarchs say, leads us to better practice and strengthens our faith.

It is also important to renew our vows from time to time and to encourage ourselves to accomplish further. By doing so, we can strengthen our faith, and this faith, again, strengthens our practice.

It is like a circle. First, 'Hosshin', raise the Bodhi-mind or seek for realization; second, 'Shugyo', practice; third, 'Bodhi', attainment of realization; fourth, 'Nehan', Nirvana. In the state of Nirvana lies the Bodhi-mind, then again practice, then attainment, then Nirvana, spiraling ever upward. Dogen Zenji said that our practice is like a spiral comprising these four strands.

So let us practice well together and strengthen our faith.

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