

An Affirming Flame

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The following is a transcript of a Dharma Talk that was offered to the Community by Rev. Master Kōten in December 2016. It has been lightly edited.

Homage to the Buddha.

Homage to the Dharma.

Homage to the Sangha.

When it seems like "things fall apart, the centre does not hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," it is important for those who know how to be still, even if just a little, to "show an affirming flame," because the validity of their practice is tested by the insanity that descends upon a country from time to time.

Although Buddhism has been taught very widely in the United States over the past 150 years, a lot of what is taught is pablum, which is ineffective in actual times of crisis, for it cannot stand up to reality. All soothing platitudes -- and telling people to dwell in the present moment or to breathe -- fall apart in the face of spreading selfishness. Showing an affirming flame is to remain centred in one's practice and in the Precepts, while knowing and understanding that one's fundamental understanding of what this means is about to be challenged severely.

Remember that there is a "before" and an "after." It is very important to remember this. There was a "before" and there will be an "after." There will be a time when the mountain stops shaking. Sometimes, when the mountain shakes, and the sea withdraws, there is quiet for a moment, and then the sea rushes back in.

I personally cannot see any good coming out of the direction that the United States just took. Sometimes we stumble into harm due to our delusion and confusion; and sometimes we choose to undertake a course of action with our eyes open but not caring what the results will be. When that is done, there is no control over the consequences. One must not set in motion the wheel of karma for other beings, because it becomes and is beyond our recall. Crystallised selfishness, lies, doubt and despair have consequences.

At such a time, the insights developed from training, meditation and Precepts can start to take on an aura of unreality. It is hard to hear the interior voice sometimes when there is screaming going on in the background. This is also partly because the knowledge of the Unborn and of stillness is

of an entirely different type than the usual knowledge and information that we receive in the course of our daily lives.

Reverend Master Jiyu once said to me, "This world is upside down. People drown puppies and kittens that they cannot create, and yet they pay hundreds of dollars for battered old tin trays in antique stores." Sometimes it seems as though the world is not only upside down, but that it takes another somersault. It is essential to turn within and find the concreteness of stillness, to allow it to permeate our lives.

We are human beings living where we are living, and that we cannot escape. We will not be able to remain isolated. I've said many times that people think hatred and selfishness are real, and that compassion and gentleness are unrealistic and an illusion, but in fact it is the other way around. The Buddha said, "If people understood truly as I do the merits of giving, they would share their last crust of bread."

Training, in the eyes of the world, often resembles "walking in the sky." However, to truly "walk in the sky" means to give without reward, to let go of attachments and to try to live letting go of them, to not pursue fame and gain.

"If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?" That was said by Rabbi Hillel around the time of Christ, and it often gets quoted. But that is only the shallowest part of it. He also said, "If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when? If not me, who? If not with others, then how?"

Remember that one's experience of stillness and of Precepts is real, that the law of karma is real, that to help others is a law of the universe. Particularly, do not be afraid of your neighbours or afraid of the other, and do not sink to the lowest common denominator.

It is particularly important for monastics not to drink the wine of "thinking in an ordinary fashion," for when that happens one ends up like those monks in Sri Lanka and Burma who generate hatred against other communities in their countries. This is due to what in Zen is called "following the crowd," buying and selling the wine of delusion, and believing in the existence of one's own selfishness. Monks are supposed to step beyond the clouds and mists of the world, or else what use are we at all if, as monastics, we drag our minds down into the ordinary filth that passes for wisdom in the world?

"As long as bowing continues, Buddhism continues." To cease from evil, to do good, to purify our hearts: this is the teaching of all the Buddhas.

Homage to all the Buddhas in all worlds.

Homage to all the Bodhisattvas in all worlds.
Homage to the Scripture of Great Wisdom.