

## Article

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### The Vessel and Its Contents

Rev. Master Haryo Young

[Rev. Master Haryo asks] “Would someone get me some water, please?” [A glass of water is brought]. “Hmm... I asked for just water, not a glass as well. Please give me just the water – in my hand.” (Water is poured into Rev. Master Haryo’s open hand, spilling onto the floor). “Oh dear, we are losing most of it, let me give you some back.” [Most is gone, there is little to pass back. After a quick cleaning up, the talk continues.]

Now that I’ve got your attention, the point I was trying to make is that even the purest of water needs a vessel to transport it. I’ve often heard people say “I’m spiritual but not religious”, and that they aren’t interested in the form, or formality. If Rev. Master Jiyu’s teacher had lived elsewhere, rather than at Soji-ji, where they had been evolving a form over hundreds of years, would she have met him? Would she have been able to pass on the teaching that she has? It’s a question.

Forms aid in the perpetuation and transmission of what the form is about, what the form is pointing to; the contents of the vessel, which is the important thing.

Everyone has forms, things we do or don’t do depending on our culture. We stop at

a stop light – that’s a form. We have hairstyles, or lack thereof, and that’s a form. Fashion is a form. We can’t escape forms. And as human beings we like forms. We appreciate stability. We don’t like things changing underneath our feet. We tend to like to know what’s ahead; we don’t like surprises. We don’t like to feel out of place; we like to fit in, not stick out. Forms – how we do certain things that are familiar and that we can come back to with others – help that aspect of our humanity.

Forms also interact with our human nature in positive ways – music can inspire us and draw things out of us that we might otherwise unknowingly keep under wraps. Forms can have inspiring beauty; this cup I’m holding has lotuses on it that may remind us of the liquid contents, but we don’t drink the cup. Yet it helps with the transmission of what is inside.

Form can reflect the processes that are going on within us when we practice. The Jukai ceremonies are a good example of that. *Sange* in particular is a very powerful ceremony given the concentration of the mind that happens with the procession and reciting the mantras. We have put aside guilt, judgement, dwelling on the past, worrying about the future; we are just there in the present with the mantra. And if conditions are ripe, the *kwatz* [a loud cry] can blow away the last bit of self involved in the process. The ceremony of Following where the Precepts Lead shows how to keep going through what comes in life, whether it be an easy road or a rocky climb.

So forms have a role. They are not an end in themselves, but are a skilful means. They point to something beyond themselves; something with which they are inextricably mixed. But there has to be a balance, that’s part of the skill of skill in means. The form itself is not magical. The Buddha cautioned against rites and rituals: but what he spoke against was not the rituals themselves, but the belief that just going through the motions could bring about purification without the effort

within oneself to purify one's heart and mind. For us what matters is *how* we do something more than *what* we do.

Within meditation we don't do something mindlessly or distractedly, everything being a form of meditation. There's no job that's lower than another; everything is the work of a Buddha, although we tend to rate those people who appear to be more productive than we are as doing better training. But productivity can be an obsession, an expression of attachment, especially if it's something we're good at; a distraction from looking at something within that needs looking at, and a vehicle for self.

One of the things that happens in a monastery is that someone who's good at something, or might have professional experience of it, is probably initially not put in a position where they can draw on that experience, just because of the potential for it becoming a further expression of self. So you may end up stumbling through things that you wish you didn't have to do. Rev. Master Jiyu used to say that a monastery should never be too efficient! Which points to the fact that we're not here for efficiency; we're here to work on something; we're here to work on ourselves. And I've seen over the years a few people who were really good at something get distracted by it, and go off, continuing to be really good at it, but no longer as a monk.

So the Sōtō way is just meditating throughout the day. There's no real fundamental difference between sitting on your cushion or walking, or sweeping, or figuring out your income tax: it's not limited to simple things. It's just simply doing what needs to be done.

We don't give a person a formal koan, so there's not that sort of focus that you bring yourself back to. Our koan is what's getting in the way of just doing what needs to be done, what gets in the way of just walking; such as your doubts, your

criticisms of other people – that’s the natural koan. Which can become quite extreme. And it’s not uncommon in the life of a meditator to come to a point where those sorts of things that get in the way can take on quite a powerful and obstructive appearance: ‘Should I continue on?’ ‘What’s this all about?’ ‘This isn’t getting me anywhere.’ It’s usually some form of doubt, or criticism of oneself or others. And that’s the koan naturally arising in a more serious form.

Those are moments of great opportunity because they represent part of your mind, if you like, that you’re experiencing and that you can let go of and find what’s on the other side of that letting go. It can be very challenging, and I’d say from my experience it’s at best 50/50 that people accept that challenge, because it is so challenging: there’s no solution. I’m told in some Temples they might beat you if you do the right thing; beat you if you do the wrong thing: what do you do? We don’t rely on that sort of artifice. We find that daily life will eventually present us with challenges: ‘OK, I’m supposed to let go of this ‘whatever’, aren’t I, if I’m going to continue meditating?’ But it seems so real or good or promising ... But meditation is really absolute when it comes to letting go; especially on the cushion, when there isn’t anything practical you’re supposed to be doing. Active meditation is a little more complicated, but one can still have that sense of not clinging to personal preference – what one wants – but just listening to what do I do next? Getting out of the way.

As far as the vessel and its contents are concerned, Dharma is there, but I view it more as that which is visible and painted on the inner wall of the vessel – that which is in the realm of the known and expressible. But that which is expressed as knowable Dharma comes from a more fundamental place of understanding. Insight is ultimately the contents of the vessel. The highest purpose of our practice is insight into ourselves – in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. Insight that leads to change; and change that leads to deeper insight. All of this is a movement towards a deepening insight into ourselves.

For each of us, there's always another step to take; something more to cease grasping after, or some aspect of self to cease identifying with. And the Dharma offers teaching at every step to help us forward, no matter where we are on the path. It's been called, "The Heavenly Medicine That Cures All Ills".

The Buddha lived for a long time, and was able to address the human condition over and over again in many ways and from many angles. For the self that suffers, there's teaching on how to make life more peaceful, so that the self doesn't suffer so much; and we don't cause so much suffering for others. But if we want to go further than self – the self being problematic to begin with because it is in a position of ultimate isolation and separation – there is that which bids and guides us beyond the self.

For those who do evil, there is the teaching of good, which is a next step. For those who do good, and want to go beyond it, there is the teaching that points to the transcendence of both good and evil.

There's implied movement towards something, which naturally we tend to imagine as some sort of experience. And we might call it enlightenment, nirvana, liberation, experiencing the Truth; these are all these phrases and words that talk about this imagined thing that there's an assumed movement towards.

So we imagine ourselves experiencing something. And in doing that we simultaneously (usually unconsciously) hold on to this self that's going to experience it. So we maintain this 'self and other' relationship: we have the 'experiencer' that has a natural 'of course it's true' reality, because it feels so true. This experiencer wants some experience other than what it's got, something that it imagines is the purpose of all this.

But it's difficult to become one with something which you hold off as an 'other', which you separate from yourself. So, even if done with great faith and sincerity, it's best not to lock yourself into the idea of an experiencer who's waiting for a new experience. Because what happens is more along the lines of the experiencer changing, not the experience. There's nothing wrong with our raw, basic human experience.

If you say 'I want to become one with the truth' – however you characterise or personify that inner lack or something missing, or that something calling, or that not enough-ness of the present moment, or there must be more than this – holding yourself in relation to that which you long for or anticipate can impede anything along these lines from happening.

But the longing may allow for lesser things to fall away; lesser desires; lesser longings. So it can serve a purpose. But ultimately zazen allows nothing to be clung to, even longing. Or even hope. That might sound 'what? Can't have hope?' No, let go of it too. It sounds scary, and it's hard to let go of it, but that can be an impediment. Hope can imply I want something other than what I've got now. And I'm hoping for it, and longing for it. It implies there's something fundamentally wrong, something we don't have. And hope just feeds that illusion, that mistake.

So phrases like 'becoming one with the Truth' are actually misleading. As long as there is a 'you' in the equation, the Truth will elude you. There will be that separation of Heaven and Earth that's referred to in the *Rules for Meditation*.

But if you let the 'you' fall away, as indeed we do in meditation by just letting go of everything, which includes the idea of a self – or includes even the idea of falling away – then there's no equation to be solved, there's just True Being, which is without lack. And that's about all you can say about it. If you give it any

characteristics, that just causes it to disappear and become a thing; or a transient experience; or a transient piece of knowledge.

But this True Being embraces both self and other as they and all other things arise and pass within it; nothing is discarded; and nothing need be discarded.

In the Far East I've been told – I've never been there – that some monastics view meditation as just too hard a practice, so their practice might be chanting, which of course is a path. But from our perspective – no, it's not too hard. I think they sell themselves short. But I think we sell ourselves short if we dismiss ideas such as Enlightenment, liberation, nirvana, etc. as beyond us, or philosophical concepts unrelated to daily life. I've even heard monks say – 'I'm not interested in any of this mystical stuff!' I would say – don't sell yourself short! It's not that far away!

What the Buddha was pointing to was a deep insight into ourselves, beyond just how to make life easier, less full of suffering. You can waken as well as anyone, if you're just willing to carry on the fundamentals of the practice, which include just returning to the mind of meditation, letting go of extraneous thoughts, and doing what needs to be done, and following your heart as it voices the path of the Precepts to you throughout the normal activities of daily life – it's not rocket science. It's just a matter of committing to listening and saying yes.

But don't do it in an experience-seeking way. Our common flaw is experience seeking; and deriving the meaning and value of life from our experience. Just do it for its own sake. Training for training's sake is what we say. Not as a goal-oriented effort. Don't hunt for experience, because any experience has to be let go of. The phrase 'enlightenment experience' is actually misleading. At best 'enlightenment' is the last thing you let go of, before you don't need anything. And there's no lack.

I think in the *Surangama Sutra* there's one Buddhist explanation of how the Universe was created, and it's clear it's not talking about how the planets were formed and all that: it's talking about how our perceived world around us has come into being, and it starts off with: 'Thinking creates the thinker' – and then the game is on, as Sherlock Holmes would say!

To me, realisation has to do with insight into the nature of our minds: our minds creating and profoundly affecting much of what exists in our world. It's seeing the birthing of the opposites occurring within our minds, and this created world spewing forth and interacting with everyone else's created world. Truth and delusion are but one pair of opposites that we become entangled with. But when we see this process of creation within ourselves – truly see it, by being still enough to really see it – and know the value of desisting from that process, then I feel we are actually appreciating what the Buddha was ultimately pointing to. I see this as the essence of what the vessel of form contains, and what the skilful means of form helps to transmit.

For me the Truth that matters is insight into the way things arise within us; insight into their transitory and ephemeral nature. And seeing this breaks the seeming absoluteness of the reality of the world around us. That reality is seen through. Indeed the first line of the *Dhammapada* talks about all the mental phenomena having mind as their forerunner; they have mind as their chief; they are mind-made.

Although one sees – knows – the transient nature of the reality of things, things don't go away. Appearances don't go away. One's just free from the tyranny of their seeming reality, and the reality of the self that can't escape from the opposites that are bound to cause suffering if we can't see through them – if we can't find a way to sit still, and just see them arise and pass.

Practice still exists, but it is practice for its own sake, and the seeming paradox between the teachings of ‘fundamentally enlightened from the first’ and the necessity of ‘ongoing practice’ is resolved. Practical reality and karmic consequence still exist; the feeling of self still exists; but the reality of all of it, including of oneself, is provisional, if you like. It’s just accepted as the world of appearances; and just how things are. But one knows something else, as if in a dream when you realise you’re dreaming, you know that there is (and isn’t) more to it than meets the eye. And you awaken to the fact that you don’t have to be a swirling thought-cloud. You’ve put something down. You’ve seen the house-builder; the creator of worlds. You don’t seek truth, or call something delusion; and you return to a place you fundamentally never left. And you’ve transmuted the ordinary mind into the Buddha mind.

There’s the whole alchemical process of trying to transmute lead into gold; transmute something base into something special. I must wonder if that’s code for transmuting the ordinary human mind – the value of which we tend not to appreciate, and kick around in all kinds of ways – into seeing it’s actually the Buddha Mind. We see it in a completely different way; it’s transmuted into something different, not because it’s changed, but because we understand it is something different than what we thought it was in the first place.

It is without lack, and yet there’s no accomplishment that it can hold up; no truth gained to hold up. There’s more a falling-away of falseness rather than the gaining of something we can call truth – a falling away of falseness with nothing needed to replace it. A release from need in the deepest part of us.

So you could say in the end there’s nothing in the vessel! That is, nothing you can point to. Except perhaps the primordial immaculacy, purity, innocence that existed before the first thought ever appeared, and the process of knowing and obscuring began.