

ARTICLE

Vespers: The Litany of the Great Compassionate One

(The following is an edited transcript of a lecture given to the congregation at Lions Gate Buddhist Priory, Aug. 28, 2001, by Rev. Master Kōten Benson.)

What I'm going to be talking about tonight is the Evening Office that we do each evening after meditation; what we have also called in the past "Vespers". Vespers simply means the evening, and the occurrence of the evening star, and is a term we borrowed from Western monasticism. The purpose of the recitation of these scriptures at the end of meditation in the evening is to set up the process of training and meditation for the night. It is done so that the Wheel of the Law turns and continues to turn during sleep, so that a person makes the right decisions in the event of death during that time, but also so that meditation continues through the night. It's interesting that Dōgen's discussion of the monastic schedule does not start with Morning Service; it starts with meditation the evening before, so to emphasize the continuance that goes on and that meditation and training are something that go on day and night.

The first scripture that we do for this is called the *Litany of the Great Compassionate One*, or the *Daihi Shin Dharani* in Japanese, the Dharani of the Great Compassionate One. A dharani is not a paragraph, in the sense of the way English is written in the form of a paragraph, with a beginning, subject, etc. A dharani or a mantra is a series of interjections. We use the word "litany" because in Western church music a litany is a list, as it were, of titles, like "The Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary"; it's a listing of interjections. One of the problems in translating things from Sanskrit into English along these lines is that one has to be very careful not to make it sound ridiculous. There are Sanskrit mantras that are the equivalent of "bang," but you can't quite do "bang, bang, bang," if you see what I mean, without it seeming silly in English. In Sanskrit there are words which are like the snapping of the fingers, to call attention to a particular point or emphasize a particular word, and so when this dharani was translated an attempt was made to convey as much as possible the religious meaning and not

necessarily use all the little Sanskrit words, which don't do the same thing for us. Those of you who have been at a Shurangama Ceremony, Rev. Hubert translated some of the Sanskrit mantras as "peace," for example.

The Litany of the Great Compassionate One, like all dharanis or mantras, is for the purpose of generating within oneself, in this case, Great Compassion. If one says that Great Compassion is something that is within oneself, to many people's minds that makes it small, or makes it a product of people's minds, and it is much more than that. It is personified as Avalokiteshvara, in this case the thousand-armed, with multiple hands, with an eye in each of them. The meaning of the hand with the eye in the centre of it is that one makes use of all aspects of one's body and mind to benefit others and that this is beyond the usual limitations that we think of concerning ourselves. When we can truly let go of the separate self and generate, if I can put it that way, Great Compassion – True Compassion, then Great Compassion manifests itself in all that we do and is not something that we produce. It is something, in other words, that arises out of our training, out of our meditation, out of learning how to be still, and is not a contrived phenomenon, although the gateway in is to try to be kind, if I can put it that way. One starts with what is in front of one, and as one enters through, it becomes wider and wider and wider.

So, it starts off with "Adoration to the Triple Treasure," which is Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the taking of refuge in something that is greater than oneself.

"Adoration to Kanzeon Who is the Great Compassionate One!" When I recite this, a question arises: Who is the Great Compassionate One? Where is the Great Compassionate One located? It's not something that can be found at some great distance; it's something that has to be found within oneself. The answer to the traditional question used in kōan Zen, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" is similar to this, because we have to make this real for ourselves.

"Om to the One who leaps beyond all fear!" This was one of Reverend Master's favourite quotes and, again, who is the one who leaps beyond all fear? When we let go of our grasping, then there can be a leaping beyond all fear, but only, and I'll come back to this, if the one who leaps is not us.

"Having adored Him, – may I enter into the heart," which means, "May I come to know fully what Great Compassion is and make it real for myself," and it bears on that

story of the lay disciple who says, “In my garden there is a stone, which sits up and lies down.” He means himself. It was a poetic way to refer to oneself, also meaning this thing which is difficult to deal with. “Can I carve it into a Buddha?” And when he asked the teacher that particular question, the teacher said, “Yes, you can.” But then the person said, “Well, maybe I cannot,” and the teacher’s response was, “No, you cannot.” Ultimately only you can make you True, by your own training.

“His life is the completion of meaning.” We talk about what is the meaning of our lives or the significance of our lives. Great Compassion truly understood, and as Dōgen would say, digested thoroughly, is the completion of meaning, is what gives meaning to one’s life, one’s existence. Great Compassion in this is not separate from meditation and training. When I was first at the Abbey somebody made a very important point; that what we are seeking is not perfection, but rather compassion.

“It is pure, – it is that which makes all beings truly victorious – and cleanses the path of all existence.” This is the path of karma, both from the distant past and from the present, because that which cleanses karma, whether of this life or of the past, is compassion. If we wish to truly cleanse the path of all existence, if we wish to deal with our past karma, it isn’t a matter of having to fix it in some way. As a matter of fact, it’s often that we can’t go back and fix it, but when we can see it through the eyes of Great Compassion and have compassion, then that is what cleanses it.

“Om, – O thou Seer, –” Seer: One who sees truly, one who sees far, one who has what Reverend Master Jiyu used to call long-distance eyes. Long-distance eyes see compassion in things and in the cause of things, if I can put it that way. “World-transcending One!: Great Bodhisattva!” As I said, this is not a paragraph with subject, verb, object.

So, it says, “All, – all is defilement, defilement, earth, earth.” This is because that is often the way we see it, whether it’s in our jobs that we do, or anything else. There is the story of Tōzan, who was with his teacher, and they were down by the river washing out their bowls, and they saw two birds devouring a snake, or a frog, tearing apart a snake or a frog, and Tōzan turned to his teacher and said, “How has it come to this?” Why does this happen? And his teacher said, “Only for your benefit,” which was not a metaphysical statement, or a cosmological one, or even a karmic one. He was saying that when you

encounter whatever you encounter, the nature of it does not take away your responsibility regarding training and what you do with that encounter, whether or not you can do something about the way you think another being is suffering. Training does not have results in the way other things have results. Sawaki Kōdō used to say, “Zazen (meditation) is good for nothing,” by which he meant that it has no value in a commercial way. People can get health benefits from doing other things. If they want to calm down their whatevers they can do biofeedback or something.

Then the next sentence, which is very, very important, coming out of the seeing of “defilement, earth”: “Do, do the work within my heart.” Who is it that does the work within the heart? I like to think of this phrase as referring to that which happens in the very, very deep caverns of our being through the permeation of training and meditation and of our sincere intent. It permeates very, very deeply to very, very deep aspects of ourselves, deep into our hearts without it necessarily being visible to us.

“O great Victor I hold on, hold on!: To Indra the Creator I cry!” Sometimes it seems like all we can do is to hold on, hold on.

In Japan, when they bless a new stupa or tombstone, they write an inscription down the back of it: the manji or swastika, and they do three of them, meaning, “Move, move, move,” and then they do three of the character “shin,” or “heart,” one after the other. This is the True Heart, “defilement-free One.” Then they write the Sanskrit character for Great Compassion, which has a long tail on the end of it. They draw it all the way down to the very bottom, so that when the tombstone goes in the ground, the tail of the letter goes all the way down into the earth. This means that through the use of our intention and will, in the sense of willingness, the movement that we generate for our training is the movement of the defilement-free One, that which is truly pure within our own hearts. This is what generates Great Compassion, and that Great Compassion penetrates all the way through.

“Come, come, hear, hear, a joy springs up in me!” As a result of this, then the joy that does arise within oneself, not as a personal possession and different from the happiness of attaching to the self, is the happiness of letting go.

“Speak, speak, give me direction,” which is related to the taking of refuge, both interiorly and with others.

“Awakened, awakened, I have awakened!” This is the voice of our True Nature, which is awakened and aware and is Great Compassion and Great Wisdom and Great Mercy from the very, very beginning. It is difficult for us to imagine that this is true, because we often see only the clouds that obscure our own natures, and yet it is nonetheless true and nonetheless what people have actually experienced, that when we let go of this there is something there.

The conclusion of this article will appear in the next issue of the Newsletter.

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