

ARTICLE

Vespers: The Litany of the Great Compassionate One

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

“O merciful One, compassionate One, Of daring ones the most joyous, hail! Thou are all successful, hail!” Success in training is not the same thing as success in anything else. It cannot be measured in the same way and, as Sawaki Kōdō said, it is good for nothing; it cannot be bought or sold, and it is something in which we train our imperfections in the middle of true perfection and even when we come to the point of seeing that true perfection and true purity we continue to train our imperfections. It becomes like swimming in a great ocean, to use a metaphor, with one’s pockets filled with rocks. One is still swimming in the great ocean and one still has to work on the rocks, but the rocks do not interfere with the swimming.

“Thou hast attained mastery in the discipline, hail!” This refers to sila or precepts: to truly practice the Precepts.

“Thou hast a weapon within Thine hand, hail!” This is traditionally depicted as either a sword – given that nobody uses swords nowadays, sometimes the metaphor is kind of lost – that which cuts through; and sometimes it’s the bow and arrow, because the skill, if I can put it that way, in our training arises again out of Great Compassion.

“Thou hast the Wheel within Thine hand, hail!” Wherever the heart of True Compassion exists, the true teaching comes. As Dōgen says, “Anything can teach.” It does not have to do so deliberately.

“Thou who hast the lotus, hail!” The lotus is the symbol of purity, of true awakening, of our True Natures. The holding of each of these things is, in

the iconography, being offered to us, and we should not be hesitant to accept that which is offered.

“Hail to Thee Who art the root of eternity!” In *The Most Excellent Mirror Samadhi*, it says, “the Absolute Upright;” in the *Denkōroku*, it says, “That Which Is, the Eternal, the Lord of the House.” What Shakyamuni Buddha called “the Unborn, the Uncreated, Unformed, Undying” is the root of eternity, is that which is fixed and does not move, and is still and completely transparent. It cannot be anybody’s personal possession because nobody has more of it than anybody else, and unless we train we will not experience it.

“Hail to Thee Who art all compassion!” And again: who is “Thee?” One is, in a sense, addressing oneself in this. Reverend Master Jiyu always used to say that one could make good use of *The Litany of the Great Compassionate One* to turn the Wheel of the Law, and that that was not a wrongful use of it. It’s considered particularly efficacious in despair, actually.

“Adoration to the Triple Treasure” – the Three Refuges.

“Give ear unto this my prayer.” And again, this is something within, rather than outside of oneself. People often make a distinction in training with Buddhism; they say, “Is this outside of me or is this inside of me?” Sometimes the problem is that people have not experienced their own Treasure Houses, so they do not realize that the whole of the iconography, the pictures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, are depictions of our own Treasure House. As it says, “When the trainee is feeling low and all inferior, the teacher will say that on their head there gleams a jewelled diadem and on their bodies rich robes hang, and at their feet there is a foot rest.” And when the teacher says that, they are simply describing the Buddha Nature of the person concerned; and it says, “When the trainee receives this with surprise and doubt, then the sage goes back to saying all things have the Buddha Nature: cats and cows and everything else.” And if cats and cows have the Buddha Nature, you do; but that doesn’t stand against the jewelled diadem. That actually exists.

Now, before I go on, I was wondering whether there were any questions.

Q: I’ve been puzzled by “Indra the Creator.”

A: On one level it's basically a cry for help to anything. Indra actually means the world created through out sense organs, and Buddhist symbolism in India in general is not exactly positive or negative, but is based upon the process of training, so that one symbol can mean the beginning of training as well as its fruition. So Indra means the sense organs, but it also means that which brings about True Life. It means the enlivening aspect; that's one way I can put it. As Reverend Master said, "Zen is eternal life." There's a story that kind of goes, "Does the dragon roar in the withered tree?", which means that people often think that training will kill their humanity, if they give up things or let go of things; that there will be nothing on the other side of it, and the dragon's roar in the withered tree is in reference to this. Some of you have seen what I hold at formal sanzen: that twisted nyoï that I have, carved out of a dead, twisted branch. That's used in China to represent that there is something alive beyond the usual way of looking at life and death. So, calling upon Indra the Creator would, in India, include that whole range of things; in the beginning, refuge in the world that we create and the way we see, and later, within this, refuge in the Great Compassion; because without Great Compassion, samsara, the world, as we experience it, is like a heap of broken dishes or an enormous amount of trash paper blowing in the wind; that's the only way I can put it.

In Buddhist medicine, it is said that the causes of enlightenment are the same as the causes of mental illness. They both result from the direct encounter with impermanence: one is the letting go of it; the other is the inability to let go of it. Both see, only in different ways. I think that is why it is said that to alcoholism there is a spiritual base, because people are actually seeking that which is beyond samsara but do not have a practical way of doing so, so they find the nearest thing, if I can put it that way. Viewing alcoholism that way is viewing it through Great Compassion. This doesn't mean that when the drunken person appears at the gate they're not still Buddha; they're a drunken Buddha, and drunken Buddhas need to be shown somewhere where they can sleep it off before they can participate, but they're no less.

Compassion doesn't mean that one does not see things as they are, although, as Reverend Master Jiyu used to say, "If one trains oneself one runs the risk of being seen as unrealistic in the eyes of the world, and maybe even to the extent of being called a bleeding heart."

Indra also represented that which, in the really old depictions of the life of the Buddha, stood behind Shakyamuni, holding a vajra, a dorje, which is sometimes in the shape of a dumbbell with large ends. This figure is always standing behind, and is sometimes seen as the true nature of, or to other people, the guardian deity of Shakyamuni. It's one of those things in Buddhism that is no doubt talking about something that is actually experienced, and the only way they could depict it was by depicting it in that form, and I certainly know for myself there are quite a number of things that I would never have thought were literally so, that are, but not literally so in the way I would have thought.

Any other questions?

Q: The turning of the Wheel; the story of the cart, where you leave the burning house, and the cart, its wheel is there. I find it comforting in that I associate it with something happening, with a given commission, that I've invited, that goes on all the time.

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: That even though I may – I do have the Buddha Nature, I'm not living in the state of enlightenment, so it's expanding that, going towards, always.

A: Yes. Because what happens as that occurs over a period of time, and the interior movement and change happens in the person, is that the expansion, sometimes seen symbolically as the opening of a lotus blossom, takes place within; I could say within oneself, but that sounds like it's in one's tummy – within, and, as that happens, there is the conversion of karma. When we hear "conversion of karma," we think, oh yeah, you scrub your clothes and the dirt goes down the drain, but in the way karma is converted, those very things which are obstacles become the cart wheels, in the same way as greed, hate and delusion become compassion, love and wisdom through training. It's just the

same substance transformed. There's a quote from W.H. Auden, and he's talking about the origins of World War Two, in a sense the origins of suffering:

“For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.”

And that is what it's all about, and that can be transformed. When the self changes then everything looks different, and as each part of that karma changes then it is an impetus toward training, and that transformation goes on and when we come to particular points along the way we have a glimpse of it, but that doesn't mean it only goes on when we have a glimpse. It's like D.T. Suzuki's comment of “Once or twice I've had the great experience and a million times the little moments that make one dance.” When we see the little moments we think they are only occurring at that time, rather than something that is going on all the time. Sometimes we see it and sometimes we don't. As is says, “Sometimes we raise the eyebrows of old Shakyamuni, and sometimes we do not.” Sometimes it is good to do and sometimes not. What do you think?

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

