

Vespers: Part Two

(The following is an edited transcript of a lecture given to the congregation at Lions Gate Buddhist Priory on Sept. 4, 2001, by Reverend Master Kōten Benson.)

So, I'll go on to Achalanatha (Fudo: J). Achalanatha: A – “not,” in Sanskrit; like we have some words in English, where we use the “a” as a negative. “A-chala” means the immovable, that which does not move, that which is not disturbed, that which is not disrupted. “Natha” means either the protector or the lord, the one who does not move. The reason these things are put in what appears to be the form of a person is because the experience is personal, if I can put it that way, because it is real, because it is not abstract. It is not an intellectual experience. It is, as Dōgen says, “skin, flesh, bones and marrow.” *The Invocation of Achalanatha* is therefore the invoking of, within ourselves, this sitting still. Interestingly, Great Compassion comes first, then sitting still.

In the pictures of Achalanatha you can see the sitting still in the middle of fires. An important thing to study in detail: Is Achalanatha separate from the fire? Are we thinking that we sit still in the middle of the fires of greed, hate and delusion as if they were something separate from us, or do we learn actually to sit still in it, as part of it? Do you understand? There is a distinction there, which is very important to consider carefully and meditatively.

“Hail to the Mandala!” Again, these things are not meant to be paragraphs, so don't necessarily think of them as one thought leading to another, but rather a series of internal movings.

Now, the Mandala means the Sangha; the people we train with on all the levels; the Ariya-Sangha; all the people who have come to know the Eternal for themselves. It also represents the mundane level, the very real level of our

work environment, our home environment, the people we deal with on a minute-by-minute basis.

A mandala is a three-dimensional organized way of representing the process and experience of training in daily life. It is not a diagram drawn by a crazy person. It is a three-dimensional depiction of how training is done. It is not flat. It's never been flat; it is alive! It's depicted that way because that is the way it happens. The gates are gates. The steps and all the rest of it, the multitudinous numbers of beings depicted in it, are all real – but remember, it is not talking about a separate-self thing. “Hail” is what you say at the gates as you enter into the process of training.

“Let us so be engulfed within its praises evermore that,” – “Engulfed within the praises of” is to enter into and continually participate within, “praise” meaning speaking from within.

“By our own wills and vigilance, may we our fetters cut away.” Remember that the initial dharani of Vespers emphasized the power of Great Compassion. Sōtō altars have Achalanatha standing to the left side and Avalokiteshvara to the right. This is the turning of the Wheel of the Law in meditation. It is a person sitting down in meditation offering up flowers: – Sange is a word meaning to stew flowers, literally, before the Buddha. Achalanatha is the flames and the sitting still within them: – this requires a certain exercise of our will and determination. Avalokiteshvara is on the other side pouring out the water. Through the use of our will in the cleansing of karma in training, in offering up, what is produced is the water of Great Compassion.

“May we within the temple of our own hearts dwell – amidst the myriad mountains.” The myriad mountains is a reference to the various aspects of the self, the skandhas. So, to go into the mountains or to climb the mountain is always a reference to studying the self, to study the self and forget the self. The temple of our own hearts is the dwelling place of true stillness, and Achalanatha is depicted as sitting still in the midst of the fires of greed, hate and delusion.

Achalanatha is often depicted sitting in the middle of the mandala of four other guardians of the gates, which are as fierce as he, and what these other guardians signify is the encounter with self and the encounter with training. Looking at what is in front of one can be quite frightening and intimidating, but through the process of training, although they don't lose their fierceness, they begin to be seen rather as helps in training. For example, something like anger, when initially looked at, is seen as an obstacle; and when trained with, the way we view it transforms into that which actually assists us, because it is the means by which we train. The arising of our kōan is the very vehicle of our training and, as strange as it may seem, we eventually become grateful for it. The fierce forms are fierce because of what they convey: the seriousness of encounter with the self; that suffering is real, and can be a vehicle of our training.

Invocation of Mahakala; Mahakala is the next one. He has two different aspects, which are really one. There is the fearsome, the Great Black One, who is the form of Great Compassion that appears to beings who don't respond to the more peaceful forms. It is our own suffering appearing in its strongest form. The other is what is called *Daikoku* in Japan: the "kitchen god;" a little, fat gentleman holding a hammer, wearing a little hat. He's the Bodhisattva of generosity, in the sense that the Great Black One means the seeming emptiness out of which everything good can come. In China, they say that it is the emptiness of something that makes it valuable. It is like a cup or a vase: it's the emptiness inside the cup that makes it able to be filled in order to be made use of. So Mahakala means the great blackness or darkness out of which anything is possible, in a good sense. And again we enter the mandala: "Engulfed within the Mandala of the Sons of Buddha."

"The Arrow of Emptiness." As I said at the beginning, these are not paragraphs, they're attempts on some level at describing pure experience. In the Christian tradition they talk about the wind, moving where it listeth. I saw this for myself when I was on the prairies in Edmonton: the wind moves across the grass in the fields and the grass bends. You can't see the wind, but you can

see the effect of it, and so in the Christian tradition in general it's a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, the activity of God which cannot be seen, but the results are seen. The "arrow of emptiness" is kind of like this. There is a story of Keizan and his teacher; his teacher was talking about the nature of the Unborn or the Eternal and was asking the various monks to respond from their own experience. Keizan said something like, "It is as a jet-black iron ball moving through darkness." In the same way as the wind, it cannot be seen but it can in fact be known. It cannot be pinned down; the results of training cannot be pinned down, but they can be known and felt. So the arrow of emptiness is like an arrow moving through a dark night. It cannot be seen, but we can in fact experience it, if you see what I mean. I'm using metaphors from another culture. The arrow of emptiness is also in reference to the two arrows meeting in mid-air or the effect when training or some aspect of the teaching strikes us.

The *Invocation of the Cosmic Buddha*, which is Vairochana. Now, this is something quite difficult to translate. A mystic is someone who experiences or seeks union with the Unborn or the Ultimate in whatever tradition. A mystic is a person doing the form of training. To me, the *Invocation of the Cosmic Buddha* is saying that there is something, which for lack of a better term is called the Unborn, the Uncreated or the Eternal, that this Something is not simply a concept or an idea or an experience, but is beyond that, and when we come to experience ourselves in union with it we experience no separation, so that the person training becomes one with the Ultimate, with the Unborn. They do not become the Unborn; they become one with It. Therefore, it's depicted in some sort of form, as a statue, in different ways in different Buddhist traditions, not meaning that it is a person or has a personality or is an ego writ large, but rather that it is something real and to be experienced for ourselves. I don't know quite how to put it other than that, because this Invocation, for me, is very much a description of the experience where it becomes real for oneself and no longer either a theory or an idea. In the same way, the Eternal is sometimes called the Lord of the House. I once knew a monk who, after they had had a major awakening experience, came across that term and said, "Yes,

that is what it is called.” It very much resonated with them, that particular term, because It is not something separate from us and yet it is something that, when we experience it, is so much bigger than us. It is also, while not exactly personal, is definitely intimate, in the true sense of a connection with something. I’m explaining this very badly, to tell you the truth.

Now, *The Golden Bell that Rings but Once*. “Makura Om” is translated literally as “peace upon the pillow,” because “om” is translated as “peace” and “makura” means pillow in Japanese, as far as we are able to tell. The Japanese call the Scripture of Great Wisdom the “Pillow Sutra,” not in the way we think of ‘pillow’ in a frivolous sense, but in terms of signifying the time of death. What is spoken to the person dying is called the “Pillow Sutra,” because it’s recited when, as it were, lying on one’s last pillow.

When we hear the golden bell ringing we think that it is rung only for us, when in fact it is ringing all the time. The fact that we do not hear it does not necessarily mean that something is lacking in us. When we have any insight at all (everyone here would have had at least one or two insights) into ourselves, where a penny drops, spiritually speaking, or training becomes true to us in some way, we think that we are having a moment in time of realizing something that we had not realized before, and we think of it as linear. We think, “Oh yes! That bell just went off for me.” In fact, the bell sounds all the time on the level of our own true nature, the realization of it going on constantly. The ringing is going on all the time, and is beyond time because it is the true nature of things. From time to time we have a glimpse of it. “Sometimes we raise the eyebrows of Shakyamuni and sometimes we don’t.” Sometimes we hear it, sometimes we don’t. That is not necessarily a problem, as long as we simply continue to train, but the fact that we have heard the bell means that we know that it is there, if we actually trust in that. Having heard it once we can hear it again.

There is a poem about this by Tendō Nyojō: “The entire body, the entire being, is a bell, hanging in the air. Whichever way the wind blows, it always gives forth one sound.” This means that we are in that sense like a bell hanging

in the Eternal, and the wind of the Eternal blows, and if we give ourselves over to that wind, then it produces the sound. Our doing so is not necessarily something that is cognizant through the self, but rather something experienced in trust, and the fact that one hears this and moves within it does not mean that everything is going to work out all right, that there are going to be no difficulties or obstacles.

Dōgen says that what really helps the training is if one realizes that one has never been upside down, lost or confused. He doesn't mean that we don't experience it that way. He means that we can train, dropping all thoughts of obstacles and things getting in our way and simply take that which is in front of us at this very moment, whether we like it or don't like it, whether it's greed, hate or delusion, whether it's good feelings or bad feelings, we can take it and embrace the moment and do what we can with it.

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