

A Buddhist Work Ethic - Rev. Master Oswin
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Homage to the Buddha
Homage to the Dharma
Homage to the Sangha

I want to talk today about the Buddhist work ethic. This will be “old hat” for some but hopefully there will be something here for everyone.

One of the things that drew me to Buddhism in the beginning was its approach not only to ethical matters, but also to daily life. The phrase that epitomized this for me was “doing that which needs to be done.” There is no right or wrong, should or should not, must or must not. One simply looks straightforwardly at the situation and does what needs to be done. It incorporates both compassion and wisdom, or wise discernment. And over the years through the process of training, we get better at it. The better we are at it—the more experience we have with it, the more we are able to practice with it—the less negative karma we are going to create and the more peace we are going to have in our hearts. Ultimately there is no separation between us and that out there. In doing that which needs to be done, a little bit is responding to all the big bits and all the other little bits and does that which keeps the harmony among the totality of all the bits. It is what keeps those bits flowing, it’s what keeps the spiritual life flowing within ourselves.

This is not indulging in the “love and light” misunderstanding—that we are going to feel good about everything we do. Or that all we have to do is love each other and everything is going to be alright. Karma is constantly being created. We create karma just while we sit here, yet one creates the least karma possible when just sitting in meditation. Of course, unless one is escaping their responsibilities by coming to the Priory to sit. As soon as we get up from our seat, here karma begins to occur in the choices that we make. As members of a temple, as members of family, as members of a community and nation, or members of the world, we interact with other beings, and we take responsibility for what we do. There is much we cannot do anything about. By keeping the focus on what one can do about oneself, and within the circumstances that one finds oneself in, there is a terrific amount that one can do something about.

In many ways it is much harder turning the light within where we are faced with letting go of and giving up that which is familiar, rather than pointing the finger and saying this and that should be different, or, “if they would only stop doing that.” This is one of the meanings of renunciation. This is what the Buddha gave up when he left home to find the cause of suffering. He gave up that which was familiar. This is the essential practice of zazen, Serene Reflection Meditation letting go, giving up. Dogen calls it “dropping off body and mind” And this place where we find ourselves when we let go, drop off, or give up is not empty. Remember that “emptiness” is not empty. As the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* says, “form is pure.” All the five skandas are pure: form, sensation, thought, activity and consciousness. Also, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body mind.

The more we can drop off self, the more the Heart of the Buddha Nature can work through us, the more compassion can work through us, or wisdom can work through us. When we talk about self, I think we often get afraid to give up self. In our present society this has been unfortunately escalated by our pop psychology. This pop psychology has filled a vacuum that religion either abandoned or failed to meet. We are all very fortunate to have found Buddhism which addresses this need directly and gives us fulfillment. This does not mean that one cannot make use of psychology.

The purpose of spiritual practice is to find the True Self, to know the True Self, and to live from the True Self. If we are afraid of giving up this little self, we should think of it more as giving up selfishness -- that which puts me at the center of the universe, how are things going to affect "me." At one time this was one of the things that helped us survive as a species; however, our survival no longer depends on this, and there is a greater purpose to living than to just merely surviving. When we talk about the Four Noble Truths, we can substitute the term "selfishness" for the term "desire" as the cause of suffering. Suffering is caused by selfishness. The term selfishness adds a clarity to the meaning here.

Doing that which needs to be done applies to all aspects of our lives -- our personal life, our family life, our community life, our private life. None of these is separate from training, all of these are the stage on which we train. The opportunity presented to us is: how do I live in this place without selfishness? It is a challenge and it has always been a challenge. This is why great saints are few and far between. And yet we all have that potential, perhaps not to be a great saint, but to be someone who did the very best they could with what they were given. This allows one to live and die in peace. Sacrifice is not a popular word these days, which comes back to the clinging to the self. Nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice, nothing worthwhile is gained without effort, nothing worthwhile is gained without patience. Such is the human world. What are we putting our energy into? Look at what we are doing -- are we truly doing that which needs to be done or are we just doing what we want to do, what is pleasant or what everyone else is doing? As I was telling one of you this morning, look at truth along a straight line -- do not hide truth around the corner and pretend that we do not see it, or pretend that there is not a consequence to what we are doing in this moment.

Please keep the temple in mind when you make your decisions as to what needs to be done. We did not have a very good showing in the last two workdays and things needing attention are mounting up. We have a short workday this coming Saturday, and we really need your help. There is enough work here at the temple for one additional person full time. I cannot do it all. This is your temple and part of being a member of the temple is offering one's service. In Taiwan the Buddhist temples there have waiting lists for people who want to come and help. They want to come to the temple so badly and to give of themselves so much that they have to wait just to get in and help clean. I know you are all busy, as this is the human world. I am not asking anyone to sacrifice their family, work or school. Because for lay people, these are your primary responsibilities. But

beyond that, please keep the temple in mind. It cannot exist and continue without your help. There is great merit in building a temple and there is a lot of pride, in the good sense of the word, and joy and fun in doing this. I think there is even greater merit in maintaining the temple, because this is not so much fun, there is frequently less to show for it when we are done, and it is a continual task, always there.

Doing that which needs to be done: It is not always what we want to do, what we like to do, or what our friends may be doing, but what is it that we truly wish to do? I think all of us want to follow what we call the will of the Eternal: the True Heart's Wish, a wish for the enlightenment for all sentient beings. That is our agenda, if you will. There is no set time for this to be done by, and, time is running out for all of us. One of the koans that is grossly misunderstood in the West and made into this cute little story is about the man who is running from the tiger and falls off the cliff and is hanging by a vine. Down below him are the rocks which mean certain death and above him is the tiger wanting his lunch. Two little mice come along and start gnawing at the vine. One is white and one is black. Off to the side the man sees this luscious strawberry. What does he do? The way the story is often popularly told is that since he is going to die anyway, he might as well go for the gusto and eat the strawberry. However, what is not seen nor expressed in this koan is that the two mice, white and black, represent day and night. The vine is our life, i.e., the karmic thread that keeps us going and is being gnawed at continually by time. What do we do? Do we just go for the gusto and eat the strawberry and then fall to our death on the rocks below? We are all in that situation continually, and, though we should not be anxious about it, it is good to remember that night and day are chewing at our lives. What is important to us? What is it that needs to be done as we are hanging off the cliff, tiger above -- what is it that is good to do?

To come to the Temple for a work day is more than to just accomplish a project. I would like to suggest that we try to change our frame of reference for work days, not looking at them as what we are going to accomplish, but simply coming to the Temple because we are having a work day. Because it is a good thing to do. It is a time that we spend together and get to know each other. It is looking at work days with the goal of goallessness, a process rather than an end, even if occasionally there is a goal that we may be trying to achieve. What I am suggesting is that we try to look at work days as any other activity at the Temple. It is something that we do, simply that. We do ceremonies, we do Dharma talks, we do meditations, etc., and we do work days. It is an activity of the Sangha. We are simply doing that which needs to be done, even if it is just making tea. Coming to workdays or other activities as our commitment grows is learning to let go of the discriminatory mind, i.e., I like this, I don't like that. It is also how we deepen our friendships in the Sangha and our trust in each other. I often talk about a Temple being a mandala and how each of us is a strand of that mandala. When some people are missing then the other strands have more to support. The mandala does not then turn quite as well as it might.

A final suggestion on this is that you could encourage each other to come to activities at the Temple and in this way develop a bit of an enthusiasm. I like how Jewish people

speaking about going to their Synagogue – they are “going to Temple,” rather than “going to the Temple.” They are going to the activity at the Temple: “Temple” is an activity. We are not going so much to the place, but to be with the people and to practice.

Taking refuge in the Sangha is deepened by our being together and working together. There is a lot more going on than just the work, there is something much more going on than meets the eye. I will leave you here with this, and please do not take this as a harangue. Sometimes there are good reasons to not come for a work day. And ask yourself, “What is it that truly needs to be done?”

May you all be well and happy, may you all have peace of mind and of heart, may you all be successful with whatever you do, and may you all know true Joy.

Homage to all the Buddhas in all the Worlds
Homage to all the Bodhisattvas in all the Worlds
Homage to the Scripture of Great Wisdom

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