

Turning Around in our Hearts

Rev. Master Oswin

At this last Wesak [2005], I related to the Dharma school kids how the Buddha converted the terrible serial-killer Angulimala, “Finger Necklace,” who was trying to kill the Buddha in order to obtain the 1000th little finger for his necklace. The Buddha used His special powers to appear to be walking at a slow pace as Angulimala frantically chased after Him at the speed of a horse or a deer. Unable to catch up with this unusual monk, he finally cried breathlessly, “Stop, monk, stop!” The Buddha replied, “Angulimala, I have stopped. Now you must do likewise.” On a surface level, He’s asking Angulimala to stop chasing Him. On a deeper level, the Buddha says that He has stopped for Himself the cause of birth and death, that there is no longer any necessity for His karmic stream to be reborn in this world of suffering. He enjoins Angulimala to stop killing and thereby creating the karma that will only make for enormous suffering in the future. Angulimala was ripe for conversion, and he turned his heart around right on the spot.

Conversion is a vital part of Buddhist practice. As Great Master Dogen teaches in *Shushogi – What is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment*, conversion (*sange* in Japanese) entails three elements: “full and open confession, true conviction, and earnest endeavor” not to continue in one’s old ways that cause suffering. This process of conversion is expressed in different ways in our Scriptures and spiritual writings. “Turning one’s heart around” is one way; another is “turning about at the deepest seat of consciousness”; “standing against the stream to train in wisdom” is yet another. It entails choosing a different path (in the sense of life, or process). The turning includes renunciation of the causes of suffering, an acceptance of precepts to abide by, and courage to go beyond conventional or societal (worldly or mundane) ways of looking at and doing things. We commit to the endeavor of purifying and living from our True Heart.

Some people obviously have memorable dramatic conversion experiences like Angulimala, or like the Christian apostle Paul in the New Testament who was blinded on the road to Damascus. For myself, I find that I need to keep endeavoring to “turn around” every day. It’s not enough to do *sange* and commit to the Precepts once and for all. There is great value in formal commitment, don’t get me wrong. But for most people, I suspect that we need to remind ourselves of what our true purpose in life is, to continue to examine our motives and intents, to study ourselves deeply and honestly, to be brave enough to be different. Meditation is, of course, essential for this introspection. I find reading of the Dharma to be particularly helpful, too, especially the hard-hitting words of Rev. Master Jiyu in which she spares no pains to be frank and out front about the causes of suffering that ordinary people like myself cause. Training with the Sangha also helps, for when we are with others who are sincerely doing the same work, we are much more likely to encounter areas where our personal understanding or perspective is challenged or called up short.

Some of us find it helpful to recite a form of the confession verse every night before retiring. I personally use this form from Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Ten Vows: "I vow to repent all evil deeds and abstain from evil to the best of my ability." Another version is the one in the Renewal of Vows Ceremony in *The Monastic Office*: "All the evil committed by me is caused by beginningless greed, hate and delusion. All the evil is committed by our body, speech and mind. I now confession everything wholeheartedly."

The act of meditation itself can be a good reminder to keep turning, particularly if we remember to "circulate the breath" at the beginning. One monk of our Order suggests that this "backward flowing method" of serene reflection meditation might more accurately be called the "return flowing method." We are not going backwards! We may disagree or not go along with society, our peers, or what we perceive to be non-Buddhist activities; and to say we are going "against the stream" sets us up in opposition to something. However, returning to our True Home expresses well what we endeavor to do, for the practice leads us to the True Home already within us. We learn to live again in accord with our True Heart or Buddha nature.

"Going against the stream" refers to training in accord with meditation and the precepts, to choosing to base our life and values in something other than the greed, hate, and delusion which serve as the foundation of most societies. The stream that we can do something about is our own personal karmic flow (tendencies and momentum) that is rushing headlong down the mountain to the ocean. We can stop anytime midcourse and choose to resist (convert, transform) that flow, to turn our energy into something useful and beneficial to humankind. Yes, it takes a lot of effort to turn a whole river around, but as Rev. Master Jiyu used to say to me when I despaired about the weight of my karma, "Well, get on with it!" Dogen, too, teaches that no matter how much time we may have wasted, we have this moment! Use it wisely!

Always we just do the best we can. And that word "just", as in "just sitting", means wholehearted single-mindedness, without distractions – our very best effort. Also, as the scriptures teach, "With the ideal comes the actual." Our suffering is usually caused by conditions not being as we want them – they are not ideal. It's our perception that makes conditions into suffering. As I said to one person recently who is experiencing dramatic changes in their life, "What is normal changes." As Buddhists practitioners, we understand the truth of impermanence with more than our intellectual mind. We experience it – and that truth becomes our blood and bones. We develop wholehearted acceptance of whatever life brings our way. The more we can let go of how things should be or how we want them to be, the more peace we will have in our hearts – and more freedom and flexibility to make the changes that are possible. And though the stream of our karma may be gurgling merrily along, we have the peace of mind that we have done, and are doing, all we can to convert that flow into a river of compassion, love, and wisdom.