

## Empty Hands, Pure Heart

One of the most useful attitudes of mind to cultivate in Buddhist training is that of “empty hands.” This attitude is that of the open mind and heart, the willingness to do whatever needs to be done, without attachment to personal preferences or agendas. When our hands are empty, our heart can be full with the Unborn. The more we hold on or onto, the more we experience suffering, the less we can know the “pure.”

This was brought to mind a while back when several members expressed the wish to have a regular “job” at the temple. While having a regular responsibility can be useful to the Priory, what is equally valuable is just coming to the temple and offering our help in whatever way is needed.

It would be helpful to have all Priory responsibilities delegated to specific people – that’s the ideal; however, in a small temple like ours the work often does not fall into regular categories – that’s the actual. The needs cover a broad area and are constantly shifting. Most needs are one-time or occasional: cleaning, repairing, sewing and mending, grounds work, maintenance, word-processing, mailing list, computers and their care (!), cooking, etc. Dependable offerings of help are invaluable: the Prior can trust and depend on someone coming regularly to help and just pitch in with whatever needs doing. This dependability is the training of Achalanatha, the fierce Bodhisattva to the left of the main altar in our meditation hall. He (or she) is steadfast and willing, committed and flexible.

The purpose of Buddhist training is the cleansing of karma, the purification of our old habits that cause suffering – opinions, ideas, judgments, resistance, likes, dislikes, preferences, worries, fears, attachments, ideals, etcetera. The Priory provides a wonderful opportunity to do this cleansing practice if we will come with empty hands, trust that what we are asked to do is good, and simply do our best to respond to the need. In our Order great care is given to the setting up of its temples so that they are safe refuges physically and spiritually. We do everything we can to ensure that the spiritual purpose of the temple is kept paramount, a place where we

can go to meditate and do this cleansing process, where it's okay to let go of the security of who we think we are.

We all have agendas and ideas – that's our karmic conditioning. In our Order temples are set up with a senior monk trained and certified by their master: this monk (the prior or abbot) can lead and teach from the heart of the Unborn. This "pure" is a selflessness that benefits all beings. This does not mean that the teacher is already perfect or infallible. None that I know are and certainly I don't claim that quality for myself. We can learn from others – and everything – if we are willing and open. This is trust. How will we ever learn to trust the teacher and the Teaching if we do not give requests our best attempt to fulfill them? And we all learn together, teacher and student alike: no one's training is ever finished.

In "letting go" in our approach to tasks we put aside our judgments of "gain and loss" ("success and failure"), two of the "eight worldly winds" which inevitably blow suffering our way. We also "let go" of identifying with who we are – the idea of our self. The self is not evil or bad, it is just mistaken and thereby limiting. The egocentric self is a mental construct, convenient for communicating and as a reference point in daily life, but it is not a concrete, unchanging identity. Meditation loosens our grip on this fabricated idea. The "letting go" principle is in fact the essential act of serene reflection meditation. We "let go" in formal meditation, and we take that principle into all the activities of daily life. We simply do that which is in front of us that needs our attention while simultaneously harmonizing the activity out of this deeper "pure." This purity is the emptiness of prajna, "the deepest wisdom of the heart" presented in *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*.

This "letting go" necessitates the cultivation of trust, particularly in our own Buddha Nature. The Buddha taught "there is an unborn, undying, uncreated, unchanging". There is "something," which is not a "thing," which we can entrust ourselves to. This is what going for refuge means. In Zen writings the simile of "stepping off the hundred foot pole" is often used for the act of faith in completely letting go and stepping into the unknown. For many of us at first, the challenge is to begin to climb the pole. If we never start and never climb, we will never be at the top in a position to

leap. This leaping is same idea expressed in Great Master Dogen's "dropping off body and mind." If we have gone for refuge to the Three Treasures, can we trust—have confidence in the Buddha's words—that this works and is safe? Can we begin to let go? This process also entails humility, that others have the Buddha Nature, too, and may be more experienced or knowledgeable than we. We can trust the gentle nudge of the sangha refuge to take the next step.

The simple willingness to try to do the best one can when given a task is also crucial in undermining our attachment to "work" as an essential part of who we are and a measure of our worth. The Protestant work ethic permeates American culture—"our goodness and value depend on our work." This belief or viewpoint is insidious and completely contrary to the Buddha's teaching. We are perfect and completely good to begin with. Our "work" is an expression of our gratitude for the opportunity to train—cleanse our karma—and harmonize ourselves with the Unborn. Working meditation, also called "every-minute meditation," focuses our attention on doing a task. In secular literature this often called "process orientation." We focus on the task rather than looking ahead to our accomplishment of it—and our sense of worth and/or others' praise for doing it. This is the "goal of goallessness" that Dogen refers to in *Rules for Meditation*. It is the "existence, time, flow" pointed out in "Uji," Dogen's *Shobogenzo* chapter where he attempts to express "enlightenment," the Unborn, as a flow, an activity.

However, this "flow" is not the laissez-faire attitude of "just going with the flow" so often espoused in situations where people are not taking responsibility for their actions. Working meditation at temple can be challenging, particularly when the prior or monk asks us to do a task in a way different than what we feel is "with the flow" or "right." This request can stretch us physically, mentally, and spiritually. Fortunately, in a temple such as ours we are assured the ethical safety that no teacher will ask us to break the Precepts. (That assurance is one of the functions of the larger Order all our monks and temples belong to.)

Attachment hinders this flow and produces suffering. Harmonizing with It produces peace and joy. Cultivating the long-term view can particu-

larly be helpful. The choice is ours, moment by moment. Training, our practice of the Buddhadharma, is about choosing and doing. Buddhist truth is experiential: we actualize It by doing It. This is an act of will, an intentional act, the mental activity where karma is created. As Rev. Master Jiyu often pointed out, it is more “willingness” than “will” – we are listening to and responding of our own free will to the Buddha Nature, the Heart of Being. And this brings us back to Achalanatha. This willingness is strong, make no doubt about it. It is “immovable,” which is what “Achalanatha” means. I sometimes think of this fierce and fiery Bodhisattva as “unstoppable,” because his “unmoving” is not a hard and set position. It is rather a flexible, yet dedicated, commitment to fluid training.

I’ll close with two examples of my fellow monks who for me embodied this idea of “empty hands, pure heart.” One was a newly-made senior monk (teacher) who was asked to go to the Berkeley Priory to replace the Prior there who had become ill and had to resign. This reverend was in the midst of a huge art project, one that our Master had asked him to undertake. Yet when asked by her to fill this other responsibility, he simply said, without hesitation, “Sure. Just give me a couple of days to pack my things.” No “buts,” “maybes,” or “isn’t there someone else who can go?”

The other example occurred during one of the first Abbatical Dharma Ceremonies at Shasta after Rev. Master Jiyu’s death. Rev. Master Eko was the new “Buddha” upon the altar, and each monk was asking a question about the Dharma. Most of us were immersed in thoughts of inadequacy and grief, asking how could we go on without our Master. However, one of the more senior monks went up and simply said, “How may I assist?” What a refreshing teaching! No personal wants or needs or concerns, at least not stated, simply, “How may I serve the Eternal? How may I help you?” I don’t know whether it was an intentional echo, but it reminded me of a Biblical story from the Old Testament chapter of “Isaiah”. Isaiah was one of the important Hebrew prophets. Jehovah (God) was trying to find someone to go and give his message to the children of Israel, the Hebrew nation. Everyone He called was either too busy or felt they couldn’t do it. Finally, a young man, completely unqualified by external standards and thus made fun of by his peers, decided to answer the call. He went to Jehovah and said, “Here am I, Lord. Send me.” God had found His man.

These kinds of responses are those of “unconditional acceptance,” a phrase I heard recently from a fellow monk. This frame of mind is the “selfless activity” pointed out by Dogen in *Shushogi*. Through such activity we express our gratitude. We put no conditions on our reply when we hear the call of the Unborn, the “still, small voice” of the Buddha Nature. We don’t judge whether a task is too small, too large, too unimportant, or too difficult. We simply say, “Yes.”\* This attitude of mind and heart is the all-acceptance that unlocks the “gateless gate.” This “gate” is the entry into the garden of the Eternal with its great and bountiful compassion. There actually is no lock, let alone a gate. The entryway is completely wide open and free. And it our training, our unconditional acceptance of this unconditional love, that opens our heart to the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha: “Empty hands, pure heart.”

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\*We may also need to ask, “How?” as a former novicemaster of mine once advised and as Rev. Master Jiyu describes in *The Wild, White Goose* when the Prior asked her to take some tea up a steep ladder to workmen on the roof. The important thing is the attitude of mind, the willingness.

— Rev. Oswin

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