



Finding our Calling: The Practice of Serene Reflection Meditation

“One calls and one replies—This is your Real Lord.”
Great Master Keizan in *Denkoroku*¹

In a contemplative or meditation tradition like ours, we often refer to our “calling.” I am using the word not in reference to the formal calling of a monastic, although that example certainly provides us with illustration of, and inspiration for, living a life of faith and meditation within the Precepts. The calling I wish to explore here is the fundamental practice each of us does in serene reflection meditation as we listen and respond to the “still, small voice.” This practice does not depend on the external form of our training, monastic or lay. The practice is the critical aspect, not the form.

Most of us may not hear an actual ‘voice.’ This term refers to the inner promptings of our True Self, True Nature, which quietly suggests that a particular action would best be refrained from or that another action would be good to do. There is a pulling away from, a restraining process which we call renunciation—not indulging our karmic inclinations, habits, and patterns infused with the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. These three are considered the root of all the other *klesha* (obstructions, hindrances, defilements, cankers) which cause suffering. There is also a positive movement toward peace and joy (Nirvana) as we convert these three poisons into compassion, love, and wisdom.

Every moment of meditation and mindful awareness provides us with a conscious choice as to which way we go—in the direction of suffering or in the direction of peace. Our intent is the crux of this process. Formal meditation gives us both the insight into how this works and the strength of willingness to follow these quiet promptings. The Precepts describe what actions create karma resulting in suffering, and we listen to, read, and study the Teachings so that they become our “blood and bones,” imbedded deep within our minds and hearts. The Four Wisdoms, the Six Perfections (*paramitas*), the Four Brahma-viharas, and other qualities for cultivation describe the sorts of actions—good karma, merit—that lead to the end of suffering. These too we study and practice so that they become part of us, neural pathways in our minds that our volition or will can find easier over time to fire down and choose to go in the direction of merit and enlightenment. The ‘calling’ is the prompting of our Heart, Buddha Nature, to refrain from evil and move in the direction of good, for ourselves and others. Our response is the choice we make, moment to moment, to listen, heed, and respond in accord with the path of training.

Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett often referred to a saying in Christianity that “All are called, but few are chosen.” However, she clarified this statement for her disciples by commenting that “In Buddhism all are called, but few answer.” This calling is something that is going on within the mind and heart of every human being all the time. A fundamental teaching of Buddhism is that all beings have the Buddha Nature and we are all capable of realizing what Shakyamuni came to understand. I would rephrase Rev. Master Jiyu’s statement to read “All are called, but few answer *in a positive manner*.” The reason I amend her comment is that to respond in a negative manner is still an answer, and through our own experience of meditation and training we each learn how often in the past we have said “no” and covered up our intuitive Buddha Nature. We learn painfully that this creates suffering, and that pain becomes our teacher as we choose to respond differently in the present.

People say “no” all the time, often for many lifetimes, hardening their hearts until finally someone in their karmic stream, us, finally says “Enough!” and begins to turn toward the Eternal. This often happens upon the occasion of meeting with someone who through their example, words, or actions awakens the seed of Buddha Nature within us. We then begin the process of training—transformation or conversion of our karma. Rev. Master Jiyu discusses this development in *The Book of Life*.² For me it was encountering her words in one of her books. For others I know it was upon hearing her voice. Shakyamuni was awakened upon seeing the form of a renunciate. Something as simple as kindness can awaken It. Something inside us recognizes this

goodness, and says, “Yes, there is a Way,” or “The Unborn does exist,” or “Here is something better than what I presently know and I perhaps can learn from them.” This awakening can be very subtle, and often we don’t even recognize it when it happens.

We live in uncertain times. War is on the horizon, terrorism and environmental decline or disaster threaten on all fronts, the thrust of our society and civilization inclines toward material goods, scientific knowledge, technical know-how, and comforts that were known only to royalty in earlier times. Secular goals pervade our lives and values. It’s presumed that the answers to life and the problems of the world will be found in externals—longer life; better health; peace through power, education, societal reform, justice, political revolution, etc. Someone new coming to our training tradition might well ask what is the point and value of contemplative practice and this listening to an internal sense of good, especially at a time like this? What does serene reflection meditation or contemplative prayer offer a world on the verge of destruction? How can what I do sitting looking at a wall make a difference? These are good, sincere, and valid questions. In follow-up articles I will describe gifts that contemplative practice—this internal listening and responding—makes and show how they benefit the world. The first three offerings are meditation, merit, and the Four Wisdoms. The next three are Precepts, compassion, and gratitude. They all come back to and arise from pure meditation, the practice of coming to know the Great Unborn, of reuniting or harmonizing with Buddha Nature.

—Rev. Oswin Hollenbeck, Prior

¹ Great Master Keizan Jokin, “The Sixth Ancestor, Saint Mishaka,” Chapter 7 of *Denkoroku: Transmission of the Light*, in Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd edition (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 227.

² Roshi P.T.N. H. Jiyu-Kennett and Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy, *The Book of Life* (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1979), Chapter 6.