

Offerings of Contemplative Practice

Part 1: Meditation, Merit, Four Wisdoms

In response to the suffering of the world, especially at a time like this when our country is engaged in military action overseas and protests abound throughout the land, it can be helpful to remind ourselves of the value of the offerings that contemplative practice makes. Three of them are meditation, merit, and the Four Wisdoms.

The practice of pure meditation, serene reflection meditation, is the offering of our bodies and mind to do the work of the Great Unborn. Our bodies and minds become the field for the cleansing of karma, the purification of the heart. We help the world by converting the small and large seeds of greed, hate, and delusion – the causes of all suffering – so that they will not sprout up and come to fruition again. This is a great and wonderful and adequate offering. It is unseen, usually unnoticed, and not glamorous. It does not attract attention to itself. It is not exciting; in fact it's often downright boring. It's long, hard work. But the fruits are Peace of Heart, Nirvana, the transformation of the passions into compassion, love, and wisdom. This Purity quells all suffering.

Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett used to often say, "It is enough to know the Cosmic Buddha [this Purity]." We don't have to do anything else. This is enough and good and wonderful. The world may never understand or appreciate this offering, for by its nature the world is fueled by the very desire and selfishness which those who engage in religious practice renounce. Human society often can't see the value of such an offering; the three poisons of greed, hate and delusion obscure its vision. But as the great god Brahma entreated Shakyamuni after His enlightenment when He was hesitating to teach, "There are some with little dust in their eyes who will benefit from what you've learned. Please go forth and share your understanding."

The second offering is that of merit. In Mahayana or Northern Buddhism, the larger branch of Buddhism of which Serene Reflection/Soto Zen is part, compassion is given equal emphasis with wisdom. All that we do in the way of training is done for others as well as self. This emphasis is expressed in the first words we say each morning after formal meditation, the Kesa verse: "I wish to unfold the Buddha's teaching that I may help all living things." This verse is a form of the Bodhisattva vow, and is first formally given at the time of receiving the Precepts. It is significant that our form of the Precepts is called the Bodhisattva Precepts. We train for both self and other.

In our Serene Reflection tradition we are continually encouraged to offer the merit of our training to others. The last of the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is "I vow to transfer the merit of my practice and training to all sentient beings." We do not hoard the fruits of the meditation practice described above as the first offering. If one examines the offertories of our tradition's various ceremonies, one will find that the merit of each ceremony is usually offered wider and wider so that it extends to all beings. Two examples are the memorial offertories which end with "Let us walk on the way to enlightenment with all living things" and "We pray that all may ascend the brilliant altar and realize the Truth." Another is the morning service offertory

which climaxes with “We pray that we may...make the Four Wisdoms perfect together with all living things.” Always our merit is offered to others, indeed all.

The Four Wisdoms just mentioned are a third offering of contemplative practice. Whereas meditation and merit are intangible and invisible, the Four Wisdoms are both tangible and visible: charity or generosity (*dana*), tenderness (kind speech), benevolence (helpful actions), and empathy (identification with others). We see these qualities, they are actions, they are the expression of the Bodhisattva vow. They are considered the signs of enlightenment, as Great Master Dogen teaches in the *Shushogi*: when we cultivate and practice them, our minds become enlightened and indeed are enlightened in that very moment. A drop of water is water; a single ray of sunlight is light. The Four Wisdoms arise naturally in the mind of those who practice the Buddha’s Way, and they are not limited to Buddhism. These qualities can be felt, appreciated, and responded to by all humanity, and other forms of life as well. They are the “selfless service” of gratitude, which Dogen also holds up in the *Shushogi* for us to practice.

These three offerings of contemplative practice – meditation, merit, and the Four Wisdoms – are our answer to the call of the Cosmic Buddha, the Great Unborn. IT calls to us in each moment, and we respond in each moment through the choices we make. The form of these offerings likely vary from person to person. A beautiful aspect of the Bodhisattva Path is that Great Compassion, Avalokiteshwara, takes whatever form appropriate to give just the right help to suffering beings. She helps both us – and through us. As we heed the calling of the Eternal, “the still, small voice,” in everyday life, these small responses lead us to where we may be of greatest assistance to the world. These quiet responses are just the doing of that which needs to be done in daily life and can seem insignificant. However, they are the expression of the bodhichitta, the Buddha-seeking Mind, which wishes for the enlightenment or liberation from suffering of all sentient beings. This is our True Wish and the reason for which we train. ❖

--Rev. Oswin