

Trust and Truth

Rev. Oswin Hollenbeck, Prior

Always we must be disturbed by the Truth.” Great Master Dogen¹

Many of us come to Buddhist practice looking for perfect love. We have been disappointed or hurt in life, and we place all our hopes on Buddhism that here that will not happen again or we place so many defenses or boundaries that there is no opening for Real Love.

Buddhism asks us to take refuge in the Three Treasures, the Unborn Buddha Nature. When we take refuge in the Sangha, we look past or through the personalities of our fellow trainees to the Buddha Nature. We both ask from our Buddha Nature and also hear in that place. The other person likewise hears and responds from their Buddha Nature. This is sometimes called “seeing with the ears and listening with the eyes.” We operate and live from a deeper place than our ordinary senses—our meditation—when we “take refuge.”

We do the same when we take refuge in the Buddha—listening to our True Heart, the Buddha nature, the “still, small voice,” not the turbulent or sentimental heart of emotionality and feelings. Likewise, refuge in the Dharma consists of opening ourselves to the teachings of the Buddha, the Truth—listening with our heart-minds rather than analyzing and judging, weighing and assessing with the discriminatory mind of duality.

Our ultimate trust is in Truth. “Truth” with a capital “T” is another way of signifying, in a nonpersonal manner, the Unborn Buddha Nature, That which pervades and yet surpasses all things. Seeing and accepting the truth about ourselves can sometimes hurt, and in Buddhist practice we develop our trust so we can hear the truths—all of them—that life, a teacher, and everything around us are pointing to. Buddhism teaches us to observe that much about life is sorrowful and painful: suffering is inherent in existence; human beings suffer because of attachment; the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion rage throughout the three worlds; everything is impermanent, changing and uncertain; karma is inevitable and inexorable, a universal law; human life is short; there is much, much we can do nothing about; and so on.

We don’t like to hear such things. Most of us treat ourselves much like Prince Siddhartha’s parents protecting the Buddha-to-be in his pleasure place, wishing to shield ourselves from suffering, old age, illness and death. Much of Buddhist training is recognizing the great compassion of the four guardian monarchs who keep appearing in the forms of old age, illness, and death, plus that of the mendicant monk, the truth-seeker, in order to motivate us to search for Truth—that which is not subject to illness, decay, death and suffering, the Unchanging, Uncreated, the Unborn and Undying: eternal life.

Human beings are fallible. Teachers and masters are human beings. Therefore, teachers and masters are fallible. This is part of Truth, too. As Rev. Master Jiyu often said, “Buddhism is a religion for spiritual adults.” We accept everything as it is, rather than imposing our own ideas or opinions or expectations on things. No matter how great a person’s understanding may be, we can still make mistakes. The Buddha Himself made some big ones. Our trust grounds itself in this greater Whole and transforms itself into an earnest search for knowing that Whole. This True or Pure Love is the source of human love: it can accommodate and forgive and tolerate the mistakes and fallibility and humanity of others. As one of my teachers is fond of saying, “The disciple’s trust must be greater than the master’s mistakes.” Indeed, that humanity—not the mistakes, mind you—comes to be cherished, for it is our guarantee that we too as human beings, just like the Buddha and all the Ancestors, can practice the Way and become enlightened.

So, yes, let's cultivate trust. It is essential for walking the Path. And let's keep our feet firmly on the Path, which is Truth Itself. Everyone, no matter how much we love or revere them, we must part with eventually. Either through their death they leave us or through ours we leave them. By making our refuge the person's Buddha Nature, that "part" of them which does not die, we remain in touch with and a part of that which cannot be lost. This is the true refuge of the Sangha. As those of us who were Rev. Master Jiyu's disciples discovered at her death, she was no longer there in body but she definitely was there in spirit, throughout the monastery and in every particle of it. And so she remains as part of everything still, not only in Mt. Shasta, but everywhere one looks, if one has the eyes to see. Yes, there is grief when someone we love dies—we are human—but by making our refuge the Unborn Buddha Nature, we trust and know in our Hearts that all is well.

How do we realize such a mysterious-sounding and wonderful relationship? Simply by meditating regularly and practicing the Precepts to the best of our ability. This recognition of Truth develops gradually and naturally as a result of just plain old practice. This is meditation's true purpose: to enable us to open our hearts to and within the Unborn Buddha Nature and thereby live ever more closely in harmony with It. Again, we accomplish this by "just sitting," by just "letting go" moment after moment after moment—the simple basic instruction of serene reflection meditation.

¹ Rev. Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *The Wild, White Goose: the Diary of a Female Zen Priest*, 2nd ed. (Mount Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 2002), p. 205.