

In the year 1239, Dogen wrote explicit instructions to his students on how they were to bathe, groom themselves, and care for the washrooms and toilets of the monastery. The temple toilet was called the *Tosu*, and the instructive essay on its care was entitled "*Senjo*." In the course of these instructions, Dogen reminded his followers that "even the Buddha had a toilet." This is a fact that many people choose to ignore.

Westerners, especially, have always seemed to consider the toilet as some secret, inner sanctum—the less said about it, the better. When they *do* speak about it, they often use euphemistic terms such as those employed when speaking of sexual perversion or death. If speaking about the toilet is so difficult, what about actually *cleaning* it? Throughout the history of Zen, cleaning the toilet has been considered a time-honored chore, and the task was often assigned to senior students. It helped reinforce the idea that there are no impure places, and that, as Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Zen in China, put it, "the universe is a vast emptiness and there is nothing holy about it." One place is really no different, no better or worse, than any other.

The fact is, the toilet is an excellent symbol of our humanity. Moreover, the elimination of waste products is a feature common to all living beings. What we take in, we must burn or expel. All we have to do is keep our mind clear and stay out of our own way. It's as simple as that.

Many people have an aversion to cleaning the toilet. If you're one of them, you might consider asking yourself the following questions: How did I get this aversion? Are there valid reasons behind it? Research has shown that the area surrounding the kitchen sink has much more harmful bacteria than does the average toilet rim. Still, you may have qualms about cleaning it. Try approaching this work with a different spirit. After all, a toilet is a wonderful thing to have when you need it. Just try imagining your life without it. And the next time you begin to clean it, try approaching it in a more grateful way, taking it less for granted. As you scrub away, you can wish for all beings to be cleansed of impurities, greed, anger, and delusion. And you can again express your gratitude for the food that keeps you alive, and for your own body's internal plumbing, which processes this food before filtering, separating, and discarding its waste.

All of this takes very little time. First check the toilet paper, soap, towel, and cleaning brush. Then scrub out the bowl and wipe the surfaces of the lid and seat. Finally, rinse and wipe off the sink. By straightening and

cleaning the room, you make it pleasant for the next visitor, even when you live alone. If you feel like it, you can offer fresh flowers or burn a stick of incense.

As you do these everyday chores around the house, you have the perfect opportunity to engage in what some people refer to as integrative practice. This is just another way of saying that you try to bring the qualities of *zazen*, sitting meditation, into your everyday activities. The laundry or washroom offers another venue where you can experience this practice. It's just as natural for us to clean and care for the clothes we wear as it is for an egret to preen his feathers or for a house cat to lick her fur in the sunshine. Most people these days don't have to beat their clothing against river rocks or rinse them in their drinking pools. Doing the laundry can in fact be a very pleasant experience; it's a great chance to enjoy a feeling of renewal. Consider the warmth of the laundry that comes out of the dryer, the feel of each item as you fold it. If you use a clothesline to dry your laundry, you can also marvel at the warmth of the sun and the release of moisture into the air. Savor the aroma of freshness in the things you have washed. Consider the nature of the things before you and of those who made them available.

In formal Zen practice, there are explicit instructions on how to care for one's robes and bedding. Each item is handled in a certain way, washed in a certain way, and stored in a certain way, all handed down through the centuries from teacher to student. These small rituals have a twofold purpose: They help ensure uniformity and equality in the monastery setting, and they also help residents focus their attention on what they're doing. The point is not to do things quickly but to do them completely.

Today, we often sacrifice many of life's experiences for the sake of speed. We're constantly short of time, no matter how much time we have. We're continually preparing for and rushing to meet "something." What this "something" is, we often don't know. We only know that we have to be ready for it, and the sooner we escape from what it is we are doing, the better. But once we step back a bit and begin to look at things more carefully, we can begin asking the questions of ourselves that can instruct our lives. 21