

TRADITIONAL ZEN SPIRIT *“If you are trying to attain enlightenment, you are creating and being driven by karma, and you are wasting your time on your black cushion.”*

The most important things in our practice are our physical posture and our way of breathing. We are not so concerned about a deep understanding of Buddhism. As a philosophy, Buddhism is a very deep, wide, and firm system of thought, but Zen is not concerned about philosophical understanding. We emphasize practice. We should understand why our physical posture and breathing exercise are so important. Instead of having a deep understanding of the teaching, we need a strong confidence in our teaching, which says that originally we have Buddha nature. Our practice is based on this faith.

Before Bodhidharma went to China almost all the well-known stock words of Zen were in use. For instance, there was the term, “sudden enlightenment.” “Sudden enlightenment” is not an adequate translation, but tentatively I will use the expression. Enlightenment comes all of a sudden to us. This is true enlightenment. Before Bodhidharma, people thought that after a long preparation, sudden enlightenment would come. Thus Zen practice was a kind of training to gain enlightenment. Actually, many people today are practicing zazen with this idea. But this is not the traditional understanding of Zen. The understanding passed down from Buddha to our time is that when you start zazen, there is enlightenment even without any preparation. Whether you practice zazen or not, you have Buddha nature. Because you have it, there is enlightenment in your practice. The points we emphasize are not the stage we attain, but the strong confidence we have in our original nature and the sincerity of our practice. We should practice Zen with the same sincerity as Buddha. If originally we have Buddha nature, the reason we practice zazen is that we must behave like Buddha. To transmit our way is to transmit our spirit from Buddha. So we have to harmonize our spirit, our

physical posture, and our activity with the traditional way. You may attain some particular stage, of course, but the spirit of your practice should not be based on an egoistic idea.

According to the traditional Buddhist understanding, our human nature is without ego. When we have no idea of ego, we have Buddha's view of life. Our egoistic ideas are delusion, covering our Buddha nature. We are always creating and following them, and in repeating this process over and over again, our life becomes completely occupied by ego-centered ideas. This is called karmic life, or karma. The Buddhist life should not be karmic life. The purpose of our practice is to cut off the karmic spinning mind. If you are trying to attain enlightenment, that is a part of karma, you are creating and being driven by karma, and you are wasting your time on your black cushion. According to Bodhidharma's understanding, practice based on any gaining idea is just a repetition of your karma. Forgetting this point, many later Zen masters have emphasized some stage to be attained by practice.

More important than any stage which you will attain is your sincerity, your right effort. Right effort must be based on a true understanding of our traditional practice. When you understand this point you will understand how important it is to keep your posture right. When you do not understand this point, the posture and the way of breathing are just a means to attain enlightenment. If this is your attitude, it would be much better to take some drugs instead of sitting in the cross-legged position! If our practice is only a means to attain enlightenment, there is actually no way to attain it! We lose the meaning of the way to the goal. But when we believe in our way firmly, we have already attained enlightenment. When you believe in your way, enlightenment is there. But when you cannot believe in the meaning of the practice which you are doing in this moment, you cannot do anything. You are just wandering around the goal with your monkey mind. You are always looking for something without knowing what you are doing. If you want to see something, you should open your eyes. When you do not understand Bodhidharma's Zen, you are trying to look at something with your eyes closed. We do

not slight the idea of attaining enlightenment, but the most important thing is this moment, not some day in the future. We have to make our effort in this moment. This is the most important thing for our practice.

Before Bodhidharma, the study of Buddha's teaching resulted in a deep and lofty philosophy of Buddhism, and people tried to attain its high ideals. This is a mistake. Bodhidharma discovered that it was a mistake to create some lofty or deep idea and then try to attain it by the practice of zazen. If that is our zazen, it is nothing different from our usual activity, or monkey mind. It looks like a very good, a very lofty and holy activity, but actually there is no difference between it and our monkey mind. That is the point that Bodhidharma emphasized.

Before Buddha attained enlightenment he made all possible efforts for us, and at last he attained a thorough understanding of the various ways. You may think Buddha attained some stage where he was free from karmic life, but it is not so. Many stories were told by Buddha about his experiences after he attained enlightenment. He was not at all different from us. When his country was at war with a powerful neighbor, he told his disciples of his own karma, of how he suffered when he saw that his country was going to be conquered by the neighboring king. If he had been someone who had attained an enlightenment in which there was no karma, there would have been no reason for him to suffer so. And even after he attained enlightenment he continued the same effort we are making. But his view of life was not shaky. His view of life was stable, and he watched everyone's life, including his own life. He watched himself, and he watched others with the same eyes that he watched stones or plants, or anything else. He had a very scientific understanding. That was his way of life after he attained enlightenment.

When we have the traditional spirit to follow the truth as it goes, and practice our way without any egoistic idea, then we will attain enlightenment in its true sense. And when we understand this point we will make our best effort in each moment. That is true understanding of Buddhism. So our understanding of Buddhism is

not just an intellectual understanding. Our understanding at the same time is its own expression, is the practice itself. Not by reading or contemplation of philosophy, but only through practice, actual practice, can we understand what Buddhism is. Constantly, we should practice zazen, with strong confidence in our true nature, breaking the chain of karmic activity and finding our place in the world of actual practice.