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COMMENTARY BY MASTER SUZUKI ON MODEL SUBJECTS #14 & 15 FROM THE BLUE CLIFF RECORDS:

UM-MON ZENGI AND THE TEACHING GIVEN BY SHAKYAMUNI DURING HIS LIFETIME

First Question:

A traveling monk asked Um-mon Zengi: What is this first age of teaching? (The Teaching told by Buddha during Buddha's own lifetime.)

Um-mon replied: The teaching confronts each. (Model Subject #14)

Commentary:

The teaching given by Shakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime was accommodated to each disciple's particular temperament, and to each occasion's particular circumstances. For each case there should be a special remedy. According to the circumstances there should even be teachings other than the teachings which were told by Buddha. In the light of this, how is it possible to interpret and pass down an essential teaching which can be applied to every possible occasion and individual temperament?

Second Question:

The same monk asked Um-mon a second question: What would Buddha have done if there had been no one to hear the teaching and no occasion on which to apply the teaching?

Um-mon replied: Topsy-turvy idea. (Model Subject #15)

Background: the Founding of Sects

These questions and answers are quite interesting. This questioning monk had a preconceived idea of Zen Buddhism as an esoteric Dharma transmitted thru the Zen Patriarchs which is different from the teachings of other schools of Buddhism based on supposedly "dead" scriptures. Um-mon's answer points out the monk's misunderstanding of the real nature of the sects of Buddhism. (Um-mon's way of Zen was quite rough, but it was rough and strong enough to support Buddhism during the severe persecutions of his time.)

During Um-mon's time, so-called "Daruma Zen" (Bodhidharma's Zen) was becoming known as "Soshi Zen" (Patriarchal Zen): an esoteric school claiming special transmission outside the scriptures from Buddha to Mahakasyapa to Bodhidharma and the Zen Patriarchs. The school was popular in South China because of these claims of special transmission and because of the rough and whimsical methods of instruction used by the Zen Masters of the period. Eventually this school slighted scriptures and ignored precepts on the ground of Buddha's reported statement that: "words are not the first principle."

All the Sects Are One

The first principle of Buddhism is called by many names: Buddha-nature; Dharma-nature; Reality; Voidness; Tao; One Phrase of the Pre-voice; Great Light; Universal-nature; Butathagata; Saddharma; wonderful law or truth as revealed in the Lotus Sutra (Tendai Sect); the One Vehicle which contains final complete law (Kegon Sect); True Words (Shingon Sect); Anuttarasamyaksambodhi (or Anubodhi); unexcelled, correct, complete, universal wisdom of Buddha (a term often used by Dogen).

However, according to the most authentic tradition, the first principle, Buddha's teaching (as attained by Buddhas) in its pure and formless form, is not expressible by word or idea. Hence, the contribution of each sect to Buddhism is to give system to the scriptures, to set up the true words of the Tathagata (Buddha's highest title) in a consistent way so that people may understand and follow Buddha's way of life. The fundamental philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism affirms the absolute character of all phenomena and the possibility for ordinary people to attain Buddhahood.

The leading two Mahayana schools, Tendai, Kegon, applied Zen practice (Shikan) in order to attain thorough and deep insight into the Dharma. For the Shingon Sect, the pure and genuine teaching is in the Dainichi Sutra because it was supposedly told by Buddha in his samadhi to himself and not to an audience. The origin of this sutra is supposed to give it incontestable importance among all the sutras, and thus the Shingon Sect used it to authorize their teaching.

For the teaching of the Shingon Sect to be authorized should not mean that it is superior to other sects. The Zen practice of Dharma-zen transmitted from Bodhidharma may be considered different from the Zen practice of the Tendai and Kegon schools, and the idea of the Dharma-nature of samadhi may provide a turning point by which to differentiate the Zen school from other schools, but this does not mean that the Zen Sect or Soshi Zen is superior to other schools. Dharma-zen emphasizes practice instead of teaching, that is all; but this emphasis does not mean to ignore the words of Buddha.

The Nature of the Teaching

Whatever the teaching may be: the teaching confronts each. In accordance with the circumstances, the teaching has absolute value; and to accord with the circumstances the teaching should have an infinite number of forms.

Buddhism in its pure and formless form is given to us in samadhi or zazen when we are ready to accept Buddhism without expecting anything. Buddhism is not something you will find out when you try. When you are just ready to accept it, everything you see flashes forth the great light, everything you hear is the wondrous Pre-voice. That is why we sit.

Enko Zeng, in his introduction to Main Subject #15, mentions the "Life-taking Sword" in order to clarify Um-mon Zengi's answer, "Topsy-turvy idea." "To kill" means not to expect anything, not to put any object in front of you, and to be one with what is given to you, as if you use your own hands. "To kill Buddha" means just to be ready to be Buddha. To be ready to accept everything as it comes to you, one thing after another, is Buddha's activity. In this way the gist of the teaching does not escape you.

If you have a preconceived idea of the first principle, that idea is topsy-turvy; and as long as you try to find out what is the first principle which can be applied to every occasion, you will have topsy-turvy ideas. Such ideas are not necessary, Buddha's great light shines forth from everything, each moment.