

The Gift of Zazen

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I AM STILL STUDYING to find out what our way is. Recently I reached the conclusion that there is no Buddhism or Zen or anything. When I was preparing for the evening lecture in San Francisco yesterday, I tried to find something to talk about, but I couldn't; then I thought of the story I was told in Obun Festival when I was young. The story is about water and the people in Hell.

Although they have water, the people in hell cannot drink it because the water burns like fire or it looks like blood, so they cannot drink it. For the celestial beings, water is a jewel, and for fish it is their home, and for the human being it is water. If you think "water is water" that is a human understanding. Although water is like fire or looks like blood for those in hell, or like a jewel for the celestial beings, or a home for fish, you may think that that is not real water, as you may think that zazen practice is real practice and the rest of the everyday activities are the application of zazen. Zazen is fundamental practice. But Dogen Zenji amazingly said, "Water is not water." If you think water is water your understanding of water is not much different from a fish's, a hungry ghost's or an angel's understanding of water. There is not much difference between our understanding and their understanding.

Then, what is our zazen? Or what is water? And if zazen is not zazen, what is it that we are practicing everyday? That is the next question. Dogen Zenji says, "This is Buddha's activity," some activity which was given to you. Tentatively, the water is not water actually; it is something which was given to you. Our practice is not something you can understand, because it is something which is given to you. You didn't make it; you did not invent it; the reason you can practice it is just because it was something which was given to you. This practice is possible because Buddha gave this practice to us. We do not know what it is, but because it was given to us we have to receive it, we have to accept it. That is why we practice zazen.

Now, if you understand our way in this way whatever you do that is the gift for you, something which was given to you and something you should accept. Because you cannot accept everything and you cannot choose everything, you have no chance to accept something when it is given to you. Even though there are various treasures, if they are not given to you, you cannot accept them. And the way to accept it is to accept it when it is given to you. You cannot say, "I will accept it tomorrow." You

cannot say, "I can accept it yesterday." The only way is to accept it right now, when it was given to you, then tomorrow something new will be given to you. So, day by day, we practice our way, as a gift. And we accept it when it is given to us. The Buddha gives everything according to the people and the situation. When they are in hell the gift will be fire. For celestial beings the gift will be the jewel. For fish the gift will be their home. And there may be many kinds of gifts from Buddha, according to the nature of people. When you understand this there is no problem. This is how to practice our way. This is the real gift from Buddha.

Not only water, but a mountain is also a gift. A mountain is not always a mountain. To us it is a mountain, but to a bird it is home. Fuyo Dokai Zenji says, "The east mountain flowing, and the river stays." Water stays and mountain flows. We think a mountain is something which is always staying in some certain place, but there may be some person who sees the mountain flowing and water staying. A gift is not just something we see. It looks like a mountain, or water, or cake, or something else; it looks so. But we don't know exactly what it is. So before we understand what it is, the only way is to accept it and to practice it. That is actually true practice, or else you cannot practice our way. Even though you have built a zendo you cannot practice.

At Tassajara for almost one year we have been trying to practice our way very seriously, and the more we make our effort to practice our way, the more we are involved in big problems. There are more than forty people and they each have their own understanding of Zen, more or less. "This is Zen!" "This is Zen!" That is the trouble. Because you practice zazen you cannot practice; you cannot have Tassajara. Even though they are there they cannot do it. Why? Because they practice zazen. So I think the best way is not to practice zazen [laughter] but just to live in Tassajara, like a bird. Then you can practice zazen. Birds or badgers know what is zazen better than students in Tassajara. This happens, actually. Because we understand water is something to drink, we think water is not something to live in; this kind of one-sided understanding of our way creates many problems. So, at Tassajara, there is Tassajara's way; here in Los Altos there is your own way; as a gift. And the only way to practice it is to receive it, just to receive it when it is given to you. This is a very important point.

Even though I say this, to make our effort to find out what is real practice is not in vain, and I am so grateful for students in Tassajara, and the students who practice in Los Altos, in the Bay Area, and recently in Mill Valley, too. They are making a big effort. We are finding out the real meaning of our practice. After making a big effort to find out what is zazen, we are almost finding out what is true zazen and why we should practice our way in this cross-legged position—finding out the understanding of our practice which was given to us by Buddha.