

## **Vespers, Part I: “The Litany of the Great Compassionate One”**

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What I'm going to be talking about tonight is the Evening Office that we do each evening after meditation, what we have so called in the past "Vespers." Vespers simply means the evening, and the occurrence of the evening star, and is a term we borrowed from Western monasticism. The purpose of the recitation of these scriptures at the end of meditation in the evening is to set up the process of training and meditation for the night. It is done so that the Wheel of the Law turns and continues to turn during sleep, so that a person makes the right decisions in the event of death during that time, but also so that meditation continues through the night. It's interesting that Dogen's discussion of the monastic schedule does not start with Morning Service; it starts with meditation the evening before, so to emphasize the continuance that goes on and that meditation and training are something that go on day and night.

The first Scripture that we do for Evening Office is called "The Litany of the Great Compassionate One," or the "Daihi Shin Dharani" in Japanese, the Dharani of the Great Compassionate One. A dharani is not a paragraph, in the sense of the way English is written in the form of a paragraph, with a beginning, subject, etc. A dharani or a mantra is a series of interjections. We use the word "litany" because in Western church music a litany is a list, as it were, of titles, like "The Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary"; it's a listing of interjections. One of the problems in translating things from Sanskrit into English along these lines is that one has to be very careful not to make it sound ridiculous. There are Sanskrit mantras that are the equivalent of "bang," but you can't quite do "bang, bang, bang," if you see what I mean, without it seeming silly in English. In Sanskrit there are words which are like the snapping of the fingers, to call attention to a particular point or emphasize a particular word, and so when this dharani was translated an attempt was made to convey as much as possible the religious meaning and not necessarily use all the little Sanskrit words, which don't do the same thing for us. For those of you who have been at a Shurangama Ceremony, Rev. Hubert translated some of the Sanskrit mantras as "peace," for example.

"The Litany of the Great Compassionate One," like all dharanis or mantras, is for the purpose of generating within oneself, in this case, Great Compassion. If one says that Great Compassion is something that is within oneself, to many people's minds that makes it small, or makes it a product of people's minds, and it is much more than that. It is personified as Avalokiteshwara, in this case the thousand-armed with multiple hands, with an eye in each of them. The meaning of the hand with the eye in the centre of it is that one makes use of all aspects of one's body and mind to benefit others and that this is beyond the usual limitations that we think of concerning ourselves. When we can truly let go of the separate self and generate Great Compassion—True Compassion—then Great Compassion manifests itself in all that we do and is not something that we produce. It is something, in other words, that arises out of our training, out of our meditation, out of learning how to be still, and is not a contrived phenomenon, although the gateway in is to try to be kind, if I can put it that way. One starts with what is in front of one, and as one enters through, it becomes wider and wider and wider.

So, the Scripture starts off with "*Adoration to the Triple Treasure!*:" which is Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the

taking of refuge in something that is greater than oneself.

*"Adoration to Kanzeon Who is the Great Compassionate One!"* When I recite this, a question arises: Who is the Great Compassionate One? Where is the Great Compassionate One located? It's not something that can be found at some great distance; it's something that has to be found within oneself. The answer to the traditional question used in koan Zen, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" is similar to this, because we have to make this real for ourselves.

*"Om to the One Who leaps beyond all fear!"* This was one of Reverend Master's favourite quotes and, again, who is the one who leaps beyond all fear? When we let go of our grasping, then there can be a leaping beyond all fear, but only, and I'll come back to this, if the one who leaps is not us.

*"Having adored Him, may I enter into the heart of the Noble, Adored Kanzeon!"* which means, "May I come to know fully what Great Compassion is and make it real for myself," and it bears on that story of the lay disciple who says, "In my garden there is a stone, which sits up and lies down." He means himself. It was a poetic way to refer to oneself, also meaning this thing which is difficult to deal with. "Can I carve it into a Buddha?" And when he asked the teacher that particular question, the teacher said, "Yes, you can." But *then* the person said, "Well, maybe I cannot," and the teacher's response was, "No, you cannot." Ultimately only you can make *you* True, by your own training.

*"His life is the completion of meaning."* We talk about what is the meaning of our lives or the significance of our lives. Great Compassion truly understood, and as Dogen would say, digested thoroughly, is the completion of meaning, is what gives meaning to one's life, one's existence. Great Compassion in this is not separate from meditation and training. When I was first at the Abbey somebody made a very important point; that what we are seeking is not perfection, but rather compassion.

*"It is pure, it is that which makes all beings victorious and cleanses the path of all existence."* This is the path of karma, both from the distant past and from the present, because that which cleanses karma, whether of this life or of the past, is compassion. If we wish to truly cleanse the path of all existence, if we wish to deal with our past karma, it isn't a matter of having to fix it in some way. As a matter of fact, it's often that we can't go back and fix it, but when we can see it through the eyes of Great Compassion and have compassion, then that is what cleanses it.

*"Om, O Thou Seer,"* Seer: One who sees truly, one who sees far, one who has what Reverend Master Jiyu used to call long-distance eyes. Long-distance eyes see compassion in things and in the cause of things, if I can put it that way. *"World-Transcending One! O hail to the Great Bodhisattva!"* As I said, this is not a paragraph with subject, verb, object.

So, it says, *"All, all is defilement, defilement, earth, earth."* This is often the way we see it, whether it's in our jobs that we do, or anything else. There is the story of Tozan, who was with his teacher, and they were down by the river washing out their bowls, and they saw two birds devouring a snake, or a frog, tearing apart a snake or a frog, and Tozan turned to his teacher and said, "How has it come to this? Why does this happen?" And his teacher said, "Only for your benefit," which was not a metaphysical statement, or a cosmological one, or even a karmic one. He was saying that when you encounter whatever you encounter, the nature of it does not take away your responsibility regarding training and what you do with that encounter, whether or not you can do something about the way you think another being is suffering. Training does not have results in the way other things have results. Sawaki Kodo used to say, "Zazen (meditation) is good for nothing," by which he meant that it has no value in a commercial way. People can get health benefits from doing other things. If they want to calm down their whatevers they can do biofeedback or something.

Then the next sentence, which is very, very important, coming out of the seeing of "defilement, earth." *"Do, do the work within my heart."* Who is it that does the work within the heart? I like to think of this phrase as referring to that which happens in the very, very deep caverns of our being through the permeation of training and meditation and of our sincere intent. It permeates very, very deeply to very, very deep aspects of ourselves, deep into our hearts without it necessarily being visible to us.

*"Oh great Victor, I hold on, hold on. To Indra the Creator I cry!"* Sometimes it seems that all we can do is to hold on, hold on.

In Japan, when they bless a new stupa or tombstone, they write an inscription down the back of it: the manji or swastika, and they do three of them, meaning "Move, move, move." Then they do three of the character "shin," or heart, one after the other. This is the True Heart, *"Move, move, my defilement-free One!"* Then they write the Sanskrit character for Great Compassion, which has a long tail on the end of it. They draw it all the way down to the very bottom, so that when the tombstone goes in the ground, the tail of the letter goes all the way down into the earth. This means that through the use of our intention and will, in the sense of willingness, the movement that we generate for our training is the movement of the defilement-free One, that which is truly pure within our own hearts. This is what generates Great Compassion, and that Great Compassion penetrates all the way through.

*"Come, come, hear, hear, a joy springs up in me!"* As a result of this, then the joy that does arise within oneself, not as a personal possession and different from the happiness of attaching to the self, is the happiness of letting go.

*"Speak, speak, give me direction!"* which is related to the taking of refuge, both interiorly and with others.

*"Awakened, awakened, I have awakened!"* This is the voice of our True Nature, which is awakened and aware and is Great Compassion and Great Wisdom and Great Mercy from the very, very beginning. It is difficult for us to imagine that this is true, because we often see only the clouds that obscure our own natures, and yet it is nonetheless true and nonetheless what people have actually experienced, that when we let go of this there *is* something there.

*"Oh merciful One, compassionate One, Of daring ones the most joyous, hail! Thou art all successful, hail!"* Success in training is not the same thing as success in anything else. It cannot be measured in the same way and, as Sawaki Kodo said, it is good for nothing; it cannot be bought or sold, and it is something in which we train our imperfections in the middle of true perfection and even when we come to the point of *seeing* that true perfection and true purity we continue to train our imperfections. It becomes like swimming in a great ocean, to use a metaphor, with one's pockets filled with rocks. One is still swimming in the great ocean and one still has to work on the rocks, but the rocks do not interfere with the swimming.

*"Thou hast attained mastery in the discipline, hail!"* This refers to sila or Precepts: to truly practice the Precepts.

*"Thou hast a weapon within Thine hand, hail!"* This is traditionally depicted as either a sword—given that nobody uses swords nowadays, sometimes the metaphor is kind of lost—that which cuts through; and sometimes it's the bow and arrow, because skill in our training arises again out of Great Compassion.

*"Thou hast the Wheel within Thine hand, hail!"* Wherever the heart of True Compassion exists, the true teaching comes. As Dogen says, "Anything can teach." It does not have to do so deliberately.

*"Thou Who hast the lotus, hail!"* The lotus is the symbol of purity, of true awakening, of our True Natures. The holding of each of these things is, in the iconography, being offered to us, and we should not be hesitant to accept that which is offered.

*"Hail to Thee Who art the root of eternity!"* In "The Most Excellent Mirror-Samadi," it says, "the Absolute Upright;" in the *Denkoroku*, it says, "That Which Is, the Eternal, the Lord of the House." What Shakyamuni Buddha called, "the Unborn, Uncreated, Unformed, Undying" is the root of eternity, is that which is fixed and does not move, and is still and completely transparent. It cannot be anybody's personal possession because nobody has more of it than anybody else, *and unless we train we will not experience it.*

*"Hail to Thee Who art all compassion! Hail!"* And again: who is "Thee"? One is, in a sense, addressing oneself in this. Reverend Master Jiyu always used to say that one could make good use of "The Litany of the Great Compassionate One" to turn the Wheel of the Law, and that was not a wrongful use of it. It is considered particularly efficacious in despair, actually.

*"Adoration to the Triple Treasure! Hail!"* — the Three Refuges.

*"Give ear unto this my prayer, hail."* And again, this is something within, rather than outside of oneself. People often make a distinction in training with Buddhism; they say, "Is this outside of me or is this inside of me?" Sometimes the problem is that people have not experienced their own Treasure House, so they do not realize that the whole of the iconography, the pictures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, are depictions of our own Treasure House. As it says, "The sage will tell a trainee, who is feeling he is low and all inferior, that on his head there gleams a jewelled diadem, and on his body rich robes hang and at his feet there is a footrest." And when the teacher says that, they are simply describing the Buddha Nature of the person concerned; and it says, "If the trainee hears this teaching with surprise and doubt," then the sage goes back to saying all things have the Buddha Nature: cats and cows and everything else. And if cats and cows have the Buddha Nature, you do; but that doesn't stand against the jewelled diadem. That actually exists.

Now, before I go on, I was wondering whether there were any questions.

*Q:* I've been puzzled by "Indra the Creator."

*A:* On one level it's basically a cry for help to anything. Indra actually means the world created through our sense organs, and Buddhist symbolism in India in general is not exactly positive or negative, but is based upon the process of training, so that one symbol can mean the beginning of training as well as its fruition. So Indra means the sense organs, but it also means that which brings about True Life. It means the enlivening aspect; that's one way I can put it. As Rev. Master said, "Zen is eternal life." There's a story that kind of goes, "Does the dragon roar in the withered tree?", which means that people often think that training will kill their humanity, if they give up things or let go of things; that there will be nothing on the other side of it, and the dragon's roar in the withered tree is in reference to this. Some of you have seen what I hold at formal sanzen: that twisted nyoï I have, carved out of a dead, twisted branch. That's used in China to represent that there is something alive beyond the usual way of looking at life and death. So, calling upon Indra the Creator would, in India, include that whole range of things; in the beginning, refuge in the world that we create and the way we see, and later, within this, refuge in the Great Compassion; because without Great Compassion, samsara, the world as we experience it, is like a heap of broken dishes or an enormous amount of trash paper blowing in the wind; that's the only way I can put it.

In Buddhist medicine, it is said that the causes of enlightenment are the same as the causes of mental illness. They both result from the direct encounter with impermanence: one is the letting go of it; the other is the inability to let go of it. Both see, only in different ways. I think that is why it is said that to alcoholism there is a spiritual base, because people are actually seeking that which is beyond samsara but do not have a practical way of doing so, so they find the nearest thing, if I can put it that way. Viewing alcoholism that way is viewing it through Great Compassion. This doesn't mean that when the drunken person appears at the gate they're not still Buddha; they're a drunken Buddha, and Buddhas need to be shown somewhere where they can sleep it off before they can participate, but they're no less. Compassion doesn't mean that one does not see things as they are, although, as Reverend Master Jiyu used to say, "If one trains oneself one runs the risk of being seen as unrealistic in the eyes of the world, and maybe even to the extent of being called a bleeding heart."

Indra also represented that which, in the really old depictions of the life of the Buddha, stood behind Shakyamuni, holding a vajra, a dorje, which is sometimes in the shape of a dumbbell with large ends. This figure is always standing behind, and is sometimes seen as the true nature of, or to other people, the guardian deity of Shakyamuni. It is one of those things in Buddhism that is no doubt talking about something that is actually experienced, and the only way they could depict it was by depicting it in that form, and I certainly know for myself there are quite a number of things that I would never have thought were literally so that are, but not literally so in the way I would have thought.

Any other questions?

*Q:* The turning of the Wheel;<sup>1</sup> the story of the cart, where you leave the burning house, and the cart, its wheel is there. I find it comforting in that I associate it with something happening, with a given commission, that I've invited, that goes on all the time.

*A:* Yes. Yes.

*Q:* That even though I may—that I *do* have the Buddha Nature, I'm not living *in* the state of enlightenment, so it's expanding that, going towards, always.

*A:* Yes. Because what happens as that occurs over a period of time, and the interior movement and change happen in the person, is that the expansion, sometimes seen symbolically as the opening of a lotus blossom, takes place within; I could say within oneself, but that sounds like it's in one's tummy—within, and, as that happens, there is the conversion of karma. When we hear "conversion of karma," we think, oh yeah, you scrub your clothes and the dirt goes down the drain, but in the way karma is converted, those very things which are obstacles become the cart wheels, in the same way as greed, hate and delusion become compassion, love and wisdom through training. It's just the same substance transformed. There's a quote from W.H. Auden, and he's talking about the origins of World War II, in a sense the origins of suffering:

*"For the error bred in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
Craves what it cannot have,  
Not universal love  
But to be loved alone."<sup>2</sup>*

And that is what it's all about, and that can be transformed. When the self changes then everything looks different, and as each part of that karma changes then it is an impetus toward training, and that transformation goes on and when we come to particular points along the way we have a glimpse of it, but that doesn't mean it only goes on when we have a glimpse. It's like D.T. Suzuki's comment of "Once or twice I've had the great experience and a million times the little

moments that make one dance." When we see the little moments we think they are only occurring at that time, rather than something that is going on *all* the time. Sometimes we see it and sometimes we don't. As it says, "Sometimes we raise the eyebrows of old Shakyamuni, and sometimes we do not." Sometimes it is good to do and sometimes not. What do you think?<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

1. See "The Parable of the Burning House" in *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Japan: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 85-88.
2. W. H. Auden, "September 1st 1939," *Another Time* (New York: Random House) © 1940 W.H. Auden.
3. See Great Master Keizan Zenji, *The Denkoroku*, Chapter 2. Trans. by Rev. Hubert Nearman (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1993), pp. 5-10.