

## NEWSLETTER

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### TASTE-TESTING THE COMPOST

The occasion of my 30<sup>th</sup> monastic ordination anniversary prompted me to do some reflection on the past thirty years -- please see CZBP Newsletter 15, December 2005. That very reflection reminded me of the time that I have spent over the years judging my training -- a kind of deluded attempt at reflection that is, unfortunately, caught in the opposites. From personal experience, I often warn trainees that this is a waste of time and a distraction. Encouraging judgmentalism is not helpful, and in itself tends to create suffering. Training takes a long time, and our continually getting involved with how we think that we are doing, or comparing ourselves with others, or with some ideal, or simply with our own expectations, tends to get in the way of getting on with it. In my experience this judgmentalism tends to feed impatience, frustration and despair. Those are habits that are not helpful to persevering in our training.

As we train, we become aware of all of the old habits that we cling to that cause our suffering. When we begin to see them, we may not realize that our very seeing is due to our training, and we may tend to judge what we see, identifying them as obstacles to training, as bad, as worthless trash, as burdens to be gotten rid of. My Master described these habits in a different way, giving me a new and helpful perspective. She called them compost. All of our habits are the eventual fertilizer of our training. Our habits are our own particular doors in to the Buddha-Dharma.

Compost is a very descriptive metaphor, since most of us are already familiar with it as something that begins with our waste and through work and time, becomes something that helps things grow. The lotus is a similar metaphor for training. Its roots begin in the mud and its stem grows up through dark/murky water, before its lovely bloom can spread above that water. Early in my training I was only interested in the blossom, or the fruit that the compost can produce. I was definitely not interested in doing the dirty work that precedes/produces these wonderful gifts. I was too impatient for the rewards to be willing to give anything the chance to deeply root itself and produce the strong stem that is the foundation for hardy blossoms. It took me many frustrating years to realize that the gifts (the blossom or fruit) are the reward of the work, and do not accrue otherwise. This is the Law of Karma.

For those of us who are willing to try to do the work, the problem of impatience may still arise: "Are we there yet?" This is when we keep taste-testing the compost, if you will. And is it any wonder that we may not find the flavor to our liking? After all, just think about what goes into compost. When the taste isn't to our liking, isn't up to our standards of what we think our training should be, this can be discouraging. This is why judgmentalism is so unhelpful. There is probably nothing wrong with the compost. The problem is with our standards, our "shoulds," our delusion. How can we expect ourselves to have the expertise to know if the compost is doing well, until we have lots of experience with compost and gardening (training) in general. This is when we need to have compassion for ourselves, let go of our expectations, and understand that we simply don't know what the compost should taste like, or to understand that we really have no business tasting it in the first place. This is when we must rely on faith to keep us going until we personally have more experience with this process.

In any case, when we judge our training (if you are anything like me) we are very likely focusing on the wrong thing. What I focused on is how I felt or thought compared with a) how I expected to feel or think, b) how I wished to feel or think, c) how fast my feelings or thoughts were changing in the desired direction, d) how "good" (or "bad" ) were my feelings or thoughts, etc. This is all ephemera anyway, and much (if not all) of it is simply the effect of past karma. This very act of judging how I felt or thought told me much more about my training (if I had been willing to see), than how I actually did feel or think. In fact this judging was my training, but I was too close to it. It was such a part of me that I couldn't see it. I couldn't imagine any other way of being

until my Master's continual admonition to stop judging finally got through, and I decided to try. It took great courage for me to be willing to attempt to do that, and I was astonished with the results. I didn't become some evil, horrible person, acting out my every whim without the corset of judgmentalism. In the back of my mind this is what I had suspected might happen. In fact, I felt much freer and more able to keep the Precepts and train, not wasting all of the energy that I had been diverting into irrelevancies. I had just taken a step in learning to trust myself. Please understand that this first step was just that, with many, many missteps to come, much falling back into old habits, getting up and dusting myself off and trying again, always trying again, continuing even now to try again. Please note that I would suggest that it is probably good to do this kind of training in the context of regular contact with a teacher, lest we really do make the mistake of beginning to ignore the Precepts, or to simply become confused about Preceptual behavior.

When looking at my training I also had much impatience arise, as well as frustration, dissatisfaction and discouragement. I would keep pointing out to myself that I wasn't, and didn't seem to be becoming what I "should" be, what I had expected. I would continually get stuck on belittling, or becoming dejected about, my training. All of this, however, was really a dead end. The real training was in learning to be willing to try to simply let all of this judgmentalism, all of these opinions, go. Rather than using my impatience, or frustration, or dissatisfaction, or discouragement as a club to beat myself with, I needed to be willing to actually try to recognize the impatience, etc. itself as what needed to be let go of. Rather than toward all of my myriad failings, my training needed to re-orient itself toward dealing with--converting--the habits of impatience, judgmentalism, expectation, "shoulds," etc. I needed to stop wallowing in, and let go of all of my opinions about my training. These were the source of my suffering. By the way, this applies equally well to someone who feels that his/her training is going very well. In fact pride or satisfaction may be a more dangerous dead end than what I experienced. We need to be willing to work on letting go of all of our opinions about our training.

What I am trying to discourage with all of the above is judgmentalism, not the process of "recollection," i.e. setting aside a time to review our daily actions in light of the Precepts. Recollection can be a very useful practice and was recommended by my Master. What I do not recommend is trying to discover if our training is "good" or "bad" in light of our likes and dislikes, what we want or don't want, our expectations or opinions. To do this is encouraging the arising of the opposites and, as Dogen described in his *Rules for Meditation*:

...WHEN THE OPPOSITES ARISE, THE BUDDHA MIND IS LOST.\*

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