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FEAR AND DESPAIR

The first edition of this article was published in The Journal of Throssel Hole Priory, Volume VII, Nos. 3,4, March-April 1980. I decided that much of its value was in giving a perspective on a young monk's struggle with training, so I have tried to maintain that voice throughout, making relatively few changes to my words, even if I would write about it differently now. The occasional comment in brackets is from my current perspective.

The Precepts are an essential part of the practice of Buddhism. The Precepts are one side of the gate, and meditation is the other. One without the other is a dead end. For some of us coming out of a Judeo-Christian background, the Precepts may seem to be just another strait-jacket of "Thou shalt not(s)". At first we may only follow them with the faith that our teacher [Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett] knows what she is talking about; with the faith that by following this path we will come to understand in our hearts what is really good to do. The Precepts are simply an expression of the way an enlightened being acts, and by following them to the best of our ability, we come to learn to express our own Buddha Nature.

At Shasta Abbey we read the Precepts everyday while making Gassho. I used to find this one of the most difficult things that I "had" to do. I had always thought of myself as trying to be a "good" person--I was afraid of not being perfect--and the Precepts were, seemingly, battering at me to be more perfect, to pull the moral corset a bit tighter still, until I began to feel that I couldn't breathe. Something in me truly wanted to do the very best I could, and the despair that arose from reading what I judged to be evidence pointing at my continued failure was sometimes overwhelming. I got to where I desperately wanted to avoid that morning reading period, because of my fear and self-judgment that I would never be able to overcome my non-Preceptual habits.

In meditation we are taught to allow things (thoughts, emotions, perceptions, sensations) to arise and to allow them to pass. I was trying to deal with my own greeds, hates, and delusions by trying to not allow them to arise. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to deal with them if they did arise. Here we begin to get to the root of the thing. I didn't trust myself. I did not have faith in my own Buddha Nature.

Repression (not allowing things to arise) is an interesting phenomena. By the very act of repressing we give energy to the things with which we are trying to deal. While I wasn't letting it out, and while I was at the same time not facing it, not trying to deal with it, not accepting it, I was effectively (quite effectively, I might add) creating a pressure cooker. When the pressure (tension) got to where I felt that I couldn't stand it any longer, I would allow past habits to control me. I would use them to try to relax, or at least to distract myself. After the "crisis" had passed I would experience the despair of not having faced whatever needed to be faced, and the fear that this cycle would just continue.

When I realized that fear was no longer something I wished to use to control myself, fear arose that, without it, I would not be able to control myself. This came from a basic misunderstanding of meditation and of my own strengths. Allowing things to arise can be scary, because we may have always, heretofore, allowed them to control us when they did arise. It is very important to understand that this is not inevitable, and learning this is, in fact, part of the purpose of training. There is a space between the arising of some desire, emotion, or thought, and our acting upon it. For those in the world of animals, this space is not recognized, and whatever arises is, as much as possible, immediately put into action. Humans who act like this may think of themselves, with some delight, as being spontaneous.

Through meditation, we can learn to be aware of this space and we can also learn

that it is our choice whether we act upon whatever arises. The real spontaneity is in "spontaneously," without argument, listening to our heart and doing whatever is GOOD, always being guided by the Precepts and always with the awareness that we could be wrong. Meditation never guarantees that we will not make mistakes. In fact, training is being willing to do whatever needs to be done even though we know that we will make mistakes, and also being willing to learn from those mistakes.

So constantly I had this dull anxiety with me that made life more than I wished to bear. I did have this vague hope that if I could just stick it out long enough, within my own personal hell without breaking the Precepts too badly, I might have a kensho and then "all my troubles would be over." [This was a misunderstanding of kensho (an enlightenment experience).]

So all of my energy was going into the fear of not being perfect, the fear of having to cope with a world that I felt I wasn't really capable of dealing with (and if I let it show, maybe others would realize that I really couldn't do it, and I would be asked to leave) and all the despair that arose out of that. Until, that is, the day when I realized that fear and despair were as much a breakage of the Precepts as were anger and lying. I was stunned. Without realizing it I had been "taking refuge" in the delusions of fear and despair rather than taking refuge in the Three Treasures. And then I was incredibly relieved. I no longer had to pay any attention to those two delusions. [Although, I have since found that easier said than done.]

It was ironic how willing I felt to try to keep the Precepts that prevented harm to others, but was totally oblivious to the aspects of the Precepts about not harming myself. I was also amazed to realize that I was, at least on some level, afraid or despairing because I chose to be. How many times have I gotten myself into a situation which caused tension or anxiety, fear or despair? And it always seemed that these feelings just proved the importance of dealing with the situation, when all the time what I needed to do was simply be willing to let go of clinging to the tension, or fear, or despair. To do this I found that I first needed to grow faith. I continue to work on doing this by doing the best that I can (that's all that anyone can do, and no more is asked of anyone) to train everyday. I often seemed to do a terrible job, but I came to realize that as long as I was doing the best that I could, that was all that was required. I also came to realize that it was simply my judgment of what I had done or not done that was often at the heart of the matter. As it says in *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity** in "The Visitation and Exhortation of the Dying and Dead" on p. 118:

Know that NOTHING stands between you and the Lord except your own opinion of yourself.

and again on p. 119:

Do not, through feelings of unworthiness, try to flee because of your past actions, do not judge yourself before the Lord for in Pure Love there is no judgement...

Essentially, I was setting myself up above the Unborn, the Lord of the House. I couldn't even ask for help because then my "secret" of imperfection would be out of the bag. Then Rev. Master Jiyu began talking about "offering *all* things up" to the Unborn. I really didn't understand that at first. I remember though, when I began to have an inkling of what this was about. I was feeling particularly joyful for no apparent reason and so I offered this up. And it went. It left me. For a second I was stunned. And then I felt cheated. I had offered up this joy but I certainly didn't expect it to be taken! After I had gotten over my indignation I began to understand better what offering up was all about. This was something that I was honestly willing to offer to the Unborn without holding back,

without thinking that it was not good enough. And the offering was accepted, although I had kind of hoped that maybe we could share it or something.

I began to realize that if I really wanted to take this seriously, I would have to be willing to offer all things up to the Cosmic Buddha, even my anger, despair, sexual desire, fear, etc. This came to a kind of head one day when I was really angry with everyone and everything, "...and maybe I'll leave, I'll show them, and nobody cares anyway." I'm not sure why, maybe as much to prove people wrong as anything, I went into the Meditation Hall, and offered up this anger--and it went. Suddenly I was very still, and I understood then what one of the seniors had told me. That this anger, or fear or whatever is not really me. I knew that the stillness was what was real, and that I had simply been feeding the anger to keep it alive. I was very grateful for that knowledge.

Now let me say here, in my experience offering something up does not necessarily mean that you will no longer feel the thing, or be affected by it. It does mean that if you are truly willing to stop clinging to, or pushing away from this thing, it will begin to stop controlling you. Sometimes I find that this willingness has to be renewed constantly. Basically it is just the continuous coming back--to just sitting still, to stopping feeding this thing that seems to have me by the throat--that is the heart of our meditation.

I had been aware that tension affected many aspects of my life but before I started to train I didn't understand the source of the tension. I am now beginning to. Fear is a funny thing. If it is your "karmic rut" it's not really necessary to have a situation that raises fear within you; it can be that fear is always present and it is simply applied to whatever situation arises. It can be, in effect, your standard reaction to the world. This can obviously warp your view of reality and your view of yourself, and it can also cause a great deal of suffering. There are other "karmic ruts": anger, pride, insensitivity, jealousy, greed, etc. Each person must discover and deal with their own.

Sometimes in a deluded attempt to deal with my fear I simply refused to look at certain situations, to admit that they existed. I remember some of my first attempts at serving during formal meals in the Meditation Hall, as a postulant. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the process, at Shasta Abbey meditation hall meals are eaten while seated on the tan [meditation platform], facing outwards, not toward the wall. Postulants and novices serve the food to all in the Hall. This must be done quickly, carefully, and efficiently. It is an excellent aid to meditation--if your mind wanders you may pour hot soup in someone's lap. Anyway, I was frightened and didn't want to make any mistakes (especially where everyone could see--that I wasn't perfect), so when I dropped some food on the floor, I quickly (and almost unconsciously) kicked it under the serving cart, hoping that nobody had seen. And then, of course my co-server and I picked up the cart to move on to the next two people. Well, there lay my karma uncovered, and it really began to dawn on me that one cannot simply sweep mistakes under the rug. It's amazing how long it takes for some things to sink. By refusing to look at our mistakes and to try to deal with them, we have cut ourselves off from the possibility of doing something about ourselves, for if we are afraid to look to see what needs to be done, afraid of what we might see or need to do, how can we possibly do anything.

One thing that fear teaches us is to be sensitive to others, after all, if you are not, they might hit you or something. Once you've begun to deal with fear you may find that that sensitivity can be useful. It may be that it can help with the Three Pure Precepts. In *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom***, Rev. Master Jiyu sets down her understanding of the Precepts. On page 31 she writes of the third Pure Precept - "Do Good for Others.":

Do not set up a chain of causation that will cause others to do wrong; do not do that which will cause another to grieve; do not do that which will result in my creating karma for another being; do not accidentally set the wheel of karma in motion.

This may be an excellent place to positively use the sensitivity born out of fear. First, however, you need to begin to get yourself out of the way.

Fear and despair may arise from a sense of inadequacy, a feeling of not being able to cope with the world. In a sense this is taking natural spiritual humility to an extreme. Rev. Master has said, in a recent lecture:

Do not debase yourself and do not puff yourself up. If you cannot believe that you too possess the Divine Light, you are again in duality. One has to be very careful of humility, an incredibly dangerous pitfall. At the same time humility is absolutely essential.

Know then that there is no safe place to hide. If you truly wish to do something about your own suffering you must start from where you are. Your sticking your head in the sand will help no one. All you can do is just get started and the best time to do that is now.

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* *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1990, 2nd Ed. Rev.

** *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death*, Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., Shasta Abbey Press, 1993, 2nd Ed. Rev.