



FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

I am writing on the first day of 2015. In this Year of the Sheep, a twelve-year return for me (I'll turn seventy-two in October), I am entering my fifth year as abbot of the Zen Studies Society. As the dark days of this winter season gradually brighten, I have been doing a lot of introspection about the future of Rinzai Zen practice in America; about authenticity in training; and about upholding and transmitting Buddha-Dharma in these turbulent times.

During these years of transition at ZSS, we have focused on motivating sincere students who want to train in this challenging yet transformative and spiritually rewarding practice. We are making every effort to provide an environment that inspires and nurtures their enthusiasm. We continue to examine how best to attract and encourage long-term, serious residents. Our mission is to offer a strong, clear, decisive atmosphere that conveys the core principles of Rinzai Zen Buddhism yet is in keeping with American ideals of open communication, psychological health, mutual respect, and inclusiveness.

How do we provide training that upholds the rigor of daily practice and is true to the essence of Rinzai Zen, yet is responsive to our culture and our time? There's no one answer, no "one size fits all." As the Buddha taught, we need to work appropriately with each person using skillful means, recognizing the student's degree of understanding and readiness.

To do so, senior students in positions of authority must function as role models worthy of respect. They need to understand students' struggles, offer corrections as appropriate that are neither demeaning nor intimidating, and intuit methods that will allow everyone to grow and mature in the Dharma. Concern for our manifest standards, our rules and regulations, must come from the compassion and gratitude that emanate naturally from the power of awakening. That is an absolute baseline.

Struggles themselves are crucial to practice, and involve a process of trial and error. Students bring with them all the confusions and entanglements of their ingrained habits and conditioned reactivity. We need to encourage them to work with their inadequacies not because these are inherently bad, but because they are rich areas for growth. And we need to look at students' gifts, and encourage them to explore them, even though they may not look like traditional Zen practice. We need to be as flexible and creative as our heroes, the great masters of old.

After all, Rinzai Zen is not a product; it's not something sealed up in an airtight box or preserved in a jar. It's alive, just as Master Rinzai was alive. What we think of as traditional Rinzai Zen was free, fresh; dokusan occurred spontaneously on a walk, while working, through unpredictable exchanges and experiences.

The best way of repaying our enormous Dharma debt to Buddha Shakyamuni, to all the ancestral masters, and to our teachers is to realize our own authenticity as practitioners in twenty-first century America. The simple daily schedule of zazen, chanting, and working together offers a calm and quiet embrace so that little by little, an opening can happen. The very structure and discipline of Zen practice, including frequent sesshin, provides a trustworthy container in which the challenges to the ego that foster inner growth can take place.

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There may be times when we feel unequal to the task; when our delusions seem to be the only reality. We must remember, however, that it is the mud itself that allows the lotus to grow. We may think, "Oh, the lotus blossom is so beautiful floating on top of the water," but where are its roots? We may recite, "Sentient beings are fundamentally Buddhas," but do we understand this includes us, mired in mud as we may be? As each of us bravely faces what comes up without trying to smooth it over, we can remember the saying, "The more clay, the bigger the Buddha." With Great Doubt, Great Faith, and Great Determination, let's train with honesty, integrity, compassion, gratitude, and resolve.

This is our era, in which American Zen, strongly grounded in the authentic teachings of the past yet responsive to the present and dedicated to the future, comes into its own. Whatever the difficulties, we're in this together. Let us bring forth our great vow to liberate all beings from suffering. That's what Rinzai Zen training is all about.

So be a part of our future. Bring your strong Zen spirit to spring kessei at DBZ, starting March 26. Come and support our Introduction to Zen weekend March 27-29. Practice diligently at New York Zendo. Plan on attending Holy Days Sesshin at DBZ, which begins this year on Sunday evening, April 5, to allow participants to celebrate Passover and Easter with their families. Happy New Year, and Namu Dai Bosa!