



A NEW JUKAI CLASS FORMS

Holy Days Sesshin is always a very special time at Dai Bosatsu Zendo. Although much of the landscape is still white from the deep snows of winter, over the course of sesshin a great melting occurs, of the ice covering Beecher Lake and within our hearts. Nature's renewal sends up brave shoots of green, and the nights are pierced with the sonorous notes of owls. Flock by flock throughout the week, spring birds return.

We celebrate the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha, creating a flower pavilion and bathing the statue of the Baby Buddha with ambrosial nectar (pure water from Beecher Lake). The Jewish holy day of Passover, with its emphasis on freedom and rededication, and the Christian holy day of Easter, with its teachings on death and rebirth, swiftly follow Buddha's Birthday on the lunar calendar this year.

One year ago, Holy Days Sesshin culminated in Jukai, a precepts ceremony for a wonderful group of eight students. They continue to practice strongly at our temples, deepening their understanding of what it means to live by the Buddhist precepts. *Ju* is a synonym for *kaku*, "to realize." *Kai* is "precepts," but it is also a synonym of *Buddha-nature*. So in the most profound sense, *Jukai* means "to awaken to ultimate freedom."

With our various infirmities and deluded preoccupations, our fragmented, complicated lives, we may think our karmic impediments are such that we can't awaken to this.

But awakening to ultimate freedom is not limited by circumstances; it is actualized in the midst of the most confining and circumscribed of situations--even, as some of our incarcerated brothers and sisters have discovered, in a tiny cell. What keeps us from realizing this freedom is the very thought that it lies beyond our present conditions. "We seek it far away," Hakuin Zenji says in *The Song of Zazen*. "What a pity."

The commitment to live by the Buddhist precepts--to enter into Jukai--is a crucial and indeed revolutionary step. Practicing with assiduity and earnest motivation, we can embrace the challenges and obstacles that confront us as our best teachers. The diligence and devotion mandated by the Jukai process brings the understanding that we awaken to who we truly are right here, not far away--right in the midst of our struggles.

The precepts are far more than a set of guidelines for leading an ethical life. They are not a panacea by which we can feel cured of our ills, but rather an outline of the work ahead.

When we take the precepts into our hearts and vow to live by them, we find them to be a complex and interrelated koan. We realize how impossible it is to truly follow them when we're still caught up in dualistic concepts revolving around the separation of self and others.

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Living by the precepts requires righting the upside-down views that come from thinking of oneself as a separate entity at the center of the universe, an entity in need of being defended by erecting all sorts of barriers. Defended from what? Life?

Sogen Yamakawa Roshi once spoke about the terms *daihi* and *daiji*: to take away others' pain and to bring others happiness. When we live by *daihi* and *daiji*, we are no longer being held hostage by the idea of a separate self. This is the true meaning of taking the transformative step of Jukai.

Would you like to take this step? Several of my students have recently requested Jukai, and I am now forming a new Jukai class, with the ceremony to be held at Dai Bosatsu Zendo at the end of Harvest Sesshin, on Saturday, November 6, 2014. A letter of request may be sent to me by May 15, either through [Hoen-ji](mailto:admin@hoenji.org) (admin@hoenji.org) or DBZ (office@daibosatsu.org).

The requirements are as follows: a curriculum of study, guided by me through dokusan and group meetings; consistent Zen practice at and support of either ZSS temple or Hoen-ji in Syracuse; past participation in at least one sesshin; and attendance during this coming year at a five- or seven-day sesshin at DBZ as well as at Harvest Sesshin (Saturday, Nov. 1, through Thursday, Nov. 6). Those who apply will receive a reading list and instructions on sewing a rakusu (or on purchasing one through the DBZ office). I will give each student a Dharma name, which will be inscribed on the rakusu received during the precepts ceremony.

Although we speak of "taking" or "receiving" the precepts, in truth they are not something we can take or receive. What is necessary is to give up that usual way of thinking--that mind of taking and getting something. What is required is a mind of giving, purely and without any expectation of reward. Then indeed the rebirth of this season happens again and again--and every season will be the best season.