

When the Buddha Does All

by Rev. Kinrei Bassis

“When the Buddha does all, and you follow this doing effortlessly and without worrying about it, you gain freedom from suffering and become, yourself, Buddha.” (Shoji-Dogen)¹

The suffering and difficulties we carry around in this life centers around the importance we give to ourselves and all people and things we are attached to. The more we cling to the importance of ourselves, this me, the more we feel the weight of this burden and we inevitably will confront suffering. Yet how do we let go of this burden and see through this overwhelming sense of self-importance and allow the Buddha to fill our lives?

The importance we give the self is what gives power to our cravings and attachments. This clinging includes how we identify with our thoughts, with our history, with our achievements and failings. Right View in Buddhism is teaching us that we do not need to cling to all the difficulties we face. We make this personal self out of the way we identify and give deep importance to our thoughts and feelings, to our successes and failures.

We often want to cling to an illusion that we are in control of our lives. Yet we do not control the outside world, thus we can drive carefully and we may still have our car totaled in an accident. A less obvious truth is that we do not control what happens to us on the inside, either. I may be depressed but I never wished or sought my sad or depressed feelings. I tell myself, I will not lose my temper but then someone says something hurtful and my

anger may still erupt. I can say “this thoughtless speech of another should not bother me” but then I obsess on what disturbed me and I find myself deeply bothered and hurt. To have Right View of what unfolds in my life I must first recognize that much of what I am experiencing is outside my ability to control. The question then arises, if I am not in control, how do I let the Buddha be in control. This is a very deep problem and in many ways forms the substance of many of the deeper spiritual questions we have.

Buddhist training does not place us in control but it does make us take responsibility for our choices. Buddhist training can simply be seen as learning to make the best choices. The following quotation is again from Shoji by Great Master Dogen.

The way to Buddhahood is easy. They who do not perpetrate evil, they who do not try to grasp at life and death but work for the good of all living things with utter compassion, giving respect to those older, and loving understanding to those younger than themselves, they who do not reject, search for, think on, or worry about anything have the name of Buddha: you must look for nothing more.²

Although I find the above teaching to be both inspiring and also very simple and straightforward, I do not find that it is easy to follow. I have never met or heard of anyone who could make this teaching into a living reality without great effort and without confronting major difficulties. Yet that does not stand against the basic truth that whenever we are not following this teaching, we just create more conflict and more difficulties in our life and in the lives of those around us.

I cannot control what feelings arise in me but I can work so that the choices in my life are in harmony with this teaching of Dogen and the Buddha. When strong and even overwhelming feelings and emotions cause me to act in ways that are not in harmony with the Dharma, I need to recognize myself going astray and then grasp my will and make the effort to choose to do good, to be compassionate, to be kind and generous. We point ourselves to liberation when we see whatever is happening to us, others, and the world, as just passing conditions and we bring ourselves back to the purity of the present moment and trust that it is enough to just do our best and take the next step in following the path of the Dharma.

The simple fact that we are not in control can easily be seen in our meditation practice. We all want our meditation to be peaceful and we want to let go of our strong habitual thoughts and disturbing feelings. Yet the mind wanders and disturbing feelings still frequently arise. Yet the right view of meditation sees this as an opportunity to work at being at peace with whatever is happening with us right now. Meditation is working at letting go of whatever arises and when we notice ourselves wandering off, we try to peacefully accept the wandering mind or the upset feelings and then make the effort to let go and bring the mind back to just sitting. We will never be in control what arises in our minds and in our lives, but we do have a choice in how we respond to what arises. We can try to make a response that is in harmony with the Dharma and this effort will generally bring forth good results.

What is often driving our behavior and how we see the world is our defilements, our passions, our desires, our fears, our delusions. In Buddhist practice we do not control the arising of defiled emotions, but we do have some control over our response to our defilements. The freedom and peace that Buddhism promises is found by freeing ourselves from being driven through life by our defiled feelings and thoughts. The self that we cling to is an aspect of our defilements. When we learn to loosen our grip on being so self-centered and self-absorbed, we can allow our spiritual purpose to move us rather than just being driven by our defilements. Mindfulness in Buddhism not only being aware of what we are doing in the present but being aware of what is driving our choices. The more we are aware of the choices we are making, the more we can make the choice to let go our defilements and choose to follow the Dharma.

When the Buddha does all sounds wonderful but how do I go from the life of being weighed down by this difficult self to a life of spiritual freedom? When suffering seems to be filling our lives, we need to trust that none of these difficulties has any fundamental substance. Our difficult feelings, such as disappointment, inadequacy, despair, and anger, are all telling us we looking the wrong way. In accepting whatever is unfolding, we are opening our hearts to the

Buddha. Buddhist training requires a trust that there is deep meaning and spiritual importance to whatever is unfolding in the present moment.

The practical way we turn our life into the life of Buddha is by the hard work of incorporating into our life activities that point us to our spiritual aspiration, such as meditation, reciting or reading Buddhist scriptures and the Dharma, Buddhist ceremonial and simple acts of faith such as offering incense. Daily practice is our way of cultivating our spiritual intention and keeping it a living presence in our life. Coming to the temple and practicing with others is a concrete way to help change the intention of our life from just pursuing self-centered or limited goals to cultivating a deep and all-embracing spiritual intention. We are lost in the worldly mind if we only do activities that have a worldly purpose rather than choosing to do that which has no other purpose but pointing us to the Buddha. There is a deep meaning in our choice to practice Buddhism. The scattered elements in our life can be brought together and they all can be pointed towards our true deepest desire, to find and live in the place of the Bodhicitta, the heart of Buddha.

1 & 2- Shoji, translated by Rev. Jiyyu-Kennett in *Zen is Life* (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999), p.197-198.