

When It's Hot, Be Completely Hot

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(Reprinted from Santa Barbara Buddhist Priory Newsletter July--August 1997.)

"One day a monk asked Great Master Tozan Gohon, 'How can we avoid hot and cold?' Tozan said, 'Why don't you go somewhere that is neither hot nor cold?' The monk asked, 'Where is a place that is neither hot nor cold?' Tozan replied, 'When it is cold, be completely cold; when it is hot, be completely hot.'"1.

This response of Great Master Tozan has the appearance of being one of those puzzling Zen type answers: the way to not be hot is to allow yourself to be hot. Yet this is not an illogical answer but one that points us in a very direct way to one of the most important spiritual truths. We all face the suffering of being too hot and too cold. What does it mean to "be completely hot"? The deepest solution to all the problems we face lies not in changing and manipulating the external circumstances of our life, but in finding the Buddha within everything.

The normal human response to suffering is to try to find a way to escape; when we are hot and not comfortable, we seek to be more comfortable by finding a place which is cooler. It is obviously a good thing to eliminate unnecessary suffering, yet the problem in life is that we cannot stop the hot and cold of suffering from frequently enveloping us. I can remember having a difficult and depressing job. I would come home from work and desperately try to find a way to distract myself. I would often immediately fill my apartment with music, so that the music occupied me and obscured the feelings of emptiness and uneasiness that would arise when I was silent and still. I was always trying to be doing something, doing anything: watching television, reading, hiking, socializing. Keeping myself compulsively busy with work or entertainment allowed me to avoid having to confront the seemingly depressing reality of my life. Yet it is not surprising that I would live in this manner since I was following one of the most basic principles guiding behavior, to try to avoid pain and to seek pleasure. If being aware of suffering seems to only increase my feelings of suffering, why should I not try to avoid looking at all my suffering? And why should I not try to seek to find all the pleasures and enjoyment that I can in my life?

The Four Noble Truths help explain Great Master Tozan's answer, and why seeking pleasure and avoiding pain does not help us to solve the problem of suffering. The First Noble Truth is "suffering exists". Awareness of this fundamental fact of life is that which brings people to look for a solution in

Buddhism. Some of us have confronted great trials and enormous pain in life. Others have experienced just a cold emptiness, a lack of heartfelt meaning or hope.

The Second Noble Truth is suffering is due to attachment. The normal human way to escape suffering is to build a life which maximizes the situations we enjoy and minimizes those we find bothersome or unpleasant. Yet what Great Master Tozan told the monk was not to avoid hot and cold but to find the place that is neither hot nor cold. We try holding on to that which brings us pleasure, but this is no solution, for uncontrollable change moves through everything, leaving us no true refuge in which to escape suffering. Birth places us in a cycle that inevitably brings disease and death. The fact that we cannot control the universe means our relationships with other people, our livelihood, the overall social and political climate, all of these may become unpleasant or even monstrous, and we, as individuals, cannot control everything and make our existence and our world into what we desire. Everything can and will fall apart: our bodies, our loved ones, the entire world. And this fact is a burning truth that is always gnawing at the edges of our life, pointing out to us the very precarious nature of everything we hold so dear.

The Third Noble Truth is there is a cessation of suffering; Nirvana exists. There is this place within our hearts that no fires can touch and no cold can penetrate. This is the place of true freedom from suffering, and awakening to this Truth is the true promise of Buddhist training.

Yet even if we have the faith that Nirvana exists, how do we find this Truth for ourselves? When the fires of suffering are burning us what can we do to find relief? The Fourth Noble Truth gives us the answer: to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is really just a description of Buddhist training. And what Buddhism teaches us is to learn to accept everything, both the very hot and the very cold. It is pointing us to a very simple solution for suffering, but one which can be very hard to do when we are burning. We need to be still with an open and all-accepting heart and mind. By pushing nothing away, no matter how frightening or unpleasant, we learn that there is nothing that we need to fear, that our True heart will not be damaged by the fires of suffering. We also do not need to grasp after anything, no matter how desirable or joyful, for all those pleasures are fleeting and do not provide a true refuge from the storms of our suffering. There is a place within us that no suffering can touch, that fulfills our heart's deepest needs no matter what external trials life takes us through. It is a deep act of faith to sit still in the midst of suffering and not run away, and it is that faith that unlocks our hearts and allows us to open ourselves to the Unborn. We all need to be willing to accept the "hot" and the "cold" and have faith that nothing in our lives, or in the entire world, is outside the Buddha.

1Dogen: Shobogenzo, Vol. 2. Translated by Kosen Nishiyama [Sendai, Japan, Dihokkaikaku, 1977, p. 33].