

Not Necessary, but Useful

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Great Master Tendo Nyojo said, "Learning meditation is to cast off body and mind. It is not necessary to burn incense, prostrate oneself, recite the name of the Buddha, perform repentance, or chant sutras. If you concentrate on meditation, your main purpose will be attained".¹ To understand the "not necessary" in this quotation is essential if one is to comprehend the relationship between religious forms that are used in Buddhist practice and the true heart of Buddhism.

Many of us in the West were brought up in religions that seemed to substitute rigid doctrines and rituals for true spiritual practice and experience. The attitude of "not necessary" within Buddhism, having an Iconoclastic tone, is therefore appealing to Westerners, promising a direct experience of the Truth, rather than strict adherence to hollow forms. Yet many people who have been interested in the literature of Buddhism are often disenchanted when they confront the actual practice of the religion.

When I came to study Buddhism, I found a practice filled with what is said to be "not necessary". The life in the monastery involved long daily scripture recitations, many ceremonies, innumerable bows, and a heavily-structured schedule. At first I was confused because I took the advice of such masters as Tendo Nyojo literally. I did not understand why there were these other activities instead of simply "concentrating on meditation". I wondered why we spent so much time on work, ceremonial, reading, and the like, instead of doing sitting meditation. I have even met people who have equated depth of training with the time spent in formal meditation. Yet something is amiss, because if you look at the actual life of such masters as Tendo Nyojo, you see that they always practiced, taught, and transmitted the forms of bowing, incense offering, repentance, and daily recitations of the scriptures. So why is it said that it is enough if you concentrate on meditation?

One of the problems that many people have with Buddhism is understanding the fluid manner in which many of the key terms are used. Words such as Dharma, Buddha, and meditation can have different meanings in different contexts. Meditation can refer to the formal practice of seated meditation, and it can refer to meditation in a much broader sense. Unless one can see the Buddha nature throughout all the mundane activities of daily life, one is still bound; there is one's meditation practice and then there is one's life, two separate things. The true meditation of Tendo Nyojo, however, is not just another isolated technique, but the transformation of the focus of one's life. "To concentrate on meditation" is not to allow worldly matters or personal problems to take precedence over the true spiritual purpose of life, the effort to be one with the Eternal, the Lord of the House. It is the constant attempt to maintain an Inward stillness and awareness so that one is always nurturing the ability to hear, feel, and know the presence of the Buddha. It is sensing what is needed and doing it so that the Lord can flow freely through us. True meditation is not limited to facing the wall; yet this is not to say that formal meditation is not important, for it is there that one sets a time and place where the only purpose is to deepen one's practice of the Way. It is through the formal practice of meditation that one learns the attitude of mind that one must cultivate at all other times so that it permeates one's whole life. In "Rules for Meditation", Great Master Dogen gives very detailed instructions on how to do formal meditation because it is the key practice in Zen Buddhism. Yet Dogen says within these instructions, "all activity is permeated with pure meditation - the means of training are thousandfold but pure meditation must be done". The endless activities of daily life are a means of training and the place where pure meditation is done. Since the Lord can be, and is, found everywhere, there is no place outside of meditation.

Descriptions of deep meditation given to us by the great masters may sound wonderful and enticing, but the real question for most of us is how do we experience the "pure meditation" for ourselves? The purpose of Buddhism is to help us make pure meditation a living experience. All the myriad teachings and practices of Buddhism can

be seen as tools that direct us out of delusion. Although the path to the Eternal is not bound to any single practice or teaching, why disregard their immense value? If we were all able to "concentrate on meditation" without ever faltering, then Buddhism would be unnecessary, but if we feel the need to seek out Buddhism, it means we are asking for help and direction.

The many bows that everyone does in a Buddhist monastery are an example of how the forms of training help orient the , trainees toward the mind of meditation. One master said, "As long as bowing lasts. Buddhism will last...When bowing ceases. Buddhism will be destroyed". The true bowing is the opening up and offering of the self to the Eternal. Body and mind are one, and disciplining the body to show respect, reverence, and gratitude helps direct the heart and mind to realize those qualities as well. Once we realize the true value of bowing in our hearts, the resistance to the bowing of the body disappears. To get down on our hands and knees and fully bow will help break down the mental barriers, bringing joy and the inner confirmation that we are truly on the Way.

Bowing is an ever present feature of Mahayana ceremonial because it also symbolizes the willingness to offer ourselves in service to all living things. Out of respect and gratitude to the Eternal, which permeates all things and sentient beings, comes the willingness to share the merit of our training with others. This is central to all Mahayana Buddhist ceremonial, directing us to the truth that we are all bound together spiritually and that in helping others, everyone benefits, including ourselves.

Buddhist scriptures are often misused by people who substitute reading about training and enlightenment for a detailed, down-to-earth practice. Yet this error does not mean the scriptures have no use, for having been written by people who have reached the summit of the spiritual mountain, they can be used as maps of the Way. A map cannot climb the mountain, but it can give the direction to follow. A map is not a necessity in ascending the mountain; however, being human, we can easily become lost or disheartened when we encounter unanticipated obstacles. Why make a difficult task even

harder by climbing into unfamiliar ground without using the best map we can find?

Another misunderstood, and often considered unnecessary element of training is the disciplined and ordered behavior within Buddhist temples. Yet as the following quotation of Dogen illustrates, he found this practice to be at the heart of Buddhist training: When, by the correct ordering of our daily life, we exhibit the heart of Buddhism, we are free from delusive body and mind. As this is so, the disciplined life of the trainee is the embodiment of both enlightenment and practice, pure and immaculate since before time began.²

However, many newcomers find the schedule, the silence, and the rules intimidating and confusing. One of the reasons they were attracted to Buddhism was the promise of complete freedom as described in the writings of many of the masters. For instance, Great Master Keizan wrote, "Throw away heaven, earth, the holy, the mean, subject and object; wherever you go you should be disturbed by nothing, completely free".³ It seems to be a contradiction that it is necessary to discipline oneself in order to be free.

Freedom is usually thought to be the ability to have some choice in, or control over, our external circumstances. However, this freedom has a very limited sphere because, as Buddhism teaches, "the universe is not answerable to our personal will".⁴ We may work for peace, and war still arises; or spend years building a successful business, and an economic depression forces us into bankruptcy; or exercise and eat health foods, and still be stricken with cancer. We all inherit a stream of karma and, although we can purify it and alter its direction, we are not free of the karmic consequences of our past actions. The good actions in our past will bring happiness and the wrong actions will bring suffering. Buddhist training does not lead to instant happiness and bliss; rather it cleanses our hearts, purifies our desire for the Way, and ultimately opens our hearts to the Buddha. Life is filled with worldly dualities: war and peace, health and illness, life and death. True freedom, on the other hand, is not to be

compulsively concerned with these worldly matters because we know that we are with the Unborn no matter where we find ourselves.

The disciplined life of Buddhist training does not indulge all our personal preferences and thereby points us to true freedom by forcing us to look within. What truly matters, and what training is trying to awaken, is that which we all share, the Buddha nature. Each of us has no more significance than a speck of sand. When we stop making this speck the center of the universe, as we do when we are overly concerned about our likes and dislikes, we can then realize our true nature as part of the boundless body of the Buddha. Hearing this, people are sometimes frightened, fearing that the practice will strip them of their individuality. This concern is unwarranted because training does not eliminate the differences between people. Each of us is an heir to a unique stream of karma and, when we train and convert the karma, the light of the Lord becomes apparent within this body and mind. Then our differences no longer divide us, because each person can be seen as a unique and singular jewel of the Dharma. An important lesson Buddhism teaches is not to judge ourselves or others because that judgment will distort our vision and prevent the potential jewel from manifesting.

It is also helpful to see that the correct ordering of daily life is a reflection of the Buddha Mind, the Dharmakaya, and by making a ceremony out of the commonplace actions of daily life, we are constantly reminded that there is a spiritual purpose and meaning in every action.

The teaching of "not necessary" exhibits the true liberating quality of Buddhist teaching. There is no single form of practice that is absolutely essential in order to be one with the Eternal. Pure meditation is the only necessity and that has no form. It is liberating because it is saying that the forms of Buddhist teaching and practice only point us to the Lord. The true Lord transcends Buddhism. Yet all the teachings and practices of Buddhism should not be ignored for they are all means of leading beings out of delusion. If we, in our lives, are not always seeing the formless form of the Eternal, then

why discard anything that may help us in clearing the distortion from our vision? The mind of meditation teaches us to waste nothing, particularly that which may prove to be our key to Eternal Life.

Notes:

¹See Great Master Dogen, Shobogenzo: The Eye and Treasury of the True Law, four volumes (Tokyo: Nakayama Shobo, 1983) volume 3, p. 40. ²"Bendoho" (How to Train in Buddhism"), in Zen Is Eternal Life, trans. by Rev. Roshi Jiyu-Kennett (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1976), p. 113. ³Denkoroku, *ibid.*, p. 221. ⁴. See the Glossary of Jiyu-Kennett, Zen is Eternal Life, s.v. "Five Laws of the Universe".