

Contrition and Conversion by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett

The following writings on Sange, the Buddhist practice of accepting responsibility for our karma is an excerpt from Roar of the Tigress; The Oral Teaching of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. This book is available at the Priory. These Dharma teachings were transcribed from her lectures and then beautifully edited by Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy. This section is from page 118-124. The scripture being quoted is from Great Master Dogen's Shushogi.

Shushogi: "Freedom is gained by the recognition of our past evil acts and contrition therefor. Because of their limitless compassion the Buddhas and Ancestors have flung wide the gates of compassion to both gods and men and, although karmic consequence for evil acts is inevitable at some time during the three periods, contrition makes it easier to bear by bringing freedom and immaculacy: as this is so, let us be utterly contrite before the Buddhas."

Yes. What we are speaking of here is what I was talking about to our friend about all the stuff that comes up when meditation starts to break down the walls we have built against seeing who we really are: as it comes up, deal with it, allow it to go, and above all, sit up straight and face yourself and say, "Yes, I did this; I am going to do something about it." And get on and do it, if it is possible. And if you need help in doing it, get some people to help you. These things have to be dealt with. The beauty of meditation is that it will assist you in doing it, and, as the scripture says, you will gain freedom and immaculacy. There is a difference between immaculacy and emptiness. Bodhidharma, the great master who brought Zen from India to China, wrote a very fine treatise on this. He points out that "emptiness" is a word you can use because it stops you grabbing on to something, but It is something much more than emptiness: It is an Immaculacy of Emptiness, the Eternal. You can't say It's something, you can't say It's nothing; you've got to get beyond this and experience It. Immaculacy means freedom to be one with the Eternal, having cleansed yourself of the karma, and, while you live, taking the consequences of that karma.

Again, this particular scripture, the Shushogi, tells you first the purpose for meditation and then tells what will happen in meditation as each thing comes up. And the first thing that comes up, after you've realized you must have faith in the Eternal, is all the junk that's got in the way that you need to clean off so that you can really see the Eternal. After all, if you will "make clouds in a clear sky", as one of the great Zen sayings said, don't blame me if you can't see the blue above it. Many people make clouds in a clear sky. All you have to do is watch the soap operas that are on TV of an afternoon to know that! Soap operas thrive on clouds in a clear sky: it's their main stock in trade; it's why they're soap operas. Therefore, get this stuff out of the way: let the old baggage come up, let it be looked at, let it be dealt with, get rid of it, and be free!

Shushogi: "Contrition before the Buddhas brings purification and salvation, true conviction and earnest endeavor: once aroused, true conviction changes all beings, in addition to ourselves, with benefits extending to everything including that which is animate and inanimate."

Contrition comes out of recognition within oneself of the full reality of what one has done. The word "confession", yes it's right, too: you confess to yourself what you've done, but you also take a look at yourself and realize that you need to clean things up. Understand clearly what this is talking about. It is not saying you must go along to the police and tell them everything you did, although that may in some cases be necessary. But you need to look at what it is.

Now, the big problem that comes about here is that the word "confession" implies guilt to many of us, but it is not guilt that makes us deal with the things; it is simply the fact that we're now taking time to have a really good look at them. We're not driven to saying we're sorry because of the danger of punishment, or of being found out: we're driven

to saying we're sorry because we do not want to repeat that which we now find we are carrying around within ourselves and which we have not actually, properly dealt with. So the words "confession" or "contrition" imply taking a good look at what's inside, and really trying to do something about it, and making sure it doesn't happen again; in other words, it is simply doing the best you can. Although this is the implication, it is not confession in the sense of confessing to guilt. Now, there may be some guilt in it, especially for those who have come out of other religious traditions, but a true act of contrition, called *sange* in Japanese, is having a full look at what is in there and saying, "Oh dear! Did I really do that? Was I really that stupid?" and taking a look at how and why, and making sure that it doesn't happen again.

Therefore, in this chapter, when speaking of this, Dogen says, "It is important to sit up straight in the presence of the Buddhas and Patriarchs." So you take refuge in the Sangha, in all of the people who know the Eternal, and you have a look at what is within yourself, because now you can see it without all the external distractions. You have a good look at it and say, "Right, how did those Buddhas of the past (for a Buddha is what you are to become, once you become one with the Unborn), how did those people in the past, deal with this?" Well, they had a good look at themselves, and they cleaned up as much of what they had done as they felt they could really do something about. Maybe that's just writing letters to somebody saying you're sorry for some way you hurt them. It can be a number of different things; or maybe you have to do some act to help someone whom you have injured or hurt. All these things have to be taken care of to the extent that is possible and wise. Once you have done all of this, you'll have done what the Buddhas and Ancestors have done in the past, and you'll have sat up straight in the presence of the Buddhas and Ancestors. You've not pretended you didn't do it, but you did not deal with these issues out of guilt. You dealt with them because they had never been dealt with. You were carrying them around with you. And, oddly enough, all such acts, whether they are just unkind words or whether they are actually acts of violence, will cause various tensions throughout the body. As you meditate, so these things come up, and the tensions fly off as you deal with them. We all do take the consequences of our actions at all times, but not as the average person thinks we take them: we carry them around within us automatically.

Now, I said that all this can be looked at in another way as just doing the best you can. Just doing the very best you can changes all things, and that is really all you are asked to do, but have you ever thought what a huge thing "to do the very best you can" is? It's colossal! I can remember being in the Far East and complaining bitterly to my master, the Archbishop of Tokyo, whose secretary I was at the time, that I couldn't begin to do what he wanted me to do because of all the difficulties that people were throwing in the way, and he kept saying to me, "All I ask is that you do the very best you can." And one day I realized what he was saying to me, which was, "Do the very best you can." When I heard the words he was actually saying, which was do the best you can, then it worked, and within about two months I discovered I'd got about four hundred people in his Foreign Section, which made him very happy. But I had to find out for myself what it was he was asking me to do. Above all, I had to discover what it was I was trying to do, and I wasn't trying to do what he was saying for those first two months; I was doing something rather different. So remember, you are required to do the best you can. That this does, or does not, have the desired consequences is fine. That this is not what you would necessarily like to do is fine. According to the Buddhas we should always be "disturbed by the Truth". To be disturbed by It means we should always be not completely satisfied with our own training. Any time somebody comes to me and says, "I don't think I'm doing as good as I could", something inside me rejoices. Any time somebody comes to me and says, "So do I need to ask any more questions? I think I've got it now", I am in terror, because we're about to have somebody go out and polish their halo and sit on a throne. It's important to know that "they travel

fastest who are not there”, as Dogen put it.

Therefore, do not be worried if you occasionally break the precepts; sometimes the world will force you to. Without meaning to, you will find yourself doing things you don't want to do. Put on one of its lowest levels, I came up from Santa Barbara recently with somebody who was breaking the speed limit all the way. If he hadn't, it would probably have killed a whole lot of people on the freeway because everyone else was going even faster. It was unfortunate; one does the best one can, and still it is necessary to wish one was not breaking the law, and yet one must do the best one can. But you understand what I am saying; do not get caught up in rules and regulations so that they make it impossible for you to move, and also recognize that if you break them there will be a consequence, and don't be afraid of it. This is not a religion for spiritual children; it is a religion for spiritual adults. There is a big difference.

Shushogi: “Here is the way in which to make an act of perfect contrition. ‘May all the Buddhas and Ancestors, who have become enlightened, have compassion upon us, free us from the obstacle of suffering which we have inherited from our past existence and lead us in such a way that we may share the merit that fills the universe for they, in the past, were as we are now, and we will be as they in the future. All the evil committed by me is caused by beginningless greed, hate and delusion: all the evil is committed by my body, in my speech and in my thought: I now confess everything wholeheartedly.’ By this act of recognition of our past behavior, and our contrition therefor, we open the way for the Buddhas and Ancestors to help us naturally. Bearing this in mind, we should sit up straight in the presence of the Buddha and repeat the above act of contrition, thereby cutting the roots of our evil doing.”

Someone asked me yesterday, “How did you deal with this stuff when it came up for you?” This is the way I deal with it. There is the act of contrition, confession, or “the way to deal with it”, whichever you prefer. The beauty of this particular thing is it says, “They were (these Buddhas and Ancestors) as we are now, and we will be as they in the future.” Nothing can come between you and your own Buddha Nature. Do not allow anyone to put upon you the fact, in their mind, that you can't make it. Every single living thing can make it! And anyone who tells you that you can't does not know anything about genuine religion! Sit up straight, face what you've done, face the karma that you have inherited which you need to clean up, accept and embrace it, send it to the Eternal, and be done with it. And know that, yes, if after this you do anything really horrendous, you will have to sit up straight again. But if you have done this truly once, the chances of your doing anything big, I would say, are infinitesimally small. You won't understand this if you do not understand the importance of responsibility: the importance of not making karma that others will suffer from.