

The Perfection of Zen

[This article by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett is reprinted from Chu Shin Zenji News-letter, February, 1968. The temple she refers to is Unpuku-ji, in Haino, Mie-ken, Japan.]

The perfection of Zen teaching must, of necessity, show itself in the way of life of the trainee, and in his behaviour to other people, otherwise he has learnt nothing. But perfection is something at which we work, it is not something that we can ever completely achieve--hence there is nothing but endless training for the trainee, and no one ever says he is either enlightened or not enlightened--he just goes on in his endless training, doing the best he can.

I learned a lot of what I know of the perfection of Zen teaching from the statue of Kannon in my own temple in the country. When I first took this temple there was only half a roof, no ceilings, no wall, no gate, a weed patch for a garden, no gas, water or sewerage arrangements and only one electric light bulb which you carried on a long line from the ceremony hall to the one room in which there were mats and in which I was to live. I was abbess of this two hundred year old temple in which even the statue of Kannon needed an umbrella to keep out the rain. Rats scuttled at her feet and wood worms gnawed at her pedestal, but her face was completely at peace. With hand upraised in blessing she gazed down on me in utter serenity, silently blessing the village in spite of the fact that her house had been allowed to fall into ruin, and drunks sported themselves bawdily in her meditation hall, for the temple had no parishioners at that time and was known to be the poorest temple in all Japan.

For the first few days I did nothing but Zazen in the company of the beautiful statue then, as the weather grew warmer and I began

to look around me at the state of the temple's dereliction, I gradually collected the money to mend the roof. I put up the ceilings with my own hands, never knowing before that time that I could handle a hammer and nails. Together with friends we put up the wall and built a gate, and begged enough mats from those who were buying new ones for their houses to cover the floors of all the rooms. As you will see from the news-letter the house is almost finished--only three ceilings now needing very slight repair and, this year, a friend is putting in modern toilets. It has been hard work; it has taken a long time--and I have loved every minute of it. But the statue has the same smile of benediction now I have almost finished as when I began--come rain, sleet, snow or typhoon, buildings or no buildings, she blesses the village. And when the drunks insult her by making water in her now lovely garden and desecrate her meditation hall she does not complain.

This attitude of uncomplaining all acceptance is one of the signs of the perfection of Zen teaching and the complete peace and freedom that training for such an attitude of mind can bring is its own reward. But, you may say, I have no such statue to teach me such things. My answer is that you can find spiritual truth in everything you see; even the most inanimate thing can be the master of a true trainee, hence the stupidity of looking for a specific person as a "master" or teacher. If you doubt this, take a look at the road outside your house. The rain soaks it, the sun scorches it, the traffic churns up its surface and the dogs and the drunks foul it without ever a sound of complaint therefrom. When the trainee can become like the road outside his house, completely uncomplaining in the face of all events, both good and bad as the world understands good and bad, he will have come close to the perfection of Zen. My advice to all of you who grumble and complain is to look with religious eyes instead of worldly ones on everything around you and make even a blade of grass your master for it has much to teach. No one expects you to become perfect but there is room for improvement in all of us. And remember that three of the signs of

enlightenment in our behaviour are gratitude for all things, and a complete lack of either grumbling or anger.