

Sermons

Beneficial deeds - *Rigyo* 利行 by Rev. Jiso Forzani part 1

The expression "*rigyo*" is typical of canonical language used by the Sotoshu. It is found in Dogen Zenji's text, *Bodaisatta shishobo* 菩提薩埵四攝法 which is the twenty-eighth fascicle in the sixty fascicle version of *Shobogenzo*.

Scholars investigating the writing, history, and in some cases authenticity of the *Shobogenzo* fascicles have not yet come to unanimously shared conclusions. Scholars reckon the seventy-five fascicle version as the most reliable *Shobogenzo*, with the addition of the separate collection of twelve fascicles. The text we have chosen is not part of this edition. In the list of the *Shobogenzo* English version in progress as part of the Soto Zen Text Project organized by Sotoshu Administrative Headquarters, *Bodaisatta shishobo* is temporarily listed among "other fascicles."

We cannot consider here the complex studies of the genesis of each volume of *Shobogenzo*, but it is enough to point out that the placement of our text is not established for certain. Nevertheless, a large excerpt of it constitutes a relevant part of the fourth section of *Shushogi* 修証義, a collation of sentences excerpted from Dogen Zenji's texts compiled at the end of the nineteenth century as a kind of compendium, mostly for lay use, of the main points of Sotoshu doctrine.

To be able to speak about the expression *rigyo*, which is the theme this time, we should try to understand the meaning of the title of the text, *Bodaisatta shishobo*, which I translate as "The four comprehensive bodhisattva's methods."

Bodaisatta is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word, "*bodhisattva*," literally meaning, according to the Sanskrit-English Dictionary by Monier-Williams, "one whose essence is perfect knowledge; one who is on the way to the attainment of perfect knowledge."

The shades of meaning of ancient words still in use, change with the changing of cultural influences and of general sensibility: "*Bodhisattva*," in time, came to mean only Maitreya, that is to say, the next Buddha, the past incarnations of Shakyamuni on the way to becoming Buddha, those who would realize Buddhahood in the next life, and ones who follow the Way pointed out by Buddha to verify it in their own lives.

Nowadays, if I were to give a synthetic definition of "Bodhisattva's" meaning I would say: everyone who follows the Way that Buddha walked, not for the sake of personal realisation but believing that the goal Buddha pointed out is the best possible also for his/her own life. I will try afterwards to better clarify what this means.

Shishobo is also the Chinese translation of the original Sanskrit expression *catuḥ-saṃgraha-vastu*. I mention here this etymological reference just to point out that it is an ancient expression, already in use at least ten centuries before Dogen Zenji's time (for instance, we find it in the *Lotus Sutra*). The reference to the Sanskrit words, however, while being useful for us to better catch some shades of the expression's meaning, does not help us understand what Dogen Zenji meant by using that word, because he didn't know the Sanskrit original.

The word is composed of three Chinese characters which respectively mean: *shi* 四four; *sho* 攝to understand, to embrace; *bo(ho)* 法manner, method. Nearer: *sho*, usually we read as *setsu*, a character most readers often meet, because it is part of the compound word *sesshin* 攝心, which in the Zen-world usually describes a communal intensive zazen retreat. *Sesshin* means for instance "meeting of hearts" and even more simply "spiritual union." Participants in *sesshin* are spiritually unified by the fact of sitting still silently together with the only goal of sitting still silently together, realizing by this fact a spiritual union both personal and communal. *Setsu* (read exceptionally in this case *sho*) means both something that unifies, comprehends, embraces, and the union itself, the very fact of comprehending and integrating. *Ho*, here read *bo* for euphonic reasons, is the Chinese character translating the Sanskrit word *dharma*, with all its meanings. In my understanding, in this case *ho* has the meaning of method, way of being as way of thinking, of speaking, of behaving.

Briefly, *shishobo* is the four comprehensive ways of being of a bodhisattva, both because they include all the existential attitudes of the bodhisattva who understands and embraces all four, and because we can recognize a bodhisattva from the fact that

he/she comprehends and realizes in his/her way of life those four ways of being. They are respectively called: *fuse* 布施, *aigo* 愛語, *rigyo* 利行, *doji* 同事.

This is the context where we meet the expression that is the theme of this article, *rigyo* 利行.

We don't know exactly how Dogen Zenji himself understood this word and in which sense he used it. I think it is impossible to reconstruct Dogen Zenji's meaning, even if we analyse his words with great care. We see with our own eyes, we analyse with the instruments we have at hand, we understand with our own intellect: Our efforts at objectivity cannot be separated from our subjective position. We have therefore to acknowledge that our understanding is composed of two elements: First, faithfulness to the most accurate study and investigation of Dogen Zenji possible intention. Second, our personal interpretation of that expression, which is necessarily different from what Dogen Zenji "really" meant. This is why it is said that a good translation is a "faithful infidelity."

To be continued.

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Sermons

Beneficial deeds - *Rigyo* 利行 by Rev. Jiso Forzani part 2

Rigyo (in Sanskrit *artha-carya*) is a compound of two Chinese characters (here read with Japanese pronunciation): *ri* 利 which means "advantage," "benefit," "interest," "utility," "gain," "profit" and *gyō* 行 "deed," "behaviour," "conduct," "to do," "to act," "to carry out," "to go." The overall meaning is therefore "beneficial deed," "profitable conduct," "beneficial behaviour," "to carry out in the interest of," "doing the interest of"...We should also notice that *ri* is the word used in many compounds to indicate interest (also in the economic sense) ability and efficacy, so that the general sense is something very concretely advantageous.

The sentences about *rigyo* from *Shobogenzo Bodaisatta-Shishobo* are translated here twice, with two different intentions and in two different styles. The first is, as much as possible, a literal translation, trying to render Dogen's words directly in English. It gives a taste of their power of expression, even at the risk of allowing some shadow, something that remains obviously obscure to us. The second is an interpretative translation, free from philological bonds. That is to say, it is a possible way to read and understand Dogen's words today in our cultural context, to render them meaningful for our everyday life. This corresponds also to Dogen's intention. He wrote what he wrote not as a literary exercise but to express his understanding of the Buddha Way and to communicate encouragement to follow it. This is particularly true in the case of a text like this one, which is meaningful only if it is actually practised.

The first translation needs the second one to be actualized, the second one is justified by the first one being its source.

Beneficial deeds means to utilize good skill to benefit human beings both noble and humble. For example, drawing the near and far away perspective, we run instruments to benefit others. Someone had pity for a suffering turtle, he fed a sick sparrow. Seeing a suffering turtle, when he sees a sick sparrow, without searching for any reward he acts only for their benefit. Foolish people think that if one put others' benefit first, one's own would be erased. But it is not so. Beneficial deed is one (complete) dharma, it benefits both oneself and others. An ancient man, while taking bath one time, bound his hair three times. While taking meal once, he stopped eating three times. He only had the spirit to benefit others. It was never the case that he didn't instruct a person of the people.

Therefore we should benefit equally the hated and the loved one, and we benefit in the same way ourselves and others. If we get this spirit, the truth of the never receding and never changing of beneficial deeds (expanding) from oneself also to grass, wood, wind, water truly becomes operating benefit. We have only to take care of saving the foolish.

Now we try to express the same concepts in contemporary words in a contemporary cultural background, an exercise that each reader may easily do for him/herself, appreciating this text in his/her own situation.

We should ask ourselves what should be the principle inspiring the conduct of a person who wishes to follow the Buddha Way. What kind of goal should a bodhisattva pursue? I would answer that one should behave in the interest of all beings, acting with all one's skill for the advantage of any living being. To do so, one should first of all not be concerned about the status or condition of anyone, if one is rich or poor, well-educated or ignorant, smart or ugly. Concretely speaking, it means to utilize all useful tools for the true interest of all beings, looking both at the surrounding environment and at a broader context, at the immediate effect and at the faraway future possible consequences. We should not think that we will obtain some personal advantage or reward from this kind of behaviour. When we give some crumb of bread, some grain of rice to pigeons, when we put back on its legs an overturned turtle, we don't do it expecting to gain something for ourselves in return. The gesture is justified by itself; it is an expression of an attitude free from any search for personal reward.

Silly people think that putting others' interests first means to diminish one's own, but it doesn't work like this. In this sense we cannot say that we make sacrifices for others, that we are renouncing something for the benefit of others. Beneficial behaviour is an act complete in itself, the reward is in the act itself, it is profitable for oneself and others, it is the true interest of both me and. It is the deep encounter of me and you, where the true meaning of "myself and other" is realized. So, if someone requests our care and attention, even if we are a person with exalted public responsibilities and status, we should not care about the

condition, the belongings, the status of that person, if he/she is a countryman or a foreigner, if he/she belongs to our group or is an outsider. Even if we are engaged in a very personal and private activity like eating or taking a moment to relax, we just stop and we take care of the other when someone is asking for our attention. We have to work for the benefit both of the agreeable person and of the hateful one, for people we like and people we dislike, in the interest of both ourselves and others. If I have such an attitude, then the benefit becomes operative all around me. It will reach surrounding living beings and all the so-called inanimate matter around. All our world will benefit. It is a matter of fact that never ceases nor changes. So the only thing to do is to save people from their silliness.

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Sermons

Beneficial deeds - *Rigyo* 利行 by Rev. Jiso Forzani part 3

In the first part of this article we discussed the context of this text and in the second part we translated it. Now in this final part we want to see what it could mean for our actual lives.

The core of the issue is simple and clear - working for the good of oneself and others, which is a single and unique good, not two separated or even opposing "goods." But in saying so we have said everything and nothing. If we do not clarify the meaning of "benefit" and how we can work out this benefit, these words are nothing more than a general call to do good, obvious as well as meaningless. Everyone always says that we must do good. Since everyone always says so to everyone, by now good should have prevailed everywhere. Clearly this is not the case. Why? One reason is that our conception of good is relative. What we consider good depends on our scale of values and the situational standards we apply. It depends on who applies them, the length of time that has passed, the place, and the precedents, etc. What is good for me might not be good for you, what is good today might not be good tomorrow, what is good for the spirit might not be good for the body, what is good for a child might not be good for an adult and so on. Each time human beings claim to establish an absolute value of good, to state the absolute good, only disasters and tragedies arise because to define the absolute is nonsense which creates a short-circuit in reality. But then what does "benefit" mean here?

We can find a clue in the title of the text in which the expression *rigyo* occurs. It is clear that here "benefit" means something beneficial from the bodhisattva point of view. Let's consider the definition we gave at the beginning, completing it as follows: a bodhisattva is someone who steers his or her life towards the goal Buddha pointed at, looking at the world with the eyes of awakening. The bodhisattva world is the scene in front of the awakened eyes, in the moment of the Buddha's awakening. This is the bodhisattva point of view. The Buddhist tradition hands down few "descriptions" of the Buddha's vision at his awakening. There is one in particular which I have selected because it was certainly familiar to Dogen. There is a clear trace of it in the text we translated. According to the Chinese tradition, at the moment of his awakening Buddha made a proclamation which became afterwards a characteristic expression of the vision of reality in the awakened eyes. We can find this sentence in old Chinese texts like the *Dajogenron*, a Sui period (around 581-618) text. It also summarizes the thought of the *Nehan gyo* (Nirvana sutra) literature. In Japanese, this sentence says, "*so moku kokudo shikkai jobutsu*" 草木國土悉皆成佛. Freely translated, it means "Every living being, conscious and without consciousness, all come now to be Buddha." There is not the least trace of separation between Buddha and the world - in the very moment in which Buddha is Buddha, everything is Buddha. This is the position that a bodhisattva assumes towards him/herself and towards the world.

Common sense says that everybody lives her or his own life, so we should look to our own interest even at the expense of others. In the world seen with bodhisattva eyes it doesn't work like this. My life doesn't exist here without yours, nor yours without mine, and in no case could my interest be in conflict with yours. So, caring for the world is caring for myself. There cannot be something that is good for me and evil for others. The evil of the other in some way comes back to me.

This is the highest value. Rather, we can say it is the only value. It is the hidden treasure close at hand according to which we should shape our behavior.

"Beneficial deed" is to witness with our own behavior this understanding of reality, sharing in this way with other people, because here lies the fullest benefit. But "bodhisattva" means also knowing that I am not Buddha, that I am a human being conditioned by my own constitutive limits. The Buddha's vision for me is a vision of faith, which my human eyes don't grant to me. How can I inspire my behavior toward the vision described above without pretending to be what I am not, to see what I do not see?

I have at hand a simple and fundamental instrument which allows me to put myself in this position of faith - zazen posture. In zazen, discrimination between myself and other, between the world of awakening and the conditioned world doesn't come into play. Simply sitting silently, awake and released from any relationship, to sit zazen sitting is to be in the position of "working faith" 信行. The position of zazen is the beneficial deed standard, the basic attitude to which we return, bringing it into any moment, into any situation of our life.

If we get this spirit, the truth never receding and never changing of beneficial deeds (expanding) from oneself also to grass wood wind water truly becomes operating benefit. So really the only thing to do is to take care of saving the foolish, knowing that the first foolish one to save is me who is writing, is you who are reading.

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