

Sermons

January - Welcoming New Year by Issho Fujita

Happy New Year to all!

I hope that the New Year finds you in happiness and good health. How have you started off this brand-new year?

In the Soto tradition, we celebrate New Year's Day at training monasteries in Japan by performing special ceremonies such as *Saicho Ninji* (New Year's morning salutations), *Gakyaku Settai* (receiving visitors), *Tendoku Daihannya* (ceremonial reading of Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra). In the *Saicho Ninji*, the *chiji* (stewards) and *choshu* (prefects) in unison voice formal congratulations to the abbot, saying:



This day of renewing the year is an auspicious occasion; we humbly express our congratulations. These days the weather is extremely cold; with deferential consideration for you, Reverend Abbot, we respectfully inquire if everything is going well.

At this moment of welcoming New Year, we should investigate the deep meaning of "this day of renewing the year is an auspicious occasion." Here I recall one of Daichi Zenji's verses, titled *Gantan* (New Year's Day).

If someone asks me, "What is the Buddha Dharma of New Year?"

I would open my mouth and say, "there are no words to tell you."

When the New Year comes, the true face of spring is revealed everywhere around us.

Look at the December plum newly blooming because the spring winds have blown (Nothing is hidden. No need to speak in words).

The auspiciousness of each New Year lies in the feeling of renewal and freshness when we welcome the beginning of the brand-new year. But in Zen we should live every day as New Year's Day, shouldn't we? We eat meals every day. If eating meals is our practice, we should eat each meal with a totally fresh attitude as if it is the first (and the final) meal in our life. We sit zazen everyday. But we should sit each zazen as if it is done for the first time in our life. If we become too used to zazen and lose freshness in our attitude, it stops being a practice. It simply becomes "routine work."

So "the Buddha Dharma of New Year" is the Buddhism of living each and every day as New Year's Day. When every day is an auspicious day, our whole life will become auspicious and a matter for congratulation. Not only is New Year's Day auspicious but also every day. It is really auspicious that any day is auspicious.

We meet each day anew. This is the correct attitude of living in the impermanent world. Everything is in constant flux; it never stops. We will never be able to live the same day again. Every day is the first and last day for us. We have to freshly invent our own unique "TODAY" without imitations and repetitions. Moment by moment we should renew ourselves and produce "New Year's Day."

Here is one of Dogen Zenji's Jodo (Dharma Hall Discourse) on the first day of the year from Eihei Koroku (Dogen's Extensive Record);

Today is the beginning of a new year [1241], and also a day with three mornings. I say three mornings because it is the beginning of the year, beginning of the month, and the beginning of the day.

Here is a story. A monk asked Jingqing Daofu, "Is there Buddha Dharma at the beginning of the new year or not?"

Jingqing said, "There is."

The monk asked, "What is the Buddha Dharma at the beginning of the new year?"

Jingqing said, "New Year's Day begins with a blessing, and the ten thousand things are completely new."

The monk said, "Thank you, teacher, for your answer."

Jingqing said, "This old monk today lost the advantage."

A monk asked Mingjiao Zhimen Shikuan, "Is there Buddha Dharma at the beginning of the new year, or not?"

Mingjiao said, "There is not."

The monk said, "Every year is a good year, every day is a good day; why isn't there [Buddha Dharma in the beginning of the new year]?"

Mingjiao said, "Old man Zhang drinks, and old man Li gets drunk."

The monk said, "Great Elder, [you are like] a dragon's head and snake's tail."

Mingjiao said, "This old monk today lost the advantage."

The teacher Dogen said: [Both teachers] say the same, "This old monk today lost the advantage."

Hearing such a story many people say, "These are good stories about [teachers] losing advantage [in a dialogue]." This mountain monk [Dogen] does not at all agree. Although Jingqing and Mingjiao speak of one loss, they do not yet see one gain. Suppose somebody were to ask me, Kosho, if there is Buddha Dharma at the beginning of the new year, or not.

I would say to them: There is.

Suppose the monk responded, "What is the Buddha Dharma at the beginning of the new year?"

This mountain monk would say to him: May each and every body, whether staying still or standing up, have ten thousand blessings.

Suppose the monk said, "In that case, in accordance with this saying, I will practice."

This mountain monk would say to him: I, Kosho, today have advantage after advantage.

Now please practice.

[translation by Taigen Dan Leighton & Shohaku Okumura]

I would like you to chew on this Dogen zenji's presentation of "The Buddha Dharma at the Beginning of the New Year."

In this year why don't we make sincere effort to enrich and renew the eternally ancient Buddha Dharma ("December plum") so that it freshly blooms in a brand-new form in the year of 2012!