

Sermons

December - Jodo-e (Ceremony Commemorating the Awakening of Shakyamuni Buddha) by Issho Fujita

At Soto Zen monasteries in Japan, a very intensive zazen retreat (*sesshin*) is held from December 1st until the 7th. On the 7th, all-night zazen (*tetsuya zazen*) continues until 1 a.m. next morning. After the end of the last zazen period, the Buddha hall bell is rung and all the practitioners enter the Buddha hall. The abbot offers a stick of incense. Everyone makes three prostrations together, then they fold up their sitting cloths. The abbot then offers sweet hot water, rice gruel and tea, and everyone chants the *Great Compassion Dharani (Dai Hi Shin Dharani)*. When the assembly finishes with the dedication (*eko*) and three prostrations, they hold small convocation (*shōsan*). Then they leave the hall and sleep until morning.



This whole event is called *Rohatsu sesshin*. "Ro" means December. "Hatsu" means eight. This special retreat is annually held to commemorate Shakyamuni Buddha's realization of the Way. According to the Buddha's story, after many years of difficult ascetic practice, Shakyamuni sat in zazen beneath the Bodhi Tree. At dawn on December 8th, he saw the morning star (Venus) and had a great awakening. He was transformed from an ordinary, common person to the Awakened One, the Buddha.

His awakening is also called *Jodo*, literally meaning "realizing the Way". Here the word "Way" is a Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word "bodhi". In the Zen tradition "bodhi" is understood as "to awaken to the true self as it is." When he realized the Way, Shakyamuni became the real and authentic Shakyamuni.

In Keizan Zenji's *Denkoroku (Transmission of the Light)*, Case 1 describes his awakening as follows;

Shakyamuni Buddha, seeing the morning star, attained awakening. He said, "I along with the great earth and all sentient beings simultaneously realized the Way."

We should take notice that before he made this statement he, it is said, radiantly exclaimed: "How wonderful! How wonderful!" It implies that he was, first of all, emotionally lightened up. Until that moment he had been moping his time away because it seemed to him everything around him was an enemy or a demon. It was just obnoxious. He felt separated from the world and lonely. But once he awakened, he found out that he was surrounded by all kinds of precious treasures shining brilliantly. He could feel intimately connected with all the things in the world. He was not alone anymore. The world as a whole fundamentally changed. Shakyamuni Buddha profoundly enjoyed this unity.

The doorway to this simultaneous transformation of the self and the world is open to us, too. As descendant practitioners of Dogen Zenji and Keizan Zenji, we are fortunately taught a wonderful and direct way to realize the Way like Shakyamuni Buddha. That is to practice zazen. "*Sitting upright, practicing zazen, is the authentic gate to free yourself in the unconfined realm of this samadhi*" (*Bendowa*). *Samadhi* here is not a special state of the mind but this dynamic and fluid unity of the self and the world.

Dogen Zenji described this transformation as follows in *Bendowa*;

When someone, even for a short moment, sits up straight in the balanced posture of the Buddha that puts the body right, it becomes apparent that everything in the Universe also exhibits the same balanced state, and that this realization spreads through the whole of space. Practicing thus returns us to the joyful state of the buddha and we confirm anew how splendid reality is. All the various states of mind and all the different physical conditions that human beings go through in living their lives dissolve immediately, replaced by a state of wholeness that is clear and pure. We enter the state that is free from all that hinders our acting freely and return to our state of natural balance. Experiencing and understanding what is truly real extends through all things, and each thing assumes its balanced and natural form. In this moment, sitting supreme in the same posture as the Buddha under the tree of bodhi, each thing passes beyond the limits of what can be experienced and understood. In its balanced state, each thing in this moment is in tune with the teachings of the Universe and is exhibiting the bare and profound state that exists before the world is conceptualized. Because it is dynamic balance between the practitioner and the world, it

works in both directions in ways that we cannot fully understand, so that we who are sitting in zazen are freed of the split between body and mind, cut away the various indoctrinations and thoughts we have accumulated from the past, and thus realize in experience the real and pure nature of this world...

On December 8th, after Rohatsu Sesshin, a special ceremony called *Jodo-e* is performed to express our deep gratitude to Shakyamuni Buddha. In *the Buddha's Attainment Assembly Statement*, there is a statement of heart-felt appreciation;

On the eighth day of this month, we respectfully celebrate the occasion of the attainment of the way by our Great Benefactor and Founder of the Doctrine, the Original Teacher, Most Reverend Shakyamuni Buddha. We have reverently prepared incense, flowers, lamps, and candles, sweet hot water, sweets, tea and rare delicacies, and have extended them in offering. Respectfully gathering the present pure assembly, we have also chanted the Ryō Gon Shu (Dai Bucchō Man Gyō Shu Ryōgon Dharani from the Surangama Sutra). We hereby offer up the excellent merit accumulated thereby to requite the compassionate blessings of his dharma milk.

The following is humbly considered. When pitchers, plates, hairpins, and bracelets are melted together, they become one metal; were it not for the fire of wisdom, this would scarcely be possible. When guitar, zither, lute, and harp are tuned together, the six dominant tones can be harmonized; but without wise fingers, how could this ever be accomplished? That is, the "wonderful pointing" (i.e. teaching) of the Buddha.

It is true that all living beings are fully equipped with the properties of wisdom and virtue of a tathāgata (nyōrai), but if the Greatly Awakened One did not have the expedient means to reveal the delusion and awakening of living beings, Ennyadatta's madness would be difficult to stop, and the jewel in the strongman's forehead would be long forgotten.

We now know of the attainment of the way by the great earth and sentient beings, and are freshly aware of the direct cause of the inherent buddha-nature.

May the illumination of wisdom long shine, and the flame of a single lamp be transmitted to hundreds and thousands of lamps. May the wind of the way long blow in this world and reach to limitless worlds....

Thus *Jodo-e* is an important occasion when we vow to renew our effort and commitment to follow the Buddha Way.