

Sermons

August 2014 - *Sange Metsuzai* - Repenting and Eliminating Bad Karma by Rev. Tenshin Nakano

Whether one is a lay practitioner or has entered the priesthood, absolute self-denial is first required in order to awaken to the reasonableness of the truth of which the Buddha became aware, and to practice the Buddha's teachings. In other words, repentance, in which one thoroughly and completely offers one's all to the Buddha, is what is important.

Repentance of "one's all" does not consist merely of regretting and asking forgiveness for one's physical or spoken wicked actions that are knowingly avowed. It also includes all incorrect behavior and thoughts that may have been committed unknowingly in body, speech, or heart due to ignorance of the truth.

Regardless of the greatness of a teaching, if one does not put the self aside and learn, he or she will interpret that teaching in a self-centered, personally convenient manner, and will be unable to understand and master it all correctly. It would be the same as filling your cup to the top with a beloved yet spoiled drink, then attempting to pour the Buddha's sweet and wonderful water into that same cup. If you do not first empty that cup of the drink, you cannot fill it with the sweet water of the Buddha.

If one does not surrender the self and absolutely and engage in absolute repentance, neither compliance with the precepts, altruistic conduct, nor the practice of *zazen* will constitute correct practice.

One summer vacation during the time I was studying Buddhism at Komazawa University, I had the opportunity to read sutras at a certain home for the *Obon* (Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the deceased spirits one's ancestors). When I had finished, the grandmother of that family who had also participated in the worship service asked me a question.

She said, "I apologize for bothering you in your busy schedule, but I have a question. There's something that has been bothering me for a long time. My husband died at a young age. I still had three young sons, and each day was a frantic struggle. I had no education, no special skills, and no talents, and I always caused them much pain and hunger. One day, I put my sleeping youngest son on my back and went into the mountains to gather firewood. Suddenly, my son woke up and asked 'Mama, what mountain is this?' I was startled, so much so that I felt cold sweat running down my back. It seemed to me as if my dead husband had changed into my son and was scolding me, saying 'Even if it's merely firewood, is it okay to go into somebody's mountain and gather it without permission? Aren't you embarrassed to have your child see you doing this?' At that moment, I swore in my heart that I would never again take something that belongs to another without permission, even just a single piece of firewood. I would not live in a way that I would be ashamed to be seen by my children. Since then, each morning when I place my hands together in front of my husband's memorial tablet and photograph, I ask 'Please protect our children today. Please scold me if I am about to live in way that I would be ashamed for our children to see, or that strays from moral principles.' Each night before I go to bed, I say to my husband 'I believe that I have lived this day in a way that I would not be ashamed for our children to see. It's because of your protection. Thank you very much. Please help us again tomorrow as well. Good night.' I continue to do this even today. From the perspective of the Buddha's teachings, is this manner of worship correct?"

I was deeply touched by this woman's story. It taught me that this is the true way of worship, and the ideal nature of memorializing our ancestors, and I told her so.

Around 1950, people went into the mountains to gather dried cedar leaves and fallen sticks to use for fires when cooking rice or heating baths. I believe it was the type of scene that could be found anywhere in Japan. Further, I do not know whether gathering fallen sticks in the mountains was legally prohibited, but that grandmother was not thinking about legal issues. She was working diligently each day with a strong sense of responsibility and deep love motivating her to rear her children correctly. In the midst of that, any time she had doubts or concerns, she asked her husband, who was always in her heart as a buddha, to help her as she examined and reflected on her way of living, so that she did not stray from the path. I believe that such an attitude resulted in her

son's casual comment being heard as her husband's voice as the buddha. Unconsciously, this grandmother was diligently walking a moral path while constantly repeating the process of repentance.

Not only when "walking the path of the Buddha," but also when we learn anything, our thoughts and actions will begin moving in the right direction when we first correctly practice repentance.

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