

Sermons

January 2015 - Gyoji Ho-on - Practicing Buddhism and Repaying Blessings by Rev. Shomyo Aihara

About 2,500 years ago in India, people frequently visited Shakyamuni Buddha to resolve the questions, worries, and suffering they had in their lives. At such times, the Buddha always answered warmly and kindly.

One day, a practitioner asked the Buddha a question.

"Sometimes I understand the things I have learned in the past very well, and I even understand the things I have not learned well. However, at other times, I am unable to understand no matter what I do, even when I have been taught something very important. Why is this?"

"Let us say that your face is reflected in a vessel of water. If the water in the vessel is clouded, how well would your face be reflected?"

"I would not be able to see it well."

"That is correct. In the same manner, when our hearts are clouded by desire which we feel concern only for ourselves, neither ourselves, those around us, nor nature will be reflected clearly. What if your face were reflected in hot, boiling water?"

"My face would not be reflected because of the bubbles."

"That is correct. In the same manner, when our hearts are boiling with anger, nothing around us will be reflected. It goes without saying that even if the surface of the water were covered in grass, it would be impossible to reflect our faces."

The practitioner's face suddenly brightened. The Buddha continued speaking.

"If our hearts were covered with the grass of hatred, anger, or concern only for ourselves, it would be impossible to see this world as it truly is. Conversely, when the water of the heart is unclouded, we ourselves and the situation around us can be reflected as they truly are. Our hearts are the same as water. When it is unclouded by desire, not boiling with anger, and not covered with suspicion and doubt, things will be seen clearly and correctly, and will be correctly understood."

The meaning of this story is that, when we discard self-centeredness and egotism, the clouded water of our hearts becomes clear water that reflects people and nature as they truly are. At the same time, it shows how we become aware of the suffering and sadness of others who are reflected in that water, think about how we can become involved, and then take action. This is Buddhist practice and training.

Moreover, this training is not to be engaged in only once. Just as fingernails and hair continue to grow and must continue to be cut, we must continue to practice this training. How do we practice this training? Separating ourselves from self-centeredness and egotism requires us to sit quietly and examine the self. This is the life of zazen, which teaches "harmonization of posture," "harmonization of breath," and "harmonization of mind." We cannot continue zazen forever. However, as the teaching of "leaning neither left nor right, neither forward nor backward" indicates, we can practice 24 hours a day, 365 days a year without becoming either arrogant or servile, flattering, or fawning. That is the life of zazen.

Our lives are not just our connection with our parents. They have been established in the midst of an unfathomable variety of relationships. For example, each of our parents has two parents, as does the generation preceding them, and so on. If we continue that thinking to five generations, we have the existence of 32 irreplaceable people. In addition, the era in which we were born, our education, and the circumstances around us all combined to create us as we are right now.

It is important that we value those relationships as we live.

As we are interconnected with this life, our existence is irreplaceable. If such is true, then consciously continuing the life of zazen is the way to live, valuing each day.

When we continuously maintain them, a repentant heart, the peace of mind of receiving the precepts, and acting to give benefit to others will become wonderful habits. It is the days of living the life of zazen, the life of harmonization of posture, harmonization of breath, and harmonization of the mind that will keep the water of the heart unclouded.