

The Dharma Doesn't Discriminate

The meeting of East and West can look strange, but Zen has no problem adapting to different situations, people, and cultures.

By Dennis Genpo Merzel

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The other day just before going into the meditation hall, I was standing on a busy street corner waiting for my daughter Nicole's puppy to do what she is supposed to do – and I was in full robes. It struck me how strange it can be when East meets West. The robes that many of us wear must look pretty strange to newcomers. Our bows and offering of incense may even look silly. And our chanting is weird. We often chant in a foreign tongue, usually Japanese, but we also throw in Sanskrit here and there. A person attending one of our Soto Zen services for the first time might well wonder why Westerners today would choose to become involved with such a peculiar practice with such ancient roots.

Are we simply trying to act Buddhist, or is the living Dharma still maintained somehow in these ancient rituals? This is a fair and important question to ask.

Although Zen Buddhism didn't become strongly established in America until the 1960s, the practice has since gone through many changes. In fact, the way we Westerners practice Zen is nearly unrecognizable to a monk from Japan. Something as simple as the way we sit when we listen to a teisho or dharma talk – facing the speaker – would be unheard of in Japan, where they listen while facing the wall in zazen (sitting meditation). Practice would never be as informal as it is here. So even though Western Zen is very young, our practice already looks quite different from traditional Zen.

Zen teachers in the West are struggling with the question of how much change can be introduced without risk of losing the living essence of the Dharma. Each one of us must accept the responsibility of bringing Zen into our culture in a way that seems right. One of the beauties of Zen always has been its ability to adapt to new situations, to fill any container into which it is poured. Western culture is the new pot that is being filled by Zen – and for everyone, whether we're a teacher or a beginning student, our body is a container for the practice. Zen will fill this container perfectly.

We have a beautiful Zen tradition of eating meals together in meditative silence. Special bowls are used for these meals, and the largest is called *oryoki*. In the time of the Buddha, monks carried one large bowl when they begged for food, and this is the basis of the *oryoki* bowl used today. *Oryoki* is a Japanese word that means "contains just the right amount." On a deeper level it means that this very body-mind, *your* body-mind, is also *oryoki*, the Buddha bowl itself.

Your life is the Buddha bowl, and the food of your life is everything that happens, even things of which you're not aware. Our awareness of life is very limited – we really see only the tip of the iceberg – and yet this life always contains just the right amount. Whatever happens in your life is the teaching, is Dharma. When we see our lives in that way, nothing that happens can be taken as accidental.

When he talked about the path of spiritual development and how to find lasting peace, the Buddha urged his disciples to focus on the root of the problem and not to be distracted by the leaves and branches. Actually the root of the problem isn't so easy to see. It's just too obvious. This doesn't mean that we Westerners are especially stupid or blind; even Shakyamuni Buddha found seeing the cause of suffering difficult. The Buddha spent years in training and went through many ordeals before making his discovery: the root cause of our

suffering is ignorance – seeing ourselves as separate and incomplete. This is delusion, and it leads to desire – wanting, craving, and clinging. The wanting itself is the cause of our suffering.

We may already have some understanding of how ignorance leads to our discontentedness and neediness. Still, because of our conditioning, we all encounter resistance to waking up. It seems like it should be simple: if my ignorance is caused by staying in the dark, then all I need to do is lift my head, shift my view; just turn around. But what does that mean – to turn around? Buddha taught that we need to change the way we usually see the world – the perspective that I am here and everything else is out there. If I've never seen the world in any other way, then of course, I will believe that I see the world as it really is, that I see reality. To try to shift the way we perceive things simply doesn't occur to us.

Early in practice, it is very helpful to have a glimpse of the other side of reality. Even the tiniest glimpse will put a dent in our armor. Yet in order to have a glimpse, we must first be willing to ask a simple question: "Is there a perspective other than my own?" It is impossible to know what kinds of life experiences a person will need in order to have that question come up. What did it take to get you right here, right now, in this very moment of space and time? Only a few of those forces can ever be known because you are the karmic result of everything that happened in the past. Everything! So it took exactly what it took for you to be where you are at this moment. This very moment is Dharma: perfect and complete as the total karma of each one of us.

When we begin to question whether there is another way to perceive reality, a deep desire and craving for the Truth emerges. We want to understand, to see, hear, and feel the Truth. But as with every desire, the desire for Truth will cause us to suffer. To really put an end to our suffering, we have to heal our basic illness: we have to stop *all* craving, desiring, and wanting.

How can we possibly put an end to our wanting when we want and crave almost every moment of our lives? Buddha discovered the way, and so can we, because his discovery has been transmitted to us through the lineage of realized ancestors.

What is this Buddha treasure that has been so carefully transmitted to our present day? Zazen! Through zazen, we can finally put the seeking mind to rest. Zazen itself contains the answer. When we simply sit, with our spine erect and yet naturally relaxed, we can just be. In the beginning, however, there might not be anything natural or relaxing about it. It's just a lot of hard work. We might even mistake straining for accomplishing. However, the point is not to strain and strive, but to practice until our sitting is really effortless. The goal of our practice is to relax, surrender, and let go into our lives.

It is important to be clear about what is meant by *letting go*. To let go into our lives does not mean just doing whatever we want. To let go and surrender to life is to become free from desire and clinging. Zazen goes to the root of our grasping by revealing to us our true nature – our complete and whole Buddha nature. What could we possibly need or desire when we have realized that nothing is lacking to begin with?

Until we become familiar with our true nature, it can seem unlikely that we ourselves really have Buddha nature. It seems impossible to be nothing but Buddha nature through and through – but that is the truth. There is a beautiful story about this. Nansen was a great Chinese Zen master of the Tang era and the abbot of a mastery. Flax was grown in the fields around the monastery, and the townspeople used the flax to make fabric. Nansen worked with the flax like everybody else. One day while he was weighing some flax, someone asked him, "What is Buddha?" Nansen replied, "Three pounds of flax."

Nansen knew that he embodied Truth – the ordinary and the Buddha. Nansen and great teachers like him are not the only ones who embody these two aspects. We all do. But because no two people are the same, Buddha nature will be manifested uniquely in each

individual. You and I embody Buddha and the ordinary, from moment to moment, in our own way.

True nature is Buddha nature, unfixed and able to adapt to any container, so we will all express Buddha nature differently. Every person is a unique container, and what is appropriate in one bowl may not be appropriate in another bowl. Our lives, too, are made up of different containers. Your body-mind is one container, and your family is another. Your work and living situation are containers, and our Earth is a container. For each situation a different manifestation is appropriate. Practice is all about learning how to recognize and manifest our true nature in everything we do. To become confident, free, and joyful in manifesting our true nature takes a lot of attention and practice. Zazen is the way we accomplish this. Through zazen, we learn how to be who we really are.

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excerpt

Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings

Are there universal truths? If we compare the sayings of Jesus and Buddha the answer is a heartfelt yes.

Buddhism and Christianity would appear to have little in common. One is non-theistic for instance, the other, theistic. But the sayings of Jesus and the Buddha, whose teachings gave rise to the two religions are another matter. They have much in common in the realms of ethical behavior, discipleship, compassion, materialism and the inner life. The following are some examples.

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Jesus: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Luke 6:31

Buddha: "Consider others as yourself." Dhammapada 10:1

Jesus: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also." Luke 6:29

Buddha: "If anyone should give you a blow with his hand, with a stick, or with a knife, you should abandon any desires and utter no evil words." Majjhima Nikaya 21:6

Jesus: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Matthew 25:45

Buddha: "If you do not tend to one another, then who is there to tend you? Whoever would tend me, he should tend the sick." Vinaya, Mahavagga 8:26.3

Jesus: "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword." Matthew 26:52

Buddha: "Abandoning the taking of life, the ascetic Gautama dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword." Digha Nikaya 1:1.8

Jesus: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." Mark 8:35

Buddha: "With the relinquishing of all thought and egotism, the enlightened one is liberated through not clinging." Majjhima Nikaya 72:15

Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19-20

Buddha: "Teach the dharma which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the end. Explain with the spirit and the letter in the fashion of Brahma. In this way you will be completely fulfilled and wholly pure." Vinaya Mahavagga 1:11.1