Excerpts From "What Seems Important Now"

By Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy

Rev. Master Daizui wrote "What Seems Important Now" on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Shasta Abbey in 1995. Following the death of our master, Rev. Master Jiyu Kennett the following year, he became the head of the O.B.C. His life was unfortunately cut short by lymphoma ten years ago, in April of 2003. As the original article is fairly long, what follows are excerpts of the article. The entire article can be found in the Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, *Volume 10, numbers 3 & 4 Autumn and Winter 1995. –Rev. Master Seikai*

Whatever I am able to say on this topic….I must say for myself only, with no expectation that it is true for anyone else nor even that it will remain true for me tomorrow, let alone for another twenty-five years. Indeed, if I live to train another twenty-five years and some bright-eyed young monks remembers to shove a copy of this article under my nose on our 50th anniversary, he or she will probably be treated to the sight of me turning red with embarrassment. Nonetheless, I suspect that the process I am about to describe, of my coming to view Buddhist training as resting upon relatively few, simple, very human attributes, is somehow related to the broader process of spiritual revolution which the Abbey community has undergone in this past quarter century. With that hope in mind then, what follows is one monk's perspective on the last twenty-five years from the point of view of what seemed important then and what seems important now.

Back then, it was <u>all</u> important. Everything was new and intense: the practice, the teachings, the Sangha relationships. There were a lot of strange ideas about Zen and Zen masters floating around in the general culture, and we had no experience of training to help us distinguish religious truths from silly notions. Even the act of trying to make such a distinction would as easily have been seen as the exercise of judgmental thinking as of wise discernment. Of course, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett was patiently and repeatedly telling us the plain and simple truth, but back then things did not seem either plain or simple, and the master-disciple relationship was one of the areas that was most new, uncertain to us, and subject to the popular misconceptions about Buddhism in general and Zen in particular. The experience for me was an intense and confusing swirl, each sometimes contradictory aspect seeming equally and vitally important. * * * * *

And these things which now stand out as seemingly important are surprisingly few:

The Three Refuges —because our path is, after all, Buddhist;

Faith/trust —in Something more than just oneself;

Truthfulness —the simple gateway to a peaceful heart;

Empathy/sympathy —from which comes acceptance, compassion, and the Precepts;

Compassion/love/wisdom —letting each grow into the next when all is ripe;

Awareness —without which the above doesn't seem to happen;

Meditation —which is the engine that drives all the rest;

Not to fear much —for fear is the only true enemy of religion; and

Never to give up —by which success is assured.

In the original article, Rev. Master Daizui then provided a section of commentary on each of the nine aspects of the spiritual life which he listed. Here, I include most of three of those commentaries.

Faith/Trust. As taking refuge in the Three Treasures defines us as Buddhists, so the act of placing faith or trust in Something more than just our selfish selves defines our Buddhism as a religion rather than simply a philosophy of life. It is possible to enter Buddhist training without any faith, to undertake Buddhist practice provisionally, and to take the Dharma as a "working hypothesis'. Indeed, I bless Buddhism for this, since this is what I did and, were it not possible, I probably would not have entered any religion, as I could not stomach what I called the 'mental lobotomy' required by religions which proclaimed to me that 'first you must believe'. And one can go a certain distance with this experimental stance, but, after a time, one comes to a point where one can go no further: a point where it is necessary to admit that there is Something in the universe that is greater than oneself and that this Something can be trusted. * * * * *

How we experience that Something, and the words we use to describe It, don't seem to matter nearly as much as that there exists a faith or trust in It. My own sense of It is rather far to the impersonal end of the spectrum: I'm the type of person who uses words like "That Which Is" and who like to look up into a moonless starry night alone on a remote mountain and feel his utter insignificance before the awesomeness of the universe. Some of my best friends in the Sangha have a sense much nearer the personal end of the continuum. They seem to have a warm, personal, direct realization of Something they tend to call by names such as "The Cosmic Buddha" or "The Heart of Kanzeon", and they feel most at home doing a ceremony before a nicely decorated altar. We each kid the other about being a little strange, and that is a mark of affectionate mutual understanding and a recognition of the fact that it doesn't seem to make any difference how one experiences or manifests faith or trust, just that it exists. Similarly, some people seem to feel more comfortable with the world "faith" to describe what this refers to, while others have a sense that "trust" comes closer to the mark; again, it doesn't seem to matter, and so I have used the term "faith/trust". * * * * *

Truthfulness. You may well wonder why I select this one Precept to include on my list, to the apparent exclusion of all the others. I admit this is a little odd, but I do it because it seems to me that with this Precept present all of the others will follow naturally, and without it something is incomplete. It may also be that I interpret truthfulness broadly, to include personal honesty to oneself as well as integrity in dealing with others. Or perhaps the answer maybe a simple as the fact that the only way which I can see to lead a life without lies and secrets is to follow all of the Precepts as best one may.

And that is the goal of truthfulness: a life without secrets. In this aspect of training I was a slow learner: I had no idea of the degree of freedom and peace which such a life can bring until I was into the second decade of my monastic training. Perhaps it was due in part to my karmic conditioning: I realized early in life what I lacked in physical strength and coordination could to some degree be compensated for by a quick wit and smooth tongue, and thus began what I now refer to as "my life as a fox". It was not that I told many outright falsehoods, just that I developed a knack for subtle verbal maneuvers and the ability to keep secrets, both my own and others'. This was not all bad and, indeed, was usually used to good purpose, but it eventually landed me in a situation in which it was clear that continued use of these "skills" was bound to produce great pain to myself and others. Thus being forced to speak the lain and simple truth, I discovered for the first time what it was like to have absolutely nothing to hide. It was wonderful! The sense of inner peace and relaxation was so deep and enjoyable that I have tried ever since to make simple truth-telling a way of life and not to hold back anything of importance about myself from those around me.

It soon became apparent that the only way to continue to do this was if there was nothing about my life which would tempt me to lie, dissemble, or keep a secret. And the only way to do that was to lead a fairly clean life, Preceptually-speaking, and to trust the Sangha to accept me as I was. Thus truthfulness, for me at least, implies the keeping of the other Precepts and presupposes a good measure of faith/trust. It also helps build more trust, since simple truth-telling is problematic situations seems to be a major building-block of mutual trust. Other consequences of truthfulness, when it is applied within one's own mind, are the fostering of compassion, empathy, and acceptance, and the requiring of awareness….

I should hasten to mention that the truthfulness I am describing here does not seem to require that one always tell everyone what one is thinking all of the time. First of all, most of one's thoughts (at least most of mine) are simply ideas and opinions which may have as little truth value as they do importance; a constant blathering from the mouth is quite different from a commitment to speaking simple truths about important matters when it counts. Secondly (and here I am grateful to my "fox" self for having learned something that can be used in the service of truthfulness), even in important matters it is not always possible to get the plain truth out of one's mouth comprehensibly, or to have it heard clearly, at any particular time. Thus, if I am over-tired, grumpy, or have an incomplete picture of something, truthfulness may be best served by not speaking until later. The same may be true if the other person is for some reason unlikely to be able to hear the plain truth accurately at that moment. Since the important thing is not so much the speaking of truth but the conveying of it accurately to another, the holding of one's tongue for a little while under such circumstances doesn't have the feel of secrecy. For the same reason, finding words that are likely to be agreeable to the other person (something "foxes" get very good at), when those words are used for the purpose of conveying clean truth as best one may, does not feel foxy. And keeping the "secrets" of others, when those "secrets" are spiritual confidences, is not burdensome as long as everyone concerned is aware and agreeable as to the nature and limits of the confidentiality.

Not to Fear Much. Of all the hindrances listed in Buddhist Scripture, why do I single out fear? It is because fear seems to be somehow involved in all of the others and appears to be more basic, more

destructive. Consider, for example, the Three Poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance: they are often regarded as the three basic impediments to training, and so they are. But by themselves, in their simple forms, the damage they do is limited and they are not all that hard to cure. However, combine fear with greed and you get compulsive craving, combine it with anger and you get hatred, combine it with ignorance and you get delusion: now you are into big-time suffering! Furthermore, it is fear that renders religions narrow-minded, mean, and even dangerous. It is fear that inhibits awareness, stifles empathy, incites deception, locks out compassion and love, and precludes the development of wisdom. It is fear that undermines trust between people: show me a person who doesn't fear much and I'll show you someone into whose care you may trust your life, physical or spiritual. And it is fear that gets in the way of faith/trust both in one's master and in the Ultimate Reality of the Universe. Mistakes can and will be made in the course of training; no matter how grave they may be, one can correct them, learn from them, and go on, so long as fear does not paralyze one's ability to see, face honestly, and to accept. Thus do I make so bold as to call fear the one true enemy of religion.

This does not mean that fear is all that difficult to cure; it isn't. The practice of all the other aspects of training mentioned here will serve to undermine and weaken fear. There are also other more specialized strategies for overcoming it; perhaps the simplest and most powerful is simply to do what needs to be done despite such fear as may be present. Each time fear is faced down in this way it weakens, just as each time fear succeeds in keeping us from doing what is right, it becomes more powerful. There is no middle ground with fear: one is either retreating or going forward.