



Mountains Talking

Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver

Winter 2011

On Repentance Resolution by Karin Ryuku Sensei

At our temple the ceremony of receiving Jukai, the Bodhisattva precepts, is open to everyone and the ceremony takes place on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The week before, we have a teisho focused on the precepts. This year it was on repentance-resolution, which I believe is the foundation for preparing to take the precepts formally. It was particularly poignant since there has not been strong participation in repentance ceremonies for some time. My sense is that there is a vague distaste for repentance-resolution and little appreciation for its relationship to awakening and a life based on the precepts. But really they are very intimately related.

Because some of you may be relatively new to the precepts I will just say a few words first about them. They are of course the basis for ethical living and practice-enlightenment. They represent the expression of the enlightened mind, the awake mind as it functions in the world. The precepts help us function in relationship and when we make these resolutions publicly together in our Jukai ceremony, they carry a greater power to function in and through us than if we just read them silently or repeated them to ourselves. Practicing the precepts is as important at the very start of Buddhist practice as it is after many years. They provide the stability for daily life and spiritual practice, day by day. They make it possible for us to make real any insight we have as we function in relationship.

Aitken Roshi, who is our grandfather in the Dharma, wrote this: "Without the precepts as guidelines, Zen Buddhism tends to be come a hobby, made to fit the needs of the ego...The sixteen Bodhisattva precepts...are archetypes, 'skillful means' for us to use in guiding our engagement with the world. They are not commandments engraved in stone, but expressions of inspiration written in something more fluid than water. Relative and absolute are altogether blended¹."

Repentance-resolution is also part of Jukai and is complementary to the actual precept vows, but we tend not to discuss it enough. In the actual Jukai ceremony, the initial section is a repentance ceremony. We recite the repentance gatha together and then burn the klesha papers as an actualization of our relinquishment in order to more fully open as we commit together to uphold the precepts in our daily lives and to help each other as a sangha in this practice. These klesha papers have on them a pig, snake

and rooster and symbolize the three poisons, or defilements of human life - greed, anger and delusion - attachment to which causes human suffering. Interestingly, in the Tibetan tradition these three poisons are also sometimes called the three seeds of virtue, since their energy can of course be expressed in action from an enlightened point of view as compassion, wisdom and realization. But we are all too well aware that often, in fact many times during a day, we will act in a way that causes harm, and is at odds with our precept vows. This is true even if we have practiced for a long time. So what can we do?

First, we have to notice! If we are unaware, if we walk around in a dream, then we have no clue really of the harm that we cause often unintentionally. We have to see ourselves clearly, see our actions clearly, with transparency. This means that it is not enough to experience emptiness and the dropping of body and mind. We have to live awake and aware and this means we have to practice mindfulness and attentiveness, minute by minute. This is the challenge of a lifetime.

Then, when we notice, we do have to feel regret, remorse. (This is the basis of conscience, and its not only normal, it's essential.) We have to wish that we had behaved differently; we have to want to move forward differently. This is not the same as rejecting ourselves harshly or sinking into guilt. Guilt, sin these words tend to imply and reinforce a strong sense of self, an approach that makes us stuck. But if, when we see what we have done, we open our hearts, we feel the action and its repercussions as if it had in fact happened to us; we feel the pain of the person we harmed. Remorse is the basis of empathy and compassion. Unless we do see how we act, we cannot take responsibility for our actions. In the end, it is this taking responsibility that frees us to move forward and to act with awareness.

Next, there may be something we need to do to make reparations. This act can be as simple as saying "I am sorry". It is amazing to me however how often this step is skipped. Why is it so hard, so very hard to apologize? To really apologize means that we have to give up our pride, our image of ourselves, and we have to step into that unknown place with another person. We have to be willing to be uncomfortable because we don't know how the other person will react. And yet it is an essential effort. Our apology may not even appear to have been accepted, but over time, it will lessen the distance, and start healing the breach.

And finally, we resolve to do better next time. We have all been warned against self reform- this is because attempts at self reform, the attempt to make this self into a different, better self, actually strengthens the “story of me”. This is a particular danger if we have not yet seen into the illusory nature of this “me and mine”. And yet, we have to start somewhere, even if it’s awkward to behave in a different way. To do this involves not only seeing what we do, but also having enough stability and openness to not fall blindly into the same automatic response again. We practice our intention to be more mindful, clearer and more settled. It may feel “off”, even uncomfortable, and so it takes courage. I realize that all of this is from a very simple, everyday, relativistic point of view, but the more refined ways of practicing repentance-resolution don’t make sense without this base.

In monastic circles for many eons, dating even before the Buddha, the community would gather for group repentance and confession, usually at the time of the full moon. At this temple, we have our repentance ceremony at least once a quarter and at the first night of each sesshin. We acknowledge openly the harm that we have participated in, and in doing so, to reaffirm our deep interconnectedness with others. We also have the aspiration to be freed from the wheel of blind habit, which drives so much of our lives. By speaking publicly, we help and support each other, because each of us recognizes ourselves in the confessions of others, and we come to see the universality of greed, anger and ignorance. This is important and it functions on the psychological and emotional level to heal and grow the bonds of sangha.

Together we recite the repentance gatha three times:
“All harmful karma created by me since time immemorial
Stemming from greed, hatred and ignorance,
Born of my conduct, speech and thought,
I now repent openly and fully”

We then repent a specific action, something that weighs on us, and resolve to change course. The specificity is important. Repentance-resolution is also an enlightenment practice, a practice of actualizing our life of wholeness. Like the precepts, repentance-resolution can be seen from the relative, the compassionate and the absolute points of view. The spiritual practice of repentance-resolution functions not only in the dualistic world of self and other, but as a practice and expression of the One Mind, of our true nature and the true nature of all things.

Daido Looi wrote about repentance that “The Gatha of Atonement, or ‘at-one-ment’, creates a pure and unconditioned state of consciousness...a mind receptive and open to transformation....Real atonement takes place only when the Bodhi mind has been raised and practice is engaged...

Practice and enlightenment thus become one reality². We can also remember Dogen’s words that practice is enlightenment and enlightenment is practice. It is important to realize that atonement or repentance is not about repressing or rooting out negative tendencies or thoughts, but that knowing and experiencing Mind as fundamentally vast, empty and pure, we do not feed these mind-actions; we and all beings are liberated, in fact have always been unbound and free. This is only possible because there is nothing from the very beginning, no separation, and nothing outside us. Repentance-resolution functions in that place where there is full interpenetration of relative and absolute.

I appreciate very much the comments of Katagiri Roshi on repentance-resolution. Several years ago, when we reworked sections of our own ceremony, we borrowed heavily from him. Katagiri wrote: “Repentance in Buddhism is to lead us to be present right in the middle of peace and harmony. It is the perfect openness of our hearts that allows us to hear the voice of the universe beyond the irritation of our consciousness... Repentance is to realize exactly the oneness of merging all sentient beings and Buddha, delusion and enlightenment³ ” Nothing is excluded here; each of us opens to the fullness of our lives and we accept responsibility without reservation. Aitken Roshi wrote: “Our dark side is hard to see and acknowledge, and yet it is wonderfully rich and fertile”⁴ Transformative practice cannot really take place if we pursue light and avoid darkness. The more transparent we are to our own personal karma, even our dark karma, and the way it functions in the world, the more we see the importance of practice, and paradoxically, we are not burdened but rather freed by this responsibility.

Dogen wrote:

“When the truth does not fill our body and mind, we think that we have enough. When the truth fills our body and mind, we realize that something is missing⁵ the Buddha Dharma, we no longer know who or what we are. And yet, when we live with care and with love, then the world opens like a flower and we realize that our life is endlessly reborn minute by minute in harmony with all beings. Then taking the precepts is not a burden, but a lightening of our past actions. It is a way of participating in a great and vibrant dance, the dance of living in deep, deep harmony and gratitude with everything, with everyone.

1. Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover*, p.3,15.

2. John Daido Looi, *The Heart of Being*, p. 35,38.

3. Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence*, p. 72-3.

4. Robert Aitken, *Diamond Sangha Renewal Ceremony*.

5. Hakuyu Taizan Maezumii, *The Way of Everyday Life*.

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Sangha News

Turning of the Year Turning of the Wheel

Yes, we are entering a new era, but the dharma is still the dharma and practice continues. And our evolution continues as it always has. There will be changes in small ways. Since two of our teachers will be out of town at a retreat in early January, the Center will remain closed through January 9 with the first regular sitting on January 11.

And... Thursday morning sittings will be discontinued. So for the winter angu, we will have three morning sittings (Tues, Wed, Fri) and two evening sittings (Tues, Thurs) per week. Plus Sundays, of course (lots of teishos).

Nothing is written in stone, and we will be listening to feedback and revisiting schedules as time goes on. Gassho and all the best for the new year, Karin, Ken & Peggy



Letter from Roshi

Dear Sangha,

Thank you to all who created and attended the retirement party for me last Sunday. To say that it was a memorable experience does not begin to express the import of the event and the place it has found in my heart and personal history.

My friend, Bob Sample, whom I have known since adolescence, came up to me after the procession of personal gifts in the form of poetry, art, music and simple heartfelt words often spoken through tears, and Bob said to me, "Danan, you are loved!"

Of course, to be the recipient of such deep affection and love was overwhelming. Everyone wants to love and be loved. However, something else was clearly evident that moved me even more. It was the evidence of 15-25 years of Zen practice on the part of a group of core members who have worked tirelessly and courageously on themselves in the work of investment in loss, ego attrition, self forgetting and coming forth from that place of nothing at all. The Buddha said, "A man may defeat a thousand men in a thousand battle but greater is he who conquers himself".

For 40 years I have cared about almost nothing other than Zen practice and realization - forgetting the small self, realizing essential nature and thus coming forth with greater selflessness and affection for the benefit of all beings. And low and behold, last Sunday I saw a group of my friends who have stuck it out and worked tirelessly together over decades, and are in fact growing beyond narrowness and learning to live as very simple, ordinary people, less encumbered by self importance, by selfishness, by self, period.

I could not possibly receive a greater gift and greater inspiration for my own practice and realization. So I can only say thank you! Working together with you has been the greatest honor of my life

gassho

Danan

Calendar Highlights

Center Closed
Seminar
Repentance Ceremony
Talk & Discussion
Samu
Talk & Discussion
Weekend Sesshin App. Due
Board of Directors
Sangha Workday
Weekend Sesshin
Zazenkai
Talk & Discussion
Senior Talk
Talk & Discussion
Samu
Workday
Sesshin Application Due
Talk & Discussion

January 1-9
January 15-16
January 20
January 25
January 29
February 1
February 4
February 7
February 13
February 18-20
February 20
February 22
February 27
March 8
March 12
March 20
March 25
March 29

Rohatsu Sesshin 2010



Break apart that rough,
unshapen staff and the
great earth's Indigenous
Black stretches out on
every side. -Hakuin

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