

Buddha-Nature and How Compassion and Wisdom Support It

Practice Sunday Dharma Talk May 28th, 2022

by Shinko A. Hagn

We had an intensive retreat with our Sangha in Bloomington via Zoom earlier this month, a study retreat with Shohaku Okumura Roshi who we actually just call Hojo-san. Hojo translates to “abbot”, simply, and “san” is a designation that expresses respect for the other person. The title “san” is given to virtually everyone in Japan.

Okumura does not really like the term Roshi, it is also not a kind of rank within our school, in a hierarchical sense, which testifies that it is something special that one has achieved somehow. This is often assumed here in the West, it is even wrong on Wikipedia! “Roshi” is an honorary title given to an old teacher. the Sangha, that is the community of students, gives this title.

The retreat we had with Hojo-san is called Genzo-e and it usually covers a chapter/fascicle from the main work of our lineage founder Dogen Zenji from the 13th century, the Shobogenzo. This time, it was the fascicle "Bussho" - Buddha Nature. This chapter is so long that there will be three of these retreats - so whoever is interested in participating might like to know that there will be another one in November and then another one next May. The retreats are five days long, with 2 lectures each, 1 ½ hours long, and we sit together, work and study.

That's where the three activities of our lineage - zazen, work and study- come in, the same as in our practice Sunday today..

The two following Genzo-s will be the last ones Hojo-san will do before his retirement. If all goes well, I will be at the last person to complete the Shusso Ango in Bloomington while Okumura is still abbot.

The Bussho chapter is one of the three most important chapters in Shobogenzo, along with Genjokoan and Bendowa.

“Bussho” is Japanese and means Buddha nature. Buddha nature means that we all have the ability to become Buddha or attain Buddhahood. This was a revolutionary thought around the 3rd century A.D. in India, because until then one could only become a so-called Arhat, an enlightened being, and only within a very elite order of monks, but an ordinary person could never become Buddha-like. This was reserved only for Gautama and his few predecessors because this is an event that takes place only every million years.

In Christianity, by the way, it was not until the 13th century that a human being, no matter what his status or level of education was, could become similar to God, and this was proclaimed by Hugo de Balma, a mystic and the forerunner of Meister Eckhart and many others. In both cases this idea was revolutionary, and many were strongly opposed for these statements.

So, everyone carries the ability to become Buddha within themselves, but what does that mean?

What are the signs of Buddhahood?

Yes, there are the 32 physical signs of a Buddha, you can easily find them on the Internet, some of them are quite bizarre, but many are mystical, like golden skin that shines and golden webbed fingers and toes like frogs, but these are only matters of appearance.

So, what does it mean that we all have Buddha nature and can attain Buddhahood? We have learned a lot about this during the Genzo-e and I would like to encourage everyone to take this opportunity to study with us the next few times.

And there is not enough space here to explain Dogen's argument, Okumura's view, our discussions and my insights on this, but I would like to limit myself to a few things that are essential for me.

First of all, we must remember that Buddha's teaching was revolutionary at the beginning, because he denies Atman, a concept in Indian philosophy that is comparable to the soul in the West. Atman is also called the eternal essence of the mind, that is, that there is nothing solid, nothing external. Buddha instead introduced anatman, so a form of not-self.

And with the emergence of the concept of Buddha nature, this discussion really gets going again, because one could accept Buddha nature as something fixed, because everyone possesses it.

This discussion continues in Buddhist philosophy until today. In Japan, there is still a movement that denies Buddha nature.

In the first third of Dogen's text, he refers exactly to this and, as usual with Dogen, he plays around with words, the original sutra text and corresponding stories and images from Chinese poetry and literature. I am very happy to have Hojo-san who can interpret these hidden word games and makes me, as someone who speaks neither Japanese, Chinese, nor Sanskrit, aware of these connections.

At the very beginning of the fascicle, Dogen quotes and interprets a sentence from the Parinirvana Sutra which reads:

"All living beings without exception have Buddha nature"

and Hojo-san often talks about the fact that, translated into English, it doesn't make sense, because you have to look at the Chinese characters, which usually also contain the opposite.

Buddhism originated in India and came to China at the beginning of the first century A.D., several hundred years before Bodhidharma. The teachings, transmitted in Indian languages, came in contact with Chinese characters, which were mostly already filled with a meaning. These meanings were on the one hand closely connected to nature, and on the other hand

the meaning was already filled with the Taoist or Confucian points of view. A prime example is the word "Tao", which translates to "way" or "path", but in Taoism, this is more than the way or path. It is the explanation of the world, I will also come back to this later.

So, when we talk about attaining the Buddha way, a very common phrase in Zen, this view is already included.

From my point of view, one of the reasons for Dogen's way of expressing himself in such a complex way is to avoid falling into all these traps that have opened up over the centuries, or to make them visible.

Let's go back to the first sentence:

"All living beings without exception have Buddha nature".

In Japanese, "u" means "to have", but Dogen interprets it as "being" and in contrast, "Mu" is "not being".

In the Heart Sutra it says, "Form equals form and emptiness equals emptiness, form is emptiness and emptiness is form".

This is like two sides of a coin, that is they are not one and not two, so not either - or, but both at the same time, but the most important thing is: they never meet.

Form always remains form and emptiness always remains emptiness, both are present at the same time but do not mix.

But that also means "Mu equals u".

Many of you probably also know the first koan from the Mummon - Koan ("The Gateless Barrier") in which a monk asks Master Joshu: "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" and Joshu answers: "Mu".

Maybe the Gateless Barrier opens up a little, here?

So Mu = U or form=emptiness, when transferred to its Chinese origin from Taoism, to the heaviness of meaning of the words and the transfer of the concept of emptiness and form, is emptiness, in Sanskrit "Shunyata" = absence, and form, Sanskrit "Rupa" =presence or "being there".

So form = emptiness means in Dao: presence = absence.

Absence does not mean that something is empty, but what is absent?

The basis of this concept comes from one of Daoisms two founders, Chuangzu, and is called "tzujan". It explains how the world comes into being, how our world comes into being, this very moment.

"Tzujan" translates to "spontaneous" or "natural".

A more descriptive translation would be "the event of the appearance of a self", an attempt to explain the origin, that which is born, that which is unborn. It is the ontological basis of Daoism, which later became intertwined with Chan Buddhism.

"Wuwei", a part of this concept, literally means "doing nothing" or "selfless action".

Chuangzu who, along with Laotzu, is considered the founder of Daoism, said:

"The 10000 things can only have "tzu-jan" as their source. It is the selfless action - "wu-wei" that makes "tzu-jan" into "tzu-jan", [...] when you act selflessly, "wu-wei", you are confident and act from the source."

That is, the self is absent, we act from the source without adding anything, that is, the emerging presence is the true reality, we have added nothing.

To understand Dogen, it is important to always think in this way, always in two ways, these two opposites, at the same time.

But what connects these two opposites if they never meet, or differently put: if they are two sides of the same medal?

They are connected by compassion and wisdom, which, moreover, are mutually dependent.

Compassion and wisdom are the forces that reconcile the constant paradox of our being.

When we open ourselves, tear down the barriers of our limited self, rise beyond our thinking, step out of our habitual way of seeing.

The tool for this is our compassion. When we practice to expand the boundaries of compassion, our inner tightness will widen and these "opposites", the paradoxes of our being, will open up for us.

Further on in the fascicle Bussho, Dogen says:

It is his dharma-wheel turning utterance "What is that which comes thus, in this way?"

This is a quote from a dialogue between the 6th Patriarch Huineng and his dharma successor Nanyue (in Japanese Nangako Ejo) who lived from 677 - 744 AD. This dialogue goes as follows:

Huineng asked Nanyue, "Where are you from?"

Nanyue replied, "From Mt. Song."

Huineng asked, "What is it that thus comes?"

Nanyue could not answer.

After eight years, Nanyue suddenly attained enlightenment. He informed the sixth ancestor about it and said, "I have an understanding."

The sixth ancestor asked, "What is that?"

Nanyue said, "To say just one thing would miss the mark."

The sixth ancestor further asked, "Then can it be made obvious or not?"

Nanyue said, "I'm not saying it can't be made obvious, but it can't be defiled."

The sixth ancestor said, "It is precisely that which is undefiled that is upheld and nurtured by all Buddhas. You are like that. I am also like that."

Nanyue then stayed with the sixth ancestor for fifteen years.

In this dialogue, two very important questions are raised, one is, "Where did you come from?", one is "Where do you come from?" and this question is does not necessarily concern the actual place but is rather related to the path, that is, related to our practice path.

And the second question is "What is this?" and here it gets very difficult as you can see in this dialogue, it is about the fact that after 8 years he brings up an understanding that he can't really explain because what he wants to express is beyond language. He's actually talking about the hidden Buddha nature and that we need to practice with our three poisonous minds (greed, anger, hatred) because they are the cause of our suffering for living in samsara. And that we have to practice, his eight years of practice being an example.

"It is precisely that which is undefiled that all Buddhas uphold and cultivate. You are like that. I am also like that."

This is a statement of what Buddha nature is.

If, in our practice, we include the question, "What is it that thus comes?" or just "What is this?", backed up with this understanding, it can help us expand our view.

If in our questions: "What is this?", or "Why?", we leave our conditioned way of thinking and, for example, do not immediately put a label on things. Take this glass of water, for example – and examine not that which we are seeing, but examine our perception of it and see how it arises. If we do not refer to our habitual strand of consciousness, we can grow.

So, we have a sensory perception, and our mind immediately calls the appropriate routine, that which is called a feedback loop in mechanics, so there is a routine going on, depending on our imprint, that means we tell ourselves the story we always tell ourselves, what the sensory sensations evoke in us, e.g. that water is transparent, that is translucent. The fact that we call it "transparent" is a cultural agreement.

In book four of "Zuimonki", another text by Dogen, which has just been published in English in a new translation by Hojo-san, the question "What color is the grass?" is raised. The answer is "yellow", and the master tells the monk that he has also attained understanding.

Now this is a very simple example, it is more difficult with our emotions because we are so entangled in them. Untangling this tangle requires some effort and also some support.

What has helped me a lot on the one hand is the practice of "Neidan", the practice of inner alchemy from Daoism, an exercise which, too, is rooted in the early phases of Daoism. It is recognizing the network of the inner energy pathways and how our energies are flowing within it and the connection to our emotions.

On the other hand, to link this inner flow to our outer world, the exercise of social engagement, has also had a great effect on me.

Norman Fisher, a very well-known American Zen teacher and poet from the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki, writes in his book "Training in compassion" that in Zen, unlike in other Buddhist lineages such as Tibetan Buddhism, there are no exercises to work with emotions and he borrows the exercises for compassion from Tibetan Buddhism and the practice of tonglen.

This may be good and helpful, but I believe that in Zen, these roots that ultimately lie in this practice of inner alchemy, which is based on the fact that the process of transformation is an inherent reality, are very strong.

It's about recognizing the integration of our emotional energies, the kleshas, (Sanskrit) as they are called in the Abhidharma scriptures, into our inner emotional energy circuits as they have been integrated since the beginning of Daoism.

I have often talked about this and we will perhaps be able to do our own workshop on it this autumn, together with Susanne, who is a Qigong teacher. Neidan is often referred to as a kind of silent Qigong.

This sounds very mystical and yes, opening to our own mysticism is a gateway to gaining an understanding of what lies beyond our thinking.

It's more like gaining a sense of what's going on inside of us and how our world is generated.

For me it was and is very helpful to do this exercise in the outside world as well. This became possible through my voluntary work in social institutions.

It allowed me to give this exercise more room in which to closely observe and explore our own emergence. A space in which I can consciously take back my self, my ego, and be more intensely absorbed in the "other", get more involved in the present situation itself than in my everyday life, at work, at home with family or friends, or my professional life.

But at the same time, it does not happen in a monastic practice environment but in an everyday environment and with everyday encounters.

In these everyday encounters, I can then pay special attention to the emergence of my emotions, without the need for immediate action, I can create room for these emerging emotional energies.

Not only can we let them spread out in our sitting to explore them, but we can do so in an everyday environment.

To be absorbed in the other, to recognize my own inner limits, but not to close myself off immediately, but to simply let them be, becomes possible.

Thus, the emotions expand all by themselves, as I take care of my inner resistance and bring compassion to it.

This can form a bridge for a better understanding and recognition of our own paradoxical world.

Compassion is the connecting force and the resulting insights often lead us to act more wisely in our lives and thus provide more harmony and peace in the world.

The translation of the German word "Geist" comes from the English "mind", could also be called "spirit", and the English "mind" is a translation of the Japanese word "Shin" which actually means "heart-mind". There is no separation between heart and mind, between feelings, emotions and thoughts. Here, perhaps, lies the problem why we believe that in Zen there is no emphasis on emotions. Because they are always part of the whole.

In this way we can open up more to our Buddha nature, to this gate through which we can see the world as it really is, moment by moment, and not our idea of the world.