

# “Compassion and Wisdom: Gentle and Strong”

**Maurine Myoon Freedgood,**

**Roshi**, a concert pianist, began formal Zen practice in the early 1960's. She studied with Yasutani Roshi, Eido Roshi and Soen Roshi, and was ordained a Rinzaï priest in 1977 by Eido Roshi. For the past six years she has been teaching and leading retreats at the Cambridge Buddhist Association. She received confirmation as a Roshi in 1982 from the late Soen Roshi during his last trip to the United States.)

Dear friends who have come from all across the continent, it is really a wonderful experience to be here. Let us start this afternoon by chanting together. The chant is NAMU DAI BO SA. All of you who practice will know that when you chant you are not thinking, “What does this mean?” — no need for that — chanting is zazen with voice, with your whole being, every pore of you breathing the sound.

Before we do it let me briefly tell you what it means. “Namu” means “to unite with.” Namu: let us unite in one spirit, one mind, together. Unite with “dai”, which ordinarily means “big”, but here dai means the absolute, the ultimate ground of our being that is every single one of us. So to unite with this absolute in a Bodhisattva spirit (Bosa means Bodhisattva), for the sake of all sentient beings we are here. For the sake of all sentient beings we are chanting.

Myoku asked Rinzaï: “Avalokitesvara has one thousand hands and each hand has an eye. Which is the real eye?”

Rinzaï answered: “Avalokitesvara has one thousand hands and each hand has an eye. Which is the real eye? Now tell me quick!” Rinzaï said in his wonderful style, “Quick! tell me!”

Myoku pulled Rinzaï from his seat, then sat in his place. Rinzaï stood up and asked “Why!” Then he shouted, “Kaaaaaatz!” and pulled Myoku from his seat in turn and Myoku left the room quietly.

This Bodhisattva of compassion and wisdom has one thousand eyes to see the thousands of needs, and thousands of hands to help. As symbols of this, some

response to this question of “Which is the real eye?” was immediate and spontaneous. Why? Why are you asking which is the true eye? Why are we here?

At a dinner party some weeks ago, my husband and I in the course of the conversation were asked, “What is your favorite question?” Mine is “Why?” Why am I using this story? Avalokitesvara with the thousand eyes and hands is all the different roles that each one of us here represents: Man, woman, artist, friend, mother, lover, child, whoever. Every single one without exception is this true eye.

It is the moment to moment experience of being here together that is so vital to all of us. This is the life-giving and wisdom-making process: our being here together, looking at how we are engaged with one another, heart to heart, hara to hara, mind to mind, and each one of us answering this “why?” with the deepest expression of our own nature, our own experience, without any speculation about it.

There was a Rinzaï school nun named Chido who was given inka, which means, she was allowed to teach. Some monks were a little hesitant about it. Is it alright for this lady to be up here, giving us a discourse on the Rinzaï Roku? Is it alright for this piano player from Saskatchewan, Canada, to be up here giving you a talk on the Rinzaï Roku? Is that okay?

So this nun Chido, the founder of Tokujji, confronted the head monk, who did not at all approve of her being given inka. He decided to question her. “Ha! I’m going to trap her and see how stupid this lady is. She is not ready to be a Rinzaï Roku teacher. Let’s see.” So he said to her, “In our line, one who receives the inka gives a discourse on the Rinzaï classic. Can this nun teacher really brandish the staff of the Dharma in the Dharma seat?”

She faced him, and drew out her 10-inch knife, carried by all women of her warrior class. She held it up and said, “Certainly a Zen teacher of the line of the patriarchs should go up on the high seat and speak on this book, but I am a woman of the warrior line and I should declare our teaching when really face to face with the drawn sword. What book should I need?” The head monk said, “Before father and mother were born, with what then will you declare out teaching?”

The nun closed her eyes and sat perfectly still.

The presence of each one of you is teaching the Rinzaï Roku. Your living dynamic, wonderful presence is your living Rinzaï Roku and mine, standing here heart to heart. This is what Rinzaï asked us to come to in his Rinzaï Roku: no hanging onto words and phrases but coming to the living dynamic spirit. This is what we are here for. Looking into all your wonderful faces, I sense how far you have come to share this experience together, not just in a distance of miles but in life distance. What experiences have brought us here together?

As Suzanne told you, I come from the Cambridge Buddhist Association. I am the teacher there. I am most grateful to be there. The founders of the Cambridge Buddhist Association some 27 years ago were people like Daietz Suzuki and Shinichi Hisamatsu and Elsie Mitchell and John Mitchell and some other wonderful friends. Dr. Hisamatsu and Dr. Suzuki have passed on, but they left us a wonderful heritage. One of the things that Dr. Hisamatsu said when the Cambridge Buddhist Association was founded was that it should be a non-sectarian place. So our house in not just a zendo, but a place for all people to come for the study and practice of Buddhism. The fact that I am a Zen teacher does not mean that it is just a Zen Center. It is for everyone.

Dr. Hisamatsu was a great Zen teacher himself. When I saw Soen Roshi on his last visit, he said, “Dr. Hisamatsu was a true roshi, a true old teacher. I learned so much

from him.” Dr. Hisamatsu stressed the flexibility of Zen. One must know something of its history to understand it, but one must be aware of its flexibility, the way it adapts itself to various circumstances. It is not rigid. Zen must be able to change its form from what it was centuries ago. How will Zen differ now from the past? What will happen to it in America?

What is happening to Zen in America is very interesting, from the standpoint of its history and looking at the present scene. Some things are sad, and because they are really difficult, they are making us grow up in our Zen practice. They are making us become less dependent, making us see things much more clearly.

So where does this begin, this independent spirit in Zen? Before it came to America, there was a great deal of feeling already in Japan that it should be less encrusted by temple emphasis, although there’s nothing wrong with the temple. I’m happy you’re building one here. But Zen should extend itself to lay people, not just men but women too. It should be extended to everyone.

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*“Zen must be able to change its form from what it was centuries ago. What will happen to it in America?”*

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One of the roshis who believed this implicitly was a man called Kosen. His birthdate was as early as 1816. He was extremely interested in Western culture and insisted that his monks go to the university and learn about other parts of the world, learn other languages, study other philosophies, in fact, open their minds. He was the teacher of Soyen Shaku, the first Zen teacher to come to America.

In 1893 Soyen Shaku came well-prepared to a conference of religions in Chicago. He understood our language and a great deal of Western thought. In 1905 he returned to San Francisco, which of course is the place of the beginning of Zen practice in America. He was welcomed into the home of Mrs. Alexander Russell, who was the first person in America to study Zen. This wonderful woman did deep koan study with Soyen Shaku. Wonderful beginnings!

Another great lady in our American tradition is Elsie Mitchell. It was she who with Dr. Suzuki and Dr. Hisamatsu began the Cambridge Buddhist Association. To this day she is inconspicuously working with all of us there to help wherever there is a need — a true Bodhisattva of compassion and wisdom. Soen Roshi said to me when I left New York, “Do not be so sad to leave. Find Elsie Mitchell in Massachusetts and you’ll be alright.” Indeed he was right.

In June of this year, a group of women in California gathered with me to experience a sesshin together as women. This was not my idea. It was their very good idea, something that they wanted to try. I said, “I am absolutely at your disposal. I am very fond of men and I love to have them with us but if you feel that there will be some special quality — something that we can do together as women — then let us do it and find out what happens.” So we did.

I arrived one afternoon and there was a sparkling young woman from the Empty Gate Zen Center to greet me at the airport. We went almost immediately to a meeting of a group of women who had worked very hard on this, among them Lenore Friedman who is here with us at this conference. The next day we went off to a Vedanta retreat house in Marin County. This was already a beautiful beginning for our time together. The Vedanta retreat house was quiet, beautifully cared for, with wonderful white deer wandering around on the lawn, humming birds in every little flower — incredible paradise!

But the meditation room of this Vedanta center was not for us as Zen students. It was very heavily carpeted and each little tuft of carpet was full of rose incense. The windows would not open wide enough. We looked around and asked, “What shall we do?” We moved all the furniture out of the living room, which was right next door to the kitchen, right next door to the dining room. How shall we deal with this? We asked, all the noise of food preparation, setting the tables and so on. Will it work?

It worked. Everything flowed into everything else in a wonderful way. We went from the zendo into the dining room, into the kitchen, and back to the zendo, and it was all clearly flowing.

Once last year in our zendo in Cambridge, I tried this. As teacher, I was the cook, the giver of the talks, the interviewer, etc. All day I just went from one room to another, from this place to that place, it too was a clear and flowing experience, as in California. The atmosphere became stronger and warmer, participants feeling less and less judgmental and more accepting of everything.

In the California retreat, somehow many of these women had been intimidated by sesshin atmosphere, and also were somewhat fearful because of certain things that have happened in relation to teachers. So we were feeling closer and freer.

We listened to Rinzaï. We listened to Nansen and Joshu as if they were there, as they were. The spirit is here, not in ancient

China, but present in our time and place, right here. We listened to Nansen telling Joshu that this calm and ordinary mind, this non-discriminating mind, is the way. We heard Rinzaï encourage us to seek Buddha within ourselves, not as something we seek outside or are given by someone. We heard Rinzaï telling us to free ourselves from him, free ourselves from attachment to him or any teacher. No attachment.

It is so easy for us to become attached to what we revere. We put someone up on a pedestal. Soen Roshi was absolutely adamant about that. He always said, “Do not put me in that place, I am just an ordinary monk. I have to practice harder than you. Please don’t put me in that place. No attachment to me. Look at the universe, the stars, look at the moon, look at all this. Don’t look to me.” No matter how lofty the teacher, in so far as that presence is outside of us, it’s not real. It’s not our own treasure.

We came here as we came together in California sesshin to realize Rinzaï in us. His wonderful shout is our shout of joy and celebration of life together. We heard his “why?” Endless dimension universal life wondering. This was Soen Roshi’s phrase: endless-dimension-universal-life. No beginning, no end, just wondering with heart empty and open.

When one of my children started mathematics in her grade school, she had a remarkable teacher. On the report card this teacher wrote: “At the beginning of the term, Barbara caught the spirit of mathematics and wondered on.” So, here we are capturing this joyful celebration of life together, and wondering on.

To go back to this matter of teachers for a moment, Dogen Zenji said, “If you cannot find a true teacher it is better not to practice.” Who or what is the true teacher? Our practice, whatever it is, is our teacher. Not necessarily Zen practice. Everyone here has their own practice. Your life is your practice. Your life is your koan. Each one of us learns from that, if we listen deeply, if we’re involved down to the bottom. This is our true teacher, the most venerable teacher: our practice.

And what is our attitude to this teacher? Are we sitting with thoughts of dependency, of gaining something, of

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Photo by Sonia Alexander

*“Some things are sad, and because they are difficult, they are making us grow up in our Zen practice.”*

Bodhisattvas also have eleven faces, so that they may see in all directions simultaneously. A direct response, this vivid Zen school of Rinzaï, which is my school, Rinzaï’s

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## WITHOUT IMAGES

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touch with this fundamental anxiety of being nobody. And usually there's an immediate withdrawal from that anxiety. But will one not escape this time? Will one face that anxiety—but just anxiety? Not stopping the questioning, but simply looking, feeling, listening, quietly with no goal in mind. Just being with what is there or isn't there in utter silence...

Maybe there is a flash of insight into the fact that we are nobody, nothing. With this glimpse comes a joy that cannot possibly be put into words. It has nothing to do with words. It is no image, no thought.

Then the next moment, does one try to grab onto it, make it into an image? "I am somebody who has seen." "Now I know." Does one congratulate oneself again? Does one try to recall and relive the experience? Images come so quickly, like mushrooms springing out of the ground on a moist rainy day. There they are — new images. Will one see them immediately and drop them instantly?

Or does one just carry on, "I've done this thing, I've gotten through it. This is it. I'm no one!" What does it mean — "I'm no one?" It's already become a concept, a memory.

So — is it possible to see and be free of images from moment to moment — really being no one and therefore completely open and related to everyone and everything, with a lovingness that cannot be produced through any kind of practice? Love is not practiceable. It's either there or it isn't, and it is not there when the "me" is there who wants to bring it about, who tries to grab it and hold on to it.

One may deceive oneself as being a loving kind of person being very compassionate. Is it just an image? Do you see it when it comes up? Can it be dropped instantly so one really does not know what one is? Just letting action flow out of this not-knowing, just being in touch with what's within and before one — listening, seeing, responding openly? It's up to each one of us. No one can do it for us. Listen!

## EVERYDAY LIFE

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emptiness. We don't recognize what is constantly changing. We try to fix it or hold it in some way. "Oh! I am a vegetarian meditator. This will always be my life." Right away we're headed for trouble. The fundamental teaching of the Buddha is impermanence, constant change. We have to recognize that we are all of it, and it is constantly changing. Emptiness is not like some big black void waiting for us to fall into it and yell for help. Emptiness is constant change, nothing fixed, nothing permanent.

We are a celibate nun, and also we're very sensual people who love being married and having relationships. We are very vulnerable and frightened and childlike, and also very clear-minded and steady, with diamond-like wisdom to cut aside any impediment. We are also fluffy-brained and confused and forget things. We're health food nuts who love to eat burned oatmeal in the morning because "It's good for our practice." We also love those Pepperidge Farm cookies with the sugar icing for tea break.

We are vegetarians and meat eaters. If we don't recognize the meat-eater in us we cannot relate to them "outside". A whole world is off-limits to us. Right away there are conflicts. "You guys are not on the right path, I am." It doesn't mean we have to eat meat, but, being both carnivores and vegetarians, we can choose freely each moment which to be.

There are endless ways to divide us up into little boxes and say "This is the right box." All those parts constantly changing and flowing are us. If we try to exclude a part, it's going to cause us trouble.

As a pediatrician I talk to many parents. I have to know there's a child-abuser in myself, or I can't work at all with child-abusers. If I don't know that part of me, boy, they know it right away: "Here comes that goody-goody." We all have parts that comes home frazzled after a hard day's work and hasn't sat a sesshin in two months because our husband got to do the sesshin this time, and when the kid starts crying and whining, you want to open the window and throw him out. Or you want to say to your teenager, "Look, see you later when you get your act together. Come back in about five years."

Knowing and exploring all those parts is exploring Buddha nature. It's not just human nature, it's everything. I am the grass, the leaves, the Datsun Z. I am Ronald Reagan.

I am a star and a piece of dirt. All of that blending together and constantly changing is who we are. It's not a blend in the sense of gruel, like on the seventh day of sesshin when the cooks keep mixing the leftovers from days before into the pot and it comes out all gray with some little green flecks in it, not tasting like anything. It's a rich and lovely blending like Chinese food, that preserves and recognizes the diverse elements: salty, sweet, spicy, crisp and soft, and so on. That's what our mixture is — delicious. Our Buddha nature is delicious, as Gesshin said.

We mentioned the notion that women don't have Buddha nature or can't become enlightened until they become men. Should we reject that notion? Or can we examine it, ask what it means in a deeper sense...women can't become enlightened until they are born as men? Absolutely right! I can't become enlightened until I have been born as a man, as a woman, as neither and as both.

Men cannot become enlightened until they know their masculine nature, their feminine nature, the nature that is neither and both.

So let us practice together. Every life and every minute of life is communion, coming into union with who we are. □

## GENTLE AND STRONG

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grabbiness? Or are we sitting instead with this kind of mind that other women teachers have spoken about today, this open-hearted, not-knowing, giving-up-yourself practice? No grabbiness, no gaining idea, just moment after moment open.

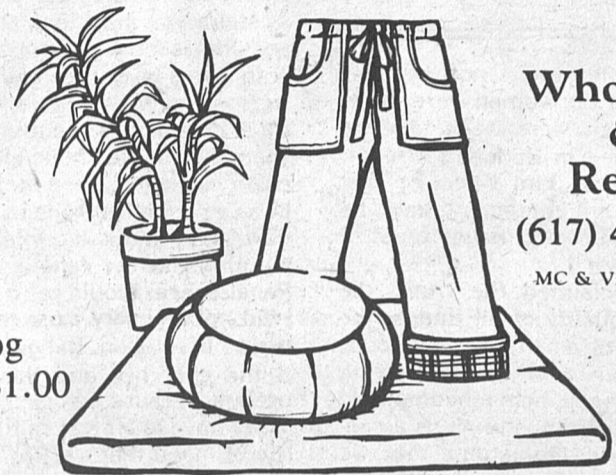
When we had finished the California sesshin, we sat around outside in a circle

and had a very intimate time together, really open-hearted, ready to share experience and feelings of freedom and deep compassion with one another. What came out of it were feelings of real strength with that compassion. There was our compassion and wisdom, gentle and strong: real women warriors cutting off all their delusions about what they could or could not be. There we were!! □



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