

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

# The Rimpoché's Toenails

By Jane McLaughlin

When I first started practicing, I went to Nepal to look for a teacher. At that time there was a famous Buddhist Rimpoché at Swayambu monastery. Everyone said that he was accustomed to teaching Westerners, so I decided to go there first. Swayambu is a beautiful stupa which sits on top of a mountain surrounded by monkeys, hence its nickname, "The Monkey Temple". In order to reach the monastery, you have to walk up hundreds of wide stone steps whose ascent seems interminable. The steps are lined on either side with dozens of monkeys and beggars, both of whom are equally persistent in their efforts to obtain something from you, whether it be the apple you're eating (the monkeys will snatch it right from your hands if you're not careful!), or some money. There is a beggar on almost every step — it isn't possible to give money to each person who asks.

One day, on the way up these steps to see Thrangu Rimpoché, a woman grabbed hold of my skirt, saying, "Memsab, Memsab, paisa!", which is a kind of honorific used for foreigners, and means something like, "Venerable person, give me some change." She was maybe the fortieth person to ask that day, and the sheer number of requests was wearing me down. I was immediately exasperated by the woman grabbing me. It felt as though the enormity of her need (and all these people's needs) far outstretched my ability to respond materially, so how could I respond at all? I didn't want to give her anything, but begrudgingly reached into my pocket and gave her some money anyway. The whole experience was so ironic. I was climbing the wide steps to receive these teachings on clarity, compassion, and "saving all beings." Here was a real life situation — a chance to put that teaching to the test — and all I felt was annoyed!

I reached the monastery and went in to see the Rimpoché. He was a jolly-looking man seated on bright gold and maroon silk cushions in a room filled with colorful thankas and old



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scrolls hanging on the walls. There was the sound of far-off chanting from the meditation hall, and the smell of wonderful Tibetan incense permeated the entire room. And in the midst of this glorious setting was the great Rimpoché, seated on his cushions, intently . . . meditating? No! Intently clipping his toenails with one of those huge red Swiss Army knives. (You know the kind of knife — thirty or so different blades and survival gadgets that are supposed to help you get an edge on the next guy if there's sudden all-out nuclear war.) Anyway, as I was bowing to him, he asked (without looking up from his toes), "Do you have any questions?"

I told him about what had happened on the way up the steps, and how confused I felt about it. (All the while he's clipping, clipping, clipping — his toenails flying around everywhere as I laid bare my soul in the foothills of the Himalayas. It was not what I'd expected.) At the end of recounting this story I asked, "So, what is more important, the motivation for an action, or the action itself? Outside, this woman got the money, so she was happy, but inside, my heart was closed."

His response was wonderful, and has always stayed with me. He said (clip, clip, clip), "Well, if you want to practice generosity, you can start by giving your best friend some small thing that you are not attached to, like a penny. (Clip, clip, clip, clip, clip.) When you have mastered that, give them something you really like, perhaps your favorite shirt. Then, once you have mastered that, try giving some small thing to someone you dislike. At last, when you can do all this with ease, give your greatest enemy something which you cherish dearly."

Then he smiled, and passing the knife from one hand to the other and back again said, "If you can't do any of that, you must practice like this: right hand giving to left hand, left hand giving to right hand, right hand giving . . ."

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At this point we both started laughing uncontrollably at the sheer absurdity of it. Imagine someone being so selfish that they would have to practice giving from one of their own hands to the other! Yet perhaps that's not so preposterous as it may seem. Part of that teaching has to do with our need to be generous with ourselves, if we are ever to be generous or compassionate with others. The second and perhaps more obvious part of his "survival knife" teaching is that the right and left hands are part of the same body. It's only natural for one to give to the other, for them to work together in harmony. This natural quality is what is most important in Zen, and it comes by itself. We can't just pluck some idea of "good" or "kind" out of the sky and think "I am like this!" That would feel contrived and uneasy, like the way I felt with the woman on the steps. With practice, we come to see that all these feelings and thoughts, good and bad, are empty, like clouds. They don't "belong" to us or to others, so we don't have to let them get in the way. This is how natural harmony can appear. We just have to let that veil drop away.

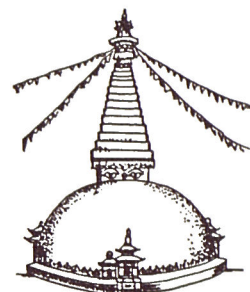
The most important thing we can give to ourselves, or anyone else, is clarity, the practice of being *awake*. For me, the greatest happiness has always been just being able to see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think. When we can do that, we can correctly perceive situations and respond to them as they are, as the moment-to-moment condition demands, and not merely by our own categories of "right" and "wrong," or our own private "shoulds" or "should nots." But we Zen students can easily fall into the trap of our own exalted ideas of openness, which are, despite all the practice in the world, smug and delusive. To cling to them is to go from one "opposite" to another; it's just that the new thing we have chosen to attach to has a "good" face rather than a "bad" face.

When Zen Master Seung Sahn was in Cambridge recently, he gave me a little heart-shaped jewelry box. As he was handing it to me he said, "This is a heart; that is for love." Then, opening and closing the lid, he said, "See? Open. Close. Good, yah?" "Thank you so much!" I said. Then, trying to be saintly and clever, I opened the lid of this heart-shaped box and said to him, "Open is good, yes?" (as if to say, "keeping the heart open is the best way, yes?"). Without skipping a beat, he said, "Open time, only open, closed time, only closed. Don't be attached to 'open,' okay?"

That really hit me! I can think, "Oh, I'm a good Zen student, my heart is always open, no separation, everything's perfect." And we can all practice bowing, sitting, and chanting until the cows come home, but if we're always trying for samadhi, trying for enlightenment, trying to become something better than what we are — it is all just one more subtle trick of the mind. (It is very easy to trick ourselves!) It happens a thousand times a day. Zen practice doesn't depend on ideas of "open" or "closed" — there are a million approaches for a million different situations, all pointing to the same thing: stay awake. It's nothing more than that. Once we are awake, we can correctly perceive any situation. Then, function is automatic, undetermined, and completely free.

"Right hand giving to left hand, left hand giving to right ..."

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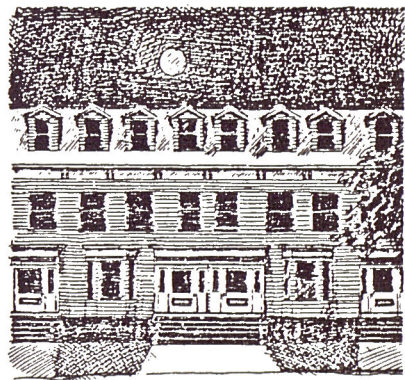
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