

## THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

# Right Livelihood for the Western Buddhist

By Robert Aitken, Roshi

*I am large . . . I contain multitudes.*

— Walt Whitman

The notion of engaged lay Buddhism, popular among progressive Western Buddhists, is rooted in earlier Buddhist movements, notably the Kamakura Reformation of thirteenth century Japan. Honen, Shinran, Nichiren, and some of the early Zen masters empowered their lay followers with responsibility for the Dharma itself, rather than merely for its support. In this process they made Buddhism more relevant to Japanese needs and expectations.

The acculturation of Buddhism in the West is a process of further empowering lay men and women. Christian, Jeffersonian and Marxist ideals of equality and individual responsibility and fulfillment are as alive in our hearts as ideals of Confucianism, Taoism and Shinto were for our Far Eastern ancestors. Our task is to make Buddhism accessible in the context of Western culture, and to be as clear about this task as Shinran and Nichiren were about making Buddhism Japanese.

This task begins with examining what the old teachers said and did not say about their own traditions, and then considering what we might say in turn. For example, Hakuin Ekaku declared that all beings by nature are Buddha, and "this very body is the Buddha." However, he did not say that this very body is a Bodhisattva, a being enlightening the world.

I interpret this omission as a limitation of the Mahayana. There can be something passive in "This very body is the Buddha." It is Shakyamuni simply accepting himself under the Bodhi tree. He is completely enlightened, but nothing is happening. It was not until he arose and sought out his former disciples that he began to turn the Wheel of the Dharma. This is the process that Buddhism itself has followed over the centuries and millennia. It has, for the most part, sat under the Bodhi tree appreciating itself and only gradually come to remember its myriad, faithful disciples.

Yet all those disciples — ordinary people as well as monks and nuns; birds and trees as well as people; so-called inanimate beings as well as birds and trees — are clearly the responsibility of the Mahayana Buddhist, who vows every day to save them. This faith of ours, the great vehicle transporting all beings to the other shore, emerged two thou-

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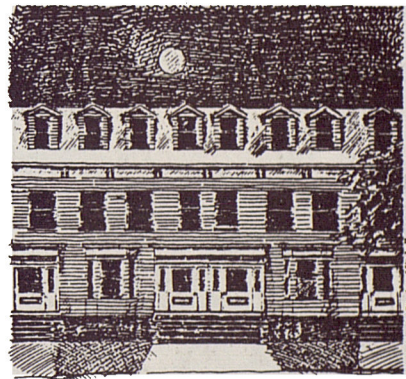
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## Right Livelihood

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sand years ago; but strangely enough, so far as I know no teacher has commented on the vows and said in so many words, "You yourself are the Mahayana. You yourself with your modest limitations are responsible for ferrying people, animals, oceans and forests across." Surely, with the entire Earth in grave danger, it is time that such things be said.

Regrettably, social responsibility has been framed negatively in Buddhism so far. In setting forth Right Livelihood, for example, the Buddha was explicit about wrong livelihood, such as butchering, bartending, manufacturing arms, guarding prisoners, and pimping. Yet the pursuit of such harmful occupations is surely just the most basic kind of transgression. It seems to me that the Western Buddhist might be asking what is Right Livelihood? after all! What is Right Lifestyle? What is the great endeavor that fulfills our Bodhisattva Vows — not just in the monastery but in daily life?

Turning back to our sources, we find the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin (*Korean: Kwan Seum Bosal*) offering answers. By her very name, Kuan-yin "hears the sounds of the world," the sounds of suffering, and the sounds of joy as well. She hears the announcements of birds and children, of thunder and ocean, and is formed by them. In one of her representations she has a thousand arms, and each hand holds an instrument



Robert Aitken, Roshi

of work: a hammer, a trowel, a pen, a cooking utensil, a vajra. She has allowed the world to cultivate her character, and also has mustered herself to develop the skills to make her character effective. She is the archetype of Right Livelihood: one who uses the tools of the workaday world to nurture all beings and turn the Wheel of the Dharma.

Nurturing begins with the experience of inclusion. "I contain this new life," the pregnant woman finds, and this experience sustains her as a mother. Like Mary, she knows that she is the mother of all. And like Mary, Kuan-yin too contains everyone and everything. To be intimate the way Kuan-yin is intimate, and to walk her path, is to hear the many sounds within my own skull and skin, and to find that my skull and skin are as porous as the starry sky. The starry sky inhabits my skull and skin.

The genius of the Hua-yen Sutra uses a starry image to illustrate inclusion. This is the Net of Indra, multidimensional, with each point a jewel that perfectly reflects all other jewels, and indeed contains all other jewels. Another image in the Sutra is the Tower of Maitreya, which the pilgrim Sudhana finds to be beautifully adorned, containing an infinite number of still more towers.

Here the androgynous nature of Buddhist archetypes seems to break down. Perhaps if Kuan-yin rather than Maitreya had been the final teacher of Sudhana, we might be stepping into the cavern of Kuan-yin, each cavern beautifully adorned, containing an infinite number of other caverns, and each one of those caverns all-inclusive too.

Thich Nhat Hahn's felicitous expression for inclusion is interbeing. When you experience interbeing personally, then fulfillment of yourself is the fulfillment of all. Your practice of Kuan-yin is turning the Dharma Wheel with your particular skills — not for, but with everyone and everything as a single organism.

The drive for fulfillment is embodied in another archetype: the Buddha as a baby. Taking seven steps in each of the cardinal directions, he announced, "Above the heavens, below the heavens, only I, the World-honored one." This is the cry of every new-born, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. "Here I am! I begin and end here!"

Completely unique! There is no one else with your face — never has been, never will be. This is the Nirmanakaya — the special self that has come together by mysterious affinities. There is no essence, and each of the affinities depends on all others. Together they form one kind of bundle here, and another kind of bundle there. Now a child, now a fish, now a stone or cloud.

Each bundle is an eager avatar of the great universal potential, each one drinking in the sounds of the mother, father, sisters, brothers, animals, wind in the trees, sea on the shore — with personal and particular talent. Fulfillment of that talent is the abiding passion of infants of every species. It continues to be the passion of life as it unfolds with the satisfactions of consummation to the very last breath. Human

beings share this passion with all beings, including those that are called inanimate. See how the stone resists destruction, how the soil heals itself.

Yet with dedicated effort the stone can be destroyed and the soil killed, just as human beings can be stifled — and cows, lambs, chickens, trees, and a thousand other beings can be exploited by harmful livelihood. This exploitation is so fierce today that we are using up the world the way a drunk uses up his body, and heading for premature death. This will be not only your death and mine. It will be the death of Shakespeare and Beethoven and Sesshu, of Mary and Kuan-yin, of oceans and forests.

Human beings are solely responsible for creating this headlong drive to destruction, and only human beings can turn it about. The extra turn of DNA in human genes brings forth awareness that we as individuals include all other people, as well as animals and plants, and it brings forth our motive to name them. The drive to realize this awareness and to reify the names can lead to a conspiracy to exploit all beings for the aggrandizement of a single center, or to a conspiracy to let the countless flowers bloom: the Mayan weaver, the duckbill platypus, the hibiscus kauaiensis, the common sparrow. When this uniqueness and variety is given scope it is the forest at climax, the farm burgeoning with vegetables, the city in one hundred festivals, the stars on course.

In the farm or forest or desert or river or ocean, fulfillment of one is the fulfillment of all in a dynamic system of constant destruction, renewal, evolution and entropy. With diligent cultivation, you and I can find that the Buddha's own experience of containment is, after all, our own. We can find that vast universal process to be the panorama of our own brains. Gradually it becomes clear just how to help maintain the whole universe at its climax.

At the same time, of course, we are, all of us, eating each other. Destruction and renewal join in Shiva's dance. Trees died that this book might live. Beans die that I might eat. Even at the kalpa fire, when all the universes are burned to a crisp, the flames of that holocaust will crack the seeds of something; we don't yet know what. Meantime, with minds as broad as can be, my lifestyle and yours will be modest and hearts will be thankful. It will be clearly appropriate to do this and not to do that. Kuan-yin has a boundless sense of proportion.

Proportion is a matter of compassion, and by compassion I refer back to the etymology of the word: suffering with others. Twenty-five years ago I traveled extensively in Asia, and in some countries I observed mansions surrounded by high walls that were topped with broken glass set in concrete. In the United States the walls are more subtle, but there they are: a hundred different styles of exclusiveness. Yet everything is still interdependent. The slums sustain the suburbs. The suburbs sustain Palm Beach. Palm Beach sustains the prisons. Prisons sustain the judges. Wrong livelihood does not disprove the Buddha.

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## Right Livelihood

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So the question becomes, How does one practice? As early Zen teacher Yung-chia said: "The practice of the Dharma in this greedy world — this is the power of wise vision." Right Livelihood is in the middle of the Eightfold Path — the path that begins with Right Views: "We are here only briefly, and we are parts of each other."

Hui-neng, who was a key figure in the establishment of Zen in China and who was Yung-chia's teacher said, "Your first vow, to save the many beings, means, I vow to save them in my own mind." Easy to parrot, difficult to personalize — but if they are saved there, really saved, and we move our bottoms from beneath the Bodhi tree and exert ourselves with our own well-developed skills, then there is hope.

Hope, because willy-nilly we are in intimate communication. We are not a scattering of isolated individuals with the same ideas, but an organism, with each cell perfectly containing all other cells. Color one green, and all are green. Your idea is a virus in my blood, mine in yours.

These are not just Buddhist notions, but perennial truths clarified by nearly simultaneous events around the world, bringing the promise of peace, social justice and genuine concern for the living Earth, where violence, repression and exploitation ruled before.

*Robert Aitken, Roshi, is the founding teacher of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, where he lives with his wife, Anne. He has long been active in engaged Buddhism, and is the author of several books, including The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics.*

*This article is reprinted, with permission, from Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology (Parallax Press, 1990). □*

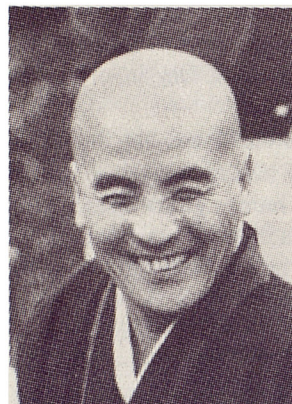
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## In Memoriam

### Dainin Katagiri, Roshi, 1928-1990



American Zen lost an important figure when Katagiri Roshi passed away in Minneapolis on March 1, 1990. He was 62.

Dainin Katagiri was born in Osaka, Japan. When he was nineteen he entered Eiheiji Monastery, one of the premier Soto Zen temples in Japan. He trained there for three years, and continued to work for the Soto Zen order after he left.

In 1963 he was asked to assist at the Soto Zen mission in Los Angeles. Two years later he moved to San Francisco, where he would become assistant to Shunryu Suzuki, Roshi.

In 1972, Katagiri Roshi was invited to Minneapolis, where he established the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. In 1977, he founded Hokyo-ji, a mountain training center on 1600 acres near the Mississippi River in southeastern Minnesota. A network of groups associated with MZMC sprung up in places such as Omaha, Milwaukee and Manhattan, Kansas.

Katagiri Roshi is survived by his wife, Mrs. Tomoe Katagiri, and two sons. He gave transmission to twelve students (eleven American and one Japanese) and died after an extended bout with cancer. His reflections on the illness were printed regularly in the center's newsletter and were an inspiration to many. Just before he died, he wrote the following bequeathed verse:

*The moment you see death, it's scary. But death is what? Death is death. But — death passes through death to freedom — means all you have to do is to be with death. At that time, death is not death. Death becomes life. So life, death are working together. Living life, living death and entering life, entering death constantly. This is . . . human life. That is called the Middle Way. — Flowers in the sky —*

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