

Dogen instructed,

Students of the Way, you should not postpone beginning to practice the Way. Just do not spend this day or even this moment in vain. Practice diligently day by day, moment by moment.

A certain lay person had been sick for a long time. Last spring he promised, "As soon as I have recovered, I will abandon my wife and children and build a hermitage near the temple. I will join in the meetings of repentance (*fusatsu*)¹ held twice a month. I also want to practice daily and listen to your lectures on the dharma. I would like to spend as much as possible the rest of my life being in accord with the precepts."

After that, he received various treatments, and recovered a little bit. But then, he had a relapse and spent his days in vain. In January of this year, his condition suddenly became critical, and he suffered increasing pain. Because he hadn't had enough time to bring the materials to build the hermitage he had been planning, he rented a room to stay in temporarily. Within a month or so, however, he passed away. He died peacefully since he had received the Bodhisattva precepts and had taken refuge in the Three Treasures the night before his death. So it was better than having stayed at home, clinging to the bonds of affection for his wife and children dying in madness. However I think it would have been better for him to have left home last year when he first made up his mind to do so. He could have lived close to the temple becoming familiar with the sangha and ended his life practicing the Way. Considering this, I feel that the practice of the Buddha-Way should not be put off until a later day. It is due to your lack of bodhi-mind that, you think since you're sick you can begin to practice after you have recovered. Whose body doesn't become sick composed as it is of the four elements!² The ancient masters did not necessarily have golden bones. They practiced without concern for anything else only because they thoroughly aspired (to practice the Way). It is like forgetting petty matters when encountering a great problem. Since the Buddha-Way is the vital matter, you should resolve to complete it in this lifetime and not waste even a single day or hour.

An ancient master said, "Do not pass time wastefully³." When you are receiving some treatment, but instead of getting better the pain gradually increases, you should practice while the pain is still not too bad. After the pain has become severe, you should determine to practice before your condition becomes critical. And when your condition has become critical, you should resolve to practice before you die.

When you are sick, sometimes the illness passes, sometimes it gets worse. Sometimes it gets better even without any treatment. And, sometimes it gets worse even though you are being treated. Take this carefully into consideration.

Practitioners of the Way, do not think of practicing after shelter has been assured, and robes and bowls etc. have been prepared. Although you may be living in dire poverty, while waiting until robes, bowls, and other equipment have been prepared, can you prevent death from

approaching? If you wait until shelter has been prepared and robes and bowls are ready, you will have spent your whole lifetime in vain. You should have the resolution that without robes and bowls, even a lay person can practice the Buddha-Way. Robes and bowls are simply the ornaments of monkshood.

True practitioners of the Buddha-Way do not depend on such things. If they are available, let them be with you, but do not deliberately seek after them. On the other hand, do not think of not owning them when you have them. In the same way, if it is possible to cure your sickness, it goes against the Buddha's teachings to try and die intentionally and not receive treatment. For the sake of the Buddha Way neither hold your life dear, nor be careless about it. When possible, use moxa or decocted herbal medicines which do not obstruct your practice of the Way. Anyway, it is a mistake to put aside your practice of the Way and put primary importance on curing your sickness, planning to practice only after you have recovered.

1. *Fusatsu* (Skt., *Uposata*) is a regular meeting of monks and other members of the sangha. It is held twice a month, on the 15th and 30th of the lunar month, at which time the precepts are recited and any transgressions repented.
2. The four basic elements of the material world: 1. *chidai*, the earth element, which represents solidity and forms the support for all things, 2. *suidai*, the water element, which moistens and contains all things, 3. *kadai*, the fire element, which represents heat and enables all things to mature and, 4. *fûdai*, the wind element, which represents motion and causes things to grow.
3. This is a quotation from the *Sando-kai*, a poem composed by Zen Master Sekito Kisen.