

# One Thing Means One Thing

WHEN SOMEONE PUTS on the priest robe, it is Buddha's robe he or she is wearing, not something *like* Buddha's robe or a symbol of Buddha's robe. We may ask, "Who wears this robe?"

Taizan Maezumi Roshi\* told me once, "Priest is ordinary person. People will have confidence if priest is ordinary person, not extraordinary person." Suzuki Roshi ordained many different types of students, so one could not define a "priest type."

Priest practice is externally marked with robes and a shaved head. The priest carries the ceremonial functions in the zendo. His or her life is to serve the community and be available to everyone. But we often cannot tell from the outside what is a liberated life. It is only from long and careful observation that we can understand someone's practice. The priest vows to do zazen as a way of life, in each situation, and even after acquiring buddhahood to continuously observe the precepts. To sustain these vows, the ordained person needs to find the invisible priest within.

The vow we take when we put on Buddha's robe is not dif-

ferent from the vow we make each time we sit zazen. It is the vow to clarify and realize this mind and body. We commit our lives to facing ourselves directly and intimately and to do this not only for ourselves but for the benefit of everyone.

One dictionary definition of commitment is "an engagement that restricts one's choices." Yet to make a commitment to one thing frees us to engage it completely. Commitment to zazen is a commitment to not moving away from ourselves, to doing what is immediately in front of us, to knowing this mind and body as deeply as we can.

One doesn't need to go to a monastery in the mountains to do this practice. It can be done when we are with the family, at work, with friends. One thing means one thing at a time. Give your complete attention to whatever is in front of you. If distraction is there, we are willing to be distraction. We know we have no choice but to be this very arising mind-body. This is choiceless being.

This is the fundamental teaching of Zen. There is only this moment, this timeless and simultaneously fleeting now, the now that is eight or nine p.m. and the present moment that is always here. Whatever is arising for you—a joyful or difficult sensation, pain in your knees or back, ease, or good feeling—this is your life now. We learn to accept our experience as the fullness of our life.

Thomas Merton has called the monk "deliberately irrelevant." This simple and profound practice of facing the wall that we call nondoing is a nonacquisitive activity. We are not even collecting merit. We are witness to being a mind and body. We see what is generated in this organism when we are not doing anything, not trying to do anything, when our consciousness

## THE TRUTH OF THIS LIFE

is available to itself. This attending to the inner life may seem irrelevant to society. William Carlos Williams writes:

It is difficult to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

Poetry's gift of opening to our deeper life can also be found in the practice of nondoing. If we bear witness to nondoing and there isn't any push to become an ideal being, then we are free to realize this actual human self with all of its wonderful human strengths and flaws.

The point is to become authentic and ordinary, to find out what that is. Our practice is based on equality and mutual identity in buddha-nature, regardless of age, skills, and talents, or our situation in life. The horizontal dimension is the ground of our life and makes workable the various hierarchies of student and teacher, parent and child, boss and worker.

Even though our minds may insist on something else, ordination is not a hierarchical move away from the shared ground of being. This is a new condition for our communities to work with. Let's watch what our minds make of it.