

GREAT EFFORT

When you make the effort to observe precepts, even if the effort is not complete, it is the effort of the Buddha mind.



When you practice Zen, you will of course have pain in your legs, and you will have some difficulty mentally. You will find that it is rather difficult to be concentrated only on your breathing. One after another, various images will come into your mind, or your mind will go out for a walk, wandering about. It is rather difficult for me too.

You should understand that the difficulties you have in zazen do not take place outside of your mind. So to deal with them, you have to accept the difficulty that you have, and you should keep up your efforts. But you should not

try to make some effort based on your small mind. When you say, “My practice should be better,” that is small mind. “My practice” is not right; Buddha’s practice should be better, but not yours!

If your small self acts without the care of big mind, that is not Zen. You should be well taken care of by big mind, and your practice should be based on big mind. When it is, even though the pain in your legs will be the same, the way that you handle it will be quite different.

We say, “Zen practice and precepts are one.” To observe precepts is to practice Zen. They are the same thing.

The precepts are not exactly a moral code, but they do include many rules. Most of these rules are almost impossible to observe completely. I don’t think that you can observe them, but if you practice zazen, you can observe them.

The secret of observing precepts is to see that the dualistic idea of “to observe or not to observe” takes place within your mind. Practicing Zen, you see that you have no one to blame, and that there is no one who is violating precepts.

When you make the effort to observe precepts, even if the effort is not complete, it is the effort of the Buddha mind. If you think that you yourself are outside of the precepts, or Buddha mind, it won’t be possible to observe them completely. On the other hand, if your activity is an expression of Buddha’s big activity, then whatever you do is Buddha’s effort, and even though it is not perfect, you are manifesting Buddha’s compassionate activity.

According to his record, Dogen Zenji was enlightened when he heard his master slap a disciple sitting next to him, saying “What are you doing? You have to make a great effort!”

That great effort we have to make is Zen, and the observance of precepts. If we make our best effort with confidence on each moment, that is enlightenment. Don't ask whether your observance is perfect or not; when you do your best to observe precepts and to practice Zen, right there is enlightenment. There is no other way to attain enlightenment.

Enlightenment is not some particular stage; it is everywhere. Wherever you are, enlightenment is there. When you do whatever you do with your best effort, that is enlightenment. This point is very important for our Zen practice and for our everyday life. Our Zen practice is part of our everyday life, and we should make our best effort in our everyday life. It is not Zen at all if we just come and sit here for forty minutes without also making our effort in everyday life.

Even though it is almost impossible to observe the precepts, it is necessary to have them as an example of practice in everyday life. It is possible to be concentrated in sitting because we have rules about the way of sitting; we have some form or specific strict way to work with and take care of our breathing. It is the same thing in our everyday life. If we have no purpose or aim, we cannot organize our life or make our best effort.

My teacher Kishizawa Roshi always said, “You have to have a vow or an aim to accomplish.” If you do not have an aim in your life, you cannot be a good Buddhist. Even though the aim we have may not be perfect, it is necessary for us to have it.

The same is true of the precepts. Even though it is almost impossible to observe them, we have to have them. Without them, we cannot actualize our way, or Buddha’s spirit. It is because of the great compassion of Buddha that we have precepts.

You may think that, since it is impossible to observe them, the precepts are useless. But the life that we have now is the result of many efforts that seem useless. How many useless things did we do to arrive at this life? How long did it take for humans’ ancestors to go from fish to monkeys? I don’t know, but we wasted so much time and effort to arrive at this human life! Like a big tree in Muir Woods, your life has layers that are added each year. That is precepts. Even if you say that you don’t want them, you have them. You sit, and you continue your effort, and you get another annual layer on your self. In this way you will develop more and more.

As long as our effort is based on a self-centered idea, we cannot be in harmony. By reflecting on ourselves, and respecting the precepts and rules, we will know a direction for our effort that isn’t self-centered, and we will have the right orientation for our life. This is how and why we practice Zen, and how Buddhism has been developed.