

1-2/63

BCR 14713-1-63

MODEL SUBJECTS NO. 14 and 15: Ummon and the 'First Age Teaching'
Ummon's Topsy-Turvy idea!

Model Subject No. 14 is to be read in connection with No. 15. The questioner is the same man in each case.

Main Subject No. 14 by Setcho:

Attention! A monk asked Ummon: What is this First Age Teaching?¹ Ummon said: The teaching confronts each.

Commentary by Suzuki-roshi:

The teaching given by Shakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime was accommodated to each disciple's particular temperament, and to each occasion's particular circumstances. For each case there should be a special remedy. According to the circumstances there should even be teachings other than the teachings which were told by Buddha. In the light of this, how is it possible to interpret and pass down an essential teaching which can be applied to every possible occasion and individual temperament?

This questioning monk had a preconceived idea of Zen Buddhism as an esoteric Dharma transmitted thru the Zen Patriarchs which is different from the teachings of other schools of Buddhism based on supposedly "dead" scriptures. Ummon's answer points out the monk's misunderstanding of the real nature of the sects of Buddhism. Ummon's way of Zen was quite rough, but it was rough and strong enough to support Buddhism during the severe persecutions of his time.

During Ummon's time, so-called "Daruma Zen" (Bodhidharma's Zen) was becoming known as "Soshi Zen" (Pa^{triarchal} Zen): an esoteric school claiming special transmission outside the scriptures from Buddha to Mahakasapa to Bodhidharma and the Zen Patriarchs. The school was popular in South China because of these claims of special transmission and because of the rough and whimsical methods of instruction used by the Zen Masters of the period. Eventually this school slighted scriptures and ignored precepts on the ground of Buddha's reported statement that "words are not the first principle".

The First Principle of Buddhism is called by many names: Buddha-Nature; Dharma-Nature; Reality; Voidness; Tao; One Phrase of the Pre-voice; Great Light; Universal Nature; Buddha^{hat}athagatha; Saddharma; Wonderful Law or Truth as revealed in the Lotus Sutra (Tendai Sect); the One Vehicle which contains

¹First Age Teaching. This refers to the teaching given by Shakyamuni during his lifetime. Pg. 68. Ibid.

The final complete law (Kegon Sect); True Words (Shingon Sect); Anuttarasambodhi (or Anubodhi): unexcelled, correct, complete, universal wisdom of Buddha (a term often used by Dogen).

However, according to the most authentic tradition, the First Principle Buddha's teaching . . . in its pure and formless form, is not expressible by word or idea. Hence, the contribution ^{OF} ~~IN~~ each sect to Buddhism is to give system to the scriptures, to set up the true words of the Tathagata . . . in a consistent way so that people may understand and follow Buddha's way of life. The fundamental philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism affirms the absolute character of all phenomena and the possibility for ordinary people to attain Buddhahood.

The two leading Mahayana schools, Tendai and Kegon, applied Zen practice in order to attain thorough and deep insight into the Dharma. For the Shingon Sect, the pure and genuine teaching is in the Dainichi Sutra because it was supposedly told by Buddha in his samadhi to himself and not to an audience. The origin of this sutra is supposed to give it incontestable importance among all the sutras, and thus the Shingon Sect used it to authorize their teachings.

For the teaching of the Shingon Sect to be authorized should not mean that it is superior to other sects. The Zen practice of Dharma-zen transmitted from Bodhidharma may be considered different from the Zen practice of the Tendai and Kegon schools, and the idea of the Dharma-nature of samadhi may provide a ~~clear~~ ^{turning} point by which to differentiate the Zen school from other schools, but this does not mean that the Zen Sect or Soshi Zen is superior to other schools. Dharma-zen emphasizes practice instead of teaching, that is all; but this emphasis does not mean to ignore the words of Buddha.

Whatever the teaching may be: the teaching confronts each. In accordance with the circumstances, the teaching has absolute value; and to accord with the circumstances the teaching should have an infinite number of forms.

Buddhism in its pure and formless form is given to us in samadhi or zazen when we are ready to accept Buddhism without expecting anything. Buddhism is not something you will find out when you try. When you are just ready to accept it, everything you see flashes forth the great light, everything you hear is the wondrous Pre-voice . That is why we sit.

* Introductory Word to Main Subject No. 15 by Engo:

Introducing he said: The sword which kills men, the dagger which gives life to men¹-these were the customary methods of ancient times. They are essential for the present time. But, say what is this sword which kills men? What is this dagger which gives life to men? Look at the following illustration.

Main Subject No. 15 by Setcho presented by Suzuki-Roshi;

A monk asked Ummon: What would Buddha have done if there had been no one to hear the teaching and no occasion on which to apply the teaching?

Ummon replied: Topsy-turvy idea.

Commentary by Suzuki-Roshi:

In the Introductory Word Engo refers to the "Life-taking Sword" in order to clarify Ummon's answer "Topsy-turvy idea." "Life-taking Sword" means to eliminate all the ideas and expectations which you have, to leave out all the objects in front of you. In other words, to be one with what is given to you, and to feel empty.

"To kill the Buddha" means just to be Buddha. To be ready to do anything as it comes to you, one thing after another. In this way the Buddha's Great Activity appears.

If you have a preconceived idea of the First Principle, that idea is topsy-turvy; and as long as you try to find out what is the First Principle which can be applied to every occasion, you have topsy-turvy ideas. Such ideas should be removed. When everything is clear and empty, Buddha's great light shines forth.

¹"The sword that kills...the dagger that gives life..." These are the negative and positive ways to guide students to the Ultimate Truth.- Suzuki-Roshi.