

Bowing (II)

" Even though it is impossible to get rid of our self-centered desires, we have to do it, if our true nature wants us to. "

My teacher had a callous on his forehead from bowing. He knew he was an obstinate, stubborn fellow and so he bowed and bowed and bowed. The reason he bowed was that inside himself he always heard his master's scolding voice. He had joined the Soto order when he was thirty, which for a Japanese priest is rather late. When we are young we are less stubborn, and it is easier to get rid of our selfishness. So his master always called my teacher 'You-lately-joined-fellow', and scolded him for joining so late. Actually his master loved him for his stubborn character. And when my teacher was seventy, he said, " When I was young I was like a tiger, but now I am like a cat ! " He was very pleased to be like a cat. " Now I am a cat ! " he said.

Bowing helps to eliminate our self-centered ideas. This is not so easy. But even though it is difficult to get rid of these ideas, bowing is a very valuable practice. The result is not the point; it is the effort to improve ourselves that is valuable. There is no end to our practice.

Each bow expresses one of the four Buddhist vows. These vows are: " Although sentient beings are innumerable, we vow to save them. Although our evil desires are limitless, we vow to be rid of them. Although the teaching is limitless, we vow to learn it all. Although

Buddhism is unattainable, we vow to attain it. " If it is unattainable, how can we attain it? But we should ! That is Buddhism.

To think, " Because it is possible we will do it, " is not Buddhism. Even though it is impossible, we have to do it if our true nature wants us to. Actually, whether or not it is possible to get rid of our self-centered ideas is not the point. If it is our inmost desire we have to do it. We have to get rid of them, and when we make this effort, our inmost desire is appeased and nirvana is there. Before you determine to do it, you have difficulty, but once you start to do it you have none. Your effort appeases your inmost desire, and there is no other way to attain calmness. Calmness of mind does not mean you should stop your activity. Real calmness should be found in activity itself. We say, " It is easy to have calmness in inactivity, it is hard to have calmness in activity, but calmness in activity is the true calmness. "

After you have practiced for awhile, you will realize that it is not possible to make rapid, extraordinary progress. Even though you try very hard, the progress you make is always little by little. It is like going through fog. It is not like a shower; if you go out in a shower you will know when you get wet. In a fog, you don't know you are getting wet, but if you keep walking you will get wet little by little. If your mind has ideas of progress, you may say, " Oh, this pace is terrible ! " but actually it is not. When you get wet in a fog it is very difficult to dry yourself. So there is no need to worry about progress.

It is like studying a foreign language; you cannot do it all of a sudden, but by repeating it over and over you will master it. This is the Soto way of practice. We make progress little by little, or we don't even expect to make progress. Just to be sincere and make our full effort in each moment is enough. There is no nirvana outside our practice.