

Repetition

" If you lose the spirit of repetition, the kind of practice we stress will be quite difficult. "

Indian thought before Buddha was based on the idea of human beings as a combination of spiritual and physical elements. They thought of the physical as binding to the spiritual element, and their religious practice aimed at making the physical element weaker in order to make the spiritual element freer and more powerful. So they practiced asceticism. But the practice of asceticism will make our religious practice more and more idealistic, because there is no limit to the effort of making our physical power weaker. This ascetic effort can continue until we die, when it will be the end of the war. But according to Indian thought, even if we die, we will return in another life, and continue our struggle. We will repeat it over and over again, without ever attaining perfect enlightenment. And even if you think you can make your physical strength weak enough to free your spiritual power, it will work only as long as you practice asceticism. If you resume your everyday life your weak body will be of no use, and you will only have to build it up again. And then you will have to repeat the same process over and over again. We laugh at this, but actually some people continue this kind of practice even today. But however hard we may practice this way, it will not result in any actual progress.

Buddha's way was quite different from this kind of practice. At first he studied Hindu philosophy and

practiced asceticism. But Buddha was not interested in the elements comprising human beings, nor in metaphysical theories of existence. He was more concerned about how he, himself, existed in this moment. That was his point. You make bread from flour. How flour becomes bread when put in the oven was for Buddha the most important thing. How we become enlightened was his main interest. The enlightened person is some perfect, desirable character, for himself and for others. Buddha wanted to find out how human beings develop this ideal character - how various sages in the past became sages. In order to find out how dough became perfect bread, he made it over and over again, until he became quite successful. That was his practice.

But we may find it not so interesting to cook the same thing over and over again every day. It is rather tedious, you may say. If you lose the spirit of repetition it will become quite difficult, but it will not be difficult if you are full of strength and vitality. Anyway, we cannot keep still; we have to do something. So if you do something, you should be very observant, and careful, and alert. Our way is to put the dough in the oven and watch it carefully. Once you know how the dough becomes bread, you will understand enlightenment. So how this physical body becomes a sage is our main interest. We are not so concerned about what flour is, or what dough is, or what a sage is. A sage is a sage. Metaphysical explanations of human nature are not the point.

So the kind of practice we stress thus cannot become too idealistic. If an artist becomes too idealistic, he will commit suicide, because between his ideal and his actual ability there is a great gap. Because there is no bridge long enough to go across the gap, he will become despairing. That is the usual spiritual way. But our spiritual way is not so idealistic. In some sense we should be idealistic; at least we should be interested in making bread which tastes and looks good ! Actual practice is repeating over and over again until you find out how to become bread. There is no secret in our way. Just to practice zazen and put ourselves into the oven is our way.