

Purification

Good morning! Welcome to the April zazenkaï of Clare Sangha – our first one on-line. We hope and trust you'all are keeping yourselves safe and healthy these days.

We're hearing some commentary about the changes in our living arrangements. Maybe you've heard some of them too.

Someone said "Better 6 feet apart than 6 feet under."

A parent said: "Ah, Day 6 of Homeshooling: My child just said 'I hope I don't have the same teacher next year.' And I'm offended."

A neighbor told me "I hope the weather is good tomorrow for my trip to Puerto Backyarda. I'm getting tired of Los Livingroom." Ha!

Whatever about that, today I want to talk about purification as a practice that may help us in this time of sickness and separation. You know, it is often said that Zen is about emptying out. The sense of it is that to wake up – to realize and manifest our Awakened Nature – we don't need to add stuff to our mind. Rather we need to let stuff go out of it. Suzuki-roshi, author of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, calls Zen "a general housecleaning of the mind." Zazen practice – sitting meditation – is our main means for this housecleaning – for emptying out and letting go.

Yamada Roshi taught that you can put your questions on the shelf and just practice zazen; you'll get your own answers. He was confident that Zen practice could help anyone who came to him, whether their background was Christian or no particular faith or other background.

The emptying out and letting go that comes from zazen practice is the basis of purification. One of our traditional chants – the Gatha of Repentance – was initially called the Gatha of Purification. We've already chanted it today. There's a slightly extended version of this chant that goes: *All evil twisted karma ever created by me since of old, on account of my beginningless greed, anger and ignorance, borne of my conduct, speech and thought, I now fully confess, atone for and purify it all.*

The Gatha mentions "karma." Karma is sometimes described as a volitional principle or "conditioned action." In his Way of Zen, Alan Watts said: Conditioned action arises from a motive and seeks a result – the type of action that often requires further action. One is involved in and generates *conditioned action*

or karma when one interferes with the world in such a way that one is compelled to go on interfering, when the solution of a problem creates still more problems to be solved, when the control of one thing creates the need to control several others too. In this way, one may lay a trap for the world in which oneself gets caught. (Watts p. 49). Such traps come from a lot of **doing**. In our Zen Way we want to be human *beings*, not human *doings*.

The Gatha formulates that karma is evil when the action arises from one or more of the three poisons mentioned – anger, greed and ignorance – for these poisons are what motivate the karmic action.

If we take it to heart, the Gatha of Purification invites us to own up to the specific evil karma we've created since of old. (*Since of old* means forever in our life up to the present moment.) Each of us knows our harmful actions in detail. It's no use to deny or ignore them, or pretend we didn't mean them. It's not healthy or wholesome to leave such karma blocked up, unresolved, not brought to the light of day. Zazen meditation is our means for this.

Our right effort is to not deny any aspect of ourselves. We look at the way we are now, for it is the only way to begin. Ten years from now it will still be the only way to begin.

Poetry – that wonderful witness to human experience – can bring this home. In his poem “Little Gidding,” TS Eliot writes in part:

*To each of us a life is entrusted
For whose years and days we ourselves are responsible,
Once it is ours...
And at the end, there's the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; maybe the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue... TS Eliot*

To purify means that, having confessed and atoned, our effort is to let it go and move on.

At this point, if you're skeptical about purification, we can ask a couple *what if* questions. What if some of the evil karma we've created – and may still be packing around with us – cannot be made amends for. For instance, what if it's

past and gone in the sense there's no chance to actually express remorse to or otherwise reach out to those harmed or affected?

This is a specific case of the more general *what if* question: what if the world we go through is messy and not conducive to rectifying mistakes nor to neat or tidy resolutions. In fact, we know the world we go through is like this. Isn't it?

Atoning and setting things straight – it's not so easy. What does this mean for us?

In my opinion, it means we do what we can, we make our best effort. The force of our intention matters a lot, our current action to do right. Right effort will always help us. There's an ancient Japanese verse:

*If this little snail sets out for Mt Fuji,
Surely it will arrive...*

If we don't make best efforts to resolve and purify our evil karma and harmful actions, then they may work against us all the more. We may repeat our mistakes.

This reminds me of a line from a favorite book, The Adventures of Augie March: "The repetition of man's bad self is the worst suffering known to humankind." Augie March felt this in his own experience, and saw it in the experience of others.

We should be confident in our ability to purify ourselves – as we go through life – with the Zen practice of being **one-with**. The Peacemaker tenets put forth by Bernie Glassman-Roshi show the mechanics and manual effort of being **one-with**. Many of you know them, including precept students.

First is **Not Knowing** – letting go of fixed ideas about ourselves and others so we can be fresh and open to what's arising this very moment.

The second Peacemaker tenet is **Bearing Witness** – paying attention to the whole setting and situation, including our role in it. The aim is simply to be where we are and to see clearly.

Third is **Taking Loving Actions** – to heal ourselves and others. Caring, healing and loving actions help us to be useful. And they help us to atone and make amends. Such actions arise from tenets 1 and 2 – **Not Knowing** and **Bearing Witness**. We are interconnected.

When our Zen practice is like this, it gives us a *steady hand*. By not knowing and bearing witness, we can trust ourselves to know what to do – and what not to do –

in a word, to know how to be. Learning to trust ourselves encourages us along the Way.

Back to **purification**... It has a Judeo-Christian context too: the great Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart, said: “When we purify ourselves, God by nature flows into us.”

Back to our **Gatha of Repentance**...Zen places great stock in the primacy of the present. Besides repenting for past mistakes, the spirit of the Gatha bids us to guard our minds, to keep ourselves free from error here and now.

Back to the **3 poisons**. Let’s briefly take a closer look at these poisons and see what illumination can be brought to them.

Anger: anger is fairly straightforward. When acted out, anger or hatred or fear is a striking at or sending force at something, pushing it away. It is violent. Shakyamuni Buddha taught that when we do violence against another, without fail we do it to ourselves. We are all connected.

Greed: In a sense greed is opposite of anger. Instead of pushing away or striking out, it’s like trying to bring everything in to oneself. There’s a Spanish saying: *El quiere llevar todo el agua a su propio Molino* – He wants to bring all the water to his own mill. In Buddhist lore, greed is sometimes caricatured as a figure having a huge, open mouth, but only a pencil thin neck and body that is unable to swallow or take in all that it puts in its mouth.

Greed often has a craving aspect to it. The Buddha once defined suffering as a ravenous appetite to find peace and security in places and activities where peace and security are not to be found.

Ignorance: Ignorance may be the trickiest of the 3 poisons referred to in the Gatha of Repentance. Sometimes **folly** is used in its place, in the sense of foolishness. Acting out of ignorance often has a reckless quality to it – maybe a restless quality too – failure to relate one thing with another, or to see downstream – a lack of awareness about what we *don’t* know. As the environmentalists say, “we all live downstream.”

To help illuminate the poison of ignorance, let me tell an anecdote from Rumi – the great Sufi mystic of Islam:

You Have No Idea What You Are Asking For

One day Jesus was walking in the desert with a group of insincere and self-absorbed seekers. They begged him to tell them the secret name which he used to bring the dead back to life. Jesus said, "If I tell you, you will use its power wrongly." They swore they would use the knowledge humbly and wisely and went on begging him.

"You have no idea what you are asking for," Jesus said. But he told them nevertheless.

Soon afterwards, the group was walking in a part of the desert where the ground was heaped with whitening bones. "Let us see if the word works," they said, and they uttered it. Immediately, the bone heap clothed itself with flesh, transformed into a wild beast, and tore them to pieces. Yikes!

So it is with ignorance. When we act from it, the consequences may be very unintended, not to mention surprising and terrible. Do we see similarly extreme cases of ignorance in the world today? Yikes!

So it is that Zen practice helps us to recognize states of anger, greed and ignorance when they arise. When we see and understand these states as poisonous, we can learn to be free of them. Being free doesn't mean that aversion or fear or grasping or folly won't come up. It means we can see them straightaway, understand them for what they are, and not be ruled by them. We can hold them in the vast transforming field of acceptance – the "bright and boundless field" as Zen Master Hongzhi called it – without identifying with or acting them out. In this sense, we purify them through our Awakened Nature.

Finally, the Gatha of Repentance or Purification comes down to us from our ancestral teachers whose names you precept students have written into your lineage charts. The gatha is another example of the compassionate efforts they made on our behalf. Truly practicing the Gatha helps us take Zen practice to heart, to work at our Bodhisattva vows. It helps in our emptying out and letting go, in purifying and guarding ourselves from error. In home practice, we can start each sitting with this Gatha. And we can end each sitting with the Great Vows for All.

Alright then, so there you have it. Gassho.

4-11-20 Zoom