

Transformation through Form

8/28/04

Today, I would like to talk about transformation through form.

Form, “rupa” in Sanskrit is one of the five aggregates or skandas. (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness). There are 10 forms – 5 sense fields: color, sound, smell, taste and touch and 5 sense capacities or sense organs – eye organ, ear, nose, tongue and body. Our organs are sensitive and respond to the phenomena called sense fields. All life is physically based. Form is conditioned by other aggregates such as formations. It is our practice to become familiar with the 5 groupings.

In Zen, to say “wholehearted” practice means we pay attention to whatever we are doing, washing the dishes, peeling carrots, lighting incense, bowing. We ask ourselves to focus the mind into the moment.

In Zen, the practice is very simple, but can be difficult – the way through is to allow “Reality”, “Truth”, “Dharma”, “Ocean” to come in. To do this we need to become “selfless”; to let go of our attachments. If we repeat these steps in awareness frequently, then we can get a glimpse of the possibility of transformation in a larger sense.

Some of you have now been practicing Zen for some time 2-3 years & I can see changes in thoughts as expressed through speech, behavioral changes as expressed in your weekly commitment to practice.

By now you are familiar with some of the Zen forms and rituals. Zazen, bowing, incense offering, chanting. Forms and rituals are external expressions of our inner state. And, we strengthen and reinforce our inner state by these external actions.

In reality, these are not 2 things, but a unified whole. As we practice together, sincerely, we become increasingly aware that such notions as internal and external cannot be separated. This awareness is actually the growing realization of the real harmony that underlies everything.

When we come to practice together in the zendo, we share a pact among us. A pact to practice wholeheartedly, to behave as “Buddhists”.

We bow when we enter the zendo mindfully, and we put aside our sadness, frustrations and busyness

When we greet Sangha members we bow and rejoice in their presence

When we support one another, we actively listen to another’s stories

We help set up and take down the zendo, mindfully and respectfully handling the zafus and zabutons

When the bell rings for meditation we drop our everyday mind, let go of our stories and focus our mind, concentrate on breathing, observe our thoughts as they arise and dissipate like waves in the water.

Each of these forms, bowing, sitting, walking, lighting candle & charcoal, ringing bells and playing instruments, IS a call to practice.

When we hear each other chanting, move together in bowing and in kinhin, this is our harmonious environment. Because we are doing this in a harmonious environment and concentrating on what we are doing, this itself is harmonious consciousness – our environment and our consciousness are inseparable. The 2 are 1

The key to this harmony is simply to be “selfless”

Form itself is emptiness and emptiness itself is form.

For years I did not know “why” I sat facing the wall. I just did it – in a way the benefit I experienced (quieted mind, observing my mind creating suffering and unhappiness for me) was the driving motivation but it wasn’t one I was always aware of or could articulate. Over time, I did change my thoughts and my behavior. How is that? It is the “transformative” power of zazen that gives rise to realization.

Coming up in the month of September at Jikoji we will celebrate Ruth’s taking of the Bodhisattva Vows as another expression of her deepening practice. She entered this process by sewing a Rakasu, “Buddha’s Robe”. This patched robe of 5 strips consisting of 10 pieces looks like a rice field. Each hand sew stitch is made accompanied by the mantra. “I take refuge in Buddha”. While I have never counted the stitches it takes to sew a rakasu, you can imagine the repetition of this mantra soaks into your consciousness and goes deep into alaya vijnana. As you sew this robe many thoughts come up, some with a recurring theme. For me, it was my habit of wanting to rush through the task onto to the next task. So facing the present and just experiencing the feeling of the cloth held in my hands, the pushing of the needle through the material in the intended direction and stitch size took on new importance. When concentration broke, it showed up in the sewing. I ripped out as many stitches sewn. The visual impact of seeing one’s mind transgress in very powerful. Here form itself is emptiness.

When we say “Emptiness itself is form” Reality comes forth into our practice and we are one with sitting, one with sewing, one with bowing, one with chanting. There is no separation. Truth, Dharma is expressed in everyday activities. It is manifested in our sitting, sewing, bowing and chanting. Right here, right now.