

Conference (Teisho) of Yusho SASAKI Roshi, Director of the European Center of Buddhism Soto Zen, Nice, April 14, 2018 on the occasion of the Hossenshiki by Marc CHIGEN Estéban.

Usually, at a Hossenshiki ceremony, the lecture should be related to the subject chosen by the Shusso for his Dharma combat, but today, at the request of Yuno San, I will tell you about the theme of compassion. In a way, it is not a subject on which I had much opportunity to think about until today. In Europe, on the other hand, and in Western countries, much emphasis is placed on this subject of compassion. I wonder if this can be explained by referring to the culture of our respective countries, or by invoking religion: Buddhism on the one hand and Christianity on the other. I will therefore address this topic by referring to Shakyamuni Buddha's thoughts about compassion, then compare them to those of Master DOGEN, and finally consider what is the interpretation of traditional Zen Buddhism of the theme of compassion. I will conclude by saying that we must probably transform our traditional way of thinking in order to adopt a new approach to this subject. These are the outlines of the plan for what I'm going to talk about tonight with you.

Shakyamuni Buddha, when teaching Buddhism, wanted originally to reflect on the subject of his personal salvation. You know of course the four gates that were the starting point of the Buddha's meditation on the reality of the human condition: the causes of life's sufferings, old age, sickness and death. These were his original starting point and then, having attained enlightenment and having become "buddha", the awakened one, he was at first a little hesitant to teach others because he thought that it would be very difficult for them to understand his teaching, since what he had just discovered went against human nature and human desires. As you know, what the Buddha had just experienced was totally beyond secular values and he almost gave up. However, he was persuaded to teach when he realized that if only one in a hundred people could understand his teaching, it would be worth it. We can therefore conclude that his decision to teach stems from his spirit of compassion. It's the origin of everything. As you know, at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, the monks could not perform any productive activity: they could not work, cultivate the ground, cook, or do anything with their hands. The only responsibility for a monk was to teach. This is called the gift of the Dharma to others, because the monk was to encourage others to study Buddhism, to become a monk and to reach enlightenment. This is the only responsibility of monks and their only form of compassion. This is the ultimate compassion: to urge others to study Buddhism, encourage them to become monks and thus achieve enlightenment. And this is what we could call later, in the evolution of Buddhism, great compassion.

On the other hand, it was also necessary to encourage the laity to have an attitude of compassion towards others and to help them. For remember that in the time of the Buddha it was only by becoming a monk that a layman could hope to attain the ultimate stage of realization and those who had not become monks in this life could only hope to become one in a later life by practicing the eight righteous deeds, including giving (**fuse**) and of course compassion. This was the meaning of the word compassion for lay people at the time. Of course, for our modern spirit, this behavior of doing a good deed in the hope of a favorable rebirth, a kind of trade off, does not seem to us very "**mushotoku**", namely an action

accomplished without purpose or spirit of profit. This behavior has been called small compassion, in opposition to great compassion, of which I have just spoken.

Now let us talk about Master Dogen's attitude towards compassion, it does not seem fundamentally different from that of Shakyamuni Buddha. You know when you study Dogen, that he insists enormously on the fact that to study Buddhism is to forget oneself. It means for him that we should turn our gaze inwards to understand who we are and see which direction we should go. This is our current interpretation of **Shobogenzo**. Originally, when Master Dogen began teaching Buddhism in Japan on his return from China, he wanted his teaching to be for everyone, monks and laypeople. Gradually, his attitude evolved and he focused on the teaching of monks, he settled in Eiheiji and trained the monks there. His aim was to improve continually their practice of zen. The fundamental principles of Master Dogen's teaching on monastic practice can be found in the ten short chapters of **Gakudo Yojinshu** (Points for Practicing Zen Buddhism) which do not mention compassion. But I will come back to this point, because compassion is mentioned in Dogen's **Shobogenzo** in the chapter on the four great practices of the Bodhisattva. If I think of the theme of compassion in **Shobogenzo**, it is the only chapter that comes to my mind. Other mentions may exist, but I'm not aware of them. It is obvious that Dogen is interested in what it means to become a monk and to practice as such. Even nowadays when you receive the monk's ordination, there is a verse that contains three essential words: while it is very difficult to detach oneself from love and compassion, one must do so and cut off the bonds of love, compassion and attachment in order to dive into the ocean of Buddhism and attain realization. This is the only way to pay off your compassionate debt and reciprocate your own compassion to others. In a sense, Master Dogen's approach to compassion differs from ours in that he emphasizes practice first and foremost. It is only through zazen, the reading of the sutras and all the actions of everyday life, that you fully practice. This is the fundamental point, because without knowing yourself first, you cannot do anything. It seems that at the time of Master Dogen, there were two directions: one, vertical, consisted of a quest, an aspiration of the monk towards awakening and the other direction consisted of helping others, the rest of humanity, by offering your compassion. The ideal was, of course, to be able to reconcile, at the same time, the two movements, the two impulses, towards enlightenment and compassion. Even if Dogen may want to give the same importance to both movements, he seems to me to put much more emphasis on the personal search for realization and enlightenment. But let's not forget that he was born eight hundred years ago and that our judgment may be erroneous because of the huge amount of time that separates us from him. In this connection, a very interesting anecdote is reported in **Zuimonki**. This is a story that has given rise to divergent interpretations. If you are familiar with **Zuimonki**, you remember that at the time, Dogen's master was Myozen a Rinzai master. You also remember that Master Myozen and his disciple Dogen wanted to study in China. There was a problem, however, because Myozen's master was then very old and sick. He asked Myozen: "I will not live very long, six months at most and I ask you to postpone your trip". Myozen then turned to the other monks and asked for their opinion. Most of them said to him, "Your master has been very good to you, you should stay with him six month or a year to look after him and wait until the end". Dogen, on the other hand, disagreed and encouraged him to leave with him and finally convinced him. Thus, both of them decided not to wait for the old master's death. The main reason that led them to leave was that the opportunity to study Buddhism in China might not have presented itself again because

nobody knows what the future holds for you and life is impermanent. The second reason was that if the master of Myozen had prevented his disciple from going to study Buddhism, he would have committed a very grave sin that might result in him going to hell. Myozen and Dogen therefore went to China. Reading this story, one realizes that the interpretations diverge strongly. There is another similar anecdote. Ejo asks Dogen one day: "My mother is old and I am her only son. She asks to come and see her more often. What do you think?" Dogen's answer was very similar: "Whoever prevents you from studying and deepening your sincere quest for Dharma, commits a very serious sin". You see how Dogen thinks. Imagine asking the same question to someone nowadays, it is certain that 99 percent of the answers would be: "go ahead without further ado, where is the harm?" But Master Dogen did not think like us and these anecdotes show the importance he attributed to the practice of Zen. And this attitude is found throughout the history of Zen in Japan, until today. The fundamental point remains that practice is the most important thing. It's the priority, everything else is secondary: helping others, helping those in trouble, all of this goes after practice. This may seem a little surprising, but it is the idea that we have to give ourselves fully, one hundred percent, with all our heart to the practice of zen. Do not be distracted by anything.

I find another example in the sequence of the ten images of the catching of the ox, which one uses frequently in Zen to illustrate the search for awakening. The first image shows the young herder looking for the footprints of the hooves of the ox, in the second, he sees the animal and so on, each image marks a step in the quest and illustrates an anecdote. In the tenth and last image, the young herder who has captured and tamed the ox and thus reached enlightenment, returns, alone, to mingle with the crowd in the village square. After practicing and attaining enlightenment one can come back and express one's compassion by sharing one's awakening among other men. We find in this sequence the double movement of which I spoke earlier, the one that pushes you, alone, towards realization and awakening, the vertical movement and the second, horizontal, which brings you with compassion to help other human beings. Thus, when we sing the four Bodhisattva vows, **Shigu Sei Gan Mon**, we understand that even if there are four vows, the first of them: **Shujo muhen seigan do**, insists on the notion of universal compassion: "As numerous as all sentient beings are, I vow to help them all to liberate themselves". The second vow emphasizes the will to cut all illusions, the third the study of all the teachings and the last wish is to realize the perfection of the way of the Buddha. So, every time I sing this Sutra I wonder where the emphasis is, because three of the vows are on the aspect of an aspiration to enlightenment and realization, and just the first one includes all sentient beings. In this case, can we talk about e between the four vows? I always think of the double aspiration, for awakening and for compassion when I recite these four vows. So, you can understand how much, in Zen, the emphasis is put first and foremost on the practice. The idea is then that if you practice intensely, if you push yourself and achieve enlightenment, you will be transformed internally and this will automatically be viewed by the others and influence them and they will themselves be helped by your example. This is, in a way, the ideal of Zen: without saying a single word, by your actions, your behavior and your presence you give out a resonance of compassion. The question that can then be asked is: must one wait to have reached enlightenment? How long should we wait? Eternally, I guess! But this emphasis on practice is prevalent in traditional Zen Buddhism. I'll give you a second example that illustrates the traditional Zen interpretation of compassion. This is a very famous anecdote. A monk was

anxious to study Buddhism and knocked on the door of a master in a monastery. The master, after checking the seriousness of the applicant, let him in. But one day, the master accompanied his monastic community in a practice of traditional alms (**takuhatsu**). But the building of the monastery (**Sodo**) was at the top of a steep hill and on the way back, returning from the alms round, they saw an old woman who was struggling to pull her cart up this very steep hill. Without thinking, our very serious monk rushed to help the old woman by pushing her cart. Once they arrived at the top of the hill, she thanked him profusely. Back inside the monastery, the master took the serious monk aside, expressed his deep dissatisfaction with him and immediately threw him out of the monastery. Only after many supplications was the monk finally readmitted into the community. This reaction of the master is very interesting. It seems natural to us of course, in the twenty-first century, to rush to help someone who is in trouble, especially an old woman. We don't even have to think about it, because it seems to be part of our human nature, if someone is in need of help, we rush to help. Why, then, was the master so furious at the attitude of his monk, to the extent of driving him out on the spot? This is because he expected better from a Zen practitioner. From the master's point of view, the monk was not focused enough on his practice of the moment. The incident distracted him and diverted him from the true practice of the moment. Even small good acts or compassionate actions can distract us and hinder our practice. If all ancestors and patriarchs had so delayed their awakening because they were being distracted in this way, even Bodhidharma inside his cave in the mountain would have been interrupted by anyone requesting his help and would not have given us an example and a teaching that has survived more than a thousand years. The anecdote of the compassionate monk is very famous and it was told in the United States by master D. T. Susuki who was very impressed by this story. Yet it was not popular at all with his followers, highlighting perhaps the difference in approaches between traditional Zen Buddhism and Christianity.

For Zen, it is a question of practicing relentlessly from the start and without distraction as Shakyamuni Buddha did. But this does not necessarily mean that it is applicable to the twenty-first century because Buddhism and Zen have changed and evolved with the times. In the time of Shakyamuni Buddha and Master Dogen, the emphasis was on the practice of monks. They were cut off from the rest of society and lived in isolation, in a community focused on practice. Thus, the Mahayana branch of Buddhism developed as a criticism of this monastic practice cut off from the world and the society that surrounded them. Nowadays, it is very different, because from the point of view of the practice, there is really no fundamental difference between the practice of the monks and that of the laity. In Japan, there are still monks, but they live in the middle of society, they marry, have children and do not cut themselves off from the world in which they live. Should they engage even more in society? Some say yes, others no. The first group points out that times change and that if someone needs our help, why should we refuse to give it? What the other group responds is "Fine, we can help others, but only by encouraging them to practice and follow the teachings of Buddhism". Here we find the two movements, one inward and one outward, of which I spoke earlier. I often hear the comment that Buddhism could learn social engagement from Christianity while Christianity could, in turn, learn from Buddhism how to learn to know your inner self. Buddhism should learn to go outside towards others, while Christianity should be more self-reflexive. Those two approaches are more common in both traditions nowadays. In Japan, many Buddhists seek to socially engage by volunteering to help others while in the

West, many Christian priests and monks introduce zazen in their spiritual practice. Both traditions are therefore constantly struggling to find the right way and a kind of equilibrium between the two aspects of the practice. Why not engage in the world, provided we do not forget to know ourselves. But to know oneself is to understand how egoistical we are, and it will be necessary to get rid of this ego before any action. And when you put these principles into action, it will express compassion. A compassionate act is not difficult. Talking about compassion is even less so, but putting it into practice is a very different thing. To help us, we have the Bodhisattva's four boundless practices: the **fuse** or gift, the kind word, or the benevolent word, thirdly to benefit or profit others, and finally to treat others as you would like them to treat you. This is the line of action to follow. This is why I said that you know what to do, but to put this into action is a very different thing. In fact, Master Dogen said that helping or profiting others is not only helping them, but helping or profiting oneself at the same time. We always tend to say: yes, helping others, it's good but what about helping me? For Master Dogen, it's one and the same action. When you help others, it's the same energy that helps you. These are the words that Dogen uses and the fourth unlimited practice of the Bodhisattva, **doji**, literally means: at the same time. There is no difference between you and the others: what you want is what other people want, there is no distinction between you and the others. This is of course easy to say, but very difficult to do! And this echoes Shakyamuni Buddha's own words when he wrote: "Wherever you go, the most important thing is you". Once you realize this fact, you will treat others exactly as you do. In the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, a story tells that King Hashinoku, a devotee of Buddhist teaching, heard this and meditated on it: "Think of others and be full of compassion for them." He wondered about this, turning his gaze inward: who is the most important to me in the world? And as he examined himself deeply, he found the answer: myself! This greatly surprised the king because it seemed to him the opposite of the teaching of the Buddha. He then asked his wife, the queen: who is the most important person in your eyes? She answered him, you, my king. But Hashinoku then asked her to think carefully and examine her mind. After carefully considering the question, the queen came to the answer that the most important person in her eyes was herself. As they both had reached the same conclusion, they thought they were wrong and told the Buddha of their doubt: "We looked into our minds and realized that we were the most important in our eyes. Do you not think that proves how selfish we are?" But the Buddha replied that they were both absolutely right, because wherever you go, even if it is very far away, you will understand that it is you who is the most important to you. If you understand this deeply and open your eyes to what the others think, you will understand that it is the same for everyone. If you understand this fact, you will no longer harm anyone, you will respect others. That's how you will overcome your own selfishness. Basically, you do not make any distinction between you and the others and treat them as you would like them to treat you. This is essentially the same subject of the fourth unlimited practice of Bodhisattva mentioned by Master Dogen in **Shobogenzo**. This idea is close to a word used by Mahatma Gandhi in his struggle for the independence of India: **ahimsa** often interpreted as "non-violence", but which can be translated as "not to harm others". This is what we need to learn, because if your practice leads us to aspire to awakening and realization, the vertical movement, this should be simultaneous with the other horizontal movement of compassion towards others. Even if in the traditional vision of Zen practice, it is said that we must first realize awakening and then go toward others. I do not think that this approach is really applicable today, especially in the light of compassion such that it was expressed both

Shakyamuni Buddha and Master Dogen. It is never simple to study Zen, because there is always a degree of contradiction between what one says and what the other responds to it. This is why we must always read, study and reflect. As I mentioned earlier, Dogen places practice before compassion but at the same time he emphasizes that helping others is exactly the same as helping yourself. Therefore, you have two levels of reading that make your final understanding deeper and what is important above all is to reconcile the two aspects of Dogen's teaching. So, although I spoke at the beginning of the difference in traditional Zen Buddhism between "great" and "small" compassion, I think that in the end, there is no distinction between them. Compassion is compassion. It is up to us to realize true compassion. We are solely responsible for the practice of true compassion, it is not others who can do it for us and if you want to perform an act of compassion, do it one hundred percent, with all your energy, without worrying about whether this act is small or great compassion. Because otherwise, you will start calculating and this will slow down your action. That is how I see it. Today, there are many engaged Buddhists and others who focus on individual practice and teaching. Whichever way you choose, you will need to put all your energy into your action because this action will be the action of the Buddha, and the Buddha's action is compassion. This is how I see it and it will also be my conclusion. We can, of course, consider the cultural biases and recall that Buddhism was born in India, then moved to China where there is no begging, before arriving in Japan where Japanese culture influenced it. Time and culture both influenced the evolution of Buddhism. There will be, in the twenty-first century, the birth of a new tradition. That's how I see you. Thank you very much for your attention.

Are there any questions?

- I wanted to know why it would not be a good practice to stay six months with your master, if he asks you to? Because it is customary to say in Zen that everything is practice.

Answer: Of course, this is a good practice, but it's all about priority, and we can say that both options are two forms of practice: staying or leaving, everything will depend on your thinking. If you want to do more and leave, then should someone pull your legs or let you go? Everything will depend on the quality of the master of course.