

A FIERY WILLINGNESS

A young student at a local community college asked me recently, "If Buddhists are trying to get beyond desire, why do they say that they desire enlightenment?" This is a very fair and a very good question. If enlightenment becomes an object of our desire, then we are only getting more and more stuck in our own delusion. So I told this person that enlightenment should never be desired, that even if we desire it for a moment, we need to let that desire go so that we can actualize the enlightenment that we already have. I think he was satisfied....

But this student's question caused me to think about how we apply ourselves to our practice. Indeed, we shouldn't desire anything, but in Ch'an practice we have to have some kind of a motivating force, something to provide a conduit for our energies so that we won't quit on the path but instead will keep going and going until we are freed from the shackles of the ego-mind.

I think a good term to describe this gung-ho attitude would be a "fiery willingness." We've all seen people who have a fiery temperament; we don't get in their way, and when we do we usually pay for it! This has to be our demeanor, a fiery willingness to keep going at the object of our practice again and again and again; nothing can stand in our way because we will not permit it to. We just keep going with strength, resolve, determination. We are absolutely willing to do whatever it takes not to stray from the path of practice, the path of awareness.

When we look at images of the Bodhisattva Manjushri we see a very strong, fiery countenance. I wouldn't want to stand in front of Manjushri when that sword of wisdom comes slashing through! If we have that same kind of countenance when we practice, the ego-mind surely cannot withstand it.

Many times we hear the phrase "gung-ho" when people are talking about those who give a tremendous effort. "Gung-ho" comes from the Chinese term which means "work together." It's just like the term "gung-fu" or "kung-fu" which means "training with time and effort." In the Ch'an sense, we must be both gung-ho and gung-fu because we have to work with our entire self together over time, which means that we have to work with anything that comes up during our practice....and things will indeed come up, all sorts of things, and lots of things that aren't very pleasant. If doubts, fears, trials and tribulations aren't coming up in your practice, then you're not practicing hard enough! Remember that in a very real sense we are trying to be

reborn, and any birth means there's a lot of blood, sweat and effort.

I got a letter today from a fellow who asked if he could become a Zen monk. He said he couldn't come to Cleveland to study, but that if I would just give him permission to teach, that would be good enough. The problem is that that isn't good enough; it isn't even in the ballpark. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" sounds funny when you first hear it. When you start to realize what it means from an intellectual standpoint, your journey is just beginning, but it isn't until you start to *live* it that you've reached some kind of real understanding. And to reach that understanding, you have to go through fifty kinds of hell!

I remember when Eido Shimano Roshi from Dai Bosatsu Zendo in New York used to come and give talks at Cleveland Buddhist Temple. One time he regaled us with the song "The Impossible Dream" from the musical "Man of La Mancha." The line that meant the most to Roshi was the one that went, "To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause!" Exactly! We've created our own hell-like state that we call delusion, and when we do Ch'an practice we are marching right back into hell instead of running and hiding from it. Why? Because unless we see it head-on, we're never going to realize that the hell that we've created really doesn't exist!

So whether we're banging on a kung-an or a hua-t'ou, trying to keep ourselves focused on the antecedent mind or just trying to stay focused on that spot down below our navel, we have to bring every single bit of our energy and determination into every single breath. We have to have a fiery willingness to march into hell, because the heavenly cause is worth more than we can ever know.