

SACRED DISCIPLINE

Seeing how Ch'an students comport themselves in the Practice Hall is very instructive. Let's take bowing, for instance. It's not uncommon to see people make a very short, quick bow before they are seated for meditation. It reminds me of someone who is nodding off: a quick bob of the head, then sit down. This is what I would call a "convenience bow." It bespeaks the attitude of, "Let's get this out of the way so I can sit down."

If whatever we do in the Practice Hall....bowing, walking, placing our cushion down....is done with such carelessness, then we are guilty of treating something very, very special as if it were just another mundane thing to do. How unfortunate this is. Whenever our actions in the Practice Hall are done simply for our own convenience, we find ourselves skating on the slippery surface of an ego-based illusion.

Let's take the act of bowing, for instance. If our bow is a very thorough bow, done with our entire being, then instead of a mundane bow, it becomes a most *sacred* bow. And isn't what we are doing in the Practice Hall aimed at realizing something which is most sacred? For one thing, we're trying to understand the basis of all existence. Sacred? Of course! We're looking directly at our own Buddha-Nature, our inherent, enlightened self. Sacred? Without a doubt! We're also trying to understand this thing we call Dharma, which is not only the absolute truth of all phenomena, but is also the Path, the teachings and practices which lead us to this realization. Sacred? Absolutely!

What we are attempting to do in the Practice Hall is to bring an attitude of sacredness to all our actions. And how do we do this? In a word, discipline. Discipline lies at the very foundations of Ch'an practice. Bodhidharma, around whom the Ch'an tradition is said to have had its beginning, sat meditating in a cave, facing a wall of rock for *9 years*....imagine! How disciplined do you think Bodhidharma had to be to do that?

It behooves us to examine how we approach formalized practice with others. We need to ask ourselves if we are remembering to approach every single thing we do in the practice hall, from bowing at the doorway to placing our cushion on the mat, with a sense of discipline. There are some people who have been practicing with our various Sanghas for months, years even, and they still don't remember that when Walking Meditation ends we then do five bows. Write it down and memorize it if you have to....have a cheat sheet handy if you need

it...make a determined effort to do everything you do in the Practice Hall thoroughly and completely, and commit to memory the order of the evening so that you help to create a mindful atmosphere which is beneficial to yourself and others.

Now people will ask (and I have been asked this on more than a few occasions), "Sifu, isn't all this ceremonial stuff just for upholding the tradition? The real practice is sitting down and meditating, not all this bow-here, bow-there stuff, right?" In truth, the organized aspect of Ch'an group practice is as much a practice as anything one does on one's cushion, bench or chair. The Sixth Ancestor, Hui-Neng, addressed this kind of question directly in the *Platform Sutra* when he said, "The object of ceremony is the curbing of arrogance." In other words, when we mindfully participate in formalized practice with others we put aside our ego-mind and act, along with our fellow meditators, as one organism, one body. We curb our arrogance by replacing our "Look what I'm doing" mentality with the doing itself. Formalized practice may be thought of as group discipline.

It all gets back to discipline of course, and if we become very disciplined in our practice, a sense of the sacredness of what we're doing begins to come through. And so, we may be said to be engaging in a Sacred Discipline. Whenever we hear somebody say, "I consider this a sacred trust," we invariably get a feeling of seriousness and somberness; we know that this person really means it. Shouldn't we have that same kind of feeling, even more so, when we tell ourselves that we are engaging in the Sacred Discipline of Ch'an practice?

When we practice Ch'an, we are engaging in the deep focus of body and mind. We do this so that we may see what is important and what isn't...what causes suffering and what prevents suffering...what is real and what is unreal...what is enlightenment and what is delusion. And so if we are sincerely engaging in our Sacred Discipline, we will begin to see that the Practice Hall is indeed a sacred place. Eventually we will begin to see that our Buddha-Nature is a most sacred thing, that we ourselves are sacred, that everything in our environment (i.e. our world) is sacred, and that all living beings are sacred, even if those living beings don't have the faintest idea of how sacred they are. These kinds of realizations will fundamentally change your life forever. And they will occur if we are patient enough to practice this Sacred Discipline.