

Sojun Mel Weitsman on the opening of Rin Shin-ji

Talk given Sunday, April 2, 2000 at the opening of the new zendo

It's very nice to be here, and I see some old friends. I came here to open the eyes of the Buddha and dedicate your new zendo. It's a wonderful occasion. I remember when I used to come to Humboldt County in the 1960's, and there were people scattered around who were practicing, but no one could ever get together. People were practicing in their trailers or in their little houses in the woods, but it was a community of anarchists - everyone independent. The thought of doing things together in a sustained way was anathema to most people, and so my impression was that for Humboldt county northerners, it would take some extraordinary person to actually be a focal point for the practice, for people to come together. Maylie is the first person I know of who has been able to be that focal point and organize a practice in which people are willing to be part of a sangha. The non-joiners are actually joining together to do something, organizing a practice and keeping it going together. So to me, this is a minor miracle, and I really want to support it as much as possible.

We have the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, the Three Treasures. Some people are interested in the Buddha. Buddha is like the person, the teacher. Some people are interested in just the relationship with the teacher; they are not so interested in the dharma, not so interested in studying or learning about the dharma or the sangha. They don't care about that so much; they really just care about a relationship with the teacher.

Some people are only interested in the dharma. They are interested in studying. They're interested in leaning about Buddhism, but they don't so much care about who the teacher is or they are not so interested in the sangha.

There are some people who are just interested in the sangha. It's okay for the teacher to be there, and it's okay to have study, but what they're interested in is the social life. They want to be members in order to have a social life. But a well-rounded student is someone who has a relationship with the teacher, studies the dharma and is really interested in what Buddhism is about, and also feels an important part of the sangha. Sangha is like the foundation for the practice.

I think that there have been many people interested in Buddha, many people interested in dharma, but not so many people interested in sangha. But sangha is the support for making it all happen. It's more than just a social life. It's our combined effort to maintain the practice, to support each other. Mutual support may be the most important thing - I don't want to say "the most important thing" because whatever we talk about is the most important thing. So if I say sangha is the most important thing, and I think especially for a community where the people don't live close together, it is easy for people to become isolated. It's only the members together who can support a practice that is ongoing. So it is a very precious thing to actually have a practice that is supported by the members and that is ongoing.

There are several styles of practice - many styles of practice, in fact - but I want to talk about two aspects of these styles. One is the style of the sprinter and the other is the style of the long-distance runner. The sprinter does the 100-yard dash as fast as he can. The long-distance runner paces himself over a long distance. So the sprinter is like the one who is seeking some big experience, some big opening experience, and puts all his energy into doing something quickly or energetically in order to have some big experience, some kensho or opening.

The long-distance runner knows that practice is something for your whole life, not just to get some experience. We should have opening experience every moment. When you finally have an enlightened experience, you realize that you have been wasting a lot of time trying to have an opening experience because you are sacrificing this moment for a moment in the future. We should be very careful not to sacrifice this moment, this time, for some other time. That other time may not arrive. The practice of the long-distance runner is to appreciate each moment, not wait for some moment that you can appreciate.

If you read a lot of Zen literature, we have this stereotyped idea in the literature that some day you will have this big enlightenment experience, and that may be true. We say that enlightenment is the beginning of practice, not the end. The reason why you practice is because of the enlightened mind. Enlightenment brings us to practice, and it encourages us to practice in the dark. We all practice in the dark. In other words, we kind of feel our way along, stumbling along. [Laughs] Stumbling along is wonderful enlightened practice, stumbling along in the dark is wonderful enlightened practice. But we don't necessarily have realization of what we are doing so it takes a lot of faith actually to practice in the dark - stumbling along, feeling our way without knowing what the end is. We know what the direction is even though we are not sure where the rest of the road is. When we finally do have an enlightened experience or some realization of our enlightenment, then we really appreciate each moment's activity. We appreciate the bad things. We appreciate the good things. We appreciate our boredom. We appreciate the fact that just being able to breathe is enough. Then everything else is just candy.

So our practice is not just to get something. If you practice in a manner just to get something, that is materialistic practice, what Trungpa used to call spiritual materialism - practicing in order to get some experience. So supposing you have some big enlightened experience. Then what? Then life just becomes ordinary so you might just as well appreciate the ordinariness of life to begin with.

Enlightenment brings us to practice, and then a lifetime of practice matures our enlightenment. That is why it is so important to continuously practice. Not trying to get something. But just appreciating each moment, truly appreciating each moment's activity with gratitude and without wanting too much. It is very easy for us to want too much, and there is so much that is offered to want. So if we can just be careful not wanting too much and practicing in a very steady way, we can have some really deep experience of our enlightened mind.

Enlightenment is not something to get but something to reveal. We say it's like walking in the fog.

Walking in the fog, your clothes get wet unawares. It's not like walking in the rain where you know that you're getting wet. You reach down and feel your clothes and say, "Oh, my clothes are wet." So practice over a long period of time means that at some point your maturity reveals itself, and you realize that has been happening for awhile but you weren't aware of when it happened.

People ask, "Well, how should I practice, what should I do?" I say that if you really want to practice, you should harmonize your sitting practice with your life. But you should decide when you are going to sit zazen and put that on your calendar. You may say, "Well, I'll sit zazen Tuesdays and Thursdays." Then you put Tuesday and Thursday on your calendar and when that time comes, you say, "Oh, time for zazen." You don't do something else. Otherwise, our lives are so busy that if we just arbitrarily sit, other things will sweep away our intention or take over our intention.

So in order to really have a practice, practice has to be intentional, intentional in the sense we have to put it on our calendar, and then it becomes a part of our life. When zazen is integral with your life, with all of your other commitments and responsibilities, then you have a practice, and you can sustain that over a

long period of time. When that month is over, you ask, "Well, did that work?" Okay, so you continue or you add something or if it didn't work, you change it. So you are always monitoring what your practice is. That way you have an intentional practice.

There are different styles of practice, but for lay people who lead busy lives, you need some structure to make it work. Without the structure, practice doesn't work for very long; it's just another thing that you do and then pretty soon something else comes along and washes it away. I really advise you to structure your practice. Practice is not dependent on your moods; it's not dependent on whether you like it or don't like it; it's not dependent on feeling good or not feeling good - "I feel good today so I'll sit zazen" or "I feel terrible today so I better go sit zazen." It shouldn't depend on your feelings; it has to be beyond your feelings. Practice has to be driven by your intentions because feelings come and go and are not stable and are untrustworthy. Intention is what is trustworthy. I don't want to say vow, which is a little strong, but if you want to think of it that way, that's good. But intention, a strong intention, is necessary because otherwise you can't sustain a practice.

When the time comes to sit zazen, you may feel, "I don't want to sit zazen today," but your intention was to do it so you follow your intention rather than your momentary feeling. In that way, you build a strong practice, and then you feel better. When you follow your intentions, you really feel good. That is enlightened practice. So we don't have to wait for an enlightenment experience to have enlightened practice. Practice itself when done with an attitude of intention is enlightened practice. It's good to study the old masters, but I think it is also important to set them aside as well, because if you only compare yourself to the old masters, you'll think, "Oh, this is impossible for me," and then you get very discouraged. We should study the old masters' words and be inspired by them and at the same time we should set them aside and realize that our life is right here - the year 2000. This is our circumstance, and we have to act within our own social norms given all the problems that we have.