

Rev. Masaki Matsubara  
Week Three, *Zen and the Work of Everyday Life*  
March 20, 2017  
“Caring for Others”



Eighteenth-century Japanese Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku says in his writing, *Hebi ichigo*: "What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person, while causing many to suffer?"

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Hakuin was a fearless fighter against the power and authority of Tokugawa shogunate, Tokugawa dictatorship, [which lasted] roughly from 1603–1868. Hakuin continued to criticize the luxurious lifestyles of social elites, including emperor families, and also criticized the government's political economic policies like *sankin kotai* [policy where landholding military lords were required to spend time living in the capital city], as a waste of money, as a waste of resources. But, at the same time, Hakuin tried to save the lower-class people whose lives were extremely squeezed by heavy taxes and heavy labors.

Again, what state of mind is that that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person while causing many to suffer? Let me tell how I came to understand his message.

Let me start with my story. My story begins with my first travel outside [of] Japan, which was India. [It was] 32 years ago, in December of 1985. My father and my grandmother took me to India. Mostly, we [were] visiting northern parts of India, especially focusing on Buddhist sites, like Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Agra. I flew into Kolkata Airport in the middle of the night, nearly the middle of the night.

We got out of the exit. I was overwhelmed by [the] many people there. Yet, my eyes were clearly caught by a girl. That girl was the same age as me, which was almost 12 years old. Sixth grade. Her hair was dry and messy and brownish. She didn't wear any shoes. Other people at the airport, they had some sort of gifts, which they tried to sell for the travelers. But, that girl didn't have those gifts.

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And, our eyes met. She was straightforwardly approaching me and she tried to say something, like this. I was 12 years old at the time, but still immediately, I understood what she tried to say. She was begging [me for] money or food. And, I was very shocked. I was very shocked because I asked myself, "Why me?" I was a part of the tourists. My father and grandmother [were] organizing [the trip]. Other people [had] more money, obviously. And, I [was] just 12 years old. Why [was] she approaching me? Also, I had not seen such homelessness in Tokyo. I didn't see homelessness like a 12-year-old girl who was almost half-naked. She was barely covering her body with simple cloth. Again, she was almost same age as me. I had never seen such a girl in Tokyo. And she was asking me, asking, begging me.

And then, five days [to] a week later, our group had a dinner party at the Bodh Gaya. We ordered a lot of food and alcohol. And, I gave the girl 10 dollars I had in my right pocket. No question, I just gave all the money I had, which was a 10-dollar bill. One of the ladies at the airport who was part of our group was watching, [and she] said to me, "Ma-Chan"—my nickname was Ma-Chan at that time—"Ma-Chan, you can't give 10 dollars."

I said, "Why?" She said, "If you give one person the money, then you have to give others, as well. Because others are also begging you." I said, "Okay." Then she said, "Also, do you know how much it would be, this 10-dollar bill here in India? A lot of money. You don't need to give [a] 10-dollar bill." I was remembering that conversation at the party, at the Bodh Gaya.

The food and alcohol we ordered at the party was, obviously, more than 10 dollars per person. The party lasted three, four hours. In the end, what I saw was a lot of leftovers on the table. And I thought to myself, our group ordered a lot of food and the cost is expensive, easily more than 10 dollars per person. And, even then, we didn't finish eating everything. It was just wasting food. Then, why can I not give the girl that 10-dollar bill? That was my big question.

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My story talks not only about hunger, poverty, and famine, but also social justice, socioeconomic equality, and environmentally responsible living. What state of mind is that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person while causing many to suffer?

Let me mention two Buddhist ideas. The first is buddhanature. Buddhanature is the idea that we are all naturally endowed with [the] awakened state of the Buddha, but fail to recognize it. Based on the idea of buddhanature, inherently all living beings, it [is] implied, [have] dignity, priceless, and equality of life given [to them].

The second is the eightfold path. Namely: right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. This idea of the eightfold path has been regarded as the steps in the path and what moves beyond them to meditative practice, but the eightfold path is not just meditative practice. Here, we have [not] to ask the questions of what it *is*, but what the true meaning of it *was*, is, and what we can do with it. What can we do with it in our everyday life?

We are living [in] times that we are called to reconsider and take action for the moral and physical crisis of our own time involving abuses of power, injustice, the many violations of human bodies and spirits, and the issues of climate change, all of which we see around us today, every day. We are always thinking about freshness, authenticity, and truth. And, yet, we don't know, always, how to recognize those qualities in ourselves, people, or events around us.

The true nature of Zen, under meditation, in a more global context today, lies in finding this authenticity, freshness, and truth of moral ground. Namely, it is a moral imperative that is called forth in us when we bring our minds and see the nature of reality, others, and ourselves. What exactly is a moral imperative? Simply put, it is a drive that emerges within us that calls us to act for caring [for] others. What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person, while causing many to suffer?

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Based on the idea of buddhanature, inherent in all living beings, a moral imperative is a potential in all human beings. We need to cultivate it, refresh it, and activate it. The eightfold path certainly helps this. Let me introduce Hakuin's moral imperative in detail.

Hakuin said, against the Tokugawa shogunate:

The common people, day by day, grow feebler. Month by month, become more stunted. It becomes impossible to support the wife and family. Each has more, and there's suffering. Each family falls into crying until misery and starvation are everywhere. There is grain in the fields in abundance. Thus, hatred wells up within. At last, there comes a time when life is not longer of any consequence.

When things reach this point, 20,000 or 30,000 men gather together, like swarms of ants and bees. Screaming their hatred, they first surround the village head's house, smash open the doors, and scatter his possessions. If they catch him, they will be sure to tear him to pieces. Slowly they end up storming the city, entering its gate and creating a riot. Then, the temples within the domains are called upon. And, with deception and persuasion, they bring things under control. Once peace is restored, a spy is sent around, in secret, to search out and seize the conspirators. Then, 20 or 30 men are crucified or executed and their rotting bones litter the fields. But, it must be known that, the conspirators are not among the people. They are the officials and the village head.

If the official takes into account the quality of the crops each year, investigates what is good and bad for the people, sees to it that the high and the low gain profit equally, and shares in the misfortunes and joys of the noble and the base, who will take an evil attitude towards the rural province? Don't they say that a dispirited rat will bite a cat? No, the conspirator is not among the people. How can you say that? He is not the official and the village head.

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Hakuin said this, against the Tokugawa government. Tokugawa shogunate—dictatorship. This was very brave, revolutionary, and radical in 1754 under the Tokugawa time in Japan. What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person, while causing many to suffer?

Look at the issues and the struggles of social justice, socioeconomic equality, and environmentally responsible beings we see around us every day. Many leaders across the world and leaders at home, along with many of us, should raise the alarm bell not only that we have entered in an era with struggling social justice, socioeconomic equality, and environmentally responsible living. But also that, we are entering an era that we need to wake up for acting moral imperatives for these struggles.

Here is what I advise myself. First of all, the most important thing the world needs right now is to conduct, refresh, and recharge the eightfold path. And engage in practice of harmony, kindness, respect, compassion, and connectedness. I would add forgiveness. Buddhism teaches this. Hakuin is saying this.

Second, we can use our meditation as a form of harmonizing the bias. We can be of no use to the world if our inner world is in disarray. The world and one's mind are the same, two sides of the same one hand. We cannot separate these two. Our mantra is here: harmonizing body, harmonizing breath, harmonizing mind, and harmonizing the world.

Hakuin's voice, his legacy, still resonates today. I can only hope that, somewhere, shoguns and leaders and all of us today are listening. We need to cultivate, rehabilitate, activate moral imperative and keep ourselves present in the world in which we now find ourselves. What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person, while causing many to suffer?