

Finding Our Way

Dharma talk by Maylie Scott, Roshi, given November, 1999

I want to talk about finding our way; how we engage with our path. There is a discussion about this in a collection of koans in the Book of Serenity, case number 20, "Dizang's Nearness."

Dizang asked Fayan, "Where are you going?"

Fayan said, "Around on pilgrimage."

Dizang said, "What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"

Fayan said, "I don't know."

Dizang said, "Not knowing is nearest."

When we are practicing, that is, when we are living by vow or intention rather than by what we want or don't want, we are on pilgrimage. If we understand our life as pilgrimage, we naturally take the cultivation of the precepts as the work that turns us towards our Buddha nature. Our suffering takes on meaning; as we recognize and honor it, we learn to work through our resistances and to go deeper in our way.

The teacher asks the student what he's doing and the student says he's going around on pilgrimage. In those early days in China, monks traditionally went around from one practice place to another. We too move around - we have an extraordinary number of teachers and traditions to choose from, but this is not the point. The teacher wanted to take care of the student, to go deeper. "What's the purpose of pilgrimage?"

This is the teacher's job; to re-frame the life situation in practice. Somebody asked me if I felt bored when she came and "dumped her moods" on me. I said no, because moods are what we live with most intimately, so how we use them - compelling, demanding, confusing as they are - how we practice in the midst of them is very important. Pilgrimage is an every day matter.

What's the purpose? Every other month we have a three day sesshin. After a few periods as body begins to complain and mind is less than accommodating, the question "What am I doing here?" naturally arises. We very often talk about it; no one of us can give a definitive answer, but we continue to come and it is even possible to look forward to sesshins. The student says he "doesn't know" (he is probably a sincere student, known to the teacher, who is not using "don't know" in a superficial way), and the teacher accepts and refines the answer, "Not knowing is the nearest," thus helping all of us on our way.

Zazen keeps us "near" to our experience. Even if we are obsessing and daydreaming, we are not doing anything else - not running around - and our breath and body are strong reminders of the bare presence of our root. Sesshin sustains this experience of "nearness" for a longer time and so we have more time to digest it. When our experience is one of separateness, we are the victims of our situation. "I am bored, hurting, impatient, angry," etc. When we bring our attention in closer, what was a problem becomes just the experience of pain, mood, fatigue, etc. and we can find a place of rest in the midst of it. We are then in recovery from thinking we have to dislike or like what is happening.

"Not knowing is nearest." Not an easy practice. There is often an element of holding one's feet to the fire. But as one stays with it, one's life begins to change; there is a freedom from burdens of attachment and a warming up of compassion. Large decisions about life changes can be made with more stability because one is grounded, in the transition - taking one step at a time and watching the effects, then taking another. One is involved with the many aspects of the situation, rather than engaged by attachment to our idea of the outcome.

While each of us has a unique path, we are also deeply affected by one another. Our different intentions are mirrors for one another and we find energy and inspiration in the common effort. Nine people are involved in the process of receiving Jukai, the Bodhisattva lay precepts. This involves sewing rakus, studying the precepts together, and participating in a ceremony that will occur in late spring in the new zendo. What will happen next? We don't know, but our purpose is strengthened.