

## **Question: What does ordination as a bodhisattva mean and how does it effect zen practice?**

### **Taiun Jean-Pierre Faure Replies:**

#### **The Bodhisattva Way**

The ideal of Mahayana Buddhism is the bodhisattva. Bodhi means awakening while sattva means existence. The bodhisattva is therefore an awakening being, awakening existence. Awakening is at the heart of all existence.

In early Buddhism – which is sometimes pejoratively called Hinayana – the bikkhu (literally a beggar) did not concern himself with the material aspect of his life. He just meditated and studied. The bikkhu followed 250 precepts and the bikkhuni (women) followed 267 precepts. But, in order to do that, they have to avoid a good number of situations and, by doing so, cut themselves off from the world.

The bodhisattva tries to see and be free from the negative reactions that external circumstances provoke within him \*. In order to do so he resolutely turns his mind inward. His playing field then extends to include all the situations that human beings are called upon to live through. Through his awakening and careful to maintain a free mind, he dives into situations without giving in either to greed or to aversion and lives them with a mind in equanimity. Thus he practises awakening in the world.

The human being who follows this way of awakening feels gratitude and devotion for the Buddha and for the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, and for those who practise it, the Sangha.

He has three pure precepts for his ideal – do no evil, do good, work for the freedom of all existences. As the Buddha did before him, he takes the ten major precepts as rules of life – don't kill, don't steal, don't tell lies, etc.

The desire not to harm others is necessary but not sufficient because it is by devoting ourselves to the service of others that we can grow. It is by taking a sincere interest in our fellow beings, by devoting time and energy to them, that we can free ourselves from an idealistic point of view, leave behind the vicious circle of selfish worries and help others to do so as well.

If we practise zazen but we forget bodaishin, the mind of awakening – if we practise only for ourselves – then we will certainly be shut up in the dualistic and selfish attitude from which all conflicts come. That attitude goes against Buddha's teaching which tends to go beyond the idea of the self.

#### **Question: Does the determination to practise come from within or from the outside, from a master?**

It is up to the individual practitioner to turn towards the Buddha Way with a mind that aspires to Awakening. Of course, that aspiration might come to us in the beginning from an encounter with a real bodhisattva. In any case, that mind – bodaishin – may grow deeper if we understand its double root.

On one hand, the root of wisdom consists in seeing that all phenomena without any exception whatsoever take on constantly changing forms, and thus meditating upon, and experiencing, impermanence.

On the other hand, the root of compassion calls upon us to vow – even though it may seem daunting – to help all existences to get free without thinking of ourselves.

#### **Question: Do you need to be ordained as a bodhisattva in order to practise zazen?**

If practising zazen is only a personal search for physical or psychological well-being, a personal development technique, or a selfish desire for tranquillity... then it's not worth being ordained! But if our aspiration is much greater, if the suffering of the world (including our own suffering) is at the heart of our concerns, then we receive ordination as a bodhisattva. We vow to help all existences, to free ourselves from all passions, to live the Dharma in all situations, and to live as a Buddha.

Illuminated by Buddha's teaching, our zazen then takes on a whole other dimension – the dimension of mushotoku\* \*. It is pure existence, the natural, unconscious and automatic realisation of all the universal and eternal precepts.

**\* Please note:** A bodhisattva may be either male or female; we have used the masculine gender for grammatical reasons.

**\* \* Mushotoku** - without goal or desire for gain