

The Meaning of Practice and Verification

Shushôgi, translated by the Soto Zen Text Project

修證義

[I. General Introduction]

[1.] The most important issue of all for Buddhists is the thorough clarification of the meaning of birth and death. If the buddha is within birth and death, there is no birth and death. Simply understand that birth and death are in themselves nirvana; there is no birth and death to be hated nor nirvana to be desired. Then, for the first time, we will be freed from birth and death. To master this problem is of supreme importance.

[2.] [X] It is difficult to be born as a human being; it is rare to encounter the buddha-dharma. Now, thanks to our good deeds in the past, not only have we been born as humans, we have also encountered the buddha-dharma. Within the realm of birth and death, this good birth is the best; let us not waste our precious human lives, irresponsibly abandoning them to the winds of impermanence.

[3.] Impermanence is unreliable; we know not on what roadside grasses the dew of our transient life will fall. Our bodies are not our own; our lives shift with the passing days and cannot be stopped for even an instant. Once rosy-cheeked youth has gone, we cannot find even its traces. Careful reflection shows that most things, once gone by, will never be encountered again. In the face of impermanence, there is no help from kings, statesmen, relatives, servants, spouses, children, or wealth. We must enter the realm of death alone, accompanied only by our good and bad karma.

[4.] Avoid associating with deluded people in this world who are ignorant of the truth of causality and karmic retribution, who are heedless of past, present and future, and cannot distinguish good from evil. The principle of causality is obvious and impersonal; for inevitably those who do evil fall, and those who do good rise. If there were no causality, the buddhas would not have appeared in this world, nor would Bodhidharma have come from the west.

[5.] The karmic consequences of good and evil occur at three different times. The first is retribution experienced in our present life; the second is retribution experienced in the life following this one; and the third is retribution experienced in subsequent lives. In practicing the way of the buddhas and ancestors, from the start we should study and clarify the principle of karmic retribution in these three times. [X] Otherwise, we will often make mistakes and fall into false views. Not only will we fall into false views, we will fall into evil births and undergo long periods of suffering.

[6.] [X] Understand that in this birth we have only one life, not two or three. How regrettable it is if, falling into false views, we are subject to the consequences of evil deeds. Because we think that it is not evil even as we do evil, [X] and falsely imagine that there will be no consequences of evil, there is no way for us to avoid those consequences.

[II. Repenting and Eliminating Bad Karma]

[7.] [X] The buddhas and ancestors, because of their limitless sympathy, have opened the vast gates of compassion in order to lead all beings to awakening. Among humans and devas, who would not enter? Although karmic retribution for evil acts must come in one of the three times, repentance lessens the effects, or eliminates the bad karma and brings about purification.

[8.] [X] Therefore, we should repent before buddha in all sincerity. The power of the merit that results from repenting in this way before the buddha saves and purifies us. This merit encourages the growth of unobstructed faith and effort. When faith appears it transforms both self and other, and its benefits extend to beings both sentient and insentient.

[9.] The gist of repentance is expressed as follows: "Although we have accumulated much bad karma in the past, producing causes and conditions that obstruct our practice of the way, may the buddhas and

ancestors who have attained the way of the buddha take pity on us, liberate us from our karmic entanglements, and remove obstructions to our study of the way. May their merit fill up [X] and hold sway over the inexhaustible dharma realm, so that they share with us their compassion." Buddhas and ancestors were once like us; in the future we shall be like them.

[10.] [X] "All my past and harmful karma, born from beginningless greed, hate, and delusion, through body, speech, and mind, I now fully avow." If we repent in this way, we will certainly receive the mysterious guidance of the buddhas and ancestors. [Y] Keeping this in mind and acting in the appropriate manner, [Y] we should openly confess before the buddha. The power of this confession will cut the roots of our bad karma.

[III. Receiving Precepts and Joining the Ranks]

[11.] [X] Next, we should pay profound respects to the three treasures of buddha, dharma, and sangha. We should vow to make offerings and pay respects to the three treasures even in future lives and bodies. This reverent veneration of buddha, dharma, and sangha is what the buddhas and ancestors in both India and China correctly transmitted.

[12.] [X] Beings of meager fortune and scant virtue are unable even to hear the name of the three treasures; how much less can they take refuge in them. Do not, being compelled by fear, vainly take refuge in mountain spirits or ghosts, or in the shrines of non-Buddhists. Those kinds of refuges do not liberate from sufferings. Quickly taking refuge in the three treasures of buddha, dharma, and sangha will not only bring release from suffering, it will lead to the realization of enlightenment.

[13.] In taking refuge in the three treasures, we should have pure faith. Whether during the Tathagata's lifetime or after, we place our palms together in gassho, bow our heads, and recite: "We take refuge in buddha, we take refuge in dharma, we take refuge in sangha." We take refuge in the buddha because he is the great teacher. We take refuge in the dharma because it is good medicine. We take refuge in the sangha because it is an excellent friend. It is only by taking refuge in the three treasures that we become disciples of the Buddha. Whatever precepts we receive, they are always taken after the three refuges. Therefore it is in dependence on the three refuges that we gain the precepts.

[14.] The merit of taking refuge in the buddha, dharma, and sangha is always fulfilled when there is a spiritual communication of supplication and response. When there is a spiritual communication of supplication and response, devas, humans, hell dwellers, hungry ghosts, and animals all take refuge. Those who have taken refuge, in life after life, time after time, existence after existence, place after place, will steadily advance, surely accumulate merit, and attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment. We should realize that the merit of the threefold refuge is the most honored, the highest, the most profound, and inconceivable. The World-Honored One himself has already borne witness to this, and living beings should believe in it.

[15.] Next we should receive the three sets of pure precepts: the precepts of restraining behavior, the precepts of doing good, and the precepts of benefiting living beings. We should then accept the ten grave prohibitions. First, do not kill; second, do not steal; third, do not engage in improper sexual conduct; fourth, do not lie; fifth, do not deal in intoxicants; sixth, do not criticize others; seventh, do not praise self and slander others; eighth, do not be stingy with the dharma or property; ninth, do not give way to anger; and tenth, do not disparage the three treasures. The buddhas all receive and upheld these three refuges, three sets of pure precepts, and ten grave prohibitions.

[16.] Those who receive the precepts verify the unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment verified by all the buddhas of the three times, the fruit of buddhahood, adamant and indestructible. Is there any wise person who would not gladly seek this goal? The World-Honored One has clearly shown to all living beings that when they receive the buddha's precepts, they join the ranks of the buddhas, the rank equal to the great awakening; truly they are the children of the buddhas.

[17.] [X] The buddhas always dwell in this, giving no thought to its various aspects; beings long function in this, the aspects never revealed in their various thoughts. [X] At this time, the land, grasses and trees,

fences and walls, tiles and pebbles, all things in the dharma realm of the ten directions, perform the work of the buddhas. Therefore, the beings who enjoy the benefits of wind and water thus produced are all mysteriously aided by the wondrous and inconceivable transformative power of the buddha, and manifest a personal awakening. [X] This is the merit of nonintention, the merit of nonartifice. [Y] This is arousing the thought of enlightenment.

[IV. Making the Vow to Benefit Beings]

[18.] [X] To arouse the thought of enlightenment is to vow to save all beings before saving ourselves. Whether lay person or monk, whether a deva or a human, whether suffering or at ease, we should quickly form the intention of first saving others before saving ourselves.

[19.] [X] Though of humble appearance, one who has formed this intention is already the teacher of all living beings. Even a girl of seven is a teacher to the fourfold assembly, a compassionate father to living beings. Do not make an issue of male and female. This is a most wondrous principle of the way of the buddha.

[20.] After arousing the thought of enlightenment, even though we cycle through the six destinies and four modes of birth, the circumstances of this cycling themselves are all the practice of the vow of enlightenment. Therefore, although until now we may have vainly idled away our time, we should quickly make the vow before the present life has passed. Even if we have acquired a full measure of merit, sufficient to become a buddha, we turn it over, dedicating it to living beings that they may become buddhas and attain the way. There are some who practice for countless kalpas, saving living beings first without themselves becoming buddhas; they only save beings and benefit beings.

[21.] There are four kinds of wisdom that benefit living beings: giving, kind speech, beneficial deeds, and cooperation. These are the practices of the vow of the bodhisattva. "Giving" means not to covet. In principle, although nothing is truly one's own, this does not prevent us from giving. Do not disdain even a small offering; its giving will surely bear fruit. Therefore, we should give even a line or a verse of the dharma, sowing good seeds for this life and other lives. We should give even a penny or a single blade of grass of resources, establishing good roots for this world and other worlds. The dharma is a resource, and resources are the dharma. Without coveting reward or thanks from others, we simply share our strength with them. Providing ferries and building bridges are also the perfection of giving. Earning a living and producing goods are fundamentally nothing other than giving.

[22.] "Kind speech" means, when meeting living beings, to think kindly of them and offer them affectionate words. To speak with a feeling of tenderness toward living beings, as if they were one's own infant, is what is meant by kind speech. We should praise the virtuous and pity the virtueless. Kind speech is fundamental to mollifying one's enemies and fostering harmony among one's friends. Hearing kind speech to one's face brightens one's countenance and pleases one's heart. Hearing kind speech indirectly leaves a deep impression. We should realize that kind speech has the power to move the heavens.

[23.] "Beneficial deeds" means to devise good ways of benefiting living beings, whether noble or humble. Those who encountered the trapped tortoise and the injured bird simply performed beneficial deeds for them, without seeking their reward or thanks. The foolish believe that their own interests will suffer if they put the benefits of others first. This is not the case. Beneficial deeds are one, universally benefiting self and others.

[24.] [X] "Cooperation" means not to differentiate; to make no distinction between self and others. It is, for example, like the human Tathagata who was the same as other human beings. There is a way of understanding such that we [X] identify others with ourselves and then identify ourselves with others. At such times self and other are without boundaries. The ocean does not reject any water; this is cooperation. It is because of this that water collects and becomes an ocean.

[25.] In sum, we should calmly reflect on the fact that the practice of the vow of arousing the thought of enlightenment has such principles; we should not be too hasty here. [Y] In working to save others, [Y] we should venerate and respect the merit that allows all living beings to receive guidance.

[V. Practicing Buddhism and Repaying Blessings]

[26.] [X] Arousing the thought of enlightenment is mainly something that human beings in this world should do. Should we not rejoice that we have had the opportunity to be born in this land of the Buddha Shakyamuni and to have encountered him?

[27.] We should calmly consider that if this was a time when the true dharma had not yet spread in the world, we would not be able to encounter it, even if we vowed to sacrifice our very lives for it. We who have at present encountered the true dharma should make such a vow. Do we not know that the Buddha said, "When you meet a teacher who expounds supreme enlightenment, do not consider his family background, do not regard his appearance, do not dislike his faults, and do not think about his conduct. Simply, out of respect for wisdom, bow to him three times daily, honor him, and do not cause him any grief."

[28.] That we are now able to see the Buddha and hear the dharma is due to the blessings that have come to us through the practice of every one of the buddhas and ancestors. If the buddhas and ancestors had not directly transmitted the dharma, how could it have reached us today? We should be grateful for the blessings of even a single phrase; we should be grateful for the blessings of even a single dharma. How much more should we be grateful for the great blessings of the treasury of the eye of the true dharma, the supreme great dharma. The injured bird did not forget its blessings, but showed its thanks with the rings of three ministries. The trapped tortoise did not forget its blessings, but showed its thanks with the seal of Yubu. If even animals repay their blessings, how could humans ignore them?

[29.] Our expression of gratitude should not consist in any other practices; the true path of such expression lies solely in our daily practice of Buddhism. This means that we practice without neglecting our lives day to day and without being absorbed in ourselves.

[30.] Time flies faster than an arrow, and life is more transient than the dew. With what skillful means or devices can we retrieve even a single day that has passed. A hundred years lived to no purpose are days and months to be regretted. It is to be but a pitiful bag of bones. Even if we live in abandon, as slaves to the senses for the days and months of a hundred years, if we take up practice for a single day therein, it is not only the practice of this life of a hundred years, but also salvation in the hundred years of another life. The life of this day is a life that should be esteemed, a bag of bones that should be honored. We should love and respect our bodies and minds, which undertake this practice. Depending on our practice, the practice of the buddhas is manifested, and the [X] great way of the buddhas penetrates everywhere. Therefore, the practice of a single day is the seed of the buddhas, the practice of the buddhas.

[31.] These buddhas are the Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha Shakyamuni is "mind itself is buddha." When buddhas of the past, present, and future together fulfill buddhahood, they always become the Buddha Shakyamuni. This is "mind itself is buddha." We should carefully investigate who is meant when we say [Y] "mind itself is buddha." [Y] This is how we repay the blessings of the Buddha.