

DHARMA TALK FOR MONDAY, 12th February, 2024.

Years ago when I was a member of Mountain Moon Sangha, there was another member there by the name of Joanne Miller, who would later go on to write a Book called "Zen and the Gospel of Thomas." This talk will largely take its material from Chapter 35 of that book.

As the gospel of Thomas will be referred to, its best that something be said about it. Written in Coptic, an ancient form of Egyptian, it was found in Egypt in 1948, and consists of a series of sayings attributed to Jesus that have neither a specific context nor setting in life. I interpolate here that this gospel has nothing to do with the Dead Sea scrolls which were found in Israel and are associated with the Essenes and Qumran.

The fact that the sayings have no setting in life or specific context, unlike the contents of the New Testament, gives them a zen koan like character.

Saying number 71 has Jesus saying: "I'll destroy this house and no one will be able to build it again." This saying is considered in relation to the verse of Case 4 of the book of the transmission of light which says: "With the house demolished and the self overthrown, no inside or outside remains. So where, pray, are body and mind to conceal their forms?"

Since the saying refers to a House, perhaps the best place to start is by looking at Maslow's Pyramid or hierarchy of needs. Usually depicted in the form of an equilateral triangle, the theory suggests that we begin at the bottom with elemental needs and climb the pyramid as we get things increasingly together. A "house" is both a psychological need and a safety need. Psychological needs include air, water food, heat, clothes, shelter and sleep. Only to the extent that these are met can we climb the pyramid to begin the work of self-actualisation, which is what zen practice is really all about.

The question may now be reformulated as follows: Having put the "house" together to satisfy our psychological and safety needs, why are we now talking about its demolition or destruction?

There are 3 fundamental points about this Jesus saying that need to be stressed, and they are these:

1) the basic thrust of the saying is concerned with non-attachment. The saying is referring to a state of mind where the solitary one has left the house of the separate self for the homeless life of enlightenment. Essentially, the attachment to concepts and things is no longer that primary place where we invest our time and energy.

2) To be completely free the old house has to give way to the new, which is unlimited by time and space. As Master Dogen said: "when we throw ourselves into the house of the Buddha, the dharma fills our hands." But to get there the separate self must die.

3) this entry into what Christianity calls the Kingdom of Heaven is the destruction of the house (ego) and the house of the builder (the separate self), and a refusal

thereafter to attempt to rebuild the house again

As another saying has it, your rafters are broken and your ridge pole is shattered. The rafters of this self-created house are the Kleshas— attachment, aversion, illusion, conceit, false views, doubts, apathy, restlessness and moral shamelessness....The ridge pole supporting these is our ignorance of the true nature of the kingdom.

Zen holds to the proposition that there is no separate self or separate body to be enlightened. Everything is enlightened in the essential world (the kingdom of heaven) because of its very nature. In emptiness there is no landlord to pay rent to and no one to take out a lease. Sometimes therefore the exhortation given is to become passers by or itinerants. Another saying suggests that we come into being as we pass away. "Someone who has seen the unseen no longer lives a life that revolves around wants and desires because life doesn't revolve around a separate self." If there is no separate self, who or what is there to attach to?

This freedom does not mean that material things are not important, just that they are no longer the most important.

Does this mean a retreat from the world???

The observation has long been made that Christianity has a long and involved participation in the world with charitable works and social action, being demonstrably active in countless areas of the life of the nation. Although Buddhism doesn't have such a track record, it is not to be understood as some retreat from the world, nor some form of detachment to the world at large, nor as something that is fundamentally escapist and inward looking. It should be understood as someone who is very connected to the concerns of the world. This group is active on climate change and has some who contribute to UNHCR with respect to the war in Ukraine. Indeed, compassion assumes a greater role.

What may be said is that "when someone lives with a well-developed awareness of the empty nature of the world, they are free to put down and pick up as they choose."

I don't pretend to be living in that space, but we all get glimpses of it from time to time, at which point it doesn't seem so remote or distant, but becomes imbued with new vibrancy and understanding. It is then that we can understand the instruction to destroy the house, or just watch it disintegrate, and why it is pointless to attempt to rebuild it.

And it is with those thoughts that I leave you.

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