

Quick Dharma Series

Patchwork Robe

by Gyoshin

Harmony among people develops when we engage in the practice of harmony with nature. A number of years ago my teacher Reverend Saito wrote,

The real living life is the life of awareness that the whole world is one being. But in our everyday life, if we are not truly alive, then our life becomes conceptualized as merely part of the universe. A living being does not say, 'a part of my body is sick,' or 'a part of my heart is stopping,' or 'only my brain is enjoying something, but my heart is cold.' When we come to the real awareness that all of the world's pain is my pain, and that my pain is the pain of the whole world, then our eyes are open.

As we have moved away from that awareness of the "whole world as one being," we have entered the great spiritual crisis of our day – disharmony with nature. This spiritual crisis has grown to become a great sickness. Fortunately, as we struggle to overcome this crisis, there is a wonderful karmic reciprocity at work: as we seek to understand the pain of nature, we become illumined about our own pain. As we assist nature in its own healing process we find our own healing. In finding the balances of nature, we begin to find our own balance.

I also remember a line from a poem by Reverend Saito's teacher, Haya Akegarasu: "I am not such a limited self, conceptualized self as to exist apart from others."

When our ability to see reality outside of ourselves diminishes, we become full of ourselves. When this happens, we become insane because, ultimately, the outside real world no longer exists for us. We are totally isolated in our own private world.

On the other hand, if we allow our lesser self to fade away and be replaced by our larger Self, we are born into the world of true Mindfulness. This is a truth at the heart of all great spiritual traditions.

I am speaking here of a movement from small self to larger Self. This is the natural and proper process of growth, and it is accompanied by an increase in harmony among people.

Buddhism teaches that the basis of true religion is the passing away of this smaller self. Once this small self no longer fills our lives then the larger Self can enter. Reverend Maida described the event as being:

...like a Phoenix which revives and flaps its wings. One is reborn into a new life. This is the life of 'freedom without hindrance. This is the very extreme form of dynamism. This is the life in which we can do all things.

The experience of this “larger Self” is the experience of a world in which everything and everyone – trees, rocks, waterfalls, flowers, the poor, the rich, the homeless, those who suffer disease, endangered species, and rain forests are respected for their intrinsic worth. This is the landscape of a truly ecological vision grounded in the Earth as “community.” This is the vision of the Bodhisattva Vow.

What has upset the balance of Nature? It is selfishness and greed. It is our conquering, fighting, taming, and using small self. Given some rest, nature will ultimately restore itself. We are, however, in danger of further damage to ourselves and nature when we restrict ourselves to only applying the "technological fix." The answer to toxic waste is not simply how to modify waste technologically so that we can continue to produce it, but rather to reduce our production of it so that nature can rest and engage in its own restorative process.

We are not “stewards” of the environment, but rather, “members” of the community of the Earth. To understand this is to make a paradigm shift in how we see ourselves. In so doing we begin to walk the path of the heart – a heart not born of small self, but a heart wrapped in the robes of the Bodhisattva’s Vow.

When we commit our lives to the greater life of which Earth is a part, we commit ourselves to the realization of a truth grounded in the life of the earth. The state of the environment is intimately related to our own personal state. Healthy people create healthy environments. Healthy environments create healthy people.

We find the heart of Buddhism in the ordinary lives of ordinary people making everyday choices. In this ordinary life, we are, on a daily basis, called upon to overcome our smaller self. This is the path that leads to tranquility and inner peace.

The Dharma teaches us that everything is impermanent and we are not trapped by a fixed self. All life changes; in each moment we are born anew. Buddhism itself changes when it is centered in living life rather than dead dogmas. I believe the best symbol of this living, changing, Buddhism are the robes of Gautama Buddha. It is said that He picked up discarded pieces of cloth, trash, and wasted parts blowing about the village streets, and he sewed them together to make a patchwork robe to wear. In so doing he became:

The Buddha

Who Values the Valueless.

The Buddha

Who Stitches the Parts Together.

The Buddha

of Recycling!

The Buddha

of The Patchwork Robe.