



BUDDHA'S DHARMA WITH ST. BENEDICT'S RULE

FOUR ESSAYS ON THE RULE: LISTEN

By A Single Thread | Zen Contemplatives

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Ho Getsu Sen Gen
Zhong Fen li Bao yu Di

Buddha's Dharma with St. Benedict's Rule 1

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Buddha's Dharma with St. Benedict's Rule 2







Introduction

Buddha's Dharma with St. Benedict's Rule is a series of essays that were offered during a winter retreat at A Single Thread. This e-book is the collected work of four Zen contemplatives, a priest and three monks in training. The basic structure of the e-book followed the structure of the retreat. Each contributor presented an essay on a quote from The Rule of St. Benedict. The quote from Benedict's Rule precedes each essay making it clear what the writer is focused on.





Headline News

Listen child of God....

attend to the message you hear and make sure it pierces your heart.

Benedict's Rule



EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

- School Shooting in Kentucky Was Nation's 11th of the Year. It Was Jan. 23, 2018 – NY Times
- VW Suspends Chief Lobbyist Over Diesel Tests on Monkeys and Humans – 2018 Wall Street Journal
- Yemen: At Least 15 Killed in a Suicide Car Bomb – 2018 Aljazeera

Headlines, messages if you will, like these are with us every day. We feel absolutely glutted by information. We are assaulted by sound bites and tweets and headlines 24/7. And when we look around we are accosted by ads and more ads. They pop up on our computer screens and smart phones. We are encouraged to buy whatever we want, right now. We are told that by buying what is advertised we will be happier, more fulfilled, glamorous, sexy, better off than those other people who aren't or can't buy what is advertised. And when we are finally able to crawl into bed at night we feel utterly drained, famished by a world full of glitter and no substance. We go to sleep knowing that the next day will bring more of the same. Day after day we are slowly starving in this onslaught of messages. My spiritual story begins with a message I heard nearly 30 years ago. The world around me, even then, felt glutted and spiritually famished. But I wasn't looking for nourishment because I didn't feel hungry. I was just living my life. In January 1989, on my way home from work, I heard a news report on NPR. The story was about a man who walked into a school yard in Stockton, California with a semi-automatic



rifle and killed five children, wounded 32 others and killed himself. The news stunned me. I had heard other stories like this, yet this story stayed with me. It played over and over in my head. The feeling I had was the need to do something. At the time, my brother was living with me. He was studying to become a Shaman and had joined a local Nichiren Buddhist group that practiced chanting. He was using chanting to tune his auras. When I got home, with the story still in my head, he was heading out to chant with his meditation group. I asked if I could join him. The group chanted a mantra. I never learned the meaning of the mantra because I was told that just the sound would send positive energy into the world. As I continued to chant, I started reading Matthew Fox's *The Cosmic Christ* and Shamanic stories from my brother. What I didn't realize until later was that I was being fed. It was an unlikely combination of food; Buddhist chanting, the *Cosmic Christ* and shamanic stories. I was finding nourishment. It was a slow practice of letting these teachings sink-into my mind and heart. Week after week, month after month, year after year I continued to sit and chant and study. This practice eventually led me to a Soto Zen practice which led me to a Chan practice which led to my becoming ordained as a Zen priest in the *Contemplative Order of Hsu Yun*. And as far I can see it all began when I heard a news story that pierced me, that stirred me to respond. Now, let's fast forward to last fall when I was asked to suggest a Buddhist related topic to offer at St. Nick's. At the time I was studying the book, *Benedict's Dharma* and suggested I could put together a talk about the book. My offer was accepted and here we are talking about *Benedict's Dharma* and turning it into a Winter



Retreat, all from hearing a story on NPR. You might ask what does my experience have to do with *Benedict's Dharma* and *Buddhism* and spiritual nourishment in a glutted world? Well, let's see. Let's begin with Benedict's Prologue. "*Listen, child of God, to the guidance of your teacher. Attend to the message you hear and make it pierce your heart, so that you may accept with willing freedom and fulfill by the way you live the directions that come from your Father.*"

It is as if he knew about our 21st century world. I say this because he gives us a blue print for how to find nourishment. The work of feeding your starved heart is up to you. All that Benedict or I am able to do is offer a message, a teaching or ask a question which may pierce your heart and change your life. Let me outline Benedict's blueprint as a series of questions for each of you to listen to, to ask yourselves and to study. Then I will go over one of the questions using my own experience as an example. Do you listen and what do you listen to? Who is your teacher? What are the messages you hear and follow? As I re-read the Prologue I realized that my journey into Buddhist practice roughly followed what Benedict was saying. I started with attending to a message...a news story that pushed me into finding spiritual nourishment. It took me quite a long time to listen and find and accept guidance from teachers and teachings and to acknowledge the need for them both. And, it is still difficult! As I continue with sitting, I find more willingness in myself to accept the teachings and live the directions that come from the teachings. I have to come to realize that teachings are all around me, if only I listen. At the time I didn't know the truth of the teaching *everything comes into my life to awaken me* but my own experience shows



me time and time again that this is true. The headlines that I started with are not going away. But the “I” that heard the message has changed. Without knowing it I followed and still follow a message of big T Truth; the ineffable unborn, undying that which cannot be faced or turned away from, the subtle source that is clear and bright. My experience continues to tell me and show me that nothing is left out when we listen and attend to the message that comes into our life from this Source.





Piercing the Heart

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Benedict's Rule



Each morning, I chant Tenzo's Prayer after I meditate. It begins with the instruction, "Pay full attention to all work. The way-seeking mind is actualized by rolling up your sleeves." The Prayer ends with the Tenzo (a cook) replying to the question, "What is practice?" Answering, he says, "There is nothing in the world that is hidden from it."

Tenzo's Prayer and the quote from Benedict's Rule seem to make a similar point. Everything that happens in each moment comes to awaken us. Everything that comes into our lives has spiritual meaning in addition to its meaning in our daily material existence. But, we must listen, attend to the message, roll up our sleeves in order to hear it....to discover it.

Two incidents illustrate this for me.

Often as I enter my grocery store, someone is there asking for money...different people on different days. For some months, there was a woman who sold Streetwise, a newspaper published and sold by homeless individuals. She was quite engaging and greeted shoppers with a dazzling smile and pleasant demeanor. She was there most days regardless of the weather. Eventually she moved on because of good fortune. A wonderful story, but I thought about it no further.

More recently, a different person arrived, regularly asking for money. She had neither a dazzling smile nor a pleasant demeanor and she was demanding. Additionally, I had heard unflattering things about her. After a time, I noticed that I was getting annoyed with her and was reluctant to give her money.



Then slowly, I began noticing that my irritation with her was now irritating me. Several days ago, I thought, what on earth is going on here? I began to reflect on it. When I ceased focusing on the two women and began to look within, at what I was doing, I saw clearly what I was up to. I was liking, disliking, judging. And it all rested in believing that I could know. I recalled a line from my daily chanting of the precepts that says, "Realize that likes, dislikes and indifferences of the mind are hindrances to the pure mind."

I see now that I thought the first woman's story was wonderful because I liked her. I judged her to be a good person, deserving of generosity and of good things happening to her. I regarded the second woman as unpleasant, demanding, and unattractive. I disliked encountering her and I was withholding towards her. All of this was taking place because I thought I could know... know them, even what was in their hearts. There is much more here for me to deeply reflect upon, but I want to consider a question.

Why was I able to wake up just this little bit?

Since I began training to become a monk last summer, I think I have begun to pay more attention. Nothing magical or mysterious about it. I have been spending more time meditating, writing, reading, chanting, and contemplating in silence and solitude. This deepening of practice, this rolling up my sleeves is supporting me, helping me to focus on the spiritual, so that I am more likely to attend to the messages that come in life in a way that pierces my heart. I understand better that spiritual work and effort is key, if I hope to awaken, even this little bit.





A Deeper Embrace

Listen child of God...

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Benedict's Rule



Here, Benedict asserts the imperative that one go beyond an intellectual understanding of spiritual truths to a deeper embrace, one which emerges from a piercing, personal experience of the teachings.

Recently, I experienced a crisis in my spiritual practice that has moved me to a heartfelt re-dedication to the messages I hear.

The 4 Noble Truths are the core message of Buddhism. The First Noble Truth: There is suffering. I know that I have a tendency to put myself above other people. I know this is one of the ways I suffer. This tendency was apparent this past week, however, I was blind to it as it unfolded.

My pride is an example of the Second Noble Truth: Suffering is caused by our ego's craving for life to be more, less, better, happier than it is. I had become hooked into striving for superiority, and in my disappointment with myself, I plunged into despair and frustration. Desperate to feel better, I determined to fix myself, once and for all! Soon I recognized that this too is a pattern. When I want to be the best and brightest, I suffer. And, when I want to fix that habit, I suffer. Eventually, I saw that I was piling craving upon craving. It led me to this: "Nothing I do works. I DON'T KNOW."

Although I hold dear the wisdom of the Third Noble Truth, that there is an end to suffering, still I DID NOT KNOW. Here, my pain met the truth of the teachings and my heart was pierced. There was a way through my suffering. I began to see it.



The Fourth Noble Truth tells us to follow the 8-Fold Noble Path to put an end to suffering. The Noble Path teaching which pierced my heart during this recent experience describes Noble Effort.

The efforts of spiritual seekers must be directed toward seeing what we are doing in every moment; as we cross the street, as we talk to a friend, as we make dinner. Unless we are serving the Buddha with consistent attention fixed on what is, the ego slips in, our thinking gears up, and our habits take over. When we do find ourselves caught in craving, our efforts must orient toward dis-identification with what we want, what we think we know, how we think we can fix. Though I fully understood these teachings, I was not applying my efforts effectively to my practice.

Egoic thoughts and feelings plant their first seeds of discontent, of the craving described in the Second Noble Truth, in a mind that is unaware. I had been unaware when pride first crept into my thinking. A spiritual student, utilizing Noble Effort, resides continually in the gap between her presence and her ego's desires. In that gap, she can recognize when suffering's cause is upon her. In this full and concentrated presence, being Buddha, she sees that her ego's drive is a delusion born of false truths. Her efforts have led her down the path of freedom from the attachments of the ego. I, in my unaware state, allowed my pride to grab hold and run the show. I had squandered a precious opportunity to put an end to a bit of suffering.



Such is Noble Effort; the full application of all one's energy towards the study of the delusions of the mind so that one can let them go. Noble Effort requires moment-to-moment dedication of a heart that is penetrated by a fervent wish to end suffering.





Enso and Me

Listen child of God...

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The Ensō is the Chinese circle of enlightenment. It is a one stroke painting cut down to its very essence. It is the essence of simplicity but is very complicated to reach. The student of the Ensō paints it again and again and again. It is a process, a commitment that is often filled with doubt. Each time the student shows a new painting to the teacher the teacher questions. Why did you do this? Where will you put the calligraphy? That's the wrong calligraphy for that painting. Those are the wrong words. Where will your stamp go? Each time the student returns to do it again until she begins to question why she ever signed up for this. Perfectionism is not helpful, if you want to paint an Ensō .

The Ensō student must shed any pretense of excellence and stay close to the core of what the painting of the Ensō teaches; put the attention on what you are doing. Do not let the mind go ahead of the brush in anticipation or look back in criticism. Judgment is suspended and for a moment the student forgets the small self. When the brush is lifted off the paper, the Ensō is finished and there is the realization that what is there is good enough.

Yesterday evening I listened to a presentation by my former Chinese brush painting teacher on his experience of painting the Ensō . As I listened to him speak I was deeply moved by his commitment to his art and by what he went through to remain faithful to his practice. It was an invitation to look at my own commitment and practice as I train to become a monk. I hear my teacher's questions and challenges, her pointing out places of blindness of which I am completely unaware. There is the going back to look at something again and again, the bouts of



discouragement and encouragement too, often enough to want to chuck the whole thing. And still there is something that says this is what I need to do even though I am not quite sure why. I don't rule out a bit of stubbornness. There is a set of cards in my bathroom and each morning a new one is turned over. There is one that reads, *You Will Continue*. And so I continue.

“Listen” is the first word of St. Benedict's Prologue to his Rule. I have heard it translated also as, Listen with the ear of your heart. So what am I to listen for in the painting of the Ensō? What does it teach me? What do I hear?

Painting an Ensō is meant to train the mind to STAY with the moment and realize ultimate Reality. It calls for determination and unwavering dedication, but not stubbornness. Stubbornness grinds the teeth and hardens the heart. Unwavering determination is steady. When you get discouraged and want to give up, STAY. Recommit. Make it wholehearted and don't hold a bit back for oneself. Commitment is not a one time thing. It is a daily practice in daily living. Like an Ensō, living has plenty of wobbles and uncontrollable and unexpected 'flying white' (white streaks from the brush) which makes us pay attention.

Don't criticize and don't judge. Accept what is.

I have been practicing looking into the center of the Ensō , that empty space, whether in its painted form or seeing it in my mind's eye. That center is a place of rest and not only a place of rest but becomes Rest Itself. The Ensō says BE with what shows up. This is what Listen means for me.



