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Zenkei Blanche Hartman's Presentation Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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William Skudlarek: The last person to begin our session considering suffering caused by alienation and a sense of worthlessness is Zenkei Blanche Hartman. Blanche was born in Alabama in 1926 to nonobservant Jewish parents. She told me that in 1932, when the public school was closed because of lack of funds, she was sent to a Catholic school, where she was deeply impressed by the faith and devotion of one of her teachers, Sister Mary Catherine Flynn. In 1943 she moved to California, where her father was serving in the Army and worked as an instrument mechanic for the Air Force until the war ended. She then returned to school, majoring in the application of statistical methods to chemistry and biochemistry at the University of California. She married in 1947, and she and her husband of 55 years have four children and six grandchildren. In 1957 she began working as a chemist and statistician and then, in 1968, due to various circumstances, she began to question many of the things that she had long taken for granted and to deeply examine the direction of her life. In that process, she discovered Zen meditation and met Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. She and her husband began to sit zazen daily and to participate fully in the activities of the Berkeley Zen Center and the San Francisco Zen Center. In 1972, she and her husband entered Zenshinji, Zen Heart/Mind Monastery at Tassajara, and have lived in one of the three residential training centers of Zen Center ever since. She and her husband were ordained together in 1977, and in 1996 she was installed as co-abbess of San Francisco Zen Center, in residence at Beginners Mind Temple in San

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Zenkei Blanche Hartman is the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

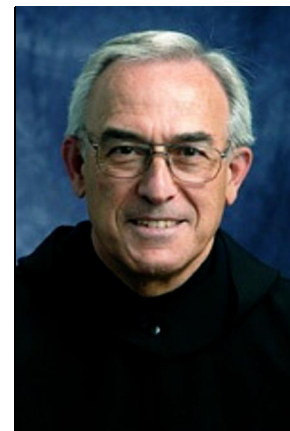
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Francisco. Her ordination name is Zenkei, a name that means inconceivable joy. She says that though it was a mystery to her at the time, now twenty-five years later, she can appreciate that choice of name.

Blanche Hartman: I'm really glad to be here again and to see some of you whom I met last time. It feels like a much more intimate dialogue that we are having this time. I'm really enjoying and appreciating it. I wonder how those of us who chose a life of renunciation and contemplation can get so busy sometimes. Perhaps it's because of the vastness of our vow. In the Mahayana tradition, we daily chant the bodhisattva vow, the vow of one who aspires to awaken to reality for the benefit of all beings: "Beings are numberless, I vow to free them or to awaken with them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to cut through them. Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them. Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it." As you can see, an endless vow. Maybe that's why Avalokitesvara, the hearer of the cries of the world, has a thousand arms and a thousand eyes, an eye in each hand, to try to respond to the cries of the world—the bodhisattva of compassion. Including all beings without exception in loving-friendliness meditation is similarly vast, and I'm sure there are many Christian equivalents. At the same time, we recognize our limitations, our incompleteness, and so our repentance is also endless. We live a life of vow and repentance, constant joyful effort and constant falling short.

Somehow, we humans seem to have lost our awareness of our interdependence and connectedness with all that is. As a result, we've fallen into the basic ignorance that is at the heart of all suffering: the belief that we are separate, isolated entities. Perhaps this wrong view is one interpretation of original sin. One's early conditioning may have fixed notions of unworthiness, something wrong, not good enough, unacceptable, etc. in our minds. If one adds the notion of original sin, it can be a heavy burden. There is no such teaching in Buddhism, but most of the members of our community have been exposed to it because they are converts.

When Suzuki Roshi began to teach in America, he welcomed everyone who shared his enthusiasm for zazen. Zazen is just sitting. We had this



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huge enthusiasm and devotion to zazen, which is worthless As Sawaki Kodo Roshi says, "Until you get it through your thick skull that it [zazen] is good for nothing, then it's really good for nothing." When someone steps into Zen Center now, perhaps without even having heard the words, "taking refuge," they may have the direct experience of being welcomed just as they are. At least that is our effort and our intention. Some people find that the new freedom they experience releases an urge to assert that self which was so long denied. The precepts and guidelines for practice governing a person's conduct in the community may be opposed or resisted as restrictions on their new sense of personal freedom. Here, the discipline of daily zazen meditation—bowing, chanting sutras, communal work, following the schedule, interaction with fellow monks and regular discussions with the teacher—may in time enable monks to experience the underlying reality of the precepts; that their origin is not outside but within themselves; that they are expressions of how we really want to live so as not to cause harm, and not demands placed on them by some outside authority. In the same way, zazen may enable them to become more open, to discover for themselves the Buddhist wisdom teachings.

How do the teachings of Buddhism address feelings of unworthiness and alienation? First, in the teachings there are many references to our original wholeness. The ordination ceremony begins with the statement, "In faith that we are Buddha, we enter Buddha's way." In the very first Dharma talk I heard in the Zen Center, Suzuki Roshi said, "You are perfect just as you are." He said other things like: "You have everything you need." "You are already complete." "Just to be alive is enough." I knew I couldn't be the sole exception to all these assertions, and it became my koan to try to understand what he was talking about. Many of the old teaching stories of Zen have a similar tone:

- A monk named Hui Ch'ao asked Fa Yen the Teacher, "What is Buddha?" Fa Yen said, "You are Hui Ch'ao."
- Once when Pao Fu and Ch'ang Ch'ing were wandering in the mountains, Pao Fu pointed with his hand and said, "Right here is the summit of the mystic peak." Ch'ang Ch'ing said, "Indeed it is. What a pity!"
- Ta-mei asked Ma-tsu, "What is Buddha?" Ma-tsu said, "This very mind is Buddha."

The primary teaching of the Lotus Sutra is that the fundamental nature of all living beings is Buddha-nature, the nature of awakening. Throughout the scripture is the assurance that every being will be a Buddha some day. According to the Flower Ornament Scripture, when the Buddha was enlightened, he said, "I now see all sentient beings everywhere fully possess the wisdom and virtues of the enlightened ones. But because of false conceptions and attachments, they don't realize it."

This is just a sampling of teachings pointing at our original perfection. The last one calls our attention to the false conceptions and attachments that hinder our realization of it. Here is where our daily practice, study, and regular interactions with our fellow monks and our teacher can help us to see more clearly. With all these teachings, the examples of teachers and daily practice, how is it that the sense of personal unworthiness can persist?

In my own experience, I found it still potent when I was invited to serve as abbess after twenty-seven years of practice. I decided that I could not accept the invitation without first getting to the root of my need for acceptance from outside. I had to find what I thought was unacceptable about me. So I did some work with a friend, who was both a therapist and a Zen practitioner. With her help, I was finally able to fully embrace that whiny three-year-old girl who didn't want to be a boy, which she thought she was expected to be. Actually, she was expected to be. Let's be honest about it. I was able to accept myself as I am, in particular the female I am, which I had always rejected, even as I had been a militant feminist. The other thing I found out in that therapy was that as long as I could remember, I had had the assumption that I had to do something good in the world in order to deserve to be alive. I had been caught by the conceit that I can and should save the world in one fashion or another all my adult life, and also know the matching despair that I can't.

As for doing good, I now realize that for me, as for everyone, since we all possess the wisdom and compassion of the awakened ones, naturally we want to do good and not cause harm. It's not an intended

action. It's a natural action. All we need to do to deserve to be alive is to accept the gift of this life. Suzuki Roshi said, "A true human being, practicing true human nature, is our zazen." There are several aspects of our monastic life that may cause us to question our conditioned notion that we are unworthy. For example, it is our custom to stop, put our hands palm to palm, and bow as we pass one another in walking along a path, or down a corridor, or whenever we may meet. When we serve food, server and served bow to each other, and we all take turns serving and being served. Having this experience of bowing and being bowed to constantly reinforces the teaching that all are worthy of respect.

I think our ceremonial life addresses the judgment of oneself as unworthy. Pretty much everything we do—sitting zazen, eating, bowing, chanting, dokusan (that is the private interview with the abbot), walking meditation—all involve doing so in an erect, dignified posture. Our posture and deportment training all insist on an erect as opposed to a slouching posture. A slouching posture is often a condition of a mind that judges itself as unworthy. If the slouching becomes a habit, often the person will just feel unworthy all the time without being aware of it. My experience of Suzuki Roshi was of someone who totally respected everyone, who saw Buddha in everyone. Meeting in private interview, he invariably held everyone in positive regard. It has been my aspiration ever since to cultivate that possibility in myself. Alas, I often fall short. But I truly believe that this is the most potent transformative aspect of monastic practice. If the abbess or abbot can see Buddha in everyone and demonstrate it in actions of body, speech, and mind, the monks will learn from that example.

The first words spoken or actually chanted at the end of morning meditation as we prepare to put on Buddha's robe are:

Great robe of liberation!
Field far beyond form and emptiness,
Wearing the Tathatagata's teaching,
Freeing all beings.

At the end of the monthly repentance ceremony at the time of the full moon, the last words we chant together are, "To expound the Dharma with this body is foremost. Its virtue returns to the ocean of reality. It is unfathomable. We just accept it with respect and gratitude." If we take these vows to heart, we may finally be able to let go of feelings of unworthiness and alienation and realize our oneness with all that is. This direct realization of the nondual simultaneity of particularity and sameness is at the heart of Zen practice.

Continued in **Zenkei Blanche Hartman: Discussion
(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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