



BUDDHA'S DHARMA WITH ST. BENEDICT'S RULE

ESSAYS ON THE RULE

By A Single Thread | Zen Contemplatives

Lao DiZhi Shakya

Getsu San Ku Shin

Ho Getsu Sen Gen

Zhong Fen li Bao yu Di

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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

Listen child of God....

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

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.



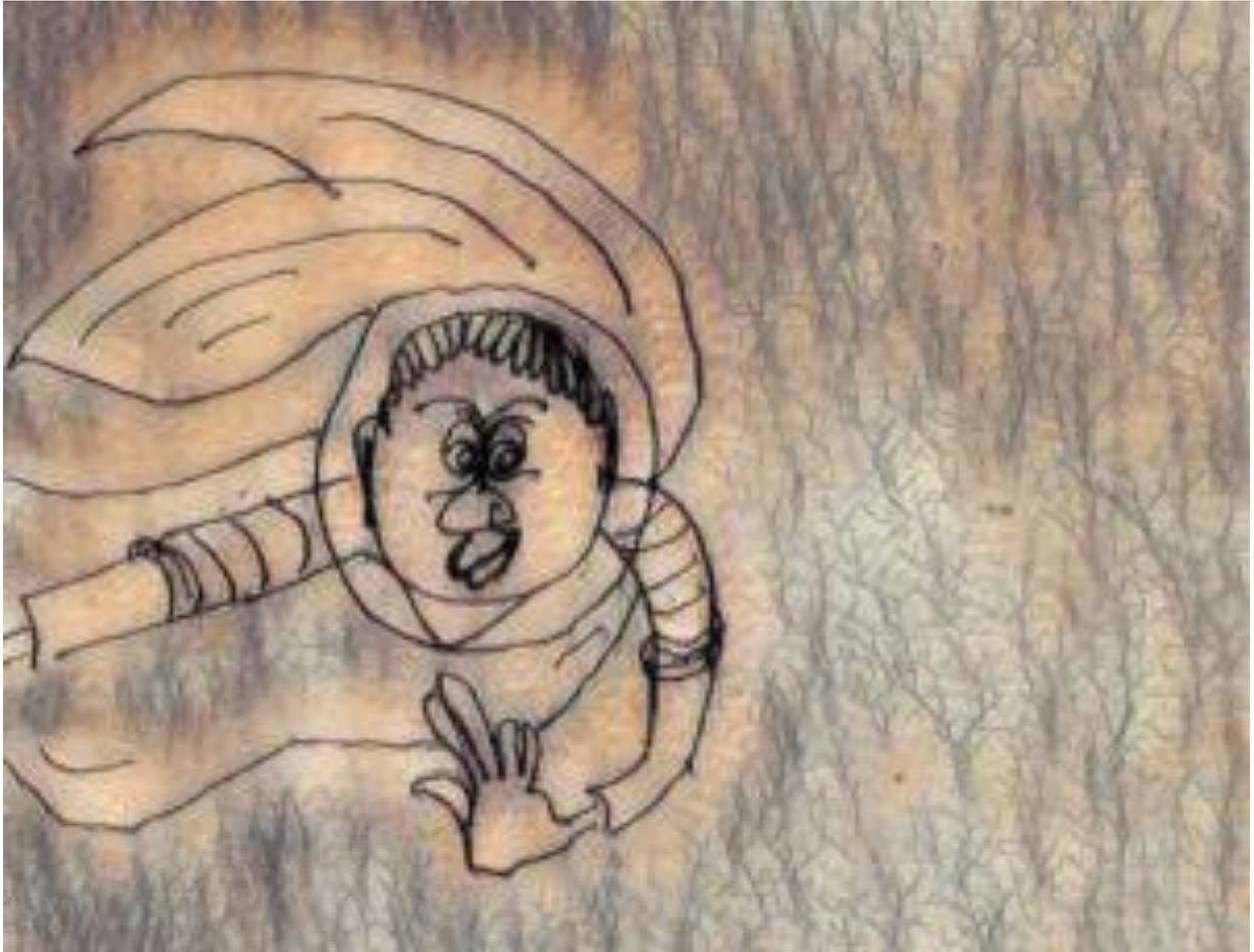
Then slowly, I began noticing that my irritation with her was now irritating me. Several days ago, I thought, what on earth is going on here? I began to reflect on it. When I ceased focusing on the two women and began to look within, at what I was doing, I saw clearly what I was up to. I was liking, 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...

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

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...

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

Benedict's Rule



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.





Aspire to Be Holy

No one should aspire to gain a reputation for holiness. First of all we must actually become holy then there would be some truth in having a reputation for it. The way to become holy is faithfully to fulfill God's commandments every day by loving chastity, by hating no one, by avoiding envy and hostile rivalry, by not becoming full of self but showing respect for our elders and love for those younger, by praying in the love of Christ for those who are hostile to us, by seeking reconciliation and peace before the sun goes down whenever we have a quarrel with another, and finally never despairing of the mercy of God.

Benedict's Rule



The longest Chapter in Benedicts Rule is Chapter 4 on Guidelines for Christian and Monastic Good Practice. In this chapter he is trying to help a group of people learn to live together. The chapter is full of good counsel: control your body with self discipline, refrain from speaking evil, don't be lazy, keep the reality of death always before your eyes, avoid empty talk, confess to God with real repentance. People in monasteries or in lay-life could be well-served to follow his counsel. There is a deep morality in what he is offering.

In Buddhist teaching moral conduct (*sila*), is a first step to having a calm mind. Without this, spiritual practice is impossible. And I think that this is what Benedict is getting at. In the section quoted above, he finally gets to holiness. He says that the only way to holiness is to follow God's commandments every day. Again, probably good advice...but here is the problem I see and the problem Benedict saw. We can gain a reputation for holiness, we can do all the right things and not be holy. A reputation can be faked or polished or enhanced. We can look good and still hold back. Our doing good can be self-serving, as in we want to look good.

Holiness comes from the word *whole*. Being holy takes whole-hearted effort. Not half-hearted effort or effort when we can get something in return. One can't do holiness, one must be holy.

Let me give you an example. When I was ten, we flew to New York City to attend my Jewish grandparent's 50th wedding anniversary. We stayed with my father's sister in the biggest house I had ever been in. The house had a formal dining room, more bedrooms and bathrooms that I could imagine and they had a live-in cook. The anniversary party was in March, the middle of Lent. My Mother, a practicing Catholic, was fasting. I remember getting up early one morning and going to look for her. I found her in the kitchen having a conversation with the cook while she ate a soft boiled egg and one piece of toast. She skipped the big breakfast we all had in the dining room. I also remember her coming into the house early on the one Sunday



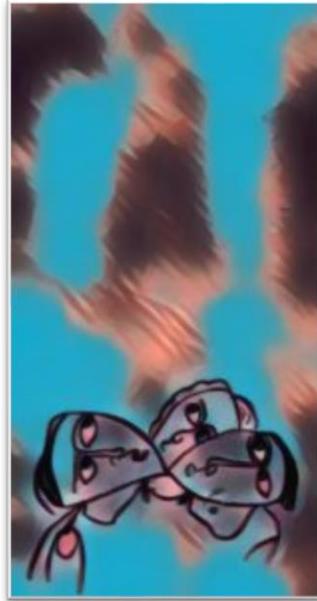
morning we were in New York. She called for a taxi to take her to Mass. She gave me, my sister and brother a dispensation, but she got herself to Mass.

In my memory, my Mother was wholly committed to practicing her catholic faith in what must have been a difficult situation. It seems to me that she lived and practiced her faith, not because she had to abide by all the rules, not because she was afraid of falling into mortal sin, not because she was trying to impress someone else. She just lived and practiced her faith. What is surprising to me, some sixty years later I remember these two scenes.

A lot happened the ten days we were in New York, a lot that I don't remember. I do remember seeing my Mother eating in the kitchen. What was it about this that I understood as a 10-year old? After reflecting on Benedict's quote, I would say it was *holiness*...not someone seeking a reputation for holiness, but the real thing.

Following commandments or precepts can help us find *wholeness*. This practice of following rules is one step on a long journey that can lead to holiness. When we experience wholeness in ourselves or see it in someone else we can know when it is honest, when it is without pretense. But if we are looking for holiness/wholeness as a destination, a result for following rules, we miss the boat. As I said, I always thought of my mother as a practicing Catholic. What I saw that morning in New Rochelle was a glimpse of my mother's practice...honest and without pretense. Honest, steadfast, without pretense were qualities she exemplified. And today as an adult....I see similar qualities of holiness exemplified here at St. Nick's in the faithful, steadfast, and never give up qualities of Sister Christina. When she's in town she's at daily Mass. Time and time again I have seen her steadfast, never give up practice of her faith. Neither of them aspired to become holy, they lived faithful to their path. This is what seems to be the message of Benedict....for all of us.





You Think You Are More Holy Than You Are

No one should aspire to gain a reputation for holiness. First of all, we must actually become holy; then there would be some truth in having a reputation for it. The way to become holy is faithfully to fulfill God's commandments every day by loving chastity, by hating no one, by avoiding envy and hostile rivalry, by not becoming full of self but showing due respect for our elders and love for those who are younger, by praying in the love of Christ for those who are hostile to us, by seeking reconciliation and peace before the sun goes down whenever we have a quarrel with another, and finally by never despairing of the mercy of God.

Benedict's Rule



While these essays were being composed, I received from my teacher, also the editor of the essay, a recommendation that I scrap the piece I had written to accompany this quote from Benedict and start over. Her advice was accompanied by thoughtful comments, the gist of which were, "You think you are more holy than you are."

My mood plummeted. How could I have been so self-important as to declare myself holy in any way? I did not like being someone whose ideas were seemingly rejected wholesale. My teacher suggested that my next attempt focus on my experience of being re-directed. I felt exposed and daunted by the task ahead. I wanted to disappear into a hole and not come out until spring.

Instead, I got out my knitting. I willed myself not to think, just to knit, focusing on each stitch as it made its way from one needle to the other, on the jeweled colors in the yarn as they emerged from the skein. After a few rows, it became clear that I was feeling humiliation, not humility. OK, I thought, I am caught in my ego. This clear-seeing was a little beacon of light in the darkness. I began to trust what was happening.

In the middle of the night, I awoke, already deep in contemplation about the essay. My first thought: Gratitude for the instructions, "You are still operating from your ego." More gratitude for the specific feedback that detailed how the first draft was riddled with self-absorption. I would have these teachings to work with in the weeks ahead. More gratitude for my teacher's mercy, her willingness to instruct me despite my failures. The gratitude was another beacon of light within the darkness I felt. Gradually, through the hours before dawn, more was seen and understood.

Spiritual practice is primarily a deconstruction project. We aspire to let go of everything, to know nothing. We write these essays to show the *how* of this deconstruction, the *how* of the



Way toward holiness. We want to be holy, yet the eyes we see with, the mind we think with are SELF absorbed. We need a way out of the familiar conceptual territory that locks us into the ego. Sometimes we have to get the rug pulled out, the road blocked. Having my essay returned with a “false holiness, start over” stamp was such an opportunity.

Past experience with this bottom-dropping-out state has provided me with some tolerance for it, though it remains excruciating in its emptiness, its dark and desolate-ness. It is uncomfortable there, where what one has always known and relied upon is gone. Could I continue to trust it?

Over the next few days, the sense of being without a compass returned several times. It was always unnerving. I wrote some paragraphs, then discarded them. Perhaps I needed help. One morning as I sat with my eyes glued to the computer screen, trying to find a way forward, my eyes came back to the words I had used to describe this lost place as “empty” and “desolate.” Something inside came together. This place isn't dark or desolate; it's just empty of my thinking about my ego. I embraced the emptiness, entered into it. It felt as though my head expanded as my mind too became spacious and open, but also settled and still.

The defeat of the ego is a precious gift. Both the Buddhist precepts and Christian commandments, as articulated by Benedict, above, are opportunities to hand the ego more moments of defeat. They are, when faithfully executed, a disengagement from our conceptual mind with its sticky feelings of right and wrong, good and bad; a clear map for how to pull the rug out.





Vow to Train

No one should aspire to gain a reputation for holiness. First of all, we must actually become holy then there would be some truth in having a reputation for it. The way to become holy is faithfully to fulfill God's commandments every day by loving chastity, by hating no one, by avoiding envy and hostile rivalry, by not becoming full of self but showing due respect for our elders and love for those who are younger, by praying in the love of Christ for those who are hostile to us, by seeking reconciliation and peace before the sun goes down whenever we have a quarrel with another, and finally by never despairing of the mercy of God.

Benedict's Rule



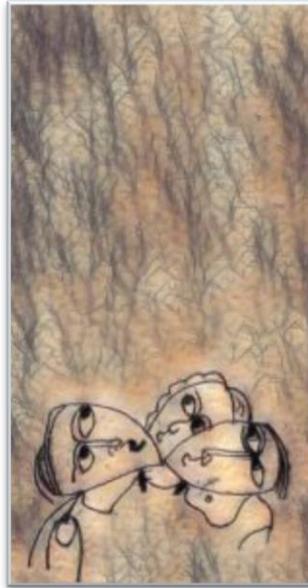
Eleven years ago I received the Buddhist Precepts and vowed to train to keep them for the rest of my life: to do good, to do no harm and to benefit all beings. These are expressed in actual practice as in: do not kill, steal, lie, misuse sexuality or intoxicate. I emphasize 'train' for to keep them perfectly is impossible. The Precepts are guides, instructions to inform my heart/mind on how to live daily. They lead me in the direction to 'wholly-ness'. I may lose sight of them but they are always there.

When I first read today's given passage of St. Benedict's Rule those precepts came to my mind and I set the two teachings side by side. Both ask the same generosity of disciples- to not harm, to do good and to care for all beings. I began to work the two together but decided to reread the whole of chapter 4. The chapter burst open. It took on an intimacy I had not seen before. It hit me that I am still so much the center of my life. I felt a sorrow with the flash of recognition that I hold so much back and give so little.

There also arose delight as I read the whole chapter. It was as if among all the guidelines, Divinity popped up and said, "Here I am!" and I was surprised into thinking, "Oh, I didn't see you at first." It was almost as if I met the Divine face to face.

I picked out lines in the chapter that particularly spoke to me and chose to reflect on one that challenges me. That one tells me to throw my failings down at the feet of the Divine. To do this is to take refuge in the mercy of God for, as St. Benedict reminds us, we are never to despair of that mercy. It's letting go of the failings which is the challenge; to just drop the selfish and harmful actions at those feet and not take them back to be gone over again and again; wallowing in guilt and refusing mercy. This letting go also touches my everyday living. I am practiced in defending myself and making excuses for my mistakes and negligence and of covering up my vulnerability. The challenge is to see it, to recognize it without blame and then, change.





It's Difficult to Be Faithful

No one should aspire to gain a reputation for holiness. First of all, we must actually become holy; then there would be some truth in having a reputation for it. The way to become holy is faithfully to fulfill God 's commandments every day by loving chastity, by hating no one, by avoiding envy and hostile rivalry, by not becoming full of self but showing due respect for our elders and love for those who are younger, by praying in the love of Christ for those who are hostile to us by seeking reconciliation and peace before the sun goes down whenever we have a quarrel with another, and finally by never despairing of the mercy of God.

Benedict's Rule



Benedict says the way to become holy is “faithfully to fulfill God’s commandments...” He goes on to list the commandments. For me, living faithfully is to study the precepts and follow them. I also use them as tools to help me study myself... how I get distracted with wanting things in this material world.

To be faithful is difficult. What makes faithfulness difficult: inattention, impatience, and my frustration that I cannot order my small self into being faithful.

One of the precepts says, “I vow not to praise self at the expense of others.” In my professional life, I praised myself over others most days. I often considered political opponents to be bad people rather than people with different interests or a different perspective. I developed a strong tendency to place myself above them. I train now to grind down this tendency.

Since last summer, I have built a trellis as recommended in an early chapter of *Benedict's Dharma*. A trellis supports a climbing plant as it grows skyward. I have built mine of daily meditation, silence, solitude, chanting, writing, and study. My teacher is the center post. The particular parts of my trellis may change. Whatever I choose just needs to help hold me upright and faithful. In this case, it needs to help me see my self-praise and restrain it. Each morning, I meditate, chant, write, and read in order to pay better attention. It has helped me notice that self-praise arises whenever I offer opinions. The thrust of my job was to offer opinions and convince others. This tendency is harmful in the context of my personal relationships. My opinions often denigrate others and elevate myself. The self-praise embedded in my opinions also leads to violating other precepts, like grasping to take credit, harboring ill will, and speaking without kindness or compassion. My daily morning work helps me more clearly see what is going on, so I can let go...in this case to let go of my need to offer my opinions.

I do the rituals and work with the precepts each morning because they are useful only if I spend time with them, soak in them. Later in the day, I copy the New Testament. I have become interested in Christ, primarily through art. His example of surrender and living without fear have



grabbed hold of me. Copying the New Testament each day also helps me to pay full attention. Christ repeatedly speaks of “moving through the world of men with one’s eyes on the kingdom of heaven.” His words are like looking into still, clear water. They let me glimpse what lies deeper. I also carry with me the image of an El Greco painting. It depicts the moment when Christ said farewell to his mother in anticipation of his betrayal and death on the cross. When I saw it, I understood surrender and began to move towards it.

My work with the Bible resulted from a knowing faith that has emerged in me... that I am more than this body, this mind, these thoughts, and this moment. I have not had this knowing faith very long. It is new. But it is there and it grows. I don’t force myself to think about it. It arose from my practice onto a trellis; it grows skyward.

With the trellis and the knowing faith that has taken root in my heart, may I let go of the non-essential and faithfully embrace the precepts.





Monastic Obedience

The first step on the way to humility is to obey an order without delaying for a moment. That is a response which comes easily to those who hold nothing dearer than Christ himself.

Benedict's Rule



In this chapter, Benedict is setting out rules that will allow a group of diverse people to live together, where authority is clearly defined and understood. In Benedict's monastic setting an order given by an Abbot should be obeyed, immediately...no questions asked. And to give a little encouragement, Benedict says that this should be easy for those who see that it is actually Christ who is giving the order. What could be easier? If we see the Abbot as a representative of Christ...of course we will quickly obey any order! If God was here, standing right in front of us we would be crazy not to do what God wants, right?

This is where I disagree with Benedict's encouragement. Directives directly from God don't always lead to obedience *without delaying for a moment*. Obedience seems to cause humans difficulty. We humans always have an opinion, a belief or a view that comes quickly to mind when we are given an order. We delay obeying and offer an argument as to why our opinion, belief or view is superior to the order we are given, even when the person giving the order has a legitimate right to give us the order and expect our compliance with the order. So we know we have a problem when another human gives us an order...what about when the order comes directly from God? One of the first stories in the Bible sets out just how difficult obedience is. Adam and Eve live, actually live, in the presence of God. God has only one commandment for them, do not eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. Doesn't seem too much to ask? They have everything they could possibly need and they are with God, in the very presence of God. We all know what happens; they disobey the order given by God. They held their beliefs, opinions and views as more important than God's command. Not wanting to obey an order has been with us for a very long time.

OK so what happens when I am in the midst of a decision to obey or not obey an order? If my ego self is in charge, my decision is based on greed...I want my own way. Hate...I



hate the person giving the order and do not want to obey. Or Delusion...I don't see how clouded my thinking is and ignore the order. One of these three poisons or all three of them move into my mind in milliseconds. So...I've received an order and before obeying even comes into my mind I find myself arguing or getting defensive. (NOTE: I'm not talking about being asked to do something immoral or illegal or harmful.) Over time I become better and better at recognizing the superiority of my views, opinions and beliefs and become less and less able to study what happens at the moment I am asked to do something.

Starting a practice of studying obedience usually means you have to think and analyze what happened after the fact. Your boss, your partner, your teacher asked you to do something and instead of doing what was ordered, you ended up in an argument leaving both sides disgruntled. Try to remember back to the moment you heard the command, request, order...which of these words did you hear? Did the very word that came to your mind make a difference in how you reacted? What self was trying to take control? Why did it want control? What would have happened if you just obeyed the command, the request, the order? What happens when you argue with the order?

This is how to study the self. Without this kind of work, studying how we behave, how we think, how we feel we are doomed to a *yes, but* reactive life. To practice obedience is to practice just saying yes. (Note: I'm not talking about an order to do something immoral, illegal or harmful.) Practice by just saying, *Yes*, and then just get on with doing what you were asked to do. This is spiritual practice. In the moment of choosing obedience there is freedom. The last line of the Rumi poem at the beginning of the book says,

“While intelligence considers options, I am somewhere lost in the wind. This is where obeying an order without delaying a moment can take you.”





Monastic Obedience

The first step on the way to humility is to obey an order without delaying for a moment. That is a response which comes easily to those who hold nothing dearer than Christ himself.

Benedict's Rule



In my professional life, I reacted negatively to the word obedience. It referred to persons having power over others and using it to impose their will on them....an imposed obedience.

In my spiritual work, three things have helped me understand obedience differently.

First, I have a teacher. Her teachings and the form of Zen which she asks that I follow have broadened my understanding of obedience. She asks that I adhere to form and ritual for services in the zendo, for participating in retreats, for meetings with her, and for my training. She does not make demands or promises. She does offer suggestions. She stresses that I should not *believe* what she says.... that this is my practice and I should investigate for myself. She often states she can only point in a direction. During individual meetings, she asks questions and offers observations, teachings and suggestions about how to practice. She is warm but does not coddle. She frequently says that this practice is not for everyone....do it or don't, it is up to me. The obedience I practice with her is a surrendering to her teaching and what is in my heart. It rests on respect, a willingness to share in her truth and to investigate it for myself. It supports me, but it challenges me to let go of clinging to my old habits, thinking and desires and instead asks that I surrender to the precepts.

Secondly, some say the only rule of Zen is, *to begin and continue*. It is a rule I want to obey. I had valued *continuing* in my professional life. I now practice each morning to reflect on it. I draw strength from it when I am stymied or feel defeated. It reminds me that the way forward is linked to my own effort and attention. It triggers me to remember to obey other directives such as to pay attention to just what is in front of me, to restrain myself from being carried off by my thinking, and to ask for help. Obeying such instructions, I am better able to focus on what is going on within me instead of getting caught up in reacting to that which surrounds me.

Finally, my willingness to obey is strengthened by moments when I have unexpectedly reacted to some event from some place deep, absent my thinking and consideration and



uncharacteristic of my small self. This happened in 2012, when a security guard in Florida shot and killed a young man. In the opinion of many, including me, the killing was unjustified. Many demanded charges be brought. I suddenly became uncontrollably grief stricken for the man who did the shooting. I did not reason my way to this reaction. I did not have words to talk about it. It just arose in me. My heart opened in a way that I had never experienced.

Upon reflection and discussion with my teacher, I believe my reaction was a result of all that is my practice and evidence of a knowing faith that has emerged in me. Buddhists refer to it with words such as the unborn, undying, unending or mystery. Other religions refer to God. I do not know what to call it. It is something in me and beyond me that opened my heart at that moment in a way that nothing else has. When it happened, it made me want to obey all that this work asks of me.





Monastic Obedience

The first step on the way to humility is to obey an order without delaying for a moment. That is a response which comes easily to those who hold nothing dearer than Christ himself.

Benedict's Rule



In this passage from his Rule, Benedict instructs monks to aspire toward humility. Obedience paves the way, and love of Christ is fuel for the journey.

To compare and contrast this Christian message with Zen, we can take a look at an ancient Zen chant

“To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.”

Students of Zen aspire to be actualized by myriad things. Forgetting the self paves the way, and studying the self is fuel for the journey.

To be “actualized by myriad things” is to be so free of desire that we can be in the world without doing harm to anything or anyone, wanting nothing for ourselves, needing nothing from others. No pushing, no grasping, no knowing. No suffering. Everything just as it is. Allowing the great unfolding of time and space and myriad things to proceed, unhindered by our tiny, inconsequential minds, Awake to it all.

You might find that as you read, or hear, these words, you have reactions. Perhaps you feel judgment, confusion or disbelief. Maybe it's inspiration or a disconnect you feel. Whatever your reaction, the path is to recognize these reactions and examine them. More than obedience to the way, Buddhists aspire to study our responses to the Way, and to life as it is, and find out for ourselves.

*“Turn around the light to shine within...” says another Zen chant,
“then just return.”*

Return, that is, back to reading this essay, back to living your life. Then, shine the light again on your actions and reactions, over and over, bringing the light of awareness to body, speech and mind.

At the Art Institute in Chicago is a huge stone Buddha that I visit when I am there. He exudes a dynamic but restful ease as he sits in silent meditation. He concentrates deeply to hold



everything he feels and thinks in his awareness. He receives it all within the embrace of his open, allowing presence. Nothing is excluded. Nothing is grasped.

This iconic Buddha, and the one on my altar, remind me to continually recognize that my thoughts and feelings become my suffering. My pain is also my human condition. I practice holding it with an open heart. And so, I study myself, shining the light of my awareness, being Buddha. This Buddha, this awareness of all that is present, is what I most dearly love. It is fuel for my journey toward forgetting the self.

When we shine the light within, we look to see if what Buddha taught is true; that our pride and greed, our emotionality and the constant stream of thoughts are born of an identity. We have cultivated a person who we think is solid, but this person is only in our mind. We come to know Buddha's rest and ease, the result when we stop believing in the self we thought we were.

*"It's no use to seek the truth,
just let false views cease."*

With consistent self-study and the help of a teacher, we grow in our ability to forget this false self. We learn not to construct another identity, not to replace pride with humility, anger with passivity, or greed with indifference.

We learn the Buddha way, to not attach to any fixed views, but to walk through the world with hearts and minds open, responsive, flexible, and authentic, at one with the Buddha in everyone and everything. It includes obedience and goes beyond it.





Monastic Obedience

The first step on the way to humility is to obey an order without delaying for a moment. That is a response which comes easily to those who hold nothing dearer than Christ himself.

Benedict's Rule



Forty five years ago I visited with Gerry, a young gifted sculptor. His mentor was an internationally known older artist who was very challenging to work with. I asked Gerry if it was difficult to work with this man. He said he didn't care how hard it was. He just wanted to learn all he could learn.

Joseph Goldstein writes something similar in *Benedict's Dharma*. He speaks of his teacher who required his students to largely surrender to his style and instructions. The teacher saw that his role was to help awaken the student and he had no interest in debating or pleasing the student. Joseph told himself, "I'm not here to argue, I'm here to learn."

Both these students listened and obeyed an inner pull and entrusted themselves to a guiding teacher. It was not a mindless submission to another but a conscious choice to listen and to receive from someone who was wise. They exemplify what I strive to be about in my training. When I entrust myself to my teacher I leave the comfortable and familiar and take a leap into the unknown and the unknown is in my very self. I never know how I am going to be brought face to face with my ego. The teacher points out the obstacles that trip me up. It may be a word that is hard to hear. But something changes in me as I open myself to my teacher's instruction and wisdom. It is as if she holds open the door and steps aside and if I dare to walk through that door I will find the Divine.

Today I encountered her unexpectedly. During this Lent as part of my training I have committed myself to study, meditation and writing. I say no to just about everything else and am living pretty close to being a hermit. This morning I received an invitation to be part of an enterprise that very much interests me. I felt torn because I really wanted to say yes to this work but was conscious of my Lenten commitment. I happened to pick up a book and a scrap of paper fell out. Its message was written years ago by my teacher during some retreat or other. I don't remember when or where. The note said, "Don't let work overshadow sitting and walking. It's



tempting, I know.” I listened. It was just enough to remind what I am about. I said no to the request.

When I first read today's quote where St. Benedict says to obey without delay I experienced resistance. It felt as though I was being told to be docile and submissive. I had to go beyond those few words to what he is really saying. He is talking about the love one has for the Beloved and the willingness to do anything for that Love. I believe that is what my teacher wants, for this student to go beyond the small self and to “hold nothing dearer than Christ himself.





Advice for Silence

In a monastery we ought to follow the advice of the psalm which says: I have resolved to keep watch over my ways so I may not sin with my tongue. I am guarded about the ways I speak and have accepted silence in humility, refraining even from words that are good.

Benedict's Rule



Several years ago I attended a several day silent Zen retreat. On the drive back home, I commented to the people in the car that I thought it had been a particularly noisy retreat with lots of talking. The people in the car disagreed saying that they felt it was a particularly silent retreat. Needless to say, these comments left me puzzled. Not wanting to argue, I started looking at why I thought the retreat was so noisy. If what the people in the car observed about the retreat was accurate, what was I hearing? Where was the talking, I kept hearing, coming from? It took quite awhile and a fair amount of concentrated effort for me to finally understand that the talking I heard at the retreat was in my own head. The talking, I thought I was hearing, was in my head. My thoughts were making so much noise I believed it was other people.

A basic Buddhist teaching is: To study the Buddha way is to study the self. If it hadn't been for the quiet, silent setting of a retreat, I wouldn't have even noticed my thoughts. My realization about my noisy thoughts opened a way for me to study myself.

I've always seen myself as a quiet person. I was comfortable with long stretches of silence. I once drove from Maine to Colorado and back in a car with no radio. I now see that this image of myself tricked me. I may in fact be a quiet person, but the continual roar of thought meant I really wasn't in silence. I was still in the midst of the noise of the world. I mistook not talking with knowing myself. It wasn't enough to just be aware of all the thoughts that continually circulated in my mind I wanted to learn more about the self that needed all the thoughts

One meditation instruction is to see your thoughts come and go like soap bubbles. Let them just float through your mind. Just see your thoughts and don't grab them. Let them just float in and out. This instruction doesn't work for me. My thoughts don't come as individual thoughts. They are moving rivers, whole novels, intricate plans, a narrative that never turns off. In Chapter Six, Benedict encourages us to guard the way you speak. This is how one begins to learn to cherish silence. What I've learned about myself is that before I can guard my speech, I



need to guard the way I think. There are two practices that I have learned and that I continually work with. The first is a practice of memorization. I memorize Buddhist chants. When I notice my thoughts trying to take over, I mentally substitute my racing thoughts or anxious thoughts or planning thoughts or fixing thoughts or remembering thoughts or *should-have-done* thoughts with a chant. I do this over and over throughout the day. When I am able to do this substitution, I become aware that I am not my thoughts.

The second practice is concentration. I have learned that I need time in a day to do concentrated work. I'd like to say I can concentrate on any task, but I'm not that practiced. Right now I am hand sewing a queen-size patchwork quilt. I try to work on it a couple of hours each day. When I make the effort to engage in this concentrated activity, I can feel my mind settling. This settling isn't immediate. It takes time to get settled into the rhythm of sewing. And for me when I am in the rhythm of the sewing the thoughts slow down and I can focus on the needle going into the cloth and coming out again, over and over. This practice of concentration carries over into the rest of my day. Over and over again I notice that I am not my thoughts.

To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. When my mind is quiet I can begin to find...the vast inconceivable self that can't be faced or turned away from...the silent source that is clear and bright...and that in each moments thought a lotus flower blooms and each lotus flower contains a Buddha.





Cherishing Silence

In a monastery we ought to follow the advice of the psalm which says: I have resolved to keep watch over my ways so that I may not sin with my tongue. I am guarded about the way I speak and have accepted silence in humility, refraining from even words that are good.

Benedict's Rule



Benedict adds, "it is written in scripture that one who never stops talking cannot avoid falling into sin." I hold a similar view. When I feel the desire to talk, which is often, I usually want something for my small self. I wish to appear in some way that satisfies the needs of my ego. This is the case even when the words are "good" as Benedict says. When I talk less, when I move towards silence, it helps me restrain my desire to be seen as this or that. Sister Wendy Beckett says less talk creates more opportunity to focus on one's personal truth. She adds,

"Truth is what you're meant to be, but haven't yet become.... what God meant you to be, all of your qualities fulfilled, no dead sections that you are afraid to work with within you, no areas of negligence that you just didn't bother to take seriously."

I meditate in silence each morning and observe silence at other times. The silent periods help me turn from the distractions of everyday life. When in silence, I can observe and reflect upon what arises, my reactions, and my desires for the small self. More awareness helps me in my effort to be faithful to the precepts.

I live in a monastic householder setting. I practice in my home with another monk in training, and where I share in the tasks of running a household. It can be difficult to maintain my attention.

These are some things I do to help with that.

First, I try to pay attention to just what is in front of me. When I do, I am less distracted by what swirls around me. When I lose my attention, I drift. It helps me refocus if I stop and chant. A favorite is "Little thoughts, subtle thoughts, when followed, stir up the heart."

I practice to restrain myself from offering opinions. This is very difficult for me. The opinions I offer are based on my likes, dislikes and judgments. I offer them from the



belief that I know. When I throw them around, the precepts vanish. I am calmer and less distracted when I speak less about what I think I know.

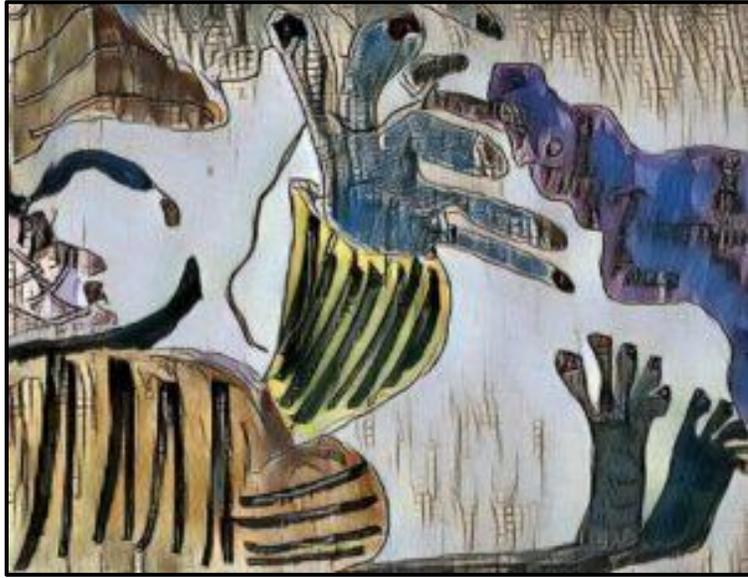
I look at art in silence. I sit with one or two paintings at a time. Sister Wendy Beckett advises “to let the work speak without setting up preconditions, without defending the fragility of your ego, because works of art can teach us things about ourselves we would rather not know.”

The practice helps me focus my attention on what matters.

I write. I work with whatever I have written to strip away what is untrue, misleading or my own projection. I once wrote a poem based on a photo of indigenous women who had suffered torture and rape. The image showed them sitting in a courtroom, heads covered, confronting their perpetrators. After a rewrite, my teacher would remind me to stop projecting onto the photo, see what was actually there, and write about it. Wonderful training that I do in silence.

Finally, I train to avoid chit chat. I need to train because it is a strong tendency of mine. It leads me to gossip and this brings in my prejudices. Even so-called “good” chit chat distracts me. My friend recently used the word “passive” in describing Buddhism. I bristled, but said nothing. It irritated me for several days. Reflecting upon it, I realized that I regarded “passive” to be bad, even though it is neither good nor bad. Chit chat distracts and wastes precious time.





Practice of Silence

In a monastery we ought to follow the advice of the psalm which says: I have resolved to keep watch over my ways so I may not sin with my tongue. I am guarded about the ways I speak and have accepted silence in humility, refraining even from words that are good.

Benedict's Rule



“The Good Place” is a Netflix comedy that takes a hilarious look at the afterlife designed for “good people.” It’s cast of funny characters includes a silent Buddhist monk who *never* says a word. Though this is exaggeration for the sake of a laugh, it reflects a truism about Buddhism: Silence is the name of this game.

Buddhists, however, do not aspire to be zombies. A spiritual practice of silence is not about shutting down. As Benedict suggests, and Buddhists also practice, silence has spiritual value on two levels. As we refrain from sinning with our tongues, our minds and hearts are freed to deepen our connection to the greatest, word-less truths. Buddhist practice begins as a practice of silence within the stillness of meditation, full minutes of silence and stillness, slowly strung together into longer stretches. Eventually one enters the meditation retreat experience of several full days of silence, including no eye contact, no speaking to other retreatants, no conversation at meal-time, no contact with anyone outside the retreat. It was excruciating to not extend even a word of greeting to others in passing, to share a meal with others and not converse, to not discuss the wonder of all that I was experiencing in my practice with family and friends. Silence was a much more difficult practice than hours of sitting on a hard cushion in a drafty zendo. Speech is a medium through which we experience being part of a group. The call and response we have with each other is like bird song, giving others of our species clues about who we are and how we are, projecting our identities into the larger world. It can be difficult to see birds in the wild, easiest to know them through hearing their songs. This too is rather like people. Our true selves are hidden, only our noisy facades are identifiable.

Eventually I could see that as I discussed my practice with others, I was bragging, thrusting an identity out into the world. Eventually I saw that my tendency to compulsively connect with friends and family often reflected thinly veiled neediness that



I look to others to assuage. I felt the anguish of letting loose with heated words, flung like arrows, meant to hurt.

Such failures are a necessary condition in this process of spiritual growth. In failing to remain silent, I show myself to myself. I squarely face my craving for control, one-up-ness, esteem, a lessening of the anxiety that I will be a lone bird, calling in vain for others of the species.

The fear and anger that drives so much of my speech began to lessen as I could feel my truest connection, the only relationship that I will follow into eternity. This love is not for the other birds, with whom my relationships will always be transient. As I don't speak, I find I can turn my heart toward the undying, unchanging Source that lies beyond the human community we presently inhabit (but not for long). Growing in my love of the Source, I let go of needing others to affirm me. I find I feel deeper love for everyone and everything and am driven less by needing something for myself.

By refraining even from words that are good we grow our ability to lean into and trust silence and stillness over thoughts and feelings generated by craving. Receptivity takes the place of assertiveness; an agitated mind is replaced with an open heart. We fly high above the tree tops, singing to all of our true colors.





Stop!

In a monastery we ought to follow the advice of the psalm which says: I have resolved to keep watch over my ways so that I may not sin with my tongue. I am guarded about the way I speak and have accepted silence in humility, refraining even from words that are good.

Benedict's Rule



I wrote the essay for this week and finished it before it was even due. I sent it off to my teacher knowing it would come back with comments and suggestions of areas that need attention. I would have plenty of time to add or subtract or elucidate. It was an OK essay. My teacher even said it was “a fine teaching”. All right, I thought. I can follow up on suggestions made. Then I reread her response. I had missed the first sentence. It read, I “would like you to rewrite it.” I didn't say what came to my mind for, as the Psalm says, “I have resolved to keep watch over my ways so that I may not sin with my tongue.” Then I laughed. Then I felt frustrated and mad. “Get real,” she wrote. I thought I WAS real. What's real? I thought. Am I that out of touch with myself?

Writing these essays is tough, I tell myself. One a week! I go through my litany of protestations. Anxiety arises. I talk some more. What if nothing will come? What if I won't be able to express myself well? Where is my focus? Why is getting my thoughts together like herding cats? Why am I not able to understand what my teacher is asking? I'm just don't seem to be able to get it right! I wish I had more of a well ordered left brain, a 1, 2, 3 brain! Why can't I get it right!

Then I said,

STOP!

At that moment I received a phone call. Jo, one of our residents died. Her Procession of Honor would be at 8:30 this morning. I came to my senses. Really! What does anything matter? What does getting something RIGHT matter? What does having an excellent essay matter? What Jo has just done matters. That's what's real. Everything else is a blip. We sang Jo out in company with her husband, nine kids and a crowd of residents. Sang her out the door on “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”.

And the sweet chariot carrying what wasn't Jo, slowly drove away.

...who never stops talking cannot avoid falling into a pit”.



That line is further down on the page of today's quote. It reads 'sin' but I changed 'sin' to 'pit' for 'pit' feels more like what I get into with my self-talk. The image works better. It's a dark place inside, a place of doubt and fear. It's full of the self that I look to for answers and find none. Self-talk throws me into my pit because I believe it.

Except when someone like Jo comes along and says look up.

My teacher once said, "Stop a word with a word." I think the word is STOP.





The Koan of Humility

*As to pursuing our own will we are warned against that when scripture says to us:
Turn away from your desires; and in the Lord's Prayer itself we pray that his will
may be brought to fulfillment in us.*

Benedict's Rule



In this section Benedict cautions us to turn away from our own desires, as a way to bring God's will to fulfillment. This is very Buddhist. Following our own desires causes suffering every time. The problem is the *me*; the self trying to be in charge, to run the show. Let me give an example of this from a Buddhist view.

For the past fifty-seven years I have off-and-on worked on what I call "*The Nun's Story*" koan. A koan is a paradoxical story that cannot be understood using logical reasoning. It is used in Buddhist practice to help a student break-free from conditioned thinking. A koan is not something that can be thought out. One might say, working with a koan is to invite an experience of seeing clearly.

My koan arose from seeing the movie *The Nun's Story*. There is a scene that is the heart of the koan. Sister Luke, Audrey Hepburn, is studying at what looks like a lab table. She is studying for a test on tropical diseases. The nun who gets the highest score will be sent to nurse at a hospital in the Belgian Congo. As Sr. Luke studies a nun, senior to her, comes and says to her: "As a practice of humility, you should fail the exam." In addition Sr. Luke is told that if she fails an older more humble nun will then have the highest score and will be able to return to the Congo.

I play this scene over and over in my mind. I am of course Sr. Luke. My ego has tried for years to "understand" the scene. I challenge the assertion that failing a test is an act of humility. In my role as Sr. Luke I've tried over and over to work out what is the right thing to do. Is failing really practicing humility? Is it self-pride that makes me want to pass with flying colors? Do I have what it takes to make this humble gesture? Do I put the older nun's desires before my own? What right does someone have to ask me to fail? In this fantasy I calculate what I might do and play-out the consequences for each of my make-believe decisions. And perhaps what I have been doing is rehearsing for a time in my life where this type of conflict might arise. Will I choose to be humble or will I choose to be proud?



As you can hopefully see my focus on choosing and on their being a right answer is why I made no progress in working with this koan. I was thinking, trying to reason out the best response, ever hopeful that my ego would finally make the right/good/holy/humble choice and I wouldn't make the wrong/bad/arrogant choice. It was try, try, try again. The on-going debate in my head held me captive but I couldn't see I was caught.

As I have worked for hours writing and re-writing this reflection something within me broke open. I knew this koan from a different place. The catalyst was remembering a line I had memorized from a Buddhist chant:

May I know in my heart that the results of my actions can't be avoided and cultivate virtue as I give up delusion.

I picture Sr. Luke saying this chant. What a difference. The focus shifts from her wanting to do the right/good thing to knowing, at that moment, that there are consequences for whatever she does. There are consequences to passing the test and there are consequences for failing the test. At the moment of taking action Sr. Luke does not know what the result of her action will be. Either way she will ride the waves of her karma.

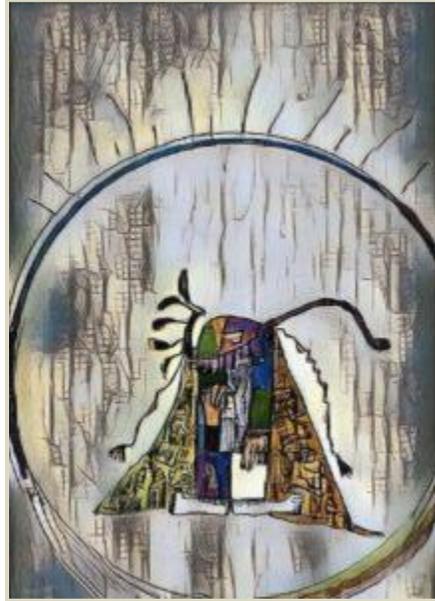
My pretending to be Sr. Luke kept me in a frozen, never taking action delusion; I was trapping myself in an ego-fantasy. When I sat down to write about this koan, I took action; there was split second opening with no words to explain it. I wasn't a make-believe Sr. Luke any more. The koan was about me, right here, right now sitting at a computer typing words. I knew, really knew *that the results of my actions can't be avoided*.

Ok, I had a seeing-through realization with my koan, but what next? Well, go back to Benedict: *Turn away from your own desires*. How do I or we do this? A first step is to study yourself. Get to know what your ego is up to. Really watch what your ego does do moment by moment all day long. Watch the judging, criticizing, pretending. Watch your emotions. Watch what you are looking at or who you are listening to. As we watch and study ourselves we can to



learn to see how our actions stem from our own desires. As we continue to study, (it is life-long) we will be able to catch ourselves and turn away from actions coming from our desire. But, even as we turn away from our desires, we must remember that we do not know what the result of any action will be. This is why we commit to tirelessly studying ourselves; this is practice.





Blocked by Desires?

Practice Being Silent

*As to pursuing our own will we are warned against that when scripture says to us:
Turn away from your desires; and in the Lord's Prayer itself we pray that his will
may be brought to fulfillment in us.*

Benedict's Rule



Benedict advises to turn away from our desires. He says, "Scripture teaches us that anyone who claims a high position will be brought low and anyone who is modest in self-appraisal will be lifted up."

For St. Benedict, pursuing prideful desires may make you exalted for a moment, but it will be the humble, those who surrender to God, who will be exalted eternally. For me, living with humility means surrendering to the precepts and the knowing faith I have uncovered in myself.

I continue to examine silence in today's reflection because practicing silence and living with humility are inextricably linked. Also, my teacher has pointed me in this direction. In my reflection last week, I wrote about various things I *do* to move towards more silence, to incorporate it into my daily practice. Those activities are useful. I do them, though, because it made sense to me after much consideration. They are born mostly from my mind, my intellect. They reveal I am trying to get my arms around silence and make it happen. This is not a bad thing, but I have much more to do. I do not yet long for silence as a way to uncover more, to deepen my knowing faith.

Why not?

Because I do not wish to surrender everything to spiritual work. I am blocked because I still have strong desires for my small self. When Christ said give up everything and follow me, he meant *everything*. I do not want to give up looking good, especially to those I love. It is vanity that I have been aware of for a long time. But, I have not grasped how important it is to me or how it distances me from the precepts. As Benedict might say, I want to be exalted for a moment. My desire to look good, to be exalted for a moment reveals a clinging to my own existence. I am unable to accept the impermanence of all things, especially myself. This is ignorance and delusion. Buddha said one of the three marks of existence is impermanence. It is indisputable, but so hard to accept. So, I cling to my existence. I strive to



be *somebody* that someone else can love. And I perform in order to get it. I use my words, actions, and conversation with others.

I will be unable to live with humility, to surrender to the precepts, unless I can let go of my desire to look good. There are three things I can do to start.

First, bring greater attention and effort to being silent....and restraint.... followed by investigation and contemplation. Roll up my sleeves.

Second, continue to work with my teacher. Her words drew sharp attention to this tendency and pointed me in this direction.

Third, continue my daily practice of copying the Bible. Christ makes it clear through his parables and teachings to his disciples that we must turn our attention to the kingdom of heaven in making our way through the world of men. This helps me so much to focus on the *why* of what I am doing.

In St. Luke, Chapter 17, verses 20-21, Christ is asked about the kingdom of God. *"And being asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come? he answered them and said: The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say: Behold here or behold there. For lo, the kingdom of God is within you."*

If I am to live with humility, my work lies within, in the silence.





Inspired by the Open Truth of the Sky

As to pursuing our own will we are warned against that when scripture says to us: Turn away from your desires; and in the Lord's Prayer itself we pray that his will may be brought to fulfillment in us.

Benedict's Rule



At the Adult Enrichment Group meeting several Sundays ago at St. Nicks Catholic Church, I found myself immersed in a compelling inter-faith dialogue. Buddhists and Catholics gathered to listen to each other and test our understandings of faith in light of the views of those from another tradition.

It was a powerful experience for me, both the respect I felt from my Catholic peers, and the rigor of the debate between us. Though our discussion was over before real differences could be deeply probed, those differences were not insignificant. I felt inspired to be a rigorous student of the Way, to be constantly honing my knowledge and understanding, not resting on easy assumptions about Buddhism, so that in conversation with others I could accurately represent the heart of the Buddha's teachings to those who are open and listening, as were the participants that day. It felt important to do this, not only for my own edification, but so that this thing we call God, this thing we circle and circle, trying to find our way to, could be better known by all of us. So, I left St. Nick's that day with a better sense of some of Buddhism's differences with Christianity, but also inspired by the deep and real similarities in our traditions, despite differences of language, tone, history, culture. I have felt that same feeling throughout this process of reading and reflecting upon Benedict's Rule. That it calls me constantly to reach more deeply inside myself to find words that pierce MY heart, whichever tradition they may arise from. I am called by this process not to rest in my desires for easy solutions, for quick dismissals of another's tradition, in fact, not to reject in any way this other facet of spiritual life called Christianity. I am called to keep my heart open not to my will, or to my most visceral responses to differences, but to Truth.

I was raised a Lutheran but my faith, tested in adolescence, did not hold. I rejected Christianity, I rejected God for many years. In my youthful arrogance, I divided the world into right and wrong....and.... the church was wrong. But more centrally, there was little in the church's teachings that I felt faithful toward. My heart was not in it.



Because Buddhism was, to my beginner's mind, very much NOT like Christianity, I could open to these teachings and put my resistance toward religion aside. As my love for the Buddha grew, and I would have moments of sudden insight into the heart of the teachings, I would be brought back to the words of liturgy or hymns I sang or chanted on Sundays at Our Savior's Lutheran Church. It was with surprise and joy that I welcomed these bits of my Christian past back into my consciousness. Who knew THAT was still in me?!

And yet.....and yet, the use of the word "God" coming from my teacher, this I choked on. I wanted to keep God out of MY spiritual life. It was best to stay wrapped in Buddhist teachings, holding the dharma close, keeping the rest of religion at bay. It felt clearer, it had more integrity in my mind, to remain in the purity of THIS way.

What I could not dismiss was the notion put forward by my teacher that *all* religions were speaking, ultimately, of the same thing. This I could neither accept or reject, as I had no experience at all of that which she described. Then this, too, changed. A veil was lifted from my eyes, and I entered a circle of bright light where differing notions of the Way have no purchase. I felt divinity itself moving through me, and the possibility of surrender to Absolute truth began to live as a possibility in my heart.

Looking back over the 50 years that have led me to the life of a monk, I now realize that I was never far from That which has guided me here. I was unable to open to this guidance for all those years. My drive, ambition and pride stood in for the Divine as my compass. It has only been as a result of turning away from ego-based desires, often with great trepidation, and only because I felt my teacher at my side, that I was shown the way to go home, where my heart has so long yearned to go.

It is with deep gratitude that I have entered into this process of studying Benedict's Rule and coming to know it through the lens of Buddhist interpretations. I appreciate the imperative to honor Benedict's wisdom while also leaving room for the possibility that I may not agree. It



requires a rigorous commitment to truth, to appreciate the meanings I hear in the Benedictine tradition, whose language and culture are not my own, and to let them into my heart anyway. To respect them as if St. Benedict himself were sitting just behind me, paper cup of coffee in hand, at the Sunday morning meeting of St. Nick's Adult Enrichment Group.

And for us to remember that the Buddha is sitting in the room, robes tightly wrapped around him (he isn't used to February's chill) and that he is smiling at Benedict, across the heads of people deeply engaged in serious debate, many hearts yearning to see Truth, opening to love in true humility.





The Proof is in the Pudding

As to pursuing our own will we are warned against that when scripture says to us: Turn away from your desires; and in the Lord's Prayer itself we pray that his will may be brought to fulfillment in us.

Benedict's Rule



Not long ago my teacher brought home to me in no uncertain terms my resistance to her as teacher and my looking upon her corrections as an intrusion, something to be angry about rather than seeing it as a Treasure of the Dharma. I was dismayed. I had not been aware of it at all and didn't get it. I was disparaging the Treasure? Don't I have the teachings in my home from bathroom to kitchen? It took some time before I could see the truth. Then it hit me on the head like a brick. I understood. All day I stared at this new realization and as can happen a memory came to illustrate what I needed to learn.

Some years back, my community was planning to celebrate a significant occasion. It was a big deal. I was part of the planning group. Someone had the bright idea that we should put on a production that would tell our story— with giant puppets. I thought it was crazy. Too much work and I knew I would be heavily involved. I was not enthusiastic at all. I wanted a more simple, easy way to celebrate. I resisted and did my best to discourage it.

Then one morning I had a 'vision' so to speak. I saw what this whole thing could look like, what its message could be. It was as clear as day. I was so energized by what I understood that immediately I wrote the rest of the gang and told my story. We were on. We hired the artistic director of the puppet theater to lead us. We built our story out of fact and fancy. Volunteers came out of the woodwork. We dropped everything else and every day for the month of January we planned, drew, cut, sawed, sewed, sanded, nailed, hammered, and painted. Our teacher guided and taught. The story grew and we grew. We finished the work and put it all to bed until practice time in summer. A month of practice and honing. We let it burst open in August for community and neighborhood. We and the giant puppets told our story with history, music, drama, dance and twelve foot puppets, a lively, prayerful, playful kind of liturgy that in subtle ways lives on.



It lives on for me today for the memory of that messy colorful building of a play together deepens my understanding of the Three Treasures; the Teacher, the Teaching, the unique Communities in my life, living and dead.

It lives on for me today for it reminds me of how I can prevent something beautiful from happening when I hang onto my stingy desires and reject what seems too difficult but is actually so full of promise.

It lives on for me today as I remember the 'vision' of what could be and how my resistance turned into wholehearted giving of self.

Benedict reminds us of the psalm that tells us to turn away from our desires. It's a daily dying to self, a discipline, a practice that helps open the way to know our True Desire. Sometimes it takes a whack on the head but that True Desire, that Root Desire is absolutely necessary. It's the desire for the One for whom one gives everything.





The Power of Just Do It

All the utensils of the monastery and in fact everything that belongs to the monastery should be cared for as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar.

Benedict's Rule



Many years ago, I worked for a manufacturing company and taught Lean 6-Sigma. The aim of Lean 6-Sigma was to get rank and file employees to think differently about their day-to-day work. The company hoped this training would improve efficiency, productivity and ultimately profits. The company wanted results.

Basically this Lean 6-Sigma is a method for sorting, cleaning, and organizing stuff. It was an attempt to teach employees to take care of their workplace (monastery). The program had limited success. One of the limitations was that it required people to change for the benefit of the company which did not translate easily as a benefit for the employee. On the contrary, it cost the employee since it required a great deal more work.

Benedict asks his monks to care for the utensils in the monastery as if they were the *sacred vessels of the altar*. In essence telling them to care for the stuff of the monastery as if they were the utensils that had actually held God...patens and chalices. This seems to be a powerful motivator for care. Or is it? Is it the same as our earlier quote on humility and obedience for Christ? We don't do things even for or in the name of God.

As a trainer, I couldn't use Benedict's motivator. I was too timid to explain what I really thought was the true motivation. For as long as I can remember I've had a mantra for actions I take...*do it, because it matters*. What I mean is to do whatever I do with my whole heart and not because of someone else's expectations. Doing something with a whole heart means not to judge the results. It requires a removal of the *doer* (me) who often wants to take action *for* something, for some goal or reason. To take care of things as sacred is an empty willingness (no will for me) to do the next thing. No will is without a *for your good*. There is no judgment *for* or *against*. Now, this rests on knowing that everything matters knowing everything is of the unborn, undying nature. Cleaning up the clutter on my desk, organizing and prioritizing work, recycling paper, filing instead of piling. All these things matter not because a company thinks it will make me more efficient or productive or because Benedict says so. Things matter because the *vast*



inconceivable source that can't be faced or turned away from is right here, right now. But getting here to this very high level requires practice. We may first need to unify the mind. We do that through concentration, a power of the mind.

A concentration practice involves interaction with the things of our lives. I am hand sewing a quilt. I see it as a concentration practice. When I started I thought that what I needed to concentrate on was the sewing. I've learned that the concentration needs to extend far beyond the sewing. Measuring and cutting cloth needs concentration. Setting up all my work tools requires concentration. Keeping track of pins and needles needs concentrated effort. Putting things away after working requires concentration. It is a steady power, a strong stream of concentration, unbroken.

Concentration settles the mind. When we experience a settled mind we are free of judgment, blame, fear and worry. In concentration we open and like that sweet St. Kevin *we are alone mirror'd clear in love's deep river*. Where we can take care of stuff and not seek reward.





**Householder,
Do Not Think It is More Difficult**

All the utensils of the monastery and in fact everything that belongs to the monastery should be cared for as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar.

Benedict's Rule



In Chapter 31, Benedict talks about the qualities and duties of a cellarer. The cellarer is in charge of all the monastery's goods, utensils and provisions. He interacts with the members of the community in this role. Benedict stresses that the cellarer should be mindful of the sacredness of every aspect when carrying out his duties.

My father was the cellarer in our family. It was a calling. He was trained for it by his grandmother who raised him from an early age. She was a devout woman who valued kindness above all else. She was quite poor and sold homemade bread and took in wash from others to make ends meet. My dad, Jim, was at her side most days helping her with whatever needed to be done. This included doing the laundry by hand, beating rugs, cleaning, baking, and yard work. I don't know if the teasing by others, especially boys, bothered him. I do know that as a man he remembered his childhood with his grandmother with gratitude and joy.

In January 1942 at age eighteen, he eloped with my mother and then joined the navy. After the war, he and my mother, Helen, began their family, raising three boys. Both worked, with my dad working two jobs. Each did whatever was needed in our family, but my dad was the cellarer. He did the food shopping, most of the cooking, laundry, housecleaning and many of the other things that are part of running a household. Dinner would be on the table for us Monday through Thursday at five o'clock before he left to drive truck for ten hours. My mom returned home from her job later in the evening. He did the food shopping and finances on Fridays after driving school bus. Saturday, he did the laundry. On Sundays my mother often cooked.

I cannot remember him ever complaining about any of it. He was devoted to it, as he was to my mother and the three of us. He seldom went out with friends, although others enjoyed his company. His care of his family and running a household were sacred duties for him. He performed them with the gentle kindness and devotion that grew from the love and work he had experienced with his grandmother.



Years later, my mother was diagnosed with emphysema. As she continued to smoke, her health worsened and she was forced to quit work. My father cared for her for ten years as she declined, unable to be the full partner she had been. He now managed everything. He bathed and fed her. He moved her from bed to living room and back. When she became bedridden, he massaged her skin to prevent bedsores. In her final years, he retired early to give her round the clock care. His duties had increased and changed, but his devotion was steadfast, perhaps even growing.

Besides managing the “goods, utensils, and provisions” of which Benedict speaks, I believe that he cared for the divine in her that was housed in her withered, failing body. Is this projection on my part? I don't know. I can only tell you that I remember him loving her with a love that seemed greater than that of one person for another. His example, his life of carrying out his cellarer duties, especially in the midst of such monumental heartache is the most powerful spiritual teaching I have ever received.





Just This

All the utensils of the monastery and in fact everything that belongs to the monastery should be cared for as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar.

Benedict's Rule



What does this invitation of Benedict's mean to care for all the things of my household monastery? With full attention and energy.... for the beaten down old stove, burners crooked, for the bold and bright African fabric curtain and the chipped cereal bowls. For the worn-out potatoes stored since October and the fresh crisp apple, shipped in from somewhere warm. Sacred is receptive to each as a full expression of itself.

This present moment into which Benedict invites us, the actual experience of it, and the profound spiritual implications of true and complete presence, these draw me ever farther into the study and practice of Buddhism. Presence is for Buddhists the holy grail of practice. To be fully present is to be fully Awake.

As a member of a Zen sangha for many years, I participated each Sunday in a silent work period. I learned to just do the task to which I was assigned, whether I liked it or not. I learned to not suck up the spiders in the corners when I vacuumed, for this was their household, we were their Sunday guests. I learned that presence requires me to focus on just what my hands are doing.

In this way, I began to take baby steps toward that which Benedict and Buddha teach: JUST THIS. To truly be here with just this glass I am washing, just these Christmas things I am storing away, just the rolls of toilet paper going into the cupboard, is to show up with full attention, giving all of myself to the moment, each object revered. My capacity for this practice is a good measure of just how much my thinking mind is running the show.

Completing all the tasks of making meals is a good time to practice letting go of likes, dislikes, past and future, focusing my attention on *just* what is in front of me. Recently I had the experience of cutting up vegetables for a soup and being so present with the ingredients that I was aware everything glistened with aliveness, full of its essence, utterly precious.



The glistening sacredness emerges when the mind which is present to the stuff of now is not my ego-bound mind, but the Buddha mind. Those vegetables I cut? I went into that project primed by a prior sitting period in which my mind had become settled enough that thinking and feeling had been replaced with a settled heart and a clear internal stillness. Turning to the task at hand, I found there was room in my field of awareness for communion with a pile of carrots and onions. Not only was I present to the vegetables, but the vegetables were present to me. In our exchange, sacredness emerged. The onions were alive, and I was alive. Just this: Shimmering, heart-opening aliveness.

This Buddha mind to which I make oblique and unpracticed reference is revealed when we can leap clear of thinking and feeling, leap all the way to another shore where all is included, all is adored. This includes me. In this present moment, *fully lived*, I am adored and adoring. Adoration born of no separation between ourselves and everything else the whole world round.





The Community of Things

All the utensils of the monastery and in fact everything that belongs to the monastery should be cared for as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar.

Benedict's Rule



The details escape me but I remember the gist of an article written by my teacher years ago. It was about the community of things, how everything is here to serve us; the floor that holds us up, the chair that supports us, the myriad things in everyday life that one uses without thought or thank you. A sangha of things. I like to think of that, that I am surrounded and served by a community of things; the candle burning in the dark of the morning, the smell of incense, the little sofa I bought at Good Will for fifteen dollars. My cat. A favorite kitchen knife. The river birch trees with blowing flags of Tibet. The cars in the lot. The neighborhood, the country, the world, the whole universe that holds it all.

In the beautiful Buddhist psalm-like prayer, the *Bodhisattva's Vow*, the one who prays it looks at the universe and sees that it is all “the never-failing manifestation of the mysterious truth of Tathagata...the marvelous revelation of the glorious light.” Those who realize this:

*“Extend tender care, with a worshipping heart,
Even to such beings as beasts and birds.
This realization teaches us that our daily food and drink,
Clothes and protections of life are the warm flesh and blood,
The merciful incarnation of Buddha.
Who can be ungrateful or not respectful
Even to senseless things, not to speak of a human”.*

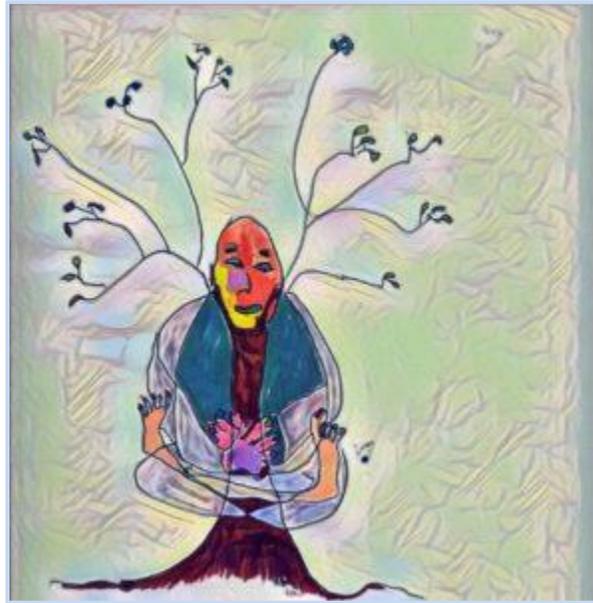
I understand this prayer not only as the realization of the ‘virtuous masters’ but also as a directive for me.

This whole world is a monastery and everything in it, above and below is Divine Love made tangible. All is sacred vessel to be cared for on the altar of the world. My mind extends to that great beyond and then comes back to the mundane in my daily living, *the knife, the plate, the vacuum cleaner, the car, the small community of things.*



A Buddhist grace before meals begins, 'We reflect on the effort that brought us this food and consider how it comes to us.' I adapt it and say it sometimes during the day, I reflect on this pen, this floor, this road, this shoe and consider how it comes to me. "Who can be ungrateful or not respectful even to all things including human beings?"





In a Spirit of Uncomplaining Obedience

If instructions are given to anyone in the community which seem too burdensome, or even impossible, then the right thing is to accept the order in a spirit of uncomplaining obedience.

Benedict's Rule



Six down and one to go...this is my last reflection for this retreat. And this is the one I thought would be easy. What tricksters my thoughts are!!! My first attempt came back with a note saying, "Contrived." And it was...I thought I had something to say!

So here's another try...looking for something real in my experience of working with Benedict's quote. With the prodding of 'contrived' I realize that I substitute words. I take out the word *impossible* and substitute it with the word *difficult...if instructions are too difficult*. And the second substitution is taking out *spirit of uncomplaining obedience* and substituting it with *spirit of heroic obedience*.

Let's take a look at the first substitution...difficult instead of impossible. In reflecting on my life I can see many times when this substitution proved useful. My first job was at a college in Maine. I grew up in Colorado. The trip east was in two stages one to my older brother's in Mechanicsburg, PA. My parents wanted me to deliver a crate of fresh Rocky Ford Peaches. My sister and younger brother agreed to go with me, if I paid their air fare back, a deal I was willing to make. So with a crate of peaches and two snow tires lashed to the top of my VW we headed east. This was the easy part. The second half of the trip was from Mechanicsburg to Farmington, ME a nine or ten hour trip. I planned to do it in two days. I'd stop somewhere outside Boston, stay over-night and set out early the next morning. As I left the peaches and my brother and sister behind, the trip felt daunting...impossible.

I drove north, with my snow tires, heading for a new job in a new state where I knew no one. The trip, the new job everything seemed impossible. I was afraid and alone. All I knew to do was just keep driving. So the two day trip became one long drive. I tried listening to a Red Socks baseball game and finally found a Maine radio station. Little did I know, that at that time, Maine radio stations signed-off at 10:00 P.M. So the final leg of the trip, was driven in dark silence. And somewhere in this long drive full of fear, impossible fell away and I learned that I could manage difficult.



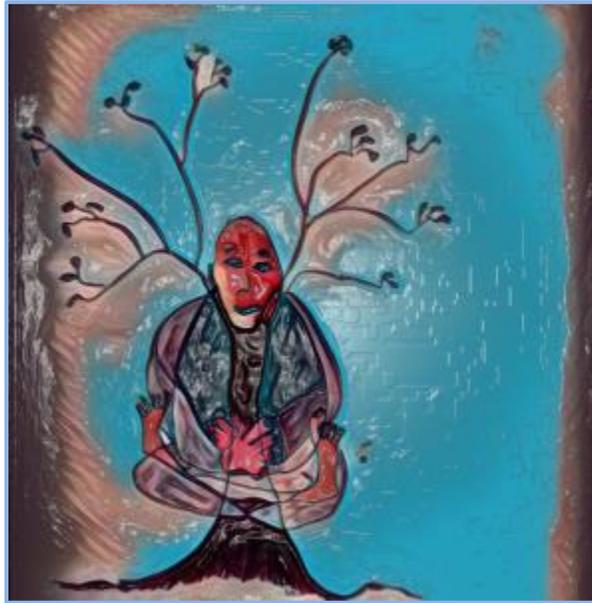
Now for the other substitution...taking out *spirit of uncomplaining obedience* and substituting it with *spirit of heroic obedience*. Two examples come to mind—Jesus and Shakyamuni Buddha. Who could be more heroic? Who am I to think I can do what they did? And yet, powerful as these two examples are, by making them I excuse myself. The point of practice is not to become anyone else. And I see that this substitution does not put me on a path of sincere practice.

Several years ago I read a reflection in Give Us This Day about John the Baptist. It was written by Karl Rahner. Here's what it wrote:

May we have a willing acceptance of the small seemingly mundane task that this present moment puts before us. May we have a humble readiness to do the one small thing, even when we see the greater thing that is denied us.

For me, this quote let's everything fall into place. I don't need contrived thinking about the fairness of given instructions or their burdensomeness. What is required is to find within myself, the *spirit of uncomplaining obedience* and take the next step, all the while knowing that at the moment of taking the step I don't know what the result will be and I take it anyway.





The Stories We Tell

If instructions are given to anyone in the community which seem too burdensome, or even impossible, then the right thing is to accept the order in the spirit of uncomplaining obedience.

Benedict's Rule



This process of reflection upon passages from Benedict's teachings has been nourishing beyond what I could have imagined. I begin by contemplating the passage, turning inward to find a personal vantage point from which to reflect and learn. Then comes the task of articulating my understanding on paper. That leads to deeper reflection, as my blind spots and inconsistencies are revealed by the black words on the white page. After a period of some internal disruption and re-organization, an essay emerges. Sounds excruciating you say? Yes. Excruciating in its demand for honesty, vulnerability, and surrender to Truth. Excruciatingly beautiful.

The internal inconsistencies inside each of us are known in Buddhism as delusions. These are the stories we tell ourselves that are fed by greed and aversion. When we don't examine our delusions, then we live from a blind spot. We believe that what we want and don't want is real. This blind ignorance keeps turning the great wheel of suffering.

In this passage, Benedict turns our attention toward ignorance of delusions. He gives us a tip. Does something seem utterly impossible? Probably you are caught in the delusion that you are right, that you are in charge. You are ignorant of the path to awakening; to put down the burden of greed and hate and accept how things are.

I speak from experience, as I have been grappling with ignorance, rooted in a fervent belief that a difficult life situation was an impossible burden. Here is the story I tell myself... and I was sticking to it! I WILL be successful professionally, personally and relationally, as defined by rigid parameters. I WILL be strong, healthy and consistently vital in pursuit of this success. And, my family members WILL also be successful in this way. Perhaps you can see the greed and the hate in this delusion. There is ignorance here, too, as this familiar story continues to run me and make me suffer.

Last year, the impossible happened. My child became quite ill. The success story fell apart. Completely. How could I bear this? My child was suffering, and I could NOT accept what life had brought her way, my way. I vacillated between hope and despair, anger and



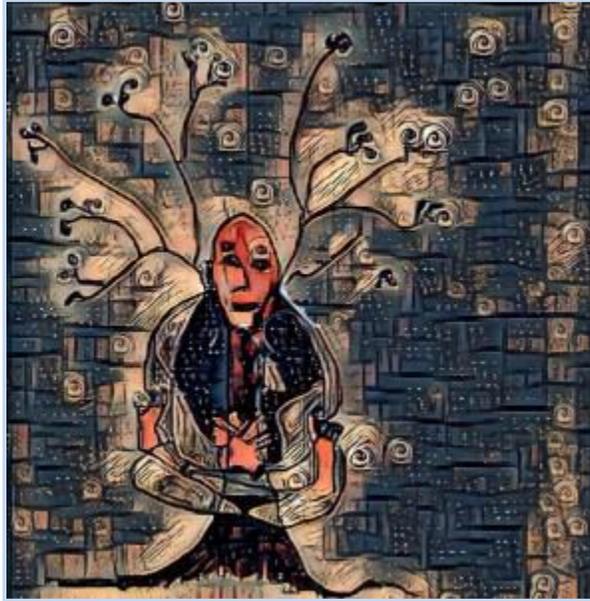
sadness. I cried a lot. I also meditated consistently, and various delusions running my show were revealed. I was able to let go of some stories about parenting, about control.

But the deep anguish continued, and I was at a loss for how to address this suffering and this essay topic. I had some vague understanding of why things were impossible to accept, so I wrote one draft, which was returned. You are still caught, said my teacher. Find out what you are still clinging to.

With my teacher's help, and a writing deadline to hold me, I turned toward the teachings and toward silent sitting. Like a spade in the spring dirt, practice began to let light and fresh air into the compacted ground of my habits. I saw that my child's inability to hold up my delusional success story was a great threat to me. The "I" that is caught in the ignorance of success had been busted.

It is good news that life gave me a situation that was impossible to accept. It has helped me to see once again that suffering IS delusion, rooted in ignorance. This is the task of awakening; an ongoing effort to turn the hard soil of blindness and root out the false beliefs so that uncomplaining acceptance of how things are can flourish in soil enriched by awareness, watered with a desire to end our suffering and the suffering of all.





Giving Up the Body — Giving Up the Mind

If instructions are given to anyone in the community which seem too burdensome, or even impossible, then the right thing is to accept the order in the spirit of uncomplaining obedience.

Benedict's Rule



The woman I visit in the Care Center is tethered to the small oxygen tank strapped to the back of her wheelchair. Her voice is weak, her eyes are bright. There is a peaceful energy about her. We talk about the fading of the body. She says it is her poverty, this breaking down of her physical being, this inability to do for herself what was once so easy to do. She is vowed to live into poverty, obedience and chastity but I am sure that she never dreamed of this kind of poverty when she first made those vows as a young woman. But now here it is. I do not see her diminishing self as something that is being taken away from her so much as something that she is giving. I believe it is her obedience to prayer that has brought her to this point. She reflects SHANTIDEVA'S PRAYER where one prays, *With no sense of loss, may I give up possessions, even my body.*"

After being with this friend I think about obedience. What about obedience, I wonder. Does not the body ask our obedience to whatever stage it is going through? Is not the body our last earthly authority we are asked to obey? As whatever dormant diseases of my body make themselves known and as my mind slows, can I say yes to what is being asked? Is not the diminishment of the body and mind the Divine declaring that nothing shall stand between you and Me? Is this our greatest act of obedience; to let go of this wonderful wondrous body/mind so we can be absorbed into the Infinite? Right here. Right now.

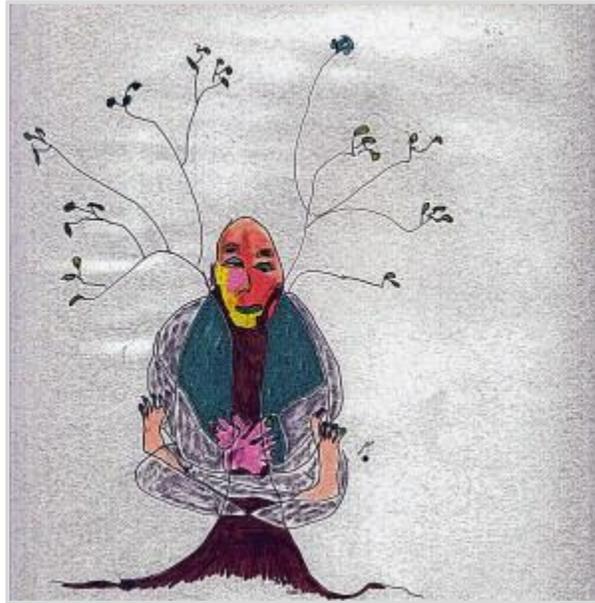
Once in awhile there is a flutter in my stomach with the awareness of dying and death. It seems so real, so close. And of course it is. Old age, illness, death, and the loss of everything near and dear; there's no escaping them. Dark Angels, I've heard them called by one Buddhist teacher, Messengers that remind us of what is important. Perhaps that spark of fear is also a dark angel that wakes me up and pulls me into prayer and beyond to the Eternal Reality. The momentary fear melts.

I am aware of the last week in Lent as I write this. I recall the last words of Jesus as he died, *Into your hands I commend my spirit,*" he prays to his God.



Does he not give us that same prayer. Into your hands I commend my body. Into your hands I commend my spirit.





Resistance as Futile

If instructions are given to anyone in the community which seem too burdensome, or even impossible, then the right thing is to accept the order in the spirit of uncomplaining obedience.

Benedict's Rule



I frequently fail to recognize that instructions which seem too burdensome or impossible are actually gifts. Too often, I am unable to see that my resistance to them is an invitation to look more deeply at my behavior and thinking. When I resist, when I dig in my heels, it can be painful. I initially resisted the instruction from Benedict. I began debating it in my head as though I was participating in a college ethics course. Something about it pricked my small self. Fortunately, I quickly noticed it and had the wherewithal to ask who was the "I" that was resisting this instruction?

Was it the "I" who wants to have the final say rather than obey? Or the "I" who wants to qualify obedience so that he can still get whatever he craves? In this situation, I was fortunate to stop my reaction quickly. Further investigation is now possible.

But, what happens when it is more difficult than this.... when my resistance to instructions or my attachment to spiritually unhealthy habits persists?

I need to restrain myself. I need to STOP doing it, whatever it is. If I do not, I will continue to be carried away by my thinking and desire. I will be unable to regain my attention or hear the Dharma. Even though the divine is next to me, I will stay turned away from it. I must quiet myself, drop the internal and external discussion about whatever it is, not defend, and obey the command to STOP IT. If I fail, I must try again. Restraint from thinking and speaking is my starting point.

When my children became adults, I found it very difficult to follow their instructions to give them advice only when they asked for it. I wanted to *help* them. I believed that I was entitled, even obligated to do so, as their *father*. I also believed my years of experience meant I *knew* things. Fortunately, each of them forcefully rebuffed my intrusions. But, the exchanges were unpleasant for everyone. Eventually, with their continued instruction and attention and effort on my part, I was able to restrain this behavior. I began to listen and offer support and silence instead. When I failed, they reminded me. Working with the precepts I was able to see



the harm I had been doing. I had been a thief... stealing their autonomy and power, making them feel less than they were...less than me. It also dawned on me that being a father is not who I am. I had helped to raise them, but that was now over. I needed to let go of this identity and all that I wanted from it. I have more work to do. But, STOPPING my behavior and obeying their instruction were essential first steps in calming my mind enough to uncover my delusional thinking and the harm I was doing.

A few words about working with the precepts. There is no one way to use them. It is up to each of us to determine that for ourselves. I read valuable commentary about them, but the precepts are of little value unless I work with them. I start the day by considering them, reciting them. It takes little time, but it helps me to begin the day remembering them and vowing to train with them. Next, I train with them as I participate in the activities of the day. I fail when I become distracted by my feelings and thinking. As with any training, when I fail or fall down, I get up and keep trying. Defeat is neither good nor bad. It's another opportunity to study myself in order to protect my mind and heart, so that I do not harm myself or others.

I usually begin with the precept to "cultivate goodness in all conditions." It instructs me to "return to the Dharma within in all situations...to train not to be swayed by external circumstances." It encourages me to let go of whatever I am attached to in the "world of men" and turn towards the goodness, the divine. Always a good place to begin.

The daily practice of the precepts is on the website of A Single Thread/Zen Contemplatives. Or click: [The Precepts](#)

