

Dharma Talk, Eido Frances Carney
Olympia Zen Center
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The Four Kings

We have a simple change in the Zendo with a new bowing mat, and it is very amazing to think that we change one small thing and the atmosphere of the Zendo is altered by this one architectural shift. We received this bowing mat from Reverend Mugaku Kataoka who resides in Shikoku, Japan. I came to know him years ago, long before we had this property. He used to come regularly to Olympia because he practices Aikido, and also because he has some friends who live here. He would never tell anybody he was coming, he would just show up and then he would walk into the Aikido Dojo and give the students a run for their money! He's very expert at Aikido.

So he hasn't come for many years he has been unable to get away – he is a Rinzai priest and head of a Temple in Shikoku. But he is friends with Hiroe Nakagawara. When she came, she noticed that the mat that we have on the other altar, that was also given us by Mugaku Sensei, is worn through. Hiroe phoned him in Japan and said “They need a new mat !” So he sent this mat and it's very startling to see this shift, because the other mat we've been using as a Indian Native American feel to it.

So I want to talk tonight about this mat, about the symbol of this mat.

Some of this topic tonight also comes because of a discussion that I had at the Zen Translation Form that I was at last week. I was talking during a coffee-break with a couple of scholars and they were talking about Dogen Zenji and some attitudes toward Dogen Zenji and practice in the 21st century. The attitudes between Dogen Zenji and Keizan Jokin (who came after Dogen) are quite different. The general attitude is that Dogen Zenji was very straight, that he said no bowing, no chanting, no Sutras, no ceremonies, just sitting, just sitting. Then later when Keizen Jokin Zenji came along, he brought this atmosphere of belief in ghosts, mysteries, the Lotus Sutra and all of these other mystical dimensions that were not present in Dogen Zenji's time. So the scholars were saying that none of that is true, that all of that is newly, newly decided. And, that it is not true at all about Dogen Zenji. Dogen did many, many ceremonies, he loved the Lotus Sutra. They chanted, they did all kinds of other practices aside from just sitting. So these attitudes developed over a period of time and we apply these ideas, backwards in time, in order to suit our beliefs at any given time, we apply our beliefs backwards.

When we receive anything like this that is going to be placed in our Dharma Hall, in our Zendo, we always put it at the altar in a Morning Ceremony first to express gratitude for the gift we have received. So, that occurred this morning.

I was thinking about that conversation that I had with those scholars, and I was thinking about the simple appearance of this bowing mat. The same arrangement is on the bowing cloth that priests use, the same idea, it is exactly the same kind of design. There is that open center

with a hem all the way around, and there are four corners. The four corners on this bowing cloth that I use are not quite as widely defined as you see on this bowing mat, but it is exactly the same. So there is a symbolism in this and what these four corners mean.

Now, I'm not saying that we necessarily think about these in all of the meanings behind this, but in the tradition that we inherit, it is layer upon layer, upon layer of symbolic meanings and design, that have gone into this thoughtful arrangement of the things that we use. You will always see this in a bowing mat in Japan, these four corners. Here, we have been using a Native American influenced rug, and you will see that kind of thing in many Temples in America, and not necessarily see these four corners in a bowing mat. When you know what the four corners represent then it is not just a bowing mat. There is layer upon layer, upon layer of some kind of resonance and meaning that occurs in all of these religious articles.

So, these four corners, represent the "Four Kings." This comes out of a cosmology that we find in Buddhism. There are all kinds of invisible worlds, and layers upon layers of heavens that have all kinds of beings associated with them and guardians and angels and deities - all kinds of things in the cosmological Buddhist world. You can see it or not see it. We don't make some kind of doctrine that says "You must believe in these" or anything like that. I'm just saying that when we put down something like this, it is good to know what this means, what the intention of these Four Kings mean.

These four corners, called the Four Guardian Kings, they represent the directions that the Kings are guarding North, South, East and West. When the celebrant comes out, and steps onto the mat, then there is this engagement of the Guardian Four Kings that are called forth to guard the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and to guard the Temple Priest and all of the participants in any of the ceremonies. So this stepping onto the mat is engagement in and entering into the protection of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The Northern, is the Guardian who "Hears everything in the World." In Japanese, his name is Bishamonten. The Northern King is associated with the color yellow, and the symbol is an Umbrella. The Umbrella is a very interesting article. The umbrella is associated with opening space, and creating very large space. We don't see the umbrella quite so much in Soto Zen, but the umbrella as a symbol is very apparent in Tibetan Buddhism. Canopies are related to umbrellas and we see these in Soto Zen. The idea of canopy occurs in many, many religions, in which the canopy forms a protection over a holy article, a holy person, or to guard against the elements. But, in the sense of its meaning in the Four Kings, the essential point is to open space. In the opening of the Umbrella, we step into the Umbrella of the Dharma and we take refuge under the Umbrella of Dharma.

There is another symbol associated with the Northern King, mongoose, but there must be some story in which the mongoose spits out jewels. So the mongoose is associated then with generosity, also giving forth the jewels of the Dharma, the generosity of the Dharma. So these are the great jewels and the great Teachings of the Buddha and the Dharma and the Sangha. In symbol, they come from the mouth of the mongoose.

The South corner's King is Zojoten, the One who Enlarges, the Patron of Growth. He inspires the Dharma and encourages the Sangha to grow. The South is associated with the color blue, and the symbol is the Sword. This is the sword that cuts through delusion, that allows the True Dharma to grow, and allow the Sangha to see the Truth in the Jewels that the northern mongoose is spitting forth for us. So, the sword is an old symbol, it represents warrior-ship, a powerful symbol.

The Eastern corner is "The One Who Maintains the State and the watcher over the lands." The symbol is the lute and the color is white. We can imagine the beautiful rising sun in this, the light that comes over the lands as the sun rises. This corner is related also to the devas. Devas are beings that are messengers who go out and look over and report back to the gods, to see how things are going in the various realms and in the realms of the humans. Devas are able to fly through the air and play music, but they also can be found in the scent of flowers and in gardens.

On the West, Komokuten, is "The One Who Sees All," the color is red and the symbols are the serpent, the pagoda, and the pearl. The serpent represents the Nagas who are Water Spirits. You have seen pictures or statues of Buddha with a big cobra snake over the back of his head. The snake comes up and is a guardian of the Buddha's back, covering his head. Sometimes you'll see statues with cobras with many heads, guardian of various aspects of the Buddha. Nagas are also servants of the Four Kings, who out and report and take care of various earth realms and report back to the Kings, so that the Kings may know how things are doing with humankind.

Another of the symbols is the pagoda. Pagodas are ancient in design that were built to house relics. If you go to Japan, if you go to China, to anywhere in South-east Asia, you will certainly see pagodas. Another symbol is the pearl. The Pearl of Wisdom. The pearl comes out of the water, so it is associated then with the Nagas.

The Four Kings come out on the eighth, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth day of each month. They come out or they send their messengers out to inspect, to see how the virtue is doing, to see how the morals are doing among the earth people. Then of course they come back and if there is some need they come and they bring forward some kind of helping hand in a way that might be invisible – that we just don't know about. We don't know what is helping us always.

Do remember that these things I've mentioned are part of a cosmological story, a mythos, that has come out of a long history of Buddhism that has moved through various cultures. For some of us in our very young American culture, we can't imagine how these symbols and realms could have meaning in our culture.

Dogen Zenji speaks about the Four Kings in a couple of his fascicles in SHOBOGENZO. In this particular one, "On a Monk's Bowl," he is talking particularly about meanings of the monk's bowl, yet they go beyond just the article itself. As with this bowing mat – we can just take this bowing mat as a rug that appeared from Japan, or we can look more deeply. It is made of tatami, I'm sure you could smell it when you came in, it's deeply fragrant and it permeates the whole zendo. It is a special kind of fiber that is grown in Japan, almost everybody in Japan has at

least one room made of tatami, even in today's modern world. Temples floors are tatami. Tatami is a sacred plant that we live on. So it is put in to this mat to support the Four Kings – to give the Four Kings a sacred floor for the temple celebrant to enter during ceremony and stand on a sacred element with the Four Kings, to interact with, receive and transmit the teachings of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha.

In this fascicle Dogen is talking about a monk's bowl, he's saying something more than just that which looks like an article. The monk's bowl functions in the heart of the Priest, it functions with the total heart of generosity, it's function is that which holds all of the nutrition of the Dharma. It does all of these things, and this is the true meaning of the bowl, not that it is an article, but that it represents the life of begging. It represents that holy vessel given to a monk upon ordination. Let me read this little bit to you so you can get a little feel for how Dogen refers to the Four Kings:

“On the day in the first year of the Pao-ching era of Great Sung China (1225) when my late master the Old Buddha of Tendo, assumed the role of Abbot of Tendo, he entered the Dharma Hall and said the following:

I remember a story, a monk once asked Hyakujo : “What is this thing about something being miraculous ?” Hyakujo replied: “ It is your sitting all by yourself on Daiyu Peak.”

You in this great assembly should not be disturbed by this. Just let the old fellow kill himself with sitting. If someone here today, should suddenly ask me what a miracle is, I would simply say to that person “what is miraculous in the first place. Ultimately what else is there ? I have brought my Monk's Bowl with me from Jinzu Temple to eat my meals from.”

You need to know that what is miraculous is done for the sake of those who are already miraculous. For that which is miraculous, you need to use a miraculous tool, since this is a miraculous occasion. Accordingly what manifests as something miraculous, is the miraculous bowl of a monk. Thereby, you should call on the Four Guardian Kings to protect it and the various dragon lords to defend it, since this bowl is what we dedicate to the Buddhas and Ancestors and what They have entrusted to us.

To speak more generally a Buddhist monk's bowl is not something that is manufactured, nor is it something that arises only to later pass away, nor is it something that comes or goes, nor is it something subject to gain or loss, it is not span.. a new and old, nor is it connected with what is of the past or of the present. Even if the Robe and Bowl of the Buddhas and Ancestors had been brought into existence by the collected efforts of novices, they are beyond the delusions that snare and entrap novices, and even if they are brought into existence by the springing up of myriad helpful laity, they are beyond the delusions that entrap lay-folk. The underlying principal of this is that water is

water, as a result, as a bringing together a varied assembly, and clouds in turn are clouds as a result of their bringing together a varied assembly.

The monk's bowl that novices now receive is the monk's bowl that the Four Guardian Kings offer to the Buddha. If the monk's bowl were not that which the Four Guardian Kings offered, it would not be the one that appears right before our eyes.”

Perhaps I'm being a little bit vague in all of this, but simply that things are always more than they seem and they are always miraculous. This bowing mat looks like it comes through the mail and it looks like it is manufactured and sent here in a box and so forth, and yet it is a kind of miraculous thing, that it comes across the world and appears here at this moment. It is a miraculous thing that we all sit here in this place, in this time, coming together as we do in the heart and the realm of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. So this bowing mat then, is also like the monk's bowl, that which comes forth from the Four Kings to fully protect the Buddha, to fully protect the Dharma, to fully protect the Sangha.

We in America have very few layers of mythic and cosmological base to call on to give color and richness to the things we do in our spiritual realm. I don't know how long that will take for that to happen – a long, long, long, time. But to know some of the points of this tradition helps us to understand and helps us to understand the depth and the range that comes with these Teachings.

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