

ZEN AND THE ART OF BEGGING:  
PRACTICING TAKUHATSU IN AMERICA

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*Takuhatsu is the spiritual activity of Zen Buddhist monks to receive charitable offerings for support of the temple. It is the tradition in Zen practice for monks to go on rounds, holding their eating bowls to receive offerings. The person who gives, places the offering in the bowl and the monk acknowledges this by chanting a verse that acknowledges gratitude, as the giver and the receiver are one. They then bow to one another in mutual gratitude and respect. Both parties are recipients. Together they are the teaching.*

*In takuhatsu, the monks offer the teachings by means of their own example. In exchange for this they are supported by those who trust in the truth of the teachings. In addition, almsgiving is considered a virtue, which increases good. The monks through takuhatsu provide an opportunity to practice this virtue.*

Olympia Zen Center

(This explanation is given as a small paper handout on the street to those we pass by who may be curious about our begging activity.)

It is the day for *takuhatsu* in this small city in the Pacific Northwest. After zazen and morning ceremony, we eat a modest breakfast of oatmeal and tea and still feel hungry. This is good as one should not go begging on a full stomach. The rain has held off but it is misty, windless and raw. Streets and alleys are full of puddles. Only students who have especially requested that they have this opportunity are participating, and two are doing *takuhatsu* for the first time.

There will just be four of us. We are not trying to create a spectacle, we are simply practicing. Students wear their street shoes and standard Japanese temple work clothing that they have borrowed from me. They will each wear *rakusu*, little robe, and a *takuhatsu* bag to collect offerings and identify our affiliation, Olympia Zen Center. I wear the traditional *takuhatsu* clothing of the monk: *kimono* and *koromo* hiked up and tied at the waist so that the white cloth leggings show from below the knee, half gloves covering the visible portion of the forearm, towel around the head to keep the wide straw woven hat from slipping, grass sandals over Japanese socks with the big toe separated from the other toes like mittens. We all carry begging bowls. I also carry a tall stick with three rings on top that will make a clear *ching-ching* as it taps along the pathway leading the procession.

*Takuhatsu* is one of the deepest traditions of my lineage in Soto Zen which manifests alongside the poet/priest Ryokan san who spent his entire life relying only on the fruits of *takuhatsu* for his food and sustenance. My teacher, Niho Tetsumei Roshi, is abbot of Entsuji, where Ryokan san trained as a monk. It was along the narrow streets near Entsuji that the sound of Ryokan san's begging stick first rang out against the mud walls of the old farm buildings. Later he returned to his home town where he wandered throughout the Bunsui plain living his life completely as a mendicant, practicing *takuhatsu* from town to town. The tradition of *takuhatsu* is unbroken.

I, too, was raised in a begging tradition. The 1940's and 1950's were still close enough to the Great Depression to appreciate that begging at one time was commonplace. Catholic monastics practiced begging in Brooklyn, New York. It was not unusual to see clerics sitting outside shops holding coffee cups to collect coins, and as I realize at this moment of writing, in those years it was only women I ever saw. Nuns maintained this religious practice supporting their communities through this work. In our neighborhood in Brooklyn on Thanksgiving, children had the practice of dressing in old, torn clothing and going from door to door to beg for Thanksgiving. This served to remind the householders that kindness to beggars, especially on such a holiday as Thanksgiving was indeed virtuous, and to remind the children that all people were worthy of notice and that sharing the goods we have is what we are to learn to do. Thus, we collected a few coins for the missions and took home some slices of apples and a handful of nuts.

In Olympia, before leaving the Zendo we face one another in a line and chant *Hannya Shingyo*, The Heart Sutra. We open the door and emerge into the cold winter air, and feel a sudden vulnerability. There is no hiding, no way to disguise what we are doing. We are suddenly visible to everyone. The mixed nervous feelings about practicing *takuhatu* in America rise with the wisps of fog that catch around our ears as we walk in single file.

A little more chanting and down the hill into town we intone “Ho” only it sounds more like a deep “Hoooooooooooooooooooo” coming from the belly in a long vibrating stream. We breathe at different times and the echo is continuous. Cold hits the hand and the fingers numb around the bowl like frozen lotus petals forming a winter cushion for a Buddha.

So far as we know, no Zen communities in America are practicing *takuhatu* in this particular ancient form. We have no models in America, only my experience of practice in Japan. We have had long discussions about why, although it was practiced and taught by Shakyamuni Buddha and all Zen monks since, *takuhatu* has not been transmitted to America. We have asked why Americans embrace zazen meditation and yet do not incorporate *takuhatu* in their practice?

Begging is legal in our city so long as we do not engage in aggressive panhandling. The word is an American colloquialism developed from the homeless, literally to use a pan with a handle for begging. In America, religious begging has all but disappeared. The Salvation Army, the last of the street religious beggars, comes out at Christmas with the unmistakable Army bell as we enter the supermarket. As late as the 1950's, religious organizations practiced begging on city streets in New York. Religious went from door to door, or they stood at train stations, or outside factories accepting donations. This was acceptable and recognized as virtuous practice. As begging became popular, but not completely acceptable, during the “hippie” movement, young people took to the streets demonstrating the need for changing values in society. They did not hesitate to ask for money and people were curious and generally responsive. But as the “hippie” movement faded, it gave way to the homeless who became more and more visible on city streets. As the homeless increased, the practice of begging persisted and the public became impatient with the continuing visibility of the poor. Other areas were beset by Hari Krishna who had aggressive and confrontational methods. Some cities passed ordinances to

prevent beggars from annoying others. Begging is now illegal in some places and restricted elsewhere.

The disappearance of the religious from the activity of begging may have to do also with the increased wealth of the American religious communities. Few religious groups practice poverty today in the style in which Ryokan san lived or for that matter, St. Francis of Assisi, in the Christian western tradition who taught his monks to store no more food than they could use for one day. Each day Francis and his brothers practiced begging, and any left over food was given to the poor. Today, most religious live in comfortable housing with guaranteed meals and an income. Begging has been institutionalized in the form of fundraising and is conducted by every church and nonprofit corporation in America. Giving is no longer the direct matter from the donor to the begging bowl. We make appeals through the mail requesting donations for every imaginable cause. If we are moved, we send a check. There is no contact, no communal prayer, no immediate direct eye-to-eye gesture.

As we walk, we reach the main road alongside reasonably heavy traffic for a Saturday morning which also proceeds in single file. People see us and stare. They are not sure exactly what we are doing, but our demeanor is unmistakable. Our begging bowls are held out. We are deep in meditation. We cross the streets with the traffic lights and pass in front of motorists who now see us head on, not just a sideways glance. We are right there together. Memories of Sangha discussions feel woven into the fabric of these black sleeves. The insistent *ching-ching* of the stick keeps us concentrated and we are a living Sangha, moving in a single body through the city.

Our first direct encounter other than with people in cars is at Bread and Roses, the Catholic Worker soup kitchen. About ten men are gathered on the sidewalk talking as we turn the corner and walk toward them. Likely, we appear as a small attack force arriving out of nowhere. There is no precedence for this; no picture that they can turn to for reference. We are moving at a moderate pace, chanting *Enmei Jikku Kannon Gyo*. . They are facing us and staring since this is their block, their territory, and many who are standing here now will be begging later in front of different shops, or huddling in doorways of businesses that are closed for the weekend. Shopkeepers will ask them to move saying they are bad for business and that they keep shoppers away.

I look out from under the hat and my eyes meet one man's eyes. His are deep, tired, and watery from being in the cold. His look is full of question but in

an instant we both know something: the *takuhatu* I am doing is engaged in prayer; his *takuhatu* is engaged in a raw kind of desperation that fights back incessant hunger and cold. I can go home and shower; he cannot. I have a place to sleep; he may not. Yet a dimension to begging seems to wash through him and is revealed in his eyes, is made spiritual, is lifted out of the stereotypical attitudes he must face every day. It seems a reminder to him that the great saints begged, that Christ loved the poor, and he seems to intuit the ennobling nature of his life at that very instant. We have seen inside the other in a stark moment of truth.

There are other dimensions, too. I have dared into this territory of begging without the crisis of hunger. I have dared to ask for participation on the street where Christ's children and Buddha's children walk together. What we feel is more complex, is layered with nuance and the pain of not meeting fully in the intuitive happening which quickly passes. We are pulled along by the simple action of walking, by the silence of going forward step by step in our meditation. We try to give the man a paper that explains what we are doing, but he doesn't want to take it. He shakes his hand and his head together. He's not afraid of us. He seems more afraid of what we represent. Finally, another man accepts. We go on our way.

As we get closer to town, the resistances and encouragements that Sangha members expressed appear and dissipate one by one. The support to do *takuhatu* has been powerful. Niho Roshi encouraged me to practice it in America. Others, who themselves cannot go, have expressed it as deep, pure activity that they know takes courage. They are somehow in awe, unable to express exactly what *takuhatu* means, but they sense the rightness to begin.

Other Sangha fear we will be perceived to be Hare Krishna. Because we live in an area of fundamental Christianity, they fear that through *takuhatu* we will be misunderstood. To be misunderstood means to be discriminated against, I suppose. Perhaps some fear that they will have to defend their practice in some way. They may be guilty by association.

Others speak of what it means to face the homeless, what it means to be associated with such a massive problem and to stand face to face on the street with all the vulnerability of feeling and be unable to come to terms with it. Some resist asking for alms in such a fundamental and direct way knowing that there is no expectation on either side. Usually we make some kind of bargain when

we ask for money, but in *takuhatu* there are no promises, no expectations. It is the most direct way of almsgiving and the gift is pure.

Some feel that by begging we might take what would otherwise be given to a homeless beggar. We tend to give where wealth has already accumulated. We want to identify with success, with accomplishment, and therefore we will be generous where we can see some sign of economic protection or legitimate use of our money. We want our gift to be insured. We want accountability of our judgments of worth. Thus, we will give to the successful organization but not to the homeless.

Perhaps the deepest most debilitating notion, and one that hits the entire nation and not just those who worry about *takuhatu*, is the fear of being perceived as or associated with the poor. Fear that we will find ourselves on the street begging someday is real for some people. The thinking is that so long as we ignore the poor around us, we can pretend that it won't touch us, won't show up on the doorstep, won't shake the stuffing out of our plans and our kids' welfare, and won't find us knocking helplessly on the door of the shelter in the middle of the night. A more crippling fear is to no longer be a consumer, to no longer participate in the culture of the mall, to have the hobby of shopping and accumulation of goods ripped away in a sudden mortgage failure.

Some mention the problem of the visibility of *takuhatu*, to appear publicly as poor. They are new to practice and not ready to say that this is their route, their way, their life, their home. Some want only to come and sit and go home. They are not yet prepared to be Buddhists, at least, publicly practicing Buddhists.

*Takuhatu* is a deeply visible part of practice. It means going into the public arena, the market place, dressed as a monk. It means having society see you in relationship to what you own and profess. It means being recognized and considered. But, the Zen clergy as well as the Christian clergy have become invisible today. Although this may have several graces such as allowing the laity to feel its own spiritual strength and equality, or giving the clergy some anonymity in personal life, the other side is the loss to society of what a visible clergy means. To be visible means that there are those in society who are willing to live as examples for people to emulate. It means that the clergy willingly live the precepts and openly live the precepts from moment to moment in all conditions. It means that the young have some notice of the potential of spiritual commitment, someone they see who lives inside yet outside of society, someone

visible they can turn to, someone who will advocate for them. It means that when someone sees clergy they have some hope. This is the meaning of the visible robe of Buddha: *hope*.

*Takuhatsu* is a different aspect of practice on the street as a homeless person, of experiencing oneself as invisible to society, of swallowing the meaning of hunger, confusion, cold, hopelessness and learning to survive. It finds itself in the same root experience yet *takuhatsu* confronts the self from a different angle. In *takuhatsu* there is the assumption that we recognize Zazen as the primary way, that the practice of Zazen brings healthy change, balance and harmony, and therefore we enter society with bowls open to receive support to continue this work.

It sounds as if I advocate for a separation of clergy and laity or that I suggest that clergy have some power or spiritual inclination that laity do not. Quite the contrary. True, the basis of *takuhatsu* is the belief that monks carry the Dharma. Monks do not carry any more dharma than laity, but monks are those who make lifetime vows and whose vocations compel them to encourage the dharma such that they arrange their lives to practice in intense and consistent ways. In a very democratic society such as America, we have not created any separation of clergy from the laity. Suzuki Roshi speaks of Americans as being not quite monks and not quite laity. But we clearly have not wanted to make a distinction, nor should we. Dogen Zenji teaches there is no difference between monks and lay people. And yet we delineate teachers, make hierarchy, establish levels, have different vows. Among other things, to be a monk means to be visible in the community, just as one is visible as the bank teller, UPS driver, police, bus driver, postal clerk, gas station attendant.

Were all these complexities too much for the first Zen masters from Japan? Was it too impossible to understand the dynamics of this culture in relationship to *takuhatsu*? Is this why they did not transmit *takuhatsu*? Is this why some Japanese teachers today laugh a little to themselves, make a face and say, 'No, no, no. *Takuhatsu* is impossible for Americans'? Perhaps *takuhatsu* is too deep an encounter with the culture? Is it too direct? Is there something in our culture, some distaste for begging that recommends against it?

Perhaps Japanese Zen masters were reticent to place themselves in this aspect of practice in America for several reasons. We are a violent nation. In *takuhatsu* we have no protection. It is deeply vulnerable work. Americans are verbal, outspoken and will not hesitate to belittle or ridicule what we don't

understand. In *takuhatsu* we have no cover from the rude or obscene. Japanese teachers may have seen this as too controversial, too problematic outside their own culture. They may have felt that to establish practice at all, it had to be acceptable to society. It had to find its way into daily life, into the mainstream. *Takuhatsu* may have seemed too radical for the American mind. This, they may have felt, was a purely monastic practice that has yet to take root.

Will *takuhatsu* take root in America? First, a deep visible monastic stream must flourish. While householder Zen and lay practice continue to be established, such practice must rest on a foundation where training and a clear understanding of practice have firm ground and are solidly planted in the monastic stream. Perhaps monasticism itself will take on some redefinition, but it still must be the core. In lay practice we are always at risk to become a Sunday only congregation, using the cushions occasionally, but not when it interferes with the primary schedule of family. Something larger than ourselves has to happen. Americans must discard any notions of casual practice, must give our lives fully committed to dharma. We cannot see Zen practice as faddish or exotic. It is work at the core. Many men and women must give their lives to become these very roots. It must become natural in the culture, a respected and familiar expression.

It is the very matter of establishing a monastic stream that tells us why Buddha begged. He went in search of poverty, to live among the least to learn non-attachment and acceptance. The alms-round permitted the monks to practice poverty and humility, to learn how to overcome vanity, and it allowed the laity to benefit, to merit, through acts of generosity. Monks further learned acceptance since they were completely dependent upon what was offered. They had to eat what was put in the bowl and they ate just once a day. There is a story of Makakasho who was said to have eaten a leper's finger that had dropped into his bowl, an extreme practice of acceptance. We are told stories of St. Francis and Ryokan san who ate food which had been shared by insects and grubs, having gone beyond any discrimination of the condition of the food. Simply, this was Buddha's and therein lies the nourishment.

As we walk further downtown, people step aside as we come by. Our voices are reverberating off the back walls of shops where doors are standing open. Customers look out as we pass. The low vibrating chant penetrates each portion of brick and mortar, of plaster and wallpaper, display shelves, cabinets with antiques, dress racks, glass cases filled with jewelry, taverns where there are

leftovers from early morning happy hour, racks of cards, books, incense, stacks of futons, coffee urns, bubbling pots of soup in restaurants. The words are healing. Yet, we see ourselves reflected in shop windows, our images like double exposures against the sheer massive piles of goods stacked in shop windows. We ourselves are startled by the contrast. We sense the impact on others.

Although we hold the bowl open for an offering, the practice of *takuhatu* does not teach us to be dependent upon society, asking for something that is not earned, or pressuring a community for an entitlement to food or goods. Rather, it teaches us to be dependent on nothing, to live our original homelessness, to include the homeless in thought and deed, to share everything, to accept what comes to us, to be generous, to be humble in society, to recognize the timid, to resist fame, to be modest, to resist the acquisition of goods, to throw off ego, to have the courage to be fully visible in practice. And as we practice *Takuhatu*, that is what we teach and that becomes our culture. But it is also easy to imagine that these are the very lessons we resist the most.

We walk beside the marina and are photographed by a tourist against the backdrop of the state capitol building, a dome that is the copy of our capitol in Washington, DC. I see the photograph in my mind's eye, the name "Entsuji" written in Japanese across my hat and the capitol dome above. In this incongruous image it still seems to make sense, the collision of cultures, time, no more nor less than this direct activity, the same incongruity that is at the heart of practice. We follow the boats to the farmer's market where we stand in one area for half an hour. One of us gives the handout to the curious who walk slowly away reading. In a moment they come back and make an offering. Some, when they understand, return. One man gives us a bagel which later we eat for lunch.

Making money or filling the bowl in *takuhatu* is not the point. The point is the practice of acceptance, humility, poverty - a way to address the arrogance of our material times. When we see that we are all dependent upon the same Emptiness, that we are all homeless, we can fully exchange the deepest meaning of this practice. Our giving away, our receiving are the same act. The spiritual act of *takuhatu* reminds us where our true treasures are and that the begging bowl and the hand filling it are always Empty.

We have a long way back up the hill to the Zendo. We do not chant on the return, but walk silently, observing the smallest seedlings that are tucked here and there in crannies of stone and fence that line the avenue. Unexpected

details in the landscape seem surreal. They fill the heart. Two young missionaries from Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints cross the street to find out what we are doing. We stop for a moment and trade stories. We agree on this: rain rains on us together; and our feet share the same wetness. The faithful gray sky and rain of the Pacific Northwest persist. We walk home.

After we chant, we wash our feet and place the offerings on the altar. We drink tea, have lunch, feel stiffness and soreness set into the muscles and joints. *Takuhatu* is hard work, and is cleansing and purifying. Without doubt those who go out on *takuhatu*, want to go again. They want it to be their regular practice. The deep matter of monkhood has been touched. Each of us is calmed and thoughtful. We sense Ryokan san in our midst. We begin to appreciate the life of a mendicant, the life of simplicity in poverty. Poverty: not an end in itself, but a means to a life in Buddha, one most complete and free.

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