

Encounters With Reverend Master Jiyu
During the 1970's and 1980's
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The call to train can come to us in many different ways, and one of those is through the written word. In 1975, whilst still a lay person in England, I read an article by Reverend Master Jiyu called 'The Cost of Reality'¹ in which she wrote, *“And if you have even a stick of the raft upon which you have floated here left know that I will take it away from you for there is no way you can know the immaculacy of understanding whilst even a shred of safety remains.”* As I read this I had my first real encounter with Reverend Master. The words flowed out of the page and awoke something within me. I had neither seen nor spoken to her but, through these words, we 'met'. They went through me like electricity; fear coursed through me (at the enormity of what lay ahead) mingled with joyful gratitude (that I could change my life, and here was someone who would show me how). Here was someone who wrote with the authority of personal experience and who would not let me get away with being anything other than my best. I think that was the moment I became her disciple.

Two years later, in 1977, I had the great good fortune to be one of six Britons who were invited to train with Reverend Master Jiyu at Shasta Abbey, so we could form the basis of a British Sangha. That September I knelt before her as she ordained me and, over the coming years, there were some significant encounters with her that stand out in my mind, as they offered teaching that has been constantly relevant.

Having been at Shasta Abbey for only a few weeks, I was in the cloister when grief rose up, so unexpectedly, and I felt like my heart was breaking. I could do nothing other than shake with gut wrenching sobs. Reverend Master was out with her chaplains, on her morning walk around the cloister. Seeing a distraught postulant in the distance, she strode purposefully towards me. Without hesitation Reverend Master wrapped her arms around me and held me until the grief subsided, then, looking me in the eye, said, “If I had my way, you would never be hurt again”. She then stayed with me until I was calm enough to continue with my day. Looking back I see how significant this was. Her kindness touched a place of hopelessness within me, and this was the beginning of a thawing out, a gradual opening up process that took place over the following decades.

We can see another person's distress in such a way that sympathy flows. There is a knowing within that recognition, the hand of compassion reaches out and touches a raw wound with a gentleness that one may have thought would never come. It let me know that I would be listened to, that I was worth being listened to, and as this reassurance silently flowed in, it changed something within me. I was no longer alone with it.

We should never underestimate human kindness or the importance of listening to

another person and of allowing an understanding of their state of being to enter into us. When someone can see with the eye of the heart (the Refuge) then what dwells within the heart can come forth, making itself known, flowing through that connection, bringing reassurance and gentle awakening. This is an offering of Dharma.

One of the most significant moments in my training took place in Reverend Master's little den whilst I was staying with her at the Berkeley Buddhist Priory. She asked me to pass her spectacles, receiving them from my hand she looked at me, smiled, and said, "Thanks lass". Looking into her eyes I saw the acceptance, I knew I did not have to fight to win my place with her, that it was freely given and that she accepted me as I was right then, lumps, bumps and all. I was no longer an outsider, trying to get in. This enabled an inner relaxation, layers of tension fell away and I felt grateful. We never know when 'Buddha's touch' will reach out and these gifts of grace, that offer the Dharma in a tender human and personal way, can come to us at the most unexpected of moments. They enable us to know that we are wanted and welcome in the human environment where we train. We have to be able to relax in that environment. This may seem like a little thing, but it is a very big thing. It makes much possible.

Every time I looked into Reverend Master's eyes I saw my reason for training. That does not mean to say that it was all easy going. It was not, and there were times when I wanted to get away from her because being near to her brought so much unresolved confusion to the surface of my mind. When asking her about it she said, "It is because I am your true master and these are the things you need to look at and resolve." Now I understand what she meant and, when I have that effect upon someone who trains with me here at The Place of Peace, and close contact with me calls forth the arising of their own fearful mental scenarios and unresolved issues, I remember how it was for myself, and have compassion for both of us.

Some years earlier, when I was in the midst of one of those dark and stressful times, I saw Reverend Master, who was taking her morning walk, at the far end of the cloister. There was some distance between us and, hoping to avoid her, I thought I would do so by stepping into a store room, where we changed for outdoor work, and wait for her to pass. I heard her footsteps approaching along the cloister, but she did not walk past, instead she flung the door open and looked at me, standing there, in the dark, amongst the work clothes, and said, "Don't try to hide from me Myōhō, it won't work", then continued her walk along the cloister.

This is what, at the time, I found could be so unsettling about Reverend Master. The depth of her awareness was such that there was never anywhere to hide because she knew us better than we knew ourselves, and training with her drew so much to the surface.

This was her great gift to us. We can only see what is within us. If, through contact with the Master, someone feels trust and inspiration, it is because they are connecting

with their own heart of faith. If they feel anger or fear, it is because the Master is the catalyst for that opening up and unfolding within them. It is how, in a good way, life uses the human refuge to reveal what needs to be seen.

One of the great offerings we make in our lives as Buddhists is the willingness to train with those uncomfortable or disturbing feelings rather than seeking escape. Our trust in the Master can help us to see, and make the most of, the opportunity that is being offered, because it connects us with, and strengthens, our ability to trust ourselves. Ultimately we come to see that trusting ourselves and trusting the Refuge amounts to the same thing. And Reverend Master was right, trying to hide won't work.

On another occasion, when I was in what could be called 'a bit of a state', she said, with calmness and clarity, "As a last resort, you could try sitting still with this". When the hurt of what is within them makes a person difficult or over wrought it can get messy and we need infinite patience, both with ourselves and others. We should not fear that messiness. Training is like cleaning out a deep festering wound and most of us will have many challenging and messy times along the way. My experience has been that it takes courage and faith to allow the opening up process of all that we hold within us to take place, it also takes time. None of us knows when the tide will turn, only that it *will*, and, sooner or later, we find that we can sit, we can 'go on', so we should never give up on ourselves or others.

It is hard to remember the past accurately, and there must have been times when I was difficult to deal with, but looking back, I have only admiration and respect for the young monk I was. The training of those early years paved the way for a calling forth that is ever increasing. If we keep going in faith, then all needs will be met, all obstacles overcome, and we will never regret the herculean effort it can, and will, take. Her words, "It is better to die trying than not to try" and "The greatest gift a monk can give to the temple is fearlessness" ring in my heart now as they did then. How right she was. I am sure that training with her saved me lifetimes of suffering and it is worth saying that it will never all be easy for either master or disciple. When the connection is true it will leave no stone unturned. We can resent those whose presence touches on our unresolved issues, our blind spots, but in time we come to appreciate, and want, Truth, more than the delusive self-satisfaction of criticising another, or of engaging in any other activity that is an attempt at escaping from what that connection reveals.

Training with our True Master helps us to see that freedom comes from an entering into, not a running away from, what the jewelled mirror of inner reflection offers us, and the Master's presence is as that jewelled mirror. It helps us to recognise the Truth, and it is truth that sets us free.

In the mid 1980's, when I was visiting from Britain, a few of the monks were watching television with Reverend Master Jiyu in her room. Suddenly she turned to me and, in a matter of fact way, said that I was too emotional and needed to do

something about it, because it meant my training was not of the standard that it should be. Her words went through me like a jolt and I felt stunned. Letting myself settle and digest those words I could see that what she said was true. I could be too emotional and it was preventing my training from maturing. Turning my head, I looked at her, she smiled at me, and I saw the love and kindness in her eyes, I saw that she was helping me. I made *gasshō*, bowed and thanked her for telling me the truth, saying that I would do something about it (and I did). She smiled and said, “I know you will”. We then continued watching television as though nothing had happened. It was very simple, very direct. There was no criticism, judgement or emotionalism, just the opportunity that hearing the Truth brings.

Time and time again I have seen the value of allowing myself to be disturbed by the truth and how this ‘disturbance’ awakens the mind that seeks the way. The right words said at the right time are as an arrow of compassion that penetrates to the heart of the matter, highlighting an opportunity, and within that disturbance lies the way forward. It awakens a questioning of how one is and a wish to do better, combined with a knowing that we want to do it, in fact we rejoice at the opportunity, and this invites the heart to teach us. In the Lotus Ceremony it says, “The teacher of those who can be taught”. 2 A great gift to oneself is to always be thus, to be one who wants to be taught by inner reflection rather than being one who wants to be right, or to hide behind a shield of self-protection (such as resentment or criticism).

As a young novice monk, back in the 1970’s, sitting in meditation in the ceremony hall at Shasta, an image came into my mind. I saw myself in a cage of loneliness and hopelessness. In that image, Reverend Master quietly walked up to that cage, opened the door and stood in meditation beside it. I was terrified of the vastness of freedom that I could see outside of the cage, but I knew she would wait for me to be able to come out. It took many years of training for the walls of that prison of grief to break up and finally fall away, enabling me to step out, with joy and vigour, into a very different quality of life.

Sometimes a being carries a heavy load and they need help. I know, from personal experience, that if they *need* it, that help will come, because it came to me through Reverend Master Jiyu, who recognised my worth as a human being. In doing so she gave me a lifeline, which I took with both hands. It enabled me to look at things I carried within me that took me to a very dark and terrible place; once again I needed help.

In the late 1980’s Reverend Master invited me to sit a retreat, under her supervision, at Shasta Abbey. At the beginning of it I told her I was unsure how to open up to so much inner distress and the tension that went with it, would I become out of control? How can I do this? She smiled at me and said, “I will tell you exactly how you can do it. You let the Eternal handle it”. These words spread through me like a wave of peace. I knew she was right, I knew what to do. This is what she always did, she entrusted herself to the Refuge. In this she was fearless. Her trust in what flows forth from meditation was, for me, her greatest attribute. It impressed upon me how deeply we must train so that the placing of ourselves within the Refuge can be pure. By

‘pure’ I mean that we let the mind be as pure, clear water, which can receive whatever needs to come forth without ‘I want’ ‘I don't want’ entering into it, and muddying that water.

This enables us to become as a pipe through which the emptying out, the revealing of all we have carried for so long, can unfold and be set free. This ‘letting go’ and entrusting ourselves to the meditation, can be a time of great vulnerability, and we may need the physical refuge that a protected place of training, and the understanding of those who have been through such an opening up, offers.

When the emptying out is complete, the confusion and distress that accompanies it, will no longer have a reason to exist. We are left with a knowing of what (rather than who) we are, and the silent invitation to be always becoming our potential flows out to us and is received through the breath; it is ever unfolding, as we sit within the purity of faith.

There are times when saying “thank you” cannot even begin to express what one feels.

The Master is the human form through whom the Great Mystery can call to us. That call will awaken all that needs looking at and resolving. There is a place (or **formless** state of being) where Master and disciple meet as one, and this is the common root within which their individual (transient) differences fall away. We ‘meet’ our Master, which is the eternal flowing of The Great Mystery, within that place, where neither self nor other exist. Through the grace of this ‘meeting’, and the gift of our relationship with the human Master (through whom we can understand what it means to practice in this everyday world), we can receive insight, direction, guidance and, most importantly, human understanding and example.

Reverend Master told us that, “It is enough to know the Eternal”. She then showed us how to know that ‘enough’, how to receive the gifts of training, how to enter into, and be filled, with its sufficiency.

For this I bow in gratitude.

Footnotes:

1 The Journal of the Zen Missionary Society, November 1975. This later became the OBC Journal we have today. Reverend Master Jiyu wrote a second article, *The Cost of Reality*: Continued from November 1975, that appeared in the OBC Spring Journal 1989.

2 This is from the Lotus Ceremony that we recite at festivals. The full quote is ‘the Supreme Teacher of those who can be taught, the Teacher of gods and men’ and can

be found on page 186 of *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, Shasta abbey Press, Mt Shasta, CA, 1990.