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## WHY DO WE RECITE SUTRAS?

by Hakuun Yasutani Roshi

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues. Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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(Hakuun Yasutani Roshi (1885-28 Mar 1973) was a successor of Daiun Sogaku Roshi and a teacher of Koun Yamada Roshi. He was one of Maezumi Roshi's three principle teachers. He visited the United States each year from 1962 to 1969, holding a number of sesshin from coast to coast. More articles by and about Yasutani Roshi appear in the Yasutani Roshi Memorial Issue of the Zen Center of Los Angeles Journal, available in the ZCLA Bookstore. This document was scanned from an un-referenced 2-page typed manuscript in the collection of the Sydney Zen Center.)

There are three reasons why we recite sutras. First, we recite them to make an offering to Buddhist patriarchs; second, to create a noble relationship with all beings; third, to unite these first two actions with our Buddhist training.

The first reason, to make a sincere offering to Buddhist patriarchs, is a natural expression of gratitude for the opportunity to hear, to believe, to learn and to realize Buddhist teaching.

Our action in erecting a Buddhist image and offering it incense, flowers, candle-light and deep bows is such an expression. The greatest delight for Buddhist patriarchs is for their followers to respect, to maintain and to spread the teaching. Therefore, we sit before an image and recite with sincerity the sutras which they composed. In this way, our sutra recitation is the expression of our gratitude to them.

Second, Buddhist followers want to have others know about and believe and realize the noble teaching of the Buddha. In order to do this, we must read sutras as often as possible. It is necessary and important to do this to establish a relationship with many people. You may ask why, then, we may read sutras alone, or before a dead person. Such recitation has value, and I will explain it to you.

We recite sutras before others as an education of their subconscious minds. On the surface, it may seem that effectiveness of teaching is limited by the extent of understanding. So, it may be thought, if we read difficult sutras, they will have no effect. However, only people who do not understand the power and subtlety of the subconscious, hold such an opinion. If you have studied only a little about the subconscious, you will know that even though you do not grasp meaning with your conscious mind, you may understand very clearly with your subconscious. Or, if you do not get any conscious impression, you may already have a subconscious impression. Moreover, you will know, if you have studied the matter, that our conscious mind is influenced by our subconscious; indeed, that our subconscious operates absolute control over our character.

Now, reading sutras alone in a mountain temple is announcing Buddha's teaching to all the world, to all the universe. For our conscious minds, we need a radio station and a radio. However, on the subconscious level, all people in this world and all life in this universe receive perfectly the sutras recited by one person in a mountain temple, and they accept completely the doctrines of Buddhism.

Moreover, if you know the grandeur and subtlety of the thinking process, you

will realize that just thinking the sutras, without using the voice, has a great influence upon the people of the world

Thus, whether or not others can see or hear, whether they are alive or long dead, if we recite sutras time and again with great conviction to the visible and invisible worlds, we permeate everywhere and guide many to Buddhism, saving all beings. Therefore, the recitation of sutras is very meaningful work.

I presume that you understand that the first two elements of sutra recitation are elements of Buddhist training. But I want to emphasize this point, that there is a great difference in effectiveness in both elements according to the way you recite the sutras -- with great energy and single-mindedness, or half-heartedly.

At the same time, there is also a great difference in effectiveness in the third aspect of sutra recitation. This third element is this: if you recite sutras with great energy and single-mindedness frequently, then your own samadhi-power will be strengthened and you will have a good chance for satori. Or, if you have already awakened, your satori will shine more brilliantly in your character and act more effectively in your everyday life. The most important attitude in reciting sutras is to recite with your whole spirit.

In conclusion, let me say that if you recite sutras with your whole heart, there will be no difference between zazen and your recitation.

Translated by:  
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