

# Flowering Garbage

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei (Presented while training as Shuso)  
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**Our lives are the flowering activity of the Lotus Matrix Treasury.**

Really. I know this because that is what it's called in the **Brahmajala sutra**, the text that I am translating with Zen Master Anzan Hoshin. But I also know this because it is what we are all practicing and realizing here in the Zendo at Zazen-ji. The **Brahmajala sutra** is the source for the Precepts that the monks of the Northern Mountain Order practice and part of the inspiration for the shingi or standards of deportment that allow us to recognize how to live as that. The whole environment of the forms, of zazen, of the ikebana and artwork and Teachings of the Teacher is one in which our lives become opportunities.

Our greatest difficulty in living as the flowering activity of the Lotus Matrix World is that we are *convinced* that we are less than that. The Lotus Matrix World is a description of what is true but it is not just a story about who we are; it is part of a set of instructions that help us to realize who we are beyond all stories and concepts. But for most of us, all that we seem to be are our thoughts and feelings, our stories and concepts; the stories we tell ourselves and tell each other. And most of our stories are based on a sense of poverty, of problem, of unworthiness. And so instead of living face to face with Reality in all its richness, we stumble over scraps and husks, we wade in garbage.

But even this isn't a problem. Every gardener knows that the worst garbage can make the best compost. From the garbage of our confusion we can learn to grow the flowers of Richness.

Coming face to face with Reality begins with facing the fact that we tend to make ourselves feel like shit;

that we rub our noses in whatever seems wrong; that we find unconditioned joy to be uncomfortable.

I would like to tell you a story about this involving Anzan roshi. Bear in mind that what the Sensei does is to free people from their states. In order to tell you a story about the Sensei, I have to tell you about a state I was in which he opened. But the difficulty of conveying anything about it to you is that when we are in a state we become dysfunctional and can't remember anything. Still, I'll try.

Recently, I bought a beautiful pineapple. It was quite large and had a crown of thick, very green leaves. When I unpacked it at the monastery, I decided that it should go in the fridge until it was to be used because the heat and humidity was causing fruit to spoil very quickly. But it just wouldn't fit. It was too large for the shelf. So I proceeded to saw off the crown and left it sitting on the counter.

A few moments later, the Sensei came into the kitchen to make lunch. He saw the cluster of pineapple leaves on the counter and, without the least hesitation, reached for a black bowl. He placed a kenzan in it, arranged the pineapple crown and filled the bowl with water. Turning, he walked directly to a bookcase in the kitchen, on top of which stands a rupa of Kwannon, the bodhisattva of graceful compassion. He set the bowl next to it and we both moved back to see it. It was beautiful. The pineapple crown ikebana looked like an exotic tropical plant. It certainly didn't look like garbage.

I think that this is a good example of the kind of everyday art we are presented with at Zazen-ji. Another would be the ikebana that have been mounted recently in the Zendo. One was an arrangement that the Sensei called, "the bamboo kami." It was just a bunch of bamboo garden stakes that he cut into different lengths, arranged their lengths in unpredictable ways with each other and bound with raffia. It was beautiful. It wasn't kami or sacred because it represented the god of bamboo. Nor was it that each piece of bamboo was kami. It was the presence of the sacred, present as bamboo. Or, right now, there is an arrangement made from lengths of willow that were pruned from the willow in the garden. They were bent into a curve, allowed to dry, and again wound around with raffia.

It is not just that garbage can be used to grow flowers. The Sensei shows us that garbage can be flowers.

Now I will tell you something about the moment to moment art of the Teacher.

Every morning the monks assemble one hour before the morning formal sitting begins. The Sensei leads us in **Ta-kesa no ge** , **the Verse of the Kesa** , and then we do the *shinrei* or morning bells. Following this, as the shuso, I lead the monks in the **Samu no ge** , or **Verse of Caretaking Practice** , and then we prepare the Zendo and the monastery for the sitting. The morning after the Sensei transformed the pineapple crown into an ikebana, I went into the kitchen to get something, just as the Sensei began speaking to one of the monks. The Sensei asked if he had noticed the ikebana (which had been sitting there since the afternoon before in full view). Unfortunately, the monk hadn't. We miss so many moments of dignity and richness if we don't make ourselves available to what is right before us and right here, (as the Sensei would say), as us. I allowed myself the luxury of a moment of pity for the monk. Something like, "Poor benighted fool! Hee hee."

I heard him say, "It's the crown of a pineapple! We cut the top off and put it in water. Do you like it?" The monk responded enthusiastically. Standing behind them, I glowered, although no expression showed on my face.

The Sensei then turned to me and said, smiling, "Shuso, I'd like to see you outside for a few minutes." I

followed him out to the garden, where he sat down on a bench. I stood in front of him and he began to ask me what I would like for lunch. As he spoke, I tried to follow what he was saying, but my attention kept turning to a feeling tone and a sense of contraction.

In the middle of a description of a type of soup, the Sensei's face suddenly changed expression. "What?" he asked.

A familiar shock wave moved through my body along with, as nearly as I can approximate it, the thought: "Oh, oh. He's got me and there's nowhere to go." You see, monks don't get away with anything here; at least, not for very long. With the Sensei, nothing is hidden, no matter how small. He might let us stew in something for a while, but sooner or later we find ourselves standing in front of him, being asked to take responsibility for how we are, to open up around it.

I said, "Oh, well... I just got caught in some stuff." Now, with the Sensei, this kind of dishonesty is tantamount to a full-blown lie. I was still caught in the state even though I was able to recognize that I could just drop it. We just can't hedge. He can see exactly what we're doing and this is only slightly less dishonest than saying, "Nothing, Sensei," and grinning or acting cute. Once asked, any attempt to re-arrange the landscape to try to hide, to make it look like nothing or to make it look like something other than it is, is absolutely futile, because he comes right in after us. Which is precisely what he did.

His face completely changed and it was nothing short of terrifying. He said, "What are you doing?" I knew exactly what he was talking about. I also knew that I had about three seconds to admit it.

"Oh, I had some poverty stuff come up this morning...um...(hedge, hedge) about the pineapple top."

"What about the pineapple top?" Admitting to being poverty stricken was a start, but I still wasn't coming out from behind my conviction about the contraction.

I whined, "You *never* say that I do anything, that I had anything to do with things that are done." Now this is garbage and had nothing to do with anything that actually happens in my real life but at that moment I was stubbornly determined to be that garbage.

The moment I admitted to what was actually going on, the Sensei's face changed again. It was no longer terrifying. First he laughed, and then said, "So you wanted me to say that you cut the top off the pineapple? But then I would have to talk about the person who put it on the shelf in the store, the people who brought it there and the person who grew it. I would have to talk about the size of the sun, the mass of the earth, the relative distance between the sun and the earth, the whole history of the universe up until the point that I am speaking right now. Everything is intimately involved. Each thing makes everything else what each thing is, intimately. Everything is done by everything and everyone. For the sake of convenience we can say, 'I' or 'you' but there is no one being spoken about."

As he was speaking he was showing me the Total Field of Richness and I could see for a moment from the point of view of the Lotus Matrix, if not from that of Awareness itself. But it was too big for me to be me. In the next moment, a cascade of fragmented thoughts arose and I stood there, desperately looking for something to grasp onto, some form of escape.

Watching this, he stopped in mid-sentence and said, "Now what?"

“Oh, I had just better go and finish my samu.”

He said, “You know that we’re not finished until you’re finished with doing this to yourself. After everything I’ve just been saying to you about this, you’re still holding on to this feeling tone. You just don’t want to let go of it, do you? By doing that, you’re taking what I just taught you and you’re throwing it in the garbage. You can’t do samu with this going on because then it’s not samu.”

Another shock wave passed through me as I realized what I was doing. But this time I gave it up.

He smiled and bowed me out.

Just as grace, dignity, and art is an everyday bread and butter (or rice and tea) matter at Zazen-ji, living past roles and social identities is simply how things are here. For example, gender distinction is something that is seldom discussed at Zazen-ji. It just isn’t an issue for the most part because the shingi, or rules of monastic deportment as taught by the Sensei really make any discussion unnecessary. The shingi transform our garbage into flowers and situations will tend to look after themselves because as we follow the shingi, the alignment that they create corrects deviations of any type that come up. It is only when we step outside of the shingi that things become complicated.

I have another little story about garbage to show you what I mean.

Earlier this year, we were invited to a Vietnamese Buddhist temple to visit with other monks and share a meal that the abbot, Thich Bon Dat, wanted to offer to the Sensei. In the gathering of 8 monks, two were female, 6 male. Towards the end of the visit, we gathered in an office to share tea, fruit and some sweets.

I helped to pour the tea and passed it to junior monks sitting to my right. Although I am a female monk, the fact that I poured the tea had nothing to do with gender. I happened to be seated closest to the tea pot and it was simpler for me to pour the tea and pass the bowls of fruit and sweets to the other monks. The monk to my right took a piece of fruit, and a sweet. I noticed in my peripheral vision that he did not know what to do with either the pit or the wrapper and so kept it in his hand.

When we were finished the tea, we stood to say good-bye. The monk to my right stood with his hand hanging awkwardly to his side, clenching his little store of garbage. I reached across the table, pulled a kleenex from a box, turned and handed it to him. I didn’t do that because I was a female acting out a mothering role for the poor messy male who’s much too important to know how to take care of himself as I used to feel compelled to do. I did it because, as his senior, I was responsible for him and I knew what he needed to do and he didn’t.

He nodded in appreciation, and, laying the kleenex across his left hand, placed his garbage in the centre and then very carefully folded it into a small bundle. Then he handed this neat little package of garbage to me. I looked at it, and then I looked at him, and then I handed it back.

We looked at each other and both of our faces simultaneously blossomed with smiles.

Have a **good** morning.