

THE CONSTANT PRACTICE OF RIGHT EFFORT

Revised version of the opening lecture for a Zen Buddhist retreat at Pendle Hill in September 2008

Thank you to everyone for your presence here. Simply and in a word, we have gathered for this retreat to put an end to, to come to the end of, “dis-ease” or *dukkha*. (*Dukkha* is a Buddhist technical term; it is also the first noble truth of Buddhism.) To put it another way, we are here to find true ease, to come to true rest, genuine health and wholeness – *real* stability.

Can we, by exerting effort, come to rest? Can we? You see how important it is to practice correctly. Or we end up chasing our own tail in an endless, fruitless effort.

The fourth noble truth is called the eightfold path, one of which is right effort – correct or proper effort. Clarifying and putting into practice this right effort is crucial. Otherwise, wrong effort only prolongs the dis-ease you are trying to cure; a fatal error.

This is the beginning of a retreat. As many of you have mentioned in your introductions, it is a precious opportunity for us to practice together, to support and be supported by each other in our practice. Right here and now, let us begin with right effort.

Do you see how striving to attain something, within or without, is itself prolonging the dis-ease? You may do it quickly or slowly, poorly or well, but after all it is a fruitless and futile effort, like chasing your own tail. It is not the right effort of Buddhism. To put it bluntly, trying to get somewhere other than where you are, trying to realize something or attain some state of mind, is part and parcel of the dis-ease that self is.

As you come to clearly see this through your own experience, to taste it, you can let go of wrong effort once and for all. Then your practice can naturally develop right effort untainted by self. Not that you cease to do anything! But you cease the frustrating and pointless practice of wrong effort, you stop chasing your own tail. Such wrong effort is a tremendous waste of energy. And it does not bring about true ease. In fact, it tends to create other problems instead.

Striving to get somewhere, to attain something, is wrong effort. Is it any better, however, to try and persuade myself that I’m okay as I am, that I don’t need to do anything – after all, all beings have the Buddha nature, right? I trust you can already see what a deceptive and fruitless dead end this is. To put it bluntly, the self that is not at ease is trying to convince itself that it is. It doesn’t work. Far from resolving anything, it tends to become an escape from actual problems. Clearly not right effort.

On the one hand striving to attain something, and on the other hand trying to convince myself that I’m okay when I’m not – both are symptoms of the same dis-ease. The self, through its own will power, striving to attain some enlightened state is like being dehydrated – and then deciding to run around the block a few times. That will only make it worse. Trying to convince yourself that you’re okay when you’re not is like overeating to the point of nausea – and then deciding to wash it down with a banana split. Both are wrong effort. Seeing this much, let them both go, now and for good. Not because I say so, but because you see it through your own practice and experience.

This retreat is a precious opportunity to *see through* the delusive dis-ease that self is. Not mere ideas or notions *about* it. But to actually see through it, thus to let it go for good. One way to work on this is through the constant practice of right effort. The retreat and the meals as well are in silence. During the sittings we are not only silent but still. Not because we are prohibited from talking or moving, but because such noble silence and noble stillness are themselves right effort. We eloquently support each other in our practice without unnecessary talking or movement. These are themselves precious facets in our constant practice of right effort, whether eating, sitting, walking or going to the toilet.

If you are in good health, sitting through the nights together is also a natural part of this. Why? Do it and you will see how sitting through the nights is an integral part of the constant practice of right effort. However, if your health does not allow it, no problem; sitting through the nights does not equal right effort. If you sit through the nights as a huge, willful striving, that is wrong effort. Better to rest in your room, lying on your back and gently maintaining your focus below your belly so that when you wake up it is there before a thought arises. That is right effort.

In a sense, it has nothing to do with sleeping or staying up all night. This retreat is, however, a precious opportunity for sustained practice together. We have all made preparations, some of you have come a great distance, and our families and coworkers have made sacrifices so that we could be here. It is only natural to make best use of this opportunity and sit through the nights. No one will tell you what you must do, however. Finally you must decide for yourself.

This means not letting your momentary inclinations and passing fancies dictate what to do either. If your sitting is not yet firmly established in right effort, you may find yourself lost in thoughts such as: “Wow, I’m really inspired. I’m going to sit through the nights!” And that may keep you going, for a period or two. Around three or four in the morning it can get pretty fuzzy, however, and you may find the following much more convincing: “Well, he also said that it’s not just about sitting through the nights...” In short, you find yourself swayed by momentary waves of discursive thought. And if you’re going on sheer willpower, they will sound very persuasive indeed. Mere willpower is utterly useless here, quite powerless.

Don’t give in to what are merely momentary inclinations. If you do, you won’t be able to do anything completely, certainly not sustained Buddhist meditation. As your sitting becomes settled, such passing fancies cease to be a problem. This is not mere willpower, but a much more basic kind of dedication. In a word, right effort coming to fruition. Confirm it yourself during this retreat. Right effort allows us to keep the practice constant, without being swayed by such passing fancies.

Don’t replace one set of delusions with another. For example, don’t waste time and energy using willpower to endlessly cut off thoughts as they arise. You can already see why, can’t you? The very effort to stop thoughts arising or to cut them off once they have arisen is itself a kind of willful thought. Wrong effort – striving to put a stop to thought – merely arouses more thoughts, an endless cycle of attacking thoughts with more thoughts.

Thus Buddhism emphasizes uprooting the root-source of delusion, rather than endlessly cutting off one blade of grass, then another, and then another. More to the point, the root itself dissolves of its own accord. That is right effort.

Practically speaking, each one of us needs to practice in a way that is appropriate for where we actually are. You may have read books about all kinds of marvelous states and attainments. But if you can't even sit in sustained zazen, if you can't gather all of your energy into the concentrated oneness of samadhi, then you're likely sitting there dreaming up delusions.

Where are you in your actual moment-to-moment practice? Not where do you want to be or where do you think you should be. Then find the practice that is appropriate. One of the reasons we have one-on-one is so that we can go through this together. Then you can clearly see where you actually are, and we can find the practice appropriate for you. This is also a part of right effort.

See what wrong effort is? Endlessly replacing one set of delusions, one form of dis-ease, with another. And then another. And then another. Then you wonder why your practice is so tiring, so boring. As the four noble truths make clear, far from the practice of right effort, this is itself a symptom – and a cause – of the continuing dis-ease.

Discursive thought endlessly replaces one delusion with another; it may go in many different directions, but it is all wrong effort. Dis-ease will never end that way. Let it all go. Do you see? It is the result of dis-eased mind endlessly flip-flopping, hip-hopping from one delusion to the next. It has nothing to do with Zen practice.

What is right effort? Being fully engaged in what is right here and now – without discursive thought arising, without fabrication or contrivance of any kind. In other words, directly seeing through the present experience, whether it is one of intense pain or sublime bliss. This is the practice of right effort. It is also the source of true creativity and of compassionate action in the world, whether we are a gardener, a musician, or whatever. Thus we can truly help another in pain by helping them to see through it. Confirm this through your own practice here at this retreat, and in the rest of your life. Find out your self. See through your self.

A formal koan in Zen Buddhism can serve to gather and focus all into one. However, it is not necessary. What is necessary? To see through self. That is really the only koan there is. If you are using a koan and you are not doing that, then face it, you are not really working on a koan. Nor do you need a formal koan in order to do this.

Through right effort, naturally and patiently pour yourself into your practice. Consumed with the practice, there is no room for thoughts of getting closer to – or farther from – some imagined goal. Any such notions are themselves wrong effort. The practice of right effort reveals this to us.

Beware of thinking that you understand Zen Buddhism. It's really very simple, yet it can be easily misunderstood. Which is why I began by expressing it as, "Can you, by exerting effort, come to rest?" Self is already stuck, entangled in the self-contradiction that it is. Proper practice is not really difficult. But there is something subtle about it that can easily be missed or misconstrued.

The difficulty lies in self's inability to truly see what is. Due to the inherent dis-ease that it is, self distorts things through its own lens into something that it can then acquire if it desires, or eliminate if it doesn't. Confronted with the challenge to simply see – and be – what actually is, self is totally at a loss. Thus it concocts some enlightened state that it assumes will solve all its problems, and then strives to achieve it. Or, to conceal its dis-ease, self deludes itself into thinking that its confusion is clarity, that it's okay when it's not.

A natural koan can emerge the moment I face the fact that, despite all these charades, self cannot even sustain itself! Right effort, very simply, begins by letting go of all such wrong efforts. Then practice can go smoothly, though it will take time. Patience is a virtue.

Precisely why we have a retreat like this. It is a great inspiration for patient and sustained practice with like-minded folks. Make good use of it.

I have been speaking about thirty minutes. Please feel free to stand up and stretch for a moment. That too is right effort. [Short break]

Linji (also Lin-chi), the outstanding Chinese monk of the Tang Dynasty known in Japanese as Rinzai, is considered the father of Rinzai Zen. One of his renowned sayings is: “The Buddha’s teachings are so much toilet paper to wipe your butt with.”¹ Does this mean that the sutras and other Buddhist texts are utterly worthless?

Not at all. Once again, Rinzai said that Buddha’s teachings are toilet paper to wipe your butt with. See how easy it is – with such an apparently clear-cut metaphor and without sufficient practice or experience – to conclude that therefore such things are utterly worthless?

Did you ever go to the toilet and do your thing, then realize there’s no toilet paper? Toilet paper has its place. Everything has its place. It is not worthless by any means. The point Rinzai is boldly declaring has to do with mistaking those precious teachings for the living fact itself.

As I said before the break, be careful thinking that you understand Zen Buddhism. Many of these sayings can be easily misunderstood, even distorted for self-serving purposes. If you are going to take up such Zen expressions you must make them your own, digest them thoroughly – then they can be eliminated.

Rinzai himself said, “I started out devoting myself to the vinaya (monastic code) and also delved into the sutras and sastras (commentaries).”² By his own admission, he studied these things deeply. He goes on to say, however, that he eventually realized they were prescriptions for salvation.³ What about this?

Ever rush to the pharmacy in dire need of medicine – but forget the prescription?

¹ See Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009) p. 19; also see pp. 31, 169-70, & 223.

² Ibid, p. 21.

³ Ibid pp. 21, 52

Indeed, the prescription has its place. It is not worthless. Again, Rinzai is warning us that the precious prescription is not the medicine itself. No matter how valuable the written word or document, if we do not follow the instructions and faithfully take the medicine, then it really is worthless, isn't it?

Rinzai himself, after carefully studying the words and grasping the prescription, goes on to say how he then threw himself into a Zen monastery. He concludes, "...after exhaustive search and grinding practice, then in an instant I knew my self."⁴ That is what we are doing here: the natural fruition of right effort.

According to one of those classic Buddhist "prescriptions," Gotama (Sanskrit.: Gautama) Buddha, sitting under the Bodhi tree prior to his great awakening, vowed to himself something like, "Flesh, blood, and marrow may dry up in my body, but without complete awakening I will not budge from this seat."⁵ That is right effort. Do you see?

He is not saying you can never take a break – even Gotama had to go to the toilet. The real significance of that statement is revealed when we sit so intently that it is not possible to end our practice – whether we get up, take a nap or whatever. During this retreat we naturally have time for nutritious meals and time to rest. Done properly, these are themselves the practice of right effort, done without budging from our Bodhi seat.

"Flesh, blood, and marrow may dry up in my body, but without complete awakening I will not budge from this seat." Whether Gotama actually said anything like this or not is a concern for historians. Actually come to the end of dis-ease – then it is an indisputable fact.

If this is not yet clear, don't worry. Simply give yourself to the practice during this retreat and you will see your self. All you need is to see through now. As Rinzai put it: "Outside this mind there is no dharma-truth – nor is there anything to be attained within."⁶ That is right effort.

Thank you for listening so intently.

THE SUMMIT: CLEARING THE WAY

from lectures during the retreat

Second Day

Two days ago I had the pleasure of taking five Dutchmen, who flew in for this retreat, into center city Philadelphia to visit some historical sights, including the Liberty Bell. On the Liberty Bell is inscribed words adapted from Leviticus 25:10: "...*proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof...*" Sort of a Bodhisattva Vow

⁴ Ibid, pp. 21-22; see also p. 32.

⁵ See for example, *Lalita-vistara*, quoted in Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) p. 71.

⁶ *The Record of Linji*, p. 17.

from early Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was founded as a kind of experiment in religious liberty by William Penn, one of the early members of the Society of Friends, popularly known as Quakers. Many suffered religious persecution, which is one reason they came here.

Over 350 years ago in 1652 the founder of the Society of Friends, George Fox, was wandering in Lancashire, northwest England where he happened upon a hill. Climbing to its top, there he had the decisive religious experience of his life. He later described it as a vision directing him not to simply obey doctrine and rule but instead to focus upon the inner light – the ability of every person to directly perceive truth. The affinity with Buddhism is obvious. He also described it as a religious truth deriving from immediate perception, although some of the aspects become lost in dogma and doctrine. Again, an obvious affinity with the “Zen doctrine” of not relying on words and letters, of an independent transmission apart from any teaching.

The hill in Lancashire upon which George Fox had this religious experience was called Pendle Hill. Which is why the place we are now sitting outside of Philadelphia has the same name; this major retreat center of the Society of Friends in the United States was named in its honor. During this retreat, together we will ascend that hill and see for ourselves.

The following traditional Zen koan can help us clear the way. It may not make sense this first telling, but by the end of the retreat it will. It is case 23 of *The Blue Cliff Record*⁷: Once a Chinese monk, let’s call him Jack, was wandering in the mountains with his fellow monk, let’s call her Jill. Jack points and exclaims: “Right here is the summit of mystic peak.” Jill responds: “Indeed it is; what a pity.” Later this brief exchange was made known to another monk. He said, “If it wasn’t for Jill, you’d see skulls covering the fields.” What are they talking about? Perhaps this sounds bizarre to you now, like a conversation in a secret language. By the end of the retreat you will see that it is a familiar and natural way for them to speak – though there is no need for us to imitate it.

Today let us focus on the first part. No need to worry about the names of the Chinese monks. For ease of understanding, I inserted familiar names of Jack and Jill. But better yet, let’s say it’s you. So, YOU are now wandering in the mountains. Intent on religious practice, you have reached the summit.

Right here is our first task: let go of everything and actually ascend the summit where there is nowhere further to go. On the way up it may not be clear at all, it may be very confusing at times. But once we have actually reached the summit, the vista is crystal clear on all sides, without the least vagueness. Having clearly seen, now you must express it: What is it?

“Right here is the summit of mystic peak!” This is the first part of the case as a koan. There is only one way for you to really know this truth. And that is for you to actually be there yourself. Then express what you have seen. The point here is not what someone somewhere long ago meant when he said such-and-such. Is Mystic Peak an actual place

⁷ See Cleary & Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005).

of pilgrimage in China or a legendary place in a Mahayana Sutra? Or, if we call it Pendle Hill, is it the one in northwest England or the one here in the Philadelphia area? None of these is being addressed here; it is your summit, where you can go no farther, no deeper, no higher.

Again, the first task at this retreat is for each one of us, patiently, calmly, and with right effort to actually arrive here. Clearly, decisively, definitively – not glimpsed through binoculars. Whether you are giving yourself completely to concentrated zazen or working with a koan, it all comes down to this.

These apparently strange koan cases are here to help us on our way. There are many of them. They all point out and express the living truth, yet they do so from different perspectives, to assure that it is seen and lived in every aspect of our lives. This koan case begins with the basic point of religious practice, challenging us first to actually reach the summit and see for ourselves.

Let me introduce one other koan case. It may help you to illumine one case in light of the other. This is case 29 of *The Blue Cliff Record*: A monk asked the master, “The conflagration at the end of the eon destroys the universe, but is *this* destroyed or not?” By way of background, in ancient Buddhist cosmology, at the end of an eon, all that we know as this world will be consumed in flames and come to an end. Then a new eon would begin. All of this is part of samsara, the endless cycle of dis-ease. Nothing mysterious here; it was the way Buddhists understood the world. How different is it from someone nowadays seeking to understand our world in terms of Genesis, or for that matter, Darwin?

To rephrase the monk’s question: “I have seen that all things of this world are temporary, subject to arising and decay. But what about this one, this true self I have realized – it will not be destroyed like all the rest, will it?” Perhaps this monk had some insight or experience, and now he cherishes it. Not so difficult to understand, is it? Perhaps it was gained as the result of great effort – right or wrong, we don’t know, as no details of the monk remain. At any rate, he is asking for all of us: when the world is destroyed, is *this* destroyed or not?

The master’s response: “Destroyed!” The published translation, adding English syntax, reads: “It is destroyed.” – destroying the force of the Chinese, which consists of only one character with no stated subject or object.

The monk, following what he thinks is the master’s logic, persists: “Then does *this* go along with it?” The published translation accurately renders the master’s response: “It goes along with it.” Allow me to freely render the master’s response: “Gone!” This koan illumines a slightly different perspective than the koan of the summit. Is it useful for you here and now?

Like the case of the summit, this case can also be taken as three separate but related koans. Today let me just touch on the first koan: A monk asks, “When the world comes to an end, is *this* destroyed or not?” How different is this from the opening koan of the summit? “Right here is the summit of mystic peak!”

To see into these koans, it is helpful to know something of the Buddhist culture from

which they naturally derive. And so I have explained something of the background.

But the essential point is to pull the koan out of your self. Or rather, pull your self out of the koan. Otherwise it's just a story about someone else. To be a living koan it must become our own immediate, inevitable question. Thus, in our own practice at this retreat we must actually reach the summit, then we know and can express it: What does it look like? What do you see?

In the second case, if you have realized something – call it this precious one – can it be destroyed? Again, not just these two koans, but every koan is concerned with seeing through self: first of all what I call my self, but also the self of every thing. No need to be preoccupied with the details, the personages and so on of the koan cases. As the great Japanese Zen master Bankei put it, don't get stuck in another man's tub!⁸

These koan cases have been devised to help us realize no-self – for no-self to realize itself: “Right here is the summit of mystic peak!” Or: “Is *this* destroyed?” Here and now, does anyone have their own living koan to bring forth? [Pause]

If not, then continue on into your own. If these two koan cases can serve as grist for the mill, can spur or inspire you, fine. If not, throw them away, or use them as toilet paper. Thank you for listening so intently.

Third Day

I trust you have confirmed for yourself some of the things I have said. For some of you, pain has become a problem. Sitting many, many hours each day in zazen, naturally there is some pain. We are not trying to hurt, of course. That's why it is important to learn to sit properly. Everyone has a different body, so we must learn this for ourselves. We learn by doing it, although yoga stretches and so forth can be helpful to limber up.

Even if you sit well, there will likely be some pain. *Standing* for ten or fifteen hours a day can be painful; confined to a bed for a long time, people develop bedsores. Again, learn to sit properly so as to eliminate or at least minimize the pain. We are not trying to have pain, of course; but neither are we trying to avoid the inevitable pain that we do have. If you have pain, be aware of it. It is your body telling you something – listen.

As your zazen becomes firmly established, you simply *are* the pain; you don't avoid or deny it. Neither do you *react* against it, which causes it to tense up and become worse. For example, when your left knee hurts, you may try to compensate by moving. This usually works – for about a minute or so. Then what happens? It starts to hurt somewhere else. Then you move again. This is not zazen at all, but the physical manifestation of dis-ease, restlessness playing hide and seek with itself.

Instead, *be* the pain. If that is your present experience, let it be your koan of the present moment. If it is there, be it. Then to a great extent the pressure can be relieved rather than worsened. It's no miracle, but this can greatly reduce rather than aggravate the pain. It also allows you to continue the constant practice of right effort by *being* what is actually present at the moment.

⁸ See Norman Waddell, *The Unborn: The Life and Teaching of Zen Master Bankei* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984) p. 133.

Tiredness and sleepiness can also be problems. We've sat through two nights so far. Established in the constant practice of right effort, it's not hard to sit through the nights. The samadhi or concentrated oneness is so deep and settled that even when rising from the seat, samadhi gets up and does what must be done. Sustained sitting in deep samadhi is more restful than sleep – certainly more restful than fitful sleep.

If you're not sitting properly, it is difficult to sit through the nights because your sitting causes extra strain. See for yourself: once your sitting is settled, there is nothing more restful. On the other hand, we've all gone to sleep on occasion and woke up feeling worse than when we went to bed! Sleep is not always restful. Awake or asleep, self fills itself with delusions and dreams, worries and nightmares. Sitting through the nights is a fine way to confirm that your sitting is, indeed, settled and that you are becoming established in the constant practice of right effort.

Sitting through the nights, getting hit with a stick – Rinzai Zen has a reputation for severity. And there is some truth to that, especially in a Rinzai monastery. But don't mistake that severity for lack of compassion. Zen Buddhism does not show its compassion in the beautiful manner that some other branches of Buddhism do. But I can assure you, that stick *is* compassion. Here you're not being hit as punishment; you're only being hit when you ask for it, and then to help you in your practice. It can relieve stiff shoulders, wake you up and spur you on. It is even called the stick of compassion.

Likewise, silence can be cold, indifferent. The silence at this retreat is not. Although we are keeping noble silence, if we happen to meet others on the grounds here, we are happy to hear their talk and laughter. It is not a hindrance at all to our silence. Our silence embraces the whole cacophony of marvelous sounds around us. Talk is not always compassionate communication – words can be used as weapons, or to conceal truth. Done properly, our silence, our stillness, even our "severity" is compassion.

Yesterday we took up the first part of the koan case: "Right here [striking the floor] is the summit of mystic peak!" I trust this first task is clear – for each one of you to confirm it for yourself. Clearly and without doubt: "Yes, this is it!"

However, the case does not end here. In a sense it *begins* here. Our good friend on the Way cannot help but bow in agreement: "Indeed it is..." Yes indeed, right here is the summit. But then she adds: "...what a pity." Why does she say this? Where does this come from? Here is the second koan of the case.

Once you have truly arrived at the summit, the next step should be obvious. However, as a matter of fact, often it is not. We become blinded by what we have seen. Thus our good friend on the Way kindly pushes us off our high horse.

You may think that the first monk was ignorant and the second monk enlightened. But, at least according to the Zen tradition, both of these monks were speaking from the same place and they understood each other perfectly. They were testing and teasing each other in the utmost seriousness of Zen play. Thus, this "story" continues to inspire us over a thousand years later.

Again, you may think that the summit was lost because the first monk spoke of it; he turned it into "right here." But if it's really living, it can't be lost or lessened, however

much we speak of it. Both of them fully and eloquently expressed the truth. “Right here is the summit of mystic peak” is a marvelous and essential spiritual fact. Not only Zen but the Pali texts of early Buddhism make this clear time and again with statements attributed not only to Gotama but to disciples, male and female: with awakening one *realizes* that what must be done has been done, that final freedom has been won, that dis-ease has come to an end once and for all, that there is no more becoming, and so on. Needless to say, this is an essential “highlight” on the Path. And we must realize it ourselves.

If it is thoroughgoing, however, right there the second statement inevitably arises, like the valley’s echo from a mountaintop cry. From out of the bottomless depths of that summit, the echo comes forth loud and clear: “You’re damn right; and ain’t that a shame!” In other words, where do you go from there? What do you do with it?

Without first reaching the summit, the resounding echo cannot come forth. But once we have reached the summit, our practice naturally takes a turn. As I mentioned in the beginning, we must practice appropriate for where we actually are on the Way. Where are you? We have just examined the second koan of this case; tomorrow we will see into the third.

We also looked into the case where the monk asks: “When the world comes to an end, is *this* destroyed or not?” Well, maybe all things must pass – but not this! The response: “Destroyed!” With this unequivocal utterance, every last foothold and hiding place is wiped away. Is this the same or different than the koan of the summit? According to Zen tradition, the monk in this case did not get it. What about you?

Fourth Day

We left Jack and Jill up there blabbering on about the summit of mystic peak and what a pity it was. Now for the third and final koan of this case. Later someone else added the comment: “If not for Jill, you’d see skulls covering the fields.” What about this? Is something being added, or taken away? Is something clarified, or gone beyond? Without making the koan our own, we cannot get inside. In effect, he is saying that without Jill’s precious statement, it would have been dead long ago. How does it continue today as the living, breathing reality that it is? Only YOU can answer that question; and only then can it truly be the living reality that it is.

“Right here is the summit of mystic peak!” First you must arrive here. Then, inevitably arises: “Indeed it is; what a pity.” Then a further statement is made – but from where? From the standpoint of lowly delusion? Exalted enlightenment? Finally, where do you stand?

We also looked into the first two koans from the following case. A monk asks: “When the world comes to an end, is *this* destroyed or not?” The master responds: “Destroyed!” Now for the third and final part of this case: The monk, not understanding, persists: “Then does *this* go along with it?” Can you hear the monk tripping over his own feet? This precious one that I have realized, polished and perfected for years – gone, just like all the rest? Seems the monk doesn’t want it to be this way. Perhaps he was holding on to some true self which he thought must be unborn, undying, and so on. What about you? On the surface, the master appears merciless, but he is really most merciful. He adroitly

responds: “Gone!” Can you go along with that?

These two koans of “the summit of mystic peak” and “destroyed” are not identical. But both in their own way are pointing out, indeed, eloquently expressing, the living truth. How do you see it? How do you express it? Baisao was a Zen-tea man living in Kyoto a few hundred years ago; when he got old he committed some of his precious tea utensils to the flames with a poem to the effect:

*After the eon-ending fire consumes all things
Won't the emerald mountain peak still soar into white clouds?*⁹

We still have several hours; please do not waste this precious opportunity. What remains?

Closing

We are now coming to the completion of our retreat. Thank you to everyone for your precious support. We have been sitting long and hard, giving ourselves fully to our practice.

Be careful that the retreat does not become something that you did, some “peak experience” that you had. Don't turn it into the summit at Pendle Hill. During the retreat you may drop the division that self is. Without the constant practice of right effort, however, once you “return to the world,” you may find new divisions arising. With right effort our practice really is seamless; there is no separation – whatever we smack up against. *This* – call it what you like – can it be burned, destroyed, perfected or corrupted?

One special concern now is how to return to the world: to our families, daily lives, and to our work. Wrong effort assures us that when we return we will end up getting in an argument or seeing how everyone else is so utterly unenlightened. With right effort, we pour ourselves fully into our practice at this retreat – a rather special environment. In much the same way, when we return to the world, we pour ourselves into whatever comes next. Just as we have embraced our practice here, we go home and embrace our family, our loved ones. We embrace the joys and pleasures, just as we embrace the challenges and problems.

Let what must be done *be* the practice of the moment. Will it always go smoothly? No. Right there is where our blind spot is revealed. Then we bow, in deep thanks, to the difficulties and challenges as our precious teacher clearing the Way. In this way our practice will proceed, wherever we are.

Thank you for listening so intently. Take great care returning home.

⁹ See Norman Waddell, *The Old Tea Seller* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008) p. 84.