

The Pearl Revealed

Retreat Lectures

Steyl, Netherlands, September 2013

Day 1

Introduction

What we are doing is so simple it brings tears to my eyes: To let all come fully to rest – then see what is there.

It is simple enough. But for the seeking self it is not easy. Why? Because it is seeking, grasping – through all of its senses. Through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch (bodily sensations), and most importantly through mind (or mental sense): thinking, feeling, willing, hoping, desiring.

Thus the marvelous practice of zazen, which naturally allows the grasping at the root of sense experience to come undone. This is not just a matter of our surface thoughts or intellect – that's merely the tip of the iceberg. Confirm this for yourself. Not merely thinking about it, but neither is it the mere absence of thought. It is the grasping activity of sense experience come to rest – then **seeing** what is there. What remains when all has been brought to rest, when there is not one thing? Then you will know what needs to be done.

Zazen manuals describe it this way:

To find the pearl, calm the waves. With the water clear, the pearl reveals itself.

[Cf. Thomas Cleary, *Minding Mind: A Course in Basic Meditation*, p. 18
and Carl Bielefeldt, *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation*, p. 183]

This is the essence of genuine zazen. To find the pearl, calm the waves of mind and all sense experience. With the water clear, the pearl reveals itself.

The Great Matter of Life and Death

In his introductory talk last night, Guus van Osch kindly provided us with his own take on “the great matter of life and death.” He did it in such a way that each of us could consider for ourselves what that actually is. There are many such expressions in Buddhism. But they are basically pointing out the same thing – which is right underfoot. So it is not really difficult, once we open ourselves to it. Terms like the first noble truth of *dukkha*: that all conditions are in a state of dis-ease. Dis-ease.

How can we come fully to rest in that? It is also spoken of as *samsara*: the endless cycle of birth, aging, sickness, death. Different ways to express the deeply rooted yet ultimately delusive dis-ease that is self-existence.

The great matter of life and death, or of birth and death. (“Life and death” and “birth and death” are renderings of the same term, consisting of two Chinese characters. The first character means both life and birth.) It is not just about living. Nor is it just about dying. It is the great matter of life and death. The whole thing. Even in the greatest liveliness of our living, death is always right underfoot, isn’t it? The moment we are born, we bring death into life, don’t we?

The great matter of life and death is crucial in Buddhism. To the extent that it is realized, our practice takes a natural turn. It is discovered underfoot. It cannot be resolved simply by continuing to live this self-centered life. Nor can it be resolved by dying. Thus we have this wonderful practice of zazen. The very posture shows the way through. We are not going anywhere; we are no longer trying to escape from our situation. Instead, we are putting our legs in such a way that supports practice. We don’t have to sit in full lotus, but it is a very balanced way of opening up the hips. It allows the belly to be settled and the back to be naturally erect, so that we can fully focus on the matter at hand.

The same with our hands as they naturally rest on our lap. We are not scratching every time we have an itch, or looking at our watches. Such things no longer bind us. Eyes and ears remain open; if the fire alarm goes off, we hear it and respond. But we are not seeking anything through the senses. We don’t need to, for we have already heard, seen, smelled, tasted and touched enough, haven’t we? And we have thought until we couldn’t think anymore. We know where that goes. Been there, done that.

The great matter of life and death is really no different than **you** – what is that? Here is the precious entrance. Precisely here, the self-delusion that is the source of suffering is undone. Then we are no longer fooled by mere states of mind, by ways of doing this or being that. The body and mind fully engaged in practice reveals this. What are you waiting for?

Buddhism often speaks of a doctor examining the symptoms, then prescribing the needed medicine. If, in your delirium, you are not clear about this great matter of life and death, of self grasping after itself, then you are likely trying to heal yourself without knowing what your illness is. This can make your suffering even worse. So please, open your eyes to what’s directly underfoot. It is your precious entrance.

Self as Cyberspace

Let me try and make it as clear and simple as I can. Let's consider this self, the totality of sense experience including our urges and desires, as what appears on our computer screen. After all, don't we sometimes chase our fleeting desires on that screen? With mind racing and heart on fire we may become trapped by them, virtually enslaved. In cyberspace we can instantly see and hear almost anything we desire. But are we content with that? Or does it sometimes make us more agitated? So what do we do?

One alternative is a retreat like this: the appropriate atmosphere, surroundings, and schedule, as well as the proper guidance are provided here. But beware. We are not here to replace one thing with another, for example, our present website or screensaver with a zenistic, soothing, *shakuhachi* soundtrack. Or shave our heads, change our names, wear robes and get certified. Why? Because the grasping self remains. It may take on a different form. But it is still there, isn't it? It is still seeking, still unable to come fully to rest. The point is not to change the website or the screensaver. Because we are still attached, we are still enslaved to cyberspace, to the whole complex, the dis-ease of life and death projected on the screen. So what do we do?

The point is to turn off the computer. Not to change the screen or the website, but to unplug the machine. Self-delusion untangled at its root. The painful delusions and destructive urges undone. It is very simple, but for the struggling self it is not always easy. It can be unsettling at first, especially if practice is not integrated into our lives. Because what we grasp onto as reality is now gone. All the familiar sights and sounds that we were absorbed in, sucked into, disappear. When we turn off the machine, the screen goes blank and the sound is gone. If we identify our selves with those sights and sounds, greedily chase after them, then the screen going blank is very unsettling. "I want my computer back, I want my sounds and sights!"

What is real? When we turn off the computer, the screen goes blank. But that allows us to **see**: "Wow! [Looking around:] **There** is the sky! **This** is the room! [Striking chest:] **Here** is my body! Not what was reflected on the screen of self. How foolish to have been sucked into that, when reality all the time has been right here!" With the waves of self-delusion gone, the pearl reveals itself.

What is real? Did you ever get up in the morning and, still half asleep, stumble over to your computer and go online? What was there **before** you turned on the computer? [Laughter]

Genuine Zen practice begins when that whole complex, mind and all sense experience, comes undone. Dissolved. Brought to an end once and for all. The machine unplugged. The tangled web of self undone. So that you can **see** what is really here before you turned on the machine, not just its pale reflection on the screen of self.

Perhaps you worry, have doubts: “But can I really do that? After all it seems rare. There are troubled people posing as teachers, but how many have genuinely awakened to this? You say it’s simple, but it sure doesn’t seem simple to me. Enough of this numberless beings Bodhisattva bullshit!” If such doubts are there, fine – but can you stop there? Do you give up because at one point it seems difficult? Is that how you live your life? Do you imprison yourself and then complain it’s hard to get free?

Thus we sit properly. We sit through. And in sitting through, we see through. To sit through, to see through our strongest urges, our deepest delusions. To sit through, to see through, our deepest doubt. Who is behind it all? Have you seen that? Who is behind it all? Here is the great matter of life and death – and its end! It’s that simple.

When it’s useful, you can always turn the computer back on. But what is real? The sounds and images reflected on the screen of self? What is, for lack of a better word, experience itself? After all, anything worth experiencing is so, isn’t it? If you’ve never tried coffee, you can look at pictures and read all about it: the history, culture, the different kinds of beans and flavors, roasting and brewing, and so on. But you can also take one sip [taking a sip of his drink]. **That’s** coffee! Actually it’s tea, but close enough. [Laughter]

Our immediate experience is just so, isn’t it? Embodied, but without self-reflection, without manipulation of any sort. Not one movement, word, or thought needed; yet all is revealed. Indeed, the entrance is always here – and we recognize it once we undo our grasp on things. Confirm it yourself: without using your body, mouth, or mind, reality is fully revealed. Now bring that to life in body, mouth, and mind!

Does anyone have a question? Please feel free.

Participant: How do I know that I’m not just turning on a different screen?

Jeff: Look carefully and you’ll see. As the screen gets darker, it actually gets clearer. The familiar sights and sounds and thoughts are gone. But they are not replaced by

anything else. Instead, there is great clarity and calmness. Eventually, everything is there – but not as we **intend**. Keep your eye open; you'll see.

You may take a couple side roads on the way; get involved in a train of thought about something, go into another site. It's okay. If you're practicing properly, before long you know where they lead, so they no longer tempt you. They lose their hold. If you had to take every possible avenue, you'd likely spend the rest of your life going down dead ends. But once you clearly see the nature of such futile escapes, you can let them all go, once and for all. That is not turning on another screen.

Participant: How to deal with the lack of great trust?

Jeff: Do you think you lack trust?

Participant: I might.

Jeff: You're here, aren't you? For those not aware, you just finished a retreat elsewhere, didn't you? Now you've taken great effort to attend this retreat. I wouldn't worry about great trust. [Laughter] Just take that energy and put it into your practice. Perhaps you worry because you still have moments of doubt. So doubt! The point is that you continue on with your practice. What are you really worried about?

Participant: It does not go fast enough!

Jeff: Put your energy into the practice.

The Flower Sermon

In the Zen tradition, the flower sermon is considered the first transmission and thus is foundational. It is a legend, but a useful one. Gotama Buddha was going to give a sermon. A huge assembly had gathered. It so happened that someone had given Gotama a flower. Gotama was known for his golden mouth; he could appropriately and eloquently respond to any person. But on this occasion, he simply held up the flower in his hand. Without a word.

Seeing this, everyone in the audience was waiting for a sermon, thinking something like: "Nice flower. Now please teach us. Please enlighten us." Except for one of Gotama's leading disciples, who realized the eloquent sermon that Gotama had already given. Simply in raising the flower. And so, this one disciple smiled.

Then Gotama opens his big mouth and starts talking about formless form and transmitting it and so on. [Laughter] But that's secondary. The real point is already there in raising the flower. And smiling. It's all there. What was in Gotama's mind when he raised the flower? Was it the same as when he spoke, or different? And what was his disciple's mind in smiling? Where did his smile come from? [Cf. Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan/Gateless Barrier*, case 6]

Is this really so difficult, so rare? What are you really seeking? Is it maybe what keeps you from smiling? It's sublimely simple – though impossible to project fully on the screen of self. Let go of your computer-screen dream and enter reality! Then your smile smiles others open. And that smile is found on the face of all.

Day 2

What Happens Next? A Thunderclap!

What comes next? No need to worry about that. Just give yourself to the practice. When the conditions are right, when the fruit is ripe, you will see.

Here is one dramatic example of what happens when the conditions are right. It is the experience of the Chinese monk who compiled the classic koan collection called *The Gateless Barrier*. He is called Wumen Huikai (1183-1260) and he awakened after struggling long and hard with the famous koan known as "Jôshû's Mu," which he then included as the first koan in his collection. [Cf. Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan/Gateless Barrier*, case one, and *Being Without Self: Zen For The Modern World*, pp. 11ff.]

When Wumen awakened, he wrote a poem expressing it. De rigueur for a Chinese monk. His poem:

*A thunderclap under a clear blue sky!
All beings everywhere have opened their eye.
Everything under the sun bows at once.
Mount Sumeru jumps up and dances.*

[Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, p. 10, slightly revised]

Rather zenistic, over the top. But it expressed his realization. I introduce it here because it provides an interesting contrast to a famous Chinese layman's poem. Although famous in China, Layman Zhaobian (1008-1084) is virtually unknown in the West. He lived in the eleventh century and passed away a hundred years before Wumen was born. Layman Zhaobian was a commoner from a small village, but went on to hold high government positions as a kind of magistrate and even tutored

the prince. At night after he finished his duties, he would often sit zazen in his office. One summer night during a thunderstorm it happened. His poem:

*Silently sitting in the office,
leaning on my armrest,
mind-source unmoved,
clear as water.
A thunderclap overhead opens my crown,
waking who I've always been.*

Crown refers to the top of the head. Who does it awaken? It's difficult to translate: "Waking who I've always been" in the sense of my ordinary self, the same old guy. Compare this with Wumen's soaring rhetoric of all beings opening their eyes and Mount Sumeru dancing.

A mature poem by a mature layman practicing squarely in the world. Might Wumen have borrowed his thunderclap from layman Zhaobian? For the layman it was an actual thunderclap right overhead. For Wumen it was a fitting metaphor.

Following his poem, Zhaobian describes how clear everything was and the joy he felt. "There's nothing in the whole universe," he adds, "that is not like this." The layman continues: "But those attached to the world cannot hear it, and instead consider it magical powers." Indeed. Misunderstood, it is lost and becomes mystical, magical powers.

When layman Zhaobian retired, he wrote another poem. One of the symbols of his authority as magistrate was a pouch containing a seal used to stamp official documents. His retirement poem:

*Golden seal carried at the waist now stored away.
This, too, is no big deal.
Others seek out the old man in his "elegant study."
But I'm just the fourth son of the Zhao family from Ke village.*

"Elegant study" was the term people used to speak of layman Zhaobian's study room; he did not consider it "elegant." "But I'm just the fourth son of the Zhao family from Ke village." Although he was known far and wide as a wise man who could resolve the problems of the world, he still considered himself a simple man from a common family. Compare this with his earlier poem and you can feel the same humility, the same freedom from status or rank flowing through his active lay life. Something for us lay people today to consider. But no need to imitate.

Does anyone have a question or concern?

Participant: Years ago I had an experience not of light or enlightenment, but of total confusion. Could you say something about this?

Jeff: Here there is not even enlightenment; where is there room for confusion? In giving ourselves to practice, we get to the point where we don't know that one plus one equals two. There is a kind of total darkness. We have let go of all our fixed ideas and cherished preconceptions. At this point we don't even know enough to be confused. This is not the end of the road, of course. But it is, relatively speaking, better than thinking we know everything. Isn't **that** where we fall into total confusion? Are you talking about confusion in your daily life, such as a crisis situation?

Participant: It wasn't just daily life. It came to include my sitting as well as daily life and thinking.

Jeff: You mean the familiar signposts were gone?

Participant: Yes.

Jeff: That's where great trust comes in. It's okay not to know. But we need to let go of everything. Thus a retreat like this is a precious opportunity.

Participant: Thank you.

Now We Play

At fifteen, in the summer of 1969, I hitchhiked to Woodstock, the mother of all music festivals. As I remember it, in the middle of the incredible event Ravi Shankar came on stage with tabla drummer and so on. We in the audience hardly knew what a sitar was. Anyway, when he started playing we were mesmerized, but feeling a bit strange and disoriented. I distinctly remember thinking, "Wow, this is weird." It felt like the whole audience was on the verge of a bad LSD trip. But we were young and open-minded, so we went with it. And it took us somewhere we had never been before – the delicate melodies and complex rhythms were amazing! And when the last strains of music ended, everyone, myself included, jumped to their feet screaming and gave Ravi a standing ovation. As we sat down, Ravi spoke: "Thank you very much. We finished tuning instruments. Now we play." [Laughter]

We were naïve, but we had a kind of great trust. Isn't this where Zen Buddhism is now in the West? We've listened attentively to the instruments being tuned and made all kinds of assumptions from that. Now we need to hear the music – and learn how to tune our own instrument.

To help instruct a musician, Gotama Buddha used the metaphor of tuning a musical instrument. [See *Sona Sutta*, AN 6.55] If the instrument is too tightly or too loosely tuned, it does not give a fine sound. Once our instrument is properly tuned, then it brings forth beautiful music. We are doing an intense retreat. But we have time to rest, eat nutritious meals, take walks and exercise, so body and mind remain properly tuned.

Thank you for your comments and questions, and for listening so intently.

Day 3

Done With Seeking

*For the raindrop joy is in entering the river;
Unbearable pain becomes its own cure.*

*Travel all the way through sorrow, tears turn to sighs;
In this way we learn how water dies into air.*

*When after heavy rain the storm clouds disperse,
Is it not that they've wept themselves clear to the end?*

*Want to know the miracle – how wind polishes mirror?
Look: shining moss grows green with spring.*

*It's the rose's unfolding that creates the desire to see.
In every color and circumstance, may your eye be open for what comes.*

From a Ghazal by Ghalib (1797-1869).

In the more prosaic language of Zen Buddhism, we might say: *Done with seeking*. This is the essence of genuine Rinzai Zen: to truly be done with seeking. Finished. Done with birth and death, dis-ease. Done with seeking to do or to be something, anything. Then we do what needs to be done. Freely. The so-called “miracle”:

“Look: shining moss grows green with spring.” The early Zen classic *Enjoying the Way* ends:

Sitting serenely carefree:

Spring comes, the grass grows green of itself.

[See *Zen Classics For The Modern World*, pp. 87, 97]

Zen Buddhists even dare to speak of it as *pissing and shitting*. Or *when you have to go you go, when you have to stay you stay*. Utter freedom. For the self, however, this is confinement: “I have to go – but I want to stay!” When self comes to its own end, when we are truly done with seeking, doing what must be done **is** complete freedom. Can self wrap its mind around that? [Laughter]

Tell me, where have all these Buddhas come from? Has the morning sun nourished you? Will you grow as big as the pumpkin in the garden? [Laughter]

There was an old man who once asked a Chinese master: “What is the essence of the Buddha-dharma?” That is, the living truth of Buddhism. The master answered: “Do no evil. Do all good.” These are the first two lines of an ancient *gatha*-verse that expresses the essence of Buddhism: “Do no evil. Do all good. Purify your mind. This is the way of all Buddhas.” The old man responded: “If so, even a small child could say that.” The master responded: “Though a child could say it, an old man can’t seem to do it.” The old man bowed deeply and left. He was Bai Juyi/Po Chu-I (772-846), a lay Zen man and one of the greatest Chinese poets of all time.

Seeing Another Person’s Faults, I Correct My Own

Are you really done with seeking? See what happens over the next few days, when you go back to home and to work. Can you seamlessly return and do what needs to be done? Or do you end up frustrated at how totally unenlightened everyone else is? If it seems that they don’t understand or appreciate you, look at your own blind spot – not theirs. A common saying in Japanese: “Seeing another person’s faults, I correct my own.” Then the world becomes our *dōjō*, our place of practice. All beings become teachers we can learn from, and our practice cannot help but mature and deepen.

Many faults have come to light recently in the world of Buddhism and Zen, both here in Europe and in the US. Scandals over power, fraud, money, and sex show how corrupt some of the so-called masters and teachers really are. So don’t feel that you as a layperson are below them. Don’t ever seek to be above them either. But you are no less as a layperson. No beating around the bush: better to be a sincere

layperson than a fake monastic. Looking at the many scandals that have occurred, the responsibility finally lies with the phony teachers; sadly, sometimes those most in need of help conceal their sickness behind robes and assume they are beyond it. The victimized students, however, must look at their own naiveté and needs. What were they seeking that allows such perversion to continue? The myth that we must blindly submit to someone because they are supposed to be “enlightened,” is propped up by everyone’s delusions – the teacher as well as the disciples. Even if someone has some authorization, some credential, some title, I urge you to keep your eyes open!

Otherwise, face it: it could be a dangerous cult under Buddhist trappings. Zen Buddhism is not about blindly following – **anyone**. The danger of falling into cultish nonsense, or even worse, is obvious.

Make no mistake. I stand on no authority whatsoever. Here you are free – you are **encouraged** – to doubt as long as doubt remains. You are free to accept or reject what I say, and to criticize me as you please. I love to be corrected. It’s a wonderful way to learn and to mature, isn’t it? “Seeing faults, I correct my own.”

But this is not the place for **self**-improvement. This is not the place to seek success. Success is not the concern of Zen Buddhism. Here, you are free to fail. To fail **completely** – then see what rises from those ashes.

Know Shame!

After completing Rinzai practice in the monastery, I took as my final koan a statement from one of the great Sung Dynasty masters known as Wuzu Fayan, who died in 1104. He moved up rather quickly in the monastic ranks, but finally had the good fortune to meet a real teacher. He then realized how far he still had to go. His statement is in a way very un-zenistic; you won’t find anything like it in *The Record of Linji/Rinzai*. Wuzu states: “Twenty years practicing the Way; only now do I really know [my own] shame.” Later, someone added: “What splendid words, to ‘know shame’!” These two words remain a common expression in Japanese today.

What is the shame of someone on the Way? What is the shame of fake teachers wreaking havoc? Do they know their own shame? Confirm for yourself: True humility comes from being without self. Not pride, not arrogance. How could pride or arrogance arise? How could desire for power or for recognition arise, let alone abusing others to fulfill one’s carnal lust? That is what a sick, dis-eased person does. True humility is the blossom of constant practice – a practice that continues on. Hakuin mentions the expression: “The further you go, the deeper it gets. The more

you realize, the harder you will strive.” [Cf. *Zen Classics For The Modern World*, p. 62] An interesting expression. Self tends to think: “The more I realize, the **easier** it’ll get: great, I’ll be ‘teaching’ (i.e., using, abusing) others in no time!” No. The more we realize, the harder we strive. That’s the Bodhisattva spirit. The nature of the striving is different, isn’t it? It is the striving of our Great Vow: *Numberless beings – set free.*

Day 4

A Bird Sings, The Mountain Stillness Deepens

Good Morning! I trust you have experienced how difficult, at times, practice can be. And discovered how exquisitely simple the real practice is. The difficulty lies with our own seeking, doesn’t it?

To find the pearl, calm the waves. With the water clear, the pearl reveals itself.

Do you see what it is to just sit through? To sit through the limits set by the seeking self? Not a matter of mere willpower. It’s more like the earth is supporting you. Take care to sit properly. It doesn’t need to be full lotus, but the best posture for your body. Then, just sit through. If there is pain, recognize it, listen to it. What is it saying, what does it teach you? Do you need to correct your posture? Or just sit through? Once you actually do sit through, things like pain, wandering thoughts and frustrations are no longer a problem. You have seen how they arise. And how they cease. A valuable step on the Way.

What is resolved when great doubt breaks up? And what remains to be done? Someone asked: “If we’re done seeking, why do we need to come to one-on-one?” In a sense it is even more important then. Done with seeking – **now** what do I do? Sure, the universe doesn’t ask for more, the church bell outside doesn’t need to ring any louder. But do I still have problems, blind spots, which need to be worked through? And does the homeless person still need food? Does your abused neighbor need help? What about the abused Zen student – and the sick person posing as a “teacher”? If you think: “I’m done with seeking so there’s nothing more to do” – you’re not done!

No bird sings, the mountain stillness deepens.

This is rather easy to understand. Silence is easy on the ears. But it tends toward dead stillness, doesn’t it? Later, one Chinese character was changed to make:

A bird sings, the mountain stillness deepens.

Definitely not dead silence or blank stillness. The bird singing reveals the silence, the stillness, which cannot be broken. If it can be broken, it's not living silence, real stillness, is it? A bird singing, the roar of a motorcycle – or the pain in your knee – all in their own way eloquently express the symphony of being without self. Consider this well when you go back to your home and your job.

Does anyone have a final question or concern?

Participant: Yes, I have. You said something about failing, that it was okay to fail, or even necessary to fail. Did I understand you correctly?

Jeff: It is necessary for the self to get to the point where it can do no more – where it has failed.

Participant: Thank you.

Revised version of retreat lectures given at Steyl in the Netherlands and throughout Europe and the US in August and September of 2013. Thanks for transcribing to Christian Wagner, Fred van den Bos, & Ruth Mouton in the Netherlands, Antje Jansen & Stefan Ettmayr in Germany.