

Clarifying the Mind of Nirvana

From lectures given during the retreat in the Lioba Priory, Egmond, November 2008

Thursday Night

I am glad we were all able to join in the religious service – the compline – this evening here at the cloister in Egmond. Maybe for some of you it was a bit of a surprise: ‘We are doing a Zen retreat. Why are we attending a Christian service?’ Sharing this space for the next couple of days with practicing Catholics, it is natural to share in their practice as well. Whether we are Catholic or not, it is important to make peace with the religious tradition that we grew up in. Many westerners, myself included, when young went running towards the Orient, towards Buddhism, towards Zen. We were also running away from the religious tradition we grew up in. As we idealized the traditions of the far east, we only saw what was wrong with the traditions we grew up in. Some of you have been to the far east and know that there’s good and bad in every religious tradition. It is wonderful that we could share a bit in this other tradition tonight and see its great good. I trust it will help you to make peace with, and see the great good in, the religious tradition you grew up in.

In the Catholic tradition it seems there is a compline service for every day of the year. *Compline* – the very word gives the sense of completion. ‘Completion’ here has a spiritual sense, and refers to more than just the end of the day. Let this be a retreat where we really *complete* practice. Not just forever struggling with or working toward, or trying to attain something, but to truly complete the practice. We all made a sacrifice to come to this retreat. Our family, the people we have left behind, and our coworkers also have to make a sacrifice. So I urge you to practice right effort and truly complete the practice, thus to be worthy of this precious opportunity.

What are we doing here? Very simply, in accord with the Zen Buddhist tradition, we are here to end the delusion of self, *to end the self that seeks for an end*, and in that way realize true freedom. We are not here to learn better ways of dealing with interpersonal relationships. Done properly, this practice should lead in that direction; but that is not the purpose. Nor are we trying to view the world in a new way, to take one view of the world – a Christian view, or an atheist view for example – and replace it with a Buddhist one. In learning and practicing Buddhism that may happen, but that is not the purpose of a retreat. Nor are we here to learn how to handle our thoughts and our emotions. That too may happen, but that is not the purpose of a Zen Buddhist retreat.

We are doing something much simpler than any of that. There are Buddhist expressions that make this clear. For example, “The Mind of Nirvana is easy to clarify; the wisdom of discrimination [that is, of genuine distinction & difference] is hard to enter.” Practicing properly as we are here at this retreat, it is really not so difficult to clarify the mind of Nirvana. But then to work it out in the world can be a great challenge. Especially in the beginning of retreat, we naturally focus not on working it out in the world, but rather on making crystal clear, unmistakably clear, what the source of this mind is. Then we can work it out in the world. A retreat is a matter of going to the very bottom, to the very source. Once the retreat is over and you return to your home and your job, you will have plenty of opportunities to work it out in the world and complete it in that sense as well. But we shouldn’t be preoccupied with those concerns here.

Introducing a story from the Lotus Sutra
Where we begin: Putting an end to self-entanglements

There is a famous Buddhist sutra called the Lotus Sutra, one of the great Mahayana texts. I will use a story from it as a kind of theme for this retreat. I could take up many things to make the point clear, but this story is a very good one for us here and now.

In the Lotus Sutra, chapter seven, there is a Buddha whose name literally means something like ‘The Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom’ or ‘The All Knowing Buddha.’ This all knowing, great wisdom Buddha is seated on the lotus-shaped Wisdom Throne. In other words, the perfect place in which to practice. And he is seated there in perfect mental and physical poise. He is sitting in the full-lotus posture and his mind is completely at rest, completely motionless in body and in mind. The sutra even says he has destroyed ‘the army of *marā*’ – a metaphor for the illusions and delusions we continually get entangled in. So this Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom has even destroyed all delusion.

I will continue with this story over the next three mornings. Now your present task is to *be* this all-knowing Buddha – no more and no less. We all have our own lotus throne, this ideal situation here, in which to give ourselves fully to practice, to destroy the army of *marā*, to let go of all self-entanglement. That is our first task. Not to think about it, but to actually *be* it – so grounded, so silent and still in body and in mind, that we *are* this Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom. This is where we begin.

How do we do this? For those who are more or less beginners, the breath is very helpful. Breathe naturally from the belly and just gather all your energy into one. We are not trying to create visions or to realize esoteric truths. A simple way to destroy the army of *marā* is to gather all of the energy that you have into one. You don’t need to force anything. Just simply take all the available energy that you have and patiently roll it all into one. Most of the beginning work is right there, giving one’s self fully to the breath in seated zazen.

If there is something that is really driving you in your practice, then you have what could be called a natural koan or a *genjo-koan*, the koan at hand, the koan manifest here and now. The koan can serve as a kind of anchor for gathering all that available energy into one and keeping it focused. Whether you call it a koan or not doesn’t matter. Gathering all into one – whether it’s the sitting itself or some specific doubt or koan that is alive and burning for you – it must become *what you are*. If there is no such specific question, fine. The sitting itself is enough. Just give yourself so completely to the sitting that the whole army of *marā* – all delusions, as well as any notion of enlightenment – dissolves.

We really don’t have to *destroy* our delusions. The sutra uses that metaphor, but it can easily be misunderstood as an act of sheer willpower. It’s not that kind of thing. When done properly, it’s a perfectly natural and constant activity. Effort is involved, but it’s not simply an effort of the will. It’s as natural as our breathing, but with a total focus on that one point. All of your energy is right here. Whether it’s just the sitting itself or even just the breathing itself, or some formulated koan, it doesn’t matter as long as it is *you*, without remainder.

You will find sometimes mind wonders. That’s okay. The point is to be aware of it. In this kind of concentration, it is very easy to be aware of it. As soon as you start to drift, you are aware of it and you simply come back. You don’t need to think about it or judge yourself or compare yourself to the person sitting next to you. That’s just more of the army of *marā*. Simply return to one. If the mind wanders again, simply, patiently return to one.

See why a koan can be helpful? It keeps you anchored. Being locked in to the koan, so to speak, keeps the mind from wandering. There's the need to really know, the need to get to the bottom, to see through the koan. A real koan, one that is alive and burning in you, can be a great anchor in your practice. Not an anchor for mere willpower, since with the will you are still on the outside trying to push in. Proper koan practice is a much more subtle and powerful thing than mere willpower. It's not ego-self trying to push in, but rather reality bursting out. That's why you're able to sit through the night – you're so engaged in this, that it is hardly possible to do anything else. It is impossible to go to sleep because you have yet to get to the bottom of it. So you are naturally driven – again, not by mere willpower but a much more fundamental dedication – to get to the very bottom. Some degree of determination is important, but you don't need to push in a willful way. You have already made the commitment to be here and have entered the practice. Now the focus is on right, or proper, effort. Instead of self willfully pushing in from the outside, self gets out of the way. Getting out of the way defeats the army of *mara*. This is our first task: to actually sit through and realize this.

The Lotus Sutra speaks of the *army of mara*. Let me speak of the *navy*: John Paul Jones is considered the father of the American Navy. He was a legendary naval hero during the American Revolution. He was a very determined man. One of his most famous fights was against a vastly stronger, more heavily armed British vessel. They were fighting in the sea off of England when, among other problems, some of the canons on John Paul Jones's ship blew up, killing some of his crew, and setting the ship on fire. The British vessel was very strong and continued to shower the burning ship with canon fire. John Paul Jones's ship was virtually out of control, burning, and so badly damaged that it was sinking.

Do you know what John Paul Jones did at this point? As his ship is sinking and burning he crashes it into the British ship, locking onto it in such a way that it can't get free. The British commander, assuming John Paul Jones was giving up, shouted over to him, "Do you surrender?" His ship is sinking and on fire; what was John Paul Jones's response? According to one account: "Surrender? I have not yet begun to fight!"

A few hours later John Paul Jones took command of the British ship, forcing *them* to surrender. So even though John Paul Jones and his crew had almost nothing left, they were so determined that they damaged enough of the British ship to force their surrender.

What is the point of this story for us here? After all, this is a Buddhist retreat, and we are doing it at the Peace School of a Catholic nunnery! What we need is *not* that fierce, willful determination that allowed John Paul Jones to win the day in a bloody battle. What we need to realize is *that place from which we have not yet begun to fight*. That is where to put forth effort, and where your effort comes from. Do you see? That is where we "fight" from. Then, though we meet various difficulties and challenges, nothing can really get in the way.

In this way, the whole army of *mara* is rendered powerless. Not by attacking it with willful effort, but by allowing mind to return to the original oneness that it is. As long as ego-self remains, then pain, distress, *dis-ease* is inevitable. Samsara is inevitable. I trust to some extent you have already realized this – that's why you are here. To repeat: your task here and now is to sit as this Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom, giving yourself completely to the practice. Then you cannot help but see through samsara.

Friday Morning

*Self-entanglements at an end, yet no awakening
Zazen as clarifying, not denying, the doubt you are
Theme from The Lotus Sutra Continued*

Sitting through the night I trust you have all tasted for yourself that there is nothing to attain. For the seeking, grasping self there are endless things to attain or to escape from. In a word, that whole complex is samsara. It is samsara, *dis-ease*, distress, because the self cannot come fully to rest. To some extent you all already know this – and yet you continue to seek, don't you? I trust you have seen directly that there is nothing to attain. Decisively attaining that is what Buddhism is about. Not just intellectual knowledge, feeling, or insight, but the actual ending of the self that endlessly seeks.

Though some of you have already realized this to some extent, your seeking mind continues to function, and you are aware of this. There is nothing to attain, and yet this urge, this samsaric condition, the self's *dis-ease*, is still functioning. So a delicate but very important part of practice is to see that and to allow it to come to rest, to come to its own end – without remainder.

Do you see? Your own experience is similar to that of the Buddha in the Lotus Sutra mentioned last night. This Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom sat perfectly on his lotus throne not just for a couple of days, but for endless kalpas. And yet, to continue the story from the sutra, *he did not awaken*. It wasn't that he failed to sit long enough or well enough. The sutra is clear: This Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom sat perfectly on the lotus seat; in other words, in all the right conditions – full lotus, completely at rest in body and mind – for endless kalpas! Yet, the sutra goes on to say, “Seated on that lotus throne, having destroyed the armies of *mara*, this Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom was just about to attain perfect and complete enlightenment, but the Buddha Dharma was not revealed to him.”

What about this? Is this perhaps your situation? Are you sitting the best that you can on your lotus throne, attaining profound and subtle states of mind in the process? Do you see what the sutra is saying? This Buddha got all the conditions right: posture and mind flawless, army of delusions wiped out – for an endless period of time. And yet the Buddha Dharma was not revealed to him. He did not awaken. What about this? What about you? Is this in some sense your question, your situation, your doubt? If not, what is?

In Zen there are expressions like, “Get the question clear and you're close to an answer!” Get your question – the real question, the doubt that you are – clear. Do not just sit there in a state of deep samadhi or concentrated oneness, but *be perfectly clear*. Is there something lacking? Is there some question, some doubt? If there is, make it perfectly clear. Why? Because that's the way to the real solution. Make the question or doubt – what is lacking in you – crystal clear. Then the ‘answer’ or ‘solution’ – *the collapse of the self that is stuck* – is inevitable.

To use a dramatic Zen metaphor, “With bow broken and arrows exhausted, *there* shoot with your whole being.” That's what we do in zazen; that's what we do with a koan. See why this kind of extremity is necessary? As long as self maintains its delusion, has one more arrow left in its quiver, one more thing it can do, it will do it. It will keep chasing its tail. Deep inside you know it doesn't work, you know it doesn't strike the heart of the matter, but you don't know what else to do. Proper zazen is a very effective way to let all of that habit energy just dissolve. And then, as I said last night, with all available energy gathered into one – with bow broken and arrows exhausted – *there* the balloon of self is punctured once and for all.

Without this extremity, the self will just continue making itself bigger, or smaller, attempting to ‘make a difference.’ Due to its inveterate *dis-ease*, self wants to make a difference, to change things somehow. But it only ends up expanding or contracting the delusive circle it is running around in. Face it: self wants to improve the situation, to make a difference – but self can’t really make a difference. That ‘difference’ is the delusion that self maintains in order to maintain itself. That is *samsara*.

Of course, I urge you after the retreat to go back to the world – your family, your work, your loved ones, your enemies if you have any – and work this out and in that sense ‘make a real difference.’ But that is not our work here in retreat. Our work here is first to make crystal clear that there is no way for self to make a difference. In the religious world, in entering Zen, every ‘way’ must finally be done away with. Otherwise it can get in the way, can become an obstacle. Yes, even *zazen*. In the depths of your *zazen* here and now – however deep it is – *there cannot even be a hint of zazen*, let alone some kind of illusion to eliminate or enlightenment to attain. To some extent you have all tasted this already. It’s not something out there, it’s what you are at bottom, right here and right now.

Right effort is not an effort of the will

Now, what about this Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom? What about you? We have a little less than two days left, but that is *kalpas* if we use it well. Sit *zazen* until nothing remains. Sit until there is *nothing* left. Sit until there *is* nothing to attain.

Do you see why I use that statement of John Paul Jones? – “I have not yet begun to fight!” He is expressing a very willful determination, but that’s not what we’re doing here. Rather, we are realizing *that which has not yet begun to fight*. That which is not divided into two, the inseparable, the indivisible – then working from there.

When Gotama Buddha was sitting under the bodhi tree, his lotus seat, according to Chinese accounts he said to himself something like, “Skin, flesh, and marrow may dry up in my body, but without complete awakening I will not move from this seat.” This is easy to misunderstand. Like John Paul Jones, this seems to be expressing a tremendous effort of the will. But it’s not that kind of thing at all. Gotama Buddha got up sometimes, for example, to relieve himself. It’s not a matter of gritting your teeth and stubbornly refusing to budge. It doesn’t mean that you can’t get up from this posture. It means that even when you *do* get up and break the posture to go for a meal, for a walk or a rest, you do not stop your practice. *That’s* the sort of determination or effort he is expressing. Not mere willpower. Willful effort was what Gotama came to the limits of at the end of his arduous ascetic practices, prior to sitting under the bodhi tree. When he realized he was not getting enlightened but instead was killing himself, he decided to refresh himself, take nourishment and bathe in the river. Then he sat down and said, “Skin, flesh, and marrow may dry up in my body, but without complete awakening I will not move from this seat.” This is much more basic than mere willful effort. It’s the commitment that from now on, whatever I do, I will not budge from this seat. I *cannot* budge from this seat. Then the lotus seat is where we are, wherever we are and whatever we do. It’s not a matter of just sitting in a certain posture and being very stubborn.

Does anyone have a question from out of their practice that they want to raise for everyone, instead of in one-on-one?

Questioner: I have a question about effort. I find myself sometimes using my will, and find that the very use of will becomes the obstacle. So then I try just sitting here, yet sometimes that seems a bit

like twiddling my thumbs. So then I try to barrel-ass through with my will, which again becomes an obstacle. So I keep struggling with my own failures.

Jeff: There is a place for determination and will. You would not be here if you didn't have determination. You've all made plans and preparations to come here, and now you're dealing with your passing fancies and momentary inclinations – all those great experiences you dreamt of having when you came here, as you struggle to stay awake. Yes, there is a place for determination. If we simply sit here twiddling our thumbs, that will not do. The problem is when it becomes wrong effort, the will trying to will itself into enlightenment, to pull itself up by its own bootstraps. The very effort maintains the delusion. Or you try to focus and you find your mind wandering. Instead of simply bringing it back, you find yourself engaged in a dialogue with yourself about your mind having wandered. This is just continuing that whole process of your mind wandering, isn't it? You don't have to be happy about your mind wandering, but you don't have to get angry either. Just simply bring it back. And that is a kind of effort, a kind of determination.

Right effort is not mere willpower though. Nor is it, as you suggest, simply sitting there twiddling your thumbs. That's going backwards instead of forwards – the point is to stop! So you're quite right. It will not do to simply barrel-ass through with will. But it will not do simply to say to hell with it, I'll just sit here, stay relaxed, and not try too hard. You've already seen that neither of those will do.

For you here and now, right effort is sitting – as Gotama Buddha did – with the resolve not to get up until you have gotten to the end of yourself. It doesn't mean you don't get up from your cushion. It means the resolve to continue on this path until the end *no matter what, in whatever you are doing*. This means maintaining your practice when you are confused and frustrated too. If you are confused, recognize it. That is your practice at the moment. If that's where you are, be there, even though it may not be pleasant. If you're confused, be a confused Buddha. But don't be confused about your confusion. Nor is it a matter of simply giving up on effort altogether and not trying. It's a matter of putting effort in the right place, so to speak. It's not going outward, but it's not really going inward either. It's seeing through where that division arises from. Right there. And it's always right here and right now. It's not something we will attain some day as the result of some superhuman effort. This – pain in the legs right now – *is* the mind of Nirvana, if we actually see through it. It's unmistakable. No one can take that away from you; no one can give it to you either. From there, the very struggle and distress that you speak of is transformed into the Way itself.

Questioner: My experience is that it's something that comes from out of the blue, and not something I can engineer.

Jeff: No one has awakened in the Zen tradition simply sitting in meditation. Look at the records. According to the Zen tradition, even Gotama Buddha – though sitting in meditation – awakened upon looking up and seeing the morning star. He wasn't just meditating. You'll never get there *by* meditating. Not to say that zazen is useless, of course. Not at all. That's like saying, "Even if I plow the field and plant the seeds, that's not the food." Well, that's right, but if you don't put the seeds in and plow the field, and take care with the water, you won't have the conditions you need for food. So even though there's not a direct cause-effect relationship – I sit, and then I get enlightened – *conditionally speaking*, awakening does take conditions.

No, awakening cannot simply be engineered; but practice should be done with right effort. In other words, we don't practice in order to get something. We do it so purely and wholeheartedly that there can be no room for "Am I going to get it? Am I closer?" That very thought is wrong effort. Give yourself so completely to practice that there can be no room for such things.

As Dogen himself admits, he wasn't just sitting in meditation when he awakened. During early morning zazen, the monk next to him fell asleep. Seeing this, the master shouted, "Zazen is the practice of body-mind dropped off – how can you sit there sleeping?!" And with that, for Dogen – not for the dozing monk – body-mind dropped off. In other words, 'body-mind' or everything that one can identify as one's self, was 'dropped off,' in other words, gone. Period. But simply sitting cannot cause this.

Do you see what this has to do with the Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom? He did it all, for kalpas– forever! You'll never do that. And yet he didn't attain it. Skating on thin ice, you're right where that Buddha is! Right here it becomes even more important to practice properly, which includes doing it without any purpose at all. If you have any intent to become a Buddha, engineered or not, your practice is not yet pure. Do you see? Precisely because it can't be contrived, it can't be engineered, you don't *stop* sitting. On the contrary, you sit *completely*.

Thank you for your questions and comments. To some extent, everyone is struggling with the same concerns, so your questions are helpful for all. Thank you all for listening so intently.

Saturday Morning

Sitting perfectly, yet failing to awaken
A Zen koan: Confronting the aspiration to attain awakening
Completing the story from the Lotus Sutra

Let me return now to that story from the Lotus Sutra: the Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom was sitting on the lotus throne for eons, perfectly at rest in body and mind, and yet Buddhahood was not revealed to him. This actually became a kind of great doubt for at least one Chinese Zen monk long after the sutra was written. Perhaps like you, this monk couldn't swallow it. So, according to case 9 of *The Gateless Barrier*, he asked the master about it. He was not only asking about this legendary Buddha of an infinite past who practiced for millions of years. He was asking about his own practice: "It says that the Buddha of All-knowing Wisdom sat zazen on a bodhi seat for *kalpas*. Yet the Buddha Dharma was not manifested, nor did he attain Buddhahood. Why?" Not a bad question, is it? What do you think the master says in response? What do you say? "Why?"

The master responded, "That's a marvelous question." In Chinese this kind of response is called chasing after the robber on his own horse. Some masters might strike the monk, "Fool, don't ask such stupid questions!" But this master, at that time and place responded what a marvelous question it was. He doesn't deny where the monk is coming from at all. Instead he embraces the monk to help him see through. Do you see where the master is coming from when he says what a fine question it was?

But the monk doesn't get it. So he persists. Perhaps he has put in a lot of time and feels it is all wasted now. So he again says, "He sat zazen on a bodhi seat. Why did he not attain Buddhahood?!" The monk persisted. He did not give in to the master. How does the master respond? How do you respond? How do we really help that monk here?

The master responded, "Because he didn't attain Buddhahood." It doesn't record that the monk was enlightened with that response. But it was taken as such a precious exchange between monk and master that it has continued down to this day for over a thousand years.

Is this your own living, vital question? If not, what is? "I've put in a great deal of time and effort, struggled with a lot of pain and sleepiness. Where am I now?" A good question. Where are you now? Again, get the question clear and you're close to the answer. If you get the question clear and precise, you're right on top of the answer. You can't miss it. The question will drive you there. The question – or if you don't have a question, the sitting itself – becomes you, then caves in on itself. You become the question, the sitting itself. And with that, self-delusion ends. It cannot be maintained. It is 'un-self-sustainable.' It is only the machinations of the deluded self that keep some semblance alive.

The master said to the monk, "What a marvelous question." To rephrase it, "Take that question all the way and you're there!" Thus, when asked again, the master very kindly responded: "Because he did not attain Buddhahood." He doesn't give the monk anything – or take anything away. No excuses. No explanations. No consolation. Not even criticism. Nothing. *See through right there!* Don't give me analyses or descriptions. Simply see through the question itself. Really see through it, then there can be no doubt: attaining Buddhahood or not doesn't make the least bit of difference!

Questioner: What is the meaning of the word 'attain'?

Jeff: To attain is to achieve. In the four vows as commonly recited, the word attain is used: "I vow to attain the Buddha Way." And that's the challenge from the Lotus Sutra. For the struggling self, trying to attain something is all it has. But what does it really mean to 'attain Buddhahood' – is that

not your question? Can self *attain* no-self? The self attempts to use its old bag of tricks here: “I want this; tell me what to do so I can get it.” The master’s statements here undercut that very delusion.

We cannot bring self-delusions on the Buddha way. It will not work. That is what the monk could not see, what he could not ‘attain.’ In a word, to attain that is what it’s about. And that’s not something self can attain; rather it is the end of the whole self-complex. The Lotus Sutra makes clear that this Buddha is doing all that he needs to do to attain his goal – all of the practices, the paramitas, charity, meditation, and so forth. That’s precisely what this koan is asking about. This Buddha did everything right, but did not attain Buddhahood. Why? Do you see? And that became the sticking point for that monk, so he raised the question: If the all-knowing Buddha can’t even attain it, how the hell can I?!

You can’t. Real practice begins here, when you realize that self cannot do anything about it. Self cannot attain it. That’s the nub of your question. That’s why we sit like this – without our little bag of tricks.

In the beginning, self cannot help but chase its own tail; that’s all it knows how to do. It seeks a technique to end its suffering – and ends up extending that very suffering in the process. Instead of trying to escape from your situation, what if you took your doubt, your question, all the way? Thus the master kindly leaves the monk with his question. In effect: ‘That’ll do – now take it all the way.’

“An ordinary person realizes it and becomes a sage. A sage sees through it and becomes an ordinary person.” We have to – not attain – but *realize* it, *actualize* it. However we express it, the fact is we don’t become superhuman Buddhas. By really being who we are, we realize what it is to be a sage or a Buddha. And really realizing what it is to be a sage is to be – and to be content with – the ordinary person that we are: no odor of enlightenment, no stench of realization. You see how immature that is, how it cannot be the fruition. It’s more like something rotting.

Layman Pang was a Tang dynasty Chinese layperson who was deeply realized. But like most of us, he did not become a monk or priest. Layman Pang says in one of his famous poems something like, “Carrying firewood and hauling water – how marvelous!” He fell through as a layman, and he did it in such a way that it naturally became what he was doing. “Sitting on the Buddha Throne – how marvelous!” But for Layman Pang it was hauling water from the well and carrying firewood. You see? That’s the sage becoming an ordinary person – all stink of attainment is gone. This is very important.

Just doing what must be done at that time and place *is* the freedom we seek. But ego-self cannot attain that. It seeks to get away from limitations and responsibility: ‘I want to be free.’ Thus it remains shackled to itself. Ego-self cannot really recognize that doing what must be done *is* utter freedom. Complete freedom. Whether we are carrying firewood or answering the telephone. When ego-self is gone, anything will do; and as long as ego-self remains, nothing will do. Thus we practice like this.

Again I ask you, what about the Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom? What about *you* in your practice? We have one day left; make good use of it.

Sunday Morning

Clarifying the mind of Nirvana Working it out in the world

One thing that should be touched on now is how to take the practice into our daily lives. All of you have had to struggle – to face yourselves, to struggle with sleepiness, pain, and many other things. But you've all been able to go through and reach some depth – if I may use that expression – in your practice.

Now we take it to the streets. Now we return to our home, family, work, messages that have piled up, and so on. We have given ourselves completely in our practice here sitting on the cushion. Giving ourselves to the breath, to being one, to *mu*. When you go back to your family, your home, give yourself there as well. It's not quite the same thing. You won't be sitting fifteen hours a day – you don't need to. That's what we do *here*. When you go home, please give yourself to what needs to be done there with the same sincerity and dedication that you have given yourself to practicing here. Then there will be no discord between the two. No, it will not be the same; but it won't be completely different either. Thus it remains seamless, without disruption.

Returning home, embrace your loved ones, embrace your family, embrace the work you have to do. Embrace your enemies if you have any. In that way the practice goes smoothly. I am not saying from now on you will have no problems. I am saying when you face a problem, face it squarely. Be it. Don't stand on the outside judging, blaming, or trying to escape. Thus we become grateful for those challenges as our precious teacher. Then nothing can get in the way of the practice. Everything becomes grist for the mill, a precious treasure. Everything.

If, on the other hand, you go back and neglect your home and family so you can practice hours of zazen, so you can keep your 'retreat high'... you see the problem. That is wrong effort. Go back without disrupting home and family. It's important to apply yourself constantly so there can be no interruption, no gap in the practice. You have seen the value here over the last couple days of constant practice. That continues as you return to the world, but it becomes more complex: "The Mind of Nirvana is easy to clarify; the wisdom of discrimination [that is, of genuine distinction & difference] is hard to enter." Give yourself to it without a moment's hesitation. *Don't try to hold on to some state you have reached*. Any state you have reached, throw it away. That's not it, so don't worry – you don't need to hold onto it. If there's something that can be lost, let it go now. Gone! Throw it away. In that way our practice continues seamlessly.

I mentioned Layman Pang, who referred to the everyday act of carrying water as "marvelous." What is being expressed here? Doing what must be done at the moment is complete and total freedom. When you can give yourself completely, not holding anything back, to what must be done at the moment, *that* is complete freedom. Unhindered, unbound. Whether you're carrying firewood or checking email – not as romantic sounding, I know. Again, ego-self cannot attain this. Many traditional koans make this clear. Your own practice makes this clear, doesn't it? Ego-self cannot attain this, so it comes to an end. Actually coming to an end, there is nothing whatsoever to attain, within or without. Nor is there anything remaining to go beyond.

Have you seen clearly this Buddha of Penetrating Wisdom? Have you sat on his lotus throne? Have you clearly seen through your not attaining Buddhahood? This practice is precious indeed. You have all made great sacrifices coming here. But this practice is not the answer to every particular problem. In a profound sense, this practice is also completely useless. You don't get anything out of it. Nothing. That's why it's invaluable. If you think that by doing this practice all your problems

will be solved, you've got a big problem indeed! That is using practice to escape from problems. Don't fall into that trap.

When you sit, sit so thoroughly that there is no self sitting. There is not even zazen in this depth of sitting. Then when you get up and respond and work in the world, it's not the same mind, nor a different mind, so it works freely and effortlessly. That doesn't mean we can then solve all the problems of the world. But it's a good place to start – getting self out of the way. It gives us a place to begin to really resolve problems at the root, rather than going in the same old circles. So don't use the practice as an excuse or escape from the actual problems in the world or with others. And when you confront a problem within or without, deal with it directly. Bow in thanks for that challenge or problem and you will see the way through. Thank you.