

THE UNCONDITIONED

In Buddhism, Zen and Our Own Lives

Jeff Shore

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INTRODUCTION

We are all doing this retreat together. Thank you to each and everyone of you for your help. Together we are making it happen. I am deeply grateful to be a part of it.

This is a talk about the truth of Buddhism, the truth that is Buddhism. But how can that truth be expressed? And how will you receive it? We need, first of all, to get behind the words, so to speak, to grasp the real import and significance of what is being said. So, this is not just a talk to passively listen to. I invite you, as you listen, to realize it for yourself, or at least get a sense of it.

What is Buddhism? Simply put, it could be called a practical way of emancipation or liberation. Liberation from what? From everything. From all conditions. The theme of this lecture is the unconditioned. As we shall see, however, everything — including ourselves — is conditioned. Where, and how, then, are we to find liberation?

You might think that we somehow transcend the conditions. Buddhism, however, affirms no such transcendental, supernatural reality. There is no need to. But we are then left with the question: Where, and how, are we to find liberation? There is nowhere to go, no transcendental reality. And yet, this reality, including we ourselves, is conditioned, unstable and ever-changing. Here is the whole problem in a nutshell, both practically and theoretically. And it leads directly into our theme: the unconditioned.

THE UNCONDITIONED IN BUDDHISM

"This is unconditional. Were it not for this, there would be no emancipation for the conditioned. But since there is indeed this, unconditional, all conditions are emancipated!" That is a paraphrase, from the early Buddhist sutras, of a statement attributed to Gotama Buddha. Not an analysis or reasoned description, as is much

of the Pali literature. It is, rather, an exclamation, a kind of hallelujah or eureka.
[See *endnote for references and technical data.*]

In context, Gotama Buddha is teaching and the assembled monks are listening intently when Gotama himself "realizes the significance." Then he makes the above exclamation on the unconditioned. I will return to the truth of this statement. In a sense, everything I have to say flows naturally from this truth.

What are these conditions? In Buddhism, "conditions" sometimes has a technical meaning, but it's often used in a very broad sense. Simply put, we can say that our lives, and we ourselves, are conditioned by various factors: space and time, body and mind, previous acts and decisions, present attitudes, genes and environment, and so on. Needless to say, this is not merely a theoretical or speculative concern. What happens if we don't have clean air to breathe or water to drink? Without these conditions we would not be what we are. Indeed, we would not be at all.

Buddhism invites us to look carefully and see what really is. Is it not true that everything, including ourselves, is conditioned? Buddhism does not posit an eternal, unchanging soul behind all of this. For example, instead of speaking of a self or soul, Buddhism breaks this notion down into the **six senses**. This does not refer to psychic abilities, but to the five common sense faculties of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching, to which is added the sixth sense faculty: mind or consciousness. Note that in this description the sixth sense faculty of mind or consciousness is just that: one sense faculty, no more, no less. Just as hearing takes place through the activation of the auditory sense, thoughts and feelings occur through the activation of the mental sense. Because the sixth sense plays an integrating role, we tend to consider it our center and self-identity. But it is significant that, through the actual experience of close and careful observation, Buddhism does not posit any substantial self or underlying soul. Rather, it simply points out the working of these six senses. Nor does Buddhism urge us to believe this. Instead, it invites us to inquire for ourselves through sustained practice.

Buddhism also speaks of the **five aggregates**, a way of describing not only the self, but all reality, experienced or imagined: 1. matter, including material form and the physical body. 2. feeling or sensation. 3. perception. 4. volition or will. 5. mind or consciousness (the sixth sense mentioned above). Even more generally, Buddhism speaks of the **three marks** (characteristics or "seals") of all that is: 1. without permanence or impermanent. 2. without ease or *dis-ease*. 3. without self or selfless. These three marks are, of course, closely connected with each other, and with the five aggregates and the six senses. Because things do not exist forever they are, by nature, without permanence. Nothing is found to exist forever, unchanging. And because we ourselves have no eternal, unchanging self, we cannot come completely to rest or be at ease with ourselves. The second mark, which I call *dis-ease*, is also the first noble truth of Buddhism, often rendered in English as "suffering."

In a word, the three marks reveal that no condition is permanent — and there is nothing beyond conditioned existence; no condition can come to rest in or as itself;

indeed, there is no underlying self or soul. Put even more succinctly, we cannot come to rest in being — in being anything. True stability cannot be found in ourselves. This is the constant dis-ease of our existence. And this is the first noble truth of Buddhism.

Please remember, this is the beginning, not the end of the experience that is Buddhism. If it ended here it would be pretty depressing! There are four noble truths, not just one. Keep in mind the wholeness of Buddhism.

Maybe this sounds a bit strange to some of you, especially those not familiar with Buddhism. Let me put it another way: "I was intent on the things that are contained in places, but among them I found no place of rest, nor did they receive me, so that I might say, 'it is enough, and it is well.'" Do you know which great Zen master said that? That is from Book seven, Chapter seven, of *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. He went through his own tremendous spiritual struggle, poignantly revealed in his confessions. Here we can see Augustine clearly realized that, as he was, he could not come to rest in himself. He is using a spatial metaphor but he is not, of course, simply speaking about physical space. And what was his salvation? Expressed in the celebrated passage on the opening page of his confessions: "...you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." This is a pithy and wonderful expression of the monotheistic salvation found in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition: We can only find rest in God as our source and salvation. In effect, Augustine had discovered that as he was, nothing would do. And he had tried it all, as anyone who has read his confessions knows. Finally his salvation came upon him in a garden in Milan in the summer of 386. But he speaks directly to, and for, everyone of us when he acknowledges that our heart is restless until it rests in God.

While the salvation found in such religions is different than that of Buddhism, the problem is much the same, isn't it? Frankly, I don't think this has anything to do with Buddhism or Christianity. It has to do with being human. It is the genuine insight that sets us on the religious quest — the realization that we are not sufficient unto ourselves. The first noble truth is not limited to Buddhism.

The Core of the Problem

Let's go a bit deeper. What is the real core of the problem? The conditions that bind us? Not exactly. Buddhism is rather subtle, but completely consistent here. It describes self, world, and all in it as a kind of universal interrelatedness, or co-dependent arising and ceasing. In short, everything comes about due to certain conditions and ceases when those conditions cease. This is connected with the three marks of existence mentioned above. We have already seen that Buddhism does not posit an eternal self or soul. Neither does it posit or assume an absolute first cause of all existence, such as a Creator God in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition.

But Buddhism does address the more immediate cause of our dis-ease in terms such as ignorance, craving, and self-attachment. Rather than speculating on the ultimate first cause of it all, Buddhism tends to focus on the fact that right here and

now we are not at ease. And if we examine ourselves, we can see that this is due to ignorance, craving, and self-attachment. That is where we begin. As I mentioned, Buddhism is a *practical* way or path. It is never mere theory.

Buddhism uses terms like ignorance, craving, and attachment to describe the relative cause of our dis-ease. This may not satisfy someone seeking a simple, either-or answer. If we look under the surface, however, we can see that these causes are, indeed, intertwined and pointing to different dimensions of the problem. Ignorant of who we really are, we crave fulfillment in something else. We can never come to rest that way, so we go on, blindly entangled in craving and attachment. Attached to something, we become possessive and afraid to lose it. Rather than finding fulfillment, our dis-ease only seems to increase. Why do we crave? Because we don't know who we really are. If we truly knew ourselves, we would not crave to be or to have something. And that craving in turn keeps us from seeing who we really are, thus perpetuating the vicious, painful cycle of ignorance-craving-attachment.

Practically speaking, here is the core of the problem: this tiny, literally insubstantial — yet damned tenacious — knot of deluded self-attachment. It's really nothing at all, but through conditions entwining, a tight knot of "I-ness" emerges. And we all know how painful this can be. That's what impels us to begin religious or spiritual practice. That's what drives us to sit zazen.

Spiritual Practices

Spiritual or religious practices should be done with great care. Otherwise, all kinds of problems can arise. Further, our fundamental religious problem may not be resolved.

For example, somewhat aware of and suffering from this religious problem, there may be a tendency to literally erase all consciousness itself: "No brain, no pain." Through meditation, people have sought to literally eliminate all conditions. This is an ancient art. Even today Yogis can enter a trance and eliminate all consciousness. They will not feel a lighted match next to their skin — at least for the moment. But that does not resolve the religious problem, does it? It's a lull in consciousness, similar to excessive drug or alcohol abuse. Look at Gotama's struggle prior to awakening. He rejected such practices after having mastered them. He saw that such practices were only a temporary cessation. During the lull it's true, one is not subject to suffering or any conditions. But that lull itself is merely a temporary state. It's clear: Trying to simply and literally eliminate all conditions will not resolve our religious problem.

Another common mistake is attempting to eliminate all the content. For example, by trying to find a place that is totally quiet, or trying to create such a place for our practice. Trying not to hear anything, or see anything. Trying to minimize all sensory input. I think you can already see what a dead end this is. Remember those flotation tanks, immersion tanks, or isolation tanks apparently first developed by John C. Lilly, M. D. in the 1950s and eventually used as methods of Sensory Deprivation by meditators? What do you think happened? Many people had a

peaceful, pleasant experience. But others got freaked out. Why? Which of the six senses did they forget to deal with? The mind. It's obvious: Trying to eliminate or minimize the content of consciousness like this does not touch, let alone resolve, our religious problem.

Zazen

What, then, is Buddhist meditation practice, such as zazen — "seated Zen"? First of all, it has nothing to do with eliminating consciousness itself or the content of consciousness. What, then, is it? It is this: [*Sitting in zazen*]

What's going on here? In zazen there is no need to eliminate anything — neither the conditions themselves nor the content. In the beginning, of course, it's beneficial to have a quiet place away from worldly turmoil. That's why we have a retreat like this. But that is not the final purpose, nor should we crave it as an escape from the world.

Zazen is freedom from all conditions without eliminating them. Freedom from all conditions. Without eliminating them. There is no need to eliminate them. Right now, let's give ourselves up fully to zazen. [*Sitting in zazen*]

Eyes are half open, not closed. We are not looking *for* anything. But neither are we *blocking out* anything. Just be with whatever sight or sound there is. And when it's gone, it's gone. If someone walks by, we are fully aware of it. But we don't do anything with that awareness. We don't make it into something. Someone walks by. No more, no less. This is completely different from our ordinary consciousness, which is always making something out of nothing: There he goes again; if that person wasn't walking around, I could do better zazen. Or: Wow, I'm doing good zazen — somebody walked by and I wasn't distracted at all!

The same holds for the other senses as well, although the greater difficulty, as we've just seen, is the sixth sense, the mind. Thus, the practice of sustained, disciplined zazen in a retreat like this. With patience and practice it's relatively easy to just be with the sights, sounds, even the painful sensations that may accompany sustained zazen. Genuine zazen, however, includes and embraces body-mind in its totality. Focusing on one's breathing can be very helpful here. Such breathing is a natural function of, and at the same time integrates and embraces, body-mind.

Once again, zazen is freedom from all conditions, without eliminating any of them. More than that, genuine zazen is the *fulfillment* of all conditions — but let me return to that at the end. First, by actually giving ourselves up to concentrated zazen and sitting through to the end of ourselves, the tangled knot of deluded selfness naturally comes undone. There is nothing holding it together. In a sense, it is only our delusive craving to be a certain way — even to be "enlightened" — that holds the painful snarl together.

The Knot Untied

Let me give a simple illustration. [*Puts on a shoe with laces tied tight*] This is the self. It's out of place here in the meditation hall, isn't it? All of you are naturally barefoot. No need for shoes in here. I am the only one parading around with a self.

What do we do when the shoe starts to hurt, when this self-complex becomes aware of its dis-ease? Often we grab one end of the knot and pull it even tighter: "My damn boss is the problem!" or "If I wasn't stuck in this stupid job...." We might then pull the other end — making the knot tighter again: "Oh, it's all my fault. I'm no good. I never do anything right." Now the knot is very tight. It really hurts.

What is zazen? This: [*Unties shoelace by gently pulling apart both strings at once*] It's as simple as that. Then we actually know for ourselves because the painful tightness is gone. Now we can hold up the two ends of the shoelace and see that the whole painful complex was only the knotting up of those conditions. No more, no less.

Be careful here. Don't fall into thinking that the self is absolutely evil and must be smashed to pieces. That itself is just another delusion. Buddhism does not say that. When Gotama, a Zen master, or you and I for that matter, leave the meditation hall, we naturally put on our own footwear. Not somebody else's. In that respect, we all have a sense of self. There's nothing wrong with that. The shoe comes in handy sometimes when we go outside. But we don't identify ourselves as that. We freely wear it, and freely take it off.

The Heart Sutra

We have been focusing on early Buddhism and the Theravada tradition. The Heart Sutra is a very concise expression of the Mahayana spirit which developed later. I suppose it is the most recited sutra. It's only one page long, but it says it all. Let me recite some of it in the present context, so you can see that Buddhism speaks with one voice here, although the tone is decidedly different: "Practicing the profound Perfection of Wisdom and thoroughly realizing that the five aggregates [mentioned above] are Empty." In other words, all conditions are empty of self. "Thus, all dis-ease was eliminated." That's the heart of Buddhism. The most renowned section: "All form as it is, is Empty; Empty itself is all form." In other words, all conditions are empty of self. And this wondrous emptiness is none other than all forms and conditions. Not a matter of transcending this world and going to some world of emptiness. The Heart Sutra goes on to say: "No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind." What is this? The six senses. And it is saying there aren't any. As a matter of fact, it goes on to say about all six senses that there is no such sense, thing sensed, or act of sensing. And it doesn't stop there. It goes on to declare: "No ignorance." Wasn't that the problem? Then it states: "No extinction of ignorance." Neither ignorance nor extinction of ignorance. Clearly not merely a state of mind, nor a matter of mental blankness. "No dis-ease, no cause of dis-ease, no extinction of dis-ease, no way leading to the extinction of dis-ease." These are the four noble truths. And they are all gone. "No wisdom, no attainment." Neither is there any wisdom or attainment. Nothing to attain.

There is no need to interpret this. We could spend the rest of our lives doing so, and barely scratch the surface. Suffice it to say that the Heart Sutra is not speaking merely of conditions, or the lack thereof. And yet, it is not something transcendental or supernatural. It is this [*striking floor*] being empty. Ourselves being empty of self. Again, quoting the Heart Sutra, this is "freedom from all hindrances, all fears, all delusions, Nirvana." In short, freedom from all conditions. The unconditioned.

What we thought of as self and world have been transformed. But where have we gone — to some transcendental, supernatural world? To return to the beginning, I ask once again, what are we liberated from? From ourselves, from the knot of self-attachment. Thus we are liberated from everything. To put it even more bluntly, we don't need to be liberated from our conditions; they are not the problem. Then what remains? Everything! — now unconditioned.

Perhaps this still seems somewhat abstract, so let's now look at how it is dealt with in the Zen Buddhist tradition.

THE UNCONDITIONED IN ZEN

What is Buddha?

One of the most common questions in Zen Buddhism is, "What, or who, is Buddha?" Buddha means an awakened one, you awakened to reality. Usually this question is being asked by a monk or someone who is devoting their life to awakening. And usually we are asking this question because we have not yet realized it ourselves. So it is a most pertinent question: I don't get it; who is Buddha, what is awakening? In the present context it amounts to: "What is the unconditioned?"

Very many answers have been given to this question. Let me give just a few. A monk named Echo asks what is Buddha. The response: "You are, Echo." It sounds like an elementary English reader: John asks "What is Buddha?" The teacher says "You are, John!" That's the entire koan. The whole question, and the whole answer. Perhaps the monk had some preconception, some misconception, about what the living Buddha is, so the master responded that way. But that's beside the point. For us right here and now, what is Buddha?

Another answer to the same question: "Three pounds of linen [or the flax that linen is made of]." What is the difference between this answer and the previous one? It has been suggested that at the moment the master may have been handling linen or weighing flax, perhaps to make robes. Or the master may have been stating the weight of a monk's robes. But again, we needn't be preoccupied with such things. The point is, the master was asked what the Buddha was and he answered with what happened to be present at the moment. In effect, he answered the question about the unconditioned by pointing directly to the immediate conditions around him. A superb answer at that time and place. When someone

tries to imitate it, however, it's lost.

Still another answer: "A dry hunk of shit." This is not merely vulgar language. On the contrary, it is religious discourse of the highest order. Perhaps this master knew the inquiring monk, knew that he was attached to the form of Buddha as a peerless paragon. But the monk seems to have had some doubt, so he asked the question. Maybe they were on the road, maybe there was some feces around. At any rate, at that time and place the master replied, "A dry hunk of shit." Is there anything wrong with that? Is it beyond the pale of "Buddha"? Do Buddhas go to the bathroom? Do you?

What's the Point of the First Patriarch Coming?

Another very common question is about the intent or meaning of Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Chinese Zen, taking the hazardous journey from India to China to "transmit" this unconditioned dharma. On the surface this seems to be asking something quite different from the previous question about what is the Buddha. But it's really asking the same thing.

What's the point of the first patriarch coming? One answer: "Why don't you just ask the point of yourself?!" Then you can get clear about it once and for all. Why bother asking about Bodhidharma?

Another answer to the same question: "If there's any point at all, no one can ever be saved." In the Chinese text there is no subject, so it could be read as no one, I, you, or he (Bodhidharma). But the "point" here is, as long as we are grasping anything — even Bodhidharma's point or some so-called attainment — we are only binding ourselves.

Another answer: "That tree in the garden." It seems that there were some grand oak or cypress trees at this temple. With branches extending to the heavens and roots digging down into the bowels of the earth, the master naturally let the stately tree in front of them do the talking. The monk continues: "Please master, do not refer to objective [or conditioned] things." The master says, "I am not." The monk repeats his question: "Then what's the point of the first patriarch coming?" The master: "That tree in the garden!" It is as if the monk is pleading: "I'm asking about the unconditioned, so don't answer me with something conditioned. I want Emptiness, but you keep giving me forms." The unconditioned is rising up in front of our eyes at this very moment. Where else could we possibly find it?

Ah, Konan in Spring: Partridges Cooing, Flowers fragrant!

One more example from the Zen tradition. A monk asks: "Speech as well as silence are relative [or conditioned]. How can we be free from both?" This monk seems tied up with the duality of speech and silence. How do we respond? The master responded with the verse of a renowned poet: "Ah, how fondly I recall Konan in spring: Partridges cooing, flowers fragrant!" Konan is an area south of the Yangtze River renowned for its natural beauty. Has the master fallen into the trap of using language? Or is he giving living, eloquent expression to that which is beyond

speech and silence? Note that the master is fondly recalling, in a sense he is longing for the beauty of which he sings. What a free and wondrous answer to the monk's question! Love birds cooing to each other in spring — a wonderfully apt image for this monk wrapped up in the duality of speech and silence. When you are intimate with your loved one, is there a problem of speech or silence, conditioned or unconditioned?

These are just a few examples from the voluminous Zen tradition, but I think it is already clear as can be: We do not come to the unconditioned by denying the conditions. Rather, free of the "knotness" of deluded self-attachment, the unconditioned is each and every condition that we find ourselves in. The conditions themselves are not the problem. Nor is it a matter of becoming completely desireless, lifeless, cold, or impotent. This is made clear time and again in the Zen tradition, not least of all in the just-quoted poem of longing.

The Fire God Seeks Fire

Nor is it a matter of mere understanding, intellectual or otherwise. One outstanding example of this: A monk is training under a master for three years. But he never goes to the master for instruction, so the master asks him why. The monk explains that when he was with his former master he had a realization. The master asks about the circumstances, and the monk explains that he had asked his former master what is the self of a Zen practitioner. ("What is Buddha?" — it's the same.) The former master replied: "The fire god seeks fire." The present master declares it is a good statement, indeed, but that the monk does not yet really know it. The monk replies that it is like fire seeking fire, or the self looking for itself. (The god of fire is forever ablaze. What is more ridiculous than the god of fire asking for a light?) The master then declares that indeed the monk has not got it at all. The monk gets agitated and leaves the monastery. But on the way, genuine doubt sets in, so he returns and begs the master, now in all sincerity, "What is the self of a Zen practitioner?" The master replies: "The fire god seeks fire!" — And the monk immediately awakens. Yet the words were exactly the same as his former understanding. What was the difference?

Lots of good stories, but that's not why we're here. Finally, let's turn to the unconditioned in our own lives.

THE UNCONDITIONED IN OUR OWN LIVES

The Reality of Losing Ourselves

You've heard something about the Buddhist sutras and even some Zen stories. But for us, right here and now, to actually come to this selflessness — that's another story altogether, isn't it? You might think it's virtually impossible. You would be wrong. Why? Because, as a matter of fact, we are constantly losing ourselves. What happens whenever we "get into" watching a movie or "lose ourselves" reading a book? Ever fall in love? Where do we go when we lose ourselves?

What is this experience of losing ourselves in the movie or the music, getting into the game or sport we're playing? It's not a matter of losing all consciousness and being unable to function. On the contrary, isn't that precisely when we are fully there? Musicians, artists, athletes know this.

What is the difference? — that's the point here. Losing ourselves like this is only a temporary, partial self-transcendence. Then we come back to ourselves. Buddhism, as we've already seen, is not wrapped up with such things. Buddhism is the consummate and conclusive "undoing" of the delusive self-complex. Awakening to reality is realizing the freedom of there being no self to come back to — and not attaching even to that. Far from a cold and lifeless trance, there is nothing more lively and liberating than this. Each and every moment boundlessly unfolding.

On a long drive home, all of a sudden you find yourself pulling up safely in front of your house. How did you do that? Were you there or not? Maybe now you can see that those apparently incomprehensible, ambiguous Buddhist statements are expressing something very accurate, very profound. And we are touching it every day of our lives. But as a temporary, partial state which we go into and come out of. And it's usually confined to a particular content or context. It's a temporary, partial state only because we are still tied to the delusive self-complex. This living reality, however, is not a state, temporary or otherwise. It is not a thing at all.

When we come back to ourselves we say, "Wow, that was great!" It has been reduced to something experienced by us in the past. We've already turned boundless reality into something. But what about the moment we were lost in awe at the picture or performance? What was there? And what were we the moment we were lost? We were there *fully*, and yet not there at all. How strange. Yet it's constantly happening to us all, every day. Right now, my giving myself up to speaking and your giving yourselves up to listening are none other than this.

Why is it so easy, literally effortless, to momentarily lose ourselves like this in everyday life — yet so hard to do it in sustained spiritual practice? Zazen is not difficult at all. It seems hard only because our minds have been turned into idol factories, endlessly spewing mental activity, restlessly chasing after things. Zazen is impossible in our ordinary mental activity and restlessness. But again, that is not because zazen is something hard to do. Give yourself up fully to zazen and there's nothing easier. There is not one single thing to attain in zazen. It's easier than lifting your finger. The "difficulty" is tied up with ourselves; it's not in the zazen. Approaching zazen with our ordinary, distracted and distracting mind is what makes it seem so distant and difficult. Thus, sustained zazen requires some discipline, and patience. That's the value of a retreat like this.

When I smell a flower, *I* don't smell *a flower*. At that moment there's just [*smelling a flower*] "Ahhh!" There is no self at that moment, nor is there a flower. Everyday, in our living experience of the moment, we are confirming the truth of those apparently incomprehensible, ambiguous Buddhist statements. But we fail to fully realize it for what it is. Instead, the knot of "I" returns and boundless reality is reduced to myself facing some thing — a fragrant flower, a smelly shoe, whatever. By our restless

mental habits, the living experience turns into something experienced by me. But it's undeniable: The actual "undoing" of the self — the vital core of Buddhism — is under our feet at every step. It is every step. We are like small children who carefully tie up our sneakers then run out and play; before we know it they're untied again! It's clear: What we think of as ourselves is not substantially real. In fact, we are constantly losing ourselves. *Self-undone* is living reality, not some vague ideal to be attained in the future through self-effort.

Someone might object, "But we need the self. Without the self we couldn't make decisions, we couldn't even lose ourselves." Sounds logical. But it's not true. The renowned Japanese Zen master Bankei often used the example of hearing sounds outside while listening to a talk. You're absorbed in listening to my talk right now. But if a car passes by, you know it's a car. And if a dog barks you know it's a dog, not a cat or a car. How, Bankei asks, do we know? How are we knowing these things without even directing ourselves toward them, without reflecting on them at all? His answer is the Unborn Buddha-mind. That is, the unconditioned at work. The moment the crow caws we know it perfectly without having to reflect on it or turn in into anything.

Another example Bankei uses is walking down a crowded street. If you happen to be with a friend, you don't need to stop talking, nor do you need to consciously navigate through the crowd. You both effortlessly weave around the other people as you continue your conversation. How in the world do we do that? Can we do it because we have a self? Or because we don't have a self? If I called out your name right now you'd respond. From where? — Where do we come from? Who are we before our name has been called? As it's said in Buddhism, any other self is like putting a head on top of the one we already have. It's like taking our original, unfettered freedom, stuffing it in a shoe and tying it up tight, then strutting around the meditation hall saying, "Look at me!"

The Practice of Reality

It takes time, but if we give ourselves fully to our practice we will know the release that comes when the shoelace is found to be untied. As important as that is, however, it's not the end of the Buddhist path. It's the beginning. We need to continue our practice ever more deeply to make sure that the lace really is untied and stays untied. Thus, sustained and rigorous practice involves not only untying the knot, but actually unlacing the shoe.

First and foremost, the knot is undone. Then, strange as it may sound, we need to make sure that we don't get tangled up in the fact that our shoe is untied. Thus, we then patiently pull the lace out of the eyelets and undo the lace all the way down. What does this mean? We all bring along our own karma, our personal history and experience. And we must work through these things in our practice. Having a very deep realization in itself doesn't resolve every particular problem. Human beings are very complex creatures. Actually untying the knot does not guarantee that it can't get tied up again. Untying the shoe is not the same as unlacing it. Unlacing the shoe, we can finally hold up that little lace and see it for

what it really is. And that is not something to get knotted up again.

"But what concrete practices should we do?" There are many possibilities. Zazen is one form of discipline, but it is not the way for everyone. As mentioned, Augustine found a genuine way, though it is not for everyone either. If you are a Catholic, however, it can be a precious pointer. But whatever practice it is, let it be one that puts an end to all searching as self-practice. As long as I am still trying to attain something through *my* practice, that practice is not yet pure. Residue of self-delusion remains. By all means practice and make it real. But let it be a practice that is directly coming from reality, rather than a self-practice that is forever going toward, ever-approaching but never reaching some intended goal.

"Tell me how to do it." Perhaps this request really means: "Give me some concrete *conditions* to fulfill so that I can be assured of success." To put it in the context of our opening questions: "Where and how can this realization occur?" In other words, "What conditions are necessary?" None whatsoever. Simply undo the knot of self-attachment. That is not a condition, though. Undo your self. What is holding the knot together? Our continuing self-delusion, our craving to be something, to do something, that is all. As it's said, this so-called Buddha-mind "shows no decrease in ordinary people and no increase in Buddhas." It's not something that you lack or that you attain, partially or otherwise. It's not that kind of a thing.

"Be more concrete!" OK. Take whatever thought or feeling you have right now and trace it to its source. Undo it. Where does it come from? Better yet: Take your *self* — what you take to be yourself — and trace it to its source. Right now, where do you come from? Even better: What are you lacking right here and now?!

Let's end where we began. "This is unconditional. Were it not for this, there would be no emancipation for the conditioned. But since there is indeed this, unconditional, all conditions are emancipated!" I have looked at many English translations and, with the help of some scholars of Indian Buddhism, at the Pali text. A number of the translators rendered it as emancipation *from* the conditions. The Pali itself is ambiguous and can be read either way. I suggest it should be read as emancipation *for* the conditions. Why? Because rendering it as emancipation *from* the conditions suggests that, through practice, I am getting away from the troubling conditions by holding onto some unconditional Self.

Buddhism is emancipation *for* all conditions. Buddhism is concerned with the emancipation of all beings, all conditions of dis-ease. And I don't just mean the Mahayana-Bodhisattva ideal either. If our awakening does not involve all beings — whether other beings are aware of it or not is another question — then it is not genuine. This is directly connected with compassion.

We must ask ourselves, does our practice truly culminate in this compassion, in the *work of love*? Or does it tend toward escapism and quietism? By freely and selflessly sharing in the suffering and dis-ease of others, we help them *empty* it, let it go, whatever the actual "conditions."

We don't seek emancipation *from* all, but *for* all. This is not just quibbling over words. It is a crucial point in our practice, isn't it? Not just in how we "complete" our practice, but in how we genuinely begin.

Thank you for listening so intently.

ENDNOTE

THE UNCONDITIONED IN BUDDHISM

The paraphrase on the unconditioned is from the *Udâna*, VIII, 3 in the *Khuddaka Nikâya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* found in the Pali Canon (*Ti-piṭaka*).

Translations of this *Udâna* in its entirety can be found in Peter Masefield's *The Udâna* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994) p. 166; John D. Ireland's *The Udâna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997). John D. Ireland's translation, along with another translation by Thanissaro Bhikku, can be found on the Access to Insight Web Site: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/>.

Partial translations can be found in Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974) p. 37; Edward Conze's *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (Boston: Shambhahla, 1990) p. 95; Rune E. A. Johansson's *Pali Buddhist Texts: An Introductory Reader and Grammar* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998) p. 119-20.

The Pali text can be found in Johansson's *Pali Buddhist Texts*, p. 119; commentary by the Fifth Century Ceylonese Dhammapâla with extensive notes by a leading scholar can be found in Peter Masefield's *The Udâna Commentary [by Dhammapâla]* Volume I (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994), pp. 1-15, and Volume II (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995) pp. 1018-1021 and 1077-1081.

St. Augustine quotations are from John K. Ryan's translation *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Image Books, 1960) pp. 167 and 43.

THE UNCONDITIONED IN ZEN

What is Buddha?

"You are, Echo" is from case seven of the koan collection *Blue Cliff Record*.

"Three pounds of flax" is from case eighteen of the koan collection *Gateless Barrier* and case twelve of the *Blue Cliff Record*.

"A dry hunk of shit" is from case twenty-one of the *Gateless Barrier*.

What's the Point of the First Patriarch Coming?

For "Why don't you just ask the point of yourself?!" see "True Sitting: A Discussion with Hisamatsu Shin'ichi" in *The Eastern Buddhist* XXXI, #1 (1998), p. 82.

For "If there's any point at all, no one can ever be saved" see, for example, Burton Watson's translation *The Zen Teaching of Master Lin-chi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993) p. 68.

For "That tree in the garden" see case thirty-seven of the *Gateless Barrier*.

Ah, Konan in Spring: Partridges Cooing, Flowers Fragrant!

See case twenty-four of the *Gateless Barrier*.

The Fire God Seeks Fire

See Dogen's *Bendowa*, question 16.

THE UNCONDITIONED IN OUR OWN LIVES

The Reality of Losing Ourselves

For Bankei's illustrations, see, for example, Norman Waddell's translation *The Unborn: The Life and Teaching of Zen Master Bankei* (San Francisco, 1984) pp. 35 and *passim*, and p. 40.

The Practice of Reality

For Buddha-mind "shows no decrease in ordinary people and no increase in Buddhas," see John Blofeld's translation *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 30, where it is rendered as "It is not the less for being manifested in ordinary beings, nor is it greater for being manifested in the Buddhas."