

## *Public Lecture:* *Comfortably Seated Under the Rose-apple Tree*

When Gautama Buddha was still struggling on the Way, he happened to recall a childhood experience in which he was comfortably seated under the cool shade of a rose-apple tree. Still a child, yet he spontaneously entered a very calm and peaceful state of deep meditation, free from sensuous pleasures. The early Buddhist teachings and practices can seem dry and tedious. Yet, it was the recollection of this unprompted experience that became the final spur or inspiration to drop his will-full asceticism and thus awaken.

What about us, here and now? Are we doing the right thing—sitting here on our butts when the world is in the state it's in? Isn't there something we should be **doing**? My response: *Wars begin in the minds of men, and it is here that peace is created*. This noble sentiment is found in many religions. It's also found in the preamble to the constitution for UNESCO. You can find it almost anywhere, if you look deeply enough. Conflicts arise in our own mind and our own heart, and true peace is found and nurtured here. Rather than an **escape** from the problems of the world, what we are doing here and now can open up a genuine solution.

Very simply, what Buddhism calls mind or heart or self is not different from sense experience in general. Mind includes what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. And what we think, desire, hope for, worry about, and hate. In a word, the totality of our experience. And sometimes this mind and its experience are moving too quickly, aren't they? As if mind has become an express train without brakes. We look out of the window to try and see where we are and to get our bearings, but it's just a dizzying blur: "I'm going too fast! I've got to slow down!"

This is one way to illustrate the dis-ease that is the first noble truth of Buddhism. Not just wandering thoughts on the surface, but the basic drives and urges that propel us. We can assert some control over them. But they also control us, don't they? Can we control them completely? For example, when we slow down, we are able to examine our dis-ease more carefully and respond in a better way. We're certainly more in control then. But is dis-ease in slow motion still dis-ease?

Looking out the window of our racing mind-train, our whole experience is like a blur: *Whoosh!* We can't see clearly, can't distinguish things or make good judgments. Some people seek to escape through drugs or alcohol, or dull their minds on electronic screens. Fortunately, many people nowadays are turning to meditation. It is no panacea, but by learning to meditate we can slow down our speeding mind-train. Slowing down from 300 miles an hour to 10 miles an hour, what do we see, what is our experience? Not another world; yet the world is completely different—for now we see clearly and in detail the person walking along the road, even the color of his shoes. We can see the leaves on the trees, and each flower, experience the beauty all around us. And we can respond better to conflicts that arise within and without.

Slowing down—becoming calm and clear—is a healthy thing to do. That in itself may save our lives: jump into your car with mind racing and it may be your last ride. And yet, as valuable as this slowing down is, it is still scratching the surface, isn't it? In fact, this slowing down process may excite us so that we speed up again. We're still on the endless cycle of slowing down and speeding up, slowing down and speeding up. I invite you to examine your experience and see if this is true or not.

When our racing mind really calms down, what do we clearly see, what is our actual experience? Can you discern the underlying urge or drive at the heart of our dis-ease? This is craving, the second noble truth: the self-centered urge to be, and to assert my self. Even to dominate the other. Intimately connected with wars beginning in the minds of men, and ending there, isn't it? Find out for yourself. Really slow down the mind-train that you are. Further, I invite you to complete that process: let the movement of mind itself, the experience of self, come to a full and complete stop. Then you'll see what's really here.

What's here—before thought arises? Before you've deemed this [*pointing to the floor*] is blue, before you've made a judgment about it, what is it? A rug? The whole universe? Nothing? What is your actual experience right now—before self arises? You see how self is stuck: immediately mental wheels turn, reflection churns. Self cannot bring itself fully to rest, for the experience of self is unrest, dis-ease. Look and see yourself.

Thus, the sustained practice of meditation. Genuine zazen discerns the underlying dis-ease that self is—and reveals that it is undone at its root. Allow all of your energy to simply gather, to fully focus into one. Without judging, without anticipating or expecting, without comparing. Just being fully present—with pain in your knee, if that what's there. Letting it be just as it is. Buddhist meditation is, in two words: stop, see.

Some people might think: “I can't even imagine what it would be like to really stop. No, it's impossible!” Perhaps for them it is. Other people might wonder: “Should it stop?” Should this dis-ease end? I invite you, through your own experience, to confirm for yourself: Is that what needs to be done or not? Then the way is clear.

Can this dis-ease really be stopped? As long as you haven't actually confirmed it by stopping, you can't help but doubt. Come to a complete stop and see: is this where you started, or not? When the experience of self really comes to its own end, what happens? Nothing new pops up. Nor do you enter a new world of enlightenment. No. For the first time you really come home to **this** [*looking at his hand*]: “I have five fingers!” Comfortably seated under the rose-apple tree, or wherever you happen to be. We don't need another experience or a new world. Truly see what's in front of your face—really see the face of the other in front of you—then you won't race around seeking anything else.

Is practice difficult? If it is, what makes it difficult? Conflicts **are** created in the minds of men, aren't they? Find out what's wrong with your practice and correct it. You already know from your own experience: I can slow down this mind-train, I can give up drinking, quit smoking, stop getting angry. I can let go of painful cravings and dangerous delusions. Yes, all of this is good and true—by all means do it.

But how does the self give up itself? How does the self that is doing all of this let go of itself? How can we cease craving itself—the third noble truth? Can we cease our very craving to be, to assert ourselves as such? Don't fool yourself; that takes work. That's the way, which is the fourth noble truth. That's why we have a retreat, so that we can throw ourselves into it and confirm it for ourselves.

That's what sustained meditation is all about: to be able to maintain that. Not only while sitting here on the cushion, but also in getting up and doing what needs to be done in the world. Not from *my* perspective in conflict with yours, but from here, from the

ground. Perhaps you are beginning to see how necessary it is to let the war in our minds come to an end. To relinquish the drive to have things *my* way.

*Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, special orders don't upset us! All we ask is that you let us have it your way.*

From an old Burger King commercial. In any genuine religious practice, you can't have it your way. If you're still trying to have it your way, you're not practicing, are you? So the first thing to do is let go of trying to have it my way. The pickles and the lettuce are not the problem; if you have an allergy, by all means have it your way. But not with spiritual practice—it doesn't work.

Let's return to the beginning: Is there something we should be **doing**? Should we be living and acting from this here—the real, actual ground of all? Is this where real peace arises? It's not something esoteric, only experienced by monks on distant mountaintops. You're constantly touching it! Every time you're immersed in something: the music you're listening to or performing, the book you're reading, the movie you're watching. Sweating with the character in the book or on the screen, are you one or are you two, are you fast or are you slow? At least for the moment, everything virtually stops. You too. Stopping is always here; it's always available.

Right here is where you stop. Look—right here you already are stopped! Confirm it: Let the lid come off, let the walls come down, let the ground underfoot be gone, in a very good way. Let go of the self-created conflicts and delusions that you lock yourself up in. See what's really here.

Yes, it can be unsettling at first—to the extent that you stubbornly hold onto your delusions. But it is a very good unsettling. When you settle into **this**, you can't get unsettled again. Even death is not separate from this. As Walt Whitman said, "I am not contained between my hat and boots."

As valuable as it is, it's not enough to simply stop the delusions dead in their tracks. Why? A beautiful butterfly pinned down in our collection is not a living butterfly. It's stopped moving and we can see it clearly now. But it's just the dead shell preserved in our collection. Coming to a full and complete stop, fly free—then **all** is set free. Expressed in Zen fashion: "Go pursuing sweet grass, return following fallen flowers."

You can't help serving others then. On New Year's Day this year I considered: *What is there left for me? What do I really want?* Nothing came to mind. There was nothing I desired. At the end of March I hope to go with my wife to Venice. She's always been curious about the city, and now the conditions are right. So I really look forward to it. But I don't need to, as it's said, "See Venice and die"—I could die and then see Venice [*laughter*]. I'm really happy that I can go with her, but it's not as if something is lacking in our lives. There are many things we can, and should, hope for. And work for. But on New Year's Day I couldn't think of a thing. Then it came: *To serve others. I want to be there for others.* That includes sitting comfortably under the rose-apple tree together.

You have to stop. Once you stop, you can really start again. Do you see? You can get on the train of another in need. Or you can get out of the train and sing and dance with them. And you can freely get back on the train. Then **really** move, work, do what needs to be done.

*I was trying every which way to save the bucket,  
Making sure the fragile bamboo strips never came loose.  
Suddenly the bottom fell out.  
No more water in the bucket!  
No more moon in the water!  
Emptiness in the palm of my hand.*

This poem is attributed to Mugai Nyodai, a Japanese Zen nun of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It expresses her awakening. She was practicing long and hard with great sincerity. One night she took a bucket to the well to water the flowers. A wooden bucket secured with bamboo straps that you'll still find today in the Far East. That night there was a full moon. When she filled the bucket she saw the moon reflected in the water. It was so beautiful as she admired it reflected in the water bucket. Her whole life of practice must have become concentrated there.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the bottom of the bucket burst! All of the water was gone, and of course the moon as well. Awakening, she realized how all of her practice of "letting go" was really desperately **holding on**, trying to "keep it together."

There are many useful Zen expressions, but I'd like to use one from a Christian friend. It's his paraphrasing-commentary on *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a text of Christian mysticism. In trying to make it approachable, my friend put it this way in one of his sermons: "The only thing between you and God is you." This is a Christian retreat center so I don't mind calling it God, but if you prefer we can call it reality, or the real other.

The only thing that separates me from the other is me. And that separation is ultimately not real. Thus we practice: to let that delusion come undone and find out what is from the start. That's what is cultivated, nourished. It's a marvelous practice.

"The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense by which he has attained liberation from the self." Albert Einstein, from *The World As I See It* in the section on good and evil. "The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense by which he has attained liberation from the self." Not for the self, but from the self. You see how important that difference is. There is no self that needs to be liberated. It's liberation from that delusion. Still that's only halfway, but it's a good beginning.

If anyone has a question, comment, criticism, or condemnation, please feel free.

*Participant: Jeff, I heard a lot of compassion in what you just shared with us.*

Well, I'm getting old [*laughter*]. I don't know that I even used the word once.

*Participant: That's why I said it.*

It takes one to know one. Thank you.

*Participant: I love that poem by the nun. All of the constructs that I've put in place to keep me believing in this self—to finally have that drop away! It is so beautiful. I actually felt it.*

She seems to have realized at that moment how even her spiritual practice was just another form of trying to hold it together. Practice can so easily become a kind of psychological cover-up or spiritual arrogance.

You'll have to forgive me, but I'm a bit of a fundamentalist. I'm afraid much so-called Buddhism in the world today is simply learning to slow down. As I've already said, this is very good, very valuable, by all means do it. But it's not enough. By nature, Buddhist meditation is about not just slowing down, but coming to a full and complete stop. Then seeing—realizing through all our senses—what's here. That's what happened to Mugai Nyodai.

Without knowing it, she was trying to keep her self together, not only the water in the bucket, but that marvelous moon. She tried to keep the water calm so she could enjoy the beautiful reflection of the moon in her bucket. And then the bottom fell out!

There really was a woman named Mugai Nyodai, and she was officially designated as a Zen master. It's unclear whether the poem that has come down to us is actually hers. Anyway, let it be yours.

## *Comfortably Seated Under the Rose-apple Tree* *Selections from Retreat Lectures*

### **Second Day**

Comfortably seated under the rose-apple tree. Are you, comfortably seated, under the rose-apple tree? Is there some tension, tightness, soreness? Take a moment to feel what is happening in your body. If your shoulders are tight, take a moment to massage. Release the tension; get a sense of where that tension is coming from. Adjusting the cushion under your butt might help.

Not going around in circles in your head might help too! Notice how body and mind are connected. This practice is done with our whole body and our whole mind, not just sitting here thinking about the practice. It's pointless to try and deny or suppress what is actually going on. Pain is your body telling you something's wrong. Listen to it, learn from it, but don't be enslaved by it.

We're not trying to cut ourselves off from sensations and feelings. On the contrary, we're opening ourselves up completely—to see what's really here. We don't need to react or escape. Reacting to pain and fear keeps the mind-train chugging along. Trying to

escape from our sensations and feelings is also part of that same dis-eased momentum. As is willfully trying to stop the train. All of this simply provides fuel for the engine of our suffering.

You cannot just follow your mental processes. You've already been there and done that, countless times. You already know that goes nowhere fast. But you cannot just make it stop either. Do you see: that very attempt comes from the same dis-ease.

So, we have this sublime practice of sustained zazen, literally "sitting Zen." Buddhism often speaks of our four physical postures: sitting, standing, walking (or moving), and reclining (or lying down). Zen rightly emphasizes that genuine practice is constant, it includes all of these postures, not just sitting. Although the natural focus during a retreat like this is zazen. A wonderful way to let the mind—again, that includes everything—come, of its own accord, to its own end. All activities of body and mind, all sense experience, undone.

Once we stop feeding it, the craving to be, to do, to have—even the craving to get away from everything—runs out of fuel. It takes time simply because we've been feeding it for so long. Use your time well.

A genuine koan stops the self in its tracks, instead of feeding it. You can't think yourself into or out of a koan. You can think about it all you want, have all kinds of neat ideas, and some teachers will even affirm such nonsense. But that has nothing to do with it. Self can't resolve the koan, and so it becomes stuck. Precisely. It's a way of bringing the whole self-process to its own end—dead in its tracks. This is true of sitting itself, done properly. Be careful not to turn your practice, your koan, your sitting, into "tool zen" or "toy zen"—that just keeps the little choo-choo train chugging along.

*Rôhatsu* is the most intense weeklong retreat of the monastic calendar. For the whole week, no hot water, no lying down—that very posture is prohibited. For my first *Rôhatsu* thirty-five years ago, I remember my preparations: big bag of trail mix (nuts and raisins), stretching, going back and forth with each leg in half lotus, and so on. Well, within eight hours of the first day, my legs and back were already ruined. Excruciating pain in places I never even felt before. Half lotus—I could hardly do one-eighth lotus! And all my precious trail mix already gobbled up. That's when *Rôhatsu* began for me. Once my neat little agenda went out the window, all my strategies, my bag of tricks and trail mix gone. No, you don't have to follow such a monastic routine or suffer like that. Yes, you do need to drop your own agenda.

Before you make the mistakes I made, drop it all. Everything's taken care of here. The retreat schedule is up on the wall, meals prepared, you've got a bed, a sink to wash up, a cushion to sit on—everything you need for the next couple of days. Let go of your strategies, your agenda, everything, and just give yourself to the practice. It's simpler that way.

Finally, what are we trying to do? Not a thing. Where are we trying to get? No place. Stop and see: where you're trying to get to is **here**, right where you are. There is no other place. There never will be. Early Chinese master Shitou (Sekitô in Japanese) was asked: "What about liberation?" His response: "Who binds you?" Need an agenda, a strategy for that?

A few generations later, the Chinese master Linji (Rinzai in Japanese), said: "You want to know the real Buddha? None other than **you** right now listening to my talk!" Clear enough?

To make it even clearer, see what Linji said just before the statement above: "If you just let the ceaselessly seeking mind come fully to rest, then you're a Buddha just as you are." Only then does he go on to bait his listeners with: "You want to know the real Buddha? None other than **you** right now listening to my talk!" How do you cultivate that? Even to say it needs to be realized is a step away.

## Third Day

Comfortably seated under the rose-apple tree. Firmly settled in proper practice, is there some obstruction, some hindrance? What can hinder **this**?

Buddhism includes a vast array of teachings and practices. Simply put, the earlier more traditional forms teach how to undo all sense entanglement, remove each hindrance and every obstruction, thus to end craving and dis-ease. This seems to be what Gautama Buddha did, though we don't know for sure.

Mahayana directly sees into, sees through, the nature of these entanglements, hindrances, and obstructions. Unfortunately, pop Buddhism trivializes this into a kind of double take in which we see something—then add on the notion, "But it's really empty, it's not ultimately real." Mental masturbation. The point is to actualize, to realize, in body and mind, that **this** is without self. Then, from there, carry out the Bodhisattva practice for all.

In a way, Mahayana Buddhism turns the more traditional practices, with all their analyses and stages, on their head. Any practice, however, has its value; and its limit. One of the great values of the more traditional practices is that they get down to the nitty gritty, the distasteful details that otherwise tend to get pushed under the rug. The five hindrances are a fine example:

- 1) Sensuous Desire
- 2) Ill-will
- 3) Sloth-torpor
- 4) Restless worry

## 5) Skeptical doubt

In more traditional Buddhism, these hindrances are described in detail and practical remedies or antidotes offered. Zen Buddhism rarely mentions them, though the third and fourth are sometimes taken up briefly in the context of meditation (see Suan quote below).

The first, sensuous desire, is greed and other defilements entangled in gross sensuous or sensual (not mere sense) desire. Lusting after someone or something. The second, ill-will, is the other extreme. Instead of sensuous lust, this is a feeling of hatred or disgust. (For more on these first two gross hindrances, see for example, “Principles of Zen Practice” in *Being Without Self: Zen for the Modern World*, or the transcribed retreat talk on our website).

The third is sloth-torpor, a hindrance that may assail and beguile us as long as we are not firmly settled in our practice. A heavy dullness or drowsiness engulfs us; we’re not sleeping, but we’re not awake either. It can be difficult and frustrating to try and pull ourselves out of it, for as soon as we lose concentration, we’re stuck in it again like a pot of glue. What do you do? First of all, make sure that your breathing is correct; during the break splash water on your face, have a cup of tea, walk briskly or stretch.

The fourth, restless worry, is the reverse of the third. Instead of being stuck in dead drowsiness where we don’t feel much of anything, with this hindrance we feel endless agitation and scattering as mind wanders down negative tracks: remorse over the past, worry over the future, and so on. What do you do? First of all, to keep from wandering, return to the breath: gently, calmly, patiently. **Feel** the breath in your body, steady and constant—unlike the wavering thoughts and worries.

The fifth and final hindrance is skeptical doubt, a variation on the fourth. Unlike Great Doubt, skeptical doubt is uncertainty produced by mental wavering: an unhealthy, pointless back-and-forth of endless possibilities. What do you do? Get refreshed, then choose a healthy, pointed anchor to focus on.

Zen Buddhism does not go into detail about these five hindrances or their remedies. It goes for the root rather than the branches. For example, here’s how Suan, a Chinese Zen lay master of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, dispenses with hindrances three and four:

Nowadays, those who devote themselves to Zen practice are few. Once a koan is taken up, they find their minds trapped by the twin demons of sloth-torpor and restless worry. They don’t realize that great doubt vanquishes them. If trust is firm, great doubt will be firm; once great doubt is firm, sloth-torpor and restless worry will naturally vanish.

Linji (Rinzai) goes even further when he speaks of the five grave sins. These are much worse than the five hindrances, for they include killing your parents, shedding the blood of the Buddha, and disrupting the unity of the sangha. Linji declares, however, that

these five grave sins become the great ocean of emancipation! He's got a profound point; in the end, what else could they be? But if you're not actually there, such statements can be gravely distorted by a confused mind.

If you really are there, bring it to one-on-one! If not, you might want to look into the five hindrances. If you feel something obstructing you, what do you do? Hone your own experience; see what you're doing wrong and correct it. These hindrances and their remedies are described with great care and detail in Buddhist texts. The five hindrances cover virtually every problem on the way. Here I have just briefly touched on them.

One way Linji expressed the absence of any hindrance is with the simple term 無事, pronounced *buji* in Japanese. Literally the two Chinese characters mean no thing, no matter, no problem. In contemporary Japanese it refers to safety, "nothing wrong." (Cf. "Enjoying the Way" in *Zen Classics for the Modern World*, p. 90 or the transcribed retreat talk on our website, p. 23 where I translated it as "carefree"). For Linji, a *buji* person is one who has nothing further to do, who is not entangled by things within or without, who is truly noble, yet is quite ordinary, wearing clothes, eating, lying down when tired. Such a one never gives a thought about being a Buddha. I would say that the person of *buji* freely does what needs to be done. But how, you may ask, can I really be carefree like that? How, I ask, can you not?

Over the centuries this term was corrupted into "do nothing zen" or "anything goes zen." Linji himself already knew the danger and condemned it clearly, for example when he spoke of "shavepates (bald heads) who stuff themselves with food, then sit down to meditate. **Arresting the flow of thought**, they don't let it arise. They hate noise and seek stillness. This is the method of the heretics." Do you see the difference between "arresting the flow of thought" and his already mentioned "just let the ceaselessly seeking mind come fully to rest"?

Take care. Don't be fooled by the words. Hone your own experience with them, but don't go to the words for understanding or you'll never really understand the Zen Records—nor will you understand yourself. Any questions, comments, or criticisms? My words are already growing old.

## Fourth Day

Are you comfortably seated under the rose-apple tree? Are you where you began? Or have you gotten somewhere? Let the speeding mind-train run out of fuel. Let it all come naturally to a full and complete stop—in a very good sense. I trust you are coming to see, from your own experience, that the real practice is not so difficult; it is the constant fueling of the engine of delusion that is tiring and frustrating.

Have you seen into your hindrances? Done properly, the needed remedy manifests; the hindrance itself shows the way to its ending. Nothing can really get in the way then. To be carefree, that is, free of self: not just free **from** care, but free **to** care. Keep your eye open. What is hindering you?