

Open To What Is

Good morning. It's wonderful to be back. All of us working together, supporting and being supported by one another. This is what a sangha really is. Even though several of you are joining us for the first time, we are all now a living and vital sangha. It's a joy and an honor to be here with you.

We are doing this together; yet, each one of us must do the basic work for herself or himself. There's no other way. No one else can sit through and see through for you. Everyone is in their own place. How could it be otherwise? Not higher or lower, I simply mean that everyone is coming from where they are. It's not good or bad; it's where we start from – rather than dream about being somewhere else or compare ourselves with someone else.

If anyone feels the urge to speak, from out of the practice, please feel free to do so. This is not a one-sided affair where an absolute authority tells you what to do and you passively accept. That has nothing to do with real Zen Buddhist practice. We don't play that game here. We do spur each other on at times, inspire and challenge. That is the work of Great Compassion. For example, if you are fully there in one-on-one, I may just be a mirror for you. But if you are escaping, I may become an impenetrable wall. Beware.

Now, how do we really begin? Some of us are still getting settled in our sitting. It takes time. Maybe you were busy right up to the beginning of retreat, and then all of a sudden here you are. You may have brought some concerns along with you. Those concerns have their place. But we don't need to be concerned with them here. Not because we don't care about them, but because they are not the work of this moment, of this retreat. Family, friends, work, the political situation, are very important; but not here.

“This is the great matter of life and death; pain in the legs is not!” Well, someone may come to one-on-one talking about the great matter of life and death, but it may not be that at all. It may just be some notion they heard or read about. On the other hand, if your leg really hurts, that's your present practice. That's what is there, although you don't need to make it into anything else.

As with zazen, so with one-on-one: what should you bring with you? Some people apologize for not bringing an important question – or answer – to one-on-one. Fine. It's best not to bring anything. One-on-one is not a report about your practice either: how this retreat differs from another retreat, or how one sitting compares with another.

So, how do we really begin? If we begin properly, the rest goes smoothly. Begin by simply remaining open to what is. Not your ideas or thoughts about it, but to what actually is: (*showing it*) the hand in front of your face, the rug that's visible on the floor, the pain in your

knee. No need to judge, compare, or condemn. No need to suppress or pretend it's not there; it won't work anyway. Simply remain open to what is. This is how we begin.

Is the practice difficult? Is the sitting frustrating, tiring? Before you're settled, you might experience the mind constantly wandering. After a day you might find that you can't get your mind off the pain. Curious. Yesterday you couldn't stop your mind wandering; today you can't get your mind off the pain.

What if you put your mind *on* the pain? Really be there with it, if that's what's present. See what it really is. No need to judge it or to try and get away from it. Of course, no need to try and increase the pain either. But if there's pain, don't try and escape. Let it be what it is. You might learn something.

Do you see what really is frustrating about the practice, what really tires you out? It's not what is, it's *escaping* from what is. When all is said and done, all you need to "do" to enter this practice is stop escaping. Before you couldn't get into it no matter what you did or how hard you tried; now you can't get out of it. But you must confirm this for yourself. There is no other way. Begin by simply remaining open to what is.

Now, what can be done to root or anchor mind so that it no longer wanders from what is? It's really simple. It's not always easy because of what we've done with our minds all of our lives. It doesn't just (*snaps fingers*) go like that. Although it's not always easy, it is ultimately very simple. Don't make it harder than it is.

Instead of wandering from what is, lock into it. Like an anchor or magnet, like a bowling ball in your belly: get good and stuck! Then there's no wandering, there's no place to go. All becomes clear, frozen – in a good way: no more going out to, or pulling in through, the mind and other senses.

How do we do this? There are many ways. If we're really sitting zazen, it's none other than that. If we're breathing properly, the breath is naturally open to what is, inseparable from it. If mind still wanders, a real koan will get you good and stuck on what is. You can't get away from it. There's no place for anything else. It provides the needed focus by bringing mind and all its contortions to a standstill. It becomes me and I become it. Then I cannot get away from it even if I try. This, too, is a way of being open to what is.

But it has to be a real, living koan. Face it: thinking, even very deeply, about a koan is just escaping into mental masturbation. It must become the koan that *I am*: it becomes you and you become it. This very one. Various koans have been formulated: "Who is behind it all?" "What is lacking?" "What remains?" Open to what is, I ask you here and now: what is your living, breathing koan – the koan that *you are*?

Participant: I've been finding my personal koan for a couple of years. Can you give us advice on how to do this, how to find and formulate it? Because we all have questions. But turning them into a koan – that's where I am now.

Many questions may come up: Who am I? What should I do in this world? Where did I come from? Where do I go? Or for that matter, where am I right now? I know where I am on Google Maps, but ultimately speaking, where is *this*? The point is for you to open up to the question in the depths of your own heart. What is the question that needs to be answered? Simply remain open to what's in the bottom of your own heart.

You mentioned formulating it; why do we need to do that? In a way it's a crucial part of the practice because once it's precisely formulated, the needed focus is there – it virtually answers itself. (*Participant*: Yeah.) It will never come to a head and be resolved if it remains vague: "Well, yesterday it was sort of a death thing, but today it's more like a guilt thing, and now I'm kind of worried about my mother..." What's really driving you in your practice? There are many ways to put it, but it's not simply some statement found in a book or something that I tell you. It's not someone else's concern. It's you. Remain open to what's here, and it becomes clear.

For me, "Who is behind it all?" worked. I knew painfully well the guy up front who's doing this and saying that, ashamed and proud at the same time. But who's behind it all? Then it can come to its own end. Done properly, the practice itself shows you the way you must go. Simply stop escaping into thoughts and ideas, expectations and hopes, and just come back *here*. Open up right here. Put your energy here.

The koans of old, the living koans of our predecessors, can be helpful in our own quest. Sometimes an old koan can help open us to the great doubt underfoot, the great doubt that we are. Then everything comes to a wondrous halt.

That's what entering zazen and koan practice really are: not running away. You don't need another experience or worldview, another toy to play with. Drop all of that and remain fully open to what actually is. If it seems difficult, face it: the difficulty is in your discursive mind, not with what is. Look: it's staring you in the face! Look: it's staring out of your face!

Our first task in this retreat is to actually sit through in sustained samadhi, concentrated oneness, so that we can confirm it for ourselves. We have such a precious opportunity here, with everything taken care of: meals, a room to rest in, schedule up on the wall – a greenhouse for practice.

Thus the practice gradually comes to be constant. In our busy daily life it can be difficult to practice constantly like this. That's why we have a retreat – so that we can just pour all of ourselves into it without interruption. During zazen of course; but also in walking, eating, doing our assigned tasks, taking a rest. Yes, by all means take a break, get some sleep when you need it. But don't drop the practice. Let it be constant.

For example, when you rest, lay down on your back if you can. The focus remains below the belly, but gently, softly now, so that you can get the rest you need and wake up refreshed, without one thought stirring. Then the practice naturally becomes constant, the way that we are – not something that we go into and out of.

Does anyone have a question about pain, posture, sleepiness?

Participant: Well, it isn't exactly that, but about the chattering mind. I find it often hard to stop. I get to a place where the chattering does stop and I can focus, but then the bell rings. I come back thinking I'll just get back into it but I don't. It takes a long time to really settle my mind.

Is your mind settled now?

Participant: I think so.

Being one with the breath is helpful to keep you grounded and not go off into thought. Going off into thought includes thinking about the breath, as well as obsessively trying to perfect a breathing technique, force the breath, or get back into some state. If you're alive, you're breathing, so just breathe – without separating from it. No need to think about it.

We've already got it, but we often stray from it. Simply come back to the immediate breath – the actual sensation, not the thought or idea of it. We breathe out, exhausting ourselves naturally: not forcing it, just letting go of everything. When everything is let go, then we naturally breathe back in. It's as if we're being filled with the nourishment of the universe. This is a fine way to remain focused in sustained samadhi.

But as you see, your mind will wander if you can't sustain that focus. Thus, having an anchor to keep you locked in can be helpful, even if it begins as something artificial. You don't have to create something if it's not there. That anchor could simply be the breath itself. Just giving yourself to the breath is healthy physically and mentally. It's also a natural way of bringing the dispersed mental and physical energy together through the breath. Nothing added.

The other point is not to get hung up seeking to return to some state. I trust you already see how misdirected that is. You don't need to get back to some state. Just be fully where you are and you'll realize that you're into it up to your eyeballs! Yes, there are states; we all have them. But if we seek to go back to some state, we're just creating another dis-ease. We don't need to go backwards to some previous experience. Nor do we need to go forward into some new experience. Face it: the sought-after "enlightened state" is just a concept. Everyone in this room, all of us, have what we need. Everything we need. It's just a question of using it well.

Your question is appreciated. Not just for you, but for all of us who share the same quandary. Thank you. Does anyone else want to respond? I'm not the authority here. Other people may have more experience in these things than I do.

Participant: Do you have any advice on how to work with the breath in sleepiness? I try to follow my breath, and I can do that perfectly well when I'm awake, but sometimes, when I'm very sleepy, I've sat and struggled for thirty minutes and can't get past four. I watch my mind as carefully as I can, so why do I not make it to five?

Why do I drift off every time? I find it's just difficult, when I'm very sleepy, to do anything other than sleep. Is there anything you can do with your breath that helps that situation?

If you're really tired, get some sleep! If you need to continue sitting late at night, then splash some water on your face, have some tea, exercise or walk briskly to get your heart pumping. Then, when you sit down, put your attention on your breath and take a couple deep breaths to begin.

Have you tried just being and breathing one instead of counting from one to ten? You don't even have to get to two, let alone four or five. Just one, then you don't have the added impediment of "I only got to four." As long as it remains clear, one will do.

If you need to in the beginning, take a couple good breaths, push the breath down a bit. Once the breath is stabilized, you won't get sleepy. But when you're really tired it tends to be spacey, not stable or grounded. If you're working on making it constant and sitting through, then struggle on. But if the sleepiness is overwhelming even after you've tried to rouse yourself, then take a nap and come back refreshed.

When you take a nap, no need to add the thought: "I failed." Just take a nap without dropping the practice. Like you were sitting, but now you're gently lying down. Get the rest you need and then, without dropping the practice, come back refreshed to the sitting.

There's a time and place to pull out all the stops, to give all of ourselves to constant practice. That time is now and the place is here. How fortunate we are to be practicing together. By all means leave behind your comfort zone, your preconceptions, and do what needs to be done!

Second Dharma Talk

A grounded, silent energy nourishes us here in the meditation hall. It comes from all of us devoting ourselves to the practice. It can be a real support if we are struggling with sleepiness or pain. I trust you sense this as we give ourselves to the practice. We are a cosmos. People have come from pretty much all over the world, gathered here and doing this as one.

Have you properly begun? No need to ponder some profound quote or something that somebody said. Simply remain open to what actually is here and now. You can't go wrong.

This retreat is an intense practice period with many forty-minute sittings every day. There may be pain. Some of you may not be used to it. How do you respond? If the practice is stable, the pain is not a problem any more than pleasure is. But reacting to the pain, wanting it to be other than what is, is *dukkha*, the dis-ease of Buddhism's first noble truth.

Pain itself is not *dukkha*. Pain is pain: your body telling you something's wrong. Listen to it. Correct it if you can. But no need to react to it or separate from it. Realize what it is, what it is really saying. Maybe you need to adjust your posture or the cushion under your butt. Maybe you need to make peace with an uncomfortable truth – something that is not the way that you want it to be or think it should be. Or maybe you need to just sit through. Find out what needs to be done and do it.

Sitting through is not an act of willpower. Trying to be stronger than the pain doesn't work. It just makes it worse. When you are settled in the sitting, it feels as though the ground itself is supporting you in your practice. It is, isn't it? What can hinder or interfere with this – other than your wavering mind? Make it clear: what is the pain really saying? And what is your wavering mind doing with the pain?

Pain and the like only become hindrances when mind seeks to have it some other way, when we are no longer open to what actually is. Ultimately, the practice is very simple. What we turn it into is the difficulty. Look and see: does the difficulty, the hindrance, really come from *here*? Or does it come from *not* being here, from being split?

We are already in our third day of retreat. Sitting is concentrated; other activities such as walking and eating are also naturally becoming so. Concentrated on, and open to, what is, there's no need to conjure up discursive thought. Mind is not making anything out of experience, not seeking anything. All is simply present, clear and sharp.

You may want to hold onto this concentrated oneness, cling to the clarity, even though it is only a temporary state. Be careful: this samadhi, this concentrated oneness, is not an end in itself. What then is it for? It gives us the calm clarity to see *what remains* – without turning it into something. Here is where we now need to apply ourselves, rather than cling to the state and thus distort it.

This clear, calm state of samadhi is wonderful. It lessens if not eliminates surface distress and discursive thought. The practical benefits are enormous. But keep your eye open: is there still a basic urge or craving to be? Even to be “enlightened”? Until even this craving falls away, we cannot see what really is driving us to practice, what finally remains. Nor can we be fully open to what is.

Samadhi is the holding pattern for our airplane, circling round and round in a safe space until it's time to land. We can even see the landing site below; we're virtually there. As valuable as this holding pattern is, it is not landing the plane. The plane has yet to land on solid ground, has yet to come to a complete stop. It is still inherently unstable – and running out of fuel.

Participant: Regarding samadhi, my understanding is that the difficulty I am having in achieving samadhi is the fear of letting go of ego-self. When you were speaking earlier, it sounded as though you were saying that ego-self loves samadhi, so I'm confused.

In samadhi, ego-self is relatively neutralized. But it is not gone. In the deeper meditative state of dhyana, especially formless dhyana, there is virtually no self. In samadhi, ego-self is not gone, but rather “equalized” – in accord, rather than in conflict, with its surroundings. So it tends to feel refreshed, peaceful, calm. But as long as ego-self remains, even the calm state can become something that it clings to.

Participant: So the fear of letting go of ego-self isn't what is preventing me from gaining samadhi?

It depends. Some people realize that the only thing to really be afraid of is living the rest of their lives deluded, not open to what is. But for ego-self still wrapped up in and clinging to itself, letting go – as we are doing – can seem scary, threatening. You see? As we enter samadhi and sustain it, the ego-self's grip loosens. Practicing properly, it becomes clear that we're not losing what's real, we're actually realizing, returning to, what's real. In this way, the self-delusion – that is, the delusion-of-self – comes undone.

There are preliminary practices that can help prepare for entering and sustaining samadhi, such as relaxation and focusing exercises, devotions, and so on. But you don't need to slay something. Self-delusion is not a substantial reality – yet its clinging can be tenacious and cause pain and suffering. As this clinging loosens its hold, the fear naturally dissolves. Fear is not the real problem. Anyway, it's up to you: when you are ready, when you realize that this is what must be done, sit through and see.

It's important to enter and sustain samadhi. It's not the purpose of the practice, but it's a very helpful entrance. It's like preparing to land the plane properly, making sure your wheels are down and so on. If you crash land you won't be much use to anyone. Patiently cultivating this practice moment-to-moment, we come fully to rest, to a full stop. What is, then, is quite enough. Now we can really get down to the work at hand.

Participant: I'm getting a little hung up on samadhi as a goal, like a kid in a car on the way to Samadhi-land: “Is it samadhi yet? Is it samadhi yet?”

If you're having such thoughts, it's not samadhi yet. Just drop them, and let the energy go into your breath.

You've already landed. That's what you find: you're always safe on the ground – even when you're up 10,000 feet. But until mind actually comes to that full and complete stop, you can't really know that *as what is*. So simply apply yourself to the moment-to-moment practice without worrying about when, where, even how. You really want to know how? It's impossible – and it's right here and now!

Every one of you, whatever your age or ability to enter samadhi, already has what you need to get the job done. Whether you're sitting on a cushion, a chair, or on your friggin' head! Simply return to where you are and really see it for what it is.

Thank you again. Your questions and comments are helpful for everyone – myself as well – to make it clear and to bring it home.

Third Dharma Talk

Well begun is half done: simply remain open to what is. Thus we drop our own agendas, and all the baggage we brought with us. The practice is much simpler that way. Clinging to our precious delusions, we continue suffering. Are you still clinging to your delusions: “Sure, I want to give myself to the practice – but I want to do it *my way*.” This is precisely the problem.

When you have given all of yourself, what remains? Put another way: what really makes you practice? When that’s clear, the way is clear. You don’t need another to show you the way. Sincerely open to what’s in the bottom of your heart.

Now in day four of our retreat, samadhi is becoming settled and constant. Not just in sitting, but when we get up samadhi gets up, does walking meditation, and so on. Walking meditation is not simply a break to stretch our legs. It’s samadhi in movement. Simply follow the footstep of the person in front of you. Take that noble stillness into movement. It’s not just something on our little cushion. When you get up, *get up!* When you sit back down, samadhi takes the seated posture. In this way, practice is constant.

That is retreat. We’re lay people. We have busy lives. We have other commitments. Good. Take them seriously, and do them well. However, when we have an opportunity like this to just throw ourselves into sustained practice, confirm it in your bones.

Does something remain in the bottom of your samadhi? Dwelling in samadhi, clinging to it, won’t do. Keep your eye naturally trained underfoot: what remains? As some of you already know from your own experience, at one point “that which remains” turns over. The ground itself opens up. Everything opens up. When it happens, recognize it. What is this turnover? What remains now? Examine carefully. You may find in that overwhelming experience that there are no psychological hindrances. There seem to be no physical, spatial, temporal hindrances either. All is vast, wide open. Thinking itself is free from thought.

Within that experience, keep the single eye – which is the heart, the whole body, the whole universe – open. No need to turn it into something, not even something marvelous. Let it be what it is. And yet, if it is a real glimpse, a real insight or realization, you can subject it to all of the inquiry you want. Test it; take it out on the road. Bring *that* to one-on-one! If it’s genuine, the further the inquiry the clearer it becomes. If it’s not genuine, it will collapse soon enough. Good. Let it go, the sooner the better.

No one else’s words, actions, or realization will do. Just see through. How can you not? I ask all of you now, how can you not? Don’t you see the hand (*showing it*) in front of your face? Or are you already looking for more?

What a precious opportunity! This group of people from all over the world, coming here to practice together – has there ever been a greater congregation earnestly practicing the way? This puts the congregation at Vulture Peak to shame. Let us patiently continue the work.

It might feel like molten lava; let it flow down. Like liquid lead pouring from head to belly. It knows where to go. Not stuck in the chest, it flows down below the navel. Don't get stuck there either. As it settles it becomes clear: it comes from, and goes to, the ground itself. Let it.

Discursive, wavering mind is not activated. Naturally, physically, the focused energy gets firmly grounded and settled. The senses, physical sensations, mind itself, become clear and clean, subtle and refined. No outflow – no going out through the senses seeking something. No inflow either. Yet everything is clearly manifest. Nothing to seek. Nothing to attain.

Simply stop running. Stop escaping, from this. Stop sticking to your delusions; you already know they don't work. Let the activity of all the senses come to its own end. If you fight it, you just get more entangled. When you actually stop, you realize you have landed. Confirm it in your bones.

Participant: Sometimes practicing with my delusions feels like wandering through a minefield. Everything seems okay and then *boom* – it explodes in my face.

Thus in retreat, we simply stop – right in the midst of it. Rather than try and escape from it, which only ends up setting off another booby trap. After all, who put them there in the first place? Stop trying to escape, whether through the body – including seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch or physical sensations – or through the mind. Then you'll see: you're not stuck in a minefield; you're strolling in the Garden of Eden.

Participant: I want to give an analogy to see if this is the trouble that we have. My body already operates quite well because it knows how to regulate the heartbeat, to regulate homeostasis, and so forth, without me using my mind to think about it. The body is being regulated in a natural way, connected to the whole system in order to work – if one of my muscle cells decides it should be this and not that, we're in trouble. The human being is a system that is already regulated.

What would happen if the blood cells try and make the whole body do what they do?

Participant: Homeostasis would fail.

Yes, you would end up getting sick. Every cell of the system needs to do what it is doing. It's a good analogy because it shows the difficulty in beginning practice. In a sense, we do not know how to let the practice do what needs to be done. It is already being done, but we get in the way. In Mahayana Buddhist jargon, each and every atom is the full and perfect functioning of Dharma. Realizing this, we no longer force it with self-will. But we don't then

lay back and do nothing; on the contrary, then the whole body – the whole universe – is the working of *this*. There's an incredible vitality and energy, yet it's completely grounded, settled. This cannot come from self-will. It comes from the ceasing of self-will. True health, true vitality is realized here, isn't it? It's a helpful analogy. Thank you.

Fourth Dharma Talk

Open to what is actually present, the way we must go is clear. We do not need words, explanations, descriptions, comparisons, or tales from the past. They can be helpful; they can also entangle us if we seek to imitate them. Each one of us came into being, came to ourselves, with what we need. That is what needs to be made clear: Who is that one? What is that one? Where does it really come from? Where does it ultimately go? Right here, right now, what is it? Right here, right now, what remains? What is lacking? These are all just different ways of directly inquiring underfoot. Zazen is none other than that. I trust you have intimately inquired, savored, made it clear. Thus we come fully to rest; in a profound sense, we are found to be already at rest. On the other hand, trying to view mind or self objectively in order to see if it is at rest, things just keep getting stirred up.

An early Chinese Zen monk asked, "What about liberation?" The monk was not there yet. Instead of telling him hurry up and get there, or try your best, however, Sekitô responded, "Who binds you?" He does not give the monk any place to stand, so that the monk could see he does not need any place to stand. Here our original face is directly realized.

See Sekitô's expression "Who binds you?" in light of an expression from Rinzai a few generations later. Rinzai also put it in a way that condenses the essential teaching of Buddhism to a few words: "Just let the ceaselessly seeking mind come fully to rest. You are Buddha as you are." Here Rinzai's words are "kinder" than Sekitô's. Sekitô simply wipes all away with his question, and that's marvelous. Rinzai goes a step further: "Just let the ceaselessly seeking mind come fully to rest. You are Buddha as you are." Here he "gives" a little more than Sekitô. Rinzai is not known for his grandmotherly kindness: he is infamous for striking or yelling, giving no avenue of escape, challenging most dramatically. But here he bends over backwards for us.

Is "ceaselessly seeking mind" clear enough? Do you know what that is? "Just let that ceaselessly seeking mind come fully to rest." In other words, stop. Stop and see. Then you realize: "You are Buddha as you are." Continuing, Rinzai hammers it home: "Do you want to know the real Buddha?" He's baiting the audience. He himself answers: "None other than you right now listening to my discourse." Just let the ceaselessly seeking mind come to its own end. Stop feeding it and it cannot continue for long. Do anything with it and you are feeding it. Try to push it away, and you are feeding it. Thus delusions continue.

Simply return to the embodied breath. Right there. A fine entrance. Again, not the *thought* of the breath, but return to this (*breathing*). Like putting on the brakes. You can experience

the mind slowing down. This is good, but it is not enough. Mind must come to a full and complete stop. The very mind that is now seeking – *that* must fall away.

The essential teaching is right there: “Just let the mind come fully to rest. You are Buddha as you are.” “You want to know the real Buddha?” Notice he does not say, “It’s me!” He says, “It’s you.” Every one of you. Right now, listening, completely confused or completely clear, it makes no difference. You now listening. You want to know how the hell to get into it? I want to know how the hell you think your way out of it.

Do not confuse this with so-called Rinzai Zen nowadays. Unfortunately, Rinzai Zen now is mostly a matter of being given koans and having some kind of glimpse or insight. Where is someone in these Zen centers who has really broken through a koan and resolved the great matter of life and death? What *are* their teachers doing?

Quoting from the *Record of Rinzai*: “Outside mind there is no dharma. Nor is there anything to be gained within. What are you seeking? Yet you say there is something to practice, something to obtain. Make no mistake, even if there were something to be obtained by practice it would be nothing but birth-and-death karma.” Is that clear enough? Where is he speaking from, where does he stand when he dares to say these things? Right where you are now. Confirm it for yourself. He also says: “When I look back over the past twelve years for a single thing having the nature of karma, I can’t find anything even the size of a mustard seed. Followers of the way, people everywhere say there is a way to be practiced, a dharma to be confirmed. Tell me, what dharma will you confirm? What way will you practice? What is lacking in your present activity? What still needs to be patched up?” Are you a Rinzai Zen Buddhist? Your smile says it all. Please feel free to stand up and shake the Buddha off. (*Short break*)

Participant: I want to ask a question about language. I love language in a way that does not feel ego-driven. Language seems to be deeply clarifying or healing when you were speaking, or in the Buddhist texts. At the same time, it obviously gets tangled up in the endlessly seeking mind. It’s a deeply personal problem for me, someone who wants to write.

For now, put the writing aside. It will be there when you get back. For now, just throw yourself into the experience. In the schools of Japanese Buddhism it is Zen, the one that insists, “don’t rely on words or letters,” that has the most letters and texts. Why did they write and speak? Why are they still writing and speaking?

Look at real Zen culture. Through various activities as well as through artistic depictions and words, the same thing is being done: giving expression to this – *manifesting it* – to help others realize it for themselves, and not just get trapped in the images or words. An old timer said, “don’t rely on words or letters,” but what he’s really saying is don’t rely on anything. The point is clear if you sit through. No Buddha, no dharma. All of us are “red-faced with shame,” because what we express in words can be misunderstood, but we do it anyway, out of compassion.

Look carefully at the language and you'll see. How is it different from ordinary discourse? A classic example: "The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection; the water has no mind to reflect their image." Neither Buddha nor meditation is mentioned, just a natural phenomenon without intent. Yet everything is flawlessly reflected. Zen poetry and painting probes this in all seriousness – yet often expresses it playfully. Now, how do *you* express it? (*Silence*)

Your present attitude sounds like the one you should have. You sincerely see how you can trip over your words. Perhaps you feel you do not yet have anything to say. Fine. Sit right through there. From where does a Zen master speak? He is not just silent; he speaks. From where? It's not different from where you speak.

Participant: Christianity warns of the danger of confusing being free like a child and being childish, letting the impulses run free. I am concerned about the tension between the two. Recently there have been serious abuses among Zen teachers, which seem to indicate being childish has been encouraged by Zen training.

I wouldn't say encouraged by Zen training, but that Zen training has been perverted into childishness and worse.

Participant: How do we avoid using the training to let loose our own pathologies?

Let me speak from my own experience. I will not speak for other people. I will let them do that. After I completed koan practice in a training monastery in Japan, I took upon myself a final koan: "Know your own shame." In context, a Sung Dynasty master stated: "Practicing the Way for twenty years; only now do I know my own shame." Not "practicing the Way for twenty years, so now I can do what I want with others." No. "Only now do I know my own shame." Where does that come from? Is this sorely lacking in so-called teachers nowadays? We must not make the same mistake. I offered some formidable quotes from Rinzai above, but in response to your present question, we need to see where this "shame" comes from. Maybe we should all take this as our final koan: to know our shame. It is in the Zen tradition. It needs to be. It comes from utter humility; it does not come from outside. I do not care how enlightened you think you are; in our daily lives, our hearts must be humbly open to this.¹ Thank you.

Fifth & Final Dharma Talk

I trust you all had a good night's sleep. When you go home today, please take great care. It's below freezing out there. It can be slippery walking to the car not to mention driving, so

¹ See the section on "Know Shame!" in the retreat lectures on *The Pearl Revealed*: <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/steyl-summer-2013.pdf>. Also see: <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/rinzai-zen-in-the-modern-world2.pdf>

please do take great care getting safely back home. You may not realize how tired you are or how icy the road is.

We began by simply remaining open to what is. It's all there. Later today, we will "return to the world" so to speak – the retreat will come to an end. Tomorrow, I reckon none of us will be sitting twelve or more hours a day. That's fine. There are other things that need to be done. I trust that, just as you devoted yourself here, you will devote yourself there to what needs to be done. That is no less important than what we have been doing here.

Remain open to what is; but at the same time, you will need to respond, to act, to speak. It's different from retreat. Fine. Savor that difference. See what you can learn. See how you can best apply yourself to what needs to be done.

It can be a bit bumpy in the beginning. There's this retreat, and then there's the rest of the world. They are not really two separate things. But sometimes it can be a bit of a rough landing. In all humility, appreciate those you are returning to, those who have been taking care of things while you were here sitting on your butt. Continue a regular sitting practice, but no need to hold on to something that you think you attained here. It's no more present here than it is lacking there. It is naturally carried out in our daily lives, not something we do just on our cushion.

We've spent most of this time in noble silence. I trust you've all savored the great virtue, the great value, of that silence. But there's also a value and a virtue in noble speech. Buddhism emphasizes the importance of speaking truly and with care. After sitting here in silence for six days and really giving yourself to the practice, please don't go out and thoughtlessly babble, speak ill of others and speak well of yourself. Take care with your actions, your thoughts – and your speech. Speak from here. Don't just blabber to fill in the silence or create an impression.

It all comes down to love, compassion, kindness. Not mere sentiment but genuine compassion. Loving wisdom that nourishes and sustains. Love is the great leveler – not in the sense of dissolving distinctions but rather dissolving the wall that ego-self puts up. This leveling reveals the true dignity, the real beauty in each and every thing. Each and every thing shines bright. Do you see?

A ninth century Chinese monk, already learned and experienced, was challenged by his master: Don't tell me what you have learned; just present your original face. But whatever the monk presented was rejected. Finally the monk begged the master to teach it to him. But the master refused. Devastated, the monk left the monastery and eventually ended up caring for the gravesite of a famous master. One day, as he was cleaning, a pebble happened to strike bamboo and the "tock" awakened him. Prostrating himself in the direction of his former master, he exclaimed: Your compassion is greater than that of my own parents. Had you taught it to me when I begged you to, I would not have had this great joy today!

Please, if you're going to take up these old stories, don't rely on pop versions that simply regurgitate how a monk was sweeping and the sound of the bamboo enlightened him. Realize the monk's predicament – which is *yours* – then it's worth considering.

A famous koan tells of a man up a tree, hanging from a topmost branch for dear life by the skin of his teeth, unable to grab the branch with hands or feet. Someone comes by and asks the point of Bodhidharma coming from the West – that is, the essential truth of Zen. If he does not answer, he fails to respond to the need of the fellow below. But if he does respond, he'll lose his life. Now, how do *you* respond?

Who made up that ridiculous koan? That's right, Master Kyôgen, the monk who awakened upon hearing the pebble strike bamboo. He condensed his whole life into that koan. Do you see his Great Compassion overflowing here as he dramatically unfurls the great matter of life and death for us? It's *you*! If you don't see this, don't waste your time with these ridiculous stories. We can't read them without tears. With Great Compassion, doing whatever they can – and, when necessary, doing nothing – so that each one of us can realize it for ourselves.

When Kyôgen was desperate, but the master accepted none of the brilliant quotes he presented, Kyôgen famously said: Painted rice cakes don't satisfy hunger. This is commonly taken to mean that mere words and so on cannot replace our own experience. Dôgen, however, argues that it is precisely a painting of a rice cake that satisfies hunger. Well, that's Dôgen. His challenge is worth considering, though it's far from satisfactory. Here and now, see directly into this *hunger* – what is that? When *that's* laid bare, there's no need to argue about painted rice cakes.

Gobble up these stories so that they leave no trace; leaving no trace, their reverberations are endless. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.” (Matthew 5:6)

I'd like to leave room for questions and comments.

Participant 1: Do you give koans to your students?

I don't want to hand them koans like candy, as often happens in Zen centers. Why don't you bring forth the koan that you are? Then we can work on a koan.

Participant 2: Then how should we get ready in this life?

I wouldn't wait for the next life! There are other schools of Buddhism if you want to do that. Right now, what are you waiting for?

Participant 2: To get ready?

You're hanging from the topmost branch by your teeth, yet you say: “How can I get ready?” You're ready! Now what do you do?

Participant 2: I don't know.

That's a good place to dig in. Right here, where you don't have a clue. Better than indulging in half-baked ideas or thinking you know. Answer, even if it means losing your life – then you'll know. Let it be your koan, the koan that you are. Then it answers itself.

Kyôgen said that a painted rice cake doesn't satisfy hunger. Another Chinese master spoke of his "work of love" as taking the delicious lychee fruit, carefully peeling it and removing the pit, then gently placing it in your mouth – hell, I'll even help you chew it! Now all you have to do is swallow.

Participant: Following the teacher's intention, I am at rest. Is that enough?

Can that rest be shaken?

Participant: Yes.

Is it still at rest?

Participant: No, it disappears.

Is there still someone seeking to be at rest?

Participant: It changes.

Are you at rest in that?

Participant: Yes.

Keep your eye open.

Participant 2: Isn't it *your* intention, though? It's not the teacher's intention, is it?

Participant: You're right!

Participant 2: So whose intention is it, really?

Participant: Well, I'm not looking for it, but it comes up.

A monk once asked his master the point – the intention – of Bodhidharma's coming from the West, and the master responded: "After a long sit, I feel tired." *That's* being at rest. Let me add: (*yawning*) "How about you? Do you want to be *more* at rest?"

Participant: No.

Okay. When the very need to be at rest has been put to rest once and for all, we don't go seeking for more. We simply get up and do what needs to be done. A fine way to finish this fine retreat. Thank you all.

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Transcription by Andrea O'Hearne, Craig Brown, & Gerald McLoughlin]*