

First Dharma Talk

Spring 2017 Retreat in Philadelphia

Thank you to everyone for bringing this together. We are all doing this as one. Supporting each other in our practice – it's a wonderful opportunity. Already in our second day of the retreat, I trust you can feel not just yourself as an individual, but the group as one getting settled in the practice. Confirming it in our bones, not just in our head. Working together, we can help to support each other, to guide, to inspire, and when needed, to challenge. We do this out of mutual respect. Out of care for each other. We are here to live truth. To really live what is real.

From the very beginning you must stand on your own. Maybe you will fall over a couple of times – that's ok. But the point is, you must realize where you really are. No one can do that for you. Each one of us must realize it for herself or himself. There is no other way.

What is actually going on in your practice? In the beginning, pain, sleepiness, drowsiness, wandering mind, these things can seem like hindrances – things that prevent us from getting where we think we should be. We have to work through these things. When you sit, take a couple of deep breaths, and then just settle into the sitting. If you are open to what is, and if you are not running away, not escaping, you will find the energy.

Be aware of your posture. As the zazen period goes on, some people start to droop. Whether that is the cause or the effect doesn't matter, they are going to get sleepy if they lose their posture. The breathing becomes shallower, the head goes down, the neck goes down, and you find yourself falling asleep. When posture is correct, then sleepiness isn't a problem.

Full lotus is the best posture. If you can't do that, figure it out: half lotus, quarter lotus, Burmese, *seiza*. You can stand on your head if you want, but keep the back naturally erect. Find out by doing it. If you're sitting late into the night, you may have to struggle with sleepiness. The best way to learn why we sit so late into the night, is to do it and find out. If you are sitting properly, it's not a problem. If you're not, find out where you are going wrong, and correct it.

Often, if it's not sleepiness, it's pain. With the pain, it's your body telling you something. Listen to it. If you react to the pain, it doesn't work. You have to be there with it before the body reacts. As with sleepiness, maybe you need to adjust your cushion. Or do you need to just sit through? Not willpower, not trying to be stronger than the pain, but just being there, completely with the pain, and simply sitting through.

The suffering or dis-ease that Buddhism addresses is not merely pain, it's what the mind does with the pain. It's present in pleasure as well as in pain. It depends on how we react to it. What the mind does with our present experience.

It can help to have a focus, a kind of anchor, like a bowling ball in the pit of your stomach – something that holds you there so that you can't escape into avenues of thought. That's the value of a koan. A real, living koan is like being grabbed by something which you can neither resolve as you are, nor can you drop it. It comes to be the question, the problem, that must be resolved.

For some it's "what is this?" or "who is behind it all?" "What is lacking right here right now?" "What remains in your mind from moment to moment?" All of these can come to be living breathing koans for us, and in this way, keep the mind from wandering.

If you don't have such a burning question or koan, that's fine. You don't need one. Let the sitting – the breathing itself – be it. You don't have to turn it into something you read or heard about. Remain really open to what's in the depths of your heart. What is it that really needs to be made clear? That's the only real koan there is.

Remain truly open and sincere. Drop the stories that you've read and thought about. And see for yourself – what, after all, remains? When all of the wandering thoughts finally have settled down and it's very very clear, and very very calm, this is good. But don't get lost in that calm clarity and abide there. It's just a temporary state. The point is to keep that single eye open. What remains?

Like many of you, I'm just an ordinary guy from Philly. I was born and raised in this area. I have no special talents, no special abilities. I'm just an ordinary guy. If I can really come home to it, for sure you can, and probably with a lot less time and trouble.

Recognize and work through any unnecessary, vicious cycles due to poor or inattentive practice. Let go of those delusions, those virtually endless cycles that we go round and round in. Practice must be immediate, it must be this here. It cannot be something you project forward or backward, to some experience you might have had or want to have. Neither can it be a part-time hobby that you do while also involved in three other things.

As laypeople, we have other concerns. We have jobs, family. But for the next few days, we have a precious opportunity to just throw ourselves into this immediate practice and make it clear for ourselves. That can't be a part time job. It's got to be constant. That's the most valuable thing about a retreat – it's an opportunity to make it constant, 24 hours a day for several days. Please make good use of it.

As the practice becomes stable and constant, you'll see – it's not difficult to do what needs to be done while staying with the practice. They are not two different things. In the beginning it's difficult. Simply give yourself to the sitting, to what needs to be done. The only hindrance, the only separation, is what you create.

Does anyone have a question or comment from out of the practice? Please feel free to speak. Raising it here, for the benefit of all, it can be resolved for the benefit of all.

Q: What's the best way to quiet the wandering mind? Do I just tell myself to stop it, or do something else to stop it?

A: It's best not to get involved in a train of thought. For example, trying to manipulate it. Simply return to the breath itself – not the thought of the breath, but the breath itself. This is the simplest way. If you willfully try to push away the thought, you're fighting yourself, you're just tiring yourself out. When you realize your mind is wandering, you don't need to judge yourself or condemn yourself. You don't need to get angry. It's just a thought. Be aware of it.

What is it that brings you here? What is it that drives you? Is there something at the bottom of your heart that must be resolved? If there is, simply open up to that. Let that show you the way to go. If there is something that has really driven you here, this is the time to open up to it. If it's not there, don't worry about it.

You're breathing, right? Sometimes there's thought, and sometimes there's not, but the breath is always there. Whether you think or not, simply return to the embodied breath.

Q: Regarding the difference between thoughts and thinking. Thoughts to me are natural phenomena. Like breathing, we cannot tell the breath not to breathe. We can't tell the heart to stop beating. And the brain is the same way – we cannot tell the brain to stop having thoughts. But the thinking part comes from adding stories and associated ideas. Thought seems to be natural, but adding the stories is the thinking. Would that be right?

A: The brain is functioning, we have thoughts. There's nothing wrong with that. So-called "enlightened" people think, but from where? When you give yourself to sustained practice and enter deep samadhi, there will be times when there are no thoughts whatsoever. This is very good to recognize, and it's very valuable in some ways, but that's not the goal.

We're not trying to get to a place where we never think anymore. There's a time for thought, but again, from where? When nothing needs to be thought, there's no thought. There's not even the thought of no thought. There's simply nothing going on. If you keep your mind open and give yourself to the practice, when you've really sat through and thought disappears, it comes back – but from the source! Freely.

The metaphor of calming the waves of the mind to find the pearl. Then you can see it as it is. Your point is well taken. As a practical process, especially in a retreat like this, all of that stuff dissolves, and all of that dispersed energy gathers into one. If you're breathing properly it comes to be gathered right here. It comes to be the way that we are, and when a thought needs to arise, it arises.

What is it before a thought arises? We know there must be such a thing, but we can't even conceive of it. You see how trapped we are in our thoughts? Where do they really come from? Where do they really go? What's behind it all? What's in your mind before a thought occurs?

What is it? Once you see this, the practice takes a very good turn. Thank you for raising your point.

Q: When you were talking about just being a regular guy from Philadelphia, you said that if you can do it, then you're sure that all of us can as well, and in probably less time. Can there be people unlikely to develop in this practice?

A: You're precisely the one that Zen is for! Zen masters like Dahui say that intellectuals have the hardest time of it. So there may be a virtue in being pure and simple. But don't make a problem where there isn't one.

For the longest time when I was going through my practice, I used to make a big deal about the things that I had gone through. It's important not to deny that stuff, but also not to allow it to live your life for you. After a while I realized how I was just holding onto something that could be let go. It wasn't holding me back; my dwelling on it was.

We all have insecurities, uncertainties, doubts. Our mind learns to think in certain ways. We have our past, and that can become a tremendous burden, but it can become fuel for the fire if you really open up to it. If there really is something burning, open up, really let it shoot through you. Let it come, and let it go. It doesn't come back – unless you hold onto it, make something of it, dwell on it. Pay attention!

When I spoke about my talents and abilities, I really meant that. As a child, I was painfully mediocre. I was not especially capable in any way. But I had an insatiable curiosity. There was something that pulled me through, no matter what. It helps to be hungry at a certain point in your practice.

Don't worry: you don't become a buddha at a certain point in your life, and you don't stop being a buddha because you have a bad thought or dwell on something. "Buddha" is not that kind of a thing.

Thank you all for your questions and comments. They're not just yours; they're everyone's. Thank you for having the courage to raise them for the benefit of all.

[Transcribed by Craig Brown]