

# Second Dharma Talk

## Spring 2017 Retreat in Philadelphia

Good morning. It's wonderful to practice together. There was a go-around the first day, and it was moving to listen to all of you, some who have been coming for decades now. Some of you I've known for forty, even fifty, years. It's amazing and reassuring to see you really coming home in your practice. Confirming it in your bones so to speak, and then continuing on from there.

If it's already confirmed in your bones, you might wonder where do go from there? The Zen tradition focuses on confirming it in your bones. But there's an equally strong emphasis to continue on from there. This training is at least as important as the initial practice. It may not yet be clear why, or what kind of practice that would be, but don't worry. When you get there, you will see. Keep your eye and your heart open.

In Zen Buddhism, you are made to stand on your own from the word go. There is no other way. Maybe you will stumble. This happens in life. Learn from your mistakes. Be aware. Be humble. The only way to bring the practice home is to do it, over and over. If your practice is correct, the practice itself shows you the way you need to go. It shows you what needs to be done.

What we are working through in these retreats is a living Zen practice that comes from out of our own depths. We're not just learning, or being indoctrinated into, some tradition. What do we really need to inquire into? It's not merely something in a book; and if it is, it's got to be something in the depths of our own heart as well. Otherwise it's just somebody else's story. It may be a good one, but it's somebody else's story. Reading Zen may inspire and challenge, but it's only helpful if you realize it for yourself.

What's the question that you need to get to the bottom of? For example, what is it that's really driving you – that brings you here in the first place? Although words in a book may spark something, that's not what brought you here. Once it is clear in your heart of hearts what must be done, nothing can get in the way: not pain, not sleepiness. It is, to all intents and purposes, already done. Remain open to what's in the bottom of your own heart, then you can't go wrong.

In Zen there are terms like “original face.” It's a nice expression, clear and concrete. What is your original face? Not the one you put on for others. Not the one you put on for yourself. And when you really get down to it, what does *not* manifest your original face?

“Man's extremity is God's opportunity.” This was one of D. T. Suzuki's favorite expressions. If we are still stubbornly sticking to our comfort zone when we sit zazen, we are not really practicing, are we? It's precisely our extremity that is, so to speak, God's opportunity. When your loved one suddenly leaves you, takes all the money, then you find out you have cancer and your house burns down – that's an extremity. Let me ask you here and now: When all is said and done, where is this extremity? Where is it?

It's right here, isn't it? Always underfoot. Self stubbornly sticking to itself is what puts up the distinctions and conditions – puts up the wall and then tries to hide behind it. Of course, that extremity is there where everything goes wrong and you're hanging on the edge. But if it's not realized right here as well, you're dreaming. This extremity – that you're desperately trying to get away from even as you chase after it – is right here, isn't it? You're walking on thin ice the whole time. Since the moment you were born. Once you stop trying to escape from your actual situation, the way is clear. Are you ready?

This wonderful practice of zazen is an opportunity to stop deluding ourselves. To let it all go and see what's in front of our face, what's underfoot. That's enough. If you really do that, you won't go running around trying to escape from, or chase after, shadows again.

Does anyone have a question or comment from out of the practice? Please feel free to speak up for the benefit of all.

Q: There's the kind of effort where you try to beat everything into submission, forcing it, and then there's right effort. Can you say something about that?

A: We're familiar with the first kind, which is banging our head against the wall, trying to force our way, which doesn't work. Not just here, but out in the world.

There is a place for thoughts, for words, and for effort. You've already made a good deal of effort for this retreat. All this didn't just magically appear. You had to make efforts and arrangements to come and to prepare. Perhaps cancel other activities. If there was no effort to begin with, you would never get out of the vicious cycle you're stuck in.

There's a place for right, correct, or proper effort as it's called in Buddhism. But the focus in Zen is a kind of effort which naturally burns itself up in the process. We can't just sit here and twiddle our thumbs. But we can't force it either. Precisely here – where nothing in our bag of tricks will do – is where we give all of ourselves. If you still have a self-willed urge, practice in such a way that it burns itself out.

That's what zazen is – naturally letting it all come to an end. We're not escaping anymore, so we put our legs and arms in a way that supports us, our back naturally erect so that we stay focused and clear. Everything about the mind, body, breath, is helping us exhaust whatever self-willed effort remains. When that is burned up, what happens? It's not that you don't try anymore. It's then that you really practice – because there's no longer an opposing position to bang your head against. Isn't that the point of your question?

With willful effort, there's an opposing force. Once you realize that the opposing force is actually you fighting yourself, then all can fall away. Until you realize that, you're stuck fighting yourself. With sleepiness for example, as soon as there is one moment of inattention, you fall asleep. Then your will reasserts itself and you fight against the damned sleep demon. No wonder you're so tired!

Practicing properly, that self-willed effort naturally burns itself out. Far from becoming powerless or just doing nothing, however, then the whole universe is practicing. Maybe there's pain, but it's not in opposition to this. Once self-willed effort comes undone, there's no opposing position.

It's impossible to do that with will power. Self can give 99%. But that last 1% remains out of its grasp, doesn't it? It's like a cat chasing it's tail. The faster you run, the faster the tail goes. But when you finally stop, you realize it was attached to your butt the whole time. But as long as you run, the tail is always there tempting you – and always just out of reach.

Thus, what do we do in zazen? Stop. Then see: What you were so desperately seeking through self effort, or “wrong effort” if we use that term, was precisely what was keeping the delusion going.

We cannot come to a full and complete stop through willful effort. And yet, in the beginning, that's what we have. Fine. Use it properly, so that it naturally burns itself out. That's right effort. Confirm it for yourself. The whole universe – the ground itself – is supporting you, isn't it?

Q: There is a saying that you use a thorn to remove a thorn, then you throw the thorn away. But you need that thorn there initially?

A: As every child knows, when you become attached to something, pain arises. When you don't like something, that's unpleasant. When you do like something, it doesn't take long for suffering to arise as well, because you worry about losing it, you become possessive, or you lose interest and start chasing something else. For the self-centered self, dis-ease – the thorn of self – is inevitable. It cannot be avoided.

We all know the first noble truth. For the self, any condition is one of dis-ease. We cannot come fully to rest in the self. That's why we're here. And yet the real point is the second noble truth which is that there's a cause to all of this. All of the dis-ease comes down to one cause, and that is *tanha*, craving or clinging. The craving to be, even the craving to be enlightened. Thus self effort needs to burn itself out, or it just becomes you trying to become the biggest no-self around.

The preliminary point of zazen is to become calm and clear so that self effort is exhausted. But it's important not to get stuck there and dwell in that calmness, in that temporary feeling of wellbeing. What is the point of that calm clarity? It's to see what remains. Is there still something there or not? Is there still a basic urge? Find out.

Q: Can you demonstrate again how you breathe?

A: I was exaggerating when I demonstrated before, so that everyone could see. With the lung capacity that you have, use your abdomen below your navel to help extend the breath. Don't force it or you'll get headaches, stomachaches, and so on. Don't corrupt it with clinging, longing to get somewhere with it. Let it come. Pay attention, don't wander. Then with the energy that you have, (*demonstrates extended breath*) exhaust yourself. Completely.

Like water, all poured out, and when you're done, if you can, hold it for a moment before breathing in. Don't force it, but when you breathe it all out, just hold it there. Your body knows. Eventually, you'll breathe in.

The focus in such breathing is the outbreath, but it needs to be there for the inbreath as well. It can't just be outbreath, and then your mind wanders again. But the focus is more on the outbreath, as though you are exhausting yourself with each breath. Then naturally drawing in the nourishment of the ground, the universe itself, with each inbreath. Don't force it, but don't waste your energy on anything else. Gradually your breathing will get slower, deeper, longer as the needed concentration gathers all into one. This is how we begin.

[Transcribed by Craig Brown]