

Final Dharma Talk, Day 5

Hoepertingen, Belgium, Summer 2017

We're almost at the end of our retreat here in this Garden of Eden. I can't remember a retreat with such wonderful weather. You could wear just one or two layers. Often a nice breeze. I suppose there may have been a little bit of pain, but it has been a very fine retreat.

Without rouge and powder, your charm beyond compare.

*Spring flowers,
summer cuckoo,
autumn moon.*

And in winter, snow, clear and cold.

What does not manifest our original face? When we stop trying to put the pieces together, we find that all is wonderfully complete from the beginning. From here we work. Perfecting perfection. Rounding the circle. This other shore, as it says in the *Heart Sutra*, gone beyond, beyond to the other shore, *Bodhi Svāhā*. Where is the other shore? To paraphrase Christian paraphrasing me: Have you tried looking under your own feet?

How do you express this inexpressible, inexhaustible, inconceivable? How do you live what is beyond birth and death? This is the concern now as we complete the retreat and return, so to speak, to the real world. I trust you already see it's not another world. There is no need to try to hold on to something attained here. If it's not just as present there as it is here, throw it away! Just as you gave yourself here, give yourself there to what needs to be done. I assure you, you will find it overflowing there.

In a sense, the work out there is not so easy, not so clean cut as it is here on our little cushion. You will be busy with three, four things at the same time and have to make compromises. **There** is the real dojo, the real place of practice. If it's not alive there, you're dreaming.

In terms of expressing the inexpressible, I suppose there's no spiritual or religious tradition greater than Zen. Let me give an example. The further we go the deeper it gets. Again these are not just Zen words or expressions, they are expressing, coming from, and returning to, that which cannot be exhaustively expressed. And yet here it is, overflowing at our feet, in our hands.

There was an early Chinese Zen master who penetrated when he was travelling through a village in China and happened to walk by a butcher shop. Monks don't eat meat, but when the monk passed by, a customer who happened to be ordering meat said to the butcher: "Cut me some of the good stuff!" The butcher immediately put his knife down and said: "What part is not good?" To put it another way, as a good Chinese businessman, "Every part is as good as the rest, it's all the best!" Where is a part that's not good, not the best cut? With that simple Chinese expression, of a butcher nonetheless, the monk had a realization. Here is how he expressed it:

*The three realms are without dharmas.
Where can mind be sought?*

Some clarification may be helpful. The three realms are the worlds of desire, form, and formlessness. The world of desire is the ordinary self drowning in the sea of craving. The world of form is where gross desires, passions, and cravings have been stilled and emptied, but there's still the world of distinction. The third realm is the world of the formless, where even these distinctions have been let go. This formless realm is still a subtle form of Samsara, of suffering. These are the three realms: desire, form and formless.

Dharma can mean truth or law, the living truth, the Buddha Dharma. But dharma also refers to each and everything. The Dharma or the "truth" of each particular thing is also its dharma or "being." There is no absolute distinction, although sometimes when the former sense is strong, it is written with an upper case "D" and when the latter sense is prominent it is written with a lower case "d."

*The three realms are without dharmas.
Where can mind be sought?*

Throughout the whole universe there is no substantial truth I can grasp as I, me, mine. If there is nothing to grasp onto, where are you going to find Buddha mind? This statement is taken up as a koan in the *Blue Cliff Record*. The three worlds are without dharmas; where can mind be found? It's a fine expression of the monk's own realization, and a wondrous challenge to us. It's a bit abstract, but you might consider it well in the depths of your zazen. The three realms, that is, everywhere: inside, outside, before, after, above, below—it's all without self. Where will you find mind? Consider well.

Next, let me give you a sense of the delicacy, the profundity, the depth of Zen literature, which at the same time does not rely on words and letters. Hundreds of years later, one

of the early Japanese Zen Masters, Daito Kokushi, added a commentary to the above statement:

The sky clears, raindrops glisten, cool, midst myriad peaks.

This is my poor attempt to translate seven Chinese characters—one line of classical Chinese verse—written by a Japanese Zen master who was also a master of Chinese verse. There is much nuance. Without going into detail, it has rained in the mountains and the first few Chinese characters reveal the sky clearing. Needless to say, he's not just talking about the sky clearing. So after the storm and rain of confusion and distress, all is clear. Raindrops, like morning dew, glisten. Feel the coolness. The heat of the storm is over. Raindrops glisten, shine, cool midst a vast landscape of myriad mountain peaks:

The sky clears, raindrops glisten, cool, midst myriad peaks.

How is that a comment on the previous verse?:

*The three realms are without dharmas.
Where can mind be sought?*

Unlike the philosophical abstraction of this earlier verse, the second verse-commentary by Daito Kokushi appears to be simple nature poetry. There's no reference to Buddhism, the three realms or dharma. Not even to mind. What do you see in it? Five hundred years after the earlier verse, Daito Kokushi has brilliantly expressed the same profundity by turning it over completely, bringing it down to earth to behold in delicate detail. Our original face is revealed anew.

But there's another verse commentary. Hundreds of years later, Hakuin, who died just 250 years ago, wrote a commentary on Daito's verse-commentary on the previous verse. Actually, doing a little homework, it turns out Hakuin borrowed his verse from elsewhere. But his genius was applying it here. Hakuin's verse-comment on Daito's verse-comment on the original verse is very difficult to translate, it is two lines of five characters each:

*Look in the eyes:
Wordless, as if carefree.*

Like a love poem, as if he is describing his beloved upon parting. This is not common in Zen Buddhism, although speaking of and to the "Beloved" is common in other religious traditions.

The first line could naturally be rendered as “Look in your eyes.” However, I translate it as “look in *the* eyes.” In English this can mean “the look, such as sadness or longing, that someone has in their eyes”, but it can also mean “to look in someone’s eyes.” Who’s looking at whom—and at what? “Wordless”—is this simple silence? Or is there something eloquently hinted at here, something that cannot be adequately expressed, that need not be expressed? That in remaining silent is more fully expressed? In Japan and in much of the Far East, silence has a positive and central importance. The crucial point may be left unsaid, does not need to be said. To pronounce it would be to cheapen it. A lingering sadness is hinted at, there is something longing to be expressed, but is not. And then it ends: “as if carefree.” There is concern, revealed eloquently in the beloved’s look **as if** carefree. Looking deeply into the eyes of the other, our beloved, what words are needed? Through the silence is it even more poignantly expressed?

Like Rinzai a thousand years before him, Hakuin has a reputation for extreme severity. But can you feel his compassionate sensitivity here? This is how we go forward in the world. I’ll read through and see if you can catch the thread:

*The three realms are without dharmas.
Where can mind be sought?*

The sky clears, raindrops glisten, cool, midst myriad peaks.

*Look in the eyes:
Wordless, as if carefree.*

Just like the three Dharma talks by others that we had during this retreat. Quite different in their own way, each one expressing in their own way, like different facets of the same diamond.

Please feel free to stand up and stretch for a moment.

Does anyone have a question or a concern from out of the practice?

Participant: Is there some doubt in the second part of Hakuin’s phrase “as if carefree”? And what is the difference in tone from the other two phrases?

Jeff: On the surface there seems to be some doubt. But looking, with loving compassion, deeply into the eye of the other, this is what we see, isn’t it? In terms of a love poem, the obvious sense would be: you’re about to leave your lover, and the lover is deeply saddened. Your beloved doesn’t want you to leave, but doesn’t say that,

because that would just make it harder for both of you. All of this is manifest in the eyes of your beloved. Without saying a word.

That's not all that's being expressed here. We must look deeply into the eyes of the world. It's very subtle, let alone trying to render it in English, so I well understand your confusion. But I trust you can see the value of wrestling with it until it's clear. It is not just poetry, it's what we are wrestling with in our lives, in our practice. But here it is put elegantly and eloquently for us to consider. You're right, Hakuin's phrase is not clear cut the way that the other two are. Is Hakuin offering us the delicateness of the world seen with loving compassion? That's where it ends. In a sense returning fully to the world, you see? It's already returning fully in the first one, where can mind be found? If you find it there, you've returned. But Hakuin gently brings it home, right there, in the eye of the other. Thank you for your question.

Participant: Isn't Hakuin's phrase a criticism of the earlier one?

Jeff: Zen verse can often sound like criticism when it's actually profound appreciation. Completely taking in the former phrase, then moving beyond shows deep understanding and appreciation. It's not just criticism. If you just repeat the image, it's dead. But if you simply trash it, you've missed it. So you might say it's by diving in deeply and fully appreciating the first and second verses that Hakuin is able to apply the borrowed line here as a commentary. By fully grasping it, you go beyond it, and something new is revealed. I would prefer speaking of it that way, but you're welcome to call it criticism.

There is a song that I grew up with, a popular love song, which I would like to use as a capping phrase to Hakuin's phrase to Daito Kokushi's phrase to the Chinese Zen master's phrase. To bring it home, or perhaps to further muddy the water! It goes like this:

*The look of love is in your eyes. A look your smile can't disguise.
The look of love is saying so much more than just words could ever say.
And what my heart has heard, well it takes my breath away*

It was a hit made famous by Dusty Springfield. Other people, like Diana Krall and Nina Simone have covered it. But if you have a chance, YouTube Dusty Springfield's version. It's very sensuous, yet the words can be taken as a worldly response to Hakuin's phrase.

An expression by the Persian poet Hafez wonderfully completes this trilogy of poems:

*Monastery, tavern, **in love** there's no difference.*

The radiant face of our friend shines everywhere.

The friend is the Beloved in Sufi Mysticism. This resonates with the first poem, the second poem, and the third poem. Is it also a wonderful expression of our original face? Although Hafez may have never heard that term. Nor did he need to.

Let me end by saying thank you to everyone. We are all doing this together. You see what a real living sangha is. Coming together and doing what needs to be done. We have one more sitting, so please let us continue giving ourselves to the practice.

[Transcription by Alex Buijs]