

FIRST DHARMA TALK

March 2018 retreat, Tannenhof, Germany

We are here together to realize the boundless peace, joy, vitality of being without self. This is the koan – if you like – the koan that we, each one of us, are.

For me the past year has been very busy, in some ways the busiest year of my life. One of my many weaknesses is impatience, so it was great test of patience. Working in a university – even if it is a zen university – there are many opportunities to be tested for your patience. For example, recently I was stuck in a long, dull faculty meeting. The conclusions already mostly decided, and yet the meeting went on and on.

Precisely there is where we find ourselves free. Nowhere else – not when the meeting is over. Right there, in the midst of it, is where we find ourselves free. When you find yourself free there, you're free wherever you are. It's difficult to describe the marvel of realizing that the one who felt stuck, that very one is gone without a trace.

Here and now in this retreat we give ourselves, we devote ourselves, to zazen, to sitting through. Whether we become very good at sitting through or are in much pain, either way we must beware that practice does not become an escape from **this**. Do you understand? Be careful not to turn practice into an escape from practice or anything else.

When sitting itself will not do, when even sitting through will not do, that is real practicing, that is where the practice comes alive, springs to life. Be careful that the one who felt stuck does not end up sticking to itself sitting. You see? The one who feels stuck tries to escape by sitting and sticking to itself. Sticking to the form, to a certain attitude, to a certain mindset. This is not zazen, it is an escape from real zazen, from what really is. Beware.

Do you see how you are trying to escape? Trying to escape, you only become more entangled. You can't really escape from **this**, but you sure can continue deluding yourself by trying! What are you afraid of, what are you trying to escape from? What is that? What **is** that?

What if we stop escaping, running away? What if we stop running away – or toward – **anything**? Where are we **then**? There is zazen.

Do you see? The difficulty of practice is not the actual practice at all. The difficulty is in trying to run away from the practice. **That's** what's tiring, frustrating. The practice is not the difficulty. Confirm this in your bones and the excess baggage is gone.

What is it that we are running from – even when we may be sitting? **Real** zazen is like finding refreshing water when you are dying of thirst. Taste that refreshing water. Then trace it to its source! Tasting with your whole mind and body that refreshing release, that pure water – trace it to its source. Where is it really coming from?

You see, don't you? These so-called koans are all around, they are everywhere. But there is really only one – it just takes different forms as we go through our experience

of pleasure, pain, sleepiness, and so on. As it becomes clear, as we trace it to the source, there is really only one. Otherwise we endlessly waste our time chasing this and escaping from that. We must become intimate with it, so close that no separation is possible. Lock onto that koan that is **you** – that **you are**. Not someone else's koan, not something from a book, not something that you learned or heard or read. What is at the source of it all, in the depths of your own heart? That's the only real koan there is. Only there do you really find yourself free. And it is only found it under your own feet.

A retreat like this is a precious chance for the practice to be constant, uninterrupted, no more stopping and starting, stopping and starting. So when the zazen is over, the zazen stands, walks, has tea, takes a rest and then comes back and sits. It doesn't **begin** the practice again because it hasn't stopped the practice. It simply continues it, now in the seated posture. For the practice to mature it must become constant, not just something that we do for a while on our cushion. This is why we have a retreat. It is a precious opportunity to let the practice continue without interruption. Even when we take a break. Yes, we take a break from formal zazen – yet the fundamental practice continues, even when we lie down to rest.

Our energies are no longer escaping into patterns of thought, memory, expectation, and so on. Fully manifest here and now – the only place this energy could be. Now the more energy you give to the practice, the more energy you have. For the ego-self, the more energy it gives, the less it has and the more tired it gets. Energy is dispersed.

Real practice is the opposite: the more that you give, the more there is. Confirm it for yourself. It is indeed escaping from the practice that is tiring, not the practice. Let go of everything, let go of seeking itself. Seeking itself is a form of escape. What is here when we no longer seek?

What remains when everything has been let go? What remains? Or turn it around: Right here, right now, what is lacking? Another way of saying the same thing: Who is behind it all? Who is the one that desperately seeks to get away from itself? Who is the one who realizes it is escaping? Who is the one who gets so stuck, in a very good way, that they can't escape? There is nowhere to go. We can no longer escape because we are totally stuck. Let the seeking mind itself come to rest, stop, freeze, get stuck in a very good way. Continue all the way through! If there is the least doubt, continue until there can be no doubt.

This is not an experience, insight, or mental projection, nor is it a hope, belief, or assumption called "God" or the "true self." All of that has nothing to do with it, that's just another form of escape, isn't it?

What is **this** before you turn it into something? What is it before it's anything? And if that doesn't do it for you, who is that one now wondering? Who is that?

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

Question: You once showed us how to lie down and rest during the break so as to continue the practice without interruption. I found that very helpful. Could show it again?

The zendo can be used twenty-four hours a day, except for the last night to make sure everyone has a good night's sleep before returning home. Otherwise this space is available twenty-four hours a day, use it well!

But when you realize you need to take a break, go to your room and lie down on your back if you can. The focus in zazen is below the belly rather than in the head. Taking a rest, the focus is the same – but very gently, like a warm disk or orb softly glowing below the belly. Breathe out slowly yet completely. Let the body rest, be nourished. And you will find that you enter deep sleep. Then when it's time to wake up, you just wake up, clear and focused, without missing a beat. There's no break, no gap, in the practice at all. Yet you're totally refreshed after a good rest.

Anything else? I think we still have time for a short sit before we finish for the evening. Thank you for your question and to all of you for listening so intently.

[Transcription by Bernhard Kleinschmidt]