

Dharma Talk

First Day of Hoepertingen Retreat, August 2018

Pablo Catalan

Welcome, and good evening.

Once again (and perhaps for the first time for some of us), we meet to dedicate our time to deepen our practice.

How lucky we are! Lucky to be alive. Lucky to have discovered this practice and lucky to have come here to share it with others. The early Buddhists said that it was as lucky as a blind turtle swimming through the ocean, coming to the surface once every 100 years, and then sticking its head in a wooden ring half a meter wide, floating in the middle of the ocean. Try to imagine that. That's how lucky we are, they said.

A blind turtle, swimming through the ocean, sticking its head through a wooden ring. The simile is so ridiculous it's adorable. Still, it gets the idea across.

But you may not feel lucky. You may feel there's something's not right, that something's lacking in your life. That's fine. That's why we're here. To put all our attention on this dis-ease, as Jeff likes to call it. Here, now, what is lacking?

You may think you're not ready for this. Maybe this is your first retreat, and you think you need more time before asking such fundamental questions. The thing is, you don't have the time. And, really, you can't escape from the problem. We've all tried that before, haven't we? It doesn't work. That's why we're here. To put an end to this dis-ease.

Going into the retreat, we give all of ourselves to the practice. What's "give all of ourselves"? How do we do that? Remember old Gotama, before he became the Buddha, determined after six years of search. He sits under the Bodhi tree and vows not to get up until he's completely free.

We're no different from Gotama. If you think so, look again! Well, of course, he was Indian and died a long time ago. But, apart from that, what's so different? What is lacking, here and now?

So, the same as Gotama, when we sit, we give all of ourselves to the sit. We just sit. When the bell rings, we get up, and give all of ourselves to kinhin, or eating lunch, or taking a nap. Every moment, we do what we have to do. We don't need to think about what will come after, or what came before. That's all been taken care of, so we can focus, single-mindedly, on THIS.

Yes, we will fail, and get distracted, bored, painful. In Spain we say "It's ok, it happens in the best families". When we notice we're not fully here, we just come back. No need to regret anything. Just come back, and keep giving all of ourselves to what's needed.

Chinese Chan master Gaofeng Yuanmiao wrote:

It's just like poling a boat upstream against the river current—you'll go upriver by one meter, and you'll fall back by ten meters. You'll go up by ten meters, and you'll fall back by a hundred meters. The more you pole, the more you'll fall back—falling back over and over

again. Even if you've fallen back to the very floor of the great ocean, take the prow of the boat and turn it back around—you absolutely, positively must keep poling up towards that. If you possess this kind of ambition and fortitude, then you will arrive home. As with people who go up a mountain, each one of them makes the effort on his own.

Two hundred years later, Japanese Zen master and poet Ikkyu wrote, just before he died in 1481:

South of Mount Meru, who can meet my Zen?

Mount Meru was supposed to be the center of the world, so “South of Mount Meru” roughly means all the world. So Ikkyu is effectively asking “In all the world, who can meet my Zen?”, who is my equal?

If not you, who? If not now, when? Let us devote ourselves to the practice, together. Thank you for listening.

Dharma Talk

Second Day of Hoepertingen Retreat, August 2018

Jeff Shore

As Pablo quoted last night, beginning practice is like poling, or rowing, upstream against the current. But what are we fighting against? The flow, the ordinary movement of things?

The simile is ancient. It goes back at least to the time of Gautama Buddha and his notion of stream entry. He also spoke of practice as going against the flow, against the stream. This may include habitual thoughts and ideas, the whole movement of society and the world. For example, in terms of contemporary mass media, curiously questioning it, consciously turning our attention away from it: Seeing that we do not need more, bigger, faster, cheaper, and so on. Refusing to stupidly follow this blind drive.

But there is a deeper sense. What is it that we are turning away from, and what are we turning toward? As the quote that Pablo gave makes clear, in the beginning it can be very difficult, it can demand all of our energy to bring ourselves back to this present moment again, and again, and again. To put it simply: real practice is not dreaming, not escaping. That's 99% of it right there. Not to run away from, not to escape from...**what?** From **this** (*tapping floor*).

You can wander off and get lost for a while. But you can't really escape from **this** anyway, so stop wasting your time trying. Stop wasting your time and energy thinking you can get here by drifting away from here! See what you are doing moment to moment in your practice. Are you really practicing, or are you dreaming up escapes from this present practice? Beware: if you're stuck to

what you think or feel is yourself, you're still trying to escape—even when you're sitting perfectly in zazen posture.

We have all come together for this. We all had to make plans and preparations. Being here for several days together, we have made a great leap in our practice. We needn't wander off or escape into thoughts and emotions about whether we are worthy, determined enough, have enough doubt or faith or whatever we think we're supposed to have or to be. Coming here, you have already made a profound commitment. Now simply stop escaping, stop running away from that fact. Let the practice become constant. That is what retreat is for. Otherwise you cannot really begin. We apply ourselves without a break in practice.

Of course we take breaks, rest, have nutritious meals, take walks. But all of that is a natural part of the practice. When you really give yourself to the practice, you realize that practice does not stop when you get up from your cushion. The practice itself gets up and walks and does what needs to be done. Then when you come back to the cushion, the practice doesn't **begin** again, it simply **continues**—now in the seated posture. This constancy is the first priority of a retreat.

That's why the retreat schedule is the way that it is. That's why we emphasize no unnecessary talking, no unnecessary movement during zazen. All of this is working together to allow us to do what we are doing here. To fully give ourselves and be where we are, not to run away from it, not escape from this.

Japanese Rinzai monastic rigor is one model for us and it has its value. Many of us here have trained in the Rinzai monastery of Tōfukuji in Kyoto, and also done sustained practice at our hermitage in Kyoto. But the Rinzai monastic model is a narrow one that includes, for example, unquestioned submission to authority—natural enough in a feudal society. This year marks the 150th anniversary of Japan leaving feudalism behind and entering the modern world. Not that long ago. And a Rinzai monastery is one place where that feudal attitude still maintains a foothold.

This, however, is 21st century Europe. Samurai Zen can cleanly slice through self-centered delusions. It can also become a robe proudly worn, a costume that self hides behind. Here you must be your own *keisaku*-warning stick. This is grown-up Zen, not play Zen.

There is a story from early Buddhism about Gautama Buddha in a previous life when he was known as Snow Mountain Kumara. There are many legendary stories like this, such as the Jataka Tales, which describe the trials he went through in order to become a Buddha. In this story there is a demon wandering around chanting one line of a traditional two-line verse:

All is impermanent; this is the truth of birth and death.

Kumara, seeking the way, is deeply impressed upon hearing this first line of verse. So he begs the demon to teach him the second, concluding line. The demon agrees—provided that Kumara offer his own life in return. Kumara agrees and the demon teaches him the second line:

Birth and death extinguished [i.e., undone, gone]; this is final peace.

Basic Buddhism. But this teaching didn't exist yet, so it is a real eye opener for Kumara. Kumara runs around writing this two-line verse on leaves and rocks so that others can learn and benefit from it. But then the demon, far below, reminds Kumara that he must now repay for the second line with his life. So Kumara keeps his promise and throws himself into the waiting jaws of the demon. As he is falling however, the demon turns into a god, gently catches Kumara, puts him down on the ground, and praises him.

All is impermanent; this is the truth of birth and death.

Birth and death extinguished; this is final peace.

Buddhism in a nutshell. It is all there, once we really see for ourselves through our own experience, that all is impermanent. This is the inevitable truth of the self, of birth and death. And the end of this is birth and death undone, final peace, unconditioned joy.

And yet Kumara—and we—can only **realize** that fact by giving ourselves to it. Giving himself to it, Kumara was thus saved. What about you?

We will return to this story. I trust you will see how it is connected with what Pablo spoke last night and what Ronald will speak later today. And what Bas will touch on tomorrow.

Beware that you're not feeding the root delusion that keeps you clinging to birth and death—even as you desperately seek to get away from it. Are you really going against the stream that continues suffering, dis-ease? Or are you simply being pushed and pulled by your momentary thoughts and inclinations, tiredness and pain, sleepiness and wandering mind? Give yourself fully to the practice and what happens? Those things may remain, but they are no longer problems or obstacles. Once you really see what needs to be done, sleepiness is not a problem. Yes, you may still have pain, but it won't be a problem or a hindrance once you really see the greater pain of not dealing with it, of trying to escape from it. Wandering mind? There is no room for wandering mind when you see **this**, what is really in front of your face!

If you still are struggling with pain, sleepiness, wandering mind, see what is wrong and correct it. Do you simply need to splash some water on your face, drink some tea, get your heart pumping so that you're wide awake? Remember what you really came here for. If there is pain, what needs to be done? Sometimes, adjusting the cushion just a little bit does it. Other times, you may realize that you're obsessing about some past wrong or future worry and so your body is tensing up. See what is actually going on in your mind and body. Is it something that you need to correct, or simply sit through? Not by sheer willpower or force of will, not by trying to be stronger than the pain. It doesn't work. No. Not **reacting** to the pain, but genuinely **responding** to it. In sustained, constant practice, doing what needs to be done.

Pain is not the problem. If you're sitting properly, you enter samadhi, concentrated oneness. Entering samadhi, you experience joy. Not a joy conditioned by pleasurable sensuous experience such as eating a fine meal, or remembering a pleasant memory, or taking a drug. Rather, this is a joy that arises from the depths of your very being, a contentment that rises precisely from not clinging to anything. In that sense it is a relatively unbound joy that allows you to see more clearly what needs to be done and how to proceed. And it gives you the energy to do so. If you sit more deeply, you experience the samadhi of neither pleasure nor pain. There is not even the joy that you experienced before. It is so subtle, so unbound, that there is no room for the experience of pleasure, let alone pain. How can pain be a problem here?

The problem is, you may cling to that state and try to stay there. That's not the answer because pain is your body telling you something is wrong. Listen to it and do what needs to be done—but don't be enslaved by it. See what is hindering you in your practice and correct it. Then it's clear what remains to be done, that is, not running away. Stop escaping into dreams and delusions of past and future. Stop holding onto the so-called present as well. Right here, before there is a past, present or future, what's there? There is the real practice.

You can't come to the end by running away from it. Stop running away, stop escaping; you can't really escape anyway. Stop running away from **this**. Fully enter it, and you will see; right here is the end of disease. Leap into the mouth of that demon!

Otherwise, you just tire yourself out prolonging your suffering, like a cat chasing its tail. The faster you go, the faster the tail goes. And then you wonder why practice seems so hard, tiring, frustrating. Nonsense: It's **escaping from** the practice that's frustrating, tiring. The practice itself has nothing to do with that. It's because you are **not** practicing that there is frustration, pain, sleepiness. That's what we are here for, for each one of us to confirm it ourselves. You can't rely on my words, even my experience. To confirm yourself, you must confirm in your own bones what lies in the depth of your own heart. That's all. Not something you read in a book or something someone else tells you.

Finally, what is in the depths of your own heart, what cannot be denied, however hard you try? What if you stop escaping it? What is in the depths of your own heart? That is the only real koan there is. Everything else is fluff. Open up to it and it shows you the way you must go.

[transcription by Ruth Mouton]