

## Dharma Talk

### Third Day of Hoepertingen Retreat, August 2018

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I trust you are all coming to see through your own experience, in your own bones, what it is to be without self. This is the koan that each one of us is. Each in our own way. We must come to the end of our self. Thus to realize this boundless compassion or love which comes from boundless peace. Genuine rest that cannot be disturbed – not just a temporary lull that turns into further dis-ease. Death itself is not outside of this, not to mention the ups and downs of living. Boundless joy also wells up naturally from being without self, as well as a vitality that is totally settled. Not a frenetic, nervous energy. No. Totally settled, yet it's not dead or lifeless. Rather, this is where true life, real vitality, arises from. Thus to do what needs to be done at that moment. I trust you see this is not different from the statements of early Buddhism, including the one I mentioned yesterday:

*All is impermanent.*

For the self it's inescapable. The self itself is split, divided. So what it comes into contact with is also so: self wants to dispose of what it dislikes, and keep what it likes – try to make it permanent. But it's not. Even the self is impermanent. Inquire and see. So, in early Buddhism it's stated over and over and over again:

*All is impermanent, this is the truth of birth and death (living and dying).*

This is the state of the self – and self cannot pull itself out of it. To put it bluntly, this **is** the self, split within and without. As already mentioned, the point of Buddhism is succinctly stated in the second line, what Gautama in his previous life was willing to give his life for. That second line is:

*Birth and death extinguished (undone, gone) is final peace, unconditioned joy.*

We must beware that we are not feeding the delusion that is self. That tangled knot. Once you really see it for what it is, that it has no real substance, the tangled knot untangles. It is itself temporary causes and conditions, impermanent. It cannot remain. And when it is clearly seen through in this way, it comes to be undone at its root. As far as I'm concerned, this is the basis of Buddhism.

It's like a fist (*showing a fist*). You can squeeze your fist so tight that you draw blood with your fingernails. In our daily lives, body and mind can become this fist squeezed tight. You might even mistakenly think that you've got to cut off the damn thing! A hand is not much good if you cut it off. What we need to do instead is to simply open the hand (*slowly opening it*). It's the same hand when it's a fist, but what is it good for? Well, maybe punching someone. But it's that same fist that becomes an open hand, open arms, completely released, free. Now it can count with its fingers: 1,2,3,4. It can give, it can receive, can wave hello and goodbye. It can wash the dishes and, when necessary, it can even become a fist and bang on the door. But it's utterly free. As a tightly closed fist it's just causing pain – and yet they are not two different things. This “*arghhhhh!*” (*tightly squeezed fist*) is what becomes this (*open hand*).

This free and open hand is our original nature, our real nature. It is this that works and is free in its working. You don't have to cut off your hand to be free. You just have to let it be what it really is. That's zazen: letting the hand, which is the whole body and mind, be what it truly is.

Beware: are you running from, escaping from, what truly is – even when you are sitting in zazen? Sitting must be thoroughgoing. It can't be just sitting there dreaming, continuing your self-delusions. It must be thoroughgoing. Then sitting itself is enough. The breath (*slowly exhaling*) itself is enough, if it is thoroughgoing, if we give all of ourselves. For some a koan is helpful. For most, it is an utter waste of time because they end up mentally masturbating with it. This has nothing to do with koan practice. Sadly, much koan practice nowadays is a kind of zenistic mental masturbation. And so, people who have "passed" many koans – even become teachers – have not resolved the one great matter of life and death. Their own life and death is unresolved. And yet they are "teaching koans."

The one real koan that each one of us **is** – that's what needs to be resolved. A borrowed koan from a book can help, if you cement yourself to it, make it yours. But that's already second-rate or third-rate zen. The real way to do it is to realize the koan **that you are** – that is you. Where did those koans originally come from? They didn't come from a book. They were the quandary, the ultimate problem-question, of that person at that time. Perhaps you think: "But I'm just an ordinary person, not a monastic. How could I come up with my own koan?" Nonsense. You're a human being, that's enough. You've got all you need. Let go of the false assumption that a monastic is somehow closer. Drop this layperson inferiority complex. The essential koan practice called *huatou* was developed for laypeople. This is often mistaken in the literature, because there were so many monastics who attempted koan practice. Doing it as a curriculum inside the walls of a monastery is what is artificial, contrived. The essential practice must be in the world. No, it is not easy, especially in the beginning. We have to devote ourselves to it. Thus we do what we are doing right now in this retreat, and in our daily lives. Don't misunderstand. If you can, by all means spend time in a real monastery. Then bring it home.

(For more on koan practice: <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/koanpractice2019.pdf>)