

Dharma Talk

Fourth Day of Hoepertingen Retreat, August 2018

Jeff Shore

What is being without self? In a word, boundless compassion, love, that can respond to the world. Here is found genuine peace, joy, creativity, vitality that responds to the needs of the world.

This poetic statement from the early buddhist suttas or sutras sums up the teachings of buddhism:

All is impermanent for the self, this is the truth of birth and death

Being without self is birth and death extinguished, undone. This is final peace, unconditioned joy. Self-entanglement – the self-delusion that is the delusion of self – undone, extinguished. What happens then – do we leap up to nirvana? No, we find that **this** (*taps on the floor*) – what was formerly seen as endless distress and disease, the suffering of birth and death – **is** the final peace of nirvana. It's found nowhere else. This is being without self.

Beware: you don't have to go through what I went through, or what anyone else went through. You've all read accounts of buddhist and zen teachers. We even heard some stories here in the last few days. It can be helpful to see what they went through. But they went through themselves. And we have to go through ourselves. We don't have to pick up someone else's burden. I've seen elders in Japan coming to the dojos, places of practice, saying things like: "In my day we used to sit through the nights without even thinking about it! People would get sick and they wouldn't even get up from their seat." One gets the sense that you've got to do it their way. But you don't. For sure, you have to give all of yourself. But you don't have to go through what they went through, as noble as that may be. Don't make that mistake. Could that be what's so tiring and frustrating – trying to go through someone else's experience instead of your own?

When the practice is proper and it matures, when you've really given yourself to it, the more you sit, the more energy you have. At the end of retreats you are exhausted physically from sitting so much with little sleep. But there is a glow in the eyes. Never been more awake. Sitting properly, the more you practice, the more you give yourself to the sitting, the more energy you have. It's encouraging to see. The ego-self can't wrap its mind around this. "The more I give, the more tired I get. I need to take a break!" Confirm it for yourself: really sitting through is the simplest thing in the world. If you're getting tired from it, see what you're doing wrong and correct it.

In his intro talk the other day, Pablo offered the Gaofeng quote saying that we **absolutely, positively** must keep going, no matter what. I didn't go back and look at the Chinese, but that must have been a couple of heavy duty characters (*laughter in the room*). You absolutely, positively must just continue poling, or rowing **against** the stream. There's this strong, incessant current and it's moving in the opposite direction, it's coming at you and you have to go against it. What is it that you really have to go against? What is it that you have to pole against?

In the beginning, our urges, desires, dreams, delusions, wandering mind – all of these things play a part. But when we get down to the real practice, the **only** thing that we work against is ourselves. That's all. Those urges, desires, dreams, delusions, the sleepiness, pain – none of that is a real hindrance, is

it? Right here and now, none of those things are hindering you. It's you turning against yourself that hinders. You are fighting yourself. And until that is undone, there is no way, at least in Gaofeng's zen. His way was to resolutely, absolutely, positively, just keep going. Well, there are other genuine guides with other approaches. But during a retreat his point is well taken. It's a good way to begin retreat because if you begin half-assed, you'll likely end half-assed.

But the only real enemy is yourself – and that's a delusion. It's not real. You're sitting on a gold mine complaining: "Brother, could you spare a dime?" You should be on your knees thanking the earth, sun, stars, this carpet (*taps on the floor*) that you've had to stare at for several days. How can you not be thankful for each particle of dust in this vast universe? How can you sit there feeding your delusions – then say the practice is difficult? Falling asleep, absorbed in mental masturbation, then blaming the practice. That hindrance, that final obstacle, is not really anything at all. You must see it straight. See it through. See it directly and immediately (*taps on the floor*).

"Throughout the three worlds, there are no dharmas anywhere" – let alone things that can get in the way. This statement was mentioned last year. Don't waste your time. If you haven't really seen through the delusion of self, then sit through until there is no mistake, till there can be no doubt. I know of no better way than to sit and actually allow our self-delusion to end, rather than fostering it, feeding it, looking for something to do, to have, checking the time, how much time left, until **what?!** Until **what?!** (*laughs*). Until the next break – which just leads to the next sitting? You must see through self-delusion and how you are feeding it. Nothing else, no one else, nowhere else. Until you do that, you will keep on chasing your tail and blaming everything and everyone. Drop it now. Don't waste your life like that.

Reality is not against you. You don't need to fight against reality. Reality is supporting you. The whole world is at your feet. Yet you say: "Well yeah, but I'd like a quieter place. I need more days to sit." The light of the sun, 93 million miles away, travels in about nine minutes and warms your cheeks. And you tell me you want to get enlightened! All you have to do is see what is in front of your face. The hand in front of your face (*showing it*). Do you need more? Where does your mind wander off to? What are you seeking?

Tomorrow the retreat ends. We have one more dharma talk tomorrow to send us off. But now consider well: can you go back to the same addictions? I don't just mean physical addictions like drugs. Or alcohol or sex or even violence... I don't think anyone here is going that far. But you know what people do to release and to feel better about themselves. Sometimes it's deadly. Beware: there are also psychological, mental addictions that we fall into. "I'm practicing constantly. But now I need a cigarette." "I'm practicing pretty constantly, so ten minutes of porn on the computer won't matter..." **What are you doing?** What you are doing the moment you go for that cigarette or the porn? Look! What are you seeking? Have you seen that? How can you light a cigarette then say you're a practicing buddhist? How can you push the porn button then say you're a practicing buddhist? You're not practicing – you're indulging in delusions. You must see the moment you make that decision, when you make a mistake, in all humility and sincerity.

I'm not saying you can't enjoy yourself. On the contrary, you can truly enjoy yourself. I enjoy a glass of wine with others. But I don't seek it to fill some vacuum in myself. I enjoy the food and the time with others. There are even koans about the precepts: not abusing sexual relations, not abusing drugs and alcohol, not stealing, not lying. These basic precepts. And yet they're not taken up as ethical teachings in Zen because if you're practicing buddhism, how could you possibly break these basic ethical teachings? So they're not even brought up as ethical teachings. They're dealt with as koans. For example, not to take intoxicants. The point of that precept as a koan is not getting intoxicated by anything – including the precepts.

Please feel free to stand up and stretch your legs for a moment. (*short break*)

*I vow, here, now, and for the rest of my life to devote myself to practice.
This includes living a wholesome life, being mindful moment to moment,
doing daily zazen, and retreats when possible.
I will do my best to support the sangha-community.
I take responsibility for my actions in body, speech, and mind
and for my own health and wellbeing.
I recognize there may be times when I lose heart;
thus I vow to continue this practice in all earnestness, no matter what.*

This is a simple boshisattva vow I was asked to write some years ago. You can find it in the transcript on Boshan's *Exhortations for Those Who Do Rouse the Doubt*. There's an earlier work on *Exhortations for Those Who Don't Rouse the Doubt*, but this is in the second part. If you find it helpful in your practice, you might recite it. Not to someone else, but in the depths of your own heart. Chant it as a way to keep the practice constant and to keep in mind the essentials. If it's helpful, please do.

This retreat has been so solid, the sitting has been so deep, I reckon you are all enlightened now so I will move on to after-enlightenment practice (*laughter in the room*). Let's say you do have a deep insight or experience, things become very clear. It's essential to know how to practice then. In a sense it's at least as important to know what to do, how to practice, how to continue then. So much Western zen is in the mess that it is in because people have experienced a little firefly lighting up at night and they think they've seen the sunrise. You can imagine what happens in the next generation. See for yourself what it is to have an unmistakable and genuine insight or experience. It's wonderful. See it clearly. If it's genuine, the more you examine it, the clearer it becomes. People who don't know will say: "Oh no, don't do anything with it or you might lose it. Don't test it because that would stain or defile it." Well, if it's real, you can inquire all you want. Test it – take it out on the road, as we say. If it's real, no matter how much you test it, it just becomes clearer. If it's not real, if it's a delusion, it will fall apart. Good. The sooner the better. Get rid of it. Don't be afraid to test it. That's a part of after-awakening practice. Is there a weakness, a blindspot? If there is, that's where you need to humbly apply yourself.

Let me read a clear statement of someone who had a genuine glimpse. This is from a Chinese monk who lived around 1287. So it's about the same time as Gaofeng:

All the actions of daily life between heaven and earth, all the things of the world, things seen with the eye and heard with the ear, things I had up until now disliked and discarded, as well as ignorance and defilements, I saw that from the beginning, they are my own wonderful brightness, and flow from my nature. For half a month no other characteristics of movement, not even tiny thoughts, arose.

Unfortunately I did not encounter the worthy eye of an expert. I ought not to have just sat in that state. An ancient called this: "Not dropping off understanding, blocking knowing things as they really are."

This is a valuable quote from first-hand experience on the need to clearly see what remains and apply yourself there. Plenty of people have had experiences: "There can be no doubt, it's all clear, perfectly clear!" Good, come back in a few weeks and we'll see. Does it end? If it does, then what? Then where are you?

I recently found a wonderful example from a Chinese nun three or four hundred years ago. Little is known about her, but fortunately there have been some scholars who are now digging this stuff up. This is what she said in a retreat she was leading:

The wise men of old spontaneously pointed at things and then uttered a phrase. These exclamations were huatou that drove practitioners into pitch darkness. Suddenly the doubt block shatters. Then for the first time you realize people now are no different than the wise men of old. And the wise men of old are no different than people now. Thirteen years ago this mountain monastic (she is talking about herself) embraced her huatou. Forgetting sleep and food, simple and steady like a fool, I was as if dead. Now, thirteen years later, soft spring sun in a clear blue sky illumines everywhere, without exception!

Here's for gender equality.

Does anyone have a question or concern from out of the practice? Something unclear? Something Ronald, Bas, or Pablo brought up in the days before?

Jeff: Bart?

Bart: When I hear this I just feel a sense of dedication which is very inspiring to me.

Jeff: John?

John: I'm feeling gratitude for your teaching and the teachings of the mountain monastics.

Jeff: Bas?

Bas: This whole retreat really slows me down. It's quit intense. But it's a very good experience. It all comes together.

Jeff: Ruud?

Ruud: I'm still thinking about what we were discussing yesterday, about the will, and willpower, and the limits of it. I think there is some will at stake. For instance the determination we need, which is also a kind of will to me. So how can we take this, without falling into a semantic discussion. You have determination, you have will, and even doubt has power, and will has power. I cannot really distinguish them very well.

Jeff: Would anyone like to respond to that?

Ruth: I also think the will is a big problem. Because the more you want... You always want to push yourself. Although you know it's not necessary. It causes friction.

Jeff: That's why I return to this image that came out in the introductory talk. It gives a sense of great determination, poling onward – whatever comes, whatever comes, however many times. You just absolutely, positively must keep going. You go one meter, you get pushed back two meters. It doesn't matter.

Ruud: What do you call this?

Ruth: You want to control the situation.

Jeff: Control... Certainly in a sense determination, and in a sense control. Without having any control you wouldn't even sit for ten minutes. You wouldn't even have come here to the retreat. To get settled in the practice, determination is necessary. You will never begin without it. And some degree of control, some degree of maturity, some degree of discipline. All of these. Some degree of trust. And some degree of doubt. All of this is working together. And it is **pushing** you.

The point is to take it in the right direction. **Yes**, it is the **self** doing this. That's what you're working with at this point. There are still delusions. There are still struggles. And so you bundle that up and go in the right direction, towards silence, stillness. Going in the right direction, it is exhausted. Don't turn it into anything else. You don't know what's upstream. You have some idea what's downstream because you've been struggling with it. But you don't even really know where you're going. And yet you have some kind of trust, based on experience, that this is what must be done. Yes, at this point it's the self doing it, it is struggling. But, you do it in a way that exhausts it. That's the point of practice here.

You know what it's like when you're just wasting your time indulging in delusions, for example, sitting there thinking about somebody you hate and all the good reasons to hate them and you can just get angrier and angrier and angrier. What happens if you stop frittering it away on this and that, blaming this, blaming that, trying to justify yourself, and just roll it up and don't go anywhere. Stop escaping. To stop escaping is already beyond mere willful determination or willpower. Willpower can't do that. It's got to have a direction or it's stymied, it's stuck.

Participant: Can we call it directed willpower?

Jeff: It's got to be directed, otherwise it will just keep floundering, going around in circles. But when it's directed properly and taken to the limit, it burns itself up. You're not escaping into anything.

Ruth: To control the mind, you put your energy all together into one. But then you come to a point – well, I come to a point – where my mind is still trying to interfere.

Jeff: That's where you need to apply yourself. As Gaofeng stated: "It gets to the point where you can't think about something else, even if you want to. It's like you're glued or nailed to it." This is not mere willpower anymore. Because that very will gets stuck – in a good sense it can't go anywhere, can't escape anymore. It can't will itself anymore. It gets stuck. As long as you're attached to your ego-delusions, this can seem frightening, threatening. Thus you don't want to go there. You know you have to, but *(in high pitched voice)* "I'll lose all my precious delusions!" Damn right. That's what you've got to lose. At that extremity, it's impossible to give up because it hasn't resolved itself yet. But you're no longer pushing. Because there's nothing to push against. There's no opposing position.

Participant: Nothing to push against...

Jeff: There is nothing coming in either. It's like being frozen, in an ice cave ten thousand miles thick, as it's said. Everything is perfectly clear. But the mind is not leaking out or drawing things in. You can't do a thing. But it's not yet resolved. At that point, it's not a question of will anymore. You can't give up, but there's nothing you can do either. That's where, as the Chinese nun said, suddenly it shatters. What happens? It's inconceivable, and yet it's right here. It's finally right here. But it's not will. The extremity is no longer will, or determination. And yet to have gotten there, yes, the divided self needs to unify itself in sustained samadhi. But that's not **it** yet. That's as far as the will can go, to bring all of that energy right here.

Jeff: Risto, do you want to say something?

Risto: Well I got a strong feeling that, compared to this, how can we have any problems anymore when it comes to our daily concerns and habitual worries about this and that? When the task is expressed so directly, it becomes very simple, even though it can still be difficult at times. At least there is a quality of simplicity and flow.

Jeff: And you need to be wary of that. Because at this point it can seem that: "There could never be a problem again, how could there be?" As a matter of fact, when you come back to the world, maybe it takes time, but eventually you may run into somebody you really dislike and you find the old mind wheels starting to churn again. "But they were all gone!" Well, here they are.

What is after-awakening practice? Part of it has to do with this. If those things can still arise, we need to humbly and sincerely see that. Guatama Buddha's awakening is portrayed as conclusive and final. But if you read later buddhist and zen texts, someone has had a deep experience, yet six months later they're on pilgrimage and they get seriously ill, for example, and doubt arises. This is very important. We need the sincerity and humility to see what remains. Even though it's true, in the flush of that experience nothing remains. Not a thing. Good for you; give it six months. With all the sincerity and the humility that you have.

Do you want to say anything else?

Risto: Not now.

Jeff: Thank you. Ronald?

Ronald: I would like to second John; I feel very grateful for your teaching and the teachings of old – but also for your frank questions and concerns. I think it's wonderful.

Jeff: Thank you. But what do your knees say?

Ronald: They are telling me something different (*laughter in the room*).

Jeff: Alex?

Alex: I really liked the first half of your talk!

Jeff: So, the second half sucked (*laughter in the room*).

Alex: You talked about the pre-enlightened self. It speaks to me more than the enlightened talk.

Jeff: I'll work on it. Thank you.