

Great Contentment

I started practicing Zen 20 years ago. A few years into it, before sitting with Jeff, I sat through yet another week long retreat. Sitting diligently, eventually I got caught by a really fundamental fear, and it was like everything was freezing into one block. It lasted for a round of Zazen, a lunch, and the larger part of the break that followed. Eventually my gaze falls onto a single brush stroke in a painting on the wall. The whole frozen block dissolves. Walking out into the park, all was without hindrance. And although all appeared to be without hindrance, this experience turned into a hindrance itself.

2022. A few weeks ago. We are on vacation in Munich. I'm in an exhibition hoping for some inspiration for this talk. I'm there for the second time, the stuff is worth it. I take my time, and get lost in one of the paintings. For a split second it "freezes", and my awareness settles on a single brush stroke. It just happens. The whole painting, everything comes to life. This IS contentment. I realize: for most of my life contentment has been a word without meaning.

In between these two experiences are 15 years of practice in this Sangha.

So what can we learn from that?

First of all we cannot find contentment in whatever it is that "dissolves" or "resolves". This process of something dissolving, and then all being really there, happens in meetings, walking in the woods. Less and less dramatic over the years, but noticeable. Something dissolves, resolves. We are present. Of course this is better than being wrapped up in thoughts and gadgets. We can respond.

But why can it turn into a hindrance?

Maybe less obvious at first, but we observe that a lot of our mental tendencies are simply still there. Like the tendency to get wrapped up in my thoughts facing problems. But also the urge to turn these experiences into something.

A few years ago I also gave a talk here. I said that whatever I thought Zen was about exhausts itself, or wears itself out over time.

So all these tendencies, these "somethings" we try to turn Zen into, wear out, exhaust themselves. It's more clear now than it was a few years ago. And even that has come more and more to rest.

A few weeks ago I learned that my job will disappear because of a reorganization. It's not urgent, but there is time to make a new assignment, so my boss is eager to make sure I get it. "Consider your job gone". It hits me really hard. It's like the rug pulled away under my feet.

Vacation starts, and there is nothing I can do. I can only grab this urge to mentally dash about by the horns or the tail so to say and keep it from running off. Bear with it, bear with me, sit with it. Walk with it.

It's in that context that I'm in this exhibition, getting lost in one of these paintings. Everything coming to life. Saying: This IS contentment.

Let me summarize:

Starting with the old experience, nurtured by the sustained practice in this Sangha, a lot of stuff has resolved or dissolved over time. There has been a long and tedious process of exhausting everything that I tried to turn Zen into. You could say there was a final tough blow from my boss, hitting a deeply held conviction of achievement and the need to get somewhere. What was left could be grabbed by the horns. Bearing with it, not much - nothing was left.

It's clear that this "contentment", this "everything coming to life" is not the result of becoming a really good Zen practitioner.

It is after all based on nothing. This is not a theoretical statement. It's the end of a long process. Often not knowing what was going on at all. It's there before anything arises. Before. This is what makes it beyond doubt.

So in a sense only from here, I can see that great doubt, and at the same time, it's done with, and gone.

After my first retreat with Jeff, he hit me very hard with an email. I felt humiliated. He responded something like: "It's hard to hit someone who is always on the run." Be humiliated until there is nothing left of you, and then see what's there.

Today this email does not hurt anymore. But it brings tears into my eyes, to see the great trust and the guts that Jeff had back then to write it.

Thank you.

(Duizel, August 2022)