

2: Grasping

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Dainen-ji, February 21st, 1998

Having only begun to practise and study with Zen Master Anzan Hoshin a week or two before, a student whilst standing with the Roshi as he talked to other students, nervously picked up “Chanting Breath and Sound”, the chanting text for White Wind Zen Community, and longingly said, “I want to learn all of these chants!”

The Roshi, turning, glared, and boomed, “Don’t do that.”

The text fell from suddenly nerveless fingers. At that very moment the student understood. There it was: the Teachings; complete; everything. Quickly came confusion and shock to cover up the understanding. But please, let me explain. Anzan roshi says, in “The Rabbit Killing Tree”,

“Any moment of grasping, any moment of denial, separates us from this whole moment of experience. This moment of breathing, this moment of being alive, this moment of experiencing, this is where our life is. To hold to any thought or feeling, any understanding, any concept, any viewpoint, merely increases our conflict. To search for moments of happiness through trying to be a particular way or to have a particular state of mind is like the poor man sitting by the tree”

And you’ll all remember that is on page six of “Before Thinking”, waiting for the tree to do its stuff.

If we look at the moments of our life when we have felt happiest, most complete, these are the moments in which we expected nothing. They were not moments in which we were trying to acquire something or trying to deny something. We were neither trying to become anything nor to distance ourselves from anything. We were simply present. As you remember from the first Dharma Talk on the Four Noble Truth, the First Noble Truth, as presented by Anzan roshi, is, “Conditioned experiencing is suffering.” Experiencing which is conditioned by anything whatsoever so that there are obstructions or obscurations causes dukkha, bad space, suffering, fundamentally a sense that things don’t work, things don’t work out for us. Of course they don’t. We are the obstruction which breaks the openness into self and other, this and that.

The student couldn’t rest with this moment. Self-image reared its ugly head and wanted an award for being good, wanted to be seen by the Roshi as keen, intelligent, a worthwhile student, maybe even better and more important than the others. This grasping, this becoming a some “one” separate from the moment, obstructed the moment of open experiencing. As the Roshi has said, “Knots were tied in space.”

The Master bellowed, “Don’t do that!” and a brief flash of understanding, a moment of terrifying openness, which self-image hates because it knows it ceases to exist. The student recoiled, forgot to practise, and self-image started to generate its stories. The space of the moment became even more dense, now there was no open experiencing. There was a student and The Teacher. Maybe he was angry. Maybe he would toss the student out. Oh woe. Oh suffering.

“He can’t talk to me like that! Why is he talking to me like that? I could ask. I can’t ask. He’ll think I’m even more stupid.” The student froze in the dukkha of dukkha; the suffering of suffering.

Remember the four kinds of dukkha? The first: not getting what we want. The student wanted what; praise, recognition? It was a habitual response. There was no reasoning behind it. It was simply, "Look at me. Look at me." Self-image never knows what it wants so in the glaring light of truth is shone on it, it fragments, it doesn't know. But then what do students know?

[Long pause]

Exactly; that's why they are students.

The second dukkha is getting what we want and then losing it. The student had wanted to find a Teacher, to spend time with that Teacher, and to communicate with the Teacher, and was, even when there were no words. But if there were no words, if the moment wasn't filled with, "yada-yada," the usual mind's understanding of communication and interaction falls apart. Perhaps self-image needs to generate some glue to keep this moment of intimacy from disappearing. Hah! Self-image wants to be in control, wants to seem to understand, and so grasped at a chance to demonstrate what a good student it was thereby sustaining what it wanted, interaction with the Teacher, but on its own terms. As it doesn't know anything, doesn't exist, there were still knots tied in space.

The third dukkha: getting what we don't want. "Don't do that!" Attention from the Teacher that is apparently, to self-image, negative. That was not what was wanted at all.

And the fourth dukkha, the dukkha of dukkha, the inevitability of suffering that follows along after the introduction of an image of a self. Some "one" suffering because of suffering and the knot becomes pulled tighter.

Fortunately for the student and for all of you, what the Zen Master was pointing out was that whatever arises and falls, comes and goes, is the activity of the awareness it is arising within. Awareness cannot be conditioned by what arises within it. Awareness is the only condition. You are not that grasping; you are not that "self".

This talk is on the second of the Noble Truths which is that suffering is caused by grasping. The Buddha says the root of dukkha is grasping. Anzan roshi says that this is not cutting deep enough. And it is not. Over the years this has become an idea of grasping and then that kind of changed so it has turned into wanting, or desiring, things, such as money, power, sex, love, food, and so on. It has been propagated that the treatment for this is a turning away from life, a denial. This is a misunderstanding.

A student came to me after the first Dharma Talk in this series and said, "I wish I knew this, years ago. I grew up being told that life is suffering and the root of suffering is desire and this desire must be denied." We can see self-image folding in upon itself over and over again, becoming denser and denser as attention focuses and fixates, not only on desire, but on thoughts about what having these desires, random thoughts and sensations in bodymind, say about us, because desire is bad. Isn't it? We know through this practice that our usual categories of good and bad, hope and fear have nothing to do with the basic questions: What's going on really? And who is this? We answer this question with the whole bodymind over and over again as we sit in zazen, walk in kinhin, as we practise this moment of noticing how we are, this moment of weariness, this moment of self pity, this moment of clear seeing, of insight, of prajna, for this is what noticing anything at all about how we are is. If we notice we are confused this is a moment of clarity. We use the breath as a touchstone as we practise mindfulness of body, breath, speech, and mind. We only grasp if we have some

sense of lack, a sense of poverty, which inevitably arises through believing that we are, in some sense, as self. As Anzan roshi says, "Anything which presents itself as a self cannot be what it pretends to be." And why is that? Because it is known; it is felt, and so cannot be the knower.

Poverty mind: It can happen over the simplest things. First thing in the morning your eyelids snap open; fresh, clear, nobody there. And then BANG, "I don't wanna get up. Ooh I'm so tired. Oh, five more minutes. That's it; oh my goodness." And a self has been created that believes itself separate from the world, from other, and from its own life. As soon as we grab on to that tired self, it conditions everything we experience.

Anzan roshi says in "The Rabbit Killing Tree",

"As soon as you grab on to one thing you exclude everything else. As soon as you identify with something it is like tying a tourniquet around your life. You cut off the flow, the circulation, the life of your life."

Now an example, a metaphor could be, a little child playing with a tiny, soft, purring kitten. The child likes playing with the kitten, likes it a lot, wants to keep it, wants to hold it and hold it - tighter and tighter and tighter until "haaa" it scratches and hurts the child. We fall in love, frighteningly often it seems. We fixate on the object of our adoration and the space becomes claustrophobic. The loved one often starts to suffocate, driven away by our desperate self. Or back to the new student of Zen Master Hoshin, she's found after a lifetime of looking the Teacher, the Zen temple within which to practise and study with body, breath, speech, and mind, the Way of Liberation, shoji-noshu, the practice of Awake Awareness. "Well! Better get it all...now". Better learn all of these chants. Better grab the text. Better say, to impress the Teacher, perhaps, with our sincerity, "I want to learn them ALL."

Zen Master Anzan Hoshin with grand-motherly kindness boomed, "Don't do that!" And the student - every day she chants, and some days like today, when the Roshi is not in the Hatto, I even lead the chants for you and others. What can you do? The moment you notice a movement towards any sort of grasping, and the creation of a self starts to make the space bad - practise.

Next week, the Third Noble Truth: We can end this suffering. That's right.

How you can end the suffering, the dukkha caused by grasping. O-sensei whispers, "Nirvana".

Thank you for listening.