

## 4: The Makeup of Coercion

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei  
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[Three gong strikes]

*Moment after moment we become what we are*". That was said by the Roshi in "The Wheel of Becoming" teisho series.

Now, before we go any further I would like to point out that no word is the experience it is describing. We have made up every word we use to describe anything. This does not mean, of course, that we cannot use words. That would be silly. Words are tools; the more of them we have and the more capable we are of using them accurately, and one hopes, with a sense of humor, the more capable we are of making clear to ourselves, and anyone else that we are talking to, or any other being that we are talking to, what we are communicating. The only point of saying words out loud is to communicate something. If at any point in the course of this presentation you have a question, please just raise your hand and ask the question because it is important that we all are on the same page of the Sutra, as it were. Self-image is such, the way it operates is such, that it reaches out with its metaphoric little graspers, grabs onto something that is said or done and before we know it, has constructed a whole story, a whole viewpoint, a whole defense for its very existence using what was said. And each time that happens and goes unnoticed it distances us further and further from our own experience. Open experiencing is coerced when that happens, by habitual patterns.

In the "Wheel of Becoming" teisho series, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin also said,

*We have the tendency to only become what we have been; what we already know, the parts we have rehearsed so tirelessly, standing before the mirror in our dressing robe, applying the paint and the makeup of concept and conversation and coercion.*

We like to think that we are performing for an audience. We like to think that it is our duty, and even, in some cases, that our very life and wellbeing depends upon how well we can perform for that audience. Well, we can forget that part because as we start to understand when we do start to look into our own experience, there is no audience. Everyone in that presumed audience is so busy with their own stuff, they're not paying any attention to what we are doing.

So we come to practice and we don't know why, often. We just have this vague sense that we are missing something; that there's got to be more, there must be more to our life, to the life that is living as us, than what we are being presented with day-to-day. We feel uncomfortable; perhaps we don't quite know why we feel uncomfortable. So we end up sitting in a situation like this on a Saturday morning, with our legs folded, our arms and hands held up against our body, and the instruction to practise any time we notice anything at all about how we are. Anything. In the beginning of our practice we are so caught up in the "thoughts 'R us" and the "feelings 'R us" culture, that those are the only things that we are aware of.

So we spend whatever length of time starting to know a thought as a thought, regardless of the content; starting to know a feeling as bodily sensation with thoughts describing what it is. And we are faced with this impossible situation, in a way, of being able to know through our own experience, that which cannot be

described by any external “authority”. We are used to having external authorities tell us what we are experiencing. The idea that we can sit and know our own experience does seem to be quite foreign.

Your thumbs are touching. The instruction we give is to feel those thumbs. Can anyone else feel those thumbs for you? No. Can anyone else breathe that breath that you are breathing? No. But be there any sort of an aberration, if for example you start to notice that your breath is a “little too short” as it were, you start to describe and judge the breath, the way that the bodymind works. And before you know it you will have really short breath or really deep breath [O-sensei makes a gasping sound] and you can get yourself into a state very quickly about that and...then we can call in the “experts”.

When you start to look into your own experience you find that you have far more choice available around everything and this is what practice does start to uncover. We are used to using the word “coerce” to mean something that is external to us, that is inflicted upon us.

It comes from the Latin, the word “coerce”, which means the “co” signifies, or is a symbol for, “coming together”; “Coming together to shut up, restrain, keep off or prevent”. So we are used to hearing that word, and since we humans think we are sort of the be-all and end-all on the planet, we will think of words like that as things that are being done to us by an external agent because we are in the very strange position of not being willing to take responsibility for ourselves on the whole, because we’ve never been taught, usually, that we can only take responsibility for ourselves, for our own experience.

So, “Coerced”: “to constrain or restrain by the application of superior force or by authority resting on force; to constrain to compliance or obedience by forcible means; to compel or force to do anything; to force into.” and as I said, we are used to thinking of coercion by an external agent, by an institution, be it church, military, medical, psychiatric, governments, and these are all “authorities” – (when I was researching the Dharma Assembly I of course went on Google and looked into “coercion” and this is where the word came up, in the context of military, medical, psychiatric, government, church, in the context of institutions) which of course we have constructed, we human beings have constructed. We can look also at the social coercion which can occur; I think it’s time to be talked about a little bit – coercion by media, consumerism, families, and peer groups. So bottom line, we can say that coercion is the overwhelming of the will (of another) by force or threat or fraud.

So what I am asking you to do is to look at, in the course of the Dharma Assembly today, how we coerce our self. We coerce our own freedom anytime we let a pattern that has been previously established, previously unquestioned, run on its own. So in the course of our practice, we start to see the many ways that we coerce our own freedom by following patterns that we have put into the vocabulary as being our personality, as being how we have to be to just get along in the world. Practice asks us to, demands us to, actually, notice those things. The whole purpose of the Lineage, which we chanted this morning, has been to help us see the patterns that are established in bodymind that limit who we are, that limit our freedom to actualize who we really are in this moment and this moment and this moment.

So we start small-small, as they say in West Africa , we start small-small by looking into our experience and learning to recognize a thought. By recognizing a thought and using that as a cue to feel the breath rising and falling, moving the body in and out, to straighten the posture, to open the eye gaze, we see over time that any thought whatsoever, any story, will lose its power over us because we are using the very things that can enslave us to open to the freedom of this moment of experiencing. And this can be done regardless of the

content that we carry around with us. Any content is basically just more of the same. It's a pattern that has been embodied, it has been running for a long time, and if we don't question into it, it will become the thing that motivates us, as it were, that coerces us, that propels us towards action without question. And with coercion, again the definitions that are in play today, there's talk of compelling someone to perform an action or be harmed in some way. We do that all the time when we do not know the actual nature of our experiencing.

We take our stories to be more true than the rest of what we are experiencing. We fall into states, and they can be triggered by anything, and we use that state as a way of acting in this moment. So when we take that apart it really is pretty silly. There is something that we learnt or the bodymind learnt. We, as the knowing of experiencing, were never consulted as to whether that was useful or not. But that pattern came into being and it became a definer of how we are. So then, depending upon the situations we've encountered in the course of our life, depends very much how we would seek relief from that pattern if we chose to seek relief from the consequences, actually, of the pattern.

We are in a culture right now where the reality of our experience as a human is being coerced as well. We coerce it ourselves; we coerce it through media, through not knowing what we are doing when we are actually engaging in any activity whatsoever.

The Shuso and I were at a High School the other night and someone made the statement that television is evil. So we looked into that a little bit because there are many things interesting that are going on in media right now. One of them is these reality shows. I'm sure you've all come across a reality show, so to speak, where a multitude of cameras and production crews follow along as a couple, say, get together and go out on a date. Now, it's only within the last few days, actually, that there has been writing, media critics have written about these reality shows and pointed out what should be obvious: anything that is watched in such a way and recorded in such a way has nothing to do with the "reality" of "the date". We have a totally fabricated situation.

So, is television evil? No, of course not, it's plastic and it's metal and it's programming and it is a little dot going across a screen. Are movies evil? No, same thing: moving pictures don't move. Right off the top we have a fundamental misunderstanding of what's going on. There's no such thing as a "moving picture" when you go to the moving pictures. They are still frames that travel at a certain speed in front of light. But we like to think that they are up there and it's moving. So it behooves us as human beings to look into, over and over again, the things that we have created and that does include our moment-to-moment experiencing right now because the personality that we like to carry around and say, well, this is who we are, is coerced necessarily because the stronger patterns will overcome something that is just new. And until we are told that no pattern is what we are, that it is just something going on in our experience and can be known and can be practised, it will just bulldoze over everything else. Why? Because it's been at it longer, it's not been questioned, in fact it's probably been supported in many ways by institutions that are around us.

So, any pattern that is unquestioned coerces your experience. Another question that can come up: Do you have the right to sell yourself into slavery, slavery to your own patterns? Well, as long as you are in the monastery, and remember you came here voluntarily, no one went out on the street and dragged you in, so that act of entering into practice, entering through the Gates of Practice, does indicate that you are not content with what was, I think, described quite nicely, in the Matrix, as the "splinter in the brain" that brought you to practice.

So practice has, for 2600 years, presented an opportunity to look into your own experience moment-to-moment. To do something, anytime you notice a focusing on any aspect of that experience, because you only notice the focusing after it has started to open. When we are focused on something we don't notice that that is what is going on. Why? Because we are consumed by it. We have been wrapped up, as it were, chained by that focusing. So then it [O-sensei snaps fingers] starts to open and that's the point when we see it; that's the moment to practise because you are going from a smaller to a larger in your experience and practice is always practising the larger.

Everything in the monastery, everything in the environment of practice, is here for only one reason and that is to show you over and over and over again, the many ways in which you narrow your own experience, the many ways in which you choke yourself. Really, yes, it's like this [O-sensei 'chokes' herself]. We get like this and we are here to say that you don't have to do that. And we go "Ohhh" [sigh of relief].

[Laughter]

The Vow we chanted this morning, the Vow of Samantabhadra, talked about compression. A fact about being in a bodymind is that there is energy and because we are alive it's a certain kind of energy. After we're dead, if we are left to our own devices, there will be another kind of energy, and that's the energy of decay. I'm talking about reality here; I am not talking about something "up there" or another sort of "mystical experience", I am talking about the magic of reality. So the bodymind drops, energy transforms itself into little shining beings and gases and things like that. We are talking about the energy of being alive.

We are in a situation. We enter into the monastery for the first time, let's say, and we don't know what to do. We bring with us all these little leeches of our previous experience which, on the whole, has told us that we have to know what to do in every situation, that if we don't know what to do in every situation there's something wrong with us or we will be perceived to be a certain way, and self image does not want to be perceived to be any way other than perfect. It comes to a situation where it can learn things, but often it will try and pretend that it should know what it's going to learn beforehand. Self-image brings into every situation everything that has ever been learnt to try and create a solid, an armoured self. In the environment of practice, over and over, this becomes very evident; this tendency to do that becomes very evident. We can have a perfectly open moment of experiencing and something may happen that we are not expecting. Then self-image will start to look around with shifty eyes and start to look inward with shifty eyes, start to make stories about how it thinks it should be, how it thinks this situation should be and how it thinks the other people in that situation should be. And I think we have all experienced that, maybe today already. This is wonderful because if we are alive, this is what is going to present itself in the atmosphere of practice, in the environment of practice.

All of our patterns will present themselves and that's wonderful because that is an opportunity to practise. You do that by feeling the breath, sitting up straight, opening the peripheral vision and that, over time, becomes embodied. Each moment is allowed, then, to present itself as it is, un-coerced by our ideas about how it should be.