

# Being Breathed - I

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei  
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[Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei in a "Good Morning America" radio announcer voice]

Good Saturday morning to you. It's a bright minus 26 degrees here in the capitol with a wind chill factor of minus 44. But of course you, sitting here in the Hatto, know that because you walked here through the bright morning of the second coldest capital city in the world. As you were walking along, it bit your nose. It pinched your lungs. It reddened your cheeks. It was right there in front of your face. You walked through it. It carried you here through the brightness of morning.

It brings you light from the candles and scent from the incense. It bows. More intimate than any lover could be. Stronger than a bull, bigger than an elephant, it supports the earth and gently moves as you.

Now in a little while, we'll have practice interviews and The Question will be asked, "How is your practice?" And you've all had differing experiences of what happens when those sounds are heard.

This story, a short story that I am going to tell you is not about one student but rather it is a compilation. The densho rang. I rang the gong in the Zendo. The student opened the door, bowed, and walked towards The Seat. We bowed and the student sat down. The student took a deep breath, waiting.

"How is your practice?" I asked.

The student gulped, gulped again, reddened, and said, "I never...I don't know...but at home...earlier this week...I noticed that my breath was moving in and out of my body and that it was the air in the room. I noticed my cat was breathing...the same air...my friends, my mother's people I loved people I would never know...all breathing the same air...and then I got scared...it was too big!" The student stopped. Eyes looked around.

"What did you do then?" I asked, "When you noticed you were scared..."

"Aahaa..." There was a long pause. "...I tried...no, no, that's not right...I noticed the breath?"

"Yes?"

"I saw that being scared was really a thought...and then...I noticed the breath. I felt the breath. At the tanden."

The student had recognized something that was true about how they were in that moment which was long gone, and what they were experiencing in this moment. Yes. The student felt the breath at the tanden moving the body in and out and said, "And I remember I wasn't afraid then and I'm not afraid now..."

The student had practised that moment of clear seeing; by making a choice to feel the breath rather than propagating the story about being scared, the student practised. And this practice is about, of course, noticing how you are in this moment.

A long, long time ago, I lived in the country with my family and our family business was caves. We didn't

manufacture them. We took people on tours. We were in the tourist business and this business was five miles from anywhere. As a ten-year-old unwaged tourist guide I didn't even have a bicycle. So for recreation, after walking through the caves, talking about them to people, I would go and lie on my back on the limestone near a waterfall. That limestone, I knew, was four hundred million years old. Four hundred million years ago, that limestone was mud at the bottom of a tropical sea. Hard to believe, isn't it? I would lie on my back looking at the sky. I breathed in and breathed out. Noticing breathing in and breathing out, I knew that the sky, the breath, the rocks, the flight of swallows following currents of air around the descent of the waterfall were this moment. I knew I was simply a part of it, no more, no less.

Thirty-five years later I was in the Zendo at Zazen-ji when Anzan roshi spoke of the intimacy of our lives in a Dharma Talk for his associate and general students that was later called "The Sky Talking" he pointed out what I had recognized then and pointed further. The sky moves through breath, is present in the breathing out of every word we say and hear, moves up as far as the blue of the sky and into the deepest cave. We are not just a part of this. This all-pervasive context, this vast activity, indicates something of the vastness, which we all are. Sky, breath, bodies, minds, you, I, are just part of what we each are. I vow to bear this in what I say and hear. It will be difficult to remember it always in each moment. But each moment shows, this so I have only to allow it. As do you. Here is a poem:

*this breath  
explodes space  
this thought  
this non-thought  
forms, forms,  
sounds, sounds  
at this moment  
what else but just this*

This is how Zen Master Anzan Hoshin expressed this moment of practice in "The Sky Itself: Poems on Zen practice", published in 1986. At this moment what else but just this? What a question! Answer it with this whole bodymind in this moment.

Here we sit in the Hatto of Honzan Dainen-ji, the main monastery of the White Wind Zen Community. We sit here in this moment being breathed. Listen...you can hear the sounds from your bodymind as the ribs rise and fall, the spine straightens and maybe snaps and pops with the life that is living as you. Beside you and behind you are other sounds; sounds of bodyminds being breathed. There are coughs and sighs, and swishes and swooshes, and the sound of the fan. Are you paying more attention to the breath of the person beside you or to the breath moving across my vocal chords than you are paying to the breath breathing you? Balance it out...now. At this moment practice just this.

[Pause]

Isn't it funny that we talk about "my breath" and "your breath" and "the cat's breath"? As if we could stake a claim on something that we literally cannot hold. As if we could mark it and keep it separate. And on those increasingly frequent occasions when we do notice the breath for a moment, judgment arises. "Aaah it's too fast, too shallow, too loud." Well, too bad. Let's not settle for our puny little stories. Come on; let's have a

look at what's really going on.

Picture the earth as seen from way, way up in space. We're incredibly lucky. We've all seen the earth from space in films, on television, or in photographs. I'm amazed every time I think that I was amongst the first generation that has actually been able to see our home from space. The beautiful blue pearl turns in space. As we move closer, space becomes sky. As we penetrate the cloud cover and get closer to the earth, we are able to breathe the air unassisted. Just as fish are at home in the water, we air-breathers are at home in the sky. Sky becomes breath; breath becomes sky again.

This morning, January 22 nd , at the formal sitting, we chanted a memorial for Hanamatsu Daiji Tenku daiosho, your great-grandfather in Dharma. The "Tenku" in his name means "ku" or "empty", "ten" or "sky". "Tenku - "empty sky". This is from the memorial we chanted.

[O-sensei reads from the Memorial to Daiji Tenku daosho composed by Ven Anzan Hoshin roshi ]

*In deep snow, in cold wind, your voice sounded forth, striking the sky and setting it ringing. Awakening all beings to the Actual Nature, you blazed in silence as the Great Acala. With the hammer and tongs of Great Compassion you forged Buddhas and Bodhisattvas out of whatever came to hand and set them spinning like suns for beings to find their orbit around them.*

*Throughout war and devastation, you sheltered the lamp of luminosity. Its light shines even now and lights up our faces, our eyes. It is because of you that we can see.*

The Lineage speaks as the sky. Many hundreds of years ago Zen Master Dogen in "Jippo" wrote, "The ten directions are the breath of the Awakened Ones. This is the point of our practice."

Zen Master Dogen never saw the earth from the sky but he said that this breath is the point of our practice. The only place our practice can occur is wrapped around this breath in this moment. You may as well notice it. It is, after all, your life.

The world turns in space and we can know that at this moment, it is night dark somewhere. It's bright at ten o'clock in the morning here in the Hatto but it is, nevertheless, this moment everywhere. In a cave under the earth, there may be total darkness. No waves of light may penetrate to the retinas of beings and there may be no seeing. In other darkness, some light waves travel through the air and some beings can see to hunt. In the bright daylight on the other side of the globe, we sit in the brightness of the Hatto facing a white wall. Waves of light move and touch our retina creating images and light and dark. Light waves move through the air we breathe.

Sound waves move through the air being breathed as you and you and you. A voice, sound waves of a certain amplitude created by the movement of air over the flesh of the vocal cords, travel through the air of the Hatto and strike your tympanic membrane making sound. Scent molecules travel through this air and you can smell the incense and taste your own breath. Warmth from the radiators travels through the air and strikes the skin and we feel hot. Walking in kinhin, we can feel colder air beneath our feet.

We sit in the air being breathed. Walking, we move through the air as we are being breathed. The air moves through us as breath. The air, the breath, is the context of all our experiencing. Without this breath, without this air, there can be no experiencing. In this Hatto, in the monastery, the city, the country, the world, the air

is the context within which contents arises. The content may be called weather, rain, snow, rocks, rivers, dogs, or people. The content may be called seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, feeling, smelling and thoughts, but it can all only arise in this moment of breathing in and out. You may as well notice it. It is your life.

Thank you for listening.