

Difficulty, Strangeness, Beauty

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Zazen-ji, December 13, 1988

Printed in Zanmai #7, Winter 1991 Issue

Good evening. This is the evening of Tuesday, December the 13th, 1988, and it is one day after the ninth year anniversary of the death of my own beloved teacher, Yasuda Joshu Dainen Hakukaze roshi... I think back to the time that I first arrived at Hakukaze-ji, to take up the practice of the Way of Zen under Joshu roshi.

When I arrived at the train station, somebody was there to greet me and to drive me to the monastery. We drove along a dirt road and it was raining. The rain was washing down the windows, and the wind-shield wipers were making their arcs through the path of the drops. After some time, we turned into a lane-way and I could see the farmhouse and the barn, trees and long grasses. The leaves of the trees were bowed under the pressure of the raindrops and the wind was moving the long grasses. I was told to wait there until Joshu roshi sent for me.

I looked for a place that was somewhat dry, to put down my sack. It was raining all around me. I put down the sack, sat on top of it, and waited. The rain fell. I had long hair at that point, and so I had hair in my eyes and I was breathing rain in and out of my nostrils. Since I was quite young, the rain and cold didn't particularly bother me physically, but mentally it did. I was pissed off. I sat there for four hours, because I knew that if Joshu roshi said to wait there, I had to wait there. I also knew, from my brief meeting with him some weeks before, that when he did call me in, he would say something like: "Aren't you even smart enough to come in from the rain?" And so I sat there and waited.

Finally a monk in a rain poncho came out and said "Please come in". We went in through the back door into the kitchen. Joshu roshi looked at me and said, "Aren't you even smart enough to come in from the rain?" He threw me a towel. Somehow I laughed.

This practice of Zen is difficult right from the very beginning. Sometimes it is difficult physically; our knees hurt, our back aches, we have to get up so early in the morning. Sometimes it is difficult because our feelings ache. This practice hurts our pride. It hurts our pride because we find ourselves in a situation beyond our control, even though everything is very clean, very sharp, very clear; you sit until the bell rings, then you take care of your zafu and you stand up. Despite the fact that things are so simple and there are so many straight lines in our practice, we find that it is out of our control. Thoughts and feelings come up which we would rather not have to face; thoughts that we've spent a lifetime convincing ourselves are not us; thoughts that we just do not have. We're brought face-to-face, again and again, with all of who and what we are. And so our pride is hurt.

When our pride is hurt, sometimes, this is truly the beginning of healing because, when we drop our pride, when we drop our humbleness, we can begin to find that another quality entirely will manifest: a quality of unshakeable confidence. The confidence of this moment. The confidence of the heart of our lives. This heart of our lives arises as the entirety of what we experience, the vastness and vividness of this present moment without barrier. This confidence that we learn, and we begin to be able to naturally manifest, is not the kind of confidence that arises out of a self-help course, or out of having toughened something up, of "knowing

that we can take it". It is an unconditional confidence. It is unshakeability. And so, when we hear terms like "the iron man", or "dukkha", or "the mile high cliff", we begin to understand.

Sitting in the rain, being drenched by the rain, I began to feel the raindrops, to watch them explode around me as they touched the ground, or entered puddles, the slant of the rain changing with the direction and strength of the wind. This was so beautiful. Despite the fact that our practice is difficult, it is also very beautiful. When I actually noticed the raindrops, I felt and saw and breathed how beautiful they were.

When we begin to notice our lives, when we begin to practise this attention, we begin to understand an unconditional beauty beyond good and bad. We begin to understand our lives. At the moment that we truly drop attempting to understand our lives, when there is "no understanding", our understanding is complete. When our understanding becomes complete, it is time to drop that and go yet further, because once we realise the unconditional confidence of the "mile high cliff", it is time to take a step off that cliff.

Taking such a step, there can only be one step. There is no room or time for a second step. This is realizing this single bodymind as the display of all directions, of all times, and dropping this bodymind, dropping all directions, all times, so that one can act freely, can come in and go out, can range throughout the six realms, can dance atop the pile of the five skandhas and realise the Unborn Nature of all conditions.

Zen is not only difficult, not only beautiful, but also a very strange thing to do. When we attend to just how strange a thing it is to do, we are shocked. Yet, despite the fact that it is strange, it makes absolute and complete sense. There is something in us that responds "Yes!", something in us which recognizes the strange things that the teacher says in dokusan and teisho. There is something in us that recognizes the beauty of this practice and finds itself at great ease in the midst of the difficulty.

It truly becomes very difficult to say anything about this practice. When we try to talk about this Way of Zen, as a whole, what seems difficult at one time, at other times seems easy. It is only when we pick up a particular facet of this practice, that we can say anything about it; but this practice is only a facet of a jewel called Zen. This practice of which we speak, in this moment, is only one of a hundred thousand facets of practice of this jewel of Zen. Our practice is changing from moment to moment. Our practice is turning from moment to moment; sometimes easy, sometimes difficult.

When we find it to be at its most difficult, we must realise that it is self-image that finds it difficult, and it is self-image that makes it difficult. It makes it difficult through wandering and sinking, through obsessing, through playing its games and strategies, through trying to make its deals and then finding that they just don't work, and it finds all of this so difficult it could just scream. But, what is it that is aware of this difficulty? Where do the games and strategies come from? Where do they go? When this thought arises, at the moment of its arising, it ceases. When this sound is heard, it is gone. Where is there difficulty in this? Where is there ease in this?

The place of true practice is really the heart of our lives. The heart of our lives has no shape, has no form. Sometimes it looks like this wall, sometimes it feels like the floor, sometimes it feels like a dream, sometimes it is eating and drinking, sometimes it is driving along a highway, or wandering in the forest, sometimes it is morning and sometimes it is night. This heart of our lives has no form, no shape. It is defined by none of these thoughts and none of these feelings. It is completely unobstructed. The heart of our lives extends in all directions. It is the very direction that we face. It is the faceless face without direction, without time, without

expression, without a smile, without a scowl.

The true place of practice is this heart, this Original Face. We practise to glimpse this Original Face. Once we do so, if we continue to practise, we will realise that it was the Original Face which had this glimpse and then, there is only seeing this Original Face. We discover that our life, all worlds, are simply the display of this Faceless Face and all Dharmas are reflections arising on the Mirror of Mind.

If we go yet further, we polish this Mirror, and we begin to realise its vastness and how far it extends in all directions. We realise that it truly is the place in which all dharmas arise. It is the arising of all dharmas. It is the decaying of all dharmas, it is this impermanence, it is this heartbeat, this breath. Going yet further, we see that, that which we were polishing itself shines. Even the dust that is gathered upon this Mirror is bright. We see that even the confusion, the strategies, the deep-rooted tendencies, are simply the display of this Mirror.

Going even further, (Roshi bangs nyoï staff on the floor), we shatter this Mirror, and then we're truly free. Being truly free, we realise that we need be nothing at all. We need not even be everything. We need not even be "one" with the All. It is at this point that we understand JUST THIS. It is at this point that we truly understand the heart of our lives. It is at this point that all understanding drops away, because we can no longer find a knower and a known, and there is just this Knowing.

Sometimes our practice is difficult and sometimes it is easy. Sometimes it is shallow and sometimes it is deep, but this practice is the transmission of freedom, it is the transmission of ourselves to ourselves.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating things in this practice is realizing that there is nothing that we can give our teacher and nothing that our teacher can give us. The teacher is just like our practice: something that we can't really understand. Our practice, our teacher, the environment of training and the Lineage of Ancestors simply points, simply question us, again and again: Who are you? What is this body? This mind? If the realization of the Buddha could be given to you, it could be taken away from you. What is it which cannot be given and cannot be taken? What is it that you have always had so long? That you do not even have, because it is what you are?

Whether our practice is difficult or easy, this is what we must realise. This is what we must practise. Simply this questioning, this looking, this attending. We must realise what it is that attends and then we will realise the Mind of the Lineage, the Mind of the Buddhas and Dharma Ancestors, the mind of all beings.

Practice always begins now. It begins at the moment of hearing this sound. It begins at the moment of this breath. It begins this cold December evening. Practice begins wherever you are. Right now. Let's not avoid the difficulties of our practice. Let's not avoid the beauty of our practice. Let's not avoid being shocked by our practice. Let's not avoid that which recognizes what is being pointed to.

Please enter into this practice most fully. Enter into your lives most fully. Enter into this breath most fully. Sharpen and clarify your mindfulness of this moment. Live this moment fully, with the whole body. Live in each moment with the whole body until you realise what this living is, and then there will no longer be any question of "whole body". There will be JUST THIS.

In this moment there is just this: just this moment, just this practice, just this difficulty, just this ease.

Please, practise to your utmost and enjoy yourselves.

The sequel to this transcript is [Standing in the Rain \(Tangaryo\)](#)