

# Four Horses

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This is the May 1988 Sesshin and we have just this one day to practice. To practise the limitless reaches of this room — of this breath, of this step — of this body, breath, speech, and mind, breathing in, breathing out. The Zendo breathes this in and out. The altar breathes this in and out. The heat of the May sun breathes this in and out. Sesshin breathes this in and out.

Coming into sesshin we come back to this breath again and again. We get lost, and we come back. Each time that we come back, here we are. Each mistake that we make, is another opportunity to explore how we are. A moment of guilt is this moment. A moment of clarity is this moment. Holding neither to clarity nor confusion, here we are. And so for this one day let us explore completely. Let us be willing to allow ourselves to open to how we are in this moment and in every moment, and seeing how we are let us question into who is it that is this way, that is that way. Coming back to this breath, what is this breath? Hearing the sound of the jet overhead, what is it that hears? Seeing, hearing, moving, breathing — let us find out, and finding out let us question yet deeper.

In the “Shime” chapter of the Shobogenzo, Dogen zenji discusses the “four horses,” which is a metaphor used by the Buddha in the Samyukta-Agama sutra. This metaphor of the four horses speaks about how we are when we practice — four, one could say, classes of students. The first class, the superior class, is like a horse that immediately obeys its rider’s direction by merely feeling the whip’s shadow. The second horse acts accordingly when the whip brushes its hair, the hair of its mane. The third, where the whip has actually touched its flesh. And the fourth, the lowest kind of horse, is the one who acts only when the whip reaches its bare bones.

Although we often would like to be like the first horse and to catch the point immediately, often our attempt to be like this first horse is what makes us into the fourth horse. We need to be whipped again, and again, and again, because we try to avoid the whip. By having an image or ideal about practice — by trying to be like this first horse, or the second horse, or the third horse, or the fourth horse — by comparing ourselves to anything, we get away from the essential realm of this very breath, this very thought, which arises without any comparisons, without any categories. It is this breath, this thought, it is this world arising now. Practising within an image of practice, we never quite allow ourselves to touch practice. To touch practice, we must practice completely. We must allow ourselves to glimpse the shadow and we must allow practice to touch our hair, to touch our flesh, and to penetrate to our very bones.

Self-image itself — that which we find blocking our every move — wants to practice. It does, it really does. It realizes that its strategies, its confusion, are painful. And because it is inherently Buddha, it also realizes that it does not even really exist, that it is merely a pretence at existing. It is merely the effort to try to become something, it is merely a process of contraction and grasping. It is intelligence becoming lost within objects of intelligence, in what it is being intelligent about. But it is intelligent and so it realizes the futility of all of this, and so would like to practice. But it wants to practice on its own terms. The problem is that practice is much too large to fit into any terms, much too vast to be controlled. Practice is the very air, the shadows and light around us, our very hair, our very flesh, our very bones.

When Bodhidharma gave Mind-to-Mind transmission to Huike, he said, “You have realized the marrow of my bones.” Practising with our very bones, our very flesh, our very hair, the very air we breathe in and out, we come closer to the marrow of practice, the heart of practice. Allow the practice to be this very air, hair, flesh, and bones. We ourselves receive Bodhidharma’s Transmission with every sound we hear, every breath we take, every breath we release.

When we compare ourselves to others, or how we would like to be, we cut ourselves off from the marrow of our bones; we cut ourselves off from our bones; we cut ourselves off from this very moment, which is the whole of our lives. And so all these concepts, these strategies of how we would like to be, of how we would like to practice, of how we would like to control practice arise, don’t be ridden by them. When an idea of first horse, second horse, third horse, and fourth horse come up, don’t worry about it. Just ride it, just saddle up. See the horizon, see the energy of the movement of the gallop, as they form and structure awareness and attention. Sit tall in the saddle, sit straight. Breathing in and out. If you are working through a koan, realize each breath to be koan, each floorboard to be koan. Each blade of grass, each sensation of cool breeze touching your face in the midst of the heat of the sun, are koan. Come back again and again to this very air, this play of light, and shadow, to this hair, flesh, and bones — come back again and again . . . .

Welcome.