

Receiving the Dharma Seal

Hekiganroku Case 2: Zhaozhou's "The Vast Way is Without Difficulty"

Dharma Talk Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei

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On this day, in this moment, I sit before the students gathered in the Hatto, having just received Inka, or the Seal of Authenticity as a Zen Teacher, from my Master, Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi in a face-to-face and mind-to-mind private ceremony in the Hojo, or Abbot's Quarters. Having been a successor to his Dharma through shiho, I now have been entrusted as his Dharma-heir through inka and can Transmit it to my own students.

And so, the Lineage of Awakened Ancestors is continuously alive, being passed on from Teachers to students who themselves can become Teachers who then pass it on to their own students.

I can never repay the Roshi for his instruction, encouragement, his humour, and sometimes his fierceness in his insistence that I practise realization and follow through, that I make as much use as I can of rich resources that are available, the Dharma Gates that are open in all directions right now. In speaking with the Roshi, every situation, no matter what it is, is a lesson in how to embody the Way, in how to fulfill the Four Great Vows. Whether through instruction in formal practice, or providing guidance about how to respond to a student or a situation, or explaining something about literature or history or Linux, he is continuously pointing to the spaciousness and Radiance of Experiencing, continuously asking us to open past our states and beliefs so that we can see what he is pointing to. He is always Teaching, in word, deed and gesture. His commitment to all of his students, the depth and breadth of his knowledge and understanding of Dharma and the entanglements that students experience, his foresight in creating volumes of Teachings for those who will follow, all of the effort he has made to ensure that we have the best possible resources - for all that I have mentioned and so much more, I am grateful beyond words.

I am also very grateful to the late Ven. Shikai Zuiko osho-ajari whom we honoured as O-sensei. She was my Dharma-sister and together with me had received shiho as a successor in Anzan Hoshin roshi's Lineage. I am grateful for the instruction she gave me when I was a new student, and then for always being available to consult with over the years.

Our Transmission from such Masters as Eihei Dogen to Koun Ejo, to Tettsu Gikai, to Keizan Jokin, Sogaku Hakukaze, Anzan Daiko, Mushin Daie, from Joshu Dainen to Anzan Hoshin, and now from Anzan Hoshin to me, is the practice of Vast Openness that is without a centre or fringe, and has no beginning and no end.

The whole point of the Lineage is to protect, maintain and uphold, and to continue the practice of realization, so that it can be passed on to coming generations as completely as possible. It's not something that can be owned by anyone - although people will try to rope off areas of Zen practice and try to sell them off in various forms - those can only ever be scraps and husks because these fragments do not have actual Transmission behind them. But though the practice can't be owned by anyone, it can be upheld and passed on.

I often explain to students that since what we are practising is Vast Openness, within that some 'markers' are needed - a structure with clear signposts along the way so we don't just wander about aimlessly and fall into ditches and bumble in the brambles. In an open field you could just wander around and around in the

closed circles of self concern. Without touchstone and markers, we could very easily just “wander in delusion”.

And yet the structure that we use in our Zen practice is very simple. The forms are part of that structure: bowing practice, how we take our seats, how we handle our zafu, sitting zazen, walking kinhin, the kata, oryoki, koan practice, Mikkyo practices, samu, the structure of training itself, with the various training posts - minor and major - these are all markers within Vast Openness that show us clearly what we need to do now and what we need to do next.

But people tend to want to make them into things, into signposts that they can hold up and say “Look, I am here! I’ve arrived! I understand! I’ve GOT IT, for once and for all”. But they are not ‘things’ that you can take hold of and own. They are more like gates that open out into larger and larger spaces.

Some of you may be familiar with the game of “Weiqi” or in Japanese “Go”, which is likely the oldest board game. It originated in China and is thought to be about 4,000 years old. According to legend, the game was created by the legendary Chinese Emperor Yao as a tool to teach his son how to rule. Anzan roshi and I played many games together, especially decades ago when the Sangha was at our old monastery Zazen-ji. It is played on a flat board marked with a grid. The blank board is open with possibilities, but so many that it is not until the pieces - which are actually small stones - are placed on it that you can begin to see the shapes made by stones as clear possibilities. The stones do not just squat on a square but are set on the interstitial lines so that the four directions open out from them and can form relationships with the other stones. The stones are set and rest and interact rather than squat and then jump to take territory. There are more and more possibilities as more stones are added but this is not a matter of building actual structures out of the stones. The board and the stones together merely represent various possibilities of interaction. And if you narrow and focus attention on some little area, some strategy you’re letting yourself become preoccupied with, you’ll miss what’s going on with the rest of the board. In the games of Go that Anzan roshi played with me there was no winning or losing but only playing with possibilities until they became too certain to be interesting. Then the game was over.

In the same way, the forms, the practices we do are not about building structures and rules. They are about opening attention, not narrowing attention, and they all point to the Vastness in which all of this is occurring. But because self-image is so habitually contracted, so territorial, it will lock onto fragments of experiencing and try to hold them, freeze them, so that it can feel that it is finally clear, finally certain about something. This is what is going on when people take bits and pieces of our practice out of context and try to sell them off. Self-image wants to use meditation, spirituality, anything that is at hand in order to be better at being itself. It wants something isolated from everything around it, in order to “justify” itself, or make itself seem more “real”. This is self-image practicing itself, and what it will produce is self-image. This is the exact opposite of our practice.

But, of course, the Teachers of our Lineage know all about this and there are many Teachings that address it, including many that became koan. So this evening I would like to raise with you one of my favourite koan, Anzan Hoshin roshi and Joshu Dainen daiosho’s translation of the Hekiganroku or Blue Cliff Records Case 2: Zhaozhou’s “the Vast Way is Without Difficulty”.

Yuanwu’s Pointers:

Heaven and earth are flattened; the sun, moon, and stars go out. Even if blows from the stick fall like rain and "katsu" shouts roll like thunder, you still stop far short of the furthest truth. Even the Buddhas of the three worlds can only know it for themselves, and even the successive Lineage of Awakened Ancestors cannot exhaust its depths. The vast treasury of the sutras cannot wholly expound its meaning and even keen-eyed rag-robed monks cannot save themselves. At this point, what will you do? Saying the word Buddha trails mud and water. Saying the word "Zen," your face should redden with shame. The best students don't need to be told. As for late coming beginners, just get down to it and investigate it.

Through the process of narrowing and congealing into contraction, self-image flattens seeing, hearing, bodily sensation. It blocks out the world in order to sustain itself and the states that seem to justify it. Yuanwu says that "Even if blows from the stick fall like rain and "katsu" shouts roll like thunder, you will stop far short of the furthest truth. Unless you practise the instructions and follow through, it doesn't matter what anyone else tries to do to try to encourage you to open attention to experiencing as it actually is - not as you 'want' it to be. No one can 'give' you the Treasury of Dharma.

Yuanwu also says that "...even the successive Lineage of Awakened Ancestors cannot exhaust its depths". So this tells you that the Dharma is limitless, boundless, without end. So how could you take hold of any part of it and say "This is it", or think that you could possibly be 'finished' in your practice and study when even the successive Lineage of Awakened Ancestors stretching back 2600 years, stretching forward for as long as students are able to uphold the Dharma can never exhaust its depths?

And then Yuanwu says very plainly, "Saying the word "Zen," your face should redden with shame". The Buddha himself didn't want to Teach. He didn't want people to look to him as someone who "knew" everything. Self-image would love to find someone who 'knows everything' so that it can pick their brain and take their understanding and then itself be the 'one' who knows. Teaching students to practice isn't about any of that - quite the opposite in fact. So if you find yourself in online chat rooms straightening other people out about how they understand "Zen", or trying to 'share' your understanding of practice with your friends, you should just stop. One should never do anything that might later cause them embarrassment and you will be embarrassed by having done this if you deepen your practice. I almost made this mistake as a beginning student, but I was forewarned by the Roshi that this could come up so I avoided it. This is why all students are told that they should not discuss their practice with other people - to discuss it with a practice advisor, a Dharma Teacher or a Teacher.

The Koan:

Zhaozhou said to the assembly, "The Vast Way is without difficulty. Just don't accept or reject. With a single word, there may arise picking and choosing, or there may arise clarity. This old monk doesn't abide in such 'clarity.' Do you still hoard any treasures?"

The moment you think you have "clarity" should be the moment you choose to actively question what is being experienced. The same is true of a feeling of 'difficulty' - that should be a prompt to question what is being experienced. When Zhaozhou said "The Vast Way is without difficulty. Just don't accept or reject", he gives us no choice but to go into this questioning with the whole body.

Xuedou's Verse:

“The Vast Way is without difficulty.”

The direct word directly said.

One with many,

non-dual in two.

At the horizon, the sun rises,

the moon sets beyond the hills.

High mountains,

cold waters.

A dried skull has

no consciousness, no joy.

The withered tree

sings tirelessly in the wind.

Difficult, difficult!

“Accepting and rejecting”?

“Clarity”?

See for yourself.

Xuedou knows students so well. He says “The Vast Way is without difficulty, the direct word directly said. He’s really giving you no choice. If what you are practising IS in fact the Vast Way, then you cannot justify a sense of difficulty. Self-image continuously generates a sense of difficulty and this is what students spend so much time roiling about in - in their lives and even when they are sitting on the zafu. Xuedou won’t let students do that. He points to the choice you need to make moment after moment when you are sitting - to release the sense of difficulty, by opening attention to what is actually being experienced in this moment.

Xuedou says, “One with many, non-dual in two”. This is another way of saying “no opposites”. Or “nothing in opposition”. To use an example from your practice: When you are sitting and you open to the visual field, allowing the seeing to open to peripheral vision instead of peering at the wall, the wall isn’t obstructing the seeing. The seeing of the wall is part of the seeing. When you allow attention to open to seeing and hearing and bodily sensation - as many sense fields as you are able - none of these obstruct each other - they all provide information about the whole of your experiencing. Seeing does not obstruct hearing (non-dual in two); opening to all of the sense fields allows attention to open more and more completely (one with many).

Xuedou says,

At the horizon, the sun rises,

the moon sets beyond the hills.

High mountains,

cold waters.

Both of these verses speak of things as they are. At the horizon, the sun rises. You don't do anything to make that happen. And how you are won't stop that from happening. There is space for you and everything else and still the sun rises at the horizon and the moon sets beyond the hills. When there are high mountains, there is cold water (water comes from glaciers atop mountains). When there is cold water, there are high mountains.

Stop struggling. Experiencing unfolds as it actually is. Open attention to this extraordinary play of experiencing and – as the Roshi would say – enjoy yourself. Thoughts come and go, feelings come and go, sensations shift and change. Birth, old age, fresh bread, stale crackers, bird song, the sunlight on your skin and the smell of new flowers in the spring. Each thing is in its own place; each thing is taking its own time. Stop struggling.

Xuedou then says,

*A dried skull has
no consciousness, no joy.*

*The withered tree
sings tirelessly in the wind.*

Again, he's speaking about things as they are. A dried skull has no consciousness, no joy. This is obvious on the most basic of levels. But also, if you are sitting there on your zafu, trying to be hollow, trying to be "no-one", trying to be any way at all, you are like the dried skull with no consciousness, and no joy.

Meanwhile the withered tree isn't trying to be a 'something'. It isn't trying to make a sound. And yet, because it is what it is, and because of the way it interacts with the wind, because both of these things are exerting themselves as they are, there is a song. If you have ever heard a withered tree singing in the wind, you'll know how beautiful that sound is.

Zhaozhou Congren zenji was speaking from what Eihei Dogen zenji called *Before Thinking* and Koun Ejo zenji called the *Treasury of Luminosity*, pointing past the ideas about confusion and clarity held by students.

As Anzan Hoshin roshi said in the series "Without Difficulty: Commentaries of Jianzhi Sengcan's *Xinxin Ming: Words on Trusting Awareness*",

Quote:

"In the absence of picking and choosing, there might arise clarity. But if it is a clarity that depends upon the absence of something then it is merely another state of mind. Like all states it will come and go, like mist and fog and rain and light and dark within the sky. To be truly without difficulty, we must not settle for merely the opposite of anything let alone try to hoard it as if it were a treasure. Instead we must sit, walk, stand, and lie down as the sky itself, always already before and beyond the conditions of body and mind that gather and disperse like weather. There is nowhere to abide, nowhere to dwell, nothing that can be grasped".

End Quote.

Ryoko Jikaze's Comments and Questions:

Old Zhaozhou confounds the monk. I think the monk confounds Zhaozhou as well, otherwise he would have just beaten the monk into Vimalakirti's silence, wouldn't he? Or is this some kind of dim-witted compassion, letting oneself get entangled in all of this talk of "picking and choosing," "clarity," and "difficulty, no difficulty"? Is there someone to be entangled? Perhaps that's the point after all. Still, there has to be a clearer way.

Ryoko Jikaze doesn't mean that Zhaozhou doesn't know how to respond to the monk. But when a student asks a question, the Teacher is tasked with finding a way to respond in such a manner that the student will understand. That can be quite difficult, especially if the student has already taken up a firm stance. Ryoko Jikaze points out that Zhaozhou could have just "beaten the monk into Vimalakirti's silence." And although that would have let Zhaozhou off the hook, he chose to help the student understand instead. He's being a bit tongue in cheek, a bit humorous when he says "Or is this some kind of dim-witted compassion, letting oneself get entangled in all of this talk of "picking and choosing", "clarity," and "difficulty, no difficulty"? Is there someone to be entangled? Perhaps that's the point after all. Still, there has to be a clearer way". He's asking students to look into what is being spoken of here, so that they too can understand what Zhaozhou is pointing to.

Zhaozhou said, "The Vast Way is without difficulty. Just don't accept or reject. With a single word, there may arise picking and choosing, or there may arise clarity. This old monk doesn't abide in such 'clarity.' Do you still hoard any treasures?"

For the Dharma to be Transmitted, it must be given and it must be received. There can be no "holding on" or hoarding. What can be held? This is the true meaning of what people call "renunciation". What can be held? What can you hold reality with? Where could you take a hold of it?

This old monk right here does not abide in such clarity and hoards no treasures. This is how this old monk has received the Dharma Seal of her Master, yet another old monk.

Please, keep your practice open and straight.