

Remembering Reality

Dharma Talk by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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Sometimes the Teachings can seem so endless and complex that we can forget what they are about. Essentially, what they are all about is remembering reality. The Pali word for memory or remembering is “sati”, as in “Satipatthana.” In Sanskrit it is “smriti” and “nen” in Japanese. But “memory” in this context, is not remembering some “thing”, but rather refers to our capacity to remember. If we did not have this capacity of memory, we would not be able to function. None of us would be able to understand what I am saying because we all would have forgotten the meaning of one word before I spoke the next.

But fortunately, in the moment of hearing a word you are able to recognize the meaning of the word and remember it as the next word is spoken. In recognizing it you are making use of memory. But this does not involve having to “go back” in memory to understand what each word means. Wouldn’t that be dreadful - if on hearing a word we had to go back in memory and replay our 2nd grade teacher explaining a definition? And then go rummaging around for the meaning of the next word, and the next? The reason we don’t have to do this is because, of course, the information is already known. Everything that we have experienced is already known and so there is no reason to constantly reference back to prior experiences. However, this is what we will tend to do much of the time. This is why it is so easy for us to confuse the recognition of this moment with the recognition of a previous moment.

Anything can trigger associations of past history. Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says, in Class 14 of the “Development of Buddhist Psychology” series,

There is nothing in the ability to recognize which leads to a deadening of our experiencing. In fact, it can show us the richness of it, that, you know, this thing is much the same as this thing and as that thing so in fact it can lead us to connections which actually deepen our appreciation of what we are experiencing rather than deadening it, just as memory can be something that we dwell in rather than experiencing what is actually going on, rather than being open to the people that we are meeting now and the situations that we are experiencing now, we can just be involved in some nostalgia or wishing that things were the way that they were or the way that we would like them to be and on and on and on, so that we are completely dissociated from this moment. Yet at the same time, a memory arises now and is part of this moment. This moment contains the past. So these things can be things, which act as bonds, and

fetters or they can be aspects of the richness of our life.

That last sentence is very important. "So these things can be things which act as bonds and fetters or they can be aspects of the richness of our life." Unfortunately, we will often choose to view ourselves and the world around us in terms of what we think we already know. Everything can remind us of something else and even something as simple as seeing a colour can evoke associations of past experiencing.

For example, in the moment of seeing the colour red, we may for a flash of time recognize the richness and vividness of the colour, but then reduce it to an association about Aunt Vi's red lipstick bleeding into the age lines around her mouth and the boredom we experienced as she repeated stories about her trivial little life over and over and over again. Of course, it doesn't occur to us at all that we are doing the same thing - telling ourselves stories about our own trivial little lives over and over and over again. Yet the colour red has nothing to do with any of this. It is completely empty of all of our associations, our thoughts and our feelings about it. It is simply - red; and there is no need to add anything to it. Adding anything to it takes away from the seeing of it. It is right here, right now and the seeing of it is seeing this moment of present experiencing.

Each moment rises and then falls and in its rising, its falling is already present. This moment rises and is gone and now it is this moment; and it is now; and now; and now; and now; right here; and here; and here. New, fresh, bright. You have never been here before, have never experienced the light as it is in this room at this moment. It might look familiar, but that is only because you are able to remember certain details about the room, enough to be able to recognize objects, just as you are able to recognize the meaning of each word as I speak it. But in turning that recognition into familiarity, we can cut ourselves off from the richness and directness of experiencing. Self-image backs away and curls itself into what Dogen zenji calls our "old nest of ideas."

When we are mindful of these sensations in this moment, we remember reality, right here, right now. Mindful of these colours and forms and sounds, we remember reality right here, right now.

Mindfulness is opening to this moment of present experiencing. It is practising the directness of each moment as it is. Remembering reality through practising mindfulness is not "going back" to what we think we have already learned about practice, or the moment, or what we think reality is.

Even "Mindfulness" can become part of the repertoire of states that self-image, the structure of contraction, uses to play out its basic ignorance concerning itself and its world. But mindfulness is not recalling the memory of how we experienced mindfulness in the past. It is not a memory. It is an activity, something that we must practice in this moment, meeting each moment as it is, as we are, new and fresh. It is what is true, right now, right here.

Zazen, kinhin, bowing, chanting, the Daruma-kata aiki, the 1700 teisho and classes Roshi has presented, Dharma Talks presented by Dharma Teachers and by a new shuso, meeting with a practice advisor, a Dharma Teacher or Zen Master face to face or in an email exchange - this is what all of these Teachings are pointing to - the brightness and freshness of this moment.

The traditional Meal Chant that we use is one such Teaching. It is called the "Gokan-no-ge: the Five Remembrances" or the "Five Reflections." "Go" means "five"; "kan" means "remember"; "no" means "of" "ge" means "chant or "gatha."

We will recite the chant now:

*This meal arises from the labour of all beings,
may we remember their offering.*

*Delusions are many, attention wanders,
may we justify this offering.*

*Greed arises from self-cherishing,
may we be free in moderation.*

*This offering sustains us, gives us strength,
may we be grateful.*

We use this strength and attain the Way.

Prajnaparamita!

We will begin with the first sentence, "This meal arises from the labour of all beings." What does this mean? It means what it says. "This meal arises" means just that. It means this meal in front of us, right here, right now is the presencing of awareness in itself arising as this moment, as this meal, as you reciting the chant.

Despite our preference to think of the Dharma realized and Taught by the Buddha and the Awakened Ancestors of the Lineage of Transmission as something elusive and unattainable, and as something we will "get to later", here it is right here, right now. Here we are right here, right now. Waking Up is Waking Up to our lives as they are, in this moment. As Roshi often says, "If not now, when? If not here, where?"

Looking into a bowl of soup, the colours and shapes of the ingredients swirl, the fragrant steam fills our sinuses and with the first spoonful, flavours dance across the tongue. The Dharma is in our eyes; it's in our mouths and it's up our noses. It presences as the experiencing of the sensations of the hand as we lift our spoons.

If there is a sense of separation, of not really being able to experience or appreciate the directness of experiencing, this is also just something that we need to notice and practise with. We tend to hold ourselves back and away from what is being presented to us, moment after moment, glossing over the details of our experiencing. We can feel the sensations of the body, open to the colours and forms and sounds and yet, even as we practice opening to them there can still be this sense of separation. As though we, or perhaps some "thing" is holding back. That sense of separation, the perception that there is some "thing" between us and what we are experiencing, buffering things, needs to be recognized and practised with. It is that sense of separation that reduces everything, renders it meaningless, that washes all of the colour out of our lives. That "thing" is self-image, the perception of a "self" or an "I" that is at the centre of our experiencing, that pretends it is doing the experiencing. It recoils and refuses to participate in even something as simple as eating a meal or walking, or sitting, or standing or laying down. It is distrustful, suspicious and it pisses on everything. Sorry if you don't like the "p" word, but that is a very accurate description of how self-image behaves. It is, as Roshi once said, rather like the guest served a meal by the host, choosing to stub their cigarette out in a plate of fried eggs.

Whether you are being served a meal or have prepared it yourself; whether it is made from fine ingredients or leftovers, the food in front of you is the presencing of Awareness in itself, presenting itself as food. It should be prepared as well as is possible, served beautifully and eaten in mindful recognition of this life, this

moment, this meal, this opportunity to practice.

“This meal arises from the labour of all beings, may we remember their offering.” What is meant by “the labour of all beings”? To begin with, what is a being? A human being is a collection of systems of knowing, many small systems of knowing which interact with each other, such as blood and bone and tissues and skin. But there are other systems of knowing which also interact with one another to maintain a structure. Plants, water, air, these are all beings. The sun, the moon, the planets within our solar universe are beings, each made up of small systems of knowing.

What is the “labour” of all beings? Well, beginning with the human contribution to this meal, there are countless beings I could list: farmers; those who harvest crops; those who work in mills and processing plants; those who package and organize the distribution of food; truck drivers; shopkeepers and clerks; those who cook our food. And that is just listing a few of the more obvious beings who labour on our behalf.

But as I mentioned above, the word beings is not limited to the human variety. If not for the position of the sun relative to our planet, we could not grow food; the moon and other planets positioned as they are, absorb the impact of meteors that would otherwise destroy this planet. The labour of this whole solar system contributes to the gravity and atmosphere that enables life here. This is vast labour.

Then there are smaller systems of knowing, such as the worms which aerate the soil; insects whose labour contributes to the pollination of plants; the micro-organisms that are needed for fertile soil.

When we really look into who or what it is that makes this meal possible, we realize that each thing is dependant on every other thing; that each thing interpenetrates every other thing. We are looking at the Renge-zo or Lotus Matrix World which includes all beings everywhere, and so we simply say, “all beings.”

The next phrase of the first Remembrance says, “may we remember their offering.” I have always found the use of the word “may” interesting. “May”, to me, implies that nothing is guaranteed, nothing is for sure. There is the possibility of remembering that experience is rich and deep and wide, but will we? Will we remember that there is more to our experiencing than the little scraps and husks that we reduce it to? Will we make the effort to at least flash on the countless beings who contributed to this meal, to acknowledge their offering? This is where your labour and mine come in, and the labour I refer to is our practice in this moment.

The next Remembrance is, “Delusions are many, attention wanders, may we justify this offering.”

There is tremendous wisdom in these words. Delusions are many and attention does wander. How many nonsensical thoughts and feelings have we taken seriously? How many states and storylines have we identified with? How many dreadful situations have we landed ourselves in because we identified with them? Seeing this is why we chose to practice. Remember?

The view that we can take, that eating a meal is a “break”, a time to separate ourselves from reality and become self-indulgent is very strange. And these days, of course, it is not uncommon to almost completely disconnect attention from the fact of eating by reading or watching TV at the same time. Not that I am saying that there is anything wrong with doing that as such, because we can eat and read at the same time and be mindful. But very often there is no mindfulness whatsoever and the TV or book becomes simply a way of ignoring that the bodymind is eating. Food becomes a backdrop for whatever else is going on. How

strange and how out of touch with reality is that when we consider that if we did not eat we would die, that this food enables life?

So how do we justify this offering? How do we bring about something in our lives that justifies or comes forward to answer what is offered? We offer it back to all beings by practising. And we had thought it was just for us, all about us? Hahahahaha! No. Nothing is. We are each what is alive as all lives, all beings. And so is everyone else.

Speaking of things being all about us, the next Remembrance says, "Greed arises from self-cherishing, may we be free in moderation."

Self-cherishing describes the obsessiveness of self-image. Self-image sees everything in terms of "me-me-me". This obsessiveness will often express itself in the habitual ways we choose foods, prepare them and our eating habits. For instance, what we might call exercising our "freedom to choose" by eating absurd amounts of food at one sitting is obsessiveness; it is being bound by the habits and patterns of self-image. To be free in moderation means to be free of obsessiveness. It means choosing wisely and taking only as much as is needed. But this teaching, as with all of the Five Remembrances is not limited to food, of course. It applies to everything that we do.

The Fourth Remembrance is, "This offering sustains us, gives us strength, may we be grateful". This Remembrance reminds us that this food is the offering of the labour of all beings, that it arises through the activity of numberless beings throughout the ten directions. The gratitude that is spoken of here is not just some feeling of collapse. Very often, when we are in a situation in which we think or are told that we should be grateful, we might pay lip service to the word, without really knowing why we should be. It seems that being grateful is the "right" thing to do, and so we will pump up a feeling tone that we think is a close facsimile but resembles something more like, "Yeah, right. Grateful. Check. Anything that smacks of that of course should be noted and practised with, not in order to "make" ourselves feel grateful, but simply because regardless of whether it is about food or anything else, it is an obviously distasteful attitude.

In the context of the chant, "may we be grateful" does not mean feeling a certain way. If we were paying attention to the previous four Remembrances, applying the Teachings in this moment, then there is a direct and simple acknowledgment of what we have been given.

And this leads directly to the last of the Five Remembrances: "We use this strength and attain the Way." We can eat and eat and eat until we explode. And for all of the actual purpose that we might live our lives with, that had might as well be all that happens. We live, we eat and shit and die and everyone forgets about us because they are all busy doing their own eating and shitting until they die.

Or we could use our lives, use each moment, use the energy that we are offered by each meal and each spoonful and each grain of rice to attain the Way. Roshi has spoken of this as "living on purpose." The purpose that Zen offers us is to question into and realize who we are and what each grain of rice is.

The last line of the meal chant is "Prajnaparamita." This is the summation of the whole chant, and is a dedication to all beings, everywhere. Roshi once defined Prajnaparamita in this way:

'Prajna' is the Sanskrit word for what would be 'Hannya' or 'E' or 'Chie' in Japanese. It means Wisdom or Perfect Knowing. 'Jna' means 'knowing' and 'pra' means 'higher' or 'transcendent'. In Zen it is used to

mean Awakening. In the Zen Community it is often translated as 'radical insight' or 'perfect knowing' because it is the direct experience of the Awakened nature and so shatters the terms and reference points of self-image.

'Paramita' is the Sanskrit word for what would be 'Haramitta' or 'Haramitsu' in Japanese. It means perfection; activity arising out of realization of emptiness. Inherent transcendence. In particular, 'The Six Paramitas' (ropparamitsu): generosity or recognizing the fundamental richness of experience (dana, dan, fuse); integrity or living with not-knowing (sila, jikai); patience or the flexibility of not jumping to conclusions (ksanti, ninniku); energy or the limitless uncontrived exertion of experiences (virya, shojin); the practice of inherent freedom through continuous questioning (dhyana, zenjo); perfect knowing or Awake Awareness becoming itself as it is (prajna, hannya).

There is more information about this in the teisho series entitled "The Pathless Path."

Students practising at Dainen-ji or its branch centres and public students practising in other parts of the world can recite the meal chant before each meal just as monastics do. If you are by yourself, you can bring your hands together, palm-to-palm in whole-bodily mindfulness and recite the chant through before beginning to eat. If you are with others, recite it silently. Years ago, when Roshi would eat at a restaurant with someone, he showed us that by just taking our time while picking up a napkin or arranging cutlery we could silently review and recite the Gokan-no-ge before eating without anything standing out to others as unusual. When sitting a retreat, attending a Dharma Assembly or at other formal occasions when meals are served, the chant should be recited twice without including the last line, "Prajnaparamita" and on the third recitation, include it. When eating a snack which does not constitute a meal, you can simply say "Prajnaparamita" while flashing on the meaning of the chant before beginning to eat.

For those monastics training in the Office of the Tenzo, under Roshi's direction, the Go-kan-no-ge has great significance. In his translation of the Tenzo kyokun by Eihei Dogen zenji, it says:

The Zen Monastic Standards states, "The monastic community is the most excellent of all things because those who live thus live beyond the narrowness of social fabrications."

Not only do we have the fortune of being born as human beings but also of being able to cook meals to be offered to the Three Jewels. We should rejoice and be grateful for this.

We can also reflect on how our lives would be were we to have been born in the realms of hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, or jealous gods. How difficult our lives would be in those four situations or if we had been born in any of the eight adverse conditions. We would not then be able to practice together with the strength of a monastic community even should it occur to us to aspire to it, let alone be able to offer food to the Three Jewels with our own hands. Instead our bodies and minds would be bound within the limits of those circumstances, merely vessels of contraction.

This life we live is a life of rejoicing, this body a body of joy which can be used to present offerings to the Three Jewels. It arises through the merits of eons and using it thus its merit extends endlessly. I hope that you will work and cook in this way, using this body which is the fruition of thousands of lifetimes and births to create limitless benefit for numberless beings. To understand this opportunity is a joyous heart because even if you had been born a ruler of the world the merit of your actions would merely disperse

like foam, like sparks.

A “motherly heart” is a heart which maintains the Three Jewels as a parent cares for a child. A parent raises a child with deep love, regardless of poverty or difficulties. Their hearts cannot be understood by another; only a parent can understand it. A parent protects their child from heat or cold before worrying about whether they themselves are hot or cold. This kind of care can only be understood by those who have given rise to it and realized only by those who practice it. This, brought to its fullest, is how you must care for water and rice, as though they were your own children.

The Great Master Sakyamuni offered to us the final twenty years of his own lifetime to protect us through these days of decline. What is this other than the exertion of this “parental heart”? The Thus Come One did not do this hoping to get something out of it but sheerly out of munificence.

“Vast heart” is like a great expanse of ocean or a towering mountain. It views everything from the most inclusive and broadest perspective. This vast heart does not regard a gram as too light nor five kilos as too heavy. It does not follow the sounds of spring or try to nest in a spring garden; it does not darken with the colours of autumn. See the changes of the seasons as all one movement, understand light and heavy in relation to each other within a view which includes both. When you write or study the character “vast,” this is how you should understand its meaning.

If the tenzo at Jiashan had not thus studied the word “vast,” he could not have woken up Elder Fu by laughing at him. If Zen master Guishan had not understood the word “vast,” he would not have blown on dead firewood three times. If the monk Dongshan had not understood the word “vast,” he could not have taught the monk through his expression, “Three pounds of flax.”

All of these and other great masters through the ages have studied the meaning of “vast” or “great” not only through the word for it but through all of the events and activities of their lives. Thus they lived as a great shout of freedom through presenting the Great Matter, penetrating the Great Question, training great disciples and in this way bringing it all forth to us.

The abbot, senior officers and staff, and all monks should always maintain these three hearts or understandings.

Interestingly enough, a question about Zen practice that I am often asked by beginning students is, “Is there any feeling in Zen?” This is because they are worried that practising Zen might make them cold and indifferent. Hahahaha.

As pointed out by Eihei Dogen zenji, food is chosen, prepared, and served with great care. He uses the metaphor of parent and child to emphasize the degree of care. I personally don’t much care for that metaphor because when one is really practising, the kind of care, intimacy, attention to detail and willingness to practice whole-heartedly far surpasses familial relationships which I can say as someone who is not only a Zen monk and a Teacher but has also been a daughter, a sister, and a mother. At the same time, I can understand why he used it. We simply do not have any models for practice that are accurate. Words can never be what experiencing is.

But they can point us to pay attention to what is going on here. I remember what Roshi said when instructing

me in oryoki, the practice of using the traditional set of nested bowls and cloths that we use in sesshin. He said that when he lifts up the bowl and chants "This meal arises from the labour of all beings..." his heart breaks. And that after many years of doing this I would know what he meant. And now I do.

Another chant we recite, the Fukanzazengi, says that we have the treasure of this body and birth. It is here for an instant and vanished in a moment.

I say that if we want to feel that we have truly lived before we die, we must open attention to each moment of experiencing and remember Reality. The taste of practice, the taste of food, these are not different from each other. In tasting food, we taste Awareness in itself. We Wake Up and take the next bite.

Have a good morning.