

Snake's Head Soup

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
Dainen-ji, May 4th, 2006



A monk was the tenzo for a small monastery somewhere, sometime, probably in many different countries, as the story has been around for a long, long, time. The tenzo was cutting greens in the garden for the monastery's meal and in the course of doing that, without noticing, sliced the head off a snake. Without noticing, it got cleaned along with the greens and went into the soup pot.

Service time came and the tenzo, who was serving, as it was a small monastery, ladled soup into the abbot's bowl. The abbot looked at it, lifted the bowl to his mouth, took his hashi and lifted out the snake's head and held it up. And you can imagine what thoughts you might have had in that moment had that been you.

But fortunately a tenzo is a monk whose practice is mature and commitment to the way profound. So the monk took his own hashi, took the snake's head from the abbot and ate it. Crunched his way through the little head bones, the skin, the eyes and the little teeth. Slowly, (gulp), and went on with the necessary duties.

A long time later - we'll never know how long because we don't know how old this story is - I was walking with the Sensei. I was a new monk. We were walking in this very neighbourhood of Dainen-ji. I started talking about the beautiful houses and how since where we were at the time was so small, we better be looking for a larger place to establish a temple. I really got carried away with it. I had the temple filled with people. We were just walking down the street. People from all over the world were flying in. When finally I had to stop to take a breath, the Roshi (Sensei at the time) said, "A long time ago there was a monk who was the tenzo in a small monastery and he was in the garden preparing greens, cutting greens for the monastery soup and he cut the head off a snake without noticing and it was served up in the soup. The abbot lifted the snake's head out of the soup. The tenzo looked at it, very quickly took the snake's head and ate it."

Well, at that point, I really wasn't quite sure what was going on. I knew that I had been stopped dead in my tracks. I didn't have, since I was a new monk and a new practitioner, I really didn't have a depth of

understanding of teaching Zen, how one went about being a Zen Teacher and doing what a Zen Teacher does. But it stopped me and I could see very clearly reactivity to this story. I could see all the stories I had in readiness to explain why it was perfectly appropriate for me, while walking with the Teacher, to take up all the air time. Now this is not something that's exclusive to myself nor was it exclusive to any of the goodness knows how many thousands of people who might have heard the story of the snake's head. The snake's head story is really talking about sila paramita, discipline, the willingness to learn, and you will find, as you practice, that your understanding of what words mean, will change. So sila paramita is attempting to deal with things as they are in a very straight-forward way, cutting through the sense of struggle, cutting through the sense of drama and melodrama that is the basic of usual mind. Trying to come to some sort of straight-forward relationship with things as they are.

We're not used to looking at how things are. When we come to practice, we really don't have a clue. We think practice is all about 'me' - 'me' becoming a nicer person, 'me' becoming a calmer person, 'me' becoming a wiser, all-knowing person. We busy ourselves with propagation of all these different views of self-image and when we come to practice, we're lucky, because we have a chance to see more and more clearly all the ways that we confuse ourselves. Our name is called for daisan or a practice interview and immediately the spinster gets into it, starts spinning the story: what it will say, how it will make itself look great, how it's going to bitch and whine, how its really going tell that "you know what" off or how great it is to be here, how really wonderful, how very, very, grateful I am and then you get, "Ya, O.k. How's your practice?" and there may be whole other stream of thoughts that come up, "cold, heartless"...(O-sensei chuckles) We've heard them all! (laughter from O-sensei and Sangha) Those are mild!

But our job and the job of the Lineage is not to help you propagate your silly little stories about what's going on. The universe is not about you, You are not at the centre of it. None of us is. So in order to see this more and more clearly so that we are able to practice with the contractions of self-image and before that just to see thoughts as thoughts, we need to have tools - ways of reminding students that what they are here to do is to practice. "Snake's Head" was a powerful image and reminder for me and it's still present. Very useful.

Zen stories are instruction and they are useful and they do open up layers as your practice matures. You start to understand more and more clearly the process of perception and cognition. Interactions happen. And usually when (and by usually, I mean the usual mind - the mind that is not practicing- ordinary mind is how we refer to the mind that is practicing) usual mind is that which has been conditioned to believe that it is a "self" and the centre of everything and it's talking to itself constantly, discursiveness. Reminders to practise are necessary. Sometimes we actually see in that very moment what's going on. We may not see it the next time. A bunch of views about what's going on seem to grab us and bury us, but the persistence of the lineage, the Teachers and the practice advisors, will help you see your stories.

Now you might go through a period where you'll see stories or have something pointed out to you and immediately there'll be justifications. So many explanations as to why such and such a thing happened, which is of course all a crock because that in itself is another view of what happened. Now I'm not saying that if a Teacher or a practice advisor says to you, "Well, what happened?" that you can't answer. Sometimes, we need to know why the door was left open, why there's no such and such in the cupboard when we go to get it, because we need to find out what's going on so we can solve a practical problem.

But what happened that I got so carried away on that fine day walking in Sandy Hill with the Teacher? I got so carried away that I actually forgot he was even there! It was all about 'me'. This is what happens! Self-

image does that. It gets so concerned with its own little pile of treasures and its own sheer wonderfulness that it can take something shocking or surprising to wake us up for a moment so we can actually see that we're not any of those thoughts. We don't have to fill the space. Space does not need to be filled because it's not empty. Space is full of seeing and hearing and tasting and touching and feeling and smelling and colours and forms and sounds and a little bit of sweat running down your back and perhaps a sneeze. There's always a myriad of dharmas or moments of experiencing occurring. Most of the time we don't notice them because we funnel down into a story about something - we focus in on a story of some sort.

So the job of the Lineage is to remind you of what you're doing. To remind you that there is only this moment. This is what you are learning to look into and you are developing the discipline, the willingness to learn and are very sincere about it. Sincerity simply means showing up time after time after time, no matter what reactivities have occurred as a result of what may have been said or done, that may have 'insulted', 'humiliated', 'angered', 'pissed off', - um - I could go on, but I won't. You get my drift, don't you?

We go off like fireworks until we start to understand that practice is not personal. Practice is not about propagating that which you think is your personality. Practice is seeing and helping you, by what ever means, to see that you are none of those thoughts and feelings and the contractions and stories of self-image that you've whipped together, woven together, into a pretty tawdry and ill-fitting suit. That's why we feel uncomfortable a lot of the time because we are moving through experiencing tightly bound up with a sense of who we are and what we know and we can feel threatened when we know that we've been seen. Now we can see it. Our job is to teach you to see it.

So there are a myriad of Zen stories. All around the monastery there are reminders that point to your practice: the ikebana on the shelf - you see it, you are reminded to stand up straight, feel the breath, open the peripheral vision, see the seeing, "see" the hearing, the colours, the forms, the sounds. See the contraction into self-image into a sense of self for what it is. Practice there and release it. Bodhidharma's scowl, those big round eyes peering at you, remind you that what you're here to do is to look into the actual nature of experiencing; the process of perception and cognition.

The Roshi has said in "Paramita: The Pathless Path" that usual mind is based on flowing outwards. Our opinions and judgments spilling outwards so that we see this and we see that and something repels us or something attracts us; typical "centre of the universe" stuff. There's a hackneyed old joke, "enough about me - now what do you think about me?" Often this is the approach that we will carry with us into daisan and it can be a little unsettling perhaps when you get the kind of, what may seem to be or what can be described as a blankness looking back at you, not going to play your game. And that Teacher, that practice advisor knows what's going on. Why? Because you are a human being - each one of you are human beings- the Teachers, the practice advisors, the Lineage are all human beings. The process of perception and cognition, the process of being a human being, is the same for every human being who has ever walked on the face of the planet.

Our content may vary slightly, the metaphors we use to express ourselves may vary, but this process of contraction into an image of a self is a universal, so give it up, o.k.? When you see yourself wanting to fill up space with a lot of stories about why you are the way you are and, of course, it's always a justification which will polish up the sterling character that you know that you are and that you want to present to us and the world. We've all done it. Our job is to help you see how that happens.

Now, we could do a forensic investigation of the poor tenzo and the situation in the small monastery, but why bother? We don't need to do that. So, the person wasn't paying attention, as much attention — they weren't being as mindful as they could be when they were actually cutting the greens. Hey, who hasn't forgotten something somewhere at some time? That's what happens and because the practice of that tenzo was mature, was based in sila paramita, the willingness to learn and discipline, he did the only thing possible - ate the snake's head. So no matter in what form those snakes or situations or reactivities present themselves, they are there and you can see them and you can practice with them... so,.. eat it!

Thank you for listening.