

Standing in the Rain (Tangaryo)

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Zazen-ji, December 15th, 1988

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Good evening. This is the evening of Thursday, December 15th, 1988; nine years to the day, after the cremation of my teacher, the Ven. Yasuda Joshu roshi. Tonight, I would like to pick up where I left off from Tuesday evening's teisho.

After I dried the cold rain from my hair I was given some soup. It was quite late at night at this point, and so I was instructed to roll out my sleeping bag and sleep in the pantry just off the kitchen. I washed up my bowl after Joshu roshi and the tenzo had left, rolled out my sleeping bag, and laid down to go to sleep. I was quite excited thinking, "This is it... this is it".

Around 4:00 am the head monk woke me up. He told me it was time for me to sit tangaryo. Tangaryo is a tradition, a custom from the "old country". When a monk came to a monastery and requested that he be allowed to stay there and study, he would sit for several hours or perhaps a whole day, kneeling on the steps of the monastery, with his sack by his side. He would be repeatedly told to go away, that there was no room for him. If he persisted, he would, at the end of the day, be invited in, given something to eat, and told that he would be allowed to stay overnight, but overnight only. In the morning, he might be chased out to wait again on the steps, or he might be led to a small, somewhat open room, where he would sit tangaryo.

Tangaryo is sitting inside the monastery, without truly being in the monastery yet. It is a testing ground, in which the teacher and the monastery test the potential monk, and the monk tests himself. The structure is to simply sit. You can change your posture as often as you like, you can get up and do kinhin for as long as you like, but you must be sitting whenever anybody comes by to check on you. So you can sit, or you can walk according to no particular order, no particular rhythm except the one dictated by your knees, back and mind. It seems like quite an open structure but, of course, the catch is that you have to be sitting whenever anybody comes to check on you, and it can happen at any time.

Because I was not yet a monk when I came to Hakukaze-ji, I was told that I would only have to sit two days in tangaryo. I rolled up my sleeping bag, secured it to the bottom frame of my knapsack and sat the knapsack in front of me, so that I sat facing it, as I had been instructed to do. This, too, is an important part of tangaryo. Right in front of you are your possessions. Right in front of you is the possibility of just getting up and going and not looking back. Right in front of you is the possibility of staying. If you go, go. If you stay, stay.

For the last two years I had been sitting three, four or five times a day, but I had never before sat for an entire day. The thought had crossed my mind, but only in the most romantic way; you know, sitting in that kind of painless way that only happens in our imagination. So I sat, and after a while I got up and walked, and then I sat again. After some time the head monk returned and showed me how to do oryoki. Tangaryo also provides an opportunity for the monk to learn the ways of that particular monastery, the various Shingi or modes of monastic conduct or deportment: how to walk through the doors, how to gassho and when to gassho, what an oryoki set is like, the dokusan procedures, and so on and so forth. The head monk left and I sat and I walked. I heard someone coming so I scuttled back to my zafu, staring at my knapsack. The tenzo

came and gave me some soup, some rice, some pickles. I ate and then I sat and walked some more.

I toyed in my mind for some time with questions like “what is Mu?” or “what is the Original Face?”; and this was the most amazing thing: in my practice I was aiming at the ultimate and yet here was Zen bringing me face-to-face with the relative. It’s a funny thing about Zen. It’s so uncompromising. Whatever we want, whatever our expectations are, have nothing at all to do with Zen, just as they have nothing whatsoever to do with our lives, because Zen is about our lives. If you want to search for and realise the Ultimate Nature, Zen brings you face-to-face with your sore knees, your sore mind, your strategies and your grudges, your anger and your fear. If you want to obsess about the relative, about your anger, your fear and your sore knees, Zen always forces you to try to look at the ultimate. Either way, you can’t win.

I found it so amazing that I was so thoroughly bored. I had never been so bored before in my life. I’d been bored in school, I’d been bored in church, I’d been bored at family suppers, I’d been bored sitting in my room on a Sunday afternoon, I’d been bored talking to friends, but I had never been so thoroughly bored of myself. This was amazing: I was so boring. All of the thoughts, all of the expectations, all of the fantasies, all of the fears, were so incredibly boring.

This boredom was like a heavy weight that settled and congealed around my head and shoulders, around the knapsack and the wall, around the floor, around the sounds coming and going. And so I began to be very interested in this boredom. When I did so, things began to change. The sounds of the birds ached in my belly and chest. The aching of my knees cut through the moment like something bright, something sharp. My posture was occurring in the midst of some great space. I couldn’t find any “boredom” any more. I wasn’t sure of what I could find any more, but there was the breath, there were the sounds, there was this scene, this posture. I got up and walked and there was walking. I sat down and became lost in thought, became lost in self-pity, but after a time, I remembered how boring but at the same time how interesting they were.

Practice brings us face-to-face with everything that is personal about us and then pushes us past that, into intimacy, an intimacy so vast it cannot be personal. While this is not yet realization of the ultimate, still it is far more ultimate than the relative has ever been. The Sandokai, by Sekido Kisen, says “Ultimate and relative, like a box and its lid. Ultimate and relative, like two arrows meeting in mid-air”.

The first day of tangaryo ended and the second day went much the same: boredom, difficulty, interest and joy alternating, but all of it occurring right in front of me, right within me, right there. I began to lose all of my preconceptions about practice. I no longer had what I thought I had gained in my couple of years of practice. None of it was worth anything, because there was something beyond value, something beyond any price, going on right there in that moment of practising. I couldn’t quite understand what that was, but I had begun to understand practice. A little later, of course, I would lose that understanding and gain a new understanding, and later on lose that one and gain another.

Practice reveals and opens unlimited meaning, a meaningless meaning, which is always open to going further. Practice itself is not settling into a firm posture, or settling into this breath, or settling into this moment. It is surrendering into this moment. It is the dynamic exertion of this moment itself, with no place to settle, no place to hold on to, no possibility of holding.

At the end of the second day, I was brought to have my first interview (Shokan) with Joshu roshi, in which I requested to become a student. I offered three great bows and some money I had in my savings account, and

he accepted me as a student. Right now, I cannot express my gratitude for having met such a teacher. When I told him of my experiences in tangaryo, he gave me formal instructions in zazen. When I told him about the romanticism and the boredom, he whacked me on the shoulder with the stick and said: "Yes, of course, practice is here... practice is here."

This man, my teacher, your grandfather in Dharma, was truly the only true human being I've ever met, and this is the essence of practice: becoming truly human in the midst of our various styles and strategies, which are described by the six realms: the hell realm, the ghost realm, the animal realm, and so on. Practice is to realise our humanity and in this humanity to cut through being anything at all. Then, as Dogen zenji says: "We uncover the true human body (shinjin ninka) which goes beyond the three bodies of the Buddha, beyond space and time, beyond self and other". In our practice, we work directly with our confusion, with our clarity, with our thoughts, with our feelings, with our hopes and fears, with all that makes us what we are. And we realise that it is right here, in the personal and in the relative, that the ultimate manifests and may be entered into. NOT SOME PLACE ELSE!

We discover too that what we think we know, what we assume about reality, what we assume about what seems personal and relative, is not true at all. And so, that which we hold most dear, that of which we are most afraid, is not really here at all.

Practice is a mystery beyond our understanding, just as our lives are a mystery beyond our understanding. We must practise our lives and truly enter into this mystery. We must truly understand and truly not understand. Being honest with this moment as it is, we must be honest with this seeing, this hearing, this mind and this body, and we must be honest to that which is seeing, hearing, feeling this posture, standing, sitting, lying down.

Joshu roshi slapped my shoulder harder and said: "Can you feel this? This is what practice is. That you can feel this. What is it that feels this?" he asked. Having received the Mind Seal Transmission from this teacher, Yasuda Joshu Dainen Hakukaze roshi, I have received nothing but empty hands. For this I'm most grateful. This I can never repay. I ask each of you now, in this moment, with this posture, with this breath, to actualize this Way, to practise your lives, to find that which is living. What is it that is born? What is it that dies?

Snow falls and covers the day, covers the night. Each flake is always filling the ten directions and the three times. The ten directions and the three times are always manifesting themselves as this single flake of snow. As this single breath. As this single thought. As this single bodymind. Dropping this bodymind, going beyond directions, going beyond times. Who is this, staring at the wall? Who is this, wandering into thought? Who is it that feels this, that hears this?

I thank you for your efforts. I ask you to continue these efforts, to exert yourself in your life. As long as there is breath, as long as there is a thought, as long as mind and body arise at all, practise this moment most fully, most completely. Enter again and again into your own lives, until you realise that there is no coming, no going, and no place to stay.

Please, enjoy yourselves.