Vain and Vanished

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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So, obviously you all made it through the night. Obviously you woke up this morning. Obviously you saw all of those little thoughts that came up about why it was impossible for you to come this morning. Or you saw all of those little thoughts saying what a great day it was going to be, and you may have believed them, in which case, if you did that, you have an expectation. Any time you have an expectation you could stand the risk of being sorely disappointed.

[Laughter]

Practice, as we know, is practising beyond hope and fear and expectation. Practice is practising this moment, which is your life. Your life will end. I hope that doesn't happen during the course of the Dharma Assembly, but I do hope on the other hand, that you notice birth and death moment-to-moment during this Dharma Assembly. You can notice a thought that comes up. It wants to be born, as it were. Attention feeds into it and before you know it there's a "self" sitting there who is either having a miserable time or a great time. It doesn't really matter. The sense of a self that has formed, this knot in space, has been born into a self that has certain characteristics which, in fact, you are making up. That is what we human beings seem to do. We find this moment of experience, this moment of our life, so devoid of interest that we go to great lengths to fabricate stories about who we are and what's going on. And it takes us as long as it takes to start to recognize that, that is what we are doing. That's why we practise.

Now, we have the sense of sudden enlightenment, which is recognizing that maybe we should do something with our life; perhaps we could look into it, perhaps we could practise it. And then comes the gradual practice which is a wonderful opportunity to, moment-to-moment, look into the movement of attention, to look into how you are so that who you are can be uncovered before you die.

So you have birth and death in each moment, the birth and death of dharmas, moments of experience. You can notice them. The instruction is: at the moment of noticing anything whatsoever about how you are, no matter how trivial self-image may think it is, you notice it, feel the breath, sit up straight, open the peripheral vision. What you are doing by doing nothing is allowing those knots to unravel, the knots being the patterns that have been accumulated which we use to define ourselves.

Yesterday I was at the swimming pool. I went to the pool because about a week ago I decided I was going to really practise swimming. I thought that would be fun. And I have on my little agenda that what I would like to do is learn how to dive so it makes sense to be a good swimmer before you dive, apparently.

[Laughter]

So I had sort of dabbled around with this swimming business over the years, sort of…get the nice suit on and the nice hair and go out like this [O-sensei makes sounds reminiscent of someone ineffectively paddling in water] across the pool, not wanting to get anything wet, get out, sit in the sun. So this time I thought, well, that looks like a good thing to do. It just felt right that I wanted to do this swimming business.

So I'm in the pool and I'm starting out and I am splashing and thrashing and thinking, "This is so difficult.

This is really difficult". So I do one length. I have to stop about four times going down that length to catch a breath and in the course of doing that my mouth fills up with water and so on and so on. I was thinking, "This is impossible. I will never be able to do this." So the next day I went again and I did four laps, still splashing and thrashing. Then it occurred to me that what I was doing with the thrashing around was replicating a situation when I used to swim when I was growing up.

I swam in a river that was quite narrow, that had rapids at one end and a waterfall at the other. And what happened was then, in order to get to the other side and to avoid being swept over the waterfall, you had to just paddle like crazy. There was no room for any sort of style. It was survival. So I realized I was doing the same thing in this pool. So I was bringing all of the energy of survival into this situation and actually defeating my purpose totally.

So once we got that sorted out and I then ventured into the flippers, that you put on the ends of your feet, which actually…work… I was so surprised. It became more and more smooth; I was going further and further. And I got the little yellow paddles, the plastic paddles on the hands and taking a stroke and going even further. Before I know it, I thought I was an otter and I got all the way down the length of the pool in two breaths. So yesterday I did 20 laps. It was fabulous. I just had the best time!

So then I thought about birth and death. I thought about death, I thought about "vain and vanishing". How many of our patterns do we allow to play themselves out? Here we are experiencing. We're sitting in the midst of the sky; we're breathing it in and out or it is being breathed in and out through us, through the bodymind; and we are thrashing around, kind of flailing against all our stories about what's going on. So practise, sitting down on the zafu and looking at these things, these stories that come up that cause us to contract and thrash, and learning how to open them, can open to what has been described as "great ease", the great ease of your life. So by practising, moment-to-moment while we are sitting on the zafu we are, in a way, preparing ourselves for THE great ease, kind of when we just slide out; when the bodymind ceases to breathe. This is inevitable.

Yesterday I also picked up a Yoga journal and in it there was an article entitled "The Art of Dying" . So I thought I would pick that up. And by the way, if anyone thinks we are calling this the "Zen of Dying ", let me say we are not. So "The Art of Dying" – and that caused me to think for a moment about how self-image really, really does like to think that it has a handle on everything. So we are preparing, we get busy preparing for this death, this physical death as if it is going to happen sometime in the future, a long time from now, way, way in the future. So we have lots of time to prepare for it. Well, none of us sitting here know if we are going to have another breath. So at this point we might be able to understand the urgency with which people – the Teachers of the Lineage – have spoken about the effort to put forward in one's practice: practise as if your hair were on fire.

We chanted the "Fukanzazengi: How Anyone Can Sit" and you may have noticed the words "vain for a moment and vanished in an instant ". "Vain and Vanished" is the title that I chose for this Dharma Assembly, for this mondo. So, vanished we understand, but vain, well, hold on a minute because the first thing that does pop into mind is looking in a mirror saying, "I am so cool". And we see in the poster that Roshi made up, that wonderful graphic where it's a skull for a moment, whatever attracts your eye first, and then there's a very attractive woman looking in a mirror, looking at herself in a mirror, which is just great – "Vain and Vanished" . But why settle there? So I went through my gigantic dictionary and looked into what "vain" actually means because I realized that it couldn't be just that. There was certainly more to it. And would

opening the door of meaning shift understanding? Which, of course, it does.

So “vain” means worthless, futile; comes from the Latin, “vanus”, empty of substance, vainness, empty, void, idle, and in the 1300’s the word was used to mean “devoid of real value, worth, or significance, worthless, of no effect, force or power”; then, “trivial and unimportant”. So if we used that to look into “vain and vanished”, “vain” then is a very good description of all of the manifestations of self-image. Basically worthless. The thoughts coming up about how we can or cannot do something; how we are having a good time or a bad time. We latch onto them, we feed attention into them, we construct a personality, we construct an attitude; we construct a point of view; when we do that we limit the possibility of open experiencing; that’s what we are practising moment-to-moment; seeing how we do that, feeling the breath, sitting up straight, allowing it to open. Opening to openness.

Now, think about thrashing around in the pool again, or think about some point in time when you have been thrashing around with a problem. If you were to drop dead in that moment, would that have been how you would have liked to go if you had a choice? Or would you rather smoothly watch the bodymind closing down, watch the energies of bodymind as they fall into the heart area and actually know and experience what’s going on? Well, I know what I opted for a long time ago, so here we are.

Mondo

Does anyone have any particular aspect of death or dying or this moment that they would like to talk about right now, or ask a question about? And bear in mind that this is a relatively new process for us, this mondo. It’s a traditional form of Teaching, it’s like a practice interview for a group. We haven’t done it before, so self-image will come up and it will say…

[Laughter]

…Or not say, as the case may be, but it will say and impose limitations. “I can’t”…well, none of us can, so let’s just relax. Is there anything you would like to know?

[Student]: I would like to know, if somebody in the Sangha dies, what is the procedure at the Centre? What would you do? Would you say certain chants?

[Osho]: We do have a chant that we do which can be requested. It would be done automatically, well not actually “automatically”. But we would do this. The “Komyo Shingon” is what it’s called and people who are here at Dainen-ji will often see up on the board a notice saying that so-and-so has died and that Roshi and the monastics are doing this particular chant for them. Also, if a person who was close to a practitioner dies, the “Komyo Shingon” can be requested for them. And that’s it.

[Student]: I told my husband to email the Zen Centre if I died and let them know right away.

[Osho]: Right. And the “Komyo Shingon”, this goes on, I think, for 49 days or 46?

[Chunen angya]: 49 days.

[Osho]: 49 days, yes.

The purpose of that is the recognition that this transforming that’s going on all the time and has been going

on since the first star burst, the first star exploded, is occurring again. And that for a practitioner there is a recognition that what has come from luminosity, the basic nature of reality, is disbursing into that again.

[Student: Osho, if there is nothing beyond this life, when you die you are gone, what difference does it make whether you see your going or you don't?

[Laughter]

[Osho]: Okay, that's a good question. Each thing affects everything else. That's one fact. The process of our life is our life. It is not our stories about our life. When we get caught up on any sort of story about our life, as a species there is a contraction that occurs. We've all experienced that. "Oh, I hate this, I hate this, I hate it so much" and what has happened with that – bang – there is a focusing and what is born is this being that is hating something and the natural and inevitable and unfortunately proven over and over again, end result of that, can be mass destruction, violence of some form or another, something that is basically not useful.

So the story that this little "me" is going to come back again is simply not true either. So we can take reincarnation, "back in the meat again", as simply another story, the way we usually think about it. So we talk about – what is talked about now is – "easeful" death as well. We may as well, in my view, do anything as gracefully as we possibly can and having as much enjoyment with it as we possibly can and that causes greater gentleness and ease in the long run.

There are many aspects to any of these questions that we are dealing with right now because recognize that since humans first started to talk they've come up with all kinds of schemes and very creative stories to try to explain what's going on, to try to make the randomness and chaotic nature of reality somehow containable. Experience can only be experienced. It's not any of our words about it.

So if we want to be useful, I think this is one of the things that brings everyone here to practise, is that we want to be more useful to maybe ourself – we think "I'm not having as good a time as is possible" – all of our reasons for coming to practise are actually suspect…

[Laughter]

But underneath it there is, I do believe, there is a drive to find out what's really going on so that things can be kind of fixed. In the world in general, why are these things going on? We may get this, we start to look at this, maybe at a very early age, like "what's going on?" And eventually we find ourselves in a room full of beings talking about what's going on really, and how can we open more fully to our life while we still can, which is at this point, while we are alive.

We'll have an opportunity to discuss things further, so what you can also do is, if during the course of the day, during a free period, there's something that you would like to have raised, we can do that. If during a practice interview there's something you would like to have addressed we can do that.

Anyone else have anything they would like to?

[Student]: Yes, I do.

The thrashing about that you described is for better or worse what makes it possible for us to get through a day.

[Osho]: Oh really?

[Student]: Well, going out there and getting caught in a traffic jam – is (inaudible) I'm not going to get here on time.

[Osho]: So you thrashed. Did you get here faster?

[Student]: I don't know.

[Laughter]: "I" couldn't get here at all.

[Osho]: But you caused yourself a lot of unnecessary depletion of resources, energy of bodymind, because that's what we do. It's not the thrashing about that gets us here, it's looking at reality and saying, "Well, really, there's so much traffic that me sitting in my little vehicle thrashing about is not going to hurt anybody; but it's not going to change anything, except that I'm going to get really tired and I might just ram that guy."

[Laughter]

Intention and thrashing about are sort of different things. Identifying what we want to do is great, it helps us because we don't want to just sit here in this kind of current of "going with the flow, like…" that doesn't work. The 60's proved it – "peace" and "love and going with the flow" and "being herein the moment" didn't really stop anything from happening like the World Trade Centre or the genocides that are occurring in various countries right now, so I think we can put that aside.

But looking at reality, looking at what's really going on in this moment, in your own experience, and then knowing what to do, which is; feel the breath, sit up straight, open the peripheral vision, and over time, that is embodied. So no matter what you're doing, whether it's being really sick or whether it's being terribly frustrated by doing that, you can ease the way for yourself and for others.

(Student]: Self-image tends to manipulate, to give negativity, causes us to thrash, take over the body, maybe make it sick by making it so negative, frustrated and upset. Why would self-image seek to destroy its "livelihood"?

[Osho]: Well, self-image is not a "thing" as such. We use that phrase to describe a tendency that human beings have. A thought comes up and we as the knowing, we know the thought. But we don't know that before we actually start to practise because we think we are the thoughts. Thoughts are us. That's just how it is. So we feed attention, or attention is fed into that, whatever that thought might be, whatever the subject that self-image has chosen, and we use it to define ourselves. So when we start to practise we start to see that we have choice and that we are practising that moment of choice. So there is a clear seeing, we go "Oh, yeah. This is not really going on. This thought and the content that is telling me to do something cannot do it, unless I let it". So knowing makes a choice to either follow or not follow. But the only way we can know that is by practising that.

But it certainly is a good question. Like, human beings, right, one of the things that we as a species are doing is destroying the host. No parasite in its right mind destroys the host. The idea is that we keep the host alive as long as possible so that the parasites could propagate. But I am not sure, I am not familiar with all forms of parasite but I think that we are one of the few that is doing everything we possibly can to kill the host, the

planet. That's self-image in all of its manifestations, when we get into nation states, when we get into "mine" and "thine", these kinds of separations and fighting and squabbling and thrashing about, which benefits no one, is the same movement from the broader to the narrower.

So, just sitting there you are making a choice not to follow whatever view self-image comes up with.

[Student): Osho, I regularly confuse the "I" that is making the choice – you used the language "knowing, knowing makes a choice?" and I can take that "I" as self and potentially self-image, I guess, when I use that language it means the same thing to me. Can you help me understand that a little better?

[Osho]: First of all, what we are talking about is experiencing and no way of talking about it can be that experiencing so "I", "you", these are just words that we use for convenience of communication. They're kind of a code. They don't define any thing although we have made it so that we will say "This is a striker" [O-sensei picks up gong striker] and that would be the end of it. But really, first of all it could be called all sorts of other things, names in different languages and it is a description of activity rather than an object. So in this sense, there is no such thing as objects; there's just activities that are occurring; same thing with "I" and "self"; same way with "knowing". This happens to be a larger, a vaster, a more encompassing description of what's going on rather than there being an "I" in here, which is how we tend to think about it. So we talk about "knowing". And any time anything like that comes up, feel the breath, sit up straight if you are sitting on your cushion, and let it open. And then we see the pattern. There will be a thrashing about. Practise at the moment of noticing the thrashing about and other things will make themselves apparent.

Anyone else?

[Student]: I have a question further to what you said about reincarnation, in terms of that. I've always had a little difficulty understanding what was being talked about in reincarnation, if there isn't a self.

[Osho]: Me too.

[Laughter]

[Student]: Hinduism makes a bit of sense, but when there isn't a self, what is that talking of?

[Osho]: Well, with Zen practice what we are talking about is the actual nature of experiencing. Quite simply, that's it. So even anything I say we'll get into stories about it. Anything anyone says we'll get into stories about. But I think about things like this:

DNA, now, wasn't around in the time of Dogen or in the time of Gautama Siddartha, so the idea that you could, in fact, identify someone who'd been in a particular place after they'd long gone would be quite unusual and probably someone would say "You must be mad to come up with such an idea" , but now it's been proven that that can be done. Not only that, that can be done to the point of identifying DNA from Cheshire Man, who was, I don't know how many thousands of years walking around, and his mitochondrial DNA has actually been followed to people who lived in that particular area of England, so we could say direct descendants of someone who lived thousands of years ago. Is it not possible that just as we can smell a molecule of perfume that was left a long time ago in a room, is it not possible that other information is in fact conveyed, information that may have been encoded in a molecule that someone of long ago discarded or had discarded when they were in this room? So what it means to me is that there is this process, quite simply,

there is this process of constant recycling that goes on with all of nature. And anything else, including what I say is a story or a way of looking at it or of trying to have some fun with what's going on. But we human beings do love stories and we will believe them and we will make cosmologies out of them as quickly as we possibly can because that gives us the illusion that there is something that is controllable and understandable.

Does that help at least open up a little…all we can do is open doors, "Dharma gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate." So when the thrashing comes up, and it can be about anything, and it can be looking at why does so-and-so say this, and why does so-and-so say that, and how come I don't understand? You have three thrashings there, so at that moment feel the breath, sit up straight, allow the thrashings to open up and recognize that there is some very interesting moments of experiencing available that can lead to more and more interesting moments of experiencing which will help us at least become more capable of communicating to various and sundry beings in the process of liberation of those beings.

[Student]: Yes, a story that I sometimes make up and I think it probably works with the philosophy of this group.

[Osho]: There's no philosophy. It's good to be clear – this group, the Zen students sitting in this room of which you are one, – Zen practitioners practising the bodymind in this moment. There's no philosophy involved in it. There's no belief system involved in it. It is not a religion. Okay, so what is your story?

[Student]: All right. Something that I practise, I guess, is that if I'm experiencing something or doing something and it is something, perhaps, that I have done with someone else or reminds me of someone else, be it good or bad or whatever, and that in a certain sense is the equivalent of everlasting life, so to speak, for that person, you know, me sort of bringing that up.

[Osho]: I see what you mean. Sure, yes, memory, when we have memory, when we have patterns that are triggered off, in a sense, yes. And with great works of art, with great writing and so on, what makes it great, often, is that it is a universal, it touches the core of human experience so it can live forever. It's true. Yes, that's very good.

So, anything else or would we like some kinhin?

[Osho]: So, since 9:30 this morning, hundreds and thousands of beings have been liberated; mind moments have come and gone; contractions have been opened and everybody Woke Up, right?

[Laughter]

So is there anything that you would like to talk about? Well then, put on your nose plugs, we're entering into the Ocean of Reality , so face the wall.