Wherever You Stand 14: Yoka daishi's (Yongjia) Shodoka: Song of Freedom part 3

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Previously on "Wherever You Stand"…

we looked into the verses of the "Shodoka: Song of Freedom",
which was written 1300 years ago by Yoka daishi.

Freedom from what?

Freedom from the
nagging,
bitching,
whining,
pushing,
complaining
of self-image,

those random stories of habitual patterning that,
let's face it,
do get human beings into all sorts of trouble,
not just sleeping in
but all sorts of devastation
violence
raping
killing
pillaging
blowing up,
like
rampant bad behaviour
and it is that contraction
into a sense of self
with its story about how it is
and how the world is
that is the cause of all these problems.

In the "Shodoka", Yoka daishi lays out quite clearly the history of the practice of this particular Lineage as was taught to him by his Teacher Huineng.

I'll open with a quote from Anzan Hoshin roshi:

> *You're brought face to face with the difference between the view of the Tatagathas and your own conventional view of being a lump of red flesh filled with cravings that has to struggle its way in the world*

and has to own as much as possible and has to try to fight for the respect of other lumps of meat. This is the conventional view.

The view of the Tatagathas, the Thus Come,
is the mind is complete freedom,
the mind is limitless compassion,
this moment experienced by the bodymind is
boundless wealth.

Why not pay attention?
Why not remember to practise when you notice anything at all about experiencing?
That is what you're here for.
And that is what this monastery is here for.

That's the only thing it's here for.

So sit up straight,
feel the breath,
and don't look for some special way of being which would be okay,
when you notice you're doing that
you've noticed a moment to practise:
feel the breath
feel the whole bodymind,
free yourself from
the shackles of
your own patterns.

The verse:

The six realms of existence are a dream,
in waking they are nowhere to be found.

"The six realms of existence" are describing mental states rather than places that exist outside or on some other level, although this view has been adapted and adopted by all sorts of people. You do something wrong, you might end up in a Hell Realm, but if you do something else wrong, you might end up as a Hungry Ghost. People talk about being reborn and so on, but to the best of my knowledge, there is absolutely no proof that anyone has actually been, in the conventional sense, most commonly understood sense of the word, reincarnated. No one has been put back in the meat, because we are such arrogant types that had this happened for real, it would be blabbed all over. [laughter]

So let's just not count on it.

So the first of the six realms of existence is the hell realm, and in the hell realm, oh my, depending upon what you read and where you read it from and the graphics and drawings and so on and so forth that you see, there are some representations of very unpleasant states of being.

We ourselves have experienced those states of being,
contraction into a sense of a self that has a view about how it is
and it's roasting itself on its own BBQ,
it is sautéing that belief that it has with all sorts of juices
and it's really getting a lot out of it.

But when it ceases for a moment,
or when it is seen and practised,
we can realize how fracking pointless it is
and how we are causing ourselves those problems
even though we do like to do "pointy finger" at everybody else around
and say it's their fault.

They have nothing to do with it!
It's all about you.

So we have classically, some 18 hells:
hot hells,
cold hells,
occasional hells,
neighbouring hells,
reviving hell…

Now in "reviving hell", people are tied together to fight to the death and when they are dead, a cold wind comes along and revives them so the whole thing starts all over again.
Now, when we fall prey to our states that believe that we have to fight to be someone, and take it out on everyone around us and ourselves, that's a bit like that isn't it?

So we can start to see the Wheel of Becoming is describing mental states that come and go, and if we don't see them for what they are…
(and if we do practise by feeling the breath, feeling the whole bodymind, they will wear out)…
if we don't do that,
we'll be doomed to repeat them because
they are patterned in the bodymind.

There's "black thread hell", bodies are marked with black lines and flaming torches cut along those lines and when they're all cut up—bit like a butcher shop really—when they're all cut up and in pieces, the bodies reassemble, and what happens? It starts all over again.

In the "crushing hell", crushed between mountains or metal plates…

There are other hells;
the "hot hells": burnt with molten metal, pierced with spikes—(sounds so religious).

the "cold hell": blisters form, chattering teeth, skin splitting open—oh my: Ottawa!! [laughter]

Then there are the delusions in the "neighbourly hell".

When these are laid out graphically, graphic depictions of these realms, the “neighbouring realms” which we must pass through on our way out; a pit of hot embers appears to be a shady trench, a swamp full of corpses appears to be a cool river, a pleasant meadow is really a plane of razors, a protective grove of trees is really a forest of swords.

People always have been quite inventive in their storytelling, haven’t they?
And the interesting thing about these stories, they can become more predominant, they turn very quickly into belief systems, so then any question or possibility of practice is out the door. We live in a world of delusion, stories abound…

So first of all,
see your own
feel the breath,
feel the whole bodymind,
actually do the practice.

The next realm is the realm of the hungry ghosts, strange and pathetic creatures consumed with hunger and thirst. And remember, these are descriptions of states that any human being can pass through in the course of a day, in the course of an hour, we’ve seen that flipping back and forth and it’s nice to recognize that this has been recognized and described for thousands of years.

There are three types of hungry ghosts, those with external obstacles, those with internal obstacles, and those with specific obstacles. The external obstacles: they can never find food and drink they seek. They don’t hear the news of food and drink for centuries, when finally they do hear it and get to where the food and drink is supposed to be, it’s taken them such a long time because they’re so fragile, that it’s all dried up.

“Nothing ever goes my way.”

“I can never get what I want.”

“Everybody else is there first…”

Sound familiar?

… No of course not… [laughter]

Or, another external obstacle: we see an abundance of food and drink BUT as we, no no no, as THEY approach, (archly-this has nothing to do with us), as THEY approach, they’re attacked by men with weapons. Everything is agony for the hungry ghosts. If a traveller comes near them, they produce a fire in the traveller, so beware of hungry ghosts.

Ghosts with internal obstacles have gigantic bellies, their necks are thin as a hair, they have mouths no bigger than the eye of a needle. If they find water, by the time it gets down their teeny tiny throats, the heat of their body has evaporated it. They can’t force enough food down and if they do force some down that thin as a hair neck, it bursts into flame. These hungry ghosts can hardly move their bellies are so huge and their limbs are like grass.

Specific obstacles… and there’s a variety of stories around these, so I’ll just briefly get into one…

Four ghosts were chained to the legs of a throne which belonged to a, of course, beautiful woman. A traveller came along, she offered him food and said: “Don’t give any to these people chained to my chair” and then she went off to do whatever she was going to do, maybe nails or hair or who knows? The ghosts begged. One ghost was in such straits that any food that he ate turned to chaff, another, food would turn into a lump of iron, the third, food would turn into a lump of flesh, the fourth, food would turn into pus mixed with blood.

The traveller felt sorry for them so of course gave them some food,
and it happened…

The woman came back: “What are you doing? These were people I knew in my past life, they’re all here because of their stinginess and greed. Number one was my husband. I was giving food to one of the Buddha’s disciples, a monk, and I thought my husband would like to share in the opportunity. My husband yelled: ‘What are you doing offering food to a worthless monk? You should save it. Stuff his mouth with chaff.’

“Number two was my son. He agreed with my husband. ‘You shouldn’t give that bald-headed old man anything, shouldn’t give him any food, just stuff his mouth with a lump of iron.’ Look what happened to him.

“Later, my parents sent some delicacies for me to eat. My daughter-in-law ate the best parts and then lied to me, saying: ‘I’d rather eat a lump of flesh than eat something meant for you.’ so there she is, chained to the chair leg, doomed to eat lumps of flesh.”

(You have to be careful what you wish for.)

“Number four was my servant who ate a meal that I was sending to my family and when I questioned her said: ‘I would rather eat pus and blood than steal from you.’ Fourth leg of the chair.”

“Why are you there?” the traveller asked the woman.

She said: “I vowed to be reborn where I could see what fate awaited these four as a result of their actions.”

Now that seems to be to be just nasty. I cannot for the life of me see her as some sort of heroic character.

So people who were selfish and greedy and feverish and passionate and desperately unsatisfied would end up in the realm of the hungry ghosts, but we can use this to recognize when these states come up in ourselves.

The next realm depicted, and this is a touchy one, is the animal or beast realm, which overlaps with the human realm, definitely far more now as we know more about other species, 13, 1400 years later than when these were originally written. The animals or beasts, driven by instinct, simple physical needs, base emotions like fear, aggression, and sex.

Now, the human animal has written about the world in such a way that it makes itself superior and more intelligent than any of the other species and we know that’s just not true. Anyway, that’s an aside.

In the archetypical animal realm, the beasts must always worry about being eaten or catching some other animal to eat. They can also get caught and enslaved by humans.

Aside: we’re really good at enslaving other humans and anything else that can come in contact with us, so

when we see those tendencies in ourselves, tendency to want to enslave, to want to by whatever means bend others to what we think is the right thing, we've recognized a moment when we can practise.

So in the animal or beast realm, the being is caught in a cycle of basic instinctual self-maintenance and there's no choice because they're at the mercy of their needs.

Next we have the human realm, a mixed bag; some aspects of the other realms, and this is the traditional way of viewing it as something external, these are like little lands we go to, but in our understanding of it these are descriptions of how we are moment to moment, how we can recognize different states. They're like signposts. They're like maps to help us practise with our own bullshit, the stuff that enslaves us, helps us see the way we wrap our hands around our own neck, put pressure on it and wonder why we're not feeling so good.

Recognize anything:
you don't even have to think about it,
there's this moment of recognition,
feel the breath
feel the whole bodymind.

So human realms are a mixed bag carrying with them some aspects of all the other realms as described:
bliss,
delight,
sorrow at losing pleasure,
jealousy,
ignorance,
aggression,
hatred,
anger,
greed,
stinginess,
generosity,
love,
equanimity,
wisdom,
patience,
satisfaction,

and that can happen [O-sensei snaps fingers]

really quickly,
just see it,
it's not a defining factor,
it's not who you are
unless you let it be so.

There is said to be eight—I love the lists, as you know, the eight of this, the 2009 of that, the 64,000… but

anyway, somebody said “I think I’m going to make a list, that will make it easier for people to understand.”

There is said to be eight unique kinds of human suffering:
birth
any beginning of anything which is often marked by awkwardness and stress
old age
illness
death
being separated from loved ones
meeting those not dear to us
having to guard our possessions.

The human realm is also said to be one of the most fortunate to be born in.

Why?

Because the human realm gives you a chance to get off the Wheel.

So here we are,
all sitting in this Hatto,
to the best of our knowledge fully human,
and
with the capacity to recognize knows or dharma,
moments of experience,
and at the moment of noticing
to practise,
to feel the breath
to feel the whole bodymind,
to get off the Wheel of Becoming.

This is not giving up self-determination,
it’s not giving up “free will”,
what it is
is completely releasing any tendencies, habits, or patterns
that get in our own way
causing us discomfort
to a greater or lesser degree
and perhaps pissing off people around.

It’s a good thing.

So practise.

The next realm is the realm of the asuras or jealous gods. They’re jealous. They’re suspicious of each other. It’s almost as good as the heaven realm, but not quite.

The realm of the jealous gods has beings that value justice, wisdom, and faith, but they desire to be superior

to others. A wish-fulfilling tree grows in the asura land, but it grows so tall that it only bears fruit in the heaven realm for the devas. Beings are born in this realm when they live a life of devotion as a priest, monk, nun, or lay practitioner, while secretly harbouring hatred and jealousy. Or, they live a fairly virtuous life but with a propensity for envy, fighting, ambition, and corruption.

Then, the deva or heaven realm. Devas live for countless ages, according to some descriptions. They're seven times larger than humans, their bodies shine with a brilliant light (probably you can read by them). Everything around them stays fresh and beautiful. Some reign over celestial kingdoms, most live in delightful happiness and splendour. Devas have a mastery of desire, control of themselves, joy, and contentment. They experience progressively deeper states of (air quotes) "meditation". But beware, they haven't yet attained liberation, they still have a concept of self, and self is saying "things are good, I don't have to practise because I'm feeling kind of a contentment, I don't have to practise because I know better than anybody else what's going on."

But the merit that they may have gained from past deeds wears out, understanding that they had acquired wears out and disappears. They begin to descend from the heaven realm, the clothes they were wearing which in the heaven realm never got dirty, never had to be cleaned, start to get dirty. They start to smell, they're engulfed with sorrow because they're losing heaven.

What to do?

Well, as I hope I've made clear, these descriptions are just descriptions of states that people can get into. They've been embellished. There are lots of stories. I hope in a way I've piqued a little interest in you so that you can yourself read about and track down different depictions and look at the art work that this has generated. It's really interesting.

What can you do?

When you notice anything about experiencing,
anything whatsoever,
practise mindfulness of breath and bodymind
in this moment.

Wake up!
See the delusion of "self" and "other".
See the delusion of stories.

> *No error, no happiness, no loss, no gain;*
> *you won't find these in the Actual Nature.*

Why won't you find these in the Actual Nature? Because they don't exist as things. They are descriptions of moments of experience. They are descriptions. These is a difference between the dharma and a description of same.

The Actual Nature or True Nature or First Nature is the Reality of the experiencing of the bodymind, not the stories about it.

I'll end with a quote from "Begin Here: Five Styles of Zen" by Anzan Hoshin roshi:

> *Experiences and states arise freely as the activity of primordial Awareness itself. Awareness is effulgent with forms but is always formless. Nothing that arises, dwells or decays can, in itself, invite or provoke any confusion, or separation, or identification. In shikantaza, all worlds and all beings are always sitting as their own True Natures.*

The two verses looked at today:

> *The six realms of existence are a dream,*
> *in waking they are nowhere to be found.*
>
> *No error, no happiness, no loss, no gain;*
> *you won't find these in the Actual Nature.*

Thank you for listening.