

Wherever You Stand 15: Yoka daishi's (Yongjia) Shodoka: Song of Freedom part 4

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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Here we sit,
in and as the evidence of life,
around us...
birds tweeting,
setting up their little estates,
building their little families.

In the corner of the Hatto the pussy willows are sending out leaves and if we planted them in the ground,
they would over time turn into trees.

The persistence of life.
Hair growing,
insides digesting breakfast,
it's truly amazing
the Magic of Reality.

Last time in "Wherever You Stand", we took a little romp through the six realms: hell, hungry ghosts, animal, human, jealous gods, and devas. That was a lot of fun, I hope, maybe some of you might have had memories of that when you were going about your day to day business, seeing thoughts and feelings and states and situations arise, because that's what this is all for, it's so that you can open more and more to the richness of Reality.

The "Shodoka", by Yoka daishi, Master of Enlightenment Attained in One Night.

[in a whiny voice:] "Oh I wish that would happen for me..."

[laughter]

Little thoughts come and go,
not a problem,
they're the manure for
the fruit of your gradually maturing practice.

So as soon as you notice anything at all,
feel the breath,
feel the whole bodymind.

The next verse:

*Having given up wiping dust from the mirror,
its brilliance is completely seen.*

Bear in mind: Yoka daishi received transmission from Huineng. They were alive at the same time, both died in 713. So Huineng, as you remember, wrote in response to Shenxiu's verse:

*The body is like a bodhi tree, the mind like a clear standing mirror.
Wipe it carefully again and again, never letting dust alight.*

Then Huineng the illiterate had someone write on the wall for him:

*Enlightenment is not a tree and the clear mirror has no stand.
Right from the beginning there is not one thing; where can dust alight?*

So, different points of view, different understandings of the metaphor, the metaphor of wiping dust from the mirror occurs again and we can picture how it was that Yoka daishi, having recognized the truth of the Teachings as transmitted by Huineng, was able to and wanted to write a song, the "Song of Freedom", containing in it what he considered to be the most valuable points of practice.

Now one interpretation of the verse is that wiping dust from the mirror means to have polished the mirror, or polished Awareness so thoroughly, means to see things as they really are.

Suchness,
tatagatha,
the growing realization
or understanding
and practice of what you really are:
Knowing,
Experiencing,
or Awareness itself.

As Anzan roshi said in his presentation on the "Shodoka", which took place in 1988 during the January sesshin:

It means to see what you actually see, to hear what you actually hear in the same way that if you hold up a flower before a mirror it shows the flower, if you hold up an empty hand, it shows an empty hand, hold up two hands and spread the fingers, the mirror shows all of this without hesitation, without adding anything of its own and without being stained by what it shows.

So Awareness is the only condition,
all that arises as the display of Awareness,

you're using all that is,
anything that is noticed by you as
the Knowing of the knowns,
to practise with,

polishing the mirror

until there's nothing left.

Opinions arise,
thoughts arise,
states arise,
they're not a problem,
opinions and thoughts are not a problem,
sometimes they can be kind of useful,
sometimes they can be kind of interesting,
sometimes they can propel us into projects to express something about our understanding of experiencing
that we think is worthwhile,
so they're not the problems,
they're things that people do,
bodyminds do this.

Problems are when patterns occur,
which means certain ideas,
certain thoughts,
certain states
come,
they arise in Awareness again and again,
and we fall for them,
we are convinced that they are descriptions
of who we are in that moment,
rather than just being dust on the mirror.

You know what to do:
use the breath,
what do you do with dust on the mirror with the breath?

[O-sensei blows out sharply as though blowing away dust]

Gone.

So you're feeling the breath in the bodymind,
you're feeling the whole bodymind,
and remember this is information that has been passed down through generations
of students and Teachers.

I find it really easy to understand why Yoka daishi decided to write the "Shodoka".
You think: "Okay, this is good stuff, this is important, this is literally vital, this is information that everyone
should have..."

because there are a lot of byways around,
there are a lot of instances of people taking a little bit of what's spoken of,
a little bit of Reality and making a whole meal out of it,

so people spend lots of time,
they put lots of resources into something that just further enslaves them,
rather than recognizing the simplicity of actual freedom,
the simplicity of being free in this moment,
no matter where you are,
even in prison.

The next verse:

*Who is it that thinks of
not-thinking and non-existence?
The Unborn is realized
within the born.*

Now sometimes when we first read something like this, what happens? Our brains can curdle. [laughter]

“Oh no...”

And if we're the type that can become so compressed that juices are squeezed from our eyes, that can happen too.

We might put a label on it of “frustration”, whatever, no problem.
As soon as you notice anything,
feel the breath,
feel the whole bodymind.

Now, let's just say it's impossible to think of not thinking.
Self-evident!
In order to think of not thinking,
you have to think,
so I'll say it another way:
It's impossible to think of not thinking without thinking.

Three opportunities right there as thoughts come up to notice them as thoughts regardless of the content,
and feel the breath, feel the whole bodymind.

We can spend time thinking about how great it will be when
we're not thinking.
We can come up with lots of ways
and lots of plans
and lots of concepts about what
it's going to be like
when
we're not thinking,

and eventually it will occur to us that that is a moment to practise,
so we do it,

then we do it again,
and after we've congratulated ourselves, perhaps,
we do it again,
and we start to understand what is being spoken of.

Roshi spoke, again during a teisho in the January 1988 sesshin, about this verse in the "Shodoka":

Suppressing thoughts and feelings, wrapping ourselves up in a shroud of holiness, none of this has anything to do with true practice. The unborn is realized within the born. The moment of awakening to the Tatagatha's Zen is this moment, this sound.

That's how it is right now, and that's how it has always been.

Simple:

when you notice anything—
and I'm coming to the conclusion that I'm sure I've expressed to some of you—
that "anything"
seems to be amongst the most difficult words for us to understand.

We think that "anything" might mean
things that we think are moments to practise,
things that we don't like and so therefore will practise,
and that we have to sort through experiencing,
putting them into little bags:
practise with this one,
not necessary with this one,
this one's cool, I'll put it over here...

[laughter]

Anything means ANYTHING,
not just a thought,
not just a feeling,
the sound of whatever engine that was,
the sound of the sputtering of a candle,
the air on your head from the fans,
the birds,
noticing the pussy willows growing in the corner as you walk by in kinhin,
ANY moment of noticing anything at all.

How simple is that?

It's simple but it's not easy,
and we learn over time how
we can practise more and more completely
with in fact
less and less
struggle.

The next verse:

*Can a wooden puppet attain Buddhahood
by its practice of not-thinking?*

Duh! [laughter]

But, sitting like a wooden puppet can mean sitting holding thoughts at bay, with a very rigid posture, and going along with that rigid posture, very rigid ideas about what you are doing. Or sitting very rigid and holding, trying to hold thoughts away so that you don't slip into them. That's not practice.

Setting ourselves up to exist in some sort of blank space
is not practice.

Sitting and ruminating
and chewing at our cheeks
as we go over our ideas about what practice is
is not practice...

...but when noticed,
it is a golden opportunity
to practise.

The reality is,
thoughts come and go,
regardless of the content,
we can practise with them.

See them,
practise at the moment of noticing
things as they are.

It does take bravery and honesty,
it does take ruthlessness sometimes,
sometimes it takes gentleness
but do what it takes to actually open fully and completely
to who you are in
THIS moment.

The next verse:

*Without grasping at the four elements of this body,
drink and eat aligned with the Actual Nature.*

Now. The four elements:
earth,

water,
fire,
and
air,
referred to as the mahabhuta.

Apparently the earliest Buddhist texts explained that the four elements were taught as the four sensory qualities, originally:

solidity,
fluidity,
temperature,
and
mobility.

So we can see where the Buddha, who is attributed to have taught these, but there's no actual written records, taught them so that people could learn to notice more about experiencing,

notice the bodymind,
feel the flowing of energy,
feel the flowing of blood,
of the juices in the bodymind,
notice temperature,
notice how things move as you sit,
as you breathe,
as you do kinhin.

But of course then it turns into something else over time and the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air have come up in almost every culture. Hindu culture, medieval culture, the field of alchemy, people getting busy to see if they could take these elements and mix them in a certain way to produce, in the case of alchemy, gold, precious metals. So they became a source of study in Greece, in Babylonia, in Egypt...

Now apparently the Buddha's teaching of the four elements predates that of the Greeks and some say, or rumour has it that the Buddha sent out some 60 arhats to scatter and teach the Dharma. I find—who knows? Who knows? It's obvious that people travelled and it's obvious that people talked. If they were sent out as dharmic missionaries I haven't run across any record of something like that, which is not to say that it could not have happened, I'm sure there were people travelling, talking, and passing on the words that they had heard from others.

There's a difference between pointing out experiencing and then taking the thoughts about experiencing and existence and turning them into something to be thought about more, to be talked about more, rather than point to the direct experiencing of this moment.

As I said, the Buddha and those who recorded him seemed to be pointing to one's own experience, that makes sense, instructions on how to notice. Like all of the Dharma,

this is not a philosophy, but is a
pointing to what is
seen,
felt,
heard,
and
tasted
around the breath,
breathing the bodymind in and out.

The next verse:

*Appearances are empty, all is impermanent;
this is the complete view of the Those Gone Into Thusness.*

Or, Tatagatha.

All is impermanent,
things are born,
they live, they die.

*As a true monk I speak the truth.
If you don't agree with me, let's discuss it;*

*but remember that the Way of Awake Awareness
aims for the root
and is not tangled in branches and leaves.*

So if "branches" and "leaves" and "entangling" appeals to you,
look in Roshi's "Before Thinking"
have a little look at "The Little Book of Stopping and Looking"
for a very short couple of paragraphs about roots and tangling.

The Way of Awake Awareness, the Buddhadharma aims to the root of the Reality of this moment,
and is not tangled in branches and leaves of interpretation.

Remember that while you are actually sitting in front of that wall.

When you notice anything...
you know what I'm going to say
so just DO it.

That is the Way.

Thank you for listening.