

Wherever You Stand 26: Yoka daishi's (Yongjia) Shodoka: Song of Liberation part 15

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Previously on “Wherever You Stand”
the commentary on Yoka daishi's “Shodoka”,
we had the verse:

*Men of the Narrow Path practise without compassion,
worldly scholars have knowledge but no wisdom.*

*Foolish, with wrong interpretations,
they miss the pointing finger of the empty hand.*

Now you'll remember Yoka daishi wrote this verse
this series of verses
in roughly 712, 713,
it was an accumulation of what he had learned
over his years of pursuing study and practice
and various methods
and in the course of that
it is said that he did manage to
realize Awakened Nature
and this was confirmed when he came across his Teacher
Huineng.

The “Shodoka” was published in 713
which was the same year that Huineng died
and Yoka daishi was compiling
for future generations,
for future practitioners
what he had learned.

Roughly 500 years after Yoka daishi wrote the “Shodoka”,
Eihei Dogen zenji came back to Japan from China
after practising, studying, and waking up
with his Teacher Tiantong Rujing,
and when he was asked by people what he had learned
and what he had brought back
he said:

Eyes horizontal, nose vertical, empty hands.

So again we have a reference from what was a future time
perhaps
to Yoka daishi's "empty hand"
and "pointing finger".

It's interesting that even today
and maybe even today
students ask,
cajole,
or even
plead
for "something to deepen my practice,
like give me SOMETHING so that I can deepen my practice faster,
what have you got?
What can you give me?
What can you say?
Are we there yet?"
[laughter]

And the reality is,
now and ever has been
and ever will be...
that all students need to do to deepen their practice
is to... guess what?

[STUDENT]: Feel the breath, feel the whole bodymind.

To practise,
you're right,
to feel the breath,
to feel the whole bodymind,
open the peripheral vision,
feel the whole bodymind
wrapped around the breath in this moment.

So all you need to do
to deepen and mature your practice
is
to
practice.

No one can give you anything
that is going to do that for you.

Today's verse:

Mistaking the finger for the moon

*their practice is confused
and they fabricate complexity with senses and objects.*

So rather than noticing what's actually going on,
the Reality of this moment,
complete as it is
as it always has been
and as it always will be,
they confuse the pointers,
they confuse the teisho, the Dharma Talks, the instruction
with what is to be practised with that instruction.

We even go so far as to memorize quaint sayings
that when said
might make us appear to others to be very
"Zen-like".

Well, there's no such thing as "Zen-like",
this is from outside observers,
I mean my goodness,
there's such a growth of references
and they refer to everything
from recipes to decor to basketball playing,
it's everywhere, it's everywhere
and none of it is talking actually about practice.

So,
everything
points to
this moment
and what you can do
to practise
yourself in this moment
fully and completely.

You may be lost in something.
This is not a problem.

There may be thoughts.
Thoughts aren't the problem.

Nowhere does it say:
"erase all of these things, then you'll be able to practise".

At the moment of noticing,
of waking up from a thought

Ooh!
Feel the breath,
feel the whole bodymind,
you're actually practising
that moment of waking up
and we all know that when we practise anything,
we get better at it.

So at the moment of noticing
anything at all,
practise that moment of noticing.

The "anything at all"
really can be
ANYTHING
and you don't have to decide
whether this is an appropriate moment to practise or not
there are no inappropriate moments to practise.

[laughter]

None!

You can do it in public!

[more laughter]

Around the dinner table,
on the toilet...

ANYWHERE

ANYTIME

you notice

ANYTHING

notice what's already there,
the breath and the bodymind.

So rather than paying attention,
attending to experiencing this moment,
we make up stories,
and referring back to the verse,
we want to accumulate objects
because THAT is really going to show what a great practitioner we are
because we have this bobble and this bit
and this piece of verse
and ooh ooh ooh look at that, a shoji screen,
well obviously, huh, obviously, we're very "Zen-like"...

We want to look at what is experienced and deconstruct it,
and make meaning out of it,
failing to notice that when we're doing that,

we're having a blossoming forth of
many many many thoughts,
it's so obvious when you actually notice it,
but we're used to taking our thoughts
very very seriously
and we're not used to looking at them
as fabrications of complexity when they're followed.

Yoka daishi is reminding us of that.

So all of the teisho, Dharma Talks, sho, oryoki, chanting,
all of them are fingers
pointing
at your practice
in that moment.

And only you can do your practice.

That's it.

It's up to you.

It's your life in this moment,
and it's kind of backwards to think that
if you memorize the pointings
that you are doing the practice.
Not so.

Remember: ["painted cakes..."](#)

Another verse:

*When not one thing is seen, this
is the Realm of Reality as a Continual Presencing
and one is truly the Sovereign Seer.*

So "when not one thing"
is focussed on
so that it becomes the "all"
we see that whatever it is
that one thing
that dharma
and we don't need to categorize
really
dharma are moments of experience
and that covers everything

and we see Reality
as this "Continual Presencing"
that is experienced by the whole bodymind.

And we are the Knowing of that
we are the Knowing of the experiencing of the bodymind.

And in that instance
the "Sovereign Seer"
of that moment of experiencing.

Another verse:

*Understand the truth, and all conditional hindrances
are nowhere to be found;
not knowing true emptiness you worry
about debits and credits.*

*This is like a starving man turning down a
feast for a king,
or someone ill refusing the physician's prescription.*

So we understand the truth of experience
and of experiencing
by experiencing it

we might as well,
it's going on

and we need do nothing
there is no effort required
there's just this open attention

and at the moment of noticing a movement of attention
towards one thing
feel the breath
feel the whole bodymind
practise that moment.

Now the mention of the "physician's prescription"
is an apt time for a reminder of the Four Noble Truths.

Why are they noble?
Well they're noble because they are true.

Why are there four of them?
There are four because in the time of the Buddha

doctors used a four-part formula for treating people
or four-part questioning.

What's the disease?

What's the cause?

Is there a cure?

What is the cure?

Now Yoka daishi would have been familiar with the Four Noble Truths,
of course,
they are basic
and the Four Noble Truths,
in our practice, are:

1:

Experiencing that is conditioned causes suffering or dukkha or bad space,
basic unsatisfactoriness,
the "conditioned hindrances" referred to in the verse.

What's the cause of these conditioned hindrances?

Grasping,
grasping after a self,
moving attention toward arisings of experiencing
and grabbing onto them
and saying

"I need more of this, what's going on right now is basically unsatisfactory. If only... or when... THEN I'll REALLY be able to practise."

Is there a cure for this suffering,
for these conditioned hindrances?

Yes, there can be a cure,
there can be an end to it.

What's the cure?
Mindfulness practice.

Because when we practise at the moment of noticing anything
without discrimination
without saying

"well this is not so nice, so I'll practise here. THIS I like, so I'll just sort of sit with this for a while"

when we can accept that
ANY moment of experiencing

ANY moment

ANY dharma is a moment when we can practise.

The conditioned hindrances,
this tendency to want to grab onto basically anything
as if it were a lifesaver
wears out.

This takes as long as it takes
because it's a living bodymind
it's a very complex arrangement
of atoms into cells
and these are what transmit
or cause
or what the bodymind has learned to do
and it takes a while
for these neural networks and so on to change.

So change takes a while.
There's no magic potion that can accomplish this.

There is persistence
which in a way, these days,
is kind of a magic potion
you know people come two or three times,
they sit two or three times
and it's not all better,
so fuck it.
[laughter]

That's not how it works,
it's the persistence,
the zafu and your bum
have been referred to as a grindstone.

You sit there, grinding away
at patterns and habits
so it does take a while.

Another verse:

*Practise Zen in this world of desires
like a lotus blossoming in the midst of flames.*

*Even Pradhanasura, although he broke the grave precepts
woke up to the Unborn and achieved his realization of the Buddha.*

So we practise in this world
of passion, aggression, and stupidity,
that of ourselves
and that of others
and like the lotus,
which is a traditional reference to
the fact that practice can occur
no matter what is going on.

The lotus is rooted in mud
and it grows up through the water
and it blooms
regardless of what's going on,
it's a very sturdy plant
in fact, it's so magically mystical in a way,
that its leaves which float on top of the water
have a structure that sheds dirt,
keeps sort of self-cleaning
and this capacity has been picked up on,
studied by scientists,
and they're using it for material that is to be used in space
and so on and other uses.
That's interesting.

So it's revered as kind of an indestructible
or kind of a symbol of something indestructible.

So there you are practising
in the midst of the flames
of passion, aggression, and stupidity,
and sometimes it literally feels like that
when we're in a heavily contracted state.

Use it,
don't let it use you.

Now, who is Pradhanasura?

Well, it is said by some that a long, long, loooong, incalculably long time ago, he was a Bodhisattva, he was a monk. It's said he became the 133rd Bodhisattva in the Lotus Sutra.

Now, the story as recounted in the Sutra of Purifying Karmic Hindrances, was the Pradhanasura was a very handsome monk, very handsome. The daughter of a wealthy home fell madly in love with him and grew lovesick, pining away for him, in spite of having, or maybe because of having a fiancé.

[O-sensei and students laugh loudly]

Thank you for listening.

Her mother, in desperation, sought out Pradhanasura and brought him secretly to the daughter and they were secretly married. Well the fiance found out, and enraged, said he would kill the monk.

Well, bad situation, so of course let's make it worse.

Pradhanasura passed poison to the girl and the story is that she did in her ex, soon to be late fiance. Pradhanasura because consumed with guilt about what he had done and was at his wits end.

Another Bodhisattva, Vikyaktala, told him "Don't worry, dude, I'll help you."

So, this Bodhisattva used mysterious powers to assemble a myriad of Buddhas who came together and chanted:

"All phenomena are like images in a mirror.

They are like the reflection of the moon in the water.

The confused minds of ordinary persons discriminate among delusion, anger and attachment."

Pradhanasura was deeply moved,
recognized he was not condemned by his past actions,
and needed to practise strongly and continuously.

It is said that he woke up,
achieved completely the "patience of the unborn",
the realization at all times
that our essential nature is empty
and intrinsically unstained and unborn.

So this was not like confession,
but rather he had, apparently,
a recognition that just because we've done something
does not mean that we are doomed to repeat it

and this is a very practical thing because
how many of us are faced with obstacles,
faced with things that we would like to do
and when the time approaches to do it,
well,

"I don't know what happens, but I always do the opposite of this thing that I want to do!"

...as if there were some sort of mystical powers operating
pushing us towards whatever it might be.

That could be changing eating habits,
it could be studying,
it could be going for a walk
it could be doing the dishes.

"I want to do those dishes but when I look at them, something just pulls me away and I just can't"

...and it's become so prevalent,
this idea that we have to want to do something to do it,
that it's encoded in our DNA
and we have absolutely no way of overcoming it.

Well that's a crock.

We can learn to see clearly these patterns,
and although it might take a little effort,
a little willpower,
a little shamata,
the bodymind learns.

So, we CAN wear out these karmic
(as in cause and effect)
hindrances
or "conditioned hindrances"
they can be
worn
out.

*Having heard the Lion's Roar, the fearless teaching,
what will become of those who obstinately waver?*

*Breaking their precepts, losing their wisdom,
they ignore the open door to the Thus Come.*

*Once two monks, one who had committed sexual misconduct,
the other had taken life,
were condemned by Upali's flickering wisdom.*

*The great being Vimalakirti erased their doubts
like the sun melting frost and snow.*

*The inconceivable power to liberate beings
has activities numberless as the sands of the Ganges.*

And that is where we will pick up next time,
number 27 in the "Wherever You Stand" series.

And wherever you stand,
sit,
walk,
lie down,
wherever you are

whatever you are doing
when you notice anything

feel the breath
feel the whole bodymind.

Takes no effort,
you don't have to think about doing it
it just starts to happen.

So thank you for coming today,
and thank you for listening.