

Wherever You Stand 27: Yoka daishi's (Yongjia) Shodoka: Song of Liberation part 16

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Last time on "Wherever You Stand"
we had three verses for the closing:

*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.*

Well, I did make the mistake of promising you details of sex and violence...
[laughter]

So, I couldn't find any,
well there's lots of sex and violence, let's face it...
but I couldn't find any explicit references to "two monks"
who had committed sexual misconduct
and murder.

The conclusion I came to, as a result of this investigation,
which would not hold up in any court,
is that perhaps,
perhaps,
it MAY be that what's being talked about
or who is being talked about is that monk,
Pradhanasura, that we met the last time.

He was the one who became the object of affection
of a lovesick girl
and the mother, you remember it,
the mother brought him in secret
and married him to the lovesick girl, etc., etc., etc....
so perhaps that is being referred to.
Could be.

Now who is Upali with his "flickering wisdom"?
Upali was another monk

and one of the ten chief disciples of the Buddha.
Apparently he was born into a family of the lowest caste
and he was destined to be a slave.

Outcasts at that time in ancient India
were not allowed to receive any education.
(It seems that, although change may be happening,
that on the whole may still be the case...)

When he grew up his parents asked him to learn the skill of cutting hair
to support himself,
so he became the barber of the princes in the palace.

Now that in itself is a little suspect,
but nevertheless,
the story is that Upali was 20 years old
when the Buddha returned to his home town, Kapilavastu.

Upali was recommended to give the Buddha a haircut.
The next day,
Upali's mother knelt before the Buddha and asked:
"Lord Buddha, what do you think of his skill?"

"He bows too low," replied the Buddha.

Upali straightened his back when he heard this.
It is said that by the mere fact of straightening his back
he attained the first stage of meditation.

After a while, his mother knelt down and asked the Lord Buddha:
"What do you think now?"

"His body seems to be too straight," replied the Buddha.

When Upali heard this,
he concentrated his attention and it is said
that he attained the second stage of meditation.

After a while his mother asked Buddha again:
"Lord Buddha, what do you think of his skill now?"

"He breathes in too fast."

When Upali heard this, he concentrated his mind
on breathing in and breathing out.
It is said he attained the third stage of meditation then.

His mother asked the Buddha again:

“What do you think now?”

“Ah, he breathes out too fast,” replied the Buddha.

[O-sensei is laughing]

Now some of you may have little flickers of recognition or memory
of perhaps practice interviews or daisan
when you felt like Upali;
nothing you could do would be right.

Remember:

that’s self-image that’s coming up,
notice something like that,
it’s a contraction into a sense of self
with a belief about how it is and how the world is.

What do you do?

Well, with this all-inclusive practice,
it falls into the category of ANYTHING:
[laughs]

feel the breath,
sit up straight.

Back to Upali, who now was mindful of breathing in and out.
It is said he attained the fourth stage of meditation.

We could learn from here that Upali was very attentive in his work,
he was strict with himself
and could listen to people’s criticism with an open mind,
hence,
he was preeminent among those who knew the disciplinary rules by heart.

So,
Upali observed every rule set by the Buddha.

Now are we talking about forms
or are we talking about rules?

Well, the way the story is set,
we’re talking about rules.

So, this is not actually reflective of this particular practice,
where there are no rules,
we have forms.

Upali had his eye on all the practitioners,

all the monks,
and he knew all the disciplinary rules by heart.

For those who were careless in observing the rules;
Upali was the thorn in their flesh.
They even made things difficult for him.

The Buddha was very concerned and scolded them.
He gathered the people and told them the value of precepts.

The Buddha said that one who observed the precepts
was like a bright lamp,
those with pure mind would like the brightness,
whereas those with evil mind pervert darkness,
they didn't want their little habits and patterns to be seen,
even by themselves.

The Buddha told them they should have respect for people such as Upali,
who observed the precepts well.

Whenever anyone had a problem with what was going on,
or how something should be done,
they consulted with Upali.

When the Buddha died, Upali was in his 70s.
In the First Great Buddhist Council,
he was selected to summarize the rules of the order.

He humbly declined,
but Venerable Mahakasyapa insisted that he must participate in the Council.

He said to Upali:
"Venerable Upali, please do not decline our offer. The Lord Buddha had imparted the Fourteen Rules to you
and you are preeminent among those who know the disciplinary rules by heart. Please recite the rules of the
order now."

Upali accepted the offer.

When he recited the rules of the order,
he was able to say where, when, to whom, and why the rules were set.
His good memory was greatly admired by the participants
and I'm sure was a thorn in the side of many.
[laughter]

Upali was an outcast but enjoyed high prestige in the community of monks.
His success was a stimulus to people in distress.
His success symbolized the glory of equality in the Buddhist community.

So Upali was quite important, really,
if for no other reason than symbolizing the fact that
it didn't matter what you were born into,
you could practise,
it didn't matter what you had done,

when the past comes up it comes up as a memory,
which happens only and ever
now,
in the present
and can be practised with.

So we can all remember that,
and as Dogen writes in the [Fukanzazengi](#):

"It doesn't matter whether you're clever or stupid..."
... you can practise.

Going on to say:
It doesn't matter whether you are a man or a woman
or anything in between
it doesn't matter
ANYONE can practise,
regardless of the views they have of themselves
because a view comes up:
that's a moment when you can practise
and you MUST practise.

Now, Vimalakirti is mentioned in the next verse.

Vimalakirti is the central figure in the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa sūtra
which presents him as a great lay practitioner
and a contemporary of Gautama Siddhartha.

There's no mention of him in Buddhist texts until after Nagarjuna.
It's argued that the Vimalakirti sūtra was likely composed in India
in approximately 100 C.E.

So Vimalakirti has had a large influence.

The verse:

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

So Vimalakirti, this contemporary of Gautama Siddhartha and Upali,
erased the doubts of the two monks

or the one monk
(who had committed two breaking of the precepts)
they were assured that the sun melting frost and snow
is a good metaphor for their doubts
melting like the frost and snow
with the Teachings.

The next verse:

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

You've often heard, I'm sure, "the sands of the Ganges"
as a representation of something that is so numberless
there are so many numbers of it
that it couldn't possibly be counted.

So anything that human beings do;
any activities that those who have liberated themselves
from the burning flames of passion, aggression, and stupidity,
and woken up to Reality as it actually is,
can and will and may engage in many activities
but whatever it is,
the activity can be used to practise the Way and liberate beings.

The next verse:

*Making the four kinds of offerings,
even a thousand gold pieces would not be enough;*

So donation, or dana, has played a large part in practice
since the beginning of practice.

The four kinds of offerings referred to are:
clothing, food and drink, bedding, and medicine.

Now offering food is one of the oldest and most common rituals of Buddhism.
Food is given to monks during alms rounds
and also offered ritually to tantric deities and hungry ghosts.

Offering food is a meritorious act
that also reminds us not to be greedy or selfish.

Now the first Buddhist monks did not build monasteries,
as we know, they were called "home-leavers"
because they left home

and they left all concepts of home behind,
home being defined as someplace where you could sit yourself down
on your ass basically
and have things done for you
or just do nothing,
where you can set up a little nest.

They were homeless mendicants who begged for all their food,
and that still goes on today in some communities,
particularly in Asia.
Their only possessions were their robe and begging bowl.

Today in many Theravadin countries like Thailand,
monks still rely on receiving alms for most of their food.
They leave the monastery early in the morning,
walk single file,
oldest first,
carrying their begging bowls in front of them.

Lay people wait for them,
sometimes kneeling
and place food, flowers, or incense sticks in the bowls.

Women must be careful not to touch the monks.

The monks don't speak
even to say "thank you".

The giving of alms is not thought of as charity.
The giving and receiving of alms creates a spiritual connection
between the monastic and lay communities.

Lay people have a responsibility to support the monks physically
and the monks have a responsibility to support the community spiritually.

The practice of begging for alms has mostly disappeared in Mahayana countries,
although in Japan monks periodically do takuhatsu.

Request: taku

Eating bowls: hatsu.

Sometimes monks recite sutras in exchange for donations.

Zen monks might go out in small groups chanting "ho"
which we all know is "dharma",
signifying that they are bringing the Dharma.

Monks practising takuhatsu wear large straw hats that partly obscure their faces.
The hats also prevent them from seeing the faces of those giving them alms.

There is no giver and no receiver,
just giving and receiving.
This purifies the act of giving and receiving.

Ceremonial offerings of food are a common practice.
The precise rituals and doctrines behind them differ from one school to another.
Food may be simply and silently left on an altar with a small bow,
or the offering might be accompanied by elaborate chants and full prostrations.

However it is done,
as with the alms given to monks,
offering food on an altar is an act of connecting with the spiritual world,
it also means to release selfishness
and open the heart to the needs of others...

And we've addressed that word "spiritual":
spiritual coming from the latin "spiritus"
coming from "the breath",
so we can say the practice of mindfulness,
feeling the breath,
feeling the whole bodymind
and opening to the infinite possibilities of reality
is what is being offered too,
because as that is done,
the mundane bullshit of passion, aggression, and stupidity,
and the habitual habits and patterns
that we human beings fall into can be
seen,
practised,
opened, and
released.

And out of this can come the desire and the action
of opening the heart to the needs of others,
the recognition that we are not different from anyone else,
anyone else is not different from us,
the process of being a human being is the same for all human beings.

Not all human beings will take the responsibility
for looking into the moment to moment arising of experiences
or "dharma"
and, using the practice of mindfulness, practise,
feeling the breath
feeling the whole bodymind
opening to the full moment of Reality.

It's a common practice in Zen,
and we do it here,
to make offerings to the hungry ghosts,
and we've looked into,
in this series,
"hungry ghosts",
this depiction of the individual
who is consumed by grasping,
grasping after what?
Well grasping after anything other than what is going on for that person in this moment.

And you remember hungry ghosts:
big eyes,
big bellies,
long arms,
spindly fingers that can reach out for the impossible dreams
and a mouth so tiny
that nothing that it tries to grab onto
can be taken in.

An impossible situation,
but have we not all done it in one way or another?
Seeking to be different from how we are in this moment?

And that's the basic mechanism of self-image:
contraction into a sense of self
a belief about how we are
and the baseline story,
the common thread:
unsatisfactory;
how we are in this moment needs to be some other way.

We get fooled by it over and over again,
we may even see the impossibility of it
but we fall for the dream
until
we've seen it so often
we've managed to feel the breath,
we've managed to open the whole bodymind to this moment
and we no longer believe whatever the story might be.
We see it as a flickering of a moment of experience
in the vast expanse.

So we do make offerings of rice or something from the meal
from oryoki,
we do that during sesshin and O-sesshin.

A small offering is placed in bowls
and taken out to the rupa on the front veranda.

Now again,
hungry ghosts represent all of our greed and thirst and clinging
the stuff that increases our hope,
our desperation,
our disappointments,
our sorrow,
our suffering...

We LOVE them!
We get juice from it!
Until we get so fed up,
we don't want to have juice from these things anymore.

It's not as if we went to the pattern store
and said:

"I'm going to take a gross of that desperate longing to be something other than what I am... And oh yeah,
here, gimme two grosses of this where I know for sure that everyone else is doing better than I am. Oh and a
few of those 'I'm the best there is' and an equal amount—well actually in reality, probably it's I don't know
how many times more-'I'm worse at whatever it is than anybody else'"

So we stack these on our shelves,
and for the longest time
or the shortest time,
it depends
we identify with them.

What does 'identify with them' mean?
We allow them to control the choices that we make.

Now that's just stupid.

We are allowing the choices we make
to be determined by fantasies.

Back to hungry ghosts...

We can remember then,
big bellies,
long graspy fingers,
huge eyes,
tiny mouths

[in a whiny voice]
"Why does everybody else have..."

If only I could...
Whine whine whine..."
[laughter]

Eventually we see it.
We feel the breath,
we feel the whole bodymind
and the power of that can just dissipate.

It's like putting a drop of ink in an ocean,
it disappears.
But if that drop of ink is put into one container
which is the size of a thimble,
it's going to be really black and dark.

So open to the Ocean of Reality,
open to the vast expanse,
let it go,
you don't need it.

Ask yourself when these things come up
and yes you're entitled to have a thought that asks something like:
"Do I really want to be this whiny desperate person?"

If you answer yes,
that's your business,
but
don't be surprised if when you call people to come out with you and do something,
they say "I'm sorry, I'm busy".
[O-sensei and students laugh]

And with the offering to the hungry ghosts;
it's left outside
and other beings will eat it up.

Here we feed other beings,
we have some of the fattest squirrels in the city, I'm sure,
fat, shiny,
we have birds that are fat and shiny,
so it's nice to see
that we can benefit beings,
and we can do that over and over and over again
in as many ways,
ways as numberless as the sands of the river Ganges.

*reducing bones and body to dust could not repay
words ensuring a leap over numberless eons.*

*This is the supreme Sovereign Reality,
the experience of countless Thus Come Ones.*

This is what Yoka daishi has offered up to us
with the Shodoka: The Song of Liberation,
a way of understanding the history of this particular Lineage,
a way of delving deeper into what is meant
and a way of actually simplifying practice.

Simplification is damn hard
because
we are so used to making things complicated.

We're so used to taking something we have heard or read,
some instruction about how to practise,
and then trying to turn it this way and that
with what we know already,
which of course reduces it
and believing that if we can have something
"in our own words"
that it is more true
"for me"
because after all
"I am separate from everything else".

That's what self-image does.
It says "I need to know in my own words what this means"
as if it is the only person in the whole history of practice
that has experienced what it is experiencing.

That is the essence of self-image.

It's not a problem;
it's a moment of experience
a dharma,
practise with it.

Next time, we will finish the verses,
and of course the emphasis will be on
simplification.

So have fun with that!

Thank you for listening.