

Yaza 2012: Morning Star

by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi
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The dark of the hot Indian night slowly glowed into indigo. Slowly, it became what we might call “morning”. As the stars in the sky began to fade into that glowing indigo, by contrast the planet Venus seemed to grow brighter, reflecting the light of the sun. We call it the “Morning Star”.

Beneath the spreading branches of a pipal tree, a person sat as they had sat throughout the night.

They had been born into a noble family — a royal family — and swaddled in comfort and luxury. As an infant, as a child, as an adolescent, they had seen through the hollowness of these comforts in the face of what they had seen when they looked into the faces of the poor, of the ill, of the hungry and the destitute, and also into the faces of the comfortable and well-fed. Regardless of comforts or discomforts, no one was ever truly satisfied.

Putting aside the security of family and the walls of the kingdom, they had abandoned themselves into wandering the forest and meeting with various teachers of spiritual paths. They had listened. They had studied. They had practised various meditative techniques of withdrawing attention from the senses, folding attention inwards tighter and tighter into what seemed a vast space, but only because there was nothing to compare it to: there was only the sense of fixation and concentration. Looking into the face of these concentration states, they had seen their hollowness, their sunyata. Like the coming-together of all causes and conditions, of all circumstances, they were impermanent and would decay just as a meal would become excrement.

Finally, they had become utterly disenchanted at all strategies of attention: they had seen through all of the faces that they had assumed in their childhood, their adolescence, their adulthood, and their spiritual practices. Even the extremities of asceticism were not as painful as the recognition of the futility of all activities that were merely reactions and recoil from the basic and primordial fact of Experiencing and experiences.

And so they had sat down in the hot Indian summer day on a gathered pile of kusha grass beneath the spreading bows of the pipal tree. And sitting there — sitting up straight and straightforwardly facing the rising and falling, the coming and going, of experiences — they had allowed this coming and going of experiences to indicate the nature of the space of Experiencing in which they arose and vanished.

Night drew on. And throughout what was called the “first watch” of the night, they had seen all of their associations, all of their presumptions, all of their reactions, all of their stories and habits and tendencies, rise and fall and come and go like beads of sweat arising in a fever. Each gesture of attention pushed and pulled them into claiming those gestures of attention as their own nature, as their very selves. But in releasing fixation, in attending to the movements of attention as they actually occurred, all of this fell away. They had had no real preparation for what was occurring: their experience as royalty, their experience as a sadhu (their experience as an ascetic) were all irrelevant, were all mere imaginary identities.

As the second watch of the night came and went, more fantastical presumptions of self and other and world came and went. They saw lifetimes as men and women and animals, and each of these lifetimes seemed as if

they might be who they really were. But they rose and fell within the space of open attention and the Aware Space of Experiencing and were all released.

It is said that during the third watch of the night, all possible identities as any and all beings throughout all possible worlds, all possible realms of knowings and knowns, came and went and were all seen to be hollow. Looking up, they saw the Morning Star, and Siddhartha Gautama Awoke as the Buddha.

The tradition says that at this time, the Buddha said, "I and all beings everywhere together attain the Way at the same time." The Buddha had realized that his nature was the nature of all beings everywhere, and that all beings everywhere and all worlds and all places and all times were the same movements of the immovable Luminosity of Experiencing in itself.

In the Zen tradition, we celebrate the beginning of our Lineage by commemorating the Buddha looking up and seeing the Morning Star. This is preceded by the days of o-sesshin. Throughout the centuries and millennia, students and teachers have often sat through the night, sometimes to commemorate the Buddha's sitting beneath the bodhi tree, sometimes because there had been no time throughout the day, or it had been too hot. Or simply because they couldn't sleep, and so why not sit. But ceremonial commemorations of the Buddha's sitting throughout the night, his "yaza", have also taken place. In the Zen community for decades now we have practised yaza one night during the summer.

For some of you here tonight, this will be your first extended sitting. And it will be more difficult than you can imagine; it will also be much easier than you can imagine. It has nothing at all to do with your imagination — with your thoughts, with ideas of difficult or easy or day or night or self or other. There is just simply this moment, moment after moment.

Fortunately, we've made it interesting for you because the coming and going of all of these moments and the presencing of this moment is happening throughout the night and the early morning hours, and you have never done this before. You have stayed up all night, yelling at someone and being yelled at. You have stayed up all night watching movies, or surfing porn on the web, or simply unable to sleep. So it's not that you have never stayed up all night before ever in your life. It's that now you have the opportunity to be interested.

How the body-mind is moment after moment and hour after hour throughout the day and the night goes through various cycles. There are cycles of attention that are approximately twenty minutes in length. There are cycles of the body-mind processing food, processing the chemistry of the brain: these circadian cycles throughout the day and the night are quite different from each other. And so even if you have sat all day throughout the day, this will still be very interesting.

And if you have done yaza before, well, you haven't done this one. Remember how easy the last one was? That's just an idea; that's just a memory. This will be more difficult and more easy than you can possibly imagine.

Far too soon, this hot night will brighten into morning. In the coming and going of all of these moments, sit up straight and look up, look down, look all around, with the whole body and mind and you will see it: you will see that the nature of Experiencing is brighter than the Morning Star, brighter than the Sun. It is beyond light and dark, beyond self and other: and it is the very nature of who you are.

So please, tonight and this morning, enjoy yourselves.