



Mountains Talking

Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver

Summer 2008

Avoiding Idle Talk

A teisho given by Peggy Sheehan, Sensei

May 11, 2008

As many of you know, we have been investigating the Eight Awarenesses¹ during our talk and discussion evenings over the last several months. The Eight Awarenesses were the last of the Buddha's teachings before his passing.

The final one, which is called, "Avoiding Idle Talk," is so important that I thought we might take a deeper look at it this morning.

The Eight Awarenesses include: 1) having few desires; 2) knowing how to be satisfied; 3) enjoying tranquility and serenity; 4) exerting meticulous effort; 5) not forgetting right thought; 6) practicing samadhi; 7) cultivating wisdom. And they culminate with 8): avoiding idle talk.

Dogen Zenji says this about the Eighth Awareness of Avoiding Idle Talk: "Having realization and being free from discrimination is what is called 'avoiding idle talk.' To totally know the true form of all things is the same as being without idle talk."

And the Buddha says: "When you monks engage in various kinds of idle talk your minds are disturbed. Although you have left home and become monks, you are still not liberated. Therefore, you must quickly abandon mind-disturbing idle talk. If you would like to attain the joy of the extinction of delusion, you must first simply extinguish the affliction of idle talk. This is what 'avoiding idle talk' means."

And the Buddha continues: "You monks should continually and single-mindedly strive to accomplish the Way. Every dharma in the world, whether active or non-active, is characterized by destructibility and unrest. Now please keep

quiet and say no more. Time passes on, and I shall enter complete nirvana. This is my final admonition."

This is my final admonition!

Well, before another word is said, the teaching is finished. Avoid idle talk. It is that simple. It's interesting to consider that human beings are the animals that have developed speech. We talk. We communicate with words. We are considered "highly evolved" in this sense. We are also the one species that has the greatest potential to fully awaken. To know, to see the true nature of all things and to experience ourselves in complete harmony, total accord and perfect unity with all that breathes and does not breathe. Yet, we all know intimately, that our ability to communicate in language, speech, thought and words is perhaps the greatest hindrance to that clarity. Anyone who has done zazen for five minutes knows the burden, and often the pain, of the endless chatter. This is the most important aspect of beginning practice: to truly come in contact with this mind of chatter. Before practice, we are generally totally unaware of it. We babble on and on in our heads and this babble spills out into words often with the same content and quality that is occurring in our heads, that of judgments and opinions, preferences, half-truths and manipulations, degradations of ourselves and others, expressions of anger, mistrust, insecurity, and desire; or, simply talk that is habitual and mindless. As long as we are caught up in this endless stream, we live in a dream. The gift of zazen is to encounter this, to see the chattering mind clearly once and for all and begin to wake from the dream.

I say this so that no one will feel too discouraged with practice. We have lived with eons of mindless, endless, idle talk. And it's just fine that when we sit down - there it is. It's

other - there it is. What might happen though if we simply began to pay absolutely no attention to it?

Remember the movie *A Beautiful Mind* about John Nash, a Nobel Prize winner who suffered from schizophrenia? At a certain point, when his wife is leaving him, he suddenly realizes that the girl in his delusions has never grown older. In that moment, he knows that she can't be real. He then begins a very long process of working with his delusions. First, with anger, frustration, and yelling at them, telling them they aren't real. "You aren't real, you aren't real!" Finally, he simply tells them goodbye, and that he won't listen to them anymore. They keep coming around, but he ignores them and they begin to fade into the background. They never really go away completely, they wave at him occasionally, but he is able to live more freely than ever before.

Do we know that our thoughts aren't *real*?

Wu-men says in case 1 of the Wu-men kuan: "If you do not pass the barrier of the founding teachers, if you do not cut off the mind road then you are like a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses." When we cling to our thoughts as if they were *real*, we are ghosts living in a dream. In his book *The Mind of Clover*, Aitken Roshi says, "To cut off the mind road is to experience total silence, so that circumstances can be seen clearly and taken in cleanly, each one fresh and new. Not to cut it off is to continue projecting one's own confused images on the world and then to cling to them ... the realized mind is at rest and deals with things as they are, the ghost mind is noisy and deals with its own creations."

Language, speech, thoughts, communication is a gift of humanity. How shall we use it? How do we avoid idle talk - ghost talk?

Remember the Buddha said to avoid idle talk, He did not say *don't* talk. We are human beings, we communicate with one another. We speak. Note that three out of ten of the Bodhisattva precepts concern Right Speech: not to lie, not to speak of the faults of others, and not to praise oneself while downgrading others. Keeping and practicing these precepts is a means of avoiding idle talk. Practicing and realizing any of the spokes of the wheel of the Eightfold Noble path of which Right Speech is one IS enlightenment itself.

Dogen Zenji said, "In the Buddha Dharma, there is one path, one Dharma, one realization, one practice. Don't permit faultfinding. Don't permit haphazard talk."

Aitken Roshi says, "The Net of Indra inspires me to regard the universe as a great communications workshop, in which you and I practice the expression of compassionate truth with all beings, and encourage that practice in others toward ourselves."

Isn't that a wonderful image? The universe is one great communications workshop. Each of us playing our part with all others whether in speech or silence, action or non-action, everything intricately interwoven; you and I practice the expression of compassionate truth with all beings. And as such, there is no such thing as idle talk! Our dancing and songs are the voice of the Dharma. Always. How could it ever be otherwise?

Indeed this is the truth of things. We are already whole and complete, endowed with wisdom and compassion, and our every word, deed and action is the voice of the Dharma. But be careful, for this inherent truth within us functions via Right Speech and Right Action. We must be true to this essence. We must speak truth and not tell lies or half-truths or deceive others. We must not speak of the faults of others, get caught up in gossip, judgments, opinions of right and wrong. We must not praise ourselves or boost our own self-image while downgrading another. We must not use our words in anger, resentment or unkindness. We must let go of our ghost minds, let go of our old perceptions of others and ourselves in order that they and we may be free to change and grow; we must let go of our habits of not listening, of not telling the truth, of speaking automatically. Or as Nakagawa Soen Roshi says, we must not use rootless words - idle talk.

Bernie Glassman in the book *The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment* says this, "We talk about two kinds of expression in Zen: dead and alive. Using dead words, we express our understanding in such a way that the listener holds onto what we say as an idea or concept. In this way, we hinder their realization. This is the problem with the Dharma talks we give, and why Zen masters are so reluctant to talk too much. Most of the time, our expressions provide new ideas for attachment. An alive expression is one in which we don't give people anything to hold on to, but rather

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something which forces them to re-evaluate what they've been doing, or to see it in a different light. An alive expression can be verbal or nonverbal. Somebody coming and hitting you with the waking stick (kyosaku) can be a very alive expression which frees you from where you're stuck."

Do you see that this does not just pertain to Zen teachers? How about you? Do you use dead or alive words? Anyone practicing koans must come forth with an *alive* expression or you will be sent right out. Our koans themselves all represent profoundly alive expressions of the old Zen worthies. That's why we use them. Do you realize that by returning again and again and again to the dokusan room with *live* words, *live* expressions, your entire life wakes up. YOU, in fact, become a live expression in which there is no such thing as a dead word. Every encounter becomes fresh and new. We begin to meet the bare essence of each moment free of our projections and creations. Imagine that!

How about this koan, case 24 in the Wu-men kuan: "A monk asked Feng-hsueh, 'speech and silence are concerned with equality and differentiation. How can I transcend equality and differentiation?' Feng-hsueh said, 'I always think of Chiang-nan in March; partridges chirp among the fragrant flowers.'"

Feng-hsueh comes forth with alive words. Or are they? He is quoting someone else. Using another's words. How can they be alive then? Look again, look again. "I always think of Chiang-nan in March; partridges chirp among the fragrant flowers." Where is Feng-hsueh?

Another case: "An outsider asked the World-Honored One, 'I do not ask for words, I do not ask for silence.' The World-Honored One just sat still."

One master speaks, another sits in silence. Now, can you show me the difference?

And Wu-men's verse to case 24:

It was not a verse of elegant tone!
Before speaking, it's already expressed;
If you go on chattering glibly,
You'll find yourself at a loss.

Yes, go on chattering glibly and you will live in your dreams, clinging to bushes and grasses, only aware of the ghost songs and speaking your own dead words. Or turn around, step out of the weeds, stop the idle talk and SPEAK! SPEAK!

'The subjects of the talks and discussions are based on *The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment*, H.T. Maezumi and B.T. Glassman, Part III, Ch. 8, "Eight Awarenesses of the Enlightened Person."

Black Robe Ceremony



On February 24, the sangha was surprised to see four people wearing new, black robes. What does it mean? To paraphrase one senior member, "It means, if you stay around long enough, and they can't get rid of you, they give you a black robe." Roshi says, when there is no difference between your practice and how you live your life, then it is recognized with a black robe. Maybe it doesn't *mean* anything. Nevertheless, congratulations to Bill Hamaker, Geoff Keeton, Mike Tabor and Cathy Wright for sitting long and getting tired!

Monday Night Informal Zazen with Dokusan

Beginning July 7 there will be informal zazen and dokusan with Karin Kempe, Sensei on Monday nights from 7:00-8:30 pm. Since there is a group who meets in the lower instructional zendo on Monday evenings, dokusan procedures will be altered and described in an upcoming e-mail letter to sangha. Please note that there will no longer be dokusan on Sunday mornings. [see dokusan schedule on back page]

Gassho

Thank you to Dennis Tesar for purchasing a new lawn mower for the Zen Center. His generosity has filled a great need. Of course, this does not mean he will be mowing every week. There is a mowing sign up sheet on the bulletin board in the entry.

Schedules and Dates

Dokusan Schedule

Monday Evenings: Karin Kempe, Sensei
Tuesday Mornings: Karin Kempe, Sensei
Tuesday Evenings: Danan Henry Roshi & Peggy Sheehan,
Sensei
Wednesday Mornings: Ken Morgareidge, Sensei
Thursday Mornings: Danan Henry, Roshi
Thursday Evenings: Danan Henry, Roshi & Ken
Morgareidge, Sensei
Friday Mornings: Peggy Sheehan, Sensei

Sesshin Dates

2008

August 21-24 (Mountain Sesshin)

October 18-25

December 6-13

2009

March 28-April 4

June 20-27

October 17-24

December 5-12

Calendar Highlights

Center Closed	July 1-6
Meditation & Games	July 20
Chanting Service	July 24
Mt. Sesshin Application Deadline	August 1
Sangha Workday	August 3
Chanting Service	August 14
Potluck Brunch w/Am. Contra Dancing	August 17
Center Closed	August 31-Sept. 1
Repentance Ceremony	August 11
Zazenkai	September 14
Sesshin Application Deadline	September 18
Dharma Discussion	September 21
Center Closed	September 28 - October 5

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