

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.3

### Opening Comments

In my opening comments for tonight, I would like to begin by returning to two excellent questions that were posed in our discussion last week, one by Michael regarding the implicit truth claims made by Zen Buddhists, and one by Sylvia regarding the environment of meditation, or *zazen*, in which the koan discipline is embedded. With regard to the first question regarding truth claims, it is important to remember that Zen Buddhists, like all Buddhists, begin their spiritual journey by having faith in the teaching, or Dharma, of the Buddha. This is as true of Zen Buddhists as it is of Theravada Buddhists or other branches of Mahayana Buddhists. The teaching of the Buddha must be accepted on faith before one begins one's realization of that teaching in one's life, and the same is true of the teachings of Jesus or the Church, or the teachings of Mohammed or Moses. To better understand the Zen Buddhist understanding of such faith, we can safely turn to the Diamond Sutra, which is revered by Zen Buddhists, since it was upon hearing a verse of the Diamond Sutra that Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan in China, attained enlightenment.

The Venerable Subhuti said to the Buddha, "In times to come, will there be people who, when they hear these teachings, have real faith and confidence in them?" The Buddha replied, "Do not speak that way, Subhuti. Five hundred years after the Tathagata has passed away, there will still be people who appreciate the joy and happiness that come from observing the precepts. When such people hear these words, they will have faith and confidence that this is the truth."

In particular, the Dharma of the Buddha in which Zen Buddhists have faith comes from the Perfection of Wisdom sutras that teach the doctrine of *sunyata*, or the emptiness of all reality, including the emptiness of the Buddha and the Dharma he taught. This doctrine of emptiness is directly related to the Zen ideal of freeing the mind from all attachment to anything, including to the Dharma, the Buddha, one's meditation practice, or even one's own enlightenment. The Zen insight into no-self and the mind free of everything in *satori* is seen in the Diamond Sutra (the verse Huineng heard that led to his sudden *satori*):

[The Buddha said:] "So, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva gives rise to the unequaled mind of awakening, he has to give up all ideas. He cannot rely on forms when he gives rise to that mind, nor on sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or objects of mind. He can only give rise to the mind that is not caught in anything."

Zen Buddhists monks and lay people chant the Diamond Sutra daily to keep this ideal of emptiness, and the attainment of the mind that is not caught in anything, before themselves at all times, as this is what satori means, the concrete and personal realization of no-self, the personal and existential awakening of the mind that is not caught in anything. It is also important to note that before one can be ordained as a Zen Buddhist monk, one must study the sutras and master them, including the longer Lankavatara Sutra, as well as the shorter Diamond Sutra and the brief Heart Sutra, copies of which I sent to you on Sunday. We see evidence of this kind of training in the reading for this evening, in the example of Gutei's student. "Gutei had a young lay disciple attending him, a youth who stayed in the monastery to study sutras and receive training but had not yet been ordained as a monk." Zen Buddhists build on the wisdom of the Mahayana Buddhist sutras, and the beginning of their path is faith that these sutras are true and will lead one to the realization of Absolute Truth. But one can only verify their truth by living a life in conformity with this wisdom, so that one realizes Absolute Truth for oneself. There is no other way to verify the truth of the Dharma.

There are other texts which Zen Buddhists chant and memorize as an essential part of their practice, not only in the period of training, but throughout their lives as monks. One of them is the fourfold vow of the Bodhisattva, which we also saw two years ago in our reading of the *Bodhicaryavatara Sutra* by Santideva. This is a vow common to all Mahayana Buddhists, as it sets forth the ideal toward which they strive.

Sentient beings are numberless: I vow to liberate them all. Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all. The Dharma gates are infinite: I vow to end them all. The Buddha way is unsurpassable: I vow to attain it.

Zen Buddhists reinforce these vows by chanting every day the twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in which the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is described and invoked by his Chinese name Guanshiyin/Guanyin, also known as Kannon in Japanese. Here is the opening of that chapter:

AT THAT TIME Inexhaustible Intention Bodhisattva rose from his seat, uncovered his right shoulder, placed his palms together, and facing the Buddha, said, "World Honored One, for what reason is the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin called 'Guanshiyin', i.e., "One who perceives the cries of the world"?"

The Buddha told Inexhaustible Intention Bodhisattva, "Good man, if any of the limitless hundreds of thousands of myriads of *kotis* of living beings who are undergoing all kinds of suffering hear of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva and recite his name single-mindedly, Guanshiyin Bodhisattva will immediately hear their voices and rescue them." [a *koti* is ten million]

Zen Buddhists strive with all their mind and strength to attain satori in this life, so that they might join Guanshiyin in becoming bodhisattvas who hear and respond to the cries of the infinite number of

sentient beings who are suffering, even though they also know, through the Diamond Sutra, that neither they nor these myriad suffering sentient beings actually exist.

“Subhuti, do not say that the Tathagata has the idea, ‘I will bring living beings to the shore of liberation.’ Do not think that way, Subhuti. Why? In truth there is not one single being for the Tathagata to bring to the other shore. If the Tathagata were to think there was, he would be caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span.”

We can only free ourselves and all sentient beings from suffering if our minds are free of everything, and are not caught in anything, including the idea that we, or the myriad other suffering creatures, are anything but empty.

This brings us to the other topic I would like to address this evening, which has to do with the place of meditation, or *zazen*, in Zen Buddhist practice. Although the Sixth Patriarch Huineng insisted that meditation is not essential to the attainment of *satori*, Zen Buddhists still insist on the importance of meditation for the internalization and realization of wisdom, with the understanding that meditation itself *is* wisdom, an insight shared by Rinzai and Soto Zen adherents. One of the great Zen Masters in Japan, Hakuin (1686-1769), whose artwork we have been contemplating in our *Visio Divina*, has a beautiful Song of Zazen which is chanted frequently in monasteries, as well as by lay adherents to Rinzai Zen. I will include this song in full, as it gives us a very full idea of Zen Buddhist life.

All sentient beings are essentially Buddhas. As with water and ice, there is no ice without water; apart from sentient beings, there are no Buddhas. Not knowing how close the truth is we seek it far away—what a pity! We are like one who in the midst of water cries out desperately in thirst. We are like the son of a rich man who wandered away among the poor. The reason we transmigrate through the Six Realms is because we are lost in the darkness of ignorance. Going further and further astray in the darkness, how can we ever be free from birth-and-death? As for the *samadhi* of the Mahayana, there are no words to praise it fully; the six *paramitas*,+ such as giving, maintaining the precepts, and various other good deeds like invoking the Buddha’s name, repentance, and spiritual training, all finally return to this. Even those who have experienced it for only a single sitting will see all karma erased. Nowhere will they find evil paths, and the Pure Land will not be far away. If we listen even once with open heart to this truth, then praise it and gladly embrace it, how much more so then, if on reflecting within ourselves, we directly realize Self-nature, giving proof to the truth that Self-nature is no nature. We will have gone far beyond idle speculation. The gate of the oneness of cause and effect is thereby opened, and not-two, not-three, straight ahead runs the Way [Tao]. Realizing the form of no-form as form, whether going or returning we cannot be any place else. Realizing the thought of no-thought as thought, whether singing or dancing, we are the voice of the Dharma. How vast and wide the unobstructed sky of *samadhi*! How bright and clear the perfect moonlight of the Fourfold Wisdom!\* At this moment, what more need we seek? As the eternal tranquility of Truth reveals itself to us, this very place is the Land of Lotuses and this very body is the body of the Buddha.

+ generosity, ethical discipline, patience, heroic effort, concentration, and wisdom

- Wisdom of Perfect Mirror, Wisdom of Sameness, Wisdom of Differentiation, Wisdom of Benefiting Others

Notice how clearly Hakuin describes the transition from faith in the Dharma to the realization of the truth of Dharma in one’s own life. “If we listen even once with open heart to this truth, then praise it and gladly embrace it, how much more so then, if on reflecting within ourselves, we directly realize Self-nature, giving proof to the truth that Self-nature is no nature.” *Zazen* is directly related to the realization of the truth that Self-nature is no nature. As we can see, there is no other way we can verify the truth of the Dharma.

We can attain a more concrete idea of the role of *zazen* in Zen Buddhist practice by looking at a rather typical daily schedule of a Zen Buddhist monk. This schedule is not written in stone, as each Master and community has its own rhythm, but this schedule would be very representative.

- **4 am** Wake up
- **4.10 - 5 am** Sutra chanting
- **5 - 7 am** *Zazen* and interview with abbot
- **7 am** Breakfast of rice gruel, salted plum, and pickles.
- **8 - 10.50 am** Cleaning and work duties
- **11 am** Lunch, typically barley rice, miso soup, cooked vegetable, and pickled radish
- **1 - 3.50 pm** Work duty
- **4 pm** Light meal similar to lunch
- **5 - 8.30 pm** *Zazen* and interview with abbot
- **9 pm** Lights out
- **9 - 11 pm** Night sitting.

As we see in the reading for this evening, Zen Buddhists also have a practice called *sesshin*, which involves week-long intensive sessions of *zazen*, combined with sermons by and personal interviews with one’s Roshi. Here is a fairly representative schedule of one day during a *sesshin*:

4:10 a.m.	Wake-up
4:25	Outdoor kinhin [walking meditation]
4:45	Zazen & Private Instruction

7:00	Breakfast
7:20	Work period
8:25	Bell ending work period; rest period
9:25	Zazen warning bell
9:30	Zazen
10:15	Dharma Talk
11:25	Zazen
12:30 p.m.	Lunch, followed by rest period
1:55	Zazen warning bell
2:00	Zazen & Private Instruction
4:00	Chanting
4:20	Calisthenics
5:00	Zazen
5:35	Dinner, followed by rest period
6:55	Zazen warning bell
7:00	Zazen & Private Instruction

We see an example of what happens to the monk in *sesshin* with the story that Shibayama Roshi tells about his own experience as a monk:

I had already spent three years at the monastery and was in the abyss of darkness. I did not know how to proceed, where to go, or what to do. There is an occasion in the *sesshin* (the intensive week-long training period at a monastery) when every monk has to go to the Master's room for *sanzen* [instruction], which is the occasion for a monk to show his Zen ability to his teacher in private. (It is totally different from logical or philosophical discussions, or questions and answers.) I struck the bell of *sanzen* and stepped into the Master's room feeling like a lamb dragged to a slaughter house, for I did not have anything to say. In a fix, I instantly raised my hand and exclaimed, "The Truth pervading the whole universe!" The Master, with piercing eyes, stood up and drove me out of the room of *sanzen*, saying, "You good-for-nothing monk! You had better return to college!" I shall never forget the pain I had at this Master's rebuke.

The koan discipline is added to this round of practice to give focus to the practice of *zazen*, for the thought is that only by combining *zazen* with a personally assigned koan, together with repeated interviews with one's own Roshi, can one cast away one's dualistic and discursive mind, and break through the gateless barrier of Zen. As Shibayama Roshi says in tonight's reading:

In Zen training one has to strive with soul and body to transcend his dualistic discriminating consciousness. One has to come to the ultimate extremity where any slightest touch may effect a great change in his personality, so fundamental as to be described by saying that "the earth splits and the mountains collapse." He has to plunge into the abyss of "sheer darkness altogether," as an old Master expressed it.

Once one has attained this state of consciousness, one is capable of breaking through to the Zen of One Finger. But it takes a lifetime of sutra study and chanting, as well as a rigorous regimen of *zazen* with a focus on one's personally assigned koan, to reach the point of being plunged into the abyss of Great Doubt so that one can break through to satori.