



Mountains Talking

Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver

Spring 2008

Embracing the Dark Side of the Sacred

Excerpted from a teisho delivered by Henry Danan Roshi on Jan. 13, 2008

Like it or not, admit it or not, we are subject to *all* the ten thousand shocks that flesh is heir to, as Hamlet put it. Sickness, old age and death are tracking us down daily. The real possibility of loss of sight or reason, severe accident, paralysis, poverty, and total aloneness are always there. Until we actually befall such tragedy or really get old and ill and finally are on our deathbed, we may somehow manage to ignore or distract ourselves from these specters. But many of these difficulties are simply impossible to ignore; we encounter inevitable loss and disappointments along the way with their attending grief, sorrow, anxiety, depression, and despair.

The Buddha said that he really taught but one thing: release from suffering. The Buddha is beyond a doubt the greatest psychotherapist that ever lived. He found a way through suffering, a way to live in peace *in the very midst of life's sorrows*.

The Buddha saw that suffering is caused by clinging. How is our craving, grasping and clinging the cause of our suffering?

Not realizing that what we call our self and everything else is impermanent, fleeting, and ephemeral, we grasp at the constant flux as though it were something stable, and this is the cause of our suffering. *Clinging* to the notion of permanence is the cause of our suffering. The more we attach to the self and insist upon having things our own way, the greater is our suffering.

Most important of all, the Buddha realized that this impermanence itself, this no fixed, abiding sense of existence, this no-self, this emptiness, *is* the Buddha nature, our divine nature, our perfect, unsullied ground of being.

So we sit up straight and work to be unattached to all thoughts, feelings, moods, memories, imaginings, fantasies and reach the bare emptiness of the mind. We find eternal

serenity right here where we have always been, in the common miracle of our own divinity.

The only way to realize this sublime, eternal, infinite, joyous nature is to stop running away from the reality of our lives, to stop trying to escape the circumstances we find ourselves in, to stop trying to avoid or dodge just what is going on. There will always be pain and suffering; that is the human condition. But the Buddha taught that “we increase our suffering through our attempts to avoid it,” and that “the only durable freedom from pain and suffering lies in its absolute acceptance.”¹

At this time the term “radical acceptance” is being used a great deal in Buddhism. One teacher said, “When you truly understand that the present moment is all there is, you have no choice but radical acceptance.”² And yet we tend to resist what we experience as unpleasant in our lives and thus miss the eternal perfection and serenity that underlies that pain, trauma, stress, or anguish. We don't have trouble accepting what is pleasant, but we have enormous trouble accepting pain, disappointment, distress, grief, chaos, and conflict.

This is a tragedy, for these are all simply the dark side of the sacred. In the US today, our education, society, and culture teach us to avoid the dark side of ourselves and the world. Spend one evening watching just the commercials on network television, and it's crystal clear. We are taught from the cradle to avoid discomfort of any kind and to strive to have everything our own way; this is what is considered the good life.

So this morning, we'll examine this business of accepting the dark side and finding release *right there*.

An excellent place to begin is with the koans. Not only do the sayings and doings of the ancient masters point directly at that dimension of absolute freedom, they are completely

devoid of the least bit of sentimentality.

Case 5 in *The Gateless Barrier*, “Hsiang-yen: Up a Tree,” reads:

Hsiang-yen said, “It’s as though you were up in a tree, hanging from a branch by your teeth. Your hands can’t grasp a branch and your feet can’t touch one. Someone appears beneath the tree and asks, ‘What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?’ If you do not answer, you fail the questioner and evade your responsibility. If you do answer, you lose your life. What do you do?”

It’s as though you were up in a tree, hanging from a branch by your teeth. What an excruciating image! Hanging there in pain and utter desperation! Hsiang-yen is presenting the human condition — *dukkha*, anguish, pain, suffering. He is not a sadist. Master Hsiang-yen is trying to help us, to help us transcend our suffering and be free.

Yes, we all hang there from time to time—and we are all hanging there constantly to one degree or another. And of course sometimes the shit really hits the fan and we hang there, flailing around in excruciating pain. At such a time, what do we do?

Some years back, a scholarly, elderly gentleman came to one of our seminars and began to attend teishos regularly. He would listen to the teishos and then go home and email me, opening up a discussion about the koan that the teisho investigated. This was his form of inquiry and practice. This went on for some time, until I gave a teisho on this koan, “Up a Tree.” After the teisho he emailed me that he had enjoyed the teisho and found the koan very profound. He said he realized that the resolution to the koan was simply to *let go*. When you encounter hard times, just let go of all your pain and suffering. Just let go of it and be free!

I wrote him back and said I was glad that he enjoyed the teisho. I told him, however, that his resolution to the koan—to just let go of suffering—is entirely incorrect. He became furious and wrote, “How dare you say that I don’t understand this koan!” And he never returned.

Now, this man’s response to the koan challenge is most common. That is why it’s such a good koan. When we are suffering badly, all we want to do is get out of the soup, escape, run away! This response—to just try to let go of all the suffering and so become free of it—reflects both the self-preservative nature of the ego and our cultural conditioning. Psychology is for the most part concerned

with the modification of the self, with becoming a better person, “a new and improved version of yourself—able to cope with difficulties of all kinds”³ Yet this is the failing of most psychotherapy as a way of resolving suffering at its root: most often, therapy itself is another attempt at escape.

We chant often, our true nature is eternal, joyous, selfless, and pure. You will never know that nature, your very essence that is the foundation of being, if you are constantly trying to run away from yourself and your circumstances. You are going in the opposite direction. That’s why enlightenment is called taking the backward step. Back right into *what is*. If we can hang in there with our grief, pain, and fear, it can open us up to something deep, mysterious, and vast—call it wisdom, or call it compassion.

One of the most important experiences I’ve had at this Temple was during a Thanksgiving ceremony of gratitude in which a member said that he was grateful for the difficult, excruciating times that he was going through. It hit me like a bolt of lightning. A mystic Christian aphorism tells us, “God sends despair not to destroy us but to awaken a new life in us.”

It’s as though you were up in a tree, hanging from a branch by your teeth. Your hands can’t grasp a branch and your feet can’t touch one. At such a time, what should you do?! *Enter there.* Thank you, Hsiang-yen!

Case 17 in *The Blue Cliff Record*, “Hsiang Lin’s Sitting Long and Getting Tired,” reads:

A monk asked Hsiang Lin, “What is the meaning of the Ancestor’s coming from the West?”

Hsiang Lin said, “Sitting long and getting tired.”

The monk wants some good news. He wants to hear the master speak of the unspeakable joy of awakening—the sublime essence, the vastness and freedom and wonder in

Mountains Talking is a quarterly newsletter published by:

The Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver
3101 West 31st Ave. Denver, CO 80211
303-455-1500 (Tel.), 303-455-1062 (Fax)
E-mail: office@zencenterofdenver.org
Website: www.zencenterofdenver.org
Spiritual Director: Rev. Danan Henry, Roshi

encountering the absolute nature of ourselves and the universe. Yes, there is such a thing. But how does Hsiang Lin point to it when asked what it is? He says, "Sitting long and getting tired."

That has special significance for those who have attended sesshin (7-day retreats). We know what he is talking about! We sit zazen in sesshin for hour after hour after hour. *And we hurt!* Not just physically. We sit here and experience loneliness, confusion, desires, hopes, fears, self-doubt, feelings of insufficiency, despair, and anguish with no escape in sight.

What is the meaning of the Ancestor's coming from the West? Sitting long and getting tired. Are you willing, do you have the courage, to sit long and get tired and all that that implies? If so, you are in the right place and you *will* enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and what is more, you will become a Bodhisattva.

For sorrow, grief, and pain are not necessary evils that we have to grit our teeth and bear. They are fertile landscapes that we can courageously learn to accept and walk through with a calm and loving heart, thus realizing compassion and empathy. They are the path of the Bodhisattva.

Case 43 in *The Blue Cliff Record*, "Tung-shan's No Cold or Heat," reads:

A monk asked Tung-shan, "When the cold and heat come, how can we avoid them?"

Tung-shan said, "Why don't you go where there is no cold or heat?"

The monk said, "Where is the place where there is no cold and heat?"

Tung-shan said, "When cold, let the cold kill you; when hot, let the heat kill you."

It's not that complicated. When we are able to face a difficult situation or our condition squarely, courageously, honorably, we feel a great relief, even joy. And yet when we experience distress, fear, anguish, that is the last place we want to visit. We are convinced that there is something wrong with trauma, fear, depression, that these are somehow not a legitimate part of living. We just want to escape.

We are not well prepared to accept conflict, chaos, destruction, death, and annihilation. Yet it is simply the dark

side of the sacred. In modern American culture, we don't have prototypes like Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction and creation, dripping with blood, nor Shiva, the Hindu deity of destruction and transformation. Our notion of the sacred does not seem to include natural chaos, violence, conflict, and death.

The psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan, author of the book *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair*, said in an interview for *The Sun* magazine:

Americans tend to have a naiveté about life, always expecting it to be rosy. When something painful happens, we feel that we are no good, that we have failed at achieving a good life. We have no myths to guide us through the painful and perilous journey of dark emotions, and yet we all suffer these journeys at some point. We have high rates of depression, anxiety, and addiction in this country, but we have no sense of the sacred possibilities of our so-called illnesses. We have no goddess like Kali to guide us. Instead we have a medical culture. Suffering is considered pathological, and the answer to suffering is pharmacology.⁴

Yes, can we open ourselves to this rich, fertile, dark side of our natures, accept ourselves and our circumstances completely. We can practice *there* and let our suffering expand us and lead us to sacred ground.

Commenting on one of the most wonderful and liberating passages in the New Testament (2 Cor. 6:10), R. H. Blyth wrote:

"As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." This does not mean that when we are in pain or grieving we look round and find something to be happy about, whether in the present or in the distant future. It means that pain and grief have in them something essential, something eternal and divine, a depth and yet a closeness which brings us so near to life that the spirit of life which is also the spirit of joy, the joy of living, stirs within us. And the depth of the one determines the depth of the other.⁵

If you have grasped the substance of this teisho, you will not find the following two statements by contemporary Zen masters strange or puzzling.

A Zen master said, "Now that I'm enlightened, I'm just as miserable as I ever was." Can you see that this is a wonderful statement? This misery is now his old home where he is able to be complete and comfortable!

One day Shunryu Suzuki Roshi entered the zendo on the fourth day of a sesshin, when people were experiencing considerable physical, mental, and emotional pain, and he gave this encouragement talk. He said, "The problems you are now experiencing will continue for the rest of your life."⁶

Isn't it a relief to realize that these dark emotions are a natural part of living, and furthermore that they are our teachers and can guide us into the Kingdom of Heaven? That in fact, they are not separate from our divine nature, they are the dark side of that nature, of the sacred? When we can admit to that and finally embrace our life in its entirety, then we realize that this ordinary life, this moment-to-moment living, with all its laughter and tears, *is* the face of the divine.

We'll let the wonderful Sufi poet Rumi send us on our way today.

This being human is a guesthouse
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

¹ Lawrence Shainberg, *Ambivalent Zen* (New York: Random House, 1997)

² Eido Shimano Roshi, "No Choice But Radical Acceptance," *Buddhadharma*, Spring 2007, p. 30

³ Judith Leif, "Forum: Psychology and Buddhism," *Buddhadharma*, Winter 2007, p. 49

⁴ Miriam Greenspan, "Through a Glass Darkly," *The Sun*, Jan. 2008, p. 6

⁵ R. H. Blyth, *Buddhist Sermons on Christian Texts* (Tokyo: Kokudoshu, 1952), p. 4

⁶ Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, *Essential Zen* (Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 16

Zen Center of Denver
3101 West 31st Ave.
Denver, CO 80211