

ENACTING BUDDAH'S WISDOM

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How do we meet ourselves one another, each thing? How do we make sense of this life? How can we re-think and re-feel the world in ourselves so that we can begin to function as a model of how we want the world to be?

About one year ago, following zazen and morning service, I was leaving Genrin Temple in the Schwarzwald to go to the nearby town to purchase fresh bread and rolls for our informal, day-off breakfast. As I was about to leave, the head cook approached me with a small wire cage containing a tiny gray mouse. It was caught in the pantry the night before. He asked me to let it loose in the fields on my way to the bakery.

I set the cage on the front passenger seat and started out of our parking lot. I looked at the cage and the tiny mouse it contained. The mouse looked up at me. It was no longer simply a mouse: it was ... Francesca! My mind raced with concern for her; a house mouse un-accustomed to the outdoors, she likely would not survive in the open fields. I thought I might hide her in my pocket and let her loose in the bakery when Herr Schelgel and Frau Landis, the baker and proprietress, weren't looking: no, that wouldn't do. I could bring her back to the Temple: we were already, unwillingly, feeding lots of her family and friends, while trying to trap as many as possible, and that didn't make sense either. What to do? I pulled the car over beside an open field. I opened the door to the cage. Francesca did not move. I shook the cage gently. Francesca looked up at me and still did not move. I turned the cage on its side and she tumbled out. We parted ways, and I slowly drove back to the Temple.

To see ourselves in all things and to see each thing we meet in us

"It is just a mouse is a way of saying Francesca fits into a category and is simply an object, separate from me. And, though this is seemingly practical and in some sense accurate, we may discover that this is just one way of looking at things. As Dogen Zenji says: "to carry the self forward is delusion; to allow the 10,000 things to come forward and be ripened and authenticated within our experience is awakening." To carry a self forward is to lead with an idea of a self, to bring our idea of a self forward. It is to treat the world as "other," as objective. To allow the world to come forward begins to dissolve the sense of "otherness." To no longer meet the world based on the habitual idea of who we take ourselves to be, is to begin to see things in their own terms, not simply shaped by our views, beliefs and preferences. Practice is not about getting rid of a self, it is about seeing through false ideas about a substantial self. So, when we no longer carry a self forward, we may begin see things as they are.

There are few explicit rules mentioned when one first comes to Genrinji. However, one suggestion that is often made is not to look around the meditation hall. To not look around is to not think around; it is to feel around. It is to soften the tendency to see things in terms of what we know. The world is wider than just our ideas about it. We may begin to see without cognizing seeing. This is supported through the practice of seeing things with "soft eyes." A soft eye is one that is

accepting and receptive; we can feel the world meeting us in our perceptions. A “hard eye” on the other hand is one that apprehends, reaches out and grabs hold of the situation. It is the kind of eye that is extremely useful when driving in busy city traffic, where we need to keep objects, particularly automobiles and pedestrians, separate. When the eye becomes soft, things come to rest; they filter to the back of the eye and settle there. Each arising may find a resting place within us.

The world that we join with is not found apart from our perceiving and knowing it. When we allow things to come forward and authenticate and cultivate themselves, we may not only see the garden outside our window and see it settling in us, but also we may see the mind seeing the garden. We may come to recognize seeing as the process of seeing, and, further, as the process of seeing the mind seeing. This is the gesture of mind settling on itself. This is to know mind in each situation, to settle in closeness. Each arising, whether new to our experience or not, is intimate, a piece of our mind. Everything is close.

This knowing the process of knowing informs who we take ourselves to be, what we take the world to be, and how we know the world. It can also affect the views that shape our experience, views that are often deeply embedded in us, prior to perception. For example, our usual way of relating to space is that it separates things: I am here and you are over there. When separateness dissolves, we may also know that space connects: we are here. My teacher Zentatsu Baker-roshi often uses the dharma phrase (i.e., a phrase that we may repeat on each encounter - with others, with each arising) “already connected” as an antidote to our assumed separation and to help root connectedness in us.

The maturing of these experiences, in which we know the world is profoundly inter-related and interfused, is to simultaneously see ourselves in all things and to see each thing we meet in us. We may call this “non-otherness,” and it is an entry to the practice of compassion.

When the foot is hurting, the hand reaches down in comfort

In the early 1990’s, my great good Dharma brother Issan Dorsey Roshi started the first hospice for people with AIDS in San Francisco. Maitri hospice began when Issan took a young homeless man with AIDS (at the time he met JD he was living in a laundromat) back to the Hartford Street Zen Center, cleaned him up and gave him a place to sleep. For Issan, it was not about starting a social service project, though an important and much needed one resulted; it was about connection and care. Maitri quickly became a model for a number of such programs throughout the city, and a writer came to interview Issan for an article about Engaged Buddhism. Issan said he did not know much about it: he only knew that when someone fell down, he would help them get up ... it was nothing special. When the foot is hurting, the hand reaches down in comfort.

From the usual perspective of separateness: I am here, someone who needs help is over there, and I am going to do something for them. When we locate ourselves in our present situation as we are, not limited by self-referential thinking, the situation itself can be a point of reference. So, from a perspective of connectedness, to save all beings is to save oneself and to save oneself is to save all beings.

However, there is a potential problem here. We may believe that connectedness is better than separateness. We may view connectedness as a new improved strategy, a better way to live this life. And, we may make connectedness into one thing as opposed to another, a subtle expression of continued separation. To practice is to simultaneously know each arising as both distinct and also inseparable. It is often described as “not one, not two,” which points to this dynamic, interrelated, ever-changing, being.

Warm-heartedness

How might we live in a way that expresses and also continually unfolds our ever-changing, interrelated Being? It is said that a meeting took place between fellow adepts in early 9th Century China. Yunyan asked his older brother monk Daowu, “What does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion do with so many hands and eyes?” Daowu answered, “It is like reaching for a pillow in the night.”

The emphasis in Daowu’s response is not so much about being a Bodhisattva, as it is about how we function in our ordinary life. . The job of consciousness is to pin things down, to make the world seem predictable, permanent. Practice is to see the world as an activity, not an entity; it is to view this life as undetermined, vibrant, and constantly in flux. Buddha’s wisdom flows from this awareness: knowing ourselves, each person, and each thing as impermanent and subject to suffering. Compassion is enacting this wisdom and expressing it in kind-minded, decisive actions, great and small, to help, to benefit and to be of service. Each of us may function as Buddha and may be a Buddha for our own practice.

This reaching takes place in the darkness, which is similar to the feeling of the mind in zazen practice: an abundant richness which is not limited by concepts and mental functioning. When the world is experienced in this way, anything may be possible. The activity of reaching in the night is not about I am here and something is over there; it is about reaching into an unknown territory. It is to know the six senses and to know that the world is not limited to the six senses. It is a kind of blindness in which we are opening to and trusting this world. There is clarity in this unknowing which is free from habitual ways of knowing. This unknowing means we are not constrained by what we know. The world is wide and limitless.

The mind of wisdom is warm-heartedness that touches everything and reaches everywhere. Each being, each thing we meet is magnificent, and each is the most important one. In connectedness, we continuously explore interpenetrating, unfolding, ever-changing being. Practice is about manifesting the emptiness of all being in each situation. This is uncontrived compassion.

The Zen monk Wansong described the functioning of the Bodhisattva in the following way:

*It's like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls
On a warm day in a gentle breeze ...
It accords with things and comes with time.
Unstopped, unhindered,
It is like the moon in the sky revolving naturally.*