

Affirming Faith in Mind (12) miscellaneous talks

Peter Thompson

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Miranda Meditation Group

I want to talk about interviews, the immediacy and understanding in our practice. In the famous poem that we always recite at retreats called *Shodoka* (*Song of Liberation*, 7th Century Chinese discourse attributed to Yongjia Xuanjue 655-713, a student of Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of China). He talks about the Zen doctrine of immediacy. In our path there has always been a sense of immediacy.

In many paths in the history of religion and spirituality there's often a sense of having to forever to go to the point of something. Some people draw it along endlessly like sheep dawdling across a pasture. Five hundred years, or five hundred lifetimes they may or may not get to the other side. There is a sense of dawdling, a sense of nothing to be understood, no insight to be gained. There is a general sleepiness that engulfs a lot of practices, to be honest.

I spent a year in India with different teachers. Typically in India as in most spiritual traditions there wasn't the doctrine of immediacy. When I encountered Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981, India) he had the doctrine of immediacy. He was very much like our ancient and modern Zen teachers. Very immediate encounter, very immediate realization – that's all he was interested in. And so he had the doctrine of direct contact, immediacy.

The Buddha gave many teachings to many different levels of aspirant Buddhahood. He would teach according to the level and the inclination of the aspirants. He would measure the level of his teachings. So in Buddhism we have a lot of different levels of teaching. Some levels equate to the Hindu levels of no immediacy, have lifetimes to get there, don't push yourself, there's no hurry. Some of the levels of Buddhist teaching equate to that, seemingly in some of the Theravada schools. Buddha on the occasion where he gave a direct and immediate teaching, only one person in the audience was said to have received that teaching directly. That was Mahakasyapa, who is the founder of our Chan, Zen sect or group. He had an immediate direct transmission of the teaching. On that occasion on Vulture Peak, Buddha didn't utter any words. All he did was held up a flower. Mahakasyapa had a direct apprehension of the truth once that flower was held up. Mysterious though it may seem, it was an immediate direct transmission.

Our school comes from that moment, that nanosecond at Vulture Peak when that transmission happened. Buddha had so many levels of teaching – indirect, direct, many teachings over many lifetimes. Here there is no preparation. There is no rehearsal. When you come down to dokusan, there is no rehearsal. There is immediacy, there is no hesitation, no procrastination.

We are here in our school to have immediate direct transmission. We don't have to prepare – the play is on in two years, so we are going to start

rehearsals now. No, there is none of that in our school. “Come as You Are” is a hymn that my mother loved which was sung in the Catholic church. “Come as You Are” can be relegated to the teaching in our practice in our school. Come immediately as you are without any embellishments, with no preparation. Because even if you are fox or a cat, any incarnation, you come as you are. You can be awakened in that incarnation, completely as you are.

We have talked about this before in the sense of working with what is, the truth is always there, it doesn't depend on anything else. You can become the greatest criminal, commit the greatest crimes, you can be awakened even through the haze and the mists of those crimes. You can be awakened immediately to your inner true nature, which the Third Patriarch variously describes in Affirming Faith in Mind, as true emptiness. He talks about it in a number of different ways to awaken the listener.

When we have our meeting in the interview room we don't engage in discursive talk as much as direct transmission of whatever is there to be transmitted. Whatever understanding is there will come out. The teacher can be awakened by the person who comes into the room. The person who comes into the room can have an awakening. It doesn't depend on the personages. It doesn't depend on the roles there. In reality there is no teacher and no student. They are just roles – the truth is not dependent on that. It is already there for everybody. It's already there, it's just allowing that reality to emerge in this situation. Normally it gets clouded over. Here we have a space where that reality can emerge.

So what is it that emerges?

It's not to do with any kind of thinking. It happens by itself if two people are interested, it will happen by itself. It's not to do with any kind of ego-effort either. That gets in the way of any kind of understanding. We come into a space here right through the evening where we let go of our thinking mind, just by being here, allowing the space to be here, by relaxing into what already is the case for us in our reality. Words are used of course, I'm using words right now, but when we do our zazen practice we go to a place as the *Shodoka* describes, “I enter the space beyond words”. It happens by itself. Time drops away, thinking mind drops, and it just happens without any self-consciousness.

When you go to sleep at night, you put your head on the pillow, you create all the conditions, and you are off to sleep. If you want to sleep, you don't go and watch television with loud music on. That is not going to enhance sleep. What enhances sleep is creating the conditions – the bed, soft pillow, covers – all those conditions create the possibility of sleep. If you are on the train on the way home it is harder to go to sleep than it is in your bed at night.

So coming here makes you more likely, more accident-prone for awakenings than going to the football, drinking beer or going to a noisy party. Coming here is like the set-up of going to sleep. There is the pillows, the soft bed, the darkened room. All that enhances and creates the conditions where sleep can happen. Here is a similar situation that traditionally was found to help create awakenings.

The interview room is similar. The interview room is a place that helps create awakenings. It enhances the possibility for that to happen.

Awakening has an immediacy to it. It's not to be awakened in Heaven, five lifetimes away, it's not to procrastinate about your own awakening. There is always an immediacy about it that is here, now.

In terms of understanding and words, I like to recall the story of the famous teacher Tung Shan who was preaching about the sutras. He was lecturing on the Diamond Sutra. He was heading south to help the poor southerners. He was a teacher of the Northern school in China. He was one of the professional preachers who wrote commentaries and then talked about the sutras. This tradition was in India as well, and has been around for thousands of years. They were called pundits who specialized in studying the teachings, wrote commentaries on them, then expounded them verbally to the people. That was their role in life, their job. They got donations, patronage for that work.

This lecturer headed south where he heard that the people were sitting quietly and believed in silent illumination without any words. He wanted to teach them so he collected his cartload of books and commentaries and headed south. It was a long journey, pulling the cart full of books. Approaching a temple he was planning to visit, he felt thirsty. An old tea lady saw him coming. He asked for a cup of refreshment and she said "I will only give you tea and refreshment if you can answer me this question."

He said, "Yes, yes, I am a teacher of religion, of spirituality, of Zen. What is the question?"

She said, "I notice that all your commentaries there are on the Diamond Sutra it says the mind of the past is ungraspable, future mind is ungraspable, even present mind is ungraspable. Which mind will you have to drink this tea?"

The teacher was totally astounded with this question. It was the last thing he expected from a humble tea lady. He was perplexed, suddenly in shock. He went back to his cart and nervously thumbed through the texts trying to find an answer with what he had been trading with all his life – words. We notice the Third Patriarch says – this is where words all fail to reach. *No yesterday, no tomorrow, not even today*. These are the last lines of the poem, *Affirming Faith in Mind* that we recite each evening.

So he thumbed through his cartload endlessly. You might imagine. He was a proud man, and an hour went by, two hours. Finally he came back and said he couldn't answer the question. We don't know if he was served the drink or not, but he headed off with his cart and reached the temple where he was going. He entered the courtyard of the temple. In his understanding he had a great shock but he had enough awareness to be humble enough to burn all his commentaries there in the temple grounds that night. There was a great fire. He burnt all the commentaries he had spent years collecting and writing. Later that night he had an interview with the teacher and had an awakening because he had gone through that understanding – that the words he had collected were useless. They were just concepts, words – they were useless.

That is a question for us.

If there is no yesterday, no tomorrow, no today, then what is it?

All those things are just words, just concepts. They exist as words. In our interview time we are interested in the reality that is beyond words, where words all fail to reach. It doesn't mean we don't use words. Of course we are going to use words.

But our main interest is what we call in Zen, the Unborn Mind. Teacher Bankei Zenji (*Bankei Yokatu*, 1622-93, Japan) called it the Unborn. In it, everything starts to get resolved. A lot of our time is spent outside the Unborn Mind. The Unborn Mind is our true nature – it is always there. It is just that it gets covered over. Here in our space and in the interview room, we are in a space where things that have been covered over can relax and come out a little bit. We don't pretend here that we have any other time. This is it. This is the time now, not next lifetime, not five lifetimes. We can dawdle like the sheep dawdling in the paddock. But it is immediate – it's here now.

In the *Shodoka*, the writer says, the hungry are served a king's repast, why can't they eat it? It is already here, what we are searching for. It's already here.

What prevents us from enjoying it? Nothing much.

When I was in Japan I talked to the teacher in the interview room and I said, "My ego is too big, I can't..."

He said. "Show me your ego." I looked for it and couldn't find any ego there. It was my mind that was creating a barrier.

I said, "It takes a big effort."

He said, "No, no, no. Not a big effort. It's like putting your finger through paper. Is that hard to push through some paper? Particularly wet paper, is it hard? It's pushing your finger through paper. It's as easy as that." He had enough command of English to say these very important words to me. It doesn't take many words.

Ego-mind wants to create a huge ego-effort. That gets in the way. That blocks anything we do. A huge effort in anything we do will block us, whereas soft gentle intention will get through. But a huge effort to get something will block itself. It's not about that. We call it effortless effort. Just that intention to do it, if that is there, is enough. We don't have to have a perfect intention, just the beginning of an intention is enough.

You go to bed at night, and might have to get up in the morning to do something at a certain time. If the intention is there somehow you wake up. It might be at 6:30 in the morning, and you wake up at 6:25 just in time.

Intention is a very powerful thing.