

Wind Bell

Fall 1993

“Just This Person”

Abbot Tenshin Reb Anderson

I want to say a few words to encourage all of us to practice upright sitting. My intention to speak in this way comes from my faith and understanding that upright sitting is the way of entering the self-fulfilling awareness which all the awakened ancestors of our tradition have held to be the true path of peace and freedom for all living beings.

For me, upright sitting means for each of us to be thoroughly and completely ourselves. So that by fully acknowledging and expressing our limited individuality we totally transcend it. By sitting still in each moment of our life and becoming just ourselves, we may finally realize that we are not ourselves at all, but that in reality we are so deeply connected with each other and so completely supported by each other that in fact we are nothing other than all living beings. Realizing this is realizing Buddha's mind because Buddha's mind is the mind of all sentient beings. In such a way we are awakened from our fundamental human delusion that we are separate from each other and are free from all the misery which is born of this delusion.

Just before leaving, Good Servant (Tung-shan Liang-Chieh) asked, “If after many years, someone should ask if I am able to portray the Master's likeness, how should I respond?”

After remaining quiet for a while, Cloudy Cliff (Yün-yen T'an-sheng) said, “Just this person.”

Good Servant was lost in thought. Cloudy Cliff said, “Good Servant, having assumed the the burden of this Great Matter, you must be very cautious.”

Good Servant remained dubious about what Cloudy Cliff had said. Later, as he was crossing a River, he saw his reflected image and experienced a great awakening to the meaning of the previous exchange. He composed the following gatha:

Earnestly avoid seeking outside,
Lest it recede far from your self.
Today I am walking alone,
Yet everywhere I meet him.

He is now no other than myself,
But I am not now him.
He is now no other than myself,
But I am not now he.
It must be understood in this way
In order to merge with Suchness.

When we wholeheartedly practice the teaching of “just this person,” all beings come forth to meet us, and we realize that they are “now no other than myself,” no matter what their form in terms of race, gender, species, and so on.

The way of freedom from self delusion comes forth from the thorough acknowledgment of such delusion. Our compassionate ancestors studied, understood and taught completely how self-delusion arises and how it is the source of all our misery. Buddhas are those who deeply enter into learning about self-delusion and are greatly awakened in the midst of studying delusion. We call the gate to this liberating study of the self, “upright sitting.”

Our great ancestor Thoreau says in “Walden: “You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods, that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns.”

By sitting still we enter into the real study of the self. By just sitting we give up mediating our experience and preparing ourselves for it. Thus the self that comes to us through upright sitting is not a self we choose to study, not the self we expect to study, but the self that “may exhibit itself to us by turns” when we just sit. It is a fresh, unexpected, troublesome, difficult, immediate self. This is the self that’s fruitful to study, because when the self which appears is fresh and immediate and not what we expect, we are shocked out of our numb complacency and into total engagement with it.

I find that the more troubled I am by an event, the more immediate it is; and the more immediate, the more engaging. So I’m interested in what’s fresh and immediate for people, and lately, as a way of finding what’s most immediate I’ve been asking people, “What is bothering you most?” One person answered that she has been bothered by her swallowing while she is sitting in the zendo. It’s not that she couldn’t swallow, but rather, that she was doing so often and noisily. She was troubled and worried that her swallowing might be bothering her neighbors. As she continued to sit and watch her breathing and swallowing and worrying, she noticed something else. She noticed that the reason she was worried about bothering others was that she was afraid they would dislike her for the noises she was making. She was bothered by a fear that she would be disliked. After telling me about all this, she said, “Is this kinda like the right direction?”

I was very happy to hear her story of upright sitting and said, “I don’t think it’s right or wrong but I do think it’s very good that through your sitting you are becoming more engaged with yourself. This self was not the self she might have chosen to study, but an unexpected self which she witnessed being born in the advent of swallowing, worrying, and fear.

At first she thought she was concerned about bothering or harming others, but sitting and looking more deeply, things turned around and she saw that she was worried about others harming her. She thought she was concerned about others, but realized that she was really concerned about herself.

In our tradition there are innumerable stories like this which show that when we sincerely practice the ancestor’s simple instruction of “just this person,” we will see how completely contradictory an independent self is, and the more we see how self-contradictory the self is, the more we realize who we really are and the more we are fulfilled. The more fully we can affirm the contradictions in our life. And if

we can fully affirm these contradictions, we will be able to affirm our death. Thus we will have the courage to just sit and be our self beyond our idea of our self—our self in complete identity with what it is not—namely, all living beings. This process culminates in our realizing that we are in a paradoxical way completely identical with the other, thus freeing us from our basic delusion of a separate self.

Referring to this awakening from the nightmare of separate existence, the old Buddha, Yunmen said, “On South Mountain clouds rise, on North Mountain rain falls.”

Here is one more story of sitting upright. When George Washington Carver was a little boy, he lived in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains in Missouri. On a certain piece of remote and unused land he created his own little garden. From discarded material he built a secret greenhouse far back in the woods. When asked what he was doing out in the woods, he said, “I go to my garden hospital and take care of many sick plants.” He brought sick plants to his greenhouse and took care of them and they became well; they became healthy. He knew how to heal the plants. The ladies in his neighborhood heard about him and ask if he would take care of their sick house plants. He did. He took care of them and then he returned them when they were healthy again. They asked him, “Little boy, how do you know how, where did you learn how to heal these plants?” Little George said, “All the little flowers talk to me and so do the hundreds of living things. I learn what I know by watching and loving everything.”

“Watching and loving everything” was his way of upright sitting . This was his gate into the true study of self. He realized himself through his intimacy with the plants, through his listening to the flowers. Watching and loving them was his fulfillment. For him, the plants were not something external. They were the flowering of his genius, and by fulfilling him they were healed.

Sitting upright with innumerable living things, we naturally enter the self-fulfilling awareness of Buddha, the awareness which liberates and heals all living beings.

AN
10/3/22