

Wind Bell

Winter 1995

“The End of Suffering: A Christmas Koan”

Abbot Tenshin Reb Anderson

The great teacher Nagarjuna said:

Without a foundation in the relative truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation is not achieved.

Without relying on everyday common practices, the ultimate truth cannot be expressed. Without expressing the ultimate truth, Nirvana cannot be attained. Zen stories often indicate the ultimate truth:

A monk asked Zhaozhou, “In the eon of emptiness is there still someone cultivating practice?”

Zhaozhou said, “What do you mean by the eon of emptiness?”

The monk said, “That is when not a single thing exists.”

Zhaozhou said, “Only this can be called ultimate practice.”

If I say, “this is where not a single thing exists,” it sounds like I’m bringing up the ultimate truth. When I bring that up I hope that you have suffered enough in this lifetime to realize that I only dare teach this ultimate truth after you have studied and been relying on the relative truth for a long time. The relative truth is that suffering appears in this world. In this world, you and I are separate, and this clinging to separate existence is the cause of suffering. This is relative truth. The ultimate truth is that there is nobody separate from anybody, that there is not one single thing that exists by itself. I hope when I say that, you don’t think it means that there is nothing there. Please understand that “Not a single thing exists,” means that there is not a single thing existing by itself, that there is no person, existing by herself.

The monk said, “That is where not a single thing exists,” and Zhaozhou said, “Only this can be called ultimate practice.” The eon of emptiness is a time and a place where things do not exist on their own. Can you imagine a world where nothing appears by itself, where each thing comes up with everything, where everything comes up by the kindness of everything? Everything comes up with the support of everything, and everything that comes up supports everything? Only this can be called the ultimate practice. But we rely on the relative truth in order to receive this ultimate teaching. We rely on the relative truth that “I by myself practice Zen.” This is practicing relative truth. I myself suffer, you yourself suffer. We rely on this as our base, and it is there that we receive the teaching that everything is liberated right now and nothing is tied down.

In the realm where not a single thing exists by itself, anything is possible. In the eon of emptiness anything can happen. When things exist by themselves the possibilities are radically constricted. Only women bear children, and women who are barren cannot. It may not seem to be a problem that only women can bear children. But if we think so, we have not studied relative truth completely. It’s painful for us when we can’t give birth. That is one reason why we go to war. Although war is horrible and destructive, still, it gives some men access to the radiance and vitality of creation. Barren women may

also feel excluded from creation. But women who have children suffer too, if they feel stuck in that situation. This is the realm of relative truth.

In the *Prajna Paramita Sutra*, Subhuti asked Buddha: “From where does a Bodhisattva go forth into the practice of wisdom beyond wisdom?” Buddha said that you go forth from the relative world. If we don’t put our foot down fully on the earth; we cannot go forward; if we go forward without really accepting the relative truth we will misunderstand the ultimate.

In the world of relative truth we think that we can’t be ourselves. We might think, “I can be creative and think of something almost impossible, but will they let me do it? If I were just myself I would take my clothes off at the airport. But they might punish me, so I can’t be myself.” This is the relative world. You can be yourself a *little*, but not completely.

In the relative world, if somebody says they have trouble staying awake, I may say, “Try getting more sleep, or run around the block before you sit, or have some green tea, or open your eyes. Look at the spot between your eyebrows; look higher on the wall; chant the Heart Sutra; chant the Bodhisattva vows to yourself; consider how little time you have left,” and so on. When the grass around my house gets yellow, I go to the garden and get compost to put on it. The little grasses stand up and turn green; they like it. But if there is no compost or if I am too busy, they die. Still I do my best to stay awake, to help the grasses grow. This is the relative world, and it’s not workable really. You may think it is not so bad. But really it’s not going to work out. Pretty soon you are going to see that, if you don’t already see it. If you do see it you may have studied the relative world long enough to start practicing the ultimate without being misled.

If you study the world of suffering, you will become aware of your lack of faith and practice. You will become aware that you do not really trust this world. If you think that you really trust the world, do you really trust suffering? Don’t you have a little problem with it? Don’t you have a little doubt? Don’t you think a little bit that there is something that you can’t do? Don’t you feel a little limited, a little trapped? Where’s the world where you can actually just express yourself spontaneously? Where’s the world where you’re not an independent agent who is trapped and tied up?

If we have not studied the world where we are trapped thoroughly enough to realize that we are trapped, and we think that we are free, actually we are still in the world where we’re trapped. We’re just dreaming that we are free and that we can do whatever we want. But we can’t. Everything we do in the world as an independent agent is going to cause problems for ourselves and others. If we do not understand this point, we haven’t studied long enough to enter the ultimate practice from which we can act spontaneously. When we are no longer acting as independent agents, everything that we do will be harmless and we will see that everybody is supporting us. Everybody does support us in the world where not a single thing exists. We have to experience the world where we are tight, limited and anxious. It’s there that we turn and wake up to the world where we spontaneously do the right thing. In the world where there is not a single thing we can just be ourselves. We can just be ourselves when ourself is not one single thing.

Our practice of sitting is a ritual expression of the teaching that you can just be yourself. Just sitting means you can realize the way in any posture. It means you can lie down. It means you don’t have to force yourself to sit still. Manjushri gave Buddha a little talk one time and basically what he said was that

when a person is just a person, this is what we mean by being awake. After his talk, a bunch of upstanding citizens of Buddha's world came up to Manjushri and said, "You are incredibly wise, just like your name says, you are like sweetness and light throughout the universe. You are fantastic. The foremost sage." He said, "O yeah? Well actually you should call me the utmost exponent of greed, hate, and delusion. You should call me the utmost enslaved suffering being. You should call me the utmost bum. I'm an ordinary person. I'm the foremost of the ordinary."

So the thought crosses my mind, why don't we just disband, sell this Green Gulch property and give it to charity, give it to ordinary people. Why have this zendo? This place is for people who can't quite stand to be ordinary people.

They need a lot of help. Most people in society cannot stand to be ordinary. Manjushri went all the way and became completely an ordinary person. Thus he realized that there is really no such thing as an ordinary person living all by herself. This is called waking up. When someone is having trouble staying awake I can give them some advice. But actually, the ultimate practice is, if you are having trouble staying awake, have trouble staying awake. It's okay to try to stay awake when you are having trouble staying awake. It's all right to be a person trying to stay awake. But before you do anything, first of all be this person, and feel what it is like to be a person who is stuck in this state. Being this person is your ticket, your price of admission into the eon of emptiness. Being this person is the way to practice just sitting.

You don't get to be this person by your own personal power. As soon as you are completely this person, you immediately leap beyond the bounds of this person. One of the things that this person can do is to doubt and resist being this person. A person is capable of doing this. So when we are in some state, if it is not really great we imagine some way to make it better. If it is great we think of ways to protect it; and that's fine. That is the relative world. But we should know that at exactly the same time, there is always one who is not concerned with protecting or avoiding any state. This unconcerned one realizes that everybody is helping him, realizes that everybody is helping him to be irritable or happy or whatever.

We cannot be irritable all by ourselves. Everybody has to help us. We can't go to sleep by ourselves; we can't have a hard time; we can't do anything all by ourselves. We can't even feel unloved by ourselves. We can't feel not appreciated by ourselves. We can't experience injustice by ourselves. We also can't experience justice and love by ourselves. Everybody helps us with everything. So the world where we are miserable and irritable and unrecognized and unloved is ultimately the world where not a single thing exists, because we do not exist singly. Right in our misery we are completely supported and completely loved, and completely free to suffer. If we weren't free to suffer we wouldn't be able to. We cannot suffer unless we are allowed to suffer.

When we are joyfully strolling through the Green Gulch gardens on a sunny day, we might think that we are being allowed and supported to stroll through the gardens, and we might say, "Thank you." But when we are suffering, do we see that we are being allowed to suffer, that we are being lovingly supported to suffer? Very few people think that. Even if we do think that way, we probably take it to mean that others are causing us to suffer. Then we blame others rather than thanking them for their kind support.

In the world where I think that I can do things by myself, then when I suffer I don't say thank you to the people who are around me for supporting me and aiding me in my suffering. I feel bad about my suffering, I feel trapped by my suffering, I feel entangled in my suffering, because I think I can do something by myself. But when I no longer fall for that and I'm just suffering, then I realize everybody is helping me, because I couldn't do this suffering by myself. When you realize that everybody is helping you suffer, that is the end of suffering. The expression of suffering doesn't necessarily go away, but you are liberated; you get the joke. In the realm of not a single thing exists, when you are suffering, you say thank you. You feel grateful. When you are suffering and you feel grateful, this is called the end of suffering.

All of us in this session are intimate with this process. We are all suffering, but at a certain point we start feeling grateful in the middle of the same suffering. What is happening? How does this work? Gradually, by hit and miss, we allow ourselves to be this suffering person. By the act of being this suffering person just as we are, we enter the realm where not a single thing exists, and here we are always grateful.

In the realm of being just as we are, anything is possible. How do we enter this realm of unlimited possibility? By tuning in completely to our limited position in the relative world. We tune in by our body, speech, and mind. Right then, the fact of the way we are actually makes anything possible. The way we are is a momentary fleeting production of the entire universe delivered at this time and place. It seems to be something but it is just a soft, flexible overlay on top of unlimited potential. It's just a fleeting thin film of appearance over infinite radiance. But we must completely tune in to such a phenomenon. We must not look forward to it or shrink back from it. If we don't tune into it, this thin film becomes an iron door, "bound and double-chained." Even if the body happens to be golden and blissful we still have to tune into that body. Tuning in means you just tune in to golden bliss and stop, you don't tune in and cuddle it. You just tune in to it being that way, the same as with some crazy, sick, twisted mind or some yucky verbal expression or some painful, sick body. You just tune in to that form. That's it. The practice is not that golden Buddha, it's not that green monster, it's not that sick person, it's not that healthy person, it's not that nice verbal expression, it's not that mean voice, it's not those things. That's not the practice; that's not Buddhism; that's not Zen. Zen is simply that those things are as they are. Zen is the practice of tuning in to the phenomenal present. You need enough faith to tune in exactly, all the way, and not a little less or more.

Whatever we do, there are consequences. If we wear too much makeup there will be consequences. If we don't wear any, there will be consequences. If we shave our heads there will be consequences. Considering the worldly consequences of our actions, we may feel hesitant, hindered and hemmed in. But there is one thing that the world cannot hinder us from, and that is being who we are at this moment. As a matter of fact, this is exactly what the whole world is assisting us in being.

There are many stories about people who do not accept Buddha's compassion and thus do not feel allowed and supported to be just who they are. These people are miserly with themselves and with others. Charles Dickens wrote a story about this, *A Christmas Carol*. In this story, on Christmas Eve, the old miser Scrooge is visited by various ghosts. The first ghost is his former partner, Jacob Marley. Marley is very upset; he isn't a happy ghost, he isn't a mean ghost either. He isn't coming to hurt Scrooge or even to scare Scrooge. He comes to help Scrooge, to tell him how awful it is not to live your life fully every moment.

He comes to tell Scrooge how terrible it is not to practice Zen, the path of compassion for ourselves and others. Marley warns Scrooge that one will be, "captive, bound and double-chained, not to know" that for eons immortal beings have constantly labored for the welfare of this earth and this good maybe wasted if we don't do our part of being thoroughly yourselves. He warns that we don't understand this, there is "no space of regret [that] can make amends for one's life opportunity misused." And he confesses, "Yet such was I, such was I."

Then Scrooge falteringly says "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob!"

"Business, business!" Marley cried, wringing his hands again. "Mankind was my business, the common welfare was my business. Charity, mercy, forbearance, benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were not a drop of water in the incomprehensible ocean of my business!"

That night, three more terrifying spirits also visit Scrooge. Finally, Scrooge is able to accept their compassion, allowing himself to be himself, and thus unleashing his own vast potential for generosity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence. Zen is simply the key that opens the door to our vast potential for goodness. It's a bitter key a lot of the time. It means tuning in to what we are, how we think, what we say, and what we are doing with our bodies. We must be thorough; we must thoroughly be who we are in each moment throughout the day without expecting anything for it. We have to do that in order to drop through this little layer of illusion that is blocking us from our unlimited, spontaneous available goodness.