

We Have to Meet a Buddha
January Intensive Class One
Green Gulch Farm
January 6, 2007

We Have to Meet a Buddha

2500 years ago there was a person. The Buddha appeared as a human being, as a homo sapiens, on this planet, had a name and so on, like us, and spoke to people the true dharma. And then that person, being a person, died. But that person also told us that Buddha doesn't just appear as that person, Buddha appears in many ways. And so it is possible then after the Buddha is gone, to continue to meet Buddha. I guess this is why maybe Buddhism is kind of like a religion in the sense that we're talking about meeting Buddhas, but we don't actually have a human Buddha anymore on this planet. And you can't have a Buddha anymore because Shakyamuni Buddha in this historical container that we're in took up all the Buddha; he's the Buddha. So everybody after him is not a Buddha even if they understand perfectly, his teaching. Still, he's the one that they heard it from. So we can have people who have the same enlightenment as Buddha in this world but they don't get to be the Buddha because they weren't the one who delivered it originally. So it's a kind of technicality in a sense, but it looks to me like we have to continue now to meet Buddha face to face. That's what I propose to you. I propose that you must meet Buddha in order to hear the dharma. I also suggest to you that there are three levels on which you can verify or validate that truth. One is direct experience, another is through reasoning, and a third is through scripture. Through scripture it's easy to find the truth of this, but that's not the whole story. The best way, the primary or highest authority in verifying this would be through direct experience.

But it's also part of the tradition to tell you again that in order to be able to meet the Buddha we must meditate on our karma, and by that meditation on our karma, karmic restrictions are removed. So this is part of the justification for studying the problem of karma, which is the basic problem.

Meeting the Master

As you maybe have heard in the chant we do at noon service, "From the first time you meet a master, just wholeheartedly sit, and thus drop away body and mind." That's an abbreviation. In abbreviation it says, "From the first time you meet a master just wholeheartedly sit, dropping away body and mind." The part I left out was, "From the first time you meet a master, without engaging in incense offering, bowing, chanting Buddha's name, confession and repentance, reading scriptures, and so on, just wholeheartedly sit and drop away body and mind." So here the advice from the ancestor is just wholeheartedly sit and drop away body and mind. But he also mentions that this happens upon the occasion of meeting a master. And he also points out that it's not that easy to meet a master. So it seems like we need to meet a master in conjunction with wholeheartedly sitting and body and mind dropping away. And in the chant we just did, which some of you don't know by heart, it starts out by saying – this again is from the same teacher, the ancestor Dogen – it says, "I vow, or we vow, from this life on through all countless lives, to hear the true dharma." And he doesn't mention in that text, but I propose to you that hearing the true dharma is something that occurs in a certain situation, and that situation is the situation of meeting the teacher, meeting the Buddha.

So you could say, we vow from this life on through all countless lives, to meet the teacher, meet the Buddha, and hear the true dharma. Hearing the true dharma we will wholeheartedly sit, and body and mind will drop away. But this practice, this simple practice of sitting or whatever, standing or walking, basically it could be simplified and said, from the first time you meet the Buddha, just practice wholeheartedly dropping off body and mind. So do we vow to meet the Buddha and hear the dharma and practice wholeheartedly? Now you've just heard the claim that when you do meet the teacher you will be able to hear the dharma and you will be able then to wholeheartedly practice, and body and mind will drop away.

The Logic of Enlightenment and Freedom

I'm not proposing to you that any particular person in this room is the teacher but I do propose to you that it is necessary to meet the teacher. And in order to meet the teacher you have to come forward and express yourself; you can't be totally passive or, I should say, only passive; you have to be receptive and active. You have to give and receive, receive and give, in a meeting. So once again, it's quite simple. The practice is just be wholehearted, and body and mind drop away. And then we realize the Buddha way. Another way to put it is, hearing the true dharma, when we hear the true dharma we will renounce worldly affairs. Renounce worldly affairs, I would suggest to you, means renounce being distracted from where you are and what's going on with you. Worldly affairs are like not being mindful of your experience. If you're talking to somebody and you're mindful of what's happening as you speak, then talking is not a worldly affair. But if you're talking to someone and you're not mindful of what you're experiencing, then you're involved in worldly affairs. Like you're talking to someone and you're concerned not so much with what's happening but what you're going to get out of the conversation – what gain or loss there might be in the conversation – then you're somewhat distracted from simply being mindful of the activity that you're experiencing, that's right before you. When you hear the true dharma it's possible to be mindful, to renounce distractions, and renouncing distractions to maintain the dharma which you've heard. And when we maintain this dharma, when we hear it and renounce distraction, and take care of the dharma which we have heard, then this wonderful thing called enlightenment occurs throughout the universe, is realized universally.

Karmic Obstructions

So that's kind of the basic logic of the practice: hear the dharma, renounce distraction, practice wholeheartedly, maintain the dharma and realize enlightenment universally. And then it says, the way he says it is, although our past evil karma has greatly accumulated, indeed being the cause and condition of obstacles in practicing the way, may all Buddhas and ancestors be compassionate to us and free us from these karmic obstructions. So first of all he tells you the logic of enlightenment and freedom. Then he says, although we have obstructions to this path which we've just talked about, we pray that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will be compassionate to us and help us become free of these obstructions so that we will be able to practice the way without hindrance. Another way to put it is: here's the logic, here's the path of liberation, here's the path of enlightenment, and even though we have lots of hindrances to practicing this we will pray that we be helped to become free of the hindrance so we can enter this practice. Another way to put it is: here's the path and yet, even though there's a path here we have problems hearing the true dharma. But even though we have problems hearing the true dharma we still

have a chance to overcome these problems to hearing the true dharma, and then we will be able to hear it and the obstructions will be removed, and we will be able to enter. There are different nuances in the way you can put it. And the obstructions are karmic obstructions, first of all, and then there are obstructions of defilement and there are obstructions to omniscience – different levels of the obstruction – but the first ones are karmic obstructions: the things that make it hard for us just to practice, karmic obstructions.

We Can't Skip Over Confession and Repentance

Dogen says, when you first meet a master, when you're able to meet without obstruction – then just practice wholeheartedly. He says, when you first meet a master, without practicing confession and repentance, just practice wholeheartedly. But if you can meet you don't have to practice confession and repentance because if you meet there's no obstruction. But now we recognize that sometimes it's hard to meet, there are obstructions, so we haven't met the master yet, we haven't met the Buddha yet, there are obstructions. So we can't skip over confession and repentance. So that's what Dogen's vow is about. We have accumulated these obstructions; we can't hear the dharma, so we need to practice confession and repentance. By practicing confession and repentance these obstructions melt away and we will be able to hear the dharma and we will be able to practice. So again, in one sense, he says just practice wholeheartedly, drop away body and mind, but that is predicated on hearing the true dharma; and hearing the true dharma is predicated on being open to hear it; and being open to hear it means that karmic obstructions have been opened up, for a moment anyway, to let the light in, to let the sound in. So I start out by trying to make clear what the practice is. The practice is basically being wholehearted, dropping off body and mind. That's our meditation practice; that is the meditation practice of the Buddha. Right? That's the Buddha's meditation practice, which many of us might want to aspire to, to do the practice of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. That's their practice, that's the way they practice, wholeheartedly, dropping off body and mind. That's their practice. It's pretty clear that's what it is. But it's also not that easy to understand what that is. So we need to do groundwork along with this aspiration, and that is basically to study the problem, learn about the problem. And the problem is karmic hindrance, karmic obstructions, which of course come in relationship to karma. So that's why I'm forced into by causes and conditions discussing karma with you.

Paying Close Attention is Studying Karma

One story you can hear about this study of karma is, again, in the Zen text, called in Japanese Shobogenzo-koan. In that text he says if you're riding in a boat and you look at the shore you might think the shore is moving. But when you look closely at the boat you realize, oh, the boat is moving. Of course the shore is moving too, but the way the shore is moving is not the way it looks when you overlook the fact that the boat is moving. They're both moving, but when you pay attention to the boat you start to notice something you overlooked before. In a similar way, when you examine your body and mind, or when you examine your experience with a confused body and mind, you might assume that your body and mind have an unchanging self or independent self. But when you look closely at your body and mind, and particularly when you look closely at the karma, the action of your body/mind, of your psycho/physical complex, you will become clear that nothing whatsoever has an abiding self, including karmic obstruction. So when we see that things don't have an abiding, independent self, our eyes become clear. We see the Buddha. We hear the Dharma. And then we enter the Way. Then

we can practice without hindrance. But most of us have not been looking closely enough at our actions, so we don't see that nothing whatsoever has an independent self. And therefore we do see that things do have an independent self. And therefore we are circumscribed by hindrance, and we can't see the Buddha and hear the Dharma. So we need to give close attention to our actions. And this kind of meditation is the kind of meditation which this intensive is set up to make possible. Because most of you have nothing you really have to do except pay attention to your actions. The only person that's making it difficult for that to happen is this karmic person that keeps appearing here, as you. So then you deal with that. For most of you that's really your job, the job we want you to do. And if you have trouble sweeping the floor while you're doing that let us know; we'll try to find a way to help you pay attention. At first, though, when you first start switching from sweeping to paying attention to your sweeping, you may figure, well, how can I do that? You might not know how, but you can learn.

Cetana - Intention

Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha who lived in India apparently for about 80 years and then died, taught that what he meant by karma is intention. We don't know what word he actually used but when they wrote down what he said, they wrote it in Sanskrit as *cetana*. This word is translated as intention, volition, will, motivation, also translated as synergy. And when the Chinese translated [citta-kkhana?] into their own character system they translated it with the character that means thinking. Karma means action, the type of action that is evolutionary action, you might say-- a type of action which goes toward or away from, promotes or hinders spiritual awakening. That type of action is defined as intention – *cetana*. It's mental activity.

Directly Studying the Mind

Basically mind is not active. Mind is clear light. It is a clear knowing. That's what mind basically is. So mental activity is not the same as mind, but mind has mental activity. There's no mind without mental activity, at least for unenlightened beings. But I think even for enlightened beings mind has activity, has function. And the function is the overall activity arising with the knowing. So, amazingly in a way, it is possible to learn to study our intention. We actually can know, be aware of, see our mental activity. We can know our intentions, our will, our motivation. So this is a type of study which is actually in some sense the most authoritative, which is direct empirical study. You can directly study and know directly your mental activity.

Some Parts of the Teaching are Not Yet Directly Observable

You will not be able to see directly some of the things Buddha has taught about the ways mental activity works until you are perfectly enlightened. Part of the teachings about the way mental activity functions are so subtle that they are more subtle than understanding selflessness. Our understanding selflessness opens the door to our realizing the subtleties of the workings of karma. So part of the difficulty in this kind of study is that you will hear teachings which you will not be able to directly, empirically observe. But you can hear them on the level of scripture. And you can understand them potentially on the level of reasoning. You may have to just listen to some of these teachings and understand that that level of understanding them is not yet available. But we're not just saying in this tradition that you're supposed to

take everything at the level of scripture and that scriptural authority is the only way that you know the teachings. Just try to be clear about which modes of knowledge you've attained. And be aware that ultimately we want to have direct empirical knowledge of all of these teachings.

Intentions have Consequence

The other thing that Buddha said is that intention has consequence. Activity is effective it's consequential. So he's teaching cause and effect. He's teaching mental causation, cognitive causation, and moral causation, the same thing in this case.

Student: Cognitive and mental are the same?

Reb: I wouldn't say that cognitive and mental are the same. I would say, actually, that it's cognitive causation, and cognitive can be mental and physical. But the type of causation is moral in the sense that it has moral consequences. If studied or not studied it has moral consequences. So, cognitive and moral – we don't usually bring moral into non-cognitive fields. So it's cognitive causation and moral causation, but I think it's nice to distinguish between mental and cognitive. Cognitive is bigger than mental because vocal activity that's emerging from mental intention is cognitive. It's not just a physical action; it's a cognitive action because it has a thread of moral intention in it. Basic intention – the basic definition of karma is mental activity, so that's mental cognitive. Mental intentions can get translated into vocalizations and physical postures. But these physical postures that are related to moral evolution and spiritual evolution are the ones that have a cognitive thread running through them.

Distinguishing Cause and Effect from Determinism

This teaching of cause and effect is not what we call determinism. It's a cause and effect process which, when studied, comes to fruit as freedom. But it's not freedom outside of cause and effect; it's freedom in cause and effect, or with cause and effect. It's freedom which demonstrates itself in the arena of cause and effect.

We are always active. There's not a moment when we don't have mental activity. But I'm not saying that we are always aware of our mental activity. So, I think that's the key difference between the practitioner and someone who's involved in worldly affairs. The person who's involved in worldly affairs is active just like the practitioner, but they're not paying attention to their intention. If somebody is paying attention to their thinking, to their motivation, just to do that, practice is occurring. If someone is not paying attention to that, the person is involved in worldly affairs. That's basically the definition I would propose to you.

Praying to Bodhisattvas to Help Direct Attention

I really want the Bodhisattvas to help me pay attention to what I'm doing. And I know that's what they want me to do. So I pray to them. And when I pray I look: do I really want them to help me? Do I actually want help to pay attention to what my intention is right now? So I want you all to help me look inside

moment by moment to see what my intention is right now. What do I want the current moment of life to be for? I am up to something. I would like to ask for help to pay attention to that.

I would say Bodhisattvas are the forces in the world which support you to do this practice. They've been depicted in various very moving art forms; sometimes we see people, or dogs, or trees, who seem to be manifesting them. At that time, when we suddenly become aware, the Bodhisattvas are functioning. These Bodhisattvas are not something other than their function. When they're not functioning the Bodhisattva is turned off. Like your eyes. When you sleep at night and you have your eyes shut in the dark, there is no eye organ, no eye consciousness. They have to be turned on. And when they're turned on then they exist. The same with Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. They exist, they come into being, when beings are helped. That's their job, to support you practicing.

The Importance of the Historical Buddha

Once historical Buddha appears in a world then everybody after that is living in a world where the teaching has appeared. So a Buddha is somebody who presents a teaching in a world where no one has presented it. Once it is presented, everyone else is a disciple of that Buddha in that world. The disciples sometimes understand as well as the Buddha did, but they're not the founder. The first time that something is thought is more powerful than the second time it's thought. So there is something special about this historical appearance of this teaching. "True dharma is what you hear when you're talking to Buddha" As you may have seen, some people have trouble practicing because they haven't really heard the teaching deeply enough. So they keep forgetting it, or think, "I don't know if I really want to." There comes a time when you hear it and you don't have any doubt anymore. You're just on the ball all the time because you heard it. The true dharma is not what the Buddha is saying, it's what you hear when you're talking to the Buddha. But you need the meeting with the Buddha to hear it. But everything is delivering it.

The Function of Statues—Manifestation of Buddha

Student: So if you say that everything is delivering it, we don't really need little statues and incense.

Reb: You don't need little statues, but you do need little Buddhas. And sometimes little statues are the way you see the Buddha. But you can also see the Buddha in somebody's palm. You don't exactly need a palm, but you need something to look at so you can see that's the Buddha. What you're looking at isn't limited.

Student: But isn't the Buddha always there? That's my question. Do we really need a manifestation?

Reb: Yes, you do need manifestation. You need everything.

Freedom to Be Kind

Student R: There was a full-page article in the Sunday Times about how cultural anthropologists and epistemologists have looked very hard at cause and effect, and decided there is no such thing as freedom.

So would you say more about how karma comes to fruition as freedom, and maybe give an example that someone like me can understand?

Reb: The basic kind of freedom that comes to mind is the freedom to be kind. Freedom from the passions of selfish concern. Freedom from being worried about what's going to happen to me. And freedom to be kind to you. Usually we're trapped in self-protection. Some people have trouble being kind when they're getting a lot of praise because they're kind of intoxicated, distracted by the praise. Other people are distracted by insults, so they're not free. The teachings can help us be a person who is free from usual human selfishness and self-concern and free from their own biological imperatives. I don't know if any of those people that wrote this article would disagree with that type of freedom or not.

R: I'll write them. [laughter]

Bringing Intention to Everything We Do

Student L: I was wondering about the awareness of intention and what that might look like. Does that occur as a thought? I was just imagining trying to become aware of my intentions, not getting into a psychological analysis.

Reb: This is psychological analysis. This is a psychological study. The purpose of this psychological study is to free us from our psychology, eventually. It does involve actually looking at what you're intending to do right now.

One of the early Zen stories I read was about this monk who trained for quite a while with his teacher, and then he graduated and was off. He came back to visit his teacher on a rainy night. He put down his umbrella, his raincoat and his shoes, and went in. And his teacher said, "Which side of the door did you put your umbrella on?" And he didn't know. So he stayed and studied six more years. So, to be aware, you come into the entryway and you say, OK, now what am I going to do with this umbrella? Where do I want to put it? It's treating umbrella placement as something pretty important because this is an example of mental activity. What is your intention in putting the umbrella down? Do you wish to realize the Buddha way here?

We have a much better chance of meeting the Buddha if we take care of our actions. If I make a bigger effort to floss, not to prevent my teeth from falling out, which they're going to do quite soon anyway-- they offer an opportunity for me to be there with that flossing, with that intention. ... Moment, by moment, by moment. This is a normal religious practice in Soto Zen, and in Shakyamuni Buddha's time too. He taught his monks to clean their teeth. He recommended that they bathe, and he recommended that they be minutely mindful of the present moment of experience. So when we're doing that we're doing his practice. Every moment has an intention. It's there for you to enjoy.

Staying Present in Painful Situations by Studying Karma

Student: Basic intention is what I am seeing in my mind and maybe other people can relate. Is it my intention to get away from pain?

Reb: It's very common that people want to get away from pain. So pain arises, but strictly speaking, the wish to get away from the pain is not necessarily your intention. It's also possible to have pain, feel some kind of shrinking back from it, but also be willing to meet it. In that case, the mental factor of avoidance doesn't necessarily dominate the whole state of consciousness. But when the whole consciousness lines up with that desire, then the intention would be to avoid the pain. But sometimes there is pain, the impulse to avoid, but it doesn't take over and you stay in the situation. See how that is an analysis? It's a psychological analysis which you can do, and which is part of studying your karma.

Student: In that impulse to shrink away there is this idea that there is this place without the pain.

Reb: There could be or there may or may not be. Both scenarios are possible.

Student: It constantly seems to come up, this pain.

Reb: Pain and this wish to go to this place where there's no pain?

Student: I do wonder how to meet pain.

Reb: Here's this great practice called "completely meet pain". Not lean into it, not lean away from it, but meet it wholly, completely, in the moment. To learn how to do that is called the practice of patience. Part of what makes it difficult is interest in some other place where it's not painful. But this is this amazing, highly recommended practice of patience which is exactly to wholeheartedly meet discomfort. And this is also part of the warm up to wholeheartedly meet Buddha. If you wiggle around in your meeting with pain you'll probably wiggle around with your meeting with a Buddha.

The Discomfort of Meeting a Teacher

Many of you know the experience of going to the teacher. Maybe with the teacher you'll meet the Buddha. And you start wiggling, you feel uncomfortable with the teacher, you want to get away from this uncomfortable meeting. So meeting the teacher and the meeting the pain go together. Maybe meeting a teacher is even more difficult than meeting pain. Often times they're both there at the same time. Meeting the dharma is also this big adjustment, which we want even while we're adjusting. Part of us just says, leave me alone, let me continue to be this way for a little while longer, and then later I'll listen to the dharma. Another part says, please help me be willing to open up to hearing the dharma, which I know is going to be an adjustment. Please help me be willing to change and open to something I've never opened to before.

How to Apply the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: A Detailed Description

Student: I want to go back to the detailed description of mindfulness. Usually when there is instruction to be mindful while sweeping it's understood as knowing you're sweeping, being aware of it. It seems like you're also saying to be aware of what my intention is and to understand that all the Buddhas are helping me to do this.

Reb: So, there are four foundations, right? It's good to start with the physical plane. If you're sweeping, first of all know you have the broom, know which hand is farther or closer to the earth, be aware of your posture; be aware of what size sweepings you're making. Then go on to be aware of your feelings. How are you? Oh, I'm kind of uncomfortable sweeping today, or, actually I feel quite happy sweeping today. And then move on to the mind. Look at both the general mind but also, in an analytic way, look at the fourth foundation and at the mental factors there which comprise your intention. Look at your story you have of what you're doing. I'm a Zen monk, or I'm a Zen nun, or I'm a whatever, sweeping the ground, meditating, that's my story.

You're feeling pain while you're sweeping, so then you distract yourself, rather than saying: OK, there's discomfort here sweeping, there's pain here, there's depression. And there's patience, and the intention to practice patience. And there's joy here actually now. I'm in pain and I'm in joy at the same time, because there's patience with this pain. There's patience with this rickety old body doing this sweeping which is real cute when you're 20, but which now is actually painful. So it's body, feeling, mind, and then mental factors. All those things. The fourth foundation of mindfulness is analyzing and becoming aware of whether you have a wholesome state of consciousness or not. As you meditate on the psychological field you will see that nothing whatsoever has an abiding self. Wholesomeness and unwholesomeness have no abiding self. Skillfulness and unskillfulness don't have an abiding self. You and others, the whole illumination process, can occur in this meditation. You become free of the psychological process which you have analyzed.

Cognitive Entrapment and Some Comments on Thinking

M: I find it really interesting that this *cetana*, volitional action, evolved into the word thinking. Do you think that is still in our English language, that that's a good translation of things? Can we still think of those two as synonymous: thinking and volitional action?

Reb: Thinking is a little bit different from volition. This Chinese character doesn't just mean thinking; it also means intention. But usually when they translate the Sanskrit they don't use the word "thinking." The *Fukanzazengi* tells us to think of not thinking. "How do you think of not thinking? Non-thinking." And they use this character along with another character, shi ryo, [?] which means to measure. What kind of thinking and measuring are you doing, in your sitting? Dogen is actually suggesting we study our thinking to realize non-thinking, to go beyond our thinking. Otherwise we're involved in our thinking and our thinking is generally speaking, for most people, degenerating. So I think thinking is really good for adding to the list of words we use to locate *cetana*; to locate karma, to locate our moral activity of our consciousness.

M: And there's thinking that's not creating karma?

Reb: Even the thinking of a Buddha, even the desire that all beings will hear the true Dharma and enter Buddha's wisdom, has consequence. The consequence of that kind of thinking is the appearance of a Buddha in the world. The Lotus Sutra says that the conditions for a Buddha to appear in the world is that

kind of intention. Even Buddha's thinking has consequence; but it's this wonderful consequence rather than the consequence of perpetuating what we might call "cognitive entrapment." Most people are trapped inside their mind, trapped inside their psychology, stuck. Therefore it's hard for them to open to hear the true dharma and drop body and mind. So, basically, by studying the entrapment the entrapment drops away. And then we experience freedom.

Studying the Whole Field of the Mind: Finding One's Real Intention

Student: I find it difficult to get to the real intention.

Reb: Right, I often hear that. People have trouble for quite a while getting to the real intention, and I think that's normal. The more you look the more you learn. At first it might be rather superficial. For example, a feeling of wanting to avoid something isn't necessarily the intention. It might be an element of intention but it's the whole field of your mind. You might notice just one part of it at first, and that's fine. Then the next moment you notice a little bit more, and the next moment something more. You start to see more of the field and to realize oh, there's pain and an impulse to avoid, but also an impulse to stay here and perform a deed which is helpful. The more you look, the more the patterns that appear are transformed, and also your vision. Your vision gets clearer from looking at karma. Your vision will get clearer from looking at body postures, from looking at feelings, from looking at intentions. Intentions are more subtle than feelings or body postures. Some people may not be able to find their intentions, so you'll want to start just with your body then. Be aware of your standing, walking or sitting. Be aware of your breathing, of your feelings. Now can you see your intentions? Oh yes, now I can see them. And the more you study your intentions the more your vision gets clearer and you see more and more details and depth.

Intention Can Be Indeterminate

Student: Could it be that you know it's happening if it's good intention and bad intention at the same time?

Reb: Sometimes it seems to be is what we call indeterminate. There's wholesome or unwholesome intention, skillful, unskillful, good, bad and so on. But it's also quite commonly indeterminate where it's not that clear which way it goes. That's very common.

Student: What do you do then?

Reb: You just notice. It's not clearly good or bad. You're looking at what you should be looking at, you just don't know clearly what it is. But you're looking in the right place.

Decision-making, Freedom, and Awareness

Student: I have a question about your use of the word "freedom." I've heard you use it a couple of different ways. One is dropping away body and mind, getting free of the mental processing. You also said that freedom arises in the field of cause and effect. And so, I'm trying to understand the model. Maybe the flossing example: you have that karmic activity, that normal pattern of doing it as you always do, but now

with awareness and mindfulness you are aware of your intention to be mindful as you floss. Are you talking about having freedom of choice either to follow the normal karmic activity or to choose to be mindful of how you floss? Is that what you are describing as freedom in that choice point?

Reb: I think that choice-decision-selection is an element in consciousness. It's a place where, when we're not clear, the issue of freedom comes up.

Student: When we're not clear about the decision?

Reb: When we're not clear around what the field is like, how it works. Somehow we don't feel free at decision points, we feel encumbered and pushed around by various patterns. What I would pose is that, as we become more clear, the choice seems to be more free. Otherwise we may feel that the world is forcing us to choose one way and we lack the freedom to choose the other.

Finding Areas of Moral Clarity

There was an article in The New Yorker a couple of years ago about a Dr. Farmer who works in Haiti. He's a very effective medical person helping lots of poor people in this extremely poor country, and raising funds in very rich countries like the U.S. to take back to assist people. He has this term called "AMC": area of moral clarity. He recommends that you find some place where you're clear and then, the more you focus on that, the more the area of moral clarity may spread. To say that there is or isn't free will is difficult in the world of Buddhism where we avoid "is" and "isn't". But I think we do want to find freedom, and one of the places where freedom is difficult to find is at decision-making time. People have the idea that they have to make the decision all by themselves. Their misunderstanding of their relationship with the world, their lack of clarity, seems to manifest painfully in this area.

Intention is a cognitive representation of your relationship with the world. It's not your real relationship with the world; it's the way you see yourself in that relation. If you picture yourself separate from some people, friends with some, and enemies with others, that's your cognitive representation of your relationship with the world. Decisions will probably feel somewhat sticky because you don't see yourself in harmonious relationship with other beings. Any decision you make in a world like that is fettered. Every moment our body and mind in the world chooses to pay attention to something and not to pay attention to something else. Selection is going on. Where's the freedom in the picture? That's what we'd like to see: not to make the freedom but to discover it. Once again, we have a cognitive representation of our relationship with the world in which we are making decisions. If we study that, we'll become clearer about it. Becoming clear about it, we'll be free of it. Then we'll realize there's no self to the process of selection or choice, and selection and choice will be occasion for manifesting freedom.

Acting Out of Moral Clarity Without Being Stuck

Student: I'm trying to, for me, know what to do. I was walking along at Nordstrom's in Corte Madera, and a woman was screaming and kind of dragging her children. In the story I told, she appeared as an upper-middle-class white woman. I so much wanted to do something to support her in a way that could at least break the tension she was having with her kids, but the story I told myself was, who would she see

me as, and so I couldn't figure out how to think about it. So I was trying to find the freedom to go back and I did, and she was gone.

Reb: This is a nice example – excuse me for saying so – of what I said earlier. You were stuck in your concern for whom or what you are, and that hindered you from being free to act in the compassionate way you wanted. That's why we have to study our stories, so we can help people in situations like that. The time will come when you will be free to just go up and say, "Can I help you?" She may say "No, thanks"; who knows what she'll say. Being free to help doesn't mean that people will like what you offer [laughter]. So we have to be studying our stories all the time, and the more we study the more we optimize the ability to be free to do what we want to do all the time anyway. It's to offer ourselves to help people when the occasion is offered.

Making Compassionate Vows May Be Different From Our Current Intention

Student: Is it OK to ask a question about a question?

Reb: Yes.

Student: You were talking about the boat and the water.

Reb: The boat and the shore.

Student: The boat and the shore. This mention of clarifying our vision once we study our intention... I'm not perfect, of course. I make a lot of mistakes, but when I set my intention to be kind with people, to be helpful and then people around me...

Reb: Excuse me. I'm going to respond to this before you talk anymore. Is that all right? ...I'm going to start by saying there's a difference between setting an intention and what it is right now. Do you want to give an example again of an intention you have made?

Student: To be kind.

Reb: You've set the intention to be kind. That's fine. Some people say, I vow to be kind. But they're actually not feeling that way at the time that they say it. Right? Let's say at one point in history you said, "I vow to be kind, I'm totally there for that." At the moment you said that your intention was in line with what you said. Then later you met somebody and they spit in your face and you're kind of concerned with them apologizing to you. That's your actual intention. What I'm saying is, being aware of your past intention, precepts you've committed to, is important. But most important is what your intention is at this moment. Because that's empirical. The awareness of my current intention gets deeper and deeper the more I study. It gets much more complex. The memory I have of things is conceptual, a poverty-stricken image of what actually happened. The memory you have of your ordination ceremony is an impoverished version of the ceremony. It's condensed, abbreviated, abstract. But your current experience is profoundly rich and has tremendous depth. So if your current intention is not in line with some of your deep compassionate vows, then that's something to see. And the more you study your current intention, the

clearer your vision will be and the more it will line up with your compassionate vows. It's not a bad thing to keep remembering all your compassionate vows. But that doesn't necessarily clear your vision very much. If you skip over what you're doing right now you're kind of looking at the shore. You're skipping over this boat, this intention machine here. Does that address your question?

Student: No, you didn't let me finish. I didn't get to ask my question. Studying the boat, facing our own karma.

Reb: What's your intention right now?

M: My intention is to express myself: how to be with disappointment when I see myself as upset when other people are not upholding the kind of effort I'm putting forward, for example, to be clear. Others around me, I imagine, are not doing that. And I'm asking how to hold onto anger, disappointment, or how to let go of anger, disappointment, when others around me are not doing what I expect.

Reb: Look at the boat.

Student: -- Not only the people that I work with, and my community, but my city, my state, the nation, the world. That's what I'm asking about.

Reb: Look at the boat.

Student: I don't understand that analogy. I'm not understanding that.

Reb: Be aware that you're upset with what other people are doing. And, in that upset, there's an intention. And what is the intention in your upset, in relationship to other people. [long pause] Is that too simple for you?

Student: It's not that it's simple. It's slippery, it's jargon, it's something I'm not taking in, I'm not hearing you.

Reb: OK. I see somebody else doing something. And then I get upset. Now that I'm upset, the main reason I'm upset, I would suggest to myself, is because I wasn't looking at what I was up to in the first place. I wasn't doing my work. I'm upset with them, I think, but really I'm upset because I'm not doing my own practice. I myself am the one who's the problem, not what I'm seeing. They've got problems – I'm not saying they don't – but they are not the problem. The problem is that I'm not doing my work. Because I'm not doing my work, I'm upset with them.

M: I don't buy it.

Reb: I see you don't buy it. You think that they're the problem. You don't think you're overlooking your situation is the problem. I'm saying karma is the problem, not what other people are doing. And if you don't take care of your karma then you will not be taking care of your practice. Plus you will be upset with other people, rather than being concerned with how you can help them, because you're not taking

care of yourself. If you want to help other people you have to take care of yourself first. And most people do not take care of themselves, do not pay attention to their karma. They think other people are the problem, and they're upset with them. They think the shore is moving, that there is actually a self to these people, that they're trouble makers. They're bad practitioners or bad people. I will think that about people if I don't look at myself. If I look at myself I won't think that about myself or them, and then I will be free to help them, rather than be upset with them. We have to pay attention to our own actions. Otherwise we will be upset with other people. So that's what I say.

These people you're talking about, they need help. We call them objects of compassion. We come not to be upset with them but to love them and feel pain because we love them. If you take care of yourself, then these people will turn into objects of compassion. And this is all because you're doing your job of keeping track of this very living, vital, active consciousness, which needs supervision; otherwise it creates this mirror of the lack of attention. Do you buy it yet?

Student: Yes.

Reb: Yes, I myself am actually totally convinced of this practice. I'm not saying it's easy because we're oriented from day one towards the shore. We are not taught to look at the boat, to look at our own intention. Otherwise, I don't see the world properly. I see it as a result of my inattention. I see the world which appears because I'm not doing my work, which is a very upsetting world.

Being Patient With Our Own Pain

Student: A comment.

Reb: Just a comment? Yes?

Student: As she was speaking, I was seeing great pain. Something about acknowledging that in the boat there is pain. And the times that I blame others is because I can't hold that pain. It's too much.

Reb: Another way to say that is we don't have enough patience. Really, I think patience is practice with our own pain, not with other people's pain. It's OK to be impatient with their pain. If you learn to be patient with your own you can stand to be near the other people whose pain hurts you. But when we're not patient with our pain we sometimes want to get rid of other people's. And we have our limits, right? Our patience practice is not fully developed usually. But I want to thank you, M, for hanging in there and expressing yourself.

Freeing Up From Our Story So We Can Help Others

Student: I see that trying to find this place of compassion, being quiet enough to be compassionate from that place, is such a slippery place, because I'm quite good at saying I'm acting from a place of compassion. But I think I'm acting from a story. It's actually very uncompassionate and that just compounds the story.

Reb: The key thing is that you know it's a story. Just keep remembering, this is a cognitive representation of your relationship with the world. This is a story. This is karma, this is not reality. This is my intention. My intention is not the same as reality. Let's say my intention is to be compassionate. It doesn't mean I am compassionate.

Bodhisattvas do not walk around saying I am compassionate. They don't get caught by believing that's really the way they are. Because they're not caught by believing that, they really are that way. They become compassionate by not being caught by their story of compassion. But if you have a story that you're compassionate then you should take care of that. Because if you don't then you're going to go around thinking you're compassionate, and believing it and probably hating people who don't appear to be compassionate.

Intention is not the same as reality. The activity of your consciousness is not the same as reality. It is a cognitive enclosure, an enclosed cognitive version of the world. If you study it you can become free of it. If you can become free of it then these people you see will be like confused, frightened children. They don't know what they're doing and you want to help them. And you will be happy that you want to help them because you're free of your own story. But we're not going to become free of our own story unless you remember that it's a story. Usually we think our story is not a story, but truth. Not to say that there's no truth contributing to our story. Not to say that the opposite is true. But we have to remember that we have limits. We live in a limited world.

Take Care of Yourself First So You Can Take Care of Others

Student: When I hear you talk about taking care of yourself, what kind of practices are you meaning?

Reb: Mindfulness.

Student: Mindfulness and renunciation and all those things too? [laughter]

Reb: Mindfulness, renunciation, confession and repentance. Practice is the way you take care of yourself. There are practices of patience and non-violence and loving kindness toward other people. Generally speaking those practices are not recommended to people who are not being mindful of their own posture. You've heard this example of the acrobats? The male and female acrobat – the female is probably the daughter of the male, his apprentice. The acrobat says to his apprentice, "Now you take care of me when you climb up there and I'll take care of you." And she says, "No, master, you take care of yourself and in that way you'll take care of me; and I'll take care of myself and in that way I'll take care of you." And the Buddha says afterwards that the apprentice is right: take care of yourself in such a way that you will be able to take care of others. Be aware of your own karma and then you'll be able to take care of others. And how do you take care of others in such a way? By being non-violent, patient, and practicing loving-kindness. There are many practices, but some practices are first of all directed inward. If you try to direct them outward first most people stumble.

Regardless of How We Respond, We are Always Active

Student: I'm completely with you. If you think you see harm being done and you're not so sure you're completely calm, what would you recommend?

Reb: If you're not so sure you're completely calm, it might be because you checked to see if you were calm.

Student: Right.

Reb: So you're checking on yourself. Now you're oriented in the proper direction.

Student: Yes, but what about action at that point?

Reb: As you start to check on your story, you may find that you feel hindered and blocked because you're agitated, and if you go over there with your agitation you might cause more trouble. But you're starting to check your story. If you'd been checking your story before this came up you might have come to the situation more calm. I'm not saying you shouldn't try to help. We often find that even if people look inside and see they're hindered, they still act and they're less than completely effective. It doesn't mean you're not somewhat effective.

Student: But you're not saying, if I'm hearing you correctly, don't act at all until you're perfectly calm.

Reb: I'm saying you will act all the time whether you're calm or not. [laughter] If you see some harm being done, you will act in relationship to that. You will either go say something, or walk away, or stand there and cry; you will act. But if you want to be free to act, to be up for it moment after moment, that requires composure and awareness of your actions. But you will act. I'm not saying not to act. When you see some violence, if you look inside you'll notice the relationship between the quality of your response and your state of mind. You start to see that, yes, there's this relationship. The practice is the awareness of your karma, of giving close attention to your action right now. So again, you are active. You are active, living creatures. That's the case now. The Buddha says if you want to be compassionate, if you want to be patient and non-violent with others, then you have to do this first. This is the price of admission to that way of being.

“Everything Out There is Joy”: Studying Our Own Karmic Hindrances

Student: In orienting to watching the boat, not the shore, it's easy for me to just think, “It's all me, it's all me,” so how to keep this awareness of collective responsibility?

Reb: What do you mean by “It's all me, it's all me”?

Student: That problems are just located inside of me, that there aren't actually things that are problematic that are happening.

Reb: In some sense that's not so bad, actually. That's how Bodhisattvas feel. They feel like the problem's in here and everything out there is opportunity. It's job security. [laughter] Everything out there is joy. People have tremendous problems and they're suffering, but from my perspective this is my family, these are the people I help, these are the people I love. That's not really the problem. The problem is me being hindered to be that way with them. And their problem is they're feeling the same way. So mostly, it's my karmic hindrance that's stopping me from being the person I want to be. It mostly is inside. It doesn't mean people aren't suffering, but it isn't like it's bad that they're suffering. The good thing is that I love them. Their suffering isn't really good or bad.

Using the Bodhisattva Vow in the Realm of Social Justice

Student: I've heard you speak to this before. I think it would be helpful for me to hear it again. How does this play out in the realm of social justice?

Reb: It would make you free to act compassionately in situations where injustice is appearing. You would be more skillful to act in relationship to social injustice. That's what it would lead you to; that's the point. That's what Buddha was trying to do. Another way to say social injustice is social non-virtue. And Buddha was trying to help people practice virtue.

How Great Compassion Operates

Student: What is your current operating definition of compassion? I have no idea anymore what true compassion is. I really don't. I seriously have no idea.

Reb: You have no idea?

Student: I have an idea, but my idea has been so storified. I have made a profession of storifying it.

Reb: Making a story out of it. One kind of compassion is where you feel compassion towards an object. That's the first kind.

Student: But "compassion": what does that mean?

Reb: It means suffering with the person. It means that you love the person. And you say what does love mean. You care for the person. You love the person, and when they're in pain you don't feel their pain, but you feel pain because you love them. Pure compassion is finally when you don't feel any separation from them. They're not an object anymore. But originally they're an object. And then it grows. It can get bigger and turn into great compassion where you feel it very widely and you also don't just feel pain, you also wish to devote your energy to the person. There's greater and greater compassion and purification. That you give everything to each person, that's the great part. And the pure part is they're not an object anymore. That's where it heads.

Compassion is basically happiness. The greatest happiness is the Bodhisattva's happiness of feeling pain because they love people. So it hurts, it actually hurts. That's why you're patient with your pain, but

you're not patient with their pain. Their pain hurts you. The idea I have of that is not what it is, but that's the way I talk about it.

Transcribed by Sandra Hansen

Edited by Roberta Werdinger

Edit Update 9/22