

FINAL DHARMA TALK

March 2018 retreat, Tannenhof, Munich Germany

Good morning.

What is the koan that you are, the koan that is you? To realise or actualise this is to manifest the boundless peace, joy, vitality of being without self. The inviolable dignity of each and everything, manifest precisely in being without self. The boundless beauty, truth, goodness of each and everything—manifest. I trust you have tasted this fact, savoured it, digested it. Together, we have seen what it is to try and escape from this, and what it is to be genuinely held by the practice, fully embraced in it. Finally, the practice is no other than this. And this is none other than true practice.

Has the retreat been a heavenly paradise or has it been hell? As many of you know, at Tōfukuji monastery in Kyoto the first week of December is the *rōhatsu*, the hardest retreat of the year. Last December, a European friend came to Kyoto to practise at the hermitage and to do the *rōhatsu*. There was also an American friend coming for his second *rōhatsu*. But a day after it began, the European sheepishly returned to the hermitage. Turned out he couldn't sleep, even during the short breaks, and he was still getting over jetlag. He was afraid he might go crazy. Feeling embarrassed and ashamed, he came back to the hermitage where a group of us were practicing. He had left his kids with his wife back in Europe, so he felt like a big failure. Especially when the American had trouble understanding why he wanted to leave the monastery, saying, "It's like practising in a picture postcard here!"

After several days sitting zazen at the hermitage with us, at least nine hours a day with one-on-one mornings and evenings, he finally realised what it really is to escape and what it is to really practice. So it turned out to be a precious experience, even though he didn't do it in the monastery eighteen hours a day. The point is, we make our own heaven, and we make our own hell—and neither is ultimately real, is it? And our heart is the battleground.

And so, the peerless practice of dropping all in sustained practice: both in zazen and in the other activities of life. No need to turn it into heaven, hell, or someplace in between. You've seen what it is to escape from the practice—and the fact that you can't really escape. You go from one prison to another, which is not really escaping at all. Just running from yourself: that is what's difficult, frustrating. That is what seems bleak. Authentic practice is none of that.

Giving ourselves to the practice, there are moments when the walls come down, where everything becomes completely clear. The point is, what do we do with that experience? Do we then turn it into something? You see the danger. An opening or insight can show you this boundless peace. Yet it's not some goal to be reached—or held onto. It's like suddenly opening your eyes after they've been closed for ages. But if that glimpse is not thorough, it may be no more than opening your eyes in the dark. For sure, the eyes are

open and the nightmare is over, but you can't clearly see or distinguish things yet. You can't bring it to life. Thus, at least as important as an initial opening is working it through: working it out in the world, seeing others illumined, each and everything illumined, the dignity, the boundless beauty of each and everything. This is at least as important as the initial opening.

Barbara brought up an important point yesterday. She mentioned how those old monks' tales of wonderful enlightenment can make us laypeople feel very small. What should we do? Well, first of all, exactly what we are doing now: turn off the phone, the computer, and just give yourself completely, morning, noon, and night for several days. This is a precious chance to ground ourselves in sustained practice, then return fully to the world and work it out there.

Recently I was asked to write a chapter on Koan Practice, so I had to look into the history and so on. I was amazed at how koan practice developed specifically as a way to train laypeople in the world. Chinese Sung dynasty teachers a thousand years ago, including Dahui—the most important Zen master in terms of developing koan practice—were training Chinese literati, Confucian scholars, government officials, and other laypeople, including women. Many were married, with families, and very busy lives. This was at least one reason Dahui and other teachers at the time simplified the complex literary practice that koan cases were turning into.

By all means practice humbly and sincerely. But don't delude yourself with an inferiority complex because you're just a layperson: "How could I ever realise what those great monastics did?" Nonsense. There are plenty of awakened laypeople—and plenty of deluded monastics. It's simply a question of whether you apply yourself or not. Dahui and others have stated that lay life is the ideal place for practice. Why? Because we can't escape into cloisters the way monastics can. We have to make decisions, deal with temptations and so on. This helps us to deal with it **in life** and not simply as an abstract monastic practice.

Do you see how naïve and misguided it is to assume that to truly practice we have to **get away from** our actual problems? I trust you see the fatal mistake, and will not make it again. If you're human, you have all you need! Returning to Barbara's question: how should we actually practice as laypeople? Exactly as Bernhard, Michael, Huberta, and Sabine have arranged here: four full days sitting together, like-minded practitioners, morning, noon and night. Yes! And yet this is not the end of the practice, for we then return to the real world and work it out there. Yes—don't turn it into an escape!

I was always struck by the question who, what, and I realised early on, if I didn't really know that, I don't really know anything. I can't really come home, be at home, truly at peace, at rest. Digesting the story of Gautama Buddha's life struck a very deep chord in me. Here was someone 2,500 years ago in a vastly different world, yet asking the same question, stopped in his tracks by the same quandary: the great question of birth and death, of life and death. Like an arrow shot 2,500 years ago hitting home in the depths of my heart. How could that be, how could he have been asking the same question? How could he have been stuck in the same place? Obviously this is not just my personal problem. It's **very** personal, perhaps the most personal problem there is. And yet, it's not

just mine. It's so deeply personal that it's in the heart of everyone.

So I have difficulty understanding how someone can escape from this. Of course, I spent a great deal of time escaping myself! And yet through it all something continued driving me, something that would not let me rest until I knew, until there was no doubt, until there could be no doubt. This genuine drive, the genuine need to know, to live truth—**no matter what**. This is the final spur and inspiration in real practice. Everything else falls away. There is no hindrance here.

Thus when a person asks, “But how can I do it?” I honestly feel, how can you **not** do it? How can you not? [*Pause*] Dahui’s disciple said that he is like a severe customs official at a barrier-checkpoint. He confiscates everything, takes everything you have. Your carriage is completely empty. Nothing. And then he demands more. Dahui remarks that he finds this comparison sublime. He collected many koans, he himself struggled with many koans, and he's famous for developing the essential koan practice called *huatou*. But there is supposedly only one koan of his own making: holding up a bamboo comb, Dahui would say: “If you call this a comb, it's wrong. But if you call it something else, it's also wrong. You mustn't say anything, but you cannot remain silent. Now, what is it?” Actually, it's not that original. There are many similar koans, such as “thirty blows of the stick if you speak, thirty blows if you remain silent.” Many variations on a theme. But Dahui’s koan concerned a bamboo comb. Here and now, how do you respond to his koan? [*Pause*] It's not important, but I say: “What's a bald-headed monk doing with a comb anyway?!” [*Laughter*] Does anyone have a question or concern from out of the practice?

Wolfgang: If you are given a koan, you are supposed to stick to it day and night for weeks and months. But this is not possible for me in daily life. Because in daily life I have to focus on many different things. So what I try to do is to stick to the point as best I can. Whatever happens in my work, I try to reach the ground.

Jeff: Do you think it's different for a monastic?

Wolfgang: At least my impression is like that. I can sit here in retreat with mind quiet and focussed, but in daily life it's not as focussed, it's changing constantly.

Jeff: And how is that different from a monastic? Do you know how many weeks a year they have for retreat? About seven, that's seven weeks out of fifty-two. What are they doing the other forty-five weeks? Pretty much what you're doing. The question is whether one is committed or not, that's all.

Give yourself to the practice here. Then when you return to your busy life, give yourself there. In time you will see that they are not two different things. There is no conflict, other than the one you concoct in your head. Don't use your busy life as an excuse not to practice. There is where the real practice must come to life! When you realise the necessity to **complete** practice, you will find the time underfoot.

In the kitchen we sometimes put things on the back burner to simmer while we focus on what is cooking on the front burner. We speak of putting something on the back burner when it is not the conscious focus. This is what we naturally do with our practice, with our

koan. We focus on what needs our attention at the moment. But the koan remains in the background, on the back burner. Give yourself to what requires your attention at the moment. Let that be your practice at the moment. You will see that the koan gradually boils over, comes to life in and as your daily activities. Those daily activities, your work and so on, are just as important as your so-called “Zen practice.” Eventually, they **are** your practice.

Would anyone else like to speak?

Werner: I want to mention something I learned in this retreat, something about you and me, Jeff and Werner. I think all of us put you on a pedestal, far away from us. But I realized that we're living on the same ground. There is no pedestal. Now I understand what you mean when you state that you are not a teacher. Though you are teaching us a lot. That's what I learned.

Jeff: I am happy not to teach you.

Participant: You were talking about koans and laypersons. Does every layperson need to work with a koan?

Jeff: Well, in the deepest sense, the koan is the question that you are. In that sense, yes. But does everyone need to be given a formal koan? No, of course not. What did they do before they had koans? Where did koans themselves come from? Most of them were that person's great doubt, their question that had to be resolved. A simple example: Layman Pang, a family man with wife and two kids. But he roused his own koan: “Who is the one that is not involved in the 10,000 things?” It sounds a little strange, but that's the literal Chinese. In other words: Who is the one that transcends everything? Who is the one that doesn't get caught up in anything? The liberated one, the Buddha—who is that? He didn't get that question from someone, it came from **here**. That's where koans really come from. They were the perplexing question that came to include everything. So, do you need to be given a formal koan? Absolutely not.

Participant: But it is the traditional way, especially in Rinzai Zen.

Jeff: In a word, it developed because of corruption. The Zen masters themselves state this over and over again. Eventually Chan, that is, Chinese Zen, became almost the state religion, so many people from all walks of life were flocking to the Zen masters for instruction. Most without their own living, burning question or natural koan, as layman Pang had. So the statements of old were taken up and used, eventually becoming what we now call koans. There's inevitably a level of artifice with them. You have got to make them your own, cement yourself to them, in order to really work with them.

So, I ask you here and now, as I asked in the beginning, what is **your** koan? That's the best way. Then you don't have to mess with someone else's. Anything else is secondary. Perhaps what lies behind your question, and that of many others, is the assumption that you cannot come up with your own koan. Bullshit. If you're human, it's there. Simply stop running away from it. We have a couple more periods of zazen, so please let us continue this precious opportunity together and if you feel the need for one-on-one, you can always

ask for it.

I want to thank all of you for making this happen, and Werner, thank you for pulling me down from the pedestal so that we can all do this together. It's what we're doing anyway. Doing this together as one. Bernhard, Sabine, Michael, Huberta—thank you for all your fine efforts so that this could run smoothly. Thanks to all of you, doing your tasks so that we could all give ourselves to practice. We don't need to imitate a monastic life behind monastery walls that has little connection with the world. Look what we have here. This is in no way inferior to what goes on in a monastery.

[Transcription by Michael Walter]