ZEN IN EARLY BUDDHISM

The Fundamental Koan in Gotama Buddha's First Sermon

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INTRODUCTION

It is a truly precious opportunity for me to join in this retreat in my hometown of Philadelphia.(1) Twenty years ago I left here in order to throw myself into a Zen monastery in Japan. People often remark how fortunate I have been to practice together with monks and do koan training under a master in a Rinzai training monastery all these years, learn some of the language, eventually teach at a Zen-affiliated university, and so on. And it's true: I feel extremely fortunate. Over the years, however, my respect has grown enormously for those of you who did not or could not do such a thing, but instead stayed here and carried on your practice. When I went to Japan, I was desperate; but the kind of courage you have to sustain practice on your own home ground, so to speak, is truly remarkable. Perhaps you have something to learn from me, I don't know. But I'm certain that I have much to learn from all of you.

When the Philadelphia Buddhist Association first asked me to speak to them a few years ago, some of my old friends from the area and even my twin sister and my mother came. They had never heard me give a talk before. I spoke quite frankly about Zen practice, growing up here, and the doubt and turmoil that drove me to Japan. The evening went very well, with good questions and discussion. Finally, I turned to my dear 88-year-old mother to let her know it was about time to leave -- just in time to hear her put the finishing touch on the evening by explaining, to the president of the Philadelphia Buddhist Association, that I had two older brothers, "But whenever the police came to our house, it was about little Jeff."

Eventually I found my way to Buddhism, Zen Buddhism in particular. Zen thought and practice seem strikingly different from much of Buddhism. Zen rhetoric even appears to make light of Buddhist doctrine, to intentionally deny and contradict Buddhism's most basic principles. On the other hand, early Buddhist texts can seem dry and lifeless. Thus, in this lecture I would like to examine and illumine basic Buddhist teachings in the light of Zen and Zen teachings in the light of basic Buddhism. For although their modes of theoretical presentation and practical expression are at times in stark contrast, Zen and Buddhism spring from common ground. It is crucial for us, not just as Buddhists but as human beings, to clarify that ground.

Gotama Buddha's First Sermon

Many of you know the story: Gotama the Buddha or “awakened one,” later known as Sakyamuni or “sage of the Sakya clan,” had lived a full life until beset by the problems of illness, aging, and death. He then left home and struggled long and hard to achieve liberation. He practiced under two meditation teachers, mastered their teachings, but left them when he realized that such transcendent states did not put an end to the problems he was struggling with. He continued sustained and arduous practices with five fellow ascetics, including fasting and stopping the breath. Finally, with navel touching backbone and body wracked with pain and exhaustion, he realized that he was approaching not liberation but death. He then recalled a childhood experience of sitting under a rose-apple tree and becoming absorbed in viewing the earth being plowed up. At that time he spontaneously entered a state of deep calm and concentration free from sensuousness. Resolving to follow this lead, he bathed in the nearby river and took some milk gruel as nourishment to redouble his efforts. His five fellow ascetics saw this as abandoning asceticism and indulging in the senses, so they decided to shun him. Awakening to the Middle Way, out of compassion he returns to his fellow ascetics and instructs them in the truth he has realized. This teaching eventually came to be formulated as Dependent Co-Arising, the Eightfold Path, and the Four Noble Truths.

This much is common knowledge. But what does it have to do with us here and now? How can we bring these teachings to life? What, after all, is Buddhism really all about? The first point to underscore is that Buddhism is not merely some objective, absolute truth realized by Sakyamuni. Buddhism can never be fully comprehended as an objective, absolute truth. If we don’t find it in ourselves as well, then it is nothing. Take for example the Buddhist teaching of the First Noble Truth that existence is inseparable from *dukkha* (often translated as suffering but perhaps better rendered as discontent or *dis-ease)*. This First Noble Truth is not true because Buddhism says so; it is true to the extent that we realize it ourselves. In other words, it is true to the extent that, reflecting deeply on ourselves, we find that we cannot come to rest as something, as anything -- we cannot come to rest in *being*. We don't experience *dukkha* or dis-ease because Buddhism tells us it is so; on the contrary, when we become aware of our profound and pervasive dis-ease, the Buddhist teachings are relevant and "true." The same holds for the other truths of Buddhism as well. I would even go so far as to say that if we all fully realize the truth of Buddhism, if everyone has actually awakened to it, then Buddhism itself becomes unnecessary. Buddhism is not merely an objective, absolute truth, nor can it ever be fully comprehended as one.

To clarify the essential way of Buddhism, that is, of awakening, let’s return to Sakyamuni’s quest now as our own. As already mentioned, Sakyamuni’s quest is said to have been prompted by the problems of illness, aging, and death. But what do these three problems really refer to? Aren’t we really circumscribing the inescapable limits, the inevitable negativities, of being itself? Isn’t life itself inseparable from death? The First Noble Truth, that *dukkha* or dis-ease is inherent in all life, points to the fact that life itself is inseparable from death. Although we desire pure life, pure being, it is an unrealizable abstraction; life is actually living-dying, being is actually being-nonbeing. And isn't this true not only of being-nonbeing but of every aspect of our lives? Although we seek health, can we ever be

fully free of illness? Wanting to be good, can we ever fully divest ourselves of evil? As long as we are something, anything, we can never be truly free. Only by breaking through the entire dualistic matrix can we put an end to this. Thus Buddhism since its beginnings has stressed that salvation is "putting an end to this entire mass of *dukkha*" by "crushing the great 'I am' conceit" which itself is described as happiness supreme.(2)

How is this done? Can we learn this from a teacher, from another? Again, Buddhism since its beginnings has been clear: On his way to give his First Sermon, Sakyamuni was asked who was his teacher. He responded: “By knowing for myself, whom should I follow? For me there is no teacher....”(3) Who was the teacher of Sakyamuni’s awakening? As mentioned, he had practiced under two outstanding teachers. But they were clearly not the teacher of his awakening. And who, finally, can be the teacher of our awakening? Sakyamuni? Already a step in the wrong direction. The real meaning of “solitary awakening without a teacher” has been corrupted over the ages. Thus it has come to be criticized in Japanese Buddhism, although it is clearly the genuine and original way of Buddhism.

Sakyamuni’s First Sermon is considered foundational for Buddhism. Proclaimed soon after his great awakening, it is thought to contain the very pith of the Buddhist teachings in their most concentrated form. To see what this First Sermon is really saying to us, let’s peel away some of the layers of doctrine and interpretation that have enveloped it over the millennia.

Sakyamuni’s First Sermon is thought to center on the Middle Way. Much has been made of the fact that Sakyamuni spoke of this way as neither indulging in sense pleasures nor abstaining through painful asceticism. This Middle Way between sense indulgence and ascetic renunciation has even been considered the essence of Buddhism.

But why did Sakyamuni’s First Sermon open with this explication of the Middle Way? I have seen plenty of detailed explanations about this teaching, but none that point out why Sakyamuni spoke about it in the first place. It’s simply because he was asked about it in those terms! As mentioned above, his five former fellow ascetics had decided to shun Sakyamuni since he had apparently fallen into sensuous indulgence by taking milk gruel for nourishment. Thus, when Sakyamuni approached them and spoke of himself as “Truthfinder” and “fully awakened one,” he was repeatedly interrogated by them: You did not attain through austerities, how could you attain through abundance? In response to this questioning, Sakyamuni unfolds the Middle Way that he awakened to as neither the dead end of sense indulgence nor ascetic renunciation. But there is no absolute truth here — Sakyamuni was simply responding to the question at hand in the terms of the questioner. Needless to say, he preached the *dhamma* or realized truth in innumerable other ways as well. The point here is that he was speaking in response to a specific question, and he responded that neither one (sense indulgence or ascetic renunciation) would do.(4)

Now we can begin to see what the Middle Way truly means. All the translations

and interpretations I have read describe it as a Middle Way between the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism. Even the Pali commentary, however, states that "the Way (*Maggo*) does not lead to, does not approach, these sides, it is freed (*mutto*) from these sides, therefore it is called the middle course (*majjhimå pa†ipadå*)." It even states that "awakening is the Way (*Sambodho ti maggo*)."(5) It is clearly not meant simply as something between two extremes. In a word, *majjhimå pa†ipadå* is not merely the Middle Way or middle course between hedonism and asceticism; it is the *core* way which has broken through and is free from *all* dualistic opposition. As long as the ordinary self or “I” exists, it possesses — and is possessed by — the dualistic dis-ease of pleasure-pain, good-evil, life-death, I-not I, and so on. Sakyamuni, on the other hand, is describing — and giving expression to — the self or “I” that is unconditioned, freed from the entire dualistic matrix of pleasure-pain, good-evil, life-death, I-not I, and so on.

Eventually this teaching developed into the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths can be briefly stated: 1. All exists in a state of *dukkha* or dis-ease. 2. The origin or cause (*samudaya*) of this dis-ease is *tanhå* or craving (i.e., thirst, blind desire, self-attachment). 3. This dis-ease ceases through the ceasing of all craving. 4. The Eightfold Path leading to this. Once again, there is much commentary on these Four Noble Truths. But what are they really saying to us? Truths one and two point out that being as we are -- being something, anything -- is dis-ease caused by craving and thus will not do. We cannot come to rest in being something, anything. Truths three and four show us what to do about it. In short, as I am -- however I am -- will not do; now, what do I do? This is the fundamental koan.

These are not separate truths, although they have been broken up into four distinct parts for ease of understanding. These four are one simple truth. Penetrating these four-as-one is what Buddhist practice is all about. At bottom, that is, fully penetrating, the first truth inevitably leads to the second, and to the third, and the fourth. Even to speak of them as consecutive is beside the point.

What about the Fourth Noble Truth, i.e., the Eightfold Path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration? This Eightfold Path has been exhaustively described and divided up. But why eight, and what are they finally referring to? Lifting them from their ancient Indian moorings, don't they simply mean every aspect of our lives? Buddhist practice-realization brought to life in every aspect of our lives. The Four Noble Truths are brought to life in genuine zazen, and genuine zazen is brought to life in every aspect of our lives as the Eightfold Path.

J0SHU’S “THEN WASH YOUR BOWL”

A monk, recently arrived at the monastery, once asked the Chinese Tang master Joshu (Chao-chou; 778-897) to teach him. Joshu asked the monk if he had eaten the morning rice gruel. The monk replied that he had. Joshu said, “Then wash your bowl.”(6)

This is one of the most well-known — and most often-recited — koans in the West. But is its Zen Buddhist meaning really understood? It is not simply pointing out the ordinary, simple act of washing the dishes when you finish eating. And yet Joshu offered nothing else, nothing really new or novel. He said what any child already knows. The point is: From where was Joshu speaking?

Joshu's ordinariness was "extraordinarily ordinary." Compare it with our "ordinary," "simple" thought-actions: If I eat breakfast then I'll have to do the dishes, but then I might be late and get into trouble. But if I don't eat I'll probably get tired later. Besides, I did the dishes yesterday so someone else should do them today. And on and on. Far from simple, what could be more tedious than that? No wonder we can't find time to eat breakfast or wash the dishes! Even in the supposedly simplest and most ordinary acts we are caught in the dualistic matrix of dis-ease.

Modern Japanese Zen commentaries mention that although the monk was new to Joshu's monastery he was probably not new to Zen Buddhism. The monk probably had some experience already and decided to make the long and arduous journey to this monastery after hearing about the renowned master Joshu. Perhaps he already had some notion that nothing would do, so he was desperately seeking out a teacher to instruct him. Thus his incisive request upon reaching the monastery, begging Joshu to teach him the Way.

Now we can start to see the greatness of Joshu's "extraordinary ordinariness." The monk was asking Joshu to teach him the Way. The master, however, quite literally taught him nothing that he didn't already know. And yet this Zen case ends with the following: "The monk had an insight." Highly significant: He wasn't awakened, but he did gain an insight. The monk caught a glimpse of Joshu's "extraordinary ordinariness." How? What did the monk see?

There is not a hair's breadth between Joshu's "Have you finished your morning meal?" and "Then wash your bowl"! Not a matter of mere speed or quickness, Joshu immediately and decisively unfurls his true face, not to mention the true face of the questioning monk — and our's as well. And the monk could see that. Catching a glimpse through this exchange, the monk could now see the error of his ways, the error in his very being, in his very coming to ask about it. Thus, the monk is finally turned in the right direction, rather than outward toward the person of the master. Now he is ready to bow in profound homage to the master, for teaching him nothing.

There's no magic in the breakfast bowl, either -- don't look for it there. Although the bowl was naturally and concretely taken up at that moment, if it is clung to, the real significance is lost. It has nothing to do with washing bowls, nor with the duality of mundane-sacred, or ordinary-extraordinary.

The entire exchange could be explained as a concrete, particular expression of the Four Noble Truths: In self-deluded craving our life in every aspect is full of dis-ease; free of self, our life in every aspect is itself Nirvana, ultimate ease. One could

go even further and state that the bowl is simply the particular opportunity or occasion to break through the entire dualistic complex. But that, too, is quite unnecessary and superfluous, isn't it?

THE REASON OF AWAKENING

All of us were born sensuous beings, so to speak, instinctively suckling nourishment, laughing or crying in response to our environment. And all of us eventually developed into rational beings, able, for a greater good, to hold off taking nourishment for awhile even when hungry. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and others have thrown light on how children come to reason. And yet it's also true that we ourselves are transformed in the process. In terms of individual evolution, this transformation is a natural and necessary development, although we also recognize that something, let's call it infantile purity, has been lost. To some extent children can be taught to think rationally. And yet, in a far more fundamental sense, rational self-awareness is something that we *realize*. We have all *become* rational beings in the process. In a very real sense, this rational self-awareness cannot be taught, each one of us must realize it from within. Awakening to, coming to, rational self-awareness, self-world is radically transformed. We can say that we have transcended the limits of mere sensuous existence, yet we don't go anywhere else, we don't go to another world.

One of the greatest of human tragedies is that this rational self-awareness -- its further development, fine tuning, so to speak -- is considered the final goal and end of our lives. The overwhelming direction of modern civilization, with science and technology as vanguards, is the result of this assumption. Great discoveries, cures for formerly deadly diseases for example, are the result of this; so is much of the present environmental destruction, not to mention feelings of profound and pervasive dis-ease. We should certainly continue developing this rational self-awareness. What is most urgently needed, however, is to realize the limits and contradictions inherent in rational self-awareness itself, and get free from the profound and pervasive dis-ease that underlies it. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Gotama became a Buddha by decisively doing just that.

The problem can be said to be rational self-awareness. But it is not merely an intellectual problem. Our *being* rationally self-aware includes not only the intellect but emotion and will as well. *Our being in its entirety* is ruled by rational self-awareness. We not only seek truth and try to avoid falseness, we desire pleasure and try to avoid pain, we will to do good and avoid evil. Our entire being possesses -- and is possessed by -- the dualistic strictures of rational self-awareness. Any attempt to get around it is itself part and parcel of the problem. Indeed, as we are, *however we are*, will not do. Now what do we do?

The "answer" is formless self-awakening which breaks through the limits of both the senses and reason. This is not a matter of regression or repression, but of the senses and reason utterly divested, emptied. Then the senses and reason, revealing their original, formless ground, can come back into full and unhindered

play. If we speak of a final end and goal of human life, this formless self-awakening is it, for with it the senses and reason are brought to unhindered rest and ease. The pervasive dis-ease of rational self-awareness is brought to rest once and for all, and formless self-awakening comes to life both in -- and beyond -- the senses and reason, now "Frolicking freely amid the gardens and groves [of what formerly constituted agonizing self-delusions]," as the Mahayana Buddhist expression suggests.

Just as an infant can't reason, in rational self-awareness we cannot fully comprehend formless self-awakening. Dualistic reason is futile here. But that is not because formless self-awakening is some transcendent form or state *beyond* reason; on the contrary, it is the formless source and ground of reason itself.

Just as there is a kind of discontinuous leap, a transformation, from sensuous to rational awareness, so there is a leap from rational self-awareness to formless self-awakening: Heaven and earth are born anew. There is no continuous path from one to the other. If a way is spoken of, it is the way of breaking through the limits and contradictions of the former, thus realizing, actualizing, the latter. Much can be done to guide, foster, and provide optimal conditions for children to develop reason. Finally, though, children awaken to it for themselves. Likewise, much can be done to guide, foster, and provide optimal conditions for all of us to awaken our formless self. Finally, though, each one awakens to, by, and for, oneself. As quoted above, "awakening is the Way."

Although the problem can be said to be the "ego," i.e., rational self-awareness, the ego itself is not bad or evil. Hating it will not make it go away. Hating it is itself an ego-delusion. There's nothing wrong with the ego -- only when it is grasped as something, anything, is there a problem. Just as an infant is not punished for failing to be rational, the ego need not be castigated for not being awake yet. The ego, if it is anything at all, is awakening not yet realized; it is the womb, the shell, for the formless self to break out and awaken. When the conditions are ripe, the chick naturally pecks its way out of the shell.

The actual condition of the ego just prior to awakening, however, can appear to the ego as death: It is always darkest just before the dawn. But that is inevitable for the ego at the end of its rope. There can be no new life without the death of the old. Great faith and sustained practice lead us through where there is nowhere to go -- the dark night of the soul, the valley of the shadow of death. But it is not faith in another, nor is it faith in one's own ego. It is great, subjectless-objectless, faith. This faith comes from awakening, it is faith-cum-awakening, awakening-cum-faith.

The problem of profound and pervasive dis-ease is in myself, it is myself; awakening to the formless self, the ceasing of the problem of profound and pervasive dis-ease is in myself, it is myself. It is me -- the "I" that is not anything whatever, the "I" that has no form whatever. And each and everyone of us, at bottom, is such an "I." No one is excluded. We can ponder whether we are fully awakened to this or not -- a crucial point for anyone who takes their Buddhist practice seriously. Crucial as such considerations and practices may be, however,

they all are secondary. Why? Because "awakening is the Way." This is the fundamental way of Buddhist practice.

"Awakening is the way"

Authentic zazen, true "seated Zen," is formless self-awakening. Not seeking outside, nor are we seeking inside: True zazen is manifest self-awakening, in no way limited to the seated posture. Continually going toward awakening, forever seeking to get closer and closer to it through sustained practice, is most admirable. What is essential, however, is *coming from* awakening. What else is Sakyamuni's sitting under the Bodhi tree?

Needless to say, such formless self-awakening can't come from another. As already mentioned, we cannot be awakened by another. Nor is there any need to. And yet, practicing together -- as we are here -- is a precious opportunity to mutually spur and inspire.

Struggling to find our way through such practice can be hell. I know. For years I struggled day and night with this. But the difficulty is our own making. Why is this? Because we are so used to grasping and rejecting, so attached to *being* something, anything — including so-called "enlightened beings." Really, though, there's nothing simpler — there's nothing to be. In everything we do, we are not anything. In our doing, thinking, feeling, we are not anything. But we are so accustomed to ceaselessly seek this and avoid that by grasping what has already taken on form — including the form of our "selves." Once we actually let go and return to the origin, though, we see what has always been here with us, as us. Prior to form of any kind — always right here, right now. This is how I understand Sakyamuni's description of his discovery as "the ancient path" (*puråna magga*). This is certainly not limited to Zen, nor to Buddhism for that matter. Nor is it a matter or "religion," narrowly conceived. It is simply a matter of realizing the boundless depth of humanity.

Mutual self-inquiry is this getting to the bottom of ourselves *with another, any time, any place*. Compared with more traditional Buddhist, even Zen, practices, this may sound quite radical. But it's really only returning to the origin. So-called Zen koans originated, for the most part, from spontaneous *mondo*-exchanges, living and dynamic mutual self-inquiries. Let's not stop there, though: I say it's no different from Sakyamuni's First Sermon!

THE FIRST SERMON -- AND THE LAST

All the translations and interpretations I have seen speak of it as the "First Sermon" or "First Preaching." (Borrowing an Upanishadic metaphor, it was apparently first spoken of as the turning of the *Brahmå-cakra* or Brahma wheel, then was later called the turning of the Dharma wheel.) As far as I'm concerned, however, it was not a sermon or a preaching at all. The Sutra accounts can sound long-winded, extremely repetitive, and dull. But do you think Sakyamuni was merely sermonizing, rattling off long lists? Sakyamuni must have been *demonstrating* it --

he wasn't *preaching to* them. "*This* -- he was *going through it with those five ascetics* -- is the truth of all dis-ease. And *this* is the ceasing of all dis-ease." And *this* is what mutual self-inquiry is all about.

Thus, one of the five ascetics, though under the guidance of Sakyamuni, awakened “without another’s help....”(7) Then a second, and a third, at which point these three ascetics went off to beg food for the group (I reckon they remembered to wash their bowls, too!) while the remaining two stayed with Sakyamuni and continued to work through it. Eventually all five ascetics awakened. Only after awakening did each ascetic ask to receive ordination. Thus, the Buddhist *Sangha* -- the Buddhist community or order -- was established with awakening as the Way, not merely as a formalized way toward awakening. This section of the *Mahåvagga* ends with the following: "At that time there were six *Arahats* in the world.”(8) Unlike later legends, Sakyamuni is here considered simply as one of the six awakened ones.

"Therefore, oh Ananda, be lamps unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves. Have no external refuge. Hold fast to truth as a lamp. Look not to anyone besides yourselves."(9) This paraphrase from the *Mahâ-Parinibbâna Sutta* (*Sutra of the Great Decease*) is attributed to Sakyamuni near the end of his life. It should be remembered, however, that it was spoken in response to Ananda’s request to name someone to lead the order. Denying this request, Sakyamuni goes so far as to state that he never considered *himself* as leader of the order. He likens himself to a worn-out cart that can only be kept moving with much care, and then he states the above about being lamps unto ourselves. To paraphrase his final words: “All conditioned things pass away; work out your salvation with diligence.”(10) Sakyamuni’s first sermon was his last. And it is resounding within each one of us — Listen!

IN CONCLUSION

Be patient with your practice. Have faith -- in your own true self. Throw yourself into your practice, yet with calmness and composure. When conditions are right, when the fruit is ripe, it naturally falls to the ground.

What is my role in all of this? I am completely dispensable. And that's the way it should be. Why then do I travel halfway around the world to come here and say these useless things? It is a chance for the most deluded one to speak. After all, if someone as stupid and selfish as me can realize it, then anyone can! It's true. Can you deny it? If I can be of some small service, that's great. Anyway, practicing together like this is always a precious opportunity for me. Thank you.

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1. A revised version of lectures given in the summer of 2000 for retreats in Philadelphia sponsored by the Philadelphia Buddhist Association and held at Chestnut Hill College, in Belgium at the University of Leuven and at Peer, and in Utrecht, Holland sponsored by *ZEN onder de Dom*.
2. See *The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka)*, Volume IV *(Mahåvagga)* in *Sacred Books of the Buddhists* Volume XIV translated by I. B. Horner (London:

Luzac & Company, 1971) pp. 2 and 5. Another translation can be found in *The Sacred Books of the East*, Volume XIII (*Vinaya Texts*) translated by T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg (India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982) pp. 78 and 81.
3. Ibid, p. 11. (Also found in the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta.*The first sentence is found in the *Dhammapada*, verse 353.)
4. Ibid, pp. 13-15.
5. Ibid, p. 15, footnotes 3 and 10.
6. From case seven of the *Mumonkan* (*Gateless Barrier).*
7. See *The Book of the Discipline* , p. 18.
8. Ibid, p. 21.
9. See *The Sacred Books of the East, Volume XI, Buddhist-S¨tras,* translated by T. W. Rhys Davids (India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980) p. 38.
10. Ibid, p. 114.