Jeff Shore

Being Without Self Retreat

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Day 5, The Final Day

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Louis: Jeff invited me during this last Dharma talk to share a kind of open-end conversation with him. So we looked around for what we could talk about, and there's one thing that is dear to my heart in practice. It is humiliation. So, the question I asked Jeff is: There seems to be a very long history, a link between Zen and humiliation. What is that history?

Jeff: I'm not sure how it began, but I suppose because of the nature of Buddhism, especially the Zen approach, that there's a freedom and ability to do *anything* out of compassion to help another awaken. This is classic Zen: The most Zennistic of Zen masters, Ma Tsu (in Japanese, *Baso*) kicked people, shouted at them, struck them, and this became typical Zen fare. After that it became a way of expression, of demonstration, rather than, for example, sutras, written words, lecturing. Perhaps the real question is: does it have to be humiliating? I've had the honor to be able to work with many Zen masters, so have been able to see that some of them love to humiliate. It's their forte. Some of them don't go there, for whatever reason. So it's certainly not necessary, but it is one way of testing the disciple. If there is still some place where you are holding on, you will feel humiliated. But if you really have opened up, if you really *are* without self, the humiliation passes right through.

With my teacher I had to deal with it when I was going to America with him as his assistant, interpreting and doing these kinds of things. And he would just wait – he knew some English – so he would just wait for me to make a little mistake or something like that and then he would turn and say "I didn't say that" or "It's not what I meant." Or talking about *becoming* something so, "*bray* like a donkey" or "*sing* like a bird," and I would be called to do that, much to the amusement of some university in America. And if it irks you, there's something to learn. It can be a tool to show you where ego remains. But is it necessary? Do we need to do it that way?

Louis: When you say, "Is it necessary?", evidently not. It cannot be turned into a formal method that teachers would use. I think it comes out – at least in my own experience with my teacher – out of what he saw in me, because when I first came to the Center after about a year I was offered to start training as a monitor by Albert. And for sure I made mistakes, like we all do as we're learning any new task, and I was faced with very stern and severe reactions from Albert. I guess that he had already seen that behind what I was doing, behind the kind of perfectionism I was bringing to it, I had a very deep insecurity inside. So I was striving to succeed, to be sure that I wouldn't be hurt in any way. And he saw that, so when I made mistakes he had the eye for it. He could point them out very severely and I hurt myself very profoundly

with that. I think one of the major things that helped me with humiliation is when I saw clearly that it was not the criticism from outside that was hurting me. It was that the sense of self was threatened, or at least I thought it was because I really did believe that this was me, this was what I was, and this was under attack and because of this conviction, I really felt absolutely worthless, inferior, no good at all. I did make many mistakes, so it happened many times. How many times did I think of leaving? But I just would not do it, so I stayed and instead of resisting the humiliation, I embraced it. I really started working, not against it, but with it.

Yesterday, Jeff gave a beautiful example of that, saying when you're overwhelmed with a very intense negative feeling, you just pour it down completely in the breath so it comes *completely* in the body. The body-mind is completely one through that. And it is not a matter of analyzing the feeling or labeling it, saying, "Is this anxiety? Is this depression? Is it this or that?" No, just staying with the unease, the discomfort of the physical feeling that is there and completely diving in it, completely opening oneself to it by letting it completely go down in the breath. And through that, not only did that deep hurt dissolve, but the kind of energy that was blocked in it became available in the practice. There was a release there, and you know I wished so hard that " OK, I'll do it one time and then I will be done with it", but it wasn't like that at all.

And that was another lesson for me, a very important one: the importance of coming back, coming back, always remaining open to do the work again, do the work again. In my case there really was much work to be done, and there still is. But this coming back, how humiliating for one who should succeed the first time. But through that a very deepening faith in the practice started to take its place. I could trust the practice to completely take care of all the hurt that I was inflicting on myself *because* of my self. I could deeply trust the practice to do that. And when I look back on it, through the compassion that Albert expressed, through his severe criticism, what a gift I received! How he deeply helped me to stop playing all those games, stop pretending, get down in your own heart, see, let it open, release all this.

As some of you may know, I lead the introductory workshop and I tell people that at the end of each evening sitting we chant Hakuin Zenji's *Zazen Wasan*. The first line says in English, "From the beginning all beings are Buddha," and I tell them that these words mean that you and I and everyone here is completely awakened as we are with all our failings, with all our doubts. But then how do you put that in accord with the First Noble Truth: Life is Suffering? A few lines later in The Song of Zazen, Hakuin Zenji says "It is the illusion of self that causes our sorrow." The work with humiliation is simply going down in this ego delusion, opening up to it, not to strengthen it in any way, but just to really get to know that complex web of ideas, emotions, behaviors, expectations, dreams, fantasies, and whatever else we call "my *self*." Get to know that, get to see through that, get to feel deeply and practice with the hurt, the suffering that all that brings, and it becomes less opaque, it becomes less and less solid. Albert would say you start to see through walls. It melts in a way. That's what I wanted to say about the work I did with humiliation.

Serge: But when we work with you, you don't do that.

Louis: No, it's not my style at all. Like Jeff said it comes easily to certain teachers. I know it came quite easily to Albert, even though he could at the same time be such a kind man. But if he gave you a

responsibility of some sort, he really could jump on you if you weren't up to the task and that was good for me. At the time, I couldn't see it, but after a while when I decided "I won't try to escape it in any way, this is my work, this is what I have to work with", what a beautiful gift he gave me.

Jean-Luc: If you were to work with a teacher today that works with humiliation the same way that Albert did, how different would it be for you? Or what would you do differently, if anything?

Louis: I'd just go on working, but I guess today in the practice this is not what I'm looking for in a relationship with a teacher. But if I'm working with a teacher and this is present I will just go on working with it. If I see that the hurt is there, for me that is a signal that there's a chunk of ego that is moving somewhere.

Jean-Luc: What does that ego prevent you from doing? What would trigger the teacher to stop working this way with you? What would change in your behavior? What can it initiate? What can it transform? In my opinion, if that happens, the teacher won't go there anymore.

Francis: When there is an ego, the humiliation is still necessary because that's the main point of all of our practice. Life is humiliating in the first place; the teacher is just pointing it out.

Jean-Luc: The role of the teacher in that context is to do whatever it takes to wake you up. This is what the teacher is doing and Albert had the ability to use the full spectrum. He made no concessions. The downside is if you get stuck in that vicious cycle too long you wear out in a way. Life is relatively short and we need to be pretty engaged and almost aggressive. I think that is setting up a barrier and you have to pass through the barrier.

Louis: I think you're quite right. I must say that for myself and the work I did with Albert, I was not able to pass through that barrier, so it stayed like that when Albert passed away. It did not open like that, but I went on with my work and practice and I remember two years ago when I met Jeff for the first time I was able to completely open up about this, and doing that I became really able to see all that Albert had given me out of his compassion, all the risks he had taken with me by pushing me like that. I saw that and a very deep gratitude came out, and that for me was passing through the barrier, but Albert wasn't there, not physically at least. That was passing through for me.

Jean-Luc: You forgave him.

Louis: That barrier dropped away completely, it melted.

Jean-Luc: I'm not suggesting this is what you should've told Albert when he was challenging you, but there was definitely an invitation to walk into *dokusan* and say, "Hey, what's the matter?" And that is a demonstration of something. You are responding to the challenge.

Louis: That didn't happen that way with me. There was a mindset behind all that; I always turned it on me.

Jean-Luc: You took the blame.

Louis: I took the blame, yes, but that blame pushed me to a very deep questioning. But it didn't come out and I guess I still do feel that if I had gone in that direction and said "What's the problem? What's the problem?" I would have destroyed something. I was very very fearful of that. There's a very deep insecurity and I saw a great risk in doing that.

Jean-Luc: And what is the risk?

Louis: In my relationship with Albert it would have been not being able to work with him any more.

Jean-Luc: And it could've been the exact opposite.

Louis: I know. I know that deeply. I wasn't able to go in that direction when he was working with me, but when you said I forgave him, that was the first part of it. It didn't end there because through that forgiveness came, also the gratitude, because then I could see what he had given me, what work I had been able to do.

Jean-Luc: But he never saw it.

Louis: He never saw it. It's not that I didn't tell him.

Jean-Luc: He didn't expect you to tell him. He expected you to show him.

Louis: I don't know what he expected but the only thing I could say is that I told him. I told him through the gratitude that came out. It was a melting, completely melting. There was absolutely no barrier standing any more between Albert and me. But it didn't come out, as you're saying.

Jean-Luc: There's a saying that we hear often. "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha." You see, we establish a relationship. We create the other. We know that very well. It's not complicated psychology. My point is if the teacher carries on in this behavior he's telling you something. He's trying to show you something. Then it's up to each and every one of us to ask ourselves the question: "So, what would be my way?" The point is if you are ever confronted with that situation, find your way through.

Jean-Guy: We understand what you say, but Mr. Low was a giant. When I came to dokusan he was a giant.

Jean-Luc: You made him a giant.

Jean-Guy: I agree with that. [If it were] boxing, he knocked me down with one punch. I was on the floor, by a very simple word. He said, "Well, I don't know what to do with you." When I got out – first I had to get off the floor – I was shaken. I had to sit on the stair to cry a bit before I had to go back to the zendo. Who didn't make Mr. Low a giant when he came first time to the *dokusan*? The next time he smiled, but the first time...

Jean-Luc: He did exactly what he had to do. In almost all the *teishos* he explained it over and over and over. Really, what I hear is that we all went through the same thing and he said it over and over, and also gave us the tools to get through it.

Francis: Mr. Low at the end was very sick at the hospital and I went to see him, and I'd bring him a juice with a straw, saying "Oh, well it's new juice and maybe it's good for you," and he'd say "Okay, let's try it," and he'd take it and he'd do it on purpose and spill it a little, but all the time he was trying, not to humiliate me, but to point out if I would be humiliated if he acts this way, and I was familiar with this game so it didn't touch me anymore. So I was cured about this humiliating thing. One day, maybe a year ago, a year before he passed away, I was feeling very bad and said "Mr. Low, I feel really depressed," and he came close to me, touched me on the shoulder and said "Don't waste it." That's all. So I said "What does it mean, don't waste it?" and after that I understood what he meant about it, this self-pity and humiliation, it's all a game.

Louis: And don't waste it. Never waste it. But we're very fortunate because life provides so many opportunities to feel humiliated, vexed, neglected, you know, fun work. It struck me this morning when I was thinking about the talk we would be having. It's funny to see that all that we're talking about is illusion, because it's all based on the fact that we are convinced that we are the self. We are the center. We are the self. We truly believe it: that is what we are. And all the rest becomes important because it is all related to that core conviction that this is what I am. And if this is attacked or threatened in any way, you can imagine - or probably already know - the burning hurt that comes through that. So through the work we're doing we're not only letting all these hurtful feelings appear and dissolve, but at the same time this work is corroding that conviction that this is what I am. We see all of this passing away, it is completely unstable. It goes in all directions. It is very fragile. Someone looks at you in a certain way and then you feel crumbling inside. It is so vulnerable, but this work corrodes that. But still we're talking about ego delusion.

It's funny, what we are doing now, because it's as if we're completely in illusion and that is not Zen. That is not the work of Zen. I guess it's important that we talk about these things, that each one of us can really recognize his own personal work and how it comes about. For me humiliation was a very central piece of my work, but even saying *my* work is too much. It isn't mine. It is the work. It is working with one's self. It struck me that we're in words, we're completely in words, but when we're sitting on the mat that's not what's happening. We're not building up dictionaries of words in our head. We're all pouring it in the practice completely, completely. Are there words for that? Can we ever find words to express that?

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Louis: You told me, Jeff, that Zen is not interested in mind states. Would you care to say more about that?

Jeff: We all go through, the self goes through all kinds of experiences and mind states, mental states: bliss, agony, and so on. No doubt. Zen has nothing to do with those things, with mind states, ecstasy even. And if we're not familiar it may sound strange. Isn't what we're trying to get to some kind of ecstasis,

some kind of enlightened state? But it's not a state, a condition at all. That's the point. There are states. There are conditions, and the self is constantly going through them, clinging to them, rejecting them, returning again and again. Some of them are "liberating," so to speak. But if you look at Buddhism it's very clear: It's not interested in reaching some kind of a mental state, for example, equilibrium, equanimity. That is not the *end* of Buddhism because it is itself subject to conditions.

So if you look at the meditative discipline in Buddhism it's very clear: not just samadhi, this concentrated oneness, but deepening it until it becomes total, embodied, what's called dhyana. Dhyana is the Indian word for what became Ch'an which became the word Zen. These are deep meditative states where to some extent the ordinary self is dissolved. For example, sitting so deeply that you feel the vastness of space. You are vast space. There is no limit. It's just vast space like the clear blue sky. Sunyata actually means both "the sky" and "emptiness." They're not two in this thinking. Probably most of you or all of you have experienced that in deep samadhi. There's no barrier: vast space. But the temporal, spatial element is still there. That's why you experience it as space, not normal space, but like it has opened up, but there's still an element of the spatial temporal domain. It's a deep dhyana, but it's still subject to conditions. When we come out of it, we return to ourselves.

If you go deeper – again in the sutras it's very clear – beyond that they describe it as consciousness unbound. Now the spatial temporal element is dissolving. It's even deeper now. It's just consciousness itself, not conscious of anything, aware in a way that is impossible in ordinary consciousness, but not fixating on anything, even empty space. It's like being the light of the Universe itself. It's marvelous. But this too is a state, clearly, a mental state, a very deep one, and in a sense we can say the ordinary self is gone in that experience, but that experience itself is temporary.

If instead of getting carried away with that we continue right through the bottom of it, we get to the point where in the sutras they describe it precisely as "not a thing." Nothing. There's nothing there, but it's not mere blankness. There's a clarity there that is impossible in ordinary awareness, but it is not objectified, turned into any thing, even a sense of a consciousness, pure awareness. That itself is gone. So how do you describe it? They describe it literally "nothing" or "not a thing." But it's not just blank. One *is* in a sense experiencing it, but not as an object. One *is* it through and through, not a thing. But it's also a temporary experience. Often when you first go through that and you come out of it, you don't even remember. It's just a blank. You don't know what it was. Did I fall asleep? No. But you can't even recall it. It takes some discipline, some familiarity until you realize there's not a thing. Everything is there, but it's not a thing.

When that is bottomed out, so to speak, then we come to what is called "neither perception nor non-perception." And again that's exactly what it is. There's no one perceiving anything, but neither is there "non-perception." It's not just blank, dead. There's an illumination there but it is not objectified in any way. It is not turned into anything, subject or object. Neither perception – perception means anything through the senses, sense experience – nor the lack of it. You're not a zombie.

When *that* is broken through, *awakening* unfolds. But you see *that* is not another state for the self, the final state, "enlightenment." No. Enlightenment, better "awakening" is when that final element collapses. When that bottoms out, when that dissolves, you don't then become something else. There is nothing else to become. It's a very good metaphor, "Awakening." We wake up from that whole dream, the whole

dream. Even the very deep dhyana states, they are in a sense a delusion because there's still a remnant there. Any mind state, there's still something clinging on. There's still a trace. Pure awareness, call it what you will, *that* is a trace. *That* must be dissolved, forgotten. If it's still pure awareness it "smells," as we say in Zen. Pure awareness smells. There's an expression, "He doesn't know the smell of his own shit." But that's actually used as a positive expression. This is a very high "state." It's no longer being confined to any state, and not even attaching to that. Then you freely enter, as it says in the Record of Rinzai for example, into the realms of the devas, of the devils, of the demons, like walking through a pleasure garden.

In some schools of Buddhism these states are very important: the samadhi of concentrated oneness, without pleasure or pain, things like that. Dhyana, or literally "formless dhyana" are the states that I was explaining: space unbound, consciousness unbound, not a thing, and then finally neither perception nor nonperception. These are the four final formless dhyana. But when was the last time you heard Zen talk about them? They usually don't talk about it at all. It's not that they're not aware of it or they don't think it's important, but there's a danger of turning it into a meditation factory. You can see why Zen developed. Endlessly going in and out of these mental states, when is that going to arrive at *awakening,* of the dissolution of the self? There's a directness, an immediacy in Zen, but it has it's danger. Zen would not have developed without that meditative discipline. It didn't come out of nowhere. Zen took it a step further and said "What is the essential point?" It's awakening. It's not any of those states, so they tend not to talk about that.

Those states are there. In a sense they are real, they have a reality. They can be experienced and described but always see, "What is it?" Acknowledge it. Yes, it's like vast space. Examine it carefully. What is it's limit? Once you see that you can't help but continue on through. Zen is *not* a state of mind. It has nothing to do with states of mind.

Marie-Claude: Jeff, where is Nirvana in this?

Jeff: Awakening is metaphorically entering Nirvana, but Nirvana is often also spoken of in terms of passing away, *paranirvana*, final Nirvana, so when Gautama Buddha died it's also called Nirvana but that's a Nirvana without remnant. He "went." But he didn't go anywhere. He finished. But when he was alive there was still a body, there was still a mind. It was completely at rest even though there may have been severe pain or sadness about something, but it is completely at rest. It is not a state. That is the Nirvana here and now that Zen speaks of. Zen usually doesn't use the term Nirvana. It usually uses terms like *satori, kensho.* Kensho literally means *ken sho*, to *see through* the nature of things, of course most of all the nature of *self*, to see that there is no such thing. But now in the West, everybody has "kensho." It's become just an experience, a state of mind, a bit of a glimpse. So it becomes a big problem in Western "Zen." The original meaning is "awakening," to really see the nature. It's not an initial glimpse. Bodhidharma speaks of kensho. It's the same as awakening. But over the centuries for various reasons, trying to pull students through no matter what, this word *kensho* has become a very overused term. So now, "just a glimpse," and people will say "kensho." This is a big problem because that's still definitely a state. Nirvana is all of that cracked open.

Jean-Luc: The description you made is very accurate and it's remarkable, but it also leads to believe that it is reserved to some form of an elite, because of the difficulties to be able to give ourselves fully in order to visit for our own what you just described. It leads to believe that it remains inaccessible for lay people.

Jeff: A lot of monks don't have any idea what I'm talking about. They've never experienced it. So I don't think it has anything to do with that. If you're devoted you can enter these states, but that's not the point. You know what I mean? So when you do find yourself there, test it, see. Yes, it is like that, and it just ended. Okay, now I know. But not to go looking for them, not to think we have to go through all of these. Zen is not interested in those stages. But a lot of monks don't have any idea about this. They sit, but they don't really know what they're doing even though they're monks. I don't find that distinction relevant. You have to be devoted for sure, but you've got that.

You have what you need. Stop thinking about what's gone. You have to move it forward. That's what I'm sure Albert would have wanted. It's only one thing, not two. WAKE UP! You know what that is in French?

"*Frère Jacques, frère Jacques, dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?"*

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