

Summer 2024 - Steyl - Retreat Lectures

DAY 1

When Gotama Buddha, Shakyamuni, was wandering out on begging rounds or with his disciples, someone might ask him a question or point out a beautiful view they were walking by. In the old Pali *suttas*, it sometimes says that at such times Gotama Buddha stopped walking, turned, and answered the question of the person or looked at the beautiful view.

Already there is something valuable here for us. Now, in the 21st century, we are often so busy doing three or four things at once that we don't seem to have time to stop – maybe even to slow down! We want to be able to continue going where we're going, while also checking our cellphones or thinking about other things.

Of course, the point of Buddhism isn't just to stop walking for a moment and turn our attention to something else. The point of Buddhist practice is for the mind itself to come to a full and complete stop. This, in a sense, is the entrance to genuine Buddhist and Zen Buddhist practice. Without that, we may be sitting in a certain posture, but we're still moving, with our mind.

The first thing to get straight is: what we do in this practice, in a radical sense, is not to do anything, but rather to let the very seeking mind itself come to rest. In Buddhism, this includes everything: what we see, hear, smell, taste, the physical sensations, walking itself, and, of course, the mind. All of that naturally brought to rest. Then, to truly see – not just with our eyes but with all of our senses – what is here. Don't we already see what is here? Consider well: we do – and we don't. We see as we race by, always looking for something else. But to once let that seeking mind itself naturally come to rest, so that we can truly realize what is here. No magic is required, no need for being up in the clouds or in some mystical state.

Again, take this very simple, earthy example from the Pali *suttas* of Gotama Buddha stopping to consider a question and respond to it or to enjoy a beautiful view. The true beauty, the true dignity that we seek, is found to be under our feet, in front of our eyes, in the depths of our own heart. That's the only place we can really find it. And how do we do that? Not by seeking, but by letting that very seeking come to its own end. This is the basis of Buddhism, of Buddhist practice, and of Zen Buddhist practice.

For now, see from your own experience. You know what it is for your mind to go running at 10, 20, or 100 miles per hour. And you know what it is for the mind to slow down. You can become much more calm, and things become much clearer. But what is it for that very

seeking mind to come to its own end, to stop? Consider well in the depths of your own practice.

When we're sitting, it doesn't mean we're not moving anymore. Because you can be sitting in perfect full lotus position while your mind races at 100 miles per hour. There's a great virtue, a great value in this physical posture. Of course, it doesn't have to be full lotus, but sitting in sustained zazen is precious. However, that in itself doesn't stop the mind, does it? We all know that. What is it for the breath to help us calm, focus, and concentrate? We all have some sense of this: how the breath can bring all of the activities of the body and mind to a halt. The most delicate point, of course, is the mind. What remains when the body has come to rest and the breath is truly focused and centered, calm? What remains? We will go through this in some detail in the coming days.

See what your body is doing as you are sitting. For example, are you tensing up as you sit? Yes, there will be pain. Or are you able to release that and sit through – not by mere willpower, but something much more basic that allows us to sit completely free of tension for hours or days. You must realize what your body and mind are doing, not what you want them to do or what I have mentioned that they can do. What is actually going on in your body? If you don't see that, well, then you're practicing blindly, aren't you? Again, we are not trying to create some special state, but rather to recognize, to clearly realize what this body and this mind are doing. If you can experience it tightening up and becoming tense, you can experience it loosening up and being released. But if you're simply in your head, you don't even realize what you're doing and, all of a sudden, *'Oh, my back! My shoulders! My knee! It's so painful!'* Do you see what is going on? You have to see what you are doing. It's not the zazen that is doing that. Zazen is not one single thing. Zazen is not tightening up. How can this be uncomfortable? See what your mind is doing. If you can see it tighten, you can see it release, loosen and come to rest. But you must experience that, with your own body and mind or, as I like to say, in your bones. Otherwise, it's just a neat idea.

Q&A

Questioner #1: I have a question about the eyes. I understand how to sit with eyes closed and eyes open but, as I understand, it is advised to sit with eyes half closed. I find it very hard.

Jeff: It's quite a common problem; I struggled with it for quite some time. We are used to having our eyes open, looking around, doing things, or, when we go to sleep or take a nap, closing our eyes. But this halfway state doesn't seem natural – and yet it really is. If you look at someone praying in church, for example, they're usually doing that. Their eyes are not closed; they're often just looking naturally down in front of them. They're not really looking *at* or *for* anything, but that's what your eyes would do if you are released from that visual field. In other words, we're not trying to close our eyes or our ears so we won't see or hear anything. That's not the problem. It's true, there are many kinds of Buddhist meditation where you close your eyes, but in Zen, it's clearly stated – for example, in the

Zazen Manual – that the eyes are to be half closed. And once you get used to it, you see how it works. But it does take time.

Eyes open? No problem. Eyes closed? Probably go to sleep – no problem. But halfway? It seems unnatural. Just let it do what it's doing. If this discursive mind is still working, then what will happen? You'll start to see patterns on the floor – *huh, there's a dragon!* – but if you just allow your mind to come to rest, the eyes will naturally fall a few feet in front of you.

Again, the point is not to go inside any more than it is to go outside. The point is to let that very distinction fall away. So we allow the eyes to remain open a little bit. Because if they're open all the way, you'll be paying attention to what's going on out here. But you don't close them and try to go into a world of dreams or imagination either. We don't close our ears either. If the fire alarm goes off, we hear it. But we're not listening – *oh, I want to hear more birdsong*. We're not listening to anything either. With the eyes, it's a little different than with the ears; there's a kind of conscious focus we do with the eyes, whereas the ears are just kind of open. So it can be difficult – and I've struggled with it for quite some time. But once you enter into *samadhi*, or concentrated oneness, you'll find your eyes just naturally doing that.

You'll see – it's very valuable. Because if you close your eyes and maybe go into a very deep *samadhi* or even a *jhana* state, a really concentrated state – all well and good, but then when you open your eyes, it's over. And you're now in another state, the ordinary waking state. Well, now you've got two states. Which one is it?

So, the subtlety of Zen practice, where the eyes are allowed to be left half open, is difficult in the beginning. It's a kind of a rather mature practice. But once you're stable enough to do that, you're not going off into a special state. So, when zazen's over, *ding*, you get up – the zazen gets up. It's not '*oh, and now I'm awake*'. No, you follow – it can get to be what it needs to be, the way we are. When zazen is over, you're not transferring from one state to another; you're allowing that to continue.

So give it some time and allow the eyes just to naturally do that. You know what it's like when you close them and you get sleepy or dream. And you know what it's like if you start comparing the zazen of everybody in the room, right? You don't have to do either one. Just let the eyes do what they would do if you're not engaged. If you're not seeking something with them, they'll just remain half open.

If it's really a problem and you can't stay focused, you can close your eyes. It's no big deal. But there's a good reason they recommend that the eyes be half closed. Give it some time and see. And again, I'm sure several people here have struggled with the same thing I did. I remember struggling for a long time. But as you deepen and sustain *samadhi*, you see your eyes will just do that.

Did you want to say anything else?

Questioner #1: *Well, there's an imbalance with my left and my right eye. One tends to close down, and the other tends to stay open. I don't know.*

Jeff: I wouldn't worry about it. That's what short toothpicks are for, you know? *[Laughter]* Again, we're not fixating, we're not looking at anything. So just let the eyes do what they would do. Thank you for your question.

Questioner #2: *When we go in kinhin, there are many impressions coming. How do I play with this?*

Jeff: You don't have to play with it. Just, when the *jiki* says '*kinhin*' – the sitting now gets up, and then you turn, and you follow the feet of the person to your left. It's exactly the same thing – looking down a few feet in front of you, but this time at the foot of the person in front of you. And you simply watch – when he moves, you move.

Inside the zendo, it's pretty simple, but when you're going outside, you have to be a little more free to negotiate. '*Is there a car coming?*' If you're crossing the street, you may look around. In principle, you're not out there to look around and enjoy the view. You're out there to continue the practice in a simple physical movement – walking. Simply follow the footstep of the person in front of you. We may take a look – it's a beautiful view, a nice sunset, or whatever. If your practice is stable, it's not really going to matter. But we're not out there now to enjoy the view. It's there if you want to look – nobody's going to hit you. But really, what we're doing is simply following the footstep of the person in front of us.

Why are we doing that? Well, we're taking the zazen into a simple physical movement, a very practical one – walking. But the point is to sustain that concentration. And the eyes are doing the same thing. Looking a few feet in front, but this time just following the foot of the person in front. It's a very simple but effective way of allowing that focus in zazen to be carried out in a physical movement. Do you follow? *[Yes.]* Okay. Thank you for your question.

DAY 2

I trust you can see how body, breath and mind are all related. Everything we do with the body has been tested over centuries and centuries. For instance, the way we hold our hands: either informally, you naturally wrap the left hand around the thumb of the right hand. Or more formally, the fingers of the left hand on top of the fingers of the right hand, with the thumbs lightly touching. If you're sitting in full lotus, naturally, the hands rest on your lap and right where your thumbs touch would be your belly button or your navel. Of course, it depends on how you're sitting; it doesn't have to be full lotus. But we don't put our hands on our knees – for example, like in some yoga poses. We bring them together on our lap. And when you do, you will see: placing our hands like this is very helpful for maintaining that energy, not up in the head, but rather settled in the physical center of our body in the abdomen.

After we get through problems with the body, we will turn to problems with the breath – how to breathe properly. The body and hand posture is very much connected with it because you're breathing from your lungs, of course, but you're using the muscles down in the abdomen to deepen the breath.

The way we cross our legs, too, makes sense – when you actually get used to sitting like this, it's extremely comfortable. And yet the back especially is naturally erect. Of course, you can hunch over, but crossing your legs, with the butt pressed down and a little back on the cushion – your back is naturally erect. So for long periods of zazen, holding the body like this is quite natural. If you can't do it in full lotus, you can try half lotus, quarter lotus, Burmese with your feet flat, or sitting in seiza – you can stand on your head if you want, as long as you continue that practice. The mind can come to a stop at any place, at any time.

The only way for you to really confirm that is to do it – find out what works, what is the right posture for your body. And everything that is being done during the retreat – even the way we have meals or the way we can take a break – is helping the body, breath, and the mind to come naturally to rest.

But now, I would like to return to the first point I brought up about Gotama Buddha, Shakyamuni, stopping to respond to a question. As I said, this means not just to physically stop – but for all the activities of the mind to come to a halt. Why? Simply so that we can really see, realize from the ground up – what is here, in front of our face, under our feet, in the depths of our heart. Once we really realize that, we don't go running off again. We don't need to. This is the basis of Buddhist and Zen Buddhist practice.

There was one time when Gotama Buddha did not stop, and it's a very suggestive theme to take up during retreat. Does anyone know what I'm talking about? This happened during one occasion where the Buddha was out on begging rounds.

Monastics and people who had left home in ancient India cannot make a living: they cannot grow their own vegetables, they cannot work, they cannot make money. So they have to rely on others for their food: they go out on what we call *begging rounds*. And so, Gotama Buddha often went on begging rounds, walking at a regular pace, going to a nearby village to receive his food.

The example I'm using, which is in the Pali suttas, happened during one of those days. The background of the story is a bit bizarre, but perhaps not as bizarre as it sounds at first. There's a guy called Angulimala. which literally means a wreath or a garland – like a necklace – of fingers. Very simply, Angulimala was practicing under a guru at the time of Gotama Buddha, and he was a very adept practitioner. It was clear that he was soon going to reach the same level as his guru. Because of this, jealousy arose in the teacher, and perhaps some of the disciples – there are different versions. The students spoke ill of him. Or perhaps the teacher himself did not want this Angulimala, the young disciple, to rise too quickly to his level. There are even stories in the later tradition about the guru having a wife and Angulimala making advances to the wife, or perhaps the wife making advances to Angulimala. It's all pretty complicated, but it doesn't matter. The point is the guru decided to give Angulimala, the disciple, an impossible task. One final practice, but it would be impossible so that he couldn't rise to the same level as him – basically keeping him in his place.

He told the person who eventually came to be called Angulimala, "Your final practice is this: you have to kill a thousand people. And for each person that you kill, you cut off one of their fingers, and you make a garland of their fingers. When you have done that with a thousand people, your practice will be complete." Well, good or bad, he was a faithful disciple of the guru, and he proceeded to do just that as he was told: he went around and killed people and cut off their fingers, making a garland which he wore. Whole villages were terrified of this guy. He was a big, strong man, armed with weapons, and he would chase after people, slay them, kill them, and then cut off one finger.

He got to 999. One more to go. And guess what? There was old Gotama Buddha walking on his begging rounds, according to the sutta. Well, Angulimala had heard of this guy – the World-Honored One, the All-Enlightened Buddha. Ah, a great one-thousandth finger, wouldn't it be?

So big, strong Angulimala starts running after Shakyamuni Gotama Buddha, who is alone, just walking at a regular pace, going to the nearby village to receive his alms, begging. Gotama Buddha, here, doesn't stop. He continues to walk. Meanwhile, Angulimala, no matter how hard he runs, he can't seem to get any closer. And yet Gotama Buddha is just walking at a regular pace. He doesn't stop. He doesn't run. Angulimala runs and runs; he can't get any closer. Finally, Angulimala stops, and he yells, "Hey, you, World-Honored One, stop! Stop!" Gotama Buddha doesn't stop. He continues walking at a regular pace, turns around and says, "I have stopped. Now you stop."

It's kind of an early Buddhist koan.

Angulimala knows this is the All-Enlightened Buddha. Whatever the situation, he would not lie. So Angulimala is now very confused. He's not moving anymore, he's not chasing Gotama Buddha. He says, "I have stopped, but you say I haven't. And you are still walking, yet you say you have stopped. What's going on here?"

Gotama Buddha, still walking but truly stopped, says, "I have stopped all forms of craving, all forms of selfish desire, all delusion. You have not." With this, Angulimala has a kind of a

conversion experience. He realizes the truth of what has been said. And, it says in the sutta, he became a disciple of Gotama Buddha.

The first point to be made clear is that Gotama Buddha stopped in the most fundamental sense. It's not a question of not walking anymore or sitting for really long periods of time, as valuable as that is. Finally, the mind and all of its contrivances and creations must naturally come to an end, so that we can truly see what is here. Then we don't go running off again. It doesn't mean you can't move, but you move from here.

This is the only example I've ever seen where Gotama Buddha, on the surface, doesn't stop. But because he has truly stopped, he is actually able to use that occasion to convert someone who was, using today's word, a serial killer, a mass murderer.

Consider well what it is to stop. And what it is then to move on. It's not a matter of dead stillness. But first, we must let this mind and all of its contrivances, desires and urges naturally come to rest. This is the point of our practice.

We don't go around cutting off fingers, and yet, if we look deeply into our own thoughts and actions, maybe there's a little bit of Angulimala in all of us.

Zen likes to say, '*we're all Buddhas.*' But you have to see – we're all also a little bit of Angulimala as well. There's an expression in the Japanese Rinzai monasteries: literally, *a monk practitioner without kensho isn't worth a penny*. Kensho is basically a term for awakening, although it's pretty meaningless nowadays. Originally, it meant a genuine awakening. A monk without awakening isn't worth a penny, it's worthless. He's not a real monk yet. What they don't tell you is that a monk with kensho isn't worth a penny either. Consider that well, in the depths of your practice. What is it that we are seeking? What is it that we want to cut off and call our own? Is this, perhaps, itself a hindrance to genuine practice?

Another point to consider well is that this guy, Angulimala, went on, according to the Pali suttas, to become an arahant: he was released, he awakened in that very life. We'll have to look a little more deeply at that, just as we have to look at our own actions, our own past, our own karma, so to say. How does that become fuel for the fire instead of a great barrier or impediment in our practice? Well, perhaps there's no better example than Angulimala. We will return to him tomorrow and in the next few days. But at any rate, you can already see – *heck, if he could do it, I guess I could*. If somebody with that much stuff that he has to carry around – having killed 999 people! – if he could become an arahant in this life, what about us? Consider well.

DAY 3

We left Angulimala with a garland of 999 fingers, meeting with Shakyamuni Gotama Buddha. After that, in the suttas anyway, he becomes a disciple of Gotama Buddha, and in that life becomes an arahant, a fully awakened one. I suppose it's a legend, but it's a good one.

So what are your chances? Pretty good, I reckon. However, he killed 999 people: are there some causes and conditions, some karma, that comes from that? Did he just become a disciple of the Buddha, did some meditation, and then became an arahant?

Well, not exactly. If you carefully read the *Angulimala sutta*, it says that after Angulimala became an arahant, a fully awakened one, he was out on the begging rounds like Gotama Buddha when he first met him. He goes to a village, and one of the villagers, even though Angulimala is now bald and wearing robes, recognizes him. "*That's the guy – the brigand, the mass murderer who killed my sister and terrorized our village!*" And he starts throwing stones at Angulimala. The other people in the village realize what's going on, and they also throw stones at him. His robe gets torn, his begging bowl is broken, he gets cut and is bleeding. But he doesn't fight back.

He returns to Gotama Buddha, who asks, "*What happened?*" Angulimala explains, and Gotama Buddha says, "*How wonderful! What would have taken you such a long, long, long, long time to work through, you are working through now.*" He's not denying the causes and conditions. He's saying: go through what you need to go through. Yes, if you need to get bloodied, get battered a little bit – go through it now.

In other traditions they make much of a past life, a future life, many lives, and so on. And even in the Pali Suttas it mentions Gotama Buddha recalling his past lives. Exactly what that means is worthy of serious consideration: is it *his* past life? Or is it the past life of numberless beings set free? But anyway, it's very clear in Zen – awakening must be here and now, in this life. Well, here it's even more radical: is Angulimala, being awakened, now free of all conditions? Is he floating up there in the clouds? No. He still had a past. He still did the things he did. And of course that means we must also work through that. It doesn't just disappear.

Most of you already know this. When you sit deeply in zazen, you can go through even something really hard like pain. It can no longer be a problem. And yet, there are things that we may have done, or even just thought – they don't just disappear. Buddhism is very clear about this. Yes, in a sense, awakening is a release from what is called the causes and the conditions, but it doesn't mean you become superhuman – you literally transcend them. In Zen, it's very clear – you transcend them by living them. The causes and the conditions that are you, what you might now look at as your limitations, your obstructions, the things you have to get free from – they are your release once you stop running from them. We're not looking for pain. But if it's there, it can become either your great enemy that you fight against and make worse, or it can become part of the path of release.

Here, what Gotama Buddha is making clear is: you killed 999 people, that doesn't just disappear. But there is a way to work through that – to do what needs to be done here and

now. And in this case, yes, it means maybe getting pummeled, getting accosted, abused by these people – with good reason! Their village was terrorized by this guy not long ago! Again, this isn't just a story about the guy who cut off 999 fingers. It's a story about all of us.

There's a humorous koan about this question of the causes and the conditions. It's case two in the *Mumonkan* or the *Gateless Barrier*, called Hyakujo and the fox – Hyakujo is the Japanese pronunciation of Baizhang, a Chinese Zen master.

It comes from a legend, a common kind of fairy tale in China at the time. In the Far East, foxes are looked at as sly and smart, but also a little tricky, mischievous creatures. You don't want to be reborn as a fox – that's not really high up on the level of beings.

Well, there was a Chinese Buddhist monk, and after a talk he was asked by a Chinese layperson, "*When you get awakened, are you free of causes and conditions or not?*" You see how this is directly related with the Angulimala story. That monk said, "*Yes, once you're enlightened, you're free of all causes and conditions.*" And so the legend has it, he was reborn as a fox for 500 lives. So much for being free of causes and conditions!

It's considered a difficult-to-pass koan, a complex one. There are several parts to it, and we needn't go into the details, but the point here is that it's almost humorous to see: this monk says, "*Yes, you're free of all conditions,*" and as a result, was reborn as a fox. Obviously, it wasn't that simple. However, one of the points of the koan is: when you really see through these causes and conditions, you see – to put it dramatically – he was perfectly happy living his 500 lives as a fox. He didn't have to become somebody else.

In the koan, he asks the master Hyakujo, "*What could I have said that would have been to the point? Please give me a turning word.*" A turning word means a word that can transform. Hyakujo says, "*You don't deny causes and conditions.*" And with that, he was released from the fox's body.

To be blunt, the point is not about denying. You can't deny those causes and conditions. They're there. They're in the past, but they affect us here. We have to see that deeply. And maybe we need to do something in response.

When you really see these causes and the conditions for what they are, they themselves become fuel for the fire. They become the path itself.

The fundamental mistake is trying to get away from that stuff – so that I can have some kind of pure, up-in-the-clouds enlightenment. But what are you, apart from those causes and conditions? You have to be able to see through what you think of as something that gets in the way: the pain, the difficulties, the obstructions – are they really obstacles? Or is it what your mind does with them?

Clearly, pain can be an obstruction. Just as well, pleasure can be an obstruction. Does anyone not know what I'm talking about? Pleasure itself can become a hindrance – as soon as we grab on to it and want to hold on to it. Usually it's already pretty much gone at that point, and then we try to chase after it. It becomes itself a cause of dis-ease, suffering.

Turned on its head, that pain can be the way through. No, we're not trying to have pain – "*more pain, more gain*." But if it's there, it can become the vehicle that it is. The same with joy, pleasure, contentment – yes, they can become a very obvious helping path along the way. They can also become an obstruction. Beware. It's simply a matter of what this present mind does with it.

A few years ago, during COVID, I was in Hungary to do a retreat. Just before the retreat started, I laid down and I had what's called vertigo. Not just dizziness – it's like you're lying there and you turn and the whole room moves up and down. It wasn't so bad that I got sick, but it's common, for example, to have to throw up or have diarrhea. It was like being really drunk – you are not moving, but the room is. I had never had something like that. In a way, I suppose that was the sickest I've been in my life. I don't know what it was caused by.

The reason I mention this is because it was a great experience in the end. It showed me that Zen is not a state of mind. Maybe 20 years ago, I said this in a Dharma talk: "Zen is not a state of mind." I guess I already knew it somewhat back then. But I really learned it this time. See, you can sit and settle in the body and the breath and the mind. You got vertigo? That don't mean shit. If you think you can stay in some kind of physical posture or in a certain state of mind that will keep everything in control, well, have vertigo and you'll see. It's not a state of mind. It was a great confirmation.

The obvious point is that anything taken up by the ego-self can become an obstruction. And anything can become the path if we know how to use it, if we stop fighting against it. We've already touched on this in several ways – in terms of the body and the things that trouble us in our practice physically.

You see how valuable it is, to really get settled physically. When the body is at rest, the breath comes more naturally. And then the mind – most important and delicate – can then become settled.

DAY 4

We have taken up the physical practice of zazen. Once the body is settled, we then bring the attention naturally to the breath. If you can, breathe through the nose, with your mouth naturally closed. But be careful not to clench your teeth. Especially as we get older, there's a tendency to clench, to push the teeth against each other. This is not good for your teeth, and it's not good for the zazen. So be careful that if the mouth is closed, let the teeth have a little space between them, so you're not clenching them – especially if you're sitting intensely.

Another thing is the tongue. If you can, just let the tongue gently rest against the roof of the mouth. This helps so that you're not doing things with your mouth, but also there's less of a need to swallow the saliva, so you can keep the focus.

Questioner #1: What do you mean by “breathing properly”?

Jeff: When you breathe properly, in the out-breath you're exhausting everything. Everything is let go. And then when you breathe in, you're breathing in not just from the abdomen, but from the ground itself. Don't get stuck in the abdomen. As they say in Daoism, you breathe from your heels. Open up to the one great matter underfoot, and you'll know how to breathe properly!

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Let us now turn to the most delicate part of the practice – the mind. We can spend a lifetime settling the body, and also spend a lifetime letting this breath mature and develop. But, without taking it all the way to the mind, it just becomes a physical exercise. Zazen is not a mental exercise, but it's not just a physical exercise either. It's something that is total, done with the whole body and mind, which includes the breath.

Once you have taken time and care to find the posture and the way of breathing that is right for you, and once you are settled into it, what remains? I trust all of you know from your experience that the discursive mind settles down also. All of those thoughts and ideas and superficial doubts and so on – they just dissolve of their own accord. You don't have to push them away, that very effort is a thought too. If they don't dissolve, see how you are feeding them. And then just return to the body and the breath.

For many of the mental obstacles that we have, it's simply a matter of getting the body and the breath in order. Once that's done – it depends on the person and where you are in the practice – maybe 90% of the problems are done already; they're undone. Now, what remains? After sitting for a few days, as we have been doing, the discursive mind dissolves. You can still think about things, but it doesn't disturb the practice.

This is fundamental: not getting stuck in the body, not getting stuck in the breath, not even getting stuck in the mind. This last one is most important, because that's where we usually end up, in some kind of a mental construct.

If you're practicing properly, discursive thoughts dissolve in a few days. They should not be an interference. The point is, what do you do then? Rest content and think about how few thoughts you have? No. WHAT REMAINS? For some people, there may be emotional stuff that comes up and needs to be dealt with. You have to be able to discern, to clearly see what's there. Most thoughts can be let go. But emotional things or memories that are still not really resolved can sometimes come up. We are not here for that, but if something is there and it really holds your attention so you can't go through, maybe you need to open up to that. Zazen is not the answer to everything, but it can be a very good way to open up to some kind of trauma or some kind of emotional stuckness that's there. If you are settled enough in the body and the breath, you can just let it come. You don't need to judge it, or condemn yourself for having that experience, or condemn someone else for causing it. Just let the experience come in its rawness, just as it is. Maybe it brings tears – you won't be the first one to cry in the zendo. Maybe it brings laughter – in that case, try not to make too much noise. What is it? Let it come all the way. What can you learn from it? What is it showing you?

When you do that, it can come all the way and it can sometimes be very, very humbling. Let it come in all of its rawness. And if you can really let it go, it's gone; it doesn't come back. Often, that's the problem with those experiences: they keep coming back from nowhere. "*What is that doing here? Here it is again. What is that?*" If you can really let it come, see it for what it is, maybe you find there's something that needs to be done after the retreat: write a letter to someone and apologize, or perhaps accept an apology. It will be clear if you open up to it. Sometimes something needs to be done; it can wait till after retreat. But a lot of times, just letting it come all the way, shooting right through you – then it's gone. It's truly just a memory now, it doesn't have a hold on you anymore.

What remains? When all is truly settled, we face the very urge or craving to be. It's not just intellectual discursive thought or even emotional stuff, but the deep urge to be something, anything. It's not all bad: the desire to be a better father, a better brother, a better friend, perhaps even enlightened – these are all very noble. But in the depths of our practice, we must get to that point where the very urge to be anything – even Zenistic *nothing* – is undone. Otherwise we just go around and around in those intellectual-emotional-wilful circles. That's why the practice must be thoroughgoing. It's not just sitting there playing with thoughts, or even letting them go. Finally, we must sit through that very urge to be anything. When that is undone, you walk freely through the universe. Until then, you are subject to that deep craving. It's the master of you; you are being pushed around, hauled over the fires and the coals. You suffer as a result of that.

That's why in Buddhism, back to the very beginning, when Gotama Buddha was awakened, he made it very clear: "There is no more being for me." There's not another life

that I have to go on to live. What needed to be done has been done. The end of the disease of *taṇhā* – craving – has been reached. Very clear. None of this fuzzy “maybe I feel a little bit better today” bullshit. It’s the end of the very craving to be. Once that comes to an end, life springs forth in a way that is impossible otherwise – free from itself. This is none other than letting the mind in its entirety come to a full and complete stop, as I said in the beginning. It’s one and the same. I trust from your experience you can see how getting the body and breath in order really helps to do this.

Some people obsess about getting the breath just right. But to repeat: open up and realize the great matter underfoot – then you’ll know how to breathe! But people want to manipulate their breath endlessly so that they can do something. No! Open up to what’s in the depths of your own heart. It may take a little while, but you’ll know. And then simply remain open-eyed and heart-fully open. What is there? We don’t need to create problems or questions or even answers. What is it in the depths of your own being that needs to be made clear in this life? It’s not someone else’s concern. It’s not just some intellectual thing; it’s not even emotional; it’s not even the will. It’s something even more basic than that.

We’ve begun now to inquire directly into this question – not just of the body and breath, but of the mind. What do you do with the mind in sustained *zazen*? We are not dispersing it into thoughts and ideas; it’s clear. But we’re not indulging in emotional memories or hopes about the future and so on. That’s not bad; it’s not evil. We don’t have to shoot it down. Rather, what is at the root source of that? Otherwise, you solve one problem, then another one comes along; and on and on: it’s endless. You’ll never get to the end of dis-ease that way. That itself is a profound symptom of the dis-ease of the self.

Thus, the peerless practice of *zazen*. The way we hold our body, the way we have our hands, the way we have our eyes, and of course the way we breathe, the way we attune our mind: all of this is simply to help us see what is here; to stop waiting for something which is always already here; to stop seeking after some kind of in-the-clouds experience that will solve all my problems. No, that’s pure ego parading as spiritual practice. To come home – truly come to rest here with this. There is nothing else.

Questioner #1: *It takes so much courage to confront what comes up. Last night I felt a very intense fear of death.*

Jeff: You know what’s really frightening? Spending the rest of your life not facing that. That’s what you should be afraid of. Nobody’s here to push you, but when you realize this is what must be done, it will be done. Do you really think it’s any better to run away from it one more time?

The only thing you have to get rid of is the self-delusion that is the delusion of a self. You don’t have to get rid of your family, your friends, quit your hobbies – it has nothing to do with that. Once you see it through, you walk freely in the universe. Yes, it does certainly

take courage. But to live truly, to live genuinely – that takes courage. You have that courage, or you wouldn't be here.

You don't have to manufacture some fear. What is it that you're really afraid of? Dying? You're going to come to the end of your life at some point. The opportunity here is to see it through right here and now, to finish dying – spiritually speaking – right here and now. Then, as they say, if you die before you die, you do not die when you die. Then you will be free of that very fear, that very basic urge to live. By the way, some of the answers to kōans are actually *"I don't want to die!"* and people think, *"Oh no, wait, but that can't be the answer to a kōan, because you've transcended life and death."* Well, at the same time that fear is there. See it through. What is it? Where does it come from? Again, I would say from my experience, the only thing to really be afraid of is to live the rest of your life deluded – especially when you know better. To me, that would be hell. Now you have a golden opportunity to see it through. When you're ready, we have plenty of time left – use it well.

Questioner #2: *Many years ago, I realized that there is no self. In the beginning, it was okay. Then, after some time, the self was there again. It seems I cannot let go of that.*

Jeff: That's the value of sustained practice. We don't sit long and hard in order to get some enlightenment. No, we sit to sit, so that when something like that comes up, we can be fully there. If it's an opening where the self falls away, enjoy it to your heart's content. And if that self comes back after some time, see that it's no more real when it returns than when it left. The ego is nothing – and yet it can be very deceptive, it can seem very strong. But only one minute of inattention, and it's gone, disappeared. When you fall asleep – where's your ego? It's always coming and going, because it's not anything substantial to begin with.

So when you do see through that self, it can be very encouraging and inspiring. But you must be able to see, as you did, *"Oh, wait a minute – something just came back."* Now here's where the practice really must come to life. What has returned? My mistake was I had a pretty deep experience of release, but I wasn't prepared for it. Perhaps you were not either. Was it too early? Who's to say? When it comes, it comes. Some people watch a sunset and [clicks fingers] things fall away, without having ever done zazen. In my case and perhaps in yours, we can say it was too early. We hadn't prepared the foundation. So when it happened – boom! *"Oh my goodness!"* As I put it, I became the biggest no-self around. And then I remember exactly when the self returned a few weeks later. I thought, *"Wait a minute, but I don't have a self – so where did that come from?"* You spend time struggling with that. That's why the practice must be thoroughgoing – not just to have an illumination, an awakening, a glimpse like that. That is very valuable, but we then have to see it through: *"Is something returning?"* Does something remain? If so, we need to see that through with all the humility, patience and love we have. That becomes our teacher, showing us where we must apply ourselves. No more, no less. It's clear: if that can come back, the root has not been undone. Fine – it is what it is. It can be very encouraging and inspiring. But if we turn it into something that "I" now have, it becomes the seed of its own destruction. I struggled for a couple of years after that, trying to get back to something that

I never really lost. That's why the practice must be thoroughgoing. Thank you for speaking from your experience.

Questioner #3: When we ask the question "what remains?" sometimes, during meditation, there remains pain, or a very good feeling. Do we have to be released from that, from all?

Jeff: The only thing you need to be released from is your self. You don't need to be released from the weather, or the physical condition of your body – you're getting old, so am I. We have illnesses, we have weaknesses. Our eyes are going, our ears are going, our memory is going. That's not the problem. The only thing that needs to be released is this self-delusion that is the delusion of a self. To see through it is to release it. Then I would say to be free of the very need to be free. As long as the self is there, it's going to want to hold on to this or to get away from that. To be free from the very need to be anything. It's not an experience in that sense, it's to be free from the very need to have another experience. Then, when you experience, it's ten thousand times more vivid and alive than through the lens of your self. You realize you were just seeing a shadow, a reflection of your delusion through the lens of yourself. When you really see that, how can you do anything else? Finally, my question is: How can you not do it? How can you not be released?

DAY 5

I trust that you have come to see what an obstacle the body can be – and at the same time how it can itself become something that aids us along the way. Of course, it's not the body – it's what our mind does with it.

The same thing with the breath. We can get stuck in the chest or somewhere else when we're breathing, perhaps trying too hard to breathe properly. Again, I trust you can see from your own experience what it is to obstruct yourself and what it is to just give all of yourself to your natural breath. Then the breath itself becomes the way through.

What then remains is what is still going on in the mind. This is the most delicate part of the practice. For example, very deep states of mind can become an obstruction, if they become something we want to keep. If we're practicing properly, we can enter boundless contentment and peace, or perhaps excruciating pain, it does not matter what it is. When the mind is released, it is able to experience what is present at the moment fully, without denying it, without grasping on to it. In doing that, that experience becomes the way, not an obstacle or an impediment.

There are countless Zen expressions that point this out. One of my favorites is only three Chinese characters long. At the Tannenhof, the place outside of München where we used to do the German retreats, there's a little wooden drawer with incense where the head monk sits – he lights incense before each zazen period. Often, in the monasteries I've been to in Japan, there's nothing written there. But at the Tannenhof, three Chinese characters are written: "Seeking is going astray." For the mind to seek, to try to attempt to push – the seeking itself is going astray, going the wrong way. It's especially sublime because this is written there next to the head monk who, after lighting the incense with those three characters right there, will get up and proceed to beat a bunch of the new monks with the warning stick. Meanwhile, here it says, "Seeking is going astray." Do you understand? It may look like, "Oh, he's hitting them because they're not seeking, they're not trying hard enough." But if he's a worthy monk, as this head monk is, he's beating them because they're still seeking. As I said before, the mind must come to its own end. This is saying the same thing: we can't seek to put the mind at rest. That very seeking is the mind not at rest. That's why the discursive mind is endless; it will endlessly repeat the same mistake, and it doesn't know how to get out of it – the very attempt to get out of it is just to continue the same cycle.

We all know this when we begin practice: instead of being completely one with our breath or our koan, we sit there thinking about them. And so we have the marvelous practice of zazen, of letting the mind come to its own end. As strange as it sounds, we don't do that by simply not doing anything: if you don't do anything, your mind will go into default and it will start to think about the things that you usually think about. Don't make the mistake of thinking zazen is very difficult. Zazen isn't even one; it's the simplest thing in the world. It's your mind that's so complex – not the practice.

The mistake the mind makes is thinking this practice is too difficult. That is why we need the proper attitude and regulate body, breath, and mind. Yes, this is a discipline – not because zazen is very difficult, but rather because the mind is so wrapped up in things. So we give it the breath, which isn't a thought, and we regulate the body, both of which helps the mind come to rest. A retreat like this is simply a way to complete that. It's not really a process, although it can look that way from the outside, when we're struggling with it. But it's a process that ends up in the recognition that we've never been apart from it for a moment. How could we be? But you have to fully come home to that through your own body, breath, and mind – not as a nice thought or idea or something you have read. The practice allows the mind to come fully to rest, so that we can then see, realize with every sense, what is here. Then you don't go running off again.

We have a good 24 hours left. Don't waste your time making complications, adding more difficulties to the mind. See what your mind is doing. Nobody can do that for you. It's all you have to do: you don't have to attain some profound state. What is your mind doing? Not what do you want it to do, or what Jeff told you you're supposed to make it do. What is your mind actually doing? When you really see through it, it can't help but collapse. It has no support unless you feed it. You may not even be fully conscious of it. That's why zazen must be thoroughgoing: so that you see with every bone and every fiber of your body what this mind is doing. The ego-self will then try to replace it with something else – perhaps a new and improved, enlightened mind. That's just continuing the same disease. You don't need to replace it with anything – not even the Zen nothing.

Sometimes Zen calls it "ordinary mind." Ordinary in the sense that it's free of any kind of entanglement, free of any kind of tinkering, cogitating or manipulating. You see dishes that need washing in the sink – you wash them. That's ordinary mind. When Zen speaks of the natural or ordinary mind, it means without anything added on. Look at nature: where is the mind of nature? It's now summer – beautifully turning into autumn. Who does that? You? Me? Well, in some religions this could be answered very well with something like God. But we don't need to go there. I would say the nature of nature is that it's being without self. And yet, is there anything more beautiful, more dignified, more sublime than nature? How does it do that? It does it because there's no self. It doesn't need it. You don't need a self for summer to turn to fall.

Now consider your self: what is the nature of that? Is it big? Is it small? Is it better? Is it worse? Is it diluted? Is it enlightened? Throw all of that away, and then see what it is immediately, directly. There is no other way; otherwise it's not the mind, it's something you've turned it into. You've objectified it. Maybe you can say it's a shadow of it or a glimpse of it, but it's not [hits floor] itself – and so you go tripping over your feet again and again and again. Before this very mind has taken shape, before it has turned into something, before you have objectified it – what is it? It's the most obvious thing in the world; and yet you can't turn it into an object. That's how marvelous it is. It is beyond conception. You can conceive it endlessly in endless different ways if you like, but again, that's just a shadow – and so we cannot come to rest in that. But when you come from it,

rather than trying to go to it, you can't get out of it then. However you leap up, get frustrated or angry, you can't leap out of this. But you must confirm this in your own bones. That's the point of retreat.

Questioner #1: *It's hard to ask a question because it probably makes things only more complicated – but I'll try anyway. When I sit, all kinds of things happen in my mind. Sometimes it's clear, with very few thoughts, and I have the feeling my mind can't handle that yet, because it has to reflect that there's nothing there – only the perception itself. When I see this, when the thoughts are away, I'm at a loss.*

Jeff: It's a good point, because it's often described that there's a point for most people in the practice when they feel completely lost. They don't know where to go. It's important to see: this is not a bad thing! When you're ready, go there all the way. But if there's still some fear, see what it is, what is there to be afraid. Ordinarily, we think we know about something, so we build this construct, "I know about that, I know who I am, what's the problem?" But when we give ourselves to the practice, all of those conceptions start to dissolve – both the self-construction and the world that we create. It's not real anyway, but as long as we hold on to that there's going to be dissonance. Giving yourself to genuine practice, all of that starts to fall away and you realize the self-delusion that is the delusion of the self, playing itself out in endless ways, none of it satisfying. Before that, it's what you know, at least what you think you know, so you go back to it. Then you start to have this experience, giving yourself properly to the practice. It's like a black hole, but a very good one, because you're not escaping into your mental constructs. At the beginning it can be like a dissonance. No need to push it, just make it clear. You've seen the mental constructs, you've been there ten thousand times. It goes nowhere, fast. Don't worry, they'll be there when you're back if you want. But, finally, in zazen allow yourself just to fall into that unknown, into that inconceivable.

When you see this is the way you must go, what is it? Don't have a frigging clue, that's the best way. Thinking is useless at this point, in a very good way, because this allows you to come into direct contact with it [taps floor]. When you see this is what must be done, I'd be afraid of all those concepts! You should not be afraid of returning here to this [taps floor] which is not a concept. When you are ready, you will surrender fully, not know through and through.

I had a dear Japanese friend, Confucian scholar, martial arts master, he's passed away since. He told me, "*when I got to that point in the practice, I didn't know that one plus one makes two.*" That very calculation was no longer functioning in his mind, in a very good way. Of course, when you go out in the world, as Hakuin says, "*Count your change at the market.*" But here, in the depths of zazen, you don't need to count your change, you don't need to know that one plus one equals two. This is very profound; it's not stupidity, it's arriving at what is inconceivable. You can't stop there either – that has to flip over, and you will from the inside. But as a process, getting to the point where you don't know, where you're no longer fooling yourself with your intellectual knowledge is a very valuable place.

Yet you can't stop there either. Just when you're ready, sit right through it – don't know a thing.

Questioner #2: *That specific point you mention – 'I don't know that 1 + 1 makes two' – is it saying the observer is not there anymore?*

Jeff: So many kinds of meditation are a matter of observing – feeling your foot touch the ground and so on. It's very valuable. But the point of Buddhist practice, if we speak of awakening, is precisely when that observer – "me" viewing it – falls away. Then, as they say, "you see with your ears" or "you see without seeing." It's paradoxical but accurate: you see without a self viewing. You are what you see – that separation is gone.

Questioner #3: *Last night I tried to focus; everything became a blur. When you have no thoughts, or it's muddled because you're tired, you can't grab onto anything. There's nothing to hold on to.*

Jeff: What do you want to hold on to? [*Silence*]

Practically speaking, if you're tired there are things you can do to wake yourself up: drink some tea, get your heart pumping, walk quickly, splash water on your face. You may just be genuinely very tired and need to rest. If you're exhausted, practice that way: be exhausted. Do you understand?

Questioner #3: *So I should try to stop fighting. But then I'm not in control anymore.*

Jeff: Were you before? It's a valuable lesson: maybe trying to be in control is what makes you so tired?

There's a wonderful kōan in the Blue Cliff Record, answering the famous question, *What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?* Literally, it is asking what is the intent, what is the point? He made this long journey, but why did he have to do that if we're all already enlightened as Mahayana Buddhism says we are? It took months, maybe even over a year, to make the trip – why did he do that? In other words, the question is asking: *what is Zen?*

If you look through the Zen records there are literally hundreds of answers to that question. One of them, in the Blue Cliff Record, is: *"After a long sitting, I feel tired."* It's a very nice answer, probably because that monk was expecting some kind of superhuman, sit-through-the-night superpower. There is a time for sitting ram-rod straight, but there's also a time when you get tired. You can still sit then or, if needed, take a break.

Questioner #4: I used the pain to help me focus when I'm thinking about all things. Now my sits are getting easier, and I feel good, but now I feel more thoughts.

Jeff: If you want to increase the pain, you can sit full lotus or sit through the breaks. If you're a glutton for punishment, as we say, go ahead. But you have to see where the thoughts come from. If it's just a kind of a gap where you're feeling and then the thoughts come, you need to deepen the samādhi. It has nothing to do with whether you're comfortable or not. See what you're doing. You're generating the thoughts.

DAY 6

There is a delicate but very important issue in terms of human connection, relating to other people. In a sense, this is the real crux of the matter, isn't it? Going out into nature, feeling one sitting alone on your cushion – with some time it's not so difficult. It's actually quite natural. But relations with other human beings are in some ways the most challenging part of the practice.

I often speak rather abstractly about what it is to let go of oneself and find oneself in the other. What I've found in the practice is that, often for a period, there can be a turning away from the world. This is actually a kind of official part of the practice: it is literally called leaving home – leaving everything to throw oneself into this practice. But equally important, is, having done that, then returning fully to the world to be of service, to bring it to life in the world.

And of course there's no blueprint for this. Each one of us has different abilities, different talents; we need to find out what we can do and perhaps develop and nourish that so that we can be of service to others. But this delicate issue of human interaction or communion – to really not just meet another but to commune, to mutually become one with the other – this is the real maturing of the practice.

I realized at one point in the practice that you don't have to get away from these problems. You don't want to get sucked into them, but once you really are able to see, to hear, to listen with love to the other – it opens up. When you're able to just be there with that jerk at work who is always giving you a hard time – not just let down the ego defenses but let yourself go, and just be there with that other – it's so precious, because you can then start to see what it is that is really driving them. Perhaps there is anger or confusion or suffering underneath which produces their reactions, the way they respond. Once you start to see that, you stop just banging your head against the wall of this other guy. It doesn't mean you just agree with everybody. You may respectfully agree to disagree, but you can do that from love, not from anger or resentment or hatred.

My goodness – we could use a little bit of that in the world today! You look at what some of the nation's leaders in the world are doing today; you can see it's fueled by anger, hatred, revenge – and what will that produce? More anger, more hatred, more revenge. Gotama Buddha nailed it down pretty well 2,500 years ago when he said, "*Hatred is not appeased by hatred; it is appeased by love.*" That doesn't mean to just show complete careless love: love can be strict and hard. It must be at times. Hatred produces more hatred.

When you encounter the other with your whole heart, self falls away. If it just falls away for you, you're not there yet; unless you can at least start to see it in the other, it's certainly not complete in you. You need to start to be able to see the inviolable dignity in the other. When you touch it in yourself, the more deeply you touch it here, the more naturally you start to be able to recognize it there.

At this point in the practice you're not looking for anything at all; you're simply open to what comes. And sometimes what comes is terribly different than where you are standing. Here is a valuable teacher – someone that you cannot perhaps even comprehend where they're

coming from. Imagine meeting up with Angulimala on the street. Can you even comprehend what is going on in his mind? How can he go to sleep at night? It seems impossible – how could you live like that? And yet people do. To be able to encounter someone and see them as they are – in their strength, in their weakness, perhaps in their hatred, in their love – not to try to reduce them to some reflection of yourself. Again: the inviolable dignity of the other as the other. When you see truly what it is to be without self, it becomes apparent in the other as well; otherwise, your practice is not living. This is a great challenge, and yet you see how necessary it is. As the practice deepens, we will be able to see where the other comes from, to see what is fueling them – not intellectually, but to really see it. They may or may not be aware of it, and sometimes we can help by gently pointing that out. But often just being fully with the other is enough. At times maybe we will have to say, *“I disagree completely; I think you’re doing the wrong thing.”* We have to be able to say that from love, from that common ground that we all share, every one of us, Angulimala included. It’s not some kind of up-in-the-clouds idea; it’s the ground that we all share. Speak from there; they may hear, maybe not, but they have a better chance of hearing it when you speak from there. And you have a better chance of hearing them when you stand there.

We’re coming to the end of the retreat: mostly in silence, mostly in a sense on our own, on our own cushions. We work together wonderfully seamlessly, often in silence, and there’s an incredible communion, not just communication but communion in that silence. But in a few hours we’re going back to the world, a precious opportunity to deepen this practice and see that it really comes to life. No, you’re not going to go out and solve all the problems of the world; you don’t need to. But you can go out and do what you can do out of love, out of compassion. Sometimes that means saying no; but we speak from love, from genuine compassion. True compassion arises from that ground that we all share. It’s not yours; it’s not the Buddhists’. This isn’t an idea; this isn’t a thought. It has to be existentially realized in our bones, as our own ground.

From now, we have the precious opportunity to take it to the streets. A Dharma friend once said, “This is when the retreat ends, and from now the real practice begins.” I hate to tell you folks: this is the easy part. But if you’ve done it here, the next step is simply to do it there – not to try to hold on to this. No need to sit ten hours a day and forget about your family. That’s what we were doing here, and we did it well. It’s a precious practice, just as precious as going back to family, friends, work, whatever it is, and giving yourself there.

When you really give yourself to the sitting, the sitting gets up and it does what needs to be done without stepping out of the practice. It follows the step of the person in front of them, or it goes for a meal, or it takes a break, goes to the bathroom, and then it comes back – not to start the practice again, but to simply continue it once again in the seated posture. It comes to be the way we are. In the same way, when the retreat ends, the lunch will be a little bit louder than the breakfast, once the silence has ended. But it gives us all a chance to commune with words. It’s one of the ways to catch up with each other, to talk, to laugh. And then each one of us will have to return to the world. Do it with an open heart, and don’t try to carry something you realized here back to all those ignorant people in the

world. Rather, go back there, find it there. If you can't find it there, you didn't find it here. Find it there – see how their time was the last five days while we were sitting here on our butts and they were working and taking care of the things. How was their time? What was their experience? If you can really see it, you'll see it was no less valuable than what you did here. Then the practice matures. You don't step out of it; you don't even need to step into it anymore – it comes to be the way you are.