



## CUT THROUGH!

On the first day of Golden Wind Sesshin, someone told me, “Yesterday was the most beautiful day of my whole life.” We all experienced yesterday. But you know the expression, “It takes one to know one.” Yes, outside it is beautiful, but this feeling, “the most beautiful day,” comes from inside. As we know, we cannot grasp this moment; we cannot hold onto this feeling. When we try to recapture what we had, we miss what we have.

There’s a story about Seppo and his brother monk, Ganto, who were traveling together when a terrible snowstorm came along. As the snow came down and drifts rose up, they decided to wait it out at an inn. Of course in ninth-century China there were no snowplows, so waiting it out meant relinquishing all plans and schedules.

During that time, Ganto spent every day sleeping; Seppo, diligently sitting. Seppo grew disgusted with Ganto and cried, “Elder brother, come on! Get up!” “Why should I?” asked Ganto. Seppo muttered, “Why am I so unlucky to be traveling with a guy who just drags me down? Ever since we got here, he’s done nothing but sleep.” Ganto shouted, “Every day since we got here, you’ve been sitting there like a stone buddha. What’s the matter with you?” Seppo was taken aback. His criticism changed to introspection. He said, “Within myself I feel no peace. I dare not deceive myself.”

There is a saying, “Self-deceit is a strong fort.” We must have this kind of honesty in our practice. Resistance comes; willfulness comes; arrogance comes; ambition comes; laziness comes. Seeing these conditions arise, we must return over and over to the breath. No “I” returning--just returning.

All of us, at one time or another, feel disappointed in ourselves. This is not the same as a lack of self-confidence. Rather, it’s because of the introspective process of our zazen that we see our lack of attention, lack of awareness, lack of kindness. It’s not self-mortification; it’s just immediately noticing those old habits, that conditioned “self,” and immediately letting it go, with one complete exhalation.

Seppo honestly owned up to feeling no peace, and because of that honesty, Ganto was able to use skillful means. He asked him, “Tell me about your experiences up until this point. Maybe I can help you see what is genuine in your practice and what is an impediment.” Seppo proceeded to tell Ganto how he had gotten some understanding from this teacher’s talk and some insight from that teacher’s verse and how he had questioned Tokusan about the great vehicle beyond all vehicles and was struck by him and still did not get it. At this Ganto cried, “Haven’t you heard that what comes in through the front gate is not the family treasure?”

Do you know this saying? “What comes in through the front gate is not the family treasure.” What does it mean? (Student comments: “You have to come to your own understanding; it can’t be acquired from others.”) Yes. What comes in through the front gate--what you read with your eyes, what you hear with your ears--is someone else’s understanding. You must realize your own inner treasure.

(see next page)

Seppo then asked, "Well, what should I do?" Ganto replied, "From now on, if you want to be capable of true insight and become a great teacher, let everything flow forth from your own heart-mind. Then it will cover heaven and earth." At this, Seppo was thoroughly awakened. He eventually became abbot of a monastery with fifteen hundred monks. Many of them, like Ummon and Hogen, became outstanding Zen masters in their own right. Ummon and Hogen founded two of what are known as the Five Houses of Zen (Igyo, Rinzai, Soto, Ummon, and Hogen).

In Case 23 of *The Iron Flute*, Seppo was working with one of those fifteen hundred monks, Chosei. He warned, "Do not stop until your ax cuts the very center of the tree."

Each of us is using our ax. This is what's meant by assiduous practice. Every day! At shinrei, if you are not already in the zendo, get there immediately. Sitting after sitting, cutting, and then at the end of the day, Namu Dai Bosa! What does that mean? Great Bodhisattva, yes—but what does it really mean? Go back to the zendo!

Cut this tree—cut the mighty projection of this separated individuality, this self that rears up so imperiously at the slightest threat to your well-defended ego. It's a thick trunk, and you need to cut through once and for all: trunk, branches, to the very root, leaving no trace, not even a wood chip. Hakuin said, "Cut your life-source at the root."

When Shakyamuni Buddha was awakened, he said: "The ridge pole of the ego has fallen." The whole edifice—gone. This is what we're here to do: cut the edifice of I, me, mine. This great enterprise: I, Me, Mine, LLC. Do you know what LLC means? Limited liability corporation! Nowadays, everything is an LLC: corporations saying they take no responsibility for anything that happens as a result of their products, their actions. But it's not "their." It's our own LLC edifice that we construct as "self," blindly taking no responsibility for the suffering that results—this is what is meant in Buddhism by "ignorance."

"Do not stop until your ax cuts the very center of the tree." The mystical Persian poet Rumi, who lived around the same time as St. Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Dogen, and Myoan Eisai, put it this way: "Would you like to have revealed to you / The truth of the Friend? / Leave the rind / And descend into the pith."

There are no halfway measures in our practice. We have to descend into the pith, the heart of the matter. We must give 100 percent to everything we do. Sometimes people think, well, it's a seven-day sesshin, so I'll just take it easy the first few days, and then, little by little, I'll get some energy going; I won't expend it all the first couple of . . .

Oh, no no no! That is a guarantee of misery. From the beginning, sit with all your might, chant with all your might. Don't leave anything undone. Cut through! Don't think that Zen practice is in the zendo, on the cushion. Practice breathing out Mu while walking, working, lying down, getting up—Mu starts before you even inhale in the morning. This is 100 percent. Then, breathing in, the lake is shining, golden leaves are floating down, branches are nodding in the wind. Breathing out: no one breathing.

In the koan, Chosei replied to Seppo, "I have cut it." You may think that this sounds a little cocky, perhaps conceited. Oh yes, he's saying, I have cut through the very center of the tree—there is nothing left. There is no self that remains. I have testified "to the truth that self-nature is no-nature," as Hakuin put it in "The Song of Zazen." But what about when your teacher says, "Cut through, cut completely through." At that moment, something happens. You feel a charge in your hara, right? Then you may be able to feel what Chosei did: Yes! I will! Or yes, I have! I have!

So he was not responding from a place of conceit, but rather of awakened confidence. True confidence: "with faith." Beyond belief in a separated self. Cutting through all dualistic notions of this and that, good and bad, should I or shouldn't I, am I good enough or can I ever . . . Gone!

(see next page)

Cutting two into *one*. This is what we are here to do. This is true practice; this is sesshin, a word that comes from *setsu-shin*, two characters that mean “to bring together, to unite the fragmented mind”; to realize our original oneness.

Then Seppo responded to Chosei, “The old masters transmitted the teaching to their disciples from heart-mind to heart-mind.” “Heart-mind” is the character *shin*.

How about these “old masters”? Who are they? All the masters in the great cosmic mandala or, as Dogen put it, in the “Circle of the Way.” Of course it’s not only our own Dai Bosatsu mandala, with Soen Shaku, Soen Nakagawa, D. T. Suzuki, Nyogen Senzaki. It goes back to before Buddha Shakyamuni and extends through Mahakashapa, Bodhidharma, Rinzai, Tokusan, Ganto, Seppo, Mugai Nyodai, Hakuin, and beyond: it includes all the great teachers who came from Asia to the West who are no longer with us, the pioneers of Zen in America in this ever-expanding mandala, as well as second-generation teachers like Maurine Stuart, Joko Beck, Daido Looi, Peter Matthiessen, and Kyogen Carlson, abbot of Dharma Rain in Portland, Oregon, who died just recently.

“Transmitting to their disciples from heart-mind to heart-mind” is not two; not *t-o*, and not *t-w-o*. Bodhidharma said, “A special transmission outside the scriptures . . . direct pointing to the human heart-mind.” Immediacy; intimacy.

In the autumn of 1937, while a young monk temporarily based in Manchuria, Soen Nakagawa wrote:

“One day after morning service, as usual I cross my legs in the lotus posture, place my hands together, elongate my spine, and make my body immovable. On this day, I go into a dawn samadhi that is bright and clear. Nothing, not even Buddha Dharma, is in the way, let alone the wasteful delusions of the transmigration of birth-and-death! In this samadhi of samadhis, the lives of the ancestors enter my life; my life enters into theirs. And now I can touch upon the essence of an earlier Dharma dialogue I had with Gempo Roshi. I knocked on the door of his tiger’s cave and went into dokusan. I was scratched by the master’s great compassionate claw, and I experienced my original before-birth childhood, ending that dawn practice glaring through my own tiger’s eye.”

Soen Roshi’s “the lives of the ancestors enter my life; my life enters into theirs . . . glaring through my own tiger’s eye.” Seppo’s “old masters transmitted.” Chosei’s “I have cut it!”

Then Seppo tested his student. Is it completely cut through? “How about in your case?” he asked. Chosei threw down his ax. What a great actualization of “I have cut it!” But something was left of that tree, that edifice of I, me, mine. Because what happened next? He said, “Transmitted.” That’s completely superfluous; in fact, it’s self-contradictory! “I have cut it. Transmitted!” What a shame to still have that trace. So Seppo compassionately whacked it away.

I remember once when I was working on a certain koan, and something wonderful happened. I went into dokusan, expressed it, and Eido Roshi and I just sat, just sat. Wordless. Electric. And then I opened my mouth and was about to speak, and Eido Roshi put his finger over his mouth. That was his sensitive whack.

I’m sure you’ve had such experiences: absolute oneness, clarity, being completely in synch, however you want to put it: just this, as it is, nothing extra--and then the old pattern reasserts itself: putting it into words, as I just did! And once you do that, the temptation is to cling to it. Once it’s in words, it becomes reified; another encrustation. So you’re free, and then once again you’ve enslaved yourself by conceptualizing that freedom. Such a wonderful practice we have! If our karma is fortunate enough, a teacher will strike. Or some unforeseen life circumstance gives us that whack.

(see next page)

In his comment on this koan, Nyogen Senzaki observed, "Many Westerners seek truth, visiting philosophy classes or studying meditation under Asian teachers, but how many can cut the tree to the center?"

Not only during his time in the United States (1905-58), when Asian teachings and culture were seen as exotic, but nowadays, too, we see people visiting here, studying there, flitting from one place to another, getting a superficial taste, sticking a toe in the water and pulling it out. How many are willing to commit, to immerse themselves fully? How many have the determination to give 100 percent, to cut the tree to the center? And how many are willing to submit to a teacher, to senior students? Only by doing so, can one see into one's own subterfuges, one's tricky ways of keeping everything at bay, clinging to the mind of distraction that keeps one from seeing those layers of encrusted shit!

Nyogen Senzaki continued, "More often they scratch at the bark, but wait for someone else to split the trunk for them." Or as Rumi put it, they just examine the rind, waiting for handouts. Nyogen Senzaki had a word for such people: "Mollycoddles!" Perhaps this is not a term that many of you know? It was slang in his era for pampered ones, self-indulgent ones, those who are not willing to do the real work.

This practice takes a daring mind, as Hakuin said. Don't be mollycoddles. You can't coddle your mollies. In the midst of fear, hesitation, and apprehension, OK! Go straight on! Don't think, "Well, when I feel ready, then I can do this, but right now, I don't really want to." Want to or not doesn't really cut it, does it? Go straight on! Muuuuuuu, muuuuuuuuuu, muuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!

Then, without a doubt, you will encounter the joy that is far beyond the relative happiness that everyone is chasing. You may know Al Green's song, "Love and Happiness." True love, true happiness, is what comes from 100 percent practice. So erect your spine. Exhale completely. Fill your hara with vitality, and then exhale to the last drop--and beyond. There's no end to it.