



Be The Light

When Soen Nakagawa Roshi was in India in the early 1970s, he discovered the Pali verse *atta dipa* on the lid of a box containing Shakyamuni Buddha's relics. He later taught it to us at a sesshin. With this verse, given as he lay dying, the Buddha was teaching fundamental nondependence: You are the light. The light of the dharma is within you. You are always held within the refuge of the dharma. Don't seek outside; don't depend on anyone else's understanding. Realize this for yourself. I am departing. You must continue. Go straight ahead on this endless path of awakening and loving-kindness. All I can do is to encourage you to live with intention and integrity. Now it's up to you.

Case 31 of the *Mumonkan* tells the story of an old woman who ran a teashop at a crossroads at the base of Mount Tai, considered a sacred mountain and the destination of many pilgrims. Monks would come along and ask her, "What is the way to Mount Tai?" She would reply, "Go straight on." After a monk had walked a few steps, she'd comment, "A fine, respectable monk, but he, too, goes that way."

"What is the way?" The monks were seeking directions, thinking the sacred must be up there somewhere, and completely missing the sacred truth within: the light of wisdom. By responding "go straight on," she was teaching them that "The Way is found by going straight on—by walking the Way right under your feet. Just follow this Way, no matter what curves or zigzags the path of your life takes—walk straight on."

To have faith in this unfolding present moment is to find ourselves at home wherever the path may lead. The thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen wrote a poem:

*Treading along in this dreamlike, illusory realm,
Without looking for the traces I may have left;
A cuckoo's song beckons me to return home;
Hearing this, I tilt my head to see
Who has told me to turn back;
But do not ask me where I am going,
As I travel in this limitless world,
Where every step I take is my home.*

Dogen's "limitless world" is the reality that the physicist David Bohm described as "unbroken wholeness in flowing movement." What we call "life" and "death" are merely different aspects of that unbroken wholeness in flowing movement. Life and death are not separate states but simply two stages of one endless continuum.

Life unfolds from undifferentiated wholeness, which in Buddhism is called *shunyata* (emptiness, boundlessness), and returns to wholeness. When we experience this *shunyata* for ourselves, we realize that we are all interconnected: humans, animals, insects, birds, stones, trees, mountains, and rivers: as Dogen put it, "The whole earth is my body."

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Each of us is here but a brief instant in this endless continuum, yet we are called upon to present ourselves fully, engage fully, just as did our ancestral teachers and all our departed Zen friends. The examples of their lives remind us that there is much we can offer when we are true to our inner light. We are not allowed to remain in some transcendental bliss state or in the undifferentiated realm of MU. We are here to actualize our insight, to respond fully to each call with compassion, to make of our lives veritable incarnations of Kanzeon. What is essential is how we live among the ten thousand things, realizing that there is not an iota of a gap between essence and phenomena. We must see, hear, and alleviate the suffering around us. To do so requires that we comprehend and respond to the issues of our time.

I just returned from two conferences. At the first, US Buddhist Leaders at the White House, there were 120 of us meeting with officials of the Obama administration. At the second, held at Omega Institute, I was one of some 250 American and European Buddhist teachers convening over a four-day period. We were remarkably diverse in terms of lineages, ethnicity, race, gender and sexual identity, and age.

The topics at both conferences were the same, and they were urgent: first, pernicious and persistent racism, fed by fear, ignorance, unexamined white privilege, and the structures of economic inequality; and second, the climate crisis, growing more dangerous every day.

We were called upon to examine the subtle ways in which we participate in ongoing racism and prejudice, and to bring creative means toward diversifying our mostly white sanghas.

We heard from leaders in the field of climate change about the need for a global transformation, so that we can examine and put an end to the often-clueless ways in which we go about our lives when we ignore what Al Gore told us in his “inconvenient truths.”

Among the extraordinary scientific research presented, we learned that we’re in a feedback loop, wherein the heat generated from carbon dioxide emitted by fossil fuels is now releasing far more devastating methane emissions, and if we do nothing, human existence may be wiped out within thirty-five years.

As one participant said, “Just as reflection on the inevitability of death can serve to inspire a deep sense of responsibility, contemplating the profound disruptions the world will undergo as the encounters with resource limits accelerate can help us see how our actions now are of crucial import for future generations.”

We were encouraged to ask essential questions and to challenge ourselves to go further. How do we respond to the suffering of our mother earth? We vowed to move from indifference and despair to compassionate action and systemic change, based upon a shared understanding of interconnectedness. How do we work together to save all beings, realizing we are not separate? When one person is homeless, we are all homeless. When one person wastes, we are all being wasted.

Caring deeply for each other, for our places of Buddhist practice, and for our planet, let us devote ourselves to finding creative ways to work together as the vibrant humans we are -- not just *Homo sapiens*, but *Homo universalis* -- so that future generations may thrive, imbued with the radiant power and warmth of the compassionate heart.

“Love,” Martin Buber said, “is a cosmic force. Love is a responsibility of an ‘I’ for a ‘You’ . . . Look! These beings live around you, and no matter which one you approach, you always reach Being.”