

Dharma talk 5/29/22 Innocence

Good morning, dear friends

A warm welcome to our May one day sit. I hope zazen has brought you home to the body and mind of zazen. Returning to the body, returning to the breath, feeling grounded makes me grateful to practice and grateful to those who have, from warm hand to warm hand, taught and practiced this tradition for centuries. It would be wonderful to give a nice talk on how wonderful our practice is or about something discovered while reading Dogen. However, I cannot. The death of children – I cannot turn away. Today's talk is a mix of Dhammapada, The Sayings of the Buddha, and the death of innocence.

1. Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.
2. Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow.

It is the end of May 2022. This week, nineteen children and two teachers were killed in a shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. An 18-year-old shooter and incompetent law enforcement officials. Seventeen more people also suffered non-life-threatening injuries in the shooting. The Uvalde school shooting joins the grim ranks of nearly a dozen other mass shootings. Where do they die? They die at music festivals, nightclubs and other schools in the past nearly quarter-century in America's gun violence epidemic. The incident makes it the second-deadliest shooting at an elementary, middle or high school in U.S. history behind the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. It was the seventh-deadliest shooting in the country since the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. The pain of the parents, their weeping goes all the way to the heart.

3. "He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred.
4. "He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me." Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred.

When such a terrible event happens, it becomes a part of life, of existence, of the real. When children are killed in school, evil is manifesting in the world. It becomes something that is. This too is reality. And yet, somehow we need to integrate this happening. This is the karma of living in this place and time. Can we see the dead children, the pain of the parents, and the causes and conditions that drive the murderer to this point of no return?

5. Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.
6. There are those who do not realize that one day we all must die. But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.
7. Just as a storm throws down a weak tree, so does Mara overpower the man who lives for the pursuit of pleasures, who is uncontrolled in his senses, immoderate in eating, indolent, and dissipated. [1]

8. Just as a storm cannot prevail against a rocky mountain, so Mara can never overpower the man who lives meditating on the impurities, who is controlled in his senses, moderate in eating, and filled with faith and earnest effort.

My teacher, Norman Fischer said this about “no difference between good and evil”:

*“In Zen precept practice, the fundamental, absolute ground of ethics is being itself. Because we and the world exist, there are precepts. Things are. Life is. And in this, **not** being is also included. A moment of time arising is a moment of time passing. Being born is the beginning of dying. This is sad, tragic, and probably impossible for us to fully appreciate. Yet we can and do feel the immensity of being itself—and the strangeness of unbeing. Grounding our lives in this fundamental truth is the fruit of our practice. This is where the teaching of “no difference between good and evil” comes from. It is essential. But it can’t be taken out of context.*

This doesn’t mean we have to condone it or accept it in a moral sense, or that we shouldn’t do everything we can do to prevent it from happening again. It only means that we have to accept it as having happened. This acceptance is how I understand the absolute level. When evil exists, we accept it as existing, just as we have to accept a loss that’s happened to us, even as we grieve it. If we deny or refuse to accept reality as it is, we won’t be able to cope with it. We will keep on making the same mistakes again and again. Our losses, if we don’t accept them, can destroy our lives. To attempt to relieve our pain by identifying evildoers and vowing to wipe them out, as if that will remove the loss’s stark grip on us, won’t work. It will only add to evil’s mounting pile.”

11. Those who mistake the unessential to be essential and the essential to be unessential, dwelling in wrong thoughts, never arrive at the essential.

12. Those who know the essential to be essential and the unessential to be unessential, dwelling in right thoughts, do arrive at the essential.

What do we mean, when we speak of nondualism or nonduality in zen? Nondualism cannot mean the great oneness, undifferentiated. By this logic, good and evil as separate things would be dualism, two different things. Nondual would mean that good and evil aren’t different; they are one thing.

I actually looked up the definition of nondualism. Nondualism, also called nonduality and interconnectedness; and nondual awareness, is a fuzzy concept for which many definitions can be found, including: a rejection of dualistic thinking originating in Indian philosophy; the nondifference of subject and object; the common identity of metaphysical phenomena and the Absolute; the "nonduality of duality and nonduality"; the unity of God and man...

Nondual awareness, also called pure awareness or pure consciousness and the "non-difference of subject and object,"[12] is primordial consciousness or witness-consciousness,[4][5] a "primordial, natural awareness" which is described as the essence of being, 'centerless' and without dichotomies... In Indian traditions, the realisation of this primordial consciousness, witnessing but disengaged from the entanglements of the ordinary mind and samsara, is considered moksha, release from suffering and samsara. Please understand that non-dual awareness is not a way to avoid suffering. It does not make the cries of parents who lost their children less painful to hear.

15. The evil-doer grieves here and hereafter; he grieves in both the worlds. He laments and is afflicted, recollecting his own impure deeds.

16. The doer of good rejoices here and hereafter; he rejoices in both the worlds. He rejoices and exults, recollecting his own pure deeds.

As I quoted Norman Fischer "In Zen precept practice, the fundamental, absolute ground of ethics is being itself. Because we and the world exist, there are precepts."

Maybe it is a way of rising up to meet the oneness, the non-duality of life. If we do think in terms of one and not-two how can we think about breaking the precepts? Maybe it is remembering wise words I received when I needed them: If it is without love, it is not the precepts. We also need to recall how we are so profoundly tied up together, how our lives, are each completely interdependent. We are more intimate than the words can ever convey. We are all relatives. We are all family.

Now that I have said If we do think in terms of one and not-two how can we think about breaking the precepts, I ought to add the other part. Yes, we do break the precepts. Sometimes we may stick too closely to the literal meaning of the precept and at other times I just need rules. Rules. Reminders. We usually don't need reminders not to kill but gossip may sneak its way into our conversation. And of course, the literal meaning IS important. Sometimes our interpretation of the compassion aspect of a precept may be wrong, we are off what it means to be compassionate. And we need to see that abiding by the compassionate view of the precept is essential. Following a literal precept is not always our way. Our understanding of what is required of us may miss the point.

Last is the ultimate meaning which touches on deep understanding of the precepts. A superficial understanding of the ultimate level, the emptiness level of the precepts can be harmful to practitioners unless it grows out of a solid grounding in the literal and compassionate levels. Yes, the cup is already broken.

Heedfulness: the path to the Deathless.

Heedlessness: the path to death.

The heedful do not die.

The heedless are as if already dead.

Knowing this as a true distinction,
those wise in heedfulness
rejoice in heedfulness,
enjoying the range of the noble ones.

The enlightened, constantly
absorbed in jhana, persevering, firm in their effort:
they touch Unbinding,
the unexcelled rest from the yoke.

Those with initiative,
mindful, clean in action,
acting with due consideration, heedful, restrained,
living the Dhamma: their glory grows.

25 Through initiative, heedfulness,
restraint, & self-control,
the wise would make an island
no flood can submerge.

In our Zen practice we say that we cannot speak about others breaking the precepts. How can we talk about the 8000 children shot in the the Us each year?

864 – murdered, 6300 – shot and survived, 2800 – shot intentionally and survive, 662 – gun suicide, 166 – survived attempted gun suicide, 10 – killed by legal intervention, 101 – shot by legal intervention and survived, 89 – killed unintentionally

How do we speak of the more than 200 children who have been killed in the Ukraine since the beginning of the war? I have no answers. I feel the importance to be present, to witness, to not turn away. To hold the pain and touch emptiness equally. How do we practice together in the face of innocence destroyed?

THE BUDDHAS LAST INSTRUCTION by Mary Oliver

“Make of yourself a light” said the Buddha,
before he died.

I think of this every morning
as the east begins to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first
signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet,
even green.

An old man, he lay down between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything,
knowing it was his final hour.

The light burns upward, it thickens and settles over the fields.
Around him, the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen.
Even before the sun itself hangs, disattached, in the blue air,
I am touched everywhere by its ocean of yellow waves.
No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life.

And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazes over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire—
clearly I’m not needed,
yet I feel myself turning into something of inexplicable value.
Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.