

Dharma Talk : Glimpsing Emptiness

By Jeff Tipp, JDPSN

Friday, March 18, 2016

One thing that we're all good at, at this point, is patience – patience with ourselves.

I want to propose some experiments – ways of noticing, looking more deeply into the question, the theme of Kyol Che, “What is mind? What am I?” There are many ideas and systems of that, and many ways of practicing, and personally what I've found most useful are some ways of having direct experience, the qualities of what our nature can reveal to us very simply, in the context of some simple questions.

And any of you that have trained with me before will certainly recognize some of these questions again, but let's take them in a fresh way, because it's quite interesting although what we're talking about is so close and intimate, in fact easy and accessible, and as well completely mysterious. This is what our grand-teacher Zen Master Seung Sahn advises us centrally, primarily “Only go straight, don't know” which does not mean “don't be curious, don't wonder, don't have what we call a great question.” The context of that question is “What am I? What am I?”

The Zen Circle we've been studying some. Eric PSN and Jeong Ji Soen Sa have been presenting different ways of understanding the territories of the mind, of the ways we experience it. Tonight I want to suggest some other ways of noticing of how it is with this knowing nature, this capacity we have for experiencing, that which is with us very closely.

So I begin with this one question - when I point to the mirror – the mind mirror, our nature, which is empty like a mirror. But emptiness is a tough idea, hard to get our head around. But I could ask you now:

What is the flavor of your tongue? It's not a trick question. Just notice, look now. What is the flavor of your tongue?

There's probably no particular flavor. The tongue itself, this tasting organ itself, has no flavor. Do you agree? Just look into it, no flavor. We all know honey is sweet, kim chi is hot. We know that because the tongue will sense that, but it's empty. The capacity to taste is empty, like the empty mirror that is empty. It has the capacity to reflect whatever it faces, but itself, it has no image whatsoever, nothing. It's the same with our capacity to taste. No flavor.

Where I live wine is a big deal. People assign the exotic nuances of smoke, radish, etc. to wine – elaborate descriptions. They have a very developed sense of taste. But no matter, I guarantee you, that a wine taster's tongue has no flavor. It's empty. There is nothing that impedes the accuracy and alertness of the capacity to taste based on that evidence. OK, that's one gate, the tongue.

<chimes> The bell sound. Before striking it, and except for my voice and the sound of I-5, we can imagine it's still, silent. There's silence, <chime>, there's the bell sound, and silence again.

But let me ask you, does that silence go away <chime> now? Is it still there (chime), behind, under, outside of, all around (chime) that sound? The silence is unbroken regardless of the sound that comes. Our capacity to hear is itself completely still and silent.

Again, it's empty. It has no sound of its own. There's no sound associated with our capacity to hear, and because of that every tone or nuance or bird song or wind or even the ringing that can go on in your ears (if we've had too many skill saws or chainsaws in our lives, our ears are ringing all the time), but even behind that, it's empty...still...completely quiet...empty.

Sensation in the body. Notice your left foot now, the feeling of it, but not like you're observing it from up here (pointing to head) of what we call Thinking Central, and also the big seat of our identity. This head where we live, the eyes we look out of, we're very identified up here.

So we're not looking to find our left foot. We can do it with our eyes closed or open because awareness lives in the whole body. Feel it now, notice it, its volume, what it may be touching, its temperature, the aliveness in your left foot. Can you connect with that? See if you can feel it. Can you feel the foot from the inside..... without having to refer to it as "the foot down there"? Without going up to thought at all. Just the immediacy of feeling. There is an awareness that is effortless and fully awake in the body.

People who do a lot of yoga have good body awareness, can feel the weight of the legs or the sense of the body resting on the earth, on the ground, the weight of it, the sensation of physically being a body.

The sensations, wherever they might be, tense, we can know that not from here (pointing to head) because awareness, our knowing nature, is all through the body, right up through your fingertips, in the back of your head. Notice your shoulder blades. Are they tense? Is there an ache there, between the shoulder blades? You could check in.

Now you weren't really noticing them before I asked but something in you can check and see. That's awareness in your body, and whatever's there – a good feeling or a bad feeling – it doesn't matter. The empty mirror has no preference. It doesn't care what it's reflecting. It's just whatever appears, and it's the same with the sensation in the body. We can complain about our aching knees at this point of the day, but that's something extra. The capacity to feel it – just feels it without being selective, completely unbiased, and very present.

So besides this empty unbiased nature, there's also the sense of all of our experience and everything that's reflected in this mirror, is only the experience of just this moment, just now. The mirror cannot reflect – not a moment ago or a millisecond from now. It can only reflect what's before it, just now.

And mind is like that, awareness is like that. The terms are a little tricky. When we say mind, by the way, we're identifying with thinking, and the activities of something else going on which we're aware of, the coming and going.

I have this wonderful calligraphy in my living room by Zen Master Seung Sahn that he gave me at a retreat at Skysong years ago. It's four characters: Blue – Mountain – White – Cloud.

The poem is:

Blue Mountain, never moving
White Clouds, come and go by themselves

So we know that in nature. It's beautiful. The mountain is always there. Rainier. Mt. Baker. From here we can see them, never moving, solid, still.

White Clouds, come and go by themselves. That Blue Mountain is like Awareness...still, motionless, and is you might say, present to every kind of cloud coming by, every kind of weather, every sensation of the body, every sound, every thought that comes through, every taste that we're attracted to, every smell that comes along, coming and going.

But Blue Mountain is never moving, never swaying, never tainted, never defiled by anything that comes by, that's the good news!

No matter what we've experienced in our lives, no matter how tough it is right now, Blue Mountain is never moving. We have to find Blue Mountain. It's the same question – What am I? What is this awareness that is empty, present, inseparable from this very moment? It's always just now and capable of knowing nearly anything. We have it; we have that capability.

And our Zen training, or yoga training, or chi kung training, or whatever discipline we do to develop ourselves – in fact, it doesn't improve our fundamental nature. It's a finished work already; it's complete. There's nothing missing.

It's the great cosmic joke, when the old Zen Masters recognize that, when they have a breakthrough and recognize that. We see it in many of our kong-an stories – great laughter! Oh it was just this, just this! So simple, nothing new, not the result of our training. But our training makes us, you might say, accident prone. We can stumble into it somehow. We can make great effort in our training. It's a big deal to sit all day, or to sit a long retreat, nine days, 14 days, 49 days. Zen Master Ji Bong sat 49 days. Zen Master Seung Sahn sat 100 days.

So great discipline – but what's discovered? The life of great ease, simplicity, effortless. That's why it's so worthy finding it, recognizing it, such a relief. We don't have to have full enlightenment to have some taste of it at all. We can have a taste of it right now. That's sometimes the way we find our way. There are glimpses, moments of great ease, moments of just resting in how it is right now, with no objections.

We can make effort to have that happen, but usually it's better to somehow sort of give up on the Me Project, just for 30 seconds, give yourself a break. Because what's there is so free and liberating and so spacious and transparent. We have all these descriptions and we do all of our ways of training. What's beautiful about our training here – the routine of the day, our forms, our chanting, the predictability of it, how our Head Dharma Teacher lets us know when it's walking time and sitting time, and comes by to reassure us about halfway during sitting time.

It's a very kind and tender practice we're involved in, even though it feels like it has such an edge sometimes, because what we're up to is noticing what we have, noticing what we already have, no one is without it here, everyone has it. And then we start to notice that. It's so refreshing.

Something else comes along, which is how tragic it is that so few in our world, most of our friends and family, people we care about, so few, have a glimpse of that. They sort of overlook it and keep searching in every possible way to satisfy that longing we all have. What is this? What am I? The hwa-to, the kong-an that we're all born with naturally.

You'll see it in small children, really small children, beautiful. They're like – wow! I am! I am! You see it in their eyes. They're so interested, amazed, and good natured.

We were like that, all of us. Even if we had a rough up-bringing, even so, it's tender, delicate. We can find that again, what that was, and we can find it now. It's been with us our whole lives. When you're sitting tomorrow and practicing, when you find yourself really struggling or feeling confused or none of this makes sense, I don't want to go to that interview, I don't like this chant. Or maybe I think I really got it now, or whatever is going on.

If you can just give yourself a 30 second break. No that's too long. How about 10 seconds, like three breaths. Just give up on the whole thing, and notice what's here now when there's no problem to solve, when there's no project. What's here now? You really can't name it. But it's the release of the urgency, however brief that will tickle our enthusiasm, and keep us going. We can have an experience of that.

Now and again, we can know, because it's self-confirming. When it happens, and we get a glimpse. We can rest and see, indescribable. The mystery is there, I am the mystery, then there's a certainty that comes with it. That was genuine. How did that happen? How do I find my way back to that? And then we're back on the hamster wheel.

But then you could just give up again, another time, and when I say give up: just release, let go. Let go and let be, for a moment, in the middle of all of it. You'll find the mirror that you are is always there – not busy at all, not busy at all.

That's it. My time is up.