Entering Through Your Practice

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01 The harmony between two ways of seeing things; the Fourfold Practice

So yesterday we heard about wall gazing. We heard about the great Bodhidharma, the first Chinese Patriarch, how he spent nine years gazing at a wall in his practice of realization. And when we got into that a bit more, we saw that wall gazing doesn't really mean sitting staring at a wall. It means dwelling firmly, full established, in non-duality. It's more a case of wall gazes, wall observes. Both ways.

So, this establishment in non-duality is what Bodhidharma calls in his treatise a wakening to the true nature, awakening to the Buddha nature in all beings. This of course is utterly beyond words, really, beyond thought. It is, as the Zen tradition describes it, utterly solitary and steep, rising up like a great cliff face shrouded in mist. It's like the blue cliff, which is the name of that celebrated book of Ch'an koans. And that book is trying to do nothing else than spark you off, introduce you directly to this primordial reality. That story I told you about Bodhidharma's encounter with Emperor Wu would have been meditated upon in order to enter into communion with primordial reality.

Was also saw that in Bodhidharma treatise on the two-fold entrance and four-fold practice, that he tells us that you enter the Dharma in two ways. So, first through awakening to the primordial reality, which we've looked at, and secondly we enter through practice. We also saw that these two things are in fact inseparable. Practice is either the expression of primordial reality or you can regard it as a way of harmonizing with that reality. And looked at this, kind of tried to relate to it a bit more, in traditional Indian terms of vision and transformation. We also had a look at the Chinese terms of essence and function. You could also, it occurs to me, look at this in terms of the harmony between principle and practice. You actually have this distinction in ancient Buddhism. The Buddha always talks about the Dhamma-vinaya, which you could translate as principle and practice, principle and application. So you maintain awareness always of the vital, living spiritual principle. You also see how that can be expressed in terms of what you actually do – how you actually live – and you need to keep the two in constant harmony.

Today we're going to explore Bodhidharma's four-fold practice. So we're looking at what we actually do, what is going to be our conduct. But I want to try to relate whatever we talk about to the essence, to the principle. So, trying to keep this harmony between principle and practice, essence and function, keeping both sides of the wall flowing between one another – mixing my metaphors furiously.

So the four-fold practice is firstly removing hatred. Secondly, living by cause and effect. Thirdly, giving up craving. And fourthly, living in accordance with reality.

02 i. Removing hatred; harmonizing with others and with the way things are; Dogen's intimacy

So first of all removing hatred. What Bodhidharma means by this is removing not just hatred, but any kind of aversion and ill will. He means removing any resentment and any tendency to blaming others for our misfortune. He means as well putting up with the difficulties, the pains, that life brings – responding to them with equanimity and patience. He means as well putting up with the difficulties, the pains, that spiritual practice brings. And the spiritual practice which you're not just leading for yourself, but you're leading for the benefit of others. Spiritual life is a struggle. It can be very difficult and demanding, it takes you into places where difficult things come up. A few people have said to me when I've asked them how they are, "Things are coming up," and it's a little bit uncomfortable, obviously.

And it's easy when things come up, very easy, very tempting, to give into resentment and to give in to blame. Blaming other people – you know, the person next to you in meditation who's shuffling around. Actually it's our mind we're having trouble with, it's not whether or not they shuffle. Blaming our teachers. You know, "Bad teacher, bad practice. If I'd only been given that special teaching by so-and-so I wouldn't be in the mess that I'm in." Blame our friends, blame our families, "If only they hadn't done that, I would be fine."

Bodhidharma takes a classic traditional approach to this problem of aversion. He says that throughout innumerable lives, we have continually turned away from what is essential. We have left the root and just followed the branches. We've left the main river and have just gotten caught in the little meandering tributaries of life. We've just flowed – because we've abandoned the root of things – into various states of suffering, the six realms. We're kind of distorted. Because we've constantly given into attachment and aversion, because we've not been true to the real. We suffer because of this – that's why we suffer. The only way to cure this is through, first of all, being patient, enduring whatever pain arises, not retaliating, not reacting. One of the signs of real spiritual progress, of real spiritual vision is this patient endurance. Remaining calm and unmoved in the face of suffering. Not seeking to hurt others because of one's difficulties.

Put more positively, this first of the four practices is the practice, of course, of the first great Buddhist precept - the fundamental Buddhist precept – abstaining from harming living beings. Abstaining from any form of violence. And more positively still, it's the practice of love. The practice of deeds of loving-kindness. The practice of friendliness. So, why is this so fundamental, so basic?

Well we have to remember how Bodhidharma described *li-ju*, or Entering by Communion with Primordial Reality. He described that in terms of having a deep faith,

which means a kind of glimpse of the true nature, the Buddha nature, which is the same in all sentient beings. He discovers through this that there is no self and no other, which means not that things vanish but he means that you can't separate self and other, and that the ordinary and the sacred are one. Meaning that you don't retreat in some sort of pseudo-spiritual state separate from other people.

If you harm others, if you blame others, if you resent others, you are simply out of touch – badly out of touch - with the true nature of things. Renouncing harm, becoming genuinely friendly to others, loving others, especially empathizing with other, identifying with others - recognizing that they're alive like you, that they breath like you, feel like you, think like you, imagine like you; when you begin to harmonize with others in this way, you're actually harmonizing with the way things are.

This is why I personally regard the *metta bhavana* as not only an elementary practice, which is the way it's often spoken about, but as an enlightenment practice. In that practice you are softening self and other, you're dissolving self and other. I firmly believe that if I really made progress with the *metta bhavana*, I would need no other practice. Of course this isn't just in relation to other people, it's related to all life, all life whatsoever, even inanimate things. So-called inanimate things.

Dogen, when he speaks of this, evokes this, he uses the term "intimacy." And I find this really very beautiful and very profound, the way Dogen discusses intimacy, it's incredible. Non-duality, after all - transcending self and other, subject and object - is a bit weird. It's a bit cold, those expressions. But intimacy puts it so well. I spoke of the Buddha holding up the golden flower to Mahakashyapa, and Dogen describes this – the Buddha's act of holding the golden flower to Mahakashyapa - as intimate language. It's intimate gesture, of course, intimate communication.

Dogen says:
"Intimate means close and inseparable. There is no gap. Intimacy means the Buddhas embrace everything. You embrace everything. And I embrace everything.
Practice includes all. A generation includes all. And intimacy includes all.
You should clearly study this. Indeed, intimacy comes forth at the place where the person is. At the moment when understanding takes place. Right now is the very moment when you are intimate with yourself, intimate with others, you are intimate with Buddhas and intimate other beings. This being so, intimacy renews intimacy. Because the teaching of practice, enlightenment, is the way of Buddhas, it is intimacy that penetrates Buddhas. Thus intimacy penetrates intimacy."

I mean, you could probably spend the rest of your life just contemplating that passage, incredible. So remove hatred, practice patience, soften, unfold loving kindness, become intimate with Buddhas and all beings and all things. And you can see, with insights like this, why you get such wonderful Chinese and Japanese Zen poetry, why it's a practice, because in the poetry and the painting and the calligraphy there is this expression of that profound intimacy with all things and all beings.

03 ii. Living by cause and effect - conditionality; a poem by Ryokan

Secondly, Bodhidharma talks of living by cause and effect. Or you could call this going along with conditionality. What Bodhidharma says here is that all living beings are without a fixed and permanent nature. We are all a flow of ever-changing states and conditions. Conditions that give rise to further conditions. There's a connection between each set of conditions and the next set of conditions. Of course, this is the basis for Buddhist moral practice. If we act skilfully - creatively, out of contentment, love, and understanding - happiness and satisfaction follow for ourselves and others.
If we act unskilfully - reactively, out of greed, hatred, delusion, and so on - suffering follows for ourselves and others. This is absolutely basic Buddhism. And we need to develop a keen and precise awareness of the effects of our actions on self and others.

And it might come as a surprise to some people to hear that such a basic teaching can come from the mouth of a Ch'an master like Bodhidharma. And sometimes you even hear it said that *real* practice, if you're *really* doing it, if you're a *real* practitioner, you're beyond karma. You're forming the view that you're beyond karma. I heard recently someone say that they were beyond karma, they regarded themselves as beyond karma. But again, this is a real travesty of the Dharma, and a real travesty of the Ch'an and Zen tradition, and of all traditions of Buddhism. The Buddha's teaching of impermanence and conditioned co-production is extraordinarily profound, but before you can go to its profound depths, you need to practice on this very basic moral level of seeing that your actions have consequences. Before you can go anywhere near *sunyata*, you need to learn how to see how it works – how conditioned co-production, how cause and effect, works – in terms of the effects of your actions. It isn't actually easy to see that. It needs reflection and mindfulness, and probably feedback too, from our friends and people around us. We need to try to see, putting it positively, how the metta bhavana leads to friendliness and happiness. If we recognise that, it will strengthen our practice. We need to learn to see that our ill will just causes us pain, and other people pain. So we need to really bring mindfulness to bear on our lives to see how all this works.

But of course, you can go deeper into this teaching, and it's important to go deeper into this teaching. We need to see how everything is arising and ceasing all the time. That there is this constant flow of conditions arising and passing away. And when you go into this deeply, you find in the end that no words can actually describe this. And this is how there is no contradiction between conditioned co-production and sunyata, going beyond subject and object, and all the rest of it. There's no contradiction, they're in complete harmony.

If you go out onto the front lawn – I say this because my window overlooks the front lawn, I've seen that scene in so many different guises – but if go to that front lawn and you look at the great oak trees you'll see them really bare, almost completely bare this time of year. There are no leaves. All the leaves have come down and they're just rotting down into the mud, kind of enriching the mud and the grass. There's water and wind and bird and light. And then there's your senses and your mind. There's an

incredibly complex play of conditions going on just in that scene, arising and ceasing, arising and passing away. You won't be able to find any sort of final, fixed, permanent self in any of that scene. You have to, of course, be very calm and meditative in order to see this. But it's an extraordinarily rich and complex scene, this interconnectedness. It's vivid and clear, yet without any final substance.

So, when you look in this way, you come into a deep and profound relationship with the world around you - when you go along with conditioned co-production, when you go along with cause and effect. You start to change your relationship with things.

Here's a poem by Ryokan, a great Japanese poet:

A cold night, sitting alone in my empty room,
filled only with incense smoke.
Outside a bamboo grove of a hundred trees.
On the bed, several volumes of poetry.
The moon shines through the top of the window,
and the entire neighbourhood is still except for the cry of insects.
Looking at this scene, limitless emotion,
but not one word."

So, live by cause and effect, go along with the flow of conditions. Act skilfully and start to see deeply.

04 iii. Giving up craving; the danger of moralism; contentment

The third of the four practices is giving up craving, an old Buddhist favourite. And Bodhidharma explains this by saying that wordly people are always craving. We're always craving, always longing, always seeking. We always want something – anything. We crave things, people, fame, fortune, love. We're always longing, always wanting. We even crave spiritual states. We try to grab *dhyana*, grab insight, grab enlightenment. There's always this restless craving. Maybe we get something for a while, but it passes away.

Because a state of craving is so restless, it's actually painful. This is something that we need to kind of train in. Start to notice that, actually, craving is painful. When we crave we think we're wanting something pleasurable, but the state we're in is actually painful. We feel a lack, we feel hollow. So we need to notice this, notice how painful craving is. And then, when we lose what we get, that is painful too because we've relied on it so much. We don't even realise sometimes that we've relied on it so much, and when it's taken away it's devastating. And then we just start craving again, we want something else or we just crave oblivion - just make it go away.

The wise, says Bodhidharma, are always absorbed in the principle of primordial reality, so they're utterly content. They don't crave anything. So they dwell at ease. Now I

must admit, for myself, craving is very hard to renounce. I find it very difficult to deal with craving. In one Buddhist text, it is said to be the hardest thing to get rid of. They say it is actually harder to get rid of than hatred in some Buddhist texts. Hatred is very serious, much more serious than craving, fortunately, because you're breaking your connection with living beings, but craving is much more subtle and insidious.

Maybe we can begin with small things, like sweets and seconds and so on. Maybe they are not so small for some of us. [Laughter] I'm really setting myself up for the evening meal here, I can see it. But with craving I think it's important that we know why. I think we have to be kind of careful. Sometimes we get this kind of Buddhist moralism that's a bit kind of Christian, I think, creeping in, where you know, you say "Well, that's craving, I can't do that. That's craving." There's no thought or intelligence as to why. We need to get a sense of how craving, of just how restless it is, how actually painful it is, and how it disrupts contentment. We need a feeling for contentment if we're going to actually deal with craving. We need to have a feeling for it, a sense of it, that feeling of fullness and satisfaction, that feeling that you really don't need anything. I'm sure that you've all had experiences like that. That feeling of contentment that is the fruit of creative expression. You know, maybe after a good meditation, where you feel content because you've really worked in the practice. You might not necessarily have had a wonderful experience, but you've worked intelligently in the practice, and with awareness, and you've kept that going for a good amount of time. And you think, "Well yes, I feel content, because I've really put forward effort intelligently." Or, you know, you just do good deeds, you're just really generous to somebody, and then you feel very content because of what you've done. Not smug, but just content because you've done a really good thing. Or aesthetic experience. Something you've been making, or writing, or whatever it may be, or something you've been watching or listening to. And there's that sense of contentment and satisfaction. Or sometimes, at the end of a *puja*. There'll be that wonderful feeling of contentment, which is really sort of thrilling and alive, in that silence. Well, in those states there's an absence of craving. You know, you're not restless. So, we need to recall those feelings of contentment and realize how pleasurable they are.

The Buddha in the *Dhammapada* – it's interesting, I remembered this the other day, it just sort of popped up, this particular line, and I reflect on it quite a lot – the Buddha speaks in the *Dhammapada* of cutting off craving. Actually, a more literal translation of the word is "sticky affection." Cutting off craving as one plucks the bright autumnal lotus. You cut off craving just like picking a beautiful lotus flower. So, cutting craving here is described as an intensely pleasurable and aesthetic experience, not something really heavy and harsh. It should be like taking hold of a beautiful flower. Remove craving, and you harmonise with the true nature, you become intimate with things.

Sangharakshita relates the removal of craving and the development of wisdom, and he connects this with *metta*, in a brilliant passage in *Wisdom Beyond Words* in his commentary on *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*. He discusses the greater mandala of aesthetic appreciation or the greater mandala of uselessness. And he told a very simple story to help illustrate it. He talked about how, when he was in Kalimpong,

walking with a Nepalese friend, they came across a magnificent pine, just looming up along the path, just a really beautiful tree. And Sangharakshita said "What a beautiful tree!" And his friend said, "Yes, that will keep us in firewood for the whole winter." And Bhante was making the point that he was seeing the tree as something in itself - it's useless, you don't do something with it, you see it aesthetically as it is in itself. You're closer to it, you're intimate with it, you love it. You can see how wisdom and aesthetic appreciation, and absence of craving link up there. While his friend was seeing it in terms of utility, what you could do with it for you and other people. So, instead of craving, we can develop this aesthetic appreciation.

05 iv. Living in accord with Sunyata

So, the final practice, the fourth practice, is to live in accord with reality. Or to live in accord with the Dharma. By this, Bodhidharma means living in accord with *sunyata*, with voidness or emptiness. When you look deeply into life, when you look into yourself, into others, you cannot find any permanent lasting and separate self anywhere. This doesn't mean that everything and everybody disappears into a dead vacuum. Everything, everybody flows, you could say. It's also said, because there is no fixed or separate self, you see the essential purity of everybody and everything. So, it's a wholly positive vision, this vision of *sunyata*.

And this vision, it's said, naturally expresses itself in selfless activity, in the form especially of generosity. This is what Bodhidharma mentions. You naturally give of yourself. You naturally give of your time, your energy, your body if necessary. You give especially the Dharma. But the giving is unforced, it's natural, it's un-self-conscious, it's utterly pure because you don't have a perception of self and other and anything given. It's as if you're like an artist, completely absorbed in his creative activity.

So generosity is more like just a flow of energy, just naturally sharing itself. This is the expression of your deep communion with the true nature of things. And, of course, this is the kind of generosity that really does lead to great merit – this is the kind of generosity that Bodhidharma was talking about to Emperor Wu. Of course, you might accumulate great merit, but you share that too. You just give it all away, all the time.

06 Summary of the Practice

So these are Bodhidharma's four practices: removing hatred, living by cause and effect, removing craving and living in accord with reality. This is how you can enter the Dharma through practice. This is how you can harmonise with the primordial reality. This is how you can express that reality when you've experienced it, in wise and compassionate activity.

But it all begins in vary basic ways. We give up ill will and develop love. We become aware of cause and effects, that our actions have consequences. We remove craving and cultivate contentment. And we live in accordance with the Dharma.

07 The Ox Herding pictures - Entering the Market Place with Bliss Bestowing Hands

In the Zen Ox Herding pictures, which are these pictures and poems that describe the Zen way of practice, we are given a picture of how a man who goes along with reality lives. How one in touch with the primordial reality goes about things.

The last painting shows a stout, fat, pot-bellied, grizzled man. He's kind of robed, but his chest and belly are magnificently protruding. He is going naturally amongst the people lost in confusion, with great magnanimity and generosity. And this stage, this last stage of practice is called "Entering the Marketplace with Bliss-Bestowing Hands." What a beautiful phrase. It is to there that we should aim our practice. To go into the marketplace – into the towns, into the cities, to wherever we may be – with bliss-bestowing hands.

Let me just read you some of the poetry that goes with the picture, describing his natural performance of generosity and compassion:

"Bare chested and barefooted, he enters the market. Face streaked with dust and head covered with ashes, but a mighty laugh spreads from cheek to cheek. Without troubling himself to work miracles, suddenly dead trees broke into bloom. In friendly fashion, this fellow comes from a foreign race, with features like those of a horse or again, like a donkey, but on shaking his iron staff, suddenly all gates and doors spring wide open for him. Carrying a gourd, he enters the market. Twirling his staff, he returns home. He frequents wine shops and fish stalls to make the drunkards open their eyes and awaken to themselves."

So, you have here this beautiful image of the mature, big, round, carefree man, rich with wisdom. Always in communion with primordial reality. Always at home. There's that line from Hakuin – "whether he comes or goes, he's always at home." Meaning, whatever he is doing, whatever activity he's involved in, he never leaves that communion with reality, with the way things are. But this big man, this grand man, seems to come from somewhere else, as though he is of foreign race –not foreign in the sense of a nation - but he oh-so-naturally connects with those drunk with ignorance and brings them into bloom without trying, without effort, without any self-consciousness. He doesn't go around saying, "I'm enlightening people," or even thinking like that. It's just his natural function. It's a beautiful image of the enlightened man. There's something very mature, like a fine wine that's been left a long time.

As with all Buddhist traditions, the Ch'an and Zen schools prize compassionate activity, born of wisdom as the highest attainment.

08 December the 9th at the Shaolin Monastery - Bodhidharma and Hui Ko; Dogen on comittment; Dogen's last days

So, we've come some way in these talks, we've covered some ground. We've looked at some features of Buddhist practice inspired by Ch'an and Zen, inspired by the Buddha. There is one thing I haven't made clear, although probably it's implicit in all of the talks, and that is the attitude, the motivation of the Ch'an/Zen Buddhist practitioner. To evoke this I want to return to the life of Bodhidharma.

I want, in fact, to go back to a particular night. It's some time in the 530's of the Common Era, but the night is specific in the records - December 9th. Not too long ago, December the ninth. Back to the Shaolin Monastery. It's a night of icy cold, with snow falling heavily and winds raging. And Bodhidharma is sitting up all night, wall gazing. He is seated upright in meditation in the shrine room, his robes wrapped around him. Remember those fierce eyes of his.

Outside in the snow, standing in the cold and wind is a solitary figure. His name is Hui Ko, and he badly wants the Dharma. He badly wants the Dharma that Bodhidharma knows. He's been following Bodhidharma for years and years, and he badly wants this Dharma. That's why he's standing out there. He's been standing in the snow for days, entreating, but so far nothing has happened. He hasn't been ready.

On the night of December 9th, deep in the night, deep in the cold, Bodhidharma comes to him out of compassion and gruffly tells Hui Ko, "You're still not ready. You haven't given enough." At this, Hui Ko makes a supreme effort. He takes a sharp knife and cuts off his arm at the elbow and presents it to Bodhidharma and said, "Your disciple's heart-mind has not found peace. I entreat you master, please give my heart-mind peace through giving the Dharma."

At this, Bodhidharma said, "Bring the heart-mind to me and I will give it peace."
And Hui Ko said, "I've searched for the heart-mind and it's finally unattainable."
And Bodhidharma said, "Then I have thoroughly set the mind at rest for you."
At this, Hui Ko awakened, received the transmission of the Dharma, he entered into communion with primordial reality. He became the second Chinese patriarch. And his going in the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hand began.

And Bodhidharma's work was done and it's said that after that he just went off wandering. Went off with another community of monks. The story is that he was poisoned by jealous monks and buried. But when they dug up his body for some reason or other, they found that he'd disappeared. There was one sandal left in the ground. And the story is that Bodhidharma is still wandering. So if you meet a man with one sandal, it could be Bodhidharma.

Now Hui Ko's severing of his arm, I know, sounds well over the top – sounds very brutal. And I'm really not going to recommend it as a practice. I really don't want anyone to cut their arm off and offer it in the *puja*. Please don't. [Laughter] I take it as symbolic, of course. Standing in the snow for days and offering a limb of his body shows powerfully the utmost dedication and commitment is needed to follow the path of whatever tradition, whatever Buddhist tradition you care to mention. You need utmost dedication and commitment. If you want to make progress in Buddhist practice, you have to give yourself to it totally and completely for years and years on end. Master Yun Men was once asked, "How do I break through?" and he just said. "Thirty years."

Dogen says that if you want to make progress on the way, it's like anything else, you need to be utterly dedicated, utterly committed to make any progress. He said in ordinary life, if a thief wants to steal a priceless gem, or a man wants to have a liaison with a beautiful woman, they study the situation closely. They watch what goes on and they observe. The watch for their opening. They get to know the person or thing they are going to take. Of course, they have got a deep and powerful interest. They are watching and waiting for opportunities. Then they make decisive, committed action. They get the jewel, they get the woman. Well, Dogen says that it is the same with Buddhist practice. You need intense interest, intense dedication, intense commitment, decisive activity. Dogen says the best way to generate that is to reflect on impermanence. To reflect that there really isn't much time. Engage now. Don't defer, because who can tell how long you will live.

This kind of commitment is called in Buddhism more formally "Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels" or "Going for Refuge to the Three Treasures." The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha embody all aspects of Buddhism. And, of course, this commitment isn't made just once - it needs constant renewal, constant rededication. We need to reaffirm our aspiration to awaken to reality, all the time. This is why we do the Refuges and Precepts so often.

I want to conclude with a very moving story about Dogen. It's about Dogen's last days. He died quite young, I think in his mid- to late 50's. And he had a long and very painful last illness. But his last act as he was dying was to set up a pillar, or to go to a pillar. And on that pillar he inscribed the Japanese characters "Buddha, Dharma and Sangha" And as he walked painfully around the pillar, he rededicated himself to the Three Jewels with these words:

"In the beginning, in the middle, and in the end, in your life as you approach death, always through all births and deaths, always take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha."