

## **ALL FORMS ARE UNREAL**

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Students from South Puget Sound Community College, and The Evergreen State College were to come tonight, plus other members from the community. I'll try to speak to the Dhammapada, which the students of South Puget Sound are studying this week, and some of the material from the *Essence of Zen*, by Seiki Harada Roshi, the text that the Evergreen students are studying. We are fortunate to have the benefit of their curricula.

I'm not going to go into the long history of the Dhammapada. I want to speak to the essence of a piece of the Dhammapada rather than the history of it. Essentially the Dhammapada is scripture that was memorized by various groups of monks right after the Buddha died. It is the essential foundational platform for the monastic practice, the virtue of the monastic practice. There are more than three hundred chapters in it and each chapter has, maybe ten, twelve, sometimes fifteen verses within those chapters. "The Dhamma" means that which is Universal Truth or, the entire phenomenal world, and "pada" means a particular verse form. So it's a very old text, and it has the feel of doctrinal teaching much like some of the other Sutras that we come across or have studied.

I picked out from the Dhammapada something that I wanted to try to correspond with in the *Essence of Zen*. I chose Chapter 22, and there are just three verses that I will read from Chapter 22 in the Dhammapada called "The Way."

*You yourself must make an effort, the Tathagatas (The Buddhas thus come) are only preachers.*

*The thoughtful who enter the Way  
are freed from the bondage of Mara. (The personification of foolishness in the world.)*

*All created things perish,  
He who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain.  
This is the Way to purity.*

*All forms are unreal.  
He who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain.*

*This is the Way that leads to purity.*

I am interested in this line: "All forms are unreal."

Let me read a little bit then to make a bridge also to Harada Roshi's book.

Harada says:

*Mental activity is composed of sensation, conceptualization, volition and consciousness. We are made up of the coming together of these five skandas: form, sensation, conceptualization, volition and consciousness. Without the function of form, which is comprised of the four elements, the mental functions would not arise. This is why we cannot think of the physical body as being separate from mental activity. This is also why, as I mentioned earlier, no matter how much you refine thought, that in itself, cannot comprise everything.*

*A question that is frequently asked is, whether the physical body or mental activity comes first. In fact they arise at the same time. The physical body receives impressions from the outside environment through the six senses. Simultaneously on receiving these impressions, many different conditions arise as a result of mental activity. Nothing is comprised of only one thing. This thing, or what we call a human being consists only of these functions. There is no center, no nucleus. This means that no matter how much the physical body and mental activities are polished and refined, it will be of no use. Since there is no substance or essence, no matter how much training or discipline is undergone, it is merely that activity and nothing more. While the True Self may seem something special, it really isn't. As I have just explained, it is merely, knowing the fact that only the functions exist. These functions themselves are what is called the Dharma. It is to realize that the Dharma is you yourself. This reality is expressed as the True Self.*

So, the part I will try to speak to is: "All forms are unreal, insubstantial, the body, all phenomenal existence is insubstantial." This is really not a simple thing to realize, but it is the most essential thing in life to realize. Even outside of Zen practice it is an essential realization for spiritual awakening. It's hard to realize because we feel everything. We feel the body going from one activity to another, we get cold, we cough, we hurt and our knees ache, or we have some kind of injury and we can't bow. So all these things happen in our lives and we have the feeling that that is really happening, I mean my bones are so solid! We think that that is who we are, that we are those bones, we are the back and we are ourselves aging, also we feel the emotions of our lives and our relationships. And we feel that's who we are, this aching heart or this joyful moment or whatever. We are

sure that's who we are by our feelings, but time and time again the Buddha says that's not the case, that we are not substantial. Harada Roshi many times in his book, *The Essence of Zen* – (I think it's the finest book that we have in Zen practice today) – he says no, we are not substantial, this is the mistaken identity that we have taken on in our lives. We developed this personality and we developed a person and we developed a reference point as this body, this self, this one who is treading through life and who gets sick and dies. There is no substantiality in that, no substance in anything. No substance in matter.

So, how do we go about realizing this? How do we go about coming to terms with this? It's the essential point of healing in Buddhism. It's the essential point of realization in Buddhism, the non-substantiality of ourselves as matter. I wish I had some specific root to avail people of this realization. To say look, if you do one, two, three, four, five, six, surely when you come out of that you will realize. Maybe it takes sitting down on a cushion facing the wall and the determination: "I will not get up from here until I really know what that means!" I have certainly done those practices in my life. I recommend them actually. I didn't necessarily sit on a cushion until my knees ached and so forth but I sat down and refused to get up until I had a breakthrough in understanding. "What does this mean? What does it feel like, to feel insubstantial? What's the implication of that of who I think I am, my personality, my relationships?" I think there is a way that we can realize this with the same kind of sitting down and being with one of the skandas until we realize what it is saying.

What does no eyes, no nose, no ears, no tongue, no body, no mind, no color, no sound, no taste, no touch, no body, no mind, mean in realization? We can't say what those are. So we have to know that, right by itself, is beyond intellection. It is beyond our being able to describe it. It's something that must be realized with and in our being. When we are talking about the activity of seeing – Harada Roshi speaks about this a number of times in the book, about the senses and being just this sense – he's talking about active seeing without anything being attached to it. No object that is seen, no person who is doing this seeing. Just being seeing. Even the word "just" is too much. Seeing. The eyes, in the activity of seeing, are the Dharma itself. That is who we are without any attachment of the thing that we see. That is the True Self. We hear without making any identification on the hearing, without liking it or disliking it, without sorting it out. Just being hearing and hearing itself. The ears working as hearing is the Dharma. That is the True Self, without any attachment. This is so simple that it is extremely difficult to

grasp without fully engaging in that effort encouraged in the Dhammapada. You, just you, must make an effort, to sit down with what that means “to see without any attachment.”

When we see in this way we know that there is no inside or outside. There is no-one actually seeing, there is no-one to be seen. In essence, we become invisible and we are released from all karma, we are released from attachment, the kinds of attachments to suffering. If we realize this just once, we know how to practice in this way, we know how to find the root of Dharma again. I'm not talking about Samadhi, I'm not talking about some big floating-kind of wonderful transcendent state. I'm talking about the most natural way to be. Most unattached, most natural expression of the Dharma – that we already are, except that we bring perception into it. We bring into it our identifications or we hear a word and we say “O! That's an eagle out there. No there is the Red-winged blackbird. It has returned for the springtime!” And then we build a case around it, rather than when we are sitting Zazen, simply to hear, without any intellection around it, without any thinking around it.

When we sit Zazen in this way, we realize insubstantiality, there is nobody here! Neither you or I actually here! And of course we are here at the same time. So I'm not negating the body, I'm not negating existence, I'm saying what the experience of insubstantiality is here and now. When we can do this, as in the Dhammapada, it says we “become passive in pain” - which isn't to say that we aren't also experiencing pain, but we aren't so attached to it that we are bound by that pain. We're no longer bound and making identity with it. We also must be sensible and we must not do things that cause injury. Do you understand me? I'm not advocating we ignore pain, but we are not subject to it. We are not a slave to pain, when we know that we are insubstantial! I completely challenge you on this, I work with this myself.

In the Dhammapada then, *you yourself must make an effort*. We have to sit down and we have to realize this. We have to take the time to sit with “What does the Buddha mean? What does it mean, to see without attachment, to see without anything else, to sit and be with that until we realize it?” Go to a park-bench, go some where, I don't care where you go. Sit with that until you get it. Dhammapada says *you yourself must make an effort*. The Tathagata, *one who is thus come*, sits here at this moment giving this word to you, preaching. The Tathagata, the Buddha is the teacher, you also are the Buddha, the teacher of

yourself. Every Buddha must make effort to realize.

*The thoughtful who went to the Way are freed from the bondage of Mara. Mara is other than the True Self. Mara is the personification of the troublemaker within us, who makes things difficult for us, who simply throws hindrances in our way and we believe them. All created things perish. This body comes and goes, like the trees, like the dandelions. This body comes and goes, it's the way of the Buddha, it's the way of life. We can let go of many of the difficulties we feel, the baggage we carry that causes us pain, and this is the Way to purity, so says the Dhammapada. All forms are unreal and insubstantial, he who knows and sees this becomes passive in pain. This is the Way that leads to purity.*

It isn't that we are trying to be pure, that's not what it is about. Nor are we trying to be perfect. We are trying to experience a truth that the Buddha gave us that is so utterly simple that we often miss it. We so easily miss the simplicity of this. Sitting with ourselves in quiet reflection is so fragile, realization of seeing without anything attached, is fragile and requires a deep attention!

I've also, lately been reading James Hillman's book, *The Soul's Code*. A very wonderful book, beyond psychology, Hillman does not say he is a psychologist. He's looking at life. Not looking at it in the insubstantial way that the Buddha is, but he has a wonderful chapter on "Invisibility," that I feel drawn to. Everything has an invisible spirit resonating in it, the trees, the leaves of grass, the table. The table has the foundation of the spirit of table, the walls the spirit of walls, everything has this. Of course, in that chapter he's trying to get us to recognize the invisibility of our own existence. At the end of this chapter, he reminds us that if we are visibility we are also invisibility. And if invisibility dies then visibility dies. The spirit leaves the body, we die. You know that there is something there! You know there is some invisible being that you work with all the time who moves you through your life. Hillman also shows that when the tribal people lose the invisible practices or the invisible nature of their practices, their tribal nature falls apart.

So, a great deal of what we do in our practice is about the invisible. We celebrate the invisible Buddha out of each one of us when we do the ceremonies. We offer incense, which also is about that invisibility. We bow to the invisible True Self when we practice, when we do ceremony. To whom do we recite the Precepts? Not for me, not for the statue, we recite them for the invisible Self of yourself that lives out your life and also manifests in a visible way. My seeing is

invisible, your seeing is actually invisible, so this simplicity, this delicate thing that I urge you to take the time to try and experience, is completely invisible. You can look at my eyes but you can't see me seeing, well maybe you can, but my seeing is not the thing that I'm looking at. My hearing is not the ears that you are looking at, nor is yours. So, very much in Zen practice we become aware of the invisible. We become aware of the invisible nature of each one of us, that is the living Buddha. Makes for very rich interior in ourselves when we look at the invisibility, when we enrich the invisibility and we notice the invisibility, not just what you see, but what is underneath the person before us. This is the way we see, this is the third eye that we speak of, seeing the invisible and seeing as Dharma Itself.

Let me finish with another little piece from Harada Roshi:

*Our Zazen practice is essentially a matter of awakening to the True Self. This True Self cannot be perceived. True Self is completely before perception. As the seeing that I speak of it's before perception. To awaken to this True Self, is also expressed as awakening to no-self or no-mind or emptiness or to forget the ego-self. All the same. All things including people are never fixed in a same condition from moment to moment. In the midst of this constant change there is no central thing, nothing we can perceive as the ego-self. The teaching of Buddha then is the matter of awakening to the fact that originally there is no self. No self means to awaken to a self that is so vast and limitless that it cannot be seen. Something that can be seen has a limit, is small.*

So that's how I invite you to the invisible. I invite you to find the no - self, the invisible, to allow the created small self to be released.

*With gratitude to Josepha Vermote for transcribing this talk from her home in Brussels.*