

2009 12 30 New Year

We come back to practice after a short holiday and we have New Year the day after tomorrow. It is much colder this year in Olympia, I don't remember it so cold, very invigorating actually. We are at the time of the year when it is traditional to think about the matter of resolutions, a chance to start again, a chance to resolve.

For tonight's talk on the question of resolve and resolution I'm taking a lesson from Dogen Zenji's, "One Bright Pearl" a chapter in SHOBOGENZO. In this chapter, Shibi is a simple fisherman, and for thirty years there is nothing extraordinary about his life. As Dogen says, without any warning and expectation, a golden fish jumps into his boat. Now, we can guess what that means, can't we! Immediately, something moves Shibi to change his life. He puts away his fishing career and he goes up into the mountain. Going up into the mountain and the boat in this story are both metaphors. Certainly the going up into the mountain refers to his entering deep Zen practice, entering the monastic way and putting behind him, worldly ways. The matter of the fishing boat could represent floating around in the world without any purpose. So he gives up his floating way and goes up to the mountain to root himself. He has heard of Zen Master Seppo, high up the mountain.

After quite a number of years, he decides that he's going to go to a another place, he's going to find another teacher. Now, it was customary in China to go and visit different teachers. So Shibi packs up his things, and as he is going down the mountain he stubs his toe quite badly. He shrieks in pain, and immediately has a deep realization. Dogen Zenji writes:

*"Thereupon," Shibi said, "This body has no independent existence, so where is the pain coming from?" So he goes back up the mountain to Seppo and he tells Seppo what happened. Seppo asks him: "Is this Shibi the Austere Monk?"*

*Shibi responded: "I have never dared to deceive anyone about that!" So delighted by this response Seppo says: "Who could fail to cherish this response. Who could have expressed the Great Matter, more fully!" On another occasion Seppo called out to him: "O Shibi my Austere Monk, why haven't you gone out on pilgrimage to seek a master to train with?" And Shibi answered: "Bodhidharma did not come east to China for that, nor did the Second Ancestor go west to India for that!" Seppo highly praised what he had said.*

*Shibi had been devoted to fishing for so much of his life, that he had never set eyes on the voluminous body of Buddhist Scriptures and spiritual writings, even in his dreams. Nevertheless when he put the depth of his resolve to realize the truth above all else, a true determination emerged which surpassed that of the other monks around him. Seppo realized that Shibi excelled all others and praised him above Seppo's other disciples.*

Dogen goes on to explain that Shibi had very few garments, very few clothes. That's why they called him the Austere Monk. He wore paper underwear and a course hemp cloth. He made clothes out of mugwort leaves. It seems he wore a hemp cloth of a hundred patches because his clothes were always falling apart and he had to sew them together.

*Apart for working under Seppo, he did not seek out any other Master to train with. Even though he kept to just one Master he certainly found within*

*himself the spiritual strength to become the heir to his Master's Dharma.*

So Dogen Zenji is pointing out that the deep matter of practice lies within ourselves, not in going around to find what other teachers might think. Dogen himself did not necessarily promote going around and studying with other teachers. Dogen Zenji says that students should find the question of resolve within themselves. And through that resolve they will understand the Dharma of the teacher they are with, and resolve to be a great student to succeed their own teacher.

We talk about the question of resolve and resolution tonight, because this comes every year as a special time to consider our lives. New Year's Eve I spend quietly and I think about my life and resolution and I consider things that I think would be important to my life, a way of taking up some aspect of practice to focus on, because New Year is an opportunity to exercise a resolution. And the matter of resolution and resolve, I think, is about exercise.

I don't know about you, but I so dislike to hear the word exercise. I myself do not like to go out and exercise. That is not to say that I don't think I should be fit, or that I shouldn't take care of my body, but the matter of "exercise" seems so distasteful. In times past, we weren't so sedentary and many people had jobs that required them to be physically active. We have generally become sedentary, our children have become sedentary, they do not play out of doors any longer. So our bodies are showing the result of no exercise and even with that I'm not keen on the word exercise. When you go to the doctor, that's one of the first questions asked these days: "Do you exercise?" And of course I fib, a little bit, I mean I do exercise, I'm very active, there are stairs in the house, and I'm up and down the stairs maybe thirty times a day, not to mention other physical work.

Nevertheless, on a spiritual level, spiritual life is exercise -- exercising for strength within ourselves to change, to take up aspects in our character that need to be polished. To polish the character requires exercise. Clearly, I know that when I talk about physical exercise, I can disappoint myself if I don't get exercise, and I disappoint myself if I resolve to do something and I don't exercise the resolve. Our character becomes quite weak when we don't exercise ourselves very truly. So resolution and resolve which bring about determination, require us to do something. The meaning of the word "resolution," is to loosen and to release. Most interesting! Because the word to resolve means that we have to loosen some hold or thinking in some way or some manner of identity that we have about ourselves, or some kind of constriction that is keeping us from doing something. That has to be loosened, it has to let go for us to be able to resolve to do something. To loosen the grip of identity or thought, whatever it is, that has to be loosened for us to go forward. Most interesting and very subtle. It's a very subtle matter. So to resolve means to release ourselves to find an answer, to release ourselves to begin to do something. And that little piece is extremely subtle in us, the piece that prevents us from the resolve to do something, and to continue it, and to allow determination to take us over the long haul. So many people, most people make a resolution and without ten days it's gone. Ten days, it's forgotten! And of course sometimes we have really fancy notions about ourselves and we're going to go for the moon, we're going to do something extraordinary that we're not prepared for.

But spiritual practice is subtle work. We make great spiritual strides in subtle work in subtle understanding. Understanding the matter of that gripping machine and to loosen and to release. At some point it's necessary if we wish to advance, to go forward. All the little pieces in spiritual work are things that turn out to be big things, pieces that are the underpinnings that are the platform of spiritual growth. Nobody sees them, they are just subtle pieces within ourselves that allow our character to be polished.

So, with Shibi, this depth of resolve to realize the truth above all else, a true determination emerged. I'm not suggesting by the way, in reading this story about Shibi that we throw everything down, and go to the mountain for monastic practice. Monastic practice life is in us, it is not in external things even though we have temples that make it look that way. Monastic practice is clearly a way that we pick up within ourselves. And I know very often, I say I'm not a monastic, and yet I live within myself as a monastic, yet I may not look like a monastic in my daily life. Of course I sit Zazen and of course I'm practicing here, but it is more than that. It is truly about our resolving to live a particular way in which throughout our whole life, we determine that we will progress and we will live fully in search and resolution of a spiritual foundation, which requires continual exercise. Practice must be exercised. There's nothing that makes us happier than to be that...to grow that eternal monastic light, into caring for ourselves continuously and once again forming the teacher within ourselves.

Dogen Zenji says that Shibi's determination and his resolve was so deep, and this is the aspect that has to do with receiving the Transmission of the Buddha. Even if we do not wear Okesa, the robe of the monk, we still receive the Transmission of Buddha. We receive it by life practice, this practice which is the Transmission. There is no separation whatsoever. Just to sit in the posture of the Buddha, is to receive the Transmission, is to be in the posture of Awakening. If we continue to sit Zazen, there is resolve behind it, there is resolve in the underpinning, the determination to continue, the determination to experience that Awakening and a real understanding of ourselves, a real confidence in the root of the true Self.

So this is the New Year, this is the wonderful opportunity to look at something. Something that we can really make happen, that we can really change, a very small thing, it has not to be huge at all. You know, the important aspect to sitting Zazen, is to sit at the moment that we have the intuition to sit, it doesn't matter how long we sit. The important thing is to respond to the intuition to sit, the call to sit, to respond and to actually sit at that moment. This is the same as The Golden Fish jumping into the boat. If we have the urge to sit and we don't respond to it, we turn away, we're not exercising our resolve.

I hope you can sit quietly with yourself and consider the question of resolve and the question of loosening something that needs to be loosened to allow ourselves to open to resolution. I love New Year's Eve, the quiet of it. And do you know, we have a Blue Moon tomorrow night.