

6 April 2011
Olympia Zen Center
Eido Frances Carney

Situation

This is my first time to speak after being away for three months, so it feels a little strange to be sitting in this seat. Thank you very much Bob (Witzl) for all the great talks you gave, I have no doubt there were very wonderful Dharma talks. I know you were in capable hands, with many people doing different kinds of work and kept everything going and supported practice very well. It's just perfectly fine, perhaps I can go away for a long, long 6 months next time!! Just like Ryokan-san did! After he became head of Ensuji Temple he started going out every day, and gradually he drifted a little further away, and then one time he just didn't go back. That's how it went.

As I mentioned to many of you, to come to this grey world up here, is quite startling after waking up every morning to the golden sunshine of California. It was very beautiful, mostly. It started to rain in the past week just before coming back... to help me get used to it. But just the day before I left, it turned golden again and it stayed beautiful all the way up to Portland and then....the Pacific Northwest happened.

I did many things while I was away. I realized that I needn't have brought any books with me at all, because I found a whole new world when I got there. You go to a new place, you go to a bookstore, you see something, you start reading something new, and you forget about your whole past life. You begin to explore in the new world where you are. Living as close to Berkley as I was, there was plenty of all kinds of things happening.

I took a Lifelong Learning course at Berkley, titled, The Promise of Polytheism. As some of you know I have been a world religions teacher so I'm very interested in these subjects. The course was taught by a professor from Berkley, Prof. Hubert Dreyfus who has just written a book with Sean Kelly chair of the Philosophy Department at Harvard, called "ALL THINGS SHINING." The two of them wrote the book in response to the present day nihilism. Their feeling is that monotheism via the Abrahamic tradition essentially has come to an end point. People are suffering from depression and a great sense of emptiness. Their feeling is that the Greek gods demonstrated a different flavor in the culture. The virtues of gratitude, and collaboration and awareness of something than we are was

more deeply in the society than we see now. So they were suggesting that we become aware of this earlier civilization and teachings that we enjoyed at one time and we re-examine the values at this time, and that we open ourselves to receptivity which was a quality of life found in community. They're not suggesting that we worship the Greek gods, that's not what they mean. They mean that particular practices of virtue of the society, a receptivity to moods that can lift us out of ourselves and bring about a deeper sense of connectivity.

In the book they particularly point to the phenomenon that happens when we all celebrate together, where we are lifted out of ourselves and we enjoy something wonderful. For instance in the Bay area, when the Giants won the baseball World Series, everybody was elated, and whether you were a baseball fan or not you were lifted into the joyfulness that was occurring. Everybody was so happy that their team had won! So they point to these moments that are celebratory, that give us a collective point to gather on, a collective meaning.

Of course we can have a similar thing happen not only about something joyful or celebratory but certainly we can see in the terrible destruction in Japan. There is a gathering around, there is a mood of assistance and a mood that wants to bring hope, a mood that is collective and wants to do something together to help. So they suggest that we be receptive to these moments and that we open ourselves to allow them. They call this a shining. When the gods met you in some way and brought something forth, you were been shined on.

These things also happen in our personal lives, not just collectively. We have moments in which some moment of grace comes into our lives, we don't know where this opening comes from, but some shining happens and we are given a moment in which perhaps we can reconcile, or we can find something lost, or see the right way to go! We see something greater than we are. We're lifted out of ourselves. This is the wonderful practice of receptivity.

During that course at Berkeley, we read three texts which fortunately I had read before or I could not otherwise have survived that profound reading in six weeks. The books were THE ODYSSEY, THE DIVINE COMEDY, and MOBY DICK. If any of you have read those texts, you know it's an enormous commitment. I admit to not reading every single word of MOBY DICK this time, but I re-read enough to convince me that it is truly one of the great novels, *the* great novel of American literature. I refuse to give up ULYSSES by James Joyce as the greatest written novel. ULYSSES is of course an abstracted ODYSSEY, so to really understand Joyce's ULYSSES you have to read the ODYSSEY to really

understand. Six months before going on this particular adventure to the Bay Area, I had started re-reading the ODYSSEY because I wanted to read ULYSSES one more time. So I had already started on this journey and I'm definitively awash, so that tsunami comes on the tail end of this, so there is an awful lot of water in these three months, at least for me personally.

In this course, the most brilliant people I have heard in a long time were 80 students. The questions were formidable and astonishing. You just know that you're in the midst of brilliance. It was packed with retired professors, researchers, thinkers, and people who'd been reading their whole lives.

At the very first lecture Professor Dreyfus spoke about Odysseus, and about the things Odysseus was doing, how he was going about various exploits and events that Odysseus would meet, and the tremendous difficulties that he would run into. And Professor Dreyfus said "look at the situation! And when you look at the situation, this is how you know Odysseus. You see him meet every situation and then you know who he is." This is also true in Moby Dick where you see, Ishmael meeting situations or you see characters continually meeting situation and you find out what they're made of and who they are by their response to the situation.

At the same time, I was reading along with you in David Loy's book, LACK AND TRANSCENDENCE. Loy speaks about situation, and so does Dogen Zenji. Dogen says in Genjo-koan, "*Life is the situation at one time and death is the situation at one time.*" That's what he calls life, the situation, and death a situation. Dogen goes on in another part: "*When we give voice to Dharma it flows forth from their mouths like a tide, limitless in its breath and depth. All Buddhas continually dwell in this state with none holding on to their thoughts or perceptions, regardless of whatever may arise, whereas the great mass of sentient beings perpetually make use of what is within this state, but without their being fully awake to any situation.*" So Dogen is saying that Buddhas continually dwell in this state, regardless of whatever may arise. Buddhas meeting the situation, moment by moment, as David Loy says "in the flowing now." Buddhas are meeting situations as Buddhas and Loy will later say "as situation itself." And yet sentient beings, "we make use of what is within the state but without being fully awake to any situation." Meaning that we are not fully realized. Dogen says, "*To know yourself is really to forget yourself, is to be awakened by all of the myriad things coming forth to awaken us.*" Which is pure situation, just situation arising in this single moment. This hand touching this book is pure situation, each breath is pure situation. No self, just the myriad things coming forth as situation, as the flowing

now.

Because there were so many people, and so many questions being asked in this course, I never got to ask Professor Dreyfus about his thoughts on this matter of situation and the nature of the Self. He's an existential phenomenologist so I thought he could answer. I was not there to challenge him with Buddhism, it was not the point of the course, but I wanted to meet on this particular point, so finally on the last day of the course, we all got to ask questions. So I said "Professor Dreyfus in the very first lecture you said "we know Odysseus by the situation, what about this self or no-self, would you be willing to say that there is no such thing as self, there is only situation?" And well he said after a moment's thought, "Yes, I could say that." I was very happy because to me that is what Loy comes to. To me this is the meaty section of his book, and he's getting at the self and the sense of lack. But he comes to this point which to me, is the essence of the book. Loy says and he is mirroring Dogen here: *"To become enlightened is to forget one's own suffering, only to wake up in or one with a world of suffering. This experience is not sympathy or empathy but compassion, literally suffering with. What will the meaning of life become for such a person, freed from the delusions of objective meaning, and narcissistic self-preoccupation ? What will that non-dual freedom, which has nothing to gain or to lose, care to do? The career of the Bodhisattva is helping others, not because one ought to, for the Bodhisattva is not bound by dogma or morality, but because one is the situation and through oneself that situation draws forth a response to meet its needs."*

This practice of meeting situation, moment by moment, is of course to fully live the Bodhisattva life, to be fully awake and to understand the totality and meaning of situation, to see the whole realm of situation, all its ramifications - to understand also sometimes how difficult it is that we cannot always perfect response. It's almost impossible. If we eat we are killing something, because everything is alive. We can't even hold the first precept "No killing life." We have to take in life in order to stay alive, so there is situation! We know the situations that we meet may have great paradox in them. Extraordinary paradox. As we develop, as we see more into situation, we can hold deeper and deeper levels of paradox, which is to see deeper into the situation.

Dreyfus and Kelly are asking us to see something greater than our own small selves, to see a world larger than we are, to see situation larger than we are, to know that there is something greater than my life alone, or let's say greater than the sense of self, as Loy would call it. Loy's quote around this is : *"For Buddhism greater than sense of self, refers not to something transcendentally other to this*

world, but to the interdependence of Indra's Net. There is no appeal to another reality, just the need to come out from my private and delusive hiding-place, my sense of self, in order to realize this one, in order to experience the full invocations of my integral, interdependence with everything else."

So we must let go of the self, we must release ourselves from our own small hold on life. We needn't fear about lack of suffering in the world if we let go of our own; there is plenty of suffering to go around that we will meet, when we let go of our own, and we release ourselves from any personal addiction to suffering, and we see the world of suffering outside of our own selves – a far greater and more unifying experience in the world, a more generous experience.

That was my experience of the course, the essence of it, I thought that was pretty rich time, just that by itself. Maybe you have some thoughts about this ?

Student

I guess in my touching on Greek history and such, my sense was that the Greek Pantheon, each of the Greek gods and goddesses had their own problems so to speak. And I always had a sense that they represented many aspects of personality. So I'm trying to relate that to shining and..

Teacher

OK. Paaanng!! Something happens, you fall in love. Aphrodite has visited you, your heart is stolen away. Aphrodite oversees love and that is really true that they all represent aspects. But the interesting thing about the Greek gods, is that they're not different from humans. The only thing different is that they're immortal and that is one thing about Odysseus. He has the opportunity to become immortal and he refuses! Doesn't want it. Yes, the moods are represented by various gods, very definitely.

Student

Would the book address things like faith ?

Teacher

Well it's not looking exactly at the gods, it will point to them, but it isn't doing that, it's not getting you to worship the gods or think that we are going to run into Apollo when we go down the street of that we should create statues. It's a sense of respect in the society for one another, and respect for virtue.

So indeed, they say in this book, that we stopped paying attention to the gods who were aspects of ourselves, projected of course, and monotheism came along and we began to look in a completely different way. The gods faded out. Whatever it is you do, they are saying, you have to pay attention to it. And you

have to notice it and care for it. It is this kind of quality that they are after, this quality of life.

Student

So, this was a way of knowing the self.

Teacher

Yes, that's right. Because you can't find yourself, yourself is situation. Just situation. Even in the looking for ourselves we find situation. "To know yourself is to forget yourself, is to be awakened by all the myriad things". That's Dogen Zenji.

Just think about situation, just work with your life as situation. Everything you meet. We're all going to get up, we going to get in the car, going to drive home, going to meet situation one moment after the next. Just meeting that, and allowing the situation to be there without thinking about this smaller self is liberating.

Student

Along the same line. Meeting the situation still implies the self, meeting something else, but just as the situation, it is incredible liberating too, because you're not dragging around this self that's trying to think what to do with the situation. You just are the situation and you do.

Teacher

Yes. It's really simple !!

Eido Frances Carney with gratitude to Josepha Vermote for transcription.