

## Wisdom in Retreat

Seclusion, solitude, religious refuge, quiet, security, moving back from danger, and shelter are but a few words to point toward what retreat is. Sesshin is yet a further meaning in that we “collect the heart-mind” in an intensive, strict practice for a certain period of time. Rohatsu means “the eighth day of the twelfth month.” So, Rohatsu Sesshin is a time of intensive practice (at our Zendo from December 1 to 8), leading to the time when Shakyamuni Buddha sat Zazen under the Bodhi tree and Awakened when he first glimpsed the morning star.

This is our deepest and most sacred time of the year; it is a time when we practice long periods of meditation, work, oryoki, dokusan, and listening to teachings all the while keeping a concentrated focus on a particular aspect of our practice. What does this mean? Perhaps your teacher has asked you to focus on your breath in a particular way; perhaps you are working on koan “Mu”; perhaps you are working with posture. Throughout all activities during the days of sesshin, you apply willing and joyful effort to that focus, throwing yourself fully into collected heart-mind, forgetting all other aspects of your life as you become practice itself. To fully engage body and mind in practice is liberation itself.

When Shakyamuni Buddha saw the morning star he was Awakened. This “Awakening” unfolds the Buddhadharma; without Shakyamuni Buddha’s Awakening-Enlightenment, there would be no Buddhism. It remains the field-kernel-atmosphere-center of our practice.. Yet, Awakening is not some objective realm that is sitting waiting for us to enter or to get to. Awakening is the experience of the reality of the oneness of the relative and the absolute which is all abiding. Again and again we chant this in the *Hannya Shingyo, Great Wisdom Beyond Wisdom Heart Sutra*: “Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. That which is form is emptiness; that which is emptiness is form.” In sesshin, we practice not to do activities to become good at them or to chant *Hannya Shingyo* repetitively to learn the words: we practice intensely as Awakening itself.

Yasutani Roshi comments on Dogen Zenji’s *Genjokoan*: “Mountains and rivers are not seen in a mirror.”<sup>1</sup> It’s not that mountains, rivers, and the earth are reflected in one’s mind-mirror. That’s okay when we are using metaphors for thought and consciousness. But what we are speaking of now is the realm of the actual experience of enlightenment. The self is the mountains, rivers, and earth; the self is the sun and moon and the stars.”<sup>2</sup>

The wisdom of retreat, sesshin then, is to come to *realize* wisdom which has always been in us. By way of our practice we manifest abiding wisdom in our daily lives, forsaking the anguish and turmoil of politics, dilemmas, financial woes, crises and pain, We pour our whole selves into the wisdom of the practice-experience-expression of Buddhadharma and become wisdom itself.

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<sup>1</sup> A line from Hsueh-t’ou’s verse in the *Blue Cliff Record*, case 40, which is cited parenthetically by Yasutani.

<sup>2</sup> Yasutani, Hakuun. *Flowers Fall*. Trans. Paul Jaffe. Boston: Shambhala, 1996.