

**Talk given by Janet Selby
at Annandale Zendo, May 16 2004**

I've been coming here to meditate now for about 9 years, but I wouldn't consider this to be a dharma talk. I'm not a teacher. All I can do is share with you that which I know about.

The topic of this talk was to be about myself, and my experiences with meditation. Firstly, about being a parent to Lily aged 7. But I realised I had already written about that in Mind Moon Circle, twice, in fact. "Parenting as a Spiritual Practice" concluded that there are no rules or formulas in being a "successful parent", just an awareness of the needs of each situation as it arises. This awareness, I said, begins with a spiritual practice, in my case, zazen. Awareness arises from zazen.

Next I thought I would share about my experiences as an artist. But I have already done that, too. Most recently in the Clay and Meditation Workshop in March 2004. This was also based on a cultivated awareness arising from my zazen practice. An awareness of the body and how to express it.

But the real topic came about when the Easter Sesshin was happening. I had decided previously that I would limit myself in the number of retreats during the year so that I could spend time with Lily being a "good mother". Then as the time approached, I realised the nature of this pre-meditated decision. That's not the way to go. I could look after Lily any place. So with this feeling of disappointment of missing out, my family and friends (Peter, Maria, Anna and Lily) all went for a small trip into the country for a few days. In the quiet of the bush I found myself sitting cross-legged in zazen posture, hands in lap, meditating together with the sangha. Then after dinner, sitting on the floor, I was meditating again. Just emerging, in seeming connection to the Easter sesshin people. It was in this context that I began reading the book "Warm Smiles from a Cold Mountain" a series of dharma talks from San Francisco Zen Centre, by Reb Anderson. I only read the first chapter. It was enough. And here I quote from it:

The Acupuncture Needle of Zazen

What I want to talk to you about is zazen. Zazen is sitting upright in the present moment, right here, in the midst of Buddha's mind. There is a text about zazen by the great teacher Dogen Zenji, Zazen Shin. There are two ways of understanding this title. Zazen means – well, no-one knows what it means – zazen is zazen. Shin means "needle", particularly the bamboo needles that were used in the old days for acupuncture. The first way to understand this title is that zazen is a needle with which we stick into our lives; it's the needle with which we care for life. If we put this zazen needle in the right place it will tenderise our lives. We will become sensitive to the totality of our lives, tender to all beings, so responsive that we realise how deeply connected we all are. This tenderness transforms ourselves and others. This is what happens when we understand zazen as an acupuncture treatment for our lives. The other way to understand zazen shin is as a medicine for zazen itself. It's a medicine to treat out misunderstanding of the practice of zazen.

When we first begin, most of us practice zazen just as we do other things. We practice zazen to get something out of it, to improve some situation. We practice zazen as though there were something we could do by ourselves. We understand the self as something that can do things – do Buddhist practice, do zazen - and this misunderstanding is deeply ingrained in us. This is normal, we all do this.

Dogen Zenji wrote, "When you first approach the way, you remove yourself from its neighbourhood." When you first approach Buddhist practice, you go away from it just by the very fact that you are approaching it, rather than realising it on the spot. We can't help this. We're looking to improve things. It's the way we see things; it's unavoidable. Once we start practicing, we need treatment, we need a little medicine for our misunderstanding of what practice is. So may I insert a needle into your zazen practice?

First of all, zazen is a practice of living with all sentient beings. Zazen cannot be practiced one-sidedly. I cannot do zazen apart from you. You cannot do zazen apart from all of us. Zazen is realised in concert with all sentient beings. Good cannot be done by any one person. All good things are done together with all sentient beings.

Zazen is just like our lives and our lives are like riding in a boat. You can't ride in a boat by yourself. As Dogen Zenji says, you raise the sail, you sit up straight, you put your tongue on the roof of your mouth, you cross your legs, and you row with the oars. And although you row, the boat gives you a ride. Without the boat, no one could ride, but your riding is what makes the boat what it is. This realm of mutual creation with all sentient beings – where we make one another what we are – is the realm of zazen. Zazen is the way we care for our lives together.

We can care for our lives by ourselves, and that's the way we're accustomed to living. We have all done a pretty good job of it. You got this far because you did a good job of taking care of

yourself. But this is not zazen. Now that you've taken care of yourself so well, you have the chance to enter the great mind of the Buddha, to learn how to take care of yourself along with all sentient beings. This is "cultivating the empty field." Cultivating the empty field is the same as cultivating the sky. Do you know how to plough the clouds? This cloud farming is done with all sentient beings. It's also called zazen.

Someone once approached Suzuki Roshi and asked, "Why haven't you enlightened me yet?" Suzuki Roshi answered politely, "I'm making my best effort." He might have told the student to make more effort herself, but he didn't say that. He said "I'm making my best effort." Zazen is the way I care for my life with all beings. I can't do it by myself. Can you have faith in a way that you can't do by yourself? Most people can trust only in a way that they do by themselves. But living a life that you can do by yourself is unadulterated misery. Completely trusting a way that you can't do by yourself, that you do with all sentient beings, is immediate liberation.

Some people say that Zen is hard to understand. It is hard to understand, but not because it's obscure. It's hard to understand because it's like the sky. Look at the blue sky. It's nice to look at, but it's hard to understand. It's so big and it goes on forever. How are you going to get it? It's hard to understand all sentient beings, too, but it's not difficult to sit upright and be aware of them.

One day a monk asked the great teacher Matsu, "What is Buddha's mind?"

Matsu said, "Mind itself is Buddha."

Later someone told Matsu, "I hear you said 'Mind itself is Buddha'"

"I say that to children, so they will stop crying."

"What do you say after they stop crying?"

"I say 'No mind, no Buddha.'"

The practice of "no mind, no buddha" is based on great faith. This is trusting what is actually happening. This is trusting "what." Put aside your doubts and trust it. Trust what. Don't trust it, a thing that you can think of. Trust what you can't think of. Trust the vastness of space. Trust every single living being. Trust cause and effect; vast, inconceivably complex, and wonderful cause and effect. This faith has unlimited possibilities. Think about not moving. Think about giving up all action. And remember, giving up all action does not mean stopping action. That would be another action. "Giving up" means giving up the attempt to do things by yourself, and embracing the way of doing things with everyone.

Trust Buddha's mind. Trusting Buddha's mind means trusting all sentient beings. This is fearless love. You can give it all up, and then you can love every single thing.

Dogen said, "Mind itself is Buddha. Practice is difficult; explanation is not difficult." People like a practice where you can explain how to do it. It feeds the deluded karmic mind. First you do this, then you do that, and then you do this; people like this. But what is easy to explain is difficult to practice, because the explanations move us further away from the practice itself, and we need all kinds of antidotes to get us back on track. "No mind, no Buddha" is not difficult to practice, but it is difficult to explain. Sitting still is not difficult to practice, because it's just like the sky, but it's as difficult to understand as the sky.

Practicing goodness is like riding in a boat. When you make a bag lunch and give it to someone who is hungry or take a present to someone who is sick, if you think you are doing this by yourself, you're missing the point. You can't ride in a boat by yourself. You need the boat; the boat gives you a ride. If you make a lunch for someone, the food gives you a ride, the food makes it possible for you to make the lunch. All sentient beings give you the food. All sentient beings make the lunch through your hands and your eyes and your body. Without you, the lunch couldn't be made. Without them, the lunch couldn't be made. Now let me ask you: If the practice of all the buddhas and ancestors is being realised right now, who is it realised by?

If you answer "All beings." you're right. Yes – all beings! All beings are sharing the way at this moment. Never graspable, yet totally available. There is no other thing outside of this. My question is, do we trust it?

Looking at myself, the only thing I can find that holds me back from completely trusting the practice in which all sentient beings are now engaged is the lack of courage: lack of courage to affirm all life, which is the same as the lack of courage to affirm death. Without being able to affirm death, I cannot affirm life. This is the courage that comes with insight, so I could say that what holds me back is a lack of insight.

When I'm with some sentient beings, I lack the courage to meet them. I'm afraid of what he or she may do in response. So I hold back, and by holding back, I don't affirm life. Holding back, I'm unable to care for the other person completely.

But I can make a vow, which, for me, is the same as practicing zazen. The vow will not be to meet each person completely by my own willpower. I will not make that vow. I will vow to trust that all

sentient beings meet in my life, as my life. I will witness the arrival of all things as my life. That's my vow.

What will be your vow? Do you want to commit yourself to the way of Buddha, the way that all sentient beings practice together? Or do you wish to continue an ancient karmic pattern of living by your own willpower? Consider my question and tell me the answer. Again and again, tell me the answer, so I can understand the heart of your zazen, the heart of your love, the heart of your wisdom.

(pages 5-10, Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains, Dharma Talks on Zen Meditation. Reb Anderson, Rodmell Press, Berkely, California 1999)

As sometimes happens, the right book comes to you at the right time. Continuing with my ceramic artwork, I have made a series of vessels using an image I have always liked from the Belgian Surrealist, Renee Magritte. It is of a leaf which turns into a bird at its tip. The leaf and bird are one and the same. After I made a pot using this image, Gilly described it as depicting "interbeing". I hadn't previously thought of it like that. The sangha presence and feedback has been invaluable in my life. So when I sit in zazen it is with the knowledge that I sit with the support and presence of the sangha along with all sentient beings, sangha and birds.