

Dharma talk Rohatsu sesshin 06.12.2008 (Worldview Center Maleny)

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I would like to continue with the question reality and illusion.

Every Wednesday maybe for a few months now, every week we have been exploring this question and I would say this Koan is very important.

Unless we get to the bottom of what is reality and what illusion, we can easily remain stuck in illusions for our whole life.

So I feel all spiritual traditions essentially have to deal with this very, very huge question, and for me, this Koan has taken many different turns and many different aspects have opened up that I didn't expect.

I haven't finished with this Koan either, there is still ongoing exploration.

This talk is like a report to what's the status of my engagement with this question, so all I can do is place my report in front of you and maybe its of some use, maybe not.

The first thing that became apparent to me about this Koan is how easily, at least in my case, my intellect got dragged into it because reality and illusion, or enlightenment or delusion, we want to have them cleanly separated.

We would like to know this is "enlightenment" and that is "delusion", or this is "reality" and that is "illusion". So the first aspect was my intellect became heavily involved trying to come up with clear conceptual definitions of what they are, but that ultimately is not useful.

The intellect likes to have consistency and clear boundaries between things, ...ok – so – I tried.

First , even though I have been practicing Zen for some years and even though perhaps I have realised that the intellect is not very useful, but still it's a very sticky thing, so for me initially the intellect very cunningly became involved.

This Koan is not about trying to separate "this" from "that," - separating "reality" from "illusion" or separating "enlightenment" from "delusion", and we can get a scent of that, because when you read what other masters say about this question, for example, from Peter Kinsley the initial passage that we used for this Koan was;

“reality is not separate from illusion, illusion is not separate from reality,
the illusion (or the deception) is what is real”.

Therefore, this statement crosses both aspects. The statement is not trying to separate – its very contradictory to the intellect– this statement is trying to unify these [“reality” and “illusion”]

– and also, I think one Wednesday evening, in a similar sort of statement I told about my very first sesshin, I wanted to know what is enlightenment. So I asked Genpo Roshi, “What is enlightenment?” and he said, “enlightenment is delusion, delusion is enlightenment” - that’s what he said.

So my first sesshin and my first Dokusan with him and he sent me out with that statement, so I was confused and a little disappointed.

I remember, he didn’t say ‘enlightenment is this, or delusion is that’, – I had hoped for such a response.

I hoped to find some recipe to package enlightenment so then I could attain it but he didn’t give me that, and then recently last Wednesday before zazen I was reading in this book there is passage from Zen master Dogen from the Genjokoan and he says in relation to this Koan,

“Those who greatly realise delusion are Buddha’s and those who are deluded about realisation are ordinary beings”.

Isn’t that statement very challenging and provocative?

He didn’t say those who greatly realise “truth” are Buddhas, he didn’t say that.

He said those who greatly realise “delusion” are Buddhas.

So once again we see that this “realization” and “delusion”, “reality” and “illusion”, these masters, they don’t separate them - they give us these statements, which are to the intellect, very contradictory.

So when I first began practicing with this Koan - the initial question was how do you address this Koan without being trapped by opposites and so if we hold some idea of illusion and some idea of reality, or enlightenment

- if we keep them separate, its very similar, I feel to poles and electricity.

Just like electricity, there is always potential when you are between two opposites for movement. One of the things that surprised me about this Koan, is that it is about movement.

Its quite common we accept that we are in a deluded state, or are in illusion, and the point of zen practice is to actually move from that pole towards reality, or to enlightenment.

So when I first started Zen practice, I thought that’s what I needed to do.

I thought I am clearly deluded, so what I need to do is to keep practicing then I am going

to move away from a deluded state and go towards the other pole: “reality” or “truth” or “enlightenment”, or whatever you want to call it.

This is very, very deep, at least in my case, a very deep habit and that habit involves movement, so you are trying to move away from your current state to some “enlightened” or “reality” state.

I think when you try this many times you realise you don’t get anywhere, so in fact you are just moving further into illusion but the tricky thing is that when you are doing practice you feel sometimes you are moving towards some awakened understanding.

This is very, very dangerous, because we are moving into more subtle illusions, so that sounds very, very tricky.

So that is the background of this Koan and I found two passages that I would like to share.

I would like to first read them and then I would like to then re-state the Koan again.

So each time in my practice with this Koan I find I need to re-state it,

I need to re-ask the question sincerely.

So we have been studying, or we have been reading from Peter Kingsley’s book and also we have been reading from “Parmenides’ poem“.

Parmenides was this pre-Socratic philosopher and in that book Kingsley also gives a commentary of another pre-Socratic philosopher called Empedocles. Historically I think there is some reason to believe that Empedocles was one of Parmenides’ students.

Parmenides wrote his philosophy in a poem as did Empedocles also. Empedocles had a disciple called Pausanias so in this poem which I will read a fragment, Empedocles is transmitting his teaching to Pausanias – a sort of Dharma transmission, so this is a very significant poem.

Empedocles is trying to transmit his awakened understanding to Pausanias so in this is one fragment, he says:

“Come now watch with every palm how each single thing becomes apparent. Don’t hold anything you see as anymore of an insurance than whatever you hear, or give those loud sounds you happen to be hearing preference over the sharp taste on your tongue, and don’t reject the assurance provided by any other limb that offers some passage for perception, but perceive how each single thing becomes apparent”.

There are a few words that are unusual in this context and everyday language.

Empedocles says, first “come now, watch with every palm how each single thing becomes apparent”.

So by “palm” he means this [the palm of our hand]. In ancient Greek, a “palm” was like a means for perception, so that’s how they understood a palm as

a particular mode or means of perception and that's not so strange because I don't know any meditation technique where we sit like this [fists closed].

In some meditation I learnt, like in Yoga, we sit like this with palms open and even in zazen our even though we have a circle - our palms are open - we don't sit like this [fists closed].

So he is saying with every mode of perception we have to watch how every single thing becomes apparent -

how every single thing arises using every "palm", that's is, every mode of perception.

So what is significant about this, I feel, *he is not asking us to perceive something specific [like an object] - he is asking us to be aware of the perception, the perceiving process itself - to be aware – to perceive that you are perceiving*, so this is very significant.

It comes out of the western philosophical tradition before Socrates.

Now I would like to share another passage from a different tradition and this comes from the historical Buddha on the "Four Establishments Of Mindfulness" (Satipatthana Sutta) Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a book, which is a commentary of this sutra, so this is a sutra that historical Buddha gave, and in the book Thich Nhat Hanh says there are various versions, but he gives a wonderful commentary on this Sutra.

The book is called "Transformation and Healing" and this is the passage I would like to share with you from that – it's a very long Sutra but I would only like to share a small passage and then revisit it in relation the Koan "reality" and "illusion".

So the Buddha says ;

"further bhikkus, the practitioner observes the object of mind in the objects of mind with regard to the sixth sense organs and the sixth sense objects,

how does he observe, how do we observe?

He says, the practitioner is aware of the eyes and aware of the form,

the practitioner is aware of the ears and aware of the sound,

the practitioner is aware of the tongue and aware of the taste,

the practitioner is aware of the body and aware of the object touch,

he remains established in the process of the coming to be in the object of mind, or the

process of dissolution in the object of mind or both,

in the process of coming to be and the process of dissolution,

he remains established in the observation,

...free, not caught up in any worldly consideration"

Remember, Empedocles says "perceive how every single thing becomes apparent" using all our "palms" (senses), and the Buddha says the practitioner "remains established in the process of the coming to be" so the two passages, one from Empedocles and one from the Buddha are very similar.

I would like to just leave these two passages for a moment and then go back to the poem

by Parmenides which we have been penetrating for many weeks every Wednesday at our zazenkai.

On the one hand the Goddess tells Parmenides that reality is whole, complete and unmoving and on the other hand our everyday experience of life is so dispersed, so fragmented and involves separation.

When I talk like that I am always reminded by Yasutani Roshi who said our biggest problem is thinking “I am here and the world is out there,” so there is some separation and he said that is our biggest problem, so when we are addressing the Koan reality and illusion, he said that even if we have a fantasy, any fantasy, that’s real.

“It has a reality but we can’t stop there, the danger if we stop there with that line of thinking is that we can easily start indulging all of our illusions”, as Peter Kingsley said, “there is no illusion apart from reality”, ... so he is saying illusions are real.

But the danger I feel that if we stop there then we can easily start indulging our illusions, so ok, everything is real, ...problem solved, everything is real, illusions are real too and then we can easily be stuck in these illusions, so that’s why I needed to ask myself a question

- in every day life we feel the ‘separation’.

For example, if you have an argument with your partner, the ‘separation’ seems so obvious and real. Don’t you feel such a separation when you are having an argument, so it is “me” verses “other”, or very often in everyday life we feel like Yasutani Roshi said, its “me” and the rest “outside”.

But where is the oneness in that?

So I asked that to Hogen san in a letter and he called me.

I don’t remember what he exactly said, but he said “THIS” essentially all he said was “THIS” and I was shocked so I couldn’t reply so very often in my relationship with Hogen san, he says something and then I am shocked so I didn’t know how to respond.

I want to say a few things before I get back to Hogen san’s THIS.

We assume this separation, it has become so familiar that we assume it, my feelings become a very highly persuasive illusion for separation but we can test this, so if there is a separation I should be able to say where the boundary is between “me” and “that”. Ok, so maybe a commonsense feeling is that my boundary would be my skin, so my boundary is here and then similarly for that object, the bell, which has a clear boundary.

So isn't it clear that that bell is outside of "me"?

I can even get a ruler and I can measure the distance how far outside the bell is from me. In that case, it seems obvious that there is separation – it can be measured.

But let's try another example, very often when I start zazen one aspect is awareness, the other is the breath.

So an observer arises, and my breath is objectified so I feel there is an observer and the observer observes the breath.

Then once again we have that separation, we have the observer and then the object (the breath), but where is in that case, the boundary between the observer and the breath.

In this case it is not so clear where the boundary exists between the observer and the breath and also, sometimes what we do is objectify our self and start to observe our self and then another observer (subject) is generated.

This is essentially where "I" comes from, our notion or our idea of "I" is a product of awareness looping back and objectifying the observer - we then observe some objectified representation of our self.

In that case where is the boundary between the new observer and the objectified self? We can't put in a ruler and measure the distance between them.

So where is the separation? I learnt this from a book by the physicist Shimon Malin in his wonderful book called "Nature Loves to Hide".

He talked about this separation and using sort of like a scientific approach to establish that its not so clear the separation is there – we can't clearly establish where the boundaries are. If there was such a separation, we should very clearly be able to find where it is, but in these examples hopefully I can show its not so clear where the boundary is, so maybe then we can begin to doubt that such a separation is real.

In that connection the third part of Shimon Malin's book is for me was very, very special.

He wrote in the last part of his book, the next frontier in physics was to transcend the subject object duality. I couldn't believe a recognised scientist like Shimon Malin could write that because its almost like the opposite of orthodox scientific thinking which tries to objectify reality.

I had to ask him how did his scientific colleagues responded to this view and he said many of his colleagues thought it was rubbish but there was a very famous philosopher and quantum physicist Abner Shimony at the University of Boston and I think what happened he got a copy of the manuscript of Shimon Malin's book and he contacted Oxford University Press and said that this book ("Nature loves to Hide") absolutely has to be published.

So I would love to be apart of this new "physics and the one".

So this is my special wish to contribute to such a new science.

When we were talking about the bell, we can also consider this question of separation

using sound.

So in zazen, sometimes it seems the sound is “outside”.

Scientifically, they would say that when I hit the bell then there is some disturbance and then a wave is created through the air molecules and the wave hits our ear and then something happens in our brain and so we hear a sound. The scientific explanation is therefore the sound is “outside” of us.

No one questions that explanation anymore.

However, if you attend sesshin when you are sitting mindfully for longer periods in very peaceful surroundings, our awareness becomes sensitive, so sometimes when we are in a zazen period, we are sitting and then someone hits the bell, the experience is “inside”.

The whole field of awareness is simply that sound, so even now, when our awareness is sensitive enough the question whether that sound is inside or outside is no longer relevant because your whole being, your whole field of awareness is that sound.

The experience of that sound and then,

so when we have such an experience, is there any movement?

No, I don't find any - our awareness doesn't extend beyond that sound.

On the other hand, our object consciousness is very highly developed, and so we identify objects and movement is defined in terms of other objects.

But when you have such an experience, where's the movement?

There is no movement because that experience is here, its now.

So it can't go anywhere, so that is why I feel in Parmenides' poem, he says; “ reality is caught in bonds.”

So reality is “caught in a bond” because there is nowhere for reality to go, *so when you have such a very, very direct experience, there is no 'movement'.*

There is just the experience. The experience doesn't move anywhere.

Its here, its now.

This morning after breakfast I was watching out into the valley and you can see birds flying and it seems the birds are like objects that are moving but underneath that object consciousness - its perhaps so obvious that we don't notice it - but the very raw direct experience of seeing.

Is that moving anywhere? I don't feel it is moving anywhere.

This experience, this awareness there is no movement.

But of course object consciousness creates movement.

This is a rather contradictory, but somehow I am slowly beginning to understand why the Goddess told Parmenides that reality is “unmoving”,

there is no possibility of movement.

So, now back to the passages I read before.

Empedocles said, “see how each single thing becomes apparent” and, for example, in the Four Establishments of Mindfulness ;

“the practitioner is aware of the eyes and the form”,

so Buddha didn't say ; “the practitioner is aware of the form“,

he said the practitioner is BOTH aware of the eyes and aware of the form.

So he is saying we are not only seeing that form but we are aware that we are seeing.

We are perceiving an object but we are also aware of the perceptual process itself whether it be seeing, whether it be hearing, whether it be tasting, whether it be touching, and this I think is highly significant because mostly in everyday life we see “something” [an object]. But we are generally not aware that we see it.

And that state when we are seeing, its like half blind - we don't have awareness. We may see something and we are not aware that we are seeing something,

so we are already half blinded and we are therefore unstable.

You can check this in your zazen with regard to thinking.

So suddenly there is a trail of one thought after the other, we haven't completed one thought and already the next one is coming, and that thought is not completed, then the next one, etc.

In such a state, we can't complete anything.

I know sometimes my state in everyday life is very messy so I haven't completed something and I already I have started beginning something else.

This is a movement away, but in “the practitioner is aware of the eyes and aware of the form” our awareness needs to come back to the source.

So if our awareness is always projecting outwards, it will easily get into a chain and then we will move further and further away.

Empedocles says significantly;

“perceive how each single thing becomes apparent”,

he is not talking only about a thing but also the perceptive process itself,

being aware not only of the form but that you are seeing, but also aware of the seeing, not only of the listening but also aware that you are listening.

Justine (Seiko) isn't here but two weeks ago she asked

“how can we turn awareness back to the source?”

These two passages actually provide a practice for us to do that.

So I have been experimenting with this passages and what I found is the quality of awareness is different.

So one way of seeing is half blind- we hardly notice what we see.

But when you become aware of seeing, THIS arises.

That’s the answer to my earlier question, “where is the oneness in that”?

Shimon Malin has a wonderful expression, “the eye that sees itself “.

When we go back to the sutra, “the practitioner is aware of the eyes”, so aware of seeing as well as the form so this is one way to say the eye is aware of itself. Such a “seeing” is mindful seeing, when we see without being aware of seeing, that’s not mindful seeing, that’s not mindful awareness.

So I tried practicing with these passages, and I found a very, very different quality.

When you are aware that you are seeing, or when you are aware that you are hearing, it has a very mindful quality.

When we are not aware we are seeing, the quality is indirect and easily unstable, for example, we can quickly enter into dispersed and fragmented mind.

To go back to the question of “reality” and “illusion”:

On the one hand reality is one, complete and unmoving and on the other hand we have this illusion of separation.

These practices for me are a way to address these two.

When we are aware of not only what we see, but we are aware of what we are seeing, its very, very mindful and that’s different from illusion.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes in the book, “Transformation and Healing”,

...he has a wonderful passage, he says ;

“true mind and deluded mind are two aspects of the mind“.

So essentially he is saying reality and illusion but it is all reality,

he says both arise from the one mind.

Deluded mind gives rise to the forgetful, fragmented and dispersed mind, which we are all very familiar with.

He said the basis of true mind is awakened understanding arising from mindfulness, so by following Empedocles’ practice, we don’t allow our selves to the luxury of saying our illusions are real.

We don’t stop there, we don’t allow ourselves to stop there, so mindfulness is the mother

of that, as he says of awakened understanding.

In this talk, I have covered many aspects but I would just like to finish with one more.

Peter Kingsley has in his book a wonderful passage which is goes something like this:
“if we talk about the truth then we lose it, but if we understand our illusions we will find
truth in the middle of it.”

Mostly our state is fragmented and illusionary, but when our awareness goes back to the source, not projected in an outward direction, we can find the truth in the middle of the illusions and that's THIS, this encounter, this sound, this seeing, so that's why I think these passages are very, very significant and also it's wonderful, he says:

“ if we talk about the truth we will lose it, but if we understand our illusions then we will
find truth in the middle of it.’

That's such a wonderful response to Dogen who said,
“those who greatly realise illusions are Buddhas”.

Hogen-san wrote me a letter sometime ago and it was related to the topic of this talk
“reality” and “illusion”,
and he wrote about “truth” which is “practice/experience/awareness”,
so that's what I have been trying to clarify.

He also wrote about reality and he used creative English with the term “field study” or
“field research”.

So you can imagine our being in a field full of illusions and so “field research” or “field study”, is like archeologists so we are in the midst of that field making discoveries in very sticky mud.

We are not looking for dinosaur bones but the truth in amongst all that illusion.
I'm beginning to appreciate such a “field research”.

Everything I have said up to now is necessarily incomplete, so all of the times I have been talking on Wednesday evenings about this Koan, we always been talking about how we are trying to reconcile these opposites how to unify “illusion” and “reality”.

The thing that became very clear when Hogen san wrote about truth and this reality, this ongoing field study we have in our daily illusionary life, like archeologists.

However there is a third aspect, “selfless action”
and so far I have not mentioned compassion.

I have been talking about reality/illusion, enlightenment/delusion, I have never mentioned compassion so that means what I have been saying up to now is missing a crucial element and Hogen san's letter made me aware in my explorations of this koan reality/illusion, I haven't considered compassion, so that's blindness on my part and also I don't feel I can talk about that so I will stop there.

In this talk I have expressed many different aspects, maybe confusing clarifications, but this Koan for me has opened up many different aspects and I haven't tried to integrate them in this talk.

This koan is still a journey for me so each different aspect I am seeing along the way - that's all. Thank you.

So if anyone has a comment or correction....

I forgot to say one thing about Empedocles, he said don't hold anything you see as more of an "assurance" than whatever you hear.

He used the word "assurance" and then Peter Kingsley in his book actually explains quite carefully what is meant by "assurance" because the actual Greek word was "pistes" which actually means more than say when I give you an assurance.

In this case it means I will tend to do something but its not binding.

The Greek meaning of "pistes" was actually more of a binding - it was like a pledge and before this passage Empedocles had actually invoked a muse [a Goddess] so what he is saying is that assurance, so any sound, any form, any thought, any touch, any taste, these are pledges from a muse, a God so they are absolutely genuine, even our fantasies, they are actually genuine. They are all genuine, we could say in the Christian context all of them [sense perceptions] are "holy" - that's essentially what "assurance" means - each sound, and each thought is a pledge from the muse, it is 'holy'.

I think each of them are an opportunity for completion, when our awareness is there, then these can be completed, so it is about reality completing itself through us, so when we really listen to a sound with awareness, that reality is being completed and normally its not actualising fully, it is crippled.

Like I said when we were empty and our awareness is just that sound, it is being completed.

So reality is always trying to complete itself and our senses are the gateways for that.

Some meditation traditions, they assume senses and sense perceptions as being something

bad and some techniques are too block off the senses in meditation, but Empedocles and the Buddha say the opposite.

We are humans but we don't use our senses [we are normally senseless due to our habits], so when we are using our senses, reality is being completed - it is one.

This one experience, this one encounter.