



Zen Open Circle

'Turn Off Self View'

Roshi Susan Murphy | 10 May 2020

Taking Part in the Gathering - Online Zen Group

It is a beautiful thing to watch people gathering on screen again, taking part in this gathering... Seeing your faces arrive on screen, seeing the world arrive in all your different home places, different states, even different continents or at least countries, is a beautiful thing. So let's begin.

By happy coincidence today is Mother's Day, and very close to the first full moon of May, the traditional marker of Vesak, the birth of the Buddha. So it seems to me this is a wonderful chance not only to revisit some of the strange koans of this time of Covid virus, but to bring it together with the chance to affirm life and birth on both sides of the matter -- Mother's Day *and* the birth of the Buddha -- embracing *exactly* what comes with life, with birth and death, minus all picking and choosing.

In my heart, this talk is dedicated to the memory of my own dearly beloved mother and her fierce maternal love – the love that may be the strongest mortal energy on the earth, a red thread that does not break with death but stretches as far as love can stretch and then a little further, from life, to life, to life, to life. On the last occasion I could speak with her before an operation that took her life, I

said to her as I had said many times before, ‘You are the best and most wonderful mother in the whole world!’ And she said, ‘Yes, I know.’ Why shouldn’t she, it was so clear.

So birth and with it death...every Buddha is born into the world by a woman.

There’s a sharp encounter that explores exactly this fact. The nun, Wuzhou, was given a place to live in an all-male monastery by Dahui -- quite a fiery and iconoclastic 11th century character, instrumental in the compilation of the famous and magisterial collection of koans called *The Blue Cliff Record*. Wuzhou’s very presence in the grounds of the monastery aroused contention, especially in Wanan, the head monk, who complained bitterly to Dahui about all the rules it broke for her to be present in an all-male monastery - even though she just lived and practiced in a little hut way down the back somewhere. However, Dahui said, playing slightly to the gallery, ‘Even though she is a woman, she has strengths. Why don’t you go and check them out.’ We sense he was very sure who would get the better of the encounter. But Wanan was only too happy to go off to interview this scarlet woman for himself and thoroughly disprove her strength. A woman, strong in dharma terms, was surely a contradiction in terms.

Wanan took four attendants with him, setting off with a bit of a grand flourish. When Wuzhuo saw him coming she asked, ‘Is this a dharma interview or a worldly one?’ Interesting question, dharma or worldly? Is there any difference? Wanan believed there was, and replied, ‘It is a dharma interview.’ Wuzhuo said, ‘Then please send your attendants away and just wait a moment.’ She closed the door and soon after that said, ‘Please come in.’ What follows, as I say here in *Red Thread Zen*, is one of the most unusual dharma interviews in the records of Zen.

When Wanan stepped past the curtain he found Wuzhuo lying naked on the bed with her legs apart, while looking straight back at him unflinchingly. He pointed between her legs and said, ‘What kind of place is this?’

What kind of man is this? In another context ‘What kind of place is this?’ could be a mutual kind of opening to a dharma encounter in which one person generously tests or confirms the clarity of insight of the other. But here the context is heavily weighted with pre-emptive disapproval. And here was a woman with her well-known carnal nature so flagrantly displayed, here in the sacred place of the

dharma! I detect fear and uncertainty as well as defensive anger in his question, ‘What kind of place is this?’ But I ask again, if the dharma could be separated from all that we call ‘the world’, can it be dharma at all?

Wuzhuo is calmly offering a teaching right in the place of her scandalous display. She said, ‘All the Buddhas of the three worlds, and the six patriarchs and great monks everywhere, they all come out from this.’ And what’s more, by the way, they come out covered in blood. Wanan asked, ‘Will you let me in or not?’ There’s possibly an overtone of sexual baiting here, overlaid with scorn, pushing her to see how far she can be pushed... There’s even possibly a first sign of humility in Wanan, inviting at last some genuine opening of dialogue.

But perhaps not enough of one. For Wuzhou turned her back on him, saying, ‘It allows horses to cross, it does not allow donkeys to cross.’

Her words deliberately echo a famous encounter in the record of Zhaozhou, in which a monk asked, ‘Where is the famous great stone bridge of Zhaozhou? All I can see is a little modest wooden one.’ And Zhaozhou met this insult with, ‘Horses may cross, donkeys may cross.’ Leaving it wide open to the monk to sort which is which out for himself. But Wuzhuo here is diagnosing a definite donkey.

My reason for raising this case is to confirm, with Wuzhou, the inarguable facts of life, that make it so very clear that this grave matter of birth and death -- the place where we breathe every breath -- confirms the fact that a baby is born into life in a mortal body that is equally inseparable from death... The grave matter itself, for which we must be completely alert and never self-indulgent in the kind of attention we offer to its mystery.

This moment is all we have and it is precious. There are quite a few final words attributed to the Buddha, and one of them is, ‘*Things fall apart, tread this path with care.*’ Life is, inherently, equally valuable and vulnerable. This hardly even needs stating in a moment like the one we’re in. It really is as simple as this: living beings, including human ones, are sentient. Sentience opens a path of experience called suffering. And suffering opens the beautiful daily path of *proceed with care*, become care itself. The form of this care doesn’t begin with plans or propositions or anything except a certain firm, natural, unforced readiness.

And that form of *readiness* is examined most beautifully in the four radiant states of mind, sometimes called the four noble abodes, or the four immeasurables – immeasurable, because they cannot be compared, measured, or found to have a beginning or end. Immeasurable also because all four rest in recognition of the unbounded fact of there being no ultimately separate self.

The first of them is Metta, loving kindness, and when we chant the sutra we hear the fierce words, ‘*Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart, may we cherish all living beings.*’ With these words, the Buddha made a very strong case for the efficacy of loving kindness as a gently *fierce* form of caring. Loving kindness, *metta*, is not pushy or demanding, it is a widening energy of well-wishing, raised first for ourselves, then radiating out to include not just the ones you love but the people you have most trouble with, and to people and beings we don’t know and never will – the born, the unborn, the seen, the unseen... radiating finally over the entire earth, before coming all the way back home in this expanded, potentiated and widened form to ourselves. The circuit, complete and endless.

The second is *karuna* and it is a charged state in the sense that compassion is the charge laid upon us by any degree of awakening; the charge that your life is not other than my life, your suffering is also my suffering, and calls for my response to ease or end that suffering -- and so recognition (of suffering) seamlessly becomes the offering of the self to fill another’s need. What is wrong? What can I do to help? How are you hurting? How can I be of some help?

The third immeasurable is *mudita* – pleasure taken in the joy or success of others. No barrier in the heart here, no comparing mind that would far prefer that joy to be mine not yours. So, once more with no sense of ‘the other’ as separate, *mudita* strips away the energy that would otherwise fall into envy, jealousy, mean-spiritedness. Instead, your joy is no other than my own.

And the fourth, *upekka*, equanimity, enfolds and is the ground, capacity and verification of the other three. Equanimity is the recognition and state of being equal and at ease in all directions, empty of difference, bringing with it forbearance and a steadying of the heart. The first three immeasurables find their home in this supple steadiness. The four immeasurable states of mind eschew the delusion of separateness, and so possess no fear. It is fear that carves us out from this, this...this light on the

floor, this distant bird singing now. The sound of an engine somewhere. It is fear that carves and casts us out from the whole of what is our life in every breath.

That is an isolate self, and this strange time of careful self-isolation in order to care for all beings raises the question of why would we ever deliberately choose to be the profoundly isolate self?...And do we recognize the choosing when we do fall back into an encapsulated, momentary, vulnerable, closed-in life that must be locked down and fortified against the insults of life in a mortal body?

Where lockdown is tightly insulated, ‘sheltering in place’ can become at last becoming the host of what is happening and where you are, not shrinking away but recognizing yourself in and as the place where you are, and in doing so, tending that place and being tended by it. The sesshin that was happening during our last session here for so many people brought practice all the way home, finding the dojo right where we live -- as we have also been doing right here in various ways throughout three years of Taking Part in the Gathering.

So how can such a beleaguered sense of self be transcended, seen through, recognized as a dharma gate to walk right through? Consider once more the provocative finding Yunmen made, that ‘The whole earth is medicine’. What flows immediately on and out from that his riveting statement is his question, ‘So then, what are you? What, then, is this self?’ Every aspect of practice is this same and it question points straight at our own hearts: ‘What, then, are you?’ It is precisely an existing sense of a separate self that becomes the place of deep inquiry in which at last a whole and undivided self may be realized. Our entire practice then is to test and confirm this fact in all circumstances. Or to let all circumstances test and confirm this fact. Thus medicine and sickness heal into each other, as does inside and outside, as does this versus that, as does me unopposed to you.

In the face of this mysterious face of reality, can we say ‘one’? Can we say ‘two’? And in the pregnant mammalian body, likewise: Is this one, is this two? We are born into this productive and sharp conundrum, as Nelson Foster called it. The conundrum of birth and death arriving together, covered in blood – here is the uncuttable red thread of life-and-death, the sculpting and shaping force of all life on the earth, the very basis of individual existence, and the guarantee – that all individuals, by definition, must finally yield their life.

Even viruses, although not quite life forms in their own, independent right, are yet profoundly interwoven with the wondrous story of the emergence and shaping of profligate life on the earth too. We can return to that another time maybe. But individual and unrepeatable beings as we are, we are also indivisible from the whole. As Shitou Xiqian sets forth eloquently in *Taking Part in the Gathering*, ‘All things are interwoven and not interwoven, while each thing stands in its own place.’

‘Not interwoven’ – when my name is being called, I respond. ‘Standing in its own place’... the tree I can see through the window here is coming out exactly in its pink flowers now. Yet how is that tree and every particle of every flower not interwoven with the air, the water, the earth, myself as am I... both utterly ‘interwoven’, and also ‘not interwoven’. Being and also non-being....*this* is the completely alive place in which we come into birth and death and also no birth and death....being and non-being.

You could say that we are born in a palace of undividedness as infants, but gradually wander further from that palace of oceanic awareness, becoming more individuated, and separated into more and more fine-grained perceiving of ‘my struggle, my suffering...’ And in the old fairy stories, that’s usually depicted as becoming lost in the dark wood for quite a long spell. And so opens the entire journey of full individuation (as Jung would have it) to rediscover the lost palace of original wholeness, and find – and this is the best part of all, as well as the joke on all of us - that you have never left it at all, that you cannot leave it, and never could. In passing, how very like the Buddha’s journey -- born in a palace, discovers suffering, abandons the palace to solve the source and transformation of suffering, wanders through extreme hardship, sits under a tree... you know the story.

So when you know – in other words when you wake up to - the place where you are, practice begins.

In relation to this, let’s examine another of the resonant phrases of our time of ‘Shelter in Place’ and the seemingly endless zoom sessions which I know many of you are enjoying at the moment, including even as I speak. One thing we made sure of during the sesshin was to invite people to please use the zoom offer of ‘Turn Off Self View’, so that we were not in any way seeing ourselves on screen as if in a mirror.

‘Turn off self-view’ offers us a beautiful upaya. At any moment you realise you are blinding yourself with a foregrounded sense of self, turn off self view. In a sense zazen is exactly this ritual openness and readiness to turn off self-view, to notice and turn off any impulse or form of tedious ‘self-performance’. The burden of self loses or loosens its grip at last as we offer ourselves in zazen. And taking up this matter of turning off self-view, I remembered John Tarrant exploring this possibility in a pre-zoom time in *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*, which some of you have read.

John talks about the time when his mother was going through one of her several apparent ‘dyings’ – she had quite a few of these, a little like Dame Nellie Melba never quite finally retiring... On this occasion she was once more close to death, and once more, John flew home to Tasmania from America. He and his sister had gathered in the hospital room with her, and he richly describes the usual fug or cloud of compensatory family relationships. There was the sense of a fundamentally miserable scene unfolding around a woman withering away on her death bed. There was her anxious husband coaxing, ‘Dear you must eat something, you really must’, and she saying, ‘Oh you’re *always* bothering me, no, I don’t want to eat!’ And there were nurses coming and going, and there was that hospital weight of anxious boredom and the greyness of hospital sounds and smells. You could easily succumb to its story...

But then John decided to simply ‘drop the view’, to turn off any pre-existing view he had right at that moment of what was happening. With pre-existing views, we are, of course, pre-existing the very moments of our lives! In its own way, like being stranded forever for no good reason in an eternal Zoom waiting room... And when he turned off his ‘view’ -- the view that the sense of self, unchecked, will duly bring with it into this and every other kind of moment -- he describes the way in which all weightiness and boredom simply lifted off, and how suddenly he couldn’t really find anything wrong going on there at all in that room, only sundry, highly particular and interesting varieties of.... love. Highly idiosyncratic, ancient, family, almost ritual forms of his father’s love and his mother’s love, his own love, his sister’s love -- *and* the expressions of love in the directness of care taken by nursing staff, the plainspoken compassion that the very fact of a hospital figures forth... When any ‘view’ was simply dropped, it was immediately plain that there was in reality nothing but love going on in that room.

Everything became wide and roomy -- and this is exactly the move towards *not*-knowing, *no* view, that opens up the ripe place, the place where suffering can ripen and become discovery instead; where fault, or the determination that something is amiss, or wrong, becomes recognition that the view itself is the only 'fault', and beyond and before the 'view', absent malicious or harmful intent in this world, there is really just love going on.

Just love, in one of its infinite number of intimate forms, for which there are (probably luckily) no words.

This is the ripe place where the blather of the mind just gives way. Somewhere in the record of Zhaozhou where somebody asked, 'Among the ten thousand things, which is the most solid?' And he replied, 'When we curse at each other, that we can go on flapping our lips. When we spit at each other, that we can have saliva flowing out.' And he wasn't talking about the danger of getting COVID virus, not at all. You know what he is talking about. We all do.

And yet, without excusing the cursing and spitting at all, how wonderfully well we are able to move and breathe and have saliva pooling in what we call mouths... All done without the slightest 'knowing'...

So the rich, ripe place of unqualified discovery that we call not-knowing has a chance to open when you turn off self view. And it is a most generous and allowing place, where we notice we can agree to suspend judgment, drop any argument and tolerate discomfiture, and discover what is really present beyond the clouds of our presumptions about that. Where we can say, 'You are welcome here', not in any way needing or wanting to move to name what that intimate 'you' may be. It is already fully here, apparent, present, and itself. 'You' becomes ground of intimate, mutual relationship with what is appearing, needing or wanting no singling out by name. As names drop off, and the emergent intelligence of not knowing extends more and more deeply and widely exactly when we are no longer being so carved out from all that is happening.

Zhaozhou describes this formless encounter in a verse that says:

I meet with him but know not who he is;
I converse with him but do not know his name.

He's not talking about a meeting on the street with a stranger. 'He' is a way of naming our intimate true self, evident in everything you can ever encounter, in whatever (or whoever) is presenting its utterly particular form to awareness. So, *I meet with him but know not who he is*. I stay in this generous open place of wonder, rather than the miserably small place that moves to limit, claim and proclaim in static fashion, 'this is just that'. *I converse with him but do now know his name*.

There is of course a knowing *how*, that is at hand in our most simply open moments of responding. When you catch with lightning speed something you barely had time to see falling off the table, you don't know how you catch it. The 'knowing how' disappears completely into *caught!* When we're fully in the flow of what is happening we can't possibly, and would not want to even try, to pick apart how that is happening. Immediately it would stumble and stutter and not be able to happen. So that's another aspect of not-knowing. That's the innate knowing that disappears without trace into the knowing-how that is already the very doing, the open responding.

So not knowing is really the natural intimacy of the world when it is experienced with no self, or at least as little as possible, standing in front of everything. And not-knowing, no-self, is intimately active in those four immeasurables. Not knowing is turned up when self view is turned down or off, so compassion can be present, natural and unforced, not consciously enacted in any way.

A couple of weeks ago we looked into the first verse of the first cycle of Dongshan's Five Ranks, at the dark mirror, that moment of being blessedly at least half asleep to self-view, and catching a glimpse in your heart of hearts of the fact that nothing ever was actually carved out from anything else – and that this is *you*, your face, seen more clearly in that very darkening of all difference, all opposition, going blessedly dark. Of that undivided state of true self-recognition we call emptiness.

And in the next verse in the first cycle we looked at how the dark mirror becomes bright mirror, a bright mirror in which everything can be clearly seen also to stand in its own natural unvarnished place, just as it is; and this too in its infinite variety, is recognizably your own most intimate face. There's that old Hasidic story, when the rebbe asks his people, 'How can we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?' and everyone tries to answer – 'It's that moment when you just can't quite tell the mist from a cloud'; or 'It's that moment when the trees begin to step out in the forest and you can begin to see them clearly'; but each time the teacher says, 'No, that's not the

moment.’ Finally they implore him, ‘Then please tell us, what is the moment when light ended and the day has begun?’ And he tells them, ‘It is that moment when you can look into the face of a stranger and recognize it is no other than your own face. Until then the night is still with us.’

So the burden of self, letting it slip off, soften any prevailing view, letting that drop off so that you can see without the frame that has for so long framed you. And you find yourself no longer separate, isolate, no longer in lockdown and at the mercy of imaginary outside voices.

Many years ago I dreamt I was in the middle of dark woods staying in a Russian dacha with my two young children. And it was a worryingly flimsy kind of building, for I suddenly knew that there was a very dangerous force or creature at large just outside, probably a tiger. And so I had to rush to quickly bolt all doors and windows, racing to try to remember where all the doors were in this unfamiliar house, and did they have good sturdy locks on them or not? And after I finally had slammed every window shut and locked, every door secured and locked, I had the momentary relief of feeling that I and my children were safe.

And then I realized that I and my children were simply now prisoners. We had so beautifully trapped ourselves in a locked-down prison-house of fear, with no way out, no safe or easy way out, and no possible way to truly discover what was happening or to engage with it.

So, just as with ‘Don’t touch your face’, you dare to let ‘face’, ‘self’, ‘self-view’ drop away, and open up to the bare fact of a world of infinite touch, that offers nothing that does not clearly reflect your own most genuine and unbounded self back to you. This is the infinite, tender mutual engagement Zhaozhou calls ‘Me and you’ – dynamic mutuality. And its very nature is the sharing of the good.

So how wonderfully rich is this intimacy vested in our true home, our discoverable home place which is vast, awake, receptive, complete and full -- original emptiness. It is touched in a poem I read in the last sesshin, ‘Singularity’, by one of my favourite poets, Marie Howe, referencing the work of Stephen Hawking. The Singularity of course is that unknowable place or moment or incident or threshold event beyond which we cannot pass because there is nothing there that mind can possibly latch onto. It was the implicate moment/state (both) from which the entire universe

exploded into being, or unfurled into an infinite transformative, explosive and complete giving away of itself in countless, ongoing stages. Continuing now.

We can't look back past the singularity, but her poem is in its own way a journey all the way back through the fact of emptiness to the only and always welcoming place we call home. That we cannot leave. Right here. In the undivided Singularity itself.

So, 'Singularity':

Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity
we once were?
so compact nobody
needed a bed, or food or money—
nobody hiding in the school bathroom
or home alone
pulling open the drawer
where the pills are kept.
*For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you. Remember?*
There was no *Nature*. No
them. No tests
to determine if the elephant
grieves her calf or if
the coral reef feels pain. Trashed
oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;
would that we could wake up to what we were
— when we *were* ocean and before that
to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock was
liquid and stars were space and space was not
at all — nothing
before we came to believe humans were so important
before this awful loneliness.
Can molecules recall it?
what once was? before anything happened?
No I, no We, no one. No was
No verb no noun
only a tiny tiny dot brimming with
is is is is is
All everything home

Just as we can't retreat from the not-two facts of birth and death, we can't retreat from the not-two of form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Dongshan refers to this as 'two crossed swords, neither permitting retreat', and goes on to say it is precisely where there is no retreat that the lotus blooms in the midst of fire. In other words, practice emerges exactly in the teeth of difficulty, the teeth of exigency, of suffering, of being sentient. Thus the lotus of radiant mind is born in the midst of the fire that is at once birth-and-death, and no-birth and no-death.

Let me offer you the last two verses of the first cycle of Dongshan's Five Ranks briefly, in closing. The second last one is:

Not falling into being or non-being,
Who can accord with this?
Everyone longs to leave the eternal flux,
Not just to live in harmony,
But to return and live by the charcoal fire.

'Not falling into being or non-being' – or 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form' -- not retreating but steadily facing these two crossed swords... We can't move a skerrick of an inch from this place where we are. 'Who can accord with this?' asks Dongshan. This is not so far off from Yunmen's 'And what about you?' 'Everyone longs to leave the eternal flux'; life is painful, life hurts. Unceasing change takes everything we think we have away from us. However, we long 'Not just to live in harmony', not just to take our ease in eternal perfect balance of some kind – that's a dream of enlightenment as some permanent state, as a noun rather than the wonderful verb that it is, a constantly discoverable matter and fact.

And he ends with, 'But to return and live by the charcoal fire'. At home and at peace in exigency, at peace with the dusty earth, at peace with the beauty of sharing the good and not dividing what is into good and bad; sharing mortal life and love, sharing also the unavoidable forms of suffering, and the connectivity this opens up from heart to heart.

John Tarrant's translation of this verse is slightly different in a way that raises one more point of interest. His translation:

Not deciding it is, or it isn't,
Do you have the courage to be at peace with this?
Everyone wants to leave the eternal changes,
But when we have finished bending and fitting our lives,
We come back to sit by the charcoal fire.

So, do you have the courage to be at peace with this? Your practice asks of you this very fearlessness. It is not just the move of making room for the other and offering the generosity of not-knowing that is germane to me-and-you; it is the courage to find accord with the other as also *not-other*, being as *non-being*, which opens us wide

Finally, all this fitting and bending of our lives. We have been doing a lot of it lately to be sufficiently at home or at ease with a very uneasy world. What do you hear here, in these words, 'fitting and bending our lives'? Is this consciousness attempting to bargain with the two crossed swords, neither permitting retreat? Can we be done with that, and give way towards the possibility of congruence, of fit and agreement, a very particular kind of ease, an inclusive ease, sometimes called 'royal ease'. You have probably seen a figure of Avalokiteshvara, Guanyin, the one who hears all the cries of the world, sitting in royal ease, one arm gracefully resting forward on her raised knee - sitting at ease in a world full of cries in which suffering, not turned away from, is transmuted through not-knowing into unending awakening.

So find your ease by the charcoal fire, the warm, earthy, dusty hearth-place where you can rest in just what is happening in all its mixed character and underlying simplicity. Then 'shelter in place' becomes refuge in the deepest sense – a home for all the many beings.

ZEN OPEN CIRCLE

TAKING PART IN THE GATHERING, 10 MAY, 2020

SUSAN MURPHY ROSHI