

Cutting Off The Mind Road

Good morning! And welcome to the November zazenkaï of Clare Sangha. Here's a sports pop quiz for you today. Since we last met, a championship event took place. Can anyone tell me what it was and who played in it?

Yes, the World Series of baseball. The Washington Nationals and Houston Astros played. Do you know who won? Yes, the Nationals in 7 games. It was the first time they won the World Series in 95 years - since 1924. The old Washington Senators weren't a great team; there was a saying that *the Senators are first in war, first in peace, but last in the American league.*

There was some great reporting on the 2019 World Series. Joe Garagiola, former catcher with the St Louis Cardinals, said "This Series was hard fought – with clutch hitting, clutch pitching – and a lot of come-from-behind baseball." He told a self-deprecating anecdote of his experience in the game: "When I was coming up in the minor leagues, a scout reported that my speed was deceptive." 'He's slower than he looks,' said the scout."

As most of you know we had our 5th Jukai Ceremony in July. A visiting student recently asked me if Jukai – formally receiving the precepts – is required at Clare Sangha? It is not required. At the same time we recommend learning the precepts so you can integrate them into your daily practice. You can participate in our Jukai study course without taking the formal ceremony. We don't force anything at Clare Sangha. But we do encourage Jukai study for those interested in making this commitment in their life practice.

One benefit of doing the precept coursework is the reading assigned. Many of us might never read this material, but for its inclusion in a course such as Jukai. **But for** – that's an interesting phrase. One of my university teachers often used *but for* to attribute a weighty effect to one factor or precondition. He would say something like *but for the function of decreasing marginal costs, economists might consistently underestimate company profitability.*

As many but not all of you know, we offer three principal and mutually supportive practices at Clare Sangha – all handed down from the Buddha. They are: *Sila* (precept practice for ethical living); *Dhyana* (meditation practice); and *Prajna* (wisdom practice). Taken together, they comprise our True North Guide.

To see and open to our True North, the Buddha taught us to water the seed of awakening by practicing zazen. And he taught the Eight Fold Path and the

Bodhisattva precepts to guide and support our practice. The path and its precepts are aligned with our Essential Nature and True North.

So our training goes back to the Buddha's awakening. We can follow in his footsteps. When we do, our own experience will encourage and lead us onward. Our purpose at Clare Sangha is to help you experience this Way for yourself, in the details of your own life. If you do, you'll be happier and more joyful, maybe pleasantly surprised. Some of you already have experience of this.

Speaking of joy, Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara of the Village Zendo has this to say: *What is it that opens the gate to joy in our ordinary, day-to-day lives? I've been calling it awakeness and awareness: the simple practice of sitting quietly, breathing in and out, dropping our obsessive thoughts and resistance to the freshness of the moment that is exactly here. It is amazing, our resistance to tapping into the joy that is like the blue sky surrounding this earth.*

Today, to help us relate precept practice with meditation and wisdom practice, let's look into the 6th precept of "not discussing faults of others." This 6th grave precept, which comes all the way down from the Buddha's teaching of right speech, is one of the most challenging precepts to practice.

In his book The Mind of Clover Robert Aitken-Roshi gives teisho on each of the precepts. In his talk on the 6th precept, he begins by quoting from case one of the Gateless Gate collection of koans – Joshu's Dog or Mu. Master Mumon said: *If you do not pass the barrier of the founding teachers, if you do not cut off the mind road, you are like a ghost clinging to the bushes and grasses.*

This passage is familiar to Zen students undertaking koan study. The barrier Mumon refers to is the koan Mu; and the mind road is the endless stream of words and images that may run through our heads. Other terms for the mind road are the discursive mind or monkey mind.

To cut off the mind road is to experience silence, so that circumstances can be seen clearly and taken in cleanly, each one fresh and new. Not to cut it off is to continue projecting one's own confused images on the world and then clinging to them. We all know how this can be in our own experience, wouldn't you say?

You know it's interesting. Master Mumon's teisho on case one of the Mumonkan deals primarily with passing the barrier of the founding teachers. In koan 1, Joshu's Dog, the barrier is Just This Mu. In the remaining koans of the Mumonkan, each koan is the barrier. Passing the barrier means seeing into our self nature – forgetting the self in Dogen's phrase. **But for** passing the barrier, our

ancestral teachers, including Mumon and Dogen, may never have realized their true nature. They encourage us to pass the barrier as they and their teachers before them passed.

The sixth precept – not discussing the faults of others – emphasizes cutting off the mind road. The two lessons clarify each other. The realized mind is at rest, and deals with things as they are; the ghost mind is noisy and deals with its own creations.

In first encountering this teaching of the barrier, I was taken by the confluence of teaching here: That how we work to pass the barrier of the founding teachers and see our self-nature is the same effort we make in the 6th precept of not discussing faults of others. That is, cutting off the mind road. It's a strong confluence of teachings that go to the core of the Zen Way. Wouldn't you say?

In terms of our daily zazen practice, this means we want to recognize a thought or image as a thought or image when it arises. If we're not aware of thinking, we may get carried away by it. We may lose or contract ourselves in a delusive mind state, we're on the mind road. There's a big difference between recognizing a thought as thought in this moment, and being lost in thought.

To elaborate this a bit, if we don't make our mind road an object of meditation – but let ourselves drift away and contract – we miss (don't see) the swift movement of our identification with a mind world and our elaboration of it. Done often and long enough, we develop a habitual pattern that may be difficult to see through and break because we've let it grow so strong.

As an example, did you ever badmouth or speak poorly of another person, and the person entered the room just as you were saying it? How one feels in such an event is very instructive. Did he or she hear what I said? A part of it? All of it? It's the kind of dilemma feeling we don't want to be creating for ourselves. It occupies us for some time afterward. Maybe everytime we see the other person we remember our badmouthing, our words replay themselves. Such thinking and feeling takes us out of life in the present moment. This is the opposite of cutting off the mind road, of forgetting ourselves. Replaying the memory of what we said again and again is a big price to pay in our practice. So it is, observing the precepts is a refuge and protection for us in the world.

Aitken quotes both Bodhidharma and Dogen in his teishos on the precepts. Bodhidharma said, "Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the

flawless Dharma, not expounding upon error is called the Precept of Not Speaking of Faults of Others.” Bodhidharma’s words may seem a denial of the everyday world where some people are weak and some people are irritable. But the Dharma and everyday life are the same. One person is indeed strong; another is indeed weak. One person is serene; another irritable. The way of the sixth precept is the way of Jesus when he said, “Judge not that you be not judged,” says Aitken-Roshi.

From Bodhidharma’s point of view, this would mean, “When you judge, you place yourself in the dimension of good and bad.” As Mumon wrote, “If you argue right and wrong, you are a person of right and wrong.”

This is really a matter of common sense. It reminds me of a verse my grandfather used to tell us:

*There’s so much good in the worst of us
And so much bad in the best of us
It little behooves anyone
To talk of the rest of us.*

As an aside, my grandfather was a jolly sort. He liked to gather us grandchildren together in the parlor on a Sunday afternoon and chat us up, tell stories, joke and cajole us, and make us feel comfortable and at home. When he wanted to emphasize something he would raise a didactic finger and say “Little Adam says:

Little Adam says if you always tell the truth, you don’t have to remember what you say. Once he told us: Little Adam says it’s very hard to trust a pig that sells pork sandwiches. End of aside.

Aitken-Roshi continues. The mind that is not relative is silent. With a truly silent mind, the self is forgotten, and the myriad things – the 10,000 things – are our own essential nature. As some of you know in experience, we may forget ourselves in one of a myriad of events. Forgetting the self is not a matter of getting rid of the self. In fact realization is a matter of seeing yourself more clearly. What do you see? As the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva tells us when we chant the Heart Sutra, all those things that bind us together are empty. There is nothing to hold on to at all. And so it is that you are free to give your attention to what is happening in the ephemeral world you are living in.

The ephemeral world is made up of relative elements: high and low; light and dark; loud and quiet. The sixth precept shows us how we can find intimacy with this world. The silent mind intuits directly and truly and finds intimacy with what

is before it. But fault-finding, discussing the faults of others – these are acts of rejection.

Dogen Zenji said, “In the Buddha Dharma, there is one path, one Dharma, one realization, one practice. Don’t permit fault-finding. Don’t permit haphazard talk” While Bodhidharma points to essence, Dogen Zenji shows us the way to practice it. He insists again that we must be single-minded. Reject everything except the Buddha Tao. Everything except that! Among the things we must reject are fault-finding and haphazard speech.

Aitken-Roshi continues. You and I should be careful in following Dogen Zenji’s cautionary instruction. Most of us respond immaturely to others and cling to the bushes and grasses we have created. We may say, “He is a woman chaser; she is lazy; that other person is aloof,” and whether these labels are true or not, we react to these people accordingly. We distrust the woman-chaser; we avoid giving the lazy one an important task; and we foist our own resentment and aloofness onto the withdrawn person. Aitken-Roshi warns against being carried away by group emotions. “This is all too human. With the drop of a hat, we may get drawn into group think/acting and neglect the Way.”

There are things in a sangha that may need correcting. But the corrections can be made without finding faults and without being haphazard and destructive. Let’s remember our purpose, Aitken tells us.

It is not always easy. Just as we practice Mu when it is not clear – or *being the breathing* when we’re preoccupied – so we practice intimacy when we do not feel it. Just as we return again and again to Mu or breathing after drifting into remembering and planning, so we return again and again to intimacy when we drift into discussing the faults of others.

So, how should you return? Like zazen, it is a matter of practice. When you notice, or when someone brings your aloofness to your attention, directly or indirectly, take the appropriate steps to restore your intimacy.

So it is that Aitken-Roshi counsels us in the sixth precept. As all the Bodhisattva precepts, this one comes with our Zen practice and training. In zazen, we recognize poisonous thoughts as they arise, and maybe we can see anger or fear, greed or craving, ignorance or delusion, or some combination of these as the motivating factor.

Not acting them out, but letting the poisonous thoughts or images pass, cures the sickness that comes from them. Letting go and coming back, this is the strength of zazen training/practice. When our zazen is strong, our observance of the precepts is strong, including not doing fault-finding or haphazard talk.

That's more than enough talk by meself. Thanks for your attention.

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