

LECTURE BY ED BROWN

from Green Gulch Farm sesshin lectures, August 1985

Here we are again, sitting together . . . breathing. How is it for you? How is your breath? Relaxed? Tight? Smooth? Jerky? Shallow? Deep? How is the body and mind of the present? The breath of the present? Welcome home. Here we are. Welcome to the indescribable present.

An old Zen teacher once said, “Just to take this posture is to have the right state of mind.” Funny business, this “right” state of mind, because it is not right compared to something wrong. This “right mind” is not determined by comparing, judging, evaluating, or measuring, so you cannot say, “Ah ha, now I’ve got it!” Right mind is exactly here. How is it for you? And exactly here is not something special — it’s just not “somewhere else.”

So this week, during meditation, we practice being here, exactly here: walking, sitting, standing, lying, breathing, eating, or working. Don’t go off somewhere else, and, if you do, come back. That’s a joke, you know, because where else could you be but here! And yet we need to do it, to practice being here.

Now you may notice that we have a kind of addiction, a habit of wanting to always be right, of wanting to do the right thing. When we start practicing meditation, we say, “What am I supposed to do? What should I do? How do I do it right?” And the answer is to stop asking those questions. Do you understand? The point is to find out what is actually happening, exactly here. When you look closely you will find that the “supposed to” or “should” is not found in what is actually happening, but is something we add, something we think.

We think that if I do what I am supposed to do, everything will work out just the way IT is supposed to work out. Of course, this is ridiculous, but we still believe it.

I mean, really? Starting when? How could you decide, how would you ever know, that you were doing what you were supposed to be doing? When everything works out the way it is supposed to work out, right? And since that never happens, you know you must have done something wrong. “But I just did what I was supposed to do.”

Fine, but does the universe actually work that way? What a bind to put yourself in.

So instead of asking what you are supposed to do, try asking, “What do I really want?” “What do I really want,” right now, exactly here? Asking this question may seem quite formidable, it may seem difficult. Just doing what you should was so simple and now you have to figure it out: “Oh me, oh my, it would be up to me! I’d have to decide. I could be blamed. What AM I to do?”

So what do I really want? Do I really think it is possible to make everything work out just the way it is supposed to work out, if only I behaved properly, correctly, or perfectly? No? Then what do I really want? This is something to work on, something that may require some digging. Do I want to control things better? Or, realizing that I cannot control things, do I want to find composure right on this spot? Do I want to be the slave of every whim that comes along? Or do I want to be free and unmoved? Do I want to be stonelike and unmoved, removed? Or in intimate contact, touching and touched by others? To find out what I want I have to dig and I have to sift, to sort through a lot

of earth. Hard work, heavy work, a coming down to earth. But how else will I be able to take root moment after moment exactly where I am?

One of the ancients was asked, "Please liberate me, please free me." And the ancient replied, "Who is binding you?" At this the disciple had an insight. Do you have someone telling you what to do? How to think? Is there someone who feels trapped — tied down? Who does all this? No one tying down — no one to be freed. We do not need to learn how to meditate right. We just meditate. Who knows what will happen.

Let's sit quietly. Breathing a full, warm, open breath. In this quietness, what is your way? What would be worthy of respect? What would be worthy of devotion? What will you take time for? Will you take some time to breathe? Will you take some time to make yourself at home right where you are? An old expression says, "Take off the blinders, unload the saddlebags." Are you willing to settle here, exactly here, this body, this mind? What is it like?

I'll tell you a poem, by Gary Snyder — he was visiting Wendell and Tanya Berry in Kentucky:

Under dead leaves Tanya finds a tortoise
matching the leaves — legs pulled in —

And we look at woodchuck holes that dive
under limestone ledges
seabottom strata,
who lives there brushes furry back
on shell and coral

Most holes with leaves and twigs around the door,
nobody in.

Wendell, crouched down,
sticks his face in a woodchuck hole
"Hey, smell that, it's a fox!"
I go on my knees,
put the opening to my face
like a mask. No light;
all smell: sour — warm —

Splintered bones, scats? feathers?
Wreathing bodies — wild —.

Some home.

This poem is about being right here, at home. It may not be beautiful and glamor-ous, pristine and perfect. But take some time, make yourself at home.

I read an article recently in the Wall Street Journal which said, "Even Canned Corn Strains Abilities of Modern Cook." The article said that when the directions were left off the canned corn the company received so many calls from consumers wondering what to do that they put the directions

back on. The directions were to “Put corn in saucepan on heated burner.” This is our modern life! The accompanying article said, “How Much Will People Pay to Save Time Cooking? Plenty.” You want to know what to do? Spend some time with the ingredients. Spend some time with yourself. Spend some time with your breath. Stop saving time. Will you do this? There is no answer beyond this. Your life isn’t canned corn. There are no directions.

Spending time with yourself, making yourself at home: this is meditation. Naturally, we sometimes get concerned about whether we are doing “good” meditation or “bad” meditation, but that is missing the point. As Steven Levine puts it, “When people say, ‘Oh, I’m really getting there, my sitting is getting so beautiful, it’s so wonderful, I can just sit all day,’ I think, ‘oh, oh, they’re not experiencing all of themselves,’” I mean, let’s realize and actualize what it is to be alive, to be human. Let’s keep it real.

There is tremendous power in unearthing, in recognizing distracted, scattered mind, the mind which would rather be anywhere but here, and spending some time there, with that mind: rather than an anonymous voice from the dark bossing you around, scattered mind is someone you can sit down and hang out with.

One of the basic practices of our meditation is following the breath. When we follow the breath continuously, evenly, we are developing another kind of mind, a mind that is not concerned with how the breath should be, but a mind which can just be with the breath, exactly, precisely. The mind that can stay with the breath is subtle, soft, tender, warm, caring. We say “the mind which can stay with the breath,” but that is not quite right. It is not a mind different than the breath, it *is* the mind of the breath. The breath itself is this mind. So we practice letting go of the mind of accomplishing, attaining, and achieving. We practice entering the mind of the breath, settling into the mind of breathing. This is opening, unfolding, blossoming — but we can’t rush it. It’s the work of a lifetime. Our breath is not just in the front of the body, but in the back, the stomach, the shoulders. We can touch the pain in our body with the breath softening around the pain; breath inside breath; breath welcoming home the breath.

I call the fourth day of sesshin “Limp Day.” By the fourth day, we have discovered our limp. We realize we can’t breeze through, untouched, unscathed. Since it is Limp Day, I want to bring up part of a poem by Robert Bly. It’s called *My Father’s Wedding Day, 1924*. Robert introduces the poem by saying that he had been looking at a log and it reminded him of his father’s leg, his father’s wooden leg, but, he continues, his father didn’t have a wooden leg. Here’s the beginning of the poem:

Today, lonely for my father, I saw
a log or branch
long, bent, ragged, bark gone.
I felt lonely for my father when I saw it.
It was the log that lay
beside my uncle’s milk wagon.

Some men walk with an invisible limp,
stagger, or drag a leg: their sons are often angry.
Only recently I thought:
Doing what you want,
is that like limping?

Tracks of it show in the sand.

Have you seen those giant bird-men of Bhutan?
Men in bird's masks, with pig's noses, dancing,
teeth like a dog's, sometimes
dancing on one bad leg!
They do what they want,
the dog's teeth say that.

But I grew up without dog's teeth,
showed a whole body,
left only clear tracks in the sand.
I learned to walk swiftly, easily,
no trace of a limp. I even
leaped a little. Guess
where my defect is!

What then? If a man, cautious, hides
his limp, somebody has to limp it!
Things do it, the surroundings limp.
House walls get scars. The car breaks
down. Matter, in drudgery, takes it up.

So what about your limp? Are you hiding it? Hiding from it? Or do you dance on one bad leg? And have you found your dog's teeth, the strength and determination to do what you want, what you really want, and risk limping? Now that you can't walk swiftly or easily, can you guess where your defect is? Our suffering is to be not willing to limp. Our freedom is to dance on one bad leg!

Let's talk some more about that dog. Irmgard Schloegl, who teaches Zen in London, uses a metaphor about a dog to bring up what Zen practice is about. It goes something like this:

Once upon a time you were living with a dog in a big house. Sometimes the dog did not behave properly, especially when guests came over. So one day you locked the dog in the basement. The dog howled mournfully, barked loudly, so you moved up to the second floor. Occasionally, you could still hear the dog, so you moved up to the third floor, and finally the attic. What a nice view! And no need to be bothered by barking, misbehaving dogs. The house is neat and tidy — no problems here!

But one day it occurs to you, "Oh me, oh my, I locked the dog in the basement and just left him there. How awful, and he was such fun to have around. My life has been rather empty since then, rather dry and predictable. I wonder if I could ever be friends with him again?"

So you make your way down to the basement. You get down there and the dog snarls at you. "But I want to be your friend," you say. The dog just snarls. He only knows you have locked him up. If you want to make friends with the dog it takes some time. You'll need to be patient, you'll need to be inventive. You push the food

over to him with a long pole. You arrange to let him out into the yard. Little by little, you make friends.

Do you understand? That dog in the basement is not just a dog in the basement. That dog is not inherently a dog, but is a dog because of the way we have treated ourselves. We snarl when we have locked ourselves up in the basement. But that dog is our great energy, our tremendous vitality, our pain and hurt that we have pushed away. Then we wonder why we feel so unalive!

What would it be like to welcome yourself home, to welcome home your whole body and mind. To make it all right to be here? No more worry about not being good enough, no more worry about not being perfect. Welcome home. What would it be like? Think about it carefully. What kind of mind would that dog open up to? What kind of mind would you be willing to feel vulnerable with? You can't just barge up to the dog, and say, "What the hell's the matter with you anyway?" Maybe you say to the dog, "I'm going to be sitting quietly, and if you have anything to tell me, drop by. I'd love to see you."

So we have to watch what we say to ourselves, what we call things. Suppose my neck hurts and I say, "you really are a pain — get lost." How am I going to feel? Terrible. My neck will hurt: "He hates me. He wants me to just go away. He doesn't want to have anything to do with me. I'm going to bark and howl, and when that gets no response, I'm going to lie down and dog it! To hell with him. He just bosses me around and expects me to do what he says. Well, forget it!"

But try calling the pain Buddha, try calling it Dharma. Your neck is hurting. That is the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Gee, and we thought it was a pain in the neck!

Years ago, at one of my first sesshins, my knees were hurting fiercely, and I said to them, "Damn you, I'll teach you to hurt me like that." Then I pushed on them to hurt them back! Then they hurt me, and I hurt them back. So who is hurting whom? No wonder the dog barks in the basement. First you lock him up and then when he complains, you kick him. Next you have to protect yourself, right? That dog is vicious. Anybody can see that, so you have to keep him locked up. It's obvious, but is it really?

This is meditation. To meet the dog, and even more importantly, to meet the dog keeper. To watch what you say, especially to yourself, and to watch what you call things, especially yourself. And to put an end to the samsaric dynamic that keeps the dog a dog and the master a master. The master is the dog, and the dog is the master. Figure that one out.

Buddhism gives us many tools, many practices to do this work. But we often get it wrong, thinking that our practice is to better tame the dog, when it is more to the point to get the keeper to lighten up. It is so difficult to be here because we are so hard on ourselves, so demanding, so judgmental. Who would want to hang around here with someone like that? Let me out of here. And our energy deserts us, or propels us along with underlying resentment, anger, and hatred. So it helps to lighten up. As I heard recently, "Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly." Lightening up and also owning up to what we have been doing, what we do to ourselves, what we demand of our body and mind. As my friend Stephen puts it, "You can't let go of something you don't acknowledge — that's called suppression."

I have been talking about being exactly with things, as they arise, in the very heart of things, absolutely still, dancing on one bad leg. You might shatter into a million pieces. You might burn up completely. You cannot figure it out. Just do it. Stop bossing yourself around and telling yourself what to do and how to make it right. Enter the heart of the matter. Breathe, breathe a breath, a breath within a breath, a breath welcoming home the breath.

Zen teacher Rinzai was asked by another master where he came from, and he replied, "From Obaku's." "And what did Obaku have to say?" asked the master. Rinzai replied, "He had nothing to say." "Why didn't he have anything to say?" Rinzai answered, "Even if he had something to say, he had no place to say it." The master said, "Try me and let's see." Rinzai responded, "An arrow in the Western Sky." Tremendous space at the heart of the matter, exactly with things as they arise. Where is the Western Sky after all? Which way is the arrow pointing? Obaku had nothing to say.

We have been talking about many things: energy, determination, faith, compassion, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, emptiness, without saying that that is what we have been talking about. Now I want to tell you something which Dogen Zenji says about sitting, and I take this as a metaphor for any time you are exactly with thing's-as-they-are, "not wishing," as Dogen says in another place, "for more color and brightness":

At the very time of sitting, examine thoroughly whether the universe is horizontal or vertical. At this very time, what is this sitting itself? Is it wheeling about in perfect freedom? Is it like the spontaneous vigor of fish swimming? Is it sitting within sitting? Is it sitting within body and mind? Or is it sitting which has cast off sitting within sitting, sitting within body and mind and the like?

In this way, while sitting, examine thoroughly thousands and tens of thousands of such details. It is a body sitting. It is a mind sitting. It is a body and mind which have cast off sitting, cast off sitting within sitting, sitting within body and mind.

Do you know this place? Suddenly the thread breaks, and you plunge into the darkness. Only it's not dark there! It's just not the way you thought it would be: breathing, physical sensations, feeling, emotions, an arrow in the Western Sky. Welcome home. Where have you been?