

Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara
Week 2, Recognizing the Self
To Forget the Self
May 13, 2013
Tricycle.com/retreats

Welcome back to our second retreat in the series studying Dogen Zenji's famous lines from the Genjokoan, "To study the way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be awakened by the myriad dharmas." I am rephrasing his last one line. Rather than saying dropping away, I would say that when we are awakened by the myriad dharmas we grow into becoming a bodhisattva.

So last time I encouraged you to sit every day for about 20 minutes and really become intimate with your own unique self, to be able to experience yourself and realize that this incarnation, this time of your life and this space of your life is how you will live your life, and to really study the self in that kind of very grounded, relative, unique, personal way. I hope that you were able to do that this week and really ground yourself in your own reality, because today I want to talk about the other side of that, another aspect of self: To study the self is also to forget the self.

What does that mean, to forget the self? It's to forget the *idea* of the self, to forget the story of the self, to forget all the niggling, avoiding, and clinging aspects of the self. I think the way that we see that most clearly is when we actually become involved in some aspect of reality, and all our dialogues and stories and discussions that are going on inside our minds suddenly drop away and we are just simply present with the flow of what is happening in the moment.

I experience that often in physical work. I can remember a few years ago after being involved in a lot of discussions and a big project with a lot of committee work and so forth, I took a holiday with a friend and we were supposed to relax after all of this work. I would say that in a lot of the work, the ego and the self really come up when you're trying to get something done and you're pushing against some conditioning and aspects

of yourself. And so we're sitting there having a cold glass of lemonade on this porch, and I looked up and there was this hillside in this person's property that was completely covered with tarweed, this sticky tough weed, which is really a fire hazard. And you know, I just got up and I went and got some tools, and I went up on that hill and I spent two full days just pulling out these weeds and this sticky smelly sap, getting scratched up with the sun beating down, and I completely forgot the self. I was just physically and emotionally and spiritually completely in that weed patch, and it was so marvelous. It was such a coming back to the ground of being through that forgetting of the self.

A famous Zen master once said that the way to forget the self is just like a mother who is holding her baby and singing to her baby. Forgetting yourself could be cooking a dinner. You're not thinking about all the aspects of who you are and the stories that come along with that. You're just being sure that things are timed right so that when the parsley is chopped and the soup is ready, you can produce a wonderful meal. Just that feeling of flow. Or in painting or singing, just really feeling the flow of life around you. This is the way to forget the self.

In the tea ceremony we have an expression, "one time one chance." And what it does is it points right back to the idea that this very moment is the only time that this very moment is going to take place, and that if we can be aware of that as we live our lives, it is another way of forgetting the self, of forgetting all our ideas about this moment—how it should be and how it was before—and instead actually being present in this moment. Every aspect of tea ceremony, for example, has to do with being in the flow of just this moment. "Ah, some tea was spilled"—being there with that moment, rather than in your idea that the tea shouldn't be spilled or should be spilled, or this kind of tea or that kind of tea, but actually experiencing this very moment just as it is.

We could try that right now, to experience just this moment wherever you are. Maybe you're in your office, or on a train, or at home. And just for about five minutes now, together let's try to just experience this moment: the way sound comes into your ear, the way your body touches what it's sitting on or leaning against, the way the light is

entering your eyes— not tomorrow or in an hour from now or yesterday, but now, this moment, this chance to experience yourself as forgetting yourself and being completely, thoroughly in this moment.

[Meditation.]

So I wonder how that felt, just allowing yourself to be in the flow of what is happening right now. Quite a few years ago, I was helping on a project where I was shooting a video that was just background video for some presentation that was going to happen, and so I was shooting this creek and I was watching this little waterfall. And I just sat with my camera for several hours. I recall, first of all, my own feeling of just being completely enthralled by the constantly changing moment-to-moment changing of that water and how it fell over those rocks, and the other aspect, which was that it was never the same, although eventually it became kind of a background. It was always slightly different if you paid attention to that moment. The water would fall on this side of the rock or that side of the rock, or over the top and around, and I felt that kind of complete awareness that that's what our lives are like.

We think, “Oh, this is what I do every day. I get on the train, I go to work.” But actually it's always different if we're awake, if we can forget that small self that's always chattering in the background, and allow ourselves to be in the flow of what we could call the big self. There's a koan that talks about this that I like a lot. It's a little tricky, but I like it. A monk asked his teacher, “How can we avoid the heat and the cold?” And the teacher says, “Well, you have to go to the place where there's no hot and there's no cold.” The student says, “Well how do I— what is this place of no hot and no cold?” And the teacher says, “When it is hot let the heat kill you, and when it is cold, let the cold kill you.” What do you think is going on there? I mean, of course he doesn't mean literally “kill.” He's talking about killing that clinging small self that is avoiding what is present, that is pulling away from what's real, pulling away from the *dharmakaya* itself. So let's kill that small self, that avoiding self, and enter right into what is going on in this very moment.

This is a very powerful koan in terms of our own self-regulation, in terms of how we respond to scary situations, how we respond to our own suffering. To try to push away from it, we create anxiety and agony because it's what really is happening. [Pokes hand.] "Ow. Ow, it really hurts!" To be present in it actually helps us to endure and to heal. I've seen it so often with folks suffering from physical pain. When I sit with them and we breathe together into the area of pain, rather than avoiding the pain, we go right to the place where the pain is, and in that moment of breathing and of bearing witness to what is happening, some of the pain drops away. That's not an anodyne, a complete cure, but some of the pain drops away. And so it is with our emotional pain. Go to the place where it's happening. And you could say on a societal level, if more of us would look at the structures that are creating our suffering rather than saying, "Oh, I'm not into that"—poverty, the ecology—but to actually go to the place, and to see it, and to let it kill that part of us that wants to pull away, and instead realize that we are it, that makes the difference. It's a crucial difference. So go to the place where there is heat and cold. Don't turn your back on reality; otherwise you're living in a dream.

So to forget the self is to forget that clinging, frightened self and to enter into the great self, the wholeness of your being. Now, next time we're going to talk about how to forget the self is to be awakened or enlightened by all the many things in the universe, the myriad things, and this will lead us directly into how we can make a difference in the world. So for the next week what I suggest you do is to sit for 20 minutes a day and simply listen to the sounds of the world as they come into your ears. Forget your small self. Forget the stories and all the words and ideas of who you are and just come back to this moment in the space that you're in. It might be a very quiet space, or it might be quite noisy like it is here, and yet that is the flow of the world where you are right now. That is how we forget the self: when we become immersed in all of reality.