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Week 3, Recognizing the Self
To Be Awakened
May 20, 2013
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So, welcome back to the third week of our retreat. As you may recall we're studying Dogen Zenji's twelfth century phrases 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 things. To be awakened by the myriad things, is to enter into becoming a Bodhisattva. So, today I'd like to talk about to forget the self is to be enlightened by the myriad things.

Consider that this whole world is right here and has the potential to wake you up in each moment. And yet for whatever reason we are so blinded—blinded by our conditioning, by the inherited stories that we receive from our families, from our society—that we forget our true nature, we forget our real self. This is not a modern contemporary thing. The ancients talked about it all the time.

There's a wonderful story, a verse written by a Chinese nun from the tenth century. And she talks about how she was looking for spring, and she went out in the forest to look for spring and she looked everywhere, but she couldn't find spring anywhere. And so she gave up, and as she was walking back to her hut she saw the peach blossoms in the tree and she said, "Ah, I realized that spring was everywhere, on every branch tip."

I think that's so true of so many of us who are interested in a spiritual practice. We are looking so hard for something that we don't recognize that it's right here. It's in the sound of the car horn, or the sound of the bird tweeting. It's in the sound of our neighbors opening a door. Everything is an opportunity to wake up, but we have to be open to recognize it, to realize it. The myriad things are right there. So, the way we do that is by sitting, by taking the time to quiet ourselves, to do as we've been doing over the last couple of weeks; to study the self, to inhabit the intimate with our own bodies, to

forget the self and inhabit and be a part of all that is, and to allow ourselves to be awakened by everything that's around us.

That's what we call enlightenment. It gets so reified, and objectified, and becomes like a "thing," but actually it's very ordinary. It does happen to many people, but they don't even register that it's happened. I can remember many years ago I was sitting in retreat, so I was able to be quiet down for long enough to become intimate with myself and to actually experience the spaciousness of the self that arises. I was having breakfast in a formal setting and I was eating oatmeal. And all of a sudden there was just a shift in my consciousness—just a slight listing of the consciousness. And as I looked at the oatmeal it was like I saw its texture and its color and I could see that I was oatmeal and the oatmeal was me. It wasn't that I'd lost myself—Enkyo was still there, but Enkyo was also a part of that which oatmeal was a part. And actually everything in the room that I was in was also a part of this wholeness. But it was triggered by this oatmeal. So, one could say that the whole universe was oatmeal, that I was oatmeal, and yet I was still sitting in my formal posture having my bowl of oatmeal.

It was a complete sense of security in the universe, of one's place in reality. Not something really fancy, "Oh, my gosh, the lightning struck and the heavens opened." It was a bowl of oatmeal, and yet within that bowl of oatmeal I was changed. I felt kinder. I felt secure. I felt alive and connected to everything. And then it was time to put the oatmeal bowl down and get on with the next aspect of that retreat, but that is how a simple a thing, a humble thing, and probably an unappetizing a thing—if I remember that cook—could make a difference, a profound difference in how I perceived myself and how I perceived the universe.

It can be anything if we're open, if we can allow ourselves to listen to the myriad things. Another translation of that is the 10,000 things, which is like anything. Something beautiful, something ugly; it's beyond that sense of distinction of quality. So, I wonder what might wake you up? To forget the self is to be awakened by the myriad things.

What would wake you up if you were to sit right now for a few minutes with me and allow whatever it is in the universe to come to you to wake you up? Let's try it.

[Meditation]

You know, as I was sitting with you here I was listening to the sound of a truck outside that was backing up, you know, that sound they make when they back up: "Beep, beep, beep." Often we have people who come to this zendo who complain about the street sounds. Like that famous monk Xuanzang I say to you, "Hear the sound of the streets and you're there. That too, will wake you up." It's not just the sound of a beautiful bird singing over a bubbling brook or a roaring stream, but also the unpleasant sounds that can wake you up. Just like when you're out in the desert and you accidentally get a cactus thorn in your finger—that can wake you up.

Years ago I studied in a retreat center in southern California. There's some ecological imbalance there and it was like covered with these stellar jays, who have the most raucous cry that you can imagine. And all day long, [makes crying sound of a bird]. So, the challenge is to allow that sound to wake you up. The irritating political situation in this country can wake you up if you have that openness and realize that everything is a potential for healing.

There's a story about Manjushri who sent this young seeker out to find various things to help this person to realize the way. At one point Manjushri said, "Bring me something that isn't medicine." Or we could say in good context of this retreat today, "Bring me something that doesn't wake you up." Bring me something that isn't medicine. And so Sudhana goes off, and he's off for years looking all over the world for something that also doesn't serve as medicine, that doesn't also serve to wake us up. He comes back to Manjushri and he says, "You know, I've looked everywhere. I cannot find anything that doesn't serve as medicine." And Manjushri says, "Okay, bring me something that *is* medicine." And Sudhana just reaches down, picks up a blade of grass, and Manjushri says, "This blade of grass can kill or give life depending on how it's used."

And this story just completely goes to the heart of the matter. Everything we encounter in our lives, everything is an opportunity to wake up. Every challenge, every delight, is not to be grasped, not to be pushed away, but can be allowed to wake us up, to really see that aspect of the light in our life. All of our life is in this moment, only now, and everything that comes to us is our opportunity to wake up and to realize ourselves, to realize who we really are and what our function is in the world.

So, for the next week I'd like you to consider that and sit every day for 20 minutes and just sit in the receptive frame. Realize that every moment of what comes into your five portals—your eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—are opportunities for you to wake up. We've just been listening to a really loud sound outside and it stopped. That's our opportunity.