



# Furnace Mountain

Newsletter

Autumn 2008

## Purity Beyond Purity

Excerpts from a Dharma Talk  
by Zen Master Dae Gak  
Furnace Mountain, March 2008

We are taking up the koan in the Blue Cliff Record, Case 96, Chao Chou's Three Turning Words.

Chao Chou addressed the community and gave three turning words, "A gold Buddha does not pass through a furnace, a wood Buddha does not pass through a fire, a mud Buddha does not pass through water."

Reading these stories, taking up the teachings of the ancestors, is most inspiring. I wish the record were more complete because there were hundreds of thousands of practitioners who have come before us, who have given their lives to this deep inquiry.

True inquiry has no Zen. True inquiry has no Buddhism. True inquiry has no religion, dogma, fundamentalism. There is the human mind's tendency to try to belong to something. And there is the human mind's tendency to try to step out of being human in order to fix humanity. We have the capacity in our imagination to step out of experience and reflect on it. It's not true. If you look carefully, it's simply not true. But it seems as if in our judgment we can step out of and evaluate ourselves and others.

I think the hardest thing to remember, to recognize, is that the turning around, the awakening, the transforming of everything, happens just now. Just as I am talking and you are listening; to have absolute faith that in the quality of our



being together in this moment that transformation is possible. Not transformation relative to our expectation like if transformation were to take place then there would be more this and less of that. That never works. But to have absolute faith that there is no place outside of the very moment of listening. That transformation. Can we find in our hearts the capacity, in a moment, to wake up? In a moment of listening, not judging what's being heard, not agreeing with what's being heard, not going along with what's being heard, but to find in the very listening itself, in the very effort to come together and find some truth outside of doctrine, outside of institution, outside of spiritual movement, outside of belief in someone else. To have absolute faith in one's own capacity just here, just now to awaken again and again.

And we don't even need to say again because again is apologetic. Do you see that? Again is apologetic. It says this awakening is not enough because I lose it. Which is apologetic. Which is not awakening. Which is the effort to stand apart from and we cannot stand apart from being human. And our awakening is the

awakening of all. To awaken in this moment and have absolute faith in that is the awakening of all beings. What other awakening could there be? And where? And when? And on what schedule? And who could judge it?

So, to take it up then is to take up not becoming different but a shift, so that there is not a, "I am here and I am thinking and that thinking process will then transform," but it is a shift away from the very ground that one has been standing on. And one doesn't take on the new age images or the written images about the past, images of stars bursting out of the head or a sense of sublime joy and all those things, which one might feel. But there is a fundamental shift in the ground. So that, for example, I am here and I'm sitting in this wide spacious ten-thousand miles of clear blue sky, boundless blue sky and one feels then the negativity, the caution as the birds fly through the sky. And if one then idealizes the empty sky, one is in conflict. But if one remembers that the sky is always empty no matter what comes and goes in it, there is a shift from the content to the ground of being. And then when something comes and upsets one, or something comes and provokes the heart, it's a wondrous event in the sky, the boundless sky, only one sky, in the unfettered, boundless, pristine sky of awareness which is not owned. So then one is not constantly cleaning the sky, but one is acting from the sky. And the content comes and goes and sometimes it is clear and blue and vast and beyond measure. And sometimes it is full of smoke and birds and fighter planes and pollution and all of that. Yet, in the midst of whatever appears in the sky, one is the sky. One is inseparably the sky. And that is the shift in the very ground of being itself from being the content, where the content is continually trying to do something about itself, to being the sky, to being the holder, to being the container of it all.

So this is the marvelous teaching of Chao Chou. We are deeply indebted to Chao Chou. He went

into the swamp and wrestled with the alligators for us. Not that he did it for us, but he certainly showed us the path through the swamp and said, "Look, you've got to get in here and wrestle these alligators." And it isn't pretty. And it isn't easy. And if you give up they'll eat you. And you'll be no good at all. But it is totally do-able. And you look and that was his whole life, for us. To take on this alligator wrestling, to take on this wide-mouthed, saw-toothed, older-than-time creature which is our own doubt and self-consciousness. To take it on: the wall of self, the impenetrable iron bull that the mosquito must penetrate; where blame and complaint no longer have dominion.

"A gold Buddha can't pass through a furnace, a wood Buddha can't pass through a fire and a mud Buddha can't pass through water."

When you are wrestling the alligator, it is your alligator, your fight, and no one can save you. But you can rub its belly. You know if you rub an alligator's belly it will fall asleep in your arms. If you can find its belly and if you can keep your arm out of its mouth. And that's our practice isn't it, to find that inner space which is the rubbing of the

alligator's belly. And then the alligator wakes up, and it's hungry, and it wants to eat you again. And you spend all night running around your cabin being chased by the alligator., or all over the country, or wherever the alligators are chasing you.

The waking up, of course, is that one day you are in the fight, wrestling, the alligator is thrashing, and the alligator is seeming to overpower you and then the moment of shift occurs and you realize, my god, I'm an alligator, and he's trying to make love with me. I've been mistaken all along. The very aggression and fight that I've been in is simply the dance of life. I've never been anything but an alligator. And all of the efforts and special techniques that I have for taming the alligator have arisen from the mind that believes it's a human: that believes it is separate from the swirl of life itself. And that is the wonder of being human. That while there is oneness beyond separation there is the interplay of oneness, which is the entire world of being.

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## New Developments at Furnace Mountain



The last few months have seen many physical improvements to the buildings at Furnace Mountain. The tea house and lodge have new roofs, the interview hut has been freshly painted, has a new Japanese tile roof with copper edging to match the bath-house, and new window shades. A bathroom and electric heating system are being installed in the upper cabin (also known as Sam's cabin). New external screens have been installed at the temple. These screens can be rolled down to provide sun protection and lower the internal temperature. When rolled up, they tuck neatly behind exterior beams so that they barely show.

The bath house is nearing completion; it is now fully functional and provides us with three toilets, two showers, an additional sleeping space for retreatants, and a kitchen area for preparing tea for morning tea service at the temple. A railing will be built around the outside deck, and landscaping will finish the job. All of these improvements help with the attractiveness of the facility and will contribute to making the retreat experience more comfortable for guests.



### **Purity Beyond Purity, con't:**

So, Chao Chou says, "A gold Buddha can't pass through a furnace, a wood Buddha can't pass through a fire and a mud Buddha can't pass through water." That means everything is what it is, and everything is subject to cause and effect. And there is no pure state which lifts us out of the inevitability of cause and effect, which is old age, sickness and death, which is disappointment, frustration and heartbreak, and joy and great happiness and sympathetic joy, sharing in the pleasures of others and love beyond love. All unavoidable, and to make some effort in our practice of beating the alligator is to forget that we are alligators and that all the conditions that effect an alligator, effect us.

In that realization is the purity of being: that there is no pure state. Our hearts break; joy arises in our breast. We feel terrible and miserable some days; we feel wonderful and joyous

other days. People like us one day; people hate us the next day. Everyone has been through that. Things that bothered us yesterday don't seem to even matter today. Things that didn't matter at all yesterday get under our skin and make us insecure and cautious and tentative. And we look and we want to purify that state. We look and we see there is no pure state, this is the condition of being human: having a limbic system, having a body, having a heart, being capable of arousal. And in that realization is the realization of purity beyond purity. That what is purity is in fact the rising and falling of our own consciousness. What is purity is the full and complete mistake that is living. What is purity is the totality of being human. And from that purity of being human, when we are gold we are smelted in the furnace, when we are wood we catch fire and when we are mud we dissolve.  
Thanks for listening.

## Upcoming Retreat Schedule

- Sept. 11- 14 Furnace Mountain Retreat
- Sept. 19- 2 Calligraphy Workshop at Furnace Mountain with Kaz Tanahashi
- Sept. 27-28 Dialogue Retreat at Furnace Mountain
- Oct. 3-5 Retreat in Cincinnati led by Zen Master Dae Gak
- Oct. 11-18 Week-long Retreat at Furnace Mountain
- Oct. 24-26 Retreat in Washington DC, led by Zen Master Dae Gak
- Oct. 30-Nov. 3 Retreat in Houston, TX led by Zen Master Dae Gak
- Nov. 6-9 Retreat at Furnace Mountain
- Nov. 27-30 Retreat in Bristol, UK led by Zen Master Dae Gak
- Dec. 12-14 Introductory Retreat at Furnace Mountain



Calligraphy by Kaz Tanahashi

All retreats start at 6:00 PM on the first day and end at noon on the last day.  
Retreat Fees: \$180 for weekend retreats, \$420 for one-week retreats.



Furnace Mountain Zen Retreat Center  
P.O. Box 545  
Clay City, KY 40312

### New T-shirts

T-shirts available in Black.  
Women's sizes M, L & XL  
(Women's sizes run small)  
Men's sizes available in M, L, XL 2XL.  
Also Men's long-sleeve shirts L, XL & 2XL  
\$25.00 short sleeve  
\$35.00 long sleeve

### Greeting Cards:

Images from Furnace Mountain

\$4.00 each or  
3 for \$10.00  
assorted



Your purchase helps support Furnace Mountain. To purchase T-shirts or Greeting Cards send your check and order to Furnace Mountain.

"Dragon" Calligraphy  
by Zen Master Dae Gak

For more information email us through our website at [www.furnacemountain.org](http://www.furnacemountain.org)