



Furnace Mountain

Newsletter

Summer 2009

Deer Sighting

Dharma Talk by Zen Master Dae Gak
May Retreat 2009, Furnace Mountain

I thought we could look at one of my favorite koans, “Mind itself is Buddha” or “this very mind is Buddha.” It is about a student like us, someone eager to see through the fog of one’s own preference and partiality and to see things as they are.

The student, Dai Mei, went to his teacher and said, “What is Buddha?” I think we all come to practice with some question like that. Sometimes the question is very particular, very personal; why is it that I can never get what I want? Why is it that I’m unhappy? Why is it that I’m stressed? Why am I, or why are things, the way they are? We don’t come and say why am I joyous, why am I moving through the world unhindered and happy and without a care in the world?

This wanting freedom from suffering is classic, its archetypical. It describes every one of our hopes and our condition to not want to go on the way one feels at a certain point, where one touches that place in one’s own heart that seems to be so totally true and unavoidably wrong. And then one looks around and one imagines that no-one else feels how I do, or has ever felt as bad or as wrong or as unhappy or as unable to accomplish or make happen whatever it is one wants. This is the first Noble Truth; there is suffering. What drives the mind inward in spiritual quest, or drives the question of who am I or what is this life, is suffering and everyone suffers. Everyone has this



question; what is the cause of suffering and what is the mind that is free of suffering? This is Dai Mei’s question, “What is Buddha.” What is the mind that is enlightened?” This is also the question we have about life in general. What is this life? What is this death?

Coming into the mountain recently, in the evening, I came down into the driveway and there was a very young deer in the driveway. It was standing there and when my car lights shone on him he was startled and ran off. He just ran off a little bit. I stopped and shut the motor off and rolled down the window and looked at him for a little while. He looked at me, meeting, a wonderful meeting, and then he ran off and broke my heart. They always do, don’t they?

So I was thinking about deer and I was looking into deer and looking at this whole idea of watching for deer and it occurred to me that this is exactly the practice of Zen. It occurred to me looking at the deer that this is precisely the activity of the way-seeking mind.

I think it begins believing that there is something quite rare and precious out there, hidden in some recesses. There is the sense that the deer hide somewhere, that there is a place where the deer come from, a good hiding place. There is the thought that this rare and wonderful creature has a rare hiding place and that if one could find it then one could know deer and then go to the place where they are and stay forever or whenever one wanted. That is the mind that looks for the precious outside of itself.

We have the notion and hope that there is a place, if only I could identify it. One sits in the hope for kensho as a mind apart from the looking mind. We want some awakening, some shift out of our ordinary mind, and one sits in the belief that there is a place where this precious jewel of a mind abides. One just has to find the journey, the route, the map to get to it and once one gets to it one will become completely and forever annutara-samyaksambodhi, always and forever free.

Deer certainly have patterns that one can observe, and one can corrupt deer and then they stop being deer and stop being interesting. We don't have dog sightings in the same way we see deer. I don't come down into the property and say, "Oh wow, dogs!" Dogs are always there. You love your dog, of course. You love your dog and he is happy to see you, but it isn't as precious, like that which is unusual, the deer. So then one begins to order in one's mind toward what is valuable toward what is unavailable, toward just what is out of reach.

Can you see how in our practice the very sense that awakening is somewhere else undermines the immediacy of our practice? We think that what is precious is hard to reach and therefore if it is constantly available, if we are continually able to touch it, to have it, to know it, it's not so interesting. You see how the mind orders what is out of reach.

First the mind orders that enlightenment is somewhere else in a secret kingdom, like they talk about the elephant burial ground, where the elephants go to die and that becomes very interesting. We think there is a place that one could go and find what is most precious. Some religions call it heaven; Buddhism calls it the Pure Land. There is a place and it is out there somewhere and one needs to find a map and get to it. The mind thinks that this something special lives somewhere else and if by chance we cross paths and if one could find that place then one could be joyous by going there.

A first delusion of awakening is that there is a place that one could go to and find, nail down, map, and get back there whenever one wants a little hit of enlightenment. I think I'll go, I'll learn the skills, I'll go to the workshop, get the map, so that whenever I'm feeling a little down, a little blue, a little out of it, I'll go to the place where the great awakening abides and get a little bit. That is the first delusion.

Of course if you found the place where deer live they would move. If you keep going to where deer hang out all the time they would move. You can't go where they live because when you go where they live, they move.

The whole movement of finding one's true heart is the activity of looking and seeing, not nailing down or establishing a particular place.

A second delusion is that what is rare, unavailable, out of reach is more precious, the supply and demand of the mind. So, I'm not particularly interested in the everyday dogs, I'm a little interested, but the deer are special. It is the scarcity mentality that we have. What follows is the activity of abusing ourselves for not being able to have more of what we identify as most precious. Then there is the identification with not having more. We identify ourselves as one of those who is not part of the special group that has more access to that which is special, the backstage pass to the rock concert, or whatever.

There is a third movement in which we sight the deer and look and wonder, and there is no effort to find its constant home. One realizes that the deer is not predictable or fixed in some place. The third way or the third remembering is that our enlightenment, our awakening is the very alert looking. In that looking deer pass, otters pass, friends pass, clouds pass, pileated woodpeckers pass, frogs pass, everything passes.

One believes that there is something that will come to us from the outside, a deer will appear in its preciousness and we will be thrilled to tears, and we may be when we see a deer. We believe that there is something special out there rather than the very capacity in one's heart to see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think and that activity is the activity of deerness itself. There is not just a deer that comes but the whole world, the whole being, the whole structure of existence appears.

If one were really to take up rarity as one's motive one would have to appreciate that being born and given this body is such a rarity and such a glimpse, such a "Gee I saw a deer on the side of the road? Gosh, it was gorgeous." Was that a human life that I'm living, that I lived? And in this a glass of water is enlightening as is washing the dishes as well as conflict with ones friend and ones misery can all be the activity of opening and awakening.

Dai Mei came to Baso and said what is truth? What about these deer that I see every once in a while? He had had some opening, some sighting. What about these deer? Dai Mei said, "What about this?" He had to have some experience just to ask the question. Baso said, "This very mind itself is Buddha." The very question that you are asking is no other than Buddha.

The very ground we stand on, the very talking and listening itself is Buddha. To see a deer, how marvelous, but to see your finger, to actually see your finger. How marvelous.



So our path is one of remembering, of waking up to the capacity to be alive, to hear the frog, to look at our life and wake up to the wonder of this sighting. It is the sighting of our very life itself. We and everything we see, hear smell, taste, touch and even think is the rare sighting of a gorgeous rare deer. We wake up in the morning in full awareness of how wonderfully rare it is to be born a human yet again. Can we find that mind? That is our birth-right, that innocence where we feel our skin. We wake up and get out of bed. We wake up and exclaim, "Skin! Breath! Thoughts!" We wake up to the very texture and feeling and movement of mind itself.

Thanks for listening.

Upcoming Retreat Schedule

- August 6-9 Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Thursday, through noon Sunday. \$180
- August 22- 24 Retreat with Zen Master Dae Gak in Washington D.C. For further information contact <http://www.furnacemountain.org/zenretreats.html>
- Sept. 10-13 Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Thursday, through noon Sunday. \$180
- Sept. 18 -20 Dialogue Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Friday, through noon Sunday \$120
- Sept. 25-27 Calligraphy Retreat at Furnace Mountain with Kaz Tanahashi
- Oct. 10-17 Week long retreat at Furnace Mountain. Beginning 7:30p.m. Saturday, through noon Saturday the 17th. \$420
- Oct. 23-23 Retreat in Cincinnati with Zen Master Dae Gak. For further information contact Cincinnati Zen Center at 513-684-4216 or <http://www.cincinnati-zen-center.org>
- Nov. 6-9 Retreat in Houston with Zen Master Dae Gak. For further information contact <http://www.westhoustonzen.org/>
- Nov. 12-15 Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Thursday, through noon on Sunday. \$180
- Nov. 26-29 Retreat in Bristol, England led by Zen Master Dae Gak
- Dec. 11-13 Introduction to Zen Retreat at Furnace Mountain
- Future Planning: Furnace Mountain will offer a one month retreat in February 2010.