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"Perseverance in the Tao"

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This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious
issues.
Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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JOHN TARRANT ROSHI

TEISHO delivered during a ROHATSU SESSHIN
December 4, 1992 Camp Cazadero, California

Please sit comfortably.

We do this because we want to be in harmony with the flow of things. We
want to
have no effort. And we do this because we realize that we struggle all
the time
and we are not in harmony with the flow of things, which is the first
noble
truth of Buddhism, that there is suffering in the world. And usually
suffering
comes upon us as a sense of being out of harmony, out of sync, with our
circumstances. Wishing they were different. Out of sync with our own
minds.
Wishing they were different and wishing our minds had different things in
them.
So we could say we do this because we have become aware of suffering, but
that
is not enough because just to become aware of suffering might lead us to
give
up.

At one stage when Hakuin Ekaku gave up in his own training he found out that Yen-t'ou Ch'Yan-huo (Jap. Ganto Zenkatsu), one of the great Chinese Zen masters who was a hero of his, had died by being run through with a spear by a bandit when he was sitting in his monastery. The bandits just rode through and he kept sitting and they ran him through like a pig. And this was very disillusioning to Hakuin and he thought, "If even Yen-t'ou can't escape this kind of death, what hope is there for a miserable creature like me." So naturally he gave up zazen and decided to while away his useless, miserable life reading poetry and chatting with his friends. But then eventually, as you know, he came back to zazen, too. And he meditated and the suffering became his question. He meditated on Yen-t'ou's death, which is very mysterious and interesting because Yen-t'ou could have escaped. He sent off his students away into the mountains. He knew what was coming. So Hakuin meditated on this for a long time and eventually the question opened up for him and he jumped up and shouted and said, "I am Yen-t'ou alive, unharmed." He realized that Yen-t'ou still lived.

But in order to do this, you see, there must be something in us that doesn't give up. There must be something in us, some intimation that something else is possible. So the first requirement of zen is doubt, great doubt, which is, I think, just a clear sight. And if our sight is clear enough, we will see that people suffer. We will see that we suffer. And we'll be disturbed by this and this is the doubt. This is that sense of being out of harmony with the Tao.

And then the next thing is a faith. We must have the faith that something is possible. We must have some kind of, just enough confidence that there is a way and that we can find it. And what gives us this faith? I think it is just a kind of trust in the world, just a little bit of trust. A trust that the sunlight striking the leaves is beautiful and stirs the heart. The trust that there is kindness in the world. The trust the child has that it will be fed and held. All this goes up to make a trust in the Tao eventually. This an intimation of what we can deeply trust, which is the true way of the Buddha dharma, our own Buddha nature, really, our original face.

So we trust that there is something greater than our minds can grasp and we

trust that if we pursue it, it will reveal itself to us. And it is hard at first to trust there is something greater than our minds can grasp because we are used to using our minds to grasp things. And it's the only way we can think of as perceiving something. But when we worry about the question, this is the value of the question, the value of the koan path, really. When a question rises up in us and we start worrying about it, we soon realize the very reason it is a question is because it has defeated our minds, it has defeated our intellect. And this is not to say that the intellect is useless, but it is to say that there are some things that it cannot answer. And so we must live our way into the question cell by cell, bone by bone.

And then, when we are willing to take up the question, we do find that there is a path. We do find that there are times when even just holding the question, we are happy and serene. We find that there is friendship because we find the dharma and we find people are willing to help us along that way and that this is the most precious thing, to have companions in the way. It's encouraging in those times when we cannot see the way. And so when we take up the way sincerely, we will find that it does ease a little. We will find that we become in harmony with things, that our own minds are easier for us to bear. And not only our own minds easier for us to bear, what comes at us changes a little bit. We hold it differently. We do not get quite so jarred by what we experience. We have more equanimity in the face of birth and death. And we realize that birth and death always happen at inconvenient times and we accept that with a kind of joy. So this is why we follow the way. And we realize, too, that it is not our struggle, really, that counts. Our struggle is very necessary, but it is eventually just our willingness to be present that counts and that this is the true effort of the way.

The third thing in traditional zen is that there is great doubt, great faith and great effort, but this effort is really to become in harmony with the way. So again it is one of those absurd conundrums. How can you struggle to be in harmony? It's like the old instruction to be spontaneous or the instruction to

relax makes you tense. So that effort is really all directed to transcending yourself, to going beyond all efforts so that everything is natural. And you'll find it arises out of your own heart and covers the world. It is always coming out of you.

I thought today I would illustrate this path by reading you the story of Lin-chi I-hsŷan or Rinzai, who is one of our notable ancestors. He's notable enough that we still chant his name in the lineage chants. And it is through his path that the koan has come down to us. The very idea of holding a question until it opens up. He's quite a character, too, so he's worth spending some time with.

When Lin-chi was one of the assembly of monks under Huang-po Hsi-yŷn (Jap. Obaku Kiun), he was plain and direct in his behavior. The head monk [of the name Mu-chou Tao-ming (Jap. Bokushu Domei)] praised him saying, "Look, he's a youngster. He's different." Then he asked Lin-chi, "How long have you been here?"

Lin-chi said, "Three years."

"Have you ever asked for instruction?"

"No, I've never asked to be taught," said Lin-chi.

(So here he is, sitting for three years and he's never had dokusan. Never been really taught how to do his zazen.)

"Why don't you go and ask the head of the temple just what the cardinal principle of the Buddha dharma is?" said the head monk.

(So the head monk is trying to prompt him and saying, 'Here's a good question. Why don't you go and ask this and see what happens?')

Lin-chi went and asked, "What is the cardinal principle of the Buddha dharma?" (he said faithfully asking the question.)

Huang-po hit him. Then Lin-chi came back.

"How did it go? said the head monk.

"Before I'd finished speaking the master hit me. I don't understand," said Lin-chi.

"Go and ask him again," said the head monk.

(So you can see that there is something good happening here. It's not just a drama between Lin-chi and the great teacher, but he's got a mentor as well. The head monk is trying to guide him and prompt him and interfere in the course of things.)

So Lin-chi went back and asked. Again, Huang-po hit him before he had finished speaking. (Huang-po read right through him. Didn't even let him finish.)

Then Lin-chi went back to the head monk and the same thing happened. The head monk prompted him and again he went back to the master and again he got hit. So then he came back to the head monk and said,

"It was so kind of you to send me to question the master."

(So you can tell he had this rather open mind. He still thought of this as kindness.)

"Three times I asked him and three times I was hit by him. I regret that some obstruction caused by my own past karma prevents me from grasping his profound meaning. I am going away for awhile."

The head monk said, "If you are going away, you should go and take your leave of the master."

Lin-chi bowed low and withdrew.

The head monk went to the master's quarters before Lin-chi and said, "The young man who has been questioning you is a person of the dharma. If he comes to take his leave, please handle him expediently. In the future with training he is sure to become a great tree which will provide shade for the people of the world."

(So this head monk leaves nothing to chance.)

Lin-chi came to take his leave.

Huang-po said, "You mustn't go anywhere else but to Ta Yu's [Kao-an T'ai-yŷ, Ta Yu (Jap. Koan Taigu)] place by the river in Ta An."

(So Huang-po just says that.)

Lin-chi arrived at Ta Yu's temple.

(So you can tell his sincerity here. He follows along. He feels stupid and he feels helpless, but he's trying. He's still trying to follow the current of the great river.)

"Where do you come from?" asked Ta Yu (which is the all purpose test question).

"I have come from Huang-po's place," said Lin-chi.

"What did Huang-po have to say?"

"Three times I asked him what the cardinal principle of the Buddha dharma was and three times he hit me. I don't know whether I was at fault or not."

(I think that's a very beautiful answer, isn't it? He has a kind of integrity. He knows that he doesn't know. And he doesn't jump to conclusions. He doesn't say, 'Well, I'm stupid. It's my fault.' Or, he doesn't get angry and say, 'This teacher's no good.' He just says, 'I really just don't understand the situation.' A very important attitude because there's an opening there where something can come through.)

Ta Yu said, "Huang-po is such a grandmother. He utterly exhausted himself with your troubles. (You know, the grandmother is traditionally softer than the mother or father.) And now you come here asking whether you were at fault or not."

With these words Lin-chi attained great enlightenment.

"Ah, there isn't so much to Huang-po's Buddha dharma after all."

Ta Yu grabbed hold of Lin-chi and said, (this is literally what he said), "You bed wetting little devil."

(Ruth Fuller Sasaki's notes to this say, "This could be a term of insult or endearment depending on the context.")

"You just finished asking whether you were at fault or not and now you say there isn't much to Huang-po's Buddha dharma. What did you see? Speak! Speak!"

Lin-chi jabbed Ta Yu in the side three times.

Shoving him away Ta Yu said, "You have Huang-po for a teacher. None of this is any of my business." and sent him off.

So Lin-chi left Ta Yu and returned to Huang-po.

Huang-po saw him coming and said, "What a fellow. Coming and going, coming and going. Where will it end?"

(So again, you can see there's a certain amount of press going on here by Huang-po. He's got a very strong context. The head monk, he knows, is helping him out, and he has Ta Yu helping. So he sort of presses to see if there is an opening.)

"Coming and going, coming and going. Where will it end?"

"It is all due to your grandmotherly kindness," Lin-chi said. Then he presented the customary gift (after enlightenment it's customary to bring something) and stood waiting.

(Somebody once brought me a crushed beer can as the customary gift. A very good gift.)

"Where have you been?" asked Huang-po.

"Recently you deigned to favor me by sending me to Ta Yu," said Lin-chi.

"What did Ta Yu have to say?" asked Huang-po.

Lin-chi then related what had happened.

Huang-po said, "I'd like to catch that fellow and give him a good dose of the stick"

"Why say you'd like to. Take it right now," said Lin-chi and immediately gave Huang-po a slap.

(Huang-po was a very big guy. Some people say he was seven feet. Lin-chi wasn't that big.)

"You lunatic!" cried Huang-po. "Come back here!"

Pulling the tiger's whiskers Lin-chi gave a shout, "Roar!"

"Attendant, get this lunatic out of here and take him to the monk's hall," said Huang-po.

Later, Kuei-shan Ling-yu (Jap. Isan Reiyu) in telling the story to Yang-shan Hui-chi (Jap. Kyozan Ejaku) asked him, "On that occasion did Lin-chi get help from Ta Yu or from Huang-po?"

"He not only rode on the tiger's head, but he seized his tail," replied Yang-shan.

(He got help from both people.)

I think there are a number of things that are worthy of note here. Lin-chi was prepared to be patient with himself. He waited around for three years, actually, in the temple before anybody took any notice of him. Actually, people had noticed him, but they hadn't wanted to help him too much.

There's one koan where the student says, "I'm pecking from inside. I beg you, master, please peck from outside." The idea is that a chicken is pecking from inside the shell and at the right time the mother hen hears that and pecks from the outside and helps break the shell. But the teacher was reluctant to and he said because the problem is if you peck too soon, the chicks not ready to come out. If the mother hen pecks too soon, the chick won't be able to survive outside the shell.

So the head monk just sort of watched him and then decided that the time was right and so he encouraged him. And I think that our friends in the dharma often are very helpful in a way that the teacher can't be. This was so for me. I had friends who really encouraged me when I went to sit. Say, to sit up late at night in sesshin, which I kind of wanted to do, but nobody much was doing, but I had a friend who did. Stephen Mitchell, actually, who used to like to sit up late at night and used to think it was a good thing and so I used to sit up with him. And his view of the dharma was so high and serious and profound that it really encouraged me, too, in my hard times. And I think that's very important, you know. If you can see, then encourage others. And if you can't see, hang around with those who can. If you can see a little bit encourage others.

There's a story about the head monk whose name was Mu-chou Tao-ming (Jap. Bokushu Domei). There's a poem about him. He became famous.

Bitter and harsh, biting like a dog,
He opened up Lin-chi of the north
And made him a great tree.

(So it attribute the interaction to his friend, really.)

He pushed Yŷn-men over a precipitous cliff.
His words were like dry firewood.

(They blazed quickly.)

His reason cannot be systematized.

(He was the person who actually broke Yŷn-men Wen-Yen's (Jap. Ummon Bun'en)

leg. So his kindness was rather rough sometimes. When he was very old, Yŷn-men was much younger. When he was a very old man. He was about 100 years old, actually, close to 100 years old. I think he kicked Yŷn-men out when he was about a hundred. He made straw sandals for the pilgrims and would put them out secretly, but he wouldn't let people in if he didn't like their footsteps. They'd come to dokusan and he wouldn't open the door. And Yŷn-men went a number of times and finally he liked his footsteps and he got in and he seized him immediately and said, "Speak! Speak!" Yŷn-men didn't say anything so he threw him out and slammed the gate, but Yŷn-men didn't get his leg out quick enough and it broke in gate. But at that moment Yŷn-men had great enlightenment. As he screamed with pain, he began laughing. So, while his methods were unorthodox, his results were good.

This is really the way the Tao works in us. Sometimes it will come with something very difficult. And we will realize that a great pain has come upon us, but it is a good thing. A marriage breaks up or we get in a car wreck and get thrown into the hospital. We get sick. Something happens that is very disappointing. We fail on the exam. I remember how useful it was to me to fail an exam. How much it helped me. And that this is the voice of the Tao sort of speaking to us and opening us and changing our hearts, really, so that we can persevere in dark times as well as good. And it gives us compassion, that sort of thing.

And yet, at the same time, it's very good not to be harsh with others, not to try and imitate in this way. And some people do. There's actually a famous teacher gave a presentation that I heard about on the dharma in front of a lot of business people. And he had a student sitting there and the student asked, "What is Buddha?", something like that. And his teacher peeled a banana and began eating it. Which is sort of okay, but a bit flashy, I think. And then the student said, "Well, I don't understand." So he pushed the banana into the student's face. That's not the dharma. That's just disrespectful. Nothing's happening there. Nothing's going to flower there. Stephen Mitchell told me this story and we thereafter always refer to that teacher as the Banana Roshi.

There's another interesting legend like this about another younger dharma teacher who was having problems with his older dharma teacher and didn't feel like he understood him. He was going through that stage that people go through with their teachers. But he kept trying to address it with his teacher and his teacher wasn't interested. So he decided to talk to a psychotherapist who was part of that zendo. So he made an appointment and came along. It was a woman. She was apparently a senior zen person, too. He was already a teacher in this zendo. And he said, "Well, I'm having trouble with the roshi." And before he quite finished she slapped him. When his head cleared he said, "Well, the problem is that he doesn't really listen. . ." and she slapped him again. Three times this happened and he said afterwards, "Well, I don't really think I had a problem after that." But again I think that that was too quick and too easy and wasn't quite right. It's an attempt to imitate the way the Tao kind of will give us harsh lessons and a great beauty can come from them, but I don't think this was right either. It doesn't feel true to me. Again, it's like the banana. So it's very important, I think, to be most respectful with each other. And when something like Mu-chou's slamming the gate comes up it's just a great action that comes out of the Tao and there's not even a person there doing it. You don't have to make these things up. And actually what is emphasized in the tradition is his kindness. The way he made straw sandals secretly for pilgrims because he worried about people's feet getting hurt as they tramped on pilgrimage.

Lin-chi waited and he had a friend. So it's good to do both those things. And he listened to his friend and his friend was sincere. And you may notice that when somebody comes to you for advice in the dharma, it's very important to give them the best advice you can. If you know a little bit, don't claim to know a lot. But if you know a little bit, don't claim to know nothing either and don't just give up. Give the help you can to encourage the person. I think that's very important. We need to encourage each other. Quite often in the dharma people who know nothing are the ones who keep trying to encourage the young students, the newer students in the zendo, and the people who know something

don't say anything. So, it's good to sort of come out and not spare the dharma assets as the precept goes.

Lin-chi doesn't falter, in a sense, when he realizes he doesn't understand the teacher. The teacher's shocking him. The teacher's presenting the shocking nature of the Tao to him. Just `Kaatz!`, just the Tao itself, just the tree, just breakfast. But he understands something is going on that he doesn't understand. That's as much as he gets to. Then he waits with it. And that sense of waiting with it, `not knowing whether I'm at fault or not,' is very precious and important. When something happens to you that seems difficult, that waiting in that way is very good because that allows the dharma to come in and that allows it to become a sacred occasion. When you don't immediately adopt an attitude that this is bad or this is good. It's a very important moment and very closely related to being in harmony with the Tao. If you don't know yet, you don't know and that's okay. Sometimes it's foggy; it's not always clear sunlight.

And then he faithfully follows. What his teacher does is send him on a pilgrimage so that he can digest this, so that it can start to percolate through him and you can see that all this time, the question, what is going on? what is the true nature of the Buddha dharma? what does that striking mean? So the question was working in him as he just walked along through the back roads of old China. Then he had the candor, he didn't fake it and say, "Well, I was an important person at Huang-po's monastery," which a lot of people do when they come to see me, actually. He didn't try to impress, he just said candidly exactly what had happened. If people are learning something, it's quite hard to get people to tell me exactly what happened without lots of overlay and lots of interpretation on it. He had this very good mind where he'd just be honest and he was--without either taking blame or blaming others. And then, of course, Ta Yu comes in and jumps on him, grabs hold of him and shakes him by speaking about Huang-po's grandmotherly kindness.

I ask you a question: What if at that moment Lin-chi had not gotten enlightened? What then? Another koan.

What Ta Yu does is he realizes that he has been somebody helping out Huang-po and the head monk and he doesn't try to cling to the student at all and he's obviously the sort of student that a teacher would love to have. He knows it's right to send him back. He just listens to the Tao and he sends him back. So he sends him back to Huang-po and says, "You have Huang-po for a teacher."

Then he comes back and Huang-po continues, he doesn't just let that go when Lin-chi comes back. He presses on him and asks him why he came back. And here's the story. And Lin-chi already is starting to sort of challenge his teacher. He has joined the democracy of the dharma. He slaps his teacher quite fearlessly showing his dharma. After all Huang-po had slapped him, too. Very free. And gave a shout. And Huang-po just accepts it by saying, "Attendant, get this lunatic out of here and take him to the monk's hall." Which is his kind of blessing on him, really.

When Lin-chi came to die, he acknowledged his great student by saying, "Who'd have thought the essence of my true dharma would be inherited by this blind donkey." This kind of expression holds out the possibility of having a pure expression without clinging to it. This is the kind of praise that doesn't confuse you so that you cling to the praise. It's unattached. It has the great world of emptiness mixed with the great world of form so seamlessly you can't tell the difference.

And then everybody really acknowledged that Lin-chi was something. And here's the kind of thing he did. This is the sesshin commemorating Shakyamuni's enlightenment. So it's an occasion of respect and reverence. Here's how Lin-chi respected and revered things. He arrived at Bodhidharma's memorial tower.

When the master of the tower said to him, "Venerable sir, will you pay your homage first to Buddha or to Bodhidharma?", Lin-chi said, "I don't pay homage to either the Buddha or Bodhidharma."

"Venerable sir, why are Buddha and Bodhidharma your enemies?" asked the master of the tower.

Lin-chi swung his sleeves and left.

And that was how he paid homage to Buddha and Bodhidharma.

So if Buddha and Bodhidharma are stuck there in the memorial tower, they're not a lot of use to us, are they? If they are right down here in every action you take, then they have something. That's how Lin-chi was able to strike Huang-po and say, "Well, here it is. Right now." And that's of utmost importance.

And here is a sample of the kind of dharma he came out with after he was more mature. He said to his own assembly, when he became a teacher:

There is a true person of no rank who is always coming and going through the portals of your face.

(Always coming in and going out through your own face.)

Beginners who have not yet witnessed it, Look! Look! It is always here. (It's always here.) Look! Look! It's all around.

So this is why we do this. It's why we do sesshin. Because it is all around and we just need to become in harmony with it.

Someone came to Lin-chi and said, "Do you teach the sutras here?"

Lin-chi said, "No, nobody learns the sutras here."

He said, "Do you teach zazen here?"

Lin-chi said, "No, nobody learns zazen here."

"What do you teach?"

Lin-chi said, "I just teach people to become buddhas and great ancestors."

So, no need to have any fancy ideas, just truly enter this moment with great sincerity. And like Lin-chi, do not be afraid of hardship. Do not grumble too much to yourself about any hardship that arises. That is somehow to be distracted by what could be a blessing. Treat everything that comes as the grace of the Tao. Everything, without exception, is the voice of buddha's own enlightenment. And whoever you are, you are open to it. Do not be persuaded that it is not for you. Everybody has the great nature of the Buddha and you just attend. It is inexorable. It will take you over. It will appear before your very eyes. It will look out from your very eyes.

Please be faithful in your zazen.

Some supplementary notes:

Encounters of Lin-chi with his teacher Huang-po and Huang-po's friend Kao-an T'ai-yŷ, Ta Yu (Jap. Koan Taigu) are fully described in the original commentaries to the Case Eleven of "The Blue Cliff Record" (Chin. Pi Yen Lu, Jap. Hekiganroku) and in the Lin-chi's biography given in a Biographical supplement (pages 253-255) in: Thomas and J.C Cleary (transl.) 1977. The Blue Cliff Record. Shambhala: Boulder and London.

Kao-an T'ai-yŷ, Ta Yu (Jap. Koan Taigu) (active 9th c.) was a dharma heir of Kuei-tsung Chih-ch'ang (Jap. Kisu Chijo) and a cousin-in-dharma of Huang-po Hsi-yŷn (J. Obaku Kiun) [see Ch'an Lineage Chart, in: Rider Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion, 1989. London: Rider.]

The "banana incident" is also described in the Dialogue #2 (pages 8-9) in: Philip Kapleau. 1980. Zen: Dawn in the West. London: Rider. (tmc 7.03.93)

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