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"Soul in Zen" - lecture.

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JOHN TARRANT ROSHI

LECTURE - "Soul in Zen"  
November 30, 1992, Berkeley, California

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(David W's intro)

Tonight I'll talk about trying to meld two great currents in late  
twentieth  
century western thought. One is depth psychology, which varies from  
being a  
passion to a cult, I suppose, but is very often usually important in the  
way we  
see the world. And the other is the perspective of the zen tradition--  
the  
Buddhist tradition generally, I think, and my particular branch of that  
is the  
zen tradition--which I think is also a great current in western thought  
now, I  
hope becoming a greater current, and offers some resolutions to some of  
the  
issues we're really grappling with as a culture and individually. My  
interest  
in this talk is to talk a little about the more individual aspects of  
that  
crossover, that confluence of currents of thought and feeling and  
passion.

The way I did it. I trained first in the Buddhist tradition, actually I  
started  
out in the Tibetan tradition and ended up in zen, for many years; and  
then I

went to the psychological tradition because I wanted to flesh out some things that I felt I didn't understand and I felt that having another place to stand would help me understand some things about the zen tradition. So I'm in a really different position from the many people who have gone from psychology to zen to try to heal psychology. I was more interested in healing zen and so I feel like that's my perspective and my main interest because I function as a zen teacher.

I'm writing a book on this material. I recently wrote an essay and I started out with two quotes and I'll start this talk with these two. The first is a quote from Lin-chi, or Rinzai, who says:

Officially even a needle cannot enter; unofficially you can drive a horse and cart through.

This was my experience of zen. I spent much of my time in zen doing things my teacher told me not to and somehow trying to find ways to make them work. I felt it was very important that he told me not to do them, and it was very important that I did them. Both things were necessary.

And the other one is Prospero's speech, the opening of the epilogue to "The Tempest".

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint.

If you know that play at all, it's the play about the magician who is finally throwing away the tools of his trade so that he's not going to live by magic any more. He's going to live as a mortal, as a human on the earth. I feel that that's a classic zen position. That people tend to take up meditation for many reasons. The reason I took up meditation was for insight. I wanted to see how the world was put together. I also thought that I was kind of crazy and I thought it might help. I guess it did. But I wanted insight. I wanted to understand my life and find meaning in my life. I think many people took up zen for that reason, took up the meditation. At least in my tradition, what you do is you work very hard at meditation, and typically you put aside times and have retreats, and sooner or later something dawns on you, some change happens, some inner shift in your life happens, which we call by fancy names like

enlightenment or kensho or satori. The term I like most, which is an old Chinese jargon term, is intimacy for a spiritual experience, which I think is nice and has that sense of the warmth and the connection to the universe that belongs to true spiritual experience. True spiritual experience is not an isolating or grand thing, but a very near, close kind of thing.

I went through the dark and dreadful zen mills and sweated very hard doing it and it was a good experience for me. I found that on the way certain things, I felt, were being taught officially and certain things were being taught unconsciously, and I became very interested in what those things were, the second category, because we always know what's being officially taught. Everybody hits you over the head with it, but we're always teaching other things as well.

Everybody, sooner or later in their life, comes up against a question. Usually that's a wound in some ways. It's a place of failure or our understanding just doesn't grip. I think of those times as very, very important because they're boundary situations where what we know has run out into the sands. They just soak up all the water of our wisdom and we're left with nothing. Zen and all traditions of Buddhism try to evoke that in a sense. The assumption is that that boundary situation is already there, but we're not always aware of it, so the tradition evokes it. In our tradition we did that by getting a koan, which is a question to hold. The koan can have many different shapes and forms. It can be a classical story taken from Chinese zen and condensed and something you just hold until you drive yourself nuts with it and something happens. But it's something that defeats your thinking. It defeats your intellect. Or it can be a question that just arises out of your life. I had dinner with a woman on Saturday who had never taken up a koan officially, but had got obsessed with a particular question in her life, in her work (she's a writer), and was amazed at--She'd run across the course of miracles, this dictated, channeled, strange book, and she was trying to figure out how this could have happened and what it meant and how phony or real it was and all. She was worrying about this and this somehow became her question about what is beyond our knowledge. What is

true and what is false. A neighbor waved to her and she had an enlightenment experience. Everything in the world coming from her neighbors hand. I just mention that because it's a recent example and a fairly classical example of the spiritual experience. The Buddhist traditions tend to evoke this kind of experience. They're pressure cooker and keep the lid on in various ways and then you have this experience of insight and it's a marvelous thing and it's full of joy and changes your whole life and you're quite sure you have the answer to everything.

In my tradition you then have to do a lot more koan questions and one of my favorites that comes shortly after this experience is called, "The clearly enlightened person falls into a well." Indicating that maybe something else is going on here. And what that something else is going on is I think is the underground teaching that's in all great traditions. I describe that as being about character, or I conceptualize that to myself as being about character. That character, or soul is another way, a western way to put it, that character is something that can be good or bad. A person's character can stink or it can be rather solid and we can stand on it in some way. We can push up against, or we knock on it and it sounds good, or it has a floor. So character is something that is developmental, isn't it? Insight is really not. When you see into the very bottom of the universe, you see the same thing that Shakyamuni Buddha saw and you see the same thing that everybody else saw, Jane Doe and Joan Blow, for centuries. The vision really is the same. It will be expressed in the terms of your unique universe, but it's really the same vision. So there is a sense in which insight rests in the eternal and it's not much interested in development because everything's already perfect. It's lovely and we'll just delight in that, and then we'll fall into a well.

The western classic opposition is between spirit and soul. Spirit is the transformative function and it's eternal. It doesn't learn, I think, really. It's the way in which we're all one and it's the way in which, even when you are--it kicks in sometimes when you're very sick, if you're close to death, you notice that your life is perfect at that moment even though you're dying. That

sort of experience. It's a very classic spirit experience. It's very helpful, and in our culture it's helpful, because we tend to get stuck in objects a lot in our culture and it drags us out of the shopping malls and into noticing our lives and noticing how much richness there is all around us without having to go into the shopping malls in the first place. Spirit has a loveliness to it and a blissful transcendent quality to it and it's got a great rigor to it, too. If you sit in a zen center, you sit cross legged for a long time and if your body doesn't hurt, you're very remarkable, and if the pain in your body doesn't get extreme, you're remarkable, too. Eventually we come to a different understanding about pain, hopefully. There is a freeing quality in spirit. Even if I die, I know that the world is--there's something wonderful I can rest on. We're not so afraid when we have this experience and we feel like we belong on the earth. We know who we are and where we stand. That's such a wonderful thing that it really does change your life. There's less attachment to things we know. We're more fluid and open, hopefully, to the new.

But then there's this whole other part of the world that seems neglected by this fascination with spirit. Spirit has its own sort of darkness that seems to come with it. This other part of life seems to balance it. I think of the pleasures that are very transitory--chocolate and lingerie, things like that--but are very real interests of human beings, and obviously, they can't be outside buddha nature. From the spirit's point of view they're all fine, they're all one, they're just like the moonlight, but then there's another part of us that prefers this kind of chocolate or prefers chocolate to corn flakes or something like that. That part of character, we might say, that wants to be heard and if it's not heard and if it's ignored and if you just cut off its head, something bad happens in the spiritual training. I'll talk about what some of those bad things are as we go along.

I found in my own training this twofold impulse. One was towards the eternal and the spiritual and wanting to have a wonderful big enlightenment experience and solve everything. Just really see how the world was put together and lead a really good life that was sort of flawless. And the other impulse was towards

the transitory, neglected, small and furious sort of world, which is not the life eternal, but the life that we die of and we die of living it well. That's just a truth that we can't get away from.

My theory about all this was that when we took the great traditions out of Asia, we brought across the spirit but soul is a local thing and we didn't bring that with it. Then we'd try to have this event often which was a very purely spiritual event, but it wasn't sufficiently inhabited. So we had all these scandals that you know and love and still are fascinating to us and we're still trying to work out what they're about, I think. A teacher sleeping with his students, power trips, all sorts of stuff that went on. I think that that was the soul's revenge. "If you neglect me, watch out." It's the dark thing in the corner of the room that we think is so insignificant, but suddenly we turn around and it's grown and it grabs us.

What I think our task is is to inhabit and find the personal modes to inhabit the great traditions like zen. The tradition of depth psychotherapy can help some there. I think we need to honor and notice the ways in which the zen tradition itself develops soul and develops character. I just wanted to get enlightened. I didn't give a damn how I did it. I came to a zendo. I came from Australia, which is probably one of the more secular cultures in the world. Much more secular than the U.S. Australians hate to do things like bow. They think it's all bullshit. So I came in and said, "You want me to bow? Sure, I'll bow. Whatever it is you want me to do, I'll do it. I just want to get enlightened." I think that was an attitude of the time. The seventies were when I first ran across a temple. Then I found that these stupid forms like bowing, which are by definition always nonsensical. Ritual is always nonsensical or otherwise it would be a practical activity and wouldn't be any use for ceremony. These nonsensical things were changing me. That it was good for me to let go of my idea that I came from a secular culture and was much more rationalist and immune to the seduction of these things. The key moment for me, I remember, was that I would go along to my teacher with my question. It was the koan Mu, which some of you may know, where you basically hold this one word

Mu which doesn't mean anything to you and you have to find out what it is. Any answer you give will be rejected so it's a very simple practice. I would come along almost every day to my teacher. I was in hard training. I'd work all day and sit much of the night and do a lot of meditation. It was a kind of joyfully insane life. I'd come in and I'd do my three full bows before him and he'd look at me and I'd say, "I don't know." He had a little hand bell that he'd ring when you were through and he'd ring his bell and I'd bow and leave. It was a perfect relationship, really. For some time I was doing this. The first time I came to see him, I'd come from Australia and I'd been meditating for years on my own, inventing the wheel, and I walked into see him. And he said, "Well, what do you want?" And I said, "Well, I think I want to get enlightened." And he said, "Well?" I said, "I've already started working on the koan Mu." He said, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "No," and he rang his bell. So you can see at one level there is something stupid going on because nobody's talking about anything, but at another level something very deep is going on and good because somehow it is given back to me and I'm empowered by that. As I would come along--first I would think, "Well, if I'm just in the right frame of mind when I go along to interview my teacher, I'll be enlightened," and things like that. Gradually, these ideas, of course, fell away and I knew they were ridiculous, but I couldn't help holding them. That was, again, an experience of character. I realized that I was not immune to the stupid ideas that everybody else in the zendo had, that I had to honor my own kind of foolishness and allow it and somehow be sweet with it. I knew better than that, but I couldn't help holding that idea, couldn't help preparing myself to go into the interview and somehow get it. Gradually I noticed that as I was just working and meditating and I'd come in and say, "I don't know" and he'd ring his bell, then I realized that I was already living the great life. That there was something beautiful and shapely about this life that I'd never experienced before, that I really cared about something, really going for it, and I was failing. There was an honor in that, a strength in that, and that I was prepared to do it for the rest

of my life. I'd always had the idea before that I wanted to get it and run. I wasn't even aware I had that idea. Some people call it spiritual materialism.

Realizing that I was quite happy, then suddenly it didn't matter if I got enlightened. It didn't matter--any of those things. I became who I was. If I had a taste for chocolate or lingerie or whatever it was, then I could look at that and start to experience my life instead of trying to endlessly empty my life so that something better could come in. That this is the experience of character that happens in a good spiritual center. The soul work always does go on. In fact, I remember not being very interested in enlightenment any more. I was interested, but not--let it take care of itself, I thought. I obviously couldn't effect it, so I wouldn't bother with it too much, and becoming more interested in--my meditation became much looser, much less pure, became much less interested in creating states of mind. Technique, I think, is one of the vices of spirit along with arrogance, because the spirit always thinks that if we get another technique, we'll be able to stay in our spirit place forever, where everything's pure. Whereas soul knows that no technique is really going to help you. And some time you're going to die and you're going to lose people you love and you're going to have to find your beauty there, too, in the autumn leaves as well as in the spring.

In our tradition, what we do is after somebody's had some sort of spiritual opening, we try to keep them around and not let them go because people then usually tend to have a spiritual opening and go out and commit disasters upon the world because there is an over confidence, a grandiosity that comes with spirit when it's not being tempered. It's a terrible thing to be a new zen teacher. I speak from experience. There is a tempering that needs to go on, an acknowledgment of our vulnerability and all the things that we don't know. The simultaneity of our wisdom and our foolishness. This is "The Clearly Enlightened Person Falls into a Well" koan. You can actually have a very deep understanding of the spiritual world and still do something stupid and still have areas of your life that are inferior and you're not very good at, kind of

stupid at, and that doesn't make you a less spiritual person. But noticing it makes you a more spiritual person. Being prepared have the shame of it and the disappointment of it, because it's very hard on your grandiosity, somehow that allows the spirit to come through in this purer way. Then something real can happen. Real teaching can happen. Real love can happen and the beauty of the world is the beauty of the Buddha's path just there before us then. But it's not if we're not prepared to accept our own stupidity, not in a complacent way, but in a way that's engaged. We notice what we're not very good at. We notice our pain when we're in it and allow it there. We have to allow the darkness in the world in order to experience the light. Our first move, you see, in spirit is always to transcend. We always want to go straight to the light. My own experience was of going up and then down and then not knowing which way was which after a while, I suppose. We have to let in, in some way hold, the opposites, hold the very small parts of who we are along with the rather grand, eternal parts of who we are and not let one take over. When one takes over we become less than human.

If the soul takes over, it's just full of longing and vapors. We get moody all the time and nobody can bear us. That soul consciousness, that very personal consciousness, notice how transient it is and it's always trying to shore itself up with a new cadillac or whatever it is, chocolate, a new spouse, a new something. It's in love with the productions of time. It always wants to go out and do a mystical fusion with things. Spirit knows that things are always coming into existence and passing away and isn't so impressed and is a very good counteraction to the soul point of view. Psychotherapy is very riddled with the soul point of view in good ways, often, I think, but often misses the spirit. Or when it does take up the spirit is often very mechanistic; like, hypnotise me if I was molested so that I can fix it, which is a classic crude technical move, ignoring who you are. It's like your BMW somebody took in and wants to fix.

But soul is also necessary because without it, without that point of view, the spirit tends to start making rules a lot, I've noticed. If you notice as a

spiritual community gets older, it gets a lot more rules and those rules usually don't seem like they're going to help anything. There's a lot more control. What happens is that there's not enough love sometimes in the spirit. The spirit has an equanimity--I live or I die; that's fine. Things can rush in to fill the vacuum. Power interests rush in. You find the gurus got armed guards by now. It's not enough just to condemn the guru or to side with the guru. I think we have to go beyond those two, neither the blame nor praise. I think we have to understand that there's a great process that goes on inside us as well as somebody like Rajneesh, or whoever your favorite guru villain of spiritual community is. Trungpa is a good example. I think that we have to acknowledge that these people often have very genuine, very powerful spiritual experiences and got taken over by them in some way. Didn't have enough ballast to hold them and that we're like that, too, and that we need to have both. We need to have our wings and we need to have our feet.

The moral comes out of the soul dimension, of attentively cultivating the soul dimension. If we cultivate the spirit and we do our zazen, we absolutely have to do that. If we do it with any grace and intelligence, it starts to allow a spaciousness and awareness of space in our lives and then we can do the soul work well. So I see that the spirit work, in a way, is primary. We have to build the superstructure before we build the foundations. I'm not sure that's true, but it's an idea I'm playing with at the moment. Spirit's idea of morality is to set down rules and say, "Don't sleep with a menstruating woman." A classic spirit statement from how many cultures. What you'll find about spirit morality is that the position of women will gradually start to suffer. There will be a rejection of the soul domain, which tends to get projected onto women, who actually don't necessarily carry that domain more than men, but since men are rejecting that they're going to project that onto women and so might start excluding them. We find examples of this all over the place. One of the senior students of my first Tibetan teacher told me, "In order to be enlightened you have to be reborn as a man if you're a woman." I thought I was pretty dumb,

but I knew that wasn't right. I knew I didn't know anything, but I knew that this wasn't one of the things I could add to my list of knowledge. It's a very classic spirit move there. Very often women will be the vehicles, the exclusion of women, too, of course. Somebody banned Mayumi Oda's goddesses with naked breasts (she has a very feminine interpretation of buddhist iconography) from one of the zendos because it wasn't appropriate for a zendo to be selling pictures of naked ladies, which is a classic spirit move against the soul. The moral comes out of the soul because the soul is always questioning itself and it really doesn't know and it's kind of foolish. It feels partial a lot of the time and so there's that misty quality that's so prized in zen. I think the images of mist and fog are characteristic of the virtue of not knowing, of uncertainty, that when we're uncertain, we can be very near to what is true. We can be very near to the gifts of life because we don't already know and we haven't shut things out with our knowledge. When we're uncertain, we're uncertain about a decision and maybe we worry about it and obsess about it some and we don't think it's a very spiritual thing to do because you're already supposed to know if you're spiritual, but maybe it is the right thing to do and maybe that's how the moral arises. The moral arises not through certainty coming down from the sky. That's how rules arise. Somebody engraves something in stone with a lightning bolt. The moral arises from the ground up and it arises through the partial in the floor. So we have to always take on in ourselves, and in those we love, the floors. We have to be acknowledging that they'll be there and that's okay because that's the windows through which transformation comes. And if you haven't got your floors, then your neighbor will have to have them for you and that's a horrible thing to do to your neighbor.

I don't know if you've found this, but I've found that when I first discovered Buddhism, I went to the National Library in Australia and I read every book there was on zen in the National Library, which actually sounds more dramatic than it was. Three books. No, there were quite a lot. I had this passionate devouring of the subject. After a while I began to notice the similarities in the narratives, that there's this heroic narrative. All the autobiographies are

essentially the form of the heroic narrative where somebody goes out, falls into the wilderness, digs their way out, and comes home with wisdom and gets help along the way in various ways. That's a classic story. But I found that there wasn't a lot of imagination, often, in the Buddhist literature. The Pali Canon, for me, is an example of the most unimaginative, mental engineering that I've ever run across although there is a great depth of brilliance to it, too, but it offended me. The lack of soul, I suppose, always offended me in some classic Buddhist literature. I think it's boring because it's soulless. It doesn't allow the imagination to play. It doesn't allow anything personal to happen. If something personal doesn't happen, we'll start paying lip service to it and doing something else in our private lives. So we need to bring the personal into the zendo, into the temple, and make it sacred and that's the true task. There must be some sense of imaginative play in zen. There must be laughter and jokes and things like that because the soul loves those things, and they're so transient, and you explain it later and there's no point to it. You can't put it in a sutra. Sutras aren't very good on jokes, but that's an essential part of human life.

The last thing I want to say is that I think the great traditions did embody this. This work on character and the honoring of the soul, and the transience, small animals, gardens, the feminine in whatever forms the culture hallucinates it. All this was in the great tradition. There are always misogynists in the great tradition, but there are always great women, too. This work on soul always did go on although it's hard to codify and wasn't codified. I think one of our tasks of really deepening Buddhism--I think one of our tasks is to try to help the culture if we can by deepening Buddhism. I think that the first place to do it is in ourselves, that we have to hold that conflict within ourselves and work with our own messiness and see what happens from there and then we follow and trust the actions that start coming out from that, the generosity of action that will automatically come from a spiritual practice so that we can make our bodhisattva contribution to the culture.

This might be a good place for me to take a breath. I think it was Mark Twain who said, "Few people are converted after the first twenty minutes of a sermon."

And maybe take some questions.

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