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"TO BE AT EASE" - a provisional title of
an originally untitled teisho.

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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TEISHO

John Tarrant Roshi

October 20, 1990

Oakland, California

"TO BE AT EASE IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES"

I'd like to emphasize today the value of insight and different
ways it emerges in zen training. The koan tradition is a
tradition of insight. I don't know about you, but that is what
attracted me to the training in the first place. Handed down
from the beginning there was this great way of seeing that frees
us. Our lives are impermanent. Everything we hold onto is
always being snatched away. You may notice that there is
something you really want and you struggle to get it, and then
you get it. A good analogue for some people is something like a

new car or a new house. You struggle and struggle to get it. People plan and plot and decide which car to buy and then they buy their new car and it's just another new car. Just another thing in your life. There it is. Impermanent. Another piece of metal. We all know that experience in many ways. Unless we make them so, our lives do not flower. Unless we fully experience them, our lives are just pieces of metal.

Sung ten's (sp???) teacher, Yuan-wu (Engo). His teacher was Fa-yen. He came to Fa-yen and said:

I avoid experiencing something.

Fa-yen said: Please explain that to me; what you have experienced.

He explained it to him.

Fa-yen said: Yes, it's as I feared. You do not understand.

Engo got pissed off about this and he left in a huff.

Before he left his teacher said: Remember me when you are sick with fever.

Engo said: Yeah, sure. And he left.

One day he did become sick, very sick, and he remembered Fa-yen's words. The sickness was of that kind that shakes you to the very core and makes you reassess your life and your certainties. After he had convalesced he went to Fa-yen and

studied with him for a long time.

We sacrifice our time and we come together to sit. This is a good thing, a great thing to do. This is what will get us through the hard times and the good times.

The koan tradition started out with students just asking questions in public and the teacher would answer them. Sometimes the dialogue would go on for a little while and then it would stop. The students would ask things that seemed to be a decent way of formulating the question. Traditional questions were often things like, 'what is Buddha?', or 'why did Bodhidharma come from the west?' And the teacher would say something helpful like, 'the oak tree in the garden,' or 'three pounds of flax.' And every now and then a student's mind would be opened by this and then the student would become the oak tree and understand completely what was meant. Some of those sayings because they were found to be particularly helpful, because they seemed unusually resonant, survived and got passed down. Yun-men's (Unmon) speech was so fine that he forbade his students to write it down. A student might concentrate on remembering or telling somebody else about what he was saying rather than hearing it. We have his koans because his tanto disobeyed him and wore a paper robe and scribbled them down on the robe. Gradually the koans were passed down and collected and have been with us for over a thousand years, which in human terms is quite a long time.

One thing that makes a good koan is that it's difficult to get hold of. It's intriguing and interesting, but you can't quite

unpack it. It doesn't immediately reveal itself to you so your doubt and sense of mystery begins to collect around the koan. All our difficulties get poured into the koan, which is what it is for. It is through this that we open the gate of our own living. When we really become one with the koan, we begin to enter our own lives so fully that we are no longer ghosts clinging to our old concepts thinking we know how the world works and living through those ideas rather than directly. When we understand the fleeting quality of life and there's no way we even wish to change that. Whatever we hang onto will be snatched away. We all know that. However much we love it; however well we behave, even if you practice special breathing exercises, it will still be snatched away. Even if we take homeopathic medicines; even if we are made a full partner, it will still be snatched away.

At first that is an occasion for something like terror. I think that terror, perhaps, is what brings us to the practice initially whether we know it or not. But as the practice deepens, I think we are not so afraid or so terrified. There's something like joy in that fleeting quality, too. When we live each moment within its beauty, we understand it to the core and it is easy to love each moment. It is easy to get up in the morning full of joy. It is easy to embrace and welcome the others who are also getting up in the morning. All our companions of the way from the trees to our friends in zen. Each moment the trees, the birds and the weather all come into being all over again at the beginning of the world.

So at first, I think, people sat with sayings of koans they made

up themselves and gradually through them came to insight. Then the koans became a measure of the impact of the insight. I know of no other tradition that has a language in which we can talk about the fine movements of the Tao after enlightenment. Language is the distinctive vehicle of consciousness and of awareness. The koans, which at first seem so awkward and indigestible and, in fact, are awkward and indigestible, turn out to be the great highway markers for the road. To have the language, to be able to speak with it, to wrestle with the accuracy of our expression with the teacher, allows us to deepen our insight in a way that is not otherwise possible. This is the sense in which we all hold each other and all help each other. The original development of the koan work was actually a collective project of all deeply sophisticated human matters. No one person was responsible for it. We all shared it.

Harada Roshi, Dai'un Harada, who was one of the most important recent Japanese teachers of the koan tradition in the west since many of the western koan lineages run through him, used to say the best way is to hold somebody for forty years. No matter what way the student turns you block him or her. No matter how wise they are you tell them it's not good enough. Then by the time forty years is arrived a great wave of enlightenment comes and overwhelms everybody in the student's path including the teacher. He said that few students and teachers knew this and had the patience for it anymore. We do it the second best way. He said there were many worse ways, but the second best way was to bring the student along gradually opening and opening and opening and opening until after forty years the student was completely opened, which is the same. He still didn't think it was as good,

but he thought got to the same place. It's true we work that way. There's a little bit of both in the way we work. We hold ourselves, particularly in the beginning and one of the teacher's jobs is to hold the student up against the question. This means to value the question, to honor the question, the great question at the core of our lives.

One of the things I have noticed about the solutions that people adopt in their lives is that usually they have not taken sufficient care over the question. Very often people are solving something without finding out what the problem is. The koan tradition makes us sit with the koan until this matter becomes clear. This is true in commonplace matters as well as matters that are obviously to do with the dharma. It's amazing how quickly we want to go running off to solve a problem and how unwilling we are to just be with the problem until something gets to work in it. We consider the Tao begins to show itself. When we have a problem, it just means we're not in the Tao in that particular area, that particular time. The traditional zen way of handling that, of course, is just to immerse ourselves in the problem, to return in that way to the Tao and then the problem becomes clear. We may not like it, but it's not a problem any more.

One interesting thing about this is that zen always brings up your inferiority. A good zen path always brings up your sense of your own incompetence and your own sense of either depression or anger about that according to circumstances. People either get angry with themselves or the leaders are usually popular targets or with the teacher or who knows? The method, there's something

wrong with the method. Really, we should be wearing red. This is not such a bad thing when it comes up. It means that somebody's alive in there; the spirit is still there; the fight is still in them, in their being. Over and over again we have to return to the treasure that is not in outside objects. It is not in the leaders or in the teacher or in the great teachers of the past. Each of has his or her own practice to follow and the integrity with which we follow that is the important thing. The integrity means when the mind wants to stray, the mind wants to blame somebody else or blame oneself, for that matter, we just bring it back. It is so simple. The method is very simple, it's just that we don't do it a great deal. To bring it back in the dojo, in the meditation hall, gives us the experience of what happens when our obsessions begin to fall away. New obsessions arise, but then they, too, begin to fall away. And then we need to take it out and do it elsewhere in our lives. This is where we tend to be a bit slack, I think.

When we begin to open up, we remember the jewel that we came into the world with and that we forgot or misplaced. We remember who we are. People open up in different ways so that when you read accounts of enlightenment, you'll find they're rather flamboyant because, after all, they're the best accounts to record. But the truth is some people have dramatic experiences and others do not. From the point of view of the teacher the emotional tone of the experience is not so important. Whether you laugh quietly to yourself or jump up and start yelling in the zendo, in which case the tanto will tell you to please sit down, or none of those reactions. That doesn't matter so much. What matters is the depth of the insight and how much it permeates your life. The

first opening is always just a beginning. So is the last opening. The old koans and the new koans, that we are always generating, are good measures of this and good aids in this process. They provide the language through which we can communicate with each other and understand the world, become clear about the nature of the world.

When we do begin to open for the first time, we don't know what we are doing. This is always a positive step. We begin to be content with the great mystery of this life and not knowing what the next step is and understanding that this itself is enough. We can fully relish and taste that next step when it comes. We experience it with the whole body.

There are two mistakes when we have small insights and I think everybody does both so I'll describe them. One is to say, 'this doesn't count for anything at all,' which isn't so bad as long as it doesn't then slide onto, and 'I'm no good' or 'Zen is no good,' which is another common way to go. 'This doesn't count for anything' is one mistake, which is when you have an enlightenment experience and then you find that you still have a fight with your spouse, or whatever it is. Some difficulty arises, you're income tax is audited, or something. The second major mistake is, 'Well, this counts for something.' When the smaller insights come, I think we greet them the way we look at a bird and say, 'Well, there's a bird with great wings. Whoosh!' We regard it the way we hear the sound of rain. We say, 'Ah, rain!' Like that. The other responses we have are our opinions about the rain. Even, 'I hope this fills up the reservoirs' and 'I wonder how much difference this will make in the reservoir.'

Those are this unnecessary fussing that we do with our minds and they block the true creative power of our minds and we give our lives away. How often do we give our lives away? So if you are the kind of person that has little insights along the way, then you are the kind of person that has little insights along the way. If you are the kind of person who waits and has great insight, but never knows until the last minute that he or she is going to have it, then you're that kind of person. That means that the opening and purification, in your case, doesn't happen with your conscious awareness, but you can trust that it is happening. Chao-chou (Joshu) used to say, "Go away and practice another twenty years and if it doesn't work you can come back and kill me." He was pretty confident. Also he was very old, of course. No, he was confident as well. Justifiably so. As far as I can tell, it doesn't matter. There is no required procedure for enlightenment that would be a malign sort of contradiction. So whatever you've read in a book won't apply to you. If you're looking too much for what is in the book, you won't notice your own life.

Many people of my generation, and the generation of many of you, had significant experiences with psychedelic drugs. I've often met people who seem to have had quite a helpful experience with a drug that seems to have opened them some. It's kind of cloudy and scattered, but it's opened them up, but who then spend the rest of their meditation history trying to recreate that experience. I know a guy who studied with everybody. He studied with the best teachers you could imagine and he's still struggling to get that. He's been in all the great temples, (lists temples and roshis). He's a good man, but he won't let go

of this idea he has. I know a number of people like that. That hanging onto the idea of what enlightenment is stems from some crucial fear and it is the last thing we are holding onto. If we let go of this last certainty, who knows what will happen. Who knows? Who knows? We almost come to that place where we let go of that last certainty. And then what? We must trust what will happen.

If you are kind of a control freak, as most people who come to zen are. Zen, as you know, was invented by people who were driven and liked to think a lot and run things and so it's a great counter action for those tendencies. A great releasing of the narrowing qualities of the shadow of those tendencies is what it does, actually. Then you'll find that letting go of the certainties is a great relief, but there is a kind of discipline to it, too, which is why, even when we are far along in practice, we'll find sometimes that a resistance to sitting comes up in us. You all know that. When you sit in a retreat, you'll find the first few hours are very rocky, that jabbering kind of quality. It's just the old clinging to certainties coming up again. Don't worry. It will go away, just like enlightenment.

There is a story in many cultures. The story of a person who wanted to experience Kuan-yin, to experience that great enlightenment and compassion. He began to meditate very hard knowing that this experience would (let's call him her), change her and she would become fully enlightened with the power to help others.

She's meditating and Kuan-yin is walking along and notices

her and walks up and taps her on the shoulder.

The woman says: Oh, please don't bother me right now, I'm looking for Kuan-yin.

Kuan-yin taps her on the shoulder again and the woman says: Go away. I'm looking for Kuan-yin. I'm meditating.

So Kuan-yin says, "Oh, okay."

If we're trying to contrive too much or exploit our zazen too much, we will not get the true treasures of the zazen. You can actually get some small treasures when you try and contrive your zazen and go for some particular samadhi states, for example, or spend it solving your business problems as some people do, arguing your law cases as somebody I know used to do, but you will miss the true gold. The world is more interesting when we are more open to it. The picture of bread is not as satisfying to our hunger as the true bread.

One experience that is very characteristic as we deepen in the koan path is that both enlightenment and life are simpler than we thought they were. We find that we really know what to do, but sometimes we don't quite do it. I feel like as my own practice has deepened, it's been a lot easier to know what to do when I really never had a clue what to do most of my life. It seems like that gets given to me more and more, but whether or not I do it is more of a question sometimes. I'm tired, or I don't want to. So we still work with our resistances. Then we have to become curious about those smaller, though nonetheless real.

dualisms we erect within ourselves between the person who knows what to do and the person who doesn't want to. In other words, we have to work with the idea that the resistance is something separate from ourselves, not part of our practice and part of our path.

Things become clear because for the moment there is nothing in the way of the view. You know how when we're walking along and then maybe we're talking with friend and then suddenly something invades our mind and we can't be there. We're not walking with our friend anymore. We're not even walking. We're off in a room somewhere arguing with somebody. I think we become more and more able to know that that's not a good thing to be doing and eventually more and more willing to come back from that, to pull the ox back from that kind of behavior, to become fully and richly present. Yang-ch'i, one of the last of the great Chinese Lin-chi teachers in our Japanese Rinzai lineage--in other words, it went from him to Japan--he said this marvelous phrase. He said, "The coin that is lost in the river is retrieved from the river." The sense that whatever we let go of will return to us and it is something golden. If you let it go, it will come back a thousand fold. If you hold onto it, it will be snatched away. I remember as a young child the most final thing I could conceive of was dropping a coin into the harbor. I remember have a couple of two shilling pieces, which was a lot of money for a young child who wanted money for all the reasons children want money. I remember being fascinated and flipping it off the wharf and watching it go down and it just disappeared in the blackness. It was the most final thing I could think of and I felt this awe at how lost it was, how utterly irretrievable. I think of that as

this metaphor, in the sense that whatever is lost is actually fully present. It is fully gained. The impossible. The coin that was lost in the silt of the harbor returns again.

So when we have really tasted our rice, our hamburger, or whatever it is we're tasting, other things begin to seem small to us. Even when we suffer, it is not too bad. We are willing to stay with the suffering, to inhabit it, to live our lives, to be in the Tao until the suffering, too, turns on the wheel and passes. We do not mind it. We are free of the terror of it, which is the great fixing, claustrophobic thing about suffering. Last time I was in Sydney somebody said this great phrase in sesshin, "Today, for the first time in my life I ate breakfast." Right. Today, for the first time, I actually did something without being in a thousand places and having a thousand disturbances arise. How intoxicating that is.

Lin-chi said:

There is no stability in the world. It is like a house on fire. This is not a place where you can stay for a long time.

The implication being, don't bother making yourself quite that comfortable.

This is not a place where you can stay for a long time. The murderous demon of impermanence is instantaneous and it does not chose between the upper and lower classes, between the old and the young. If you want to be new and different from the buddhas and the zen masters, just don't seek outside yourself. The pure light in a moment of awareness in your

mind is the buddha's essence in you. The nondiscriminating light in a moment of awareness in your mind is the buddha's wisdom within you. The undifferentiated light in a moment of awareness in your mind is the buddha's manifestation in you.

He also said:

It's best not to have obsessions. Just don't be contrived. Simply be ordinary.

You can see to be truly ordinary is a wonderful thing. To be truly ordinary is to be full of the sense of joy and also that sense of, well, this is this, just this. The greatness and the commonplace of the dirt. The commonplaceness of the Tao.

Yang-ch'i again said, the fellow who told of the coin lost in the river. Somebody asked him:

When Bodhidharma came from India to China, he sat facing the wall for nine years. What does this mean?

Yang-ch'i said: Well, he was Indian and couldn't speak Chinese.

Someone else asked him:

As it is said, if you want to escape from clamor in the mind, you should read the ancient teachings. What is the ancient teaching?

Yang-ch'i said: The moon is bright in space; the waves are calm on the ocean.

The inquirer asked: How does one read it?

Yang-ch'i said: Watch your step.

So there is always the play in zen between the great vastness that underlies everything and shines brightly and carries us up within it. It is so vivid. And on the other hand, the small person who carries, who inhabits that ocean and the land and walks about and is a particular height and weight and age and has these troubles and that happiness and is related to these other people, who knows this and does this for a living. The great vastness only appears through this individual, unique being, which is why we end up having compassion for each other when we have the opening of the way. Each being is precious. Each of you carries the light of the buddha. It is to be found nowhere else but in living things. Also, we can say, non-living things. The stones and the stars each have their own lives.

This life at the moment is full of blessing. Over and over again I used to go to my teacher and go through the whole procedure of dokusan and bows and kneel on the mat and have nothing to say. He would look at me and ring his bell. My discipline was to come and have nothing to say, but to come anyway, and his was to ring his bell. After awhile I began to understand this, that the Great Life was working right there. Shortly after that I began to have something to say as well, but even now it is not completely necessary.

The poet Ryokan was very good on the connection between the smallness and the vastness. He said:

In all ten directions of the universe there is only one truth. When we see clearly the great teachings are the same. What could ever be lost? What can be attained? If we attain something, it was there from the beginning of time. If we lost something, it is hiding somewhere near us. Look! This ball in my pocket. Can you see how priceless it is? (trans: Stephen Mitchell)

Okay. I think I'll stop on that note. Please enjoy the rest of your zazen this afternoon. Each moment full and complete.

end of record