

## SESSHIN LECTURE

by Zentatsu Baker-roshi  
April, 1976, Zen Mountain Center

When we start a sesshin, I always like to come back to very simple considerations. Why we're doing it at all. Or when you get up in the morning, why get up? What gets up? Who gets up? If you lie there a moment after the wakeup bell your body becomes stuff. Stuff which you know fairly well—rib cage, shoulders, legs; but if you look for your self in that stuff, you cannot find your self. But I think when you decide to get up, you have some sensation of finding yourself, or the stuff takes on some identity by deciding to get up. But if you look at the decision to get up, is the decision to get up you? It's correct, isn't it, to say, "It is I," and not correct to say "It is me"? But from another point of view, "It is me" is more correct. When we answer the question, "Who is there?", we don't mean, it is I from my own subjective point of view. We mean, it is me, from your point of view.

Something is here at the door. So getting up: Who is me? Doing zazen: Who is I, who is me? It's difficult to find me in the stuff of your rib cage, or even in the decision to get up. Do you carry your identity in the decision to get up or the decision to do zazen, or to do sesshin, or the decision to develop the one who gets up. It is ephemeral and very difficult to pin down. At least you can physically hit your rib cage; but you can't hit the decision to get up. It can slip away easily. On one side, most of us identify psychologically or in our daily emotional acts with the series of decisions we call character or personality or intention. But then there is a fundamental anxious identification with our physical presence and body because we know if we get sick, or have an accident, if your rib cage becomes broken, that can rapidly be the end of every other me and I.

So without making a decision, we just lie there, some meaningless stuff; and yet even making a decision, we are dependent on the health of our stuff and our inability to penetrate the oneness of our decisions and our stuff. So who is responsible for our doing this sesshin? Our continuing to sit through pain. What separates this level of decision and personality from our stuff? What brings them together? Who is doing zazen? Why are they separated?

When I was going up to San Francisco last time, I was struck again by what most of you must have already felt coming out of Tassajara. Coming out of zazen is the same thing, but maybe after having been at Tassajara for quite a while, it's more pronounced. You drive out of Tassajara, and you enter a historical period, this country, this twentieth century. But it would not be so surprising if you drove out and found the seventeenth century. Are you familiar with this feeling? How everything is so arbitrary and yet so exact. Some big

billboard, that Governor Brown put there, or President Ford, or our society. And it is very beautiful. Even some trashy song on the radio is a quite wonderful song. The bright colors. Some motel. Whatever you see has a wonderful transiency and transparency. A wonderful emptiness about it, a wonderful arbitrariness about it, artificialness about it, some sham show, you know, that we all take so seriously. But suddenly you see it as just an arrangement. You have a very tangible feeling of emptiness. Not the emptiness of meaning, meaninglessness. That too, but the emptiness of something *more* than the forms. The forms have some arrangement. So you can feel that for yourself too. The decision is just some arrangement. Your rib cage is just some arrangement.

Dogen tries to point this out when he says, "The painted teacakes are real," or "Eat the painted teacakes." His statement is a reflection on an old Buddhist story and saying that you can't be satisfied by a picture of teacakes. Dogen says, you should have painted teacakes for dinner. He means you are painted by the five skandhas. Everything is some painted picture, some billboard.

When you really have a tangible feeling for emptiness, not just an insight, but a dwelling in non-dwelling based on not needing anything anymore, you can use things, but you don't care so much one way or the other. It means you have gotten through your intriguing karmic stories. You know your intriguing karmic stories as something artificial, something you have made up, just an interpretation, one interpretation, and yet they are what tie you to a sense of reality, what keeps you from the tangibility of emptiness. The looseness of everything. Yet everything in its own residence. Not caught in a definition. It always comes out as a contradictory expression. But if you see that this period is actually the seventeenth century, our twentieth century is actually the seventeenth century, everything has a kind of looseness, of freedom of possibility, of not being just the seventeenth century, of suddenly being also the seventeenth century. Just some adjustment. And also you have that wonderful feeling of having been there before, of having been there before it happened. So most of us trying to understand our world and predict where it's going, are caught in our own prediction. Such a person can't feel the dis-illusion of it. Not only the looseness of it, but that being created, it can also be undone. In the story of Keichu's cart that Gettan tells—I've told you that story—there is a commentary on it: Taking twigs and branches and grasses, making a thatch house; undoing twigs and branches and grasses, again a grassy field.

Usual person doesn't think it can be a grassy field again, they think it always has to be something following from the thatched hut. But the seventeenth century can be undone. The twentieth century can be undone. And when you have that feeling, tangible feeling, you don't need anything, you are quite free. When you have that feeling, the world is a very different place. Zen is very simple; if I describe it, it is very simple. But when that simplicity is you completely, you live in a very different world. And your understanding of historical process and the possibilities for us and the meaning and extent of suffering, are very different when you see that the grassy field and the thatched hut are both always there.

Keichu was a mythological cartmaker of ancient China. Keichu is said to have made a great cart with a hundred spokes in a wheel. But take away front and

back, axle and hubs. What will it be? Gettan does not mean form and emptiness, the contrast of emptiness and form, or something like before and after. He means form *as* emptiness itself. Always the cart is apart—it's very loose. Wheels are floating through space, body of cart is floating through space. Arbitrarily together. Loosely together. Such a superb vehicle understood this way can carry us. Can go in any direction.

So you're not in any particular century. You're sitting with Dogen, with Nagarjuna, with Buddha. You don't have any particular history, or parents, or century to return to. Through and through you can see how we generate ourselves. How everything is generated from "inside." You can say all subjective—I, I, I, I; or all objective—me, me, me, me. Subjective and objective do not have much usefulness as expressions anymore. I like photographs which have no space in them, or which are all space—like a photograph of an illuminated vegetable leaf, so you don't see anything but vegetable leaf, or vegetable leaf behind vegetable leaf. So you don't think there's some escape over there, some space over there, some absolute or emptiness. Or some particular century you find refuge in. Rain hitting the ocean.

Letting your description loose in this way in a sesshin is sometimes a decision to sit, and then sometimes your rib cage has its own decisions. At the same time the decision to sit and the rib cage are also arbitrary painted teacakes. So beyond the decision to sit, beyond the physical need to sit, what is sitting? What is arbitrary or not arbitrary or artificial or not artificial? What century are you sitting zazen in? Do you need to give it a name?

Please enjoy the formless realm, the transiency of this sesshin, transiency of this century, transiency of your own body, of your own stuff, your own personality. Temporarily we are here together.



*This photograph has been in our files for some time. No one knows what it means.*