

Pelican Bay

Dharma talk given by Maylie Scott at Pelican Bay Prison January 14, 2001

Last Sunday we read the first chapter in Reb Anderson's book "Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains" and he talked about the acupuncture needle of zen, of zazen. That was the first image that came up in the chapter, how our zazen practice is like a healing needle in the middle of our lives; that as we continuously sit zazen this needle tenderizes our lives from the center, tunes up our lives.

And then there was some talk of appropriate action. So this whole business is about activity, how we tune in to our life's activity. Sitting zazen, how we tune in to the mental activity, and the breath activity, and the physical activity, find our place, find our beat.

I wanted to talk about a case in the Blue Cliff Record, "Hoshan's knowing how to beat the drum."

"Hoshan gave a teaching. Cultivating study is called learning. Cutting off study is called closeness, nearness. Going beyond these two is to be considered the real going beyond." A monk came forward and asked, "what is the real going beyond?" And Hoshan said, "knowing how to beat the drum." And again the student asked, "what is the real truth?". Hoshan said "knowing how to beat the drum." And again he asked, "Mind is buddha. I'm not talking about this. What is not mind and not Buddha?" Hoshan said, "knowing how to beat the drum."

In the old Pali sutras a buddha said "I go to the city of kasi? now to set the wheel of law in motion in a blindfold world. I go to beat the deathless drum."

So how do we tune into that activity?

We know that when our mind is related to something, when there's some thought, some object in our mind, our mind is not free. And when our mind is not in relation to some object, it's free.

And how do we find the place where we can act freely, without the constriction of our bodymind habits?

So: "cultivating study is called learning." And we do need to learn. We need to study and we need to figure things out. But how do we know what makes the studying, the cultivating study, what makes that helpful?

It's kind of a two-edged sword. Reading about zen, reading about the dharma is useful and very helpful when we can include our whole being in that reading so we feel as if when we're reading the dharma we are reading about ourselves, and we see our effort there and we see our demons there and we see our freedom there and that's very helpful.

But, you know, the zen teachers were really strong about talking about zen without doing it. "Having your eyebrows grow very long." Talking about the dharma without practicing. Talking... you have to "walk the talk." And when a person is not walking the talk but preaching the dharma, pretty quickly one feels that.

And there's a great deal of talk about zen these days, it's very fashionable.

So it's a really good idea to study, but how do we manifest that study so that the study tunes up our

lives and tunes up the lives of others.

You can see that for all of us sometimes we're just kind of blindsided. We enter a room and there's things to do and we just stand there, tuned out. And then other times some people come into a room and they can just kind of see what needs to be done here, does the window need to be opened, this, bum, bum, bum, and they just do it. Sutra cards need to be passed out, they're just there. And you can kind of see when you're in a setting of zen students that the people who are really tuned into the activity that's going on - those are the mature students.

So, learning and studying. We have this small group in the mornings, in the early mornings at 7 when we have services. For months we've been studying the service: the bells, the beating of the drum, of the merkudyo, that directs the chants. The leader of the chants, how the chants are vocalized, we've been studying it for months and we are still learning, all of us, and when people learn there's a crib sheet and first they're kind of... and that's the crudest way of studying. After a while they get so they can mostly put the sheets down and then they can tune in and then they can be in tune because that's what the service is about. It's about all the people in the room being exactly in tune with one another. At the beat one person rings the bell, the next person strikes the mergudyo, the next person announces the chant, and it's continuous beat.

So first you have your glued-to-the crib-sheet and then you put the crib sheet down and then your ears and your eyes and your body get into it and you're beating the drum when that happens. That's just an analogy.

"Cutting off study is called nearness." The sitting, the just being in the moment is nearness, just exactly being here with no judgment, no fear, just being present, and that's wonderful. How does appropriate response arise from that stillness? That's our big question.

And there are various falls that we have, various ways in which our drumbeat gets erratic or wobbly or doesn't happen. From one point of view, at one extreme, the fall is imagining that there is a standard of what I ought to be doing, imagining that "the group does it this way," "so-and-so says to do it this way," "I ought to be doing it this way". You know, one needs to look around and be alert and make a focused effort, but if you get too used to the painted dragons you miss the real one. And you miss what's really going on, you miss that play of the dragons and fishes in deep water.

And the other extreme of the fall is that you sort of, "well, I have a pretty good intuition and I'll just trust it." "I know a lot about dogs, so I can just trust that this one won't fight back." Sort of taking your intuition and going on automatic pilot doesn't work either.

Having too little confidence, having too much confidence.

So finding that middle way. Somebody said emptiness is not a state but a way of living in a rich and complex world without fixation. That's beating the drum.

So I wanted to talk a little bit about the last two days. It just happened that I went up two days in a row to Pelican Bay and as I went I had this koan going in the back of my mind, how do you beat the drum, the dharma drum in this blindfolded world. Well, Pelican Bay is a blindfolded world.

So on Friday 13 of us or so went up on a tour that was organized by a member of the Bar None student activist group and we took a two or three hour tour. It was a very exhausting tour given by a guide, a lieutenant who really hoped -- wanted -- hoped he could disabuse us of some prejudices that we were likely to have about Pelican Bay. And so there was a kind of line about it being a pretty good institution. That the guards spend most of their time taking care of prisoners, bringing them food, taking them to medical appointments, etc... But then there would be the contradictions,

or the other sides, that we would see. "The guards were caretakers," but then we came across the extraction cart filled with helmets and shinguards and all sorts of things for when prisoners should be extracted from their cells. And we were shown a shoe factory, "prison industry" going on, except that everything was very quiet because they're on lockdown and the whole prison has been in lockdown for the better part of two or three years. So despite the fact that there were these opportunities, things were mostly very quiet. But there were some people making shoes in the shoe factory. And there was a very nice looking woman who talked about the educational program for the prisoners who are soon to make some kind of transition and then there was the mental health unit, that if there's some problem, there's some diagnostic activity, and then people are sent to the mental health unit.

Well when we went in there they have groups but then you could see where the groups, how the group room is a very small metal windowless chamber and it has three or four tiny little cells with grilled doors and that's where the group members sit, each in his own tiny little grilled place.

That kind of thing.

We were shown a great array of prison-made weapons. Plastic materials, with toothbrushes, very ingeniously devised. So it went on and on. And I'm pretty sure that by the end of those couple of hours -- we got a lot of chances to ask questions -- I think everybody was pretty overwhelmed by the end of it, kind of blotto.

And my experience was being overwhelmed and then little by little feeling a sadness, great sadness, when we got back home, began to sit zazen and open myself. Because, what can you do there, you're protecting yourself, everyone's protecting themselves, one of the guards in fact told one of our members "half the guards in here are on prozac." So there was this very overwhelming situation.

Our experience in practice is usually we sit facing a wall and that's an exterior wall, and we also are quite familiar with the interior wall. Walking out of that prison, the grayness in the midst of beautiful country, I just felt the wall, the interior wall. But if we're willing to keep at it, if we are willing to just sit in front of the wall, then we know from our practice that it's not so solid as it seems. Somebody said she sits in front of a wall, just a wall, well what do you do you? You take a little bite out of it, and then it's not just a solid wall.

Well, Friday night I was not looking forward specially to going up the next day again with my friend who was in prison herself and has been out for some time and is a 100 percent devoted prison activist. All she does with her life is "what can she do about this situation, how can she help particular people." I told her some time ago that I wanted to visit somebody. My request was somehow dropped into the inmate pool and they, the inmates, figured out who I ought to see, and it was an incredibly good match.

About half the people are in the segregated housing unit, the SHU. The SHU is divided up into pods, and we went into one of them.

There are perhaps 20 cells in a pod, upstairs, downstairs, a narrow corridor between and, beyond, a narrow outdoor exercise area and somewhere a shower.

So people who are in the SHU -- many of them for decades, many of them for life -- that's their world. They don't get out of the SHU unless maybe they go to the law library.

I don't know how the inmates communicate with one another from pod to pod but they do and they suggested that I see this man, who is named Wolf, because he's very interested in mathematics

and philosophy and was said to be smart.

So the visiting is through a glass, through a telephone and we were there for 2 hours and I was somewhat apprehensive about spending two hours in face to face contact. It went very quickly, very easily. He turns out to be a man about 50. He's in the SHU for life, didn't say why. Tattoos from the wrists up.

But what he has realized is that the only way to live this life is to live it as a monk. That from his earliest childhood experiences he's had experiences of - intuitions of the world not being the way it seemed; the world being much wider, much bigger. So he's always had the question "what is it whats going on, why, what?"

So -- they do have TV and there was an ed channel almost always available.

So he devotes his days to studying math problems, learning Spanish, reading his books, and watching the TV and figuring out "what is it?"

And the other guys in the pod get annoyed and actually he has a cellmate - you can choose to have a cellmate and these guys have been together for eight years and before that they knew one another in another prison so somehow their lives have joined and he also tries to help his "fellas" he calls them, teach them things.

And he was very keen to learn something about meditation.

So somehow I could feel my drum beginning to beat again. When it seemed "total blank," "total impasse," there was this drumbeat.

So how do we tune ourselves in? How do we find the activity - our life activity - and keep that activity bright and available? Find the drumbeat of our lives, and carry that through our personal suffering and carry it through the world's suffering?

How do we hear it and how do we tune in?