

Spiritual Simplicity

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This talk was given on New Year's Day, 2002 and has been edited by Rev. Master Hugh, Rev. Master Oswin and Rev. Master Meikō.

Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma, Homage to the Sangha. What a year. I pray that we may not again have to be faced quite so intensely with the utter lack of the four aspects of enlightenment that we all, with the whole world, had thrust in our faces this past September. It is sobering to me to see the enormity of suffering and the ripples of that suffering, karmically speaking, which can be brought about by just a few of us human beings who give ourselves over thoroughly to delusion.

It seems to have had an effect on the entire world. There is a certain sadness, a certain insecurity, a certain sense of the fragility of human life and the fragility of human decency. And we have no way of knowing how long the ripples of this will continue, nor how, perhaps, they may even be magnified by some of our attempts to set them to rest. For we who are people of faith, religious faith of any sort, there is the added sobering fact that the particular delusions in this case, as historically in many cases, were religious in nature. It would seem that many of the atrocities of humankind, throughout history, have come

from religious notions of how evildoers must be punished by self-appointed agents of divine retribution.

For me, at least, this raises an inevitable question. Am I doing that in some way, too? Might I do that? In what way may I do that? How may I not do that, please, even in little ways. The big ones are obvious; the little ones are subtle, but present, sometimes. If there is anything that the events of this past year have made me wish to abstain from more than all else, it is doing anything of that sort.

And yet within this sadness, this self-questioning and introspection, there are some positive things which many people have pointed to: a new perspective on what is important. A perspective on, not only what is well not to do, but what is well to do. Such things as being, simply being with one's loved ones and friends. Not doing anything in particular, just being. Such things as doing small acts of enlightenment, bringing charity, tenderness, benevolence and sympathy into life in little ways. Truthfulness, whether it be within oneself or to one's fellow people; and the tolerance that comes from forgiving ourselves, and others, our mutual humanity; a wish to care for one another and for the world.

All of these things strike me as being very simple, very basic, and somehow, together (and this is where I am not quite fathoming or able to bring together what I sense), these things paint a picture that is larger than the things themselves. A picture of what I will call, for lack of any other term, "spiritual simplicity." While I cannot define that for you or even for myself, it's something that seems to have been recognized and spoken of in various ways down the ages in the Zen tradition. I will try to share with you

some observations about it, perhaps in the way in which one sees a moth circle around the flame. Even if I cannot point directly to it, perhaps we can fly around it a little together.

One thing that strikes me about spiritual simplicity is that it has something to do with accepting ‘what is’. I remember one of the things that Reverend Master Jiyu taught us: “All acceptance is the key to the gateless gate.” The gateless gate refers to the non-existent entrance to the Way, the non-existent barrier to enlightenment, which is no barrier at all. And, as she said from time to time, “Sometimes it feels like a gate, or it looks like a gate, and if that’s the case, and you feel the need for a key, well, here, try all acceptance. See how that works. You could do worse than all acceptance as your key.” And she’s not the only one to say that in various ways. I would like to quote you a poem written by the monk Nyōgen Senzaki, one of the first Zen monks to live in this country. It is a New Year’s poem (how appropriate), written on the first of January 1946. This was his first New Year upon release from the Japanese internment camps in this country after the Second World War. He says the following:

Like a snail, I carry my humble zendō with me.
It is not as small as it looks
For the boundless sky joins it
When I open a window.
If one has no idea of limitation,
He should enjoy real freedom.
A nameless monk may not have the New Year callers to visit
him,
But the morning sun hangs above the slums.
It will be honorable enough to receive the golden light from
the east.¹

You can sense it in there. There is a simplicity of all-acceptance. There is a deep sense of “it is enough.” And from that it opens something. It is not as small as it looks.

Dōgen talks about it too, in his characteristically linguistically complex way. But he’s pointing to something similar, I think. This is from [*Yuibutsu Yobutsu*,] a chapter in the *Shōbōgenzō*.

The state of no-mind or undefiled mind can neither be self-induced nor is it innate. Although it is commonly believed that the mind moved by the moon and flowers is this True Mind, in actuality this is untrue and contrary to the Dharma. Determination to see all things as they really are, free of preconceived ideas, results in the emergence of true practice.

That’s a critical line there. It points to the foundation of all-acceptance: the willingness, the determination to see what’s really there—mindfulness in its fullness. He continues:

An ancient sage once said, ‘Although the entire world is our Dharmakaya...’²

Dharmakaya. Ah, another one. I can’t define spiritual simplicity, how am I going to define Dharmakaya? Well, think of it, if you will, as the Buddha-ness, Buddha Nature of the entire universe.

‘Although our entire world is our Dharmakaya we should neither be obstructed by it nor attached to it.’

A question one may ask is how can we cause the Dharmakaya to emerge without being obstructed by it? And be answered. As an ancient sage has said, “The entire world is our Dharmakaya.”

Whatever this is, it cannot be produced. It simply is. And that is one of the characteristics of it. That is one of the reasons why all-acceptance somehow is a part of this. To do anything other than all-acceptance is to complicate it, to go away from spiritual simplicity. “It is,” says Dōgen. And it cannot be made to happen. Now this property of not making it (or anything else of a spiritual nature) happen is, I think, another characteristic of spiritual simplicity. When we try to make such a thing happen, it’s a form of non-acceptance. It’s a form of forcing, controlling, and it dooms itself to failure. It cannot possibly succeed, because it goes in the wrong direction, it goes away from the very thing itself. Therefore, don’t even try, don’t even bother to make this happen. It doesn’t work that way.

It’s easy to see that forcing things doesn’t work when we look to what happens when we try to force others, for instance, to adopt our views. Here we get back to where we started today. Even right and benevolent views, when we try to force them on others, are in effect the royal road to crimes against humanity. Most of us, thank heaven, never take it that far. But there are subtler forms, and those forms are not, I think, unknown to you and me. When we try to force or manipulate or—I’m not quite sure of the word, a subtler word than those—influence others to view things in our way, why do we do that? Well, sometimes it comes from what we might call “hating what is wrong,” or not being able to stand what is wrong, and consequently really wishing to bring it to an end. Now where does that come from? Often, it comes from trying ever so hard to do what is right, what is good. And, although hating what is wrong may or may not be a familiar thing to you, simply trying very hard to do what is good is familiar. But spiritual simplicity is simpler than

all that. Listen to a poem by Bankei, a Zen master who lived in the 17th century:

Abominating hell, longing for heaven, you make yourself suffer in a joyful world. You think that good means hating what is bad. What's bad is the hating mind itself. Good, you say, means doing good. Bad, indeed is the mind that says so. Good and bad alike—roll them both into one ball, wrap it up in paper and toss it out. Forget it all. Notions of what one should be doing never existed from the start. Fighting about what's right, what's wrong, that is the doing of the 'I'.³

Ah! Yes! Doings of the 'I'. The Way is to be found not in trying ever so hard to do what is good, but in dropping the doings of the 'I'.

Ryōkan, the Zen poet monk, had many things to say about spiritual simplicity. Here is one regarding not making things, not forcing things to happen:

The great high road of faith is like a brimless receptacle.
It stands infinite, and none have the skill to measure it.
The thoughts and feelings of average men spend themselves
And their rights and wrongs end in more rights and wrongs.
In this bible-babble, who knows that there is a mysterious
Way.

I walk along it, all by myself, my lips lock in silence.
And should I see another road that looks easier than the one of
Nirvana,
I know how foul it would present itself to cloudless eyes.⁴

Yes, the great high road has nothing to do with the rights and the wrongs. It is a Way walked in the midst of those, in silence. It is present but unsuspected in the bible-babble. I love that translation, the nonsense with which we are apt to fill our days. Indeed, another observation I might make about spiritual

simplicity is that it seems to be incompatible with filling one's head with nonsense. While it is not possible to make spiritual simplicity happen, we can at least guard against the nonsense that gets in its way. Now what do I mean by "nonsense?" Well, we've already seen some examples. Right and wrong, forcing things, the million thoughts and feelings that spend themselves, as Ryōkan says. All the forms of not accepting just what is; all the forms of delusion, both within, and the delusions that we seem to sell back and forth to one another on a daily basis. How does one guard against filling one's head with nonsense?

Well, there are a number of ways. Perhaps the ultimate way is the way that Bankei pointed out: just set it all down. And you do not do this just once, by the by. You set it all down again and again and again. But when you set it all down, the nonsense just dissolves. Now, you know there are some times that I don't do that. Bad monk. And when I don't find myself somehow finding a way to do that, there are a couple of things I find helpful. One is to not quite believe the nonsense that I do allow to rattle around in my head. Ryōkan had something to say about this; another one of his poems:

In its innocence, the heart is like water, pure and bright.
Boundless, it presents itself to the sight of its beholder.
Should a proud desire rise, however, to disturb its peace
[which happens],
Millions of wicked thoughts and pictures will bog it down.

Sound familiar? By "wicked" I might have said "seductive" or "engaging." Here comes the interesting part:

If you take these fancies to be real enough to engage you, you
will be led farther and farther away from tranquility.
How sore it is to see a man crazed by earthly thoughts,
A heart bound closely by the cords of the ten temptations.⁵

Right. Sometimes, these million thoughts, feelings, pictures will arise. What then? Well, just don't quite believe them. It's remarkable how we assume that because there is something floating about in our consciousness, it's true, real, big, the way it is...no, not necessarily. The same mind that is capable of holding on to those or forming those thoughts, feelings and things is capable of thinking that the moon is made of green cheese. It would appear not to be so. Just because I think something doesn't make it true. Just because I feel something doesn't make it the entirety of the universe. So this is another way one can deal with nonsense. And one can deal with one's own internal nonsense in this way, and also with the nonsense that we barter back and forth with each other. You just don't have to, quite, entirely believe it.

A third thing that helps me is that there's no point in making this nonsense business harder to deal with than it has to be, though I can avoid stuffing more of it in. Okay, how does one do that? Well, one of the traditional ancient Buddhist ways is by guarding the doors of the senses, by deliberately avoiding unnecessary exposure to nonsense and distraction. Somehow this has a way of assisting the flowering of spiritual simplicity. It is one of the reasons there are monasteries, there are temples, priories. We try, we don't always succeed, but we try in places like these to minimize the nonsense, so that one can come to such a place and see that at least some of the nonsense is not really necessary. It also refers to the ancient advice of avoiding unnecessary contact with people who are selling great wads of delusion, and unnecessary contact with distractions and diversions that have a high nonsense component. This is not easy to do sometimes. One can easily turn this into a way of the oppo-

sites, “Oh, well, I mustn’t have something to do with this person because they’re selling delusion.” Don’t do that. And yet, sometimes you may need to simply step aside for a while and not allow yourself to be flooded with the nonsense of a particular situation.

The trouble is that if one doesn’t do some of this, then one is tempted to do something else instead. If one doesn’t guard the senses from excessive nonsense in one of these ways, then what you’re tempted to do is what I do. I use the metaphor of nonsense being flashing neon signs, okay? There’s so much of it that you’re overwhelmed with it. And so, what do you do? Well, what can be tempting to do is to take out a pair of dark glasses and put them on. It reduces the glare, the flashing is less insistent. The nonsense level that gets in is lower. But, you’ve just added complexity. You’re no longer looking at ‘what is’. You’re looking through this pair of sunglasses. And one of the characteristics of the spiritual sunglasses, as well as regular ones, is they don’t just decrease the glare of the nonsense, they cut out a little bit of everything. And they separate us, therefore, from the directness and all-acceptance characteristic of spiritual simplicity. Rather than put on such dark glasses, better to just step aside occasionally from great wads of nonsense.

The same goes with the nonsense of distraction and diversion. It is possible I am going to sound like a curmudgeon here, and it is possible that I am becoming one. I do entertain that possibility. Consider the act of flipping on the television after a hard day’s work to take your mind off your work so you can rest. That works. It does take your mind off your work. But it doesn’t do it by taking it off, exactly, it does it by filling it up with something else, so that you don’t notice the work. And so

I ask myself, do I really want that stuff floating around inside of me? I almost begin to think that partaking of some of these movies and television shows, video games, etcetera, forgive me, as the equivalents of sharing needles or unprotected sex. Do I really want that stuff inside me? I, at least, take days for it to rattle and pounce around in there and finally, gradually, settle out. I'm not saying don't do it, but I'm saying, maybe take care with what you insert into your mind, just as you would with what you insert into your body. For me, this is going to sound terribly virtuous and my apologies, it's not meant to be, I find that reading a brief passage of Dharma (not a long one, not a complicated one, just a little one), or sitting and watching the sun go down, or sitting in front of the wood stove watching the fire and listening to the rain come down, takes my mind off my work a lot better, without the nonsense.

There's another way of dealing with nonsense, and that is not owning or taking possession of, if you will, the nonsense that does come in. Because form really is "void, unstained and pure." Listen to what Daii Dōshin, the fourth Chinese Ancestor had to say about this:

When the eye sees things, the things are not there, in the eye; it's like a mirror, reflecting the image of a face with complete clarity. In the void appear shapes and images. In the mirror there is not a thing. Evidently, the person's face is not in the mirror, and the mirror does not go out into the person's face. Investigating in detail like this, we realize that from the beginning neither the mirror nor the face has ever gone out or gone in, come or gone. By this analysis, we find that in the eye and in the mirror, from the beginning it has always been empty and still. It is the same for the other sense faculties. We know that the eye is fundamentally empty, so whatever form is seen we

know is not ours. When the ear hears sound we know that it does not belong to us. When the nose smells scents, we know that they are not us. When the tongue differentiates flavors, we know they are not ours. And the same with the thoughts of the mind, the touches of the body. To contemplate like this and reach such understanding is contemplating empty stillness. When you see forms with such understanding you do not take in [he says “receive”] the forms. Not taking in the forms is emptiness; emptiness is formless; formless is uncontrived, and this is the gate to liberation. For one who finds liberation in all the senses, like this, all the senses are like this; there is no need to repeat the discussion for each one of them.⁶

This actually, to use a bad verb, works. I find that if you don't let in too much nonsense (and I do have my limits), you can actually not grab onto it, not take it as yours and it just flows on past. I'm beginning to suspect that that's what Reverend Master Jiyu did in the early days around here when she sometimes would sit with some of us and watch television for hours. She was baby-sitting some of us from worse nonsense. And you know, it didn't seem to affect her at all. It wasn't that she wasn't looking at it. But I, being a naughty monk, watched her sometimes. She was looking at it but it wasn't going in somehow, it was there but it wasn't becoming part of her. I suspect that it may have had something to do with what Daii Dōshin was just talking about.

Another observation about spiritual simplicity, and this one is tricky. It's tricky because it's so easy to make it complicated. The observation is that somehow I sense spiritual simplicity has something to do with living simply. This goes back to another one of the things that Reverend Master Jiyu used to say which

drove me absolutely nuts at the time. She would gather her temple officers together and tell us to stop wanting or insisting on ‘the middle class trip.’ She would talk about being content to just live under a tree, and then she’d go out and buy another widget, or ask us to spend an entire month doing nothing but work on a new section for the cloister. It made no sense.

But she was pointing to something. I suspect at one level what she was pointing to had to do not with ‘the middle class trip’ but with the wanting, the insisting. I suspect what she was saying at one level was, “Be content with what is.” Being content with what is is an aspect of living simply. And within that contentment, that all-acceptance again, one can make use of anything. I also think she was pointing to something more than that. And here’s where it gets harder for me to know quite what it is. There seems to be something in the setting aside, at least once in a while, of the complexities of life, the things which have perhaps a high nonsense load, and being in direct contact with either the natural world or the basic necessities of life, which somehow seem to have a low nonsense factor. There were times when Reverend Master Jiyu would say—and I really believe she meant it,—she longed to live in a cave. She didn’t get the opportunity to do that. But she was telling me something. There were many smaller aspects of that that didn’t involve living in a cave but did involve keeping it simple. I was her cook for many years—because she had diabetes she required a special diet—and often she did not feel very well. So I would prepare delicious dishes with the available ingredients that she could eat to try to tempt her appetite, which she very much appreciated. And, every once in a while, she would look at me, with a slightly wistful expression on her face, and say something like, “Daizui, today, I know you want to prepare *tofu à l’orange* but,

could I just please have a plate of plain, boiled beans?” There was something there in that, it dealt with this simplicity.

I need some help here, in what I’m talking about. Let me go back to Ryōkan. He talks about this a lot in various ways. Be careful how you take what he’s saying. For example:

My house is buried in the deepest recess of the forest.
Every year ivy vines grow longer than the year before.
Undisturbed by the affairs of the world I live at ease.
Woodsmen’s singing rarely reaches me through the trees.
While the sun stays in the sky I mend my torn clothes.
And, facing the moon, I read holy texts aloud to myself.
Let me drop a word of advice for believers of my faith:
To enjoy life’s immensity, you do not need many things.⁷

Now don’t focus on the forest here. That’s context. It is a simple context but any simple context will do for this. What I get from this is a way of life with the senses naturally guarded, with nonsense naturally minimized (so he has no temptation to put on pair after pair of dark glasses), with his attention naturally drawn to just the next thing. When it’s light, he mends his clothes. At night by the light of his fire or his candle, he reads the scriptures. It’s just the next thing. And somehow this is what allows space for perspective on the human condition, and for a type of joy that arises from simple things.

Listen to Master Hsu Yun, one of the greatest of the Chinese Chan masters of the twentieth century:

If there be fear of false thinking, this fear will increase false thinking. If there be awareness of purity, this purity will immediately be impure. If there be fear of falling into non-existence, there will immediately be a fall into existence. If there be a desire to attain Buddhahood, there will immediately be a fall into the way of demons. For

this reason, it is said, the carrying of water and fetching of firewood are nothing but the wonderful Truth. The hoeing of fields and the cultivation of soil are entirely Zen practice. This does not mean that only the crossing of legs for sitting in meditation can be regarded as Zen training.⁸

You don't have to carry water, or fetch firewood, or hoe the field, or cultivate the soil to do what he's talking about. He's talking about living with such a direct connection to life, that it is so immediate that it pre-empts concerns with inner complexities and nonsense. Yes, it is possible to hoe a field in a state of mind of nonsense, but it is difficult. You really have to be locked into it. And, hauling firewood is the same. It invites just doing the next thing. And that's what he's talking about, just doing the next thing, directly connected to what one is doing.

Shakyamuni Buddha, even, talked about it. This is from the *Gradual Sayings, the Anguttara Nikaya*:

Monks, it is because I observe these two results therein, that I am given to dwelling in lonely spots in solitary lodgings in the forest. What two? Observing my own pleasant way of living in this very life, and feeling compassion for future generations. These are the two results.⁹

Now, given that this is Shakyamuni Buddha talking, we can pretty well be sure that this 'pleasure' he's speaking of is not self-indulgent. It seems to refer to a type of joy that comes from spiritual simplicity. And the "compassion for future generations" again suggests that living without nonsense opens a door to the perspectives of what is truly important. I myself find that when I take time out from my office and I just literally shovel snow, cut firewood, plant peas, whether that be here, at my own little temple, or wherever—wash the dishes—good

stuff happens. Good stuff happens to me, and good stuff seems to happen all around. I cannot explain this, I do not understand it, and yet, it seems to be true. There is something about living simply, even one moment of living simply, or directly connected to what is around me, that allows room for something good to take place. And the moment I insist on that or am attached to it in any way, it vanishes. Remember, what we saw earlier, you cannot make spiritual simplicity happen.

That's why I said this is such a tricky area: it is very easy to turn spiritual simplicity into a delusion. There are several types you can do this with, but one of the most common is to turn it into a romantic ideal of training. Let me quote again from Nyōgen Senzaki, this time in his book of Kōans and Zen stories called *The Iron Flute*. This is a kōan of a monk who came to Yun Shu, an ancient Chinese Zen master, and asked:

‘How can I live alone at the top of the mountain?’

Here Reverend Fugai, one of Nyōgen Senzaki's disciples, inserts a comment:

‘Hm. Already lost in the clouds?’

Nyōgen continues with the story:

Yun Shu answered: ‘Why do you give up your zendō in the valley and climb the mountain?’

Fugai again:

‘That's not the way to handle ghosts.’

In other words, he's saying “Ah, rrr, yes, Yun Shu, but this guy's really locked into this, you'd better do something more than just say that.”

Nyōgen:

American friends often ask me how to find the quiet place to meditate. My usual answer is ‘Can you not find a quiet

spot in your own home?’ No matter how busy one’s daily life is, one can find certain minutes in which to meditate, and a place to sit quietly. Merely pining for a quiet place away from one’s own home is entirely wrong. This monk could not harmonize himself with the other monks in the zendō, and wished to live alone on a mountain peak. Even though Yun Shu cornered the monk with his question, no wonder Fugai thought that Yun Shu was too lukewarm in his methods. I think if I were Yun Shu I would demand that the monk tell me where he is at this moment. If he hesitated I would push him out of the room.

Again another one of Nyōgen’s disciples:

If I were Yun Shu I would say to the monk ‘If you do not neglect your own zendō, I will allow you to stay on the mountain peak.’

Nyōgen:

Look at my associates. They’re all good businessmen, businesswomen, housewives...none of them neglect their work in their pursuit of zen. Any teaching that is apart from daily life is not real teaching.¹⁰

Better, I think, the training of one day in the midst of the swirl and complexity, yes, and nonsense of, say, downtown Los Angeles, training with one’s eyes open and one’s feet on the ground, than thirty years in a mountain hermitage with one’s head in the clouds, indulging playing with one’s own delusions. It’s not the context, it’s the simplicity within it. Please do not turn this all into a complexity, an ideal.

Perhaps because of the danger of these attachments, and perhaps because of the Bodhisattva vow, living in contexts that are literally simple is not something that Zen trainees seem to do all the time, if they do it at all. Although Shakyamuni praised

it (in the passage we just read) most of the time he did not live alone in the forest. Though Reverend Master Jiyu really did long to live in a cave sometimes, she did not abandon us. Even Ryōkan, who spent most of his time in a small mountain forest temple, didn't do it all the time. It does not seem necessary or even good to seek spiritual simplicity by trying to do that.

What then, is good, in the “living simply” aspect of spiritual simplicity? Well, from what we've seen I think there are a few things that can be said. One is finding moments of direct connection to our surroundings, whether those surroundings be the vastness of space or the bustle of a city. Direct connection is the important part of it. These moments of direct connection help break the bonds of the inner complexities that we occupy our minds with. Put another way, it is important to walk the dog. Just walk the dog, it's important. Pat the kitty, it's important.

Another thing is to find some time to do the basic activities, the direct basic activities that are necessary for life. You know, there are very few of those left to us. We don't gather our own water, we don't grow and gather our own food, we don't gather our own fuel, we don't make our own shelter, we don't sew our own clothes, this is all indirect nowadays, it's all complicated. The only things of a direct nature of basic human life activities that we seem to have left are what we call “chores.” I guess I'm saying, don't underestimate chores. It is important to cook a meal. It is important to do the dishes. It is important to sweep the floor. In fact, there are some Zen masters who have taken such things—this simple, direct, physical work—as being so important that it is an integral part of their practice. One of

the most famous is the Master Hyakujo. This is a description of him by Dōgen, in Dōgen’s chapter *Gyōji* (“Ceaseless Practice”) in the *Shōbōgenzō*:

Zen master Daiichi of Mount Hyakujo [that’s Master Hyakujo], from his days as Basso’s attendant to his entering into Parinirvana, worked every day, without exception, for the community.

And the work that he was doing was of this simple, “direct connection to the necessities of life” sort of work. It would have been weeding the garden, it would have been gathering the fuel, hauling the water, sweeping the temple grounds, etcetera.

He left the venerable saying:—‘A day of no work is a day of no eating.’ He was already an old man when he said this. He always worked as hard as the young monks. People felt sorry for him, and thought it was a pity, but he refused to stop. The monks once hid his tools...

Oh, boy! (laughter)

...and would not let the master have them. Then Hyakujo would not eat, because he did not participate in the community work. This is the origin of the saying ‘A day without work is a day without food.’ In great Sung China, Hyakujo’s style of teaching based on ceaseless practice is popular throughout the country.¹¹

Another thing that can be said about this “living simply” component—and perhaps the most important thing, I think—is that it has to do with just doing the next thing. Therefore, it is an extension of all-acceptance. “Just doing the next thing” is very interesting. For instance, one of the reasons for a temple schedule is to teach “just doing the next thing.” You know the temple schedule, it’s that pesky thing that’s always getting in the

way of your ideas of living simply. It invites one just to do the next thing without attachment, without judgment, without preference. As the old saying goes, “When the bell rings, you just put on your robe and go to the hall.” If we cannot do that, as lay guests or monks at the temple, then what shall we do when there is no such reminder to lay down our judgments and preferences and attachments, to do the next thing, without the assistance of a thing such as a temple schedule?

It is when one does the next thing that spiritual simplicity is present, and this business of good stuff happening within us and around us, without anybody trying, occurs. As I said, this is a mystery to me; why does this happen? Why do good things happen when people are just doing the next thing, when the next thing is often quite dumb. I don’t know, but it is an observation that has been made before. Listen again to Nyōgen Senzaki. He’s quoting here a poem by the monk, an ancient Chinese Master, Lee Shee:

Lee Shee, who lived thirty years on [Zuhu] mountain
wrote a poem:

‘For thirty years I have lived on Zuhu mountain,
I have taken simple meals to feed my body,
I have climbed the hills and returned to my hut to exercise
my body,
None of my contemporaries would recognize me.’

O.K., he’s living simply in a particular context, and presumably in this context spiritual simplicity is happening. Listen to Nyōgen’s comment, however:

As a bird flies freely yet leaves no trace in the air, so the
Zen monk should live, without making any impression of
his passing.

i.e., without doing, trying, making anything to happen.

The Buddha said: ‘And so he rests and is at peace within, people revere such a monk. Therefore he should avoid all entanglements...’

I would say “nonsense” instead of “entanglements.”

...for otherwise like a solitary desert tree in which all the birds and monkeys gather, so is a monk who is encumbered much about, with friends, admirers...

Again, “encumbered” is the important word here.

It is said, ‘Therefore, in order to avoid opposites, the sage manages his affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech. His presence causes things to happen without his acting, or claiming ownership of them, or expecting any reward’.¹²

I would say not so much even “his presence,” but simply “the presence of spiritual simplicity” in the training of the people concerned.

The master in our story wished to live in this way. Anyone who accomplishes any great work is indebted to unknown contemporaries. So it is with such a monk who lives on a mountain for thirty years, taking his simple meals and climbing the hills. His life is faultless, he is content. His everyday life constantly preaches Buddhism. What does he care about the recognition of contemporaries?

So this having space for good things to happen is one of the consequences of spiritual simplicity. Another seems to be that it revitalizes the spirit. See, its opposite, spiritual complexity, inner complexity, is very tiring. Trying to direct the universe—you know poor old Atlas? It’s heavy, holding up

the world. Trying to direct one's own training is likewise. It's exhausting. So is keeping the nonsense at bay by filtering it out with all those pairs of sunglasses balanced on your nose. This may be one of the reasons why people in modern society are getting so tired. Conversely, spiritual simplicity refreshes something. And that refreshing of something also has something to do with what we just talked about, of leaving space for good things to happen without anybody trying to make it happen. On this refreshment, let me read to you again from Ryōkan:

Bent under a pile of firewood, I walk down a hill.
The green hill road is too steep for my aged legs.

O.K., this sounds tiring, right? It is, at one level. It's also direct. Again, don't pay too much attention to the context. Pay attention to the directness and the simplicity. He continues:

I take a moment's breath...

Which is just the next thing. He isn't locked into getting the blinking firewood down the hill.

I take a moment's breath beneath a towering pine tree.
With a quiet mind, I hear spring warblers twitter.¹³

You can feel the revitalization, the ... refreshment occurring here. Again, don't get into the 'Zen and nature' thing here. In a modern context he could just as well have heard a train whistle from the valley below. It doesn't have to be spring warblers. He just did the next thing. He wasn't grinding himself into the pavement getting the firewood down the hill. And with a quiet mind he opened to just what was there, and somehow it refreshed him, and so it does.

Another thing about spiritual simplicity seems to be that it yields perspective about what's important. We do not need great

tragedies to remind us of what's important. Spiritual simplicity will do the job quite admirably and much more reliably. Again, listen to Ryōkan on this:

Walking along a narrow path at the foot of a mountain,
I come to an ancient cemetery filled with countless tombstones
And thousand-year-old oaks and pines.
The day is ending with a lonely, plaintive wind.
The names on the tombs are completely faded;
Even the relatives have forgotten who they were.
Choked with tears, unable to speak,
I take my staff and return home.¹⁴

'Anicca' comes to him: the fragility of human life, the preciousness of human life. You can see in this the need to train honestly and earnestly. They all just come from the perspective of his spiritual simplicity. He just sees an old cemetery...and somehow something arises.

Spiritual simplicity also sees beyond the opposites to the core of things. Listen to another poem of Ryōkan's. This was on reading the scriptures to himself:

The ancient sages left their works behind,
Not to let us know about themselves
But to help us understand our own stamp.
Had we wisdom enough to know ourselves single handed,
No benefits would result from the works of ancient saints.
A wise man learns the mystery of his existence in a flash
And climbs in a leap beyond the world of hollow phenomena.

This is when you encounter the Dharma, O.K.?

Whereas a foolish man holds willfully to facts and details
To drown himself in subtle differences of words and lines.
And, being envious of others in their achievements,
He wastes his mind night and day in his effort to succeed.

You see how one thing is leading to another here? And the perspective is just deepening and deepening.

Truth, if you cleave to it as Truth, turns into falsehood.
Falsehood, when you see it as such, becomes at once Truth.
Truth and falsehood are the mated edges of a double sword;
None alive can separate with certainty one from the other.
Alas, too many of us drift in a skiff [a small shallow-draft
boat], thinking we fathom the sea.
From time immemorial, we are causes of endless deception.¹⁵

Now, speaking of double-edged swords, do take care not to turn spiritual simplicity into yet another complexity, yet another opposite, yet another thing to attach oneself to. For to do that will turn it from a blessing into a curse. I've already mentioned the head in the clouds idealism, which is very attractive, and can totally get in the way of not only living simply but the whole of spiritual simplicity. Once it becomes an ideal like that, it's merely an added complexity. You just add it on top of all the others and it just weighs you down more.

The same is true of turning it not into an ideal but into an idea. Something to be thought on, studied, planned about, schemed (I would say) about. One has to actually do this, this being the things we've talked about: all-acceptance, stop trying to direct things, guarding the senses, living simply, doing the next thing. If one doesn't actually do it, it remains forever what is sometimes called "a painting of a rice cake"—it yields no nourishment.

Consider what has happened to poor old Ryōkan in our present century. This is from the introduction to one of the books of his works, called *Great Fool*. This is part of the editor's introduction:

The past hundred years has seen the publication of over 3,600 books on Ryōkan...

In the past three years, new books on Ryōkan have appeared at the rate of one book every day, and this does not include many other forums—magazine articles, public lectures, broadcasts, and so forth, in which Ryōkan is being constantly discussed.... No day passes without Ryōkan being discussed somewhere in Japan.¹⁶

In 1978, the Ryōkan Study Society was established, in Ryōkan's native region of Nigata, and its membership has since swiftly spread to other areas of Japan. Currently, the All-Japan Ryōkan Study Society, which comprises not only scholars, but literary figures, artists, and above all, ordinary people who admire Ryōkan, publishes periodicals, supports research, hosts conferences, and organizes exhibitions.

Huh? Are they listening? What?

Okay, there is a point to such activities. I mean, here I am, talking about Ryōkan, right? I'm one of such people. There's a point. But, 3,600 books? Don't turn it into an idea to discuss. And above all, please do not mistake what I call spiritual simplicity with what I will call, for lack of a term for it, "simplification."

I'm going to define simplification in a funny way; it's not the usual way of talking about it, okay? What I'm talking about here (and I wish I had a better word) when I say "simplification," I'm talking about what happens when you try to make spiritual simplicity happen, okay? Already a problem. You try to make it happen without doing the practice which underlies it. In a spiritual sense, though often not in a technical one, the world is already simple. You don't have to make it so. But if we insist on

what we think of as simplicity, without doing what it takes to see the world from the eyes of spiritual simplicity, then there's an obvious way of going about that and it is disastrous. The obvious way to make things look simple is to reach for those pairs of dark glasses and start putting them on, one after another after another, until the world which looks complex to our self, the eyes of self, begins to look simple. If you put on enough sunglasses, all you can see eventually is the faintest of shadows. You've decreased the input so much that finally it looks simple, and you don't have to do any of this other work. You just balance those sunglasses on your nose and it looks simple. But it's not. What you've done is added layer after layer after layer of complexity and filters and funny stuff, until it finally looks simple to the eyes of self.

And if one then acts on that, it can be tragic. At the level of one's own personal training, it leads us farther and farther from the Truth, all the while thinking we're getting closer. It looks like you're getting closer because things are getting simpler, or at least they look simpler the more glasses you put on. And the simpler they look, the more certain one can become that one is right. And "right" is a very sweet wine to drink.

It's a way to certainty, spiritual certainty, without giving up everything. Unfortunately, what one gets the certainty about is delusion. You see, certainty is imperfectly correlated with Truth. (Old statistician talking.) Yes, spiritual reality (Truth) does bring with it certainty. But many other things bring certainty too, and some of them are not True, and this is one of them. Don't do that to yourself.

And when more than one person does this together, then such certainty about simplification rather than spiritual simplic-

ity can pervert their entire understanding of a religion. There is a name for what happens when groups of people take the messy richness of great religions, and by all wearing the same sets of dark glasses reduce it to a few simple and rigid doctrines; it's called "fundamentalism," and it's found in every religion in the world. And it doesn't have to be found only in the big obvious areas—you can find it in little ways, in your own thinking from time to time. "I just want to hold on to a formula for how to train." That, my friends, is the beginnings of fundamentalism. There are no formulas in spiritual simplicity. You're adding a complexity by trying to make it simple through a formula.

Fundamentalism, because it looks simple, and it leads to certainty, can be highly attractive and contagious when we are vulnerable to that or when our training is immature. And, as we have seen this past year, there will be a few people who take such simplification to the point where they even override the natural empathy that comes from their basic enlightenment, the enlightenment we all share, and thus do great harm to other beings. So, that brings us full circle. It is possible, I am saying to you, that the very yearning for spiritual simplicity, when perverted by mistaking simplification for simplicity, can take us to the very place we least wish to be.

I take that as a warning for myself. I also find that it gives me sympathy, for those who do fall into that trap and for myself when I fall into it, hopefully in only small ways. It no longer surprises me, for this reason, when I hear that both today and throughout history, some of the people who end up committing the greatest of atrocities started out with a generous and benevolent intent. They were just trying a little too hard to help. I pray that I and none of you may fall into that trap, even in the slight-

est ways. And you know, one needn't, because the Way of the Buddhas is simpler than all that stuff. Simplification, though it looks easy, is a lot of work—balancing all those sunglasses on your nose, and holding them there. It's a lot of work to keep your head in the clouds: it's a lot of work to refuse to accept, or to control the course of your training, or to maintain the opposites, or to maintain a self. No, the Way is much simpler than all that. Dōgen again—*Shōji*—I'm using Reverend Master Jiyu's translation:

The way to Buddhahood is easy.

I will here say “simple.”

They who do not perpetrate evil,...

“Do no harm.”

...they who do not try to grasp at life and death, but work for the good of all living things with utter compassion, giving respect to those older, and loving understanding to those younger, than themselves,...

“Older” and “younger” being sort of “senior” and “junior,” however you want to put it.

...they who do not reject, search for, think on or worry about anything, have the name of Buddha. You must look for nothing more.¹⁷

Notes

Because this talk was edited after Rev. Master Daizui's death we were unable to track down complete references for all the quotations.

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