

A Transcription of a Dharma Talk given by Genjo Marinello at Chobo-Ji on 1/5/14

Sit – Breathe - Listen

I want us to read from the end of the Diamond Sutra, which is one of the core sutras or scriptures in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The Diamond Sutra is a long dialog between Sariputra and the historical Buddha, also known as the Tathágata. The Historical Buddha was a human being who broke through his attachment to his own ego identity. In doing so he saw beyond his sense of a separated identity and came to the following conclusion:

Who sees Me by Form,
Who seeks Me by Sound,
Wrongly turned are his footsteps on
the Way,
For he cannot perceive the
Tathágata.

In other words, the Tathágata... the Awakened Mind is not something that can be perceived by form, or sound, or touch, or any sense organ. The Capital “M” Mind is not something that you can grasp, hold onto or point to. And when we break through our own shell of attachment to our sense of separate identity, we open up, sometimes quite suddenly, to an awakened broad perspective that we call Mind or awareness. This Mind doesn't have a focal point, a location or a form.

It's a quality of the universe much like you could say gravity is a quality of the universe. You can't have a universe without gravity, and gravity is not the whole universe. But there is this quality of what we call universe and that's called gravity. We can think of “Mind,” in the same way. It just is and it's everywhere, not attached to any point. And it's not something that you can grasp or hold. You can feel It, but you can't hold on to it... you can't even point to It.

So what do you realize, when you break through to this kind of mind?

“So I tell you:

All composite things
Are like a dream, a fantasy,
a bubble and a shadow,
Are like a dewdrop and
a flash of lightning.
They are thus to be regarded.”

These are the four lines that arise from Awakened Heart-Mind. You realize that all composite things, that means you, me, the pillars, the roof, the ceiling, the planet, the stars, the galaxies... all composite things are like a dream... a fantasy... a bubble and a shadow... are like a dew drop and a flash of lightning... and thus they are to be

regarded.

In our Sutra book the English translation, repeats these four lines, just in a different way.

“Think in this way
of the fleeting world:
As a star at dawn,
a bubble in a stream,
A dewdrop, a flash of lightning
in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom,
and a dream. “

This is the penultimate experience of an Awakened Mind, which is free of ego attachment. Usually we are stuck in our worries, concerns, desires, fantasies and impulses, which all arise from our ego identity. When we are limited by our attachment to a sense of a separated self-hood it is a “Hell-realm.”

When we break through the artificial barriers between self and other, and our awareness somehow leaps forward, out beyond our natural attachment to ego identity, then immediately we realize that consciousness or awareness is not limited to a particular point... it's not you or me... it's everywhere, permeating everything. We come to see that there is nothing to attain, there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. Wow! It's just all here, It's all out, It's all manifest and It's all shining. And at the same time we realize that all this fleeting world is like a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a dew drop, a flash of lightening in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream ... these are the words of any Awakened Mind.

Whether it happens because we were doing Sufi Dancing, or transcending the Torah, or doing deep zazen, when we become free of our attachment to our separated sense of ego identity the Awakened Mind always has the same realization. It doesn't matter where or when this realization comes. It doesn't matter what continent, planet or galaxy this realization arises. Once where ready to let our attachment to our personal identity die, anyone and everybody can have this kind of intimate experience of Universal Mind.

I call this the “Penultimate Experience of the Awakened Mind.” Penultimate means it's prior to ultimate... laughing... The Ultimate experience is to have this realization, get up from this cushion and Live It!

To live in this world, with this kind of awareness and freedom and open-heartedness, and therefore meet the trials and tribulations of living this particular and peculiar life, with so much more spaciousness means that we are free to be caring, mindful and loving in our daily lives... that's the ultimate.

So how do we get to the penultimate of the awakened mind by using this particular

path of zazen? It's really simple and yet hard to do.

You know if you were to take a dance class and you've never taken dancing before, you might think it is too hard to learn. You'd see everybody who knows how to dance, and they make it look really simple, but you know it had to take time. Learning to dance is all about learning how to take the very first steps. Yet, in the beginning you are probably going to trip over your feet. You might get discouraged, because it takes time, effort and practice.

Once we learn how to dance, we're just dancing. When we get over that hurdle of thinking about it too much, worrying about whether or not we got it right, stop looking at our feet and find the rhythm of it, then we're "Dancing."

Meditation is exactly like this. There's a certain learning curve, in the beginning that can make it seem hard to do. But once you get in the rhythm of it, it should be something that serves you for the rest of your life. Just like if you learn how to ride a bike, you can't ever forget how to ride a bike, or if you learn how to dance, you can't forget how to dance. Even if you get a little stale at it, picking it up again is pretty quick. The same thing is true of meditation. But if you danced every day you'd be happy. And I can tell you if you meditate every day, you'll be happy... that is if you find your groove regularly when meditating.

A lot of people come and sit on the cushion and worry, sleep, or just look pretty, and they aren't really dancing. This kind of zazen doesn't serve you or anyone, but you may get some needed rest, which isn't a bad thing. However, unless you come to the cushion and find some measure of "Samadhi," where you are in the dance of just sitting, breathing and listening you will never reap the benefits from flowing with the "flow."

The most important thing is to have good posture. If you're going to dance, the first thing the instructor is going to show you is how to get your spine erect, your feet planted on the ground and your arms in position, so that you're ready to dance.

The same is true when we're approaching the cushion. In order to dance you have to get ready to dance and posture is a lot of it. So, we have to take our seat and learn how to just sit. The more contact points that you can get with the ground, the better off you are. Whether you're sitting in a kneeling position or a cross-legged position, or even on a chair with your feet on the ground, the more that you can get in contact with the earth the better, because part of learning how to be in the Flow is feeling plugged into the earth.

When I'm sitting cross-legged, it took a while for me to do, but now after forty years, it's no big deal, and I probably make it look easy. My knees are definitely touching the ground and my tailbone is planted deeply in the zafu. This position is like a three pronged plug, and I'm plugged into the earth. The more contact points that I have, the more plugged into the earth I feel.

I don't want a position that feels lumpy. If I'm sitting like this [hunching over looking very much like Rodin's the "Thinker"], it's just not going to give me a very good plugged in feeling. The more you can sit like this [sitting very much like a traditional statue of Buddha on the lotus flower] the easier it is to feel plugged into the earth.

You can sit with the legs folded or you can sit seiza (kneeling with your ankles in back), but whatever you do, you want to take your seat and feel plugged into the earth. Next you need an erect spine, which is like raising your antenna to the heavens. When I'm planted in the earth and connected to the heavens, then right here in my own center of gravity [pointing to his hara or lower abdomen], I put a circle around my balance point [taking up the "Cosmic mudra" with his hands], right over my center of gravity.

With hands in this position, it helps me to remain aware of my center of gravity. Whether I'm sitting, moving or I'm dancing, if I act from this center of gravity I can be so much more aware of my surroundings and engage with my surroundings with much more power and harmony. If I'm not aware of my balance point or center of gravity, I'm going to trip, I'm going to fall, I'm going to be out of balance, I am not going to be able to sit or move with any sort of grace or power.

So take your seat. Get plugged into the earth. Raise the antenna. And then find your center of gravity and sit in it... sit in that balance point. [Demonstrating mudra again] sit right here at one's center of gravity, just at or right below my navel.

If I'm plugged in... that's sitting. And then comes breathing. Breathing just means finding the natural breath pattern for your metabolism. That is to say, extend your out breath until it feels complete, but not forced. Breathe in and out slowly and evenly. Allow your inhalation to be as slow and as even as your exhalation.

Put some effort into nurturing a slow and even breath pattern. Find a pace that feels natural to you for your metabolism in this moment. Extend your breath out, letting it go all the way out, without feeling forced. When every breath is gentle and slow with every exhalation and inhalation, that's breathing.

It's amazing how much we tend to breath in a way that's anything but slow and gentle. So it does take some practice. We have to put some effort into it... slow gentle breathing... it's a kind of a mantra, it doesn't happen all by itself... you have to put some attention on it. You can say silently to yourself ... "**Slow, gentle, breath,**" extending the out breath until it's complete but not forced. Practice this during each zazen period.

By the way, you have to let your diaphragm move, which means, if you have a gut, you have to let it hangout. We're all taught to "Suck it in... Don't show your gut," but here, we can all be natural, and let our gut hangout. I have a bit of a belly... it's okay... let it hangout, so that your abdomen is very relaxed and comfortable... no tension... relax so that the diaphragm has room to move.

If we don't have the diaphragm moving gently up and down, a little bit in and up on the

outward exhalation, down and out on the inhalation we're not dancing... we're not breathing freely... we're doing some stilted staccato breath which is not conducive to dancing... So breathe in a way that is gentle, slow, and relaxed.

I will say one other thing about breathing. Over the course of a sit, over the course of a day, or over the course of sitting or a week of sesshin, you should notice, with just a teeny bit of prodding, that your cycle of breath becomes longer. In other words, today or at the beginning of your sit, your breath goes in and out like this [mimicking a short breath] and towards the end of the sit your breath is going a little bit slower [demonstrating deeper breathing] and at the very end of the sit [demonstrating ever gentler breathing] it's going really nice and slow. The slowing down of the breath is completely natural, but if you don't pay a little bit of attention to it, you may unconsciously miss out on the opportunity to observe and benefit from the natural positive effect of a slower breath pattern.

It doesn't have to be as slow as my demonstration. I've been doing this for 40 years... My breath can go really slow and I can take perhaps only two to four breaths a minute. Most everyone will naturally take more breaths than that. And that's fine. But from the beginning of where your sitting is, to the end of the sit, watch it slow down. If it's not slowing down, you're not really in samadhi yet.

At the beginning of a dance, even the professional dancers, look a little stilted, verses once they get into the routine, or find the flow. As they go along, you can see them loosening up and really starting to flow. This is samadhi dancing and the same is true for samadhi sitting. This is how we want to be in the flow of slow, gentle breathing. You will also notice that as your breath slows down the volume of air diminishes. Some people have even gotten frightened, thinking that "Oh my god, I'm not even breathing..." You don't have to worry about not taking a breath. If you were high on drugs, you might have to worry about it, but not in zazen. Don't worry, even if the volume of air being drawn in is very small; you can trust that your breathing is just right. Don't worry that the volume is going down and the pattern is getting slower that's simply the sign that your entering samadhi and it's wonderful.

After sitting and breathing is established, comes just listening. We listen with all of our primary senses. Not just with our ears, but with our eyes, with our nose, with our touch, with every pore and fiber of our being. We listen not just outside of ourselves but inside. Interiorly we listen to our own thoughts and feelings and sensations.

Because everything our brain perceives is through indirect nerve impulses, we can say, that listening is being attentive to our own thoughts, feelings and sensations. From our center of gravity, listen interiorly to the world of thoughts, feelings and sensations. This is just listening. We don't try to direct our thoughts, nor do we try to still them. We just listen to the symphony of now, whether it's cloudy, rainy, or sunny. We smell the incense, and with great simplicity gently listen attentively to all thoughts, feelings and sensations as they arise. Make no effort to discriminate, analyze, judge or fix anything. Just listen to the symphony of now.

It's simple to say but it is really hard not to engage our discriminating mind to analyze, judge or fix something. So often when we come here and sit on the cushion we end up worrying about and trying to solve problems. And sometimes this just can't be helped, because something is so pressing that we "have to" worry about it. It's not the best use of zazen, but sometimes there is nothing for it, and zazen is absorbed in analysis. But we're not here to worry or solve problems. We're here to listen.

There's plenty of time to worry or solve after we get up from the cushion, and in truth after a period of deep soulful listening, we'll be in a better place to solve problems. So if at all possible reserve the cushion for just listening... not worrying, analyzing, judging or solving. Just listen with every pore and fiber of our being, like you're going to the symphony, listening to the most exquisite symphony of now. And that's listening.

So if you do these three things... take your seat... breathe; gently, slowly, attentively and listen to the exquisite symphony of now, without judging, just letting it in... then without question, without fail, you will settle into the groove of samadhi. As your samadhi deepens, your breath slows, and as you listen without judgment, at some point you will naturally break through or let go of your life root, your attachment to self. At this moment, ego identity temporally dissolves, or at least becomes completely transparent.

I can't tell you how long this will take, but in the readiness of time it is guaranteed and not to be missed. When the cord of attachment breaks even temporarily, there's an immediate release into THIS, a vastness that's not connected to form, place, or identity. Then the artificial barrier between "your" mind and the consciousness of the Tathágata melts away. In this moment, we all realize together that this world is like a flash of lightning in a summer storm, a bubble in a stream, or a drop of dew in the morning sun... Each miraculous moment is both beautiful and impermanent, and there's both tremendous joy and sorrow that fills and opens your heart. This big love is the penultimate experience of all awakened beings.

The ultimate is to take this feeling of openness and spaciousness of heart into our daily lives, with caring, loving action.