

The ever unnamable 'it'

[Talk on a Zen Sunday at ZEN onder de Dom, Utrecht, The Netherlands, May 18th, 2014]

Introduction

Good morning. Great to see that we're here with such a big group. This morning I realized that this is exactly the place where we started with Jeff Shore about 18 years ago. We have come a long way since then.

We only have a day, or we could also say: we have a full day, to sit. And even though it may not be the longest of times, if we all make use of every single moment, then not one moment will go to waste. I hope we can do that.

I would like to talk today about 'the ever unnamable 'it''. This is the term Shibayama Zenkei uses in his book *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, some time ago republished as *Gateless Barrier*. Shibayama is the Zen master of the Zen master of my present Zen master – Shibayama, then Fukushima, then Jeff Shore. Basically, to say 'it' is already too much, because you cannot point at it, you cannot show it. So 'ever unnamable' might be good, since it's not a thing, it's not something. So it's going to be really difficult. Maybe we should stop here. That would be great. But anyway, I prepared nine pages, so... let's see how far we get.

Three questions

For today, I would like to look at three questions. First of all, how is 'it' expressed in the words of different Zen monks or Zen masters? How do they talk about it? Then secondly, how is it found? What happens? Where can you 'get it'? We all want it, right? But where can you get it? And then the third and final question, how can it be brought as close as possible, how to bring it home? So that we can really start to see that it's not so far away, that it's not a different time and a different place, it's not only the monks in China, but it's right here. It IS right here. Every time a Zen guy talks about it, they would say it's right here. As Jeff would put it: right underfoot.

But still maybe we are haunted by the stories of the wonderful old monks in the monasteries. That they were training for many years and had nothing else to do but focus on that and break through the barrier. So for us, how can it come to life? How can we touch it, how can we realize it?

First question – how is it expressed?

Mumon

Let's start with the distant and long ago. And then work our way up towards the here and

now. Mumon (1183 – 1260), the collector of the koan (Zen questions) in the *Mumonkan*, wrote a poem in the preface of his work:

*Gateless is the Great Tao
There are thousands of ways to it
If you pass through this barrier
You may walk freely in the universe.*

Tao is mostly translated as 'Way'. But in this case, maybe it could also mean 'all reality' or 'the dharma'. There are thousands of ways to it: basically, every thing, everything, is it. So everything, for us, can be a way to find 'it', to discover it, to be there. This is gateless: it's open on all sides, there is no barrier.

Still, he's talking about the barrier in the third line. Here, gateless has a totally different meaning: there is a barrier but there is no door, no gate in that barrier. So either you can enter everywhere, everywhere you are there already. Or, on the other hand, it's incomprehensible. It is something that we cannot willfully reach, we cannot *do* something, anything, to get there, to find or realize it right here.

It would be great of course, if somebody comes by and tells you: 'Well, first do this, then do that' and you could say to yourself: 'Ok, so I should be more like this, or less like that' and then it happens, it falls away and it's all fine. But it's just not like that.

So what can you DO?

Sometimes still, it happens. Even though you cannot say much about it, you can still find it. Mumon expresses it in the following way:

*A thunderclap under a clear blue sky!
All beings on earth have opened their eyes
Everything under the sun has bowed at once
Mount Sumeru jumps up and dances.*

He's really happy here, he's exalted. 'All beings on earth have opened their eyes - Everything under the sun has bowed at once'. It's a total shift, a total change in his way of looking, in his way of being.

Mount Sumeru is the center of the universe in Buddhist cosmology. It 'jumps up and dances'. How come he's so overjoyed? It must be something great, right? Why is Mumon like that?

Maybe because he's a monk, his whole life is centered around this. This is what he was searching, single-mindedly. Nothing else. Just that.

Maybe also he's younger. Maybe he's just very energetic, and he writes like that.

Or it's his personality, his character. Maybe he's just a guy who's very bright and happy to begin with.

Or it's propaganda. He writes a book, and it better be good, so he puts in this very exalted verse so that everybody is going to read it. Of course it is not about reading the book, it's not to sell the book. It is to get you to DO this, to sit through yourself, to find it for yourself, to want to find it for yourself, because it's so great. Mount Sumeru jumps up and dances – who doesn't want that?

Zhaobian

I'm very fond of another expression, a much more quiet one. It is a poem by layman Zhaobian. He says:

*Silently sitting in the office,
Leaning on my armrest,
mind-source unmoved,
clear as water.
A thunderclap overhead opens my crown,
waking who I've always been.*

He's depicting himself sitting in the office. He's a layman, already closer to us maybe, sitting in his office. Mind-source unmoved, clear as water - probably he sat in zazen for quite some time and is now resting on his armrest for a while. So he depicts the situation of that moment. And then all of a sudden, obviously a thunderstorm is happening. I think this thunderclap is a different one than Mumon's. His was a metaphoric one. This is a real thunderclap, *brrrrrmmmm* – with that noise, all of a sudden, it falls away. And then he says: 'waking who I have always been'. That's so subtle, so quiet. Nothing special. You have always been exactly that. The only thing that happened is, it falls away, that little thing that prevents you from seeing it fully, falls away.

Jeff Shore

In the words of Jeff Shore, he expresses it:

'Let the seeking mind fall away. (To be) done with seeking. This is the essence of genuine Rinzai Zen: to truly be done with seeking. Finished. Done with birth and death, dis-ease. Done with seeking to do or to be something, anything. Self comes to its own end.'

'Let the seeking mind fall away' – it falls away. It is not even to 'let' it fall away. You can't make it happen. The seeking mind itself falling away of itself. That's all.

'(To be) done with seeking.' – So there's an end to that 'not quite there yet' or 'I can't really say it yet'. Then he goes on to say:

'This is the essence of genuine Rinzai Zen: to truly be done with seeking. Finished. Done with birth and death, dis-ease. Done with seeking to do or to be something, anything.'

And then maybe the most wonderful expression – 'Self comes to its own end.' It ceases. Finishes. It's gone.

And then of course you're still a person in the world. But at the same time, it's different. Not so different, but very different.

What should I do?

The question of course is how to understand it, how to know what that looks like, how to enable it to happen, how to 'let' the seeking mind fall away. For us, right here, when we're sitting. How can we do that? Again, as I said in the beginning, there is no door. There is no handle. There is no entrance. It's gateless. It just happens.

I was looking for that. I said to myself, 'what should I do, there's something still missing in my practice, I have to do something, to be better.' Now you may know these bathrooms where the light goes on automatically when you walk in. When training with Jeff, at some point he said to me: "You are like a guy that walks into the bathroom, you don't have to do anything, the light switches on automatically, but you go in there and you're still searching for the switch to turn on the light!" That's how I practice...

There is nothing whatsoever we can do. Only to practice intently without stopping. And even that is open to a lot of misinterpretation, because what is 'practice intently without stopping'? Basically, it is just living your life. It's being exactly who you are. Nothing else, nothing other.

Dogen

Coming back to 'how is it expressed', how did it happen to Dogen? Dogen is a Japanese Zen monk. He lived from 1200 to 1253. He went to China in 1223 to study Zen. When he was in the monastery, at a certain time they were sitting in zazen. The monk next to him was dozing off. Then the Zen master came by and he hit that monk, and he shouted: "Zazen is not sleeping!! It's dropping off body and mind!!"

At that moment, with Dogen, body and mind dropped off. And Dogen uses that term – in Japanese: *shinjin datsuraku*. *Shinjin* – body and mind. *Datsuraku* – fall off, drop off, fallen away. The full sentence is sometimes rendered '*jinnen ni shinjin datsuraku shi*' – '*jinnen ni*' means 'naturally, of itself'. I think this is a very fine addition to the statement. Basically, it says: 'body and mind spontaneously dropped off'. So again, not something that you can evoke, do, or bring about.

Buddha

The Buddha himself describes the person as having 'a mind with the barriers broken down'. We all know the story, right? He sits under the bodhi tree for seven days and seven nights. Then on the morning of the eighth, he looks up. He's really intent, he's completely there. Then for a moment maybe he sort of pauses, and he looks up and sees the morning star, and then for him, it falls away.

According to legend, he said:

*"Oh housebuilder, you have been seen through!
You will not build this house again."*

*Your rafters are all broken, the ridgepole shattered.
Unconditioned, this is the end of all craving."*

So the roof of the house just collapsed. It's a metaphor for the constituent elements of your self. Unconditioned: without a condition, without a cause. End of craving: end of longing, end of searching.

Is it so? Maybe, maybe not. Last Wednesday we talked about it not being the end of longing and suffering, but the end of the *longing* to end the longing and suffering.

These are expressions of that which cannot really be put into words, the 'ever unnamable 'it'.

Second question - how is it found?

So, what is that? If we are to search it at all, where can we find it? What would be a good way to get at it? Let's try again. What can we *do*? We can't give up until we give up, right?

I already pointed at the Buddha seeing the morning star, and Dogen, who heard: "Drop off body and mind!!"

Kyogen

Another example is Kyogen, a Chinese Zen master. He was in the monastery for years and years, a very eloquent, intelligent person. The Zen master had asked him the question 'show me your face before your parents were born'. But for years, he just couldn't find it. He was desperate and utterly disappointed, left the monastery and became the caretaker of the grave of an old Zen master. But obviously his search continued, he was still in agony within. On a certain day, he was collecting leaves and there were some stones there too. He threw them over the fence into a bamboo grove. Then one of the stones hit a bamboo. With that sound, for him it happened.

Another Zen monk got a candle blown out, and it was pitch dark. That's when it happened with him. And with layman Zhaobian, as we have already seen, it was a thunderclap overhead.

Three more days

The last example is about a Zen monk who was also quite desperate to solve that basic and central life question. It is in *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*.

Suzuki's presentation of the story:

A monk came from Okinawa to study Zen under Suio, one of Hakuin's great disciples and a rough and strong-minded fellow. The monk stayed with him for three years working on the koan of the sound of one hand.

Eventually, when the time for him to go back to Okinawa was fast approaching and he had still not solved his koan, he got very distressed and came to Suio in tears. The master consoled him saying, "Don't worry. Postpone your departure for another week and go on sitting with all your might."

Seven days passed, but still the koan remained unsolved. Again the monk came to Suio, who counseled him to postpone his departure for yet another week. When that week was up and he still had not solved the koan, the master said, "There are many ancient examples of people who have attained satori after three weeks, so try a third week."

But the third week passed and still the koan was not solved, so the master said, "Now try five more days." But the five days passed, and the monk was no nearer solving the koan, so finally the master said, "This time try three more days and if after three days you have still not solved the koan, then you must die."

Then, for the first time, the monk decided to devote the whole of whatever life was left to him to solving the koan. After three days he solved it.

So often it happens in intense, single-minded concentration. But also, as we have seen, at a moment where a sudden sensation occurs. It's not just concentration, it's often also a moment of relaxation, or something happening. Still, you cannot evoke it. Dogen somewhere says: "Not every time a stone hits bamboo, someone gets awakened."

Third question – how to bring it home?

Most of what I said up until now is 'a long time ago in a land far, far away'. It's mostly about monks who sat in zazen in the monastery for years and years. And again, you cannot push it, but it can be done. It's nothing special. It's everybody's birthright or essence. It should not be far away, it should not be alien. It should not be somewhere else. It is, after all, right here. We can do it too.

This is going to be a little personal, so I hope you will forgive me for that. When I was in training in Japan, I wanted to see through. That's the reason I went there. I hoped it would happen one day, but it never did. I had my images about what it takes to find it, and I also had my images about myself. I didn't think I was so great. Even though I tried very hard to stay upright and awake, I fell asleep quite a lot during zazen in the monastery, it was really hard for me. And I did all kinds of things that weren't so great, so I felt very imperfect, and maybe not up to snuff, not good enough. By the way I still feel myself being very imperfect, so no change there.

I somehow knew that these great stories about the monks and the Zen masters, the stuff I just cited about Mumon and how it jumps up and dances and so on, were just that, namely, great stories. They can motivate you. But they can also get in the way, because you get all kinds of images about them. When I was in Japan, those stories were in my mind. I mirrored

myself in them, and I discarded myself as being unfit. “What they could do in those times, back in the day – I could never ever give so much of myself.”

But basically, you’re already doing it, we’re already giving EVERYTHING of ourselves in sitting, in the practice, as WE are. Maybe we don’t need more than that. Just give ourselves. As Jeff says, ‘give ourselves fully to the practice’. That’s not something extra. It’s just: fully. As you are.

Only a baby hair

Anyway, I thought it was distant. I thought it was at the other end of the universe. But once when we were in the Netherlands doing a retreat, all of a sudden Jeff said: “You may think it’s distant, but you’re only a baby hair away from it.” We are only a baby hair away from it. Now that was really helpful! OK! Bring it on! Give it to me! It’s quite different whether you think it will take fifteen or twenty more years, or someone that has an eye tells you that you’re so very close already. So I was very happy to hear that, and very motivated to really get down to it. But still, nothing happened of course. Yes, three more years.

At some point, I went to a little village in the Ardennes with Jeff, and he said: “Why don’t we go through the koan that you’ve already done in Tofukuji, and you present them to me once more?” We couldn’t continue the koan training because at that time I was still training under Fukushima Roshi. So we just went through the ones I already did. I could give the answers, and could ‘sense’ them, understand them, be there. But I was also painfully aware that I couldn’t say or present it with my whole being. There was still something there that held it back. It’s like a wall you bump into all the time, and there’s nowhere you can push through.

Another time we were staying in someone’s house in Philadelphia. We were working in the garden and there was an iron rod sticking out from the grass. I tried to dig it out, but it was very difficult, the soil was hard and there were stones in the ground. I got deeper and deeper, but still the rod wouldn’t move an inch. Then Jeff came by and said: “Yes, that’s your work, just keep on digging.”

Later on, we went to the retreat, and I thought: “This is a perfect time.” Mostly, in the Netherlands, I would organize it and I would be very busy. But in the States, there was nothing I had to do, nothing extra I had to think about. I could just devote myself to the sitting. So I said to myself: “Now let’s do it! Finally. Three days!” I had three days. Every minute I had, I sat. My body hurt all over, but still I pushed through.

I also had the motivation that if I crossed that barrier, I would be a much better father. But still, three days and again it didn’t work. I was so depressed! I thought: “This is the time. Now it’s going to happen, it definitely will.” And it didn’t. I felt so bad for many, many days after that. And I thought: “Again my children don’t have a good father.”

Tail of the ox

I was working with Jeff on ‘what is lacking?’ A general question that you can use as a powerful search light. But it went on and on, and I thought to myself: “I know nothing is lacking, but I cannot say it from the heart, just that little thing is missing still.”

I'm not a philosopher, more like, when it needs to be done, let's do it. So when we were at a retreat in the Netherlands again, Jeff said to me: "You are a rather practical person. Maybe instead of 'what's lacking', use the koan 'The ox passes through a window. Why doesn't the tail go through?'" I imagined a small window or a keyhole. "The whole ox is already through the window. There's just a little thread that you cannot get rid of. Why doesn't the tail go through?"

It was halfway through the retreat. We had just said goodbye to the part time participants and went back to sitting. During the evening, I was clenching my teeth, I was cursing inwardly and almost physically wrestling with the tail. Then all of a sudden, in sitting, it occurred to me: "Why don't I just pretend the tail is not there? It's not there." And then, all of a sudden it was totally gone. There was nothing left. And with that, all the tension, all the weight, all the frustration, the barrier, that which I couldn't reach, couldn't find – all of that fell away, disappeared in that moment. I went to Jeff, and he said: "Now the real work begins. Nothing is lacking. But still, something is lacking. Now it starts."

Not distant

So, it can be done. Not in Japan or China, not in the monastery, but just in the Netherlands, under our feet. And contrary to what we may think, it's not just intensity, not just 'the more you sit, the better'. It does help, but it's not just that. It's also creativity, the right word at the right time, the right guidance. And also your own intent of course, your own searching.

Sure, we have to apply ourselves. But it is not as distant as we may think. We have these fairy tale images that are just completely in the way. But maybe you are just a baby hair away. So let's put ourselves to it and deepen our practice together. When the intensity is there in your practice and the time is finally right, any fruit will fall away to nowhere and disappear forever, opening up to a whole new, but still the same world. With the exact same you, and exact same problems. So don't think that everything will be wonderful. It's not. But with a whole new freedom, that's the other side. Just drink your coffee and work your ass off. Practice without end.

Questions

With the 'tail-experience', what changed? Something disappeared?

Up until that moment, I still felt limited – it's very hard to express – I felt like I could not really fully be. There was something preventing it from being completely open and natural. And that limit or that impediment – it's an impediment, it prevents you from being 'just like that' – disappeared, it's gone. And it didn't come back. I waited over six years to talk about it. Actually, I think you shouldn't talk about it at all. I checked with Jeff and he said it's fine as long as I'm humble and honest. So I hope I've been that. Anyway it didn't come back, so I'm quite confident that it's not a temporary thing. Like I said, it's not something you think about ever. You have problems enough and it doesn't help. But at the same time, a burden that I carried up until that moment has left, a heavy burden, one that I didn't know how to tackle. It's gone.

Is that the end of suffering?

No. I don't think it is the end of suffering. Normally, you would see suffering as something to overcome, for example in your practice, you want to end suffering, right? But rather than that, it's to end the intention or will to end suffering. So rather than seeing it as a provisional reality, you can finally see suffering as ultimate reality. This is life. Life is also suffering. It's not that there's no suffering all of a sudden. The essence of human life is that there's also suffering. There's also happiness, but there's also suffering.

But would you not make a distinction between pain and suffering? Suffering is when you say 'it's not supposed to be'.

Yes, that's the extra suffering. Yes, maybe you can get rid of that. The suffering you are pointing at is maybe the suffering that you have when you say: 'Suffering shouldn't be.' Or 'pain shouldn't be'. Do you want to say: 'pain is a part of life, and suffering is when we want to get rid of the pain which is a part of life'?

Yes.

Yes, maybe that's another way to put it.

It's a bit of a problem as I see it, there's pain and there's pleasure and all kinds of things, and I have the feeling that it should be a free flow, but I get stuck everywhere.

Yes, in the different moods or whatever you have.

Yes. And that's useless.

Yes, you mean you go through all kinds of emotions and states, and it would be nice if you didn't get stuck all the time.

Yes. And do you still get stuck?

Yes, I still get stuck. It would be too wonderful if I said no. For example, I can be very melancholic and I sometimes don't know where that comes from. During the last retreat, it was very strong. I went to Jeff and said: "I have that and don't know how to solve it. It's there, maybe it's a part of me, maybe not, I don't know." Since then by the way, I don't have it so much anymore.

But yes, there is still stuff. You continue to practice your whole life, forever. It's not done. There are still things that I don't see about myself that can be very detrimental, not very clever ways to deal with things. Maybe it's more psychological, but it's really deep, really hard to discover why I behave like that, why something triggers me so much.

You talked about the requirements in order to break through, among others creativity. What do you consider as creativity?

Yes, especially from the side of the person that guides you I would say. In this particular case the fact that Jeff could see I'm a rather practical person and he gives you the word to work through it. Sometimes, it's just a few words to put you in a certain direction. And for us when we're practicing, it's much more about how we apply ourselves, so to be intent, serious and honest. And also playful and light at the same time. But I actually meant the creativity of the person that guides you, the way to make use of words or pointers.

Yes. But you could also say it's about how to bring the practice to expression in your own life.

Yes, that's also very true. What can be more creative than expressing yourself in everything you do in every moment. That IS the Zen way or Zen practice.

Ron Sinnige, May 18th, 2014