



# The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

*The following is a reworking of a Dharma talk given last year by Sozui-sensei.*

## The Joy of Seeing Through the Three Marks of Existence

The Diamond Sutra is the world's oldest printed book. Written in Chinese and featuring an illustrated frontispiece, the woodblock printed scroll is five metres long and dated 868 AD. The sutra unfolds as a dialogue between the Buddha and Subhuti about impermanence and the nature of reality. It includes an often quoted poetic verse:

*Thus shall you think of  
all this fleeting world:  
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a  
dream.*

Does this mean that everything is meaningless, melancholy, transient and vain? This is not about falling into the extreme view of nihilism, which we are warned against by experienced Dharma friends as well as traditional meditation manuals.

One of last year's Sunday Dharma talks was given on a poem that Dharma friend Jeff Shore shared a while ago. It reads:

*Children catching  
Bubbles they have made  
[like in: blowing bubbles]  
with a butterfly net.*

Aren't we all like those children, creating our own bubbles and sometimes living inside them, inventing our own problems or things that we

use to distract ourselves with? Aren't all of us creating our very own painfully separate worlds depending on our individual conditioning? Not that there aren't serious things to carefully consider in our lives, but how often do we end up creating unnecessary pain and suffering for ourselves and others? As our practice deepens we may become painfully aware of where we tend to get caught in our accumulated conditioning. This being a vital and most important step in our practice, do we then let ourselves be swallowed by melancholy thoughts and feelings about how everything is just transient and vain? Do we cling to the wrong view of a separate small self, feeling bad about ourselves, weighed down by feelings of anger, guilt, shame and frustration? Or do we welcome this important opportunity as a chance to grow? Welcoming what we begin to notice and see and feel more and more clearly, with radical acceptance and compassion? Allowing genuine healing to unfold?

Do we get caught in trying to solve a perceived problem of our own creation—a problem created by the way we perceive, interpret and react to what is? Trying to self-improve what has no true reality to begin with: our self image? Trying to catch those bubbles with a butterfly net? Of course it does not work. As we try to catch them they pop, and they pop even if we do not try to catch them; aren't we completely involved in trying to do the impossible, trying to catch something that in a way does not even really exist? Something we have invented ourselves?

Is there a way out of that vicious circle we often find ourselves in, off and on the cushion? Using the extended outreach we can find a way to sense down deep inside, underneath those thoughts. Accepting our actual sensations and

feelings, staying in touch with what is, without being dragged into believing the story about it. With more practice we begin to become free from believing that we are our thoughts, from mistaking the story for reality.

*Isn't pain impermanent? Yeah! If you know this, then you're all right. It's because we don't know this that we go through a lot of hassles trying to solve our problems. And that is the second biggest problem we have—trying to solve our problems.*

—Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

Sometimes it is very hard to recognize how we create our own misery by believing the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and about what is. The harder we struggle to get away from what we dread, the more difficult it becomes to recognize that these things are simultaneously—just bubbles. How often do we mistake those things for real?

*Children catching bubbles, Bubbles they have made with a butterfly net* also works the other way around. Sometimes things that should be taken seriously we conveniently decide are just unimportant bubbles. When things don't go as we would like them to, when we have difficult decisions to make, when things happen where we just want to ask ourselves, "Why me?" "Why is this happening to ME?" we have the chance to become aware of what in traditional Buddhism are called the Three Marks of Existence.

Direct insight into the Three Marks of Existence can bring an end to suffering. The Buddha taught that all beings conditioned by causes are impermanent and dis-eased and that not-self characterises all dhammas (things), meaning there is no "I" "me" or "mine" in either the conditioned or the unconditioned. With the faculty of wisdom the Buddha directly perceived that all conditioned phenomena are marked by these three characteristics. And as the Buddha did, we, too, can directly perceive this:

1. That everything changes. There is nothing in our lives that we can hold onto, there is nothing

that does not change, no matter how much we might want this 'one pleasant moment' to last. Wikipedia defines "impermanence" this way:

*All conditioned things are in a constant state of flux. The appearance of a thing ceases as it changes from one form to another. When a leaf falls to the ground and decomposes its relative existence and appearance transform, and its components go into a different form, perhaps a new plant.*

Regarding permanence, Buddhism teaches the Middle Way, avoiding the extreme views of eternalism and nihilism.

2. That everything is without self. There is no fixed self we can hold on to. There is ultimately no such thing as a me to be found anywhere. The definition of Anatta (Sanskrit anatman), again quoting Wikipedia:

*...means "not self". Anattā has a wider scope than the other two marks because it applies to "all phenomena" (dhammā) without qualification.*

3. In that sense all is unstable. There is no ultimate satisfaction to be found anywhere. This brings up Wikipedia's definition of Dukka:

*Dukkha (Sanskrit dukkha) means dissatisfaction, "dis-ease", "suffering" "stress". As all things are impermanent, nothing in the physical world or the mind can bring lasting satisfaction. Dukkha is thus the dissatisfaction, suffering or stress experienced by all sentient beings that are not fully awakened.*

*Change or impermanence is an essential characteristic of all phenomenal existence. We cannot say of anything, animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, "this is lasting"; for even while we are saying this, it is undergoing change. All is fleeting; the beauty of flowers, the bird's melody, the bee's hum, and a sunset's glory.*

*The Buddha directly perceived that the concept of an ego is an illusion: it is not real either in this life or in the hereafter.*

*If, when you try to abandon or transform attachment to your own experiences, you don't understand the three marks, you end up regarding the contents of your mind as the manifestations of something evil, diabolical and bad. If that's what you do, you are far from the truth.*

—Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

Anything which we try to get something out of, is eventually going to be taken away from us and we realize that it is not really satisfactory. If we do get what we want it may be easier to recognize that after a while we get bored with our toys, we get bored with money, position, sex, having things; we even get bored with all the exciting things we always wanted to do, and we realize that what seemed so promising isn't really what we thought it was going to be like or what we hoped it was going to be like.

But we don't know what else to do. We are caught in this dis-ease, this restlessness, looking for something here, looking for something there, getting bored again, getting dissatisfied again, having problems again. We may even realize that we cannot really control anything. And so again we feel this dissatisfaction. After cycling through this again and again we may get to the point where we just want to get away from it all.

This can become an entrance into genuine spiritual practice.

If we realize that all the things we are going after are ultimately not as fulfilling as we thought they would be we may be more ready to let go of the more superficial levels of existence. We have somewhat tasted that everything changes. That there is nothing there we can hold onto and take with us when we die. That everything is without a fixed self. And that there is no final satisfaction to be found in the world. So, often still following the same pattern, we start looking

for something that promises more, something that may bring more stability. Some other, more lasting kind of ground under our feet. And maybe we start looking into religion or some kind of spiritual practice.

As we go along we may experience a certain degree of silence, relaxation, peace and release here and there. And we may begin to experience a little hint of freedom. So, coming back to the poem:

*Children catching  
Bubbles they have made  
with a butterfly net.*

Children catching bubbles they have made. If we fall to the nihilistic side we may hear this as melancholic. Everything is empty and meaningless. But it can also be pure joy, pure freedom not burdened by expectation and judgement. We can experience it with childlike freshness and joy.

Many Buddhist stories express this in one way or the other. In one tale a spoiled young man by the name of Yasa could have everything he wanted. Towards the end of a great feast, he falls asleep while being entertained by his entourage, and as they are not needed any more his dancing girls and musicians fall right asleep around him. As he wakes up in the middle of the night he finds himself surrounded by a big mess with everyone asleep. One of his dancing girls is snoring ungraciously, another drooling in her sleep. The sensitive young man gets thoroughly disgusted with the disarray surrounding him. In him arise deep dissatisfaction and the question of whether there wasn't something beyond that. In his disgust and despair he leaves the palace. Walking around in this melancholy state of mind he meets the Buddha. The Buddha, sensing the young man's state of mind, sat down at the foot of a tree as the young man complained to him: "What a distress, what a mess, how disgusting everything is."

What did the Buddha reply?

The Buddha simply stated: There is no distress.

Was he living on a different planet?

The young man, from where he is at, feels deep despair, feels caught in this fleeting world, is disgusted and disillusioned with his toys and the world around him. He wants to get away from it all. And the Buddha says there is no distress. Where is he coming from?

Birth and death are a fact of physical existence. There is great suffering in the world. Our lives are not without physical and emotional pain even if we do not have to encounter war and accidents. But there is also, right in the very middle of that, a place within each of us where there is no problem, no distress.

Is it possible that right in the very middle of what we might judge to be distress, what we don't want to deal with right now, what we would prefer to ignore, that right in the very middle of that is also Great Light? Great Joy? Great Wonder? Great Peace? Who decides ultimately whether a situation is good or bad? Do we really know? Can we really know?

Always busy running away from something or towards something, trying to reach some imagined goal. What happens if we just stop running and instead look at what's right under our feet, even if it appears to be something we don't like to face? How about entering right here, right where we are, finding the childlike freedom, joy and wonder right under our own feet where it is always, always, available?

After awhile we may be able to experience quite pleasant, tranquil, peaceful states of mind in our practice. And we will likely be tempted to stop there and try to abide in those relatively pleasant and peaceful states. We may feel relatively comfortable and free. Zen Master-to-be, young Hakuin seemed to have seen through to the point that when his teacher questioned him about the koan MU, Hakuin just said: "There is no place to lay hand or foot on it" You cannot grasp it! Impossible! The absolute truth cannot be grasped. He had let go of a lot to be able to say that. He really went beyond a lot. He was relatively free and unbound by things. He real-

ized how everything is just bubbles in a stream, or those bubbles children make. But his Master pointed out where he was still unripe, where he had become bound by his own supposed freedom. His teacher rather abruptly and roughly took Hakuin (literally) by his nose and twisted it painfully, stating: "Got a pretty good hold of it here!"

Hakuin says there is nothing to get hold of. You cannot lay hand on it. But his master just does exactly that, taking painfully firm hold of Hakuin's nose, declaring: "Got a pretty good hold of it here!" And adds, "You poor little hole dwelling devil!" referring to the nice quiet, empty place Hakuin has made up, leaving society and hiding in this dark little hole. Hakuin's master is teaching all of us that this is not what spiritual practice is about.

We not only have to realize that everything is empty, that form is emptiness as the Heart Sutra says, but we also have to come out the other end, realizing the other half, that emptiness is form—reborn to live energetically and joyfully in the world but without the stickiness of the small self.

The verse to the Eighth Oxherding Picture reads:

*Worldly sentiment shed;  
empty even of holy intent;  
not hanging around where Buddha  
resides; quickly passing where no  
buddha is;  
without abiding in either;  
not even a thousand eyes  
can penetrate here.  
A hundred birds offering flowers—  
what a shame!  
Whip and rope, man and ox  
(ideas of awakening) all gone;  
vast heavens beyond recognizing;  
Snowflakes can't survive  
the flaming furnace;  
here truly ONE with the masters of old.*

Wonderful poem! However, as Hakuin's master kindly points out, this is not a place to dwell for

long.

The Ninth Oxherding Picture:

*Originally pure and clean  
without a speck of dust;  
seen through the growth  
and decay of all forms;  
at ease in the unconditioned;  
without illusory phantoms;  
what is there to embellish?  
waters blue, mountains green,  
sit and see through  
the change of things.  
return to the origin, back to the source,  
what wasted effort.  
Far better just to be blind and deaf,  
inside the hut, no sight of things outside.  
streams flow of their own accord.  
Roses naturally bloom red.  
Every day the sun rises and sets.  
Each moment the whole world awakens.  
From where? For whom?*

The Ninth Oxherding Picture sounds complete.  
So why is there one more?

We have already stopped trying to analyze things, trying to desperately grasp for some imagined absolute truth, trying to be right. We have let go of all of that to the point where our false sense of self drops away. From there we have to come forth, freely living and returning to the world with empty hands—and maybe with the shining eyes of children blowing bubbles... Embracing everything and everyone.

So there is this Tenth Oxherding Picture that says:

*Alone beyond brushwood doors,  
not even the thousand saints know.  
Hiding his light  
not following the tracks of sages past.  
Carrying his gourd,  
he enters the market.  
Leaning on his staff,  
he returns home.  
Hanging around honkeytonks  
and fish stalls,*

*all become Buddhas.*

*Entering the market with bare chest and  
bare feet, smeared with mud and ash,  
broad face beaming.  
No display of magic powers.  
Yet willow trees burst into flame.*

Now the poor seeker who was trying so hard to catch the ox of awakening is a chubby Buddha, playing with the children, aiding a young inquirer. The circle is complete here. But there is nothing special or remarkable there, not a glimmer of inner experience. "Covered in mud and ash," having truly driven into life, including those things that in the beginning we wanted to get away from. Having seen through the Three Marks of Existence we are now free to truly live. Now covered in the mud and ash of serving others with a look not unlike that of a fool. Not simply free FROM care, but free TO care. With no strings attached. No special powers or charisma, yet somehow all are saved.

The pictures before included being truly one with the masters of old. Now there is no thought even to follow in such tracks. Instead we carry our (empty) gourd to market. We go about our daily work. We still observe the precepts (naturally) but without being intoxicated even by them.

"Smeared with mud and ash, entering very worldly places." Why enter such worldly and corrupt places? A Dharma friend comments here:

*Certainly not a place for a self-respecting monastic to go. He is not here to enjoy himself though. He is not there in order to save others either. He has let go even of that idea. Precisely because there is no such intent, no secular or sacred, no worldly, no holy, all are embraced and become Buddha's. - Just as they are. Numberless beings set free.*

Do we see it like Yasa (who later became a deeply awakened person), that there is someone who has to be set free? Once we truly real-

ize how everything and everyone is already free to begin with we can live the all inclusive truth, like it says in Hakuin's Song of Zazen: "This very land is the Land of Lotuses and this very body is the Body of Buddha."

*Children catching  
Bubbles they have made  
with a butterfly net.*



## Vesak Celebrations

Every April we celebrate the birthday of Sid-dhartha Gautama, who later became known—after his profound awakening—as “the Buddha,” “the Enlightened One.” And we are not alone: all over the world, Buddhists are celebrating this event with gratitude and joy.

At HVZC we begin the weekend's celebrations with Temple Night, during which the zendo is transformed, lit only by candles, with the addition of several altars, including one for children. The following morning we gather for the Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha, followed by the telling of the story of the life of the Buddha, and then a potluck meal. It is a time for family

*Below: Trainee from Italy, Federico,  
carefully irons an altar cloth*



and friends, and especially for children, and in some ways it is no accident that the traditional date occurs right around Easter, when Jesus' resurrection is celebrated in Christian households, for the Buddha taught resurrection—that a renewed and joyful life opens when we realize the true nature of reality. Here are photos of some of the preparations for Temple Night and our special altars this year:



*At left: Sozui-sensei  
adjusts an altar cloth  
before setting the  
figure in place*



*Above: One of the special Buddha altars,  
complete with offerings*

## Mountain Gate Expansion

*Gratitude to all who have helped make this much possible! Thanks to the excellent design and working drawings of our architect benefactor we have been able to obtain a building permit, pour the foundation, accomplish under-slab insulation, radon abatement piping (there's no evidence of radon gas, but it's easier to put it in now than to retrofit later), piping for the heating system (warm floors!), and pour the slab. Since then our generous and skilled team of neighbors has also raised the south and east walls of adobe and framed the rest of the first floor walls, set the beams and planking for the first floor ceilings (including a beautiful herringbone pattern in what will become the office), built stairs and enclosed the stairwell, and framed the floor and walls of the part of the second storey that is above the extension of the existing building. Beams for that part of the second floor have been delivered up to the second floor level through the generosity of the gentleman who sustainably harvests lumber and mills it. Generosity has been the theme of this project, for not only have many people donated money to pay for materials and labor, but our workers themselves have donated as well, though they are all local folk who live simply and sparsely. Random acts of kindness have frequently occurred, and gratitude and humility arise in response...*

*We have a long way to go yet, and it will require a great deal more money to do so. Please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to Mountain Gate to help us complete this project!*

*Below and at right, some recent photos:*



*Hauling those heavy beams into the upstairs space from the "dock" seen in the photo at right.*



*At the left side of and attached to the new construction is the existing building.*



*A batch of beams is hoisted up to be brought in through the south-facing window opening of what will become a second floor bedroom*

Please help! There are a number of members who wish to attend sesshin as well as daily sittings but suffer from chemical sensitivity. If we could all refrain from using perfume, aftershave, cologne, and scented lotions, soaps, and shampoos prior to sittings and in sesshin it can make a difference between our Sangha brothers and sisters joining us for sitting—or not.

**May 3 All Day Sitting** led by Sozui-sensei

**May 6-10 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD**, at Mountain Gate. These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. During these retreats women veterans are taught tools that they can use to help center themselves.

**May 30 All Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen;** see [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org) for more info & to download an application form. Members attend for free. Roshi expects to be at HVZC May 28-June 4.

**June 7 All Day Sitting;** schedule to be announced. This All Day Sitting coincides with one Mitra-roshi is doing in New Mexico on the same date. (see next entry)

**June 7 All Day Sitting in Albuquerque NM;** for information and reservations, contact Zen-shin at: [monkzenshin@gmail.com](mailto:monkzenshin@gmail.com)

**June 12-14 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Partners/Spouses of Veterans with PTSD**, at Mountain Gate. Please see [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org) for further information.

**June 26-28 2-Day Work Sesshin** led by Sozui-sensei; this is a chance to accomplish

some much-needed caretaking of our center!

**July 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications: July 1.

**July 25-August 1 7-Day Sesshin;** this is our only 7-day sesshin this year at HVZC. *August 2nd is a Free Day with no formal sittings that day,* since it's the day following a longer sesshin. Roshi expects to be here July 23-August 2.

**August 19-23 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate.** These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.

**August 23 All Day Sitting** led by Sozui-sensei

**September 25-27 2-Day Work Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here September 22-29.

**October 3-10 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate** Deadline for applications: Sept 20

**October 14-18 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate**

**October 30-November 1 2-Day Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here October 27 to November 3.

**November 2** there will be a **Jukai [Precepts] Ceremony**, an opportunity for Sangha members to recommit to their practice and to working toward living the Precepts. This is the only time this year Jukai will be offered at HVZC.

**November 17-24 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications: Nov. 5.

**November 30-December Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications is November 15.

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*A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West? Joshu answered, "The oak tree in the garden!"*