

'Heat and Cold'

Dedicated to Sexton Bourke

Yesterday we explored the path of no self, waking in the vast open sky of Mu - of the freedom secreted in every one of us *as* our self nature. When we go all the way into that 'Who are you really?' we find a glimpse of the whole universe blazing right there in the final disappearing-point of 'Who?' We really do disappear, when we look. But it's all right. For what appears then is the most valuable thing in the world, and it is sometimes called 'no self'.

But today I want to turn the Dharma wheel to the very human side of no self. We are human beings, so we are eventually *failing* human beings. Here's the vital news for every human being: We will fail. We will all fall down. We will all come to an end that isn't necessarily pretty. If we were to write our whole life story from *that* kind of disappearing point, the whole thing's just a tragedy, let's give it away now.

Of course it's not like that. There might be something extremely valuable in this failing business. I remember hearing about Sylvia Boorstein, an American dharma teacher, for whom a very poignant moment arrived in her career as a teacher. She was giving a dharma talk just like this, and at a certain point people began to look at each other. And it was not apparent to her for quite some time that she was in fact wandering badly, she was not being very coherent, she was in fact failing in front of everybody. She had decades of practice behind her, and so she was gradually catching up with and bearing witness to what was happening, along with everyone else. And she turned it into a beautiful teaching. She said 'Everybody, quickly, pay attention, this is an important opportunity. You are now seeing a senior dharma teacher failing right in front of you'.

And that was a very moving moment. We do all fail, and we do all have to be entirely human. We have to realize ourselves as nothing else but entire human beings.

In this morning's sutras, there was a dedication to Sexton Bourke who is, by his own account, in the final stages of a disease that has been undoing his body and health for the last six or seven years. He's been not so much fighting cancer as *meeting* cancer. This is to say, he is a true human being. His attitude is both very Australian and very ordinary. He once said, 'You know, nobody can sustain mindfulness 24/7. That's a dream, a dream that must fail.' And he went on to say, "So that's why we have to come to sesshin, to get a clear hit of it!"

But the point here is that failing might be one of the great dharma gates of all time. After all dharma gates are countless. That means they can leave

nothing out, nothing - no manifestation of being, being here, being human. So I am inspired and humbled by Sexton's ability to fail without self-pity, and actually he considers himself to be and *is* a lucky man. It's painful, he's contemplating parting with his life too early, he is only in his fifties and he is parting with so many things, with a 'limitless' future, with his health and wholeness, with being pain free.

And he's not 'making the best of it'; it always seems to me that he's more like *being* the best of it. So 'being the best of it', this ability to not turn away from what is - it begins with the ability to stop. There's a sense in which not turning away is always the best choice, always. It means you can see things as clearly as possible, even see how they are 'the best', and act accordingly. If you have turned away, if your heart has flinched off, then you are not going to be seeing clearly, but acting on bad information that is in no real accord or unbroken contact with what really is.

It's not hard to see how this can start an avalanche of subtle harm, and larger harm can come from such a turning away. Not turning away means meeting that which is not 'me and my wishes'. Turning away is favouring 'me and what I want and would prefer to be the case and my whole dream of an escape'. Not turning away is meeting the true self, and that's *not me*. It is deeply personal, but free in the way we call no self, *Anatta*. It never stops opening, it is never completely done with us, but it begins with stopping.

There is a mysterious poem by Tomas Tranströmer about stopping - on all sorts of levels - but it has in it that hint of 'stopping can be very lonely and painful'. It is about how it is when we are stopping to meet something that is actually difficult to meet, not easy or homely, something we are not glad to meet. That's a stopping that's not yet in reach of home, though it is indeed the only way home.

Two a.m., moonlight.
The train has stopped out in a field.
Far off sparks of light from a town,
flickering, probably, on the horizon
as when a man goes so deep into his dream
he will never remember he was there when he returns again to his room.
Or when a person goes so deep into a sickness
that his days will become flickering sparks,
a swarm, feeble and cold on the horizon.
The train is entirely motionless.
Two o'clock, strong moonlight, few stars.

In our Zen tradition we sometimes use the word 'moonlight' to point to

the mind in its most natural state. Moonlight is what appears with the stopping of the endless drone of the self, the stopping of the moves of the mind to keep creating and affirming and ramifying itself. Moonlight is coming to an almost perfect stillness, facing ourselves so closely that we disappear, but that stillness is shimmering with the creative force of life itself. So what we sometimes call 'moonlight' is an act of maintaining a powerful and relaxed state of focus, a graceful and dynamic state.

So then, 'moonlight', 'moon', is consciousness without an object we could still call 'self', and so it sees with no separation from each thing: moonlight covers everything evenly while each thing is at the same time distinct and clear in itself. The poem is saying that sometimes we have to come to this *stop* in very lonely country, to stop denying or fleeing reality and to simply take on the difficult things as who we are, and then the moonlight is right there, in that difficulty.

The koan that is probably most famous for addressing this ability to meet yourself completely in pain, itself, is Dongshan's 'Heat and Cold'. A monk asked Dongshan, 'How can we avoid heat and cold?' He's wondering, can't we get away from the painful, humiliating extremes of being human? Dongshan said, 'Go to where there is neither hot nor cold.'

The monk was naturally pretty keen to find out where that was! "Where is that place where there is neither hot nor cold?" he asked. And Dongshan told him where it is.

'When it is hot, kill yourself with heat. When it is cold, kill yourself with cold'.

'Kill yourself' can sound a bit formidable if you're too literal-minded, but he is saying: use that difficulty to practice easing yourself out of the picture completely. You know, when we're out of the picture, when we're not so self-importantly in front of every single thing, then heat is actually just heat, cold is just cold, grief is just grief - and crickets can be crickets, tigers can stroll, and elephants can get to keep their tusks.

We can meet the real right there in that heat and cold and extremes of a situation, and lose our sense of self and step free, into something far bigger than that sense of 'me' could ever let us know about. Because when we are more out of the picture, that is, when we have 'killed' our uneasy, complaining, formulating self just by quietly gritting our teeth and tolerating, facing and agreeing with the apparently extreme situation itself, then the view becomes different. To begin with, it's infinitely wider. It's very roomy, and very interesting. Right where we thought we were so entirely destitute,

we find there's nothing truly missing there.

Strangely enough when we favour this 'not me', we realize that everything is our self from the beginning, inseparable and undivided from the beginning. We realize everything is who we are. And if everything is who I am, then what is there to fear? Virtually all states of 'too much' hot and cold are created and driven by fear, fear in all kinds of strange distortions - of what is originally usually found to be love, when you dare to take a close look. For fear itself is love in heavily distorted state, almost always, when we look without flinching away.

So, let's look at an example of the hot state, a very hot state - lifelong anger. Robin Hart is a young African-American woman who has written about the way she uses her practice to try and take on the enormity of the racism that she endures, as a kind of ongoing madness that she must somehow live with as sanely as possible. When I was at a large Buddhist teachers' gathering at Spirit Rock in 2000 in California, I was struck by the fact that there was just one black Buddhist teacher present, in a room of perhaps 200 Buddhist teachers from all over the world. A salutary fact, that needs a good close look. And so I was interested to read this woman's subtle and honest account, first of all of the strength of what is met in racism as she has encountered it, and then of how she has learned to bear witness to it.

Robin is the child of educated, college educated parents, and she herself holds a number of degrees, she has studied law and worked for ten years in Washington DC as an assistant to a Congress member. She has gone on to be admitted to the California bar and worked as an attorney there – one of the hardest bars to gain admission to in the world, I'm told. After working for quite a while as a lawyer, she gave up on law and left it in a broken state because, despite her prestigious position, she had encountered such extraordinary racism in her job. She says:

'I was the only African American out of approximately 200 attorneys in my law firm. Despite the fact that I made an extra effort to dress in a professional manner, always wearing quality suits, silk blouses and gold jewelry, I was constantly mistaken for a secretary and treated rudely and with little respect. When I walked into a partner's office, I was often asked with a scowl 'What do you want? What do you want?' When I identified myself and the reason for entering the office, an apology soon followed.'

But you can imagine the anger she had to constantly swallow.

She left the law and took up the study of theology, and to her astonishment found that amongst spiritual people, the racism was even more

acute and unconscious. And she struggles to deal with that fact. She says: 'Where can black people go to get away from the madness that engulfs us?'

Robin goes on, 'Every single day I am treated as if I have no intelligence, no feelings, as though my cheques are automatically suspect, as though I am a thief, as though I am a non-entity, as though my opinions have no worth, as though I am not competent. I could fill this page but I will stop.'

She reports that the racism she experienced was fairly light in primary school, but in high school she began to feel it more, and in graduate school, hugely, and so on. It got more extreme as time went on, for her. But her history is not just about her, it is inseparable from the history of her people. Her people's history of slavery, emancipation, and continuing oppression is part of her. And strangely enough that is part of where she works from, finding the strength to meet racism. 'When it is hot, kill yourself with heat, when it is cold, kill yourself with cold'. She says:

'Yet I know within the depths of my consciousness that I am limitless in my ability to create all that I need and desire. I know that I could not survive, and my people could not have survived the horrors inflicted upon us, but for some invincible power within each and everyone of us that enables us to persevere. But I have allowed myself to believe that all my power emanates from without'.

Here she's describing what happens when we concede to anger, when we, in a sense, give ourselves away to anger. At that moment we have allowed ourselves to agree that all of our power emanates from without. What 'they' do is the source of my anger and my captivity, 'They won't give me, they won't let me, they deny me opportunities, they are in control, I control nothing.'

Now in one way she is describing the objective reality of her condition. But she is also subscribing to a powerless and incomplete version of the reality of her condition, which she starts to sense as well. And so she begins to practice studying her own mind in meditation, to take back her mind from the racism of others, and she talks about how she works with this in her practice.

She makes this beautiful point, about the prison we create for ourselves with 'me' and 'mine': 'As long as I feel anger I cannot experience *Anatta* or no self.' So already you can see how anger is a Dharma gate, and that we must go through the anger to recover our true no self. 'It's important for me to realize that I do not have anger, anger has me if it is affecting my life in such a way that I cannot think clearly and my aspirations are diminished.'

I think we all know how, when we give ourselves away to anger, when anger takes us, we are engulfed in a kind of madness. It can be a quite low-key event relative to world peace, and yet, and yet - is it so significantly different from a car bomb blowing people apart? If in our hearts we demolish people with our anger, at those moments anger profoundly limits us, locks us into ourselves, coarsens us and hems us in. We become the fool and the thing of anger. At those moments of losing it, or of acting in vengeance, we have ceded our real power and sovereignty, and cut ourselves off from the freedom and generosity, the integrity of our ultimately untouchable no self.

Let me read a little more: 'Mindfulness involves looking at life the way a scientist observes a specimen', this is Robin's view. 'When being mindful of the breath, one need not say I am breathing hard, I must relax - one merely observes the breath with no judgment, just taking an interest in how it works. Learning to observe the breath in this way, this non-judging way, will enable a person one day to be similarly mindful about the people, circumstances and conditions which seemed to cause anger.'

And she gives an example of how she works close in. Noticing, for example, that as she walks around a lake for pleasure she finds her hands clenching from time to time, a kind of energy of strong contraction running through her body at different moments. And so each time she noticed that, she would deliberately unclench her hands. And then she had a chance to notice that each time she did so, she immediately started feeling bigger and roomier.

She says 'In examining anger one must try to see clearly how it arises and what causes it, how and when it disappears, and try not to have any subjective reaction. This is a very hard discipline. It's like lifting weights', she says, 'you start off on small weights until you can lift much heavier ones. I don't yet have the ability to observe my anger when the racism is acutely painful. But this is alright, the seeds are being planted.'

A related part of her practice is to try to 'track back' a feeling. When she starts to feel the weight of racism, she now remembers to ask herself, 'Why did that upset you?' and she answers herself: 'Because she thinks I took the book. Did you take the book? No, then why are you upset? Do you think she thinks you took it because you are black? Probably. Are you sure that's the reason? No. Even if it is, is that your problem or is it hers? How does her thought affect your life at this moment?'

You can begin to see how subtle it grows as you 'track it back', as she says. And this is an interesting practical example of the practice of 'not knowing', is it not? Of undoing the hardening of opinion and knowing that

forms with the speed of light when we give way to anger. At such a moment, we've hardened not just into a probably rather wild decision about something or someone, but trenches have been dug, guns are lined up, ammunition is at hand. It is a very fast business.

'This is not to discount the people and the situations that indeed cause pain and depression', Robin says. 'But if I continue to match their angry energy, I remain bound to the wheel of change. I seek to grow beyond these conditions.'

And finally she says 'I can observe my anger at a safe distance from my 'assailants''. She puts that in inverted commas because she's acknowledging that the one who actually causes the anger to solidify, the one who is the greatest assailant of herself, is no other than herself. She is admitting and noticing how easily she builds the house of pain each time. And she says, 'I may interact more closely with them when my strength develops to the point where I can be among them without pain. Right now I see the worth of a Buddhist practice, of being aware of my body, my breath and my pain. This is where I start.'

Really interesting. *This is where I start.* She is not just saying here's where I start to work at it, every time. She's pointing to where she actually starts to get born as a true person, every time, starts to genuinely arrive, starts to be real, and to be here.

So, it's a very moving account I think of the enduring nature of the practice that is required, especially if your anger is coming from a provocation of the kind that she must work with, where moment after moment she has to meet the hardened and bruising opinions that (racism ensures) people are not even especially conscious of possessing, or off pushing onto others. As she points out, 'If people do suspect they are being racist, they are often even more extremely angry in a pre-emptive way.' And so you cannot get close to the truth with them, and if you can't share that truth you are very lonely.' That's one of the things that comes across most poignantly - how lonely it is to be engulfed by the madness of racism that she is describing, coming from the world she lives in, like a relentless prevailing wind.

So, heat and cold is what Dongshan is asked about. There are hot states like anger, and there are cold states like fear or shame.

Lin Jensen is a man who sometimes comes to John Tarrant's Pacific Zen sesshins, in California. He's a published writer, and something of a teacher in his own right. He's written a book called 'Bad Dog', a whole series of

memoir stories about the humble process of becoming real. And in one of these he tells the story of the dog in question, Laddie.

It's really a story about his family situation and about how shame - a dissociated, barely conscious shame - formed this whole family, coming mainly from the father's very strongly punitive response to his children. Beatings that his children had to submit to regularly, almost ritualistically, desperately working out, 'Okay, will I go first or last, quick!' You had to make decisions like that. Lin gives a very visceral description of the little child waiting for an overkill punishment to be meted out, thinking 'What did I do, was I bad, did I think bad thoughts, did I say something bad? How was I bad?' And those seeds of un-nameable shame being planted so early in a small, barely started life.

But the Bad Dog story is about the children's beloved dog, Laddie, who is found with feathers and blood around his mouth. Laddie has killed a turkey. Normally that's a shooting matter in this family - a turkey is killed, the dog goes - but the children say, 'You can't shoot Laddie!' and they rush to protect him. And the father doesn't really want to shoot Laddie, but the turkey was a seriously valuable part of the family's household budget, so he says, 'Okay, this is what we have to do'. He gets the dog and he ties the heavy turkey corpse with bailing wire around the dog's neck, leaving it there to rot. So Laddie spends the next week drooping, laden, disappearing under the house in shame - like the Ancient Mariner with his albatross. And this bird gradually rots and stinks to high heaven, and the dog is just coated in his shame. Think about a dog's sense of smell - ten, twenty times sharper than our own.

Laddie retreats under the house, and you can hear in this the shamed soul of these children, retreating into a dark safe place, a dangerously dark, and in fact, dangerously hidden place. The little boy Lin is still small enough to crawl part way after him, and says, 'Laddie, Laddie', and Laddie will barely acknowledge him. You know how shame cuts us off from each other, we can't even look at each other when we are deep in shame. And when you are ashamed of someone, you can't look at them, that's the terrible isolating force of shame.

Eventually, after weeks of foul disgrace, this awful thing falls off and the dog is somewhat freed, but until then, Laddie debar himself from all reach of love.

Lin writes: 'Once during this terrible time I see from a distance that he has come out from under the shed. The turkey round his neck drags on the ground when he walks. Even from far away I can see that the turkey is slimy

and bloated from rot. 'Laddie', I call, I run to him but before I can get to him he crawls back under the storage shed. I see him there in the darkness,. 'Laddie, I'm sorry', I try to crawl in but it's too tight and I can't reach him. The smell of him gags me, 'Laddie', I say again.'

'And then one day he's out, I find him in the barnyard. The bailing wire is still round his neck where the turkey has rotted off. I take the wire off but he doesn't wag his tail or try to lick me. He doesn't do anything at all. I take him to the washroom and fill the tub with warm water. I lift him into the tub, I wash him with warm water, I scrub him and rinse him and draw more water and wash him again. I dry him with a towel and brush him and I keep telling him that it's okay now, that it's all over. I let him out on the lawn by the house where the sun shines through the elm tree and I go back to clean up the washroom.'

'When I come for him, he's gone. I find him back under the storage shed.'

The persistent force of being shamed speaks for itself. But in the last part of Lin's exploration of, 'When it is cold, kill yourself with cold', he speaks of when he's 60 years old, his father now 93 years old and in hospital with pneumonia, not expected to survive. His father by then is a more *human* human being, he's a failing human being, his lifetime of almost overkill strength is not abounding any more. He actually needs a great deal of support and help in even the most private matters. And his son, Lin, now helps him with his diarrhoea, cleaning him up and handling his father's shame most lovingly.

His father is shamed by the fact that he's in hospital. On more than one occasion he can't make it to the bathroom, and a trail of diarrhoea marks the path of his failure. And Lin says, 'It's okay, it's okay', and he washes him down. He wrote: 'I wash him as though I were washing my very own flesh until all the awful rotten things are cleansed away. In the morning, Father is breathing easier and he survives another year before dying on 8th December 1993'.

And finally, what he says about this is the human reality of what it means, 'To kill yourself with cold':

'I've written of these things out of gratitude so that others might know, as I have come to know, that pain summons its own healer. You do not have to seek outside yourself for deliverance. If shame is all you have, embrace what you have, honour it and care for it with all your attention and kindness. In your own grief you will find the power to convert shame to compassion.'

I find that 'out of gratitude' remarkable, and a sign of achieved humanity. Our practice is listening, listening to ourselves in a deep and intimate way, right at the source of our being, our all too human being. It's not passing judgment, or criticizing, or distributing findings of right and wrong. This act of bearing witness is intimately bound up with a cultivated, discerning and compassionate *not-knowing* of such matters, with softening these hardenings of our self that get so attached - to our fears really, produced and shaped by our fears. And then they come with us all our lives, and they are painful things to drag around with us, they take all our life's energy.

So 'bearing witness' and 'not knowing' become the same, liberating move in the end. It is the act of unconditional listening that lets in true intimacy, with all its healing power. So just as you are, offer that up to your practice, just as you find yourself. Whatever your ghosts may be, grief or shyness or anger or love or shame or forgiveness or whatever it is - that is your offering.

And it is acceptable. The space of zazen does not exclude a single thing. It's deeply acceptable, nothing is wasted if it's human. And everything is valuable when it is completely honest.

So our lives are precarious. We fail. It's been found to be subject to change, this life we are in. That is its nature, that is *our* nature. And we can either resist that, which is called suffering. Or we can embrace it as our element, our nature, our mysterious unseen shaping. Then it is a potent and valuable dharma gate, an access point to our deepest self.

After all, this unseen shaping that I spoke of yesterday, it got us here into this amazing universe in the first place. And it never stops surprising us. When you stop judging your self, your circumstances, and what you feel sure has been done to you, it's all just one lucky chance after another. Which is more the compass setting for a plucky adventurer than a Pollyanna, by the way.

The koan of 'Heat and cold', which is to say, the koan of 'No heat and no cold', is pointing very powerfully to a practice of resolving again and again to not flee into accusation but face the self, not turn away. And to the intimate work that goes on in this subtle act of not turning away, and facing the self as it disappears before our amazed eyes into something so much bigger.

It's a work that is so valuable. Think of the work that we face as human beings right now with a planet running amok, with a climate running amok, with the huge call this places on us to grow up as a species, to grow past the infant stage at last. Someone said, 'It is the work of all the ages and it is our work today, more than ever. It is the work that allows one to live joyously

while in a profound state of grief.' It's not just about recovering a future for our grandchildren's grandchildren, and for the tiger's grandchildren and those of the more humble axolotl, too.

It is about finding the cure for pain in the pain. You know, we're very human beings.

Last night I mentioned the epitaph 'Mu', that single and singular word that is inscribed on the gravestone of Ozu, the filmmaker. Here's another epitaph you might like to consider for your own grave. This one arose once when David was explaining to me that he actually hadn't quite got round to doing something important... yet. I asked, 'What happened?' and he said 'Events overtook me.' We both burst out laughing.

For this is a great epitaph for our lives, is it not? In a way, it's actually there, silently, on every tombstone: 'I was born, but...events overtook me.' Dongshan invites us to consider that these events that ceaselessly overtake us as, every one of them, lucky chances, because we're human beings and this is the nature of the human path. Failing again, we resolve to try again, and fail better.

You see this small teaching staff of mine, this *kotsu*, cut from a small branch found in the creek just down over there? Actually, a short staff like this is a cut down version of the tall staff the old teachers used to carry around with them to bang on the ground, and so forth. But big or small, the staff is just a way of saying 'the teaching', without bothering the quiet too much. And the teaching of our path is for human beings, it's not for saints. And it is the teaching of reality itself, this staff.

The teaching, reality itself (holding up the *kotsu*) - you cannot tell them apart. Yasutani Roshi said (showing cutting the staff), 'If you cut it here, it's gold. Cut it here, it's gold. Cut it here, gold. It's all gold.'

This is your life. Wherever you cut it - *gold*. And Wumen said, speaking about the teaching staff: '*It helps you to cross the stream when the bridge is broken down. It guides you back to the village on a moonless night.*'

Can you hear that it's a very quiet, humble, human matter? It's a beautiful matter, to practice the way of the teaching. It's hard but it's a beautiful practice. Dharma gates are not just countless, they are every one of them beautiful, even in their extreme shame or pain or anger or grief, for they do not and cannot exclude human failings.

A practice like this can follow us all the way home, so please, keep it up,

all the way home.

- *Susan Murphy Roshi,*
Day Two Teisho, Spring Sesshin 2009, Gorrick's Run