Hands and Eyes

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 36:58

Tonight, as Hart mentioned, we're going Zen.

I've been working on a new Dharma talk based on Bodhidharma's Don't Know. But it's quite difficult working on a talk about Don't Know, because again and again I realized, actually, I don't know. What can I do? Eventually I got to the end of the first draft, and then I remembered this other koan, Hands and Eyes. I'm going to incorporate this somehow, but I don't know yet how. Don't know. So I'm testing it out on you, and I hope you'll forgive the fact that you're being crash test dummies tonight.

We'll have the talk first and any questions or comments you might want to make, and then we'll do the meditation. If you've got any questions, jump in at any time. In fact, I think I'll be throwing in a couple of questions to you as we go through.

Shall we begin?

This is called Hands and Eyes, and it's found as case 89 of the Blue Cliff Record and case 54 of the Book of Serenity—it appears in both works. These are two Song Dynasty koan collections, and if you do koan study today, these are two of the basic books that you would study to get through the curriculum. They're right in the heart of the classical Zen tradition, and each of these books contains a number of stories and dialogues, with comments for each one. We're going to look briefly at comments made by two subsequent Chinese Zen teachers.

Let's go through the story first. We have two characters, and there's not much of a story—it's just a brief conversation. These are Yun Wen and Tao Wu. At the time of this dialogue, they're both students of the same teacher. I haven't actually looked up who that teacher was, but they're students together. One is senior to the other, so there's a hierarchy, and the hierarchy kind of comes out in the dialogue.

The subject of discussion is compassion—in particular, compassionate action. The question is asked by Yun Wen: "What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do with so many hands and eyes?"

The reference here is cultural. The bodhisattva of great compassion is a Mahayana figure. In Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara. In Tibetan, Chenrezig—if you follow Tibetan Buddhism, you've probably heard of Chenrezig. In China, this figure often becomes female: Kuan Yin. This particular aspect of Avalokiteshvara refers to a specific way of imagining the Bodhisattva of great compassion. A bodhisattva in this context is a being that is enlightened almost, but not quite a Buddha—like a deity, in effect.

One particular kind of image of Avalokiteshvara shows him standing with eleven heads and a thousand

arms and hands. The idea is that Avalokiteshvara, depending on the particular story, is one who hears the sounds of suffering in the world, one who sees the suffering in the world, and reaches out and tries to help. But of course there was so much suffering that his head basically exploded. So he's portrayed with eleven heads. And there's so much suffering to reach out and do something about that he needs at least a thousand arms to do it. There are statues showing Avalokiteshvara standing with eleven heads and a thousand arms, and at the palm of each hand is an eye—because he sees the suffering, reaches out and responds, does something about it. These are the hands and eyes.

Does that make sense? Any questions thus far? We're just setting the scene here.

So: two students, one junior, one senior. The junior student is Yun Wen, and he asks Tao Wu, his friend and senior student, "What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do with so many hands and eyes?"

What's the question about? Essentially, it's this: What is the action of compassion? How does one actually do compassion?

Wu said, it's like someone in the middle of the night reaching back for a pillow.

Have you got that image? Someone in the middle of the night reaching back for a pillow.

Yen said, I understand. He gets it.

Wu said, how do you understand it?

Yen said, hands and eyes are all over the body.

Wu said, you have said a lot there, but only eighty percent of it. Now, this is a Zen way of saying you completely missed the point.

Yen said, what do you say, elder brother?

Wu said, the entire body, hands and eyes.

So that's the dialogue. And if you're working on this koan, you've got to demonstrate reaching for a pillow. Not imitate anything, but you've got to show what this is actually about. But we're just going to talk about it, which is much safer.

Let's look first at the commentary on this case as recorded in the Blue Cliff Record. This is a commentary by Yuan Wu, who assembled all these cases to turn them into a book. He says, "Groping for a pillow in the depths of the night without any lamplight."

This is a detail you don't find in the original dialogue. There's no light. Complete darkness. "Groping for a pillow in the depths of the night without any lamplight. Tell me, where are the eyes?"

Has anybody here ever groped for a pillow in the depths of the night? Where are the eyes? How can you

tell where the pillow is? There's something touching here. There's a physicality to it. Where are the eyes? He's not talking about seeing with these eyes. He's talking about an action—groping for a pillow in the middle of the night. How much thinking do we have to do to accomplish this? How much planning is there in this?

Clearly, what this is getting at is spontaneous action. And spontaneity is very big in the Zen tradition. I'm sure you're aware of it. It's the reputation of Zen teachers doing all sorts of crazy things. But what is the nature of this spontaneity? What are they actually getting at here?

The commentary continues: "You must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking, become clean and naked, free and unbound. Only then will you be able to see this saying about great compassion."

Here the commentator Yuan Wu points out what you actually need for this spontaneity. Now, it's easy when you talk about spontaneity to think, "Well, what is it? I'll just do what I like. I'm being spontaneous." And of course, from the Buddhist perspective, are you really being spontaneous?

Because the Buddha is coming out of the basic background of dependent arising. In other words, anything that happens, happens as a result of causes and conditions other than itself. Right now you are looking at a screen, hearing words. How did this situation come about? It came about because of causes and conditions. Without those causes and conditions, it would not happen.

In fact, when the Buddha talked about dependent arising, he rejected as wrong view the idea that things arise spontaneously without any cause. For the Buddha, when he used the word spontaneously, what he meant was without a cause, without a condition—things simply arise with no causation involved. And he rejected that view as wrong view. He said no, that's complete nonsense.

If something happens, then something else has influenced it to happen. Otherwise, it wouldn't happen.

So let's assume that these two characters here are highly educated in their Buddhist philosophy, and they know this. What are they talking about if they're talking about spontaneity?

Also, let's consider the lifestyle that these two characters undergo. These are both meditation monks in traditional China. Their lifestyle is, first of all, completely dedicated to the Dharma. They're living lives of celibacy, comparative poverty—though it's hard to say poverty in a traditional society. If you're a monk or a nun in a traditional society, you get fed and housed, you get to study if you want to study, and you're pretty well looked after. So it might be poverty by our standards, but probably not poverty by the standards of the time. They were probably comfortable middle class by the standards of their era.

But they lived a very disciplined life. If you're a meditation monk or nun in traditional China—and also in current day Korea—you'd spend three months of the year doing an intensive retreat, three months off, three months retreat, three months off. And you do that for five years, ten years, twenty years, thirty years. So it's pretty intense and highly disciplined, very hierarchical. You live your life constricted by

rules. There are many rules and they cover everything, right down to the details of polite behaviour. Everything is regulated.

And if you're being spontaneous, quote unquote, in that context, basically it means you have internalised the discipline. It's simply the way you behave. You're so conditioned that you simply learn to behave in a certain way—it becomes part of you. Otherwise you wouldn't fit in and you wouldn't survive in that world. So these are highly conditioned, trained individuals who are having this conversation.

What do they mean by spontaneity?

And of course, this comes out in the commentary: you must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking. Here, the commentator is talking about two aspects, two things that condition us—the emotional and the cognitive.

The emotional is what we would call the heart. These are feelings, emotions, and so on. These are the drives. What drives us? How I feel. This is the area of what the Buddha calls craving and clinging. It's the drivenness of the heart. "I can't help myself. I've got to have this. I can't control the fact that I just feel miserable. And if this happens to me, then my life will be ruined." And this is not under my control. This is the realm of the emotions.

And then there's the realm of concept. This is the world that we create in our conceptual thinking. We create, for example, past and future. And when we meditate, just check. I don't know if this happens to any of you—does it happen to any of you that when you meditate, you sometimes find yourself thinking? Does that happen? Next time it happens, check. Just ask yourself the question: past or future? Because often what we're thinking about is either the past or the future.

Have you noticed how often past or future is actually more real than the present? Have you ever been so worried by something that you have to do tomorrow that today is miserable, even though the objective conditions are very good? Has that ever happened?

So my present reality—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—is clearly pleasant, yet I'm overwhelmed by concept, by my concepts about tomorrow. Or I remember something that happened in the past and it really upsets me. "Oh yeah, that happened. That's what that person did. If only I had done something else." And I feel really bad. The past has colonized the present.

This is the world of concept.

And Wu says, you must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking in order to understand what's going on here, in order cleanly to reach for the pillow at night. You must cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking, become clean and naked.

This idea of clean and naked is very interesting.

Nothing added. Free and unbound. Only then will you be able to see this saying about great compassion.

Now, you notice what he's getting at. How do we cut off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking? What he's talking about is that we need to go through a long training to get to this point. And this is really quite important, particularly in non-dual traditions that talk about spontaneity and freedom and so forth. It's very easy for people to get caught up in the idea of "Oh, I'm already awakened, my Buddha nature is already free, and I can just do what I like." Because the reality is that what we do is what conditions us. And if I'm doing what I like, then in all probability I'm just acting according to greed, hatred, and delusion, but putting a big spiritual layer of paint on top of it and pretending to myself and others that I'm really being spiritual—which is, in this context, complete nonsense.

But if everything is conditioned, then how can there be spontaneity? This takes us to the Buddha's sense of what it is that we're doing when we undertake his training.

The Buddha's understanding of ethics teaches a synthesis. Part of his approach to ethics is virtue ethics—in other words, the cultivation of certain virtues. I'm sure if you've been around Buddhist circles, you know that generosity is regarded by Buddhist types as being a very good thing indeed. And things like loving-kindness—these are regarded as very good things indeed. Generosity, loving-kindness, compassion—these are virtues. They're qualities of the heart. And what the Buddha is saying is that if we want to live well, we need to have these qualities, and they need to be quite strong.

These qualities, these virtues, will come about because they, like everything else, arise because of conditions. So let's say I have tendencies toward being stingy, but I want to become generous. How do I do that? Well, I train in generosity. I train myself to be generous. And the name of this training is *dāna*. *Dāna* means giving, and it also means gift—both the act of giving and that which is given. So I would practice giving. It would be my practice. It's like learning to play the piano, but in this case I'm practicing being generous. And the way that I practice it is by giving.

So I get used to giving. I make it a habit. And the Buddha points out—he talks about graceful giving. How to do it gracefully, skillfully, so that the result is I become more generous. Because it is possible to give without becoming more generous.

Let's say some weird situation arises—you come to some kind of virtual meditation meeting and someone hits you with this stuff about how all the teachers are so free and generous with the teaching, and you've got to give them loot, otherwise frankly you're a very bad Buddhist indeed, and maybe it'd be best if you don't come back next time. They didn't actually say that, but... dot, dot, dot. So you think, "Okay, I've got to give them some money. He's probably got lots of money. Better give him something, I suppose. How much is enough? That'll be enough." Off it goes.

Now, the thing is, you've given something. You've practiced *dāna*. But do you walk away from that a more generous person? Well, probably not. You probably walk away thinking, "I was exploited. If they say

something is freely given, then mate, it's freely given. What's all this dharma on top?"

On the other hand, you might think, "Wow, this is fantastic! I'm being taught the dharma and I'm going to be liberated!" And how much money have I got in the bank account? "Here, take it all." Which is very nice from my perspective, but from your perspective, later on you think, "Oh my God, why did I do that? I've got to be more careful from now on." So again, you don't come out of the exchange a more generous person. You come out of it a more guarded person.

So graceful giving—it's an art. And for the Buddha, it's all about enjoying the gift, finding pleasure in giving. And that includes the anticipation beforehand and thinking about it afterwards. The classic case is when you give a gift to someone you love, say for Christmas or a birthday. I'm sure you've had the experience. The big day is coming up. I want to give them a present. What will I give them? What would they like? Have you ever spent time in bookshops just going through every shelf thinking, "I don't think he's read that"?

This will be good for him, but I don't know, he might have read that. Maybe this one. Well, this might be a bit weird for him. This one. And finally—ah, this is it. This is the perfect one. He's really going to like that. And joy arises. Then, of course, you give it, and if the person says, "Wow, this is fantastic," joy arises again.

It's this joy arising which cultivates the virtue of generosity, what the Buddha calls *chāga*, which literally means letting go. So it's cultivating a virtue.

Let's give another example. You're walking down the street and there's a rather irritating homeless person who seems to have issues with personal hygiene, suddenly thrusting something at you and demanding money. Or you see them beforehand and think, "Oh, this person will want me to give them something." So you just weave your way across the street and come back. Now, it's a perfectly natural response. But of course, when you come back, are you coming back a more generous person or a more guarded person?

This is the kind of calculation that you start to make. And it's something conscious—it's a training. So you might find yourself thinking, "Okay, the next person who bails me out, they're going to get the contents of my purse, my shrapnel, my spare change, whatever it is. They'll have it." And then there it is. No holding back. You might wait to see if you can get some kind of human interaction. Sometimes people on the street who want money have no idea how to ask for it. They lack grace, because there's a graceful receiving as well as a graceful giving. Sometimes people don't play that dance, which is always disappointing. But still, you can walk away from that encounter a more generous person.

The point is not how much you give. The point is what is the effect on the *citta*, on the heart-mind, over a period of time. We are developing these virtues, and we develop them through practice.

Take compassion, for example. You have the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, which in the texts has a capital B, a capital G, and a capital C—very impressive. So how do I develop the great compassion? Well, I practice it. And I make a point of practicing it. I might, for example, start to become sensitive to seeing

pain.

Now, pain is very interesting. Has anybody ever been irritated before? Have you ever been irritated and upset and angry and resentful and bitter and grumpy? When you get to my age, it's pretty much a daily occurrence. These are all manifestations of aversion. What conditions the arising of aversion? Something does, because nothing arises without something conditioning it. Well, what conditions aversion is pain. Aversion is the response to pain—"I don't like this." It's a kind of tightening, defensive response, a kind of cringing.

If I'm going to work on developing compassion, I need to become sensitive to pain, but without getting caught up in my habitual aversive responses. I need to open and relax to the experience of pain, and take the opportunity to do that whenever I notice it's there. It might be, for example, an attitude of surrender. This hurts. Relax into it.

Now, my own pain is the most obvious to me. But as I become sensitive to the pain here, of course I also become sensitive to the pain out there. So I meet someone who's grumpy, for example. And if I'm not conditioned by my own aversion and grumpiness, then I won't respond to that by thinking, "What a grumpy old bastard." Instead I'll respond by recognizing—ah, they're suffering. Because otherwise they wouldn't be grumpy. Because they're just like me. Because that's what happens when I feel pain.

So developing that sensitivity, recognizing what's going on, and instead of responding with aversion—shut it out, resist, avoid, thump it on the head—we relax, open up, absorb it, and let it go. Don't fixate on it, but let it go. This is practicing compassion.

In this practice, we are cutting off emotional defilements and conceptual thinking. We're not getting caught up in our own responses, our own habitual responses—that's the emotional defilements. And we're not creating stories about what total bastards these people are and how I am the victim of circumstances beyond my control, living in these stories and taking them as absolute truth.

The kind of spontaneity being spoken about here is paradoxically a product of conditioning. But it's conditioning in a certain kind of way, because the Buddha's view of human nature is that we are designed to live in a certain kind of way. If you look at his basic project, the fundamental framework of his teaching, it's the four noble truths: dukkha, the arising of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, and the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Dukkha is pain, unsatisfactoriness, suffering, dis-ease. And often he would say, "Look, I teach two things. I teach dukkha and the cessation of dukkha. That's what I'm interested in."

The cessation of dukkha, the cessation of pain—another way of talking about this is a flourishing human life. How can I live a flourishing human life? The Buddha's view of human nature is that we will flourish, we will have a highly satisfactory, meaningful, flourishing life, if we embody certain virtues such as generosity, compassion, love, joy. It's like we're designed for that, built for that. But we need to train it.

It's like the paradox of learning meditation. Gary Snyder, the American Zen poet, once commented, "Doing meditation, it is as natural for a human being to meditate as it is natural for a cat to take catnaps. The only difference is no one needs to teach a cat how to take catnaps." That's the only difference, but it is completely natural for us to meditate.

Now, if you think about your own meditation—a good meditation, when that happens—is the heart and the mind at ease, peaceful, unified? Or is it grasping and fighting and complaining? Obviously unified, peaceful. In a sense, this is the natural human condition under which we flourish.

So this is the spontaneity that the non-dual traditions are getting at. That's the aim: to be able to reach back for a pillow in the middle of the night. Here in the commentary it says "to become clean and naked, free and unbound." This reaching for the pillow is something we are all familiar with. It's completely natural, it is our natural state. But things get in the way, so we have to work with these obstacles. And of course, when we actually practice meditation, most of the time that's what we're dealing with—the obstacles. What we're looking for is for these to drop away and for this natural state to emerge. And this is the great compassion.

Getting back to our story: "It's like someone in the middle of the night reaching back for a pillow." Yen said, "I understand." Wu said, "How do you understand it?" Yen said, "Hands and eyes are all over the body." In other words, there's always an opportunity to practice compassion. It's always there. You don't have to go looking for it. It's available.

Wu replied, "You have said a lot there, but only eighty percent of it." Yen asked, "What do you say, elder brother?" Wu answered, "The entire body, hands and eyes." So even more intimate than "it's already available."

In the *Book of Serenity*, the commentary says, "It is like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. Where is the spring?" Let's get a sense of that image: willow-grown banks along the river, flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. What's being conveyed here? A direct sensate experience—in this case, a warm spring evening with a screen in front.

And the light of the candles behind. It's just what it is.

It is like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. Where is the spring?

What's that question about? "Spring," quote unquote, is a concept. Why is it warm tonight? Oh, it's spring. No—it's just warm. Do you see what he's getting at? Just the intimacy of the experience. Don't add anything to it. Just the experience.

The entire body, hands and eyes. It is like willow-grown banks and flower-grown walls on a warm day in a gentle breeze. Where is the spring? What shape is it? Clearly it's not there. *Nevertheless, it is able to accord with things and come with the time, unstopped, unhindered, like the moon in the sky, revolving naturally.*

And this is the ideal. Things just happen. The dharma unfolds. And our job is to get out of the way.

When we do this next meditation session, what is your job? Sit and be aware. Simple. That's it. Just be aware.

Notice how, again and again, you'll be pulled away from that. Something will interfere. The emotions, the concepts will get in the way. What's your job when you notice that? Is it to shake your fist and say, "Get out of here, I'm trying to meditate"? Is it to give up because it's too hard?

No. It's just to be intimately present with this thought, with this feeling. It's just the warm breeze on a spring night. There's no problem with it at all.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.