

## The Great Effort

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Teisho held at the ZenZondag on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 by Olaf

Good morning, I apologize for breaking the silence. Today our theme is "The Great Effort". It is the last of the three pillars of Zen. In April we did "The Great Faith" in June we did "The Great Doubt" and today is "The Great Effort". We all know the Chinese version of this, in China it is called "Kung Fu". This brings us smack in the middle of what Zen is about, Zen as a religion that is. Because Zen officially starts with the Buddha, but Zen really started in China with a monk called Bodhidharma, who came to China in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. The story tells that he was an Indian monk, but some texts claim he came from Persia. But in China talk about the Ch'an school of Buddhism only started after a monk known as the sixth patriarch of Chinese Zen, Hui Neng. And actually the story of the sixth patriarch is the story of Zen and of "the Great Effort". Zen distinguishes itself from the other Buddhist schools by claiming that awakening is not coming about by studying sutras, doing rituals and even not by sitting long in meditation. Awakening strikes like a lightning bolt. It's instantaneous, right here, right now!

The story goes that China in those days was divided in a sophisticated Northern part and a barbaric Southern part. And in this Southern part a young man who lives by selling fire wood he collects in the forest, hears one day a monk in the market place reciting one sentence of the Diamond Sutra. Upon hearing this sentence this young man who is illiterate and has no education at all is completely awakened. He hears that there is the 5<sup>th</sup> patriarch, Master Hung Jen, lives in a great monastery with more than a thousand monks in the North. Upon hearing this he decides to go there. The Fifth Patriarch immediately recognizes him as a man of great potential for the dharma. But the Fifth Patriarch knows that the monks in his monastery will get very jealous when they hear that this simple barbarian is so awakened. So he orders Hui Neng to work in the kitchen as a simple wood cutter and rice pounder. At a certain point Hung Jen asks his monks to express themselves in a poem so that he can acknowledge the depth of everyone's realisation in order to be able to choose his successor as the Sixth Patriarch. And all the monks know of course that the head monk is the most awakened one. And so no one dares to write a poem. They are all waiting for the poem of the head monk. And the head monk is in a big fix, because he knows he has to write a poem and he doesn't know what to write. But he gathers his courage and after three days of pondering he writes secretly on a wall the following poem:

*Like the Bodhi tree is body,  
Like a bright mirror on a stand the mind.*

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*Constantly and diligently rub it clean  
So that it cannot gather dust.*

Hui Neng is in the kitchen as he hears a monk reciting this poem. Because all the monks think this is the ultimate in awakening. He asks the monk, "Where did you hear this poem?" and the monk tells him the story. He asks the monk to show him the poem so he can pay his respect. The monk takes him there and shows him the poem, but of course Hui Neng can't read it. And he asks the monk to write a poem from him on the wall. The monk is of course astonished that this lowly kitchen aid has the audacity to also want to write a poem. But the great Master had said that anybody can write a poem so he agrees. And Hui Neng dictates:

*In essence Bodhi has no tree  
And the bright mirror has no stand.  
In essence there is not a thing;  
On what then can dust gather?*

It is clear that there is no mirror and no dust can accumulate anywhere. And then the story goes on that he becomes the Sixth Patriarch and he has to hide for 16 years, because all the monks are so jealous that they want to kill him. When he comes out of hiding he is acknowledged as the Sixth Patriarch. And that is actually where Zen starts. With the controversy between a great effort, sitting in long meditation, cleaning the mirror day in day out and adhering to the eightfold path, and the effortlessness of immediate awakening, right here, right now! Without waiting. There are many Buddhist schools that believe one has to practice life after life and create many meritorious reincarnations, some even believe 15000 reincarnations. Many lives of diligent practice before one reaches the state of Buddhahood. And especially in China they really believed that one had to memorize as many sutras and commentaries as possible in order to advance on the path to awakening.

The point is, and we read this also in the Sandokai, there is no difference between the Northern and the Southern School (the school of Shen Shui the head monk and Hui Neng the Sixth Patriarch). There is no difference between the view that reaching awakening is effortless and reaching awakening takes incredibly long and arduous effort. Why is that? How is it possible that both are true? Looking at my own life I can see on one hand my life is effortless, it just flows, things happen reactions just occur more or less by themselves. Of course I try to create or cause certain things to happen because I wish those things, but if I am honest with myself, things just happen. On the other hand if I look at my life I must say, "It is a

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great effort." I struggle to raise my children, I struggle to get enough money in my household so everything that needs to be done gets done. I have problems with people at work and with people in the streets and I have to solve these problems. And there are so many things to do, so many mails to answer. It goes on and on and on, it's a huge effort! To stay alive and to keep on going. And at the same time it is no effort at all. It just happens.

Actually Dogen the famous Zen Master that brought Soto Zen from China to Japan, was struggling with this same deep problem. When he was 13 he was ordained as a monk and he was taught to sit in meditation, to chant sutras, to perform services and to make a lot of bows. And at a certain point he heard that every sentient being innately has Buddha Nature, and is in principle already awakened. So he asked his teachers, "If we are already awakened, why the heck do we have to do all these practices?" And none of the teachers could give him an answer that satisfied him. That was the reason he went to China to find a teacher that could help him solve this dilemma. Why do we have to do all these practices when we are already there? What is this for crazy world? Sitting with his teacher in China he had this awakening which he calls "Body and mind have fallen off". He fundamentally understood then that doing the practice is the expression of being fully awakened. So, undertaking the effort is the expression of complete effortlessness.

We have a picture on our programme leaflet of today of a monk sitting on an ox riding backwards. The ox is walking in one direction and the monk is facing the opposite direction. The oxen is a symbol of awakening in the East. And actually this is basically our predicament. We think we have to go there, but our life and our awakening takes us in another direction. Why do we find ourselves time and again in the situation that we think we have to go somewhere while our life takes us in another direction? I think a little poem by Wu Wei Wu expresses it very well:

*Why are you unhappy?  
Because 99.9 per cent  
Of everything you think,  
And of everything you do,  
Is for yourself —  
And there isn't one.*

With that we go back into the silence. Thank you.

