

Fall 2010

Based on the talk “The Divine Abodes”

by Byakuren Judith Ragir at Clouds in Water on April 11, 2010.

“How is it when a person of great realization returns to delusion?”

From Dogen’s Shobogenzo fascicle, “Daigo” or “Great Realization”

This wonderful question from the koan of Zen teacher Hochi,

“How is it when a person of great realization returns to delusion?”

is one of the core investigations of Zen practice. It is taken up for study in Dogen’s fascicle “Daigo”. Dogen insists that we should study this completely. How is it when a person who understands interrelationship, who can see life beyond the individual story and psychological components of a self, and who can be completely merged with the occurrences of the now, function in the ordinary world of consciousness? Even though as a realized person we know that there is no time, no space, no story, no self, how do we act in consensus reality? My teacher, Katagiri Roshi had a beautiful saying, “Even a delusion needs to be cared for.” This is the teaching of the last ox-herding picture, the liberated person returning to the marketplace. How do they act?

Many years ago, while studying the Paramitas, or the Perfections (they are Generosity, Patience, Ethics, Effort, Concentration, and Wisdom), I was shocked to find the Divine Abodes or “love” under the Paramita of Concentration, sometimes translated as Meditation. I thought it was taboo to talk about love in Zen! But there it was! This “love” comes from the extraordinary working of the universe. It has as its source the unconditioned, non-constructed reality. You can connect with and taste this when you are deeply concentrated. It is the radiance of concentration.

This radiance is described as the Divine Abodes (the houses where the Buddha dwells):

- ▶ Loving Kindness
- ▶ Compassion
- ▶ Joy
- ▶ Equanimity

These four qualities need to be present in an **unconditional** love. “Unconditioned” means that which is beyond egocentricity and beyond our personal agendas. Though these qualities are not based on a personal agenda, their expression and experience are intensely intimate. They are the response to each condition that arises. They are the building blocks of presence.

These qualities work as the antidote to the three poisons of ego-based reality: greed, anger and delusion. Through Concentration practice, we taste the unconstructed dimension and discover the abodes naturally arising. They reinforce our understanding of how to act as a Buddha. We can see that there is no presence when we are in our habituated self-centered patterns. In the background of the openness of the abodes, our egocentric patterns expose themselves and we can work with the Abodes as a transformative method to lessen our reactions and enter into presence and attention.

These qualities are not simply lightweight and sentimental, as some people seem to view them. They are an ego-breaking proposition! It is not “trying to be nice” like a Hallmark card. It is not a “slap a smile on your face” and display a facade that you are kind. This immature understanding of unconditional love doesn’t ever work. Even worse, it can suppress our anger and greed without digesting and transforming them. Our unloving emotions are then left unconscious to come out sideways or explode.

There are subtleties to the practice of the Abodes. You can balance them by discerning when to switch from one abode to the other. You can notice when they start to get corrupted by ego and adjust your attitude. This corruption is described as the enemies and the near-enemies of each abode.

The Love of the Divine Abodes comes from an open, direct awareness that accepts each moment as it is. In some sense, it starts with **Equanimity**. We can enter the moment exactly as it is if we are not being influenced by our reactions of likes and dislikes. In the Tibetan system, the first Divine Abode is the quality of Equanimity. How we behave comes from the base of the absolute equality of all things. This quality is encouraged by equanimity phrase such as “May I be at peace with the ups and downs of life” or “May we accept things as they are.”

Each abode can slide off their pure qualities by the arising of the near enemies. In Equanimity, the near enemy is indifference or distancing, a type of aversion that presents as uncaring coldness. As you notice the near enemy in your behavior, you can make slight adjustments in attitude to come back to a pure, open, direct awareness of each moment. As we work with equanimity our awareness has a deep clarity to it.

Building out of Equanimity, **Loving-kindness** has radiant warmth in it. We are able to extend an open heart to anyone and anything. The most common phrases come from this abode.

Examples are: “May I be happy.” “May I be free from danger.” “May I have ease of well-being.” Its near enemies are: indulging in one’s comfort zone and not taking risks, turning into attachment/desire/possessiveness, conditional love, and sentimentality.

Compassion teaches us how to be truly present and close to other people when difficulties arise. It is a loving quality of attention directed at suffering and pain. With no aversion to pain, we can get right up close to pain, sit down next to it, and be patient and loving. It is the Bearing Witness quality. Some phrases are: “May this pain turn into wisdom and compassion.” “I care about this (your, my) pain.” “May all beings be free of suffering and know the root of suffering.” The near enemies of compassion are: pity, overwhelm, manipulation, control, and an idealism that ignores the complicated, painful aspects of life. Learning compassion makes us fearless.

The last abode is **Joy**, sometimes called Sympathetic Joy. It is unapologetic joy in being and a passion for life in the moment. Because it understands the base of abundance in life, it eliminates any envy or criticism of other people’s success or happiness. It’s supported by phrases like: “May we know the Joy of our own true nature.” “May we never be separated from the great happiness that is devoid of suffering.” “May your happiness and good fortune continue and increase.” Its near enemies are: attachment to ecstasy or peak experience, addictions, comparison and jealousy, ignorant optimism, or idealization of a situation or a person.

Many things can shift as you bring awareness to each abode. The abodes are marked by opening, relaxing, and knowing. In these conditions, the abode can arise. By mixing our awareness with the Abodes, we can let go of effort, and meet each moment as it is.

Dogen writes, **“We should know that there is great realization that makes returning to delusion into the most intimate partner.”** Our life is an improvisation with each phenomenon as it arises and how we respond to it. What is arising in the moment is our dance partner. When we’ve let go of our personal agenda for our life or for our day when we’ve let go of the way we want things to be, then we truly can respond to each occurrence with one of the Abodes and be the expression of Buddha.

We begin to improvise with wholesome responses and we are very intimate with what is. Sometimes the moment is successful, sometimes failing. Sometimes we like the moment, sometimes we don’t like it. Sometimes it’s sickness, sometimes it’s health. Sometimes it’s love, sometimes it’s conflict. It just keeps coming up. As you walk through your day, it’s coming up. In this moment, this dharma is your dancing partner. How do you respond, not react, to the improvisation of this moment in your life? A Buddha responds from his or her dwelling place of kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.