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The Seven Pound Shirt

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Commentary on Blue Cliff Record 45:

A monk asked: The myriad things return to one. Where does the one return to?

Joshu answered: When I was in Ch'ing Chou I made a cloth shirt. It weighed seven pounds.

The strategy for great peace is ceasing to fight with duality. In this season of peace, there is quiescence with the opposites. The classic duality that runs through all Zen practice is form and emptiness, ordinary and sacred, the many and the one, delusion and enlightenment. How do we cease to do battle: longing for one side, fighting with the other? This is the pivot of Zen practice.

Can we open our awareness to see the integration of these sides that are naturally expressing themselves in each moment and are completely intimately co-arising? Can we see the one *without disturbing a mote of dust* or destroying any moment of our life in form? Where does the one return to? It returns to and is the invisible support for each moment of delusion.

When Reb Anderson was last here, he said, "To live delusion authentically is enlightenment". By that phrase, he brought the opposites of delusion and enlightenment completely together into one. We can merge subject and object together in the activity of the moment. In that merging, we are naked and bare to the moment itself. This is authenticity. "Just being what is actually happening" is enlightenment.

It is similar to the famous Zen saying, "What is this? Not one, not two." This present moment, clothed in a "sign" or a form and having a name, is actually in such a state of flux; so porous, moving, and inter-relational that it cannot be identified as a separate "thing". The "thing" becomes universal functioning. That means we don't have to go anywhere to be enlightened. We have to become completely merged in the activity of this moment and allow the separate "self" to be forgotten. Then we are "just living" as Katagiri Roshi would say, or "life-ing".

So, a monk asked Joshu, "The myriad things return to one. Where does the one return to? This monk still perceives the one and the many as different. Mr. "Silver-tongued" himself,

Joshu responds: "When I was in Ch'ing Chou I made a cloth shirt. It weighed seven pounds." What? This is not the expected answer. We laugh! Hey, wait, that is what I want to get rid of – the weight of all the construction, all the busy "doing" of my life! My job, my mortgage, the problems of my family, the economy. I don't want to live in Saint Paul with a seven pound shirt on, buddy! This is why I came to Zen. Help me let go!

This is the revolving paradox of this koan. How do these two sides: construction in the human realm and letting go into universal functioning, dance with each other?

The making of a seven pound shirt is all the construction that happens in the human realm. We construct our stories, make families, work all day, are at war and at peace. We construct light rail train stations, civilizations, music, congress, ski resorts, Zen centers, everything. And each construction can be beautiful or ugly, for the benefit of all beings, or for the benefit of individuals and their small self-centered ideas. But at some time or other, in our life, "we want out" of our heavy and burdensome constructions. We come to a Zen center to find a way to relieve our burdens and our suffering. But what is the way out? It is the way "In!" Dogen said, "The way to understand temporal conditions is through temporal conditions." Katagiri Roshi in dokusan, always and repeatedly, seemed to put his hands on my shoulders, turn me around and push me back into my life.

Hsueh Tou's Verse for this Koan:

He wraps everything up and presses against the ancient old awl.

How many people know the weight of the seven-pound shirt?

Right now I throw it down into West Lake;

The pure wind of unburdening – to whom should it be imparted?

How many people know the weight of the seven-pound shirt? We all do. But how many of us know how to throw it all in the Mississippi River and be free of it? To be free of it but at the same time "not destroying life," this is the great paradox of Zen Life. To be unburdened by circumstance and yet, tending to and constructing our one precious human life. How do we do that?

He wraps everything up and presses against the ancient old awl. An awl is a pointed instrument used for digging deeply and poking holes in leather, wood, etc. How does a

practitioner dig deeply into each moment and find the one? How do we see the impermanence of each construction? Each moment? Each breath? And what happens to our sense of the burden of life when we actually realize the fluidity, the universe functioning, the interdependence of life itself? How do these realized truths affect how we hold our life, our constructions and our circumstances? If we see that our sense of “I” is not actually in control and we see that universal functioning is entirely and always present, we begin to trust and as Katagiri Roshi would say, we begin to have spiritual stability. How does this insight help us unburden?

Once Joshu taught the assembly: “If you are coming from the northern school of Zen, I’ll load up for you. If you are coming from the southern school of Zen, I’ll unload for you. But either way, you are still a fellow carrying a board”. When a person carries a board on his shoulder, half of it’s in front of him and half of it’s behind him. When he swings around, he doesn’t know what is going to be hit by the half that is behind him. We only “see” half our life.

“Loading up” means all the constructions and the explanations of sutras, techniques, opinions. “Unloading” means throwing all the perceptions and opinions in the Mississippi River and seeing the true reality of life which is non-dual and liberating. Then the subtleties of the ego intervene and we suddenly prefer liberation to life’s complication! Buddhism then becomes anti-life. This is truly where Joshu’s brilliance as a teacher comes in. How do we deal with this? In liberation “the one” returns to the making of the shirt of our lives but with freedom.

We return to delusion and our constructions with three admonitions. Use:

- ▶ Skillful means – to act in the most skillful and appropriate way to each unique condition as it arises.
- ▶ Compassion – to have compassion for the suffering that always appears in the world of constructed reality.
- ▶ Identity action – to have subject and object merged in each moment. To have the activity of the moment become your identity.

We must be able to work freely with “loading up” and “unloading”. Most of us need a lot of inquiry into what is “unloading”. The commentary to this koan ends with: *“all of this (the commentaries, the koans, the words, this article) is ‘loading up’. But say, what is*

unloading? Go back to your places (your meditation spot) and look into this.

We have to learn how to “unload”: to let go, see impermanence, and have a non-seeking (aim-less, wishless) attitude. We must learn how to not identify with life as me or mine. To let our clinging and attachments diminish. Therefore, allowing “the unbinding of the mind from greed, hate and delusion”. As Hsueh Tou’s says in his verse on this koan, *“Right now, I throw it down into West Lake (the Mississippi!).*

Dogen has written: *“An enlightened person is someone who embodies the deep understanding of non-duality while acting in accordance with ordinary boundaries, not being bound to either realm but acting freely and harmoniously. (translation by Kaz Tanahashi)*

Katagiri Roshi says: *“Entering the mud, entering the water, a bodhisattva enters this moment of life; going into delusions, paying attention to the delusion, and figuring out what each delusion needs to be taken care of with respect. Each moment, each thing, each person is an expression of eternity or the source of life. We can see and treat them this way.*