

# BOUNDLESS WAY ZEN

Dharma talks, sermons  
and teishos

## **THE ZEN PRACTICE OF BEING DEFEATED** by **Josh Bartok**

I'm going to talk here about an arc in Zen practice. The beginning of the arc is being utterly defeated. Defeated by our lives, defeated by our minds, defeated by our spiritual practice. This then unfolds into a really profound – and profoundly uncomfortable – not knowing. This not-knowing then gives way to a kind of receiving, a receiving of just this, of this moment as it is, a receiving of God's love, a receiving of Amida Buddha's compassion. And a receiving of ourselves.

To begin, I'd like to read a piece about defeat. This is from a book called *The Instruction Manual for Receiving God*, a lovely book by a fellow named Jason Shulman who is a Zen teacher – and he's also a master Kabbalist, a person studying the Kabbalah. This book, in general, is interesting in that it can be seen as akin American Shin Buddhism: it uses that language, a faith language, in a way that is precisely Buddhist.

One day you realize or admit that you are imperfect. It finally sinks in that you are not who you thought you were. You begin to feel terrible about not being perfect. Your self-esteem

descends to new lows, your feelings hover over you like a low-pressure weather system. In addition to feeling imperfect you now also feel depressed and defeated. You have added one suffering on top of another, depression on top of imperfection, because you have encountered another one of the great obstacles to spiritual work: the difficulty we have with simply suffering, and with suffering in a simple way.

This first barrier that we all encounter in some way or other is our selves, our pervasive feeling of not-enoughness. Even if we commit ourselves whole-heartedly to trying to live a life of mindful vigilance, of choiceful presence, of waking up – even if we're trying to commit to following as best we can the precepts, suggestions of how we can be the person we mean to be – even if we commit to this, we fail so miserably. This is what we see in the fourth ox-herding picture where the ox-herder is struggling, he's got the ox which is your self-nature or Buddha-nature, and it seems to be resisting. We see ourselves going through the same patterns again and again, we see ourselves acting from grasping and aversion. And the unpleasantness is enhanced because whereas we used to just act from grasping and aversion, from delusion and the stories we're telling ourselves—now, now we see ourselves doing it and we have awareness of it... but we still can't stop. This is being defeated by our practice, as we inevitably will be if our practice is trying to do anything, trying to be enlightened, trying to be calm, trying to be a better person, even just trying to focus on the breath, trying to get to ten, trying to pass Mu. Trying to do any of these things, we're going to be defeated.

It feels for all the world like a defeat. It feels like

totally getting kicked and crushed. There's nowhere to go. And that's true, there is nowhere to go. And this is actually a great place to be on the spiritual path. That very feeling of defeat, that very feeling of certainty that what's going on in your mind and life and practice cannot possibly be good enough, that very feeling indicates that your feet are firmly on the path.

I'm going to read a short quote from John Tarrant. This place of stuckness, this place of defeat – John Tarrant talks about being confronted by mountains of iron, cliffs of silver, an impassible barrier, the barrier of trying to be better, of trying to be enough, of trying to be that Buddha over there.

The silver cliffs and iron mountains can give you an interest in the thing that you are most afraid of. [That thing is that this might be all there is, that it might never get any better than this.] Then, once you learn to enjoy the mountain scenery...

Part of the practice of this stage of defeat is that you just be defeated, be there with that, look at it, what is it? What does it feel like? What's here right now? And to really get to know it, to welcome it as a friend. "Please, feeling of worthlessness, sit down right here next to me. Let's do some zazen together. Please, total failure, welcome." John Tarrant calls this "learning to enjoy the scenery." Learning to enjoy the scenery of this big, impassible, totally-in-your-face, not-getting-out-of-the-way iron mountain.

...it's hard to go back to your life without the cliffs.

This is also another thing that happens. At a

point pretty early on in spiritual practice you get past the point of no return. The point might even be before you ever set foot on the spiritual path, so you don't have to worry about "if only I'd have bailed last week." There comes a point where you no longer can look away. You can't not see this barrier. You can't not see at least some of your rubbing up against the precepts, rubbing up against your grasping and aversion, your stories. You can't go back to sleep-walking.  
John Tarrant:

The deep work, the inner work has confronted you. What defeats you also allows you to know your life, to really feel your life.

That very defeating quality makes it so unavoidable that you really get a chance to be with it because wherever you turn, there it is. Wherever you go, there you are. You stay at the base of the cliff because that's all you can do. You don't have to climb the cliff. You think you have to climb the cliff. You think that if you were a better Zen practitioner, a better meditator, a better person generally, or if you had better parents or a better upbringing or a better job you'd be able to climb those cliffs. But in fact, the person you are can't climb those cliffs. You can't do anything. You can't understand anything. If you were smarter, if you were wiser, you could understand--but you can't, you're just stuck, totally thwarted. So you stay there at the base of the cliff.

Isn't it wonderful? That's the thing that you can do. You can stay there, thwarted, defeated, inadequate. John Tarrant:

You stay at the base of the cliff until you don't need to leave.

You begin to get a taste of that not needing to leave in the very first moment when you say, "Okay, this is what I've got now." The very first moment you say, "Welcome, impassable barrier of crappiness. Sit down right here with me." And then you get a taste of what it means to not need to leave. Even if it doesn't change anything for you. There's a way in which we can practice acceptance, subvert it into the purpose of denial. We can say, "Please, everything be as it is.. so it can be different. Please, come this way... so you can leave! Please, come... so that you can get out of here!" If that's our practice of being with this, it doesn't work. And we can welcome even that: "Welcome, wanting these barriers to just leave."

Then John Tarrant gives us a positive note: "When that time comes, you can't find the cliff. There is no cliff, there's nothing standing in your way."

Even the cliff that's standing in your way is not standing in your way. Even the completely inadequate self you've got is perfect and enough.

That's at the end. Maybe, or maybe not. I think there's a point between being defeated and this, and I think that the cliff has to do with not-knowing.

I want to read to you from a manuscript from Zen Master Dae Gak. Dae Gak was perhaps the first heir of the modern Korean master Seung Sahn, and he has since taught independently. Dae Gak is the Dharma brother to our Boundless Way teacher David Rynicks's teacher George Bowman.

We reach the gate that cannot be passed, the gate of impassibility, completely frustrated. The mind cannot know. There's no solution that we can get, nothing we can wrap our mind around. No matter how we adjust our breath, our mantra, no matter how many koans we try to pass or do pass, the bottom line is "I Don't Know". Not knowing - and there is no Knowing of Not-Knowing. "Oh yes, I know. I know about don't-know."

And isn't it interesting how quickly we try to make not-knowing into this thing we know. We call this capturing the spring breeze in a bottle. You put a stopper on it, but then what you have in the bottle isn't the spring breeze.

True "don't-know" pervades every crack.

This isn't comfortable. This isn't the serenity that we thought we were going to experience, this isn't equanimity. This is don't-know in every pore.

When one really sees the hopelessness of trying to know, something else that has always been there is revealed.

Nothing in Dharma practice ever gives you more. When you see something, it's not that something new has arrived. You are seeing what has always been there. That is the perfection of things as they are, the compassion of Amida Buddha, God.

Something else that has always been there is revealed. Not that it can be known. Not that it can be held.

So even in that moment we still can't hold onto it, we still can't get it, we can't wrap our hands around it. Or we can, but then what we have changes. If you've ever tried to chase a bunny rabbit, their evasion strategy is that they can corner really fast and you can't. They go this way, and as soon as you go this way after them, they change direction. It's the same way with insight.

But there is something far beyond knowing with thought. Then one begins to realize, to make real, that the touch of a friend's hand, the sharing of a cup of tea, is not different from the swirl of two solar systems colliding.

So, we're defeated by our us-ness, our small ego minds, all of the things that we read in Buddhist books that are the problem, "Yes, it's clearly me, I'm the problem. It's the self. Now get rid of it." We're confronted with that. And we sit down with that at the base of the mountain, in front of the impassable gate. All of our efforts to get through this mountain are left, we are just here with this. If we can let that unknown rest comfortably as the unknown – we don't need to seek to know it, to convert it from the unknown to the known – then we can begin to receive this moment, receive perfection. We can begin to see the light, the mysterious truth of the Tathagatha.

Receiving this moment is exactly the same as being received by God, being saved by the Other Power of Amida Buddha. It doesn't matter which way you go, being received or receiving.

Again, from Jason Shulman:

God receives us just as we are, but we don't

receive ourselves in the same way. We don't love ourselves as we are. Our deepest work is not so much to improve ourselves as to realize ourselves, to see ourselves clearly and dearly.

The small self, hearing the words, "Be just as you are," takes it as permission to sidestep the spiritual path. It whispers: Just do what you want! Don't worry! No effort is needed! But we arrive at the truly effortless condition only after practice and more practice. The secret here is that we are not practicing being better than we are. We're simply practicing kindness toward who and what we are.

Practicing kindness towards ourselves. In this past sesshin which was two weeks ago, I was practicing with a lot of sadness and a lot of grief. A year ago this July was when I was ordained, and for that ordination my father came. A year ago, two feet from the spot where my cushion was at sesshin, was the last time and place I saw my father before he killed himself. I was sitting with a lot of sadness. A lot of grief. There's a way in which the structure of sesshin and the practice of just sitting enabled me to just receive that. The kind of vigilant attention that I was practicing – it didn't feel like concentrating. What it felt most like to me was – loving. In feeling it, I realized how unfamiliar that kind of loving directed at me was for me. I was familiar with being loving and supportive toward my partner, or lovingly holding the cats that I had in childhood. I was familiar with feeling that kind of love directed toward me, but not ever with me offering it as well. There's a way that just that attention, that full presence to this, was the expression of love. It wasn't even precisely my love. It's being received by God. As we open-handedly and open-heartedly hold ourselves, our



experience, in that very act we're being completely held and supported in the hands of the universe, by God, by Amida Buddha.

Ezra Bayda, in the wonderful book *Saying Yes to Life – Even the Hard Parts*, comments

Experiencing our emotions fully without wallowing in them or turning away allows us to break through the layers of protective armor and connect with the heart. Fully felt, our emotions can clear the path to the deep well of compassionate love that is the essence of our being.

When I worked on this book with Ezra, so much of what he was saying I could vividly affirm. "Yes! Yes! Great! I totally see that!" But "this deep well of compassionate love" – I had no idea what he was talking about.

And yet, now I can say my experience is that it's actually true. It actually is what fills all of the space when everything else disappears. There's gratitude that inexorably rises in response, even to the suffering, even to that sadness, even to the fifth day of sesshin pain in my knees or of being unable to stay awake during a period of zazen. It's such a small thing, such an intimate practice. It's just being there with yourself.

Jason Shulman:

Knowing who you are is not a mystical thing, but a matter of experience, acceptance, honesty, and compassion. It is knowing you are small and selfish and angry, and great, creative, tender-hearted and caring.

Returning to the first quote, the last line of it:  
"The difficulty we have with simply suffering, and  
with suffering in a simple way."

This is the second great bait and switch of the Zen path. The first great bait and switch is that we find that after just a little practice we expand our heart in a way that actually lets us suffer more. We become less inclined and less needing to turn away from the sufferings in other people. We become less able to not look homeless people in the eye, pretend they're not there, to pretend they are not people. We become less able to ignore the suffering of the world. This is our heart transmuting into Avalokiteshvara's heart, into the heart of Kuan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. The name Avalokiteshvara means "Regarder of the Cries of the World"—and as our heart becomes Kuan Yin's heart, becomes the compassionate heart of the buddha, we are seeing the cries of the world more and more. Whereas previously we had to keep our hearts small and constricted for fear that we would be destroyed by the amount of suffering we encounter, now we gradually see that we can let more and more of that suffering in and be undestroyed by it.

That's the first great bait and switch. We come to spiritual practice for less suffering, and somehow we get... more. And the other aspect is that rather than getting better at not suffering, through intensive practice, a week of ten hours per day on the cushion, rather than getting better at not suffering, there's a way that what we're doing is learning to suffer... better. To suffer more skillfully. To be more at ease with it. It's a very loving, generous practice.

Imagine! The two great fruits of Zen practice:

you'll get to suffer more, and you'll get to suffer better! Who's with me?!

I'll wrap up with this last quote from Jason Shulman:

We need only embrace ourselves in conscious awareness with deep knowledge and without judgment.

I want to amplify that. He says, "...with deep knowledge and without judgment." We can even embrace our not-knowing. Our not-knowing, this filling every crack, painful, uncomfortable, totally inadequate not-knowing – we can embrace that with deep knowledge. This deep knowledge is prajna paramita, this is wisdom beyond wisdom, beyond mere knowing, that's deep knowledge. It doesn't change the quality of our life, we don't then know. Without judgment we can even embrace our judgingness – our self-judgment, our other-judgment – we can embrace all of that. In that moment, we find, inside outside everywhere in between, we find God, which is this. In that moment we affirm all the incomprehensible things we've read in Buddhist books, the gibberish we've heard from our teachers. But it's all right here.

I encourage you all to keep up this great work of receiving all of this exactly as it is, perfect.

*Josh Bartok began his practice under the guidance of John Daido Looi, and lived for eighteen months as a monastic Zen practitioner at Zen Mountain Monastery. He was James Ford's first shoken student in Boston, and also currently studies with Jan Chozen Bays at Great Vow Zen Monastery. He works as an editor at Wisdom Publications, and serves as practice leader (tanto) at the ZCB affiliate Spring Hill Zen in Somerville.*

