

6. Transcendence

April 5th, 2018

There is a zen saying that when you are enlightened, you will be able to see the stone Buddha dance. Any guesses what this might mean? It sounds so magical that it is tempting to assume this is a poetic metaphor for something. I would like to suggest that it is not metaphorical. It is literal.

I'm not talking about hallucinations or about 10 tons of stone coming to life, like a scene in an old Sinbad movie. I'm talking about having such clarity of perception and equanimity with change that you are able to transcend the mundane experience of congealed conceptual vision in order to see the underlying force of perpetual motion, the energy that creates and sustains what we call reality. I am talking about seeing with such precision that you can notice visual input change in each instant in which your eyes move from point to point, you can see the passing of one moment's experience in the arising of the next. You are able to detect the wave-like nature of what you had hitherto believed to be fixed solidity. The stone buddha dances because perception itself is a continually changing activity, and you become able to detect the tiniest changes in perception that smoothly flow together into the recognition that you are viewing a stone object. By the time you attach objectivity and definition to the experience, perception has coagulated into a solid stone statue. But as long as you focus on the flowing change, the statue is dancing before you, because all of experience is dancing.

So is it really possible for us normal people with jobs and families to learn to see the stone Buddha dance? Absolutely it is. It doesn't take decades living in a cave to learn it either. But it does take a great deal of clarity and equanimity. It takes clarity because you need to learn to detect and discern a great deal of subtle detail in experiences that might now seem solid and simple. It takes

equanimity because we have to be willing to allow time and space to arise and pass while we focus on them, over and over, even when it feels like nothing is changing in either the experience or our practice. But given sufficient persistence and patience, you will eventually drop into a state of such crystal clarity and uncontested allowingness that you begin to see existence changing and flowing and dancing around and within you.

What I'm talking about, of course, is *impermanence*. We all understand the concept that everything changes, and we've all experienced that fact in trivial ways. When you came in to this room, perhaps you were hot, and now you feel cooler. Maybe you noticed an itch a while ago that is now gone. This sort of event is so mundane that it probably seems silly for me to suggest that it's exactly the same thing as seeing the stone Buddha dance. Well, if you learn to look at those same trivial types of changes with continuous concentration, and an attempt at clarity and equanimity, you start to see the changes as they occur. You notice an itch, but as you watch it, you see it increase in intensity and then spread out so far that it dissolves. You feel a small twinge in your knee, and as you watch it deepens and grows and begins to burn and throb. Before, you might have noticed the twinge, gotten distracted with something else, and then suddenly realize that your knee is throbbing. Now you are able to observe the changes that take place between the twinge and the throb. You're detecting more detail in the pain, and are able to discern differences between different parts and qualities.

This is unpleasant, but if you bring equanimity to the discomfort (which is aided by your clarity in distinguishing details), then you are able to continue to observe without being overwhelmed. This provides the opportunity to develop even greater clarity, detecting yet subtler sensations within the pain, and discerning greater detail within each instant of sensation. More equanimity facilitates even

more clarity. You are watching, first hand, impermanence in action. The theory is becoming the experience.

Even at this point, you are beginning to transcend your mundane experience, because you are able to allow more discomfort to arise without blocking or fighting with it, and this reduces the amount you suffer from the pain. But keep on doing this, and then the magic starts to happen.

As you are able to detect tinier and subtler changes at higher and higher rates, you begin to see (or feel, or hear) an underlying activity in the movement of each sensation. It's as if you are increasing the resolution from Standard Definition to Hi-Def to Ultra Hi-Def. As you see more detail, the experience of change becomes smooth and bubbly, more like pure energy than individual sensations arising and passing away. What was an intensifying pain becomes a vibration, or an undulation, or a sense of expanding or contracting space. It is the same discomfort you have been watching all along, but you are seeing it in such detail that the solidity has dissolved into a flow of energy. And that undulating, vibrating flow of energy is pleasant. It's like an internal massage. The pain has been purified, and you can feel the energy cleansing your senses as a result of the pain having arisen.

If that last step seems over the top, then think about getting an acupuncture treatment. What happens when you go to an acupuncturist? They stick thin needles into your body at certain locations, which is intended to help your energy, or *chi*, flow more freely through channels in your body. Have you ever been able to feel a sense of energy around the needles? Maybe tingling or a deep, subtle vibration? Let's look at the objective experience of being needled. You experience a slight pain. Because it is small, and because you believe it will help you, you don't feel the need to resist it or even particularly dislike it. Then if you pay close attention to the location of the needle, you can feel a subtle

movement of *chi*. To put it another way, you have a great deal of equanimity with a small pain, which you then concentrate on with clarity. As a result, you are able to detect flow.

This is why experienced meditators are willing to sit with pain rather than moving to reduce discomfort. It begins as an unpleasant experience, but in the end it becomes pleasant, even blissful; a truly transcendent experience of the energy lifting them above the ordinary, congealed way of experiencing physical sensation. By working with small, controllable discomforts, such as itches and the pains you feel during a meditation period, you are training your clarity and equanimity into higher and higher resolution so that when a larger discomfort arises that you are not able to control, you already have the skills to turn that unpleasant situation into a pleasant flowing energy massage.

This is not a skill that you can learn overnight, nor is its full significance easy to comprehend. I'll talk more next week about the theory and world history of this characteristic of experience called *flow*. Tonight, I want to get you started on some sensitizing exercises so we can begin to detect impermanence and improve the resolution of our awareness.