

Zoom Zazen - Saturday 11 Dec 2021

Master Keizan says in the Zazen Yojinki:

"Overcoming demons, joining the Way, achieving Nirvana, turning the Wheel of Dharma: all these come from the power of zazen."

This is now the last zazen of the Rohatsu sesshin at Lanau Zen Centre and this sentence from Keizan sums up what this week of continuous practice in Silence, together, has been about. It also says what the arrival and the Awakening of Shakyamuni Buddha has meant for all beings.

To overcome the demons of confusion and ignorance is just what Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha, did on the Great Night before his Awakening. Mara, the prince of demons, on seeing Siddhârta's perfect and sovereign practice under the Bodhi tree, became worried and was afraid he would lose his power of seduction over beings. He then sends his armies to dissuade Him (Siddhartha) from continuing to seek awakening through a practice that he (Mara) calls illusory and useless.

The demons that constitute the armies of Mara are called: "Desires, depression, hunger and thirst, laziness, lust, fear, doubt, anger, hypocrisy...". They act insidiously in the minds of all beings to maintain the illusion of a separate 'me', a belief that leads to suffering.

These demons are the painful and often unconscious karmic memories that continue to influence our choices every day. They are the defence mechanisms or aggression that we have put in place to try to heal our childhood wounds and to manage our relationships with others. They are the disguises that dress up our *persona*, the one we want others to believe in; they are the protections we have put in place to avoid the hard knocks of life. The demons are our habits that are the product of our social, educational and cultural conditioning - based on the notion of profit - and that have shaped our way of seeing, diverting it from the right vision. We meet all these demons during zazen, in our bodies, our thoughts, our intentions, our illusory dreams and our phantasmagorical projects. They live and unfold in the space of our mind itself, insinuating fear and deficiencies. We can only escape them if

we are willing to see and accept them as an inseparable part of ourselves.

During the Great Night, Siddhartha Gautama looks at the demons, smiles, yawns and coughs to demonstrate to Mara his complete lack of interest. The Buddha does not engage in combat, even though in the texts he is called, "He who has overcome". He looks on and welcomes all the demons with benevolence. Thus He teaches us that becoming aware of the intervention and attacks of demons in our mind is an invitation to find true peace, Presence; and to see that they are also emptiness. In seeing and becoming aware of demons, we then spontaneously return to That which is watching within us, the Eye-Treasure. We find the spontaneity of an innocent and undisturbed gaze and we are then in the aliveness of our posture itself. We learn to embrace the intimate experience and encounter we have with these demons with loving attention, so that we can accept what our fragile humanity is and what our darkest moments are.

This Great Night before Enlightenment, where the demons of confusion besiege the Buddha, has a powerful symbolism. It teaches us that we must die to the false perception that these demons distil in our minds. This is the paradox of awakening: we must die to truly exist. Only then can we realise, in our very bodies, that we are One with the moon, the stars, the universe and all beings. Everything takes place in that elusive Presence which is the very place of Awakening!

Zazen brings us to the Great Way, where our every step is a celebration of this Awakening. Our practice is to learn to breathe between our darkness and our light, to study and experience the sensations in our belly, our chest, our shoulders, our legs, our whole body as if the whole space itself were breathing. To be One with Presence, to join the Way and achieve Nirvana. Our ceremonies are nothing more than an expression of gratitude for the sublime Way that the Buddha has shown us.

Only then can we turn the Wheel of the Dharma, Tenborin, which means to teach beings, to transmit the true Dharma of the Buddha. The source of this Transmission is keeping ourselves motionless at the heart of zazen.
