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Ummon's 'Particle After Particle's Samadhi

Today's teisho will be on Case 50 in the Hekiganroku, the Pi –Yen Lu or Blue Rock Collection. Case 50 is entitled, "Ummons 'Particle After Particle's Samadhi.'"

Engo's Introduction

*Transcending all ranks, rising above all expedients; spirit corresponding to spirit, words answering words—unless he has undergone the great emancipation and attained the great use of it, how could he rank with the Buddhas and be a faultless exponent of the teachings? Now, tell me, who can be so direct and adaptable to all occasions, and have the free command of transcendent words? See the following.*

Main Subject

*A monk asked Ummon, "What is particle after particle's samadhi?" Ummon said, "Rice in the bowl, water in the pail."*

Setcho's Verse

*Rice in the bowl, water in the pail!  
Even the most talkative can add nothing.*

*The North and the South stars do not change places,  
Heaven-touching waves arise on land.*

*If you doubt, if you hesitate,  
Though you are heir to millions—trouserless!*

Three Bells

Thank you so much for coming to sit on this Saturday in December. Many of us have been sitting together for years. In fact, some of us have been sitting together for more than a decade—almost two decades. Other people are "newcomers" here: that is, practicing for less than ten years. I imagine that most of you have a cushion at home, and that you use it all the time. And maybe you come here fairly often as well. We all sit so regularly, watching the breath, following mu, or working with our koans, that it's easy to take what we're doing

completely for granted. It's easy to forget just how remarkable this activity called zazen really is. A few years ago, I was asked to demonstrate Zen meditation for a group of elementary school children—third or fourth graders, I think. I sat down on the ground in the Burmese posture and asked the children to sit in a circle around me. I spoke to them about how meditation works, how to straighten the back, and how to breathe from the *hara* or *dantien*, the abdomen. So far, so good. They looked intrigued and were remarkably quiet and attentive. Then I pulled my legs into full lotus and the kids just exploded with laughter, chattering and shrieking. That was the end of the lesson. If I had taken my head off and rolled it across the room, it couldn't have seemed more astonishing to them, and they simply never regained their focus and composure. In a certain way, however, they correctly understood how remarkable zazen is, whereas we often take it granted. Actually, Zen is not less strange and wonderful than rolling your head across the room—in fact, much more so. But our attitude about it can become quite blasé: “Back to the cushion again. No surprises there.” How does it happen that something which once seemed so strange and exciting can become a chore you do half-heartedly, like mowing the lawn or brushing your teeth? “Particle after particle,” the koan says. Every one exactly like the one before.

I recently read about a study of high-school students across the U.S. Two out of three students told the scientists that they were bored in class every day. Another survey found that 91 percent of young Americans reported feeling chronically bored. This is supposed to be the age of information, when everything around us is highly stimulating and creativity has become ubiquitous. The reality is far more complex. The constant stimulation can become so repetitious that everything starts to seem trivial and uninteresting—everything from global warming to a war in Africa gets flattened out into a tweet. Perhaps the more we try to stimulate ourselves with new information, the more we create an atmosphere of boredom and fatigue. Maybe you've heard about the recent news that Facebook use causes depression. Apparently heavy users often feel they are missing out on all the fun that other users post about. You might have also seen the research showing that depressed people use the Internet in ways that makes their condition worse. Constantly switching from email to blogs to chat rooms and games erodes concentration in ways that make it very hard to be present, and the lack of mental focus seems to cause depression or at least make it worse. The more depressed you get, the more you try to find something new online that will make you feel better. Which erodes your concentration, which makes you more depressed. No wonder rates of depression keep going up—for people under 30, the figure is now almost 20 percent.

I don't think this boredom is natural or inevitable. I think the problem is our way of life, which values the future at the expense of the here-and-now. If the future is what really matters, after all, then while we are here in the present, we're just killing time until future arrives. Since the “now”—no matter what it might be—can't compete with whatever lies ahead, real spontaneity becomes impossible, and the faster we hurry toward the future, the more rapidly it recedes. It's like living your whole life in a waiting room. What could be more depressing than that?

If we're not very, very careful, we can get drawn into this mentality. Here's a simple example. Many of you know that I like to jog—I've been jogging since college, and I like to exercise because it reduces stress and makes me feel more alive. My sister also knows I love running, and when we were making plans for my visit at Thanksgiving, she told me with delight that she had signed me up for one of her spinning class. Laughing, my sister kept warning me that I was in for a challenge. I don't know if you're familiar with spinning, but it involves

special stationary bikes which are designed for rapid changes in the resistance exerted on the turning wheel. Halfway through the spinning class I felt like bursting into tears. The pace was simply brutal with no chance to rest. Apparently, my sister's spinning trainer Dana is something of a spinning guru, a spinning roshi. She has a retinue of followers who will only train with Dana, and my sister is one of them. Dana has amazing strength and stamina, and she expects you to keep up, or try to keep up. You peddle very, very fast, and then you increase the resistance on the machine until it's like running uphill at top speed. When you are told to reduce some of the resistance, you have to go even faster, 140 rpms minimum. Sometimes you stand up on the bike for an interval that Dana decides, and then she orders you to squat halfway down, and then almost completely down, just above the seat. When it ended, I was so relieved—like someone just learning to do zazen, waiting for bell to ring.

After the class was over and I went back with my sister to her house, she told me that in exercise circles and many fashion magazines, it's considered bad to have a space between the tops of your thighs. If the tops of your thighs touch, as mine do, that's considered quite unattractive, at least in women, and one remedy is to do a great deal of spinning. And indeed, when I thought back on the spinning class, it seemed very likely to me that Dana—a former body builder who retired from international competition after she gave birth to her twins-- had a visible space between her thighs. My sister is a nurse practitioner and her specialization is oncology. I love my sister very much and she is a wonderful mother to her two sons and works very hard in her job. I hope that she doesn't worry too much about whether or not the tops of her thighs touch. But she might.

Do you see how the problem of touching thighs changes our relation to exercise and even to ourselves? Instead of using exercise as a way of being in the moment, we begin to treat it as a means to an end—and now the payoff lies in the future. After every workout, we can look in the mirror and say, "I'm not there yet." And even when we get there, with a space between our thighs, we will still find ourselves saying, "I could lose it all tomorrow. I've got to maintain."

For many years now, my wife has categorically refused to look at magazines like Cosmopolitan or Vanity Fair. She actually gets angry when she thinks about these magazines. "Why do you get so mad," I once asked. And she said, "Because my mother brought me up to try to imitate the models in these magazines. I would spend all this time trying to look beautiful and I always felt that I wasn't physically attractive. No matter what I did, I would compare myself with these models in these magazines, and I would feel so unattractive. I was too skinny, too tall. My ears were too big, whatever." The message of the magazines is that you are never quite right, although it turns out that the models in the photographs are often highly photoshopped to guarantee impossibly small waists and, of course, large spaces between the tops of their thighs. Physical beauty is one of life's many gifts, and most people who get regular exercise enjoy the process for its own sake. But in a way, our bodies can be taken from us. We are taught to think about our bodies as a project we have to work on, a problem we have to solve in the future. Through magazines and other media, the culture is telling us how to view our bodies, and as a result, we experience our own bodies as though we were seeing them through someone else's eyes. If you are a woman, you can take your shirt off in the bathroom and compare yourself to the image on the cover of Cosmo. Or, if you're a man, and you don't look like Brad Pitt, you can look at your flabby biceps and sigh. "Not yet," you think. "I'm not there yet."

From Mahayana standpoint, the body is the door into enlightenment. Everything we need in order to wake up is right here in this body. As Hakuin says, "This very body is the body

of the Buddha.” And the secret to the body’s power is that it lives in the now—the present moment—one hundred percent. The “now” is always the body’s time, and for that reason, it has all of these amazing potentialities that our culture doesn’t train us to appreciate at all. When we sit down on the cushion, we’re really grounding ourselves in the present, and the present connects us to reality. The door of the body opens “in” and it opens “out.”

First, it opens “out” into the world. When you straighten your spine and allow your breath to become natural, you begin to relate to the body in a very different way. You’re present with your physical sensations—you become your sensations—instead of watching yourself from a distance and judging. When you’re not adopting the viewpoint of an imaginary outside viewer, the body becomes a wonderful, wonderful opportunity to come into contact with the world. Maybe this morning, as you were meditating here in this room, you became aware of the air blowing out of the vent overhead. Feeling the cool air on your face, you might have wanted to push it away because it feels, perhaps, too cool for comfort. Maybe you wish you had brought a blanket for your legs. You’re trying to watch the breath but there’s that coolness, slightly uncomfortable--almost cold, and definitely annoying. You go back to the breath to escape, but there’s that coldness again. There’s a moment when you’re thinking, “This is really uncomfortable. I really don’t like this.” But eventually, if you keep returning to the breath, you can become one with this coolness. You suddenly realize, “This is OK. No problem.” The judging mind stops and you’re just present. You become the air; you become the coolness.

The breath also opens “in.” Sometimes, on occasions like the one with the cool air, you unexpectedly drop down into deep samadhi—the deep state of concentration that arises when your sense of a separate self disappears. Watching the breath will take you right there. But you can fall into samadhi by listening to sound. You could even enter into samadhi by focusing on your hands. I think that it quite remarkable that attention to the breath, to hearing or to physical sensations—attention to the body—will take us deeply and quickly into samadhi. Even the experience of pain will do this: in fact, the experience of moderate pain can push us very deeply into samadhi, as we know from sitting past our normal comfort level and having to struggle with tired legs or aching backs. Last night, at the evening sit, somebody returned after a hiatus of about a month. At the end of the evening I asked him, “How was your sit?” And he said, “It was wonderful! I came in and I sat down and I dropped right into samadhi. I just settled right into it. I felt like I was floating above myself.” When you’re in a deep samadhi state, you can experience your ordinary body sensations in a different way. Parts of the body seem to disappear. Perhaps you can feel your face or your hands, but other parts of your body are simply gone. You might feel like you’re opening up or emptying out, or you might feel very rocklike and solid. My first teacher Genki Roshi used to say that whenever he started sitting, he felt like a stick of incense burning down: he could feel himself disappear, beginning with the crown of his head. As the flame moved down the incense stick, he kept disappearing until he felt completely weightless, emptied out.

This is a different way of relating to the body than we learn from Cosmopolitan or Vanity Fair, which are actually selling the future—not the real future but an imagined one. The real future will not be like the images in those magazines. The other day I was looking at a photograph of myself thirty years ago. My hair, once black, is now grey and it’s falling out. It’s getting thinner and thinner. My body is getting older too. The flesh around my neck is crinkled like a chicken’s neck, and my face is sagging more and more. In the Cosmo future, you will be radiant and young for all time. But on the other hand, you also know that because you have a body, you are going to get old, you are going to get sick, and you are going to die. This is part of

reason becoming one with the body can be quite difficult. The physical dimension of meditation is hard because, of course, you have pain in your legs. But it's harder on another level because you have to accept processes that are in fact uncontrollable and that will lead to your dissolution. Having a body makes you vulnerable, and embracing it means accepting your impermanence. Some of you may know about Ray Kurzweil, a major figure in Artificial Intelligence who believes he's going to download the contents of his brain into a computer. He has actually declared "I will live forever." Many people have pointed out that this won't work: you can't download your awareness because intelligence itself comes from having a body—with five senses, a nervous system, and so on. But you can see why he wants to do it, right? He wants to get away from this body which is going to get sick and old and die.

One of the reasons that zazen—sitting—can seem so difficult to do is that it requires us, right from the start, to acknowledge that we are embodied beings who are going to disappear. But if we experience the body from the inside out, so to speak, it becomes a door into the world that leads us to enlightenment. And indeed, enlightenment is really only possible for creatures who have a body. The Buddha says this to his bhikkhus in the *Balapandita Sutta*,

The Buddha:            Bhikkhus, [imagine] a man [who] would throw into the ocean a plough share with a single hole in it. Then with the eastern winds it would be carried west and with the western winds carried east. With the northern winds it would be carried south and with the southern winds carried north. Then there is a blind turtle in the depths of the ocean and it comes up to the surface after the lapse of a hundred years. Bhikkhus, how long would it take this turtle . . . to put his neck in . . . the hole to see light?

Bhikkhus:                Venerable sir, it would happen after the lapse of a very long time.

The Buddha:            Bhikkhus, it is more likely that the blind turtle would put his neck in the plough share. . . than for [us to] gain humanity.

The odds of being born as a human being are just as overwhelming, the Sutra says, as the chance that a blind turtle, swimming in the middle of the ocean, will happen to come up for air and put his head through a wooden yoke floating on the surface. In traditional Buddhist thinking—but not Zen—animals are supposed to lack the ability to become awakened because they are caught, more or less, by their instinctive routines. On the other hand, the gods in Tushita heaven are totally absorbed by pleasure-seeking and have no idea that their merit will run out and then they will descend into some lower form again. Neither animals nor gods can wake up.

To be born at all is a lucky break. To be born a human being—astonishing. To experience awakening—inexpressibly precious. But you can't be human and immortal—that's the Buddhist view. Once we settle down into the here and now, we have to accept our own impermanence as embodied beings who are subject to birth, sickness, old age and death. We might imagine that doing Zen will teach us how to transcend that predicament, but the opposite is actually the case. Once, Shunryu Suzuki's students asked him, "What is the essence of the Buddha's teaching?" Perhaps they thought he was going to say, "Bliss" or "Oneness" or "Liberation." Maybe they imagined he would say, "Eternal life." What he said is, "Everything changes." Our bodies—ourselves—arise and then they're gone. We'd rather exist eternally in some timeless realm, but when we become one with the body, a body sitting on the cushion,

sweating on the cushion, working with our pain, something remarkable can happen: the moment actually becomes timeless, for as long as it lasts. I'm sure that you've had this experience. Sitting in deep concentration you find the time sensation has disappeared. A thirty minute meditation period can be over in a snap. But don't think of this as "transcendence." You aren't transcending anything: you have to embrace "this" unconditionally. You have to become one with the here-and-now in order to experience the timeless.

But I know that accepting the here-and-now can be quite difficult. Often the moment is exactly the place we don't want to be. When we feel trapped by the moment, the way we normally respond is to imagine a future time when we won't be as unhappy. And the Cosmo mentality only makes things worse.

This week at my office things were tense because two of my coworkers simply couldn't get along. One of these people came in to see me confidentially, to speak with me behind closed doors. She said, "I hate to say this but D----- has been giving me a hard time." Then, a little later, D--- also called me to say that the other person was completely at fault for all kinds of problems and confusion. Worse yet, the two of them have managed to recruit other people in the office as their allies, so it's a bit like World War II. Both people tell their stories in convincing ways, and when I'm with each of them I feel that they are completely justified. When I try to get to the truth on my own, the facts become more confusing than before. It got so tense later in the week that I didn't want to go to my office. By the end of the week I found myself thinking, "I can't wait until this day is over. I can't wait I'm away at sesshin and I don't have to deal with this."

All of us have what might be called a travelling mentality. We're always thinking about moving on to some other place where things will be better. And this is, especially in America, very much part of our culture. When settlers first came to the United States from Europe, they had left their native lands behind and they came to places like New York City, which they often thought of as a temporary stop, since conditions in the City were only so-so. Then they moved out to the Midwest, but maybe they didn't like the Midwest any better, so they moved on to California. We all live with this mentality, right? Do you know this song from the Broadway show Annie:

The sun'll come out tomorrow  
Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there'll be sun  
Just thinkin' about tomorrow  
Clears away the cobwebs and the sorrow till' there's none

When I'm stuck with a day that's gray and lonely  
I just stick up my chin and grin and say oh

The sun'll come out tomorrow  
So you got to hang on till' tomorrow, come what may!  
Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow  
You're always a day away.

This is a poignant expression of the travelling mindset: I'm going to focus my energies on tomorrow because today is just not working out for me. Tomorrow is the only sure thing in a world of overwhelming instability.

Now, the truth is that the future exists: living for the future is a valid part of life. If you become unhappy about your state of health, you can buy a gym membership and work out every morning. And if you work out with some regularity, you'll get in better shape eventually. That's true. That's part of life. But there's another aspect of existence. If traveling is one aspect of life, another aspect of life is dwelling: being here, being here.

One way to think about Zen is to say that it teaches us to how to dwell—how to be here fully. Every morning at sesshin we take refuge with these words:

ATTA DIPA  
VIHARATHA  
ATTA SARANA  
ANANNA SARANA  
DHAMMA DIPA  
DHAMMA SARANA  
ANANNA SARANA

“Atta dipa/ Viharatha.” In Pali, “Atta” means “you” or “yourself,” and “dipa” can mean “light.” “Viharatha” means “you dwell” or just the command, “Dwell!” So we could translate the first two lines this way:

You yourself are the light.  
So dwell just where you are.

In other words, when you are here fully, when you dwell here, you will know yourself as “dipa,” a lamp or a light. Even as *the* light. “Taking refuge” is one way to understand the word we recite, but they might also be understood to mean, “*being* refuge.” The rest could be translated this way:

You yourself are the refuge.  
There is no other refuge.  
The dharma is the light.  
The dhamma is the refuge.  
There is no other refuge.

We want the future to be our refuge, but these lines suggest that our real refuge is being-here-now, one hundred percent. When we are here unconditionally, we dwell in the light which is our True Nature.

Traveling and dwelling often seem like opposites, and in a certain sense they are, but the truth is more complicated. Buddhist monks, after all, were originally anagarika—that is, people without a home. Until the creation of formal monasteries, they lived like the Buddha himself as wandering mendicants, dependent on the dana provided by others. There's a Japanese monk named Junsei Terasawa who is trying to bring Buddhism back to Turkistan. He says that Buddhism is an expression of the ancient spirituality of the nomadic steppes of Eurasia. Buddhism later flourished along the Silk Road too, where it travelled freely. Maybe Terasawa is right. There's a traveling aspect to meditation as well. You sit down on the cushion. You watch

your breath and you hope something happens. As you watch and wait, you begin to see that everything is travelling, with each moment swiftly followed by another one:

*A monk asked Ummon, "What is particle after particle's samadhi?"*

This is the traveling aspect of reality. You're sitting on your cushion and you are watching your breath. As you watch, the breath comes. Then the breath goes. And then the next breath comes, and so on—travelling—because everything is constantly changing. Three breaths ago you were a different person, and in three breaths you'll be a different person again. All true. But when you're with this breath, which is here only for an instant and then gone, what happens to you then? That's the dwelling aspect. In the middle of all that change, there is something that is changeless. What is it? Ummon tells us directly, without any artifice or equivocation:

*Rice in the bowl, water in the pail!*

If you eat rice as often as I do, you know that putting it in the refrigerator completely dries it out. The best way to store your cooked rice is to leave it in a covered bowl at room temperature. Right now, in the winter, your rice will keep for two or even three days like that, but in the summer, mold quickly grows, starting from the bottom, which is dark and moist. Like everything else in the universe, rice is only here for a little while before it breaks down into its composite parts, and even these parts will keep changing form. And yet, when we look down at our bowls of rice on the third or fourth days of sesshin, the whole universe becomes just this rice. Then, looking through the eyes of deep samadhi, we find that every grain of rice is exactly where it should be:

*Even the most talkative can add nothing.*

*The North and the South stars do not change places,  
Heaven-touching waves arise on land.*

But what would it mean to try to live our lives this way? How do we live in a changing world in the spirit of really "dwelling"?

One important lesson of zazen is that when you're in a difficult situation, instead of imagining a better future ahead, you should try to become one with what is happening now even if it seems unpleasant. In the middle of a sitting period, when your legs are aching and your back is tired, the worst thing you can do is imagine a time when you will be able to uncross your legs and freely walk around—or better yet, the time when the sesshin will be done and you can finally go home. That will only intensify your pain by adding emotional distress. Instead, a much more effective strategy is to direct your attention to the breath, one breath at a time, until your concentration comes to a point focused on this very moment. That's a better strategy in the short term because your pain will diminish, and pain is your most immediate concern. But the strategy makes long-term sense as well because getting up would solve nothing ultimately. Even if you decided to uncross your legs, stand up and walk out of the zendo, and even if you jumped into your car and drove home at top speed, the problems that brought you to sesshin would still remain unresolved. Once you're back home with your legs stretched out, your muscles might no



longer hurt but you will feel the same confusion and pain that started you on the journey that brought you to Zen.

But let's say you decide not to get up off the cushion and leave the sesshin. You decide to sit motionless in spite of the pain. At some point the pain might go away, but the relief will only be temporary. True, sooner or later the bell will ring, and everyone will get up for kinhin, or you will walk to the dining hall to have a diverting meal. But later, when you are back on the cushion, the pain will be there again, possibly as strong as ever. If leaving sesshin is no solution, but you can't solve the problem of the pain either, what are you supposed to do? I would say that you have to recognize that there aren't any good alternatives. You're stuck if you go and stuck if you stay. No matter where you go and what you do, you'll be in here-and-now. And the here-and-now, as the Buddha said, is always in some sense unsatisfactory.

Stuck, stuck, stuck. We think that travelling will set us free, but no matter how far and fast you might go, every road will simply take you right back here. *Viharatha*—be here now—because you actually have no choice.

When I come into my office and the people are fighting, I'll find myself at times thinking something like, "I wish all of these people were gone and I had a better set of people to work with." Maybe you have friends who get on your nerves sometimes. You might think, "I wish I had a better class of friends." But this is a destructive fantasy because these are the only friends you've managed to get, maybe not the only friends you'll have in your life, but the only friends you could possibly have at the present time. And the people I work with in my office are the only people I can be working with right now. It's possible to imagine a better world, but the world I'm actually in right now is the only world I could possibly be in. We modern people tend to always think in terms of alternatives, options, choices. But much of this thinking is pure fantasy. Perhaps you feel stuck in your job and you torment yourself with regrets for the road never taken. "If only I had made a better decision," you think. "I would be in a much better job right now." But actually nothing in your life could have been different from the way it is. Absolutely nothing can be different from what is actually the case, and that holds true for every moment in your past as well. As you can understand in retrospect, every moment had to happen exactly as it did.

When you start to see things in this light, you realize that the way we often think about life—as a series of free choices made from among a rich array of options—never does justice to the reality. Of course we might have gone to college in another state instead of staying at home, but the advantages of that choice couldn't have been obvious at the time. Of course you might have married someone who shared more of your interests, but at the time you couldn't have understood why having common interests would matter later on. All of our decisions at the time were the best ones we could make, and only retrospect can we say that they were "bad" or "good." So much is at stake, then, in Ummon's "particle after particle."

In a certain sense, we simply have no choice. We are in this moment and it couldn't be any different from the way it is. And the same will hold true when the next moment comes, and the next one after that. And at first, this might seem to lead to a depressing thought—that we really have no freedom at all to change the way we live. But while it is true that we can't change how things are in the present moment—whether we live in San Francisco or New York, whether we are young or old, gay or straight—we can decide how we are going to inhabit the "now," how we will dwell in this moment.

It's like being an actor in a play. Someone else wrote the script but you can play the part skillfully, or not. I don't know if you read Hamlet in high school but there is a moment in the

play when he finally overcomes all his vacillation and self-doubt and surrenders himself to the moment:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay  
Worse than [in chains] . . . .  
. . . . let us know  
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well  
When our deep plots do pall, and that should teach us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.

Hamlet has been torn apart by the idea that he is responsible for events that include his father's assassination. Everything he has tried to do to set things right has ended in utter disaster. But now that he has given up, surrendering to the moment, he can act with perfect freedom, without the chronic self-doubt or endless second-guessing. Now he sees that all his failures *had to be*, and this convinces him that "a divinity. . . shapes our ends." In other words, he learns how to trust the wisdom of what has to be.

Like the actor playing Hamlet, we don't get to decide how the play turns out, but we still have the power to experience the unfolding of our lives as an opportunity to wake up. You can say, "I'm going to be present with my life. I'm going to dwell in this here-and-not unreservedly." And when you do that, everything can be transformed. Events really seem to unfold as though "a divinity" behind the scenes is directing everything on the stage--as though events are unfolding of their own volition, unfolding as they have to unfold. And if we play our roles with energy, openness and a bright mind, this moment is a wonderful place to be—precisely because we don't control it. Who knows what the next moment is going to be? Maybe someday you might win the Nobel Prize. But once the ceremony in Stockholm is over, you get into a taxi and set off down the street where another driver hits and kills you. Something like this happened just last week to the actor Paul Walker, who went for a casual ride with his friend and died in a terrible crash. No one can tell what's going to happen next.

I imagine that all of us have moments when we would prefer to be someone else, living some other person's life. But that's a formula for unhappiness. You didn't choose to have size eleven feet. You just do. You didn't choose to be born in a Cuban family or have brown hair. You can be miserable about all this, but things will be radically transformed if you say, "This is the part I have been assigned to play. In this crazy tale, I am Hamlet, and I'm going to play the Hamlet part unreservedly." You know it's all a play, and not really real. You know that Hamlet is just a role, a fictional creation. But you're going to play the part with a good spirit, open to the undiscovered possibilities.

This might sounds like abstract philosophy but if you sit down on the cushion and become one with your breath, you begin to have a deep sense of exactly this openness. Sometimes there's an energy or joy that comes from embracing what is happening precisely because you have no control. You're sitting on the cushion in pain and you think, "I hate this. I hate it. I hate it." And then all of a sudden you just give up and you feel a sense of connectedness, as though you are part of a much grander drama whose conclusion none of us will live to see. All those coworkers who drive you nuts, all those friends whose eccentricities you find unbearable at times, can suddenly seem fascinating—still annoying, maybe, but

precious; still eccentric, but lovable in a very deep way. And somehow, not knowing how the play will end doesn't really matter. We always think we want a happy ending, but it's just possible that happiness comes from no longer caring how the play will turn out. Perhaps it comes instead from being here—dwelling—in a wholehearted way.

Ummon said, "Rice in the bowl, water in the pail."

Three Bells