

 Cold Mountain Zen

Baso's "This Very Mind is the Buddha"

Mumonkan Case 30

A version of this teisho was delivered on August 21, 2014.

Case

*Daibai asked Baso, "What is the Buddha?" Baso answered, "This very mind is the Buddha."*

Mumon's Comment

*If you directly grasp Baso's meaning, you wear the Buddha's clothes, eat the Buddha's food, speak the Buddha's words, do the Buddha's deeds—that is, you are the Buddha himself. However, alas! Daibai misled not a few people into taking the mark on the balance for the weight itself. How could he realize that even mentioning the word "Buddha" should make us rinse out our mouths for three days? If a man of understanding hears anyone say, "This very mind is the Buddha," he will cover his ears and rush away.*

Mumon's Verse

*The blue sky and bright day,  
No more searching around!  
"Where is the Buddha?" you ask:  
With loot in your pocket, you declare yourself innocent.*

[Rings bell three times]

This is the second day of our August sesshin, and I want to thank everyone for sitting so still in the early hours of the morning. This stillness is especially impressive because the second day of any sesshin can be the most difficult day of all. Only twenty-four hours earlier--on our first morning here—kensho, a moment of awakening, might have seemed like a real possibility. But as sit follows sit and the hours wear on, our optimism can evaporate. Simply staying mindful of our breath or fixing attention on a koan can become an almost impossible task.

Typically on the second day, people start to feel overwhelmed. Sometimes you get a little edgy or you feel a bit depressed. Your legs begin to hurt with a dull ache you didn't have to wrestle with on day one. And after such intense concentration, you can feel deeply tired. A

sitting period might have only begun when you already want to move--or lie down and take a nap. And by the time we all hobble to our beds tonight, we might feel completely drained.

How different this is from what happens back in the comfort of our homes. There, in the morning, before we leave for work, we might sit down to meditate for half an hour or so. Rising from the cushion after that, we might feel serene and refreshed, our minds clear and calm. But please don't be deceived, because this calm is actually quite shallow. Under the surface of your mind, in depths you can't even start to glimpse in your half hour of sitting, all kinds of things are going on. These are what we often have to confront on day two of sesshin: the "ghosts" – thoughts, emotions, memories—we usually manage to keep offstage, out of our immediate awareness. But on the second day we can become too exhausted to keep up our defenses.

Sometimes people get so discouraged they leave, and the evening of the second day is when they usually decide to go. I can recall a long procession of men and women who have come to see me one last time in dokusan, their bags already packed. I remember one woman many years ago who was just completing her Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Like most people, she first practiced tentatively, coming to sit only once in a while, gradually becoming a regular, and then finally getting up the nerve to attend a sesshin. She came to one sesshin and then another, I think, but the third was to be her last. It was a sesshin in August much like this, but unlike today, which is so dry and cool, the air was drenching and the temperature somewhere in nineties. Even the breeze in the zendo didn't help. It felt oppressively hot everywhere.

On the evening of the second day, this woman came to see me in dokusan, the private meetings with the teacher. From the start she seemed brittle in a way that caught me off guard. I couldn't guess what was making her so unresponsive, even rude. Talking halfheartedly for a while about her meditation, she suddenly asked me if she could use the pool near the building that we rent for our sesshins. The idea seemed absurd at the time—I'd never even thought of it. Laughing, I told her that it wasn't possible. "Most Zen temples don't have swimming pools," I said, trying to be funny. "It just isn't part of the tradition." Then her face darkened and she began to complain bitterly about everything--the schedule, the food, the beds, the regimentation. Finally, I said, "If you're so unhappy here, you can always leave." I was hoping that she would think, "Well, I'll show you! I'll prove to you I can do it." But that's not at all how it worked out. After she left the dokusan room, I went on with other peoples' interviews until a car roared past the window at top speed. I could hear the gravel spinning under her wheels.

I don't think she was really mad at me. The real issue wasn't the stifling heat or permission to use of the pool. I suspect she felt deprived in many ways, and the swimming pool became a symbol for many satisfactions she had never found. I'm sorry to say that I never had the chance to follow up with her, but if there is something like a typical second-day sesshin story, her abrupt departure qualifies.

When people leave, they offer reasons of all kinds, but usually these are secondary. No one, I think, would give up a chance to fundamentally transform their lives because of the humidity, or because they disliked eating so much rice. Even the physical pain we struggle with doesn't amount to so much, all things considered. The real reason is the necessity of acknowledging our ghosts.

Of course, leaving doesn't mean you can't come back. Many of you have practiced with Taido, a longstanding member of our group who eventually took priest's vows and served for years as our sangha's Karmadana, the person in charge of organizing sesshin. If you have had the chance to practice with him, I'm sure you've been impressed—even amazed—by how deeply and how long he can sit without moving. But a decade ago you would never have guessed that his story would turn out this way. For his first few years, he would come to sesshin and never make it past the second or third day. On the first evening he would arrive in dokusan, where I would ask him "How's it going?" "Good!" he would say, his face open and bright. But on the evening of the second day or in the morning of the third, his face would be a mask of terror. After several years, it all began to feel like a comedy routine. When day two I arrived, as I prepared for dokusan, I already knew what he was going to say. I could even see him in my mind's eye mouthing the words, "Well, I'm out of here."

Over the years I've tried many different ways of dissuading people who want to leave sesshin. I've said, "Why not give it one more day? I promise you'll feel better if you do." Or I've said, "Please remain 'til lunch at least. Please do it for me." Or I've told them stories of Zen masters who overcame terrible adversity. But their faces are still like masks of fear, and there's no reasoning with them. One person just looked at me deadpan and said, "It's time." And once they decide to leave, nothing, I suppose, can undo their decision. They have to leave, and they have to leave right now! But fortunately some of them come back. Taido is just one example of someone who finally learned to ride out his crisis.

The challenge of Zen practice isn't physical pain. It's confronting whatever you don't want to face. If you stick around and don't leave tonight, your sitting will become much easier because you will eventually see your ghosts for what they really are. Those who know me well might not be surprised to learn that when I was a little child, I was terrified of sleeping in the dark—perhaps the same was true for you. Night after night I would wake up and see some menacing figure in my room, over in the corner or against the wall. I would think, "My god! It's a witch. It's a ghost." I remember that my mother once took me to see the Disney movie "Sleeping Beauty," and for more than a week afterward I had a hard time sleeping because I kept awakening to see that terrifying witch, the one who used her powers to harm to innocent young girl named Beauty. One night I woke up and there was the witch—the dark contours of her body absolutely clear, absolutely real. I started screaming, "Mom! Mom!" until my poor, overworked mother, who was a very kind person, came in and flipped the light switch. The witch was just

my coat hung on the back of a chair. “Look! It’s just a coat,” she said reassuringly. But I still asked her to leave the light on, and I’m glad she did.

Something like this moment will happen to you if you can make only it to day three. It will be like the moment when your mother came in, turned on the light and announced to you, “It’s all in your head.” At that moment, when your mother rescued you, you might have thought, “Oh, I can handle this. It’s not so terrifying after all.” That was, and is, a wonderful turning point, and it will happen once again if you just stick around.

Even though we might not notice until we’ve practiced for many years, on the second day people begin to undergo an important change. Of course, we all know that a sesshin has a specific structure. We start sitting at 5:00 am, for example, and finish the day at 10:30 at night. We have breakfast at 8:00, lunch at 12:30 and dinner at 6:00. Samu, the work period, goes from 8:45 in the morning until 10:00. But sesshin also has a deeper, subtle structure because those who attend will also undergo a series of psychological changes as they move from the start to the finish. From my own experience, I am well aware that it can take a long, long time to become aware of this process of unconscious transformation. Everything can seem haphazard and confused, when actually the very opposite is true.

In The Ariyapariyesana Sutra, the Sutra of the Noble Search, which is one of the most important Pali sutras to those of us who practice Zen, the Buddha describes his own journey from the confusion of ordinary consciousness to the most refined forms of awareness and, from that state, on to enlightenment. It’s important to appreciate that like all of us, the World Honored One began his journey in confusion:

I, too, monks, before my awakening, when I was an unenlightened bodhisatta, being subject to birth, sought what was likewise subject to birth. Being subject myself to aging, illness, death, sorrow and defilement, sought [happiness in] what was likewise subject to illness, death, sorrow and defilement. The thought occurred to me, “Why do I, being subject myself to birth, seek what is likewise subject to birth? Being subject myself to aging, illness, death, sorrow, defilement, why do I seek what is likewise subject to illness, death, sorrow, defilement? What if I, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, were to seek the unborn, unexcelled liberation from bondage: Nibbana?”

And so the Buddha set out on his noble quest—much like those of us who have come to sesshin this week. First he studied with a great meditation teacher named Alara Kalama, who introduced him to practices that allowed the Buddha to reach what he calls “the base of nothingness” or the “foundation of nothingness”—what we in Zen call “Mu.” In the sutra, the Buddha explains that he became so accomplished at immersing himself in Mu that Alara made him his chief disciple and colleague, treating him as an equal. But the Buddha realized at some point that the

attainment of Mu is not enlightenment, not Nibbana, and eventually he left. Then he sought out another teacher, Uddraka Ramaputra, who taught him how to reach a state that could only be described as “neither perception nor non-perception.” Once again, the Buddha equaled his teacher and was acknowledged as a colleague. But the Buddha still felt that this state too was somehow inadequate. Subtle forms of obstruction remained, and he so left Uddraka as well.

The problem now was that the Buddha had reached the limits of the wisdom of his time. Alara and Uddraka had gone as far as anyone had gone, and no one had surpassed their achievement. The Buddha, it seemed, would have to find the way to awaken on his own. For a while he practiced with a group of ascetics who threw themselves into fasting and other austerities. But the Buddha, almost dying of hunger and no closer to enlightenment than before, finally abandoned them and was saved by a farm girl who offered him some milk and rice. These humble foods restored his physical strength as well as his courage and resolve. Determined to break through once and for all, he sat under a bo tree all night until the dawn. And as we learn from other sources, when the Buddha looked up and saw the morning star, he experience anuttara samyak sambodhi—complete enlightenment.

The story of the Buddha’s breakthrough is inspiring in itself, but the sutra doesn’t end there. So far, the sutra has simply told the story of his enlightenment from the “outside.” But now the Buddha gives us a look us “inside,” revealing changes no one could have witnessed because these took place in his own mind. He represents his progress to awakening as a sequence of jhanas or “absorptions” that progress like the steps on a stairway. The first jhana is the state we reach simply by coming to sesshin: the “joy of seclusion” that arises when we put aside our worldly concerns. Having reached this state, the World Honored One continued meditating until he reached the second jhana, which the sutra calls “singleness of mind” and we in Zen call “one-pointed mind.” This we usually achieve by watching the breath. The third jhana sees the arising of deep calm (samatha) and mindfulness (vipassana). The fourth jhana involves working through the sources of our suffering, and this is where we often find ourselves on day two of sesshin. But the inner journey does not stop there. Next the Buddha moved beyond the realm of form to experience the space around him as formless and infinite. And then he saw plainly that consciousness is formless and infinite as well. Then he entered into what we call deep Mu-shin, just as Alara had taught him to do. There he remained until he reached the state that he had learned about from Uddraka—a state of emptiness so complete that words like “thought,” “feeling,” “knowledge,” and even “perception” no longer described his experience. Then he looked at the evening star. Going from emptiness back into form, he finally awakened.

The Buddha wanted us to understand awakening as a *process*. While it’s true that the Buddha’s life story includes many mythical details, I don’t think there’s anything mythical about the stages he describes. Even though we don’t speak of jhanas in Zen or describe the path in the systematic way the Buddha does in the sutra, at sesshin we are doing exactly what the Buddha

did more than two millennia ago. And we should view sesshin as a process, too, one that takes us through a series of stages or steps. But it's easy not to notice this, especially on day two when we can find it very hard to believe what Baso says: "This very mind is Buddha." On day two, it can seem that our distress will never end. But I'm asking you to have faith in process of sesshin and also in your own mind. Because the Zen view is that your own mind is really Mind with the capital "M."

It's no accident that we recite Seng T'san's Hsin Hsin Ming or "Verses on Faith in Mind" every morning here at sesshin:

The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.  
When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised.  
Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.  
If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinion for or against anything.  
To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind.

Seng T'san tells us that we shouldn't be concerned about our mental obstacles. In fact, he recommends that we put aside all aspirations, even the desire to achieve enlightenment. Considering the time and energy we're putting into our practice at sesshin, this sounds like very strange advice. What could he possibly have up his sleeve?

You might not be aware that Seng T'san is supposed to have suffered from leprosy. Legend says that he was miraculously cured, but in the absence of any reliable accounts of such recoveries, I prefer to think that the real miracle was his ability to overcome the experience of this terrible disease, which has been the cause of so much suffering and shame for many, many millions of people. Although the disease can now be cured by antibiotics, people in times past lost their noses and ears, their toes, their hands and fingers. A man without fingers may have written the words we recite every day, words that tell not to worry and to trust in the fundamental wisdom at work in the world. "The Way," he wrote, "is perfect like vast space,/Where nothing is lacking and nothing is absent."

To understand the source of Seng T'san's confidence in the wisdom of whatever happens, we have to remember that his title, "Hsin-Hsin Ming" means 'Faith in Mind.' Of course "faith" is a Western idea and not quite what hsin-hsin means in Mandarin. Some scholars suggest that a better translation might be "relying on mind," and I think that "relying" might actually get to the heart of the matter even better than "faith," because we associate faith with belief, whereas reliance feels much more natural and less forced. We can rely, Seng T'san tells us, on the way of things. Things are working out for the best no matter what is happening. And that's an astonishing claim if you stop to think about how very wrong things can go. The key to Seng T'san's confidence is his belief that when we recoil from the moment as it comes and goes—

when we separate ourselves—we produce the suffering we’re trying to escape. Especially when we find ourselves in crude pain like the throbbing in our knees and hips after many hours of sitting, we want to create some kind of barrier. But Seng T’san tells us not to do it. The way out of pain, he tells, is to move in the very opposite direction, becoming one with what is happening.

At first this advice might simply seem like a kind of trick or gimmick designed to help us through our difficult moments, a bit like stopping the crying of a child by showing him something shiny and bright. But like many other great practitioners in the Mahayana, Seng T’san really believed in the experience of “becoming one with.” In fact, he saw it as the gateway to reality. On the second day of sesshin, this oneness can seem very far away. We ordinarily think that oneness is something we have to achieve the hard way, by overcoming the painful split between our expectations and reality. We need to wipe away our illusions through hard work on and off the cushion. In a limited, relative sense, this understanding is true, but Seng T’san says, “Not so fast.” The unity between mind and world is not something we have to achieve. In fact, the more we try to achieve it, the more frustrated we become. The unity comes first—it’s always there. But then thinking creates the illusion of a split between what we call the “subject,” the one who thinks, and the “material object” we perceive.

Sometimes we discover quite effortlessly the “becoming one with” that Seng T’san praises. On a Saturday morning in July, you get up and take your coffee into the backyard, listening to the sound of leaves in the wind and watching the play of light and shadows on the ground. At that moment you return effortlessly to the oneness that has been there all along. Self-consciousness disappears and you simply become the leaves, the wind, the coffee—whatever you behold. This experience is not actually daikensho or “seeing the Source face to face,” but it tells us something important about the way things really are. As Seng T’san says,

To come directly into harmony with this reality,  
just simply say when doubts arise, "Not two".  
In this "not two," nothing is separate, nothing is excluded.  
No matter when or where,  
Whoever comes to enlightenment  
realizes this fundamental truth.  
And this truth is beyond extension or diminution in time or space;  
in it, a single thought is ten thousand years.

Even though it’s true that we have to show up—we have to come to sesshin, wake up at five o’clock, watch the breath and sit motionless for many hours--it’s also true that there is nothing to be done. We simply have to trust the process. I would say that sesshin is not really about becoming accomplished in certain techniques: folding the legs, straightening the back, watching the breath, moving through the jhanas. What we learn at sesshin is how to *rely*—how to trust--

and we learn it by experiencing helplessness, the kind of helplessness and hopelessness that sometimes overtake us on day two.

The Japanese Zen tradition, as opposed to its Chinese counterpart, has traditionally made a distinction between zoriki and tariki. Zoriki describes the kind practice that relies upon the resources of the self—“self power”—as Zen is supposed to do. Tariki is associated with “other power”—with Pure Land Buddhism and the saving power of Amida, the Buddha of Sukhavati Paradise. Zen people are supposed to rely only on themselves, while Pure Land people typically pray for Amida to descend from heaven and rescue them, a practice sometimes looked down on as an inferior vehicle. But I think that this distinction between zoriki and tariki doesn’t stand up to scrutiny, at least on day two of sesshin. On day two, we all find ourselves reaching the limits of our personal strength, so much so that the idea of “self-power” can seem like a straw in the wind. What personal power do we have left by 10:30 in the evening on the second day? Yet that’s when we discover trust. Only when we have come face to face with our personal limits does genuine trust become possible. But trust in what? Seng T’san says “trust in mind”—but what is mind?

Many people are unaware that the most important teaching in the history of Zen is not actually a Zen teaching—it’s a teaching older than the appearance of our school. In the sixth century CE a monk-practitioner whose name was Asvaghosa composed a revolutionary treatise called The Awakening of Faith or The Awakening of Trust. Asvaghosa said that the mind has many layers, each with its own form of consciousness. There is eye consciousness, hearing consciousness, touching consciousness, tasting consciousness, and smelling consciousness—the five senses, of course. There is also self-consciousness and the discriminating intellect. Underneath these eight forms of consciousness is the “storehouse mind,” something like our idea of “memory,” and together with these eight forms of consciousness, the storehouse mind helps to perpetuate what we call our personal selves. This conception of the mind had become quite familiar by Asvaghosa’s time, but he and other monk-practitioners made an additional discovery that turned out to be quite radical. Through their profound practice of the deepest samadhi, they realized that the storehouse mind was not really neutral, a blank slate, which is how people thought of it at the time. They discovered that it had an active character—that this deepest mind was actively engaged in leading us all toward enlightenment. At the core of the mind, beneath all the different layers, was what is called the Tathagata-garbha, the Womb of the Buddhas or Buddha Mind. This is the mother who comes into your dark room and turns on the lights to dispel your fear. Another word for it is Dharmakaya, which in Zen we also call the Source. But the term Tathagata-garbha was used instead of Dharmakaya to underscore the active or creative dimension of our intrinsically enlightened mind. Needless to say, Asvaghosa knew that humans can become very confused, and that we can do terrible things, hurting each other in countless ways. He knew that our fear and our attachment can overwhelm us at times. But underneath it all, day and night, the liberating Mind is at work. Seng-T’san wants us to trust that Mind--to



trust the Tathagata-garbha. When the Awakening of Trust made its way to China, it became a foundational teaching for the Eastern Mountain School that gave birth to Zen.

Many people who come to sesshin are disappointed, maybe even shocked, when on the second day they discover that their minds are far from clear, bright and spacious. But to expect such an outcome right away is to forget how much baggage we all carry—how much karmic baggage. And in fact, the real cause of our suffering is our desire not to have to deal with that all the baggage we've collected. We might come to sesshin imagining that we can drop it off at base camp and ascend to the mountaintop unencumbered, but our liberation actually depends on our willingness to unpack it all, one item after another. Unpacking your baggage is the real work of sesshin—in fact, of many, many sesshins. But it's really less difficult than many people think because you have a lot of help.

I don't know if you saw the recent article about the origins of depression. It created quite a stir. The researchers discovered that depression is far more commonplace than anybody knew. Something like half of all adults have been depressed at some point in their lives, and people in every society on earth—even in remote Siberia and the Kalahari in Africa--have been found to suffer from it. So widespread is depression that the scientists reached a rather shocking conclusion: since depression is universal, more or less, it probably shouldn't be classified as a mental illness at all.

Ordinarily we think of depression as a sickness caused by the malfunctioning of our brains, and we take all kinds of medicines to halt the rumination which is thought to be one of the condition's symptoms. Because we have come to see depression as a case of the brain gone terribly wrong, we might consider it the ultimate betrayal: our own minds have turned into an enemy, plunging us into a darkness so profound it can be terrifying. I know what this is like myself. When Seng T'san taught that we should have faith in mind, he must not have known about depression! But the researchers tell a very different story. They say that depression should be seen as a form of consciousness that evolved to help us cope with our lives. Here's part of what they report:

depression is nature's way of telling you that you've got complex social problems that the mind is intent on solving. Therapies should try to encourage depressive rumination rather than try to stop it, and they should focus on trying to help people solve the problems that trigger their bouts of depression. (There are several effective therapies that focus on just this.) It is also essential, in instances where there is resistance to discussing ruminations, that the therapist try to identify and dismantle those barriers.

Depression, they tell us, is nature's way! Instead of prescribing drugs that will arrest the process of rumination, therapists should actually encourage more of it. The new research says that people fall into depression not because that have been thinking too much, but because they are

holding themselves back. They want to resolve their issues but they feel that certain questions simply can't be asked or certain answers even entertained. Let's say, for example, that your marriage has become more and more unhappy, and that on some level you already know that divorce might be the only option. Yet maybe you were raised to see divorce as cowardly, an option no good person would ever choose. So you don't allow yourself to recognize the insight staring you right in the face. It's like working your way through complex maze only to find the exit and then turn away, plunging back into the labyrinth again. No wonder you become depressed.

It turns out that depression might not be a disease but a special mode of processing, a special way of dealing with our baggage. The mind is shutting down the peripherals in order to devote all our energy to the situation that has left us blocked. Far from acting as our enemy, the mind is actually trying to help—trying to protect us from greater suffering.

In zazen, rumination is discouraged, so it's not the same as the kind of therapy these researchers recommend. But therapy and zazen are both designed to help people to recover trust in their own fundamental wisdom—the wisdom, we would say, of your Buddha Mind. A good therapist gives the patient what she needs: permission to think the unthinkable or to say what she won't allow herself to say even though she already knows the truth. In therapy, you gradually come to recognize that you already know what you think or feel, but you simply couldn't trust yourself until the therapist transferred to you the confidence you lacked.

That's what Seng T'san is also trying to do—giving us permission to trust ourselves. And at sesshin, as in therapy, the real problem isn't that we didn't get a raise, or that we didn't win a Pulitzer, or that we don't know how to talk to our son. The real problem is that we don't believe in our own ability to see through all our problems. And Seng T'san's response might come as a surprise. "Don't even try!" he tells us. "Let the Mind do all the work. All you have to do is become one with whatever is happening."

But what exactly is this Mind? What is exactly is "this *very* Mind," in Master Baso's words?

Ordinary we think of the mind as the observing consciousness, the Watcher. As we're walking down the street, we see people passing by, shops we've frequented for years, cars and buses on the move. All of this we notice from a vantage point, it seems, located somewhere behind our eyes. The Watcher is always observing everything, sometimes intently, sometimes mindfully and sometimes with indifference. On occasion, the Watcher might forget to watch and we collide with a lamppost or a trashcan, and if that happens, we tell Him—or we tell Her—to be vigilant and not let us down. Usually the Watcher does its job, but maybe on the Garden State Parkway one night, we miss our exit while the Watcher was rehearsing some event from earlier

in the day, perhaps a conversation with a lover or a spouse, when something important was left unsaid. And so we miss the turnoff. “Where was my mind,” we say aloud, in a tone of frustration.

But where exactly is this mind? A minute ago I said “behind your eyes,” but obviously that’s not right. If there’s a little person behind our eyes watching everything we do, then there must be another little person behind the eyes of Watcher as well. The Watcher must have a Watcher who requires another even smaller Watcher who requires. . . . Obviously this line of thinking is absurd. But if the Watcher is not behind our eyes, or in our heads, where can it be?

The Zen answer is that it’s nowhere. The Watcher is a fiction we ourselves create. When we’re walking down the street past the shops and cars, we construct an imaginary self who is not quite there with us but always close, somewhere right outside the frame. Maybe we create the Watcher as a way of feeling less lonely, less completely on our own. But having a Watcher also leads to some very big complications because we also often consider it to be our real self, the person we really are. And that means my real self is never here-and-now but always somewhere off to the side: I’m a witness to a world that still remains permanently separate from me.

Earlier I spoke of the ghosts we confront on the second day of sesshin. Well, I want to add that the watcher is the Ghost of ghosts—the ultimate Ghost. The fears and attachments we store away, all those memories and raw emotions, these we imagine as the Watcher’s property. But what if the Watcher doesn’t really exist? What if the Watcher is no more real than Pip in Great Expectations or Bilbo Baggins in The Lord of the Rings? Well, of course your memories and emotions are real—I’m definitely not denying that they are. But we don’t have to use them to prop up the illusion of the Watcher. We can stop treating our fears and memories as the essence of this fictional person, “the self.” Painful things have happened to us but they aren’t who we are: they aren’t our true identity. This is another way to understand Seng T’san’s advice, “Don’t try.” He really means that we should let the Watcher go. Stop trying to rescue him!

What can make day two of sesshin so frightening is that illusion of the Watcher becomes more compelling, more apparently real, as we withdraw our attention from the world around us. Suddenly, we seem to be left with nothing except the Watcher’s running monologue, with all the mental loops we normally block out by focusing on inputs from our senses. Being alone with the Watcher is a little bit like being locked in a very small room with a deeply neurotic person! You want to get out of that room!

But then, if you just continue to sit, a shift of perspective takes place. The Watcher will gradually disappear as you stop attending to the inner monologue or imagining another self just outside the frame. As moments of internal silence open up, you start to become totally absorbed

by whatever you hear, taste, touch, smell, feel and see. You don't observe yourself staring at a bowl of rice. You just become one with the rice. You don't see yourself in your mind's eye listening to the song of a bird. Your whole consciousness becomes the song. Nothing but the sound of the bird is there. Not real-self-plus-bird, not real-self-plus-rice. Just song, just rice.

When the Watcher disappears, there is just one consciousness, not two. This is what Seng T'san refers to as the "unified mind in accord with the way." And when you experience the world in this way, without a divided mind, you "wear the Buddha's clothes, eat the Buddha's food, speak the Buddha's words, do the Buddha's deeds." In place of the little self behind your eyes, there is only emptiness, "blue sky and bright day." So where, then, is the Womb of the Buddhas? What has become of the Tathagata-garbha? Why, it's nothing other than what's happening, right here and right now.

"Where is the Buddha?" you ask:

With loot in your pocket, you declare yourself innocent.

[Rings three bells]