

It's hard for us to really get that our practice is about softening and letting go.

Letting of our rigid positions and opinions. Softening around our defensiveness and fears.

The fears can run deep and run us. And often we either don't notice them or we find the conclusions of a divided mind to be super justified. I am this way.

In some of the circles I run in there is more and more recognition of the power of past trauma. And how we do indeed need to learn how to be sensitive to trauma, to give trauma room to express and be seen, to care skillfully for the impacts of past trauma.

And yet I feel like I'm also seeing how being a trauma survivor can also be another story. Another way to defend our brittle selves against all comers. Maybe we need to defend for a while until we gradually, little by little, start to feel into the ways it's safer than we think. That the danger was real before, absolutely, but it's less now, or not really here now.

And I do know that's tricky territory for me to shine a light on as I've had the karma of relatively little trauma in this lifetime. And I don't really know about the whole past lives thing but I suspect I've probably had a series of pretty fortunate births.

The tricky thing for us about our rigid positions and opinions is our conditioned mind absolutely needs to believe in them and all of our justifications about them, that's part of how they work to defend our fear of threat which is ultimately our fear of being broken.

The theme and occasion of the Rohatsu sesshin as you know is the Buddha's awakening. There are many stories about the Buddha's awakening but the dominant one was carried forward by the Theravadin school of early Buddhism and written down in the Pali Canon and it's a heroic journey story as I was saying last night. The Buddha pushed HARD in his practice to overcome clinging. At first, it's

true, he pushed too hard. You probably know about how he spend a couple of years with his practice buddies with insane ascetic practices - nearly starving themselves to death for one thing. The idea was if we deny ourselves everything we'll let go of clinging to everything. It was extreme.

And in the story he realized he had to back off. Two kind of triggers or reminders he had to help with letting go of pushing that hard are kind of lovely. First a childhood memory of peace and contentment, openness, and also of clarity. We remembered hanging out at a seasonal village festival they held before starting to plow the fields at the start of the farming season. A sunny peaceful day. The people cheerful. It must've been a good harvest the year before as in simple agrarian society when you were planting and waiting for the new crops to grow is almost a year since you finished the last harvest and when you're likely to be low on supplies and drifting towards starvation. So apparently all was well there. His father guided the ceremonial first plowing. Everyone cheered. The insects were buzzing, the sun shining, he felt his incredible wave of contentment and joy. This sense of everything being just as it is for all beings. It's said this included feeling compassion for the worms who were disturbed by the plow - a knowing that everything is just as it is but that still includes suffering. And it's all okay.

He remembered that feeling of spontaneous contentment and deep insight from childhood. I remember Norman used to encourage us to feel into whether we have such memories. I'm sure some of us do, but not all of us. Some of us had childhoods far too marked by the slow moving trauma not receiving what we needed or acute traumas of abuse or misfortunes. And yet it's still worth considering: so easily we paint the past with one color when actually every moment is different - if there were such moments for you. (PAUSE)

And the second thing that happened to the Buddha-to-be was he received generosity from another. I think the power of this goes deeper than we can imagine. The power of giving and receiving. The matriarch of one of the better off families in the village near where he and his friends were starving themselves and standing in cold lakes all day and

entered meditative trance states for days at a time knew there were mendicant monks in the woods and she had her cook make some extra rice porridge and sent her servant girl off to offer it to the first one she could find. And you know the rest: she found the Buddha. He was "supposed to" refuse this offering but something flashed in his heart and he felt a release of clinging and pushing and opened to accepting the food. And then everything shifted in his practice.

Raizelah and I actually tried to do a similar practice on Thanksgiving day. We had plenty of leftovers as you do and there are many homeless folks around. We'd seen one guy sleeping under the bridge over the creek so we walked down to give him a meal. He was gone so we kept walking around and offering it to those we met. In our case no one wanted it. And we went back home. So it doesn't always work out like in the story.

Anyway the Buddha's friends were disgusted with him. He hadn't kept the faith. They scorned him after that.

And then the Buddha's practice did get less extreme but this version of the story still has him pushing pretty damn hard. Chris will talk a bit about the trope of Mara, the tempter, tomorrow. After the Buddha sat down under the Bodhitree tree along the banks of the what's now called the Phalgu River but in my memory it was something like the Naranjara River or something then. Anyway after he sat down he was continuing in a very strong intense mode of practice. Vowing not to move until he reached clarity in his quest to understand how we can live with peace in a world full of suffering, illness, old age, and death (not to mention ecological collapse these days). He's pictured with such strength. At one point it gets so hard that he has to seek the support of the earth, reaching down to touch the earth and feel the non-difference of himself and the soil which means the non-difference between himself and all things. The interpenetration of all. But it's still written as a huge struggle. He battled the armies of temptation and distraction - the armies of Mara.

It's a very male story is another way to look at it. A strong heroic guy who pushes though. He does have to be more skillful and not push in

an EXTREME way but he still PUSH he did. And our Zen tradition, especially as it's practiced with group of younger men in Japan, retains a strong spirit and a tendency towards PUSHING.

Pushing isn't all bad. Nothing is all good or all bad. Sometimes it's what's needed. There is always some strain and suffering that it brings up but sometimes that's what's needed.

But other times, in other ways, no. It's not pushing that's needed but softening, but release, but letting go, but trusting and having faith in a process of release into the empty nature of all. This too is courageous and strong. The courage of lowering the defenses and trusting. Our minds are so conditioned to always need a subject with every object so I find myself wanting to say trusting this or trusting that. Trusting the practice, trusting ourselves, trusting each other in the sangha, trusting the universe. But ultimately it's deeper than needing to pin the trust on some something. It's just trusting.

Anyway thank goodness we also have in our tradition a deep thread of women's wisdom and bringing it more into the tradition helps us ultimately see that what we consider male and female are also concepts and social structures and that the freedom that's possible here is also a release from that.

So here's a story unearthed in The Hidden Lamp. A wonderful collection, if you don't know it, of the awakening stories of women practitioners which includes commentaries by contemporary women teachers. It was put together by Florence Caplow who helped to found this very sangha with me and Bob Penny and the many people who came along from there. And also Sue Moon who's a wonderful lay teacher and writer in the Bay Area, a student of Norman Fischer's also. So it's a family book and we can be grateful to Florence and Sue for inviting it to come together.

[story of Chinoyo + commentary]

One thing that's worth noticing here is that the moon is actually the symbol of enlightenment. The bottom falling out of the bucket and

letting go of even the moon is a beautiful expression of releasing even from the idea of awakening. Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi savaha means that. Going beyond, beyond beyond.

Full disclosure:

This talk is inspired by rohatsu but also by sangha life. I've been working hard in my practice lately being among our dear leaders as we consider the MASSIVE project of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to remodel our building. The whole thing is so incredible but it's also a fertile ground for getting triggered and defending and losing track of our deep trust and love for each other. Strong opinions that one person expresses and the other isn't sure about loom larger when it feels like there's the danger of screwing up and launch on a course that will waste a LOT of money right? Or maybe it's not exactly the details of the opinion but the way they're said or when they're said. Too much! Stop! Do you know that kind of reactivity?

So I'm practicing with noticing when I feel tight or reactive or judgmental and releasing back into trust. And working on owning it when I feel reactive. In my case it's feeling reactive about other people's reactivity towards each other mostly! It gets complicated!

And please don't worry, we're working it out and we'll be reaching out more widely to sangha to get more input and I'm 100% confident all is going to work out beautifully with the building. Absolutely. But it's always humans here. And everything's practice. And it can actually take a lot of time to see see that somethings we say "everything's practice" but we're still defended and mostly want so-and-so to shape up in their practice and haven't yet felt that everything's practice can only mean looking at our own clinging and holding.

But BOY you sure know when it releases again. What a relief. Just like the bottom of the bucket falling out. You didn't realize yours hands we pressing so tightly to keep the bucket of me and my opinions together.

So may we all let the bottom fall out.

May we all practice trust and love and allowing each other to be who we are. In all things In all of our relationships. In all of our endeavors. The only way forward is trust. And we're all wounded. So it takes a lot of time and patience and care. But sooner or later it's also inevitable. The bucket just isn't that solid.