Zen Master (Bowman) Bomun

Teisho on the Koan

Hogen’s Hair’s-Breadth

Case 17, Hogen’s Hair’s-Breadth, from the Shōyō Roku (The Book of Equanimity)

Preface to the assembly:

Paired geese beating the ground with their wing tips fly up high. A pair of wood ducks stands alone at the edge of a pond. Leaving aside the matter of arrow points meeting head on, what about sawing on a steel counter weight?

Main case:

Attention! Hogen asked Administrator Monk Shuzan, "If there's even a hair’s breadth of difference, heaven and earth are clearly separated. How do you understand this?" Shuzan replied, "If there's even a hair’s breadth of difference, heaven and earth are clearly separated." Hogan said, "If that's so, how could you understand it?" Shuzan answered, "I am just this. How about you Osho?" Hogan remarked, "If there is even a hair’s breadth difference, heaven and earth are clearly separated." At that, Shuzan bowed low.

Appreciatory verse:

A fly settles on a balance pan and it tilts.
The ten-thousand-generation scale illuminates unevenness.
Pounds, ounces, pennyweights, grains – measure exactly as you will.
In the end you’ll lose to my fixed indicator.

Already we're into the belly of the retreat, the fourth day, and appreciating the atmosphere of the zendo -- a deepening silence, a greater space.

We have created this wonderful place of practice together, this dojo, or zendo, this center of gravity. I'm always amazed each time I do this that we are able to come together in this way and do it.

Practicing in different homes around the world over the years we’ve entered someone’s living room, taken the furniture out and transformed it into a place of genuine, wonderful practice. That's quite a thing.

Also wonderful is how we can come together and go through such changes, each one of us. There is space, there is room for all of those changes here.
Although it's often hard to bear, what's uncovered in the practice of zazen, still whatever it is that is uncovered or brought to the surface in our deep inquiry its welcome here and included. We, as a community of friends, in our silence, have this incredible luxury of being able to be ourselves with the support of the group; completely ourselves. Alone together. And together alone. That's a very rare and wonderful thing.

Most of the time when we come together as a group at a lunch or picnic, or dinner party, whatever it is we do in groups, and we start talking, it can often become a problematic thing if it goes to places of contention. You have to somehow hide it away or pretend it's not happening, or manifest your persona in order to look good. To look at least like you're somewhat socialized or civilized.

Of course, underneath it all kinds of worlds within worlds are going on. But here in the zendo there's no need for pretense whatsoever. You are completed. As we say, this is a “come as you are party.” And you are completely welcome just as you are.

That’s the wonderful thing about this space, this space of ‘not knowing,’ of unimpeded openness where we practice suspending our judgment. It cares for whatever appears, wonderfully, in a completely uncontrived way.

You are the way you are in this space of openness. A space where we all have agreed to, as best as we can, suspend our judgment and not peek at each other, or judge each other, or check each other too much.

I suppose we all peek from time to time. But, really, we have this encouragement to not look around, and to not look away from our practice, to give people privacy to be themselves, to not be a voyeur of some sort peeking through the window of someone's soul.

So, we create this space and all kinds of energies. And the many beings from the six realms appear in our consciousness. If we, as a group, hold the space – hold the space in the sense that we practice suspending judgment – and offer ourselves to the space.

We human beings are judgment machines and judgments continually come and go, come and go. Don't they? But we can suspend our identification with that machinery of our mind and we can trust what emerges. We can trust what emerges in the space of our zazen practice and in our consciousness.

We can be gentle and open–hearted and steady with it and allow it to be the space of not-knowing, or the space of the uncontrived, or the unconditioned (such a difficult word!), to let it be relative or absolute, whatever our notions are, or even whatever our “no notions” are of absolute and relative.

They are all just projections of our own mind. And they are not what it is obviously.

Basically, I think we all have seen in our practice, or at least at times tasted how it is, when Big Mind meets this particular expression or provisional manifestation of being, meets this particular expression. And there is some resolve, resolution. I don't mean
resolution in a fixed place, because a core teaching in Zen is that there is no fixed position and that things are constantly morphing and shape-shifting and ghosting.

We use the word “impermanence” in Buddhism as one of the four marks of existence. But it is so well-used it is sort of like saying, “God is love.” So I like to use words like “shape-shift” or “morph” because it is shape shifting and morphing and changing all the time, recreating itself all the time in a very, very lively way. Appearing and disappearing; appearing and disappearing.

In our koan study, which is self-study, we meet it and are intimate with it in the sense that we sit upright in the center of our gravity and become what's happening as best we can.

It does happen, doesn't it? And when it happens, it is a blessing in the sense that we are completely accepted as we are, we are received and known and loved. Or, what we are is nothing but gnosis and love.

We chant “Manjushri” and “Avalokita” in “The Return of Merit.” The merit we return to Manjushri is the capacity to know, a kind of knowing that precedes intuition or thought. We return the merit of our practice to the mind’s capacity to appreciate, or to be warm, or to be gentle, or to love, or to feel the ten thousand joys and sorrows of life.

And we return merit to “Bhadra,” the one who sees or experiences – not as object, but as our innate bright wakefulness, our wonderful energy. Bhadra is the one who upon seeing that there is nothing but the manifestation of this takes a firm action, resolute action.

So, we have created a zendo and in this zendo everything is welcome. And you have very few places where you can do this because so much is required of us. So much is expected of us. So much is demanded of us by consensus of the tribe.

So I am appreciating that, as the retreat goes along. And, of course, a great deal of effort goes into the holding of the space on all of our parts. We are completely cared for by our tenzos, for example. And this space also has been cared for by – in addition to you and me in this time and place – countless beings over countless generations.

It is quite remarkable, isn't it? That we can get along. And not only can we get along, we can function harmoniously in the midst of all of the stuff that's going on inside of us.

One person may be in the hell realm, maybe feeling righteous and that everybody is wrong, wrong, wrong. Someone else is in the heavenly realm, enjoying the samadhi of unimpeded brightness, openness and spaciousness – the wonderful absorption of formless jhana perhaps. Another person is manifesting as a hungry ghost, never enough and always in hunger. Endless worlds! And yet we function harmoniously together and meals are made.

We have certain rules we play by. We go for our walk. And it rolls along. It rolls along wonderfully, each one of us doing our own thing. Manifesting our own truth – that manifestation being the silent orchestra of the ten thousand joys and sorrows of human life in this moment.
So, appreciating that *that's* possible. And that we have some deep silent space. And also that we go outside from this place, this nowhere place. This endless dimension, this everywhere-and-nowhere place. You settle deeply, even at times hopefully forget yourself in some formless absorption. And then we have *that*. We are safe. You know, like little baby birds in the nest, or sleeping children of the Buddha. And then we can go out and play.

I used to live in South Chicago. It was actually quite tough. I grew up in the university district, which is on the edge of one of the toughest urban environments in the United States. We would go out and play in a farmer’s field across the street. My family lived in a row house. And we would go out and it was fantastic. The kids would come out of their homes and play for a period of time, play games – Little League, swings – all that stuff. And then we would return home.

Reminds me of those wonderful, bright sunlit days of my childhood when I come out of the zendo sometimes, walk out into the brightness of the backyard – the life in all of the trees, the wind, the bird songs, all of the plants, and so forth, and so on. It’s sort of like those wonderful summer vacation days sometimes – walking out where it's unimpeded. Endless dimension.

So we come and go. And I'm appreciating it while at the same time not making light of the tremendous challenge and difficulty of the work we're doing. You know, this is at times no walk in the park – to encounter yourself in all of your dimensions.

But what I have found over these last 40 years is that the more I take my vow as a bodhisattva seriously I find myself participating in the life of all worlds. And all of this community’s members are within me, and all of my friends, as we are all community members. Within us there's a community within a community within a community, and so forth and so on.

The more that I participate in my life, in the life of the moment – which is, of course, reality and truth – the more I participate in Truth. However it is – a route to my conditioning and opinion about The Way, or the way I imagine I am, or the way I imagine I should be, or how things should be.

As David [Rynick, aka Zen Master Dae An] said, "Reality has a way of rubbing and scorching and grinding us up in this zendo."

And what I invariably have found over the years is that the more I'm willing to do that, to participate, the more I'm willing to appreciate human beings and life on this planet and what we go through, each one of us, as human beings on our pilgrimage, or on our journey.

It's an incredibly poignant and loving and heartbreaking thing, what we as human beings do, what strategies we employ to find satisfaction and fulfillment in life when we lack some kind of vigorous practice, some genuine spiritual practice.
And I think it goes without saying that without some pretty serious taking ourselves in hand and looking into the matter, and sitting with ourselves, as we do here, we employ the strategy of greed and anger and denial to find happiness. And those are, as we know, rather questionable strategies. But it’s like anything you are really invested in. You figure if it hasn’t worked a hundred times, I’ll try it a hundred and one times. Because everybody's doing it, so there must be something to it!

And here we are in our zendo, taking a slightly different approach now that the koan has shifted.

From one perspective all koan are the same koan, you know, different aspects of one thing. Just a different lens or particular-ness we can look through to see our original nature or our “no nature.” To have some intimation of it.

You know, it's always at its very best. Even when we completely forget ourselves. It's a relative forgetting, because we're bodhisattvas.

But we do forget ourselves. And then come alive. And we do have the capacity to look into some particular experience, whatever it may be, and find – what could we say – our presence-ing, our experience. I suppose you could say we find something that has that flavor or aroma. It's like we’re bloodhounds, you know, Sniff! Sniff! You have a scent, and the best of the scent is a tracking of something that's already happened, something that has passed by.

Sometimes it passes by perilously close and leaves us dazed and weeping, but with amazement. At its very best, it is a thread of the garment of not-knowing. It’s looking through, or looking into, or sitting upright, as [monk] Shuzo [in the koan] said. This wonderful monk said, “I am just this.” We have the capacity when we sit upright in the suchness, or the this-ness, or the just this much-ness, of our experience, to glimpse that it's not what it seems, nor is it otherwise.

So in the not-what-it-seems, of course, there is a way in which it seems. Perhaps it seems familiar, or it seems outrageous, or wrong, or it seems so beautiful that you just want to take it home with you and bottle it.

But when we look into self-nature through the lens of some experience, inevitably if we are committed to this practice of no-minded mindfulness, of pure presence-ing, or of at least the intention to be present and to practice mindfulness with calm abiding and openness of heart, at least to have that movement or direction of, you know, falling down, getting up, falling down, a hundred, a thousand times, then there comes with our practice those entry points where the koan actually starts to become clear, or more clear.

Sometimes, quite vividly clear. Sometimes, it's as clear as the front and back of your hand, or the noonday sun. It doesn't become clear as an object, but we enter into the world of that experience and find, as it says in the koan, the radiance of something that casts no shadow and is completely unknowable, ungraspable, totally beyond all comprehension.

We are dazzled, aren't we, when we go out in the garden after sitting sometimes.
And the practice of self-realization is to bring out that understanding and that faith, and that trust, and that love, and that capacity to take incredibly creative and determined action in service of something. That is, for me, the experience of a kind of chivalry.

Because I have seen, I have known in the marrow of my bones, and seen very, very clearly. Seeing is so definite isn't it? Maybe “intuit” isn't the right word either, because it is too hazy. So I'll stay with “seeing.” We all can relate to it. I have had some glimpse of essential nature, and I have had some glimpse of its expression. And I have had some glimpse of how all of the particulars arise, manifest and pass as shape-shifting of this lively intelligence and movements.

That's our koan study.

And since each one of us is nothing but that manifestation of that wonderful, loving intelligence, the more that we trust and take refuge in our basic aliveness and goodness, the more we can testify that we are all children of the Buddha, we are all God's children.

And the more we can dare to start to see that aliveness in more and more things. And certainly you have had the experience, when you have been sitting strongly, that you go outside and look at stone or so called inanimate objects, the earth or stones in the garden. … I’m quite fond of these cement alligators that are emerging out of the ground in the garden here. I walk along and then I get caught by them, you know, and they are alive! The stones glow. Stones have their own life. Of course they do. When you are sitting you go out and, one-by-one, pebbles and tiles glow. And then we come back into the zendo and we return to some silent place, some formless absorption, samadhi. And then, once again, we are awakened by something, maybe something dreadful, I don't know, maybe something wonderful.

And so this process goes – of emerging, and appreciating, and stepping aside, and making room for another, and re-emerging in some new way. Seeing it in some new way. It is quite something. It's quite a thing, isn't it? What we are doing here. It's an incomparable blessing.

Interesting thing about grace, the experience of grace, which is the experience of some kind of awakening, is that you're awakening to a manifestation of your life, and that it is alive, that it is intelligent. The space is not dead that we inhabit. It is not vapid. It is alive. It is infinitely resourceful and alive.

And it has the capacity to reflect and to know intimately whatever emerges as itself. We say the Great Round Mirror has no likes or dislikes. So this is our model practice of self-fulfilling samadhi, a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful clear practice.

And to be able to practice the practice within the difficult places, wherever you wake up! I often wake up when I am in a slumber, or an absorption. Sometimes a slumber, sometimes an absorption, sometimes a formless place.
Oftentimes when I wake up in the zendo I'm awakened by the bell if I've been asleep, or wakened by someone's cough, or a look. Or I forget where I am and forget to do the Four Vows. That was a wonderful moment [earlier in the retreat when he forgot to do the vows].

After shouting out the, "I take refuge," and really getting into it, and really losing myself in it, and then everybody joining in, "All Buddhas throughout space and time," I fell asleep totally.

Well, it wasn't exactly a sleep, it was more like one of those delicious reveries, those afternoon naps in which you kind of slumber off. It was like that. I just fell off into this wonderful reverie of love and peacefulness, completely stoned and spaced out, gone.

Really wonderful!

Then I came to a little bit and realized that I was some place. I was in the zendo. So I figured, "Oh, it must be time to get up." So I picked up my chanting books, tucked them under there, and then I started to arrange things. But I was still, you know, like sleepwalking in a kind of wonderful way! Had no idea! But then, you know, you start to get the glimmer that something's a little wrong. You know that feeling? Like you've just sort of completely spaced out, and everything's fine. Then you realize that you left the water running in the bathtub and it's overflowing. Or you left something in the oven, and there you are thinking, "Oh, isn't it grand! We're going to have a great Thanksgiving dinner." And you realize you burned the sweet potatoes and it's starting to smell.

Then I realize that I'm getting that slight edge of anxiety. But I don't want to go there because I'm in such a great heaven room. Then David's face comes over. You've all met his face in meetings [dokusan]. You know that round, wonderful, loving face. Then he says in a whisper "What are you doing?"

So often when I wake up from my reveries, wherever I am, I wake up and I chastise myself for being a bad Zen student. I chastise myself and say, "You bad dog! Look at you! You're supposed to be a Zen practitioner. All these years – and you're still a knuckle head, still a sleepy fellow. Get going!"

It's such a relief to wake up to love. I don't have to run away from waking up. I can actually go, "Oh, it’s my best friend, David, reminding me that we're going to do our vows." And there is a kind of sweetness about it. So, often for me it turns the corner into this heavy duty thing, where I take myself in hand to the edge of judgment and righteousness and contraction and “You bad boy, get to work! You did it again, you're late for school!” Not that that mind of striving and struggle hasn't helped me in some ways. But it also has its limitations.

So, a wonderful encouragement for us when we wake up is to just look around where you are when you wake up. Rather than run back to what you fill up the space between self and other with, what you pack, your insulation, between inside and outside.
It gave me a wonderful, different sense. I went out in the garden with a very, very different sense, so appreciative of that. It's a strange thing.

One of the things David said last night in his talk really got into that and was a tremendous help for me personally. Setting sail on the good ship with him and looking at things, refreshing myself. It freshens my mind. I start to look at my experience sort of taken out of myself. I look at it from another perspective. It was really helpful.

But a couple of things really caught me, were turning words for me. One was David speaking about our fear of life, our resistance to life. I don't remember exactly the metaphor he used. But the one that came through was setting sail on a ship that was leaking badly. Of course, we all set sail on a ship that's leaking badly. Ordinarily, we plug the holes with whatever we can, or man the bilge pumps to keep it dry. And yet there's another way in which we're setting sail in a boat and the boat is leaking light, and light is coming in through the cracks.

There's a certain kind of brightness or a certain kind of goodness or a certain kind of homecoming. A beauty is seeping through the cracks. And it is. In Zen we call it mind light, shadowless light, homecoming light. And it is life itself that is finding its way, perforating our carapace.

I'm reminded of those machines on the golf course, they go along and cut holes, they've got these spikes on them and they aerate the grass so that moisture and light and oxygen can move into the ground and revitalize the dry, encrusted surface.

I don't know how it happened. But we often times have it so backwards don't we? We try to protect ourselves from the aliveness of the moment, thinking that it will … I don't know what we think. I guess we think that it will overwhelm us. I guess we think that our opinions, our beliefs and our opinions, are a matter of life and death, rather than a creation, a provisional story, a wonderful creation.

Then we start to attach to them and if they are threatened we think we need to fight to the death over something which isn't even ours. The creation, all of the thoughts of course, are just a rehash of stuff we've read and been told and studied in our lives.

And it's not even that we've come up with some new thought. They're old anyway. Someone foisted them on us. Then we collect them and we take them home and we think, “What a commendable thing.” And if somebody takes it away from us we'll die, or we'll have to kill you.

And then we go about protecting ourselves from reality, more and more and more. I mean, not that there isn't terrible stuff going down out there. This is a terribly violent and difficult world. And we're not practicing in order to be bodhisattva idiots who do not know that you can get hurt or be taken advantage of, who don’t need to be careful and wise about where they lay their backpack down, who do not have to exercise care in who we choose to have as our intimate friend and partner along the way and all of that.
But this is another matter that we are talking about and the more we practice this matter, the more the discernment can be made so that we can act fiercely, or strongly, or lovingly, with confidence. What we see is true and we take action in service, in building a dream. As they say, "We will build Jerusalem in this green and verdant land."

But there is another way in which the life of all worlds is in and around and trying to find its way through us, in this frozenness, in this plastic or congealed quality that we have, and it is grace, and it is our redemption, and it is what will bring tears to our eyes.

And it is what will enable us to see, to experience, a timeless realm, a realm of immense intertwingling as David said, as Rosemary said, or whoever – an intertwingling of relationship, of mutual support, allowing us to glimpse a meaning that is so true. Not true as compared to false, but true because there isn't anything else.

And it allows us to at least provisionally or temporarily solve the question of where come from. It allows us to solve in the very marrow of each self questions of where we come from, what is going on here, and where we’re going.

It gives meaning, a truth we say, which is “Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate,” which is true not false. True, as opposed to the horns of the dilemma, tangling with each other. And true because there is nothing else.

And when there is nothing else, in that moment you live an eternal life. Where we say eternal life, not as opposed to death, but, as we say in Buddhism so dryly "Oh, it's just impermanence, isn't it?" But that impermanence is not like, "Oh, it's impermanent. It'll all be over so, you know, life sucks and then you die. Let's just pack it up.”

It's not that kind of defensiveness against how deeply we care and love and feel. It's something else entirely. This presence.

We have moments where time stops, and we are in a relationship that has an inside that has no outside, and an outside that has no inside. This is a place of Meaning with a capital M – or at least a place with the aroma of something so precious and valuable that you would die for it.

It's very important to see what you would die for. We will die anyway, but to see what you would happily die for, that is a fantastic thing. Not that we can hold it all the time. But to glimpse that allows us to be steadfast for dying in the zendo. Because we see that the more we let go the more that we give up, the more that we dare to trust life in the form of the Dharma, reality, the freer we will be, the more loving we will be.

And it's pure grace. We didn't do anything to deserve this. How could you? How could you? You know, you're just hopeless. You're so hopeless, and just so determined to be small-minded and uptight and judgmental and defended. I say you, I mean me, we. We are given grace. Grace happens.

On our altar on the mountain we have an Amitabha Buddha that was sent to us from Korea by Soen Sa Nim, my root teacher, guru, whatever. He was much more, but we’ll
leave that aside for now. Anyway, he sent us this beautiful wooden, gold Buddha. Quite a large guy. Koreans in the chanting halls, they like large, big, bright colors and things larger than life. I used to be so embarrassed by it all, for so many years. I mean, everything... it was just one embarrassment on top of another.

Like, "Oh, God, no! Now we've got to have pink cushions and green cushions and yellow cushions. OK, all right, all right, I'll do it!" I feel like Joe Pesci, or something, "All right, all right!"

And then the plastic flowers on the altar, I thought, "Oh, God, I can't take it any longer."

Then the gray pants – big boaty bloomers! The most unattractive, unstylish pants you could ever, ever imagine. We would dress up in those. It was almost like the practice was one body cringe after another. There was a sense of, "Gee, if you just do more of it, if you just outrage yourself and be so untruthful to what your core principles are, you're going to be enlightened!"

Just do more! Right? Actually, there is a certain beauty here. Because, of course, the place of embarrassment, on a deeper level is about how we must choose things that are true and resonant for us in our life and honor ourselves.

And still, we will not, of course, avoid the emotional imperative of the body cringe and the contraction and the vulnerability when someone says, "You're just an idiot, you know that?"

We can actually bear the need behind what's being said, and see it as an offering rather than something we kill the person for and then go back to our houses to think about it for the next 40 years.

"Call me an idiot, huh? You know, I remember that guy calling me an idiot 40 years ago, I'm still thinking about it. How the hell could he do that? What a jerk he is!"

Anyway, we got this gold Buddha, which was a gift, actually, a beautiful gift. We have it on the altar, and it has the mudra of fearlessness, which is quite lovely.

Just as a note, about this Amitabha Pure Land Buddha – which initially was kind of an embarrassment, because I thought we'd get one with a nice stone or antique patina – I really quite love it now.

A couple of things occurred to me just reflecting on this Buddha on the altar. One is that they say, in the Pure Land Buddhism approach to reality, that you're hopeless. There's just no way. Everything that you do in your spiritual practice is just a projection, a kind of spiritual materialism, and a projection of your idea of the way things should be, an expression of your ego's fixation with itself.

So if you're a person that struggles all the time, and is all righteous about really trying hard all the time, then your whole practice is about trying hard all the time and struggling doing that. You know, it ain't going to work, and you've got to drop it. And if you drop it
completely, then they talk about it in service of some other power, then grace will appear. There's some great wonderful truth to this.

And … maybe this is a way out of the talk, I always get into these talks, and then I don't know how to get out of them, I sort of embarrass myself and say, "All right, okay, bye!" … in Pure Land Buddhism there's a practice that's called "Thirty Thousand Days."

The idea is we have 30,000 days to live, more or less. Of course it's a metaphor. Maybe you'll live 100,000 days, or probably not 100,000 – but maybe 40,000 or 50,000, or maybe 20,000 or 10,000. But, you know, the sort of general gist of it is everyone's going to be dead shortly and you get 30,000 days.

So they say it's helpful to realize that you have 30,000 days. You might do it on this retreat if you want a little amusement, or Dharma candy on one of your breaks. You figure how old you are, and you see how many days you have left.

You have 30,000 days to live, and you have how many days left? You can figure it out — 365 times 65 is, whatever.

That's a wonderful practice as we go through our pilgrimage. What is the meaning of your pilgrimage?