

Dharmette: Power and Worthiness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 6, 1016

In Japan at the Zen monasteries, I was periodically encouraged, instructed or reprimanded – depending on how you understand it – to do things with something they call *Zen o chikara* – usually said with strength. *Zen o chikara* means to do things with Zen power! If I was assigned to sweep the courtyard, I would go out with one arm, tap at the dust and take my time. But no! I was supposed to do it with Zen power: not to do the activity, but to be the activity, and to really give myself over to it – to do it with gusto and enthusiasm, like it really mattered. It helped that the monks exemplifying the model for what well-engaged Zen power should look like were mostly still in their twenties.

Years later at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, I experienced another wonderful example of *Zen o chikara*. They had a tea teacher, an old lady, Okamura-sensei, well into her nineties, if not older. She was more than old – she was ancient. She was to perform a tea ceremony in the meditation hall. And back then, the meditation hall was an old barn with wooden floors and rafters, maybe still with hay. For lighting we had kerosene lamps at the altar where she was going to perform her tea ceremony. And I was the *doan*, the person who was to ring the bells, so I ended up sitting next to the altar in front of her, with everyone else seated further away. I was facing her; it was like a ‘me and her,’ and I got to watch her perform the tea ceremony. It felt like some timeless, ancient, primordial event. I felt transported back in time to ancient Japan or ancient China. This wise elder was a great teacher, a very strong woman – psychologically strong. I don’t think she had a lot of physical strength, but there was power. Whatever *Zen o chikara* power is, she had it! I got this transmission from her – she was fully there, just doing this one thing – giving herself fully to performing the tea ceremony. There’s something to that – giving yourself, being fully engaged. I wouldn’t say she was enthusiastic in the conventional way, yet she was the tea making, she wasn’t doing the tea making. Watching her and being there, I entered into a zone of timeless time.

The idea of power or strength is all related to the tremendous value that Buddhism understands that each of you has. This whole Buddhist enterprise of practicing mindfulness, concentration, compassion, and the path of freedom is done with a tremendous sense of the importance of who you are as a person. You are a worthy and valued person.

One of my favorite stories from the Buddha is the simile he gave about a woodsman, a person who goes into the woods and finds there the traces of an ancient path that has become overgrown, as in the Yucatan where old pyramids are found that no-one has seen for years. The woodsman follows the overgrown path until he comes to this big city, an ancient capital that has long been forgotten. He then goes back to the monarchs of the realm, to tell of the path that led him to this ancient capital. The Queen and the King go with the workers to clear the road and re-populate the ancient capital.

In the same way, the Buddha says he found this ancient path, the Eightfold Path. And if you walk this path, you can clear away the debris and overgrowth so you too can inhabit something that is waiting for you: your palace, your capital. In the simile, the Buddha is the woodsman who finds the ancient trail, and returns to tell of a trail that almost disappeared but that can be cleared. And the monarchs, the Queen and the King, are you. The idea that we are represented by the monarchs in the story points to the great value that we have as human beings.

Part of Buddhist practice is you, your presence, your showing up, your being here. You can show up with dignity, with value, with a sense of unapologetic presence. You don’t have to prove yourself. You don’t have to assert yourself or identify or be something for anyone, because you are more valuable than needing to become or to prove something. You can just be.

To sit or stand here and be upright with a certain strength, dignity, value, power, confidence and authority, as if you count. You don’t have to belittle yourself, or see yourself as less than, or feel that somehow you’re a failure – you can just be. I think that this is the ethos, the background and the context for Buddhist practice. It is with that context that I hope the path of mindfulness, freedom and liberation is one that you don’t feel diminished by, but rather enhanced by it – to feel that your freedom comes with a greater sense of confidence, value and willingness to be here in a full, embodied way.