Don’t Think Good Don’t Think Evil – Zen Practice in the Messiness of Groups

Before reading the koan case I’ll use in today’s talk, I’d like to provide background first about why I’ve chosen this case for today, and then the back story of the case itself.

This is the third talk in a series on Zen practice in relationship – applying our practice when with others, not sitting quietly on our own cushions. In the first, I emphasized the inescapable interconnection that raises question about the very framing – in relationship or one? In the second I explored aspects of the form of our personal practice that are available when with others. Today, I want to take our Zen practice and wade into the special case of relationship in and with groups.

In the global, it can be hard to avoid our own vehement disagreement with others anytime we receive the day’s news. What is the issue that evokes your passionate response about the behavior of those with whom you disagree? Is it yet another mass shooting and the resultant polarized debate about gun control? The droughts, floods, extinctions and calls for regulation related to climate control? Abortions, and shooting of doctors performing abortions? Marriage of same-sex couples? Income inequality, tax laws, insurance, and healthcare? War and our responses to the behaviors of unbalanced or power-hungry world leaders? Each of these is now the source of staggering suffering, and thus carries enormous weight as we consider our choices of response, and the choices of response of those with whom we disagree. It is easy to respond with indignation, disbelief at the positions of others, repugnance and resentment. It is easy to separate self (us), and other (them).

The challenge is not just global, and may be even more difficult personally as well. Our families can break into us-and-them camps when decisions of ending life support arise. And within our own Three Treasures community, related to decisions we make about the future of the group.

With that context, I want to say a few words about case 23 from the Wu-men Kuan, Hui-neng:; “Neither good nor evil.” I’ve talked about the story before, as has Jack, and I know many of you are familiar with it from your own work as well, so I’ll keep the introductory remarks brief.

As the story goes, Hui-neng was a poor, uneducated lay person from the south of China who had been staying for a short while at the monastery of Hung-jen (the 5th in succession after Bodhidharma). As it happened, Hung-jen decided he was ready to choose a successor and step down; he asked anyone interested to write a poem on the monastery wall. The poem of the head monk, Ming was this:

The body is the Bodhi Tree;
the mind is like a clear mirror;
moment by moment, wipe the mirror carefully;
let there be no dust upon it.
Hui-neng asked someone to read the poem to him and dictated this one:

   Bodhi really has no tree;  
   the mirror too has no stand;  
   from the beginning there’s nothing at all;  
   where can any dust alight?

When seeing the poem dictated by the illiterate Hui-neng, the old teacher called for him in private. After talking, the old teacher gave his robe and bowl to Hui-neng as a symbol of the transmission, but also advised that he flee from the jealousy of the monks. Taking it even further, Hung-jen himself rowed Hui-neng across the river to help him on his way. This was wise as the assembly of monks gave chase. The head monk Ming was strong of body and will and left the others behind. From this point, I will read the text of the koan itself.

   The Sixth Ancestor was pursued by Ming the head monk as far as Ta-Yu Peak. The teacher, seeing Ming coming, laid the robe and bowl on a rock and said, “This robe represents the Dharma. There should be no fighting over it. You may take it back with you.”

   Ming tried to lift it up, but it was immovable as a mountain. Shivering and trembling, he said, “I came for the Dharma, not for the robe. I beg you, Lay brother, please open the Way for me.”

   The teacher said, “Don’t think good; don’t think evil. At this very moment, what is the original face of Ming, the head monk?”

   In that instant Ming had great satori. Sweat ran from his entire body. In tears he made his bows saying, “Beside these secret words and secret meanings, is there anything of further significance?”

   The teacher said, “What I have just conveyed is not secret. If you reflect on your own face, whatever is secret will be right there with you.”

   Ming said, “Though I practiced at Huang-mei with the assembly, I could not truly realize my original face. Now, thanks to your pointed instruction, I am like someone who drinks water and knows personally whether it is cold or warm. Lay brother, you are now my teacher.”

   The teacher said, “If you can say that, then let us both call Huang-mei our teacher. Maintain your realization carefully.”

   (Robert Aitken, The Gateless Barrier, 1990, p.147)

In previous talks I savored this koan for the rich perspectives of Hui-neng, and Ming. The story came to mind today for the reflection it offers about the perspective of the community. I thought of several koans that included the community as a background to the main point. Buddha twirled a flower, Mahakasypa smiled – and the many others did
not. Nan-ch’uan asks for someone to speak to save the cat. No one does until Chao-chou returned. In the story of Hui-neng the community has an active role, and it isn’t a flattering one. Reading it, including the description of their jealousy and knowing that Hui-neng is the 6th patriarch, we also know that the community is on the losing side of history. It is natural to be dismissive of their participation in the story. I will ask that we together step back from that conclusion and instead join the assembly ourselves. Doing so, we now both join in the koan, and bring it to life as we will experience it today and tomorrow in our own lives.

Bear with me while I indulge in making up a scene for the assembly back then that might be closer to the difficulty in discernment that we encounter today. Perhaps the community then had been aware of the decline of old man Hung-jen, forgetting things, making mistakes, and less aware of the every-day activities of the monastery. Perhaps also the community had been grateful for the steady guidance and competence of the head monk in maintaining and inspiring practice and practical function. Further, perhaps they didn’t know Hui-neng, except for his odd, illiterate, south-China behaviors they didn’t understand – washing irregularly, or not able to even effectively follow directions in the kitchen. Individuals in the community would then likely have a lot of reasonable fears and questions, which might be like these:

“Even if he wrote a lovely poem, how can we trust turning our lives and futures over to this character? Will he be able to interact with the community to assure the donations we need to survive? Is the old man really losing it, out of touch, blind to the needs of the monastery, and unable to understand the choice he’s making? One poem can’t possibly be enough to make the important decision the old man just made. We clearly know Ming better than the old man does. I love this practice and monastery – I owe Huang-mei my very life. In gratitude and reverence, I must respond to preserve the Dharma assets for others as well as myself.”

If something like this was the experience and understanding of you or me, we might well give chase to return the bowl and robes. I might well do so to correct the injustice of the choice with respect to Ming, and to alleviate the suffering that will arise by the squandering of the Dharma assets of the monastery. Just as one might feel compelled to join an anti-abortion movement to alleviate the suffering of unborn children and uphold the principle (justice) of not-killing. Just as one might feel compelled to join a movement to support the right to choose abortion to alleviate the suffering of women who might otherwise get illegal abortions, unwanted children, and the principle (justice) of choice over one’s own body and belief. Just as one might speak passionately for each side of any choice that is as important to others as it is to you, yet others’ approaches are an anathema to you.

In this moment, your way, your understanding, may be right, or it may be mistaken. Yet you cannot escape the call for an appropriate response – any response. What does practice offer in these moments of the deepest disagreements about issues of grave importance?
The writer, George Bernard Shaw once said, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

I could stop there and open the question for discussion, throwing to each of you right now the opportunity for discernment, how does your practice bridge deep and real disagreement? Stopping now would be a choice of mine as to my appropriate response. If I did so, my choice would be to not speak up and say more. That too is a fundamental component in the choice of appropriate response – I may be mistaken and I can never be certain as to my understanding of the world, nor can I be certain of the outcome of my acts. Nevertheless, in this moment I will speak.

Returning to the koan in the moment of any vehement or modest disagreement, Hui-neng is speaking to you. “Don’t think good; don’t think evil.” At this very moment, don’t think parent or child, spouse or sibling, employer or employee, assertive or accommodating – any role to which you identify yourself. What is your original face?

It is as if we paint our delusions on a scrim hung between us and the world. On it we paint our roles and the ways we wish we were seen, in hope that others will see us that way. On it we paint images of the world as we wish to see it. At this very moment, what is your original face? Tear down the scrim or not. The world of guns is such. The world of politics is such – as it is. You are such – as you are. Returning to the silence, without confusion of the concepts we have of self and other, now what is your face?

Basho wrote these three poems:

If seen by day,
A firefly
Is just a red-necked bug

The black crow I always despised,
And yet against the snowy dawn…

In the moonlight
There were flowers
But it was just a field of cotton.

Don’t think good, don’t think evil - Don’t think mysterious, dancing light of the firefly, don’t think dull red-necked bug. As it is. Don’t think despised black crow, don’t think stunning contrast against white snow in dawn’s light. Just crow. Don’t think receptive, don’t think assertive, now what is your appropriate response to these circumstances? If either receptive or assertive are painted on the scrim, then we have defined ourselves as if permanent. How about now?

There is another aspect of preconception we bring as well. In the face of suffering and injustice it can seem impossible to be patient with the pace of change. We can demand the world and others around us meet our expectations in taking steps, and alleviating
what we see as wrong, and in the way we see it can be done right now. Each day that passes multiplies the suffering and injustice. And the pace of change can be over millennia. In Biblical times there was acceptance and expectation that the losing side of war will face utter devastation of men, women, and children. Though holocausts still occur, now there are war crime tribunals, wide condemnation, and horror. Development of patience to the pace of the world is a natural outgrowth of sitting with this one breath, one breath outside of time. Each finding our way to hold the wrenching suffering is inescapable for any open heart. It is also at the core of following the Buddha way, as he did when he left home after seeing old age, sickness and death. The more deeply piercing we feel the knife of suffering when considering an issue before our groups big and small, the easier it can be to drift from righteous passion to self-righteousness without respectfulness.

Carl Jung said, “Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible.”

We all want belonging, love, and respect, and it’s seductive to reach for it by convincing others to agree with us. All with an open heart want to alleviate suffering, and it is seductive to reach for relief by convincing others to support our solution.

I don’t know a better response than sinking into the silence of our practice, and letting preconceptions fall away. Here we can find that however painful the pace of change, there is nothing to say that it is supposed to be, or could be, otherwise. Here, on a good day, we can be respectful and disagree, whether we are in the minority or the majority.

In the koan, the group includes the old teacher Hung-jen, head monk Ming, the illiterate barbarian from the south Hui-neng, and the rest of the unnamed assembly. The koan begins before the first written line, in silence. Hung-jen is first to respond from the silence – to his age, his own perception of decline, we don’t know. But he acts, likely recognizing the coming change to his status, and apparently recognizing the drama that will unfold in the group. To act he must be ready to lose what is dear to him, belonging, respect, perhaps love and affection, the integrity of the monastery in his care, all are at risk. But to act or not act, change will occur as reflected in whatever motivated him to retire in the first place.

In the Five Remembrances, we chant four lines about the inevitability of loss of all that is dear to us. In the fifth line we chant, “My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand. I love this chant, though I confess for my own understanding of it I would adapt, that is rewrite, the last line. Others have told me this is a pretty cheeky thing to do to a 2500-year-old chant, but I’ll do so for at least for the purposes of this talk anyway. Instead I offer this 5th line: “This action is my only true belonging. I cannot escape the consequences of this action. This action is the ground upon which I stand.” I could shorten it as well to “This action is,” and leave it there. Or even further shorten it to
“Action!” This act is the only true belonging – leaves no room for a scrim. For Hung Jen it leaves nothing but Retiring! Write poems!

Hung-jen acted, and doing so risked being wrong. Perhaps he accepted that he might be a great Zen teacher, but a lousy manager. He chose to require the public nature of his means of selection while aware of the jealousies in the group. Once the poems were offered he knew what would arise if he didn’t authorize Ming to teach, and the best response he could come up with for Hui-neng was to help him run away. Don’t think good. Don’t think evil. I row Hui-neng across the river.

If no act is taken, whether that is remaining silent, or speaking, nothing happens, the monastery lacks creative opportunity and is dead, not engaged in what is true. All koans call for a response that risks all – call for action that is no action, like sleeping when tired.

As an example, this is case 48 of the Book of Equanimity two aspects of action are presented. (Cleary, p. 201):

Vimalakirti asked Manjusri, “What is the Bodhisattva’s method of entering nonduality?”

Manjusri said, “According to my mind, in all things, no speech, no explanation, no direction and no representation, leaving behind all questions and answers – this is the method of entering nonduality.”

Then Manjusri asked Vimalakirti, “We have each spoken. Now you should say, good man, what is a Bodhisattva’s method of entry into nonduality?”

Vimalakirti was silent.

In today’s koan, Ming is receptive to the question about offering his name and writing a poem. Doing so he risks all. This action—write poem. Ready to be denigrated. And he was denigrated by Hung-jen’s public refusal to offer the transmission that he thought was warranted.

Hui-neng was receptive to the question, asking what was going on, offering his own poem and ready to be pilloried. He too was denigrated by the rest of the assembly.

The assembly was receptive to the question raised by Hung-jen, only two were drawn to offer poems. No action that is action. The assembly was receptive to Hung-jen reporting he had already offered the robes and bowls to Hui-neng. The assembly acted – restore the world we know, retrieve the robe and bowl!

It is worth noting that much of the fuel for this koan was provided by the response of all to the robe and bowl, symbols of transmission. In the imagery I’ve been using today – the robe and bowl was an image painted on the scrim. There was a robe and bowl that could be confounded with the experience of the Buddha accessible to us all. Recently
the confederate flag on the South Carolina state house was a symbol that divided and likely still divides Americans today. To some it means racism. To others a culture and tradition. Each may perceive the other perspective as disrespectful and dismissive and thus deeply offensive. In families sometimes small things take on symbolic value – a dish left in the sink can be taken as a symbol of disrespect by one and meaningless to another. In our Zen practice we are consciously cautious even of the use of words as symbols for the thing named, blinding us to the thing itself. As in the chant, “If we call it mind or Buddha it becomes like a visionary flower in the air.” And yet questions of symbols have arisen in our group as well. I recall discussion of our use of the keisaku that held intensely different meanings for different members, leading to discord. Here, our recognition of the thing itself can be particularly helpful to our participation in groups. It is directly relevant that Hui-neng chose to let the tradition of robe and bowl as symbols of transmission die with him.

Once Ming caught up with Hui-neng, the reception and response unfolded with each action. Ming was open to his own mess of thoughts and feelings as he tried to lift the robe and bowl – and his inability to do so. Perhaps there was an anguished cry not written into our version between the lifting and turning to ask Hui-neng for teaching. Perhaps a minute or a day went by. He abandoned the image of teacher he painted of himself on the scrim that he offered the world, and accepted this action that is no action – “help me, teach me!” In extinguishing all else in this action he was available to the experience at the heart of our practice. “Don’t think good. Don’t think evil.” At this moment of jealousy, disappointment in myself, humiliation before my peers all written in my expression, what is my original face? Leaving nothing out. Sometimes we express it as, “All things are Buddha.” Or, “Each particle of matter, each moment, is no other than the Tathagata’s inexpressible radiance” (from Torei Zenji’s Bodhisattva’s Vow). Without acting, without risking all, Ming would not have received the teaching that freed him.

This is the mess of community – in this case in the form of jealousy and aggression. Greed, anger, and ignorance rise endlessly; we repeatedly vow to abandon them. Each of these words, “greed,” “anger,” and “ignorance,” are symbols, representing a category of delusion. In other translations of Great Vows for All the three words are represented by one word – “Delusions rise endlessly.” It may not be important to determine the category of the acts represented by the actors of today’s koan, or of our own at home, work, or elsewhere, but it is helpful to recognize that we endlessly paint images each on our own scrim, separating us from seeing simply what is, moment by moment. This rising endlessly implies that we cannot wait for our own delusion to stop before acting. If we expect that we can ourselves act always without the distortion of our own delusions, then that is an image of ourselves we have painted on the scrim. If we expect that others around us can or should act without delusion, then that is another image on the scrim.
Mahatma Gandhi said, “Friendship that insists upon agreement on all matters is not worth the name. Friendship to be real must ever sustain the weight of honest differences, however sharp they be.”

The mild or impassioned tension that arises from a difference among us is the sound of the clapper calling us. Attention! When in our impassioned responses we range from righteous determination to address suffering and injustice, and to self-righteous indignation leading to separation of self and other, the clapper calls us. Attention! Whether we see or not see, all beings are Buddha. What we can do is speak and listen; there is no conflict between them when acting in accord. We can present as a firefly or a red necked bug without distinction – received as either firefly or dull bug. What is, can include feeling encouraged when received as a Firefly, and saddened when received as the Dull Bug. Likewise we can receive another as Firefly or Dull bug in any moment, with the resultant connection or tension likely to arise.

In the story of the koan, passions were extreme, actions taken, conflict undeniable, and respectfulness lost. Yet, all is well. The mess along the way would have been no one’s ideal, yet the opportunity arose again and again for open eyes, for respectfulness at each moment.

There is no messier discord than that of the Mideast, repeatedly leading to suffering, death, accusations, and seemingly irreconcilable differences. Yet in 1978 President Carter helped Israeli President Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to find common ground and step toward peace. Begin was a member of a militant group of fighters even before there was a nation of Israel. Sadat was an army officer who engaged Israel in war in 1967, and when he was president in 1973 as well. The animosity between Begin and Sadat was profound, and they found a vision for peace, free from the fixed images of each other and each nation. Anwar Sadat was assassinated by officers of his own army in 1981 because of his participation in the peace accord. In 1993 Israeli Defense Minister and then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was similarly involved in the Oslo Peace Accord with Yasser Arafat. In 1995 Rabin was assassinated by a radical Orthodox Jew because of Rabin’s involvement in the accord. It is with sadness even now that I reflect on each being assassinated by those in the nations to which they were dedicated, demonstrating the differences within us are at least as profound as those among us. Designations of “us” and “them” become meaningless in a concrete way, even as they melt when concepts of self and other fall away. There is space for weeping and anger within that which is. Openness to that which is inspires response. Suffering inspires passion. And all is well.

It seems to me that during meetings of our group, members more often look for what is true in what is said by others – a reflection of our members’ ability to bring respectful openness – I bow in admiration of this. Even so, bowing and accepting isn’t enough. Taking a stand isn’t enough. There is no safe stance or rule in discerning an appropriate response. Even talent in a direction of response does not free us from the call of another direction. We can err in speaking, and we can err when not speaking. In saying
this I recall the board of directors of my old Sangha in New York that appeared to
tolerate the sexual misconduct of a teacher for a time. I also think of meeting here in the
past in which I sought common ground when I now see the discerning response would
have been to object to mean-spirited comments. Speaking up too can be no-action.

All beings are Buddha; there is no other than the Tathagata’s inexpressible radiance. It
is our practice at every moment to open our eyes and see what is. It is our nature to
see, and to not see. In bringing Zen practice to our participation as members of an
assembly, we bring our intention to see those with whom we are in disagreement as
thus, inexpressibly radiant. Disagreement can be consistent with the utter
respectfulness of Ming’s recognition of his own face as radiant, while filthy, sweaty, and
contorted. Disagreement can carry the respectfulness of Gandhi having tea with his
English prison warden, Nelson Mandela saying “Let’s surprise them with our
generosity”, Sadat and Begin at Camp David, Arafat and Rabin in Oslo, and me and you
when we engage with attention to that which is.

It is with this respectfulness that Sangha relations become complete.