

Roshi and his Teachers

Roshi and His Teachers, Dharma Transmission, and the Rochester Zen Center Lineage

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The teisho today will be on lineage and Dharma transmission. It's one I've wanted to give for a long time. Recently I became aware that there are still people who don't know about the break between Roshi Kapleau and Yasutani-roshi, or who have misunderstandings and are unclear about the implications of this break, so let me now address this important matter.

How are we to understand this matter of Dharma transmission and lineage? First of all, let us get all the facts – as much as I am aware of them – and make clear what our own situation is here at the Rochester Zen Center. I'd like to read from *Zen: Merging of East and West* because this is where Roshi makes clear his own break with Yasutani-roshi. This book was originally published in 1979 under the title *Zen: Dawn in the West*. In the Afterword, which is a personal note by Roshi, he describes the conflicts that developed between himself and his teacher, Yasutani-roshi, over some aspects of teaching, particularly about adapting Zen to America. Roshi focuses on Yasutani-roshi's insistence that the Heart Sutra not be translated into English here in the United States, but that it be chanted in Japanese. This was a point that Roshi found especially problematic, he writes, because the Prajna Paramita has been translated into all the languages of the various Buddhist countries. Let me read the final paragraph of this Afterword:

Because of my teacher's opposition to this Westernizing of Zen, and for other reasons, it became increasingly difficult for me to continue as his disciple, and I asked leave to withdraw. It was a painful step, for the relation between a master and his disciple is an intimate one, closer in some respects than the parent-child relationship. But the break was inevitable. Whatever pain I may have caused my master Yasutani-roshi I deeply regret. I owe him and my other masters a debt of gratitude that is immeasurable. Indeed, the only way such an obligation can be requited is for me to faithfully pass on to others the essence of the teaching I was privileged to receive. I can only hope that during the past thirteen years I have in some measure accomplished this and thus begun to repay their benevolence. (p. 270)

I don't feel that it is particularly necessary or even useful for me to go into Roshi's side of this conflict with Yasutani-roshi. Only Philip Kapleau and Hakuun Yasutani know the full facts about what happened between them. And even if the two of them were still alive and sat down together today, it's unlikely that they would remember what happened in the same way. We all know how memory can be distorted, especially with regard to an emotional situation. But in any kind of conflict that is so painful, you can be sure there is responsibility on both sides.

This break happened before Roshi had received full, formal Dharma transmission from Yasutani-roshi. There were koan collections offered by Yasutani-roshi that Roshi did not work on, and these he never offered himself. [These koans are now offered at our Center. See addendum.] It is important to acknowledge that Roshi has never claimed to have received full and formal Dharma transmission, or *inka*. What he did say was that he received from Yasutani-roshi permission to teach. This happened after Roshi had moved back to the United States. I have never felt compelled to get all of the details. Roshi has shown me a certificate to teach that was given to him by Yasutani-roshi. He has also shown me the robe and bowl he received, the traditional symbolic objects given a student who is sanctioned by his teacher to teach.

When I first heard, in the 1970's, that Roshi had not completed the full course of training offered by Yasutani-roshi, the implications were a bit sobering. It meant that Roshi and the Center are not on any lineage papers in Japan, in the Soto or Rinzai or any Zen headquarters. I was never afflicted by any serious doubts about Roshi, but people in this country, and in Japan and elsewhere, could, if they wanted to, point to this incomplete Dharma transmission to dismiss the authenticity of the teaching here. And in fact that has happened; it has been heard from various quarters ever since Roshi began teaching. And there will always be people who will see Rochester Zen as incomplete because of our broken lineage. The awareness of this forced me to recognize that Roshi's qualities as a teacher for me - and "for me" is all anyone can rely on regarding their teacher - outweighed the importance of credentialed Dharma-transmission. As the years went on and I encountered other teachers in this country and Japan, as I read more, and as my practice deepened, this break between Roshi and Yasutani-roshi receded even further in importance for me, and I gained a much broader perspective that allowed me to accept the fact that our lineage is flawed in this way. What I would like to do today is share with everyone this broader perspective.

First of all, let's look at Dharma transmission, the ideal. Very briefly, the purpose of the Zen system of Dharma transmission, traditionally, is to ensure that the mind-seal of enlightenment is passed on from teacher to teacher. And, in fact, the ideal has it that this transmission of mind can be traced all the way back, unbroken, to the Buddha himself. This is the party line in Zen. The key element is the enlightenment experience, and formal Dharma transmission, *inka*, is seen as the method or institutional way of verifying this enlightenment. Now, let's look at Dharma transmission, the reality.

Let's start by going back to the beginning of Zen, which at that time in China was called Ch'an, to show how far from the ideal the reality always has been. The history of Zen is

full of irregularities, breaks, and fabrications in lineage. About ten or twelve years ago Louis Gomez, a Buddhist scholar, gave a talk here and told us that there are all kinds of holes in the Zen lineage. He said that often these holes were patched up posthumously: after the teacher had died, a way was found to "repair" the broken line. Much later it was another eye-opener for me to read the introduction to Philip Yampolsky's *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. In his introduction, "Formation of the Legend," he talks about the great need that the Chinese felt to legitimize Zen by tracing it back to the Buddha. Chinese culture, unlike Indian, was dominated by Confucianism, in which the supreme virtue is filial piety. Chinese Buddhists, then, had to find patriarchal kinship with the Indian masters, whatever it took. Yampolsky writes in his introduction:

Once Ch'an began to be organized into an independent sect, it required a history and a tradition which would provide it with the respectability already possessed by the longer established Buddhist schools. In the manufacture of this history, accuracy was not a consideration; a tradition traceable to the Indian Patriarchs was the objective . . . To this end, they not only perpetuated some of the old legends, but also devised new ones, which were repeated continuously until they were accepted as fact. Indeed, in the eyes of later viewers the two are virtually indistinguishable. These legends were, in most instances, not the invention of any one person, but rather the general property of the society as a whole. Various priests used various legends; some were abandoned, some adopted, but for the most part they were refined and adjusted until a relatively palatable whole emerged. To achieve the aura of legitimacy so urgently needed, histories were compiled, tracing the Ch'an sect back to the historical Buddha, and at the same time stories of the Patriarchs in China were composed, their teachings outlined, their histories written, and their legends collected. Treatises were manufactured to which the names of the Patriarchs, the heroes of Ch'an, were attached, so as to lend such works the dignity and the authority of the Patriarch's name. (p. 4)

Yampolsky spends the next fifty pages of this long introduction presenting in detail the irregularities and fabrications that took place not only in the so-called Indian lineage but in the Chinese lineage itself.

Ch'an then went from China to become Zen in Japan and Son in Korea. Let me read from another introduction, this one by Thomas Cleary in his book *Transmission of Light: Zen in the Art of Enlightenment*. You will hear that this need for purity of lineage, at least formally, was paramount not only in China, but in Japan. In fact, if anything it was stronger in Japan.

During the Song dynasty (960-1278), with the dramatic increase of Confucian agitation against Buddhism and the establishment of a government-controlled public monastery system for Zen, there was more concern about Zen succession. Even then, however, a Zen master typically mentioned his succession only at the ceremony of opening of a teaching hall – and even then, while it may have satisfied Confucian demands for orthodoxy, in the context of uncontaminated Zen it was a symbol of humility and deference to ancient masters – not a mark of assertion and profession. As the Zen proverb says, "Good children don't use their parents' money." (p. xviii)

"Good children don't use their parents' money." This is also a strong American ethos: the self-made person.

Please don't misunderstand. By raising these cases we are not comparing ourselves - either me or Roshi Kapleau or his other heirs, or even Roshi's teachers - to these great masters. The point is that formal Dharma transmission has never been an *absolute*

requirement. Moreover, the Confucian-inspired patching and back-filling of the ancestral line does nothing to diminish its spiritual value, which goes far beyond historical accuracy. This golden chain of masters points to an awe-inspiring enlightenment tradition. It reminds us of our kinship with *all* our awakened predecessors, both women and men, throughout the past 2,500 years. When we chant the ancestral line we breathe life into our Buddha-nature.

Looking at more recent history, there's Nakagawa-roshi, who was Roshi Kapleau's first teacher, briefly, in Japan. He told Roshi that when he was appointed his teacher's successor, he hadn't had even kensho, a first, usually light, experience of awakening. He was so ashamed, he said, to inherit such a position without having opened his mind's eye that, at his next sesshin, he got it. Harada-roshi was the abbot of Hosshin-ji and Roshi's first main teacher. He had started out and received transmission in the Soto school but had been so disappointed at the lack of realization among Soto teachers that he found a Rinzai teacher, Dokutan-roshi, under whom he worked on koans. But since Harada-roshi was formally in the Soto sect, Dokutan-roshi wouldn't give him Dharma transmission. This at least is what Roshi heard from an old Japanese disciple of Harada-roshi. Possibly, as a beginner at that time, Roshi himself had voiced some doubts and concerns about Harada-roshi and his irregular ancestry.

In contemporary Zen, Dharma transmission is less reliable than ever. In one of his books, Sangharakshita points out that ever since Shinran, a Pure Land Buddhist master, began allowing Buddhist priests to marry in Japan, all Japanese priests have technically fallen outside the Buddhist lineage, in that they have been married. In Southeast Asia, Buddhists dispute the lineage of any teacher who is not a celibate monk – which would include almost all ordained Zen teachers in the West and Japan today. In Japan there are twenty-two independent organizations that consider themselves heirs to the Zen lineage. The vast majority of ordained Zen people in Japan, and in this country, are of the Soto school, and the Soto and Rinzai schools have drastically different criteria for Dharma transmission. Regarding Zen in Japan, Griffith Folk writes, in Ken Kraft's book *Zen: Tradition and Transition*:

Today all but a few monks are sons (usually the eldest sons) of temple priests, and they are expected to inherit the positions held by their fathers. (p. 165)

Many scholars agree that the decline of Zen in modern Japan can be traced to allowing monks to marry, because what came from that, in the vast majority of temples, was successorship along family lines. You got married, you had children – hopefully a son because nuns were and are pretty much disregarded – and when you died you handed down your temple to your eldest son. Folk also writes:

Because Dharma transmission is a prerequisite to becoming the head priest of a Soto branch temple, virtually all Soto priests meet this ritual requirement at a relatively early stage in their careers. (p. 173)

And their careers consist, he says, primarily of officiating at funerals and performing regular memorial services. The basic requirement for inheriting a temple in Japan is to

complete a course of six months to three years at a monastery. So in the Soto school, which is what almost all Japanese Zen is, Dharma transmission lacks the criterion of realization that ensures the continuation of an enlightened mind-seal from generation to generation. In the United States, as in Japan, there are centers where Dharma transmission has real fiber, with the expectation that there be insight and realization. Regrettably, even some of these have been tainted by scandal.

If you really familiarize yourself with the lineages of Zen, and Buddhism in general, you'll find that Dharma transmission has been contended among different teachers at every stage of Zen history. And one of the hardest things to accept about the history of Zen is the rivalry among teachers and their lineages; not just rivalry, but maligning and slandering. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in Japan, where even the two most famous masters, Hakuin and Dogen, were fierce in their attacks on other teachers and lineages. In Ken Kraft's collection *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, Philip Yampolsky writes of a sudden change that occurred in Zen master Dogen:

The tone of Dogen's writing changed at this certain point in his life. Where before he had praised lay people Zen he now attacked it. Where he had refrained from sectarian distinctions he now championed the Soto sect and censured Rinzai Zen, claiming that his teacher's lineage was the only true Zen. He attacked in scathing terms a major Song master, Ta-hui [whose teachings are in the book *Swampland Flowers*.] (p. 145)

As an American Zen priest said after spending two years training in Japan, "It seems that no Zen teacher has anything good to say about any other Zen teacher." How could this be? Traditionally the Japanese have secured their relationships to teachers, mentors, superiors – anyone in a position of authority – on the basis of intense loyalty and obedience. As Westerners, few if any of us are able to understand the depth of this fealty, which so easily leads to competition with those who do not share the same personal allegiance. But certainly the bad-mouthing of other teachers and centers is something we don't need to perpetuate.

At this center we have, in the past, done our share of putting down other teachers and centers. In recent years we have been making efforts to pull free of this habit, and I welcome any help. There are times when speaking of a teacher's gross misconduct is called for, to protect others, but otherwise, if I or anyone else disparages other teachers, please point it out.

Sometimes the sniping among teachers comes from differences in koan interpretations, or in the way koans are worked on. If there are deficiencies in a teacher's understanding of koans, that is a serious problem. But the fact is that there have always been disagreements in the way koans are interpreted. There are Soto presentations of koans that are different from the Rinzai ones, and even within one lineage there may be differences. Part of the richness of koans is their evocative ambiguity; they are spare, and subject to interpretation at different levels. Even Hakuin, who is credited with single-handedly restoring the koan system in Japan in the eighteenth century, said at an advanced age that he was still finding new understandings of koans.

What is to become of the system of Dharma transmission in this country? We see that all too often today it is unreliable. Yes, there are awakened teachers and lineage-holders in this country and in Europe, as there are in Japan. But receiving formal Dharma transmission in and of itself is no guarantee at all of genuine insight. There must be realization in a teacher. There has to be understanding, or else we lose the essence of the teaching. Deep enlightenment – the Great Death – may be an unrealistic standard to expect of teachers; probably it has always been the exception. But there must be realization.

How can students know whether a teacher has realization, since we can't rely on the system of Dharma transmission for that? The fact is that new students especially, and even medium-seniority students, rarely are in a position to judge whether a teacher has the enlightened eye. The fact that a teacher's actions don't fit with the student's notions about the way an enlightened teacher should act doesn't mean anything. Still, we cannot accept that someone who shows a pattern of wanton behavior is enlightened in any real sense of the word. We have to keep that as the minimum to expect of a teacher. Falling in love with a student, once, or being seen under the influence of alcohol once or twice, may be excusable. But when we see a *pattern* of these things, we have to ask, "How can such a person have any self-mastery, any true realization?"

The Dalai Lama takes a strong stand on misconduct. Ordinarily, it seems, he is scrupulous about refraining from speaking of the faults of others. But in the matter of persistent, gross misconduct on the part of a teacher, he says, "Publish it in the newspapers." We have the right to expect this of teachers, some purity of conduct. Or at least the absence of the grossest misconduct. Or at the very least the absence of a *pattern* of gross misconduct – can we agree on that? If a teacher has a drinking problem, or a problem with seducing students, it doesn't mean he or she can't teach people something (as long as we're clear that what is being taught is not enlightened behavior). But it certainly does mean that the teacher's realization – if there is any at all – is incomplete.

We need to distinguish between an enlightenment experience and the integration of that experience into one's everyday life. Enlightenment experiences, in and of themselves, amount to little. There can be this tremendous opening, but if that enlightened eye is not confirmed in one's life, what is it? It's just an experience. Taking drugs can also bring ecstatic experiences, but what do you have when you come down? So we have to see the experience confirmed by upright character and set in strong practice. These are the things in which Roshi Kapleau has always distinguished himself.

Let me read from a letter from the head of the zendo at a highly respected training temple in Japan where a number of us over the years have spent time. The person who wrote this letter has been practicing Zen for over twenty-five years, and for much of that time has been translating in dokusan for her teacher. She says of one of Roshi Kapleau's students who was there at the time:

He is delightful to train with and I'm consistently impressed at the spirit and the meticulousness with which all of Kapleau-roshi's long-term students have been imbued. A true tribute to his (Kapleau-roshi's) essence is the similar fragrance, joy, and humility with

which all of you approach your practice, and those who guide you and train with you. This is called "the wind of the house" of the master in Japanese. And that an American roshi's students can so similarly express a particular wind of the house says something very positive to me about Kapleau-roshi's teaching quality. I say this with confidence from dealing with you all in dokusan, and sitting, and in work practice as friends. Sincerely and deeply thankful for Kapleau-roshi's integrity.

As Roshi writes in *Zen: Merging of East and West*, his break with Yasutani-roshi was painful for him and not something that he is at all proud of. About ten or twelve years ago, author Lex Hixon [who died in 1995 – eds.] was an interviewer at a radio station in New York. He asked to interview Roshi and came to the Center. At one point in the interview Hixon suddenly asked, "What would you do if Yasutani-roshi were to walk into this room right now?" Without a moment's hesitation Roshi said, "I would put my hands palm-to-palm and beg his forgiveness for being such an unworthy disciple." Now, if that response strikes you as evidence against Roshi, then you're missing something very important.

Certainly we can't ignore the staying power of Roshi Kapleau's books. *The Three Pillars of Zen* is a modern classic. Although a lot of the material comes from Yasutani-roshi and others, Roshi sweated over that book in Japan for five years. He put everything into that book, and it shows. Part of his character, and one of his many assets, is his great commitment to the Dharma – and the faith that underlies that commitment. These qualities are manifested in his books, in his articles, and in his general recognition and stature as an authentic teacher in the Zen tradition.

Besides the importance that realization be reflected in conduct and qualities of character such as integrity, self-discipline, and honesty, for a teacher there is the obvious requirement of merit. Is the person an effective teacher? Can he or she help others, inspire others to continue on this path? Because ultimately it is the path – the practice – that we must look to. This matter of merit is our American way: America was founded on the freedom to prove oneself through one's own abilities rather than trying to rest on the name and accomplishments of one's ancestors. And it works both ways. As a people we don't normally judge a person because of his parents' misdeeds, and neither should we see someone's Dharma-heir as diminished by his teacher's wanton behavior. Let us take the measure of the teacher himself or herself, and not base it on his predecessors.

We have to accept the reality that there is no one seal we can rely on with teachers. Someone with perfect credentials on paper can behave in ways that belie the formal transmission. At one center in this country, the teacher urged his disciples, "Just get Dharma transmission; once you get that, no one will be able to touch you." This worship of formalized legitimacy invites abuses; once a teacher believes that "no one can touch you," he has all but granted himself moral license – with consequences that have proven damaging to Zen and Buddhism in general.

A Zen scholar, Martin Colcutt, states in his chapter in *Zen: Tradition and Transition*:

In the West there are very few teachers who have actual inka certificates. There are a number, however, who have practiced Zen for many years, attained spiritual insight, and have been encouraged by their teachers to spread the Dharma and help others in Zen practice. Thus there may be qualified teachers without formal inka, and there may be inka holders who are less capable as teachers. (p. 207)

In looking for criteria of legitimacy in American Zen, like it or not we find ourselves in a state of transition – even chaos. But then, what else can we expect in the United States of America than a diversity of criteria, a tumult of different standards? We are a melting pot, and we are trying to assimilate and absorb the criteria for authenticity of different countries, each with different styles of Buddhism and different lineages.

There is little doubt in my mind – and I bet Roshi would agree – that had he stayed another five or ten years with Yasutani-roshi, and had he done the other koans, his understanding of the Dharma would have been deeper at that time, and when he became a teacher he would have felt more complete in his understanding. What happened is regrettable, and I would never suggest that we could dispense with Dharma transmission. Without that criterion, or at least some kind of clear authorization to teach, we would have more problems than we do already. But for me, Roshi's other qualifications were enough: his thirteen years' training in Japan, his moral rigor, his devotion to his own daily sitting, and his teaching skills. And of course his power to inspire me in my own practice. On top of all this, Roshi changed drastically in the thirty years after he broke with Yasutani-roshi and began teaching. You can't avoid changing when you're working with students all the time; you're constantly facing yourself, in dokusan and outside it.

There is in the profession of psychology the concept of a "good enough" therapist. This notion may be useful also in connection with spiritual teachers. The fact is that very often, in finding a teacher, there are considerations of convenience and geographical proximity involved. Not for a minute do I believe that just because a student is with me, I am the only teacher for him or her. But certainly we can say that, at any given time, a teacher is just the one that each of his students needs at that time.

A teacher may have a large following, yet for the student there is no safety in numbers. We know that leaders of cults can attract students by the thousands, but this is not necessarily a reflection of a teacher's stature or abilities. In the end we can go back to the Buddha's basic teaching of dependent co-arising: all teacher-student relationships are mutually conditioning. They are *relational*, and so it's a mistake to focus exclusively on the teacher. In Zen, and in other spiritual traditions, the depth of enlightenment of a teacher is seen as less important than the chemistry between the teacher and the student. You can have a more deeply enlightened teacher, but if that teacher doesn't relate to you very effectively, you're not going to develop yourself as much as you would under a less enlightened teacher with whom you have a stronger rapport or affinity.

So let us come back to ourselves. We need teachers to help us, but ultimately this is an introspective practice. We need to look into our own minds; we need to stand on our own two feet, rely on our deepest intuitions of teachers, and find who and what is best for us at a given time.

Addendum:

In 2006 I completed a course of additional koan training on the following collections not done by Roshi Kapleau: the Shoyoroku (Book of Serenity), the Denkoroku (Transmission of Light), and Tozan's Five Ranks. These I worked through, "knee-to-knee, eyeball-to-eyeball," over the course of two years with one of my Dharma-heirs, Sevan Ross-sensei, who himself had worked through them with Roshi James Ford, a Dharma-heir of Roshi John Tarrant. After I finished this koan work, my other disciple-teachers, one by one, undertook the same "post-graduate" koan training with me. These collections have now been added to the koan curriculum of the Cloud-Water Sangha, comprised of the Rochester Zen Center and the Sanghas of these same disciple-teachers of mine.

I have been offered Dharma transmission in the Soto Zen lineage, but declined it. Since I never worked extensively with any Soto teacher, such certification would, I believe, be a mere formality, and contrary to the spirit of Zen's "mind-to-mind transmission." Roshi Kapleau's seal--and now my twenty years of teaching experience--is more than enough for me.