Unborn Mind: the Teachings of Bankei

Today is Day 4 of this 7-day sesshin here in southern California in June, 2018, and I’d like to continue sharing with you the teachings of Bankei Yotaku, the 17th century Japanese Zen master, who taught famously of what he called The Unborn Mind. This, of course, is another word for our true nature, our Buddha nature, or life essence, or, if you’re Christian or Jewish, God. Other religions have other words for this which cannot be described. Over the centuries, in Christianity at least, that word “God” has largely become frozen into an image.

The source of Bankei’s teachings this morning is a book called—surprise!—The Unborn Mind: Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei. Specifically, I’ll be sharing part of what was recorded during his teishos at Hosshin-ji, which of course is where Roshi Kapleau trained for several years until, suffering from malnutrition, Dai Un Sogaku Harada-roshi suggested he move out of the monastery and continue his training with Dai Un Roshi’s Dharma successor, Yasutani-roshi, since he’d be able to earn enough money teaching English to buy the food his body needed to be healthy. Japan at the time was still desperately trying to recover from the effects of WWII and food was scarce.

Dai Un Roshi had trained extensively at two different periods in his life at two different Rinzai monasteries, Shogen-ji and later, Nanzen-ji which is why koans can be taught in the traditional Rinzai way in the Kapleau Line. Although he had been ordained as a Soto monk and spent time teaching in what became a Soto Sect university, he felt he needed a different training than was then available within the Soto Sect. He found that training in those two Rinzai monasteries.

Jumping into the middle of one of Bankei’s teisho at Hosshin-ji:

Now you’re probably all wondering what this Unborn Buddha Mind is like. Well, while you’re sitting there facing me and trying to catch what it is I’m saying, if the bark of a dog or the cry of a street vendor should find its way in here from somewhere outside the temple walls, thought you’re listening to me each of you would hear it though you had no intention at all to do so, thanks to the workings of the Buddha mind which hears and understands in the Unborn. The Buddha mind, unborn and illuminating all things with perfect clarity, is like a mirror standing clear and spotlessly polished.

A mirror, as you know, reflects anything that’s before it. Whatever is placed before it, the shape never fails to be reflected, though the mirror has no idea or intention of doing so. And when the object is taken away, the mirror doesn’t reflect it any longer though it makes no decision to cease reflecting. That’s just how the Unborn Buddha Mind works. We see and hear all things no matter what they are although you haven’t generated a single thought to see or hear them because of the vital working of the Unborn Mind, each of you receives at birth.

A couple of things about this. First of all, we don’t necessarily receive it at birth. It’s our life essence, that Face Before Our Parents Were Born! That’s the Unborn Mind! That Mind didn’t disappear when our parents died; it’s still here now. And while our basic perceptions are clear and un-skewed, if we’ve added any of the distortion that comes from our ideas about things, in particular our self image, that mirror is not as clear as it can be. Perhaps you’ve
been in a Fun House where there are mirrors that are distorted and so show our bodies in funny and peculiar ways. When we are caught in our conditioning our perceptions are distorted in the same manner. But behind that is that clear Mind that Bankei calls the Unborn Mind. In front of it are the filters that emerge as a result of our conditioning and it is these filters that distort our perceptions.

If you’re trying to take a photograph with a camera with a smudge on the lens, the resulting photograph will have been influenced by that less than clear lens. The photograph will not be as clear as you would like it to be, nor as clear as the camera is capable of producing. We judge and interpret our experiences in life and that judgment and interpretation alter that initial perception in each experience. If we have expectations and assumptions—and we all do—we are going to distort our perceptions just as when you apply a filter to a camera lens it will distort the resulting image. And so we misperceive, miscomprehend, misunderstand situations, people and things—perceived through our senses. This is the cause of an enormous amount of suffering.

This is why it is so vital to do zazen deeply, persisting regardless of how it feels or seems or what we want it to be like: Zazen clarifies everyday mind, bringing to light where we are misperceiving, where we are caught in greed, anger and delusion accumulated over lifetimes. When we can see it clearly enough the impetus to continue distorting reality is very easy to drop. Why engage in something we now can see is quite artificial, without basis in truth? The result is we are less caught in misperception and can see more clearly on a regular basis.

There’s a tremendous amount of hope because this Unborn Buddha Mind is everyone’s basis! We can’t not be it. We CAN open to it. Perhaps this is why practice is so challenging to people: In order to open to that incredible spaciousness, clarity, and true liberation that is offered when we do open to that Unborn Buddha Mind, to that Face Before Our Parents Were Born, to Mu, we have to see where we are caught and unable to perceive it. And that is a place most people are not comfortable with unless they’ve already done a great deal of inner work.

When we’re brand new to Zen practice we’re developing our “sea legs,” learning how to do zazen, do the chanting, work with the teacher in sanzen, etc., and we’re kind of excited to be doing Zen practice; it’s a kind of honeymoon period. But then when what Shunryu Suzuki Roshi termed “mind weeds” start coming up—our zazen begins bringing clarity to our and showing us where we’re preventing ourselves from experiencing that liberation—many people feel their zazen is failing and quit. Or they change their environment: They try a different group, a different teacher, a different practice. Zazen is supposed to open us to peace, harmony, wisdom, and compassion, right? True, but there’s a lot of work ahead of us to be able to do so on a regular basis. When the shit starts hitting the fan we are called upon to turn and face it, delve into it, see it truly for what it is, accept responsibility for it—and the responsibility for changing it in positive ways. And it’s worth all we have to do to get there!

Bankei continues:

I go on explaining things to you like this to make you understand. If you can’t grasp it here today then I don’t suppose you’d understand no matter how many times you came here and listened to me.

I’m not sure I’d agree with that. Sometimes we do have to hear it more than once in order to grasp what is being said. Sometimes we have to be exposed to something many times before it begins to sink in.

But those who do understand about their Unborn Buddha Mind after only this one meeting, these people are living buddhas now and for endless ages.

We are all inherently Buddhas. We all have this Unborn Buddha Mind. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say we all ARE this Unborn Buddha Mind. But because it’s obscured by all the conditioning, all the assumptions, all the ideas, all the history, we fail to perceive it, and in failing to perceive it we also fail to act from it much of the time. This is old news: the Buddha is supposed to have said it at his great Awakening: “Wonder of wonders! All beings are endowed with this great mind of compassion and wisdom that I have opened to. But because the
minds of men and women are turned upside down through delusive thinking they fail to perceive it!” Then he spent the rest of his life teaching people how to perceive it. More than two and a half millennia later, amazingly, we are the beneficiaries of that experience. And here in this zendo and at Mountain Gate and at Turtleback Zendo we are working to perceive that Unborn Buddha Mind and live its truth in everything we do or say or think. During this sesshin we have the incredible opportunity to practice doing it, to work at doing it for seven days and nights with the support of our fellow practitioners, with the support of our teacher. It’s truly an incredible opportunity. Of course it’s not always that easy. But it is truly worth it.

Let me give you an example. Suppose you didn’t know how to get from Edo to Kyoto [Edo being what Tokyo was called back then] and you asked the way from someone who did. You would fix well in your mind all the directions he gave you. If you follow them exactly you wouldn’t have any trouble reaching your destination. Today in the same way, if all of you listen carefully to what I tell you and then arrive at understanding of it, you’re living in the Buddha Mind right then and there, just like that!

On the other hand, if you didn’t follow the directions for Kyoto even after you’d been told them you’d be certain to lose your way and end up in an entirely different place. So you see, you’d better listen carefully to what I say. There’s no telling when I’ll be back here to talk to you, and even if you went and listened to other people I don’t think you’ll find anyone else who will tell you about the Unborn Buddha Mind. Be sure then that you don’t go brewing up a lot of unnecessary thoughts in your heads. Make up your minds that you’re never again going to revolve in the Wheel of Existence. Don’t forget: If you miss the chance to become buddhas in this life you won’t be born into the human realm again and get another chance for millions of ages.

That’s kind of questionable perhaps; we don’t really know. Although there’s a saying in India, I understand, that after a human life a person is reborn as a bird for something like 10,000 lives. Birds’ lives are not usually as long as a human life. Of course it’s very difficult to prove any of this but we’re born a human in this life, and we’ve clearly got an affinity with Buddhist practice. Let’s take advantage of that while we have the chance. Not only are we born a human with a propensity to Zen practice, but we have a place to practice, fellow practitioners to support us in our practice, and teachers to guide us in that practice. This is an incredible gift! And we don’t really know when—or even if—it will come around again. It’s important not to take it for granted.

By all means, then, you want to confirm yourselves in the Unborn Buddha Mind now and keep yourselves free of illusion. When you’ve done that, the men will live undeluded in their men’s Buddha Minds and the women in their women’s Buddha minds. You’ll all be Buddhas, enlightened Buddhas!

Now while we’re on the subject of women’s Buddha minds, I know there are many women who are deeply troubled by the people who say they are cut off from the Buddha Mind just because they’re women.

This has been an ongoing theme in the Theravada tradition, which may have risen from cultural prejudice.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. I’m addressing the women here now, so listen carefully. How could women be any different from men in this? Men are Buddha beings. Women are, too. You needn’t doubt for a moment. Once you’ve got the principle of this Unborn Buddha Mind fixed in your minds you’re Unborn whether you’re a man or a woman. Men and women are not the same in appearance; we all know that. But there’s not a whisker of difference between them when it comes to their Buddha Minds. So don’t be deluded by outward appearances. Here’s something that will prove to you that Buddha
Mind is the same in men and women:

There are a lot of people gathered here. Now suppose that outside the temple walls someone started to beat on a drum or strike a bell. When you heard these sounds would the women here mistake the drumbeat for the bell, or the bell for the drumbeat? No. As far as hearing those sounds is concerned there is no difference between the men and the women. It’s not only true of men and women. There are people of all kinds in this hall, old people and young, priests and laity, and so on. But there wouldn’t be any difference in the way a young person or a monk or a layman heard the sounds either. The place in which there’s no difference in the hearing these sounds is the Unborn Buddha Mind, and it’s perfectly equal, the same in each one of you.

When we say ‘This is a man,’ or ‘This is a woman,’ those are designations that result from the arising of thoughts that come afterward. At the place of the Unborn, before the thought arises, attributes such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ don’t even exist. That should make it clear that there’s no distinction between men’s Buddha Minds and women’s. There’s no reason then to doubt about women having Buddha Minds.

“Those are the designations that result from the arising of thoughts.” What our practice involves, really—and the extended outbreath is tremendously effective in reaching it—is to go beyond thought. As the Korean Son master Chinul and others have said, “Turn the light inward and trace down the radiance to its source.” As we do our practice and work at extending that outbreath farther and farther, with total presence in your body of the experience of that, you may reach a point where there’s a kind of little jiggles in your mind. And it’s important to try to pay attention to that and see if you can open to its presence. When you are able to do that you’ll realize that that is a space between thoughts. Fear can come up then, but tune in and move forward by embracing it. You’re standing in a doorway, on a threshold, and if you move far enough in, insight is made possible, and even awakening. The space before a thought is born, where you are completely one with moment just as it is, self forgotten, is the doorway to the Unborn.

But if you try to anticipate it or practice with one eye waiting for potential results, you’ll never get there. Yet if you give yourself totally to experience, although that insight may not be revealed at that very moment, have faith. If you’ve walked deeply enough into forgetting yourself through that extended outbreath and the yearning to be free, to comprehend Mu, to know firsthand that Original Face, it will open, though the opening may take place at what appears to be a completely unrelated time. For Kyogen it was the sound of the broken piece of tile striking the bamboo as he was sweeping the grave of the ancient master that brought about a deep awakening. For Hakuin, the first time it was the sound of the big temple bell booming, and for the second time it was being beaten over the head by an angry villager with a broom when he stood too long, lost in his koan, in front of her home; for Reiun it was the sight of peach blossoms; for Flora Courtois, American college student, it was the sight of the small green desk in her bedroom at home on a break from the University of Michigan. It can come at any moment, but it is brought about as a result of our deep questioning and our forgetting of ourself. We can’t think ourself into it.

You see, you’re always Unborn. You go on living in the Buddha Mind, quite unconscious of living man or woman. But while you’re doing that perhaps you’ll see or hear something that bothers you. Perhaps someone will make a nasty remark, saying they don’t like you, or whatever. You let your mind fasten onto that, begin to fret over it and thoughts crowd into your mind. You may feel that you want something. You may feel unhappy. And yet if you don’t allow them to lead you astray into thinking that it can’t be helped because you’re only a woman, then you’ll be able to gain a strong confirmation of the Unborn.

It’s the case whether your male OR female.
Then you yourself are a Buddha, of the same substance not only as other men and women but also as the Buddhas of past and future. So there are no grounds whatsoever for saying a woman can’t become a Buddha. If they really couldn’t, then what would I gain by going around lying to everyone? I’d be willfully deluding you. If I was guilty of that I’d be the first candidate for hell.

I struggled very hard, right from the time when I was a little boy, just because I wanted to become a Buddha.

There is an old story out of China of a monk who was assiduously sitting zazen when his master asked him what he was doing. “I’m trying to become a Buddha,” he replied, upon which the master sat down in front of him, picked up a rock and a piece of brick and started rubbing the brick with the rock. The monk asked, “What are you doing?” “I’m making a mirror,” replied the master. “You can’t make a mirror by rubbing a brick!” retorted the monk. “And you can’t make a Buddha by doing zazen!” responded the master.

Why could he not make himself a Buddha by sitting zazen? Because he already WAS a Buddha, and needed only to reveal it. That Unborn Mind has been closer than our own eyes since beginningless time. It is through ongoing, committed, persistent zazen, fueled by the yearning to be free, to comprehend that elusive Face, and deepened through the extended outbreath that this Face, this Mu, this Unborn Mind, can be opened to. It takes a lot of work. But it’s an option for all of you.

Even people who have done terrible deeds in their lives still have the potential to awaken. One thinks of Frankie Parker, who was executed some years back. Frankie Parker was abused as a child and had turned the rage he experienced as a result of that abuse into brutally murdering people. He was sentenced to death, and in prison was incorrigible, sent as punishment to solitary for months on end. One day a guard tossed a copy of a book of Buddhist teachings into his cell; the book was the Dhammapada, the earliest sayings of the Buddha. In there is a chapter of linked verses, including this one:

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We are what we think
Having become what we thought.
Suffering follows an evil thought
As the cart follows the cart-pulling ox.

We are what we think
Having become what we thought.
Joy follows a pure thought
Like the shadow that never leaves one.
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It changed Frankie Parker’s life. He became a model prisoner, inspiring other prisoners to do likewise; some of them even started doing zazen, which Frankie had learned after reading the Dhammapada. Although he was eventually executed for his crimes, as he was dying he turned his face to look at the relative of his victims sitting in the gallery behind a glass window watching him die, and said, “I’m sorry.” He died peacefully with no resistance or fear.

There was something that Frankie opened to that each of us can open to no matter our history. Thankfully no one at this point in this place has murdered anybody, but we all have our “sticky wickets.” None of us is exempt, and I’m speaking of myself in this case as well. We are all “works in progress” and one of the wonderful things I’ve witnessed in this sesshin in particular is how that is actually taking place here—there are obvious positive changes happening. It’s quite awe-inspiring….

More from the Dhammapada…

This is from the Introduction to the translation by Eknath Easwaran:

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The eye cannot see it;
The mind cannot grasp it.
The Unchanging has neither eyes nor ears,
Neither hands nor feet.
Sages say it is infinite in the great
And in the small, everlasting and changeless,
The source of all life.
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—Mundaka 1.16-7
As an archer aims his arrow, the wise aim their restless thoughts, hard to aim, hard to restrain....

Hard it is to train the mind, which goes where it likes and does what it wants. But a trained mind brings health and happiness. The wise can direct their thoughts, subtle and elusive, wherever they choose...

Those who can direct thoughts, which are unsubstantial and wander so aimlessly, are freed from the bonds of Mara.*

—op.cit. p. 87

All the effort must be made by you. Buddhas only show the way. Follow this path and practice meditation; go beyond the power of Mara.*

—op.cit. p 162

HVZC’s Environment Challenged

For some years now a group of investors have been attempting to push through a high end housing project that would seriously impact the quiet, peaceful environment Hidden Valley Zen Center and our rural neighbors have enjoyed for many, many years. The massive project goes against the 20-year General Plan for San Diego North County. It would bring a severe increase of traffic, noise and pollution into our close environment—and take out our parking lot, bringing traffic literally to our front door. The area is also a high risk area for fire and the development plans limit exit access in the event of fire, preventing hundreds of people from escape.

We’ve been working diligently with neighbors and other interest groups to oppose this project but unfortunately the planning commissioners voted 6-1 to approve what is currently called Newland Sierra.

We will continue to try to prevent this project from being built through further steps in the approval process as well as ballot initiatives. For more information contact Sozui-Sensei. You can reach her at the HVZC phone: 1-760-591-9893.

Some Books...


Both authors are long-time meditators. Goleman is a psychologist and a science journalist; he is the author of Emotional Intelligence, and The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience. Davidson is a professor of psychology and psychiatry, currently at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he has conducted extensive research into the brain, one study resulting in the documentary, Free the Mind. He is also the author, with Sharon Begley, of The Emotional Life of Your Brain. Both men are long time friends of the Dalai Lama and have been involved with the Mind-Life Institute, which grew out of meetings between scientists and the Dalai Lama.

Here are some quotes from that book:

The original aim of meditation, embraced by

“Pure Radiance, Subtle Clarity”
Calligraphy by Mitra Bishop-roshi

This and calligraphies by Sozui-sensei and Harada Shodo-roshi are all available for sale to benefit Hidden Valley Zen Center & Mountain Gate.

*Mara, sometimes called “the Buddhist devil” was the demon who tried to tempt the Buddha away from his search for truth beneath the Bo tree. The term can also reflect any form of distraction from our zazen.
some circles to this day, focuses on a deep exploration of the mind toward a profound alteration of our very being.

—p. 45

“A deep exploration of the mind toward a profound alteration of our being.” This description of our purpose in practice covers one angle of it. But “alteration of our being” might better be expressed as “source of our being, insight into which makes possible an alteration of our way of being.”

An altered trait—a new characteristic that arises from a meditation practice—endures apart from meditation itself. Altered traits shape how we behave in our lives, not just immediately after we meditate.

—p. 101

In particular underscores the possibility that not only can our zazen impact our life in terms of becoming more peaceful and less reactive, more relaxed and able to take things in stride, but the insights that arise can—assuming we don’t do that “end run around our issues” that psychologist John Welwood speaks of—lastingly transform our behavior in profound and deeply positive ways.

The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity’s Search for Meaning, by Jeremy Lent

Lent is a professional writer as well as a practicer of meditation, Qigong and Tai Chi.

The book is extensively researched and absolutely fascinating in its providing a window into how environmental circumstances influence the development of outlook, spiritual practice and culture—in a word, how conditioning influences personal and world views. Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist and author of Buddha’s Brain—another book worth reading—wrote about Patterning Instinct:

This fascinating page-turning exploration of the human journey from the Stone Age to the space shuttle gives us powerful new ways to see ourselves. Deeply researched, and written with great clarity and style, this book is also full of hope about humanity’s possibilities in the twenty-first century.

Zen Women: Beyond Tea Ladies, Iron Maidens

and Macho Masters, by Grace Shireson

Myoan [her Buddhist name] Grace Shireson is a clinical psychologist, Zen Buddhist priest, and a Zen teacher in the Shunryu Suzuki Lineage. Along with her husband she also trained under the Rinzai master, Keido Fukushima Roshi, former abbot of Tofuku-ji in Kyoto, Japan. She and other women have been instrumental in uncovering and bringing to light the often forgotten history of the deep practice and enlightenment—and teaching—of women. In this book she goes into detail, sharing the lives and practice and some of the direct encounters with monks which demonstrated the depth of understanding of these women. For example, this account by the Obaku Zen monk Yuzen Gentatsu (1842-1918), who later became abbot of the Rinzai headquarter temple, Myoshin-ji:

I was young then, speaking nonsense and boasting greatly. To my surprise, the nun showed the knowledge and experience of an equivalent amount of training. Her calm opposition quickly silenced me. I couldn’t say anything in reply to show any Zen understanding. The nun harshly demonstrated my ignorance. At her sarcastic words all I could do was make the sound Guu—. The chagrin at the time was severe. If there had been a hole, I would have crawled into it. It lasted a long time and inspired me to work harder.”
—quouted on p. 27

Advice Not Given: A Guide to Getting Over Yourself, by Mark Epstein, M.D.

Epstein is a psychiatrist in private practice as well as a long-time meditator, having trained with Achaan Chah, renowned Thai forest master. In this book Epstein takes each of the Eightfold Paths as the work of personal transformation. In this quote from Right Speech, he writes:

While Right Speech conventionally means abstaining from lying, gossip, vain talk, and hurtful rejoinders—all of which create turmoil in the mind—it has taken on an additional meaning for me. How we talk to ourselves is as important as how we speak to others. The way we think is as crucial as what we say out loud.

—p. 65
2018 Calendar

July 8 All Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

July 10-17 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline is July 3.

August 3-5 Regaining Balance Retreat for Wives and Female Partners of Veterans with PTSD; like the Regaining Balance Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD this is a special retreat—also free and nonsectarian.

August 10-12 Weekend Sesshin led by Mitra-roshi, who expects to be at HVZC August 9-16

September 26-30 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD; this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: RegainingBalance.org

September 29 All Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

October 9-16 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications: October 2.

October 21 All Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

Please note: Sozui-sensei will be continuing her Zen practice for two months at Sogen-ji, taking part in Sogen-ji’s most intensive training period of the year. Accordingly, she will not be at HVZC during November and December.

November 1 Jukai [Precepts Ceremony], beginning at 7 pm. Jukai is a very important ceremony in the Buddhist world, and to receive Jukai is to make a commitment to live as much as possible by the Buddhist Precepts. While some of these resemble the Ten Commandments, these precepts are not commandments, but rather, express the way a person completely enlightened and with that enlightened mind state expressed in every moment, would naturally behave. As for the rest of us, it’s a work in progress, and each time we undergo the ceremony of receiving/taking the precepts we are deepening our intention to align with this compassionate behavior of body, speech and mind.

November 2-4 Weekend Sesshin led by Mitra-roshi; Roshi expects to be at HVZC Oct. 30 to Nov. 8.

November 13-20 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is November 6.

November 30 - December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin—considered the most powerful sesshin of the year—at Mountain Gate; app deadline Nov 20

2019 Calendar

January 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is December 31.

February 8-13 5-Day Sesshin led by Mitra-roshi; she expects to be at HVZC February 6-15. Deadline for applications is February 1. Please make sure that your application has been received at the Center by February 1; otherwise you may not be considered.

Deep Zen practice affords us the opportunity to see clearly who we really are, and with that seeing, wisdom and compassion naturally arise. When we see a need, we naturally move to meet it. The practice of dana—the paramita [perfection] of generosity, is a way to express that wisdom and compassion by offering support to our places of practice and to our teachers, who guide us through all the pitfalls of practice and help us to reach depths we never knew existed. Without dana, neither our Zen centers nor our teachers would be available to us or to future generations. Although Zen teachers and centers are sometimes supported by larger institutions in places like Japan and China, they are not usually supported in this way in the U.S. Offering support to our places of spiritual practice and to our teachers is a vital component of our practice as Zen students, because it affords us not only an opportunity to express compassion and gratitude, but it also ensures the continuity of Zen itself. Where would we be without a place to practice and a teacher to guide us?