



Zen master Jiun Hogen roshi talks with Myoko Sint about masters and students (May 2016)

What exactly is a Zen master?

That's a nice question. It would be a good idea to ask me that question a couple of times, because I suspect every time I would answer differently.

One aspect is having an affinity with teaching. I know people who don't want to be or cannot be teachers. For example, they don't want to maintain a teacher - student relationship or because they know their communication skills are not good enough. My most important task as a master is to guide people on the path of zen. Sometimes I am asked why I am not more socially engaged. If I would make that my focus, it would be at the expense of my current Zen work. The long and intense training I received, the huge involvement and effort of my master to teach me - in a way all that would have been in vain. So I prefer to guide people on this path, and I hope it will induce many to become socially active, and perhaps some very few will become zen masters, in order to guarantee the continuity of Zen as a base for whatever.

Furthermore it is very important to realize (and this is not a platitude) that you know nothing. Only then can you be open for what is in this very moment. Especially in private interviews I very consciously try to sit in that seat of 'No Knowing' and to just open up for what's coming, and then to see what happens. This does not mean that I completely let myself go, nor that I expect that from others. It is all about truly

listening, looking, smelling, about opening up all my senses for what the moment has to offer.

And then of course I have to let it go. I must not dwell on any of it. If I wasn't open in this moment, I would for example now still be pondering a former question. This happens quite often in meetings. Someone still wants to make a point while the meeting as a whole has moved on and the point made is not at all relevant for what is currently being discussed. At such moments you are not really open, you will miss what other people are saying, because all the time your mind is busy with "I really need to make this point." Basically, my guidance is nothing more than being open, seeing and experiencing what happens. Out of that, communication naturally arises. Of course this only works when my mind is reasonably clear. It would be impossible being drunk.

Did your master, Prabhasa Dharma zenji, teach you this openness? If so, how?

I wouldn't say that she taught me this, but rather that she helped me to become aware of tendencies in myself. This was her part and this too is how I see mine: a teacher is there to indicate things that enable students to make their own discoveries. Let me give an example. When I just started my training with her, she told me sometimes I was much too grumpy, but at first I denied this, or I was so disappointed in myself that I became even more grumpy. So that did not work. Actually it never works: being criticized directly doesn't motivate you to change. But at a certain point I came to realize that if I was grumpy or angry, it bothered her (even if you are a master, it does cost extra energy), and also that I was imprisoned in this anger of mine. I didn't want that, and so I started working on it. Meditation helps with that, because while sitting on your cushion, you can't do a thing. I was confronted with the whole story in my head related to that anger and I started noticing that it did not make any sense. That is how meditation works. Bit by bit some layers start to disappear. For a while you still get angry, but you don't express it as much anymore, it comes with less and less energy, you grow more alert. More and more you realize you do not want to do something that hurts someone else. And so you learn to control yourself at an early stage and bring yourself into a different state of mind. After a while this whole process enables you to open up. Your communication with others becomes free of unconscious emotions, desires and attachments.

What is the most important thing you want to teach people?

What I want to teach people most of all, and what is the most important thing I myself learned, is to have faith. Faith that, what ever the circumstances may be, you are capable of living them. Whether a situation is ideal or not, if you yourself are clearly present, you can live it.

Being clear means that you can perceive and experience what is there in a way that is not influenced by emotions or expectations. This is what I call direct contact. I do not put anything in between, or as little as possible. And if I do put something in between,

I hope I am aware of that fact. Suppose for example I am in a bad mood and I have to function as a master, then I hope my mood does not influence what I say and do.

How can people learn things like that here at Noorder Poort, for example during sesshins¹?

Through the structure provided by the schedule and through sitting in meditation. A number of things keep coming back. Again and again we drink tea, we meditate, we walk, we bow. Eventually this will bring a certain calm. Not immediately, but after a while (in the beginning many people struggle with the structure). At some point you will know exactly what is coming next, so you don't need to think about that anymore. At the same time, because everything keeps coming back, you notice that each bow is different. You may think "Well, this is interesting. I keep doing the same things, but I notice that even so I do them differently each time." So you get the opportunity to see yourself. And I think that is the key, the ability to see yourself in an open way. Eventually that happens habitually. You will start to notice during meditation whether some thought or emotion is just arising spontaneously or whether you produce it to feed a certain image of yourself, making it grow and grow. Once you can see that difference, you get the opportunity to see yourself in the way that self manifests: not the way you would want it to manifest, but the way it actually does. This enables you to be open and that is where faith comes from: you can live what ever is presenting itself now, without fear and without expectations.



Jiun roshi with dog Paco

¹ An intensive Zen retreat. Most sesshins last five or seven days.

What if you just participate in a weekly group? Is that a very different kind of Zen practice?

I think so, yes, although I also have to be careful with that. Looking at the participants in our Zen course, I see people who are very thorough, who in their daily life practice very seriously with exercises I give them, and who gain equal insight to those who participate in sesshins. But there are big differences. There are people who participate in this group for years of which I regret that they never start practicing a bit more intensively. Their insight never goes beyond “I am now aware of drinking tea”, without ever realizing what may be underneath, for example, how some emotions may express themselves in drinking tea. Of course this is related to why you practice Zen: whether you just do it to relax, to feel good, or whether you are brave enough to accept the unpleasant aspects as well.

Is everybody able to train and practice Zen intensively?

No, I do not think so. You need a certain fundamental stability, in order to be able to handle the confrontation with yourself. You need a certain measure of quietude. If that is failing (which may even be physiologically determined), the mind may be so agitated, so much all over the place, that people cannot handle the things coming up during zazen, the things they start to see.

Therefore the safest route is to participate first in a Zen weekend, then in a five day retreat and only after that in a seven day retreat. If someone from one of our weekly meditation courses registers straight away for a seven day retreat, we will first speak with that person over the phone and perhaps also ask the meditation leader for an impression. Based on what we learn we then may decide to let him or her participate. I will always make sure to keep in in close touch with anyone coming for the first time to a dai-sesshin² with us. I want to see such participants often in the personal interviews and will keep a special eye out to see whether they are really OK.

When is somebody your student?

That is hard to say. A huge part of me says *I don't have students*. In the same way that you cannot say *I have a wife* or *I have a husband*.

When training together in a sesshin, there is at that instance a teacher-student relationship. But the moment you go home at the end of the week, you stop being my student. You could consume all kind of things which confuse your mind, let your emotions take over and cause you to harm other people or yourself, in which case you certainly would not behave as a student of mine. Or, the other way around, if I am partying with my family and in no way acting as a Zen master, I am at that moment certainly nobody's teacher.

You see, the Zen way is only a part of life. People remain responsible for their own life, and I feel that I should help them to realize that. You can walk together, but in the

² A seven day sesshin

end it is you who do the walking, you who are taking these steps. To me that is very important.

So, there are some pitfalls in the teacher-student relationship. You need to be very careful. As a teacher you can be too dominant, too directive, wanting to intervene too much in someone's life. As a teacher you can be very tough, very strict: *This is how you should do it*. That is a way, but I don't think it is a way which is suitable for our own age and culture. The old fashioned teacher-student relationship, one-on-one, based on authority and servitude - you have to do this; you have to do that - doesn't suit the average mind of someone growing up in our culture. It would not work, it might even be a bit dangerous. I say this even though I myself was trained like that and even though I still feel that for me, Roshi [*Prabhasa dharma zenji*] was the right master, with the right way of training, and that I was a suitable student for her. From childhood I was used to this kind of authority, so for me it was a perfect match. But I find I cannot relate to my students like that.



Prabhasa Dharma zenji and Jiun roshi in 1989

Which part does Prabhasa Dharma zenji still play in your everyday life?

A part which is much smaller than it once had been. In my life she now plays a part almost in the way that Shakyamuni Buddha plays a part. She is tremendously important, but unlike some years ago, she is no longer my benchmark. When in some situation I wondered what to do, I used to think: What would she have done? I don't do that anymore. I have changed too much by now. I no longer want to walk in her footsteps. Instead, I want to give myself the opportunity to go my own way, like she did, too, as a matter of fact.

***She gave you the names Jiun Hogen, Cloud of Compassion - Original Dharma³.
What do these names mean to you?***

I am very pleased with these names because to me they indicate clearly how my path is developing. Because of the name Hogen, Original Dharma, I feel free to deviate from what she was doing. The name Jiun, Cloud of Compassion, also fits because I notice that in guiding people, I more and more act from compassion and empathy, rather than from sternness and discipline.

I am growing more and more convinced that the so called military or Japanese style of Zen (this is a gross generalization of course), was - and perhaps still is - deeply rooted in a specific culture. When I was a Zen master for two or three years - roshi had already passed away by then - I found myself in some kind of crisis. I noticed more and more that I felt uncomfortable with this style of sternness and discipline in which I myself had been trained. I wondered if it was possible to discipline without rigour, a bit more friendly, a bit more free. I'm not even sure if this necessarily suits me better, but I simply preferred it that way. If there is message worthy of being brought into the world, it is this: To be open and kind towards each other. Not too soft or too sweet, but just to communicate in an open and natural way.

Every master is different. In this context you sometimes refer to someone's dharma character. How do you see your own dharma character?

Talking about names, my first name was Dharma Udaka, Water of Truth. I still like that image very much: flowing like water, sometimes bumping into something hard, like water against a rock, but eventually streaming on. I am not sure if I can really say that that is my character, but if, as is said, a name also points to your task in life, then this is a task for which I still feel a lot of affinity. It epitomizes the way I want to live. Is it really my dharma character? I hope so.

³ Dharma refers to the Buddha's teaching, but can also mean Truth