

RIDING THE DRAGON 1 : FIRST NIGHT

Good evening. It's wonderful to be here together starting our Open Source Mahasangha retreat, and I'd like to add my welcome to those already offered by our retreat leaders.

As Kelly was leading us so deftly in our first walking meditation just now, weaving us in pretty elaborate curves to make room for us all in the hall together, I remembered the first time I was timekeeper and did a similar thing, as I'd seen many timekeepers do. Only I did it wrong, and ended up at the center of a tightening spiral with no discernible way out—till a bunch of people parted, making room for me to unwind the traffic jam. So this time we're off to a good start, and in good hands! But mainly it's wonderful to have such a full zendo, so many of us together in the hall sitting the retreat together; it feels really beautiful, and it's promising. Plus there are several more people who planned to be here and ended up not being able to attend; that seems like par for the course the last few months, as we slowly untangle ourselves from the worst of covid and other, related disasters and difficulties. Maybe we can feel those who wanted to be here sitting with us in spirit, and maybe we can return the gift so they feel us sitting with them as well. The gift has to circulate, and that's one way we can participate in its circulation. And a final item in the welcome department: it's a great joy for all of us in Desert Rain to be able finally to host a Mahasangha retreat here in Tucson, after playing the role of guests so many times while Springs Mountain Sangha and other Colorado people were such gracious, generous hosts. So, welcome to Tucson and the beautiful Sonoran Desert. Don't forget to keep an eye out for rattlesnakes, and don't forget to let the saguaros and prickly pears and chollas, and the creosote and oleanders, into your bodies and hearts.

OK then. Down to business. Welcome to our Riding the Dragon retreat. All aboard and don't miss it. But actually not to worry because you can't miss it, we're all, all of us already, riding the dragon. Here's just a bit on dragons from David Hinton, retelling an origin story: "Primal emptiness separated into heaven and earth. That's how it all began. Before long a pair of dragons emerged from bright prosperity mountain, Root Dragon and Lady She-Voice. Now dragons in ancient China embodied the awesome force of change. A dragon was in constant transformation, writhing through all creation and all destruction, shaping itself into the 10,000 things, tumbling through their traceless transformations." We can't really be outside that, can we? Still, a lot of the time we think we are, we don't feel like we're riding the dragon, nope, no dragon here, just little ole me. Or sometimes we feel well, I'd prefer not to get on that dragon, I don't want to take that ride, maybe later when I'm feeling better prepared, thanks very much. You know, actually I'd rather stand on the sidelines, not be subject to all that gigantic force, that ceaseless transformation, creation and destruction. As a voice says in a John Ashbery poem: "Better, you said, to stay cowering like this in the early lessons." Or Melville's Bartleby: "I would prefer not to." But I think deep down we know, we can feel, we're riding the dragon whether we like it or not. And it's not always action movie pyrotechnics; there's a lot of quiet and even indolence, that tremendous force kind of at rest: "power slumbering on its own right arm," as Keats says. It can be dragon even if it's not all hopped up.

So tonight I want to say just a few things that I hope will enlarge the territory, open up your sense of dragon a bit, and your sense that a dragon might be carrying you even when you don't feel you're on the ride of your life. Maybe the ordinary rhythms of retreat are dragon already, and the ordinary rhythms of our lives.

Here are a few suggestions for easing ourselves into that sense of it. If some of them seem idiosyncratic, not to worry, they're meant as invitations, not prescriptions, so if they don't speak to you, you can just let them slide on by. But maybe one of them will float toward you and fetch you.

Since dragon is energy and change and flow, anything we can feel carrying us along, anything we can feel that we're flowing along with, anything that lifts us up in some way out of our sense of being fixed and settled selves, that's dragon. Sometimes it happens suddenly, sometimes it happens gradually; sometimes it's big and powerful, sometimes quiet and subtle; sometimes we slip into it, sometimes we struggle to do, it and sometimes we struggle against it, and all that's fine.

Here are a few kinds of flow that might lift and carry us at some point during the retreat, if we don't dismiss or turn away from them, declining the invitation. First, just a simple thing, the flow of the retreat day, which the leaders have already evoked so beautifully. Just sliding along from one activity to another, just to go along with that. We say that at the beginning we feel like we're holding or carrying the retreat, bringing its forms and rhythms into being, sometimes smoothly sometimes haltingly, by doing what we do; but after a while it feels like the retreat is holding and carrying us instead, and we're just flowing with it. It takes on a momentum and a power of its own, and we can ride that.

Next: it's pretty common during a retreat to like some of things we do, some forms we follow, and dislike others, and there's nothing wrong with that really, and even if there were something wrong with it there's really not much help for it sometimes. But if you don't take that too seriously, don't fret over it or feed it, often you can feel yourself kind of letting go of those preferences and aversions, little by little or sometimes all of a sudden; and maybe you start to feel there's a flow to the forms and a wisdom to the flow, that if you let it carry you where it goes those end up being places, states of heart/mind, that have an organic wisdom to them, that help you let go and allow yourself to open. Oh I was so calm and quiet during the first early morning sit. And then they made me do *what* in that first walk? What is this, some kind of aerobics class? But maybe let that go and give your body to that very fast walk. Maybe this canonical switcheroo has a deep wisdom to it. You won't know if you don't allow yourself to join it. As the Rutger Hauer character says to the Harrison Ford character in *Blade Runner*, you can't win if you don't play. "Everything goes as it goes," Suzuki Roshi says.

And letting everything go as it goes, which is partly a prescription for the heart/mind, often has a bodily aspect to it as well, as the fast walk example suggests. "Flow" can start to feel visceral, a kinetic sense of being carried along, and sometimes your body might be able to relax right into that. Maybe that's easiest in moments when what's happening has a kind of slow, easy rhythm to it: your body might feel buoyed up, a bit as if air had the supportive density of water, the breeze like a soft current. And when your body starts feeling like this, it tends to draw your heart/mind along with it; as your body loosens and lets go it helps your mind do the same: "thought after thought rises in the mind; thought after thought is the mind," nothing there, for a moment, to hold onto. In this state, likes and dislikes, attractions and aversions, are a little more like twigs and driftwood just floating by, here comes another one, now there it goes. As the body loosens, as we let that happen, we can often feel ourselves letting go of our tight grip on our thoughts and preferences. I don't want to have this thought, I want to have that other thought, I don't want to have this feeling, I want to have that other feeling, or I wish my mind would just get quiet, dammit. Well, there goes another thought down the lazy river.

Or here's another image for it: sometimes over the course of a retreat our thoughts get a little fuzzy and it's harder to keep track of them, since they no longer seem sharply distinct. That can feel a little disconcerting—ack! I'm losing it!-- but mostly it's a good thing. I lost the thread of my thinking! Get a grip, Tenney! Well, no: open the hand of thought, as Uchiyama says. But I was just, finally, thinking about the dragon, I was almost understanding! Well, turn the mind around: that flow of thoughts, morphing and changing so you can't quite track them, so you can't quite pin that dragon down, *is*, itself, the dragon, doing its dragon dance. Or if that feels too grand for little ol' me, anyway I'm not the one controlling their direction or determining their goal right now, it's like they're riding some current or force with a mind of it's own, or they're riding Tao or the dragon, with no special effort, no fierce determination and no bracing myself either, and I don't seem to be falling off. And there's no need to jump off and get back to familiar, predictable ground; I can just ride.

Then there's time. Kelly talked last night about being off clock time; and we can slip into that for swaths of the retreat, as our tight grip loosens; it doesn't take any special effort. For me, it's not that I force myself to ignore clock time; it kind of recedes on its own, from time to time, and I notice I'm in the midst of time moving through space in some different, less calibrated way. My body, and heart/mind, start noticing, and accompanying, some of the multiple, various rhythms around me. They don't seem to move all together in lockstep, but they don't seem wholly random either, chaotically disparate. Things are moving in so many different tempos, but I kind of sense subtle, interpermeated patterns. There's the rhythm of the birds flying by, other birds hopping around or perched on a cactus or ocotillo, swayed with it, or maybe pecking at it. There's the sound of the big temple bell sometimes, there's the clacker and four gongs announcing a sitting period, followed after an interval by two bells for a walk or one bell if we're doing something else when the period ends. Through it all there's the flow of my own breathing, and the breathing of the breeze in its different rhythm. There's light moving across the zendo floor, really slowly as the day flows by and slips away toward dusk. There's also, here in the Sonoran Desert, a really big stillness that feels very old; and, overlaying that, a very, very slow rhythm that seems omnipresent; it feels archaic and almost timeless, a beat under all the disparate, surrounding activity; maybe it's silent, more like the feel of a pulse or long rhythmic vibration than a sound. And it feels like all these rhythmic signatures are in some mysterious, subtle relation to each other, loops of call and response, including the rhythms of my own body in its overt physical movements and its internal, somatic processes and sensations. So, as the retreat deepens, maybe sometimes you can feel yourself sort of riding or flowing in and among these various, interrelated time signatures, sense them in your heart/mind and also moving through your body, the rhythm of your own movements joining the dance that pervades all of it, an endless interpermeation in which you're immersed.

And then sometimes there's another thing, less gradual than the processes I've been describing; it often feels abrupt, sudden, out of nowhere. If you get lucky, some single, specific thing, some particular animal or cactus or rock, for no apparent reason, might suddenly come to fetch you, catching your attention, riveting it for a moment, till you feel its own unique rhythm echo and move through your body, and heart/mind, and you're carried out of yourself. Keats: "or if a sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel." In *The Blue Cliff Record*, Yuanwu calls this "subtle touch": you're not literally touching the sparrow, or the top of the ocotillo swaying in the breeze, you're seeing them, maybe hearing them; but sight or sound re-echo in your body as a subliminal, participatory feeling of rhythmic motion, and perhaps texture or touch too, and there you are, carried right out of your usual sense of your separate, isolate self. Sometimes our language, our name for something, knows and remembers this sense of interpermeation: they're not called tree limbs for nothing. You know, if you see a tree moving in the breeze, if you're

sitting in the hall you're probably not going to wave your arms around like this (but: if you do, that's great! Here's prior, blanket encouragement to break our forms for the moment). But whether you make the movement or not, you can feel it in your body.

So, sometimes we're just sitting here in what feels like our own separate self, no dragons, we think, in the vicinity. Sometimes that dragon energy seems to condense into the qi of some particular thing that comes forward to fetch us—sparrow, or cactus wren; saguaro or ocotillo. And sometimes the surge and flow of all of it feels like one big omnipresent dragon, lifting and carrying everything along on its dragon back as it moves with and through all the various rhythms around us.

Dragons are said to rest sometimes at the bottom of pools of water—deep rivers even—then wake and twist up toward the surface, stirring everything up into movement, current and flow. So dragons have an affinity for water, and so do we, even here in Tucson, in the desert (which used to be ocean bottom; you can feel that at dusk, especially up in the Tucson Mountains looking out over the desert floor at Gates Pass, the breeze coming up then like it does over the bay or ocean as the sun drops). So, recommendation, idiosyncratic maybe: if a sensation of water and its rhythmic movement come to fetch and carry you, from somewhere out of your own sense memories, your alaya vijñana, please take that ride, float and flow with it. It's such a visceral, deep sense memory for most of us, and it really does carry us out of that prison of feeling ourselves as fixed and bounded and alone. Whether it's ocean or river, there's a sense of flow, and it's rhythmic, and it's outside the body but inside it too, and there's that sense of being buoyed up and carried, and of giving ourselves up to that. And it's not hard to give ourselves up to it again in memory and revery, if it comes for us, during our sitting or walking meditation or on our long walks. If taking that ride doesn't strike you as a rigorous enough activity of mind to be real zen, I'd say think again, or don't think again, don't worry about it, just let it happen. There's a Charlie Parker cut called "Drifting on a Reed." I love the track, and I love the title. It's a pun, I think, drifting downstream on a reed (that's mythic, kind of: the "Red" Sea of the Hebrew Bible supposedly really meant the "Sea of Reeds"); it's also the reed of Parker's alto sax, and so we're also drifting on the reed, the rhythm, of the music his body is making. So it's all mixed and mingled, blurred: inside and outside, movement of reed in the water and sound coming out of the reed in his mouth; and the movement of the water, or the body in water, and the movement of sound—rhythmic hearing and kinetic rhythm intermingled, a relaxed synaesthesia, call and response, fetching and getting fetched, ourselves lifted out of ourselves. And then we're free; that's how we feel. And "Drifting on a Reed" is kind of an indolent dragon, relaxed and lolling around. So also, though it might not sound like zen: on the whole, soft is good, blurry is good, fuzzy—as in fuzzy boundaries or fuzzy thinking or fuzzy sets in set theory—is good.

So there are lots of ways to sense we're riding the dragon, and maybe to sense that we already were. Over the course of a retreat, this sense of the body, and of the heart/mind, tends to move into the foreground of awareness at least a little more, sometimes a lot more. So it's already happening, and it's something to look forward to, be hopeful about. Let's give ourselves to that, let the retreat roll right through us, and lift and carry us along, who knows where.

Thank you.