

Face-to-Face Transmission

By Kokyo Henkel

In our tradition we have a ceremony called Dharma Transmission, or Dharma Inheritance, two different names for the same ceremony – transmitting Dharma from the point of view of the teacher, and inheriting Dharma from the point of view of the disciple. Many things could be said about this, but none quite reach what it is. It is enacted through a ceremony, which is what we can talk about, and at its heart is the relationship between teacher and student.

Except for my parents, there is no other close relationship I have had with anyone for nearly as long as that with my teacher, having stayed in touch with him almost every month throughout the past twenty years, with most of those years spent actually living together in the same temple, practicing zazen together, doing ceremonies together, working together, meeting together in dokusan, week after week, month after month, year after year. At some point a teacher feels it's time to ritually enact the intimacy that has developed with a student. This ceremony is done in all kinds of different ways, particularly in American Zen, but my teacher is quite traditional, so we did a 21-day ceremony that was completely "by the book," very thorough, very formal, very ritualized, very involved. The ceremonial events are mostly things we do all the time in Zen, like bowing. Lots of bowing. At one point I calculated that there are over 3000 full prostrations in the 21-day ceremony. There is bowing to the teacher and also to the ancestral lineage, because one is deeply connecting with that lineage, the teacher's teacher, and his teacher, and so on, back to Shakyamuni Buddha. The ceremony is fusing the disciple into a lineage of intimate connection. A lot of it is ritually enacting Dogen Zenji's own Dharma transmission ceremony, and also the transmission of the Sixth Ancestor in China, because we have some stories about that. In the Platform Sutra, the Sixth Ancestor received the robe and bowl of the Fifth Ancestor in a secret midnight ceremony, so we do such a ceremony at midnight. And it's a very private ceremony, unlike a priest or lay ordination, which is a public event.

One might wonder what is the Dharma that is being transmitted and inherited. In the most tangible way we can talk about it, it's this ceremony that is being transmitted, the Dharma of this particular ceremony. And the ceremony is enacting the intimacy that is already present between the teacher and student. It is actually a ritualization of a connection that is already formed between the teacher and the student, but over and over again the teacher and disciple are expressing that non-separation, in a very formal kind of way. We might think that this intimacy should be formless, it should have no form, just being the nature of mind. In Zen we can see that our forms of practice, how we do things, how we bow and make offerings, and chant, and sit zazen in a particular posture, and all these details of form, are an expression of intimacy, an expression of the formless nature of mind meeting what we call the world. I think that's what they are for, actually. We can see these forms on many levels, and they have many functions, but this is one of the main ones. It usually takes some time of doing them to open to this function. Of course for all of us, when first learning a new form it feels awkward and doesn't feel at all intimate; it just feels confusing, and doesn't feel like we are being ourselves. But anything we do over time begins to feel more natural, and eventually we are really expressing our most authentic being through a form.

This is like playing a musical instrument. You can learn chords and scales and so on. When just practicing scales, it doesn't feel very creative or natural or intimate, it's just mechanical. But you are learning the instrument, and once you learn it, you can play music. And other people have been learning the same instrument, so you can play together, and then you can start improvising. Through the form, based on the form, it can become very creative and spontaneous. But to just improvise music without having learned the instrument first is not very fun, or as intimate or beautiful, as if you have learned it first. Then you kind of go beyond it, in a way, but you are not really beyond it, since you are still in the form too.

And to carry the musical instrument metaphor a little further, we could say Soto Zen is like a specific instrument, like an acoustic guitar, and Rinzai Zen is like an electric guitar, and Theravada is like a flute, and Vajrayana is like a drum. And we can learn all these instruments, and they are all related, they are all playing music, and we don't say any are better than any others, they all beautifully express musical harmony, and yet there are these specific instruments. I had a strong sense during the ceremony that there is a very specific and very beautiful instrument that is being played really wholeheartedly at this time. I had a new feeling about our tradition during the ceremony, after practicing for a long time within this tradition. It's hard to say what it is, if I had to put my finger on it I don't know if I could, but it is something about intimacy. That point was just driven home again and again.

Another name for Dharma Transmission is "face-to-face transmission," or *menju*, which literally means "face conferring," or "face giving." It is a really important point in Soto Zen, that Dogen Zenji strongly emphasized, that this transmission must be face-to-face. It has to be a human-to-human intimate connection. Even if one has some insight hearing about some teaching, if there is not an actual body-to-body, face-to-face connection, it's not alive, the blood stream is not flowing between living beings in the same way. The image of blood, and words like "blood vein" and "blood lineage" are woven into this ceremony, and the documents that are copied and received all have red blood lines going through the names of the ancestors; it's living pulsing life blood.

Dogen says, "Shakyamuni Buddha saw venerable Mahakashyapa in person." Shakyamuni Buddha, our original teacher in India, transmitted Dharma to Mahakashyapa, the first Zen ancestor, when Mahakashyapa smiled as the Buddha held up a flower. "This is face-to-face transmission. Thus the authentic ancestors of all generations have continued face-to-face transmission, disciple seeing teacher and teacher seeing disciple... In thousands and millions of transmissions, the trunk and branches are one, breaking an eggshell by pecking from the inside and outside at once." The trunk and branches are one; the trunk is like this one blood vein streaming through all the ancestors, and the branches are all these different ancestors, unique individual people, with something that connects them. The teacher is like a mother hen pecking on the egg on the outside, and the disciple is like the chick inside the egg pecking from the inside, and together they break the egg, the egg that traps us in our narrow vision of the world, the egg of boundaries, the egg that separates the mother and the chick. When the egg is broken, teacher and disciple can meet face-to-face.