

## **JOHN TARRANT: Enlightenment Is Something We Do Together**

There's a romantic idea of enlightenment as a solitary and heroic act, but even if you're off by yourself in a cave, you are still part of a culture, and it's observable that some cultures are more friendly to discovery than others.

Building a culture has been an ongoing and repeated task of Buddhism since the time of the Buddha.

When I was teaching meditation at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, I read a Mary Oliver poem to a group of doctors. It had the line, "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." This line gradually changed the retreat. Some combination of meditation and permission encouraged people to talk about things they hadn't talked about before. Painful stories are often kinder in the light.

We often disapprove of parts of our lives without really examining them—it's like never going into certain rooms of your house. But meditation allows all the voices and all the images into the room. When we open the invisible doors, we can come to rest in the life we have; we can love it as it is instead of waiting for a shinier version. Every day is a good day, goes the Zen koan.

Just as doctors don't normally talk about what they feel and the difficulties they face, meditators don't talk about the personal stories that are the basis of their discoveries. We don't talk easily about personal matters because they make us feel vulnerable, which is not an approved expert emotion. But all intimacy is vulnerable, and intimacy is one of the old, old words for enlightenment. With koans we become intimate with the trees and the stars; it's as if the birds fly through us and the stars shine in our chests. Everyone I meet, their emotions, thoughts, and hopes shine into my body too, touching and changing me.

At Pacific Zen Institute we started courses in which we sit with a koan and talk about what it brings up. When you keep company with a great koan, something rises in your life to meet it. As long as you don't disapprove of whatever rises, it becomes your journey and your gate. When we told the stories evoked by the koans, the koans didn't seem hard. We were making a culture in which waking up happened inside the real events of our lives.

No one was excluded from that. Conversation is itself a kind of meditation, a way we can accompany each other through life. We can share errors, painful mistakes, dreams, losses, discoveries, or just the ordinary glowing things. That's a good day. It might be necessary to say that though this often has healing effects, it isn't psychotherapy. It's not a mental health project; your intrinsic nature doesn't need fixing.

We have to build a conversational culture, a culture of transformation. Here are a few parameters we use in groups and seminars:

1. **Kill your sacred cows.** We inherited a tradition of never talking about koans because it would ruin the experience for others. But we learn more quickly by talking and meditating together. People wake up more easily when they can talk about what's real for them.
2. **Look behind the "no trespassing" sign.** Everyone has something they have decided not to look at, and we might not know where we are not looking. What's behind your no trespassing sign?
3. **Speak from the heart.** Don't talk bullshit. Say something real, not something impressive. When I speak from the heart, I allow myself to know what is important to me. When we are afraid to say something, it's not so much other people we are afraid of, it's that we're afraid of what we ourselves might think.
4. **Listen with your whole body.** Listening means doing less. When we're not trying to influence the other person in any way, we are simply present. Then a vast peace appears. Gratitude, the moon, and the stars enter the room. Listening is a form of love. It's a way to keep company with each other in the night.
5. **When all the voices are in the room, it's a good day.** We invite people to speak who normally stay silent. People can trust their own moves and be interested in their own lives. If we want to wake up, we probably will.
6. **New people count.** Even before we begin, we might not be doing it wrong. The person who just walked in has something amazing to say, and it's good if there's no waiting period before they can jump in.
7. **Fewer rules equals more innovation.** If I'm afraid to say the wrong thing, or bow the wrong way in the meditation hall, I'm worried about approval and I don't take risks.

Meditation changes speech, and speech changes meditation. The koans open up. Suddenly everyone has a beautiful face, and we are more forgiving and probably smarter too. Enlightenment is a point of view and it's also something we do together. An old friend said, "I had a hole in my heart for years and years, and now I don't."

(NB – This article by John Tarrant was published in the Spring 2014 issue of *Buddhadharma*.)