

May we be safe from inner and outer harm,
may we be free from guilt, shame, and hatred,
may we enjoy mental and physical well being,
may we live with the ease of an open heart,
may we go beyond our inner darkness,
and awaken to our radiant true nature as boundless love.

Good morning.

So Dogen Zenji, the founder of our school of Zen in Japan, said this:

"To be in harmony with the wholeness of things is not to have anxiety over imperfections."

That doesn't say much for how much we enjoy harmony, I think?

How many of you could say that you have been a perfectionist? Only three?

I myself am a recovering perfectionist. When you hear the word "perfect", what comes to mind?

Sangha members: "A goal." "Flawless." "Complete." "Ideal." "Above reproach."
"Better than others."

Now we're getting there! Excellent. That is a very high standard, isn't it? How about "imperfect"?

Sangha members: "Human." "Shoulder shrug." "Enh!" "A chip, like something is chipped off." "Not good enough." "Deviation." "Deviant." "Regrettable."

At some point in our lives, don't know, we we may have been born with it, but we learned that if we were just perfect then we'd be safe and accepted and loved. That's not too much to ask, is it? I thought I'd do something really daring today. You ready?

(Kosho peels down part of his robe.) (Laughter.)

I know, I know. I'm going to see how long I can stand it. Take a picture! That'd be even worse!

So, umm, something happened to Buddhism when it left India and went to China. In China, it met with one of the religions that had been there for a long time, Taoism. And I don't know all that much about Taoism, actually, but what I do know I'm very grateful for; it gave us notions of duality. Duality. And looking closely at duality, which gave us the courage to accept paradox. Are you as excited as I am about this? Perhaps I should say a little more.

Like the koans, for example? I'm sure you've heard some of them -- what's the sound of one hand clapping is one. In order to understand the meaning of these, among three things, you have to find the duality. Where is either the teacher or the student coming from a dual mind? One hand clapping? Well what is that? Ooops, here's the other hand -- duality to unity.

So with "perfect" -- I think it would be "perfect" if that's all there were. Perfection. But the problem is that everything is on a teeter-totter in the world of duality, which is not a mistake. It's not like we're making an error, it's just the way that our minds are set up -- on or off, right or wrong, nothing in between. Very helpful most of the time, except when we start weighing certain things. So here's the scale and over here is perfection -- so the more energy I put into perfection, something happens over here with the other hand: and because perfection is HERE, what do you suppose is over here? Imperfection.

So in order to achieve balance -- we don't like imbalance -- we start putting energy into the imperfection. Sometimes a little too much, trying to find equilibrium. You can't have just one, you have to have both. So, the only problem with this is that either extreme of perfection or imperfection are both ideals.

Perfection is ideal. Do you know what ideal mean? It doesn't mean really terrific, it means "not real." So we go around chasing our lives after perfection and try to destroy ourselves because we are imperfect, or at least shame ourselves, so it's a huge mess.

So Zen comes in and says, "Well, there is a way for happiness to push its way into this mess." And that is to accept both ends. So that this balance can occur. Not too much over here, not too much over here. But by accepting both, something happens -- something new happens. To reject either one is to be stuck and very unhappy!

So some examples of this: I never saw myself as a "perfectionist" and I mean that in the nicest meaning of that word, but I did notice that something wasn't working. A lot of my time at Tassajara, where I trained, I worked in the shop building things, which was really fun. But what I noticed that when I really cared about what I was building, I never finished it! In fact, I would make the first cut -- and go do something else. Why? Because it wasn't perfect! Is that too much to ask to a machine being operated by me? That they produce something flawless? Apparently, yes. It was too much to ask. So I had great ideas -- great IDEAS, great IDEALS, that I wanted to be expressed through my hands but as long as I had that view of perfection, nothing could happen. Nothing could happen.

So, you know what helped? I think it cured the building thing, was the notion of "wabi sabi". It means something natural and yet coming through people. It's

like when you make a garden, if on its own the garden will certainly work. But there'll be something that oftentimes looks like a bit of a mystery. Like my front yard over there, not to mention the back yard -- someone said the other day I think it's pretty, in a "natural kind of way". It certainly is natural -- it's a mess.

So when I realized that the notion of wabi sabi, that it was a good thing, then that started to get some balance. Why? In Japan, they'll make tea bowls that are considered very valuable if they are flawed. If they are perfect, you can get them at K-Mart. Or Target, I guess, these days.

If it was not perfect, something was wrong with it; the only way to make it perfect was to make an imperfection in it. It could be a little dribble of glaze, a little flaw in the inside of it, a little chip somewhere. As long as it had that, it was perfect via its imperfection.

I thought this was crazy, but it helped me lower my standards. Which, incidentally, if you are a perfectionist, you might try that. Lower the standards to where they might apply to what is actually happening. I have very low standards now!

And if you are a perfectionist you can see how low they've become if you look around.

Obviously it's just comparison and point of view. In other words, very very relative. And pretty useless.

I was looking for words of Dogen Zenji about this, and I find what's really helpful for understanding Dogen is to look for a web site of quotes of Dogen. To have to read all of that stuff, oh, very difficult! If you've ever tried to read some of Dogen's writings, it's very difficult -- so it's easier with quotes that are understandable. So the quote that I began with: "to be in the harmony with the wholeness of things is not to have anxiety over imperfection."

So what if we do have anxiety over imperfection? Are we aware of anxiety over imperfection? What that feels like?

But actually, in other words, if I think it's "just anxiety", than that's how it is -- it's what's happening in my life right now -- it's not due to something that I might have avoided or being caused by something that I didn't realize.

So I was looking for quotes and found something by Elijah Goldstein, PhD, I suspect he's a psychologist. He entitled it: Dogen Zenji: Secret to a Happy Life -- something you wouldn't normally hear from a psychologist -- or Buddhists for that matter. Dogen was kind of intense, I don't know if he was every happy! But assuming he might have been, Elijah looked at Dogen Zenji's teaching. And he looked at this "to be in the harmony with the wholeness of things is not to have

anxiety over imperfection."

Which is to say that we are all perfectly imperfect. Is that something you can stand to hear? That if we are imperfect than we are whole with our perfection. They are both there, and to have both is wholeness.

We have the paramitas -- the "perfections" -- which is kind of an unfortunate translation; because as soon as we say perfection, we're pretty much dead, so shoot me now because I cannot achieve perfection even though I worship and chase it.

Another translation of paramita -- perfection of wisdom, dharma, generosity, etc., is: wholeness, or skillfulness. Experiencing the wholeness of generosity; experiencing the wholeness of patience, and so forth. So it's not about achieving perfection, it's not about that at all -- it's about welcoming all of the extremes at each end.

So once we do that, once we realize that it's actually not a crime to be imperfect, in fact, our perfection depends on imperfection, then something else can arise instead of hate or shame or fear or grief over our lack of whatever we thought perfection was. And kindness comes to it. Kindness comes up.

When I was in my 20s I was in theology school and we had a visitor from England who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Does that wow you? It was quite a wow for me, I'll tell you. So here we were in this chapel and there was this big ceremony, a typically English Anglican ceremony with a lot of grandeur but very understated; it was a total pleasure for those of us that who were more restrained. So they all came in, the faculty, with their outfits, very fancy, so here is the Archbishop coming down the aisle and you could tell by the way he walked, the way he looked, and then later the way he spoke that he was a very kind man and a very "big" man -- I'm not sure how to say that. Dignity, strength, but sweet. A wonderful combination. So the point is, he got up on the pulpit at some point and started to give his sermon.

So he was the hundredth Archbishop of Canterbury and he must have been in his 60s -- he was VERY old (laughter). He was wearing something like this but it was very long, about 5' long on each side, and it went over the back of his neck, and as he was talking he would use his hands, graceful gestures, and it didn't take long before you started to notice that something was wrong with how this cloak was laid out. The longer he talked, the farther this thing started to slip down -- and it was like oh my god! For that kind of ceremony this is a very shocking thing to see; the man was losing his clothes as he talked. So finally it just flopped down, and I don't remember him noticing.

The perfection of part of me noticed that this was not good at all. The man clearly didn't have meticulous attention to detail, which incidentally is a Dogen virtue, but it can get overboard. But instead of judging that, I found

that I became very affectionate towards this imperfection. Can you imagine?
It's hard to bear.

So a couple more examples, well, one more.

I was in Japan and had seen many temples; too many temples. And we ended up, towards the end of the trip, we ended up at a particular temple in Kyoto (that seems to be where most of the temples in Japan are for some reason). And it's the temple that has a very famous garden, a rock garden, maybe you have seen pictures of it. I figured, eh, another temple. More rocks. More sand in place of water or something. And then over here there would be little croppings of big stones. I thought eh, I don't really want to see it. But I did anyway. So I walked through and I got out the on the walkway that overlooked the garden. And I swear to God, I didn't need to fix it. Have you ever had that experience and it didn't cry out for repair? That somehow this was flawless. But it wasn't! I just didn't have the need to "fix" it.

It was simple and yet exquisite expression of something -- even better than that, because when you looked at it, it looked like it was far away but it wasn't; the back wall was this high, but as the wall came closer to you, it looked bigger, so it was a trick of perspective to make it look perfect.

After being struck by the joy of it, I started noticing that the walls were actually kind of beat up and scratched and worn off. Making something look new all the time is not a great thing in Japanese culture; that's why some of the gold statues we get have black marks all over them -- they are old, and we don't try to make things new you let them show their own maturity and patina.

The point is that there is a way to practice with anything, I guess, that we're stuck in. We're usually stuck because there is a duality -- we're stuck at one end of it, and it needs the balance of the other end. So Mr. Goldstein said there are three things, three steps to accept the fact that we're imperfect, as we all are.

1. Acceptance. And that's to accept the fact that we are all imperfect from a certain point of view of perfect and imperfect. Which actually is a virtue and one of the highest values! Because that's real -- if we do either one or the other isn't real, and that's why it hurts so much.

2. ANTS. That means something else, too -- it means automatic negative thoughts (ANTS). Does anybody have those? Did you just have one? Automatic negative thoughts. It's a habit -- negative thinking is a habit. It's part of our conditioning and we're certainly wired to see things that are off, that aren't quite right. Do you know what I mean? It's a survival mechanism and we're wired that way; we notice when something moves, we notice when something's not quite right. It's not like it's bad, it's just that it's not great when it becomes a hobby. Like OCD -- that's just a clinical way to talk about how we

all are sometimes. Because of the ANTs -- that very critical voice inside that says this is not going to turn out; something is really bad, actually, you're bad, you should have done better, well, you know, I can't think of any right now but it wouldn't take long for them all to rush in. The problem with the automatic negative thoughts are that they affect us. According to our conditioning, we would experience the pain of shame, disgust, fear, sadness, or anger. So once we notice that our old friend, the critic, or the ANTs, have come to visit, we recognize it, accept it, and then we do the next thing. We meet these ANTs with kindness instead of taking them too seriously; obviously this is very hard work to get that kind of perspective, to be able to step back. Or to even ask them to step back a bit -- actually, they will, if you ask nicely. Any scolding, though, and no. There actually is a way to deal with perfection-imperfection.

So when it comes up -- shame -- I wonder if you can bring to mind a thing or event where you felt ashamed; I mean, like, a lot. Totally ashamed, you know what that feels like? In fact, it's still there. So what the practice is to meet that shame with kindness and respect. And in fact, to even picture it as a little baby that's hurting. And what would you do with a little baby that's hurting? You would hug it. That's what they need -- they need love and acceptance. Think of a little older than a baby, what they need to hear or feel from the tone of your voice. It would be that you're safe here. You can be yourself here; it's okay to feel what you are feeling; you are loved just the way you are. Can you imagine hearing those words from someone that you respected? Very, very powerful. That one's a good hobby to have.

So we go around chasing our tails, looking for happiness, and Dogen says that our happiness is there only if we meet our imperfections with kindness. Then he goes on to say "The black dragon's jewel (happiness) you have been searching for is everywhere."

That's all I'm going to say -- any questions or comments?

Student: What if it's justified shame? You made a really bad mistake in life.

Kosho: What if it's justified shame? Umm, what do you think? What's the purpose of shame? As a technique?

Student: To measure your values, I guess?

Kosho: Nope. No, it keeps society on course. Shame. In this country, it means that there's something bad in us if we feel shame. But its oldest use is actually -- I think Mako mentioned this last Saturday -- societies use shame to keep people as part of the group, as part of the whole, as belonging. When one does something that goes against the group values -- oftentimes mother or sometimes father would say you should be ashamed, how can you bear this! Works every time. Depends on what kind of shame you're talking about. The corrosive stuff

that we use is VERY effective.

I didn't understand the budget. Why would I? I really can't stand mathematics -- well, economics, I guess. But somebody in the room said "You SHOULD know this by now." And I fell through the floor. I felt incredibly ashamed, I couldn't talk, it was just amazing. It was perfect, it was exactly what was intended. Guess what I've learned to do? Read a budget. And you know it's not as bad as it looks.

And it happened once before -- when I was out West, when my teacher, bless her heart, we were sitting in front of a crowd and we were taking care of the sesshin that was about to start, and I was the ino (the one in charge of the meditation hall) someone asked me something and I said, "I'm pretty new" as an explanation of my problem; I said "I don't know" and I felt terrible. And then my teacher said something about, well you're the ino, you should know that. Whoah! My heart just dropped down through the floor; the energy drained out and I thought I was dead. I felt just horrible.

When we were walking out, our teacher asked me if I was alright; you know, I was looking like death. And I said "No I'm not, and I don't want to talk about it right now." I'd never said that before -- I don't want to talk about it. She loved me much more than I loved myself and she thought much more of me than I did myself, so we talked afterwards and it was fine the next day. So, shame works pretty well -- the only reason it works is to make us die a little bit, is because we have this idea of perfection. We should have known or we're really bad. That's why shame works.

Student: What would you say is the applicability of these ideas in political contexts? In the context of actions that we think of as shameful, such as Guantanamo and such? I guess I'm asking, should that be thought of as a shame?

Kosho: Well, it's shameful, isn't it?

Student: Yes, so what's the way to deal with it if not by invoking shame when it comes to the leaders who are responsible for something like that?

Kosho: I think it can be useful to invoke shame sometimes; Gandhi did. Remember the salt factory, British soldiers guarding the gate to the salt factory and the people that came up and were going to go to work, and the soldiers were there to stop them. Their orders were to just walk up to them, and of course you'd be whacked with a big stick and carried away, so each of them did. That is one way to use shame -- because what actually broke the British "hold" is seeing their own brutality. Shame is shame; what you do with that is up to you.

Student: Less of a question, and more of a thought. In order for shame to work like you say, you still have to have some idea of perfection; like though perfection causes all of these problems for us, we can't get rid of it; this is

that's why everything in Zen is so crisp and precise even though it's never going to be perfect. Perfection causes problems but it's still really useful.

Kosho: I didn't mean to indicate that you could get rid of it. You can't get rid of these things, I didn't mean to imply that; the absolute reality that these things point to is only revealed via duality. Duality is not the problem, it's being identified with either end.

Thank you all very much.