

Five Short Talks

Segaki Retreat 2007

Rev. Master Daishin Morgan

The Bigger Picture of Our Lives

I would like to welcome all of you to the retreat and the opportunity that it presents. It's a time to reflect on the bigger picture of our lives and I want to talk this morning about this bigger picture. I expect many of you have seen a digitally-created film of the universe. It's a giant zoom-out starting with a view of the Earth from space, moving back until the Earth disappears into the vastness of the galaxy, back further into the great vastness of space, further back on and on until the galaxy is just a point of light and then that disappears among yet more vastness until the mind rather gives up and can't really encompass all this. That's often what we think of as the big picture, but it's not really that big picture that I want to talk about, although that view of the universe does set our human concerns into a certain perspective.

But even the scientists, the cosmologists, even if they could actually hold the whole universe in their eye, and see it all in one glance, what would happen when fear and desire arise? The great vision collapses and is replaced by self-concern. When you look at the vastness of that image, or when you look out at the stars at night, and then you look across our little valley here, or at the wall or the space in front of you, you look from a point-of-view. Even that great view of the cosmos is seen from one point, receding endlessly, towards what? The centre of the universe? But it's a view from a certain point.

The big picture perspective of zazen is different. It is a view that comes through the abandonment of self-concern. It is a view that comes from letting go of a point-of-view. This is rather difficult to get your brain 'round, perhaps even more difficult to envisage than the vastness of space. We are so used to thinking from a point-of-view that we actually find it impossible to imagine what it might be like to not look in that way. This is not surprising because our whole body and mind is structured in a certain way: we have two eyes that look forward, we have senses that detect the world around us coordinated in a brain, a point. So it is not surprising that we think in the way that we do, perceive in the way that we do. And there is nothing wrong in this way of perceiving provided we realize that there is also a big picture. What we might call the little picture is, of course, within the big picture like the Earth is within the universe. It would be ridiculous to try to think of the Earth as outside the universe; just so, our little picture way of looking at the world from a given point is part of the big picture. And because we are not grasping at a point-of-view, we are not abandoning the little picture and trying to get the big picture. Rather it is that we need a capacity to flow, to not be fixed, so that there is big picture and little picture, little picture and big picture, a free-flowing movement, not holding on to a point-of-view and yet informed by both big and little picture.

There is no access to the big picture without engaging with the little picture. We have to understand how our own processes work, how we generate a certain view of the world and how we then see the world through this self-generated picture. It's a tragedy when people spend their lives worrying about what someone else said or didn't say—when we nurture hurts—when in front of us, behind us, above us, below us, everywhere is the vastness of the big picture.

And yes, of course, we need to live within human society, with each other; we can't have big picture without little picture. Yet little picture without big picture is suffering.

We may think we have big picture, but if you think that, by definition you have little picture. You are still looking from a point-of-view. But don't despair. The big picture cannot be far. Think of it in terms of selflessness. If we think of ourselves as having given up self, clearly we have more work to do. We are looking at the universe from a given point. But at the same time, we have an intuition that there is more than a selfish point-of-view. When I speak of a selfish point-of-view, I mean to encompass everything from the grossest form of selfishness to the most subtle, the most hard to see.

It's a shame if we spend our lives worrying over the little picture, trying to rearrange the little picture to give us satisfaction. We have this intuitive sense that there is more to life than our self-concern. This intuitive sense is with us right now; it is why we come. We may all come with different formulations of why, but there is something which brings us. It is that something that I refer to, that is the intuition, the wish to train. See in your sitting how there is sometimes the you that is worried, frightened, anxious, in pain and then there is that which seems to be the object that causes the fear or the pain or whatever. See the way in which we divide the world into subject and object, me and the world, me and you. If the person next to you sniffs and fidgets, that is simply a condition of the universe. Why should it trouble you? But, boy, can it trouble you; but why should it trouble you? If you invest in a subject, it troubles you. If you invest in a subject who has risen above the mundane world, boy, does it still trouble you. Just let it be sniffing and fidgeting.

If it is your own mind that troubles you, treat it the same. You know the way we do things here. If somebody sniffs and fidgets, it

is not up to you to go and tell them to stop. This is one of the joys of training. When your own mind does the same kind of thing, when it torments you with fears and desires, concerns and worries and what have you, it is simply conditions of the universe right now. Just as you don't leap up and throw out the person next to you who sniffs and fidgets, don't try to do anything with what is going on in your own mind. Because if you do, you are simply continuing the round of samsara. And whatever it is that you are doing, it isn't zazen. Just sit. Nothing more. It really means what it says. And yet of course it isn't as quite as simple as that, is it?

Somewhere in here there seems to be effort and we also seem to fall over our own effort. And yet without effort, we don't bother to do zazen. There is something here very important that is the meeting of big picture and little picture. Big picture and little picture are not two; they *are never* two, *can never* be two. And so explore this ground. Look closely. See the way that when you react against the distractions of your own mind, all you do is give yourself a hard time. And when you just give up and let the mind wander and let it take you down every by road and alley way, you get mugged. But those are not the only alternatives. Stuff goes on, but notice how momentary this stuff is. In a moment one thought is replaced by another thought. Who thinks? If you spend your time chasing thoughts, zoom-out a little bit. Who is it that is thinking? Forget the thoughts; they will take care of themselves. Look at: what is this apparent point that seems to be thinking? Take a step backwards. Yes, of course, Buddhism teaches that there is no permanent self. But if you grasp at that and just tell yourself that there is no permanent self, you miss the point. Actually look. It may seem to you that there is a very substantial self right now. Then look fearlessly, look thoroughly. But notice the difference between just looking and

chasing thoughts, or being pulled by thoughts up all kinds of alley ways and by ways. It is the thinker who should concern you, not the thought. Turn your gaze back. The thoughts don't matter. They are simply trifles that come and go, whatever they are, however profound they may seem to be, however disturbing they may seem to be. Who is it that thinks? The big picture gives us access to this.

Now this is not distant to any of us. So do not think that you are unable to access this until you have done twenty years of meditation. The whole point of the teaching of Zen is that it is immediate. That is to say, without mediation. With nothing between: not time, not distance. Just this right now. Who is it sitting? What is it sitting, is perhaps better. What is this that sits? Keep that question in mind. Look closely and don't let yourself be dragged up all the old alleyways by the particulars of thought. All that is so much stuff. Zoom-out a bit. What is this that thinks? Consider carefully.

Surrender

I was speaking yesterday about the perspective of seeing from the point-of-view of what I called the little picture and the big picture. Buddhism gives us some help in understanding the mechanisms of the little picture point-of-view, how we get caught in it in such a way that we fail to realize the big picture. The Dharma offers an analysis in terms of the five skandhas as to what constitutes the little picture. If you are not familiar with Buddhist teaching, or the doctrine side of Buddhism, don't be put off by the technical term 'skandha'. It is a word that means aggregate or part, so the five skandhas are five parts that fit together to make up what we call the little picture. We recite them every day as a part of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*: form, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness. And the point is

to see how little picture thinking arises, how it is that our fears and desires take control.

The first skandha is form, which is not only our body but also the physical universe. So we have a body which is part of the whole of the universe. And what comes with a body is sense organs and so we perceive the world around us, or we feel the world around us. The sense organs work. This results in what is called perception. So it is not just that we see, we walk into a room and we see the decor, but we like or dislike the decor. And the like or dislike gives rise to volition—action. And the totality of that is our consciousness. Let me go through this in a bit more detail so you can get a handle on it.

Our human body interacts with the environment that we encounter—whatever it is. We see, hear, smell and so on. One of the elements, one of the sense organs in Buddhism—we have six sense organs—is our ability to perceive things of a mental nature. So we perceive ideas, we perceive conceptions, culture, if you like. Just as we perceive sights, smells and so on. That which we encounter creates a certain like or dislike, sometimes neutral, response within us. The sun comes out and we get a bit of a lift; if it starts to rain, we sink a little. Our perception is altered according to that which we encounter through the senses. Our perception of the world, our perception most especially of ourselves, then gives rise to how we act, to volition. And what we do makes us the person that we are in the sense that our actions are what generates the sense of who we are, our consciousness. This is consciousness in little picture terms.

Now the point of going through all this is so that as you sit in meditation, it is helpful if you can see these elements at work. Hopefully you are quite aware of form: here is your body sitting on a seat, your knees or feet on the floor. So far so good. You are experiencing feeling. Your sense organs are functional. You can hear my

voice and see what is in front of you and so on. You also have memories arising, you have mental objects, as it were, as well as physical objects that you encounter. One of the prime mental objects is memory. If a memory comes of something that was perhaps threatening and difficult, that gives rise to a certain kind of mental posture. This could be very crudely described as like or dislike, but it is a great deal more subtle than that in practice. Out of that mental posture, comes action. So you are sitting there, a memory comes to mind of something that is perhaps unpleasant, you wish to be done with it, which is the arising of volition in response to perception. So your consciousness is one of pushing away.

This is a rather simplified version and I don't necessarily recommend that you sit there, as it were, 'naming the parts'. But understand the basic connection that there is between form, feeling, perception and volition: how our wants and desires are linked to our perception of the world, and how acting upon our perception of the world leads to the round of suffering. In other words, when we act upon our fears and desires that come from seeing with a little picture perspective, we generate what you might call a little picture consciousness which is very hard to break out of. But the means is at hand. See the way that the mind generates itself, perpetuates itself. You don't have to do that. If you want to know the big picture, it means stepping back from this perpetual process of generating a little picture view. You have to say, "Enough. I have been down that road often enough. I know it, I know where it leads. Enough already".

When we find ourselves in conflict, the only way to remain in the big picture is to surrender, to give ourselves. This is very difficult sometimes because we make a basic mistake. We think that surrender involves giving oneself to the other or, in conflict's terms,

giving oneself to the enemy. But this is not what surrender means, not in the spiritual dimension that we are talking about. Surrender, in this sense, means to no longer divide what is already whole. Surrender is letting go of the division. When there is conflict, surrender the division. To do this we have to be willing to abandon like and dislike. There is nothing wrong with having form; there is nothing wrong with having functioning sense organs. But when we invest in one side or the other, we give rise to volitions that are driven by our wants and desires. And this is often not just crude wants and desires. Because perhaps for ages beyond count we have felt ourselves to have been excluded, or not loved, or rejected, that we have a desperate, powerful, deep longing for acceptance. And this pain becomes the driving force in our life and leads us to grasp at love. And yet when we grasp at love, we mess it up. Getting messed up, we grasp all the more desperately.

What Buddhism says is: cease to grasp. But this is very hard teaching because the pain screams, I have been separate so long and now you tell me do not grasp. Look and see where grasping takes you and yes, the teaching says do not grasp. There is a leap of faith here, the surrender. Come at it another way. The leap of faith says: yes, do not grasp, be patient, sit and look and see the way the world is when you do not grasp. This is what I mean when I say that to surrender is to no longer divide what is already whole. Our grasping is what divides what is already whole. Do not grasp. Accept that which is right now and it will show you. Try to push it away or grasp onto it—this is not surrender. Remember, surrender is to no longer divide that which is already whole.

When you don't grasp or push away, there is that which the situation simply requires, simply needs. And this is no longer about

what you want or don't want. You may still have, you *will* still have, likes and dislikes, wants and desires, but now you know that they are not really the point. Now you know that wants and desires are the things that perpetuate suffering. So be willing to do what is asked of you, knowing that this is not the act of a great martyr. It is the act of coming in to your true inheritance. Take up your inheritance. Do the work that comes to you. Don't fight it.

If you find yourself to be unwilling, and who doesn't at times, listen to the unwilling voice. Zoom-out a little bit. Distinguish the complaint from the one who complains. If you are unwilling, if you are fighting, if you are in conflict, there is a complainer. There is complaint. Complaint is a direct consequence of dislike. When you complain, you are acting upon dislike. It is pretty clear how suffering is generated there. "But my complaint is so justified". Well, yes, but why did you come? Did you come for justification or did you come to let go and find the big picture. Justification will only lead to little picture consciousness. This business is not about perpetuating our little self, our ego.

When you find yourself unwilling, see the element of complaint as a function of the mind. See your thoughts going round in that complaining circle, but don't join it. If you join in with it, in other words, if you leap in and see the world only from the point-of-view of being an injured party, a victim, then samsara goes on, little picture goes on. Zoom-out a little bit further and see there is a complainer who is suffering. You know what it's like when you meet a person who no matter what happens complains. It doesn't take a degree in psychology to see the suffering that ensues. A complainer experiences the world as a victim. One can see that in others; when you find yourself unwilling, realize that to some degree one is doing

the same thing. One is creating this world of complaint where the solution is surrender and surrender is to no longer divide what is already whole.

So stop your complaint. I don't mean suppress. I mean recognize the futility of it and see what it leads to. And so you put down what is hurting you. This is no great renunciation. Put down that which is the cause of your suffering and then you can see just the pain. The pain has a place in the big picture. This is compassion. The pain is not rejected, but the pain is not continued. It comes to an end because we let it come to an end. When you allow yourself to zoom-out a little and see the complaining and hear its voice, in other words to hear its pain, realize the difference between that and joining the complaint. To zoom-out and see the complainer, hear the pain that is within it. Let it be so. It is embraced and already life has moved on. No need to look back.

So when it gets hard, keep in mind why you came. Keep in mind your intention. Our intention arises in the first place from the big picture. Our intention arises because we are not condemned to continue forever perpetuating our suffering. The only one who can bring it to an end is ourselves. We can live in a world of complaint or we can live in the big picture. Choose well.

Practice Is Not a Tool

Buddhism helps us to come to see things as they really are. In sketching out the path of training, we see a magnificent vision. It is affirmed from the beginning in our tradition that the universe is undivided. Even if we create fantasies of division, our fantasies of division are still part of the undivided. Enlightenment is already present. Genuine compassion is to willingly do what needs to be

done. Conditions reveal the path to us. The path doesn't come from anywhere or go anywhere. It's simply the living expression of the True Nature. This is the great vision—the way things are.

Why Buddhism points to a path is because while we have the great vision, we seem to be stuck with ourselves. Don't make a bad self; don't make a good self. We make a bad self when we think we are hopeless, that we can't do it. Maybe we even take refuge in the idea of our inadequacy, because it perhaps seems easier than facing our adequacy. Don't make a good self. The good self is one who has understood something, who is achieving something. We seem to spend a lot of time oscillating between our good self and our bad self. That should tell us something. It is not about making a bad self into a good self, or telling ourselves off when we think we are a bad self. These are strategies that go nowhere. The way that cuts through self and other—self-loathing and self-love—is to leave behind the prison of our imagined separation. Whether we say it is good or bad, leave it behind. This is why I say just do the work that comes to you.

Today I would like to explore a little more a couple of the symptoms that reveal fantasy-making in progress. Fantasies are those things that the self takes refuge in rather than allowing itself to just be what it is. We create pictures for ourselves of who we are, we tell ourselves stories. The two symptoms of this process are complaint and self-justification. This is another way of looking at fear and desire. For today, let's look at it in terms of complaint and self-justification.

Next time you realize that you have spent the last ten minutes, or even longer, of the meditation period just letting your thoughts run away with you, stop for a minute and look back at those thoughts. I think you'll find that they are either complaint or

self-justification. It's quite disturbing, amazing really, to see how pervasive this is. Don't get all puritanical and hot and bothered, just notice. With complaint and self-justification we prevent ourselves from realizing acceptance. We are actually running away from acceptance when we engage in complaint.

It may help to link this with a very prevalent feature of our society: the idea of change, progress, development. Much is based in our society upon imagining how things might be better and then setting out to change them accordingly. This is actually a wonderful expression of life. I am not wishing to be a Luddite and I am not one of those who fulminates against the modern world. Yet it is necessary to see the limitations that this has: to imagine how things might be better and set out to change them accordingly is based on the idea of an objective universe upon which we act we change things. There is an implicit separation in this model. And this model produces great wealth and ever-increasing comfort. And, believe me, I relish those things. Yet I can also see that there is a big gap still left. It does nothing to help us realize our true nature and so, how much is enough? I don't suggest that we should try to put the brakes on imagination and development. That would be wrong.

But see the relevance of this when it comes to our practice of meditation. We sit there and try to imagine how our practice, how our lives, how our inner lives might be better. We approach Buddhism as though it were a tool that we can apply to our lives in order to make our lives better, rather along the same model, unsurprisingly. Buddhism is not a tool. Our tradition traces its origin to the flower sermon of the Buddha. The Buddha simply held up a flower, said nothing. Makakashyo, who was close to the Buddha, understood and smiled. And the Buddha said that he had transmitted the eye and treasury of the true teaching to Makakashyo. It is this

transmission that is passed down to the present day. There is no tool involved here. The flower that was held up was not a lever being applied to Makakashyo. It was the holding up of the flower. The revealing and the expressing of the true nature. This is zazen. So when you do zazen, do not look for a lever, do not try to imagine what enlightenment is like and adapt yourself accordingly. Just sit. And in the sitting you will come to recognize, if you persist, what complaint is. You will come to recognize self-justification. They're not so bad, but still, better not get caught by them. Just notice when they arise.

Complaint reveals a lack of understanding. We look outward, we make ourselves a victim. Don't complain. And when you make the resolve not to complain, body and mind straight away goes deeper. It doesn't really *go* deeper, it is just that a certain amount of unnecessary fantasy, unnecessary fuss and bother, is allowed to pass away and what has always been there becomes clearer. This is hard because we still feel unsure and we try to cover over our unsureness with self-justification. If you are unsure, just be in the heart of the unsureness. Indeed, if you see yourself engaged in justification, just notice and you will see the little germ within it of doubt. Just dwell with the doubt, if that is what is there. Just as the justification shows the doubt, so the doubt will show you something else. You must discover that something else for yourself. Shakyamuni holds up the flower. It is very relevant.

The Tides of Circumstance

The words that I have for you this morning are not intended for monks; they are not intended for lay people.

Are we compelled by circumstance? We can be in the world in a manner that experiences circumstance as a hindrance or as

a compulsion, in which we live like slaves because we are owned by circumstance. This happens when we live from a point-of-view. This goes very deep: to give what conditions need is to respond to the call of life. When we hold on to a point-of-view, or we *view* from a point, we cannot really hear what life calls us to listen to hear and so our lives are ruled by circumstance, most especially our own inner compulsion.

Who are we? Sometimes we appear as a child, then a parent, then perhaps as a child again. Sometimes child, sometimes parent, in all sorts of different circumstance. If we hold on to a point-of-view, or we view the world from a given point, we cannot flow with these necessary tides. When we let go of the position, we can understand what is needed. Although actually, very often, we find that we *have* responded. There is a knowing, perhaps afterwards, that we have responded rather than a self-conscious changing. We recognize the change once the change has taken place. What enables that to happen is our aspiration not to cling to a point-of-view.

It's sad to be stuck with complaint and justification. It prevents us from moving with the tides. In the depth of *zazen*, the heart of contemplation, there is no centre, no point as a separate being. Now to say that there is no centre to our separate being is a worrying statement. We tend to think that to have no centre is to be spineless, incapable of standing up for oneself, to be blown by every puff of breeze that comes along, to have no grounding. This is what we may fear, but this is not at all what I am talking about. There is no *core* in our separate being; there is a *core of being*, however. There is a true nature, but the true nature is not what we think. What is asked of us by the tides of life is to let go of that point around which form fears, desires and views.

It is one thing to see the grand vision of non-duality. But we must also hear the call that comes with it. Otherwise it remains simply a kind of fantasy. The call that comes with it is this deep inner letting go, a surrender. So that when the person next to you annoys you, are you compelled by circumstance? Do you seek to be strong in your *self* in circumstance, or do you recognize that there is no core of a separate existence? There is no point.

There is an old dialogue that is sometimes seen as a kōan. It is a conversation between Tōzan and a member of the community who asks Tōzan, "When cold and heat come, how can they be avoided?" Tōzan replies, "Why don't you go where there is no cold or heat?" And the monk asks, "Where is that?" Tōzan replies, "When it is hot, heat completes us; when it is cold, cold finishes us." The circumstances of heat and cold can be birth and death. It is often interpreted that way, but actually heat and cold, cold and heat are the tides of circumstance that we encounter. I don't think the monk was so foolish that he didn't know to go to the place where there is no cold or heat; he wanted to know more about that place. When cold and heat come, how can we avoid them? By now we should be past trying to avoid them. Are we trying to go beyond them? In which case, we are still trying to avoid them. The answer to birth and death does not lie in life after death. The answer to what is good to do is just now.

We are all confronted with circumstance. Will you be a slave of circumstance? What will you do when you encounter cold and heat. Tōzan says, "When it is hot, hot completes us; when it is cold, cold finishes us." We need to give that deeply. Don't fear it. When we look for nothing more than what is right here, then the heat that comes completes us. It is complete right now. When we are not

looking for anything more, this is the true Iron Being. The tides of cold and heat, the moving of circumstance, completes us. Does it matter what those tides are?

This has nothing to do with being a monk or a layman. It has everything to do with the depth of our wish. This is where the way opens and if we hold back from this kind of giving, this kind of deep, deep acceptance, then we miss our true inheritance. Don't get left behind.

Conditions Change, Completeness Doesn't

Tomorrow we are celebrating the Ceremony of Feeding the Hungry Ghosts so I would like to link that with what we've been talking about over the last few days.

When conditions arise, no matter what the conditions are, they complete us. And then conditions change. Acceptance means that conditions change, completeness doesn't. So although we say that heat or cold completes us, it is not that we were incomplete before heat and cold came along. This is the activity of very complete, very deep acceptance. Whatever the condition that arises, whether that is our health, our birth or death, our freedom or repression, it is our completion. The conditions give rise to our expression. Expression means expression of the completeness. Conditions change, things happen and in their happening, we are completed. That is not the end of the story. There is expression which arises out of completeness. This is the activity of enlightenment. Put it another way, Kanzeon hears the cries of the world and has a thousand hands with which to respond. The arising of conditions is Kanzeon hearing. The conditions complete Kanzeon because without conditions there is no Kanzeon. But a Kanzeon without expression is

an impossibility. Kanzeon does not simply hear, but Kanzeon expresses. And in the expression the world of enlightenment emerges. We might say the world of enlightenment awakens. There is no gap between completion and expression.

In the traditional Buddhist view of the cosmos, hungry ghosts are beings who believe that water is fire. When they try to drink, their throats are burned because they believe the water is fire. This state of misery arises because they misunderstand conditions. When we cling onto things, when we are driven by fear and desire, we create a world, a world of experience. Fear gives rise to desire; desire gives rise to fear. A mutually reinforcing circle. And within that circle, we think water is fire.

For example, I was talking yesterday about the meaning of surrender. When we fear to give ourselves completely, we think that water is fire, that the water of compassion will burn us. So when we speak of hungry ghosts, we are not necessarily thinking about a specific realm, but about how beings in any realm get caught in suffering. In all the realms that we know of, the dynamic of suffering is basically the same. In the classic representations in the wheel of life, the Buddha is shown as appearing in each of the six realms: the heavens, the hells, the hungry ghosts, the animals, the devas, the warring deities. The appearance of the Buddha to me is not the appearance of a mystical being so much as within the condition of the realm itself, there is the teaching. In other words, when it is hot, the heat completes us. When we can see the nature of heat, when we allow ourselves to see the nature of heat, we realize the presence of the Buddha. And heat, remember, is the condition of the moment. Whether we perceive it as heat or cold, life or death, here right now is the appearance of the Buddha. And this is real. This is living enlightenment right now. Not dependent on anything and yet each

condition completes it. Each condition gives it the form that it has. And it is right and human that we seek to improve conditions. This is part of the work of Kanzeon. We can do that because we know that through the deep acceptance of conditions as they are, we will find the true expression. And giving expression is the appearance of the Buddha in this world.

And so in our ceremony we make an offering of the Dharma to the hungry ghosts. Those of you who have been to the ceremony before know there is the opportunity of remembering particular people who have died. We have paper *ihais*, paper memorial tablets like the ones in the Kanzeon shrine, and you can write the name of anyone you would like to be remembered on a paper and it will be placed on the altar at the Segaki ceremony. In doing so, you are making an offering of love, giving expression to the mind of Kanzeon in response to conditions arising from their death. You are not saying that they are a hungry ghost. The ceremony is offered to all the dead. There is one all-inclusive memorial tablet in the centre of the altar that simply says, "In memory of all the dead".

We have no need to look at others and see if they are hungry ghosts or not. We just do the best we can to make an offering of the Dharma. The way that used to be done originally was to provide a meal for the monks who would then dedicate the merit of their training to the dead. But seeing how all of us are training, all of us are dedicating our lives to train, therefore we can receive the food and in our conversion of that food, we give expression to the life of training and we offer that. Because when we allow conditions to be our completion, and give expression to that completion, the merit is endless. When we wish all beings to find this same truth that we are exploring for ourselves, don't be concerned with whether you have found it or not. Seek to give expression to acceptance as conditions

arise. And through your acceptance, there will emerge the expression and that expression will be very particular to you and the conditions. Because it will be the offering that you, and only you, can make. It is your training to uncover that expression, to give that expression and to dedicate the merit of that giving to all beings everywhere. And, of course, we remember especially those in deep states of suffering.

If we go back for a moment to this loose definition of hungry ghosts as being those who believe that water is fire, it really is a symbol of how difficult it is to hear the teaching when we are in suffering. We talk about the dangers of opinions. Of course we all have opinions, we must all work through opinions; we as human beings probably must have opinions in order to function. But it is very important to see how opinions or beliefs are structured. They very often arise from sources that are not rational. In fact, they arise from our fears and desires, they are how we desperately want the world to be, or they may be driven by what we fear the world to be. And so our desires and fears shape our view of the world and that world seems to us to be very substantial. And we get lost in our own world where, in fact, we are seeing water as fire. The Dharma is present in that world, but our ability to hear is dependent upon our acceptance or, if you like, our surrender, our willingness to just utterly let go. It is that we move to the utter letting go rather than to correcting opinions, because there is no end to the argument over which is the right opinion or which is the wrong opinion. Of course there are those things that can be clearly seen to express the Dharma and there is the need to discuss the Dharma and clarify it for ourselves. But the reason why one person believes one thing and another person believes another usually is not a matter of rational opinion, but of something much deeper and more visceral. It

is these deeper and more visceral understandings of the world that we have to tackle and this we might say is analogous to the realm of the hungry ghost.

Although the Buddha appears in the realm of the hungry ghosts, the Buddha does not destroy the realm of the hungry ghosts. Metaphorically speaking, the Buddha does not kick down the doors and take the hungry ghosts off into a heaven. It is no good just changing one thing for another thing, because that heaven would very quickly turn into the same place the hungry ghosts have just come from. Each 'ghost' for themselves must come to see that suffering is not caused by conditions; suffering is caused by our particular response to conditions. We cannot control conditions, but we *can* choose to accept. In the depths of acceptance, we find the completeness, no matter the condition. So although we cannot guarantee conditions, we can find the truth, we can find the living expression of enlightenment now. Everyone sooner or later, we believe, will come to this and so in our ceremony we make the offering in the hope that all may hear and know that what seems to be this burning fire is really the water of the compassion of the Buddhas. We are not trapped unless we make it so.