

Dharma talk
11/13/10
Poodles on the lawn

Here we are...just sitting here.

A little story...it was years ago, early in the morning, and I was walking down one of those little quiet residential streets near Craig and Bayard. Just walking. In front of one of those tidy homes, up on the lawn, there was a dog--such a strange dog, just standing there, in profile, looking straight ahead. I stopped. Stared. I stared harder. That is the weirdest looking black standard poodle I have ever seen, I said to myself. It turned and looked at me. It said "Baaaaa".

I had not expected a lamb. Therefore, I could not see a lamb, until he told me quite clearly who he was.

Pre-conceptions and habits of mind are part of what makes us human. That is the normal functioning of mind. It is also what makes us dumb enough not to see the lamb in front of us. I saw a poodle. A poodle on the lawn.

So here we sit, observing the habits of our minds, the functioning mind trying to wake up, to find our way to make contact with primary experience and primary sensation, trying to hone the capacity to see, to feel, to hear what is present, and to be curious about how our minds make habitual meaning out of these experiences, and learn to not hold onto our conclusions. They are at best a temporary truth. For a moment it was a poodle. Silly me.

We know it takes simultaneous factors of mind to engage in this process of disassembling our entrenched habits. We are poised here. A hawk poised in mid-air floats steadily on constantly changing air currents, eddies of warmth and sunlight, up-drafts, constantly adjusting his wings to hang right there. We are poised on our pillows, mindful of the movements of our own consciousness. We adjust the effort, the amount of energy of our concentration. We move into absorption for periods, and time drops away, and then mind re-minds us of some fragmented commentary, and back again. We remember trust and the weight of our own bodies when we get uncomfortable,

and regain stability. We remember that all phenomena are temporary when we forget and these 35 minutes stretch into forever. We sit here, poised, while the stream of consciousness creates updrafts, turbulence, or pools of sunshine. Just sitting here. Even making room for the storms.

Sometimes we think that when our minds are in a frenzy or lethargic or bored that we are doing something wrong. But really, this is when practice is just getting really interesting. All the hindrances to clarity get going, like hordes of leaping poodles, or sleeping dogs on our path, when the habits of consciousness are putting up their defenses to keep us from feeling. Feeling what? I don't know. But the hindrances are committed to the status quo, committed to keeping the world familiar and known. This is the time to redouble our attention. These poodles are not really poodles. What are they?

Here is when the body is our ally, even if our knees and our back hurt. We can use the weight and form and the energy of our bodies to keep focused and let something new happen. Let the sense of the body become big enough. When we get caught into clinging or aversion, our sense of self, our sense of our body becomes narrow and predictable. Expand the awareness so it is big enough. Sometimes the bodily sense and the emotional sense work together—the twitch of shame, the sucker punch of defenselessness, choking off anger so we don't blow our top, the suffocating grip of fear? Where is it? Feel the vitality and energy of this arising. What is present in this moment? How is it moving, transforming? Is there a story that comes with this? All truths are temporary. Curiosity and compassion help hold this with poise, with nobility. This is the cultivation of equanimity. I am just sitting here. In knowing this moment, the feeling of this moment without aversion or clinging, without holding on to it or pushing it away, this is the alchemy required for transformation. This is the dharma in action. This is the equanimity necessary to disentangle our entrenched pre-conceptions and the habits of our mind.

And we are just breathing. Sitting here. Nothing to do or fix. Our minds from head to toe. Is this a poodle or something I have never seen before? Let me look again.