

4: Practice

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We will continue our examination of the Four Noble Truths. The first; conditioned experiencing is suffering.

The second: the cause of this suffering is grasping. We grasp if we sense that there is something lacking, a sense of poverty present, the sense of poverty arises as Anzan Hoshin roshi says, through believing that we are a separate self. Anything, which presents itself as a self cannot be what it pretends to be. Why? Because it is known; it is felt, and so it cannot be the knower.

There is an end of suffering, end of conditioned experiencing. How do we end it? Through practice: this practice; this lineage of realized practice which was set in motion when the Buddha presented these Teachings to his first five students. Now in various translations and texts, the means to the blowing out of suffering, the blowing out of the burning flames of passion, aggression and stupidity, is presented as the Path or the Way. Now this is true and it is not true. It all depends what we are talking about. And as the Roshi has said, "It is important for us to understand our practice because if we misunderstand we will practise that misunderstanding".

Now the clarity of Anzan roshi's Teachings show us that the Path, the Way, and practice are one and the same. The Roshi wrote a gata (a chant) called the "Shinjin Gata",

*"Body arises as mind
Mind arises as body
Right here, right now,
The way attains itself."*

You are the Way. As you practise this moment, as you see obscurations arise and open them by feeling the breath in the body - seeing the seeing, hearing the hearing - you are practising the Path. Experiencing is open, clarity presents itself. You are turning the Wheel of Realized Practice.

Right here we have another opportunity to see how misunderstandings arise.

As I said a few moments ago, often the Fourth Noble Truth is stated as being the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is presented using different words, such as "Right Understanding" or "Right View", and in other texts, "Perfect View".

The second step of the Eightfold Path is; "Right Thought" or in other texts, "Perfect Resolve".

The third: "Right Speech" or "Perfect Speech".

Fourth: "Right Action" or "Perfect Conduct". Right here I am getting a little bit scared - "Perfect conduct" in order to realize the Path? Hmmm.

Fifth: "Right Livelihood" or "Perfect Livelihood".

Sixth: "Right Effort" or "Perfect Effort".

Seventh: "Right Mindfulness", in other text, "Perfect Mindfulness".

And the eighth: "Right Concentration" or "Right Meditation" or "Perfect Concentration".

Now this does seem to be rather confusing and complex, doesn't it? It seems a bit like a whole lot of rules, and I'm not really quite sure exactly what is being talked about. But, as we know if experiencing is open, if this moment is open and contraction is released, then this moment is free of obscurity and obstruction. It is whole thought. The creation, the coming into being of "a self" which is a contraction, which believes it can hold itself apart from everything else that is going on is released and results in experiencing in this moment.

So we understand through this practice that seeing and hearing, tasting and touching, feeling and smelling arise in this moment as this moment; thoughts and feelings arise in this moment and are practised and can be released into this moment. And so we begin to understand reality, the reality of our practice, of our life, more and more clearly. We see things for what they are. Thoughts are seen for what they are. The reality of their appearing and disappearing presents itself moment-after-moment.

As we continue to practise and continue to open to this moment through the forms of our practice, through zazen, kinhin, bowing practice, oryoki, chanting, the tendency of self-image to separate ourselves, to hide from open experiencing in a fabricated self is released. What we think becomes clearer as obstruction is released; what we say, when we open our mouth to speak. And as we speak we feel the tongue against the teeth, we feel the breath passing over the soft tissue of the throat, we feel the vibration of the sound, and the words we utter become clearer. They are unobscured by self-image trying to say the right thing and do the right thing. What we say or do is what it is.

Now, the same clarity starts to manifest in what we do, in the action we choose to take. Action which is unobstructed, not contracted, which is open and generous, is dignified, is an expression of the dignity of life as it arises in this moment. As our practice matures we may find ourselves making career changes, changing what we do for a living, changing how we are so we are more in line with the Dharma, with the Teachings of Reality and with vows that we take, should we take them. So more and more we start to understand what is spoken of as "Right Livelihood".

As we practise, as we feel the breath, rising and falling in the body, as we see the colours and forms, hear the sound of birds; each moment opens more and more fully if unobstructed. Present in this moment, as the energy of bodymind is clarified in each thing that we do, nothing is left behind. This moment is traceless. We can now start to understand the seventh step of what is presented in a linear fashion of "The Eightfold Path", mindfulness, "Right Mindfulness", the practice of mindfulness, which clarifies misunderstanding into understanding, practice. At this point "The Eightfold Path" has circled or spiraled and we realize that out of our practice, what was spoken of as eight rules, in fact, is just what we do when we do what we do from clarity.

In "The Straight Path", Anzan Hoshin roshi presents the discourse by the Buddha on "The Four Noble Truths":

"And again, monks, one lives completely viewing the Four Noble Truths as mental states. And how, monks, does one live completely viewing the Four Noble Truths as mental states? Here monks, this is suffering. Thus one knows it as it is. This is the arising of suffering. Thus one knows it as it is. This is the ending of suffering. Thus one knows it as it is. This is the way to the ending of suffering. Thus one knows

it as it is.

“Thus one lives completely viewing mental states as states, internally. One lives completely, viewing mental states as states, externally. Thus one lives completely viewing mental states as states, both internally and externally. One dwells observing mental states as phenomena which arises. One dwells observing mental states as phenomena which decays. Thus one dwells observing mental states as phenomena which both arises and decays. When the mindfulness ‘These are mental states’ is established, there is just knowing and just mindfulness.”

One practises. You practise, as you sit facing the wall, you are practising yourself as you are in this moment: realized practice, the practice of Awareness Itself, the practice of Waking Up.

2600 years ago, Gautama Siddhartha woke up to this, to the actual nature of experiencing. He recognized that all things rise and fall and nothing that is known can be what Knowing in Itself is. That recognition, that practice of this moment has been Transmitted from Teacher to student through a 2600-year Lineage. We call it Zen. Now here in this practice we are taught to practise what Dogen zenji, our Lineage Ancestor and the Founder of Soto Zen taught, “Shinjin Gakudo: Study of the Way Through the Bodymind”.

The Bodymind can only arise where it is arising, which is right now in this moment. Feel the breath arising. Anzan roshi instructs in “Before Thinking”,

“Practise whatever presents itself to you. Practise this thought, this sound, this feeling, this tension in the shoulder, this shortness of breath, and this ease of the breath sliding in and out. Practise this joyful posture, practise this contraction in the belly, practise whatever is present, whatever presents itself to you. Practise this present moment. As you do so, you enter more and more into the body, into the mind, into the moment, and greater and greater depths begin to show themselves to you”

I recognize in this moment, complete as it is, right here, right now, with the practice of right here, right now, obstruction and obscuration are released. Grasping is released. Suffering is ended. Move on.

Now, remember our student, our student who grasped and closed down with, “I want to learn the chants”?

Remember Zen Master Anzan Hoshin, “Don’t do that”?

What happened?

Well, the student practised this moment and this moment and this moment and chants and sits and walks and eats in this present moment, just as you are doing.

There is a traditional gata which is marked outside the gates of Zen Monasteries. It is chanted during sesshin. It is written on the block of wood with the wooden striker in the Hatto; the characters on the block of wood on the wall which is called the “han”, say “Daiji”, or “Great Matter”. The chant, which is one of the ones that the student learnt, is called the “Daiji-no-ge”. So I will ask my Dharma sisters and brothers, monks, who are in the room, in the Hatto at this time, to join me in chanting the “Daiji-no-ge”.

[Gong is struck twice]

The Great Matter is birth and death.
Life slips past and time is gone.
Right now, Wake Up! Wake Up!
Do not waste time.

[Gong strike]

Practise.

Thank you for listening.