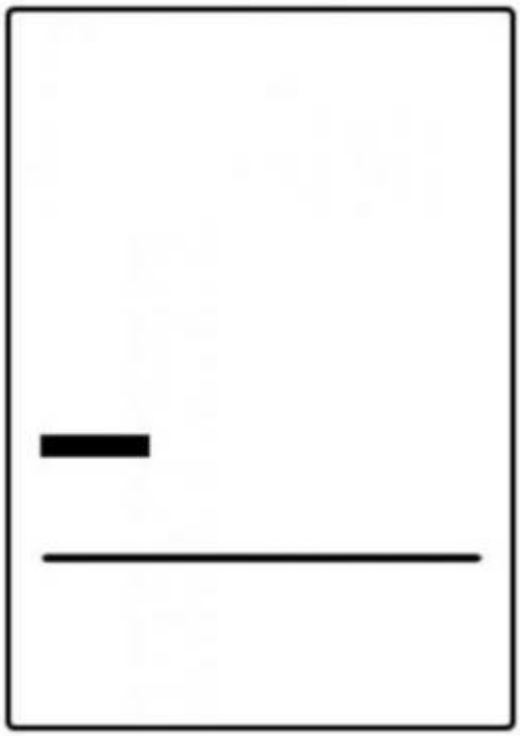
The Art of Subtraction

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How lightly can you do what you do? Whatever you do, is there something that can be subtracted so that it is more authentically what it is? When you pick up a cup, or turn a doorknob, or take care of your zafu, can you just do that without bringing any heavy-handedness to it, without doing it automatically, without “trying”?

The simplicity of Zen practice is the practice of things as they actually are. It is not an attitude or a stance or an affectation. It is not something extra. It is actually feeling the cup in your hand when you lift it. It is not doing something else at the same time, absent-mindedly turning a storyline this way and that in your mind whilst giving a minimal amount of attention to the cup, even if the story is that you are “being mindful”. It is really paying attention to what you are doing.

Through being inattentive, the details of your life become a blur. You, your storylines, the objects and people around you, together with all of your issues and concerns and states and the stuff you need to do can become blurred together. You stop seeing the details of things as they are because when your attention becomes that fogged up, you don’t realize how little attention you are really paying to anything. But your lack of attention shows itself in a myriad of ways and you can notice these and use the noticing of them to do something about the blurring. Your lack of attention is actually something you are adding to your life. Zen practice is learning how to subtract that and how to live in the life that zazen uncovers.

For example, when you leave a room, turn off the light. It’s such a simple thing, but most of the time when you leave a light on it is because you are not really seeing what you are seeing. You’re not seeing that the light is on. And why is that? What are you “seeing” instead? Thoughts about where you are going next, what

you will be doing next? Let go of all of this nattering to yourself and turn off the light. But when you turn off the light, just turn it off. Don't then get into a storyline about how "green" you are or want to be, and how you should conserve and limit your use of energy and buy new recycling bins and wear shoes made out of rubber tires because all of this means something about you being a "good human being". Subtract all of that and just turn the light off. Let it be as simple as that. Just do this one thing and feel the hand as you do it. Subtract the sense of a "self" who is turning off the light and just turn it off.

In the words of the "Mahaprajnaparamita Hridaya sutra", as translated by Zen Master Anzan Hoshin:

There-fore, Sa-ri-putra,
in emp-ti-ness, there is no form,
no re-action, sym-b'lization, patt-ern-ing,
nor con-scious-ness.

This of course is a reference to the five skandhas, which are a way of talking about how "otherness" happens; how you can seem to become separate from what is actually being experienced.

No eye, ear, nose, tongue, bo-dy, mind;
no form, sound, smell, taste, touch,
nor what the mind takes hold of.

What this means is that, for example, is that the eye (e-y-e) does not need an "I". There is no "self" that sees. Seeing is not an idea of seeing. The word "eye" "e-y-e" and the word "I" as in "i" cannot see. The eye sees.

No ig-nor-ance, nor end of it,
no de-cay and death,
no end of de-cay and death.
No suffering, no source of suffering,
no ce-ssa-tion of suffering;
no Path, no wis-dom,
no a-ttain-ment, no non-a-ttain-ment.

All of these things are empty, and all ideas about these things are empty. They are empty of all of your thoughts and feelings about them.

Thus,
Bo-dhi-sattvas have no a-ttain-ment,
but just live in pra-jna-pa-ra-mita;
un-ob-scured, and so with-out fear.
Thus they real-ize com-plete re-lease.
This is nirvana, the blowing out of the flames of passion, aggression, and ignorance.

How do you practise this? By really attending to what is being experienced without adding anything; by letting each thing stand out clearly, as it actually is, instead of covering over the details with your own

fabrications.

So, when you use a piece of paper towel to dry your hands, scrunch it up before you throw it in the garbage can. Why? Because a garbage can hold many more pieces of scrunched up paper towels than it can unscrunched pieces. It's just common sense. The three-ply toilet paper you use comes from 100-year old trees. Do you really need three layers of a hundred-year old tree to wipe your butt?

Just look at what you use and how you use it. It doesn't need a storyline about you or about how "mindful" you are being. Flatten out cans and tins as much as you can. Tear up cardboard. Subtract laziness and thoughtlessness and take care of what you do by doing it fully.

Wash your cups and dishes and put them away after using them so that when you come back, you have a nice clean cup and bowl to use. This is an act of compassion towards oneself and, in fact, towards others, because the tendency to blur and clutter and avoid taking care of simple details has become so commonplace that little is standing out for anyone and it creates more work for all of us.

Wash your cat's dishes. Don't just put another plate of food on the floor next to the one already encrusted with cat food. Use one bowl and clean it each time, before filling it. But when you do this, don't get into a storyline about all of the other stuff you "should" clean up and how much work that would be and how you already have too much to do. Just do this one thing and clean the cat's dishes. Clean the litter box instead of subjecting the poor cat to your laziness. Would you want to clamber about in a stinking mess in your bare feet? Don't you see that the states you indulge in that lead to such complete disregard of the obvious are something you are bringing to experiencing, something you are superimposing? Subtract that and taking care becomes obvious and simple and straightforward. It's not difficult. Most things are pretty obvious. If you don't fill in a tax return, you will not get a refund. If you don't take care of your teeth, they will fall out.

People usually have long lists of stuff they want to do, stuff they have to do, stuff they really don't want to do but know that they have to. And of these three categories, the last is where they will tend to procrastinate and blur. Subtract the blurring and procrastination by moving up the items that you know you have to do and really don't want to. Each day or each week schedule time to do something about those instead of ignoring them. If you regularly clean a room and find some things simple and easy, some things more complex, and you really, really don't want to clean the windows, choose a day to clean the windows as the first task you do.

Look into how you are prioritizing what you need to do and how you allow your states to influence your priorities and subtract the states. Just do what needs to be done without a storyline about how much you hate washing windows, or how "mindful" or "efficient" or "competent" you are because you washed the windows or about how this is going to change your whole life. Just clean the windows. Thoughts about what you are doing or how you are doing it or what this means relative to anything else are irrelevant. They might come up, but don't move attention towards them. Instead, stay with the simplicity of THIS thing you are doing.

Look at the space around you, your living space, the space you work in, the space of your car, the contents of the bags you carry around with you. What's in them that doesn't need to be there, and doesn't really serve a purpose? Subtract the clutter and you'll be able to find what you actually need and use. If you start looking around your living space with an eye to functionality, to what you actually use and how you use it, you can easily subtract most of this stuff so that it is easily maintained, everything has a place, and you know where

it all is. Look for ways in which you can simplify and clarify how you arrange things around you.

Set up systems for yourself, such as a hook on which you always place your keys so you always know where they are. Get a white board and write down items that you use up so that you don't have to try to remember what you don't have and need to buy. Learn from your experience. If there is a gap, a place in which you are allowing things to become blurry, are wasting time or wasting resources, clean it up by attending to what you actually do, how you confuse yourself, and subtract the confusion.

Dainen-ji, the monastery in which you sit today, is a very good example of the results of the art of subtraction. After we purchased this 135 year-old heritage building in 1996, we spent the first three months working round the clock, cleaning, renovating, and repairing it so that it would better reflect our practice. We filled two huge industrial-sized dumpsters with layer upon layer of flooring, drywall, bad carpentry, psychedelic wallpaper from the 60s and all manner of other debris. All of this debris came from the many years of layering that had been added to the building, the years and years of people covering the floors and walls and even the ceilings with their ideas. And when we stripped away all of this stuff that had piled up, what we found underneath was solid oak floors, beams that were six inches thick, wonderful craftsmanship from an era long gone that one no longer sees in this day and age. And much of what we have done since in refining the building is to simplify it further — taking a jumble of rooms in the basement, for example, and turning them into clear and clean spaces; turning the kitchen and pantry into spaces that allow the activities that occur there to flow smoothly.

Similarly, if you subtract the complexity, the "extras" you bring to things – all the stuff and states and procrastination and idea-hampstering and cloudy thinking, you will uncover a simplicity in how you live that will much more closely align with what you are learning through your practise of zazen. But the information needed to do this comes first and foremost through sitting zazen. Sitting facing a wall in zazen is the direct way to practise the art of subtraction because there's nothing you can justify adding on to it. You have been given instructions and no matter how much you "try" to rework them, you keep finding yourself just sitting on a cushion watching your mind run down the wall. The practice of zazen is the practice of your life as it actually is and has nothing to do with your thoughts or feelings about it or about yourself or about the world. When you are sitting just sit, feeling into the sensations of the breath, opening to the sensations of the whole body sitting, opening to seeing and hearing.

If you are "trying" to sit, viewing the body as though it were something "other" that you have to do this practice thing to, subtract that. If you are heavy-handedly "trying" to sit up straight, "trying" to sit still, subtract that. What do you need to let go of to just sit up straight and sit still? It's not hard. It's actually the simplest thing in the world, but to do it you have to subtract all of the stuff you "try" to bring to it.

You let yourself pitch forward, slump, pull back and tighten. You do all sorts of things instead of just letting the bodymind sit straight and still. If you are slumping, what are you bringing to the experience of sitting that is causing you to slump? That is what you need to subtract by releasing it. Sit in balance point, allowing the skeletal frame rest on itself, and you'll find that this is simpler and easier than trying to fend off the forces of gravity that are causing you to pitch forward. If you are pulling back, tightening, sitting as though you have steel rods up your spine, what are you bringing to the experience of sitting that is causing you to do that? That is what you need to let go of. Fidgeting, wiggling your toes, rocking with the breath, letting your eyes wander or your head jut forward, even the smallest of movements should be noticed because the movements of attention that are causing them need to be released. How do you release them? By really

practising the balance and alignment of the posture, by feeling into the sensations of the breath and tanden and the whole bodymind sitting; by opening to peripheral vision and hearing. Release attention into the sensations, colours and forms and sounds. Let the mind BE the sensations and colours and forms and sounds.

If you were really just aligning yourself with the practice, you would just be sitting up straight, not moving, and the experience of sitting would be light, almost effortless, clear and bright. And this has NOTHING to do with your state of health or whether you are physically tired or whether your life is difficult or easy. Not pushing, not sinking, not holding or applying any kind of strategy, just sitting, feeling, seeing, hearing, attention fully engaged. But when you are not doing this, it is because there is a separation in your experiencing. You have separated yourself from what is actually going on. There is a sense of locatedness, a "you" who is tired, a "you" who is bored or confused or lost in thought pursuing ideas and storylines. This "you" is a contraction and distortion of attention into the sense of "self" and "other".

The five skandhas are a way of talking about how this "otherness" happens. In Sanskrit, the five skandhas are called the panca upadanaskhanda, the five binding groups. They are rupa (form), vedana (basic reactivity), samjna (symbolization), sankhara (habitual patterning), and vijnana (consciousness). The five skandhas are compulsive and occur through glossing over the details of experiencing: not noticing that a thought arises, dwells and decays; not hearing how a sound is actually heard. So the five skandhas refers to how experiencing is conditioned rather than how Knowing shows itself as what is known. And all depending on how closely we are looking at things, how much we attend to the details of things as they are, how subtle or how coarse our attention is, we experience things in different ways and the differences can seem to be worlds apart. Simple things can seem extraordinarily complex. Or simple things can be seen and understood to be simple.

The third skandha, symbolization (or sanna in Pali or samjna in Sanskrit) can also be translated as "perception". Symbolization skandha allows us to recognize and identify what we are experiencing.

In Class 13 of the Development of Buddhist Psychology series of Classes, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says, and I quote:

> *In the Visudhimagga it says that its function is to make a sign as a condition for perceiving again that this is the same, as carpenters do in the case of timber, and so on. So just as a carpenter would make a mark on a board to show that this board is going to be cut in a certain way or used in a certain way, so the perception skandha marks our experience, saying that this is much the same as that, so that the perception skandha then helps us to know which door to enter to go to the washroom and which door to enter in order to go to the bedroom. It allows us to clarify our situation a great deal.*
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> *On the other hand, this perception skandha can function in such a way that we are not actually experiencing what we are presently experiencing. We are only experiencing its similarity to what has been experienced previously. So in that way, if the perception skandha occurs in the context of that basic piling up, that heaping up of experience into unexamined continuities, then we are basically experiencing only what we have experienced, not what we are experiencing. We are experiencing our past so that if someone speaks to us in a certain tone of voice that triggers all kinds of memories and that also triggers all kinds of ways of reacting that have been encoded in relationship to a similar event. So that, if say when we are young and we are helping our father or mother doing something about the kitchen or about the house or working on the car, if we don't do things in quite the way that we are supposed to and they snap*

at us and this happens consistently, then later we might be thirty, forty, fifty years old but if we are trying to hang a picture and our wife or our husband is critical of how we are doing it, we become quite childish about all of that because once more, we feel as if we are a child. We feel as if that same situation is ongoing. And so we are experiencing our past rather than experiencing our present.

So therefore, it is very important for us to notice this skandha of perception when it is present. When we recognize something, what is that like? When you see snow, when you feel rain, when you stand up or when you sit down, are you really feeling it, are you really seeing it, are you really hearing it, or are you only experiencing your past? What does that actually feel like when that moment of marking comes in, when our experience becomes marked and labeled and split off and gathered in certain ways? What does that actually feel like? Can we recognize that as it is happening? I think that we can within practice.

We can notice when we are bringing something "extra" to experiencing, when we are complexifying, when we are cluttering up our own lives and cluttering up other people's lives. We can choose simplicity over cluttering; we can choose clarity over blurring. We can choose to live with intention instead of just allowing ourselves to be carried along by the momentum of compulsion. But we have to actually DO this.

The other day a student told me of a state of fear he had experienced that was very strong. He was on a bus when this state came up and seemed to envelop him in a big wave. He recognized it as a state and knew that he had to practise with it and so he was very busy trying to be mindful. But at a certain point he realized that the bus was emptying, that all of the passengers were getting off and realized that he hadn't heard the bus driver announce that they should all disembark. I laughed heartily when I heard this story, but not because I was enjoying a joke at his expense. I laughed with him because when a student begins to realize that mindfulness is not just conjuring up an attitude to counter another attitude, "trying to be" this way or that, applying some strategy, but actually feeling, actually hearing, actually seeing, there can be the understanding that all that is needed is to practise the art of subtraction, to get out of the way so that experiencing can be experienced as it actually is. And that when we allow ourselves to do this, we are unobscured and so without fear.

So now, back to that cup. You might ask yourself how paying attention to the way you handle a cup is going to help you. After all, you have SO much to do, all kinds of confusing relationships, SO many demands on your time, decisions to make. You're always in a hurry, and often, as you say, you don't feel good. You just don't feel up to the challenge. It's too much work and compared to all of these other terribly important aspects of your life, it seems trivial and it's irritating to be reminded that you should feel the cup in your hand when all you want to do is down this coffee and get on with the next thing.

But, you see, you're going to get on with the next thing and the next thing and the next thing with the same disregard for detail. The cup is jumbled in with your thoughts, with other stuff you are doing. And the cup ends up jumbled in the sink with the jumble of other dishes while you go on to the jumble of other stuff you complain about being so jumbled, when all the while it's not that other stuff is jumbled, it's that YOU are jumbled. You've allowed it all to become piled up and you're not recognizing that experiencing has become conditioned through this piling up. That's why you're not feeling the cup in your hand.

What are you going to do about this? Obviously it makes no sense at all to allow such confusion to continue. What you need to do is learn the art of subtraction and practise it as often as you are able.

So, Prajnaparamita: EVERYBODY OUT OF THE POOL. Open to the fullness and richness of each moment and subtract anything you are adding.