

Beginning to See

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Our life is continually rising and falling. Each and every moment comes and goes as the colours, sounds, forms, sensations, smells, thoughts and feelings in this moment as this moment. Sakyamuni Buddha spoke of this as “annica”, or impermanence, as being one of the three marks of existence. (The other two being “dukkha” or unsatisfactoriness; and “anatta” or no-self.) Our Teacher, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin, has reminded this to us in many ways. In the teisho “Now and Then” in the series “Wild Time: Commentaries on Dogen zenji’s Uji: Being Time”, he says:

“Time is not merely something which ‘passes.’ It is the utter and radical impermanence that makes life possible so that when you breathe in you don’t have to hold it forever and ever. You can breathe out. And when you breathe out there is room to breathe in. And this impermanence is so radical that it must be understood not as some thing which happens “to” things but as the activity, the presencing, of Reality.”

Here the Roshi is pointing to something far more penetrating than the usual view of impermanence.

Usual mind is the assumption that there is a self that exists separate from the world, which is comprised of things or objects, and impermanence is the various ways in which these objects are configured in relationship to each other and this sense of self. It uses memories to further the illusion that impermanence is happening round it. It uses thoughts and feelings about expectations to solidify this sense of self which will experience life in different ways based how it will interact with things or objects in the world. Thus is deludes itself into thinking that time is flowing by and the world is happening around it. Instead of this view, the Roshi points to that fact that this is the only moment where the activity of experiencing is taking place and impermanence is this very presencing of reality.

Usual mind, however, refuses to recognize this immediate and continuous rising and falling taking place right before it; and instead is continuously trying to relive past experiences, or is searching and grasping at those experiences that fit its story-lines about how it wants the world to be.

How much of today have you noticed? Did you feel your feet as you were walking down the street? Did you hear the sounds of the leaves rustling? The sounds of traffic? Were you mumbling to yourself as you walked up the stairs to the Hatto? Are you feeling your breath right now?

So, as you can see, in the midst of impermanence, in the midst of the moment to moment presencing of vividness, usual mind has been obsessing about itself. It is trying to isolate and abstract itself from the reality of now, and trying to hold on to fragments of experiencing that are in reality, continually slipping away.

Many sutras and traditional teachings have spoken about this. Zen Master Anzan Hoshin has presented these for us in thousands of teisho. In his translation of selections from the Lankavatara Sutra, in the text titled “The Way of Intimate Knowing” he translates the chapter “Freedom From Attachment (Lanakavatara 3, 68)” where the sutra speaks of what you are noticing with the tendencies of attention this morning/evening:

“This tendency to objectify experiences and propagate conceptual contrivance about experiences and to attach oneself to this process is limitless, Mahamati. This tendency can involve all manner of experiences: Appearances, causes, being, nothingness, the born and the unborn, cessation and non-cessation, what lies in the path of Awakening and what does not, the conditioned and the unconditioned, conditions which prepare for awakening and those which do not, the structures inherent in any mode of knowing, thoughts about the attachment those outside the vast path have about contradictory ideas about reality, the insights transmitted in the lineages of those who practice the Three Vehicles and the Single Vehicle.

The simple minded attach themselves to these and other things, Mahamati, binding themselves to the conceptual structures of assumptions. The usual crowd of simpletons entwine themselves in the thread of thought structures, their opinions, and their categories like a silk-worm covering itself in silk. Entangled in those threads, but fascinated by what binds them, they hang in the margin between being and non-being.”

It's not very much fun is it, being like a silk-worm covering itself in silk?

We can be driven to practice because we see some of the consequences of our states - hurting ourselves, hurting others, ignoring things in our life (also called “forgetting”), wasting time in the haze of memory and expectation. We can be driven to want “to fix things in our life”. This however is another form of strategy of self-image; though it may be cloaked in the terminology of good intent. So what should we do? We should approach our practice with not trying to get anything or fix any problematic circumstances, but just practicing and seeing what is present for us. To hear what we hear. To see what we see. To feel what it is like to stand and feel the feet. To sit up straight and open the eye gaze and to actually experience our experience. This is something we have to do and use the whole bodymind to engage in. And since our experience is rising anew in every moment, we have to do this in every moment.

The Roshi emphasizes this in the teisho “The Most Important Thing” in the series “Turning the Wheel of the Way: Commentaries on Dogen zenji’s Gyoji” where he says:

“At the very beginning of his text Gyoji: Continuous Practice, Eihei Dogen zenji tells us that, “In the great Way of the Awakened Ancestors the most important thing has always been continuous practice.”

The Buddha Dharma, the Way of Awakening, is a practice. It is something to be done, something to be engaged, and something to be embodied. If we want to understand the Buddha Dharma, the most important thing for us to do is to do what the Buddha did. And what did he do? He did zazen. He sat and practiced mindfulness and engaged a deep radical questioning into experiencing and experiences. So for anyone to understand the Dharma, no matter whether we stand close or far, above or below, within or without, we must sit. We must do zazen.

The Roshi continues:

“However, while zazen is necessary in order for there to be any Dharma at all, Zen practice is not only zazen. When Dogen speaks of continuous practice as the most important thing in the Way of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors, he also means samu or caretaking practice. He means consistency and thoroughness in how we do what we do. He means exerting the Way beyond struggle, despite hesitations

and hopes and hardships. He means following through on what we have been taught and what we have recognized."

Doing this, moment by moment, exerting ourselves without struggle, we begin to align with the actual presencing of reality itself. We begin to see that attempts at grasping lead to suffering, and how to let it go. We begin to see ...

... come on take a look right here, with all that you have.