

Choice

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Very often in daisan I am asked about choices. Students sometimes ask about relationship problems, about work problems, about money problems, and all manner of other problems. I offer practical suggestions, but I know this isn't the answer to their problems. The fact of the matter is that no sooner than you find a solution to one problem, another springs up in its place. And this will continue until you begin to understand that as long as you live your life without intention, there will be trouble. Very often when students are discussing their problems, they already recognize to some extent what they need to do and what they are asking me in essence is, "How can I open past this... without changing anything?" This is like building a brick wall in the middle of the road and then complaining that it's in the way.

The truth of the matter is that we do have choice. We have choice in our relationships, in our work, in everything that we do. More importantly, in each moment we can choose to open to reality or close ourselves from it by contracting attention. But can closing ourselves off from reality really be considered a choice? As Anzan Hoshin roshi has often said, "Only the choice to open is a choice. Anything else is just compulsion."

When we act in a certain way, this creates pre-dispositions for the same act to occur again. If you ignore the dirty dishes in the sink, it becomes easier to do that a second time and a third time and if you continue in this way, ignoring a sink full of dirty dishes becomes habitual. It becomes "normal" to you. But habituation is not limited to such things as ignoring the dishes. Throughout our waking hours the tendency to engage in an endless flow of storylines and states about ourselves, about other people, about the world is also habitual. If we propagate a sense of problem, a feeling-tone of sadness or resentment or loneliness or whatever the flavour of the day is, each time that we engage in it we deepen it and attention will keep turning to it. To make matters worse, our responses to our states, the "methods" we use to try to avoid or jolly ourselves out

of a state we don't like or grasp after or prolong a state we do like serve to deepen our habits. As this is what people tend to do to themselves, the relationships people form with each other are often based on mutual agreements concerning enabling and propagating states they like or relying on one another to interrupt or distract them from states they don't like. This might seem comfortable and convenient but it becomes simply a way of avoiding ever having to take responsibility for oneself.

It is the acting out of pre-dispositions that makes up what we are as personalities. Anzan Hoshin roshi translates the term "karma" as following the "momentum of tendency" or we could say "following compulsion". In a manner of speaking, these habits make up the "default settings" of our personalities. These "defaults" are the "endless blind passions" referred to in the Four Great Vows which spring from the grasping and avoidance that comes from ignoring reality. Attention distorts and contracts into a swirl of thoughts and feelings which distract and confuse us and when this happens we believe that this swirling is an inherent part of the process of making a choice. What we do not realize is that all of these swirling thoughts and feelings about the issue have nothing to do with clarifying anything at all and in fact, will compromise our ability to think intelligently. Defaulting to habit is not making a choice; it is simply following compulsion.

It can be very difficult for us to know the difference between making a choice and following a compulsion although obviously the distinction is very important. We find it difficult to tell the difference because we believe that decisions are made at the level of thoughts and feelings when in reality, making a choice occurs in the process of mind-moments that comprise perception and cognition. And the process is very simple. If we allow it to be simple. But the more that we clutter up the space of experiencing with the habitual swirling of thoughts and feelings, the more complex the process becomes.

When people need to make a decision about something, they tend to believe that they have to really, really think about the matter. There is a very big difference between intelligent thinking and just having a lot of thoughts or feeling tones about a decision. Having a lot of thoughts or feeling tones is not clear thinking, it is just having a lot of thoughts. It is just roiling around in thoughts and feeling tones. Intelligent thinking does not require abstracting oneself from bodily sensation, from colours and forms and sounds. There is no reason why you cannot think about something and at the same time feel into the sensations of the bodymind and open to the context in which you and everything else is actually taking place. In fact, if you are not feeling the body, your thinking will already be skewed because you are leaving out most of what you are. Attention gathers in the area of the head and you get lost in thought. This is not intelligent thinking.

The bodymind does everything that you think that "you" do. Whether you are walking, talking, sitting zazen, working on your computer or finally washing that sink full of dirty dishes, it is not "you" that does any of this, but the hands, the eyes, the whole bodymind and the mental factors needed to carry out the task. When you get lost in thought and drift this way and that in feeling-tones, you have forgotten everything that is most true of your experiencing - that you are right here, right now, and the thinking is taking place in the context of right here, right now. How can you possibly think straight when it is like this?

Making a choice is a very, very simple thing and occurs very quickly - in less than the space of time it takes for a raindrop to hit the top of your head and for you to say, "Oh. Rain". Before the moment of choice and after the moment of choice, you can make things very, very complicated for yourself by bringing all kinds of thoughts and feeling tones into it, and you can seem to slush it all down or fragment attention into seemingly endless interpretations, but the choice itself is very quick.

Take for example something as simple as sitting. It's time to sit and you know that. But you start talking to yourself about how much you really don't feel like doing that, and how complicated and difficult it is. The decision was already made to sit and now it is time to do it. You know this. But instead of simply following through with what you know to be true, you cover over what you already know by talking to yourself about how difficult it is. If you stop talking to yourself about how difficult it is for a moment and simply pay attention to your experiencing as it actually is, you could open past this state. Is it difficult to put one foot in front of the other and walk to the zafu? No. Is it difficult to sit down? No. Is it difficult to sit up straight for 30 minutes? No. So what's difficult? Just the state that says "difficult, difficult". Instead of listening to a state, would it not be more intelligent to pay attention to your experiencing as it actually is? Yes, but it's easier to ignore what you know to be true. And ignoring is an old habit, isn't it?

If you don't open to the inherent wisdom of the whole bodymind while you are in the process of making a decision, your decisions will be skewed because they are not grounded in anything but your thoughts and feelings. This is why people have such difficulty doing what they say they will do or following through with anything. It's that ignoring that makes it possible for you to stroll past the sink full of dishes along with an untold number of other tasks and responsibilities that you know you should take care of but don't. It's why you procrastinate, why you leave things unfinished, why your life seems so fraught with problems. You make resolutions that you rarely if ever follow through with. And you make impossible promises, such as "I take you to be my (wife/husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part". How can you actually follow through with a vow to love someone every day until you die when you can be so completely hoodwinked by a state about sitting for 30 minutes and forget that this is something you promised to do?

At Dainen-ji, a great deal of emphasis is placed on making choices. Beginning students are required to make the choice to sit 30 minutes once a week on the same day, at the same time and cannot apply as students of our Lineage unless they demonstrate that they are doing this. You can have all the aspiration in the world, could have read every book there is to read on the subject of Buddhism, but none of that means anything if you cannot follow through with making the choice to sit. One of the first things beginning students discover about practicing Zen is that a deliberate choice has to be made to sit each time they sit. Although 30 minutes a week is less time than most people spend completely lost in thought over a cup of coffee each day, following through with this commitment can seem very difficult for someone learning to practice and this is because practicing according to a schedule means not following the momentum of tendency and instead choosing to sit with intention. Writing a letter of application to the Roshi requires making a choice. Attending sittings at the monastery each week requires making a choice. In doing all of this, it becomes clear that doing something is very different from thinking about doing something.

An associate student who wishes to apply as a general student must choose to sit every day and maintain this daily effort for a period of two or three months before they can apply. Each day they have to renew their intention as students and make the choice to sit whether they feel like sitting or not. And this is very important because feelings change all of the time and if you only ever sit when you feel like sitting, you're still to a large extent following compulsion. When people make the commitment to sit every day, they can see in greater detail the range of states they experience and make the choice to open around them on a daily basis. This is also true for students practicing as probationary formal students, formal students, and those who eventually take up monastic training.

All of the different categories of enrolment are structured as they are because they are about learning to choose opening over following habit and tendency. It is not until we are more able to distinguish between making a choice and following compulsion that we can really begin to integrate our practice with what we think of as the rest of our “lives”. Until then, there is a tendency to think of one’s practice as one thing and one’s “life” as another.

Monastic training, like all of practice, is about learning that it is always possible to choose to open up around how self-image constrains experience. But there is a difference between training as a monastic and training as a lay student. The difference is in that monastic training requires that one makes the choice to open to Openness not just once a week or once a day, but continuously.

The Roshi says in “Life Beyond Boundary”, an open letter on monastic training which was published in 1989:

The winds that howl over the earth move homeless through the sky. Having no place to dwell or settle, they are simply the sky moving within itself. Our life arises between earth and sky and moves without rest: breathing in, breathing out, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, being born, giving birth, dying. The life that lives each of us is the same life. It lives you. It lives as the colours and sounds and thoughts and feelings. It lives as a heartbeat and as a deathrattle. This life lives and dies as each of us but life itself doesn't die; it just lives. It lives as bodies and minds, trees and stones, planets and stars and space, it lives as earth and sky. The life that lives you, that beats your heart, that thinks your thoughts, that gave birth to you and will bury you is not your life. It is just life and you and I and all beings are simply life moving within itself.

When we pretend to ourselves that these are our lives we blind ourselves to the horizonless expanse in which we arising and moving. When we separate ourselves from this vastness we fall into loneliness, anger, fear, self-pity and the whole pattern of struggle and suffering that we play out to pretend to ourselves that we don't have to take responsibility for ourselves and live as this vastness. To avoid learning and manifesting the dignity of being truly human, we feel small and threatened by this vastness. We look at each other but see only ourselves, only see our own images and projections walling off this vastness into territories and strategies (although this is as senseless as trying to tie knots in the wind). We try to squat down and try to bury ourselves under the weight of our thoughts and commentaries and relationships and fears and cravings, hoping that this density will make self-image a fact instead of the trick of the light that it is. We try to make a home out of open space and dwell there and try to keep out anything that might call us to move out from under the weight of habit and tendency and conditioning.

Shukke tokudo means to commit oneself with body, breath, speech and mind to move out of our home territory into a life beyond boundary, without limits. It is stepping out from under the crushing weight of self-image and finding ourselves to be the vastness of life itself.

The homeless life is the term traditionally used to describe monastic training but, in truth, whether we are a monk or a householder we are all homeless. Life stretches out in all directions around us. The house that we live in can never be a home. Although we might live in this house, this house arises in the restless exertion of life itself which is showing itself to us as walls and windows and floors.

The difference between a householder and a monk is not that one can realize this vastness and the other can't. The crucial point, the testing edge, is that the monk has left him or herself no choice but to practice

and recognize and unfold this vastness and has also committed herself to helping others to do the same, even if it is only through the inescapable fact of their commitment which shows itself in their every moment to themselves and others through their robes and kesa and walk and manner. While a layperson can be dedicated to their practice, to the teaching and the teacher, this dedication is weighed in shifting balance with the commitments and relationships involved with family and career. The commitment and relationships of the monk are to the Sangha of practitioners and all beings are their family.

A vow is continuous. Feelings and thoughts come and go, but regardless of how one is feeling the vow to obtain the Way and liberate all beings remains constant. This is Hotsu-bodaishin, the mind of Buddha, from which we vow to never turn. The life of a Zen monk is the embodying of the Four Great Vows:

All beings without number, I vow to liberate.

Endless obsessions, I vow to release.

Dharma gates beyond measure, I vow to penetrate.

Limitless Awakening, I vow to unfold.

Sometimes students wonder how we can vow to do such far-reaching and awesome things. But really, the question is first how can we become capable of actually vowing at all.

To become capable of making a vow we must first become capable of making a choice. When it comes time for you to sit at home or to come to the monastery, the fact that you often don't feel like making the effort does not mean that you can't make the effort. The resistance that comes up, the disinterest that comes up, the thoughts about other things you'd rather be doing – all of these are what you need to practice with. In each moment you can choose to open to reality. Choose with your fingers, your knees, your forehead, your elbows, the colours, sounds and everything that is arising as this moment. Choose reality with reality, the reality of your own experience as it actually is. Only the practice of mindfulness is actually a choice. Anything else is delusion and compulsion.

When you choose reality, it might surprise you. When you choose reality it is not what you expect because it's not based on your expectations.

Have a good morning.