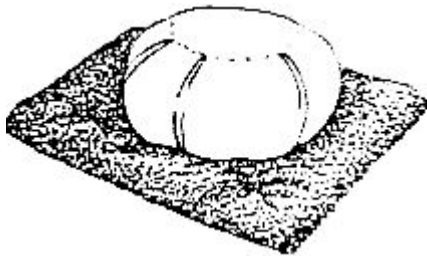


The Circle

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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I've spent a lot of time sitting here on this circular cushion called a zafu, watching my thoughts and feelings, watching myself circling without going anywhere – literally.

Zen Master Anzan Hoshin often says to us, "Sit up straight, pay attention". Now, we've heard this before. Our parents used to say, "Sit up straight, pay attention." And we say to our children, "Sit up straight, pay attention". Another saying that we have all heard is, "What goes around comes around."

Sitting on a zafu is an invitation to sit in open space, alert, attentive. We sit here, feeling the movement of the breath, feeling the body, opening the senses. Again and again we sit here just getting lost in thought, starting over again and again, coming back again and again to this breath, this moment. We seem to keep coming back to the beginning of a circle. But is that really what is taking place? Thoughts and feelings, irritation, bits and pieces of confusion, shards of memory, tactics, the hope that if we crank things up and practise hard..... the frustration of falling asleep.

We spend a lot of time joining the ends of fragmented thoughts and feelings into circles that we can be the centre of, spliced and sectioned understandings of how things are for us. We seem always to be starting, coming at things from a different point in the circle. When we begin our sitting, we may be very clear for a few moments about our intention to sit up straight and pay attention to what is actually going on. And then a thought comes up, a feeling comes up and away we go, circling around and around.

I found this news clip dated November 25, 1997. It's entitled "Sad Ending for the Little Plane That Could." It reads:

"Investigators haven't determined how a vintage plane took off by itself Sunday while its pilot was out cranking the propeller. It flew around Ohio for more than hour before running out of gas and crashing in a field."

Sort of like the little plane that could, with no one behind the controls, we circle around, going nowhere until the state runs out.

But here the metaphor crashes, because there is no plane, no pilot, no circling around anything. As we sit here on these circles, in a room in which there is absolutely nothing going on, all of this apparent activity, the whirling and circling of thoughts and feelings, of memories, of associations, is nothing more than movement of our own attention. All of it is fabricated. All of it is illusion. There are no circles around us, just

open space.

In this open space in which nothing that we think is going on is actually going on, a great deal is happening. Our life is happening. Rising and falling, coming and going, colours, forms, sounds, and thoughts and feelings too. But they are just coming and going.

The Sensei reminds us in *Wild Time* that when this moment comes it has not come from anywhere, when it goes it does not go anywhere. There is just vast activity without any one doing it.

If we didn't create a circle, there would be nothing we could be the centre of. If we did not believe that the feeling of self really was a self, then there would be no circle which contains experiencing by measuring everything relative to the limited perspective that comes about by narrowing Knowing into the sense of being a knower.

The Buddha Dharma, the Teachings of Awake Awareness, begins with paying attention. When we begin to pay attention we begin to notice how we pay attention, to how fickle, insincere, heavy handed, and exaggeratedly earnest we tend to be. Struggling against our sense of struggle causes us to chase ourselves in circles. Even when we are sitting still in zazen.

This is called "samsara": the circuit of conditioned experiencing.

When we sit up straight on these round cushions, however, we get another perspective. We can see that all around our conditioned responses and klutziness, the colours and forms and sounds and sensations are all doing just fine. We recognize that it is our attachment to the sense of self and a world of objects arranged around a self that is the cause of our irritation, our suffering.

This is called "dukkha."

When we sit up straight, we gain a vantage not usually available to us. Perhaps it is only a glimpse, a moment of insight which just vanishes. Then we find ourselves coming back again and again to doing the various things that cause us suffering. And being so convinced of these strategies that we don't even recognize suffering as suffering.

But if we come back again and again to sitting on the zafu then again and again these glimpses come up. As they come up again and again it becomes harder to take what Eihei Dogen zenji in the *Genjokoan* calls our "small circles of concern" so seriously.

We begin to be able to see from more than just one perspective. Sitting here on this circle, watching our circles, obsessing about them, watching them disintegrate, we begin to see clearly.

There is nothing solid, nothing substantial about them, because they are only the movement of our own attention. We begin to see through the walls of the circles, even as they form.

As we open to the arising of these moments of understanding more and more often we begin to understand what the Hua Yen tradition calls "round wisdom." Having a mind which does not measure experiences from the sense of self towards an object outside of it, but which embraces 360 degrees simultaneously.

When the sense of referencing everything from a sense of a self is just no longer something we can take

seriously, then this is called “nirvana” which means “vanished” like a flame on a match or a candle that has been blown out.

Although it can seem as if Zen practice is a matter of getting lost in some contraction of attention, having it fall out from under us, and then starting all over again, this is not really a closed circle that just goes around and around and goes nowhere.

In *The Straight Path* , Anzan Hoshin roshi says,

The Straight Path is a circle in that, in order to get back to Awareness itself, in order to return to where we started from, we have to make our way through all of the things we have used to separate ourselves from Awareness itself, from experience itself. We have to sit and observe our habitual patterns, we have to look at our tawdry little stories right in the face and begin to realize just how meaningless they are.

So when I say that we have to go through all of the things that we have used to separate ourselves from Awareness, I do not mean that we have to pay for our sins. I do not mean that we have to suffer for having separated ourselves in such a way. The separation itself is already suffering (dukkha). Instead, we must simply sit with it, we must observe it openly.

Another way to talk about the Straight Path is to talk of it as a spiral. At any point within our practice, whether we are just beginning our practice or practice is mature and deep, we are working with the same thing (body, breath, speech and mind) but working with them from different angles.

Actually, of course, the Straight Path is not a circle, not a spiral, it is not a square, is not a line. It is a point! But it is a pointless point. It is a dimensionless point. It is the Zero Point of this moment in which everything is coming and going simultaneously.

And **now** it's time to sit up straight on these round zafu and pay attention.

Have a good morning.