

Cultivation of the Ground of Mind

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So the rain soaks into the earth and the earth is vibrant with life. The soil is rich and black. Rain beads on the petals of flowers and the leaves shine with a deep green. The mind is vibrant with life: the feeling of rain in the hair and on the cheeks, running down the nape of the neck. Seeing the flowers, breathing the air, taking a step, giving rise to a thought...

Practice has been called "cultivating the ground of mind". The ground of mind is as it is, no matter what grows there: crops, flowers or weeds. The ground of mind is the ground of mind. In order to cultivate the ground of mind, we must first clear this ground that is growing thick with undergrowth and brush and so we say: to uproot blind passions.

Blind passions are simply those moments of compulsive grabbing, grabbing at itself and other, grabbing at time and space, grabbing at objects which appear to be outside of us, grabbing at thoughts and feelings, which appear to be inside and define us. To uproot these means simply to take firm hold and expose the root.

Whatever arises, arises within this ground of mind and the ground of mind is itself groundless, itself formless, shapeless, without colour, without any characteristic whatsoever, except for this quality of knowing. To uproot blind passions, means simply to recognize this formlessness. To "take firm hold" does not mean "to grasp" because when something, whatever it is, arises within the mind, it is itself ungraspable. Hearing a bird, where can you grasp this hearing? A thought arises. The moment that it is noticed, that it is seen, it is gone. Even if it is not noticed, if it is not seen, even if it simply slides into the next thought and the next thought and the next, there is still only the arising of this thought and then the next and then the next.

Whatever arises within the mind, arises as the display of impermanence, arises as the display of tracelessness and so is ungraspable. Taking firm hold means to simply expose this ungraspability and to allow whatever arises to self liberate on its own ground, to allow it to self liberate by expressing its own nature, as being Unobstructed, as being Luminous, as being Traceless.

Cultivating this ground of mind, clearing it of underbrush, does not mean to simply leave this ground blank, because this ground is vibrant and alive, rich and deep, but it can grow anything, just as this moment can be anything. In this moment you can be jealous, in this moment you can be petty, in this moment you can be compassionate, in this moment you can be wise. Any kind of thought can arise, any kind of feeling, and you have no idea what you will think or what you will feel, no idea of what you will experience, because our experience is beyond our ideas, beyond our models, beyond our concepts. And yet, we do have a choice.

When thought or attention becomes disposed and localized towards contracted and unwholesome states, when life is lost by focusing upon only a small part of our lives, then we choose to become confused. When we attend to the whole of our experience as it is, then we recognize this experience to be beyond concept and can express our life clearly and freely. In the same way, this ground of mind can simply grow brambles, poison ivy and weeds and these weeds can grow and choke each other; or we can cultivate flowers, we can cultivate crops, we can use this ground of mind to benefit beings.

We can bring benefit by expressing our own natures as they actually are. We are always so afraid of ourselves that we feel that if we were to express ourselves as we are, we'd embarrass ourselves, we'd embarrass others: we'd do something really foolish, we'd be angry, we'd be selfish. And yet expressing ourselves as we are is not a matter of "self expression" because self expression is simply the compulsive acting out of whatever patterns or habits we have gathered together as a self, through the arising of experiences.

Expressing ourselves as we are, expressing the nature of mind, means to express the nature of experiencing itself, which is not any particular experience but which expresses itself as this experience. Expressing ourselves as we are means to realize our lives to be beyond concept, it means to express this basic wealth, this basic richness of the ground of mind. It's open possibility.

Examining clearly through direct insight and experience what anger is like, what fear is like, what self judgement and criticism are like, we find that these states, these patterns, can only arise as contractions, can only arise when we distort our experience. When we attend to our experience as such and experience it fully, then the fullness of this experiencing expresses itself as dignity, as clarity, as compassion. So, to cultivate this ground of mind, in some way is just to leave this mind as it is and not to try to fabricate something, not to try to fabricate some buddhalike state, but simply to see, hear, touch, taste, smell, think and feel.

In the text "Gyoji", or "Continuous Practice", in "The Shobogenzo" or "True Eye of Dharma", Dogen zenji cites many examples of how the Lineage Ancestors of the past, the Dharma Ancestors and Buddhas, expressed their own natures through each and every thing, each and every event.

Continuous Practice means to practise our lives as they are and to experience and manifest the actual nature of experiencing. Practice means to cultivate our own natures, which means to dig deep into the soil of who and what we are. And so practice is a penetration into this moment as it is, not looking for some other moment in which we might realize that we are Buddha, but to experience and express, to manifest being Buddha now, in this moment of practice.

One example that Dogen zenji cites is that of Linji Yixuan or Rinzai. Dogen zenji says:

The Great Master Huizhao of Linji Monastery was the legitimate heir of Huangbo. He spent three years in Huangbo's community following the Way single-mindedly. Following the encouragement of his Dharma-brother Chen of Muzhou, he asked Huangbo three times about the great meaning of the Buddha Dharma, and altogether he was beaten sixty times with the staff. His sincerity was undiminished. When he visited Dayu and had a great awakening, it was due to the two Zen Masters, Huangbo and Muzhou, who sent him there. It has been said that the heroes of the Ancestral seats were Linji and Deshan, but how can Deshan be put in the same category with Linji? Truly, Linji was without an equal in the whole crowd. Even those of the crowd of those days were extraordinary compared to those who are outstanding today. It is said that his conduct was pure and simple and his continuous practice was extraordinary. No speculation about the instances and manner of his continuous practice could ever hit the mark.

When Linji was in the community of Huangbo, while he was planting some cedars and pines one day with Huangbo, Huangbo asked him, "Why are we planting so many trees here in these deep mountains?"

Linji answered, "First, to improve the scenery around the monastery. Second, to serve as a guide for those who come after us." Then he struck the ground with his hoe twice.

Huangbo raised his staff and said, "I've already given you thirty blows."

Linji made a sighing sound.

"My Teaching will become widely known in the world in your generation," said Huangbo.

In this little story about these old bald men in black, we hear about Huangbo and Linji planting trees in the monastery grounds. Huangbo said: "Why are we doing this?", which was a kind of bait to draw out Linji's own practice and his own ability to express his realization in practice; and Linji answered: "First, to improve the scenery around the monastery, second to serve as a guide for those who come after us." Every activity of body, breath, speech and mind is our opportunity to manifest ourselves as we are, to manifest Buddha. The most ordinary thing, "eating rice and drinking tea" as Dogen zenji would say, or "bread and water" is, at the very moment that we perform it, the most important thing because it is what we are doing right then. There is nothing else being done, there is nothing else to do but what we are doing at that moment.

In this moment of seeing and hearing, this seeing and hearing is all that is and so, to do this as completely as is possible without looking for anything else is to express this moment of seeing and hearing. To express this Buddha does not necessarily mean to do something extraordinary, but to see that what we take to be the usual matters of our life, are not. When we think of our life, often we think of that which we are doing in our life, our career, our family and so on, but our life is our life as it is. This moment of seeing and hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, thinking, feeling, this is our life. To express our life means to express just this: to just see, to just hear and to know what this seeing is, what this hearing is, which is not apart from the seeing and hearing but is not the seeing and hearing. To express Buddha in every circumstance means to understand that every circumstance is not what we have taken it to be; it is not usual, it is not part of our life, it is our life as it is now.

And so Dogen zenji says: "Linji's idea was that ordinary events are not imitations". Nothing symbolizes anything else. Each thing is what it is. This holding up a hand, this scratching, this sitting, this waking, sleeping and dreaming are not symbols of something else, are not symbols of our culture or our conditioning. They are what they are. Nor are they symbols of the Ordinary Mind, of Ordinary Experience, free of all of those extraordinary things that we use to cloud it. Each moment that arises, that expresses itself, is not a symbol of the Original Face nor is it the Original Face, but is how this Original Face expresses and manifests itself dynamically. Our life is not a pale imitation of anything.

After hearing this Huangbo looked at Linji. Linji held up a hoe before Huangbo's face and twice struck the ground forcefully with it. *What is this?* is Linji's gesture, showing it, this hoe, this staff, this breath, this eye, this ear. This experience as it is the direct manifestation of Buddha, of our own enlightened natures.

Huangbo raised his staff: "I raise my staff thus, but haven't you already tasted the thirty blows?" Striking students, first of all in order to make them feel what they feel, but also to show them that one must be completely dynamic in one's practice, completely without hesitation, completely without expectation and completely free, was a method often used by the Chan masters of the Tang dynasty. Huangbo holds up the staff and says: "Haven't you already tasted the thirty blows?". He is not threatening Linji with the staff now, he's saying: by the time that you hold up the hoe, that you hold up the staff it's already too late. Here you pick up your hoe and slam it down on the ground and yes, this is vigorous, this is dynamic, but it's too late. What is it that wields the hoe? What is it that wields the staff? What is the staff? What is the hoe? And so he

is saying: further, further ... Linji made a sighing sound but remained silent. So Huangbo did not pass Linji on this expression, but he did say: "My teachings will become widely known in the world in your time. Through your efforts, the Dharma will manifest and bring benefit to beings". Huangbo deeply appreciated the sincerity of Linji's practice.

We, as well, must be continually sincere. Continually sincere means to realize that our life as it is, is already exposed. Whatever we think we can hide, whatever thought or feeling, shows itself clearly in how we are and we cannot hide from that. And so sincerity means, again, to express ourselves as we are, not self expression, but to manifest the moment as it is, and if we're confused, we're confused, if we're sad, we're sad. Without trying to get away from that. What is it that is sad? What is it that is confused? What is it that sees and hears? Is the seeing and hearing sad? Is the seeing and hearing confused? To take whatever feeling is present, whatever thought is present, whatever sight, whatever sound and gather it all together within the whole of our life, within the whole round of experiencing, is true sincerity and is the cultivation of the ground of mind.

To uproot blind passions does not mean to feel nothing, it means to uproot, to expose the root, it means to overcome this blindness and we overcome this blindness not through struggle, but through simply opening our eyes. Simply by taking a direct look, and again and again looking, and looking fresh each time, with complete sincerity.

Please enjoy yourselves.