

Dharma Assembly: the Dragon in His Waters, the Tiger in Her Mountains Part 1 of 3

Dharma Talk Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei (while practising as “Osho”)

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Dogen zenji’s presentation of the Dharma playfully penetrates the past, the present and the future. What was true in 1227 is still true now and will be true for future generations. But what is also remarkable is that each sentence of the Fukanzazengi is true, true of what came before it and what comes after. The truths expressed in the beginning, middle and ending are so interwoven that you could actually start anywhere and loop back to complete the circle because it is like an enso, a circle brushed as an expression of the truth of this moment and thus is always true. But there is always a starting point, even when brushing a sho and so we will follow the circle as he brushed it, to its completion. The translation was made many years ago by Anzan Hoshin roshi with his own Teacher, Joshu Dainen zenji and most of the text is used in our chanting practice.

from The Fukanzazengi:

How Everyone Can Sit

by Eihei Dogen Kigen zenji

The text begins:

“Primordial Awareness is in essence perfect and pervades everywhere. How could it be dependent upon what anyone does to practise or realize it?”

Do you know what a context error is? A context error is muddling one context with another context. This is an error that I think all students make when they begin practice. We all go about learning to practice as though it were dependent on what we already know. We want to know up front what it is, what the rules are, how it works, so we can get comfortable with it. In short, we want to practice on our own terms. That’s our context. But the context we walk into when we enter the monastery to attend a sitting is the context of practice, which is vast. It’s much bigger than you could possibly imagine. Dainen-ji is a place you come to in order to learn, and to begin with you need to let go of your own ideas about practice, be willing to receive instruction and follow through.

Our root practice is shikan-taza, or just sitting. But to be able to do that we need to be able to practise with open attention. Attention is so fragmented that we are unable to just sit without falling into habitual patterns of thought and feeling. So we are given practices to do, beginning with basic mindfulness practice. As our practice deepens we begin to practice the forms more thoroughly, are given bowing and chanting practice to do, oryoki practice, and later still, deshi do koan practice, receive the Bodhisattva Precepts, do Mikkyo practices, Zen art practices and so on. All of these are done for the purpose of seeing how our attention is as we do them, as it is through seeing the fragmentation of attention that we can do something about it. So we spend a long time gazing at the wall, watching our minds run down it, seeing how attention opens and how it folds down and then opens again. The practice is a process and the seeing of all of this is an essential part of the process.

Sometimes students think that zazen is what Zen is. No single practice is what Zen is. Zen is a whole continuum of training which requires many years of study and practice to understand. Zazen is the basis of our practice, but there is much more to it than that. This is why it is important for you to come to the monastery to attend sittings, Dharma Assemblies and other events. This is why it is important for you to receive ongoing instruction.

The text continues:

“The movement of Reality does not need us to give it a push.”

This does not mean that there is no point in practising. It means that

Awareness is the only condition

All that is arises as the display of Awareness

This is the seamless expanse of all that is.

It means that we are not, have never been, separate from Awareness. But, of course, we tend not to know this because we are so preoccupied with what Dogen zenji referred to as our “circles of self-concern”. When we are practising we are not “inventing” Awareness, “creating” Awareness, making Awareness “happen”. Basic mindfulness is the means by which we can begin to open attention to the Suchness of things as they are. You are already breathing, so feel this breath; you are already seeing, so open and pay attention to the seeing; you are already hearing, so open and pay attention to hearing.

Dogen zenji says,

“Do I need to say that it is free from delusion? The vast expanse of Reality can never be darkened by the dust of presumptions.”

Right now you are seeing the white of the wall. It doesn't matter what you think about yourself or about anyone else or about the world. It doesn't matter whether you are happy or unhappy, interested or disinterested. The wall, the colour white, present themselves as they are. You cannot make the wall hate you or like you. You cannot make the colour white hate you or like you. You cannot make the wall or the colour white agree or disagree with any of your storylines. Reality is free of your delusions and anyone else's delusions. It is stainless.

The text continues:

“Who then could believe that it needs to be cleaned of such dust to be what it is? It is never separate from where you are, so why scramble around in search of it?”

It is no further from you than the sensations of your fingertips, the taste in your mouth, the coolness of this breath.

And then Dogen zenji says,

“The thing is, if there is the slightest gap, sky and earth are ripped apart. If you give rise to even a flicker of like and dislike, you lose your mind in delusion. Just suppose you become puffed up about your understanding and inflate your little experiences: You think you have seen the truth, attained the Way, recognized the Luminosity of mind and can grasp at heaven. You might think that these initial jaunts about the borders are entering the realm of enlightenment but you’ve lost the Way of complete liberation.”

Essentially, the practice of the Buddha was to practise open attention through just sitting. Sit without reacting to anything, releasing the narrowing and focusing of attention, moment after moment after moment. When attention focuses on something that is “liked” or something that is “disliked”, you lose your way.

Sometimes students will lose their way because they become reactive over sensations. They may even stop practising altogether because their knees hurt. This despite being offered a stool to sit on. Or they may become reactive because they don’t like being given instruction because it contradicts what they already think they know. Or it could be over something like seeing a bug in a practice room and feeling slighted because we won’t kill everything in the building for them. The discomfort of your knees, the realization that you are not right about everything, reactivity over a bug...these are NOTHING compared to the pain people experience in their lives. So a word of advice about this kind of reactivity – grow up. Be a big person. Look for ways to work with the situation instead of freaking out.

On the other hand, there are those shiny moments that people really like. The ones they want to keep. Maybe one day you are sitting and everything opens far more than you have ever experienced. That fades, but you remember it and it becomes your “special secret”. Often students don’t want to talk about those kinds of experiences because they are afraid they will be told it isn’t all they believe it to be.

Holding on to that kind of experience, hoping to somehow cultivate it, hoping you’ll win the lottery and it will somehow happen again and this time you’ll get to keep it — this can become a real obstruction in one’s practice. The reason that kind of experience stands out so much in memory is because...it stood out so much while it was happening. At the time it was happening, you were experiencing a double set of perceptions, so to speak. Things opened, and how you perceived yourself and the world was very different. But you could also simultaneously remember how you ordinarily experience things and so there was a contrast between these two sets of perceptions. It’s the contrast that is so addictive about that kind of experience. What happens following that is that the experience fades. Why? Because whatever was understood was understood and became integrated. No more contrast. The reason that experience happened was because in that moment you were to some extent meeting your life as it is. It will never happen again in the same way because everything is now different. So if you get caught in that one, let go of it. Practise this moment as it actually is.

Dogen zenji then says,

“May I point out the one from Jetavana, the Buddha, who was himself Primordial Awareness and still sat for six years? And how about Bodhidharma transmitting the seal of Awareness through doing wall-gazing at Shao-lin temple for nine years?”

A couple of thoughts come to mind about this. Sometimes students really can’t understand why they can’t

just sit at home, by themselves, without instruction. After all, the Buddha did that. Bodhidharma did that. May I point out that you are not the Buddha and you are not Bodhidharma. You're also not Einstein and you're not going to come up with anything like the theory of relativity - not without countless years of instruction and study and probably not even then. You're not Bach and so it is highly unlikely that you will write music like his, not without countless years of instruction and study. Sorry if this is the first time anyone's pointed this out, but things are not all equal, they're not all fair, we do not all have the same starting point and you are as you are, not as someone else is. Or was. Start from where you are and be willing to learn from others.

You might not like what I just said, but do you understand why I said it?

I once asked the Roshi about Teachers - if two people who had nothing in common Woke Up and became Teachers, would they somehow come to agree with each other about everything? He said "No, but they would understand why the other was saying or doing what he or she was saying or doing."

The text continues:

"The echo of those are heard even now. If this is how it was with the great ones and their diligence, then how about you in your own practice? You should stop chasing understanding through juggling words, allow the external seeking of your mind to collapse upon itself and light up your own nature. Doing this, the bodymind will drop through itself spontaneously revealing your Original Nature. If you wish to be realized in Suchness, immediately practice Suchness."

In the Roshi's translation notes of this text, he says,

"Shinjin datsuraku". Usually translated as "dropping off the body". Unfortunately, this translation distorts the meaning of the phrase as a technical term for practice into a statement which contradicts Dogen's nondualistic intention. Shinjin datsuraku means that body and mind have been revealed within experience to be aspects of each other and to each be modes of knowing. The field of the known and the bodymind are then uncovered as transparent to each other. In the release of fixations and contractions of attention, there is no longer anything to provide a reference point for locating the activity of knowing within the field of the known. The practitioner drops through the bodymind, through the field of the known, into the Knowing which is radiant as the bodymind and the field of present experience."

Sometimes students will experience the Openness of basic mindfulness practice and will ask me "Did I drop through bodymind?" So to clear up any misunderstanding concerning this: Dropping through bodymind doesn't mean dropping in and out. Once one drops through bodymind there is no coming back.

The text continues.

"Don't give rise to the mind's common concepts, the judging of thoughts and observations."

Looking at thoughts to judge them. What can you judge your own thoughts with, other than the closed circle of your own thoughts?

Dogen zenji then says,

“Don’t sit to become Buddha because you can’t fabricate a Buddha out of sitting or lying down.”

Back to my earlier example: Can you become Einstein by scribbling numbers on bits of paper? Can you become anyone or anything by thinking about it, by hoping or wishing? In that, there is already a huge misunderstanding present. It implies that there is a some “one” inside of “you” who can become an idea “you” have. That’s not just weird, it’s insane. It’s not how anything works or how anything happens.

The text continues:

“Once you have found your posture, breathe in and out deeply, sway left and right and then settle firmly and steadily.”

In some traditions of Zen training, the form is to take one’s seat and then sway left and right to balance and align the bodymind. In our training we don’t do this because people tend to make a big deal out of wobbling around on the zafu. And so instead the process of aligning and balancing the body is done through the forms we all use to begin our sitting rounds.

Actually, at Hakukaze-ji where the Roshi trained with Joshu zenji, the form was originally to do a gassho-monjin standing bow to one’s zafu and zabuton, take one’s seat and do a seated gassho-monjin to the wall and then sway in a concentric circle until coming to a centred upright position. Then the kaishaku and gong strikes began the sitting round. But all of the bowing and wobbling tended to allow people to be self-indulgent and fussy and for them to wait until some noises were made to begin being mindful. Anzan roshi spoke to Joshu roshi about this after he had received Shiho. And so the forms were economized and streamlined and mindfulness was built directly into the forms to begin and end sitting rounds.

Dogen zenji says,

“Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Be Before Thinking. These are the basics of zazen.”

What is being spoken of here is being “Before Thinking” or “Hishiryo”. The Roshi defines this term in the following way:

“This means: No opposites. Zen is not a matter of thinking (shiryo) or of shutting out thought (fushiryo) but of being Before Thinking (hishiryo). Before Thinking means to be prior to experiences in the same way that a mirror is always prior to what it shows even at the moment of showing it. We cannot be anything that we are aware of. We are always the context of whatever content arises. When we release all of our states and our avoidance and identification then we are always right there at the very moment that the world arises, right at this pointless point. Bring together every aspect of mind, everything hidden and everything obvious, and allow each to resolve itself into the knowing of it. This is zazen, the shikan-taza of all Awakened Ones.”

The text continues:

“What I call zazen is not developing concentration by stages and so on.”

The impulse to narrow and focus attention in order to control or calm the mind is not what zazen is. It is not the scattering of the mind that is the problem; it is the focusing. If you practise labelling thoughts or focusing attention on counting the breath, for example, all that you are doing is swapping one set of thoughts for another set of thoughts and in the process you will not have learned anything about releasing the movements of attention that give rise to habitual patterns of thought or feeling in the first place. What may come as a surprise to you is that Dogen zenji did not tell his students to count the breath. In fact, he said they shouldn't. For more detail on this, you should listen to the teisho series “Sitting up Straight”.

Dogen zenji then says,

“It is simply the Buddha's own easy and joyful practice,”

Once in a while, a student will comment on this, but the tone is more like “The Buddha's own easy and joyful practice. Yeah, right.”

Yes! That is right! It is the Buddha's own easy and joyful practice and it is a very powerful practice. But you have to actually do it to understand this. The Roshi has an expression that goes,

“That which seems difficult is the same thing that is making it difficult.” What you see when you are sitting is your own deluded patterns, your reactivity, your fear, and all of the ways in which you make things difficult for yourself. The instructions are to release all of “you” into the open space of experiencing. Not just the bits you think you don't like or would like to change. All of it. Right now, are you doing that? Are you releasing by ending your fascination with “ME ME ME” by paying attention to the details of present experiencing? Do it now.

Now you have the opportunity to do it now. And now. And now. It's easy. It's just reality. So let us all sit up straight without wobbling.