

Standing Clear

Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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The other day, walking up the icy hill towards the monastery, with each step forward I slid back two inches. And I did not like that. But if I were someone who would follow that feeling of dislike, it would be more than just my feet sliding backwards. One step at a time, moving forward, sliding back. Is moving forward more “important” than sliding back? Is the intention to move forward more “real” than sliding back? Moving forward and sliding back were both part of walking up the hill. And so instead of letting the dislike limit and define experiencing, I heard the crunch of ice underfoot, saw the sparkle of ice crystals in the snow banks, felt each breath and walked up the hill, one step at a time.

It’s so easy for usual mind to get into a state or take up a stance about experiencing, but it doesn’t make anything any easier. It just means that not only do you need to do what you do, but you now also have to deal with all kinds of thoughts and feelings and attitudes and stances about what you are doing, most of which are negative. But even the so-called positive ones just cloud the issue and are irrelevant to the activity. But then again, clouding the issue is exactly the kind of smoke-screen that self-image conjures up to hide behind. It can pretend that the density of the clouds is actual substance.

Passion, aggression and stupidity are the three klesas or the fundamental styles with which self-image tries to poison its world, drain the world of its vitality so it is not so threatening to self-image’s illusions of stability and certainty because reality is so unpredictable. The strategies and stances we take up, of holding back or pushing forward or distancing and ignoring, are so habitual that most of the time we don’t even notice them until after we’ve allowed them to play out for a time.

Instead of falling into stuff, stand up. Let things fall where they may and just stand clear. If you stand clear enough, you will see that there are no “things” and never were. But regardless of whether you understand this or not, the important thing is to see clearly, hear clearly, sit, stand, walk and lie down clearly. When you stand you should be clearly standing. When you sit you should be clearly sitting. Is this clear?

In Immo, “Suchness”, Eihei Dogen zenji says,

In understanding Suchness, understand falling down to the ground as Suchness and getting up as Such. Then, falling down is not a problem. There is an old saying that came from India: “If you fall down on the ground, you stand by using the ground to get up. You can’t stand up without a ground.” This means that if you fall down, you just use what you have fallen down on to stand up again. There is no other way to stand up. This is such good advice that you should wake up just by hearing it because it is the path of liberating body and mind. If you want to know the central point of the enlightenment of the Awakened Ones, here it is: it is like someone who has fallen to the ground using it to stand up. Look deeply into this and you can cut through how you have identified yourself in the past, what you think you are in the present, and what you think you will be in the future and just yield into Suchness.

Everything, including our perception of ourselves at any given moment, is an arrangement, a gathering of details. Everything is impermanent, rising and falling, coming and going. There are no objects, no things, no self that can be found anywhere. A moment of recognition is a “dharma”, a gateless gate through which

attention can fall past itself. In this, “Noticing” is the starting point, but you still have to go through the gate. The moment of noticing is the ground on which attention falls which we can use to push ourselves up. Falling down, use the ground to push yourself up.

In a series of commentaries on Eihei Dogen zenji’s text, “Immo”, Anzan Hoshin roshi says,

*At the edge of each moment,
on this side the past is gone,
on this side the future has not happened,
and in the centre
is nothing at all
because this moment is utterly ungraspable,
is already
gone.*

Falling down as Suchness, getting up as Such. In a moment of seeing how you are, how you seem to be experiencing experience, question into what you are experiencing.

In a series of classes Anzan Hoshin roshi presented on the 8,000 Line Prajnaparamita Teachings, he says:

We must examine absolutely everything, openly and clearly. We must take nothing for granted: not who we are, not our memories, not what the body is, not what the mind is, not what our little compulsions are telling us to do, not what our tendencies are telling us to do, not what our fear is telling us to do, not what our anger is telling us to do. Not just those, but any recognition that we might have, any moment of insight, any state no matter how coarse or subtle, must be looked into clearly. Looking into it clearly, we see that the thought, in its essential and primordial nature is transparent luminosity. Whatever one is aware of is the display of Awareness. Luminosity, (prabashvara) means the ability to illuminate, to turn on the lights in a room and see what is in that room. So Luminosity means the ability to know. And so what is necessary is the recognition that thought is no thought. Thought is not an object; thought does not exist on its own; there is no one which is doing the thinking; the thought has no substance whatsoever. The thought is the display of the Luminosity of Knowing, just as a ripple on water is the display of water. From the point of view of the water there is no ripple, there is just water.

There is what is actually going on and then there is what you “add” to what is going on. Where you can most clearly see the difference is in zazen. First and foremost you are sitting on a zafu, in a room. You are not having a conversation with anyone. If you are having a conversation with someone in your head, the sane thing to do is to recognize that that is not what is going on in reality, to recognize that you are conjuring up phantom people, phantom situations. If you stop following that, where are you? Back on the cushion, sitting in the room. It can be as stark a difference as turning a light bulb on and off.

What self-image can conjure up to “add-on” to experiencing can seem to be very convincing. States of hope and fear that immediately distort; states of poverty, grasping, self-loathing, anger, frustration, confusion, discursiveness, boredom, dissatisfaction, sadness are all states that retract attention away from reality. But mindfulness can come up through any covering and any covering can be used as the ground to push yourself up from. Don’t just lie there, in that state. Get up. Sit up straight regardless of what the state is telling you.

The states I just listed are one range of states that contracted attention can produce. But here is another: Becoming brittle, critical, distancing yourself, peering out at the world with distrust even in situations where it would be in your best interest to open and meet experiencing with interest and fully participate. Stepping back and then blaming others for the distance you've created, feeling misunderstood and unappreciated.

Then there's states of dullness, disinterest, not giving a fig about anything and just letting yourself fall asleep. Stupidity klesa is always there to fall back on because it doesn't take as much energy as passion or aggression. But don't fall back on it because it will consume you whole. Sit up straight in the midst of it instead of becoming it.

Eihei Dogen zenji also says in the Genjokoan, "The Question of Our Lives",

"To practice by pushing ahead, meeting the numberless experiences as a self and witnessing them thus, is delusion. When the vast expanse of experiences move forward and practice and realize the self, this is Awakening."

Whether the states you experience seem "strong" or "weak", "up" or "down", "good" or "bad", the antidote is the same: Open attention to what you are actually experiencing in this moment. When you are sitting, just sit. When seeing, just see. When hearing, just hear. Whatever you think of yourself, whatever your past experience has been, whether you are clever or stupid, this moment stands forth as it is and only by practising can you meet it. But the moment is not a place or a thing. It's not something you can "gather yourself together" for, take a run at it and then dive through it, as though it were a tiny opening in space. Aligning with this moment is not something you can "make happen" by hunkering down around the breath right or by laying in wait to notice every sound. There is no ninja-self inside of you who can throw attention outward like a shuriken to nail experiencing. This is grasping at sounds and feelings, grasping at forms and names, watching yourself doing that and thereby deepening delusion. Stand clear of all of this. Let go and let the mind be the colours and forms and sounds and sensations. You're not a ninja. And it's a good thing too. Ninjas were hired killers. While self-image tries to kill reality, reality is just too big for it. And self-image is not who you truly are.

In "Immo", "Suchness", Dogen says,

"If you fall into fixated experiences you stand free by recognizing their Open nature. If you try to stand free without yielding fixation into the Open expanse of the Awareness in which experiences arise, you can never stand free."

What he is saying is that you cannot open a state from within a state. You can only open a state by opening around it. If you notice that you are falling into a state such as anger, you can't "get out" of being in a state of anger by staying in it, by examining it, by talking to yourself about it, by trying to take up another stance about it. There is only one way to liberate yourself from it and that is by releasing the knot of attention you are experiencing as anger into the sensations and colours and forms and sounds. Let the knot loosen and open. Stop worrying about winning or losing because if you are consumed by anger, you are already lost. Just stand clear. Let it all fall where it may and then begin again.

"If you fall into objectifying Openness as an abstraction and retract attention away from experiences you

must stand free by grounding attention to the earthy and vivid details of experiences."

Instructions for the space cadet. Openness is not a feeling or an attitude and there is nothing vague about it. It is an activity, something we must do. Attitudes and stances about openness can be cut through by gently insisting that attention open to detail. You can only practise for a split second at a time and then the effort must be renewed.

"If you try to stand free by separating attention from what is arising within it you can never stand free."

This one sentence is luminous in its clarity. Just as you cannot be separate from the world, what is arising within attention is not separate from the world. You can only make it appear to yourself that whatever you fixate on is all that there is. Fixation is a form of basic ignorance, pretending that one is bound, pretending that there is a solidity to things that does not exist.

Yesterday I walked down that same hill I walked up a few days ago. But today was not as cold and the snow in the streets had turned a dirty gray-brown. The sun, so far away at this time of year was not even as bright as the moon at night. But it was a good walk. As Zen Master Yunmen once said "Every day is a good day". If you're not experiencing it as such, practise Suchness. Let things fall where they may. Stand clearly, sit clearly, walk clearly, lie down clearly. Circumstances and conditions shift and change, but all that you experience is always arising within a larger context.