

Dharma Talk 3: The Person of Zazen

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We sit here together practising the posture of zazen. Instead of following our patterns of avoiding intimacy we can practise allowing intimacy – the intimacy between a fingertip and a sensation, between the ear and a sound, between the eye and the white of the wall. Sitting here right now our true situation is alive with this breath and this breath speaks of what is true about reality.

It really is as simple as this. Right now you are sitting here in this room hearing my voice. Or you may be sitting in a room listening to a recording of my voice. Or you may be sitting in a room reading a transcript of this Dharma Talk. There is the bodymind sitting and all around the bodymind there is the space of the room. No matter what you think you know about the room you are sitting in, you are experiencing sitting in a room and the room is being experienced.

Bodymind and room are all experiences. The bodymind is sitting in the room and the room is all around it, but the room is also arising within the bodymind's experiencing. The bodymind is in the room and the room is in the bodymind. When you look at colours or forms, when you hear sounds, what are you experiencing them with, if not body and mind? Are colours or forms or sensations separate from you, outside of you? If they were truly separate from you, how could you experience them?

Whatever is known arises directly and intimately within Knowing. Regardless of what you experience you are always experiencing experience. The "you" that experiences does not actually do the experiencing. The "you" is a way of limiting the fullness and richness of experiencing in itself. The zafu you sit on, the changing light in the room, the taste in your mouth, the smell of incense, my face, your face, my breath, your breath, are all experiences arising within experience.

The bodymind and any feeling or thoughts about a 'self' doing the experiencing are also experiences. All that you are experiencing and all that you can experience is experiencing. When you are sitting zazen there are many, many moments of sinking attention, of boredom, of discursiveness, of needlessly struggling against and then collapsing into old habits. Yet these too are experiences arising within experiencing. Of course those states will come up but even those moments of sinking and contraction are zazen, though just not zazen as zazen.

Zazen exposes all of the ways in which you are not really doing zazen. You cannot help but see this and in seeing this you are increasingly able to see all of the ways in which you do not do all of the other things that you do, all of the ways in which you turn away from being intimate with your life. Zazen exposes, as well, that moment after moment it is just this moment. In exposing this, zazen can expose us – not just as our usual habits of attention and the contents of our constructions of contraction – but as zazen itself, as the Buddha doing the practice of the Buddha.

In the teisho series, "The Person and the World of Zazen", Anzan Hoshin Roshi says:

"Now I do not think that any of you would actually be confused about the difference between many of your moments of zazen and what Dogen Zenji means in speaking of the merits of a moment of zazen. Just as you know why there are differences between most of the moments of your zazen and those moments in

which you are just sitting around and those moments in which you are actually sitting zazen and actualizing the potential of zazen”.

But there is a way of talking and thinking about zazen that I have seen some contemporary Soto Buddhists do, especially in Soto Shumonsho in which zazen is treated as if it were a sacrament. It is an approach that says that one moment of zazen is a moment of being Buddha and so when one sits in zazen for that one moment one is Buddha regardless of what the bodymind is actually doing in the posture.

For one thing this can lead to a fixation on the posture, especially kekka-fuza, sitting in full lotus, as if it were the only possible posture and that other than sitting in that posture there is nothing else you need to be doing to practice zazen. And if it doesn't feel like you are Buddha, then you just do not understand the mysteries of zazen. It is like the Catholic Church's mystery of transubstantiation in which a piece of bread miraculously becomes the flesh of Jesus Christ. The fact that it is physically and in every way still a piece of bread and not human flesh, thankfully, is in that view actually the point. The confounding of rationality and making the leap of faith to believe that the bread is not bread is the point.

And so when zazen is viewed in this way it is not seen or understood as it is as well. It can look like zazen. Someone in black robes and a shaved head is sitting in perfect lotus posture facing the wall in a beautiful ancient hall surrounded by exquisite garan buildings on immaculate grounds with the song of a hototogisu wafting through the window from the surrounding bamboo forest. That looks exactly like zazen. What could look more like zazen?

But if the person is just sitting around there thinking about breakfast or bukkake or even listening to the bird song and is not open to whole-bodily feeling and all of the other sounds and sensations of temperature and pressure and fragrances and the play of light and the colour on the wall and all of the other ten thousand dharmas that are straining to be experienced but are being shut away by that focus of attention then it is not zazen. Not at all. Let alone shikantaza and shinjin-datsaraku. It is just mild symptoms that are unrelated to the disease, whatever you might call it.

“Zazen is not a sacrament to be received passively or to sanctify someone. It is a practice that is realized when it is actively engaged. This active engagement is releasing the ‘someone’ and receiving the sacred totality of zazen through zazen with zazen. Then each moment is of equal merit if we allow them all to be equality without equal or mutodo.”

We cannot make openness and intimacy happen. We can only release ourselves into it. Any preconceived notions or expectations that we might have about this intimacy and openness must also be released because expectations of any kind can never be met. Expectations are themselves a fleeing from reality and its intimacy and immediacy.

When we allow openness and intimacy, awakened virtue or “butokku” is naturally manifest as wholeness of body, wholeness of moment, wholeness of living and speaking. Those who live with us are alive with us and are each and all together the life that lives as us and as them. The rippled glass of old windows. The creaking of floorboards. The silkiness of water on your hands. The crunch of snow underfoot. Pigeons spreading their wings. Snowflakes falling and the leafless trees rising into the endless openness of the sky are all resonant together.

This resonance is “muzosa” or naked of artifice. It is unfabricated and seamless. Although it is unmistakable, as soon as you rear up or lurch forward or pull back to try to name it or have a feeling about it, it is torn and anything you try to construct conceptually or emotively about it tears it further.

There are a few verses I would like to read to you from the chant entitled “Jijyu Zanmai Doka, Song of the Samadhi of Self-Enjoyment”, by Venerable Anzan Hoshin Roshi:

“In truth it is easier than snapping your fingers or opening your eyes. Do not follow and become the forms of attention. The hopeful might cultivate practices which refine and invert attention as subtle realms of colour, sound, formlessness and bliss. But the heart is not any experience or state at all. The fearful might cultivate practices which retract attention from its objects and dwell in the state of jhana. But the heart is not any experience or state at all. Practice beyond hope and fear and the self transcends itself and attention outshines its apparent forms. The outshining of experiences is the beginning of knowing the radiance of Knowing itself. Any experience of voidness or brilliance is only a distraction if attention falls into it. Allow attention to fall into, through and past itself. This is the heart.

“Allowing attention to fall into, through and past itself is what is described as dropping through bodymind. Only when there is dropping through bodymind into the world and then dropping through the world, releasing experiences into experiencing itself is zazen truly zazen.”

As Dogen said in “Zanmai-O-Zanmai”: “Even if some have physically realized that sitting is the Buddhadharma, few have realized sitting as sitting.” But as our zazen ripens us we fall away and the bodymind drops through itself revealing zazen as zazen, sitting as sitting, shikantaza.

Anzan Hoshin Roshi said in the teisho series, “The Person and the World of Zazen”:

“Just as zazen is not something the body does or the mind does, it is not just something that the bodymind does. Through shinjin-datsaraku, dropping through the bodymind, we will see more and more clearly that it is something that involves the whole world. As Dogen said previously, ‘Such vast Awakening resonates back to you in a path of intimacy and ripens you and all inconceivably.’”

Although we sit facing the wall even during a seven-day O-Sesshin or a two-day Sesshin or a one-day Dharma Assembly, most of the time throughout the day you are not facing the wall. You are walking in kinhin, bowing, turning, taking your seat, getting up from your seat, eating with oryoki, washing pots and pans, going to the washroom, drinking tea, practising caretaking or samu, more kinhin, more bowing, more chanting, more meals, more tea, listening to teisho, going to sleep. So most of the time you are not facing the wall. But even when you do, you cannot turn away from the world. And it is zazen that will show you this the most clearly.

Zazen is sitting in and as the open field of present experience. And as bodymind is dropped through and the world is dropped through, as experiences are dropped through into experiencing itself, zazen is sitting as the Dharmadhatu, the total field of all events and experiences, and then past that. Zazen is bukkojoji, ongoing Awakening because zazen is the practice of the Buddha and the Buddha is always going beyond Buddha. As the Roshi has said:

“To be intimate with reality is to be intimate with your life and this is not dependent on where you are, or who you are with, or your ever changing circumstances and conditions. The Jijuyo-no-kyogai, or Realm of Self-Enjoyment, is empty of ideas and beliefs, of things, of objects, of persons, of selves, of others and so it is a seamless expanse, rich and full of the wonders of reality. Without needing to change a thing, without needing to do anything particularly special, the inconceivable magic of reality displays itself.

“Eyes over the navel, ears over the shoulders, shoulders relaxed, hands resting in the mudra, the knees on the zabuton, each breath just breathes. The gong strike rings and the striker and gong are known by the ringing. Each point of space rings out struck by the space it arises in and pervades everywhere.”

If we are open to the unborn nature of all events and experiences then we see that all is a seamless expanse of intimacy. We are enfolded in an exquisite intimacy and we cannot pretend that anything we experience is separate from us or that other people are anyone else other than us.