

The Forms of Attention

Dharma Talk by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, April 22nd, 2006



In the Jijiyu Zanmai doka: Song of the Samadhi of Self-Enjoyment, Anzan Hoshin roshi wrote:

*Wherever Awareness seems to locate itself
is only a knot of space tied within space.*

*Untie the knots of experiences
and the Nature of Experiencing itself
is clear.*

*The emptiness of all forms
is only Awareness.*

*The fullness of all forms
is only Awareness.*

You are only Awareness.

*No strategy of mind
toward any experience whatsoever
can lead to freedom.*

*Self-image will conceive of this
easy and Perfect Path
as an ordeal and journey.*

*In truth,
it is easier than snapping your fingers
or opening your eyes:*

*Do not follow and become
the forms of attention.*

The Jijiyu Zanmai doka is a “doka” or “song of the Way,” a spontaneous expression of realized-practice intended to provoke recognition of advanced aspects of practice for students and was composed by Roshi during hermitage in September 1989, almost 17 years ago. It is an astonishingly simple, clear and concise set of instructions and explanations for practice. On occasion, students might chant it when sitting on their own and it is sometimes used as part of chanting practice at the monastery or at branch centres. We will chant the entire text this afternoon. Each verse flows into the next, carrying with it a vast amount of information about our practice. This morning I have read just a brief extract from the text and would like to spend a little time unfolding some of the information contained in just one sentence:

Do not follow and become the forms of attention.

The forms of attention being referred to are the result of “forming” attention into congealed patterns of thought and feeling. Attention, as it naturally is, without the activity of contraction, is vast and open. Your attention can be light, able to open to many details simultaneously, or it can thicken and congeal. When it congeals around a thought or a feeling or a storyline, we ordinarily notice only the thought or the feeling or the storyline. We typically don’t notice much, if anything, about the arrangements of attention that form before the arising of the thought or feeling or storyline. Or how those arrangements or “forms” aid and abet the propagation of whatever it is that we ultimately end up obsessing about. We don’t notice anything about this because it is in the interest of self-image that we not notice anything about it. Obsession distracts attention from recognizing that it has become lost within something actually arising within it.

Just sitting here in the Hatto, practising mindfulness: feeling the breath, the tanden, feeling into whole-bodied sensation and opening to the seeing and hearing, all manner of thoughts and feeling tones can come up about just about anything. But whatever we have believed ourselves and everyone and everything else to be can be released into the Luminosity of Open Knowing when we simply let go of the storylines and interpretations that come about through the congealing of attention into “knower” and “known”, “self” and “other”, “this” and “that”.

But that stuff is highly addictive, isn’t it?

It came up in daisan with a student recently that he had spent most of a sitting round crying because he was thinking about his adult son. The storyline he was telling himself was about how sad and confused his son was, and how much he wished he could do something to change that.

I pointed out that wherever his son was and whatever he was doing at the moment that he was sitting on his zafu conjuring up all of these storylines about him, he was probably the furthest thing from his son’s mind. His son might be speaking to someone or eating breakfast or perhaps sitting on the toilet, but it was highly unlikely that he was thinking about his father specifically, let alone any of the stuff he was thinking about concerning him. He had crystallized him into this sad and confused creature and every time he thought about him, he was deepening this view of him.

When we think about other people in the “privacy” of our own thoughts, we are not seeing them. What we

are seeing is cartoon-like representations of recordings of inaccurate fragments of experiencing. That is not your wife or your husband or your son or your friend or your boss you are looking at. But if you spend time lost in your internalized babbling about them, talking to cartoons, in certain ways you will behave as though that conversation or interaction actually took place. And when you next see them, you will respond to them in subtle ways from that understanding of them. But they were never in on the “conversation” and so your responses will make no sense to them. Ultimately, your fears and worries about the “situation” can serve to create the situation you think you are trying to remedy.

Not only do we form cartoons of other people, we ourselves become cartoons. As attention folds into forms we become all kinds of different characters. Some are fearful, some are silly, some are angry, some are clever and some are crazy. But none of these characters are who we are.

In our day-to-day lives, these characters present themselves as different “selves”. There is the “at work self”; the “at home self”; the “socializing self”; the “husband” or “wife” self; the “happy self” and the “unhappy self” to name a few. These are all structures, or arrangements of attention composed of mental factors continuously displacing one another. None of them last very long, but we ignore the fact that they constantly change. We insist that we are consistently one “I”, one “self”, when our actual experience shows us that we are unable to remain one way for more than brief periods of time.

When sitting on the zafu the same switching of characters occurs even within a half-hour sitting round. We get lost in thought about one thing; then the theme changes and an entirely different scenario presents itself. We follow that for a short period of time, then it switches to something else. And while we are busily switching selves and following the storylines associated with these different selves, we don’t notice that each “self”, each storyline, has an arrangement to it, a form, and that these forms can be noticed and felt.

Sitting getting lost in thought about a dispute with another person, for instance, has a narrowed, heavy quality which can be felt. The cartoon character you play in the storyline may be brittle, judgmental, defensive or perhaps whiney, and can say anything it wants to say for as long as it wants to say it, without the inconvenience of being interrupted by reality, for as long as you choose to completely ignore reality.

When a different form of attention comes up, you may find yourself sitting on the zafu having a silent giddy giggle about something you think is really funny, but it is only funny to you because of the way attention is arranged in that moment.

A few minutes later, you may be lost in thought thinking about how you could invent a new system for doing something, or rearrange your living space, or create the perfect meal or paint the perfect picture. Or you might be composing a seemingly inspired verse about the sound of a bird heard a few minutes ago. And through this you are not recognizing at all that the energy of your practice has been usurped by the forming of attention into a “creative self”. And worse still, because you think you are being “creative”, you will not notice how densely contracted the state you are in actually is. This is not mindfulness; this is not opening. This is just yet another way in which you become the forms of attention.

When you are sitting a round of zazen, you have 30 minutes relatively free of distraction, during which you can really practice. But if you instead use that 30 minutes to concentrate the energy of thought and feeling on someone or some situation, you are propagating the same contracted patterns of attention that you ordinarily engage in, but because there is so little distraction if you do this while sitting, you will be doing it

much more thoroughly than you ordinarily would. Conjuring up fabricated images and storylines about other people is rather like sticking pins in voodoo dolls. It's not at all nice. If you are conjuring up anger, fear, sadness, frustration, stories of seduction and affection or other feeling tones about that person or that situation, you are smearing this stuff all over them and you will act it out in various ways when you next encounter that person or that situation.

We believe the sense of self to be the "knower" of experience, that knowing originates in a particular place "within" us and moves out and towards what is known, that it is this movement from here to there that is the "knowing". When we are identified with a state, it doesn't matter to us that what it is that we are supposedly knowing is, quite frankly, bullshit. As long as we are experiencing the crunching and grasping of attention that accompanies churning thoughts and spinning storylines, we can convince ourselves that there is something going on, some kind of "truth" to whatever fabrication we are conjuring up.

When sitting, an endless array of thoughts and feelings can come up. At moments we may try to cut through them, may find ourselves following them, may attempt to apply various strategies to them. But until we begin to notice that regardless of the content that comes up, all of it is being seen from a certain perspective or "camera angle" we won't be able to practice with the mechanisms of self-image that give rise to the thoughts and feelings. That "angle" is a form, a "shaping" of attention. In order to open attention and open to who we are beyond and before the contraction of self-image we need to recognize and release not only contraction but the image of a self that gives rise to and is fed by contraction.

In the teisho, "Framed", in the series "Painting Reality: Commentaries on Zen Master Dogen's 'Gabyo'" the Roshi says,

Within the frame of a mental space that is formed by narrowing attention there might arise an image that is beautifully rendered, with such elaborate detail and nuance of light and shadow that it is almost life-like. The face of the person you hate, the memory of their tone of voice when they said what they said yesterday or last year almost sounds as if they are speaking to you now and can almost actually hear the abuse you are retroactively lashing them with.

But all around the frame is your life. It is not life-like. It is life. The colours, forms, sounds in their coming and going are free from what appears to be going on within the frame. All around in and as the ten directions Reality is being painted by the Activity of Aware Space.

Out of all of the details that you could notice, attention will seem to move towards this or that detail, which is why it stands out. If you focus on something, that thing will seem to become larger, more important. And this is because we misunderstand knowing. We believe the sense of self to be the "knower" of experience, that knowing originates in a particular place "within" us and moves out and towards what is known, that it is this movement from here to there that is the "knowing".

When you are following a thought, indulging in a storyline or lost in a state, the thought or storyline or state seems to become the "point" of experiencing. Everything else - sensations, colours, forms, sounds - become secondary to this "point" attention is pointed towards. If anything begins to become THE point of experiencing, come back to your practice and open around it. Open to the Total Field of All Possibilities. This is not the same thing as suppressing a thought or a feeling. That would be shuttling attention from whatever you notice you are obsessing about to something else in order to distract yourself from it. Beginning students

do that all too frequently: “Oh no, a thought! Feel the breath! Feel the breath!” They will try to cling to the breath as though it were some kind of life raft instead of opening to the sensations and using that as a touchstone, a place from which to open to whole-bodily sensation and the seeing and hearing.

Feel the breath together with the tanden, the sensations of the whole body and the seeing and hearing and do all of this in the same breath and at the same time. Practise whole bodymind because it is one bodymind that is sitting on the cushion, not bits and pieces. This is different from suppressing a thought or a feeling because it is not about replacing one thing with another. It is about seeing the thought or the feeling in context. And when seen in context, it becomes immediately obvious that it is just a thought or a feeling and is the smallest part of what we are experiencing. No need to follow it, no need to avoid it, just open around it instead of staring at it. It’s as easy as recognizing that you are perhaps staring intently at a bug on the pane of glass of a window, seeing nothing but the bug and then choosing to open to the seeing of the whole world all around and beyond the bug. The bug doesn’t have to disappear in order for you to see more. You just need to stop staring at it.

A metaphor for practising with thoughts that is sometimes used describes the process of practicing with them as follows:

Thoughts are like clouds moving across the sky. You are the sky and the thoughts are just a movement, like clouds. Don’t move attention towards them or away from them.

But there is something very important that is being left out. The metaphor implies a “watcher” of the clouds and unless this “watcher” is also released, we have not begun to practise with the mechanisms of self-image that give rise to patterns of contraction.

We need to attend to thoughts like the sky attends to clouds, not like someone sitting on the ground looking up at the clouds.

Have a good morning.