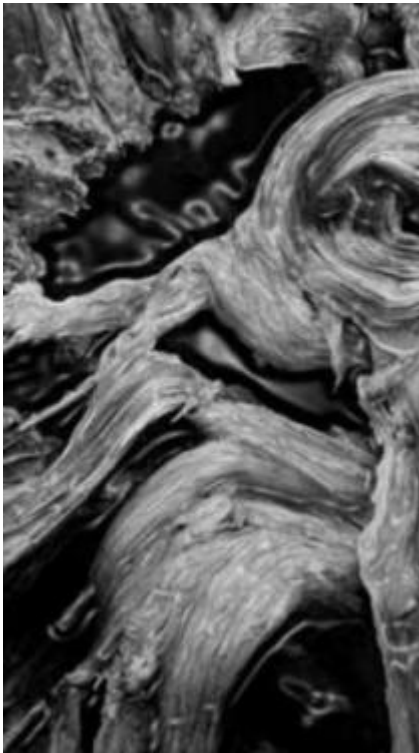


Here is not a Direction

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, April 24th, 2010



Walk to the north, the south, the east, west, go up or down or in between and in any direction and you will always be here. Just as whether it is morning or night, winter or summer, spring or autumn, if you are alive, you are alive now. Here transcends all directions, now transcends all times. Here and now, here we are.

All of the Teachings of Awake Awareness point to here and now and the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors have given us this wonderfully simple practise of zazen as a means to not just understand this, but to embody it.

Here is not in your thoughts, although when there is a thought, it takes place here. It is not in your feelings, although when there is feeling, it takes place here. "Delusions are many" and "attention wanders", so when you are sitting much of your time spent on the zafu is not spent practising. Instead you are often just letting attention wander in thoughts and feeling-tones about what you view as issues, pleasant or unpleasant, related to what you perceive to be your life. And sometimes you follow compulsion and let attention wander in ideas and conceptualizations about practice.

When attention is open and more flexible and there is less of a sense of 'self' and 'other', experiencing can be spacious and expansive. When attention is closed it becomes brittle and inflexible and the sense of self and all that it perceives itself to be in opposition to consumes our intelligence. When open, it is responsive to the directness and simplicity of experiencing; when closed it becomes claustrophobic and views experiencing as an intrusion and an interruption. When it is more open, there is less compulsion to fold intelligence into storylines about experiencing. When closed, it becomes obsessed with storylines and theories.

Giving instruction to students is not an easy job. Students are other people's adult children and, already fully grown, we come to the practice with an accumulation of habits and patterns and understandings and misunderstandings all tangled together, tightly tied by years of propagation. To some extent we may hope that the Teacher is going to sort all of these tangles out for us. Or we may recognize that, well, it's just a tangled mess, there is no point in trying to untangle it, and perhaps we should instead do something entirely different. But we are also very attached to these entanglements and can become quite reactive if the Teacher doesn't take them as seriously as we do.

We can also fall very easily into associations - transferring the meaning of one thing on to another even though there may be absolutely no relationship between them. Being corrected about a form may bring up an association of being corrected as a child and evoke strong reactivity even though these two events have nothing in common. The sound of chanting in the Hatto may evoke a strong feeling-tone of wishfulness simply due to a fragment of memory of being a very small child awestruck by hearing many voices resonate in the acoustics of a large church and having wished at that time to somehow BE that sound. Or we can be reactive and angry and feel rebellious for the same reason.

Countless examples of this can be found in the forms we use. For instance, the simple form of brushing your zabuton before getting up can be distorted by becoming overly-obsessive about removing every particle of dust from it, or it can become distorted by a careless sweep of the hand that accomplishes nothing - a token gesture that is 'form-like'. Neither of these is the form. The form is to pay attention, here and now to what you are doing, to do what is needed - not less and not more. And this is important because if you over-do it or under-do it, your tendency will be to over-do or under-do in most other things you do and this will create needless complexity for you.

And so all of our habits and patterns and associations will come up in our practice of Zen and they will influence how we practise and how we interact with practice advisors and Teachers. And this could make things extremely complex. But it can all be so much simpler if we just allow ourselves to be here. Just here. Not an idea about "here", not thinking about being mindful, but actually just allow ourselves to be where we are in reality.

Over time it becomes more and more obvious that the 'life issue' stuff is not going to sort itself out through your thinking about it while sitting on a zafu. That is not what the practice is about. When you do that, it is because you are already confused and so if you do that during zazen, you will only perpetuate and deepen your confusion. Of course, there are times when you are going to fall into that, just as at times you will sink and slump in your posture and fall asleep, but let's be clear about there being certain standards in place that you should be making the effort to uphold. So if you do fall into that, pull yourself out of it as soon as you are able by actually choosing to practise here and now. By sitting up straight, by paying attention to the details of here and now.

When you are sitting, it can seem to you as though you are separate from everyone and everything around you. It is as though you are 'inside' of the bodymind, in a seemingly private space which only you know the details of. And it can seem to you that what you are trying to do while sitting is to be deliberately aware so that you can experience the bigger aware thing that contains you and everything else that is maybe far outside of you or maybe can be found deep, deep inside of you. None of this is true. You are not a container. Awareness is not a container. The body and mind arise within the world. The bodymind and world, the sense of "self" and "other" are all knowns arising within Awareness. But Awareness has no edges, nothing outside

of it. Experiences are not what Experiencing is and it is not any experience and cannot be experienced by anything outside of it.

The practise of zazen will take everything away from you. No matter how hard you try to hang on to your beliefs and ideas and strategies, if you practise it will do no more for you than leave you just sitting here and now on the zafu, as who and what all of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors have realized themselves to be.

While zazen takes everything away from you this does not mean that you lose your abilities and capacities. When we allow ourselves to be just where we are, we do not lose north, south, east, west. When we allow ourselves to be present right now, in the only time that actually is, we do not lose memory or the capacity to anticipate and plan. It means that you lose the “you” that is separate from “everything”. We just lose the anxiety and insulation of anticipating our life and the frustration of our life never meeting our plans.

Just after Third Bell before the formal sitting on Sunday, February 28th of this year, the Roshi and I stood in the snow on the front porch of the monastery and listened to a flock of Canada geese flying overhead. This was completely unexpected as they often come back through this area only by late April. The Roshi commented that he hoped they were right, more out of concern for their well-being as they were announcing spring a full month earlier than usual. But they were right and within a couple of weeks all of the snow was gone and we began to see the first buds on branches. Now it is only the end of April and with these unusually high temperatures tulips are blooming while the leaves on the trees are still unfurling.

But as strange as this rapid onset of spring is, even stranger is the signs that one can see here and there in stores or on banners hung outside, saying such things as “spring is here” or “spring is in the air”. Everywhere you look, there are signs of new growth in an astonishing array of colours. Moss and tiny plants push up between paving stones and the cracks in asphalt and concrete. The young leaves on bushes and trees display new life in green and red and gold and the yellow petals of dandelions shine in the sunlight. Everywhere roots and branches exert new life to make use of the warmer days and increased sunlight. Walking along Daly Avenue near the monastery, there is so much to notice, so many new colours and shapes, so many birds and squirrels, spiders and ants, all released from the heavy cold of winter, enjoying this time of relative ease.

All around, there is so much to encounter, to meet, that is not what we expect, not what we are aiming ourselves towards.

This moment and this place, this here and this now, cannot be aimed at. They can only be opened to. Here is not a direction.

Sometimes, sunk into some kind of state of passion, aggression, or stupidity, students will ask what use it is to practise feeling the breath and body and pay attention to the sense fields. But one might just as well ask what use it is paying attention to spring or winter, or to the taste of food, or see clouds and rain, trees and buildings. Where do you think you are? How do you know where you are except through seeing and hearing and sensations and smells? One can close attention down so much and become so internalized that only fragments of the world are noticed, but why would you want to do that? It's not fun. And if attention is not open to the whole of experiencing here and now, where is it? Locked down into mental states, confusion, depression, anger, fear, discursiveness, cut off and isolated from the vividness and expansiveness of

experiencing. So we sit on zafu and do this practice and learn to really pay attention to where we are and what is going on around us in the simplest of environments – that of a practice room. And in learning to attend with the whole bodymind, we learn to release the recoil and refusal of self-image that has limited and constrained us. It is a very, very simple choice. As simple as the difference between walking down a street during the spring not noticing anything because you are preoccupied with a state, or choosing to pay attention and notice the details of spring, here and now.

Over many years I had tried a lot of things while sitting on a zafu, maybe even most things, and it's got me nowhere. But here.

When students first begin practising feeling the breath can seem such an arduous task. It can seem to make sense to self-image that if you feel a breath, then you've done it and something should happen. But in a practice interview or daisan a student will be told, "No, not once or twice or five times during a sitting round – you need to stay with the breath for the whole sitting round. And not just the breath, but the tanden and the sensations of the rest of the body and seeing and hearing, all at the same time, all in the same breath." The usual reaction to this is "What? I can't do that. That's impossible." But of course, it's not impossible. It requires practice. It requires noticing that if you are not paying attention the breath and the sensations of the body and seeing and hearing it is because you are doing something else and whatever that something else is, whether it be getting lost in thought or roiling about in a feeling tone, you need to let go of it in order to attend with the whole body.

Students are asked to relax their eyegaze and open to peripheral vision and often a strategy will come up of trying to 'push' the eye-gaze open, as though one were forcing open the shutter of a camera. But of course that leaves everything out about the relaxing part of opening to peripheral vision. And that is just one of the ways in which something as simple as seeing in a relaxed manner can become complexified. There is a wide range of battles students can engage in about seeing – smoky walls, disappearing walls, eye strain, wearing glasses, not wearing glasses, furious blinking, not blinking at all and tearing up, locking eye-gaze on the wall and narrowing attention into makyo (projections of mind on the wall) to name a few. Although all we are doing is facing a blank white wall and opening attention to seeing, it takes some time to learn to let it be just that simple. All of that other complicated stuff is the result of habitual tension, confusion about just letting the eyes see, and different strategies we act out even with our eyes. If one is sitting only once a week or even a few times a week, it can take some time to learn to let go of all of this complexity and just let yourself sit and see at the same time. And once you do, it is SUCH a relief to just see what you are seeing.

But those are very simple examples of the kind of complexity we can bring to simple matters. It can become much more complicated than that. We also bring to this very simple practice all sorts of ideas about what we are doing when we are practising and what we hope to accomplish by practising, and none of this, or very, very little of it will have anything at all to do with actually practising.

Self-image is in part a collection of tightly bundled, deeply-rooted beliefs, ideas, attitudes, stances and strategies. When you are sitting and are able to notice something about being lost in thought or feeling-tones, you are seeing a little of the contractions that make up these bundles of contorted perception. These are what prevent you from being able to feel clearly, see clearly, hear clearly. This is what causes the sense of separation between you and what you seem to be experiencing.

Beginning to recognize this is an important development in a student's practice because when one is

practising there can be a tendency to set up a struggle between the sense of a self trying to practise opening attention and what it is trying to open to. The result of this will be the perception of the bodymind as a kind of container surrounded by all of these 'things' - colours and forms and sounds and sensations - that "I" am trying to open to. Or perhaps it could be described as an "I", a sense of self, which is aware, trying to be aware of details it could be aware of, trying to catch them in a kind of net of awareness.

But Awareness is not a container. You are not a container. The body and mind arise within the world. The bodymind and world, the sense of "self" and "other" are all knowns arising within Awareness. But Awareness has no edges, nothing outside of it. Experiences are not what Experiencing is and it is not any experience and cannot be experienced by anything outside of it.

Initially this strategy will give itself away because there is also a tendency to label that which is noticed, but with or without the labeling the sense of directionality, of a self in relationship to the things around it, can continue.

Attention shrinks away from the openness of experiencing, narrowing and compressing into the sense of a self or a knower, which Zen Master Anzan Hoshin has at times described as an "enframing". From this frame, attention moves from the frame, narrowed and contracted by the frame, to this or that in the world.

But as the Roshi has also said in his text "On Enframing", which is part of the "Space, Activity and Knowing" series of teisho,

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."

'Here' is not a direction you can go in. It is something that you can hide from. Something you can deny and lie to yourself and to others about. You can aim for it or back away from it. But it is much simpler than all of your strategies and tactics.

So here we are. Welcome. And thank you for your efforts in this Dharma Assembly.