

Lineage

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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Practising mindfulness of this moment can seem to be a very slippery thing. After all the moment is always going away. The moment isn't anything solid that we can take hold of and say "Look moment, I'm going to mindful of you." The breath is moving.

If we try to mindful of a step by getting hold of the sensation then we wouldn't be taking a step anymore, we would be standing. I have seen people do this in kinhin. Focussing on the sensation of the step, they slow down and stop, standing there with one foot in front of the other while the line of people before and behind them continue to move. They shake themselves awake from this focussing and then continue to walk. Mindfulness is not taking hold of anything. It is more a letting go of whatever you are focussing on and opening up. Moments come and go, always in motion.

In each moment we must reinitiate our practice and begin again. As our practice continues, something begins to happen. Instead of our renewing our mindfulness of the moment, the moment begins to renew our mindfulness. Sounds, sensations, whatever is going on, whatever is coming and going shakes us out of our habitual focussing and wakes us up.

In the book **Mountains and Rivers**, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says something very interesting. He says that Zen is "Waking up to Waking Up." It is just a small comment. He said this in passing. The words were spoken and the moment of saying them was gone. Fortunately the words were recorded, transcribed, and published. There is something in this simple phrase that unlocks practice. Zen practice and realization are a process of endless Awakening. Anzan Roshi always points out to us how rich and fresh Reality is. When we see what is

being pointed to, we wonder how we never saw it because it was so simple. For almost 2,600 years there has been a Lineage of such Teachers pointing, and students looking and seeing.

I thought it might be useful to talk about Lineage because there is nothing at all like it within our experience of our culture. Many books have been written by many people for a long time. Today there are philosophers inspired by Heidegger. There are scientists inspired by Newton and Einstein. Carpenters use principles worked out by people who lived hundreds of years ago. Many recipes that cooks use have been around for hundreds of years. But the Lineage of Awakened Ancestors is not a matter of inspiration. It is not a matter of adopting a doctrine or even picking up a notion held by someone famous and then living by it. It is a direct Transmission between a Teacher and a Sangha, a Community of students. It is not the same as a sect or an institution although some people have made it into that. In Asia, people belonging to different Lineages often dislike each other. Politics between these sects cause slander and hostility. But all of the Lineages are the same when we trace them back.

The Rinzai and Soto Lineages were once the same and throughout history many Soto and Rinzai monks have studied with each other. So, as students of Zen Master Anzan Hoshin of the Hakukaze stream of the Soto Lineage, you are not members of some Japanese Buddhist Church. You do not need to say to yourself, "I'm a Soto so nuts to those Obaku Zen people." Forget that. You are members of the family of Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors and get to sit and share the wisdom of their experience.

Very recently the Roshi was ill and so Fusatsu, the Renewal of the Precepts was delayed. He decided to combine the Monday evening formal sitting with the general sitting so that the monastics leading the general sitting could attend. On this Monday evening there were some very new associate students, two of them attending their first sitting as students. I was very worried that the situation would be chaotic but everyone did very well. The Roshi said a few words to everyone so that the new students would have some context for what was going to happen. Part of what he spoke about was an explanation of the chanting of the names of the Lineage of the Awakened Ancestors. I wrote this down afterwards. He said,

Lineage is the thread of continuity of the availability of Reality through realization and practice. From teacher to student, from moment to moment, the Dharma has been Transmitted and renewed. In chanting through the names of the Awakened Ancestors of the Lineage we invoke this thread of continuity and are reminded to ourselves take responsibility for it by renewing our practice.

So this is what I want to talk about. With empty hands we bow to the Lineage, to those who with empty hands gave us what cannot be held. When Dogen zenji returned to Japan bearing the Transmission from Rujing zenji he said he came back with empty hands. With these empty hands he was able to pick up and show Reality to his students. When we chant the Lineage, we chant the names of people we never met, most now long dead, like Eihei Dogen and Tiantong Rujing and Daiji Tenku and Joshu Dainen. They never chanted in English, as we sometimes do, but if we practise chanting as they did, feeling the breath, hearing the breath become sound, aligning ourselves with Awakened Awareness, the Lineage fills this room, here and now.

The Lineage is a succession of realized teachers. They were unique in their style and vivid in their presentation, but what they were presenting was not a system of beliefs or a set of rules. The Teachers of our Lineage stand as exemplars because they were each individuals who chose to dedicate their lives into the

investigation of what is true. Their understanding, collectively, is a multifaceted jewel of Dharma, which shines in all directions, pointing to the Luminosity which is our true nature.

You may have thought that a Dharma Talk entitled “Lineage” would be a sort of history lesson. If Dharma could be understood through memorizing and regurgitating texts, it would be very easy to speak for an hour as though I knew all about it. But I am not going to do that. In fact, the truth be known, I usually avoid quoting from the accounts of my Ancestors. From what I have read and have come to understand about any one of these Teachers, I find it extremely difficult to say anything about them that I think will accurately represent what they were pointing to, so I’d just as soon not, just yet.

When I first began to practise, a very simple question came up for me. You see, I had studied with various systems, schools and some organized religious approaches for some twenty years before I met Ven. Anzan Hoshin Roshi. These included Sufism, Hinduism and various philosophical systems. And while I learned all sorts of names and dates, stories, theories, and so forth, none of these seemed to have much to do with my life or the lives of those around me. And I had often found that the knowledge acquired by people within such systems was used in ways that I found quite incomprehensible. Often it was used to defend a stance, to exert power over others or as a strange form of entertainment.

When I began to practise, it was immediately apparent that what I was being taught was how to enter into my own life, my own experience in a very simple and direct manner: Feel the breath, feel the hands, feel the feet, know where you are. The truth about how we sit, stand, walk, lie down, feed ourselves, do anything at all is not to be found in a thought about it. The Roshi’s instructions were very clear, very precise. But then, I wondered, what about Buddhism? What was I to do about all of those books I had not read, stories and names and dates?

The practise of Zen is practising practice, literally something that we do. So, for some time, the question of what to do about all things “Buddhist”, loomed before me in my imagination as a towering wall of dusty books. And the wall had not finished growing, but was being added to with endless volumes of new interpretations. There are so many books being published every year. Trying to understand all of this must inevitably result in an impossible exam that I was doomed to fail and I thought “Acckkk! I will never be a “Buddhist”. I was very hesitant to admit to the Roshi that I thought it most likely that I would flunk even elementary Buddhism. Most certainly if he knew what a dunce I was, he would throw me out. After all, not only is he a realized Master, but a great scholar as well. He reads sutras for fun. He reads doctoral theses for entertainment. But, one day, the subject of “classical Buddhism” came up and I decided to throw both fear and caution to the wind and show him my wall of dusty, unopened books. I asked, “Roshi, why Buddhism?” He was not at all taken aback and, in fact, smiled and responded as though he found this to be a perfectly reasonable question. He said, very simply “Because Buddhism works.” Well, actually there was a lot more context given. I’ll try to recount it as clearly as I can. He said that what is true is just true. All kinds of things can seem to be true but what seems to be true depends upon the context given. A small context in which most information is shut out can make anything seem to be true because we don’t know anything except what that context allows. If we take that truth into a larger context then usually it is no longer true. So to know what is true, we must look at the context and see if it is open or closed. If what we know and how we know it has to close out the feeling of the feet, the richness of the colours and sounds, then it might seem to be true but cannot be. What is true is true for everyone, always. No one owns the truth. There are all kinds of spiritual systems and most of them have meditation techniques of some sort. Even prayer. But what works is

the same. When a Christian monk gets up at 4 in the morning and kneels at a hard wooden pew and says his prayers, it doesn't matter what he is saying or who he thinks he is praying to. It is the knees at the pew that matter. I remember he laughed while he said this. It is working with the experience of the bodymind that works. Unfortunately, he said, these spiritual systems tend to get confused about what works because they take their doctrines and prayers too seriously. So whether that form of spirituality works or not is kind of hit and miss.

Buddhism is about what works, what doesn't work, and why. Zen is more direct about this than most other forms of Dharma. The Soto Lineage has been concerned with making sure that this is practised in each moment, gyoji doka, or Turning the Wheel of Continuous Practice. The Hakukaze Soto stream has kept this as clear as they could while many other streams within the Lineage became confused by the subtlety of the practice and now think of zazen as a kind of sacrament instead of a rice and tea (or bread and butter) matter.

He also said that he did not care whether what we do is called Zen or Dharma or not. What matters is that it works. After the Roshi had taken my wall down so effectively, I found myself surrounded with books which recounted the stories of students, like myself, learning to play with experience and taught by teachers, like our own, who must first teach us to how to have fun. I could go back in time and find dozens of examples of this but what those Awakened Ancestors have said is fresh and alive to me only because my experience in my own practice with my own teacher. So here, instead, is my transcription of a recent encounter between our living Lineage holder and a student:

In the evenings a series of strikes on the densho, umpan, and han signal that the monastic and lay residents of Dainen-ji are assembled for the Shushin-ge, the chants which close the day. Following the bows to the butsudan and then to the Sangha, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin always asks, "Is there anything we should discuss?" On one such evening a student from one of the branch centres of the Zen Community was on the second day of his second retreat at Dainen-ji. The Roshi asked, "So, are you having fun?" "Sometimes," the student said. "'Sometimes'?", the Roshi asked in mock surprise with raised eyebrows. "Why only sometimes?" "I...don't know," the student said. "Oh. Well, when you are not having fun, why is that?" asked the Roshi. "I...don't know," the student said. "Oh. Well, when you do have fun, what is happening?" "I...don't...know..." "Oh. Well then, how do you know if you are having fun or not?" "I...don't know..." "Oh. So then, what *is* 'fun'?" "I...don't know...." "Fun is what happens when you allow the natural expansiveness of bodily feeling, of seeing and hearing and so on to express themselves past your usual round of contractions. It is releasing structures of attention based upon configuring sets of knowings as a knower relative to knowns and releasing all of this into the Knowing in which they arise. It is not a matter of feeling good or of feeling bad but of feeling, of allowing whatever is present to point to the space it arises in. Good night."

The Lineage is always fresh in each moment that we wake up to this moment. Encountering ourselves through this wonderful practice, we meet who the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors were and are. Mindfulness of the moment can be very slippery because the moment is slippery. Sometimes we have to just let go of what we are holding onto, let ourselves slip and fall, and learn how to stand up freely.

Have a good morning.