The Makyo of Me

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This room, the Hatto, or Dharma Hall, was once a living room for the Catholic monks who lived here. The first time I saw it in 1996, during a tour arranged by a real estate agent, it was a huge room furnished with a grotty couch and big heavy so-called “easy” chairs, a coffee table and a bird cage. But it was huge, as was the rest of the building, so despite an initial impression of clutter and gloominess the potential to transform it into a monastery was immediately evident.

For a room to serve as a practice room, it needs to be as simple as possible. To most people, making a room ‘simple’ would be removing some of the clutter that seems unrelated to what they want to use the room for, and filling it up with all kinds of other clutter to personalize it. For us, making this room simple required a great deal of work to ensure that it was not ‘personalized’. Every surface in this room was renovated. An acoustic tile ceiling was replaced with drywall; the walls were taken down to the brick and new walls were put up; the floor was refinished; the doors replaced; the windows simplified and repaired; a fireplace was removed; all of the molding was replaced and the lighting was changed. There is not a square inch of this room that is the same as it was. And the majority of this work was done by monastics with one intention in mind: to provide a room for practice that would be conducive to, and reflective of, the spaciousness, brightness and simplicity of our practice.

When you take your seat and the sitting round begins, you know what the instructions are and why you have been given them. First and foremost, stay in the room. Stay with the simplicity of reality. You’re in a beautiful clean room. There is nothing going on that you need to do anything about. There is no one talking to you that you need to respond to. There is nothing you can do about anything while sitting on a zafu, so you don’t need to think about anything. You can sit at ease in the open space of experiencing, and allow your attention to fall open to what actually is.

It would be so simple if you were to just do the practice. But human beings are addicted to clutter and not just the clutter of tea cups and nick-knacks and mementos because that clutter comes from the clutter of thoughts, feeling, and associations. Human beings are content junkies. Whenever there is any kind of open space, we want to fill it up as quickly as possible with as much stuff as possible. And so although everything is laid out for us to practice, and the instructions have been made clear over and over again, instead of staying with the simplicity of the practice, instead of ‘staying in the room’, the tendency is to want to clutter up and personalize the space by conjuring up all sorts of habitual thoughts and feelings and storylines. But,

of course, concerning these illusions, the instructions are clear. You need to recognize when you are turning attention to this habitual clutter and release it. Really release it. As soon as you notice you are drifting, you need to gently, but firmly bring attention back to the breath and body and seeing and hearing. You need to do this moment-to-moment. It's not just posture of the body you are practising, it is posture of mind. Mind and body together, in the same place, at the same time.

Anyone who has sat zazen for any length of time will have experienced illusions traditionally called "makyo". I'll give you an obvious example of this:

When we are sitting zazen, we sit facing a blank white wall. There's nothing there to entertain yourself with, to watch, and there's certainly nothing to get tangled up in. But what you experience as you sit gazing at the wall is going to depend on how you attend to the wall. If you are feeling the body sitting on the zafu, then you know very directly, very simply, that you are sitting on a zafu and there is a wall in front of you. If peripheral vision is open, then you know that the wall is more than the section of wall you are seeing directly in front of you, that the wall that extends up to the ceiling and down to the floor and also to the right and left. It doesn't require that much open attention to stay with the recognition of all of this – the recognition that you are just sitting and the wall is in front of you.

But if attention begins to narrow, your eye gaze will also tend to narrow. And when this happens, the expanse of the wall seems to disappear and all that remains is a small patch directly in front of your face. You're focusing attention in such a way as to make this small patch of wall in front of you seem inordinately important. If attention continues to narrow, this focusing on the wall will have much the same effect as looking at something through a magnifying glass. Details of the area of focus stand out, while the rest of the surface of the wall becomes insignificant. This is setting the stage for makyo, in a manner of speaking. It's not that different, really, from being a child lying in the grass looking up at the clouds, fascinated with the shapes the clouds form – faces and animals and structures of all sorts.

Similarly, gazing at a wall with narrowed and focused attention, markings on the wall will seem to stand out and take on characteristics of their own. Little striations in the plaster and paint, the unevenness of what previously appeared to be a fairly smooth wall will become more and more noticeable. A tiny streak in the paint next to a small fleck of plaster begin to look vaguely like a plant of some sort, maybe a tree. A rectangular shape in the plaster could be…a building. So now we have a building and a tree standing next to it. And as attention continues to narrow, other markings on the surface of the wall form themselves into avenues and other buildings, a train station, a tiny train with puffs of smoke rising above the engine.

And even more often the wall itself is ignored. What is actually being seen is ignored. Instead attention just inverts so far that day dreams and internalized imagery overcome actual vision and all of the rods and cones and optic nerves and neurons involved in light becoming colours and forms. Seeing is screened off and instead there is a screen on which projections are played out.

Now, I have given you just one small example of the form makyo can take. It can take on any appearance – cartoons, little Buddhas, birds, a Heinz ketchup bottle. The form that it takes, though, is not at all the point. The point is that the wall does not make this happen. You make it happen. And by the time it has taken on seemingly recognizable shapes, you've completely lost all recognition that you are just sitting on a cushion, facing a blank white wall. When this happens for practitioners, they are not feeling the breath or the body, they're not feeling the zafu they are sitting on or the contact of their legs and feet with the zabuton they are

resting on; they are not seeing the whole expanse of the wall or hearing sounds in the room. The majority of their attention has become riveted on these scenes they are projecting onto the wall and for as long as the fascination with them continues, they will will continue to propagate – to add to them.

Fortunately, anyone who has sat zazen for any length of time will also have seen through this because, of course, it's all bullshit. Well, unless you are not receiving instruction and are just playing out your own meditation trip. Then you might think your little visions are the basis of a new religion or messages from aliens or are showing you some hidden secrets about the machinery of the universe. But for us, that's not a problem. The wall is the wall. That's all. And any appearance of makyo simply indicates that attention has narrowed and focused, that this is causing distortion and one needs to re-initiate practice in order to release it. And that's a matter of coming back to the breath and the body and opening to peripheral vision to let go of the fascination with it.

Now this might sound harmless enough, and perhaps it would be if it were limited to conjuring up Daffy Duck on a wall. But if you can do that with a wall, you can also do it with thoughts and feelings. The same tendency to narrow and focus attention, to project and add your own interpretations to what you are experiencing can be just as convincing if you don't recognize what is going on. This is why, in the instructions given students for practice, so much emphasis is placed on opening to context.

By narrowing and focusing attention on a thought or a feeling, you lose context. The more you focus, the greater the distortion because by focusing on the thought or feeling, you are separating it from everything around it – the context in which it is arising. When you focus in that way, whatever you are focusing on will take on a disproportionate and often inappropriate enormity and importance that will lead to more and more complexity.

When it comes to interacting with other people, this can lead to a huge amount of contraction over what are often ridiculously trivial matters. Let's say someone does something you don't like. Maybe they make smacking noises with their mouth when they eat and it really bugs you and they've just done it again. Two choices present themselves right away. You could say something or you could not say something. If you are going to say something, you should say it as soon as possible. If you are not going to say anything, you should open around the irritation. Often in situations such as these, people won't say anything because they are afraid of upsetting the other person or of offending them, although they themselves feel offended. But if you do decide to say something and say it straight away, there won't be much force to what you say and chances are it won't be that big a deal. If you sit and mull it over for a time before saying anything, you've had time to accumulate some contraction around what you are saying and how you are saying it and that will make it more difficult for you to communicate in a simple, straightforward manner. If you don't say anything at all, but instead talk to yourself about it, you are focusing intently on this one event as though it were THE most important thing in the world and you can build up a state of resentment or petty peevishness using this small thing someone else does as justification for doing so.

Sometimes people do this to such an extent that they have almost no real interaction with other people. They internalize reactivity so continuously that all they are interacting with is their own states and storylines about how the world is, or how other people are.

How is this a form of makyo? It is makyo because makyo is illusion. Instead of opening to and responding to the open space of experiencing around you, when you do this you are using forms and colours and sounds as

a kind of surface on which you are projecting your own interpretations. By focusing intently on only a limited range of details, ignoring everything around them, and by internalizing this focusing, you can reduce the world to a series of irritating cartoons. You look at someone and something they did becomes everything about them.

This has come up from time to time even in the monastery. One of the monks may, for instance, say something to a student that the student takes exception to and instead of discussing it with the monastic who said it, at the time it is said, they will let it fester. They let their attention return to it again and again and again, turning it this way and that in their mind, rewinding, fast-forwarding past anything that doesn't fit the frame of irritation or resentment or whatever it is they've constructed around the memory of that interaction. Ohhh, it would have been so much simpler if they had simply said "I don't understand why you said that", or asked some questions about it. But instead, it is allowed to fester and they talk to themselves endlessly about it. It might be days or weeks or months or, in some instances, even years later that this might spill out in daisan and I find myself being asked to answer to or explain some story about some interaction that took place between this student and that monk, a story that now is so distorted and so laden with feeling tones that it makes no sense at all and there is little or nothing I can say about it. I wasn't even there in the first place and now, with so much time having passed, the monk in question won't even remember the interaction clearly. For the student, this event in memory is 30 feet high, weighs 600 pounds and is covered in spiked barbs. For the monk, at most it is the size of a nit and of no more importance.

How many times have you recognized that you were just a cartoon to the person that you were talking to? That you were being seen in a simplistic way that had nothing at all to do with your own intentions and actions and words? Too many to count. But have you recognized how many times that you have been speaking to your own cartoons of others?

Although people's own experiencing shows them that moment after moment they change, that their thoughts and feelings change, that they present themselves as different 'selves' in different situations, when a strong feeling tone or a storyline comes up, the identification with that feelingtone or storyline can consume so much attention that they will believe themselves to actually be that feelingtone or storyline. Propagating and viewing oneself and the world through a feeling of poverty or of being overwhelmed or of anger or irritation or feelings of self-loathing can so completely cover over reality that it becomes rather like a mile-high wall that nothing can penetrate. And yet even the Great Wall of China can be seen from space because there is only open space above it and all around it. It is only if you choose to cower behind it that you can convince yourself that it is so tall that no one can see you. But there never was any need to hide. It's all already exposed.

In "Entering Completely" which is a commentary on his translation of Bodhidharma's text "Two Entries and Four Practices", Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says:

> *Bodhidharma says, "The usual person, through basic ignorance, fixates on one thing and then another." This basic ignorance is the root of self-image, avidya, basic ignorance, ignoring the fact that one is already fundamentally free and pretending to be bound. In the midst of space, trying to carve out some territory, as if one could build walls out of the sheer air, as if one could tie knots in the air, nail clouds in place.*
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> *This tying of knots, this erecting of walls, this nailing things down, is this fixating on one thing and then another, grasping at thought, grasping at sounds and feelings, grasping at forms, and names. This is*

called craving.

And so the craving that we need to address in our practice is not just a matter of giving up our attachment to fashion or a beautiful house, a beautiful wife, a beautiful husband, beautiful children, a beautiful life in which there are no problems. Dropping that does not liberate, because all craving, all greed, all lust, all anger, are rooted in this fundamental strategy of self-image to contract and localize, to create boundaries within emptiness, to grasp at emptiness. And so we must understand this process of fixation as it arises, and it arises not in a beautiful house. It arises in this moment of seeing and hearing. It arises as mind moments display themselves, and as this display is interpreted to be self and other, time and space, body and mind. This is the craving that we must understand and release.

It's not that through practising we should all become good little boys and girls who never disagree with others or from time to time or think them an asshat. But to take one's own reactivity overly seriously, to fold down and obsess, to broadcast resentment or anger or states of poverty is completely unnecessary. To agree when you disagree, to agree to what you don't understand is pointless and childish. To rear up when you disagree is pointless and childish. You can and should bring up anything that you do not understand and you should ask questions and the sooner the better. But remember, as Joshu Dainen roshi said, to always question the questioner. Hear the tone of your voice when you speak. Feel your facial muscles. Notice if you are contracting and make the effort to open around it so that you can communicate clearly what it is that you want to say, not just your feelings about it.

Please understand that there is a direct relationship between the clutter of thoughts, feeling, and associations and the clutter of belongings you allow to accumulate all around you and your territoriality about them. And that there is a direct relationship between the clutter of thoughts, feeling, and associations and your ability to have open, equitable relationships and communicate clearly. And that there is a direct relationship between the clutter of thoughts, feeling, and associations and the territoriality that has given rise to every atrocity, every act of barbarism perpetrated by human beings against one another. Do not reduce other beings to mere cartoons. They are not the images that arise in your mind.

All around each thing that is noticed, the rest of the world stands forth. When you see makyo on the wall and focus on it, the rest of the world is ignored and if you choose to focus in that manner, you are choosing to cut yourself off from the world. When you 'see' a thought or a feeling, the rest of the world stands forth around it. If you focus on it, the rest of the world and all of the information available to you is ignored and by choosing to focus in that manner you are cutting yourself off from the rest of the world and from your life as it actually is.

The treasury of this practice has been transmitted from Teacher to student for 2600 years so that right now, right here, you might put an end to the ways in which you make yourself suffer. This building, this room in which you sit today has been made available to you for this same reason. Please, do not use this opportunity to just continue to rehearse all of the usual ways in which you think about yourself and others and the world. Stay in the room. Stay with the colours and forms and sounds and sensations and practise releasing Daffy Duck.