

Not Fade Away

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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The world arises all around you in the ten directions, as the ten directions. Close your eyes, squeeze them tight, it's still there. Look around, it's all around. It is your looking, your hearing, your breathing. It is this breath. It is the inbreath, the outbreath. It is the pause between breathing in and out.

You can seem to cut yourself off from the world by inverting attention, by sinking deeper and deeper into a state, but there is nowhere that you can go inside of yourself that leaves you anywhere else but here. Right here. All sunken and shrunken and pretty funny looking to all of us out here. However, the habit of withdrawing into an internalized world of considerations and opinions and stances and strategies is so strong that people often don't realize that they are doing this. But the more that you allow attention to invert and withdraw from reality, the more you fade away.

You could ask why, but asking why won't help. Why is not the point. That's like asking why it rains when the real question is 'how does it rain'? How do you fade? What is actually taking place when you hang back? How do you go from being awake and alert to sinking so much that you have no idea why you are sitting there, or even that you ARE sitting there? How does that happen? What do you notice about it? Don't fade away. Look at the question.

How about when you are in the midst of doing a form? Bowing in the doorway of the Hatto is an opportunity to open to whole-bodily sensation, to release any quality of rushing or distraction by fully paying attention to the details of the form. But half-way through the bow you've already faded from the form, blurring the motions together without noticing; closing the door without feeling into its weight, how it moves; stepping

into the room without feeling the step.

Or when you are taking your seat? Are you paying attention to each detail of the form? Stepping onto the zabuton, lowering yourself into seiza, are you feeling the weight and balance of the bodymind? Are you feeling the body sitting in a kneeling posture? Are you feeling into the sensations as you make the transition from kneeling to taking your seat on the zafu? Or is it comfy cushion time as you reach behind you, pick up the zafu like it's a pillow and give it an affectionate pat to flatten it, ready to receive your backside? In doing that, you've faded from the form. You've made it into something familiar and comfortable instead of using it as an opportunity to practise whole-bodily.

You may begin a chant with good volume and careful attention to timing, but not long into practising the chant, perhaps after the first line or the first few words, you're fading. [fake chant:] "Aaaaaaalll beeeings (mumble) widout numner." You may start internalizing attention, thinking about something else while simultaneously making sounds with your mouth; your volume will drop and you are no longer paying attention to the timing. Or you may be shouting, completely oblivious to the fact that you are just shouting over the chanting leader and oblivious to everyone else but yourself. You have faded from reality and while you may not be noticing this, it is very noticeable to those around you, particularly to your Teachers.

Exertion in practice is releasing — releasing habitual knots of attention that present themselves as contacted, self-absorbed states. But exerting oneself does not mean to push either. Releasing is much simpler than pushing or falling into states of glazed apathy. It is actively releasing attention into sensations and colours and forms and sounds. It is not manipulating attention by suppressing thoughts or feelings; it is not attempting to cultivate a state of mindfulness or quiet or some other state that you think makes you a better student, nor is it giving up. It is choosing to open to reality BY opening to reality — these colours and forms and sounds and sensations and the space of the room you are sitting in.

How many times in your life have you made mistakes, small, medium, huge mistakes, because you had allowed yourself to fade from reality, because you were not really present to the whole of your life with the whole of the bodymind, with the whole of your intelligence? So many bad life decisions are made because attention is bound within feelingtones, superstitious thinking, broken belief systems. What can you do about the traps you fall into? Practise opening to the freshness of intelligence by staying with what is most true of your experiencing in this moment. As Anzan Hoshin roshii once said, "There are ten thousand ways of interpreting experience. Don't buy into any of them".

In daisan and practice interviews, you need to exert yourself to make use of the opportunity to receive instruction. When asked, "How is your practice?", you need to communicate your experience as clearly as possible. Don't fade away, step up.

"But I don't know what the question means."

It means, "how is your practice?". You know, practice? The thing you are here to do, what you practice while sitting on the zafu. You've been given clear instructions about this: Feel the breath, the tanden, the sensations of the whole body, opening to seeing and hearing. Release habitual patterns of attention, the states and storylines and feelingtones that you usually indulge in. That practice. The same practice you should be doing while sitting in front of the Dharma Teacher or practice advisor who is asking you the question. The practice you should be speaking FROM during daisan and practice interviews. As far as

content goes, you could talk about your experience of practising in that moment, which is of the greatest importance, but you could also talk about your experience of sitting before you were called, or you could talk about how you practised with something you noticed while practising a week ago. But as you speak about whatever it is you are speaking about, practise. Feel the breath, the tanden, the whole bodymind, feel the tongue against the teeth, feel and hear the breath becoming sound, open to peripheral vision and hearing.

Don't sink back, retracting attention away from the reality of this moment. When students do that, it can be seen as well as felt. It is like seeing someone fall into a swoon, and yet they are still sitting upright, looking at you. But glazed, so glazed. Sunk into a state of dullness and apathy and refusing to lift themselves out of it, refusing to exert themselves. Too taxed to sit on a zafu? Too faint to have a conversation? And yet, after a sitting I see the same students stride out the door, full of energy. You give yourself away in so many ways.

In other situations, instead of speaking plainly, honestly, there may be an agenda running in the background. In this instance a student might answer the question "how is your practice" with something like "It's fine". That might be code for "I don't want to talk about it" or "I can't be bothered to talk about it" or "I have no idea what to say", but it isn't "fine". Whether this is commented on or not, it is clearly seen and felt. As are other forms of reactivity that come up, such as "you're not the boss of me"; "you really don't understand me", and "you're invading my privacy". Feh. Your "privacy" is your prison. When you have a practice interview or daisan, you are speaking with monastics who have dedicated their lives to this practice. Open to context. There is no "his" and "hers" and "my things" and "your things" in this context. The only context is practice so don't create opposition where there is none.

I've been wagging my finger enough at you, so here's a little story.

A long long time ago, in a Zendo not far away in distance but in time, a cascade of dead leaves fell about my head and shoulders, falling on my black robes and zabuton. I had just long enough to wonder where they were coming from when the Roshi's voice cut through my confusion. Standing directly behind me, he said "When you let the ikebana wither, you let your life wither."

OHHH...

The ikebana!

I'll rewind a little to explain why the Roshi was dropping dead leaves on my head. A task I was given many years ago as a postulant monk was to clean a small black laquered offering table that stood in a front corner of the Zendo at Zazen-ji. On this table stood an ikebana and three small white stones he placed in a very precise pattern. Every morning my task was to dust the table. That sounds simple enough, but this involved taking the ikebana and the stones off the table, dusting it, and then putting everything back as he had arranged them. And I was also to remove any dead leaves from the ikebana. And one day I didn't really look at what I was doing. And so I sat with dead leaves on my head.

When you commit yourself to doing something every day, it means every day. It means doing it whether you feel like it or not; it means being interested despite disinterest; it means opening around reluctance and recoil and refusal by paying attention to detail.

When you are sitting zazen, all of the same states that you fall into when you are doing anything else will present themselves. The ways in which you retract attention from reality, how you distract yourself with

storylines about hope and fear, how you sink and ignore, glaze and make yourself stupid, roil about in contraction and confusion — all of these will come up. And these are all the ways in which you wither and fade away.

This is spring, there is a haze of green buds, leaves unfurling before we have noticed. After a long, cold winter, spring is so beautiful and yet so brief, and we want spring to last, but it doesn't. Nothing lasts. Everything eventually fades away. Everything we think important, all of the people we love, our pets, our favourite hat and shoes, our favourite song and the contraption we used to play it on, the streets and buildings around us, everything we have known, will eventually decay and fade away. It all changes because all that is, is coming and going. A branch buds and at the same time a star is forming in a molecular cloud being compressed by the tidal forces of other molecular clouds orbiting the galaxy. You breathe this breath and at the same time, countless beings breathe their last breath. You breathe again and again and now it's time for your last breath. Oh. Too late. Better luck next time.

In the midst of all of this coming and going within vast space, here you are in the space of this room, in the space of your experiencing. Reality's fading is part of how it presences. As Roshi often says, "It's coming is its going, its going is its coming." Reality itself never fades, never tires, never exhausts itself. Its richness is always presencing as our lives, for as long as our little lives last. As long as your life lasts, please don't fade away from your life.