

The Practice of Boards and Stones

Presented by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi

Zazen-ji, June 18, 1989

Published in Zanmai 2, Summer 1989 Issue

So this Sunday morning we are sitting here and there's the breath and there's the mind, there's the body and the back, the forehead and the thoughts: all those thoughts, all those feelings.

The breath is just the breath, but the thoughts pile up and their weight sways and pulls and pushes you: thoughts of self-criticism, judgement, hope and fear, painful memories, quivering expectations. But each thought comes and goes like the breath. Each thought arises, dwells and decays.

The thoughts arise and express the samskaras held within the fourth skandha. The samskaras are various mental states of predisposition that have been learned and gathered from beginningless time, we can say, because there's no point in trying to fix a beginning to the mind, trying to fix a beginning to confusion. No point in trying to find anyone or anything to blame, because wherever we look for something to blame for our confusion, that very thing arises within our very looking, within our awareness of it. Wherever we look, whomever we might point to, whether we point to ourselves or we point to someone else, all of this arises only within our awareness, so instead of pointing and blaming, perhaps we should look into this. Perhaps we should look into this question of self and other before we act on such a presumption.

When you look at a wall, the wall arises within your awareness! Right here is this very question: What is the wall? Which brings, of course, the other question: Who is that is aware of it? What is really going on here?

You step on the floor and there's this stepping. This step, the floor, the shifting of the weight, all of this arises within awareness. Sometimes you feel good, sometimes you feel bad, sometimes your mind is buzzing with dream-like half-thoughts as you take that step on the floor, and then you feel queasy and uncertain. Sometimes the mind is clear and bright, sharp and deep and that step seems to penetrate all worlds. Regardless of how you feel about it, those feelings, the step on the floor, your whole experience arises within your awareness of it. What is this awareness?

This morning I would like to talk just briefly about yesterday morning. Yesterday morning we had gone over to Zazen-ji, to the new Center, to prepare the boards for the zendo's floor. All the nails had been pulled from the hardwood that we've gathered from an abandoned building that was to be knocked down. We have reclaimed this wood that was probably laid around 1946. We've reclaimed these boards that are scuffed, encrusted with dirt, with nails piercing their length every which way. We've reclaimed these to lay a floor in the zendo, the Practice Hall in Zazen-ji. So we pull all of the nails. We pick up the boards and we might lay them down on the floor, or we might lean them on our shoulders, and we take a chisel, we take the sharp end of the chisel and, holding it against the tongue or against the groove, we pull, scraping off the dirt. So yesterday I commented that "this was the practice of the boards". The boards started out as boards, but through this practice of scraping, the boards become yet more boards, more board-like.

It's amazing how much this is like our practice, with the sharp edge of the teachings scraping against our entire length and breadth and width and depth. The sharp edge of our life, the sharp edge of birth and death, piercing expectations, piercing fear, piercing our very last defence, scraping and cleaning all that which was

encrusted and held in secret corners. We clean the tongue and groove of those boards so that they might fit together and not obscure or obstruct each other, so that each board can be what it is (beats the floor with nyoi staff three times), just like that.

There are so many ways, so many places that we don't seem to fit into our lives, that we don't fit with each other, with our family or loved ones, those we dislike, rocks and trees, cars and buildings, sky, clouds, our own thoughts and feelings. So we scrape and polish, we scrape ourselves up against the breath, against the koan, against the wall, against the floor, against the teacher and against each other.

The scraping and polishing takes a board and makes it yet more fully and completely a board, a plank. This practice takes each one of you and makes each one of you more completely and fully what you are, what you have always been.

Mazu, or Old Master Ma, lived in the Tang dynasty, and just as I was talking a moment ago about yesterday morning, this morning I'll talk about the Tang dynasty and Old Master Ma, Mazu. In this story Mazu or Old Master Ma was not yet old, was not yet a Master, but still we'll call him Mazu.

His Master, Nanyue saw him sitting one day, sitting very earnestly, very determined, so Nanyue, being Mazu's Teacher knew he had to seize the opportunity and so he tapped Mazu on the shoulder and said:

"What are you doing?" And Mazu said:

"I am sitting". Nanyue said:

"Well, why are you sitting?" And Mazu said:

"I am sitting to become a Buddha".

Nanyue said "Hmph!!", walked off a couple of paces, crouched down, squatted on his haunches and reached over and picked up a tile or a stone. Taking another stone, he started to rub the stones together, polishing stone against stone. Ma heard the grinding, turned and saw what his master Nanyue was doing and asked:

"Master! What are you doing?" Nanyue said:

"I am polishing these stones." Ma said:

"Why are you polishing the stones?" And Nanyue said:

"I am polishing these stones to make a mirror." Ma said:

"You can't polish stones into a mirror!" Nanyue said:

"You can't become Buddha through sitting."

At that moment, Ma had an insight.

And so, of course, Ma continued to sit and to sit yet more deeply, to sit without striving to become Buddha, but to sit in order to unfold and recognize Buddha. Buddha not at some other place, not in the Tang dynasty,

not yesterday morning, but this morning and also in the Tang dynasty, also yesterday morning and tomorrow morning and in the arising of each breath and each thought.

This arising, this presentation of experience, moment after moment, these thoughts and feelings coming and going, this movement of mind, this movement of our life, is just this polishing, just this scraping. Polishing or scraping stones or boards. Each stone, each board is Buddha and this scraping is its practice. This polishing is its practice. This polishing for no true purpose but to make a board into a board, a stone into a stone, a Buddha into a Buddha.

It is not possible for anyone to become Buddha, for anyone to become enlightened. It has never been possible and never will be possible, but it is not only possible but necessary, vitally necessary for each one of you to realize yourselves as being Buddha, which means to look without preconception at the very nature of experiencing. You see this by attending fully to each experience as it is, arising within the field of awareness, as it is.

Through this fullness of attention, you release the pettiness of struggle. Through this fullness you begin to appreciate the wealth, the vast grandeur of each experience and of this field of experiencing that is body, breath, speech and mind. Through this fullness of attention you begin to realize that each thing that is attended to is a kind of gate, a kind of doorway. A doorway that you pass through to become more of what you always already were.

Attending fully to each thought, each feeling, you can enter through each one of those to find out where the thoughts come from, where they go. To find out what the nature of mind itself is, what the essence of awareness itself is, what the heart of all worlds is. This we call Buddha because Buddha means "Awakened One". When we find this heart, when we find this essence, it is like waking up from a dream, it is like waking up from the closed, claustrophobic shifting images of hallucination into the bright, crisp fresh air of wakefulness. We call it Buddha because it is actually beyond description. We call it Buddha because it is not based upon any of the six realms of being, it is not based on the five skandhas or the twelve nidhanas, it is not based on self and other, it is not based on body and mind, it is not based on time or space.

It has absolutely no reference, because each thing that arises is actually based upon this Buddha; not that this Buddha is anything underlying things, it is awareness itself.

Polishing and scraping, sitting, studying koan, studying the teachings, studying ourselves, means to polish this moment, means to cut into this moment. It means to breathe. It means to release struggle and confusion into the vast and basic purity of this whole moment. It is to receive the transmission of the Buddhas and Dharma Ancestors through this practice and through this practice, through this transmission, to receive ourselves as we are.

In the "Hokyo Zanmai" (The Jewel Mirror Samadhi) by Dongshan Liangjie says: "Buddhas and Dharma Ancestors transmit vastness. Now you have it, so keep it well."

Please, have a good morning.