

Practising Without an Edge

A Teisho Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, February 19th, 2025

In each moment of zazen, we sit right here and right now. If we are not sitting right here and right now, it is not yet truly a moment of zazen.

This morning we sit here in the Hatto or Dharma Hall, feeling the breath, the tanden, the hands in the Dharmadhatu mudra, feeling the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting in zazen. We open attention to peripheral vision, to the sounds that can be heard inside and outside of the room. We sit in the dignified posture of zazen and allow the flickering of thoughts, feelings, states and storylines to come and go...come and go until they are only another coming and going of details along with sensations and sounds and seeing and swallowing. Instead of following mental states into some corner away from this moment as it is, we stay with the posture, with bodily sensation, with seeing and hearing.

We sit right here and now because we are sitting. This is what sitting zazen is - practising sitting. We are not 'trying' to get better at being ourselves or to become something or someone else. We are uncovering who and what we really are.

Sitting still in zazen isn't just about not fidgeting, not moving the body. It is about not moving attention towards or away from experiencing. This is the practice of the Buddha. He sat unmoving, but he also did not move attention towards or away from anything that was noticed. That included thoughts, feelings, states that he experienced while sitting. He stayed with the fact of sitting still and unmoving but not by locking himself into a posture or a certain kind of 'state' of mindfulness. But of practising moment after moment feeling the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting, seeing with peripheral vision, opening to hearing — opening all of the capacities of bodymind. This is not the same thing as cultivating a state of mindfulness or practising some sort of concentration state. It is releasing the whole bodymind into Luminosity, into Knowing in Itself.

The actual experience of truly and actually practising zazen is beyond anything you can imagine about it or conceive of. It truly is as Dogen zenji said, the practice of realization and the realization of practice.

In the Zenrin Kushu, or "The Forest of Zen Sayings", it says "a jewel in bright light loses its edges". When we practise beyond our edges, the Luminosity that is our own nature is revealed.

Right now, are you really opening to Openness beginning with practising environmental mindfulness, or is your attention fragmented, following reactions to what is being experienced or commenting discursively about what is being experienced? Are you making this experience of sitting all about "you" or are you releasing these mumbling musings and ponderings and reflections of self-image into the colours and forms and sounds and sensations? Are you thinking about "you" or are you practising with the thoughts?

The first lesson we learn from zazen is that whatever we are thinking about does not matter at all. When you get lost in thought it will seem compelling and important. It will seem as if you are following a series of meaningful and intelligent thoughts. But just a few moments later you will have no memory of what you were thinking about with the first thought, just some vague sense of the last thought. If that. You do not notice what you were focused on because now you are focused on something else.

Your focus is on grasping at the thought and you are not noticing that what you are grasping after - the content of your thoughts - keeps changing. Like a dream, the content is always shifting - thinking about this, thinking about that.

The only thing that is constant is the focusing, getting lost. The only important thing to do is to notice the focusing and to open around that.

Focusing is a narrowing and congealing of attention. It is using attention as though it were a narrow beam of light coming from a flashlight. Whatever you shine it on can seem to light up or stand out. But what is really going on is that narrowing and focusing attention in that way throws a huge circle of darkness on everything else that could be noticed. You can see a practical example of this when you get lost in thought. Focusing is the framing of small areas of what seems to us to be 'out there' to narrow the view, narrow attention so that only a few things can appear - picking and choosing what we will allow to be important to us. Then we make them seem even more important by liking or disliking them and fabricating stories about them.

When we practice, we can see this focusing and how that results in our moving from state to state to state. In the space of 30 minutes, we can seem to go from feeling quite clear to feeling sad or angry about a memory that comes up and then we move on to planning, pondering, feeling 'creative', thinking about our perceived problems and difficulties. Although these are all thoughts and feelings that you have already propagated many times, that never tell you anything new, that are already known - all of that is ignored because that is outside of the edge of that little beam of light you are shining on this state and then that.

When you focus on a thought, everything else seems to disappear. And the more you propagate the focusing, the state of concentration, the more everything else will seem to disappear until your attention becomes so internalized that no other information can penetrate the state. This is why it is possible to entertain yourself for long periods of time with a state that generates complete nonsense. Or to torture yourself with self-loathing or bad memories. Or spend half a sitting round congratulating yourself over being so profoundly 'spiritual' and so on. If you focus enough, you can convince yourself that it is worthwhile churning insane storylines that will seem to make complete sense to you.

Craziness doesn't know it's crazy until it's not. That's why we don't waste time assessing our states. Instead we practise opening around contraction as soon as we are able to notice it.

How do you release this narrowing focus? In the very moment of noticing it, just stop following it and deliberately choose to open attention to a wider range of details - meaning everything that you have cast darkness on, the rest of what you are experiencing that is being screened out. You don't need the flashlight. All of the lights in the room are already on.

Release the focusing by first coming back to the sensations of the breath at the diaphragm and the sensations of the tanden because they are easy to feel and are always available. Open to the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting in posture and open to peripheral vision and hearing. Open to as many details of present experiencing as you are able to, all at the same time rather than in 'stages'. Let the mind fall into the body and the body fall into the ocean of reality. Opening around a thought is not a matter of suppression or avoidance, but of allowing yourself to experience that thought in context. It is recognizing that any thought that comes up is making up the smallest part of the whole of your experiencing. If you open attention all around it, it will dissipate by itself because no thought can accurately represent who or what you are.

Practising this, you will come to realize that it is possible to see over and around the edges of the content of a state and you can learn not to fall into these cycles of becoming the states you experience.

You are not your thoughts or feelings. You never have been.

When we practise without an edge, we set no limit to practice; there is no edge between our practice and the arising of any experience. What this means, of course, is that you can practise with anything that comes up; with anything that you experience. And not just when you are sitting in zazen, but all of the time.

Use the noticing of states, of feelings, about your interpretations and assessments of your experiencing, of other people, of situations to practise without an edge.

In the SAkN series, "Dimensions of Space" the Roshi says in the teisho entitled "Outshining":

"Feeling into whatever boundary, whatever limit, whatever edge presents itself and feeling past it, space begins to open and flower forth as infinite spaces and infinite activities."