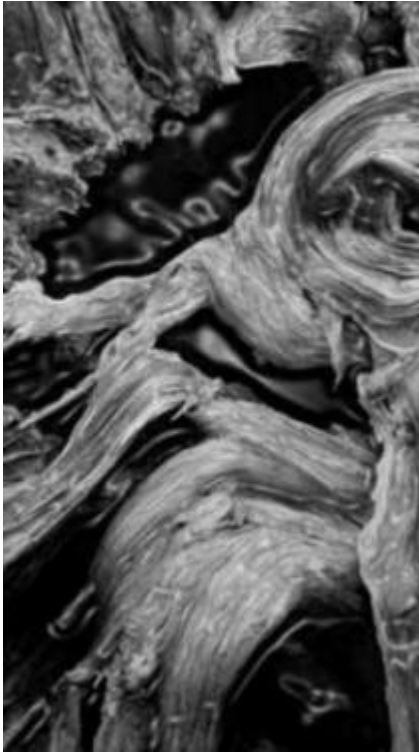


Return to the Root

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, March 25th, 2006



The “Zenrin Kushu” says, “A jewel in bright light loses its edges.” Another way of saying this is the conventional folk saying, “Who gives a fuck what you think?”

This is how Anzan Hoshin roshi began the first Dharma Talk that I heard as an associate student so many years ago. Who is it that is so concerned with the trivial and poisonous nonsense that make most of our thoughts? Is that who we really are? Or is there more to us than just that? When we let the bodymind be completely open to the moment as it is, then we lose the edges that seem to constrain us, contraction drops away, and we are like a jewel filled with and surrounded by luminosity.

He was just saying then what all of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors have always said. For example, the “Xinxin Ming” or “Trusting Awareness” says,

*The more you talk and think about it,
the more you wander astray.*

*Stop talking and thinking
and there is nothing you will not understand.*

*Return to the root and find the meaning,
pursuing appearances misses the source.*

“The root” means the source of our lives, the vitality and livingness of our lives, the fundamental open ground of experiencing itself.

We return to the root when we face what we are always facing. What is right before our eyes and what our eyes are, our fingers and toes and knees are. Who we are beyond the thoughts and feelings and states that spring up like weeds.

A little story:

A student who was dissatisfied with his practice asked me how to release patterns of contraction. He had read one of my Dharma Talks in which I said “The Roshi has spent thousands of hours with me, literally, showing me how to release past experiences” and misunderstood this to mean that the Roshi had listened to me telling him all of the stories of my life as part of what he imagined to be some sort of ongoing Zen psychotherapy.

That was not the case at all. If I told the Roshi a story about something that I had experienced in the past, he might sometimes listen to the story, but then he would always point out that none of that was going on now and I should stop talking to myself about it. He would show me how my attention was folding and congealing and how to open to reality. This is the same Teaching contained in the “Xinxin Ming”:

*The more you talk and think about it,
the more you wander astray.*

Often as not, he’d interrupt me in the middle of the story or perhaps even after the first sentence to remind me that none of that was going on now and I could just let go of it. What he was saying over and over and over again during those “thousands of hours” spent showing me how to release past experiences, was that I should pay attention to the details of present experiencing and recognize that I could not be bound by thoughts and feelings and memories if I released them into the open space of Knowing.

This is “shutting up”, not by going blank or blocking out a thought or a feeling or a memory, but by actively engaging attention in opening to this moment of present experiencing. Recognizing that any thought, any feeling, any state that is experienced takes place within the context of this moment of present experiencing.

Right now, you are sitting on a zafu. If you notice a thought about the past or perhaps about the future, that thought is taking place within the context of THIS moment of present experiencing. There are colours, forms, sounds, sensations; the whole bodymind sitting on the cushion. This is what is actually going on. Then there are phantom-like representations of experiencing that take the form of thoughts and feelings and states that can be noticed amidst the details of sensations and colours and forms and sounds. Stay with the sensations and colours and forms and sounds. Don’t focus on the strands of storylines that come up. Open around them. Use the noticing of them as a reminder to open to the luminosity of experiencing. They don’t mean anything about who and what you are and cannot bind you if you stay with reality.

Release delusion by returning to the root. Let the bodymind open to reality.

If you are talking to yourself about anything at all while sitting, just don’t complete the sentence. As the Roshi often points out, conversation is only useful if it is between at least two people. If you are sitting on a cushion having a conversation with yourself about work, or your house, or your children or anything at all for

that matter, you are not practicing; you are just doing the same things that confuse you off the cushion. Please: Shut up. If you are talking to yourself about your practice, by verbalizing “feel the breath” or “feel the feet”; or asking yourself questions you’ve come up with as part of some kind of self-assigned pseudo-koan practice, who are you talking to? Shut up.

Zen is the practice and realization of a radical questioning into the nature of experiences and of experiencing. This can only be done by the whole bodymind. It cannot be done by discursive thinking at all. True koan practice and study can only be engaged in an ongoing relationship between a Teacher and student that uses whole bodily mindfulness as its basis. Question silently into this moment by opening to it as it is.

The “releasing” that Roshi showed me was not about “resolving” anything by figuring anything out. It was simpler than that. It was about learning to recognize that the cause of suffering about past experiences was the habitual story telling that I engaged in and that I needed to stop this. And that the only way to put an end to it was by continuously opening attention around thoughts and feelings and storylines; by shutting up and actually doing the practice. What he taught me was the same Teaching contained in the “Xinxin Ming”:

*Stop talking and thinking
and there is nothing you will not understand.*

In this way, the storylines and problems and confusions become resolved by rendering the energy of contracted states into the vast energies of the whole of experience.

Those little apparently “harmless” storylines you engage in, the nattering about your day or the people you know or what you have to do later and so forth, are actually a form of insanity that withdraws from reality. Focusing on and following discursiveness and feeling-tones is feeding the same mechanisms that fuel the generation of bigger states and storylines that cause you suffering. Following these seemingly harmless storylines is “pursuing appearances”. As it says in the “Xinxin Ming”:

*Return to the root and find the meaning,
pursuing appearances misses the source.*

To return to the root, we must release the thoughts and feelings and states that clutter the space of experiencing which is the source of our lives. We must shut up. But when I say “shut up” I do not mean that you should suppress thoughts and feelings. Suppression is ignoring something that is noticed. I am not telling you to ignore anything. Releasing is much, much simpler than that.

Paying attention to the details of present experiencing requires a light, open, flexible attention because the details change moment after moment. Sounds rise and fall; the light in the room changes; smells change; sensations change. Feel into whole-bodily sensation and open to the seeing and hearing. Practise opening to all of these details in the same breath, at the same time. With each breath, there will be details that you are not noticing because attention can always open further. If you notice that you were not feeling into the sensations of an area of the bodymind; or that the hearing was not really open or that the eye gaze had narrowed; open to those details now, with this breath. Engage yourself fully in the practice of opening to the luminosity of experiencing. The continuous activity of opening attention is essential because if we are not doing this, we default to following coarse movements of attention. Contracted patterns of attention careen

around like a drunk, lurching and grabbing onto this, slipping and catching the edge of that on its way down, then rearing up and throwing itself at this other. Sit up and shut up.

Just as the posture of zazen needs to be balanced and aligned instead of being sloppy and slouching, the mind needs to be balanced and aligned instead of being sloppy and slouching. Physical movements out of the posture need to be noticed and released immediately and movements of attention towards thoughts and feelings and storylines also need to be noticed and released immediately.

As soon as you notice the beginning, the smallest flicker of a storyline, a feeling tone, a state, release it. How do you release it? By letting go of any fascination you have with it and instead of following and propagating it, opening attention to the practice. Any thought or feeling or state that comes up while we are sitting is bullshit, regardless of content. Again, this is not a matter of suppressing anything, cutting off thoughts, trying to make the mind "still" or "calm" or "quiet". It is simply recognizing that thoughts and feelings and storylines do not need our involvement. They will come up while you are sitting, but you do not need to give attention to them. What you do need to give your attention to is the sensations of the body, the colours and forms and sounds. Anything that comes up while we are practising opening attention, anything that seems to pull or tug at attention, anything at all that seems to become the "point" of our sitting needs to be released immediately by opening around it.

We need to release movements of attention towards thoughts and feelings and states as soon as they are noticed because if we wait until we notice that we have been roiling around them for any length of time, we are making things more difficult for ourselves than need be.

We cannot afford to "spin plates" while sitting - vaguely feeling into the breath and perhaps noticing a few details in the visual field while simultaneously following a storyline. This is plate spinning, not mindfulness.

To practice mindfulness we must shut up and pay active attention to the details of present experiencing.

Returning to the root is very simple. All that we need to do is release attention by not becoming entangled in the weeds of thoughts and feelings and states and storylines by releasing them as soon as they begin to appear.

Don't struggle against thoughts. Don't try to not think. Don't try to think about what not thinking might be like. Just shut up. Just stop propagating the thought.

Return to the root by coming back to reality with this breath, this colour, this sensation, right now.

Let it be simple. Let it be simple. Let it be simple.

Have a good morning