Slip

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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There is an ancient traditional verse that is very important in our practice and study of Zen. It is chanted during the evenings of sesshin. It is on the inside of the monastery's Mountain Gate so that you see it on your way out onto the streets to remind you to continue your practice wherever you are. And the characters on the han or wooden block in the Hatto say "Daiji" or Great Matter which is a reminder of the Daiji-no-ge: the Verse of the Great Matter:

> *The Great Matter is birth and death.*
> *Life slips past and time is gone.*
> *Right now, wake up! wake up!*
> *Do not waste time.*

First, I would like to point out that life does not slip past you and time is never gone but is always coming and always going. At the same time, as Anzan Hoshin roshi points out, "you cannot slip past time" and "everything is always forever gone."
In "Wild Time", a series of commentaries on Eihei Dogen zenji's "Uji" or "Being-Time", Anzan roshi said,

> *Sometimes we even think of time*
> *as if it were a space.*
>
> *And we seem to move "from" one time*

"to" another time.

Sometimes we experience time as fragments,
bits and pieces of time
—jumbles of memory, of expectations, of projections—
and because of this
we experience a sense of gap between ourselves
and this moment of time,
this timing of time.

And we do not understand that
we are the timing of the time,
the being of time,
that time is being us.

Because we feel that we are separate from this moment,
sometimes it seems as if it slips "past" us.

Sometimes it seems so flat, so featureless, so extended
that we feel we can just bypass it
to get to the next moment,
the next thing, the next event.

But because time seems to us, sometimes,
almost as if it were a thing
it then suddenly looms up
and we trip over it
and we find that
we are behind the time.

That somehow,
we can't quite catch up with what's going on.

This is all in relationship to a number of points raised by Dogen that can be summed up in the single phrase:

Time is not separate from me and if I am present then so, too, is time.

So it is not really a matter of time slipping away and leaving you behind. In all of this coming and going, we are coming and going too. This is the Great Matter of our lives.

But we keep trying to slip away from it, and from our lives. And the time, the opportunity, to recognize and realize the reality of our lives and the Great Matter of the Buddhas and Ancestors is easily missed.

To self-image, time is an indefinable current that sweeps around us, propelling us forward and back through a kind of space, to where events long gone seem still to exist and events that haven't yet happened hang hazily in the distance in front of us. The current of time seems quite separate from us and yet we are caught

in its relentless progression, as it opens portals of opportunity and then slams them shut or keeps them open for far too long without consulting us. A night's sleep is too short, a meeting is too long, money runs out before time, Christmas or spring are too far away, taxes too close, youth blooms, dries out and wrinkles, your fingernails need cutting AGAIN, eating dinner takes less time than the preparation and at times it can seem that 30 minutes of sitting should go on forever or be over in five, but is never over when you want it to be over.

Is this perception of time accurate? Or is it once again, the result of contraction rewriting reality? What is this strange split between what is going on and our sense of time about what is going on? Since we have begun attending to how our experience actually is through zazen and mindfulness we all know that self-image continuously glosses over and blurs the details of experiencing, leaving out most of what is going on to maintain various states. So is this also the case in our perception of time? I think so.

Today, during this Dharma Assembly, there will be moments when you will feel impatient about just sitting on your zafu, or taking the time to take care of your cushions properly, or taking the time to do a bow properly in a doorway. While practising the forms they will bring you face-to-face with your tendency to want to rush past experiencing or to space out and avoid it, to feel that you have to rush to keep up with the flow of time, or choose to dumb yourself down to avoid the pressure of it.

Dogen zenji said,

> *"Don't believe that "time flies." Don't see a "flowing away" as being the definition of time. If time were just a flowing away there would be no place for the present because it would fall through the gaps."*

You have time because you are time. You and time and the pressing of the cushion are not three separate things. You and time and the bow in the doorway are not three separate things. Time bows, you bow, the bow is you and time bowing. Time does not fly. Time goes from the moment **to** the moment **as** the the moment.

Shuho Myocho (1282-1336) once said: "We have been separated for so long and have never been apart. We meet each other throughout the day, and do not meet a moment."

In daisan, we meet each other, but the point of daisan is not just to meet each other but to meet each other in and as this moment, to use the opportunity of daisan to practise meeting this moment, which includes all moments, past and future. This doesn't mean you can't speak about your perception of the past or of the future, but recognize that when you speak of past or future you're not going 'to' another place that exists in the past or exists in the future, but instead, you are right here, speaking of a memory or a thought that has the appearance of past or future.

At moments in daisan or a practice interview, when you are asked "how is your practice?" or when you are sitting at your computer writing your practice journal, you can see how you seems to slip and slide about.
"What should I say?"
"What should I write about?"
"What's the point of saying anything? It's all been said before by other practitioners."
"It's not unique, or clever, or bright, it's just the same old, same old".

No, it hasn't been said before, not in this time, not in your words, not as you understand in this moment.

Don’t slip into recoil. Don’t avoid. Step through this portal of opportunity to allow yourself to experience the richness of this moment, with all of its questions and fragments of clarity and confusion. This is what we call “entering a Dharma Gate”. Meet the practice advisor or Dharma Teacher as well as THIS moment and allow attention to fall open as much as is possible without trying to arrange yourself to appear this way or that.

“But I have nothing to say”.

Really? You were sitting for 30 minutes. That’s 1,800 seconds during which countless more ‘mind moments’ occurred and you noticed nothing? You’ve slipped into a state and you’d like me to nod and agree with you? What’s really going on when you shut down like that?

On the other hand, you need not have anything to say or to ask, to entertain yourself or to entertain me. It is absolutely fine to have nothing to say if there is no sense of poverty about it and if you are not hiding from the practice, from the Teacher, and from yourself. Just don’t be slippery about it. If you are folded back, come out. No matter how tightly self-image constrains you, you can always slip out because all around contraction it is always already open.

During the Dharma Assembly there will be a samu period and you may find yourself sweeping a floor or washing dishes or folding dish towels. You sweep the broom as this time and place and this time and place are the sweep of the broom and of you. You cannot be separate from it, but you will close down possibilities – moments when you could truly practise – if you abstract attention to avoid the experience of it or sweep yourself away in impatience to get the task done or become lost in fixation.

In any moment, whether sitting and doing formal practice, or the informal practice of samu, sitting in daisan or a practice interview, at home, at work, anywhere at any time at all, the doorways of opportunity that open to us do not slam shut because we’ve run out of time or because time shuts them. Their closing is your avoidance of them, recoiling away from the possibility of stepping through them.

The Roshi says in “Wild Time”:

> *At the edge of each moment,*
> *on this side the past is gone,*
> *on this side the future has not happened,*
> *and in the centre*
> *is nothing at all*
> *because this moment is utterly ungraspable,*
> *is already*
> *gone.*

If you try to stand at the center of this moment, or stretch your arms forward to try to grasp at the future, or clutch at the past, you misunderstand. This moment, the past, the future, are the coming and going of being time. You are the coming and going of being time. There’s nothing to slip through or past or back to.

You might have moments today when you think to yourself “I could have been at home doing yahdah instead of sitting here wasting time sitting on a cushion.”

Wasting time? Wasting time is impossible because you ARE time. All that you can waste is yourself. So let’s

not do that.

Each moment of your life is the only time you are actually alive. Zazen shows us how to be alive to this living, especially when it shows us how we slip and slide and push and pull and struggle and collapse instead of opening to the richness of this life that is you and I and time and space.

We have assembled together to practice the realization of the Buddhas, the Dharma. Let each of us use each moment of this opportunity to enter Dharma Gates beyond number. So, right now: wake up! wake up!