

Splat

Dharma Talk by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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You swing out your legs, put your feet on the floor, and get out of bed in the morning but splat. You pour a cup of coffee and enjoy the aroma but before you even taste it: splat. You get into the car to drive to work and splat. You sit down on the zafu and splat.

Splat, splat, splat. We can call it all kinds of things – disappointment, sadness, sinking, sleepiness, dullness, torpor, boredom, frustration, unfairness, but what it all comes down to is splat: attention folding in, flattening out.

Standing in line at the grocery store, splat. The line seems to take forever. You read all of the headlines on the magazines that you're not interested in, check out the range of chocolate bars and batteries and disposable razors you have no intention of buying. Splat. The cashier, who has also gone splat, impatiently watches but doesn't help an elderly woman as she slowly fumbles through coins with arthritic fingers. You briefly wonder how your fingers will feel when they become like that, but you don't really want to think about that. Splat.

Walking down the street, "someone" finishes a bottled drink, screws the cap on and considers their options. They could carry it to the nearest trash can to dispose of it or they could "inconspicuously" drop it here and be done with it. Splat. They drop it in someone's carefully tended flower bed and continue on their way, walking past all of the other splatters left by others who went splat – discarded candy wrappers, drink bottles and dirty Kleenex. But when we go splat, how we feel is all that we are concerned about. We become oblivious to the impact this has on anyone else.

All around us lie the splatters of people going splat – from dirt and grime and peeling paint and shoddy workmanship to decaying infrastructures, famine and war and on and on and on.

Some splats are bigger than others. Some last longer than others. Some are stickier than others. Some are smellier than others. And they can happen anywhere, at any time.

They happen when you are sitting zazen. You might have started out all revved up about the idea of sitting zazen, but halfway through the round that initial enthusiasm is waning because sitting isn't about your idea of sitting or how you feel about sitting. It's sitting – experiencing things as they actually are. So you go from enthusiasm, to wanting the round to end, without noticing at all that you've gone splat. You start talking to yourself about how practice sucks or how your practice sucks; maybe you let yourself sink further and further until you put yourself to sleep. Or maybe you "tough it out" until the end of the round or until you're called for daisan and can ask "What about all of this 'easy and joyful' stuff that Dogen zenji talks about in the Fukanzazengi?"

What comes up when you are sitting is no different from what comes up for you the rest of the time, when you are not sitting. When your attention goes splat during zazen, you also have a direct view into how your attention does that at other times and the opportunity to learn to practise with that instead of just collapsing. Attention is not a muscle. It doesn't get tired in the same way that the body does, from physical exertion. It doesn't have to collapse.

Splat is a form of reactivity, of the three klesas of passion, aggression, and stupidity that self-image poisons its experience with. Much of the time attention grabs at this or pulls at that but much of the time it just, well, splats. Passion and aggression are both a lot of work. Being stupid and just collapsing is easy. We don't even have to try to justify it the way that we do being angry or fearful or lustful. We don't have to have something in specific to collapse about or over. And in fact, being flat or listless can be a great background for other more energetic states to momentarily star in. Boredom can be the supporting cast and set for resentment, longing, sexual fantasy, and many other more vigorous states.

Going splat seems very familiar and solid to us. It seems that way because we can go splat in so many different ways.

Sometimes it seems to be just bland and lifeless. But sometimes there is clearly a strong element of fear to it, fear that it is inescapable, that whatever we do to try to lift ourselves from it, it is always going to be there, waiting for us to fall down again. And so when we do go splat, there is a tad of "See? Here it is again. Told you so." Self-image, the image we have of ourselves, is a process of contraction and the root of contraction is fear. An aspect of that fear is that we are in some way fundamentally flawed and going splat is proof of that. And of course fear has many threads, among them the "big splat", the death splat.

So maybe we should take a brief look at that one because you're mixing several things up and your thinking is not clear. Yes, one day the bodymind is going to go splat and all of the ways in which it knows are going to come to an end. That will happen and there is nothing you can do to change that. But even when the bodymind is dying, YOU don't have to collapse. You have a choice. You can go out with an "AHHHH!" or you can practise. You may as well practise because whatever fear or pain there is, whatever strangeness there is, is because you will be experiencing yourself in a way that is completely unfamiliar to you, it's not something you will be able to get away from. You're not going to be able to escape what is going on by letting yourself collapse and slide into states of dullness and boredom the way you sometimes do when you are sitting on your zafu. You're not going to be able to let yourself fall asleep and ignore what is being experienced. You're not going to be able to turn away from what is being experienced at the moment of death, so how about learning to practise with your fear now, while you sit on a cushion in a nice clean room and are in reasonably good health? As the Roshi often says, "If not now, when? If not here, where?"

With death, as with anything else that you are experiencing now or in the future, there is what is going on and there is how you are about what is going on. Self-image struggles to create a version of the world that is predictable and controllable through inverting attention. It creates a replica of the world built out of discursiveness, imagery and feeling tones that allow it to ignore reality, ignore the world as it is. And the world that it creates by inverting attention and cocooning itself in states is precisely the world it fears. Sit up straight, open your eyes and see where you are and what is actually going on.

The circumstances and conditions of your life as it really is, change continuously. Nothing is permanent, nothing is fixed and firm. Life is not about you and never has been. It's not personal, but it is also not "against you" or "out to get you". When you are walking down the sidewalk and you trip and fall flat on your face, that does not occur through some plot to make you look or feel foolish. When you stub your toe on a chair, that is not because life is trying to tell you something, though you could learn to pay more attention through that experience. When you go splat in zazen it is not because your practice is bad, it is because splat is one of the states you can and do experience and need to practise with. What matters is not that you go splat, but what you do when you go splat. What matters is to get up again and do so as quickly as possible.

In the text "Immo: Suchness", written by Eihei Dogen zenji, translated by Anzan Hoshin Roshi and Yasuda Joshu Dainen roshi, Dogen says:

The Suchness of sounds and forms is just Such. The body and mind are just Suchness. The Awakened Ones are just Suchness. In understanding Suchness, understand falling down to the ground as Suchness and getting up as Such. Then, falling down is not a problem. There is an old saying that came from India: "If you fall down on the ground, you stand by using the ground to get up. You can't stand up without a ground." This means that if you fall down, you just use what you have fallen down on to stand up again. There is no other way to stand up. This is such good advice that you should wake up just by hearing it because it is the path of liberating body and mind. If you want to know the central point of the enlightenment of the Awakened Ones, here it is: it is like someone who has fallen to the ground using it to stand up. Look deeply into this and you can cut through how you have identified yourself in the past, what you think you are in the present, and what you think you will be in the future and just yield into Suchness.

Wake up to Waking Up by going right through delusion into the Awareness in which it arises otherwise you will be obstructed by some idea about Awakening and be stuck within delusion. If you fall down, use the falling down to get up again. This saying applies everywhere throughout heaven and earth, India and China, throughout the three measures of time and is how Awakened Ones throughout all of time have become Awakened Ones. This teaching leaves nothing unsaid and misses nothing. If you only understand this when things are just so for you then you just haven't understood it; it's as if you have never heard it.

At the very moment that we recognize that we have fallen down, right as we are at that time, we can get up.

If you were to fall into a bog, would you just stay there? Of course not. You would work with the mud, use the resistance of the mud, as a means to free yourself.

During zazen, if attention sinks and goes splat, then splat is your starting point. Use the texture of the state as the ground to push yourself up. Exert yourself. You are not any of the states you experience. Your practice is opening to the context in which all of the states you experience come and go, rise and fall. So open to context. Open to where you are and what is really going on. You are sitting on a zafu. Feel the breath, open your eyes, and practise whole bodymind. Release the commentary about how hard it is to get up because that is part of the splat. Stop talking to yourself about being down and simply get up.

In the midst of any state we experience, we can use the state as the ground to push ourselves up and this is true not only of when we are sitting zazen, but all of the time, in everything that we do. Any moment of experiencing is a starting point. So let's begin here.