

Stainless

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Dainen-ji, June 9th, 2007



Everything is already open. The characteristic of each moment of experience or “dharma” is that it is annica or impermanent and sunya or empty, transparent and open. Another way of saying this is that everything is “stainless”.

The stainlessness of this moment is not only the fact that colours and forms are as they are or that sensations are as they are; the fact is that this moment cannot be grasped. There is no particular angle that you can take upon this moment because it is too vast and it is constantly changing. You arise within it, I arise within it, we all arise within it. When we realize this through our practice then we realize that we too are stainless.

Sitting in the posture of zazen, there is nothing to hold on to. Even if you were to grab onto your zafu to try to hold it firm or hold yourself firmly to it, there is still the zabuton underneath it and the floor beneath that, room all around you and the air and the light and the sounds drifting through the open windows. The moment is stainless, unconditioned, empty of boundary and this is where you can release whatever you are holding. There is no one who can possibly hold, nothing to be held.

The Buddha’s Teaching of impermanence is not a feeling about things and it is not theoretical. It is not something that happens to things, let alone something that might or might not happen to things. It is how things always are. Stainlessness is not a mystical shining void, a special place, a special experience. It is what each and every moment already is.

How the bodymind experiences experience occurs as mind-moments. How many details are presenting

themselves as you sit here facing the wall? Your noticing of them, when you notice them, even if you are noticing very few of them, is very, very fast. Faster than you can think about them.

As Anzan Hoshin roshi says in the text “The Heart of This Moment”,

In this open space, there is little for us to be deluded about; we are not acting out our fabrications and self-deceptions and so we can see them very clearly. Since there is little for them to fix themselves on, they don't have much weight and so we find that they can shift very quickly. Seeing this shifting is an essential part of Investigation. Seeing how attention alights upon one object, and then upon another and another and another. Seeing how these are not one thing and, although attention is continually being disposed through habit and impulse toward localizing, there is also a quality of shifting present. Despite the fact that attention is continually pulling and pushing, there is no continuity to what is being held, to what is being pushed. There is only this shifting, this changing. The impermanence of dharmas displays itself openly. In each moment of mind, in the arising of whatever presents itself, radical impermanence is revealed.

When we are practicing we can see the movements of attention towards habitual thoughts and feelings and when we choose to open attention through mindfulness practice, when we align with Reality, our actions are more and more guided by Openness itself. But when we stop practising, the space of open experiencing becomes cluttered with storylines and feeling tones; snippets of past experiencing; bits and pieces of current storylines; lumps and chunks of disjointed thoughts and feelings. Contraction leads to further contraction. Sometimes you get angry. You feel misunderstood. You think you know what everything is, what's going on, what will happen. One storyline leads into another and another. It looks like “this” and “this”. But you're not seeing anything. It sounds like “this” and “this”. But you're not hearing anything. It feels like “this” and “this”. But you're not feeling anything. Except the state.

Out of all of details – the infinite range of details you could be noticing – why is this thought so important? Why this feeling? Why this state?

It's rather like this: Let's say you are looking out the window on a beautiful spring day, and you are seeing the leaves and branches of trees, sunlight and billowing clouds and birds. And then you notice a fly on the window screen. You begin to focus on it and the more you focus it, the bigger it seems to you. You can narrow attention so much that it can seem to you that only the fly exists and the world behind it and around it which you were seeing previously seems to disappear completely. But if you release the focusing, the fly doesn't disappear; instead you see the fly together with the window, the trees and sky and birds – you see the fly in context.

Similarly, if you focus on a storyline, the world can seem to disappear. If you release the focusing, the world seems to come back into view. But of course, the world doesn't really “come back into view”. It was and is there all along. And when you Wake Up from a thought, “you” don't make the world reappear. You simply stop focusing and seeing sees.

But whether you choose to sit there focusing on a fly or a thought, or whether you choose to open around it to see that the fly is arising together with the whole world, no matter how your attention is in that moment, the world, the fly, you, the room you are sitting in and a vast range of other details are all already present, already occurring simultaneously. Even if you choose to fold attention down and make yourself stupid, the

moment is still stainless. All you need do is let go of the focusing and openness is simply how things are.

In reality, you can never be separate from Openness. But you can't make things open. What you can do is simply release yourself, whole-bodily into the stainlessness of this moment. You can't release yourself into stainlessness by thinking about stainlessness. If you are sitting around thinking about impermanence, this is "gufu-shogyo-zen" or "fool's zen". Emptiness or stainlessness cannot be contained in a thought because not only is the thought empty, stainlessness itself is empty. It's not a some "thing" or a something "else". It is how everything is and all that you can do is shut up, get out of the way, and open to it. How do you open to reality? By practising reality with, as and through the bodymind. Open to the reality of the sensations of the breath, the seeing and hearing. Open to what you are experiencing in this moment. Release attention by opening to whole-bodily mindfulness and by opening to the details of the physical space around the bodymind. Align with reality.

In the "Development of Buddhist Psychology" series of classes, the Roshi says,

The run on from mind moment to mind moment is so rapid and the interaction between these in terms of content (for example smelling something, disliking it, blaming someone for leaving the washroom in such a state, thinking about the person's other faults and then stubbing one's toes, feeling annoyed about that and so on) is so rapid that the actual sequence of the shift from state to state is usually not recognized, let alone the shift from mind moment to mind moment.

Through attending directly to how we experience what we experience, it becomes clear that the conventional understanding of experience is simplistic and primitive because it takes what is really a process of moments of knowing and constructs these into monolithic lumps of content. We then begin to stumble over our own trips about these blocks and structures and feel that the situation has a permanence about it that makes real change impossible.

No matter how we might hide in it, no matter how convinced we might be of this stance, this feeling, this state, they arise and fall leaving us exposed again and again to impermanence, to anicca.

When we wallow about in the muck and mire of self-image and act from the three kleshas of passion, aggression and stupidity, our perception of ourselves and the world around us becomes entangled and obstructed. Experiencing becomes piled up and bundled together in tight, brittle formations of distorted thoughts and feeling tones. Like Jigsaw pieces of that don't fit together, but are forced into shapes to form bleak pictures. And when this happens, we talk endlessly to ourselves about who we are: seeking out blackness, calculating, mapping, propagating a sense of problem and separation. But as it says in a chant written by Joshu Dainen zenji,

Attention, attention.

All is always stainless,

each form is always formless.

Aligning ourselves with the Way,

each dharma is always Buddha Dharma.

The stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves and the world around us form as the congealing of

attention into “views” of this and that, but all around these “views”, the world extends in all directions. It is only through focusing and narrowing attention and choosing to ignore the context in which a thought is taking place that we can convince ourselves that any view is true, is final, is justified.

If you saw someone sitting in the middle of the road, talking to themselves, hitting themselves with a rock, you might say “Stop talking to yourself. Look where you are.” You would recognize very clearly that such behavior is completely insane. But when you are sitting on your zafu, you are doing much the same thing if you are not opening to reality and are instead talking to yourself, torturing yourself with your storylines.

Not long after I began practicing as a student of the Roshi near 17 years ago, I saw someone on a crowded street who made quite a strong impression. It was summer so he was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. But in addition he was wearing an assortment of bags, many, many bags with many many straps crisscrossing his body. And from these bags protruded an assortment of gadgets and wires. He had such things as phones, transistor radios, and many other small items I couldn't identify - dozens of them. From these ran many cables and wires which were also looped around his body. He really was quite an alarming sight and people on the street gave him a wide berth as he looked like a walking bomb, armed and ready to go off at any moment. Except that the majority of his electronic devices were obviously so dinged up that they couldn't possibly work. Completely oblivious to the reactions of those around him, he stopped at a bench and sat down. As I was waiting for a store to open I stood not far away observing him for ten or fifteen minutes as he disconnected and re-connected wires, but it was apparent that nothing would or could work.

I remember being very struck by this man and had various thoughts about how he could have come to be in such a sorry state. I was looking at him, and then looking at me, and then looking at everyone else as it dawned on me that through focusing attention, he had become someone obsessed with fixing his own wiring. And that anyone, anywhere, can be equally disconnected from reality through focusing attention. And then I flashed on the range of thoughts, feelings, storylines that I had seen come up for me even while sitting on the zafu and realized that these - these thoughts and feelings and storylines, propagating them, rehearsing them, going over them again and again and again was what caused “me” to crystallize into what I think of as “me” and that all of this stuff must be questioned and released. What seems “normal” is simply what becomes habitual.

As it says in the Jijiyu Zanmai Doka, “Don't follow and become the forms of attention.”

We begin practising because we recognize that something about us should change, though we're not necessarily all that clear about what that is. Regardless of what we want to change or how we want it to change or the fact that what we want to change keeps changing, one thing is clear: we want change. We might start off practicing thinking that we want to change one or two details, a couple of things we don't like about ourselves, but we'll keep the rest. So we try to practice on our own terms, try to bend the practice into a shape that is acceptable to us. We focus on what we like or don't like, but as we continue to practise, what we begin to discover is that it isn't just what we perceive to be the ugly, gristly, uncomfortable bits that need change, everything needs to change. And as it changes, what it changes into also needs to be released to allow a space for further change. The stuff we are “comfortable” with is just as bizarre as the stuff we are “uncomfortable” with.

Much of what we do when we first start practising is basically swapping one state for another. A state comes up that we don't like and then we pump up a feeling of openness to counter it. We get lost in thought and

noticing that, don't like what we see so we attempt to pump up a state of silence (a jhana state) to counter that. But once in a while we actually remember to practise the instructions to actually feel the breath, the body, open to seeing and hearing. At first, we keep checking to see what the practice is doing for us, wondering how we are "progressing", but eventually we realize that all of this self-considering must also be released. Trying to measure one's practice is a bit like running around the back yard with a wooden ruler trying to measure the sun or the moon. If you notice you are doing this, stop talking to yourself about yourself and practise. Why? Because the moment is measureless but fleeting and you are wasting time.

When the Roshi says "If it is closed, open around it; if it seems open, open further", he is instructing us to open to the stainlessness of this moment in this moment. This is real change. What does he mean by "open around it"? He means that you should use the noticing of any detail of experiencing as a reminder to release the tendency to focus on that detail and open to the context in which that detail is taking place. If you are focusing on a thought, a feeling, one sound amidst countless sounds you are hearing, one aspect of the visual field amidst the countless details you could be seeing, open attention around that one thing by coming back to the practise of whole-bodily mindfulness, open seeing, open hearing. What the Roshi is talking about is releasing habitual thoughts and feelings and the movements of attention associated with them into stainlessness, opening and opening further, not stopping anywhere, not settling, not making yourself comfortable.

The truly odd thing is that when we become contracted, we really think no one else can see how we are; that no one else can see or feel how we distort and crunch our attention, that no one else can see or feel the circle of sharp knives we slash ourselves and others with. But the truth of the matter is that we are broadcasting how we are all of the time and if we settle into and propagate a state, it will make itself known. Nothing is separate from anything else. Everything arises together, at the same time, and each thing interpenetrates every other thing in the stainlessness of this moment. All around the states you experience, the world extends in all directions, but when you bask in a state all that you will let yourself see is the state. Don't be stupid. Open around it. Stop talking to yourself about what you think and feel about everything. If you were as interesting as you think you are, you wouldn't bore yourself so much when you sit.

Each day the sun rises and sets; the moon appears and vanishes as the sun rises again. The sky is blue and bright and then clouds gather and shower the earth with rain or snow or hail. The earth shifts, mountain ranges grow and recede, shorelines change. Beings are born and die, wave after wave after wave of beings coming and going. What could be solid in any of this? How could you be solid when your experience shows you the obvious impermanence of all things? How could it be possible that any state you experience could be solid in the midst of all of this impermanence?

I was once speaking with the Roshi about my father, now long dead, about his life, the things he thought important and commented on how strange it is that we struggle and endure and hope and fear and in the end nothing remains. The Roshi said, "Like an equation written on water, vanishing even as it's being written".

Zazen is not just a matter of changing this or that about ourselves. It exposes us to and reveals the fact that change is what we always already are.

I speak and my words are already gone. You don't need to chase after them because you've already understood what you understood in the moment they were spoken. You see the wall, but there is no need for

attention to move out and towards the wall, no need for you to try to “organize” the seeing. Just see. You don’t need to look further into that moment of seeing because that moment is already gone and you’ve already seen. You don’t need to find “meaning” in what was seen because meaning was already apparent and now there is THIS moment of seeing. It is what it is. It IS the wall. Open to peripheral vision. Just see. You feel sensations, but attention does not need to follow them. Just feel. You notice a thought and you don’t need to look further into it. Just open to the experience of whole bodymind sitting on the cushion. Now. And now. Pleasant sensations, unpleasant sensations are felt, bright, distinct, gone. And now? What does it actually feel like to sit here in this moment of stainlessness?

All experiences are stainless when attention is not distorted. All dharmas arise, dwell and decay as one’s world. Penetrate each moment of experiencing. Penetrate this moment of breathing; penetrate this wall, this floor, this mind, this world. When you get up from the zafu and walk, you are still walking in this world. All beings are met, all events are rising and falling and this penetration into one’s world is the essence of our practice. Our practice is not separate from the world. Our practice is the practise of mind stainlessly arising as world and world stainlessly arising as mind.