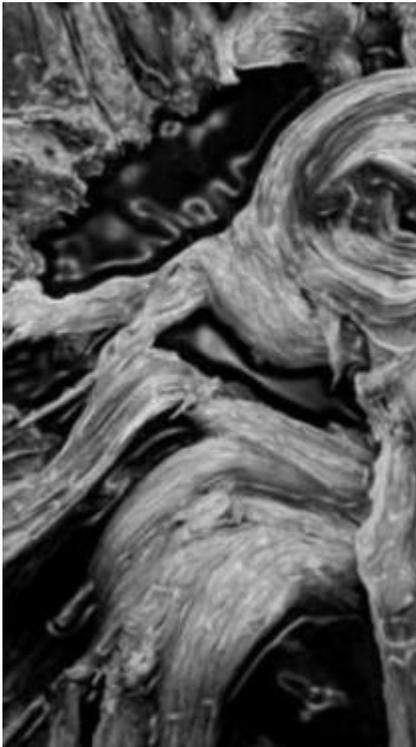


Is There a Problem?

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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Is there a problem?

We live suspended in thin air. All around us everything looms. Colours, forms, sounds. People. Buildings. Trees. Cats. Everything is so full and rich and bright. Standing in the midst of the radiance of our lives, we squint. Squinting is a reaction to bright light. If we didn't squint, if we kept our eyes open, they would adjust. And in fact, we need light to see at all. All of the things that we see: colours, forms—are all light. To adjust to this brightness is really just allowing our lives to be as they are. But we don't allow ourselves to do that. Squinting, we view the world with narrowed vision, missing a lot of the details of what we are actually experiencing. Our vision becomes thin and small and uncertain and we know we're not seeing clearly.

To feel a little certainty, we turn things around. We interpret what we see with narrowed vision to be the reality of our world. The fullness becomes thin and flat. To make this sustainable, we make the world a story, a set of descriptions, thoughts and feelings.

Within the tradition of practice this is called dukkha. Dukkha could be translated as unsatisfactoriness, pettiness, suffering, the experience of the unmanageability of reality through approaching experiences as if there could possibly be a self. The Venerable Anzan Hoshin roshi, our teacher, has explained that the roots of the Sanskrit term dukkha are “jur” which means “bad” and “kha” which means “space.” So dukkha is “bad space.” The primary metaphor is of a carriage that does not work because the axle cannot pass through the wheel. So the Roshi tells us that the dukkha that arises from grasping at entities and objects is an experience of “obstructed space.”

In order to make our experiencing of reality manageable, we create a self. The sense of a self is already a problem because, as the Roshi points out again and again and as should be obvious to us all by now, “whatever presents itself as a self cannot be the self. It cannot be the knower because it is just another thing that is known. “So the sense of self already creates a sense of problem. Naturally, like tends towards like. The self tends towards problems because it reinforces its own function of existing as that which cannot exist and so must exist in such a way that it cannot come into question. It does this by distracting itself from itself and focuses on experiences in such a way that they seem to be dense. So, the more dense the sense of problem, the stronger the sense of self.

A sense of problem begins with what seems to us to be very subtle movements of attention. We may recognize that there is something very familiar, very repetitive about our thoughts and feelings, but beyond reacting to the content, we seldom question into what is actually going on.

Everything that we perceive is made up of a myriad of details, of colours of forms, of causes and effects unfolding in a rich, chaotic, playful display. Our perception of what appears does not come from or take place in anything that is solid. Our ability to perceive is made up of a myriad of processes. In Buddha Dharma, one way of detecting the details of these processes is the five skandhas. The word “skandha” means “heap” or “accumulation.” The Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi explains that the five skandhas are a way of describing how we experience what we are. The activity of these processes creates the illusion of an accumulation or localization of experiencing. and describe the basis of self-image, the illusion that there is a self doing the experiencing, a single entity in the midst of what is being experienced.

Why don't we see this process take place? Because we can't see it if we squint. Our eyes must be open in order to see it, because this activity takes place very, very quickly. In the space of a second there is said to be 60 mind moments, 60 movements of mind. That's the bad news. Nonetheless, the experience of our Ancestors in this practice has been that even these subtle structures of attention can be attended to and so attention need not be bound by them. That's the good news.

The five skandhas are: form, basic reactivity, symbolization, habitual patterning and consciousness. In the Development of Buddhist Psychology series of classes, specifically, in classes 15 through 18, the Venerable Anzan Hoshin roshi gave a thorough presentation of these Teachings. I would like to draw on these for the following explanation. However, what I am going to say is by no means complete and I recommend that you study the classes yourself.

The Roshi says that the first of these piles is form skanda, which means **“THAT.”** It means that there is a perception of something, that experience experiences itself as a particular experience but objectifies this event. This is the development of the basic mechanism of self-image, or of how we become confused about who we really are, so that our experience occurs in terms of self and other, this and that. In order to have a subject or self or **“this”** , obviously you must have a **“that.”**

The next skandha, basic reactivity, adds weight to the **“that”** so that the **“this”** can be held in place by it. An attitude about the object forms: liking, disliking, or ignoring.

The third skandha categorizes it through “symbolization”, trying to figure out what it resembles, if something like it has been experienced before.

With the fourth skandha of “habitual patterning”, we decide what to do, how to act, based on what we did

before with something that was like what this thing is like.

Then the fifth skandha of consciousness comes into play. This is the area of experience we are primarily aware of, our thoughts and feelings about our experiences.

The five skandhas tell us something about how our experience arises as a piling up of different mental events to create the illusion of certainty and the sense, the image, that there is a self doing the experiencing.

So is there a problem, can there be a problem, when there is no such thing as a single, solid entity who is experiencing the problem? Where could a problem exist? Then what about all the problems we seem to have to make decisions about? If we are not a something in which a problem can exist, do they exist, perhaps separately from us? What are these things that we call problems? What do we actually mean when we use that word? As is the case with so many words we use, the word problem is used as a symbol to represent many different things, most of which are not a problem.

There are circumstances and conditions about which we can't do anything and that is just the way things are. That is not the same as a problem, but that doesn't stop us from entertaining ourselves with the project of self-image by making it look like one. By focussing on something we can in reality do nothing about, which has nothing to do with us, we can make it appear to have everything to do with us. By nature, self-image is a problem because it does not exist, and so the sense of problem is something which is free-floating and can attach itself to anything, anywhere.

Squinting at a situation which we can do nothing about, we narrow the view further and further. The circumstances and conditions, which are themselves formed from the details of many truths, are reduced to a cartoon-like representation. If we then respond to the situation from that understanding of it, then that version of reality is what we contribute to the situation as a whole. Our actions can literally serve to turn it into the very thing we accuse it of being and think we are struggling to remedy.

A problem is a situation in which we actually need to do something and can do something and we must respond appropriately. But what is this thing that we have to respond to, what is it made of? Everything that happens is part of many processes, becomes a part of many processes. It is the result of a vast number of details of small truths, none of them in themselves the truth. The most effective way to respond to a problem is to respond clearly, directly and most importantly, honestly to what is actually going on, to do what you can and do it as soon as possible.

Because a sense of problem is free-floating, it can attach itself to the simplest of issues. What we will tend to do is think about the problem, turn it over and over, focus and fixate on it.

Our attention becomes arranged in such a way that there is a perception of things being unmanageable. We grasp at our sense of problem, at our suffering and so we suffer. Then we have a new sense of problem because we want to get rid of the suffering. But we can't just get rid of it. If we try to eliminate it, we are just fragmenting our attention further and we can make things very difficult for ourselves. Recognizing that our judgment is impaired by the sense of problem, we may be tempted to just try to cut through it, to act with ruthless determination, mistaking this for mindfulness.

We may hang on to the sense of problem and choose to do nothing. Through this, we can fold down into inertia and render ourselves unable to respond. Our view becomes so narrowed and the sense of problem so

broad that we feel incapable of seeing anything clearly. We hesitate and become obsessed with caution, mistaking this for mindfulness.

We may grasp at the sense of problem as being a threat to our life and resolve to do great and heroic things, apply all of our energy to overcoming it, mistaking this for mindfulness.

But this is not mindfulness. This is the activity of the three kleshas of passion, aggression and stupidity, the properties that dull the mind and are the basis for all unwholesome action. Countless options, solutions, theories can arise and they can all seem valid to some extent, even though they can often simultaneously be recognized to be completely insane. So if delusion is so pervasive, how then can we really recognize what is true, what is the most sane option?

Dogen zenji's **Fukanzazengi** , which is chanted every evening during sesshin, says "Understand that right here is the display of Vast Reality and then dullness and mental wandering have no place to arise."

We must ground our experiencing in the display of reality right here. If our perception of things does not include information about what is taking place in this moment, we cannot respond accurately to what is actually going on.

The more information there is about what is taking place in this moment, the more accurate our assessment of ourselves, of our abilities, of our relationship to anything that is perceived to be arising. If you think about something, are you doing that in isolation, removed from the reality of what is actually taking place right now?

This can be a very uncomfortable question, because when we focus, when we concentrate on something, we want to be isolated so that we can enlarge upon the sense of problem, blow it up so we can see all the minute details of it, like pixels on a computer screen. We want to be left uninterrupted because we usually approach a problem with a strategy and in order to examine everything about it from that strategy, we cannot be interrupted. The strategy only exists in our own imaginations and any interruption would shatter its existence, our existence as that strategy.

A sense of problem is recognizable because it comes from an angle. It has a central point, a self who is experiencing the dullness and mental wandering.

Can we just do nothing with it? Can we just let it be as it actually is? Can we stay with the sense of problem, the sense of discomfort, of uncertainty, without turning away from it? Can we then open around it and see and hear and feel the fact of the rest of our life, which is the rest of what is available as this moment of experience?

Even if we understand all kinds of things, do we understand what anything actually is?

Being willing to live with our misunderstandings and bringing them face to face with our life as it actually is, beyond what we believe that we understand is an amazing prospect. I think that this is some of what our teacher, the Venerable Anzan Hoshin roshi, has described as shila paramita: "the discipline of living with not knowing."

We don't like that idea much. We want to be certain, we want to feel that we know. So we interpret our experiencing as though we were a central point in the midst of a kind of chaos. In the midst of all this chaos,

this not knowing, we would like to think that we know. So we think about the chaos because in our thoughts, we can convince ourselves that we know something.

The most sane and probably the only reasonable response to chaos would be to simply be as tidy as possible in the midst of it. Shoelaces work really well if we take the time to tie them properly. Everything works quite well if we take the time to work with what's going on.

In **Dogen zenji's Genjokoan: The Question of Our Lives** it says:

No matter how far a fish swims, it doesn't come to the end of the ocean. No matter how far a bird flies, it doesn't come to the end of the sky. Since the beginning, fish and birds have always been one with their elements. When there is a great need, a great use appears. When there is a small need, a small use appears. Thus, the full use of things is always as it is. Wherever something is, it covers its own ground. If a bird cut itself off from the sky it would die. If a fish cut itself off from water it would die. Also, the life of the sky is the bird itself, the life of the water is the fish. The bird is life, the fish is life. We can expand on these examples if we'd like. Practice, enlightenment, short and long life.

What we need to do can come from our experience of what is.

No problem.

Have a **good** morning.