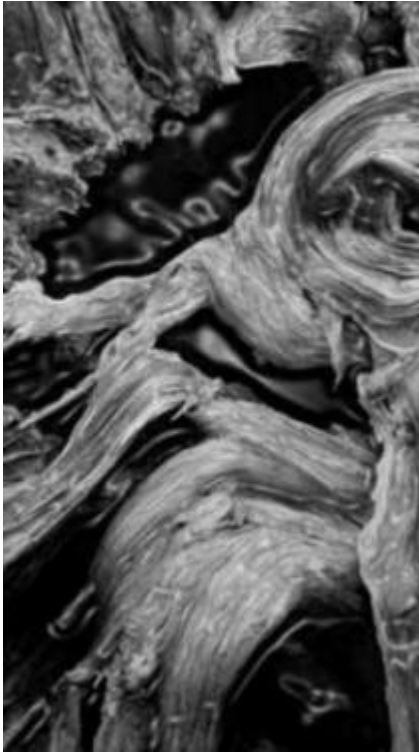


Thinking About Not Thinking

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei (Presented While Training as “Ino”)
Dainen-ji, September 26th, 1997



As a practice advisor, I am often asked, in one way or another, “How can I stop thinking?” And so I’ve done a lot of thinking about this. Thinking about not thinking is thinking and the notion of trying to stop thinking comes from thinking about it and is a strategy, a kind of thinking.

In the text *The Straight Path* , Zen Master Anzan Hoshin quotes the following from Zen Master Dogen’s *Fukanzazengi* , or *How Everyone Can Sit* :

“Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Be before thinking. These are the basics of zazen”.

The Roshi unfolds the meaning of this passage in this way:

“This means: No opposites. Zen is not a matter of thinking (shiryō) or of shutting out thought (fushiryō) but of being Before Thinking (hishiryō). Before Thinking means to be prior to experiences in the same way that a mirror is always prior to what it shows even at the moment of showing it. We cannot be anything that we are aware of. We are always the context of whatever content arises. When we release all of our states and our avoidance and identification then we are always right there at the very moment that the world arises, right at this pointless point. Bring together every aspect of mind, everything hidden and everything obvious, and allow each to resolve itself into the knowing of it. This is zazen, the shikantaza of all Awakened Ones”.

If reading that were enough, I wouldn't need to say anything further. Although the Roshi provides clear instructions on how to understand our practice in one concise paragraph, we don't do it. Instead, we think about every sentence. When we read, we think we are reading about thoughts and that we should think about them. When the Roshi speaks, he tells us how to practice. When he uses words like "release" or "bring together", or "allow", it's not just good prose. These are technical terms for certain activities of attention. This book *The Straight Path* is a guided tour through the structures of attention we experience and a manual for opening them.

It's all very simple. So simple that we don't know what to think about it. We sit. The longer we sit, the more we see that any thought that comes up is just another thought and that all thoughts arise within the vastness of Awareness. When we think, we are experiencing thinking. Depending on the extent to which we are practicing, there is some awareness of the thinking. If we are not practicing at all, we have withdrawn, obsessed with our stories, recoiling from present experiencing into fabricated labyrinths that lead us nowhere and teach us nothing. When we practice, we can allow the thoughts to rise and fall and know simultaneously that they are only thoughts, without substance, and allow them to be simply a movement, like a breeze rustling through leaves.

Even when the thoughts and feelings are so dense, so confused that we feel as though we can't see our hand in front of our face, we can still see the wall, hear the sounds, see the colours and know that we are in reality, just sitting in a room and there is nothing going on. With practice, even when the thoughts and feelings are about utter desolation, fear, anger, hopelessness, through practice, we can come to know that thinking is just an activity of bodymind, something that it does, like eating or shitting and means nothing about who or what we are. Isn't it odd that when we sit down to eat a bowl of soup, we don't look into it and think "Oh, that's who I am, that's what I mean." When we shit, we don't look into the bowl and say "Oh, that's who I am, that's what I mean." So sorry if this sounds a bit rude but monks aren't quite the sort of people you want to invite to a garden party.

My point is that when we think, we think that's who we are and what we mean. It doesn't occur to us that if we really were this thought and the meaning of this thought, we wouldn't need to think another, because we would be that all of the time. How many thoughts do we have in the space of a minute? It's worth looking into. And at the end of that minute, who are we, and what do we come to mean? And in the next minute? And the next? How odd that with the experience of countless minutes, we still think that "this thought is true, this is the one".

Often, during practice interviews, when a student asks a question about thinking, there is an accompanying frustration and when I respond by asking "Right now, are you feeling your breath, your hands, your feet?", the frustration deepens. Until they actually allow themselves to do this and then everything shifts and they laugh and shake their heads at how absurd their frustration was.

We hear the phrase all of the time, "open up around it". When we have managed to really shore up our belief in a self by working up a good state all around it to give it a place to be, we don't want to hear this. It seems too expensive to us. And that's true. Opening up around it all will cost us everything. All of our thoughts, our beliefs, our belief in our thoughts, all of it. It will leave us not knowing where we are, and because we are so used to living mediated by our delusions we doubt whether we can support ourselves without them.

But our thoughts and stories have never been how we were really able to actually live: to see and hear and

cook and eat and stand up and sit down.

Whatever you or I think about anything is inconsequential. It means nothing about who we are or what is actually going on.

So what is going on here? Are you feeling your breath, your hands, your feet? Are you seeing the colours, the depth of the space in front of you and to the side, above and below? Are you hearing the sounds, the sound of (present sound) of your breath, the breathing of the person next to you? Are you feeling the temperature of the air on your skin?

Thoughts rise and fall and come and go just like the breath comes and goes. We don't need to try to stop thinking in order to practice. We just need to allow ourselves to recognize that the world is unthinkable. That who we are is beyond thought and cannot be captured in the web of our same old stories.

Have you ever noticed how every thought we think is familiar? Every shadowy trail we follow is already known, because we've already followed them in one way or another. Sometimes we might re-combine them in some convoluted way and think that we're thinking something altogether new and brilliant, and get really into it, but it's only a matter of time before we see that these, like every other thought we have ever had, was only the flickering of mind.

Our storylines spin endlessly, but our lives are not a story. Our lives are taking place right here, right now and the storylines take place within our lives and cannot define our lives. When we sit, we see again and again and again, that there is only what is going on right now and what's going on right now isn't inside any of our thoughts or our feelings. The only place from which we can do anything about anything is only ever right here; the only time we can do anything about anything is always only right now. Right here right now is not a thought

Practice is inconceivable. It can only be understood through doing actually doing it. Anything we think about our practice is just thinking. It's not practice, just more stories.

We love stories, ours and everyone else's. Recently, someone mentioned that they would be interested in hearing my story.

I think you'll enjoy my response. I wrote:

In my story, like everyone else's, there's lots of suffering, lots of nonsense, lots of hard-won wisdom, and more importantly the mystery, to me, of how I got here and what "here" is. The Roshi has spent thousands of hours with me, literally, showing me how to release past experiences. But for that to happen, I had to be willing to show them to him. Exposure - such fear we have of it. Sometimes, when there was too much fear, he would show them to me. I'll give you an example of how subtle this can be. This was a memory that came up when I was walking with him one day. It was almost completely forgotten, and seemed not important at all.

Some background: My mother loved dancing. She used to tap dance during the war, loved Fred Astaire movies, loved swing and so on. She was in England during the war, was in the WAF, so when she was transferred from one base to another, the first thing she would do would be to check out the local dance halls. She was very beautiful, very energetic, and she had a fabulous sense of rhythm.

When I was three, we (my father, mother, older sister and older brother) emigrated to Vancouver. About six months later, we bought a turntable and I discovered Tchaikovsky - the Nutcracker Suite. I think it was the first piece of classical music I'd heard, and I thought it was just fabulous. There was a picture of a doll on the cover. That just made my day. I didn't have any dolls. My parents had very little at that point, so I had dishtowels with a knot tied in them for dolls. So this beautiful sound and the painted dolls on the cover were jewels and I got up and danced for joy. (Though I felt a bit silly doing so).

My mother got really into this. It became a thing we shared. When she had the energy (she was working night shift as a nurse in a mental institute) we put on Tchaikovsky and I would dance and she would say do this, do that and so forth. It was a lot of fun, but it was also very intense.

The memory that came up:

I have a somewhat blurry recollection of the intensity. At three, the wiring isn't working too well, so I had a really difficult time trying to sort out what was my stuff and what was hers and what was true about any of it. It was kind of like standing on a tilted floor — it was askew, but I didn't know where my sense of balance was coming from, let alone how to articulate it.

What I said to the Roshi did not include any of the details, and what I said was simply this: "When I was little, I loved to dance." That was all.

We were walking down the street at the time. He didn't say anything, just started whistling a piece from the Nutcracker Suite.

I still don't know what to think about this. So many events like this in my life are unthinkable. All of my practice continually points me to That which is Before Thinking, the space of open Awareness in which thinking and not thinking, colours and forms and sounds and birth and death are all coming and going. We don't need to stop thinking and we don't need to follow thoughts. We can just release them. Then we find that they occur in a space bigger than they are and that we can bring all of how we are together as just this moment. And release that into a yet larger space. And so I want to just point out to you that this is what your practice is as well. What do you think about that?

Have a good morning.