

The Touchstone 12: The Practice of Taking Care

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Our practice of the Way of the Buddhas is practised with and through the whole bodymind. Dogen zenji called this "*shinjin gakudo*," "studying the Way with the bodymind."

How your mind is at any moment is expressed in your posture, in your actions, in how you are with others, and the space in which you allow them to be as they are. And it's also expressed through the spaces in which you live and work.

We tend to think about things as being solid and somehow already complete, when in fact everything is always in process. Your life is made up of a vast array of details that keep shifting and changing. But people often talk about their lives as being almost entirely made up of their job and social life.

Joshu Dainen zenji often said, *Be joyful and be careful*. In our practice Teachers might often talk about the importance of "taking care."

When a sitting round ends, our practice does not end. Bowing with the breath, we straighten, mindfully move from zazen posture to seiza on the zabuton and then mindfully take care of the zafu and zabuton. Each press on the zafu is a touchstone of reality. Each sensation of the knees and shins and feet on the mat, each sensation of clothing on the skin, the air on our faces and hands are touchstones of reality. And in standing, the standing is our practice. Hearing the kaishaku strike is the sound of reality. Taking a step is reality taking a step. This is how we take care and how we can understand realize the "joy" that Joshu Dainen roshi was speaking of, how we can "enjoy ourselves" in jijuyu-zanmai as Anzan roshi invites us to.

But it has been clearer and clearer to me that students often misunderstand this. Instead of it being understood as something that we can do, as part of our practice, it is understood as just more of self-image's usual turning around in what Dogen zenji called the "closed circles of self-concern."

"Taking care" of oneself, taking care of our surroundings, taking care with the people we interact with, is not about having a feeling about any of those details. It is in how we work with the details. Taking care of yourself is seeing what is needed with a wide view. It's doing what needs to be done now, with an eye to how that will affect us later. Cleaning up your space is an act of compassion towards yourself because if you clean up the space you will come back to a nice clean space. That is what you will meet later. Setting up a pot of coffee for when you get up in the morning is an act of compassion towards yourself because then it's all taken care of for the you - as you will be then - who will have a much easier time because all that you will have to do is press the button to turn it on. Whew. Good morning! Thanks! And the same applies to cleaning the dishes in the sink so you won't have to do that later, or hanging your keys on a hook so you always know where to find them. And then building on these little actions of clarifying how you do what you do so that things become easier and easier and easier.

But these acts of compassion are often not convenient. You have to make an effort to take care of things and that won't necessarily be easy. We all know, for example, that taking care of a baby is important, but it is not easy. Getting up, night after night, in the middle of the night to tend to a crying baby is not convenient and it's not particularly easy. You don't do it because you feel motherly or fatherly or because it's fun. And it

often is the last thing on earth you want to do. But it is part of taking care, an act of compassion, and it is a necessity. And although it is quite a bit easier than looking after a baby, so is cleaning the kitchen, Even though you don't feel like doing it, it is a necessity and it is part of taking care.

When you look at the space in which you live and the objects you have within that space and how you have them arranged, what you are seeing is your mind. If you allow things to pile up and fall over, you're doing this with your mind. You're not seeing what is right in front of you or what it is telling you. Well, until you trip over it. In which case it's telling you you've forgotten you have feet and feet need a clear space to walk through.

If you want to clarify your life, you need to start with these details: Food, clothing, shelter. Eat well. Everything you do you do with the bodymind. No bodymind, no you. And the bodymind needs the energy from food to do what it does. If you are busy in areas of your life and don't eat, you're neglecting the bodymind. You're not a floating head, operating independently of the rest of the body. If you don't eat properly you will get sick. Or crazy. Or both. Because states of mind are not separate from states of body. Starve the body and you are starving the mind.

Sometimes people think that "taking care" of themselves means going to see more movies. Or hanging out with friends more. Or having different kinds of friends. No, "taking care" of yourself starts with the business of feeding, clothing and sheltering the bodymind. The movies and the friends and whatnot are activities you might or might not engage in, but the staples, the most important things, the things that you depend on for life, these involve first and foremost, taking care of food, clothing and shelter.

You need adequate clothing to protect the bodymind and you need to look after your clothing. By adequate clothing I mean warm clothing for the winter. If your winter coat is not warm enough, go get a warm coat. If it doesn't fit you anymore and you can't zip it up, go get a bigger coat. But take care of the bodymind by clothing it properly. Hang your clothes up properly. Don't just drop them on the floor mixing clean clothing with dirty, because again, this is reflecting the state of your mind. Live with a quality of dignity. Create a place to put dirty laundry and keep it separate from the clean. If you tell yourself you're just messy but that's okay because you've been messy ever since you were a teenager, take a look at that attitude. You're not a teenager anymore. And the fact that you had this or that habit as a teenager is no justification for continuing it now.

It might seem a bit odd to some of you that I am talking about this. But it is important and the level of confusion that people are experiencing these days compels me to explain it. So even if you think you already understand it all. Listen. Listen carefully. Because even if you think you already understand this, there is a good chance you know one or more people who actually do not and they will be experiencing a kind of suffering because of it. And I will also point out that what I am saying actually does apply to everyone no matter how well we might think we have everything arranged, because we are never finished. All of us are "in process" and everything could always be better, more open, clearer.

If you start with small things and are sure to do small tasks every day to keep things from piling up and falling over, the changes that comes about in your life, as your life, can be very powerful. You begin to care about yourself and through that, you begin to care about other people in a different way. You understand more clearly the challenges they face in what they need to do. You understand more about the effort it takes to establish a nice space and maintain it. And you begin to take interest in and responsibility for your own

space and how you interact with it. It becomes interesting. Very interesting. Because the space is continuously giving you feedback about how you are and you can learn from it.

But again, this is not about having a feeling. It's not about doing a big-burst white tornado thing and cleaning all the things! Today! Now! And then collapsing and not bothering with it any further. Don't make it into a great monumental task. It's about learning to take care of things, learning to work in a methodical, measured way that is sustainable. The big burst white tornado approach is a state that burns very brightly while it burns, but once it has burnt out, you're back to square one. And if you tend to take that approach to organizing or cleaning your living space you will also tend to take that approach in the work you do. In your work or in your home, letting things pile up until they pretty much fall over and then rushing around to catch up - alternating between not caring at all and trying to fix it all at once - is exhausting and completely unnecessary.

Your life is an ongoing process. Situations come and go; people come and go; circumstances change. But through all of this you're learning and part of what you are learning is how to adapt and apply skillful means to the situation as it is now; how to organize things now and make the best possible use of what you have and what is available to you. The smallest details matter. Changing the broken shoelace for a new one is being able to tie your shoe properly. That is helpful and every little bit helps because it is the sum total of all those little bits that make up your life.

If you want a rich, strong life, and good relationships with others, it starts with having a good relationship with yourself and how you are about yourself and with yourself and the space around you. If you're not responding to your environment, if you're not interested in it, it is because your attention has become so inverted you've cut yourself off from it. And if that's the case, how are you going to know how to respond to other people in a way that is appropriate and enlivening? Practise responding. Respond to the dirty cup on the counter. Respond to the cat who is asking to be fed. Respond to the smell of the litter box and the garbage pail that needs to be emptied. Respond to the laundry that needs to be done. Respond to the bill that needs to be paid and the friend who is waiting for an answer to an email. Respond to the gnawing feeling of hunger in your belly by preparing a nutritious meal or stop somewhere for a bite to eat. Cut through the passivity and respond and life will respond to you. The bodymind needs to be allowed to open to the world in which it arises and states that seem to justify not opening tie a tourniquet around your life.

It's that time of year again. Ho ho ho. Christmas trees and wrapping paper. And in the midst of that, there are people thinking about committing suicide. I find even the thought of that painful, but it is true. And beyond and all around the wrapping paper and tinsel and the disappointments people experience in their lives, there are infinite possibilities. Anything you experience can be interpreted in countless different ways. Don't buy into any of them. Let the process of life continue to unfold and let's see who and what we all are.

The posture of zazen is very simple and very clear. The point of the posture is to sit in the reality of this moment. The posture points to the open space of reality all around and within and as the bodymind. But this is also true when you are not sitting zazen. It's true when you are walking down the street or sitting on the couch. It's true even when you are sleeping.

If you habitually slouch because you can't be bothered to sit up straight, you're allowing attention to lean into a state. If attention folds down or becomes narrowed and congealed, the bodymind will begin to slouch or tighten. And you can notice this and in the noticing of it, choose to do something about it.

There's up and there's down. Down is allowing attention to fold in on itself, to become passive. There are degrees of this, of course, but at its more extreme, people stop caring. About anything. Including themselves. But this occurs through a process of making compromises - one small compromise after another. We all tend to do this but when people are experiencing more extreme states, it's more obvious.

Everything you do matters. Everything you do affects someone or something else, outside of you.

You might think "well this doesn't apply to me, because I'm highly functional, and I'm good at my job". But that isn't enough if there are areas of your life that you're not taking care of. The whole picture must include you in the picture. If you leave you out of the picture, you're not working with reality because you ARE part of reality.

Eating well, taking care of the space you live in, staying on top of your bills and dentist appointments and so forth are all very, very, important because these affect the whole bodymind and everything you do you do with the bodymind.

If your house or your living room, or your bedroom is in a mess, what you are seeing when you look at that mess is your own mind. You don't stop at the end of your nose. The world doesn't begin at the end of your nose. You and world arise together. You can't pretend you are not part of it. You can't hide from it. You and everything else you are experiencing arise together and at the same time, and there is no separation between them. So if you drop your clothing on the floor and leave the sink full of dishes you are displaying your mind. The mess is you. So you can't get off the hook by saying "well, I'm very together in this area and so that area doesn't count". There aren't two of you. There is just one body and one mind and everything you do is done by this one bodymind.

Dongshan Liangjie daiocho said, *I just want to be one whole body*. The Sutra Master Sengzhao said, *Heaven, earth, and I have one root. All things and I are one body*. Shitou Xiqian daiocho was inspired by this to compose the Sandokai: Meeting of Ultimate and Relative. Practising this single and whole bodymind wholly and completely in each moment and situation is the touchstone that allows us to contact, to meet, and then realize what the Buddhas and the Awakened Ancestors have realized.

So have a good morning and take care of yourselves.