Zanshin

by Zen Master Anzan Hoshin
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Zanshin means “the remaining mind” and also “the mind with no remainder.” This is the mind of complete action. It is the moment in kyudo (Zen archery) after releasing the arrow. This is “Om makurasai sowaka” in oryoki practice and drinking the rinse water. In shodo, it is finishing the brush stroke and the hand and brush moving smoothly off the paper. In taking a step, it is the weight rolling smoothly and the next step arising. In breathing in completely, it is this breath. In breathing out completely, it is this breath. In life, it is this life. Zanshin means complete follow through, leaving no trace. It means each thing, completely, as it is.

When body, breath, speech and mind are broken from each other and scattered in concept and strategy, then no true action can reveal itself. There is only hesitation, or trying to push oneself past hesitation. This is the mind of hope and fear, which arises because one is trying to live in some other moment, instead of in the moment that arises now. One is comparing, planning, or trying to maintain an illusion of control in the midst of a reality which is completely beyond control.

“Beyond control” does not mean “out of control;” it means that the sense of solidity, comfort and predictability that self-image tries to maintain is completely irrelevant to one’s actual experiences. You don’t even know what this sentence is going to say until you have read it. Once you’ve read it, the black shapes and letters become words and meanings and then you have the sense that you have read it. It is only after a thought has arisen that you have the illusion that you have thought it.

Self-image arises as memory, as a contraction around the vividness of life as it is and, in order to ascertain a sense of its own continuity, it lumps things together, piles them up and strings itself along. It can only do this by ignoring most of the details of the moment, and it dulls their vividness by pushing and pulling itself into an imaginary “past” or “future.” However, the energy of the arising of this moment is the energy of our life itself, and by backing away from this vast energy we find ourselves lifeless, confined, hesitating, awkward, angry, judgemental, guilty, sad.

Zanshin means to do each thing completely. Doing this does not mean to stick and hold. Sometimes, in sitting, you find yourself lost in a thought and then you wake up and cut the thought; then you find yourself going back to check if you’ve cut that thought. But that thought is gone and you are only trying to find a definition of yourself, you are only trying to become someone who has “cut the thought.” Instead, when you wake up from the thought, that’s it. What now? Zanshin then means, a mind of continual readiness, like a mirror ready to reflect whatever is shown to it.

In the martial arts, Zanshin means having no break in our activity, because there is no time to take back a stride or block and fix it. It also means going beyond technique, because we cannot force the situation to conform to the technique. The angle of the strike and the force of the strike must be adjusted immediately to the energy of the partner.

In practice we must go beyond strategies of defense and hesitation. We must open up to the energy of mind itself as it expresses itself as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling and thinking. Penetrating into this energy, we must go beyond all barriers.

Often, when we try to express complete activity in zazen or dokusan, in doing the dishes, weeding the garden, or paying our bills, we try to impose some kind of “fresh” mind, we try to manufacture some kind of mind of practice, or mind of wisdom. But true action or true wisdom arises from the energy of this moment itself. In continually renewing mindfulness of what simply is, we find that this fresh mind knows what to do. There is the mind of seeing, the mind of hearing, the mind of posture, the mind of walking, of sitting, of standing, as well as the mind of thoughts. When we stop trying to impose “our mind” upon the moment, the mind of the moment can express itself clearly and complete Knowing opens as the ten directions and the three times. This is what the “Avatamsaka sutra” is pointing to in its talk of Buddhas and Buddha-realms in all directions. It also means opening to the clarity of experiences and penetrating into the nature of experiencing itself. We must find our wisdom in the simplicity and richness of this moment itself. Blue is unquestionably blue. Breath is breath. Sound is sound.

Zanshin means allowing each Dharma to exert itself as what it is. It means that ” wherever a thing stands, it covers its own ground,” as Dogen zenji says in the “Genjokoan”. It means to take a complete step. It means leaving nothing behind and pushing nothing forward. It means paying attention to our lives.