

Zen is Not Kidding

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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It was a very, very cold night in February about two decades ago
and in a few days I would be receiving postulant's Monk's vows from Anzan Hoshin,
sensei at the time.

We'd spent the evening in the way that Zen students spend evenings:
sitting at Daijozan, the small temple on Somerset Street East.
After the sitting, I'd spent some time with the Roshi and he had once again gone over the ceremony:
what I was supposed to do, what he would say, how I would reply.

It had already been settled, two
—what could have been major—
obstructions had been accepted.

One was that I couldn't have my cats in the temple,
but I didn't have a choice to make really, about that,
because I knew that what I was being taught was true.

The second one was that I would never be able to travel again,
and I had made my living traveling and I liked it,
but that wasn't much of an obstacle to overcome either.

So those things were all settled and away,
and I was prepared to offer up body, breath, speech and mind,
flesh, blood, marrow
as a monastic for the liberation of all beings.

And this is something that I had wanted to do ever since I was a little girl,
but I didn't know how it would happen
and I didn't have any model for it until I was in my forties.

I left Daijozan, heavy winter coat on,
and I crunched, crunched down the sidewalk walking towards Strathcona Park...
and those little thoughts started coming up...

"What am I doing?"

[more emphatically:]

"What am I doing? What if it's not true?"

Wait, wait, wait... wait."

It's true.

I've experienced it.

I've experienced that I am not any of my thoughts and feelings,

and that unconditioned and open experiencing is what the bodymind does.

Zazen helps clear up the obstructions that impede that.

But what if I'm fooling myself?

What am I going to do?

By the time I reached Strathcona Park,

I was considerably agitated and it became apparent to me,

and also obviously the only sane thing to do, which was to go back to Daijozan and confront the Roshi, make him,

force him

to tell me whether this was true or not.

So bravely girding myself,

I turned around

and started to walk back.

What would happen when I rang the doorbell?

It was getting quite late by now.

As I got to Daijozan, I noticed that the lights were out on the first floor.

Well... too bad.

[O-sensei chuckles]

This was important.

I rang [O-sensei knocks] on the door.

I rang. [O-sensei knocks more loudly.]

The door opened.

Looming, light behind, looking like a panel from a graphic novel, eyes wide open.

I looked at the Roshi and said:

"This better be true! If this is not true, I will come back and haunt you forever!"

[Students laugh]

And the Roshi looked down at me,

and with kind of that grandmotherly approach

—you know the child's out of control—

he looked at me and he said:

"We're not serious...

but we're not kidding."

And he closed the door.

Somehow, the "we're not kidding" part satisfied me,

because part of the reason why I had started to practice

—and this may ring true for some of you—

was that for most of my life,

people had been trying to kid me,
telling me the most absurd stories about what was going on when I would ask them.

So here was a situation where there was going to be no kidding.

Zen is not kidding.

Now I'm sure all of you know that there's a great deal of humour involved with practice. The history of practice is filled with examples in zenga, the Zen drawings,
in koan,
in stories of interaction,
in the insane laughter that can come up when we see how silly we can be.

So, I could understand, definitely, the "not serious" part.
And I could also see how I had made this into a very,
very,
very serious thing.

Now, there's a difference between being sincere and being serious,
because, of course, being serious can taint our experience
because there's a self there who has its own interpretation of what's going on.

When we can see that seriousness,
that seriousness coming into being,
and recognize the contraction,
remember to practise,
to feel the breath,
to feel our hands and feet,
to feel the space around the body.

That seriousness can drop away.

I didn't quite understand the depth of that "not kidding" part, because,
I, like you,
was a reasonable human being,
with many sterling qualities,
with a heart that wanted to be helpful,
and of course
self-image.

The views I had of myself, and how the world was,
did tend to get a little skewed and some of the patterns of self-image, of course,
hadn't even been seen yet,
let alone had time to wear out.

Also, one of the things the Roshi told me,
and you may have heard this from time to time:

Zen practice, which is not kidding,
will over time show you that almost everything you think to be true
about how you are and how the world is,
is a way of kidding yourself.
You've created many views,
many stances that you carry with you through the day,
into the practice hall,
into daisan and practice interviews,
sometimes carrying them proudly,
wonderful little trinkets that you've picked up and are going to present,
which will of course show how clever you are.

And it can be quite surprising when in daisan we sit down and in response to
"How is your practice?"
we might say something like

"Oh, it's really wonderful. It's so wonderful. It's making everything easier for me."

And the Dharma teacher or practice advisor might say:
"Yes, but how's your practice right now? You're telling yourself a story about how you are."

We may or may not see that,
there may or may not be a rush of reactivity.
We may feel slighted, insulted, angry.
"Who the ___ does she think she is to talk like that to me?"

We tend not to articulate those kinds of thoughts,
because another role that self-image has in day-to-day interaction, usual interaction,
is one of kind of a censor.

It goes: "This is an inappropriate thought.
This is not an appropriate thought."

So we sort through them, presenting only that which we think will reflect well on us.

Now, there's nothing wrong with good intentions.
There's nothing wrong with wanting to help people in other areas of the community
—be it the global community—
sort out their stuff,
but it has nothing to do with our practice.

At the time, I was also very keen on a project I had which had to do with feeding people in underdeveloped countries.

And one day I showed up at Daijozan with the proposal I'd written for this,
and I was so proud of it and I thought perhaps there might be some little pat on the back with this wonderful project.

The Roshi picked up the paper, sort of flipped it back and forth,

put it in the drawer of the table,
and closed the drawer.

That was it.

I never heard anything more about it.

So, of course I considered why this would be the case.

And of course self-image came up,
presented various points of view as to how this should have been handled.

Because self-image is like that,
it would like to be the one in charge,
and be the one dictating how everything about our practice should be handled.

When we're neophytes with practice,
however long that may be in our practice career,
we don't see how crazy it is to listen to self-image with its view of how things should be with our practice,
and then to follow it.

If self-image knew how to practise,
why would we not be sitting in the teacher's seat?

When we are following the dictates of self-image
and our conditioned views about what's going on,
how we are, how our practice is,
we're kidding ourselves.

We're kidding ourselves that we know what obviously we do not know.

Now, how crazy is that?

We come to practice with all of our past experiences, our past history and we do believe that that's who we are.

And we're reluctant sometimes—sometimes even more than reluctant—to see those things for what they are,
which is one point of view, and certainly not worthy of all of our attention,
to the exclusion of everything else.

Each time that we allow attention to fall into and follow any contracted state,
we are making a conscious choice to limit and obstruct the intelligence and luminosity of open experiencing.

Why would we want to do that?

The only reason we do it is because we're used to it.

Zazen gives us a way to look at the process of our experiencing.

It gives us a way to see more of the details of experiencing
and it gives us access to a lineage of teachers
that for 2,600 years have been busy “not kidding” about the nature of experiencing
and the nature of reality.

Sometimes people like to talk of their life as a journey.
Well, it is a journey, but sometimes the “journey”,
sometimes the word is said in such a way that one gets the impression that at the end of the journey,
there’s going to be some remarkable state that is achieved of self-transcendence,
of being all knowing, all seeing, of perhaps hovering slightly above the zafu
[students chuckle]
as we’re sitting.

When we enter into the path of practice,
the straight path,
we are all carrying big backpacks,
backpacks full of all sorts of crap.

Now if Dainen-ji were an airline,
when we first come here, most of us would definitely be charged for overweight baggage. Now there’s a little
poem that was written, that I wrote, actually, and it’s in the book *The Straight Path*.

Backpacking the Straight Path

Instructions for the Zendo

Bare bones, bare flesh
only

Leave the backpack of self-image
Parent, child, male, female, straight, gay, old, young, black, white, older, younger at the door,
with your shoes and socks.

Pick it up on the way out.

Too heavy?
Unpack in suchness
and the load lightens.

And that will prove true over and over and over again.

Any time you notice a contraction,
a heaviness of any sort,
and identification with any particular set of thoughts and feelings while you’re sitting:

Practise.
Feel the breath.
Sit up straight.
Open the eye gaze.

And guess what?
It drops away.

We’re not kidding.

All you have to do is do it.

Now I won't kid you and say that this is gonna always be easy.

Practice is not difficult.

Life is a pain.

There's always something going on,
so there's always something to be practised with.

Sometimes the practice can be incredibly difficult because we make it so.

We believe all our stories of reluctance, recoil, arrogance,
whining, whinging, being better than,
and on and on and on...

but each time you notice that,

you have an opportunity to lighten that moment by noticing the rest of what is going on, which is
the rest of your life,

the breath,

the heart beating,

the spine straightening,

the eyes opening and softening.

Self-image is kidding anytime it comes up and tells you anything about how your practice is.

It's a greedy little sucker.

If it experiences a moment of openness,

immediately it wants to paint the rest of your time on the zafu in the same tones.

When you recognize that, you're recognizing a contraction,

a conditioning of open experiencing,

and so you practise.

Anything other than open experiencing,

experiencing as it actually is when it is unconditioned,

hurts.

The hurt can be just a little pinch or it can be a knockout blow.

It hurts.

And you're doing it to yourself.

No one else is doing it to you.

When you learn to recognize that,

you have a very important key to freedom from conditioned experiencing,

because you can take responsibility for this moment

and this moment

and this moment.

Zen is not kidding.

It is offering you everything you need to wake up to who you really are

in this moment
and this moment
and this moment.

Anzan Hoshin roshi wrote:

“Straight up and down and all around and back again. Here it is”.

Zen is not kidding.

Thank you for listening.