

Points on Zazen and Way-Seeking Mind

I want to mention a few points on ‘how to do zazen’ -- what is our zazen practice. In an ongoing way, I’d like to occasionally mention some points about zazen practice.

First, about our thinking. As you know, a phrase I greatly appreciate is one that comes from Uchiyama Roshi and that I first heard from his disciple, Shohaku Okumura -- this is ‘opening the hand of thought’, as a metaphor or description of how we relate to our thinking mind in zazen. And I feel this is a very good metaphor because I know what its like to not open the hand of thought, when the hand of thought is clenched. When ‘the hand of thought is clenched’ means when thought has us in its grip; instead of us having a thought, instead of me having a thought, the thought has me. This is compulsive thinking. Compulsive thought means coercive, forced thinking, kind of irresistible, driven thinking. This is the clenched fist of thought; this is when we are caught in our thinking and lose ourself. When we are caught in our thinking, we lose our self: our actual, direct experience of this moment. To not lose our self means that our thinking is included, its just not the boss.

Sometimes our sitting practice is described as ‘settling the self on the self’ (Katagiri Roshi’s phrase); which can seem, perhaps, like a rather enigmatic phrase. What does it mean to ‘settle the self on the self’? Some of the enigmatic quality is that Katagiri Roshi was addressing our experience of sitting practice, rather than an intellectual concept about our sitting practice. Also, I feel a good deal of what ‘settling the self on the self’ has to do with is with what is not happening, what we are not being caught by, not being caught in the clenched fist of our thinking. The active side of this then is that when we notice that our thought is ‘clenched’, that our thought has us, when we notice that we are lost in our thinking -- the active side is that when we notice that: we cease, we let go, we return to ourself, our Self, we return to just sitting, to our breath. This is opening the hand of our thinking, and it helps us settle the self on the self.

Second point: we say the main aspects to give attention to in zazen are body, breath and mind. And these all contribute to each other. So, if our thinking is settled then that has a (good) effect on our breathing and our posture: our breathing can be as full as possible and our posture can be relaxed. And vice versa: our settled body has a positive effect on our mind. As someone pointed out last week, our zazen is a body practice -- its a body-breath-mind practice. So the second point I want to make is that to help settle our thinking, to help 'settle the self on the self', we try to find a balanced posture. 'Balanced' means balanced in relation to backwards and forwards, and left and right. And, to help find this kind of balance we rock back and forth before sitting -- this is Dogen's instruction. And our body is balanced also in terms of energy and relaxation. We need muscles and our bone structure to sit upright; but whatever we don't need for that purpose, we try not to use, not to add anything on top of the minimum muscle and bone tension that we need: this is relaxed sitting.

This is the posture we 'find'. And I specifically mean that because there's another way we are sometimes caught in, where we manage our posture, coerce our posture; we have some ideal of what our posture is supposed to be, then we try to get our body to do that ideal. So in our zazen, 'mind' is not the boss, and body the servant.

I'd like to continue to speak tonight about 'way-seeking-mind'. *Doxin* [pronounced 'doe-shin']: *do* is way, *tao*; and *xin* is mind or heart: way mind, way heart: the heart in us that seeks the Way. I was mentioning that we have a practice at SFZC called giving a 'way-seeking-mind talk', where we speak about how we got here, what brought us to practice. And I spoke about my own experience as a young person: being confused, upset, distressed. Things didn't make any sense, and no one I came into contact with was making much of any sense out of things: this was painful. I felt quite lost. And then, more or less by accident, I came across zen practice. So this story is not uncharacteristic; and particularly I would emphasize two elements: 1 - suffering and 2 - fortuitous circumstance.

Someone last week made the good point that ‘seeking’, in ‘way-seeking-mind’ can sound too ‘grabby’: it can sound like one more effort based on a very narrow perspective: the perspective of: ‘I’m going to get something’. This could be so, and is something we need to watch out for. This got me thinking about, well, what does ‘seeking’ mean?

Let’s see if I can explicate some points here. I feel this ‘seeking’ is speaking about the basic motive power in our practice. And I think the motive power in our practice is often, at least initially is often, our own suffering, our own difficulty. In a talk of Suzuki Roshi’s, he says: *Our way-seeking-mind arises when we feel the evanescence of life, when we have problems for ourselves, the direct feeling of the problems and of the facts that we have to face.* This is also reflected in the mythic story of the arising of way-seeking-mind for Shakyamuni Buddha. It was after the three trips to the City, where he came into contact with old age, sickness and death -- *when we feel the evanescence of life ... the direct feeling of the facts that we have to face* -- it was then that he turned toward the path. That was the motive power that fueled his way-seeking-mind. This is archetypally so. And then the ‘fortuitous circumstance’: on his next trip to the City, he saw a monk, a religious person: ‘oh, there is some way, there is some way to make sense of all this’.

Another, related aspect of this thing about ‘seeking’ is the point I made last week: this way-seeking-heart is not something we have to create out of nothing. Rather, it is latent in us; and then is awakened, aroused, brought forth. So in the sense that it is innate in us, maybe it would be more accurate to say that the ‘seeking’ is more like a tropism. Plants are phototropic or heliotropic. We all know this: a plant grows toward the light; it naturally inclines toward the sun. So what I’m saying is that we humans are *prajna*-tropic: we naturally incline toward wisdom, we grow toward wisdom. *Doxin* is a way of speaking about that natural inclination.

Lastly, another related aspect about ‘seeking’: we say ‘practice and realization are not separate’. That is, our practice is not: I have to work now on practice and the accomplishment at the end will be realization and enlightenment. One problem with this way of understanding is that it

denigrates 'now' and overly elevates 'then'; 'now' doesn't count so much, except as a way to get to 'then', as a way to get to so-called enlightenment or realization. But 'way-seeking-mind' means to live our life fully now. We are not waiting for any 'then'. Now is enough. We appreciate now. We appreciate now, even when we don't appreciate now, even when now doesn't seem so terrific. Somewhat ironically, if we accept that we are always 'on the way', and 'in the way', then we understand that this moment is the one that counts. This is also part of way-seeking-mind.

Thank you.