

Fukanzazengi

Old Cushions, New Impressions

In one of his earliest and most important teachings, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness Sutra*, the Buddha pays special attention to the first foundation: the body. He says "First of all, find a good spot. Then sit up straight. Lift the back top of the head. Open the chest. Let the energy flow up and down the spine without crimps." He goes on to say: "Place mindfulness in front of you and start breathing. When you breathe in, be aware that this is breathing in. When you breathe out, be aware that this is breathing out... Breathe throughout the whole body with awareness."

These statements form the basis of our Zen practice, which is, above all things, an *embodied* practice. Enlightenment is in *this body* at this time. Dogen continued this emphasis on being mindful of the body in one of his important talks Fukanzazengi, *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen*.

It was written upon his return from China in a special Chinese style known as "4/6 sentences." It is a short work with a mere 752 characters. In China, the writings related to the emperor and other texts that required a solemn and majestic flavor were written in this 4/6 sentence style. Fukanzazengi is considered to be a masterpiece of this form.

Dogen wanted to instruct the Japanese people about the true dharma of just sitting or *shikantaza*, which was the direct transmission of the Buddha's life and practice. This was something that the Japanese people did not know about. It was not the Buddhism of scholars who interpreted and commented on scriptures and philosophical treatises.

He begins by saying that the Way is all-pervading. Everything we need is already here, and there is no need to do anything or go anywhere. Our life is fundamentally perfect and reaches everywhere. Truth and beauty are always right there where you are— they are never elsewhere. So we do not sit *zazen* to change what we are; we do not sit *zazen* to gain enlightenment or anything else. We do not sit to become a Buddha. We already are a buddha. There is a Zen story about a monk or told his teacher that he sits *zazen* to become a

Buddha. His teacher begins to rub a tile. The student asks him why he is doing that. And the teacher responds that he is trying to polish the stone tile into a mirror. The student tells him that you can't polish a tile into a mirror. And the teacher responds, "And you cannot become a Buddha by sitting zazen."

Dogen says that zazen is the truth of this universe and great Nature. He says that zazen is not step-by-step learning meditation or a meditation technique which we make effort at in order to reach a special state of mind. To sit in zazen is nothing other than expressing the original way of human life.

In the technical language of Zen, he says that there is no duality between practice and realization. This is the secret of Zen practice. Sitting is an expression of our original nature, our original face, which is hidden from us by layers of delusion. In Bendowa, Dogen says that a "beginner's whole-hearted practice of the Way is exactly the totality of original enlightenment. For this reason, in conveying the essential attitude for practice, it is taught not to wait for enlightenment outside practice. . . Since it is already the enlightenment of practice, enlightenment is endless; since it is the practice of enlightenment, practice is beginningless." There is no need to improve ourselves or go someplace else. We need to become aware of the *immensity of what we are*.

And yet, we do have to practice—why? The central question of Dogen's life was, "We are Buddha nature, so why do we need to practice?" He responds by saying, *if there is even a hairsbreadth of deviation*, you will be lost in delusion and confusion. Our practice is about eliminating any space between our temporal identity and our fundamental nature. When we sit there should be no gap between us and zazen. Think about it—we are Zazen. Our practice is about eliminating any sense of limit and discrimination between self and other; between inside and outside. It is about experiencing the deepest interconnectedness of everything.

If we practice to gain something, we are ignorant of what we are. The moment we turn away from ourselves, we are headed in the wrong direction. The important point to keep in mind is that we have to experience this for ourselves. In my practice I have experienced how "insights" come not from

mental interpretations of ideas but from some unknown place in myself. It feels like they come “from nowhere.” I have talked to poets who say the same thing happens to them. I think that a lot of what we call artistic inspiration is really our deepest nature appearing and expressing itself in words or colors or sounds.

In many talks, Dogen emphasizes that zazen is a ritual activity for the enactment of Buddha awareness. In dharma discourse 319, he says “We should know that zazen is the decorous activity of practice *after* realization.” Realization or enlightenment is simply just sitting in complete awareness of who and what we are.

Consider the life of the Buddha. Although he had intrinsic wisdom at birth, he sat for six years. He sat not to become wise, but as an expression of his wisdom. This is the very heart of Zen practice. Suzuki roshi said that the posture we take in zazen is the posture of enlightenment. Zen history from the time of our first patriarch, Bodhidharma, is filled with stories of enlightened women and men who sat for extended periods of time, not to attain anything but rather to express their original nature. Now it is our time. As Dogen says, we must not “dispense with wholehearted practice.”

He goes on to say that we should not chase after words and phrases. We should see things as they are before we try to interpret them. We need to give up our judgments of good and bad. Dogen is telling us that we need to live our lives with the greatest immediacy—before interpretations and judgments. Zen is about seeing and experiencing reality *before language*. All our mental activity expressed in words and phrases are projections outward, away from the self, away from what is happening in front of us. Here he is rephrasing what the sixth patriarch said: *Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures. It is not dependent on words and letters. It is a direct pointing at the mind. It is seeing one's true nature.*

He tells us to take the backward step and shine the light within. We need to let go of our chasing after external things and return to presence. Each moment we need to let go of everything that arises and return to the depths of our original nature. And when we sit we step back into the immenseness of

our life beneath all its distractions. Moment after moment we experience the truth of presence. We experience the truth in our bodies. In a way, you can say that there is no truth outside our own experience. The Buddha said that we should not accept anything he says unless we can prove it by our own experience. Zen is about getting that experience.

Dogen then says that the body and mind will drop away. When we let go of all of our attachments and worries, our true nature appears. We need to give up ourselves and all of its projections. In the Genjo Koan he says, “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened...” We need to give up our temporal identities to experience something deeper; something that is not personal or temporal; something that is so old that it is said that it to have existed since *beginningless time*.

Next Dogen turns his attention to practical matters. If you eat too much before sitting, you may become sleepy; if you drink too much you cannot be vigilant. Beyond that, he is saying that if you practice regularly, your whole life will change. Everything that you do will revolve around your daily practice. As sitting becomes a new center of gravity, you find that you want to live ethically and do things in moderation. You want to live as a buddha, because you are aware that you are a buddha. In time, you see that you act differently at your workplace and with your family, not because you try to make changes but because your life becomes an expression of a deeper part of yourself.

He then turns his attention to what kinds of cushions to use and what postures to take. While we still use the same kinds of cushions that he suggests we have become less strict about postures. Some of us sit in quarter lotus and others sit in the Thai positions and others use chairs. We put our left hand over our right and our left leg over our right leg because the left is considered to be the passive side of the body. When you sit with your left leg over your right thigh and your left thigh over your right leg, you lose your sense of right and left. You lose the sense of duality between left and right, first learned when you were young. Our early education is about making distinctions: left and right, and past, present, and future. Zen is about letting go of distinctions so that you can experience the deep interconnectedness of everything.

He concludes his discussion on the posture of Zazen by saying that we should not get up abruptly. Suzuki Roshi used to rock his body back and forth before getting up. At the beginning of each session he would end the rocking by finding a stable center. At the end, he would stop after we reached the furthest right. We are asked to find a relationship between our sitting and our getting up. This may leave us with the question about how to integrate our sitting practice with the rest of our life.

Next, Dogen turns his attention to what do with the mind during zazen. *Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Non-thinking. This is the essential art of zazen.* Here he refers to a well-known story about Yakusan Igen, or Yao-shan Weiyan, who lived in 8th century China: One day after Master Yakusan had finished zazen, a monk asked, “What are you thinking of in the immoveable, mountain-like state of zazen?” Yakusan replied, “I think of not-thinking.” Then the monk asked, “How can one think of not-thinking?” Yakusan answered, “By nonthinking.” or “beyond thinking.”

He is not telling us not to stop thinking. In Buddhism thinking includes all mental activity arising from discriminating consciousness—thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, and so on. Stopping thought involves using discriminating consciousness to control consciousness in the same way that thinking uses discriminative consciousness. Thinking and not-thinking are bound together as opposites. They define each other the way light and dark, and cold and hot do. But non-thinking goes beyond this duality; it is beyond thinking and not-thinking. Non-thinking is basically *shikantaza*, just sitting. It is awareness, seeing, without specific objects and without any discursive activity. When we sit we rest in consciousness itself. I would say that non-thinking is the original nature of thought, which appears after the illusions and delusions of discrimination drop away.

Non-thinking is a state of awareness that can include both cognition and the absence of thought, and is not caught up in either. Zazen is not concentrated awareness of an object; it is wide open awareness of everything around and within us. Non-thinking is an active, dynamic engagement with the whole of our being. It can only be understood by experiencing it in a non discursive state such as zazen.

Fujita Sensei, a Japanese priest, goes even further when he alludes to the cosmic qualities of zazen. He said, “When we refer to the qualities of...beyond thinking (*bishiryō*) ... we mean that sitting posture is [itself] beyond thinking and has no thought,...not that we ourselves are. We will never be beyond thinking.... What we can do is sit with the faith that zazen posture itself is Buddha, that zazen posture itself is beyond thinking. We tend to think that we are sitting zazen. This is not the case. The entire universe is sitting zazen.”

Dogen says that zazen is simply the dharma gate of repose and bliss. Shikantaza is not a step-by-step meditation practice that progresses into more difficult techniques. The beginner does the same thing as someone who has practiced her whole life. Zazen is not a technique for producing enlightenment, rather, it is enlightenment itself. It is the engagement of the whole body-mind with the fullness of the present moment; nothing is lacking. Zazen is the manifestation of ultimate reality; it is the genjo koan—actualizing the fundamental point. The traps and snares of our discriminative thoughts cannot reach it. When we are doing zazen, we enjoy our original nature, our true element in the same way that a dragon enjoys water and a tiger enjoys the mountain.

Finally, Dogen says that triggering enlightenment by raising a finger or a banner cannot be understood by the discriminative intellect. The finger and banner are references to famous stories of awakening. You will notice that stories of monks and nuns getting enlightenment most often happen in their lives outside the mediation hall. I can't think of a single story in which a person one enlightened while sitting zazen or studying a sutra or listening to a Dharma Talk.

Dogen mention's a finger in reference to a story about Gutei, who would hold up a finger when a student asked him about Zen. One day when Gutei was out, his young attendant met with a visitor. When he was asked about Gutei's teaching, he held up his finger. Later, when the teacher heard about this he cut off his student's finger. The young man ran away in pain and Gutei called out to him. When the student turned his head, Gutei held up a finger and the student was enlightened. I am sure that the student didn't have the time to think about what his teacher was doing. His enlightenment was instantaneous

without any time or room for reflection. I think that the shock of what his beloved teacher had done immersed him in a deep state of questioning. His whole body and mind were united in the pain of *what*.

This state of questioning is the heart of our practice. Zen is not about finding answers, but finding a space in which to sustain questioning, being willing to remain present and upright in the middle of questioning. Not knowing, letting go of everything, is the highest form of thinking; it is, *think –non thinking*. I have to stay in my *not knowing* mind, learning to see without judging, without interpreting. To see is an extraordinary act which requires an attention that is unknown to me. This unknown attention is my essential energy. It appears when I am seeing, listening and questioning—never in knowing with my thinking mind. We must give our complete attention to the question in front of us. We must become the question that stays active endlessly. In Dharma Hall Discourse, 449, Dogen says we must never reach the end. In another talk he said, “although the sitting cushions are old, they show new impressions.”

We are almost at the end of the sesshin and our cushions do look and feel well worn, but I hope that in your last sitting of the weekend you will have new impressions.

Thank you very much.