
Practicing with the body and mind

Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech - Le Vallon (Vosges), April 2012

We start doing Sesshin to deepen the practice of the way, with the whole body and mind. We put all of our energy into the practice of every moment.

Without this commitment, The Way remains like a dream, it is not truly realized. The realization is a matter of an instant of time: instant after instant.

From instant to instant coming back to the body, from instant to instant bringing ourselves back to the reality of here and now without holding onto something for later, our practice must be complete, perfect in every moment, lacking nothing, expecting nothing. In the practice of zazen we abandon the mind that always expects something else, dualistic mind, mind which always expects something else as if the here and now was only a utility, something that serves the idea of achieving something elsewhere and later.

This attitude creates a gap, a ditch, an irremediable separation between practice and realization. It creates in itself many doubt because if we practice like this our practice is not truly awakened practice – without doubt we will eventually find something missing, something we tell ourselves we hope to achieve later. It is this hope itself that prevents realization.

When we sit in zazen we should give up everything. There's really no need, when we sit, for being anything other than fully seated in the here and now.

Those who have practiced a long time have heard this said many many times, but education is not simply listening and memorizing it is actualising – making the teaching concrete by permeating the entire body and mind.

So, we practice to return to our true normal condition, to work in harmony with the Dharma, to fully live our interdependence with all beings and let go of an ego which creates separation and obstacles. Practising thus we can really awaken, see the truth of our lives as it is.

We can awaken to our illusions – see them pass by on the wall as we sit in zazen. We can awaken to the reality of our life which is without separation, not body and mind, not self and others. We can practice each instant as an instant of realization.

This is the practice taught by Master Dogen. Even if the teaching dates back 800 years, its value is always perfectly pertinent. It is up to everyone to try and see this, experience it, verify it in his or her own experience. It is not enough to simply believe or think you know but try to live it and see what happens.

In *Shinjin Gakudo*, Master Dogen discusses two aspects of practice: practice with the spirit and practice with the body. Of course mind and body are never really separate but two aspects of the same reality. When we practice zazen we study the totality of these aspects. We don't limit ourselves to imitating one side or another. Our whole being is implicated in the practice. Nothing remains on the exterior.

Dogen tells us, "When studying with the mind, it means that we study with the different aspects of the mind, such as consciousness, heart (emotions) and intellect."

Often we have a tendency to reject the intellect, but intellect can also help us to study the Way on the condition we don't attach to any particular concept. For example, understanding that "everything is impermanent" conceptually may be useful but it is vital this should not remain something purely intellectual.

Equally, the idea "everything is without fixed substance, all is emptiness" - the intellect can begin to help us understand this but it is only when we practice zazen that our real understanding deepens. "Everything is without fixed substance, all is emptiness" is something that begins to permeate our entire body and mind.

Consciousness helps us because consciousness is then thinking/non thinking, *hishiryō*. We think without attaching to thoughts. Thus we harmonise naturally with impermanence. What was an intellectual understanding becomes the reality of our life now.

In our consciousness in zazen, everything appears and disappears from instant to instant, nothing remains and our tendency to attach ourselves to concepts, to notions disappears. Our heart, our ability to feel reality intimately opens. Even our feelings, regrets at seeing people and things we have loved disappear, even that contributes to our realisation of the Way. Those feelings make us feeling what must be the suffering of all beings – there's compassion in that.

If you yourself cannot feel the sadness of impermanence you can't in your turn understand what makes others suffer. Thus feeling is not an obstacle, not something to be regretted or eliminated but rather a chance, an opportunity to open mind and heart and so develop the spirit of awakening.

The mind of enlightenment is not simply the aspiration to awaken it is also the sincere wish to help all beings resolve the suffering of impermanence whilst sharing our practice together. When we practice zazen, we enter into resonance with the Way. So, we develop the spirit of enlightenment.

Naturally we wish to take refuge in the great Way of the Buddha's and Patriarchs, by engaging deeply in the practice they have transmitted. Nothing seems more important.

It's this we experience when we do Sesshin, when we become deeply intimate with the spirit. This is the meaning of the word Sesshin. "Setsu" means "touch, become one with, become intimate," but, at the same time we realize that this spirit is elusive.

We become intimate with the elusiveness of our mind, something which helps us to let go of attachments, illusions, when we realise that they are themselves without substance.

In Zen, there is a teaching that says that the three worlds are only mind, the three worlds, the worlds of the past, present and future - the world of desires, the world of form and the world without form – the teaching that these three worlds are only mind reflects the intuition that these worlds, worlds in which we live, have no reality or substance of their own.

The experience we have of that depends on our own condition of mind. To say these worlds are only mind depends, in the end, on our own proper state of mind. To say that they are only mind is the same thing as saying the mind can not grasp their reality. Not their reality in themselves. All that we can perceive is what our mind is capable of perceiving. We cannot fix the world with concepts: the world in itself remains steadfastly beyond the reach of mind, beyond all possible means of seizing it with our minds.

What we call reality as it is, that is to say beyond our capabilities of thinking it, remains a mystery.

What we call the Three Worlds are worlds of illusion, the world as seen by an unenlightened being. The past world, when we think of the past we are thinking of something that no longer exists, whose reality such as it was now entirely eludes us, and yet we suffer when we think of the past, feel sadness for a past that will never come back, a time when there were people around who we loved who are no longer there. The future world, too, it doesn't exist yet – it is only an ensemble of mental projections themselves utterly conditioned by desires and fears.

We suffer and worry about the future as if it our idea of it had some reality, not realising our idea is only a dream: if we are not doing this we are looking forward to things in the future with great hope, expecting them to make us happy- but that also is a dream. Dreaming like this makes us forget we are living in the here and now. When we live like this we lose the here and now, we ourselves are absent, lost in dreams.

So, obviously, the truly wise thing to do is live in the here and now. However, even the here and now is elusive. An actual instant of time is only the appearance and rapid disappearance of phenomena. The present moment, at its finest point is an extremely fleeting phenomenon, like the foam on the crest of a wave.

Despite this fact we live and feel within the form of these three worlds, thoughts, emotions, feelings themselves depend entirely on our state of mind. If our mind is agitated with hatred, jealousy, envy the three worlds become hell. If our mind is freed of the poisons of hatred and greed, then these three worlds become places of peace, nirvana. Sometimes we describe the three worlds under the terms "world of desires worlds of form and formless worlds."

The world of desires, the ordinary world of everyday life in which we try to pursue, to seize what we love – or try to avoid or reject or escape that which we do not like, tires us, we are fatigued by being always in a state of tension, consumed by greed and fear.

When we sit in zazen we can see that this world of desires is an imaginary world, only the product of our mental fabrications. A world limited by our own spirit of discrimination.

There is a possibility sometimes we might in zazen experience the world of forms, what is sometimes called the world of pure forms. A world in which we no longer project our own emotions, our own desires, our own aversions on the forms we experience. Sometimes we might take this for nirvana.

However, must realise this world of pure forms is conditioned by our meditation: most of the time, when leaving zazen, we fall back into the world of desires and aversions.

Because we fall so often back into the world of desires and aversions we simultaneously aspire to the formless world, the world of emptiness and so the process continues.

There are kinds of Buddhist meditation that encourage the experience of this world without form, focusing on the emptiness of all forms. But the state of mind that results from this meditation is also conditioned by meditation.

Even the formless world is not the true nirvana. It, itself, is only another impermanent state of consciousness, one of these three worlds that are only mind.

If we realize all we have said, intimately, then there is no longer attachment to any of the three worlds, our mind is instantly released from that which is only the product of our mental constructions.

Eventually we can freely go into the world and realize that the Way is everywhere, it does not dwell in any special place, it is not the preserve of some special state of mind. Simply practice the Way, let go of all our attachments, all of our illusions with every moment and all phenomena we encounter will invite us in. That is the end of our wandering, the real *henzan*, the culmination of the pilgrimage in search of the Way.

The Way exists everywhere. There is no gate to enter. All you have to do is put down your zafu and sit.