

Bare Attention and The Way

Good morning. Before today's input, we express gratitude for the inputs of Roshis Richardson and Kennedy and the other teachers with us this week. Team teaching at summer *sesshin* is a tradition with Clare Sangha. It's a good way for us to come together for Zen training and practice.

The *sesshin* theme is "bare attention" -- simple, direct, nonjudging awareness. By the end of our time together, you should know how it can serve as your guideline for practice. Then, when people inquire about Zen meditation, you will be able to help them straightaway from your own experience.

In *zazen*, we sit in the way most conducive to bare attention. To determine this, we experiment with the options available to us. One option is *shikan taza*, or just sitting, sometimes called "being the breathing."

Other options in *zazen* include silent mental noting to help us develop bare attention. This means using a word in the mind to connect directly with what we are experiencing. For example, silent noting may take the form of counting breaths; noting "in and out" as we inhale and exhale; noting "rising and falling" in reference to the abdomen; or silently noting "thinking" when thoughts or images arise, then returning to feel the breathing. Breath awareness connects us to the present moment.

Similar aids to bare attention help us connect directly with what we experience in *kinhin*, or walking meditation. We can silently note "stepping" or "touching" with each contact of our foot on the floor. In feeling the foot contact the floor, we stay connected with the walking. When we're aware in our body, mind and spirit altogether, nothing is outside our practice of bare attention.

In Zen, we learn by doing. Knowing the options helps us experiment and get started. Again, with bare attention as a guideline, we practice in the way that most helps us be mindful. Such practice helps us be where we are and do what we're doing. It helps us "lighten up."

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This morning let's look further into bare attention practice to see how and why it is the essence of the Zen Way. To help us, we take up Master Dogen's well-known formulation:

To study the Way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.
To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers
between one's self and others.

You may ask: "**To study the Way is to study the self**"? What does this really mean? A newcomer to Zen might think: "Let's see, I'll study my childhood in the morning sitting. Then I can think about my teenage years in the afternoon. After that, maybe I can check out my early adulthood during our night sitting."

We may laugh at this literal interpretation of Dogen's words because we know that in zazen practice we don't direct our minds to any topic in particular. Bare attention acts simply as a mirror reflecting whatever arises or comes before it. Our study of self is thus *indirect* when we practice bare attention. Though indirect, it is study nonetheless. If we practice daily, it is a thorough and illuminating form of study over time.

One of our first insights in Zen is how difficult it is to control the mind. With the breaths in zazen, and the steps in kinhin, we see how the mind generates a stream of thoughts, concepts, images and emotions. Our stream of mind-forms seems to have a life of its own.

Master Mumon, who compiled *The Gateless Gate* collection of Zen koans, calls this the "mind road," referring to an incessant, troublesome sequence of thoughts. Robert Aitken, Roshi, describes it as "the tape that plays and replays all the old drearies." Concepts on the mind road can rule us in different ways. When we're caught in concepts of separation, for instance, we suffer distance and alienation.

Changing the metaphor a little, we've all hopped aboard what Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg of the Insight Meditation Society call the "train of association." Recently, a young man told me about his train of association during a *zazenkai*, or all day sitting: "Gee, the boss didn't return my greeting in the hallway yesterday. Maybe he doesn't think so much of

the report I turned in this week. Wonder if I forgot to run it by someone I should have? I really should have spent more time and effort on it. Boy, you never know what's coming down around here."

"Who's to say what your boss had on his mind in the hallway?" I asked. "It could be *anything*." He laughed. We both laughed in agreeing that a thought of your boss or job is not your boss or your job. It's only a thought.

After some exchange, he decided to note "thinking" if more worries about the report arose, and try not to "feed" them, but let them go. His aim would be to practice "not-knowing" until the response to his report came back. As well, if the chance arose with his boss, he would seek informal feedback, in that way being a bit proactive.

"Sounds suited to the situation," I said. "You're seeing this mind-world for what it is. By not identifying with it and not generating judgments, you can simply note and let it go. Maybe you're also seeing how bare attention can help you lighten up." He laughed again.

The internal process we experience on the mind road or train of association is common to us all. But the content and images we see are particular to each of us. We're all seeing the details of "our own stuff" so to speak and how we may feel about it at a point in time. This is part of what Dogen means to study the self. Again, it's indirect. But there's no mistaking whose stuff it is that we're seeing.

We shouldn't sell short the significance of seeing into how the mind works and the difficulty of controlling it. Few people know about this, for few take the time to observe the mind and its workings. With bare attention, we aren't trying to stop all thoughts and images from arising. It would be very difficult to stop them, for they arise from our conditioning and habitual patterns. At the same time, we recognize thoughts and images as clouds passing through the open big-mind that we make available to them.

Our aim in zazen is only to see the clouds for what they are and not get lost in or carried away by them, but to let them pass through. In the twelfth century, Chinul, the founder of Korean Zen, advised "not to be afraid of your thoughts. Just take care lest your awareness of them be tardy." Chinul knew well that when we're carried away by thoughts, we contract, cut ourselves off. We're not open to life here and now. There's a big

difference between recognizing a thought as a thought and being lost in thought. We want to see that a thought of the past or the future is just a thought in this moment.

Seeing into the discursive mind helps us appreciate the value of steadying our awareness, of stabilizing our attention. Thus, study of the self is a reflection and by-product of bare attention. Though indirect, over time it is very thoroughgoing.

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The second line in Dogen's formulation of the Way reads: "**To study the self is to forget the self.**" Another insight we come upon early in Zen training is that our life and practice are not for ourselves alone. Zen encourages us to give up self-centered views in favor of practicing for the welfare and happiness of other beings as well.

This insight may come to us when, in studying the self through zazen, we're seeing into the mind road. And we may wonder how our meditation practice could ever help us forget and open ourselves enough even to think about helping another. The experience of practice shows how it works over time.

First, understanding our own mind helps us understand the mind of others. Our backgrounds and stories are different from one another. But the nature of mind is the same for all. The first barrier we pass in Zen training -- learning to sit through pain and discomfort -- is experienced by all who attend zazenkai or sesshin. For instance, we know the feeling of pain in the knees. So it is with hunger and the relief of taking food. Also, our experience of love, kindness and generosity -- or of anger, greed and hostility -- is akin to how everyone knows these mind-states, regardless of background, nationality, or other difference.

In deepening, we sense the commonality of life experience. We become sensitive to the suffering of others because we know our own suffering. We see the potential for freedom in others because we recognize our own potential for it. In practicing bare attention, we become more connected. Noticing the impermanence and insubstantiality of things -- the continual arising and falling away of phenomena -- we start to forget the small, separate self. Delusional views fall away by the power of practice.

Another way practice serves, over time, to benefit others is by changing our way of being in the world. If we become more peaceful and caring -- and less judgmental and contracted -- then that is how we encourage the world and help those around us. Zen training and practice is about personal transformation. It's good for us to keep a firm grasp of the evident: Zen is a living tradition learned only through practice. There are no shortcuts or substitutes in training the body, mind, and spirit.

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The third line in Dogen's formulation of the Zen Way reads: "**To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.**" This means seeing into our self-nature, to enlightenment and self-awakening experience. As with the first two, this ingredient of the Way manifests through the power of practice.

Yamada Koun, Roshi, a Japanese ancestral teacher who worked hard to open Zen teaching to Westerners, commented about one's readiness for self-awakening experience: "When your consciousness has become ripe by true zazen -- pure like clear water, like a serene mountain lake, not moved by any wind -- then anything may serve as a medium for enlightenment."

Yamada said that we ripen our consciousness by emptying out, purifying the mind. "Readiness is all," as Shakespeare says. The roshi taught that any stimulus may then serve as agent -- a sudden breeze, the first chirping of birds, the sun's appearance itself. When we're ready, anything can be that "little help from beyond" as Dogen called it.

In Shakyamuni-Buddha's case, it happened to be the morning star. Shakyamuni changed with noticing the morning star. "Now when I view all beings everywhere," he said, "I see that each of them possesses the wisdom and virtue of the *Tathagata*; but for their delusion they don't realize this."

In Yamada's case, the little help was reading the "Mind (and) mountains and rivers" passage of an ancient text Dogen brought from China to Japan. Dogen's help was hearing Ju Ching's words of "dropping off body and mind."

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In studying the Way, we pass the first barrier of Zen -- tolerating pain and discomfort in sitting long -- and begin to forget the small self. This is

typically accompanied by experiencing the first fruit of Zen, *yoriki*, or concentration power. At this stage, discerning aspiration is usually natural and helpful. Through face-to-face instruction, we help the student determine a suitable goal. Text study is often helpful here, e.g. Yasutani Hakuun-Roshi's article on "Aspiration" in Philip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*.

This second stage of training can take a couple routes depending on the student. One route is taking on a *koan* to inspire and deepen practice. The addition of questioning practice to the harmonizing practice of zazen can provide needed stimulation at this stage.

It's helpful to consider the meaning of the Japanese word koan. "Ko" means public or official. "An" means a document pertaining to examinations. Literally, a koan is a document possessing an authority upon which everyone can rely. In Zen, koans are the highest truth expressed by the buddhas and patriarchs. They are words or phrases intended to guide or instruct; questions and answers, or *mondo*; or remarks made by our ancestral teachers. As such, koans have the power to cut off delusive thinking and open our eyes to true reality.

The first koan appearing in Master Mumon's *Gateless Gate* collection is Joshu's Dog, or *Mu*. Mumon himself trained with "Has a dog Buddha Nature or not?" for several years. It is said that when he felt sleepy or in low spirits, he would bump his head against a pillar. One day when he heard the sound of the drum signaling lunchtime, he forgot himself and was suddenly awakened. His consciousness must have been ripe, his mind pure at that moment. He wrote a poem on the occasion:

A peal of thunder under the bright blue sky!
All beings on earth have opened their eyes.
Everything under the sun has bowed at once.
Mount Sumeru jumps up and dances Sandai.

As those working with this koan know, Master Mumon called Mu the "gateless barrier of the Zen sect." We also know his stern guidance: "If you don't pass the barrier of the founding teachers, if you don't cut off the mind road, then you are like a ghost clinging to the bushes and grasses."

Mumon's guidance to "cut off the mind road" is like Dogen's guidance, in *A Universal Recommendation for Zazen*, "to sit firmly as a rock and to think of

non-thinking.” When asked how to do that, Dogen replied “by going beyond thinking and non-thinking.”

To “cut off the mind road” and “go beyond thinking and non-thinking” come in to us as tall orders, severe demands from ancestral teachers who pushed students hard at the stage of “to forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.” This is the challenge of Zen training. It tests our faith in Zen -- albeit well-founded in the experience of countless ancestors in the Way. And it challenges our commitment to it -- which is really up to us.

Both ancestral and contemporary teachers encourage us, by example and instruction, to take up the challenge of Zen training. Dogen was brought to Zen by a question that arose in him at age twelve: “If all beings by nature are Buddha, then why did the ancient masters have to sweat blood to realize it?” As Aitken-Roshi teaches us, “Well, that’s the way it is. That all beings by nature are Buddha makes our task easy. That we have to sweat blood like the old teachers makes it hard.”

His students say that Yamada-Roshi was “suitably encouraging.” He taught that *satoris*, or great enlightenments, that blow out all the windows, like Shakyamuni’s experience, are extremely rare. Initial *satoris*, or *kenshos*, are often just peeks into the Essential World. But if we truly persevere to this peek, then Zen training will help us “grow” the insight experience and progressively bring the power of Essential Nature into our daily lives. Yamada-Roshi said the true goal of Zen is “the perfection of character.”

The mediums for realizing “To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things” have varied throughout the history of Zen. Again, for Dogen, it was hearing words spoken by his teacher; for Yamada, reading an ancient text; for Mumon, hearing the drum. The Way never fails to personalize to the practitioner. But the actual experience of forgetting the self is common to all. For the nature of ultimate reality and mind is the same, what Yamada called the “Empty-Infinite,” our Essential Nature. (Christian terms approximating this include the “Kingdom of Heaven” and “Christ-Nature,” among others.)

A Zen expression of self-forgetting experience is this famous haiku by the Japanese poet Basho:

The old pond
A frog jumps in
Plop!

This haiku does not interpret or elaborately describe what happened. It is simple and direct. Basho wrote the haiku by staying alert to what presented itself. That's all. No interference, only bare attention.

Aitken-Roshi says the frog appeared for Basho as the morning star did for Shakyamuni. "Plop!" presented the act of the frog by its sound. The poet may say he became one-with the sound of Plop! -- and forgot himself! As Shakyamuni changed with seeing the morning star, Basho changed with hearing that Plop! Aitken notes that the 650 haiku Basho wrote afterward point surely and boldly to the fact of Essential Nature.

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The final line of Dogen's formulation of the Way reads: "**To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others.**" Removing the barriers points to the great principle of Zen -- freedom of being. We come back to our natural and spontaneous functioning, we keep out of our own way. We'll take up this principle along with "going into the marketplace" and compassionate action, on the road ahead.

Dogen's final line points as well to the fourth of our Great Vows for All: "The Enlightened Way is unsurpassable, we vow to embody it." It is a life-long undertaking, this perfecting of our character in the Way.

All right then, here you have the input for this morning. Again, please don't leave the sesshin with any unanswered questions about bare attention. We want you to have a good grasp of it.

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Now if my granddaughter Melanie were here she might tell us to "get a grip" on this bare attention. "Get a grip" is one of her favorite expressions these days. Let me close with a short story about my granddaughter.

Melanie turned seven in June and just finished the first grade. She was over for supper a few Sundays ago. Supper is at 6:00 pm. At about 5:30, she went to the refrigerator, took out the ice cream, then goes to fetch a dish. Seeing this, my wife Joan takes the ice cream from her and tells Melanie it's for dessert at the end of the meal. Melanie says, "Grandma, please! I'm hungry now, I'll still eat supper. Please!" When she hears "please" from a granddaughter, my wife usually melts. So she passes the ice cream to me and tells Melanie, "*Talk with your Grandfather.*" In all her time as our kitchen quarterback, Joan never made a smoother handoff.

You may think I'm in a position of power, standing there with the ice cream before supper, but in fact I'm on the spot. By now, Melanie's three-year old sister Kristina has come into the kitchen -- not for the exercise, mind you, but to see which way things would turn out. Anyhow, Melanie says "Grandpa, please let me have some ice cream. I'll still eat supper, I'm hungry, please!"

I say, "Sorry Melanie, ice cream comes at the end of supper." She retorts "*Get a grip Grandpa!*" Maybe she's annoyed because her "please" didn't work. All I can do is say "Melanie I have a grip" -- taking the ice cream in both hands, hugging and dancing a little jig with it -- "I have a good grip on this ice cream!" The girls both laugh.

As I put the ice cream back in the fridge, Melanie asks "But I get some after supper, right?" "Yes, dear," I reply, "and Kristina gets some too!" Both are beaming. And that's the happy ending of my story for you.

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