

Let Go, Come Back

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I recently watched a video that captured a road rage incident. In it, a motorcyclist on a divided highway came up on the driver's side of a passenger car and kicked the door of the vehicle. The driver of the car swerved toward the motorcycle in what appeared to be an attempt to run him into the highway's barrier wall. The cyclist braked and avoided the wall. The car swerved back toward the driving lane, over-steered, tried to correct his mistake, over-steered in the opposite direction, and crashed into the wall. The high rate of speed caused him to careen off the wall into the lanes of traffic where he collided with the left rear quarter panel of an SUV. The SUV turned sideways and flipped. The motorcyclist drove away.

What in the world engenders so much anger? What causes people to act in such extreme ways? Would the motorcyclist have behaved the same way if ten minutes passed between the triggering event and his subsequent action? Would the driver of the car have tried to run the cyclist into the barrier wall if he experienced a ten minute delay before acting? Who knows? Perhaps each would have used the ten minutes to build their anger, to feel wronged, to feel justified in their actions. Or, perhaps they would have realized they had other choices.

Maybe they would have acted differently. Regardless, by acting as they did, the driver of the car was injured and an innocent, completely uninvolved motorist was as well. There was, and there is, no taking it back. The actions stand. This is the nature of life – we are completely responsible for our own actions, and our actions cannot be altered.

We respond to situations in a variety of ways, sometime in ways that may not be very productive. Sometimes we respond to events in habitual ways, based on our conditioning, often before we even realize what we are doing. I'm sure each of you has experienced this. In a conflict situation, we can very quickly respond in a self-protective way. The defenses go up. We might respond with anger. We might feel self-righteous. We might respond by withdrawing, feeling unloved and unlovable. These types of responses are quick to engage because they are conditioned in from childhood when we were less understanding, less experienced in dealing with strong emotions, when we felt that we had to protect the self. Yet here too, once we act the action stands. How can we learn to act more appropriately to what arises? How can we learn to act in compassionate and loving ways?

In this Sangha, we often say “Let go, come back”, “Let go, come back”. What do we mean by this? “Let go” – let go of thoughts. This doesn't mean let go of thinking. It doesn't mean suppress

thinking. Don't put your efforts into trying to prevent thoughts. Thinking is a natural function of the mind. Letting go means not attaching to the thoughts, not living in the thoughts. Take a break sometimes. Give up planning for the future. Give up reliving the past. Give up believing everything you think. Be in the here and now. Your gift, your life is not in the past or in the future. Awaken to the gift.

Letting go. Why is this so important? Why is this so necessary? Letting go leads to questioning our inherent belief that our thoughts are right, are appropriate to the situation, and are the best thing for ourselves or for others. Letting go is one aspect of Zazen that leads to Joriki – concentration power. Zen master Yasutani Hakuun Roshi has referred to Joriki as -- "a dynamic power that enables us even in the most sudden and unexpected situations to act instantly, without pausing to collect our wits, and in a manner wholly appropriate to the circumstances." With Joriki, we see more clearly into our motivations, into how and why we act the way we do. Zazen engenders beginners mind, non-knowing mind. It gives us the space necessary to change conditioned responses into responses appropriate to conditions.

The other aspect of the phrase is "Come back". Come back out of the stream of thoughts. Come back to the present moment. Come back to yourself, here and now, doing just what you are

doing, being the breathing, being the koan. In the Fukanzazengi, Dogen says “The Way is basically perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent upon practice and realization? The Dharma-vehicle is free and untrammelled. What need is there for concentrated effort? Indeed, the whole body *<here Dogen is referring to the absolute>* is far beyond the world’s dust. Who could believe in a means to brush it clean? **It is never apart from one, right where one is.**” In another translation, the last sentence reads “**It never departs from right where you are.**” But Dogen goes on to say “If the slightest liking or disliking arises, the Mind *<big mind, capital M>* is lost in confusion.”

Let go. Let go. We add the like or dislike to what arises based on our conditioning. Likes and dislikes are not part of reality; they are aspects of our thinking mind. Without beings, there are no likes or dislikes, there is only what is. We color reality with our preferences and biases and so we miss “it”. Dogen says “You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate your self. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will be manifest. If you want to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay.” As you probably recall, body and mind dropping away is Dogen’s expression of his experience of kensho.

Dogen lived from 1200 to 1253, and you will recognize the expression of his experience in Hongzhi's writings. Zen master Hongzhi was a Chinese Buddhist monk who lived from 1091 to 1157. Hongzhi is primarily known for *The Book of Equanimity*, a collection of one hundred of his koans. However, in *Cultivating the Empty Field*, we can clearly see his influence on Dogen. In that manuscript he wrote "When the stains from old habits are exhausted the original light appears, blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters. Vast and spacious, like sky and water merging during autumn, like snow and moon having the same color, this field is without boundary, beyond direction, magnificently one entity without edge or seam. Further, when you turn within and drop off everything completely, realization occurs. Right at the time of entirely dropping off, deliberation and discussion *<in other words, intellectualization>* are one thousand or ten thousand miles away. Still no principle is discernible, so what could there be to point to or explain? People with the bottom of the bucket fallen out immediately find total trust." Going on, he says "Sound and form, echo and shadow, happen instantly without leaving traces." In other words, what is simply is, whole and complete, nothing to be added, nothing to be taken away.

In Fukanzazengi, Dogen also advises us to "Think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Non-thinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen." Non-thinking is beyond concepts.

How do we manage to do this? Each and every one of us is capable of non-thinking. In fact, each and every one of us has experienced non-thinking in our lives. When we were infants, before we acquired language skills, we experienced non-thinking reality every day. We have not lost the ability but we have forgotten how access it because language now dominates our mind.

At some point in early life, we began to objectify, we began to distinguish self and other. In time, we began to understand “sameness”; we gained the ability to recognize an object regardless of its orientation. For example, I recognize a dog as a dog regardless of whether it is facing me or sideways to me. We recognize categories of objects. I recognize different dogs as dogs, but cats as “not” dogs. Language allows us to label objects of the phenomenal world (to name “dog” as dog) and enables communication about what we recognize. Language also enables conceptualization about the objects as well as layers upon layers of conceptualization. That is a dog. That is a black and tan dog. That black and tan dog is hot. That black and tan dog is hot and needs a bath. On and on and on, layers upon layers upon layers of conceptualization added to dog, but in reality just dog, ultimately just “it”.

I invite you to consider Case 21 from the Iron Flute which reads: *Fen-yang brought forth his walking stick and said to his monks,*

“Whoever understands this walking stick thoroughly can end his traveling for Zen.” Can you understand Fen-yang’s walking stick thoroughly? Can you demonstrate an intimate understanding of the walking stick in dokusan? What is the essence of Fen-yang’s walking stick? I assure you, it is not something you can label or name.

There is another conceptualization we experience every day, namely “myself”. This is a conceptualization that implies ownership – *my* self. I am the owner of self. This is a strange formulation, even on the face of it, because there are two entities in it. There is the *I* and there is the *self*. So who is the *I* that is owning the *self*, what is the *self* that is owned, and what is this ownership? Looking at it another way, I have a body and a mind (or at least I *think* I do). My body has many parts, for example two arms. My arm has many parts, for example an upper arm, lower arm, wrist, and hand. My hand has five fingers. If we keep looking at smaller and smaller components, eventually we get to the realm of individual cells, then molecules, and then atoms. So, are they *my* atoms? This is a silly notion. Where did the ownership disappear in the decomposition continuum? Where does it reappear? What is the boundary line that on one side is *me* and on the other side is not *me*? Well, in reality there is no boundary line – it is all a function of thought. We think *me* when in reality there is only

the absolute manifested as the phenomenal, the phenomenal as a manifestation of the absolute.

Let go, come back. Let go, come back. There is another function of letting go and it is related to the Great Matter, to life and death. Letting go is imperative because we can do it now by choice and be at peace with it, or we can have it forced upon us later completely unprepared for the process. Sooner or later, we have to confront death where we personally and intimately experience letting go. In dying, there is no choice but to let go. One has to let go of everything. Let go of mobility. Let go of eating. Let go of drinking. Let go of conversation. Let go, there is nothing you can take with you. And finally, let go of breathing, let go of life. As the sutra says, "Life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each of us must strive to awaken. Awaken, take heed. Do not waste your time by night or day."

Let go, come back. Let go, come back. This is our practice. When body and mind drop away we are free of concepts about ourselves and others. We are free of any notion of a fixed self. We clearly see the ever-changing nature of everything, each instant dying into the rebirth of the next, all of existence fresh and newly emergent. Everything is free of all of our projections. There is "just this". Let go, come back. But take care. Let go of

the realization for if you cling to this state, it too becomes lifeless.