

NOTHING IN THE UNIVERSE IS HIDDEN

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When Dogen was a young monk, he traveled to China and, upon his arrival, met the head cook from Mount Ayuwang Monastery. At that time, Dogen thought that to practice meant to concentrate on zazen and to study the words of the ancients. He was stunned when this old monk told him, "You who have traveled from a far land do not know the meaning of Buddhist practice." When Dogen met the same cook later at Tiantong Monastery, he asked, "What is wholehearted practice." The cook replied, "Nothing in the entire universe is hidden."

What we are searching for, who we truly are, can be found in connectedness everywhere. No one thing can be depended upon, yet everything is available. With graceful, willing, and open mind, we may begin to notice that each thing, the chair we sit on, our home and garden, our village, the surrounding countryside and the vast night sky may support us knowing ourselves, others and things in this way. Each arising, each meeting can provide precisely what is needed. We may become aware, as Dogen did, that "... everything excluding nothing is the confirmation of our practice and all space without exception is the field of our awakening."

In our ordinary thinking, opinions prevail. If we rely solely on thinking, it is like seeing the star-filled night sky through a straw: what we see is just one small particle of the heaven's vastness. When we settle ourselves where we are, thinking may subside. This is to begin to establish our continuity in our body including but not limited by our thinking. This is to lead with a felt experience of the world where continuity is simultaneous, not sequential. To practice is to be present in the midst of each arising outside a linear sense of continuity and time. We are connected with the whole night sky in all directions. For example, when we hit a bell, we do not hit it twice: we hit it once and once. We treat each arising as a particular and proceed from particular to particular. Moment after moment we meet ourselves. This "right now" means that practice begins here; we never lose our practice.

To live in this way interrupts our habits and preferences. Each experience, whether painful or pleasant has its own standing. Each arising, each thing has integrity. From here, we do not see the world as a separate object, rather we feel related and connected. It is a field of activity from which we are inseparable. We establish ourselves in a field of present activity, not just comparative content.

ON THE DOORSTEP OF PRACTICE

The glow of the moon is contained in each and every drop of dew. Joys and sorrows are part of life. The jewel of realization is present in the bitter and sweet alike. Yet, we often choose to seek one and try to fix or avoid the other. The problem we all have is trying to make our life conform to our narrow view of what we think it is supposed to be like.

Some problems seem to respond to our efforts, many persist only to return, resurface later. We may temporarily achieve some ease, some modicum of control, only to find that as situations are changing, we must continually make an effort to hold tight to and reinforce our concepts and beliefs.

All of our efforts to have a “problem-free” life are intrinsically unsuccessful and doomed to failure. Problems are part of life. When problems appear to be out of our control, when nothing seems to work, we call this a crisis. Our life as we have known it cracks open, we are exposed, and there is no where to turn. We are desperate for an answer. This may bring us to the doorstep of practice. To enter, we need to step thru the door and begin accept our life as it is rather than treating practice as a new, more effective way to get the life we want. To step through the door is to bring our life to practice, rather than bringing a strategy into our life. Through being just as we are, we may find we enter a place of unlimited possibilities. How do we do this? How do we re-think the world in us?

TO SIT DOWN IN VIBRANT ALIVENESS

To sit down in the middle of our life wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we may begin to settle ourselves on our life as it is. We start at zero. We start here. Wherever we are is called here. We are constantly stepping into here, completing each moment. We are each in an absolutely unique place; no one else is sitting here. We are not in a generalized space, or a comparative space, or a space in terms of something else. We are not trying to fix anything. We are simply moving in accord with the fullness of life. To act on this is to settle ourselves exactly on this moment.

For example, when we meditate, make zazen, we join with our body and breath. Often we sit cross-legged, but there is not a right posture or a wrong one. To simply make an effort to care for our posture makes it, of itself, the “right posture.” And in our continual effort to find our posture and adjust it, we do not correct it, but rather accept it as it is.

Zen practice is about exactly being alive in the process of life itself. It is not about doing something or making something happen. It is not about constantly try to fix things and get life to accord with our views and preferences. Being present is to constantly leave where we are which is to constantly arrive here, which is not coming or going, which is to be awake. It is about sitting down in the midst of our vibrant aliveness as we find it and as it is changing. When we sit down, we allow the ideas we have about how things are supposed to be come to rest. It is about not knowing. Not knowing does not mean we do not know anything, it means we are not limited by what we know. It is about intimately participating in the creation of the newness of each moment. This is to see each thing with fresh eyes.

From this perspective, practice is not about pushing aside or denying our small mind, it’s allowing it to become quiet and to sit down in its midst, so that the activity of our big-trust mind can function. Locating ourselves inside each particular, everything is available, nothing is hidden. And, to hold onto views, however correct they may seem to be, is to create a world that is fixed , rigid and separate, one that contains suffering and opposition.

IN SUFFERING WE MAY TOUCH THE VERY CENTER OF OUR LIFE

Practice differentiates suffering into two main kinds. The first is the actual experience of pain in the present moment. For example, we have a car accident and are injured. Our body is damaged, and, we may likely experience physical pain. If we are able to be

present with it, it may not even “hurt” in the way that we expect. We may not even notice the “hurt” until afterwards; in the midst of activity, it is often a simply a sensation.

The second kind of suffering is the mental and emotional suffering related to our attitude about what we are experiencing. For example, we may be anxious about the extent of our injuries from the car accident, and may imagine all sorts of outcomes, whether based in reality or not. For example, we may fantasize: that we will never be able to walk again, we will be bed-ridden, no one will take care of us, etc. These attitudes or reactions may create much more anxiety and suffering than the actual physical pain.

Practice cannot stop car accidents from happening, but it can help us work with our attitudes and reactions. Our true nature is beyond conscious experience; only in our conscious experience do we differentiate pleasure and pain, good, bad, practice and enlightenment. My first teacher, Suzuki Roshi, encouraged us to establish our practice where there is no practice or enlightenment – this means that as long as we practice in the area where there is practice and enlightenment, there is no chance to make true peace for ourselves. This is to say when something happens, “oh, this is painful...”and not add anything to it.

The real cause of suffering in our life is what we take ourselves, one another, our life to be. This is what separates us from our big self. What we are is both the problem and the answer. When we suffer and when we are able to accept ourselves as a suffering person, we may begin to feel at ease; and, when we are completely at ease, this marks the beginning of an end of to mental and emotional suffering. We can be a Buddha for our own practice. To know this is to touch the very center of our life.

To sit still is to allow the uniqueness of each arising to come forward and meet us. From this place of stillness, we can begin to accept the world as it is, not simply in terms of our habits, of how it matches up with our desires and expectations. This is generating an initial mind of “yes.” Suzuki Roshi would often respond to a question by saying “hai.” We thought this meant “yes,” but he once explained to us that it actually means “I hear you.” It is not about agreement (i.e., sometimes what comes forward, for example the abuse of a child, is unacceptable); it is about receiving what comes. This is an initial mind, a mind of “yes:” simply hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, etc. Not adding a second activity. Not filtering experience through our views and preferences. Not adding an interpretation or evaluation.

Once we hear, etc. then we can proceed from the fullness of the entire situation. It is not about us having to do something. When we let our doing rest, we may become aware of a mutual arising, one in which we and the events of our life are mutually creating each moment.

*We are drops of white dew.
When we settle ourselves just as we are
On the fallen autumn leaves,
We are golden beads.*

Inspired by Sogen