

STEPPING INTO HERE

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My first teacher, Suzuki Roshi, would often say to us, “the most important thing is...” and we would take out our mental pencil and paper and take note. For example, he would say to us “the most important thing is zazen,” another time, “to follow the (monastery) schedule and do things with others is the most important thing,” and on another occasion, “the most important thing is to know things as it is,” and so on. He would often express a different, unpredictable “most important thing.” Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi, “Roshi, what is the most important thing?” And, he replied, “The most important thing is to find out what is the most important thing.”

So, for each of us, what is the most important thing? How do we come to know this most important thing? How can we engage the constantly changing, ongoing discovery which expresses our unique most important thing? This process of discovery is not confined to a conceptual view of life but is rather in itself an expression of the fullness of being. It includes all views while not sticking to any particular one.

When our minds are open to discovery, they are ready for anything and willing to meet to each thing. So-called “Right Effort” is about not adding anything extra. It is found in readiness, the willingness to meet the uniqueness of each moment, and to cut ourselves free from the baggage of the previous one.

INTIMATELY IDENTIFIED WITH EACH THING

It is said that all beings are the Tathagata, awakening itself, only delusions and preconceptions keep them from attesting to this. To be this awakening is to find our position in this particular moment, according to place and circumstances, connected as everything. This is not according to some idea of ourselves but rather intimately being identified through the feeling of each thing.

In connection and care, we may begin to see no one and no thing as separate. In this wide mind, to be oneself is to be completely everyone and everything in awakening activity. Each thing may be the presence of this confirming practice, and everywhere may be the field of awakening. This is our unique possibility: we can locate ourselves in the middle of this field of awakening, an authentic human being living a true human life. This is to be exactly present in the process of our life itself which is to be precisely how we are.

Yet, we often see things through the filter of our beliefs and pre-conceptions. We tell ourselves a story. We often try to get what we like, try to avoid what we dislike and attempt to make this life conform to our particular views and preferences. And, most often, we believe the story we tell ourselves.

A tourist was hiking in the jungle outside Bangalore. She saw large elephants tethered to a stake in the ground and asked their trainer, “How can you keep such large elephants tied to such a small stake?” He said, “When the elephants are small, they often try to pull out the stake, and they fail. When they grow large, they never try to pull out the stake

again.” The elephants had an experience, and they continue to repeat it regardless of their change in circumstances. They never try again.

STANDING UP IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR LIFE

In our usual experience, opinions prevail. Can we have an experience and not have an opinion about it? Can we have opinions and not be limited by them? 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 beliefs and pre-conceptions. The monk Dogen says that to carry the self forward is delusion; this means to carry ideas of the self forward is delusion. And, he says that the myriad things coming forward and authenticating themselves is awakening. This is a shift in point of reference; it is not just about us, it is about each thing as well as us. This is mutual-all-at-onceness. This is to stand up in the middle of our own life, which is not separate from all of life.

To practice the Buddha’s Way is to be present in the midst of each arising. To hold onto views, however correct they may seem to be, is to create a world that is fixed, that is separate, that contains suffering and opposition. The stress that we experience so often in our daily lives is the direct experience of this separation and opposition. Take highway traffic, for example. Most all of us feel stress when we are caught in traffic: we have to be somewhere, often at a specific time...we are running late...things are not going according to plan...we begin to feel anxious. This is the experience of a divided mind. We believe we are here, and something else is over there. We want to be someplace else, and we want to be there now.

A Zen practitioner lived outside of New York City and had a cabin in rural upstate New York. As he and his five year-old son were getting in the car to travel there, his son asked, “Dad, how long does it take to drive to the cabin.” He responded, “about five to six hours.” The child then asked, “What is about one hour away from where we’re going?” He answered, “the city of Albany is about one hour away.” The five year-old then said, “Dad, can we start from Albany?”

TO SETTLE IN MIND

To want to be someplace other than where we actually are is to be caught up in a view, to carry the self forward. It is the constant feeling of “Are we there yet?” This is to be caught by our small mind; tension and stress is unavoidable. Practice is not about trying to change things or to deny our small mind, but rather it is about allowing our small mind to become quiet so our wide, trust mind can function. From this place, we do not get rid of stress, but rather, we widen our limited ideas about it. This is to allow the myriad things to come forward and confirm themselves.

Sitting provides an opportunity to observe thoughts as they arise and fall away which is to dis-identify with any one set of thoughts. We begin to find space in between our thoughts, to enter that space and just sit. This is to settle in a mind which is itself potentiality, one that is continuously discovering this life anew. And, to engage this mind can be as simple as taking a breath, paying attention to our breath. When take a pause and notice where we are, we may begin to allow ourselves to enjoy “the ride.” To do this, even for just a moment, is to let opposition rest and to be identified through the myriad things. We may no longer simply think of ourselves as a human being in a relative world

seeking enlightenment, but also know unequivocally that we are enlightenment expressing itself as this unique human being.

To enter the moment with a felt experience of the world in its own time is to practice in the midst of each arising, outside a linear sense of continuity and identity. We are connected with the temple garden, the rolling green hillsides, the vast night sky, one another, each thing in all directions. Moment upon moment, we settle in this closeness.

Practice begins where we are; 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. From here, the world is not a separate object; we feel related and connected. We establish ourselves in a field of present activity, not just comparative content.

TO MEET OURSELVES EVERYWHERE

The Zen Teacher Changsha encouraged his brother monk, “At the top of a hundred foot pole, you should step forward. The universe in all directions is the whole body.” To step forward is not to be caught by what we know, even if we have reached so-called understanding. To even get to the top of a five foot pole may be an accomplishment. It has taken many of us a lot of work to get where we are, yet to stick to some idea, however good it may be, limits us.

To step forward is to step into here. Wherever we are is called here. We are constantly stepping into here, completing each moment. It is actually not possible to establish a fixed position, a “top” to the pole; each thing is constantly growing and changing, becoming anew. To practice is not to try to cling to some idea, or to try escape or change our life, but it is to face it exactly and completely. This is to be neither this way nor that – this is to be where we are, to “just sit.” So, to step forward is to attest to awakening itself, to the mysterious beauty and aliveness of this unique moment.

When Changsha says, “the universe in all directions is the whole body,” he is saying, don’t call it the universe, call it the whole body. This is to notice and enact the whole body. Truth, “the whole body,” is always presencing anew, but has been obscured by delusion and pre-conceptions. When we no longer carry forward an idea of the self, there is no thing that is not the self - we meet ourselves everywhere, in each situation. This is subject meeting subject. This is the myriad things coming forward and authenticating themselves.

From this place, we don’t practice to attain something special, but rather to express our true nature and extend our practice. Dogen prescribed a remedy like this one long ago:

*Piercing the sky, embracing the earth - no end to it.
An immense sheer cliff, glows with mysterious light.*

