

TO AIM AT THE VASTNESS OF EACH MOMENT

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How do we know ourselves, one another, each thing? In practice, it is often suggested that we begin with where we are now, and to trust our experience. What does this really mean? Does it mean to trust in our ideas about our experience? Is it a trust in some belief, or a habit, trusting in what is familiar? Is it trusting in how we are accustomed to experiencing things? What can we count on? What can we fundamentally trust?

The ancestor Xuansha Shibeilived in the Min district of China during the T'ang dynasty. When he was young, he liked to fish and lived a simple life beside the Nan T'ai River. At the age of thirty, he focused on his intention to practice. Once he met his teacher Xuefeng, he never traveled to study anywhere else. The coarse cotton robe that Xuansha wore was worn and tattered, so he wore a paper robe under it. He was said to be strongly determined and was sometimes called the Asetic Bei. His teaching was noted for being spare and direct.

Why do we make note of such details? Because they point to the fact that Xuansha was a real person acting in time, that practice is a human possibility, that it is our possibility, and that it expresses our potential for experience. As we become familiar with them, the stories of our Buddha Ancestors may become our stories, opening us to the world telling its story thru us. We may generalize that in early Buddhism, practitioners focus on the words of the Buddha, on his discourses, dialogs and teachings. We may say that in later Buddhism, the emphasis is on the experiences and teachings of a wide range of individuals, not just the historical Buddha. Thus, each of us may also take part in generating, completing and confirming the teaching. Each us may function as Buddha, may be a Buddha for our own practice.

So, returning to Xuansha: it has been said that a young monk once came to visit Xuansha and asked him, "How can I enter into practice with you?" Xuansha is believed to have said, "Do you hear the sound of Yuan Creek?" The monk responded, "Yes." Xuansha replied, "Enter there."

Most of us can hear, and whether we are aware of it or not, we hear something almost constantly during our waking hours. What does it mean to enter practice into practice though hearing a sound? What sort of hearing is this? Is Xuansha pointing toward hearing a particular sound, or hearing sound in a particular way? Or, rather, is he pointing toward an awareness of the mind that is hearing the sound? To be aware of our hearing, including but not limited by the content of what is being heard, is to hear our hearing. This is to hear the mind hearing, which is to settle the mind on the functioning of mind itself.

In Zen temples, newcomers are often instructed to not look around. This means to not think around; it means to feel around. This is to turn the senses inward, so the senses are not seeking outside, but are feeling mind and establishing a continuity of mind not limited by the senses; to turn our eyes inward we may begin to see non-graspable seeing itself. We may begin to find ourselves precisely where we are in a field wider than just our ideas about our experience. And, from this perspective, when we happen to look at something external, it means to see without cognizing seeing. To be where we are is to not allow the tool of consciousness to take over our experience. This is to have an experience and not immediately have an opinion about it; and, once we have an opinion, it is a support for not being limited by it.

Xuansha is pointing out a way to step through the doorway of our everyday experience and to experience things directly, without the constant filtering through our views, beliefs and preferences. Our priority becomes a felt sense of things not limited by our assumptions. Once we begin to establish this felt sense, we tend not to compromise it. Thus, the effort we make in practice, so-called “right effort,” is simply not to add anything extra.

How do we enter into and trust our sense of the world, the completeness of each moment? In our usual experience, we look into each situation to determine if it is trustworthy. And, based on our impression of circumstances, we decide whether to trust or not. But the kind of fundamental trust we are pointing toward is not based on circumstances. It is not trusting in something as much as acting with trust, locating ourselves in a body-mind of trust, being trust. This is aiming at the vastness of each moment, not just the sense impressions and our ideas about them. It is simultaneously being unique and also connected with everything; this cannot be fully understood in the thinking mind alone. In Zen practice, this is called shikantaza, just sitting, which means being neither this way nor that; it means to continually discover ourselves “in between.”

As we begin to trust in our immediate experience and in the many surfaces of this immediacy, there is a kind of bliss in simply experiencing things directly: the feeling of a cool washcloth on our face, sound of a bird, the slant of light outside the window. We experience this fundamental trust as a completeness in each moment, regardless of content: everything we need is here, in front of us, abiding in an underlying mindfulness that is always present. This awareness in itself may have no intrinsic form of its own and yet may be capable of perceiving, experiencing, or expressing any form; it is rooted in a mind which is able to make associations but does not arise from associative thinking. An aim in practice may be to continually locate ourselves in this mindfulness and on each moment, to introduce each new arising into it.

But there is a potential problem here: we may believe that this completeness means everything is OK and we don't need to do anything.

But, practice does not mean that we allow an infant to wander into oncoming traffic. It is not about not acting, but rather it is about not doing something solely from the reference point of our views, beliefs and preferences. Fundamental trust includes the entire field of experience functioning with intelligence.

There is a Sufi teaching story which tells of a man who prayed continually for the awareness to succeed in life. One night he dreamed of going into the forest to attain understanding. The next morning he went into the woods near his home and wandered for several hours looking for a sign that would provide some answers. When he finally stopped to rest, he saw a fox with no legs lying between two rocks in a cool place. Curious as to how a legless fox could survive, he waited until sunset when he saw a lion come and lay some meat before the fox. "Ah, I understand," the man thought. "The secret to success in life is to trust that God will take care of all my needs. I don't need to do anything. All I have to do is totally surrender to my all-sustaining God." A week later, weakened and starving, the man had another dream. In it he heard a voice say, "Fool. Be like the lion, not like the fox."

An unconditional trust gives us the capacity to jump into the unknowingness of each moment. It unfolds through a willingness: to let go of the images, identifications, structures, beliefs, ideas, and concepts; to accept ourselves as we are and to not try to direct things, to not manipulate them, to not push and pull at them; and, finally, through a willingness to participate in the way things develop spontaneously without trying to force them to develop in ways that we think they should go. This is to trust wherever things take us. This is to constantly be arriving in the present moment which is to accept and trust the unique possibilities waiting for us in each situation. As it is said, "non-abiding is rootless and from this non-abiding root all things arise."

From here practice is not about something to believe in, it is believing in absolutely nothing. This is to find ourselves anew in each moment. It is not about a belief in a person, idea or thing. It is a confidence in where we are; it is coming into a fullness of being and complete participation in this life. To do this is to sit down and not do anything in particular. And then, with full engagement, to allow not doing to happen.

A verse inspired by the Buddha Ancestor Hongzhi:

*As trust is present without conditions,
And awareness is serene without cognition,
Buddhas appear and disappear
Transforming the world...*