

The Mind of Idleness

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“For so many years I’ve been knocking at that ancient door, I’ve been knocking from the inside.”

(Rumi)

For many of us, this “knocking from the inside” of which the Sufi poet Rumi speaks is a radical shift. It is to locate ourselves without our usual, external reference points. This allows each particular situation to provide its own point of reference. Rather than directing our attention outward, toward appearances, we shift and step back into a felt sense of things, into the feeling of where we are. This is knowing things, knowing one another, knowing ourselves from the inside. It is to recognize an insidedness to each arising, and to trust and give precedence to this experience.

We are quite different than the images that we have about ourselves. The Buddha Ancestor Dongshan has cautioned: “Do not try to know the self through the objective world.” When we try to figure out who we are, we lose ourselves. When we stop trying to know ourselves through externals, we may begin to see ourselves in each thing, each situation, each mutual arising. This is to be willing to be here moment by moment and to exactly settle into the situation where we are now, as we are and as we are changing. We are constantly leaving each moment, jumping into the next. Aliveness is not to be stuck to some past moment, some past idea, but to constantly arrive here.

This constant arriving includes what we know about ourselves and most importantly, what we do not know. Not knowing does not mean that we do not know anything, it means that we are not limited by what we know. How does this kind of not knowing effect us? When we are not limited by the familiar, habitual way of knowing, each thing can be fresh, can be a discovery, can be a possibility.

Where we are is inside this

There is a Japanese term *kori*, which means “where we are,” but literally it means “inside this.” Where we are is inside this. There is an instruction that is commonly given in Zen temples: “Do not look around the Zendo.” To not look around the Zendo is to not think around the Zendo. This is to feel around the Zendo, feel the Zendo from inside, as its own point of reference. We do not live in a generalized space; each thing, each person is an absolutely unique place. No one else is sitting exactly here where we are now, breathing here, in aliveness here. As we experience ourselves and each thing from the inside, for example, how we are sitting, how the floor is sitting, how a wall is sitting, how others that practice with us are sitting, we may become increasingly aware of both our uniqueness as well as our connection with each thing. With graceful, willing, and open mind, we may begin to notice that our cushion, our Zendo, our village and surrounding countryside and the vast night sky may support us knowing in this way. A wider knowing of ourselves and each thing emerges. Each arising, each meeting can provide precisely what is needed. We may, as Dogen says, become aware that “... everything excluding nothing is the confirmation of our practice and all space without exception is the field of our awakening.”

Yet, quite often, we are mostly caught up in this noisy, busy world, and when we take time to sit, we may experience that much of the noise and busy-ness actually is in us. We further complicate things by identifying ourselves with this noise and taking it to be true.

To practice is to stop pretending

There is a story about a parent who would often read to their child each night before bedtime. One night, the parent suggested that they play a game together rather than reading a story. The parent said: "Let's play pretend. Let's pretend we are in a deep, dark jungle, and we are surrounded by lions and tigers and bears and all kinds of scary creatures. I would climb right up the nearest tree. What would you do?" The child replied, "I'd stop pretending."

To practice is to stop pretending. It is to stop rejecting what we do not agree with, to stop writing in stone the story we choose to believe, and to stop placing it before us and others as some kind of unquestioned truth. It is to begin to know the world apart from the story we have habitually told ourselves. It is the willingness to begin to simply see things as they are in their own terms, or as Suzuki-roshi used to say, "things as it is."

This is to abide in a mind of idleness, a mind of simply being. The Chinese character for idleness, *hsien*, means to allow the moonlight to come through an empty doorway. In idleness, there is no intensifying the senses. Simply, just this moonlight through the empty doorway. This points to an unediting mind which receives and completes each perception. This mind is marked by intimacy. This is direct knowing without any separation or gap created. There is no thought or concept which filters experience. From inside here, in closeness, the world is not an object; it is prior to our picking and choosing.

In Zen practice we sometimes say:

*The flower is not red
Nor is the willow green.*

This is knowing things from their own perspective, from their insidedness. In the fundamental mind of idleness, there is no comparing. In everyday functioning, it may be very useful to compare at times, but within the fundamental ground of mind, there is no second activity, no comparing. A mind which does not compare is a mind that unfolds. And understanding is the fruit of a mind that unfolds.

This is what is meant when it is said: "When zazen is zazen, you are you." There is no comparing zazen, no comparing you. In the act of sitting which is not limited to the posture of sitting, standing, etc., we may develop a willingness to see what comes in its own terms.

The Zen Teacher Shibeï was known for his spare and direct teaching. He was once asked by a monk: "How can I enter practice with you?" Shibeï responded: "Do you hear the creek?" The monk responded: "Yes." Shibeï responded: "Please enter there." This is to hear the sound in each of us, the sound which is sounding in us. In doing so, we are hearing itself which is to hear the mind, which is to settle in just this mind.

This is the mind of no second activity, of idleness, the mind which rests on each arising. When we engage in the practice of direct perception, we rest the mind on the sense organ, the object perceived and on the arising consciousness. This is to know things separately and also together. Through the practice of attention to the sense organs, sense objects and sense consciousnesses, we may begin to notice when there is a tendency to add something and when there is a tendency to simply allow what is there without intensifying the senses.

The mind of no second activity

There can be a deep, refreshing ease and joy in just hearing a creek. It is such a simple thing. When Dogen returned to Japan from China, he returned "empty-handed." The journey was quite dangerous. Many died. People who were successful in completing the journey often returned with some special scripture or statue. Dogen did not come back with anything. And when asked what he had realized when he was with his teacher, he said: "The eyes are

horizontal and the nose is vertical.” This is the mind of idleness, the mind of no second activity. Just this moment, just each thing is enough.

There can be a potential problem here: We can make this mind of idleness into a better story we tell ourselves. We may make “no second activity” into a new improved second activity. So the practice of idleness is to over and over again return to zero. This is what is meant when it is said: that to sit without an image is true practice. This is relinquishment. Relinquishment is not giving things up – that is just another kind of doing – but rather it means knowing that everything changes.

There is a wonderful thing about practice: When we are not able to rest in a mind of idleness, we can begin again. We can start at zero on the next moment, on the next breath, allowing each particular to arise, to have some duration, to dissolve and to disappear in its own uniqueness, its own unpredictability and amazement.

*We are drops of white dew.
On the fallen autumn leaves,
We are golden beads.
(inspired by Omori Sogen)*