

Finding the True Dragon

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When he first began recommending the practice of zazen, Dogen instructed, "Don't practice like a blind person trying to find out what an elephant is like." A blind person may touch an elephant's trunk and think an elephant is like a hose, may touch its leg and think it is like a tree, may touch its side and think it's like a barn, and may touch its tail and think it's like a fly whisk. Of course, for someone who can see, a real elephant is not like any of these things.

Dogen followed this by saying, "and don't be suspicious of the true dragon, like Seiko." In ancient China, there was a man named Seiko who loved dragons. His house was filled with them: hanging scrolls of dragons, dishes with dragons painted on them, a teapot in the shape of a dragon, sculptures of dragons, tables and chairs with arms carved like dragon heads and legs like dragon tails, he even designed his house in the shape of a dragon. One day a real dragon thought, "Since he likes dragons so much, if I visit him, he'll surely be very happy to see me." So the dragon went to Seiko's house, stuck his head through the window, and found Seiko sitting in his dragon chair at his dragon-shaped desk. Seiko was shocked and frightened at the sight of a real dragon, and began to draw his sword. The dragon cried out and fled. "Don't be like Seiko," Dogen says.

This seemingly simple story points to a subtle and pervasive tendency, something that many of us spend our time doing, in our sitting, in our approach to practice, in our relationships, and throughout our life: leading with our thinking and carving out some idea of what we believe we're doing, what we think is practice, what we take ourselves, others and this life to be. We focus on thinking as our primary organ of knowing and then take what we think to actually be the way things are. And we're often suspicious and even sometimes fearful if circumstances don't go along with the way we think they are supposed to be.

So, maybe we're new to sitting practice. Maybe for some of us, it's our first time sitting. It's difficult not to have some idea about what sitting is like, what may happen, what benefits may result. And often, these ideas are an important part of why we begin practice in the first place. But even after years of practice, many of us continue to rely on our ideas about what we're doing: "This is true Zen practice," or "My practice isn't so good, I wish I could do better," or "That person seems like they're really doing it. I wish my practice was like theirs."

It's not that it's wrong to orient ourselves with thinking and to reflect on what we're doing; our ideas and process of thinking are essential to dealing with the details of our life. However, the sole reliance on thinking for our orientation and understanding may create limitations and problems. Practice includes, but also extends beyond, our idea of practice; we can live our life in territories including, but wider than our ideas about life.

So what is it about this thinking that encourages our tendency to solely rely on it? When we investigate our experience of thinking, we may notice several things: there's a lot of it, it's constant, and we tend to identify with it. We often depend on historical knowledge and past experience to orient us, fitting what comes up into what we're accustomed to, wrapping the present moment in familiar concepts and generalizations. In the past, this

historical orientation may have been important to our well-being, to our success, and maybe even sometimes essential for our survival. But a continued reliance on it, regardless of how circumstances may have changed, robs us of the full range of experience available in the present.

How do we begin to see things as they are beyond our ideas and past experience? How do we begin to loosen the grip of our habits and patterns? How do we re-think the world in us, re-body the world in us? How do we stop believing the dragons we make-up are real ones?

Practice is an art, not a science or a philosophy; it's an inquiry based on our felt experience, trusting it as it arises and as it changes. We can begin to explore our experience through an orientation of openness, willingness, receptivity, curiosity, and aliveness, not based on past moments, not knowing what will arise, not knowing what to expect. From this perspective, practice is to set aside our idea of practice and to settle in the unique feeling of each arising, completing that which appears.

We may gain entry to this unknown territory through engagement in upright sitting. Through joining our thinking with our breath and posture, we can begin to establish a different relationship with our thinking. The effort in practice is not to empty the mind, but rather to allow the mind to pervade the entire body on each breath. Suzuki-roshi often pointed out that in zazen, we don't invite our thoughts to tea. This is recognizing a mind wider than thoughts. And we may begin to "know" with our posture, with our shoulders, or our back, and experience this wider sense of mind that includes ungraspable feelings as well as concepts.

Thinking may still be present, but it's simply thinking, one of a number of factors that make up our experience. In sitting, we return our attention to our posture and breath, moment by moment, letting thinking come and go, regardless of whether there's a lot of it or not much at all. This particular kind of thinking with our felt experience is sometimes called non-thinking, which is to think in a way that is not caught up in thinking, to not interfere with thinking. This is to settle ourselves in the middle of our world as we find it and as it changes.

When we are able to lead with the body of practice, not an idea of practice, we begin to orient in a different way. This orientation is what is often referred to as the backward step. It is physically prior to the structuring of what we know. By stepping back into our life as it is, we may begin to feel around each arising, not just think around it. We can gain entry to some dark, rich pregnant place, where experience is not mediated or filtered by views and preferences. It's like the vast, dark night sky, beyond form and color, where anything is possible, where snow can be blue – really.

Taking the backward step is full participation in this life, not separating ourselves from our full aliveness through some idea of the way we are or the way things are supposed to be. It's not that we stop picking and choosing from this place – we can still decide what to cook for lunch – but that we avoid getting stuck in the mind of picking and choosing. Stepping back into our life is to let the body "leap," which is to leap clear of dependence on this picking and choosing mind and plunge into the uniqueness of each particular.

In order to begin to explore this place before ordinary knowing, we may find our attention to breath and posture as a support for relaxing habitual ways of knowing. We don't have to constantly re-live our past. We don't have to negotiate our lives around the fixed barriers of our ideas. We may feel contact, warmth and connection, a wonderfully

open feeling when we stop filtering each experience. There's newness in each moment when we function apart from our habits and expectations.

But there's a potential problem here: we can make this orientation into an idea of practice. This may become a new, improved carved dragon, one that we think is better than Seiko's. We may want to trade in our old dragon for this upgraded model. And then we become like a blind person once again. But that's exactly when we may notice our mind wrapping around some concept of what's valuable or right, forming itself into a new, contracted and fixed position. Habits are very powerful, but our awareness can even be more powerful.

So, when we notice where we are and step back into the middle of our life, into the aliveness of this wide world that's constantly appearing and disappearing before us, each moment is unique. The room that we walked into is not the same room we will walk out of. We experience our life with freshness that feels much more like the way things really are than our ideas, than any fixed identity.

This is quite ordinary and simple, just like walking. With each step, I take care of my right hip, leg, and foot not worrying about the left. Then the next moment, taking care of my left hip, leg, and foot not worrying about the right. Each step, each breath, each moment appearing as it is, beginning practice anew.

As our ancestor Hongzhi might say:

*Letting go the edge of the cliff,
In wholeness, taking one step.
Reed flowers and bright moonlight are mixed.
Oars pulled in, the boat drifts past without difficulty.*