

My Zazen Sankyū

(san = to participate humbly; kyu = to inquire or explore)

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Notebook (6)

Fragmentary Thought XVI: <Sealing Up Human Foolishness>

“Since zazen is the posture in which a human being does nothing for the sake of the human being, the human being is freed from being a human being and becomes a Buddha.”

From “Songs of Life - Paeans to Zazen” by Daiji Kobayashi)

“It is good to take a little break. Buddha is a human being who is just taking a break from being one. Make no mistake, Buddha is not a human being grown up great and admirable!”

Kodo Sawaki, Roshi)

In these two quotations Mr. Kobayashi and Sawaki Roshi use the word “*ningen*”, a word that is usually translated into English as “human being.” The familiarity of the English phrase may obscure what they mean by it. They are contrasting “Buddha” with “*ningen*(human being).” If so, it is more appropriate to use the Buddhist technical term “*bonpu*(ordinary human being)” or “*shujo*(living being),” which have much more clear definition. A *bonpu* is a non-Buddha, a person who is not yet enlightened and who therefore is caught up in all sorts of ignorance, foolishness and suffering. As a reminder of this meaning I will use the word “*bonpu*” in this article.

In the Shobogenzo Zuimonki Dogen says that “Zazen is Buddha's practice.” When we actually carry out the Buddha’s practice instead of keeping it as an idea, we should never fail to understand that zazen practice is in a sense negation, or giving up our *bonpu*-ness as Mr. Kobayashi and Sawaki Roshi said, “doing nothing for the sake of *bonpu*” or “taking a little break from being a *bonpu*.” If we fail to take this point seriously we ruin our selves by pandering to our own *bonpu*-ness, we get slack, adjust zazen to fit our *bonpu*-ness and ruin zazen itself.

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By folding our legs into a full or half lotus position our ability to use our legs for standing or walking is temporarily suspended. Under these circumstances it is impossible for us to chase after the things or states of mind which we want, or to run away from the things and mental states that we don’t want.

In Fukun Zazengi (“Universally Recommended Method of Zazen”) Dogen Zenji advises us on how to properly place the hands in the cosmic mudra: “Put your right hand palm up on your left foot, and your left hand palm up on your right palm. The tips of your thumbs should be lightly touching.”

In doing this the capabilities of the hands, like those of the legs in lotus position, are temporarily suspended.

Human hands were freed from bearing the weight of the body when human beings acquired the ability to walk upright on two legs. Now, using the cosmic mudra, we free our hands from their inclination to seize, to manipulate, to hold, and so on.

Dogen Zenji explained how to close our mouths: “Place your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Close your lips and jaw.”

When we follow these instructions we temporarily relinquish our ability to speak -- yet another ability of great importance to a social animal like us. Without the use of speech we are deprived of the ability of communicating with others, of negotiating with them, of persuading them.

Further, Dogen Zenji says: “Do not think of either good or evil. Do not be concerned with right or wrong. Put aside the operation of your intellect, volition and consciousness. Stop considering things with your memory, imagination, or reflection.”

Following this advice we are free, for the time being, to set aside our highly developed intellectual faculties. We simply let go of our ability to conceptualize. In zazen we do not intentionally think about anything. This does not mean that we ought to fall asleep. On the contrary, our consciousness should always be clear and awake.

While we sit in zazen posture all of our human abilities, acquired through eons of evolution, are temporarily renounced, and suspended. Since these capacities -- moving, speaking, grasping, thinking -- are the ones which human beings value the most, and are most proud of, we might accurately say that “entering zazen is going out of the business of being a human being” or that in zazen “no human being business gets done.”

What is the significance of giving up all these hard-won human abilities while we sit in zazen? I believe it is that we have the opportunity to “seal up our bonpu-ness.” In other words, when sitting in zazen we unconditionally surrender our human ignorance.

In effect we are saying “I will not use these human capacities for my

confused, self-centered purposes. By adopting zazen posture, my hands, legs, lips and mind are all sealed. They are just as they are. I can create no karma with any of them.” That is what “sealing up of bonpu-ness” in zazen means.

When we use our sophisticated human capacities in our everyday lives we always use them for our deluded, self-centered purposes, our “*bonpu*” interests. All our actions are based on our desires, that is our likes and dislikes.

The reason we decide to go here or there, why we manipulate various objects, why we talk about various subjects, have this or that idea or opinion, is determined only by our inclination to satisfy our own selfish interests. This is how we are. It is a habit deeply ingrained in every *bonpu* human being. If we do nothing about this habit we will continue to use all our wonderful human powers ignorantly and selfishly, and bury ourselves deeper and deeper in delusion.

If on the other hand we correctly practice zazen our human abilities will never be used for *bonpu* interests. In this way this tendency will be halted, at least for a time. This is what I call “sealing up *bonpu*-ness.”

Our *bonpu*-ness still exists, but it is completely sealed up. Dogen Zenji described zazen in the “Bendowa (On Following the Way)” as a condition in which we are able “to display the Buddha seal at our three karma gates - body, speech and mind - and sit upright in this samadhi.”

What he means is that there should be absolutely no sign of *bonpu* activity anywhere in the body, speech or mind, that all that is there is the mark of the Buddha. The body does not move in Zazen posture. The mouth is closed and does not speak. The mind does not seek to become Buddha, but instead stops the mental activities of thinking, willing, and consciousness.”

By removing all signs of *bonpu* from our legs, hands, mouth and mind, which ordinarily act only on behalf of our deluded human interests - by putting the Buddha seal on them - -we place them in the service of our Buddha nature. In other words, when our *bonpu* body-mind acts as a Buddha it is transformed into the body-mind of a Buddha.

This recalls Keizan Zenji’s injunction in his “Zazen Yojinki(Things to Watch Regarding Zane)”: “Sokuhyo shobutsu tai” - Immediately manifest the Buddha’s body.

With our *bonpu*-ness completely obstructed by Zazen posture, pursuing our deluded human interests becomes impossible. We might say “I, a deluded human being, am crucified in Zazen, and so can no longer manifest my deluded nature.”

Understood this way, my deluded human nature does continue to exist, even while I am sitting in Zazen. However it is totally annihilated at the same time.

We should remember that when we seal up our deluded human nature we break open the seal of our Buddha nature. When we take Zazen posture the signs of Buddhahood appear everywhere. Then only Buddha is active. The sealing up of our deluded nature in Zazen, and the liberation of our Buddha nature, take place at the same place and the same time.

This is a matter of perspective. From the deluded human point of view, when our legs folded in lotus position what we notice most is that we are unable to stand and walk. From the deluded human point of view, in this case, our legs just seem useless.

However, at the same time, from the point of view of “zaso mihotoke” - “Zazen posture is the Buddha” - (cf. fragmentary thought XV), our legs in zazen posture immediately become an essential part of a Buddha’s body. This same sort of comparison can be made for the hands, mouth, mind and so on.

We should be very careful about the fact that when we talk about “sealing up our deluded human nature” this “deluded human nature” we are talking about is not something which exists as a fixed entity, as either a subject or an object, from its own side. It is simply our perceived condition.

We cannot just deny it and get rid of it. The fact of the matter is that when we sit zazen as just zazen, without intentionally intending to deny anything, our deluded human nature gets sealed up by the emergence of our Buddha nature at all three gates of karma, i.e. at the level of our body, speech and mind. As a result, our deluded human nature is automatically renounced.

All the foregoing explanations -- of renunciation, of sealing up, of deluded human nature -- are just words. These explanations are based on a particular, limited point of view, looking at zazen from outside.

Certainly it is true that zazen offers us the opportunities I have been describing. However, when we practice zazen, we should be sure not to concern ourselves with “deluded human nature”, “renunciation”, and those kinds of ideas. All that is important for us is to practice zazen, here and now, as pure, uncontaminated zazen.

Notebook (7)

Fragmentary Thought XVII <Just Sitting>

In the previous Fragmentary Thought I wrote about “Sealing up human foolishness (*bonpu*-ness)” and “breaking open the seal of Buddha nature”. I surely think that this is what is happening during zazen. We might describe this as the “benefit (*kudoku*)” of zazen. However, it does not mean that in order to get the benefit of zazen, we have to set up the goal of attaining it and practice zazen aiming at it. As a matter of fact there is no such necessity at all. To the degree that zazen becomes zazen, it naturally provides this benefit. So we do not have to worry about it at all. The harder we work to attain it, the more we are driven by the desire for it, the farther we are from it. This is really an irony. We are strongly advised not to insert any kinds of “anticipation”, “aim” or “intention” into the practice of zazen. If you bring any goal, however noble it may be, into zazen, this calculating frame of mind will, in a sense, split into two facts: one doing zazen and one who's attending to the goal. This kind of zazen has a crack inside, which prevents the practitioner from hitting the mark of zazen. Dogen's Manual of Zazen said, “Do not try to become Buddha.” Therefore, when practicing zazen, we need to let go of all of unnecessary considerations like “I should try to become like this or that in the future.” We should only do our best to just sit zazen.

In addition to this, the person who is sitting zazen should avoid the temptation to sneak a look at the result or effect of his or her zazen. The moment he/she yields to this temptation to peak, he/she slides away from zazen. This is similar to the fact that you can not watch yourself sleeping deeply. If you try to, you wake up and the sleep is gone. (... all this does not mix into the perception of the person sitting, because it takes place within stillness without any fabrication and they themselves are enlightenment. ...What is associated with perceptions cannot be the standard of enlightenment ...Bendowa) In zazen there is no place for judgement from an outside point of view. There is no viewpoint from which to say “My zazen is getting better” or “I'm doing a good job.” What we can do is to just sit zazen, adjusting our sight toward zazen, without looking away from it.

The point is to sit zazen, not to do it aiming at certain “benefits or results.” If zazen is thoroughly zazen, that is all. Zazen is so completed in itself that it does not need anything else. Therefore when we practice zazen properly, we do not need to have any “sales pitches” or “statements of virtues.” As Yokoyama Roshi said (Fragmentary Thought XV), it is enough to instruct, “Cross your legs like this, put your hands together, straighten your back and tuck in your chin, etc. . . .”

But a strange thing happens here. When you just sit zazen without doing anything to do with “benefits/results,” the unlimited and immeasurable “benefits/results” are naturally given to you beyond your expectation. Therefore if we say that zazen has some benefits and results, they are not what we attain as the results for which we seek with our will and intention but what is given to us unexpectedly. That is why we can not take credit for them as if they were the

results of our own efforts.

Let us assume that we hear or see the sentence, “If you practice zazen, you will get X results.” Examples of X might be “enlightenment,” “peaceful mind,” “freedom,” “calmness,” “compassion and love,” etc.. Hearing this kind of formulation people who think that they lack X within themselves will imagine that X must resemble their mental image of X and so they start practicing zazen very hard in order to get closer to their ideal. There may be a lot of people like this. However, as I have argued so far, this type of zazen practice is misdirected. It can not be called zazen. And this X, what is guaranteed as the benefits/results of zazen, will never ever be attained.

Let me explain this by using one example. Here is a man who feels he is always irritated and short-tempered. He is suffering from this trait and wishing, by all means, to become a person whose mind is always calm and peace. One day he hears from someone that he can attain calmness by zazen. He thinks, “This is a good news. I might be able to change myself by this method.” He, then, immediately starts practicing zazen. He tries to find out what he imagines is the peaceful mind in his zazen. And by accumulating the benefits of zazen little by little, he also expects to increase the degree of imagined calmness in his mind.

Do you think that he will succeed in becoming a calm and peaceful man? I do not think if he keeps practicing zazen this way. The peaceful mind which he pictured to his mind as an ideal is nothing but a kind of photographic negative or projection of the very same irritated mind which disturbs him. He does not really understand what the peaceful mind is like. Therefore, each and every effort he makes to attain peace contains subtle irritation, which sneaks into his practice. The fact that he can not accept his irritated mind as it is, is by itself the manifestation of his deep-seated irritation. Even if he feels that he is becoming calmer a little bit, it only implies that his irritation is becoming subtler and better at disguising itself. Then his irritation will simply become deeper and deeper part of him.

If this is the case, how do we avoid this pitfall in our practice? First, we should temporarily stop looking at ourselves through words, concepts and judgements such as, “I am always irritated and short-tempered. It is not good.” And then we should set aside the impulse to change ourselves as we wish. In fact, to sit proper zazen is not to try to calm down his irritated mind and forcefully create the peaceful mind but to put oneself in the state of completely setting aside all over personal agendas. When this is accomplished, we can directly see the reality of ourselves; the reality of our irritation in our body, speech and mind. This is not the fabricated self grasped by thoughts but the real and true self.

It is possible for us to “see deeply the reality of irritation as it is” only

when zazen is being practiced as zazen. This seeing enables the irritation to transform itself into true peace. There is no peace outside the irritation. They are not separate.

I used the case of irritation as an example of how the transformation is brought about by seeing it as it is. Roughly speaking, I think the deep transformation as the result of zazen happens in the same way.