

Wind Bell

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“Round Cooking”

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Almost exactly half of my life has been lived in Zen temples and monasteries. In the morning, I rise before dawn and shuffle sleepily to the zendo. Though painful difficulties often arise, friends and teachers are extremely kind and helpful to me. I cannot find words to fully express my gratitude and sense of good fortune, for such a life. Trying to live a life of awakening is a joy beyond joy. Now it's autumn; and I am approaching fifty. All around me, and inside of me, there is dying and sadness. I deeply question what real compassion is. How may I live the rest of my life to repay the love and kindness I have been given, and fulfill my responsibility for the welfare of all suffering beings. How can something helpful come from these mixed feelings?

Up until now, I have practiced by sitting still in the midst of all living beings, that is, by walking straight ahead in Buddha's way. Yet I sense that something is missing, and at times I hear the echo of a voice saying “reach out”. In the last few years I feel a change in my practice. I wonder, is reaching out something different from the way I am already living, or is it just doing what I am already doing more thoroughly and carefully?

Perhaps reaching out will naturally develop from wholehearted devotion to the small tasks that appear before me every day. Perhaps caring for the near will somehow accomplish the far-reaching work of compassion. Yet, I can't help feeling uneasy with this devotion to the small and near, unless I hold the universal compassion in my heart and mind. In fact, I cannot even really take care of the small things in my life without the support of others. Or, turning it around, only by devotion to the well-being of others am I able to accomplish the smallest things.

The authentic practice of sitting still in the depths of silence and understanding correctly Buddha's teaching, is not accomplished by oneself. The true significance of Buddha's radical instruction “just sit” cannot be realized except in the context of the vow to save all living beings. We cannot know what even the simplest words mean “except when we love and aspire.”

In the midst of such thoughts and feelings I find comfort and encouragement in the stories of our ancestral founders. Please consider this one: the monk Daokai went to study with master Touzu Yiching. He asked, “The sayings of the Buddhas and Founders are like everyday affairs -- is there anything else to help people?” Touzu said, “You tell me, do the emperor's commands in his own realm depend on the ancient kings?” As Daokai was about to speak, Touzu hit him with his whisk and said, “The moment you intended to come here, you already deserved a beating.” At this, Daokai was awakened.

It warms my heart to find my question reflected in Daokai's question: did the Buddha's and Founders teach anything other than this present everyday activity? Does repaying kindness and benefiting beings depend on anything outside of meticulous attention to moment - to - moment experience? Does our

everyday practice of compassion depend on the authority of the ancient buddhas? The response to and the settlement of this question is contained in the rest of the story.

Within this settlement there are two approaches to settling our body-mind into the Buddha way. The first is going to a teacher and listening to the teaching; the second is total devotion to just sitting. Listening to the teaching opens our heart-mind and allows it to work freely. Just sitting is the everyday affair of the buddhas and the living realization of the zen founders. Neither approach can be neglected.

The story indicates that first we go in faith to receive help from an 'other.' And then in accepting this help, we realize it in ourselves without depending on the other. First the truth turns us, then we turn the truth.

Recently, I went to an art show, a presentation of life-size dolls. The woman who made them also teaches doll-making. She said that doll-making is a way for people to manifest their deepest affirmation - clarifying the body-mind and awakening to reality. In the Buddhadharmā true reality is free of form and formlessness, but it must be brought into form in order to be healing.

The doll-maker also explained that these dolls are always created within a circle of friends. What is a circle? A circle is a two dimensional image. In three dimensions we might call it a cauldron, a crucible or a womb - containers for the process in which the highest aspiration of our life comes into form.

So the circle is a relationship - a relationship of mutual commitment and support. It can be created by just two people. A student working with a teacher and listening to the Dharma forms a container in which we realize the total devotion to just sitting. Knowing that the process cannot be realized by oneself, each person in the circle seeks and gives help, thus strengthening the cauldron and allowing the contents to be cooked to perfection. Teachers and friends need us to realize our truest and most perfect potential and won't be happy until we accomplish this.

Practicing in the cauldron with friends and teachers may protect us from clinging to limited ideas of what sitting and awakening is. For example, in the process of realizing the way through our sitting, we are likely to develop some narrow attitude about what awakening is. We may think we have it or we don't have it.

Entering the meditation hall and sitting in the midst of friends and teachers may actually be seen as a request for guidance and feedback. We sit down and thus ask for feedback from everyone. "This is my practice; this is my offering to all beings. This is my attempt to manifest in form my highest aspiration. What do you think folks?" Feedback may be received while a teacher walks around the meditation hall adjusting posture. Sometimes people call this "correcting posture."

I don't feel comfortable using the word "correcting" in this context. It's not that our posture is corrected but more like it is opened up and we are shown some other possibilities. Sometimes we may feel that we are sitting quite straight and upright and after being adjusted we may feel crooked. It's not that we were right or wrong but rather we now have new information about what we are. Someone has touched us and

through this touch has said, “I love you and I really want you to be completely happy. And by the way, please try this posture, how does this feel?” And if this happens, and we still don’t feel that we are receiving feedback and guidance, we need to say out loud to our teacher, “How is my practice, what is the truth?” By asking we create the cauldron and stir the soup.

Each of you, but not you separately, rather you with all beings, you in the cauldron, you cooking and you being cooked, are realizing awakening. Not you by yourself because that is not who you really are. You by yourself is not buddha nature; your total being in the cauldron of all beings is realizing the way. This is the total exertion of your life.

Neither can you really be flexible and free of fixed views by yourself. To decide for yourself, what is flexibility, is a kind of rigidity. Living in harmony with all beings is flexibility. It is a kind of cosmic democracy. Each of us has a role in the situation and gets one vote. You cast your vote by basically being here like a great unmoving mountain. Please cast your vote completely; that is your job. Then listen to all living beings, especially foreigners, strangers, and enemies.

Hang out with people who are capable of making a commitment to you and your life, and who require that you make a commitment to theirs. Hang out with people who care about you, with people who need you to develop, and say so. Make such a commitment and don’t break that bond until you and all beings are perfect.

You cannot make the buddha-body without a cauldron, and you can’t make a cauldron by yourself. You can’t practice all by yourself; that is just delusion. Everything coming forward and confirming you is awakening. Then you are really cooking.