

THREE "PILLOWS" OF ZEN

WHAT IS THE PRIMARY MATTER of our practice? It always comes back to oneself, to one's own life. We say clarify yourself. Clarify the matter of your life and death. How do we do that? Dogen Zenji says, "Forget the self." Are you forgetting yourself or are you reinforcing yourself? This is very important.

What is the state of forgetting oneself? There is a book called *The Three Pillars of Zen*.^{*} As the title indicates, there are certain foundations in Zen. When I first heard this title, I thought it was *Three Pillows of Zen*. It seems to me that *pillars* or *pillows* does not make much difference. In order to sleep comfortably, you need these three pillows. Otherwise, you will have nightmares.

The first pillow is samadhi. One common meaning of samadhi is concentration. In order to forget oneself, concentrate on one single thing. We have the simple analogy that the mind is like water in a bucket. When we move the bucket around, the water moves, too. Let the bucket sit, and the water eventually calms down. If the water is muddy, it gets cloudy when we stir it up. But leave it for a while, and the mud sinks down to the bottom and the water becomes transparent.

Sitting is sometimes compared to this, but there is one big difference between settling the body down in zazen and the muddy water settling down in the bucket. The crucial difference is our conscious mind, which functions autonomously. It moves by itself, stirring up the water and mud. So how to keep the mind transparent? By concentration. When you sit, if you let that autonomous mind go on, it goes on and on and on. It never stops. The conscious mind is comfortable that way because there is constant change, constant distraction. It is almost like watching television. Imagine that your mind is a blank television tube with all kinds of thoughts arising all the time. It can be very entertaining.

We have various schemes, such as counting the breath, to reduce the

^{*} Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (New York: Anchor, 1989).

numerous thoughts that bubble up. Counting the breath is one of the beginning practices for students as a way of strengthening their concentration. The practice is to count to ten. You can count your inhalation separately and your exhalation separately, or you can count both as one. The activities of your mind are reduced to ten, or maybe twenty. It is a very effective way to calm yourself down. When you do this, you raise your power of concentration.

Raising samadhi power is always gradual; no one can do it overnight. I think this is true for any kind of practice. You do the same thing over and over, just practicing the most basic thing. When I was a kid, I practiced Japanese archery. You draw the bow over and over in order to master the form. You need to learn how to pull, how much to pull, how to face the target, how to open the legs, where to hit; you need to master not only the position of the hands but also the position of the feet. So when you really become an expert, the arrow hits the target even if you close your eyes. Of course, my arrows hit emptiness!

In art, in sports, in music, in anything, we practice basic things over and over. When we do this kind of practice we become stronger, both mentally and physically. Even with all this practicing, I am still a rough man. When I was young I was crazy. My nickname was Gangster. I did not think I was a terrible boy, but people told me I was. If I had not practiced zazen I might have ended up a gangster. I feel I was saved by zazen. So focus, concentrate!

Another implication of samadhi is evenness. If our mind is even, if our mind is open, then we can accept everything that happens in the same way. We are not attached to one thing over another. If our mind is not even or open, then what we perceive will appear deformed to us. So how do we make our mind even?

A third implication of samadhi is to properly perceive externals. How can you properly perceive externals? By emptying yourself, by forgetting yourself, by forgetting your thoughts and concepts about those things you perceive as externals. In other words, have the proper relationship with externals. We often talk about everything as it is. Are we really perceiving everything as it is? If so, fine. But unfortunately, it is often not so. Even seeing the same thing, fifty of us perceive it differently.

How can we perceive properly? By making ourselves empty; by not being attached to our concepts of the things we perceive. This is the first pillow. Make yourself comfortable with this pillow.

The second pillow is to forget oneself. How does forgetting oneself happen? By raising samadhi. There are many different states of samadhi, many different levels of concentration. But one such experience or state is not a big thing. Dogen Zenji says it is like sticking your head into a gateway. Why is it so special to become aware of one's own life? Isn't it rather extraordinary that we do not realize who we are?

This life is ungraspable. Why is it ungraspable? Because life is limitless. We can understand this intellectually up to a point. But how can we fully experience this unlimited, boundless life? Simply forget the self. *Be* this life! Without exception, we are all this limitless, ungraspable, nonthinking life. This is the second pillow.

When you do zazen, simply identify yourself as zazen. How do you identify yourself with Yourself? In a sense, you are already doing this whether or not you realize this. Still, you sense a gap between your apparent self, which suffers and struggles, and your true self. Your apparent self and your true self are not separate. This is difficult to take in, isn't it? We cannot grasp this very state of existence through intellectual means. The true self rejects such human devices.

When you really grasp this fact, joy is just joy. Pain is just pain. But in the midst of joy and pain, there is no joy and there is no pain. In the midst of thinking, there is no thinking. In the midst of the self, there is no self. This is the fundamental wisdom of zazen.

The third pillow is actualization. When you forget the self, you are liberated and confirmed by all things. This is the realization of the oneness of life. You then must extend this realization into your daily life and make your life the realized life.

So mere sitting is not enough. You must reveal this wisdom in the way you live. How can we live this realization? Just living in a realized way is still not enough. We must share it together, with each other. How can we share it best with everybody, so that all of us can live the enlightened life? That is the third pillow.

These three pillows are the basics of our practice. When we carefully

examine what different masters say, it may sound like they are talking about different things, but actually they are not, they are simply emphasizing different aspects of this process.

In some ways koan study can be seen as running parallel to these three pillows. Generally, we do not begin koan study unless we have mastered some level of concentration. Hakuin Zenji talks about nine different stages of koan practice, but these stages can be reduced to three. The first is to realize who you are, what your life is. This stage corresponds to samadhi, to an open, even mind that perceives externals properly. The famous koan Mu is one important koan in this group.* The next stage is to function freely. You cannot be static. Do whatever you are supposed to do freely. This corresponds to the second pillow, forgetting oneself. We act freely when we are not attached to this or that. The third stage is to further accomplish the Way, trim off all unnecessary parts of oneself. This corresponds to the third pillow, actualization. When we actualize our realization of the wholeness of life, then our daily life itself is nirvana; in fact, then words like *realization* or *actualization* are no longer necessary, for they are schemes and devices that we no longer need.

Of course, we can't just jump into this actualization. This is why our practice advances little by little, though in a sense, there is no little by little. And yet, even though we are the Way, we don't know it. Even though our life is already realized, we don't see it as such. How is our life in realization? Just as we are. Just as you are. Just as everything is. How can we appreciate our life in this way? This is a very basic issue of our practice.

* Maezumi Roshi is referring to the following koan: A monk asked Joshu, "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" Joshu replied, "*Mu* [nonbeing, negation]!"—Eds.