

What Is Koan?

from Appreciate Your Life by Taizan Maezumi Roshi

WHAT IS THE POINT OF OUR PRACTICE? We are not just sitting on a cushion. Someone said to me this morning, "Roshi, one person sitting could not bear the pain and he left. I feel sorry about that." I feel sorry for this person, too. Definitely our practice cannot be just bearing pain and being discouraged. Dogen Zenji said zazen has to be comfortable. He says, "Zazen is the dharma gate of bliss and joy." Zazen should not be torture. Please try to sit comfortably. It is okay to use a chair or a bench. It is a shame, almost a crime, to let people get so discouraged that they feel they must give up.

So this leads us back to the point: What is practice? What is zazen for?

We are so goal oriented. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having a goal. But if there is any goal in practice, what is it? I am sure you have set up some kind of goal for yourself. Is it clear why you are practicing and what you are doing? We each know to some degree or other that our discriminating or discursive mind gives us problems. There is nothing wrong with this mind in and of itself. Without discrimination, life would be chaos. And yet because of this discriminating mind, we create problems for ourselves and others. How we solve this problem is the koan.

We use expressions such as koan practice or working on koans. What does this mean? When we embody a koan that we're working on, then that koan is in realization. Otherwise, even though we talk about koan practice, it does not mean much. So we have to clarify this very fundamental point in order to make our practice truly meaningful and worthwhile.

There is a famous koan of the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng, who established the Southern Ch'an School in seventh-century China, and his disciple Nangaku Ejo. Hui-neng asked Ejo, "What comes thus?" Since this was a conversation, the Sixth Patriarch may have used the word thus very colloquially. It is a very common expression, like "Where do you come from?" or "What comes like this?" Perhaps Hui-neng simply asked Ejo, "Who are you?" Ejo answered, "When anything is said about it, you miss the mark." In other words, even when one word of expression is attached to it, then it is not it. What does this mean?

In order to answer, Ejo had spent eight years penetrating the Sixth Patriarch's question. What was he doing during these eight years? He was trying to come up with something, and each time he tried, he failed. What made him fail? Somehow trying itself made him fail. It did not matter how fine a definition he gave to Who am I?. Finally Ejo gave up. When he gave up, he realized the answer. Or it could have happened vice versa, he may have seen that all this effort to find out Who am I? was unnecessary, and then he realized it! That is the realization of koan; this is seeing our original face as the unity of absolute and relative. This koan has always been realizing itself since the beginningless beginning. It is fact!

What does "comes thus" mean? Be thus! As this! What else is there to say about it? Are you seeing this very being itself and then objectifying it? You have got to be one with it! That is what Dogen Zenji means when he says that practice and realization are one. If we set up any goal as such, then there is a split. There is something extra which hinders us from seeing what our life actually is.

This reminds me of Tenkei Denson Zenji's phrase on Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. The Heart Sutra begins thus: "Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva doing deep prajna paramita." Tenkei

Zenji says that Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is your name. Isn't it wonderful? I really love Tenkei Zenji's expression; it is a very, very simple and clear-cut statement. And when you really take Avalokiteshvara as your name, when there is no separation between yourself and Avalokiteshvara, right there the koan is in realization. Avalokiteshvara is doing deep prajna paramita. That deep prajna paramita is also Nangaku Ejo's answer. "When anything is said about it, it is off." When there is even a tiny, tiny bit of discrepancy between who I am and who I am, between Avalokiteshvara and myself, it is off.

You *are* Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. That is the koan. How to practice that koan? How to make that realization your practice? When you do this, your life is marvelous. Marvelous in the sense that Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva realizes the state of no-fear and gives no-fear to everybody.

I believe that giving no-fear is the very best thing we can do. Giving no-fear is true compassion. Being compassionate, what do we give? What do we take away? We take away pain, suffering. Do you want to take it away? Then give no-fear. All of us are Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. How do we take it as our practice, as our life, to manifest no-fear? When we do, we are truly practicing koan.