

An Ordinary Grounded Life

WE COME TO PRACTICE because we don't have a sense of a deep and trustworthy place inside from which to live our lives. The slightest thing can make us wobble. So we think that wobbling is how to live. This practice can help us discover a dependable source that's always with us—our imperturbable mind.

Zen practice is about living ordinary life with our feet on the ground. This altar in the zendo represents the groundedness of this room and also of our lives. You can say the altar represents zero or emptiness, the inclusion of all possibilities and all opposites. And the Buddha we are bowing to is our own awakened nature, which includes all possibilities and all contradictions. For some people the altar is a nuisance. For others, it stops the mind: "Am I awake?" The altar is an opportunity to remember why we are here.

When I said the altar represents zero, that means emptiness. What we mean by emptiness is that this altar, this wood, is free of anything you are imagining it to be. It was originally a tree, and now it is this particular shape. Both states are expressions

of its impermanent nature. All of these altar objects are free of whether you like them or not. We can make the altar a big problem or something reassuring: "Oh, I'm at home; there's an altar. I know how to orient myself in this room." It can function any way you need it to. Emptiness also means complete. Because our true nature is not the particular form we take in each moment, we say our true nature is formless. We are both a particular form, and we are free from that form. Therefore, we exist as all possibilities, as the entire universe.

When you sound the bell or hear the bell, does your aliveness give life to the bell? Bowing can bring your life forth. Anything, including zendo forms, can bring forth our full energy, our deeper life.

Do you know you are a universe? What you think of as your self is a universe of experience continuously arising, flowing. But by force of habit, this energy tends to be expressed in limited, patterned ways. One practitioner said recently, "I never thought of myself as an uptight person, but watching myself, I see I am pretty rigid. And I keep seeing that again and again." If we stay in a training situation long enough, we can see clearly how we obstruct ourselves by our attitudes; we can begin to soften, go beyond our patterns. That's the virtue of community, the virtue of practice.

In China, meditation was no longer the exclusive province of renunciate monks; practice was seen as doable by anyone, at work or at home.

In *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community*, Dogen tells the head cook at the monastery, "While examining the rice, watch for sand. While examining the sand, watch for rice." This is both a literal instruction and is also about separating deluded

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ideas from your wisdom mind. Don't look at things with common eyes but with the eye of wisdom. Work without prejudice using whatever ingredients are at hand.

It takes time to feel that the vegetables you are handling and the water and the rice are your own body and breath. But in time it happens. I was cutting tomatoes the other night and thinking, *This tomato is my body . . . Or is this tomato my mind? And how do I cut my mind?* These questions change the activity.

When Western monks spend time in Japanese monasteries, they often ask many questions: "What does this form mean? Why do we do this?" A Japanese teacher replied, "Understanding is not so important. Understanding is easy. The main point is to continue." This means to get up every day and take care of your life. Several of us come every morning at 5:45 a.m. to sit, and some come at 6:10 p.m. Sitting together helps us continue.