

Noticing Our Story Line

In *Moon in a Dewdrop*, Dogen Zenji describes the activities of consciousness as something like “bits and pieces of ordinary mind.” He says each moment exists absolutely, independent of its before and after. This means our life is unlimited in the direction it may take at any moment. However, when we tell our story about our life, the independent moments fall into a story line that dominates the energy of our life.

When Dogen says “bits and pieces,” he is calling our attention to momentary existence. If we are not open to the present moment, we are living in memory or expectation, in past or future mind. “My story” takes over. When we meet our experience in the present, categories like hope or fear no longer apply. Our life unfolds free of language and of the linear habits of the discursive mind. When we actualize desire, it is not desire anymore; it is simply the energy of this moment. When we actualize fear, it is not fear anymore; it is simply the energy of this moment.

It seems a great shock is needed to stop our wandering

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mind, such as a serious illness, loss of a relationship, loss of reputation. When the discursive mind is abruptly challenged by events, a great space opens up. There is room now to see things freshly, to allow new possibilities, to allow all possibilities.

Do we need to wait for a great shock to dismantle our old assumptions? Can we try out new possibilities before we are faced with death, divorce, loss of important relationships? If we want to enough, we can do it.

It's a little like coming to sesshin with all of the clutter of our minds, and coming into the fresh mountain air here. It's wonderful to be in an environment where our skin is alive to the energy of this mountain wind. We feel our body directly, experience every moment directly. When we get up at four thirty and use the toilet, wash, brush our teeth, get dressed, come to the zendo. The air is sharp and cold; we know we are alive. We are here. Sesshin challenges our story line. We get a glimpse of experience free of the mind's authority. This happens simply through following the schedule. The patterning mind comes into view.

Before arriving, as I was preparing for sesshin, I thought, *It's too hard*. Giving so many talks is too hard. There's a point where we say it's too hard; it shouldn't be this hard, whatever it is.

At the beginning of my Zen practice I was surprised to see how completely Suzuki Roshi worked at things, how much care he took with the details. He took care of details I didn't even notice. He put vastly more energy into things than I ever would have. He did not cut corners. He did not decide he didn't have time.

Notice when you tell yourself, "I can't stretch that far." Watch when you come up against your comfort zone. Notice

when something is "too hard": too hard to sit here, too hard to attend the breath and mind.

I was most afraid of those times when I was simply too tired to care. In those early days we had Japanese teachers who would talk in Japanese for an hour. And then the translation would take another hour. We would sit through two hours. We were told not to put our knees up as that would not be respectful, so we sat through two hours with knees down. This went on for many weeks; we were continuously making effort to stay with the situation, with the tiredness (and often resentment in the mind). The practice pushed us through our limitations.

We can only do this practice if we are doing it for ourselves, not to please someone else like our teacher or to compete with someone else or to gain some special state of mind. Those motivations do not sustain us in the end, when we are really exhausted, when we don't care anymore. The only way we can continue this practice is if we want to sit, maybe for no reason, and if we are interested in awakening to the deceptions and delusions of our ordinary mind, not because that is an enlightened thing to do, but because it is helpful for our lives: we get in trouble less; our relationships are more harmonious.

We may find we begin to feel in harmony with things around us and gratitude for everything that sustains our life. We begin to feel more secure in our life, less susceptible to inflation and deflation.

From the strictly Zen point of view, we are not even practicing the four noble truths*; we're just watching the energies of our mind and body come and go: the breeze, a cough, snapping in the fireplace, an impulse, whatever comes up. There's no grid of ideas placed over our life, such as "I am practicing

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Buddhism." This very life just as it unfolds is our actual life. We are just being with it; we are not messing with it. We let go of our ideas about it.

As Dogen expresses in "Uji" ("Being-Time"), "Our existence is not separate from our time . . . Each moment is the fullness of our being, the fullness of our time." Even those moments when we're distracted, disinterested, in wandering mind, even those moments are 100 percent of our actual life. At those times, we can see our life as moments of being half awake. And all those moments, even the so-called half-awake times, are completely our full existence.