

## A Short Reminder on the Nature of Practice

There is an old Zen koan story about the Ancient Chinese Zen Master Mazu as a young monk and his teacher Nanyue. Mazu was sitting in meditation outside his hermitage in the mountains when along comes the Zen master Nanyue.

Nanyue asks the young monk, "What are you doing?"

"I am sitting to become a Buddha."

Upon hearing this Nanyue picks up a tile and starts rubbing a rock against it.

"What are you doing?" asks Mazu.

"I am polishing this tile to make it into a mirror."

"How can you turn a tile into a mirror through polishing?"

"How can you become a Buddha through sitting?" responds Nanyue.

"Then What should I do?"

"It's like riding an ox cart. Do you whip the cart or do you whip the ox?"

Mazu was a little dumb founded by this reply so Nanyue went on. "Are you practicing to be a seated Buddha? Meditation is not limited to sitting or lying down, and Buddha has no fixed form. In practice you should neither grasp or reject. If you cling to the sitting form you will never realize the essential principle."

This is a wonderful little story. It tells you a lot about the essence of Zen practice. Even so it is often misinterpreted. Nanyue noticed something about the way Mazu was sitting. Maybe he was a little stiff or maybe it was the way he answered the first question but Mazu seemed to be attached to the form of sitting without really knowing how to practice within his individual mind. Because Zen seems to put a great deal of stress on sitting form many Zen students fall into this trap and the effort they put into meditation is to sit with perfect form for the many hours that a good student of Zen must practice but not to properly discipline their own minds.

Zen practice takes effort and discipline. The ox in this story represents our mind and we discipline it with the metaphorical whip of proper practice. Think of what type of animal an ox is. When wild it can be a dangerous bull, going where ever it wants, doing whatever it pleases and dangerously asserting itself if anything or anyone gets in its way. Our undisciplined minds are not very different. But a domesticated ox is very different. It is friendly, does what it is asked, works for the common good and helps give life to individuals and society through its efforts. The individual trained through proper practice is also like this.

What is the nature of this practice? There are two clues given in this story. The first clue is the metaphor of the mirror. This metaphor has a long history in Zen and may even go back to India. The mirror also represents our mind. When practice matures and our mind quiets it becomes like a clear mirror without distortion reflecting the world around. To experience the world just as it is Zen samadhi. Yet for most of us our mind is usually clouded by thoughts and emotions and our experience of things is vastly obscured and distorted. We may think we clearly see what is going on but actually we don't and if we could truly clean our mirror of the mind we can understand this. Practice is often likened to the polishing of a mirror for this very reason.

There is another story in Zen about two poems presented to the fifth patriarch of Chinese Zen Hung Jen.. The first poem is by Shen-hsui who was the head monk in Hung-jen's monastery

The body is the Bodhi tree.  
The Mind is a mirror bright  
Always try to keep it clean  
Let no dust Alight

The next poem is by Hui-neng who based on this poem was given dharma transmission and the title of Sixth Patriarch of the Zen School..

Bodhi doesn't have any trees.  
Neither is there a mirror bright  
Buddha nature is forever pure  
Where can dust alight

Though the first poem did not win Shen-hsui dharma transmission, Sen-hsui was a good student and had been listening to Hung-jen's talks for years. He knew what he was to do in practice. It is no different from what Zen teachers have been teaching for 2500 years, "Think not thinking" as Dogen the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese Zen master instructed.. But Shen-Husi had not gotten beyond these instructions. He had not experienced his mind perfectly reflecting the world without any of the obscuring dust of habitual thoughts and emotions. Because of this his understanding did not go beyond repeating what he had been told by Hung-Jen. Those who repudiate Shen-husi's poem as completely wrong will be lost to proper Zen Practice. What he said is not wrong it is just not deep.

Hui-neng though just a beginner at Zen practice had already had an experience of perfect clarity and saw the world through the eyes of enlightenment which he expressed through his poem. Though Hung-jen gave Hui-neng dharma transmission he told Hui-neng to go off and practice for ten years before teaching. And what was he to practice? Polishing the mirror!

We now go back to our first story and again ask the questions how do we practice and how do we polish our minds? Nanyue tells us that the nature of practice is to neither grasp or reject. If we watch our minds we will discover that most of our thoughts are either grasping or rejecting. One form of grasping and rejecting is the habit of judging, right and wrong, good and bad, want and dislike, beautiful and ugly. We can both judge the external world and own inner world of thought and emotion. There is also grasping of another kind which is simply grasping a thought and continuing to think about it. We might be trying to figure something out or we might be day dreaming. In either case we are not involved in practice if our mind is going on this way. In practice we try to do something different with our mind, neither grasping or rejecting any thoughts or sensations. Let all sensations and thoughts enter and pass through without adding anything extra..

Neither grasping or rejecting, doing this is not easy. If we are successful our mind is already polished and dust free. Though we might think of our emotions and thoughts as dust we should also understand that they result from habits deepened through years of activity. We can think of meditation as a way to break ourselves of these habits by taking away their energy so they eventually stop. In meditation we attack this problem in two ways, mindfulness and concentration. Usually we begin a meditation practice with a practice in concentration, such as following and counting breaths, focusing on a spot on the floor, listening, or if you practice Tibetan Buddhism some sort of visualization. If we try to stop our thinking through will power alone our thoughts probably won't stop. We will probably end up thinking a lot about not thinking and if we do stop thinking we will be so self conscious of not thinking that we will start thinking about having stopped thought. We need to take a less direct approach and focus our attention on an object of concentration like the breath.

At first the practice of concentration will not stop our thinking, but with persistence, as concentration deepens, energy is taken away from our normal thinking habits. There is a stage where our awareness of our object of concentration is continuous, no longer finding ourselves lost in thought for periods of time, but there is still an undercurrent of thought though quieter and less intrusive. Put everything you have into your concentrating on your object of concentration. Eventually all thought will stop but we won't even notice because our concentration is so deep. When we have reached this point we have entered samadhi, but this is only one type of samadhi.. This type of samadhi, one pointed samadhi, is not the final stage of our practice but even so it can take many years to reach.

Thoughts will interrupt our meditation, some with great persistence. Most thoughts will dissipate as we become aware of them and return to our object of concentration. Some thoughts will not dissipate. They are highly energized and stronger than our ability to concentrate. Here we have to be careful. If we willfully try to cut off these thoughts we might find ourselves pouring more energy into them. If we try to resolve these thoughts by thinking about them we again might be putting more energy into them. Here we have to be flexible. When I sit in the early morning I often find myself thinking about issues of the coming days work. I let myself think about these thoughts because they will quickly resolve. But other thoughts, reside deeper in the psyche, are highly energized with emotion and are not so easily dealt with. Maybe we can think ourselves through these emotions or maybe we need a little help from someone else. Maybe we can apply a little Buddhist wisdom and dissipate these emotions with thoughts on emptiness or Oneness or maybe the understanding that these thoughts are just illusions of the ego. Maybe we can even utilize this emotional energy in our meditation, by transforming it into the energy of concentration. If we think to ourselves; "Let me transform these thoughts and emotions which are seemingly creating a barrier to my deepening meditation, and take this energy and put every last bit of it into my deepening concentration," we might find this actually happening. Be creative but don't lose sight that the goal is to quiet the mind. With consistent practice, creativity, and maybe some help from a good teacher, in time even the most persistent thoughts will dissipate.

Put effort into your practice, not just the effort to sit with proper form but the effort to focus your attention. If your meditation object is the breath put everything you have into attending to each individual breath. Feel it as it enters through the nose, but also feel the breath all the way down in the stomach as it is expelled. No matter what your meditation object is use the rhythm of the breath to help deepen concentration. Concentration naturally deepens on the out breath. Breath out slowly and completely but don't force the breath out. Relax and use the stomach muscles to gently push out the last bit of breath. When the out breath is finished our concentration is at its deepest. Maybe even thought has stopped, and for a moment you are in samadhi. Gently breath in, but no more than your body naturally desires. As your concentration increases you will find yourself breathing more and more slowly, and softly. With the very deepest concentration you might feel that you don't even need to breath and just sit there for a bit of time with the breath fully out. Eventually the body will call for some Oxygen and you will breath in, but maybe not much. I have discovered that for me when I breath in is when thoughts are likely to start so I put a special effort into maintaining concentration on the in breath. I often count the in breaths from one to ten and not the out breaths. Discover what works for you and don't be afraid to be a little creative.

Don't be self critical. This practice is not easy and will take many years to develop. Simply practice with effort but not expectation. Being self critical is just another thought pattern which we need to dissipate through practice. Just return to practice. Remember the practice is to take the energy that normally goes into our thinking and transform it into the energy of concentration. This can only happen through persistent effort. We are trying to form new habits, new mental pathways for our mental energy to travel.

This is how we whip the ox.

I practiced for many years without good form, not knowing how to sit with a straight back or properly cross my legs. For my physical type it was necessary to sit high on a cushion to get the form correct. Those years practicing with bad form were not wasted. When I did finally learn to sit with good form my practice quickly improved. Maybe it was like initially learning to pull a cart with ungreased rusting wheels. I could not get the cart to move very fast but I was building up strong muscles. When I finally did grease the wheels I felt like I was running with the wind.

Don't take my example as something to emulate. Figure out how to sit with a straight back in a balanced and comfortable position. This can be one of the traditional positions on the floor, sitting on a cushion with legs in lotus, half lotus, or legs laying on the ground one in front of the other. It is nice to

have both knees on the ground. I do not recommend crossing the knees at the shins like we naturally sit in as kids. There is also seiza which is the traditional Japanese position of sitting on the feet with the legs straight back, but give your knees some help by supporting your rear with a pillow or bench. If your legs are unable to find a comfortable position on the ground, sitting on a chair is just fine, but don't slump. Sit forward with feet firmly on the ground and the back straight.

Sit with your eyes open. In some meditation traditions people sit with the eyes closed, but not in the Zen school. Keeping the eyes open will help you stay awake. When practicing concentration it may seem natural to close the eyes but closing the eyes promotes sleep and dreams. I usually sit with my eyes wide open. Let even just a little light penetrate through your eyes and it will help you stay awake. Let your eyes settle on a spot in front of you. Either focus or let your vision soften but don't let your eyes wander much which will promote extraneous thoughts. Bodhidharma the man who brought the Zen school from India to China in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is always depicted with large round eyes. The story goes that he was so perturbed by falling asleep during meditation that he ripped off his eye lids and threw them on the ground which then magically grew into the first tea plants to grow in China. Tea has been used for centuries to help keep meditators awake. But more important is keeping the eyes open.

Grasp your hands and place them in your lap or place them in a mudra. I find holding a mudra above my lap will help me stay awake and concentrated but my arms tire so usually I just grasp my hands. If you hold a mudra on your lap and it collapses there is no special benefit.

Meditation should not be limited to just sitting during our special meditation times. Practice when walking or doing other activities. The practice has to change a bit when practicing in our daily activities. It wouldn't do to just focus on the breath to the exclusion of everything else. It might even be dangerous. Instead we need to creatively change our practice. The seventh step in the Buddha's Eight Fold Path is Right Mindfulness. The eighth step is Right concentration. These are the twin poles of meditation. When we practice sitting meditation we usually practice concentration, especially as a beginner. Concentration is just mindfulness of a single thing. But, when we are practicing out in daily life we need to practice a broader mindfulness. We don't want our mind to drift into it's normal habit of thoughts of attachment and aversion so we consciously become mindful of whatever we are doing. If stray thoughts arise, when we become aware of them we should bring our mind back to the task at hand.

Some tasks don't call for our full attention, in fact much of what we do is done on automatic pilot. When you walk down the street are you conscious of the movement of you feet? If you are to practice while engaged in daily life it is helpful to find an anchor for mindfulness. When walking the anchor might be the conscious movement of your feet. When driving the anchor might be the conscious awareness of your arms and hands. When eating the anchor might be the taste of the food or the movement to the tong. Of course awareness of breath can be an excellent anchor in many situations and can be used along with some other activity like the movement of the feet. Recitation of a mantra can also be an excellent anchor. We use the anchor not to hold all our attention but to hold our attention on the larger mindfulness of whatever activity we are engaged in. Each activity calls for some balance between concentration and a larger mindfulness. Find that balance and be creative with your practice.

When practices matures and our mind starts to quiet, practice can go in two different directions, concentration and expansive mindfulness. When the mind is truly quiet there is nothing that interferes with either complete perfect concentration or a fully expansive panoramic awareness – mindfulness. When our mind is this quiet we are in samadhi. If we are practicing concentration on our breath for example then our awareness of our breath becomes so deep that we experience nothing else then the breath, and all other sensations disappear, including any pain in the knees from the many long hours of meditation, and also including any self awareness. And yet if we are practicing in the Zen tradition and we have not yet experienced kensho even in deep samadhi there is that germ of a question that keeps popping up, some koan or something like What is the true self? Though this inner question might be a

barrier to deep samadhi it is also through samadhi that the question can be answered. And it is because of this question that we are driven to samadhi. But once the question is answered then all barriers to ever deepening samadhi are gone.

If our practice has matured then we can practice full expansive awareness. This is a difficult practice because for a less mature practitioner not filtering through one pointed concentration but opening awareness to all sensation becomes a stimulus for thought. In this practice we truly neither reject or attach to any sensation. In its quietness the mind relaxes and all sensations, in full awareness just wash through without any barriers. If we truly enter this thoughtless state of mind then we are in a fully expansive samadhi that has many names such as Ocean King Samadhi, or Ocean Mirror Samadhi or just Shikentaza.

Even without fully entering samadhi we can practice expansive awareness. While sitting there are three fields of awareness we can use in this practice, sight, sound and the feelings of the body. Again do this with the breath. For example, with the feelings of the body as you breath out direct your attention and take in all the feelings of the body at once. Feel your posture, feel your hands holding a mudra, feel the sensations of the skin. Feel the sensations of pain or pleasure as they arise. Only don't attach to any one feeling but let them arise and pass without hindrance. As my teacher has said, "Do zazen with all 84,000 pores of the skin and all 200 odd bones." I often practice the expansive awareness of sight. I sit with my eyes wide open and take in the the complete visual field. Normally our vision runs from focus on one object to another but in this practice relax the vision and see the complete visual field. Try also to take in the peripheral vision, I find this takes in a little extra effort, but when accomplished the whole visual field becomes one bright mandala.

At the beginning of one retreat the teacher asked me to become the whole Universe with each breath. Quite an order! I took this as asking me to use this retreat to practice expansive awareness but not just the expansive awareness of one sense field but of all fields simultaneously, sight sound and feeling. As I exhaled a long slow breath with my eyes wide open I would consciously try to allow everything in simultaneously, and not attach to any one sensation or sense field. Again and again I did this with each breath one meditation period after the next one day after the next. One might think that this is all about completely relaxing the mind and just letting go. And yes that is correct but strangely it also takes concentration. Our minds do not easily just let go, stop thinking, stop rejecting and stop attaching. Without consciously directing the mind we will just fall into old habits of thought. But then after many many hours of conscious effortful practice all of a sudden we will find that all effort is dropped and we are just there in complete expansive samadhi and a have become the whole Universe.

Whether we specifically practice expansive awareness or focused attention if we truly quiet the mind and completely drop all our presumptions of thought, not just for one minute or one period but a deep quiet that follows us off the cushion, then complete expansive samadhi becomes available. The mind in such a deep samadhi will naturally move from one pointed samadhi to expansive samadhi and back to one pointed samadhi. depending on the situation. Expansive samadhi becomes a natural resting place and as we function we will be in a more focused samadhi. This is the natural activity of a mind unfettered by thought.

There are some common mistaken ideas about Zen practice One is that it is all about just letting go and that one should not in any way try to control or concentrate the mind in meditation but simply watch the mind function. The problem with this idea is that unless you are already quite adept at meditation the mind will just continue to be so active that you will just sit there in a state of confusion. Though as I write this I am in my 40<sup>th</sup> year of practice, have dharma transmission and am an authorized teacher as I sit down to practice, if I don't consciously put effort into meditation I will just sit there and think. So put effort into your Zazen. Don't let your attention and thoughts wander. Use each breath as though it is with this breath that you will become enlightened and enter samadhi. But of course don't think these thoughts, just do it.

Another mistake people make is that what is important in Zen is insight and not learning to quiet

the mind, but the two cannot really be separated. Zen insight does not come from quick witted intelligence or even deep thought. It comes by seeing through our normal dualistic thoughts, and this can only be done if we don't have many thoughts. But ultimately, whatever insights we may have, a quiet disciplined mind is the real jewel, the diamond mind that reflects the world clearly, to be gained after years of practice.

Some people think that we should just practice without any ambition for enlightenment. There even seems to be a tabu against talk of enlightenment in some zen circles. I find this a bit ridiculous. Our desire for enlightenment motivates us in practice and helps push us through stuck places. It is certainly the energy of desire that is utilized in Koan practice. Without a deep desire for enlightenment it is not likely enlightenment will be experienced. The desire for enlightenment is a barrier that must be crossed in our practice but it should not be an early barrier it will be the last barrier along with effort that is crossed as we drop all dualistic thoughts and emotions and enter samadhi.

I hope this essay is of help to those who practice zazen. Think about these things but not too much. Don't let these thoughts interfere with your practice. When practicing just practice.