

TO STUDY THE BUDDHA WAY Part 3

1. Last week we talked about the line,

“To forget the self is to be enlightened by the myriad things.”

The myriad things are all dharmas, all phenomena, whether physical, mental, or emotional. That means all aspects of life as we live it daily. But more importantly, this phrase points at the fundamental truth of interdependent coorigination, the interbeing of all phenomena. That there is no separation between self and all phenomena is the realization of the true nature that is the basis of our existence.

2. The next line of Dogen’s remarkable recipe for realization is:

“To be enlightened by the myriad things is to drop off body and mind of oneself and others.”

The phrase, “dropping off body and mind” is a key to Dogen’s teaching and we need to examine it closely. We could spend an evening or two just skimming over the ramifications of this curious sounding activity, but for now we just need to understand how dropping off body and mind reveals our original nature or, to use an ancient Zen expression, how it reveals our original face.

Fundamentally, dropping off body and mind refers to the practice of shikantaza, just sitting, which is zazen as Dogen understands it. Repeatedly, Dogen insists that the practice of zazen is enlightenment — that practice and enlightenment and one. Furthermore, the practice of just sitting and dropping off body and mind is the one crucial practice. Burning incense, bowing, chanting and so forth are all fine practices, but only shikantaza is the true practice of enlightenment.

In his essay called Fukanzazengi, Universal Recommendation of Zazen, Dogen wrote:

“You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate your self. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will be manifest. If you want to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay.”

3. To drop off body and mind means to be free from the limitations you have placed on yourself, your concept of a personal self, of who you are, your identity, and your aptness to treat your body as if it were a delicate, comfort seeking, appendix to your mental picture of it. I have often referred to these concepts and self-images as being bars of a prison cell. In other words, dropping off these bars means freedom from karmic bonds, which is to be released from the iron rule of causes and conditions.

One Dogen scholar called this the way of experiencing life that occurs when comfort concerns and clinging to fixed ideas, opinions and so forth, drops off. I want to add to this that, in fact, from the Zen perspective, body and mind are not separable. We tend to believe that we need to control the body with our thinking mind. A moment's serious thought will reveal the ridiculous bias of that way of treating the body. On the other hand, the least discomfort in the body brings forth our mental ideas of what is acceptable and what is not.

Buddhist practice trains the body to be free of self-centered orientation so that it unselfishly harmonizes itself with the needs of all beings. Westerners see the body as just a packet of biological impulses and built it psychological drives. But this is absurd: body/mind is an inseparable organism. Thinking otherwise is an impediment to realization that must be dropped off!

4. This a passage from Dogen's Eihei Koroku. Dogen is talking to his monks,

Great assembly, do you want to hear the reality of just sitting, which is the Zen practice that is dropping off body and mind?

After a pause he said:

“Mind cannot objectify it; thinking cannot describe it. Just step back and carry on, and avoid offending anyone you face. At the ancient dock, the wind and moon are cold and clear. At night the boat floats peacefully in the land of lapis lazuli.”

Those last two lines are a quote from a poem by Hongzhi, the Zen Master who wrote so beautifully about shikantaza which he called silent illumination.

I am very fond of Dogen’s formula for dropping off body/mind:

“Just step back [which is just sitting], and carry on [which means to step forth from just sitting to make your understanding real through enlightened activity], and avoid offending anyone you face [which means to harmonize your life with all other beings].”

5. Compassion comes out of dropping off body/mind. In letting go while sitting, we experience openness and freedom from the tyranny of our obsessions with the self. This is the opening of the flower of compassion for all beings. And, in fact, at that time all beings and “I” are one and practice as one.

Here we arrive at the last line of the passage from Genjo Koan:

“No trace of realization remains and this no trace continues endlessly.”

Shohaku Okamura’s translation of the line:

“There is a trace of realization that cannot be grasped. We endlessly keep expressing the ungraspable trace of realization.”

However you translate it, the line comes down to this: when the truth of the Buddha dharma is fully integrated into your daily life, there is no longer practice, realization, delusion; there is just activity that arises from prajna wisdom.

Now the “stink of Zen” is gone, all traces of spirituality and of something special dropped off and absorbed into a life fully lived, the dharma fully digested, the

experiencing of a lifetime fully integrated in this moment. Everyday life,
compassionate and open, IS your practice.

This is truly the Buddha Way.