

Foundations of Zen 13

Forms of Meditation

Class 4: Concentration

Saturday, October 23, 2021

Concentration: wholeness of body, mind, heart, and intention

For the past three classes we have been learning and practicing concentration techniques and their relational impact, particularly our relationship with our self. The first class focused on Embodied Practice, the second class focused on Perceptions, and the third class focused on Emotions.

Is there anything you would like to share about your experience practicing with any of these techniques so far?

Today we want to bring together the practices of concentration in a more comprehensive way. I would like to begin with a practice Joko taught that has proven very helpful in my experience. It allows us to notice not only what is arising in our present moment experience, but the often overlooked patterns and systems that are created by our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. These patterns and systems form our conditioning, and in turn our relating to ourselves, each other, and the world.

Concentration Practices

Labeling thoughts: first on the cushion, relating with yourself, then in relating with another person as the object of concentration, then in relating with a group: family, work, community, then in relating with the world. Simply bring yourself, that person, group, or world to mind, focus your awareness on it, and establish mindfulness of the thoughts and emotions, labeling them as you notice them: feeling anger. Thinking: why is she so mean? thinking: I should be more compassionate. feeling: hopeless about the situation. feeling sad. thinking: what can I do? Do not make judgments about what is arising and disappearing in your heart and mind. Just note it like an interested observer. Guided practice: self, another person, a group, the world. Discuss.

Satipatthana and Anapanasati Suttas: A training curriculum directly from the Buddha.

Satipatthana is more elaborated, but has much more emphasis on meditating on the repulsiveness of the body, stages of death and dying. A wake up call to young heedless monks no doubt, but Ananda became alarmed that the monks

were mutilating themselves and even committing suicide, and he told the Buddha that the contemplations on death and the repulsiveness of the body were having a dire effect. The Buddha immediately gave a dharma talk teaching that meditation should bring happiness and joy, not harm. But then I think he must have realized the curriculum needed revision, and that is how we received the Anapanasati sutta teaching. It is a practice, rich, and powerful teaching that begins with simple breathing and ultimately leads to full awakening.

How is this practice and training relational? Let's imagine you had this clear, bright, lucid and concentrated mind when you are relating with yourself, with another person, with a group, with the world. How might that affect the process of relating?

The training is not so that you can experience some exalted state, but so that you can use this lucid clear awareness to investigate the Dharma and be alive in your present situation and the world, something we will explore next week.

Koans Part 1, an introduction, how we use koans in Soto Zen, John Tarrant's and Guo Gu's excellent introduction, and one koan to play with: *Case 12: Dizang Planting the Fields*. Koans as concentration practice. Committing the case to memory. Returning to the case on the cushion. Exploring what the case means in relating to oneself and to others. Koans as "serious play." a direct way into engaging life.

The Book of Serenity: the classic collection of koans used in Soto Zen

Book of Serenity: Thomas Cleary tr.

Introduction:

The Book of Serenity is a classic text of Chan Zen Buddhism, a vehicle of an ancient knowledge said to go back to time immemorial and to have been originally transmitted from mind to mind. The continuity of Zen transmission was fostered by periodic revisions and renewals in a body of special techniques and the knowledge subtending them. Many of these techniques are encoded in the Book of Serenity, and the use of this kind of literature to help elicit certain perceptions is itself one of these techniques.

The branch of ancient tradition that came to be known as Zen is customarily traced back in Chinese history to the late fifth and early sixth centuries C.E., and was approaching the end of its third overt major phase in China when the Book of Serenity was compiled.

Book of Serenity koan format:

- Introduction by Wansong, generally alluding to particular perspectives, frames of mind, patterns of thought and action.

- Case from Chan lore or Buddhist scripture, a saying or anecdote illustrating some aspect or aspects of Chan awareness and praxis.
- Commentary by Wansong, expounding upon the case.
- Verse by Tiantong reflecting the pattern of the case in poetic form.
- Commentary by Wansong on Tiantong's verse.

The Gateless Barrier

Passing Through the Gateless Barrier, tr. Guo Gu

In the Chinese Chan tradition, *gong'an* is the term later known as *koan* in Japanese Zen

From the introduction, page 4:

Gong'an collections are much more than just books. As a method of spiritual cultivation, gong'ans are unique in the whole of Buddhism, in all the history of human development, for that matter. There is really nothing like them. Before I explain how to use gong'an as methods of practice, it is important to keep in mind that they come from everyday life situations and are meant to be engaged with. Thus, gong'ans cannot be studied or learned or analyzed.

Discursive explanations of and intellectual speculations about life are not life. None of the gong'ans *tell* you what life is. They only put a spotlight on different aspects of life. The purpose is to show that all situations in life—its ups and downs—are opportunities to awaken to your true nature. To many people, they seem to be absurd, upside down. This is because many people live their lives in an upside-down way—bound by their own rational thinking, concepts, and proliferation of notions about the world, which they take as the world. Thus gong'ans turn us right side up, and free us from our own bondage. To engage in gong'an practice, then, is to use the cases as a method to investigate your own life and what it means to live according to your true nature. This engagement is called investigating Chan.

Investigation, here, does not mean thinking. thinking is always dualistic and discriminatory and has the tendency to reify things as real and unchanging. Ordinary people's thinking is a form of self-grasping. Thinking is by nature self-referential. Because it is self-referential, and filtered through words and language, it also reifies whatever people experience as out there, real, and separate. Being deluded by the thinking process, a sense of self and other come into being, and people are forever alienated from their experience.

This is not to say that thoughts themselves are the problem. The problem is the tendency to take the concept of a thing to be the thing itself. Because of this delusion, attachment arises and suffering follows. To investigate Chan is to use poison against poison: to use a gong'an as

a springboard to realize that which lies before words, language, and concepts arise—your true nature, which can never be defined or reified or grasped.

Therefore, whatever concept you come up with about a gong'an is just another concept. It is not freedom. Gong'ans are not puzzles or problems to be solved. There's nothing to solve. The stories in gong'ans defy logic and force the discriminating, logical mind to become stuck—turning words, language, and concepts on their head—and thereby shattering self-grasping so practitioners can wake up to who they truly are. So the point is not to "solve" them. Use the gong'an to dissolve your self-referentiality or any fixation.

Bring Me the Rhinoceros

Bring Me the Rhinoceros: And Other Zen Koans to Bring You Joy, by John Tarrant.

When I tried to find out what koans are, it became clear that koan is a Japanese word that has entered the English language without bringing a clear sense of its meaning. It is usually taken to refer to a riddle or odd question. A koan actually has its origin in sayings or records of conversations between people interested in the secret of life.

Koans originated when Chinese culture flowered about thirteen hundred years ago, at the period of the Arthurian legends in England. In China it was the time of willow pattern ceramics, wood block printing, great poets and painters, and, just as in Europe, civil war. It was also a time when people grew seriously interested in the technology of the mind. Certain spiritual teachers became known for a deep and free understanding of life, and people came to learn, hoping to gain the insight that the teacher had. Some left farms, homes, and jobs in the bureaucracy to form monastic communities; some traveled by foot. These students worked, studied, meditated, and asked questions. Others maintained their work and family life and dropped in for periods of study. The teachers weren't trying to achieve something; they just responded to the needs of their students, and it turned out that some of their improvised decisions kept the process interesting.

First of all, the trusted doubt and rewarded questions. This is rare in religion and an example of the Zen way of treating what is usually thought of as a problem — in this case, doubt — as a strength.

The teachers also treated all questions as if they were relevant, no matter what their content. "Why did I lose my love?" would have the same spiritual value as "What happens when I die?" A question is a place of embarkation, and any question was treated as being about enlightenment, whether the student was aware of it or not. There was a trust in whatever forces had brought the student to the point of asking.

Finally, instead of giving kind advice, or step-by-step instructions, the teachers responded to the students as if they were capable of coming to a complete understanding in that moment. A teacher's words often made no rational sense, yet possessed a strangely compelling quality. For example, someone had this interchange with a great teacher:

"I am Quingshui, alone and destitute. Please help me."

Caoshan said, "Mr. Shui!"

"Yes!"

Caoshan said, "You have already drunk three cups of the finest wine, and yet you say that you haven't even wet your lips."

Of all the answers the student might have been hoping for, he probably wasn't expecting to be involved in a call and response and to be told that he was rich. Yet, when you think you are desolate, it can be an intriguing and hopeful thing to be told that you are not. After such exchanges, a student who had been stuck and unhappy might be suddenly full of joy. More often, the words would work away in the mind, gradually drawing the student out of a limiting view he or she held.

Some exchanges became famous and were written down. They can be known as koans — the word means "public case" — and there was a mania for collecting them. A well-known teacher forbade his students to write down what he said because he thought people were recording his comments as a substitute for the more necessary and dangerous task of letting them work on the mind. One man adapted by wearing paper clothing to lectures, and the notes he jotted down secretly on his sleeves were passed around. These koans in turn became the core of one of the great koan collections, *The Blue Cliff Record*.

Soldiers, housewives, farmers, and merchants used koans to find freedom within the often difficult conditions of their times. The method was to immerse yourself in the saying and see how it changed you. This meant letting the koan teach you by interacting with your life and your mind; the

activity wasn't confined to periods of formal meditation. People farmed the land, ran bureaucracies, and raised children, all the while keeping moment-by-moment company with their koan.

In one instance, when Genghis Khan's troops swept through China in the twelfth century, provincial governors went to the Khan and became senior ministers. They lived out in the steppes with him, hoping to persuade him to rule the cities rather than burning them and converting them into horse pastures. It would be hard not to feel unprepared for, and perhaps terrified of, such a task, and one of the ministers asked his teacher for advice. The most helpful thing the teacher could think of was to make a connection of koans and poems that he

called *The Book Of Serenity*. When this book arrived in the steppes, the story goes, the ministers sat up together all night in the yurt, reading the koans aloud. They had an impossible situation, so they all saturated themselves in a method that prepared them to take advantage of whatever tiniest possibility might indeed appear.

Today is not so different from the way it was in China. People are called on to survive terror attacks and random mayhem. An even the most domestic life has its quota of desperation and insoluble problems and its requirements for unusual kindness. Today people can find koans as helpful as they did long ago. [pp. 16-19]

CASE 12: DIZANG PLANTING THE FIELDS

From *The Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues*, translated by Thomas Cleary.

The introduction:

Scholars plow with the pen, orators plow with the tongue. We patch-robed mendicants lazily watch a white ox on open ground, not paying attention to the rootless auspicious grass. How to pass the days?

The case:

Dizang asked Xiushan, "Where do you come from?" Xiushan said, "From the South." Dizang said, "how is Buddhism in the South these days?" Xiushan said, "There's extensive discussion."

Dizang said, "How can that compare to me here planting the fields and making rice to eat?"

Xiushan said, "What can you do about the world?"

Dizang said, "What do you call the world?"

Notes:

The reference to a white ox may be to the story of Yaoshan's enlightenment, found in Cleary's translation of Keizan's *Transmission of Light*, the account of the transmission of the dharma down the lineage. On page 38, he writes about an anecdotal exchange between a teacher and student, "By this story it should be clear that two schools of Qingyuan [Shitou's teacher] and Nanyue (Mazu's teacher) are not different. There are really two horns of Huineng (teacher of both Qingyuan and Nanyue), who was a white ox on open ground, standing alone.

A deeper reference is probably to the white ox drawing the cart in the Lotus Sutra parable about the father and the children in the burning house.

In the 10 oxherding pictures, in the traditional version, the ox changes from black to white.