

Foundations of Zen 13

Forms of Meditation

Class 7

Saturday, November 13, 2021

Here we are, in our last Forms of Meditation class together! In our classes so far, we have been exploring concentration practices, investigation of dharmas, and heart-centered practices—Metta, Lojong phrases, and the Brahmaviharas. These forms of meditation train our minds so that our “flashlight” of attention becomes reliably steady, focused, bright, and clear, so that it can illuminate our lives and our relationships. We can readily bring our full attention where we intend to—and keep it there. In an emergency, with the power out, a flashlight is useless to us if it is not charged, if it flashes around randomly, if we can’t hold on to it or direct it where we need the light. Concentration practices cultivate the capacity to skillfully manage our attention, so that we can use it as needed. We are then able to use that focused attention to investigate the Buddha’s teachings, as well as all of the other phenomena in our lives, with depth and clarity.

All of these forms of meditation involve, as Dōgen said, taking a backward step and turning our light within. With metta practice, we turn the light of attention outward, expressing our aspiration for well-being and liberation for all beings as a kind of floodlight of awareness radiating everywhere. And these forms of meditation engage us in *doing*—from following the breath to investigating koans to repeating metta phrases or radiating equanimity.

This week we have only one form of meditation to explore, although it goes by different names and is taught in different ways. It is not a practice of *doing* but a practice of *being*. In Japanese Zen the term for it is *shikantaza*—but you may also hear it referred to as “open awareness” or “just sitting.” Those terms are not quite accurate but commonly used.

This practice can be traced back to Chan master Hongzhi, known in Japanese as Tendo Shogaku, who lived from 1091-1157. Hongzhi was also the author of the *Book of Serenity*, the collection of koans we use in Soto Zen practice. His term for this way of meditation was Silent Illumination. Hongzhi is also known for writing that we’ve included in our chant book, titled “On Silent Illumination.” Here it is:

On Silent Illumination

I

Wide and far-reaching without limit,
pure and clean, it emits light.

Its spiritual potency is unobscured.

Although it is bright, there are no objects of illumination.

It can be said to be empty,
yet this emptiness is [full of] luminosity.

It illumines in self-purity,
beyond the working of causes and conditions,
apart from subject and object.

Its wondrousness and subtleties are ever present,
its luminosity is also vast and open.

Moreover, this is not something that can be conceived of
as existence or nonexistence.

Nor can it be deliberated about with words and analogies. Right here—at this pivotal
axle,

opening the swinging gate and clearing the way—
it is able to respond effortlessly to circumstances;
the great function is free from hindrances.

At all places, turning and turning about,
it does not follow conditions, nor can it be trapped in models. In the midst of
everything it settles securely.

With “that,” it is identical to what “that” is;
with “this,” it is identical to what “this” is.

“This and that” interfuse and merge without distinction. Therefore it is said:

“Like the earth that holds up a mountain,
unaware of its steepness and loftiness;
like the stone that contains jade,
unaware of the flawlessness of the jade.”

If one can be thus, this is truly leaving home.

People who have left home must get hold of the essence in this way.

Patch-robed monks should wither away and freeze
the [deluded] thoughts of the mind
and rest from remnant conditioning.

Single-mindedly restore and cultivate this field.

Directly cut down all the overgrown grass
throughout the boundary of the four directions.

Do not allow a single speck of dust to defile [this field].

Spiritually potent, it is bright, vast, and removed; it is transparent.

Thoroughly illumine that which comes before the [principal] essence, until you reach a state where the light becomes naked and pure— where not a single speck of dust can be attached to.

When you tug and pull back this ox[-mind] by the nose,

it will naturally come alive and be imposing.

Being quite unusual and outstanding,

it mingles with others along the pathway

without damaging people's sprouts and grain.

Thriving and dynamic, the ox effortlessly responds to circumstances.

Responding to circumstances without artificiality,

it thrives and is free flowing.

Not fixed to any set place, it is free from fetters—

this is the place where the ox plows through the field of the empty kalpa.

Proceeding in such a way,

all things appear vividly, without obscurity; everywhere, all things manifest as they are, [maintaining] one thought for ten thousand years. Fundamentally, this is non-abiding in appearances. It is said: "The mind-ground contains every seed. The rain will universally cause them to sprout. When the meaning of the blossoming of the flower of enlightenment is understood, the fruit of bodhi will ripen of its own accord.

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Being empty, it leaves no trace;

in illumination there are no dusts of emotion.

When the light penetrates, stillness is profound;

mysteriously it severs all defects and defilement.

When you can thus understand your "self," you can thus resolve your "self." Clear and pure, wondrous and bright—this field is intrinsically yours.

Many lifetimes of inability to resolve [this matter of self grasping]

only come from obscuring doubts and hovering delusions.

All these are but self-created obstructions and blocks.

Openly, wisdom freely roams; internally, one forgets merits and rewards. Just directly relinquish this burden [of the self].

Turn around and resume your position!

Put your feet firmly on the Path.

In this spontaneous responsiveness and wondrous function,
all things encountered are reality.

Here, there is not a single thing, from the tiniest hair
to a speck of dust outside yourself!

From *The Method of No-Method: The Chan Practice of Silent Illumination*, by Sheng Yen. Shambala, 2008.

As you can see, Hongzhi is really describing this quality of silent illumination, not providing some kind of instruction for training or practice. In a sense, there is no way to teach this form of meditation, which is simply practice in sitting with full awareness and awake, open experience of your life in this present moment, in this world with its sensations, mind waves, emotions, and consciousness, without clinging to anything, without aversion to anything projected on the screens of mind and body. We are not making anything happen, we are unhindered in simply and directly experiencing this present moment.

It is not passive or dull, but alive and engaged. We treat our mind's activity with kindly regard, as if watching a puppy dashing about, smelling this, chewing that, curled up in sleep, noticing it is about to pee in time to take it outdoors. (I have some experience of this!)

Nothing in our experiencing is lasting, nothing is substantial, nothing represents "who we really are." Our confusion about these facts causes suffering for ourselves and others, but more importantly it causes us to miss our own lives. The past year has been like a fever dream, surreal and disturbing, yet filled with beauty and kindness as well. How much of it swept by us unnoticed?

Many people believe in meditation as a way to attain some peak experience—the ultimate example of which is awakening. But every moment of every life—even an insect's life—is precisely that peak experience—often unknown and unclaimed, because we are too busy worrying about other, imaginary things. The world is real, we are real, but not in the ways we imagine them.

For example, we are permeable beings, not the solid, aging bodies we take ourselves to be. At this very moment cell phone waves are passing right through you, carrying photos of a new grandchild, a bit of pop music, a teenager's text, some racist propaganda, an email about a project in someone's office.

You are home not only to your own body's cells, but far more cells that are bacteria and viruses, beneficial and hazardous—some permanently resident, others easily moving in and out, with your breath, through your skin, via the food you are eating,

your kiss, your intense immersion in your world. No one can factually speak of *I, me, mine*; everyone is of the plural *they, them, and theirs*. So...

We sit, in Zen practice, doing nothing, just being there in the midst of our lives. We sit in wonder.

That said, there are ways to approach this formless meditation practice. I was surprised to discover, in Anālayo's *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*, that the practice of emptiness can be traced back to the original teachings of the Buddha. In the Pāli Culasuññata Sutta the Buddha teaches the gradual meditative entry into emptiness, an advanced form of practice. The Buddha was responding to Ananda asking about a statement the Buddha had made, dwelling on emptiness. In the sutta, the Buddha patiently explains a sequence for contemplation of emptiness that begins with the very room in which they are staying, pointing out that it was "empty of the hustle and bustle of city life, and also empty of domesticated animals and people. Instead of these there was just the community of monks." So the Buddha sets the format for this series of contemplations as seeing what a particular experience is empty of, and at the same time also directing awareness to what this experience is not empty of, in this case, the dwelling place was not empty of monks.

So this contemplation of emptiness is not about having a blank mind, or entering some kind of void. The contemplation moves out from this intimate space...

In the next step, Buddha teaches contemplation of the forest.

The next step is contemplation of the earth itself, with all of its features stripped away, as if the earth is "level and flat as the palm of a hand." Then the contemplation of infinite space, then infinite consciousness, and finally the "perception of the sphere of nothingness." He says, "Whatever is not present, one therefore sees as empty; whatever else is present, one sees as truly present. Ananda, this is called truly dwelling in emptiness, without distortion."

These instructions are detailed and sequential. If you would like to read more about these teachings, and how contemplation of emptiness is linked to compassion, I highly recommend Anālayo's book. Chan masters cut right to the chase, which is refreshing, even though it can be a bit disorienting. So how do we practice zazen? As the Lojong slogans suggest:

Resolve to begin: every session. This is extremely important. You don't want to just flop down on your cushion carelessly, ready to check something else off your to-do list. Each zazen period is a new beginning. So...

First, train in the preliminaries:

Intention: in class, a bit of writing activity: what is my intention for my meditation practice? Note: In this case, an intention is not a goal or outcome. It is more like an approach or orientation toward something.

Feeling tones and Attitudes: Guo Gu, in *Silent Illumination* discusses feeling tones as subtle background influences in our minds: intentions, concerns that shape our choices and perceptions. "Once we have exposed negative feeling tones, we can foster correct attitudes that resonate with our original freedom. Many of our subtle tendencies are hidden from our awareness. If we are unaware of what's going on inside us, simply practicing seated meditation won't take us too far along the road to liberation. This is why many practitioners, after years of meditation, wonder why it is that they are still vexed by the same people and events in their lives. How can it be that in seated meditation they are able to gain peace, but in the busyness of life they are basically the same people. If we don't expose the subtle tendencies that govern the way we practice and, in turn, cultivate correct attitudes, we inevitably perpetuate separateness, opposition, and self-referential thinking. These subtle undercurrent tendencies manifest as the attitudes we have toward life. We need to expose them and cultivate the right attitudes to bring out our wisdom and compassion." (p. 20)

How to cultivate right attitudes? Guo Gu teaches a fourfold process of exposing, embracing, transforming, and letting go. He says, "when practitioners come across the familiar Buddhist teaching of non-grasping, they think that they have to let go of everything, that this is something they can do right away, and that once they've done so everything will be fine. The truth is, we have to first see what it is that we have to let go of. We have to expose our subtle emotional afflictions and negative habits. In exposing them, we may recognize that they have been part of us for a long time; that there is history behind our behaviors. They may be part of our defense mechanisms and survival skills. So, we have to accept them. Only when we accept them will we be able to take responsibility for and work through them. Then we will no longer be under their influence. This is letting go of them. This is a long process, and it is not linear but circular." (p. 21)

What are these attitudes essential to practice, according to Guo Gu?

Contentment, counters tendency to grasp and chase after things—even in meditation

Interest, the quality of engagement that is not controlling or manipulating

Confidence, faith, conviction, and trust based on experience, not blind belief

Determination, usually thought of as striving or tense effort, which is actually something fueled by greed or anger. "Determination is about being steadfast, trickling on like a fine stream in a continuous flow that does not end. Even when a big boulder is in the way, the stream simply meanders around it and continues. So a Chan analogy for determination is a continuous stream of water, without gaps, without seams." (37)

Posture: Suzuki, *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* excerpt (26)

Relaxation:[practice] Once you are seated in an upright, dignified, and balanced posture, with an attitude of contentment, interest, confidence, and determination, it is most important to completely relax the body. Tension and contraction in the body are obstructions to meditation. Obviously, this relaxation cannot be rushed, which just comes from agitation and creates more tension.

So let's try this. First sit upright, balanced in your chair or on your cushion, both feet on the floor, or both knees on the mat. Arouse the attitudes of contentment... interest...confidence...and determination. Now we begin a slow, progressive relaxation, beginning with the awareness of the crown of the head, making sure all tension is released then moving to the forehead, where we often hold some unconscious tension, releasing any tiny contractions at the temples, down to the eyes, with their many small muscles. Simply release any tension you discover there, piece by piece, and now moving down to your cheeks and jaw, another common place of tension. Now your mouth, teeth, and gums completely relax, until you can feel your whole face is entirely at ease. Continue with the back of the head and the top of the spine, releasing and relaxing, allowing ease and comfort there.

Moving very slowly down the throat and neck, balancing the head so easily and comfortably, down to your shoulders, the collarbone, the arm sockets, muscles and tendons completely relaxing, nothing to do, the body in balance and at rest. Your upper arms grow soft and at ease, your elbows and forearms releasing any tension, your wrists softening, your hands still and quiet in your lap, fingers completely relaxed. Now feel your upper body, lungs gently swelling, relaxing, swelling again, like gentle waves lapping the shore. Your shoulder blades melt down your back, utterly relaxed, and in that way your chest opens, and breathing becomes easier, more full. Your belly now relaxes completely, not sucked in, all tension releasing as you bring your awareness there. Your lower back, slightly curved, is relaxing as your body finds its natural balance and poise. And the base of your body, pelvis and buttocks are also releasing any tension, stable and firmly connected to your seat, which supports you with the whole earth's gravity. Your thighs can rest, without

contraction or stiffness, completely at ease, nothing to do, nowhere to go. Moving on, your knees relax, your lower leg with its calf muscles resting comfortably, your ankles, feet, and toes can rest in ease, the whole body now entirely relaxed. As you do this preliminary scan and release, you may notice some places that are more stuck than others, some that were not able to completely release their tension or contraction. When you practice this, you should feel comfortable to stay with those places a bit longer, or to return to the beginning and repeat the process. You may find this work with relaxation can fill an entire meditation period, especially in the beginning. But ultimately, you will find it much easier and quicker as your body learns how to relax itself at will. And you may find yourself in situations where this knowledge alone may serve to put you at ease, so that you can meet the situation skillfully, wisely, and compassionately.

Breathing

Continuing with our training in the preliminaries, we turn our attention to following the breath, keeping our attitudes of contentment, interest, confidence, and determination. We are contented with our breath, our body relaxed, interested in each breath, confident and determined in this practice. Each breath is unique, each breath is life-giving, and the quality of our breathing reflects the quality of our lives, moment to moment. It is something we can attune with any time in our everyday lives. Breathing in, we breathe in the whole universe, breathing out, we express our whole living being.

Now relax even the activity of following the breath, and allow "breathing" to become just another sensation in the body. What else is there? Warmth, energy, sense perceptions: sounds, colors, the felt sense of the body itself. And the immediate surroundings, the cool air, the space around you, in the room, and permeating all of the things there. And this immediate space is opening out to the larger spaces around it: a forest, a neighborhood, a city, an ocean, and your awareness expands there, carried on the light breeze of your breathing. This moment, too, moves beyond just a few seconds, filling this day, and expanding outward to this week, this month, this lifetime, many lifetimes for many beings. Now all of that just falls away, no need to hold on to it, just resting immersed in it, contented, interested, confident, determined simply to relax and be present, right now.

Awareness What we discover is just how fluid and expansive our awareness can be; that when it is not stuck somehow, it can be intentionally accessed and

developed. It becomes a resource for our journey on this spiritual path, when we learn how to use it. Here's an experiment in awareness:

Sitting comfortably, without straining, bring your awareness to the center of your chest, the heart area. You can probably feel your heart beating, your lungs gently expanding and contracting. Notice any sensations you experience in that area. They may be obvious or quite subtle, or you may not notice anything much at all. Just be aware without judging or straining in any way, completely relaxed. Now allow your awareness to float backward, out of the back of your body, so that you are aware of yourself sitting there, as if you are watching from behind you. Allow your awareness to travel above to a corner of the room in front of you, taking in your body and the whole room. Can your awareness move even further? Of course it can move out of the room into the outer world, with its noises, neighbors, trees, roads, and larger networks: fields, forests, traffic, sewer systems, and beyond, filling the sky with awareness of clouds, weather, sunrise, the moon, the distant stars, the whole cosmos, and now slowly returning from that journey, back into the neighborhood, this room, your body and breath. [reports?] Awareness is a powerful ally, we must use it well.

"Just sitting"

So now, relinquishing all contractions of the mind and the body, we are really ready for our practice of zazen, or "just sitting." We can do one last scan of our bodies, our attitudes, our awareness: are we content, interested, confident, determined? Just let go of all that now. You are not a parent, a child, a worker, a teacher, a consumer, or any other role you may sometimes inhabit. You have no responsibilities or jobs or problems or projects here. Just allow all of that to be set down, like returning from a long trip and coming home at last, setting your heavy suitcases down, just sitting there. Be still, be alive, be awake, resting in sky-like mind. As the Tibetans say: leave the arisings in the arising.

Can you imagine how such a practice might be deeply relational, and a benefit to all of your relationships?