

Foundations of Zen 13

Forms of Meditation

Class 5: Investigation

Saturday, October 30, 2021

Investigation of the Dharma

For the past four 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, the third class focused on Emotions, and the fourth class introduced comprehensive concentration practice and briefly introduced Zen koans.

Is there anything you would like to share about your experience practicing with any of these techniques or what we discussed last week so far?

Today we want to turn our attention to an often overlooked meditation practice taught by the Buddha: Investigation of Dharmas. In Anālayo's wonderful guide to the Satipatthana sutta, *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, investigation of the Dharmas is the subject of five chapters, so obviously we will not get to cover the whole territory, and I only hope that once we introduce this practice to you you will continue to explore it. I'll first introduce the traditional Pāli canon teachings on investigation, and then again take up koans as a special case, developed in the Zen tradition.

Well, what do we mean by "investigation of dharmas?" Our Buddhist tradition is not based on beliefs or origin stories or paranormal mystical experiences; it is an empirical practice in which we engage in inquiry to examine the teachings and their truthfulness based on our own experience, intelligence, and study.

There is a sequence to the concentration practices taught in the Satipatthana and Anapanasati suttas, a kind of curriculum of the Buddha's instructions for meditation. It is a mode of inquiry. So we take up our practice of investigation of the dharmas once our bodies are calm, our mental activity has settled down, and we have accessed the mind, which has become concentrated, bright, lucid, and unperturbed. We undertake this inquiry to establish our own relationship with the teachings conducive to wisdom, compassion, and happiness taught by the Buddha. Anālayo writes:

The word “investigation” (*vicaya*) , is derived from the verb whose range of meaning includes both “investigating” and “discriminating.” Thus “investigation of *dhammas*” can be understood as an investigation of subjective experience based on the discrimination gained through familiarity with the Dhamma. Such discrimination refers in particular to the ability to distinguish what is wholesome or skillful for progress on the path and what is unwholesome or unskillful. (p. 235)

What this satipatthana is actually concerned with are specific qualities (such as the five hindrances and the seven awakening factors) and analyses of experience into specific categories (such as the five aggregates, the six sense-spheres, and the four noble truths). These mental factors and categories constitute central aspects of the Buddha’s way of teaching, the *Dhamma*. These classificatory schemes are not in themselves the objects of meditation, but constitute frameworks or points of reference to be applied during contemplation. During actual practice one is to look at whatever is experienced in terms of these *dhammas*. Thus the *dhammas* mentioned in this satipatthana are not “mental objects” but are applied to whatever becomes an object of the mind or of any other sense door during contemplation. (*Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, Anālayo, p. 182)

In other words, when thoughts, feelings, or sensations arise in the mind, investigate whether one of these is present. There’s no need to be agitated about it, we are simply investigating mindfully the appearance. Consequently, we want to establish mindfulness as our introduction to investigation.

- **Contemplation of the five hindrances:** .

- Sensual desire
- Aversion (ill will)
- Sloth and torpor
- Restlessness and worry
- Doubt
- If sensual desire is present in you, you know “there is sensual desire present in me:” if sensual desire is not present in you, you know “there is no sensual desire in me.” And you know how unarisen sensual desire can arise, how arisen sensual desire can be removed, and how a future arising

of the removed sensual desire can be prevented. And so on with each hindrance.

- The use of the term “hindrance” clearly indicates why these mental qualities have been singled out for special attention: they “hinder” the proper functioning of the mind. Under the influences of the hindrances one is unable to understand one’s own good or that of others, or to gain concentration or insight. Learning to withstand the impact of a hindrance with awareness is therefore an important skill for one’s progress on the path. According to the discourses, difficulties in counterbalancing a hindrance are a good reason for approaching an experienced meditator to ask for practical guidance. (*Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, Anālayo, p. 187)
- **Practice: 3 minutes of contemplation of hindrances: sensual desires, aversion or ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Don’t contemplate the hindrances, notice when they are attached to some experience, thought, or sensation you are having.**
- **Contemplation of the five aggregates:**
 - You know: “such is material form, such its arising, such its passing away; such is feeling, such is its arising, such is its passing away; such is cognition, such is its arising, such is its passing away; such are volitions, such are their arising, such are their passing away; such is consciousness, such is its arising, such is its passing away;
 - Two steps: clear awareness of the aggregate, followed by awareness of its arising and passing away
 - Dissolution of a sense of a solid self
- **Contemplation of the sense-spheres**
 - P. 216 Buddha’s description
 - eye-form-eye-consciousness: vision
 - “One’s experience of the world is the product of an interaction between the “subjective” influence exercised by how one perceives the world, and

the “objective” influence exercised by the various phenomena of the external world.

- **Contemplation of the awakening factors:**

- p. 231
- Mindfulness factor
- Investigation of *dhammas* factor
- Energy factor
- Joy factor
- Tranquility factor
- Concentration factor
- Equanimity factor

- **Contemplation of the Four Noble Truths**

- p. 243
- Dukkha
- The arising of Dukkha
- the cessation of Dukkha
- the way leading to the cessation of Dukkha
- Buddha: The realization of the four noble truths will be accompanied by happiness, and the noble eightfold path is a path productive of joy. This shows that understanding *dukkha* is not necessarily a matter of frustration and despair.
- Anālayo: The need for careful translation of the term can be demonstrated with the help of a passage from the *Nidayana Samutta*, where the Buddha stated that whatever is felt is included within *dukkha*. To understand *dukkha* here as an affective quality and to take it as implying that all feelings are “suffering” conflicts with the Buddha’s analysis of feelings into three mutually exclusive types, which are, in addition to unpleasant feeling, pleasant and neutral feelings. On another occasion the Buddha explained

his earlier statement that whatever is felt is included within *dukkha* to refer to the impermanent nature of all conditioned phenomena. The changing nature of feelings, however, need not necessarily be experienced as “suffering,” since in the case of a painful experience, for example, change may be experienced as pleasant. Thus all feelings are not suffering, nor is their impermanence “suffering,” since none of them can provide lasting satisfaction. This is, *dukkha* as a qualification of all conditioned phenomena is not necessarily experienced as “suffering,” since suffering requires someone sufficiently attached in order to suffer. (Way to bury the lead, Analayo!) (p. 245)

- Our investigations range widely in this practice, but in order to consider them “meditation,” we need to take them up with intention and curiosity and mindfulness. We need to be able to examine our own experience with some courage and readiness to observe without judging, without getting caught up in our own stories, without self-identifications. That is why I consider this an empirical practice. It is scientific, not from forming and testing hypotheses, but observational science, as when studying a frog pond, or migration patterns of birds, or the deep communication between trees.

Koans Part 1, a review, how we use koans in Soto Zen, contrast with Rinzai focused energetic striving. 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.

Koans as a form of investigation of Dhammas:

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'an 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 19. Ordinary Heart/Mind Is the Way

The Gateless Gate, Koun Yamada

The Case

Jōshū earnestly asked Nansen, “What is the Way?” Nansen answered, “The ordinary heart is the Way.” Jōshū asked, “Should I direct myself toward it or not?” Nansen said, “If you try to turn toward it, you go against it.” Jōshū asked, “if I do not try to turn toward it, how can I know that it is the Way?” Nansen answered, “The Way does not belong to knowing or not-knowing. Knowing is delusion; not-knowing is a blank consciousness. When you have really reached the true Way beyond all doubt, you will find it as vast and boundless as the great empty firmament. how can it be talked about on a level of right and wrong?” At these words, Jōshū was suddenly enlightened.

Mumon’s Commentary

Nansen was asked a question by Jōshū, and Nansen’s base was shattered and melted away. He could not justify himself. Even though Jōshū has come to realization, he will have to delve into it for another thirty years before he can realize it fully.

The Verse

The spring flowers, the moon in autumn,
The cool breezes of summer, the winter’s snow;
If idle concerns do not cloud the mind,
This is man’s happiest season.