

Communication is very important in Zen practice. They say: if you do not understand your master's words, you are not his disciple. To understand your master's words is to understand your master himself. Through his language you understand more than his words actually say.

We had a conversation after sitting the other morning in which we recalled Suzuki's comment: *When it is raining, don't hurry. It's raining everywhere.* For us, this makes sense..

We understand this comment as

1. Face your situation. It really doesn't help to try to get around, or rush or force things. All we can really deal with is what is in front of us. Much of our suffering and confusion comes through wishful thinking or avoidance.
2. Understand and try to practice with the sense that each moment is an opportunity, to see what is happening and what is possible. Passing someone on the street is an opportunity. Talking with strangers is opening up a new world. Avoiding people who live on the street is to deny our relationship and responsibility.
3. If we don't include the possibility that each person is suffering, we lose sight of them in some way, and cut off a chance for real communication.
4. Talking about Alzheimer's with my family recently, we acknowledge what we are facing, and we committed to facing it together. Even though the challenge feels overwhelming, it felt good to talk openly and consider it together.

When we say something, our subjective intention or situation is always involved. So some distortion is always present in a statement. Through our master's language we may come to understand things as they are at each moment.

My initial reaction to this statement is interesting. I accept the description, but I habitually frame it in terms of other people's distortions, rather than my own. I think this is quite typical. We all like to think that we are the clear ones, who make sense, and reference the bias in other people's habitual concerns, emotional tone and world views.

To notice our own distortions requires working with people, practicing with others or having a partner. Work relationships reveal our gifts and limitations, but also our attitudes and our abilities to develop or limit ourselves. Friendliness and a willingness to listen go a long way in developing good relationships. We usually don't see how our style of intensity, individuality or narrow focus can limit our ability to see more completely and work with the situation, rather than at cross purposes. Being a good cook doesn't mean that you are an asset in the kitchen, if you don't know how to work and move with others.

Because sitting reveals our tendencies of impatience, speed, or hesitancy with people, it allows us to unwind some of the karmic knots which wear on others and prevent us from developing a feeling for the rhythm of work and communication. Sitting allows us to listen to ourselves. When we hear how repetitious or predictable we are, we may offer fewer, but more fitting words.

To understand reality as a direct experience is the reason we practice zazen, and the reason we study Buddhism. Through this study, you will understand your nature, your intellect and the truth present in human activity. And you can take your nature into account when you seek to understand reality. But only by actual practice of Zen can you experience reality directly and understand the statements made by your teacher or Buddha. Strictly speaking, it is not possible to speak about reality, but as a student, you have to understand it directly through your master's words.

Soto Buddhism presents a very plain background for our practice. This is particularly true in monastic settings and retreats. We do the same things in the same way with everyone. Our hesitations, aversions and compulsions are more palpable. Eventually, even we begin to notice. I believe that it is impossible to understand people without a sense of empathy, a readiness to appreciate their gifts and a willingness to overlook their failings or struggles. We emphasize people's negatives out of our own insecurities. If we are being critical of others, we need to consider our need to inventory people and make judgments. It is said that it is much better to see people as unknown and mysterious, rather than react based on our struggles and insecurities.. There is a paradox in Zen: *Not knowing...is most intimate....*

Your teacher communicates not only through words, but also through behavior. In Zen we put an emphasis on demeanor, or behavior. Not in any particular formal way, but rather as a natural expression of ourselves. We emphasize straightforwardness. You should be true to your feelings and your mind, expressing yourself without any reservations. This helps others to understand you more easily.

Tea ceremony turned out to be the most enduring influences of early days at Zen Center. I couldn't begin to relate what I learned during those years, and can hardly remember the forms which were part of every session. But watching those who taught and those I studied with have given me a lifetime appreciation of the qualities of care and consideration which underlie all of these traditions and study. The archaic forms: the rituals, pace and the repetition inspire a sense of elegance and appreciation which I had seen in no other context. Tea offers no explanations, just very specific forms which require care, quiet and concentration. You study by doing and observing. You might think that doing it right is the point, but that seems an incomplete view to me now. The study of tea reveals the limits of our consideration and concerns, in the same way

that Yoga reveals the limitations of the breath and the body. We have an opportunity to start from zero and participate in a very elegant world.

When you listen to someone, you should give up all of your preconceived ideas and opinions: just listen to him and observe the way he is. We put very little emphasis on right or wrong or good or bad. We just see things as they are, and accept them.

As we see every day in the news, the tone of political discourse has lost any sense of honoring the ability to listen. We use language and frame topics that are designed to elicit reactivity. Anxiety and anger seem to be what is referenced and passed off as public conversation. The great ones in any era, be they presidents or publishers, have risen above this fray and focused on our need to hear and reflect the best that is available to us. Lincoln, throughout his days in office, continued to meet with hundreds who came to see him. He called them: “public opinion baths”. Listening to everyone, encouraging the better angels, and reflecting them in his public speech.

The Buddhist recognition of the limiting value of labels: good/bad; right/wrong is based on an understanding that these concepts reinforce self serving and self centered thinking. To chant every morning to remind ourselves: *Delusions and inexhaustible, I vow to end them*, means we recognise that our vision is limited and distorted, and the corrective must come from us, rather than to force solutions or expect others to amend their understanding.

Usually when you listen to some statement, you hear it as a kind of echo of yourself. You are actually listening to your own opinion. If it agrees with your opinion you may accept it, if not; you may reject it or not really hear it. The other danger is to be caught by the statement. If you do not understand what is said in its true sense, you will easily be caught by something involved in your subjective opinion, or by some particular way the statement is expressed. You will take it only as a statement, without understanding the spirit behind the words.

If we feel the way we listen to others, we may notice an undertone of impatience and anxiety on our part. This is quite common in everyone. In argument, we are almost unable to attend to what is said without marshaling responses to support our own agenda, or point of view. This is not listening, and the exchange is not real communication. We are just debating. Our agenda is merely to enforce and enlarge our own conviction, at the expense of the other’s vision. To understand another, we have not only hear, but attempt to appreciate what they offer: the words and the intention behind them.

It is difficult to have good communication between parents and children because parents always have their own intentions. Their intentions may be mostly good, but the way they speak is often not so free, and usually too one-sided or not realistic. If parents learn to express themselves in various ways according to each situation, there will be no danger in passing on experience to their children.

Communication between generations is challenging on both sides. Parents want to protect or direct their children on paths which seem clear or practical. The next generation wants to discover their own way. Anxiety and impatience are common. Many children leave home as soon as possible, to free themselves of the assumptions, anxieties, good intentions, guilt and confusion that seems built into family life. We as parents are always behind in terms of understanding our children. Perhaps they know our concerns and hopes very well, but can't stand the unspoken pressure, judgment or concern.

A mind full of preconceived ideas, subjective intentions or habits is not open to things as they are. This is why we practice Zazen: to clear our mind of what is related to something else.

Over the years, sitting may help us see the contours of our thinking and our habits. We may come to see sitting and the "*nothing special*" attitude toward our activity and relationships with others as being very basic, rich and healing. We have no big agendas and nothing pending. We are informed every day by the Heart Sutra and all that it inspires. *No ignorance and no extinction of it. No Stopping, No Path and No Attainment, with nothing to attain.* Eventually, these obscure ancient words find resonance and expression in our lives and relationships. We have time and consideration. We can appreciate warmth and the cultivation of connection. We can discover renewed relationships and the possibility of talking with strangers. Life can slow down and open up. Suzuki once said: "*If you sit Zazen, you are quite safe. For those who don't practice: Without knowing it, what they do comes out of fear. Something may be lost for them.*"

To be true to ourselves and also follow what others say or do is quite difficult. If we try to adjust intentionally, it is impossible to be natural. If you try to adjust yourself in a particular way, you will lose yourself. So without any fancy way of adjusting yourself, to express yourself freely as you are is the most important thing to make yourself and others happy. You will acquire this kind of ability by practicing Zazen. Zen is not some fancy special art of living. Our way is just to live, always in reality, in its exact sense. To make our effort, moment after moment, is our way.

The only thing we can actually study in this life is focusing on what we are doing at each moment. Sitting allows us to begin to sort things out and appreciate the contours of our habits and moods. We become less rigid and demanding that things be a certain way: rather we begin to feel out how they actually are. We may discover feelings of confidence and consideration which arises out of our sitting experience. We can say what we feel and need to say: with less concern and hesitation.

Even if we are unable to affect the course of things, we can take comfort in at least hearing and being heard. Our agendas may become more tentative on a day to day basis, and yet our intention and resolve continue to grow over time. We arrive at a more complete understanding of our place and our relationship to others: our independence/dependence and interdependence.

To study Buddha's words in their exact sense means to study them through the activity which you engage in, moment after moment. This means that we should be concentrated with our full mind and body on what we do, and we should be faithful: subjectively and objectively, to our feelings. The life of the body: our body and Buddha's body is the life of practice. Sitting reveals how vital this direct relationship is. When we are aware of our breath and posture, our mudra and our vision, we are in the present. When we find ourselves in reveries of past or future dilemmas and anxieties, we are, as Buddhists say: *lost in a sea of miserable destinies*. We begin to sense this difference in ourselves and others. We do not have to be involved in calculation or intention to relate and connect with others. Saving all beings may be: to connect with all beings. Compassion may be our simple presence.

Even when you do not feel so well, it is better to express how you feel without any particular attachment or intention. So we might say: I'm sorry, I don't feel so well. That is enough. We should not say: You made me so. That is too much. You may say; I'm sorry, I am so angry with you. There is no need to say that you are not angry when you are angry. You just say: I am angry. That is enough.

Success or failure, feeling good or bad is not the point. *The Buddha Way is beyond fullness and lack.* It took many years for me to notice this statement, and more time to appreciate it. The Dharma is stated in the most clear and simple language from the beginning. It is our own limitations and assumptions which cloud the picture, and present obstacles on our path. Sitting and community practice have been developed, modeled and offered for us: to step into this world of practice. There are many gates to this ancient and yet contemporary world. We can meet and study, we can sit at home or together; in person or on Zoom. All of this support and challenge is available. The Mahayana Way can be translated as The Great Vehicle. It is a way of transport and vitality. It responds to our dearest concerns and highest aspirations. Even when we don't know where we are going, it can guide and support us. In the Soto Way, we no longer are concerned about realization, we know that our freedom is the practice of everyday intention and acceptance. True communication depends on our being straightforward with one another. If you do not understand what is right before you, your master may use his staff on you. What is it?, he may say. Our way is very direct. This is not our traditional way, however. The best communication may be just to sit, without saying anything. Then you will have the full meaning. If I use my staff on you until I lose myself or you die, still it will not be enough. The best way is just to sit.

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