

Dogen in his Great Fascicle: *Genjo Koan: To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized (enlightened) by all things.*

Suzuki offers a caution on this point: *Our purpose is to study ourselves: not Buddhism. But it is impossible to study ourselves without some teaching.*

We might wonder at this point, what is Zen Teaching: There are centuries of Buddhist studies, and the surviving documents and commentaries on Shakyamuni's original talks( referred to as sutras) which were spoken over 2500 years ago, not written down until shortly before the Christian Era. The first written records were originally in dialects including Pali and Sanskrit, and later translated into Chinese and all of the languages of the Asian subcontinent where Buddhism was practiced.

In Soto Buddhism, which we inherited through Rev. Suzuki, there is a vast body of literature in the form of Sutras and Shastras, and over 1500 years of Koan stories and commentaries and studies on everything that survived: A mountain of Buddhist scripture and study. Far more interesting for me than this literature, and what I encountered when I began: is the practice of Zazen and the monastic forms and schedule. Every developed Buddhist practice place includes these elements: Monastic forms, schedule, administrative roles for directing work and responsibility. Most importantly, we are practicing within a Sangha, or community. The importance of these relationships and temple practice can only be appreciated over time.

He goes on to say: *To study just the teaching alone, it is impossible to know what "i" is. The teaching is not ourselves, it is rather some explanation of ourselves.*

Many people try to understand Buddhism through books: although engaging and inspirational, books do not help reveal ourselves in the ways that sitting, sesshin and living in community do. So we say, practice is not something to talk about, rather it is something we do. There is the challenge of sitting, and the process of locating and engaging with others in community. Each person is a living experiment: making sense of sitting, study and the life of community. Getting to know and appreciate people takes time. Making friends and finding comfort in the midst of the demands of community: all of this takes time. Sitting with others creates a sense of connection and familiarity. You might recognise someone by the sound of their footsteps or their posture. We come to appreciate the efforts and the unique gifts of others in practice. There is also friction, which we find throughout our life in trying to work and live with others. The friction of relationship and the challenges of the schedule, the demands of work, identity and rank. We may begin thinking about the mysteries referred to in books, but the mysteries of

our relationship with others is more salient and illuminating. There is a process of identifying and surrendering to the challenges of practice, but we can't lose ourselves in them either. Practice is a lifetime study...

Sitting and study with a group or community is the best way to investigate and locate ourselves in practice, but how we relate and invest in community is also a koan. How long do we commit, and having committed, at what point do we regain our footing and map our own way forward. How long do we ride the bus, and where is it going?

*So.. attaching to the teacher or the teaching is a big mistake.*

Relating to a teacher is one of the great mysteries of practice. It is tempting to judge them, in the same ways we judge anyone, but imagining we understand people is a delusive and limiting way of practice. When we begin to get a more grounded sense of the real shape and scale of practice, we may find our sense of who our teacher is changing. For some, attachment to the teacher is a problem, and for others maintaining a distance is their way. The ideal is to cultivate an open, direct relationship with them, in meeting and describing our challenges and experience. These meetings don't have to be complicated, but we often bring our own expectations and confusions to the relationship. Because a teacher is familiar with the pitfalls of practice, particularly in community, they can help you locate or give shape to some of the dilemmas and contradictions that block us. Not because he understands you so well, but rather through his experience of studying with many people over many years. In trying to protect or distinguish ourselves, our patterns become clearer against the backdrop of practice and community. Suzuki said it most clearly and directly here:

*You should be independent, but you need a teacher to become independent.*

Living in community can look like cultivating incestuous and dependent relationships. Over time we begin to see more clearly what these issues are to us and what we need to develop to maintain both rigor and balance.

*If you are not attached, the teacher can show you the way to yourself.*

*The teacher is for yourself, not for the teacher.*

Although there is usually some leader or teacher in practice, we may find that our most illuminating or encouraging relationships occur among peers, people who we see regularly. We may visit with a teacher only a few times a year, but discovering who best exemplifies our ideal, they (our real teachers) could turn up anywhere. How they exemplify practice are intimations of what matters and what sustains us.

*Rinzai's four methods of instruction: talk about the disciple, talk about the teaching, sometime an interpretation of the student or the teaching, and finally*

*Give no instruction at all.* A teacher is someone who has a developed feeling for the shape of practice: How we struggle to make sense of sitting, how we distract ourselves and engage in repetitive self limiting behavior. How we get distracted by comparisons and weighed down by our insecurities. This could go on for some time. Eventually, our

attachments become less constricting and we develop ways of understanding and extending practice, and most critically: of maintaining and continuing our sitting.

*Strictly speaking, there is no need to teach a student. The student is Buddha, even though he may not be aware of it. This is a big challenge for most of us. To be a Buddha is not a designation of rank, but rather a recognition of our responsibility to ourselves and others. To be a Buddha means to stand up on your own.*

*And if he is aware of it, if he becomes attached to this realization, that is already wrong. The purpose of practice is to study ourselves. To be independent, we study. We need a teacher because it is impossible to study ourselves by ourselves. We are the obstacles in our path, our own source of confusion, our own factory of dreads and dissatisfactions. Over time, sitting can develop gratitude, humor and confidence. Without this more rounded and dispassionate feeling for our modes of relationship, we settle into cycles of anxiety and repetition. With practice, we are able to become clearer on the sources or shape of our struggle. This does not mean that we are able to release these patterns or our attraction to these dilemmas. Although at some point, some of these constrictions may fall away, but usually not by our agency of design.*

*To find the meaning of our life in the Zendo is to find the meaning of our everyday activity. To be aware of the meaning of life, we practice Zazen.*

Sitting is self discovery. We see the restlessness, the impatience, the repetition, the anxiety, foreboding and regret in our sitting practice. More importantly, we see how these habits and forces obscure our vision and our energy. By learning how to work with our distractions, we develop a feel for the states and energies that focus our attention and settle our minds. We are able to bring a sense of that rhythm and pace to our wider lives. We are no longer so hungry for experience, or need to fill up the space around us with activity or comment.

*When practicing at Eiheiiji, we did not feel we were doing anything special, our monastic life was the usual life. People who visited were the unusual people.*

Practicing with our attention, our posture and our breathing, we begin to outgrow the habits which fuel our restlessness and hunger. Sitting for days or even weeks may seem strange or extreme. When we settle, we see and hear the world around us. We are available to the wonder of the creation and see more clearly our dynamic relationship to it. Walking in the redwoods inspires the same expanded feelings as are created by the great cathedrals. They were designed to engender a sense of awe and humility.

But the day to day experience of practice is not particularly exciting or inspirational. We just sit, study, work and eat: taking care of our lives and our days. Like rocks in a pebble mill, polishing & rubbing up against each other, Generating heat and occasional

warmth, appreciating the food and the weather. Working with our energy and learning the proper pace of work and relaxation.

*Returning after many years: I had a big feeling. But those practicing actually do not feel anything special. To feel something about Buddhism is not the main point. Feeling good or bad is out of the question. We do not mind. Buddhism is not good or bad. We are doing what we should do. That is Buddhism.*

Doing what we should do is an interesting statement. How do we know this, in the midst of our many demands and endless choices? Perhaps this starts with the realization that much of the time we don't know what to do, or rather spend much time engaged in activity which is far from satisfying our original intention. Buddhist practice in community is taking on another set of priorities, many of which are not our own. We may discover some resistance (there will always be some of that) and we may also experience a world of quiet comforts and relief. Working for the sake of the work, rather than a feeling of obligation or necessity. Our relationship to time may become more nuanced and measured. We can adjust our pace to the requirements of the work or the situation. We no longer work just to get it over with.

*Some encouragement may be necessary, but that is not the purpose of practice. It is just a kind of medicine. We should not mistake medicine for food.*

The medicine he is referring to can take many forms, early on, for some, it might have been drugs or spiritual adventure stories. All of these inducements have their place. We may have been motivated to escape a convoluted family or relationship, a career setback or dismay at the endless conflicts, distractions and confusions which populate our culture and media. In this context, idealism might be a kind of medicine. It usually takes something substantial to move us to join a sangha or seriously engage in practice. To take on these demands means that we are ready to let go of our previous directions and strategies, and consider the priorities which practice suggests. We usually don't know what we are getting into.

*With Rinzai's four methods: the perfect one is not to give the student any interpretation of himself, or any encouragement. If we are our bodies, the teaching is like our clothes. Sometimes we talk about clothing, and sometimes about our bodies. But neither our bodies or our clothing is actually we ourselves. We ourselves are the big activity, and we are expressing a small part of it.*

Although our fascination with ourselves is endless and the pitfalls are more clearly revealed through practice, it is good to be reminded that Buddhism is pointing us in the direction of self sufficiency. If the challenges of practice are like working with a bonsai. (or a snake in a bamboo tube), then learning to stand up on our own is what we call a Buddha. Since we are hungry for information, we are often looking for encouragement or medicine from the teacher or the practice. Eventually we develop a sense that more information will not save us. What we begin to develop is a feeling for something which

is not our own design, but somehow part of our own creation. We begin, as they say in the Lotus Sutra, being turned by the Dharma Wheel. At some point, we begin to discover that we are turning it by ourselves and with others. Suzuki closes with a wonderful statement, which I prefer to leave without comment:

*So it is alright to talk about ourselves, but there is actually no need to do so. The purpose of talking about ourselves is to correct the misunderstandings that come through attachment. We talk about what our body is and what our activity is, so we will not make any mistake about them. To talk about ourselves is actually to forget about ourselves. This is confession. This is intimacy.*

*The purpose of studying Buddhism is to study ourselves and to forget ourselves. When we forget ourselves, we are actually the true activity of big existence, or reality itself. When we realize this, there is actually no problem whatsoever. We can enjoy our life without difficulty. The purpose of our practice is to be aware of this fact.*

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