

# The Backbone of Practice

The practice of zazen is the backbone of zen practice. So what is zazen and how do you do it. To discuss this I would like to talk about the teachings of two zen masters. These particular teachings are not specifically zazen instructions but make it very clear what zazen is and how to do it.

First, there is the koan Ordinary Mind is the Way. This koan is an interaction between Nansen, the teacher, and Joshu, the student.

Joshu asks Nansen, "What is the Way"? This question is the same as asking "What is Tao"? or "What is Buddha"? Nansen says, "Ordinary Mind is the Way". That is, ordinary mind is the essential nature of mind. It is the Tathagata, suchness, Tao and Buddha. Ordinary Mind is everything, just as it is, without any distortion.

Joshu asks Nansen, "Should I try to direct myself toward it or not"? Nansen responds, "If you try to direct yourself toward it, you deviate". This is a very important teaching, especially with regard to the practice of zazen.

First, if you try to move toward it, who is doing the moving? Any who moving toward any destination is separation. From the perspective of Emptiness, the absolute, this is illusion.

Second, Ordinary Mind, The Way and Buddha are the entire world. You can never be away from the entire world, so any attempt to move toward it, is delusion.

In Genjokoan, Dogen says something similar. He makes two statements to define delusion and enlightenment. They are: Conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice-enlightenment is delusion. All things coming and carrying out practice-enlightenment through the self is realization.

It's plain to see that Dogen is encouraging us to stop directing our mind, especially in the practice of zazen. This is the essence of shikantaza, or just sitting. Just sitting is ordinary mind. When one is just sitting or practicing ordinary mind, there is no separation. There is no need to go anywhere or do anything. You are already there! You are already it!

So how does one just sit or practice ordinary mind? The answer is found in the five aggregates, negatively presented in the Heart Sutra. The five aggregates are form, sensation, perception, mental formations or conceptualization and consciousness. The Buddha teaches that man, as well as the rest of the world, is made up of these five aggregates and nothing more.

Form is the physical universe, all things, all energy, everything. The remaining four aggregates are the domain of mind. It is important to note here that while the remaining four aggregates are the domain of mind, it doesn't mean that they are not grounded in and part of the physical universe. I remember a discussion I had with a friend many years ago. He was a science teacher, a smart guy. He was saying that thoughts were abstract, that they had no substance. He changed his view immediately after I responded that every thought he, or anyone else, ever had was a complicated series of chemo-electric physical activity in the brain.

Many years ago I asked my teacher, the Reverend Kondo Nakajima Roshi, "What is life?" He said, "What is your body made of?" I said, "Mostly water and a variety of other things." He smiled because that's a decent response. It states that we, our lives, are at one with the world. While it basically answers the question as asked, it's not the whole story. Life is not only body, it's also mind. A more complete view of life needs to include body and mind, their interaction with each other as well as their connection and interaction with the rest of the world. So a more complete definition is, 'Life is existence realizing existence'. This appears to be the least common denominator for most, if not all forms of life other than the physicality of life, Body. Perhaps you could say that existence realizing existence is Mind.

Anyway, one who is awakened sees beyond the discrimination of this and that, the formula necessary for living being. Saving all sentient being is the manifestation of Prajna Paramita which sees beyond individuality to realize the unity and the interconnectedness of you and me.