

Guidelines for Studying the Way

Part V

Tonight we explore the fifth point in Dogen's Guidelines for Studying the Way.

In the last segment we looked at the statement **“you should not practice with the idea of gain.”**

This part starts with: **“you should seek a true teacher to practice Zen and study the Way. If the beginning is not right, myriad practice will be useless. How true these words are. Practice the way depends on whether the guiding teacher is true or not.”**

He goes on to say: **“the student is like wood and the teacher a craftsman. Even if the wood is good without a fine craftsman, you won't see the beauty. Its extraordinary beauty will not be revealed.”**

He also speaks about the teachers in Japan he has met that are **“immature”** although they **“write books and give talks”** he says, **“they have not understood the way...they taught people to seek enlightenment outside the mind or to seek rebirth in a better land. Confusion starts from this.”**

I remember Roshi telling me a story that when he was a student he went to see Maezumi Roshi in daisan ... Maezumi asked him right off; what is Buddha? And my teacher responded “you are Buddha” and Maezumi slapped him saying no!! “You are Buddha.” Roshi told me he never forgot that teaching - I would have been hit plenty.

I was lucky to have a teacher who pointed out that the Way began in my own body mind and heart...that is, right here, where I am...who I am. So now I say to all of you, you will never find freedom or end what plagues you by imitating others or by looking outside of your own experience and truth. You must inquire into your own life, so the old saying goes: “if you see the Buddha on the road, kill him.”

Dogen then says **“even if you have good medicine you must know how to administer it appropriately.”**

So Dogen tells us that it is not that the teachings are off or untrue, it is that those teaching it did not do so skillfully so the “good medicine became poisonous”.

The way we heal our sickness and our suffering is to be willing to meet the moment we have in front of us. We do this for example by mindfully noticing and acknowledging the things we most want to avoid or hold on to. Our anger, greed, behavior, need for approval or to feel special, judgments we make.

When we are able to consider these things to inquire about them, say “yes” and study these patterns, then they become good medicine. I'd like to suggest we all take just one day to notice and say “yes” to whatever comes our way and see what happens. This is a good way to return to the life we have rather than the life we wish for. This way we work with even the most difficult of issues: old age, sickness and death by embracing them. This is not easy and takes a

lot of courage and determination; we embrace our deepest fears and in that embrace we transcend them. Then what was poison becomes medicine.

Dogen says “Before they establish true understanding they are absorbed only in their own thinking, and they unwittingly cause others to enter a realm of confusion. What a pity. Those who are teachers do not yet understand this confusion. If the teachers don’t know how can the student know? If you want to know the unsurpassed Buddha way, you must be willing to travel great distances and call on the masters and reflect deeply on the vital road outside thoughts.”

In our practice of zazen we begin to develop a sense of presence that runs like a river underneath our thoughts and beliefs. We know we can’t stop our thinking mind, the brain creates thoughts but we can smile at them just don’t get carried away by them, as I like to say they are real but not true. So we practice watching thoughts and fears come and go but don’t get so interested in them. We view them as passing show. We should ask ourselves: when all the narratives and stories are not engaged, what is there?

Then he says “until you have a true teacher it is better not to study, regardless of the teacher’s age or experience, a true teacher is someone who has simply apprehended the true teaching and the authentic teacher’s seal of realization. He does not put scriptures of doctrine or understanding first. He will be free of the entanglements of concepts in words. He is not concerned with self views and does not stagnate in emotional feelings.”

This just means a good teacher has emotions, thoughts and feelings. No teacher is made out of stone. Emotions and feelings are not bad, a good teacher is one that just doesn’t stay stuck in them...they work with thoughts and feelings like clouds in a blue sky. For a true teacher practice and life situations are the same, they are intertwined, rather than saying one thing and acting differently. And in my view if you don’t have a teacher around it is still better to sit down and practice zazen and still better to read and study than not. I mean something may still come. And maybe birds, trees and ocean will teach you until you find a teacher. Maybe one word or a poem will crack you open. And even if you can only work with a teacher periodically just do that, maybe he or she will say one word and because you have been practicing which can make the soil of your heart fertile, their word becomes a seed that is planted.

I say just keep practicing diligently. Just keep questioning your thoughts and perceptions and keep your heart open. Nothing new can enter a closed heart but everything can enter an open one.