

Guidelines for Studying the Way

Part VI; session one of two

Dogen writes: **“practicing Zen, studying the Way is the great matter of a lifetime. You should not belittle it or be hasty with it. A master of old cutoff his arm, and another cut off his fingers”**.

To realize our true self, our true nature we need to make a real effort, a determined effort. You are fooling yourself if you think you can read a few books, sit a little on weekends or just practice occasionally and get anywhere. As I have said in the past, we’re not here to just be a club socializing and doing a bit of meditation. Operating that way nothing will change for you.

I have seen this in the Christian faith as well. We go to church occasionally, listen to a sermon, say some prayers at Easter, give up candy for lent feel good about ourselves and then go home but nothing really changes in our life. It ends up being another way of staying in the realm of ego. Doing what is easy and convenient.

I’m happy we are really working at transformation here. We don’t need to be monks in a monastery to practice well...we can do this here and see our lives change. Many of you have told me you’ve noticed a change in your day to day lives. Even more interesting is that your partners, spouses or significant others say so!! (laughter) I’m very happy about it. We ordinary people can do extraordinary things. By that I mean being more compassionate and loving toward ourselves and others. Opening to, being with the life we have instead of dreaming about the life we want, but you have to want and work for it like anything else right? I mean if you want to be a great singer, you can’t just practice once a week.

You don’t have to cut off your arm but we have to do it, we are capable of doing it.

I spoke of our three practices: daily zazen, applying the teachings into how you live, going to sesshin on a regular basis. This is essential because our conditioning is so chronic, and deeply patterned, the way we cut ourselves off from our life.

I was reading a book by the poet David Whyte where he is teaching a poetry workshop and one woman wrote a haiku. She wrote: “I turned my head away for one moment and it became my life for 10 years,” so it can happen that fast to us, losing 10 years of our life in a dream.”

Dogen writes: **“people of the present say you should practice what is easy to practice, they are not at all in accord with the Buddha way. If this alone is what you regard as practice, then even lying down will be wearisome. If you find one thing wearisome, you will find everything wearisome. It is obvious that people who are fond of easy practice are not capable of the Way.”**

Well, it is clear if we only do what is easy and comfortable we collapse in on ourselves. We stay couch potatoes. “oh, I don’t want to get up early to go to the zendo tonight: or, “oh, I am hungry and the world cup soccer game is on - I’ll just skip zazen tonight” So if we only do what is easy, life will be a burden because life is not easy and accomplishing anything worthwhile is not easy. And the more we operate this way the more we fall into it like quicksand. Everything becomes wearisome because we are.

“Students who would like to study the way must not wish for easy practice. If you seek easy practice you will for certain never reach the ground of truth or dig down to the place of treasure. Even teachers of old who had great capacity said practice is difficult. You should know that the Buddha way is vast and profound.”

Compared with the people of old - those of today do not amount to even one hair from nine cows.”

Well, there’s a nasty put down for you. The next time you wish to call somebody out as lazy, tell them their effort doesn’t even amount to one hair from nine cows.” (laughter)

Okay, so let’s just say that working to end our suffering and transform our lives before it’s too late is difficult. Practice is difficult too and to do it means making a great effort.

Otherwise, you must ask yourself what am I doing here. If you don’t come into daisan, go to regular sesshin, show up and help out the sangha, you must ask what are you doing and why? As I’ve asked before maybe asking what is my secret goal in being here?

So we need to see how we cut ourselves off from life. To understand that grasping for certainty and our usual scenarios for suffering happen very fast. Which is why we practice returning to being present and let go, this so we can let the world in, but it takes great courage and regular practice and whether you want to or not is secondary. We do it anyway.

We practice to transform those difficult situations life presents us with. We won’t do this if our credo is, I’ll do it if it’s easy.

The next teaching Dogen offers us is: **“on the other hand we can see that breaking bones or crushing marrow is not difficult but to harmonize the mind is most difficult, to harmonize bodily activities is most difficult”**.

Breaking bones or crushing marrow means to me dealing with adversity.

When we tell people about sesshin they say “you are not going to talk all week? You are up at 5:15am every day? Are you able to do meditation for seven to eight hours? What about all the pain in your back and knees? Oh that’s too difficult, I’d never be able to do that”. But we do it. We work with these teachings, even painful teachings (which are sometimes the most helpful). We adapt, as I said last time, by stepping into the difficulty. Then it is not outside our life but just the way we do things, just the way we work with life situations things and we learn from it. One student a number of years ago had trouble with the silence of a week sesshin, but when she did it she said as she began to quiet down the thoughts “I feel so alive, so connected to my life. I heard birdsong like I’ve never heard it before”.

So Dogen says: **“what’s really difficult is harmonizing mind and body”**. I love Dogen’s word “harmonize” because that is really what we are doing. We drop notions of self that create a separation from our life that put us out of harmony with our actual life. We practice this when we bow and do kinhin too. These are practices of mind/body harmony. Noticing when we are a head without a body. We should bow and chant with awareness of what we’re doing. We chant and walk in harmony with our body mind and in relationship to others.

So consider zazen as quieting your distracting thoughts so you can hear the music of your life, harmonize with the music of life. We should ask ourselves or consider what our own song is and how we sing it rather than just hearing noise or following someone else's song. Now I ask you, can you express harmony of mind and body? Will you sing your own song?

Okay, so we'll continue with the next portion of Part VI next time.