

## EVERYWHERE I AM IS TRUE

Gekka Gensho was a Zen priest who left the monastery after forty years and lived a simple life as a layman in Kyoto, selling tea and writing poetry. He came to be known as Baisao (1675 – 1763) “the old tea seller.” One of his poems is this:

Making the busy streets my home  
right down in the heart of things  
only one friend shares my poverty  
a scrawny wooden staff;  
having learned the ways of silence  
amidst the noise of urban life  
taking things as they come to me  
now everywhere I am is true.

“Everywhere I am is true.” These words were first spoken by Lin-chi (Rinzai Gigen, d. 867) to convey the reality and authenticity of each moment.

When we first embark on the path of Zen, we first go inward to find something about ourselves and become centered, to set heart and mind at rest; then that inner energy carries us outward into the world, into our daily lives as lay people – teachers, attorneys, accountants, musicians, writers, healers.

In the going inward, we find that much of zazen is a refinement of the questions we bring to practice. The questions we bring to practice can open heart and mind. Questions, like “Who am I?” or “What is my deepest self?” or “What does this path hold for me?”, help us to go deeper and to become more familiar with our own inner terrain. When we have refined the questions sufficiently, or when they have refined us, then we can say that we are becoming intimate with practice.

So it is important to have a relationship with our questions and to honor them. “What is it? Who am I? Who is this one who sits and stands and walks and eats? Who listens? How am I living my life? How is everywhere I am true?” We must honor the one who sits and stands and walks and drinks tea. We must honor our own lives, so that our questions can lead us to the treasure of our rich inner life. At the same time, we must be patient. Character work on this path cannot be hurried.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926), one of the German language’s greatest poets of the twentieth century, once responded to a letter from an aspiring poet who had asked Rilke many questions. Rilke replied, “I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were... books written in a foreign language...” The point is to live everything. Live your questions now, in this moment with integrity, so that some day you will gradually, without even noticing, live your way into the answers. A western Zen student visited a Korean monastery not long ago and asked one of the monks if he is enlightened. The monk replied that he had forgotten all about it. A good meal was more important. Striving for it, you miss it. Search for it whilst not searching. Breathing in and breathing out is not difficult. When a breeze blows, enjoy the coolness. When sitting, just sit. Pay attention. Zazen is not story time.

Having questions, feeling confused, not knowing is not a problem. If we just do not know, that is a very pure thing — the value of haziness in the mist. Our intimate “not knowing” creates the place where we can sit patiently with our questions. In case 20 of the Book of Serenity (*Shoyoroku*), master Lo-han Kuei-ch’en (Rakan Keijin, 867 – 928) asks his student Fayen Wen-I (Hogen Bun’eki 885 – 958), “Why are you setting off on pilgrimage?” Fayen (Hogen) replies, “I don’t know.” Lo-han (Rakan) famously says, “Not knowing is most intimate.” The late Korean master, Seung Sahn (1927 – 2004) was fond of saying, “Only don’t know.”

Not knowing is most intimate. Zen stresses intimacy. The ultimately mindful is personally most intimate. Zen emphasizes that realization entails a shift to include a vast universe of immediate and personal interrelationships in the usual dimension of coming and going, self and other, past, present and future.

Appreciating and experiencing this harmony, and indeed something deeper than harmony, is a significant shift. Matsuo Basho (1644 – 1694) captures it with this haiku:

Coming along the mountain path,  
I find something endearing  
About violets.

“Endearing” is Basho’s expression of intimacy. He framed his verses as haiku, but many of them can be treated as koan. How would you show “endearing”?

We trust our practice to hold us, to contain us, to support us as we make our way each day in the world. And whilst it does, the Tao works in us and changes us from inside out, transforming us little by little. Yamada Roshi (Koun Zenshin, 1907 – 1989) said that the goal of Zen practice is perfection of character. Often we do not

want such a radical transformation. We simply want an answer, a solution, a quick fix. We want a pill to make the pain of our life go away. Yet, if we live the pain and the questions with patience, endurance and devotion, we receive in the long run far more than was desired in the first place. D. T. Suzuki (1870 – 1966) was quite open about this aspect of Dharma life. He said, “The koan has the flavor of something which can be resolved by the intellect, but it cannot. So it keeps the intellect busy whilst something else happens, whilst the real change is occurring.” The magician is at work. Intimacy is ripening.

And as the real change is occurring, the heart naturally begins to open, and we find that our interior life is rather luminous after all. We can see the Tao working in us. In the sacred, luminous quality of the interior life, everything changes – our instant reactions, our dreams, and especially our awareness that “now everywhere I am is true.”

Fu Daishi (497 – 569), a layman and early Zen figure in China, lived most of his life as a poor laborer. He often hired himself out in order to get money to give to the poor. Some of his sayings have come to us over the last fifteen centuries, sayings so powerful we still use them in our koan training:

Empty-handed I work the plough;  
whilst walking I ride the water buffalo.

In a well that has not been dug,  
water from a spring that does not flow is rippling;  
Someone with no shadow or form is drawing the water.

There was a sense of complete ease in everything he did – working the plough, riding the buffalo, playing the flute, drawing water. He saw the magical quality, the luminous quality, the pure empty quality of reality, of everyday life. Everywhere he was was true.

In case four of the *Shoyoroku* (Book of Serenity), Shakyamuni points to the ground and suggests that this spot would be perfect for a sanctuary. One of his disciples sticks a blade of grass into the ground and says, “The sanctuary is built.” The Buddha smiles since his teaching has been understood. Each moment, each thing, each grain of sand, contains the whole universe. You are a sanctuary: when you walk, the whole world walks as one walking sanctuary; when you sit, the whole world sits as one sitting sanctuary – past, present and future. Everywhere you are is true.

When you can experience, truly experience, that “now everywhere I am is true,” then there is joy, contentment and perhaps even happiness. And then practice leads into the world, into everyday life, in a new way and this is where the character work really counts. If you have been working with yourself, understanding the importance of living your own life, moment by moment, authentically, then you can tolerate any difficulty or doubt that arises. It can be borne. It is not about not thinking or not having any ideas, but rather it is about seeing and hearing and using our senses to respond appropriately to what each moment, each circumstance, requires of us. It is about being aware, attentive, expansive. It is about forgetting the self and uniting with whatever we are doing at the moment, so that there is no separation between self and other. Then the mind is not caught by anything and our *ki* reaches in all directions at once. Zen practice is learning to be that way more and more often throughout the day, whether at home or at work and with all people. Then we can offer our life to the service of others.

This is how we want to live, and this is where integrity comes to the fore, the devotion and commitment to the practice, the willingness to sustain the character work. The times when the way is dark and difficult do not cancel out the times when the way is luminous and clear, and we need to be as interested in the dark and difficult times as in the luminous and clear ones.

Sen no Rikyu (1522 – 1591), the father of the tea ceremony, was ordered by the Shogun, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, to commit *seppuku*, ritual suicide. He wrote this death poem:

Seventy years and now a sword.  
Welcome, O sword of eternity!  
Through Buddha and Bodhidharma alike,  
You have cleft the way.

He was as interested in his death as he had been in his life. So in this interweaving of darkness and light we realize that we can have sadness and also underlying joy. We can be in anguish and in pain, yet the underlying song is pure and strong and no longer ever really goes away. The deep current of joy in the universe carries us. The movement of joy and light into the world becomes stronger, and we follow it. What the moment requires of us, we do, forgetting self. It is that simple and clear. What needs to be done is to see the real thing just as it is, right in front of us.

This path is the interweaving of character and insight, of compassion and wisdom. And so we continue to work on our integrity, on our courage, on our patience, on our humility. We continue to breathe the questions, to allow the great unfolding of the inner life to come forth in all its truth.

And then we can appreciate Baisao's wisdom:

... having learned the ways of silence  
amidst the noise of urban life  
taking things as they come to me  
now everywhere I am is true.