

Notes and Quotes for December 17, 2023 *Dharma Reflections*:

What's On the Path?

Part Eight:

***Dhyāna pāramitā* (*The Concentration Perfection, or Settled, Focused Meditation*)**

Kōun Yamada Roshi tells us that “Buddhism does nothing other than to clarify who we are.” In nineteen sessions of *Dharma Reflections* so far, we’ve covered a lot of territory and have considered any number of concepts and tenets of the Buddhist tradition, and in doing that we have risked getting diverted from what is truly essential about it all—the imperative that each one of us personally guard the intention to clarify who we are. More than intention is required, of course. We must *practice* clarifying who we are.

What is that practice? It is *Dhyāna*, a Sanskrit word that has come to us transliterated to sound like “Zen.” What is the practice of Zen? We call it *zazen*. The main form of it involves sitting up straight, eyes open, staying present. What could be easier? What could be more difficult? Could it be any more simple? And could it be more elusive and subtle? Let’s explore:

“Great compassionate vows live in the hearts of bodhisattvas. By becoming concentrated on their vows, bodhisattvas deeply settle into, protect, and finally become completely one with them. Supported by the power of concentration, they are eventually able to stand steadfast in an unstable world and act in accord with their vows no matter what comes. With imperturbable presence, bodhisattvas can deeply observe all forms of life with compassion....

“We use the expressions *seated concentration* and *seated meditation* as overarching and interchangeable terms for the totality of great awakening on the bodhisattva path. In Chinese, this practice is called *tsochan*; in Japanese it is *zazen*....

“Bodhisattva tranquility is an open, undistracted, flexible, and calm awareness. It is a state of awareness that follows naturally from the first four perfections. The essence of training in concentration is letting go of discursive thought, letting go of thinking. It is not the suppression or elimination of discursive thought. This tranquil mind is not a blank slate, not directionless—it

has a clear orientation, which is the thought of realizing peace and freedom together with all beings. As our concentration deepens, it opens to the reality that we are not practicing alone, and that our practice is the same practice and same enlightenment as all beings....

“We begin the practice of concentration by being generous. This includes being generous toward our mind even when we are distracted. When we are gracious toward distractions, we immediately become more tranquil. Our ability to be generous enables us to wholeheartedly make our practice of tranquility into a gift for the welfare of all beings....

“We use our training in ethics to consider if we are trying to get anything out of our practice. It’s not ethical to take what is not given, so trying to gain anything other than what we are being given is an ethical infraction.

“We have developed patience to be present with whatever comes, and now we can notice if we are trying to get away from any painful feelings of body or mind or trying to hold on to the pleasurable feelings that may occur during concentration....

“In the practice of heroic effort, we have energized and sustained our enthusiasm for practice....

“Mindfulness of posture and breathing are among the most common aids to letting go of our thoughts and thus calming the mind. The practice of giving up thought is basically this: in the posture, there is just the posture; in the breathing, there is just the breathing.”

- ***Entering The Mind of Buddha—Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019, pp. 83-87.**

“In one of his first essays, “Bendōwa” (Talk on the Wholehearted Practice of the Way), written in 1231 a few years after his return from training in China, Dōgen describes this meditation as the samādhi of self-fulfillment (or enjoyment) and elaborates the inner meaning of this practice. Just sitting is simply expressed as concentration on the self in its most delightful wholeness, in total inclusive interconnection with all of phenomena. Dōgen makes remarkably radical claims for this simple experience. ‘When one displays the buddha mudra with one’s whole body and mind, sitting upright in this samādhi for even a short time, everything in the entire Dharma world becomes buddha mudra, and all space in the universe completely becomes enlightenment.’ Proclaiming that when one just sits all of space itself becomes enlightenment is an inconceivable statement, deeply challenging our usual sense of the nature of reality, whether we take Dōgen’s words literally or metaphorically. Dōgen places this activity of just sitting far be-

yond our usual sense of personal self or agency. He goes on to say that ‘Even if only one person sits for a short time, because this zazen is one with all existence and completely permeates all times, it performs everlasting buddha guidance’ throughout space and time. At least in Dōgen’s faith in the spiritual or ‘theological’ implications of the activity of just sitting, this is clearly a dynamically liberating practice, not mere blissful serenity, with striking potential environmental and societal implications.

“Through his writings, Dōgen gives ample indication as to how to engage this just sitting. In another noted early writing, ‘Genjōkōan’ (Actualizing the Fundamental Point), from 1233, Dōgen gives a clear description of the existential stance of just sitting: ‘To carry yourself forward and experience the myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and experience themselves is awakening.’ That we are conditioned to project our own conceptions onto the world as a dead object-screen is the cause of suffering. When all of phenomena (including what we usually think of as ‘ours’) join in mutual self-experience and expression, the awakened awareness... is present, doing buddha’s work, as Dōgen says.”

- ***Zen Questions—Zazen, Dogen, and the Spirit of Creative Inquiry*, Taigen Dan Leighton, Wisdom, 2011, Pp. 31-32**

“With the Dhyāna Pāramitā we move from the realm of morality into absorption, meditation, concentration—the realm of Samādhi. The two words *Dhyāna* and *Samādhi* are used almost interchangeably, particularly in East Asia, where they are sometimes combined into a single term. However, they can and should be distinguished. In formal practice, Dhyāna is the form and method of zazen and Samādhi is its condition.

“As the form and method, Dhyāna is charged with powerful implications. It is the archetypal Buddha seated under the Bodhi tree. It is also the method of settled, focused meditation he used and it is the method we use in our centers today....

“The extraordinary thing is that although Dhyāna is the name of our sect and is our primary method, usually not much instruction is given about it beyond advice to sit with the back straight, the spine bent forward slightly at the waistline, ears on a level with the shoulders, and nose on a line with the navel. Count your breaths, we are told. Within these very broad guidelines, the student has to reinvent the Way.

“There are certain advantages to reinvention. Once mastered, it is never lost. But lots of time can be wasted in exploring bypaths. I prefer to teach the perfection of zazen as I understand it, in as much detail as possible.

“For all the explanation, however, it is a simple method. Senzaki Nyogen Sensei often quoted his teacher, Shaku Soen Zenji: ‘Zazen is not a difficult task. It is a way to lead you to your long-lost home.’ It doesn’t take much time to find that home. In fact, if you lower your eyes and breathe quietly in and out, your distractions disappear and your long-lost home is right there. Notice what a pleasant place it is!....

“Sitting quietly, facing the wall like Bodhidharma, as Bodhidharma, is the vast and fathomless Dharma itself. It is the home of practice. But explaining the original dwelling place in such a way can be like showing a rose to a new gardener. How to get from here to there is the question....

“Our great Ancestors, beginning with the Buddha himself, had magnificent intellects and used their minds cogently and vigorously in their teachings. But first things first. Your practice is to cut off the loops. However, your thoughts will not die down if you try to block them. The more you press against them, the more they press against you. This pressing is a single act. It is you pressing against you and the upshot is that you get tired and frustrated....

“Practice is not just a matter of formal zazen. In Zen Buddhist schools, we tend to think of Dhyāna practice as the way of rigorous zazen, exacting dokusan or interviews, and cogent teishos or Dharma talks. But Dhyāna is also a matter of character, specifically spelled out in the old texts as Brahma-viharas, the Four Noble Abodes of loving kindness, compassion, joy in the liberation of others, and equanimity or impartiality. Hakuin Zenji agrees:

*Offerings, precepts, Pāramitās
Nembutsu, atonement, practice—
the many other virtues—
all rise within zazen.*

“They rise within there because zazen is the practice of dropping away body and mind, of completely forgetting the self and its preoccupations. The forgotten self is the unselfish self, at one with the self of all beings across the world and back through time.”

- ***The Practice of Perfection—The Pāramitās from a Zen Buddhist Perspective, Robert Aitken, Pantheon Books, 1994, pp. 87-93***

***“Knowing that through superior insight endowed with thorough calm abiding
The mental afflictions are completely subdued
To meditate with the concentration that perfectly goes beyond
The four formless states is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

“On the basis of excellent, fully authentic calm abiding—the mind placed one-pointedly on a focal object—the superior insight that realized emptiness will completely subdue ignorance, the root of samsara, by drawing the mental afflictions from their root. Knowing this, meditate with concentration that employs the special method of perfectly going beyond mundane meditative absorptions, such as the four formless states, in which calm abiding is predominant.

“The *Letter to a Friend* states:

Without concentration there is also no prajna.

“Even if someone has generosity and [the other paramitas], if they do not have concentration, they will come under the power of utter distraction. Then, being devoid of any prajna, they will become wounded by the sharp teeth of the mental afflictions.”

- ***A Guide to the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, Dzatrul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, Snow Lion, 2020, P. 155.**

“Although sitting is the foundation of zazen, it is not just any kind of sitting. Not only must the back be straight, the breathing properly regulated, and the mind concentrated beyond thought, but, according to Dogen, one must sit with a sense of dignity and grandeur, like a mountain or a giant pine, and with a feeling of gratitude toward the Buddha and Dharma Ancestors, who made manifest the Dharma.”

- ***The Three Pillars of Zen (35th Anniv. Ed.)*, Philip Kapleau, Anchor Books, 2000, p. 10**

“Without zazen there is no Zen. Zazen is the manifestation of the ten thousand dharmas, of the Great Way itself. We may study sutras, liturgy, art, body, and mind, but without zazen they remain only the study of sutras, liturgy, art, body and mind—not yet the study of the Great Way itself. To study face-to-face with a great master, or even with the Buddha himself, remains only study. It is not yet the eyebrow-to-eyebrow, mind-to-mind intimacy of the Way that is realized through zazen. Zazen itself is the miraculous manifestation of supreme enlightenment. As such, all things sacred and secular, all the so-called ‘dragons and snakes,’ when encountered through

zazen, reveal the marvelous mind of nirvana, the exquisite teaching of formless form, the very body and mind of the Tathagatha. Zazen gives life to the Buddha.

“We should realize clearly, however, that zazen is not meditation, contemplation, visualization, or mindfulness. It is not to be found in the mudra, chakra, mantra, or koan. Neither in its stillness nor its functioning, its seated nor its active form, can zazen be said to be meditation. Zazen is not single-pointed mind, no-mind, aware-mind, or trance-mind. It is not revealed in words and letters, and is only transmitted one-to-one, from Buddha to Buddha.”

- **The Eight Gates of Zen—A Program of Zen Training, John Daido Looi, Shambhala, 2002, Pp. 82-83.**

“(A)lthough both the mind of the person seated in zazen and its environment enter realization and leave realization within the stillness of samadhi,... it does not disturb a single mote of dust, or obstruct a single phenomenon, but performs great and wide-ranging Buddha-work and carries on the exceedingly profound, recondite activities of preaching and enlightening. The trees, grasses, and land involved in this all emit a bright and shining light, preaching the profound and incomprehensible Dharma; and it is endless. Trees and grasses, wall and fence expound and exalt the Dharma for the sake of ordinary people, sages, and all living beings. Ordinary people, sages, and all living beings in turn preach and exalt the Dharma for the sake of trees, grasses, wall and fence. The realm of self-enlightenment *qua* enlightening others is originally filled with the characteristics of realization with no lack whatsoever, and the ways of realization continue on unceasingly.

“Because of this, when just one person does zazen even one time, he becomes, imperceptibly, one with each and all of the myriad things and permeates completely all time, so that within the limitless universe, throughout past, future, and present, he is performing the eternal and ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment. It is, for each and every thing, one and the same undifferentiated practice, one and the same undifferentiated realization. Only this is not limited to the practice of sitting alone: the sound that issues from the striking of emptiness is an endless and wondrous voice that resounds before and after the fall of the hammer.* And this is not limited to the side of the practitioner alone. Each and every thing is, in its original aspect, endowed with original practice—it cannot be measured or comprehended. You must understand that even if all the numberless Buddhas in the ten directions, as countless as the sands of the Ganges, mustered all their might together and by means of Buddha-wisdom attempted to

measure and totally know the merit of the zazen of a single person, they could not know the whole of its measure.”

[*translator’s note: “The merits of enlightenment are realized not only during zazen but also before and after. While zazen is essential for realizing *shunyata* or emptiness, the fundamental reality of the universe, the working of emptiness is beyond zazen and is not affected or produced by it.”]

- ***The Heart of Dogen’s Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, SUNY, 2002, Pp. 13-14.**

“Shakyamuni Buddha said that anyone can attain the Dharma. He used the following metaphor to explain this: ‘Holding this stick, hitting the earth.’ If you throw a stick you are holding down toward the ground, it will be absolutely impossible to miss hitting the ground. Similarly, if you persevere with zazen, liberation will be as certain as the stick that cannot miss hitting the ground. Anyone can attain liberation.

“Fundamentally, it is because of attachment to the ego-self that you have forgotten that you have your essence in your pocket. Delusion is the condition of desperately looking for it. Essentially, the Dharma is yours. So if you practice correctly and look for it, surely you can get hold of it.

“Sit single-mindedly. Penetrate zazen.”

- ***The Essence of Zen—The Teachings of Sekkei Harada*, trans. and edited by Daigaku Rumme, Wisdom, 2008, P. 137.**

“Sometimes people say Zen practice doesn’t work. Well, of course, it doesn’t work. The only thing that works is us. Our practice is our self. Practice is about awareness, and awareness is just our own selves. It’s not some thing, some formula that you can learn from a book and then do it. It’s not a form of calisthenics.

“Practice is the act of placing our awareness on what is occurring in this moment as best we can. It is the act of attention to this moment. It is the act of being as honest as we can in noticing what is really going on with us in this moment, noticing that we may not like what’s going on, and noticing our thoughts and impulses about what we would prefer to be going on. Finally, practice is experiencing what all of this is in our body, our being, and resting in that. Practice is

doing this over and over, thousands and thousands of times until it just wears out. We are the joy, love, and compassion of this moment, regardless of what it may look like on the outside.

“Practice is that which enables us to live a life that makes some sense and is harmonious. I don’t mean it’s something sugary sweet; it’s not. But it promotes the welfare of ourselves and other people. When we practice, we pay attention. The more we practice, the greater our understanding is not just of our selves, but of how life works, and how things more or less go. When we have that, we tend to have a life that’s more satisfactory. It feels better to us. We like, basically, to make sense.

“The act of sitting is part of the practice. It might seem very boring, very ordinary. But the ordinary is just a manifestation of the sacred. They’re not different. They’re absolutely the same thing. Whether you’re working on your car engine, going for a walk with a friend, or taking piano lessons, each of these things, done with awareness, is both ordinary and sacred, without twisting your mind around it, you’ll begin to feel a joy that embraces both happiness and unhappiness.”

- ***Ordinary Wonder—Zen Life & Practice*, Charlotte Joko Beck, Shambhala, 2021, Pp. 95-96.**

“It is tragic. People have been deluded for so long. They do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddhas. They do not recognize that their own natures are the true dharma. They want to search for the dharma, yet they still look far away for holy ones. They want to search for Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds. If they aspire to the path of Buddhahood while obstinately holding to their feeling that the Buddha is outside the mind or the dharma is outside the nature, then, even though they pass through kalpas as numerous as dust motes, burning their bodies, charring their arms, crushing their bones and exposing their marrow, or else writing *sutras* with their own blood, never lying down to sleep, eating only one offering a day..., or even studying through the entire *tripiṭaka* and cultivating all sorts of ascetic practices, it is like trying to make rice by boiling sand—it will only add to their tribulation. If they would only understand their own minds, then, without searching, approaches to dharma as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and uncountable sublime meanings would all be understood. As the World Honored One said, ‘I see that all sentient beings everywhere are endowed with a *tathāgata’s* wisdom and virtue.’ He also said, ‘All the illusory guises in which sentient beings appear take shape in the sublime mind of the *tathāgata’s* complete enlightenment.’ Consequently, you should know that outside this mind there is no Buddhahood which can be at-

tained. All the Buddhas of the past were merely persons who understood their minds. All the sages and saints of the present are likewise merely persons who have cultivated their minds. All future meditators should rely on this dharma as well.

“I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside. The nature of the mind is unstained; it is originally whole and complete in itself. If you will only leave behind false conditioning, you will be ‘such’ like the Buddha.”

- **From “Secrets on Cultivating the Mind” (Susim Kyōl) in *Tracing Back the Radiance—Chinul’s Korean Way of Zen*, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., Kuroda Institute, 1991, Pp. 98-99.**

“In his *Recommending Zazen to All People (Fukan Zazengi)*, Dogen Zenji says:

Even a hairsbreadth difference is already the difference between heaven and earth.

“A ‘hairsbreadth difference’ refers to even the tiniest remaining concept, and ‘the difference between heaven and earth’ means that the experience has already become a counterfeit product merely resembling the real thing. Zen has always run the risk of becoming sullied with concepts. However, in recent years, the tendency to spread false ideas about Zen has become more pronounced, and people dismiss Zen as just another system of thought. Some people will do all they can to avoid the hardship of sitting down in meditation and exerting themselves ceaselessly toward what is beyond knowing. Instead, they resort to this philosophy or that psychological theory to form their own views about Zen. Theorizing is much easier than actually practicing zazen.

“Of course Zen contains teachings and theories: the whole body of the sutras can be seen as theories about Zen, and Dōgen Zenji’s *Shōbōgenzō* is filled with instruction and dogma on Zen. Yet neither the sutras nor *Shōbōgenzō* are, in any sense, mere philosophical speculation. Their authors have clearly seen through the essence of the universe with perfectly enlightened eyes, and they use every means at their disposal to bring an awareness of this same world to students of Zen.”

- ***Zen—The Authentic Gate*, Kōun Yamada, Wisdom, 2015, P. 42.**

Possible Discussion Points:

1. To paraphrase Reb Anderson (page 1), we use the term *zazen* “for the totality of great awakening on the bodhisattva path.” Note that he doesn’t say that *zazen* produces awakening, or that it leads to awakening. What is he getting at?
2. Yamada Roshi said, “Some people will do all they can to avoid the hardship of sitting down in meditation and exerting themselves ceaselessly toward what is beyond knowing” (page 9). If the outcome is “beyond knowing,” what are we talking about?
3. Chinul taught (page 8), “As the World Honored One said, ‘I see that all sentient beings everywhere are endowed with a *tathāgata*’s wisdom and virtue.’” The Tathagata (one who is “thus come”) is an appellation for the Buddha. So you, and I, are endowed with the Buddha’s wisdom and virtue. What keeps us from living that truth?
4. Charlotte Joko Beck (pages 7-8) said, “Finally, practice is experiencing what all of this is in our body, our being, and resting in that. Practice is doing this over and over, thousands and thousands of times until it just wears out. We are the joy, love, and compassion of this moment, regardless of what it may look like on the outside.” This puts the (sometimes) difficulty or tedium of lots of sitting in a refreshing light.
5. The Buddha is quoted (page 7) saying, “Holding this stick, hitting the earth.” Roshi Kapleau used to say, “If you don’t let the Dharma down, the Dharma won’t let you down.” Does this level of certainty comfort (encourage) you?
6. Dogen taught (page 6), “Because of this, when just one person does *zazen* even one time, he becomes, imperceptibly, one with each and all of the myriad things and permeates completely all time, so that within the limitless universe, throughout past, future, and present, he is performing the eternal and ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment.” Let’s correct it to say that “he or she becomes,” and consider: can something be imperceptible and still be profoundly true and real?
7. Daido Looi Roshi said (page 6), “that *zazen* is not meditation, contemplation, visualization, or mindfulness,.... not single-pointed mind, no-mind, aware-mind, or trance-mind.” So

what is it?

8. Robert Aitken Roshi refers (page 4) to earlier masters who declared, “Zazen is not a difficult task. It is a way to lead you to your long-lost home.’ It doesn’t take much time to find that home. In fact, if you lower your eyes and breathe quietly in and out, your distractions disappear and your long-lost home is right there. Notice what a pleasant place it is!” Take a moment now... breathe quietly... and notice....

9. Taigen Dan Leighton (page 3) comments, “That we are conditioned to project our own conceptions onto the world as a dead object-screen is the cause of suffering.” In what way is this the same as saying self-centered attachment is the cause of suffering, or that ignorance is the cause of suffering?