Mindfulness
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MINDFULNESS IN PRACTICE

First Moment

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When asked why he did not study sutras, the fifth century Indian Buddhist Master Prajnatara replied:

> When I inhale, I don't dwell upon things.
> When I exhale, I don't pursue thoughts.
> Thus, I breathe the sutra, As-it-is-ness.
> Hundreds of thousands of millions of times
> (Kwong 2003)

This phrase, "as-it-is-ness" is a way of referring to experiencing reality directly and it is another way of expressing "suchness" or *Tathata* in Sanskrit. Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, used the phrase "things as it is" and at first, people thought he was confused grammatically, but he kept repeating it. "As-it-is" is a way of talking about the essential nature of reality—how things are in actuality, beyond thinking and concepts. So, breathing in—not distorting or filtering what is occurring right now; breathing out—not sticking to objects or adding anything extra to our experience, we embody reality just as it is, moment after moment, breath by breath.

The practice of *zazen*, or Zen meditation, is another way where we try to awaken to the essential nature of reality. *Zazen* has been described as "think not-thinking," "non-doing," "just sitting," "the dharma gate of repose and bliss," or "the dharma gate of joyful ease." In some ways, it is easier to say what *zazen* is not than what it is. What we try to do with the mind in *zazen* has a strong correlation to the attitude cultivated in martial arts of bringing your whole being to this moment, this one action, without thinking, comparing, hesitating, deliberating, strategizing, or equivocating. This is probably easier to do while engaging in something more physically active, like martial arts, than in sitting still for 30 or 40 min. Or you might be able to do it really well for the first 2 min or the last 2 min of *zazen*, but the other 38 min present the problem. In martial arts, the "wall" you face is the interaction and movement you have with your partner which is always changing, and in order to be ready for this dynamic interaction, you have to keep on your toes so you do not stick to the last interaction, you have to completely leave behind the interaction of the last moment. If you do not, you will get hit. In *zazen*, the wall we face is the mind itself. Actually, this wall is always right before us whether we face it or not.

In Buddhism, the word "mind" means consciousness or awareness as well as the objects or contents of mind including thoughts, emotions, memories, ideas, and so on. In *zazen*, we try to allow the contents of mind to settle so we can experience consciousness-as-it-is—the empty, open mind out of which our world arises. Engaging this bare mind cannot be done by trying to stop thinking or by controlling the mind because this kind of conscious attempt puts us on guard and narrows our experience. Also, using one part of mind to police another part obscures limitless mind. Rather than trying to control your thinking, in *zazen* try letting go of anything that hinders openness of mind. Let the barriers fall away. This has been described as intention without will. Suzuki Shunryu said you must open your mind like you open a tin can.

This reminds me that when I go to the dentist and my teeth are being cleaned, I go through this dance of tensing up reflexively and then consciously relaxing, many times. First I notice that I have tension throughout my body as if I am bracing myself, so I consciously relax. As long as I am paying attention, my muscles stay relaxed. But as soon as

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my attention drifts away, my muscles tense up again as a reflex to the expectation of imminent pain. When I realize that I have gotten carried away, I return to the tension and consciously relax again. But before long, I get carried away, again. In *zazen*, I begin by trying to be open, trying to stay close to the open spaciousness of awareness. But before I know it, a train of thought comes along; it feels almost as if there is a muscle in my brain that tenses up or engages while I am thinking. I try to relax that "thinking muscle" by breathing into it. Usually, I try to bring my attention down to the breathing in my lower abdomen, but this is more like bringing my attention to a kind of tension in my awareness and relaxing that tension by breathing, into my "thinking muscle," the same way I might breathe into a tense muscle anywhere in my body.

Going back to "as-it-is-ness," to be with "things just as it is," we have to surrender everything else. Jakusho Kwong (2003) said that "Being in the moment is a loss." What we are losing is "our self-centeredness, our self-clinging, our ideas, our conditioning." "We are also losing ourselves to the sound of crickets." He said, "...when we know how to... really lose, we know how to really be alive."

The monk Yakusan Igen practiced with Sekito Kisen in late ninth century China. One day when Yakusan was sitting *zazen* his teacher saw him and asked, "What are you up to here?" Sekito was checking in with his disciple to find out what was going on in his practice. Yakusan replied, "I'm not doing anything." Because this could mean a lot of things, Sekito persisted saying, "That sort of thing is idle sitting." Yakusan responded, "If it were idle sitting, I'd be doing something." Sekito asked, "This 'not doing' you speak of is not doing what?" Yakusan said, "Even the 10,000 sages don't know" (Bielefeldt 1988).

Yakusan's response, "I'm not doing anything" describes the activity of Zen meditation or *zazen*. It is the ultimate instruction for *zazen*. Just sitting not doing anything, not making anything happen or interfering with what is, but with the full engagement of body and mind, is *zazen*. Our challenge is to figure out how not "to do" in terms of the usual activity of our mind but also in the sense of "doing our selves"—the way we process and manifest our self. This non-doing is an activity which even the ancient masters could not describe. This, again, is a kind of intention without a goal or without grasping.

Zen Master Dainin Katagiri talked about the first moment of experience before we begin thinking. Thinking, associating, judging, categorizing, and so on, take place in the second and third moments of experience. By the second or third moment, what we have experienced has become conceptualized. It is no longer alive and unfolding. When our living experience is transferred to our mental world, it becomes a fixed concept, a dead experience that we are reviewing. In Buddhism, moments of consciousness are considered to occur about 53 times a second. So, the first moment refers to the first instant of an experience where we open ourselves to let it in, before we separate from and objectify it in order to interpret the data which then results in projecting our interpretation back onto the experience. The "first moment" is our direct experience before the filtering, associating, categorizing, and labeling processes of conceptualization are engaged

Katagiri (1998) said, "The first moment is beyond any idea we may have about it... It is not a matter of choice... Returning to the first moment is our practice. It is not something we can have an idea about. It is something we have to live..." He asked, "How do we wake up to the first moment?" And he answered, "We don't know..." So, in a sense how to actually do practice is beyond our control, there are suggestions and metaphors, but no clear directions like how to hook up your computer. We see this in the instructions for *zazen* that give so much concrete detail about what to do with our body and so little direction for what to do with our mind. Katagiri continued, "Returning to the first moment requires high resolve. This means we have to practice without excuses. We just do it." "...it is like meeting a moose on a country road. When you really face the moose, the whole world is a surprise... The first moment is nothing but astonishment. If you practice deeply on a daily basis, you can meet this astonishment for yourself."

The idea of "living in the first moment" is characteristic of Zen. Shunryu Suzuki described it differently as, "Sharing the feeling we have right here, right now..." He said, "Zen is, in one word, to share our feeling with people, with trees and with mountains wherever we are." In order to be able to share the feeling "right here, right now," we have to step outside the made up world in our heads. Suzuki continued, "But usually our mind is filled with something like ice cream or lemonade... or how much the soap costs in one store compared to how much will it cost in another store... So it is almost impossible to share the actual feeling we have, where we are right now" (Suzuki, 2000/2001).

He said, "That is how our life is going on—on and on and on endlessly, with some rubbish [in our minds]. It is not rubbish when you are using it. At that time, it is an important thing for you. But after you use it, it is not necessary to keep it. It is the same thing with our everyday life. Because we have too much useless rubbish in our mind, we cannot share our feeling with people, with things, with trees, or with mountains. Even though we are right in the middle of the woods, still we cannot appreciate the feeling of the woods. That is, I think, why we practice *zazen*."

Suzuki said, "Originally Buddha attained enlightenment after he gave up everything..." "We say 'he attained enlightenment,' but it may be better to say, He forgot everything completely! He had nothing in his mind at that

moment. And then he saw a morning star rising up from the east. That is, I believe, his enlightenment. When he saw the morning star, that was the first thing he saw coming out of his empty mind. That is why he had such joy at the sight of the morning star. In other words, he shared his feeling—the morning star's feeling." Then Suzuki added this wonderful twist saying, "We don't know. It is difficult to analyze whether that is Buddha's feeling or the morning star's feeling. Anyway he shared his feeling with the morning star."

Buddhist practice is based on trust, but not the kind of trust placed in something outside ourselves. It doesn't mean having faith that Shakyamuni Buddha was an enlightened being or believing that his teachings are the Truth. Practice is based on trusting our own innate wholeness. First, trusting that we are innately whole; and then trusting that, through practice, through returning to the present moment, over and over, that the blockage to our wholeness and the ways we distract ourselves away from our wholeness will diminish, to the extent that our wholeness will manifest itself, that we will know it through every cell of our bodies. I use "innate wholeness" to mean the same thing as Unconditioned Nature or Buddha Nature.

Learning to trust our innate wholeness allows us to be able to drop our thinking, and this is essential for entering the first moment. Most of our lives are spent in the second and third moments of experience in which our inner dialogue and commentary dominate, keeping us a step behind the direct experience of the first moment. To develop trust outside *zazen*, when you are doing simple things, especially physical activity, try to enter into the activity completely, without thinking. For example, when you walk, let the awareness in your feet do the walking. Be willing to let go of tracking your activity with your thinking and see what you find.

Trust and surrender go hand-in-hand. Trust is what allows us to surrender, to surrender our story, the story that separates us from everything else. Look for ways to trust this moment, to stay open to the first moment—where we lose our separation to the sound of the crickets, to the sound of rain. This is the true sutra.

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