

Devotion to Zazen

Zen practice initially appealed to me for many reasons; one of them being that there was no deity or worship involved. I read that the serious student was asked to “be a lamp unto one’s self” and that Zen training emphasized doing rather than believing in anything. These were welcomed invitations and a relief for a good Texas boy raised in the Baptist Church.

However, as I first read the basic instructions for zazen given in Dogen Zenji’s *Fukanzazengi*, I noticed a curious line. In describing this particular school of Buddhism, Dogen states that it is characterized by “...simply devotion to sitting, total engagement in immobile sitting.” What is this devotion? What does it ask of me?

As I searched for clues among the writings of modern Zen teachers I found an interesting and rather consistent message: Zazen is not a tool to be used to get something or get somewhere, which made it sound less than useful. At the very same time, zazen is described as the one essential thread that we all follow as disciples of Buddha. It is the practice to which we are to be devoted. However, the teachers I consulted talked about this devotion in a way I had never even considered.

Kodo Sawaki Roshi (1880 - 1965) would chastise his students by saying that zazen was “useless” and that they were going to “...waste their life in zazen. “ However, he followed this by saying in his usual gruff and enigmatic way, that if they didn’t devote themselves wholeheartedly to this useless activity, their lives might very well end up being useless. How am I to understand being devoted to a useless activity?

Norman Fischer, former Abbott of the San Francisco Zen Center made similar comments in his presentation to a gathering of Catholic and Buddhist Monastics at Gethsemani Monastery in 1999. He stated:

“Zazen is, fundamentally, a useless and pointless activity. A person is devoted to zazen not because it helps anything, or is peaceful, or interesting, or because Buddha tells one to do it – though we may imagine that it helps, or is peaceful, or interesting, or that Buddha recommended it – but simply because one is devoted to it. You cannot argue for it, or justify it, or make it into something good. You just do it because you do it. It is not even a question of wanting to, or not wanting to. Zazen is for zazen’s sake. Birds sing, fish swim, and people who are devoted to zazen do zazen with devotion all the time, although there is no need for it. Our life is already fine the way it is.”

These two teachers – one Japanese and one American – are offering what is, for me, a revolutionary view of devotion. It isn’t worship. It isn’t piety. It occurred to me that the way in which I had always understood worship suggests a powerful “other” to which I would offer my devotion; a separation. Also, if I look toward another as holy or pious, or even feel pious myself, then I am judging good and bad, higher and lower, sacred and profane; another big gap. Norman Fischer goes on to say, “...zazen is something different. If we do not appreciate its fundamental uselessness, which comes from the fundamental all-rightness of our life, we will turn it into something acquisitive and busy, just like everything else we do.” These teachers are pointing to a practice that is unique because it does not separate. There is something both profoundly ordinary (“useless” in their terms) and, at the very same time, essentially sacred (and therefore worthy of devotion) in the practice of zazen. Both qualities are present in this practice, a practice that, in the ultimate sense, we can’t actually do, but to which we can be devoted.

Reb Anderson says it this way:

“Conventionally speaking, Zen students say, “Now I am going to the meditation hall to do zazen.” However, the formal actions which you or I perform in assuming the bodily posture of sitting meditation is not actually the zazen of the buddha ancestors. Their zazen has nothing to do with sitting or lying down. These ritual forms which we humans practice are a ceremony by which we express and celebrate our devotion to the actual reality of zazen.”

The reality of zazen is not the activity itself yet it is contained in and celebrated by the devoted activity. I find that a way to express this celebration of my devotion to this inconceivable reality is to re-phrase the four Bodhisattva Vows. Consider them in this form:

Beings are numberless; I am devoted to their freedom.
Delusions are inexhaustible; I am devoted to ending them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I am devoted to entering them all.
Buddha’s Way is unsurpassable; I am devoted to becoming it.

If I live by these vows, and with this understanding of devotion, then who or what can be considered “other?” Who or what in my life can be treated badly or can be ignored? What should I take care of and what should I ignore? These questions point to the most practical aspects of everyday practice. The forms of Soto Zen training ask me to attend to everything with an even mind, to bring mindfulness to bear on each moment without picking and choosing, and to devote myself to the forms and ceremonies as a way of celebrating the Way as shown by Buddha. Reb Anderson says, “The ceremonial forms are opportunities for persons to embrace and be embraced by the inconceivable totality of zazen.” We can’t conceive of it. We can’t actually do it by our own power. However, we can be devoted to zazen and be embraced by this amazing reality.

This devotion is a form of compassion. We devote ourselves to meeting life as it presents itself. This requires courage and our vow is to be intimate with each moment, no matter what it brings. Sometimes we are able to offer ourselves in this way and sometimes we are not. However, the commitment – our vow – is demonstrated by our efforts, and zazen is the practice to which we return over and over. This is devotion.