Being at Home in the World

24.05.20

Okay. So, today I'm going to continue with a few thoughts that I've been thinking about during the last couple of weeks. So, this talk will be continuing a kind of series of talks on the existential and communal aspects of Zen practice. Last fortnight we talked about aloneness and isolation. And this Sunday the 24th of May, I'd like to explore the topic of being at home in the world or not being at home in the world. And I'm going to start with talking about the 13th century Zen Master Dogen, who when he was a young monk, he grew up with the teachings of what were called original enlightenment. In other words, the teaching that all beings are inherently enlightened right from the beginning. All beings meaning human beings, animals, trees, plants, mountains, seas, the earth itself.

So, this notion of original enlightenment was contrary to the notion of a step by step approach to enlightenment, being a kind of goal that one achieved either in this lifetime or some lifetimes in the future. So as a young man, as a young monk Dogen, basically struggled with the question of if we're all originally enlightened, then why practice? Why do we have to sit? Why do we have to make some kind of effort? So

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this became Dogen's personal Koan, and I'd encourage all of you to develop your own kind of personal version of that, as to why I practice if everything is already originally enlightened?

Another word that was often used or another metaphor that's been used for original enlightenment is the original dwelling place. And Robert Aitken Roshi wrote a book of essays entitled Original Dwelling Place. And so of course, the notion or metaphor of dwelling brings me back to the metaphor of home. And original dwelling place is the sense in which it points to this ultimate reality. That's always quite impossible to pin down in words, but the sense of original enlightenment, original dwelling place, points to this world that we live in being a Holy Place, being a sacred place, being an enlightened place.

So another way of asking a very similar question that Dogen asked then would be, well, if we are all originally dwelling or we are all originally at home in the world, why don't we always experience ourselves in this way? Why do we often, at times, fail to feel at home in the world? Or in the existential sense, we fail to dwell. We have that sense of unease. And I want to suggest in this talk that this notion of not being at home in the world, of homelessness or alienation, is another way of understanding

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the Buddhist word Dukkha. This notion of not being quite in sync, of never being satisfied, of suffering.

This question about being at home in the world or not being at home in the world was a question which also interested the 20th-century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. And he wrote a famous book called Being and Time. And in the book, Being and Time, which was his earlier work, Heidegger argued that not being at home in the world, feeling homeless or homelessness was actually the core experience of human beings. However, in his later work, he turned towards the possibility that we can experience ourselves as being at home in the world. And his later philosophy came very much more poetical than the Being in Time book. And this question of being at home in the world was quite central to his meditative thinking.

Now, in this talk, I'm going to respond to this question of being at home or not being at home in the world, by making a distinction between essential or original dwelling place and existential dwelling.

And the definition of existential dwelling here is realizing or understanding our essential or original dwelling place. It’s a subtle distinction because we don't

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necessarily experience ourselves as original dwelling place, we don't necessarily experience ourselves as being at home in the world. So existential dwelling is the way of realizing that original dwelling. This particular distinction I've taken from the work of Professor Julian Young, who specializes in European philosophy, he used to teach at Auckland University, but now he teaches in the USA. And I also want to suggest from our Zen perspective that this realization of our original dwelling, this existential dwelling which realizes the original dwelling is something that we bring forth in our Zazen practice. So we don't necessarily think our way to existential dwelling. We, through our just sitting practice, we open ourselves or surrender ourselves to that coming forth. Zazen, as a practice, is a way of bringing forth that sense of original dwelling - of being at home in the world.

So, I'm just going to speak a little bit more of the notion of Dukkha as homelessness or alienation in the world or the sense of not being at home in the world. And then I'm going to suggest that Zazen is a way of returning home to the world, and which Dogen metaphorically referred to as taking the backward step. So, initially, we normally get into Zen practice because of Dukkha, because of suffering, we get caught in the world of loss and gain, fame and fortune, good and bad. And we find ourselves not at home in the world and alienated from the true self or essential self.

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To quote Maezumi Roshi, "Our ordinary life is intimate, to begin with, i.e., original dwelling. But unfortunately, we experience our everyday life as a split life, as if the enlightened life is separate from it."

So there are lots of ways and interpretations of what Dukkha is. But this is just another interpretation, another suggestion that we reframe Dukkha as this feeling of not being at home, of homelessness or feeling unsettled, or anxious, or afraid. This also includes our resistance to what is, a kind of saying no to life, as in this life, this moment of our lives and we can kind of like use the journey metaphor that we go then in search of our home, we go on the Odyssey in search of our true self, our true home. Some of us find it in Zen; others find it in other spiritual traditions or practices or philosophies. So we could say then that the ending of Dukkha is rediscovering ourselves as being at home in this world in this particular body, and in this particular place, situation and historical time.

Now, again, just to give another kind of perspective on Dukkha, and this is not exhausting the meanings of Dukkha, but it's just giving a few other examples that I often think about. We could think of Dukkha as being caused by, for example, interpersonal violence and abuse. And secondly, technological violence, the

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exploitation of the earth, and the people on the earth as resources, animals as resources. So, firstly interpersonal violence and abuse. Well, we are social beings. Our self is always a social self, and hence we're always vulnerable to the kinds of unsettling situations, that cause us not to feel at home in the world with other people. So it's in the nature of human beings, because of our particular uniqueness, our being social beings, for example, we can feel judged by others. And we, therefore, can also judge ourselves, and hence we experience such difficult and painful effects or emotions such as shame, embarrassment, humiliation, as well as anger and rage, and all these kinds of unsettling ways of being. And so, unfortunately, the literal home in which children live, and adults live is often not a safe home. And so we're not always at home when we're at home.

And as many of you will probably appreciate, the vast majority of domestic violence does occur and is perpetuated in the home. And also, we can experience interpersonal violence and abuse in schools and in other situations. Of course, there's the vast context of social violence that is experienced in terms of based upon race or gender, or ability. Basically, the whole world of us and them, the inhospitable and sometimes inhumane treatment of the “other”.

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The other focus or cause of Dukkha, I'm just pointing out in this particular talk, could also be seen as technological violence and the investment in big agriculture. The tragedy of the modern age is often that the wonder of the earth and the wonder of being that indigenous peoples would have appreciated and we can assume even medieval cultures would have been aware of, has been lost from the enlightenment (the age of reason) onwards. This notion of technological rationality calculated thinking, a means to an end kind of thinking. Seeing what we can see in the world as resources to be exploited and seeing people as resources to be exploited as being kind of like the dominant kind of culture that we've grown up in. Which has led, of course, to the exploitation of the earth and the current crisis we face ourselves, or find ourselves in. And Heidegger refers to this as the loss of the gods. But another way, a simpler way of thinking about this would be the disenchantment of the world, the sense in which the sacredness and holiness of the world has been lost due to this kind of technological violence. And this was famously captured in poems like by TS Eliot called the Wasteland, the symbol of the petrol station in the Great Gatsby by Fitzgerald - the 24-hour service station, the 24-hour shopping center, all of these kinds of ways in which technology takes over the world.

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We find ourselves socialized into that culture. And we lose that sense, we forget is the wonder of being, that kind of awe that we might experience as children or maybe as adolescents gets gradually eroded, and we become alienated from it. And so we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and from the wonder of nature. So this loss of the gods, this disenchantment, the loss of the holy, the experience of shame, like the the symbol of the apple in the garden of Eden, and the sense of shame and losing that sense of being at home or being at one in the world. This can also be this notion that we've lost the sense of wholeness, we've lost the sense of completeness, and we experience a painful sense of lack. And this painful sense of lack again can be interpreted as Dukkha. This sense of lack is alienation from the self, which takes on different forms according to our unique personal situation and culture we find ourselves in. It can also be experienced as the dread of nothingness or nihilism or just the general loss of meaning as well.

So, coming back then to Zazen as a kind of metaphor of returning home to rediscovering our original dwelling, to rediscovering our sense of being at home in the world. In a way, the practice described by Dogen that we practice here just sitting is a sense of just letting ourselves be, just releasing ourselves to be ourselves. This sense of dwelling is another metaphor of intimacy, the intimacy of Being and beings.

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Being and beings are not one and not two, but they come together as interaction, there's intimacy. The relative and the absolute fit together as a box fits on its lid. So we could think of practicing Zazen as a way of discovering that original unity, that original oneness, that original sense of being at home, that original sense of already at home. And it's important to, as Barry Magid teaches that Zazen and Dogen too, that Zazen is not a technique, it's not something we do to take us somewhere else. It can be better described using the ancient Greek word of techne. So, this again, I took this from the philosopher I mentioned before, Julian Young. The Greeks had two meanings for the word, what they called techne which is very interesting. The first word was physis, which for the ancient Greeks meant, basically what we would call nature. And nature naturally brings forth, such as when the bud bursts into the flower. Then the word techne, the Greeks use for when nature's blossoming is aided by the hand of the craftsperson or the artist. So, we might call that universal life force that brings forth new buds; we could call that Buddha-nature.

So Buddha-nature discloses itself to itself when we sit in Zazen. All we have to do is get ourselves out of the way in order to allow that to happen by that, I mean, our usual sense of self-preoccupation. So Zazen, in a sense, we could see as our craft, it's our practice, and we give our trust to that craft Zazen, which brings forth this natural

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sense of being at home in the world. So when we forget ourselves, we release ourselves from this constant preoccupation with a means to an end, this constant preoccupation with, how am I going? Am I there yet? And we experience in the Zen language, the intimacy of the 10,000 things, the experience, the intimacy of everything. One is all, all as one, coming together moment by moment. By letting being bring forth what was previously concealed from us by our culture, by our conditioning, by our self-preoccupation. That's why the promised land is right here now in Zen practice, so Zazen helps us to see, to bring forth that already at homeness in the world. As Maezumi says, “Intimacy is nothing but realizing the fact that already you are as you are. Your essential nature is nothing but you as you are, you could not be anything other than you as you are right now.”

Another way of thinking about this is, we all participate in Being, like all beings participating in Being, in existence. We're all existing, and the sense of Being is calling us home. And when we practice, we experience this call; we become more attuned to it. And we are always awakening to the presencing of this moment. And our subjective experience of Being is a kind of presencing. But to be unsettled is to experience Dukkha, but to settle is to create a home in this world of impermanence and interconnectedness. So in a sense, you could talk about Nirvana as settling,

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feeling at home in the world, I realize that the world is my world. They're not separate. And to dwell is the same, to continue the metaphor when we're dwelling when we're at home in the world. We want to take care of the home; we want to take care of ourselves, take care of others, take care of the earth around where we live in, locality where we live. And that's another story in a sense that we can't really get into that today.

So one important caveat is to not confuse being at home with a desirable state such as peace or calm and not trying to arrive at a state. Self-states are constantly changing all the time, so we're not trying to hang on to peacefulness or calmness. So being at home is much more like that metaphor of the guest house, the notion that self-states are coming and going, moods, feelings are changing all the time. But we're this notion of welcoming them or of dwelling as being at-one-ment with each moment. And there will be times when we get disrupted; we get knocked off our sense of being at home, there will be times when resistance will arise. There'll be times when we experience that sense of a separate self again, the sense of being judged, the sense of feeling shame. And you can really see how that pulls us away from feeling at home, and we no longer experience that sense of being at ease. And again, coming back to that notion of shame being like the expulsion from the oneness

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of the garden. So home is where the heart is, home is the heart-mind, feeling at home, free to be ourselves, we feel safe, and at ease, we can heal. And retreat can be seen as a timeout from our culture of use-value, of a means to an end. Barry's fond of quoting a Zen teacher who describes Zazen as useless, and that's deliberate, in the sense that Zazen is not about use-value. It's not about productivity and consumption. So a retreat can be seen like a holiday or a holy day, from this means to an end world of doing, of endless efficiency and productivity. On retreat, we return to Being, we hear the call of Being, we awake to Being, the reverence and awe we experience in nature, for example, we take a backward step, and we return to that wonder.

So practice is necessary to realize our original enlightenment, coming back to Dogen's original question, why practice? Well, practice, in a way, leads us back, returns. We take that backward step to realize our at homeness in the world because our culture and our interpersonal relationships are often pulling us out of it. So we come back to Being and our essential dwelling. So once again, to repeat, the notion of original dwelling place is possessed by all human beings that are, they are original dwelling, they are enlightenment all the time from the beginning.

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But existential dwelling consists in understanding and realizing what we've lost – our original dwelling, and then living our lives in the light of that understanding, living our lives in the light of that realization. In the same way, taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is finding our home in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. And the home we discover is not a castle surrounded by a moat; it's more like discovering our home in the commons. A home that is open and welcoming to all neighbors and strangers, and discovering in that way that original dwelling place, is also discovering ourselves as a community. And this is where we link the existential kind of aspects of Zen to the communal aspects of Zen. We discover ourselves as a community in that way. And we can in the Zen practice, if you go into this deeply, you can also identify with our ancestors, and not only our parents and people that have been beneficial influences on our lives but the ancestors in the notion of the previous teachers have gone before us, that have maintained and sustained this particular practice for us.

And finally, we can extend that notion of home and hospitality and caring for all people, to the ethic of caring for the earth and identifying ourselves as the indigenous peoples did, as guardians or custodians of the earth, and our calling being to pass this legacy on to future generations. So to conclude, the world is a holy place, a

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sacred place. We can stand before it once again in awe and reverence. And this is why in our tradition, we speak of Buddha-nature.

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