



Ordinary Mind Zen

Liberation in the Life

You are perfect as you are, and you could do with a little improvement

- Shunryu Suzuki.

INTRODUCTION

If the image of the Buddha represents the experience of the timeless now, then the image of Janus, the two-headed Roman God of transitions, gateways, beginnings and endings, with one head turned towards what has been, and the other head turned towards what is yet to be, represents our experience of what I call mortal personhood. The smile of the Buddha conveys the sense of completeness – of serenely dwelling, in just this moment. Janus, on the other hand, looks to the past and the future, she knows she is mortal. Her time will come to an end. For the Buddha, liberation in this life, is liberation in this very moment. For the mortal person, liberation in this life, is the capacity to choose the life I wish to lead, knowing that my time is limited, and therefore having the faith to make commitments to relationships and projects, whose future outcome always remains uncertain. Also, given the limitations of time, I have to prioritise what I choose to commit myself too, but paradoxically, it is the fact that my time is limited, that allows me to experience meaning and purpose.

In this final talk of 2020, I will string together a few of the themes that I have been touching on throughout this year, with the intention of integrating our understanding of ourselves from the perspective of both buddhahood and



Ordinary Mind Zen

personhood. This could be summarised in the koan like statement by Shunryu Suzuki: “you are perfect as you are, and you could do with a little improvement”. A person realises buddhahood, when they see that essentially, who they really are cannot be defined by any identity; however, before this realisation occurs, we need to have established ourselves as persons, that is someone who occupies certain practical identities, such as husband or wife; sailor or social worker; liberal or socialist; and someone who is capable of exercising personal agency, making choices and so on. The person who then realises buddahood, is someone who realises they are not separate from buddha- nature (reality). Buddha-nature is always present, but its actualisation is called Buddhahood (Roberts, 2018). This realisation occurs in this very moment. Buddha-nature is the reality of impermanence and interdependence – stars, galaxies and persons are born and die. The person who realises buddhahood, does not stop being a person who occupies certain identities. But in that realisation lies the great freedom. This realisation of buddhahood, found in Zen, unlike the quest for immortality in other religions, is not incompatible with the secular ideal of experiencing freedom in this life (Hagglund, 2019, p. 208). Unlike the monotheistic religions, which reject this life by seeking transcendence in an after-life or a life of eternal being, Zen points to not just this life, but to this moment! At the same time, pointing to freedom in this moment, complements the secular quest to lead a good, worthwhile life, in this life.

As Zen practitioners, we don't seek to transcend our existence as mortal persons. Zen enriches our appreciation of this life. As zen practitioners we all identify as persons, living in this particular historical time and place, engaging with the struggles that this particular time and place finds us in; and, at the same time, we come to



Ordinary Mind Zen

appreciate through practice, we are also living buddhas. As described by Dogen in his Genjo Koan, prior to realisation there are persons and there are Buddhas; we begin practice feeling that buddhahood is some future distant goal, maybe only attainable after many lifetimes of practice. At the point of realisation there are no persons and no Buddhas; there is no identity whatsoever to hold onto! Then following realisation, we integrate our buddhahood and our personhood - in this life, through our commitment to continuous ongoing practice.

In order to make the case for appreciating how the freedom which comes from realising our buddhahood does not negate, but enhances, our secular freedom found in our personhood, I would like to focus on three paradoxical aspects of Zen practice: the first is the importance of understanding how the seemingly contradictory notions of aspiration and no-gain come together in Zen, and how this becomes embodied as commitment; secondly, is the importance of our relationship to both finitude (limits) and the timeless present moment - how we live in the present moment and at the same time, appreciate how death sets the horizon for our possibilities; thirdly, we've talked a lot about the impermanence and interdependence of self, but I'd like to say a few words about the importance of personhood and identity, and how commitment brings us a sense of the continuity of identity through time, that provides the kind of cohesion that is lacking from the moment to moment, changing nature of our inner self. For in the end, what we do with our life tells us (and others) more about who we are as a person, then our subjective experience of self, which only I can experience. Finally, I would like to tie this up with a brief discussion about our commitment to maintaining the Zen tradition and how the precepts and the Jukai ceremony, the commitment to take on the identity of a Zen Buddhist, are central to the task of



Ordinary Mind Zen

holding and maintaining the tradition, so that we can pass it on to the next generation.

ASPIRATION AND NO-GAIN

Quote the polishing the tile story ... P. 190, Gateless Barrier, Robert Aitken

This story presents the paradoxical nature of aspiration and no-gain in our zen practice. How we don't practice to become a buddha, we actually practice to express our buddhanature. This was the young Dogen's resolution to his personal koan, why bother to practice if we are already enlightened?

We do not engage in practice in order to attain anything. Our practice is an expression of a buddha's activity. For this reason, practice, as much as it is an expression of Buddha nature, cannot be separated from realisation. Our aspiration to practice arises because our essential nature is realisation. Our practice may miss the mark, but it is still generated from our true nature. Nevertheless, make no mistake Dogen is adamant that practice is necessary and our responsibility (Roberts, 2018, p. 183).

Seen from the perspective of buddhahood, aspiration, practice, realisation and nirvana are inseparable. So we practice without expectation and in that practice of no-gain we gain everything.

Aspiration and no-gain are a wonderful example of how we integrate our personhood and our buddhahood in our practice. Only a person can aspire towards becoming a



Ordinary Mind Zen

Buddha. It would be nonsensical for a buddha to aspire towards being a buddha. However, when a person aspires towards becoming a buddha they are caught in the delusion of duality. But this is another paradox - it is the sense of something missing, which arises from being caught in the delusion of duality, that awakens our way-seeking mind – our aspiration. Our aspiration then becomes embodied in our commitment to practice. Without practice, no buddhahood. We therefore aspire towards living our lives as Zen Buddhist practitioners and we make a commitment to live from the precepts. So, although it is true that we are already buddha, it doesn't mean we give up polishing the tile. Polishing the tile is sitting zazen every day. Our buddhanature calls us home and our personhood responds by making the effort to sit. Then our personhood disappears into just this moment.

The idea of no-gain is an expression of what it means to sit as Buddha – sitting in Zazen, with attention, is intrinsically meaningful – it requires no content – all we have to do is get out of the way! Buddhahood goes beyond fullness and lack. We live our lives as persons in the world of temporality, committed to improving our lives and our world to the best of our ability and we allow zazen to teach us about perfection and completion – this is the uniqueness of Zen and why it is different to Hinduism and the monotheistic religions. Both the practice of aspiration and no-gain are expressions of freedom – aspiration becomes embodied in our commitment as an expression of what we choose to prioritise in this life; no-gain is a radical overcoming of lack without becoming stuck in fullness/emptiness. No-gain is not timeless being or the eternal now, but it is the now of practice. We aspire to be awake, to be present to this moment.



Ordinary Mind Zen

THE FREEDOM OF FINITUDE AND THE TIMELESS NOW

The next paradox concerns the relationship between being and becoming. How we integrate the freedom to choose who we are going to be with the freedom of being no-one, going nowhere! Salvation in Zen is not about liberation from this life, but about finding liberation in this life. This includes embracing this life and all the attachments of this life, rather than seeking a kind of Stoic detachment from life, which is how Buddhism is often understood. Perhaps the best synonym for liberation in this life is freedom. How do we understand freedom? Traditional Buddhism argues that to be alive is to suffer – to be born is to suffer, to have a family is to suffer, to be sick is to suffer, to grow old and die is to suffer. Liberation in traditional Buddhism is liberation from the wheel of life! Nirvana literally meant the extinguishment of all desire, even the desire to live, with the outcome being one is no longer reborn. This is not my understanding of freedom in Zen Buddhism.

Normally, freedom can be understood in two ways: negative freedom and positive freedom. Negative freedom is freedom from something; it is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. Positive freedom is the possibility of acting in such a way to take control of the direction of our lives and realise our values. some way. I want to suggest that when we fully embrace this moment we are in the zone of negative freedom, freedom from all gaining ideas – this is the gateless barrier of Zen. We are already complete, without lack. This is expressing our Buddha Nature. The freedom of just being. Yet we must also embrace the freedom of our mortal personhood – this is the world of lack and desire – the world of suffering beings – in this domain we experience the freedom of choice and commitment – positive freedom – the freedom



Ordinary Mind Zen

to become. Our finitude imposes a natural horizon or limit on what is possible for us in this life. We have to work out our values, what is really important, because time is passing. This gives us meaning and purpose and the desire for what we value to live on, after we have departed the stage. This is the realm of secular freedom. Our zazen practice cultivates our awareness of this moment, and this cultivation of awareness allows us to make wise choices and maintain our commitments.

With our understanding of practice as liberation in this life, once we get a taste of realisation in this moment, we no longer need to spend time asking the tradition question, “who am I”? Instead, we can now engage with the question who shall I be? Because we are relational beings, “who shall I be?” is inseparable from the question of “how am I going to treat others?” and the kind of community that I wish to live in.

As the contemporary philosopher of secular spirituality, Martin Hagglund says: “In engaging the question ‘what should I do?’ we are also engaging the question ‘who should I be?’ and there is no final answer to that question. This is our spiritual freedom” (Hagglund, 2019).

During our recent on-line retreat, Malcolm Martin, sixth dharma heir of Barry Magid, spoke about caring about the outcomes of elections and teacups. He spoke about how, if we are going to care about what matters in our lives, our relationships, our community, or our treasured objects, then we need to be attached to the outcome. This runs against the grain of the dominant paradigm of religious and spiritual teachings which teach be in this world but not of it. For example, “the widely influential Christian mystic Meister Eckhart emphasises that ‘the man who is



Ordinary Mind Zen

in absolute detachment is carried away into eternity where nothing temporal affects him,” since ‘true detachment means a mind as little moved by what happens, by joy and sorrow, honour and disgrace, as a broad mountain by a gentle breeze’” (Hagglund, 2019, p. 161).

This is not what we are doing here. Rather, in practicing being just this moment, compassion’s way, we are appreciating not only the preciousness of this moment, but the preciousness of all the remaining moments that are yet to come. In our practice, the timeless now is not something removed from this life, but deeply engaged with this life. Every moment counts!

COMMITMENT: IDENTITY THROUGH TIME

I now come to the third paradox we encounter in our practice: how we both realise the insubstantiality of self and identity and the importance of maintaining continuity through time. This is expressed in our commitment to identities we value and hold dear, such as our commitments to intimate partners, children and parents, friends, clients and all the various projects we all involved in: arts and crafts, song-writing, political activism and community building. Realising the insubstantiality of self and identity only enhances our awareness of the importance of the infinite network of interdependence that literally weaves our selves and our identities into a coherent whole. Knowing that my happiness and well-being depends on your happiness and well-being, means we have no choice but to think and act relationally and contextually. We can no longer pretend to be separate individuals locked in a battle of survival.



Ordinary Mind Zen

Even though the person is a social construction, we still experience ourselves as persons with personal agency. It is a conventional truth that is real enough. Similarly, we can disassemble a chariot, to show that it is completely empty, but when we put the chariot back together it functions as a chariot. In the same way, if a person develops, given a good enough caring environment, that person will function as a person: They will experience an existential identity enduring through time with a sense of personal agency. Just because we are a narrative construction, a conceptual fiction, we still experience emotions that are inherently valued. Even though, “there is no separately existing, enduring self, and that the person is a conceptual construction”(Siderits & Katsura, 2013) we still experience ourselves as persons with a soul: with intentions, personal agency and emotions. As Yoko Ono said: “A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality”, that is conventional reality. Spiritual freedom means we experience personal agency – I chose the values and identities I aspire towards and make them a reality by my action in the world:

“Who I take myself to be is a practical identity because it requires that I keep faith with a commitment” (Hagglund, 2019). What I do with my time is what I do with my life (Hagglund, 2019, p. 191).

To sustain our aspiration to be aware, to be present, we require some way of practicing continuously. This is the essence of Dogen’s teaching: continuous practice. Our values and our ability to choose to commit are what sustains our practice and ultimately the tradition of Zen Buddhism that we belong to.



Ordinary Mind Zen

As a person, we are born in time, and we live in time. We are temporal beings, living in a secular world of becoming. Only a person has agency and can make a commitment. On the other hand, as a buddha, I am nonseparated from this timeless now, I am being-time, illuminated by the ten thousand things. That is, sitting on the bank of a rainforest water hole, listening to the sound of the waterfall cascading into the pool, I become one with the sound of the of waterfall. I become nonseparated from impermanence, one with time, and hence timeless. A person, on the other hand, is born and dies in time. A Buddha on the other hand, is never born and never dies, because the Buddha is the totality of the whole of life. From the perspective of being-time, our buddha- nature is always here now, whereas our Janus-nature is always moving from a past into a yet to be determined future – it is our Janus-nature which makes intentions and commitments and our Buddha-nature which helps us to be with the consequences of those decisions. It is the Janus-nature that experiences intentional agency and the buddha-nature that expresses spontaneous compassion.

CONCLUSION: MAINTAINING THE TRADITION

This Dharma, incomparably profound

And minutely subtle,

Is rarely encountered

Even in hundreds of thousands of millions of ages. Now we can see it, hear it



Ordinary Mind Zen

Hold and maintain it.

May we completely realise The Buddha's true meaning.

This chant, which is recited prior to a dharma talk in Zen centres, captures how we honour what came before us. We also aim to maintain the tradition – in order to do this, we have to plant the seeds in new soil – different cultures and historical periods – to make it new without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What is the baby?

The three treasures: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This is really what we are receiving when we receive Jukai. Next year we will be offering a unique opportunity, to study the precepts within the context of small on-line evening meeting and to use the study process as a means to decided whether or not you would like to make a formal commitment to the life of a Zen practitioner. I will conclude with a quote from the great Master Dogen: On the great road of buddha ancestors there is always unsurpassable practice, continuous and sustained. It forms the circle of the way and is never cut off. Between aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana, there is not a moment's gap; continuous practise is the circle of the way (Tanahashi, 2012, p. 332).



Ordinary Mind Zen

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