

Integration¹

Dharma Talk

There is a traditional story about a Zen teacher who was reciting sutras and was accosted by a thief, demanding his money or his life. The teacher told the thief where to find the money, asking only that some be left to pay his taxes and that when the thief was ready to leave he thank the teacher for the gift. The thief complied. A few days later he was apprehended and confessed to several crimes, including the offense against the Zen teacher. But the teacher insisted that he had not been a victim of theft, because he had given the man his money and the man had thanked him for it. After the man had finished serving his prison term, he returned to the teacher and became one of his disciples.

Such stories sound romantic and wonderful. But suppose somebody borrows money from us and doesn't return it. Or someone steals our credit card and uses it. How would we respond? A problem with classic Zen stories like this is that they have the feel of long ago and far away. With that distance from our time, we may fail to get the point. The point is not that somebody took some money or what the master did.

The point is that the master did not judge the thief. It doesn't follow that the best thing is always to give the thief what he wants; sometimes that might not be the best action. I'm sure that the master looked at the situation, saw immediately who the man was (perhaps just a kid who picked up a sword and hoped he could seize a little quick money), and intuitively knew what to do. It's not so much what the master did as the way he did it. The attitude of the master was crucial. Instead of making a judgment, he simply dealt with the situation. Had the situation been different, his response might have been different.

We don't see that we are all teachers. Everything we do from morning to night is a teaching: the way we speak to someone at lunch, the way we transact our business at the bank, our reaction when the paper we submit is accepted or rejected—everything we do and everything we say reflects our practice. But we can't just want to be like Shichiri Kogen. That's a pitfall of training, to conclude, "Oh, I should be like that." Students do great harm by dragging such ideals into practice. They imagine that "I should be selfless, giving, and noble like the great Zen master." The master in each of these stories was effective because he was what he was. He didn't think twice about it. When we try to be something that we are not, we become the slave of a rigid, fixed mind, following a rule about how things have to be. The violence and the anger in us remain unnoticed, because we are caught in our pictures of how we should be. If we can use the stories rightly, they are wonderful. But we should not simply try to copy them in our lives. Intrinsicly, we are perfect in being as we are. We are enlightened. But until we really understand this, we will do deluded things.

Zen centers and other places of spiritual practice often ignore what has to happen to a human being for true enlightenment to take place. The first thing that has to happen—with many steps,

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many byways and pitfalls—is the integration of ourselves as human beings, so that mind and body become one. For many people, this enterprise takes an entire lifetime. When mind and body are one, we are not constantly being pulled this way and that way, back and forth. As long as we are controlled by our self-centered emotions (and most of us have thousands of these illusions), we haven't accomplished this step. To take a person who has not yet integrated body and mind and push him or her through the narrow concentrated gate to enlightenment can indeed produce a powerful experience; but the person won't know what to do with it. Momentarily seeing the oneness of the universe doesn't necessarily mean that our lives will be freer.

For example, as long as we worry about what someone's done to us, like taking our money, we are not truly integrated. Whose money is it, anyway? And what makes a piece of land ours? Our sense of ownership arises because we're afraid and insecure—and so we want to own things. We want to own people. We want to own ideas. We want to own our opinions. We want to have a strategy for living. As long as we are doing all these things, the idea that we could naturally act like Master Kogen is quite far-fetched.

The important thing is who we are at any given moment and how we handle what life brings to us. As body and mind become more integrated, the work becomes paradoxically far easier. Our job is to be integrated with the whole world. As the Buddha said, "The whole world are my children." Once we are relatively at peace with ourselves, integration with the rest of the world becomes easier. What takes the greatest time and work is the first part. And once that has been relatively accomplished, there are many areas of life that have the quality of an enlightened life. The first years are more difficult than the later years. The most difficult is the first sesshin, the most difficult months of sitting are in the first year, the second year is easier, and so it goes.

Later on another crisis may arise, perhaps after five or ten years of sitting, when we begin to understand that we are going to get nothing out of sitting—nothing whatsoever. The dream is gone—the dream of the personal glory we think we're going to get out of practice. The ego is fading; this can be a dry, difficult period. As I teach, I see people's personal agendas cracking up. That happens in the first part of the journey.

It's really wonderful, though it is the hard part. Practice becomes unromantic: it doesn't sound like what we read about in books. Then real practice begins: moment by moment, just facing the moment. Our minds no longer are so obstreperous; they don't dominate us anymore. Genuine renunciation of our personal agendas begins, though even then it may be interrupted by all sorts of difficult episodes. The path is never direct and smooth. In fact, the rockier the better. The ego needs rocks to challenge it.

As practice progresses, we notice that the episodes, the rocks in our path, are not as difficult as they once would have been. We don't have quite the same agenda that we had before, not the same drive to be important or to be judgmental. If we sit with even forty percent awareness, little chips come off of our personal agendas. The longer we sit, the less eventful our sitting becomes. How long can we stand to look at our ego stuff? How long can we look at it without letting it go and just returning to being here? The process is a slow wearing away—not a matter of gaining virtue, but of gaining understanding.

In addition to labeling our thoughts, we need to stay with our body sensations. If we work at both with the utmost patience, we slowly open up to a new vision of life.

We want a life that is as rich and wide—as beneficial—as it possibly can be. We all have the possibility for such a life. Intelligence helps; the people who come to Zen centers are typically quite bright. But bright people also tend to get caught up in too much thinking and analyzing. No matter what the discipline—art, music, physics, philosophy—we can pervert it and use it to avoid practice. But if we don't do it, life gives us kick after kick after kick, until we learn what we need to learn. No one can do this practice for us; we have to do it by ourselves. The only test of whether we are doing it is our lives

Dharma Discussion Questions

1. In Joko's telling of the story about the zen master who was robbed, she makes that what the master did was NOT important but rather his non-judgmental attitude in simply dealing with the situation before him. Do you agree or disagree with Joko's interpretation of this famous , very old zen story? Why/Why not?

2. Joko stated: "We don't see that we are all teachers. Everything we do from morning to night is a teaching: the way we speak to someone at lunch, the way we transact our business at the bank, our reaction when the paper we submit is accepted or rejected—everything we do and everything we say reflects our practice." Do you see yourself as a teacher and your life as practice in the way described? How might your life be different if you did?

3. Joko sees a mature practice as one that is unromantic and free of drama. She believes that a major indicator of this is when our lives become far less about I, my, me and the personal agendas we bring to life. Do you agree with Joko? If she's correct that practice become less about "my" life than how can we sustain such a practice? How would our lives be different if they were less focused on I, My, Me?

4. Joko is very clear that intelligence is helpful but people get too caught up in their thinking and ultimately avoid doing practice. Is it possible to achieve an integrated practice that creates balance between our knowledge-centered identities and a practice characterized by a "beginner's mind" that is wide open to life as it unfolds moment to moment? What would such an integrated practice mean in the context of your own life experience?