

Absorption in the Treasury of Light

by Kokyo Henkel

What is light? The ordinary light we experience all the time is actually quite extraordinary. When light fills a room, we don't actually see it directly. We see it reflected off of things; unless it's completely pitch black, everything we see is merely a reflection of light. Light shines indiscriminately on every single one of us, so we can equally see each other and all things reflected in light. In the Zen tradition, we don't speak of transmitting the things light reflects on, but transmission of the light itself. Transmission of light is something that can't be seen and yet can be appreciated. When the sun comes up in the morning, especially if we're camping in the wilderness and have no artificial light source at all, we really appreciate it; the sun comes up, and suddenly the whole world is revealed.

It's so easy to take light for granted, since it seems so ordinary. It's ordinary in that anytime there's a light on or the sun is shining, we can live in the world of things. It's extraordinary in that while it illuminates everything, we can't see it at all. Because light is not actually some thing, like the things it illuminates, how can it be transmitted, how can it be passed along? That's truly impossible and yet we could say that a deep appreciation of the light can actually be conveyed from person to person. It seems to me that's what Zen is celebrating. We hear many stories of practitioners who weren't appreciating the light, and therefore they were really suffering. They were living in the light, of course – we're all living in it – but they didn't appreciate it. Sometimes in these stories a Zen teacher points out the light to them in a way that their heart opens to total appreciation of light. Zen stories are about the moments when people were converted from non-appreciation to total appreciation of light. We could call this “transmission of the appreciation of light.” We call it simply “transmission of light,” because when light is appreciated, that's when it's actually light. There's really nothing ever lacking, yet the light calls us to appreciate its invisible magnificent radiance.

Many people have heard of Dogen Zenji, the founder of this lineage of Zen in Japan. His disciple was Koun Ejo. The subject of light must have been important to Ejo because the one thing he wrote that has come down to us is called Absorption in the Treasury of Light, or the One-Pointed Concentration in the Womb of Light (Komyozo-zammai). This treatise culminates in a wonderful version of zazen instruction, a perfect summary of Zen meditation practice and inspiration for how to just wholeheartedly sit: “I humbly say to you comrades who have the same true aspiration, don't hold onto a single state or device, don't rely on intellectual understanding, don't keep what you've learned in meditation. Cast your body and mind into the great treasury of light and never look back.” This invisible but radiant treasury of light is waiting for us to throw body and mind into it. Well, where is it? What if we don't know where to cast this body and mind? It has no location, but there is no place where it isn't. We might be willing to let body and mind drop into the light, but then be tempted to look back and ask “how am I doing?” or “is this okay?” or “I wonder if this may be dangerous for my health?”

Ejo goes on: “Don't seek enlightenment, don't try to get rid of delusion. Don't be averse to thoughts arising, but don't fondly continue thoughts.” This is a challenging instruction for meditators. It may not be so easy to not be averse to thoughts arising, to willingly accept whatever comes to us, but how about also to not fondly continue thoughts – is this difficult? “If

you don't continue thoughts, they cannot arise by themselves." That's a radical statement, and yet it sounds so simple as well. If you don't continue thoughts, they can't arise by themselves. Don't try to stop them! Don't be averse to thoughts arising, but don't just continue them either! We may say, "I'm not trying to do it, they're just arising." So there is a subtle instruction here about how to be with thoughts arising; is it possible that these thoughts are not created by "me," that they are not "mine" to create? The Sixth Zen Ancestor said, "No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought."

"Just be like space, like a mass of fire. Breathe naturally in and out, and sit through everything without getting involved." Wonderfully straightforward zazen instruction. It's not that nothing's happening; we're just not getting involved in it. "Even if 84,000 thoughts arise and vanish, if one doesn't get involved with them, thoroughly relinquishing them, each thought will be the light of the spiritual power of wisdom." Thoughts are light, thoughts are a manifestation of the light, but it takes not being involved with them to appreciate that. "This doesn't apply only to sitting. Each step is the walking of light." In sesshin we usually sit for forty minutes and then get up and do kinhin, slow walking. That's walking of the light, then we sit back down. That's sitting of the light. Then food comes and we do eating of the light. Night comes and we do sleeping of the light. And the alarm goes off very early in the morning and we do groggy waking up of the light.

"Twenty-four hours a day, be like someone who has utterly died. There is no view of self and no false discrimination at all. Nevertheless the breath goes in and out." So it's a little different from being a dead person. "And with the nature of hearing and feeling being without cognition and discrimination, body and mind are one suchness in the unified light silently shining. Therefore one responds when called." This is not some kind of passive, apathetic, stagnation practice. It's totally alive, totally present and totally ready for whatever happens next. So we may be sitting really still, and then somebody says, "Can you ring the bell?" or "Come over here and help me serve the food." This light can respond when called. Throughout sesshin, and when we leave sesshin, we get called in infinite ways all day long. The light is very still and yet very dynamic and responsive, like someone who has utterly died and yet responds when called.

"This is the proof the light is not obstructed by activity. The empty luminosity shines by itself without exerting mental energy." This quote from the Third Zen Ancestor's Song of the Trusting Mind is the very heart of the practice and realization of zazen. "This empty luminosity has no abode. Though buddhas appear in the world, it doesn't appear; though buddhas enter nirvana, it does not enter nirvana. When you are born the light isn't born, and when you die the light doesn't disappear. It's not more in buddhas, not less in sentient beings. It's not deluded when you're deluded; it doesn't become enlightened when you awaken. It has no location, no sign, no name. It is the totality of everything. It cannot be grasped or abandoned or attained." If we try to get ahold of that light, understand it with the conceptual mind, it can't be done. But it also can't be abandoned; we can't get rid of it, we can't escape it; we can't get it, and we can't attain it. It is the interdependent totality of the entire universe, beyond all our ideas, which doesn't come and go but just silently shines eternally. "While unattainable, it is in effect throughout the entire being; from the highest heaven to the lowest hell, it is just thus, complete and clear, the wondrously inconceivable spiritual light."