

Aspiration

by Kokyo Henkel

All practitioners, whether we're conscious of it or not, have some aspiration for our practice. It's what keeps us going, and it can take many different forms. So what is your deepest aspiration? I hope the community of people who only occasionally come to Zen Center, as well as those who come regularly, can consider how Zen Center might support them to manifest their deepest practice aspirations, and I hope Zen Center can be a place that serves such a function. Indeed, that could be the most important function of any spiritual community.

In exploring the theme of aspiration, practice aspiration, it appears to be kind of a tricky area. It almost seems taboo sometimes to talk about aspiration in Zen because of our emphasis on non-seeking, on having no gaining ideas. What can aspiration be, if not such self-centered motivations for personal improvement? Dogen Zenji, in one of his informal talks, says, "Practitioners today have to arouse deep aspiration for the Way at least once." I find it interesting that he says "at least once." Sincere practice and realization may be actualized, set in motion, by, for just one moment, letting go of everything completely, surrendering totally, giving one's life to all beings and to the Way, trusting that whatever happens from now on will be fine, so be it. I just want to practice the Way, actualize the Way. "Arousing such an aspiration," Dogen says, "means thinking little of your own life, having deep compassion for all living beings and entrusting your bodily life to the Buddha's teaching. If you have already aroused such aspiration, protect it. Do not lose it, even for a moment. It is impossible to realize Buddha-Dharma without arousing such aspiration."

The Chinese character that Dogen uses for aspiration is made up of the radical for "earth" or "ground" over "heart" or "mind." So it's like a grounded heart, a heart that's just completely resting in the earth, supported by the earth; like when the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, reached down and touched the earth. A heart grounded in the way things are is the meaning of true aspiration, intention, determination or resolve.

One time a student of Dogen asked him, "Although many years have passed since first beginning practice, I have not yet had any realization. Since various teachers of old have said that the Way does not depend upon intelligence or knowledge, is there something else in our tradition which I should keep in mind?" Dogen says, "You're right about not relying on intelligence, talent, or quick-wittedness in learning the Way." I think this is good news. This immediately opens up the way of practice to everyone. It doesn't depend on our mental capacities or anything like that. Well what then does authentic practice depend on?

Dogen says, "I believe this. It depends only on whether one's aspiration is firmly determined or not... For example, a person who desires to steal a precious treasure, to win a battle, or to win over a beautiful woman or man, will constantly seek an opportunity, in whatever situation or occasion, since one's mind is always occupied with this desire. If one's desire is that enthusiastic, one will not fail to fulfill it. In the same way, if the aspiration to realize the Way is earnest enough, when you practice just sitting, etc., though your aim may be high, you will hit the mark." The teacher I practiced with in Japan, Harada Tangen Roshi, would often say, "Those who set out to accomplish it, will definitely accomplish it; those who don't set out to accomplish

it, definitely won't accomplish it." Dogen goes on to say, "To arouse such an aspiration, contemplate deeply in your heart the impermanence of the world. This is not a matter of trying to figure this out; impermanence is truly the reality right in front of our eyes... A person we saw yesterday is no longer here today." Arousing aspiration for practice comes from contemplating how everything is impermanent; particularly how our own life is impermanent, quickly passing.

What is it to realize the Way? To bring it down to earth, where the earth meets the heart, anyone can start walking the path with the aspiration to really be here now. To actually embody one's life in a moment-to-moment way. It's so easy to get caught up in things, in the busyness of the day and unimportant matters, so the aspiration for thorough presence can be quite profound. For example, in coming and going to the zendo, can I really just walk to the zendo and walk from the zendo, without thinking about the next event? And during zazen, even if it seems too much to remember throughout the day, can I really be present for this short time? Can I see the great opportunity in this impermanent, quickly passing life, to really give this life completely to all beings, in this one period of zazen? Can I give my life to the people in this room and everyone everywhere, letting go of my narrow-minded self-concern, for just this period?

Now, to remember the shadow side of aspiration, as soon as we start going in that aspiring direction it's very easy to get uptight about it: "Yes! I'm going to really practice! And if I don't do it, I will be quite upset with myself." This very wonderful aspiration, to give my life to all beings, can become a very self-engrossed project; I'm trying to give my life to all beings, but how can I get these beings out of the way while I'm doing it? You're disturbing my concentration on giving myself to you! We can think this way sometimes, right? Suzuki Roshi is quite strong about reminding us not to let our aspiration get narrow-minded: "Usually when you practice zazen you become very idealistic, and you set up an ideal or goal which you strive to attain and fulfill. But as I have often said, this is absurd! When you're idealistic you have some gaining idea within yourself. By the time you attain your ideal or goal, your gaining idea will create another ideal. So as long as your practice is based on a gaining idea, and you practice zazen in an idealistic way, you will have no time actually to attain your ideal."

Is there a way to have a really wholehearted aspiration, a direction, even a goal in practice, yet without getting caught up in the result? We can set up a goal, but we don't spend our time dwelling in what it will be like if we reach the goal. Then we can just practice, start walking down the path and don't stop. Dogen also says, "If you wish to practice the Way of buddhas and ancestors, have no expectation of profit. Expect nothing, seek nothing, gain nothing." He says to arouse aspiration but don't seek anything with an expectation of a certain outcome. "Although you must stop seeking and give up expectations of buddhahood, if you stop practicing and continue engaging in your former karmic deeds, you will still be seeking and will fall back into the old nest."

I think this is often what happens when we hear about no gaining idea. We flip over to the other extreme of making sure we are not trying to get anything by giving up our strong practice aspiration, but that's just another kind of seeking, seeking whatever we were doing instead of practice, and falling back into the old nest. So there's a middle way here. As usual, this is a quite subtle way of being, the middle way of not falling into one extreme of seeking a goal with some expectation, being obsessed about the result, and not falling into the other extreme of avoiding

any aspiration because we might get into a gaining idea, and instead just hoping that practice and realization will somehow work out on its own.

It's easy to find a kind of practice "niche." We've basically figured out what the practice looks like, and it's going along pretty smoothly and it works to some extent, kind of like a plateau where it's somewhat comfortable and somewhat rewarding, and we can just go along like that forever. But it may be worth considering, investigating more thoroughly, is there a deeper aspiration in our heart? And if it doesn't seem to appear, Dogen Zenji gives a method for how to arouse such an aspiration: just open to impermanence, right in front of our eyes all the time, our own lives, quickly passing. When we remember how little of our lives we have left, we naturally ask ourselves how we really want to live.