

Practice and Realization are Non-Dual

By Kokyo Henkel, 2009

Recently, at Tassajara, I discovered an old translation of the Soto School Constitution. It was hand-typed, unpublished, and I picked it up because I have been thinking about the organizational structure of Zen centers. It's an outline of the governance of the Soto Zen School, covering the whole system of temples, priests, and lay supporters. The most interesting part to me was a mission statement at the beginning saying, "Abiding by the true Dharma of the Buddhas and Ancestors' single transmission, the Soto School doctrine is transmission of '*just sitting*' (*shikantaza*) and '*this very mind is Buddha*.'" These are both teachings of the Japanese founder of the Soto school, Dogen Zenji. The fundamental doctrine of just wholeheartedly sitting and this very mind being Buddha are the same thing said in two different ways. And it's a practice.

The basic tenets of the school are defined as the "one suchness of zen and precepts" or meditation and ethical conduct, and the "non-duality of practice and realization." These two tenets are pointing to the same thing as "*just sitting*" and "*this mind is Buddha*." These four aspects of practice summarize the whole style of this school of Zen; it was very moving to me to read about it in this institutional document. I thought, "Okay, I would like to give my life to clarifying, practicing ever more deeply, and teaching more thoroughly the practice of just sitting, this very mind is Buddha, the one suchness of Zen and precepts, and the non-duality of practice and realization."

Just sitting may be the simplest to talk about. A very subtle practice, perhaps almost impossible to do. It's just sitting. And some people would say anybody can practice it from the beginning. Just sit and that's it; there are no further elaborations. Just sitting is the lack of elaborating on just sitting. Anyone who sits down with the intention to not further elaborate on such an activity is just sitting.

But it is quite challenging to just sit and not add anything extra to a body sitting on a cushion. Another way to describe just sitting is to say this very mind is Buddha. Without any further elaboration, this very mind of the present moment just sitting is Buddha. A common elaboration, for example, would be the doubt that this very mind is Buddha. Like, "I'm almost not elaborating on the fact that I'm not elaborating."

Dogen Zenji's essay on "*This very mind is Buddha*" quotes an Indian teacher in Buddha's time who taught that there is a fundamental, unchanging essence of mind that isn't affected by anything. It is indestructible and is totally at peace all the time. Merging with this indestructible essence of mind is liberation. The Buddha did not agree with this teacher, nor did Dogen. Dogen talks about how flowers and trees and rocks and pebbles are mind. This very mind is Buddha so the flowers, trees, rocks, and pebbles are Buddha, which sounds quite different from this fundamental essence of unchanging consciousness.

Still, we might not find *that* the most helpful zazen instruction. Flowers and pebbles mind being Buddha? Or during zazen, we could say platform, cushion, wall, ceiling, incense mind is Buddha. There is no other essential fundamental underlying essence than all of that stuff arising and ceasing every moment, and we are absorbed in that arising and ceasing every moment. This is just sitting, sitting as this very mind is Buddha.

And then there are the two tenets of the school. "Zen (or just sitting) and the precepts are one suchness." Dogen talked about the precepts a little differently from how Buddha talked about them. For Buddha, the precepts are kind of a prerequisite for concentration. First we get our life

in order, so relationships are in harmony. Concentration is a necessary condition for a deeper understanding of the way things are. For Dogen (in his usual non-dual way) precepts, concentration, and wisdom are one suchness, not two, and the practice (of precepts and concentration) and realization of enlightenment are also not two. Dogen says to focus our attention on zazen, and in zazen, he asks, what precept is not followed, what practice is not complete?

That sounds good, but I can't sit zazen 24 hours a day, right? However, when any activity is done in this way, just doing what we are doing, with no elaboration, things are taken care of quite well. Admittedly, things can get very tricky; we do have the capacity to fool ourselves, so it is helpful to delineate the precepts anyway. We could say that following the Bodhisattva precepts is the activity of Buddha's mind. And Buddha's mind is this very mind, taking care of each day in a selfless way because the self is a kind of elaboration, the fundamental elaboration.

"Practice and realization are non-dual" may be Dogen Zenji's most important trademark saying. *Sho* literally means verification or confirmation of enlightenment, sometimes translated as "realization." What is "practice" in this case? It is often interpreted as Soto Zen monastic practice, forms and ceremonies, and sitting in a particular posture, etc. That's what Dogen called "practice," because that was his life, that was his world in the Zen monastery, but that's not how I understand practice. That's one way to practice, but it's not that if you are not doing that kind of activity, it's not practice. So then, what is practice?

We could say that practice is anything that is done with the intention, or spirit, of letting go of self-concern. Whatever is done while letting go of self-concern will be wholesome, beneficial, harmless activity. Zazen could be described as just sitting releasing self-concern, but it could also be washing the dishes, driving a car, talking to somebody, or whatever. This practice of releasing self-concern is not separate from the verification of enlightenment. Enlightenment is a big word, so how about verification of peace, contentment, and freedom. In one moment of releasing self-concern, such a practice actually verifies peace. For just one moment, we can stop, release, take a deep breath, one selfless breath which verifies for one moment that this mind is Buddha. This is a practical, simple way to look at it, not so mystical or mysterious. We can verify enlightenment in any moment; all it takes is a moment of practice, the practice of releasing self-concern.