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Shikantaza

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Many people are not aware of the numerous meditation traditions within Buddhism. This may be because usually one's first exposure to Buddhism comes to them in the form of academic learning and/or philosophy. In the West, though it is changing, actual practice has taken a back seat to theory. To be sure, Buddhism does hold a valid place for the formulation of theory. However, because of the tendency for theory to be isolated from actual practice, Buddhism has tended to treat the formulation of ideas with caution while it has given emphasis and centrality to physical practice.

Buddhist meditation practices are varied and great in number. One will not find only one type of meditation within the tradition or even within a single school. In all probability, the actual number of the types of meditation that have attached themselves to the Dharma are probably too plentiful to count. Zazen, or seated Zen, is only one type of meditation. Allowing for variation, zazen can be said to belong to many schools of Buddhism. Seated Zen, or seated meditation, is not the sole property of the Zen schools of Buddhism. Moreover, within Zen, there are many forms of zazen. The zazen that we practice for the most part at Senshin Center is called "Shikantaza." Shikantaza carries the meaning of "just doing zazen." It can be distinguished from other types of zazen in that it tends not to carry with it any of the other ritual elements or supplementary practices that can be conjoined with zazen. Such ritual elements are things like sutra chanting, breath manipulation, koan practice, etc. In shikantaza, you do nothing but sit. You sit in quietness and sit in stillness - nothing more, nothing less.

In terms of human lineage, the roots of shikantaza can be traced to China, with the Ch'an traditions. However, we can say that the practice rose to institutional and philosophical prominence with Dogen Zenji, the founder of the Soto school of Zen. Dogen favored shikantaza as his primary practice and his adoption of it is definitely related to the reasons why he felt he had to "return" to China in order to gain true insight into Zen practice. Much of Dogen's writing can be understood as a critique of the Zen that was contemporary with him in Japan at that time. For Dogen, a return to a zazen that contained nothing more than just sitting was not only a breath of fresh air, it was a breath of legitimacy. For example, by the time Dogen came on the Japanese Zen scene, koans, or Zen riddles, were having their "answers" sold on the market; Sutra chanting had come to attribute magical powers to the sounds themselves; and breath manipulation was firmly attached to a will to remain immortal, miraculous, omniscient, omnipotent, etc. Rightly seeing "the quest for Awakening," "the quest to be purified," "the quest to be holy," etc., as the firmest of ego traps there can be, Dogen simplified his zazen practice into involving nothing more than sitting, breathing, and remaining still and quiet.

When we speak of zazen in terms of shikantaza, and when we say things like the "innate oneness of mind and environment," we should not understand that zazen is a method of psychic concentration or of an effort to still one's mind. The innate oneness of mind and environment, or the oneness of subject and object, suggests that we must see all of the worlds that our lives encompass from the foundation of our own personal life experience. It is suggesting that our life experience is our mind (and vice versa). This means that all things in life, in the world (which is our experience of the world), function as a part of our being or of our bodies. Shikantaza is not an attempt to get rid of all delusions, fantasies, or thoughts that come into our heads during zazen as if they are something separate from us. Of course, if we go on pursuing these thoughts, staying attached to them, reifying them, then we are merely thinking while in the zazen posture - we are not truly doing zazen. Yet, trying to rid ourselves of these things altogether is just another kind of fantasy, another kind of delusion, and another kind of pride, ignorance, and/or fear.

Zazen, understood from the point of view of shikantaza, is a means of seeing all things from the foundation of pure life, wherein we give up both pursuing thought and trying to chase it away. From such a practice, what will arise will arise as the scenery of our lives. With non-attachment, we let arise whatever arises and allow to fall away whatever falls away.

Dogen wrote the following:

"Drop all relationships, set aside all activities. Do not think about what is good or evil, and do not try to judge right from wrong. Do not try to control perceptions or conscious awareness, nor attempt to figure out your feelings, ideas, or viewpoints. Let go of the idea of trying to become a Buddha as well."

Is this not the same advice we need to take into our jiyu-waza training as well? In our sitting practice, like in our jiyu-waza practice, the basis for such a disposition is faith. We must come to trust in the zazen posture alone. We must drop all that comes up without trying to work out solutions for what we ought to do concerning this or that. Simply return to the practice at hand. Simply return to the posture. This is shikantaza. When we do zazen with this attitude, we are no longer sitting in the hopes of fulfilling the fantasy of gaining enlightenment or of improving our minds, etc. In this way, the practice can become a matter of Being itself.

Dogen again writes:

"Sitting is the practice of the Reality of life. Sitting is non-activity. This is the true form of the Self. Outside of this, there is nowhere to search for The Way."