

Nothing Missing

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All of us come to meditation practice with some yearning, some aching, for some kind of deep peace. Perhaps we feel dissatisfaction with our lives; maybe we are hoping to find something which will relieve the stress, the tension, and the difficulties of our everyday living. This coming as a seeker, as someone who feels something is missing, is natural and normal. It is what gets us in the door. Actually, the first thing we actually are doing when we sit down on our cushion is to acknowledge this ache in our deepest heart, making room for our yearning to breathe and have life. This is not a small step; how else can we truly begin a genuine spiritual journey.

Then we hear what the Buddha taught – that what we seek, this peaceful, spacious, clarity – is already here. Our practice is not to get some *new* thing, but to discover, for ourselves, what is already here. Our sitting practice is one of uncovering what has been present from the beginning. This is the *intrinsic* aspect of who we are as humans, our buddha-nature, or awakened-nature. This is the aspect of our being which is not conditioned, not brought into being by causes and circumstances, but has always been. Actually, the ancient ones say it has been with us since “before our parents were born” – meaning it is beginningless. Here, with clarity and ease, all things are seen as completely interconnected, non-separated. Our zazen, our seated meditation, is about experiencing this directly, for ourselves.

Our direct experience is through our body. Zen is body-practice, not mental manipulation. Sitting upright, with lifted well aligned posture, dropping the breath into

our belly and letting the natural breath just breathe, leaning on sensation of whole-body-presence, we allow ourselves to settle into this body. The mind will follow. Thoughts will arise – we should be thankful for this, it means we are not brain-dead! The brain is an organ that secretes thoughts. Thinking is the function of our brain, and the thoughts that popup are like “brain saliva” – kind of funny, what a relief! So in Zen we do not fight our thoughts or get mad at them. We see them for what they are, allowing thinking to arise and pass through, like clouds in the sky.

What we begin to discover is that we are not only our thoughts. We then can enter deeper inquiry - what is the “non-conceptual” mind? What is the state of “non-thinking” mind? In order to awaken fully, we need to taste this aspect of our being directly. It is not enough to hear about it from a teacher or in a book.

This intrinsic side of our nature is also not the whole picture. We separate it out for purposes of discussion or explanation, but actually it is totally merged with our ordinary human existence. We all are born, will die, have a story, have been conditioned by past events and past actions. This is our *relative* existence. The Buddha taught about these two – sometimes called relative and absolute – as the Two Truths. Always, in fact, these are merged together, intertwined. We separate them out here for purposes of explanation, as a teaching tool. Most of the time people are caught in the relative level, caught in their identification with “me” or “mine”, identification with their story. Meditation gives us a chance to taste (perhaps partially at first, but eventually more completely) the bigger picture. We can experience something of our spacious and boundless nature for ourselves. This direct experience can change our relationship to our relative aspect. Our suffering and troubles are seen against a vast backdrop, so to speak.

Just as clouds pass through the sky, but do not harm it, we begin to see our thoughts and worries as passing along, not damaging our own “sky-mind” so to speak.

Then we can begin, in earnest, to inquire into the causes of our suffering. Buddha’s teaching on our self-motivated clinging and aversion as the root of suffering can now begin to make sense. Our experience of seeing the emptiness side, the no-self aspect, begins to transform us. Habits drop away because we have “seen through” them, not because we try to change them. True letting go is about stuff dropping off. This is not “pruning” practice. We might think that our task is, like a good gardener, to cut off extra branches and make a more pleasing bush. There might be a place for that in some psychotherapy, but in Zen practice we take a different doorway to change. Our practice is to allow things to drop away because they are no longer needed. They have been seen through. This is not something we do. It is something which *happens to us* as our *zazen* deepens. It feels something like this – we look around and are surprised to notice that the ground is covered with petals. Oh, all these have fallen! As attachments fall, true compassion can be born. Seeing more clearly without the veils of clinging, we begin to naturally serve all beings. (note: This subject, the birth of Wisdom and Compassion, will be looked at in a separate talk)

Taking your seat is the beginning of an endless journey: the initial yearning to get something that we feel is missing, the discovery that what we seek is right here, the entry into strong silent upright body-practice, the glimpses of the interplay of relative and absolute, and the willingness to allow our practice to do its work, all have their place. This moves us forward like an ever-enlarging spiral; awakening has no end.

