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reflecting Dogen's unique wisdom!"

Roshi Joan Halifax, abbot,
Upaya Zen Center



ENGAGING
DŌGEN'S
THE PHILOSOPHY
OF PRACTICE
AS AWAKENING
ZEN

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17 *Shushōgi* Paragraph 29

GRAHAM PARKES

Our expression of gratitude should not consist in any other practices; the true path of such expression lies solely in our daily practice of Buddhism. This means that we practice without neglecting our lives day to day and without being absorbed in ourselves.

—From fascicle 31b: “*Gyōji, Part Two (ge) [Continuous Practice]*”

You wake up in the morning. It is a new day. A new life, in a way. A wonder to be here again, since it is never certain that we will wake up the next morning. In fact, what is certain is that there will come a next morning when we do not wake up: one day it will all be over. “Even if you make hundreds of plans,” Dōgen writes, “and create thousands of means to save yourselves, in the end you will turn to dust in the tomb.”¹ There is no denying that: we are now able to survey a far vaster range of human history than was available to Dōgen, and we can definitively say that the death rate for human beings has held steady since the beginning—at exactly 100 percent. So, unless things are now going really miserably, this waking up this morning is something to be grateful for. As Nietzsche’s Zarathustra says: “Whoever is of the rabble wants to live gratis; we others, however, to whom life has given itself—we are always wondering what we can best give in return!”² For Dōgen, what we can best give in return is practice: “Continuous practice, day after day, is the most appropriate way of expressing gratitude.”³ Not just sitting alone, then, but engaged practice that’s not only “for our own sake”—physical, somatic practice, which prevents the body’s being taken over by “that horrendous robber, the demon of fame and gain.”

But just sitting as well. And for those of us who are not home-leavers it may make sense to begin the day's thanking with some sitting without thinking, before continuing the practice. Because one thing we learn from attending to the breath is its finitude, our finitude. A few centuries before Dōgen, the Chan master Yunmen⁴ was always telling his disciples to wake up and pay attention: "Hurry up! Hurry up! Time does not wait for anyone, and breathing out is no guarantee of breathing in again! Or do you have a spare body and mind to fritter away?"⁵ This is the lesson from those moments between the end of the exhalation and the beginning of the inhalation: that some day there will come, for the first time in our lives and as an end to them, an exhalation that is not followed by an inhalation. At one level the point of practice for Dōgen is actually very simple: to enable the confrontation with, and embrace of, impermanence—the world's impermanence, but more immediately our own. In talking to the "Students of the Way" in his monastery, he says:

When you truly see impermanence, egocentric mind does not arise, neither does desire for fame and profit. Out of fear that the days and nights are passing quickly, practice the Way as if you were trying to extinguish a fire enveloping your head.⁶

If your hair is ablaze, you do not waste time speculating, or planning how to increase your income or your chances of fame: you cannot take it with you, and before too long even the most renowned figures sink into oblivion. So you practice, in this very moment, since it is the only one there is. Like the in-breath and out-breath but instantaneous, arising and perishing, moment after moment. It is a pity when we miss it.

Sitting goes well when there is settling, like the settling, in the old days, of a newly built house onto its foundations, as the frame gradually adjusts to the weight and gets aligned with the forces of gravity and the contours of the ground. But they say the most important moments are those when you lift your bottom off the zafu and assume the standing posture that will carry you through the day. For that is the opportunity to make the practice continuous, and for the home-dweller the next phase is crucial—and more easily negotiated, in my experience, if there is a

brief period during which one can be alone and pay full attention to one's activities in silence.

Here, in Japan, now that winter is almost over, it is the season of the satsuma tangerine. The color: orange—indeed the perfect example of orange color—like the rising or setting of the winter sun. It is a blessing, at this darker time of year with its abundance of root vegetables and their generally muted colors, to have a burst of bright orange as a reminder of sunnier times. The skin is mottled, with countless dark dots (oil glands) randomly spaced but with an even distribution overall, like a galaxy full of dark suns suspended in orange space. Its texture is smooth to the touch, and malleable, caressable like soft flesh; the fragrance somehow sweet, but indefinable—except by the word "tangerine." Likewise for the tangy taste: to know it you have to taste it (like the water in the Zen saying) for yourself.

The tangerine is one of the easiest fruits to eat because you can peel it without getting your fingers covered in juice. No need for anything as formal as a plate (the skin when peeled can form two small bowls), but best to sit down and relax, for if you eat it "on the run," or while preparing some other item of breakfast, you are likely to miss the richness of the experience. Much simpler to peel than an orange, since the skin lies more loosely on the flesh. A shallow bite with the incisors is a good way to start, and provides a foretaste that's slightly bitter, thanks to the flavor of the rind. But the sound of the rind tearing and coming away from the flesh inside is a unique delight: a subdued crackling, as the inner spheroid is revealed. Sometimes a puff of fragrant mist escapes. The color within is muted by comparison with the orange of the outside, striped and blotchy with the soft creamy hue of the pith.

Twelve segments typically, rarely more and sometimes eleven or ten, it is easily pulled apart. The teeth sink gently through the inner skin and into the succulent flesh, releasing a soft burst of juice and flavor, sometimes on the tart side but also sweet. The taste turns slightly tarter as you swallow the flesh and chew the remaining skin and pith, which often takes a fair amount of grinding. Apparently the balance in taste between the sweeter flesh and tarter pith reflects the way something in the pith counteracts the acid of the juice.

One's enjoyment of this noble fruit is enhanced by the knowledge of the wealth of nutrients and other health-giving substances it contains: various vitamins and acids and enzymes and fiber, and above all "nobiletin," a phytochemical that has been found to have antioxidant, anticancer, anti-inflammatory, and cholesterol-lowering properties, to reduce obesity, counteract memory loss and dementia, and help prevent heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. How wonderful that something that good for you should taste so delicious.

Given the traditional sleeping arrangement in Japan (on futons on the floor of a room fitted with tatami mats), to clear a space for the day's activities one has to put the bedding away—an exercise that involves a bit more than simply making the bed. This could be construed as a superfluous chore to be performed before proceeding to the more important things that need to be done. From the perspective of the western household, where, if time is short, one can shut the door on the bedroom without even making the bed, the Japanese arrangement is inefficient. But we might well question the priority we tend to give to efficiency as a measure for ordering or evaluating our lives—the Nazis, after all, were paragons of efficiency. How valuable efficiency is depends entirely on the nature of the activity and its larger context.

If we think about it, the way we so often structure our experience and activities—we distinguish fulfilling ends from burdensome chores in order to achieve our goals—this condemns us to a great deal of drudgery. If we refrain (as Dōgen would encourage us to do) from dividing the world up into means and ends; for example, if we approach the clearing of the sleeping area as an occasion for enjoying life, would that not shift the perspective and enrich our experience? Part of what makes tasks like this into chores is the perception that we are having to do the same thing over and over again—whether it is making the bed, washing the dishes, or cleaning the room. But it does not take prolonged reflection to realize that things are always different every time, and each situation is in fact unique. It is just that we tend to overlook this because our eye is on some future purpose.

The task—in the positive sense of the word, meaning a piece of work that has to be done—is to clear the rice-straw matted decks. Best to let

the bedding air for a while, which provides an opportunity to wash the face and clean the teeth. Dōgen has a great deal to say about making those two activities into consummate practice.⁷ Assuming my wife can be persuaded to get up for it, the question is how best to go about this task. How can we get better at it, so much better that we are doing our very best, making the best of something that needs to be done? The first thing is to open one of the sliding doors of the cabinet along the side of the room, which has been specially constructed for the purpose of storing the bedding.

There are many ways for me to open the door, some better, some worse. But what is it that makes one way better and another worse—and does it really matter? There may be a branch of physiology that deals with the human musculoskeletal system at work, but we do not need it for answering this question if we simply suppose that the worse ways lead to pain and suffering and the better to full enjoyment. This particular door is older and heavier than most, and inclined to stick, perhaps because it is slightly warped. For a body such as mine, with longer than average limbs, successful sliding requires careful attention to the body's posture and center of gravity, and the relative positions of hands and feet, if muscles are not to be strained or ligaments overstretched. By paying such attention we acquire an implicit understanding of the biomechanics of muscle leverage. Too much force applied, and to a wrong point on the edge of the door, can suddenly send it sliding into the post with a thud loud enough to wake the neighbors. A finger pinched, shoulder muscle strained, or lower back thrown out—all are indications that this way of opening the door is worse rather than better.

What is interesting here is not just that the better ways tend to be those that take less effort and use less energy: they also feel better as you perform the movements, and they no doubt look better, too, if anyone happens to be watching. The better ways are distinguished by their style and grace, and the pleasure they afford.

So, if we do not want this first shared task of the day to be a chore, we can make it into something more like a dance, which requires not letting it lapse into merely habitual activity and leads to a lot more fun. It was clear early in our marriage that we would never be the next Fred Astaire

and Ginger Rogers, but we still hold out hope for some distinction in the far less competitive field of bedding storing. The order of dance moves that naturally suggests itself is one where the last things to go into the cabinet should be the first to come out in the evening, when you lay the bedding down on the floor again. But within that framework there is plenty of room for creative improvisation.

In folding the sheets, once you synchronize your actions with those of your fellow folder, the well-coordinated interaction becomes a joy to participate in. It is less a matter of efficient body movement than of avoiding unnecessary exertion and postures that produce strain: that way the motions flow easily and smoothly, and on a cold morning the exercise has a pleasantly warming and tonic effect. The enjoyment becomes richer as you learn not only to harmonize your movements with your partner's but also to adjust them to the size and weight and texture of what you are folding, responding to the sheet or blanket as a third participant in the early morning dance.

In our dealings with bigger things there is sometimes a tendency (for men, at least) to manhandle them: intent on our own goals, we misjudge the weights or positions or pliabilitys of things, and we end up making one obstruct another, or even hurting ourselves with them, which in turn promotes an unhelpfully antagonistic attitude. But when putting away the futons becomes more spontaneous with practice, you lose the sense that you are the one performing the movements and gain a feeling for the unfolding of the activity from a center that is somehow between or among the participants. You know where the futons, once folded, belong; and things go better if, instead of your having to heave them into place, you simply help them get to where they need to be. This is an instance of what Dōgen calls "turning things while being turned by things," and it is through practice that we develop a sense of both how things are turning so that we can align ourselves aright, and how our turning them is in turn affecting what is going on.⁸ Helping the futons get to where they need to be depends on their having their appropriate places to begin with, but these do not need to be determined by a plan thought out in our heads beforehand and then implemented "on the ground." Rather, the suitability—where the various items of bedding best belong—are

actually suggested by the things themselves, as long as we remain open and responsive to them.

Dōgen reports that the Chan master Changqing⁹ practiced for almost twenty-nine years, wearing out twenty sitting mats, before "he suddenly had great awakening while rolling up a bamboo shade."¹⁰ You can be sure that Changqing wasn't daydreaming about breakfast while he was performing that everyday task.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant famously wrote that we should treat humanity, whether in others or in our own person, never as mere means to our own ends, but always, out of respect, as ends in themselves. If we were to extend this "categorical imperative" to animals and inanimate things, we might well find that things get better for all of us.

But now it is time to leave for work, which is fortunately within walking distance. Pity the poor commuters who have to sit in their cars for hours, stuck in rush hour traffic on congested freeways: that is one of the tougher tests of one's ability to engage in continuous practice. But the workplace is also a site rich in challenges to our ability to practice "without being absorbed in ourselves." "You practice continuously," Dōgen writes, "without wasting a single day of your life, without using it for your own sake. Why is it so? Your life is a fortunate outcome of continuous practice from the past."¹¹

We did not make our bodies or create our lives but received them from the ancestors, and so we should be grateful. And since we have them only "on loan," as it were, rather than as permanent possessions, we can express our gratitude by working for the benefit not only of our contemporaries but also of those to come. "Thinking upon the time when your body will turn to dust or mud, you should care about future generations without self-concern."¹² But since most of us in the developed world at the beginning of the twenty-first century are totally uninterested in thinking about such a time, our self-concern has become so huge that the last thing we care about is future generations—as evidenced by our perverse unwillingness to do anything about slowing global warming or the ongoing destruction of the natural environment. Considering the ethos of the United States at this point in its history, it would be hard to

imagine anything more diametrically opposed to what motivates Dōgen to advocate continuous practice. But the fact that, nevertheless, Dōgen's spirit is very much alive in that same, vast country (albeit for only a tiny percentage of the population) shines a small ray of hope through this dismal situation. Perhaps, through continuous practice, that ray can be broadened and extended.