

FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND CONCENTRATION

Sit Down, Sit Still, Sit Long

Lecture by Zentatsu Baker-roshi

Every sesshin I am again impressed by the power, by the winning combination of foreground and background concentration. By foreground concentration I mean the ability to concentrate on a specific object of concentration, for example your breath or your posture, in much the same way as a watchmaker concentrates on his work.

One point for the beginner to watch is that the specific concentration of the watchmaker or chess or *go* player is often accompanied by a stopping of the breath for stillness or a deathlike clarity as if stopping the breath would momentarily stop the objects of the world. And it may be so. Stopping the breath can bring on a kind of clarity, and in fact in mature zazen your breath may slow down evenly until it is nearly stopped. But the beginner, like the watchmaker, may stop the breath unconsciously, equating stillness and concentration or confusing stopping the world with stopping yourself. As a result he or she may be flooded with another world of hallucinatory or confusing images, a kind of *mappo*, induced unnecessarily by stopping the flow of breath to the brain.

This is most likely to happen when you breathe with your chest, with the upper part of your body. But when you find the deep even breathing from the lower part of your body, from your gut or hara, the breathing that is most characteristic of zazen, then you will not unconsciously stop your breath in your upper chest when you concentrate.

By background concentration I mean the resolution that is always present in the background of what we are doing no matter what is going on in the foreground. Although you may not be able to sit still or sustain concentration on your breath, at the same time, your decision, to sit and to continue your practice is unwavering.

Studying mind and body you will find out that the form of your thinking is a kind of vowing, recognitions that you stick to as real and permanent. To try to see vowing as the nature of your thinking will give you insight into how your mind works and how you have built a world-view and an identity. For example, as a child you may have eaten a lot or a little because of your particular metabolism, and then have been told that you are a "big eater" or that you eat "like a bird". And then years later, long after your metabolism has changed, you are likely to retain the idea that by nature you are a big eater or eat like a bird. This is a kind of vowing. Our world-view, our identity, our mental and physical baggage is formed by acceptances like this — suppositions, super positions, that we usually carry with us all of our life.

To see yourself it is necessary to undo or see through the accumulation of observations that for all practical purposes have become vows, that have made up your mind. Insight is only the beginning. I think Western psychology has put too much emphasis on the catharsis of insight as if recognition and its occasional cleansing were permanent change. It is very hard to change the unconscious vows of your

lifetime. The only way or at least the most effective way is to fight vows with vows. We must use the habits of our mind to realize the nature of our mind. The experience of Buddhism is that practice, repetition, the active holding of conscious vows is the primary means of radical and real personality change and growth. Vowing must be conscious and sustained, repeated over and over again in the background of everything we are doing, in the midst of the activity of our unconscious vows of many decades, until you look through your personality, your now transparent personality, at the world. This may give you a taste of the term *sunyata*: emptiness, or boundarilessness. It is an inner sense, a wildness we are talking of, as a wild animal depends on itself in an actually uncharted world, a world only nominally predictable.

Your new vows must not further encumber you. But please do not be confused by the mental division of things into opposites like freedom and restriction as if opposites excluded or were opposed to each other. Freedom proceeds through limitations, through the restrictions and definitions of form, of life itself. We are not talking about God or aether or some mysterious other. Freedom is the realization of the activity, clarity, and preciseness of form in our non-repeating universe. Our new vows should reduce desire to the most fundamental desire, our most fundamental thought, the intention of life itself. We say the thought of enlightenment, *Bodhicitta*. This you must find on your own. Life is not separate from intention. A flower is not separate from a particular change or growth. This is not a gaining idea or goal in the comparative sense of "I want to be the biggest, most beautiful, and best located flower."

In Zen the emphasis is first on background concentration, the vows that renew the fundamental direction of your life. Foreground concentration then becomes the expression, work, satisfaction, and fine tuning of background concentration. It is like loving your child. You may be angry or discouraged with your child, but your anger or displeasure remain expressions of your love and concern for him or her. The awareness of Buddha, the one who is awake, is not a dry, dispassionate philosophical mechanical alertness, but a wet concerned warm-hearted compassionate awareness. An awareness, a seeing that also hears, that actively listens to the activity, the cries of the world.

Zazen can be considered as having three parts — to sit down, to sit still, and to sit long. To sit down is just to be able to sit down and start zazen. It is not so easy to cut through the currents of your day and sit down to meditate even for a moment. Many things lead to your unavoidable daily activities — eating, sleeping, working, and so forth — but very little leads to meditation except sometimes suffering or discomfort, or the occasional memory of the deep mystery of our life. And for most of us suffering and discomfort come and go and we forget them as quickly as possible. So to be able to sit down outside the usual currents of your life is to be able to answer a call from the background, from the whole of your life, from your recognition of the scale and suffering of human life, from your decision to give space and expression to your wide life.

Not so many of us do this unless it is forced on us by circumstances obviously outside our control. But we can do it within our usual circumstances by the simple act of sitting zazen, even just to sit down for a moment. You can find many reasons why you do not have 30 or 40 or even 20 minutes to sit. There are many things you must do and they will come up with a special clarity and an unreal urgency just when you want to sit or as you are sitting. This clarity is one of the reasons we sit. We also sit to question the urgency. But sometimes the urgency is real, and the responsibilities are

probably real. However you always have the time to sit down at least for one or two minutes. Everyone does. Even if there is a car waiting outside for you, you can still sit down for one minute. If you say you do not have time for even one minute then you have not recognized the value of sitting as part of your life, or you are resisting change or awareness in your life. When you do sit down you often find that you do have more than a minute; but the point is not to trick yourself into sitting longer. It is to develop the detachment and awareness that allows you to act on that vow from your wider life, to act on what Suzuki-roshi called your inmost request.

Trying to sit still is more obviously the experience of zazen, to be able to sit without moving inside or out, completely at rest mentally and physically. At first you concentrate on your breathing, on your exhales, finally bringing your mind and body, heart lungs stomach hands mouth eyes legs arms pain pleasure thought and attitudes together into one thought, one intention, one non-thinking, one concentration penetrating ambivalence into an intimacy with our extended being. Our internal divisions will dissolve in the purity of this still sitting.

It takes time and yet sitting also creates time because you sleep less — dreaming has come into your conscious meditation and finally been subsumed into your daily life as part of each act no longer divorced from an unconscious life (the content of most thinking is censored dreaming). Sitting creates time because your thinking begins to correspond with the possible, and you begin to act with precision and without ambivalence through the possible to what you have not yet thought of. When you live without ambivalence most of your sicknesses disappear. But we should be careful not to fill up this new fresh time with more responsibilities in a way which again prevents us from sitting.

To sit long helps us physically to sit well. After every one day sitting and seven day sesshin you will notice a marked improvement in your ability to sit still, but we can learn to sit well physically from short periods of sitting. What sitting long encounters, intensifies, and even exacerbates and confronts us with is the topography of our mental and emotional life, our moral attitudes, confusion, and resistance. Suzuki-roshi used to say kids can never leave a still pond alone. Impatience and discomfort cease to be physical and become emotional and moral aspects of your habits and character. Trying to sit still for a long period of time deeply interrupts and questions, so that we can see very clearly the currents, assumptions, habits, and hopes of life.

Culture, Buddhism are mysteries given to us by our ancestors that we may know our own mystery, know what we take for granted, almost like we take air for granted and then pollute, and miss the point of even breathing. Buddhism, culture, our body and mind are instruments that we play, instructions that we learn to speak. The secret is that you have to trust, you have to abandon yourself to your instrument. But to begin we need an image, a concept, a vision, an object. So we have created Zen so that you can trust something. If you do not trust zazen you can not let go into your practice. At some point you have to existentially, conclusively trust zazen. So Zen and zazen, given their existence, are as unprogrammed as possible, as close as a concept of form can be to you so that trusting zazen, even for the beginning student, is virtually identical with trusting yourself. As insight and decision or will are necessary to sit down, faith or trust, willingness is necessary to sit still. We have to learn to leave a still pond alone.

Eventually this developing faith and trust in yourself will allow you to sit still and be able to look at, see, and accept the particular person you are. In this way our

mental and emotional life become as stable and precise as the physical world. Time and space are your own objects of expression. Insight becomes the ability to act on your own life. And then with repeated and long sitting the topography of our habits and mental, moral, and emotional life can become the topic of our foreground concentration. When you make your life your own, the lives of others become accessible to you and so the stories from our lineage of Zen teachers can finally become pointed and pivotal aspects of the topography of your own life. And the characteristics, problems, and fundamental nature of our particular life become our own koan. We call this the genjo koan.

The process or technique of this practice I call turning a question or a statement. You take something from your life or from Buddhism, a sutra or a koan, that has become a wall, something you cannot penetrate, perhaps like "This very mind is Buddha!" or "How do I accept my friend?" or "What is this world in front of my face?" or "Why do we practice if we are already enlightened?" or "What could the Prajna Paramita Sutra possibly mean by, 'without thought coverings', or 'unsupported anywhere, without a basis'." Then with the knowledge that there is a solution even if it is only the nature of mind or thinking itself, you proceed to repeat, ask, and turn the statement or question, each word of it, over and over, certainly every time you remember it, until the statement or question is identical with every situation you are in, with every object in front of you, and equal to your own strength. You continue until your life is not separate from this turning, until you are being turned. This is foreground concentration becoming background concentration again, becoming all-ground concentration.

Tozan was asked, "What is Buddha?" He answered, "Three pounds of flax." This is the perfectly stable world of all-ground concentration.

Pao Che was asked, "The nature of the wind is constant and reaches everywhere. Why are you fanning yourself?" He responded, "You have understood the constancy of the wind, but you do not yet understand that it reaches everywhere." The monk asked, "What is the meaning of its reaching everywhere?" Pao Che went on fanning himself. This monk asked very refined or sophisticated questions, questions that we can see, or at least Pao Che could see that the monk had been turning for a long time until only the kernel remained. The chaff and husk of extraneous aspects or questions he could answer himself are gone. With this kernel bright and present in his mind he took a good opportunity to ask, "Why if we are already enlightened do we need to practice?" Dogen said, "The wind of Buddhism ripens the gold of the earth and the sweet milk of the long river."

You may use T.S. Eliot's line, "The stillness of the Chinese vase, still moving perpetually in stillness."

After not having seen his teacher for some time, Basho, the famous haiku poet, was asked, "What have you understood?" Basho answered, "After the rain the moss is so clean!" You can imagine how bright green it must have been. But Butcho, his teacher, asked immediately, "What about before the moss?" As Mumon-roshi points out, Butcho never would have accepted some easy to say and to-think-you-understand generalization like emptiness, or a state where nothing is to be found. Basho responded, "Frog jump-in, watersound."

These became the last two lines of his most famous haiku. He completed it that evening with his friends:

Old pond
Frog jump-in
Watersound.

Butcho wrote a calligraphy in acknowledgement that said: "An attainment of enlightenment through utter concentration, and an utter concentration for the sake of enlightenment."

Layman P'ang said that Zen practice was, "Difficult, difficult like trying to spread sesame seeds on each leaf of a tree!" You will find it that difficult. But then his wife said, "Easy, easy like touching my toe to the ground. The Patriarch's mind on the tip of every grassblade."

Ejo was enlightened during a lecture when he heard Dogen say, "A single hair pierces myriad holes." All run through with one skewer!

The poet Yang Wan Li wrote:

Standing by the stream waiting for the moon to rise;
But knowing how impatient I am, the moon takes its time.
Tired of waiting, I return to my study and close the door.
The moon leaps over a thousand peaks.

ABSOLUTE
REALITY, *namely,*
how much can I do right now
about life in this place? I
am it, all of this living
AND *this place and what*
I'm doing is called

TRANSFORMATION
IRRADIATION
BASE METAL BECOMES
GOLD

-PHILIP WHALEN