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Zazen and the Precepts

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After I ordained, I had this recurring thought that zazen and the precepts were somehow the same, or that they had similar functions in my spiritual life. I thought, “well, zazen and precepts are the same, I don't know really what that means, but it sounds pretty good”. Only more recently, this idea has resurfaced and some connection between zazen and the precepts became more apparent. What I would like to explore in this talk is how zazen and the precept practice are both ways to investigate and express the Buddhist teaching on emptiness and dependent arising.

When a Buddhist says “emptiness” what exactly does it mean, and, moreover, how can we practice with it? When we talk about emptiness we are not talking about whether a phenomenon exists or not, but rather, how does a phenomenon exist. As a point of departure, I would like to start with what we chant almost every Sunday, the Heart Sutra. The Heart Sutra starts,

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the prajna paramita, perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty and was saved from all suffering.

This is a pretty dense sentence, and rather than unpacking the whole thing, I just want to talk about how the terms “empty” and “own being” and how they are used in this sentence. When we say “empty” it is really an incomplete thought. We need to know “empty of what?” The answer is, empty of “own being”. OK, so that helps a little, but what the heck is “own being”? The term “own being” is a literal translation of the Sanskrit word *svabhava*. A less literal, but clearer translation, “inherent existence” is often used in translations coming from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. So, the term emptiness, in this context, refers to a particular conditioned dharma not possessing the property of inherent existence. For the purposes of this talk, a dharma simply means “a moment of experience”. Emptiness isn't a “something” which can be characterized; it is simply a negation. So rather than worrying or getting philosophical about what emptiness is or isn't, it is much more useful to understand fully what is meant by inherent existence of phenomena. This tendency to superimpose the attribute of inherent existence on some aspect of our experience is something we can examine.

A little about inherent existence. A “dharma” is said to be inherently existent when its existence is not dependent on any causes or conditions. An inherently existent dharma would also exist “from its own side” (as Tibetan Buddhists put it). That is, the dharma's existence would not depend on an apprehending consciousness. Another way to put this is: some experiences seem to have an ability to sustain themselves without our attention or participation or that they seem somehow outside of what we conceive as the “I”.

Emptiness is closely related to impermanence, which means that phenomena have no ability to sustain themselves. Phenomena are impermanent because they are empty of inherent existence. However, we often think that “permanence” is the opposite of impermanence, and I think this terminology obscures the practice dimension of this issue. I think a better opposite for impermanence is “continuity”. Maybe transitory and continuity convey more clearly what is meant, in Buddhist literature, by impermanence and permanence.

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Any moment of experience which depends on causes and conditions cannot be inherently existent. So, all conditional dharmas are “empty of inherent existence”. We know that everything arises in response to causes and conditions, so everything is empty of inherent existence.

This seems obvious, so what why is it an issue? Because, dharmas appear to us (*ie* arise in our consciousness) as though they are inherently existent. Another way to put this is that we perceive (or conceive or impute) the property of inherent existence to our own objects of mind. This means that our objects of mind appear to possess a continuity and stability, or durability and substantiality which they do not actually possess. Also, our objects of mind appear to be independent of us. For example, we experience our world as if it is independent of us and waits around for us to perceive it. Another obvious and pre-eminent example is our notion of a continuous “I”. Sure, we can observe that we change (apparently, superficially), but deep down we may hold to a belief that there really is some unchanging “I” underneath the superficial day to day changes.

Here are a couple of examples which I hope will illustrate inherent existence. When sitting zazen we might experience what could be considered invasive or unwanted states of mind. These might be fantasies, conversations with ourselves, or songs playing over and over again in our heads or recurrent emotional states. We do not have any control over what arises in our mind during a period of zazen. However, because there is a sense of “I”¹ which does not want them there, we see these states of mind a “not us” or the other, and because of their persistence, we see them as being able of functioning in a manner which is continuous, independent of “us” or our minds. They might “disappear” when we return to our intended practice, but after awhile, we drift off and find that they somehow have “reappeared”. Has anyone experienced this? This is the experience of dharmas (*ie* states of mind) appearing as having the property of inherent existence.

As second example, I remember when during a sesshin I had this fluttering anxiety in my chest about the pain I was feeling in my knee. After awhile, the fluttering subsided. At some later time, (I don't know how long) the fluttering sensation “reappeared” in my chest. I noted my first thought of “oh, its back again”. At that moment I was aware that had I caught myself red-handed assigning a sense of continuity to these two experiences which were separated in time. I had conceptually overlaid this sense of continuity to make the two phenomena appear to be a substantial entity which manifested, then hid for awhile, and then re-manifested. The experiential reality was, I had this sensation at one time and at a later time I had another sensation which I noted as “similar”. That's all. Adding a sense of continuity between the experiences was a conceptual “adding something extra” which was not something integral to the actual experience.

Jay Garfield, a Buddhist scholar, points out another aspect of emptiness of “own being” or inherent existence in his reading of some Buddhist teachings. He points out that dharmas are empty of what could be termed “causal power”.² That is, dharmas do not cause other dharmas (nor do dharmas cause themselves). This means that if you feel your face itch during zazen, the itch does not “cause” you to scratch. Itchiness may act as a condition for the arising of the impulse of wanting to scratch, but it cannot “make” us scratch. Similarly, but more subtly, the arising of a thought (a dharma) does not have the causal power to make us think about it. Having a thought is a condition for thinking, but cannot force us to think about it. Knowing that your thoughts can't make you think, might make it easier to let go of thinking during zazen. We will return to the idea of causal power when we talk about the

¹ Which, by the way, also appears as being inherently existent.

² Garfield, J. L. *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross Cultural Interpretation*, pp. 24-45.

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precepts.

It is important to note that “emptiness of inherent existence” is only meaningful when talking about a specific dharma or phenomenon. It does not mean that there is a general “Great Emptiness” which is a pervasive “core reality” at the heart of the universe from which diverse phenomena arise. Such a view is closer to a Hindu view of *Brahman*³ or a Taoist view.⁴

In zazen, when we notice and let go of our tendency to superimpose a sense of inherent existence on our experience, we can begin to see the conditionality of phenomena we experience. To make an analogy, if we are up inside a cloud and moving within the cloud as the cloud itself moves, we might presume that the cloud is vast permanent entity, maybe having the perception that the entire universe is made up of this cloud. However, if we let go of being in the cloud and are on the ground watching the cloud, we can see how it arises, floats across the sky and eventually dissipates, we see its conditional existence. When we are “moving” with a phenomenon our ability to perceive cause and effect is obscured. When we are grounded, it becomes easier to see the conditioned existence of phenomena. Dogen talks about this in *Genjokoan*:

*When you ride in a boat and watch the shore, you might assume that the shore is moving.
But when you keep your eyes closely on the boat, you can see that the boat moves.
Similarly, if you examine myriad things with a confused body and mind you might
suppose that your mind and nature are permanent. When you practice intimately and
return to where you are, it will be clear that nothing at all has unchanging self.*

It was our Zen Ancestor Nagarjuna who highlighted the equivalence of emptiness of inherent existence and dependent arising. Phenomena which arise dependently are empty [of inherent existence] and are thereby dependent on conditions and causes. Conversely, if we assert, even unconsciously, the inherent existence of phenomena, the consequence of this is that we deny, and become blind to, the dependent nature of phenomena as well as the a law of cause and effect.⁵

Dogen placed great importance in cause and effect. Dogen, in fact, devotes a fascicle in the *Shobogenzo* to this topic (*Shinjin Inga (Deep Faith in Cause and Effect)*). In this fascicle he writes

3 H. H. Dalai Lama, *Essence of the Heart Sutra*, p. 117

4 For example, see Chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*.

5 Garfield, J. L., *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*, p.69, XXIV:16-18:

If you perceive the existence of all things
In terms of their essence,
Then this perception of all things
Will be without the perception of causes and
conditions.

Effects and causes
And agent and action
And conditions and arising and ceasing
And effects will be rendered impossible.

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.

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referring to those practitioners who have ignored or misunderstood cause and effect,

It is pitiful that these fellows, without clarifying cause and effect, have uselessly idled away a lifetime in a state of confusion. In learning in practice the Buddha-Dharma, the first priority is to clarify cause and effect. Those who negate cause and effect are likely to beget the false view that craves profit, and to become a cutter of good roots.⁶

Notice that Dogen points out that in both learning and practice of the Buddha-Dharma, the first priority is to clarify cause and effect. As Dogen-zenji teaches the oneness of practice and realization, having deep faith in cause and effect means practicing or manifesting directly deep faith in cause and effect. You can't have real faith without practice and you can't have real practice without faith. Being intimate with the precepts is being fully in the stream of cause and effect. And, because cause and effect is related to the emptiness of conditioned phenomena, when we practice with the law of cause and effect through the precepts, we are practicing with the emptiness of phenomena.

Zazen and the precepts share common ground in the Zen admonition of “not moving”. Not moving doesn't necessarily have anything to do with physically moving or not. Not moving means staying with our intended practice rather than being pulled or pushed by the various states of mind which arise. Not being pushed or pulled means staying present with a state of mind without acting on it. When we have confidence (or faith in) that these states of mind lack inherent existence, it is easier to practice not moving. This is true for both zazen practice and precepts practice. Another way to express “not moving” is to see it as an all inclusive acceptance without turning away, again this applies to both zazen and the precepts. Not turning away is recommended for a couple of reasons. First, when we don't turn away, we bring our awareness to the dependent arising and emptiness of the present moment of experience. Secondly, not moving when a karmically driven state of mind arises causes that little bit of karma to be burned off.

In Buddhism, there is a teaching that all moments of experience leave an impression in an unconscious aspect of our mind called “storehouse consciousness”. These impressions or traces of past actions are called seeds. These seeds manifest at a later time when the proper conditions come about. Just as a seed from a poplar tree won't grow into an oak tree, these mental seeds will always manifest the type of activity which first planted the seed in our storehouse consciousness. When one of these seeds manifest, we may, through ignorance, take it for being an inherently existent object, or simply by blind habit energy, and follow the impulse (that is “move”) to act on that seed, then that action causes more seeds to be deposited in our storehouse consciousness for another go around. However, if we resist the impulse to move when a seed manifests, then the karmic energy carried by that seed gets burned off without producing new seeds of that type. In this way, we can loosen the stranglehold of habituated patterns on our life. So, in zazen, when we don't move, we are actually allowing a little bit of our karmic load to be lightened. In terms of emptiness, when we don't move in zazen, we are realizing the emptiness (or the dependent nature) of the karmic impulses which have governed our acts of body, speech, and mind when we stay present and aware without moving.

In zazen, our karma tends to come to us by way of the various states of mind which arise without our conscious effort. In our everyday lives of activity, we tend to go to our karma and act out our unwholesome, habit energies, which ultimately cause us to suffer. The precepts point out places in our

⁶ Nishijima, Gudo & Cross, *Chodo Master Dogen's Shobogenzo Book 4*, p. 194. The term “cutter of good roots” refers to *icchantika* – one who pursues desires to the end and has no wish to attain buddhahood.

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lives where we tend to create karma and build up habituated patterns which can take us away from the present moment. The precepts offer, like zazen, a way to return to the present moment. The precepts offer us a way to “not move” in the face of our karmic impulses. So, through “not moving” in precept practice in our everyday lives, allows seeds to arise and get burned off without generating new seeds to replace it. When we act wholesomely in the face of our unwholesome tendencies, this is having deep faith in cause and effect and the empty, dependent nature of our karmic impulses.

To give a concrete example, let's take the precept of not intoxicating mind or body of self or others. Usually, this refers to taking intoxicants like alcohol or drugs. However, it can be taken to mean any activity which medicates and insulates us from be present for the moment. It could be shopping, a relationship, watching TV, or tuning out on an iPod. In any case, we turn to a medicating activity because we believe at some level it has the power to alleviate the discomfort or dissatisfaction we are experiencing. If we do this activity enough, it becomes a crutch. If we do it even more, it becomes an addiction, where we really give the activity a lot of power and importance in our lives.

We may begin to believe that the impulse to act out in this way has some “causal power” to compel us to do something, or it appears to have a “life of its own”. That is, it is inherently existent, and that we have no power over its arising or decay. This is one way to interpret the passage in the *Heart Sutra* which reads:

all dharmas are marked with emptiness: they do not appear nor disappear, are not tainted nor pure, do not increase nor decrease

Of course, phenomena like urges to act out come and go (at a conventional level), but it is a mistake to assume that the urge has its own inherent power of arising. The arising of an urge is empty of an “inherent arising”. This is similar to what I mentioned earlier in the talk about dharmas not having “causal power”. Rather it is simply a dependent phenomena. The precepts remind and guide us to reaffirm the truth of no inherent arising. With the precepts we can stay in the experiential truth of an urge just being an urge, a dependent, transitory sensation. It doesn't have to mean anything like an imperative to act out.

Many people who are new to Zen have the opinion that sitting zazen is the “main thing” in Zen and that that ethical practice of using the precepts is somehow secondary. Another common view is that Zen is “beyond good and evil” and that ethical practice is not necessary or even counterproductive because such ethical considerations are mired in dualism and delusion. While it is good to start sitting zazen for any reason which resonates with us, eventually, as we continue to practice, we may find the need to acknowledge that these views deny cause and effect. In Soto Zen, the precepts are not just a set of rules to follow, imposed from “the outside.” Rather, they are recognized as the profound practice of a bodhisattva and hence in Soto Zen we receive the Bodhisattva Precepts. In Soto Zen, both priest ordained and lay people take the same precepts, which is different from other forms of Buddhism. In Soto Zen there is the teaching that the desire to practice the Bodhisattva Precepts arises naturally when someone awakens to the reality of dependent arising or emptiness. To actualize Zen practice in our lives outside of formal zazen practice, the precepts are an equally important component in actualizing Buddha.

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