

“No Set Plans” Olympia Zen Center, June 17, 2010, Eido Frances Carney

... so, it was a very nice trip to Europe and I told this one fellow, Helmut from Northern Germany that I would tell you about him. He goes to Zazen twice a week. They have Zazen in two different places. One night he rides his bicycle ten kilometers each way, it's pretty decent ride and then on the other night he takes the train and gets off at the station and he does a foot-scooter, no motor and he goes about three miles on that little foot-scooter to get to Zazen. Pretty decent! Sometimes we think 5 miles from downtown to out here is “oh so far to go!” This fellow twice a week and he never misses. (Our Dennis, I learn, does just under ten kilometers twice a week also. Pretty impressive commitment, I'd say, especially since we have so much rain.)

Tonight I wanted to talk about Dogen Zenji's “The Needle of Seated Meditation.” Dogen Zenji was very fond of Wanshi Shogaku who was an earlier Chinese teacher before him. Dogen Zenji refers to Wanshi Shogaku very often in Shobogenzo because he was a great teacher and poet and he wrote a poem called, “The Acupuncture Needle of Zazen.” Dogen writes his own “Needle of Seated Meditation” which is a kind of a commentary on Wanshi Shogaku. I'm reading Dogen Zenji's “Needle” and there is just a little tiny phrase within it that I want to speak about.

*The important function for Buddha after Buddha
And the pivotal moment for Ancestor after Ancestor
Is to let IT manifest without deliberately thinking about anything.*

(Now the It is capitalized and the It of course is referring to our Natural Self or the Realized Self, IT, the Absolute Self.)
And to realize IT without creating complications.

*When one let's IT manifest, without thinking about anything,
Such a manifestation is naturally close to us.
When one realizes IT, without creating complications,
Such a realization is naturally a direct experience.*

*When that manifestation is naturally close to us,
There is not the least bit of defilement:
When that realization is naturally a direct experience,
There is not the least difference, between Host and Guest.*

*When the closeness is without the least bit of defilement
That closeness is put aside and falls away:
When one directly experiences that there is not the least distinction
between Host and Guest,
Out of that experience come no set plans as we diligently continue to train.*

*The water is so clear, you can see down to the bottom
As fish swim by, just as fish do*

*The sky is now boundless, penetrating the heavens
As birds fly off, just as birds do*

So, this is Dogen Zenji speaking about seated meditation and about our Realized Self and about the Self in the posture of Zazen. I want to talk just about this little piece here “When one directly experiences that there is not the least distinction between Host and Guest, out of that experience come No Set Plans as we diligently continue to train.”

No set plans!

Well this little sequence here is of course allowing the...I'm going to say “the small self” (because it's just a piece of language, it's not that your own functioning self is small, please understand that). So, I'll use the small self and the big self.

But Dogen is making a clear distinction here about the big self, the realized self, that the contrivances fall away and the complications fall away when we are sitting in Zazen and we allow the small self to fall away and we have a clear presence of simply being on the cushion, allowing realization to appear. *There is not the least distinction between Host and Guest.* That would be the self observing the self, there is absolutely none of that. There is just being present. And *no set plans* is the experience. This is what I want to talk about.

In that experience of Zazen there is actually no sense of time and no sense of distance from anything else around us. So there is no opportunity to make any plan about anything, there is no need to make a plan, because we are complete in that experience of Zazen. Completely present, completely clear and completely at home, in being no distinction between Host and Guest. And it's from that point that we make a start when we think about making plans in our lives. We sit with and as, No Set Plan, before we think about making a plan.

In my travels and in our very complicated world today, and for all of us, there is so much planning, so much setting about organizing this and getting that and making that happen and “then we'll do this, and then we'll do that ...” And Dogen points out a little bit later the folly of such an approach, because we're all going to be in our Dusty Graves soon enough and on the way to that Dusty Grave we are going to look back and realize the folly of so much planning, so much making of plans. So much time wasted. So much misunderstanding.

No, I'm not talking about not making plans at all. I am talking about the contrivances that we do and the setting ourselves in a particular way from which we cannot extricate ourselves, saying “this has to be a certain way!” and not being able to move if this particular thing doesn't happen. We're setting out some design for our lives and then not being able to be flexible if we don't get our way in something. It's coming back to a spiritual point that Dogen reminds us, the spiritual point of No Set Plans, and remembering that in Zazen, in the practice of Zazen, this is our rooted place, our spiritual rootedness from which we begin. Dogen teaches the Reality of our lives. And that Reality continues even while we are thinking about all kinds of other things.

We don't change that Reality by our thinking. That Reality of “no set plans” and the no distinction between Host and Guest continues. So it is returning to Zazen, and rooting ourselves in Zazen as the beginning point of making any plan at all. It must be the point from which we begin. When we understand No Set Plans, we see the world a bit differently, than when we do make a plan, it comes from a very different place. It comes from a point of wisdom and not from an egocentric desire to have things go a certain way.

Master Kyogen once said in verse

*A hundred plans, a thousand schemes, all made just for this self of ours alone
as though this body could yet evade it's future in some dusty grave.*

*Say not white-haired corpses mute, take all their secrets to their tombs
for they are the ones who fully know what death's domain is all about.*

So *A hundred plans, a thousand schemes, all made just for this self of ours alone.*

Learning flexibility, learning to be flexible in our lives allows life to live us. Our lives really allows life to be lived. If we are too designing, we actually make a very small life for ourselves. If we give up the contrivances and so much planning, we see a much larger life. Life opens to something much more extraordinary, much larger than we could possibly imagine for ourselves. Of course along the way we say “Yes” to certain things and we go a certain way, but if we allow ourselves to “hang in space,” we allow things to happen that we might otherwise have closed off from. We must walk with wisdom, we must do a certain amount of taking care of ourselves, we must make some plans for this and that, but we also have to not become arrogant. We have to step forward knowing that everything can change in a moment.

Two months ago, we didn't think about the oil-spill. But things happen, and life can change for people in a moment. So much grief is experienced around this oil-spill. Grief that we don't realize has such an underpinning for us. I am grieving terribly over it, I just imagine that others are also. It's such a lesson, such a tremendous lesson for us, such a huge Karmic lesson! Of course here was a question of not enough planning of course. But certainly wisdom might say “do we really think we should go way down there?” I don't know. Anyway we can't go in to all of it, but everything can change in a moment and we have to be terribly flexible and allow ourselves to re-balance continually.

With no absolute set plans.

You know, I can watch some of you who are unemployed and are looking for a job. That's a really good place to have no set plans, as you know. That's a real thing in which you know you have to respond to something that you hope is going to come forward and you don't know what it's going to be. You know that you are dwelling in the Dharma without knowing how you're going to go. And to know that you have to hold on to something. We root ourselves in Zazen and yet realize that we can't grab Zazen, and Zazen won't put food on your table, and Zazen might not keep you warm. It's good for nothing in a lot of ways. And yet it's our beginning point, it's the point where we find confidence in life, it's the point where we root ourselves so that we can

hold on in the composure of no set plan. Unemployment is one of those things that's a really good example of dwelling in faith in one's life.

When the closeness is without the least bit of defilement, that closeness is put aside and falls away. When we directly experience that there is not the least distinction between Host and Guest, out of that experience comes no set plans, as we diligently continue to train in the midst of great adversity we touch the no distinction between Host and Guest and we diligently continue to practice.

And then Dogen says this beautiful poetry:

*The water is so clear,
you can see down to the bottom*

He's not talking about that water out in the pond or the ocean. He's talking about the True Self. The Self becomes so clear, just like crystal water, straight to the bottom.

as fish swim by, just as fish do

All things just swimming through us, practically, and all of existence going by, clearly and simply.

*The sky is now boundless
penetrating the heavens
as birds fly off, just as birds do*

The boundless sky above and actually the boundless waters that we swim in, and the boundless Self, the crystal clear boundless Self that we are. And that is the point we return to before we make plans. That is our dwelling place.