

What Does My Effort Give Rise To?

June 30, 2010 Olympia Zen Center Eido Frances Carney

I want to talk tonight about a word that comes up very frequently in Dogen Zenji's writings, in his encouragement talks, and it's the second one of the spiritual agents that I spoke a little bit about last week (we spoke last week about Genuineness and Trust) the second one is Effort. Also it's one of the Paramitas and it's one of the Noble Truths, Right Effort.

In my 40 years of practice in Zen, I have to say that Effort is one of those subjects that is persistent, confounding, subtle, difficult. Very difficult to understand the range or the balance in this matter of effort! And of course aside from the spiritual discussions we are talking about, Right Effort and the matter of effort comes up in all kinds of things. It can be a cultural matter, how we make effort, what we expect of one another. As Americans it might be very different from how we make effort in Japan, or how we make effort in Germany or Switzerland. When we go to another culture we feel a quality in how the people move, how they work, what their lives are like within the expectations of the culture around effort.

It's always a phenomenal thing to me that we can make astounding effort and see great results (I'm not going to talk about results tonight, I'm just talking about making effort) but we make tremendous effort, say around things like parades or The World Cup, or baseball and football and all of those public events. Huge effort to put on a ball game and effort to get there, and then we have some very difficult things happening that we need to make effort about and we can't seem to make things happen! So effort is one of those very interesting confounding things. Effort to get public transportation, it's really stubborn you know, very difficult in this country, especially in the West and yet we can build ballparks and so forth and so on. So it's a very mysterious one to me, effort, and how we can as a society make effort together in useful helpful ways.

Dogen Zenji speaks about effort as a way of cutting off "evils." Evils is the way it's translated here, but I'm going to use the word, "tendencies." Those little poisons that enter our lives, that make it difficult, our own tendencies. Four kinds of Right Effort address the cutting off of our tendencies, or the easing of our own tendencies. We might have a tendency to get angry or a tendency toward jealousy or something like that. Dogen says that the four kinds of right effort around helping to stop those in our lives, are those endeavors that avoid the things that give rise to the tendencies. Endeavoring to bring our tendencies to a halt when we see them arise. Endeavoring to do what produces merit and endeavoring to do what increases merit. So he elaborates on those ways to practice with that so that we see our own selves behave and watch for when a tendency arises, and then to do some work for merit, either for ourselves or for other people, and then to increase that merit. That's pretty simple actually.

The question that arises for me, in my own life, and I feel it as a way to really look at the matter of effort, is this one question. The question that I have is: "WHAT DOES MY EFFORT GIVE RISE TO?" I speak for myself, and you can address that question to yourself. What does my

effort give rise to? Very basic, simple question, but yet it's a question that looks at all kinds of efforts that we make, and then we ask "what is the result of that effort? How do I apply myself and what does, where I apply, give rise to? What comes into the world as a result of my effort?"

I think that I have made a lot of effort in my life. I work really hard, I certainly had times when I've not worked so hard, but I'm a person who makes a lot of effort and I'm certain in terms of my own teaching, as Zen Teacher, I've sometimes pushed very hard, in pushing students toward effort and making more effort, and sitting hard as if your hair were on fire. Really sitting in Zazen to push yourself a little bit. I do that because I love Zen practice so much. I also think Zen practice is enjoyable. We have enormous laughter within it and around it, so there are all those elements. You might not notice that, when you come on a Wednesday night for the first time. when you sit and your legs are killing you, your legs have gone to sleep and you can't stand up, and you don't have a really good feel for the community, so you maybe are not able to see this as enjoyable, but over the course of time, there is great lightheartedness and lots of laughter that goes on in the Zen community. So, sometimes I have pushed very hard and sometimes it may be a little too hard, because we all know what happens if we push too hard on something...if our effort turns from a balanced effort that might be seeing good results and instead it pushes very hard and then misses the target. This is a very fragile, subtle thing and we don't always see it right off till afterwards, until the great disaster! Right? We know about those disasters that are around a particular applied effort. Even the oil-spill is around effort, and around an effort that pushed too hard, because they had deadlines and they didn't want to miss their deadlines. So they pushed, pushed, pushed and as a result we have a pretty big disaster.

So, effort, I find, is one of those really almost fragile things, that takes tremendous listening to ourselves, to know and to understand where the sweet-spot is, as it were, in terms of our own recognition of ourselves in how we are doing things and how we go forward.

Of course in Zen practice, all of our effort is to move to Awakening. All of our effort is applied in that direction. Even though we may not be on the cushion, all of our effort that comes from this practice applies to all aspects of our lives. It resonates in all of the rest of our lives. So, it's an important element of practice, and very difficult too. So what does my effort give rise to? You know my whole life can move in front of me and I look at all the things that effort gave rise to, and I can see how it could apply to my job, my work, to the choices that I made in my job and then how I did my job. But Right Livelihood of course is related to Right Effort, all of these things are connected, but I could point to my jobs that I had had in relationship to Right Effort and jobs that I left because I thought that they were harmful to the environment, and I thought I don't want to contribute to that particular area, and so I didn't want to keep more effort there. We have many things in our lives that are like that, that are difficult choices for us.

Dogen Zenji, also talks about (I'm coming into another aspect that relates and I'm going to tie these two things together) ABIDING IN ONE'S DHARMA POSITION. Accepting our lives as they are. This is one of Dogen's very big themes. Accepting your Dharma Position. In the area of practice, it may be that our position is to ring the han, and truly accepting that and doing it

wholeheartedly and completely. Or to be Doan and to ring the bells and to do that thoroughly and completely and to make Right Effort, exactly the right effort to ring those bells well, and to not be thinking, "Gosh, do I have to do this again? Why isn't somebody else taking over this job?" Or to think that it is a lowly position, or to think that maybe one is not advancing in some way, because one is ringing the bells.

This is a very important aspect of Dogen's teaching. We all know what it's like when we go to the grocery-store and we're checking out and we come upon a clerk who doesn't want to be there! Tough job, person doesn't want to be there and they're making life miserable for all these people coming through the shoot. There is something that hits us painfully in that, the person doesn't want to be there, we're engaging, we're buying these things, our precious food that we are going to take home, and somebody who doesn't like that job is handling our food and packing up our food for us. And we know that tremendous difference when we go through, and it's a clerk who really cares for their job and greets us and cares for us, and we have a wonderful exchange when we encounter that person. We may all have been in some kind of job that we resent and we can't accept our situation in it, and maybe we make life miserable for people around us.

Accepting one's Dharma Position means accepting our life-situation and making Right Effort within that life-situation. This is a big practice. Fully accepting our life-situation, accepting the whole body and the whole mind with the particular gifts that we've been given and the shape we are and all of the foibles also that we carry along with us, they also are us, our dark side, all of it! Accepting the totality of it and making Right Effort. Making effort to work with those tendencies to see them when they arise and to practice with merit and to enlarge that merit, within that Dharma Position. That's really good practice. And it's the creation of happiness in our lives.

We keep resisting. We resist aspects of ourselves, we resist situations within our own lives. The more we resist, the more unhappy we become. And it's so odd, you know, the very thing that we think we don't like, when we accept it, we can find joy in it! Dogen's teaching around this: abiding in one's Dharma Position. How do we meet our own Karma ? How do we meet the Karma? And finding ways to abide with joy in that situation?

I drove home with a family after being out to dinner at another family's home, and this family had a gorgeous house overlooking the water up in University Place. One teenager became very envious of the other girl who lived in the view home. All the way along in the car she complained, why couldn't she live in that house, why couldn't she live in such a place? Of course the parents were listening to all of this, and I was listening to it. When we drove up to their house and I saw it, it was a gorgeous, huge, big mansion! The teen just couldn't see her own house, she couldn't see the beauty and the woods and the glory of her own place! And she was miserable with envy of another person's acquisitions, and couldn't accept and love her own place!

So, we lose our joy in life when we really don't embrace all that we have and all that is in our lives. Settling-in then, to the causes and conditions that make up our own Karmic bundle, settling

into this takes a long time in life, to really settle into who we are and to begin to like and accept ourselves.

But Effort is a real important matter to examine in Zazen and to understand that there is a certain amount of effort that we must make in terms of the practice of meditation. We must make effort to get here. We must make effort to get ourselves onto the cushion as a community and to sit with ourselves together in Sangha. That takes effort. Takes effort to be on the cushion and to sit and to allow ourselves to be with what rises and falls. Not so easy! So how do we encourage ourselves to continue? How do we encourage ourselves to continue to look, to continue to be responsible for ourselves in the world, in useful ways? All of these questions rise around effort. What is it that I should do? What is it that I should undertake within that situation ?

So I offer you that question to work with. I offer you that question WHAT DOES MY EFFORT GIVE RISE TO ? And as practitioners our answer of course ought be Awakening. It ought be : “It gives rise to Awakening in the world”. We say that once a month here in our ceremony. “I promise to make every effort to live in Enlightenment” That's a big life! We don't have to go into any other life. The living in deep modesty, living without having to be important. Making effort in that way.

But how we make effort, the amount of effort we put into something, the range of that effort, the balance of that effort, is a continual examination in Zen practice, a continual looking at our lives. Everyday we have to ask that. We have to do that, whether we are in Zen practice or not. It's just that in Zen practice it's a lot more enjoyable and then you can apply it to the spiritual. We just spiritualize everything and so make it really simple. It cuts out a lot of stuff. You have the freedom to let go of an awful lot of stuff. So, I offer you that question to work with please, to enjoy, to use in your journals or to sit with in Zazen: *What does my effort give rise to?*