

On Lay Practice Within North American Soto Zen

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Last week I posted on my Monkey Mind blog an essay I titled Soto Zen Buddhism in North America: Some Random Notes From a Work in Progress.

There I wrote, along with a couple of small digressions and additions I add for this talk:

Probably the most important thing here (within our North American Zen and particularly our North American Soto Zen) has been the rise in the importance of lay practice. My sense is that the Japanese hierarchy pretty close to completely have missed this as something important. And, even within the convert Soto ordained community, a type of clericalism that is a sense that only clerical practice is important exists that has also blinded many to this reality.

That reality is how Zen practice belongs to all of us, whatever our condition in life, whether ordained, or lay. Now, this clerical bias comes to us honestly enough. Zen within East Asia is project for the ordained only. But, while that is an historical fact, it is very much a problem here. Actually a profound problem here.

Throughout Asia the disciplines of Zen have largely been the province of the ordained, whether traditional Vinaya monastics or Japanese and Korean non-celibate priests. This has been particularly so with Japanese Soto Zen, where the myth and history of Dharma transmission has been collapsed into the normative ordination model.

Here I feel it needful to note this is not normative in any other Zen context. While lay dharma transmission is rare, it has never been “impossible.” Which sadly is the case in Japanese Soto, and because of that the whole of lay practice within Soto Zen has in effect been devalued.

And with the collapsing of dharma transmission with ordination it has become functionally impossible to acknowledge lay practice as anything other than providing a support for “real,” meaning that ordained practice. Even today when I meet with Japanese priests, they appear to have a hard time even thinking that lay practice is something other than a hobby, and real

practice is exclusively the province of the ordained. And, I would add seeing women as equal practitioners. I suspect there is a connection here.

But in the West something else began to emerge. It shakes the old foundations. And, as I see it, if we are honest with ourselves and care for the Soto form of the dharma going forward here (in the West, and particularly, here in North America), forces us to look at the whole matter with new eyes.

This I find a worthy challenge, and one we strive to uphold within our particular community at the Blue Cliff.

We've seen here in the West and particularly here in North America the emergence of a Soto derived Zen that is not reliant on clerical leadership. And with that a clarification, or perhaps simply a reminder of the central gifts of Zen. If the Zen project is really about awakening this should not be a problem. But, as I said, it is clarifying. The particular meditation disciplines of the Zen school are about how awakening can be encountered within a mature spiritual technology. And by technology, I mean, those techniques of practice that allow us to continue on our path.

The foundation of this technology for us is zazen. Zazen or seated meditation. This is that practice which I summarize as "sitting down, shutting up, and paying attention." It is the practice of presence. It is the practice of intimacy.

What we're seeing is that people who devote a significant part of their lives to seated Zen meditation can find their lives transformed. Throw in some retreats and a rich and powerful way has been revealed. This even produces wise counselors and, and this is critical, authentic teachers...

This is critical. This, all by itself, is enough.

Also, of critical importance, and probably not unrelated to the strength of lay practice, is how koan Zen within a Soto style has emerged here in the West. While koan introspection is part of the common inheritance of Zen, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries koan introspection was suppressed as a normative practice within the Japanese Soto school. The reasons are many, and not critical to unpack here.

What is critical for us in the West is how the work of a Soto master Daiun Sogaku Harada who studied deeply with several Rinzai masters and then developed out of that a Soto koan curriculum began to be practiced in some Japanese Soto temples and monasteries beginning in the early part of the twentieth century. And, more importantly, that discipline made its way West.

This happened through one ordained lineage by way of Taizan Maezumi and his White Plum Asangha. And, importantly, also through several lay lineages by way of the Sanbo Zen community, and through them, to the Diamond Sangha, and the Pacific Zen Institute. And, critically, and, it is worth noting how among other communities such as the Boundless Way and our own Blue Cliff Zen sangha now offer as unapologetically Soto Zen sanghas, both ordained and lay practice with authentic and full acknowledgement of lay achievement. Yes, while Sanbo Zen, Diamond Sangha, and the PZI each have felt they've moved away from Soto, their lineage charts suggest something else.

All that acknowledged, from my perspective, at least, there remains the possibility of a reconnection. For all our sakes, I hope this will eventually happen. Whether it be through the Sotoshu, the Japanese denomination, itself, the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, our principal gathering of Soto lineages, or some as yet unformed alliance, almost doesn't matter. That it happens, however, does. For the sake of the way of awakening as a Soto stream in the West, it matters.

What is critical is that there is here in the West a lay practice that is clearly rooted within the Soto school that has produced lives of grace and possibility, devoted to a healing of individuals and the world. And more than interesting, has produced authentic Zen teachers. This needs to be noted. And, it needs to be celebrated. And it needs to be supported.

This is grounded in the simple but astonishing practice of the heart we call zazen, although often, and maybe ever more regularly includes a devotion to koan introspection...

Whatever, a North American Soto Zen practice is emerging. It features a fierce devotion to zazen. That is, as I've said, a commitment to a regular discipline of sitting down, shutting up, and paying attention.

I suggest if you want to engage an authentic practice you can find it here. Just sit down and pay attention on a regular basis. I believe about half an hour a day most every day is that baseline. More, well, yes, that is better. But, if you can practice regularly for that about half an hour you're doing the practice. That opens the gate to our Zen way. Completely. Totally.

It needs to be regular. That most every day is important.

And, starting out, I suggest that regularity is vastly more important than anything else, including length of time meditating. Half an hour a day is a baseline. But, starting out, ten minutes a day three days a week, if done, is vastly more important than any stated intention like, oh, as I've heard from people who have come to a Zen group and really liked it, to assert they will sit two hours a day going forward. Truthfully, when I hear this, I think, oh rats, this will be the last time I see this person.

Start modestly. Do what you can. Ten minutes. Fine. Just do it. But, I recommend set a timer. Do the ten minutes. And, regularly. Do that ten minutes three days a week. And, extend out. Get to that half an hour a day most every day.

And, profoundly related, is occasionally joining your sangha for a half day, or whole day, or better yet, multiple day retreat. These things will deepen your practice. And, if you can't. That's also okay. Regularly sitting down and attending is the heart of it all.

That said, yes, more is, of course, of course, better. Retreats, yes, if you can. One Zen teacher said a five day sesshin, intensive Zen meditation retreat, gives us the experience of a year of regular practice. Might even be true. It certainly is powerful. Mysterious. Magical.

And, also, deeply important taking advantage of the opportunity to meet with a spiritual director. Having someone who can confirm, or more importantly, can challenge your assumptions is astonishingly important. Possibly even critical.

But, and this is the point of this reflection, the whole of it: taking on sitting regularly all by itself is sufficient to shift the heart and to allow the interior work that is our project as Soto Zen practitioners. More is better. But...

Just sit down, shut up, and pay attention.

Everything else, everything else, is an extra.