

The Practice Within the Practice
Michael O'Neal

Winter 2004

“It really depends on you.” —Dainin Katagiri-roshi

Many years ago I was listening to Dainin Katagiri-roshi, my root teacher, give a talk. One part made a deep impression on me. He was saying that two zen students might practice together for many years and outwardly do the same activities. But the change that took place in each of them might be completely different. “So,” he said, speaking to the zen students listening to him, “it really depends on you.”

In zen practice there are many so-called “forms”— doing sitting meditation in a particular posture, doing walking meditation in a particular style, eating in a particular way, bowing, chanting, etc. These forms are both an expression of something wondrous already present, and also a way of preparing the ground for the future, for the next step. When we sit, silent and upright, we are manifesting our intrinsic wholeness, and simultaneously cultivating a settled, balanced, open heart-mind that supports beneficial action in the future.

To simply put ourselves into these forms is very helpful for us. In our lives we can't help but take some form. Sitting in a recliner watching TV and snacking is a form. How is this shaping us? When we embody forms that are dignified and dedicated, we remind ourselves through the body that something great is happening in this moment. The form coming alive in our body and mind brings up our essential beauty, and this is deeply nourishing to ourselves, as well as being strongly supportive of others. So to put ourselves in an environment where we are supported in taking these practice forms is enormously important, and is a huge accomplishment. Whether we understand it completely or not, a decision has been made and an action taken to awaken and live out our essential greatness—our buddha nature.

For people relatively new to spiritual practice of this kind, this is enough—to simply step inside the practice and participate. But over time the significance of Katagiri-roshi's statement becomes more meaningful. It isn't sufficient to just go through the motions of carrying out the outer form. It doesn't take very long for zen students to discover that sitting quietly for awhile isn't really all that difficult, nor is walking, eating, bowing, chanting, etc. It is pretty easy to fulfill the outer requirements of a particular form of practice.

But one important characteristic of the forms of zen practice is that they clear a space for inner work that the outer form alone can't accomplish. For instance, walking in the meditation style is an outwardly simple activity that, once learned, can be done without much attention. But the power of this simple activity comes from its giving space for the mind to cultivate presence, awareness, and engagement. Unlike, say, mountain climbing or racecar driving, the activity itself doesn't force us to be present. It creates an environment where we have an opportunity to activate and strengthen our capacity to be

present—to be deeply alive.

In other words, the outward forms of practice leave the mind free to find its way to freedom. And the forms support this happening by bringing the body into ways of being that are reflections of an awakened mind—upright, balanced, honest, stable, open, peaceful. The form provides a platform that enables the mind to stand up.

So a central part of the maturation of our practice is to realize that to enter wholeheartedly into the practice—into our life—is itself an essential dimension of practice. Each moment is an opportunity to “let go of holding back,” as Pema Chodron puts it. It is often said that buddhas—enlightened beings—only point the way. They don’t, and can’t, do the actual transformational work for us. Waking up to the implications of this is part of the awakening of bodhichitta—the way-seeking mind, or the way mind itself. “It really depends on you.” This is the practice within the practice.