

The Professor and the Teacup Kyogen Carlson

Editor's Note: This article is based on a Dharma Talk given by Kyogen on Sunday, January 2, 2011. It is offered here in preparation for Jukai, giving and receiving the Precepts, coming up in March.

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"¹

This is the first story in the book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps. Apparently there is some disagreement about which Nan-in the story is about. It could go back nearly a thousand years earlier, to Song China. I wouldn't know about that, but no matter who it is about, it's a good tale. I imagine the professor chattering away as the two sit down to tea, maybe about some text he read recently. The Zen Master manages to get the professor's full attention, and brings him abruptly into the here-and-now. But the real point is that to really learn anything we have to be receptive; we need to empty our cup.

On the most basic level, emptying our cup is about letting go of what we think we know and understand. It could be about Zen, about the person in front of us, or about any subject that comes up in conversation. To understand this it helps to consider the Zen teaching about "nen," or "mind moments." First nen, the very first response to anything, is simple, unadorned awareness. Second nen follows almost immediately. We label what we experience, give it a name and place it on a map of past experiences. This is, of course, a useful thing to do, and essential for navigating in the world. This is how we recognize friends and greet them appropriately. It enables us to anticipate a threat and take evasive action. Third nen is opinion and commentary, it is the way we continue a story line attached to the things we name and place on our maps. Here we can see how we tend to get caught in our mental habits, how we bring a full cup to each moment.

The problem arises when the maps and the story lines get in the way of clarity. We can completely miss what is most important, most deeply true, about the here-and-now. We miss subtle shading and nuance as events unfold in front of us, and instead re-experience our own old thoughts, opinions, and expectations. Zen practice helps us to be open to the fresh and luminous quality of the present moment, even when those around us are caught in their old patterns.

Zazen practice is a daily effort to come back to zero, cultivating a relationship with our own pristine awareness, first nen. As we shift our allegiance from our habits of thought and opinion toward original mind, it gets easier to cut through our habit energy and mind clutter, to let go of it and be more fully present in the hurly burly of daily life. We let moments of first nen awareness inform us as experience unfolds.

¹ *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps, page 5. Doubleday Anchor, no date.

While zazen is one leg of our practice, working with the precepts is the other. Together they form “samadhi power” and “karma relationship,” the two essentials of awakening. A deeper level of emptying our cup in daily life is where zazen and precept practice meet. The first step in precept practice as explained in the *Kyōjūkaimon* is sange, most often translated as “contrition.” We usually think of contrition as remorse, feeling bad or sorry about something. While remorse is often necessary for deep honesty and for coming to terms with wrong action, it can also get in the way. Sange is really about emptying our cup. This cup isn’t just about opinions and views. It is about the entire mass of self-attachment. *We* are the cup, and *we* are “full of it.” That’s what we need to empty. That is what coming to zero really means. It is active zazen. The *Kyōjūkaimon* says we should “sit up straight in the presence of the Buddhas when we make this act of contrition.” In this kind of sange, this emptying of the cup, remorse drops away too. We drop defenses and self-justification, we drop opinions and judgments, including those we hold about ourselves, we let go of what we think we know, come to zero and rest in original mind. Here we are immediately in harmony with fundamental truth. While the “self,” “I,” “we” are inadequate and imperfect, at the same time it doesn’t matter. We are conditioned phenomena, limited and imperfect. Our actions are conditioned phenomena, limited and imperfect. Our motivations and understanding of the world are conditioned phenomena, limited and imperfect. All these are incomplete and cannot be otherwise. In sange we empty our cup of expectation that it could be any different.

Here we come upon a paradox. We open up to real perfection in life and practice through the grace arising in open handed acceptance of imperfection. Someone can stumble with graceful non-opposition to the fact of stumbling. Confidence arising from a lack of self-consciousness comes down to being comfortable in our own conditioned and imperfect skin. On the other hand someone can move very carefully in a stiff way, make no mistakes, but come across as stilted, uncomfortable and graceless. Holding onto the self is like that. Letting go of the self is the essence of sange, emptying the cup, allowing grace itself to flow in.

On Saturday mornings we do special dharani practice for service after zazen. One of the services in the rotation is called the Special Kanzeon Ceremony. The eko, or dedication, includes the line, “All accepting Kanzeon is the gateway to Buddha Mind.” Kanzeon, the Bodhisattva of compassion, is the embodiment of all-acceptance, and the practice of all-acceptance is our way into Buddha Mind. Sange is the first step into all-acceptance; just emptying our cup. When we understand the importance of this place of acceptance, we see that sange is not something we do once, or occasionally as needed. Sange is a door that, once open, we need to keep open. This metaphor is getting a little complicated, adding gates and doors, but this is how we keep emptying the cup, and it is the point at which zazen and precept practice are exactly the same.

On February 1st we will start a Wednesday evening class series on precept study in preparation for Jukai, giving and receiving the precepts in March. We will examine the precepts as presented in the *Kyōjūkaimon* as koans for self-reflection, and as a path of practice. If you haven’t done this before, I encourage you to consider it. And for those of you who have done it before, it is worth revisiting. I learn something every time I do it, and I appreciate the input from senior members at these classes. It is always rewarding. The *Kyōjūkaimon* presents the path of precepts as starting with sange, then moving into the three refuges of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. After that come the Three Pure Precepts. First,

“cease from evil – release all self-attachment.” This precept extends and explains sange. “This is the house of all the ways of Buddha. This is the source of all the laws of Buddhahood,” the gateway to Buddha Mind. “Cessation” here is about dropping self, coming to zero. The second pure precept is “Do only good – take selfless action. The dharma of anuttara samyak sambodhi is the dharma of all existence – never apart from the present moment.” This is about moving naturally, gracefully. Finally, “do good for others – embrace all things and conditions. Leap beyond the holy and the unholy. Let us rescue ourselves together with all beings.” Embracing the difficult and messy aspects of life is bodhisattva action in the world.

In the precept classes we will look at sange, the refuges and the three pure precepts in some detail, then go into the nitty-gritty of the ten grave precepts, considering them as koans arising in daily life, and all along the path of practice over time. Jukai, the initiation into the precepts, is about making our own lives a course of study in enlightenment. I encourage you to seriously consider taking it up.