

Zazen with Jeff

Looking into Zen 10 years ago I remember wondering what zazen was. I was very interested in “Satori” and understood “zazen” to be the meditation practice that was supposed to lead to it. I had lived my life up to this point trying to find or create a situation that felt both honest and satisfying. Eventually I began to see that neither my mind nor my senses were ever going to deliver the truth and happiness I wanted. What I want and what the world – including the mind – has to offer will never line up. Paradoxically this realization was not depressing, but gave me the sense that my fundamental orientation to the world was false somehow, and that I would radically need to change the way I was living if I was ever going to see through that falsehood, and finally be at ease.

Meeting Jeff at this point in my life was a Godsend. During our first one-on-one exchange Jeff physically demonstrated zazen. This demonstration revealed something I had not seen before. I had been assuming that “concentration” on the breath or a koan meant focusing on one thing so sharply that everything else gets excluded. But what Jeff demonstrated was the exact opposite: EVERYTHING gathers around the breath. NOTHING is excluded. It is difficult to express how important this demonstration was, being there in his presence as he demonstrated it, and how it affected me. My whole life was filled with what I would call drive: driven from one career to the next, one relationship to the next, one world view to no world view, etc., always with the belief that at some point what I hoped for would arrive. I always had the ability to focus on one thing to the exclusion of everything else. Jeff made it obvious that the breath-concentration he was demonstrating was NOT that. He helped me see that real meditation could never be that. When we allow one thing, or a group of particular things, to drive us – music, philosophy, our job, relationships – even though we are concentrated, that concentration always comes at the expense of everything that is excluded from it. This absorption, as Jeff demonstrated, is not zazen. But how do we learn to see the difference?

My initial encounters with Jeff gradually revealed that an exclusive focus puts an end to this drive for only as long as the particular absorption lasts, and we end up arranging our life as a means of moving from one all-consuming activity to the next. Even retreats or *sesshin* can become this: a period of strong concentration

and simple living that recharges our batteries, helping us to return to our diseased lives with more complacency, instead of putting an end to dis-ease once and for all. Jeff helped make it clear early on that if I was going to learn to do zazen, and put an end to this, I would have to acknowledge those areas in my life which triggered and perhaps demanded this exclusive kind of concentration, and walk away for a while, or perhaps even permanently. My career and most of my relationships, most of which were “healthy” by most standards, I had to admit “consumed” this drive instead of allowing it to gather its natural momentum.

I cannot stress enough how helpful this advice was, and how important it is to see that some things in our life consume our interest so thoroughly that they are a distraction from zazen. Without the continuous cultivation of its natural momentum, this drive will never exhaust itself. It will just go away for a while, “distracted” by one activity, then come back the moment we find ourselves in a situation we would rather not be in. Jeff’s encouragement was life-saving: if I was simply willing to arrange my life so as to allow the momentum of this drive to settle and develop, it would not be long before it was gone for good. He was right. Within a couple of years the whole problem was gone. He was also right about something else: Don’t be fooled by peace, even if it’s permanent. Now that the conscious problem is gone, keep your eye open, and don’t fall prey to “dead stillness.” The real work is only beginning.

At first, this warning against dead stillness made no sense. The words “dead” and “still” simply do not apply to this. What the heck is Jeff talking about? Over the next couple of years I slowly began to notice that even though nothing ever seemed to be lacking, I could see a subtle “insensitivity” to others operating right here in what was immediately experienced as an unshakeable confidence and ease. Even though the undeniable living fact is that nothing is excluded from this, there remained subtle ways in which I seemed to be living from a habitual pattern of excluding – yet with perfect confidence! Dead stillness indeed. There is a *demand* to be *truly* open that arises out of what is at times only an apparent absolute openness, and it is very easy to overlook this. For us to really come to life, this demand has to be recognized and obeyed, seeing through these patterns of separating instead of living from them. But who and what can help us with this?

As far as future practice is concerned, I have not met a single person, including Jeff, who I feel has answered this demand so completely as to be functioning without any apparent remainders. Yet, there definitely are people in this world, including Jeff, who are undeniably committed to seeing through whatever remains, and having even one friend in your life committed to that is a precious gift. While I find it important to remain in contact with these friends, it is equally important to avoid “practice” situations or “retreats” that do not seem to be posing the specific challenge practice is demanding. It’s true that ordinary life situations and people remain the supreme teacher, but long periods of formal zazen – perhaps months at a time – is a part of this too. Spending weeks or even months at a time at Jeff’s Hermitage in Kyoto continues to play an important role in revealing what needs to be done and what still needs to be seen through.

Jack V, USA