

Doubt or contentment?

Visitors of Buddhist monasteries in Japan are welcomed at the gate with the following sign: "Look underfoot".

I haven't been in Japan - yet - but Jeff has brought up this image quite a few times in his talks over the years. In time, it has started to come to life for me. I will come back to it later.

A fundamental doubt got me started in the practice ten years ago and has been of great help. This doubt - Who is it? - has been fuel for my practice. Pressing on using my *huatou* - *Who is it?* - I experienced existential fears during practice as the pressure built up. Eventually, during retreat while we were doing *kinhin*, a singing bird, and all fell into place. Was this *it*? Jeff urged me to put it to the test. To press on. I did. What else can you do?

As that experience waned, I started to notice the doubt that had got me started had faded, dissolved. I didn't feel that unease anymore. Was I doing something wrong? Was I slacking? How could I practice without that doubt? It puzzled me. At times, I felt completely lost. Again, Jeff urged me to press on and to see what was there.

What I noticed was that the doubt and unease was substituted by contentment. As if I was carried by life. Independent of its ups and downs. Grounded joy - *pīti* in Pali - and an even more fundamental happiness - or *sukha*. Not dependent on anything outside myself like experiences or nice food or drinks. A profound form of ease.

Was this a bad thing? Gotama was quoted in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta stating that joy and happiness are the entrance or first signs of *jhāna*. Before I share the quote it is helpful to say something about what *jhāna* is. Jeff has written a very helpful paper called '*Becoming One and Being Without Self: The Practice of Samadhi & Dhyana in Zen Buddhism*' which can be found on our website. In the paper, he explains that samadhi is becoming one, the preliminary process of becoming one with the object of meditation. *Jhāna*, simply put, is a matter of being without self.

To go back to the quote of Gotama in the Mahā Saccaka Sutta stating that joy and happiness are the entrance or first signs of *jhāna*:

When the Bodhisatta [Gotama] had the insight that jhāna was the way to enlightenment, he then thought, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure which has nothing to do with the five senses nor with unwholesome things? I will not be afraid of that pleasure [of jhāna]!"

- *Mahā Saccaka Sutta (MN 36)*

Still, is there a risk of attachment to this contentment? My next shiny object to hold on to? In the Pāsādika Sutta (DN 29), the Buddha said that one who indulges in the

pleasure of jhāna may expect only one of four consequences: indulging in jhāna leads only to the four stages of enlightenment. Thus, in the words of the Buddha, “One should not fear jhāna.”

Ajahn Brahm, an English Theravada Buddhist monk, summarized it as follows:

Simply put, jhāna states are stages of letting go. One cannot be attached to letting go, just as one cannot be imprisoned by freedom.

In his opening talk Jeff mentioned Bankei. It made me go back to the teachings of this 17th century Japanese Rinzai Zen master as well:

In recent times, wherever you go, you find that Zen teachers use “old tools” [i.e. koans] when they deal with pupils. They seem to think they can’t do the job without them. They’re unable to teach directly, by thrusting themselves forward and confronting students without their tools. Those eyeless bonzes with their “tool Zen”—if they don’t have their implements to help them, they aren’t up to handling people.

- Unborn - The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei, p.65

Bankei’s advice to teachers made me see; for a teacher, the risk of not seeing who is in front of them. The risk of being hung up on tools such as koan practice or even forcing doubt upon their students. Besides illustrating the value of a great teacher, what did his insight mean for me? Bankei, and Jeff, gave me the confidence to work with what is. And to not force anything on myself.

Of course, this is not the end goal of our practice. Working with Jeff the following became clear:

1. Either great doubt or joy are an entrance to the final cessation of our seeking mind
2. Cessation of our seeking mind is the basis for great awakening of our true self
3. Beyond awakening: the need to get back to the world so we can be of help to others

To conclude, let’s go back to the welcome sign. Keep looking underfoot. What is there for you? Is it doubt? Fine. Is it joy and happiness? Fine as well. Any entrance will do. As long as you take it all the way. Let us continue together.