

THE BACKWARD STEP

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“You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate yourself.”

Zen Master Dogen

When I first began practicing Buddhist meditation, I felt lost. It was discomfoting to realize how little control over my mind I actually had and the constant stream of thought was at times overwhelming. I had come to Buddhist meditation seeking some sort of escape to a blissful state devoid of thoughts and feelings. The years leading up to my introduction to meditation had been difficult and I had wanted to hide. Over time, I realized that the point of practice was not to escape but to be present in the midst of my life. Still, the question of what to do with all these thoughts bothered me. An early instruction by one of my teachers was to name the thoughts/feelings as they arose. And so I would sit still in the unfamiliar half-lotus position watching a continual stream of mental detritus and name it ... knee pain, anger, anxiety, planning, judging, more knee pain. The technique given to me by my teacher helped. After naming the thought or feeling, the mind seemed relieved of the necessity to pursue, avoid, or wallow in the thought. Then the next one would arise. I vaguely recall being told that the practice of naming the thoughts or feelings was only a temporary technique and that one day, I would have to leave it behind.

As time went on, I married and we adopted a son. Eventually I hung up the robes of a single lay monk and took on the robes of a busy, debt-ridden householder. Sitting at least twice each day dropped away and I began defining my practice more in “weekly” terms. I was encouraged to bring mindfulness into more of my daily life, activities off the cushion. So, I would mindfully fold laundry, do the dishes, change diapers, etc. The technique of “naming” followed me into these activities. At times it felt as if an announcer was watching me, much like a whispering commentator at a golf tournament, following both my interior and exterior life. I wanted to be whole-hearted in the

task of the householder but there always seemed to be this lag time between action and realization. Yet at other times, I could be completely absorbed in riding my motorcycle with no such commentary going on. The question for me seemed to be “How do I bring this wholeheartedness into my everyday life?”

Only recently have I begun to approach an answer to that koan. I had always understood Dogen’s use of the phrase “the backward step that turns the light and shines it inward” as a spatial description. Rather than seeing the “truth” out there, the answer lays within the practitioner himself or herself. Although I still find this statement to be true, further reading by Dogen has led me to realize that he often thought about time as well as space. In this light, taking the backward step means to move to the moment prior to when the experience could be articulated to the experience itself, “the practice-realization of complete enlightenment.”

Dainin Katagiri Roshi once wrote about this moment, which he called “the pivot of nothingness,” in a piece called “Being in Real Time.”

The real present is not exactly what you believe the present to be. In everyday life we constantly create some idea of what the human world is because we are always thinking of how things were in the past or how things will be in the future. When you are thinking about the past and future, the contents of the present are just imaginary pictures of the past and future, pictures fabricated by your consciousness at the pivot of nothingness, so it is not the real present. The real present is the full aliveness that exists at the pivot of nothingness before your conceptual thinking creates an imaginary world through human consciousness. So to understand the present as a pivot of nothingness, your concept of the present must be negated. It must become no-present; then you can see the real present.

Naming thoughts and feelings then is nothing more than a fabrication of consciousness, an attempt of the mind to remain on more familiar ground. The backward step then is a movement to the mo-

ment before a concept of the present is formed. Of course, one cannot go backward in time so Dogen's instruction is meant to use our experience of delusion to inform our practice in the present.

So how does one take this backward step? Why didn't Dogen just tell us to shine the light inward? In fact, he states that by taking the backward step, the light is turned to shine inwards. This appears important. As I sat with this koan for a while, I began to realize that aspects of physically taking a step backwards may in fact, point to what Dogen was trying to say.

First of all, a step backward is not natural. After about our first year on this earth, we figure out how to perambulate forward and never give it a second thought. To take a backward step requires a great deal of presence. It goes against our habitual thought patterns, makes us unsteady and demands our attention. A couple of years ago, my family and I moved from a rural city to Minneapolis. It was a sudden move, one necessitated by factors beyond our control. We moved into our house three days before my son began a new school year at a new school. For the next few weeks, we received calls and emails from teachers and administrators at his school regarding his behavior. At home, our once peaceful rhythm had become a drawn out battle punctuated by periods of silence. When he acted out, I responded with a consequence and so the escalation continued. On one particular night, I had sent him up to his room with a loud command with the promise/threat that I would be there in a moment. As I walked up the stairs to his bedroom, I felt a little like a wheel on the edge of a well-worn rut. It's a feeling accompanied by the sinking premonition of, "Here we go again." This is the moment of the backward step, the conscious decision to do what does not come naturally.

Besides not feeling natural, the backward step means you don't see where you are headed. As I walk forward in my life, I delude myself into thinking I know what the future holds, or, worse yet, I can manage my destiny. As I approached my son, who lay in bed facing away from me, I thought,

“I’ve got to do something different.” I sat on the edge of the bed for a moment and was silent. Then I took the backward step. I asked him if he was angry with me for moving us to Minneapolis. I had no idea where this conversation would lead. I wanted him so badly to be happy where we were and I was afraid by allowing him to give voice to his anger, it would only reinforce how unhappy he was. What followed was a torrent of emotion as only a seven-year-old can express. Often, I wanted to jump in and “correct” how he was feeling but instead I continued to take the backward step with him, fully engaged and uncertain where it would lead us. It was a moment of intimacy where both of us lowered our defenses, exposed our vulnerabilities, and embarked on a journey into unknown territory. It formed a connection between us that, to this day, when I recount the story I get choked up.

Although that evening I would not have called it “taking the backward step,” I have since come to understand that moment of connection and timelessness as what Dogen was describing. When people use the common phrase of “taking a step back,” they generally mean an attempt to gain a greater perspective of a situation. Frequently, that perspective includes stepping out of the perceived stream of time and seeing each encounter not as “time-bound.” As Dogen once stated in his Genjo Koan,

Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past. You should understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash, which fully includes future and past.

When I’m teaching a class, I’m not thinking about all the things I need to get done when class is over. When I’m bike riding with my son, I’m not worry about bills that are due. And when I’m washing the dishes, I’m not thinking about getting the dishes washed; I’m simply washing the dishes. At those moments of wholehearted living, a sense of timelessness pervades.

By extolling the backward step, Dogen encourages us to take the unnatural movement of heading in a direction where we don't see the outcome and therefore must be present to real-time information. When I engage in this practice with family, students, bank tellers, pizza delivery persons and others, a sense of intimacy with all beings is formed and strengthened. I am relieved of the necessity to be on guard, to plot and scheme, and to judge if something is "working out." Furthermore, my interactions with others are richer, more intimate, and result in a blurring of the distinction between others and myself. It truly leads to the dharma gate of repose and bliss.

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