

THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF DOKUSAN

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“Dokusan” is the Japanese word for the formal practice interview shared between a Zen student and her teacher. In the many years I have been privileged to study and practice with Diane Martin, Roshi, I have discovered how essential this intimate form of Zen training is for progress in realization. Since February 2008, when I began training for priest’s ordination with Diane, I have taken careful notes on our weekly Dokusan conversations. The process is a steady anchor for commitment to training. But, besides providing stability and accountability, Dokusan has also become a very creative experience. In Zen practice we use a variety of skillful means as support for our liberation. And, because each Dokusan is unique, the dynamic exchange provides many opportunities to develop our personal creative capacities for understanding and living the Way.

I speak with Diane on the phone every Friday morning for 45 minutes. (Dokusan need not be weekly. Teacher and student determine timing.) The creative process of Dokusan then evolves during the subsequent week. The stages I discern are 1) Preparation the morning of Dokusan. 2) The actual Conversation 3) Incubation 4) Insight and 5) Proclamation. Below I will summarize how these stages have been working for me and give examples of my creative process.

PREPARATION:

Preparing for our Friday morning conversation feels a bit like being an artist who sorts out her rough sketches, gathers her tools and settles into a silent waiting space. I review the notes in my Practice Journal from the past week to consider what holds a “charge” – an unresolved question, a significant text, a life issue. I revisit my dreams to look at them with “Dokusan eyes.” I do the same with any drawings or creative writing I may have done since the previous Friday.

DOKUSAN:

During our phone conversation I take notes. The notes consist of key words, phrases, or questions from Diane and sometimes words I hear popping out of my mouth. If I have an “ah ha!” or a bodily “felt shift” during the conversation I try to honor it by telling Diane on the spot. Immediately after the conversation, I sit with the experience in order to allow the vibrancy of the exchange to penetrate. At this point a phrase may grab me, becoming a needed “turning word” which opens me for transformation. Sometimes I do not understand what was given but I know it is important. For example, Diane once said, “a piece of your wisdom body is missing” or “you fold into your own delusions.” I could not make much sense of these words at the time. Some phrases are teachings that I

do not grasp as relevant to my life. I once wrote down “karma knows and understands intentions” and “stay on the threshold of the adverting door.” At the time I sensed these were key teachings and knew I had to let them penetrate. Often I feel resistance to something Diane has said but, because my wisdom mind trusts a turning word, I hold it – usually putting bold highlights and color around it. Other words function as assignments – texts to study, symbols to research or actual practices to pursue. I take these seriously. Other words serve to verify my understanding or provide encouragement. When Diane said, “Hooray, you broke the spell!” I made a sign with these words on it and put it on my mirror.

INCUBATION:

During the next six days the turning words of Dokusan have the potential to create new freedom and insight if they are nurtured as seeds, eventually able to bloom in my mindheart. I use a variety of practices to support the incubation of these seeds. Here are some examples.

As mentioned above, I select key words or phrases to remember and to use as a mantra. Repeating a phrase such as “strive no more,” or “my mind is bigger than this” during the activities of the day serves to remind me of practice and also to integrate ideas into action. Using a key word such as “stop it!” can directly interrupt a mind pattern. Sometimes I find inspiration in the practices of our ancestors. There is a story of the master Zuikan who sometimes forgot himself. He would then say, “Zuikan?” and then respond, “Yes?” as a way to come home to himself. By substituting my own name –sometimes twenty times a day - I was able to find support from the practice of ancestor Zuikan. It served to revitalize the “Beginner’s mind” spirit which Dokusan demands.

One obviously creative method of incubation is drawing. By drawing a picture of one of my inner demons or of a charged dream image, I give myself the time to feel my way into its truth. Then I can dialogue with the image using Jung’s process of Active Imagination. Diane has often encouraged us to work with our mind states using the form of a mandala. I value how the multidimensionality of Big Mind can come forward in mandala work.

Another incubation tool is keeping a log. For those of us who like to be organized and track progress, recording moments of waking up in our practice can be illuminating. I recently kept an “Aggression Log” because this is an energy I need to better understand and work with in a liberatory way. After noting the time, place, and the trigger to my aggressive state during the day, I also noted what my response was to each trigger. The practice was quite revealing because I discovered how many options I really had when I reviewed the log.

Finally, recording and working with our dreams is a powerful way to honor our intention to cooperate with the wisdom of the unconscious, Alaya's Mystery. I faithfully record each dream I recall and spend contemplative time with it.

One of the most encouraging aspects of the incubation period is the discovery of synchronicity. When we are actively participating in the creative process of our blooming by nurturing its seeds, we find that the Universe conspires to offer us many supports and teaching moments. The grace of Prajnaparamita arises everywhere.

INSIGHT:

Little "ah ha!" moments or mini-kensho openings can and do arise often for those who are paying attention. As I look back on the Dokusan process as a creative practice, I see how the dynamic evolves into insight. For me, it often follows this pattern:

After Dokusan day I move into incubation for the next four or five days; then there is often an arising of insight or a creative synthesis on the fifth or sixth day. What follows is a description of how this process evolved between the end of June into the first week of July this year.

During a Friday Dokusan conversation I was quite stunned by Diane's blunt words on my pattern of consistent self-aggression. As I did the follow up noting after the phone call, I named this Dokusan "Rough Ride!" On Saturday morning I woke knowing in my gut that this fear of self love was subverting my liberation. A turning word from Diane burned hot in my mind: "If things do not change now, something is WRONG!" I knew this was a crucial moment for my training. I began the incubation process by doing something not very risky for me – research! Because we had spoken of the Buddha's act of calling upon the Earth Mother to verify his enlightenment when challenged by Mara, I studied images of the Hindu Earth Mother and found them to be shockingly fierce, even ugly. This work was not going to be pretty. I learned that the key symbolic weapon of the royal goddess is the whip. Re-directing and transforming aggressive energy in myself, mentally and emotionally, meant "whipping" Mara's masochistic demons. Next, I discovered that the wild lioness is a symbol of the Great Mother. In the travel agency across from my spiritual direction office, there was a catalogue advertising safaris to Africa. For weeks I had been drawn to the cover picture of a noble lioness, staring straight out into the distance, while holding and protecting her cub with utmost intensity. On Monday I asked the agent if I could have the catalogue. I then put the picture of the lioness on my altar. Then on Wednesday, after five days of incubation, the opening was given. During a session of spiritual direction, a client was speaking with me about her upcoming retirement and her new sense of joy. In that moment the veil of ignorance was lifted. I knew to the core of my being, my own cruelty to myself.

I faced the fact that for decades I've aggressively *worked* at my life instead of *living* my life. This was more than an intellectual insight. It was a total body-mind felt shift. Here is a passage from my Practice Journal, written the next morning:

*I knew in that moment I was given a chance for a turning around of the self.
I vowed on the spot to take it. When the session ended, I closed up the
office and drove home, paying attention to the difference between my old way
of driving as WORK and the living experience of driving...Even as I write these
notes I am discerning the difference between working at writing and living as I
write...*

PROCLAMATION:

"When the flower of true awareness opens, its fragrance will circle the world" – Lianghai (19th c. nun in Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns)

When Prajnaparamita graces us with insight she asks that we proclaim her liberatory power. As The Heart Sutra says, "so proclaim the Prajnaparamita mantra..." The next day, Thursday, I was to participate in a demanding meeting, one that held the potential for being unfaithful to my vow to turn around from self-aggression. In anticipation, after zazen that morning, I renewed my vow aloud. During the meeting the clarity and conviction of my words and actions became a real life proclamation of the insight given on Wednesday. The following day was Friday. In Dokusan I was able to continue my proclamation by telling Diane the sequence of events during the past week. I went over some of the phrases in my notes that had been so disturbing to be sure I understood them now. Diane graciously "verified my understanding." Then we explored the implications of my new freedom for my work in the world. Diane asked, "Will you see yourself as a liberatory figure?" With this new turning word the practice for the next week was begun and the creative process of Dokusan began to unfold anew.

Two days later I had the following dream:

*I have received a set of papers that contain Diane's notes on our Dokusan
conversations. They are on plain blue paper (maybe a few pink pages) and they are
numbered in order. I am supposed to study them. I wonder how Diane's notes will
compare to the notes I made.*

I hope this description of my creative process of Dokusan is helpful for others. We are each unique in how we actualize the graces of our liberation. May we each trust the how the Way creates our particular path and rejoice in the gifts of our practice.

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