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Marrow of Zen

" In the zazen posture, your mind and body have great power to accept things as they are, whether agreeable or disagreeable. "

In our scriptures (Samyuktagama Sutra, Vol. 33), it is said that there are four kinds of horses: excellent ones, good ones, poor ones, and bad ones. The best horse will run slow and fast, right and left, at the driver's will, before it sees the shadow of the whip; the second best will run as well as the first one does, just before the whip reaches his skin; the third one will run when it feels pain on its body; the fourth will run after the pain penetrates to the marrow of his bones. You can imagine how difficult it is for the fourth one to learn how to run !

When we hear this story almost everyone wants to be the best horse. Even if it is impossible to be the best one, we want to be the second best. This is, I think, the usual understanding of this story, and of zen. You may think that when you sit in zazen you will find out whether you are one of the best horses. or one of the worst ones. Here, however, there is a misunderstanding of zen. If you think the aim of zen practice is to train you to become one of the best horses, you will have a big problem. This is not the right understanding of zen. Actually, if you practice zen in the right way it does not matter whether you are the best horse or the worst one. That is not the point. When you consider the mercy of Buddha, how do you think Buddha will feel about the four kinds of horses ? He will have more sympathy for the worst one than for the best one.

When you are determined to practice zazen with the great mind of Buddha, you will find the worst horse is the most valuable one. In your very imperfections you will find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind. Those who can sit perfectly physically usually take more time to obtain the true way of zen, the actual feeling of zen, the marrow of zen. But those who find great difficulties in practicing zen will find more meaning in it. So I think that sometimes the best horse may be the worst horse, and the worst horse can be the best one.

If you study calligraphy you will find that those who are not so clever usually become the best calligraphers. Those who are very clever with their hands often encounter great difficulty after they have reached a certain stage. This is also true in art and in zen. It is true in life. So when we talk about zen we cannot say, " He is good ", or " He is bad ", in the ordinary sense of the words. The posture taken in zazen is not the same for each of us. For some it may be impossible to take the cross-legged posture. But even though you cannot take the right posture, when you arouse your real, way-seeking mind, you can practice zen in its true sense. And actually it is easier for those who have difficulties in sitting to arouse the true way-seeking mind than for those who can sit easily.

When we reflect on what we are doing in our everyday life, we are always ashamed of ourselves. One of my students wrote to me saying, " You sent me a calendar, and I am trying to follow the good mottos which appear on each page. But the year has hardly begun, and already I have failed ! "

Dogen Zengi said, " Shyoshaku jushaku ". 'Shaku' generally means mistake or wrong. 'Shyoshaku jushaku' means to succeed wrong with wrong, or one continuous mistake. According to Dogen, one continuous mistake can also be zen. A zen master's life could be said to be so many years of 'shyoshaku jushaku'. This means so many years of one single-minded effort.

We say, " A good father is not a good father ". Do you understand ? One who thinks he is a good father is not a good father; one who thinks he is a good husband is not a good husband. One who thinks he is one of the worst husbands may be a good one if he is always trying to be a good husband, with a single-hearted effort. If you find it impossible to sit because of some pain or some physical difficulty, then you should sit anyway, using a thick cushion or a chair. Even though you are the worst horse you will get the marrow of zen.

Suppose your children are suffering from a hopeless disease. You do not know what to do; you cannot lie in bed. Normally the most comfortable place for you would be a warm comfortable bed, but now because of your mental agony you cannot rest. You may walk up and down, in and out, but this doesn't help. Actually the best way to relieve your mental suffering is to sit in zazen, even in such a confused state of mind and bad posture. If you have no experience of sitting under this kind of difficult situation you are not a zen student. No other activity will appease your suffering. In other restless positions you have no power to accept your difficulties, but in the zazen posture

which you have acquired by long, hard practice your mind and body have great power to accept things as they are, whether they are agreeable or disagreeable.

When you feel disagreeable it is better for you to sit. There is no other way to accept your problem and work on it. Whether you are the best horse or the worst, or whether your posture is good or bad, is out of the question. Everyone can practice zazen, and in this way work on his problems, and learn to accept them.

Suppose you sitting in the middle of your own problem. Which is more real to you: your problem or you, yourself? Your problem may be in your imagination, but the awareness that you are here, right now, is the ultimate fact. This is the point you will realize by zazen practice. In continuous practice, under a succession of agreeable and disagreeable situations, you will realize the marrow of zen and acquire its true power.