

The Function of a Zen Center

From a talk by Joko Beck Sensei

What I want to talk about today is the function of a Zen Center.

In a general way we can say that it is to support practice; of course that's true. But we have a lot of illusions about Zen Centers as we do about teachers. And one thing we tend to think is that a Zen Center is a place that should be very nice for me – in other words, it should be non-threatening (laughs). I think a good center should be quite threatening at times! It is not the function of a center to take care of your comfort or your social life. By that I don't mean that we should not have social events – I think they're great – but they are not the primary function of a center. A Zen Center's function is not to provide people with social life. It is not necessarily supposed to make them feel good, and it's not supposed to make them feel special.

A center is primarily a powerful tool to assist us in waking up. As a sangha practicing at a center, yes, we need to support each other, but the nature of that support may not be exactly the kind of support that is often seen in an office. You know, a girl's boyfriend leaves her – “oh you poor thing! Why you know, when my boyfriend left me....” (laughter) and off we go! There is a “we're all victims in this together” attitude which is not support. The more we practice, well, the less of that fake kind of support is what is met at a good center.

It should be a place then that gives us support, yes, but also challenges us, and in that sense we're all teachers of one another. Some of the most powerful teachings at a Zen Center have nothing to do with the teacher; sometimes the teaching is from another person, coming directly from that person's experience. To be honest, to be aware of what real practice is, and to share it with others – this is what makes a center a different kind of place to be.

Sadly enough, Zen Centers tend to be somewhat ego-perpetuating: we want them to be bigger, better, more important than the other guy's center, certainly! There are very subtle ego currents that can circulate in a Zen Center, as in any other organization if we are not especially careful.

And some thoughts on the sangha: one point is crucial – the longer people have been practicing, the less important the outward role should be. And for that reason I don't want people who have been practicing for a long time to assume that they are always going to be monitors – sometimes, yes, of course, but the more senior the student, the more I want their influence to be felt through their practice, and through their willingness not to seem important; and to let the newer students begin to assume some of the outwardly conspicuous positions.

The mark of senior students is to be working when no one else knows they're there. I see people working in the Center office at odd hours; sometimes I come back from shopping and they're working hard. That's a sign of mature practice, getting the job done and keeping our own importance out of it. Personally, I'm trying to go that way by downplaying the tremendous importance given to the role of teacher. And I want this to apply to all of the older students. So if you feel you are not getting to do what you usually do, GREAT! Then you have something nice to practice with.

Another mark of a good Zen Center is that it shakes all of us up; it is not the way we want it in our pictures. So, in our upset, what we get back to then, is the basis of practice – which is, as near as I can put it into words, to assume more and more an observer stance in our life.

By that I mean that everything in our life will continue to take place – the problems, the emotional difficulties, the pleasant days, the ups and downs, which are what human life consists of – but it is the ability not to get caught – to enjoy what is happening when it is “good”, to have equanimity when it is “bad” and to observe it all, which is the continuing work.

The mark of maturing practice is simply the ability, more and more and more, to notice what is going on and not be caught by it. Easy to talk about, but probably 15 to 20 years of hard practice are needed before we are like that a good bit of the time.

And that is not the final stage. When there is no object, no person, no event, no thing in the world with which I identify, by which I'm caught – when there is no object and no observing self – then there is a flip into what, if you wish to give it a name, is the enlightened state.

I have never known anyone whom I felt had accomplished that, but some persons have done well and, if you are lucky enough to encounter such a person, you sense the difference in one who is not caught by life (needing it, craving something or someone, insisting that life be a certain way) – You notice that such a person is at peace and free.

These are the people who are a healing and beneficent influence on any life that is near them. They don't have to do anything – the healing comes from the way they are. That transformation is what we want from our practice. We are more than lucky to have such an opportunity in this lifetime. Let's take advantage of it and do our very best.