

Empty of Self

Dharma talk by Maylie Scott, Roshi, given February, 2001

An ancient Buddhist simile suggests that we can think of ourselves as a handful of beads persistently imagining ourselves into necklaces. This is the "self habit." Sometimes the necklace is lovely - "Somebody said something nice about me and yes..." - but other times the necklace is heavy and hot and burns the skin with its self judgment or anger or obsession. We usually don't notice the fact that we are the makers of the necklaces until we begin to sit zazen.

Recently a group of thirteen HSU students participated in a "Zen Workshop" which actually was a mild day and a half sesshin. Only one of them had ever meditated before. It was a significant adventure of stepping out into the unknown and also a significant challenge. After the dharma talk, we went around the room and each person spoke. The necklaces were very heavy. Resistance was forceful; the repeated sittings and the attention to details of form seemed controlling and unreasonable.

Why sit through such physical suffering? Although many thought about leaving, none did. By the end of the day there was much more awareness of the transitory nature of experience; that what was nearly unbearable was abruptly forgotten or subsumed by another mind state. An agonizing thirty minutes might, for no reason, be followed by one with considerable ease.

We chanted the Heart Sutra. "Form is emptiness, emptiness form." The solidity of experience was challenged and what began to come up were more perceptions of necklaces of stubbornness, anger and desire for control and anxiety. One person said he looked out the window and saw a tree, but caught some inner distance between his eye and the tree, as if he were making the tree up. "All dharmas are marked by emptiness."

Sitting zazen offers us the opportunity of watching the activity of presenting a "self" to ourselves. One bead thought arises and within the very breath there is a necklace, with its own history and mood and desires. A Zen saying says, "Pick up the corner and the whole piece is there." We may get lost for a while, but sooner or later (thanks to impermanence) the mind construction wears out and we recall our intention of returning to the present moment. "Oh yes. I am not a necklace, I'm just a handful of beads" and we wait for the next one. If we are suffering we begin to find that this return is where comfort, even a subtle sort of pleasure lies.

Sitting zazen this way is actually very interesting; watching the play of mind and, at the same time, appreciating the space out of which the beads come. The interest in, the curiosity about the process, brings us into greater intimacy with our breath by breath experience. Samadhi, the experience of wholeness, begins to arise. Deeper than understanding, we begin to Real-ize "All dharmas are marked with emptiness." What is the emptiness out of which everything arises?

The deep experience of anatta, of "no self," is NOT nothing. It is a fluid activity that does not exclude nor get stuck in preferences or aversions. An element of pleasure - subtle or strong - begins to arise as we find freedom in the discipline of allowing ourselves to just be beads - to just be who we are, complete, moment by moment. When we are not working on necklaces, we can just appreciate the beads - each one a fresh teaching to respond, but not react to. Even if the situation is difficult, there is openness and a bedrock kindness. The heart is not obstructed.