

Buddhism and I

I invited her to, “slowly, bring your attention to the middle of your body, your throat, your chest and abdomen area. Do you feel all clear there? Or is there something there, that feels unclear?”

She smiled and said, “it’s not clear at all there.”

“Yes, and how is it in there?”, I said.

“Uhm...anxiety, there’s anxiety there” she replied.

“Anxiety, yes. And how is that anxiety felt in your body?”

“Uhm...there’s something like a round ball in my chest”.

“So, it’s like a ball. If there’s some place where this ball wants to go to, where could that be? It can be a place in your fantasy. Let’s imagine such a place.”

“Uhm... the kitchen. It’s a canister, you know the transparent jar, in the kitchen?”

“Yes, yes. The canister, a transparent jar with a lid that closes tightly.”

“Yeah, and since it’s transparent, you can see what’s inside.”

I am doing a form of psychotherapy called *Focusing*, or more precisely, *Clearing a Space*, the first part of Focusing. In *Zazen*, there is a similar process which I believe is called “*taiho*”. Here, I was present with her in her process as she moved the ball into a transparent jar.

Some interesting observations can be made about this process. When clients consult a psychotherapist like

me, they “look for” issues to discuss. But it is their *thinking-minds* that do the looking. So note that I am not asking her questions like “what would you like to discuss today”, that makes her thinking-mind active. Instead, I am inviting her to look into her body.

First, she said that she felt “anxiety”. But note that I didn’t even ask her about the contents of her anxiety. Again, I invited her to look at what she senses in her body. Then what she had called “anxiety” turned out to be like a ball in her chest. In fact, what people feel are bodily senses that come before concepts and words such as “anxiety” or “tension”. Her thinking-mind likes to call it “anxiety”, but once she establishes it as “anxiety”, she will wind up in what Ryodo Yamashita calls “the movies produced by the thinking-mind” in his recent book¹. We need to stay in a place so that we can stay clear of “the movies”. And that place is the body. There, is experience as-it-is. But what we mean by the body here is not the anatomical-physiological body. It is the “mind” and also the “body” or more precisely, it is her existence as-it-is, before concepts as “mind” and “body”.

Back to the session, she says there is “solitude”. This turned out to be a sticky sensation felt in her chest. And that wanted to go into a coffee mug with a heart logo designed on it. And the next issue after that seemed to feel comfortable laying down on the ground surrounded by flowers in a temple garden that she can see from her window.

Lots of issues around her livelihood and work also began to emerge. She picked them up, one at a

¹ Yamashita, R. (2015). *Honto no jibun to tsunagaru meisoh nyumon*. Tokyo, Kawade Shinsha.

time. She was laughing, as she took them up, saying, “look, here’s another one!” She tossed them overhead. Then in her imagery, these transformed into white clouds or a trail of steam as she imaged herself rolling ahead like a locomotive engine tossing up clouds in the air. She was vibrant and full of energy, quite unlike the anxiety and solitude with which she had begun this session.

Now, how does all this relate to Buddhism? When I square with the theme of “Buddhism and I”, I find my pen dragging along. I grew up in a Buddhist family, a kind of Japanese Buddhism characterized by Issho Fujita and Ryodo Yamashita in their book as “Buddhism version 1.0.”² But I had always liked Soto Zen, being enchanted by Roshi Shunryu Suzuki’s book *Zen Mind Beginners Mind*, and by Roshi Kodoh Sawaki and Roshi Taisen Deshimaru who my uncle, Prof. Yujiro Ikemi (who happened to be my first supervisor in Japan) was well acquainted with. (Dr. Yujiro Ikemi co-authored a book with Roshi Taisen Deshimaru.) Later on, I did Theravada retreats in Thailand and visited Kopan Monastery and Ranging Yeshe Institute in Nepal on occasions.

If we were to do a modern day translation of *Dhukka* (suffering) as “stress”, we would realize that the psychotherapeutic endeavor of how to live forward from stress comes straight in line with the practices of Buddhism. And what lies beyond my gaze is mindfulness and halls full of the treasured Buddhist teachings. So, in these respects *and more*, I consider myself a “Buddhist”. But just as I wrote

that sentence, it occurred to me that there is much more than that. I hurriedly returned to my previous sentence to add the words “and more”. Because, yes, there is much more about all this, that is felt in my body. But since it seems to require quite some time *to speak more from this more*, so I shall put down my pen for now, close this particular essay on “Buddhism and I” to spend time with this *more*.

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² Fujita, I. & Yamashita, R. (2013). *Update suru Bukkyo*. Tokyo, Tougensha.