

Rev. Masaki Matsubara
Week Two, *Zen and the Work of Everyday Life*
March 13, 2017
“Sitting Alone”



One core Zen text, *Hekiganroku* (Blue Cliff Record) says that a monk asked a Zen master, "What is extraordinary?" The master said, "Sitting alone on the mountain."

Again, a monk asked a Zen master, "What is extraordinary?" The Zen master said, "Sitting alone on the mountain."

What does this mean? What does [the] master's answer mean? In one way, this koan implies the importance of living in the moment. However, in another way, this koan becomes fascinating when this idea of living in the moment also implies one's existence itself, or one's life itself. Let me tell [you] how I came to understand this.

My story starts with the death of my family members. I [will] never forget that year from 2009 to 2010. From 2009 to 2010, I lost four family members—my grandmother, my grandfather, my father, and cousin. I really didn't know what happened at the time. It's almost seven years ago but even now I don't remember what happened in that year, or three years, or five years after that. At some point, I was always feeling [that] my grandparents, my father, and my cousin were still alive.

I [have been] living in the United States up to this moment. Time to time, whenever I [would] go back to my home, [and] my mother and brothers [were] there, when we were eating lunch and dinner together, I felt [that] my grandparents and my father were also sitting together and eating the same food.

Also, I don't know why, in some way, I had thought that my family members would never die. They were always together. We are always together. Then I lost four family members. I couldn't think at all about what [was] happening. But after seven years, I have begun to feel what I am learning from their death, what they are teaching me. I think [it is] the importance of life, [the] importance of existence in this world. I am here. I am standing here. I am sitting here because I have parents and I have grandparents. I have a family lineage. I don't know how [far] we go back

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in the past, but one thing that is very sure is that, because I have that exact family lineage, I'm here now.

We are lived by our parents, our ancestors. Again, please think about the importance of our family lineage. Everyone has his or her own family lineage; lineage going back to history, and that history is your history, my history, and our history. It's very important because our ancestors are existing. That's why I am now existing too.

Also, think of the probability of being born in this human world. It is very rare to be born as a human being. When we really recognize the pricelessness of our own lives, then we recognize the pricelessness of all others' lives. What is extraordinary [about] sitting alone on the mountain? Sitting alone on the mountain. Each day we have is a collection of meetings, meetings with many things. Every single meeting we have every day is a meeting with priceless lives, time, and space; therefore, the meeting itself becomes very priceless.

Such a meeting is limited in nature in be-here-now. The very awareness of be-here-now is what we learn from Japanese tea ceremony, which is very close to Japanese Zen tradition—which is the idea of *ichi-go ichi-e*. Ichi-go ichi-e, or one moment, one meeting. One moment, one meeting. Ichi-go ichi-e, or one moment, one meeting, means, first, [that] the meeting happens only once. The meeting happens only once. Second, no matter how many times the same host and the same guest may come together, no matter how many times they use the same tea bowls, today's meeting never be repeated. Today's meeting [will] never be repeated.

It is a unique moment and the only chance in your lifetime—that is called ichi-go ichi-e. Our every day life is in nature, ichi-go ichi-e. When we really understand this, we can cultivate not only the awareness of [the] pricelessness of life, but also of harmony, respect, kindness, compassion, and connectedness. Based on that, we can explore the calm union with fellow human beings. This generates a moral drive for caring [for] others. Again, we need to cultivate



harmony, respect, kindness, compassion, and connectedness. Those elements generate a moral drive for caring [for] others.

Therefore, based on ichi-go ichi-e, one moment, one meeting, the purpose of Zen is to cultivate moral imperative, moral imperative. It is a moral imperative that is based on harmony, respect, kindness, compassion, and connectedness. What is extraordinary [about] sitting alone on the mountain? Eighteenth-century Japanese Zen master, Hakuin Ekaku, talks about moral imperative as the core of Zen teaching. He was a fearless fighter against the power and authority of the popular dictatorship at that time. He tried to save lower class people who were squeezed by heavy taxes and heavy labors. At the same time, he continued to criticize luxurious lifestyles by social elites including imperial families. He was a fearless fighter against the Tokugawa dictatorship.

Regarding the moral imperative, Hakuin said the following, "Listen, yet from what one hears from all the provinces everywhere, the sadness of life lodges itself among the common people. What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person while causing many to suffer?"

Again.

"Listen, yet from what one hears from all the provinces everywhere, the sadness of life lodges itself among the common people. What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person while causing many to suffer?"

As this mind operation opens into one's daily life, he or she wakes up to a softer, more integrated and ethical way of being in the world. That is probably the only way Zen really has a life. What state of mind is it that allows for the concentration of luxury in one person while causing many to suffer?