

## Attention! Attention!

There is a zen story about a well-known master in ancient China, named Master Ichu. There're a few different versions of this story but one is as follows: It seems the emperor's minister was troubled and so went to visit Master Ichu to seek advice. He said, "Master, the people are unruly and difficult to govern. Please give me a word of wisdom to help govern them." The master picked up his brush and wrote one word "Attention."

The minister was a little confused and annoyed, "Umm.. is that it? I asked for wisdom and you give me just this! Give me a word of wisdom!" The Master then wrote "Attention, Attention."

– in other versions of the story this goes on with the minister, or student getting increasingly frustrated and angry and Master Ichu writing "Attention, Attention, Attention"

So, what does this story mean? Why does "attention" provide "wisdom?" How does it help govern the unruly? Could we substitute the word "Awareness" for attention? Most of us will find this story boring and disappointing - a bit dry.. a bit uninteresting; we want cooler more interesting stories and things to motivate our practice.

In boring reality we do need to pay attention to so many things in our daily lives - just to survive! We need to pay our bills on time, catch the train on time, make sure our medicines aren't expired, set our alarm to wake up for an important web meeting, remember to renew our passports, our driving licenses. Etc. How can we offer our full attention to all the things that demand it?

I recently watched a series on youtube about basic training for Royal Navy recruits. One of the big features was "kit inspection" – every single thing they had needed to be ironed and folded meticulously into rectangles of exactly A4 paper size, every speck of dust on their shoes cleaned, top and bottom, placed in exact and precise ways in their lockers. The tiniest error was a fail, and if they failed several times, they'd be kicked out of the training.

Sometimes it can feel like that in the dojo – there are so many details – we offer incense like this, we bow here, we turn this way before bowing that way, we hold our hands this way not that way, gassho is like this, not like this... oryoki meals are quite precise – it can seem almost overwhelming, so what's the point?

Why so much attention to detail for such trivial seeming things? Why does it matter how we hold our spoon, where we place our chopsticks? Or in the Royal navy, how you fold your socks, or how precisely you ironed your trousers?

I really did hesitate before making a comparison with the military – zen practice is not the military, and it's almost like "low hanging fruit" to use the comparison... however..

In the navy show, the senior officers were quick to point out that if you can't pay attention to the simple things – like how to iron a shirt precisely – how can we trust you to fix a submarine? If you can't follow the very basic instructions completely, how can we trust you to follow the harder ones when lives may be on the line?

This is not the case in Zen - in zen we invite practitioners to offer their complete attention completely to each moment, offer all of ourselves completely to each situation as it arises - because each moment and each situation is not separate from our existence here and now.

Offering our complete attention allows us to understand how things are in this phenomenal world, can we see the true nature of all the things and more clearly understand this non-

separation? Can we pay close enough attention so we can really understand there is no separation between us and the coffee cup? Between us and a dusty altar? Or a blade of grass? Instead of being trusted with a battleship, we are trusting ourselves with Buddha – the buddha nature that IS each of us. We are trusting ourselves with our true selves.

There's another well used zen story – A monk says to the master, Master, I have just arrived at the monastery, please instruct me in the dharma. The master asks 'have you eaten yet?' yes I have - and the master says, ok, then wash your bowl – this story invites us to pay attention to the matter at hand, to what is right in front of us, to the minutiae of our lives. When we give our fullest attention to our precious human life, we can feel the joy of our unity with all things and beings, awareness of our pure presence. Even in the most mundane aspects of our lives.

Dogen Zenji said.. “why leave behind the seat in your own home to wander in vain through the dusty realms of other lands, If you make one misstep, you stumble past what is directly in front of you” -

So, a suggestion, our thinking, minds are unruly, and are difficult to govern. Don't look for the hard stuff, or the flashy stuff, in the dusty realms of other lands - start with the easy stuff, with what is right in front of you - wash your bowl before you run a battleship.

We pay attention to things, to situations, to the needs of others, and to ourselves. We pay attention to all our activities, physical, mental and emotional - to the ways we do things, to feelings when they appear. To how we can better harmonise with others. To our mistakes and how we can learn from them. To each moment of our life as it appears and disappears.

Every moment is complete – in and of itself – so if we're not paying attention – we miss it. Straightening our mats, putting away our zafus, cleaning our coffee cups. This is what we do in zazen. but we can practice it in all parts of our lives. Recognising there is no mirror does not absolve us from clearing the dust off it.

When we sit in zazen, we tend to develop a capacity to notice when and how the mind wanders, when we have stopped paying attention to posture and breath. We can see when we start paying attention to our own desires – to our grasping and rejecting – and we can see how that effects the task at hand.

Zen practice has a reputation for being rather practical and direct. So, some suggestions for keeping it like that - Attention! If you open a door, close it. If you turn something on, turn it off. If you make something dirty, clean it up. If you are wearing something, treat that thing with respect. If you see rubbish, dispose of it. If you borrow something, return it in optimal condition. If you don't know better, don't correct others. Be on time. Fold your napkin with care. If you do anything, remember and take care of the consequences, if you offend someone, apologize.

Once you get the hang of it, paying attention to the details of our lives becomes 2<sup>nd</sup> nature – something normal – something basic – a source of peace. What is the most important thing? The most important thing is to discover what is the most important thing – so keep your eyes open – enlightenment is found in using your spoon quietly.

Living consciously, intentionally, attentively is living a life awake – each act in our everyday lives becomes the way of the Buddha.