

## *Crossing Over the Waters*

The Buddha compared the process of moving from the condition of ignorance to the state of enlightenment as a “boat crossing the waters to the other shore”. In this metaphor, we start from the near shore of self-identification as a separated entity-with-characteristics (body, personality, memories, habits, reactions, beliefs, etc.). Via proper Zen practice—our “boat”—we eventually traverse to the far shore of merging with an uncreated, undying, ever-existing reality called, variously: *emptiness, suchness, True Self, One Mind, Buddha-nature, etc.*

From the standpoint of Zen, the boat that ferries us to the other shore is the peerless body-mind technique of *zazen*. This vessel must be sea-worthy: sturdy, non-leaking, stable and hydrodynamic. The balanced tautness of our *zazen* posture, subtlety of the breathing, and continuity of mind-control are key aspects of creating a reliable vehicle for this ultimate journey. Before we can make any real progress along this path, we must carefully learn the *zazen* technique, gradually perfecting it over many hours and years of consistent practice. The guidance of a good teacher is extremely helpful to this process.

This vessel of *zazen*, in order to take us in a consistently forward direction, must have a rudder and two oars. The rudder is analogous to “*faith*” or “*view*”; the two oars are, individually, *mindfulness* and *inquiry*. Without the rudder of faith and proper viewpoint, the boat of *zazen* can wander aimlessly and we will become lost in the weeds. But a rudder alone cannot propel this boat of practice. Faith alone, understanding alone, will leave us standing in place, unable to move forward against the strong currents of deeply held beliefs and habit patterns. Our delusory identification with characteristics external to our deepest center will keep us anchored in place, unable to freely live by the teachings we hold close.

The rudder of faith must be assisted by the two oars of mindfulness and inquiry. A single oar alone can get our boat of practice moving, but only in circles. Mindfulness alone, without the penetrating trajectory of inquiry, can result in stagnant, “dead sitting”—attachment to quietude and peacefulness that quickly evaporates when the winds of struggle, change and difficulty inevitably blow in our everyday lives. Conversely, the oar of inquiry alone, without the stability and clarity of mindfulness, can lead us into the entrapping vortex of discursive thinking and against the jagged rocks of intellection and self-doubts.

An oar that stays on the water's surface will splash but it won't propel us. We must dip the oar under the surface, plunging down into the flow, over and over. This going beneath the surface of the forms confronting us is the key to our zazen practice. We must penetrate below the superficial level of judgments, comparisons and reactivity—our habitual patterns of thoughts and feelings. Then we can use our exertions efficiently to keep us moving forward, not sticking anywhere.

Dispassion is the key to this rowing technique. We see the movement of the waves on the surface—the reflections of light here and there—as *done, completed*. Yes, there is continual movement. But in each thought moment, all the causes and conditions creating this precise configuration of waves have been written, played, indelibly stamped. Though we may resist, protest, bargain—it is already too late! It's "done and dusted", just as it is.

Our faith in this truth gradually becomes a certainty. Seeing this clearly, we shift from reacting to *embracing*. Holding the oars, we can now dip below the water's surface. Our boat of zazen can now move with the river's flow rather than repeatedly fight against it. Our 'rudder' of true understanding, intelligent seeing, is now aimed in the proper direction and we are no longer wasting our efforts.

Now, how do we row with the oar of *mindfulness*? Simply stated, mindfulness is the awareness of the very *presence* of the object in our field of attention. We do not ignore the object, but neither do we toy with it. Allowing the object exactly as it comes, we see its sheer *fact*—the essential aspect of each and every form that has no particular color, sound, feeling or thought-nature. Holding firmly to the object while perceiving its presence: this is the very essence of mindfulness.

We don't stop here, however, but dip the oar of *inquiry* into the water next. Inquiry now shines upon our awareness of 'presence' and asks: "Just what is the *substance* of this presence?" Can 'presence' be outside of my knowing, or is it my very knowing itself? As this wondering steadily progresses, 'presence' becomes intimate—inseparable from the awareness itself. Dipping this oar under the water's surface, the light of the mind shines inward upon itself. The deeper the oar goes, the darker the water. We enter this darkness—this utter intimacy—and we stop nowhere.

And so, to enable our crossing over we construct a well-made boat of zazen: steered by faith and proper view, propelled by the twin oars of mindfulness and inquiry. A true teacher, like a coxswain, will direct us in tuning the rudder, assist us with our rowing technique and encourage us to keep moving forward. But, we must grab firm hold of the oars by ourselves. No one else can take the oars from our own hands and row the boat of practice on our behalf. This inescapable fact points to the courageous “sustained exertion” this process of Zen practice requires. At the same time, as we gradually learn how to move with the natural flow of the currents under our own power, we become ever more confident and unencumbered. We begin, more and more, to give our forward progress over to the waters.

Finally, on a particular day like any other, we abruptly recognize that the other shore is now right underneath our very own feet—just as if we had never departed from it, never required any kind of boat to ferry us, and never needed to cross over any difficult waters to arrive there. Looking about in this strange new territory, getting familiar with it, our journey to the far shore appears to have ended right where it began. We can now truly say, *“What a relief to discover that just as I am, I am perfect!”*

The Buddha put this understanding in the following manner: *“Truly I gained nothing from complete unexcelled enlightenment.”* This ‘nothing gained’, like a cleansing, clear-flowing river, now carries us along with no port of departure, no special destination. The effort we make is the river’s effort; our practice, the river’s practice. We continue in this way, never abandoning our zazen attitude of mind: a direct, intent, plunging into the flowing of our life just exactly as it comes.

*Allow mind, having no fixed abode, to flow forth...*

*[The Diamond Sutra]*