

Being Upright
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Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? -Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day"

Recently I came across a wonderful new book by the Zen teacher Reb Anderson. Its title is *Being Upright*, and these two words express the essence of our practice. First there is the being aspect of our lives. We are — period. Our lives are inextricably linked with the life of the whole universe, with all of reality, and we share in this universal life every moment. The poet Mary Oliver expresses this perspective when she refers to "your one wild and precious life." Our life is wild and precious completely beyond our preferences and prejudices, beyond our successes and failures. This is the ground of our lives, and when we awaken to it, it is the source of unshakable security.

But we don't stop here. In her poem Mary Oliver doesn't simply state, "Your life is wild and precious"; she says, "Tell me, what is you plan to do/ with your one wild and precious life?" On the ground of the unconditional preciousness of this life, how are we to live? This brings in the upright aspect. Our deepest intention is to be upright-to live in a way that expresses the innate dignity and preciousness of this life. Our practice is to turn ourselves in this direction in every moment, in every action. This may seem like a huge undertaking, but it is our basic job as human beings. My root teacher Dainin Katagiri Roshi expressed it simply in this way: "Our job is to have kind consideration for all sentient beings every moment forever."

This effort to be upright is not a burden but at heart is the joyful expression of our essential self. It takes place in the most ordinary of actions. When I look at the picture of the monk at Plum Village, I see his calm and continuing effort to be upright expressed through his body in the sitting posture, and I feel grateful to him for sitting like that. Someone once told me about two very similar photographs they had seen. In both pictures a man was sitting on the ground with his back to the camera; beyond the man was a magnificent mountain. In one picture the man was sitting with a balanced, upright posture, and both he and the mountain seemed to mirror each other in expressing their essential grandeur. In the other photograph the man had taken a very slouching, tumbledown posture, and not only did he seem diminished, but the mountain did as well.

Living as a human being in this world is not easy. No matter how hard we work to avoid it, plenty of pain comes our way. If we lose touch with the foundation of our lives as being, and forget our deep intention to be upright, our suffering can become enormous. Let's support each other by remembering who we truly are and help each other to be upright, moment after moment.