

Humility as an Ango theme, by Rev. Mitsugen

Why Humility as a topic? After some years of practice I've noticed that I mostly was stuck in suffering due to my pride. Like a coin, pride has 2 sides: the side where you feel better than the rest and the one where you feel that you're worse than the rest. It is fair to say that pride is directly born from our necessity to create a self that is separated from others. As Zen practitioners, we know that separation is the root cause for suffering and Pride has been the most common reason for my suffering. Working on diminishing pride can't be tackled by trying not to be proud because that is not an action in itself, rather we need to practice the opposite of pride, humility. So the endeavor I'm taking for this Ango, hoping you will join me too, is to practice humility in our everyday life.

The idea is to provide activities that will foster the practice of humility and the identification of pride. But before getting into the activities let me talk about how pride manifests for me and its many disguises and consequences.

Pride shows with my achievements and makes me look at others as inferiors. But it also shows in my fear of losing that accomplishment and become one of the inferiors. Said like that sounds like I'm talking about big issues like a career advancement or a successful brewery (!), but pride actually expresses in many smaller things too. For instance, I'm driving and a guy honks at me for no apparent reason and automatically I go: "What is going on with this guy??, I'm doing nothing wrong... does he think he owns the street? How disrespectful!" and so on... Why do I get angry by this? "Well, because he clearly is implying I suck at driving, but who is HE to judge ME, he is probably a moron anyway" and again I go, fueled by pride, in the second wave of defending the self I created. It's pretty obvious that pride leads to anger, but it also leads to envy ("Why does that guy with less merit have more success than me?"), to fear of failure or shame ("I can't fail this test, people will laugh at me"), to self-righteousness ("My opinions are better than yours") and to all sort of suffering. Pride is the ultimate tool the self has for its preservation, to give you the illusion of happiness when things go well or to give you the illusion of doom when things don't go well. In both cases pride succeeds in preserving the illusion of self.

On the contrary, humility is the ultimate practice and the key to selflessness. It is, however, as Roshi Junryu pointed out, a monumental task so we need to work on it piece by piece. Our self has many layers and it's very entangled in our emotions and mind. As Anderson says, "As long as we cling to the self, the impulse to stop self-praise will be just another foolish act of selfishness." So we know the issue is to stop clinging to the self but how do we practice that? To be honest, I don't know. But I think this everyday tasks could help and is my commitment to practice them during this Ango:

1. When engaged in a conversation, I will not immediately give in to the impulse to talk. Most of the times, the impulse to say something comes from a self-centered interest to show how smart I am or how wrong the other person is. The impulse to talk may also arise from anger or frustration and in refraining to give in to it will be exercising the first pure precept of Doing No Harm. I will take my time to find why am I talking before doing so.
 - a. The intention here is to deactivate one of the triggers that make self-concerned thoughts to be expressed in the real world.
 - b. As a side effect of this commitment I should be able to listen freely (wholeheartedly) as I hopefully will understand that I don't have a need/mandate to say anything. This will open also the opportunity to practice the second pure precept Embrace and Sustain all Good. As Anderson says: "First we should receive and understand the situation and then give a hand appropriately."
2. Before everyday meditation I will do three full bows inviting something I dislike to my vow. I found it is easy to bow when thinking of Buddha or something I revere. Can I let go of the separation of self and other and vow also evoking images of people or situations I don't like and understand in the action that it is all one?
 - a. I think this should help make prostrations more humbling
3. I will refrain to verbalize explanations of my opinions. Yes, I do have likes, dislikes and opinions and that is ok, but every time I cling to those opinions too much I feel the urge to defend or explain them. That only feeds my created self, so I will be attentive to that impulse in conversations or online.
 - a. Similar to this, I will take a look at impulses that are oriented to solve problems. I'm not the only one who can take care of something and is again my pride who makes me think that I'm indispensable for the solution to arise. It is not about not participating in the actions, but mostly in having the freedom that stems from understanding that I'm not responsible for all solutions.
4. I will check the real reasons to post something on social media before doing so. If the need for the post stems from a self centered need of recognition or deprecation of others I will not post it.
5. Practice being thankful to everybody and everything.