

Go where the heart of the problem lies.

(an article by Albert Low )

Go where the heart of the problem lies. Our practice is all about seeing into the conditional nature of the world, me and God. We are not people or things, among other people or other things in the world. It is illusory to look on this structure as absolute. It is conditional, it is relative, it is useful. It is useful in the same way a filing system is useful. The filing system does not itself impinge in any way on the material that is filed. It does not alter in any way the letters, correspondence, forms or invoices. It is the melting down of this structure that our practice is about.

The partitions, fences and barriers of this structure come out of words. Words are magnificent creations. The original word created the whole universe that we now know. Words are remarkable. You might say that there have been two creations: the creation of the world and the creation of the word. But words are also binding and imprisoning; words are limiting. When we are looking into the nature of this limitation of what we call "the word", we must recognize not only its binding, limiting and restrictive nature, but also its liberating, its creative, its opening nature as well. As long as we look at words and thoughts only in a negative way, this itself generates its own kind of barrier, its own kind of partition, its own kind of separation.

Why is it that I feel am someone, something, somewhere? Why is it that I am so certain I am a separate individual if, as it is said, this separateness is provisional, illusory? To say that it comes out of words and thoughts is all right, it gives a direction; but it is not enough just to say this; we must prove it for ourselves, test it for ourselves. It is in these very simple questions that the heart of our practice resides. One must not be afraid to ask others and oneself simple questions.

There is a good friend of mine who, whenever she gets the chance, always asks me the most elaborate, philosophical questions. One does not know what to do with these questions. One wants to respond, wants to work with her, but what does one do with these questions? They are so far removed from her experience that one cannot use experience to help. It is the simple questions that we need to ask, like the story of the young monk who went to his teacher and said, "In the Prajna Paramita it says: no eye, ear, nose, tongue body mind, but I have a nose, I have a tongue, I have a body. Why does it say that there is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind?" This is a wonderful question. We overlook these things. We are afraid to be innocent. We are afraid to be a neophyte, a beginner. We are afraid that people will think that we really have not made much progress in our practice. But the real progress comes when we start looking at

things as though for the first time. The question "What am I? What is it?" is such a question .

We believe that we are the body. There is this general kinesthetic sense that we have, this general sensation of being which the body generates. But this belief that we are the body comes out of something much deeper, the feeling that I must be something. If I am not something, then I am nothing, and if I am nothing then I fall into a pit of horror. What is this "I must be something »?"

As one sits in zazen every now and again the grip we have on this surface level lets go, and one is aware of the mind being able to operate at all kinds of levels. This is very sensitive and delicate. One has to be present to know what I am talking about here. It is more like a perfume than a vision. When one enters into this, there is a kind of releasement and one realizes that infinity is not an abstraction, that eternity is not simply a word, that wholeness is not something among other things. Just a glimpse of that, a taste of that, is all you need to rid you of the fears and frustrations, of the sense of life being hopeless and pointless; to rid you of the sense of being alienated, separate, being on the outside of things. This that cannot be gauged, or plumbed, or estimated in any way is what you really are.

Thoughts are like stains. To see this staining quality of the thought "I" enables one to see its limitation. We are so taken in by this thought "I" that we think it is everywhere and everything. It is as if we were to put on rose colored glasses - everything is colored rose-red. It is the same with "I". When we look through "I" everything is "I." To shake what we think is just the way it is and always will be, to see that the stain has edges, has limits, this is what our practice is all about. Never think that Zen is some kind of mysticism. Never think that we are invoking heavenly forces, or mystical forces, or magical forces or anything like that. We are not. This is not to say that the very presence of "I" or "me" or "we" is not in itself a miracle. It is, but there are not any miracles outside the miracle of being. It is in the nature of things that we practice. This is why it is said that everyday mind is the way. Do not feel that you have to be a special kind of person in order to practice.

Sometimes when we sit it is possible for us to slip the hawser; (the rope that holds a ship to its anchor). It is possible for us to let go in a way that is not a true letting go, we slip away from our practice. We slip away from the discipline of questioning. Then we can drift into a placid mind state. This placid mind state is really the mind reflecting itself in the mind. Although there are other kinds of practice that encourage this, from the point of view of Zen practice this is a cul de sac. We must go beyond this placidity of mind. Unfortunately, because we are so tormented, because we have so much anguish in our lives, when we come up against this state it tastes so beautiful, so sweet, that we want to linger. But this kind of mind state can also become demonic. Seeing the truth "upside down" can induce a horror of emptiness, of vacuity, a horror of being swallowed by one's own mind.

We want to encourage you not to look for comfort in your practice. Do not turn to your practice for comfort. Go, in your practice, where the very heart of the problem lies. The heart of the problem lies in the stony quality of the mind, the flint-like quality of the mind, the hard quality. It very often comes out of an anxiety, or an irritation, or a discomfort. The mind is uncomfortable with itself, or uncomfortable with the world. In the very middle of that discomfort, there is a crack. It is through that crack that you must go. We are not saying that you must make yourself uncomfortable. Please understand this. We are not ascetics. The idea is not to flog yourself, hurt yourself, beat yourself, or anything like that. Just stick around, life will give you the misery that you need to work with. We ask "Who am I?" and against the immensity of the world we can only see ourselves as "ghosts in the machine." But when we let go of the world as being something immense, when we examine what we mean when we say, "I hear a bird sing," or "I feel the cushion pressing against my leg," or "I see the wall," when we examine without any presuppositions, without any definitions, without any sort of conceptual structures, when we work with the simplicity of sensation, we see that there is no coming together of mind and matter. There is no mind. There is no matter. What there is we cannot say. To even say there is anything is no good. But it fills everything. It is impenetrable in its fullness.

There is a movement that is calling for Buddhists to become socially active. This is a complete lack of faith in Buddhism, because if Buddhism is not socially active, then what is it? There is the belief that we have to go out and handle individual areas of suffering. But unless people themselves have cut out from their own hearts this separation, then their help can simply become another form of interference. Wanting to help others, at the bottom, comes out of a genuine sense of the unity of everything with everything; but at another level it can be just another kind of weakness, a kind of unwillingness to face the real issue. There is only one way that we are going to get rid of war in this world, that is by each one of us getting rid of the war in our own hearts. The only place we can start to help others is by helping ourselves. There was a very famous Tibetan, Mila Repa, who forbade his disciples to go out and help others.

"It is only when you can help others without the least element of selfishness, that your help can do anything other than end in catastrophe. »

This of course does not mean that when someone calls for help you do not respond. This is not what we are talking about. Some people, by training, by karma, by temperament and nature, find themselves in situations, as doctors, psychologists, lawyers, where they can actually do something to ameliorate the suffering of the world. What we are talking about is the life philosophy of helping others, this is what is so disastrous, the belief that we have to interfere with other peoples' lives because we are Buddhists.

When asking, "Who am I?" or "What is Mu?" one part of the mind interrogates another part of the mind. This is the way of reflection. When one is going to reflect on something there is a focusing of attention or awareness. This attention, or awareness, is focused on another quality of awareness which we call memory. Between the two, that which is

focusing and that which is focused on, an energy is generated which enables thought and memory to manifest. We try the same kind of trick, it is a wonderful trick, when we ask ourselves "Who am I?" We concentrate the mind, we focus the mind, on another part of the mind. We try in that way to get a releasement. It is the same with Mu. We are asking of the mind, "What is Mu?" We are searching in the mind for Mu. That which searches, is itself the mind; that which searches is what is searched for. It is like when Bodhidharma said, "Bring me your mind here, and I will set it at Peace." Hui-k'e said "I have searched everywhere for the mind and cannot find it." It is only when one takes that which searches for the mind, as the mind, that one realizes what Hui-k'e means. It does not mean that he looked all round inside the mind and was unable to find its identifying characteristics. This is not what is meant at all. You must go beyond the mind; you must go beyond consciousness. Consciousness is something which is happening; mind is something which is going on. You are not something which is happening; you are not something which is going on.

Our practice is a matter of intelligence. When you are working, you must work intelligently. You must use the same power that you use if you are a plumber, or housewife, or doctor, or writer, the power that you use to deal with these situations is the same power that you use in your practice. The difference is that you are now freeing that power from the forms that it normally takes. Normally when one uses this power it is addressed in a particular way, within a particular limit and a particular form. It is very much along the lines of what Dogen meant when he said, "Think the unthinkable." One is using the power of intelligence. When one is asking the question "Who am I?" you are using the power of thought. It is the same with Mu. When you are asking "What is Mu?" you are using the power of thought. Instead of trying to find some adequate vehicle for this, you look into the nature of that power itself.

Asking "Who am I?" or "What is Mu?" is directly asking "What is real?" As we say, we cannot know reality - as long as we are trying to know, to see or to grasp reality, we are going to keep on going back to the rat race. But we must come to this truth ourselves directly. When we come to this truth that we cannot know reality, it comes to us not as negation, not in terms of no or as something not, but as a total affirmation, a total releasement. But until there is that releasement, one has to keep going through the way of negation.

Just be very present, very there. See into the known: I am the body; I am this; I am unhappy. Just keep cutting through that, passing through that. Then you will get to the condition where one feels, "Well, I just do not know what I am."

'I am something' is itself a derivative. It comes out of what one might call knowing/being, but even this is far too much. It is non-reflective awareness. It is our true state and it is letting go of that kink in awareness that is the essence of our practice. This is why we have said many times that our practice is a process. A process where our practice becomes more and more subtle. This is why we just have to plough on through long periods of dryness, without protest, without trying to justify it, without wanting it to cease, just staying present with it. Breathing it in, breathing it out. Totally there, totally alert.

Even when there is a sense of something screaming inside you, just let it scream. Go on. Even when this suddenly gives way and there is a feeling of benediction, just go on.