

Lay Practice (part one)

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Since Buddhism really began to take off in the West, over the last fifty years or so, there have been a number of interesting developments. For example, we've seen the growing number of scientific studies about the effects of meditation practice; the emergence of what could be described as a kind of 'secular Buddhism' in the form of mindfulness meditation and MBSR programmes which are increasingly available now; the way in which some western Buddhist teachers have described the Dharma in ways which are maybe more accessible for westerners (I'm thinking here of people like Joko Beck for example); and finally, the way in which western Buddhism is much more focused on lay practice than Asian Buddhism has traditionally been.

And it's lay practice which I'd like to discuss in the Dharma talks for this weekend retreat. I am speaking as someone who has spent a lot of time going backwards and forwards between home, work and family and initially Rochester Zen Center and now Zengården – sometimes for periods of residential training along the way and more often for sesshin.

So I'd like to talk about some of the issues surrounding lay Buddhist practice. What are the challenges of being a lay practitioner? How do we integrate sesshin or residential training and daily practice at home? How does koan work, which many of us here do, relate to our daily lives? How can Zen practice help us to deal with or respond to the many challenges and difficulties we face in daily life? These are some of the questions I'd like to discuss and focus on.

Today I'll talk about some of these questions in the context of, primarily, koan practice. In part, because koan practice is one of the central elements of the type of Zen practice which is offered here. But also because I think it can be quite difficult to relate to – these strange, unusual stories and dialogues which the teachers often talk about in teisho. How can this work relate to, and have any impact on our daily lives?

If you ask someone who doesn't practise, 'What is your mind?' it's probably fair to say that the first thing they will refer to is this little voice in their head, this monologue that goes on and on, commenting on, analysing and assessing pretty much everything we do, everything that's happening to us. (Maybe you have a little voice like this too!?)

Practice – whether that's breath practice, koan work or shikantaza – boils down to loosening the grip of this thinking, discriminating mind. Initially this means realising, maybe with some surprise, that there is something *underneath* this thinking mind, that it actually represents quite a superficial aspect of the mind. We all know very well the mechanics of this process: we simply notice when the mind has strayed and return to the practice. We don't try to figure anything out, to manage thoughts in any way or to create any special kind of mind state. The practice does all of that for us.

And as we do this, over time, we become more and more familiar with a fundamentally different aspect or quality of the mind. We begin to operate in another way. We become

more responsive to the world around us and are able to act without being pulled around by and without relying so heavily on, our thoughts, judgements and opinions. We realise that we don't need to try and *control* our experience of the world so much.

A traditional Zen way of describing this is *don't-know mind* or *not knowing*. And this is one of the great challenges – as well as the promise – of practice and koan work in particular. We are told to plunge into this not knowing and to make it our home. This is where practice takes us – even if some of us need to be dragged there kicking and screaming.

We certainly dive into this not knowing when working on a first koan but my first really conscious encounter with not knowing (and the challenge it represents to our habitual ways of thinking) came early on in subsequent koan work at Rochester Zen Center. I remember going to dokusan with answer after answer – all of which were rejected. I remember how I would feel somehow comforted when I came up with a new idea of what the koan was about which I could hang on to until the following dokusan. I remember saying to Bodhin Roshi, “I think this koan is about...” and his withering reply, “You’re not going to try and *explain* it, are you?” And then, finally, coming out of the dokusan room one more time and realising that although I still couldn't answer the koan, I had no more ideas, nothing left to lean on. And the feeling of horror and the cold sweat that this produced.

There's a nice story about this which John Tarrant tells (in his excellent book *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*). His family was gathered around his mother's deathbed. When his mind was filled with the desire to change all the dynamics in the room, to make things better, this filled him with suffering. Then he noticed something very interesting: *But when I wanted no-one to be different, the room was large and at peace.*

So really this is a description of the first noble truth, the truth of suffering and how we go about putting an end to suffering. John Tarrant again:

“The whole of the ancient teachings on suffering come down to this: Suffering is the notion ‘This isn't it’ and its variants such as ‘I can't bear this, it shouldn't be happening,’ and ‘I have to know how this will turn out’. Freedom, waking up and fearlessness come down to the simplicity of, ‘Wait a minute, what if this is it?’ and its variants, ‘No need to bear it’ and ‘I don't know’

We all have our own variations of *this isn't it*. *I'm not it, my work isn't it, my childhood wasn't it, and my practice definitely isn't it*. So practice is about acknowledging in more and more areas of our lives that *this is it*. Don't know the answer to the koan – this is it! A baby cries in the middle of the night – this is it!

But even *this is it* is still just a description, just a finger pointing at the moon. When a baby cries in the middle of the night, you don't look at it profoundly and say ‘this is it’. Well I guess you could, but it won't get you very far. So what do you say?

So dive into the practice and begin to trust this *don't-know mind*. Stop looking for answers and remain in a state of not knowing. Maybe you go to dokusan just to get rid of another idea – to free yourself from this dust in the mind. And when you really begin to do this – when you just stay with the practice – something happens. Out of nowhere something pops up, some

feeling or intuition about how to present an answer in dokusan. And you come to trust this process, which really means that you begin to trust yourself.

This is one of the ways in which koan practice can be of real benefit to us as lay practitioners. Because of course the only point of doing this work (whether it's koans or some other practice) is to bring it out of the zendo and into our lives. Otherwise we're all just engaged in a weird, esoteric and frankly pretty boring hobby here!

Every day we face difficult, complex situations where no clear answer is obvious – right now the Scottish referendum comes to mind! There are many times when we are at a loss. A typical response is to grasp at something, anything – some idea or thought which maybe gives us the illusion of control. But koan practice shows us another way of responding, another way of operating. We rely on this *don't-know mind*, applying it to the circumstances of our lives, we stay present and we wait for a course of action to emerge. Joko Beck puts it like this:

“Do we have the patience to wait till our mud settles and the water is clear? Can we remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?” (Everyday Zen)

When you read koans in a book they can seem so abstract, so dry. How could these stories from hundreds of years ago, from some far off place have any relevance and meaning for us here? You could say that koans are a bit like the kind of food you take camping! They are freeze dried, stripped down, the bare bones. We need to add water to bring them to life. This water is our attention. We bring them to life by giving them our attention. To see through a koan it needs to become personal. Even if the koan has no *meaning* as such, we need to make it meaningful for us.

So our task is to embody this don't-know mind in our daily lives – with families, at work and so on. To stop pretending, that, as John Tarrant puts it, ‘this is a moment which has happened before’. This is what makes kids so nice to be around. When we describe children as *open*, this is maybe what we mean. It never occurs to them that whatever they're doing is something they've done before.

Sometimes people – especially people around us who maybe don't practise – wonder what the point of practice is. But what better gift could there be for family or friends than this aspiration to see them see them directly and freshly in each moment, with no thought in the mind that they should be different, or that we need to change them? What better gift can we give ourselves than to set ourselves free of the stories and ideas that we have about ourselves?

You could summarise the entire koan curriculum in two words: *not two*. Every koan is designed to trick us into seeing the different components or people in the koan as separate and distinct. And to our rational minds this is how they usually look. Koans are designed to teach us, to help us feel in our bones, that there is nothing which is separate or apart. Things are *not two*. And when we take up a koan – a first koan or a subsequent koan, it makes no difference of course – this is the challenge. How can we realise and express this *not two* in the context of this particular story, this particular situation?

And again the real point, of course, is to express this in our daily lives. When we are faced with challenges or problems, our instinct might be to withdraw or to avoid them. But another way is to apply the experience of our practice, which tells us we need to get closer to things if we are to express this *not two*. This might be why there are so many koans – we need to do this hundreds of times in the dokusan room for it to really sink in, for us to really be able to apply this in our daily lives.

And this *don't-know mind* isn't just something we call upon when faced with problems or difficulties. It's a way of moving through the world, a way of encountering any situation. I remember once when Kanja Roshi came to Glasgow to give a Dharma talk. Around thirty minutes before the talk was due to begin she mentioned that she was going off to a quiet place to sit for a while. And I remember, in my stressed state (worried whether anyone would come to the talk) thinking, 'Why does she need to go off and sit? Doesn't she have all the answers already?!' Only later did I realise how far off the mark I was – it isn't about finding another answer, another clever idea, but simply taking an opportunity to reconnect with this not knowing and to bring this clarity to whatever situation we find ourselves in. To be able to meet each moment as fresh and new.

We can express this very simply: do the practice and trust yourself. Trust this not knowing. Be confident that 'as you walk, a path will appear.'