

Affirming Faith in Mind (23) Sitting With Problems

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The Wombat Sangha Meditation Group

On this occasion of the passing of Janet's mother (Phyllis Selby 1929-2015) I would like to talk about practice with regard to that every-day life event and how the Third Patriarch's poem relates to that. Connected to that as well is how to practice problem solving.

It strikes me how people can come to start our practice without any understanding. Sometimes that is regarded as good, regarded as beginners' mind with no preconceptions, no philosophy.

A friend of mine, Leigh Davison went to Bodh Gaya in India where there are many different temples from lots of different cultural backgrounds. At the Japanese temple Leigh met Master Shibaya who said, "It's simple, Leigh. Just sit like the Buddha, become like the Buddha". For Leigh, who has a PhD in mathematics it was good to get simple instructions otherwise he would have started to think about things and complicate the practice.

Our practice is served well by statements like this, as they increase faith in our practice immediately. Faith has to be there in the teachings, in the sangha and every time we practice, it is an indication of faith in the practice. It is building faith in the practice.

Often in our lives we have to eliminate a lot of other approaches before we come to a simple practice like this: things that are much more complex like psychological groups, psychodrama groups, gestalt, for example. There are a lot of different things that often come to something very simple. For some people it is too simple and they want something more to chew on in their mind. It seems too simple.

There are a lot of possibilities how people come to meet this practice. I think the Third Patriarch's *Affirming Faith in Mind* is a good title. Every time we do the practice it is an exercise in faith in our true selves. Not faith in a god or in a teacher, or even faith in Buddha as such that has to be let go of, too. In the koan *Mu*, we read that if you meet the Buddha, you kill the Buddha. This "Buddha" is an ideal, an image you have to let go of as well.

The exercise of faith in the practice builds and then the practice starts to give results: we are clearer in what we are doing; we are more settled and grounded in what we are doing. That builds more faith in the practice. If the practice starts to work for you immediately, then that starts to build more faith in doing the practice. It becomes a good feedback cycle. Unfortunately some people turn up and the pain in their knees is too strong, and they give up on the practice. Others leave because there is not enough to entertain them intellectually or emotionally. Many don't return. I'm sure many teachers think about how they can hold people in the practice.

There is an old Indian saying; "Give people what they want so they want what you have to give." This is a generally wise thing to do.

Affirming Faith in Mind is our practice. Every time we sit we affirm faith in our deeper self. As soon as we enter the dojo we can let go of every thought that was there beforehand: every thought from the previous thinking, what you were hanging on to, all the mistakes you have been ruminating on. We let go of them all as we enter the door and we begin our practice.

That's not always easy to do. The problems and preoccupations are hard to let go of until they are resolved. Our practice is renowned for being able to encourage people to sit with their problems. We wait until something feels right and completely clear before acting on it. So our practice is a great thing because we can make a lot of mistakes and waste a lot of time if we are half-baked about something. As you get older you haven't got time or energy to waste on these peripatetic things around the countryside.

Whatever issue or problem is there is bound to come up in the psyche because it hasn't been resolved yet. Joko Beck used to write about the 83 problems. However many we have got we can be sure they will be there when we sit next. They will keep coming back.

How do we relate to them? If we put them aside as being too difficult, is that a good way to relate to it? Not so. We can include everything in our sitting practice: the problems, the feeling - we are letting go the thoughts that were there five minutes ago then the next layer comes up and we sit with that.

Often it is a problem of some kind - technical, work related, emotional - that it knocks on the door for attention. We have to open the door and welcome them, sit with them and see what happens. That may go on for quite a long time. Those problems, in various guises, may come back for years and years. Hopefully we can be friendly to them. The friendlier we are the better it is for sitting with it.

It doesn't mean we don't use other means to solve the problem. We go to our counsellor who enumerates ten practical ways to deal with it. Even after the ten practical ways are used, we may find it was a deeper issue than that. The counsellor's approach helped, but the problem may be deeper. It may keep coming back.

In our practice we can see it as a variety of koan study. In our Zen practice people are usually doing koan practice - sitting with a koan, or *just sitting* practice. People who are doing *just sitting* are often sitting with their own koans, rather than the formal published koans.

Dogen Zenji called it *genjokoan*, which are the problems of daily life manifesting in different ways.

We shouldn't act out of a solution until we feel really comfortable with that solution. Aitken Roshi used to say that we can decide on some course of action with our mind but immediately the gut can overrule that. What do we listen to? The mind that reasons why we should do it or the gut. He used to say that in our practice the gut should always win out in the end.

When asked about how to make a decision, Zen Master Hogen used to say, "Let your meditation decide". That is a very profound statement because as you

sit there a lot of the activity of the thinking mind will settle down. Then the gut feeling, the whole response, will start to emerge. This includes the mind as well. You don't act on things that are irrational. No, the mind is part of the whole picture. Everything gets included in our decision when we are sitting.

It takes tremendous patience. Patience has to be on the side of being infinite as it resolves quite a few of our issues. Progress may seem to be glacial. When a friend of mine was sitting, it took him years of practice for his arising anger to subside. In the end he realized the issue lay with his relationship with his father. Every time he sat down, anger arose.

Other people have similar experiences that keep coming back, and are finally let go. We have entered a deep practice and we expect deep things to happen on those levels.

Having the patience to hang in there is important. Fortunately as we get older we become a little more patient. Women tend to be seemingly, a little more patient. My Aunt used to quote a saying: "Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can; often in a woman, never in a man". It has a lot of reality to it.

Often we have seen that men are drawn to koan practice where they get some movement, whereas, sometimes we see women are drawn to just sitting practice; called *shikantaza*. It depends on the inner person, not the gender.

In the practice these issues come up. The great issues of birth and death are the core issues of our practice. We have just had a bereavement. It is very sad. It is a difficult thing to sit with. We can't be anything else but whatever comes up, comes up.

Thich Nhat Hanh was speaking about the Vietnam War and someone said something ignorant which caused him to become overwhelmed with anger or hurt. He had to leave the stage for a while and take some deep breaths. Here is someone who has been practicing all his life and yet things can still be overwhelming for him.

Our problems will go whatever way they need to go in life. Our karma brings about whatever needs to be brought up: our life brings it up. We say yes to whatever is arising, knowing that it has been presented to us by life in this moment.

We will go through stages of letting go, of grieving, of whatever is there organically. We trust that organic process of healing.

Do we need to mope about it? Emotions happen by themselves. For years I studied the co-counselling movement. I also went off to India and studied under Bagwan Shree Rajneesh. In both those movements, people were engaged to yell and scream and emote. After a year I realized that emotion happens by itself without any self-consciousness. It just happens by itself. A friend of mine lost his mother when we were there. He didn't seem to have any emotional response to his mother passing away. When he was driving his car a few days after the funeral he suddenly found himself crying deeply. He pulled over, cried for a few minutes and that was it. It is different for different people.

It is an organic thing. Emotions happen. They have nothing to do with our self-consciousness. They are like sleep; natural and organic, without thinking.

The more you try to do it, the less natural it becomes and the more problematic it becomes.

So we can relax. Things will emote as our body-mind, our psyche releases them; there is no need to worry about any of that at all. Worry is to do with our conditioning, which has been given to us as part of our natural scenery.

Our practice has the ability to bring out whatever is there to work with it.

On another level the practice deals with the essence that is always already there. One can ask, where is that person who has passed away? Have they gone? No, their essence is always here. Ramana Maharshi, asked by his students if he was leaving them, as he was dying, would respond, "No. Where would I be going?"

The body gets dropped and this is a sad situation. But on the other level, there is just that sense of eternal life that has no end, and no beginning. It is totally indestructible. As you look at your own being-ness you can't feel where you began. You can't say where you will end.

Stay with that in your practice. That is your true nature, your true self. That other person who has gone, they are still connected to your true nature. They haven't gone anywhere either. You haven't begun or ended and they haven't begun or ended either. Yet the personality and the body have been dropped.

Then there is the debate in the Church and in Buddhism that asks, does the individual personality, the entity that has gone, continue? It doesn't matter really. In the deeper level we know there is no destruction, there is no going, there is no coming. "Going and coming, never astray", as Hakuin Zenji says in *Song of Zazen*. This coming and going is happening all the time but there is never a movement away from that absolute position that is totally serene, untouched, indestructible.

This is the incredible nature of our practice and of life itself: this interplay between the relative and the absolute. There is always this dance between the two. But before someone undertakes this practice they only see the Gestalt of the relative. It is terribly painful when you lose someone from that perspective - it is a total loss.

In our practice we open a whole new Gestalt, a backdrop which gives us a whole new security in the sense that nothing is really born or destroyed. We call it the unborn - that deep sense of faith, that massages away a lot of the great pain of losses and gains. The practice is there for all of those situations.