

## **Affirming Faith in Mind (16) Effort and Talent**

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In this poem Affirming Faith in Mind, the Third Patriarch talks about the single way, single mind, single path. He says *the wise in all times and places awaken to this primal truth.*

It doesn't matter whether it's a Christian practitioner, a Muslim Sufi practitioner, a Buddhist practitioner, or a Hindu, everything centres to one practice on the path. In the Yogic tradition, mantra brought everything to one point. They called it single minded, one pointed concentration practice.

The Sanskrit word for concentration is *dharana*. Connected to that in Patanjali's aphorisms and Yoga teaching comes *dhyana*, or meditation. *Dharana* seems to be a necessary precondition for meditation to happen. So initially what people are practicing is really concentration. Then out of that comes *dhyana* or meditation. *Dhyana* practice came to China and became Chan. The Chinese translated that word to *Chan*. Then when it came to Japan it was translated to *Zen*. So that word *Zen* means meditation. For most people starting the practice, it is concentration. It is not meditation that they initially practice. Meditation is really some kind of awakening and there is a oneness about it. That can happen in the first seconds of practice, that can happen in the first years of practice or it can happen after many years, as for Aitken Roshi.

Aitken Roshi was practicing for twenty one years before he realized oneness or realised *dhyaan*. For those twenty one years his practice was concentration practice. Before you can realize *dhyana*, concentration practice builds and builds the energy for doing that.

Concentration is needed for every art and school in life, whether it is playing the piano, playing the violin, the shakuhachi, or poetry writing. Whatever the skill is, we need concentration.

Erich Fromm (1900-1980, USA), the great psychiatrist wrote a beautiful book in the nineteen fifties called "The Art of Loving" (1956) where he made out that love is a practice and that the main thing we needed to practice in love is concentration. Therefore practices like Zen were incredibly important for loving. It was a best selling book where he linked the two things together — the art of concentration and the art of loving.

Somehow in our modern era that linkage has been lost. People see love in the movies or the magazines as an emotional thing that you tend to wear on your sleeve. It's not a practice, but it is an emotion.

The Third Patriarch says *here feelings are of no avail* in this deeper level. Those feelings, these emotions are of no avail because it's the practice of loving that needs to be worked on. You see couples married for fifty or sixty years, and

you might say that it is a match made in heaven. But they will say no, they had to work at it. We were meant to be together, but we had to work at it.

You meet the top pianist in the world, Vladimir Ashkenazy or any others, and you say, you must have had a lot of talent, and they say, no I had to work at it. You see Roger Federer, perhaps the greatest tennis player the world has ever seen, and say that he has so much talent, then he would say, no I had to work at it.

John Tarrant used to give some brilliant *teishos*, or talks when he came here for *sesshin*. He used to distinguish between people of talent and people of character. Occasionally in his *teishos* he named someone whom he felt was a person of character. He actually used the word person of “effort”. This teacher was a person of talent, that teacher was a person of effort.

Here we are reminded very much of the traditional tale of the Hare and the Tortoise. The Hare has a natural talent for speed. It’s a race and speed is what counts. The hare has tremendous talent for speed: the tortoise has no talent for speed, as we know. But this is not a contest between a slow thing and a fast thing.

It is a contest between talent and effort. What gets there in the end? Effort will always get there in the end. Talent gives way and breaks down and is rather brittle. I often see students at school who think they have got talent and they become lazier. They think they can just coast and glide along. If someone thinks they have got talent then that is a problem because they don’t make the necessary effort.

Oftentimes we see people are either one or the other. But occasionally we see someone like Roger Federer who has tremendous talent but also has a tremendous work ethic, the ability to make the effort. Those types reach the absolute pinnacle. Where you have both talent and effort coming together, the pinnacle is possible. Where you have only got one, generally you can’t reach that height of achievement. One won’t do it. Just the sheer talent alone will go high, but as our teacher said in Japan, it is like an arrow shot into the sky. The strength of it will exhaust itself and it will plummet to earth with nothing to keep it going, no effort to keep it going.

Effort itself gets very high, it goes beyond talent ever more slowly. Whatever talent is there is being used to the max, getting higher and higher. But when you have both coming together there is tremendous possibility of achievement.

We can go through history finding people who had both propensities for tremendous talent but also for a tremendous work ethic.

We can go through history and see the others who had tremendous talent but were too lazy to make the effort. They tend to be the ones who get left in the dust by the side of the road.

We can go through history and see people who had tremendous effort but their talent didn’t match that. Thomas Edison tried for a thousand times to create the electric light bulb. Every time he failed he saw it as an opportunity for learning. A worker apparently came to him and said, we have failed at this 999 time and he said that was 999 learning experiences of how not to do it!

That attitude is one in our teaching that breeds great character. Along with great ability and great effort is great character. Aitken Roshi, not hugely talented, in some ways, to see something quickly, had tremendous character. He was the tortoise — twenty-one years working on Mu. When he did arrive there, the character he built in that journey was incredibly evident to everyone who met him. Tremendous effort and that character got built with a very powerful effect in the end — that tremendous character development.

John Tarrant used to often talk about character development in our practice. A while ago we saw a young lady, Lisa Cairns, who had a realisation and posted it on the Internet. She seemingly had a lot of talent but you couldn't see a lot of character in her. We discussed it here at the time and thought that this wouldn't last longer than the morning dew, because we could see that the practice wasn't there. The bird needs the two wings to fly with.

Some of us realise that rather late in the piece. I also came late to realise that you cannot do without the practice.

Dogen Zenji was very talented. He studied all the philosophies. He mastered Theravada Buddhism at the age of eight or nine. Incredible talent. But his question was: if we are already awakened, why do we have to work on it? That was that lady's point on the Internet. If we are already awakened, then why do we have to make any effort to work at it? Later on after his deep realization in China, the answer to that koan was that we have to absolutely make the effort, and the effort IS enlightenment. It's not that the effort is to get enlightenment but the effort itself is enlightenment. Practice is enlightenment. They are not separate. That was his great realisation.

In our teaching those two things come together, the practice and the enlightenment. The character and the amazing inspiration that comes with enlightenment, they fuse together. Luckily in our school of Sanbo Kyodan (*Fellowship of the Three Treasures*) Yasutani Haku'un Roshi (1885-1973, Japan) brought these two schools together — the school of sitting practice and the school of koan study, enlightenment through koans with *Mu* being the first koan.

In our school we have a beautiful hybrid of both things coming together. It makes it a very powerful school, the Sanbo Kyodan school that Aitken Roshi and the Sydney Zen Centre come out of. The ancient two sides were brought together. You have a choice here of doing *shikantaza* practice of just sitting, or you do the koan practice which tries to move you to immediate realization with *Mu*.

It is an interesting consideration with these things. I feel that when the Third Patriarch speaks there of *single mind one with the Way*, he speaks of practice, to be here and have that single mind with the practice, is an enlightenment in itself. To be here and to surrender to the path of this practice is in itself enlightenment because the *conflicts that lead you far astray* that he talks about, generated by thinking mind, start to dissolve in that single practice. Immediately a lot of thoughts are gone because you have surrendered into this practice.

Sitting here I am surrendering in exactly the same way you are. There is absolutely no difference whatsoever. We are all doing the practice together. What thoughts were there five minutes ago for you or I are now gone. The poor

woman on the Internet who thought she was totally awakened, totally enlightened, if that thought stays there it becomes what is known as the “stink of Zen”. She stinks of enlightenment. I am enlightened! I am enlightened! There is a stench to it and in our practice that has to go. As soon as that happens to people if they have an awakening, you sit through that and let that go as well.

Dogen Zenji came to his teacher in China with his awakening. He said, “Body and mind have dropped away,” and the teacher was excited for him, happy and joyous. Then Dogen Zenji said something to him the next moment that indicated he had let go of that experience immediately. The teacher said, “That’s dropping dropped. You have now dropped the dropping — drop even the thought that you have had an enlightenment.”

Only with a sense of practice can you do that. The poor girl on the Net had no sense of practice whatsoever, so she is stuck in that thought - I am enlightened. That’s all she could think of, that stench of Zen was coming out. She couldn’t drop the dropping because there was no practice there. She was stuck in that thought.

The beauty of our practice is we can drop the dropping, because that is a stench. That is a thought that has to go. Even when we bring everything to the one point, as the Third Patriarch says, then even oneness has to be let go of because it is still a concept. He says *even oneness disappears*.

That can’t happen without a practice. So it is only in the practice that we keep letting go. It doesn’t matter how beautiful the enlightenment, how beautiful the thought, how beautiful the inspiration we have, we come back and sit again and again and let those things go. We are continually letting go whatever is there on the thinking mind level. That is the beauty of the practice — nothing is stale about it at all there is always fresh water that is there. The thought that I am a teacher and you are a student is nonsense. All that goes. That is the first thing that gets flushed away as soon as we sit down. That is just a concept. We sit in our practice and we let all that go because it is all thinking mind, thoughts.

We come back to that fresh water which is our true nature that is always there. That’s what we return to time and time again. It is our birthright, all of us to have that fresh water, always there. It gets lost because of our thinking mind. Even the thought, I am enlightened is still a blockage, that is still a thought. Let it go the next minute, as Dogen Zenji did. That’s dropping dropped.

In the aid of that we have this wonderful sitting practice that was developed first in the Himalaya six thousand years ago. It has come down to us, this wonderful practice of the straight back. It is the best posture for letting thinking mind go, letting the thoughts go.

There is something about this practice where the energy gathers down at the naval point that thinking mind starts to dissipate and let go. We come into this now moment fully, every now moment freshly, and thinking mind is letting go.

That’s the beauty of it. Nothing is stale in it at all.

There is something about sitting with others, a depth about walking the path in a collaborative way. It provides a containment and discipline for the path.

We can sit on our own at home and do our meditation, but there is certainly a power and strength within the group, a connectedness.

The Korean Zen master, Seung Sahn Sunim (1927-2004, Korea) used to call it “together action” where you are dropping your ego to do together action. It is very strong. We are dropping our persona, our face in the practice so we are completely together. That adds a great presence, group presence to it. It is nobody’s possession, just the group presence. Connectedness. There is an old story from Japan, where the teacher spoke about all the squashes on the vine in the garden. All the squashes thought they were all separate, and then one day they realized they were all growing on one vine. This is the sangha practice, together.