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“Zen without bells and whistles.”



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Meditation and Seeing Things as They Are

BY EDWARD WORTZ, PH.D.

The popular concept of “detachment” is of a person who is removed from contact with the world and others, perhaps even cold, unfeeling and disengaged. In Buddhist psychology, however, detachment is seen very differently. Detachment occurs when we look closely at an experience without ornamenting that experience with conceptual structures such as labels, memories, or other activities that shape its outcome or meaning. The experience of self is largely made up of these concepts. In the practice of meditation, we learn that we can be very “present,” very much in contact with our ongoing reality, while still remaining fully grounded within ourselves. The practice of maintaining a vivid sensory focus, as in meditation, promotes our thorough investment in the moment. This vivid focus, when free from conceptual overlays such as labeling and self-identification, makes it possible, now and then, to see things as they really are.

The salient features of concentration meditations include:

- 1) sitting still;
- 2) relaxing;
- 3) either closing the eyes or leaving them partially open and unfocused;
- 4) focusing conscious awareness on a selected aspect of ongoing sensory experience;
- 5) returning awareness to the object of concentration as soon as a distraction occurs;
- 6) maintaining alertness throughout the meditation period.

The functional utility of the various features of meditation has not, to my knowledge, been teased apart. However, for me, the most significant activities of this type of meditation are, “detection of distractions” and “returning of awareness to the chosen focal experience.” One might understand that maintaining a focus is practicing letting go of distractions. This “returning of awareness” to the focus of concentration can be seen as attempts to maintain the vividness of the object of concentration while material from a variety of sources outside of the focal awareness (including “repressed material”) compete for attention. I have hypothesized that this emphasis on the “focus of concentration” functions to “discount” the significance of the competing experiences (including memories). This could occur, for example, by making the experience of the breath more vivid than a competing memory. Such “discounting” or “relativization” of the competing experience may, perhaps, result in the diminution of the importance or valence of the emotional, or feeling, elements of an experiential aggregate. These elements and feelings, as well as memories and conceptual structures, are normally used to mark the significance of an experiential aggregate and provide much of its meaning. Reduction of valence of these elements, I suggest, results in the modification of the conceptual structures of which they form a part.

One of the most useful functions of concentration meditation is to facilitate the development of “field independence,” “detachment” or “ego strength.” This is best illustrated using a “listening meditation” as an example.

Two very important activities occur in this type of meditation. They are “taking the position” of the observer, and the loosening of conceptualizations. To develop these skills the meditator (M) is instructed to listen to sounds



without labeling them, i.e. with “bare attention to listening.” In addition, M is instructed to “observe the arising, duration, and disappearance of the sounds.” Not labeling means refraining from appending a verbal or visual label to the sound. Observing with bare attention eventually becomes a position that M can take with regard to any or all experience.

The subjective consequence of these actions is to emphasize a subject/object dichotomy. Maintaining focal contact with sounds initially separates M “or serves to detach M” from sounds. It is clear that emphasizing “crisp” non-labeled contact results in detachment. This is in contradistinction with the popular concept of detachment as loss of contact. Consequently, we might say that in eastern psychology “detachment” is congruent to the concepts of “field independence” or “ego strength” in western psychology. The ensuing consequences that develop from this practice may seem surprising. As the practice of maintaining contact continues, a subject/object figure ground reversal may suddenly take place. In the case of listening meditations M may “become the sound.” Or “M” may “vanish” as “self/other” cease to be constructed.

Here are three ways that I like to conceptualize about this experience.

1. This event may be similar to that of the figure/ground reversal commonly observed in visual perception. In our example, heightening the boundary definition (and/or contrast between figure and ground) facilitates the figure/ground reversal. One could suggest that some “enlightenment” experiences may be this type of event. Self/no-self reversal may be representative of the experiences that Engler was referring to with his statement, “Put very simply you have to be somebody before you can become nobody.” (Engler, 1984, p.31)

2. A second conceptual point of view can be taken from the combined perspectives provided by both Gestalt therapy and the phenomenology of Michael Polanyi.* Gestalt therapy models provide us with the concept of the contact boundary. The contact boundary is conceived as the dynamic point of awareness between self and other. We can utilize a tactile sensation, such as the point of contact between our finger and a desk, as an example. If you run your finger along the edge of some object, such as the desk, you will experience both the desk and your finger. If you examine your experience closely, you can easily observe that there is actually only one experience, not two. Yet this one experience is magically split into desk and finger as we reflexively include our conceptual structures of the world (finger and desk), and “self and other” in our formation of the experience. The consequence of maintaining focus at the contact boundary, with a sense of inquiry about the experience of contact, may promote the process of “indwelling” of the contact boundary. Indwelling (Polanyi) in this case results in the formation of a new Gestalt as the awareness of the contact boundary itself is incorporated into the experience as a “particular,” thus ceasing to be a separate experience, and vanishes.

3. A third idea is simply that “self and other” and similar distinctions are learned concepts. Consequently, the loss of that dichotomy may occur by simply seeing things without doing the compulsive conceptual aggregate formation normally used to construct an experience such as the experience of self.

With complete investment in an experience—without inclusion of the representational or conceptual structures—we may occasionally “see things as they are.” Saying it somewhat differently, “seeing things as they are” results from complete investment of ourselves in an experience without excessive conceptual ornamentation. Another way of saying this is “detachment is thorough investment of awareness without concern for the outcome;” allowing an experience to have its own life without too much personal interference. 🌸

**Polanyi, Michael: The Tacit Dimension*



Baby Gazing

BY ED WORTZ

I'm not at all sure when I learned about "baby gazing." I think I was attending a meeting of the Transpersonal Psychology Association taking place at Asilomar, California in the early 70's. I wish that I could make a source attribution but I can't.

Here's how to get started with baby gazing:

1. Lie on a bed facing your significant other - heads on pillows - faces approximately 4-5 inches apart.
2. Look in your partner's eyes and at their face.
3. Instead of focusing on the front of your partner's face—focus your eyes at about the plane of the back of their head.
4. So you are seeing your partner's face, but with your point of focus beyond the front plane of their face.
5. This effectively allows your partner into your personal space - just open and let them in. You should experience an especially "open and loving feeling" and a big smile.
6. The same can be done with two people sitting facing each other or by anyone gazing at a baby.

If you attempt to do this exercise with someone with whom you are not comfortable, you are likely to have an amazingly invasive and aversive experience. ❀

Bodhidharma sat on a wall facing the ocean at Santa Monica. Behind him, roller bladers breezed quickly past. In front of him, nearly naked people basked in the sun and splashed in the waves.

A disciple came to him and said, "Oh Bodhidharma, is this not the world of samsara? How do we rise above all this?"

Bodhidharma answered, "Everything is perfect, just as it is."

Three Foundations

BY ED WORTZ

In describing the process of meditation, an analogy is often made of a cat waiting patiently at a mouse hole. The cat is described as relaxed, still, alert, and continuously ready for the possible appearance of the mouse.

The practice of meditation is built on the three mutually supportive foundations of stillness, alertness and relaxation.

A good way to start a meditation period is to begin by adjusting our sitting posture to accomplish these three



goals. We want to sit so that we can become as still (physically and internally) as we are willing to become, release any tension that we may find, and support an elevated level of arousal.

Stillness is an important condition that allows us to:

- a. detect novel and subtle events and changes in consciousness;
- b. reduce the amount of stimuli coming from body and sense organs;
- c. reduce reactivity;
- d. support alertness;
- e. facilitate the observer position;
- f. promote an experience of profundity.

Continuous relaxation wipes away physical tension as it arises. This is important in that tension tends to significantly mask and prevent other events from coming to our conscious awareness. So relaxing allows:

- a. releasing tension;
- b. direct practice of the process of "letting go;"
- c. reduction of general "experiential noise level;"
- d. support of stillness.

Alertness or arousal facilitates our focus on the meditation at hand, provides the requisite energy for the activity of meditation, and supports:

- a. engagement with practice (staying on task);
- b. detection of changing elements in awareness;
- c. detection of fine grain (subtle) changes;
- d. avoidance of sleep or sluggishness that may be promoted by relaxation and stillness.

Like the three legs of a stool, the three foundation activities function to maintain a balanced practice from which we can come to other meditation practices. For example, stillness and relaxation could, without the antidote of alertness, result in sleepiness or torpor, while alertness and stillness can result in tension if not countered by relaxation. Similarly, alertness and relaxation need to be oriented and grounded by stillness.

The three foundation activities can, themselves, be practiced as a meditation. The simultaneous monitoring of relaxation, stillness and alertness while arousing ourselves when alertness slips, and keeping the body still, hones the skills necessary for all meditation. This allowing of increasing stillness, while detecting and releasing tension, together with the continuous release of distractions, can be practiced until they become assimilated, automatic and done without any special attention. This practice, then, naturally becomes "Shikentaza" or just sitting. 🌸



The Fist

BY ED WORTZ

I've been asked: what is this "fist" stuff all about? The context for the question comes from some of our meditation sessions when I have occasionally held up my hand, near the side of my face, close to the ear, curled the fingers inward and commented to everyone present "This is your fist." What's going on here? Am I disowning a part of my anatomy or seemingly giving it away to others? Can I actually deny the existence of part of my anatomy?

Additionally, now and then, I will actually make "a fist," then open my hand and ask "where did the fist go?"

What's going on here? Is this an illustration of one principle or more? What is it? What are they? 🌸

Where's Waldo?

BY ELIZABETH LATSHAW

I was asked to submit a draft of an article and I was (very nicely) told my ideas were "unclear" which they probably were. My thoughts may have been clear to me but not to another. _____. With much patience and a considerable amount of goading, I decided to revise. However, in talking to that person about the article, I realized my ideas were unclear because I wanted the reader to see and understand with me, not tell them, so I came up with a new structure - a stream of consciousness version of "Where's Waldo."

You've seen the blank spaces: _____.

To play along, fill it in with a word or concept from the list below or perhaps some not on the list . . . and you can use more than one idea . . . as few things are absolute and many are interdependent. _____.

Here's the list: *masked aggression, relative reality versus absolute reality, true mindfulness, impermanence, expectation will most often lead to dissatisfaction, true understanding, deluding passions, a meditative mind, discernment, insecurity that leads to proselytization, desire generates thought, interdependence, cause and effect, the need for affirmation, clinging, projection, enlightenment, one-mindedness.*

The problem is that, for me, a lot of articles, by their nature, tell you something. I like ideas that challenge me and my perceptions and make me think. I don't like ideas laid out for me nor do I think they are particularly useful. I like to hear about or read about things I don't know (which are considerable) and which I may not understand at first. I try to figure them out and mull them over. I try them on and possibly accept them . . . for a while _____. Ideas that I may not, upon first reading, understand nor see all the subtle shades of meaning. Ideas that I may find boring or get distracted from but ultimately I see them and understand them.

In that understanding, I am now able to see what I was not, at first, able to grasp and in grasping widening my point of view - my way of seeing _____.

I am a slightly reluctant contributor as I am of two minds, no, actually more . . . about Buddhist writings in general.

Can they be truly helpful? They can be inspiring but to what end?

A spiritual piece of writing can be the new "thing" someone clings to and spouts about to the nearest person. _____. How many of us have read a spiritual book and never told anyone they were reading it or not told some ideas from it?

Once the impassioned reader shares his or her take on the book, the listener may . . .



- a) be caught up in the zealotry - concurring passionately that they both “know” _____.
- b) Be dumfounded, numbed or disinterested by the verbiage and just bovinely blink.
- c) Or discuss a different view point.

However, very few people actually discuss open-mindedly—most know, in their hearts, what they think and so they defend that position. That position, being opposite, can sometimes lead to . . . Well, who said the best defense is a good offense? We probably all have heard a war of words . . . _____.

A few lucky ones have practiced listening, with an open mind and an open heart, knowing they can learn something from everyone and enjoy quietly discussing some ideas – kicking them around, and holding them up to scrutiny to see if they truly are “great” and if they truly understand the idea at all . . . or think it’s not anything at all . . .

The other thing that has occurred to me is that often, well, reading and doing can be two different things. You can read about swimming and still not know how to swim . . .

The truth is I read less and practice more but I like reading “Buddhist” writing. It’s a lot more interesting than reading say “People” Magazine—it has the possibility of being productive, it can be comforting and make you laugh. There was a time when I read a lot. The problem was that I was pushing my spirituality into an intellectual state.

I had a teacher who would take me to the Bodhi Tree for two years. I loved him . . . I still do but, after a while, I realized I could keep on reading and I might still be drowning and not see or feel the water. I’d be really well read and could stand up well in any Buddhist quiz. I wasn’t seeing or being but I had a lot of ideas. In the store, he would stack the books onto the pile in my arms and when he wasn’t looking I’d stash them . . . in a waiting shelf. I felt responsible (which I was) for the extra work of the staff. Eventually, he stopped training priests and now works teaching English (out of textbooks) at a Navajo school.

So now I don’t read as much and I have not read all the sutras – no, let me be honest, I haven’t even gotten through the tip of the iceberg. I’ve read the “Big Three” – The Diamond, the Heart and the Lotus, but please don’t ask me to quote them although I can quote the Heart Sutra and I’ve given classes on it . . . But after reading some other sutras, I realize they really are only a commentary on some realization experience based on the Buddhist Path—the Middle Way. However, the Buddha very clearly based the Buddhist Path—the Middle Way—on the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Path. So I am focusing on understanding and practicing the Eight-Fold Path and all its lessons which are so many I can’t type enough lines. _____. The rest of it, sutras, articles etc., is a personal commentary. Of course now that I think of it, I have a great desire to stop writing this article and go upstairs and read a sutra. _____.

However, I have learned a very valuable learning experience about the act of reading Buddhist writing and one-mindedness.

I was told by a Zen master that when I read what I avoided, didn’t “like” or found “boring,” that was what I still needed to learn, understand or at least appreciate its point of view. So if my attention wanders or, without knowing it, I quickly skim past a section, that is usually the section I don’t understand and/or need. The subconscious aversion causes a “drop-out” - much like in life and you’re not there – paying attention – your mind goes somewhere else. That is not only a lesson in reading but also just one of the lessons of meditation – the drop-out. I call it that—“drop-out” because it reminds me of a drop-out in reception. If your mind is not there . . . where are you? If your mind is elsewhere, can you be there?

So reading can teach you about being aware but so can talking. People talk about “being in the present,” or “living in the now” which teaches me to practice patience and understanding. The moment they open their



mouth and start talking about "it" I know they're not it . . . just being . . . they're talking about being and that's not the same thing. When you talk about "it" you're not "it," you're once removed. When we talk about being something we are artificially manipulating reality by "being purposeful" – it is neither natural nor just being but being influenced by an intellectual decision. They are talking about it rather than just being with a person, a dog

_____.

The truth is we all have lost our awareness and we've just got to get back in the habit of our own natural way of being. So first, you have to be aware when you are not there (when your mind goes elsewhere) so you can practice coming back. So here's my analogy to show how a "learning experience can be transformed into a natural state". _____.

It's like driving a car. You don't think and say out loud, "I am putting the key in the ignition. I am now turning the key in the ignition" Well, if you do, just tell a close confidant. But seriously, when we learn to drive we do think "okay now I'm going to make a left turn, slow down, and look for cars . . ." but after a while we drive . . . we just make a left turn. You see?

Beyond left turns - just being has a lot of great benefits. You can experience reality unfiltered - embrace life unencumbered and not have it dulled in any way – that is the happiest and most fulfilling way of being. I give to my students the analogy of when you meet someone for dinner. If during the dinner, you can see their mind is wandering – they're thinking about something else, watching the clock or what they have to do later, it's boring, tense and limiting – for both and both miss out on being together. Of course, you can also have someone who had something "bad" happen to them that day and they meet you and start on what happened – bringing their anger, frustration, fear, tension, whatever and the event with them to the dinner. It's like having dinner with a train wreck. Don't get me wrong, I like talking but I have one human friend – and two dog friends - who I like just being with. I can sit and be with them – occasionally talking but I enjoy the feeling of being with them. In Japanese there is a word - "honobono" – it means a warm feeling in the heart. Talking can be beneficial. However we often are in the habit of talking as we have learned to equate silence with boredom, non-communication, hostility or whatever.

These examples may seem pedantic but often we talk and intellectualize "being there" into grand abstractions rather than grounding them in reality. I'm still working on being there mind to mind or whatever.

That's why I have a question in my mind about writing this article . . . is it useful? Only the reader can tell. I think it's taking up my time when I could be doing something else although it has helped conjure up some lost ideas. But I know that reading or talking about it . . . is not "it." The question is can it inspire us in our day-to-day moments?

Any philosophy can be difficult to grasp the principles, to learn something and to truly understand it – to have it widen your mind and way of seeing. However, in Buddhism, it is not only having an open mind and open heart but seeing clearly so you can incorporate it into your daily life – into every breath you take - not to have it remain an ideas but to be it.

In Zen, there is the idea of being as clear as a glass of water – free from suffering, ignorance and able to see and be clear.

I have learned that from my own past and with my own limited understanding, I glean from a book some ideas. However, what I glean is already filtered by my obscured mind. It's like driving a car with mud on the windshield. I may not see my own anger, fear, insecurity or whatever which influences not only how I see the world but what I read, write, do or say and how that interacts on the world. To be "clear" like the glass of water is to be in but still be clear—unencumbered—that is why I find it useful to pick up a book I "know" and read and re-read again after some time . . . it is amazing how the ideas can seem different and I highly recommend re-



reading to see how we affect and don't affect the world in our inter-connectedness.

Let me give you a really simple example I used to give my meditation class at the temple. One day I gave a quarter to a homeless man who smiled beatifically and gave me a "God bless you" and I blessed him back. Another time, I gave another homeless person a quarter and he responded, "Fuck you. Only a god-damned quarter?" Now the quarter is the same but it is how they view the quarter which colors it and possibly my own reaction which was to be startled, laugh and then hurry off. I was startled by his anger, laughed because I thought how funny he was that he was given a quarter (he needed money) but he was unhappy with the gift _____ and so I hurried off because I didn't want to be around him.

The point is that the way those two people looked at the quarter, at me, and at the world was totally different and how they could influence the world by those they came into contact with . . . it was "night and day."

So what, if any use, was this article? This may sound weird but I didn't have any desire to write an article so I didn't have any ideas. I was asked to write about being a priest but that didn't really interest me as I just am. It's not that I don't have ideas about other ideas but I don't have the desire to share them one way. I like raising questions more than giving answers (as I see them). I do ask people a lot of questions as I want to hear what they think and maybe I can learn something and get a deeper understanding. Right now, I'm really working on negative auto suggestion and how people unknowingly affect others with their words or negative projections. Also how people spend a lot of time judging others but their judgment is skewed by their own way of seeing that person which reflects more themselves. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Also. How your own point of view can blind you to how you affect others . . . How it is really not necessary to care about how others see you because do they really see you clearly? Or just project onto you the way in which they see? How people abstract compassion, enlightenment, suffering etc. without realizing that through practicing the Eightfold Path day by day they will see more clearly and be free of suffering and ignorance – it's not some goal outside of yourself or some impossible concept that is enlightenment.

But talking about one-mindedness, enlightenment, etc., reminds me of a quote:

"He who tastes knows. But he who only thinks he tastes will not leave anyone alone."

Or as I say . . . how do you describe chocolate to someone who has never tasted it? Okay, it's bitter, sweet . . . but so is sugar. How can you let someone know what chocolate is like if they've never tasted it?

Now, the article I was asked to write was what it is like to be a priest as it was so "different" and "frankly pretty weird, Elizabeth." The thing is I don't see it as weird as I said I just am a priest. It doesn't seem weird to me and how could I satisfy someone who wanted to read about the "weirdness." I know I am not the person who can write that article.

However, after I wrote the first draft I was given a very long list of questions and so I will answer them one at a time and in each of them there is definitely something I learned - hidden in the actions, the words, and the people and the questions themselves.

As far as being a priest, well, I never really thought about being one - I just did. No, seriously . . . you see I was a closet Buddhist.

I like the way that looks . . . yup me, you see . . . so many people think Buddhism is so cool; however when you ask, "What is Buddhism?" very few people can give you an answer. People, on the whole, can answer about Judaism, Christianity and Islam but Buddhism remains a mystery, but it's "cool."

Also the hip quotient bothered me. I don't need to be hip. I've done hip and to be on the cutting edge, for me, meant a lot of fun but a lot of praying that I can fall asleep before dawn breaks so I can go to sleep. Dawn was, to steal a phrase, "like God's flashlight." I've done cool and I don't care if I am cool or not.



I started out by studying Buddhism. I was a grad student and I wanted more spirituality back in my life. I had always been "spiritual" but I wanted to explore what was out there . . . I knew a lot about Christianity, a little about Judaism, Hinduism and Islam but really nothing beyond that Buddhism had something to do with the Buddha.

That was it and so I decided to learn and study it not to become something or change – just a scholarly approach. I studied and tried it out to see if it had any merit. I liked the concepts and felt it was pragmatic and very gradually I noticed subtle changes in me for the better. But if you asked me even ten years ago if I would be here, today, a Zen and Pure Land priest and Dharma teacher – I would just laugh . . . Not so long ago, Gesshin, a Zen master and Man Giac's disciple, sat me down for a talk on her deathbed. One thing she told me was that she had never just decided to become a Zen priest . . . it just gradually happened . . .

Q. Have you felt a deepening of a commitment since you became a priest?

I have not felt a deepening of a commitment since I became a priest. I became a priest because I had deepened my commitment. I wanted to learn more and the way to do that is through training as a priest. I was a closet Buddhist and for years told no one.

Once I had deepened my commitment and stood up to be counted as a Buddhist I took the precepts. Since I "became" Buddhist I deepened my commitment and continued studying. Then I wanted to further deepen my understanding which is most beneficial through training as a priest. So I became a priest and that really is the best way as you draw on thousands of years of knowledge passed on from Master to Master . . . who in Asia come to the temple as young as six or nine and continue on until they die and on and on . . .

Q. If, like many of us, you experience varying degrees of commitment, does your position as a priest make it harder or easier?

I have never wavered in my commitment to Buddhism. I believe that following the Eight-fold Path works and I try my best. If others want to try, I hope it will help them, if not, whatever works for them.

I do, however, have great doubt, not about being a priest as I could never imagine "disrobing." But sometimes I really chafe at all the time and effort I have put in and I wonder why? For years I faced a blank wall without instruction and at times I have thought it was useless and boring. Also I can get really lazy and I like being on my own, and want to hang out with my dogs, meditate on my own and not be available for others.

Sometimes, I become disillusioned by other priest or nuns. But all that usually passes, without effort, and I realize it's just part of life – like a wave. You have to have both sides. I mean, to doubt is healthy. I don't want someone to stuff my head with ideas. To understand them it is necessary to really see if the ideas are valid, truly useful, mull them over, question and accept them or not and perhaps accept and understand them later . . . or not. To have an open mind is essential. You cannot have "faith" without "doubt" or "good" without "bad." They are just labels, so they are transitory in nature and impermanent and pass. But I have never doubted the Eight-Fold Path, only how Buddhism is practiced in the 21st century.

Q. What are your goals, in terms of your continuing growth as a priest?

I wish to continue my training so I can deepen my understanding so I can see clearly, be aware, and have a core unshakable happiness that frees me from getting caught up in transitory illusions of "suffering," so I can truly be able to help others. I also want to continue my training so I can better help others with meditation.

Q. Any insecurities or doubts about being a priest?

Hmm, not as a priest but I also took, over the last two years, the Bodhisattva vows, received lineage transmission recognizing me as the 45th generation of the Lam Te (Vietnamese Rinzai) tradition and also the Dharma Mind Seal - a mind to mind transmission recognizing me as a Great Zen master... I think they've picked the wrong



person which means that perhaps they see me in a different way than I see myself which means that I don't see myself clearly and therefore the world so I know they've picked the wrong person. However, that "knowing" points to my own misguided thinking about flawlessness and perfection. As my teacher saw me and chuckled one day, "I thought Great Zen Masters did not have any problems."

Q. What are the duties of a priest?

To deepen your understanding, to try not to harm others, and to try to help others. I also get to marry and bury and can do Buddhist services, blessings, chanting etc. and am trained in my meditation so I am able to teach meditation.

Q. How is it different from being a lay practitioner?

I can't answer that. Until you are a priest you don't know, you can't know. It's a totally different experience - one that I had no idea about and am continually surprised by. That reminded me about "know and don't know," a very valuable lesson for me . . . That is enough questions, for now, as there are still a lot more which I will try to answer sometime soon. 🌸

No Fixed Way to Be

BY ERIC HANSEN

This is an appreciation of a teaching. It made sense the first time I heard Ed say it, fourteen years ago; since then, its scope and relevance have only grown, continuing to reveal themselves. For me, it started as a teaching about judgment; it became a guide into the workings of karma; and it remains a vital perceptual tool that helps me navigate those areas in life that the Buddhist precepts don't quite reach. This is the teaching:

There is no fixed way to be – but there are consequences.

No fixed way to be. Could this be true? That would mean that all judgments of ourselves and others have no objective truth; they're merely human constructs, conceptual thinking. It would mean there's no place in the universe that judgments reside, except in human heads. It's something we learned to do, which means it can be unlearned.

I sometimes think of my Zen practice as a process of de-hypnosis, reversing the developmentally necessary but ultimately crippling process of turning children into good citizens. It's a process (I recall from college) called "socialization," and until fourteen years ago, I was only aware of it in an academic way. I had never seen how it pertained to me personally, intimately. Being a good citizen, a good boy, I just assumed it was normal to always sense a moral intelligence staring over my shoulder, watching me, judging me – if not God, then some vestige of my parents. Like all good people, I knew that there are right ways and wrong ways to be, think, feel, act, speak, look, and so on. Sometimes I stacked up, sometimes I didn't, but the underlying process of judgment remained unexamined and unquestioned. It felt valid. It felt very real. Thus, I was truly surprised – I woke up a little – the first time I heard Ed say, "There's no fixed way to be."

The opportunities to judge are as numberless as sentient beings, if for no other reason than the illusion that the problem is "out there," with the others, or "in here," in some unmet ideal for ourselves, when in reality it is nowhere, just a habit of our minds. Still, it's true that the world seems to give us plenty of fodder. People are always talking too loud, drinking too much, driving too poorly, choosing mates that we wouldn't, gossiping, malingering, bullying, whining . . . and these are the good people, our friends and family, us. No one is beyond reproach. Really—no one is beyond reproach, because it's not nearly as personal as it seems. It's just



machinery that runs, finding faults to justify its existence. It can find them anywhere, in anyone.

Judgments might feel deceptively real, based on solid observations, reinforced by our body's clenching and tensing, but what are they really? What's the process? Personally, I find that it frequently involves comparing something that I don't like about myself or others to some imagined "ideal," represented in highly contingent, fragmentary thought-images, then validated by bodily tensing. Seen like this, it becomes clear how profoundly judgments are rooted in conceptual thinking; i.e. ignorance. Against this ignorance, this hypnosis, learned in childhood, reinforced daily by a culture addicted to comparisons, I have set this teaching: There is no fixed way to be. It's simple to use. I just remind myself, every time I catch myself judging myself or others, that there's no fixed way. The effect has been that, over time, my relationship to my judgments has changed. I find them harder and harder to believe.

Of course, this invites some reasonable questions: If there's no fixed way to be, does that mean that everything is permitted? Do we risk a Zen-sanctioned nightmare where even killing and stealing are allowed, because it's all okay? What about God? What about Karma? Well, actually, if you believe in a judging god or universe, or conceive of "karma" as a kind of cosmic parent which tracks our good deeds and missteps from one lifetime to the next, waiting for the perfect moment to mete out proportionate punishments and rewards, then you probably disagree that judgment is just a human creation. What's more, to be perfectly honest, I really don't know the answers to the above questions. One of the things that initially attracted me to Zen was when Ed told me, "Don't take my word for it. Check these things out for yourself." Or, as the Buddha said, "Be a lamp unto yourselves." This works for me.

I prefer to base my beliefs on things I've observed for myself. And there is one truth which I have observed directly and irrefutably, first hand: there are consequences. That is the indispensable second part of this teaching.

My understanding of Buddhist precepts is not that they are laws, disobedience of which is punished by a wrathful god or universe. They are guidelines for life, based on deep insight into how things work. It is not necessary to fear punishment in order to desire the greater good. We only need to pay attention.

If we pay attention, we will see that our words and actions impact others, just as their words and actions impact us. Paying closer attention, we might observe how our actions have consequences that extend even beyond our immediate circle, rippling out into the world. And, if we pay even closer attention, we can perceive how all beings are interconnected, existing within us. There are no consequences that we are separate from; they are all connected to us. Thus, based simply on the act of observation, we can see how a desire to treat others, ourselves and the world with kindness naturally flows. There is no fixed way to be, but there are consequences. That's why codes of ethics and standards of behaviors evolved: not because the universe demanded them, but because experience revealed that they lead to more orderly and productive societies.

Over the years, as I have used this teaching, my sense of what "karma" is has changed. It seems that consequences flow naturally from actions, without any need or intermediation of judgment. It's not about punishment and rewards; it's not even about "merit." It's just what is. The effect has been that my world has become less superstitious. Years ago, hearing the phrase, "We create our own reality," I'd respond with dark and vague intimations of vast, untapped supernatural powers that might somehow change the universe. More prosaically, being a control freak, I have often operated under the assumption that my thoughts and feelings alone are enough to prevent or facilitate events (also known as worry, anxiety and hope). Now I see that, no, that's not actually how things work, but still my choices, perceptions, and actions – plus those of everyone else – have most certainly done much to shape my present. At this moment, I stand at the nexus of past choices and



future consequences, even if many of them are unknown, disappearing quickly (in the past and the future) into the realm of the “don’t know mind.” No point in judgment; there never was a fixed way.

I recall once referring to karma as a “law,” and Ed replying, “Karma is not a ‘law,’ it’s not a ‘thing.’ *It’s just a concept.*” That’s it; nothing really to even believe in, just something to help us observe.

What about the idea of karmic consequences carried over from one life to the next? Well, although I’m quite open to the idea of reincarnation, I have never once observed someone bopped over the head or given a million dollars because of something they did in a previous life. It might happen all the time, but I’ve never perceived it. I can see the appeal of this idea; it’s comforting; it would help to make sense of the world. But it’s beyond my present powers of observation.

If, as I said above, the Buddhist precepts are a prescription for a happy life, based on how things work, then this teaching is my pocket version, carried with me everywhere, consulted many times a day. I even (especially) find it useful in navigating all the gray areas in life where the precepts don’t quite seem to reach. For every morally charged, life and death decision that we have to make, there are thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of smaller, less consequential decisions. Like: should I lie to my boss about my absence? Is it right to make my new girlfriend (or boyfriend) go to the party where my ex is going to be? Do I need to get my kid the new Nintendo system? Who should come first, my parents or my wife? Should I take the time to snip the plastic rings of the six pack container so little creatures won’t get stuck in them? With questions like these, I find myself searching for some principle, some guideline for the “right” answer. In the absence of clear answers or god-given rules, I rely on this: there’s no fixed way, but there are consequences. After that . . . well, I give it my best shot and see what happens. 🌸

*Bodhidharma sat facing the wall,
Old Huang Po had a great fall,
without the help of horses or even king’s men,
they found themselves without beginning or end.*

NO SELF- NO MIND- THE HEADLESS WAY- WALKING ON- PURE ADVAITA AND OTHER STUFF

No Choice

BY JOHN NELSON

Things are breaking up. This is just a wave in consciousness. It will change, but here is where “I-not I” am.

I have spent most of my adult life fooling around with “this stuff” as I know you have. Your fooling around has also included taking on the role of therapist, advising people how they can relieve suffering in the practical relative world. This is very good. Many of your teachings were helpful on that level. I have been interested in both psychology and philosophy for a long time. However, I have more and more been concerned with “the stuff” above those levels using Wilbur’s concepts. I am not currently much interested in self-improvement.

I have considered myself a Buddhist for a long time. However, my practice was weak and did not really involve



sitting. I just agreed with its major premises and I felt better, sometimes even blissful, after reading the sutras or about the sutras. The ego, self, and suffering always decreased after spending time with the Buddha. I never considered myself a Zen Buddhist. The self-power of Zen seems to produce very few enlightened beings. Suzuki-roshi said he believed there were only six enlightened monks in all of Japan.

I am coming to believe that there is a pure enlightenment under most religious and some philosophical systems. The key is to strip the myths, beliefs and cultural baggage from the core. Although I do not believe in the Christian God, I do believe in the Christian Godhead of Meister Eckart, St John of the Cross, and the author of the Cloud of Unknowing. Although I don't believe in the numerous Hindu Gods I do believe in the pure bliss of True Being. Although I don't believe in most of the Tibetan mythology, the Pure Land mythology, or the military structure of Japanese Zen training, I do believe in nothingness and no self. I believe in consciousness and presence. I believe in grace and bliss. I believe in no choice. I believe the universe is ultimately friendly. (Sometimes that is really a hard one.) I believe I don't have to do anything but let go and pay attention.

I have recently been led to both eastern and western practitioners of Advaita. This teaching confirms what I think I have always felt. The modern Source of the teaching appears in the form of Sri Ramana Maharshi and his teaching of self-enquiry or Pure Advaita. He repeatedly called for one to ask who am I. Attention is turned inward to the source of awareness. As has been stated, The Maharshi's teaching of "Self-enquiry" (Pure Advaita) is simplicity itself, requiring no outward formalities, no outer change of life, only a simple change in "point of view" and a sustained effort on the part of the seeker. The goal is no heaven after death or a faraway ideal, but rather the removal of the ignorance that prevents us from knowing that we are eternally one with our Source, the Supreme Self, or God. It is an experience than can be had NOW! All that is required is a sincere effort, which earns us the necessary grace. Many Indian masters such as Ramesh Balsekar continue Advaita practice. Some of the meditations expressed are:

Enlightenment is total emptiness of mind. There is nothing you can do to get it. Any effort you make can only be an obstruction to it.

Seeing truly is not merely a change in the direction of seeing, but a change in its very center, in which the seer himself disappears.

The universe is uncaused, like a net of jewels in which each is only a reflection of all the others in a fantastic interrelated harmony without end.

Another Advaita master was Nisargadatta.

A quiet mind is all you need. All else will happen rightly, once your mind is quiet. As the sun on rising makes the world active, so does self-awareness affect changes in the mind. In the light of calm and steady self-awareness, inner energies wake up and work miracles without any effort on your part. (311)

When you demand nothing of the world, nor of God, when you want nothing, seek nothing, expect nothing, then the Supreme State will come to you uninvited and unexpected. (195)

"There is nothing to practice. To know yourself, be yourself. To be yourself, stop imagining yourself to be this or that. Just be. Let your true nature emerge. Don't disturb your mind with seeking."

I think Douglas Harding's Headless Way is Advaita until he attaches Zen to it, and the works of Tony Parson and Steve Harrison are pure Advaita. I really believe I have no choice and I have used this as my email address for sometime. I relate part of this to Krishnmurti and his choiceless awareness.

There are numerous Buddhist teachers I value. I also highly value the Stoics and philosophers like Schopenhauer



and Spinoza. But what I really value is presence, stillness, the light and consciousness itself. I like walking the best and find it interesting that both Harding and Parsons had their enlightenment experience while walking, In fact, the headless way almost only works for me while walking. I remember Christmas Humphries reciting the advice - Walk On. I also value the Friends who value stillness and the light.

I remember the first time I came to see you in Santa Monica this last year. I wanted something from you, even though I didn't know what. After I left I realized I didn't need or want anything from you but I wanted to come on Wednesday nights to be your friend and to possibly help. I really do enjoy that time. 🌻

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