

teisho d'Albert Low

A fountain of miracles

(an article by Albert Low )

We mustn't get into the notion that Zen practice is sitting on cushions in a zendo facing the wall and following the breath or working with a koan.

The heart of our practice is perplexity, wonder, care, concern, in the face of our situation. One only has to pick up a newspaper to realize the truth of Shakespeare's words, "what a tangled web these mortals weave." How contradictory our lives are; how full of pettiness and greatness, stupidity and wisdom. One can read in a newspaper that a rocket is about to circle Jupiter and in the same newspaper that scientists have been poring atomic waste into the rivers. There was a story during the Falklands war of a young Argentinean who made a courageous attack on the British fleet and homed in on a destroyer. He was shot down, and no sooner was his plane in the sea than the British were rushing out lifeboats to rescue him, rushing him to the hospital deck where surgeons were desperately trying to save his life. What a tangled web these mortals weave. And we see it in our own lives - we love and hate a person at the same time. We see the awful demand that we make on the world constantly, and yet the tenderness and gentleness that is in our heart.

Also the different ways people live: one sees films about Aborigine people, about Cowboys in the Far West, about Eskimos, about people in the 16th or 17th century, people in what we call the Stone age - all these widely different, but totally self contained ways that human beings have lived. And then we see all the remarkable things that people do - skaters twirling round three or four times in the air, high divers, incredible mathematical formula that can fill up books, marvelous artistry, painting, architecture, incredible creativity.

Things that the medical people can do now. When one looks at things in this way, looks at life and death, suffering, pain, anxiety, one just has to wonder.

To ask what it is all about just doesn't touch it. Its so banal in the face of this fountain of miracles. Our practice is opening ourselves to this. Even this is just one dust mote in a great universe of life.

One can ask, What does it all mean? what is it all about? These words come out of a bewilderment. And to open ourselves more and more to this bewilderment is the practice of Mu, the practice of Who. By following the breath we let go more and more of the things that are obstructing the arousal of this wonder.

We sit in zazen because it helps curb the restlessness that would otherwise overtake us. Anyone who has really wondered in the way I am suggesting knows how restless one becomes, how irritable at some level one becomes. One just can't stay with it. And by sitting in zazen, by having a low center of gravity above all, little by little we can open ourselves to this wonder. It comes also as an urge to create. To be able to sit with this urge to be creative, this creative hunger, this is our practice. Sometimes it comes just as a feeling of love, perhaps loving someone specific, or just love like a light shining. But unless we are well anchored, and unless we have disciplined ourselves in not allowing images, ideas and thoughts to chew up this energy, then we can't hope to open ourselves to any degree.

When we have a straight back it means that to some extent we can let go of the concern about the body. With a straight back and a low center of gravity, it is possible to get to a state where the attention is totally free.

And we come together in sesshin because we can support one another, together we can help one another. The very work that you do makes it easier for me to do my work, and because I do my work, it makes it easier for you to do your work. This is why we are so concerned about the detail of sesshin. Sometimes people might think we are too fussy - we don't like people wearing red socks, for example, - but these details stick out and take us away from the work.

But let us be sure that we understand that Zen practice is not something that we do now and again. That Zen practice and life are not different. We are not engaged in some kind of mystical activity in which we are trying to encourage a mystical state of mind. We can easily get carried away by the exotica of a spiritual practice.

There is something that is so beautiful about the Zen Buddhist tradition, particularly to the Westerner who encounters it for the first time. It is like a drink of cool water on a hot day. There is a bareness, an austerity about it, a clarity about the things the Zen Masters say, there is the sheer beauty of its simplicity, there is a dignity in the posture, and it is so easy for us to put the emphasis on the wrong things. To say this is Zen, this something is Zen, and lose ourselves in the pleasure of wearing a dignified robe and sitting in a perfect lotus posture, forgetting all about the wonder.

You could say that there is work going on in the universe and we are participating in that work. We are not trying to flee reality, because we recognize that reality is the substance of our practice. This is why so often practice presents itself in terms of pain and anguish, even deadness and inertia. Furthermore, we are not working for the personality.

Somebody who has really worked doesn't know how to answer a person who asks, "What are you doing it for?" One is puzzled by this kind of question. It is like asking what good it does when the sun shines, why does the sun shine? As long as we look on ourselves as isolated, separate, something apart from the world or something that is in

the world, naturally this question “what am I doing it for?” can arise. But when we see into the truth that there is no separation between me and the world, that the world and me are one, the world and all that can arise in or outside of the world, all heavens, all hells, are not separate from that which I call me; when we see that, then practice is realizing the truth and why wouldn't one want to realize the truth?

Wonder at its core is non separation It is seeing that which is so ungraspable that at one level one ceases to try to grasp it; when one ceases to try to grasp it, then one is one with it. Everything that we do, no matter what it is, no matter how perverted it might seem to another, is in its own way a search for ones self; everything that one does is religiously motivated, if one looks at religion as the search for wholeness, the search of oneness for oneness. The problem is that so much that we do is misguided and because of this it generates the illusion of separation.

There is a wonderful Christian saying which says If faith, then faith. If you could penetrate that you would go right through to the bottom. If faith, what need of results? What need of changing things, getting things, getting rid of things? If faith, then faith. But so often faith is a bribe.

We say to God, I'll have faith in you, but you must deliver. And when he doesn't deliver, we complain, saying, “I had faith in him so why is all this happening to me? Was my faith not strong enough?” If you have faith in the practice and this faith is that the practice is going to produce something for you, then you are a merchant trafficking in some kind of magical results for which you are prepared to pay what you call faith. But on the other hand, if faith then faith. If one prays to God and that comes out of faith, then nothing else matters.

Whatever you do for the sake of truth will take you to the truth., because it comes out of the truth. Faith is your true nature. It is that knowing which supports everything. Everything that is for you is known, everything that is for you is supported by knowing. When you hear, when you see, touch, - all comes out of knowing. And this pure, unconditioned knowing is what we call faith.

We must be very careful that our practice is not a fidget, that it is not doing something for the sake of doing something, doing something to get rid of the torturous sense of lack, this torturous sense of missing the boat, of missing something essential in life. Whatever one does, if one does it for the sake of finding oneself, will surely bring one to oneself. One could say that greed, undiluted by thought and action, pure concentrated greed, will take you speedily to your goal. Or desire, or lust. But the problem is greed, desire and lust are so often inextricably intermingled with thought and image. When we are asking the question Who am I? there is a yearning, a longing, a hunger. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness. And just to allow that in itself to rise up is the practice. And we sit in meditation in this way in order that little by little we can unglue the great clots of thought that give us the sensation of being.

Nisargadatta said we need to be earnest and honest in our practice. If one is earnest, one then realizes how difficult it is to be earnest, and if one is honest one knows that honesty is almost impossible. There is that saying of St. Paul, the saying of a truly earnest man, "That which I would not, I do; that which I would, that I do not." People say, what is the point of my trying to practice, I can't keep my mind still for two minutes. But the question shows a lack of earnestness. When Paul said "that which I would not, I do; that which I would, that I do not," he wasn't saying, so what is the point of it. It was an expression of his earnestness, his honesty. When one realizes the way one's mind flits and flutters, comes and goes, is full of all kinds of extraneous unnecessary greedy, lustful, angry thoughts, and yet one continues nevertheless, this is earnestness, this is honesty.

How often during our practice do we find ourselves mechanically struggling with a koan, no longer sure what the koan is supposed to be, what we are supposed to be doing with it, how we are supposed to work with it. The practice has almost come to a stop and we are lost in a lunar landscape, hot and dry. We ask ourselves, how can this be of any value whatsoever? We judge things in the way we have always judged things, by what they give us in the way of satisfaction, pleasure, comfort, happiness; what they give us in the way of sustenance for the personality; what we like to call enriching the personality, but what is really making it bloated, inflated.

We come to practice and we start trying to use the same criteria we have used in the past. Most people just pack up. The rate of turn over of people going through this Zen center is horrendous if one looks at it in terms of numbers, size of a center, growth of a center, and so on. Many, many people come to this Centre, every now and then one stays. This one is an earnest one, an honest one. This is not a judgment on the others, it is just a different sets of values. But if one has been bitten by this bug of wonder, by this need to know in a way that the world cannot know, cannot teach, if one is really bitten in this way, then one will travel hundreds of miles to go to sesshin.

There are people who come to awakening at their first sesshin. Some people never even go to a sesshin. There are others who practice for years and years and years. It doesn't matter. Just in the same way that you can't judge success in Zen by numbers, so you can't assess it in terms of speed. When one has committed oneself, that is already success, the rest doesn't matter. When one has said "yes" deeply, the rest doesn't matter. It doesn't matter really if you stop practicing Zen because sooner or later you will start again, or with something else; you will go on being nagged at, there will be a sense of inappropriateness in everything else you do, a sense of wasting time. Once one has said yes, it is like a seed having germinated; it can have a foot thick layer of asphalt over it but it will push its way through. You must have seen this happen.

The practice that is done in spite of the protest of the ego is the real practice. You get a lot of people, particularly when they first start, they are all a buzz - certainly this was true in the sixties, they would sit all day and all night. I used to think my goodness, these people are really putting it out, I don't know how I am going to do anything like that. And then noticed that as they sat there they would look out of the corner of their eye to see if

someone else was there, and if that other person wasn't, then they would start getting restless - if the other person was there, then they would be back at it again. It was self-will, it was contest, it was who was going to do the most, the longest, the hardest.

We are not talking about that kind of self will. We are talking about the will that comes when one has been thoroughly disappointed by everything, but somehow refuses to roll over and die. This is why Hakuin says that practice carried on in the midst of the fire is a hundred thousand times more valuable than practice on the cushions and mat. It is in these moments of deep despair that come in life, a sense that one doesn't know what to do next, if one goes and sits then, this is the real practice. When the real is first encountered it often seems black, dark, and unforgiving. The birth of the real is the death of ego.