

On Practice

(an article by Albert Low)

Insofar as it is indescribable, ungraspable, we cannot understand it with the mind that we use to make judgments, decisions, assessments; the mind we use to relate to the world in a conceptual way. Because we are unable to use this mind, we come to the conclusion that there is no such state beyond existence, beyond experience, beyond what can be grasped. (Even the word state has already betrayed it.) A further problem is that whenever you try to give a description for people, it seems as though, because you are using the language of experience, you are talking about an experience.

The koans "Mu," "Who," "The sound of one hand clapping," all of these are windows on to that which always is. It is not prior to the discriminating mind in terms of time; there is not a condition and then this condition ceases, and the discriminating mind takes over. It is more like when one sees a mountain rising out of the earth, one doesn't take the earth into account; all that one sees is the mountain. In some of the magnificent carvings by Rodin the material that he used from which to carve the figures is left clearly stated. The figures are sometimes left emerging out of the stone. In this way there was no doubt that the figure was made of stone.

Mu is immutable, Mu is pure awareness, Mu is all and yet nothing. Those working on Mu could very likely and very rightly say, "I hear what you say but what you are saying doesn't mean anything to me." And then, if they are truly sincere, they will go on and say, "How can I make it mean something to me?" Regrettably most often they simply say, "What you are saying does not make any sense to me," and walk away, as though they have said the last word about what does and doesn't make sense. But the truly serious person, the person with any degree of humility, says, "What you are saying doesn't make sense; how can I please make it make sense?"

Mu itself is the means, the bridge. The beauty about Mu is that it is the means and it is the end. It is the way. Remember, Joshu asked Nansen, "What is the Way?" This word Way means "the path"; Mu is the path. But there is also the way that you walk the way. How do you walk the way? In what way do you walk the way? Mu is the way of the way. And then there is: "What is at the end of the way?" In Chinese the way is the "Tao". And the Tao, the way, is the end of the way, is the ultimate of the way; is, if you like, the goal of the way. Mu is both the way and the end of the way. And it is the way of walking the way. It is the same with the koan Who am I?. To work with this koan works with the other side of "I am," one must work with that which is before the question arises. What is there before the question Mu? or Who? arises?

While working on Mu, never forget Mu. Forget your own name, forget your own face, but never forget Mu. This doesn't mean that you should have it in the forefront of your consciousness when you are at work.

What you should realize when you are at work is your work is Mu! When you have time outside sesshin, apart from work on the mat, try to explore what that means. Your work is Mu, and the one that does the work is Mu. If you are making a separation, if Mu is this but not that, then it is simply another part of experience. But Mu is the carving and the stone out of which the carving is made. Mu is the experience and that out of which experience arises.

Think of Mu! Use your ordinary intellectual mind to think about it until your intellectual mind breaks under the strain. I don't mean breaks down, but just says, "this is enough, I can't do it. There's nothing I can think of in any way that is going to help here." Prove for yourself that working on the koan Mu requires that you go beyond the conscious discriminating mind. It is said countless times that this is the case, but how many people have really sat down and said, "To hell with this, I'm going to work this one out for myself. I'll think it through", and really given their mind to saying, "Okay, Mu is nothing; now what does that mean, Mu is nothing? Mu is emptiness, what does that mean? Mu is everything, what does that mean? Mu is immutable, what does that mean? He asks me, 'What is the color of Mu?' what does he mean?" Think about it!

And, of course, one doesn't know where to start thinking about it! The mind is numb in connection with this question; "What is "Mu?" But then, have faith. Countless people have broken through this koan. And in breaking through this koan they have demonstrated that this immutability, this peace that surpasses understanding, this love that springs out naturally and constantly, all are revealed by penetrating Mu. Mu is not some new experiment, it is not some "New Age" gimmick. .

One gets to the point where one says, "I don't know what to do," and it is only then that the practice really begins. Up until then one has always had the belief that one knew what to do with this koan. This means that one was still juggling it with the discriminating mind, one was going to pin it down. You see people come into the dokusan room sometimes full of cunning. They've got this thing and they are going to wiggle through it with cunning. And when you say, "No, that is not it," they argue with you

Of course one is going to be disappointed. Every time one recognizes the failure of the discriminating mind to be able to handle this, one is disappointed. This discriminating mind is a most marvelous toy. You think computers are good toys? We are addicted to it, we love it. And there is no reason why we should throw it away, but we must get it into its place. It should be the servant, but, unfortunately, it has become the master.

We have to put up with all disappointments and continue on, until suddenly the mind turns around. In the Lankavatara Sutra, this is called Paravritti. The sutra talks about the turnabout that we call kensho. The turnabout in the manas, in the heart, the very depths of the mind itself, and the fundamental contradiction is loosened. Suddenly the mind turns around, away from the word towards the reality beyond the word.

Many people, when they have read half a page of Zen, start talking about how wicked words are. Any kind of thought you put in, they rush up to you and say, "But you

shouldn't be thinking; if you are practicing Zen, how can you possibly think, how can you possibly use words, how can you possibly define terms?" The English philosopher Locke said, "Words are money for fools, but counters for the wise." It is said that Buddha used words as words. That is, he used words as counters. The words God, Christ, Buddha, me, I and you; these are all words! But, at the same time, words are containers. They contain. What is important is what they contain. A Master said, "When you know what a word contains, then you can throw the word away."

Now Mu contains everything. How is it possible that Mu can contain everything? What does that mean: "Mu contains everything"? Nothing is outside Mu. There is just Mu. Only Mu. Now what does that mean? Be puzzled, be concerned. At one level, Mu is just a nonsense syllable, and there is no reason why it should not also be a nonsense syllable as well as containing everything. Don't get trapped into some mystical view of Mu. It isn't mystical at all, it is right before your face. Right before your face. Repeated attempts to go beyond the word is meditation; this is Zazen.

Mu means Buddha-nature, one's true-self, one's own-self. What does Buddha-nature mean? What does true-self, own-self mean? Hakuin says, "Our true-self is no-self." When we are asking "Who?" what does it mean, "our true-self is no-self"? The I is No-I. Muga in Japanese. Mu, we know about, and ga means I: No-I. When you are asking "Who am I?" who is this no-I? "No one walks along this path this autumn evening." Who is this no-one? It is not simply that if you say it enough times it will be enough. It needs that spark of intelligence.

Meister Eckhart quoted an ancient philosopher who said, "I am aware of something that sparkles in my intelligence; I clearly perceive it is somewhat but what I cannot grasp. Yet methinks if I could only seize it I should know all truth." St Augustine said something very similar, "I am conscious of something within me that plays before my soul and is as a light dancing in front of it; were this brought to steadiness and perfection in me it would surely be eternal life." One brings it to steadiness and perfection with the very intelligence that has created it. And when we talk about intelligence, it is that sparkle of the mind.

Of course, I am using a metaphor when I talk about "the sparkle of the mind". When one says that, people tend to think in terms of the sparklers that you get on fireworks day. There is a sparkle; there is an intensity, a ripple, a clarity. It is that leaven of the mind, it is that mind which is aroused without resting it on anything. If you hear a really funny story there is a kind of light right in the heart of things, an opening in the very heart of things. It is the same when you see into . If you have some particular puzzle or problem, you can suddenly see into the solution, "Oh, of course!" This is what we are talking about; this intelligence. And that intelligence needs to be used.

Some people say it is like boring with an acetylene torch; those torches that can cut through metal. You have this brilliant flame, this acetylene torch burning in hara. This invites images; see it is just a pointer. Harada roshi used to say, "There is a blind Buddha in the hara, make him see!" If you are working on Mu, the way to do so is to

make the blind Buddha see. If you are working on Who, make the blind Buddha see. This is meditation.

Hearing something like this some people say, "I thought you said that you are not supposed to do anything." There was a man at the last Workshop who just wouldn't stop arguing, because in the French edition of *The Butterfly's Dream* the last chapter starts by saying that Zen is realizing that there is nothing that needs to be done. He thought this meant doing nothing, that one just has to "sit and hope for the best." "Not-doing" is nothing like that. Soto Zen, Rinzai Zen, name it what you will, there is the need for penetration ! And this penetration is exhausting and exacting. But it is not "doing something," strangely enough. To arouse the mind without resting it on anything - you can squeeze all the muscles of your body, and you can squeeze all the muscles of your mind, but the very mind that does this is the mind you have to open. How can you take a step to the place you already are? And yet if you don't take that step, you will never be at home where you already are.

Here is the true test of your practice. Of course, often one just has to use muscles, one just pushes, one does anything, one does everything. One squeezes one's hands, one clenches one's teeth, furrows one's eyebrows, and one does all of these things. These have to be done. These have to be passed through. Sometimes the mind is so hippity-hoppity one looks for a pain just to sit with, to stop this mind clippity-clopping along. This has to be done. If one is desperate enough, one will do anything. But then, as one penetrates, there is just this still, still burning. This still point of the turning world. This unmoving motion. This dynamism.

In the beginning was the word, and everything has flowed from the word. And to get back to the beginning - and this doesn't mean to say the beginning in time, but the beginning as the source of it all - we must go beyond the word. It is as simple as that. Just go beyond the word Mu. Just go beyond the word I. But we have backed up I with so much. And Mu is so ungraspable, so impenetrable, that we don't even know how to start with Mu, let alone get before Mu. And yet this is what is required. Get home, get there, where it all started from, and where it all is at the moment anyway.

When I talk like this some people throw up their hands and say, "Well, I don't know what he is talking about. This is all too much for me. Zen is very complex." And I always say, "It is not Zen that is complex, it is you that are complex." It is extremely simple. Just be there before complexity arises, before any kind of this and that, yes and no, up and down, me and you arises.

There is only one way to come to awakening and that is by stopping living in delusion. This does not mean one has to give up one's present way of life, one's marriage, one's job or what one's doing and go away to a monastery. This is the worst thing you can do actually. You take all your troubles with you, and you have got a whole new set that you have got to work with when you get there. No, where you are is good enough, but how can you stop living in delusion ? Of course there is a lot in one's life that one can simplify, there is a lot that one does which is absolutely unnecessary. Certainly, looking

at television comes high among them. If you waste your time looking at television, then how are you ever going to get the energy or the effort to get beyond this barrier? It is not a question of giving up all the things that one is satisfied with about oneself and one's life, all one's sources of comfort, but rather seeing what use you are making of them. Seeing how you are using all of this in order to insure that you do not wake up. Paradoxical, but true.

People say, "I want to come to awakening." But awakening has nothing for the personality at all. There is no use to awakening, it is useless. And all that the personality knows as useful is that which in some way will make it more comfortable, enhance its power, enhance its satisfaction, and so on. This is what is useful. Of course the unknown has no use for the personality. We are not putting practice down when we say that it has no use, but elevating it beyond any possibility of assessing it in that way, beyond any possibility of putting a price on it. "The great pearl beyond price"; this is what we are talking about. One sometimes asks oneself, particularly when one begins, "What is the use of this sitting?" No use at all. Be quite clear to yourself about it. It is useless. You have solved that problem, you have answered that question. Now let us get on with the practice.

There are two aspects to our practice. One is coming to awakening, coming home, coming to see the source out of which it all arises; seeing into that which is beyond form, beyond identity, beyond any kind of structure. But the other aspect of our practice is to see the machine that we are, the mechanics of the machine that we are. Gurdjieff always used to say that the human being is a machine. A Behaviorist wrote a long book on Gurdjieff because he thought Gurdjieff meant what the Behaviorist means by saying that a human being is a machine. But Gurdjieff was talking of the human being as a perpetual motion machine. And to see into yourself as a perpetual motion machine, as the wheel of samsara that turns unendingly - something is fed in and as a consequence a whole set of reactions, levers, wheels, spigots, everything starts moving...and then something else comes in and all the wheels turn around the other way and everything that went out goes in and the levers work backward, and so on. We must see into the mechanicalness, and by that I do not mean the sort of simply absent minded behavior that one has, but rather the total "interactingness" of what we do. We do what we do because we are what we are.

The unknowable is what we call reality. Reality cannot be known, we cannot know reality. As long as we feel that we can know reality then we are living on the brink of the chute that sends us into this world in which we are tied up in our own consciousness. A dreadful sense of claustrophobia can afflict one, particularly when one is beginning to awaken a bit in the depths, a sense of being bound in one's own mind, tied up in one's own mind. This claustrophobia sometimes creates a panic, an acute anxiety in us. It can create a kind of nausea and tension. One has at the same time a feeling of having nothing to hold on to. But we must go on then. This is good news: in practice terror is good news.

People say that practice is boring. Not interesting. When you get bored, particularly when you are sitting with dryness, the tense arid dryness that comes, make up your mind that you are really going to investigate it. Not intellectually or conceptually so that you can describe it to somebody or analyze it or find out its source in past situations or anything like that. But you are really going to know what it feels like to be bored. You are really going to take this on and be as bored as you can. Find a way so that you can increase the sense of being bored so that you really, really know what being bored is. Get beyond this lust for interest, for glitter.

Only when you are satiated by all the interesting things can you really practice. This doesn't mean one has to start living it up and going through all the sins of the world. What are you looking for? What do you want? Be honest. Say what you want. To say that you want awakening is just flapping your gums. What do you want? And just keep pressing home with that question; what do I want? Any time something is offered up, look at it and say, "What does this mean? What will this give? What will this do?" Look at it, get it, see it, and then one realizes, "No, that is not really what I want."

Hubert Benoit, the French writer, said, "What we really want is light and movement. When we can't have light and movement, we will settle for light and stillness. And if we can't have light and stillness, then we will have darkness and movement. But what we won't have is darkness and stillness." And it is this revulsion, this backing away from darkness and stillness, this wanting to stir the mind again, that keeps us in an agitated state. During daily living it is extremely difficult to resist this, but during sesshin there is nothing to disturb you. The point of a sesshin (the fact that we dim the lights, that we try to keep everything as quiet as possible, that we ask people to blow their noses outside the Zendo so there is not this shattering noise that goes through if a person does this sort of thing,) is that it gives you the opportunity to throw yourself totally into this search, beyond the glitter and titillations of existence, into this which is the source of it all, but which, when you are seeing it from the outside, is simply darkness and stillness.

Reality has no content or form. This is why it can't be known. One looks around and says, "But the room is real. Surely the content of reality is the room". No. The content of the room is what you perceive. And what you perceive with is reality. Because of you the room is real; it is not because the room is real that you see it.

For the personality, practice is like going towards death. But "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Each one of us has our own work to do. Don't ever compare yourself with another person. You are incomparable. Like someone said, "Everything is unique, there is no difference". Your work is your work. By this, we don't mean you the personality. That which supports and underlies the personality, is working out its destiny. All that the personality can do is not get in the way. By giving ourselves over to the practice, by being totally one with "Mu!", if our practice is "Mu!", or being totally one with "Who," if our practice is "Who," we ensure that we don't get in the way. If our practice is

following the breath, then it is just following the breath. Remember, when you are practicing, that Buddha said, "One must practice as though one's hair was on fire." But one must also practice in such a way that it is like going into a lake without making a ripple; like going into a forest without disturbing a blade of grass.