

Why practice?

(an article by Albert Low)

"In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance. »

TS Eliot The four Quartet

"I don't know " she said. She was looking out of the window and her face was turned away from me, but even so I could see the tears running down her cheek. "I don't know," she said again. This time she turned full face toward me wiping her face with the heel of her hand. "Is that not stupid?" I sat and waited for her to continue. I had asked her why she wanted to practice Zen, a question that I always ask whenever anyone comes to ask about Zen. When I conduct workshops here at the Center the first talk is always on this question "Why?" and we spend over an hour talking about it. Its the first, and really the only important, question. The rest will take care of itself eventually. So, I sat and waited.

"What can I say?" asked the woman. She was an American and had come to see me from Virginia. It had been a difficult journey requiring a bus, train and taxi, and as she had spent a night in a nearby hotel, the journey had not only been difficult it had been expensive as well. She was already past middle age and not all that used to traveling. Yet here she was in front of me saying she did not know why she had come.

Sometimes people have the answer ready made, "I want to get to know myself," "I want peace of mind," "My life is stressful," "I want to learn to concentrate," "I want," always "I want." One lady came and said she had read a detective book in which the hero, who was a detective, was always calm and knew just what to do. "I want to be like him." she said.

What can one say? Siddhartha Gautama, whom we now know as Shakyamuni Buddha, left his family and home to seek the way for all suffering humanity. He is revered and adored because of this, that he should have made such sacrifices for us all. But sometimes I wonder. Tradition says that, at his birth, wise men predicted he would grow up to be either a monk or a king. His father, not wanting him to suffer the life of an ascetic, but hoping that he would follow him and become king in his place, did all that he could to protect his son from any experience that would turn him towards a religious way. For twenty-nine years Siddhartha lived screened away from the suffering of the world. He was married and had a son of his own but he began to get restless and

wanted to experience life apart from the shields and barriers that his father and his own habit and inertia had built around him.

It is said that he left the chateau, in which he had passed so much of his life, and went with his charioteer to a nearby town. He did not arrive there because on the way he met a sick man. Sickness was something that he had not yet encountered in his life and when his charioteer assured him that all people were prone to sickness the news upset him so much that he returned immediately to his chateau. Later he went out again, and then a third time, but, on both occasions, was compelled to turn back because on the first trip he met an old man, on the second a dead man. Up until then he had not met with either old age nor death and so these encounters shook him to the core. He had yet a final encounter, this time it was with a monk whose face was so radiant and composed that Siddhartha resolved to lead the life of a wandering monk, and seek deliverance from suffering for all humankind.

One can accept this story literally or as a legend. My own inclination would be toward the latter. This is not only due to the fact that I cannot believe anyone could live until the age of twenty-nine and not meet with sickness, old age or death. It is also because in the Zen tradition the tendency is to want to make everything life-sized, to avoid the glorious, the miraculous, magnificent, the incandescent. This is not to bring heaven down to earth but to see, as one Zen master put it, "This earth where we stand is already heaven, our very body is already the body of Buddha." Much in the same vein another Zen master said, "My magical power and miraculous activity, washing the dishes and taking out the garbage." After the blaze and brilliance of spiritual pyrotechnics we are dazzled and fail to see the sheer miracle of being, the wonder of the simple truth, "I am." If Buddha was a special human being with unique powers, and supernatural origins of what use is he to us? But if he is a human being like you and me, then what an inspiration he is!

Returning to the story of Buddha. Another interpretation could be that Buddha encountered for the first time the fact of sickness, the fact of old age, the fact of death. Perhaps he had insomnia and, at about two thirty in the morning, he suddenly realized that he could die, that he was getting older, that all around him people were suffering many different kinds of illness and disease and that he too could fall ill. If so, if he really encountered the truth of the suffering of existence, he must have been very frightened, anxious, perhaps even panicky. Probably most of us have had this experience when suddenly the truth hits us, "I can die!" To resolve to leave all that one holds dear and to face the torment and rigors of spiritual work demands more than simple altruism. One must be smitten to the core. The terror that could well have been awakened in Siddhartha's heart could well have propelled him on to his arduous search.

Sickness, old age, death : all reveal our utter vulnerability, our complete fragility. At the end of one of the sutras that are favored in the Zen tradition we are reminded of this when it says: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world : A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream; a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream." But the legend says that Siddhartha also met a monk and, although the

encounters with sickness old age and death provided the explosives, it was the encounter with that monk that was the trigger. This encounter with a monk was an encounter with a living tradition, it was an encounter with Hope. We are all not only pushed onto the way by suffering but we are also pulled on to it by Hope. But Hope for what?

A Chinese emperor asked the first Zen patriarch, Bodhidharma, "What are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know." This question of the Emperor followed an earlier conversation in which he first told Bodhidharma that he had done a great deal for the development of Buddhism and then had asked what merit that had. Bodhidharma had replied, "No merit at all." He then asked for Bodhidharma's teaching and Bodhidharma had replied, "Vast emptiness and not a thing that can be called holy."

The author of a fourteenth century guide on the spiritual path, which was called The Cloud of Unknowing, says something very similar to Bodhidharma's "I don't know. He said, "Now you will ask me 'How am I to think about God himself, and what is he?' and I cannot answer you except to say I do not know." At another time this same author also echoes Bodhidharma when he says, "Lift up your heart to God with humble love; and I mean God himself and not what you can get out of him." Never mind about merit. Those who come to Zen with their list of wants are like people wandering around a super market. In no time, after they have started practicing, will they be asking, "Why am I doing this, what am I getting out of it?" They will probably soon leave and complain that the practice was too hard, the teacher not spiritual enough, the teaching faulty. This practice has nothing for the personality, one must do it even though it is without interest, without reward, even though it is hard. The author of the Cloud of Unknowing says, "Work hard at it, therefore and with all speed; hammer away at this high cloud of unknowing - and take your rest later! It is hard work and no mistake, very hard work indeed. Everybody finds this work hard."

One begins to have the feeling that the lady from America was not so stupid. I said as much to her. We do not choose to practice, we are chosen; it is because we are One, because we are already whole and complete and that we lack nothing, that we suffer. And it is because we are One that we finally seek a way out of suffering. The fears and anxieties that we have are, when we let go of all the particulars, but our own dark face. It is something like St. Augustin when he said, "If you had not already found me you would not be seeking me." He could as well have said, "Because you have found me you cannot help seeking me."

Hope beckons and we cannot resist. But as St. John of the Cross says, "Do not hope for hope would be hope for the wrong thing," because there is Hope and there is hope. To discover Hope we must strip ourselves of all hope, all expectation all demand. We must let go of this question, "Why practice," because all answers will simply be another item on the shopping list : To know myself, to know God, to awaken love, to find peace. The only worthwhile answer to the question is, "I don't know; I am called, but by what I know not, I seek, but in the dark."

Let me finish by quoting once more from the Cloud of Unknowing

"This practice is rightly compared to sleep. For just as in sleep the use of the natural faculties is suspended in order that the body may obtain complete rest, for the nourishing and strengthening of its natural powers; even so in this supernatural sleep the extravagant questioning of the untamed spiritual faculties, their imaginative speculations, are thoroughly tamed and drained off, in order that the simple soul may sleep and rest softly in the loving contemplation of God as he is, for the nourishing and strengthening of its supernatural powers. Tame, then, your senses, and offer up this dark awareness of the substance of your being."