

Lay Practice (part two)

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How can we move as smoothly as possible between the intensity of sesshin or residential training and our everyday lives? Is it really possible to go deep into our practice while holding down jobs, looking after children and so on? Do we sometimes find ourselves just marking time during our daily lives until we get the chance to return to Zengården for sesshin, which we might feel is when 'real' practice can happen? Is it – as some of us might be tempted to think – actually harder to practise these days because of the increasing number of ways in which we can distract and entertain ourselves?

There's a quote I heard once, right here in the zendo I think. Sante Roshi was quoting a famous Buddhist teacher who said something like, "People these days are so busy. Running around from one thing to the next, distracted, anxious, never enough time for everything which needs to be done." Sounds familiar doesn't it?

Well, actually, that was written by a Zen teacher who lived around 1300 years ago in Tang dynasty China! So maybe not much has changed. It's certainly something you hear and maybe many of us feel – that things are increasingly hectic and busy, that there are more distractions facing us these days. But who knows if this is really the case? The chances are that people have always felt busy and anxious, distracted and divided. And what if it were actually true that people are busier than ever? Would we just give up?

So it's a pretty pointless discussion. We can only practice with, and in, the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Where else could we possibly practice anyway?! And we do our best. To worry about the number of distractions we face is, well, just another distraction. On a deeper level though, the point of practice is that when we work on our minds, we are actually directly influencing the circumstances in which we find ourselves. As the Buddha famously said:

"All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think, we become."

Our mind and our lives reflect each other, they are 'not two'. Simplify the mind and little by little we simplify our lives. And this is what many of us find if we stick at it. I think it was the American philosopher Thoreau who said, "Simplify, simplify, simplify."

We need to be careful though that we don't misunderstand this. It doesn't mean that we just float along and it doesn't necessarily mean that our lives get easier or less busy. It doesn't even mean that we stop feeling stressed, anxious, withdrawn or whatever our own particular thing is.

Joko Beck puts it like this:

“(A developing) practice is the ability to be with life and be in it just as it is. This doesn’t mean that you don’t have all your little considerations, all your stuff going on about it. You will! That’s not the point. But it is *held* differently. And the point of practice is to be able to hold more and more of it.”

This is useful because many of us suffer from what we might call ‘being a good Buddhist’ syndrome. Acting in the way which we think a ‘good Buddhist’ (whatever that is) is supposed to act – here at Zengården when the teachers are around, at home or at work. Or we practice for a while and we become confused when we find we still have negative thoughts or difficult emotions to deal with. Or we pretend to be asleep when the baby cries so someone else will get up in the middle of the night (that’s just a theoretical example of course. I don’t know why I chose that as an example!).

The point isn’t to become calm or clear or ‘good’ (however you understand that). The point is to become more authentic – if you feel shy, you feel shy; if you feel angry, you feel angry. ‘Holding things differently’ means that we don’t get lost in the thoughts that these states provoke. It means we can stay more with this direct experience.

And then we realise that this is how we move through difficult emotions or mind states more easily. It’s amazing how quickly even quite strong emotional states can pass if we can just experience them directly. On a practical level I’ve often found that this is a time when it can be really useful just to keep your mouth shut a bit more. You’ll be amazed how many times it can be good just to do nothing – to simply keep your mouth shut!

Thinking about lay practice for these talks reminded me of the topic often referred to as ‘engaged Buddhism’. As you may know this term was coined by Thich Nat Hanh and describes the need he felt for monks in Vietnam – and this was during the Vietnam War – to move out of the monasteries and respond to what was happening around them. The term has taken off in the west as a way of thinking about how western Buddhists might take their practice ‘off the mat’ so to speak, and look for ways of engaging with the world around them. It’s perhaps also a response to the slightly stereotypical idea that sitting in meditation is somehow a way of running away from issues and the so-called real world.

We need to remember though that Thich Nat Hanh was using the term engaged Buddhism in the context of an essentially monastic, Asian tradition. But in the west, most of us are constantly called upon to engage with the world in many different ways: jobs, families, maybe children, as well as many other commitments.

So a key challenge for most of us isn’t really finding ways to take our practice off the mat, and to engage with the world around us. It is about making sure that everything we do is informed by practice. We do this by putting zazen at the heart of what we do, by allowing it to underpin how we engage with our daily lives. Don’t look at zazen as just another thing to

fit into a busy day but as the activity that informs everything we do. So, for example, if you need to spend an hour cleaning the house you don't really expect this to help you deal with a problem at work or to make you a better parent. But this is the point of sitting for an hour – it impacts on everything we face during the rest of our day

Ultimately what regular, dedicated practice can do is help us see the absolute value of everything we do. It's all a question of being able to give our full attention to what's right in front of us. A student once asked Thich Nat Hanh, "There are some many urgent problems. What should I do?" He replied, "Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing everything at the same time."

This might sound simplistic or even a bit banal when you look at the state of the world around us. But again, as Thich Nat Hanh says "If you cannot serve your wife or husband or child or parent, how are you going to serve society?" So when we do one thing – completely – then, from a Buddhist perspective, playing with a child or responding somehow to an important social issue have equal value. You could say it simply comes down to whether our actions embody what Master Hakuin calls 'This True Self which is No Self' or they don't. That's all that counts. And acting in this way might be very different from how we think a 'good Buddhist' might act.

If we're lucky, practice might include sesshin or residential training periods. And at times we come to a place like Zengården and maybe feel jealous of the people living here – able to practice without all the distractions and pressures that *we* face (or so we think); living in this wonderful space surrounded by like-minded people. We might even feel that we are second class Buddhists, just dipping our toes in the water (I'm trying not to sound too bitter here!). Maybe, on some level, we think that there is 'more' Buddhism at a place like Zengården.

Something which seems to confirm this happens in Glasgow every year. Each year we organise a pan-Buddhist Vesak with other Glasgow Buddhist groups. Some years there is some local media coverage and one year the BBC came to make a children's TV programme. This was going to involve interviews with some of the group leaders but, as you might expect, the only group leader anyone wanted to speak to was the Sri Lankan monk leading the Sri Lankan Buddhist group. Robes and a shaved head trump western Buddhists every time – even the BBC seem to have very clear ideas about what being a proper Buddhist is really about!

So is Bhante, my Sri Lankan colleague, somehow more of a Buddhist? Is there more Zen at Zengården? Well this morning we chanted *Affirming Faith in Mind* which has a lot to say about this kind of thing:

The way's beyond all space, all time.
One instant is 10,000 years.
Not only here, not only there,
truth's right before your very eyes.

And so on for 40 or 50 verses saying the same thing over and over again: drop this discriminating mind. Drop this mind of better and worse, here and there, gain and loss. But if there isn't more Zen here what's the point of a place like Zengården?

Well, for many people it doesn't have much point at all I guess because plenty of Sangha members – certainly from Glasgow – don't come here at all. And in a sense I admire very much people who sustain a serious practice without coming here. Just maybe maintaining a daily sitting practice with the odd trip to a local centre now and then. One of the reasons I admire them comes from experiencing my own mind in daily sitting. How distracted and difficult sitting is after being at work all day. And how sesshin practice offers such a radically different perspective on the mind: a chance to dive underneath the surface noise and to experience the mind in a more stable, clear and unified way (which is, as most people here know, actually the meaning of the word sesshin: to touch or to unify the mind).

So this is an obvious benefit of sesshin. But it also creates a challenge of its own for those of us moving backwards and forwards – now in sesshin, now at home or at work. The moments of stillness, clarity, perhaps a sense that nothing is a problem anymore, which we experience in sesshin, can be very seductive. Maybe we start to feel that this is the point of practice and the point of sesshin – to create a still, clear and silent mind.

Well, in one sense it is. Sesshin is intensive practice in staying in the moment, intensive practice in direct experience. It's about providing an opportunity to work at this with few or no 'external' distractions. And slowly, over time we get better at staying in the moment outside of sesshin.

However, we need to remember that whatever stillness, clarity or silence we experience in sesshin, these are just conditioned states. Sit for ten hours a day and you get more silence, run around at work for 10 hours and maybe you feel more stressed. Both are conditioned states, neither is fundamentally 'good' or 'bad'. We don't want to cling to one, we shouldn't avoid the other.

Many of us struggle with this and we find ourselves after sesshin clinging to sesshin mind states, wanting to somehow make them last and forgetting how pointless, how contradictory this is. I remember attending many sesshins in Rochester and then the day after, making a 24-hour journey back to Spain. Slowly you feel the energy dissipate, the mind fill up. And then you might feel bad about this. I think this is pretty common for people – I know I've experienced this lot. I've often found that straight after sesshin is an important time to really work at staying with the practice – it can be a confusing time and old habits try to reassert themselves.

Sesshin practice isn't about clinging to mind states which we think are somehow more Zen, because Zen isn't a state of mind. It's always interesting in introductions to see how people are often surprised when you say this – it seems to be a very common assumption that there

is a Zen-like calm which we are trying to attain. But in sesshin this stillness, this emptying of the mind is just a launch pad – a jumping off point to something beyond conditions, beyond states of mind. The point is to see what is common to a silent mind and to an anxious mind. To see that there is something that is indivisible from both clarity and confusion and yet unchanged by both. This is the real promise of sesshin and of practice.

So the challenge for those of us who go backwards and forwards between sesshin and home is not to become some kind of sesshin junkie, addicted to mind states that we've experienced. Not to get tricked by this discriminating mind into thinking that one place, one time has real value and everything else is just something to endure until we're in sesshin again. To see that all places, all states of mind, all activities have the same inherent value. Returning to *Affirming Faith in Mind*, this is to see with *equal mind*.

So this brings us to maybe the biggest question we face as lay practitioners: are we second-class Buddhists? Can we go deep as lay practitioners? This is a question taken up in the Mumonkan. Here's the case:

A non-Buddhist one asked the World Honoured One (The Buddha), "I do not ask for words, I do not ask for no-words." The World Honoured One just sat still. The non-Buddhist praised him, saying, "The World Honoured One, with his great compassion has dispelled the clouds of my delusion and has enabled me to enter the Way." Making a deep bow of gratitude, he departed. Ananda then asked the Buddha, "What was it this non-Buddhist realized that he praised you so?" The Buddha replied, "A first-class horse moves at even the shadow of the whip."

And in his commentary Mumon adds:

Ananda is the Buddha's disciple, but his understanding falls far short of the non-Buddhist's. How different are they, the Buddha's disciple and the non-Buddhist?

So here we have the great Ananda who was the Buddha's attendant for many years, his second in command, apparently falling short while this unknown, 'non-Buddhist' can suddenly appear and be highly praised by the Buddha. How can we explain this? And at the same time, despite what Mumon seems to be suggesting, are they really so different – Ananda and this non-Buddhist?

Or you can find a contemporary take on how far we can go as lay practitioners by reading the story of Flora Courtois (*An Experience of Enlightenment*), who found being a 'non-Buddhist' and lay practitioner wasn't a hindrance at all.

It all comes down to motivation. It all comes down to this: how great is our need to *know*? Obviously we need to make a commitment, almost certainly we need to go backwards and forwards between training and daily life and maybe we need to get good at juggling practice,

work and family. It might mean that there are other things which we'd like to do which we put to one side.

But, as they say, where there is a will, there is a way. Or to put it another way, where there is a will, *there* is the way.

In many ways I think the hardest part is getting started. Deciding what is important to us. Deciding what we really want to do with our lives – whether that's Buddhism or anything else. When you find the thing you really want to do, things get simpler. Not necessarily less busy, maybe not easier, maybe not always smoother – but simpler. We know what we need to do because we know what is important to us. So a sense of direction – a path – appears.

Bodhin Roshi has often described practice as like playing the lottery. It sounds strange, doesn't it? The odds of winning the lottery are terrible. But this lottery is different because everyone wins. You just need to keep playing the game.

So let's keep playing...