

Words from the Zendo

A compilation of encouragement talks by Sensei Karl Kaliski

“He does not use an elegant verse.

Before speaking, it’s already expressed.

If you keep on chattering glibly,

You’ll find yourself lost.”

(Mumonkan, Verse of Case 24: Abandon Words and Silence)

The zendo is a place of silence. And, as we all know, both the old masters and contemporary teachers constantly warn us about the limitations of words. Yet part of the zendo leader’s job during sesshin *is* to talk: to offer words of support, encouragement and advice. So although you know there’s nothing you say can to improve on this silence, you have to say something...

Child’s play

My youngest son was four last January. On the morning of his birthday, as we were walking to nursery I asked him, “How does it feel to be four?” Quick as a flash he answered, “Cold!” I thought wow, what a great answer, a real word of Zen. Ummon himself couldn’t have done any better! Spontaneous, in the moment and completely one with the circumstances in which he finds himself.

If you spend time with young children, you also see that they have a special transparency. They can’t hide anything – literally. When my rail card or my wallet goes missing just before I go to work in the morning, I ask Zach if he’s hidden it. He’ll say, “Yes! But it’s not under the sofa, don’t look there!” So we play this little game and spend a few minutes looking for it before finding it, you guessed it, under the sofa.

There’s so much in the mind and behaviour of a young child that is similar to the work we’re doing here. Similar to our hopes and aspiration for practice: this spontaneous, transparent simplicity, with nothing hidden, everything out in the open.

When my older son (who was eight at the time) saw how interested I was in Zach’s answer, he asked me to ask him the same question. So I asked him, “How does it feel to be eight?” He thought for a while and said something like, “Well, it’s great being able to read more on my own and I’m definitely getting better at football.” His answer was really quite different – thoughtful, considered and reflective.

Now don’t get me wrong. I didn’t say, “What a terrible answer, Hugh! That’s not a word of Zen!”. Because there was nothing wrong with his answer of course. It was also perfect in its

own way. Developing this ability to think rationally, critically, and to reflect on experience is a normal and absolutely necessary part of growing up.

But along the way, we lose touch with something. We lose touch with this more childlike side of our nature. We lose touch with this simplicity, openness and responsiveness that we have clearly all had at some stage. Master Hakuin expresses this in his “*Chant in Praise of Zazen*” saying, “Like a child of rich birth wandering poor on this earth, we endlessly circle the six worlds.”

Each one of us is this child of rich birth. We always have been and we always will be. The old masters never tire of reminding us of this. Mumon offers us the finest wine in China and we can eat the fanciest pastry straight out of Kuan Yin’s hands. Only the richest person can really appreciate these wonderful things.

We may believe, and zendo leaders are always telling us, that this practice is hard, that sesshin is so tough. Well, they’re wrong. This is easy. What is really tough is to ‘endlessly circle the six worlds’. To be trapped in this world of dualism, self and other, good and bad. To be trapped inside this prison of our own making. This endless cycle of thoughts.

So we return to our practice and this child returns. We return to our practice and this child starts to play. We dive deeper into this ‘samadhi of frolic and play’. We see that all this work, all this effort, is not difficult. It’s child’s play.

Clarity

In the Tibetan centre we use for our zazenkais in Glasgow, I recently saw a Buddhist scroll which had the Pali version of the Three Resolutions written on it:

*“Avoid doing evil;
Strive to do good;
Tame the mind.”*

To tame the mind. It’s so easy to misunderstand this. When we think of taming something, maybe a wild animal, we think of being involved in some kind of struggle. We might imagine a lion tamer, with a chair in one hand and a whip in the other. Here we are, and opposing us, over there, is the thing we’re trying to tame. This is how the first few days of sesshin can certainly feel: like some kind of power struggle to get control over the mind.

At the same time, the word ‘tame’ might bring to mind certain ideas. It suggests making something placid, docile or calm. And this can be a common misconception about meditation practice – we can easily imagine that the goal of zazen *is* to calm the mind. But having a calm mind isn’t the point at all.

What practice is really about is seeing the mind clearly, just as it is, right now. This is what happens in sesshin. And a mind which is becoming clearer and clearer isn't necessarily calm at all. When you notice how distracted, chaotic, tired or anxious the mind is, well, this is clarity. This is what the struggle of the first few days of sesshin is really about. It isn't so much that the mind is tired or cloudy but that the clarity that even two or three days of sitting brings is such a shock to us. We come to see more clearly than usual just how scattered and distracted we habitually are.

But this doesn't have to be a problem. Problems only come if we add thinking to this clarity; if we decide that there are certain mind states which are OK and others which aren't acceptable. But clarity isn't like this. Mind states come and go, but this clarity is always available to us regardless of what is happening in the mind.

So however we may personally feel about boredom, fatigue or the pain in our knees, this clarity remains unaffected. It is equally happy to show us the breeze in the zendo, our confused mind state, the birds singing outside or the sound of the kyosaku. This clarity doesn't divide the world into good and bad or inside and outside, and we realise that all states of mind are valid, all states of mind are OK.

This clarity emerges when we give ourselves up to the practice, when we allow the practice to take control. Of course, sometimes the mind will be calm and still and this can be wonderful. But this is still a mind state, and like any other mind state it comes and goes. This clarity, however, is always right here. It's here whenever we return to the practice. It's always available, inexhaustible. You can never use it all up.

And in every moment, we get another chance to return to this clarity...and another, and another...And if we simply get out of the way, it will show us everything we need to know about our minds, from the most superficial surface level of the mind, all the way to the bottom.

Stupid Zen

Zen Master Bankei said:

"I tell my students and those of you coming here, be stupid! Because you all have the dynamic function of the Buddha Mind, even if you get rid of discriminative understanding you won't be foolish. So all of you from here on, be stupid! Even if you're stupid, when you're hungry you'll ask for something to eat. When you're thirsty you'll ask for something to drink. When it's warm you put on thin, light clothes and when it's cold you put on more clothes. As far as the activities of today are concerned, you aren't lacking a thing."

Bankei is describing this natural intelligence which we all share. This ability to respond to things as they are. This is how we move through a crowded train station, first this way and then that. It is how we move when the dokusan bell rings. We don't think, 'well if you go this way and my neighbour goes that way, I can just move over slightly to the left...' If we function like this, well, everyone else will be long gone and we'll be left standing. But instead the bell rings – and we're off!

What gets in the way of this intelligence, this responsiveness? Thoughts. Bankei is urging us to let go of thoughts in order to allow this natural intelligence to function more freely. Look beneath the level of the discriminating mind, he says. See what is underneath. Don't make your home in a ghost realm of ideas and concepts.

In sesshin, we come to see this natural intelligence more clearly. We feel it in the way we move around the zendo or during work periods. It is always there. The teacher doesn't say, 'It's day four. You've all worked hard so here is some natural intelligence for you.' No. It is ours and it always has been. It's there when the dokusan bell rings, when a child starts to cry or when someone calls our name.

What is really stupid is to simply take our thoughts as real, solid and true. Especially at this later stage of sesshin, when we might think, 'well sesshin is nearly over and I've done my best', or 'everyone else is doing better than me', or 'this is where I always get stuck'. Or in thinking that fundamentally we lack anything. This is real stupidity.

Bankei continues:

"So when you go back to your homes and meet your old acquaintances, you should have them wondering about you all. How did Bankei teach them Zen anyway? Why, they've come back even more stupid than when they left!"

One instant

As you get older, maybe you've had the experience of looking in the mirror and seeing the deepening lines on your face or the grey hair. But somehow you feel like the same person you were when you were ten years old. Or maybe you've experienced the pleasure of sitting on the beach gazing at the sea, or you've enjoyed wonderful mountain scenery.

Clearly, these aren't 'Buddhist' experiences. They are the stuff of life. But the same thing is expressed in *Affirming Faith in Mind* which we chant every morning in sesshin:

*"The Way's beyond all space and time.
One instant is ten thousand years."*

We look in the mirror and we can't deny the grey hair or the wrinkles. But in some strange way we feel no different to that ten year old. It's as though we have both aged and not aged. We stare at the sea or enjoy the mountain view, and maybe we feel small and insignificant in comparison. But at the same time, we are reminded of something larger than ourselves.

This is the experience of sesshin. As we become more absorbed in the breath or the koan, space and time drop away. Everything comes flooding in, everything becomes more alive. You might think that if you give your attention fully to the practice, there will somehow be less of it for the sound of the birds or the pain in the lower back. But in reality, the opposite is the case. As the practice deepens, we become more aware of everything around us.

What we all share – Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike – is this awareness. It doesn't divide the world into large and small, inside and outside, now and then. So if you give the attention fully to the breath, you give it to everything. When you become one with the koan, you become one with everything. There is no Zengården, there is no afternoon of day six. How can this be so? Simple:

*"The Way's beyond all space and time.
One instant is ten thousand years."*

The Buddha and the Morning Star

One of the big challenges of practice is that we can't measure and evaluate it the same way we tend to measure many aspects of our lives. So you start swimming and at first twenty lengths is enough but stick at it and a month later you can do forty. Or maybe you can play your piano scales at sixty beats per minute and after an hour's worth of practice you're nearer to eighty.

As we all know, practice doesn't work like this. There is no straight line between time on the mat and some measurable degree of concentration, relaxation or samadhi. Practice resists all our attempts to measure or quantify it. All the deals we might make, where we try to negotiate between a certain commitment to daily sitting and some hoped for return – all of this is in vain.

I sometimes wonder if this is, at least in part, what is driving the surge in interest in science and meditation. We seem to be bombarded with studies these days which provide hard, empirical evidence of a relationship between meditation and a reduction in stress levels or blood pressure, higher levels of concentration, better memory and so on. Is this just the western mind desperately trying to shoehorn meditation into the measurable, evaluating mindset which we all hold so dear?

Think about the Buddha as he sat under the Bodhi tree on the morning of his great enlightenment. He didn't look up at the morning star and say, 'wonder of wonders, my

blood pressure has fallen by over ten per cent!’ or ‘Wonder of wonders my memory and concentration are so much stronger since I took up meditation!’

Now, there’s obviously nothing wrong with experiencing an improvement in things like concentration or memory. There’s nothing wrong with feeling less stressed and more relaxed. This is great and it does seem to be a demonstrable by-product of sustained meditation. But I don’t think this is why we come to sesshin. I don’t think this is why we are prepared to sit here for hour after hour, enduring the physical, psychological and emotional challenges of sesshin.

We come here because of what the Buddha really said as he sat there that morning, ‘Wonder of wonders! All beings are perfect, whole and complete lacking nothing. But because of their delusive thinking, they fail to see this.’ We come here because we feel inspired by these words. We come here because these words feel so distant from the reality of our lives. We come here because we need to bridge the gap between these two feelings.

How do you measure the truth of the Buddha’s statement? Well, you can’t. It’s beyond measuring and quantifying. So what can you do? You can experience it moment by moment, simply by returning to the practice. When you notice thoughts in the mind about how you’re doing or thoughts comparing this experience of day four with how day four ‘normally’ is for you, just return to the practice and you experience it again, fresh and new.

So don’t settle for a little less stress. Don’t settle for a little more concentration. Don’t sell yourself short. Aim high. Reach for the star.

“Now tell me, did he give a talk or not? If you open your mouth, you are lost. If you keep your mouth shut, you also miss it. And even if you neither open nor keep your mouth shut, you are a hundred and eight thousand miles away.”

(Mumonkan, Commentary on Case 25: Kyozan’s Dream Talk)

Sensei Karl Kaliski is the teacher and Sangha Leader of the Cloud Water Zen Group, Glasgow. For many years now, he has been trying to follow the advice of his own teachers to say less.