

Our Undisturbed Way

In Zen practice we are encouraged to meet each moment -- each breath -- as fresh and new. Our teacher's guide us in cultivating what Suzuki Roshi called Beginner's Mind, and this kind of mind allows us to live our life with immediacy and intimacy. This sounds somehow "right" and deeply true but it is also, of course, deeply challenging.

I remember asking John Gladfelter, my primary psychotherapy mentor and one of my first dharma teachers (although I didn't know it then), what he thought was the essence of healthy living. He replied; "Expect nothing. Appreciate everything." At the time I wasn't sure what he meant, but his response resonated as so profoundly true on some level that it became my koan and the source of my aspiration to practice the Buddha Way. Years later when I read the Hsin Hsin Ming, the poem of the third Zen ancestor, I heard an echo of that reply and a song that set forth its deeper meaning.

The Hsin Hsin Ming is often referred to as the first Zen poem and is attributed to Kanchi Sosan Daiosho, written in about the 6th century. In Chinese it is composed of 146 four-word lines and we chant an English translation of a portion of this longer poem. The Chinese character *hsin* is often translated as "faith mind" or "mind of faith." *Ming* means "written expression" and is sometimes used to mean a "warning or admonition." So the title is sometimes translated as "Verses of the Faith Mind."

In his commentariesⁱ on this poem, Genpo-roshi suggests the title might read as follows: "The verbal expression of the fact that the very nature of existence and all of the phenomenal world are no other than the faith mind." This is quite a bit to take in. Looking at it in another way, I would suggest what you see in front of you right now, and your very existence as a being who is seeing and reading these words, is a complete expression of reality. Nothing is missing. Through this clear seeing you can directly touch the nature of existence and in this you can place your faith, in Buddha nature itself.

Of course, faith, here, does not have the usual meaning of having faith IN something but rather that faith is an active willingness to meet reality as it is and to lay our hearts openⁱⁱ to this existence. These may seem like difficult concepts, but there are a few other explications of this same expression of faith that might be instructive. The Nirvana Sutra says "The great faith is no other than Buddha nature." So this faith mind that is being pointed to is, in fact, what we call Buddha Nature or True Self. Dogen Zenji

said, “Without attaining Buddhahood, the faith mind won’t manifest. When the faith mind manifests, Buddhas and patriarchs (we would say women or all beings) manifest.” So there is something about the activity of realizing or manifesting this faith mind that is essential. Faith is, for us, a verb. It is something to do rather than something we have or do not have. As Kozan Garyu said “One thousand seven hundred koans are all expressions of this one mind.” There is a fundamental aspect of practice that is being pointed to here and a contemporary teacher, Sharon Salzberg’s, suggests that the act of faith in Buddhism is trusting your own deepest experience. [see footnote ii].

I grew up in a fairly traditional Christian environment in which faith and belief seemed to overlap or be confused. Allan Watts states it this way: “Belief is the insistence that the truth is what one would wish it to be. Faith is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions. It is to plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go.”

What would it be like to live with this “unreserved opening of the mind to the truth”? I believe this is what our ancestor Kanchi Sosan is expressing in writing this remarkable poem. We are so much more familiar with believing in something or someone, full of preconceptions and the expectations of comfort and solace. Our practice asks us to risk plunging into the unknown in order to directly taste the truth rather than just believing in it.

The very first line sets us on this risky path. “The great Way isn’t difficult for those unattached to their preferences.” I remember listening to Zenkei Blanche Hartman talk about this once, and she said, “You can hardly get past this first line, can you?” We are amused at the directness, the simplicity, but the seeming impossibility of such a transformation. In his commentary, Genpo-roshi states this challenge as a question. “Can we take it?” Can we see where we’re holding preferences and how these preferences often grow into elaborate forms of attachment? Can we just watch ourselves without judging? Almost automatically we look for a solid place to stand and a belief we can hold: “I’m a good zen student; I’m unattached. I’m a terrible zen student; I’m so attached to things.” Back and forth we go, missing the point. Kalu Rinpoche, a much loved Tibetan teacher said it this way: “

“You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you understand this, you will see that you are nothing. And, being nothing, you are everything. That is all.”

“That is all?” In a few short sentences Kalu Rinpoche strikes us with a gentle but powerful blow just as the Third Ancestor does in his first line. Both echo the Buddha’s first two Noble Truths. The first truth states that dissatisfaction seems to be the nature of our conventional existence. The second noble truth declares that the cause of this dissatisfaction is attachment, especially self-clinging arising from our confusion and delusions. This is very important point to understand and clarify. It is relatively easy for us to focus our understanding of attachment on our attachment to things. As we practice zazen we may become painfully aware of our attachment to our nice home or car or boyfriend or girlfriend or way of life. These can certainly become objects of desire and hence sources of potential suffering. However, it is generally easier to look at these things to which we become attached or our preferences for certain experiences and completely miss the key that the Buddha was pointed to. Can we look honestly at our self-clinging? This is what Genpo-roshi is suggesting when he asks if we can “take it.” Can we look directly at this?

The very next line offers a prescription for the treatment of this affliction: “Let go of longing and aversion and everything will be perfectly clear”. This is essentially a compact version of Zen practice. Let go of attachments and enlightenment is right there. An alternative translation of this same line makes the inherent challenge a bit more clear: “When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised.” What would a life be like with love and hate absent? How can this possibly be a life worth living? It’s a little frightening. Where is the juice? Conversely, how do we disguise reality with love and hate? Most of what we call love (and hate), if we’re honest with ourselves, is just attachment to stories we tell ourselves and ideas we have about how we might be happy. We focus on what we can get from a loving relationship rather than what we can offer. We wonder what will please Me? We cling to My child, My teacher, and My friend and, in that clinging, distract ourselves from how much we are clinging to the constructions we call Me.

To release our clinging we have a practice that is so incredibly simple – sit down, take an upright posture, and notice what happens. Expect nothing. Pay attention to everything. Notice what it’s like to remove all the ways we keep ourselves excited, distracted, confused, and disguised. We’re actually all open books, completely transparent to anyone who isn’t caught up in him or herself. Of course, that’s why hardly anybody sees us, because most everybody is caught up in him or herself. That is also why I have regularly sought out teachers who have demonstrated to me that they are not quite so caught up in themselves. I trust them to see me a bit more clearly

than I can see myself. This is a great gift and can also be unsettling. Can we take it? Can we see and can we allow ourselves to be seen?

There's an old story in which Eka, who became the second Ancestor, approached Bodhidharma, the first ancestor and said, "My mind is not yet at peace." Bodhidharma replied, "Show me your mind. Where is this so-called mind that is not at rest". It is said that Eka went away to ponder this question for ten days, Returning he said, "I've searched everywhere for this mind and finally I have realized it is ungraspable, unknowable, unattainable."

Like Eka, I came to practice looking for a little peace of mind. After so many years of grasping for something, trying to know everything, I had run out of options. My belief was that if I could just get a hold of it, understand it, and know it, and feel like I had gotten something – whatever the "it" happened to be at the time – I could rest assured that I knew who I was. There was a "self" there in which I could depend. What I began to discover in practice is that this self was actually not a very sound place to rest. I had to look at the shocking possibility, because it was being shown to me by my teachers, that it was the "ungraspable, unknowable, unattainable" that could be a source of dependability and peace. Peace came from letting go and simply being myself, not scrambling to gain more and secure this constructed self.

From another part of the poem that we don't chant, in Richard Clark's translationⁱⁱⁱⁱ, the third ancestor says, "When the mind exists undisturbed in the way, nothing in the world can offend. And when a thing can no longer offend, it ceases to exist in the old way. If you wish to move in the one way, do not dislike even the world of ideas and senses. Indeed to accept them fully is identical with true enlightenment." To accept yourself fully, just as you are, the stories begin to fade and have less power to course the same old predictable suffering. They literally "cease to exist in the old way." And yet, this dropping away doesn't mean rejecting the world of ideas and senses. We are still very much alive and lively! It is in this liberating release that the undisturbed mind becomes apparent. It is in this simple and profound practice that we accord with the undisturbed Way.

Can you take it? Can you allow this unconventional and limitless support that doesn't depend on getting anything and offers you everything? Are you willing to trade in predictable suffering for freedom that is unknown? Can you allow yourself to be loved that much? Can you love

that much? If so, let's continue to practice together, because that is only way.

ⁱ Merzel, Dennis Genpo. The Eye Never Sleeps: Striking at the Heart of Zen. Shambala: Boston. 1991.

ⁱⁱ The Pali word typically translated into English as “faith,” is *saddha*, which literally means “to place the heart open.” Salzberg, Sharon. Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience. Riverhead Books: New York. 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clarke, Richard B. *Hsin hsin ming*. White Pine Press: New York. 1984.