

## Dharmette: Stories of Practise (3 of 5) Wholeheartedness

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Hello and welcome. And so this week I'm telling stories from my practice, practice stories, and hope that this is nice for you to hear and maybe encourages you in your practice. And it also feels like a nice topic in this kind of more relaxed context. Thanksgiving week.

So one of the really invaluable areas of practice for me was something that at the San Francisco Zen Center they called work practice, that the work we did was considered as equal in value to practice as meditation. And so learning about practicing in the activity of work has been invaluable for me, and one represented very meaningful turning points for me in this regard. I'd been at Tassajara for maybe about eight, nine months at the monastery, and it was rare to be able to leave. I wasn't actually supposed to leave the first year, but I had occasion to leave. And on the way back, the driver stopped at a big shopping mall or shopping center in Carmel, California, just before we go up into the deep into the mountains, National Wilderness, where the monastery is.

And there was a bookstore. And I went into the bookstore. I had very little time. So I went to the section of the bookstore where they had spiritual books, and they had a section on kind of Eastern spirituality, Eastern religions. And I pulled out a book at random because I had very little time, and I opened it randomly, and I read a sentence that said something like this, "The problems humans have is that they hold themselves back."

And I closed the book, got in the car, and drove up into the mountains, down into the monastery in a deep, secluded valley in the wilderness, in the Los Padres National Wilderness. And so that sentence stayed with me. And as it turned out, I was assigned to work in the kitchen. And this question of holding myself back kind of was ringing in my mind. How do I do that? Do I do that? What is it?

I decided that it was a negative statement and that I wanted to reframe it positively. And so I worded it for myself that it was an encouragement to participate with what I was doing, to participate fully. And luckily I was assigned to the kitchen, and there were a lot of opportunities to do physical work. Very simple, clear work, standing at the table, and I was mostly involved in prep that first few months there. So I did a lot of vegetable chopping and a lot of pot washing.

And this question of, this issue of participating with my activity was really a great one, because what I started seeing was how much I didn't participate, how much I didn't want to be there, didn't want to be in the kitchen, didn't want to do the work. I wanted to be out, I thought the real work was meditating, and I should be up there in the meditation hall, because when you were in the kitchen, you couldn't meditate that much. And literally I could watch my body turn towards the door, and it was kind of like half my body was kind of doing the chopping of the vegetables. And so my whole body was not participating. It was trying to escape.

And so, "Gil, participate here." So I would turn my body around and really be there for chopping the carrots, or just washing these pots. And over and over again I had to come back. "Okay, Gil, just right here." And I learned so much about my resistance and wanting to get away. And I learned the delight and joy of just really giving myself over to the activity.

And to a point where I really loved to chop the vegetables. And, you know, sometimes there were lots of them for a monastery of many people. And I just loved having a whole, like a whole set of, you know, to have to do a gallon of chopped onions and just kind of just the onions. And so I worked in the kitchen for a year and gave myself kind of wholeheartedly over to being in the kitchen when I was there. And then there was a surprise that happened from that.

Because some days, or there was a time in the day where the work would stop kind of abruptly, partly because I became the manager of the kitchen. And so I kind of stayed longer than the other people. And then I would stop, and I would literally take off my apron and put on my robes and walk up to the meditation hall and sit down to meditate. And what surprised me was that I would sit down and I'd find myself completely present and concentrated. Like there was no warming up, there was no settling in. It's like, boom, I was there.

And because what had happened in the kitchen, this giving myself wholeheartedly, participating just with this activity and having no tomorrow, no yesterday, no tomorrow, nothing but the activity, giving myself forward to it, kind of cleared my mind, had already concen-

trated me, already helped me be present. And so I brought that with me to the meditation hall and I would sit down and boom, I was very still, very focused, very concentrated. And so, in that, then, the meditation in the meditation hall then spilled over and affected how I did work.

And a representative example of that was at a different time, I had to carry something with another person, a very heavy object. I forget what it was, but it was a, I think it was a wooden object, and I had to carry it, the two of us kind of crossed the property in a big long distance. And so we were carrying this thing, and it was heavy and hard to carry, especially it was digging into my hands, and my hands started to hurt a lot. And I suppose I could have asked, "Let's stop and rest a little bit." But what occurred to me, and it's more in retrospect I understand that what I was doing, what was remarkable, was that this became kind of an intuitive or an instinct to do this rather than a "should" or a practice.

Because what I was learning in meditation was how to have an unpreoccupied mind, a mind that was peaceful, a mind that wasn't cut up and reactive. Not that I did it well, but I was certainly learning this was possible. And so it became kind of a natural thing that as I was carrying this, and it was painful, rather than, I wasn't hurting myself or injuring myself, so to keep that in mind, but I could feel that I just wanted to really be there just for that activity and not give in to a reactive mind, not give in to my non-presentation, my pulling back, giving up, my screaming mind that said, "No, this is too painful." I knew a better way of having the mind, a better way of having the heart.

Could I stay in harmony? Could I stay true to this deeper way of being present that didn't give in to reactivity in a way that was, you know, safe to do, was appropriate to do? And so what was happening was then I was particular, but the work that we did was invaluable for me to understand myself, how to inhabit or live what I was learning in meditation. And there were lots of opportunities in the monastery to do that, and many of them not so dramatic as carrying this heavy thing that was so painful to carry. I remember my biceps were kind of, you know, quite intensely painful. But, you know, it was the work.

And so I learned this idea of wholeheartedness. In Zen, there was this idea that when you do something, you do it with both hands. If you offer someone a gift, you do it with both hands. If you're eating, you pick up your bowl with both hands. And this idea of two-handed participation, whatever you're doing, was a way of being fully present, wholeheartedly present, not holding yourself back, not doing things half-heartedly.

And really one of the representative times for that was when I went to Japan and practiced in a monastery there. I was tasked sometimes to carry the dinner food to the dinner table,

where there were about 30 of us monks. It was really, really long, long table in a long room. And we had this table where we'd put down all this food that we had. And I was tasked with it to carry it and place it on the table.

And one day I was carrying the pot of white rice. And it wasn't that heavy, and it was easy enough to just hold in one hand. And so I was just holding it in one hand, walking down the hallway. And one of the monks stopped me and said, "No, no, no. When you carry the rice, you have to carry it with two hands."

I think that the idea was to respect the rice, but also in Zen, the idea was to really be there for that activity. Or the other story of work practice was, after the evening meditation, I was going through the kitchen, and one of the cooks was doing some last-minute vegetable chopping, and he was one of the few people who spoke English. I think there were only two people in the monastery who spoke English. And so I stopped to talk to him, and I think I had a question. So he was chopping his vegetables. I asked a question, he put down his knife, stood up straight, and answered my question in a simple way.

It was nice. He picked up his knife to chop again, and I asked him another question. And he put down his knife, answered nicely. Well, I did it a third time. He put down his knife, sat up, and nicely said to me, "You know, I'm doing this work now, and I'm going to either fully do the work or talk to you, but I'm not going to do both at the same time. And really I need to do the work. It's late and time to go to bed."

And only then did I understand; I didn't pick up the cues that what he was doing, stopping completely to talk to me. And I was so inspired by this, both his care, the way he talked to me, but also that he was just going to do one thing. He was in a monastery, just do this one thing. Don't multitask. Just do it. If you have to stop doing it, then stop and do the other thing that has to be done.

So this is one of these really important lessons I had from my Zen monastic life, that the work practice, what we do with our daily life and how we give ourselves over to it, and really don't hold back. But participate in what we're doing. If you're doing it anyway, participate. Give it a wholeheartedness. It doesn't have to be fast. It doesn't have to be strained. It doesn't have to be overdone.

But it could be very relaxed and simple. But give all of yourself. Don't hold any of yourself back. You're too important to divide yourself between doing something half-hearted and having the other half-heart kind of doing something really not necessary. You're so important that please include all of yourself in what you do. And if you do so, that will support your

meditation and your meditation will support how you live your life. Thank you.