

Stories of Practice (3 of 5) Wholeheartedness

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Hello and welcome.

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. It also feels like a nice topic in this more relaxed Thanksgiving week.

One of the really invaluable areas of practice for me was something that, at the San Francisco Zen Center, they called work practice – the work we did was considered as equal in value to practice as meditation. Learning about practicing in the activity of work has been invaluable for me.

One representative, or very meaningful, turning point 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 / shopping center in Carmel, California, just before we go up deep into the mountains/ national wilderness, where the monastery is.

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 Eastern spirituality, Eastern religions. 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."

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 Las Padres National Wilderness. That sentence stayed with me. As it turned out, I was assigned to work in the kitchen. This question of holding myself back 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. 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. 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.

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.

Literally, I could watch my body turn towards the door, and it was like half my body was doing the chopping of the vegetables. My whole body was not participating: it was trying to escape. And so, "Gil, participate here." I would turn my body around and really be there for chopping the carrots, or just washing these pots. Over and over again I had to come back. "Okay, Gil, just right here."

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, 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. I just loved having a whole set of, you know, to have to do a gallon of chopped onions and just the onions.

I worked in the kitchen for a year and gave myself wholeheartedly over to being in the kitchen when I was there. 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, so I had to stay longer than the other people.

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. What surprised me was that I would sit down and find myself completely present and concentrated: there was no warming up, there was no settling in. It's like, boom, I was there.

Because what had happened in the kitchen, this giving myself wholeheartedly, participating just with this activity and having no tomorrow, no yesterday, nothing but the activity, giving myself to it, cleared my mind, had already concentrated me, already helped me be present. I brought that with me to the meditation hall: I would sit down and boom, I was very still, very focused, very concentrated, and the meditation in the meditation hall then spilled over and affected how I did work.

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, I think it was a wooden object – and we had to carry it, the two of us, across the property, a big long distance. We were carrying this thing, and it was heavy and hard to carry, especially as it was digging into my hands, and my hands started to hurt a lot.

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's what I was doing – what was remarkable was that this became 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 un-preoccupied mind, a mind that was peaceful, a mind that wasn't caught up and reactive; not that I did it well, but I was certainly learning this was possible.

So it became a natural thing that as I was carrying this, and it was painful, was rather than – I wasn't hurting myself or injuring myself, 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-participation, 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 into reactivity in a way that was safe to do, was appropriate to do? The work that we did was invaluable for me to understand, myself, how to inhabit or live what I was learning in meditation. There were lots of opportunities in the monastery to do that. and not many so dramatic as the carrying this heavy thing that was so painful to carry. I remember my biceps were quite intensely painful. But, you know, it was the work.

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. 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.

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 thirty of us monks. It was a 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. I was tasked to carry it and place it on the table.

One day I was carrying the pot of white rice. It wasn't that heavy, and it was easy enough to just hold in one hand, so I was just holding it in one hand, walking down the hallway. 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.

Another story of work practice: 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. There were only two people in the monastery who spoke English, and so I stopped to talk to him; I think I had a question.

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. 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."

Only then did I understand. I didn't pick up the cues from what he was doing, stopping completely to talk to me. 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.

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. Participate in what you'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. 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; please include all of yourself in what you do. If you do so, that will support your meditation and your meditation will support how you live your life.

Thank you.