

STILLNESS, NOT SILENCE

One of the most important aspects of our Zen practice is stillness. But there is a common misconception among Zen practitioners that stillness means “silence,” and this is simply not the case. The quest for silence, in the meditative sense, is simply an attempt to separate one’s self from one of the six senses, as if the absence of sound will bring about enlightenment.

I’m glad we don’t have an on-off switch on each one of our six senses. Can you imagine what some meditators would do? I’ll just shut off all sound....ahh! It’s nice and quiet. What I’m seeing is distracting me too, so I’ll just shut that off....ahh! Now it’s quiet and dark, like a womb. While I’m at it, I may as well shut off smelling and tasting....there! Now I’ve got an itch in my foot and a pain in my knee...flip the switch, no pain and itch! And now to get rid of those pesky thoughts....flip! And now there’s.....nothing!

Is that what we really want...nothing? By separating ourselves from one or more of our senses, we promote a very dualistic and attached view: sound and silence.....noise and quiet....and of course, the one who perceives these things. Now we’re going backwards in our practice.

While our concept of maintaining silence in meditation promotes a very narrow view, practicing stillness promotes a vista-like view: everything is seen in its entirety and yet our viewpoint remains still, it doesn’t follow everything around but allows itself to be the arena in which all things take place.

When we look at the sky we see birds, clouds, airplanes and so forth, but is the sky itself moving around? If it were, we’d all run screaming in panic! When we look at outer space (astrophysics notwithstanding), there are comets careening, supernovas exploding, planets orbiting, black holes drawing in matter and energy, and yet outer space itself is not moving...it’s just still.

If we wanted to intimately know the complex relationships that exist within a forest, would we gather hundreds of our friends and walk around picking every leaf off every tree until we’d examined and discarded them all, or would we simply walk, in stillness, through the forest for a number of years? When we pick all the leaves from the trees, we see some of the details but we miss the greater picture. When we just walk through the forest in stillness, the elements of that picture and their relationships to each other become very apparent over time.

Many of us have allowed ourselves to turn our meditation practice into target practice! Here comes a thought.....bang, got it! Here comes a sound.....bang, got it! The problem is that once we've shot down all of the thoughts or sounds or whatever, we start looking for more things to shoot down. Now we've conditioned ourselves to become target shooters instead of allowing our viewpoint to expand.

The Sixth Ancestor, Hui-Neng, referred to the "target practice" view when he said, "If you do not think of the myriad things but always cause your thoughts to be cut off, you will be bound by the Dharma." Our practice should be about liberation, not about binding ourselves to our own egoistic, dualistic view.

In Hui-Neng's time there was a school of Ch'an that had studied Indian Buddhist texts and was using them as a basis for meditative practice. Imagine that, in a tradition that calls for us to go "beyond words and letters!" Some of the texts said that all thoughts are illusory, so the meditators of the so-called Northern School made it their practice to shoot down all of these illusory thoughts so that they could experience so-called "silence." This is why the Northern School's founder, Shen-Xiu, said in his poem to the Fifth Ancestor that practice is about wiping dust from a mirror, and why Hui-Neng said in his poem that there's no mirror in the first place. The Northern School eventually died out.

What we need to do in our own practice is to promote stillness. By sitting in a relaxed and yet upright position and having the discipline not to move around so much, we promote stillness at a deep physical level. Our body now becomes the arena in which our realization can take place. By remaining consistent in our practice we promote another kind of stillness. If all we do is stay and return, if all we do is to keep asking the question, if all we do is to hold our awareness in place, we produce stillness of mind.

By practicing stillness in everyday activity we begin to see the complex interrelationships of our life while not becoming caught up in all of them. When you see a Bruce Lee movie where he's fighting hordes of bad guys, moving like lightning and exploding like thunder, remember that his mind is still, not silent, and yet his activity is fluid, accurate and powerful.

When you look at an aquarium full of fish and other animals, remember that the glass walls and the metal base of the aquarium remain still while the fish and other animals are constantly moving about. I've observed that mothers of young children who are being very fussy seem to

have more success in calming them down by encouraging them to be a little more still instead of telling them to “BE QUIET!”

So in our practice, the key is simply not to cut off anything. Just drop your attachments to externals and allow the thoughts, the sounds and so forth to be what they are while you maintain your stillness of mind through consistent practice. If you can do this, you will see the activity that exists within stillness....then you will see the stillness that exists within activity....and finally you will become that awareness in which there is no difference between the two.

Amitabha!