

Active Recognition: On Work

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Tonight I've been asked to talk about "work". I take this to mean that you would like to look into finding "work as practice", or finding "practice within work". I also take it that what you really mean is your "job", because the truth is that we're always working but, somehow, we have come to believe that work is something that we can stop and start.

We get up in the morning, and then we wash our face, we make the bed, we sit and we work with the breath or with a koan; we get up, we make breakfast, eat breakfast, do the dishes. We're always working. Everything that we do involves us in this give and take of daily effort, but something funny has happened with our attitudes towards work. We talk about "going to work" as if "work" were a noun; as if it were something that we "go to do" at a certain point. This seems to be part of how we segment our life, our world; it arises from a split between working mind and sleeping mind, between self and other, between good and bad, right and wrong. "Work" is a verb; it's an action; it's a continuous activity. The heart works; when you have a problem, the mind works on it; we breathe in and we breathe out; and this is "work".

With that said, we'll begin by talking about "work" and then, later on, we'll talk about "jobs".

First of all, work is considered to be essential within Zen. In Theravadin countries a monk does not work. In fact, his precepts prohibit him from breaking the ground by hoeing, planting trees and so on and so forth. He depends entirely upon dana or the generosity of lay people. In the morning, he goes out with his bowl to the nearest village and begs his meals for the day; then the rest of the day is to be spent in practice or study, and also doing little services for the lay people; death services, and those sorts of things. In China this situation wasn't possible because the Chinese people simply would not tolerate it. They just would not have given the monks enough to eat. And so, it became necessary for monastics to begin work, to begin to farm. As Zen communities began to take on a definite shape, structure, and mode of practice, work became an essential aspect of the life of practice within a monastery or Zen community.

Baizhang, one of the early Ancestors, who is credited with creating the first true monastic structure for Chan monks, was well known for his saying: "A day without work is a day without eating." Work is thus regarded to be part of one's responsibility towards all sentient beings. Work is regarded as an active and yet simple recognition of the inter-relatedness of everything that we do. In fact, the clothes that we wear came from somewhere, were made by someone, the fabric was woven by someone using certain fibres and so on and so forth. Sunlight and air and rain are all involved in these as well. If we begin to look at anything that we encounter throughout the day, we find a seamless web of inter-relationships and, the more that we cut through the seeming dualities, the more that we find this seamlessness. Work is then regarded as a way of recognizing this fact and taking responsibility for it. "Responsibility" means to make a response, to answer. We must answer the situation by doing what needs to be done.

Work is also regarded as a formal Zen practice, through which we can apply and deepen mindfulness and insight. This is known as "samu" or caretaking practice. In Zen monasteries, at Eihei-ji for example, a novice monk, an unsui, will spend most of the day (when he is not sitting) polishing the floors or doing some such work. When he polishes the floor he simply has a damp cloth and, getting down on his hands and knees, rubs

at the floor. The floors shine as if they're waxed and polished, but they've never seen wax or polish, simply this ceaseless rubbing of novices' hands. Being forced by the situation that one is in to confront these kinds of tasks, like polishing the same floor three times every day, brings one face to face with the goal orientation with which we usually do everything. This sense of working towards a goal is connected with the way that we separate things into what we want to do and what we don't want to do. This attitude only reinforces the sense of hope and fear which robs us of satisfaction and delight in doing what we do.

We tend to ignore the fine details that compose everything that we do and only recognize coarse lumps and chunks of them. For example, when we have a task to do, we start the task by thinking about how it will be when it is finished, and what we're going to be doing after that. In Zen, we begin a task by noticing the details that we're working on at this moment. In the next moment, we're working on another detail, and in the next moment another detail; and at some point the task is finished. That means simply that we go on to other details, other moments of seeing, hearing, touching, colours and sounds. The task was never really finished because it was never really there, but it was done completely because each detail was done completely.

When dealing with something like Zen, or any sort of so-called "spiritual" practice, there's always a tendency to try to abstract oneself from the true matters of life at hand. We worry about the "sound of One Hand" or the Unobstructed, Luminous, Essenceless Nature of Mind, rather than being concerned with such things as how we walk, how we talk, how we treat other people, how we make coffee, how we drink coffee; and yet this walking, talking, making and drinking coffee are the things that we actually do. If enlightenment isn't here, then where else could it be? Because we are nowhere else but where we are, from moment to moment.

The truth displays itself openly and completely in every perception, in every cognition. Because you see colours, because you hear sounds, there is this hearing, there is this seeing. What is it that is aware of these things?

Each thing that occurs, each experience that arises, dwells and decays is a reminder of this nature of mind. It points to the nature of mind. If we are attentive, we find that the "external world" is always presenting us with messages about how we are from moment to moment; whether we're tense, whether we're angry, whether we're dull, whether we're listless, whether we're joyful. In this way the "external" world and our "internal" world are always communicating with each other. When this communication can happen honestly and completely then we find that there is no "external" or "internal" side to our experience, to our life.

The way that we do things affects the actual doing of them: if we are hurried and slovenly then we do things in a very hurried and slovenly way. This is one of the messages that we are getting from the world of Dharma.

The other message which is being presented to us is the actual presentation of these moments, the actual being-time of these moments; the being-time of tasting coffee. The taste of coffee points to the true nature of mind. It is a reminder of the true nature of mind. The taste of coffee, of course, is not the true nature of mind, but it points to something and yet, whatever it is, it is not drowned in that taste of coffee.

When Dongshan Liangjie was walking through a pond, he looked down and, seeing his reflection rippling on the water, had his Daikensho. He wrote a verse about this and part of the verse says, "I am not it, and yet it is all that I am". Whatever it is, is there in that taste of coffee, in the task to be done.

When we get up in the morning we begin our work; in fact all night we were doing our work: our dreaming work, our sleeping work, our resting work, our rolling around in bed work. We sit and we work with the koan, and we work with the breath. We make breakfast for the kids or whatever we do and we go off some place else and do some work there. Instead of splitting our lives into work-week and week-end, we can recognize the fact that we are only living one moment at a time anyway, and we are doing what we are doing when we do it. This brings us to this inter-relatedness that I was mentioning.

There is a grounded quality in paying attention to the things that you're doing, a solid, grounded quality. Yet trying to fixate on the task at hand or to fixate on how you were doing it seems to miss the point; seems to form ice around the subject. Although there's a very grounded quality, this groundedness immediately points to a sense of spaciousness, a sense of openness. Because each thing arises, dwells and decays, these details all shift from moment to moment. You work on "this" and then you work on "that". You can't keep working on this forever; at some moment, it becomes that. The truth of impermanence, the fact of impermanence itself, if recognized, helps to take that grounded quality and open it further into a vast sense of spaciousness, of openness, of readiness to work with whatever comes up. There is a sense of touching and letting go freely; touching firmly, holding lightly, and letting go easily.

If we get stuck on what we're doing then it is much like when we're feeling the breath. If we try to feel this breath completely and we try to make sure that we've felt that breath, we won't allow the next breath to come in because we really want to feel this breath; and then we end up dying. Rather than self-consciously trying to be mindful of everything that we do, if we exert true mindfulness a broader awareness begins to open out at the same time.

This Awareness is that which sees, hears, walks, talks within the realm of the Buddhas. It is itself the realm of the Buddhas and it is present in every task that we do. Practice is never very far from the work that we do because we do it with body, breath, speech and mind and these are the things with which we practice. Since these things are with us all the time the mind of practice is always available. Since we're seeing and hearing there is some sort of awareness there anyway, some sort of recognition, so practice is always possible. Yet we still tend to get lost in that Unobstructed Nature of Mind. We get lost in the feelings that arise, dwell, and decay and the sheer number of tasks that we have to do and the fact that our co-workers might be people that we don't like or, perhaps, that don't like us, or there might be some politics in the office, and so on and so forth.

Still, if we can recognize the basic facts of what is going on from moment to moment, such as the fact that when we stand up our feet are on the ground, or the fact that we see colours and hear sounds, this can remind us a little bit of our actual context. No matter what is occurring to us, we recognize that Awareness is here. In this culture, it is necessary for people to work. It is almost impossible for someone to sit for twelve hours every day. We depend on our jobs to bring in money. In order to eat, to practice, to liberate ourselves from birth and death and to liberate all sentient beings we need to work, we need to have a job. Because of this we don't have as much time for formal practice as would be desirable.

Our priority is to find a way to live this life as honestly and completely as is possible. If we want to find out what this life is, then everything that we do will have to arrange itself around that. Our relationships, our jobs, our clothes, our food, all become ways to practice and to apply practice. They all become means for us to apply our realization and to practice forth and deepen that realization. When we view the things that we do in this light, then we never take our "jobs" seriously as "careers". Instead, our "job" is an active

recognition of our own needs and the needs of others. We will then naturally try to choose means of livelihood that are capable of being of benefit to ourselves and others. In this way, if we always recognize the priority of formal practice, everything becomes an art form through which we can paint or carry out our expression of what we are realizing about our life. This is the true “right livelihood” that Sakyamuni Buddha spoke of in his teaching of the Eightfold Path. In Zen we don’t tend to split things up into the eight of this or the thirty-seven of that; instead, if we just work with the simple fact of this life and this moment all of the principles of the Teachings are fulfilled.

Beyond this general availability of body, breath, speech and mind, the world of practice and the world of Buddhas and everything that comes up we can schedule little things within our jobs that will give us some sense of continuing our connection with formal practice. For example, when the phone rings we can let it ring three times and feel our breath during that period and only then reach for the phone, touch the phone, recognize our context, hear the person’s voice and listen when we listen and speak when we speak. We can, as Robert Aitken roshi has said, create little “islands of practice” in our jobs; little areas where we can remind ourselves of our connection to practice.

It is not necessary to take our office and plaster it full of pictures of Buddhas and calligraphy or have a little altar in there. We can do very simple things such as spending three, four or five minutes just sitting at the desk being mindful, feeling the breath, before we begin the day’s work. During coffee break instead of going “Oh!” and running off to get coffee you could just get up from the desk be aware of getting up from the desk, walk to the canteen and get your coffee; or you could simply stay in your office and sit at your desk and feel your breath. You don’t have to take any particular posture, you don’t have to create a situation which will disturb and freak out your fellow workers. You can simply sit at your desk, keep your back straight and be mindful feeling your breath. Also, you can go for a walk; a nice slow walk; you don’t have to do *kinhin*, but again, just simply walk.

This is where such things as mantras and so on can come in handy. A mantra can seem to be somewhat more of a “solid” thing than the breath when we are lost in the jungle of activities and events of our jobs. It can be something that we can take “hold of” to reaffirm our commitment to mindfulness. If we use the mantra, or even the breath, as something to remove ourselves from the task as such, by inverting attention to some abstract state, then it is dangerous because it would merely deepen the quality of insincerity that self-image has in regard to actually having to step past its thoughts and feelings and states and actually do something. If we are sincere about how we use the mantra or whatever then we will use it to release our sense of confusion rather than use it as a means to avoid what we are confused about.

In our jobs if we can recognize the fact that this is work and work never begins and never ends then we can give up waiting for “time off” from work. When you leave your job, you come home and you make supper and you eat it and you do the dishes and, hopefully, you sit again and work with the breath and work with the koan, or whatever one’s practice is. We cannot take “time off” from our lives because our lives are always the work of this moment. Work never begins and work never ends.