

Confusion: Cures and Causes, Part 1

Several people have asked recently about a sense of confusion regarding their practice. Here are a few thoughts.

First, accept that confusion is present. Confusion is a state of mind just like anger, grief, fear, worry, etc. It has its causes and fundamentally is a cloud obscuring our true nature. Acceptance of the confusion is the first step in relinquishing it. If we do not acknowledge its presence, how can we let it go? Just follow the basic meditation instruction: don't push away, don't hang onto. These are, of course, the negative and positive poles of craving and attachment: at one end, "I don't want," and on the other, "I want to keep" (or, "I want more"). Don't resist confusion and don't indulge it. Accept it simply as a passing state of mind. A recent bumper sticker expresses it nicely: "Don't believe everything you think." In so doing we "cleanse karma" – we change the habits, the neural pathways, of mind and heart. Like weakening any other engrained habit, sitting still with confusion eventually wears out the confusion's energy – it dissipates. Cultivating strong faith and devotion assures us that we will not be left with nothing, a negative emptiness – what we need to know will remain.

Second, endeavor to accept that there will be times when we do not know, and that's OK. When speaking at Rev. Master Jiyu's 10th Anniversary Memorial at Shasta Abbey, the Head of our Order Rev. Master Haryo related two interactions with Rev. Master Jiyu regarding knowledge that had a significant impact on his training and his relationship with her. The first was when she replied, "I don't know" to a question he had asked. So, if even great Zen masters don't know everything, perhaps there's room for others who may not be all-knowing either. The second was her response to another question: "Well, you know, Haryo, there are two kinds of questions: those that have answers and those that don't." Some things in life do not have simple solutions, remedies, or explanations. Can we learn to accept and live with that?

Third, give your attention to what your body and mind are doing in this moment. Follow the basic principle of every-minute meditation: use a simple physical activity to ground yourself and focus the mind. If need be, break up complex activities into smaller components: now I park the car near the curb; now I get out and lock it; now I place the keys in my pocket or purse; now I approach the house; now I climb the front steps; now I stand on the porch; now I ring the doorbell.... We are training the mind just as an athlete trains his or her body for

sports, or as a pianist spends hours practicing musical compositions and scales. Concentration is a key component of meditation, and this is one way that we in our tradition cultivate it. The more we do it, the more control we have over our mind and the choices we make. Please note: don't deliberately think such thoughts as "I'm playing a scale" or "I'm climbing stairs"; just give your mind's energy or attention to the doing itself, to the physical sensation of movement. Any athlete or musician will tell you that at some point one learns to "just play." If you think about it too much, you won't make the basketball goal or play the instrument as fast as your eyes read the music.

Fourth, for confusion arising over larger issues such as, "What or how am I doing in my training," again, bring oneself back to the present moment and reflect: "What do I need to do right now? Wash the dishes? Make a phone call? Drive the children to school? Prepare lunch? Download the day's email?" What is immediately before us that needs to be done? Usually the answer is obvious. We can usually trust our common sense to lead us, provided we remain mindful of the precepts and what we're doing. The intellect serves the heart of awakening, it's not something separate, nor is it something to be despised or thrown away. Rev. Master Jiyu used to emphasize the importance of utilizing our minds by good-humoredly commenting, though with some exasperation, about disciples making daft errors, "So-and-so is going around with their brains in a sack today." In learning mindfulness and trusting ourselves in the small acts of daily life, we develop confidence in our ability to do spiritual practice, for fundamentally these are not two distinct or separate activities.

Willingness is an excellent antidote to confusion, particularly if we are stubborn or prone to doubt. Probably the most valuable teaching I received while training as a monastery resident was being asked to do something that I felt I wasn't capable of. The confidence was placed in me wholeheartedly: I was expected to run with the task, without excuses, doubts, or objections. These tasks ranged from the insignificant such as firing the boiler to greater responsibilities such as running a priory. And lo and behold, I could do it. We all have the Buddha nature and can learn to live from that place beyond the opposites, beyond "can" and "can't." Our Buddha nature is not something separate from the ordinary mind or the activities it engages in: we can perceive when it's time to put another log on the fire, or open a window for ventilation, or empty the ash drawer. We learn from our experience: there are no "mistakes," only course corrections. A popular adage goes, "Good judgment is based on experience, and experience is based on poor judgment." Everything is teaching if we are open to it.

Attachment to ideals can cause confusion. We need to be careful to not set up ideals with which we then measure ourselves – or others. Tending toward idealism myself, it's easy for me to believe or hold the view that there is one right answer or solution and distress myself (and others around me) trying to find or achieve it. I learned this mental outlook early on in school and home where anything less than perfect was not good enough. In cultivating accurate perception, it's essential to let go of "should" and "must." Our morning office scripture *Sando-kai* cautions, "Set up not your own standards." Great Master Dogen teaches us to develop the kaleidoscopic mind, not the binary one of computers and discriminatory minds with their "either/or" options, such as "good/bad." This mind-heart is also the one of compassion, tolerance, and patience.

Expectations cause confusion, too. We would be wise not to set our course in training by expecting particular results or striving to attain certain goals. We of course all do this – but it's another mental habit to set down. Rev. Master Jiyu was told in Japan, first "Don't expect too much," then "Expect very little," and finally, "Don't expect anything." This is Dogen's goal of goallessness and the reason behind Sawaki Kodo-roshi's maxim, "Zazen [meditation] is good for nothing." The point of these short teaching phrases is to stop grasping at ends, for the grasping mind itself is the source of suffering.

Perseverance eventually leads to clarity. We dive into training right where we are, and we do the best we can until we receive feedback that we have overlooked or misunderstood an important instruction or teaching, or that there is a more skillful way to approach a particular aspect of the practice. For instance, when we first learn to meditate, we may count the breaths in order to concentrate the mind. However, in our way of practice, counting breaths is not something we continue once we've learned to concentrate. Having a living teacher to point such things out or help us with perspective is invaluable.

Observable results of this type of meditation, serene reflection or "just sitting," can often only be seen in retrospect, and sometimes only from a point significantly down the road. The explanation and instructions are simple enough. The difficulty is meditating regularly, day in and day out, well or sick, happy or sad, feeling inspired or not. There are no secrets in this practice. Each of us has already been given the complete instructions on how to open the treasure house.

Remembering Dogen's "training is enlightenment" can be helpful, too. We focus on the process of learning/training in this moment, the only place where we can make choices and affect the future, rather than dream or fantasize about some mysterious state that we may someday stumble into. We also do not dwell in guilt or worry about the past. Rev. Master Jiyu once said, "Whatever you think enlightenment is, it's not." Worrying or speculating about the state of our training usually just wastes time, and learning such things is a part of training, too.

So, "don't judge your own training," a teaching we were given as novice monks countless times. Particularly in the beginning years, each of us is rarely the best judge of our training, just as a child learning to read is not the best appraiser of his or her progress. Go for refuge to a teacher whom you have confidence in and believe what she or he says. If they indicate you're doing fine, trust that and get on with things. Don't waste further time by stewing on confusion. Confusion dissipates by our not believing it, by carrying on regardless. (Although it is advisable to retain some humility – none of us is infallible.)

In contemplative practice, whether as monastic or home-dweller, the body-mind learns to trust something greater and more intuitive than the intellectual mind-brain. That "something" is the Buddha nature or heart-mind (but note, it's not the emotional heart of feelings). Rev. Master Jiyu made this distinction by referring to "It" with positive, affirming words such as Buddha nature or heart. Other contemporary Zen masters have sometimes chosen to express it by calling it what it's not, for example, "the 'don't know' mind." By keeping up our meditation and relinquishing the mind's predilection for knowing (deliberate thought), we can learn to hear and heed the still, small voice within.

Commitment and faith anchor us in the midst of the waves of confusion. We keep up the practice, placing our faith (trust, confidence) in our teacher, the teaching, and our fellow practitioners. The Treasure House divides into the Triple Gem as a skillful means for our benefit – to help us find our way and keep going, providing ample evidence and assurance that this path indeed yields fruit.

It's said that the cause of confusion is too much reading. We will take up this topic in a subsequent article.

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