

Find a Hole and Fill It: Finding our Calling, Part 2

First, a footnote to the previous article on “finding our calling” in the February-March (2003) newsletter. When we reflect on our practice of bright stillness in formal meditation and everyday life, we may come to see patterns, perspectives, movement, and direction. By listening to and heeding the “still, small voice” moment by moment, we can usually see what we need to do in our lives, at least short-term. These small moments add up to larger movements. If this direction takes the shape of a livelihood, it is sometimes called our “calling.” However, in contemplative practice the emphasis is on how we live and act rather than on what we do. If we develop stillness and flexibility, simply doing that which needs to be done with a grateful and accepting heart, we can find the truth that Great Master Dogen expresses as “Nothing whatsoever in Buddhism can be set aside as a worldly task” And we will be prepared and able to take the bigger steps of life when they arise.

Many people worry too much about finding out what it is they’re “supposed” to do in life, or in religious training. Some of the best advice my master, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, gave me on this subject was, “Find a hole and fill it.” I had asked a rather intellectual question at a community tea about the relationship between the Bodhisattva vows and the Bodhisattva precepts. Rev. Master responded with a very practical answer, as she often did, addressing the heart of the questioner and giving a valuable piece of teaching. She told the story of the pink concrete truck which she had seen going around town in the San Francisco Bay Area where she would spend summers. The truck had a slogan on its side, “Find a hole and fill it.” It was this homely adage that Rev. Master held up to me as the way to fulfill the Bodhisattva ideal. It can also help to answer worry or anxiety about what we “should” be doing or help clarify what the next step is.

Rev. Master then kindly elaborated on the truck and its purpose: it simply went about finding holes—needs—and filling them. No grandiose ideals or pretensions: just simple, ordinary, practical, useful kind of work. It is enough to reflect within and meditate on the situation we find ourselves in—together with its needs and our abilities—and respond naturally and instinctively from meditation, doing what seems good and what we can.

This wisdom still helps me in my training, particularly in my daily life as a monk living at a small temple. I do not have to look for holes: the needs are usually obvious and all around me! I just have to get about doing what needs to be done. Most of it is pretty ordinary work. Sometimes I cook, sometimes I clean, sometimes I answer the phone or send e-mail. Sometimes I wrestle with my computer (most of us know what that’s like!). Sometimes I meditate, and sometimes I do a ceremony. It is a wonderful opportunity to drop the discriminative mind, letting go of my “shoulds” and “wants” and practice that “all work is that of the Buddha.” There is just the getting on with filling “holes”—the small acts of daily life right in front of us—wholeheartedly and with a bright mind. Thus we sanctify the mundane and embody the Bodhisattva. Thus we heed the “call” of, we “catch,” the Lord of the House (another name for the Unborn), as Rev. Master Jiyu relates in her diary of her years of training in Japan, *The Wild, White Goose* (2000 edition, pages 46, 62, 477).

I've seen other wisdom in this story over the years. First, it's probably human to want do some kind of important or lasting work, or have a grand "calling." Might this be fame and gain, ambition? It's the humble work of many "concrete trucks" that make our lives possible and easier by filling up the "potholes" that any . Everyone notices the potholes in the streets and complain about them before the holes are filled; how many of us reflect in gratitude on a road which has been repaired and rides smoothly? "Take nothing for granted" is another good Zen adage. The bodhisattva—person doing Buddhist training—is not interested in glory. They just wish to purify their heart and benefit sentient beings in some way. The scale is of no concern, and all beings are worthy of assistance.

Also, the cement truck driver is usually an ordinary type of guy (or gal), someone who embodies the morning office teaching of "Do not waste time." Cement work is dirty, messy, physically hard, and usually done under pressure—*the cement is drying out and there's another job to get to!* Likewise our work as a bodhisattva, filling the hole we find in front of us, can be difficult. We get our hands and clothes dirty, we become tired, and there's always another hole to fill. Yet most of the cement drivers I've met are usually cheerful people, and the one who delivered a load for our temple handicap slab here at Eugene got right out there and helped us with the spreading and screeding. He also came back with another load—unanticipated—way past normal operating hours so that we could finish the job. Can we be as cheerful and benevolent to others in our daily lives and not be concerned about rewards and compensations, recognition, or even gratitude?

Another way this story continues to help me in my training is that it's humorous. Rev. Master Jiyu had a wonderful sense of humor and used it often to make a point. She seemed to really get a kick out of the color of the cement truck, pink not being the color one would usually associate with that kind of work. Rev. Master had the skill to help us look beyond the ordinary way of viewing things, what Dogen calls the kaleidoscopic mind, and often she did it with humor. The incongruous color of the truck's big churning bin of gray muck helps me not to take myself so seriously. It was another way of saying, "Lighten up!" and not see ourselves as so important.

The analogy of the concrete truck also points out to make the best use of what we have and what is right in front of us. No longing for a different body or mind or a different set of circumstances. Just do the best you can right now, fill the hole there in front of you.

A few other points in closing. 1) The cement truck does not create holes to fill in. 2) There are some holes that we do not have the right mixture of cement for: with the mind of all-acceptance we go on to holes we can do something about. 3) There are other holes that are so vast that we would be wise to pass them up in order to help in places where it would make a difference. 4) Sometimes the street needs to be torn up and resurfaced: we need to join forces with other trucks to do the job. 5) There will always be holes so there will always be work, training, for us: we need not fret about ever not having enough to do. 6) Trucks need love and care: keep them in good working condition, providing maintenance, repairs, rest, and fuel. 7) We can go home at the end of the day, resting content that we have done our best, and sleeping in peace so that we may go on filling holes another day.

—Rev. Oswin