

## Sitting Still

Rev. Master Seikai

Over 25 years ago, when I had joined the monastery of Shasta Abbey and been ordained a monk, I was assigned to one of the senior monks who would oversee my training as a novice. Being a novice monk is not easy and everyone who takes this path in training has their difficulties, challenges, and needs occasional reassurance that they are doing OK. When I would talk about my training and my problems, my senior would almost always say, “Well, just sit still with that. See what happens.” At times I was frustrated with this answer and felt a little cheated because I thought there ought to be some more profound answer that was going to go to the heart of the matter and solve my problem.

It was only some years later that I saw clearly for myself that the answer I had been given, “just sit still with that,” was actually a truly profound answer. It was an answer that did not make any attempt to solve my problem, or give me anything to chew on intellectually in an attempt to solve my spiritual problems. But it did point me directly to what I really needed to do, and it was that simple. I consider myself fortunate that, at the time, I had a wise and compassionate monk to help me let go of one of the biggest obstacles to making progress in the path of spiritual training: the attempt to rationalize or think ones way through difficulties in life, rather than to take refuge in the actual practice.

This problem is not one that we can let go of all in one big drop—it is let go of bit by bit over a period of time, which will vary from one individual to the next. By actually sitting still in meditation, we engage in the practice which will lead us out of our desperation to find answers to our suffering. But most of us are reluctant to do this at first; we doggedly hold onto the idea that there *must* be an answer, if only someone would give it to us. So it requires a little leap of faith to practice, ‘just sitting still’ in the middle of all our problems, which is just about the last thing we would normally do to get over them.

This faith that just to sit still is sufficient has to be built up one little bit at a time, in the same way that a house made of bricks is built one brick at a time. Our problems will not necessarily just go away when we engage in this practice, but they will definitely change over time; they change in a way that is suited to us as individuals—what we need to work on and let go of is what presents itself from one day to the next.

A little while after the above situation, my suffering had grown more intense in nature, which is indicative, in the context of being a novice monk, that I was actually doing something about myself and looking at the nature of my suffering. At that time I asked Rev. Master Jiyu, my master, how it would be possible for me to tame my “hell hounds” and find true peace of heart. This question was asked in a public question-answer ceremony in front of all the other

monks in the monastery. In reply she said, “Sit still in the place where you ask this question and its meaning will become apparent to you.”

As with my senior monk friend, my master also had the same answer, pointing me inwards to finding the answer within myself, and not looking for a solution outside of myself. Her answer gave me the faith to persevere in my just sitting still, not to look elsewhere, and to stick with it. Things did get better. The unfolding of the Dharma arises from that place of just sitting still, and that process continues in me to this day. The faith that I am OK, whole and sufficient as a human being, lacking for nothing, continues to deepen—and it is because of my faith in the efficacy of just sitting still, letting suffering just be suffering, an experience which arises and passes away.

In the 25 years or more that have passed since the time I was a novice monk, our world has become all the more fast paced, complicated and frenetic. If anything, there is even more reason today to learn to just sit still. Taking 20 or 30 minutes out of a normal day to just be physically still, sitting upright with good posture, watching your breath come and go, watching thoughts and feelings come and go, is vital to sanity.

Sitting still has to do with how we respond to stimuli that enter through our senses, and the stimuli of thoughts that run through our heads. It is possible to take up an observation post a step or two removed from the immediacy of experiencing stressful events, loud emotions, loud feelings, rage, ordinary anger, despair, frustration and irritation. All these things are like the foam on the surface of the ocean as it crashes and surges against the shore—the human experience. But the human experience also includes the ability to meditate, to sit still underneath the noise and confusion on the surface of things. It is not to say that you do not feel things, it is also not an attempt to escape from the noise and confusion. To attempt that is what we call the mistake of quietism. True sitting still is to just accept fully that *things are the way they are*.

Why should we struggle mightily against the way things are? Just maybe things are OK the way they are and it is our habitual responses that need to change. A habitual response of acceptance and relaxation is what we need to cultivate within ourselves. This is what we can actually do to change things for the better; to change our habitual responses is another way of talking about what it means to purify our karma—the karma of habit energy. Learning to accept deeply and to relax within the craziness of our own minds creates merit which helps everyone around us, not just ourselves.

I come back to just sitting still uncountable thousands of times—it is the nature of Buddhist training and the nature of human existence. Accept that there is suffering, accept things as they are, sit still right in the middle of all of it. There are causes to suffering, and they are rooted in our clinging and aversion to things; we can change it for the better by letting go. We can cultivate faith and

create merit for all beings. Look up, as my master would say, towards the light of wisdom that comes from taking one step at a time into the unknown of letting go of an imaginary self that is made up of habitual reactions, hardened opinions, ideas and ideals. Buddhism is a religion, a road map for finding ones way across unknown territory, the territory of no hard-and-fast self, the real world: sitting still is one of our guides.