

## Activism and Contemplation—the Interface

The issue of whether faith or good works should be of primary importance has been pondered for centuries in various religions. These two things can come together in Zen training: *Faith* is the willingness to engage in the experiment of sitting, to look inward, and to explore and clarify the deepest teachings. *Good works* extends to all areas of life, and hopefully is aligned with Zen's three primary Precepts: living beneficially, refraining from causing harm, and awakening increasingly to our interconnectedness with everything.

Recently some Zen participants have been reflecting on the interface between activism and contemplation (or meditation). This concern intensifies as one notices how readily disharmony can arise, even in venues with worthwhile objectives. Some helpful questions we can raise are: Without meditative awareness how can activism go off-course? Without activism (or some other life-centered involvement) will meditation be enough? And what helps strengthen our wish to live with as much wakefulness and kindness as possible?

The relationship between activism and contemplation becomes more clear when we consider the qualities that meditation seeks to awaken: present-moment awareness, focused concentration, seeing through our ego-trips and blind spots, perseverance, kindness, and connectedness.

These qualities need to transition from Zen training into daily living, whether it's through activism, volunteering, the workplace, or our other activities.

If we've worked or volunteered in places where there wasn't much harmony, we know how counterproductive it can be when self-righteous anger or unskillful remarks undermine the worthwhile purpose of the activity. We also know the pain of unkind or divisive remarks, whether they're aimed at us, or come out of our mouths.

This makes it helpful to have mirrors, or ways to see whether our actions reflect our stated values. Bringing meditative awareness to the things we do helps us stay aware of the purpose of what we're engaged in. For instance, it's easy to lose



**The Questhaven retreat** is full, but everyone is welcome to side sit. The Dharma Talk will be at 3:10 pm on Friday and Saturday, June 7 and 8.

**August sesshin** applications will be accepted starting on June 11. If you can't attend the full 5-day sesshin (August 6–11) you can apply for the first or last 3 days.

**Practice Period** will be from September 14 through October 12. Please leave this period open so you can attend all activities.

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track of the point of the activity if we become obsessed with our part of the task, or lose sight of the other people involved. When we look closely, we're likely to recognize the impact of our own habitual reactions or communication glitches, as well as our hidden agendas—like hoping an activity will make us feel better about ourselves, or using the activity to keep us from having to face our shadowy, unresolved pain.

In my decades of college teaching, there was one office that many of us tried to bypass, because the person at the front desk was so hostile. When you entered, she'd scowl and growl "Whaddya want?" Yet that office was the only place where certain things that everyone needed were available.

Interacting with her over the years, I realized that she probably wouldn't deal with people the way she did unless she was in a lot of pain. It was a good reminder of how heartening it is to encounter a welcoming attitude, or to extend one, even when we don't particularly feel like it. I began to greet her with friendliness regardless of her response. This doesn't have to be phony; it just means that we don't let our moods or reactions be our god. When we've been at a low point—medically, financially, or in a relationship—and turned to someone for help, it's been a real gift to be greeted hospitably. After all, they may be having a hard time too. This is a small example of how kindness enriches daily living.

There are many ways that meditative awareness can be helpful in the workplace. Sometimes our job isn't the one we dreamed of. In fact, how many people do you know who really love their work? When dissatisfaction takes over at work, we may become more concerned with the paycheck and medical benefits than the job itself. Or we may fall into gossip, complaining, reading personal emails or surfing the internet—all on company time. It's common to forget that the point of work is...the work. Our responsibility is to accomplish what needs to be done, in the most effective way we can, whether we feel fulfilled or not. And if our job isn't what we hoped for, we can seek out ways to offer our particular skills and aspirations in other venues, like activism and volunteering.

There are also ways to bring together Zen practice with our activism and desire to serve. One small example: we might take on some responsibility at ZCSD, like showing up for the 8:30 work practice period, which helps keep the place going, since we have no staff.

As we awaken to the interface of activism and contemplation, we get tastes of our unity with existence. By the way, interconnectedness doesn't mean that "it's all good" or that anything goes. Sometimes a strong disagreement needs to be addressed, or something conventionally harmful is occurring. Still, these things can be resolved without taking an adversarial stance. Practice helps us learn to disagree with civility and diplomacy, and to refrain from dividing things into us-versus-them.

This brings us to *right speech*. Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the pre-eminent Zen teachers of our time, is nearing the end of life. Addressing the importance of how we communicate, he says: "Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the

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inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate compassionate speech and deep listening in order to bring peace of mind to others, and help relieve their suffering. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”

As an example of how this can be done, I once heard someone say, “I disagree with you on this, yet I’d be interested to hear what led you to see things this way”—and then refrain from debating or becoming argumentative when they responded.

Discovering the interweaving nature of activism and contemplation makes us less likely to fall into false dichotomies, like seeing formal practice as separate from daily living. This in turn enlivens our meditation, as well as our activism and other life involvements.

*Elizabeth Hamilton*