

from The Truth of This Life,  
Katherine Tanes

## Cultivating the Silent Mind

WE SEEM TO NEED pauses around things.

Before I begin my talk, I settle myself on my cushion, just as you have all settled yourselves, and then we chant. Chanting is a ritual pause. It is also an activity complete in itself. If I began to speak immediately after entering, you might not be ready to listen, and I might not be ready to speak. Readiness takes time—that is, readiness to be wholeheartedly and undividedly here.

The space between words allows us to discern the words. Silence is in the notes of music and also around them, like the breath in words we speak. You cannot have a word without the silence around it. You cannot have music without the silence in it. The silence inside our minds allows us to hear ourselves.

Here's a Zen story from Thomas Cleary's translation of the *Book of Serenity*\*: One day Yunyan\* was sweeping the ground. Daowu said, "Too busy." (These are two old dharma brothers testing each other.) Yunyan said: "You should know there's one who isn't busy." (Case 21)

## WHAT WE CANNOT KNOW

Yunyan was referring to the deep quiet mind that is always present, even in the midst of activity. In this story that settled mind is called "the one who is not busy." Do you know that mind, how to find it—even in the midst of being busy? That mind is always with us.

Zen practice directs us to that quality of mind that simply observes—it is called the not-knowing mind, the awake mind, the mind of readiness. At first we cultivate that mind in the meditation room, and then we bring it to each situation in our lives.

In the last mindfulness class, one student told us about a difficult conversation she had had that week during which she had practiced "just watching" her breath and her physical sensations. Instead of her usual reactions to being criticized, she said, the practice of "just watching" her body tense, her breath constrict, and her feelings that came up allowed her to remain in the situation. As a result, she had a much different conversation than she otherwise would have had. That was an example of cultivating the mind that is not busy.

This is a new robe that I'm wearing. It is beginning to fold just the way my old robe did. I would prefer that it wouldn't fold so predictably like this. It didn't fold until I put it on. The weight and shape of the cloth, the pattern, how it is sewn, and how I move my body create the folds. And once the folds are in, they're in. Each time I wear it, it folds in the same place. The folds will not disappear even when the robe is ironed.

As I'm noticing this, I'm going, *Oh, this looks just like my old robe.* This is the third day I'm wearing it, and it's already taking a familiar shape. Causal conditions.

We took our shape very early thanks to our biology, the

environment, family context—our karmic conditions. When we are willing to be creased a certain way, and keep doing it, it's hard to uncrease us. We have learned to turn and bend a certain way. Because that way is "natural" now, it is hard to divert us. These are the moments when we define the self:

- I want this.
- I feel this.
- I must do it this way.

This is the arising of the conditioned mind. There are other moments of direct knowing when we slip in and out of events smoothly, without conditioned mind impeding.

If it is a conditioned moment, we might inquire whether some fear is at its root, a fear that requires that I fold in this "particular way." These creases are burned into our nervous system; that's how deep they are.

A good way to study the conditions in which we want things to appear or to not appear is through working with pain, the sensation of burning, throbbing, hot, stretching, tearing—however it is arising for you. What happens when consciousness dares to enter this throbbing, burning sensation? When you enter the shape of pain, you go past the shape in your mind; you go past the aversion and fear in your mind. This direct experience lacks aversion and fear. There is simply direct knowing.

When a part of consciousness isn't holding out, saying, "Oh, do I have to do this?" your whole being is hot, throbbing, on the verge. It's on the threshold because you have entered the

shape of pain in your mind. That experience goes beyond the appearance and nonappearance of conditions. You're right on the margin, where your authentic life actually exists.