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Hold to the Center!

Zen advice for when things blow up around you

By Wendy Egyoku Nakao Roshi | SUMMER 2017



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A monk asked Xinghua Cunjiang, “What should one do when things come from every direction?”

The master said, “Hold to the center.”

The monk bowed.

The master then said, “Yesterday, as I was on my way to a dinner in the village, I was caught in a sudden storm with heavy rain and violent wind, so I headed for an old shrine and found shelter.”

Ying’an Tanhua commented:

“The assembly considered the matter and said, ‘Taking shelter in an old mausoleum refers to the self that precedes the Kalpa of Emptiness, or to the place where Xinghua attained peace of mind and fully realized his original nature.’”

*–Entangling Vines: A Classic Collection of Zen Koans,
trans. Thomas Yuho Kirchner*

The exact reasons that caused the monk to ask his question in this koan are unknown, but whatever the particulars were, we can all relate to circumstances that make us feel as if we’ve lost our center. The point of this koan is simple: when heavy rain and violent winds assault you, you know to seek the nearest shelter. How is it that you know what to do in a storm, and yet in other situations, you feel as if you have lost any sense of what to do?

As a member of the Zen Peacemaker Order, I have come to rely on what we refer to as the Three Tenets, which are Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Taking Action, as an effective way to hold to the center in any given situation. With regular application, the practice of the Three Tenets can become a way of living from the center at all times. Although the tenets are taken in order when you study them, the practice is not necessarily linear. Each tenet reflects the others; they are seamlessly embedded in each other, flowing as center, circumstance, and action in an ever-unfolding and endlessly varied circle of life.

The first of the Three Tenets, Not-Knowing, can be described as the letting go of fixed ideas about yourself, others, and the universe. Difficult circumstances—political upheaval, the sudden loss of a loved one, or the unexpected termination of

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your job—can make life feel suddenly unstable. But actually, according to the Buddha, things are *always* unstable. It's just that we have a tendency to live life from a set of unquestioned beliefs that make our lives feel solid: we believe that politics will always operate along the status quo, for instance, or that our children will outlive us, or that our plans for the future will come to fruition. The truth is, once you start to pay careful attention to the nature of life, you will begin to question all of your beliefs. How can you know what will happen next? You can't—because the universe, from its tiniest particles to its largest forms, is continually in flux.

In Three Tenets practice, not-knowing trains you to continually set aside fixed points of view. I describe not-knowing as a flash of openness or a sudden shift to being present in the moment. This dropping away of the things you have relied upon for a sense of stability may lead you to examine what you believe is your center. A student told me of a time, for example, when he was pruning his climbing rose, which he had painstakingly trained to grow up the drain pipe along the front of his house. He was standing on tiptoe on an old tree stump snipping away when suddenly the stump collapsed under him and he fell into the rose vine. As the thorns and entangled vines wrapped themselves around him, he realized that what he had thought was a stable center was actually a rotted stump. You may have had this exact same experience of realizing not-knowing when the ground you stood on has dropped out from under you.

Recent times in particular have thrust many people into a state of not-knowing. I received this email after the Fall 2016 U.S. election from a student: “These days things are so destabilized that it is hard to even find the center. . . . So many of my mental yardsticks of how the world works have been called into question, or have just unraveled in front of my eyes, [that] it is hard to get my bearings in this ‘new world order.’ . . . All frames of perspective seem unstable to me.”

In a world of instability, where is shelter to be found? The answer is what Ying'an Tanhua was pointing to when he said in his commentary that not-knowing is like that which precedes the kalpa of emptiness. The kalpa of emptiness is “the kalpa that lies between the destruction of one universe and the formation of the next.” In other words, to hold to the center in this view is to take shelter in the place before anything arises, a place of emptiness and profound silence, a place of the deepest rest

where self-interest has not yet entered. This is not a void, but rather a darkness where things are not yet differentiated or seen. You yourself can go to the darkness and become like an empty vessel, empty of points of view and preferences. An empty vessel refuses nothing and receives everything that is coming at it from all directions. By practicing in this way, you can create more space to accommodate your own reactivity and the points of view of others.

It should be said that the not-favoring-of-viewpoints that arises when one practices not-knowing does not demonstrate a lack of caring. Rather, not favoring any one thing over another allows you to center yourself within a boundless net of interconnection and to expand your circle of caring. My root teacher Maezumi Roshi would often say to me, “I don’t ask you to give up your ideas, but at least set them aside for a while. You can pick them up again later.” In this way, the practice of not-knowing can align you with the ever-changing interconnected reality called Life. Practicing not-knowing may seem impossible to do, and yet, when you realize that life itself excludes nothing, practicing not-knowing over time will enable you to become more aware of what you choose to let in and open to what you had previously excluded.

Bearing Witness to the joy and suffering of the world is the second tenet. The practice of bearing witness is to see all of the aspects of a situation including your attachments and judgments. You cannot live solely in a state of not-knowing, because life also asks that you face the conditions that are coming at you by being present to them. When you bear witness you open to the uniqueness of whatever is arising and meet it just as it is. When combined with not-knowing, bearing witness can strengthen your capacity for spaciousness, thus enabling you to be present to the very things that make you feel as if you have lost your center. It can strengthen your capacity to listen to other points of view, thus allowing a more nuanced picture of a situation to emerge.

In the koan, the monk is bearing witness to all the things coming at him from all directions, and Master Xinghua himself bears witness to the storm. In translating Xinghua’s direction to “hold to the center,” the word “hold” is the Chinese word *da*. *Da*, an emphatic, can also be translated as “aim,” “hit,” or “strike.” So “hold to the center” can also be rendered as “strike the center,” “aim to the center,” or “hit the center.” The phrase “hold to”

can seem passive, but consider that Xinghua is directing you to actively engage the center of not-knowing and from there to bear witness to all that is coming at you.

Buddhist meditation trains you to bear witness by strengthening your awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise and pass. As your awareness strengthens, you begin to experience spaciousness and stability and see that you have a choice in your response to what is arising. Over time, you learn to bear witness to all the elements that are arising with a curious and compassionate attitude. This does not mean repressing the strong emotions that arise or stopping the escape into story drama, but rather being aware of what you are choosing to feed. A wise old tale often attributed to the Cherokee warns that when many demons are struggling inside you, the one that you feed is the one that will become the strongest. You alone are responsible for what you feed. Will you keep feeding the poisons, such as greed and hatred, or will you develop the spiritual strength through your spiritual practice that will help you to bear witness in the midst of strong reactivity and to hold to the center?

When I recently conducted a public face-to-face in my Zen community, a longtime spiritual practitioner, wearing a yarmulke over his silver hair, came forward and took the seat beside me. He began by saying, “Hitler is my teacher. He has been my teacher for all of my life.” He then shared with the group for the first time the harrowing account of his childhood. From the ages of 7 to 9, this young boy and his family members were hidden by a Polish family in a small covered-dirt pit on their farm. They lived in this darkness for two years until World War II ended. Since then, he has been wrestling with the effects of those years in the pit: bearing witness has indeed been the practice of a lifetime for him.

On this Sunday when we were bearing witness together to his story, his shining eyes and glowing face exuded an unshakeable peace. Although the account was difficult to absorb, the act of witnessing together formed a collective center. The group itself became an empty vessel of stillness and silence into which he poured the suffering of his lifetime. When he stood up and returned to his seat, he said softly, as if to himself, “I guess I have come to accept all of it.” He had experienced a sense of wholeness by bearing witness to the parts of his life that were previously present but not fully accepted. With the passage of

years spent struggling with all of the particulars of his situation, which led to a new understanding of it, this man who survived the horrors of his youth is now at peace with himself.

Bearing witness can allow you to eventually come to terms with the most difficult life circumstances. The practice is always available to you regardless of the time, place, situation, or people involved.

In bearing witness, you are actively engaged and

There is nothing you cannot bear witness to, from dusting the lint off your sweater to living in a pit for two years.

embodied, even struggling, with whatever is arising. Sometimes spiritual practices can have a neutralizing effect, flattening feelings rather than stimulating them. To hold to the center is not about becoming a spiritual zombie; it is about living the fullness of your own humanity. You are alive, so be fully alive.

The third tenet is Taking Action. It is impossible to predict what the action in any situation will be, or the timetable for when it will arise or what might result from it. The underlying intention is that the action that arises be a caring action, which serves everyone and everything, including yourself, in the whole situation.

Sometimes the action is as simple as continuing on with the practice of the first two tenets of not-knowing and bearing witness; the very practice of the Three Tenets is itself a caring action. You could say that Master Xinghua took action by seeking shelter in an old shrine.

Or that the public sharing of the story of two years in the pit was an action taken after decades spent bearing witness. And though the action that arises from the engagement of not-knowing and bearing witness is spontaneous and often surprising, it always fits the situation perfectly. One student told me that when her landlord delivered a notice of a rent increase, she was overcome by despair as memories were triggered of her being left alone on the street with her clothes as a child. During the days following the rent increase, she bore witness to her painful feelings of abandonment. After a few days, she decided to go to one of her favorite places for lunch. When she entered the eatery, she saw a

dirty, disheveled man incoherently mumbling and turning his pockets inside out for money. To her, this man embodied all the despair she had been bearing witness to over the past few days. Without hesitation and unnoticed by the man, she told the cashier to give him what he wanted and that she would pay for it. In that moment of spontaneous action, she returned to herself and a sense of her center for the first time since receiving the rent increase notice.

Training with the tenets is a matter of taking a backward step again and again and continually discerning your internal processes in the midst of acknowledging what is happening around you. When you hold to the center by engaging these tenets, you let go of preconceived agendas about what needs to happen and your need to make it happen.

The practice of the Three Tenets can become a way of living at the center at all times. An effect of ongoing and consistent practice of the Three Tenets is that when you lose your sense of center and fall into reactivity, you also regain your center more quickly. And when you continually perform this practice in the midst of all the activities of your daily life, the practice will be readily accessible to you during the most challenging circumstances.

Training with the tenets brings about resiliency of the spiritual muscles and an ever-deepening sense of reality. As life unfolds around you, the Three Tenets are active inside of you, always directing you back to the center, so that you carry out Xinghua's directive.

When things come at you from all directions, hold to the center!



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