

Let It Be

One of the biggest problems we have as human beings is that we have an overactive roof brain. We frequently identify with the brain as who we are, rather than relating to it as simply a useful part of us. How often do we find ourselves identifying totally with our thoughts, or with our ego identities?

The brain is actually divided into two parts — the old brain and the new brain. The old brain, often called the limbic system, is hard wired toward survival, and it determines our most primary emotional reactions, such as instinctive fear. There is no sense of time in the old brain — no notion of past, present or future. That is why emotional hurts — where fear may be triggered — are often experienced way out of proportion, as if it's always been this way, and always will.

The basic question of the old brain is, “Is it safe?”

The new brain, or cerebral cortex, is also geared toward survival, but in a more sophisticated way. It relates to experiences as problems to be solved - it observes, it analyzes, it organizes, it makes decisions - all geared to make us feel comfortable and safe.

The new brain, of which the ego is a part, is basically interested in controlling our experiences, controlling our world. This is not, in itself, a bad thing. In fact, it can help us navigate through the inevitable difficulties we have as humans. However, the problem is that the brain takes over, and our world becomes like a pro-

tected cocoon — small, and narrow — and, as a consequence, we shut life out.

One outcome of living primarily from the brain is that we develop the deeply-seated belief that only by effort and doing can we get what we want. Think for a moment. Are you aware of the extent to which this belief is on board? We believe, at least on a subtle level, that we need to manipulate people, that we need to manipulate life. We may not like to think of ourselves in this way, but simple observation would show us that we do it all day long. We feel the need to struggle and push, to fix whatever seems to be a problem.

The particular attitude of mind that perhaps best sums up the brain's basic stance toward life, which again, is always based in the need to survive and be safe, is captured in the pithy zen phrase, “Just do it!” “Just do it!” implies a kind of gut effort; it involves the ideals of being active, of doing, of being productive; it requires making things happen, making things better.

But there's another kind of effort that's possible for us. You can say that this second kind of effort comes more from the heart than from the brain. Instead of trying to do, the effort is

more to simply Be. Instead of trying to fix or control, the inclination is more toward openness or receptivity. Instead of trying to struggle, the aspiration is to connect.

So whereas the message of the brain is “Just do it, the message of the heart can be stated as “Let it be.”

Let’s look at this in terms of sitting practice. What usually happens when we sit down to meditate? If we happen to have a busy mind, don’t we often think that something is wrong? Further, don’t we think that we have to do something about it? If we’re feeling confused or anxious, don’t we again think that something is wrong, and moreover, that something is wrong with us? As a consequence, we naturally move into the fix-it mode.

But there’s an alternative way to approach our “problem.” No matter what we bring in the door, no matter how we may be feeling – either physically or emotionally – the practice is to simply sit down, acknowledge what’s going on, and then let it be. What this requires is the basic understanding that our states of body and mind are not problems to be solved or obstacles to be overcome. They simply are what they are. It’s primarily our judgments about them that cause us endless difficulties.

For example, if we get bored or sleepy during sitting, we judge it as a bad sitting. If we get agitated or upset, we think we have to become calm. If we get confused, we long for clarity. But the fact is, no matter what may be happening with us, all we need to do is acknowledge

what’s happening, and then be as fully aware as we can. And in that very awareness, even our upsets become our path. The underlying principle is that awareness heals.

So the theme is to simply let it be. Please be clear: this is not a passive or pseudo detachment; we still need the discipline to stay present, to remain still, and to be precise in our self-observation. But there’s a particular attitude of mind (heart) that’s simply willing to look, to be open to what comes up, to be curious, to cease judging and resisting. And as we cease our resistance to what is, there will be a growing willingness to be with, and perhaps even enjoy on some level, our repeating patterns, our little human drama, the whole passing show. We learn how to rest in our experience without falling into the trap of wallowing in it.

Granted, sometimes we may have anxiety. But the practice is to simply see the thoughts, feel the physical feelings of anxiety, and just let it be there. Sometimes we may feel sleepy or tired. The practice is to really feel that, and then just let it be there. Sometimes we may feel resistance, or feel discouraged in our sitting. The practice is, again, to clearly see the believed thoughts, to truly feel the visceral experience of resistance or discouragement, and then to simply let it be.

This practice, in a way, is very simple. But it is also very difficult to do. Why? Because the mind is simply not inclined to let things be. It does not want to give up its pictures, its opinions, its judgments, of how things should be. It

is much more interested in analyzing, judging, blaming, and above all, making things “better.”

But it's possible to balance the “just do it” attitude of the mind – which, of course, is still necessary – with the softer effort of the heart. It's also possible to understand that we don't have to be some particular way, nor do we have to feel any special way. When we truly understand this, it's an incredible relief. As we cultivate this more spacious sense of awareness, we can begin to relax into our sitting – essentially, relax into our life. And perhaps we can even get a glimpse of the profound yet simple truth of the willingness to just Be.

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