

The Ordinary Mind

Chapter Three

Don't Know Mind: The Most Honest Position

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A chapter drawn from more than a decade of dharma talks.

Don't Know Mind

The Most Honest Position

If there is a single concept that runs through more of Will's talks than any other, it is this: don't know.

Not the confused kind of not-knowing, where we are lost and frightened and reaching for an answer. The other kind — the open, spacious, alive not-knowing that is, in Will's teaching, indistinguishable from wisdom itself.

“Beginner's mind. I like to call it don't-know mind. If you truly have don't-know mind, you've already surpassed many practitioners who practiced for many years. In that instant, in that moment, when you truly have don't-know mind — that's it.”

He takes the description further: “Don't-know mind is like space. Space has a name but no form, yet it contains everything. Don't-know mind is wisdom. If you think you know — we don't know.”

There is a Zen koan quality to this. Knowing that you don't know is itself a kind of knowing. The practitioner who sits there certain they've figured it out has actually drifted furthest from the practice. The beginner who sits there completely uncertain is, paradoxically, closer to it.

The Seeking Mind Is the Obstacle

Will connects don't-know mind directly to one of the most common problems practitioners bring to him — the restless seeking for answers, for certainty, for something to fix the feeling of being lost:

“Our seeking mind is where all the distractions and all the errors and judgment are. It’s just an extension of our idea of self — and whatever form that’s taking — looking somewhere to fulfill something somehow by seeking. Don’t know is different. Don’t know is accepting as it is. Just this. Being present to whatever is happening in the moment. It’s not in the future. It’s not something you’re aspiring to gain.”

He describes the seeking he found himself doing when reading news about geopolitical conflict — the frantic scanning for reliable information, the stress building as the algorithm fed him more uncertainty than clarity. He recognized it as a form of the same seeking anyone brings to their life when they feel something is wrong and need to find the answer that will make it right.

“I recognized that what was happening for me is I was feeling some stress about it. I was feeling some pain about the suffering that we’re going through. And just in my own mind, I found myself seeking some sort of solution, some sort of answer. And it reminded me of all those times in my life where I was seeking something outside of myself to explain the situation I’m in. By seeking, you’ve already created an idea of what it is you’re after. You already think you know something.”

Inquiry: ‘What Is This?’

The counterpart of don't-know mind — its active, alive expression — is the great inquiry. In the Korean Zen tradition, this is called hwadu: the great question held in the body of practice.

“In our Zen practice we talk about Buddha nature, or original nature... Our practice is really seeing how this identification with self isn’t working out for us very well. So we come to the practice with this great question — ‘What the hell am I doing here? What is this? Who am I?’ In the Korean traditional, it’s called a hwadu

— *the great inquiry, the great question. So you sit with: what is this?*”

He is careful to distinguish this genuine inquiry from intellectual speculation — from the philosophical discussion-with-oneself that feels profound but goes nowhere:

“I call it sometimes ‘mental masturbation’ — it can have a sort of euphoric effect temporarily, just like masturbation. But it doesn’t last. Why? Because here you are. Just this.”

This is a distinction Will returns to across hundreds of talks. The great inquiry is not a thought experiment. It is not philosophy. It is not asking the question and then waiting for an intellectual answer to arrive. It is holding the question in the body, in the breath, in the silence of sitting — and staying there, without grasping for resolution.

Don’t know is not the beginning of the path, waiting to be replaced by knowing. Don’t know is the path itself. Alive. Present. Sufficient.

Continue the practice.

This chapter is drawn from *The Ordinary Mind*, a collection of Will’s teachings being compiled from his full archive of dharma talks. The Ordinary Zen Sangha meets every Wednesday evening and Sunday morning in Sarasota, Florida — and on Zoom for those who cannot be there in person. No experience is necessary. All are welcome.

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