

Responding to Pressure

From the book *Nothing Special: Living Zen* by Charlotte Joko Beck and edited by Steve Smith (published by HarperCollins, 1994)

I. Dharma Talk

Before service we recite the verse of the Kesa: “Vast is the robe of liberation, a formless field of benefaction. I wear the universal teaching, saving all sentient beings.” The phrase “a formless field of benefaction” is particularly evocative; it calls forth who we are, which is the function of a religious service. The point of Zen practice is to be who we are—a formless field of benefaction. Such words sound very nice, but living them in our own lives is difficult and confusing.

Let’s look at how we handle pressure or stress. What is pressure for one person may not be pressure for someone else. For a person who is shy, pressure might be walking into a crowded party. For another, pressure might be being alone, or meeting deadlines. For another, pressure might mean having a slow, dull life without any deadlines. Pressure could be a new baby, a new lover, a new friend. It might be success. Some people do well with failure but can’t handle success. Pressure is what makes us tighten up, what arouses our anxiety.

We have different strategies for responding to pressure. Gurdjieff, an interpreter of Sufi mysticism, called our strategy our “chief feature.” We need to learn what our chief feature is—the primary way we handle pressure. When the pressure’s on, one person tends to withdraw; another struggles harder to be perfect, or to be even more of a star. Some respond to pressure by working harder, others by working less. Some evade, others try to dominate. Some get busy and talk a lot; others become quieter than usual.

We discover our chief feature by watching ourselves under pressure. Each morning when we get up, there is probably something in the day ahead that will cause pressure for us. When things are going badly, there’s just nothing but pressure in our lives. At other times there’s very little pressure, and we think things are going well. But life always pressures us to some degree. Our typical pattern for responding to pressure is created early in our lives. When we meet difficulties as children, the smooth fabric of life begins to pucker. It’s as if that puckering forms a little sack that we pull together to hide our fear. The way we hide our fear—the little sack that is our coping strategy—is our chief feature. Until we handle the “chief feature” and experience our fear, we can’t be that seamless whole, the “formless field of benefaction.” Instead we are puckered, full of bumps.

Over a lifetime of practice one’s chief feature shifts almost completely. For instance, I used to be so shy that if I had to enter a room with ten or fifteen people—say, a small cocktail party—it would take me fifteen minutes of pacing outside before I could get up my courage to enter the room. Now, however, though I don’t prefer big parties, I’m comfortable with them. There’s a big difference between being so scared one can hardly walk into a room and being comfortable. I don’t mean to say that one’s basic personality changes. I will never be “the life of the party,”

even if I live to be one hundred and ten. I like to watch others at parties, and talk to a few people; that's my way.

We often make the mistake of supposing that we can simply retrain ourselves through effort and self-analysis. We may think of Zen practice as studying ourselves so that we can learn to think differently, in the sense that we might study chess or cooking or French. But that's not it. Zen practice isn't like learning ancient history or math or gourmet cooking. These kinds of learning have their places, of course, but when it comes to our chief feature—the way we tend to cope with pressure—it is our misuse of our individual minds that has created the emotional contraction. We can't use it to correct itself; we can't use our little mind to correct the little mind. It's a formidable problem: the very thing we're investigating is also our means or tool for investigating it. The distortion in how we think distorts our efforts to correct the distortion. We don't know how to attack the problem. We know that something's not right with us because we're not at peace; we tend to try all sorts of false solutions. One such "solution" is training ourselves to do positive thinking. That's simply a maneuver of the little mind. In programming ourselves for positive thinking, we haven't really understood ourselves at all, and so we continue to get into difficulties. If we criticize our minds and say to ourselves, "You don't think very well, so I'll force you not to think" or "You've thought all those destructive thoughts; now you must think nice thoughts, positive thoughts," we're still using our minds to treat our minds. This point is particularly hard for intellectuals to absorb, since they have spent a lifetime using their minds to solve problems and naturally approach Zen practice in the same way. (No one knows this better than I do!) The strategy has never worked, and it never will.

There's only one way to escape this closed loop and to see ourselves clearly: we have to step outside of the little mind and observe it. That which observes is not thinking, because the observer can observe thinking. We have to observe the mind and notice what it's doing. We have to notice how the mind produces these swarms of self-centered thoughts, thus creating tension in the body. The process of stepping back is not complicated, but if we're not used to it, it seems new and strange, and perhaps scary. With persistence, it becomes easier.

Suppose we lose our job. Floods of thoughts come up, creating various emotions. Our chief feature springs in, covering our fear so that we don't deal with it directly. If we lose our job, the only thing to do is to go about finding another one, assuming we need the money. But that's often not what we do. Or, if we do look for another job, we may not do it effectively because we're so busy being upset by the activity of our chief feature. Suppose we've been criticized by somebody in our daily life. Suddenly we feel pressure. How do we handle it? Our chief feature jumps right in. We use any mental trick we can find: worrying, justifying, blaming. We may try to evade the problem by thinking about something useless or irrelevant. We may take some sort of drug to shut it out.

The more we observe our thoughts and actions, the more our chief feature will tend to fade. The more it fades, the more we are willing to experience the fear that created it in the first place. For many years, practice is about strengthening the observer. Eventually, we're willing to do what comes up next, without resistance, and the observer fades. We don't need the observer anymore; we can be life itself. When that process is complete, one is fully realized, a buddha—though I haven't met anyone for whom the process is complete.

Sitting is like our daily lives: what comes up as we sit will be the thinking that we want to cling to, our chief feature. If we like to evade life, we'll find some way in sitting to evade our sitting. If we like to worry, we'll worry. If we like to fantasize, we'll fantasize. Whatever we do in our sitting is like a microcosm of the rest of our lives. Our sitting shows us what we're doing with our lives, and our lives show us what we do when we sit.

Transformation doesn't begin with saying to ourselves, "I should be different." Transformation begins with the realization expressed in the verse of the Kesa: "Vast is the field of liberation." Our very lives themselves are a vast field of liberation, a formless field of benefaction. When we wear the teachings of life, observing our thoughts, experiencing the sensory input we receive in each second, then we are engaged in saving ourselves and all sentient beings, just by being who we are.

II. Question and Answer

STUDENT: My "chief feature" seems to change according to the situation. Under pressure I am usually controlling, domineering, and angry. In another situation, however, I might become withdrawn and quiet.

JOKO: Still, for any person, different behaviors in responding to pressure come from the same basic approach to handling fear, though they may look different. There is an underlying pattern that's being expressed.

STUDENT: When I feel pressured—especially when I feel criticized—I work hard and try to do well; I try not to just react, but to sit with the anxiety and fear. In the last year, however, I've come to realize that when I feel criticized, underlying my efforts to perform well is rage. I really want to attack; I'm a killer shark.

JOKO : The rage has been there the whole time; being a nice person and a fine performer is your cover. There's a killer shark in everybody. And the killer shark is unexperienced fear. Your way of covering it up is to look so nice and do so much and be so wonderful that nobody can possibly see who you really are—which is someone who is scared to death. As we uncover these layers of rage, it's important not to act out; we shouldn't inflict our rage on others. In genuine practice, our rage is simply a stage that passes. But for a time, we are more uncomfortable than when we started. That's inevitable; we're becoming more honest, and our false surface style is beginning to dissolve. The process doesn't go on forever, but it certainly can be most uncomfortable while it lasts. Occasionally we may explode, but that's better than evading or covering our reaction.

STUDENT : Often I can see other people's patterns much more quickly than my own. When I care about them, I'm tempted to set them straight. I feel like I'm seeing a friend drowning and not throwing a lifesaver. When I do intervene, however, it often feels like I'm butting into their lives when it is not my business at all.

JOKO : That's an important point. What does it mean to be a formless field of benefaction? We all see people doing things that obviously harm them. What should we do?

STUDENT: Isn't it enough to be aware and be present to them?

JOKO : Yes, that is generally the best response. Occasionally people will ask us for help. If they are sincere in asking, it's fine to respond. But we can be too quick to jump in and give advice. Many of us are fixers. An old Zen rule of thumb is not to answer until one has been asked three times. If people really want your opinion, they'll insist on having it. But we are quick to give our opinion when nobody wants it. I know; I've done it. The observer has no emotions. It's like a mirror. Everything just passes in front of it. The mirror makes no judgment. Whenever we judge, we've added another thought that needs to be labeled. The observer is not critical. Judging is not something the observer does. The observer simply watches or reflects, like a mirror. If garbage passes in front of it, it reflects garbage. If roses pass in front of it, it reflects roses. The mirror remains a mirror, an empty mirror. The observer doesn't even accept; it just observes.

STUDENT: Isn't the observer really part of the little mind?

JOKO : No. The observer is a function of awareness that only arises when we have an object come up in our experience in the phenomenal world. If there's no object coming up (for example, in deep sleep), the observer is not there. The observer finally dies when we are just awareness and no longer need the observer. We can never find the observer, no matter how long we look for it. Still, though we can never locate it, it is obvious that we can observe. We could say that the observer is a different dimension of mind but not an aspect of the little mind, which is on the ordinary linear level. Who we are is awareness. Nobody has ever observed awareness; yet that's who we are—a "formless field of benefaction."

STUDENT: It seems that an unpleasant sensation can anchor me in the present and focus my attention here and now.

JOKO : There's an old saying to the effect that human extremity is God's opportunity. When things are pleasant, we try to hold on to the pleasantness. In trying to cling to pleasure, we destroy it. When we are sitting and are truly still, however, the discomfort and pain draw us back to the present. Sitting makes more obvious our desire to escape or evade. When we are sitting well, there's no place to go. We tend not to learn that unless we're uncomfortable. The more unconscious we are of our discomfort and our efforts to escape, the more mayhem is created within phenomenal life—from war between nations down to personal arguments between individuals, to arguments within ourselves; all such problems arise because we separate ourselves from our experience. The discomfort and pain are not the cause of our problems; the cause is that we don't know what to do about them.

STUDENT: Even pleasure has an element of discomfort to it. For example, it's a pleasure to have some peace and quiet, but then I have an uncomfortable feeling that the noise and racket might start up again.

JOKO: Pleasure and pain are simply opposite poles. Joy is being willing for things to be as they are. With joy, there's no polarity. If the noise starts, it starts. If it stops, it stops. Both are joy. Because we want to cling to pleasure and push away pain, however, we develop an escape strategy. When something unpleasant happens to us as children, we develop a system—a chief feature for coping with unpleasantness—and live our life out of that instead of seeing it as it is.

III. Dharma Discussion Questions 1-4

Question 1: Consider the following quotes from Joko's talk:

“We need to learn what our chief feature is – the primary way we handle pressure”

“Over a lifetime of practice one's chief feature shifts almost completely”

“I don't mean that one's basic personality changes”

What is the difference between our basic personality and our “chief feature”?

Have you experienced any changes to your “chief feature” through practice?

Question 2: In her talk, Joko states:

“We don't know how to attack the problem. We know that something's not right with us because we're not at peace; we tend to try all sorts of false solutions. One such “solution” is training ourselves to do positive thinking. That's simply a maneuver of the little mind.”

Do you agree that “positive thinking” is a maneuver of the little mind?

Question 3 Consider the following post-talk exchange:

STUDENT: When I feel pressured—especially when I feel criticized—I work hard and try to do well; I try not to just react, but to sit with the anxiety and fear. In the last year, however, I've come to realize that when I feel criticized, underlying my efforts to perform well is rage. I really want to attack; I'm a killer shark.

JOKO: The rage has been there the whole time; being a nice person and a fine performer is your cover. There's a killer shark in everybody. And the killer shark is unexperienced fear. Your way of covering it up is to look so nice and do so much and be so wonderful that nobody can possibly see who you really are— which is someone who is scared to death. As we uncover these layers of rage, it's important not to act out; we shouldn't inflict our rage on others. In genuine practice, our rage is simply a stage that passes. But for a time, we are more uncomfortable than when we started. That's inevitable; we're becoming more honest, and our false surface style is beginning to dissolve. The process doesn't go on forever, but it certainly can be most uncomfortable while it lasts. Occasionally we may explode, but that's better than evading or covering our reaction.

Can you relate to the rage of the “killer shark” and also how this “chief feature” may begin to dissolve by practicing?

Question 4: Consider the following post-talk exchange:

STUDENT: Even pleasure has an element of discomfort to it. For example, it's a pleasure to have some peace and quiet, but then I have an uncomfortable feeling that the noise and racket might start up again.

JOKO: Pleasure and pain are simply opposite poles. Joy is being willing for things to be as they are. With joy, there's no polarity. If the noise starts, it starts. If it stops, it stops. Both are joy. Because we want to cling to pleasure and push away pain, however, we develop an escape strategy. . .

Do you relate to having an "escape strategy" from the discomfort of pleasure and pain described above? Does our practice help us to cultivate joy in the way Joko describes?