Don't Know Mind

Jon Kabat-Zinn¹

Published online: 21 February 2020
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Soen Sa Nim used to sometimes act out for us how to practice with the koan, “What am I?” He would sit up straight, get a puzzled, quizzical look on his face, sit in silence for a few moments with his eyes closed, and then say, out loud, quite forcefully, “What am I?” He would string all the syllables together so it would come out, “Whatamiiiiiiii?” There would be silence for a moment and then, still with eyes closed and head tilted slightly, a puzzled expression on his face, out would come, again very forcefully, “Don’t know!” It came out more like “Donnnnno!”

Whatamiiiiiii?
Donnnno!

Then he would linger in the silence, in what he called “Don’t know mind,” just sitting there.

He was suggesting that it might not be a bad idea for us to practice like that, inwardly, in silence from time to time, at first with the words, but then way beyond the words. It was the questioning itself, the inquiry into the self, and the passion behind where the question was even coming from that were

important. And the feeling, in the end, when it came right down to it, after all the investigating, after all the “not this, not this,” underneath the thinking and all the vagaries of name and form, the feeling of simply not knowing, and resting in that not knowing, in all its poignancy, with full acceptance and spaciousness.

He would tell us to “keep don’t know mind” in everything we did. “Only don’t know!” he would bellow, and so a lot of his students would go around saying, “Only don’t know” all the time, no matter what you asked them or said to them. It was hysterical. It was insufferable. It was also great training.

One day, Soen Sa Nim was being interviewed on a New York City radio station. At the end of the program, the host, the late Lex Hixon, a well-known Buddhist scholar and author, said to him: “Soen Sa Nim. Thank you for being on the show. I love your teachings and it has been a fascinating hour. But one thing I just don’t get, and it has been puzzling me a lot as we have been talking. What is this donut mind you keep talking about? I just don’t get it.”

Soen Sa Nim roared with laughter. “Yes. That is it. ‘Donut mind!’ Nothing in the middle. Just air.”

Excerpted from *The Healing Power of Mindfulness: A New Way of Being* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Copyright © 2018 Jon Kabat-Zinn. Published by Hachette Books. All Rights Reserved

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