Compassionate Action

by Rodney Smith

"Because we are nothing we are everything…" (Kalu Rinpoche)

One of the most persistent fears new students have is that meditation will somehow make them passive and they'll withdraw from socially engaged action. One student asked if practice would make him uncaring and apathetic. Another wondered whether she would eventually forsake her nursing career for a hermitage. These questions reflect the common concern that meditation will disconnect us from important issues and foster a self-obsessed search for freedom instead. Most people do not want a spiritual practice that leads to indifference toward the world.

These fears and questions are understandable, for Buddhist literature is awash with images of reclusive monks and nuns living in caves or under trees far from the turmoil and stress of society. Meditation instruction may reinforce these images of inaction and withdrawal: "Just receive your experience as it is rather than trying to control it in any way." This stance can be mistaken for passivity, leading to the common fear, "If I continue to meditate, will I eventually become complacent?"

What are we to make of the apparent contradiction in the assertion that practice leads both to a disengagement from thought (including socially conscious thought) and towards compassionate action? If my thoughts subside, what will motivate me to engage? Will meditation lull me into inactivity? Is there a deeper truth behind this contradiction, one that points towards and cultivates a clarity of mind that cannot be approached through thinking?

To answer this question, we must understand the relationship between a silent mind and a full heart. When we ask ourselves, *"Why does my heart feel dry and disconnected?"*, we discover it's often because the chatter of our minds is limiting our ability to make meaningful contact. It's not that our heart isn't big enough, it's just that our heart can't be heard over the noise of our mental struggles. Our mind stands in the way of our heart.

The remedy is learning to listen rather than to assert, to receive rather than to overpower. When we're receptive, we access the silence within us. Unless we learn to enter this silence, we cannot learn to listen. Unless we learn to listen, we can never connect with all the pleasant and unpleasant shades of our experience. Yet without this intimate connection with our own experience, compassionate action is impossible.

When our minds are silent, our sense of self no longer intrudes on our experience. Our heart's compassion is no longer overpowered by our mind's noise. From this silence, we see the world clearly: its problems, the obstacles to solving them, and the value and risk of involving ourselves in a particular problem. Not all problems benefit from action; some need silence and patience instead. When we act with a noisy mind, we're motivated by our own narrow needs—by our momentary desire to help, or by what we would want in a similar situation. Often these motivations do not lead to the best solutions.

From the sidelines, it is easy to judge the meditator as uninvolved and passive. But within a clear mind there is enormous vitality and passion. What is not there is the clutter of thoughts and feelings that can lead to knee-jerk responses. The clear mind is farseeing and powerful beyond measure. Some meditators withdraw from the world not to avoid effective action but to embody it. They understand that sometimes the best way to help is by indirect example rather than by direct influence. Others enter the world and become politically active. There is no one right approach. There is only this truth: action that flows from a clear mind is compassionate.