

What We're All Looking For

A major difficulty in practice is that most of the time we're not willing to be with whatever life presents to us.

On the long path of awakening — as we uncover layer after layer of falsehoods the deeper we dig into ourselves — there are frequently times when we just don't want to make the effort to practice. Sometimes this lack of effort can come from the simple desire to be comfortable. But other times it can arise from the fact that we can only go so deep at any given time. There is only so much we can take in before something in us feels the need to turn away. There's nothing wrong with this; in fact, it's perfectly understandable when we realize that what we're actually doing in this practice is dismantling the notion of the self. This dismantling — where, through the process of experiencing, the solidity of the self becomes more and more porous — has to proceed slowly in order for transformation to occur. When we take in too much too soon, as many have done on drug trips or with spiritual openings, what we see simply can't be assimilated into our being. When we understand this — that we can only dig so deep into the truth at any given time — we're less likely to fall into the trap of negative self-judgment whenever we see ourselves resisting.

A friend and fellow student told me of a time, in the late 1960s, when he went to see

Suzuki Roshi. The student was very discouraged because he saw that he could never practice consistently. He saw how he would repeatedly vacillate between effort and resistance, and felt that there was something essentially wrong with his practice. Suzuki Roshi replied that this vacillating process was a universal one. He said that we try and we try, and then we “fail.” We try and try again, and again we “fail.” Then we try and try again, to “fail” yet one more time. And then we learn to go deeper.

It's not really failure, it's simply the nature of practice. Spiritual practice is rarely a simple straight line toward a fixed goal; it is almost always a mixture of struggle and integration, of confusion and clarity, of discouragement and aspiration, of feeling failure and going deeper. Seeing through our deeply-held beliefs, dismantling the solid sense of the self, facing our deepest fears, opening into the unknown — how could we even imagine that this wouldn't be a gradual and halting process, with many ups and downs? As we come to understand this — which means seeing through our idealized pictures of how we're supposed to be — we naturally develop compassion for ourselves as we walk the path of awakening. As we develop this sense of com-

passion, we are less likely to judge ourselves as wrong every time we turn away and resist, and instead we become more and more willing to let the resistance just be. This small step — of simply being with the ups and downs of life with less judgment — is an essential step toward growing up in practice.

This idea of growing up is reminiscent of the purported last words of Buddha, that we must learn to “be a lamp unto ourselves.” But the only way to understand what it means to be a lamp unto ourselves is through the long and gradual process of going deeper and deeper into our being. Learning to go deeper we can awaken the heart that seeks to be awakened. The awakening of this heart occurs in small doses, because it involves uncovering and making transparent the layers and layers of conditioning imbedded in our cells. Only when the extent and power of our deeply-held beliefs and judgments becomes clear to us, and only when we have the ability to stay with the painful dismantling of the solid sense of self, can we come to understand, experientially, what it means to be a lamp unto ourselves, to awaken the heart that seeks to be awakened. And the more we practice, the more this understanding deepens. Essentially, we're talking about learning what our life is truly about.

The answer to the question, “What is my life really about?” will be answered differently at every stage of practice. But this question has to be addressed over and over, lest we lose sight of the point of practice. It doesn't matter

that for a long time we won't know the answer, or that what we think is the answer is just the ego's wish for a life free from difficulty. We have to come back again and again to the piercing question: “What is my life really about?” Sometimes there will be a glimmer, and then it will fade. Most of the time, at least for a long time, we don't know what our life is really about, yet we are still driven by the heart that seeks to be awakened. To know that we don't know, yet to persevere with the practice, is how we learn to go deeper.

Until we find the reality of life that we're all seeking, we'll continue to experience dissatisfaction. This reality can't be pinpointed with words, yet it's more genuine than anything we can speak of. All we can say is that it's who we really are. And to find out who we really are does not require that we seek after an answer — rather, it requires that we learn to go deeper and deeper into uncovering the falsehoods of our judgments, our identities, our deeply-held beliefs. The Zen teacher T'sen T'sang said this clearly in his famous line: “Do not search for the truth; only cease to cherish opinions.”

To cease cherishing opinions — including no longer holding onto the core beliefs which define our identity as a solid, separate self — is the way we learn what it means to be a lamp unto ourselves.

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