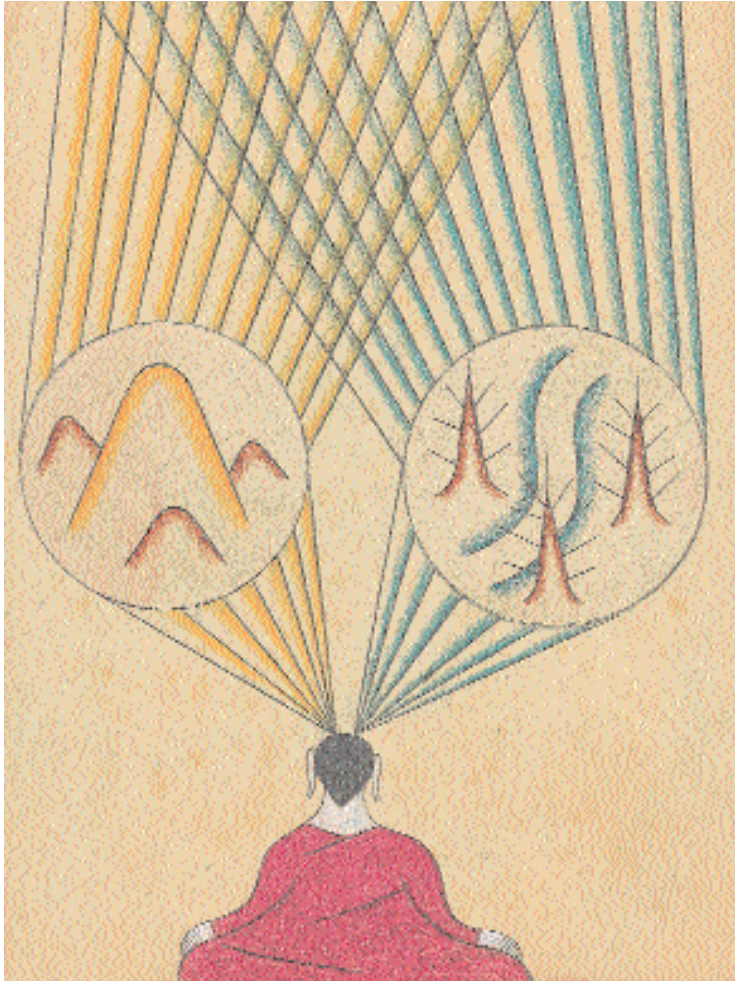


Loving Life's Questions

If you hope to find lasting happiness, you must first answer the question, what is your true priority—your inner or your outer life?



“THE HIGHEST COMPASSION, the only true act of compassion, is to point a person to their own liberation.” These are the words of one of my spiritual teachers in response to a question I had asked them about applying the dharma in daily life. I asked the question because in the meditation classes I teach, I often emphasize using the feelings of desire and aversion that arise in daily life as opportunities to practice living the dharma. He was gently suggesting that in my teaching I was putting too much emphasis on how to be in the moment with an awakened, open heart. His point was

that since it is so easy to get caught in your own emotional and physical needs, you must never give the mind the opportunity to make your ego desires the priority in your life. The danger in focusing on daily life as dharma is that instead of finding freedom, you simply become a better person—but only insofar as it does not threaten your ego needs.

His message to beware of the snares of daily life, to look through them and concentrate on your relationship with the transcendent, is a key teaching in many spiritual traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism. The teaching suggests that if you are a true seeker, your focus should be on the death of the ego—becoming free of grasping or clinging to the rewards of daily life and cutting through the illusion that anything in this temporal world will bring you lasting happiness. It is a grand vision of steadfast courage that does not yield to temptation or distraction and celebrates the magnificence of what is possible for a seeker of liberation. It brings vitality to your efforts for finding freedom and penetrating the mystery of life.

A few months after this conversation, I asked the same question of another teacher who has also greatly influenced me in recent years. This teacher, who has the most intense practice background of any Western teacher I’ve studied with, said: “I’ve learned that mindfulness practice can be just a concept; instead, there is simply knowing that ‘this moment is like this.’ It is easy to get caught up in concepts. Nirvana is a concept. How can you *know* what it is? But you can know this moment arising and passing. Just trust the practice of being directly mindful of what this moment is like, and you will gain access to stillness and emptiness.”

This teacher emphasizes freeing the heart, moment to moment, as the path to liberation. For him there is only *this* moment in which you are either awake or not awake, causing suffering or not for yourself or others; therefore, the most skillful means for finding ultimate freedom is not to focus on some future aim but rather to liberate *this* moment. And by constantly repeating this process, you will gradually come to reside in freedom

without it being anything special. When you hear this teacher's dharma talks, you can imagine finding freedom and happiness, even with all your shortcomings. In this vision your mind is similar to a flowing stream, ever changing. Just as you can never step in the same stream twice, so there is nothing you can cling to in life, no matter how precious it may be. The warmth of the second teaching may sound more appealing, or you may be drawn to the clarity and surety of the first. I attend retreats with both teachers because of my immense respect and gratitude for what each offers.

When I sit with the first teacher, I feel the passion of his vision, and I am inspired to work harder for my own liberation by practicing more intensely. I also become deeply aware of the endless times I contract in daily life, wanting things to be different.

When I sit with the second teacher, I am inspired by his very being to make my life the dharma—right now, just as it is. There is not a sense of sacrifice or struggle, just a call to surrender the fixations that arise daily around my wants and worries. It is clear in his presence that craving causes suffering. He is the embodiment of empowerment. It's palpable in the ease he has in his own life and the freedom that underlies his genuine humility. It is indeed not surprising that each of these teachers was trained by a different teacher, whose dharma had the same emphasis they now offer, for this is the nature of lineage. However, it is possible to be a dedicated student of both, as I am, because there is only *one* dharma. They both teach from the same ancient texts, offer the same skillful means for living, and present the dharma as both the journey and the destination. Both also teach the promise of full enlightenment, or absolute *bodhichitta*, as the destination of a precious human birth.

Likewise, both also offer skillful means for temporary enlightened behavior, or relative *bodhichitta*, as freedom from suffering in the moment. The distinction between what they teach is therefore just a subtle difference in orientation as to how you achieve both the relative and

absolute through the way you practice mindfulness. Sometimes yogis may think that the first teaching stresses the mind and the second stresses the heart or that the first one is a "hard" teaching and the second one "soft," but beware of oversimplifying the difference.

Your task on the spiritual path is to find a vision of your practice that yields mental clarity of purpose and a heartfelt sense of imagination and motivation. It will most likely be an ever-shifting balance of the two.

Setting Your Vision

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND the difference between these two visions, picture yourself walking up a very long, steep mountain trail covered with underbrush. You are able to find your way only because you never take your eyes off of the mountain peak that is calling out to you. You never allow yourself to be distracted, although you eat, sleep, and attend to the necessities of life. Even when the trail is clear and not too steep and you can enjoy the beauty of the terrain, you never look away from the peak for long because you know if you lose sight of it, you can easily wander off the trail and get lost in the underbrush. Whenever you do forget to keep sight of the peak and lose your way, you wander in circles for hours, days, weeks, or even years, repeating all the grasping and clinging patterns of mundane life.

This is the experience of the "transcendent" or "unity," in which inner liberation, represented by the mountain peak, is the only hope, the only basis for organizing life in a nonharmful way. For many yogis this longing for unity is the most inspiring vision. Unity for you may mean a direct experience of "oneness" with all of life or with God, or of the interdependence of life, or of the direct knowing of emptiness from which all life arises and returns in a lawful fashion. Knowing that others have made this journey and that it is the highest purpose of life motivates you to keep taking steps, even when you are lost, or the distance seems too great, or you feel unworthy. You are like Dante, willing to consciously travel through hell in order to reach *paradiso*.

Now picture this same mountain peak again, with its arduous trail. You are no less committed to following the path up to the peak, but your nature has changed or you've had new life experiences; therefore, this time you react from a different reflection or insight. For you the most effective way to keep on the path is to stay focused on the step that you are taking just now, then the next one, and the next.

Why? Because you realize the step you take at this very moment causes suffering either to yourself or to others, or it does not. The thoughts, words, and actions involved in taking *this* step are either in harmony with the values represented by the peak or in discord with them. This insight keeps you in the moment, mindful, and motivated. It's not that you are copping out or compromising by staying in the "now"; it simply is the surest way for you to arrive at the peak starting from where you are.

This is the experience of the "manifest" or "wholeness" in which the seed of liberation is present in each moment and you are concerned not with whether the experience of this moment is pleasant or unpleasant, but with whether you are grasping at the pleasant or pulling away from the unpleasant. In the constantly flowing river of thoughts, feelings, and actions that you refer to as "I," you accept its ever changing, not-Self nature in such a way that you're momentarily freed from greed, hatred, and delusion. These moments of freedom accumulate, creating new habits and also the potential for even more freedom—all by being in the sacred, ever present Now.

It is indeed useful to gain exposure to the dharma from both perspectives. Most likely you'll identify with one more than the other at any given point in your life. It may well be that you will organize around one view now, then with the other later in life. I have found it is helpful to purposefully attune my practice around the vision that most invigorates my heart—the one that gives an immediate sense of meaning and integrity to my life. But no matter whether you choose to emphasize unity or wholeness, you will inevitably become lost in the underbrush and at times even

forget about the journey temporarily. But these inner visions of how you are making your journey will help you eventually re-discover your path.

Each emphasis does have its shadow side, which can lead you astray. For example, there are sincere yogis who achieve powerful states of oneness in which they experience the bliss of transcendence, but unfortunately when they are not in such a state lead unexamined lives. They are retreat or samadhi “junkies” who feel special, and it shows in their behavior. They act with little awareness of the suffering they cause to themselves or others. Likewise, other yogis have created a sense of wholeness by extending their practice into daily life but made it into a lifestyle in which their ego sits smugly at the center approving of what nice people they are. They have never truly committed to moving on in their liberation.

It may be that you find both faults in yourself, for each of us tends to go back and forth between one shortcoming and the other. What is required of you is to balance your vision of practice in a manner that provides motivation and a sense of integrity, for these two qualities are essential to inner vitality. For years I have started out my morning meditation with loving-kindness practice. The words include, “May I experience love, joy, wonder, and wisdom in this life just as it is, as I move to wholeness and unity.” This is my way of reminding myself of my intention toward whatever occurs during the day.

Establishing Your Priorities

JUST AS YOU have a choice between emphasizing wholeness or unity on your spiritual journey, so too you are faced with the challenge of how to balance the inner and outer aspects of your life. What’s your true priority—your inner life or your outer life? I do not mean how you view yourself, but how you actually behave. When you’re forced to choose, are you ever truly willing to forsake a valued material object, or the ego satisfaction that comes with accomplishment and recognition, or the comforts of sense pleasures in order to pursue the elusive and often hard to name rewards of the inner life? Can you ever let

go of even one of your big attachments?

You might have confused this question of the priority of your inner and outer life with that of your reflection on wholeness and unity. Yogis who do so often lose direction or feel as though their practice can’t get started. Wise balancing of the inner and outer priorities is about allocating your time according to your values—how willing you are to sacrifice worldly and ego concerns for your inner development in daily life. On the other hand, wise use of the manifest and the transcendent means determining which vision of spiritual possibility is most helpful for you at this time. This is an important distinction because it is easy to delude yourself into thinking that you are focused on wholeness, when in fact your true priority is the outer aspects of your life. It is fundamentally important that you stay in touch with your true priority. The use of a vision will then strengthen as well as empower your commitment to your inner life.

It is easy to justify to yourself that your inner and outer priorities are out of balance because you’ve got a demanding job, your child is at a critical age, or you are not settled in your relationship. Once this matter is resolved, you tell yourself, you will devote more time to your inner life. Only it doesn’t work that way—the future is unknown. There is only this time, and your only choice is to work with life just as it is at present.

In order to develop your inner life, you are not required to give up all those things you care about in daily life, but rather you learn to balance them in a manner that is reflective of your true values. For most of people this means repeatedly letting go of things that the mind is telling us we want. It is not that you want things that are unwholesome, rather it is that your ego wants too much; it is insatiably hungry. The only way to be free of this craving is to stop organizing around it, to shift the balance between your inner and outer life. Making such a shift often does not feel good initially, but in time you experience a spaciousness that is far more precious than that which you sacrificed.

Sometimes rebalancing your inner and outer priorities can be accomplished by

just changing small daily habits. Are you willing to give up 30 minutes of sleep in order to have time to meditate or to stop watching your favorite TV program in order to do yoga? Will you exchange your vacation for a silent retreat, which will mean experiencing physical austerities and mental struggles? All of us are great at rationalizing why it is not necessary to make such sacrifice or why a particular instance is an exception, and we are very skilled at succumbing to the pressures of life and forgetting our intentions. Ironically, to change your priorities requires that you make your priorities a priority. Balancing your inner and outer priorities is not supposed to be easy; by definition it is hard work. Nor is it always supposed to go smoothly. If you do not accept these two truths, then you may get lost in self-judgment or simply give up on yourself.

Fortunately, there are skillful means for balancing your priorities. You can utilize any one or all of the five precepts as mindful practice—nonharming, not taking what is not freely given, not directly or indirectly lying, abstaining from harmful sexual behavior, and not abusing any intoxicants. You may take a vow of right speech, of not gossiping, of only saying that which is both true and useful. You can set a livelihood standard for yourself by working in a job where you do not feel compromised, even if it means less pay or opportunity. You can commit to a simpler life where money is less of a factor and practice is the priority.

Still another skillful means is shifting your awareness to pay more attention to the inner experiences of those around you, staying mindful of how their wants and fears may be manifesting in your interactions. To make this shift in priority, you forsake being reactive to the actions of others; instead, you hold them with compassion and empathy. Also, you can shift to the inner by saying no to things your ego desires in the way of activities and opportunities that will distract your mind. Can you even imagine not taking a promotion or not serving on an important committee in order to have more time in your life for study and reflection? In our culture it is almost a sacrilege to refuse more. To do so is to make your own inner

growth process as worthy as anything in your outer life.

Becoming a Beginner

BALANCING YOUR INNER and outer priorities and choosing between focusing on the manifest and transcendent are closely related. Imagine that you and a friend are at the Grand Canyon, one of the most incredible sights in the world. There are only 10 minutes left before you have to leave. You decide to use the time to take a picture rather than go to the souvenir shop. This then answers the first question: How will you prioritize your time? But now you must decide how best to capture this moment—Is it better to focus the camera on the background and capture the magnificence of what you are seeing, or is it better to focus on your friend and what is going on with her in the context of the Grand Canyon? This is the question of vision, and it has to be answered or there is no movement, despite having established your priority. Can you see how the two questions go together, with each needing your awareness?

You might say that you would take pictures both ways, and it is the same in your spiritual practice. Sometimes you focus primarily on your goal of absolute freedom; other times you focus on being free in the moment. But if you don't allocate the time and make a priority of connecting to the vision, then there is no chance to take any pictures. You are in the souvenir shop of your own life, picking up one object after another looking for satisfaction that never comes. Do you want to continue living your life primarily in the souvenir shop?

All spiritual teachings ask you to reflect on these questions, and each offers the wisdom for you to get yourself out of the souvenir store, if you so choose that as your priority. These are not theoretical questions. These are your life's questions: What's the balance of priority between your inner and outer experience? What internal vision motivates you to enact these priorities? If you reflect fully and honestly on them, you may rebalance your priorities, making needed changes that yield more peace, harmony, and happiness in your life. Paradoxically,

finding absolute answers to these questions is usually given more weight than it deserves.

It is living with these questions and regularly asking them in regard to all aspects of your life that elicits the spiritual vision of the transcendent or the manifest, which in turn will yield your answer. The venerable Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi once explained: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few." Be a beginner, empty your mind of answers, and learn to live and love the questions. ■

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