

Fall 2002: Doubt after practicing for many years

Question: I've been a Buddhist for more than twenty years and I've done a lot of meditation practice. But I've never experienced any real peace or absence of thoughts in my meditation, at least for more than brief moments here and there. I've also had the benefit of many wonderful teachings and yet I still succumb to my emotions and old habits. More and more I find myself asking "What's the point?" What should I do about this?

Narayan Liebenson Grady: It can be very disheartening to have been exposed to the teachings and, at the same time, to be more and more aware of the gap between those teachings and one's own experience. I think it would be better right now not to put yourself in the position of listening to generalized dharma teachings since you are at a point in your practice when doubt is predominant. You need to find ways to lessen the gap between what you understand intellectually and what you understand on a cellular level.

Do you have a teacher that you can work with in an ongoing way, who can address specific obstacles that you may be facing? Having had the benefit of many wonderful teachings is great but this is very different than the slow process of revealing your practice with all of its ups and downs to someone who can offer you a sustained sense of spiritual friendship and guidance. In the early years of practice this individualized guidance is not as important but becomes more so for most practitioners as the practice develops. Also, if you have never been in therapy it might be worthwhile to find a therapist who is sympathetic to Buddhism with whom you could discuss any issues that may be blocking the deepening of your practice.

Do you have a daily sitting practice? If you don't, there is no substitute for devoting some time each day to being physically still. If you do sit regularly, you might want to experiment with not sitting for a month or two to discover for yourself whether the daily sitting is having an affect on your daily life in ways that you have not been aware of.

Please remember that we practice for ourselves as well as for others. To remember that we are practicing for the benefit of others removes the burden of believing that practice has to bring us specific results in order to be worthwhile. Instead of trying to attain peaceful experiences, we can remember that we are cultivating qualities of heart such as patience and lovingkindness.

When we understand practice in this way, self-trust can be maintained even when our experiences are not what we want them to be. We all begin practice with countless years of conditioning. In a way, we are only as old as our years of practice. So no matter how old you are physically, in terms of practice you are only twenty. This is very young.

Your question reminds me of a poem in the *Therigatha* by a nun named Vaddhesi that begins: "It was twenty-five years since I left home (to ordain) and I hadn't had a moment's peace." The last lines of this poem are: "I have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind. The Buddha's teaching has been done." I admire her perseverance and yours.