

Winter 2003: Difficulties in Daily Life

Question: A friend who has been a practitioner for many years continues to have a great deal of trouble with her everyday life. Much about her everyday life upsets her, seems like a hassle, is chaotic. She is often resentful and complains about her plight. The only time she seems to be content, joyful and appreciative is either when she is on retreat or at practice programs. So there's a disconnection between her practice and her life.

What suggestions would you give to someone in that situation? Why is intense and ongoing practice seemingly not helping her with her life? How can one actually incorporate practice into everyday life?

Narayan Liebenson Grady: This question of why there is often a disconnection between our practice and our life is essential. One reason for this disconnection concerns the way we define the word "practice." In reality, of course, our life is our practice and our practice is our life—they are one and the same. By seeing them as separate, the mind creates an artificial construct. If we see real practice as possible only when we are on retreat, we won't be motivated to practice when we are not on retreat, which for most of us is most of the time. When we see practice in this limited and fragmented way, we will eventually find ourselves disheartened and disappointed. We may find ourselves peaceful on retreat and reactive in daily life.

It is compelling to believe that certain states of mind and insights can only be experienced under particular circumstances. But as invaluable as the special conditions of retreat life are, to forget that they are just conditions allows us to minimize the possibilities of practice in the here and now and makes us endlessly dependent on conditions having to be a certain way.

This is not freedom! The secret of healing this disconnection lies in valuing every moment of life as an invitation to practice, whatever the conditions may be. As Willa Cather said, "There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm."

In the unpredictability of our daily lives, we can learn as much as in the retreat environment. It is easy to agree to this perspective in theory, but very different to actually live it. To live it requires bringing the same degree of dedication to the dharma wherever we are, no matter what we are doing. This means learning to see each moment as having equal meaning. "Intense and ongoing practice" doesn't help much unless it is actively applied to each moment in life.

When we relate to the circumstances of our lives with resentment, it is because we want something to be different than the way it is. As understandable as that attitude might be, it only

perpetuates the suffering. To use the circumstances of our lives as material for liberation is to be aware of this resentment. It means being willing to use what upsets us as a way into a deeper understanding.

I do think that it is absolutely essential to make some time each day for sitting practice. Sitting every day enables us to bring more mindfulness into the complex arenas of our daily lives. Combining this with longer practice periods in a supportive retreat environment is an integrated approach.

When I first began to practice, many years ago, I thought the only way to truly live a peaceful life was to go on lots of long retreats. But while teaching at Cambridge Insight Meditation Center these past eighteen years, I have had contact with many yogis who are not able to do so, for one reason or another. I have been heartened and inspired to see the profound changes that can come about when there is a real commitment to the spiritual life in the midst of everyday life along with sitting shorter retreats whenever possible.

Finally, a gentle reminder not to offer suggestions unless asked. Your friend would need to be aware of this disconnection herself to be receptive to changing it.