

Experiences and Experiencing

At each second, we are at a crossroad: between unawareness and awareness, between being absent and being present—or between experiences and experiencing. Practice is about moving from experiences to experiencing. What is meant by this?

We tend to overwork the word *experience*, and when we say, “Be with your experience,” we are speaking carelessly. It may not be helpful to follow this advice. Ordinarily we see our lives as series of experiences. For example, I have an experience of one or another person, an experience of my lunch or my office. From this point of view, my life is nothing but having one experience after another. Entwined around each experience there may be a slight halo or a neurotic emotional veil. Often the veil takes the form of memories, fantasies, or hopes for the future—the associations we bring to experience, as a result of our past conditioning. When we do *zazen*, our experience may be dominated by our memories, which can be overwhelming.

Is there anything wrong with this? Humans *do* have memories, fantasies, hopes; that’s natural. When we clothe our experience with these associations, however, experience becomes an object: a noun rather than a verb. So our lives become encounters with one object after another: persons, my lunch, my office. Memories and hopes are similar: life becomes a series of “this” and “that.” We ordinarily see our lives as encounters with things “out there.” Life becomes dualistic: subject and object, me and that.

There’s no problem with this process—unless we believe it. For when we really believe that we’re meeting objects all day long, we’re enslaved. Why? Because any object “out there” will have a slight veil of emotional context. And we then react in terms of our emotional associations. In classical Zen teaching, we are enslaved by greed, anger, and ignorance. To see the world exclusively in this way is to be in chains. When our world consists of objects, we guide our lives by what we can expect from each object: “Does he like me?” “Is that to my advantage?” “Should I be afraid of her?” Our history and our memories take over, and we divide the world up into things to avoid and things to pursue.

The trouble with this way of living is that what benefits me now may hurt me later, and vice versa. The world is constantly changing, and so our associations lead us astray. There’s nothing safe about a world of objects. We’re constantly wary, even of those people whom we say we love and are close to. As long as another person is an object to us, we can be sure that there’s no genuine love or compassion between us.

If having experiences is our ordinary world, what is the other world, the other fork in the road? What is the difference between experiences and experiencing? What is genuine hearing, touching, tasting, seeing, and so on?

When experiencing occurs, in that very moment, experiencing is not in space or time. It can’t be; for when it’s in space or time, we’ve made an object of it. As we touch and look and hear, we’re creating the world of space and time, but the actual life we lead is not in space or time; it’s just experiencing. The world of space and time arises when experiencing becomes reduced to a series of

experiences. In the precise moment of hearing, for example, there is just hearing, hearing, hearing, hearing, which creates the sound of the airplane or whatever. Thup, thup, thup, thup...: there's space between each; and each one is absolute hearing, hearing, hearing. That's our life, as we create our world. We're creating with all our senses so quickly that we can't possibly keep track of it. The world of our experiences is being created out of nothing, second by second by second.

In the service we do, one of the dedications states, "Unceasing change turns the wheel of life." Experiencing, experiencing, experiencing; change, change, change. "Unceasing change turns the wheel of life, and so reality is shown in all its many forms. Peaceful dwelling as change itself liberates all suffering sentient beings and brings them to great joy." Peaceful dwelling as change itself means feeling the throbbing pain in my legs, hearing the sound of a car: just experiencing, experiencing. Just dwelling with experience itself. Even the pain is changing minutely, second by second by second. "Peaceful dwelling as change itself liberates all suffering sentient beings and brings them to great joy."

If this process were absolutely clear, we'd have no need to practice. The enlightened state is not *having* an experience; instead, it's an absence of all experience. The enlightened state is pure, unadulterated experiencing. And that is utterly different from "having an enlightenment experience." Enlightenment is the demolition of all experience built of thoughts, fantasies, memories, and hopes. Frankly, we're not interested in demolishing our lives as we have ordinarily known them. We demolish the false structures of our lives by labeling our thoughts, by saying for the five hundredth time, "Having a thought that such-and-such will happen." When we've said it five hundred times, we see it for what it is. It's just empty energy spinning out of our conditioning, with no reality whatsoever. There is no intrinsic truth in it; it's just changing, changing, changing.

It's easy for us to talk about this process, but there's nothing that we are less interested in doing than demolishing our fantasy structures. We have a secret fear that if we demolished them all, we'd be demolishing ourselves.

There's an old Sufi story about a man who dropped his keys on the dark side of the street at night, then crossed the street to the lamppost where it was bright to look for the keys. When a friend asked why he was looking under the lamp instead of where he dropped the keys, he replied, "I'm looking here because there is more light." That's what we do with our lives: the familiar framework is where we want to look. If we have a problem, we follow a familiar framework: thinking, stewing, analyzing, keeping the crazy business of our lives going because that's what we're used to doing. Never mind that it doesn't work. We just get more determined, and keep searching under the lamppost. We're not interested in that life which is out of space and time,

constantly creating the world of space and time. We're not interested in that; in fact, it's frightening to us.

What pushes us to abandon this melodrama, to sit through the confusion? At bottom, it comes down to the unease we have with the way we are living our lives. Beyond a life of having experiences is a life of experiencing, a life of compassion and joy. For true compassion and joy are not things to be experienced. Our true master is just this: changing, changing, changing; experiencing, experiencing, experiencing. The master is not in space and time—yet none other than space and time. Our experiencing of life is also the creating of life itself. “Unceasing change turns the wheel of life and so reality is shown in all its many forms.”

A poem by W. H. Auden captures much of our ordinary state:

We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

We would rather be ruined than changed—even though change is who we are. We would rather die in our anxiety, our fear, our loneliness, than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die. And the cross is also the crossroads, the choice. We are here to make that choice.