

## **False Generalizations**

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Nasrudin, the Sufi sage and fool, was once in his flower garden, sprinkling bread crumbs over everything. When a neighbor asked him why, he said, "To keep the tigers away." The neighbor said, "But there aren't any tigers within a thousand miles of here." And Nasrudin said, "Effective, isn't it?"

We laugh because we're sure that the two things—bread crumbs and tigers—have nothing to do with each other. Yet as with Nasrudin, our practice and our lives are often based upon false generalizations that have little to do with reality. If our lives are based upon generalized concepts, we may be like Nasrudin, spreading bread crumbs to keep away tigers. We say, for example, "I love people," or "I love my husband." The truth is that no one loves everyone all the time, and no one loves a spouse all the time. Such generalities obscure the specific, concrete reality of our lives, what is happening for us at this moment.

One may, of course, love one's husband most of the time. Still, the flat generalization leaves out the shifting, changing reality of an actual relationship. Likewise with "I love my work," or "Life is hard on me." When we begin practice, we usually believe and express many generalized opinions. We may think, for instance, "I'm a kind person," or "I'm a terrible person." But in fact, life is never general. Life is always specific: it's what's happening this very moment. Sitting helps us to cut through the fog of generalizations about our lives. As we practice, we tend to drop our generalized concepts in favor of more specific observations. For example, instead of "I can't stand my husband," we notice "I can't stand my husband when he doesn't pick up after himself," or "I can't stand myself when I do such and such." Instead of generalized concepts, we see more clearly what's going on. We're not covering events with a broad brush.

Our experience of another person or situation isn't just one thing. It can include a thousand minor thoughts and reactions. A parent may say, "I love my daughter"; yet this generalization ignores moments, such as "Why is she so immature?" or "She's being stupid." As we sit, observing and labeling our thoughts, we become more acquainted with the incessant outpouring of our opinions about anything and everything. Instead of just plastering the whole world with generalizations, we become aware of our specific concepts and judgments. As we become more acquainted with our thinking, we discover that we're shifting, moment by moment, as our thinking shifts.

Let's listen to a young woman. She's been going out with a young man for a little while. She feels that it's going well. If asked, she would say that she really cares about him. Now he has just called her. Let's listen not only to what she says to him, but also to what she's thinking to herself: "Oh, it's so nice to hear from you. You sound great." ("He could have called me a little sooner.")

“Oh, you took so-and-so out to lunch. Yes, she’s a charming person. I know you enjoyed her company.” (“ I could kill him!”) “You think I don’t have much to say? That I’m not a very verbal person? Well, I appreciate your opinion.” (“You hardly know me! How dare you make generalizations about me!”) “You did well on your test? I’m glad. Good for you!” (“He’s always talking about himself. Does he have any interest in my life? ”)

“You’d like to go out to dinner tomorrow night? I’d love to go. It would be wonderful to see you again!” (“ At last, he asked me! I wish he wouldn’t wait until the last minute!”)

This is a perfectly common interchange between two people, the sort of pretense that passes for communication. These people probably do care for each other. Still, she had one concept after another, about him and about herself. The exchange was a sea of conceptual material; their conversation was like two ships passing in the night—no contact took place.

In Zen practice, we tend to toss around many fancy concepts: “Everything is perfect in being as it is.” “We’re all doing the best that we can.” “Things are all one.” “ I’m one with him.” We can call this Zen bullshit, though other religions have their own versions. It’s not that the statements are false. The world is one. I am you. Everything is perfect in being as it is. Every human being on the planet is doing the best he or she can at this moment. True enough. But if we stop there, we have turned our practice into an exercise of concepts, and we’ve lost awareness of what’s going on with us right this second.

Good practice always entails moving through our concepts. Concepts are sometimes useful in daily life; we have to use them. But we need to recognize that a concept is just a concept and not reality and that this recognition or knowledge slowly develops as we practice. Gradually, we stop “buying into” our concepts. We no longer make such general judgments: “ He’s a terrible person,” or “ I’m a terrible person.” We notice our thoughts: “I wish he wouldn’t take her out to lunch.” Then we have to experience the pain that accompanies the thought. When we can stay with the pain as a pure physical sensation, at some point it will dissolve, and then we move into the truth, which is that everything is perfect in being as it is. Everyone is doing the best that he or she can. But we have to move from experience, which is often painful, into truth and not plaster thoughts over our experience. Intellectual people are particularly prone to this error: they think that the rational world of concepts is the real world. The rational world of concepts is not the real world, but simply a description of it, a finger pointing at the moon.

Take the experience of having been hurt. When we’ve been criticized or treated unfairly, it’s important to note the thoughts we have and move into the cellular level of being hurt, so that our awareness becomes simply raw sensation: our trembling jaw, the contraction in our chest, whatever we may be feeling in the cells of our

body. This pure experiencing is zazen. As we stay with it, our desire to think comes up again and again: judgments, opinions, blame, retorts.

So we label our thoughts and again return into our cellular experience, which is almost indescribable, perhaps just a light shimmering of energy, perhaps something stronger. In that space there is no “me” or “you.” When we are this nondual experiencing we can see our situation more clearly. We can see that “she is doing the best she can.” We can see that we are doing the best we can. If we say such sentences without the bodily component of experiencing, however, we will not know what true practice is. A calm, cool, rational perspective must be grounded in that pure cellular level. We need to know our thoughts. But that doesn’t mean that we must think they’re real, or that we must act on them. After observing our self-centered thoughts, moment by moment, the emotions tend to even out. This serenity can never be found by plastering some philosophical concept on top of what is actually happening.

Only when we move through the experiential level does life have meaning. This is what Jews and Christians mean by being with God. Experiencing is out of time: it is not the past, not the future, not even the present in the usual sense. We can’t say what it is; we can only be it. In traditional Buddhist terms, such a life is being buddha nature itself. Compassion grows from such roots.

We all have our favorite concepts. “I’m sensitive. I’m easily hurt.” “I’m a pushy kind of person.” “I’m an intellectual.” Our concepts may be useful on an everyday level, but we need to see their actual nature. Unexperienced concepts are a source of confusion, anxiety, depression; they tend to produce behavior that is not good for ourselves or for others.

To do the work of practice, we need endless patience, which also means recognizing when we have no patience. So we need to be patient with our lack of patience: to recognize when we don’t want to practice is also part of practice. Our avoidance and resistance are part of the conceptual framework that we’re not yet ready to look at. It’s okay not to be ready. As we become ready, bit by bit, a space opens up, and we’ll be ready to experience a little more, and then a little more. Resistance and practice go hand in hand. We all resist our practice, because we all resist our lives. And if we believe in concepts instead of experiencing the moment, we’re like Nasrudin: we’re sprinkling bread crumbs on the flower beds to keep the tigers away.

## **Discussion**

**What are your favorite concepts or ways to “sprinkle bread crumbs to keep the tigers away”?**

**How can we work with these false generalizations in our lives? Have you found your practice makes it easier for you to see them and even let them go? What would it mean in your life if you could put down the pretensions and false generalizations we cling so tenaciously to?**