

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

Groundlessness, No Escape The Challenge of Continuous Awareness

12/2/23

I find it helpful to remember that this practice is not easy. It's not too difficult a lot of the time but sometimes it is. Guess you could say the same thing about life. So we're fortunate to have something in our lives that can really help negotiate difficulties. I'd like us all to more live what I call our natural joy, which is here when we're not blocking it. But we do block it - I do.

Pema Chodron speaks of the "wisdom of no escape," and that's mainly what the talk today is about. This also involves what Myoku recently referred to as continuous awareness, or choiceless awareness.

There's two teachings I find valuable to keep in mind.

Pema Chodron:

"Life is a good teacher and a good friend. Things are always in transition if we could only realize it. Nothing ever sums itself up in the way that we like to dream about. The off-center, in-between state is an ideal situation, as it can be a situation in which we don't get caught, and as we can open our hearts and minds."

Joko:

"Life always gives us exactly the teacher we need at every moment. This includes every mosquito, every misfortune, every red light, every traffic jam, every obnoxious supervisor (or employee), every loss, every illness, every moment of joy or depression, every addiction, every piece of garbage, every breath. Every moment is the guru."

Each of these are applicable to that time when we're facing, in our life, groundlessness (a loss of footing) with no escape - when big things are falling apart and we're on the edge of we know not what. Facing the tiger, nowhere to run. Not literally, but it might feel something like that. And, can we remember, to make this our practice?

The teachings might tell us an acute groundlessness with no escape is good news. But what will we do? It doesn't feel like good news. It might feel like pending annihilation, or even worse.

The good news, for us as practitioners, is the possibility of being able to turn *toward* the situation, lean in, stay with, experience, investigate, be illuminated by, perhaps even be curious. This is the potential, as we can, to the extent that we can. And really, this applies to the bigger and smaller things.

When we experience, without running away, we learn, we grow. When we don't experience, we don't learn, we suffer. Or cause others suffering. Our human tendency is to take the escape route if we can. So no escape can offer the greatest opportunity.

If we can go straight through (experience fully), we might be surprised, and relieved, that we're still intact - and likely a bit more willing to let life take its course, without putting up as many barriers to its flow. Of course, we might not go so straight through - we get side-tracked. Likely, our surrender to just experiencing will be less than complete - and that's OK. Doing the best we can is the best we can, and that's something. In fact, in its intelligence, life may offer us an escape route, knowing how much is too much. Seems I've been *there*, more than once.

Faith and trust can be important here. You may say, "but reaction, panic, fear make small work of my faith and trust." We probably all, to some extent, will meet this. Hearing the seasoned words of the teachers helps, our previous experience (perhaps over years), helps. A choiceless moving-into the scary scenario might unexpectedly present the next step, that *will* be taken, and is soon seen to be a graceful offering, from the mystery that we are.

I've experienced "ways out" that are a complete and lasting mystery to me. The challenge here is, as we go in, we don't know the way out. That's the edge. It can be moment-to-moment, a unique life experience that may unfold step-by-step, likely unpredictably, perhaps leaving us wondering, to some extent, how we got to where we got. One might appreciate this mystery, having spent some time closer to it.

Something that is well-rooted in us will likely be addressed over time through multiple exposures or cycles. Each cycle, in and out, will tend to diminish how well-rooted that issue is - and it may take patience and perseverance, staying the course, to really take us through.

So again, we do the best we can.

Pema Chodrin speaks of the sign she had pinned up on her wall, "Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found in us." Somehow, even before I heard the Buddhist teachings, I knew that this was the spirit of awakening. It was about letting go, she says.

Letting go and staying.

I don't feel our consideration would be complete without going over the practice methodology entailed here. If we're doing it, it works. It never hurts to ask ourselves if we're committing to really do what practice asks of us. We're going to be short of 100% but just to see that is valuable. As is some self-compassion.

1. Awareness of self-centered thoughts, disengaging from them, noticing if we've gotten lost in them, returning to this moment. These thoughts can be insistent, so not getting caught can require attention and intention.
2. Bodily Presence (the physical) - awareness of body, breath, the physical environment.

These first two can be especially important when something has really activated self-centered thinking, like something core-belief related. What we call concentrative practice can be helpful - counting or following the breath. And we might need to really make an effort to just stay with the breath - going off, noticing, coming back to the sensations in the body, going off, noticing, coming back. It will make a difference if we stay. The busy mind can start to settle and about here you may feel you're getting your life back, that is, the present moment, some spaciousness. There is often more clarity in how to move forward at this point.

3. Experience of Being, or consciousness, without the weighty notions of self, or with a lighter self. As the mind settles, perception can open up. We stay with bodily awareness as we can more experience just being here, fully present. You might begin to feel yourself as much a phenomenon as a self. But don't worry, that self is still readily available. We're not trying to "throw away" anything here. You don't have to do anything, except to be with the life force that's flowing through the body. You might feel the energy of this, the vitality, the mystery of this. Even the joy of this.
4. Reconciling being and doing in our life. "Enlightening" our doing in the world with wisdom and compassion - living more fully without harming. Yes, there is much in life to do, and that needs doing, that is helpful to do. Over time, practice enables us to bring the inherent capacities within us more to the fore - into our life moment-to-moment. Like wisdom and compassion. As we touch them in our practice, we can include them more in our life, just naturally. Some patience and persistence will be helpful.

We've got a lifetime task here - up, down, in, out, around, through. Tough, and not so tough. Persevering, staying through it all, the best we can.

And you know, I can't think of anything more worth doing. Yes, it's hard - but harder if we don't do it, as Joko used to say.