

Zen Center

O F S A N D I E G O

The In-Between State

2/3/24

Pema Chodron has written about the In-Between state. What is the in-between state? You could say it's where we start to realize that we're not really in control. It's where we're confronted with the feeling of, "I don't know what to do," we're caught in-between. We are better at seeing that we have this wanting to find comfort in our usual ways - like how we spend our time in entertaining ourselves and feeling secure. But we really haven't given up our notion that outer comfort can bring lasting happiness. Maybe we're seeing our beliefs and ideas with a little more space around them and not so much feeling that they are "right". We're getting glimpses of how we might suffer less in our life, but we can see our poorly-serving tendencies and strategies as still having strength. Perhaps we could say there are cracks in it, but that wall of our self-centeredness remains largely intact.

This can be a challenging state, and since we won't readily surrender our self-centeredness, it can be with us for some time. Patience and practice. Why not do what we can to make friends with it?

Years ago, in considering this, my largely egoic take on it was, "Well, give me a few years, and I'll be through it."

Wrong. You'll probably agree, practice, the need for practice, never ends.

Then, after a while, we might have a slightly new take on it - I'll practice more, take it more seriously, and give me ten years. That's still off the mark. Still hoping for that future event.

This reminds me of a Zen joke. A student asked the master, "If I practice, how long before I attain enlightenment?" The master said, "Hmmm. Maybe ten years." The student then asked, "What if I practice really hard?" The master replied, "Then it will be twenty years."

There's a role for relaxation here, true relaxation as contrasted with laziness.

With dedicated practice, we have more awareness of how we might live with less suffering, and some ability to live that. We've evolved. We have some motivation to persevere in the practice. Wherever we're at is actually OK but we might feel it is

lacking, that we've fallen short - this is a good point for applied awareness, "Having the believed thought I'm lacking, falling short."

Ten years in, twenty, into practice, life will continue to offer us regular challenges. Could be at least as many, and maybe more. This is not bad news, we just have more *opportunities*. And it's not about comparing where we think we are to where we think we should be. We notice *that* thought. Always, it's what is happening now.

It can be helpful if we are clearer on how this whole thing works. Knowing the ground better, or being reminded, we might negotiate the unevenness more effectively and be more patient with ourselves.

I'm reminded of the old Cherokee tale of the two wolves. Remember that? Maybe it's time to revisit it.

A young boy came to his Grandfather, filled with anger at another boy who had done him an injustice. The old Grandfather said to his grandson, "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, it's like a poison. I have struggled with these feelings many times."

"It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one wolf is good and does no harm. It lives in harmony with all around it and does not take offense when no offense was intended. It will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But the other wolf is full of anger. The littlest thing will set it into a fit of temper."

"It fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. It cannot think because its anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, because this anger will change nothing. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, because both of the wolves try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which wolf will win, Grandfather?" The Grandfather smiled and said, "The one I feed."

From our practice perspective, the first wolf is the self-centered dream, or separation, and the second wolf is Being, or Presence in the Now, unity. Our challenge is to apply this practice of awareness, watching ourselves, watching what is happening in the unfolding of our lives from an expanding perspective, a deepening presence. In watching and experiencing, we are not lost.

Along the way we go back and forth - this wolf and that. Noticing, feeling, experiencing which wolf we are feeding with our thoughts and actions. And moving to feed the wolf of unity. The body can help inform us. We see, we learn, we evolve.

What, specifically, can help us in negotiating the in-between state?

Awareness of self-centered expectations of how things should proceed and the judgment that goes with that. We're each unique and what we need to experience is unique also. It takes as long as it takes. The self-judgments are usually negative. So we notice the thoughts of expectations and self-judgment, and any beliefs we have in them as being the truth. For example - "Having the expectation that I should get through this more quickly," or "Having the believed thought that I'm not progressing, and that I'm inadequate." We can come to see these as just thoughts. And notice how the thoughts show up in feelings and the body - anxiety, tension, pain, for example. We do the best we can to take in the whole of the experience. Not good or bad. We stay with it, keep practicing. There may be more going on than what we're thinking is going on.

And have some faith and trust in the process, the supports, seen and unseen. We have the wonder of our Being, the ability to practice, and the support of the Sangha. The teachings encourage us to do so.

Remember that phrase, "Not knowing is most intimate." Amazing things might flow out of that intimacy, if we stay.

And Pema Chodron has these words of encouragement:

"We are told about the pain of chasing after pleasure and the futility of running from pain. We hear also about the joy of awakening, of realizing our interconnectedness, of trusting the openness of our hearts and minds. But we aren't told all that much about this state of being in-between, no longer able to get our old comfort from the outside but not yet dwelling in a sense of equanimity and warmth.

"Anxiety, heartbreak, and tenderness mark the in-between state. It's the kind of place we usually want to avoid. The challenge is to stay in the middle rather than buy into struggle and complaint. The challenge is to let it soften us rather than make us more rigid and afraid. Becoming intimate with the queasy feeling of being in the middle of nowhere only makes our hearts more tender. When we are brave enough to stay in the middle, compassion arises spontaneously. By not knowing, not hoping to know, and not acting like we know what's happening, we begin to access our inner strength.

"Yet it seems reasonable to want some kind of relief. If we can make the situation right or wrong, if we can pin it down in any way, then we are on familiar ground. But something has shaken up our habitual patterns and frequently they no longer work. Staying with volatile energy gradually becomes more comfortable than acting it out or repressing it. Staying with it is what heals. It allows us to let go of our self-importance. It's how the warrior learns to love."