

KARMA KOAN

[This blog is for those who have experienced and perhaps understand grief or sudden shock and have wondered what we can do about it. There is something that I want to share with you. I am by function a phenomenologist, which means I study my own consciousness and describe it. I came up with the following as relates to sudden shock or the shattering of the Self that I find very useful. My style of dharma does not have haiku, but we have similar challenges that require a working answer. Here is one.]

This is a new insight, so I am probably not articulating it well enough yet. Let me know if you understand it and feed some of it back to me.

Since my stroke, up until now I've been looking in the wrong direction, that wrong direction being back there and then, you know, where I came from and the back there I have trouble remembering who and what I was. And I believe this is a common problem, actually a mistake.

Here I have been mourning or counting the blessings that I used to have, instead of counting the blessings that I now "have." That's easy to say, but I can back it up. And in my defense, it is hard to count what I'm not yet aware of, meaning my new situation that is just now coming into focus. LOL.

I have spent years sharing with folks in books, articles, videos, music, here on Facebook, and in public talks what I understand, have had experiences with, and sometimes even realized about astrology, music, rock concert posters, photography, nature, and of course the dharma. As a child of the 1960s I believe in sharing information.

So, it's no wonder that after my recent stroke I reached for those topics, to see if they are still intact, since that's how I am used to representing myself. And I am confounded when I can't quite get back into those topics to the degree that they snap to attention for me like they used to. For some reason, they are veiled or obscured. Sure, they are still back in there somewhere, but like under a caul. They are my history, but for some strange reason I'm just not into them (can't get into

them) at the present. They now have a hollow ring. How frightening that since of loss can feel.

So, of course I have spent time, and not a little anguish, over the fact that it seems I've lost my lifelong interest in these subjects, even if only "somewhat." They don't have the edge for me they had only weeks ago. That quickly became the elephant in the room. How's that?

And the answer turns out to be quite simple. All of those life-topics are not happening as much with me lately as what I've been going through with all these health-related issues. The historical me has been sidelined. They are history. To put it another way, my past has always been history. And what I have discovered is that I'm not being honest with myself. And here is the important point:

Instead of paying attention to what is most fresh (which is the whole dharma tradition), the most real just now and what's actually happening, what is spontaneous and alive in me, I find myself trying to reinvent who it is I think I was just a few weeks ago and who I have been for as long as I can remember. The great Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa said it: "First thought, best thought."

I never used to do that (read from the past) because my whole blog here is about riding the moment, seizing the present as the fiducial for my blogs. And there, at last, is where I found the problem, the little bugger. I'm no longer paying attention to my own present moment out of fear that I have lost some (or something) of whom I was and always thought I was. Like Lot's wife, I am looking back and turning into a pillar of salt.

For sure, the stroke popped some kind of balloon-ride I was on and I fell to earth. Of that I'm certain. All my party tricks and glibness were swept away in one fell swoop, leaving me standing there naked and vulnerable on what initially appears very much like an arid desert plain. No adornment; no elaboration.

However, I'm just starting to get a glimmer and see that most of what I lost was just my collected parlor-tricks and perhaps the oil that greased my glibness. And, as mentioned, the

reality of the health-event knocked the wind out of me, leaving me gasping for air, fighting for breath. And of course I reached for what I knew, what I was used to, in other words: me as I used to remember me.

Armed with the above realization, I find myself giving up the way things were (used to be) with me, not because I am denied or have lost this memory, but rather because it's ME as I was and I am no longer focused on all of the bells and whistles that I once was. I never was focused on the past except as a touchstone, a memory. Instead, here I am, stark naked and stripped of what no longer interests me, yet feeling I should identify with the past to recapture what I am, what I was or think I was. I have checked this point out repeatedly and verified it to my satisfaction. I just want to make sure readers get the point properly: that I'm doing all this to myself. I will try to explain.

It's not that the stroke or any sudden devastating event has stripped me of memories that I had and used to treasure. That's not it. It's not that I have no memory of what was, but rather that (at heart) I'm just no longer interested in what was, in the past. Try as I might, what was (used to be) glittering and shiny now falls flat and no longer holds my interest. Nothing was taken away. That's what is so hard to face up to, IMO. The fact is that I don't care. Imagine that, me not caring? LOL. For me, that is the truth.

In other words, it's not forgetfulness or a sudden loss of memory that was wiped out by the stroke as I most feared. That's just not it. What is "it" is that I don't care anymore. I have changed, but not in a bad way, but for sure in a different way. And that, at first glance, is a very scary observation. Yet, it has a big silver-lining.

And that is: I have lost or had stripped away an enormous mass of inessentials, what I would call B.S. And so I feel like the emperor and his new clothes. I feel naked without my old persona or bag-of-tricks and have not yet figured out how to create a new face that I can stand to be. It's mostly vanity folks. So, to make a long story even longer, here is the gist of what I'm seeing:

I'm not able to reanimate my past, not because my memory

has been wiped out and somehow lost, but because I am (at heart) no longer interested in it, and for at least two reasons. Number one, I am too busy dealing with the present moment's health issues to attempt to reanimate my past just for what turns out to be cold comfort. And, Number two, I don't really care about all that water over the dam (the past) and need to be (and kept) busy determining what is essential in this more modern stripped-down version of my person, the one that is just emerging, i.e. in the present moment.

And so, I can see this transition could take a long or a short time, depending upon how much I cling (or attempt to cling) to my past. And it's not like there is a real choice. The only real choice is this present moment and seizing on whatever opportunities it presents. I am starting to get that idea.

And instead of thinking I have lost so much that was valuable, instead I can see that I've had so much that is inessential removed, leaving me with the essentials from which I can build a much more integral personality, if I will just keep my eyes front and in the present.

And for my fellow dharma practitioners, there is this: There is nothing wrong with my mind and certainly nothing wrong with the absolute nature of my mind. Providing all our basic senses are working, nothing essential has been (or could be) removed. I'm just not used to working with my new set of personality-tools without all of the familiar (and non-essential) bells and whistles I am used to. And so, I'm looking backward rather than forward, which I seldom ever do.

The takeaway for me is that I need to stop thinking about the past, who and what I was (or used to be), and keep my mind on the present moment from which I can fashion a much more aerodynamic and integral "me." In a word, my whole dharma training has been about remaining in the present moment, not in the past or the future. And so, because I have had a big upset in health is no reason why I should suddenly be pinching myself every other second trying to secure a witness as to what I have been and where I have come from.

I never did that before and it would have not worked well if I did. It does not work well now. The past (or future) has always been veiled compared to the present. And it's no

different now. It was a mistake to dig in the past looking for a present. Instead, I should remain in the present and make out of whatever I have something of value. It's far easier to make of the present a life than to endlessly try to prolong a past I can't quite remember and never could. It has never been any different, this remembering of the past.

The moment I realized the above I entered the present fully again and felt like myself. I am more sober now and taking less for granted than I did, but I am reminded of an interview I did with the great bluesman Howlin' Wolf in 1969, in which he said:

“Just like a flower. You see, we're trampin' on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna' kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin', the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna' start a growin' again.”

It's the same idea.

[Photo taken today by me.]

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish”

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