

DHARMA: HARDENING OFF

Gyalsey Togmey Rinpoche states:

‘When my belly is full and the sun shines,
I look like a practitioner.
When confronting adversity,
I am an ordinary person.
Since my mind has not mingled with the dharma,
Grant your blessings that my heart may be flexible.’

[From a commentary by Tsele Randröl Rinpoche,
translated by Erik Pema Kunsang.]

This quote may not be familiar to many of you, but its meaning should be well-known to all of us interested in the dharma. There is a marked, if not a vast difference, between the state of our mind sitting on the cushion and that same mind caught in an hour-long traffic jam. This is a perennial problem for all beginning practitioners (and some more advanced students too). We can become quite ordinary in an instant, at least I can. LOL.

In many of the Buddhists teachings, a student is advised or directed to seek a place of solitude to practice. For many of us living within the city limits, this may have to be the corner of a room or a separate shrine room. Then, some (or many) years later, the student is directed to take their practice off the cushion and to town, so to speak. It’s pretty obvious how that works.

When we are learning and seeking stability of mind and practice, finding an out-of-the-way spot, some place of solitude, is helpful, perhaps even necessary.

And then, when we have acquired some stabilization in our practice, we gradually become increasingly immune to outside distractions, like the marketplace. At least, that's the theory.

In fact, at some point in our practice, we need to expose ourselves to the ordinary traffic of life, perhaps very gradually at first. In later practices, thoughts, distractions (and what-not) become the actual fuel that fires our meditation. As mentioned, in advanced practices, without thoughts and challenges we can't advance in our practice.

The Zen tradition has all kinds of lovely woodcuts and drawings that illustrate this, like the Ox-herder series. "Meanwhile, back in the jungle" as the old tune "Stranded in the Jungle" by the Cadets went, we each have to learn how to find stability in our particular jungle. I know I do.

I can be humming along like some kind of bodhisattva, being kind, friendly, rolling with the punches, and so on, when "Wham!," I'm socked in the stomach by something or other. I fall to earth faster than a lightning and my mind is immediately even less than ordinary. And I am not the only one.

As of now, I no longer have many unrealistic expectations as to my meditation's stability. I can be stable or I can be not; it all depends on the mental weather. The front-lines of regular living are where our stability (or lack thereof) is tested out.

IMO, our dharma practice (and any realization we might have) is only as good as we are on a bad mental-weather day. If we are unstable under

pressure, then we are unstable period. In many of the teachings on the bardo and after-death states, it is made very clear that when we traverse that period between death and rebirth, we are very, very sensitive and during that time the stability of our mind is crucial in terms of making the right decisions that result in our next rebirth. A little instability can send us careening off track into who knows what kind of rebirth, but for sure it would be one with no say on our part, no choice on our part.

So, how wonderful it is to have a place of refuge in our home to practice stability. Yet, keep in mind that at some point we have to galvanize or harden-off our stability by testing it in the vicissitudes of ordinary life. We when enter the bardo, it won't be on a cushion or in a corner. We will be totally exposed.

[A photo from my little office shrine. That is a rupa of Naropa in the back, next to the bell and dorje. In the front are three of the Seven Attributes of Royalty, the Precious Elephant, the Precious Horse, and the Precious General.]

“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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