

Dharma talk, 5-8-15  
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If the trickster protects the status quo, what does it take to wake up?

The trickster, our very own wily conservative, always wants to maintain the status quo, the known, our usual delusions. That clever one wants us to maintain a fixed and solid and predictable universe. Perceptions are spun to fashion a narrative, with us as the protagonist. And, by nature, it's the same old story.

What does it take to wake us up, to jolt us out of the tyranny of the familiar?

Isn't this why we embark on this path?

It is a process of taking aim, walking in a direction that seems true to us.  
It is a process of letting go of the seeming solidity of our understanding.  
Letting go, over and over again.

One of the first things we need to let go of is any romantic notion of a spiritual path with an ideal of perfection. There is no final wholeness, an end state, a new, pleasant, firm ground upon which to alight. (Dale S. Wright)

At best, we can begin by cleaning up our act.

We can take on the precepts. They are very useful for limiting voluntary chaos and feeling slimed by our own tendencies. The precepts are the ethical principles of commitment, to try not to do harm to any living being. That, of course, includes not doing harm to our self. We can vow not to steal, or lie, or take advantage of people's vulnerability. These are principles of training, to put into practice with intelligence and sensitivity. But our choices are always an uncertain approximation of the virtuous. We frequently fail to do the right thing. And, very frequently, the right thing is compromised right from the start. There is so much we don't know. And even more we cannot control. The precepts require humility. We must cultivate humility as we try not to make trouble and take hostages. Failure is built right into the enterprise.

This is a process of refinement. It is a process of intention, and humility, and dis-identification. It feels like a frontal attack on that trickster. It is a frontal attack on that trickster.

As we sit here, we are attacking the idea of a fixed identity, that, simultaneously we struggle to maintain.

We can't change our fixed identity by rebranding our self as a Buddhist. We can't change our belief in a fixed identity by taking on the precepts, although that makes the world must more manageable.

Goenka wisely said: “If we call ourselves Buddhist, we miss the point.”

We want to avoid substituting one identity for another. Leave any romantic Buddhist image out of this.

This is not a Buddhist breath that is breathing all by itself.

So we must ask: what is the nature of this attack on a fixed identity?

We cannot defeat our demons, those fragments of self we want to send into exile. Those demons thrive on the fight itself. (Jack Haubner)

We can bring interest and kindness and curiosity to every obstacle, which has the good grace to show up. It only in its showing up that we can work with it, recognize it, how it operates, how it arrives with such forceful demonic status.

In this way, we allow identity to be fluid. The obstacle becomes a process: more verb-like, in the way it functions. Mind is busy “minding”. Minding is a continuous flow.

A moment in mind is more like a singular, momentary event that occurs—an inter-dependent meeting of factors that never actually exists anywhere—but repeatedly and reliably, and usually unfolds quite predictably. (A. Olendski)

“There is no heap or store of unarisen mind prior to its arising. It does not come from anywhere, nor does it go in any particular direction.” (Buddhaghosa, Path of Purification)

So how do we wake up from our habitual stupor, of being seduced by that trickster who wants to convince us that we are the stories we repeat to our selves?

We desire to come to humility and kindness. We are cultivating our character. What can prompt us to dis-identify with that ceaseless product of our spin-doctor? What can wake us up to the way we usually process stimulation?

What is the true statement that brings our incessant chatter to an abrupt stop, halts the self-in-the-world-creating mind, and wake the mind up to the power of direct sense contact, with out the defining narrative dominating perception?

What snaps us into waking up?

For many of us, it is nothing short of remembering the mystery of birth and death that wakes us up, awe-struck, fully present.

It is the completely incomprehensible mystery of the threshold between life and death.

This is the time of year of the celebration of Buddha's birthday, his enlightenment day, and the day of his death. Why are these three conflated? Because each of these transitions touch the mystery of that which is beyond comprehension. This inescapable mystery takes most any concern of the moment and puts it into perspective. We startle awake. Holding onto our complaints becomes laughable, petty. If this is all such a temporary vanity, what is the point? Even the trickster is silenced...just for that moment.

The Orthodox Jews have a plain white linen robe they can make part of their practice. They can wear this same robe during periods of transition: when they marry; on the high holidays, when they repent on behalf of themselves and the community, and there is renewal; and they wear these same robes for their burial, when they lie dead in their coffins.

In the face of death, my death, your death, is what is concerning me that important? Should I give more power to the little rant I have running about the pain in my back? Can I walk close to mystery to know the awe of knowing nothing? Can I allow myself to understand how little control I actually have? Can I let this moment reveal its natural fluidity and malleability?

This breath, in this moment, breathing all by itself.

So amazing.  
So precious.

Or are we going to go to the internet and buy a fancy robe, with stripes or lace, and dress up death, collude with the trickster and hide birth and death behind something handsome? Are we going to call our selves Buddhist, or virtuous, or miserable beasts...whatever is the fashion or mood of the moment? Are we going to keep doing all that in order to forget what is really quite precarious and most precious? Or are we going to remember:

Everything we truly need in this moment is already present.

This breath breathes all by itself.

