

NEWSLETTER
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FOLLOWING YOUR HEART

As I have trained, as I have learned to do my best to meditate and make Preceptual action a practice in my life, I have come to get more in touch with something within me that already knows the Truth. This is not something that is exclusive to me or even to Buddhist practitioners. Those using the Bible as a guide talk about "the still, small voice." This was a description that my Master, Houn Jiyu-Kennett, regularly used and, I believe, had real affection for. Buddhists may call it our Buddha Nature, our True Heart. It is that within us which knows/expresses the Truth, an inner Preceptual guide for our actions of body, speech and mind, and which we come to "hear" through our continued religious practice. Even those without any particular religious practice know this "voice." I like another monk's example of its being that inner prompting which discourages our getting distracted by an accident we might be driving past. We may choose to ignore this, possibly at our own peril; nevertheless, it is there, if we are willing to listen. Sometimes it is easier for us to hear than at other times, but that is not its fault, or even its problem. Paying attention to what is freely, but very quietly and noninsistently, offered, is up to us. Training helps us to do exactly that.

Some aspects of this "voice" might remind you of a conscience, but in my experience, a conscience is too involved with guilt or shame. One's heart doesn't judge or punish. It simply offers. And I have never known a conscience to help in traffic. Other aspects might remind you of intuition, but again, at least for me, that is not an adequate description. The way that I experienced intuition was not particularly Preceptual, and was too involved with my feelings, and my likes and dislikes, to be a reliable guide for religious practice.

Very early in my monastic training, when Rev. Master Jiyu began talking about the practice of asking questions of one's heart, and of "listening" for the answers, I was very willing, but had great difficulty trying to put it into practice. Part of my problem initially was my motivation: I was fascinated by the idea of Something, something outside of myself, giving me all of the RIGHT answers. Hopefully just looking at the way that I have written that sentence gives the reader some idea of the delusion and misunderstanding involved. I was looking for something/someone else to do it for me, and I thought that this was the way. I was looking outside of myself. Rev. Master Jiyu would have been horrified, but that was the level of my understanding at the time.

One's heart, one's Buddha Nature is not separate from oneself. It is greater than oneself, but not essentially different or fundamentally separate. If I write anything that appears to affirm such an essential difference or fundamental separation, please keep in mind that that is simply not so. We are stuck with the difficulties and deficiencies of language and also the experience of the speaker when we talk about these things. My personal experience of this is limited, and so the words I choose may be different from those used by one with a deeper understanding. It is also true that some people do experience this offered help, these inner promptings, as somehow separate from themselves. It is important to understand that it is necessary to continue to go deeper, with an open mind, always doing one's best not to cut the universe in two, into self and other. One's personal experience of the Truth changes as one goes deeper. It is always good to keep in mind the teaching of those who are wiser than we are. My Master taught that although we are not the Unborn, there is nothing in us that is not of the Unborn.

Over years of training, I have come to find that we can indeed ask questions of Something greater than ourselves, and get answers, but not in the way that I had expected. First I needed to prepare myself, and in that preparation, I found that the willingness to be helped was essential. This seems obvious now, but was something with which I had difficulty

for many years. I would flip-flop back and forth between wanting something else to do it for me, and not allowing any help at all. I had to come to know that I have to do my own training, and I have to be willing to accept any help offered. This includes regularly asking for help. It is not important for me to know of what I am asking. What I have discovered to be important is simply my *willingness to ask* for help. This willingness literally begins to open us to receive whatever is offered. Without a willingness to ask for, and therefore receive, help, it is much more difficult to be aware of any help/answers offered. I daily, literally, ask for help in my training, not necessarily for anything specific, although I may do that as well. I find that besides opening myself to feeling that I am not alone in this process of training, asking for help assists me in being aware of and admitting to those things with which I have difficulties, to being open to doing something about them.

I have also needed to work on a willingness to trust. I try to trust that answers/help will be available. This was very hard for me as a skeptical/cynical Westerner. Part of me wanted desperately to believe that help was available, and part of me rejected anything that seemed to require faith in the unseen. I was so afraid of being deceived that I couldn't allow myself to look, and if I couldn't look, how could I see? I have come to find that following my heart is immeasurably helped by a willingness to consider the possibility that there is Something greater than myself, however I might understand or experience that. And to trust--not in anything, or any particular outcome, but to simply, willingly, in spite of my skeptical adult mind, trustingly nurture the naive mind of a child. This requires courage and that courage takes cultivation. It may seem at odds with our Western experience, at least since we learned that there was no Santa Claus, but cultivating this attitude of mind has been essential to deepening my religious training. On one level we cultivate this trust by simply not fighting it too hard, by being willing to try it out when it presents itself to us, by not too quickly discarding it as obviously flawed. Trust naturally grows out of training in the Buddha-Dharma, sometimes seemingly in spite of ourselves. I am not speaking here of blind trust, but of trust that does grow out of training. We simply have to be willing to let it grow.

Another willingness that has been important for my training is to keep trying to spiritually look up. Think of someone literally, physically, looking down, and it is easy to think of someone in despair, in fear, in denial. I find it very hard to sustain any of these emotions while working on a willingness to look up. To get a feel for what I mean by "looking up" just try physically doing it, especially when feeling any of the above painful emotions. Now try doing the same thing spiritually. Somehow I can actually feel myself changing my point of view, loosening my grip on at least some of my clinging. Looking up opens me to a willingness to experience whatever is there. And that is an important step in following my heart.

To experience whatever is offered, I had to learn to be willing to accept an answer I didn't like. To really be aware of the answer, I found that I needed to work on being willing to let go of attachment to any particular answer whatsoever. Looking up helps me to do this. Lest one take this admonition too literally, I have found that, while looking up spiritually, it is not necessary to do so physically, but that may help.

As the entire community within the OBC continued, over many years, to work on following our hearts, certain mistakes became apparent. One of the most dangerous was to follow what we thought was our heart even in contradiction to the Precepts, or our teacher, or the community of trainees. When we train in Buddhism we take refuge in the Three Treasures. This is probably the most basic commitment of all Buddhists. First we take refuge in the Buddha, the Great Dharmakaya, the Eternal, the Unborn, in Something greater than ourselves. Following our heart is an aspect of this Refuge. It is the faith that we can get in touch with that Something and allow It to speak to/through us. We also, and just as importantly, take refuge in the Dharma and the Sangha. Within the Dharma Refuge are to be found the Precepts. We should always use the Precepts as the guide and aspiration for our training. It is good to run our intended actions of body, speech, and mind by the Precepts.

If what we hear apparently contradicts the Precepts, we must be very careful. That is when it is very good to take refuge in the Sangha, the community of trainees. For this purpose, unless we know of others that are far along in their training, it is good to make our teacher that Sangha Refuge. If we find our heart in contradiction to the Sangha, we may well be making a mistake. If we are then not willing to have the humility to admit that we could be wrong, and to seek this refuge, then we are making a mistake. My Master always took refuge in the senior monks around her when trying to follow her heart. And she always kept in mind that what she heard within her could be the selfish self, in other words, that *she* could be wrong.

Another potential mistake in trying to follow the heart is not acting until we are sure of "The Answer." It is good to be patient, and we must get on with our lives. We learn to do this by being willing to act even when we know that mistakes are possible, even likely. Demanding certainty, however, is something that we can avoid as almost certainly a mistake, at least early on (the first 20 or 30 years or so of our training). We need to be willing to simply do the best that we can with the information that we have at the time. And to be willing to learn from the consequences of whatever action or inaction that we take. Sometimes there is a feeling that we know what we are doing, but more often than not, we can feel very much in the dark. This can be true, and in my experience often is, even when we are following our heart. We may only have some inkling of the very next step, but where it may lead is often hidden from us. Doing our best within the Precepts and meditation, taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is enough. We must be willing to ask for nothing more.

Another potential misunderstanding is the idea that an answer is somehow permanent. If we are truly following our heart we are like a leaf in the wind. What is good to do today may not be good tomorrow, and then it may be good again the next day. We have to be, as my Master loved to describe it, kaleidoscopic, moving like a leaf in the wind, never disobeying the wind (the Unborn), never holding on, continually letting go of all of our clinging. After all, this is where training is ultimately leading. This is what we have been told from the very beginning. We might as well get on with it.

In my early practice, I wanted an answer to every question that I might have, guidance with every decision that I needed to make, even the most worldly. Over time, I came to understand that for me there are questions better not asked of my Heart, if for no other reason than they come from the wrong place. If a question arises out of our wishing to continue to cling to greed, hate, or delusion--out of our continuing attachment to the world--it may be very difficult to hear any answer our heart may offer, and even if heard, we may easily misunderstand. I suspect that, rather than "sell the wine of delusion," the heart may sometimes remain silent. When we come to see that clinging is the source of a question, we need to step back and take another look. Since that clinging can be very difficult to see, we need to always work on our willingness to understand that we could be wrong; to work on our willingness to take refuge in the Precepts and the Sangha. We must also be willing to take responsibility for our own lives, always doing the best that we can, and not looking for worldly reassurance. I also suspect that an unwillingness to get on with things, to simply do our best, without waiting for "certainty", may get in the way of hearing the still, small voice.

So how has all of this come to work for me? I found that it was better to save this deliberately asking a question, this asking for help with something specific, for the "bigger" questions that arise out of my practice. These tended to be the questions that continue to come up over a period of time, the ones that I wrestle with. As I have gained some experience with this willingness to ask, however, I feel more comfortable asking more regularly. When I am searching for help, I try to simply ask, and then just set it aside, not demanding or expecting an immediate answer. If the situation becomes overwhelming, once again, I try to simply ask, and then just set it aside, not constantly revisiting the problem or question. This may happen repeatedly, but I try not to wallow in my difficulties. What I

have found to be the key to listening to my heart is simply the willingness to patiently, faithfully be open to its promptings. Sometimes quickly, but more often slowly, the next step would become a little clearer. As long as I approach my everyday life in training, looking up, with trust and willingness, that is, in one sense, all that is needed. I seem to usually be aware of the next step (even though that may well be the extent of my awareness) and that is enough. Although I may often want more, it is, nevertheless, enough.

I also become aware of my heart's promptings completely unexpectedly, when I have no obvious question or am feeling no obvious need for help. It just comes up as I continue my training. This can be particularly easy to be aware of because of its "out of the blue" quality. It can also be particularly hard to listen to, because it may indicate that it would be good to change some aspect of my life when there is no desire to change, no awareness of any necessity for change. In fact, I may well feel a positive aversion to change in this particular area. Once again, I consider it, doing my best to be willing, open, and patient, taking refuge, looking closely at this aspect of my life and my practice. Maybe I have gotten a little self-indulgent, or set in my ways, or gotten off on a sidetrack, or... Even if it ultimately turns out not to be my heart I am hearing, shining the light of awareness on a particular aspect of my life is usually rewarding, and I have come to be grateful for the opportunity, even though there is often some reluctance, even rejection at first (or longer).

Finally, it is not enough to merely hear my heart, I need to be willing to actually listen to it as well. If I am not careful, I can become like some teen-agers (or adults) who, although they hear the same thing over and over again, pay it little attention. When I ask for help in being aware of the promptings of my heart, I always ask for help in "hearing" and "listening." I also always ask for help in "following" what I have heard. Although the necessity for following whatever we "hear" seems obvious, I have sometimes found myself simply not following through. However skilled we may become in listening to our heart, without the willingness to follow its promptings, we really go nowhere.

As long as we continue to give ourselves to the practice of the Buddha-Dharma, to do our best to be open and willing, we will eventually find the promptings of our heart to be more and more often available to us. If this can work for me, it can work for *anybody*. I pray that you may find this still, small voice for yourself.

Yours in the Dharma,
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