

Leave your mind alone

Excerpted from a dharma talk by Jacob Perl, JDPSN in September, 1991

Q: I have a friend who has amnesia. Could you explain this in Buddhist terms?

PPSN: In Buddhist psychology, we speak of eight kinds of consciousness. The first five are sensory—sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste. The sixth is mind consciousness, which controls our body, and the seventh is “discriminating consciousness,” which enables us to distinguish white from black or good from bad. The eighth consciousness is that which controls memory.

Sometimes these last three consciousness are split apart and don’t function together. The result might be amnesia, or perhaps a split personality. In extreme cases one personality doesn’t know what the other personality is doing. If you are practicing, however, you return to “before thinking.” Before thinking there is no first, second, third consciousness, etc. It is before any consciousness. If you keep this “before consciousness,” then amnesia and even a more serious kind of dysfunction can heal. The sixth, seventh and eighth consciousness can work together.

Practicing means you don’t use your consciousness; you let it rest. When your arm is damaged, you put it in a sling and let it heal. Otherwise you will damage it more and more. It’s the same way with your mind; if you leave it alone, it will heal. Leaving it alone means returning to before thinking. This is the purpose of Zen meditation.

Q: I have trouble deciding things. Is there some way practicing can help?

PPSN: I have a secret technique which I’ve been teaching for several years now. Take a coin (laughter) and throw it up in the air. By the time you catch it, you usually know what way you want it to come up. You don’t even have to look. Just do it.

From the vantage point of distance, most decisions are not so important. Either way will be O.K. Why you do what you do is most important—is it for me or for others? If your direction is clear, then your choice is also clear. But sometimes you cannot decide what is helpful, so flip

a coin. It’s OK.

Q: My desires seem to come in two varieties: low class, like “I want that cheesecake” or “I want that woman in a bikini,” and high class, like “I really want to see peace in this world” or “I want to see my family flourish.” Is this the difference you’re talking about?

PPSN: Not exactly. We talk about desire versus aspiration. Every morning at our Zen centers we recite “Sentient beings are numberless, we vow to save them all.” That vow’s direction is for others. That is aspiration.

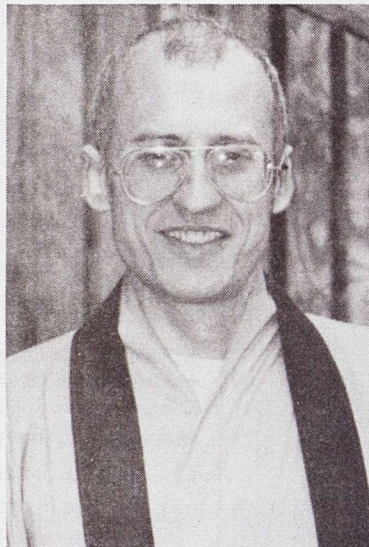
Desire means “for me.” You said, for example, “my family will flourish.” Why only “my family”? That is desire mind. But, “May all families flourish.” Not only human families. Tree family, cat family, dog family . . . Then there is no I, my, me. Or someone says “I want enlightenment.” That, again, is desire mind.

But suppose someone says “I don’t understand my true self, what is this ‘I’?” That question takes away desire mind. If you cultivate desire, desire will grow. If you cultivate Great Question, thinking calms down and desires disappear.

Thinking itself is not a problem, but if you let your desires and thinking control your actions, then you do have a problem. Let’s say a feeling or an idea appears, and you

know it’s not correct to act on it. If you’re practicing, you’ve learned to let what appears in your consciousness pass. If you’re not practicing, it’s harder to control your actions. Even though you know something’s not correct, you still do it. Or something should be done, but you don’t do it. Later you say, “Why did I do that?” But the next time is not any different. When I was a university student, I remember vowing after each exam that the next time my preparation would begin well ahead of time. I was never able to keep that vow, which means that my laziness thinking was quite strong. I wasn’t practicing hard enough, so this lazy mind controlled me.

Q: You said “don’t check yourself, don’t check others.” What does this mean?



Jacob Perl, JDPSN

PPSN: When you are practicing, uncomfortable thoughts and feelings often arise. We are accustomed to running away from these things. One way we try to escape when we're alone on the cushion is to check ourselves: "Oh, I am no good. I should not be thinking. I am a lousy Zen student." Thinking about thinking is like putting a head on top of your head. Another way of escaping is to look at and judge others. It is much more amusing than dealing with our own predicament.

Q: I saw a book named "If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him." What does this mean?

PPSN: Zen means becoming independent. That is the Buddha's teaching. Many people, however, become attached to teachers, attached to ideas, attached to words. It can be a kind of sickness. I heard a story about two friends walking down the street. One friend fell down, and the other one started to laugh. So the one who fell down said, "Look, that's not very nice. In the Bible it says that even if your enemy falls into adversity, you must not laugh, or rejoice. His friend responded, "Yes, of course I read that in the Bible, but it doesn't say anything about laughing when your friend falls down." That's a joke of course, but sadly we do attach to words, usually missing what they point at.

To be independent means that you find for yourself what the truth is. Don't just take someone's word for it, no matter how famous a person it is. If you attach to someone, you attach to someone's ideas, judgments, opinions. So if you meet the Buddha on the road you must kill him. Those are good words! However, even more importantly, when you meet your own I, my, me, kill them. Think of your life as a kind of a laboratory. You hear of a good formula. Don't accept it automatically. Test it in your life. If it really works, then use it, and teach it to others. If it doesn't, throw it out. Kill the Buddha, because you are the most important authority. That means that you must become Buddha. That means that your practicing is most important.

Q: Do you mean practicing, as you people do here in this room?

PPSN: Earlier this morning I asked you "What are you?" You were stuck, and unable to answer. That is our practice. Formal practice, which is what we do twice a day in this room, is only a technique, albeit a very important one. We can easily talk about keeping a don't know mind, but it is not always easy to actually do it. Even ten or fifteen minutes a day of formal practice can help us carry that practice into the rest of our life.

In your daily life, when you are doing something, do it one hundred percent. Then you are completely awake. If you are dreaming, wake up. Good dream or bad dream, dream of the past, the present, or the future, it does not matter. Become awake! Become an awakened one. Become Buddha. □

Longmen Grottos

The Longmen Grottos, carved from fine hard stone between 495 and 750 A. D., were once perhaps the most beautiful Buddhist site in China. Over the centuries, however, they were first defaced during Buddhist persecutions, and then looted to sell to Western museums and collectors. Now the caves remain a tourist attraction, but more than ninety percent of the images are either broken or missing.

Raining so long
a brash new waterfall bounces down
past empty niches
where sharply chiseled
slender Bodhisattvas
once meditated silently
before the swift Yi River

Raining so long
the tourists have left,
and the huge Tang Buddha
(too large to have been stolen)
sits brooding
over a wet courtyard
empty but for one single stubborn old woman
who still hopes to sell her bottles of orange soda

Raining so long
the river roars past the caves
where of all the thousand images
once carved to bring peace
to the souls of nuns, courtiers, merchants, soldiers
and to their ancestors—
now only the damaged,
the smashed, the headless
remain, slick and glistening

It may be raining
in Europe and America
where the perfect statues
sit in cases and on pedestals,
rest in changeless light and temperature,
never getting wet—
but here in Longmen
the ugly and misshapen lurk in their caves,
breathe with the wet and cold
welcome crows and sparrows
and listen to the river

Stephen Addiss