

Motivation for Practice

These articles were written by students as a prerequisite to taking dharma teacher in training precepts.

by Barry Briggs

When my best friend, dharma teacher Tom Campbell, asked me one day three years ago, "So, what will it take to get you to a retreat?" I responded, "Just ask me to a retreat." Motivation to begin practice was just that simple. You ask me, I answer you.

It hasn't stayed that simple. The practice that began with that first retreat has exposed shapes and contours of surprising power, unexpected strangeness, considerable confusion, and great reward. Pursuing these contours has taken me into a world that I had only rarely glimpsed before Tom's invitation. Practice has forced me to study the map of motivation: What is this? What is this condition? What is this situation? What is this relationship?

Answers to these questions, when they've come, haven't always been pleasant. At the beginning of practice, the first question to arise was: Why pursue this job and neglect my family? After six months of practice, it became clear that I would need to leave a well-paying and prestigious work situation so I could look more deeply at my life. Then, nearly two years into practice, my wife and I separated. In ways I don't fully understand, practice made the patterns of the relationship far too painful to sustain. Through practice, also, I've begun to look more clearly at my upbringing. This has meant accepting painful truths about my parents and the ways in which they raised me.

So, practice has begun clarifying my karma and this has brought much pain and suffering. Why, then, do this practice? Wasn't life much simpler, less confusing, more fun before practice began?

What began three years ago, and has increased in power and force, is a mapping of life's true nature. To extend the metaphor, before practice, I was wandering lost in an unknown, unperceived landscape. With practice, I have been given a mapping tool, a device for coming to know the hills, defiles, crags, and depths of this life.

For many years, I have been a rock climber. This activity has never been easy and has frequently

been dangerous. And it has been rewarding. It has been an activity of coming to know an unknown terrain intimately, sometimes painfully, so that I could be free to move beyond that territory. So, too, with practice. The practice of sitting on the cushions has been the practice of coming to know the landscape of life, sensing the possibilities, and learning to just do it.

Once this landscape has been mapped, then freedom becomes possible.

But... freedom for what?

Freedom to save all beings from suffering. Every morning I vow to save all sentient beings, numberless though they are. The vow is almost numbingly grand. How could I possibly do this?

Moment, by moment, by moment, coming to know my true condition, situation, and relationship—by practicing—I can begin to clarify the answer to this question. Now, my work situation has changed, changed in a way that gives me time to volunteer my expertise to help other people. My family has also changed—my wife, daughter, and I are now back together—to a situation where, increasingly, moment by moment, we can love one another. And, as I've come to see my karma, come to terms with it, I've experienced a loosening of its grip on my life. As karma has begun to loosen, I have started responding more directly, more intimately, to life situations, to relationships with other people, and to my condition.

So, this practice of sitting on the cushions every morning, going to as many retreats as possible, repeating Kwan Seum Bosal, and learning about staying present in every moment of the day—this practice is about mapping a landscape. The landscape of *don't know*. The landscape may have no end—don't know—but the mapping has begun and the possibility of truly seeing this life, these people, these situations, has increased.

This is the motivation for practice. Learning to look at this life directly, clearly, honestly. Looking, really seeing. What is this? Then, out of *don't know*, comes this growing sense of intimacy with the self, with the moment. Out of that intimacy comes the freedom to help other beings, even all beings, to save them from suffering.

It's as simple as: you ask me, I answer you. ☉