

ALEXANDER AND THE SIXTH PATRIARCH

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Alexander is the head breakfast waiter at the Astoria Hotel in Saint Petersburg, Russia. From the outside, it isn't possible to tell if he likes his job or not, if he feels good about himself, or if he is hoping to change the direction of his life. I've known Alexander for two years and have noticed that in a very meticulous way his "waiter" mind never moves. He elegantly orchestrates my befuddled movements through the intricate courses of breakfast at an opulent Russian hotel. There is a small ornate bowl for preserves, a small plate for bread, a larger plate for cheese and fruit, a special juice glass, and a cup and saucer for coffee. All these accoutrements are quite different from the usual breakfast (a styrofoam cup and wax paper wrapped around a glazed donut) I eat in the car on the way to work. And, oh yes, Alexander has trained me to recognize the difference between the small spoon for stirring coffee and the slightly larger cereal spoon. I always admire his ability to help others regardless of circumstances.

What attracts me to Alexander is his ability to be absorbed in the oneness of being a waiter as he makes movements effortlessly in one fluid, unified activity. Alexander does his waiting without hesitation or hindrance. He simply does his job. The Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng once said to his students, "Each of you work on your own, going along as best you can according to circumstances." Simple teaching, from a simple man, pointing straight to why our lives have become so complicated. For many of us, the problem is that we don't like our circumstances, we want something else. Our effort wanes as we refuse to go along as best we can. We come up with excuses and reasons for why our lives are not what we want. That means a lot of suffering will result from our lack of working on our own.

Underlying a meditation practice is a great celebration of joy in paying attention to what is in front of us. The constant practice of returning to the breath, paying attention, is our going-along-the-best-we-can nature functioning clearly. Alexander simply does what a waiter does. Hui Neng asked his students to go along the best they could. What do you do?

