

On this evening, Darla Jean's mother asked her, "Have you thought about what you will do when you grow up?" Darla Jean's response was unexpected: "I'm going to make all the women happy." Her mother doubled over with laughter. We may think this is a sweet and understandable sentiment for a child living in troubled circumstances, but for Darla Jean, this became a life vow. In that tender, unguarded moment, a great vow arose within Darla Jean out of deep resonance with all the women who suffer.

But what about this matter of happiness? One day a student from Switzerland visited my teacher and asked, "Maezumi Roshi, why is it that none of your students look happy?" Roshi was quite taken by this question. Relaying this conversation to me, he said, "I myself never think about whether I am happy. Egyoku, even if none of you are happy, I want some of you to at least *look* happy." Roshi and I doubled over with laughter. So, tell me, how about the one who is beyond the conditions of happiness? Does that person look happy?

Upon hearing about the time Darla Jean and her mother folded towels together, Darla Jean's teacher asked, "There is a treasure beyond happiness and unhappiness. How will you use it?" Plunge into the tasks at hand! Cast aside all thoughts and, if you are folding towels, empty into the folding, into the soft texture of the cloth, the fading of the colors, the running of your hands over the folds. Let yourself be enfolded. A small household task is, after all, not small at all.

How do you traverse the path that is beyond clean and dirty? A household task is a spiritual portal: How do you step through?

ROLAND:

Stepping Backward

"Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place."³¹

KOAN

When Roland passed all his exams to become a doctor, he got sad, and even depressed. "There was no goal left, I felt useless. There was nothing driving me anywhere."

Many years later, combining a meditation and a homeopathic medicine practice, he says: "A step backward is a step forward; a step forward is a step backward."

REFLECTION

We are so goal oriented that life often appears to us as an arrow hurtling through the air to hit the bulls-eye. As long as we're on course, we're moving forward, but the minute we step off, if only to pause, it feels like we're falling back.

An old koan addresses this directly. Chao-chou once asked Nanquan Puyuan, "What is Tao?" Nanquan answered, "Ordinary mind is Tao." "Then should we direct ourselves toward it or not?" asked Chao-chou. "If you try to direct yourself toward it, you go away from it," answered Nanquan. Chao-chou didn't give up: "If we do not try, how can we know that it is Tao?"³²

Isn't that what we naturally assume? If we don't try, how do we know that this really is it? If we don't set it up as a goal and then try our hardest, how will we get anywhere?

In Zen, we don't try to get anywhere. Our practice is about closing gaps, the gap between yourself and your Self, between you and me, between goal and practice, between the race and the finish line. "Tao does not belong to knowing or to not-knowing," Nanquan informs Chao-Chou. It does not lend itself to our daily bookkeeping of this + this + this = that. If you can plunge into each step, you will find the treasure right there. In fact, you don't have to go anywhere, you can find the treasure under your bare feet, right where you stand:

"Hundreds of flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
A cool breeze in summer, and snow in winter;
If there is no vain cloud in your mind
For you it is a good season."

If you don't grasp at things, including goals and destinations, every day is a good day. That's fine, you might say, but we still need goals in life. Goals and priorities help us plan our day, but once we start an activity we can put away the internal clock, slow down our striving, let go of mental chatter, and let the flow take over. Most important, drop the inner voices that crowd our consciousness, pushing, imploring, warning us to shape up, work hard, get ahead.

We identify not just with our goal but also with activity. Many of us get up in the morning and go instantly into work mode. Are you one of those people made anxious by vacation, afraid you won't make up the time or lack of effort, that unopened emails and unanswered phone messages will accumulate, and you'll fall behind, miss out?

How could we miss out if, moment by moment, nothing's missing?

"Labor is a blessing, toil is the misery of man," Abraham Heschel, the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher, said in his book on the Sabbath.³³ These days, how many people take a full day off from checking emails? Taking a break feels like stepping backwards.

In Zen, we pay attention to the body-mind. The mind alone is full of thoughts and manic whispers, but when I consult the body-mind, the call may be to work, take time out, have a nap, go for a walk, pick up a book, or play with the dog. Whatever you choose to do, actually do it. Do you experience what you're doing or are you already thinking of the next step? Do you know where your feet and hands are at all times? A teacher can tell from students' body language as they come for face-to-face study whether they're ahead of themselves, their minds in forward motion, or whether they're centered and aware. Don't be propelled.

As Nanquan said to Chao-Chou: "Ordinary mind is Tao." Ordinary mind is the Way. There is nothing to make up, nothing to compete for, nothing to achieve. What in you does not believe that? What hungry ghost in you feels you must be more successful, more dedicated, more determined? That above all, you must always, always work harder? You cannot ignore or exclude this hungry ghost; it will not go away. If you try to feed it by working longer and longer hours, it will remain hungry and continue to

tell you that something is always missing, that your life is still not it. Stop and listen carefully. Is anything really missing? Befriend the question. Befriend the ghost. Invite the ghost into the mandala of your practice and settle into the moment. Practice requires discipline and commitment, but not due to a sense of lack or failure. There is nothing to make up for.

Roland now says: "I am at home because I decided not to work anymore on Friday afternoon. The step backward is to be less successful and to get less money, but the step forward is to have more time for myself, for others, and for other parts of life. So, this step backward is a step forward!"

What have you considered a step forward in your life? A step backward? Have you lost anything from the first and gained anything from the second? If a step forward is a step backward, where do you land?

PATRICIA:

McTenzo Finds His Place

*Cooking is dangerous work.
You can mistake the salt for sugar,
Maple syrup for soy sauce.
But the Iron Chef doesn't worry,
Her fixings have just one taste.*

KOAN

One morning, Patricia opened the refrigerator and was astonished to find the Master sitting inside.

"What are you doing in there?" she asked.

"What are you doing out there?" the Master replied.

REFLECTION

I spend most of the hours of every day by a computer at my desk at home. Often, I look out the window at the road filled with cars, people, and animals, and imagine that life is out there rather than

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