

HOMEWORK

SITTING: Start your daily practice with metta practice for yourself.

Begin by noticing and acknowledging the difficulties you are experiencing right now. (I see that I am experiencing difficulty in a relationship, at work, with illness, etc.) Make it specific. Acknowledge there stressors you are facing.

Then send yourself wishes of well being. (May I feel more ease in this situation. May I feel connection and support. May I be able to do what needs to be done, etc.)

LIFE: Come as you are. Notice the places where you fall short. Notice the places where wholesome intention follows through. Embrace both.

Notice these same forces working in everyone around you. In conversation, listening to the news, remembering past interactions, Thanksgiving gathering, notice how everyone present has the same unconscious behaviors, the same ego hang ups, that you do. Love them through it. Love yourself though it.

FALLING SHORT

One of the hardest, most difficult things we encounter on this path, really, on any spiritual path, is encountering what looks like our failings. The times we fall short, the times we say or do exactly the things we did not intend to say or do.

Without understanding, this leads to self criticism, self condemnation, and a sense that we are unworthy, deficient. There's an illusion that if we were 'better' people, we would be able to do this more perfectly.

In actuality, we are doing things exactly as they need to be. This is hard to see because we each carry an internalized ideal of who we believe we 'should' be: what the spiritual person 'should' be like, what

an ideal ego 'should' be. This ego ideal is both what we think of as the perfect enlightened being, and also a yardstick to measure ourselves by. Inevitably, we fall short of this ideal.

Years ago in working with my mentor/teacher, she lived completely off the grid, so I needed to communicate by letters. This took a lot of thought and work to get things written in full communication, and it was hard work. There usually were days or weeks in between feeling it was time to send a letter and actually getting it done and in the mail. I carried a sense of not doing it right, the lag of resistance between the intention and the actual accomplishment.

When meeting with her, she remarked to me how absolutely perfect my timing was in writing her. How just as she felt she needed to hear from me, the letter would arrive. I realized then that the lag time was actually a valuable part of the work, a necessary part of the process in being a student.

Stephen Pope, in "The Wisdom of Yoga", called this the First Noble Failure, that we are met by our inability to meet our ego ideal. But rather than question this ideal, we question ourselves, why we aren't more perfect.

Let's look at this:

- 1) One of the teachings in the dharma tradition is the teaching called "conceit", the deep-rooted habit or tendency of self-identity as something we have control over. In this context, it is thinking we could be any different than what we are.
- 2) A corollary to this is the belief that we NEED to be different than who we are to 'get' this path.
- 3) This path is not about fixing or improving, it's about befriending ourselves. Befriending ourselves means seeing the violence of the attitude that we need to improve, that we need to change. Thinking we need to be different in some way, that we need to be 'better', is an aggression towards ourselves.

- 4) We start where we are, come as we are. We are not trying to rid ourselves of 'bad' things. We are hoping to see who we are already, warts and all. The magic of this is seeing how we run away, how we numb out, how we are attached to the things that make us miserable, with curiosity, with kindness.
- 5) And: this is training. It is practice. We don't expect to get right the first, or the hundredth time. We do it as long as it takes. When I was learning to play the guitar, I asked my guitarist friend how long it would take before my fingers could just find the shapes of the chords without my having to do it mechanically finger by finger. How many times do I need to do this for my fingers to make the chord shape by themselves? His answer: enough times.
- 6) Give this process the respect it deserves: it is not easy, because it goes against the status quo, or what our current patterns are. It's especially hard to put a new response we aspire to up against grievances and hurt feelings.
- 7) Any therapist will tell you we can only make changes to the extent we can stay steady with the discomfort that comes from change, and from the 'change back' messages we will get from those in our environment. So we understand this will be back and forth, not done perfectly, and embrace that fully.

We did an exercise in class in dyads, being asked both "how have I fallen short?", and, "what have I accomplished?" The insight hoped for here is that this work is not so much about success versus failure. It is more about seeing that despite our self criticism, we are actually pretty functional and effective in our lives.