

BURNING OFF THE DROSS: PURIFICATION

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I know something about how it is to have my mind clear, and I can tell when it is foggy, as if there was some greasy film over everything, including my usual clarity. Sometimes I just wake up with my mind out of whack. Bad dreams? Who knows?

Like a camera slightly out of focus, at those times I find that I am somehow beside myself, however subtly. I can feel it, sense it, and know that I am unclear. I am not talking about being cross-eyed, but just ever-so-slightly out-of-focus -- not in tune.

Years ago my life-teacher Andrew McIver would take care of this for me. When I would meet him on a given day, perhaps up on the Diag (central campus) of the University of Michigan, he could tell when I was out of sorts, I don't know how. And I would never see it coming, which is just the point. I was not seeing that well at those times anyway.

He would make some sudden action, often like slapping the folded newspaper he was carrying against his hand or on the bench where we were sitting. Smack! It was always a short, sharp blow, not particularly loud. And in that sudden instant, my fogginess or headache would vanish. Gone. I was myself again. He knew what he was doing. I have no idea how he did that, but he did it often. That was like eons ago in my life. These days I have to somehow do that for myself. We all do.

I tend to call this bit of off-ness "feeling out-of-sorts?" I am not talking about being ill, either. It is more like I have a very slight mental hangover, but I have not been drinking. Or, it is like there was something I did that I feel bad about, something hanging over me like a dark cloud, not a thunderstorm cloud, but just a dimming of the 'me' I know as myself. Perhaps there is. You would think I would not even be aware of it, right? But somehow I am.

At those times, I am missing the moment of the 'now' by millimeters. A part of me is slightly out-of-focus, just enough for me to be aware of it and feel uncomfortable. As the psychics like to say, I am not 'on my contacts'. Those two parts of me have to somehow become one before I can feel normal again. They have to focus into a single image. I have to pull myself together. Perhaps I just need to get back into my body. It feels like some part of me is ever-so-slightly outside of myself. I like the old saying "beside myself," and it is unpleasant. Anyone know what I mean?

There is a reason why the traditional image of a snake shedding its skin is so telling. We all work to shed the pale cast of thought we accumulate through our mistakes and to feel fully present once again. It is an ever-re-occurring problem, getting back in touch with the moment and ourselves, back to the 'now'. In dharma work, this is done through various purification

practices, clarifying the mind and burning off or removing what has to be removed.

We each have our little rituals of purification, whether we are aware of them or not. Physical exercise is often one of the best cleansers or a little come-to-Jesus talk with ourselves, acknowledging mistakes, and just being honest. Lying around and waiting for our accumulating conceptual film to evaporate just does not work. It only bakes on harder. Sooner or later, we somehow have to work it off or live in a perpetual daze.

A purification ritual is a technique that we repeat, usually in a certain order, that breaks the silence of our foggy mind and cuts through to the quick still living beneath so that, in a minor way, we are born again to the present moment. We are back! We feel like ourselves again. Hallelujah!

For me, purification is most-often accomplished through meditation of one kind or another. And before you groan over that word “meditation,” which you may have had no real experience with, understand that meditation is just an effective ritual habit to attain awareness, age-old methods of purification. What do you use to get clear?

Few of us like to be so wrapped in our own thoughts and labels that we cannot feel the cool breeze of the present moment once in a while. We all struggle to escape the suffocating fog of being out-of-whack with ourselves, so what do you do to remove this? It must be something, so think it through and let's discuss it here.