

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO

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Yesterday, I mentioned something about realization. Today I want to look at its younger brother "spiritual experiences." We all have them. The big difference between having experiences and realization is that experiences come and go, like the tides, while realization happens just once. When you get it, you got it, and it stays with you because it is not an experience, but a realization.

As pointed out in the previous segment, realizations don't go away, and are much like those figure-ground paintings we used to see, where one picture is embedded (and hidden) in another, and you have to look and look until you see the embedded image. However, once you see it, you can always see it again whenever you look. Realization is like that, very practical. You realize once and you've got it.

Experience on the other hand comes and goes, waxes and wanes. I have had lots of spiritual experiences. We all have. Years ago, whenever I would have a powerful spiritual experience, the first chance I had I would tell it to Khenpo Rinpoche, my spiritual teacher. I wanted him to know what I was going through and that at least I was going through something as opposed to nothing. Rinpoche's answer was every time the same. He would patiently listen while I shared with him my latest revelation. He never had much comment on my tales other than to say very gently: "That is just an experience. Think nothing of it. Keep practicing."

Of course I always thought these experiences were incredible, but Rinpoche never acknowledged they amounted to anything more than a passing experience. That was disappointing, but I just had to get used to it. And attachment to these fleeting experiences can be dangerous to my dharma practice.

The analogy I always use with myself is that of a baby who finally emerges from the womb and takes that first breath of air, but in my case I am so attached to it that I always try to hold it. It is the same with the just-born baby who refuses (or is unable) to breathe. The doctor smacks his bottom to get him crying, and start the breathing. With me, spiritual experiences are like that.

No matter how hard I try to hold on and to not lose the clarity of my spiritual experiences, the realities of daily life (and my bad habits) eventually manage to knock the breath out of me (always against my will), and I eventually am able to let go of the

experience, take another breath, and keep breathing. The danger of attachment to our spiritual experiences is that if we cling to them, we stop having them and also stop progressing.

Let's face it. I almost always try to hang on to my spiritual experiences, to prolong them, and I am always so proud and happy to have what I consider profound experiences that I quickly become attached and try to hang on to them. I want this experience to be "it," and never change again.

And I have the unfortunate habit of wanting to share what I see with every man, woman, and child I come across. You know, ring the bells and tell the world. Of course, I soon wear my newfound clarity out. Experiences never last anyway and I am right back where I started, stuck in my same old habits, left with only some dim memories of whatever spiritual experience I am currently hanging on to. It is like trying to carry water in your hands. It just runs out. Anyway, you get the idea.

Basically the rule of thumb with experiences is that if they are not permanent, they are not permanent. In dharma practice we are not looking for more experiences that come and go (we already have that), but for something that comes, stays, and never goes. We are looking for realization which provides the means to accomplish enlightenment.

In other words, no matter how powerful, wonderful, and glorious my latest spiritual experience, if I wake up the next day, week, or month and no longer have it, then it is just a passing glance at anything enlightening. It is just another experience that I can't seem to hold on to. It slips through my fingers and I come down from it.

And I would be remiss if I did not at least touch upon my own bad habits when it comes to these experiences. When I get a little puff (no, I don't smoke) of a spiritual high, I never know what to do with it, and I always somehow do the wrong thing. This is just another way to tell you that experiences don't last and one way or another we fritter them away, at least I do.

I don't want to dwell on this aspect, but there is enough humor in my attachment to my spiritual experiences to at least point out their shortcomings. For example:

The spiritual tide rolls in and I have a little glimpse of enlightenment, at last. I always think that now that I have this enhanced view that I will never lose it. And, of course I always lose it. But it is the way I lose it that is humorous. To begin with, what do I do with my temporary high?

Do I want to just sit still and hang on to it or take it out for a ride? Will it wilt like a flower if not put to use? Is it "use it or lose it," or is it "use it and lose it," no matter what? Hint: it is the later.

When I have a little bubble of insight and perhaps reach what for me is a new high-plateau of clarity, what should I do with it? Is this increased clarity like cash, something to run out and spend, or should I not mention it and save it for a rainy day?

For me it is like I am all dressed up, but with no place to go. That's because there is no place to go, no particular place. When I am clear like that, anywhere will do. That is the beauty of dharma practice: everything I need, I already have with me now, including wherever I happen to be.

That being the case, I can stay right where I am and not do a thing. It is kind of like "Hurry up and wait," but here it's "Get busy doing nothing." However, I tend to just sit there and rev my engine.

What I can do at those times is anything, everything, or nothing. It makes no matter, because what I am really doing is dipping my mind in experience to see what happens to my temporary clarity, a kind of litmus test. I tend to put my mind out in experience and record the results. Yada, yada, yada.

Do you see why Rinpoche bypasses all of this and tells me to forget the experience and just keep practicing, keep going? With spiritual experiences, they come up and they go down. They never stay, so I might as well just note them and keep practicing, because I need something that does not come and go, and that is realization, and then (some day or kalpa) enlightenment.

Does this sound familiar to anyone?

