

PILGRIMAGE

Swami Suryadevananda

ATTITUDE AND THE PATH

A pilgrimage is not so much about a destination but more about the attitude of the pilgrim and the path itself. If we script the journey, we must experience something very scripted too—something self-created.

A pilgrimage is a beginning and beginnings are always of something new. When you resume the old, it is a continuation of something that *was* and therefore is not new. How can something scripted by the conditioned mind or ego give any experience beyond it? What surely results is the reinforcement of inner conditioning as it plans, executes and experiences its own handiwork.

Let us not limit our inquiry to places of some significance but rather, look at every contact, because we regularly go places, meet people and find ourselves in situations. What makes going to a certain place have a positive effect on some and no effect at all on others? There must be something in the person and the way of treading the path that is of much more significance than the destination itself. Perhaps, the attitude and nature of the journey are transformative and transformation as well.

ANY START IS A JOURNEY

The start of anything is the start of a journey, and just as a seed blossoms into a full blown tree, the journey will blossom into the destination. Mostly, we venture from the known to the known, and this is not limited to visiting places of any significance but to every aspect of our life.

A start is always something fresh—a beginning. The deepest feelings or bhavana that one has in the very beginning will shape the experience—regardless of what is seen, heard or felt. With the explosion of information on the internet, it is both easy and tempting to want to know everything about a place and even people before visiting. We can even find out what others' experiences have been and their recommendations on places and people. The mind that wants change pre-decides what it will accept and be exposed to, and affirms its predispositions as well. "I like these areas" or, "this person looks interesting and genuine and I should try to see him...", "this person looks unauthentic and should be avoided..."—all this based on what we call our research.

One dictionary defines research (noun) as: “a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) information or reach a (new) understanding”. We are not trying to be academic here but to see how the real purpose can get replaced completely.

To study, discover new information or reach a new understanding, one has to be new to face things afresh—there has to be this freshness in approach which must continue throughout the encounter. This applies not just to visiting places and meeting people but to everything—to include listening, seeing and reading or study. As long as we approach the new with a mind that is old, tainted, colored and conditioned—it is impossible to experience anything new. Like contacts like, and the old will only contact the old and only reinforce conditioning by strengthening impressions.

Each day overflows with the new—there is nothing old in life. How is it that our lives feel old and tiresome when we are constantly facing the ever new?

When the ever-new is seen with the old—a mind heavily conditioned and overflowing with likes, dislikes and hopes—the new is never seen or experienced. As is the heart of the person, so is his experience. If there is fear in the heart, fear is experienced through any process and as a conclusion. We experience our deepest convictions—that which we have passed judgment on—convicted or acquitted.

When the heart or mind of a person is attentive, it is in the discovery mode and uses the mind but is never used by the mind. What makes the mind old? How does conditioning add to itself and age the mind? Is it possible to live in such a way that the mind stays ever-new and vibrantly alive?

REVERSING THE AGING MIND

Reversing the aging mind, and keeping it young necessitates seeing very clearly the danger of any and all conditioning—of any and all habit. Traditions are habits too and this is not to say that tradition must be abandoned but to start free of it by seeing if, in every single moment, what feels to be done is the right thing for the moment, completely free of any sentimentalism. If, by chance, what feels to be done in the present mirrors a response from the past—it is only accidental coincidence and never repetition.

If tradition, which is always old, is the start of something new, you will never be able to learn or experience anything new. Sage Vasistha uses the example of a crow alighting on a coconut tree and a coconut falling at the same time. The mind feels that the coconut fell because the crow alighted on the tree, but Vasistha says it is not so and that what took place was only accidental coincidence.

Tradition is just a word for action or result in the past, and since each moment is new—how can we use the past as a response? Every response is new, fresh and fitting to the ever fresh

moment and if it happens to resemble a design of the past—it is only accidental coincidence. Being ever-fresh is not a war with tradition, it is freedom from it—freedom from the burdensome weight of conditioning which leads to further bondage and suffering. Shunryu Suzuki writes¹ to the very heart of this, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

How can there be any new action or discovery if it is rooted in the old? As is the seed, so is the tree. From old seeds must come old plants—tired and incapable of any refreshing at all.

If every thought, feeling, word and action starts afresh, much will be discovered; but for this, one has to stay ever alert—to be vigilant without remission. Every action must start afresh and stay fresh; that is, without a deposit registering on the mind of a like or dislike after the action.

Natural responses are quite different from the impressions gathered. You eat something very tasty and there is natural enjoyment, some licking of the lips too. This is natural and it does not involve thought. A moment later thought rises and asserts itself somehow as the enjoyer or in trying to find ways to repeat the experience. Thought was neither! It neither originated the experience which came about by natural hunger and somehow eating something that was very tasty. Thought is never there in the actual enjoyment either, but once the joy is felt (and this goes for sorrows in the same way too), thought rises and asserts its dominance through the entire experience and placing a value, starts devising ways to repeat the conditions in the hope of similar experience.

To reverse and rejuvenate the aging mind, the high danger of thought interference has to be seen so clearly that it rouses the inner intelligence, empowering it alone to begin and end actions. One has to face every situation as it arises, and to let it fall completely just like wave, without continuing mentally. When the action ends—it ends. The mind must have no room to assert itself and this comes about by facing as though for the first time the new and unfolding present.

The awakened intelligence sees and initiates action and lets the action fall—without the interference of thought at all. Memory is used if necessary, but it does not interfere with action because the awakened intelligence is empowered. There is no struggle or conflict, as the inner capital has shifted from habit, which is always old and incapable, to the inner intelligence which is ever new and unconditioned.

FINDING THE WAY, DISCOVERING SELF

Pilgrimage happens when newness, which is the very nature of the pilgrim, is in contact with the ever new, which is every situation without predisposition, for the purpose of knowing the

¹ Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki

truth directly—and here is where it has lasting benefit. The nature of the pilgrim is newness, a spirit of discovery, and it is in this spirit that one discovers oneself by observing clearly the rise of existing conditioning. The same inner intelligence that sees, also acts and does what is needed, not what *one* needs to do but what is needed. This is very important, as if our actions are guided by what we feel we need, there must be reaction and addition of impressions—more conditioning and bondage.

Why can we not respond to a situation without standing outside it? As long as we stand outside it, there must not only be the interference but the domination of thought, because—the idea of outsideness is a thought itself. We have to see this very clearly.

We stand outside situations in the hopes of taking care of 'our interests' better. This initial division divorces us from reality and makes us smaller the more it is used, because the self which is universal is relegated to fragmentation by ignorance. We have been fed this diet of 'taking care of ourselves first' as the means to success, but it is the exact opposite—the means to self ruin! Hard work will bear fruit and sustain you quite nicely, too—why does hard work have to have 'taking care of ourselves first' added into it?

You might say that taking care of oneself is essential if we are to accomplish much or get ahead, but then you have to examine what 'accomplish much' and 'getting ahead' really mean. Everything you need to live comfortably will and must come by hard work. Greed and ambition are totally different, and if these be your lot—self-discovery and self-transformation are not possible.

Greed and ambition are the ego in full command and a mind burdened with this load can never benefit from any pilgrimage—however sacred or holy the ground. Greed and ambition are habits that have become deep-rooted in any and all conditions considered to be of personal value and gain—never the situation itself—and therefore totally blind. What possible benefit can such arid deserts of heart and mind possibly gain from any pilgrimage? Such burdened minds cannot enjoy life's simple pleasures or even smile, as the grinding of greed and ambition replace being awake to anything but greed and ambition.

You can achieve anything without greed and ambition—by sheer hard work. These two qualities do not give what they promise; on the contrary, they destroy any chance of peace and happiness, much less discovery and transformation. It is the same mind that goes everywhere, in relationships and on pilgrimage too—you cannot have two minds. This mind, even on pilgrimage, seeks to maximize personal gain with minimal loss as it cannot help not doing business—be-*sin*-ness! Nowadays, networking is a socially acceptable variant of greed and ambition's relentless appetite. Networking is working the net—nothing else! Trying to always see personal gain in every encounter and this must strengthen the personality or ego which drives it.

When every cell of your being sees, not just intellectually, but really sees the danger of the conditioned, of habit and personality—the inner intelligence awakens and this can cut through the densest of forests as long as it stays empowered.

Empowering the inner intelligence is not like giving the car keys to someone. You have to keep the conditioned mind out of all things, as selective empowerment is not possible at all. All conditioning means all conditioning—all thought, however dear it may be. If one is awake, there is no dear thought, as what we call 'dear' is a thought itself and it is now seen as ridiculous.

There is no suppression in trying to keep the conditioned mind from interfering with all action—rather, it is the quality of attention in the present which acts as a catalyst in the weakening of conditioning by not recharging it. The mind is made new by using it in a new way. No amount of wishful thinking or positive affirmation will help make the mind new—it is the way it is because of wrong use over many years and it has to be made new by right use. This requires tremendous effort and persistence which comes not by externally imposed discipline or fear but by understanding the danger and futility of careless and purposeless living.

When we practice, we find the path to renewal of the mind each time. Whatever medium be your practice: physical, selfless action, devotional, study or meditation—if you can start and remain fresh and enthusiastic each time, without the interference of thought as memory of previous efforts or hoped outcome—you will discover how to separate thought from consciousness and weaken the grip of conditioning. The content of memory of the past and hopes for a future is thought, and when you are vigilant during practice you see the rise and eventual fall of these while the practice continues—you learn to become aware of distraction but are no longer distracted.

What you discover in your practice continues in life and the momentum gained by this insight of separating thought from action functions in every aspect of living. All stress, fear, anxiety and confusion is due to the interference of thought with action rooted in the tangle of thought with consciousness. This is why what we call practice 'spiritual practice' or sadhana—it is the practice of discovering the movement of thought and its interference in one activity in a relatively controlled atmosphere.

This practice must work in the open field of life where everything comes at you from outside and from within. Practice done mechanically is devoid of transformation—it is a change of scenery and perhaps calming at best. Vigilance must be cultivated through practice and this vigilance must spread throughout all aspects of life. Then, we neither hurt nor cause hurt—all this, without thought. The inner passions and anxieties calm down not by distraction to rise again, but they give-up their steam—the mind surrenders to the largeness of its existence by

assuming its rightful place as a function. Vigilance is light on the mind so it discovers its errors and makes itself new.

Every encounter becomes a pilgrimage to the most sacred, as it is thought that is the interference. Vigilance finds the way, one step at a time, the path unfolds as you tread on it. All the grandiose plans are seen as utterly useless and abandoned. You do what needs to be done with all zeal and enthusiasm and there is great joy with whatever shape events take. It does not matter if more comes or less, as one is free of the destructive and disruptive burden of greed, ambition and agenda, and freedom from these boulders borne all along allows one to enjoy whatever comes—as freedom is the greatest gain itself.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

One dictionary defines pilgrim as: 'one who travels to a shrine or holy place as a devotee'. The Divine Omnipresence is the only existence—the mind prevents its realization by its assertion. A devotee is one devoted to the truth—the divine omnipresence as reality—and pursues this throughout life. The sacred of sacred animates your life, beckoning you to direct experience. The way of the pilgrim is the way of the devotee—not devotee *of* something or someone, but the devotee being one who is devoted to the discovery of truth in all things and at all times.

The nature of the pilgrim and the manner of treading the path are the pilgrimage, as in every place you visit, you are a better person, holier because the awakened intelligence is empowered and it is this that keeps you whole and in oneness with everything. The path is a gradual blossoming of all that is good, auspicious and holy, and attitude or sincerity is the light on the path.

www.suryadevananda.org