

Is Your Practice Working?

By Kim Roberts

In our normal view of the world, we create an image of ourselves and then put our energies into maintaining this image: our ego. We practice first to learn the boundaries of ego so that we can disassemble it, or rather see that it has never existed. The first step on the path then starts with seeing the illusory nature of ego.

In order to have an experience of this, we need the right view. Correct view ensures that our intent is in accord with our practice. If our view is incorrect or incomplete, then so will our path be. If we are practicing simply to attain a state of bliss for ourselves, or if we use a concept of emptiness to justify the whims of ego, then we are missing a fundamental understanding of the laws of nature, namely that we don't exist as we appear. We are simply a conglomerate of phenomena, or if you prefer, space and light. A lightshow. So what use to devote all this time to practice for something that will be over in the blink of an eye?

We practice out of compassion. Our awakening benefits others. Then here is the magic: once we begin to help others, this actually benefits us. So the practice is twofold: to reduce self-importance and to benefit others.

According to the Buddha, there are 84,000 different doors to enlightenment. It doesn't matter if you subscribe to Buddhist belief, or Hindu belief, Christian belief, or no belief: we all have wisdom deep within that is hidden by our obscured view of reality. We practice to clarify the view and uncover our brilliant original true nature.

We do not all need to follow the same path. Whatever practice we do is only relevant in the sense that it should create some benefit. So we should be alert to the effects of the practice. If we have been doing a particular practice for many years and don't see positive results in our lives, then we should question whether that is the appropriate practice for us in our particular time and circumstance.

The Dalai Lama notes:

“When we take medicine, it is not the taste, color, or quantity of the medicine that matters; the important thing is the beneficial effect on our body. If in spite of having taken a certain medicine for a long time we see no effect, there is no point in continuing to take it. Regardless of whether your practice is elaborate or short, above all, it should be effective in bringing about some kind of a transformation, a change for the better, within you.”

This is why we practice: to free ourselves of delusion, so that we may be of some benefit to others. Sometimes I hear modern yoga teachers make promises like, “you will feel better, your bad habits will go away, your relationships will change as a result of practice.” This is possible. It is, however, entirely possible to use practice in the service of ego. With unclear intent, wrong understanding or lack of awareness, we can use anything, even spiritual practice, to reinforce our self-serving habits.

With unclear intent, we may practice in order to enhance our position, confusing success or popularity with understanding. Wrong understanding can lead to solidifying experience into concepts or dogmatism. Without awareness, we are blind to the subtle details of our experience. We practice to cultivate this awareness - not just on the mat or the cushion, but in every single moment of our lives. If awareness is not translating into our lives, then our practice is misguided, and we should look again at what we are doing, or rather how we are doing.

Practice provides a technique to watch our responses (or reactions) to failure, success, ambition, hopes, drives, fears, disappointments. How we respond to the rules suddenly being changed, or to rules period. Can we see deeply into the core of our experience of how we view and interact with the world? Until we recognize our own little thingy – that habitual pattern, whether physical, emotional or mental, that obstructs our complete opening – then we won't be able to release it. And if we can't let go of our thingy, then it will rule us. We will carry it around with us our whole lives, like dead skin we no longer need, but refuse to shed.

The point is that the practice itself is not “It.” There is no prize for having an “advanced” practice, especially if we are using the practice to boost our ego. Practice is the tool; it is not the result that we are seeking.

We should check in with our practice periodically to see: are we increasing wisdom and compassion, lessening self-centeredness and attachment? Is the practice working? If we listen, practice will show us the way: to living more fully and compassionately with awareness of the vivid and fleeting present moment, the here and now, with all of its inconvenient and beautiful truths