

What's Next?

By Diane Moore

For those of us with a strong practice, living in this time of a global pandemic is recognized as an opportunity to potentially deepen our practice, observe our attachments and let our illusions melt. This is a worthy aspiration and it is wonderful when we are able to drop into the expansiveness of this awareness. But the reality is often we view practicing with a global pandemic as something sent to us through a freakish remembrance of an old episode of the “Twilight Zone”. It's the kind of opportunity we likely resist and do our best to escape from.

It's not at all like the opportunity of embracing strong practice by going to a beach sitting on a sunny day. We don't get to sit at the oceans edge and relax ourselves in the sand while feeling the rhythm of the waves and observing the birds on the shore and in the sky. We don't get to ease ourselves into the experience of awareness in a soft environment with an expansive horizon.

We might encourage ourselves willingly to think of this as a Sesshin of sorts, but really it isn't even like choosing to go to Sesshin. We didn't have the choice to select the “pandemic option” in order to allow ourselves the opportunity to expand our ability to embrace wide open awareness, while fear is showing up on steroids and death tolls are mounting. This is the kind of opportunity we do our best to avoid, checking every other possible option. Maybe it's not really necessary to experience this. Maybe it's over now. Maybe there has been a mistake. Maybe this doesn't apply to me personally after all. But on closer look we keep coming back to what Pema Chodran calls the *Wisdom of No Escape*. There is no place else to go. There is no way to skip this chapter. Life has asked this of us. All of us. Oh yes, now I remember...

Life as it is, the only teacher.

We were, after all, committed to exploring groundlessness weren't we? We had this scheduled for our weekend retreat didn't we? Didn't we think it would be good for us to intentionally silence ourselves for a few days by the ocean and explore what groundlessness feels like? And didn't we want to open to the potential benefit of putting some attention on practicing in this arena? Surprise, surprise! The Sesshin got cancelled but Exploring Groundlessness didn't. It actually got highlighted. And the dates for Sesshin started early and are going long. Very long.

So how are we doing with leaning into this exploration? Are we doing what Ezra calls the “conscious labor” of leaning in to the physical and emotional discomfort of our fearful suffering? Are we noticing that our willingness to bring forward alert attention matters, whether we chose this Sesshin or not? In signing up and attending a Sesshin we are voluntarily pushing ourselves to deal with the difficulty of a rigorous schedule and being confronted by ourselves over and over again. But this experience of life as it is has no bells and predictable schedules. Instead it is an unfolding of experiences that require us to continue much longer than we had planned. And the razor's edge of life and death is relentlessly present. Every day we are faced with a choice. Lean in or seek false comfort. Are you willing to lean into practice and willingly bring forth the conscious labor that life is asking of us? Remembering the practice question, *Can I see this as my path?*

Can WE see this as OUR path?

How often in each day will we gently bring forward willingness to see clearly the multiple layers of ourselves rising up in our thoughts, words and actions?

Or will we choose to remain *Caught in the self centered dream, only suffering*

How often can we turn away from what Ezra refers to as Stupid Suffering - The suffering that comes from wallowing in thoughts we don't even believe any more. Or spinning mental images of how we are going to take control of something (anything) that is absolutely uncontrollable?

Holding to self centered thoughts, exactly the dream.

Oh wait, now I remember...

Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher.

As we wake up to ourselves each morning, are we taking time before we rise to notice what is in our heart? What the experience of life as it is feels like right now? Can we be present to the physical experience of the body as the mind begins to send signals that it is time to rise and start a new day? If we are willing to pause, we will always find it valuable to notice what is on board before we even begin to face the day. Are we waking up exhausted or rested? Fearful or peaceful? Are we conscious of the physical experience of our body as it rests on the bed and noticing the signals of the mind as it begins to label and predict what we "think" will be next? Can we catch ourselves shifting from experiencing the moment to witnessing the mind as it moves quickly forward to projecting what we are planning on happening next?

Can we pause for just one more moment with the feel of the air touching our skin and the sounds and scents of the environment around us before we follow the mental dialogue that compels us to get up and get going. Could we "get awareness" before we "get going"? Our mind is so conditioned to predict what our day will be. There's nothing wrong with this as long as we are aware that whatever we are preparing for could dissolve in a second. And the moment that is being given to us is now. Just now.

Being just this moment, compassion's way. As we struggle to be in this moment with ourselves and each other, it can be helpful to remember that there is a reason for urgency. A global pandemic gently reminds us –*Time swiftly passes by and with it our only chance.*

And we have a fresh opportunity each day to clarify within ourselves where our aspiration is, or possibly is not. Do we really believe that *Each of us must aspire to awaken.* Do we really aspire to awaken? If not why do we practice? And do we want to be comfortable or *Be Aware?*

Are we willing to see that embracing the truth of groundlessness, as much as we may fear it, is the very experience that will remind us to stay present and *Appreciate this precious life*

For this mornings sitting I encourage you to notice how often you find yourself thinking about the future.

Notice the context of your future thinking and whether you are planning the future, judging the future, fearing the future, trying to fast forward to the future, etc.

Use thought labeling to identify the most familiar thoughts that come forward in "future thinking".

When you find yourself caught in spinning, Recognize, Refrain and Return.

Commit to staying present for 3 breaths of wide open awareness including awareness of your breath, awareness of your body as it receives and surrenders the breath, sounds you hear , and awareness of the larger environment around you in the room and beyond to the earth and sky.