

The Magician is you

(an article by Albert Low)

When someone says, "I have been to many different teachers, tried this and that, but nothing happened," it is a sure give away that they are looking for someone or something to do the work for them or to them. It indicates that that person is looking for a certain kind of magic, or there should be a certain kind of magic.; that if one meets the right person, goes through the right kind of incantation, does the right things, says the right words, feels the right things, then because of the magical property of this teacher, system or technique, wonderful things should happen to them. Many people feel this about meditation. Meditation still has a magical aura surrounding it. One sees this if one picks up a New Age magazine or New Age book that talks about meditation, it is all flowers and halos.

But there is no magic. Or rather, the magician is you. To look outside yourself, to expect someone else or some system to do something for you is to put yourself in the position of a slave. If somebody can do something for you that which is of vital importance, you are dependent upon that person. And this dependency is a form of enslavement.

One sees this with various political 'isms' : fascism, Nazism, communism, nationalism, this kind of thing. People are dominated, they are taken over by this, they are ruled by this. And the abominable things that come out of these isms, the terrible things that people do to one another are made possible by their being slaves. They are slaves inflicting punishment for their enslaved state on other slaves.

The fact that the only true value, the only true possibility, the only true way, is the way of your own power, faith and wisdom, means that you are already free. You really do not need a teacher or a teaching. All that a teacher or teaching can do is to allow you to work for yourself.

When we come down to it, all our desires are the desire to find ourselves. The desire to find the self cannot help but be fulfilled. Joining groups and religions and all the various things that we can join in the world, all this is done in the hope that it will lead to oneself.

People use words like happiness or success or fulfillment or perfection. But these are really substitute words. Where is there fulfillment, perfection, happiness, or success outside of yourself? When are you most happy? It is when you are most at one with whatever it is that you are doing. When you can give yourself over to it without reservation. When you want it and, at that moment, want nothing else.

The problem is that we cannot want to know ourselves, unconditionally and without reservation, without a great deal of practice and without a great deal of suffering.

People often ask, "Why does it take so long to come to awakening?" And the answer is, of course, that one still thinks one wants something else.

People feel that it is enough simply to say they want this or that, or to think they want this or that. Sometimes we ask people, what is it you want from practice? And they say, "Oh, I'd like to come to awakening." Much in the same way as they might say, "Oh, I'd like a new hat. »

You know the story of the teacher who when walking by the sea with his disciple suddenly grabbed hold of the disciple and pushed his head under the water and held it there. Eventually after he had released him and the disciple came up spluttering and gasping, sucking in the air as fast as he could the teacher said, "When you want awakening as much as you want air at this moment, nothing can stop you. »

Fundamentally everyone wants to find the self, that and nothing else. And in a way everyone will eventually come to the truth. If we believe we are an accident then of course, such a statement is absurd. But if everything comes out of and returns to the one mind, then such a statement is a truism, it is scarcely worth saying.

For many people it is only when the pain gets so bad that they feel they have reached the end of the road, that it is possible for them to say truly, "I want nothing else other than to realise myself. »

When you are practicing with Mu or Who, or when you are following the breath, this practice will enable you, if you are sincere and honest, to come to the point where you will truly want nothing else. But this means that you must practice without protest. You must practice without complaint or self-pity. And also, of course, you must practice without expectation. Protest and complaint simply undo the work that you have done so far. Protest and complaint set up a counter current to that of the work. They set up a conflict which generates its own kind of pain. It is in the desert that you will find the truth. You do not find the truth in lush meadows. In the desert everything else is taken from you. People often say, "I have even lost the taste of practice. I don't know, I have got no feel for the practice. The practice means nothing to me." That is good! Why should it mean something to you? It is because you have still got the belief that the practice is there in addition to you, that there is a Zen practice in addition to the question "Who am I?" And one keeps touching it, stroking it, feeling it for reassurance.

Some people carry magic pebbles others carry crosses. But in the desert all your talismans, your magic charms are taken away. One feels, I've got nothing to look forward to. That is right! There is nothing to look forward to. This is the problem, that looking forward to is the lure, the bait that constantly attracts you out of yourself. One is always looking for the Promised Land. In the desert the Promised Land just dries up and shrivels away. One doesn't even have any feelings in the desert. And this is again a good thing because so many people feel that to turn inward is to turn in to their feelings. Feelings are themselves a new religion. New Age literature is all about

feelings - feeling good about yourself, feeling good about others, feeling good about one's life, one's situation. But in the desert, the feelings dry up and all that is left is that naked, bare, austere possibility. This is the furnace. It is in these moments, in this time in practice that the real work is done. The dross is burned off and only what is true remains. Don't back off the desert! It is true that during these times it seems that the practice is remote, so uninteresting. One feels feeble, futile. But these are personality judgments. It is going on that is important. And it isn't the personality which goes on. It is what is true that goes on. It is not a question of forcing yourself. It is just a question of being there, staying there, moment by moment. And we mean that literally. Literally! One comes back and one comes back again, and again one comes back. As we say, not with force or fury, not with gritted teeth, not with clenched fists. One just comes back, and then one comes back again. In this way you start to be honest with yourself. And you start to really want nothing else other than to realize yourself.

The problem is not that we have desires but that these desires are so often in conflict one with the other. How many people are there that have this real need, this feeling of wanting somehow just to live a life which gives them the possibility to turn in on themselves fully and completely. And yet at the same time have this need, this desire to become engaged as fully as possible in the world, to be lost in some profession, some undertaking, some project.

In each one of us there are two : a hermit and a professional; a monk and a business man; a nun and a business woman. And they all have their own agendas. It is these conflicting needs and desires that Buddhism calls the wheel of Samsara. The very need to be a nun or a monk keeps the wheel turning. And the very need to lose oneself, to give oneself over to something outside oneself, keeps the wheel turning. To turn inwards is not to turn towards your thoughts or feelings. Thoughts and feelings are part of the outward movement. There is only one inside and that is you. Sometimes we put it to people that perhaps one day it will be possible to make a clone of their body, to reproduce that body so there is no difference at all. And this other body could have the same personality, the same likes and dislikes, but that would not be you. You cannot be replaced. Everything else is contingent, is accidental. Your past, your body, your mind, your intelligence, your creativity, all of this is contingent. It may very well be that one day they will find a gene for everything, but they will never find a gene for you.

Every now and again someone phones up asking where they can find a monastery where they can go and really practice fully. And unfortunately there are still Zen Centers that encourage this kind of activity. I say unfortunately because it gives the impression that the real work is the work that one does in some kind of monastery or center or ashram or whatever.

There is a yearning in many of us to retire in that way. The nun or the monk part of us longs for that. And as a consequence we tend to look slightly on our day to day activities, the work that we have to do, the mundane quality of the work, the boring

quality of the work, and feel it is inconsequential. I have heard people who have been fully trained in one profession or another say that they feel their lives and their work is inconsequential. It is true that in terms of the absolute whatever is relative is inconsequential. And yet, nevertheless, the only way the absolute can manifest is through the relative, through what we say is inconsequential.

There was a disciple that said to his master, "Everything is an illusion." And the master said, "Don't insult Brahman. »

It is like layman Pang said, "My magical powers and miraculous activities are chopping wood and carrying water. »

Even to sweep the floor is magic.

When it is said that one must want to see into oneself and nothing else, this is not an invitation to depreciate what it is that you do on a day to day basis. On the contrary, what it means is that one must want to see whatever one is doing on a day to day basis as the fullest manifestation of oneself. And in that way one would do it with one's full awareness, one's full commitment. Whatever you do, do it! Don't judge it. If it is necessary to change your job, you will change it. But it isn't necessary ever to spend time wondering whether you ought to. Or change your partner or change your house or change whatever.

Many people keep themselves in a state of suspension in this way. This inability to commit themselves, this unwillingness to commit themselves. Because they are afraid that if they do so, they will lose some valuable part of themselves. And yet it is in this very suspension that this valuable part is lost. This valuable part being the possibility to be at one with what it is you are doing.

So many people spend their time wondering how they can get into greater activity, do more things, meet more people. There are politicians that are always busy, always on the go. They never have a possibility of just sitting or just reading or just gardening or just walking.

Finding yourself is possible when sweeping the floor, when carrying out the garbage, when doing whatever it is that your work calls upon you to do. It is true that if situations were different you could be employed better. It is almost certainly true that most people are not fulfilled in their work in a way that might be possible were the society organized in an ideal way. But it is also true that if pigs had wings they could fly. It is a waste of time and effort to dwell on that kind of thing. But it isn't a waste of time to keep bringing yourself back to the moment, wherever you are, and giving yourself fully to what it is that you are doing. And when you do it, one does it simply because it is there to be done.

One does it without thought of loss and gain. This doesn't mean that one isn't pleased when others appreciate what one does. Of course one is. But this is not the reason

for doing it. One does it because it is there to be done. And this is how we need to practice. There are still people that are proud of their practice. They still feel that they have got the edge somehow, that they have got the inner track. One gives oneself to the practice because that is what is required. And when one does really give oneself fully to the practice, one knows this is right. This is it. This is what I have been looking for. There is a sense of completeness.

There was a master who would never go into a monastery or a temple. But he would sometimes sit in a tree outside. And he did this up to a very advanced age, up till he was about eighty.

And a monk came along on one occasion and said, "What you are doing up there old man is dangerous. »

And the master looked down and said, "It is not as dangerous as what you are doing down there. »

Monk: "What do you mean? »

Master: "You don't even know how to live. »

Monk: "All right, how do you live? »

Master: "Avoid evil, do good, save all sentient beings. »

Monk: "Oh, a child of eight knows that! »

Master: "Yes, but an old man of eighty can't do it.

What is interesting is "avoid evil" comes first. There are so many people who want to do good and yet they don't know how to avoid doing evil. Doing good is an expression of one's true nature. But once it becomes a desire to do good that people have, it becomes a form of sentimentality.

And how do you avoid evil? The only way to avoid evil is to know yourself. It is to see into one's own conflicts and go beyond them.

Nisargadatta said one should not talk of helping another unless you can put that person beyond all need of help. The only way in which one can truly do that, the only true way in which one can help another, is to help that other find that the only true help comes from within themselves.

Here at the Center we give workshops and then we give beginners' courses. And then people are more or less on their own. We get, say, thirty people who come to a workshop. Of those might come to the beginners' course. Of those seven or eight might come to the first evening sitting and of those we might get one who will be there

next week. We try to make it easy for people to meet with Zen practice, but after the initiation, after we have opened the door, all we can hope is that people will walk through. It is useless to try to pick them up and carry them through. It is a self winnowing process: those that have the need, the true need to practice, continue. Those that don't go elsewhere. The last thing a Zen center should look for is large numbers of people.

The first requirement for sincere practice is that that one sees into the first noble truth of Buddha, "life is suffering". It is not enough to give assent to that in a kind of intellectual way. The truth that all life is painful is itself a subject that can be meditated on and contemplated for years. But people tend to give a superficial assent to it and then go on, rather than living in the midst of this truth. To live in the truth that all life is painful is to no longer look outside yourself for ways by which you can get relief from suffering. When you look outside yourself, one way or another, to get relief from suffering, it is because you believe that life can be other than suffering.

It is not pessimism to say that life is fundamentally suffering. On the contrary, it is a way of reassuring you that you have the strength to carry it. It is an affirmation; not of life, but of that which supports life: a way of affirming that out of which life comes. When one sees the statement "all life is suffering" as an affirmation, one enters into oneness with all life, with all existence.. In other words, one comes home to oneself. And one comes home to oneself not in spite of, not running away from, not as a substitute for suffering, but in the full realization of what Buddha meant when he said, "Life is suffering". When one is able to do this then one is beyond all need for help. How can you need help when you are that which sustains?