

## What Do You Really Want?

If we are truly honest, most of us would admit that we come to our weekly worship services or daily spiritual practices with so many ideas, personal agendas, aspirations, hopes, and fears that the true religious miracle is when we actually begin to wake up to the freedom that our particular tradition has to offer. More often we are captivated by the relentless noise in our heads about what we want, how getting exactly what we want would finally make life just right, how we would like (or even demand) some measure of relief from all that isn't working, and some guidance regarding all of our many problems that seem to have no solution. We want to get something and we want it to be personally satisfying.

I remember having a conversation with a student at the Austin Zen Center as she struggled with these very ordinary, and very human, attachments. I listened to her frustrations with her everyday life and her life at the Center. I was sympathetic to her suffering and could understand her yearning for relief. These were all familiar concerns to me. Finally I said, "You know, you may not get what you want, but you can be the kind of person you want to be". I didn't think much about it at the time. The conversation came to a close as she shuffled away in her distress and I went on to the next task, wishing I could have been more helpful. However, later on she came back and reminded me of that moment and of that statement which had, in fact, helped her begin to shift her perspective from the narrow limits of what she wanted to the limitless possibilities of what she might become.

The conventional world is shaping our tastes and stimulating our desires all the time. It is almost an unchallenged assumption in this country that one of the core questions of life is "what do you want"? The corollaries to this question go something like, "If you don't know what you want you will never get it. If you do know what you want then set your goals and work to get achieve them. If you are not getting what you want you must be engaging in self-defeating behaviors or you are just not thinking positively".

On and on we go, wondering what is wrong with us that we don't have the good life. We see others who "have it all" and assume they must be happy. This is the acquisitive, material path. We are made whole by what we get or what we achieve.

However, every great wisdom tradition reminds us that this conventional path is a never-ending cycle of desire followed by inevitable dissatisfaction. After all, what is really enough and when are we ever finally satisfied? How much self-esteem will finally make us happy and peaceful? The unconventional option to this relentlessly turning wheel is the practice path in whatever tradition we choose. And what does it mean to practice? Practice suggests that there are ways to begin to look at our conventional assumptions and our habits in order to wake up to their limitations. Whether it is centering prayer, meditation, chanting, or any number of creative or devotional activities, this waking up opens us to the possibility of freedom and joy right in the middle of conventional life. We don't gain freedom from this baffling world we live in. We find freedom within it. We

can cultivate a little more spaciousness to view things just as are rather than only being able to see through the narrow lens of how we want it to be. As we see more clearly, we notice how much suffering there is around us all the time. Our hearts may soften in response. With this softening we are more able to look at our own habits and our assumptions to better see how they actually cause suffering for ourselves and for others. We can learn to look at all of this with the eye of compassion rather than only looking through our self-centered habits.

As they were walking down the hall at the San Francisco Zen Center one day, Suzuki Roshi stopped and turned to the priest he was training and said very simply, "You know, just to be alive is enough". What would it be like to live with this possibility. Sometimes we do get what we want and we allow ourselves to rest in deep gratitude. But what would it be like to rest in gratitude as a way of life? We might not end up getting all that we want, but we might very well end up being the kind of person we have always hoped to be.