

THE ULTIMATE CAN OPENER

December 10, 2013

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[I will post the last part of my blues festival article tomorrow, but I wanted to share this insight today.]

We all love our little gems of wisdom, and each of us has a few that come our way in life, and that includes me. Of all my gems, perhaps the one that is on the tip of the top of my list is the following. It has done me the most good and has to do with how I go about doing things, learning things

It is the difference between learning things in a serial fashion, one at a time, and true multi-tasking, being able to do everything well or close to it. And, although it is part of the dharma, I didn't learn it from the Tibetans, but from none other than the great German writer Franz Kafka, and it wasn't in any of his novels or short stories either. In fact it was a single sentence tucked away in that author's diaries. If I had blinked, I might have never seen it.

And even after reading that sentence, it then took me years to understand what it meant enough to boil it down to the sphere of action and learn to live it, as best I can. So here it is:

Somewhere in Kafka's journal writing is the single sentence to the effect "Everything I write, it already has perfection." That's the entirety of it, the whole thing. I can tell you that I puzzled over that sentence for many years, and only gradually realized what Kafka was telling me. And here is what I understand he meant.

Instead of learning one skill at a time, in serial fashion as we do in this country, it is better to improve the mind itself of the one who learns any skills – our mind. Work on the mind, not single skills, and when the mind has been trained some, then tackle the single skills. Of course, this is exactly what the Tibetan Buddhists tell me, but it is nice to get confirmation from another source.

Kafka said that everything he writes has perfection because he had worked on his mind until it had some perfection, and thus every last thing he did partook of and had that excellence. What a profound idea!

This is very different from the way I was taught as I came up, which was to learn this skill, and then that skill, and maybe if there was time yet another skill, and so on. Never in my education was my attention turned to improving or training the mind itself, but always only looking outside, in serial mode, by going to school on this skill, and then that skill, and onward, one skill after another or even several at once. But at no time was it ever suggested that I first concentrate on improving the mind itself or that the mind

even needed training.

The way I was taught in school is what could be called relative or serial learning, and what Kafka was pointing to we could call absolute learning. Do it once and everything you do afterward will carry its seal, and be a byproduct of your training. The Buddhists call this Mahamudra meditation. And I have tried this out, so I am not just talking through my hat.

Of course, it has taken me a very, very long time to learn anything, but much of that was just because I was not convinced or certain that this was the right path. I hemmed and hawed my way along, and never really went after the goal of mind training in a disciplined and confident manner. I had no teachers in all this, at least early on. There were no classes offered back then in mind training, and even the concept itself was (literally) foreign. It came from Asia. Who over here ever heard of looking at the mind itself? Not me, at least not then.

In other words, who would have thought of first improving the mind and then doing things like learning skills? Instead, we all were taught to do things one at a time and in hope that whatever we learned would gradually rub off on the mind itself. That was the way learning was taught.

But Kafka and the Buddhists are spot on. Once you master your mind a bit, you can do anything, and anything you do will be the byproduct of your mind and its training. It will have that seal or imprint. Today I would not be afraid to tackle any skill and I am confident that I will make short work of it. That is because I have been working to get my mind right.

So, when Kafka says "Everything I write, it already has perfection," I get it. Now I work to first perfect my mind and then learn skills. In fact, I am finding that thanks to mind training, everything I turn my mind too I seem to have some immediate insight into and am able to learn much more quickly than in the past.

Just saying.

[No, the graphic here is not a can opener. I have no idea what it is. It looks to me like a cross between a millipede and a bag of knives.]

