

Mindfulness – how awareness breaks through the conditioned

We usually think of the spiritual life in terms of growth, progress, development, evolution. We think of it as something slow and steady, as something which proceeds by continuous regular steps. Thinking of the spiritual life in terms of gradual evolution is perfectly valid, in fact very helpful. But we can think of it in another way also: in terms of breaking through.

There are certain advantages in thinking of the spiritual life in this way. If we think in terms of breaking through - or even bursting through - it makes it clear that spiritual life consists, in part at least, in an abrupt transition from one level or dimension of experience, or from one mode of being, to another. It draws attention to the fact that the spiritual life involves not just effort - we are all familiar with that idea - but even violence. This is not a popular conception, that the spiritual life involves violence, but involve violence it does. It does not, of course, involve violence to others, but violence to oneself, or to certain aspects of oneself which constitute obstacles to one's growth.

Breaking through any aspect of conditioned existence is accomplished mainly through the cultivation of awareness. Awareness, mindfulness, recollection, is the great dissolver of negative emotions, also of psychological conditionings, in fact of every aspect of the conditioned within us. So much is this the case that we can even say that there is no spiritual life without awareness. To the extent that there is awareness there is spiritual life. If we wanted to be paradoxical, we might even say it is better to steal with real awareness than to do a puja without any awareness.

An action, a thought, a feeling, is spiritual to the extent that it is accompanied by awareness. If we do anything with awareness, that awareness, if it is maintained, will sooner or later eat away anything negative - anything that smacks of the conditioned - in what we are doing. Awareness is of paramount importance in the spiritual life: no spiritual life without awareness; no breakthrough - no breaking through - without awareness.

Sangharakshita, Guide to the Buddhist Path, p.141

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