

Attitudes (4 of 5) From Self-Preoccupation to Gratitude

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Summary Keywords

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Gil Fronsda

I would like to share a story of gratitude with you. It comes from a very significant scholar of religion in the United States named Houston Smith. He spent a great amount of time living in different countries and participating in some of the major world religions. He studied the religions in a deeply appreciative way. He created personal relationships with people in all kinds of religions over his very long career.

He tells a story about practicing Zen in Japan. He engaged in the practice of Zen at a very strict monastery for a month. He ended his stay with a week-long intensive Zen retreat where you get about three hours of sleep each night. It was very intense and quite challenging for him. At the end of his stay, he went to pay his respects to his teacher, the abbot, Goto Roshi.

He was a bit stunned by what the abbot said to him. He was at a Rinzai monastery and had been working on koans. These are enigmatic questions that you struggle with. He had also been meditating a lot. The abbot said to him, "Koans can be a useful exercise, but they are not Zen." He thought he had been doing Zen.

The abbot went on, "Sitting in meditation is also not Zen." Houston Smith was quite surprised. What had he been doing? He came to study Zen. So much of it was intensive meditation and these koans. If these were not Zen, what had he been doing?

Then the Zen master said to him, "So you will be flying home tomorrow?" He continued, "Do not overlook how many people will help you get home. There are the ticketing agents, pilots, cabin attendants, and those who prepare your meals." He placed his palms together and bowed in deep gratitude.

He then bowed a bow of gratitude to Houston Smith. The abbot said, "Make your whole life unceasing gratitude." He said, "What is Zen? Simple, simple, so simple. It is infinite gratitude toward all things past, infinite service to all things present, and infinite responsibility to all things future. Have a safe journey home." The abbot gave him a wonderful smile and said, "I am glad you came."

So this Zen master identified the heart of Zen as gratitude for all that we receive. Maybe Zen is not meditation. Maybe Buddhism is not meditation. Meditation is what clears the heart, and clears the mind so that we can see, feel, and experience this life from a place where we are not self-centered, self-preoccupied, or self-concerned.

It is so easy for us to be pulled into the world of self-concern where everything is referenced in relation to me, myself, and mine. We think about ourselves. We have an attitude of self-preoccupation or self-concern. It is reasonable to have self-concern. It is reasonable to take care of ourselves and know where we are and what is going on.

But when we have an attitude of self-concern, that means part of our mind is always preoccupied with self. It is always preoccupied with "What is in it for me?" or, "I am not enough; I am a problem; I deserve more;" or, "I need to make myself safe."

There are a lot of emotions that are centered around this self. It is a cluster of preoccupations that are centered around a fundamental attitude that we carry – a mood or a state that references everything to me, myself, and mine. It involves tension. It involves shutting down, and not being able to connect fully to the situation.

Meditation is a way to quiet self-concern, and self-preoccupation. A lot of the reason why meditation is de-stressing is there is less self-involvement in meditation, so the source of stress does not operate so strongly – unless we bring it with us into meditation. “Am I doing well enough? Am I concentrated, or do I need to do better?” This whole game of self goes on. Let this selfing mind become quiet. Let that attitude decrease. Then it can be replaced or filled in with an attitude of gratitude.

We become grateful and thankful. There is a Zen saying: “To move forward asserting the self is delusion. To settle back and receive all things is awakening.” Just in being alive, there is so much that we are receiving all the time. There are so many people working – just like many of us are working – in a way that supports other people. Our lives are supported by so many people.

Every day those of us living in the modern United States drive on roads. We use electricity and take water from the tap in our kitchen. We have insulated homes and a heating system to keep them warm. All that has been put in place by countless people. A whole series of people contribute to the food that comes to our table. They harvest it from the ground and we bring it into our kitchen. Wow, there is a lot that we receive.

If we are self-concerned it is easy to complain – there is not enough; we want more; it should be different. It has been said that when we have an attitude of gratitude, we can be happy anywhere. If we have an attitude of complaining, we will complain even in heaven.

Let us enter this day appreciating the quieting and the lowering of self-concern or self-preoccupation. Let us enter quieting the preoccupation with thinking we are not good enough, we are not enough, the situation is not enough for us, it is not right for us, or it should be different for us. Quiet these self-concerns so no matter what the circumstance is, we can appreciate the goodness and the gift of it.

Spirituality is impossible if we are not able to appreciate the gifts that we receive. The spiritual state of freedom, awakening, the practice of mindfulness, and deepening settledness are gifts. We can't demand these gifts. We can't assert ourselves over them. We can't use spirituality to build up the self because then the beauty of this life, the beauty of our hearts, the freedom of the heart, and the freedom of the world are not available.

Let us see spirituality as entering into a world of gift-receiving. We receive so much. Perhaps in receiving these gifts in the present moment, we can also give. We can give our smiles. We can give our well-wishing and our deep appreciation for others and who they are. In our gratitude and appreciation, we can have a vision for a better tomorrow that we can contribute to, for everyone, not just ourselves.

May our gratitude, and our deep appreciation help us work for a better future and a better tomorrow, no matter how difficult it gets. Let us step forward to contribute in such a way that in the future people have reasons to be grateful for us and for what we do.

Thank you very much. I look forward to one more day on this topic of attitude. I hope that this day goes well for you. If you can meditate a little extra this day, it is a great day to turn into a mini-retreat for yourself. Thank you.