



Cheerful Perseverance is Key

There's a particular phrase that's continued to be very helpful to me ever since I began practice almost 47 years ago—and the phrase is: "Cheerful perseverance is the key to success."

When I was almost 26 years old I was very unhappy with my work as a computer programmer, and distraught about what occupation I would find suitable. Then one weekend I helped some people remodel a barn, and although I didn't know anything about carpentry, I realized I wanted to be a carpenter. Given my background this realization was quite an epiphany. I not only didn't have any carpentry skills, I was also very thin—I think I weighed around 120 pounds at the time.

Someone had just given me the I Ching, a book of Chinese wisdom. I asked it the question, "What will it take to become a carpenter?" And the answer was: "Cheerful perseverance is the key to success." Who knows why, but I actually took the phrase to heart, and began looking for a job as a carpenter. I drove from job site to job site—this was in San Francisco—and I got rejected by everybody. But—buoyed by that phrase—I finally got a job. I worked for the same company for two years, during which time I faced many situations that were very difficult for me, both physically and psychologically, like trying to push a wheel barrow full of concrete, and being humiliated that I couldn't even budge it. Or like being told to climb up a 30' ladder to fix a broken support in the ceiling. A 30' ladder is really high, and I'm afraid of heights, and my hands were shaking so hard I couldn't even hold a nail, so they made me come down. But I continued to rely on the phrase "Cheerful perseverance is the key to success." And the phrase helped me get through the many difficulties in the apprenticeship training, including being repeatedly humiliated.

The phrase is not like a fortune cookie. In a way, you could say that this phrase goes to the heart of practice, but its meaning is somewhat subtle.

For example, what does "cheerful" mean? It's not about having a smiling face or some artificial equanimity. It's more about a welcoming disposition—a willingness. When a difficulty arises, instead of seeing something as being wrong or needing a solution, choosing to see it with a kind of light-hearted curiosity. So instead of "Oh no" to whatever is arising, it's more like, "Hello. What can I learn?" In a way, it's like saying "Yes" to difficulties—with a willingness to enter into it and work with it.

This was the essence of the attitude that helped me look for the



Questhaven Retreat

Applications are being accepted for the three-day Questhaven Retreat (6/8 – 6/11). This retreat usually fills up quickly so if you would like to attend it is recommended that you apply soon. Applicants are required to attend all three days.

Ezra and Elizabeth Away

Elizabeth and Ezra will be away two weeks in early May. They will be in Paris on vacation, celebrating twenty-five years together, and leading a short retreat. The Saturday schedule will remain the same. Daisan will resume on May 16. The Wednesday evening talks will resume on May 17.

Announcements

Sesshin Application

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carpentry job, and I've resorted to it again and again over the years. It may require dropping our stories or self-images, e.g., when I looked for the job I had to drop my familiar story of "This is too hard. I can't do it." Or we may have to drop our attachment to a particular emotion, like confusion, or anxiety. In other words, it points us in the direction of "No One Special To Be"—in that we have to drop our opinions, our moods, and particularly, our illusions about who we are.

What does "perseverance" mean? Perseverance literally means to be steadfast. It makes it possible to stay with practice through all of the valleys, the low spots, the difficulties. It's what makes it possible to sit through discomfort, to sit when we don't feel like it, to sit when we're bored or tired.

It's easy to turn perseverance into what has been referred to as a "slimy virtue"—where we do our duty in a martyred way, making ourselves feel special. That's why I describe the perseverance as cheerful, to bypass getting caught in a grim sense of duty, or specialness.

Yet, perseverance is no small thing, because at times our resistance can be very strong. Isn't it a fact that we often don't want to stay with the experience of the present moment for more than a few seconds? So cultivating perseverance over the years is almost like building a muscle: we develop the strength and capacity without which practice could never really develop. Basically, we learn that practice, or life, doesn't have to please us in the ordinary sense. Nor do we have to achieve a particular result for us to continue.

What does "key" mean? This is particularly subtle, because perseverance is not the end in itself, such as in trying to fulfill an ideal of being dutiful or persevering. Rather, perseverance means catalyst, or the key that opens the door—the doorway to the practice life. It is also "key" in the sense of being "crucial," in that perseverance is without doubt one of the most important qualities in practice.

What does "success" mean? This is the tricky part. It's not the same as in achieving a goal, or the conventional cookie. The success is in the actual living of a more awake, more free life—no longer demanding that life be different. It ultimately means living more from the kindness, the gratitude, and the love that is our true nature. Cheerful perseverance is actually the means through which our aspiration can be channeled—toward the possibility of living more genuinely.

For example, in sesshin, or retreats, the quality of perseverance is particularly key, because, as we all know, there are times when we just want to run out of there. Or within sittings—perseverance means to try to stay present through the ups and downs in moods. For example, when we're bored—cheerful perseverance tells us to just stay. It doesn't matter how we feel. All that matters is if we can honestly acknowledge what is going on, and then stay present as best we can.

The same is true with sleepiness—we don't have to fight it or judge it. It's the small mind, the judgmental mind, that tells us we're weak or wasting time. So we simply feel what it feels like

to be sleepy, and persevere, even if the awareness is very low key.

Or with physical or emotional pain—cheerful perseverance means a willingness to just let it in, to feel it, to reside in it, without having to push it away or make it better. And if you think you can't do that, just ask yourself if you can do it for at least three full breaths. That's the start of perseverance.

And over the long haul of practice, perseverance is equally crucial.

Cheerful perseverance is the continuing effort to stay with the practice, even when our efforts feel dry—when we may question why we're even doing this. In these time, perseverance includes sitting regularly, coming to the center, attending retreats, talking to teachers, and so on. And it particularly includes not giving up on ourselves in our often messy efforts to work with the muddiness and confusion of daily life.

Ezra Bayda

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