

The Whole Thing

In our reading, "What is Our Life About?" we recite the phrase, "our life is about connectedness and love, not the illusion of a separate self, to which our suffering clings." How might we learn the truth of this? It occurred to me many years ago that all things are defined by everything else and it all goes together. For we humans, a suffering-prone illusion of a separate self seems a vehicle that is perhaps indispensable in coming to know its opposite. At least that seems to be true in my life. Life, to me, is a journey of discovery and integration that involves a wide spectrum of experience.

I've recently had some health challenges that have "squeezed" me toward the Heartmind, where connectedness and love can be more realized as a fundamental part of who and what we are. But perhaps ironically, I'm a bit clearer about how an important part of the journey centers on this Chuck persona that so clings to an elaborate notion of being a separate self. I'm a bit clearer about how these two work together.

I feel awareness is a kind of magic ingredient that moves us progressively toward the fulfillment of our life. Awareness of all that we're up to. Or, one could say, the ability to be present with what's happening now. That's our saving grace. I say grace because I see it as a gift of our consciousness. We evolve, or mature, as we shine the light of awareness on that compelling self-centered dream of our life. Over time we can see that we're larger than what our ego would have us believe. Seeing this more clearly can make a big difference in our life.

Before I became aware of an urgent health issue, I felt I was at a crossroads. Now it's clearer to me that the health issue was likely part of the crossroads.

I've always had a sort of dark companion, a part of my consciousness based on separation and fear. It probably goes back to day one in my life. Nowadays I have more self-empathy for what I likely faced (it's only conscious in part) and adopted as a survival strategy in early childhood.



Questhaven Sesshin will be June 6–9. Applications are still being accepted. If you would like to attend please apply soon, as space is further limited this year. If you choose to commute to the sesshin the fee will be reduced by \$30.

Practice Period will be from September 14 until October 12. If you wish to participate please don't plan any trips or activities that will interfere with your participation.

[Announcements](#)

[Sesshin Application](#)

Click [here](#) to see this newsletter online.

*These heart things
can be more clearly
seen to be so much a
part of what makes
life worth living.*

Basically, I wasn't sure I wanted to continue the human experience. I'd disassociate. I still have some tendency along these lines. My parents didn't know how to love. Probably their parents didn't either.

Over some years I found life interesting enough to want to stick around. I was curious, liked to figure things out, and probably most importantly, found nature as my nurturer. Zen practice, over many years, has delivered more awareness, understanding, and heart (characteristics, I'd say, of unity consciousness), but the shadow has never completely left.

A few months ago a disconcerting mental statement popped up: "This isn't my world anymore." I realized at that point that's how I'd progressively been feeling. What with aging, dismal politics, and ever-larger-looming climate change, the disheartenment became heavy, sometimes scary. The dark companion seemed back in a big way and begged the question, "What do I really want? What is important?"

The answer soon started coming to me, first in the voice of my sister. When, in a phone conversation, I told her how I'd been feeling, she said I was the most important person in her life and the thought of not having me around was truly upsetting, and it touched me to feel her sincerity. It helped me to realize how important she was to me.

This was the voice of the heart. And the events at the crossroads may have been the only way to allow that voice to communicate and take effect, enough to turn in the direction of the heart's path in a way I hadn't been able to before.

A week or two after this I found myself in the emergency room for the better part of a day facing possible kidney failure from a blocked bladder from an enlarged prostate. This, along with catastrophizing from the dark companion, put a possible end-of-life scenario before me. This seemed to open up the path of the heart for me—giving and receiving. A friend at the Zen Center sat with me for the three-hour emergency room wait, until after 10pm. All the doctors, nurses, assistants, made me feel real gratitude for the fellow human beings who have dedicated a good portion of their lives to caring and helping. The support and caring, offers of help from many folks—friends, family, fellow practitioners—further spoke for and from the heart. These heart things can be more clearly seen to be so much a part of what makes life worth living.

I was able to muster a sort of silent presence in the ER. Even with all the commotion around and some visits here and there from the negative thoughts, there was a fairly strong here-and-now awareness, a vital, energetic silence of consciousness, an interest—and even a curiosity—in what was going on with myself and also others. I see this as a fruit of practice. The presence was more of unity and the

negativity was more of separation. It was an invaluable scenario for experiencing directly the difference in how life feels when the one or the other is active. When the moment holds sway, suffering is lessened, perhaps eliminated.

Mother Teresa said, "God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch our soul."

I feel I have touched my heart and soul a bit more. Life feels more the gift it is.

A bit surprisingly I have mercy and more understanding for the dark companion. In large part it's tried to help me survive, offered a known territory, a certain security. As Martin Goodman put it in *In Search of the Divine Mother*, "I see that I am clinging to my darkness like a baby to a security blanket, and that I am in terror of the bright, open path that leads away from it." A path that once aided in survival may come to not serve us anymore.

I get glimpses of how enthusiasm for life (living en-theos, with god) seems to flow from the grace of heart-guided experience. I aspire to be more open and willing to have such experience. With less sense of isolation, more sense of connection, my perspective on life lightens up, warms up and makes life more inviting.

The dark companion is still around. It's been well-conditioned for many years. It probably always will be around to some extent. Often times I can just sit with it—I am at this writing, if anything, more intimate with its thoughts, feelings, and emotions. There will likely be, as there have been in the past, times when the direction of the path might be less obvious. But my aspiration is to keep walking "the bright, open path" that leads to a more heart-centered, fulfilling life.

Chuck Sweet