

 ver since I was small, I wanted to spend as much time as I could in Nature. The first thing I said I wanted to be when I grew up was a ‘mountain-man’, living off the land with no ties to society. As a kid, I’d sit in school and stare wistfully out the window on crisp Fall days, considering all happiness to lie out there in the woods, and all misery to be the responsibility of this ridiculous system I was entangled in (which, by the way, was totally failing to prepare me for the skills I was going to need in life: how to build a log cabin, farming, trapping, wild plant identification, etc.) As I grew up, and grew more attached to the world, that initial vision changed a bit. However, traveling to places of great natural beauty and spending as much time as possible surrounded by Nature were still my primary motivations in life. Spending time in such places at the time represented the peak experiences of my life. I felt that I wanted to have as many such experiences as possible and went about trying to organize a career outdoors or simply make a lot of money to live where and how I wanted. Still the kid looking wistfully out the window, I felt that my life lacked enough time spent in the woods and had too much time devoted to job, rent, and bills.

Since I’ve begun my tea practice here, the amount of time I’ve spent going on adventures has diminished drastically. I’ve still never even been to the beach that I hear is within twenty or so minutes of Miaoli. There are dozens of Taiwanese national parks I’ve never been to, with huge trees and extraordinary flora, wonderlands of Nature I once felt it my purpose in life to explore and wander through. As a servant of this tradition, I am no longer ‘free’ in the old sense, that childish notion of freedom as the ability to do whatever you want whenever you want. The child that thought freedom was the ability to walk out of the schoolroom door, quit the job and wander the world in economic independence. Now, there is too much work to be done, too many people to make tea for. And this has been the source of great inner-conflicts for me at times; feelings of nostalgia, wistfulness, occasionally even resentments arise, but thanks to my practice I know exactly where those feelings come from and have tools to deal with them.

Everywhere you look, a powerful illusion is being woven, the illusion of “more” or “different” equaling satisfaction. Perhaps it’s more money, more life, more family, a different life, a different family, a different place to live, more free time. Some people have even found themselves thinking they’d be better off if they had more or different tea! (Or so I have heard). Literally trillions of dollars (an inconceivably huge force of united human consciousness

that could be used to create any reality we wish) are foolishly used to further this conditioning in us—illusions of “not enough”. The economy of every nation depends on this dissatisfaction with life, and as everyone knows, we might as well jump off a bridge if we lose our economic stability. So it is from this same conditioning, from a lifetime of being convinced by every social structure that I am not enough and don’t have enough. And even my desire to escape that structure still falls neatly into it if I’m not careful. It happened just the other day...

I was cleaning up my house, making space for my brother Shane (who is joyously moving to live here in Miaoli this very week, hurrah!), when I came across a brochure all about the national parks of Taiwan. I started flipping through it, and quickly was immersed in those old wistful desires to go and see those big-tree forests and lush landscapes. I began to tell myself a story about how I was not free. Resentment at the constant demands on my time that deny me the ‘freedom’ to go where I want, when I want, began to creep in. Why me? Why did I have to come across this path, this Way? Why did I have to be given the eyes to see that I must walk it? Why can’t I go back, just a little, go back to the way things were before, go off and cavort in the woods whenever I want to? These thoughts then bred dissatisfaction, and the belief that my unhappiness was because of a lack of adventure in my life. “I’m unhappy,” I quickly concluded. “I’m unhappy because I live in a Heaven-on-Earth country of natural beauty and I barely even know it, we have hardly been introduced,” I thought. “What am I doing, living in a place where I don’t know the Earth intimately? What’s become of me that this is possible? And it’s this tradition’s fault! What kind of an idea is this, anyway, giving *all* my time away, *always* sacrificing my desires, *always* putting my needs below not just those of loved ones, but people I don’t even know? It’s insane; anyone in the world would have to agree! Oh, the injustice! And all I need is a trip into the mountains. Had I had one just this past weekend I wouldn’t feel this way. I’d be content. If I’d been to that beach since I’ve moved here, then surely I wouldn’t feel this way now!”

“Hmm, wait a minute... have I ever had these thoughts before? Haven’t I been to hundreds of beaches and hundreds of mountains in my life already?” It’s as insane as though I were to wake up hungry tomorrow and start saying: “The trouble is I haven’t eaten enough lobster in my life. If only I had eaten lobster for dinner every night for the last two weeks, I wouldn’t be hungry now!” or if I expected that eventually, one day, I’d have eaten enough food; I’d sigh, pat my belly, and be done.



“Full forever, ahhhh.” How absurd! No matter how much I eat, drink or walk in the mountains, these are not foods that satiate the hungers and thirsts that truly drive me. They are at best physical cures for physical problems, but even at that they are embarrassingly short-lived and inadequate. I eat, and immediately a new desire arises and I am off to try to satisfy that one. I go up to the mountains, and quickly start thinking about how nice a hot shower is going to feel when I get back to the hotel, or what work I have to get done when I get home tomorrow since I just took a whole day off. There is always something new that arises, sooner than later, and it isn't for a lack of experiences of any kind or amount that this happens, and no combination or amount of them can grant the true freedom that my soul ultimately is seeking beneath it all.

It all comes back to service. Service is the central element of our practice here, and with good reason. Living here, I choose to be somewhere I am often needed by others, whether it be in maintaining the center, helping a guest or writing these articles. If I had a personal plan of some kind it goes without saying that if either the center or a guest's needs come up, even completely without warning, I will set my plans aside. In this way, I am constantly finding myself doing things I didn't want to do. Don't misunderstand! What I mean is that the situations here don't arise out of personal desire; I don't plan them and they don't correspond with my personal ideas of what *should* happen. But I still really do want to serve.

In lowering the priority of my desires and placing others first, I create a rarified space between desire and myself that gives me a chance to actually look at my desires instead of *through* them. It becomes increasingly clear that it doesn't matter at all if I never accomplish another personal goal again. I can also hone my skills at another vital aspect of our practice in this space, which is learning to listen to the desires of the Way itself, and to live in a state of Trust that if I need time of my own, or an adventure or a sunrise, I will get them. If I don't, I won't. There is no need to try to control events or inflict my 'self' upon anything. I am complete as I am. I cannot be added to or subtracted from in any way by anything: not a relationship, not experiences, not possessions. Therefore, I can just let these things be. Knowing my completeness, I am so grateful for it, astonished by the grace that continues to give me more and increasingly abundant life every minute even though I don't need it. It is a gift that can't be repaid through anything other than consciousness of the gift itself, and so I must live a life of practice.

With a beauty and poignancy that only this incredible cosmos of ours can arrange, not more than four days after my nostalgic encounter with the travel brochure, for the first time since I've lived here a guest (Viva Antonio!) asked me to go with him to Mt. Ali-Shan National Park. Truly, this island I call my home is a place of astonishing beauty and I am so glad to have made a



deeper acquaintance at last. Accepting those moments in the mountains as a gift from the universe, like manna from heaven, I easily found myself walking amongst the deep stillness of that enchanted place overflowing with gratitude for the abundance brought to me with each step, each breath, every turn of the eyes. (Even the nasty cramp I have in my leg a week later reminds me how lucky I am. Maybe a little reality check for future fantasies of perfection too).

This is so different from when I have gluttonously taken those experiences from the universe of my own ‘power’, out of a sense of ‘not enough’ or a desire for more. I don’t need another sunset, another mountaintop, another enchanted forest, or even another breath before I will have had all the experiences I need to have lived a completely fulfilled life. I’ve had every chance and opportunity in the world for all of it already, a thousand times more than many less fortunate than me—it’s enough. When I rest in this awareness, I find I don’t need to go anywhere at all. I can look out the window at the same tree I see every morning and rejoice in the bounty of Nature I have been given. There are people in prisons who haven’t seen such a tree in years. Or I can drink a bowl of tea and converse with Nature right there in my tearoom. Even if I’m doing something completely mundane like the standing in line at the post office, I am breathing, feeling, seeing; how ungrateful I must be to feel these are not enough!

It is said that to master one desire is more powerful than the fulfillment of one thousand. It is so tempting to do whatever I want at any given moment, to go down that path of self-centered desire. It seems insane at

times to serve anyone other than myself at all. But I’ve given the practice of self-service its chance at this point, way more than enough, to see that that path doesn’t lead where all the blazing neon signs say it does. There is no freedom that way, no satisfaction, no completion. Only more hunger, thirst and dissatisfaction. Imagine meeting a smoker who tells you his practice is that he’s going to always give in to the desire to smoke another cigarette, until he isn’t addicted to them anymore. Yet that’s exactly what I’ve been doing all my life with my “what I need is more...” mentality.

Don’t get me wrong, though; you don’t have to start questioning your plans to come visit us, or ask us to take you to beautiful places while you’re here! It’s all a matter of attitude. Absolutely anything can be an act of service, and I know for a fact that many of our guests have used the energy they gathered here for great deeds later on. For me, I quickly see the vacuity of it now when, out of a sense of lack, I think about going off on an adventure. I know I would miss serving some of you tea as a result, and realize it is actually a choice I can no longer make. Not because I’m suppressing my desires; it’s as though the thought itself is just some leftover habit, a false romance of the past lingers, some of the old confusion as to what freedom really is. But a moment later I realize that what I really want is to do what is wanted of me, and thanks to this tradition and to all of you, I find that I always get to do exactly what I want to do after all.

*“We spend our lives learning how to choose what we must do” —Ursula Le Guin*

