

The Language of the Soft Heart

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WHO ARE YOU? NEVER MIND all your fears and insecurities or all the things you have or would like to have. Forget that you want to be a better person. I don't want to know your gender, nationality, age, family situation, ethnic background, and certainly not what you do for a living. My question is this: What is your true nature? Do you know? Do you ever ask yourself? Do you use your yoga and meditation practice to explore this question? I'm not asking who you believe yourself to be, but rather what you experience in those moments when you are not caught up in your wants and fears. What do you rely on to give meaning to your life? These are hard yet essential questions for those who wish to consciously experience life's fullness.

Even if you never consciously grapple with these questions about your true nature, certain circumstances will require you to pay attention. Life delivers you a series of challenges in the form of small and large good fortune, as well as petty and great misfortune. In the struggle to learn how to respond to the resulting joy, pain, and confusion, you are repeatedly challenged to seek and to act from your essence.

Sometimes it's easier to grasp the importance of knowing your true nature through hearing the story of someone else, particularly if that person's story is larger than life. One clear example of this can be seen in a recent *New York Times* article about how Germany has renamed a military base to honor a World War II army sergeant. This particular sergeant, Anton Schmid, an Austrian serving in the German army, saved more than 250 Jews from extermination. He disobeyed his superior officers and helped these men, women, and children escape by hiding them and supplying them with false identification papers. Sergeant Schmid was executed by the Nazis for his acts.

Sergeant Schmid's actions reveal the wonderment and pain of what it means to realize one's true nature. While in prison waiting to be executed, Schmid wrote to his wife of the horror of seeing children beaten as they were herded into ghettos to be shot: "You know how it is with my soft heart. I could not think and had to help them." These words capture the sudden blossoming of spiritual maturity brought on by a challenge we would all rather never have to face.

In one of life's many paradoxes, witnessing the Nazis' acts of inhumanity was the gift that opened Schmid to a deep, spontaneous realization of his true nature and led to his self-sacrificing actions. I don't mean something extraordinary by this, but rather the ordinary humanness of his act.

What he did was simply help people who were being brutally mistreated. This impulse to spontaneously help seems to arise out of the essence of human nature. It happens millions of times each day among family members, friends, and even between complete strangers. But Schmid's story stands out

because so few others came to the aid of Germany's Jews in those terrible years, and because it not only meant his death but also that he died a traitor in the eyes of his government.

"I merely behaved as a human being," Schmid wrote in his last letter to his wife. Each of us can only pray that we too can "behave as a human being" when we encounter the challenges that lie in our life's path.

It was Schmid's ability to meet an extraordinary situation with an ordinary human response that reveals a critical point about finding your true nature. So often there is a feeling that spiritual growth means achieving some extraordinary, other-worldly, blissed-out state where you are somehow transported out of daily life.

This view leads you to constantly search for the next spiritual high. Or you feel that with all your commitments and responsibilities you have little opportunity for developing your inner nature. Both of these views reflect an error in perception.

It is your daily life that is the raw material for your spiritual development. The fight over who washes the dishes, the desire to make more money, the jealousy over what another has, the pain of losing loved ones, or the discomfort of one's own aging or ill health are not impediments to inner development. Rather they are the grist for the mill that will slowly grind up your ignorance and all else that hinders you from knowing your true nature. But like Schmid you must be willing to submit to the process.

You Are Not Your Worst Traits

MANY PEOPLE FAIL TO distinguish between their true nature and their personality traits, particularly their less desirable traits. The fact is you are not the worst characteristics of your personality. It is the nature of the untrained mind to want what it perceives as advantageous and to fear or hate what seems painful. Discovering how your heart and mind can work together to use these feelings allows you to move beyond them and start to experience the kind of freedom that Schmid found. He was thrust into discovering his

true nature, and this allowed him to act against what seemed his own self-interest—to "not think," in his words. It is not an easy task.

You may feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of your present life or bound by past traumatic events. Again, this is a failure in perception. They are just mind-states which can be known. They can be seen as impermanent and not belonging to you and, therefore, they do not ultimately define your true nature. A spiritual practice can provide you with the knowledge and discipline to investigate and work with these conditions. You have to discover that this is true for yourself, for you will not ultimately believe what someone else tells you.

You can do this investigation within the parameters of your present life. There is no need to wait until you can go to a monastery or get your life more together. The intensity of your desires and fears can be a source of energy that propels you to look more deeply for that which really matters.

You Are Not Your History

ROGER COHEN, THE reporter who wrote the article about Schmid, quoted Germany's current defense minister as saying at the dedication of the army base: "We are not free to choose our history, but we can choose the examples we take from that history."

Does this not apply equally to your personal history? You do not have a choice about your personal history. For reasons of heredity, chance, environmental circumstances, and your own actions, your life is as it is at this time. But, you can choose from your history those things which will lead you to a deeper relationship with your true nature.

To use another World War II example, psychologist Viktor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (Washington Square Press, 1998) wrote, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man

but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." For more than 25 years these words have given me comfort and courage in my own search.

It is crucial that you understand, from a spiritual development perspective, that the pain and suffering with which you must work is no less substantial, less real, or even less difficult than these extreme war-based examples. The constrictions of the heart and mind cannot be measured like so many pounds of pressure; they simply are there to be worked with, to help you find your way to your true nature. Moreover, the commitment to find your true nature is often lost in the ordinariness of life; there is less inspiration, and you are beguiled by the tyranny of routine and the collective humdrum of all those around you seeking material advantage.

You Are Not Your Thoughts

THE BUDDHA TAUGHT that your true nature is obscured by the veils of wanting, fear, and delusion (or ignorance). He urged that you look at the nature of your mind systematically and observe how these three mind-states condition what you think and value, and how you behave. He taught that it is the identification with these mind-states that causes suffering; for instance, you mistakenly believe that just because you feel the emotion of wanting, your true nature is the same as that wanting.

If you are not your thoughts, then what is your true nature, how do you find it, and how do you live so that it may flourish? These are the perennial questions for anyone who starts to develop an inner life. In Jesus's teachings, love is at the center of all being—love that is forgiving, unconditional, and not self-serving.

The poet T. S. Eliot, a devoted Anglican Christian, said it in this manner in *Four Quartets* (Harcourt Brace, 1974): "Love is most nearly itself when here and now
cease to matter." What Eliot is suggesting is that the true nature of love is not based on an advantageous response, but on the sheer openness of one heart to another. This is the kind of heart-opening that

provided Schmid with his courage.

The Buddha taught that our true nature is emptiness—a lack of a permanent Self—and when this true nature is realized, the divine states of the *Brahma-viharas*—loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—emerge.

There is also a state of mind and heart known as *bodhicitta* that leads one to completely dedicate oneself to the liberation of all beings from suffering.

In the teachings of the great yoga masters, our true nature is Brahman, the universal soul, of which the individual soul is simply a part. When this is realized there is *satchidananda*, the awareness of bliss, from the knowing that pure awareness is our ultimate nature.

Ordinary Grace

THESE TEACHINGS ABOUT OUR true nature are not theoretical. Rather, they describe actual states of mind and body that can be physically and emotionally felt as profound consciousness shifts. For some people these changes in consciousness have a strong physical component or a marked shift in perception, both of which lead to dramatically altered states of being. For others the shifts are very subtle, primarily manifesting in clear thinking or a strong sense of emotional centeredness characterized by spontaneous altruism.

The manner in which your body and mind experience your true nature may be transcendent or immanent in its manifestation. When Sergeant Anton Schmid experienced a “soft heart” and first acted with selfless compassion, he was dwelling in the divine aspect of his true nature. It was most probably a transcendent moment.

Then there was the grind and dread of carrying out his inspired mission. He lied, forged papers, and no doubt worried, complained, and felt sorry for himself, just as we all do. In all these activities, his experience was ordinary, but still divine.

The Divine was in its immanent form, arising out of simple acts of being. Schmid was holding the ground of what his soft heart said was sacred, but he was just an ordinary man.

In Christian teachings, Jesus died on the cross as a man rather than as God, and therein lies the essence of understanding immanence. His words, “Oh, my Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?” offer testimony that he experienced his agony as a human being. This was his great gift—that a human body in all its frailty could hold the true nature of the Divine.

It is the same for each of us. There are moments small and large when we are filled with the transcendent, as though we have been lifted out of our bodies or the Divine has entered us as grace. There are other times when the Divine grows out of the ground of our being. Usually all that is possible in daily life is to be present in the moment, to pay attention to how we react, to be alert to greed, fear, or confusion, and to respond with as much compassion and wisdom as we are capable. In doing this we are allowing what is divine to manifest in what is human. Both the path of transcendence and the path of immanence are beautiful, whole, and worthy. It is your heart that must find its true path.

Most spiritual traditions offer some combination of four practices for those who would seek to know their true nature: devotion, meditation or contemplative prayer, selfless service, and wise reflection or inquiry. Your essence will be more drawn to one or two of these practices than to the others. But the only way to discover which practices work for you is to do them.

There are a few individuals for whom life itself seems to offer the perfect balance of these practices, but it is foolhardy to decide you are such a person. For most of us practice is essential; it is the only way that we can consciously experience and participate in the mysterious journey into that land where “love is most nearly itself.” You will know you have arrived, at least for a visit, in those rare moments when the eyes, ears, tongue, and all the other senses speak only the language of the soft heart.

T. S. Eliot spoke of the inner journey in this manner: “We shall not cease from our exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.” ■

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