

The topic for this week was Help.

Homework: "HELP!"

Calvino Rabeni:

How about "Help" as a topic for next time?
 In whatever way is important to a person, in their practice
 There are many sources
 sometimes one looks/asks, sometimes refuses
 What is it that helps one step outside the circle?
 Is it just one's own doing / responsibility?
 Trusting teachers? Faith? Study? etc.
 What makes a difference?
 What keeps realizations from turning solid and becoming barriers, etc.
 Support of a community?
 The realizations go stale when held within the small self
 Reflections from other intelligences?

Zen Arado: discipline

Calvino Rabeni: Discipline, also perhaps, grace, gratitude, resolve, surrender,...

Eliza Madrigal: Okay, and dreams can be looked at in this context also

Pema Pera: so this also addresses devotion, Calvino?

Calvino Rabeni: Yes it could Pema

Pema Pera: quite a topic, Calvin! :)

Pema is right, of course - this is a broad and deep topic. But let's see where we can go with it. :) The following are some of my (rather bland and generic) thoughts on "Help".

I proposed this topic knowing it's not one that yields to an analytic approach or any kind of tidy overview. Instead, I think it's better not to assume that the context should be somehow constrained in advance. This question is not constrained and defined, even implicitly. So the response would be - "what does Help mean to me?", rather than, "what are the appropriate answers to this question?"

At the outset I'll say what I mean by "Help" is, something that assists one in some "spiritual" sense - something that supports or enhances growth and development, and reduces confusion and suffering.

Dropping the question-answering mode reveals that one could start anywhere, reach out blindly, and sieze some part of the topic that would be a perfectly good starting place. It reminds me of a talk I heard on the topic of "spiritual evolution". Someone asked, what can we do to be a "spiritual evolutionary". The appropriate answer was - "there's nothing you can do that is not evolutionary. The issue is awareness."

The first thing that strikes me about "help" is how emotionally laden the topic is - as in "(somebody) HELP! I need HELP!" To even bring it up invokes this ancient tone of urgency and need and even desperation; and then the layers built on top of that - concealment, reluctance to reach out, separation, and self-reliance. The literatures of both psychology (self-help) and spirituality are full of this premise, in so many ways, from simple formulations such as "the answers are all within" to metaphysical assumptions that it's

impossible for any person to "really" know what goes on "inside" another.

It seems true, that most of what comes to a person is gated through awareness, which plays a key role. But even there, it's not exclusively individual awareness. In fact, it might be worth entertaining the notion that there's no such thing as strictly individual awareness, knowledge, and action.

I believe "Help" is (potentially) all around. Anything can be a source of knowledge; any event a lesson; and any context the setting for a practice. Awareness can transform virtually anything into a support or a source of help and knowledge, whether it seems "positive" or "negative". The key isn't to ask whether something is good or bad, but what are its possibilities and limitations.

At the same time, what constitutes effective help depends a great deal on the specific needs, history, character, and "consciousness" of an individual. The more self-knowledge a person has, the easier it is to seek and/or create sources of help, or to accept and respond to them if they are offered.

So what distinguishes "Help" from effective and routine use of the resources available in the world? I'd say this is a moving and evolving distinction. It refers to some influence that seems to come from outside the circle of the "self" as it is defined at any particular time. If it comes from "inside", it's a self-action, and if it's completely "outside", then there's no awareness or ability to respond. So Help is something that crosses the boundary, that comes in over the horizon of one's current capacities. Creating this connection requires both reaching (or asking), and receiving. To sum this up starkly and abstractly, the two things that enable freedom relative to the limited "circle of self" are Help (or Grace) and Discipline (or Will).

There are an unlimited variety of practices and techniques that might be helpful under given circumstances. Broadly these include study, practice, contemplation, and so forth. Whether something is helpful has a lot to do with how one relates to it in context, and little to do with what it "is". One heuristic is to seek balance and completeness in each context. The metaphors from [Ecclesiastes](#) in the Bible speak to this.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven

On a more practical level, I think many if not most people who think of themselves as engaging in spiritual practices could benefit by making an effort to get freer of the common psychological barriers that prevent people from giving and receiving help more effectively. These bear labels such as fear, shame, false pride, alienation, defensiveness, etc.

It's not my philosophy to emphasize the importance of finding "right" teacher, tradition, or path, but I recognize this is important to some people, who may even see it as essential.

It also seems indispensable to seek out the support of others, through close friendships, partnerships, spiritual communities, and other forms of [sangha](#) or community of practice. Both giving and receiving help (or some kind of service) are beneficial to an individual, and develop in concert.