

Inviting the Dragon to Tea

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Since I first invited Sister Jina to come to Holland after I moved from Plum Village to Amsterdam, my life has been filled with organizing Sangha activities. I have finally found something that I can do with all my heart, without the least bit of resistance. I wouldn't want to do anything else. But I have not yet managed to do whatever presents itself in a lighthearted way. There are always so many things to do, and they all seem equally urgent. The pile on my desk never gets down to the point where I feel it is manageable. It often burdens me. I feel no space. I often feel I am not in touch enough with the present and the joy that it contains. I know how incongruent this is with the work I am doing.

So this is what I have to look deeply into—the way I work. It has to do with a lot of other things—how I deal with or avoid my feelings, the need to manifest myself in some way, the wish to please others, and so on. I have always felt an intense dread of being responsible and have wished to hide from that role. I run away in fear and feel chased by responsibilities. But lately another attitude has opened up in me, a willingness to turn around and face what is chasing me, saying to responsibility, “Here I am.”

Recently I began therapy with a woman a little older than myself who is a big sister and friend to me as well. In her presence, I am not ashamed or afraid of the difficult, hidden feelings that arise in me. Recently, I found myself asking, “What am I doing here?” I thought I was done with this ques-

tion a long time ago, that its bones had turned to dust already, that the despair it brought up belonged to the past. Since meeting Thây, his teachings have given me more and more ground to stand on, dissolving the problem about the meaning of life. I thought this question had become irrelevant.



Handmade sign welcomes visitors to the Upper Hamlet

But the question was still alive in the dark *alaya*-earth and it became unearthed during one session with my therapist. She started the session as usual by playing some soft music to bring me in closer touch with my feelings. This time, the music brought me back to the time I nearly always felt depressed, when I wondered intensely and relentlessly what my purpose was in life. The emptiness I felt was breathtaking.



Preparing a vegetarian meal in mindfulness

I realized that the question, “What am I doing here?” presents an overwhelming emptiness that has been a seven-headed dragon swallowing all my joy. I had assumed that this dragon had starved to death because I had not given him anything to eat for a long time. But I discovered that he has secret food reserves that I didn’t know about. I decided to invite him to tea.

My therapist joined me at this tea, asking me, “How do you answer the question, ‘What am I doing here?’ in this moment?” I could not answer. With all the Sangha-building activities that bring me joy and give me the feeling I am doing meaningful work, I could not answer the question.

Then one answer surfaced: “I am waiting for ‘X’ to appear.” “X” is the person I think of as “my beloved” but whom I haven’t seen for years. There is still the dream of having someone to whom I can hand over the heavy burden of being responsible for my life. It is a dream that shines light on my desire to hide away from responsibility.

“‘What am I doing here?’ seems to be a very important question in your life,” my therapist said. “It belongs to you just as much as your heart or your liver does. The question is very much Eveline, irrespective of the answer.”

I felt soothed by these words. This question has lived in me since I was a child. I have always treated it as an unwanted guest because it scared me. I was looking for life, and death grinned at me when I allowed this question to come up. Suddenly, I saw this question as a mere question. After years of hearing it in dreadful awe and pushing it away, I could receive the question as it is—a question, a peer, and not an oppressive, fear-inducing dragon. I even regret that I have treated it so badly. And, I began to feel proud of it, respecting it as an important part of me.

During the week since that session, I bring it to mind often with a smile. There is no chasing after any answer, just an invitation to the question to sit there, with space around it, and to give attention to it. I just smile at the question and experience the moment as it is.