

Resistance

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There were numerous disasters in the past year so we have been praying full-time for people with difficulties, particularly in the Caribbean. This particular storm, Sandy, has swept up the East Coast and caused much destruction. We keep all people who are suffering in mind.

For tonight's Dharma talk, I was thinking about the subject of resistance, given the art workshop we had last week with Tokunaga Sensei. When we have someone who presents a more creative angle, we tend to have resistance to participation. There's not a human being alive who doesn't struggle with resistance. In the workshop we recently had, it was difficult to get some people to attend. We had a teacher come all the way from Japan to help us, and still people resisted giving up a brief Saturday afternoon to learn from her. We had to twist a few arms to get people to be present. Later, the same people expressed deep gratitude for having been persuaded to attend. They said their lives had been changed for the better.

So when I thought about Resistance as a subject for tonight, quite by chance I came across a book by Steven Pressfield called, THE WAR OF ART (available at <www.blackirishbooks.com>). There's no mention of the word Dharma in this book, yet I have a feeling that the author practices some form of meditation, even if his meditation is the very work he does. He uses the word "Zen" somewhere in the book, but it's a brief mention. Without calling it Dharma, this is truly an excellent Dharma. This author has had an experience of awakening in his life concerning the nature of resistance and how resistance functions in the mind and body. He's generous enough to share this experience with us. He sees resistance as something that permeates all our lives, it is silent, it has no texture, and yet it is a force that is destructive to the core of our being.

He talks about activities most common in life that elicit the nature of resistance. This is his list:

- 1) The pursuit of any calling in writing, painting, music, film dance, or any creative art, however marginal or unconventional.
- 2) The launching of any entrepreneurial venture or enterprise, for profit or otherwise.
- 3) Any diet or health regimen.
- 4) Any program of spiritual advancement.
- 5) Any activity who aim is tighter abdominals.

- 6) Any course or program designed to overcome an unwholesome habit or addiction.
- 7) Education of every kind.
- 8) Any act of political, moral, or ethical courage, including the decision to change for the better some unworthy pattern of thought or conduct in ourselves.
- 9) The undertaking of any enterprise or endeavor whose aim is to help others.
- 10) Any act that entails commitment of the heart. The decision to get married, to have a child, to weather a rocky patch in a relationship.
- 11) The taking of any principled stand in the face of adversity.

I suspect that all these activities sound familiar, even if we are immune to resistance within ourselves in several of those areas. I almost wager that if we look with true honesty we would say yes to this entire list.

Pressfield goes on to speak about the characteristics of resistance. Resistance has no texture, it is insidious such that we don't necessarily notice when it is functioning or has altered or obstructed our path. It is invisible. It is a negative thing and its aim is to distract us and prevent us from doing our work. Others may not necessarily see it in us, and we don't usually see it happening in ourselves.

We might think about Zen practice and see how easy it is to resist meditation. The urge to do so is self-generated and self-perpetuated. Pressfield goes on to speak of resistance as the enemy, which is why he calls it, THE WAR OF ART. He sees this as a form of war within ourselves continuing to resist the making of a better life for ourselves and fulfilling something we deeply want in the expression of life. These things might include the urge to write, to paint, to study, even the urge to clean the house, anything like this that feeds the soul. The force of resistance will find a way to prevent us from doing whatever we want to do.

Resistance is a destructive force within ourselves that understands nothing but power, and since it is an engine of destruction, it will continue to attack us forever. It is impersonal so it isn't as though it is a weakness within ourselves. It isn't that resistance appears because we are imperfect or ineffectual. Rather it is in the air, it's an aspect of the dynamic of life and is as indifferent as rain, as Pressfield points out.

Resistance is also infallible. Pressfield writes: "The more important a call or action is to soul's evolution, the more Resistance we will feel toward pursuing it." "Resistance is Universal. Everyone has the experience of resistance. It never sleeps and is about fear. Fear does not go away." It is something we deal with everyday in one way or another."

As this is an inner war, it plays for keeps. “It’s not there to just disable us, it aims to kill the epicenter of our being, our genius, our soul, the unique and priceless gift we were put on earth to give and that no one else has but us. Resistance means business.”

If we take up these ideas as an internal war, then we can understand this as Zen students, for we are spiritual warriors ready to confront the self, to face each situation straight on as it comes along.

I’ve spoken in the past about procrastination and how insidious and detrimental it is to the character to allow procrastination to take hold. It isn’t that we say we will never do something, but rather we continue to practice with the idea that maybe, maybe we’ll do it at another time. I want to do it, but I’ll do it tomorrow, next month, next year. Pressman says the only way to deal with this stalemate is to actually get up and do the work. As Zen students we know this. Once we begin to work, we feel resistance give way and the prize is to succeed in whatever it is we want to do. We know then that we are capable of the work that displaces the matter of fear and tamps the war of resistance that festers in us.

I have to look at my own life. I have accomplished many things, so I know I can overcome resistance by force of will and work and I can see something through to its finish. But there are many areas in my life where I’ve allowed resistance to get the better of me and have been lazy and not wanted to do the work. It’s obvious that resistance continues to play a part in my life. All those characteristics of resistance are in me and I have no choice but to continue to face them when I have something that I want to create.

Pressfield cites writers who deal with resistance by writing every day. There is no holiday for them. Maybe some days they work few hours, but still they go to the desk and do something every day. When we say the word “work” we may feel immediate resistance, and yet in Zen practice, in the teaching of the Buddhadharmā, work is joyfulness. Work is joy. Work is not something to slave through. Work is a privilege. We say in Zen: “A day without work is a day without food.” We could say that we earn food through work, but we can also interpret this to mean work itself is the food of the soul. Imagine the privilege to be able to write a book. How could it be work doing something we love. Doing something for ourselves to feed the heart’s core, to address the longing of the soul to speak, to be delivered of itself by an activity that we choose to do is profound privilege. Work cannot be something terrible to engage in. But it is still ominous to us even when it is deeply honorable.

I was thinking then of those people who were dragged into doing art for a day who were changed by the experience. We should be aware of resistance in our lives and how it eats at us and diminishes us and erodes the soul. I encourage you to read the book. I bought it as an e-book so I can’t give it to you, but Pressfield hopes if we buy the book we will give it away to someone else so that they too can be changed for the better. It is a deeply worthwhile and simple read and I suspect it will become a mantra so that I don’t succumb to my own resistance, my invented walls that stunt my growth and hinder true liberation.

Pressfield speaks of the difference between true thought and the jabbering of the brain. When we sit meditation the mind begins to rattle, that's just jabbering and not true thought. He speaks to true thinking in the creative act, such as when we assemble a poem, or consider a painting, and we rightly care for those creative processes and honor them for the sake of the work of art. I thought he had a nice way to notice brain activity vs. true thought particularly as we are often aware of monkey mind when we sit meditation and mistake it for the discerning mind. Also in Zen, it can be inferred that thinking is inappropriate, but nothing could be further from the truth. We are meant to reflect and we are meant to use our intelligence and to use all the faculties we've been given.

I offer all this as a way to help our lives, to remove obstructions from the heart, and to clear the pathway to creativity. And I speak with gratitude to Pressfield.

COMMENTS

Student: I hide resistance by finding excuses and don't see it as resistance, yet it is resistance. I believe the reasons I make up in my mind. I think it's all about fear. Goodness, I want to read that book. The only way through all this is to do the work. Resistance is deadly because we can die before we get to do the work we want to do or, we can just drop it. We can give up on it.

Teacher: The potential for embitterment is there and the potential to sour all we see.

Student: Yes we close down. In art there is fear of exposure. We take something close to the heart, very tenderly, the way a child does.

Teacher: We think of hate as the opposite of love, but fear is the opposite of love. If we are dwelling in care of ourselves, then we are engaging in love and fear disappears in the field of love.

Student: When we are creating we are caught up in the act of creation so there is no fear. There is no room for it.

Student: I find fear of exposure, of failing, of breaking something in the process of approaching it. I think of diamond cutters who could destroy an entire diamond and yet they have the nerve to do it. Once we get to the confidence level the hesitation with some things disappears.

Teacher: Right now I'm not working at calligraphy/painting. When I was in Japan and studying, I did my homework and kept practicing every day. My art succeeded because I was practicing every day. Now I'm not at it and I'm not so sure. I feel like a sham because I'm not working at it. Pressfield calls it **DOING THE WORK**. In Zen we call it Practicing.

Pressfield talks about the intuitional mind and the instinctive mind, which are in high functionality when we are in the act of creating. Later, we might step back and reflect on the work. When we are in the act of creating, we just do it. We are lifted during that process. We enter no-time, no-place. Later we step back and say, hmm let's consider how this succeeds as a work of art, and what kinds of changes can I bring to this work.

Students: All that we do requires effort. We have to put out energy to do something. It takes effort to get up, effort to come to the cushion and sit meditation. If you turn effort around it is resistance.

Teacher: If you have energy you have resistance. You remember: A body at rest tends to stay at rest; a body in motion tends to stay in motion. Pressfield says resistance is universal and will be there every day. It will always be there, it is a natural phenomenon, an opposite field going on in us. In the relative world there is always an opposite of anything. Always going to have resistance to something. The question is: how badly do you want something? How badly do you want to be Awakened? How badly do you want to stop suffering?

Student: Some things I resist because they are not on my list. That's okay. The question is how badly do I want it.

Teacher: We can't do everything and we don't have to abandon ourselves to every activity that comes along. The question is what is at the heart's core? When you are about to die, what is it that you want to know you have done? Living the heart's core is akin to living in Awakening. Knowing the heart's core well enough to say: I have to do this before I die. I need to know myself well enough to know these things. If we ask ourselves: "What have I done with my life?" and we don't like the answer, then we had better face the problem of resistance and get to work.

Let me finish with one more quote from Pressfield. He's speaking about the un-lived life. "We have two lives, the life we live and the un-lived life within us....Resistance is the most toxic force on the planet. It is the root of more unhappiness than poverty, disease, and erectile dysfunction. To yield to Resistance deforms our spirit. It stunts us and makes us less than we are and were born to be."

Thank you everyone.

To obtain Steven Pressman's books, THE WAR OF ART and its sequel, TURNING PRO.

www.BlackIrishBooks.com