

Life beyond explanations

MOST OF US WHO LISTEN to the Buddha's teachings probably have some reason for why we started listening. Those who do zazen probably have a reason for going to the meditation hall. Some will say it's to have a happy life. Others might say they want to make their life free of all the complications in the world around them. Some just simply want to make their body and mind healthy. But whatever the reason, it is not what is essential. Explanations are just secondary.

I don't mean that we should ignore our reasons, because they might be very important to us. But we will never truly digest our practice by offering explanations about why we do it. The essence of the spiritual life is that it goes on without limits. In other words, your life is not limited by your life. Thus it gives us great hope. But hearing this, you might start to think that there is something in you that exists eternally, even after you die. You might say, "The soul exists forever." If you believe this, you are what is called an eternalist. On the other hand, if you don't accept eternalism, believing that there is no soul, then you are a nihilist. These are the two basic views of life. But whichever one you pick—eternalism or nihilism—it doesn't hit the mark.

If you look at your life with a calm mind, you can see that your life holds the past and the future right now. Your life is not just the thin piece of paper we call the present. It is actually very thick, very profound. There is depth to your life that runs beyond all your ideas and speculations. To live a spiritual life is to reach to the depths of human life, which run beyond our intellectual understanding and beyond our present life. Why did you start reading this book? Why are you interested in Buddhism? Why do you want to practice meditation? You may offer reasons, but finally you don't know why.

I came to the United States in 1963. I have been here for many years. But if I look over my life, I can see that there are many things I haven't done. For instance, it is said that Buddhist literature contains eighteen thousand scriptures. I became a monk at eighteen, but still there are lots of scriptures I have yet to read. As much as I would like to read them, my life is not long enough to do all the things I want to do. No matter how long we live, how can we satisfy all our desires? If you try to finish all the things you want to accomplish in life, you will become very nervous, irritated, and uneasy.

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Human life goes on forever—life after life. But as soon as I say this, you think, “Katagiri believes in reincarnation.” But the human life that goes on life after life is not your life, or my life, or anyone’s life in particular. If we attach to eternalism, thinking that there’s some particular identity that persists life after life, we will suffocate right in the middle of the dark dream of eternalism. When this notion ceases to satisfy us, we will look around for something that does. We will struggle to find some explanation that will satisfy us, eventually falling into nihilism, but the same dissatisfaction occurs. No matter which way

we go, there is always uneasiness and dissatisfaction.

Actually, reincarnation occurs moment after moment. But we should never attach to it. “Attach” means to see in it a persisting entity. This is very important to understand. We must not create an “ism.”

If you attach to the explanation of eternalism, your life will no longer be rooted in the earth. Your heart should just accept all sentient beings as they are—as nothing in particular, as completely fluid. The spiritual life requires us to practice tasting this truth. To do so is to experience a generous, magnanimous mind.