
ARIEL:
Modern Nirvana

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XOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXO
Tell me, what mishigas lol is this?*

KOAN

A skeptical student asked a teacher, "Is it still possible to attain Nirvana in this modern age?"

REFLECTION

If you are enlightened to the truth of this koan, you can see your web traffic skyrocket and plummet, add two million followers, tweet nonstop, and add your personal signature to one million documents without running out of ink or tiring your hand.

Wow, that's a lot of activity! What happens to your attention when you feel overwhelmed by YouTubes and emails, the requests

to be someone's *Friend* or *Fan*, to *Link*, *Like*, *Tweet*, or *Share*, and wish happy birthday to a million people every day?

According to the sutras, when the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, the tempter Mara threw delusion after delusion at him, everything from horrifying demons to Mara's own gorgeous daughters, to distract, seduce, or frighten him. Our present-day Mara provides glaring headlines about the economy, hate messages on social media, viral videos, and online porn sites. It sells retirement packages, sexy negligees, advanced university degrees, and dharma webinars about how to become enlightened.

What do we do with such information overload? How do we awaken?

We are more connected than ever before to far-flung nations, reading avidly about cultures and societies very different from our own and of which we were mostly ignorant until only several decades ago. We follow the destruction of hurricanes and earthquakes as they happen half a world away, spaceships hurtling through space, and the latest medical research done in a distant laboratory. We get summoned electronically to political rallies, reminded that it's time to refill our prescriptions, invited to play games and message the world, and warned of the end of life as we know it on a specific date.

What do we stand on? How do we decide when to say yes and when to say no? What happens to our vows? Bombarded by unending pleas, requests, and invitations, do we sometimes feel our stability slipping away? What do we do with the anxiety and fear that arise in the midst of all this speed and instant accessibility?

Perhaps most important, what do we do with our attention? When I'm reading an article online, am I actually reading it or skimming through it in order to get to the next article? Am I

giving things my conscious attention, or mostly checking things off? Am I living my life or taking an inventory of it?

Zen meditation asks us to bring our attention back to the breath, or the koan, or to *Now*, each time it wanders. It is a slow and meticulous practice, but over time we begin to experience the settling of both body and mind. How do you remain settled throughout the day even as phones, emails, texts, and various apps clamor for your attention?

Eihei Dogen wrote: “[The Whole Body] is never apart from one right where one is.”⁵⁹ Wherever you are—on your cushion, in your desk chair or car seat, or even on your feet while standing at the oven cooking dinner—the whole world is right there doing those things. How do you experience that? By practicing it. By living it. Is there really any reason to look right or left, to run to the phone or the computer screen, to fragment your awareness, and give away that priceless commodity of attention for information bytes that are no sooner read than forgotten? Says Dogen: “If you concentrate your effort single-mindedly, that in itself is negotiating the Way.”

A student said to Master Ichu, “Please write for me something of great wisdom.”

Master Ichu picked up his brush and wrote one word: “Attention.”

The student said, “Is that all?”

The master wrote, “Attention. Attention.”

The student became irritable. “That doesn’t seem profound or subtle to me.”

In response, Master Ichu wrote simply, “Attention. Attention. Attention.”

In frustration, the student demanded, “What does this word attention mean?”

Master Ichu replied, “Attention means attention.”⁶⁰

Master Ichu knew this secret before Facebook, before Twitter and Instagram, before modern-day treasure hunters began to relentlessly seek attention. Your attention. Where will you give it?

We can also consciously decide not to pay attention for a while, not to focus on anything in particular. For example, meandering, or goalless walking, does not aim towards a destination or result; it's simply rambling about, looking around, giving yourself permission to pay attention to what you pass on the road, or not. Effortlessly, you become more attuned to your body and the world around you; you notice clouds, sun, and clouds again, and enjoy the ease of a lazy afternoon.

Would you call spending time in this way a waste of a day?

Whatever activity—or inactivity—you engage in, do it wholeheartedly. Give yourself to your life fully. Not half a self, not while texting or watching YouTube. Don't cut your heart in half or quarters, keep it whole, fully here now.

Can you carve out times during the day when you're just doing one thing completely? Can you give full attention to the task in front of you? The food in front of you? How about to the person in front of you?