
Kit's New Practice

*Where on the compass do you find being human?
North South East West.
Look up, then down.
Or just Google.*

KOAN

Kit asked the teacher: "What practice should I follow now?"

"Pretend to be human," answered the teacher.

"But I am human!" protested Kit.

"That is why you must pretend," replied the teacher.

REFLECTION

A friend's five-year-old crawled on her knees: "Ruff! Ruff!"

I asked her what she was doing.

"I'm pretending."

"Are you pretending that you're a cat?"

"No, silly, I'm pretending to be a dog."

"How are you doing that?"

“Ruff! Ruff!”

I liked the game so much that the next day I pretended to be a human. I got up in the morning and took a shower. I made myself some coffee and did meditation. I said good morning to my husband and fed the dog.

What do we humans mean when we say we’re human? A cat goes *meow*, a dog goes *ruff*, a cow goes *moo*, and a human goes—what? A kangaroo hops, a hawk flies, a snake slithers, a flower blooms, and a human—? Is there any one thing that makes us human?

Back in the seventeenth century, Descartes thought that thinking is what makes us human. Since then, scientists have tried to identify other traits that make us different from other species, like language, altruism, and the ability to make tools, but research shows that things we once thought were exclusive to us are also shared by other species. Life forms, with all their variations, seem to be much more fluid than anyone thought.

Is it true that all hawks fly and all flowers bloom? And if the would-be hawks are still fledglings and the rose petals don’t bloom, are they not hawks or flowers?

What makes anything what it is? When I say this is a candle, this is grass, this is a lawn chair, this is a man, this is a woman, I’m pointing to certain aspects that in my mind characterize a candle, grass, a lawn chair, and all the rest. A candle burns, grass is green, and a lawn chair sits on a lawn. But if these comprised their basic essence, wouldn’t that essence remain the same under any condition? And yet we could think of conditions—a hurricane, a frost—that extinguish candles, cause the grass to go brown, and let fly or destroy the lawn chair.

My teacher likes to say: Just be a human being, that’s the best practice. But what is the essence of a human being? Maybe

the essence of being a human being is seeing that there is no one identifiable essence.

Many years ago my teacher and I walked together in Birkenau, part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp compound. There, passing along crumbling barracks and the remains of gas chambers and crematoria, he said: "We want so much to believe that there's something that's common to everyone. Philosophers and religious leaders all try to find and point to it: What's that basic thing? The only thing that I can see we all have in common is our differences."

We have fought wars over questions like what constitutes a real human being. Witness the rage around the issue of abortion, look at what has transpired in this country in the name of race! Can we even agree on what it is to be a male or a female? We used to think it was all about biology, but more and more people now claim a gender identification that is more fluid, based on feeling rather than on the body they were born to. We can't even agree on the essence of good food or good music.

Is there any reason we should agree? When we say that everything is interdependent, we mean it's all relational, contextual, conditioned on circumstances. So what absolute truth are we fighting about? Why do we subscribe to ideas like *the real deal*, *the real stuff*? Is everything else less real?

Even as I say *that's who I really am*, or *that's the real me*, boundless molecules and cells in my body are assembling and disassembling at incalculable speeds, changing me so quickly my consciousness can never keep up.

Given that, is there anything we can do other than pretend?

What's the real you? Is there one thing you can point to with total certainty?